

THE
Alien
NOBLE'S
Little Human

ATHENA STORM

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ATHENAVerse PRESS

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Bride to Beasts Series

Soldiers of Hope Series

Marauder Mates Series:

Conquered Mates

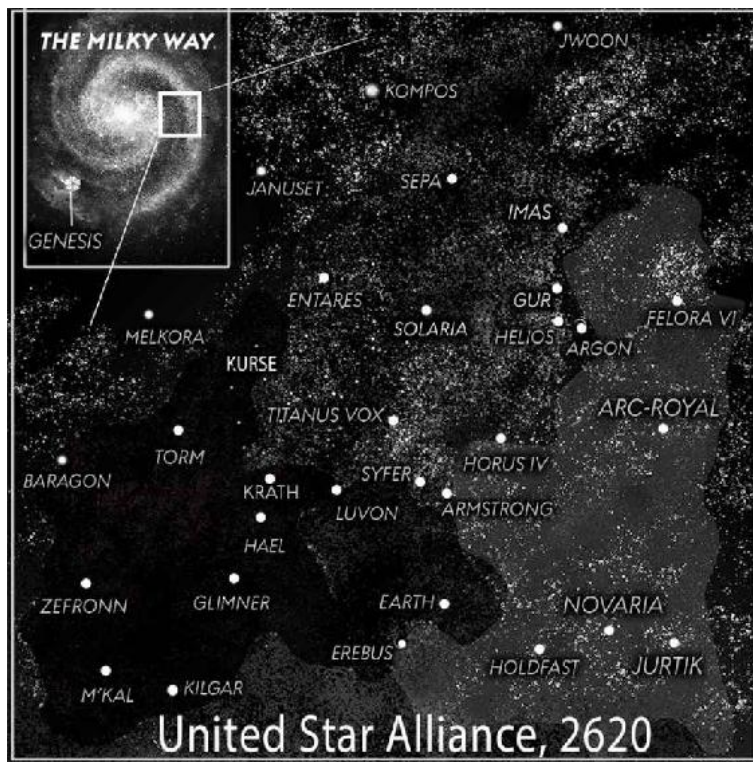
Champions of Ataxia Series:

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Warriors of the Alliance Series:

Shared Mates

THE ATHENAVERSE STAR CHART



TAUREK

“He’s the best doctor in the Mountain Kingdom,” Serge assures me.

Serge, the servant who handles the royal family’s affairs, tries to calm me down after the latest examination, to no avail.

“Then I fear for Kiphia, because he’s a fool. Like all the rest.”

The so-called doctor looks at me from the door with a sneer of disgust. I sneer back. *The feeling’s mutual*, I think to myself.

I walk slowly up to Hanai’s room. She’s been slipping in and out of consciousness, so I don’t know how much of the argument she heard between me and this butcher. He wanted to cut her open to take pieces of her brain and heart.

This nightmare has become our lives. It began with weakness in the knees, an uncommon complaint for an eight-year-old. She and her friends were climbing the replica of our sacred peaks at Taro’s Point, something she’s done so often she could draw a map from memory of the handholds and footholds of several routes. That day, though, she didn’t have the strength to reach the first step.

“My knees feel like they’re buzzing, Papa,” I remember her saying. “Like how prism moths move, but inside me.”

If only the arthritic knees were all of it. Within the week, things went from alarming to grave.

“Papa. It’s the same buzzing,” she said as I tucked her in. “But my head. Why are there spirits dancing in my room? What do they want?”

The day after that, she was perfectly normal. Then an aching in her side came. The flare-ups are completely unpredictable, like a stalker in the night. You have no clue when or where the next attack might be.

Dozens of doctors have seen her in person, and hundreds have written to us with their opinions. None of them have a clue.

I sent commpad messages to the royal families in four of the other Kingdoms of Kiphia, Ocean, Lakes and Rivers, Treetop, and Desert, searching for help. I eventually even sent word to Cloud Kingdom, a realm I despise with a passion almost as great as my love for my daughter.

With no promising leads, I’ve started to resort to more desperate measures. Every day, my scribes and messengers send word to the furthest reaches of Kiphia seeking any advice, regardless of the source. I haven’t yet resorted to other planets, but I’m about to.

The other morning, Hanai couldn’t hear. Today, her sight has ripples in it, as if the visible world is gradually receding from her. With her gradually pulling away from me, my life may as well be ebbing away with hers.

I stroke her hair, looking at her lovely face, hoping her dreams are more peaceful than the chaos around her. Since the calamity, Hanai has been the center of my world. Without her, there’s nothing.

A knock on the enormous palace doors jars me. It must be another doctor here to test his mettle. Some treat a trip to the palace like a competition of strength more than they do a sick child’s bedside.

These days, the doctors are just about the only ones who visit. Even before Hanai got sick, denizens of Cygoth were inclined to think of the palace as a haunted house, permanently cursed by the devastating events that occurred here. They’re

suspicious that if they get too close, the misery might find them, too.

“Prince Taurek, it’s Master Talan. He’s come from Tlisan, the human settlement.”

“Are you positive? He hasn’t been to Cygoth in years. I heard he swore to never return.”

I try to make out the face, but all I see is a dark silhouette against the enormous stone entrance, mined from the tallest peaks of the Mountain Kingdom.

“He did swear that,” a familiar voice calls out. “But he’s breaking his self-imposed exile for an old friend.” Although his simple clothing belies his aristocratic lineage, Talan’s smile is unmistakable.

“It’s really you, Talan. I don’t believe it.”

He opens his arms to hold me in a tight embrace. When he looks at me as if no time has passed, I’m struck by an emotion I can’t place at first. I realize it’s the peace of being in the presence of someone who regards me without any scintilla of pity.

“Come in, come in. Frin and Lurz, please prepare food and drink for our guest. The infused wine from Taro’s Point and a slab of nasarer hare. We have fermented bernai roots from the cellar. Do you like those, Talan?”

“I’m afraid I can’t stay long, Prince Taurek.”

I try to conceal my disappointment. “We’ve known each other since we were children sneaking off into caverns. Stay a while. You must be exhausted from the journey.”

Apart from Hanai, there’s practically no one I can truly talk to these days. Since she’s taken ill, I’ve lived in my head. As much as I love my father, Thane Odar has never been known as a glittering conversationalist. My brothers are all scattered in other parts of the Kingdom, and some in other parts of Kiphia.

“I took a chordata,” Talan answers. “So the journey wasn’t too strenuous.”

“I remember you were a champion rider in your youth.”

“Never like you, Taurek.”

“Please. That was so long ago, I don’t know if I can even mount one anymore.”

Talan knows me well enough to roll his eyes, not believing a word of my false modesty.

He’s right. If anything, I’m a stronger rider now. In the aftermath of the calamity five years ago, I distracted myself by teaching Hanai how to ride. It was one of the few outlets that helped us feel whole after Kantha left us.

Death would have been easier than her unceremonious abandonment. Death comes for all of us. Leaving is a choice.

It’s been months since Hanai has been strong enough for us to ride together. Her illness has robbed us of even that happiness.

“So, what brings you here, Talan? When I first saw your face, I thought I must be hallucinating and the illness had gotten me, too.”

I smile, but his expression is aghast. “I’m sorry to add to your stress, Taurek.”

“No, no, I’m sorry for the bad joke. I forget gallows humor isn’t a universal language.”

“The illness brings me here today, actually.” He looks down.

“I see.”

“There’s a woman in Tlisan, a friend of Sorsha’s, who’s an expert in these things. A human, one who’s quite wise and resourceful. When we received your dispatch, Sorsha talked to her right away.”

I stare skeptically. “Is she a doctor?”

“No. An artisan.” He continues despite my scoffing. “She was ill as a child. She has deep knowledge of various remedies, especially healing properties of the mountains. You

know, on Earth, they used to have cures from mineral deposits...”

“I’m not interested in human medicine for my Kiphian daughter. I’m sorry you came all this way, Talan.”

“Stars above, you are just as stubborn as ever, Taurek. Will you just listen?”

I grunt in assent, and he continues.

“This woman, Zaya, she spent her convalescence learning about the world, since she couldn’t interact with it. Once she was better, she wanted to see everything she’d read about. I’ve met few individuals of any species who are as naturally curious.”

“And you came to ask me to give this human a medal?”

“If you were anyone else, I would leave now. I’m only staying for Hanai. I’ll tolerate you for her sake.”

“Ah. I’ll give you the medal then.” I grin, but Talan is not amused.

The porter leaves food and drink for us on silver trays, mined from caverns beneath the palace.

“What shall we toast to, my friend?” I raise my goblet, and Talan haltingly lifts his.

“To truly living, Taurek. Not just surviving.” It cuts to the core. We clink our glasses and immediately drain them. I hold up the carafe of wine and pour us a second round.

“And another toast, Taurek. Here’s hoping the wine will make you less of a surly bastard!” Talan holds his goblet high, almost spilling.

“Is wine a miracle cure?” We both collapse into laughter and down the second glass.

“Let’s hope.”

“Anyway, keep talking. I’m actually listening for some reason.”

“Zaya has studied the records of Kiphia’s histories.”

“Even I never had the patience for that. And some of them are about my family.”

“That’s why you should listen. I think she has something to offer. She said the histories chronicled an illness that sounds like Hanai’s. It was called the stone-skipping curse, because it strikes the body like a game of stone-skip. You remember that game as kids?”

“Of course. You pass around a stone activated by heat, and you lose if it combusts into ash in your hand.”

“Yes. She can explain it better, but the books said it relates to electric signals in the body...”

“This sounds like a fairy legend.”

“It also sounds like with her knowledge, she might be able to help.”

It sounds ludicrous. At the same time, it seems less ludicrous than the doctor who said he needed to drain all of Hanai’s blood. And the one who said she needed to rest on the edge of an active volcano.

“So, Your Highness. Would you like to summon Zaya?”

Would I like to? No. Will I?

“Yes.” I let out a sigh and shake my head. “I’ll see that she’s sent for.”

ZAYA

“It’s weird, but I’ve always thought of Tlisan as an island.”

“That is weird.” Sorsha laughs. “Why do you think that is?”

“I don’t know. Just always have. I remember coming over the ring of mountains with my parents, just after we’d been in Ocean Kingdom. I thought, ‘This is the real island. Not that place.’”

Before we’d arrived to the Mountain Kingdom, we’d traveled for years like nomads from one realm to another, not out of adventure but necessity. My parents never lost faith that the next place would hold the key to restoring my health. It wasn’t until we got to Tlisan, a settlement of humans in the Mountain Kingdom, that I finally began to get better.

In the Mountain Kingdom, the Kiphians mostly mind their own affairs. They don’t love humans, but they don’t despise us either. They’re indifferent for the most part.

As soon as we crossed over to the other side of the mountain, I knew I’d never want to leave. I’ve pretty much stayed put for the twenty years since.

“I never really had much to compare it to, since I grew up here,” Sorsha says. “That’s the only thing I like about Cygoth. Makes you grateful to be back in Tlisan.”

“And that’s where Talan is? In Cygoth?”

I'm there to help Sorsha with the children while Talan is gone. I'm here most days anyway, though, since Sorsha offered me an unused part of their home for studio space. Ever since she went missing, along with her memories for a time, I get the sense that familiar faces help her feel grounded.

"Yes, he's in the capital." Sorsha purses her lips uncomfortably, so I don't press further.

I turn to the mosaic on the floor, positioning stones I extracted from nearby quarries and caverns to create a landscape portrait of the mountains nearby. I hold out my arms to block the children from crashing into it every so often.

"Zaya?"

"Hmm?" I keep arranging.

"Can I tell you something, and you promise you won't get mad?"

I hate when anyone asks that. How can I promise not to get mad before I know what's coming? But Sorsha always convinces me to make an exception somehow.

"I'll try my best." I smile, but she still looks uneasy.

"Okay. You know how I told you about the Prince's sick daughter last week?"

I nod. "Yeah. And I told you it reminded me of some things from the historic accounts."

"Yeah, with the electrical impulses and how they used minerals to repair the body."

"Yes. Although those books are probably more legend than fact."

"Maybe. The thing is, I told Talan about what you told me. And he offered to tell Prince Taurek." She pauses and looks at her hands. "He's in Cygoth to see if the Prince wants your help. It just all happened so quickly, and the next thing I knew, he was gone."

"Oh, Sorsha." I'm silent, trying to make sense of what's happening. "I don't know anything about medicine. I've read

things in books, but I don't even know if they're true. I doubt I can do much."

"I mean, they're rooted in real things, right? And hardly anyone else has ever read them. And you're better than scientists with the elements. And then there's your history..."

I give her a dark look. Illness defined my identity for so long as a child that I bristle at letting it define me as an adult, except for playing a role in healing it.

Since I grew up in a sick bed, I'd always wanted to learn the art and science of medicine to find cures for diseases, but it's not anything I ever had the means for. I never want to be on the other side of illness again.

She doesn't back down. "You know what it's like to be desperate for answers when your body fails you."

Even though she's right, I'm reluctant. The job's too big, and the costs of failure are too high.

"I'm sure others know a lot more. And what if I do the wrong thing and get blamed? I could get banished. And what if it doesn't work? That's on top of how long I'll be there, whether I'll get paid..."

"I didn't think it through that far. I just know Talan left this morning. But maybe they won't be interested."

An unfamiliar whoosh and electric hum from outside pierce the quiet.

"You think it's Talan?" she asks optimistically, but I have my doubts.

When I look out, I'm shocked to see the royal shuttle, which by all accounts isn't supposed to even work. It bears the seal of the Thane of Mountain Kingdom, a stylized crown of several metals perched on the peak of Taro's Point.

"Sorsha. What do I do?"

"Invite them in. I'll put on some flower tea."

"I'll tell them you're the one they're looking for, okay?" She waves her hand dismissively and scurries to the kitchen,

leaving me to speak with the two Kiphian guards. They wear sumptuous, blindingly white silk uniforms threaded with thin filaments of silver fibers.

I'm allergic to anything with the slightest hint of airs. These guards practically put me in a state of anaphylactic shock.

"We come by royal decree of His Majesty Prince Taurek of Cygoth. Are you familiar with a healer by the name of Zaya?"

"Yes. I'm very familiar. Although she's not a healer, just a simple artisan. But please, come in."

They nod and agree gruffly.

Their seven-foot frames dwarf Sorsha's modest house. I'm praying she gets back with the tea soon. Being mated to an important Kiphian, she has far more experience kissing ass with representatives from the capital than I do.

"We went to the home of Zaya but failed to find her. So, we came to the source of our information." He looks at me, uncertain. "And you are Sorsha, Talan's mate...?"

Just then, Sorsha glides in balancing the tray of tea, while her two small children run in front of her in brightly colored smocks smeared with clay.

"Welcome! I'm Sorsha." She places down the blue and yellow tray, which I made as a gift for their mating ceremony. "I've made tea. Have some."

They each grab a mug, which are comically small in comparison to their large hands.

"You're the mate of Talan?" The guards' demeanor brightens, as if having hybrid children and a Kiphian mate of high status somehow cleanses her of the human frailties. It's exactly why I have no interest in going to Cygoth.

"That's me, yes."

"And you know this Zaya? Where can we find her?"

With a confused expression, Sorsha looks at me and points. "She's right here."

A guard, also puzzled, addresses me directly. “Lady Zaya, it’s a matter of urgency that you come with us.”

“Can I have details? I’d like to know more before I make my choice. And it’s just Zaya.”

“Do you have obligations here? Surely someone can –”

The sound of clopping hooves grows louder, and I’m hoping it’s Talan. *They wouldn’t enlist security to force me to go if I refuse, would they?*

“Papa!” Sorsha and Talan’s children smother their father in hugs as he opens the door.

“Hello, hello, little ones!” he cries to the children swarming him. He looks at the two Kiphian guards. “Ah, I see they’re here. I hoped I’d beat them.”

“We took the shuttle,” a guard answers.

“It’s working?” Talan asks incredulously, then scoops up a child in each arm.

“After Her Royal Highness Princess Hanai fell ill, the Thane ordered it repaired.”

“Sirs, would you excuse us for a moment?” Talan motions to me and Sorsha, then indicates that he wants us to follow him into another room.

“Yes, but make it brief. His Royal Highness the Prince is waiting.”

Talan rolls his eyes. “His Royal Highness can wait a few more minutes. Just because he’s used to getting his way doesn’t mean he has to get it immediately.”

My eyes flare as we make our way down the hall. “Please tell me what’s going on. First, I learn that I’ve been volunteered as a royal medic, then I’m being hauled away like I’m accused of a crime?”

“I thought there’d be more time before they got here.”

“Apparently not. Do I even have a choice?”

Talan's face turns serious. "You always have a choice. But if you knew this child, I think you'd want to. I've known her since she was born."

"Another spoiled Princess?"

"No. The opposite. She's part of why I wanted children." Talan looks at Sorsha, who takes his hand. "Since she was born, Hanai was always inexhaustible. Scaling the walls of the castle, building statues with clay, making up wild stories. But when I saw her..."

Talan shakes his head. By the look on his face alone, I already know I won't be able to say no.

"How was she?"

"It's like her body was there. But all the life was slowly leaking out."

It reminds me of things people whispered about me, not knowing or not caring if I heard. Being treated like a problem to be solved, not a person, shaped me. I can only imagine the types of things this child has seen.

"The way you talked about your childhood, Zaya, and then what Sorsha said you'd read. And if the cure involves minerals, like you said. No one knows more. I've known a lot of so-called learned folks. None of them are as smart as you."

Sorsha looks at me pleadingly, and I can tell she's thinking about what she would do if one of her own children were ill. The silence is interrupted by the children bursting in, hugging my legs. If it were one of them, I'm sure I'd do everything.

"He's one of my oldest friends, Zaya. If anything happens, I'll never forgive myself," Talan says.

I sigh and hug them before we re-enter the main room. The guards stare expectantly.

"I'm willing to come with you to Cygoth. But I need to get some things first. And I'm going to ask you a million questions on the way."

TAUREK

“**T**he healer is on her way, Prince Taurek. Jani and Marol have informed me that the shuttle has taken off.”

“Thank you, Serge. How is the shuttle running?”

“No complaints from them as far as I know.”

“Good. That’s one less thing I need to worry about. Let’s hope this miracle worker has even fewer problems.”

I’ve had experts from all of the Six Kingdoms reveal the magnitude of their ignorance to me over the past several months. Let’s see how much worse this Zaya manages to be.

I’m expecting only bad advice, but I didn’t want to insult one of my oldest friends by rejecting his recommendation. I wish he’d simply kept his mouth shut, though, and not given me the burden of having one more ‘miracle worker’ fail.

I don’t even know when I last saw a human. It might have been when the human servants of Kantha’s Cloud Kingdom paramour, Zephyron — *oh, excuse me, fated mate!* — helped move the last of her possessions last year, after four years of claiming she would get them.

Kantha couldn’t be bothered to come back herself. I should have thrown them away so I never had to see her again. She cared more about her belongings than she did her own daughter.

I never thought much of the fated mate concept even before the calamity. My parents weren’t fated mates, and most

other pairs I knew weren't either. In fact, I'd only met maybe one or two, and they were so obsessed with each other, it seemed like a curse from the Divine Ones rather than a blessing.

I was gratified that the Kiphian I found who seemed like the best match for me indeed was not a fated mate. Kantha was from a noble household in the Mountain Kingdom, one of distinguished warriors whose line had developed new passages through the Ice-Charred Peaks. My father, Thane Odar, even said it had been a stronger match than his own with my late mother, the Queen.

'We choose our own fates,' I've always said. 'Fate does not choose me.'

But fate chose Kantha, apparently. Her family was part of the diplomatic mission to open up relations with Cloud Kingdom, and she decided she'd go. I had matters here to attend to. Even after the mission ended, she didn't come back for months, which should have been my first indication of a change. She had been a devoted mother until that point.

But when we would call on the commpad, something felt strained in a way that it hadn't before. She claimed it was because of the strict protocols in Cloud Kingdom, a place that is almost pathologically secretive.

When she finally returned to Mountain Kingdom, it was only to share the news with me and Hanai that she would be relocating. She had found her fated mate in Zephyron, and she could only stay for a week before returning to Cloud Kingdom. She insisted on taking Hanai, and I told her over my dead body.

"It's too difficult to leave Cloud Kingdom and return. I need her with me, or else I won't see her."

"Then you won't see her."

Hanai was only two-and-a-half when Kantha left for Cloud Kingdom, and three when Kantha left for good. Any later, and she would have felt the loss more intensely, although even at that age she felt a strong bond.

Once Kantha began to have her own children with Zephyron, it was as if Hanai never existed at all as far as Kantha was concerned.

And now, Hanai might not exist if things continue as they are. There's no way I can allow that. I would die for Hanai one thousand times over without question. I would endure torture. I would even destroy the Mountain Kingdom if I had to choose.

Which is why I'm allowing this woman to see her. Nothing else has worked so far. It's unlikely this will make anything worse, apart from my mood.

I'm not looking forward to humoring this idea. I don't like meeting anyone new, especially not a lower-level species that I'm rarely forced to deal with. *Why did I let Talan talk me into this?*

A bell chimes on my commpad to alert me that the shuttle is landing in the Mountain Kingdom. Unless this is a surprise visit from a royal of another realm, it means the human healer is here.

I need to enter Hanai's suite before I greet her, because I need to remind myself of the reason for tolerating the constant intrusions to our quiet lives. I need to remember that making Hanai better is worth any hardship, even subjecting myself to the uninformed opinions of unrefined beings whose presence on this planet is an accident at best.

Even the new layout of her suite serves as a reminder of what's at stake. It no longer includes just a bedroom, a playroom, a library, and water facilities. There's also a complete medical array, with machines to help her breathe and filter her blood where her body is incapable. Given the complexity of the Kiphian body, these machines only cover a fraction of everything her ailment affects.

"Hi, Daddy." She opens her eyes and sits up, hugging her stuffed chordata.

"Hi, sweetheart. I'm sorry if I woke you. How are you feeling today?"

“Better than overnight. I was freezing and hot at the same time. My blood felt like it was on fire.”

“Oh, honey. I hope we can get you some help soon. There’s someone coming today.”

Her eyes are listless. “Do you think they’ll be able to fix me?”

“Honey, there’s nothing that needs fixing. We just need to help your body heal. There is nothing wrong with you. But we’re going to see if she can help. Would you like to come down to meet her when she arrives?”

Her eyes light up. Ever since Kantha left, she seems to crave the attention of someone maternal.

“Can I see how awake I am?”

“Of course, sweetheart. She’ll be here very soon, though. We can just come up to see you, if you’d like.”

She nods her head, and I brush her forehead with my hand. It’s burning hot.

“She’s about to be here I think, so I’m going to meet her now. I’ll make sure she’s good enough to bring her to you.”

“I hope she’s nice,” she murmurs.

“Nice I can live without. I just need competent.”

I trudge down the stairs, knowing I’m setting us both up for disappointment.

The doors open wide as soon as I get to the atrium by the entrance, and I see the human healer. She’s in clothing that’s so out of place that at first I think it must be a joke. It’s a dun, faded color, streaked with what looks like mud. My anger immediately rises.

“Sir, this is Zaya Norland, the healer Talan referred to you.”

“Artisan,” she corrects. I scoff, and she notices. She scowls. The flash of anger in her eyes should infuriate me, but there’s something alluring about the fire seizing hold of her.

Despite her threadbare clothes and disrespectful manner, there's an odd beauty about this creature, with her large light brown eyes the color of raw almonds. Her hair is reddish, reminiscent of the copper deposits in the caverns on the edges of the capital, and it sets a path down to her graceful shoulders.

In one respect I'm grateful for her clothing, because I can see the outline of her fiendish curves. Her skin is so clear as to be luminous, with a healthy glow in the apples of her cheeks.

Even if she can't heal my daughter, I won't mind looking at her while she tries. I straighten my tunic, seeing her eyes wandering down to my chest, and I pray to the Divine Ones that my anatomy doesn't betray my interest.

"Pleased to meet you, Doctor Artisan. Are your healing methods hand-crafted? Maybe that's what the previous experts have been missing?"

I can tell she's gritting her teeth. Good. I don't want her to get too comfortable. She should be nervous, because the stakes of this meeting are higher than the value of her life.

"I do use my hands, but I don't presume to be any kind of healer. I have knowledge from books, and I have applied knowledge of certain curative elements from literally getting my hands dirty. I am here as a favor to my friend and out of a sense of obligation to help my brethren in the Mountain Kingdom. I'm not sure if I'll find more success than previous visitors. All I know is I will do my best."

On the one hand, it gratifies me to know that she doesn't think too highly of herself. On the other, I'd be willing to accept an over-inflated ego if it gave her a greater chance of healing Hanai.

"Serge, please see to it that Sarna outfits our guest with more appropriate clothing, and please make sure that she's never unsupervised. Post a guard outside of her room."

"Do you treat all the doctors this way?"

"Do you always present yourself to royalty with such disrespect?" It's as though she's incapable of basic decorum.

“I’ve had the pleasure of not interacting with many royals. And in Mountain Kingdom, there’s no such thing. It’s a confederation of clans. Your family is the glorified tiebreaker. If you’ll excuse me, I have to go and let them dress me appropriately. I don’t have any airs on yet. Hopefully they’ll fix that.”

We glare at each other for a moment before I can’t bear to look at her a second longer. “Sarna, Serge. Please alert me when it’s time to retrieve her for the examination.”

ZAYA

I'm in my 'appropriate' clothes for the Mountain Kingdom, which are really just glorified sheets not much different than what I was wearing. You would think they would appreciate leaving my life in the middle of everything, in such a hurry that I didn't care about changing, but of course not.

However, if I had insisted they wait, I know they would have pointed out my vanity. There's no winning with these types. I want to be out of here as soon as possible.

I leave the changing room and alert the guard that I'm ready for Taurek, who of course makes me wait. After several minutes of sitting in a chair, wasting everyone's time, I see the muscled outline of Taurek, and I stand.

"Are you going to let me examine your daughter now or...?"

Just seeing his arrogant face makes me angry, but his gladiator's physique sends a delightful tension through every cell in my body. He's an asshole. But he's hot.

Any other day I'd celebrate the opportunity to put some asshole Kiphian in their place. And a chance to do it to a Prince, that's the dream. But all of that goes out the window when a kid is in danger and when my time is being wasted.

I know what it's like to be sick at that age. To have all the 'best' doctors unable to help you. You can feel so alone, like everyone has left you to suffer. But, for this little girl, I hope I can be the savior I never got.

Taurek looks me up and down for a moment. I can't tell if it's that he's still trying to make his mind up about whether I'm fit to examine his child or whether he's toying with the idea of distracting himself from his daughter's illness with a human piece of ass. Or both.

"Yes. I just want to make sure there's no contamination. Now that you're in Mountain Kingdom garb, there's less of a worry."

"Prince Taurek," I say. "You summoned me here. So, let me help."

Taurek takes a deep breath and leads me to Hanai's wing. One of his huge Kiphian arms swings up to show me the way, and I'm stunned by the sheer size of his biceps. He could probably lift the royal shuttle I came in.

I follow his directions and eventually find myself in his daughter's room, feeling slightly breathless next to him for some reason.

This child's bedroom is larger than some homes back at the village, but instead of feeling anger, I feel a strange depletion. Even with all of these luxuries, this child is not safe from illness. Even with all of the resources this royal family has, they haven't found a treatment that works.

She's so slight, I'm not even sure at first if there's someone in the bed. Then an adorable Kiphian girl shyly looks up at me. Her eyes reveal the struggle of just staying awake. Just behind the exhaustion in her eyes, I see fear. The doctors who came before me must have really done a number on her.

I take a knee next to her, and I try my best to ignore the absurdly soft blanket that brushes against my arm. It's more difficult to ignore the brooding, intimidating, nearly seven-foot-tall Kiphian who doesn't take his eyes off me.

The little girl rolls onto her side to face away from me. Her breathing is rapid and nervous. I look back and see Prince Taurek lording over me, a glare on his face.

"Hello, my name is Zaya. Do you want to tell me your name?"

She stays quiet. But her breathing has slowed a little bit.

“Her name is –” Taurek starts to talk, but I hold my hand up to silence him. Obviously, I already know her name. But if I show up already knowing that, to her I’ll just be another doctor.

To my surprise, he follows my order.

“Those doctors who talked to you before were pretty scary, huh?”

She rolls over enough to look at me out of the corner of her eye. She simply nods.

“Well, don’t worry. I’m not like those doctors.”

“How?” She rolls over fully to look at me. Her breathing slows a little bit.

“You tell me what you didn’t like about those doctors, and I’ll show you how I’m different.” Behind me, I hear Taurek shifting his weight.

“They poked me with needles.”

“They did? That was rude of them.” I stand up and give her a twirl. “Do you see any needles?” I kneel back down.

“They talked really loudly...”

“I’ve never yelled in my life,” I whisper. She laughs, cracking the first smile I’ve seen from anyone since arriving here.

I listen to the way the laughing affects her breath and notice she doesn’t have the energy for it. It strains her, and it takes her a long time to catch her breath to even speak.

“And the things that they said were really scary. The things they wanted to do. They wanted to cut me open. To take away my blood. To put me beside a volcano.”

“That would scare me, too. I don’t have anything that would let me do that. You can search me.”

“They made me nervous. The way they talked about me. Like I was a dead body and not a live girl.”

“I promise I’ll do my best not to make you nervous. I’m nervous, too!”

“You’re nervous?” A playful disbelief enters her voice. I’m warmed to see this energy from her.

“Of course, I am!” I over-exaggeratedly look around to check if anyone is watching. “Can I tell you a secret? You can’t tell anyone.”

She nods.

“I’m nervous because... I’ve never met a princess before.” She smiles at me.

“Never?” A look of pride washes over her face. “I’m your first princess?”

“My very first. I don’t think I could’ve hoped for a better one to meet. That’s a good sign that you couldn’t tell. I must be doing okay. I think I forgot to curtsy.”

“You’re doing great!” she says with a laugh. “The doctors didn’t curtsy.”

I make a show of bending my calves into a plié hurriedly. “Phew. I almost became just like all the others.”

“Is there anything else the doctors did or didn’t do?”

She thinks for a long moment. “They asked a lot of hard questions.” I can hear in her voice as she’s answering a rattle that disturbs me. It’s different from an ordinary wheeze. It sounds like ball-bearings clattering in her lungs.

“I bet they did. Unfortunately, I’m going to have to ask you a few questions, too. But I’ll try my best to make them easy. If it gets hard, just tell me to stop. Okay?”

She nods hesitantly.

“Well, first question. I feel so silly. You still haven’t told me your name!”

“I’m Hanai!”

“Nice to meet you, Princess Hanai!” I hold out my hand, and she shakes it. I also do another curtsy, followed by a deep

bow. She smiles and returns the gesture as best she can while laying in the bed.

I see streaks of red on her neck, but it's not on the skin. It's from the blood inside, and it's radiating outward. I can make the conversation light to make the exam easier, but unfortunately, no amount of lightness can change the gravity of the symptoms I can already detect.

"Now, would you like to play a game?" Taurek clears his throat as if objecting, but I have my methods.

Hanai immediately lights up.

"A game? What game?"

"Give me your arm." Hanai holds out her arm, and I take it as I kneel back down. I place two fingers on the inside of her wrist. "Count to sixty as fast as you can in three...two...one!"

Meanwhile, I check her pulse while she occupies herself by counting.

Hanai completes the counting task, although it took a strenuous effort for her to keep focus, and the numbers weren't always in sequence. A few times, her mouth moved though no words came out, but she continued counting as if they had.

At twenty-seven, she started back at eighteen, but I didn't correct her. It gave me more time to check.

"Fifty-nine! Sixty! Did I win?"

Her pulse is extremely elevated in bursts, followed by periods of activity so slow as to be undetectable. It's incredibly disturbing, and it reveals her precarious situation. I manage not to reveal my alarm at the symptoms.

"A new record!"

I hold out my hand. "Next game! Can you please squeeze my hand as hard as you can? Try to hurt me."

"I don't want to hurt you! You're my friend!"

"Pretend I'm one of those mean doctors."

A smirk grows on her face as she takes my hand. She squeezes as hard as she can, but she can barely even grasp with her fingers. I pretend she's crushing my hand.

“Ow! Ow! Ow!”

“Sorry!”

“No, I'm kidding. You're not hurting me at all. I just wanted to give you the satisfaction of crushing the doctors.” We both laugh.

I let her know I'm going to hold her arm and feel her heart at the same time. I'm looking for one of the telltale signs, and at the same time hoping I don't find it.

Ba-bum. Ba-bum.

Bum-bum-bum-bum-bum. Ba. Ba. Babababa.

The pulse and the heartbeat don't sync up. It's the biggest indicator yet that it's stone-skipping sickness.

“Okay... Okay. Next game. No, never mind, you wouldn't want to...”

“Tell me!”

“Do you think you could hold your breath longer than me?”

I barely have the time to finish my sentence before Hanai takes a deep breath. She puffs her cheeks out as she does.

I fake being unable to hold any breath at all, since I know already she won't be able to go long without breathing, especially with her highly irregular pulse.

As I worried, she can't hold it for long. Barely longer than three seconds.

“Any more games, Zaya?”

“I have a few more, but not for right now. I think something else would be more fun.”

“Really? What?”

“Do you think you could tell me a story?”

“Me? You want me to tell you one?”

“Of course! I bet yours are way better than mine. Do you mind telling me how this all started? How you first got sick?”

I listen intently as Hanai tells me everything. And I mean everything. She may be a princess, but she’s still eight and goes off on all the unimportant tangents, like about the color of her friend’s skirt when she first felt her body acting as if her brain hadn’t given it permission.

I let her talk, keep eye contact, laugh when she laughs, and do anything else I can to make her feel heard. I’m sure the doctors interrupted her a lot to stay on topic. Or didn’t look up from their compads as they took notes. Hanai needs to know I’m listening.

As Hanai talks, I try my best to ignore Taurek. I can feel him standing just behind me, watching my every move. It reminds me of one of those old suits of armor that used to decorate human castles. I refuse to let his probing, intense eyes unsettle me.

Meanwhile, Hanai tells me, in a very long-winded way, what’s been going on. It started with a lack of balance, and it’s been unpredictable. Hallucinations. Full paralysis. Distortions of vision and hearing. Selective malfunctions of entire bodily systems. Oozing from the skin. Burning inside the blood.

I blend her descriptions of the files Taurek showed me, along with the physical symptoms I’m seeing.

I think I might know what’s wrong with her. And if it’s what I think it is, I only know of one treatment, and there’s no guarantee it will work. It’s also incredibly dangerous to get it.

I need to do some more tests with her to confirm.

We continue playing games, but her squeals of delight now hold an incredible sadness. If she doesn’t have a cure, I don’t know how much longer it will be before the halls filled with her laughter go silent.

TAUREK

When she holds her hand up to me while I try to tell her Hanai's name, I'm stunned. My body freezes, and my jaw locks up. There are a million responses swirling in my head about how badly I would love to put this upstart in her place. But I can't even speak from shock.

It's been so long since another being spoke to me like this that I want to make an example of her.

My lips part slightly, about to let her have it, when I notice Hanai looking at her. There's something in her eyes that tells me I should let this healer continue her work. I decide I won't let my pride get in the way of her getting the best treatment, although I doubt this egotistical woman is going to be the best this Kingdom has to offer.

"Those doctors who talked to you before were pretty scary, huh?" Zaya asks gently.

Hanai nods, and my throat clenches. They were trying to do their job. Who does this woman think she is?

My mind is racing with worst-case scenarios. This woman's pride might lead her to think she's more knowledgeable than she is. Then Hanai would be undergoing another ordeal for nothing if she didn't deliver the best results.

Zaya must notice me adjusting my position because she glances at the wall before turning back to Hanai. It's the worst feeling in the world, watching my daughter undergo all of these procedures.

There have been nights where I've wondered if I'm doing the right thing by forcing her to get poked and prodded, but I can't let her die. I don't know what I would do without Hanai. There's no point in life if she doesn't make it. She is the only purpose I have to continue on in this life.

Zaya whispers something to Hanai, and she laughs. She *laughs*, a sound I haven't heard in weeks, if not longer. I feel lighter hearing it, as if I'm still in the world before where she was just a normal child, free of the responsibilities that come along with being mortally ill.

"You're nervous?" Hanai asks Zaya with wide eyes.

"Of course I am!" Zaya chimes before looking around playfully. I watch Zaya's red-brown hair fall over her shoulder as she leans in to whisper something to my daughter.

Zaya looks like the picture of health in comparison to Hanai's pallor, and something about that is oddly reassuring. It feels almost possible that her life force could transfer to my daughter just from contact. Like I could touch her skin and feel the vibrance coursing through.

"I'm your first princess?" Hanai asks excitedly.

My lips curl upward. I haven't seen my daughter this chatty in a while. Hanai has always loved the title of princess. It's something most little girls dream of, and I've been all too happy to give her that title. Now, I must ensure she gets to continue her role as a princess for a very long time.

Zaya asks if Hanai wants to play a game. My eyes roll. I'm losing my patience with this woman. Then again, if she truly has no medical experience to offer, at least my daughter is getting a good conversation out of it. I can't even imagine being a child and being locked up like this.

Hanai counts quickly, and I watch on skeptically. She seems to be growing tired, and I hope Zaya can speed up the examination if Hanai's condition requires it. Zaya presses down on Hanai's wrist lightly, and my eyes widen in surprise.

She's checking her pulse. There might be hope for her yet.

After the first game, another follows, this time with Hanai squeezing Zaya's hand. My shoulders relax even more. She's checking her strength.

Then she checks her breathing. These aren't games at all. They're something much more stimulating for Hanai and more informative for Zaya and me.

The whirlwind of emotions inside me feels like they're about to burst out of my chest. The resentment I have toward the other doctors for not coming up with these methods sooner is the strongest, but beneath that, strange amazement is forming. How could this woman forge a relationship with my daughter and perform medical tests within the span of twenty minutes?

Hanai tells Zaya everything about her condition. She talks about her health like she's just learned the most exciting thing at school that day. This woman is innovative, I'll give her that. We'll see if it translates to success in diagnosis and treatment. I'm not letting myself get my hopes up.

Watching Zaya, I start to understand a little better how she could achieve such a strong bond with Hanai in such a short time. There's an energy that pours off of her and practically fills a room. I try to focus on Hanai, and normally nothing could take my focus from her even if I wanted it to. But with every movement, my eyes shift back to Zaya.

"And at first, I just felt tired, you know? Like how when you wake up from a bad dream, and you want to go back to sleep, but you can't." Hanai's face lights up while she talks. "Oh! I had one the other night! It was so cool!"

The attraction to this woman grows stronger, to the point where the thoughts of her become invasive. They begin to distort the reality around me. All I can feel is her skin against mine, and I find myself unwillingly moving in her direction as part of this pull.

In the Kiphian clothing, her body almost floats, and I want... I want. I want her.

I have to get out of there. The pull toward her was overpowering. Suffocating. As real an impediment to functioning as a lack of air. I lean against the wall, placing my hand over my heart while trying to catch my breath.

My head feels lighter, as if there's air flowing through my veins. The unfamiliarity of the feeling makes me wonder if someone spiked a drink of mine. Or if I'm getting the sickness now.

"Prince Taurek?" One of the staff members rushes over to me. "Prince Taurek, what's the matter?"

"Nothing," I reply, shaking my head. Just a sickness brought on by a human woman, apparently.

ZAYA

I've never been so eager in my life to be wrong about something. But if Hanai has what I suspect, the situation is incredibly grave. It's most likely stone-skipping sickness, and the prognosis is not good.

A short life of torture, never knowing when the next attack will hit or where. The cure that's worked in the past is only recorded in books written centuries ago. I don't know if it's still there or still effective. Kiphians may have evolved since then.

And if it is there, the journey is almost as likely to end in death as the illness plaguing Hanai.

I turn as the door slams shut. I thought I knew what to expect with a haughty Kiphian Prince, but apparently not. I never thought he would walk out on me and his daughter in the middle of a mission to save her life.

“Zaya?”

I turn to Hanai and smile like I'm not bursting with frustration. “Yes, Princess Hanai?”

“Do you know where my dad went?”

No. But I would love to find out. “I don't, honey, but I'm sure he'll be right back. You never know what kind of emergencies a Prince might have. Your family is very important.”

Kneeling before her, I rest my chin on my hand and look up at her from the bedside. “Why don't you keep telling me

your stories?”

She shrugs and looks down at her hands. “I don’t know any other ones.”

“Oh, I’m sure you do. You’re a great storyteller.”

“I am?”

I nod and grin. “What about when you first found out you were a princess?”

“Oh, that?” She smiles and waves her hand at me, and I can’t help but hold back a chuckle. The personality of this little girl is incredible. Somehow I don’t think she got her charm from her father.

“Well, most little girls are called princess when they’re little, Zaya. Did you know that?”

“Even my parents called me princess.”

“Did you ever believe that you were one?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Well, my grandpa is Thane, and my dad is Prince...”

I can’t help but wonder about the mother, especially given how awful the father is.

“And Daddy and Grandpa Odar were talking about the royal family. And they mentioned the Royal Princess, and I said, ‘Oh, Mom? Princess Kantha?’ They went quiet and sad. Because she was gone. And they said, ‘You’re the Royal Princess, Hanai. The most wonderful princess of all.’ And they cheered right up, and it made me so happy to know that being a princess made it better.”

A sharp pain strikes my gut. She’s sick, surrounded by strangers, *and* her mother is dead. What worries me the most isn’t her emotional state, as kids are extremely resilient, but what the stress of her mother dying could be doing to her condition.

I wonder how soon after that she fell ill. Although the father grates on me like sandpaper, he’s had some bad luck.

First, the death of the mother, and then his child develops such an awful illness at such a young age.

The resentment of my childhood sickness lasted years. I always wished I'd had the opportunity to fall off a slide or get in trouble for tracking mud on the floor. My childhood is one vague flash of hospital beds with people coming in and out, always wearing grim expressions.

I was constantly in the dark. I had no clue what was going on, and I was told to trust those strangers. While I look at Hanai beaming with excitement about being a princess, I remember that feeling of loneliness that hurt almost worse than the sickness. She's going through that too, and I had wished for someone to talk to when I was in her position.

I have to stay. I have to help her.

“You are the most wonderful Princess. They're right. And I can prove it with my royal reflex hammer.”

“Your *what?*” Hanai asks, giggling.

She flinches at the sight of the rubber mallet. I hold out my hand and grin. “Hey, you're okay. Take my hand.”

Gradually, she holds out her hand to touch mine, and I grip it lightly. “This isn't going to poke you or hurt you, alright? I need to see how well your body moves on its own.”

“On its own?”

I nod. “Yep! Your body has the power to move without you even *thinking* about it.”

“Hey,” I whisper, squeezing her hand lightly. She barely glances up at me, and I lean in. “Nothing scary, remember?”

Her diagnosis is scary enough. The examination shouldn't be.

“I need you to slide your legs over, though.”

“Is it going to hurt?”

“Nope! Now, can you count down from three for me?”

She shrugs. “Will you do it with me?”

“Sure. Three –”

“Two,” she mutters.

“One,” I tap her knee gently. Her leg barely moves at first, but then it’s buzzing around in spasms. I don’t want to do the other knee. There’s no need. I know that her reflexes are afflicted along with all of the other systems of her body.

“Whoa!” she exclaims, sitting up in bed quickly to look at her leg.

“Yeah, your reflexes are working, alright. Does it hurt?”

“No. But it feels funny.”

“I’m sure a lot of things feel funny right about now. At least you know it’s normal for some of your systems to not quite be in control, right?”

“Yeah.”

“How is she?” a low voice asks from across the room.

Turning around, I inhale deeply when I see Taurek standing by the door with his arms crossed. I open my mouth to respond, but Hanai beats me to it.

“Daddy! My body can move on its own! I didn’t even have to think about it.”

“What?” he exclaims, walking over to her and completely passing by me like I don’t exist. “That’s remarkable.”

He turns around to me, and I’m almost surprised he even glances at me. I was sure he saw me as nothing more than a brief inconvenience. “Hanai, my darling, do you mind if I steal Zaya for a moment?”

“Only if you bring her back!” Hanai answers excitedly.

“I will,” he responds without looking at her, his eyes focused intently on me. I can feel the intensity of his look coursing through my body. I’m hoping I haven’t done anything wrong. I know what a Kiphian of his status is capable of.

Looking at his brawny chest and his tawny eyes, I gasp a little thinking of what it would be like to feel affection

beaming from them rather than disdain.

I follow him as if in a trance. Before I know it, I'm cornered in the hallway, staring up at him.

“What do you think?”

Exhaling deeply, I try to harden my heart even more. Learning that her mother has died only makes delivering this news worse. Dealing with solutions and chemicals is always the best part of any work involving health and medicine. It's straightforward and logical. The social aspect is a challenge.

“I think...”

“Yes?” Impatience cuts through his voice.

“I'm trying to think of a way to put it.”

“Think faster. It might help.”

“A little patience might help.” I refuse to break for any man, human, Kiphian, or any other species. I deliberately go more slowly.

“Prince Taurek, I think it's skipping-stone sickness. If not that, something very much like it. Her bodily systems are not working as they're supposed to be. They're acting as if they're unaware the other parts of the body exist.”

“What does that mean for her?”

I think of saying, *Maybe if you think more quickly, you can figure it out yourself*, but it's such a distressing situation, I know that it would just make the bad news worse. And it would make things harder for me going forward.

“The only treatment that's been known to work is a very rare element called roxolite. It's only found in one place.”

“Where?”

“The Ice-Charred Peaks.”

TAUREK

Just when I'm ready to place slightly more faith in this Zaya, she undoes the goodwill she's accumulated. She must be mistaken. There must be some other cure that doesn't require a suicide mission to the most inhospitable place in the Mountain Kingdom if not all of Kiphia.

"You're trying to tell me that the only place that holds a treatment that can work is in a frozen hellscape? You're mad."

"Ask the physicians. Ask your royal geologists. Ask your chemists and engineers. But if you do ask, I suggest you leave before waiting for an answer. You'll need to act without delay."

"And what happens if we waste weeks in the Ice-Charred Peaks and it does nothing?"

"Then you'll be in the same place you are now."

"I don't trust your assessment. I'll ask the staff nurse her thoughts about your 'cure.'"

I go at a fast clip, and I see Zaya coming behind.

"Why are you following me?"

"Sorry, I just thought you wanted..."

"What I want is for you to know your place. Stay!" I point to a chair in the hall. I don't need this woman making it impossible to think, distracting me with her pheromonal cocktail.

“Nurse Hadack.” The older Kiphian nurse leaves her room in the hallway that leads to Hanai’s room.

“Hello, Your Highness. You’re well?”

“I’m fine. What do you know about...ugh, what did she call it? A mineral from the Ice-Charred Peaks.”

“A mineral?”

“Yes. Curative properties. Rolomine?”

“Roxolite. Yes. I’ve heard of this.” Her voice has shades of awe.

“What do you know about it, Nurse?”

“It’s remote. It’s hard to get. There’s lore surrounding it. The professionals I’ve heard from speak about it with reverence. It’s considered difficult to get but prized.”

“Mm. Thank you.”

“Can I help with –”

“Do you know anyone who would happen to have this?”

“No. I’ve never actually seen it.”

I nod. “Thank you, Nurse Hadack. I’ll summon you if I need anything further.”

I look at the end of the hallway, and I swear I can see the hint of Zaya smiling. I stand at her feet, towering over her.

“Come with me. To my study, Ms. Norland.” I walk quickly and powerfully, feeling the ground vibrate beneath me.

“Wait, slow down, I don’t know where you’re going.”

“I suggest you increase your pace then.”

I can hear her panting, and I’m gratified to show her where she ranks in relation to me. I hold open the door to the study impatiently, which makes her go faster. She needs to get used to who’s in command.

On a large table is an array of maps of the Kingdom, spanning different eras and surveying expeditions, including a corner dedicated to the Ice-Charred Peaks.

“What’s all this?” She’s slightly out of breath. The heaving of her chest is impossible to look away from.

“Your route.”

“My... route?”

Her flushed cheeks and glistening face make me imagine closing the door, enjoying her on this tabletop while she squirms beneath me.

“Yes. For when you retrieve your mineral.”

“For when... my mineral... I have no idea what you mean.”

“You diagnosed the problem, you find the solution. You would be the ideal person to retrieve your roxolite.”

“I’m not the ideal person for anything. I came out of a sense of duty. I am not going on a death march to one of the most dangerous places on the planet.”

“There are mountain guides.”

“No. The answer is no. I came and did my job. I’m not suited for this. As you’ve pointed out, I’m an ill-equipped, ordinary human.”

It seemed so preposterous that a mineral could rebalance the chaos of my daughter’s body that I didn’t even think seriously about how to get it.

“I certainly can’t go. I can’t leave Hanai. We’ll have to gather an expedition party to collect the roxolite.” Instantly I know I don’t trust this journey in the hands of anyone apart from those invested in Hanai.

“Who else then? Would Talan be a candidate?”

Pssh. Talan? I’m twice the rider he is.

“No, definitely not. He doesn’t have the kind of experience there that I do.”

“You’ve been there before?”

I love holding her in suspense, building a mystique, capturing the imagination of this gorgeous creature. I nod

solemnly.

“What was it like?”

“Everything they say. You know what they call the mountain pass to enter?”

“No. I know very little about the Ice-Charred Peaks.”

“Death’s Door.”

“You’re not really making the case for me to go on this trip, Prince Taurek.”

“The case for going on this trip is over there in that sickbed. You saw her. You have a greater understanding of how dire her situation is than I do. So tell me what you’ve read in your books. If you’re certain of where the roxolite is, you need to be the one to find it.”

It’s such harsh terrain that only someone driven half-mad by devotion or an adventurer who has been through the Ice-Charred Peaks successfully before could attempt it, much less complete it. I’m one of a small few who fall into both categories.

Even then, I know nothing about roxolite, including how to find it or what it looks like. Those with deep geologic expertise generally spend their lives buried in books, while adventurers typically don’t have scientific minds. Zaya seems to have both tendencies. The more I try to rack my brain for solutions, the more the solution seems obvious.

She’s also a perfect participant for a reason I would likely never share. She’s expendable. If she goes, we don’t have to risk a member of the Mountain Kingdom elite who would go in her place.

She only has to survive the first half, if I’m being pragmatic. Not that I wouldn’t make every effort to save her. But when we’re facing risks this great, delusions help no one.

“The Ice-Charred Peaks are huge, though.” She turns to the maps, flipping through them. “And they change all the time. Look at these. They’re only a few years apart, and they look totally different.”

“So why were you so certain they have what we need?”

“There are certain land features, bends in the mountains near crevasses where it’s found. Sort of like certain mushrooms popping up near certain plants. Aspects of the mountain make the roxolite accumulate.”

“So what you’re saying is you have no idea where it is.”

“What I’m saying is if you have someone who knows the peaks extremely well, I could describe the features of the places it’s found, and they could translate that into the geography.”

I know one guide with that expertise, but I don’t know if he’s available. Or willing. Like most people who spend too much time in that part of the Kingdom, it drove him a little insane. Too much death. Too much oxygen deprivation.

But he’s also crazy enough to go. If he can make the trip, there’s a chance this impossible expedition can actually happen.

“We need you to go, Zaya. There’s no question there.”

“And you’re going, too?”

I can’t tell if that makes her more or less likely to come along, but I wouldn’t mind curling up in chordata-wool blankets with her naked figure to keep me warm on cold nights.

“I’m not certain. I’ll contact the guide.”

“Well, it’s not fair if I have to go and you d—”

“It’s not fair that my daughter is lying over there watching her body disintegrate. It’s not fair that her mother...”

Zaya looks away. I don’t know if she’s heard of the calamity, but at least she’s not giving the same look of pity I’ve grown so disgusted with. *Pity yourselves, not me.*

“You’re going and I’m going, too.” I hadn’t made up my mind until after I said it. “I don’t want to leave my daughter without a parent. But if I’m the only one keeping her from

dying, then I'd rather die trying to save her than hasten her death at her side."

"I guess that's that, then."

"I have a guide in mind. He's the best there is."

"Good. I'm glad someone else will be there."

"A Kiphian Prince isn't enough for you?"

"Kiphian princes have nothing to do with it. The most uncouth mountain beasts have more civility than you. So I'm looking forward to someone other than *this* Kiphian Prince up there at Death's Door with me."

I can't help but chuckle. I'm unsure why it's so thrilling to get a rise out of her, but we all have to have a hobby.

"Be careful what you wish for, Zaya. You haven't seen these parts of the world or the beings they create."

I look her over, and incendiary thoughts cross my mind again. I could afford to have some fun. So could she, I have no doubt. She should be more terrified of the screams I could wring from her than the dangers of the mountains.

"Why don't you go check on Hanai? I'll meet you in her wing."

She turns, and I watch her as she goes, enjoying the way her body moves. On my commpad, I begin to make contact with Rylan. If he can't come, I'll need someone else. And soon.

If the Ice-Charred Peaks are our destination, we should have already left. The winds are brutal this time of the season, and there's more than enough peril even in perfect conditions.

ZAYA

“**B**ut when will you be back?” Hanai asks with wide eyes.

“Very soon,” I reply while Taurek’s footsteps echo behind me. “We have to go get this mineral so that you can feel better, alright?”

“Daddy?” she asks, lifting her eyes to Taurek, now standing over me.

“Yes, sweetheart?”

“Do you have to go?”

“Unfortunately, I do, honey. But only for a little while.”

“Can Zaya stay with me?”

“Well, honey, Zaya is actually the one who knows where the mineral is.”

“So you can stay?”

“We both have to go. But don’t worry. Zaya will keep me safe.” He winks. “I’ll make sure we both come back very soon.”

Standing up, I leave the two of them to talk and walk into the hallway. I can’t imagine being stuck with this smug megalomaniac all the way up to the peaks.

Maybe I should have taken his offer to go alone. I’m unsure if I would survive, but at least I would have had some

moments of peace in the peaks without him beside me. With a guide, I have as good a chance as with him.

As if he could hear my thoughts, he walks out of the room and greets me with a sly smile. My rage is bubbling up to my throat, and I can't contain it anymore.

"I changed my mind," I blurt out. "I want to go alone."

He laughs and shakes his head. "You had the chance to take that offer. It's no longer on the table"

I run my fingers through my hair and shake my head. "Well, I'm taking it now."

"Not a chance."

"Hanai wants you here. You should stay."

"Don't," he growls. "You're acting like the child in this situation. It's undignified. We're going together."

"If it's about danger, I could just send a message –"

"You think any of our comms work in the mountains?"

My mouth closes, and I shake my head. "Well, I could just take a weapon."

"Look, this isn't even a conversation right now, so you're only talking to yourself. But, for fun, I'll ask. Have you ever used any type of weapon?"

"Yes," I bark.

"What weapon?"

"A knife."

He laughs almost uncontrollably, and I'm about to lose my patience. To stop myself from saying something that could get me shoved in a Kiphian prison, I walk away. I'm about three steps away from him when he grabs the back of my cloak. I look into his eyes, and he shakes his head again.

"We're going together. A knife won't do you any good out there."

"Well, someone else could go, and I could give you updates!"

“With what communication system, Zaya?”

Zaya. The way he says my name makes me detach from myself. While I should be infuriated about how he’s grabbing my overcoat, I’m feeling something else instead. I want him to go even further than just gripping my clothing.

A cough from Hanai’s room interrupts our feuding. We both run in, and she’s wheezing and doubled over. Two nurses rush past us and start tending to her. Taurek runs his fingers through his hair.

“Has this happened before?”

He nods. “Every night essentially. This is a minor symptom.”

It sounds like a death rattle, but apparently, this is just a normal evening.

“Fine. I’ll go with you for her.”

“Good. I knew you’d start acting rationally. But we have to inform the Thane. We’ll send extra care for Hanai.” He looks back at his daughter, whose cough is still going strong.

I look at her, my heart sinking. He might be an asshole, but he’s still a father, and he loves his daughter enough to leave here with me to get her the care she needs. If he has that much compassion, maybe he’s not entirely awful.



THE THANE’S adjacent palace is elaborate, and even that is an understatement. I continually asked Taurek if I could wait outside, as I was unsure how well the Thane would take to a strange human woman, but he kept refusing. He was insistent.

I’m in the cloak Taurek’s staff outfitted me in, and I feel overdressed based on my own standards and underdressed based on my surroundings. Taurek has changed into royal blue robes. Even the guards standing on either side of the main castle doors are doing double takes at me.

We're halfway down the grand hall, walking toward the throne room when I grab Taurek's arm. He flinches away from me more drastically than before we got here.

"Not in the castle," he commands.

"I don't want to go in there," I whisper adamantly.

"I don't care," he replies sternly, whipping around and facing me. "This is non-negotiable. Put your hand on me again, and I'll involve the guards."

I've heard horror stories from Talan about his own family, and I can only imagine that royals are even more intolerant than nobles. I'm not certain of anything, though. Obviously, I've come at a time of crisis. But I'd prefer for family matters to be settled among family, not me.

He keeps walking toward the throne room and I follow. There is a guard posted on every inch of this hallway, unsurprisingly, and I'm doing my best to pretend I somewhat belong here while Taurek enters the throne room.

I turn to the door and freeze when I see the Thane high up on his throne. I've heard legends but have never seen a Mountain Kingdom Thane in person. I forgot to curtsy to a princess. What other faux pas might I be committing now?

"Taurek, my son!" the Thane bellows, stepping down from his throne. "What news is there? Is it Hanai?"

The Thane locks eyes with me, and immediately I shift my gaze to the ground and curtsy.

"And who is this you've brought before me? Without virtually no warning, no less. She must be more important than she looks."

"Lady Zaya from the Tlisan settlement. She's essential to the urgent preparations." I try to conceal my shock at his attempt to elevate me. The only one more surprised than me is Taurek.

"Greetings, Lady Zaya of Tlisan." The Thane looks in my direction for a moment, then back to his son. "Yes, please,

Prince Taurek, tell me about your plans. You're journeying to the Ice-Charred Peaks?" The Thane looks concerned.

"For a cure. A medicine derived from a rare mineral found only there. Called roxolite."

The Thane walks slowly back up to his throne. "Roxolite. This sounds familiar, although I'm not sure why. When do you plan to leave?"

"As soon as possible, Your Highness. Hanai gets worse by the day."

"It's a trek few return from, you know." The Thane looks mournfully in what I assume is the direction of the peaks.

"I understand, your highness. As you know, I've braved them before."

"I was unhappy about it then as well."

"Now there's a dire reason for me to go, Father. Your Highness. It's for the survival of your granddaughter and the strength of the dynasty. I don't trust anyone else to perform the task. And Zaya is necessary for finding the mineral."

Despite all my doubts, the strangest thing happens. He's starting to convince me that I might actually be useful on this mission. And it almost seems like he believes it, too.

"Very well." The Thane nods, not revealing his inner mindset. "But not without a sendoff."

"Your Highness, we really must –"

"Elcior!" the Thane bellows, and a regal guard, one who might even be nobility himself, appears in the throne room, outfitted in finery.

"Yes, Your Highness?"

"Elcior, my Chief Steward. Please. We must organize a dinner — no, a banquet — to send off our Crown Prince." His eyes meet mine from across the room. "And his aide," he adds as an afterthought.

"For when my Thane?" one of the staff members asks.

“Tonight.”

“Ah. Yes.” His words affirm him, but his voice and expression betray his hesitancy. “I shall have the household staff prepare the palace. For sundown?”

“Thereabouts.”

He nods and bows. “I shall contact the nobility and mobilize the kitchen and festivities crews.”

“Thank you, Elcior. I know you’ll rise to the occasion.”

“We shall see.” He smiles, and the Thane smiles back. It seems like they have a long kinship. I wonder if they grew up together.

The Thane motions to his son with his head for Elcior’s benefit. “We must make sure they’re well-fed before sending them on this perilous journey. Divine Ones know it’s the last satisfying meal they’ll have for a while.”

“Or ever...” I hear a guard murmuring, and the Thane’s neck twists to see who.

“Thank you, Your Highness.” Taurek bows before walking out of the throne room, and I follow.

I whisper to Taurek as we race through the hall, wishing he would slow down a hair. “Don’t we have to get ready, Taurek? Prepare for a major trip?”

“The staff can prepare what we need. But if we don’t humor the Thane, we’ll never have clearance to leave.”

TAUREK

“**T**hat was painless. Or will be, once this banquet is over,” I say to Zaya as we walk between the palaces, in a special walkway that connects my palace with the Thane’s.

Bringing the quest to the Thane went as well as could have been expected, although he couldn’t have really said no. He just could have made it unpleasant, especially with an unknown, untested assistant. But even he realizes how necessary she is to the expedition. She’s the only one who knows what we’re even looking for.

Once we’re back in my palace, Zaya and I walk toward my wing in relative silence. I see one of my servants, Mikal, a Kiphian woman, waiting for my return. “Will you be requiring anything this evening, sir?”

“Yes, Mikal, many, many things. The Thane will be throwing a feast this evening in anticipation of our departure. Please see to it that our guest is fitted in a dress worthy of such an event. Something to go with my blue robes, if possible.”

“Of course, sir. Consider it done.” Mikal leads Zaya down a side corridor, and Zaya slips away with her. She looks stunning in the informal Kiphian clothes she’s borrowed, but at a banquet, she has to be dressed at least as well as the nobility.

I start to make my way to my chambers to get changed for the feast but take a quick detour into Hanai’s chamber. I find her asleep in her bed, a state I’ve found her in all too

frequently. Never would I imagine I'd miss the headache of her running around screaming as she plays.

Her eyes weakly open as I tip-toe to her bed. An equally weak smile grows on her face as she sees me. "Papa?"

"Hanai, my love. How're you feeling?"

"Tired. And hungry."

"Well, you're in luck. The Thane is throwing a feast for me and Zaya."

"Really?" Hanai's eyes widen with excitement. "Can I come?"

"Of course. You're the only one I'd really want there."

"But Zaya will be there too, right?"

"Yes, she will."

"Good, I like Zaya."

Through pure instinct, I almost respond 'I like Zaya too,' but I stop myself.

"Wait," she continues. "A feast for...?"

"The journey we're taking. You remember we talked about it?"

"Oh. I was hoping it wouldn't be happening yet."

"The sooner we leave, the sooner we can come back and you can get better if the cure she has works."

"You'll be back, though."

"Of course. I swear it."

"Mom promised that too." Hanai rolls over to face away from me.

I flinch at the memory. We don't talk much about her mother. I honestly wasn't sure how much Hanai remembered about her. I guess the answer is too much.

"I'll be back. You'll get better. And everything will go back to normal." Hanai doesn't look at me. "Sarna is going to

get you dressed and ready for the feast. I need to go get dressed, too. I can't wait to see how beautiful you look."

"Dad?" I halt at the doorway.

"Yes?"

"Wear the blue robes. It looks the best on you. I think Zaya will like it."

"Good idea. You should wear blue, too. We'll match."

I quickly throw on my blue ceremonial robes, a dark hue like the ocean during a storm. The sumptuous fabric hugs my body, putting my muscles on full display. I've seen Zaya stealing glances at me, and I want to make an impression at this dinner. I'm sure in her blue gown Zaya will make one of her own.

Zaya and Hanai are both still getting ready, and they'll meet me down there.

I get to the feast hall, a huge stone chamber with vaulted ceilings. A large, long table sits in the middle, lined with standard seats. An extravagant throne sits at the far end. The Thane's seat.

Other guests have already arrived and are milling around. I hear their whispers. "Where is this human woman? I hear she has some miracle cure for Hanai. Maybe she'll have some miracle cure for Taurek if you know what I mean."

"I think the Thane wanted a banquet because he knows it's likely he'll lose both of them by the end of this."

"There's been so much misery, we have to have parties to mark the sad occasions instead of the happy ones."

They're not wrong.

In the back corner of the hall, a small band plays traditional Mountain Kingdom music. The dulcet tones echo beautifully around. Just as the band starts a rendition of a popular love song about two star-crossed lovers from warring communities, Zaya walks in.

One of the finest dresses of the Mountain Kingdom clings to her body. The dress, the exact shade of blue as my clothes, fits exquisitely. All of the facets of her perfect curves are tastefully on display, cradled in fabric that fits like a second skin. In the front, the dress is high-necked, but the outline of her breasts makes them irresistible. The back is exposed.

Other Kiphians feign nonchalance out of politeness, but I can see them secretly drinking her in as well. I feel a proud sense of possessiveness, and at the same time, I want her to enjoy herself.

We approach each other. I can't pull my eyes away from the way her body moves under that dress. We look at each other in silence.

“You look extraordinary.”

Zaya's eyes look me up and down, and I can tell they're lingering on my toned muscles. “You clean up nicely yourself.”

I'm about to say more when Hanai, wearing a dark blue dress of her own, enters the hall. A servant is pushing her on a hover chair, used by those who can't stand on their own. My heart drops. She looks so weak.

If Zaya has the same reaction, she doesn't show it. She immediately walks over to Hanai with a huge smile on her face. Before I can make it over, the pair of them are laughing.

Then the Thane walks in. The entire hall falls quiet. All eyes are on him.

“Be seated. Welcome, honored guests.”

Everyone quickly moves to their seats. I push Hanai's hoverchair over to the long table. I sit on one side of Hanai, while Zaya moves to sit on the other, but a Duke tries to take the seat first.

“I'm sorry, my dear Duke,” I say. “But this seat next to the Princess is reserved. Please sit on my other side if you would like.”

Zaya smiles and takes the spot next to Hanai, and the Duke bows.

The servants burst into the hall with plate after plate of dinner, and we enjoy the full complement of food. We begin with a soup dish made from roots grown in the underside of caverns, said to have magical properties — although, depending on who you ask and who's selling it, everything in the Mountain Kingdom does. That's why I'm still skeptical of this mineral cure. But I'm willing to try anything.

A salad with greens from the apex of Taro's Peak, a holy place for the Mountain Kingdom, arrives for the next course. A wild goose, a yarfo, is served next, with fermented jellies baked in berry vinegar for more than a year. For dessert, it's a cornucopia of cakes, pies, fruits, and custards that could feed an entire family for a year.

The hall is lively, especially near us. Many from the Kingdom come to greet me and Hanai, and also to satisfy their curiosity about the exotic guest next to her. Others in our Kingdom sometimes forget that we still exist, since so many of our subjects took a hands-off approach after the calamity.

“Nobility of the Mountain Kingdom.” The Thane stands up about an hour into the dinner. He holds out his glass of wine. “We are here to celebrate Prince Taurek, who is about to set out on a noble journey to obtain medicine for dear Princess Hanai, his daughter.”

Everyone at the feast turns to look at me, give knowing nods of approval, and applaud. I stand up to address the crowd.

“Thank you, thank you, kind friends. I'm honored to share this last evening with you before the arduous journey ahead. I hope that I shall come back with the cure for our beloved Princess Hanai. She is the true guest of honor at this evening's feast. As is the Thane for giving his blessing for this undertaking. To Hanai! To the Thane!”

They raise their glasses. Hanai and I smile, along with my father.

Once the toasts die down, in a voice barely above a whisper, Hanai speaks into my ear. She looks like she's holding onto life by a thread.

“Papa, I'm so tired. Would you mind if...”

“Of course, my darling, you should go to sleep. Here, we'll help take you...”

I spot Sarna by the door, and Zaya leans over to help with the hoverchair to take Hanai to the other side of the room.

Our hands grab the back of Hanai's chair at the same time. Her fingers graze mine ever so slightly, but it's enough. A jolt spreads across my body. My spine starts to heat up.

Oh, no. This is the last thing I need right now. Please, Divine Ones, no. Let this be a mistake.

ZAYA

Hanai can barely hold her body up as Sarna pushes her away from the feast hall. The banquet hall seems somehow emptier without her presence, even though it's full of hundreds of revelers.

The gown makes all of this seem real. It makes my role feel important, even historic. I feel like I'm part of something more important than myself. I don't know who the dressmakers were, but I'm grateful that the royal family happened to have a few dozen options left lying around. I wonder if it's the mother's.

Once Hanai disappears from view, I turn to face Taurek, but he's looking away and occupied by his thoughts. With the journey and his daughter, as well as the experience of attending this banquet, a place he must have shared memories with Hanai's mother, I'm sure there's a lot on his mind.

Even he's entitled to a few minutes of peace. Even if he robs me of so much of mine.

Taurek and I each pick at our desserts. There are far too many, and we can't even finish one. I'm too nervous about everything. Hanai's illness. The Ice-Charred Peaks. The slim probability of ever getting back home.

"I hear you leave at dawn, Taurek. Is that true?" a portly Kiphian nobleman asks, sidling up to him.

"Is it, Taurek?" I don't know if I've called him by his first name alone before, but it seems appropriate here. I knew we

were leaving soon, but I didn't realize that that meant a few hours from now.

"We're leaving as soon as we can. You emphasized the importance of that even more than I did. But it's crucial, of course. Yes, we set out tomorrow. And if you'll excuse me, I need to arrange some details of that with the Thane currently."

How did Hanai's mom last as long as she did with Taurek? If this is how he always is, hot and cold, it must be maddening. I've only known him for a short while and I'm already tired.

Hanai has never said exactly how her mom passed away. But dealing with someone like him couldn't be good for anyone's health.

"It's a shame." The portly Kiphian takes Taurek's seat.

"What is?" I say offhandedly but get no response.

"What's a shame, Duke?" a nobleman beside me asks. His question is quickly acknowledged.

"Really everything about Prince Taurek. I remember years ago when his mate was still with us. He was so much more alive then."

"Ah, Kantha. Yes. Before the calamity." An older Kiphian noblewoman leans in. "They were a good match. There was love there. As much as there can be in those circumstances. After she was gone, everything changed."

"If you don't mind me asking," I interject. "How did she pass?"

"How did she...?" The portly Kiphian looks at me in confusion. Just then, the band launches into playing some slow ballad.

"Oh, I love this song!" The noblewoman grabs the portly Kiphian by the hand. "Dance with me!" The two run off to the dance floor, as do most at the table, and I'm left with only more questions.

Taurek when he's nice and in love. I can hardly imagine such a sight. I get a flash of what it must be like to be the

recipient of it, and I feel something akin to stage fright. As if such a bright beam shouldn't be focused on me.

In waves, the visions appear. Taurek's hand tenderly holds mine. His fingers brush the hair out of my face. I have dinner with him and Hanai as a family. I feel his lips on mine.

"Everything is all set for tomorrow." I'm brought back to reality as Taurek sits back down next to me.

"Oh, good. That's a relief, I suppose." I try to catch his eye, and he's looking at another one of the guests.

"It is. Care to celebrate out on the dance floor?"

"I'm sure you learned some impressive moves growing up amid high society. I'd love to learn."

He gives a big grin and takes my hand as he leads me to the dance floor. I suddenly realize I know nothing about Kiphian dancing, but I have a feeling that whatever I don't know, Taurek will tell me. Probably in the most condescending way possible, too.

With one hand, Taurek holds mine. His other finds purchase on the small of my back. The touch of his fingers against my exposed skin sends electricity across my body. My free hand falls on his shoulder.

The rest of the night is a blur. Taurek and I dance together, in silence and in raucous laughter, likely inspired by the wine. We're on the dance floor until the band packs up to leave. Even then, we continue to dance while singing the evening's tunes a little too loud.

Our eyes hardly leave the other's. I can't help but wish this night didn't have to end. I also can't believe this is the same Kiphian I've been so afraid of since I got here.

"I'll be here to wake you up bright and early." Taurek leads me to my makeshift chambers after the feast ends.

"Goodnight, Prince Taurek."

"Goodnight, Lady Zaya."

I fall asleep as soon as my head hits the pillow. I had no idea just how tired I was until that moment. There is no way I'll be getting enough sleep by the time I need to get up tomorrow.

Almost instantly, my head begins to swim in a dream of Taurek. We're back on the dance floor, just the two of us. His hand is on my lower back, just where I want it. Our bodies are pressed together.

Taurek leads me across the dance floor. The music booms a lovely melody from an unknown source. My gown flows behind me as we dance.

Suddenly, as we dance, the room around us fades away. We continue to dance through the void. His eyes never leave my face. His hands never leave my body.

My makeshift chambers fade into the background. The music swells louder and louder but we stop dancing.

Taurek's hands move up and down my body. The tips of his fingers graze my skin. He holds me up against the wall. Taurek holds his lips just a hair from my skin. His breathing tingles through my body, and it feels like the skin itself is moving.

I want more. My brain can't focus on much else besides the experience of his body during this assault of pleasure. But I know I want more.

Taurek looks me in the eyes. "Time to wake up, Zaya."

I'm jolted awake as a rap on my door startles me. It takes a moment to register where I am and what's happening. The pounding grows louder.

"Zaya. It's time for us to depart," his voice calls through the stone door.

I jump up from my bed and race to the door. Opening it up, I find myself face-to-face with Taurek. Just like I was a moment ago in my dream.

As I look into his eyes, I can feel the pink rush to my cheek, as if he knows the contents of my dream as intimately

as I do. And I'm embarrassed to say, I want the real thing so much more than even the untrammelled desire I had for him in the dream.

Fortunately, I never talk in my sleep. Not as far as I know. Plus the door was closed.

"It's time to go." He looks me up and down with a glint in his eye. Mikal, fortunately, gave me a glorious silken robe for sleeping, and the image he has of me isn't much different from how my body was last night in the dream.

"Your clothes for the trip have been prepared. Here's your satchel. The chordatas have been outfitted already with other provisions."

"Thank you."

"Of course. I'll be waiting downstairs."

Taurek starts to walk away but stops and quickly looks back at me before continuing. For the briefest moment, he gave me this stare with the flash of a smirk. *Does he somehow know?*

TAUREK

Saying goodbye to my daughter is one of the most painful feelings I've ever had. I can't help the negative thoughts swirling in the back of my mind as much as I try to push them away. How much worse is she going to get while we're gone?

The worst thought has only sprung up a few times, one I don't care to think of again. Coming back home and being alone with myself in this palace would be my worst nightmare.

Walking into her room, my heart sinks. She's lying almost lifeless in her bed. My eyes fixate on her stomach, and once I see it rise and fall, I feel like I can breathe again. I just don't know how much longer it will continue that way. That's the most horrifying aspect of this illness. Not knowing.

"Hanai?" I ask, almost in a whisper. Part of me hopes she keeps sleeping so I don't have to say goodbye. But I would never forgive myself if I didn't.

"Hmm?" she mutters, blinking her eyes slowly as her head turns toward me. "Hi, Daddy."

"Hi, Princess."

Kneeling at the edge of her bed, I take her hand in mine and grin. Her hair is tangled in the back from her constant sleeping, and her eyes are dazed like she's been on a sedative.

"Zaya and I have to go, alright?"

"Now?" She frowns and pouts. I wonder momentarily if I should stop everything and pray to the Divine Ones right now

that this isn't the last time I see this expression on her face.

"Yes, honey."

"When will you be back?"

"Really soon," I respond, kissing her hand and trying to quell the knot forming in my throat.

"Promise?"

"Promise."

Her eyes shift behind me, and she smiles. Turning and looking over my shoulder, I see Zaya knocking on the door. "Can I come in?"

"Yes, of course." I have to clear my throat to get some semblance of stability in my voice.

"Hi, Princess Hanai," she chimes in a soft tone. "How are you doing?"

Hanai shrugs. "About the same."

"Alright," Zaya responds, walking over and shifting her gaze to Hanai's hair. "Hey, you know what every Princess needs?"

"What?"

"For someone to brush her hair." I gesture for Zaya to pick up the brush on the side table, and she smiles as she hands it to me. "Do you mind?"

"No, not at all," Hanai responds with a cheerful smile before rolling over and facing the other direction. Zaya glances at me, almost with a look that asks for permission. I give a nod and try to hold in my smile.

Zaya brushes Hanai's hair and gently removes all the tangles. My eyes start stinging, and I have to think about something, anything else, to keep myself from falling apart. My eyes rise to the clock on the wall.

Rylan. We're supposed to meet him outside in five minutes.

I open my mouth to tell Zaya we have to go, but Hanai starts speaking. "Will you get the roxolite, Zaya?"

Zaya looks back at me with a sad smile, but her voice when responding to Hanai is resolute, without a trace of uncertainty. “Yes. We will. I promise.”

“Sweetheart, it’s time for us to go. You’ll be with us, you know. Every step of the way, and every step back.” I hold her as closely as I can, in a hug that feels slightly too tight for her frail body.

“Alright,” Zaya whispers and pats Hanai’s back. “You rest, honey. We’ll be back soon.”

Zaya leans over and kisses Hanai on the head. Although Kantha was her biological mother, there’s a natural give-and-take in their rapport that even Kantha never had with her. But Kantha is one of those types who never was meant for parenthood. Her new Cloud Kingdom family might disagree, but when it comes to children in this Kingdom, a cloud might have more affection.

I force myself to leave Hanai’s room and try to clear my mind walking to the front entrance. When we reach the doors, Rylan is waiting for us with three chordatas. They’re stomping their hooves on the ground, but it feels like a familiar challenge.

I was always the best at taming unruly chordatas, even better than professional chordata tenders. They called me the chord whisperer. If they wanted to, they could charge me and strike a hole in my chest, but with me, they wouldn’t dare. They know quickly I’m their master.

“Welcome to your rides,” Rylan greets us stoically. “Urtell, Antell, and Entell.”

“And welcome to your riders,” I say to the shaggy-haired beasts, and I walk to the largest one.

“That’s the one I was planning on riding,” Rylan says.

The chordata is already nuzzling me and braying for me to give it attention.

“Apparently the chordata has other plans.” Chordatas choose their master. The dominant chordata chooses the dominant rider.

I look at Zaya, who looks taken aback by the creatures.

“Never ridden one before, Zaya?”

“I have. A handful of times. The chordatas never seem happy about my company, though.”

I walk over to her and place my hands on the flank of the shaggy beast, the smallest of the group. It starts purring and nuzzling my arm.

“How did you do that?” she asks, stunned.

“Magic. Hop on. She’s yours now.”

“Looks like you have ‘middleman’ right there, Rylan.”

“I love them all equally.”

“Ah, the lie all parents tell.”

I mount the creature, who’s looking over at me, seemingly concerned over where I went. I take my time adjusting to the feeling of it moving beneath me.

“Hold on tight,” Rylan commands before ushering the chordata forward. I grip the reins gently, and the chordata moves forward like a snowdrift in a soft breeze. With chordatas, they’re highly social creatures. The animals Rylan and Zaya are riding suddenly get in line behind my chordata.

“Whoa!”

“Yeah, they can be a little unpredictable at first. Hold tight!” Rylan says.

“Ugh, how do you keep from getting sick on these things?”

“Skill. Practice,” I add.

“Ah. Helpful. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” I smile.

“So,” Rylan barks, interrupting our sniping. “The mountains span from east to west. The easiest way for us to get in is through one of the side routes from the lower villages. It snakes up to the first base camp.”

Rylan continues speaking about the mountains and various passageways as our beasts of burden start walking abreast. Part of me wants to fall asleep just from listening to him drone on, especially from the wine and partying the night before. But what keeps me awake is watching Zaya's hips move with each step of the chordata.

Zaya's chordata stumbles over a rock but catches itself quickly, and Rylan reaches out a hand to her shoulder. Something about it kicks off a twinge of jealousy, even though he's old enough to be my father. Possibly grandfather. His age is something of a mystery.

During the split second of the near-fall, I noted Zaya's eyes were locked on me, not Rylan. I get the sense that if she's stumbling, I'm the first one she'll turn to. That means more than being there for her at the exact moment. At least when the moment, like now, is insignificant.

I'll be prepared when it's pivotal. And, given where we're traveling, it's not a question of when, but if.

Zaya adjusts her position and glances at me, not knowing that I'm preparing myself for the near-inevitability that I'll be saving her life at some point. I doubt she realizes just how much everything is out of your hands out here.

"Doing alright over there, Prince?" she asks, a little unsteady on her chordata.

"Marvelous, my honored subject."

"Subject?"

"I thought I'd mirror you on the formalities."

"Are you two going to flirt the whole way up this mountain?" Rylan asks.

"With you, Rylan? Always. Pucker up, baby. You look *good* riding that chordata. You're the sexiest thing on this mountain. Don't tempt me."

He gives me a kissy face and then sticks out his tongue.

I see a slight pout on Zaya's face at my dodging the question. There will be plenty of time for flirting, assuming we

survive this.

ZAYA

The snowstorms are nothing compared to the whirlwind of my life in the last five days alone. It hasn't even been a week since this all began, and I don't feel like I'm the same person I was before all of this began.

I've lived more in the span of five days than in the 24 years before it.

They never expected me to live beyond ten years old, so just surviving was a gift in itself. I never could have imagined being in the center of an adventure like this, with beings I never imagined I'd meet, much less be on a lifesaving mission with.

Well, lifesaving if I don't die first, which is a real possibility.

"Has anyone ever died on a chordata up here?"

Rylan and Taurek look at each other, and I know the answer before they say anything. The higher we go, the more treacherous things are.

"In a word? Yes." Rylan snickers, and now I don't know if he's actually joking.

"But it's not common," Taurek adds. "Especially if you're a skilled rider."

"Any opportunity you have to bring up your glory days..."

"It's just a fact."

I look at Rylan, trying to get a hint as to what he's talking about.

“Regale the peasants with your tales of heroism,” I urge.

Rylan lets out an enormous laugh.

“Well, before your hero here was famous for riding a throne, he competed astride a chordata.”

“Like gladiatorial fights to the death?”

“Not quite.”

“Will you do some tricks later? This I have to see,” I tease with a laugh. Although I mock it, the idea of Taurek attuned to every single muscle in his body sends tendrils of desire circling.

“Keep laughing. When it gets more treacherous, see how funny it is. Hubris is not appealing up here. Or useful. The sport is preparation for survival. I've had close calls where my companions' mistakes led to their demise.”

Every once in a while, something snaps me out of my delusion that this is another camping trip. Like finding out that at least one in twenty travelers through these crags never leave. At least not alive. Or that even someone as privileged as Prince Taurek has borne witness to violent accidental deaths up here on the same trails we're traveling.

A few times, I've spotted some debris in the distance, thinking it's discarded provisions from a traveler who packed too much or remnants of a campfire. Inevitably, it's the body of someone left behind, too heavy or decomposed to carry.

I sit in silence, thinking about the kinds of people who have trekked to these mountains and the reasons why. What were they seeking that led them to seek their death? I imagine riding a chordata that lost its footing, bodies disintegrating from the acidic geysers that rise up from the canyons, or simply giving out from exposure, frostbite, exhaustion, or losing the will to live.

It took a lot for me to come out here, and we're here for the most important cause there is – preserving the life of an

innocent child.

I wonder if my life would have been different if a kingdom had mobilized to find a cure for my sickness. It baffled doctors but with different symptoms from Hanai's. The cure was different, too, but worked on the same principle. It didn't just treat the symptoms.

It altered the genetics to repair the body's processes. With Hanai, it's electrical signals. With me, it was my hormones not traveling through my body, as if they got stuck at the delta of a muddy river. Like the human illness diabetes, but everywhere.

Most people don't come here to find cures, and knowledge of roxolite is practically as rare as the element itself. Were the ill-fated travelers seeking adventure? Or running from something? Or trying to siphon the greatest hit of pure life by brushing up against death?

"This doesn't look good." Taurek stops his chordata suddenly, pulling its reins as the silken-haired beast looks around, puzzled.

"What doesn't look good?" All I see is a light dusting of snow falling softly, a welcome reprieve from the gale-force winds we've faced the last few days. I wrap my fur closer against my shoulders.

"The sky. With the moisture and air pressure, the freezing rain will fall like bullets. We have to seek shelter fairly quickly. But seeking shelter isn't the most difficult part."

"What is then?"

"First, we don't know how long this ice storm will last. Sometimes days. And once it stops, there's the issue of repairs."

"Repairs?"

Rylan chimes in. "We rely on bridges to cross the crevasses. We rely on fixed ropes from previous travelers. The shards destroy them"

"And think of all the supplies we have to fit into the shelter."

“And we don’t have long to find one,” Rylan adds, craning his neck to the sky.

“And it’ll be sundown soon.”

I don’t know what I would have done if Taurek had let me go into the mountains alone. I would have likely died on the first day, just from the icefalls sliding off the trees. I thought I was used to mountains, but these ones are not like anything I’ve seen.

The Ice-Charred Peaks feel more like a living organism than slabs of rock. I’ve been to practically every Kingdom on Kiphia, and I’ve heard stories from generations of Earth lore, but I’ve never heard of a place like this. The force of the winds can snap a person’s neck. The snow is known to fall thirty feet, and even higher with wind shear.

“Ice-Charred Peaks actually became the name because of a mistake,” Ryland says gravely.

“A mistake?”

“It was ‘shard.’ Like glass, because of how steep it is, because of how brutal it is, and because of the shards of ice coming from all directions. But it became ‘charred’ and it stuck”

“When was the first time anyone came up here?”

“That’s been lost to the ages. But the first time someone went up who actually was documented to come back?” Taurek looks at Rylan, who’s frowning.

“Within my lifetime,” Rylan pronounces solemnly. Taurek told me that no one’s quite certain of his age. His lifetime might span five hundred years. No one knows.

“An expedition that included my grandfather. And Rylan’s father. There’s a long history there.”

“What was the expedition for?”

“We were going through a famine. Crop failures. Animals dying. This was a long time ago. Long before I was born. They thought maybe they could invoke the Divine Ones if they went to the highest peak in the Kingdom.”

“And did they?”

“I don’t know. But in the Ice-Charred Peaks, they found substances that helped things grow. Maybe it was the Divine Ones. Maybe it was the mountains revealing secrets and Kiphians being resourceful. But they took on special significance. They took some of the minerals back, mined in a different part of these mountains. It was called mirconium. And when they constructed the new palaces, we used it for insulation.”

“Do you think it made a difference?”

“I’m not sure. We’ve had mostly good fortune. The clans maintain peace. We still have one of the more democratic setups in Kiphia. But, I don’t know. It’s not capable of performing miracles. Hanai’s illness is proof. And...”

Taurek grows silent and looks off in the distance. Rylan looks downward at the accumulating snow. He must be talking about the death of his previous mate, and I think about the heartbreak he must have endured. A personal tragedy for a royal becomes a collective tragedy, which must make it so much more painful.

After moving forward for a little while in silence, we find a cavern protected from the elements to make camp for the night, large enough for the chordata to fit, although they were slightly spooked by the small space.

In the morning after our rest, we see the effects of the shard storm – broken guideposts split in two, boulders smashed apart like snowballs, and trees dashed into splinters.

In the distance, we see a yawning chasm. I study Taurek’s face to get a read on what to make of it, trying to notice the subtle signs. His brows knit together, and I’m not sure if it’s a small annoyance or a looming disaster.

Rylan looks back at the two of us on our chordatas. “Looks like we’ll have some work ahead of us, Prince Taurek.”

“We’ll see once we get closer. It doesn’t look like it’s in great shape. Hopefully it’s not completely wiped away, or else we’ll have to go all the way around.”

I'm continually stunned by Taurek's understated reactions to setbacks, although I suppose he may have learned it by necessity. Or perhaps royals are trained to never show emotion. Or to never feel it.

Once we get to the bridge, the wooden planks and rocky girders are covered in ice and pockmarked from the shards, but fortunately, they're still there, just precariously hung. And liable to crumble from the water seeping in.

"There's a technique I learned from the nomads, years and years ago when I was adventuring with them. It involves a certain type of maneuver with the pickaxe to shear the ice without damaging the structure."

Rylan and I look at each other, then at Taurek. This Prince is full of surprises.

TAUREK

Thank the Divine Ones for those years I lived with the nomads. While the bridge is absolutely frozen over, some quick hacking with Rylan's extra pickaxe and careful maneuvering of the chordatas do the trick.

Chordatas are strong draft creatures. One of their hooves could take this whole bridge down. Luckily, I know from living with the nomads that Chordatas have peripheral vision even more powerful than their stereoscopic sight.

"Alright," I grunt while tying up Zaya's and my chordatas reins to a nearby tree trunk. "Wait here. I'm going to get Rylan across first."

"I don't have much of a choice," she replies blankly.

I walk up next to Rylan, who eyes the bridge nervously.

"Come on," I coax the animal, nodding at the bridge. "We'll get you across."

"Urtell has had problems with nerves in the past," he states, patting his chordata.

"Alright," I respond, taking the reins from him. "Well, Urtell is going to have to get a grip because we don't have a choice. Come on!" I yell at the chordata, moving my hands in fluid motions toward its left. Avoiding the motion, he starts walking toward the right. Perfect.

I keep switching the sides of the hand motions, leading the chordata expertly. Urtell avoids whatever direction my hands are in, which is also where the holes in the bridge are. Soon,

we're on the other side, and I can breathe a sigh of relief. That is, until I look back at Zaya and the two other chordatas I have to get over this damn bridge.

“Are the other ones nervous?”

Rylan shakes his head. “No. Mostly stupid.”

Better than nervous probably. Less risk-aversion. But less predictable, too.

“Wait here.”

Walking back over the bridge, I mind my step and listen for various creaks and snaps that might indicate places we should avoid stepping. Unfortunately, the whole bridge creaks.

Rubbing my hands together, I approach Zaya and her chordata, Antell, and Entell, the one I've been riding. “Are you ready?”

“No.” Zaya grins playfully, but I can see the fear in her eyes.

“You'll be okay. Come on, give me the reins.”

She hands them over, and I'm relieved to know she finally trusts me to protect her from harm. When we near the start of the bridge, I notice her adjusting her position on the chordata, which could spook the animals. I need to make sure she's relaxed so that she can keep her animal relaxed.

Slowly I begin guiding her and the creatures across the bridge. They're stepping out of place and almost through the holes more than Rylan and his animal did. I pat them on the side instead, hoping the force behind my hand will move them in the right direction, like a rudder. It works slightly better. About eight steps in, Zaya's chordata steps in a hole, frightening it.

Zaya jolts forward, and the chordata behind it gets nervous, stomping on parts of the bridge and huffing.

“Whoa, whoa,” I caution, speaking gently and standing firm before Zaya and her steadied animal. “Whoa.”

The creatures calm down, and we continue across the bridge. The chordatas seem fine. If anyone is damaged from the experience, it's Zaya. When we finally get to the other side of the bridge, her face is pale and her hands are trembling, even through the thick leather gloves. I slow the animals to a stop before she shakes her head vigorously.

"I can't do this," she stammers before dismounting her chordata. "I'm not riding one of these again."

"It's a long walk up the mountain," Rylan declares. "You have no choice."

"Here, ride mine with me."

"That's not going to make a difference!" she barks.

"Yes, it will. I'll be on it with you. You saw how I calmed them back there."

"Maybe. I don't like these animals, though. It might be better to walk. Will you even protect me?"

"With my life. Protecting Hanai means protecting you. If you don't believe that then..."

"Then what?"

"Then you wouldn't be the person I thought you were."

After a few moments of silence and tense glances between me and Rylan, she nods. "Okay. Fine. I'll ride with you."

I motion toward Entell and take Antell's reins in my hands. I hold her by the waist and lift her. Her body is still shaking as I mount the animal behind her.

Her body is warm, and her scent makes me feel transported to a warm gathering space, drinking briconium wine and telling stories. Her energy filters through me even through thick layers of warm clothing.

Rylan ushers us on, and I gradually feel Zaya's body relax in front of me. A small sliver of skin on our wrists is exposed to the air, and the exposed areas touch.

If I was transported to another memory before, now I'm transported to another dimension. My spine heated up in the

dance hall, and I had an inkling of what it might mean. But now, it's ripping through me like the spikes of hail that fell just yesterday.

As cold as it is, I want to strip naked to press my skin against hers, knowing that if just one exposed inch of skin feels so life-changing, her entire body next to mine would end my current life and give birth to another one.

Electric jolts run down my back like lightning. I know with certainty what I had only suspected before.

She's my fated mate. I know in my bones that she's what I live for her, and I will die for her if I ever have to. It's the absolute worst time to make such a discovery with such absolute certainty.

"Geysers ahead," Rylan declares from in front of us.

"What?" Zaya turns around abruptly, slightly disturbing the animal.

"Hey, whoa," I coo, petting the animal's neck over her shoulder. "Slow movements."

"Well, it's hard to stay calm when that one's mentioning geysers."

This is why I didn't want a fated mate. You don't get to choose whether they annoy the ever-loving shit out of you.

I lean forward and whisper in her ear, hoping to get her to stop spooking the idiot chordata.

"The geysers erupt in random places. It's difficult to discern when and which ones will do so. Chordatas have exceptional hearing, even if their judgment is off sometimes. We just have to navigate this slowly. Rylan knows what he's doing. And so do I. Panic solves nothing."

"You're certain?"

"Yes."

"Ready?" Rylan asks, heading toward the geysers.

"Lead the way."

Zaya scoots back slightly on the animal and breathes in deeply. I can feel her nerves from here. The more I'm around her, the more I begrudgingly accept that the fated mate instinct isn't just a myth. It's a very real pain in my ass.

“Left!”

I make a hard left on the reins as a geyser erupts right next to us. Zaya startles, and I place my hand over her mouth before she screams. Her back cleaves to my chest. The feeling of her against me almost makes my spine practically erupt like the geysers in front of us.

Slowly she relaxes, and I remove my hand. Turning her head back to me, she stares at me with fear and its resolution still lingering in her eyes.

“Right!”

I turn the animal right, and we both jerk to the side. I steady Zaya with my hand, wrapping my arm tightly around her waist.

Eventually, we make it past the geysers and into calm territory, albeit freezing. Zaya's teeth are chattering. There's not much I can do to keep her warm, especially as the sun sets over the mountains.

“Rylan! Should we find cover?”

“Good idea.” He looks around and points to a nearby alcove beneath part of an overhang. “We can set up there for now.”

It's small, but it'll do.

When I look at Zaya again, she's trembling even worse. She needs to bundle up and hide from the elements in warmth, or her core temperature will fall dangerously low.

We tie the chordatas up near the overhang, and Rylan pulls out some sticks for a fire. I get the inferno started while Zaya warms herself in the corner of the alcove. Once the fire is lit, she sits directly in front of it.

I continually look at her throughout the night, monitoring her for signs of hypothermia and appreciating the beauty she

adds. Rylan tells wild stories of his travels. Winning over clans with reputations for cannibalism, taming wild wolves and playing fetch, and fashioning his own ice skates out of actual ice, he has a tale for everything.

Eventually, she can't keep her eyes open, and she falls asleep. Rylan does as well, but I'm restless. Between watching the stars make their movements in the clear sky and watching her sleep, there's too much keeping me awake.

The fire goes out after about an hour of her resting, and she starts shivering again. I take my blanket off and place it over her, hoping it will warm her enough. It does, and I spend the rest of my night admiring her beauty before drifting off to sleep myself.

ZAYA

“**Y**ou’ve got to be kidding me.” Taurek holds on tight to me and the chordata we’re riding.

Never in my life have I seen something move as quickly as this blizzard does. One moment it’s far off in the distance. The next, I can hardly see my hand in front of my face.

This trek through the mountains was already anything but a smooth ride. But now, consumed by this furious snowstorm, I realize just how good we had it before. I’d rather cross a thousand broken bridges than spend another moment in this storm.

The freezing cold winds slam clumps of snow into my body. Any bit of exposed skin went numb long ago. I also long ago decided to stop trying to see where we’re going. I just keep my head down against the surprisingly still cozy fur of the chordata and hope Taurek knows what he’s doing.

Taurek’s hand on my waist is the only confirmation I have that he’s still with me. Any sound gets instantly overshadowed by the roaring wind. Forget about keeping track of Rylan.

“There is a little depression just up there. We can hunker down there and wait for the storm to pass,” Rylan had said when we first spotted the storm coming. That was just about the last I heard from him.

With each passing moment, I curse Rylan for exaggerating how ‘just up there’ the trench is. It feels like we’ve been caught in this storm for an hour. Unless, of course, Taurek lost track of him in the storm, too. I’ve just been assuming

Taurek's Kiphian eyes were better at seeing through the snowstorm. Maybe he's just as blind as me.

"I can barely see in this, but I know Rylan isn't here anymore. Either we left him behind somewhere or he got too far ahead of us. We have to stop. Follow me."

Taurek hops down off the chordata. I try to follow him, but my foot gets snagged on one of the straps of the stirrups. Taurek's hands grab me under my knees and back and carry me over the snow to a small lip of stone.

We're still exposed to the elements here, but less so. The lip gives us some protection from the snow and wind. We're also able to hear each other without screaming every word. I'll take whatever comfort I can get at this point.

The comfort doesn't last for long. "Taurek. I think something bad might have happened."

"Worse than all this?"

"In addition to it. I think I dropped my bag." I look behind me, and I can barely see our chordatas, much less a bag buried in the snow.

Wherever I dropped it, it's likely long gone. It must now be covered in layers of snow that probably won't melt until the summer, if even then.

"Okay. It's okay." Taurek places a reassuring hand on my back. "It'll be fine."

"That bag has the tools we need to get the minerals. Without them, we can't save Hanai."

"Don't worry, we'll find another way to get the minerals. I _"

"We need to go back." I'm not sure whether we'll need the tools for certain, but there's an exceptionally good chance. And if we do need them and don't have them, that's the end for us.

"We don't have time for that, Zaya. We have to keep pushing ahead."

“Plus, what if Rylan is back there?”

“I trust Rylan to take care of himself even more than myself. He knows what he signed up for. He’s probably survived worse blizzards with fewer supplies.”

“I don’t know what to do. That’s why I had the bag with me. It was such an important thing. If we got separated from the chordatas, I didn’t want to be without them.” I feel the tears forming, but I don’t want my eyelashes to freeze shut.

“Maybe we’ll be able to get the minerals without your tools, maybe not. But we have to keep going. We absolutely cannot go back. It’s dangerously late in the season already.”

I’d be tempted to laugh if it wasn’t for the crushing weight of this failure. Hanai isn’t going to get the medicine she needs. All because I was too stupid to hold onto the bag a little tighter. How is Taurek so calm?

“Zaya, you know what? I remember that bag being on you until just recently. I could feel it while we were in the blizzard. I bet it fell off you when you fell. It’s probably just over there. I think it’s possible to get.”

“Maybe, but how? Even if I could dig through that much snow, the storm will pile more snow on faster than I can remove it.”

“Who said anything about making you dig?” Taurek flashes me a smile and steps out into the storm.

Sure, Kiphians are stronger and faster than humans, but he can’t expect to be able to find my bag in all that snow, can he?

I charge out into the storm after him. I’m not getting separated from anyone else today. I grip the back of Taurek’s coat as he drags me through the snow and storms toward our chordatas. The chordata sees us approach and scampers over to us. There goes our chance to just look at its feet and check where I fell. We’ll never find it now.

“What’s the plan?” I have to yell over the wind. I’m not even sure if Taurek heard me.

“Easy!”

Taurek pulls a bell root, something I've recently learned is a preferred treat of the chordatas, out of his pocket. As soon as the chordata sees the root, its tail starts wagging. It creates a sweeping motion that tosses the snow aside, exposing the layer of ice and stone below.

Taurek begins to lead the chordata around the area with the promise of the treat. The tail doesn't slow down for even a moment, snow gets tossed everywhere. But it's not doing enough, even like this, snow isn't being cleared fast enough.

That is, until Taurek tosses the root. The chordata sprints through the snow towards it, plowing all the snow out of its way. Both of us can't help but laugh at the sight. Taurek pulls out another root and throws it for the chordata to chase, and another big area gets cleared of snow.

I haven't seen Taurek laugh this much before. It's nice to see this side of him. I can't imagine anyone would be able to keep a straight face watching a chordata chase after a bell root.

After about six or seven roots, the very happy chordata cleared almost the whole area that we stopped at. While the storm is replacing the cleared snow quickly, we're still able to scan the ground for my bag.

"Found it!" Taurek calls out over the wind.

I race to him and the chordata, who is now sniffing Taurek looking for more treats. They both stand over my bag, which in the storm has gathered a thick layer of ice, encasing the pack underneath.

"No! Why? When the tools are just there?" I try to tug on the bag but it won't budge. Against all odds, we found it, but we still can't catch a break.

"Step aside." Taurek stands over the bag. He extends the crampon talon on his left foot and starts chipping away at the ice. I always forget that adaptation of Mountain Kingdom Kiphians.

In a moment, the bag is completely free. Taurek picks it up and holds it out to me.

I can't hold it in anymore. The urge overtakes my full body. I'm so grateful and impressed with how he solved the problem that a simple thank you won't do. I rush him.

My arms reach up to his shoulders, and I pull him down to me. Before I can second guess my decision, our lips meet. In an instant, I forget all about the blizzard, the snow, and the cold. All I can feel is the warmth flowing through my body from his lips on mine.

TAUREK

Her kiss cuts through me like molten lead, flowing through my veins. I pull her back in for another. My spines turn red hot. I'm shocked the snow around us isn't melting. My hands hold her body close against mine. I need more.

I can't indulge myself now, only because if I continue, I'll take her here on the ice, and we'll die from hypothermia.

"Let's get out of the storm." With one hand I hold Zaya's while the other holds the reins of the chordata.

Although the snow is piled up, I have a fairly good sense of our surroundings. Mountain Kiphians are born knowing how to survive in the mountains, an instinct that's only honed as we receive mandatory training. As a Prince, my training was far more extensive, and I always had a gift even beyond what my tutors expected. I know how to find shelter.

We in the Mountain Kingdom have something similar to echolocation but for finding refuge. I know how to survive, and I know that we're nearing a place for keeping away from the elements.

Quickly I find the opening to an underground cave. Zaya, the chordata, and I slip into the cave. It's not huge, but it will do for now. The chordata slumps down at the mouth of the cave as Zaya and I go a bit deeper in.

"Let's make camp for the night," I suggest.

“Good idea. Maybe by the morning, the storm will have died down.”

I waste no time in setting up the tent, and then the barrier separating the entrance of the cavern from the rest of the elements. Before I’m even completely done, Zaya climbs inside the bedding area, shivering the whole time.

After tying up the chordatas in the antechamber of the cavern, I follow her inside the tent, like a closed bubble of our own. She’s already wrapped up in all of the blankets we have. Underneath it all, I can still see her shivering, searching out my arms for more warmth.

Her eyes tell me she needs something more powerful than mere blankets to shield her, and with my eyes, I offer. She positions herself to make an open space, far more room than even I require. She moves her arms to indicate I should lower myself, and she grabs me, almost greedily.

The pile of blankets falls from her body beneath her breasts, and I realize that she somehow managed, while underneath the burrow of covers, to remove her freezing clothes.

She’s wearing nothing underneath. She opens up her wrapping of blankets for me to slide in next to her. I press my body against hers, and in the dim light, I see her smile. Her breath is calm and her body is relaxed.

For a while, the two of us lay in near-silence, our bodies fitting together to preserve heat. The only sounds are our breathing, the roaring wind of the blizzard, and the sounds of the chordata. Even her soft breathing drives me wild. It fills my ears.

The vibrations of her shivering body feel electric on my skin, and I caress her naked hip and pull her closer to me. Her skin is smooth, like fresh milk, and I want my fingers to draw a map of every contour.

Zaya grabs my arms and wraps them around her. She slides against my body so her back is against my chest. We once again lay in silence.

The plan is working. I already feel warmer. But that's not all that's happening.

Before, my mind couldn't move past the feel of her kiss. Now, I can't focus on anything beyond the softness of her skin against mine. My spines are only feeling hotter and hotter.

Zaya's body has stopped shivering but now starts moving in a new way. She pushes her body harder against mine. Her ass rubs against my cock. It doesn't take long for my erection to ache from how badly I need her.

My hand slides down her body, stopping just outside her pussy.

Two fingers slip into Zaya's pussy, already soaking wet. She moans softly, continuing to rub her ass against my growing cock.

My thumb lightly massages her clit while my two fingers curl and unfurl slowly inside her. Her pussy gets wetter and wetter with every movement of my fingers.

Meanwhile, my free hand finds a home on Zaya's chest. While I can't see them, firmly hidden under the layers of blankets, her tits feel perfect. Her tiny nipples are already hard to the touch. I pinch them between my fingers, Zaya's moans growing louder.

Then I start to thrust gently, sliding my cock up and down the groove of her ass cheeks. I begin teasing her with the full length of my shaft.

I slip a third finger into Zaya's pussy. She starts to pulsate against my fingers. Her moans grow louder, echoing beautifully around the cave.

“Oh, Taurek. Oh, please keep doing that.”

My thumb massages her clit harder, and I squeeze her nipple between my two fingers. I press my cock harder against her ass.

Zaya's full body quivers against mine and shakes uncontrollably. Her body is overcome with the pleasure I have given her.

Her hand reaches back and grabs my cock. She slowly starts stroking it, running her tiny soft hand from base to tip, rolling it up and down over and over. It would be meditative if it didn't make me mad with desire.

“I need you in me,” she whispers. “Fuck me.”

In all my time with my first wife, I never felt passion like this. Our lovemaking was almost clinical, like we were just completing a task. But this...

I take my cock from her hand. I press the tip along the outside of her pussy. Her wetness is already coating my cock.

I jam myself into her. Her pussy opens ever so slightly to accept my shaft. Her tight wet pussy wraps around me.

“Oh, my god,” I moan. “Zaya, your body is fucking perfect.”

“So is yours,” she moans back.

I move my hands to his hips and start to thrust. I go slowly at first, sliding my cock in and out of her wetness. I can't believe I ever tolerated sex that felt like anything less than this.

Zaya's pussy holds every inch of my cock. Pleasurable electricity is sent across my body. I can feel each thrust everywhere from my cock to my spines.

I keep moving slowly in and out of Zaya's body. Her hands reach up to grab my head. She pulls me down for a kiss. Our lips meet, and I know I can't let this moment ever end.

“Taurek.” Zaya pulls just a hair's length from our kiss.

My fingers grip her hips tighter. I fuck her harder, and she delights in feeling my cock dive inside her, thick and full and dripping with precum, lubricating my thrusts inside her as I go faster and harder.

I forcefully slide my cock in and out of her pussy, going faster and harder with each thrust. I didn't think it would be possible, but Zaya's pussy gets even wetter as I go on.

She starts moaning loudly again. It's like music to my ears. My grunts and her moans with every thrust morph together in the air to create a hot symphony of pleasure.

As I'm fucking her from behind, I can feel myself reaching climax. My cock starts to swell even larger and a delicious, unbearable tightness grows in my balls. But I'm not done yet, not even close. I pull my cock out of her.

I flip Zaya onto her back and position myself on top of her. As I wait for my cock to creep away from the edge of cumming, I bring my lips to her neck. Zaya's complaints turn back into moans.

After a moment of that, I slide my cock back into her. Zaya wraps her legs around my waist as I thrust into her over and over.

I look down and get my first look at Zaya's tits. They look just as perfect as they felt, bouncing with every thrust. This human really is something else.

Then, an idea pops into my head. A craving for a sensation that I haven't felt in a long time. Something I haven't felt since my wife and that I swore off after her. But if Zaya truly is my fated mate, I need it from her.

"Touch my spines," I say.

"What?"

"Touch them."

Zaya hesitantly reaches up to my back. Her fingers slowly creep up to my spines. I clutch her hands and press them firmly behind my back to show her how I want it.

"I'm about to cum," I moan.

"Not yet," Zaya says.

Zaya pulls my cock out of her and slides underneath me, my cock twitching. I can feel my balls getting ready to push hot cum from my dick and onto her. Her hands attempt to push me onto my back, and I comply. As I lay on my back, out of view under the blankets, I feel her lips wrap around the tip of my shaft.

An instant later, my cock explodes into her mouth. My head goes numb. Time seems to slow down and speed up all at the same time. Fucking Zaya in this cave just gave me the strongest orgasm of my life.

After she sucks my cock dry, Zaya climbs up my body, resting her head on my chest. I try desperately to catch my breath.

ZAYA

“Are you warm now?” Taurek asks as he looks down at me as my fingertips trace the outline of his pecs.

I laugh. I’m very warm now. Almost too warm, but I’m not complaining.

This is far from where I expected to end up when I first met Taurek. Now, I could happily imagine myself staying here forever. It’s funny how fast things can change.

My head slowly lifts up and lowers with each of Taurek’s breaths. Taurek gently strokes my hair. In the serenity of the moment, I’m able to close my eyes and let all the worries of the world fade away.

I can still taste Taurek on my lips. Everything since our first kiss has been a whirlwind. I can’t help but think that I need more.

I crawl up Taurek’s body until we’re face to face. He smirks as I lower my lips to his. His taste is just as strong and intoxicating.

My hand slowly creeps down his body. I still need more. As we kiss, my hand wraps around his cock, and I start slowly stroking it. I use long, deliberate movements as his shaft starts to harden against my touch.

I close my eyes and take in the moment. Taurek’s lips against mine. His cock in my hand. Our bodies pressed against each other. How could anyone want anything else?

Taurek's hand finds my chest and gives a soft squeeze on my tit. I moan into his lips as we kiss. His cock is almost completely hard in my hand now.

I let go of his shaft and pull away from our kiss. I *need* more. I climb up his body further. My pussy is pulsating, and I need to feel his touch.

I climb out from underneath the blankets and position my pussy just above his mouth. Taurek eagerly nods his head. I lower myself down onto him and feel a jolt across my body as his tongue enters me.

I'm now completely out of the warmth of the blankets, nude as the day I was born. Nonetheless, I don't care. A strong chill breeze flows into the tent and sends a shiver across my body, but all my focus is on Taurek.

His hands reach up and hold me at the hips, keeping me against his face. His tongue traces the outer lips of my pussy until he finds my clit. I let him know he found it with a light coo.

His tongue lightly teases my clit, skimming it gently before pushing it down. Each stroke of his tongue sends waves across my body.

My next orgasm sneaks up on me. My legs tighten on either side of his head. The tingling sensation spreads to my head with an explosion of pleasure.

"Taurek," I moan. His hands travel up to grab onto my tits, holding on tight, his tongue still doing its good work on my clit. My whole body quivers with joy.

I get lightheaded and fall backward onto Taurek's body. He laughs. My head lands by his erect cock, still under the blanket. I take it as a sign and rip the blankets off of him. If we get cold so be it. I slide his cock into my mouth.

I savor his taste as if I hadn't tasted it less than an hour ago. I just can't get enough. My tongue runs along every inch of him that I can fit in my mouth. Before long, his cock is coated in my saliva.

Once his cock is good and slick, I get up and straddle Taurek's body. We both moan together as I lower myself onto his cock. His shaft fills me up like nothing before.

I place my hands on his chest for leverage. Slowly at first, I move myself up and down on his cock. Judging by the smile on Taurek's face, which is still slick with my wetness, he's enjoying it too.

I speed up, bouncing up and down wildly on his cock. Another tingling sensation spreads across me.

I slow down, slowly grinding against his cock, watching Taurek on the brink of release and pulling him back from it. The switch up in tempo and method must have done the trick. Taurek's smile returns.

From there, I start alternating between moving up and down on his shaft and grinding against it. Bringing him as close to cumming as I dare, only to pull it away.

Taurek's hands slap my ass as I ride him. With each hit, the tingling spreads further in me. His hands firmly grip my hips as he starts thrusting into me from below. From just a few of his powerful thrusts, I'm sent over the edge. An explosion of pleasure covers all my senses.

Before I can come down from my orgasm, Taurek lifts me up off his cock. I watch it twitch as Taurek tries to catch his breath. I guess I didn't even notice him losing control of himself.

"Your body just feels so good." He groans.

Taurek lays me down on my chest on the blankets. His hands fall on either side of my head. He holds the tip of his cock against the lips of my pussy. In this angle, his cock hits the pleasure receptors in my pussy like never before.

I grip the blankets tightly as Taurek fucks me from behind. The building flood gathers right where it left off. If this is how he can make me feel in some dingy cave, imagine how he could make me cum in a proper bed.

"Oh, God," I moan. "Taurek... you feel so good. Keep... keep... oh..."

“Yeah?” One of his hands leaves its spot next to my head. A moment later, a loud, exhilarating slap hits my ass cheek.

“Yes, please,” I beg.

His hand smacks my ass again, harder, and his claws linger there, digging into my flesh in shooting bursts of hot pleasure. The tingling spreads further and deeper into me. He does it again, over and over again, until I almost can't take it anymore.

“Fuck, Taurek... I'm about to...” I scream more than moan as another explosion of pleasure rockets across my body.

Taurek picks up the pace, thrusting into me harder and faster. Each pump brings the raw passion to a new peak.

“Zaya...” His body tenses against mine.

I reach my arms back to push him out of me.

“Cum between my ass cheeks.”

Taurek pulls his cock out, and he greases his shaft back and forth between the cheeks of my ass, not entering my orifice, just stimulating himself on me. It's so fucking hot to feel his insanely large cock there, knowing what pleasure he's deriving from my big ass, full and wide and ready for his hot, perfect cum. I lick my lips, then bite down on them to relive the memory of his taste filling me and pouring out of my little mouth.

He pushes me flat down so he can service himself even deeper using the deep crevice between my cheeks. He squeezes both sides of my round bottom together to wring the life out of his big, throbbing dick, smothering it between my copious flesh as it glides back and forth down the length of my ass crack. His big balls stimulate the lips of my pussy like a pair of fluttering, powerful wings.

I'm still reeling from my own orgasm, and I think I might cum another time from how good he makes me feel. From knowing he's using my body like it's just another servant, one whose sole purpose is to bring him to a mind-destroying orgasm.

“Unh, God, Zaya.” Taurek moans and streams of hot, wet cum slap down on my ass, coating me from the top of my waist to the inside of my thighs.

“Augh.” He stabs forward with each beat of his erupting dick, his delicious cream pulled out by his balls into my heaving ass cheeks. He finishes with the sound of slapping, as the warm honey dripping from the hole at the end of his beautiful cock churns in wet, thick friction.

I moan as spurt after spurt lands on me. He still has so much to give, even after drinking gulps and gulps of his cum from just a little while before. Kiphians are truly something else.

With a loud thud, Taurek crashes down on the blankets beside me. As we both catch our breath, I scoot over to rest my head on his chest. He wraps the blanket back around us both.

“So...” I look up at Taurek with a smile. “Would you want to go for another round?” He lets out a loud booming laugh. So loud I’m sure it can be heard through the blizzard all the way down the mountain.

“You haven’t had enough, you beautiful, crazy girl?”

“How can there be such a thing when you’re with a Kiphian Prince?”

I happily close my eyes to the sound of his laughter. The last thing I remember before slipping away fully is Taurek kissing the top of my head.

The next morning, I wake up with a jolt. He’s already dressed and out of the blankets, and the sounds of his preparations to move on have me stirring, even as tired as I am.

I yawn and look up.

“Ah. You’re up.”

“Apparently. Um. Something happening?”

“Yeah.”

The blanket falls off me, and I catch Taurek's mind taking a brief sojourn into the deep valley between my tits.

I raise my eyebrows. "Uh-huh? What is it?"

He jerks his head as if waking himself up. "Right.

"The trail we were taking. It's not a trail anymore." He raises his arm and points upward, and I see a tangle of ice and snow, almost like layers of spiderwebs, making the route we had planned impassable.

"Okay. So what are we going to do now?"

TAUREK

“We have to keep moving.” As much as I’d like to stay with Zaya alone in this cave a little longer, Hanai needs us to complete our mission.

The blizzard has yet to truly slow down, but that can’t matter. We’re almost there. There is no other option but to keep fighting forward.

“How do we...?” Zaya looks at the mouth of our cave. Snow has piled so high on our planned trail that it might as well be more mountain wall. There is no trekking through it, even on a chordata. “We’re trapped.”

“If I can get a little higher, I could get a better view of what we’re dealing with,” I say.

“How exactly do you plan –” She looks at my crampon talons, which answers her question before she finishes asking. “Oh, right. Just... be careful.”

Kiphians from the Mountain Kingdom are born climbers. This will be nothing but a simple exercise for me.

I position myself at the mouth of the cave. A large shard of ice has formed on the wall just outside, giving me a perfect path up. My talons easily sink into the ice, and I climb up the wall.

With each of my movements, I can feel the ice cracking beneath me as the blizzard’s winds slam everything in its path, including me. One wrong movement, and I could come crashing down.

I stop for a moment to take in the situation. I'm still not high enough to get a good view. I need to get higher.

"Are you okay?" I can barely hear Zaya over the roar of the wind. Still, the concern in her voice registers loud and clear.

"Fine!" Through the wind and the snow, I can barely make out Zaya's face from here. I am fine. But that doesn't mean I can't easily die. But there's no other choice. Part of surviving here means being fine even in circumstances that are anything but. If you crumble against the first brush with death, you'll never get out alive.

I keep climbing. The ice gets shakier. The wind gets stronger. The air gets thinner. I can't even make out Zaya's figure below anymore.

But I can see our next best path up the mountain. Through the storm, I see a new trail, relatively untouched. The way the mountain is formed, and how the blizzard is coming in, the trail is almost completely clear.

We could take that trail and not have to worry about the storm at all. We'd have to push through the blizzard to get to the start of the path, but after that, it'll be a fairly straight shot to the roxolite, according to Rylan's estimations on where it would be.

The only problem is that it's a notoriously dangerous trail to take. It's steep, and it's covered in deep ravines. One wrong step can send a climber the quick way down the mountain or to a final resting place in the abyss. It's well known around the Mountain Kingdom for taking the lives of those who dare to brave it, and it's earned a name befitting that reputation – Climbers' Bane.

An experienced climber would struggle to get to the top. I'll struggle. Zaya... well, 'struggle' seems too small of a word. But it's our only chance.

I slowly and carefully work my way back down the ice shard. Any moment I'm not cautiously planning where to put

my foot next, I'm working out how to sell this plan to Zaya. I don't need her to like it. I just need her to agree to it.

When I get my feet back on solid ground, I step into the cave with Zaya. The wind is still furiously whipping around outside, whistling at the entrance as I clamber in.

“So? What's the plan?”

“I managed to spot a path. Pretty clear of snow. Protected from the blizzard by the angle of the mountain.”

“Perfect! Let's go!”

I hate that I'm about to wipe away the smile on her face.

I purse my lips together and shake my head. She should be used to unpleasant news by now, but she continually seems shocked every time I deliver it. It's endearing that she still has the capacity for misfortune to surprise her.

“It's a very dangerous route.”

“Isn't all of this?”

“Which should tell you just how dangerous this route is. It's called Climbers' Bane. It's a steep trail. Very steep. Too steep for chordata. We have to leave them.”

She pauses to think as if she's attempting to bargain with the elements outside. “Is this really the only option? We could wait until the storm dies down. Reconnect with Rylan. Stick to the original plan. Not go up a deadly steep path.”

“The storm has been going non-stop for hours. We have no reason to believe that it won't continue for hours, if not longer. By the time it stops completely, all the trails may be impossible to travel. This one we know is passable.”

“But –”

“And we have no idea where Rylan is. Our best chance at reconnecting with him would be to get to the roxolite stores in the bend around Milas Peak. Regardless, the plan was thrown out the minute the blizzard hit. The trail we planned on taking might as well be gone now.”

“I get it, Taurek. But what chance do I have on a trail that has killed Kiphian who are genetically evolved to be better climbers than I could ever hope to be?”

“I’ll be there to help you. Guide you along every step.”

“All of the Kiphians who have died here would have lived if you were here? Taurek, I can’t do this. How am I supposed to survive doing that?”

“How is Hanai supposed to survive if you don’t?”

The whole time we’ve been arguing about the trail, it’s taken all my strength not to think of Hanai. Lying in her bed, fading away as we argue. I should be there by her side, but I’m here to ensure she gets the help she needs.

My daughter is dying. We’re the only ones who can help her. I don’t care if the trail requires us to grow wings. We’re taking it. The image of Hanai hangs in the air between us. Zaya lowers her head, and I can tell that she’s let the reality sink in that we have to face this obstacle.

“We have to go. I’m sorry, but that’s the truth. We can’t wait for the storm to stop or for us to find Rylan. He might be dead for all we know.”

“I know. I know.” She looks at me apologetically. “It’s just, how does it help Hanai if we get ourselves killed?”

“I’d rather die trying to save her than to see the look on her face when we return empty-handed. Or worse, return with the roxolite in hand but no Hanai to give it to.”

I start to head towards the mouth of the cave to look outside. The blizzard is still raging. If anything, it has gotten stronger since we began to argue. I can’t wait any longer, though. We need to set out quickly.

I look behind me, and Zaya is right there, just a step behind me in the cave. She slips her hand into mine and our fingers intertwine together.

“Let’s go save Hanai.” Zaya takes a step together with me out into the storm.

ZAYA

I'm struggling badly now. An increasingly loud voice in my head is telling me to give up, but I know I have to fight it. It's altitude sickness and exhaustion. But it doesn't help to know the cause. The desire to rest is overwhelming.

I lift my foot with sheer willpower to take another step. I fight hard to stay upright, but I still stumble. With relief, I feel Taurek's arm slip around my shoulder supporting me.

"Thank you," I say, laying my head against his shoulder. "It's here somewhere, I know it."

The way to the roxolite, nestled in a fold at the nexus of several mountains, had been so clear, at least in my mind's eye. Rylan went through the maps with us. But when we got separated from him, the maps were lost, too.

The physical reality of the mountains, now just identical slabs of rock buried under snow, was more than I anticipated. After finally making it past the Climbers' Bane over two days, I regained my optimism. We were closer. But once the landscape unfolded before me, the scale made me lose perspective of what I thought I was looking for.

"We've been going all day, Zaya. And your color, look at your face." He touches my cheek as we continue trudging through. "The altitude is getting to you."

I look up at his rugged features. "But we're so near. I can feel it."

"If that's so, we'll be just as near after we've rested."

“But there’s no snow coming down. Who knows when it will start again? Shouldn’t we keep trying?”

I scan the area once more. It all looks the same. White snow and black rock in the few places where the powder is scant enough for the slabs to peek through. A cold, harsh, unforgiving landscape.

I can’t pick out a single feature that would tell me where the roxolite deposits are hiding under the snow.

“I feel like I made a mistake by bringing us out here, Taurek,” I admit. “I made us risk our lives for an inkling. We don’t know if roxolite is real. Even if it is, how do we know we’ll find it? It’s like reading a fairy tale and deciding to buy magic beans.”

“Magic beans?”

“This silly story my mother told me. From Earth. This kid sells his family’s cow for magic beans. Something they tell kids to keep them from doing stupid things.”

“What happens to him?”

“His beans grow into a huge beanstalk. He climbs it into the clouds and a giant nearly eats him.”

“Sounds like an accurate description of Cloud Kingdom.” He laughs cynically, and I don’t quite get the joke. Maybe a feud between the kingdoms or something. I continue.

“Basically, he realizes even if they’re magic, that might not be a good thing. Something like that.”

“We have a story like that here. There’s an enchanted pylorx...you know about them?”

“Huge ghastly furry things with wings that fill children’s nightmares? I’ve heard about them.”

“So, this enchanted pylorx tells a Kiphian knight to bury his riches in a cavern. In a week, it’ll double. A week later, he comes and it’s all gone. The pylorx tells him to wait longer. He comes back, still nothing. There’s more, but basically, the pylorx is a thief. The knight realizes it serves him right. Lesson learned.”

“I hope we’re not living our own versions of those stories.”

He turns to me seriously. “Zaya. Those are just stories. This is real. What you said convinced Talan to come to the capital. It convinced me and the Thane. You convinced Rylan. I initiated this mission, and I am responsible for it. I’d make the same decision again. It’s our best hope. I’m sure there are stories where giving up hope is a greater catastrophe than following foolish whims.”

“Do you think this is a foolish whim?” I ask almost inaudibly.

“No. Not at all.”

It might be the altitude, but a part of me inexplicably agrees with him. Maybe I just can’t accept what it means if we learn there’s nothing out here but snow, wind, and death.

“If Rylan were around, there are so many things I’d ask,” Taurek muses. “I bet so much trivia is rattling around that snow-addled mind of his.”

“I know. I figured he was so certain of his knowledge we could count on him when we got there. I wish I would have asked.”

I turn my face to the snow-swept mountain valley, trying to piece together any scrap of information Rylan gave us about our destination in the mountains.

“Something about a violet glow...” I mutter.

“Hmm?”

“Nothing. Just trying to remember what it was Rylan actually said about how we’d know.”

“I got the impression from him that it’s something you’ll know when you see it somehow, but that’s not very satisfying when we have nothing.”

“Sounds like something mythical, like the beans and the pylorx. Maybe it’s just a make-believe story.”

“No. There are some things that are, in equal measure, both mythical and true.” He looks straight at me, with a

searching expression that I don't quite understand. "Something tells me that finding roxolite is like that."

I realize I'm getting out of breath from talking. On Earth, they also had supplemental oxygen for situations like this.

Focus, Zaya.

The night is stalking in, bringing with it fresh dread as its icy fingers creep beneath my furs and suck the last of the energy from my bones.

I don't even realize I've stumbled until the cold snow hits me in the face. Strong arms lift me to my feet and hold me close. Taurek's warm body brings blessed warmth to my cold numbed one. I bury my face into the furs at his throat, breathing in his warmth and animal scent. I'm desperately trying to hold back the bitter tears of frustration and defeat.

"That spot there, with the little overhang. Let's make camp. We've already done too much today." Taurek steadies me with his arms.

I stand swaying and stare bleakly into the night, wondering how I'll live with myself if I fail. I barely have the strength to help Taurek. What am I doing here besides slowing things down?

"We'll have a quick meal over the fire once it's lit, and then we can try to clear our minds and think, Zaya."

Think about how we're going to face ourselves once we've failed, I finish in my head.

My mind spins, thinking about what I should have done differently. I could have insisted on doing research in Mountain Kingdom libraries. I didn't even bring notes excerpting the reference materials. I could have talked with geologists or medical experts there in Cygoth.

We could have gathered a bigger team, one consisting of more than a desperate Prince, a half-feral mountain guide, and an idealistic human artisan in way over her head.

It's getting so dark that soon we won't be able to survey the landscape visually. All I have to comfort me is his body,

but even that feels hollow. I don't know how I could enjoy physical pleasure while a young girl's life ebbs away, and I'm in control of the tides.

I can barely see my own hands, although my eyes seem to be adjusting to the dark quickly. I wonder if our time in the mountains has sharpened my vision because it's notably better tonight than before.

Maybe I'm finally losing my mind from oxygen deprivation and high altitude, and hallucinations are replacing the material world. Because everything around seems like it's glowing.

"Taurek, are you seeing –" My teeth are chattering, and my body's shaking.

"Good, you see it, too. I thought I might be imagining it."

The snow a little further across the mountains is gently ablaze with a violet luminescence, like embers. The glow changes in hue and intensity like a living being, turning from soft orchid to deep amethyst.

"Do you think...?" I start to ask.

"I wonder if this is what Rylan meant. Violet glow."

I laugh, even though it makes me weaker. I can't help myself.

It's a short distance away, requiring a small climb relative to the peaks we've ascended and then a slight trek down to the bend in the bedrock, just like the books said. But then we're there.

"We have to get over there," I gasp.

Now that it's marked with a trail of purple, the fold in the valley is easy to see. The shadow cast by the glowing mauve snow clearly defines the change in the landscape.

I'm exhausted, but the knowledge that we're so close animates my body like the strings of a marionette. If the roxolite reveals itself most at night, we'd have to wait a full day to get as good a look.

As long as we make it there, we can start excavating in the morning. But we have to make the trek tonight.

The sight is eerily beautiful. The white snow fades to the softest lilac around the peripheries of the deposit, then darkens toward the center where a deep black hole can be seen. It must be the entrance to a cave, or maybe a disused mine. The overall impression is of a giant purple flower blooming in the darkness.

I intend to walk toward it. I believe I've given my legs the right instructions, but they barely move. The snow is impossibly thick.

Then I feel Taurek lift me, cradling me in his strong arms effortlessly.

"Thank you," I whisper to him. "You are much more comfortable than a chordata."

"Hopefully smarter, too."

Taurek's guffaw can be heard rumbling around the snow-clad mountain. I feel his arms holding me tighter, pulling me into his chest.

The huge bulk of Taurek shelters me from the wind. I can feel my body start to come back to life as his warmth seeps into me. It feels easier to breathe now that I'm warmer. My heart is not struggling to push blood to my periphery. I feel a massive wave of gratitude washing over me.

I'm almost drifting off into a warm, comfortable slumber when he halts. My eyes flash open. "We're here?" I ask.

"We are," he says with an odd sound of foreboding. "I'll set up camp now, then we're going to rest for the night. We have more work ahead of us than we planned for."

I'm too tired to even ask him what he's talking about. I'll find out soon enough.

TAUREK

I lower Zaya gently to the ground after I set up a place for us to rest. If she tried to break through tonight, she might legitimately die from exhaustion. Even I'm starting to feel the physical strain.

I set up a campsite with more speed than ever before, to the point that I'm getting overheated. The first thing I do is lay down leathers and furs for Zaya to rest on, and she smiles up at me, her face just a sliver sticking out of a plush bundle.

I curl up under furs, covering her body with my arms to shield her from the elements. I don't want to let her out of my clutches, to be honest. But I'm glad to see some color back in her cheeks.

We're woken up by the sunlight coming over the peaks. "Good morning," I tell Zaya when I see her eyes open with a flutter.

"It's morning? It's so bright. Are we back in Cygoth?"

I let out a laugh that echoes around us. "Does it look like it?"

"Oh, I just had a dream that we were back there." The disappointment that we're still here is evident on her face.

"We'll get started soon. There's no time to lose," I tell her, stating the obvious.

"Started on... what exactly?"

We stand in front of the collapsed mine shaft, shoulder to shoulder, and she's aghast at the mess. The supports that once held the roof up have collapsed. Ice and snow have penetrated the area and then frozen solid.

"How on Kiphia do we get that clear?" she asks quietly beside me.

"We dig. Well, I do. You eat, I'll dig." I lift my ankle. "I'll use the crampon talons."

"There's nothing I can do to help?"

"Sure. You can help morale by eating some breakfast." I give a smile, and she gives one back, for a millisecond, just to show it's not sincere. "In the pack, there's gerlat jerky. It's delicious in the morning."

"I don't know if it's ever delicious. But it's here."

I start hewing through the ice with my talons, although the crystalline casing is thick and hard to penetrate. Her pleas to help in some way echo in my mind, and I realize there's something she can do. It reminds me of Hanai as a child when she'd clamor to help clean the palace and then decide she didn't like the idea after she realized the scope of the job.

"Actually, there is something you can do. The tools we had to rescue. Want to hand them to me?"

She disappears into the makeshift structure, and I can hear her rooting around. I continue to force the ice to bend to my will. The fact that I've asked her to get it for me is my concession to her desire to contribute.

I chip away at the ice around one of the broken planks, imagining how much a chordata would help with clearing the ice and hauling the planks and any rubble away. I'm grateful we didn't push through last night. It would have deprived us of the benefits of the sun.

Once I have a plank free, I start to hack away at the entrance. The purple glow from the phosphorescent mineral deposits is bright, although in the daytime it's more of a translucent coating than the beacon we experienced last night.

Her brilliant smile lights up mauve in the purple shimmer from the roxolite as she emerges from the tent, carrying the precious satchel that nearly drove us to do battle with a blizzard head-on.

She positions herself to toss them, but reading my body language, she walks them over instead. I grab the bag, and immediately I realize these tools may be made for human hands, not Kiphians.

“Perfect,” I tell her.

“Don’t you want me to go over them with you?”

“Sure.”

She takes them out one by one. “These are all specialized for mining and extraction. This one is a special drill that also breaks up rocks as it goes in. This one...” She holds up a surgical-looking tool, one with an impossibly small tip. “This uses compressed light to pinpoint the exact spot, for when you don’t want the structural integrity damaged. This is the tool that was worth dying in a blizzard for.”

“You’re right. I doubt I could have found anything like that. Actually, how do you have something like that?”

“Wesqanti, the chief of Tlisan — that’s Sorsha’s dad — always had a great appreciation for the properties of Mountain Kingdom minerals and metals. I learned a lot from him, and he’d let me borrow his tools. I eventually got most of the basic ones, but this one...” She holds it up reverently, flipping it around to look. “There were almost none like it. He had one custom-made for me.”

“That’s amazing.” I silently thank the Divine Ones for bringing Wesqanti into Talan’s life.

“The tools aren’t much use for this job,” Zaya says disappointedly. “You can’t exactly excise this pile of snow.”

“I’d rather have you with me, making the job more pleasant, than a whole team of chordatas to haul it.” The sentiment started as a consolation, but once I say it, I realize it’s true. I’d rather have her here with me than one hundred fierce nomads with thousands of chordatas.

“Both would be nice.” She gives me a smile. “Tools? Last call before I put them into my pack and secure them on my person. No way I’m losing these again.”

I want to keep looking at the tools, just so I can be physically closer to her now that for what seems like the first time in our nearly two-week trek, it’s not storming furiously. Still, it’s freezing cold, and, like everything with this mission, you never know how long something will take or how quickly plans will get foiled.

“Jerky?” she offers.

“Name-calling seems unnecessary.” I give her a wink as she feeds me dried strips of meat, and her fingers linger on my lips for a few moments. She looks at me with the same hunger I feel.

My desire makes me want to get through the pile of ice and rubble so that we can get to the roxolite so that I can truly savor my time with her. I turn away from her invigorated, but I focus on the task at hand to prevent my nascent erection from going full-staff.

“Hey, Taurek. This is weird. You see those patches of rock that have absolutely no snow on them?” Zaya asks quizzically. “And look. There’s steam. And the geysers here are cold, not hot.”

“Hmm? Where?”

“Over there. Look.” I turn around, fully intending to fixate on where she’s pointing, but I’m too distracted by her statuesque silhouette, like a mountain goddess wrapped in furs and leather.

“Maybe it got blown away by the wind?” I turn back to shoveling. Otherwise, my mind will get lost in memories of our nighttime bacchanals.

“I don’t think so,” she says. “Besides, they’re in clusters, not sheets.” Zaya takes a closer look, and I walk over next to her as she crouches down, holding her arm to steady her.

“Careful with the steam there, Zaya. We need those fingers.”

She looks at me suggestively.

“For the extraction.” But I’m flooded with memories of what her fingers are capable of, and I long to suck them. *Soon, Taurek.*

Zaya reaches out and hovers her palm over the ground, then places a fingertip down. “Taurek! It’s warm! It has to be drathasite. It conducts heat. I wonder if it would be useful...”

“For making easy work of the ice blocking the entrance?”

“Exactly. And who knows what else it might be useful for.”

“Heating up tents maybe,” I offer.

“I think we do a pretty good job of that ourselves,” Zaya says. I’m relieved to know that I’m not the only one constantly revisiting the pleasures of the nights we’ve spent.

“Let me get the mesh to carry it over. Maybe it’s capable of loosening the debris blocking the entrance somehow.” Compared to the scorching bolt climbing through my spine, though, who needs the drathasite? I could burn down the whole mountain.

When I return, mesh in hand, Zaya has her gloves and shoes off and is using the mineral to warm her hands and feet. “It’s marvelous,” she says, pleasure etched across her face.

I laugh at her antics, relieved that for once the unexpected turn of events is a pleasant one. “You stay there,” I insist. I start to shovel the warm substance onto the tarpaulin.

We toss it onto the tarp like we’re playing a hurling sport, and we haul it together back to the mine entrance. It’s shockingly light. Then we carefully pack it around the iced-up beams and blocked tunnel.

With the heat-emitting chips radiating warmth, I only now allow myself to acknowledge how fearfully cold I had gotten at times. My metabolism can handle much lower temperatures than Zaya’s, but if she knew how much it had affected me, there’s a good chance she might have actually given up.

We make sure to save contingency stores of it for later. The sublimating effects of the drathasite clear the area of the once-intractable encasing almost immediately. The snow and ice start to steam, and soon there are puddles of water collecting around the entrance of the shaft.

“It’s working,” she marvels.

I can tell by her eyes that our minds have gone to the same place, but we don’t dare speak it out loud. If we could encounter a rare miracle substance purely by chance, it’s the strongest evidence yet to have faith that this same cave of wonders conceals a yet more precious bounty.

As we enter the newly resurrected entrance to the site of our pilgrimage, we take one last look at the beautiful ghostly landscape, gleaming white and lilac in the mists.

With any luck, the next time we see this landscape, we will have with us the keys to my daughter’s resurrection as well.

ZAYA

I can see the old mine shaft isn't secure. The ancient logs that the miners must have hauled up the mountain many years before are rotten and collapsing.

Several times we come across areas where the supports and natural pillars of the cave have begun to degrade, although so far none of the passages have been totally closed off, thank the Divine Ones. There have been a couple of moments when I believed Taurek's preternatural bulk would pin him intractably between the narrow walls, but his preternatural agility exceeded his size.

The most positive thing, besides the fact that we found it, is that we don't need any lights. There are traces of the eerily beautiful roxolite everywhere, glowing as if lit from within. It's maddeningly close and maddeningly evasive. The glow of the mineral collects and scatters, building a self-replicating web even outside of living cells.

In its own way, roxolite seems like a life form all its own. It very well may contain a universe of microfauna. It's never been studied with rigor.

We let the mauve fluorescence of the ancient stone guide us, as it has in a very real sense since we first detected the glowing purple signal light in the snow.

"Look," says Taurek. "The seam is more concentrated there."

I've just climbed through the small aperture left by the most recent cave-in to block our path. I shake the dirt from my

hair and neck unthinkingly as I enter without thinking.

“It’s beautiful,” I whisper in a reverent hush.

From the visual signatures, I can see that this deposit of roxolite radiates out from a dense central column, like the molten iron-silicate core that sits in the center of Kiphia.

“Should we begin to extract, Zaya?” Taurek asks.

“It seems close, but the proximity is an illusion. It’s much deeper than it looks because of the energy refraction.” I tap on the walls, which respond with a dusting of silt, and I pat it instinctively as if it’s capable of understanding the action. “It’s through there. Understand the freakout over the instruments a little better?” I crack a smile, and I’m not sure if he can see until he gives one back.

This is where all of the practical knowledge of working with practically every kind of mineral on Kiphia merges with the research I’ve read in historical tomes. I can practically get around by feel rather than thought. Something about the roxolite allows me to practically commune with it directly.

“Lead the way, Captain.” Taurek gives a little bow. “I’d volunteer to help, but given my... I’d call it a deficiency in size, but lack of deficiency is the problem...”

It was not a problem at all underneath those furs at night, I think. Even with the most serious task of my life, I can’t suppress the thoughts of him driving me wild.

I squeeze his hand, and he gives me a look of hope, fear, and pride. I see the face of two soldiers stepping into battle after years of training for a decisive operation, one that will determine within minutes whether the war is lost or won.

I know what he means, but to me, the tunnels are the most incredible thing I’ve ever seen. Or maybe it’s the lack of oxygen that makes everything look so magical?

“The caverns in the mountains aren’t safe places to be,” Taurek informs me.

“Is anything?”

“No.” He laughs.

“You’ll be my canary in the coal mine.”

“I’m not familiar with that parable. Another one with a moral like the beanstalk boy?”

“It should be, but no, this is another legend that’s real. On Earth, they collected compressed carbon deposits from the oldest mountains on the planet. The smallest, because they’d been selling long enough to crumble.”

“Medicinal as well?”

“No. The opposite. It was the Pandora’s Box – that’s a myth as old as humans that is pure fiction, except allegorically, of course, and in that respect it’s truer than most facts – for our destruction. Anyway, this poison was a primitive form of energy. People went into the mountains to collect it for a pittance, most paying with their lives in some form or another, to give more wealth to men who already had more than they could ever spend. Then we all paid when the planet was sick from it.”

“Uh-huh. And the canary?”

“Oh, sorry. Right. So, in these caves, obviously there are a ton of chemical processes going on and very little ventilation. Including poisonous ones. These little yellow birds, canaries, were more sensitive to poison gasses than humans, so they’d keep birds there. If they stopped singing, the humans knew they’d be dead soon, too.” She stops for a moment. “Anyway, long story for a silly joke.”

“It’s interesting to learn. And so, if I die, you’ll know to leave?”

“Kind of the opposite. If you start feeling the slightest bit off, I’m probably in danger of passing out.”

As we walk on, the tracery in the walls gets wider and brighter, and I realize it’s not roxolite. It’s the roots of plants which bloom out of the roxolite into stunning blossoms and petals of the entire spectrum of color, including colors I’ve never seen before.

“These plants grow in the roxolite.”

“Here,” Taurek says, showing me the opened bag. I collect as many specimens as I can and place them inside. It’s likely that these plants have special properties as well. The vines get thicker, and the walls surrounding the roxolite stores get denser, as if protecting the enchanted mineral.

“In there, I think. It has to be since it’s where everything leads.”

Taurek and I nod grimly, knowing the real work begins here. And we know the loosening of the rocks could create a cave-in.

Walking further, we see a notch where the walls have fallen into rubble. Through a gap toward the ceiling, purple beams as bright as daylight pour through.

Taurek reaches as high as he can to loosen the boulders, but they’re unmoving.

“I have to go up then,” I say.

He opens his mouth to object, but his eyes tell me that he has no grounds. This is what we came for, and this is how we get it.

“Here,” he says, throwing me one end of a rope while holding the other. “Tie it around your waist.”

I do as he says and climb up, grateful for the conditioning the mountains provided in our arduous trek to get here.

I take out my compressed light cutter, and I slowly, carefully, remove the edges of the walls to reach the roxolite.

The passageway opens up into a small low-roofed cavern. The walls shimmer with pure mineral crystals, and growing everywhere is danko reed and glinnery fern. Mycelia pulsates with purple light as it makes its way to a rare fruntilia mushroom. I can’t believe I’m witnessing this.

I wriggle further in, knocking some debris loose as I do.

“Be careful, Zaya. The roof doesn’t look stable.”

“I’ll be careful, I promise.” I have so much reverence for this substance that pulling it out without regard for how I take

it feels like sacrilege.

Quickly I start filling my bags with the pure mineral, along with the symbiotic plants that flourish nearby. The stones shine through the neck of the bag even after it's closed.

I can't imagine how many potential treatments for diseases, both known and undiscovered, hang from the bag in my hands.

"Let me throw over what I've gathered." I have another large bag for more. Dust falls from the roof just from my voice.

"This is good, Zaya. We have what we came for. Let's get out."

"I just need some inger worms," I tell him. "They produce restorative silk. And some danko reed."

"Okay. Don't risk your life for it though. It's secondary. Just get the roxolite and let's get out. We don't know how much air is left, or how far we are from a cave-in. Or if it's dangerous to be around this much roxolite with no protection."

There is a wealth of potential. Some of these plants I can't even identify.

I reluctantly begin to make my way back into the outside cavern, dislodging another rock fall in the process.

I collect great handfuls of purple danko reeds. I try to tie them into a bundle, but the deficit of air in every breath affects my coordination. They fall.

"Come on," he calls. "You need to get out, now!" His bellow is followed by a deep rumble in the earth.

The rope around my waist goes taut. Taurek is pulling.

"What are you doing?" I yell. "I'm not ready."

"Yes, you are."

I find myself sailing upward, fighting it, my fingers chafing against the thick rope. "Okay, okay."

The rumbling is growing louder now. I can feel it under my hands. I stop fighting Taurek's insistent pull as he lifts me out of the cavern.

I can feel rocks landing on my back as Taurek grabs my arms and drags me from the mouth of the tunnel. Just then, the rumble turns into a roar, and the tunnel collapses.

I find tears streaming down my cheeks without realizing it. Not because I could have died, but because I wish I had been able to collect more.

TAUREK

Around us, the cave continues to rumble and shake, shifting and settling following the cave-in. More cave-ins could be on the way. But I don't care. All my attention is on Zaya and how fucking angry I am.

But mostly I'm just grateful she's alive. That's all I can think about as I guide her through the chambers to a part of the cavern that's close to the entrance, protected from the elements with adequate air, and not at risk of cave-ins.

She should've gotten out at the first sign of trouble. Zaya could've died.

I can't believe she'd put herself in danger like that. What if she was crushed and I lost her and the roxolite in one horrible moment?

I don't know what I would've done if things had gone differently.

"You can't take risks like that, Zaya," I tell her as we settle into a soft patch of ground. I place a finger on her chin and move her head to look at me. "You need to stay alive. You need to stay alive for Hanai."

And for me.

From the look in her eyes, I can tell she knows there's a second part I'm leaving out. She can see it.

"Just for Hanai?"

“No. Not just for Hanai.” I pause and look at her glorious eyes. “For me, too. I can’t lose you. I care about you too much. I love you too much to lose you so easily. We’ve been through too much together.”

She just looks at me, mouth half-open, as if she’s trying to translate a language she’s never heard before. I’m not even sure if she heard me. A part of her is still back in that lode chamber, maybe the larger part of her.

I lean in, and she’s staring at me with a hunger, a need, a demand for connection. I place my lips against hers. She reaches up her hands to hold my face, and she kisses me back with as much intensity as what I’m feeling for her.

Our lips linger together for a moment, only moving to allow our tongues to meet. I pull away from our kiss.

“I was so scared you were about to die.”

“Me too. You... you saved me.”

Zaya curls into me. I gather her into my arms, and I rub her beautiful body in my hands. She takes off her jacket and pulls off her shirt. I immediately start taking off her bra.

Once her tits fall free, I lean forward and take one in my mouth. My lips wrap around the nipple. It begins to harden as my tongue traces small circles around it.

Zaya lets out a soft moan. Her hands wrap around my head while her legs tighten around me. She starts softly grinding her hips against me, picking up the pace slightly as she can feel my cock start to grow beneath my pants.

I switch my attention to the other tit, repeating the same action on that nipple. Meanwhile, my hand lightly pinches the erect nipple.

Zaya’s soft moan turns more forceful. Her hands push my head harder against her chest. She leans her head down so that her mouth is right next to my ear, magnifying every sound of pleasure she makes.

My free hand slips down the front of Zaya’s pants, beneath her undergarments. The heat of her pussy hits my fingers first.

Then I find her lips. She's already soaking wet.

As my mouth continues to work on her nipple, my thumb finds purchase on her clit as two fingers slide into her.

Zaya releases a guttural moan directly into my ear. Seeing her lose control like that because of my actions fills me with a surge of pride.

My thumb lightly massages her clit while my two fingers curl and unfurl slowly inside her. Her pussy trembles against me with every movement. She starts grinding herself into my fingers.

Her moans grow louder and more animalistic. She grinds herself on my fingers harder and harder. Zaya's mouth softly bites onto my ear lobe. Through gritted teeth, she lets out the strongest moan yet. Her pussy trembles on my fingers.

Her body slows down. She slumps her head over my shoulder. My mouth releases her nipple, and I slide my hand out of her pants.

"Fuck..." she whispers. "I just came... I... You are amazing. You know exactly what I needed."

She holds me against her and wastes no time working on my belt. She drops my pants and undergarments to the ground. My erection is out.

Zaya starts to get down on her knees. "Wait..." She pauses. She grabs a bag, pulls out a blanket, and lays it down below her. Then she gets down on her knees.

I start to laugh at the realization that *now* she's worried about damaging her body. Being crushed alive is fine but bruising her knees on the hard ground is too much. But my laugh quickly turns into a moan as she takes my cock in her mouth.

Zaya starts slow. Her focus starts on the tip. Her tongue slowly licks it on all sides, coating it in her saliva. Meanwhile, both her hands slowly stroke the full length of the shaft up and down.

I close my eyes and take it all in.

“Fuck... Zaya...”

Zaya slides my cock further into her mouth. Her tongue glides along the underside as she does. The wetness of her tongue slickens my shaft as it enters her soft sensuous mouth, custom-made to hold my dick.

“Yes...” I moan. “Your little mouth is perfect.”

Zaya starts to slowly slide my cock out and back in again, over and over. Her hands continue to stroke the parts that bob out of her mouth as I have my hips.

One of her hands leaves my shaft. I keep my eyes closed, ready for the surprise of where it ends up. A grin grows on my face as her tiny human hand wraps around my balls.

“Oh...”

While continuing to suck my cock, Zaya starts to fondle my balls. Lightly at first, her fingers graze them. A pleasurable jolt spreads up my body.

Then her grip tightens on them. Tugging on them, my moans turn more animalistic than Zaya’s were a few minutes ago. Instantly, pressure starts to build up in my cock.

I quickly grab Zaya’s head and pull her off my cock, determined not to cum just yet. She looks up at me with a huge smirk, drool covering her face. I catch my breath and let my cock calm down.

“Were you about to cum?” Pride radiates from Zaya’s face. This woman knows me so unbelievably well.

I lift her up to her feet by her ribcage, turn her around, and pull her pants down. She laughs with delight as I slide my cock into her from behind.

Zaya leans forward and places her hands on the cave wall as I thrust into her. We both moan together, the sound echoing around the cave. I reach forward and hold her tits as they shake wildly with every thrust.

She did wonders on my cock with her mouth, and her pussy feels as incredible as ever. It’s not long before I’m about

to cum again. All the pressure returns to my cock, and I start to pull out, but Zaya holds me in.

“No. I want to feel you. Don’t you dare pull out of me. Don’t deprive me of what it feels like to have a hot-as-fuck Kiphian Prince shoot his delicious load inside of me.” She reaches back and squeezes my balls tight, and I know she’ll get the flood that she demands any moment.

I moan into her mouth as the pleasure extends from my cock throughout my body. I explode inside her, stars shooting outward from an expanding universe, coating both of us in viscous molten cum as we writhe in tandem and ride each other to ecstasy. I slap her juicy ass and a pool of my cum leaks out of her in puddles over our skin.

ZAYA

I open my eyes to a new dawn. We slept out the remnant of the night curled up together at the entrance to the mine. It was bitterly cold, but Taurek had insisted it was a safer location after the roof nearly came down on our heads.

There is a thin line of red on the horizon where the sun is due to rise and the snow-covered valley before us is a uniform gray in the lingering twilight. The faint purple glow of the roxolite deepens where there are shadows.

I can barely force my limbs to move. I've gone too long without enough oxygen. I envy Taurek and his mountain breeding. If he's suffered at all on this trip, he hasn't let it show. A memory of him carrying me up this valley springs into my mind. And to think I wanted to handle this trip on my own. I have needed his strength so often.

I feel Taurek stir next to me. "Morning," I say with a smile.

He wraps his arm around me and pulls me in tight to his warm body.

"Do you think we should go back in and collect more samples?" I ask.

Taurek is still half asleep. "You would really go back there?"

"I'm just so afraid I forgot something."

"You don't think you have everything you need?" He props himself up on one elbow, and I shrug my shoulders. "We

collected a lot, Zaya. The mine is clearly unstable. I wouldn't want to go back in unless you're certain you've missed something."

"I don't really think I have," I concede. "But what if I did? This is Hanai's life we're talking about here, it's no small thing. It would be my fault if she died because I'd overlooked something."

"Zaya, we've done the best we can. Surely it's better to get back with what we have than go back in there." He indicates the dark shaft behind us. "And possibly die ourselves. What hope would Hanai have then?"

"You're right. Of course, you're right. I have to have faith."

"It'll be okay," he assures me. "I trust you."

"That means a lot," I tell him. "And I trust you, too, Taurek."

"Then take my word for it. We're ready to get out of here. Let's get down out of these mountains and save my little girl."

The sun is beyond the horizon now, casting the snow field a radiant glowing orange. *At least the weather is holding*, I think as we set out on our homeward journey back the way we came.

Going downhill is easier this time, without the rivers of ice and piles of snow to ensnare us. The biggest problem is trying not to go too fast and ending up in a pile of snow at the bottom of a precipitous drop.

But while I'm looking forward to getting down from these heights and not fighting every day for survival, I am also reluctant.

Down the mountain signifies an end to our journey. What will things be like when we get back to the palace? Will Taurek want his little human helper around then? I may be only 24, but I'm plenty old enough to know how quickly things can change when real life steps back in. Taurek is the Prince of the Mountain Kingdom. I am a nobody from nowhere. We've all heard this story, and it rarely ends well.

This bubble we've been in is bound to burst once he gets back to life at court. How could he ever accept a meaningless human at his side in his grand palace? I should think about going home to Tlisan and picking up my own life. It will be good to see my friends and family again.

I can't seem to stop my mind from spiraling, and at the bottom of each spiral is the same ending. Rejection. I should never have allowed my feelings to get involved. I look up at Taurek's fit body as he walks ahead of me. I let my lust get the better of me, and then my heart gets hurt. I can't believe how naive I can be sometimes.

By midday, we end up on a path that allows us to walk side by side. Taurek looks eager to get home. I find my legs trudging along, lost in thought, only to see him several paces ahead when I realize.

"Hey, wait! Did you forget about me? I know I'm small, but still..."

For a split second, he looks annoyed. "Sorry. I guess I'm just eager to be heading back. And hoping the chordata we left tied up are still alive. We'll break soon when we find a spot."

My mind clings to the momentary frown of annoyance that I'm slowing him down. *He's keen to get back to Hanai. And away from you.*

There is more vegetation this far down the mountain and a lot less snow. We find a fallen log to sit on and enjoy the warm sun on our faces.

"What are you looking forward to most when you get home?" I ask, laying my head on his shoulder. "Aside from the obvious. Seeing Hanai."

"A bath and clean clothes," he says instantly. "Followed by a good cooked meal."

"Me too," I say fervently. "And a nice soft bed." I'm hoping to fill his mind with reminders of what on this trip he *will* miss.

"Yeah, it's not much fun sleeping on the cold hard ground," he says, not picking up on my hint. "Oh, and flushing

toilets. Cannot wait for those.”

I laugh, but inside my heart is breaking a little. The ground is hard out here in the peaks, but at least I’ve been lying on it with Taurek.

“You’re looking forward to getting back then?” I say with a laugh that I don’t feel inside.

“Absolutely. Fine clothes, fine wine, and sweet music. My family. My life.”

And not me, I think sullenly. I’ve been such a fool.

I finish chewing on my pack rations. He’s right about one thing. The food is definitely better back home. I wash them down with snowmelt water then stand. “Come on,” I say. “Let’s go save our Princess.”

He looks relieved to be back on our way. This time, he’s more aware, and he at least stops to look back if he realizes after a few minutes that I’m not walking abreast.

I’m still lagging behind hours later. I wish we could just stop for the night. The sun has already dipped behind the mountains, casting long shadows across the land. But I don’t want to say anything because I know how badly he wants to get back.

Suddenly, I almost bump into him. He’s stopped dead in his tracks in front of me. I look up to try and find out what’s amiss. Ahead, through the branches of the trees, I can see fire light flickering. I become aware of singing and the beat of a drum.

I make out what I think is the silhouette of three scrawny chordatas, not far from where our two were tied up. What if they’ve stolen them, and they want to take our possessions next? What if they take the roxolite?

“What is it?” I say.

“Shh!” he replies. “I’m going to creep forward and find out. You wait here.”

“No way. You’re not leaving me alone in the woods while you go off to investigate.”

“Okay, stay close and keep quiet then.”

We edge our way down the track until we can clearly see the dancers. They are clansmen. Many of them are wearing strange costumes and swinging long knives as they dance.

“Shit,” I whisper. “Are they going to kill us?”

“Maybe. Especially if they hear you asking.”

There is the crack of a branch breaking behind us. We both spin. My heart is pounding so hard, I swear it’s going to leap out of my mouth.

To my relief, I see that it’s Rylan. “No,” he says with a wide grin. “You’re not going to die today.”

TAUREK

“So, you’ve befriended the Avaris?” I ask Rylan.

“I’ve always been friends of the Avaris,” he answers. “No. The Avaris have always been my family. I trust them with my life. And with yours.”

I know this clan, which calls themselves the Avaris, is situated within my Kingdom, but generally, the clans have nothing to do with the running of the place. The beauty of the Mountain Kingdom is that if there’s a problem between two clans, they resolve it themselves. It’s rare for the Thane to be involved.

This means they don’t have much use for pomp and circumstances, and that’s exactly how I like things.

I look over at the invitingly blazing fire, the smell of roasting chordata wafting with the smoke on the breeze.

“Then let’s go make merry with our brethren,” I say, pointing with my arm toward the bonfires.

“Yes, yes, we shall. There’s one thing to know first, Taurek. Tonight, there’s a festival to honor a spirit the Avaris believe is sacred to these peaks.”

“And that’s a catch why?” I ask. A feast day sounds even more perfect.

“It’s not a catch. I’m just giving you advance notice. It’s customary to ingest an elixir that draws the spirit of the mountains out, so they’re visible.”

“How does it do that?” Zaya asks.

“It makes them visible, with a substance that makes all dreams visible. It grows in the peaks here.”

“You mean we’re going to get high?” Zaya says indelicately.

“Yes. I’ve already partaken a bit myself.” Rylan stares into space as if someone else has just come into our group, even though it’s only the three of us. Zaya nods at me.

“Well, let’s bless the deities then. We can’t be rude to our hosts, can we?”

The clan’s regalia looks metallic as if constructed from sheets of the minerals themselves woven into hardy fabrics. They wear silks and linens taken from the natural resources here, and obviously, they have a long history of textile artisanship.

“This is amazing,” breathes Zaya as we enter the circle of firelight and are instantly surrounded by dancing figures.

Even their musical instruments are fashioned from the materials in the caverns below.

A group of three women walks up to Zaya. “Would you like a bath and some clean clothes?” asks the eldest, a middle-aged Kiphian female with dark hair and purple eyes.

“Oh,” says Zaya. “That would be wonderful!”

I am pleased to see she looks to acknowledge that I know where she is before she’s led away by the three women. Despite Rylan’s reassurances, I watch carefully to see which tent they enter.

“Come on, she’ll be safe enough with Tara and her daughters. She is the chief’s wife, and the clan believes in honor toward guests at all times. Now, let’s get you cleaned up, too,” says Rylan pointedly.

I laugh, forcing myself to relax. “Okay,” I say. “Lead on.”

He leads me to an opulent tent with a brazier and a bath of scented steaming water at its center. “Leave your clothes by

the door. They will be washed and dried by morning.” Rylan bows as he then leaves the tent.

I have to admit the bath is exactly what I need, and I could probably stay in it all night. But the scent of cooking food eventually lures me out.

The clothes that have been left for me are more primal than I’m used to, made from untanned animal skins along with rough material, but they are warm, clean, and soft, a stark contrast to my traveling clothes.

By the time I get outside, the party is in full swing and the evening has passed into darkness. There is a long feasting table set up along one edge of the central fire circle, and many of the clan’s people are already helping themselves. I spot Rylan among them and make my way over.

“Grab a plate,” he yells above the noise of the music.

I look along the table to a pile of tin plates and cups. I fill my cup first from the jug of sweet-smelling brew on the table and down it in one go. It is delicious, and I go to fill it again.

“Hey, steady,” calls Rylan. “That’s potent stuff!”

I stare at my empty cup. “This is the brew? I thought it would be handed around as part of a ceremony or something.”

Rylan is still smiling and has a faraway look in his eyes. I realize he is already wasted.

“This is the ceremony,” he tells me. “The food has been blessed, and so were you when you had your bath scented with sacred herbs. Now the idea is to enjoy yourself as the mountain spirits walk amongst us for the night.”

Zaya comes up beside me and takes my arm. I look down at her. She has a beautiful smile on her face.

“Beware of the drink in the jug there,” I tell her.

She smiles, and I notice her eyes are slightly glazed. “Yep. I already found it. You were ages in the bath.” She looks at me and giggles.

I'm not sure if it's the brew already taking effect, but I'm suddenly filled with a warm glow and the feeling that everything will be okay as long as I have Zaya by my side.

"I was waiting for you to have something to eat," she says, grabbing a couple of plates.

"I'm going to leave you two to your night," says Rylan, clapping me on the shoulder. "Enjoy yourselves. But we'll regroup in the morning to talk about the route. No more getting separated."

Then he is gone, drawn away into the dancing.

We fill our plates, and then Zaya, with a wicked grin, fills both our goblets again with the sweet musky viscosity. "Come on, there are tables over here," she calls, leading the way around the fire circle. I'm impressed that she seems to know her way around already.

Once we've eaten, I can definitely feel the strange effects of the sacred roots. I stand and hold my hand out to Zaya. "Let's dance," I say, drawing her to her feet and out into the medley of whirling figures.

The music has a hypnotic beat, and we lose ourselves to the rhythm of the night. Masked faces flash past in a blur, creating a kaleidoscope of color around us. I cling tight to Zaya and am relieved that she holds on to me with just as much conviction.

As the mushrooms take their hold more and more, Zaya becomes my anchor. The image of her is the one thing that stays straight in my mind.

I start to see the spirits they were talking about, and they seem as real as anyone here. Some of the clan are speaking with them.

I have a vague recollection of being escorted here by the Divine Ones themselves. It's much later on, and we have found ourselves in a magnificent tent, lined with gloriously colored wall hangings and a magnificent bed made of furs.

"Oh, what a night," sighs Zaya as she collapses onto the welcoming bed.

I throw myself down beside her.

“Zaya. You’re beautiful. The most beautiful creature I’ve ever seen.”

She kisses me, and I tumble on top of her. The effect is like a fireworks show going on in and around my body. I swear my senses start outside of my skin as if I’m joined to the entire world by invisible threads.

“You are wonderful,” she says, running her finger down my cheek and sending ripples of sensation all the way down to my toes. “You shine. Like a star.”

I understand exactly what she means.

ZAYA

Meeting up with Rylan feels like fate, as so much of this journey has. It had seemed like such an impossible task that I don't think it could have been accomplished without the help of fate. I think about everything that got us here. Climbing the mountains, riding out the storms, re-opening destroyed mines, finding the roxolite, and extracting it while outrunning a cave-in.

And today begins the journey home, one that I hope is also blessed by fate. The daylight is coming over the mountains when we wake up in the morning. Taurek's arms are around me.

It's all coming to an end, I know. When we first embarked on the journey, I had no idea how I would last for even a day with this entitled elitist. And now, I have no idea how I'll be able to go a day without him. I've gotten so used to seeing him from the moment I wake up to the instant I fall asleep.

"Would you like some breakfast? The clan made it for us," Taurek asks as I open my eyes, greeting me with a plate of anivara, the meat from a hardy creature like a goat. He also has yopra, a fermented food made from its milk. There's also traga fruit, which grows deep in the mountains beneath layers of snow.

"That looks and smells absolutely delicious. I have no idea what it is, but I've never wanted anything more."

Except for you, I think to myself. I could be imagining it, but I swear he makes a look that leads me to think he's

thinking the same thing. Wishful thinking, no doubt. In a stressful, high-stakes situation, of course you're going to seek refuge in the only source of companionship. But once we're no longer in the mountains, I have no doubt he'll be thrilled to re-enter his old life. Every time he's had the hint of it out here, I've never seen him happier.

I'll never measure up to his wife, I'm sure. I'm a living, breathing person whose flaws are unmistakable. I can mess up, say the wrong thing, and make mistakes. We still can't be sure that my entire idea for the trip isn't a mistake until we're back in Cygoth. If the roxolite doesn't work, I'm not just an idiot. I'm also a murderer. I'd have put us all on the wrong course when we could have been finding the real cure.

And all the while, his wife remains young and, I'm sure, beautiful, in his memory. To win a man as gorgeous and alluring as Taurek, she had to be. She doesn't have to face the ravages of age. Now, she is the memory of what could have been, never having the opportunity to disappoint expectations.

In my reverie, I feel the warmth of Taurek's arms around my shoulders, warmer even than the furs wrapped around us.

"Can we just stay here forever, Taurek?" I smile to let him know that I don't remotely mean it. Right now we're at the precipice of not only the journey's end but of Hanai being cured.

"Of course, Zaya. We'll build a house here. We'll have a summer palace, up in the mountains. When the Ice-Charred Peaks become a swimming hole."

"Really? Do they?"

"No." Taurek laughs. "Up here, it doesn't matter how the planet is angled. It's always going to be cold this high up."

"Still. And Hanai will see it one day. You can show her the place where we made sure she got well."

Taurek's face turns serious, and he faces toward the skyline of Cygoth with towers that form peaks and spires, mimicking the array of metals and minerals throughout the Kingdom.

“We should be leaving soon. The sun is up.” He withdraws into himself, looking at the capital and narrowing his eyes.

“About how long of a journey is it?”

“Should take about another half-day of traveling from where we are,” Rylan says, coming up behind us and sitting. “If we set out soon, we’ll get there before nightfall.”

“How are you feeling?” I ask Rylan with a tap on the shoulder. Last I saw him, he was dancing naked around a fire in the ridge, a sight I could have gone through life without seeing.

“Fantastic! I’ve been up for hours. Where do you think the food came from?” He holds up his hands, then raises his fork and points to himself.

“I didn’t know you could cook so well, Rylan.” I hold up my slab of meat on my crude fork. “You’ve been holding out on us.”

“Haven’t had much opportunity to cook a gourmet meal. Something kept me occupied.”

I look over to see what comeback Taurek has coming, but he’s so distracted he’s not even taking the bait to ridicule Rylan.

“I’ll start outfitting the chordatas,” Rylan says with a little wave, first looking at me in acknowledgment that the Prince seems to be in a mood. He saunters over to the makeshift pen he fashioned with the nomads.

With Rylan preparing our draft animals, I realize with suffocating anxiety that this might be the last chance I’ll ever have to tell Taurek what this journey has meant to me. It might be the last chance I have to speak with him at all in private.

About how much he shifted everything I thought I knew, and how differently I see everything now. He helped me conquer my deepest fears, and he helped me believe in myself.

He saved my life, several times over. I don’t even know what it is I want to tell him. I just know it feels urgent to do something before we leave this twilight space, where there is

no separation between royalty and commoners, Kiphians and humans, and my body with his.

What I want to say is that I don't want to go back. I want to stay here with him. I can't say that, though, and I don't even completely mean it. Hanai is relying on us, and he would be disgusted by the thought.

Taurek is still looking toward Cygoth with the sadness of someone clinging to unrealized hope.

"We're ready, Your Highness." Rylan has the chordatas on a lead, and he helps me up onto the saddle. "And Zaya."

The bubble that's been dissipating punctures with that contrast in our stations. I'm an afterthought. An accessory. An asterisk.

"Let's go. What are we waiting for?" Taurek says, half-dazed and already on his chordata before his sentence is done.

"For you to complain about waiting," Rylan says.

Taurek grunts without returning the banter. As much as I want to believe it's a hangover, the source seems more internal. If it were a hangover, he'd be joking about it. But now, I feel like he might knock someone off a chordata if they said the wrong thing.

We meander through the rocky foothills in silence, each of us in our own worlds. Rylan leads the way with Taurek in front of me, and I'm homesick for my spot nestled into him on the chordata from before. Before we even knew the roxolite was there, much less found it.

The danger would feel comforting compared to this isolation.

With enough room for our mounts to stand abreast after descending a sloping hillside that obstructed the view before, we stop at the edge all at once. The gleaming palace comes into view, its metals and minerals glinting from the sharp afternoon sun.

I feel my eyes burn with tears, rolling onto my cheeks before I'm even aware that they started to form. The two

Kiphians on either side of me, powerful and fearless, wear more emotion on their face than I'm used to seeing.

Taurek's face is an inscrutable muddle, and I assume he's thinking of Hanai and grateful to be at the journey's end. Maybe he's nervous about whether the cure will work. And I assume he's always thinking of his wife, whose passing must still feel fresh to him. The loss seems so palpable in him and in Hanai.

As we travel for several more hours to finally reach the palace, I notice a larger crowd than the one that saw us off. I wonder if maybe it's customary for that sort of welcoming after a journey. I look at Taurek's face for clues, and he seems just as surprised. A horrible thought comes over me. What if it's a funeral cortege because we didn't get back in time to save Hanai?

Taurek digs his crampon talons into the ribs of the chordata, which gallops ahead of the two of us. I don't think I've ever seen one move so quickly.

Even in the side streets surrounding the palace, there's a stir. We take a longer way around to get through the throngs of traffic choking off the roads and walkways and to attempt to enter relatively unseen.

I don't see any funeral clothes or weeping mourners. The atmosphere is one of agog curiosity as if someone has come back from the dead. Security outside the palace is twice the size that I'd seen before.

Has someone used the opportunity of Taurek's absence to try to invade?

Taurek guides us into the royal entryway, and he dismounts from the chordata. His pensive, fearful look turns to one of rage.

There's a beautiful Kiphian woman with dark hair and light eyes, the color of translucent amber. Her skin seems to reflect the light in a spectrum of color. Her ethereal beauty does nothing to soften the violence in his face.

“Kantha.”

“Taurek.”

“Why are you here? You’re not welcome.”

“I’m here to see my daughter.”

TAUREK

At that moment, I freeze. Time slows to a complete standstill. I'm arrested in place by shock at the sight of Kantha, her sudden appearance like a demon re-emerging from my past to haunt me.

She lifts her head, tilting it back to peer down her nose at me despite the fact I'm taller than her. For a split second, it's as if she's on a pedestal, staring down at me like I'm below her in status.

My frustration snaps me back to reality. I take a defiant step forward, challenging her stance. If it had been anyone else in her position, they'd be cowering in fear, but Kantha has always been a stubborn bitch.

"How dare you, Kantha?" I growl.

She recoils, crossing her brows at me.

"How dare I what exactly?" she hisses.

"Just show up here unannounced! Did you think you could come waltzing back so easily?"

"Ha! You wish. Besides, I don't need your permission to come and see my daughter."

"Your daughter?" I retort.

"Are you forgetting who carried her in the womb and birthed her?"

"Says the one who walked out of her life five years ago, and told her if she wouldn't live in the Cloud Kingdom, she

wouldn't be your child any longer."

She sneers, the corners of her mouth coiling into a sickly smile.

"Still hurt after all these years, are you? I would have thought that by now, you'd have come to terms with the fact I no longer wanted you."

"I can see you left your brains up in the Cloud Kingdom. This isn't about me, it's about my daughter. The one you abandoned. The one you couldn't visit. The one you refused to receive if it meant she wouldn't live there forever."

My comeback wipes the smirk from Kantha's face.

I notice Zaya beside me, trying to shrink into the shadows, and I had completely forgotten she was there. I can't believe she had to see that. I touch her on the arm as if acknowledging that none of this should be happening.

"And who the hell is this?" snaps my former mate.

"My name is Zaya, from the settlement of Tlisan."

"She's been on a mission with me, retrieving a rare medicinal treatment in the Ice-Charred Peaks."

Kantha looks at her with as much disdain as she has for me.

"So I'm not welcome at the abode of my daughter and former mate, and yet this undignified human woman is? You won't replace me so easily."

Zaya stutters in shock. "No one is trying –"

I don't want Zaya to have to feel she has to defend herself, not in front of someone as vile as Kantha, and I cut her off. "Zaya risked her life countless times over the last two weeks to save Hanai's life. I don't know if you've ever done anything for anyone that wasn't for your own selfish ends."

I look over to give Zaya a reassuring smile, and to reassure myself with the beauty of her face, but she's suddenly gone. I see her running up the stairs to her room. I want to go comfort her and tell her everything's fine, but I have to deal with the

hurricane of my former mate blowing in with a fury stronger than anything the Ice-Charred Peaks threw at us.

“Well, she seems like tremendous help indeed,” she snickers. “Now tell me, Taurek, why was it I had to hear about our daughter’s illness secondhand? You should have communicated this to me directly.”

“Kantha, you’ve made it pretty damn clear to me that you couldn’t care less for Hanai.”

“Care less? For you, perhaps, but not for our daughter.”

I hate how she keeps using that word. *Our*. I shake my head, actively taking a deep breath to calm my nerves.

“Just answer me this then. Why have you returned when you made it clear that you wanted nothing to do with our child if it wasn’t on your terms? You never sent one word these last five years.”

Kantha bites her lips, her eyes burning with indignation. “I told you if she couldn’t be with me...”

“Do you know how tough it is for a child to hear nothing from their mother? To be told they won’t be with them on their birthday?”

“Oh, she’s a child,” says Kantha. “She’ll forget about it.”

“She won’t forget the pain. If she does forget the pain, or rather if the pain no longer hurts, it’s only because she forgot the source of it. I endured the pain of losing you, but a child... something like this will stay with her forever. You’ve never even apologized.”

“Even if that were true, she’ll come to understand why I left when I did. Fated mates are no small deal, Taurek.”

“Don’t need to tell me...” I growl. “Fated mates can change a lot of things, but they can’t change that you have a child. Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to catch up with Zaya and help cure our... I mean, my daughter.”

“Zaya is to do nothing,” says Kantha in an authoritative tone.

“Who do you think you are to be making orders like that? Need I remind you that you resigned your position when you left?”

“It doesn’t matter. Zephyron has already tended to Hanai.”

My jaw drops open as I glare at my former mate. I’m almost tempted to wrap my hands around her neck. It was one thing for her to join him in the Cloud Kingdom, but for him to set foot on my property and lay his hands on my daughter brings out a rage within me as I’ve never felt.

“He what?” I yell. “Tell me what the hell he did!”

“Relax! You should be happy that Hanai will be out of pain. Zephyron brought with him a medicinal serum from the Cloud Kingdom that cures just about any ailment. It’ll work better than any of that human’s poison.”

“No... Hanai...”

I spin around on my heels and break out into a run, sprinting at a speed that seems impossible as I make my way across the palace toward Hanai’s suite. I hear the shrill voice of Kantha call out behind me.

“Taurek! She’s fine! Don’t be so dramatic!”

But her words fall on deaf ears. I almost slip as I skid on the floor, turning for the stairs. As I ascend, I pray that wherever Zephyron is, we don’t bump into each other.

If I get my hands on him, beating him to a pulp would only take my attention away from the one individual on Kiphia who needs me more than ever, Hanai. It feels like a race against time as I speed towards her quarters.

Screw Zephyron, doesn’t he have enough? He has to play the hero, too? I have no doubt Kantha put him up to this somehow.

Whatever serum he has must be phony. No doctors I had before Zaya ever talked about such a miracle. In all my time of searching, I would have found this serum if it was reliable. I know that for a fact.

Finally, I make the final turn, running toward Hanai's doors. I burst in, and I see Zephyron standing over my daughter. He looks up, the usual look of pride in his eyes replaced by one of slight concern, as well it should be.

"You son of a bitch," I snarl. "Get the hell away from my daughter."

"Take it easy, Taurek. I was only trying to help," he says, raising his hands.

"You never should have touched her. Wait... Trying?"

"The Cloud Kingdom serum didn't work," he mutters, gesturing to Hanai. I turn to see her shifting beneath the sheets. She remains comatose, even groaning in pain as her face grimaces, causing my heart to ache. "I'm sorry, Taurek."

"Zephyron, you fool!" I yell, rushing to Hanai's side. "Dammit, she's only getting worse..."

I stroke her hair and hold her hand. I don't know what to make of the symptoms. I get a flash to the early examinations Zaya did.

Zaya. I need to speak to her now. I need to get her help to use the roxolite.

I raise a hand to Zephyron to let him know I'll be back, and he watches in confusion as I turn and rush out the door. I keep running, not intending to stop until I reach Zaya's quarters.

No doubt she'll be confused by everything going on, but right now I need her more than ever. So does Hanai. And I just need Zaya to know how much she matters to me.

ZAYA

“I can’t believe this,” I say to myself as I storm into my room. “The whole time... the whole damn time, Kantha was alive!”

I stop for a split second, trying to gather myself, but the stress is too much. I continue my scurrying about, stacking my belongings together.

I can’t handle the fact that Taurek didn’t tell me his mate was alive after all. Or worse yet, wondering how I came this far and long without having a single notion about it. On top of everything, I can’t help but ponder why she could be back, knowing she must have been gone for quite some time.

Kantha being back can only lead to one thing. She probably came so they can get back together. Or even if that wasn’t her goal, they’ll be here as a family unit while Hanai is recovering, I don’t need to be in the way. I don’t want Hanai to see me as the enemy of her parents, or, worse, an impediment to their happiness.

I no longer see a reason for myself to remain here a minute longer. After all, on my way to my room, I had walked by a couple of staff muttering something about a cure for Hanai, all the way from the Cloud Kingdom.

If it’s from there then it surely must work. I’m no longer of any use to Hanai now. My mood deflates. I was looking forward to seeing a healthy Hanai running around and playing. And maybe things with Taurek could have been clarified. But now, there’s no chance. It’s too late.

“Let’s get packing,” I mutter. I take my things out from cabinets and shelves, arranging them into a neat pile. They look like someone else’s clothes after two weeks of living a different life.

As I begin to put my old, raggedy clothes into my small bag, I’m reminded of what I’ll never have. Leaving the palace means I’m leaving the dreams behind of building something together with Taurek and Hanai.

“It was all too good to be true anyway.”

Kantha and her beautiful face and figure pop into my mind, as if my own head is trying to mock me with her beauty. Even if Taurek had taken something of an interest in me, who am I next to a stunning Kiphian anyway? I stand no chance.

I don’t notice the tear running down my face until it drops onto the bed sheets below me. I run a hand over my face, quickly dashing the remaining tears away. Everything hurts, and the sooner I’m back in my true home, the better.

Just then, there comes an echoing sound of heavy footsteps, rapid and quick like they’re sprinting. My door bursts open, and I spin around to see a breathless Taurek standing there with a worried look in his eyes, his brows knitted in concern.

“Can I help you?” I ask in confusion, thinking he’d have been with Kantha to go and see his daughter by now. He opens his mouth to answer, but his pupils flick to my open bag behind me.

“What are you doing?” he says.

“What does it look like?” I chuckle, less out of humor and more out of frustration. “I’m packing my bag and getting out of here.”

A noise of bewilderment escapes his mouth, as if what I just said baffles him. For just a split second, I let myself have hope that I’m wrong.

“Look, I won’t get in your way any longer. I’m going now,” I tell him.

“No, please don’t. I need you right now.” He speaks with a look of desperation in his eyes.

“What?” I retort in confusion.

“It’s an emergency. Hanai was given a serum from the Cloud Kingdom. They thought it would work, but all it did was make her condition deteriorate even further. She’s unconscious!”

“Oh, no,” I mutter. “Is she still in her bedroom?”

“Yeah,” replies Taurek, his voice breaking. “Please, I need your help more than ever, and so does she.” He throws his hands together. I’ve never seen him look more vulnerable and afraid than I do at this moment, noticing he too is on the verge of tears. I don’t hesitate.

“Okay,” I say firmly. “Let me grab the roxolite, then take me down to a sterile environment.”

He taps his foot impatiently as I gather the ingredients. I then hastily follow behind him as he leads the way through various twists and turns, taking me to a fresh, clean kitchen that looks more like a laboratory than somewhere one cooks food.

“How long will it take?” he asks with a shaky voice.

“I’m afraid the process itself is slow going. Every step has to be perfect and well-executed, but if you help then we can speed things up.”

“Alright,” he says immediately. “You tell me what to do, and I’ll follow.” It almost shocks me to hear this, especially now. He’s the Prince of Mountain Kingdom, and I’m down here like a glorified scullery maid. I reach over, taking his hand in mine and giving him a reassuring squeeze.

“Taurek, we’re going to save your daughter, I promise.” His eyes light up with confidence, allowing him to speak with restored grace. Even I find myself motivated by my own words to accomplish the task at hand.

He rushes to grab all of the equipment I need as I carefully remove the roxolite from its wrapping. The purple rock still

glows as vibrant as when it was embedded within the mine walls.

Now that I have the roxolite in front of me, the time has come to put this cure to the test. Voices in the back of my head start to whisper doubts, but I tune them out. My sole motivation now is Hanai herself, her face remaining as a still image in my mind. And the thought of the smile on Taurek's face at the sight of the healthy glow returning to his daughter's cheeks.

I take a deep breath and get to work creating the serum, starting by having Taurek grind down a chunk of roxolite. I add the now powdered substance into a bowl, adding a touch of salt and slowly adding a chemical mix to extract its healing properties.

I take things slowly, noticing how nervous Taurek is growing from the corner of my eye.

"I'm sorry this is taking a while," I tell him. "If I go too fast then I could mess this whole batch up."

"I understand," he says, his forehead furrowed, seemingly locked in a battle of logic and emotion.

Once all of the chemical mix is added, I then strain the mixture, letting liquid accumulate in a small vial below. Soon, I have enough, pulling some into a syringe. I turn to Taurek, showing him what is hopefully the answer to all of Hanai's problems.

He leads me to his daughter's quarters. Upon our entry, he looks around, his nervousness replaced with what looks to me like annoyance. He acts as if he's expecting to find someone else here. I consider asking if he wants Kantha here with us, but I decide against it.

My heart drops when I spot Hanai on the bed, looking worse than she did when we left. Rushing to her side, I throw a hand to her neck. Her pulse has become even more oddly irregular, veering from extremely fast and hard to virtually nonexistent in the span of seconds. Her chest barely moves

with shallow breaths. Taurek joins me at the bed, tears now welling in his eyes as he glances down at his daughter.

I pull up Hanai's sleeve. *Here we go.* I slowly pierce her skin and inject the serum. After I do so, I take a step back, praying that all our efforts were worth it. *Come on, Hanai. Wake up, wake up!*

A few seconds pass, and in that split moment of time, everything changes. Her dulled skin now returns to its own vibrancy that I had never seen before. Her breathing becomes normal, as does her pulse when I go to check it.

But the biggest shock comes when she opens her eyes, batting them as if waking from a peaceful sleep. I'm too stunned to speak, as is Taurek, when Hanai slowly moves her gaze to meet his.

"Daddy?"

"Hanai," he gasps, the tears finally falling. He leans down, wrapping his arms around his daughter. They bury their faces in each other's necks as he silently sobs. I'm only glad they're tears of joy. I take a step back, giving them some space to relish in their reunion.

My heart leaps with joy and relief, knowing I can take my leave after doing one last good deed for the prince of the Mountain Kingdom. *I did it,* I think to myself as I giggle with delight. *I helped save Hanai's life. We really did it.*

TAUREK

I realize as I wake up that I might not have slept so well in years. My daughter is cured and back to her normal self after so long. I can finally relax, feeling a literal weight being lifted off of my spirit.

With Hanai back in good health, I can at last take things easy for a while. Normally at this time of the morning, I'd be consulting with a doctor for the next steps on Hanai's healthcare journey, only to be left with no answers.

Or trudging through impassable trails on deadly mountains, feeling pulled to my fated mate beside me.

Today is a new day, the start of the rest of my life where it can be just me, Hanai, and Zaya.

"Oh, no." I shoot up in bed, recalling the sight of her packed bags yesterday. Just like that, my moment of bliss disintegrates.

After throwing on some clothes, I race through the hallways, bound for Zaya's quarters. I only hope she's still here, so she can hear me out on my proposal to stay. I come to her door, my heart beating with uncertainty as I gently rap upon it.

"Come in," says Zaya's muffled voice.

"Okay, she's still here," I whisper to myself with relief before stepping into her room.

I greet her with a smile, but my eyes immediately dart to the bed where her bag is ready and packed. If she and her bag

were gone, there'd be no sign that she was ever here. It makes my stomach drop.

“Good morning, Zaya.”

“Nice to see you, Prince Taurek. No important duties to attend to?”

“Yes. That's what I'm doing here.”

“Oh?”

“I didn't expect you to be leaving so soon.”

“Well, curing your daughter is what you brought me here for, right? And now she's cured, so I'll be taking my leave.”

“I don't understand,” I mutter.

“Look, my mind is settled on leaving. I just need to say goodbye to Hanai before I do. I don't belong here. It's clear to everyone.”

“But, Zaya. Please, wait.”

“Please, Taurek,” she interjects, throwing up a dismissive hand and walking down to Hanai's room.

A weight bears on my shoulders. If I've lost her already, then fighting for it won't make me lose her more. I run after her as she heads down to Hanai's suite. *We found love and warmth in icy, unforgiving mountains. It can survive there, but not here?*

I spin around and jog after Zaya, making my way to Hanai's room. As the door opens, Zaya takes a step back, seemingly pausing in shock, then she rushes forward.

“What the hell is happening in there? Oh, no...” My thoughts immediately spring to Hanai as I run to her room. Bursting through the door, I spot my daughter passed out once again, her face once more writhing in pain. “No... This wasn't supposed to happen!”

“I told you!” spits a shrill voice from the corner of the room. I turn to see Kantha approach from the shadows with Zephyron following close behind. Next to me, Zaya tenses

herself. “I specifically said that Zaya wasn’t to lay a hand on our daughter, and now look what’s happening!”

“Hold on just a minute,” I hiss. “Are you implying this was all her fault?” I gesture to Zaya, more beautiful than ever, although I’ve never seen her so terrified.

“Implying? No, this is a straight-up accusation, Taurek!”

“It can’t be,” says Zaya. “She was fine yesterday, I don’t understand...”

“You don’t understand much, do you, now?” retorts Kantha.

“Stop!” I yell. “Enough with the baseless accusations and finger-pointing. No one knows for sure what’s going on with Hanai!”

“Her vitals are stable, but she’s fallen ill again, so it seems,” remarks Zephyron, somehow finding the audacity to weigh in on the matter. “Who knows if she will even wake up again? Your cure did not work.”

“Neither did yours. For all we know, this could be some sort of side effect to your so-called miracle serum.”

Zephyron snarls, and I’m just about ready to take him on when Zaya’s hand pulls on my arm. I turn to her in confusion.

“Can I talk to you outside?” Zaya asks.

“As soon as I talk to the nurse on-call, and then that’s all I want to do, Zaya.”

I ask the nurse if there’s anything we can do in the meantime, and the nurse is giving conventional treatment to wait it out.

“Nothing to do but wait and keep checking in, Your Highness.”

“Please alert me if anything changes.”

“Yes, sir.”

I glance over my shoulder at my unconscious daughter, my stomach twisting with anxiety. It seems as though we’ve been

pulled back through time, once again thrown into the uncertainty of her illness.

Returning my attention to Zaya, I nod and go just outside the doors.

“I’m sorry about all of this,” she says softly. “But Kantha is right about one thing. This is all my fault.”

“What?” I retort. “No. Do not let her poison get to you, too.”

She shrugs her shoulders.

“I shouldn’t even be here. I’m interfering with your family. I’m the one causing the rift in your guys’ happiness.”

I can’t stop a huge burst of laughter from coming out. It’s like all of my anxiety about Hanai, anger at Kantha, and love for Zaya escape my body in one enormous guffaw.

“I’m sorry for laughing. It wasn’t about you, Zaya. Just... Why would you think that I’d ever want to be with Kantha? I despise Kantha.”

“For all this time, I thought that Kantha was dead, but she’s standing there in that room.”

I only just now realize that I never explained. I didn’t know her well enough, and then when we were out there in the mountains, the last thing I wanted to talk about with my fated mate is the ex-mate, the one whose touch turns anything around her to shit. I wouldn’t want her to get a secondhand curse.

“I only wish she were dead,” I say with a smile. “But no, she’s alive and well. At least in body. In mind...”

“I know you guys probably have your issues but I can’t help but feel I’m getting in the way here. I think my simply being here is creating problems for everyone.”

“Let’s walk to my private balcony, Zaya. We have to have a talk. But no. You couldn’t be further from the truth.”

I take her hand, and she follows me down the hallway.

“Zaya, you have it all wrong.”

“Kantha wants to be with you, and I can’t blame her. Who wouldn’t?”

“No, no.” I shake my head and chuckle, and she crinkles her nose in confusion. “She’s with her fated mate now.”

“You mean that Cloud Kingdom guy?” she asks. “Reminds me of a funeral director. Wow, she left you for him?”

I take a step closer and smile.

“There’s a lot you need to know, so let’s talk through everything before you come to any conclusions about leaving, alright?” I say. She nods, taking a seat as I take a deep breath. From this vantage point, we have a view of the mountains surrounding the capital.

“So, where do I start? Kantha was my mate once upon a time. But the way mates work, it’s rarely a matter of love. It’s a matter of a suitable match, continuing the next generation. Her family was high-born and ran in the same circles. But we weren’t fated mates. She had to go to Cloud Kingdom for that. Fated mates are something different.”

“How are they different?”

I can see a look of pain on her face, and I need to get to the part where I’m not talking about Kantha. I need to tell her what she is.

“They’re pairings so rare, so precious as to be considered a blessing from the Divine Ones. It’s more complex than that. Something between your Pandora’s Box and the one about the canary. But it’s about finding the person who is so right, they open your eyes to the world and to yourself with a clarity that you’ve never known before.”

I look at her intently, hoping she can see that when I’m describing fated mates, I’m looking at my inspiration.

“And you weren’t that with Kantha?”

“No. Most marriages here aren’t fated. She met Zephyron, and they shared the mate bond. That was never the issue I had. I was happy for her, in my own way. The issue was she didn’t want Hanai unless she could take her permanently to the

Cloud Kingdom, and I couldn't allow that. She didn't want to leave her new life even briefly. If she wasn't there permanently, she couldn't be bothered even with Hanai visiting. What happened was worse than a death."

"How did she know he was right for her? How were they so positive they were fated mates?"

"The spines on Kiphians' backs. They heat up from the physical touch of our fated mate. And there's a rightness that just clicks. It's not just the physical, but that's the surest sign. It's like there's a flicker the moment you meet that person, and it turns to flame when you touch them."

"How do you know that, though? You just have faith in it?"

"Actually, I didn't believe in it for a very long time. And after Kantha, I wanted to forget the idea. It caused me agony. It broke my little girl's heart. I never wanted a fated mate."

"And then...?"

"And then I met my fated mate, Zaya." I touch her hand, and the flame throughout my spine that I just finished telling her about strikes me.

"Who?"

"You, Zaya. I knew it almost from the moment I met you."

She closes her eyes as I bring my lips to hers, planting a passionate kiss there. I pull back, never lifting my gaze from her, not even for a single second.

"There's something else I have to tell you," I whisper, my heart pounding faster than ever before.

"Tell me anything." She pulls me so hard she's practically begging for me.

"I love you, Zaya. I never want you to leave. If you can take the most hellish place on the planet and give me the happiest moments of my life there, I can't imagine how beautiful my world will be with you in it forever."

“Taurek. I love you, too. I was so terrified coming back that you’d want me to leave as soon as we collected the roxolite.”

“No. Never. I never want to go anywhere again without you.”

ZAYA

“O h, Taurek...” Taurek’s lips lightly brush against the skin of my neck as he pulls away from a kiss, his warm breath penetrating through my very being.

His hands fall to the small of my back, holding me against him. His warmth seeps into me even through our clothes. Now, he’s sharing his warmth with me, not out of necessity. Just need.

Taurek’s hands move to start removing my clothing. His lips kiss areas of my skin as they’re exposed. My neck, to my collar bone, to my shoulder, to my chest right between my breasts.

Lost in the pleasure, I don’t even notice Taurek removing my bra. His kisses move down my chest. He lingers for a moment on each breast, teasing my nipples with his tongue.

I close my eyes and breathe slowly, taking in all the tenderness. My pussy is already wet and throbbing for him.

His lips make their way down my stomach while his hands start to remove my pants. In one impressive tug, Taurek brings both my pants and undergarments to my ankles. As Taurek gets down on his knees and continues to kiss his way down to my pussy, I step out of my pants and kick them aside.

Never in my life did I ever expect to be completely naked in the palace chambers of a Prince. Yet here we are. There is nowhere I’d rather be.

I run my hands over Taurek's strong shoulders as his lips meet my pussy. He softly kisses my clit, then sucks on it more deeply, rhythmically, hypnotically. A jolt runs up my body. I let out a quiet moan.

Taurek dives his tongue up into my pussy, and I moan loudly, then cover my mouth with my hand.

"Don't be ashamed to be loud," he says, looking me in the eye after removing his mouth from my vagina. "No one can hear. And I want to hear everything."

A desperate howl escapes me as his tongue teases the inside of me, running back and forth along the walls of my pussy at an exquisitely slow pace.

I close my eyes again as Taurek's lips wrap around my clit. He lightly nibbles on it, sucking on it. His hands methodically squeeze my ass cheeks.

It sneaks up on me. It all happens so fast, I didn't even notice it all building up. Then like a dam bursting, an overwhelming pleasure explodes across my body.

I moan as loudly as I can. My knees go weak, and I almost collapse onto Taurek. But his strong hands hold me up.

After a moment, as my pleasure subsides, Taurek removes his mouth from my pussy. I finally open my eyes and see that at some point, Taurek had taken his own clothes off. I was too lost in my own pleasure to even notice.

I take his cock in my hands and gently stroke it. He's already fully erect. Taurek sweeps me off my feet and carries me over to the bed.

He gently lays me down on the softest sheets I've ever felt in my life. Taurek gets on top and carefully rubs the tip of his cock against my pussy lips. In anticipation of what will come next, I let out a sound close to a purr.

Taurek slides his cock into me and kisses me, then grazes my neck with his teeth. My soaking wet pussy opens easily to accept his massive shaft. Taurek thrusts slowly and gently. It's animalistic and raw as it's been before, but there's something new. A feeling of genuine love.

“Oh, Taurek.” I grab his head and pull him down for a deep kiss. “I love you, Taurek.”

“I love you, Zaya. My fated mate.”

We repeat that exchange to each other over and over as he lovingly thrusts into me. I’m on the brink of orgasm again, so quickly after my last one. But every time I hear him say “I love you,” I get a little closer.

“I’m about to come again.”

“Let’s come together.”

“Touch my spines.”

He grabs my hands and slams them in his back, and he lets out a guttural moan, a mix between a yelp and a growl. My fingers find his spines, and his whole body starts to quiver at a single touch. I slowly start to stroke them, like I would with his cock, and dig my fingers and nails in deeply.

“I love you,” he moans. He leans in again for another deep kiss.

Together, we’re sent over the edge. The dam bursts within me once again as his cock explodes and fills me with his seed. At this moment, we’re connected in a way I’ve never felt before. If this is what having a fated mate comes with, I’m not complaining.

Hours later, I lay in bed restlessly, listening to the sound of Taurek’s soft breathing. Despite being at total peace next to him, I can’t sleep. My mind is still on Hanai. I really thought I was going to be able to save her. My remedy should’ve worked. Now it feels like we’re all just biding our time until she passes. I can’t do that.

I slowly slip out of bed, and fortunately, Taurek hardly stirs. He must be exhausted after the past few days. I throw on some clothes and tiptoe out of the room.

The palace is completely quiet. All I can hear is the sound of my feet against the marble floor. I don’t know if this is common or if it’s normally more lively, considering I’ve only been here a handful of days in total.

I make my way down to Hanai's bedroom. I need to see her face and check on how she's doing. She looks peaceful sleeping in her bed, but I know the truth all too well. She's dying, and I failed to help her.

As I get closer, it gets clearer how shaky Hanai's breathing is. I simply kneel down next to her bed. Tears start to fall down my face. I don't know what else to do.

I close my eyes and start to pray. I'm not sure to whom. I don't even think I've prayed since I was a kid, sick in bed and wishing to get better.

Please, I pray, save Hanai. She's innocent in all of this. She's just a child. She should be out running around and playing with her friends. Not stuck in bed surrounded by useless doctors all day.

I open my eyes. What am I doing? I wipe the tears from my eyes. The crying is as useless as the praying. Nothing will change unless I change it. But what can I do? I see my bag in the corner of her room, which I must have left there, thinking I was about to leave. Instead, I found out this may be my home forever, the home I've dreamed of having.

I walk over to grab it and return to Hanai's bedside.

I rummage through it, looking for a remnant from the trip, or something soothing for her that I may have packed. The roxolite is safe and refrigerated in the makeshift laboratory created by necessity in one of the unused kitchens, and the inger worms are in one of Hanai's old, unused terrariums.

I widen my eyes at the sight of the strong, corded roots growing from the roxolite, and the silk and strands of mineral thread the nomads gave to us as part of the celebration, along with the minerals I took from the roxolite cavern.

I get some of my tools, the ones for extracting minerals, but also for making my wares, and I know what I have to do.

With a mind of their own, my fingers start to intertwine the roots together. Before I know it, I'm halfway to making a bracelet. If I can't heal her, maybe I can at least give Hanai

something beautiful in this world before she leaves it. I decide to make one for each wrist.

I grab some of the silk and weave it between the sturdy rope. A colorful streak runs through the bracelet among the light threads. Using the condensed light tool, I shape the roxolite and other stones into beads and amulets.

For the centers, I use jewels of drathasite, the conductive stone we found, the one that helped us into the cave. The metal braids blend perfectly with the roots and silk around it, and it's done. I find clay sigils representing the spirit of the mountain from the ritual celebration that I add for clasps.

I slip the bracelets onto her wrists, and they fit perfectly. Both of her hands are held by love, even if no one else is with her. I hope that if Hanai wakes up... no, *when* Hanai wakes up, she'll like them.

As soon as I'm done, my exhaustion hits me like an avalanche down a mountainside. I simply lay down beside Hanai's bed. Once my eyes close, I fall asleep faster than ever before.

ZAYA

I sit up and look around, and it takes a few moments to remember that I fell asleep on the small carpet at the foot of Hanai's bed. Even the floors of this place are comfortable and luxurious. I almost don't want to get up.

Immediately, I change my mind. I need to see how Hanai is doing. I'm almost afraid to see her face, in case she's gotten worse.

The palace is peacefully quiet. Everything is so calm and serene, like there isn't a problem in the world.

I stand up and stretch, standing over Hanai's sickbed elevated high up, terrified to see her.

"Oh, my God. No."

I didn't think any sight could be more terrible than her looking worse. But there is. It's the sight of no one in her bed. I scan my surroundings in a panic, and I see no sign of her.

"No! Hanai?"

I look behind her bed and in the washroom, and there's no sign of her anywhere. How could this happen? Where did she go? How can she just disappear?

Would I have missed a commotion in the middle of the night? I was so exhausted, with so little sleep, and I'd be the least of their concerns. It's not like they'd wake me up if she needed to be transported to a hospital.

She's dead. I know she is. There's no question that's where she is. She was comatose when I saw her. Even before that, she could barely walk on her own. Her breathing and heart rate were erratic. I had always known it was a possibility, but I couldn't actually imagine it happening.

What if Hanai's health took a turn for the worse? Without treatment, the doctors weren't sure exactly how her health would deteriorate. What if it happened in the night? While I just slept here.

I failed her. How can I live with myself? I guess the small consolation is that if I hadn't come, it would have happened anyway, and Taurek wouldn't have found what he thinks is his fated mate. But my dreams of my life with Taurek never involved a family of two. It was always with Hanai, healthy again, growing stronger, living without the burden of illness.

The tears start streaming down my face. I can't hold them back. She deserved so much more in this life. She deserved to grow up. Instead, some mystery illness had the nerve to steal her from all of those who love her.

Another terrible thought enters my mind. What if the bracelet I made wasn't just a pointless gesture? What if it made her worse?

The medicine I made certainly didn't help her. Maybe the bracelet is what finally killed her. Not only could I not save Hanai, but I made it all so much worse for her.

I don't deserve to be here anymore. Someone like me shouldn't get to enjoy the luxuries of this place. Someone like me shouldn't get to be with Taurek. I should just...

Laughter cuts through the silence of the palace like a hot knife through chordata butter. Who dares laugh during a day like this? *No... could it be? No. There's no way. Could it be Sorsha and Talan's kids?*

The laughter continues to echo throughout the palace. Each time it hits my ears, I feel a sense of sadness, knowing that it's a sound Hanai can't make.

Now the only sounds are the laughter and my feet against the perfectly polished floors. More laughter hits my ears, and I pick up speed. *If it were another kid, by this point the parents would have told them to be quiet. Could it be? Do I let myself hope...?*

I get closer and closer, knowing that whatever I see next will determine the course of my life. The laughter hits my ears once again, and I pause to study it. Yes. I think it's her. I can't believe it.

I'd only heard her laugh a few times, and even that took effort. She's not only alive but out of bed and laughing! I race toward the sound. I need to hug her. I need to tell her that I've never been so happy in my life, and it's all because she's better.

I have so many questions. But mainly, I just want to get to her side. I want to hear that laugh right in my ears. The echoes against the place walls don't do the sound justice.

I'm getting closer and closer. Her laughter is the most beautiful sound I could ever hope to hear.

I turn a corner and see two guards blocking a doorway. It's understandable that Taurek would arrange for guards to protect Hanai. She's probably still weak. But as I get closer, I see that these aren't the normal palace guards I've seen around. They're both wearing Cloud Kingdom insignias. As I get closer, they hold their hands out to tell me to stop.

"No further, ma'am."

"Oh, I'm Prince Taurek's guest." I take another step towards them.

"No further, ma'am."

"I treated Hanai. I can hear her laughing. I'd like to see her." I take another step towards them. They both move their hands to their weapons. "Seriously?"

"You are not to be allowed another step forward."

"I'm Zaya..."

“We know who you are, ma’am. We’re under direct orders to keep you out.”

“Direct orders from who?”

She confirms my suspicions a moment later. Between the guards, Kantha appears. A snake would be a better mother. A black widow would be a better mate.

“Good morning, Taya.”

“It’s Zaya.” I try to keep my returning anger in check.

“Oh, right, Zaya. What a lovely name. Now, Zaya, what can we help you with?” Kantha gives me a phony smile. I return the gesture.

“I was trying to see Kantha. Please tell them they are mistaken.”

“Oh, but they aren’t. Only royals are allowed past this point. And you are...” She looks me up and down with a smug smile. My rage is starting to boil over. “Not royal, to say the least.”

“Right. But I’m a guest of Prince Taurek here at the castle.”

“Congratulations.” Her phony smile stretches wider.

“I’d like to see Hanai. I can hear she is feeling better and I...”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible. You cannot see Hanai.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t want you to. Don’t really need a reason more than that, I suppose.”

“I’m seeing her. You have no jurisdiction here.” I take another step forward. The guards’ tighten their grip on their weapons, and they step closer to me to tower over.

“No. You won’t,” Kantha insists.

“I was brought here to help heal your daughter. I went on a dangerous mission to bring medicine back to her. I just want to talk to her. See how she’s feeling.”

“We have real doctors for that. Taurek can have his... *pets* if he'd like, but as long as I have a say, you'll stay away from my daughter.”

“And how much longer do you think you'll have a say? Aren't you supposed to be heading back to your beloved Cloud Kingdom?”

The guards take another step toward me. Once they move, I can see further into the room behind them, and Hanai comes into view. Her face reads with confusion as she looks back and forth between me and her mother.

That confusion morphs into anger. It's so good to see her up and walking, but this is not how I wanted us to reunite. I wanted the laughter, not this.

I wonder how much she heard of the argument. How long was she there? Maybe I was intruding on family time. She just got healthy, and her mother came back into her life. Who am I to try to force my way into that?

Does Hanai hate me now for being rude to her mother? She keeps looking angrily back and forth between me and Kantha. Have I just alienated myself from her forever?

This can't be how things end for me with Hanai. I just wanted so badly to see her healthy again and to talk to her. I wanted to tell her that I love her. And that I love her father, too.

TAUREK

I rise to my feet, quickly marching over to see what all the commotion is about once I hear it. I had been out in the courtyard attached to the room, playing a game with Hanai. I didn't realize at first she had left, and then once I follow her, I hear chaos.

“What's going on?” I call out, only to be met with no answer. Hanai has only just recovered, the last thing she needs right now is extra stress! I reach the group, pushing through just in time to hear Hanai.

“Yes, Kantha. When are you going back to Cloud Kingdom, because you're not welcome here?”

“Oh, sweetie, you don't mean that.”

“Oh, I've never meant anything more in my life. It's time for you to leave. You don't even know whether I'm sweet or not. Maybe I'm as horrid as you.”

The look on Kantha's face is more confused than everyone else's, now reduced to a grimace as she peers down at Hanai. My daughter is pointing an accusatory finger at her, her face twisted in an expression of heated anger.

I can feel the rage coming off of her, but I don't even have to feel it to know it. It's the same emotion I have. There's a part of me that's deeply satisfied that Kantha is finally, truly getting what she deserves.

“You never cared for me! You never even came for any of my birthdays, or sent any presents! You never called. You said

if I couldn't live with you, then I wasn't in your life. Well, you're not in my life, so why are you here?"

"Honey, darling," mutters Kantha through closed teeth, raising her palms as if to surrender. "Let's just calm down here, okay? You know Mommy has always held you near and dear to your heart. I just... I found my fated mate. It's a divine calling."

Hanai stomps her foot down and crosses her arms, I've never seen her so angry. Zaya watches on in bewilderment. Perhaps she, too, never expected to see my daughter in this state. I lock eyes with her, a smirk appearing across both of our faces as we try to contain our laughter.

"Yes, I know that, Kantha. I'm not mad about that. I'm mad about the fact that if you didn't get your exact way, you didn't want any of it. If Daddy didn't let you take me to live all year-round there, you didn't want me to visit, and you were too busy to visit yourself, you said. That is what's messed up. Not that you found a mate. I mean..."

I see her looking at me, then at Zaya, like she knew just as quickly as I did.

"You can find your fated mate without ruining everyone else's life. But not you. You are selfish."

Kantha looks to me as if to signal for help, but I shrug, letting her know she's all alone in this one.

"Hanai. I have a life. I have other babies I have to look after now."

"Then go back. I wish you'd stayed gone altogether," states a defiant Hanai, shocking her mother. "You're not here for me. You only came to try and look like you were the magic one who could heal me. You wanted attention. We're doing just fine without you. You never cared about me unless it was convenient for you."

I'm impressed by her words.

"May I say something?" interjects Zephyron. Everyone turns to him as if he's an unwelcome guest, even Kantha.

“What do you want?” hisses Hanai. “If you cared about her at all, you could have made it easy for her to keep her other child. You’re just as bad as she is for not objecting to it. For not asking her to be more reasonable. I don’t want to hear from you unless you’re apologizing.”

“Don’t you think you ought to be a little more respectful to your mom? After all, she’s the one who gave birth to you?”

“She may be my mother, but she’s not a mom,” says Hanai. What happens next almost floors me, for she walks forward and gently takes hold of Zaya’s hand. Zaya’s mouth parts open, as does mine. “I’ve known Zaya for a few days, and that’s all it took for her to be more of a mom to me than that beast over there.”

Kantha wails and cries out, covering her mouth in shock. Zephyron wraps his arm around her, but she shoves him away. A look of annoyance comes over his face as he dusts himself off.

“Hanai, drop her hand,” snaps Kantha.

“No!” yells Hanai. “You should leave. You don’t belong here. You’ve already ruined so much. I don’t want you to ruin anything else.”

The air in the room falls so silent that one could hear a speck of dust hitting the floor. I bring myself to step forward, taking Hanai’s other hand. As I do, she looks up at me, her face of anger immediately melting into a smile.

“I... I don’t know what to say,” mutters Kantha.

“How about goodbye?” I say, garnering an evil eye from Zephyron. I return the gesture.

“I’m glad you found your fated mate, but now Daddy has found his. He and Zaya are the parents I choose.”

How does she...? I look down at Hanai, then at Zaya who is caught off guard just like me. I mouth the words, *I didn’t tell her.*

“Fated?” snaps Kantha. “Taurek, is this true?”

Proudly, I nod, my chin held high. From the corner of my eye, I see Zaya beaming at me. I don't know how Hanai could have known without us telling her, but I'm overjoyed. She must feel bonded to her as well.

"This is... simply preposterous," says Zephyron.

"Your word means nothing here, need I remind you?" I hiss.

"Enough of this!" barks Kantha. "I'm staying until I see to it that you're better."

"No, I want you to leave and never come back!" Hanai is firm. She then looks up at me for support, which I gladly provide.

"You heard her. Now get out of here and take your mate with you."

"Son of a..." groans Zephyron. He then grabs Kantha's arm, holding firmly onto it when she tries once more to pull away. "We need to get out of here before there's any more trouble."

"You should listen to your fated mate," remarks Zaya, wearing a smile so confident that it makes heat roll up my spine. Kantha growls at my woman, clenching her fists just as guards – ours, from Mountain Kingdom, not her imposters from Cloud Kingdom – step forward.

"Come with us. You need to leave the premises," they say.

"No," hisses Kantha. She then spins around on her heels, marching forward to face the Thane, who has been spectating this whole time from a distance. He sits there stroking his chin in a manner of deep thought, reflection deeply written across the wrinkles of his brows.

"Surely none of this is serious, Your Highness?"

The Thane leans forward in his seat, a light behind him casting a looming shadow over the floor. It engulfs Kantha in its darkness, and for a moment, she seems to cower in the Thane's grace.

“Kantha, you no longer bear the title of Princess here in the Mountain Kingdom. You revoked all of your titles when you dissolved your union with my heir the Prince. His wishes and those of Princess Hanai prevail.”

“But...”

“Kantha, for years, I’ve held my tongue. But you’re a disgrace to our Kingdom. You chose to surrender your position, but you should consider yourself an exile. It’s not that you left. It’s that you abandoned everything without a second glance. Don’t think that because of my age, you can pull a blindfold over my eyes.”

“Thane Odar, I...”

“I reject your appeal. Now leave at once!”

Hanai squeezes my hand as guards seize Kantha by the arms. She rips them away.

“Hands off me! I can escort myself out of here, thank you! Come on, Zephyron, let’s return to the Cloud Kingdom.”

As she drags her mate out, I motion for Hanai and Zaya to follow behind me.

“Let’s go bid them farewell, shall we?” I say with a smile. Shooting a nod at Thane Odar, I leave the room, sticking close behind the group of guards. Soon, we’re all outside the main palace, waving mockingly at Zephyron and Kantha as they prepare themselves to leave.

Kantha turns around, giving all three of us one final glare. She then pulls herself into the shuttle, its door sealing with a satisfying finality. The shuttle takes off, and soon we are rid of her, never to be seen again.

“You did a good job, Hanai. Well done for standing up to Kantha like that,” I beam, lifting her into my arms. She smiles and wraps her arms around me, whispering into my ear.

“I love you, Daddy.”

“I love you, too, my angel. I’ve never been prouder of you.”

I turn to Zaya, seeing tears fall down her face. Her sniffles catch the attention of Hanai, who shifts around in my arms.

“Hanai,” chuckles Zaya. “Did you really mean all of what you said back in there?”

“Yeah, I did,” says my daughter so innocently. She reaches for her, and so I pass her into the grip of Zaya. My heart melts as they share a hug, and in that moment I see Zaya as the perfect mother to my daughter, a true parent not by blood but by love.

“Now then.” I laugh, putting an arm around Zaya. “How about we all go inside and get something to eat?”

TAUREK

I kiss Hanai on the forehead, to be greeted with an adorable smile. “I’m so proud of you, Hanai. I can’t believe how strong you’ve been in your recovery. I can’t believe how strong you’ve been the whole time, even before you recovered.”

“Do you think I’ve done well over the past two months, Daddy?” she asks.

“I can’t imagine anyone doing more than you. Look at how much energy you had today!” I begin tickling her as she bursts into a frenzied laugh. “I haven’t seen you scurry around like a little insect in so long!”

“Stop!” she laughs, batting my hands away.

“You know, at this hour of the evening three months ago, you’d have been passed out or getting sick, but your symptoms have disappeared ever since the treatment started.”

“Well, you and Zaya made it easier. Sometimes I get scared doing my exercises, but when you guys join in, it helps me feel strong.”

I flex my right arm, my bicep practically bulging out of my skin.

“Do you want to be as big as me one day?” I say, laughing.

“Ew! No.”

“Ew?” I return, tickling her once more. After we calm down, I lay a hand on her forehead to check her temperature.

“How has your breathing been?”

“It’s fine. I don’t get out of breath so easily anymore if that’s what you’re asking,” she says, yawning thereafter and rubbing her eyes.

“I’ll leave you to get some sleep.”

“Can we all hang out tomorrow? You, me, and Zaya?” she asks.

“Of course we can. Every day, forever, we can.” I rise to my feet. “Goodnight, Hanai. Sleep well.”

“Goodnight, Daddy.”

Smiling at her, I slowly close the door, waving at her as I do. I laugh quietly to myself, overjoyed at the sight of my daughter doing better than ever. I’d been afraid that the departure of Kantha would have caused extra stress, but if anything, it lightened something in her when Kantha left for good. She’s bounced back quicker than expected.

I’m strolling down a long hallway to my quarters when Zaya emerges from around the corner. I stop and greet her with a kiss, taking her hand in mine.

“Are you finished with your work for the evening?” I ask.

“Yes, thankfully. I was hoping to catch Hanai before she goes to sleep. Is she in bed?”

“Yeah, you just missed her.”

She nods, clicking her tongue.

“Don’t worry,” I tell her. “She was singing praises about you.”

“She was?” asks Zaya, peering up at me.

“That’s right, she said you were a big help on her road to recovery.”

She blushes, a radiant smile washing over her beautiful face.

“So, those doctors that came to visit from the Treetop Kingdom today, how did that all go for you?” I ask.

We arrive at the bedroom door, where I open it and gesture for her to enter first, following her inside after.

“It went great. There were talks of them visiting again soon to do a hands-on experiment together.”

“That’s excellent, my love. Don’t forget we also have doctors coming next month from the Ocean Kingdom, too.”

“Yeah.” Her eyes widen in disbelief. She sits on the seat next to the window, gazing out into the evening sky. The glow of the evening sun hits her skin, coating it in a luscious glow that makes me stop and stare for a moment. There comes over me a wave of almost every emotion at once, reminding me just how in love with this woman I am.

I walk over, joining her as I take a seat by the window. Taking her hands in mine, I stroke the back of them with my thumbs and peer out over the landscape with her for a few minutes, enjoying this moment of tranquility. Turning my gaze to meet hers, I smile.

“I want you to know I’m so proud of you. All of this success you’re having, you deserve every bit of it.”

She comes closer and lays her head on mine.

“You know, I always dreamed of working with chemistry and medicines, Taurek. I was an artisan because I wasn’t able to get an education or apprentice anywhere. So, that’s one more dream you’ve made come true.”

I hold her face in my hands.

“You made it come true, my Zaya. You made it all happen. You.”



ONE MONTH LATER, I stand at the palace gates, watching from a distance as Zaya shakes the hands of the Ocean Kingdom doctors as she bids them farewell. I, too, wave them off. Zaya approaches me with an excited smile on her face, upon which I plant a gentle kiss as we come together.

Before we can say anything, a set of arms wraps themselves around our legs. Peering down, I spot Hanai hugging us. Zaya swoops her up into her arms, and together we begin walking inside.

“Something came for you during the doctors’ visit,” I say, reaching into my pocket. I pull out a letter, handing it to my mate as she gives me Hanai.

“Let’s see...” She pulls out a slip of paper, gasping as she reads its contents. “It’s a commendation!”

“A commendation?”

“Yes, from Tlisan! With the seal of Wesqanti.”

“Word of your work has been spreading fast.” I chuckle. “Well done, my love.”

She runs a hand over her head, laughing in disbelief. As she reads over the commendation, I ponder the possibility of having Thane Odar put one together on behalf of the palace. She folds it away, stuffing it into her pocket.

“There’ll be time to celebrate soon,” she says. “Have Sorsha and Talan arrived? I want to thank them in person.”

“Yes, my dear. They’re currently waiting for us in the dining room.”

Sometime later, all of us adults are sitting around the dinner table, watching in delight as Hanai plays with their kids. Sorsha and Zaya are rapt in conversation, laughing amongst themselves. I turn to Talan, clinking glasses with him.

“Cheers to you, my good friend,” he remarks, raising his glass. “For many years, I was worried you wouldn’t find a mate again.”

“Me, too. For a very long time, I had no desire to. If a fated mate could drive Kantha to disown her daughter, I wanted no part. But in all honesty, she was probably like that before. It just took that as an excuse to do whatever she wanted, claiming she had no control.”

“Who’d have thought it’d be a human healer to win your heart, eh?” he chuckles.

“She wound up healing me.” I look over at the wives as they lean down to play with the children. “She’s amazing.”

“I don’t doubt that at all. I think the same of my Sorsha.”

“Daddy!” calls Hanai. “Uncle Talan, come over and play!”

Later on, after dinner and many toasts celebrating the commendation from the home settlement of Zaya and our guests, I arrive at Thane Odar’s Court, entering as the guards open the doors for me. Striding confidently inward, I stop a few meters in front of the Thane’s throne, bowing my head as he peers down.

“My Lord, I request an audience with you.”

“Granted,” he replies in his firm, commanding tone. “What brings you here this late into the evening?”

“A very special reason, Your Highness. As you know, Zaya has claimed a place in my heart, of a kind I had never felt before.”

“Of course. It’s a pleasure to have her in the palace. I’ve seen the change in you, my son, and I can’t help but think she has a role.”

“Indeed, my lord. I come to you this evening to inform you of my intention to have a mating ceremony with her. For this, I am in search of your blessing.”

“I see,” he mutters, leaning back in his chair as he strokes his chin. For a few moments, all is quiet. He then leans forward again, this time flashing an all-knowing, wise smile. “Ever since she arrived, I have observed a new joy in your heart, my boy. Hanai appears to have taken a great liking to her, too, and her judgment is one that I trust with my heart.”

“Hanai has a good judge of character.”

“That she does, Taurek,” he says, nodding. “And she is your fated mate, is she not?”

“Yes. She is.”

“That is a divine blessing. As the Divine Ones have blessed it already, it would be unconscionable for me to

prevent your union. I give you my blessing with all the love in my heart for both of you. Let me know how I can be of service in any way.”

Elated, I almost forget to bow, and I quickly fix the lapse.

“Thank you, Thane Odar.”

“I cannot imagine you being with anyone else, Taurek. She is a welcome resident of the palace and will be until the end of days. Our relationships with other Kingdoms have been slowly improving our mutual field of medicine by collaborating with one another, thanks to Zaya.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“So, as a token of my gratitude, allow me to offer her a commendation.”

I can’t believe my ears. I flash a bright smile at Odar, and I swallow hard to suppress the emotion welling up.

“She will be ecstatic at the news, my lord!”

“I’m sure she will be.” He chuckles. “Now will there be anything else I can do for you, my boy?”

“That will be all,” I say, bowing for the final time. “Goodnight, Thane Odar.”

“Farewell for the evening, my son.” He pauses. “I’m proud of you.”

ZAYA

I'm lounging with my mate and Hanai, watching on in amusement as my plucky daughter runs in circles around her father. I see from the look on Taurek's face that he's had more than enough of her antics tonight, but he's holding back. Most likely, he's remembering the time when he would have been incredibly grateful for her to be annoying him. So he's grateful.

Still, I cannot help but laugh. Taurek turns to me, and at the sight of my smile, he seems to ease off and ever so subtly smile at himself before shaking his head.

"She has more energy than me nowadays."

"Daddy, help me pack my bag first!" exclaims Hanai, tugging on his arm.

"What?" he demands. "You haven't begun packing yet?"

"No, you said you'd help me!"

"Damn, I forgot." He groans, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"You relax," I tell Taurek. "I'll give her a hand. Come on, Hanai."

She takes my hand eagerly, leading me out of the dining room. Turning over my shoulder, I wink at my mate who silently mouths a thank you toward me.

An hour later, all three of us are on our way to the Ice-Charred Peaks, off to enjoy a week's vacation. The weather

has eased off since the last time I was here, though each of us remains wrapped in heavy clothing. Even when the weather is nice, it requires heavy layers.

Taurek leads the way as he traverses the steep, winding routes of the peaks on his chordata. I ride with Hanai as Rylan leads our chordata on foot, though his years of experience with the mountains make walking look easy. I shudder at the memory of having to wander these peaks on foot, thankful for the clearer conditions this time around.

“Hey, Zaya,” says Hanai. “So you really had to walk through these mountains with my Daddy to find my cure?”

“That’s right, little one.”

“They look scary.”

“I was terrified.” I chuckle. “But you know what? For you, I’d do it all again.”

She giggles as I adjust her coat, pulling her collar closer to her neck. We turn up a route, coming onto a section of the peaks with fairly even terrain. The ground here is still icy as the name suggests, but the flat surfaces eliminate one difficulty of getting around.

There are more people than I expected at the resort in the distance. Even in the dark orange glow of the evening sky, I spot people taking the jet propulsion ski lift up the incline and others skiing down the mountains. Still others climb a watchtower to view the landscape from above. A few more wait in line to practice bob-sledding on a mechanical hovercraft sled for beginners trying to practice the motions without the friction of actual snow interfering.

“Taurek, is that where we’ll be staying?” I call out.

“Yes, my love, but before we head there, we’re heading to a different spot where we can get some private space away from everyone else.”

He looks back over his shoulder with a confident glint in his eye, winking. There’s something sneaky about it that amuses me. It makes Hanai laugh, too. We come to the bottom

of what seems to be the final hill, the top of which is obscured by wisps of white clouds.

“This is as far as I’m coming today,” says Rylan, handing the reins to Taurek.

“Will you not come with us? We can get you a room,” I reply.

“No, thank you, Zaya. Out here in the wilderness of the mountains is where I thrive.” With that, he bows and takes his leave, waving goodbye before disappearing around the corner from where we came.

“Will he be okay?” asks Hanai.

“He’ll be fine,” insists Taurek. “These peaks are his home. Now...” My mate pulls out a blindfold and tosses it my way. “Hanai, put that on for me dear.”

“Huh?” she quips. “Why?”

“Trust me, it’ll be worth it.”

She giggles as I pull the blindfold over her face. Holding on tight to her, Taurek leads us up a steep incline. Upon reaching the top, Hanai’s laughing grows louder as she begins shaking with excitement.

We dismount from the chordatas, Hanai’s hand taking mine as we walk side by side with her father. I see the surprise we have for her just up ahead, filling me with anticipation for her reaction to it.

“Just another minute,” I whisper, taking us nearer. When we’re in position, I bring her to a halt, and Taurek gives me the thumbs up to remove her blindfold. “Open your eyes, my dear.”

Hanai’s eyes bat open, widening with shock when she registers the structure just a few meters ahead.

“Surprise!” exclaims Taurek.

Hanai’s hand slips out of mine as she takes a few steps ahead, observing the newly built house. The structure had been put together over the course of a few weeks, starting when

Hanai officially began her recovery journey. It sat on a piece of even-leveled terrain on the slope of the Ice-Charred Peaks.

The house is one story tall, made of wood, and painted a deep ocher red. Over the door is a small white archway, from which hangs yellow flowers. Beside it is a small stable for the chordatas.

“Is this...” mutters Hanai.

“Yes, my love, it’s for you,” says Taurek. “For us. I remember how much you wanted to come here, so I thought I’d build you a place of our own to stay from time to time.”

“I love it!”

“Just wait until you see the inside.”

Hanai peers up at me and smiles with glee as she jumps excitedly. She runs past Taurek, beating him to the entrance.

“Let me just unlock the door,” he says, sliding the key into the lock and twisting it with a satisfying click. Hanai runs inside, and from inside the house, I can hear her yelps of joy. I haven’t yet seen its interior myself.

Stepping in at the gesture of Taurek, I become overwhelmed with wonder at the interior decor. The place is stylized after a cottage, with an oven nestled in the corner of a cozy kitchen. There’s a fireplace in the center of the living room, where a large couch sits neatly prepared.

I peek into the other rooms, spotting a small bed for Hanai, and a larger bed for her father and me. What stands out amongst it all is the roxolite crystals, hanging in every room and inlaid in the molding. Most appear to be placed in the bedrooms, but a gentle blanket of purple ambiance is cast over the cottage.

“Do you like it?” asks Taurek.

“I love it!” yells Hanai.

“You did a great job with the place,” I remark, clutching my mate’s arm.

“Well, I couldn’t have done it without you and your collecting. Come, there’s one more place to see.”

I tilt my head in curiosity as he leads Hanai and me out to a porch, hidden behind a drawn curtain. He slides it back, guiding us out onto a balcony. Walking to its edge, the view displays the Mountain Kingdom in all of its glory.

Far below is the palace, a mere speck in the distance. At the other end of the landscape, a distance that looks like mere feet from afar but in reality is hundreds of miles, is Tlisan. On the slope opposite us, just a valley away, is the resort we spotted earlier. The rest of the peaks pierce the clouds like white-tipped, jagged teeth.

“This view is something else,” I gasp, rubbing my eyes to check I wasn’t dreaming.

“It’s not the only stunning view I see,” says Taurek from behind me.

“Oh, Taurek.” I melt at his words and turn around. “You’re such a —”

I throw my hands over my mouth, covering it in shock when I spot my mate on his knees. He opens a small box in his hands, revealing a beautiful roxolite ring in the shape of an oval. Now I definitely think I’m dreaming.

“Zaya,” he says with a smile as a tear falls down my cheek. “My life has changed since I met you. Not only did you bring my daughter back from the abyss...”

From behind him, Hanai waves politely, a smile spreading across her whole face. “You also showed me it was safe to love. More than safe. Transcendent. A miracle. I may not always be easy to deal with, but I know what I want when I see it, and what I want is to be mated to you forever. Will you —”

I RUSH FORWARD, wrapping him in my arms.

“Say no more! Of course, it’ll be yes!”

“Somehow, I had a feeling,” he whispers. “Oh, and there’s one more thing.”

“Something else! Taurek, you spoil me.”

I take notice of Hanai stepping forward with a box of her own. From it, she pulls out a roxolite crystal necklace.

“Hanai,” I mutter, unable to find words.

“Zaya, Daddy gave some of this crystal to me, and I made this for you. I wanted to ask something.”

I take her small hands in mine, kneeling down to her level.

“Anything, my dearest.”

“Well...” she begins shyly. “I want to be adopted by you, officially. Will you be my mom?”

“Oh, Hanai, that means so much to me.” I hug her so tightly, I can feel her chest constrict, but I’m no longer worried about damaging her. She’s the heartiest child I know. “But what about...”

“As far as I’m concerned, she never existed. You’re my mother. You, and only you.”

Taurek lays a reassuring hand on my shoulder. “We have enough proof to decree a dissolution of the familial bond, especially with witnesses to her words. After we sever those legal formalities, the adoption will be official.”

“Well, there’s no question, my darling girl.” I boop her little nose.

Together, we settle in for the evening, watching the tranquil landscape as all of the Mountain Kingdom carries on before us.

TAUREK

The mating ceremony goes off without a hitch. It better have, considering how much we spent on the planning. We mix Kiphian and human traditions as we bring our worlds together.

The ceremony hall is adorned with the roots, silks, and minerals from the mountains that Zaya used to save Hanai's life. She also used them to save mine.

It seems like half the kingdom and all of Tlisan are in attendance. I stand alone at one end of the room, everyone in the audience staring at me.

Music starts to play throughout the hall. The same song we first danced to all that time ago. I almost forgot all about it.

The huge double doors on the far end of the hall slowly swing open. My heart almost stops as Zaya steps in, escorted by Hanai holding her hand. She looks beautiful in a white dress, a human tradition, sewn by the finest designer the Kingdom has to offer.

She wouldn't let me see it until this moment. Now I get it. She strides down the aisle like an angel coming to bless me and my future with her presence. And, she looks fucking hot.

Zaya reaches for me, and I can't take my eyes off her. We take each other's hands, as a human officiant and Kiphian priestess take their spots in front of us.

The Kiphian priestess wraps strands of silk and metal threads around our hands, and we daub dusted clay from the

mountains onto each other's eyes as a sign of our shared vision in life.

The officiants both say their traditional prayers but I hear none of it. All my focus is on Zaya, the beautiful woman I'm about to spend my life with.

"I do," Zaya says. I snap out of it and figure that's my cue.

"I do." I don't wait a second longer and pull Zaya in for a deep kiss as everyone cheers for us.

I sweep Zaya up off her feet and into my arms. The guests clap and cheer for us as I carry her away. Zaya laughs and buries her face in my neck. I can't help but smile too. We have the customary reception with all of our revelers. I dance with Hanai, and Zaya dances with the Thane, then with Wesqanti.

We duck out when Hanai goes to sleep before the party's official end. She's my wife now, and I don't want to wait a moment longer to indulge ourselves in each other. Forever starts with tonight.

When her feet touch the floor after carrying her inside, her hands instantly grab my clothes. She starts removing them slowly. I move to start taking off her dress to reveal an incredible negligee underneath, violet, lacy, and hot as hell.

I touch her body and lower my head between her legs, and she pushes me gently away.

"No, no," she says. "Let me take care of you first, My Prince." I've never been so turned on in my life.

Zaya removes my jacket and shirt first. She leans in and kisses my chest. Her soft lips brush against my skin, each kiss leading my heart to beat faster.

As she kisses her way down my abs, Zaya starts to work on my belt. My pants fall to the floor, and my rock-hard shaft presses against my undergarments. Zaya looks down at it and back up at me with a smirk. She pulls the undergarments down.

Zaya lightly kisses her way down my shaft until she reaches the tip. She then stands up fully and takes my hand. I

let her lead me to the bed where she sits me down on the edge.

I moan as Zaya gets on her knees and takes my cock in her mouth. She starts at just the tip, running her wet tongue around it. Meanwhile, her hands slowly stroke the shaft.

Zaya moans as she slowly slides more of me into her mouth. Her warm wet mouth coats my cock in her saliva. A moan escapes my mouth.

She pulls me out of her mouth but keeps stroking. Her mouth then moves south. A jolt runs up my body as her tongue licks my balls.

“Oh, Zaya!” This human will never stop surprising me. Fuck. I love her.

While her hands stroke me harder and faster. Zaya manages to wrap her lips around one of my testicles. She begins sucking and tugging on it. It’s an overwhelming sensation I’ve never felt before. But my body likes it.

Without warning, my body tenses, and pressure begins to build in my cock. I’m about to cum. How did she do that so fast?

“I’m about to cum, Zaya...”

“Good,” she says, pushing my ball from her mouth. “Give it to me.” She runs her tongue from the bottom of my balls, all the way up my shaft, to the tip where she wraps her mouth around it.

I can’t control myself. I grab Zaya by the back of the head. We both moan together as I explode into the back of her throat.

My head goes light, and I fall back onto the bed. As I lay there, Zaya sucks out every drop of my cum, making sure not to leave anything behind. When she finishes, my cock flops out of her mouth, glistening with her spit.

In her blazing hot lingerie, Zaya looks down at me with a proud smirk. I try to catch my breath but between the fastest orgasm I’ve ever had and the beautiful woman in front of me, I can’t.

“I hope you don’t think we’re done here,” she says.

“Never.”

I bring her negligee down and watch with pure desire as her tits bounce free.

Zaya laughs with delight, causing her tits to bounce even more tantalizingly. My tongue lightly flicks her nipple while my fingers pinch the other. Zaya moans right in my ear. My cock never even had the chance to go soft.

My free hand moves right for her pussy, which is already soaked. My fingers slide right in as Zaya releases a shaky moan. She was able to make me cum shockingly fast, and now it seems I get to return the favor.

My fingers barely apply any pressure before her whole body is quivering against mine. Her hands grip onto my shoulders for balance as her knees wobble furiously.

“Oh, Taurek...I...” Zaya’s words turn into an unintelligible moan as I suck on her nipple and apply more pressure to her pussy.

I lift Zaya up, still trembling with pleasure, and I toss her on the bed, onto her chest. My cock is already rock-hard again. It twitches as Zaya shakes her ass in the air for me.

Standing right behind her, I guide my cock to her pussy. The heat pulsating off her makes me even harder. I rub my tip along her pussy lips. The moment my tip touches her, Zaya moans.

I continue to tease her pussy, not quite sliding myself in. Her moans grow more animalistic as she demands more.

Finally, I relent. My cock effortlessly slides all the way into Zaya. Her warm and wet pussy accepts me and holds on tight. Instantly, Zaya’s moans explode out of her mouth. She buries her face into the mattress. Yet still, her moans echo around the chamber.

I lean my body over Zaya’s as I thrust into her. My lips kiss her neck and her moans become even more crazed.

Without warning, Zaya reaches up behind her. She manages to grab onto one of my spines and starts stroking it. The pleasure extends across my body. I start thrusting faster and faster.

The pressure builds up in me more and more with each stroke of my spine and each thrust into her perfect pussy. Her continuing moans bounce off the walls. It all brings me closer and closer.

My moans turn into a roar as my cock explodes into her. Shot after shot of my seed fills up her pussy. Her moans mix with my roar in the air.

I pull out of her as I catch my breath. My cock still dripping cum and her wetness. Zaya rolls onto her back with a smile. She slaps the bed next to her, motioning for me to lay next to her.

“Oh?” I say. “I hope you don’t think we’re done here.”

Zaya laughs. I lean down and pull her into a deep kiss. I can’t think of a better person to be my fated mate.

ZAYA

My life has never been more tranquil. It wasn't long ago when my only goal was to make ends meet and get by while learning more about my passion.

Sometimes, parts of me still think this is all one big dream where I get to live out the perfect life. Even this morning as I slowly bat my eyes open, I can't believe this is where I am and that none of it is an illusion.

I wake up in the arms of my mate, Taurek, as he peacefully sleeps. I never get bored of looking at him. Even after three months of marriage, his face is a revelation. I watch as his defined chest slowly rises and falls with each breath he takes. His skin is warm and inviting as I trace my fingers over his muscles.

"How did I ever find you?" I whisper with a smile. I reflect on my journey up until this point, remembering how Talan had come to me on that fateful day, telling me the Prince himself was in need of my services.

Little did I know I was to go on a perilous adventure with him, dodging death and racing against time itself, all to save his ailing daughter. I learned not only about Taurek, but about myself. Safe to say it was a shock to the system when I realized the turn my life wound up taking.

"It was you who made it all feel so safe," I mutter, talking to Taurek as if he were awake. I chuckle at the memory of thinking that we weren't going to end up together, realizing I

was silly to ignore the signs my heart was giving me, all because of Kantha.

I lean forward, closing my eyes as I bring my lips to those of my mate. Even in his slumber, he kisses me back, gently lulling him out of his sleep as his eyes slowly open.

“Good morning gorgeous,” he rumbles out in his gruff voice.

“How did you sleep?” I ask.

“My rest was beautiful, like you.”

He props himself up against the bed frame, extending his arms in a satisfying stretch. Cracks and pops ring through the air as he stretches his neck and back.

“No rush, but when you’re ready, let’s go have some breakfast with Hanai,” I tell him.

Soon, all three of us sit gathered at the dining table, a sight that’s become a mainstay of my morning.

“Zaya, are we going to the laboratory again today?” asks Hanai, her lips stained with food.

“Of course,” I reply, dabbing her mouth with a napkin.

Taurek looks at his daughter with a glint of admiration and wonder in his eye.

“You seem to have really taken an interest in Zaya’s field of work,” he remarks, a sense of pride in his tone.

“Minerals are really fun to play around with,” she says excitedly.

“I think it’s becoming a passion of hers,” I say.

“Hmm, well perhaps she’ll grow up to be just like you,” remarks Taurek. He pulls out his stopwatch and rises from the table. “Excuse me, I must attend to my duties. Have a fun day, you two, and I’ll see you both later on.”

“Daddy, can we head up to the cabin tonight?”

“Of course we can, my dear.”

“Yay!”

Hanai and I wave farewell to Taurek as he exits the dining room. The two of us remain there for a short while to finish up our meal, before eagerly making our way to my laboratory.

I still can't believe it's 'my' laboratory. I think that same thought each and every time I step through my doors. Taurek had allocated this section of the palace to me. The lab itself is generously spacious, lined with equipment ranging from flasks and test tubes to scales and microscopes.

From the hook, I take down a regular-size coat for me, and a much smaller one for Hanai. No one before her had taken such a marveled interest in my work, but in a way, it feels more rewarding to teach my passion to a child than it does to an adult. Especially one whose interest arose from similar circumstances to mine.

“Fetch whatever plants, herbs, and minerals you'd like to work with today,” I tell Hanai. She scurries off while I set up the equipment, and returns just as I finish doing so. Together, we mess around creating different mixtures and compounds, producing an array of vials each swarming with magnificent vibrant colors.

I watch as Hanai stands on a stool, about to pour a concoction of chemicals into a finely ground flower powder, crimson in color.

“Wait just a second,” I tell her, fetching a pair of goggles for both of us. “This could get messy.” As soon as the liquid touches the powder, a flash blinds us both temporarily, a loud bang accompanying it.

My vision returns seconds later, the ringing in my ears disappearing at the same time. I peer down at my outfit then at Hanai, seeing the both of us are covered in soot from the explosion. Each of us bursts into laughter.

“Zaya, thank you for all of this fun,” she says after calming down. “I feel so loved.”

“You are loved,” I reply, laying a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “Shall we finish up here and go get some riding practice?”

A short while later, I find myself out near the royal stables, leading a chordata into the training ground. Once inside, Hanai takes the reins and mounts the chordata with ease.

“Watch this.”

Hanai whips the reins, spurring the chordata into a dash. She takes it around the enclosure for a lap before coming to a stop beside me and jumping off the animal.

“Well, well, well! That was pretty impressive!”

“You try now, and I’ll give you a hand.”

Shakily, I climb onto the chordata, taking the reins just as my stepdaughter taught me last week. Over the past while, she’d personally been teaching me how to ride these creatures. I’ve been adamant about learning, figuring it’s best to do so if I’m to live out my life with a family of champion riders.

“I still get nervous,” I tell Hanai as we begin trotting.

“It’s normal. I was the same when Daddy started teaching me as well. But I can tell you’re getting more comfortable.”

She keeps an eye on my form as I guide the chordata, turning him in alternating directions and spurring him at higher speeds, then slowing him down. We keep at it for close to an hour when a familiar voice rings in the air.

“Having fun?” calls Taurek.

“Daddy!” shouts Hanai, sprinting over to him. I dismount and join them as we engage in a group hug.

“I’m all done for the day, so whenever you’re done here, get packed and we’ll get up to the mountain home while it’s still early.”

Within the next hour, we’re making the ascent up the Ice-Charred Peaks. Though I insisted to Rylan that I take hold of my own reins, he keeps a watchful eye on me as we climb the steep slopes.

“You’re getting better at not losing me,” he jokes.

He comes with the family as we make the final climb up to the level where Hanai’s cabin sits, tucked away in the

mountain. After helping us carry in our luggage, he bows and takes his leave.

“I can’t get enough of this house. It’s cooler than the palace!” exclaims Hanai as she runs inside. I remove my coat just as Taurek approaches me from behind, planting a kiss on my cheek before taking my coat.

“I know it’s been a few months since Hanai recovered, but I can’t ever thank you enough for giving her back to me,” he says with an air of reflectiveness.

“And I can’t tell you just how much I appreciate you giving me the chance to change my life. You turned it upside down in the best way possible,” I reply, wrapping my arms around his neck. He pulls me closer by the waist, kissing me once more. We stop only at the grimacing of Hanai.

“Get a room!” she hisses, causing us to laugh.

“You guys go take a seat on the balcony, I’ll be out in a moment,” says Taurek.

Hanai and I peer out over the edge of the balcony, watching the vast landscape before us. It’s late afternoon and we still have the rest of the day ahead. Still, I take a seat, feeling out of breath.

“Are you okay?” asks Hanai.

“I’m fine, my dear. It’s just your baby sibling moving around in here,” I reply, gesturing to the bump on my belly.

“How long until they arrive? I’m gonna be a sister? To a little halphian? That’s the word I just made up.” She leaps up and down, doing a little dance and shrieking.

“Another six months,” says Taurek as he steps out with a tray of hot drinks. “I’m as excited as you are, Hanai.”

With a warm mug in my hands, I close my eyes and listen to the sounds of my family laughing and joking beside me. Life couldn’t be any better than it is now. And then I remember that, with any luck, in six months, it will be.

The End

To read more about Zaya and Taurek join my newsletter at:
[Athena Storm Newsletter](#)

PREVIEW

NANNY FOR THE ALIEN KING

Love is a precious commodity in the Athenaverse, and it transcends human or alien. Check out the planet Kiphia, where the alien rules fall in love with their human servants and must breach not just a different culture, but class as well.

Nanny for the Alien King

By Athena Storm and Tara Starr

Available [here!](#)

KRAVATH

I stare at the three children in front of me as they tumble around on the throne room floor.

Can I see any resemblance to Balak in their young faces? I catch just a glimpse of my dead brother's nose here, his chin there. I barely knew his wife, so whatever features might belong to her are lost on me.

The one thing I'm certain of is that the male's pale blue skin will eventually deepen to Balak's royal indigo.

One of the triplets lets out a squawk as another one sits on her face. The high-pitched noise is surprisingly loud and echoes around the high ceiling of the throne room. I wince.

Balak and I weren't close, but family is family. I know it's my responsibility to care for his toddlers now that he's gone, even if I have no idea what to do with these little monsters. I don't even know their names.

"My King?"

I lift my head. My chief financial advisor is standing at the double-doored entrance. He raises an eyebrow as he takes in the rambunctious playing of my new charges.

"Yes, Larim? What is it?"

"King Kravath, your council meeting? It began a few minutes ago."

I curse and stand up abruptly. It isn't like me to forget my responsibilities.

I glare at the triplets. Having to deal with them has distracted me from my duties, which is a problem.

No sooner have I thought this that the problem gets worse.

A shattering wail bursts through the air of the throne room. One of the little females has the other one's ear between her fingers and is pulling—hard. The little male child begins laughing hysterically and poking his siblings.

“Enough!” I bellow, striding over to them. This only makes the upset one cry harder. Instinctively, I pick her up, so that her sister can no longer yank at her ear.

Unfortunately, that means I now have a screaming child in my arms.

I hold her out in front of me and try to jiggle her, as I have a vague memory of seeing my mother do the same with my youngest brother. Rather than being calmed, the child yells even louder, which I can't help but think is quite a feat for such tiny lungs.

For no reason that I can see, the other two triplets decide to join in.

Now, all three toddlers are howling fit to call down the Divine Ones, and I feel ridiculous. A king should not appear so stupid, bested by a mere child two years of age. I tuck the girl under one arm and use the other to beckon to a page standing near the dais.

“You! Come take this!”

The page scurries forward and hesitantly accepts his sobbing burden. Clearly, he has no more idea what to do than I. I am unbothered by this.

He is an attendant and I am a king, with royal responsibilities. Better that this page, rather than I, waste time attempting to figure out how to soothe a young one.

Larim and I exit the throne room, the sounds of distressed triplets following us down the hallway. We're both grimacing.

“My King, may I offer a suggestion?” asks my advisor, tentatively.

“Please do,” I reply. “My brother seems to have made no plans for the care of his offspring. Of course, it was right for me to bring them here, but none of my staff has experience with children.”

“Well, I’m sure the former Prince of the Second Isle could not have anticipated the accident that claimed him and his lovely wife,” says Larim, in a diplomatic tone. “I imagine he did not think it necessary to make plans for the chance his children should become orphans.”

“My brother was foolish not to prepare for any and all possibilities. Your suggestion, Larim?” I’m impatient. I don’t need the man to hedge around.

“Ah—I would take this opportunity to remind my Lord that it would be prudent for you to take a wife.”

I glare at my advisor, and he nearly trips over his feet.

“I don’t want a wife or need one right now,” I say, firmly.

“But my King, you need to ensure you have an heir,” persists Larim, more bravely than I’d have thought. “And a wife could care for Prince Balak’s children.”

“Procuring a wife would be more trouble than it’s worth,” I retort, letting my irritation show. “I’d have to select an appropriate female, formally court her, and arrange a royal wedding as well as the Queen’s coronation. That does nothing to solve my current dilemma with Balak’s brats.”

“An heir though, King Kravath...”

“I have enough annoyances dealing with the ridiculous fact that my libertine of a younger brother is inheriting governance over Second Isle.” I stop in the middle of the hall and turn to my advisor. “There is plenty of time for me to wed and bed a female, Larim. I am in the prime of life, I do not need an heir anytime soon.”

“You did just say your brother was foolish not to prepare for all contingencies,” Larim points out.

I ignore that and resume walking.

“What I need is a dedicated caretaker for the children,” I say, ending the discussion regarding an heir. I’m sick of my entire council pestering me on that front. “That’s the answer. I’ll find and pay a female to keep the triplets content and out of my way.”

“My King, where would you find such a female?” Larim looks puzzled and a little scandalized, which regrettably I cannot blame him for.

He doesn’t need to tell me that no Kiphian woman works. The only paths open to them are as wives, priestesses, or sacred warrior maidens—not servants, even for the ruler of the Ocean Kingdom.

“The human quarter.” I permit myself a smirk of satisfaction at my neat solution. “All the humans work. Most of them are poor enough that they have to. So, it’s merely a question of finding the right one for this job.”

LIARA

I close the door on the last of the kids with a smile. It was a long day, but a pleasant one.

Tonn is getting good at reading whole sentences, and little Marie can finally count to ten with confidence. It's hard to teach children from such a wide age range, but today at least, it was rewarding.

"Ouch!" I stumble as I suddenly feel a sharp pain in the sole of my bare foot. I catch myself on the side of my worn table and look down. There's one of the tungsten alloy blocks that Adri so loves to play with. Its edges are rounded, but stepping down hard on it hurts anyway.

I groan. I guess this block is my reminder to clean up before I do anything else. We have tidying time at the end of the day, but something always gets missed. Several somethings, actually.

I'm on my hands and knees trying to sweep up the sand that always gets tracked into my little shack when there's a loud knock. I sit up, confused. Sometimes the little ones forget things, but they would never rap on my door so forcefully.

"Yes?" I open the door a crack, peering around it. This part of the human quarter is safer than others, but there's still trouble sometimes.

"Is this the home of Liara Zavier?"

"Who's asking?" I push the door a little wider, and to my surprise I see a Kiphian soldier standing on the other side.

“His sovereign majesty King Kravath, exalted ruler of the Ocean Kingdom, requires your presence,” intones the Kiphian. I now recognize that he’s wearing a royal uniform.

“Um, there must be a mistake,” I tell him, confused and a little nervous. “Why would the King want to see me?”

“There is no mistake.” The Kiphian rudely pushes my door open all the way and folds his arms. “Do not keep his sovereign majesty waiting, human.”

Two other soldiers are at the first one’s shoulder. They all look stern and impatient.

“Oh, uh, okay. Let me put on some shoes, please?”

The first soldier gives a curt nod. I gulp and grope behind the door for my shoes. My confusion is threatening to become panic. Humans are of zero interest to regular Kiphians, let alone to the royal family, who’s ignored us from day one. I can’t think of a single reason why the King would demand to see me, which makes this kind of scary.

Truth be told, there are some humans on Kiphia who probably spend their entire lives without interacting with the natives. That’s the degree to which the two races are separated.

Twenty-five years ago, as the war between the Alliance and Coalition began to get even more brutal, our colony ship departed from Erebus. The colonists had come from all over the Interstellar Human Confederation. My dad had come from Novaria and my mom had come from Titanus Vox. They had met on the journey and by the time the colony ship had settled down on Kiphia, they had fallen in love.

The Kiphians had invited the humans to come create a base of operations on Kiphia. The various kingdoms had felt that it would cement Kiphia, on the edges of the League of Non Aligned Races and on the boundaries of the Frontier as a hub for interstellar commerce.

And there was some, to be sure. But the economic boom didn’t take hold the way the colony planners had hoped. The war focused the eyes of the galaxy away from the Frontier. The brutality of the battle of Horus IV shocked most sapient

races into digging in and spending their resources protecting their core systems before venturing out.

And so, the humans on Kiphia sought to build out a life. The Kiphians had hoped at first the humans would herald economic growth. But when nothing happened, they began to impose a new order. One that called for separate societies.

And so, here I am, wrapped in curiosity as to why I'm dealing with a Kiphian at all.

Have I done something wrong? I wrack my memory as I shove my feet into my boots, shoving away the stupid thought that I wish I had fancier clothes for a royal audience. It doesn't matter what I look like, especially if I don't know why I'm being summoned.

Perhaps the King has confused me with someone else? I run a makeshift half-school half-daycare for the kids of human colonists. There can't be anything troublemaking about that.

There isn't another Liara on Kiphia that I know of though, and after what happened back on Earth, I'm not even sure there's another Xavier in existence anymore.

"I'm ready to go," I say, pushing away that last thought too. Now is definitely not the time to wallow in bad memories.

The soldiers escort me to a very shiny hover-carriage. I've seen them, usually from afar, but getting to go in one is all new to me. My mouth falls open at the lusciously outfitted interior. Is that fur on the seats?

As soon as I'm inside, the vessel launches into motion. It glides through the streets faster than any Lork could ever walk. The gigantic turtle-esque creatures are the only forms of transit I've seen since the colonists got here, so I can't help but glue my face to the window and watch everything whizz by.

"Wow," I sigh, as we leave the city streets to head up towards the palace, which sits on the highest hill. The view to my right is incredible. Cerulean ocean sparkles underneath the late afternoon sun, and the pinkish-orange sands of this planet glimmer like they're made up of precious gemstones.

All too quickly, the ride ends. One of the soldiers yanks the door open and hustles me out. I want to turn around and take in the view, but I'm already being shepherded into the palace.

While I wish I were still outside, this inside is pretty impressive too. As I'm hustled down a series of hallways, I catch sight of statues made from precious metal, silken curtains, and ceilings of exquisite inlay. I'm even taken through a hallway made entirely of glass, tinged the same salmon as the beaches of Kiphia.

The soldiers and I come to a halt with a jolt, and they push open two massive doors. Before I've even caught my breath, we're entering an impressive throne room.

"Presenting the human Liara Zavier, as requested, most illustrious King," says the soldier, bowing deeply. I wonder if it's part of the job to use as many fancy words to refer to the King as possible. Then I realize that everyone around me is bowing, and quickly drop into an awkward curtsy.

"Rise," says a deep, rich voice.

I lift my head and see a Kiphian male sitting on the tall throne. This must be King Kravath. He's beyond striking, the skin over his powerful muscles an intense saturated gold, with dark blue tattoos curving beneath his shirt.

My face heats up as I realize I'm staring.

"I've received information that you are the best with children, among all the human women." The King sounds almost bored. I don't know if I'm supposed to respond or not, but I give it a try.

"That is difficult to verify, your majesty." I incline my head. "However, I do run the only school for human young ones."

"I'm aware," drawls King Kravath, "but you are to do that no longer. Your new purpose is to tend these three."

With a gesture, the King waves forward a young Kiphian male struggling to manage a trio of Kiphian toddlers. One of them is trying to bite him.

“Excuse me?” I find myself saying, shock and anger warring in my throat. “Are you trying to offer me a job?”

“No,” says the King with an arrogant laugh. “This is not an offer. It is a command. These brats are your problem now.”

KRAVATH

I keep my tone curt, so as not to give away how startled I am by the human woman's beauty. The moment she entered my throne room, I couldn't look away from her. I caught one tantalizing glimpse of brilliant green eyes before she dropped into a shaky curtsy, and I was mesmerized.

Now she stands before me, those gorgeous eyes blazing. I should be displeased by her lack of deference, but instead, a surge of desire stirs in me for the first time in a long while. I can't stop myself from gazing at her, noting the way her dark hair cascades in curls over her shoulders. The way her worn clothing clings to her lush curves.

"Excuse me?" She's speaking, and I straighten at the insolence in her voice. "Are you trying to offer me a job?"

"No." I laugh at the idea that this human of no consequence has a choice in the matter. She may be beautiful, but she's still a nobody. "This is not an offer. It is a command. These brats are your problem now."

"Ah. Well, unfortunately, your majesty, I refuse." The human crosses her arms. Her face is calm but there's temper in her voice. "My students need me. There's no one else to take care of them. With all the kingdom's resources at your disposal, great King, I imagine you can easily find someone else to take care of whoever these children are."

I can't believe what I'm hearing. How dare this female question me! No, not simply question me—flat out turn down

a command from her King. Rage flares in my chest, chasing away the shreds of desire.

“You do not get to refuse,” I say, through gritted teeth. “I am your King. You humans may have your own land, but that land was given to you by me and lies within my Kingdom. You will follow my orders like any other subject of mine!”

“Humans may be your subjects but we’re not your slaves,” she snaps back, her composure cracking. “Do you make a habit of ripping people from their lives on a whim, King Kravath?”

My name on her lips sends a shiver down my back. It almost feels like the blunt spikes of my spine are tingling, but I dismiss that as nonsense. I must be so angry that I’m losing my senses.

“You should be honored to serve me,” I roar. “You don’t know who these children are? They are the offspring of my late brother, Prince Balak of the Second Isle. I am putting royal blood in your care! Your former activities are nothing compared to this prestigious responsibility.”

“For you to say so, you must never have had the joy of children who put their trust and affection in you,” says the woman, her tone cool once more. “My students rely on me and are dear to me. Royal or not, I have no attachment to the children you suggest I tend to.”

“I could destroy your simple school.” I follow the woman’s lead and replace the fire in my voice with ice. “I could do any number of things to make you do as I wish. Yet all I will say is this: you will serve as caretaker to my brother’s triplets, and that’s final. I will pay you handsomely.”

She opens her mouth to spout more brazen defiance, I am sure, but I cut her off. I’m not finished.

“Moreover, if you keep arguing with me, you’ll see no less than a week in the dungeons for your trouble. Do I make myself clear?”

By my last word, fury has made my voice so loud it booms throughout the throne room. For a moment, I am pleased by

the flash of fear I see on the human's face. Then, a familiar wailing begins.

I look down and see that all three of my brother's brood are sobbing. The page is crouched down among them, frantically trying to shush them. It seems his efforts only make them cry harder.

I jerk up, ready to direct further wrath at the woman who has indirectly caused this irritation. Yet, the words die on my lips.

She's staring at the miserable triplets, a strange look in her eyes. Her face is pale, and her lips are pursed. I'm not sure what to make of her expression, so I wait.

"You scared them," she murmurs. "They can tell you're angry."

"If I am angry, then it is your insolence that has caused it." I cross my arms forbiddingly. "Human, I have already spent too much time on you. The nursery, or the dungeon. Make your choice."

I see the woman's fists clench at her sides. I prepare myself to dispatch her to the dungeons, but find a strange resistance deep in my chest.

Could I send this strangely compelling female to languish in a stone prison? I am a warrior, a leader who does whatever he must, but somehow the image of her cold and alone in the dark gives me pause.

Luckily, my will is not put to the test.

"Fine," says the human. "I will be your nieces and nephew's nanny—on one condition."

"And what is that?" I growl, danger underlying my question.

"I want you to send someone to my house and get a few of my things." She stands tall and proud. I'm unwillingly reminded that she is remarkably attractive. "If you're going to unceremoniously force a new living situation and job on me,

the least you can do is get some of the things I wasn't given time to pack."

I bristle at the idea that anything from her human hovel would be necessary when she'll have access to much of what the palace offers. However, I don't want to continue this confrontation.

Already, I'll have to command my pages to never repeat what they've just seen. I don't want it getting out that I've let this woman get away with blatant disrespect.

"Consider it done." I wave my hand, demonstrating that such a foolish request is beneath me. Without waiting to hear any more from this stunning, infuriating female, I stalk down the dais and head for the door.

I've secured a caretaker for the triplets. I should be pleased with that success, yet somehow, I'm even more frustrated than before.

LIARA

I turn and watch the ruler of the Ocean Kingdom storm away. Both his powerful shoulders and the pointed ridges of his spine strain against the fabric of his shirt. The spine continues, rising out of his collar and up the back of his shining head. Locks of beautiful dark blue hair cascade down.

His colored head, which I would like to throw something at.

Kravath—who deserves no title as far as I’m concerned—is the most arrogant, imperious, entitled person I’ve ever met. Everything he just said made me so angry I could barely see.

He thinks that what he wants is the only thing that should matter! How does that make for a good, fair ruler?

Fuming, I turn back around to stare at the three sobbing Kiphian toddlers. The attendant previously in charge of them has fled, as have all of the others in the room. I’m alone with a trio of alien children who I know nothing about.

What in the hell am I supposed to do now?

I remember the one trying to bite the Kiphian wrangling them all and sigh. I wonder if these royal triplets have been raised as badly as Kravath clearly was. Grudgingly, I take a step towards them. Then, I really, truly look at the little ones and feel my heart soften.

The pale green child is crying so hard, sobs are becoming hiccups. All three of them are holding onto each other, like

they've got no one else in the world. I guess, given Kravath's behavior, they don't.

"You can't be that different from human children, can you?" I croon, keeping my voice low and pleasant as I approach. "I can't tell how old you are as easily, but we'll figure that out together, won't we?"

I sit on the floor an arm's reach away from the triplets. I note that only one, the pale blue child, has the line of nubby points that will grow into a spine. A little boy, then, and the other two with smooth backs are little girls.

"Hello there," I wave, slow and friendly. "I'm Liara."

The trio's weeping slows, but doesn't stop. They gaze at me with distrust, even as they gasp for breath in between sobs.

"A star came down and went ker-splash," I say in a singsong, beginning the first little rhyme I think of. "And all the little children laughed! The pond went bright and then went dark. But suddenly, they heard a bark!"

The triplets are mostly hiccuping now, their faces still wet but with no new tears flowing.

"From the water bounced a dog, his coat as bright as moonlit fog," I continue. The youngsters begin to inch towards me. "The children clapped and reached right out, and stroked their new friend on his snout. A fallen star become a pup, to always love and cheer them up!"

"Pup," says the lavender little female. "Pup pup pup pup."

"Oh! You like that word?" I smile and try to figure out if she's old enough to be verbal. If she were a human child, her size would suggest yes. Since she's Kiphian, I simply can't tell.

"Pup." She nods, staring at me.

"You don't have dogs here on Kiphia," I say, since talking seems to calm them. "But other animals can have pups, too."

The little girl cocks her head at me. Then, as though listening to an inner signal, she clambers into my lap. At once,

the other two are doing the same. They are not small, and suddenly I have a pile of wriggling toddlers all over me.

“Okay, okay,” I laugh. “Hold on, let me help you.”

I arrange the triplets as best I can, so everyone feels like they’re being held. The lavender girl’s head is practically in my armpit, but that’ll have to do for now.

“There we are.” I use the sleeve of my shirt to clean the tears and snot off my new friends’ faces. Turns out, Kiphian kids have as many boogers as human ones. That shouldn’t be oddly comforting, but it is.

“Now, can you tell me your names?” I ask, hoping they can. I’d guess they’re just under two years old, but the Kiphians are bigger than humans, so they could be younger.

All three regard me with big eyes.

“I’ll go first,” I say. I introduced myself once, but they probably didn’t hear it over their crying. “My name is Liara. What’s yours?”

“Lee-ra,” repeats the pale green child, her voice sudden and startlingly clear.

“Li-a-ra,” I say again, more slowly. “How about your name?”

“Velli.” The little girl wiggles on my knee. “My name Velli.”

“Velli! What a beautiful name!” I’m thrilled, already excited to not have to think of them as the ‘green one’ or the ‘blue one’ anymore. “Hello, Velli!”

“Parik,” proclaims the boy. “Parik.” He pokes himself in the chest, and I smother a laugh.

“Well, hello to you too, Parik.” I smile at him. “Another wonderful name!”

“I am Reena,” announces the third child, tucked under my arm. I’m startled by her complete sentence, in comparison to the other two. Is this a personality thing, or are Kiphian children a lot more complicated than I realized?

“Nice to meet you, Reena. You have a very pretty name, too.” I squeeze all three of them. “I’m so happy to learn all of your names!”

The triplets nestle into me, their small bodies soft and warm. Almost against my will, I’m utterly charmed. They settled down remarkably fast and are clearly hungry for affection.

I wonder silently what happened to their parents. Kravath said they were the children of his late brother, but nothing more than that. Did he even know their names?

I let out a soft sigh. I trust that someone else will take care of my students back in the human quarter. For now, I have to do my best for these little people. It’s not their fault they were stuck with King Kravath the Brutish and Rude.

A voice in my head says he might be a brute, but there’s something else about him... Something compelling. I try to ignore it, but I can’t shake that first image of him, sitting on the throne.

Magnetic. Intriguing.

Trouble.

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