

THE 
SALT PLANET
GIANTS

RUIN'S

REVENGE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SARA IVY HILL

The Ruin's Revenge

Salt Planet Giants Book 3

Sara Ivy Hill

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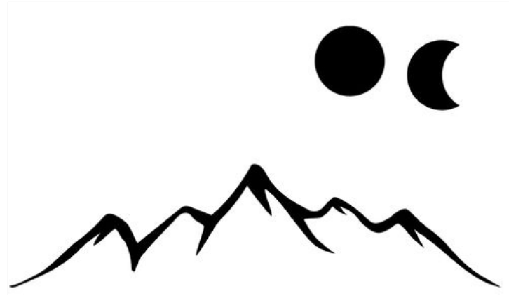
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About This Book



He'll ruin realms for her...

Skarr giant Alrek was one of the lucky ones. He had a mate—the very last female of their kind. Now the widowed chief of a dying clan, he has only two hopes for the future: saving as many other species as possible from the same extinction...and exacting revenge on the invasive humans who caused it.

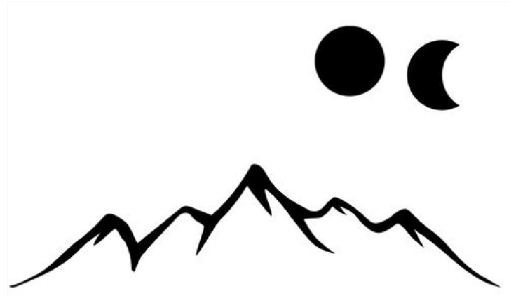
But then *she* walks into his territory. Tiny. Sweet-smelling. Infuriatingly human.

At first, he just wants her off his land, so he escorts her home. But the more time he spends with the fascinating farmer, the less he can imagine his life without her in it. Can he reconcile his painful past and embrace a former enemy? Or will his need for revenge ruin any chance for love to grow again?

The Ruin's Revenge is a sweet and steamy size-difference alien romance about a grumpy giant and the tiny,

sunshiny human woman who reignites his instincts.

Content Guide



D EPICTED IN SCENES

Animal Attack, Arson, Captivity, Injury, Killing, Violence, Wake-Up Head

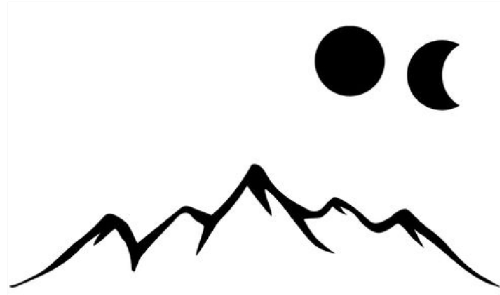
REFERENCED

Death of a Partner

TROPES

Alien Planet, Fated Mates, Forbidden Relationship, Grumpy/Sunshine, Human Men Are Terrible, Hurt/Comfort, Mars Needs Women, Neurodivergent Heroine, Pining, Revenge, Size-Difference, Touch Her & Die, Widower Hero

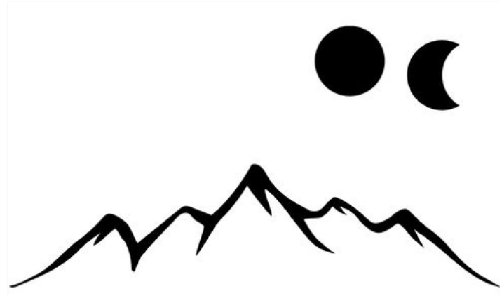
Dedication



For the ones who feel broken—

Don't give up. Your story isn't finished yet.

Chapter 1



RAINA

Autumn

She liked getting messy. She relished submerging her fingers in the rich, damp soil, feeling the mix of sand and clay and organic matter that she'd so carefully cultivated. It'd taken three years to get this little plot of land to this point. It was not an endpoint by any means—restoring the ecology of this soil after years of irresponsible agriculture would be her lifelong pursuit—but it warranted a celebration all the same.

Her first harvest. The first fruit of her endless labor. The proof she needed that her plan would work.

Finally, Raina's fingers found the end of the carra root, fumbling to clear the earth from its thick, fibrous skin. She levered it out of the ground, tossed it in the wheelbarrow, and sat back on her heels to enjoy the moment. First field cleared, the last few rows by her own hands since her harvester, the all-purpose vehicle that she depended upon for everything from transportation to irrigation, had given up the ghost. The stupid rust bucket was still parked in the spot it had died on the other end of the field, smugly watching her do its work.

The sound of another harvester approaching on the dusty dirt road caught her ear, and she rose, absentmindedly rubbing her hands on her grubby overalls and then, grimacing at the gritty

sensation, swiftly strode across the field to the pump near the barn to rinse them in cool water. It was one thing to feel the rich, living soil, and it was quite another to have dirt crusting and drying between her fingers.

The heavy harvester pulled up nearby while her back was turned, and boots hit the ground. She tensed, shook some droplets off her hands, and took a deep breath.

“Greygor,” she said, pasting on a smile she didn’t feel as she turned around. “How nice to see you.”

It was not nice to see him. Lord Greygor Calcano was not here for a friendly social call. He was here because her time had run out. Her debt was due. And she was not *quite* ready to pay it.

He surveyed her field, noting the enormous stacks of filled crates lining the edge near the road. “Well, look at that. You finally got something to grow.”

Raina bit her lip and didn’t say the things she wanted to say. That she hadn’t tried to take anything from this abused land until she had poured everything she could into it. That she’d let it lay fallow so it could rest. Breathe. Heal. That she would’ve let it rest even longer if she’d had more time and more credits. That she’d apologized to Salaan for every carra slip she’d planted this season.

But men like Greygor didn’t understand that approach—not *yet*—so she just said, “Yeah.”

“How are your yields?” he asked, interest sparking his pale-gray eyes. All of him was gray—his name, his eyes, his teeth, his short-cropped hair, the broad-brimmed hat he always wore, the spotless jacket that protected him from the morning chill. Everything but his skin, which was sun-bronzed from days spent supervising the workers on his hundreds of acres.

This time she couldn't resist, her excitement bubbling over. “Haven't been to the weigh station, but they're beyond my expectations. And the land could produce more, with more enrichment. The mycelium is only just reestablishing itself. In a few more years, could be twice as much and allow for interplanting, too. A secondary cash crop on top of the carra, one that wouldn't take up any more space.”

“Two crops on one plot?” His tone was skeptical, challenging, but she'd expected that. “Like what?”

“Off the top of my head...” She rattled off a half-dozen species that were native to this region and could have added a half-dozen more, but she could hear her voice rising, becoming more urgent, so she toned it down. Put it in terms he'd understand. “What I'm saying is that you wouldn't have to sacrifice profits if you put in the ten or fifteen years up front to get the system going. It would maintain itself after that, just like a natural ecosystem.”

Greygor guffawed, bending at the waist and bracing his hands against his knees, rocking with the force of his laughter. “You had me going there for a minute,” he wheezed. “Why

would I wait a decade to match profits when I can earn just as much by not changing a thing?”

Suddenly it was her mouth full of grit, coating her tongue. “Because in ten years, your tzat weed will have stripped the soil to nothing. You won’t be able to grow anything on it. Your land will be worthless.”

He pushed his hat back on his head and waved a hand at the forested foothills rising behind them that marked the edge of Skarr territory. “Plenty more where that came from.”

Her stomach turned over at the thought of any more of the lush, diverse forestland being burned, plowed, and planted. “You said you’d use my methods if I could prove them within three years. That was part of our deal, wasn’t it?” She didn’t need to mention the other part of the deal, the part where if she failed to pay him back for this parcel of land, she’d be contracted to work for him. Her research would be for his exclusive use.

“I said I’d consider it,” he rocked on his heels. “Let’s say I plant all three-hundred-plus acres with carra. That’ll be what, a yield of a million tons every harvest season? What am I going to do with all that? There aren’t enough giants on Salaan to eat that much root. Same for just about any other crop. But tzat? No matter how many acres I grow, there will always be someone who wants it.”

Sadly, he was right. She’d seen it herself in the City for most of her life—the hold that tzat had on people. The purified form was smelly, expensive, and highly addictive. Users built up a

tolerance, needing more and more to feel the same euphoria, to the point that tzat addicts would do almost anything to sate their need. There would always be a brisk market for the drug. But that didn't mean it was right to grow it, especially here. Tzat weed belonged in the hunting lands, where layers of legume roots fixed nutrients, replacing what the spindly yellow tzat plant siphoned. Here in the river valley, where the clay soil often waterlogged deep roots, the tzat took everything.

Greygor knew her arguments already, though. He knew her objections. She'd made them a hundred times. He just didn't care.

"I should get back to work," she said abruptly. The river barge that hauled goods to the City markets would leave when it was full, and that could be any day. She needed credits to fix the harvester so she could get the rest of the roots out of the ground before it frosted and they turned to mush. Mushy carra was good for the soil, bad for her credit balance.

"You'd better," he agreed. "But Raina? If you can't make the payment, don't fret. I'll value your help over at my estate. Even if you don't like the idea of growing tzat, your methods will benefit the planet. Better to grow tzat your way than my way, right?"

He tipped his hat and, after her polite nod, swung up into the seat of the harvester. It roared to life. Of course, *his* equipment was in fine working order.

“Hey,” she called, jogging over to the side of the vehicle and craning her neck to look up at him. Greygor cracked open the door, resting his boot heels against the frame. “Any chance you have a harvester I could borrow? I only need it today to haul a trailer to the terminal and then I’ll get it right back to you.”

He gave a regretful grimace and shook his head. “’Fraid not. All in use.”

“This one isn’t.” She stuck out her chin stubbornly even though her skin was crawling, confronting him like this. “I really need it.”

“Raina.” He gave her a mild, indulgent look from under the brim of his hat. “That wouldn’t be in my interest, would it?”

All her arguments died on her lips. Of course, Greygor wouldn’t help her. He’d rather she *didn’t* repay him. Then he’d own the land *and* her. Not forever, like when he’d proposed marriage and brought her here from the City. Thankfully, he’d recognized as quickly as she did that they were not a good match. But he still wanted her to stick around long enough to improve his fields, double his yield without doubling his costs.

He was clever. Ruthless. Patient. She had to respect it.

She nodded and turned back to the house. Didn’t look back when she heard the harvester start up with enviable smoothness and drive away. Inside, she contacted the terminal office on her datacom, carefully switching the camera off before connecting.

The man who answered looked bored. She would be, too, staring at a screen all day.

“Are there any harvesters for hire today?” she asked. Sometimes people who owned small farms would rent out their equipment or employees to make some extra credits once their own harvests were in. “I need someone to come out with a trailer to haul a load to the weigh station.”

“Yuh.” He poked around, located a notebook, and read off it. “Got a 20-footer from the Graig farm. Gotta use their operator, though, it says.”

“That’s fine. How much?” She held her breath, rubbing her thumb over a tiny bit of dirt she’d missed on the side of her forefinger.

“Fifteen up front for loading, and then a credit per ton for the hauling.”

It was a fair price. Too bad she didn’t even have five credits, let alone fifteen. “Will the Graigs take a share of the harvest as a payment?”

A snort was his reply.

“What about an interest in the load? A promissory note until I get paid? It will only be a couple days.”

He ended the call. Answer enough.

She stared out the window at the perfect view of her problem. The tower of harvested roots. The empty field that hosted the useless machinery. The thriving rows of unharvested carra in the field beyond, surrounded by acres of

waving, yellow tzat. In the unseen distance, the barge that would leave with or without her crop, the river that didn't care, the City marketplace where Skarr giants would buy someone else's roots or do without.

Layers of problems. Making sense of them all felt like the kind of calculation she did regularly when she worked out soil amendment ratios. Complex. Knotty. But because the beginning and end were knowns, she could solve for the variable.

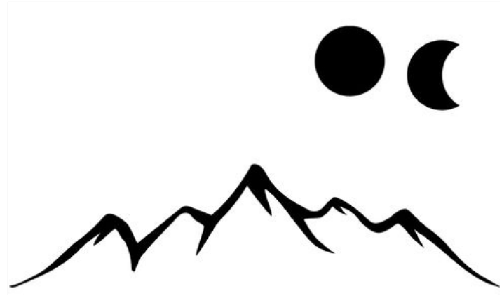
She needed credits. The Skarr needed carra roots. The variable was the transportation. Her eyes flicked to the green foothills the bordered her land and the harsh peaks that rose above them. Skarr territory, where the formidable, rocky species made their home.

They were notoriously private and unwelcoming to visitors. But if they needed carra, maybe they wouldn't drive her away. Maybe they'd purchase her harvest. And maybe they'd be willing to transport it themselves.

Maybe, maybe, maybe. Layers of hope felt like a weak defense against her layers of problems. But hopes were just solutions not yet realized, weren't they?

She packed a bag and set out to climb a mountain.

Chapter 2



ALREKELL

Alrek cursed his Skarr senses and the way they constantly bombarded him with information, most of which he did not want. The sound of his brother, Patrek, coupling with his tiny human mate in the early hours of dawn, for example. The annoying drip at the back of his den that he hadn't yet repaired. The grating cries of the small flock of edjrees that were rehabilitating in one of his side passages, informing him that they wanted their breakfast sooner rather than later.

He threw off the furs and stumbled to the hearth to check the grassgrain porridge that had been simmering over the banked fire all night. He breathed in the earthy, slightly floral steam that emerged from the pot when he lifted the lid. The warmth soothed the perpetual ache in his broken tusk, and he lingered over the pot for an extra minute, even though it didn't really need to be stirred that much.

The edjrees scented their breakfast, and their cries increased enough to drown out the passionate noises coming from his brother's den. He'd get no rest until the birds were fed, so he poured out half the pot into a shallow pan to cool. The other half he ate with stony efficiency, barely tasting it.

He didn't decorate it with petals and pollen and sweeten it with onga honey as he might have done for his mate Brannica, when she still lived. The plain porridge was simply fuel for his

life, which had become an equally bland series of tasks to complete. He did not take pleasure in them or even much interest. They had to be done, and when they were, he could finally rest under a cairn next to his mate, Night Mother willing.

Until then, he didn't have time for this sentimental dawdling. He dropped his spoon into his empty wooden bowl with a clatter and went to feed the edgrees the cooled grains. Then it was time for his rounds visiting the elders in their dens, the ones so aged that they rarely moved, growing moss and small mushrooms between their plates. He'd just finished coaxing some berries and honey into the last of them and exited the den when, across the meadow, Hinri mentioned to his mate that a message had arrived from Arngar.

"...the unmated males want permission to stay," Hinri finished. "Arngar's new mate is expecting a kit in the spring."

Corek-cursed Skarr senses. Another thing he didn't want to hear.

A little over a year ago, his cousin Arngar and half of the youngest generation had set off to meet with a newly discovered Skarr clan across the sea, one with living females. As their chief, Alrek did not begrudge his clan's males the chance at finding mates, but Skarr's Hand had suffered for their absence. Fewer residents in the Hand meant less work completed. More dens in disrepair. Plus, the cold season was coming, and their food stores were dangerously low at a time when they should be overflowing.

Hinri was hailing him now, knowing he'd heard the news. Wanting a response.

As Alrek strode through the soft, golden grasses to meet him in the middle of the meadow, every instinct told him to say no. Tell the young males to return to the Hand, contribute their labor. Ensure a comfortable winter for the elders. Care for the burgeoning population of wildlife they'd rescued. Have some clan loyalty, for the love of Salaan!

But why *should* they be loyal to a dying clan? Arngar's generation still had a future to look forward to across the sea. And Alrek, the last Skarr of their clan to have a mate, could hardly ask them to give it up just because he couldn't share the same hope. He would look backward, care for the moss-gatherers until they turned to stone, then gather some moss himself.

"Tell them they can stay where they want. We have no need of them here," he grunted when he drew close to Hinri. As was his habit, the tall, blue-gray Skarr carried his human mate, Mimma, on his shoulder. She was so small, it was a wonder Hinri hadn't crushed her or dropped her by accident yet.

Hinri's brass-capped tusks glinted as he raised his rocky brows in surprise. "You're sure? We could use their help getting in a good harvest, and there's still time for them to travel."

Alrek jerked a nod, sending a lance of pain through his jaw that made him grimace. "They won't be happy if they come back. The humans' presence here has made them too restless.

I'd rather do twice the work than listen to them pining after other males' mates." He chanced a look at Mimma, bracing for open offense exhibited on her tiny face, but she merely looked understanding.

This was her fault. She'd been the one to bring news of the other Skarr clan across the sea. She'd been the one to arrange passage for Arngar and the others on a human ship. She and her sister, Maja, were a terrible distraction for their mates, too, keeping Hinri and Patrek occupied with pleasing them instead of picking up the slack.

He didn't hate humans. He really didn't—or he tried not to. But he hated how they'd disrupted his clan.

Okay, he hated them a little bit. They'd invaded his planet. Encroached on Skarr territory over the generations until their lands was too small to support their species. And now, two of them had moved into his meadow so he didn't even have the luxury of ignoring them!

With a huff, he turned away from Mimma, only to be faced with her sister's freckled features staring up at him from somewhere around his mid-thigh. She was swathed in a knitted creation of Patrek's that swallowed her in woolly loops and made her look like a flowering shrub.

"Lucky I didn't squish you," he grumped, side-stepping her. Of course, when Skarr senses would have come in handy, they'd failed him.

"I have an idea," Maja piped, trailing after him even though she could talk to him just as well if she stayed in place and let

her voice carry. Humans were surprisingly loud given their size.

He groaned internally. She always had ideas—usually good ideas for how to improve the way they did things, but they always involved a lot of work. Work he didn't have time for. But she was his brother's mate, so instead of brushing her off, he gritted out, "What is it?"

"We've had an influx of injured creatures due to the wildfires, and we're running out of space," she began.

He cut her off. "I know. I have a whole flock of Corek-cursed edgrees living in the back of my den!"

Seeming to realize he was losing patience, she spoke in a rush. "It would save a lot of work if we could centralize care for the animals that are worst off. What if we honored Brannica by using her midden as a rehab center? It's wasted space, just sitting there empty."

His belly clenched, threatening to revolt. Brannica had built her midden on the edge of the meadow after they'd mated—closer than *gyddyr* liked to dwell, usually, but a sacrifice she'd made to be with him. A clan chief could not wander so far as other males to visit his mate, so she'd done her best to tolerate the noise and activity of the Hand. He'd dug the foundation for her, hauled boulders and branches, collected sheets of moss from the surrounding forest, but she'd been the one to weave it all together and make it a home.

When he looked at its low, curving form near the stream, he didn't see it as wasted space. He only saw the touch of her

hands.

But he had to admit that if he used today's eyes instead of seven-years-gone-in-a-blink ones, he noticed its hollow dustiness. The way it had crumbled around the edges. Brannica would hate that. She would want it to be cared for and made useful, as she wished for all things.

“Fine.” He thought that would be the end of it—*prayed* it would be the end of it. But of course, it wasn't.

“I'm almost done digitizing her records and cataloging her collections, but there are some personal items. Journals. Letters.” Maja hesitated, waiting for him to respond, then when he didn't, *couldn't*, asked, “Do you want her things?”

He clenched his teeth and the right side of his face flooded with tusk pain. Yes, he *wanted* them. Wanted a lot of things. He wanted his mate, well and whole and alive. He wanted his people to thrive. He wanted a kit of his own. He wanted *everything* to be different.

But it was not and would not be, no matter how much he wished it were so.

“Put them in my den. I'll deal with it all later.” He could not face any more. Turning, he swiftly crossed the meadow, ignoring the blare of conversations, and dipped into the quiet of the forest, where the addoc leaves below buffered some of the unwelcome sounds.

Brannica's cairn was in a mossy glade where bright slices of light pierced the canopy, caressing the boulders that only just

disguised her shape. He came here often—too often, some said—to talk to her. To gift her and guard her while she rested, as he had when she lived. He sank down beside her, pressing his brow plates to one sun-warmed stone.

“I don’t know how to lead them forward. It’s all changing,” he confessed. “I know it’s right, on the face of it. I know life has to change. But it feels wrong at the same time, like I’m a traitor to you. A traitor to our kind. Did I make a mistake, letting the humans into our sanctuary?”

Brannica didn’t answer. She had, once, or at least he imagined she had. He could hear her whispered counsel at first, feel her heartbeat in the throb of his broken tusk. But lately, as his uncertainty about the future grew, she answered him less and less.

“Tell me what to do,” he begged.

She gave him nothing. But then, he had given her nothing, he thought ruefully. He rose and gathered some wildflowers, the last sprays of pink bells and new clusters of shy, white, sweet-scented blossoms from the surrounding understory, and used them to decorate her cairn. When he was satisfied, he tipped back onto his haunches and let his mind wander.

What if he just walked further into the mountains and didn’t return? He had a feeling the clan would barely miss him. Might even rejoice to be rid of his grieving guts. He’d do it, too, if it weren’t for his duty to the sanctuary. They couldn’t afford the disruption of a *hnefyal* to choose a new chief on top of all the other challenges they faced.

He was so absorbed in his thoughts that his Skarr senses failed him for the second time that day. He didn't scent or hear the unfamiliar human approach until she tripped over his foot.

"Careful," he grunted, moving it out of her way, too surprised to say anything more fitting. What was in Salaan's name was she doing here? There weren't any human settlements for twenty miles. She wore a pack on her back and had sturdy boots on, so she must have trekked up the mountain and gotten lost.

"Oh. Hello." She craned her neck to look him in the eye, like they were equals and she wasn't an invasive pest. "I didn't see you, but you're just who I'm looking for."

"Me?" he asked stupidly. "You don't even know me. I've never scented you in my life." He would have remembered. She had an earthy, pure scent, like a spring thaw. Not overly sweet, but full of the promise of life. He shook his head at his own pathetic thoughts.

"I came to speak with the Skarr," she explained.

He groaned internally, thinking of how another female in the Hand was going to throw everything into chaos again. She needed to turn around and go back the way she'd come before anyone else caught her scent. "So speak."

She nodded, looking pleased rather than offended by his brusque command. "I'm a carra farmer. I have a load of roots to sell. I can give you a decent price if you haul them yourself. My fields border Skarr territory so it would be an easy distance for your kind." She slung her pack to the ground and

opened it, pulling out a large, knobby root that must have taken up most of the space in it and held it out to him.

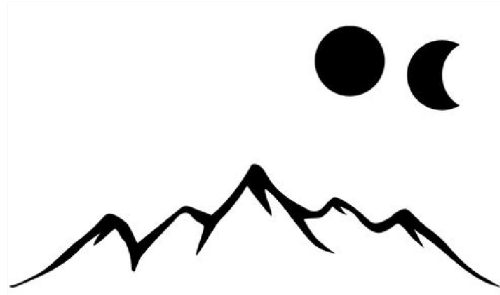
The warmth of the stones he rested on vanished in an instant. He felt sick. The land in the valley to the southwest had been Brannica's territory. She'd lost it a decade ago to human incursion. That's when she'd fallen ill, when the press of their agriculture, their burning and plowing and noise, had destroyed that section of her forest. And *this* was the human responsible. He wanted to *destroy* her.

His hands curled into fists that could crush her so easily. He didn't want the stench of her blood on his hands, otherwise he might have brought them down on her.

"We don't need your saltstained roots," he barked.

They did need them, actually. But he'd be damned if he fed his clan with crops grown on stolen soil.

Chapter 3



RAINA

The giant with the broken tusk glared at her like she'd somehow offended him with her offer. Perhaps she had. She often offended people without knowing exactly why, and that was when she was dealing with her own species. She knew even less about Skarr niceties.

“If you'd just try it,” Raina pressed, feeling desperate. “I think you'll find the flavor is closer to wildgrown roots than the type you get in the City markets. I've worked to nurture the disrupted mycelium. It's not at full health, but it's improved, and it really makes a difference in the taste. The nutrition, too.” She was babbling, unsure of the right thing to say, so she tried to say everything. “The improved soil structure helps the plants absorb more nutrients, the way it would in undisturbed land. In a few more years, it will be even better, but these are pretty good. At least, I think so. I'd love to know your opinion, if you would be so kind—”

“Go,” he rumbled as loud as thunder, rising to his feet and pointing down the mountain. His huge form blocked out most of the light seeping through the canopy. His dark, rocky plates were tinged green, blending perfectly into the surrounding mossy stones. No wonder she hadn't noticed him until she tripped over his foot. “Get out of our territory. You're not welcome.”

Her shoulders sagged as she stowed the rejected root in her pack. She ought to follow his orders and trudge back the way she'd come. But what was the point? At the bottom of the mountain was her defeat. The thought of being at Greygor's beck and call was the motivation she needed to keep pressing. "Is there someone else I could talk to? Someone in charge?"

He growled, a low, ferocious sound that vibrated her spine, and turned away, striding off through the forest too quickly for her to keep up. She followed his general direction anyway. The forest was older here than the groves where she collected mushroom spores and impran guano, with open space between the broad addocs. Their branches whispered together overhead, and the damp forest floor muted her footsteps.

Glimpses of sunlight glittered ahead of her, increasing in number and size until they flooded her view as she broke out of the trees into a beautiful, wild meadow. Cradled in the giant palm of a caldera at the top of the mountain, it was ringed by five jagged stone peaks. A few animals grazed near the meandering stream that wound through the golden grasses and merely raised their heads to look at her before resuming their meal.

She spotted the giant who'd unwillingly led her here with a few more of his kind on the other side of the broad clearing. It was a jolt seeing them move about, so massive, like watching the mountains themselves move. Most astonishingly, one of them lifted a human woman down off his shoulder and set her gently at his feet. The woman's long brown hair swung behind

her as she jogged in Raina's direction, skirts clutched in one hand as she waved enthusiastically with the other.

"I didn't know any humans lived up here," Raina blurted out when the woman came close enough to hear.

"Welcome to Skarr's Hand. I'm Mimma," the woman gasped, pressing a hand to her heaving chest and smiling broadly as she caught her breath. "Alrek said you're a farmer."

"Alrek?" Raina asked just before the answer became obvious. That must be the one she'd met in the forest. Then, realizing she'd ignored the woman's introduction and was well on her way to botching this interaction as well, added, "I'm Raina. And yes, I am. A farmer. Not that you asked. You already knew. Obviously."

She cringed. She should have practiced her introduction on the way here. But rather than being put off by her awkwardness, Mimma's earnest smile stretched even broader. "Wonderful! We're so glad you're here."

A laugh burst out before Raina could stop it. So much for *not welcome*. "He said—"

Mimma rolled her eyes. "Don't mind Alrek. He's not a big fan of humans, but don't let that put you off. Most of the males here are *lovely*."

Raina glanced over at where the group of giants were congregated, but they had vanished. Where in the world did a giant hide?! The corners of her mouth tugged down. The Skarr were even more standoffish than she expected. Perhaps this

hike up the mountain had been a complete waste of time. “They don’t exactly seem excited to see me,” she said wryly.

Mimma only looked amused. “Oh, they are. It’s the Skarr way to let a female settle in before they bother her with their attention. It means they want you to stay.”

A curious warmth flooded her. That was so...*nice*. She’d always needed her own space, even when she was a child, something her family had never quite understood. It’d been one of her first stipulations when she was negotiating the ill-fated marriage to Greygor, that she’d be allowed to have her own bedroom and study.

It seemed such an absurd, frivolous thing to ask for when every other married couple she knew lived quite happily in company. But sharing space eroded her patience, stole her concentration. She could bear all the commotion and movement around her for only so long, and then she couldn’t *think*.

Mimma tugged on her hand. “Come on, I’ll introduce you to my mate. He already said you’re welcome to stay in our den, but if you’d like more privacy, there are lots of empty ones. You’ll have males squabbling over who gets to prepare it for you.”

“Oh, I can’t stay,” she protested, a little bubble of surprise bursting in the back of her brain at the news that the woman in front of her, who was very average-sized, had a giant for a mate. She didn’t have time to process it or ask questions, though. Not when she had a load of carra roots languishing in

crates and several more loads waiting impatiently in the ground for their turn to be harvested. “I have to get back to my farm. I just need to speak with whoever is in charge.”

Mimma giggled. “You already did. Alrek is the clan chief. He didn’t tell you?”

Raina groaned. Of course, she’d already pissed off their leader. “No. But he told me to get out of the clan’s territory and that they didn’t need my saltstained carra roots.”

“He said that?” Mimma’s brows lifted in surprise as the breeze picked up, whipping her wavy hair into a halo. “He was just storming around this morning, grumbling about our stores being too low to make it through the cold season. Come on, let’s get you settled and introduced, and we’ll sort it out.”

She followed Mimma across the meadow, hardly letting herself hope that this might work out, a clock ticking down in the back of her mind. It’d taken her over eight hours of walking, four yesterday and then four as soon as it was light this morning, to get here. The route home had plenty of steep descents that would slow her down. She couldn’t stay long if she was going to make it back before dark.

“This is the Thumb,” Mimma explained when they reached the base of one of the pinnacles, where several tall openings punctuated the rocks. She led Raina into one of them. It opened into a spacious cavern filled with giant-sized furniture and tools, where a gray-blue Skarr was stirring a pot large enough to drown in that hung over a roaring fire. “And this is my mate, Hinri.”

He looked up, the smile that cracked his craggy features bracketed by two short, brass-capped tusks. “Welcome, Raina,” he rumbled.

She started. “How do you know my—”

“The Skarr have exceptional hearing,” Mimma explained. “Anything you say or do here in the sanctuary, they all hear. You’ll get used to it.”

“Your sister and her mate are coming,” Hinri said calmly, seconds before a huge shadow blocked the doorway. Another human woman entered with reddish-brown giant close behind.

“I’m Maja! This is Patrek. We live next door,” the woman chattered, looking Raina up and down. She resembled Mimma, but slightly rounder, with more freckles and short hair, and was dressed in a coverall jumpsuit with a long, textured scarf wrapped several times around her neck and shoulders.

Raina mumbled hello, feeling slightly overwhelmed by all the new introductions. But she stuffed down her discomfort and explained about the carra harvest and her need for credits to fix her harvester. When she finished, Maja gave a happy sigh, glancing up at her enormous mate. “I think she’s Salaan-sent, don’t you?”

“Perhaps,” he said, nodding.

“We’ve been stretched so thin lately because of the forest fires that we haven’t had as much time to forage,” Maja explained. “I’m sure we can find a volunteer or two who will be happy to haul the roots back up the mountain.”

Her mate huffed a laugh. “They’re already lining up outside.”

“You can choose the one you’re most comfortable traveling with,” Mimma said at Raina’s elbow. “They’re all very respectful, though. It’s in their nature to have a guardian mindset, so you’ll be safe no matter what. And they’ll carry your pack for you—that looks heavy.”

Raina swung it off your shoulder and produced the root she’d brought as a sample. “I thought you might like to try one before you buy crates full.”

Hinri set down his cooking spoon and solemnly took it from her with surprising delicacy given the size of his fingers. After deftly peeling the thick husk away to reveal the sweet, starchy interior, he sliced it up and handed out small samples to the two women and the other Skarr. They made appreciative noises as they tasted it raw, pronouncing it as good as wildgrown roots.

“We can pay you half in advance, half when we pick up the roots,” Patrek said kindly. “Does that sound fair?”

She nodded. “Very fair.”

Something in Raina’s stomach settled. This was going to work. She’d fix the equipment, harvest the other fields, sell them to the broker at the terminal, make the payment to Greygor. The land would be hers. He’d be annoyed to lose out on her exclusive expertise for his tzat, but it wasn’t like she wouldn’t share her methods with him anyway. She’d publish

them so everyone could improve their fields, Greygor included.

Hinri added the remainder of the root to his simmering stewpot and then burst out with a chuckle. “They’re jealous. The ones outside. They think I should have given them the rest of it. Quit complaining that you didn’t get to eat raw roots, you saltlickers. You can have some stew in a bit.”

Mimma giggled. “Or they can have a taste when they haul the crates back to Skarr’s Hand.”

“Whoever accompanies me can have all they want when we get to the bottom of the mountain,” Raina joked. This time, even she could hear the raised voices arguing over who would get to go with her. She flushed. It was oddly flattering, having these enormous, good-natured giants bickering over her, like her company was some kind of prize.

“You’d better pick one before they have a *hnefyal*,” Patrek advised. “If you give me your com code, I’ll set up the payment.”

“Alrek approved it?” Maja asked, and when he nodded, she gave a relieved sigh that Raina felt in her bones. “I knew he would come to his senses. He’s always been a good listener.”

So the grumpy clan chief had been eavesdropping, too. He might not like her, but at least he wasn’t being spiteful and blocking the deal. She dried her sweaty palms on the front of her overalls. “I need to go now.”

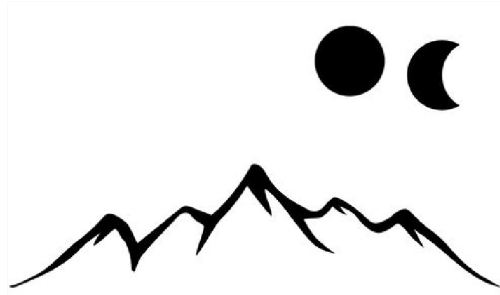
Their jarred silence told her she'd been too abrupt. "I mean, thank you for everything. I'm glad we came to an agreement, but I really should head out if I'm going to make it down the mountain before night falls."

"You have time to eat," Mimma said firmly. "We insist."

Her sister nodded in agreement. "Your giant will carry you. You'll be home in no time."

Her giant. The Skarr were a formidable species and no doubt would not appreciate being appropriated in this way, but you couldn't tell that to a woman who'd managed to mate with one. Raina chuckled, shaking her head, and gave in to their relentless hospitality.

Chapter 4



ALREKELL

His suffering would never end. Not only did the human linger, eating and laughing with the other females, but every unmated Skarr on Salaan was panting after her, lining up to show her their wood carvings and rock collections in an attempt to impress her with their skills or how far they'd roamed. And she tolerated it, even when he could scent that she was tired and heard her pulse speed, not with excitement, but a kind of fluttery, anxious dread.

Why didn't she say something? Why didn't she *leave*?

Finally he could take no more. "Have her make her choice and go," he grunted to Patrek from where he sat, many yards away from the gathering. "We have work to do."

Of course, her would-be suitors heard him, too, and pressed in on her, begging and arguing and making a disgraceful racket, like they didn't know how to behave in front of a female.

Something in him panged. Of course, the younger generation didn't know how to behave. The luckiest among them were barely grown when their mothers and sisters finally slept with Salaan. Most had been younger, still kits, when their last female relative slowed to a stop and sat down in the forest, never to rise again. Their only experience with courting was when Patrek and Hinri dragged home their human mates, and that hadn't exactly been in the old ways.

Humans were not like his kind. They didn't need all the protections and considerations that skittish Skarr females did. But for Manna's sake, they needed *some*. Couldn't these idiots see that she was *trembling*?

"Enough," he snarled, rising. "Give her space. Give her peace."

"Good chief," one of the moss-gatherers murmured approvingly from the entrance to his den in the Little Finger, far across the meadow. The unruly younger giants shuffled back, rubbing their tusks, chagrined. Their eyes still glittered covetously toward her, though, their lesson unlearned.

He stationed himself in front of her, blocking their view, and Raina shot him a look, half question, half gratitude. She didn't understand why he'd intervened, and he wasn't going to explain it to her. Nor was he going to let one of these overgrown kits manhandle her down the mountain.

"I'll go," he grunted, ignoring the murmured groans of disappointment behind him. "Get your pack."

She nodded and ducked into Hinri's den to retrieve it. While she was gone, Patrek's brow-plates grated in confusion. "Are you sure that's best, leaving the Hand without a chief? I could go, instead"—he glanced down at Maja and then at Mimma—"or Hinri could, if you're worried the unmated males will be too undisciplined."

"You handle things while I'm gone." Why did his shoulders feel so light once Patrek nodded in assent? Maybe it was the thought of escaping the tight circle of territory around the

Hand for the first time in a decade. Maybe it was relinquishing the heavy burden of leadership, even temporarily. Whatever it was, it made him feel like a kit playing avalanche, like he might freely tumble his way down the mountain. That sensation alone might be worth putting up with a human for a day or two.

Raina returned with her bag on her back, and Alrek held out his hand for it. She shook her head, her fingers gripping the straps. "I've got it."

"Suit yourself," he grunted, turning away from her and starting for the edge of the forest. If she expected him to carry her the whole way, she was mistaken.

"Have fun!" Mimma called after them.

"Fun," he scoffed as the sky disappeared behind the veil of the forest's canopy and the temperature abruptly dropped. "Since when is hauling a load of carra up a mountain *fun*?"

"I think she means on the way down," Raina offered. She was keeping up with him, barely. Her heart thumped in his ears, and he could smell the perspiration beading on her skin, warming her thawed-earth scent into something headier.

"Since when is spending hours enduring a human's noise fun?" he snapped, but he slowed his pace. He'd never hear the end of it if she collapsed and he had to take her back to Skarr's Hand for treatment. Patrek would push him off the mountain, *hnefyal* or not. Plus, if she wasn't sweating, maybe her distracting, female scent would stop clinging to the inside of his nostrils and coating his tongue, sending an unwelcome

hunger into his guts—and lower, to a part of him he'd thought was asleep for good.

Traitorous thing.

Why did he volunteer for this saltstained task? He couldn't remember. Something to do with how the other males were treating her. He didn't want one of them to court her and keep her as a mate, that was it. He didn't want more humans living in the Hand. It couldn't have been for *her* benefit—nor his. He didn't know her from any other human. They could all sleep with Salaan as far as he was concerned.

Well, maybe excepting his brother's mate and her sister. They were annoying, but not as awful as he'd come to expect from their species. They cared about the planet and its living creatures, at least. And they made their mates a little less lonely. Night Mother knew, life in the Hand could be lonely, and he didn't begrudge anyone a companion more responsive than their own hand. Someone to pet and hold, spoil and guard. His cock twitched, remembering what that was like. Or maybe with futile hope.

Traitorous, traitorous thing.

As they walked together in silence, he grudgingly had to admit that so far, Raina didn't seem like others of her kind, either. She didn't prattle endlessly, and her careful steps barely disturbed the delicate humus underfoot. She didn't complain when the route he chose meant she had to scramble over fallen trees or around boulders. And she didn't ask him for anything, not even to carry the pack that swung on her back. Even

divested of its carra root, it looked too full to contain only the dried fruit and nuts that he could smell.

“What’s in there, anyway?” he asked, instantly regretting his curiosity. He didn’t really want to know. He didn’t care. “Never mind. Don’t answer.”

“Yarn,” she said at the same time.

Yarn? She’d hauled *yarn* up and down a mountain? He pinched his lips together, keeping the question inside, even though part of him hoped she’d elaborate.

She didn’t.

Irritation built between his plates, and he had no one to blame but himself. He was the one who’d barked about enduring human noise, and now she was keeping silent as an impran. Manna save him, he was a bastard.

“You can talk if you want,” he gritted out.

“Okay.”

That’s all she said. The only sounds she made as they continued on were small grunts of effort when she had to navigate an obstacle, and those irritated him, too, because her struggle was pointless when he could just lift her over them. Was she too proud to ask? Had his harsh words made her fearful of him? He sucked in a deep lungful of her scent and was gratified that there was no sourness in it.

Perhaps she was just stubborn.

“I’ll carry you from here,” he said when they reached a fast-moving stream that tumbled over a granite fall. He wasn’t testing her resolve. He just didn’t think he could stand to see her wobble and leap from rock to precarious rock when he could scoop her up and step over it so easily.

Raina, who was already scouting the best place to cross, glanced up at him with a frown. “Am I too slow? I can walk faster. I just need a minute to rest.”

She was tired? Why hadn’t she said anything? Did she expect him to read her mind? *Humans*.

“Rest, then,” he said. He crouched by the stream. His tusk ached just thinking about how cold it would be to drink from it, but he was thirsty and they still had a long way to go, so he braced himself and cupped the icy water to his mouth. As expected, it sent an excruciatingly throb down the exposed nerve. No amount of preparation could hide his momentary anguish.

Raina made a sympathetic noise. “It hurts you. I wondered.”

“Wonder no more,” he sniped, rubbing it. Then, feeling slightly ashamed for taking his pain out on her, he added, “It doesn’t hurt all the time. Only when I bump it into something or it gets cold. Cold is the worst.”

She eyed him from where she’d settled, legs crossed under her, on a log near the water. She offered him the nuts from her pack, but he shook his head. She munched a few of them, then asked, “Why don’t you cap it like Hinri’s?”

He turned his back on her so she couldn't see his expression. Her question was one he'd been asked many times, one he didn't have an answer for. He was well beyond the expected period of mourning. Years past it. He'd even had a cap fitted, buckling to the pressure of his clan. It was on the mantel in his den. He just...wasn't ready to wear it. Didn't deserve to.

"I like to keep my hands busy," Raina said, breaking the long silence.

"Good for you," he huffed, slightly confused by her non sequitur but glad to have the attention off his brokenness.

"That's why I brought so much yarn," she explained. "I knit whenever my hands don't have something else to do. It helps make my thoughts more orderly."

He turned back toward her and saw she'd drawn the yarn out of her pack. Blue and fluffy, it was being transformed into something tubular by the four crisscrossing needles that Raina deftly maneuvered. It was magical seeing a single strand feed into her hands and a three-dimensional object slowly appear on the other side. It was a little like watching a plant grow and bloom, miraculous, from a seed.

"My brother knits." Why did he say that? She didn't care about Patrek's hobbies. But she rewarded Alrek with a smile.

"Did he knit his mate's scarf? I noticed it. Beautiful."

Alrek nodded, feeling irksomely proud of Patrek's shrubby-shawl. "I think he spun the wool, too."

“Wow!” She lifted her brows, looking impressed, and he was about to tell her that he’d made the wooden drop spindle Patrek used when there was a movement in his peripheral vision. One of the ferns growing nearby the log where she sat *writhed*. He was instantly on guard.

“Hold still!” he hissed urgently. There was only one thing that moved like that, and he’d been lucky to spot it through its enviable camouflage. His fingers inched toward a nearby rock. “Did you know a krulloct is stalking you?”

Raina, who’d stiffened and paused her knitting at his warning, relaxed and resumed her handiwork. “Oh, that’s just Jared. Don’t worry about him. He’s been after me for years.” She *laughed*.

Just Jared? She’d *named* a krulloct like a pet? Alrek gaped at her. Krullocts were perhaps the most vicious, patient predator on the planet. They’d follow their prey for as long as it took, waiting for a moment of weakness to attack with claws that could shred any hide, even Skarr plates. They could disembowel a human with one swipe of a tentacle. Thankfully, they were rather rare, but she’d been unlucky enough to catch this one’s single, bloodthirsty eye.

“He’s old,” she said, waving her hand dismissively. “He’s nearly blind.”

“Still dangerous,” he growled, keeping a close watch on the creature’s faint outline in the underbrush. He didn’t particularly want to tangle with it himself, but he wasn’t going to let her fight it off alone, either.

“Not really. He’s been traveling from my farm since yesterday and only made it this far. I pen him up when I’m at home I don’t have to check under the furniture every time I sit down, but he’s harmless. For the most part,” she amended, chuckling.

She made a few more stitches, then the knitted item dropped free from the needles. She examined it, looking pleased, then bit off the yarn and fussed with the loose end before holding it up. It was a sock. She pulled its mate from her pack, paying no attention to the nearby menace.

“If he gets his claws in you...” Alrek pinched his mouth in a straight line, cutting off his sentence. None of his business if this human wanted to tempt a krulloct. He wouldn’t see her bones bleach once the creature had stripped them. He wouldn’t build her cairn. That was the job of her family. Her mate, if she had one. Did she have one? She hadn’t mentioned it. Why *would* she mention it, though? It was none of his business.

She shucked her shoes, revealing her bare, brown toes. They looked like a row of little naka nuts, curled and bitable. He was thankful when she tugged the socks on, covering them, so he could avoid such ridiculous thoughts. She replaced her shoes and sighed happily. “Much better.”

The more he thought about it, the more he was sure she didn’t have a mate. Who would let their female wander sockless in the wilderness with a krulloct on her heels?

Not that he cared one way or another if she was mated or had comfortable toes. It was nothing to him.

“I toss him a meal every day or two so he’s never too desperate. I suppose it’s time to go now, though, before he makes his move.” Raina rose, slipping into the straps of her pack. She craned her neck to look up at him and lifted her arms expectantly. When he didn’t immediately pick her up, she dropped them again. “Sorry. I’ve never been carried by a giant before. I don’t know how this works.”

“I don’t, either. “ He looked her up and down, uncertain. Though small like the rest of her species, she was sturdy and rounded, less breakable-looking than the humans Patrek and Hinri toted around regularly. But he still wasn’t sure where to grip her. Her soft curves melded together appealingly, making every part off-limits.

What was he going on about? She wasn’t *appealing* or *biteable* or anything of the kind! He swiped her up from the ground and, ignoring the way her backside fit perfectly in his palm, plopped her onto the shoulder next to his good tusk like the burden she was.

She squeaked on the way up but settled into the hollow above his collarbone, bracing herself against his shoulder plate with one hand and gripping his tusk with the other. Her heels bounced against his chest as he started to walk, and her breath shuddered out.

“Good?” he asked, slowing in case she needed to readjust her seat.

“Good. But next time, a little warning, please,” she said, chuckling. She patted his shoulder to let him know he could

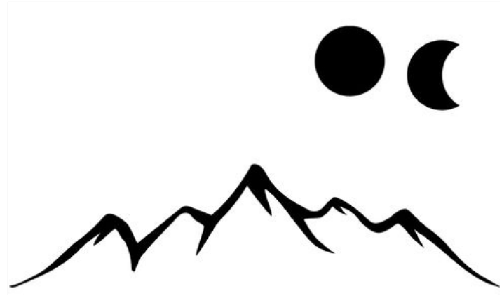
resume his pace.

Next time. There would be no *next time*. He was not in the business of playing pack animal. But there was a tiny part of him that was pleased that he had earned her trust. That she didn't dread his touch even though she would have no occasion to feel it again.

He did his best to ignore her scent bombarding him at nostril-level as he stepped over the stream and made his way down the mountain, putting distance between them and the aged-but-still-lethal krulloct. He would carry her, but he wouldn't enjoy it. He'd ignore her, *endure her*, and then brush her off when they reached their destination, like she was a like a pebble caught between his plates.

But he found that, as much as he tried to dislike Raina on the basis of her species alone, he enjoyed her weight on his shoulder as they traveled down the mountain and through the foothills to the valley. Like all humans, she was a thief, stealing most of his attention with her quiet questions and observations. At least, until he reached the edge of her fields, the ones she'd stolen from his clan, and saw the smoke that his other Skarr senses, distracted by her, had missed.

Chapter 5



RAINA

Her harvest was on fire. Or had been. Even from here, she could see the crates she'd left stacked between her field and the road were black and smoldering, some reduced to coals that glowed ominously in the purpling dusk. The breeze rolling down the mountains had pushed the smoke the other way, but now it filled her throat, choking her with the rich sweetness of cooked carra. Thousands of pounds, roasted and ruined. It was the scent of her defeat.

Beneath her, Alrek's shoulder tensed. His nostrils flared. "Where is your water source?"

"It's a well. The pump is by the barn, but don't worry about putting it out," she said wearily. "It's too late to salvage them. You can put me down."

He did as she asked, depositing her at the edge of the harvested field. She trudged across its lumpy clods, aware of the behemoth following her at a pace that she now recognized as painfully slow for him. She couldn't even be upset that his massive feet were compacting the soil. She'd recruited him on this foolish journey, a journey he'd been reluctant to make, and now she had to send him home with nothing to show for it except wasted time.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Truly. I am. If I had any idea this would happen, I'd never have dragged you down the mountain."

“Who did this?” he growled.

She shrugged, walling off the part of her that wanted to panic and fall apart. “Doesn’t matter. It’s done. It’s over.”

She could flee back to the City. It wasn’t honorable of her, but she could do it. Take a crew position on the barge or, worst case, stow away. Her aunt and uncle would take her in until she could get back on her feet. She could sell her blood, earn enough to start over on her research. Use what she’d learned on a new patch of dirt somewhere. A back garden or patio. A rooftop. Anywhere.

“*Who?*” Alrek pressed when they reached the smoking crates.

She hardly gave them a second look as she continued on toward the house. Why torture herself? She knew who’d done it and why. She’d underestimated him, and that was her own failing. “His name is Greygor. I owe him a lot of money.”

A noise of disbelief came from the giant. “He won’t get paid if he ruins your crops.”

“He doesn’t want to get paid. If I pay him, I’ll own this farm. If I don’t pay him, he owns it and *me*. That’s what he really wants,” she answered shortly, her voice cracking at the end.

The hold she had on her emotions was slipping. She needed to get inside. That would be easy because the front door was kicked in, splintered in half, her few possessions spilling out onto the front porch.

She picked them up as she went, counting her steps as her arms filled to keep herself calm. Clothes, papers, pots and pans. One more step and she'd be inside. Another three and she'd be at her narrow bed where she could collapse and pile the pillows on top of herself to block out the world and its bright, piercing frustrations.

“He's the landowner?” Alrek demanded, too loud and too close. “Did he do this to your door? What was he looking for?” Jarring. Thunderous.

“Go. Please. I need...quiet.” Raina tried to close the door to block him out, but it was broken. Something cracked inside her, and she knew she wouldn't make it to the bed. She hid behind the half of the door that was still attached to the hinges, curling in on herself as she fell apart. Her mind floated away, her body something unreal even as it wept and shook.

This hadn't happened since she'd moved out of Greygor's house. Not since she'd had her own space and the ability to retreat to its safety. But now her space *wasn't* safe. It was ruined.

She would have to leave her little sanctuary and go back to the constant pressures and noise of the City now, where her body didn't fit inside her skin and her brain didn't fit inside her skull. She *needed* this place. Needed open sky and growing things, rich soil to root her fingers in.

But she wasn't a child. She couldn't cry and get what she wanted. She'd been accused of doing just that when she lived in her aunt and uncle's house, manipulating with her tears.

She'd gotten her own bedroom that way even when her young cousins had to share. But that's not why she cried. It was never why.

If anything, she felt guilty being indulged, and that's part of why she hid away when she felt an episode coming on. Witnesses just made her internal storm worse. She hated that Alrek was still there beyond the threshold. She couldn't see him from her vantage point, but his long shadow invaded the cottage, stretching across the floor even though he was too large to enter. Shame settled over her like a too-hot blanket.

"Go away," she forced out again, but it sounded like a tearing sob, not words. The shadow didn't budge, but at least he didn't stifle her with questions or advice. He just...stayed.

She focused on her breath, slowing it down, pulling it in and pushing it out, even though it felt as unnatural as walking on her hands. As she regulated her breathing, she slowly became aware of a deep, calming vibration, a sound that she heard with her whole body. Its low hum drowned out the cacophony of thoughts in her head. It loosened her tense, quivering muscles and slowed her galloping heart. It dammed her tears and diluted her embarrassment to barely a trace.

He was making the sound, she realized, as some of the panicky fog lifted. And it was *helping*.

A few minutes more and she slipped back into her body. Breathing and blinking became automatic again. Her cheeks cooled. Finally, the comforting sound faded, ending with an awkward scrape of his throat.

“Are you well?” he asked.

“I will be.” She swiped her sleeve up her neck to catch the tears that had made their way that far and stood, stepping farther into the cottage interior where she hoped he would not see her. Her head ached behind her eyes. “Sorry for that. It happens sometimes.”

“Do you need more?”

She knew he meant the sound. It felt greedy to ask for more, though. She needed rest more than anything. “I’ll be fine,” she repeated, voice shaky. “I just got overwhelmed. You don’t have to stay.”

The giant sat on the ground outside, palms flat against the ground as he leaned to look in the door. Manna, the sister-moon, was rising behind him, casting his enormous silhouette into relief. She heard him draw a deep breath. “I can scent several humans here, not just one. I’ll stay until your door is fixed, in case they come back.”

The thought was even more comforting than his rough sound had been. “Thank you. I don’t think you’ll fit in the cottage, but—”

“Ground is fine,” he grunted, shifting to sit on his heels. He began plucking up rocks and moving them to the side, clearing a section to be his resting place for the night.

“The barn is better,” she insisted, her head starting to throb in earnest. “There’s a load of straw I use to mulch that you can make into a bed. Water pump is on the west side of the barn.

I'd help, but I have to lie down for a moment. I'll come out to make sure you're comfortable when I can."

"Don't bother." He stood in one smooth, agile movement, taking her breath away with his grace despite his enormous size, and strode into the deepening dusk.

She didn't dwell on his abrupt exit. She couldn't muster the energy. Her body demanded rest, so she gave in, curling up in the quilts with a pillow over her face until, after an hour or so, her muscles stopped trembling and her headache faded.

The evening breeze wafted sweet-smelling carra smoke through the open cottage door, and her stomach growled and twisted like it was the scent of a hearty meal cooking and not evidence of a devastating arson. So generous of Greygor to prepare such a feast in her absence.

She sat up, a bitter smile curling her lips. It'd been many hours since she shared stew in the Skarr meadow, and there was no point in letting the cooked carra completely go to waste. Armed with her biggest cookpot and a toasting fork, she poked around the charred crates until she found one with perfectly cooked roots inside and filled her pot. She lugged it, wreathed with fragrant steam, to the barn.

The wide door stood open. Through it, she could see that the giant had taken her advice and spread out the pile of straw into a pallet along the wall. He rested there on his back, head propped on his hands, like a monument. She almost turned back to the house, thinking him asleep, but he opened one eyelid and then the other.

“You came. I told you not to.”

She lifted the pot. “I thought you might be hungry.”

“Skarr don’t eat all the time. Not like your kind.” He shut his eyes again. She didn’t blame him for not wanting her company. He’d been thrust into this uncomfortable situation for reasons he couldn’t possibly understand, and tomorrow he had to trek back up the mountain with nothing to show for it. She wasn’t going to let him do it on an empty stomach.

“It would be a favor. There are about twenty tons of roasted carra roots out there that are going to spoil. And there’s a cask of brew there in the corner you’re welcome to tap.” His eyes popped open at that, and she suppressed a grin. She plunked the pot down on an empty crate. “I’ll just leave it here.”



ALREKELL

“Stay,” he said gruffly, something tugging at his insides. She’d thought of his needs when her scent was still thready and complicated from whatever had happened earlier, but she needed care, too. “Eat with me.”

Any desire he’d had for revenge had vanished when he’d realized that she was a victim of the landowner as much as Brannica had been. No, not vanished. Transferred. He knew who deserved his wrath now, and it wasn’t this little female in front of him.

Raina’s dark brows lifted momentarily, but she took his request in stride, settling into the straw, her cookpot between them, while he pried the head-hoop off the dusty cask. He could hold it as easily as she could a cup. He tipped it back, taking a long draught of the lukewarm brew.

She’d brought as much carra in her pot as she could carry, and it would only be a mouthful or two for him, so he waited while she ate her fill. She scooped out handfuls of the steaming, starchy root, and he enjoyed the slow sweetening of her scent as the food restored her.

“Not bad,” she said, wiping her chin on the back of her hand. She flopped back into the straw. “Greygor’s a good cook.”

Alrek snorted at her dark humor and tipped the rest of the root into his mouth. Two bites and swallows, and it was gone.

He washed it down with more beer, the combination comfortingly familiar.

She braced up out of the straw and started to rise. "I'll get you some more."

He shook his head and pushed her back down. "Stay. Rest. I'm satisfied."

"Me, too," she hummed, rubbing her hands in mesmerizing circles over her tiny, rounded belly.

He shook his dizzy head, trying to clear it. The beer must have already made him tipsy. He was becoming a lightweight as he aged. Feeling unsteady, he offered her the rest of the cask before realizing it was far too large for her to hold. Gingerly, he held the rim of the cask to her lips, tipping it until the beer lapped at its edge. "Thirsty?"

She bent forward eagerly as he tilted it toward her the barest amount more. It was still too much. Whether because the arc of the cask's rim was too wide for her mouth or because he moved it too much, the beer sloshed over the edge, dousing her front. She grabbed the sides of the cask to steady it and, giggling, gulped some down, heedless of the overflow that ran down her neck and soaked her clothing.

Alrek was less heedless. The moisture made the fabric cling to her form and did nothing to help his dizziness. He set down the cask and tugged off his tunic, dropping it next to her. "Here. You'll get cold."

She grinned up at him and pulled the tunic over her head. It swam on her, the neckline wider than her frame so it hung off one shoulder. She hiked up the hem and, using some female magic, divested herself of the sodden garments without giving him a glimpse of what lay underneath. Thank Corek. He could barely breathe.

“I’m too lazy to go change. Or maybe I don’t want to see the mess the cottage just yet.” She sighed, her smile slipping.

Alrek scented her rising despair. It was thick and choking like layers of dust. He tried to wash it out of his throat with another long drink of beer, then put the cask to the side before he pickled himself. He settled in the straw beside her a careful distance away. “What was this Greygor looking for?”

“My research. Probably realized I’d run back to the City with my tail between my legs rather than stick around to help him grow tzat weed.” She rolled onto her side to face him, nibbling pensively on her lower lip before her words lashed out again. “That was our *deal*. He let me live here and do my soil research for three years. If I could increase yields enough to pay him for the land at the end of it, it was mine. If I couldn’t, I’d work for him exclusively for another three years.

“He’s afraid I’ll share my methods with everyone. But how can I keep them to myself? One tzat farm doesn’t make up for generations of stripping the whole valley, does it? He wants to own the knowledge I’ve gathered, but it doesn’t belong to me or anyone else. It belongs to Salaan. Not that he cares about the planet. He just wants to make more money per acre. Acres

he stole from the forest, I might add! I feel stupid that I believed he'd honor our deal. Why should I honor my end when he sabotaged my crops and looted into my house?" Angry color bloomed in her cheeks as she ranted on in the moonlight that streamed through the open barn door.

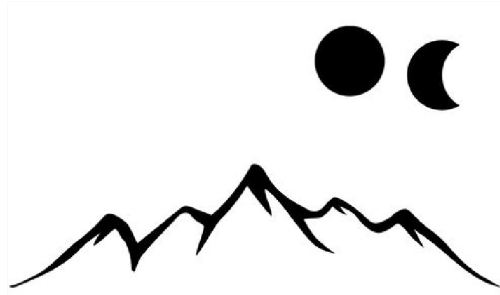
Alrek had to work to suppress the urge to coo for her again. It was a habit he couldn't shake when he sensed a female in distress, even though humans didn't need soothing like Skarr females did. And yet, it had worked. Brannica always said his coo was the strongest she'd ever heard, but what mate wouldn't say such things? Still, it gave him an odd satisfaction that it had worked to end Raina's obvious suffering.

"Want me to get it back for you?" he asked, his plates grinding as he flexed his fingers, thinking of what a pleasure it would be to crush this human who'd caused her so much grief. Caused *him* so much grief, he mentally corrected. Caused the Skarr so much grief, not to mention Salaan. He had plenty of other reasons to take his revenge than this one human's concerns.

To his surprise, her eyes sparkled, her cheeks lifting as she flashed a triumphant smile. "He didn't get it. Where I keep it, nobody can find it."

"Clever female," he rumbled approvingly.

Chapter 6



RAINA

Alrek's praise made her feel giddy and warm. Or maybe it was the beer. She didn't drink very often, so it was probably just the alcohol in her bloodstream. Or possibly it was Alrek's soft, thick tunic that swathed her in his scent, a pleasant combination of addoc leaves and moss. She pulled it closer around herself. It still held the residue of his body heat, a realization that made her sharply aware of his half-dressed state in her peripheral vision.

"You're not cold, are you?" she blurted out.

He chuckled, the sound as soft as his shirt. "No."

"Because you said your tusk hurts when it gets cold, and I don't want—"

"No," he said again. They laid there side-by-side in the straw, staring at the moons-lit open rafters above for several long minutes, before he spoke again. "We break our tusks when our mates die. They're *supposed* to hurt. That's the point, to grieve. We cap them when we're...done."

"*Oh.*" Her heart twisted and thumped as she thought of the giants she'd met in Skarr's Hand with one or both tusks shortened. They represented so much grief and loss. Unlike Alrek's, they'd all been capped, though. He was still deep in mourning for his mate, wearing his pain on his face. "I'm so sorry. What was her name?"

“Brannica. She was the last of our females. Several males broke a tusk for her because her death meant they would never have a mate. Her death was all our deaths.” Something in his posture tightened. “We thought so then, anyway. We discovered another clan of Skarr last year that still has healthy *gyddyr*, and some of our younger males have gone to live with them to seek potential mates.”

Raina wasn't sure how to respond. The surge of hope she'd felt when he said they'd found another clan was at odds with the stark despair in his voice. The loss of his mate clearly outweighed everything, still. She turned on her side to face his towering profile, propping her head on her elbow. “Tell me about her. About Brannica.”

He blew out a shaky breath as he absentmindedly fingered the splintered end of his tusk. “She was...brilliant. Strong. That goes without saying, I guess. She didn't show symptoms of the wasting sickness until this part of her territory was destroyed to make way for the farms. It was too much for her. She fought the disease for years, though. Tried everything to stave it off. But in the end, she couldn't.”

Raina's breath caught. “Wait, what? This land was her territory when it was still forest?”

He rumbled an affirmative noise. “At first, I thought you stole it. Now I know it's this *Greygor*.” He said the name with venom, and she couldn't help her shiver when she realized he must have felt the same venom toward *her*. But how could he not, if he thought she was indirectly responsible for his mate's

death? No wonder he'd been so short and dismissive when he met her.

“I wish I'd known,” she said, her eyes burning and throat tight. “Wish I could have done something sooner. I should have asked Greygor for more acreage. Maybe if I'd restored —”

“Ach, don't grieve,” he said, cutting her off with a strangled voice that made her ache. He rolled suddenly to his side to face her and created such a well in the straw with his weight that she pitched forward and tumbled into him with a gasp.

He laid his hand over her, cupping her into his broad, plated chest. Raina braced her palms against him, so shocked that she stilled as his words rolled over her. “I can smell your sadness like a ripe carcass, and it's needless. Many years too late. You said you only arrived here three years ago, and Brannica's been gone almost seven, long past the period of mourning. She would not want it. She would scold us both for crying over her instead of doing something useful.”

“You've left your tusk uncapped that long?” she asked, horrified at the thought of how much cumulative pain he'd experienced. Just the glimpse of how much it'd hurt him to drink water from the mountain stream...and he felt that *often*. Daily. “Why would you torture yourself like that?”

He made the purring sound again, the one that traveled through her from fingertip to core, soothing and syrupy, and she couldn't help melting into him. The weight of his hand pressed her down into the springy straw, a comforting squeeze.

“Rest,” he said gruffly. “We have a lot of work to do tomorrow.”

“We do?” She’d expected him to head up the mountain in the morning. He had no reason to stay now that the carra roots were ruined.

“Fields to harvest.”

She sighed. He was so sweet to offer. Hard to believe this was the same giant who’d turned her away so rudely when she’d first met him. “I appreciate the thought, but the harvester is broken.”

“I’ll fix it.”

She believed him. Or believed he’d try. She knew better than anyone that intentions didn’t always match outcomes. Night Mother knew, she’d had the best intentions when she’d signed that marriage contract with Greygor back in the City. But circumstances had shaped her story in another direction. Instead of a husband, she had a debtholder. Instead of a partner, she had a nemesis. And now, instead of a carra root customer, she had a...friend?

“Thank you,” she said. She needed a friend, more than anything. Maybe it was exhaustion from her episode earlier, or maybe she was tipsy from the beer, but her heart felt squishy and exposed.

A dismissive grunt. “Don’t thank me yet.”

She grinned into the straw. Of course he’d say that. She was starting to understand him and the strong current of loyalty

and humility that ran under his grumpy surface. “Too late.”

He huffed indignantly, but his heavy hand tugged her the tiniest bit closer. “Sleep.”

“I should go back inside. Clean up a little before bed.” Her jaw tightened even as she said the words, dread making her heart rate kick up. She didn’t want to see her carefully constructed nest, her little sanctuary, cracked open and strewn across the ground. Not yet.

Alrek’s voice somewhere above her head came muffled and drowsy but insistent. “No. I want you here.”

He did?

He probably meant in case Greygor’s cronies came back to shake her down. It was easier to guard her if she stayed in the barn. That was it. The rise and fall of the chest she was pressed against slowed, became the deep rhythm of sleep, and the hand on her back relaxed and rested even more heavily on her.

The weight felt good. Really good, like a tight hug. She laid there in the dark, moons-light striping her limited view, listening to Alrek’s breath and the stasher calls that occasionally echoed over the fields from the forest, and for the briefest time, she forgot about the mess she was in. Sleep crept up on her like a krulloct, stealthy and patient until it overwhelmed her.

Fingers tightened on her waist, jostling her awake. He mumbled something she couldn’t make out as she blinked

blearily into the dark. Panic flooded her. Had Greygor come back? “Alrek? What’s happening?!”

“No, please,” he slurred. He shifted restlessly, fingers twitching, squeezing her and relaxing. “Don’t leave me. *Please.*”

He was talking in his sleep, she realized. Dreaming. And it wasn’t a pleasant dream, judging by his agitated movements and pleading tone. She stroked his chest, wishing she could make the calming sound like he did. “It’s all right. Everything’s fine. I’m here.”

“Stay here,” he moaned.

“Yes, I’m right here.” He probably wasn’t talking to her. He was dreaming about someone else. His mate, probably, long gone but still with him every time his tusk twinged. Poor, sweet, sad giant. “You’re safe, Alrek.”

He woke with a jerk, his fingers tensing around her. “Don’t go.”

“I won’t. I’ll stay with you.”

He exhaled, relaxing back into sleep. Her adrenaline took some time to fade, so instead of falling back to sleep immediately, she laid awake, running her hands in slow circles over his plates. Hopefully, her soft touches would reassure him that he was not alone. She doubted he’d remember anything in the morning, and she wouldn’t remind him, but she was glad she could perform this small kindness to pay him back for how he’d helped through her own breakdown.

Eventually, sleep knocked at the back of her skull, and she let it in as dawn was just graying. When she opened her eyes again, he was gone, only a crater in the straw as evidence that he'd slept beside her all night. The color of the light flooding the barn told her that the sun had been up for several hours.

She gathered up her damp, beery clothes and the empty cooking pot and, holding up the hem of his huge tunic so it wouldn't drag in the dirt, made a dash for the house. On the edge of the field, she spotted Alrek's broad, bare back bent over the hood of the harvester as he worked on it. Just as she reached the threshold, where the battered door was hanging off the hinges, she heard the harvester sputter to life.

He'd done it! She almost dared to hope that she'd be able to keep this land after all, the soil she'd poured so much of herself into. Maybe all those hours of nurturing the mycelium and building back the nutrient bank hadn't gone up in smoke with the carra crates and wouldn't just be sucked away by a season or two of tzat-planting.

She rushed inside, dumping the clothes into the laundry hamper on the way to put on a clean pair of overalls. Her thick braid was hopeless, frizzed and tangled with straw. She twisted it into a bun, tying a scarf over it to deal with later. There were carra roots to harvest. But first, breakfast.

When she found Alrek outside, already two rows into harvesting the next field, he accepted the stack of brindle-berry flatcakes she'd brought him but waved away her offer of help. "You have plenty to do. I'll handle it."

And he did. While she worked to put her house in order, he harvested the rest of the field and started on the next one. Full crates piled up, the stacks even taller than the ones that'd burned yesterday.

She hauled him a bucket of fresh, cool well-water around midday, which he guzzled gratefully, rivulets trickling down his chin and between the plates on his chest. Her cheeks warmed thinking of how she'd petted them last night. It was hard to imagine, seeing him so massive and capable, towering above her, that he'd been comforted by her hands. He was so powerful, chief of his clan. Why was he deigning to work her fields like a hired hand?

The Skarr needed the carra root for their winter stores, she reminded herself. That's what he was working for. She moved her attention to the harvest, where it belonged. "That's probably more than you can haul up the mountain. Will you leave this afternoon?"

Oddly, she would miss him. He might be brusque and impatient with human ways, but he brought a sense of solidity and safety to the farm that she'd been missing. These past few years, she'd been operating in an uncomfortable uncertainty and his grounding presence threw that into high relief. He didn't owe her more favors, though. She was already deep in his debt, and she'd had too much of that lately.

Alrek made a noncommittal noise as he returned the bucket to her. "Might as well finish what I started. You find a new

front door with a strong lock. When that's installed and the harvest is in, I'll go."

She blinked at him, unable to form the words as she clutched the bucket to her chest. It wasn't empty. He'd handed it to her full of dreams. Did he know what a gift he was giving her?

He turned back to the harvester. She couldn't let him labor without knowing what he was doing. "You're changing my life," she blurted out.

He stopped, frowning down at her for a long moment. "Then I'm sorry. Change is rarely for the better."

Of course, he would say that. She would normally say the same. When she made changes in her life, it was only after long and careful consideration. *Study.*

This change was like a bud bursting into flower, sudden and necessary. The farm would be *hers*. Because of *him*. "You're wrong."

His steady gaze wavered, flicking to something behind her. "Your krulloct finally made it down the mountain. Will you let me kill it now?"

She turned and, after a quick scan, spotted a dirt-colored Jared inching his way along the edge of the field. The poor thing looked withered and exhausted after his long trek. She doubted he'd stopped to eat or rest along the way. "Don't worry about it. I'll pen him."

"I won't build your cairn if he catches you," Alrek warned.

Raina laughed. "I wouldn't expect it. If Jared eats me, let my bones fertilize the fields."

Something in the way he stared back at her, shaking his head like her joke was the worst thing he'd ever heard, made her laugh even harder. She left the humorless Alrek and, using herself as bait, led Jared to the enclosure she'd built for him near the barn. The large wire cage housed a bathing pond and a large rock shelter for him to sleep beneath.

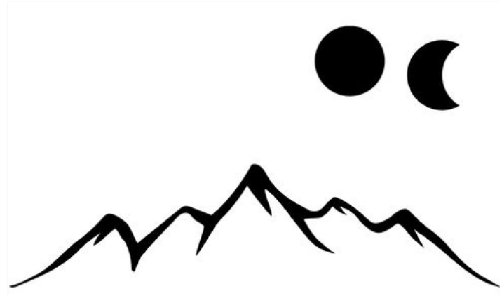
Krulloct were crafty enough to avoid being trapped, but Jared had a weakness...the bell she'd attached to the outside of the cage. She rang it every time she threw strips of meat or barn stashers she'd trapped into the feeding area. He knew the bell meant an easy meal. As soon as she sounded it, he diverted his route into the enclosure instead of following her.

She swiftly closed the door behind him, latching it securely. And, as she'd promised with the tinkling sound of the bell, she fetched him a bowl of diced djum and tossed it to the grasping tentacles that he stretched through the gaps in the wire.

"He'll come around," she assured Jared, as though Alrek were going to stay on the farm with them permanently. The krulloct just sank its clawed limbs into the soaking pond, blinking at her with its single, fixated eye as he rehydrated. "I won't let him hurt you."

An easy promise to make when she knew Alrek was leaving. One she couldn't make to herself, given how much she would miss him once he was gone.

Chapter 7



ALREKELL

What on Salaan was he doing? The harvester kicked up a cloud of dust as he walked beside it, mercifully shrouding the him so he couldn't stare after Raina to make sure the krulloct didn't eat her. It was none of his business, but he felt like he should be guarding her. Like he wasn't doing his duty, like he was *wrong* for working this field instead of readying to stomp Jared into smithereens if his claws got anywhere near her.

Didn't help that a lie was festering on his tongue. *I won't build your cairn if he catches you.*

He might. He'd be sorely tempted, anyway. A stupid impulse, considering she wasn't his mate and could never be. Skarr had only one mate, and his was long dead. Raina had slept in his tunic, and their mingled scents on her skin were confusing his grief-addled brain, that was all.

When he'd woken with her tiny, snoring body wedged between his palm and his chest, his cock had answered first, crowing possessively at her warm softness in his grasp. But he'd quickly been overwhelmed with guilt, rolling away from her and storming out of the barn into the brisk, dawning day. The ache in his tusk at the cool autumn air had been like a penance for disloyalty to Brannica, his true mate. His only mate.

So why did he want this human? Why was he so *weak*?

Irrationally, he blamed Patrek. If his brother hadn't been rutting his female on the other side of the den wall every day for the past year, Alrek wouldn't have the sounds and scents of Skarr-human mating battered into his brain. He wouldn't be *considering* Raina in this way. He'd be transferring credits and trekking up the mountain to fill their stores. Forgetting her.

The harvester choked and coughed, drawing his attention back to the task at hand. It'd veered off the row while he was lost in thought and was sucking up dirt clods. He steered it back on course and tried to put the little human out of his mind. He got lost in the satisfying *chunk-chunk* sound of roots being sucked into the hopper. When it filled, he emptied it into crates and stacked them by the road. Then he did it again.

Easy. Mindless. Peaceful.

When, late in the afternoon, the harvester trundled down the last row and sputtered to a halt, he walked back through the fields, loosening the earth to collect the last few roots that the machinery had missed. Rich soil perfumed the air, clung to his hands, and stuck between his plates. His shoulders heated and loosened in the sun as the day dragged into evening, and the buzzing pain in his tusk faded to background noise.

Rather than feeling like yet another chore to be completed, there was enjoyable freedom in the harvest. Pleasure and reward in coaxing a stubborn plant to give up its prize. Each one he unearthed felt like a treasure. He wanted to drag them over to Raina, show her what he'd found, even though

obviously he'd dug thousands of pounds of roots from her field already.

It wasn't rational. None of this was.

When he risked a glance at the cottage, his eyes found hers immediately. He jolted. How long had she been watching him from her kitchen window? Was she admiring her fields or his form? A curious pleasure swarmed in his veins like onga, industrious and sweet, at the thought that it might be both.

She disappeared from the window, emerging a moment later from the front door. She gestured to it, her smile glinting bright even at this distance. One half of the door was the mellowed, original wood and the other half was raw and new.

She'd repaired it.

He couldn't help but make the connection that she'd done what he'd thought was impossible—melded the old and the new into something functional and, in its own patchworked way, beautiful. It didn't erase the wound of her home being invaded. She'd be reminded of it every time she entered. But like a knitted scar, the join said *that happened, but I wasn't destroyed by it. That happened, but it was the middle of the story, not the end.*

Maybe the same was true of hearts.

Maybe losing Brannica hadn't ruined his. Maybe the bitter, broken half that still ached for what he'd lost and could never recover would knit with something fresh.

Or maybe he was a morose idiot who was infatuated with the first single female he'd met in seven years. Scoffing at his own foolishness, he went to the pump and rinsed the day's dirt from his hands while the krulloct eyed him from its pen. She'd managed to round it up, and it scented of fresh meat, so she'd fed it, too. Just like she'd corralled and fed him last night, Raina had put the Corek-cursed thing under her spell.

"Jared," Alrek acknowledged, feeling a sudden kinship with the beast, one tinged with a not-small amount of pity. At least *he* wasn't caged. But when he retreated to the interior of the barn and couldn't resist rolling in the straw that still smelled like her, he was forced to reconsider the assumption that she didn't have him trapped as securely as the krulloct outside. He was a Corek-cursed pet in a pen.

The sound of Raina's voice jolted him out of his self-pity. "I brought you—" She broke off as she entered the barn and saw him bathing in her scent. He sat up, brushing stray straw from his shoulders. A tuft clung to his tusk and he shook it away, shriveling inside.

"I was just..." he fumbled and then shrugged, leaving the sentence unfinished. Night Mother knew what he was doing. He certainly didn't.

"Getting comfortable?" Raina supplied.

"Sure." He scrubbed his knuckles over the strange ache in the center of his chest.

"You must be hungry after all that work." She set the pot down in the same place she had last night. Then she placed his

tunic, which she'd washed and folded, down next to it. "There's another cask of brew in the back that you're welcome to if you want it."

He grunted his thanks, fighting the urge to invite her to stay and eat with him. She would agree because she was polite and kind, not because she wanted to share stew with a big lump like him, and he wouldn't put her through another night of his drunken rambling.

Raina seemed to be waiting for something, though, because when he looked up, she was framed in the doorway, twisting her hands.

"Why are you still here?" he demanded, immediately wishing he hadn't used such a harsh tone. He was a saltstained idiot and a bastard to boot. This was her barn, and she could stand there trembling like the last autumn leaf as long as she wanted to.

She drew something out of her pocket and held it out. "I made you this. A thank you for all you've done. I—hope you like it."

He pinched it between two fingers and held it up. It was a small knitted tube, striped in various colors, closed at one end. He stared, bewildered. What was he supposed to do with a single, human-sized sock? "I...don't think it will fit my foot."

He tried to give it back, but she refused to take it, dodging away from him. Planting her hands on her hips, her dark brows fiercely punctuating her face, she said, "It's not a sock. It's a cozy!"

He stared at her blankly. “For a tea pot?” Surely, it was too small for that, too.

With a tiny noise of frustration, she gestured at his face. “For your *tusk*. To keep it warm. But you don’t have to wear it if you don’t like it.” Before he could process what she’d said, let alone react, she’d whirled around and marched out.

He blinked after her retreating form and then at the soft cozy in his hand. She’d *gifted* him. His silly, scarred heart flipped and flopped as he turned it over and admired the even rows of stitches and rich, earthy colors. It smelled like her, too, the yarn having spent a whole afternoon resting in her lap and running through her hands.

He slid it over the tip of his broken tusk, careful not to snag the wool on the splintered end. It fit snugly and, true to its name, immediately warmed the nerve, muting the dull background pain caused by the evening chill. Better still, it filled his nostrils with Raina’s unique, spring-thaw scent. He hoped it never faded. He sucked in a deep, satisfying breath that made his head swim.

What a gift. Had he even thanked her? He couldn’t remember. Probably hadn’t. Probably offended her. She’d give her next gift to another, more agreeable male.

He growled under his breath. It wasn’t a *courting* gift. Her opinion of him didn’t matter. He wouldn’t see her again after tomorrow. They’d complete their business in the morning, part ways, and forget about each other until the clan bought carra roots from her again next year. That was why he’d helped

Raina with the harvest, so she could keep the land and they'd have a reliable carra supply going forward.

Oh, who was he kidding? He helped her because he wanted more. More of her time, more of her scent, more of her soft smiles and rambling stories about soil amendment. More nights next to her. He hadn't understood the appeal of bedsharing when Maja and Mimma moved into their mates' dens. Skarr females preferred solitary sleep, and Alrek had always deferred to his mate. But now he understood the pleasure. The absolute *satisfaction*.

He groaned and flopped back into the straw, only to be *enveloped* by her scent. His cock, perpetually at Corek-cursed attention, stiffened even further, and the oil-producing olje that lined his shaft leaked into the crease of his thigh. Salaan save him from himself, he was going to indulge this fantasy for one night. Tomorrow he'd go back to being a sad sack of a clan chief. Tonight he was a male who plowed his female's fields and then took her to bed to plow her again.

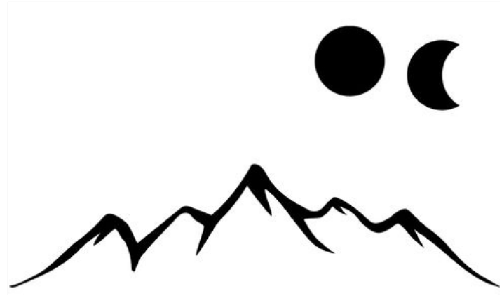
He dipped his hand into his trousers, pretending that the circle of his thumb and forefinger just under the head of his shaft was her arms. The heel of his palm was her hot little core, rubbing frantically up and down his shaft, seeking her pleasure. He knew he could make her feel good this way, if she wanted it. Likely she didn't, but this was *his* fantasy, not hers, and it wasn't hurting anything. In his imagination, she moaned and squeezed and begged for him. She shivered and licked and came on his cock, her scent growing stronger and sweeter until it overwhelmed him.

He groaned as he came hard, strong jets of seed striping his belly until it ran down his sides and soaked the straw. Even after it was over, he laid there, stunned by the force, watching his heavy breaths sway the spinnerwebs in the rafters above him. It'd been a long time since he spilled in his own hand, and past occasions had always been to memories of his mate.

This was new. Exhilarating and terrifying and...messy.

So messy. He'd forgotten what an absolute mess it made. Rueful, he mopped himself with his clean tunic, then turned the pile of straw so he could sleep on the dry side. Lying there in the gentle dark, he stroked the soft covering on his tusk and couldn't help wishing Raina was there, drowsy and pleasure-struck, beside him. Instead, he slept with stained trousers and a guilty conscience and senses still full of her scent.

Chapter 8



RAINA

She hadn't meant to spy on him. Not exactly. She only lingered outside the barn near a knothole to gauge his reaction to her gift.

The cozy she'd made was such a silly thing, a quick project intended to show her gratitude for his incredible help in some small way. Not only was he buying some of her crops, he'd somehow fixed the harvester and then managed to harvest a huge portion of her fields! She wished she could repay him in more than an afternoon's knitting, but she hoped the humble cozy would be useful to him and ease his pain.

Of course, she'd wanted him to like it for more than its utility. She wanted him to enjoy the colors she'd carefully chosen to match the fall foliage of his forests and compliment his dark, gray-green plates. And if she was being honest with herself, she wanted him to think of her when he wore it.

If he wore it. It might not be the kind of thing a Skarr clan chief would sport. It might even be insulting given the meaning behind his broken tusk. It was *that* horrified thought, that she'd unwittingly offended him, that drew her to watch him after she left the barn. Then, when he'd tugged it on and it fit perfectly, she'd turned to go, satisfied.

But then he'd made a sound.

It wasn't the soft, comforting one, either. It was a shredded, angry growl. So she turned back and looked again, expecting to see her gift tossed to the floor. But instead, she saw Alrek sprawled out in the straw, one hand stroking the soft, striped wool and the other stroking...

Night Mother. Was that his *cock*?

Even shadowed, it was huge. Of course it was—*he* was huge. Even so, it was disproportionately large. He was not a human man scaled up. He was a Skarr giant, impressive in every proportion. Her breath gusted out so loudly she worried he might hear, and she clapped her hand over her mouth. But she didn't look away.

His hand moved up and down his textured shaft, the skin growing shinier with every motion. His forearms flexed beneath his plates and his abs—less armored, more visible—rippled. Manna save her, he was a vision. She shouldn't watch this obviously private moment, but she couldn't tear herself away.

Instead, she indulged in the sight of him, warmth creeping over every part of her, finding its way to the most secret places. Places that made her knees press together. Places that made her nipples pinch without any fingers on them. Places that made her lean against the barnwood, crushing her chest against it so she could pretend the pressure was the weight of that enormous, erotic hand, the one that could lift her up and splay her out and hold her down.

She craved it—craved *him*.

It'd been too long since she looked at a male this way. Too long since she'd been touched. She was not prudish and had a few casual lovers in the City, ones who didn't want a commitment and would go away when they were finished. But when she'd moved to Greygor's estate, her physical relationships ended. Though they weren't intimate after the first few nights proved their absolute incompatibility, everyone knew of the marriage contract and believed her off-limits. He was a powerful figure, and no one was eager to cross him if he had any hint of a claim on her, even after she moved out of his estate manor and into the cottage.

She hadn't had time for a lover once she had her own land, anyway, not with the time limit on her efforts, so she'd let the issue go, taking perfunctory care of her own needs when they arose like they were hunger or thirst. But now it was like all her pent-up desire had been unleashed, and poor, unsuspecting Alrek was the target.

Inside the barn, he groaned, eyes closed and back arched. His face contorted with pleasure as he released a flood of liquid all over his broad torso that shimmered, opalescent, in the moonlight.

Her breath caught. He was so beautiful. A strange word to apply to a craggy, taciturn giant, but he was beautiful like the mountains he called home were beautiful. The kind of beauty that made you want to climb it to claim a piece for yourself.

This scene wasn't for her. She had no right to it. But still, she filed away the mental picture and then made a cowardly retreat

to the house before Alrek opened his eyes and discovered her.

She ate and washed and methodically detangled and moisturized and braided her hair, doing her best to keep her mind and hands busy, even while the saved image throbbed in the back of her imagination, begging for her undivided attention.

When she slipped between sheets that frictioned against her still-sensitized breasts, she forced herself to breathe evenly and read the latest journal article on the role of *Levanti corum* in soil health. She'd read it twice already, but she hoped it would bore her to sleep.

It would be difficult enough to face Alrek in the morning, after what she'd glimpsed. After what she'd *wished for*. If she indulged and explored her desires further while he was still on her property, it would be even more awkward. She'd wait until he left before she used her ill-gotten view that way. The blossoming infatuation she felt toward her giant savior was the daydream of a lonely woman and would remain firmly in the realm of private escape.

After the third or fourth time backtracking to read a section of the article she'd skimmed, she put the it aside. Focus was impossible. But so was sleep, she found. She was too cold and then too hot. Sheets twisted, were thrown off. Bugs chirped and stashes shrieked and, worst of all, silence roared, all of them urging her to hike up her sleep shift and indulge the memory in Alrek's gusty groans and astonishing girth. Every time she closed her eyes, she was bombarded with shadowed

images of slick skin, an arched spine, swift strokes. She had to make herself a cup of dahlmary tea and knit most of a dishrag before her mind quieted and she finally slept.

She woke with a jolt to full-fledged morning, body still buzzing from the night before. Faintly embarrassed that she'd slept late on the only two days that Alrek had known her, she reheated yesterday's flatcakes and took a half-dozen out to him. She was surprised to find him in the fields instead of the barn. Though it was a brisk day and a cold wind whisked down off the mountains, he was bare-chested, and she felt a renewed surge of desire in her core, remembering why he didn't have his tunic on. It needed washing again.

He turned off the harvester when she approached so the dust had time to settle before she reached him. She handed up his breakfast, noting with secret pleasure that he still wore the wool cozy on his tusk. Judging by the half-filled hopper, he'd been at work for an hour or more already.

"Thanks for bringing breakfast out," he said around a mouthful of flatcake. Each one was barely more than a bite to him. "These are great. I was hungry."

She stared in shock. She didn't know he was capable of three polite sentences in a row—at least, not when he was sober. "*You're* in a good mood this morning."

"You're not?" He tossed another one in his mouth, swallowed it, and gave her a *wink*. "You smell like you are."

Her mouth dropped open. Then she shut it with an audible clack, feeling her cheeks heat. Who was this male? It couldn't

be Alrek. He wouldn't *flirt* with her.

She must be reading his signals wrong. It happened often enough that she questioned herself, mentally reviewing their exchange. When she took his words at face value, she acknowledged they could be construed as simple niceties one paid to a host. The smell comment was inscrutable. Who knew what it meant to a Skarr to smell someone's happiness. But that *wink*. Surely...?

He finished the last flatcake and started toward the harvester. "You don't have to do this," she said awkwardly, motioning to the unharvested section of the field when he turned back. "You've already done more than enough, and I'm sure you're eager to get home."

He shrugged his broad shoulders. "I'll finish the harvest. Help you haul it down to the terminal. Don't want to leave you with the task and risk another round of sabotage from *him*," he finished darkly. This Alrek she recognized, the one whose protective sense of duty overruled his other instincts.

"Thank you," she said weakly, relief flooding through her. She hadn't let herself worry about Greygor's cronies coming back, but her subconscious had clearly been at work.

"I won't leave until you've paid the debt and the land is yours."

Their eyes met, and a flash of *something* passed between them. His implicit vow that he would keep her safe at all costs, she realized. Alrek was the safest person she'd ever met, but also the most dangerous. He intended to be there when she

paid Greygor to ensure he didn't double-cross her, and Raina had no doubt he'd threaten Greygor—or worse—if he tried it.

“Thank you,” she said again, quieter. “I don't know why you're doing all this.”

“*I do.*” In another tone, he might have meant *for you*, but his voice was grim, all the earlier playfulness gone. This Alrek wouldn't wink. This Alrek's eyes weren't on her, they were focused on the distance, on the mountains where he lived with his clan.

“You're doing it for her,” she said, the sad understanding dawning that this was all about his dead mate and the land that had once been her territory.

“For Brannica,” he agreed heavily. “For what was stolen from her. I can't get her back, but I will do whatever I can to punish him for it.”

That she could not argue with. “Very well. Can you use my help out here?”

“No.” He turned away. Whatever good humor he'd been in was gone, so Raina left him and found other things to do while he methodically harvested one field and then another and the stacks of filled carra crates grew.

She retrieved last night's dirty dishes from the barn, pausing along the way to collect his tunic. She rinsed the stiff fabric under the pump, scrubbing out the seed-stains with efficiency that belied the sordid thoughts running through her head of

how it'd been dirtied, then hung it to dry. Then she cut up some of her remaining djum to feed Jared.

When she rang the bell outside the krulloct's enclosure, Jared was slow to rouse from under his rock. Even his camouflage was sluggish, a second or two behind his movements across the ground. Part of her would miss him when he finally succumbed to age. He was still strong as he wrenched the pieces of meat through the wire, though, and his claws were still sharp. He devoured it all.

Rather than reducing his interest in her, the food only seemed to give Jared more energy, his cloudy eye clearing as he plastered himself against the end of the cage. He reached toward her with his tentacles, claws swiping fruitlessly through the air with no pretense of subterfuge.

"You're going to tire yourself out," she admonished, stepping out of range. "You should soak and sun yourself while the weather is nice. It's going to be too cold for stalking soon, so enjoy it while you can."

Jared gripped the wire with four of his tentacles and rattled it, clearly begging to be released. Raina sighed. She didn't like penning up a wild thing. She imagine he felt as stifled and frayed as she'd felt in the City.

"I'm sorry you're stuck in a cage. If you weren't so obsessed with eating me, I could let you out. Is there a way to free you from the fixation?"

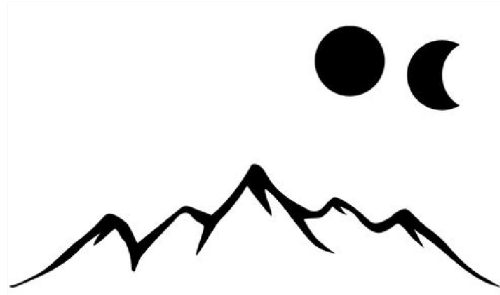
Jared whirred, forcing air out of his breathing tube in a noise she swore was a laugh.

She grinned at him. “Maybe if I feed you enough, you’ll realize I’m worth more to you alive than dead.” She doubted it, and that’s why she penned him up, but she’d never kill him. He was a spectacular creature who’d lived a long life in this region before the valley had been invaded by human farmers. It wasn’t his fault that she—thin-skinned and preylike—had moved into his territory.

Her attention shifted to the Skarr giant’s silhouette, dark against the horizon of yellow tzat, as he bent, straightened, strode a few steps, and bent again. He shouldn’t be breaking his back picking up the stray roots from a field that was rightfully his. He shouldn’t be broken-tusked or broken-spirited, either.

Her kind had interfered here enough. If she had her way, she’d return all the land to the Skarr, even if it meant she had to go back to the City. It didn’t matter how many improvements she made to the soil on these few acres when there were hundreds more lost to human agriculture. She *had* to share her knowledge somehow. Convince the other farmers to use her methods. Greygor might bully and intimidate them, but she would take inspiration from Jared’s tireless obsession. She couldn’t let this go.

Chapter 9



ALREKELL

He didn't feel bad sorting out the best crates to keep for his stores. The buyers in the City markets wouldn't suffer eating the second-rate roots. Even the worst of Raina's harvest was superior product to most farmed carra. Once he'd set aside all the carra roots the clan would need to survive the cold season, he began loading the harvester with the rest.

Raina came to offer him a midday meal, but he waved her away. She'd fed him well since he'd arrived, well enough that he normally wouldn't need to eat for another day or two. He'd surely want something after hauling all the carra up the mountain, though. It would take three or four trips as it stood, though perhaps he could do it in two if he convinced a few other Skarr to return with him.

When he'd stacked the harvester to its limit, he stood back, admiring his accomplishment. Silly to be proud over stacking crates, but he was, absurdly so, especially when Raina showed up again to marvel at it.

"I can't believe you got it done so quickly! It would have taken me a whole day with the loading attachment. I wasn't sure I'd get it down to the terminal before the barge left."

"We'll get it there before dark," he grunted, nearly giddy with success or with her scent, he couldn't tell the difference. She still smelled like *wanting*. He'd been around human females enough in the past year to know that they didn't smell

like that except around their mates. Raina couldn't be his mate, obviously, but she wanted him like one. And that made him feel like he'd stacked crates to the sky.

Maybe she would be his lover if he proved that he could please her. He could slip away from the sanctuary often enough to keep her satisfied, he was sure. He wouldn't propose it until her debt was paid, though. He didn't want her thinking his help was contingent on her agreement. All the more reason to hurry up and get to the terminal.

While Raina changed, he set his tusk cozy aside with reverent care so it wouldn't get wet and scrubbed between his plates to get all the dust out. A splash of cold well water made his exposed nerve twinge. He paused, dripping, struck with the realization that he hadn't thought about Brannica even once today.

A sick feeling crept over him as he stared at the blank side of the barn. Here he was scheming to snare a female, and he hadn't done right by his mate. Hadn't paid enough penance. He didn't deserve to find happiness with someone else after what he'd done to her. As much as he railed against humans, as much as he'd like to crush this Greygor's skull and any other human's who'd stolen land from Brannica's territory, he knew who'd hurt her the most. Who'd condemned their clan once and for all.

Him.

A soft sound came from behind him. He turned to find Raina holding out a clean and dry tunic. "I thought you'd want to

wear this. I washed it,” she said shyly.

He grimaced, his brow plates grinding together. She'd seen his shameful weakness all over it, then. Touched it. He couldn't think about that now. He couldn't think about anything. He yanked the tunic on over his head, sending a screaming spike of pain down his tusk that made him bite his tongue to stop from crying out. When it faded, he choked out, “Let's go.”

The harvester loaded to its limit, he walked while she rode in the cab, keeping pace with it on the open gravel road. A stiff breeze blew the dust away from him as he followed behind. Their unconventional caravan drew stares as they neared the outskirts of the settlement around the terminal, but gawkers quickly looked away when he met their eyes.

Good. They should be scared. All the land in this valley had been stolen from the Skarr.

Raina pulled the harvester into the terminal weigh station and got out, circling around to watch while the attendant checked and recorded the load.

“Looks in order,” the puny human attendant said to Raina, eyes lingering on her figure until they tracked upward to Alrek standing behind her with his arms crossed. Maybe the man wasn't puny. Maybe he was normal-sized for a human male, the right size for Raina. Alrek wouldn't know; he'd seen about as many human males as this human had seen Skarr—a handful, and at a distance. He still didn't like being stared at,

though. He didn't like Raina being stared at either. He let a low growl simmer in his chest.

The human's gaze dropped to the harvester's hubcabs. "I'll call the broker."

He left in a hurry, and Raina smiled up at Alrek. "I can't believe this is happening. It feels like a dream."

"Let's get it over and done with," he barked, instantly regretting the harsh tone. He wished he could soften it, but it was too late. Her smile cracked and fell.

"You can head back if you need to leave tonight. I'll be fine from here."

Corek curse him, he wasn't going to ruin her day just because all of his were ruined.

"I'm staying until the farm is yours. If you'll let me," he amended. When she didn't look at him, he thudded to his knees in the dirt, palms open. "Please. I'm an ill-tempered idiot. Ask anyone. I'll go get my brother if you don't believe me. He'd be happy to tell you the same."

"You're not. Don't say that." She reached out, tentatively brushing the side of his broken tusk. "You forgot your cozy at the barn."

He hadn't forgotten it. He'd left it on purpose to deny himself the comfort. But now he let his lids fall shut, selfishly soaking in her delicate-as-a-glasswing touch.

"Well, well, what a sight," drawled a male voice. Alrek opened his eyes in time to see Raina fold in on herself, her

expression going still and careful as she dropped her hand. He stood up abruptly, ready to defend her.

She turned to face a man who'd emerged from the terminal office smelling of tzat pollen and djumjum grease, too sweet and too rich. He had his hands in the pockets of his spotless gray jacket and a hat tipped back on his head so Alrek could see a bright grin beyond the brim, even from his high vantage. Humans had a shocking number of teeth in their little mouths, and this human showed every one of them.

“Aren't you going to introduce me to your helper here?”

Helper?

Lover, he wanted to roar, but it wasn't true. *Friend*.

“This is Greygor,” Raina said grudgingly.

Alrek's fists clenched and his lips peeled back. This was *him*. The one who'd stolen Skarr land and stoked Brannica's illness. The one who now held so much power over Raina that she'd boxed herself away just to speak with him.

“Pleasure.” Greygor tipped his hat back to look up at him. “And your name?”

“None of your business who I am,” Alrek snapped. “Where's the broker?”

Greygor shrugged. “He'll be out. Fair warning, though. He's not buying carra root. Might as well haul it home.”

“What do you mean?” Raina asked hollowly.

“Meant what I said.” Greygor chuckled, shaking his head. Oh, he was far too happy. He was *delighting* in her dismay. “Council renewed the ban on carra root, so the broker’s not buying it.”

“They ban tzat sales, too, and that never stopped him buying yours,” Raina shot back with a fierceness that surprised Alrek.

“True.” Greygor smirked.

Raina blinked and blinked, her scent souring, and despite her blank expression, Alrek could hear her heart careening toward panic. The coo in his chest tore at him to release it, begged him to calm her, to take her mixed-up pieces apart and put her back together the right way. But he wouldn’t disassemble her, not in front of this smug little man.

“Let me kill him,” he suggested, triumphant when Greygor startled at his words.

“No,” Raina said in that ugly, empty voice. “This isn’t a crime. Just bad luck.”

Greygor, who’d made a quick recovery when he realized she was standing staunchly between him and Alrek, winked at her. “Now, now. You won’t mind working for me, I promise. Might even like it. I’m generous to my employees. And in a few years, when my yields have doubled, you can publish your research and earn all those accolades you’re dreaming of.”

“I don’t want awards,” Raina whispered faintly, but Greygor didn’t seem to hear because at the same time, the broker exited the office with a datacom in hand, already shaking his head.

“No. Nope. Barge is full for this run. Next one is three weeks out. Might be buying carra then, might not.”

“What a shame. But not the end of the world, is it? We get along fine.” Greygor patted Raina’s arm as she stood there woodenly.

Alrek didn’t need another reason to kill the man. He had enough of his own, but that could wait. He’d get to it eventually. First, he wanted to *take* from him. “I’ll buy it, then.”

All three humans swung their chins up to look at him, like they’d forgotten he was looming there.

“You’ll buy it?” Raina parroted, clearly not processing what he’d said.

“All of it.” He had the credits. The funds were earmarked for the ongoing wildlife rescue efforts, but he could sell a portion of the carra directly to the Skarr still in the City to recoup some of the money, Council ban be damned. The rest, he’d figure out. He picked up the broker by the back of his jacket, dangling him at eye level. “What’s the market rate for carra?”

The broker started to hyperventilate, his legs paddling in the empty air like he’d fallen into the sea. “Uh, sir. I have to check. I don’t—”

“*Check, then!*” he roared, losing patience.

The man struggled to bring the datacom close to his face, mumbling as he navigated through the calculations with his

stylus. Finally, he stuttered out a figure per ton and then for the whole load.

“Will that be enough to settle your debt?” Alrek asked Raina.

“Nearly,” she said, a quaver in her voice. “Put him down now?”

He plunked the broker on the ground. “I’ll pay the same for the crates still at your farm. There are half again as many. Will that be enough?”

“It will.” Her voice was warming, strengthening.

“Give her your com,” he ordered the broker, who was still sitting here on his backside, shaking his head. It was possible he’d put the man down a little too hard.

“Don’t do it, Rodnik,” Greygor said sharply.

The broker looked between Alrek and Greygor before promptly handing his datacom to Raina. He shrugged when Greygor glared at him. “Apologies, Lord Calcano. Don’t feel like getting on a giant’s bad side today.”

“Smarter than you look,” Alrek said, chuckling. The broker proved himself even wiser when he scurried back inside the terminal rather than lingering and risking the other man’s wrath.

“You’ll regret it,” Greygor hissed after him, his skin stretched tight and corpselike over the bones of his face as he vibrated with anger. “All of you will.”

“Never seen someone upset to collect on a debt,” Alrek remarked. After asking her permission, he lifted Raina to his shoulder to make the transaction, exchanging account information in voices too quiet for anyone below to overhear. Most of the clan’s funds were transferred to her account and then from hers to an escrow company that would pay Greygor’s. In the end, neither of them had any money, but both of them were smiling broadly.

“It’s done,” Raina said after Alrek gently lowered her to the ground. She showed Greygor the screen with successful transfer code. “I’ll forward it to the deed registry so they can complete the paperwork. And I’ll make sure to send you a copy of my manual when I finish writing it. The majority of the research is done, so it will be ready by next harvest season. I hope we can be colleagues, Greygor, even if we can’t be friends.”

“Colleagues?!” Greygor snorted. “I’ve been your *patron*. When you broke our contract, I offered you *charity*. And this is the thanks I get? The same treatment as everyone else?”

“I’m grateful,” Raina said thinly. “I will always be indebted to you.”

Alrek frowned. She was being too generous to a male who’d destroyed her hard-earned harvest and attempted to steal from her. He suspected Greygor was behind the broken harvester, too. All the more reason to dispatch him as soon as possible. “Her debt is paid. You can go now,” he ordered.

“You owe me more than credits,” Greygor warned, nostrils flaring. “As far as I’m concerned, you owe me everything. And this boulder you hired won’t be around to knock heads forever.”

“Go.” Alrek pointed down the road, his skull-squeezing impulses dangerously near the surface. Greygor’s lips pinched shut and he turned his back on them, storming away from the terminal to his harvester and disappearing into the dusk.

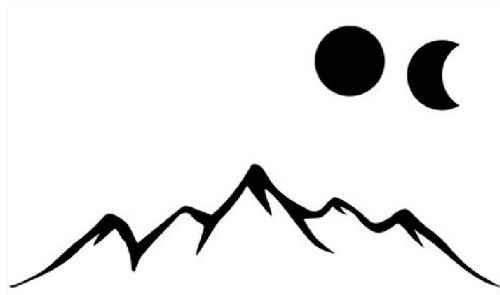
“Don’t trust him, ever,” he said to Raina, whose heartrate was finally settling.

She shrugged. “Doubt he’ll bother me now. With an account full of credits, he’ll forget all about me.”

“He won’t. You’re not forgettable.” Alrek certainly wouldn’t, and neither would his clan when they saw their credit balance. He had a lot of explaining to do to the rest of the Skarr. He might even be challenged to *hnefyal* when they found out what he’d done.

At this point, he welcomed it. Not that he had any interest in being pushed off a mountaintop. If he were challenged, he’d step aside as clan chief. Without the responsibilities of chiefdom, it’d be easy to visit Raina whenever he felt like it. He could be the boulder at her back as long as she needed.

Chapter 10



RAINA

He bought *all* of it. Three times what his clan needed. As she drove the still-heavy harvester home, she tried to wrap her head around it. Why would he *do* that?

For his mate, probably. A way to get back at the man who'd stolen her land. Raina couldn't imagine having someone so committed to her that they'd go to such lengths after she died. From what she'd read, the Skarr had fated mates, one in a lifetime. Their loyalty was a biological imperative. That's why Alrek was so driven to keep the land out of Greygor's hands. Why he'd spent so many hours harvesting the fields and hauling crates of carra roots. He couldn't help it.

When she reached the farm and exited the harvester, it was nearly dark. Corek was rising, Manna soon to follow, and the brightest stars were peeking out overhead.

"You'll stay another night, won't you?" she asked Alrek, hope straining her voice.

He nodded. "I'll get an early start so I can squeeze in two trips tomorrow. Probably bring a few Skarr down with me so we can haul it all back, if you don't mind having strange giants lurking around. I can do it alone, if you prefer. But it will take longer."

"They're not strangers," she said gamely. "I met them, remember? Eliok, Jonn, and the rest."

His grunt didn't sound too pleased. "I'll keep them out of your way."

Loneliness spread around her like the empty fields. This was all an uncomfortable, stretched-out goodbye that she didn't want. "I'm going to make dinner. Would you like some?"

He waved away her offer. "I won't say no to flatcakes in the morning, though."

"Okay." She should go inside. Eat, read, sleep. But her feet wouldn't move. His didn't either.

"What did he mean when he said you owe him more than credits?" he asked, the growing dark hiding his expression. He was referring Greygor, of course.

She nodded, old guilt sprouting new leaves. "I was supposed to marry him. I moved into his estate, intending to be his wife. But I backed out of the contract when I realized I couldn't do it. Couldn't be a wife the way he wanted. He was...gracious. Let me use my dowry as a down payment on the acres I've been farming. You know the rest."

"What does he think you owe him, then?" Alrek's growl was heated. "Your body? I knew I should have killed him. I'm going to kill him now. Which direction is his estate?"

"No, not that." At least, she didn't think so. "He's interested in my research, not me. He probably expects some special consideration. A head start on everyone else. He did me a favor...a number of favors...and simple repayment was my barest obligation."

“It was a predatory loan. He made it thinking you’d be unable to pay. It’s only because you’re a genius that you pulled it off.” Alrek cracked his knuckles, clearly still agitated and ready to confront Greygor. It wouldn’t be a fair fight, and Raina wasn’t interested in being the cause of bloodshed. She had what she wanted, and she was grateful for it. Her goodwill didn’t extend quite as far as Greygor, given his attempts to undermine her, but he hadn’t succeeded in the end. She hoped they could both let it go. They were stuck being neighbors for the foreseeable future.

She stepped closer, reaching up to touch the back of Alrek’s hand. “He underestimated me, but it doesn’t matter now.”

“He tried to sabotage you,” Alrek bit out.

“But he didn’t,” she pointed out, stroking over his knuckles. His fingers flexed and relaxed under her touch. “You don’t need to worry about me.”

“I do worry. I will worry. I—” He broke off, a frustrated noise rasping in his throat. “What if he comes back when I’m gone?”

“Then I’ll give him my research early. He’ll have a season’s advantage over the other tzat-growers, even if it’s not as much of one as he wants. I’ll be fine.”

“*Fine* isn’t enough. You should be happy. Spoiled. And... Night Mother knows, I want to be the one to spoil you.”

She felt her cheeks heat, her tongue twist even before she tried to speak. “I—I don’t know what that means.”

“I don’t either.” He shifted so his dark form blocked out a new section of stars. “I don’t know what any of this means. All I know is that I don’t want to let you go, Raina.”

This whole conversation was bewildering. “Last I checked, I’m not going anywhere. You’re the one leaving.”

“I’m going to pick you up now,” he warned. She braced, and he cupped a hand around her backside, waiting for her to settle into his palm and grip his fingers securely before he lifted her to eye level. He took a deep breath before he began. “I want you. That’s all I know. I have...burdens. Obligations to my clan. I can’t stay here, and I know I don’t deserve to have you, but I want you all the same.”

A little thrill ran through her. “I want you, too,” she blurted out breathlessly, her core clenching.

“Night Mother knows why. I can’t give you much. I can’t be your mate.”

“I’m not looking for a mate.” Her brief stint as a wife had taught her it wasn’t a role she could fulfill. She’d been a disappointment, unable to juggle the pressures of keeping a home and a husband in addition to doing her research. It’d driven her to near meltdown by the end of each day.

“I can’t promise you anything except pleasure,” he added, sounding pained. As if pleasure weren’t valuable in its own right. As if she hadn’t spent a whole night and day thinking about it. As if it would be the only benefit to spending time with him.

She reached out to caress his intact tusk, searching out the shine of his eyes in the moons-light. “You give me so much more than that. You give me company. Care. Respect. A listening ear.” *The weight of your hand, pressing me into the earth, keeping me safe.*

He snorted. “Anyone can give you those things.”

“Yet they’re in short supply. Anyway, you are the best at all of them. I wouldn’t trade your ears for an inferior pair, nor your hands for smaller ones. Nor other parts for smaller ones,” she teased.

“No?” he asked, holding her to his chest where she could feel his heart thundering beneath his plates as he strode swiftly in the direction of the barn. Facing the rising moon, she could see the smile curving his wide mouth. Had she seen him smile before? “Which part do you mean, Raina?”

Her name in that low, lascivious rumble made her nipples tighten and tingle. “You know exactly which part I meant.”

“It doesn’t frighten you to be with a giant?”

“It intrigues me,” she whispered, knowing he could hear every word and scent every drop of moisture welling between her legs.

“I *interest* you?” he asked, sounding amused. He ducked through the barn door and then knelt to let her dismount from his hand into the soft straw. Silvered moonbeams pierced between the wood slats and streamed through knotholes to

partially illuminate the dark interior, casting stripes of shadow across them both. “Is this a scientific interest?”

“Yes. You fascinate me,” she admitted.

He made a noise of disbelief. “Then I am humbled. I know how much of your life you dedicate to your interests. How you’ve pursued them and sacrificed for them. If I captured even a fraction of that attention, I’d be honored.”

Why did that make her eyes sting? She had never felt so *understood*. Her interests were her true loves, the colorful threads that wove through her life, connecting it and holding her together. Now he was one of them.

Stepping toward Alrek so she stood between his knees, she confessed, “I can’t think of anything else when you’re near me. I want to learn everything about you.”

His cock swelled visibly in his trousers. She reached toward it, eager to explore, but he gently grasped her jaw between his thumb and forefinger, holding her back. “Let me please you first, human. I need to prove I can please you. Call it a Skarr quirk, but we have to earn our females. Then you can do whatever experiments you like, I promise.”

“Whatever I like?” She bit her lip, making a mental catalogue.

“I can see your mind working.” Was he smiling again? She hardly recognized him. Suddenly she found herself on her back in the straw, his broad shoulders spanning her view, his

enormous elbows bracketing her body. “I want it to *stop* working.”

She laughed. “It never stops.”

“Hmm. We’ll see.” He dipped his head down, tusks plunging into the straw on either side of her face as he brushed a bizarrely oversized kiss on her forehead. When he drew back with a wince, her heart panged.

“Your poor tusk?”

He jerked a nod and withdrew, leaving the barn, and the seconds of silence that followed ticked like the clock in her aunt’s parlor, too loud and lengthening until she wondered if he was coming back. Just went she thought he might not return, he reappeared, wearing the striped cozy she’d made, and resumed his posture above her.

“I should have put it back on before.”

“Why didn’t you?”

He kissed her forehead again, with no wince this time. “Didn’t think I deserved it.”

“Why not?”

This time his kiss landed on her cheek, sweet and warm. She turned her face and he kissed the other one, too, and then her lips, the hollow of her throat, between her breasts. His thick fingers, deceptively deft, unfastened her overalls, flipping the bib down. He traced over the swells of her breasts and she tugged the hem of her shirt up herself so she could feel the rough callus on her bare skin.

He hadn't answered her question, and her curiosity wouldn't rest. "Why don't you deserve—*oh!*" His tongue replaced his fingers, sliding hot and slick up her middle from her navel to where her shirt bunched under her chin, stealing the end of her sentence and making her squirm. His breath huffed out, cooling the damp path, and then he repeated it, heating her all over again.

"Why don't you deserve—" she tried, but this time she didn't get any more out before his impossibly large tongue licked her sideways this time, the soft textured tip catching on both breasts, strumming her nipples to painful attention. Hot, then cool. Arch and press. Laughter against her soft belly when she squealed as his tongue dipped lower, under the edge of her overalls to tease against her undergarments.

He sat back to tug them off, baring her, and she finished the job, yanking the soft shirt over her head and flinging it somewhere beyond the straw. He did the same with his tunic.

"Why don't—?"

And then his tongue was between her legs and all sense left her, all words stolen by the slick, swift pressure. His groan vibrated through her, making goosebumps raise from her ankles to her hairline, and she felt her core gush in reply.

"Manna save me, your *taste...*" He didn't elaborate, just went back for more, latching his mouth over her full sex to apply a gentle suction. His tongue prodded into her, thick and strong, exploring her in broad strokes that made her squeal and pointed insertions that made her gasp and squeeze her eyes

shut. The push of his tongue and the pull of his suck made her body writhe and thrash and her thoughts fracture into smaller and smaller pieces, so small that they dissolved into the dark and threatened to fly away into oblivion.

“Hold me down!” she begged.

He obliged with one heavy hand, the heel resting on her belly and a finger draped over each shoulder. Her breasts flattened under his palm and the gentle compression settled her soul back into her body. Now she could enjoy the intensity of the oversize pleasure he was doling out. No tiny fluttering darts hurrying her toward climax like her previous lovers. This was indulgent, generous, unfocused.

She wrapped her arms around the two fingers that spanned her neck, hugging them tight as her hips canted up, seeking him. Her pleasure built in thin layers, each wash of his tongue sinking into the one before, deepening the sweet ache inside her until it felt rich and limitless.

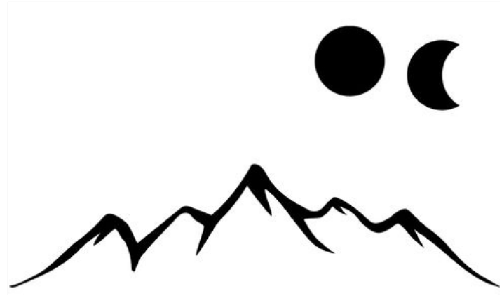
She didn't need words for this because there were no words for this. This was—this was—

Night Mother, this *was*.

She settled into a rhythm that matches his and felt him smile against her. Sweet giant, he deserved to be happy. The thought that *she'd* made him happy tipped her over the edge into a blinding cascade of ecstasy that seemed to pulse on and on, patient and lovely. All the while, Alrek held her down—held her *together* as she shook and called his name—until he'd

sucked out every throb. He didn't ask anything of her, just answered over and over again.

Chapter 11



ALREKELL

He sensed the moment her thoughts disappeared. Heard her pulse turn to syrup, felt her limbs loosen under the gravity of his hand. Her spring-thaw scent melted in his mouth, and he'd never tasted anything so sweet. When she came, he pushed her far beyond the edges of her pleasure, dragging his tongue relentlessly over her folds to wring every drop he could out of the moment, wishing it would never end.

But everything does.

The moment he lifted his head, Raina's active, clever mind was working again, asking the question he didn't want to answer. "Manna save me, that was amazing. Why do you think you don't you deserve it?"

A black mood descended despite her praise. He didn't want to scrape into his heart and reveal the festering wound inside. "Never mind."

"All right. Tell me when you're ready." She stroked the back of his hand and turned her head to kiss his knuckles one after the other, tender and erotic. His olje overflowed, his instincts burning and begging him to rut his mate. His mate was gone, though, and this human was not...*couldn't* be...

He released her, flexing his fingers where she'd planted her kisses. They made him feel raw and even more unworthy

because he could not let those little seeds of affection grow and flower. His heart had been torn out by the roots long ago.

“Enough,” he said gruffly, rolling away so she could rise. “Go to bed now.”

The sudden souring of her scent slammed into his nostrils. “Oh. Is that what you want?” Her voice was faint and swimming in confusion. “You want me to go?”

Every part of him cried *no*. But his mouth said, “Yes. Please. Now.” He felt mortared together with wet sand, and if she didn’t leave soon, she’d see him crumble.

Her breath rushed out. “Will you tell me what I did wrong? I didn’t mean to hurt you, Alrek, I swear. Sometimes I don’t go about things the normal way. Tell me. Let me fix it.”

Salaan smite him. He couldn’t stand it if she blamed herself. He pulled her to his chest and cradled her there, stroking and rocking her. “Nothing. You did nothing wrong. You were perfect. Delicious. More than I could have dreamed. I am grumpy old bastard, that’s all. Punishing myself for my mistakes. But *you* are not one of them.”

She snuggled into the curve of his hand. “I think you should tell me what troubles you, Alrek. Whatever it is, I’ll listen. I won’t judge you.”

He grunted his disbelief. No one could hear what he’d done and reserve judgment. “What good will that do?”

“Sometimes saying things aloud takes away some of their power. And also, I really want to ride on your cock, and I think

this secret is weighing on you too heavily for you to enjoy it.”

He groaned. This little human would be the death of him, because now that she’d said it, his cock would never let him rest until she’d ridden it. “Fine. I’ll tell you if you agree to some rules. One, listening only. No arguments or pity or tears shed.”

“I can’t always control my tears,” she protested.

“No crying,” he reiterated. “And if, after you’ve heard what I have to say, you no longer want to...”

“Ride you,” she prompted.

“Yes. That. If you don’t want to do that anymore, you have to go home to bed. No pretending. No play-acting. None of that.”

“Of course.”

He took a deep breath and cracked open the hollow place in his chest. “I’m to blame.” There. He’d said it. It felt like airing out a tomb.

“For what?” Raina asked.

“Everything,” he gritted out. “Brannica’s illness, for one. I should have defended our territory with more force. I should have rallied my clan and crushed the humans the moment they set foot in this valley. Then she might not have sickened.”

“But you did what—” Raina began, then bit off the end of her sentence, seeming to have remembered her promise not to argue. Alrek wanted to hear her protest. He wanted to be

defended and soothed. But he didn't deserve that, either. Instead, she asked, "What else?"

He didn't want to say it. Didn't even want to acknowledge it. But now that the tomb was open, the dead were loosed. "The end of our people. That's my fault, too. Brannica wanted—she wanted—" He broke off, throat so tight he couldn't finish. Raina didn't say anything, just waited until he wrestled down his emotions and could continue. "She wanted a kit. I refused. She was too ill, and I knew she wouldn't survive the birth. She said it was the only chance the Skarr might live on. I believed she might recover and wanted to wait until she was stronger. We argued endlessly about it. Now I know that I should not have wasted all that time."

"Did she lose the baby?" Raina asked, misunderstanding him.

"No. I didn't give her one. And she died anyway. She was right, that was our species' chance to live on, and I stole it out of pure selfishness, because I wanted to protect my mate. But I couldn't do that, either. I failed them all."

"Alrek." Raina's voice was scratchy, and he could hear a hundred things she wanted to say in it. Pity, recrimination, arguments, comfort, who knew what else. But she kept silent, as he had asked. "Thank you for telling me that. For trusting me with that."

"Do you still want...me?" he asked, pinching his eyes shut as he waited for her answer.

Her tiny palm slid over his chest in slow strokes. “Yes. But it doesn’t have to be right now if you’re not in a state of mind to enjoy it. I can come back in the morning.”

He didn’t want to deny her. Night Mother knew, he wanted her. But If he’d learned anything from Brannica’s death, it was to listen. To hear what she was saying and believe it. Raina didn’t want his body if she couldn’t have his mind, too.

She was right to feel that way. He felt unburdened, as she had predicted, but there was still sorrow clinging to him. As much as he wanted to wash away that residue with a rut, he’d delved so deeply into the past that he couldn’t be fully present with her. Part of him would be somewhere else. Somewhere else.

“Stay with me tonight?” he asked, too abrupt and demanding. Females deserved their space and should nest where they pleased. Even *asking* to share sleep with her forced him into her space, so she had to reject him to reclaim it. Shameful behavior on his part to put her in that position, but at least Raina had promised him she wouldn’t pretend. He trusted her to deny him.

She hummed, considering. “Yes. I would like that. Can I sleep here?” Her position pressed right into the center of his chest above his heart, like a pebble weighing down a map so it didn’t fly away. No more perfect place. When he made a sound of agreement, she tugged his hand into the position she wanted it, and, thumb draped over her shoulders like a blanket

and little finger curved around the swell of her bottom, he slept.

Instead of his usual nightmares, he dreamed of rutting a Skarr-sized Raina, pinning her neck to the ground with his tusks, his olje soothing and stretching her with his oils until she could take him fully. But when she was ready and he finally sank into her heat, she didn't feel like a Skarr inside. She felt like feathers. Like petals falling. Like raindrops or kisses or—

Manna save him, he wasn't dreaming. Not anymore. He was awake, dawn was pinkening the sky, and Raina was inside his trousers, her tiny hands stroking his length, her mouth busy licking each olje with devoted attention. His cock jerked and nearly spilled right there.

Raina reacted instantly, throwing her arms around it, squeezing under the head in an excruciatingly wonderful embrace. He felt her bare breasts and belly press against him with every breath she drew. "Good morning," she said, then tongued into his cleft that was already leaking seed.

Good wasn't the word for it.

"Pebble," he croaked. "Keep that up, and you'll have me stalking you all over Salaan like your cursed krulloct."

"I'll be sure to ring the bell when it's time to eat," she teased, rubbing her core against the base of his shaft. He jolted again at her bare slickness. His mouth flooded, remembering her taste from the night before, and he clutched the straw with both hands.

“I’ll hear it and come,” he vowed, half tempted to pull her off his cock and park her on his face. But her exquisite, miniature touch was too seductive. Every slide of her hands and arms made his spine tingle and his hips buck, jostling her. Every jostle made her slide again, and the dizzying loop continued.

“Promise?” she asked, her voice throaty and provocative as she pressed her cheek against his glans, her double meaning clear.

“Yes.” He’d come for her any way she liked. His balls tightened, threatening to spill right in her face. Not the way he wanted their first mating to go.

He unlaced his fingers from the straw and hooked his thumbs under the edge of his waistband, peeling the trousers down his thighs so both of them were exposed to his view. She shivered as the morning air chilled her tender, thin skin, already gleaming with his oils.

Then their mingled scents hit him. All the breath left his lungs. It felt like a burning comet burrowed into his chest, cauterizing his heart.

What *was* this?

Dazed, he watched as Raina sat up, adjusting her position so she straddled his shaft, her succulent thighs spread open so he could glimpse the shades of rose that bloomed between her legs and her backside was propped against the pillow of his balls. “Is this okay?” she asked, giving an experimental slide.

His olje obligingly primed the way, and he groaned when she did it again, his desire igniting like a wildfire. He had no words to answer her, only raw need and base instinct.

This was his *mate*.

With his last crumb of coherent thought, he knew that it couldn't be true. This feeling was a memory. An echo of what he'd felt before. Maybe madness from seven years without this kind of touch. But his body believed it, and he no longer had the power to resist.

He cupped his hand around her back, pressing her more tightly around his cock, and frictioned her against it. His olje stuttered through her folds, and they gasped in unison at the increased sensation. He eased up a little, slowed his movements, but she whined impatiently, tugging his thumb to let him know he didn't need to be so gentle.

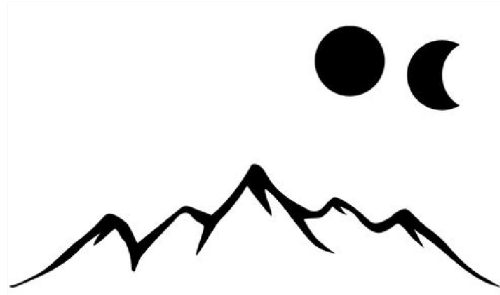
It was good for her, too. That was all he cared about, all he needed to know to let himself dissolve into a rut. Her sweet, soft body molded around him, quivery and warm, her core searing him almost as much as the hole in his chest as he shuttled her fiercely up and down his cock, *taking*. He'd never been so selfish, never been so gifted, never been so hard and hot and helpless.

"Tighter," Raina gasped. His fingers flexed around her, squeezing her, and he felt her fall apart, her limbs weakening and her scent strengthening as she came in his grip.

Seconds later, he tipped over the edge, balls pulling up before he groaned his release, hot seed jetting all over his

plates and hand and *her*.

Chapter 12



RAINA

“Worth the wait,” she murmured. She was warm and sticky and relaxed inside the circle of Alrek’s grip, and the feeling stayed even when he released her to rub her back, trailing the broad, callused tip of his finger up and down her spine. It made her scalp tingle—and other parts, too, ones that ought to be satiated.

“I’m glad,” he said, voice cracking at the end. She laughed softly. Her giant was as speechless as she felt. He hadn’t seemed to mind her request for more pressure or thought it odd. She supposed nothing was odd if you were bridging such a vast difference in size and species. Alrek seemed to know just what to do with her, though.

“Have you been with a human before?” she asked, tracing circles around the circumference of each of his oil glands. They were still responsive to her touch, treating her to fresh drops of his fragrant, iridescent oil. She rubbed it between her fingers and tested it with her tongue. It was slightly spiced and made her mouth both tingle and warm. *Fascinating.*

“Never.”

That meant she was likely his first sexual experience since his mate died. Her heart clutched for him. So many years without companionship. It’d only been three for her and it already felt like a distant memory. She wriggled up to his chest where it was mostly clean and dry so she could kiss along the

seam of his mouth. “You were amazing. I’ve never felt so good in my life.”

“*Never?*” He sounded like he didn’t believe it. “But I couldn’t be inside you or touch you the way nimbler fingers could.”

She shrugged. “I liked your way better.”

His throat bobbed as he swallowed. “I pleased you?”

A laugh burst out of her. “Now you’re just begging for compliments. You know you did. I’m sure you tasted it or smelled it, if you happened to miss my screams.”

With one lazy flick of his wrist, he rolled her over onto her back, pinning her to his chest with one hand while the other stroked over her and tugged at her limbs. “I did,” he rumbled, prying her legs apart and pressing his between them with the knuckle of his little finger. It was too big for her to take, but the blunt pressure felt good, anyway.

They laid there like that for some time, staring at the rafters, until the creeping vines of sunlight made their way into the barn, warming them and drying their combined fluids into something much less pleasant.

“We ought to clean up so you can get home, “ she observed eventually.

He huffed. “So eager to be rid of me, Pebble?”

“Why do you call me Pebble?” she asked, curious. This was the second time.

He pinched her foot between two fingers and tugged on it gently. “Because you’re tiny. Just a little pebble compared to me. The question stands. Are you running me off?”

“I know you have to get back to your clan.”

“I do.” He didn’t let her go.

She pushed his fingers off. “Get up, or we’ll be glued together,” she teased, sliding off his chest.

He sat up. The straw clinging to the sticky remnants of his emissions made him look like a huge, molting bird. She giggled, plucking off as many strands as she could reach, feeling a little tipsy. Last night and this morning had been so *fun*. Lately, her focus had narrowed to her work and, by extension, paying back her debt, and she’d forgotten how to relax and enjoy herself. Now that she was debt-free and pleasure-drunk, she realized how much her life had lacked. This was delicious.

He looked serious as he watched her ministrations, though, like something was bothering him.

“What?”

“You said you don’t want a mate.”

Oh, he thought she was getting too attached because she was fussing over him. “Don’t worry, I don’t. I’m much happier on my own. The last thing I need is a man lurking around, competing with my research for my attention. This, with you, was lovely, though. If you want to visit again sometime, I’m

open to a certain kind of friendship.” She held her breath, hoping, as she collected her clothes.

“Friendship,” he muttered behind her.

“You can visit me again whenever you like. Or not. I enjoyed being with you, though. A lot.” She grinned at him over her shoulder. Why hide it? He grunted noncommittally, and something twisted inside her. He’d said he wanted her, but maybe he regretted what they’d done. She didn’t want to pressure him into something he wasn’t ready for. “Think about it. I’m fine either way.”

“Fine.”

Outside, she rinsed off in the bracingly cold pump water and slipped her clothes back on over her tight nipples and gooseflesh. She’d take a longer, warmer bath later, after she’d done her other dirty chores and the boiler had time to heat. Alrek exited the barn as she headed back to the cottage. He was bare-chested, wearing his trousers but with his wrinkled, slightly damp tunic slung over his shoulder. He’d obviously used it to clean up—again.

“Your poor shirt.” They shared a grin, and she was relieved that whatever concerns he’d had seemed to have passed. “If you want to get started, I’ll make you those flatcakes I promised.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I want to.” She held his gaze until he gave a jerky nod.

While Alrek packed up the first load of carra roots to haul up the mountain, she switched on the boiler and mixed a batter, studding the flatcakes with chopped naka nuts for extra protein and brindle berries for their heavy dose of phytonutrients. He'd need a lot of fuel to make the trek loaded down with crates weighing literal tons, so she made a triple batch.

Flatcakes stacked high, she called him over for breakfast. He sat on the ground with his back against the cottage's stone chimney, balancing the huge platter on one thigh. He patted the other. "Eat with me."

"Is that an order or an invitation?" she asked with a straight face, glad that he wasn't trying to put more distance between them.

"Yes," he answered with his usual stoicism.

She couldn't keep her smile hidden as she climbed up and straddled his thigh with her back against his solidness. When she glanced up at him, he wasn't keeping his smile in, either. It felt like sunshine beaming down on her. He passed her a flatcake, and she rolled it up and took a bite. The buttery cake melted in her mouth, leaving a sugary coating on the crunchy, toasted nuts and tart berries.

"Not bad," she said after she finished the first one and licked the berry juice from her fingers.

Alrek swallowed what must have been his tenth and coughed disbelievingly. "You understate your talent. These are perfect."

Her whole body warmed. “Thanks. I like cooking. It’s like a chemistry experiment that you can eat at the end. Enjoyment from start to finish.”

He chuckled. “I’ve never thought of it that way. For me, cooking has always been just another chore to endure. I do it so I can eat, another chore I endure because it’s necessary to survive. It makes me feel sick to waste time on it when I have other things to do, but I force myself to go through the motions.”

“I feel similarly about shopping at the market,” she said, her chest growing tight just thinking about it. “All the noise and people and a thousand things to wade through to find the one thing you want. I do it so I can eat. But that’s life, isn’t it? Some things you just have to grit your teeth and barrel through.”

“I can bring you what you need.”

She blinked at the non sequitur. “What?”

“From the market. Whatever you need, tell me, and I’ll bring it to you.”

“Why would you do that? You’d have to come all the way down the mountain.”

“I want to,” he said, echoing her earlier words and holding eye contact until she believed him. He’d seemed reluctant to maintain a friendship with her in the barn this morning, but maybe she’d read him wrong. And she was more than happy to have an excuse to see him again.

“Okay. I’ll cook for you when you come. Make it worth your while.”

He slipped a hand around her middle, pulling her sideways so she was pressed against the stiff length standing at attention inside his trousers. “See what a promise of your flatcakes does to me?” he rumbled.

She giggled, desire making her giddy. “Whatever brings you back.”

“I will come back to you, Pebble, I swear. But I have to leave now. My early start has already evaporated.”

He was right. Their dawdling in the barn and her flatcake feast had pushed his departure to midmorning already. Reluctantly, she dismounted his thigh and watched as he drank deeply from the pump and then made his final preparations for the hike back to the Skarr sanctuary.

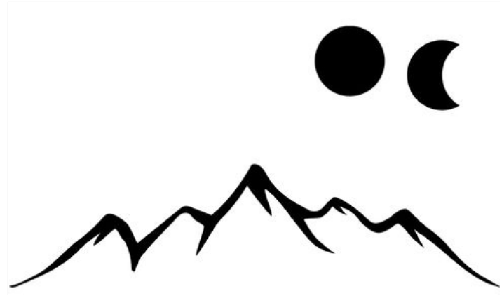
While she was cooking breakfast, he’d built a tight frame around a tidy stack of crates that she estimated contained more than a ton of carra. It seemed an impossible load for him to lift, let alone carry up a mountain. But he crouched down beside it, whipped a wide leather strap over his head and around the back, and stood.

Alrek’s powerful thighs strained against the fabric of his trousers, and the strap tightened to its limit, but it held. The load stable and secure on his back, his face showed no evidence of strain. He was *so* strong.

“Goodbye, Raina,” he said.

“You are remarkable,” she replied, realizing a half-beat after he’d started to walk away that it was a strange way to say goodbye. But she didn’t want to say goodbye anyway, so she didn’t call after him. He’d return soon enough.

Chapter 13



ALREKELL

He didn't look back. He wanted to, but it took most of his strength to keep the heavy load of carra balanced with the hauling strap. Raina wasn't his mate. She didn't want one, and he couldn't be one for her. So why did the burn in his chest burrow deeper with every step he took away from her?

Old instincts gone haywire, maybe. Memories and grief had him mixed up with greedy olje and a satisfying scent. If he'd had a free hand he would have taken the saltstained cozy from his tusk to get it out of his nostrils, but as it was, he did his best to ignore it as he doggedly made his way up the mountain.

He paused once to rest when he crossed the stream, resting the load on a boulder so he could remove the cozy and stuff it into one of the carra crates. Then he sat in the frigid water and scrubbed her scent away with a handful of rough moss. Pain lanced down his tusk with every splash as he rinsed away the residue, but he didn't do anything to avoid it. It was simply the reality of his situation, and it hurt less than whatever was happening to his idiotic heart.

Manna save him, it hurt. Ridding himself of her scent only soothed it a little.

Carrying on with menial tasks in spite of pain was what he was good at, though. He looped the hauling strap around the load, heaved it to his back, and stomped the rest of the way up the craggy path to the sanctuary, keeping his mind as blank as

possible, only noting waypoints and taking care not to step on the many fruiting fungus that had emerged since he'd made the trip down.

When he was a mile out from Skarr's Hand, he caught the edges of clan conversation. Patrek had already heard him crashing through the underbrush and alerted the others, so when he reached the meadow, they were there waiting to relieve him of his load.

He relinquished it gratefully to Hinri and Eliok, who each took a side and balanced the weight between them as they carried it toward the storage caves in the middle finger.

"You took longer than we expected," Patrek observed mildly, but gave himself away with the flare of his nostrils. Of course, some of Raina's scent still clung to him. His brother knew what they'd done.

"Bought more carra than I expected, too," Alrek grumbled, hoping to distract him. "Far more. We'll need to muster a few males to make a return trip with me."

The assembled Skarr quickly decided that three unmated males would go with him so that Patrek and Hinri wouldn't be tempted to carry their humans along for the ride, reducing the amount of carra they could haul.

Though she obviously understood the logic, Mimma made a show of pouting about it, crossing her arms and stamping her tiny foot. "I want to see Raina's farm! She said she'd show me her mulching technique."

“Another time,” Alrek promised. “I’ll let her know you’d like to visit. You’d enjoy it, too,” he added to Maja. “She keeps an elderly krulloct as a pet.”

Maja sucked in an excited breath. “I’ve never seen one in person. Is it friendly?”

He had to laugh, even though between his tusk and his chest, he was in agony. “No.”

“Want something to eat before you go back?” she asked.

“No. Ate this morning.” The flavor of Raina’s delicious flatcakes still lingered at the back of his palate. He’d eaten enough of them to sustain him for a week. Would he ever taste them again? Would he ever taste *her* again? The burn in his chest migrated lower, transforming into hunger. “We should leave soon. We have just enough light to make it there and back if we hurry.”

The other Skarr resumed their daily tasks. Mimma went to find her mate, and the volunteers split off to prepare for the journey, their receding conversation conveying their excitement at getting a glimpse of the human settlement, in particular at any unmated human females. Alrek glared after them. Perhaps it was worth taking Hinri and Patrek to avoid the misery of watching these males drooling over Raina.

“What’s wrong?” Maja asked from her perch on Patrek’s shoulder.

He shook his head. “Nothing. How did it go?”

“How did what go?” Patrek sounded puzzled. “Cleaning out the midden?”

“It went fine,” Maja interjected. “I put Brannica’s things in your den. I also cleared out one of the empty dens to use as kind of a library if you’d prefer to keep them there. Not the private letters, of—”

Alrek made a noise of frustration, cutting her off. As if he was asking about *one* project. “Clan business. All of it. How are the moss gatherers? How are the wildfire refugees? Now that we’re stocked up on carra, are we on schedule for the rest of the cold season stores? Is anyone ill or injured? Any word from the Skarr in the City? Are they having any more trouble with the Authority?”

“All is well,” Patrek assured him.

That was it? *All is well?* He rubbed his tusk in disbelief. He’d been gone for *days*.

“The mountain doesn’t fall down when a clan chief takes a little time off,” Patrek said wryly, clapping him on the back. How was he in such a good humor after carrying the burden of chieftdom? He must be in denial. Ignoring something critical.

“All is *never* well,” Alrek muttered under his breath, as he set off to inspect the sanctuary himself. “Nothing has been well in—”

“Seven years?” Patrek supplied behind him, voice quiet and somber. Maja’s faint intake of breath was audible even though Alrek had put dozens of yards between them.

He stopped in his tracks, turning to face them. The naked sympathy in Maja's expression was almost too much to bear, so he focused on his brother's two tusks, gleaming and whole. Patrek didn't understand pain. He'd left the sanctuary for the City as soon as he could after Brannica died. He hadn't been there to shepherd the clan through their collective grief, let alone borne the loss of a mate.

In four long strides, he was face-to-face with the two of them again. "You think it's so easy, being chief of this clan? The stewpot just simmers along, only requiring an occasional stir?" he hissed, hoping his heated whisper didn't carry through the rest of the sanctuary.

"Just because you're broken doesn't mean everything is broken," Patrek replied evenly as he took a step back, out of range of Alrek's fists.

"Are you challenging me to *hnefyal*?" Alrek demanded, forgetting to be quiet. "Because I'm itching to push you off a mountain right now." He didn't miss the way Maja's knuckles whitened and scent soured as she gripped Patrek's tusk. She feared for her mate, and regret threaded through Alrek like stitches on a sloppy patch.

"No. You have no worry of that. You've done a good job as leader. You've been dedicated and fair. Listened and led us forward, even when it hurt. I meant it's time for you to heal, brother. Cap your tusk. Take some time for yourself if you need it. Visit your human or bring her here."

“She’s not mine!” he barked. The denial lanced through him like lightning, and he grimaced, rubbing the center of his chest.

“He and Raina...?” Maja asked, and Patrek nodded, Salaan smite him.

“They’re mates. That’s why he’s acting like a moons-addled bastard.”

“We’re not,” Alrek said irritably. “We can’t be. Skarr only get one mate, and I had mine.”

“Look what you’re doing.” Patrek nodded toward him. Alrek dropped the hand that was still desperately trying to rub away the feeling in his chest. “That’s a mated male if I ever saw one.”

“My instincts are confused, that’s all.” He felt desperate to escape, like a caged animal. He needed to leave. He needed to be away from their concerned, judgmental gazes. He needed to duck back into the forest and walk until he reached Raina’s barn where everything had made sense.

“Maybe you can have a second mate if she’s human?” Maja ventured.

“Did you do all the proper steps? I can smell you’ve done at least one of them.” Patrek smirked, no doubt recalling that Alrek had insisted Patrek court Maja the proper way, even after she’d agreed to be his mate. “Maybe we should bring Raina up to Skarr’s hand so the others can court her, too.”

“Leave it alone!” Alrek snarled at him. “We didn’t do the ritual. There was no gifting or guarding or feeding or anything except fucking. Just two lonely people finding a little satisfaction. *We’re not mates*, no matter how much I wish it could be true.”

Patrek blinked at him. “You do?”

Guilt washed through him, cold as a mountain stream. He should never have said that, true though it might be. It was yet another betrayal of his kind, wishing for happiness when he’d caused so much harm. Most of the remaining Skarr would never have a mate, and here he was wishing for the impossibility of *two*? It was selfish beyond belief.

Before he could issue a denial, Hinri appeared with his mate in one hand, holding something out toward Alrek with the other. “Found this in one of the carra crates. I think it belongs to that female down the mountain if you want to return it to her.”

Alrek snatched up the soft, striped cozy, reeling at the thought that he’d almost lost it. He pressed it to his face so he could suck in a tiny scrap of her scent before clutching it inside his fist. “It’s mine,” he snapped at Hinri. “Raina made it for me.”

Patrek exchanged an amused look with Maja. “Definitely mate-mad. He’s about to fight Hinri over a sock that doesn’t even fit him.”

“It’s not a sock!” Alrek snarled at him but stopped when Maja held up her hand, a thoughtful look on her face.

“You said Raina gifted it to you? After you accepted it, did she guard you all night?”

Hinri gave a booming laugh that jostled Mimma until she was giggling, too. “Guard him? How could she protect him from anything? She’s tiny.”

“She did,” Alrek said, his heart banging a slow, resonant rhythm as he remembered Raina’s soft warmth pressed against his chest, her words of reassurance. *You’re safe. I’m here.* “She stayed with me all night. Woke me from a nightmare.”

“She guarded you,” Maja said quietly. “Did she feed you, then?”

He nodded. “She did, more than I could eat. The best meals of my life. And then we—”

“Rutted. *We know,*” Hinri and Patrek said together, laughing. Corek-cursed Skarr and their senses. He’d push them all off a mountain if they didn’t stop laughing at his bewilderment.

Maja tilted her head and gave him a soft, sweet smile. “Your instincts aren’t confused, Alrek. You found yourself a mate. Your instincts must have ignited a second time because she did the ritual instead of you.”

He dropped to his knees, stunned. His fist uncurled and he stared at the tiny woolen scrap in his palm. He slipped it on his tusk, cushioning the raw nerve that he’d never let heal. Somehow Raina given him the perfect courting gift, something he desperately needed but hadn’t allowed himself. She’d guarded him, not from wild forest creatures but from a far

worse enemy—*himself*. Then she'd nourished him, tending to him even when he pushed her away. And she was so generous with herself, sharing her desire, sharing *sleep* with him.

Sweet Salaan, the little pebble in his plates was his *mate*. Of course she was. In an instant, the world that had been upside down far too long righted itself, and he saw what needed to be done.

“Tell the others to go ahead without me. They can trace my scent down the mountain to find the way, and I'll follow once I take care of a few things,” he told Patrek. He rose and strode away from his clan toward the forest.

“Where is he going?” he heard Mimma ask.

“I think he's going to say goodbye,” her sister answered.

In the small glen, sunlight gilded the patches of moss on Brannica's cairn. He kneeled beside the rocks, bowing his head as he placed a few wildflowers that he'd gathered along the way. Not in grief this time, but in gratitude.

“I came to thank you,” he murmured. “For your strength. For your perseverance against all odds. For your wisdom. You knew what I didn't—that our species could not regain what we'd lost but would have to find a new way forward. I didn't listen at the time, but you were patient with me anyway, and I thank you for that, too. I learned so much from you.”

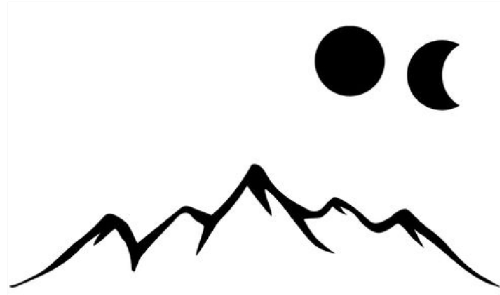
Brannica didn't answer, but a sweet, swift breeze rolled up his back, brushing over his shoulders and rocky skull and playing around his tusks. He smiled at the gentle touch. “I

came to tell you something else. My instincts ignited for another female. She's not our kind, but she loves the planet as we do. She nurtures it and puts its health above all else. She nurtures *me*, and I need it so badly. I need *her*. I hope you'll forgive me for loving her as I loved you—as I will always love you.”

The busy breeze softened to a sigh as it melted into the surrounding trees, leaving the glen still and silent. It was not an abandonment. It was...relief. *Peace*. Brannica finally rested.

He had no such luxury, so he rose and hurried back toward the sanctuary. He had a broken tusk to cap, a dusty den to clean out, and a stubborn, sensitive female to court and convince that she needed him as much as he needed her.

Chapter 14



RAINA

After Alrek left the farm, she went to tackle the pile of burned carra crates languishing near the field, a task she'd been dreading. After circling it a few times, thinking about the best way to approach the cleanup, she realized it was more than unsightly garbage. In fact, it wasn't garbage at all.

At least, it wouldn't be once she sorted out the components. The charcoal would oxygenate the soil and make space for good tuber production. The ash would increase potassium levels. The parts of the crates that hadn't burned could be chipped and composted with the roasted carra roots to enrich the fields with organic matter.

The fire hardly seemed like a loss, now that she'd taken full stock. Maybe she ought to send Greygor a thank-you note. She smiled, thinking of his annoyance at receiving it. It'd almost be worth sending if she didn't have to be his neighbor for decades to come. Armed with a pitchfork and shovel, she submerged herself in her work for hours.

The tops of the trees waving despite the lack of breeze caught her attention in the late afternoon. The giants were coming down the mountain. Raina straightened, planting her pitchfork and rubbing her aching back as she watched their progress.

Her heart raced, and it wasn't from the hard work. Alrek would be here soon, and she wasn't quite sure how to greet

him. Should she act friendly? Businesslike? Or should she hold her arms up for the kiss and squeeze she really wanted?

She wished there was an etiquette manual like the kind her aunt had given her to help her navigate social situations in the City. Something that would lay out the expectations, the unspoken rules, the pitfalls to avoid. But there were no guides for greeting your Skarr giant lover, so she decided to follow his lead.

If he pretended there was nothing romantic between them, she'd stick to business. But if he showed affection, she'd happily own up to her interest in him. His clan was already accustomed to seeing humans and giants as mated pairs, so they probably wouldn't even blink.

Her anticipation grew as the disruption in the leaves neared. Finally, three hulking figures emerged from the treeline. She recognized them as some of the giants she'd met in the Skarr sanctuary, but Alrek wasn't with them. A brief scan of the forest showed no evidence of him trailing behind, either.

Her heart sank. He hadn't come back, merely sent the others to collect the rest of the purchased produce.

Well. That answered that. At least she knew where she stood. Theirs was a secret affair. Perhaps a finished one. She swallowed her disappointment and raised her hand to greet the Skarr in the lead, a pale-sandstone giant with long tusks and a ready smile she remembered as Eliok.

"Good to see you again, female," he boomed. One of the others elbowed him, and his smile faded somewhat. "A

storm's blowing in, and the chief says we're not to trouble you, so just point us to the carra and we'll be on our way."

She nodded briskly and led them to the remaining crates. It didn't take them long to divide the crates into three loads and secure them into frames as Alrek had done. It was a remarkable demonstration of Skarr strength that a full harvester-load of carra could be carried by only four of them.

"There's a pump by the barn if you'd like fresh water before you start up the mountain," she said. The offer earned her crooked smiles and thanks from the three Skarr, who drank deeply before they returned to get the carra-loads.

"Why do you keep that krulloct?" Eliok asked as he crouched in front of his load and threw his hauling strap around it. His more cautious friend gave him a warning look for speaking to her, but he ignored it. "I overheard the chief say you had one, but I didn't believe it until I saw the little bastard over there by the barn in a cage."

"If I let him out, he tries to eat me." She shrugged, and they shared a grin.

"You could just kill him."

"He was here first. It seems a little rude to kill him when I can just share my dinner with him instead."

The giant threw his head back and laughed. "I like you. If you weren't already mated, I'd court you."

"I'm not—" she began, but at the same time, the three Skarr all pushed to their feet, plates scraping and breaths gusting out

with the effort of lifting their loads. They buried the rest of her sentence in their goodbyes and promises to see her again when she came to the sanctuary, though she had no plans to do visit. They left her wondering whether what she'd been about to say—*I'm not mated to anyone*—was even the truth.

Had she missed some cue and accidentally agreed to be Alrek's mate? He hadn't even asked! In fact, he'd seemed to make it quite clear he did not want that. *You don't want a mate*, he'd said with a frown like a broken branch when she fussed over him. His dismay had been clear.

The sky was growing darker, and it wasn't just the impending dusk. A grim line of low, dark clouds advanced from the east, promising heavy rain. As she hurried through the rest of her chores before the storm set in, she went over the interaction with Alrek, searching for what she'd missed.

You don't want a mate. The frown.

Had she read it backwards? Maybe his dismay was not because *he* didn't want a mate. Maybe it was because he thought *she* didn't. But she'd only said that as a reassurance to him that she wouldn't press him into a relationship that required more commitment than he could handle.

He'd said himself that it was *impossible* for them to be mates! And if by some small chance they *were* mates, why hadn't he come back to see her? Was it because he thought she'd be averse to it? She was only averse to certain expectations of how a wife should act—not to the commitment

itself. Surely, he understood that, just as she knew he'd never ask those things of her?

Or maybe their communication had been perfectly clear and Eliok had just misunderstood the conversation he'd overheard. Perhaps Alrek was perfectly happy leaving her behind.

Her head hurt more than her back now. Why couldn't relationships be as easy as carra roots? All she had to do to know whether a carra root was happy was weigh it with her little spring scale. She chuckled, imagining a spring scale large enough to weigh Alrek. There was nothing tall enough to hang it from unless she hooked it on a mountaintop. She'd have to take him to the terminal to weigh on the harvester scale instead. She'd earn one of those precious smiles from him when she told him that.

Raina glanced at the forest, half-expecting his gray-green plates to emerge from between the trees, but the leaves were eerily still. For a moment, she considered filling a pack and hiking up the mountain. But the shadows were already lengthening as the evening approached. She wouldn't make it before nightfall even if she left now, so she decided to wait until morning before she stormed the sanctuary to find out what his feelings were.

She and Alrek would sort it out and hopefully make something sweet of their unconventional pairing.

Rain began to spot the soil, so she hurried to feed Jared. She'd just rung the bell after tossing djumjum slices into the enclosure when she heard the rumble of a harvester coming up

the road. It pulled up right behind her, where her own harvester was parked by the barn. She tensed and turned, spotting Greygor at the wheel. Why was he here? She hoped it was a neighborly gesture. Sure enough, he smiled at her when she lifted her hand to wave.

But he didn't get out. When the harvester door opened, two other men did—younger and taller than Greygor, with sun-bleached work shirts and scruffy facial hair. They weren't smiling. Before she processed what they were doing, they strode up to her and each grasped an arm, twisting them roughly behind her back like she was a criminal being arrested.

“Are you Council enforcers?” she asked, bewildered. “I think there's been a misunderstanding. I paid—”

“Shut up,” one of them barked in her ear, squeezing her wrist until she winced.

The harvester's door opened again, drawing her attention. Greygor stood on the running board, arms braced in the door frame, smile still slicing bright as a blade across his face. “Hello, Raina. I noticed your giant friends left and thought I'd pay you a visit.”

“What do you want?” she asked, unable to keep the edge of fear out of her voice.

“Only what you owe me. Where is it, Raina?” he asked, his tone silky-smooth even as his mouth pulled into something jagged.

“I paid you in full!” she blurted out, turning her head to address the men who held her arms. “You can check the escrow records if you don’t believe me. Let me get my datacom from the cottage and I’ll show you.”

They wouldn’t meet her eyes, but instead looked to Greygor. Of course, they were *his* men, not law enforcement. Nothing she said mattered. They’d do whatever he told them, and judging by the ugly way he was looking at her, lips curled back from his teeth, he planned to hurt her if she didn’t meet his demands.

“I don’t want *credits*. I have plenty of those,” he hissed. He flung an arm out, waving dismissively at her fields where empty rows were being pattered with rain. “This land is garbage anyway. Not worth the effort of planting, let alone tending.”

Raina badly wanted to argue with him, correct the half-dozen falsehoods in his few sentences, but she bit her tongue, knowing it would only anger him further. “What do you want, then?”

“Don’t play stupid. Your work. The *manual*,” he bit out. “Where did you hide it?”

“It’s not done.” The ache in her shoulders from the awkward posture Greygor’s lackeys held her in was unbearable, so she shifted, trying to relieve it. They only twisted her arms higher until the pain forced her to bend at the waist. Tears dripped down her nose into the dirt at her feet, mingling with the raindrops and creating tiny mud puddles where they landed

before being sucked away by the thirsty earth. “It won’t be useful to you. I’ll give you a copy when—”

“I’m not going to *use* it. Salaan smite me, I knew you were soft in the head, but I didn’t realize *how* stupid you were. I’m going to *destroy* it.”

“You don’t want anyone to have it,” she said, stricken at the realization. She worked backward, tracing his casual statements over the past three years back to their unsustainable marriage. His spurts of anger, his impatient demands, his false smiles and promises. She followed them all the way to the beginning, to the letter she’d received that fateful afternoon in the City.

Dear Miss Whittock, I have followed your publications with interest. I have an unconventional proposal to match your unconventional practices. I think we should marry.

He had land in need, and she was in need of land. It was a marriage of mutual interest. Or so she’d thought. Funny how, once she moved in with him, he’d suddenly had dozens of other pressing concerns. Meaningless tasks for her like choosing upholstery fabrics and planning seating charts for dinners she had no interest in attending. Staff to oversee, flowers to plant, guests to host. Any time she made a tiny hint of progress with her research, she was interrupted. Badgered. Overwhelmed until she cracked.

He’d sabotaged her.

“You were never trying to support my work, were you? From the beginning, you were always trying to stop it. Why,

Greygor? I thought you wanted to improve your land.”

“I don’t need to improve it when I already control the market.” His smirk was plain in his voice.

How had she missed it? She’d believed those uncomfortable weeks at his estate were normal married life, but they weren’t. That’s why he’d let her move into the cottage. He didn’t want a wife. He wanted to control her, and he could do it perfectly well even if she wasn’t living with him.

He took her dowry credits, calling it a down payment. He set an overambitious timeline for the loan repayment, hoping to trap her into an employment contract. He’d likely paid the seasonal workers to decline her employment, knowing harvest would be near impossible without help. Then, when all those efforts failed, he’d torched her carra roots so they couldn’t be sold.

Rain pounded on her back and blood pounded in her cheeks, hot and righteous, as she spoke to the dirt. “You thought I’d give up. But I’ll never stop, even if you destroy everything I’ve accomplished. My research isn’t something I do, Greygor—it’s who I am.”

He gave a heavy sigh. “Now I’m bored. Tear the house apart. Find it.”

Anger balled in her belly. How dare he violate her space again? She’d only just put it back together after the last time. Panic made her breaths short. “Don’t bother. It’s not there.”

“Search the barn, too,” Greygor snapped.

“It’s not in the barn, either. You’re wasting your time.” He was going to ruin everything.

“Let her up,” he commanded. The men loosened their grip on her enough that she could stand up straight and look him in the face. “Come work for me. Last chance for this to end well, Raina. You should take it.”

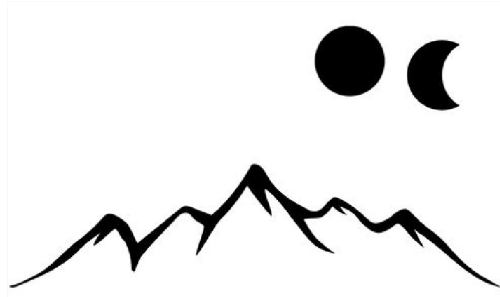
She swallowed hard. “No.”

“Fine.” Greygor shrugged. “If you don’t find what I’m looking for quickly, just burn everything to the ground.”

Panic speared through her. If they burned the barn, it’d destroy all the roots she’d saved for slip production in the spring. She’d paid him all her credits and had no way to buy more slips to plant. She felt her knees weaken, her chest tighten, her mind going floaty. “Don’t do this!”

Footsteps crunched away from them. She caught a glimpse of his rain-darkened gray jacket swinging up into the harvester as she was yanked backward toward the house. She stumbled, but they didn’t stop, just dragged her along, her heels carving a furrow in the damp earth.

Chapter 15



ALREKELL

His preparations made him so late leaving Skarr's Hand that he passed Eliok, Jonn, and Natti, weighed down with carra on their backs, only a mile or two into his journey. Soon after, the first autumn storm started in earnest. Thank the Night Mother, a good rain was just what they needed to get the wildfires under control. It was one less worry weighing on him.

His mental burden a little lighter, he let his thoughts wander as he made his way down the mountain in the deepening dusk, daydreaming about carrying Raina back home to his den. *Their* den. It was clean and tidy now. The edjrees had been moved to the new rehabilitation center in Brannica's old midden, her possessions carefully relocated to what would be the new library. A place of honor. That left plenty of room for whatever Raina needed to bring with her when she moved in.

The rain beat down pleasantly on the forest canopy, slipping through the leaves onto his shoulders where it ran in rivulets between his plates and dripped off the end of his newly capped tusk. But rather than decreasing as he'd expected, the acrid scent of woodsmoke increased until it scratched the back of his throat, pulling him out of his thoughts. It was possible that a lightning strike had sparked a blaze nearby despite the worsening rain.

He slowed, tempted to investigate and see what could be done about it, but he was in a thick part of the forest, his view blocked on all side by trees with no way to tell which direction the fire was in. The downpour would put it out, hopefully.

Then the wind picked up, blowing even more smoke toward him. In the midst of its bitter bouquet, he smelled Raina. Her *fear*. Another breath and he picked up the djum-and-tzat-pollen smell of Greygor and the sharp, painful notes of an accelerant.

This was no forest fire.

He crashed down the mountain like an avalanche. Not a kit's game but an untamable urgency that propelled him faster than he'd ever run in his life, so fast that the rain lashed across his vision, temporarily blinding him. Trees parted for him, some groaning as their roots strained in the soil. Branches caught, their leaves stripped as they slid between his plates. And blood throbbed in his ears, louder than the thunder, louder than the ragged roar of her name that tore from his chest.

When he reached the edge of the forest and saw her farm, it was even worse than he thought. Her little cottage was ablaze, flames licking up into the storm like a torch. Her thin sobs reached him, and he realized with horror that she was *inside*.

Greygor was there, lurking in the cab of his harvester, watching the cottage burn. Alrek would deal with *him* later. Two humans whose scents he recognized from the previous arson scurried around the exterior of the barn, emptying cans of accelerant around the perimeter. They shouted empty threats

at him as he cut between the building and the parked harvesters to reach the cottage. The foundation was already blackened where they'd used the same accelerant, and thick, oily smoke roiled around the windows and door, permanently staining the exterior.

He didn't have time to save it. He only had time to save *her*.

Ignoring the searing heat, he curled his fingers around the edge of the roof and tore it off with a swift, vicious yank. The flames snapped and snarled like a wild thing being denied its dinner as he pulled down a wall and reached inside. He couldn't see her through the choking smoke, so he felt his way around the small space, mourning everything he touched—her books and cooking pots and soft bedding—until he found her, curled up and shaking on the floor.

Triumphant, he lifted her out and clasped her to his chest, carrying her swiftly to the pump. He stamped out the infant flames by the barn that were struggling to stay lit against the onslaught of rain. The humans buzzed around like annoying insects, shouting silly threats. He flicked them away, maybe a little too hard. They collapsed facedown in the mud, twisted and lifeless.

They deserved worse for letting Raina burn. If she was hurt, he'd bring them back to life so he could crush their skulls and send them back to Salaan all over again.

He kneeled by the pump and ran cool water over Raina to extinguish any sparks that had caught in her hair and clothing. As he washed away the soot and ash, he examined his mate in

the glow of her burning cottage. Her face was dirty and tearstained, but she seemed otherwise uninjured. He cooed for her, letting the full resonance build in an aching harmony of regret for leaving her alone. He didn't let the sound fade until her eyes opened.

"You came back," she said weakly, her voice raspy from the smoke. She rubbed the dark red fingerprints on her wrists.

"I shouldn't have left you, Pebble." His jaw tightened when he thought of how close she'd been to death because of his absence. He picked her up, and a wave of prickling pain rushed over the skin on his hands and forearms. It felt like he'd been flayed now that his adrenaline levels had reduced. He was finally paying the price for reaching into the fire.

"You're burned," she exclaimed, looking at the scorched fingers surrounding her with dismay. "Night Mother, it's bad. You shouldn't have used your bare hands."

"It's nothing." Burns would heal. Loss of his mate would not. He would know. "Raina, there's something I need to tell you. Something I should have told you before, but I couldn't believe it was true."

"I already know. We're mates," she said, looking up at him with wide, glowing eyes, and his heart leaped. She *knew*? "I'm so glad, Alrek. You should have just told me. I don't always pick up on subtle cues."

"I didn't hint. I didn't know," he stuttered in disbelief. "I didn't think it was possible. I didn't think *you* were possible. How did *you* realize?"

“One of your friends said something about me being a mated female when they came for the carra, and I put it together. Oh, Night Mother, watch out!” The tail of her sentence was drowned out by the growl of the harvester’s engine behind them. It revved once, twice, and then gave a bellow as the driver slammed down the accelerator.

Alrek didn’t have time to do anything but stand up and set Raina out of harm’s way before the huge vehicle plowed into him. The front end took his legs out from under him with a sickening crack that rattled his whole skeleton. He slumped forward onto the harvester’s hood, eye level with Greygor’s triumphant face behind the wheel.

Alrek reached up to smash his fist through the windshield and drag him out, but Greygor abruptly slammed the vehicle into reverse. Alrek scrabbled futilely for purchase on the slick metal as he slid off into the dirt. His desperate attempts to regain his footing failed, and his broken legs crumpled under him in a dark sinkhole of pain that stole his breath and most of his consciousness.

The engines roared toward him again. If Greygor hit him while he was prone, it would be the end for him. He might be a giant, but he was no match for the huge harvester’s weight and power. Mustering the strength left in his arms, he tried to hoist himself upward using the corner of the barn, but his burned hide cracked and protested. The heat-warped plates on his hands locked his finger joints from closing completely, and his grip failed. He collapsed to the ground again like a pile of rubble.

This was it. This was the end.

Then, like magic, Raina appeared, a small dark silhouette between him and the bright headlights of the harvester, waving her arms. She was trying to stop the damn thing, but it was going to take them both. Why was she wasting herself on him?

“No. *Run*. Now,” he groaned. But pinned in the glare of the vehicle’s lights, she didn’t turn toward him. Didn’t move out of harm’s way.

The harvester braked with a grind and squeal, stopping mere feet from her. Rain speckled through the harsh headlight beams as the scent of her fear built. Her heartbeat raced in his ears. Alrek had to *do something*, but he could barely lift his head. He couldn’t even muster another coo for her. It took all his effort just to stay conscious, so he gritted his teeth, saving whatever shred of strength he had left for when it would count the most.

Greygor dismounted from the harvester and swaggered over to Raina, who trembled before him.

“I’ll do whatever you want!” she said, raising her hands in surrender as Greygor approached. “Anything. Just don’t hurt him anymore.”

“Glad you finally see reason.” He stood a little too close to her and smiled a little too broadly, hands on his hips. Alrek wanted nothing more than to reach out and squeeze him in a tight fist until his face purpled and his eyes popped, but he was just out of reach.

Step closer, you saltstained bastard.

“Wouldn’t call it reason. What I see looks a lot more like insanity,” Raina snapped. Greygor squinted at her like she was already dead. He might have stopped the harvester before it ran her over, but she wasn’t safe from him yet. A cold serpent of fear slithered up Alrek’s spine as she continued, oblivious to the danger she was still in. “What did you think you’d accomplish here tonight? You can’t just burn down someone’s house because you’re angry with them. Even you aren’t above the law. I called the enforcers. They’re on their way.”

Alrek tensed, ready to expend whatever energy he had left to protect her from Greygor’s inevitable backlash. But to his surprise, the man threw back his head and laughed. “Good. It’s not illegal to burn down an old shed on your own property.”

“It’s not a shed, and it’s not yours anymore!” Raina said hotly, her pulse gone irregular and jumpy. Alrek closed his eyes, trying to push down the pain long enough to intervene. Long enough to tell her not to argue, not to fight. “I have the paperwork. Take me to court if you want, but the enforcers will agree with me.”

“I’ll tell them a feral Skarr killed my workers and burned the outbuildings. Nearly killed my wife. Nice of your friend here to corroborate my story by dying at the scene of his crime.”

“He’s not dead, and I’m not your wife!”

Greygor seemed amused by Raina’s outrage, like she was a disobedient pet. “Manna save me, you still don’t get it. We’re married. Whatever you own, I own. Your property. Your

research. Your crops. Everything is mine. Legally, *you're* mine.”

Fear and fury gripped Alrek in equal measure. Raina did *not* belong to this saltlicking human.

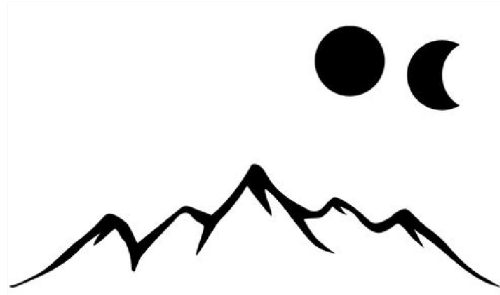
Raina gasped. “No, we called it off! We agreed!”

“The contract was never dissolved. I have the paperwork,” Greygor slyly echoed her words. “Take me to court if you want, but the enforcers will agree with me. You’re my wife.”

“No,” Alrek growled reflexively, and Greygor’s gaze jerked to him, as if realizing for the first time that he was still alive. This was it. This was the moment that counted. He mustered all his remaining strength. “She’s *my* mate.”

With a grunt of pain that tugged at the edges of his consciousness, threatening to capsize it, he reached for Greygor with a huge, charred hand. But the man stepped back. His fingers closed on nothing. And then nothing closed on him.

Chapter 16



RAINA

Greygor barely looked human, his gray eyes washed colorless by the bright headlights, lips peeled back in a grimace as he stared at Alrek's broken body. "He's going to be a problem when he wakes up."

"No, I promise he won't be," Raina said swiftly. Greygor could burn her house and her hopes, but he wouldn't take her giant, too. The sight of the harvester cutting Alrek down like a scythe had made her sick. Her stomach had twisted, ejecting its contents onto the ground next to the krulloct's cage, and her heart had sickened, too. She wasn't sure it would ever be well again if he didn't make it out of this alive. "Don't hurt him, and I won't tell anyone what happened here today. You win. The land is yours. Just let us walk away."

Greygor smirked. "I don't think he'll be walking anywhere."

"The other giants will carry him away into the forest," she said calmly, even though she felt like crumbling. But she had to be strong for Alrek. "I'll tell them it was an accident. We'll disappear and never trouble you again."

Greygor stepped closer, grasping her shoulders until they bruised, and her throat went tight. He leaned in and murmured in her ear, "I know you, Raina. Wherever you go, you'll be trouble. That's why I had to marry you to begin with. You're going to go off and finish your manual and share it with everyone and then we'll be right back to the same place we are

now. Give me your research, wherever you've hidden it, or I'm going to crush him with the harvester until he can't be sifted from the soil."

"How do you know it isn't already destroyed?"

"Because if it were, you wouldn't be standing. You'd be a mess. You're nothing without it."

He'd never believe the truth. She'd told him a hundred times already—her research wasn't hidden. It was right there in front of him. Not in a cupboard or under a mattress, but in the dirt of her fields and inside her head. She fastened her gaze to his boots so he wouldn't see the truth in her eyes. "Fine. You can have it. I'll show you where it is. Just don't hurt my...don't hurt him."

He released her with a satisfied sound and eagerly followed her to the dark side of the barn where they were shadowed from both the housefire and the harvester's headlights.

"Just through there," she said, opening the door for him so he could pass through. "Under that rock. Reach in and you'll feel it."

Greygor rushed into Jared's enclosure, falling to his knees to access the small space under the rock. He was so greedy to get his hands on her work that he didn't look back when she shut the door behind him. Didn't ask why when she rang the little bell. Didn't notice the flawed, flickering camouflage of the krulloct as it crept up behind him and whipped a single, lethal tentacle around his throat, severing his carotid artery.

When two enforcers arrived, she explained everything. How the outbuildings had caught fire. How two men had died heroically while trying to save the barn. How their hired Skarr giant had been injured, too, and in the confusing rush to help the giant and prevent the barn from burning, Greygor had stumbled into the krulloct's lair and met an unfortunate end.

"I couldn't watch," she said tearfully, though the tears weren't for Greygor but for Alrek, who was still unconscious. She was unraveling again, barely able to speak. The only thing holding her together was the gentle rise and fall of Alrek's chest that meant he was still breathing despite his twisted limbs and blistered hide.

"Of course you couldn't. No one could," the senior enforcer said, though he couldn't seem to tear his eyes away from the macabre sight of Jared gleefully stripping the flesh from Greygor's skeleton. Neither of them seemed interested in trying to retrieve his body from the enclosure. Neither of them seemed particularly sorry to see Greygor devoured, either. "Not much we can do except file a report for insurance. We'll take the two over there and come back another time to collect his bones. Do you need a ride home, Lady Calcano?"

Home. Her gaze flicked to her poor cottage, now little more than coals. They didn't mean *here*. They meant Greygor's estate. Technically, it was hers now, she realized. The enormous house, the hundreds of acres. The barns and equipment, the employees. The accounts full of credits. That marriage contract Greygor had kept to control her was now her source of power.

“If you could help me load the Skarr onto the harvester and get him to the estate, I’d be grateful,” she said, her voice shaky.

The enforcers obliged, pulling Greygor’s harvester parallel to Alrek’s prone form and using the lift arm to move him onto the trailer like a stack of carra crates. He groaned when they moved him, a deep, ragged, animal sound that tore something inside her.

He had to make it. He *had* to.

“I’d better drive,” one of the enforcers said, motioning her to the passenger side when she tried to get in the driver’s seat. “No offense, but you don’t look right.”

She was shivering violently, she realized, muscles twitching in unpleasant jerks. It might have been the cold rain that had penetrated her clothing and raised goosebumps on her skin, or it might have been the shock and fear, but either way, her body was close to collapse.

She let the enforcer help her into the seat but could barely process his polite chit-chat. She managed to keep it together on the ride to the estate by closing her eyes and resting her head against the window, focusing on the singular goal of getting Alrek somewhere warm and dry where he could be cared for and heal. Nothing else mattered.

When they pulled into the courtyard of Greygor’s palatial estate, Raina felt numb, nearly overcome by the terrible floaty feeling that happened before her mind and body disconnected. Even as her breath shallowed, she nodded along as the

enforcer who'd driven her explained to the estate staff what had happened before leaving with his partner in their transport.

She couldn't melt down again. Not until she was sure Alrek was safe and cared for. She stood there beside the harvester, hugging herself to keep it together. Who knew how Greygor's staff would react to the news that he was dead and his estranged wife had returned with an unconscious giant in tow.

Consummate professionals, they barely blinked before they broke into action. The estate manager immediately called a doctor and rallied a team to move Alrek to a clean barn nearby for treatment. Raina wanted to go with him, but the head housekeeper, a briskly efficient woman named Njola, forbade it, instead whisking her away to the sumptuous room she'd inhabited for the short weeks she'd lived here. It was exactly as she'd left it three years ago, full of pillows and books and a wall of slate for chalking ideas and figures. Not a speck of dust marred a surface.

“Nothing's changed,” she murmured in surprise.

“We kept it ready. We were none too happy that Greygor ran you off. All hoped you'd be back.” Njola eyed her with a faint smile as she wrapped her in a soft blanket and parked her in an armchair. In a motherly, cluckish tone, she added, “Sit tight while I run you a bath and fetch someone to help with your hair.”

Raina cocooned in the blanket, closed her eyes, and pretended the sound of the running bathwater was Alrek's coo. It wasn't quite as good, but it smoothed the frayed edges of her

mind enough that she was finally able to draw a deep breath. The hot bath helped, too, and the soft sleep shift a maid miraculously produced from the room's deep closets.

"I need to see Alrek now," she said, when the maid and Njola had finished conditioning and detangling her hair. She felt almost normal again, her usual dogged single-mindedness returning. Her wet, dirty clothes had disappeared in a basket, so she reached for a flannel dressing gown to put on and go out to the barn.

"Not tonight," Njola said crisply, taking it from her hands and returning it to a hook. "The doctor is here and doing what he can. The Skarr will live. You both need rest more than anything. It won't do either of you any good if you come down with an ague."

"But I need to see—" she protested.

Njola made a disapproving buzz, cutting her off. "If he takes a turn for the worse, I'll wake you, but otherwise you can visit him in the morning. He'll be fine. That one is made of mountains, and—beg your pardon—you're not."

Raina was installed in bed, piled with pillows and quilts, and had two cups of tea and another of fortified broth poured down her throat before the housekeeper relented and left her to sleep.

In the light of day, Greygor's prophecy proved true. Alrek *was* a problem when he woke up. A housemaid came to shake Raina awake with news that she needed to dress rapidly and visit the barn to calm him down.

“He’s going to wreck the whole place if you don’t hurry,” came the young woman’s grim prediction. After helping Raina find her boots, the maid paused at the door, chewing her bottom lip. “Pardon for asking, but what’s going to happen to us now that Lord Calcano is gone? Will you keep us on? I’m a hard worker and I’ll do any type of work as long as I can stay. My life in the City was...well, I just *can’t* go back.”

“I feel the same way,” Raina said wryly. “Don’t worry, the estate isn’t getting any smaller, and I’ll need all the help I can get. You always have a home here.”

The maid’s eyes grew shiny and she bobbed a curtsy. “Thank you, Lady Raina. I am in your debt.” The young woman’s voice cracked a little at the end, and so did Raina’s heart. The staff was depending on her now. All their fears and needs and wounds were hers to manage and soothe. Ordinarily she’d feel overwhelmed when faced with the prospect of juggling so many personalities and emotions. But as long as Alrek was at her back, ready to lift her up or hold her down, she could do anything.

He was awake—that was the first step. Now she had to persuade him to rest long enough to heal from his terrible injuries.



When she arrived at the barn, wrapped in dressing gown because she was too impatient to wait for the laundry to return

her overalls, she could hear his angry roars. A cluster of men stood outside the door even as it jolted with his efforts to open it. The black, iron handles were wrapped in chains and secured with a heavy padlock, but the hinges were close to failure.

“Greygor, you saltstained coward!” Alrek yelled. “Let me out! I might not be able to walk, but I can still crush you like an insect.”

“He doesn’t believe us that you’re unharmed,” the estate manager explained apologetically. “If there’s anything you can do before he knocks the barn off its foundations, I’d be grateful.”

“Alrek, my love,” Raina said in a soft voice, knowing he could hear her perfectly. The crashing, banging, and yelling from the barn ceased immediately. “I’m here. If these men open the doors, you must promise that you won’t hurt any of them. They’re here to help.”

“I’m not promising anything,” he growled. “Not until I see you.”

“I’m doing fine,” she said firmly. “Better than you, in fact. Calm down so I can come in and kiss you.”

The gathered humans goggled at her, but she returned their stares with a blithe smile. “We’re mates,” she explained, but that just made them stare harder, like she was speaking another language. She wasn’t sure what more information she could provide. That was all the explanation there was.

“You can unlock the door now. He’ll behave,” she added patiently to the open-mouthed estate manager. He snapped his jaw shut and unlocked the padlock, then scurried back. Chains slithered to the ground and the broad barn door swung open.

Alrek lay on his belly in the center of the space, his legs splinted with literal tree trunks, immobilizing him. He had to stretch his arms out fully to reach the entrance. His hands and forearms were wrapped in bandages, and the sharp herbal scent of burn salve reached her a moment before he picked her up and brought her to his face. He sucked in deep breaths, snuffling her all over until she wriggled and screeched.

“Stop it, that tickles!”

“I need to make sure he hasn’t hurt you, Pebble,” Alrek said roughly. “I’ll kill him if he laid a finger on you.”

“He’s dead.” She grabbed his tusks when he didn’t seem to be listening, surprised to see that his broken tusk now bore a shiny brass cap. He’d finally done it. He’d ended his suffering. But now he was suffering all over again, this time for her, and she hated it. At least this time, the healing wouldn’t take as long. “Greygor’s dead. Jared ate him last night.”

That got his attention. “The Corek-cursed krulloct got him?”

She grinned and nodded, and a laugh rumbled out of his chest. “I’ll be salted. Never thought I’d be glad to have that thing following you all over Salaan, but now I’ll feed that little bastard until the day he dies. We can take him back to the sanctuary to live with us once my legs are healed. It won’t take long. Skarr heal fast.”

Her heart skipped like a stone over the water, stuttering and then sinking. She stroked his jaw and pressed a kiss to his wide mouth, an ache building inside her, half desire and half dread. She'd have to tell him eventually that Greygor's entire estate was now legally hers. She couldn't just leave it and move to the Skarr sanctuary. She had too much work to do here. But right now, she didn't want the smile on his face to disappear, so she tucked away the truth for another time.

"Are you hungry?" she asked.

"Mmm, always," he rumbled. He swiped out his muscular, purple tongue, teasing apart the sides of her dressing gown until the belt loosened enough that he could dip beneath the hem of her nightdress. The tip of his tongue nudged her thighs apart, and her knees went weak with the hot invasion. She had to lean on his tusks to hold herself upright.

"People are watching us," she gasped, conscious of the gawkers still lingering just outside.

His tongue withdrew briefly. "So shut the door."

Instead, she drew in a shaky breath and stepped back, her clit pulsing and complaining as she pulled her dressing gown closed again and knotted the belt. He would not distract her with his addictive touch while he still wore *bandages*. All his energy needed to go toward his recovery. "I'm going to bring you breakfast."

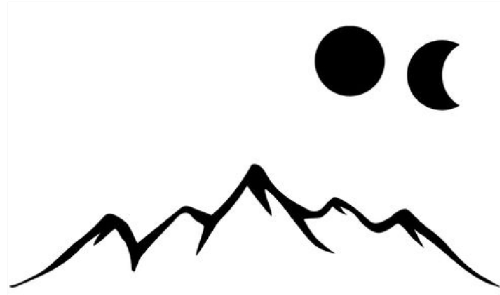
"I don't want breakfast," he crabbed. "I'm hungry for my mate. I want *you*."

“You need good food and rest. You can have me when you can bear weight on your limbs.”

His eyes narrowed belligerently. “That will take a week at least.”

“Consider it an inducement to heal.”

Chapter 17



ALREKELL

*I*nducement to heal.

Manna save him if it didn't work. He played the perfect patient while Raina earned her nickname and was a pebble in his plates all week, insisting that he eat when he wasn't hungry and sleep when he wasn't tired. She forced disgusting potions down his throat and slathered his burns with stinging salves. He wasn't used to being fussed over, but he bore it with good nature.

Well, not good nature, but he tried to be less of a bastard about it so he wouldn't drive her away. He wanted her to enjoy herself in his presence so she'd keep coming back. When she visited him, she sat cross-legged on his chest, her knitting needles clicking away as she told him of all the changes she was making now that she'd inherited Greygor's property.

Apparently the piece of paper that saltlicker had been hoarding that claimed they were married—as if writing something on paper makes it true—meant that Alrek's mate now held an enormous territory and spent most of her conscious hours working to care for and protect it.

She had big plans for it, too, plans that kept growing and vining into even bigger ones. At first it was restoring some of the fields back into forestland, slowly rehabilitating the soil and adding native species. The rest of the exhausted land, she'd nurture until it was ready to be farmed again.

“We could grow carra for all the Skarr on Salaan! And have plenty of other crops to sell if we interplant.” She beamed at the thought, breathing on the bright brass of his tusk and then tracing dreamy patterns in the fog. She made a humming, contemplative noise. “Not that we need more credits. Greygor had enough in the bank to run the estate forever. What if, instead of working all that land ourselves, we offered it to people in need? We could teach them how to farm it sustainably!”

“Sounds like a lot of trouble,” he grumbled, itching to have her to himself. His conscience tugged at him, though. He sighed and reluctantly admitted, “When Hinri and his mate visited the human colony across the sea, they met many females who were subject to cruelty but had no credits and nowhere to go.”

“There were a lot of women like that in the City, too.” Raina sat up, sucking in a breath. “They could all come *here*. We could offer humans sanctuary! Imagine lots of little farms like mine, supporting women who just want freedom,” she said excitedly. She stared off into the distance, lost in the daydream. Then, a blink later, she was off and running to implement her new flash of inspiration without even saying goodbye.

All her dreaming and scheming meant he saw less of her than he’d like, but he was unreasonably proud of her. Of course, the fact that she owned such big property didn’t mean the same thing to humans as it did to the Skarr, who often bragged about size of their mates’ territories, but he still

boasted about it to every human brave enough to come to the barn, from the housemaids who brought him clean linen bandages to the footmen who hosed him down in lieu of a bath.

Though the warped plates on his hands would take more time to shed and regenerate, his hide healed and his bones knit with the usual Skarr speed. In less than a week, the leg splints were off, and he was able to stand again, though he was trembly and knock-kneed as a newborn kit. The first thing he did when he could leave the barn was find Raina in the fields, where she was embroiled in a meeting with the estate manager about her human sanctuary idea, already drawing up building plans and surveying acreage.

Her face lit up when she saw him shambling awkwardly toward her. Without a word, he swept her up, installed her on his shoulder, and strode back toward the barn.

“Alrek,” she protested. “I have work to do.”

“You induced. I healed,” he said, ducking under the barn’s doorway and making sure the doors were closed securely behind them to keep out chilly autumn winds and unwanted eyes. Then he set her down and methodically stripped away her clothing until she was in her natural state.

Night Mother, she was beautiful bare, a succulent mouthful. His cock swelled at the sight and threatened to tear his trousers. With his hands stiff and bandaged until mere minutes ago, he hadn’t touched it since before the fire, and the

saltstained thing was bucking in his trousers, it was so eager to be ridden. He palmed it, begging for its patience.

“I know I should take you to our den for this,” he said helplessly. “This is the second time I’ve bedded you in a barn. You deserve better.”

Raina grinned as she climbed into his lap, making his impatient cock situation even worse. “It’s a nice barn. But Alrek, there’s something we need to talk about before—”

He groaned with need. “I’ve waited a week, little mate. Don’t make me wait any longer.”

“It’s important. I know you want me to move to the sanctuary with you, but—”

“You can’t leave your territory!” he interrupted, shocked that she’d even suggest it. Females belonged on their land. They might leave it to mate or meet with other females, but abandon it entirely? He tipped her chin up with his forefinger. “You’re a *gyddyr*, a guardian-mother. The land needs you. The creatures, too. Even the humans.”

She gave a doubtful chuckle. “But you said ‘our den.’ You must want me to move to the Skarr sanctuary with you now that we’re mates.”

“Ah, little human. You’re thinking like your kind. Our ways are different. Females choose, their mates make it possible. We have a den in Skarr’s Hand, but we’ll make our nest here as long as it suits you.”

He held her gaze until her eyes grew shiny like two pebbles in a mountain stream. “You’d move here?”

He gave a jerky nod and cleared his throat. “Never thought I’d leave Skarr’s Hand, but I prefer it here in the valley, I’ve found. I’m at peace when I’m with you and your land here is crying out for care. I’ll miss the sanctuary, but Patrek will be a good chief in my stead. The clan already likes him better, anyway.” He waved away her protests to the contrary. “I’ll visit the moss-gatherers and help with the wildlife when they need me, but my heart dwells with you. My hands will always be within your reach, Raina. My shoulders will bear your burdens, and my c—”

“Cock,” Raina prompted, grinning. “Your cock will always be at my service. I’m certain that is what you had in mind.”

He barked a laugh. “I was going to say my *coo* will be at your command, but your version is better. My coo can jump off a cliff.”

“Don’t say that. I love your coo. It switches off my brain and turns my insides into liquid, which is exactly what I need sometimes. I wouldn’t trade away your coo *or* your cock.” She ran her hands over his forearms, tracing the curled edges of his burned plates so her fingertips trailed against his sensitive, newly healed skin. He let out a brief scrape of sound, and she gave a full-body shiver that made all her best parts jiggle, parts he wanted to lick and suck and tease for the rest of the day and night.

“Night Mother, do it again,” she begged shakily, falling forward to cling to his chest. “Hold me up, because my knees are going to give out.”

He cupped a hand around her, rejoicing in the feel of her flesh in his palm. He could feel the breadth of her thighs bracketing the damp folds between them that practically begged for his tongue. When he let out another short coo, her core clenched, and her scent bloomed, enveloping them both.

“I could feel that, Pebble,” he breathed, rubbing his tusk along one side of her neck. “I felt your body grasp for me.”

“Again, please,” she said, leaning back into his hand. She pulled his fingers close around her like a blanket, encouraging him to squeeze. He pulsed his grip gently, tightening and relaxing as he matched the pace to the short coos he let out, teasing her with the sound and pressure, letting it vibrate through her until she moaned and clenched for him. His palm grew slick with her arousal, and he pushed her thighs apart with his free hand.

He notched the pad of his thumb against her sex, letting it press into and part her folds. She arched up into his touch, grinding against the ridged fingerprint. Her pulse quickened in his ears as he adjusted his thumb’s angle to hit the right spot.

“That’s it, you’re almost there,” he urged. “You’re doing so well. Come for me, Raina.”

“Tighter!” she panted, and he obliged, squeezing her with infinite tenderness until nearly every plane of her body was hugged by his hands. He felt her tension peak as she reached a

shuddering climax. He didn't release her until every last quiver had finished and she was limp in his grasp, her cheeks flushed and her eyes half-lidded. "Night Mother, you've ruined me."

"Sleep if you like, beautiful," he murmured, cradling her to his chest that could barely contain his heart, it was so overflowing with love for his mate. His impossible, improbable, irresistible mate. "I'll watch over you."

"Alrek," she mumbled, sounding annoyed. "This time was supposed to be for you."

"I'll be here when you wake up to collect on the debt." The instant it was out, he wondered if it was too soon to joke about debts. He was relieved when she laughed even as her lids fell shut.

While she slept, he basked in her scent, pleased that it was all over his hands, rubbed into his skin and captured beneath the edges of his plates so it would linger even after he washed them. That was the privilege of a happily mated male, carrying his female's scent with him.

Some small part of him still couldn't believe he deserved another mate, but the rest of him staunchly believed *Raina* deserved the best mate on Salaan, and he didn't trust anyone else with the role. He'd throw himself wholeheartedly into the task for that reason alone. She hadn't been given to him. He had been given to *her*.

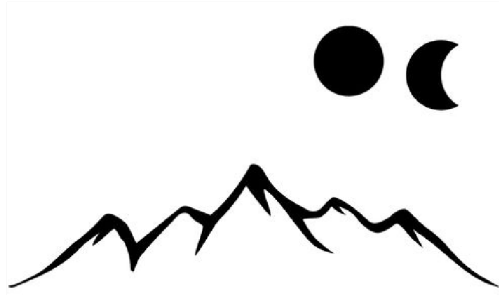
To his surprise, she didn't wake to eat, but slept through the afternoon and late into the evening. He watched the moons rise one after the other through the barn's clerestory windows and

stroked her hair. She smiled in her sleep but didn't open her eyes.

His mate was sleeping off more than her pleasure, he realized. She was exhausted from all the work in her territory this week. She'd barely stopped to eat, let alone rest, she was so absorbed in her dreaming and doing.

This was why Raina needed a Skarr mate. Not to fight her battles or rescue her, but to feed her and remind her to rest. To watch over her. To help her achieve every dream her remarkable mind could conceive.

Chapter 18



RAINA

The barn was dark and quiet when she opened her eyes. Alrek's strong fingers still surrounded her, the scars from his burns visible in the middle-of-the-night moons-light. She yawned and stretched, a delicious feeling that immediately revived the warm thrum between her thighs.

"Did you dream?" he asked softly, thumb brushing gently down her arm. He was awake. Watching her.

"Yes, but waking up in your hands is better than any dream." She beamed at his crooked smile. Refreshed from the extra hours of sleep, she felt ready to scale mountains. One in particular. "I think it's your turn. What would you like me to do for you?"

His enormous cock swelled visibly in his trousers, nudging up against her. If boulders could blush, Alrek did. He grimaced, pushing it down with his free hand. "I don't want to ask too much of you. And I don't know what's too much."

She considered his dilemma. "I would rather you ask than not," she decided. "Then I can tell you whether it's something I can do. If we're both guessing all the time, we're bound to get it wrong. You didn't mind when I asked you to hold me tighter, did you?"

"No, I liked it." He was quiet for a few long moments, then said, "It's been a long time since I thought about what I want."

Between the clan's needs and my own grief...well, it hasn't been a consideration. Wanting *you*—that's all I know."

"Take your time." She leaned against him and waited patiently until his chest rose with a deep breath that indicated he was about to speak.

"I want to go outside. I've had enough of staring at the rafters this week."

She chuckled. "I can imagine. Let's go outside, then." Raina scooted off him, slipped her feet into her unlaced boots, and headed for the door, but Alrek didn't move to follow. She turned back and raised a brow. "What is it?"

"You won't be too cold?" he asked.

"If I get cold, I'll tell you. Trust me, Alrek. I'll let you take care of me if you let me take care of you." She held her hand out, and he offered her a finger to hold. Together, they walked out into a night that was cool and clear and quiet. Stars splashed across the belly of the Night Mother in a broad path that seemed to lead them into one of the unharvested tzat fields, so Raina followed it into the yellow sea of flowers. They waded through the sweet-smelling rows until she could barely make out the dark geometry of the estate behind them.

"How's this?" she asked, stretching out her arms to embrace the wide-open. But Alrek wasn't looking at the expansive, starry sky, nor the bounty of moon-silvered blossoms that surrounded them. He was looking at her.

“Perfect,” he breathed, sinking down beside her. He laid back, raising a glittering cloud of tzat pollen, and pulled her onto his chest, pinning her with a warm, comforting hand so they were both staring up into the sky. “I want you to myself for a minute. Just us, looking out at the universe, while the rest of Salaan sleeps.”

She could give him that, even though her body was restless to find some interesting new way to experience pleasure with him. She settled in, enjoying the quiet, limitless night, watching the occasional star streak across the sky. After some time he spoke again.

“I just realized that I’m not in pain. Not one part of me, inside or out. I don’t even remember the last time I felt this... *whole*.” He sounded bewildered and a little bit lost, as though he were stuck rummaging through the past to find his last pain-free moment.

“Let me make you feel even better,” she suggested wickedly, hoping to draw him back to the present. “What else do you want?”

“You know I can’t resist you. You’re the pebble that brought down a mountain,” he joked, and then his voice dropped, drumming into her with its resonance. “I’ll tell you what I want. I want you sitting on my tusks with your full weight. I want my tongue inside you. I want to suck every drop of your sweetness when you come.”

Her skin sparked all over at his words, her nipples pulling tight. “This is for *you*,” she objected, even though she was

already crawling up to her intended perch.

“This *is* for me,” he repeated gravely as she looped her legs over his tusks...his beautiful, strong, mismatched tusks that told the story of his love and loss and healing.

It was a vulnerable, indecent posture that required her to spread her thighs wide to straddle his broad jaw, shattering any self-consciousness she might have left. She gasped and held on with both hands when he slipped his tongue over her sex, probing greedily for her most sensitive spots. Her legs kicked involuntarily when he found her clit, and her boots flew off into the tzat rows, probably lost forever.

He focused there, humming with pleasure when her brain switched off and her praise and gentle directions devolved to nonsense exclamations. All she could do was tilt her head back and pretend the stars could understand what she said.

How could his touch be so tender and so strong at the same time? Just when she felt the rush of hot sensation crawling up her body that meant she was about to come, he abruptly stopped moving, leaving her poor, throbbing clit without fulfillment.

She clenched on nothing, helpless with frustration, and his tongue narrowed, the tip plunging into her channel to fill exactly where she felt empty. He was teasing her. Serious, complicated Alrek, teasing her. How wonderful and unexpected.

Her eyes rolled back in her head when he began to thrust the tip of his tongue in and out. It molded perfectly to her shape,

filling and stretching her to the limit. She was vaguely aware that his whole frame was shifting, shoulders jostling against her heels, and when she turned her head slightly, she saw he'd taken down his trousers and was stroking himself while he feasted on her.

“I want to see!” she exclaimed, feeling irrationally jealous that it'd been going on behind her back.

Alrek chuckled, his exhale cooling the damp skin between her thighs and on the underside of her breasts. In a muffled voice, he said, “Turn around then. It will work both ways.”

She eagerly reversed her seat so she was leaning forward against his tusks instead of backward, and his groan of pleasure at the new position vibrated through her. She felt the same, now that she had a clear view of his cock. One of the few places on his body that wasn't plated, it was stunningly sensual to see his bare hide, especially with his huge, rocky hand wrapped around it. Iridescent pearls welled from the tip and fell onto the plates of his abdomen, and the shaft swam with his oils.

“I want it on me,” she managed to string together, her skin already tingling in anticipation. He groaned again, tongue working erratically as he milked his cock for more oil before bringing his hand up to massage it into her back and thighs and breasts.

As the oils sank in, making her body glisten like the stars had dusted her with their light, she felt the relaxing warmth from it build. It *melted* her. Her muscled loosened, her skin

sang, and her clit greedily ground against his textured tongue. She rocked her hips and the intensity built quickly, making her thighs shake and the back of her neck prickle. His hand returned to his cock, his movements rougher this time as he jerked his fist up and down, his desperate need conveyed in each harsh stroke.

“Let’s come together,” she gasped.

His reply was his tongue sliding inside her in a single, powerful thrust. That was all she needed. Her channel clutched around him in deep, overwhelming waves that rippled through her whole body, her pleasure so vivid and profound that she lost all sense of time and place. They could have been on the surface of a moon or underground for all she knew. Salaan could have spun out of orbit and she wouldn’t have noticed. It took all her focus to keep her eyes open so she could watch him come, too.

Like always, he was a primal force, planetary, like he was part of Salaan itself. He came like the tide. Like a storm. Like the river spilling over its banks after the spring thaw. Beautiful, powerful. Unstoppable. *Hers*.

When they’d both caught their breath, she climbed down from her seat on his face. He protested when she made her home on a seed-slick part of his chest.

“I don’t want you wet and cold,” he said, moving to pry her off his plates.

She laughed and rolled away from his hand into an even bigger pool that was still body temperature. The warm, viscous

liquid coated her, smelling of his temptingly sweet spice.
“How about wet and warm?”

“Raina,” he groaned. “You’re in my mess.”

“I love your mess,” she said, smoothing it over her skin. “It feels good and smells good and tastes good.”

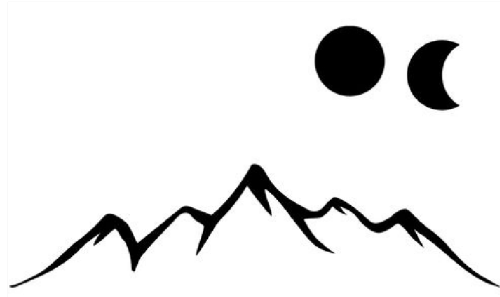
“There’s a lot of it,” he said doubtfully.

“There’s a lot of *you*,” she shot back. “And I love all of you. Your big mess and your big heart and your big hands and your big—“

“Coo,” he broke in, an equally big smile spreading across his face.

Her smile matched his. “That’s exactly what I was going to say.”

Epilogue



ALREKELL

Springtime

With the spring thaw came the floods, pouring over and between the rocks as the snowmelt made its way down the mountains to the river at the bottom of the valley. Raina's territory was crawling with humans—her regular staff, but also seasonal planters she'd hired at the terminal and a freshly migrated flock of City females. The latter, though they were eager pupils of Raina's new approach to agriculture, gave him such a wide berth that he'd barely caught their scents.

That was fine with him. Alrek still had little affection for humans as a group. He liked a few individuals and loved just one—his mate. In his view, she had no flaws. She was brilliant, loving, and devoted to her land, exquisitely sensitive to its needs and the needs of its residents, even when she neglected her own.

When he sensed she was tired or hungry or nearing overwhelm, he'd scoop her up and carry her away from whatever task had absorbed her. She would laugh and let him drag her off to the wing of estate that they'd renovated as a proper Skarr den, with a deep nest of furs and a roaring fire in the generous hearth, where no one bothered them.

He kept her happy with coos and caresses and his cock. She deserved to be spoiled, his Pebble, his mate, so shiny and rare. And when he wasn't feeding her or rutting her or holding her as she slept, she kept *him* busy with tasks that challenged his strength and filled his heart with peace.

He was enjoying one of those tasks, planting carra slips on her old acreage and listening to her tinker in the barn on one of her projects, humming and tapping away with her tiny, human-sized hammer. He nestled the pale shoots into sunwarmed soil, overwhelmed with affection for them like he was putting his own kits to bed. To his mind, there was nothing better than this, working alongside his mate, knowing they'd share a meal together later and spend the night in each other's arms.

He straightened when he saw Raina striding across the field toward him with a pack on her back. This wasn't in the day's plan. He frowned, his brow plates grating together. "Where are you going?"

"Jared woke up from hibernation!" She bounced on her toes, thumbs looped under the straps on her pack. "I wasn't sure he'd make it through another cold season. I think he deserves his freedom, don't you? I don't want him lurking too close to the new women's properties, though, so I thought we could take him out well into Skarr territory and let him go."

He jerked a nod, already gathering up his tools. Jared had avenged one of his mates and saved the life of the other. He owed the Corek-cursed creature everything, even an unscheduled hike up a mountain. "Good idea."

Raina's barn-tinkering had been construction of a travel crate for Jared, one with cracks too narrow for his sneaky tentacles to slip through. They baited it with a fresh djumjum steak and rang the bell, and the beast went inside the crate without hesitation, much to her delight. Alrek carried it and Raina rode atop so they could move at Skarr speed through the forest, unhindered by her short strides.

He avoided the area around Skarr's Hand—though a krulloct couldn't easily kill a Skarr, it could be annoying, and Patrek would be deeply unhappy to have it relocated so near his human mate and her sister. Instead, he sought out a deep gorge many miles away, one with steep sides that would take Jared too much time and effort to scale his way out of, should he have the urge. Alrek suspected the krulloct would stay put, though. His last prey had provided him a large meal that would sustain him for a long time to come.

After descending into the ravine, Alrek placed the crate beside the small stream that tumbled down a cliff face, over a rocky spill, and into the deepest part of the mossy hollow, where it formed a clear, blue pool. Raina hopped off the lid, turning around in place to take in the lush greenery and many hiding places for both predator and prey.

"I like this spot. He will, too. Won't you, Jared?" Inside the crate, the krulloct huffed.

"I think he knows his name," Alrek said, surprised.

"Of course he does." She smiled at him, brief and dazzling, over her shoulder before she leaped between rocks over the

stream. He watched, bemused, as she reached up to tie something in the low branches of an addoc tree. When she withdrew her hand he caught a glimpse of brass at the same time that a spring breeze shook the tree, making the bell chime briefly.

“This way, if he wanders toward any settlements, the bell will ring when the wind blows and draw him back.” Of course, her brilliant plan worked...a little too well. Inside the crate, Jared thumped and snarled, thinking it was time to feed.

“How does he still have an appetite when he just ate a whole djum steak?” Alrek marveled.

“I suppose one could ask the same question of a Skarr who just mated,” she teased.

“The difference is he doesn’t need the nutrition, whereas I always need my mate,” Alrek said, crossing the stream in a single stride to lift her onto his shoulder.

“Wait,” she protested, as he moved to take the lid off Jared’s crate before making a hasty retreat down the mountain. “Shouldn’t we say some words for him? Wishing him luck in the wilds or something?”

“Go ahead then,” he grunted, impatient to get back to their regular life. Their simple, joyful, perfect life.

Raina clasped her hands together as she stared down at the noisy, shaking crate. “You were a loyal companion, Jared.”

Alrek snorted, and he swore he heard a tiny giggle escape her, but she continued her speech to the box with measured

solemnity. “Though your camouflage wasn’t perfect, you didn’t let that get in the way of achieving your dream. You kept trying, and I admire you for that.”

“His dream was to eat you, Pebble!”

This time, she definitely giggled. “Jared, you inspired me to keep working toward my own goals, even when it seemed like success was impossible. Neither of us ended up with exactly what we wanted in the end, but I’d argue that what we found was even bigger and better than what we’d dreamed.”

Alrek guffawed. “Bigger, definitely.”

“Thank you for teaching me persistence, Jared. Thank you for your company these past years.”

“And thank you for eating our enemy,” Alrek added, meaning it. “You gave Brannica justice and saved our lives, even if you would have preferred to eat us yourself, you little bastard.”

Inside the crate, the krulloct was still, almost like he was listening. He was probably just winding up to do his worst. Alrek broke the latch on the crate. “Careful now,” he warned Raina, who wriggled on his shoulder to avoid sliding off when he bent over to open the lid. “We may have to make a swift retreat if he comes out on the attack.”

She nodded and grabbed his tusk to secure her seat as he gingerly lifted the lid. Several of Jared’s tentacles whipped out, claws hooking over the edges of the crate to pull himself

out of its confines, and Alrek moved back several yards to give himself a head start if necessary.

Jared's lithe form bunched and spread as he drew himself out of the crate and onto a nearby boulder, his single cloudy eye roaming over his new territory before fixing on them. Alrek felt Raina tense on his shoulder and found he was holding his breath, both of them waiting to see what the krulloct would do.

Jared didn't make a sound. He didn't lunge for them. His skin rippled boulder-gray, then—two seconds after he left the rock for the verdant ground—turned a mossy-green patchwork as he slipped away into blue pool, disappearing beneath its glassy surface.

Their relieved breaths rushed out in unison.

“He's gone. His fixation must have abated,” Alrek said, feeling a strange, bittersweet joy for the damn thing. Jared's obsession with Raina had been a terrible duty that kept the krulloct in a place he didn't belong. It was only Raina's kindness that had shown him a life that was anything other than misery.

Alrek could relate.

Raina stroked her tiny hand over his jaw and down his tusk, seeming to sense his mixed feelings. “I'll honestly miss him a little bit, but I'm glad he's finally free.”

They took the long route home to check on regrowth after last autumn's fires and to brush the winter debris from Brannica's cairn. They even stopped by Skarr's Hand to visit

Patrek and exchange news. Alrek did his best not to growl at Eliok who gifted his mate a basket of sweet snow plums and two skeins of handspun wool.

Once he got over the insult of another male gifting his mate, Alrek was glad to hear that all the moss-gathers had weathered the cold season without incident. And everyone in the Hand was excited to learn that the first group of humans had arrived at the new human sanctuary on Raina's estate. Mimma and Maja were impatient to welcome the new residents, and several of the unmated Skarr were embarrassingly eager to meet them, too.

"You should all come down and stay at the estate when you can," Raina suggested. "We have room for everyone, and the staff is used to giants now. Mostly," she amended.

Mimma lit up. "Actually, this is great timing. We just released the last of the wildfire refugees, and it'll be another month before Hinri and I cross the sea to meet Arngar's new little one. She's doing well, according to the proud papa."

"A new baby, how wonderful," Raina said warmly from her seat on his shoulder. Alrek had to blink and pinch the bridge of his nose to dissipate the hot sting in his eyes. A new kit. A female kit. There was still hope for the Skarr.

"That means we can go with you now!" Eliok said cheerfully. He was the one who'd given Raina the yarn, and that made Alrek's plates grate together if he thought about it too much. Maybe he wasn't over it. You didn't gift another male's mate!

“Don’t get your hopes up,” Alrek growled, glaring at him as he wrapped a possessive hand around Raina’s calf, enveloping her foot in his grip. “Few humans want to wrestle a cock the size of their torso. You’ve just met all the ones that do.”

All three females giggled at his description, which softened his mood a little. He couldn’t begrudge anyone a chance to have a mate. Not when he’d been lucky enough to find two. He tugged gently on Raina’s foot. “I’m just saying, they’re not all this...perfect.”

Raina elbowed him gently in the ear, a loving reproof, before adding, “Of course, I’ll introduce you. But these women are very fragile. They’ve been through a lot and are trying to build new lives for themselves. So don’t take it personally if they aren’t exactly...*open* to the idea of mating with a giant.”

“I wouldn’t expect it. We just want to help.” Eliok sounded earnest, but Alrek could already see him mentally calculating how many courting gifts he could carry down the mountain in one trip.

“We’ll sleep outside their dens in case they need anything,” Jonn added, hands clasped in front of him, practically vibrating with hope.

Patrek shook his head. “You won’t do anything of the sort. Not unless they ask you to.”

“But—”

“No. You won’t be meeting with them if you can’t exhibit the simplest good manners. And you won’t be meeting with

them if you don't get the grassgrain threshing done, either." Patrek crossed his arms, his mouth firming even as his gaze was kind.

He looked like a chief. A leader who would guide and govern fairly. Alrek clapped him on the back, too overwhelmed with pride to articulate his feelings. He'd chosen correctly. The clan was in good hands with Patrek.

"Chief's right," one of the moss-gatherers said from his porch across the meadow. "Faster you get your work done, sooner you can court a female."

"This isn't a courting visit," Alrek reminded them, but Eliok and Jonn were already dashing across the meadow like exuberant kits. It took all Alrek's strength not to roll his eyes. This was why he wasn't in charge anymore. Let Patrek motivate the young males and keep them in line. He had better things to do. Like his mate.

He turned from the group and carried Raina off into the forest. She laughed, already used to his abrupt exits.

"No goodbye for your clan chief?" Patrek asked, when Alrek was already a few hundred yards into the trees.

"Goodbye," he grunted, knowing his brother could hear him perfectly well. "Don't follow behind us too closely."

Patrek's answer was just a fading chuckle.

All the way down the mountain, Alrek and Raina celebrated their love. They mated in moss and on top of boulders, in pale spring sunlight and dappled shade. They washed off the mess

in frigid, crystal-clear pools, and then he got his mate messy again with the excuse of warming her up.

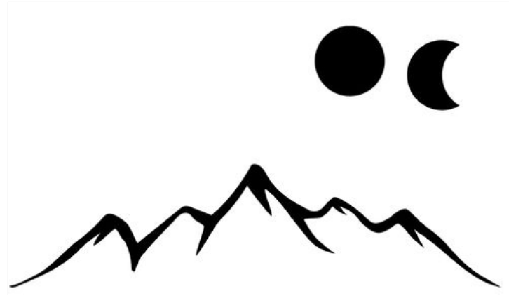
They paused when the forest opened at the edge of a cliff, allowing them a vista of the wide valley below. Salaan's bounty spread out before them like a generous courting gift. The river wandered lazily between plots of land, sparkling like it was made of gems. Their sprawling estate was visible as a dark smudge amid greening fields, the new cottages built for the human refugees bright dots nearby.

At one time, this would have been a view of lost things, evidence of a dying planet, poisoned piece-by-piece by human presence. But now when Alrek looked at it, he saw a future. One where humans were part of the problem, but also part of the solution.

He and his mate would do what they could to make the planet happy and whole. And they'd do the same for each other every day for as long as they lived. He reached for Raina, holding her up so she shared his same view, and she leaned into him, smelling of spring thaw and their love and the soil that grew all things.

She smelled of life. Their life. All life.

Author's Note



While writing *The Ruin's Revenge*, I learned just how much I love torturing grumpy heroes. Alrek is a special case, though. His deep losses meant I only tortured him in sweet ways, like intense longing for what he thinks is impossible. He doesn't need punishment...he does enough of that to himself. He needs love and acceptance and healing. He needs space to think and feel without the pressures of responsibility for his whole clan, and Raina gives him that on her little farm.

In our time and place, we'd probably call Raina neurodivergent. Her intense focus on her special interests and her sensitivity to her environment make her very Skarrlike, and that's just the kind of female Alrek knows how to tend. He doesn't see her differences as weaknesses, but as valuable parts of her temperament, inextricable from her many strengths. We should all be so treasured!

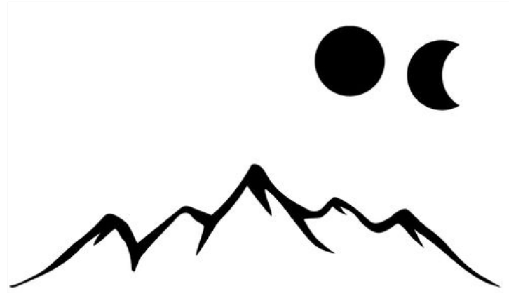
My favorite scene in this book is when she walks in on him rolling around in the straw because it smells like her. It's the

moment when the stern clan chief finally lets go and admits she has him wrapped around her tiny, human finger. She's so kind and doesn't embarrass him when she catches him in the act. It's no wonder he falls in love with her.

Love doesn't magically solve everything. It can't reverse generations of environmental damage overnight nor bring back those we've lost. It doesn't convince cruel people (or krullocts) to change their ways. It doesn't alter the anatomy of Skarr giants and their human mates to make them more physically compatible. But it can inspire creative solutions to seemingly impossible problems, and it can heal. What a gift.

XO, Sara

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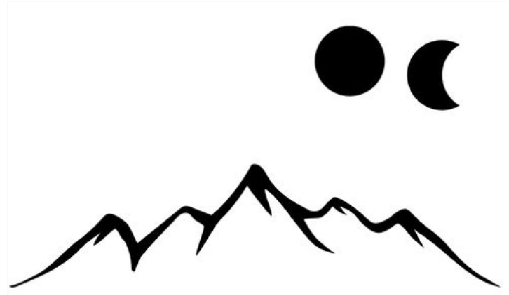
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About the Author



Sara Ivy Hill is truly hopeless about staying up past midnight to read by moons-light. She's fascinated by the possibilities of the universe and is certain it's bigger and more magical than anyone on our little planet can imagine. She writes steamy alien romance because true love is limitless. You can discover her books and connect with her here:

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