



ALIEN  
BEAST'S  
FATED MATE

VALTI FATED MATES

ELIN WYN

# ALIEN BEAST'S FATED MATE

VALTI MATES BOOK 1

ELIN WYN

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SNEAK PEEK OF ALIEN HUNTER'S FATED MATE

Also by Elin Wyn

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About the Author

## LITA

**M**y brain began to clear.

How much time passed, I didn't know.

Enough to send for soldiers to drag me up South Spoke to the center of Terr. And the pointed arch of the temple door.

I couldn't think clearly, every thing coming at me in quick bursts as I tried to pull myself together.

But failed.

Clop of siu hooves, and their rank animal smell. Above me, roofs and eaves of Terr crowded the stormy night. I was on a cart, propped on a hay bale.

My head ached, my jaw and teeth and nose throbbed. Blood clotted in my throat.

"She's coming around," I heard a deep voice say. The three spires of the temple rose above us.

"The old man really gave it to her," another said as he dismounted. Then the round knocker in the mouth of a serpent was slammed three times against the bound door.

"Too bad," the first said. "I'll bet she's a beauty under all the blood and bruises."

Blinding, a flash of lightning preceded a steady downpour. I blinked away the afterimage and sat up.

The door stood ten feet tall but opened without a sound.

The soldiers knelt, gazing at the ground. One held out a sheet of auto-scribe. From the shadows, a pale hand beckoned.

"Let's get this over with and get the hell out of here." The soldiers

returned, lifting me from the cart. When they saw I could stand, they walked me to the pointed black maw of a door.

“You’re afraid,” a soft voice spoke.

I nodded, unable to answer.

“Come.”

No way was I going—the soldiers gave me a rude shove. I ended on my knees on a hard stone floor. Light narrowed and vanished with the thud of a door closing. Thin hands gripped my shoulders.

“I’m touching you.”

Looking up, torches distant, I saw amber eyes set in a hooded pallor.

“Your skin is like gold.”

Too afraid, my mouth clamped shut.

“You are afraid,” the pale woman said.

Finally, I managed to croak, “Yes. I’m afraid.”

“Your response is appropriate.”

Then hands reached out from the dark, pulling me in all directions. My beautiful dress was ripped from my body, tossed out of my view. I was lifted up, stripped completely naked, carried into the dark.

I didn’t have the voice to scream.

In an unlit chamber, I was dropped into a tub. Rough cloths scrubbed me, reaching everywhere, my private places—I could not slip free of their grip. Just as suddenly, I was pulled from the water. Manacles slipped over my wrists, my ankles. When I tugged, I found my bindings were soft but firm.

Gripped by these bonds, I was hauled into yet another room. This one had a rectangular hole in the floor. A cover, like that of a sarcophagus, lay a few feet away. I could not see my captors as they forced me into the watery grave.

“What are you doing to me?”

The water was warm, so warm I hardly felt it. I floated, my bonds secured, but not tightly. Only my face remained above the surface. When I tried to thrash, I was held—but loosely.

The pale face floated above me again.

“What is this?” I asked. “Please don’t hurt me.”

She crouched down. “We only need to learn if you can learn.”

“What? What does that mean?”

“The temple needs oracles to maintain the city. We will train you. If you are able.” She touched my face. Her eyes widened. “You are present. I’m never sure.”

“I don’t understand what’s going on.” I sobbed, tears rolling into the warm bath.

“You will be deprived of sensory input. Once you reach a calm state, the priests will attempt to impart knowledge. If you cannot accept, there are other uses for you.”

“Uses?” I wailed.

“Should you prove an unworthy vessel, there are other ways your form can be applied.”

I didn’t understand—except that one word.

Applied.

So few girls brought to the temple by lot ever reappeared. Something had been done with them. Is that what she meant? Were they *applied* in some frightening way?

With a sound of stone on stone, I heard the sarcophagus cover move toward the hole in the floor. It was going to entomb me.

“No, no, no, no—”

“Fear is your friend,” the pale woman stood.

I saw the edge of the cover looming. It slid relentlessly in place.

Lightning flashed in the room. I would’ve thought we were deep in the bowels of the temple. The walls shook with the report of thunder.

The woman threw back her hood, clutching her temples. Sparks flew from black, featureless walls. She let out a moan.

But I caught a glimpse of her. Thin, with auburn hair shaved short. When she blinked, I noticed the green of her eyes.

Freckles?

She was hardly older than me. How could someone who looked so normal torture me within the walls of the temple?

“Error,” she said.

“Don’t do this to me,” I pleaded.

More sparks erupted out of sight. She winced. “Error,” she said.

The lid slid home. I was trapped in the warm black. For a time, I merely floated. Nothing bad happened. Nothing good, either.

Lights played in my vision. Visions took shape. Shapes took on solid form.

My father bouncing me on his knee on our terrace, telling me silly stories. Slicing firin root and patat with Mother for larendove pie. My friends on Four Ring playing a game of skip. My true love, crawling through narrow,

claustrophobic darkness. Terr, blazing, the city engulfed, an explosion of soil and rock. Smoke and dust reformed into concentric circles. Lecherous and lame, my betrothed assaulted me within view of the temple. A wall built from steel plates stood inside a mote. Giants wandered a glistening forest.

Stars at night.

Whispers in my ear.

Nothing.

And then...

I sensed his thoughts in my state of nothing.

*Danger*, he thought, fearful himself.

He? He who?

He sensed I was afraid, in mortal peril. With him, I crawled through the rusted, blood-scented guts of an alien stronghold.

Passages barely large enough to belly-crawl. Slick, cold, greasy fluids dripped on our skin. Sometimes, we slithered through grotesque, fetid muck.

He would not give up. My rescuer.

For many moons, he dreamed of me, as I now dreamed of him.

But then, a sudden shift: terror and pain, forced his hand. I was no dream.

He was compelled to find me, even across miles of wilderness, even in this maze of metal, blinking lights, miles of tubes and wires.

What was this place?

To my shock, he sniffed the air, taking in the scents. My scent. It drove him on.

What was my rescuer? Man or beast?

Should I feel a jubilant relief, or dread at his unstoppable approach?

Needing to know more of him, I reached out with my mind.

At first touch, his reflexive growl was bestial. Savage.

Yet we still connected.

Rage and fear vanished in a flood of recognition, of yearning joy.

“My fate,” he whispered. “The bond of my soul. You will be mine.”

Never had I experienced such forceful emotion. It was too much to bear. I broke away...

## LITA

“Give her a robe.”

I felt rough hay beneath a thin cover, an itchy blanket.

My senses returned.

When I sat up in a dim chamber, something struck me in the face.

Laughter ensued.

“First time is the worst time in the Tomb.”

I was in a dorm, a cell. Two women sat on another cot. They tossed a garment at me.

“Get dressed. We’ve got work to do.” She had features like mine, straight black hair, dark eyes.

“You do know what we’re working on?” the other asked.

“Removing corrosion from the contact points in Monitor One.” My words surprised me. Where did they come from?

“Good. You can learn to learn. In that case, my name is Mila.”

I pulled the rough white robe over my head and stood.

“Denna.” The other girl had a foam of blonde curls and deep blue eyes.

“Guess it’s the three of us, then.”

Five girls were sacrificed every year. “But where are the others?”

“Not suitable for temple slaves, we guess,” Mila said. “They’ve been...”

She shrugged.

Applied. The word shuddered into my thoughts.

“You know what we’re doing. Do you know where we’re going?” Denna asked.

How could I possibly— “Monitor One is on sublevel three west.”

“Let’s go,” Mila shrugged.

I took a few staggering steps. Stopped.

“You’ll get used to it.” Denna put a hand on my shoulder. “The priests put thoughts in our heads. Instructions. Skills.”

The door to the cell opened at my push. I turned to the other two.

“They don’t lock us in?”

Mila turned my shoulders physically and guided me into the corridor. “The temple is your life now.”

“Don’t bother trying to escape,” Denna said.

“They’ll kill me?” I whispered.

“Worse. They’ll keep you alive. Maybe forever,” Mila said. “You’ll see.”

A woman turned into the corridor. I recognized her. She had taken me into the temple.

“Oracle,” Mila and Denna bowed in greeting.

“Error,” she said. I heard that from her before. She handed each of us a metal device.

“Huh,” Denna said. “Good morning to you, too.”

Mila elbowed her.

We turned and moved down a staircase.

“Niam is strange,” Mila said. “Her lot was drawn when she was just a baby. She’s grown up in the temple.”

“Stranger than even other oracles,” Denna said.

After another set of stairs and a maze I could somehow navigate, we moved into a bright room. What looked like the auto-scribes my father worked with were wall-sized. I’d never seen screens so huge. Designs and colors swirled across them.

“One day, we might understand the data,” Mila said. “I’m not looking forward to that day.”

But right now, we were just doing low-level maintenance. Not knowing how, I disconnected a pulsing tube from the wall. Inside were squirming wires that ended in gold points. With the device that the oracle handed me, I trapped a moving wire and removed dark gunk from the shiny end.

I looked up to see the other two at the same task.

The three of us were frighteningly efficient.

Over the next few days, I had no dreams of the man who was driven to rescue me. I did learn something about my fellow temple girls.

Denna was a warrior brat from Five Ring. Mila, a leather worker from the lowest ring in the city of Terr, Eight Ring.

“What did you do before your number came up?” Denna asked me.

“Oh, I was a nanny to some wealthy healers on Three Ring. I did some gardening on our terrace—mostly herbs. I took care of the family shopping and cooking,” I said.

“That’s not a job,” Denna said. “That’s just life.”

“Is nannying a job?” Mila asked. “Somebody owes me some coin. Sounds like you’re high class.”

My job.

I felt my eyes welling, but didn’t want the others to see.

“I found out what my real job was right before I was traded to the temple,” I said.

“Real job?”

“All my skills were meant to make me a prize for a wealthy man of status, that I could bear his babies and keep his home. I made nice dresses, learned to pin up my hair and blush my lips. So my father could collect a dowry and climb from Four Ring to Three.”

Had it only been days ago that my life went topsy-turvy?

“But you drew a lot instead?” Mila asked.

I shook my head. “No.”

Denna nodded sagely. “She’s like Branna was. Her parents took money from a wealthy family so their own daughter wasn’t sent here.”

*Close enough*, I thought.

The door to the cell opened. Niam the oracle beckoned to me.

“The Tomb. You need to acquire a new skill.”

I didn’t want to go. Being submerged in the liquid, hanging weightless in the dark for who knew how long, the idea made my skin crawl.

“Better go,” Mila said.

When I faced her, she pulled up her sleeves. I saw rings of scars. Burn marks. Branding? She gave me a nod.

I went.

This time, the Tomb chamber was not empty. Tall men stood, faces invisible within deep hoods. They stared at me, not speaking.

I looked at the oracle. She stared into space.

“Remove her robes,” one of the hooded men said.

“Yes, Father Zarak.”

“I don’t need—”

The priest made a wide gesture. Before my eyes, a line of heat and light

cracked, hot enough to hurt.

Okay. Do what they said. I got it.

Niam removed my robe. For a while, I stood naked in front of the priests. They stared, emotionless in their hoods.

“The wisdom we impart will hurt you,” the other priest said. “Should you survive, you will be initiated.”

Survive?

“Into the Tomb,” the priest said.

“Why will it hurt me?” I asked.

Like Father Zarak, the other priest made the sweeping gesture. A flash, and an agonizing welt appeared on my skin. Zarak took a step forward, utilizing his own horrible whip.

Under the assault of the fire whips, I fell to my knees, shrieking, covering my head. The priests didn’t stop.

“Father Aronn. Father Zarak. The Tomb,” Niam said, stepping between me and the priests.

I saw the whip element burn through her robe, leaving a mark beneath. The Oracle didn’t react.

Her presence stopped the assault.

“Yes,” Aronn breathed heavily, his words sounding wet.

“Into the Tomb,” the other priest moaned.

Niam took an instrument from her sundered robe. A green light flashed and the painful welts disappeared from my skin.

She had it on her as if she knew the priests were going to whip me.

My jaw clenched.

The priests took manacles from the walls, but had Niam bind me. I moved to the Tomb and descended the stairs into the warm liquid. They remained staring from under their hoods as my body was suspended and the lid slid shut...

Late in the night, I rose from my cot, not remembering how I got there. Dreams haunted me, a face, a voice I couldn’t remember.

Pulling on my robe, I picked up my sandals, so as to move quietly.

“Where are you going, Lita?” Mila whispered.

So much for that.

I faced her. “I don’t know. Not here.”

*Lower*, I thought, *below the temple*. I needed to get there. But why?

Whatever happened, the priests were right. I hurt. All over my body, even

inside my brain.

She slipped out of bed and took my hands. “Don’t. I know you think this is bad, but there are worse things. Please, just go back to sleep.”

“I’ll be fine.” I pulled away and shoved through the cell door.

“Lita!” Mila hissed.

She didn’t follow.

I wandered. While I didn’t know the temple, the Tomb gave me knowledge, even though I didn’t realize it. Moving down the curving stone stairs, I headed deeper into the temple.

Walls went from undressed stone to flat panels. Screens and lights decorated a few of them. As I descended and meandered the lowest levels, a sight made me stop short.

One of the panels had an odd decoration. A series of lines in different colors glowed. When I squinted, I saw the lines formed an intricate design. No, not lines. The delicate design looked organic, meaty—

*Applied.*

Above, a screen came alive, startling me.

*I am Branna. How may I serve?*

Eyes looked at me from the screen. I backed away, away from the pulsing design, the eyes, the voice in my head. Running, running.

I found myself lost.

Searching my thoughts, I found nothing imparted about this area. Though I moved carefully in the near darkness, I lost my footing.

With a whoop, I fell. Slid. Landed hard.

Now complete darkness surrounded me.

Hands extended, I found smooth, cold stone. Turning, I sought the hole I fell through. Then, a dim glow.

It brightened, revealing a smooth bore intersecting the black rock, and a robed woman.

From her frame and her hair, I recognized the oracle. A lantern was suspended in one hand, something shapeless in the other. I pressed myself against the stone. What would my punishment be for coming down here?

“Error,” Niam said. She dropped her burden.

I stared. A siu fleece cloak?

“Where are we?” I asked her.

“Error,” she said. “Lava tubes. Formed before the establishment of Terr.”

What was she talking about? Lava? Before the city of Terr?

But the oracle returned the way she came. “Error,” I heard her say before her light faded.

I picked up the cloak and put it on. What did this mean? Was Niam actually helping me?

“She thinks she can escape.” Aronn’s voice echoed, chilling me.

Where could I hide?

“We will show her our ways,” Father Zarak answered.

“Many, many times,” Aronn breathed, and my stomach turned.

“Branna!” Zarak shouted. “Attend! Where is the initiate?”

*In the lava tubes*, the voice shivered in my head. Almost at once, I saw reflected light bouncing on the polished black walls.

It was time to run.

## DRAX

**M**y shoulders barely fit in the tight passage, but I crawled forward on my belly until it opened wider. This awful place...

I sensed her. The girl from my dreams. I felt the vibration of her thoughts in my heart. More than that, I caught her scent. She was real. Though I knew that already, I had no proof until—

“Aahh!”

Pain sliced me, sizzling fire drawing strips across my skin.

And again!

“Aahh!” I screamed through clenched teeth.

My voice echoed. Hands sliding over my body, I felt no sign of injury.

The pain wasn't mine.

With double the effort, I surged through the smooth burrows deep beneath the earth. My Valti overwhelmed me with roaring abandon as the beast within railed against the pain. For the moment, I exalted in the animal power, the enhanced senses. It drove me faster, surer.

The pain was hers.

She was being whipped by flames, tortured. Surging agony could not slow my progress.

When the cave turned upward, I followed her scent. Unholy decorations appeared, red eyes watching, a fire that didn't warm.

Uneasy as I was, it could not match the abject terror I felt through the bond of my soul.

She must be protected. I must make her mine. Tear those who hurt her limb from limb.

Suddenly, the pain vanished.

I stood still in a geometric cavern. Felt fear through the bond. She was still alive, but injured, in torment.

Taking a relieved breath, I focused, calming myself. This strange place was no place to unleash my inner beast. Following the air in and out of me with my mind's eye, I restrained the animal within.

Once calmer, I examined my surroundings.

Was this room so different from a chamber in the castle palace? Staring eyes could be candles. Flickering blue squares windows. Bizarre boxes and tubes... furniture?

Calm. Balance.

I needed these to fight.

Tapping lightly into my Valti nature, I sniffed the air. The girl, my mate, was somewhere above.

Stalking these shadow chambers, I sought a way up.

My motions halted as my mind filled with a calmness deeper and stiller than I ever experienced. Unlike the state I fought to achieve to tame the animal that lived in me, never had I felt such overwhelming tranquility.

*I recognize you, though I don't know you.*

That touch, I knew it from before. "I am here for you," I said.

*So fierce... Are you my savior, or devourer?*

"None will hurt you and live to tell of it," I said. "You are mine and mine alone. Come to me."

Even in this serene state, I felt her fear rising. Was she held captive?

"Come to me!" I commanded.

Her thoughts quailed, intellect rippling like a still pool disturbed by a thrown rock.

A shudder of hopelessness as the depthless tranquility flashed away. My mind lost hers.

By the cursed red moon. If she could not come to me, I would go to her.

Passing beneath mountain-sized construction, through straight caves in steel, around cold objects that blazed with light, I sought a passage upward.

*I am Branna. How may I serve?*

A vision appeared, eyes without sight. Below, a network of lines pulsed and shined. Glowing red eyes winked on the flat surface.

"What are you?" I took a step back. "Are you trapped in there?"

*I am Branna. Biological Oracle. Interface to Terr. How may I serve?*

"Where is my bound soul, Oracle?" I asked.

*Error.*

“A woman held captive. Imprisoned. Where is she?”

*Cells of initiates are on sublevel one north.*

Meaningless. “Where are we?”

*I am omnipresent. You are below sublevel five.*

“How do I get to sublevel one north?” It was worth a shot.

*This temporary monitor chamber is beneath Terr proper. Passages are natural lava tubes and unmapped.*

Lava tubes. Is that what I’d been creeping, squeezing through since the Canyonlands? Easy enough to recognize.

I continued my quest.

I would not give in to despair.

Then, voices.

Echoes made the direction difficult, but the call to my heart was clear.

A jolt ran from my shoulder to my hand, stunning me. I tried to shake off the numbness.

Again, it was not my own feeling.

More jolts seared through me. I sprinted toward the source. As I neared, the intensity of the attack increased. At least I knew I was headed in the right direction.

Swerving around a curve in the tunnel, I came upon two hooded men. They stood above a form covered by a fluffy blanket, each stabbing at the fallen one with a wand.

Every touch crackled with energy, through the nerves of the one on the ground.

Through our bond. Through my own. Lunges of agony.

“Hold, torturers!” I raced toward them, drawing my blade.

Hooded figures staggered back in shock.

One cried out a babble of fearful words.

The other hooded figure sounded more commanding.

*Warriors to sublevel five west. The temple has been breached by a primitive.*

Branna’s voice response told me it was time to flee.

But not alone.

I leapt over the fallen one, putting myself between her and the hooded foes. They backed away even more, staring at my weapon.

The first made a sweeping gesture and a line of fire cut through the air. I

parried it away but even that slight touch brought heat all the way to the pommel.

When the hooded ones attacked in earnest, I knew there was no point in defense. Turning the sword, edge meeting whip, I swung with all my strength.

With a clang, the tip of my weapon bounced off the rock walls as it was sliced. At the same time, glowing red and squirming, the flame whips lay on the floor.

With cries of panic, the hooded ones fled. I should go after them...

Her face.

Legends, stories told around campfires burst into my mind at the sight of her. Tiny. Impossibly delicate features. A Frostling, a forest nyx, deceptively frail, yet bearing lethal magics.

In my dreams, haunting me, drawing me, never once did I think she was a fearful creature of myth.

She lay so still...

Dare I?

My fingers touched her neck.

A strong pulse. Warm skin, not the feel of an unliving, unearthly fiend.

She stirred as I lifted her in my arms.

“You...” Her eyes widened in fear. “You... what are you?”

Her head slumped again, unconscious.

*And what are you?* I thought.

The woman was small, hardly a burden. Though barely larger than a child, her feminine curves were evident under her clothes. Still, shoving her through narrow caves—lava tubes—all the way back...

There had to be another option.

Might as well give it a try.

“Branna, what is the fastest path to the Canyonlands?”

*An emergency escape passage runs from sublevel one north beneath the city wall.*

Okay, a good start.

“How do I get there from here?”

*From sublevel five east, take the central corridor to the farthest north wall. Stairs lead to the levels above. A door beyond the level one north landing leads to the emergency escape tunnel.*

Adjusting the woman’s slight weight, I moved away from the direction

the hoods had fled. Since they'd melted my sword in half, I hoped not to meet their warriors.

Following the oracle's directions as best I could, I ran through the underground nightmare.

The female trapped in the wall wasn't lying. After racing up flights of stairs at the north side of the dungeon, I saw a disused door. Kicking it open, I ran through a square, metallic passage that rose steeply.

Hollow shouts pursued. Warriors. Their torches provided enough light to see, and I sprinted after my shadow.

Finally, I came to a short flight of stairs, a door above.

Ramming with my shoulder, I crashed my way into the cool night.

Looming walls of the alien city rose close behind as I glanced over my shoulder.

Time to put some distance between us and it.

In my mind, I reached out to the bagart. Though I'd left her in the Canyonlands days before, she still remained. Grindi was loyal, chained to the dominance of my Valti side, even if she would rather run free.

At my summons, she ran towards us. I would do my best to meet her halfway.

Running through the forest, I kept casting looks behind. This was territory controlled by the aliens. I needed to reach the Canyonlands, and my home beyond.

Slowly the bond of my soul, my creature of dark lore, stirred in my arms. Her legs thrashed and she gasped.

I could not understand the words that followed. Gripping her more firmly, I continued taking us deeper into the forest until her struggles grew more frantic, and I feared she would hurt herself.

But still, I kept hold of her arms.

"We are destined to be one," I explained. "I'm taking you to safety, to my people." I glanced at her hands warily. "Unless you burn me to ash with your spells."

Her eyes took me in, growing wider and wider.

Then she let out an ear-piercing scream.

More painful than that, her obvious horror stabbed me in the heart.

"I have claimed you. You came to me in my dreams, and now you are mine," I tried again.

"Like hell I'm yours!"

Our language on her tongue sounded strange. How did she learn to speak it? A Frostling. Strange and magical. And here before me.

“You can’t claim me!” she shouted. “I don’t even know you!”

She tried to pull away, to run back to the city.

“I would not whip you,” I said. “Chain you. Force you to live in a wall. Am I so savage?”

“Live in a wall?” She stopped struggling, her face blank. “Branna...”

“We remain in alien territory,” I said. “If we don’t move now, the warriors will find us. Drag you back to that monstrous place and cut me to bits.”

“I can’t go with you!” she said. “My home is in Terr.”

“Do you really want to return to your prison? To the hooded men with the fire whips, the lightning cudgels?”

She faced south, back the way we came despite the trees which blocked the view of the city.

Would she choose that terrible life over an unknown future?

I couldn’t let her.

I needed her, more than she would ever know.

But...

If she wanted to return, I could not stop her. The choice must be hers.

“Tell me, my heart. Will you go to them, or come with me?”

## LITA

He was a walking legend. Dusky skin with gray spots that ran from his temples down his neck. Fangs. Sweeping, pointed ears. For my entire life, I'd been told stories of savage, man-like beasts in the woods beyond the Canyonlands.

I hadn't believed.

But there wasn't any choice about that now.

His body was larger than a man's, broader, rippling with muscle, hands huge. Dark blue hair was caught in a queue. Shoulders practically burst from a tooled leather vest, his pale shirt stretched by muscles. Breeks and boots were of a different leather than the vest. An empty scabbard hung from a braided belt.

Did primitive, man-eating monsters wear belts and boots?

Taking a calming breath, I dared look at his face.

Brutal blocks of bone, eyes heavily ridged, cheeks broad, chin a slab. His eyes were strange. The irises were multi-colored, a blue ring surrounding a green, the pupils slit like a night predator's.

Yet his mouth looked delicate, soft. Until he opened his mouth to speak, revealing sharp, prominent canines.

"We need to keep moving," he said.

The beast man strode away, not looking back.

I jogged to catch up. "Who are you? Why are you here?"

"My name is Drax of Zashi. I claim you as my mate," he said. "For months, I have dreamed of you. Did you not dream of me?"

"No..."

Not until I was placed in the Tomb, my mind twisting itself in knots.

Then I felt his presence. Did I dare admit it?

“You can’t claim me. Arrangements must be made. A dowry paid to my father. My parents would never let me marry below my status,” I said. “My marriage must be to a man in a higher ring.”

“Ring?” he said.

“The city of Terr is terraced in concentric rings. I am from an important one—Four Ring.”

“I don’t care about rings,” he said. “Only that you must accept me. If not —”

“Really? You’re giving me a choice?” I said.

“You are mine.” He glared at me. “You called to me. There is no hiding from our bond.”

Bond?

I *had* felt something while the priests crammed skills and knowledge in my brain.

However, I had come to think that the presence was my own mind, inventing a savior, keeping me sane. Life had swiftly become a horror. It was only a coping mechanism.

Except my made-up hero now dragged me into the woods, far from Terr.

So maybe there was something to the whole bond thing. I pushed the thought away. I couldn’t deal with it now. There were too many other questions.

“Where are we going? It’s dark. We could get lost,” I said.

“We can’t get lost. My mind touches Grindi’s,” he said.

“Grindi?”

“My bagart,” he said.

How I knew that a bagart was a beast of burden, I didn’t know. They were built like stie—hooved browsers—except carnivorous, with a spread of fierce horns to bring down prey.

“She is racing to meet us. Once we are mounted, we will lose your captors.”

I wasn’t getting on a predatory beast with a stranger. An alien savage. No matter who was on our trail.

But what was I going to do? Break away and run back for Terr?

Could I even find my way through the woods?

We were forbidden from traveling so far from the city walls. Not even hunters came this far, I was certain.

“Do all you Frostlings speak my tongue?”

I found Drax eyeing me curiously.

“Frostling?” I said. What was that?

“I’ve been told of your kind, my ancestors going back to the sunrise of eternity committed your fearful image to tapestries, to dark songs.”

He said it as if he knew something about my people.

“Honestly, I don’t know what that is.” I scrubbed my face. “My name is Lita, and I don’t even know why I know your language. It must be something from the Tomb. But why put that in my brain?”

Vaguely, I recalled the oracle behaving oddly after a lightning strike. How else could I be fluent in a language spoken heretofore by legendary monsters?

So many questions. With the sudden insanity my life had become, I didn’t feel grounded enough to find answers.

On and on, we ran through the woods. My head spun, lungs burning, trying to keep up with him.

My foot caught on something and with a yelp, I tumbled forward.

In a flash, Drax was there, catching me before I hit the ground. Lifting me in his arms, he continued on.

My weight seemed like nothing to him. Rather, he seemed relieved that we were moving at a faster pace.

We passed enormous trunks, branches laden with broad leaves, the ground rising and falling beneath his steady feet.

The red moon appeared above in the breaks between branches. It was low in the sky. Morning neared.

With the first vague glow of dawn, I heard a commotion in the woods ahead.

A huge beast broke through the screen of leaves, shaking a head loaded with killing antlers. Bearing shredding fangs at us, it rose on its hind legs as sharp front hooves pawed the air.

“Grindi!” Drax commanded. “Down!”

I felt a flurry in my brain, a whirlwind of fierce command.

The huge animal settled down and trotted over. On its back, a kind of saddle was strapped.

When it got within reach, Grindi bared her fangs and moved to bite Drax’s shoulder. He gave her a light tap on her shin with his boot. The animal blew, looking confused. But Drax wasn’t bitten.

The creature gave me a sniff. Nuzzled me. I braced myself, but the bagart didn't bite.

Drax stuck a boot in a hanging bit and levered himself into the saddle.

"Grab me at the elbow." He extended his arm.

"I'm not riding that monster," I said.

He bent to one side, hanging off the animal, and grabbed both my arms. Without effort, he placed me on the saddle in front of him.

"Hyah!" His legs jerked and the animal trotted off with a snort. His arms surrounded me, hands gripping the leash.

Now we moved much quicker into the woods.

"They wouldn't chase us this far," I said.

"No?"

"There are laws. While Terr holds lands as far as the Canyonlands, none are allowed that far. Most of our farms are south," I said. "Warriors maintain order in the city. Hunters take down monsters that threaten our herds." I glanced behind us. "They probably wouldn't have chased us very far outside the walls," I said.

"Your people would allow me to take you?" He sounded confused. Through our strange bond, I felt a growing heat. His anger flared at the back of my mind.

My heart sank.

"I may have exaggerated the importance of Four Ring. It is really the middle of our society. I am not very important. Especially since..."

After a pause, he prompted me. "Yes...?"

We moved farther and farther from home. Fright squeezed my heart. "I can't go home again."

"Why?" His arms tightened around me reflexively.

I sighed, simultaneously comforted and disturbed by his possessive hold. "You wouldn't understand."

"I would try," he promised. "If it is important to you, I would learn."

How long had it been since someone really cared what I thought, what I wanted?

Lost in my thoughts, I fell into a light trance, the hours slipping by as we traveled further away from Terr.

Suddenly, I realized the motion of the beast and his intoxicating nearness lit fires inside me I didn't understand. I squirmed against him, my breath coming faster.

“We’ll need to camp soon,” he rasped, his voice husky.

After riding all day, my legs were numb and sore, but tingles of excitement coursed through my body, too. The trees changed, now lower, the canopy thicker, and the rush of water came from the distance.

Drax brought his mount to a halt and slid off, then reached up to grasp me around the waist. As he lowered me down along the length of his body, we both froze, gazes locked. The barely leashed desire in his strange eyes stole my breath.

Neither of us moved for a long suspended moment. Then he set me down carefully, steadying me as I found my feet. “You have had a hard day,” he finally said gruffly. “We should rest. There is still far to go before we reach my home.”

I shook out the pins and needles in my legs, nodding wordlessly. His nearness made it hard to think or speak.

Did I want to see his home? Did I have any choice?

Drax made camp in the shelter of fallen trees with a bedroll from the saddle. A single bedroll. Would we have to share? My cheeks flushed and I busied myself gathering sticks, intensely aware of his every movement.

“Can you start a fire?” he asked. “Grindi needs grooming.”

I focused on igniting the tinder pouch he gave me, understanding his need to put some distance between us. The growing attraction was palpable, impossible to deny. What would happen when we could avoid it no longer in the intimacy of this camp?

The fire sparked to life as darkness gathered. Now what? I glanced at Drax caring for his mount, his muscles flexing. Heat that had nothing to do with the flames washed through me.

I looked away, trembling.

We were utterly alone here.

## DRAX

She hunched near the fire as I put Grindi's brush in the side pouch and unbuckled the saddle. Afraid of me—she couldn't hide it.

Lita, her name was Lita. The word sang through me.

Did she know I was a little afraid of her? I took in her smooth hair, her dark, tip tilted eyes framed by long lashes. So strange to me, yet more than compelling.

The bagart wandered to the river to drink. I fetched a skin of water. There was pemm wrapped in a morgon leaf in the side pouch. I brought it to the fireside.

She made a face. "What is that?"

"Dried meat and tongue fruit in tallow. Travel food," I said.

"No thank you."

She could suit herself. I peeled off a chunk.

"What do you want so badly back in that place?" A spike of fear drove through me. "Do you already have a mate, a lover?"

She laughed bitterly. "That's the whole problem. My parents were not happy in their marriage. They didn't expect me to be either." Tossing a twig into the flames, her gaze followed the sparks. "I was a bargaining chip, nothing more than livestock to be sold. And they found a buyer. Old and poxy, with three wives already bred and buried."

I ached to hold her, to ease the pain in her eyes. But instead I stayed quiet, watching. Waiting for her to confide in me.

"I... I couldn't take my father's command. So that's when he sold me to the temple."

"He would marry you to such a man without your consent?" I couldn't

believe it. “Why?”

“Money. Status,” she said. “It’s the way of Terr. Families make alliances, making ties to our betters to lift ourselves to an easier life. For me, marrying a man two tiers above would have made my life leisurely. Our children would grow up wealthy, inherit their positions. At least, the boys would.”

“The girls would be like you—groomed chattel.”

She shrugged. “Women aren’t worth more than that.”

I bit back my snarl. She was worth everything. And to be treated like that should have been a crime.

Although, I had to admit strands of her story weren't dissimilar to my own family's, save that she was a commoner.

Among our royals, there was much matchmaking, the maneuvering of brides or mistresses. Unions to ally against raiders, or stave off invading armies.

Such was my state. My father was king.

Even though I was a bastard born of his concubine, I still stood in line for the throne.

Not that I wanted it, nor was it likely I would ascend it.

“It’s late. We’ve ridden night and day.” I spread out the bedroll.

She stretched and groaned. “I’m sore from it.”

“I have healing balm in my pack, if you would like me to massage you.”

“Massage me?” she said. “That wouldn’t. I mean, my people don’t. No thank you.”

“At least share my bedroll. The warmth will soothe you,” I said.

“I have this cloak. It will keep me warm enough.”

Her nervousness traveled through me. Or perhaps it was my own.

To have her this close, the match to my heart, set all of my nerves on fire.

Closing my eyes, I focused on my breathing, willing my body to calm, to resist the urge to wrap her in my arms.

Such soft skin. What would it feel like under my hands, my lips?

What gentle moans would sound through the night as I explored her body, learning every place that made her quiver, tasted her desire?

Sleep was a long time coming.

## LITA

It did not take Drax long to fall asleep. I watched the rhythmic rise of his chest as he lay across the fire from me. Only then did I dare drop off.

Once again, I was in the blackness of the tomb, held fast. Except the water grew warm enough to feel—and warmer. I felt my face sweat, my muscles go limp. Breathing became laborious.

Then, the sarcophagus lid pulled back. But it was neither the oracle nor the priests who drew me out, but Drax.

“I’m so hot,” I breathed.

“As am I,” he said.

We were back in the forest. His face above me, Drax yanked free the woolen cloak. I gasped at the chill of the air.

“I won’t let you grow cold,” he whispered in my ear.

Then he kissed it.

“Wait—”

He bit the lobe, making sparks shoot through me. Bit my neck. My hands clawed his back of their own accord.

Roving, his lips explored my naked skin. I felt his passage like burns.

“Wait—”

His lips met mine. I responded, perhaps with more animal ferocity than he possessed. Arms locked around his neck, I pressed his soft lips firmly with my own. My tongue sought his.

Never had I wanted anything like this.

What was I doing? This primitive—

Rough hands kneaded my breasts, pinching and massaging my nipples until I cried out into our embrace.

He pulled away. In a rough, low voice, he growled, “I will kiss you everywhere, my bonded soul.”

No! I did not want this savage—

“Yes!” I pleaded instead. How I wanted this animal man touching me everywhere, I didn’t know.

Impulsive desire flooded me. I guided him to my secret places with my hands.

His face rasped against my belly as he kissed lower and lower.

My traitorous hips lunged to meet him, back arching.

His arms locked around my legs as his kisses plunged.

I wanted to struggle. Away from him or against him? My heated flesh yearned for his touch.

But then he vanished.

I opened my eyes. Branches and leaves, the pale green of dawn.

When I looked across the cold fire, Drax remained bundled in the blanket. I was still wrapped in the woolly cloak.

Dreams or nightmares?

I remembered deeply wanting Drax’s touch. My face flamed, as I was shamed by the memory. Being alone with a man was improper enough.

But it was only a dream.

Grindi's impatient hoof stamp and frustrated snort made me jerk awake. I sat up, leaves and dirt falling from my tangled hair as I blinked in confusion.

Drax rose slowly, his movements fluid and silent like a predator. Our eyes met, and I saw a flash of something feral in his gaze before his expression smoothed into nonchalance.

All around us, the forest seemed to hold its breath. The snapping of a twig underfoot shattered the stillness. Then came the dry rasp of leaves brushed aside by careful footsteps.

Another sound, then the gleam of early morning sunlight on steel. A figure glimpsed from the shadows, crossbow loaded and aimed unwaveringly at Drax's heart.

More shapes slipped between the trees, hemming us in. We were surrounded.

In a blur of motion, Drax leapt to his feet, muscles coiled tight beneath his tunic. His head turned rapidly as he scanned the woods.

“Stay down, Lita,” he murmured, eyes flashing yellow for an instant. “Brigands.”

My legs trembled as I tried to stand, the lingering effects of the temple's poison still making my movements sluggish and weak. I took Drax's advice and huddled on the ground making myself small.

Drax's hand went to his belt, grasping for a sword that was no longer there. Vaguely, I remembered he'd said it had been destroyed when he rescued me.

He frowned, then threw himself flat, as an arrow buried itself in the tree trunk where his head had been. Arrows hissed through the leaves as he crawled rapidly to snatch his saddlebag.

From its depths, he drew not another sword, but a large jagged knife. He turned to me, an odd urgency in his gaze.

“Look away, Lita,” he said, his voice deeper than before.

I turned my face into the dirt, clamping my eyes shut. I wanted to obey, but the sounds of rending fabric snapped my attention back.

What was going on?

When I found the courage to look back, my breath caught in my throat. Drax's eyes glowed, his canines lengthening into wicked fangs. Claws tipped his fingers, and the faint spots on his face and neck had expanded into the bold rosettes of a stalking cat.

Though already muscular, his frame grew larger, stretching his simple garments. The transformation transfixed me. No longer was he the Drax I knew, but something wild and primal from legend.

Here before me was the true beast man I'd been warned about as a child.

“Stand down!” a voice called out from the trees. “Surrender! You are surrounded.”

“We want only your mount and weapons,” came another voice from the opposite side.

The words barely registered through my shock. When an arrow buried itself in the branch above me, I scrambled deeper beneath my cloak, heedless of the leaves and dirt.

The temple had been trouble enough, but this? My guide was a beast wearing a man's face. Whether he or the brigands won out, I feared the loser would be me.

Keeping the cloak wrapped tight around me, I crawled for the dubious safety of the trees.

From behind came a roar that vibrated through my chest. Risking a glance back, I saw Drax leap into the brush, predatory grace belying his size. Arrows

peppered the leaves around him, but if any found their mark, he gave no cry of pain.

Another scream tore through the forest—this one filled with agony. I did not want to imagine what horror Drax had visited upon the man.

“Valti! Valti! Run!” came a panicked shout.

A brigand burst from cover, cloak flying behind him as he raced for escape. But Drax was faster—his claws caught the man's hood and belt, lifting him effortlessly.

With brutal efficiency, Drax swung the struggling man into the unforgiving trunk of a tree. The awful crunch left no doubt his foe was dead.

Drax's fanged maw opened in a snarl as he slid the jagged knife from his belt. Then he was off again, pursuing another target. He dodged an arrow with uncanny speed and vanished into the underbrush.

“No!” A different bandit shrieked in despair. “No! Valti!”

The screams rose in pitch and volume, becoming a wail of unimaginable pain and terror. Beneath it came the horrible tearing sounds of Drax's fury being unleashed.

In the silence that followed, I huddled beneath my bush, trying in vain to still my panicked breaths. The forest gradually came back to life—birdsong, insect whines, the impatient noises of our tethered bagart.

At last Drax returned, crossing the bloody ground on two legs once more. His muscular chest heaved with exertion and dark arterial blood spattered his skin.

Wiping his blade clean on a dead man's cloak, he slid it home in its scabbard. As his breathing slowed, he turned his face skyward. The last vestiges of the beast melted away, leaving only shadows that shifted across his rugged features as he mastered himself.

Soon it was just a man who stood blood-stained in the dappled light. The same man who had whisked me away from the temple.

Drax moved silently to the nearby river. I heard him splash and wash.

“Lita?” he called, his voice now mellow and familiar.

I did not answer, only huddled smaller beneath my cloak.

He returned from washing. I realized the blood that had covered him was not his own.

My heart quivered at the thought.

“Lita, are you hurt?”

Lifting his head, he sniffed the air like the predator he was.

There was no point hiding.

Rising, I pulled back the cloak and returned to the fireside.

My stomach turned at the sight of his relieved face.

Had I really desired this creature? Even in dreams, it seemed my emotions were unthinkable. Taboo. Drax was a monster.

“Valti?” The word came to me. “What is that? What are you?”

His relief vanished and he faced away. “There is a condition. Rare among Shakai. A savageness beneath. There are remedies.”

“You’re an animal,” I breathed, risking his wrath.

“No.” He gave me a fierce look. “Not yet. I am still the master of my beast.”

It sure didn’t seem that way.

“I can use it. To protect you while we travel the wilds.”

I didn’t want to be protected by a monster.

“Even here, on this side of the Canyonlands, there is danger. Desperate brigands. Hungry beasts of great size, that would protect their territory, devour you in hunger. We have not yet crossed into my lands.”

I looked away. “You frighten me.”

He sighed.

“I have time. Time before my Valti side becomes less controllable. I would not hurt you, Lita. We are bound.”

Panic swirled through me. “I don’t know what a Valti is. I don’t know these lands. How can I trust you?”

He folded his arms. “Is it a matter of trust? Or survival? Brigands are defeated, but it is always best to stay on the move in the wilderness.”

Drax had a point. Maybe it didn’t matter if I trusted him, or his inner animal.

“Your heart knows me,” he said. “There is beauty in my homeland. Such as you’ve never seen. And peace. You need surrender to no one ever again, save me.”

Survival or not, how could I give into this creature?

“My heart doesn’t know the animal that ripped these bandits apart,” I argued.

“Your presence will calm my inner savagery. It is why we are drawn together,” he said.

“That’s a lot to put on me,” I said. “Claiming that I can keep you... *you*.”

“More than your people trading you to a foul old man? To a temple of

torture?”

At this point, I was calling it about even: fear behind me, fear before me.

“Allow me to show you a better way,” he said. “Should you refuse it, I vow to return you to your former life.”

I didn’t want that. I didn’t know what I wanted. I didn’t know what to do.

“Come. Let’s leave this place of violence,” he said. “Find a place of beauty. If you will.”

Drax was giving me a choice. Although there weren’t really any other options.

I was deep in the woods, past the end of Terr’s lands. Grindi had brought us much farther than I could easily walk. We had encountered bandits. There were wild animals out here.

I was a city girl.

And despite everything, something deep in my belly trusted Drax.

“Let’s get out of here,” I said.

Whatever those feelings were, I’d sort them out later.

## DRAX

**B**y midday, Grindi brought us to the steep, gray walls of the Canyonlands. She knew her way through the network of deeply cut rivers, guiding us unerringly towards Zashi.

There were hidden drop-offs and pitfalls in the canyons, as well as many dark caves that could shelter predators. But the bagart's senses were far keener than mine, and I trusted her to avoid any dangers. We passed the same cavern by which I had originally entered the alien city. Had that only been a handful of days? Another lifetime.

One without Lita.

There was no point in even remembering it.

After hours of traveling between the sheer, close-pressing walls, my mount led us out into the salt jungle beyond and towards the hypnotic roar of the sea.

As soon as the claustrophobic canyons opened up into endless vistas, I felt Lita relax in the saddle in front of me. The set of her slender shoulders eased, and she took a deep breath of the briny air.

So far, she hadn't spoken a word since we rode away from the bloody carnage of the bandit camp. Through our soul bond, I felt the numbness of her shock, the bone-deep fear and confusion that still gripped her. My unleashed Valti side terrified her almost as much as her former life imprisoned in the strange temple.

How could I overcome this quandary? As much as I longed to calm my thoughts and control the Valti beast within, it was an intrinsic part of me. Perhaps the only solution was time and patience.

"The water," Lita said suddenly, her voice hushed with wonder as she

gazed out at the glimmering sea. "It's so beautiful."

I followed her rapt stare. "Yes. The coast has always been a place I come to find peace. At times, it's good to be alone here."

She turned slightly in the saddle to glance back at me, the scent of her hair tickling my nose. "I've seen the Snarling Sea before from a distance. But I've never gotten to spend time alone by it."

I frowned. "Snarling Sea? That sounds dangerous. We call it the Bright Sea."

Grindi continued on tirelessly through the thinning trees. Before us, the alien crystal sands of an isolated beach spread out, studded with the swaying emerald fans of the dinva trees. The rich green of the sky met the deeper purple of the waters at a sharp, clear horizon.

The clever bagart made her way towards a small freshwater river that ran down to the sea, sheltered on both sides by tall reeds. When we reached it, I dismounted, then helped Lita down from the saddle. She leaned against me for a moment, her slim frame pressed to mine.

I led her towards an outcropping of tumbled boulders, isolated in the midst of the clear sands.

"It's so beautiful here," Lita said again wonderingly as she gazed out at the perfectly flat expanse of the purple ocean. "I've never seen a sea that color before."

"There is a vast creature that lives in the depths beneath the still surface," I explained. "Some say it is bigger than a city, and has remained unmoving for eons like a stone. Its natural hue colors the waters."

I clambered easily up the piled rocks and reached a hand down for Lita to follow. She took it without hesitation, allowing me to guide her up the boulders until we sat together atop the highest point, temporary monarchs surveying the alien sea. The soft pads of moss made a gentle seat.

"Mmm, it's so warm here," Lita sighed in contentment, stretching her legs out and arching her back. The dappled sunlight played over her curves. She turned her heart-shaped face up to me, dark eyes dancing. "The rocks feel almost hot in the sun."

I smiled back, the ever-present tension in my shoulders easing. "The Bright Sea is very shallow and calm near the shore. The water becomes heated by the sun."

Lita bit her full lower lip thoughtfully, still facing me. "Just how warm does it get?"

I thought she might feel trepidation. Through our bond, I'd felt the almost unfelt waters of what she called the Tomb.

But did I catch a gleam of playfulness?

The sight sent a spike of heat through my own body.

"Well, there is one way to find out," I answered lightly, and before she could react, I scooped her up in my arms.

"Drax!" she shrieked, though she was laughing now even as she swatted in protest at my shoulders. Her hair tumbled free around us both as I carried her down the boulders and waded into the surf.

The water swirled cool around my legs at first, then warmer as we went deeper. Lita kicked and squealed as the foam lapped higher, wetting her feet.

"It's not warm at all!" She gasped dramatically, clutching at my neck. But she was still grinning, eyes dancing with mirth and thrill as I swung her playfully through the gently crashing waves.

I obediently moved closer to shore again until the water was only knee-deep, then set Lita down carefully in the wet sand. She kept one hand on my shoulder to steady herself as the surf tugged at her skirts.

"All right, now you have to turn around and close your eyes," she instructed, mocking sternly.

I raised an eyebrow but did as she asked, wading back out until the swells lapped my waist, then turning my back. "Why? What are you planning, little fish?"

"No peeking!" came her voice from behind me. I heard a splash as she slipped into the deeper waters.

After a long moment, she called, "Okay, you can look now!"

When I turned around, Lita was floating serenely in the glassy waves, clad only in her thin white shift. Her dark hair fanned out around her, contrasting with her golden skin. She waved at me, then flipped over in the water, kicking up fountains of glittering spray as she swam with smooth, strong strokes.

Her laughter rang out freely over the water. I watched her playfully diving and splashing about, seemingly without a care. She was captivating—joyful and unbound, more radiant than ever.

I quickly shed my own tunic and boots, stripping down to my breechclout before diving in to join her. The silky water closed around me, cool and caressing. As I surfaced, Lita swam nearer, floating before me with a dazzling smile. Her sodden shift clung alluringly to every curve.

“How did you know this is just what I needed?” she asked wonderingly, treading water.

I could only shrug, taming a sudden urge to pull her lithe body against mine beneath the waves. “Perhaps we both needed this respite.”

Lita tilted her head back, closing her eyes with a blissful sigh as she floated atop the swells. “I’ve only been to the lakes in the Infinity Ring before. But never have I been able to enjoy the water all to myself like this.”

I drank in the sight of her, committing this untamed joy to memory. But reality could not be ignored for long.

“It’s still at least three day’s ride to reach Zashi, and true safety,” I said reluctantly. “We are exposed and vulnerable here in the open.”

Lita’s eyes opened, her expression sobering before she nodded. “You need to turn around again,” she said.

I faced the horizon. Avians with great wingspans rode the air currents. One dove into the water, coming out with a wriggling fish.

When I turned, Lita sat on the boulders, swathed demurely in the wool once more, though it did little to hide her sodden state. Rivulets of water still dripped from the ends of her hair and the hem of her sheer shift. She bit her lip and hugged her arms around herself against the chill wind off the sea.

“I suppose we should get moving again before it gets much colder,” she said quietly after I’d dressed and joined her.

My heart ached at the thought of her shivering and miserable. Before I could think better of it I stepped forward and enfolded her in my arms, wrapping her in my greater warmth.

Pressed together so intimately, I felt a swirling riot of emotion through our soul bond—hesitation, a spike of fear...and buried beneath it all, tentative desire. Those conflicted feelings surely mirrored my own maelstrom of longing and restraint as I met her fathomless dark gaze.

I brought her into the wilderness, and now she had no choice but to rely on me. The trust implicit in that reliance humbled me. With a sigh, I loosened my embrace and stepped back, staring at clouds scudding nearer. “The storm will be on us. It’s time to find shelter.”

Grindi found a track through the jungle. Vines hung heavy with bright traveling flowers. Thick trees bulged, looking waterlogged. Undergrowth swayed with stalks of fat pink kernels that exploded when touched. Ripe fruit hung low from branches.

I picked one as we moved beneath. When I offered it to Lita, she shook

her head.

“It’s not healthy to eat food we don’t grow,” she said. “It’s one of the rules of the city.”

Such a strange rule. But soon she would need to eat something. I would simply keep trying.

Biting into it, the sweet aroma drifted as juice ran down my face. I smiled and wiped it away. Grindi knickered.

“Here, feed her,” I said, picking another dandrow and handing it to Lita.

She leaned forward, clucking to the beast. The bagart delicately took it before munching it down, pit and all.

Lita giggled. Then, she picked one for herself as we passed beneath. She took a tentative bite. I thought she might throw it away, but she didn’t.

“It’s so beautiful here,” she said.

A brilliant mist of golden pollen danced in shafts of light between the trees. When we passed through, it clung to Lita’s hair. She turned to me and I saw it glittering on her features.

“Beautiful,” I said.

Distantly, I heard the crash of branches and leaves. Kicking Grindi to a trot, I scanned the foliage.

“What was that?” Lita said.

“The cold is coming. This will be the last chance for animals to fatten up. On fruit and each other,” I said, leaning against her back.

She gripped the saddle horn as the bagart found her footing.

Daylight dimmed, unseen clouds moving in from the sea. Stiff, spear-like leaves raked us on either side of the trail.

“We shouldn’t try to move past the jungle rocks tonight,” I said.

“Why?” Lita asked.

In answer, the sky darkened swiftly. Almost at once, rain sizzled through the canopy. As we passed beneath the gaps, we were drenched.

Lita gasped as more and more water lashed through the leaves.

“There’s a cave I sheltered in on my journey here,” I raised my voice around the hiss of water. “It’s not far. Hyah! Grindi! Yah!”

The animal doubled down, sprinting through the narrow track surging beneath us. If some large browser or predator stalked the path ahead, we would be in trouble.

I swiped water from my eyes.

Lita pulled up her wooly hood against the weather.

Trees thinned out to the left. I made out a rise in the land, outcroppings of rock. Reining the bagart in, I guided her with my legs.

Briefly, we moved up a muddy hill. Then the sheer cliffs rose from the mist.

I guided Grindi alongside, until a hollow opened up. The bagart eagerly moved under shelter.

Rain curtained the entrance as we dismounted.

I gazed around the dim space. "This is where I sheltered before. I think."

"There's a stack of dry wood," Lita pointed.

She pulled her hood back. It hadn't kept her from getting soaked. My heart ached at the sight of her face dripping and miserable.

"You're shivering," I said. Unable to help myself, I pulled her close.

Souls bound, I felt a whirl of emotions. Trepidation. Repulsion...

Excitement.

Those emotions were mirrored in her impossibly dark eyes as I gazed.

Yet I brought her into the wilderness. She had to depend on me. There was no other choice for her.

"Let's get a fire started and some food in you first. Then we'll continue on before the weather worsens."

I busied myself unsaddling Grindi and rubbing the bagart down. Lita moved closer to the shelter of the rocks and began gathering driftwood for a small fire, her sodden white shift clinging distractingly to every alluring curve.

This was going to be a long, tempting journey to Zashi.

## LITA

**M**y sleep was not an easy one. I might blame it on the flashes of lightning, the booms of thunder, the torrential downpours. I had never liked rough weather; it set my nerves on edge.

Yet the storm inside me was the true cause of my restless slumber. My eyes barely left Drax's broad, muscular back all through the long night. It was difficult to reconcile the two sides of him that I had witnessed—the gentle protector who treated me with such care, and the feral monster he became when provoked.

Did I feel an unwise attraction to both aspects of his nature? A yearning for the tender touch of a man, yet also strangely roused by the raw power and violence of the beast within? I dared not examine those conflicted emotions too closely. It was safer to ignore the heat that pooled in my core when I studied his imposing frame.

Before Drax awoke, I stirred the fire back to life, welcoming the warmth and light. He rose shortly after, offering me more of the juicy sweet fruit we'd enjoyed the day before.

“It will be hard travel today,” he told me soberly as he efficiently saddled his mount. “There is a main road not far from here that leads towards Zashi. But judging by the many animal tracks outside the cave, we'll need to stay off the main paths as much as possible to avoid notice.”

Outside, the day dawned bright and clear, though the jungle still dripped with the remnants of the night's rain. Every colorful flower and leaf now seemed bejeweled with glistening droplets, sparkling like gems when touched by the rising sun.

“If we make good time, we should reach a village by nightfall,” Drax said

as he helped me onto Grindi's back. "From there, it's less than a day's ride to my home. It is clear I did not prepare well for two on this journey."

He swung up behind me, the hard planes of his chest pressing against my back. I suppressed a shiver at his closeness.

"A village?" I asked curiously. "Like my city?"

"It's nothing like the place you describe," Drax clarified. "Just simple thatch and timber buildings, home to everyday Shakai leading quiet lives."

I considered that image. "It doesn't sound unpleasant. Peaceful, even."

Drax made a noncommittal noise. "We shall see."

We set off into the dripping jungle. Drax had been right about the difficulty of finding a path; yesterday's narrow trail was now trampled wide by the passage of numerous nocturnal beasts. Few fruits remained in easy reach, clearly already plucked.

With no other option, Drax guided Grindi off the main track, picking his way carefully through the dense undergrowth. Vines and leaves, still wet, lashed at us from both sides as we passed. I winced at the stinging blows, shoulders hunching.

Sensing my discomfort, Drax pressed closer behind me to shield my body with his own broad frame. His arm came around my waist, anchoring me against him.

"You never finished your tale yesterday," he remarked casually as we jolted along. "Why does your temple demand a tribute of young women?"

I considered the question. There was still so much about my old life that seemed strange and sinister in hindsight.

"No one knows the full reasons," I said slowly. "It has always been that way for as long as our records go back. But girls who are chosen to enter the temple do not come back out again."

The acrid smell of wood smoke drifted through the trees, along with the earthier scent of animal dung and cooking oils. The redolence of civilization. My pulse quickened in response.

"Keep your hood up and you'll pass for Shakai," Drax advised, lifting the woolen garment over my hair. "Just keep silent and follow my lead."

We passed through a rickety wooden gate, its doors flung wide. The village within bustled with late day activity as various villagers went about their business. The buildings were simple timber and thatch, the roofs peaked and covered in some kind of blue tiling.

Temporary stalls were set up lining the street, their cheerful cloth roofs

waving slightly in the breeze.

A festival, maybe?

A twinge ran through my chest, memories of festivals I'd been to with my friends, the laughter of the crowds, the friendly jostling and haggling.

Something normal. Safe.

I'd never go to one again, would I?

At one structure with large open doorways, Drax drew Grindi to a halt and dismounted, then helped me down. He studied my face critically for a moment, then reached out and tugged my hood further forward to shadow my foreign features.

A bandy-legged man ambled out through the doors, squinting suspiciously at the new arrivals. He wore a homespun woolen coat and cap.

"Bagart, eh? That'll cost you double rate," he informed Drax gruffly. "I'll have to keep her separate from the other mounts. Biters can spook 'em."

Drax nodded agreeably. "Triple is fine. And she does bite. Frequently." He reached for a bulging purse at his belt and tossed a large coin to the man, who bit it dubiously before pocketing it.

I kept my head down, peering around curiously from the shadows of my hood as the hostler took Grindi's leading ribbons and brought her inside. Attached to the rambling stables was a two-story building with the same peaked blue roof. Cheerful flower boxes decorated the exterior. Inside, tempting cooking aromas wafted out along with raucous voices.

Drax placed a hand on my back, steering me towards the entrance. Inside was a large common room with a roaring hearth. A spitted animal carcass turned above the flames, fat dripping and sizzling into the fire. My mouth watered at the savory scents, my empty stomach rumbling.

Drax approached a rotund man sweeping the plank floor. "We require a private room for the night," he stated without preamble.

The innkeeper paused his work to squint assessingly at Drax's imposing frame. "Private room, he says! And isn't that a laugh and a half," he snorted. "Seems every high-and-mighty with the king's name on his lips these days thinks he's too good to bed down in the common room with the other travelers."

Before he could continue his diatribe, Drax moved with sudden speed, seizing a handful of the man's grimy shirt and yanking him close. He spoke low and cold.

"A private room. Fresh bathwater and a hot meal. I have more than the

king's blessing to ensure your cooperation.” As if to demonstrate, his free hand drifted meaningfully to the long knife at his belt.

The innkeeper paled, his eyes rounding comically. “Y-yes, milord! Right away!” he stammered.

But I noticed it didn't seem to be the knife that altered his treatment of us, but rather something in Drax's face.

Drax pressed a gold coin into his palm and released him with a slight shove. The man scurried away, bellowing for maids and hot water.

I raised an eyebrow at Drax's tactics, unable to hide a smile. He took my arm reassuringly and guided me towards the stairs. It seemed we would be sleeping in comfort tonight.

A wicked thought crossed my mind.

Was I sure it was sleep I desired?

## DRAX

“I ’m not getting in there,” Lita said.

I frowned at the wooden tub, steam rising. “The water is fresh and hot. There is even a cake of soap. You’ll feel better once you wash the road dirt from you.”

She shook her head. “I’ve had my share of warm baths. I can sponge down well enough.”

“It will help you relax,” I tried, but the terror stamped on her face stopped me from insisting.

“A basin will suit.” She bit her lip. “And then can we go out, see the festival?”

“I can’t imagine there would be anything to amuse you here. You should rest instead,” I decided, pulling off my vest. “I’m going to soak away the journey for a time. Wait for me. I’ll summon the innkeeper and we’ll dine in our room.”

When I pulled the tunic over my head, she stared for a second. I stared back. Even through her bulky cloak, I could see the shape of her. She hurried across the hall into the bedchamber.

I had no other clothes with me. When first I heard Lita in my head, I went to her, driven by need and longing to be at her side. It might have suited better if I’d packed a few things. Yet I was too forcefully compelled by her presence.

As it was, I hung my shirt and loincloth from a line, hoping the steam of the water might freshen them.

When a girl from the inn appeared with a bucket of hot water, I waved her away. “I’m done, thank you. Although another towel would be good.”

With the towel over my shoulder, I grabbed my clothing and headed into the bedchamber.

It was empty.

“Lita?”

Calling was stupid. Where would she be, under the bed? I saw my purse on the bedcover. A quick count revealed a missing coin.

She had gone out.

The festival that I’d been so quick to dismiss.

I should have listened.

Dressing quickly, I hurried down the stairs. “The girl I’m with—”

“Went to the night market, milord,” the innkeep said. “A slip of a thing, but she should have no trouble there.”

“Damn it,” I said under my breath and raced out the door.

I didn’t know the name of this village, though it was in the domain of Zashi. The community was small, a gathering of people in support of the Kingsfields, the Kingsherds. Market consisted of a few temporary stalls, a few carts and wagons.

Almost immediately, I spotted Lita. Her hood was up—at least there was that. She held a bunch of flowers from one of the stalls. As I watched, she chatted with the vendor.

Keeping hidden, I watched. I’d seen her frightened, fleeing, but hadn’t yet had a chance to see my mate in ordinary circumstances. She seemed to revel in her conversations with merchants and farmers.

Her easy attachment, her friendliness seemed genuine, and her attitude was returned in kind. A gift I didn’t possess.

The story about her life prior to being imprisoned in the temple came to mind. This was a comfort to her.

I’d ripped her away from everything she’d known, forced her into a strange new world.

I could at least let her have this.

From the road, opposite the direction we’d traveled, I saw soldiers ride in. Maybe this inspired the innkeeper's attitude.

I saw that their shields and pennants bore the argent striking crest falcon on azure. Zashi military coat of arms. Leather armor adorned their mounts—villarts, smaller, more tractable than a bagart—and their harness bristled with weapons.

It wasn’t unheard of for the army to go on maneuvers this far south. Still,

the innkeeper indicated that he had enough soldiers. As they dismounted by the stables, I peered inside.

Glindi rested in the last stall, her coat brushed. Next to her, the stall was empty, of course. If inspired, a bagart would make short work of a villart. Yet nearly all the stalls contained large military mounts. Not a dray sui in sight.

There were no kingdoms south of Zashi. Only the alien city Terr lay farther south, and many days' travel.

As the soldiers dealt with the stableman, I kept out of sight.

I wasn't long away from Zashi. What could've happened in that short time? Were we preparing for war, training in secret?

Our relations with Ginthu, the nearest city-state to the Kingdom of Zashi, were usually rickety at best.

It might make sense to attack them from the south, if companies of mounted warriors could be trained for jungle survival.

But military theories and strategies aside, I had no idea why so many soldiers would reconnoiter in this little village.

I noticed lamplighters walking the cobblestones outside. Night falling. Slipping from the stables, I checked the market for Lita.

She stood with a group of villagers. They watched a small band of wandering musicians setting up.

"Play 'Hail the Dove-White Harlot,'" a farmer said.

"If I had a copper for every country oaf who asked for that old broadside..." A musician drew a bow across strings to make a sweet harmony.

"Play 'Hooded Eagle,' then," another villager said.

A man set a stool next to a large drum. "Bumpkins," he murmured to the string player.

The third of the trio blew a few notes from his flute, warming up. He looked at his bandmates. "Is it 'Hooded Eagle' mates?"

Once they started playing, a stir came from the inn. A line of soldiers moved toward the sound. Some carried steins with them. The innkeep tried to call them back.

Merchants with their carts and tents packed pushed into the crowd. The drummer passed his hat around.

The street was quiet. She would be safe enough while I gathered a little information.

I headed for the inn while most of the village was occupied.

“Innkeep, ale,” I said, standing at the bar.

He drew a stein and slid it to me. “From the coin you gave, that’s covered.”

“Tell me why so many soldiers are visiting this village,” I said.

“It’s no concern of mine. Their coin is as good as another’s.”

“How long ago did they start arriving here?”

The man shrugged. “Not long. Maybe a week or so. I’ve heard talk of brigands in the jungle north. Maybe the king is finally doing something for his subjects.”

I didn’t comment on his politics. “There are certainly brigands in the south,” I said.

“They don’t bother us much here. Nothing to steal—and if they did, it would be from King Sarl himself. This village offers the summer corn; keeps the cold harvest. Other than a netful of fish? A few chattels?” The innkeeper shrugged.

Out in the street, the musicians finished their song.

I drained my ale and headed back out.

As I exited the inn, the players broke into their next tune to the sound of light applause.

Scanning the gathering, I saw no sign of Lita.

Gazing up and down the darkening street, I saw no one.

My heart stopped.

I elbowed my way into the group. “Have you seen the girl who was here? A stranger in a woolen cloak?”

All I got was blank stares.

The band played where the cobblestones met the dirt road, at the end of the village. Other than the inn, no buildings showed a light. I walked along the street, glancing into alleys.

I opened my senses, letting the pull towards her heart lead me, but I saw no one in the alley between the inn and the blacksmith.

On the opposite side of the street, I glanced between a baker and cooper’s shop. Hurrying forward, I passed a surgeon, a butcher. Then a potter and bowyer.

She was closer, but where?

When I reached the final shop, a carpenter’s, a strangled sound reached me.

Racing forward, I pressed my back to the side of the structure and peered

into the alley.

On the ground was a woolen cloak.

It was unlike any garment worn in Zashi. The wool was foreign. It could only belong to Lita.

Running down the alley, I found her behind the shop.

A man held her arms as another tore at her robes. With a laugh, he pulled the white fabric free. The man holding her wrapped his arm around her scream.

The other began unbuckling his belt.

“We should let her go,” the man holding her said. “Look at her! She’s a Frostling!”

“My cock isn’t superstitious.” He closed on Lita and her captor.

“That’s not the weapon you want,” I said through my teeth.

“Shit, Merk, he’s a big one,” the one holding her looked up at me.

Merk whirled around. “Makes for an easier target.”

He tossed a knife at me. It sliced through my shoulder as I twisted sideways. Lita let out a cry.

Freeing the sword from my belt, I moved in, keeping my body sideways to make a narrow target for another knife toss.

Merk’s own sword skirled free. Matching my position, he moved in.

Trained. A soldier, not a brigand.

Blood ran down my left arm, dripping to the ground. Ignoring it, I pointed my blade at Merk.

“You’d best let her go,” I said past my opponent to his companion.

He shrugged, still holding Lita. “Let’s see how this plays out.”

For her part, Lita struggled against him. Her nudity was distracting. Almost to the point where Merk got his sword past my guard.

Twisting my wrist around, I parried. It should’ve sent his sword flying, but he recovered quickly, then lunged.

The stress of combat awoke the Valti sleeping within me. I batted aside the lunge. Made a thrust—but only a feint. As he jerked to parry, I rattled my blade over his ribs.

My Valti growled eagerly at the bloodletting.

Too quickly, my animal nature brushed aside my swordsmanship. With hacking blows, I moved in on Merk. Using my sword two-handed as a club surprised him. Shocked him, especially when I chopped his skull to the teeth.

“Behind you!” Lita managed.

I whirled to face a surprise opponent. He charged with his dagger, burying it near the first knife wound. With a howl, I tossed the sword aside and gripped his throat. Then his crotch.

With my growing strength, I slammed him against the wall, his spine making a thick, wet *crack*.

“Oh. Okay. Letting her go.” The man holding Lita spun around and sprinted for the woods.

Yanking the knife free from my shoulder with a howl, I gripped the blade and sent it end over end toward his fleeing form.

He shouted as the point found its mark and he fell to the ground.

Before chasing him, finishing him, I stared. Lita pulled her tattered robe around herself. It provided little cover.

Grunting in the dirt and weeds drew me. I launched myself at the third man. Gripping the knife that stuck from his lower back, gripping his neck with my other hand, I ripped the knife upward.

I felt each rib give; his scream quickly ebbing with his blood.

A single sigh left him before I dropped his lifeless form to the ground.

Others? My night vision sought shadows among shadows.

Music drifted from the other end of the village.

“Are there more?” I approached Lita. She tried to back away. I gripped her wrist.

“No. Just the three. I don’t know where they came from!”

She wanted to pull away. I wanted her closer. Bestial fire roared through me, stoked by violence. Now fanned by desire.

“Drax, please,” Lita said.

Her eyes were soft, frightened as she gazed up at me with her too-dark eyes.

“Your shoulder. You’ve lost a lot of blood,” she said.

I looked. Yes. Bleeding like crazy.

Her other hand pressed against my chest. The savage heat in me flagged at her gentle touch. Caring touch. My own hand covered hers.

“I’ll help you,” she said. “Let me.”

Like a long-held breath, the searing rage left me—and left me weak. I nodded. “Help me.”

## LITA

**D**rax leaned heavily against me, his muscular frame shuddering as his rage-fueled transformation receded. Blood continued to flow freely from the deep slash in his sword arm.

My flimsy ceremonial robe had been shredded by our attackers, and I easily tore a long strip of fabric free to press against Drax's injury. He grunted in pain, the sensation echoing through our shared soul bond. My own shoulder throbbed in sympathy.

In the orderly, well-guarded Fourth Ring of Terr, the idea of a brutal attack in the street had never occurred to me. Lamps burned at every corner there, and the nights were lit almost as bright as day. But here in this rural village, lamps were few and far between, leaving the rutted streets bracketed by swathes of impenetrable shadow.

I hadn't realized the danger those shadows could conceal. When the drunken men first approached me, laughing and tugging at my clothing, I assumed it was just a clumsy invitation to join in the lively music and dancing. But then a rough hand clamped over my mouth, making their vile intentions clear.

Together Drax and I staggered down the deserted side alley away from the village square, my torn dress providing little protection against the chill night air. I paused only long enough to pull the concealing cloak tighter around myself before allowing Drax to urge me onwards.

The entire attack had only taken minutes. Music still played, the notes and lyrics now sounding sinister.

"Through the back," he rasped, one arm wrapped around my shoulders as he guided us in the opposite direction.

Behind the row of shopfronts, a warren of small fenced yards and outbuildings presented a more sheltered route back to the inn allowing us to slip inside without drawing any undue attention.

As soon as we gained the privacy of our room, Drax abandoned any pretense that he was uninjured. With a pained groan he collapsed onto the edge of the bed, face etched with strain, his injured sword arm hanging limply at his side.

I hurriedly lit candles around the shadowed room, then turned my attention to his wound. The ragged slash was still oozing blood, painting his bare chest crimson. Drax would not be able to remove his slashed vest unaided.

As gently as I could, I helped strip the ruined garment away, baring the impressive muscles of his torso and arms. I tried not to linger on the allure of his powerful form.

Drax drew in a sharp breath as I examined the injury. "We'll need a barber-surgeon," he said through gritted teeth. "Though I'd rather not draw that kind of attention if we can avoid it."

I shook my head, unwilling to involve anyone else in this. "Those men who attacked us - we don't know who they were. They could have families here who would come seeking vengeance if they learned what happened."

Drax's expression darkened. "Or they might have been soldiers. Still, I'd rather not bleed to death tonight."

On impulse, I asked "Do you have any clean gut or fish hooks in your travel supplies?"

He looked surprised, then gave a weak chuckle. "I'm afraid not. If not for your robe, I wouldn't even have makeshift bandages."

I rose decisively. "I'll return as quickly as I can. Try to rest."

Ignoring his weak protests, I hurried from the room and down the stairs. The common room was still boisterous with drunken soldiers seeking pleasure after a day of harsh training. I spotted a harried serving girl and managed to get her attention.

"Please, my husband has badly cut himself," I whispered urgently. "He is too proud to involve the village barber. Might you have a needle and thread I could borrow?"

At the sight of my exposed face, the girl's eyes went round with shock. "F-frostling!" she gasped.

I barely refrained from rolling my eyes. Did all these rural villagers really

believe I was some evil ice demon?

“No, please listen, I truly need help!” I grabbed her work-roughened hands imploringly.

She flinched at my touch, then blinked in surprise. “Your hands are warm,” she said wonderingly.

“I’m just a normal woman,” I insisted gently. “With a normal husband. Please, will you help me?”

The girl studied me for a long moment, visibly struggling between fear and compassion. At last she nodded reluctantly.

“Meet me on the back stairs,” she whispered.

Moments later, she pressed a bone needle, a small flask of strong spirits, and some sinew thread into my hands. “There are many bar fights here where the men don’t want the guard involved,” she explained with a shrug.

I placed a coin in her palm, change from the silver I’d stolen from Drax’s purse. She shook her head wryly. “Your husband paid me plenty. But if it’s trouble you’ve found, I’d leave this place come morning. The guards are thick as maz-honey here. Have I your blessing, Frostling of the Wood?”

I promised the superstitious girl my ‘blessing’ and hurried back upstairs, supplies in hand.

Drax looked up at my entry, face tight with pain. “Ah good, there’s the thing. Pass me the spirits first if you would.”

He downed a bracing drink straight from the flask, then upended a measure over both wounds without ceremony. I felt the sting across our shared bond and tensed in sympathy. No time for squeamishness—I threaded the needle with shaky hands.

“The slash is deepest, but the stab is bleeding more,” I said. Healers were expensive in Terr, so most women learned some form of the art.

Drax pressed a fresh wad of fabric to the slash to slow the bleeding as I stitched the puncture wound. Each poke of the needle through his tortured flesh seemed to echo in my own shoulder, along with the pulling ache as I knotted the sinew.

I paused, staring down at his back in dazed realization. It wasn’t empathy I felt. No, I felt the bite of sutures in my skin as I made them in his. When I tugged the stitches tight, my own flesh felt the pull.

What was going on?

A bond, he said, calling me his bonded soul. My mind had touched his when I was insensate in the Tomb.

Drax shifted restlessly, ignorant of my epiphany. “Tug them tight, it will hold better,” he urged.

I shook off my unease and complied, binding the wound closed as quickly as I could. Drax applied more pressure to the deeper slash while I tied off the sutures.

Soon it was done. Drax sat up with effort, rolling his shoulder gingerly. “Not bad work,” he assessed. “My thanks.”

I could only nod numbly, disturbed by the revelations about our bond. My steps faltered as I automatically moved to bolt the door against any intruders, the strength of Drax's natural wariness bleeding through our connection.

Sensing my distress, he reached for me, then thought better of it with a muffled groan as his injuries pained him. “Lita, what is it?”

I pressed back against the rough wood, seeking its solidity. “This bond between us—it's real. I feel your pain as if it were my own.” My voice broke. “Our souls are linked.”

He reached for me, then his shoulders sagged. “It is different for every pair, this tie. I would not have had you experience it like this.” Drax scrubbed a weary hand over his face. “Loss of blood has always...loosened my hold over the Valti spirit. My other nature grows stronger when I am weakened.”

Even as he spoke, I saw the glow kindle behind his eyes. His broad hands clenched, nails extending into claws. His muscles swelled as if pumped full of scorching adrenaline, veins popping along his arms and torso.

I watched the transformation with mingled fear and fascination. There was something compelling about the raw power barely leashed beneath his skin.

“You must calm yourself and regain control,” I urged unsteadily, then slowly stepped towards him. This was Drax. No matter what form he wore, he would not harm me.

He'd proven that, over and over again.

“Lita,” he rasped, voice dipping an octave. Before I could react, he grasped my waist and pulled me between his widespread knees. Burying his face against my stomach, he inhaled deeply.

“My bonded soul,” he murmured, almost too low to hear. His large hands flexed convulsively on my hips. “My precious mate.”

Slowly, he drew back, features once again wholly human. But a dangerous hunger smoldered in his darkened gaze as he looked up at me. An answering heat kindled low in my belly, my skin prickling with awareness.

I fumbled for a distraction. "I'm sorry for stealing a coin from you earlier. Sorry I did not understand the danger outside."

Drax blinked, some clarity returning to his shadowed eyes. Yet his hands did not release me.

"I would pay any price to remain close to you, even if only to watch your pleasure from afar," he rasped solemnly. One hand drifted up to brush my hair behind my ear with unexpected tenderness.

"Stay near me, Lita. Your presence is a balm to my ravaged soul." His pupils expanded until only a thin band of gold remained around the black.

Unbidden, vivid images from his ferocious battle to defend me flashed through my mind. I was disturbed to feel a surge of arousal at the memory of his unleashed violence on my behalf. In the wake of near-death, my blood still pumped hot with fear and adrenaline.

Sensing the direction of my thoughts, Drax made a low approving noise deep in his chest. The sound vibrated through me.

"You want this," he murmured knowingly. "You want me."

I shook my head in weak denial, even as my body throbbed and melted shamefully under his hands. "Gratitude, that's all. I'm grateful you saved me." My voice emerged thready.

Drax's smile held a hint of fangs. "Our bond hides nothing from me now, Lita. I feel your desire, equal to my own."

He drew me inexorably closer. This time it was not solely his strength that compelled me. I went willingly, eagerly, pressing my lips to his.

The kiss obliterated thought. My hands slid of their own volition over his bared chest, marveling at the iron muscles under smooth skin. His tongue plundered my mouth, stoking me to new heights of urgency.

I recalled him in my dream, the wanting I felt. It was nothing in comparison.

I wanted this, I realized desperately. Despite my lingering fear of him, I wanted Drax with a ferocity that shocked me.

I tore my mouth from his with a gasp. "Touch me," I panted recklessly. "I need to feel your hands on me."

A rumbling purr of approval vibrated through his chest. Deftly, he stripped away the remains of my ruined finery until I stood bare before him.

His nails trailed lightly down my back, raising gooseflesh. Up the backs of my legs, reading my responses through our bond. I leaned into him, consumed by sensation. Our mouths met again in a fierce tangle of lips and

tongue and teeth as the last of my gown fell away.

Drax's large frame tensed as he tried to rise, but he quickly collapsed back with a grating curse. "Still too weak to take you properly," he bit out in frustration.

Though fear still warred with desire, the realization that he was vulnerable emboldened me. I pushed him firmly onto his back.

Straddling his hips, I pinned his wrists to the bed, luxuriating in his rush of surprise and arousal.

"Then allow me to take you," I whispered against his throat. Through our link, I felt his pulse leap in response. His fierce joy at being mastered, even briefly, by his soul match.

I flexed my hips, grinding my aching core along his rigid length through his trousers. We both cried out at the intense sensation.

"Make me yours," Drax pleaded raggedly. "However you desire."

Sudden shyness drowned my brazenness. "I don't know how," I confessed. "You would be my first."

Drax surged up to capture my mouth in a lush, wet kiss. "Let instinct guide you, my heart," he rasped. "All paths lead to shared pleasure between true bonds."

One big hand broke my faltering hold. His fingers trailed down my belly, parting my slick folds. I jolted and cried out as his talented fingers unerringly found and caressed the aching peak of nerves at my center.

My thighs fell open shamelessly. I was near delirious with need. Our mouths collided again as he stroked me higher, my climax coiling inexorably tighter.

"So close, I feel you trembling," Drax groaned, his eyes blazing like twin suns.

The pleasure crested and broke over me like a wave. I shook and shouted, drenched in ecstasy. When I could bear no more, I collapsed, falling to his side on the bed, his fingertips still working me through every quiver and aftershock.

As I caught my breath, I pushed his trousers down, wrapping my fingers around his thick length.

Surely this was larger, different from what the rumors passed between my friends had led me to expect. I wanted to see it, to study every part of him, but the expression on his face caught my gaze, refusing to let it go.

Drax bucked, head falling back. Even through a haze of satiation, I felt

his throbbing need.

I began to pump him experimentally. The vulnerability of his powerful body in my hands thrilled me. His tongue speared between my lips again as I increased my pace.

Deep in his core, I felt the coals of pleasure brightening, edged with delicious hunger. He tore his mouth away.

“Too much, too fast!” he choked out. But his body undulated helplessly, chasing release.

I tightened my grip in defiance, working him ruthlessly towards his peak. “Let go for me,” I demanded.

With a surrendering groan, Drax let his release take him, spilling heat over my fingers again and again as I stroked him through it. I watched, rapt, sharing every pulse of pleasure.

When he finally quieted, I released him and collapsed again at his side. Strong arms came around me like steel bands as I drifted, cherished and replete.

## DRAX

I felt as mischievous as a truant schoolboy as I crept through the sleeping village in the predawn gloom.

Traipsing through the village in the false dawn, I spied the work of a seamstress, forgotten overnight on a line. Stealing garments that would suit, I left a pile of coppers and I raced back through the dim, for once appreciating my Valti blood that healed so quickly.

The bodies of Lita's attackers would be found soon. We needed to make haste to leave this village. Having my own soldiers hang me would be unseemly.

Lita still slept as I crept back into our room.

"My soul, we need to go," I whispered.

She blinked awake.

I held out the pilfered dress and cloak.

Though we'd spent the night in a hot embrace, she now covered herself, shy. Then held out a hand. "It's a pretty dress. The fabric is finer than the homespun of Terr."

I examined the cloak. Reddish purple, the edges trimmed with simple embroidery. "It's a boy's cloak. But it is at least Shakai. I doubt anyone would look at you twice."

She pulled the dress over her head, lacing the bodice. "Would that be so terrible?"

"It would. First, as an outlander, you would draw attention. Second, you are mine, and any man who would stare at you would get the eyeballs knocked from his skull," I said. "Let's depart."

"Why are you in such a hurry?" she asked.

“Those bastards who attacked you deserved a worse fate. But there may be those who feel differently. I’d be gone before the fingers start pointing,” he said. “This village is lousy with justice-dealing men-at-arms. With little to do here, I fear they would be overeager.”

An odd expression crossed her face as Lita rose and dressed. The dress was large on her, yet her form was spectacular. The neckline was cut low. Laces held the leather bodice as a cradle.

“Speaking of eyes popping out of skulls,” she said, shrugging on the cloak. She pulled the hood forward. “How do I look?”

“Like a villager of Zashi, if an especially small one,” I said. “Perfect.”

Down in the common room, men snored and breathed heavily in drunken slumber. There was no chance for food. We passed through silently and out the door.

In the stables, I found a basket of plesple. Handing one to Lita, I took a bite of the asymmetrical fruit. Between my blood loss and early foray, my stomach complained enough to rouse the mounts.

It was too early for stable hands. Saddling Glindi myself, hanging the pouches and paniers, I led the beast out.

I reached out to Lita to help her up. She faced the road.

“What is it?”

“Where are we going, Drax?” she asked.

“Away. Quickly.”

“Will I always need to wear a hood, to hide my face?” Her eyes were wet. “I fear too many people will say that is not right, our coupling. There can be no happy ending for us. I am human. You are...”

“In love with you,” I said.

A tiny sob escaped her. “What future do we have? You should return me. At least the punishment I face is... certain.”

I took her in my arms, turning her to face me. “Your future is with me. Forever. Tell me you don’t want me.”

“I can’t say that,” she said. “Wanting is not the same as real life, Drax.”

“Let me show you. Take you to some quiet place. You can know my heart, and know that I will keep you safe, comfortable. I swear—but you need more than my word. I ask again—come away with me, my bound soul.”

Her eyes fell.

I lifted her chin. “The decision is yours. But what do you have to lose?”

“The only thing a woman truly possesses. My value to a husband who

would keep me.”

“I value you more than that,” I said. “We are bound. There is no way to be closer, no pronouncement of the gods, no law of the land. We are together, Lita. I can show you what it means. But I will not force you.”

Her laugh was dark. “It isn’t a girl’s place to ask how a man might provide. There is a system, a method where couples are paired. It certainly isn’t based on desire.”

Nonsense. What lies had she been told in that place?

Then again, her family had been willing to sell her for their own benefit, and I had seen for myself the tortures of their temple.

My Lita would need time.

And I would give it to her. I would give her anything she needed, anything she wanted.

“We have more,” I said. “You will have everything.”

“Show me a life that we could have together. Then I might pay attention.”

“So be it,” I said. Again, I held my hand out to her. This time, she allowed me to help her into the saddle, although it was with a wary expression.

With the Zashi road beneath her hooves, Glindi quickly made distance. We headed north, toward the capital city.

But something stirred in me. I did not want that to be our destination.

Not yet.

Rain fell, not dousing, yet a harbinger of the coming cold. We continued on and by midday, I knew we were not pursued with any fervor.

Reaching back, I pulled the wrapped pemm from a saddle bag.

“You should eat,” I said, offering it.

“Grease and old meat?” she asked, eyes narrowed. “You didn’t make it sound exactly enjoyable before.”

“The fruit makes it palatable. Once we find shelter for the night, I’ll hunt,” I said. “But for now, you must have something.”

She pulled off a chunk. Tentatively put it in her mouth and chewed.

“You should eat the rest,” she said, making a face. “For your injuries.”

I laughed, and held her tighter.

A few hours before sunset, we reached a fork in the road. I pulled Glindi to a halt and dismounted. While we stretched our legs, I examined the clearings on both sides of the road, reading the plantings.

“Aslivoon!” Lita hurried over to a berry tree. She plucked a few and

stuffed them into her mouth.

The berry tree faced the village we had left, indicating a farming community. On both sides of the left fork were young aurk trees, branches meeting over the road—the symbol of Zashi, and the way to the capitol city. On the right, horllia vines, their fat striped fruit hanging near the ground.

I pulled one free. But I noted the clearing was not well kept, the vines running wild. After cutting the fruit in half, I handed one to Lita. Horllia were fat and juicy, blue, reminiscent of water.

“There’s a fishing village,” I said. “It looks to be abandoned.”

She ate the fruit, face covered in clear juice in her zeal. Lita squinted at me. “How do you know?”

I waved my hand around. “The ways are planted at the forks, the types of plants act as a signal. Berry trees—aslivoon you call them—indicate a farming village. The trees show the road leading to the capitol.”

She nodded. “Smart. And also food.”

“Usually, roads fork near a spring or lake.” I looked around. I’d come this way, but in my rush to reach Lita, I had paid little heed.

Lita pointed at our mount, deep in the weeds, neck bent to drink. “She found it.”

Revived, we returned to the road. But instead of going to the capitol, I followed the right fork.

In the late sun, it became evident why the village had been abandoned. Houses looking like they’d been built of moss stood on an estuary near the sea.

The river running from the mountains must have flooded the place too often, and too fiercely, for levees or dams. Even now, stone foundations were submerged in dry mud.

Yet a distance away from the water, a tall stone house stood on a hill. I turned the bagart toward it. As we neared, I saw the blue tiles of the roof were still intact. Doors hung in arched frames, shutters blocked the windows, despite the greenery clinging to the slope above.

In the attached stables, I filled a trough from the well and I let the bargart drink. There was plenty in the overgrown garden to browse.

Lita was already inside the house, cautiously looking around.

“It could use some work,” she said.

Riding with her so close all day, I paid no attention to the state of the dwelling. Reaching out, I pulled her cloak free. “That dress suits you,” I said,

tossing the cloak aside.

She backed up. “We should explore this place—”

“I would explore. But not this house,” I said, nearing her.

Lita backed up until she hit a table and could go no further. “Drax—”

I stopped her with a kiss. My hands roved her smooth, cool hair while my lips took in her heat.

After a moment’s resistance, her arms circled my neck. “Yes,” was all she managed before I deepened the kiss.

With deft tugs, I loosened her bodice. She moaned into my mouth as my hands massaged her breasts. “I have not had my fill of you,” I said.

The dress easily slid from her shoulders. She didn’t balk. A leg slid behind mine.

“This will be our place,” I said. “Our safety. Our life. Until you fully grasp our bond.”

Her hands gripped my head, pulling me into the softness of her breasts, the firmness of her nipples. Kissing and nipping, I felt her succumb to desire.

My hands moved down her sides, feeling her shape. She was built like a dancer, lithe and willowy. Yielding skin under my hands increased my ardor.

She pulled my hair hard. When I looked into her eyes, I saw fire.

“Why do I want you so?” she asked. “It’s not right.”

“Let it be wrong,” I said, kissing her neck. “Just let it be.”

She sang a note of pleasure. For a long time, we kissed, our mouths writhing into more passionate shapes. Lita pushed off my vest, pulling my tunic over my head.

“You’re so beautiful,” she said. “So strange. I never expected love—and never like this.”

My lips and tongue moved over her flawless skin, finding places that roused her. But I needed more, as did she.

Hands sliding under her legs, I placed her atop the table. She gazed up at me, lips quivering. “Drax, yes,” she said, reading my thoughts.

First with kisses, I covered her thighs. My nails moved beneath her legs, the backs of her knees. She cried out, legs parting.

Her scent intoxicated me. No longer able to resist, I shoved her legs wide. Kissing continued on her inner thighs.

“What—what are you doing?”

I parted the bud of her sex, reveling in the glistening pink. To taste her...

“Oh!”

My tongue moved gently over her slick flesh, growing slicker as I continued. Moving inward, slowly, patiently, I felt the urging from her mind. The tip of my tongue touched a nub. Lightning flared through her.

She jerked under my touch. With tight circles, I massaged her clit. Each pass brought joyful sighs, cries without words.

Face wet with her passion, I increased the pressure, the speed of my motions. When her limbs shook, nails biting my neck, she let out a shriek.

It echoed through the empty house, and along the abandoned shore.

I wanted more of them.

## LITA

**B**efore I could gather myself, Drax took me into his arms, carrying me upstairs.

Room by room, he nudged open the doors with his foot, until he grunted with approval.

“Thank the Ancients.” Holding me easily with one hand, he pulled the outer blanket off the bed, then lowered me carefully. “I would not have our first time be anything other than perfect.”

The low growl of his voice sent shivers through me.

Our first time would be my first time all together.

I should be scurrying away from him, searching for my clothing, running as fast as I could.

Instead, I lay back, tongue wetting suddenly dry lips. “And now?”

“You are perfect enough, no matter where we are,” he replied, slowly pulling off his boots, followed by the rest of his clothing.

For a moment, I could do nothing but stare at the rigid member that was revealed.

Thick, impossibly thick, the shaft patterned with swirls of tiny nubs. And at the top of the shaft a wide bulb sat, tapering to a pointed tip.

Surely that couldn't go inside of me?

Drax's hands skimmed my breasts, down my sides to the curve of my hips as he lay next to me.

“Fear nothing, my heart,” he crooned.

His fingers entered me, stretching and plunging until I shattered once more.

In an instant, he lay over me, his weight on his elbows, chest hovering

over mine. “I could make you sing all day,” he said, rocking his hips slightly until the point of his cock pressed against my sodden folds. “Watch your face as you come, hold your shaking body.”

Slowly, he drove forward, the bulb widening my tight channel further. It was warm. No, hot, like a brand far within me. With every sensation, sparks coiled through my core, until I panted beneath him.

It wasn’t just me, I realized. I felt him, feeling his pleasure amplifying my own.

“Knowing that I’m the one that holds you, I’m the one who makes you feel this way only makes me want you more.”

His breath at my ear made me tremble, the sudden pop as the base of the bulb entered me all the way pulling a sudden shriek from my lips.

But there was more.

I groaned as he filled me, the textured shaft pushing deeper inside of me, every moment strange and wonderful, blotting out every thought, every worry.

All I knew was I needed this.

Needed him.

Needed more.

And with our silent communication, Drax knew.

With maddening slowness, he pulled back, then plunged into me again, repeating the motion until my legs trembled and I clutched his shoulders.

“Please,” I begged. “It feels so strange. Something’s happening...”

My words only spurred him on, the speed of his thrusts increasing, until I lost myself again and again, holding onto him as the only solid presence in a world on fire.

Then with a roar he bucked wildly, pulling me tight against his chest as a burst of warm liquid filled me.

“Perfect,” he murmured once we caught our breath. “You are my perfect mate in every way.”

I WANTED DRAX, although my conscience said I shouldn’t. Yet we were bound. I felt his desire as he felt mine. I had given myself to him, although all of my culture’s teachings said I was not mine to give. And yet...

Despite my circling worries, we easily moved into domestication. Firewood and fishing. He showed me edible plants and I gathered them. Fruit trees were laden, and needed to be harvested before the cold came. From the banks of the river, he speared leels, toothy mud dwellers, delicious when fried.

It was what I expected my life to be, in a weird way. Perhaps a little more work given the rustic setting. A man who protected and provided. This sturdy home of large hewn stone. The garden in need of tending.

And it was more. Perhaps it had been a dream, expecting a man to be so enamored with me. Was I still dreaming?

I walked out through the arched doorway. Drax stood on the overhang, hammering at the shutters. A storm drove through, revealing the chinks in this solid-looking house.

His upper body was naked, glistening with perspiration. Broad shoulders, muscles playing beneath his dark skin. His body was perfect. I craved having him close, our bodies touching...

I caught my breath, not realizing my stare had become a carnal fantasy. He turned, the late sun casting shadows across his rough features, making for a delicious, arousing visage on the giant of a man.

How did I come to want him so?

He smiled, the elongated canine teeth not spoiling his graven beauty. "Do you need something?" he asked.

*You*, I didn't say. Honestly, the vision of him drove whatever purpose I had out in the garden from my brain.

"I caught a couple bridil in my snares. Nice to have something other than leels for dinner."

Near the stable, I saw the brightly feathered creatures hanging.

"I should dig in the garden. There may be more patat root hiding," I said, not taking my eyes off him.

He clambered from the porch roof and slipped into his tunic. Which was disappointing.

"Let's have an early supper," he said. "It's a full moon tonight, and the sunset should be a wonder. We can watch it together."

It struck me then, how this monstrous-looking male possessed the most romantic heart I'd ever known. An aching, yet pleasant, feeling squeezed my chest. "That sounds... like a wonder. Wonderful."

"On the morrow, we should take Glindi into the jungle. Harvest what

plesble and horllia remain before the first frost takes them,” he said.

“Yes. I’d like that,” I said.

My eyes strayed over the abandoned village, the overgrown fishing huts, the line of surf crashing into the swift-running water of the delta.

Dinva trees swayed on a wind carrying cries of sea fliers.

Even now, the sun dipped into a soup of roiling clouds, the light scattered.

The solitary beauty of it made me want to cry.

I hadn’t realized he’d come up behind me until his arm circled my shoulders.

“You like it here,” he said.

I faced him. “I love it here.”

For a few moments, we stared into each other’s eyes.

“If we don’t start a fire in the stove now, we won’t be eating supper.” His voice was husky.

In his arms, I didn’t care about anything else.

Okay, I felt a little peckish.

“I’ll clean the bridil. You start the fire,” he said.

“You’ve already started a fire,” I whispered.

“Let it smolder,” he said, kissing me. “So that it might flare intensely later.”

We made food together. Crouching before the arched fireplace, his hand easily rubbed my back. I took his hand for a moment.

The cauldron boiled in the coals.

While I chopped vegetables for the stew, I stole looks at him. I knew his every desire. Yet I knew nothing about him. Zashi, his kingdom. His family. His world.

If I didn’t stop staring at him, I would chop my fingers off.

“You don’t talk much about your family,” I prompted.

“I have an older brother,” he said, spatching the fowl. “Tharon. We get on as brothers do, I suppose. Father is still alive. Mother died when I was young.”

“That’s so sad,” I said. “It must’ve been hard growing up without a mother.”

“Even harder, given I was raised by my stepmother.” He looked up from his work and smiled. “We get on, as stepmother and child do, I suppose.”

“You still live with them in Zashi, the city?” I asked. “What do they do?”

For that matter, what do you do?"

"We're in government," he said. "The worst kind of bureaucrats. Autocrats, actually."

"Oh. Like administrators?"

"Yes. Like that," he said. "It's made me lazy. Here, I feel more useful. Even though it's just the two of us."

"I like it that way," I admitted.

Dinner was a nice change from the fishy leels. Patats were tender, the skin of the bridil crispy. Mother had taught me to cook for a husband. Even if I wasn't married, I put that skill to use.

Drax groaned and rubbed his stomach. "That was divine, my bonded soul."

I took our plates to the washbasin. "Why thank you, my bonded heart." The strange phase came easily to my lips now. Had I truly accepted it? "I thought it was pretty good myself."

I found him behind me as I washed our plates. His arms circled around me.

"We can clean up later," he whispered in my ear.

When I faced him, our lips met. "The sunset," I said. "It won't wait."

Taking my hand, he led me from the house down the beach. At the wide point of the river, he gathered some wood and rocks to make a firepit.

Green sky turned blue with the sun behind the clouds. On the other horizon, the fat red moon showed her face.

Once the fire crackled merrily, Drax lay on the sand beside me.

"Beautiful," he said.

It was. The sunset was a powerful mix of color and the fury of yet another storm. The moon made the clouds look heated and smoking.

But Drax wasn't looking at the sky.

I kissed him softly. My hands felt the planes of muscles beneath his tunic. I tugged, and he pulled it over his head. My own dress joined his clothing.

His skin glowed in the firelight. I kissed him up and down, touching, caressing, feeling his sense of excitement in my own mind.

"Why do you want me?" I asked, kisses migrating across his abs.

"You're beautiful. And you call to me. You are mine. I don't question it."

"I like that you began with 'beautiful,'" I smiled. I ran my tongue over his inner thigh.

My prior experience with men was limited. Knowing his desires, feeling

them as my own, guided me. At my gentle touches, his cock rose, erect.

The bulb no longer frightened me, instead sent thrills of anticipation deep in my belly.

I cupped his balls, kisses moving up and down his textured shaft.

“How did you learn to make love to a woman?” I asked between kisses.

“I had classes,” he said.

Giving his balls a squeeze, I glared at him.

“Lovemaking theory,” he grunted. “It’s finally come in handy.”

Theory my ass. I took as much of him into my mouth as I could manage.

Heard him gasp.

He must have been with other women. Even if he didn’t speak of it. Did it mean they weren’t important? That I was?

Bobbing my head, I enjoyed the sound of his pleased moans.

His hands fistled my hair.

Swallowing him, feeling his bulb’s choking pressure, I massaged his shaft.

“My true mate...” he whispered.

Gobbling him fiercely, I worked him into a frenzy. I felt the surge of blood in his veins. His head lolled back as he roared at the sky.

He was mine. Whatever was to happen, right now he was mine.

I pleased him as I wanted.

Body bucking beneath me, I held tight. His fingers dug furrows in the sand. Mindless sounds escaped him.

Under my ministrations, his pleasure reached the pinnacle. I felt him erupt in my mind before he filled my mouth.

I kept in place, drowning in his hot seed, welcoming it.

When he finally subsided, I curled up in his arms. He sheltered me from a chill wind off the sea.

I blinked. How the moon had climbed so high, the sky grown so dark, I didn’t know. Only that I was roused as Drax gently carried me into our bedroom.

## DRAX

Lita lay warm and languorous in my arms as steady rain pattered against the windows, cloaking the world in gray. A persistent drip fell from the ceiling in the corner.

I thought I had fixed that.

I wished we could remain this way forever, cocooned from cares and obligations. But ugly duty would eventually rear its head, I knew, drawing me back to the intrigues of court at Zashi.

No matter. I would find a way for Lita to remain at my side, propriety be damned. My family could go hang. None had ever soothed my darker nature the way my soulbound love did. I hadn't felt the beast within stir in weeks now. Lita was the cure to my curse, the balm to my ravaged spirit. As my fated mate, she brought me a sense of profound rightness and completion. Wasn't that how true love was supposed to feel?

Such utter devotion was rare outside of cloying ballads, I knew. Even in the dimness, I appreciated the solid stone walls of this forgotten cottage, the rough-hewn timbers overhead. In the hearth, coals still glimmered, not yet burned down to ash.

Lita shifted against me with a soft sigh, her eyes still closed in replete relaxation. "The clothes are getting smelly," she murmured. "I should do laundry today."

"Mm. Or we could just stay naked," I suggested, nuzzling into her neck.

She hummed low in her throat, the sound vibrating through me. "You're so lazy." But she made no move to leave the snug haven of my arms.

I pressed suggestively against her shapely rear. "On the contrary, I was considering getting quite energetic right here in bed." I was already swelling

for her. It seemed I walked in a state of perpetual arousal when Lita was near.

Why wouldn't I be? My hands touched her, tracing her shape. Her soft skin was warm from sleep. My bound soul was beautiful, desirable, and she returned my absolute affection.

By way of reply, she took my seeking hand and brought it to my rigid shaft. Her lips quirked in a feline smile. "Oh, that kind of vigorous activity."

My fingers splayed across her belly, tracing abstract patterns on her silken skin as we exchanged languorous kisses.

I took her wrist, placed her hand against my rigidity. Her lips curled in a smile.

"Oh. That kind of strenuous."

Eyes still closed, she brushed her full lips against mine. We gently kissed.

"Maybe I'm a fool. But I'm in love with you," she said.

I claimed her mouth more fiercely, emotion swelling my heart near to bursting. "Then I'm the greater fool," I vowed solemnly, "for I loved you before we ever met."

Her answering laugh was low and throaty. "Sweet nonsense." Yet her kisses contained a new heat now.

Lita's hands roved my body boldly, tracing the rigid contours of my muscles. "So strong," she purred. "So perfect. I cannot get enough of touching you. It's a thirst."

I dragged her closer, kneading her breasts as I suckled first one taut nipple, then the other. My need was rising urgently.

"Harder," Lita pleaded, reading my desire. I opened my mouth wider, tugging strongly with lips and tongue until she gasped and arched.

"Your teeth drive me wild," she confessed wantonly.

I devoured her mouth again, our tongues tangling. "You are more than I could have dreamed or wished for," I swore fiercely.

Her bold hands dipped low, rings of pleasure tightening around my swollen flesh. "How can this be real?" she wondered aloud even as she stroked me. "It feels like a fantasy."

I slid my fingers between her thighs, finding her slick and ready. "You feel real enough to me," I assured her throatily. "Real. And wet."

As I fingered her, she sighed. Her face moved lower, licking and biting my nipples this time.

"I like your touch," she said. "I like it a lot. Please don't stop."

I watched her writhe, taking her in under the faint light from outside. Her

sleek black hair, the gentle curve of her cheekbones. Her mouth was so full, I had to touch her lower lip.

She bit my finger, then slowly sucked on it. Lita smiled around it. Then her face clenched. “Oh, yes. Like that!”

With a finger on each side of her clit, my motions became less gentle.

“Oh, you like it like that?”

“Yes! Yes, like that!”

I pulled her hair hard, yanking her head back to kiss her. Her tongue slid into my mouth. I felt her hips shift, and groan with the new angle.

Lita let out a grunt between her teeth. Pleasure made her skin erupt in goosebumps, her nipples jump to attention.

For a while, she panted, breathing into my hair. Then I felt her hand on my manhood.

“Your turn,” she said into my ear.

We took our time pleasuring one another as rain gave way to shafts of sunlight. I was content to remain in bed all day, wrapped up in Lita's beauty. But she eventually pulled away with great reluctance.

“I really must wash our things before I have nothing at all to wear,” she chided.

I flopped back with a groan, loathe to release her. “Why bother dressing at all way out here? We have utter privacy.”

“Because we’re right by the ocean, and it gets cold, and it rains,” she said. “Your leather breeks could use a good steaming, by the way. Never mind the underwear.”

I got out of bed, gathered my clothes, but didn’t dress. “Come on, lazybones. Let’s get the laundry together. I, for one, adore your smell. It actually makes me horny. But if you really want clean clothes...”

“Your smell doesn’t make me horny,” she said getting up. “So I don’t believe you.”

When she tried to pull the dress on, I snatched it away.

“Hey! What are you doing?”

“Naked laundry,” I said. “It’s a new game I just made up. C’mon.”

“We are not walking around outside naked!” she protested, yet still followed me downstairs and out the door. I grabbed the bar of soap from near the wash basin.

Once in the garden, Lita hugged herself, trying to cover her naked body. Her eyes scanned the horizon.

“There’s nobody here. C’mon, down to the fire pit,” I said.

“I’ve never notice before, but your butt is tiny,” she called. “Very round. Rather pale in the sunlight.”

“Follow it,” I said.

At our firepit for sunset watching, I set sticks and twigs for a fire. Rain revealed a glossy orange shell in the sand. I had a pile of pretty shells and stones going. “Might as well get started,” I said, nodding at our clothes.

“You’re really going to wash our clothing naked,” she said.

“We’ve both been naked out here before,” I said. “Many times. I remember them being quite fun.”

She shrugged and moved our small bundle onto a flat rock. I watched her motion, the way she looked as she bent to her task. I burned my fingers in the fire.

Here, the river broadened, almost as wide as a lake, and vanished into the grasses. Fingers and rivulets flowed from here to the sea, winding and snaking through deep cuts and smoothed rocks.

Between the deep streams, houses stood nearer the shore.

“We should explore the village some more,” Lita said, taking in the same view. “See what other furniture we can salvage.”

The tumbledown structures sagged, jutting from drifts of deep mud or grassy hills. At its wildest, the river flooded and buried the fishing huts. They now seemed to spring from the delta like mushrooms, covered in moss and plants.

Lita scrubbed her dress and wrung it out. Laying it flat on a rock, she soaped up another garment.

“We don’t walk around naked in Terr,” she said.

I picked up her dress to dry by the fire. “Actually, we don’t much in Zashi, either. I thought I’d start a new tradition.”

“No, don’t hang that by the fire. It will make the fabric stiff. My mother always hung laundry on a line, even in the cold,” she said.

There were no trees, save the dinva with branches at the tops of long stalks.

“We’ll bring it back to the house,” she said. “There’s a line out back.”

When I spread the dress back out on the rock, I yelped in surprise.

Lita laughed, holding the wash bucket she’d dumped on me.

“That’s cold, wench,” I said.

“Maybe we shouldn’t be naked outside,” she said.

I lunged toward her, feigning a grab for the bucket. Instead, I scooped her in my arms. She let out a whoop as I dropped her in the river.

Even as she gasped and gaped, she managed to kick out with her foot and trip me off the rock.

I landed awkwardly, the surface slapping my skin.

When I rose, she held her hands out, backing away. "You started it," she said.

"Maybe I'll finish it."

We moved deeper into the water.

As I got near her, she splashed me with both hands. I caught her before she could swim away.

Her skin was slippery against mine. Hot compared to the river water.

My hands gripped her, pulling her close.

"How are you going to finish this?" she whispered.

## LITA

We lay on a slab of river rock in the sun. Leels crawled from the water, scrambling in retreat when they saw us. I held Drax's hand.

"There won't be many warm days left," he said.

"If I were home, Mother and I would be smoking meats, salting fish, pickling vegetables. Preparing for the cold," I said.

He didn't look at me, eyes distant.

"I haven't prepared anything for the cold," he said.

"There may still be time."

Finally, his eyes met mine. "As much as I want to stay here forever..."

My heart plummeted. "You have to leave."

"We have to leave," he said.

"When?"

"I don't know." He frowned. "Eventually. I may appear carefree, but I have duties."

"Your family?" I asked. "You said you grew up without your mother."

"My mother was a dancer. Probably a good one, since I was born out of wedlock."

The idea of it saddened me, but Drax's expression was light.

"Your father then?" I asked. "Your brother?"

"I shouldn't grouse. By law, he didn't need to declare me his son. Perhaps I should be more grateful. Less inclined to shirk my responsibilities." His hand squeezed mine. "Right now, you're my only responsibility."

It was my turn to look at the fliers high above the waves. "I should've known this wouldn't last. Here, I can pledge myself to you. Maybe because it's only a dream."

“Don’t speak so,” he said. “The only thing that matters is that we’re together.”

“Your family will accept me?”

Why would they? I was human, not Shakai. People feared the sight of my face. I took in his alien features with a sigh. The shape of his bones, his size, his dark color and pretty blue hair. Spots running along his jaw, over his shoulders joining in the back. Fangs behind his shapely lips.

“They must,” he said. “If they don’t, I’m fine with that also.”

“You wouldn’t cut your family ties for me,” I propped myself up on my elbow. “I won’t let you. How could you?”

“How could I not?” he said. “I love you. Who knows? Maybe my family will think I’ve died and leave me be. Then I’ll be sad that I preserved no food for the cold months.”

Part of me wanted him to be right. That his family would forget about him. I was certain that mine had.

“I want to make something special for you, then,” I said. “Something from my city. To celebrate whatever time we have left.”

We rose, gathering the laundry for the line. Somehow, I had gotten used to our nudity. So, this must be a dream.

Once the laundry was hung, I padded into the kitchen.

Previous occupants had left provisions. Either they had left in a hurry or planned to return.

In earthenware jars, there was something resembling flour. Another held maz honey. From the jungle fringe, I had picked some aslivoons and stolen the eggs from a nest.

Placing these on the table, I remembered baking with Mother. Most of our bread came from the bakery, but together we made treats and desserts.

One important aspect was the blooming of flour into a bubbling froth. I left a mixture of water and flour on the hearth, covered with a cloth.

I checked it, smelling the heady aroma. From that alone, I figured the white powder was flour. So far so good.

Framed by the pointed arch of a window, Drax moved downhill along the beach. Unclothed, his form held my attention for a time.

Dragging my eyes away, I went about my chores.

On the line, the laundry had quickly dried in the sun and breeze. I brought it into the house. After attaching the leather bodice to the fine fabric, I donned my dress again. I left Drax’s clothing folded on the bed.

Back in the kitchen, I mixed my ingredients, trying to remember the proper order. After lighting a fire in the hearth, I poured the mix into the cauldron. Once the coals gathered, I would bury the metal among them.

Soon, a fragrant aroma filled the house.

I watched Drax lay a large fish on the butcher stump in the yard. He moved inside.

“Your clothes are on our bed,” I said.

“Aw. You dressed. I was hoping to find you cooking naked,” he said.

“Wash that fish blood off you before putting your clothes on,” I said. “Laundry is not my favorite task. Naked or not.”

“Perchance one day you won’t have to launder another garment again,” he said.

What did he mean by that?

“What is that heavenly smell, Lita?”

“I’m baking ludvinn. Hopefully. It was my mother’s favorite.”

He smirked. “Hopefully?”

“I’m uncertain of the ingredients here.” I shrugged.

“I speared an actual fish for dinner. Are you as sick of leel as I am?”

Shrugging, I used a stick to lift the cauldron lid. Why did I bother? I had no idea how the dessert was baking. “I won’t complain. Not about anything. This is our special place. If we have to eat leels daily, I would be happy.”

“We could pickle them,” he suggested.

“No.” Ick!

While we prepared the fish for the outdoor stove, something terrible happened to my ludvinn. When I looked, the dough had pushed the lid off the top. Globes of it fell into the fire.

“Is this baking, or just foaming?” I said. “Too much leavening?”

“It will be fine,” Drax said without conviction.

“Possibly not the best supper,” I said. “Maybe the most memorable.”

He glanced around. “The dessert may be ruined but at least the kitchen isn’t a disaster.”

With his help, I put the ingredients back and washed up.

He went out to turn the fish. Again, I studied him through the window.

My mind spun up memories of Mother.

She always warned me not to feel too happy, not to laugh too much, never feel content. Such thoughts always invited sorrow.

I couldn’t be utterly happy, not with thoughts of our leaving at the back of

my mind.

There were other matters as well. The bestial change had not overcome Drax since arriving here. Did it still lurk beneath his placid surface?

Some aspect of his darker side attracted me in a way I would not even give thought to.

My attempt at ludvinn ended up with a hard, tall cake that fell into a heap when we dumped it from the cauldron.

“Huh,” I said.

Drax grabbed a handful and stuffed it into his mouth. “Mmm.” His brows lifted.

“Good?” I doubted it.

“Gooley,” he said. “Burned. A fine combination.”

I punched him in the shoulder. “So I’m not a baker.”

“You are still more than enough for me,” he smiled.

While we ate, the sky quickly turned dark. Rain pelted the roof high above.

“The cold is here,” Drax said, getting up to close the kitchen shutters. “I can hear ice in the rain.”

I touched the back of his hand as he sat. “You will keep me warm.”

“And you will enjoy it.” His features turned lecherous.

Thunder cracked, making me jump, the dim kitchen blazing with light.

“You don’t like the thunderstorms?” he asked.

Not since my time in the temple. “I prefer a quiet storm.”

He put our dishes in the basin and held out a hand to me. “Come. My mother taught me a way to ride out storms like this.”

I stared as he stacked the benches. He went upstairs, returning with our quilt and down pillows. The quilt went over the benches and table, making a low tent.

He crawled inside with the pillows. After a moment, his hand emerged, beckoning me.

“Pillow castle,” he said when I crawled in beside him. “My mother always made one when the storms raged outside. It turned fierce weather into an event. I’ve never feared the thunder.”

We snuggled up. “Your mother sounds like a good woman.”

“The best. But even at an early age, I knew I wouldn’t have her long,” he said.

“A sickness?”

“Politics,” he said into my hair. “Traacherous in Zashi.”

I allowed myself to relax into his solid body. “You speak of politics, of autocrats, of government and administration. Are you a palace guard?”

He laughed. “Absolutely not. I’m not disciplined enough for military life.”

I couldn’t argue there.

“Are you...” The thought hadn’t occurred, but it was really the only thing that made sense. “Are you high born?”

“A little, yes,” he said. “As high born as a bastard can be.”

He pulled me into his lap and kissed me.

“It’s not that interesting,” he said.

Lightning flashed, thunder breaking instantly. I held him tighter.

“Do you feel safer in our pillow castle?” he asked.

“Not with you in here,” I breathed. “You’re devious, and perhaps a perverted scoundrel.”

He pulled us down to the pillows, lying atop me. “I’ll keep you safe. But not from me.”

My arms hugged his neck. “Imperil me, my villain.”

## DRAX

Lita cried out in her sleep at a distant thunder crack.

I pulled her to me in bed, spooning her.

“Ssh. You’re safe, my bonded soul.”

Whimpering, she pulled away. “The women I met in the temple. They’re in danger.”

“It was just a dream,” I said. “The storm reminds you. Go back to sleep.”

“How do I know they weren’t reaching out to me?” she said. “The horrible things they did to me in there—do they still linger?”

I knew a little about a lingering dark side.

The Valti slumbered in me, yet I still felt its presence. Its threat.

“Don’t think of it, my mate.” I gently lifted her hair and kissed the back of her neck.

“I’m afraid. Oh…”

My kisses ran down her back, my nails trailing on both sides.

Lovemaking had stilled the force within me.

It was a remedy I highly recommended.

Certainly, it would chase Lita’s night fears away. I ventured lower.

Lifting her pelvis to meet my kisses, I tasted her.

Quickly, she became slick. Maddeningly fragrant.

She let fly a growl of passion, fierce as any predator.

I serviced her from behind with my tongue and a charge surged through her quickly, leaving her limp and trembling. Again, I spooned her, whispering in her hair until she fell back to sleep.

The bed was empty as wan light peeked past the shutters.

I opened the window, the sky glowering at me. Looking down, I saw Lita

working in the garden.

Dressing quickly, I joined her.

“We need to dig up whatever vegetables remain before the first freeze,” she said.

Lita leaned on a shovel, turning the soil. Uncovering a root, she tossed it in a small pile. Patats, she called those. Pink firin root. Firebulb.

A freeze would spoil them. She was right.

“Let me find a basket. We can keep these in the cellar.”

“We should pull the nuts from the dinva, too,” she said.

From the cellar, I returned with baskets. Sorting the vegetables, I paused.

Did this count as preparing for the cold?

There would likely be no need.

I did it anyway.

“Sometimes, I miss my homespun day dresses,” she said, flipping another clod of dark dirt. “This one is too fine for this kind of work.”

“I like the way it looks on you,” I said.

Punching her shovel into the soil, she leaned on it. “I just hate getting it so dirty.”

I felt a smile cross my face.

“Stop it,” she frowned. “How do you make every occasion a time for making love?”

“Simply because you are close,” I said. “And the thoughts of taking you in the mud are arousing.”

“Hold on. Let’s finish in the garden,” she said.

“I thought we could start in the garden,” I said. “Finish in the bedroom.”

“You’re incorrigible.” She turned away.

I put my arms around her from behind. “I thought you liked it.”

She relaxed against me. “Have you realized that I am unable to resist you?”

“It’s not all on my end, then?”

“Does it do me any good? Wanting you? Surrendering to you?”

I didn’t know where she was going, so I didn’t answer.

“We’re together here. But here is... a place without rules. Without customs. Just the two of us, living and loving. I would do this forever.”

“But?”

“What happens when we leave here? The rest of the world might force us apart. I might be thrown to the whivven. I have no claim on you.”

“You have a claim on my heart,” I said. “The bond won’t be broken.”

“Your heart. Is it enough? You captivate me, despite our differences. Because of our differences. I will do what you want. What you say.” She faced me.

I reached in my vest pocket. I had collected small objects, shells, stones, and a tiny gold coin found in the village. Painstakingly, I bound them together on a thong. I placed the necklace around her neck and tied it fast, then I went down on one knee.

She drew a breath, gazing at the baubles.

“Accept this as a sign of our bond. It is made of the few things of beauty or value found in this place. But it is a special place to us. Will you let it serve? I know it’s crude.”

“No, it’s beautiful,” she said, lifting it in her fingers.

“You will be bound to me,” I said.

“I’ve been bound to you since our first touch,” she whispered.

“I will be bound to you. There is no one to witness this, save the flyers. Perhaps the gods. It is my pledge to keep you always, my love. My Lita.”

“That’s good enough for me,” she said, eyes welling.

I stood, lifting her chin with my finger. “This is no time for sorrow.”

“No?”

“It is time for making love,” I said, pulling at the laces of her bodice.

She looked around. “I thought the mud thing was a joke.”

“Nope,” I said, pulling the dress over her head and carefully hanging it on a fence post.

Her body looked stunning, garbed only in my glittering handiwork.

Gently, I laid her in the muck. She smeared mud in my face.

“You like it dirty,” she said.

Which turned out not to be the case. Copulating in the ooze and mud proved less than comfortable. As did a dip in the river. Its waters ran cold now, a sign of coming weather.

We ended up in bed. Shivering. Not completely from the cold.

I hastily threw kindling on the coals in the hearth. Mainly to see her naked form in the glow of the flames.

Her kisses turned ferocious as I lay atop her.

“Never will I let you go,” I said.

Her hand found my cock.

“I want you inside me,” she whispered. “Now.”

Gently, I spread her legs.

She was having none of gentleness. Biting my neck until I cried out, I shoved myself between her thighs.

“Like that. Take me,” she begged.

With both hands, she guided me into her velvet grip. As my head pressed into her, she cried out, but did not hesitate.

Her hands found my waist, legs wrapping around mine. Pulling herself onto me like a sheath around a sword, she groaned, fingers clenching.

Smooth and wet, her pussy allowed my steady invasion. It was difficult to move through her clench. Pulling her legs apart, I sank deeper.

“Ravage me,” she whispered in my ear. Again, her teeth found my neck.

Compelled, I thrust my hips forward. It took some moments before I was buried fully.

“Savage me!” she demanded, nails cutting into the skin of my back. When she slapped me across the face, my body bucked with shock.

“Fuck me,” she said through her teeth, slapping me again.

Deep within, the pain aroused my sleeping Valti.

I would not allow it to take me over.

But with Lita’s frantic scratching, biting, slapping she brought it to the fore.

I felt my muscles swell with its power, my senses sharpening, until the scent of our passion drove the Valti wild.

Keeping the claws that extended from my fingers away from her tender flesh, I gripped her tighter nonetheless.

“Yes, like that! Like that!” she cried.

Beyond my command, my hips began a rhythm. Quickly, Lita synched to me. We moved in time. Yet the animal within amplified my motions, augmented my size.

“Harder,” she commanded. Lita pulled my hair, bit my shoulder where I had been wounded.

My interior beast railed even as it succumbed.

My thrusts made her shout and cry out. The bed shook. The room shook with my manic thrusts.

Pulling out, I spun her around on the bed. When she was on her hands and knees, I entered her again.

Like an animal.

I was capitulating to my darker side.

Reveling in it as my hips slapped her ass with whip crack sounds.

Gripping her wrists, I held them down to better position her body. Words spilled out of her, nonsense syllables of lust.

I answered with physicality, with thrusts so fierce, I feared I would break her.

And knew she wanted to be broken—through our bond. Even with the animal at my helm, we were still connected.

She wanted as much as I could give.

Growling, snarling, I put all my energy into hip thrusts. I increased my speed, my force.

The friction grew unbearable.

Yet I held back, feeling the first of Lita's orgasms in the pulse of her muscles, the twitches of her hands.

She buried her face in the blankets, taking them into her teeth. Lita became as animalistic as me.

Increasing, and again, I pounded her yielding pussy. Her yowls of pleasure excited me further, a challenge to the beast.

Roaring back, I plunged into her with all my might.

In my core, a spark was struck. The flame grew.

Wildfire.

Gripping her with bruising force, I pressed my manhood beyond deeply. She shuddered, coming again, lashing my own pleasure onward.

I didn't let go. My orgasm was ripped from me.

Shaken, I rammed her as I spilled my seed, completely, utterly out of control.

When my muscles stopped at last, stretching me like a bowstring, I lay beside Lita.

She touched my face, gazing into my eyes.

"Why?" I said over my panting breath. "Why raise my savage side?"

"I don't know," she said gently. "But now I feel bonded. As if we're complete. Knowing both sides of you. Loving all that you are."

She was foolish in this. My dark side came with danger. The only control I had was tamping it down by calming my thoughts.

Bad things happened when the Valti was let free.

Yet I would bow to Lita's wishes. Agree to anything she asked.

I hoped she wouldn't try to raise the Valti again.

Deep inside, I wished she would.

## LITA

**G**host moon and sun hung together in a clear, cold sky as I gathered sweet berries at the jungle's edge, lost in uneasy thought.

Why had I goaded Drax into unleashing his inner beast, the ferocious Valti spirit? The raw power it granted him was undeniably thrilling. Yet I was a foolish child poking at a deadly serpent with a long stick, tempting fate.

Some broken part of me craved that dangerous edge, the animalistic lust and savage intensity. I needed to push him to that forbidden brink, if only to see what would happen. Was that the true nature of our bond? He was a beast calmed by my presence, yet I longed to unleash the blackness coiled within him.

Even as I plucked ripe aslivoon berries, memories from the previous night's passion rose unbidden. I felt like a lion tamer with a predator on a leash under my command. However hot and desperate and wet that notion made me, it was a dangerous self-deception. The Valti could have easily turned on me and ripped me apart.

Did I harbor some secret death wish? Was I the true deviant in this relationship, not Drax? I had no answers, only uncomfortable questions.

“What are you?”

I sucked in a breath and leapt back from the jungle's edge, spilling berries.

A woodsman stepped into view, the hood of his cloak lowered, green hair pulled back in a queue. His eyes were like Drax's—concentric blue and green circles around his pupil. Spots ran down the sides of his face, around his neck.

I screamed and ran, pell-mell, for the house.

At my screech of fear, Drax burst from the house, armed with a sword, but otherwise naked.

I faced behind me to see the woodsman scratch his head.

“Is that you, milord?” he called.

The stranger came toward us. I saw a double ax slung from his back, a short sword at his side. Behind him, a saddled bagart emerged with a snort.

“Ancients be damned,” Drax said under his breath. “Ashur?”

“You’d think at least some light armor to go with that sword,” the man said. “Naked again?”

“I don’t need armor to deal with the likes of you,” Drax said, then lowered his blade. “C’mere, you son of a whivven’s ass.”

Holding up his palm, the woodsman stopped. “If you want a hug of camaraderie, pull on your breeks, milord.”

Drax grabbed him in an embrace anyway. The stranger stood, stiff and awkward.

“Okay, that’s enough.” The woodsman pulled free.

“You’ve been sent for me, cousin?” Drax asked.

“Sent to see if you yet lived, milord. And... Milady?”

“Close enough,” Drax said, pulling me forward slightly. “This is my bonded soul, my mate, Lita of Terr.”

“Lita,” he said. “I’m Ashur. I’m Drax’s...The one who cleans up the messes Drax leaves in his wake.”

“Ah,” I said. “He does need that.”

Did he say milord?

“Yes, the village south of here, I killed some bastards who dared touch Lita,” Drax said.

“And then fled in the night?” Ashur asked.

“Of course not,” Drax said. “In the very early morning.”

“Begging milady’s pardon,” Ashur said to me. “But you don’t seem to be Shakai. If the stories Mother used to frighten me with are even slightly true, I would say you are a Frostling, a ghost of the wood.”

I looked at Drax. He shrugged and nodded.

“I’m not a legend. I’m human, from Terr.”

“Terr?” Ashur raised his brows at Drax.

“The forbidden city of falling fire,” Drax said. “But to me it brought life.” He pressed a fervent kiss below my ear that made me shiver.

“Oh,” Ashur said, although he didn’t appear to understand the answer.

“Well, milord, I must say you seem...”

“Yes?” Drax said.

“Naked. You seem very naked. Will you please dress? This is too distracting. A cloak? A loin clout? Something?”

“A hat?” Drax asked.

“Drax, please,” I said. “Put your pants on. Let me give you some refreshment, Ashur.”

“Thank you, milady,” he said, bowing.

“Just Lita,” I said, leading him toward the kitchen door. “I’m no highborn.”

“Put your mount in the stable,” Drax directed. “We’ll take care of her together.”

We entered the house, Drax running upstairs. I sat Ashur on a bench at our table. Water on the hearth was hot enough for tea.

“Honey?” I asked.

“If it’s no trouble,” Ashur said, his eyes studying me.

I set the tea before him. “There’s leftover fish if you haven’t broken your fast.”

“The tea is more than plenty, thank you.”

I sat across from him, folding my hands. “You’re here to take Drax away from me, aren’t you?” My voice emerged steady, belying the sudden hollow ache in my chest.

“Take him away? You mean give him an order?” Ashur smiled broadly. “No. That would be pointless.”

“But they sent another Valti,” I said.

Ashur sat back. “You know of Valti?”

“Some,” I shrugged. “Enough to know the look.”

Drax came downstairs and sat on the bench beside me. “What news, huntsman?”

“Nothing good, my prince,” Ashur said. “Your father’s spells are increasing in frequency.”

“Hmm,” Drax said, his eyes clouding.

“It’s hard to say how long he is for this world,” Ashur said.

I stared at Ashur. “Prince? Did you say prince?”

“A technicality,” Drax admitted, frowning.

“You’re second in line to the throne.” Ashur’s eyes widened. “It’s a reality.”

“Guess that means my charming brother hasn’t married yet,” Drax said. I stood up. “Your father’s a king?”

“Yes. But I’m not the heir. As soon as Tharon finally knocks up some virgin royal, I’ll be out of contention,” Drax said. “Seems my older sibling continues to drag his feet.”

Ashur stared into his mug. “I know you prefer to make light of your station, milord—”

“It’s just the three of us here, Ashur. And we’re family. Call me Drax.”

“Only cousins in the most remote of ways.” But with a slight grin, the huntsman let out a long breath. “Your father’s worsening illness is a concern to the court, to the royals, and to the citizens of Zashi, Drax. If you were to return, it would set some nervous minds to rest.”

“I don’t like the castle palace, I don’t like games played at court. My mind isn’t devious enough, and politics are not interesting enough,” Drax said. “Besides, the Queen has made it very clear there is no place for me there.”

Ashur ignored him. “It would do the people good to see the royal family gathered for what eventually will come. And better for you to arrive before your father’s death. Your stepmother is no comfort to him—although she seeks comfort of her own, I’m told.”

“You’re a prince. A royal prince. Your father is king,” I said, my mind still catching up, half-rising from my seat.

It was hard to believe.

Yet the confidence, the devil-may-care attitude that attracted me—that could certainly come from a prince.

He pulled me down, and I nestled into his lap. “Sit, my love. My stepmother has barred me from taking any role in governance, any responsibilities. This changes nothing.”

Didn’t it?

“Do you have to go?” I put my hands on his shoulders, resting my head on his broad chest as my emotions roiled. Would this revelation tear us apart? Could a human woman build a life with a royal Shakai prince? The differences seemed insurmountable, even without weighing the matter of his Valti nature.

“No, I don’t,” he said, his fingers smoothing down my hair.

“Not yet,” Ashur said firmly. “But soon.”

Drax let out a sigh.

“Rest you here, Ashur. One night or many. Rest your mount. Fish and hunt with me. Learn about my mate. Provision yourself for the return to Zashi. We have little to offer but friendship,” Drax said.

“Thank you for the offer, milord. Drax. I will take you up on it for a short time. When I travel again to Zashi, I won’t reveal your home,” he said.

“Thank you for that,” I said, grateful for even the tiniest chance that our peaceful life could continue.

“Yet heed my words. Travel home before it’s too late,” Ashur warned.

Or not.

Drax nodded to himself and stood. “Come. Let’s feed and water your bagart. The stable is small. Hopefully our mounts won’t rip each other to pieces.”

I watched them go out the kitchen door, too stunned to follow.

There was much to process in Ashur’s few words.

Prince? Drax?

We had no royals in Terr. Our highest-ranking citizens were priests or the House of Command, the high families. None with a gods-given right to rule. Terr was a representative democracy, the council, the temple tribune, and the house of judges making rules and decisions.

What must it be like to be a prince?

I wandered to the kitchen window, trying to overhear Drax and Ashur in conversation.

“She is a beauty, there’s no denying that, even if she is so strange to behold,” Ashur said. “You say she calms your Valti?”

“I *would’ve* said that,” Drax muttered.

Heat infused my face at his words.

“No, it’s true. She’s the one. The reason I left the castle so quickly was because I heard her call,” Drax said.

“None would blame you,” Ashur said. “How much more time do you have before the Valti takes you over?”

“I think my savagery has been tamed. Or at least caged,” Drax said. “For the moment, anyway.”

Hooves clopped over the stone floor of the stable, the bagarts whickering and whinnying.

“Down, Glindi!” Drax commanded.

“It never occurred to me that a stranger might be soul bound. Or that such a distance would need to be crossed to find your true heart,” Ashur said.

“No matter how far, I would’ve gone to her,” Drax said. “I had no choice, once her soul called to me. You will know soon.”

“It better be soon. The manhood ceremony is long past for me.”

“Not nearly as long as it was for me,” Drax said. “Relax. It will happen.”

“I pray it’s so. You haven’t had to hunt down those of our kind who turned the dark facet. Should I be overtaken, promise me you’ll be the one to take me out.”

“Ashur—”

“Promise me, milord,” Ashur said.

“It won’t come to that,” I heard Drax say. “But if it does—I won’t let you down, my friend.”

Ashur’s words echoed in my head: hunt down those of our kind who turned the dark facet.

Did that mean men who suffered from the Valti curse succumbed to it?

Deep inside, Drax had a beast barely leashed.

Could it take him over?

And if the dark part took control, would other Shakai hunt my love down?

## DRAX

**D**uring Ashur's stay, Lita became distant. At first, I thought perhaps she didn't want him to overhear us making love.

But I quickly realized that was not what brought the cast of sadness to her features.

The two of us sat by the firepit, gazing at the stars. Cold had come, and we were bundled against it. Clear skies were a harbinger of the season to come.

"You have to return," she said, leaning into me, not looking at me.

"Not yet. We still have time to be alone," I said.

She leaned away, giving me serious eyes.

I gave in.

"You're right. I need to return."

"It would be safer to travel with Ashur. Another sword," she said.

I frowned. "I don't want to."

"I guess being a royal allows you a certain amount of acting the spoiled brat," she said.

"I'm half-royal. When Father dies, Tharon will ascend. And I'll be free to go about my non-royal business," I said. In my ears, the words sounded heated.

"So get it over with," she said. Her gaze wandered around our ruined village. "Maybe someday, we could..."

"Return?" The word left me with a sigh. "That would be ideal."

"But impossible?"

I shrugged. "Not necessarily. We've been here this long."

"Are you—" She stirred the fire. "Are you ashamed to bring me home?"

“Don’t be silly, Lita. The court expects the unexpected from me. I would hate to let them down. Besides, you will make my brother mad with envy,” I said.

Her eyes met mine. “Envy?”

I touched her cheek. “Tharon, and every other man of Zashi with a pulse. Do you not know how beautiful you are? How desirable?”

“You’re just sweet talking me,” she said. “Trying to get under my skirt.”

“Now and always,” I said, pulling her closer.

She kissed me softly. “I couldn’t bear losing you.”

I kissed her more firmly. “That goes for me as well.”

Lita lowered her head. I felt her breath against my neck. “How will it be? In the city? So many people around.”

I tilted her face to look her in the eye. “It will be like it is now. Save a barred chamber door. And fewer chores to do.” I kissed her. And again. Until she took me seriously.

She pulled the tunic over my head. “It’s cold out.”

“We could continue this in our bed,” I said.

“No.” She unlaced her bodice. “I would make love to you under the stars, on our beach, one last time.”

I pulled my belt frog loose. “So be it,” I said.

Pushing her into the sand, I stared at her golden skin, lit hot by the light of the low fire.

“Slowly,” she said, removing her dress. “Make it last, Drax.”

My fingers followed her curves. Even though I knew her body well, she still entranced me. “I will love you until the sunrise, if you command it.”

She squirmed in the sand, getting into position. Then she lifted a leg, resting it on my shoulder. I kissed her calf, along her slender thigh.

“Slowly,” she whispered.

I was happy to oblige, to savor her, until limp and sated in my arms I could carry her back to bed.

MORNING CAME, bright and dreadful. Lita clung to me as I threw off the covers. When I opened the shutters, the heartbreaking green of the sky greeted me, the surf roaring against the shore.

Our place. Our solitude.

My heart sank as the sun rose.

In the little stable, I saddled both mounts. Glindi tried to give me a bite. I tapped her foreleg with my foot. She shook her head with a snort, not much of a multitasker.

“What provisions do we have?” Ashur wandered into the stable, paniers over his shoulders.

“Not much. Some dried meat and fish. Lita would not agree to prepare pemm.”

“No one agrees to pemm,” Ashur said. “It’s just a sad necessity. I have a bow. You have a knife and a... sharp stick. We’ll make do, milord.”

“I should make tea,” I said. “Let Lita sleep a little.”

“Have you trained her in self-defense, milord?” Ashur asked.

I shook my head. “Why would she need that? She has me.”

“Zashi is a large city. And the court is not always gentle. Your step-mother—”

Is a bitch.

“I’ll speak to Lita about it.”

We traveled through the jungle back to the Zashi Road. Lita kept her eyes forward, refusing to give the abandoned village a last look.

Perchance not to jinx the idea of our return.

The mounts blew clouds before them in the morning chill. I couldn’t find it in me to kick Glindi to a trot. Without much talking, the day passed.

We came to rest some miles past the fork, the sun at zenith.

“Have you a copper, milady?” Ashur asked Lita.

She pulled one from a concealed pocket. “Why?”

Ashur pulled a sheathed knife from his belt. “It’s bad luck to give a blade as a gift. It could sever our friendship.”

“A blade?” She put the coin in his palm and took the knife.

“I would show you the way of its use. To protect yourself if needs be. Zashi is a vast city. Crowded. It would make me feel better to arm you, train you.”

Lita eyed me. “Drax?”

“If I trained you, we’d only end up naked in the bushes with every move,” I said.

She nodded. “Good point.” She turned back to him. “I would like to know how to defend myself, Ashur.”

Lita tilted the blade in sunlight, making it flare. The blade was curved, like a talon.

“It’s suitable for a woman,” Ashur said. He patted his left side of his chest. “Nestled here, it would be undetected.”

“I’d not hear of nestling, huntsman,” I growled.

“Stop it, my mate,” Lita frowned.

“Fine. I’ll make a fire.”

As I readied our small lunch, Ashur showed Lita how to fight with a knife. She mirrored his footing, her moves smooth, dance-like. It was only two days to Zashi, but by then, it looked like Lita might have a chance against a trained fighter.

Might.

For that day, and the next, we travelled. The road climbed higher. Soon, we moved along a ridge in the hills. Jungle turned to conifers, the surroundings familiar.

“Is that it?” Lita gasped as we reached the summit and started down.

Below, Zashi spread her blue rooftops to fill the entire valley from slope to slope. The castle palace sat on a spire on the far side of the city, overlooking the Strait of Fear. In the cold light, Zashi looked pristine, welcoming.

“There’s no wall,” Lita said as the mounts descended.

“Around the castle are two,” I said. “Otherwise, the city is too large.”

“We fear no outsiders,” Ashur said proudly.

It was market day in the Southern Quarter. Lita stared at row after row of merchants; foodstuffs, jewelry, fish, meat, livestock, herbs, medicines—the tents went on and on. We passed through, none giving us a second look, but I made sure her hood was up, her face well shadowed.

Once leaving the cries of the hawkers and shouting bargainers behind, I pointed out the sights to Lita. There wasn’t much in this quarter, although South Street did boast a number of heroic statues and sprawling fountains.

It wasn’t until the road rose at the end of the city did dwellings become ornate. Rich houses of courtiers, provisioners to the throne, and tax collectors gathered on the slopes below the castle wall.

Taking the winding road up the pinnacle of granite, we soon arrived at the drawbridge.

“State your name, your house, and your business,” an armored man with a lance challenged us.

“Borny, get out of the way,” I called. “I’m saddle sore.”

“Milord Drax?” the man’s face brightened. With a sweeping bow, he allowed us to pass. “Welcome back, my prince! Shall I alert the royal family?”

“No,” I said. “No feasts. None of that. I just want to relax.”

Lita’s eyes were wide on mine.

“It’ll be fine,” I said.

At the lowest level of the castle, we rode the bagarts to the stable caves. I dismounted and helped Lita down.

“What do I do?” she asked. “What do I say? Do I bow?”

“Nope. No bowing. Unless someone bows to you. Oh, to the king and queen, yes, bow. I’ll let you know.”

I hugged her tightly. “If I’d known sooner we would be coming here, I would have tried to prepare you more. I know its overwhelming. I’m so sorry, my love.”

A stableboy hurried over to take the leads. “Milord Drax!” he said with a smile.

“Careful with Glindi,” I said. “She bites.”

“Oh, I remember, milord,” he said. “Should I have the paniers sent to your quarters?”

“No. Have them washed. Or burned, maybe. They’re a mess.” I took Lita’s hand. “Come. Let me show you my chambers. My private chambers.”

She nodded. “Yes. Okay.”

“You’re supposed to say: ‘Is this just an excuse to get under my skirts?’ To which I reply—”

She gripped my hand with force. “I’m so nervous.”

Kissing the top of her head, I circumstances that had brought us back to his place. “It’s just building. Fancier than some.” I waggled my eyebrows at her. “We’ll definitely have to get you a new dress.”

“Is this an excuse to get me out of this dress?” Her slight grin cheered me. Lita was brave, clever. She’d adjust to this, even if I’d hoped she would never have to.

“That’s my girl,” I smiled.

“Should I keep the hood up?” she asked.

“You should,” Ashur said. “For the moment, milady.”

## LITA

“My apologies, I forgot to warn you about all the stairs,” Drax said ruefully as we climbed yet another winding staircase. “Just one more reason we should have ignored the summons and stayed home.”

“Try to behave, my prince,” Ashur said. “I’ll be in the barracks.” He headed off, shaking his head.

I clung tightly to Drax’s hand, dizzy from craning my neck at the soaring towers all around us. The castle was immense beyond belief, and seemed to contain an entire town’s worth of denizens. Armored guards stood at attention on every level we passed, most offering Drax a respectful greeting or salute.

Servants, soldiers, and all manner of workers bustled efficiently through the maze of halls and chambers about their various tasks. Many nodded or even bowed slightly to us, warmth lighting their eyes at Drax’s return.

It took only a few turns down identical passages before I was completely lost and disoriented. The warren of rooms and stairs brought back chilling memories of being led blind and stumbling through the windowless halls of the temple. I suppressed a shiver of unease.

Sensing my distress, Drax wrapped a comforting arm around my shoulders. “Almost there, and then I’ll give you the full tour.”

At the top of a tight spiral stair, he unbolted a heavy door and urged me into the room beyond. It was perfectly round, with a soaring ceiling painted with stars. Colorful cushions were strewn about low couches and chairs set before a massive fireplace. Another door led out onto a sunny rooftop terrace.

“Here we are, safe and sound. It’s easiest to get your bearings from this vantage.” Drax led me out into the fresh air.

I clutched the balustrade, staring wide-eyed at the sprawling castle complex laid out below us. We stood atop one of the taller towers, its crenelated roof soaring even higher behind us. Far below, ocean waves crashed against sheer cliffs. Closer, within two mammoth curtain walls, I glimpsed courtyards, gardens, barracks, stables, even more towers. Flags bearing a winged crest fluttered from every pinnacle, silver birds on blue fields.

The entire town could be seen from here, despite its vast size. We exited a door that was part of a tower that rose even higher behind us.

“We’re on the roof of the royal apartments,” Drax said. “The great hall is below them. This terrace roof steps down to the kitchen roof yonder. Towers are named by position, this being the southeast tower. The central open space is the inner ward. Space between the tall and short walls is the outer ward.”

It was three stories below. Structures and shelters were built there. I saw the gatehouse where we entered.

Drax pulled me to the tall inner wall that also formed the tower and pointed down.

“The moat, of course. Right now, it’s empty, but it’s spring fed. In time of siege, the dam is open. See there, the murder bridge? It leads to stairs cut in the spire, and down to the bay below.”

“It’s so big. Big as the temple,” I said.

“Hopefully friendlier,” Drax said, leading back into the tower. “Men will use this tower to fight. Not that we’ve ever been attacked from the sea. However...”

He opened a door, hidden, plastered like the walls. A staircase ran between the tower room and outer wall to an upper story. “Up here is the coward’s loft. Originally built for the children to be hidden from battle.”

I saw a wide bed, several trunks in the room, padded chairs. “Your bedchamber now?”

“Indeed, milady.” He smiled and leaned in to kiss me.

Pulling back, I put my hands on his chest. “All of this seems... not at all private, Drax.”

He shut the door and lowered a heavy bar. “Look out the window,” he said.

It was deep-set, the curved wall many feet thick. When I peered out, I saw the roof terrace below. And all the way to the jungle, the pine covered hills.

“No one can see us here, or overhear us. We are far from court, the

kitchens, the barracks. I value my solitude. A little walking is a small price to pay,” he said, wrapping his arms around me.

A cold hearth hugged the wall across from the bed, chimney rising to the cone of roof tiles. When I paused to listen, only a heavy stillness reached my ears, despite the busy castle below.

He held me close. “Welcome to my sanctuary,” he said.

“I’ve never seen a bed so big. I wonder how many people it would fit,” I said.

“Six,” he said. “Plus two domesticated whivven.”

“That sounds suspiciously specific.” I eyed him.

He grinned, and I had to laugh. His silliness was the balm my nerves needed. “Some say a down mattress is too soft—bad for the back. Down pillows provide no support. A down-filled comforter too warm, even in the depths of the coldest cold.”

“Down mattress?” He diverted well.

“I say you shouldn’t knock it until you try it.” Drax smiled.

This time, when he moved to kiss me, I kissed him back. He lifted me and laid me on the bed. I sank in with a sigh. He lay next to me.

“After our journey, I should have the servants fetch a tub and hot water to the lounge,” he whispered in my ear. “The two of us should just fit, if we press closely enough.”

Bad thoughts about warm baths had fled long ago, whiled away by his sweet touches. His whisper was followed by a kiss, a flick of his tongue in my ear.

I drew a sharp breath and moved against him.

Distantly, I heard a knock.

“Drax—?”

“Ignore it,” he said, kissing my neck. “They’ll go away.”

But the knock persisted, becoming insistent.

He sighed. “A moment.”

Drax disappeared down the stairs. Through the open door, I heard muffled voices from the lounging room.

“You are required at court, milord,” a scolding voice said.

“What’s required is food and bath water after a long journey,” Drax snapped. “Must I serve myself here in my own ancestral home, like a vagabond wandering in from the wilds?”

“Milord, the queen, King Sarl—” Rebuke vanished from the tone.

“Would probably prefer a prince who doesn’t smell and track road dirt into the great hall. My mate requires a proper dress.”

“Prince Drax—”

“Now!”

I hurried down the stairs. “Drax, a basin is enough to wash in. This is a fine dress—”

“What on Ryhn...?” The servant, a tall, broad-shouldered man in a military tunic, stared at me with a dropped jaw.

My damned hood...

“Close your hole before I feed you my blade,” Drax said.

Wide-eyed, the guard looked between Drax and me.

“Perhaps a demotion to the oubliette.” Drax’s voice lowered, his hand gripping the knife’s hilt.

Anger changed him, subtly, but I knew his form well. The darkening of his spots to a predatory cat’s, the flare in his eyes.

“Milord—allow me to attend. Forgive my impertinence. I beg you,” the large soldier said, holding his palms out.

“Summon the seamstress,” Drax said, “and pray it isn’t your hide that requires hemming.”

The man bowed deeply and hurried away.

Drax took a few deep breaths. I took his hand. After a few moments, he returned to his normal self.

“I’ve never seen you like that,” I said.

“Sorry. I’m out of practice with servants. Especially those who think they can order me about,” he said. Then he looked into my eyes. “I didn’t mean to cause you dismay.”

“Dismay... that may be my go-to emotion for the moment. I’ve never been in a castle before. I don’t understand the rules. To me, a place like this exists only in stories,” I said.

His brows went up. “I suppose it will take some getting used to.”

This brought a chuckle from me. “That’s quite an understatement.”

The swift arrival of an older woman trailed by two younger ones surprised me. She had gray hair piled on her head, a gown of soft scarlet fabric. I managed to pull my hood up before she got a good look.

She pulled it back down, examining me with squinted eyes. “Hmm. Peasant dress and cloak. Fine workmanship, but hardly fitting for your first visit to court. I may have something that will suit you. You are quite...

small.”

Her eyes widened as she took me in. My round ears. Plain, dark eyes and hair. Yet she made no comment.

“Yezzette, fetch the brocade from the mannikin. And several hair combs.” The seamstress studied me again. “Bronze would work well.”

One of the girls curtsied and dashed from the room.

“I see you fetched a true beauty, Prince Drax,” she smiled at him. “And a rare one.”

My face colored at the compliment. The seamstress seemed to enjoy that.

It did not take long for the girl to return. In the meantime, I washed in a basin hastily provided. Then, my fine dress was unlaced and stripped away. A garment finer than any I’d ever seen was placed on me.

I gasped. Designs were not merely stitched on the glowing, glossy green fabric, but part of the very weave.

“It’s but a child’s dress, Mistress Dowin,” the other of her girls said.

“There’s enough fabric we can quickly take it out in the bust,” the seamstress mused, then barked. “Get to it!”

“Ma’am!” The girl hurried over with her basket.

“The fabric is so...” I couldn’t describe it. “It’s too refined for me.”

“Nonsense,” the seamstress said. “I’m dressing you to meet the queen. Of course, we’ll put together a suitable wardrobe for you shortly, milady.”

“I’m not a lady,” I said. “Please call me Lita.”

She took a brush from the other girl’s basket and went to work on my hair. “Lita it is. I’m Dowin. My silly girl is Lesrey; the other Yezzette. Give us just a moment more.”

Lesrey furiously stitched the square-necked corsage.

Yezzette approached cautiously. “My mother has warned me of Frostlings in the thickets. I’ve never seen one before.”

“You still haven’t,” Drax growled.

“Rudeness has earned you the switch, Yezzette. And I thought Lesrey was the silly one,” Dowin said. Then, work completed, she stepped back.

Holding me at arm’s length, she nodded with a smile.

“You say you’re not a lady, but you’ll easily be confused for one,” the seamstress said.

I felt my face heat up. “Thank you, Dowin.”

“And you,” she turned to Drax, “Would you have me dress you in your own chambers? You smell of bagart and wood smoke, my prince.”

Her apprentices gasped at her words, but her eyes held nothing but affection.

“I can handle it,” he said. “Go.”

She bowed, just slightly, and shooed her helpers in front of her.

“Thank you again,” I called to her.

I found Drax staring at me.

“You look like a vision in that dress,” he said.

I mimicked Yezette’s curtsy. “Thank you, my prince.”

Drax smirked. “I can hardly wait to rip it off you.”

## DRAX

“I’d heard you returned with a monster for a mate. I shouldn’t be surprised—if anyone could tame a legendary Frostling, it would be you, Drax.”

Queen Kiha lounged indolently upon her gilt throne, regarding us with distaste. At her side, my father sighed in exasperation.

“Mind your tongue, wife, lest I banish you from court for the remainder of the day.” The king’s tone allowed no argument.

Kiha’s lip curled petulantly. “I speak only the truth. Look at the creature—clearly not natural.”

“Enough!” Father slammed an unsteady fist upon the armrest before visibly mastering himself. “Forgive my queen, dear lady. To my eyes, you are a woman of uncommon beauty and grace.”

Before I could intervene, he rose creakily from his high seat and lifted Lita’s hand to his liver-spotted lips. She froze, eyes rounding comically.

Father patted her hand in a transparent attempt at gallantry. “We are honored by your presence, my child. You may address us as ‘Your Highness’”

I cringed inwardly at his familiarity, relieved when he released Lita and sagged back onto the throne. His labored movements spoke all too clearly of his advancing infirmity.

Once settled, the king regarded me shrewdly. “Your lady calms your infamous temper, Drax. I see the difference in you. I am glad you have found a stabilizing match.”

I inclined my head in gratitude, unsure how to respond. But Kiha’s cruel gaze had already shifted to a new target.

“This is highly irregular, your return unannounced. What feast can be

prepared on a whim?” She sulked like a child denied a sweet. “You might have sent word, Drax.”

“Peace. We shall celebrate properly once there is an engagement to announce,” Father said. “I assume that day draws near? You will formalize the bond?”

Lita flushed scarlet at his bluntness. I shifted uncomfortably. “In truth, I have not yet spoken of marriage.”

“Well get on with it, boy!” Father exclaimed impatiently. “I’ve little time left—I would like to see you happily settled. Do not dally as your brother has done!”

“Speak of the devil,” I muttered as the doors groaned open.

“My ears are burning, though I know not why.” Tharon sauntered into the hall, resplendent in embroidered finery. The perfect prince as always.

“Word reached me of Drax’s return, with a captive wildling bride no less.” His cold gaze raked Lita lasciviously.

“You will mind propriety in our court.” Kiha preened under Tharon’s approving glance. “The lady is a guest.” She was always quick to trim her words to father’s will. At least, in public.

“Come, I merely jape.” Tharon smiled but his eyes remained dead. “What barbaric land do you hail from, exotic creature?”

I envisioned my hands tightening around his smug throat. With monumental effort, I restrained the impulse.

Lita lifted her chin. “I am no creature, no wildling. I am Lita of Terr, and I claim no land.”

“Terr?” the queen repeated the unfamiliar name musingly.

Ignoring the undercurrents, Tharon took Lita’s hand and brought it to his smirking lips. “Well met, indeed, fair Lita. I am Prince Tharon, heir apparent. Take care—legend says your folk can immolate a man with a glance.”

He mocked Father’s gesture, his kiss on Lita’s hand lingering as revulsion twisted Lita’s soft mouth at his touch. I yearned to break every bone in my brother’s hand.

“I can’t decide if she’s a little young for you, or just a little small,” Tharon said to me. “Will the throne even allow such a dangerous pairing? A wicked Frostling, a savage Valti?”

“Enough, Tharon,” I growled through clenched teeth.

He held up his hands innocently. “Merely welcoming our strange guest, brother. No offense was intended.”

“Silence, both of you!” our father roared. The guards took half a step from the shadows, then relaxed at the familiar familial squabbling.

But the loud fury triggered one of the king's fits. He convulsed, face mottling, hands cramping into twisted claws.

I started forward, but a dark-robed priestess materialized from behind the thrones and pressed a silver vial beneath Father's nose. In moments, his ragged breathing eased. He waved the woman away impatiently.

“Forgive my frailty. We shall speak again at supper.” The king's sunken gaze turned stern. “For now, attend to your own affairs.”

Dismissed, I escorted a shaken Lita into the empty courtyard beyond the hall. “Welcome to court,” I said sardonically.

Lita worried her lower lip between her teeth. “You seem like a different man here. Colder, barely leashed.”

I blinked, surprised by her observation. “I suppose donning princely armor changes me. But you remain a breath of fresh air.”

“I feel adrift. Unsure of my place, or how to act.”

Halting, I turned her face up gently. “Never doubt you belong at my side. Be only yourself—kind, clever, honest. That is armor enough.”

We walked on through the bustling bailey. Lita considered the servants dashing about on various errands.

“I was taught to desire a life of luxury, yet it comes at such a cost,” she mused quietly.

We continued to my tower. “Hold to yourself, to your true nature. It will suit you here. Although given your greeting by the queen, and the prince—expect more of that. But as my mate, you will need to learn your place is higher than you know.”

“I should order servants around?” she asked.

“There's no reason not to be kind. There is also no reason for a servant to dictate to you. Or even a courtier. My family is above us in status—but no others. Understand that, my bonded soul, and you won't go wrong.”

We passed the lowest structures, reaching the inner wall and the passage to the so-called “useless” tower. I opened the door for her. From the base servants' quarters, we ascended to the tower proper.

She stopped at the door to my room and stared for a moment. “There are the fittings for a bar on the outside of this door.”

I sighed, looking away, ashamed. “The curse seems to run stronger in my blood. Long ago, there were times when the Valti consumed me. It's part of

the reason I stayed here for so long. There are those who can control my violent side here. Priestesses and sorcerers, armored men. The priestesses have taught me methods to control the beast within. Calming techniques. There has been no need to imprison me in my rooms for years. However..."

"What?" she asked, voice a little desperate.

I chided myself inwardly. There was no longer a need to fear. "Nothing. My loss of control is in the past. Ah, look here."

The seamstresses had been at work. A new dress lay spread on my lounging couch, along with undergarments. Thankfully, Lita was distracted.

"What is this?" she breathed, lifting the dress.

Deep blue silk bore silver embroidery. Small figures, crest falcons in striking position, talons forward, came alive in the stitchery.

"That Dowin." I smiled. "Azure and argent, the colors of Zashi. Our crest and coat of arms. She wants to leave no doubt as to your station, my love."

"This material—I've never felt anything so smooth, so delicate," she said, holding it up to herself.

"Darkav silk," I said, hoping she didn't want me to describe the menacing creatures that spun it.

"It's so beautiful—even more than the one I have on," she said.

"Yes, well, best get dressed for dinner," I said.

"I'm already dressed."

I shook my head. "The queen has already seen you in that garment. Dowin and her girls didn't stitch their fingers off for nothing. It is your dinner dress for the evening."

"A dinner dress? Just for this evening?" Lita frowned. "That's so wasteful. How many dresses do I need?"

"A dozen or so," I figured. "There will be ways to arrange them, the addition of various accouterments, to make it seem that you have many more."

"Many more?"

"I want to see you in that dress," I said.

"Turn around," she said.

"We have been naked together often," I reminded her.

"Yes, but I would have you see me with this dress fully on, not stepping into it and dragging it clumsily to my shoulders," she said. "Have you no sense of revelation?"

Smiling, I faced away. A few moments later, she softly swore.

“Can you help me, Drax?”

I turned. She wore a sheer white dress that came to mid-thigh. It clung to her form so snugly, it left little to the imagination. Maybe just enough.

“Pair that dress with some hose and we would never leave my rooms,” I said.

She looked down at herself. “It’s but an undershift.”

I touched her skin through the fabric. Aroused. I leaned in for a kiss.

Lita relented for a few moments, then pulled away. “Help me with my hair combs. I dislodged one. I’ve got crazy braids all in a tumble.”

On a small table, I found that Dowin had left silver hair accessories and jewelry. After studying the complex arrangement of Lita’s hair style, I carefully replaced the bronze holding combs with silver.

“Thank you,” Lita said. “Mother always helped me make my hair fancy.”

“Here, a silver necklace to go with the combs,” I said.

Lita fingered the unskillful thing I’d made her and shook her head. “I’ll stick with this one.”

“It’s so crude, Lita. Look at this one.”

“It’s not crude. It’s a gift from you. From a time before I knew you were a prince. I will always cherish it,” she said.

I was disappointed when the shift was covered with the ornate dress. But just a little. The color of it gave her features a glow. She stood taller, prouder, as she twirled before me.

“Much like the first dress, I am looking forward to tearing it from your delightful form and ravishing you,” I said.

She moved into my arms. “I’m looking forward to that as well, my prince.”

“Please don’t call me that,” I said. “You are the master of my beast, of my heart.”

She blushed and looked away, lacing her fingers into mine to keep my hands from wandering. “We’re expected for supper.”

We walked out onto my terrace, across the roof, and down the stairs on the other side. From the ground, we entered the great hall. The place was already crowded with envoys, soldiers, courtiers, jesters and musicians. I led her to the high table.

“Well, well, well.” Tharon rose from his seat. “Dress a Frostling in silk and it produces a sexy monster. Sit with me, pretty creature. Let me whisper sweet nothings to you. I’m sure you’ve had your fill of this oaf.”

My teeth ground as he led her to the table.

“My prince, you... flatter me. In a way,” Lita said.

“The strange color of your skin is alluring,” he purred. “The black of your hair is a fearful yet pleasant distraction.”

I sat on Lita’s other side.

“Are these sweet nothings?” Lita asked him. “Should you not try harder?”

Tharon looked abashed for a moment. But he launched back into his role as asshole quickly. “You know, I am in need of a bride. Should you wish to experience a life of true wealth, privilege, and power, maybe you have taken up with the wrong brother.”

“Tharon...” I heard the deepening of my voice, the barely suppressed undertones of a savage roar.

Lita took my hand, then, to my surprise, she lightly kicked my shin. Giving me the side-eye, she raised her brows.

The same way I distracted Glindi from taking a chunk from my shoulder!

It was all I could do not to laugh out loud.

“What’s so amusing, brother?” Tharon glared at me, but for once, I felt no need to reply to his taunts.

Lita was a natural jousting in this snake pit. Together we would manage fine.

## LITA

The royal supper proved to be an endless parade of exotic delicacies I could not begin to identify. Cuts of meat from strange beasts, enormous fowl stuffed and sauced, vegetables dressed in pungent spices—every dish overwhelmed my senses.

We dined at the high table on the raised dais. Below us, long tables filled the great hall as an array of subjects feasted and reveled. I felt utterly adrift amidst the grandeur.

At one end of the high table, Queen Kiha murmured in intimate conversation with the imposing general seated beside her, their heads bent close together. At the far end, King Sarl presided over the festivities, observing all with a weary eye.

Drax leaned over to speak quietly with the general around Kiha's disregarding form. "What news since last I was at court, Krall?"

The broad, bearded soldier only glanced at the returned prince. "More brigand raids plague villages to the south. The Wandering Nation is suspect, according to my queen's sources."

Tharon gave an exaggerated yawn. "Always the conspiracy theories about those pitiful beggars with you, Mother." He cocked a sardonic brow at Drax. "Tell me, did you come across any of these notorious brigands on your travels, brother?"

Under the table, I squeezed Drax's tense fingers in warning as I replied in his stead. "As it happens, we did encounter some ruffians. But they soon regretted accosting us."

Krall's mouth twisted in a patronizing smile. "Truly? Do tell us more of this daring adventure."

Drax's jaw clenched, but he retained a calm tone. "In truth, the confrontation proved beneath notice. Still, a sword serves well on the road, no matter its quality." His hand drifted meaningfully to the worn hilt at his hip.

"That old relic?" Tharon laughed. "No, once you rejoin court you shall have a proper blade forged, brother. We'll train together—even your giant's frame may benefit from some refinement."

"I carry steel for function, not fashion," Drax replied gruffly. "But come, let's speak of more pleasant matters."

At that moment, King Sarl looked up from his preoccupied brooding. "A new sword would lend you a more princely aspect. I would like to see you armed fittingly."

Before Drax could reply, Kiha made a scornful noise. "I'll not have drunken brawls in my hall. No swords but for the guard."

"Oh come, where is the trust?" Tharon cajoled her. "Would you disarm your own princes, Mother?"

The general rumbled his disagreement as well. "Unwise to forbid self-defense, my queen. What do you think, little one?"

All eyes turned to me. I shifted self-consciously. "In my experience, better to keep a weapon and not need it than to face peril unarmed." My hand went reflexively to the small dagger hidden in my bodice—likely useless against brigands, but reassuring.

King Sarl barked an approving laugh. "Well said, child! The lady has the right of it."

Kiha toyed with a jewel at her throat, staring at me pensively. "Perhaps so. We shall discuss such matters at greater length tomorrow over tea, you and I." Her smile held no warmth. "I find myself quite fascinated by our exotic guest."

Unease skittered down my spine. "You do me honor, Your Grace," I murmured, lowering my eyes. Beside me Drax tensed.

"Good idea, wife," the king said. "A meeting of future in-laws is both fitting and a pleasant notion."

Servers moved around the table. Wine goblets never emptied. Courses changed, this time with platters of sweets and nuts. Below the dais, a group of musicians in piebald harlequin patterned clothing gathered.

"Enjoy the cakes." Kiha nodded toward a stacked platter. "I'm told two men died harvesting the maz honey."

King Sarl gave her a long, expressionless look.

“I prefer the berry tarts,” Tharon said. “Like my brother. You’ve always loved the tarts, Drax.”

Tharon smiled at me while Sarl glared and cleared his throat.

“Are you implying something, brother?” Drax returned the smile.

Further talk was curtailed by the approach of the troupe of entertainers in their harlequin motley. Plucked strings and a heavy drum brought me back to the village. The men who attacked me.

But Drax rescued me, the moment of terror replaced by the magic of our joining.

Yet when the harlequins sang, my heart nearly seized.

*The prince with the monster inside*

*Returns with a sinister bride*

*Will he rein o’re the beast within*

*With a Frostling at his side?*

*O!*

“Ah, this is a good one. I heard them rehearsing by the military stables,” Tharon said, clapping his hands in time. “You’ll love the next verse, my captivating kobold.”

*Now begins the debate*

*O’er the creature he found as a mate*

*Will her terrible magical powers*

*Save him from his terrible fate?*

*O!*

The music returned to the introduction. A glow leapt into Drax’s eyes. His shoulders swelled. He let go of my hand as his nails transformed to claws.

“It’s just a song,” I whispered to him.

“They’re insulting you,” he growled.

Tharon snorted. “It’s all in jest, Drax.”

Gleaming eyes shifted to Tharon. Drax’s voice grew deeper. “You instigated this, didn’t you?”

“Oh, please. You know I’m not that creative,” Tharon said.

Queen Kiha smiled, this time the expression reaching her eyes. “It’s a catchy tune, don’t you think?”

The musicians reached a chorus.

*The fiend that hides inside his hide*

*Will take his soul and mind for a ride  
Unless his bugbear mate can guide  
Him from a fate even gods have decried.  
O!*

Drax began to stand, but I pulled him back down.

“Don’t let them get to you,” I whispered. Did he catch my meaning? I wasn’t just including the jesting harlequins, but his family as well.

He glared at the musicians. “I’m going to shove those instruments up their asses.”

“Let me handle this,” I said. “Please?”

He wrestled the angry beast, trying to gain control. I saw the struggle physically in his frame, in his twisting features.

I stood and moved to where the musicians could see me.

“How about a different tune?” I said loudly, thinking back to the songs that were played at the village festival.

The drummer lost his sticks when they fell from limp hands. The piper squeaked out a note before falling silent. Mouth hanging, the lute player stared at me.

“How about ‘Hooded Eagle?’” I said. “That’s a crowd pleaser. Unless you’d prefer ‘Hail the Dove-White Harlot?’”

A quiet snicker from behind startled me. It was Tharon, back on the dias, laughing. And for the first time, it sounded genuine.

“Milady,” the lutist said, continuing to stare.

The music didn’t start again until I retook my chair. Gathered folk in the hall cheered at the opening glissando of the tune.

Tharon frowned, ignoring the sweets before him, his gaze in the distance.

Kiha narrowed her eyes at me, but didn’t speak.

King Sarl smiled and leaned back in his chair. “I love this song,” he said, then gave me a wink. “It is good to see you are familiar with the folk tunes of our land. Music has a strange power, does it not?”

Within Drax, the Valti subsided, deflating.

My mind whirled. Why would Tharon provoke Drax? I’d seen the full effect of the Valti unleashed. I had no doubt it would kill Tharon, whether he was Drax’s brother or not. The heir to the throne wouldn’t last a second.

Even Kiha seemed in on the provocation. Why would the queen want to see her son killed? Or see her stepson hopelessly out of control?

I was missing something here. It had to be more than the family dynamic.

Mayhap Zashi politics were beyond me.

“My king!” Kiha burst out.

Sarl’s head lolled, hands shaking on the arms of his chair.

“We need help,” the queen said. “Summon the guards to carry him to our chambers!”

Apparently with excellent hearing, guardsmen appeared from curtained alcoves around the great hall.

“No!” Drax said, voice still retaining the beastly depths. “Revive him. Let not the court see his weakness.”

“Drax is right,” Tharon whispered. “The priestesses. Let them bring Father around.”

But after a few tense moments, the king came to. Breathing hard, he leaned forward in his chair. “Forgive an old man his sudden naps,” he called out to the hall.

Polite laughter followed. Was he fooling anyone?

I looked at the musicians, who had moved a distance away from the dais. Would they next write a jaunty tune about the king’s weakness?

Tharon rose. “Let me escort you, Father.”

For all his sniping and cajoling, concern colored the prince’s features.

“Sit, boy,” the king said. “I can manage.”

“Father—”

The king stood and addressed the hall. “Thank you all for attending. Don’t allow my departure to deter you from the entertainment.”

Responding as one, the crowd offered a joyful farewell. King Sarl nodded and walked down the dais steps toward the rear of the hall.

“Follow him,” Kiha urged Tharon. “Make certain he doesn’t injure himself.”

The prince nodded and went after the old man.

“I should retire as well,” Drax said. “Your company exhausts me as usual, my queen.”

“A moment, my prince,” Kiha stood.

I paused, waiting.

With narrowed eyes she dismissed me. “Alone.”

Following the king and prince, I moved down the dais stairs. But my request to the musicians was enough to let me know that if I pressed close to the raised platform, I could listen in unseen.

I might be a stranger to this city, to these people. But there were

mysteries here. Information might be my only weapon.

“You have to get rid of your pet,” Kiha said.

My ire rose. Pet?

“She is my mate. Family. And under my protection,” Drax answered. “I will not be separated from her.

The queen sighed dramatically. “She frightens people. Even the courtiers. They think she’s dangerous. I’m not sure she isn’t.”

“Dangerous like me?” Drax said, tone oozing sarcasm. “So dangerous that troubadours write mocking songs in jest?”

“They think she’s a creature of legend. I fear there will be violence in the castle palace,” the queen said.

“And yet you and your son prod me, provoke me, hoping I’ll provide a spectacle to the court and your guests,” Drax said. “You make it difficult to take you seriously, Stepmother.”

## DRAX

We stood on the terrace outside the tower. In the east, the moon rose. With the onset of the cold, its color turned blood red. Waves of the sea reflected the light like blood.

“Guess I can’t refuse the queen’s invitation to tea,” Lita said. “Even if she doesn’t like me.”

“No, you can’t,” I said.

“Can you come with me?” she asked in a small voice.

“To the queen’s tea? No,” I said. “But I’ll be close by.”

We stood watching the stars ignite, my arm around her shoulders. I felt her shiver.

“Why do they do that to you?” I asked.

I didn’t need her to clarify. “Kiha has always been jealous of my existence. She thinks that my public rages make Tharon look like a better prospect for the throne.”

“But isn’t he next in line?”

“Yes. He is. The king is his father, the queen his mother. My mother was a pretty dancer before she was a concubine. From Kiha’s oft stated distaste, I feel she may have come from the Wandering Nation.”

“Then how can she be so insecure?” she asked. “And why does Tharon play along?”

“I do not know. There were times when we were young that I thought he was my best friend, my only ally. Lately things have changed.”

“I don’t trust your stepmother much, either,” Lita said. “When she smiles, it doesn’t touch her eyes.”

“It’s good to be wary,” I said.

“So your stepmother wants to parade you around as an animal, to further Tharon’s claim to the throne. Tharon was your friend, but can’t be trusted. Your family is insane, Drax.”

“Why do you think I enjoy traveling so much?” I said, and smiled at her. “Tharon is a mystery. And as for Kiha...”

“I understand what the king sees in her. Even at her age, she’s very attractive,” Lita said.

“The only thing she sees in my father is power,” I said. “She fears and seeks to destroy any obstacle to maintaining her power. Including me.”

“How do you live with this?” she said.

“By staying out of the way, out of public view. Let them play their courtly games. I have my private space. There are other places I can go.”

“Like an abandoned house near the ruins of a fishing village?” she said.

I hugged her tighter. “Like that.”

Beneath my arm, I felt her shiver again.

“It’s cold out. Let’s get inside. Start a fire.”

Turning in my arms, she kissed me. After a moment, her hands gripped the sides of my face. Firmly, we embraced for a long time.

She gasped when she pulled away. “There. My fire has started. How about yours?”

There was already another dress laid out in the lounging room when we entered. I pulled Lita onto a pillowed couch and kissed her.

“How does Mistress Dowin produce such wonderful dresses so quickly?” she asked.

I moved my kisses down her neck. “She’s the royal seamstress. She has many girls. I’m only interested in the girl with me right now.”

The sensation of her skin beneath silk maddened me.

She moved her hand between my legs, maddening me further.

“I would test your feather bed, my prince,” she breathed in my ear.

With those words, I picked her up from the couch and carried her to the secret stairs. Once in the coward’s loft, I kicked closed the door.

“Drax...”

Right. I turned back, dropping the bolt.

“Ravish me, as you promised,” she smiled.

The beautiful dress fought me, but soon I revealed the even greater beauty beneath.

“Let me take down my hair,” she gasped.

“No. I like having access to your slender neck.” I buried my face there, hands cupping her breasts.

Lita let out a pretty moan and I pressed her into the soft mattress...

GRAY LIGHT STREAMED past the shutters. I shook my head, not aware I had fallen asleep. Lita lay with her back against me, my arms around her.

“Thank goodness you’re awake,” she said. “I’ve been lying here for hours, worried about the queen’s tea.”

Pulling her close, I whispered, “You have nothing to fear. Be yourself. And I will be in the apartment, hiding.”

“I’m not sure if I feel better, thinking of you eavesdropping. The conversation will undoubtedly turn to you, my bound heart.”

“That doesn’t worry me. I’ve told you everything about me. There’s nothing I would hide from you,” I said.

She rolled to face me. “I’ve found that others may know us in ways we don’t know ourselves.”

“No fears there. My stepmother has gone out of her way to ignore my existence.” Giving her a long good morning kiss, I rolled from the bed. When I opened the inner shutters, the deep-set window offered a gloomy day.

Lita pulled on her undershift. I stared at her for a while. Then we moved down to the lounge.

“Ah. A tub,” Lita said. “Is that why you’re wandering around naked?”

“No. But it’s one less step.” I held out my hand. “Join me.”

“There’s hardly room for two,” she said.

“Exactly the point,” I said.

Barring the door to the lounge, I proceeded to show my beloved the benefits of bathing together.

I loomed over her, hands on each side of the tub, kissing her warm, wet skin. “You look good in suds, Lita.”

She ladled warm water over my back. “I’m not sure this will get us clean.”

“I hope not.”

“Will you wash my hair?” she asked.

I switched positions as she did. Our slick skin rubbed together in tight

quarters. Sudsing my hands with the soap cake, I added a few drops of spiced oil. Then I worked it into her black locks.

“That feels so good,” she moaned. “Get some nails on my scalp.”

Never would I think that washing hair could prove so erotic. But her sudsy hair in my hands, the gentle pressure against her scalp, our position, and Lita’s gasping, cooing reaction drove me erect.

Lita’s head lolled on my chest to look into my eyes. With the touch of a smile, she reached back under the water to touch me.

“This might convince me to take warm baths again without thinking of the tomb,” she said.

I gasped. “Lean forward, and I’ll convince you harder.”

But a knock fell on the door. “Time to break your fast, milord.”

“Leave it!”

“The guard needs to speak to you,” the persistent voice continued. “Your lady is expected for tea.”

“Go away!”

“...Mistress Dowin has requested a fitting.”

I growled and leapt from the tub. “This is what I’m talking about. Servants who don’t know their place have to be dealt with.”

Flinging the door wide, I saw Ashur standing there, grinning like an idiot.

“Naked as usual, milord,” he said.

I pushed him hard enough to make him collide with the wall but he only laughed.

“It is good to see you happy.”

“What do you want?”

“All the things I said. Oh, the blacksmith has some foppish weapon for you. And we need to discuss your lady’s personal guard. If she’s to move about the castle, much less the city, she’ll need a detail.”

“I would love to move about the city!”

Ancient’s fire. Lita was still behind me. And very, very naked.

When I turned, I saw only Lita’s head peeking over the side of the tub. Her eyebrows lifted, eager.

I might want to keep her locked in the tower with me, but that would not make my mate happy.

“You’ll do it,” I said. “But safely.” Turning back to Ashur, I nodded. “Choose three others, ones you trust the most.”

“Already done. I’d leave it to no other,” Ashur said.

I clapped his shoulder. "Thank you, cousin."

"In the meanwhile, you have a busy schedule. Tea, training, fittings, the weaponsmith, plus the usual official nonsense," Ashur said. He peered past me. "We will meet you in the courtyard, Lita."

"Prepare for a full inspection, Ashur," I said.

We dried off and dressed. It took me all of a few minutes. Lita took much longer. Her next dress was complicated with eyes and hooks, skirts, a shoulder cape, a variety of things only women understood. Then she stained her lips and cheeks, over her eyes.

"Do you know how to braid hair?" she asked.

I frowned. "You need more than a personal guard. You need attendants."

"Oh, I can do it myself. I just get tingly when you play with my hair," she said.

"No, you'll need a staff of ladies. It's the only way for you to function in the palace castle."

"You have no servants," she said.

"And yet they keep showing up at my door." I sighed. "I hate castle life."

She grabbed several locks of perfect dark hair and twined them. "I'll admit, this is overwhelming."

"You deserve it," I said, leaning down to nuzzle her neck. "The fancy dresses. Court dinners. Servants. You are probably the only one in the palace who appreciates it."

She continued braiding her hair. "I could do with a toned-down version."

Eventually, she was ready. I walked her to the ground level.

"Why do you still wear that necklace I made you? We need to visit the royal jeweler."

"Never!" she said, putting hand protectively over the bauble I made. "This is perfect. I'll wear nothing else."

Ashur and his men came to attention as we reached the servants' quarters on the ground floor.

"Nothing like an armed walk across the yard," I smirked.

"We'll take care of her." Ashur nodded at me. He smiled at Lita.

"Off to tea!" She leaned into me and gave me a kiss.

I watched her walk across the grass toward the great hall then hurrying back to the lounge.

Heading across the rooftop terrace, I moved to the edge about halfway across. Since my youth, I had snuck into the royal apartments this way. I'd

never been caught.

Climbing through a tunnel of a window, I entered a linen room. Then I slid down the hall to the queen's private chambers.

"You'll give me your take on the creature." I heard my stepmother's voice. "And help me determine how great a threat she is."

"We don't know she's a threat at all," a deep voice responded. "We can only listen to what she has to say. Trust me, my queen. All shall be as you wish."

Who was Kiha talking to? The man's voice was familiar, but I couldn't quite place it.

Gritting my teeth, I left my position to sneak through an antechamber, where I could see her day room from behind a screen. To my surprise, a priestess sat at one side of a table, my stepmother at the head.

Glancing around, I didn't see her other companion.

Had I misheard?

I shook my head. Impossible. There was a man, but he left in the few seconds I'd taken to change locations.

Who had it been?

"She isn't Shakai," the priestess said, her hands calm and still on the table before her. "But I doubt she's a mythical monster."

"It's no good guessing," Kiha said. "We need to know."

And then they fell silent as a commotion on the stairs indicated Lita was on her way.

## LITA

**M**y guard left me outside an ornate door that opened both on the top and bottom. From within, a young woman in a gray smock beckoned me in. She tried to smile, but I saw that she kept her distance.

What kind of monster did these people think I was?

“Your Majesty,” the maid curtsied.

I did the same, not really knowing what else to do.

“Our guest arrives,” Kiha said.

“Forgive me, Your Highness, I’m not familiar with your customs.”

Another woman nodded, her face hidden in the hood of a blue robe. “You’re doing fine, child. Sit.”

On a round table sat cakes and tiny pies, piles of things that looked like frosting, cookies dotted with something. Spices rose from the table with the heady aroma of fresh baking. There were also a great number of tools next to the platters. In my home, even a sharp table knife was usually reserved for special occasions. What was all this?

Another servant moved around the table. In one hand, she dosed my mug with leaves. The other poured steaming water from a pitcher.

“So my stepson found a mate before his time ran out,” Kiha said. “Not surprising that he had to go to the literal ends of the earth to do so. You say you hail from Terr. What is Terr? Where is Terr?”

“It’s a city—and after arriving here, I will say a very small city—between the Canyonlands and the Snarling Sea,” I said.

“The city of falling fire,” the woman said from her hood.

“Forbidden lands. Huh,” Kiha said. She passed a small plate with a cake. “Do try this. It’s spiced with murnnu, one of our greatest trade items.”

I did eagerly, ignoring the tools near my plate. Mostly to stuff my mouth so I didn't have to speak.

The hooded woman took a tiny pie. I watched her stab it with a tinned instrument, slice it rudely with the dullest knife. A small chunk of food went into the hood.

Interesting.

"How did you come to Drax?" she asked.

"He came to me. He said he heard me, saw me in a dream, and he had to find me," I said.

"Did your mind touch his?" the hooded woman asked.

"It did..." How to explain the torture of the Tomb? The utter stillness, blackness, being manacled and floating in body temperature water. "...When I was in a relaxed state."

"So he was right," the woman in the hood said. "You are his fated mate. It's impressive that he would go all the way to the forbidden land to retrieve you."

"What choice did he have? He's a Valti," Kiha said. "If he hadn't found his mate..."

What? What would happen? It seemed so utterly important, yet all the talk danced around this aspect. "Please continue, Your Highness."

"He would go wild. Lose his civilized self, the part that makes him Shakai. The Valti would drive him into the jungle to live as an animal," she said. "Yet with you, he is now safe from that fate."

"I see," I said. In my heart, I felt a shift. Is that why Drax wanted me, needed me so? He said I was a balm for his savage soul. But I was the cure to his turning bestial.

"The beast hasn't been fully quelled, I see," Kiha went on. "My dear son can still prod him into savagery. I admit, I find that part of my stepson alluring."

"I wouldn't want to quell that side of Drax," I said. "It is part of him. I love him, flaws and all."

The woman in the hood patted the back of my hand. "That is exactly the thing. To calm him, yes. But if you accept his inner wild, he will be able to find balance with it. As you say, the Valti is part of him. He would be crippled without it, as much as if his hand were cut off."

"He would be more crippled if his intellect was subsumed, Priestess Vahn," Kiha said. "Valtis who give in to their baser nature are hunted down

before they can prey upon their former kind.”

The priestess shrugged. “As you say.”

“So crush it, girl. Subdue that dark facet of your mate if you value your future,” Kahi said.

I nodded and pulled a tiny pie toward me. Busying myself with the strange tableware, the other women ignored me. It took some time to spear a morsel fully enough to move to my mouth.

“Are all your people like you?” Kiha addressed me. “Your skin, your hair.”

“Um. No. Some are darker. Some are paler. So pale, they’re like the snow,” I said.

“Are your people war-like?” Kiha said.

“We have guards to protect the peace, and keep away wild beasts,” I said thoughtfully. “Fighting is part of human nature, I suppose, even if we don’t have wars anymore.” I caught myself quickly. “Humans. My people are human.”

“How is it that you were able to leave with Drax?” the queen asked.

“It’s a long story.” I took a breath. Then, I thought of a way the queen might empathize with me. “A mismatched marriage arrangement, something I’m sure you know much more about than me.”

“Royal marriages avert wars, open trade,” she said.

“Not mine. My marriage was supposed to net my father a fat dowry. In the meantime, the man who wished for my hand was older than my father.”

“A man of high station,” Kiha guessed.

“Well, higher than mine, but he was no royal. Our children wouldn’t go on to rule anything other than his accounts and business. He was old and ugly and I was young and pretty. A wealthy man can get what he wants. A woman gets nothing,” I said.

“Here, here!” Kiha raised her mug in a toast. “If it wasn’t for women plotting to rule gracefully at the side of some dolt of a lord, the world would end in fire. Yet what is our due? The bearing of more children, more male heirs who will require reining in by a strong woman.”

“When I didn’t go along with Father’s obviously flawed arrangement, I was beaten senseless and taken away,” I said.

“Your people practice slavery?” the priestess asked.

“No. I was brought to the temple as a sacrifice.” Not exactly a lie. “I took the place of a wealthy girl slated for that fate.”

“That was wrong of your father,” Kiha said.

Was she becoming sympathetic to me?

“There is always a better negotiation to be made,” she said.

Maybe. Sort of.

“I’m happy for you that you found your bonded mate,” the priestess said.

“There can be no better match than the one that resides in your instincts, in your blood.”

I wanted to believe that. I desperately needed to believe that Drax and I were a true match, and nothing could separate us.

But here in the castle filled with dark undercurrents, doubts crept in.

“How can that be? I’m not even Shakai,” I said.

She shrugged. “Who are we to argue with a fated mating?”

I tried out the utensils some more. It was going to take practice.

With a subtle gesture, Kiha summoned the servants and the table was cleared. “It was lovely getting to know you. We will have to do it again soon.”

She stood and vanished into a deeper part of the apartment.

The hooded priestess looked around the room before leaning closer.

“You are correct in attempting to balance your mate. Valti is mostly a problem of royal blood. They see the darker half as a corruption. If they can, they will stamp it out from those that suffer. It only makes the suffering worse. But they ignore the truth.”

“I’ll do what I can,” I said.

“There is little for you to do,” she said. “Other than follow your heart, your instincts. That is why you are called together.”

I stared down at the cleared table, my cheeks hot. “Admittedly, I brought the beast to the surface once...”

“While you made love?” the priestess said, then patted my hand. “Frankly, my dear, I don’t know a woman who wouldn’t.”

She walked me to the foyer at the top of the stairs. “We have worked with Drax. He is a good man. Unfortunately, it is his natural temperament to rise quickly to anger. Still, he has followed our teachings. With you by his side, he will attain full control.”

“I appreciate your faith in me,” I said.

“Love him, Lita. As he is well-loved by all in the castle. It seems every woman here adopted him after his mother’s passing.”

“Every woman save his stepmother,” I said.

The priestess chuckled. “Indeed. Any affection she has toward him is not maternal. But those who like our heads attached to our necks don’t speak of it.”

“Well, well, well,” a familiar voice echoed up the stairs. Tharon turned the corner and slowly moved up toward us. “It’s a terrible gray day. You might brighten it up considerably for me, my tiny imp.”

He smiled, but it was a hungry expression that made me want to back away.

“Prince Tharon.” I did my best curtsy.

“How about we leave your degenerate boyfriend behind and take in the city? You haven’t taken a tour of Zashi yet, have you? It’s a place of wonders. And the market is open in the quarter nearest the castle today. Shall we take a pair of villarts from the stables?”

“I think I have a schedule to meet,” I said. “Dress fittings and so forth.”

“That dress looks snug and fine to me, little goblin. There is no other I’d wish to be seen on my arm.” He moved close, touching my cheek. “So unnaturally fair...”

“Do you treasure those fingers, brother?” Drax came up behind me.

The prince scoffed, but stepped away. “Still hanging that rusty cleaver off your belt. Haven’t you received my gift yet? I’m trying to make a gentleman out of you, wild man. I think you’d want to turn a more polished side for your lady creature here.”

“Luckily my mate can see through such façades with ease,” Drax snapped.

The priestess chuckled. “Lovely to see you, Drax.”

“Vahnn! How are you? It’s been too long.” Drax grabbed her in a hug.

“It has, my prince,” she said, hugging him back. “Have a blessed day. I have matters of spirit to mind. I’ll let you get on with the ongoing family squabble.”

The priestess drifted down the stairs.

“Was that some sort of dig at us?” Tharon said.

“Deserved,” Drax smirked.

“Tell you what. Why not pick up your gift from the smithy and meet me on the proving ground? I’ll show you how a man of taste and honor fights. You can show your beloved how clumsy you are.” Tharon bowed, and for just a moment, I wondered what was behind that flickering grin.

“I have been remiss in my training,” Drax said.

“Excellent! See you there, half-brother.”

The prince sprang down the stairs, waving. As we followed, my personal guard picked us up.

“Where to, Lita?” Ashur said.

“Apparently to the smith’s, and then the practice grounds,” I said. “My beloved has accepted some sort of half-assed deal with his brother.”

“Ah! How some things never change. It’s been a few days since your knife training, Lita.”

I held up my arms, dripping with lacey sleeves. “You want me to spar in this?”

“What do you think you’ll be wearing if you need to use that knife?” Drax asked.

## DRAX

“What on Ryhn is this?”

I handled the four-foot, skinny skewer. It easily bent.

“They are all the rage, Drax,” Ashur said. “All the well-heeled courtiers have one.”

I examined the intricate wirework grip. “Seems a toothpick, not a sword. Of what use is it?”

The smith's nervous apprentice spoke up eagerly. “It's for a more elegant style of fighting, sire. Lets you pierce vitals instead of hacking flesh.”

I scowled, unconvinced. “The thing would snap on armor. It packs no force behind it.”

“Ah, but it slides smoothly between armor joints,” the boy explained. “And it's wielded by rich dandies with no mail to weigh them down, armed with a toothpick, shielded by wealth.”

“Is that so?” I said.

“Begging your pardon, milord, I meant no insult.” The apprentice looked like he might lose control of his bowels.

“No, I know the type. Somedays I wonder if I'm brother to one. It comes with a scabbard? Something I won't trip over?” I asked.

“I can't promise the latter,” the apprentice said. “But aye, it does.”

Loosening my belt, I pulled the scabbard off of it and handed it to the apprentice. “What do you make of this?”

He slid free the longsword I'd taken from the bandit. “Well used, good steel, crafted for a fighting man. Nothing fancy. Just regular killing.”

“Can you tell where it was made?” I asked.

The apprentice bent close. “Mm. I'm not sure. Let me get the master.”

“That weapon does look flimsy in comparison,” Lita said.

“Looks like a sword a woman could handle,” Ashur said, “Easier than the usual three pounds of metal.”

“Hmm,” Lita said. I could see her thoughts turning in her head.

“Ah, the gift from your brother,” the burly, bald man said, nodding at the weapon in my hand.

“Bardull, well met,” I said. “It’s been some time.”

“Too long. But then you’ve been busy picking up soldier’s swords out in the world,” he said. “No need for a lowly master swordsmith.”

I wanted to tell him that the last masterful sword he’d made for me was cut in half by old men wielding whips.

“A soldier’s sword. Whose army?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Ours. It’s standard issue, Zashi military. Where did you get it?”

“Off the body of a brigand,” I said.

He and the apprentice exchanged a look. “Abandoning service to become a highwayman? It’s hardly steady pay outside the city.”

“Cold red moon!” The apprentice swore.

“I can’t say the sword wasn’t stolen by a brigand from a soldier,” I said. “Considering that’s how I came by it.”

“No way to tell who owned it previously. We make a dozen of these a week, more during conflicts,” Bardull said. “It doesn’t look new. Whoever used it didn’t replace the minart leather with shagreen, or shami on the grip. Pommel’s dinged up. Been used as a hammer or such.”

“Not a master swordsman, then,” I mused.

“But take care with the rapier,” the smith said, tapping the flimsy blade. “It doesn’t look like much. But it can pierce every vital organ before a longsword can split a skull.”

“If it doesn’t break first,” I said doubtfully.

“It won’t. It has the length and spring to skirl away a breaking blow. The distance to attack out of the range of common swords. And as for accuracy, a longsword is an extension of your arm—a rapier is an extension of your pointer finger,” he said.

“Hmm. You haven’t sold me yet. Let me give it a trial run on the green,” I said.

Strapping it on my belt, the lengthy thing threatened to trip me at every step. Lita stopped me. She pulled the two straps that held the rapier back and

made one shorter with the buckle.

“That better?” she asked.

I took a few strides. “That’ll suit.”

From the smithy, we walked to the training grounds. A handful of guards practiced with sticks, shirts off, skin slick with sweat. Even from a distance, I could make out the bruises of the less skilled.

“Come, milady, there are spaces to keep our sparring from watchful eyes,” Ashur said. He nodded to me. “Go get him, whivven.”

My brother was surrounded by a gaggle of courtiers, all insipid dandies. One in particular, a weasel named Deonor, aimed barbed comments my way, hoping to gain status by provoking me. I ignored the fool—he sought only power and had attached himself to Tharon in hopes of currying favor.

We fixed wooden tips to the rapier points for safety. At Tharon's taunting invitation, I took my opening stance across from him. To my surprise, my brother handled the slender blade with easy grace and competence.

We exchanged strikes and parries, far swifter than any broadsword duel. Tharon landed several touches right away—the rapier fighting style was unfamiliar to me. Yet I found myself grinning, enjoying the contest. For a moment, it felt like we were boys again, not rivals but brothers bonded by the joy of sparring.

“Come now, brother, you handle that toothpick like a miner's shovel!” Tharon laughed as he neatly slipped through my guard. “Have you no delicacy of wrist?”

I circled him slowly, watching for openings. “Swordplay is meant to be practical, not pretty. Though I'll admit you have some skill with your new toy.”

Tharon grinned, giving me the chance to dart in for a touch beneath his raised elbow. “A point to me, it seems!”

“Well struck,” Tharon conceded. “But watch how a master handles the queen of blades.”

He launched a dazzling series of strikes and feints. I defended doggedly, refusing to be drawn out of position. “All flash, no force behind that flailing,” I scoffed.

But Tharon's rapier snaked past my clumsy parry to prick my shoulder. “The force is in the precision and speed, not just brute strength.” His eyes met mine. “Sometimes you should look for the movement beyond the obvious, brother.”

We exchanged several more passes, Tharon scoring more hits but none decisive. I slowly adjusted to the rapier's style, managing to pink Tharon's hip in turn.

“You handle it like you would a broadsword still,” Tharon chided. “The rapier is a scalpel, not a cudgel!”

“A scalpel wielded by a tailor, more suited to snipping threads than fighting men,” I shot back.

Tharon smiled as we circled and clashed again, blades flickering too fast to follow. I held my own this time, though Tharon's intricate web of steel drove me back.

Until Tharon's foot slipped on the trampled grass. As he stumbled, my rapier nearly landed a slice across his chest, only a hair's breadth from drawing blood.

With a cry of outrage, Deonor charged across the field, dagger flashing in his hand. “The beast meant to murder our prince!” he shrieked hysterically.

Before I could bellow at the little toad to stand down, Deonor's blade found my side, piercing deep. I gasped at the bloom of hot pain.

Tharon shoved Deonor back, face twisted in dismay. “Have you lost your mind? Drax would never—”

“He must be dealt with!” Deonor thrashed, spitting and cursing. “He's a mindless animal that needs to be put down!”

“No!”

I heard the cry from across the yard and in a flash, Ashur was there.

But not the japing, smiling friend.

His shoulders burst through his tunic, neck corded with muscles. Baring huge fangs, he roared at Deonor.

I felt the blade plucked free, the pain of the wound making the world shudder around me.

But the Valti was unleashed, huge and hulking, veins popped from his flesh, claws extending from his fingers. I saw no sign of my cousin in the animal glower of his inner beast.

When he spoke, the words were a meaningless growl. The other courtiers didn't bother with their weapons, instead fleeing the training ground as Ashur stalked the courtier.

“Get away from me!” Deonor backed up, hands raised. “I'll see you in the dungeon, you filthy animal.”

“You fool, stand down,” Tharon shouted. “You're only making things

worse!”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Lita sprinting across the grounds, a priestess following her. It was always a good idea to keep a healer on the proving grounds, where accidents, and non-accidents, could leave a man wounded or perhaps near death.

“Ashur, your breathing!” the priestess called. “Focus, Ashur!”

With a meaty sound, Ashur struck the knife from Deonor’s hand. I watched it whirl away as the idiot screamed in pain.

“You won,” I whispered to Ashur. “There’s no more danger here. Rein it in, my friend. Listen to the priestess. Breathe.”

Slowly, Ashur took backward steps. His size diminished as he knelt on the ground. His usual features returned. Lita was there, a hand on his arm.

“Oh, Ashur, are you all right?” she said.

He frowned and looked at the prince. “Probably not,” he said.

“Is he all right? Look at my fingers!” Deonor whined, holding his crushed hand high.

The priestess moved behind me. “I don’t think the blade went through the bone,” she said, hands on my back. “Take a deep breath and hold it.”

I did as she said. The priestess spoke a single word, a few syllables. Its sound echoed, made the air purl and go liquid. In my shoulder, the pain eased. I let out my breath.

But the confrontation had drawn dire notice. Queen Kiha strode onto the field, General Krall at her side, guards at her back and accusation in her cold eyes. “The beast goes too far this time. Arrest him for threatening the crown prince's life!”

“It was a misunderstanding, Mother!” Tharon argued hotly. A strange glint flashed through his eyes, but Kiha's upraised hand silenced him.

Ashur submitted quietly as the guards clapped him in irons, head bowed. I searched Tharon's stricken face.

What game was he playing with the viperous Kiha?

## LITA

“I guess I knew Ashur was Valti,” I said. “That’s not the same as seeing it in person. He changes...more than you do.”

Drax’s shoulders slumped. “He is younger, but the curse is strong. Hopefully, he will sense his mate soon.”

“Ashur will lose his fight with the beast if he doesn’t,” I said.

“He has control. Better than I,” Drax admitted. “He’s more patient, more meditative. But when he loses that control, his Valti is a pure, raging animal. We’re lucky no one was killed.”

“What’s it like?” I couldn’t help but ask.

Drax sat on the lounging couch. The shutters were open, and he stared out the window. I sat close to him.

“The senses sharpen. Strength infuses my entire body. Emotion overtakes rational thought. Power urges action, the feeling of invulnerability is nearly irresistible. My very being is drowned in the flood, inconsequential to unrestrained urges, vicious impulses.” He swallowed hard. “It is euphoric, and equally terrifying.”

My hands massaged his back. “I’m sorry you have to bear this curse.”

The blood stain surrounding the hole in his shirt covered nearly the entire back. Beneath, the skin was unmarked.

“If I had a needle and thread, I would mend your tunic. But your wound was completely healed by the priestess. Amazing.”

“They are gifted by the gods. Perhaps they can’t relieve me of my dark tenant, but they have helped me a great deal,” he said.

“The priests of my city...” I didn’t want to think about it. “But your Valti—it did not rise when your brother fought you.”

“My mind was occupied. The strange weapon, a battle my brother threatened to win, I was confounded—forced to focus.”

I turned him to face me. “If your darkness is not an ailment, if it cannot be cured, you must learn to live with it. Let me help you.”

“You already do,” he said. “Your calming presence—”

“No, I don’t want to calm you. I want to help you. To integrate the separate parts of you. I want you—you know that. But I want all of you,” I said.

“Integrate the Valti?” He pulled back. “It’s not part of me, but a curse, a dangerous one to all around me. Especially you.”

I gripped his wrists. “No, I don’t believe you. I made the beast rise from you. It was not from a place of anger, of violence. I felt that you still loved me.”

“Savage love? A contradiction,” he said.

But I wasn’t certain that was the case.

“Give me the chance,” I said. “The one thing I want for you is to live your life completely. You’re the one who taught me to embrace freedom. To live for myself. I would give you the same—to be free of your curse by embracing it.”

“You are a fool to try,” he said. But his expression softened. “I know your efforts come from a place of love. Don’t let yourself get hurt. Don’t let me hurt you.”

“You would never!” I said, launching myself into his arms.

He kissed me. I fell into it, instantly lost. I pulled the bloody tunic over his head, kissing down his chest as his hands bunched in my hair.

Until a heavy pounding sounded on the door of the lounge.

“Milord, you are commanded to attend the court,” a voice called.

He sighed. “That happened quicker than I would’ve guessed.”

“It’s about Ashur, isn’t it?” I said, feeling icy fingers creep inside. “What will happen to him for attacking that man?”

“I’ll give my side of it. Perhaps I can save him from the headsman’s ax, or the oubliette.”

I quickly rehooked the front of my dress. “Your tunic—”

“Serves as evidence. Come.” He flung the door open, startling the guard. I followed in his wake.

Duty called, despite the vipers likely awaiting.

The castle corridors were hushed and empty as we made our way toward

the great hall. Even the guards stood frozen at their posts, eyes averted from our passing. The very air seemed to crackle with tense anticipation. I clung more tightly to Drax's steadying presence.

The doors loomed ahead, flanked by armored guards. As we approached, the guards pulled the heavy wooden doors open, revealing the cavernous hall within. Afternoon light streamed through the high windows, illuminating the long table where King Sarl sat with Queen Kiha at his side. Tharon stood uneasily behind the king, Krall behind Kiha.

My steps faltered for a moment. The queen's presence filled me with misgiving. Kiha had never hidden her disdain for Drax, for me, for all those she deemed beneath her station. Her pale eyes were cold and calculating as they fixed upon us now. Nothing good could come of this.

"Come closer," King Sarl commanded, beckoning us forward. His voice was weary, even now, his skin held an unhealthy pallor.

Drax released my hand as we moved to stand before the king. I clasped my hands before me, resisting the urge to shrink back.

"There has been an accusation," Kiha announced, her cultured voice echoing through the hall. "Your guard, Ashur, insulted and threatened Lord Deonor at the training grounds."

I blinked in surprise, glancing between the queen and Deonor. He sat near the far end of the table, his thin lips pressed into a satisfied smile.

"This has gotten out of hand. The court has put up with your jealous bickering before, but this is too much," the queen said. "What will you do about it, my king?"

Drax tensed at my side, hands clenching into fists. I felt his outrage simmering beneath the surface. But he held his tongue. We were at the mercy of the king's decree.

After a long moment, Sarl spoke. "While an investigation is warranted, we must keep the peace for now." He raised one hand.

"I decree that these so-called gentleman's weapons be banned from the castle. Further, none other than professional soldiers will attend the practice yard," the king said. The scribe dipped a quill and wrote.

"Is that as far as you will go?" Kiha demanded.

"What more, wife?" the king glared at her.

"That none shall carry arms in the castle.

Save the men on duty. All other weapons are to be secured," she said.

The scribe looked to the king.

Sarl nodded. "So be it."

I took a deep breath, dreading what was to come as the king continued.

"Ashur will be confined to the barracks until the matter can proceed to trial."

Relief rushed through me. There would be a trial, an opportunity for Ashur to defend himself. Perhaps this would not end in tragedy.

But Kiha was not satisfied. "Confinement is not enough," she hissed. "Not when the safety of this court is threatened. I say we expel all Valti from the castle, effective immediately."

"Now see here," Drax growled through gritted teeth.

Sarl raised a hand. "Peace. Though you argue from fear, not wisdom, the law still stands."

"That's it?" Kiha exclaimed. "He should be jailed."

"For saving Drax's life?" I couldn't help but cry, then looked at the floor. This wasn't my place to speak.

"For being a monster," Kiha said. "For far too long, we've allowed the Valti to walk among us."

"You'd see me locked up, stepmother?" Drax said, voice dark.

Kiha's lips twitched, as if hiding a smile. "I'd very much enjoy seeing you bound in chains, Drax."

The hall went quiet under her steady, hungry gaze.

"Enough!" the king roared. "I've made my ruling! Empty the hall!"

But even in his rage, I saw the tremor in the king's hands. He slumped on his throne, features growing still, eyes staring.

"Father." Drax moved to his side.

"The king said to clear the hall," Kiha said. "Go!"

"I'll summon a priestess—" Tharon said.

"No. You will stay with me," she demanded.

My heart went out to the king, his body shaking as if with fever, his expression dazed and frozen.

After a moment, Sarl rose unsteadily to his feet. "If there is no further business, I must take my leave. The headaches have returned." He turned and shuffled away, supported by the castle priestess.

In his absence, Kiha's gaze turned steely.

One guard turned to Drax. "Your blade, my prince." His sneer was almost palpable.

With great restraint, Drax removed his sword belt and handed it over. "I

will retrieve this when we leave,” he stated in a low voice.

Satisfied, Kiha lifted her chin. “Now remove the one called Ashur to the dungeons. He will await trial there.”

I watched helplessly as Ashur was led away, staring beseechingly at Drax. But my mate was powerless to intervene. Outnumbered and unarmed, we could only stand by as injustice unfolded before our eyes.

After Ashur was taken away, Kiha swept from the hall, Tharon following close behind.

Drax turned to me, jaw clenched. “I must speak with Ashur. Wait here, I will return shortly.”

I nodded, watching him stride from the hall, flanked by guards. Unease churned within me. The queen was up to something sinister, I was certain of it. Power and status meant everything to her. She would stop at nothing to see her son on the throne.

Voices in the corridor snatched my attention. I recognized Tharon's irritated tone. Moving closer, I pressed myself into an alcove and listened.

“What do you think you're doing, Mother?” Tharon was demanding.

Kiha's reply was cool. “Securing your future, my son. Sarl is weak, he will not rule much longer. When he is gone, you will take the throne.”

“And you with it, I suppose?” Tharon retorted. “Admit it, you crave power for yourself.”

“Mind your tongue,” she snapped. “I act only in your best interest.”

Their voices faded as they moved away. I leaned heavily against the wall, pulse racing. My worst fears were coming true. Kiha meant to seize control, with Tharon as her puppet king. Anyone who stood in her way would be eliminated.

Including Drax.

I hurried from my hiding place, nearly stumbling in my haste. If Kiha meant Drax harm, I had to warn him. She knew he would never stop fighting for Ashur's freedom.

The guards tried to stop me as I ran for the doors, but I pushed past them. I had to find Drax. My heart dropped into my stomach at the sound of angry shouts from the courtyard below. Peering out, I saw Drax surrounded by armored men, their cudgels drawn threateningly.

“Cease this madness!” Drax bellowed, raising his empty hands in submission. “I mean no harm to any of you!”

“More lies!” came Deonor's shrill voice. “The beast means to cut us

down!”

To my horror, the first blow fell, a guard's mailed fist striking the side of Drax's face. He reeled back but did not strike out himself. I knew he was trying to prove his peaceful intent, even as they descended upon him.

“No!” I cried, racing down the steps, struggling to pull the dagger from my bodice. I had to stop this.

But the guards merely laughed as they saw me approach. One caught me about the waist, effortlessly lifting me away from Drax. “Let us handle the savage, little Frostling. Unless you think you can stop us?”

I struggled in vain as they crowded back in, raining down blows onto Drax's unprotected body, my own body aching with each blow he took. He crashed to his knees under the onslaught.

“Please, stop this!” I begged, hot tears spilling down my cheeks. “Can none of you see reason?” They ignored my pleas, their faces twisted in savage glee. Deonor watched with smug satisfaction, making no move to restrain them.

When the guards finally tired of the brutal sport, they stepped back, leaving my mate bloodied and motionless in the dirt. Drax stirred weakly as I broke free and ran to him, collapsing at his side.

“Lita,” he rasped painfully, trying to push himself up.

“Hush, don't move,” I urged, cradling his battered head in my lap. My vision swam with tears. How did it come to this?

## DRAX

I slowly moved across the green, swiping blood from my face, trying not to limp. Each step sent a sharp pain through my ribcage, but I couldn't let it show. I had to keep moving.

“Where are you going?” Lita demanded, hurrying to catch up with me. Her brow furrowed with concern. “We need to get you to the tower. You need rest. Healing.”

“I'm going to the smithy,” I said through gritted teeth.

“I think you took too many blows to the head,” she said. “You can barely walk. You need a healer, not a blacksmith.”

“Officially, I am still on duty. Guarding you. And apparently guarding myself as well.” I tried to force a smile, but it came out as more of a pained grimace.

Lita grabbed my arm, forcing me to stop. “This is foolishness. You are in no condition to walk about the castle grounds.”

I gently removed her hand. “I'll be fine. This isn't the first beating I've endured.”

She crossed her arms. “Well, it may be your last if you don't get those wounds treated. Now come.” She took my hand and led me towards the central tower.

I resisted, pulling my hand back. “I'm going to the smithy. I won't walk these halls unarmed after that stunt my brother just pulled.”

Lita sighed in exasperation. “Why must you be so stubborn?”

“It's part of my charm,” I said with a wink. But even that small motion made my head pound.

Lita looked me over, concern etched on her face. She hesitated, then

finally nodded. "Fine. But let's make it quick. Then straight to the tower."

We changed course and made our way slowly to the smithy. I tried not to limp or show any outward sign of pain, but each step jarred my battered body.

When we entered the smithy, the heat from the furnace felt good on my aching muscles. Bardull looked up from his anvil, his eyes widening as he took in my disheveled appearance.

"Ah, welcome back. The rapier was not to your liking?" he asked.

"Not to the liking of the king," I said bitterly. "You'll hear soon enough. I'll take back the sword I left earlier."

Bardull nodded. "There's an aspect of it you may be interested in. Shaw!" he barked.

His apprentice appeared from the rear of the shop. "Yes, master?"

"Bring the longsword."

Shaw hurried off. Bardull wiped his brow with a rag. "The wrapping on the grip was worn. No real soldier likes that kind of leather in his hand. But see here."

He took the sword from Shaw and laid it on the workbench, pointing to the unwrapped grip. I leaned in closer, spotting a maker's mark hammered into the steel. It wasn't the crestfalcon of Zashi like the royal swords, but rather a darkhawk with wings unfurled in an open circle, talons splayed.

"It's from a smithy here in the city," Bardull explained. "Reputable place. But this sword didn't come from the castle armory."

I ran my finger over the mark thoughtfully. "A mercenary blade then."

"A high quality one," Shaw added. "That steel is Tamascene, very expensive."

I lifted the sword, testing the balance. Even banged up as I was, it felt good in my hand. Natural. "You've reworked the edge?"

Bardull nodded. "Razor sharp. Shall I wrap the handle for you? Some nice cord will give a good grip."

"Please. And quickly."

As Bardull set to work securing the cord around the hilt, I glanced at Lita. She shifted impatiently, glancing anxiously between me and the door. I knew she wanted me to rest, but I wouldn't feel secure until I had steel at my side again.

"We should return later," Lita urged quietly. "After you've had time to recover. Please Drax."

I shook my head. “Not after the underhanded attack I just endured. I won't walk these halls unarmed again.”

Bardull looked up from his work, his eyes narrowed. “Should I be concerned, milord? Unarmed in your own castle?”

I hesitated. Word of the queen's spite would spread soon enough. But still, discretion was warranted. “Not just yet. But times are changing.”

The smith grunted knowingly as he lashed the last knot on the cord wrap. “Times always change. You don't have to tell me twice.”

He handed me the finished sword, and I felt more secure immediately. But as the adrenaline of the fight wore off, my injuries made themselves known with increasing ferocity. My head pounded relentlessly and my vision swam. I had to get off my feet soon.

Lita seemed to sense this. She took my arm gently. “Come, let's get you to the tower.”

I didn't argue this time. As we left the smithy, I had to lean on her more heavily than I cared to admit. By the time we reached the central tower, each step was agonizing. We entered and Lita quickly shut and barred the door behind us. I sagged against the wall, trying to catch my breath.

“Upstairs,” Lita said. “I'll help you.”

“The lounge is right there.” I nodded to the plush couch.

“No, you need to lie down properly. Come.”

“I like the sound of command in your voice.” I smiled.

Ow. My lips hurt.

She bolted the door. “You make me brave. Sometimes, you force me to be brave for your sake.”

“Where is the frightened girl I took from an evil temple?” I asked.

“She's been forced to become a courtier, and defender of her lord and lover. Upstairs with you.” She pointed imperiously.

I bowed, suppressing a pained grunt. “Milady.”

With effort, I pushed off from the wall and allowed Lita to support me as I limped slowly up the winding stair to the bedroom loft. Normally I bounded up these stairs, but now each riser was a small mountain to climb.

At the top, Lita steered me straight to bed. I all but collapsed onto the soft mattress, groaning in pain and relief. Lita swiftly shut the door and dropped the bar across it.

“Your ribs are likely cracked or broken,” she said. “Let me see.”

Gently she removed my tunic, sucking in a breath as she revealed the

blossoming bruises across my torso. Her fingers probed tenderly, searching for damage. I flinched and gasped when she found a broken rib.

“Sorry,” she whispered. “Lie still.” She pressed a cool cloth to my forehead. “I’ll ask for healing salves. Once you’ve rested, I will tend to you. Then we must leave this place.”

I shook my head, immediately regretting it as the room spun. “I’ll come and go as I please.”

Lita sat on the bed beside me, her eyes full of concern. “Your brother’s men have tried to kill you. Twice,” she said.

But was it really Theron behind these attacks?

“If he’s behind everything, he’s terrible at it. If I was trying to take him out, he’d be floating in the moat,” I said. “I won’t be driven out by him, or any other.”

“Why?”

“Our bonding ceremony. I will make you mine in front of the kingdom and the gods.”

“We are already bound, my love. No ceremony will make it any more secure. I need no witnesses,” she said. “Do you need it? To control the Valti?”

I shook my head. “I need only you.”

“Then why stay? Just because you’re stubborn?”

I wasn’t exactly sure. “There’s more going on here than my brother’s usual jealousy. And I don’t think it’s only because father is close to the end.”

She stroked my cheek. “Then why remain in this viper’s nest any longer? Why risk your life for mere appearances?”

I frowned. Why was I stubbornly clinging to this rotting court and all its false pageantry? Was my ego really so fragile?

“There is more stirring here than my brother’s pathetic jealousy,” I finally said. “I fear troubling times lie ahead. The kingdom is already on the brink, and Father fades by the day. If I flee now, it will plunge into chaos.”

Lita’s brow furrowed with concern. “I do not trust the queen’s motives, either. She is ruthless about putting her son on the throne. She said herself she wishes to see you in chains.”

“She’s always wanted to cage my Valti.”

Lita cocked one eyebrow. “I don’t think that is what she means.”

I shook my head. “Surely she could not truly desire...” But thoughts of the seductive queen twisted my gut in unease.

Lita seemed to read my mind. She traced a finger down my chest. “She wants you. I’ve seen how she looks at you.”

“Many have died for accusing Kiha of infidelity,” I said carefully.

“And often rumors hold some seed of truth.” Lita leaned closer, her breath hot in my ear. “She would bed you herself if given the chance.”

I shuddered in revulsion. “She is my stepmother. The notion...” I trailed off, unable to continue that disturbing line of thought.

“Why are you still wearing pants?” she asked.

“Never have I felt less aroused.” Between the bruises and thoughts of my stepmother...

Lita undressed slowly, unhooking the hooks, removing the separate pieces one by one. It took her an agonizingly long time to strip down to her undershift. She cocked a hip, putting a fist on it.

“Now why are you still wearing pants?”

I struggled to shuck them. Lita helped. “You know I can’t resist you in your under things.”

“I know,” she smiled and crawled on the bed. She knelt there, beckoning.

It was a struggle to follow—a struggle I was more than willing to undertake. I clutched her through the thin fabric, feeling her softness.

“Can you... summon the Valti?” she asked, kissing my ear. “Let it heal you?”

“What? No!”

“There are emotions better than anger. Do you want me? Do you love me?”

“More than anything,” I said.

“I can’t believe it only surfaces when you are under stress. I think it knows that anger makes *you* out of control, not the beast within. It wants what you want—to protect me. It is not a separate part of you.”

“You play with fire,” I said, gripping her shoulders.

She shook her head. “I know you won’t hurt me. Frankly, you’re in no state to cause me harm. Show me that side of you. Not in pain, frustration, or anger. Let it free.”

“I don’t dare!” I whispered.

“I love all of you, Drax, every part. I promise. Trust me.”

“I do trust you. I just don’t trust—”

“Yourself?”

“The Valti is not—”

“It is. You need to see that it is. I’ve seen that side of you. I’m not afraid. Don’t you be afraid.”

She kissed me, nails clawing my chest. “I want you, Drax. I want all of you. Give me all of you.”

A flicker. The beast within scenting her, becoming aroused.

Altered vision displayed her by her body heat. Her face, her hands, glowed, as did... other parts.

“Gentle,” she whispered, kissing me lightly everywhere. “I will be gentle.”

Whispers, kisses and touches engorged my member. When I tried to push her to the bed, I found myself too hurt.

“No. Gentle. Easy,” she said, her hands pushing me down on my back. “Let me do the work.”

In my animal senses, she glowed like a goddess, her scent the aroma of life, her touch the motion of the sun and moon. The blackness of her hair, her bright eyes against her golden skin became such a sharp vision, so tantalizing, stars against night, I could not look away.

“Stop me if I hurt you.” Her whisper entered my body, a vibration, unceasing.

Claws erupted from my fingers, the dangerous part of me surfacing. Yet I did not attack. She laced her fingers with my own. Pressed my hands down next to my shoulders.

I heard her pulse increase. The skin of her neck glowed warmer, and her breasts.

“You are beyond beauty,” I managed to say. “I know all of you, sense all of you—”

She straddled me, still dressed in the undershift. The skirt was lifted, revealing her dark thatch below.

With small gasps that exploded in my oversensitive ears, she rubbed her sex against mine.

In seconds, I felt her wetness.

“I see it in you, in your eyes. It is only you, Drax,” she said. “All that you are.”

She rose on her knees, angling her hips. I entered her, feeling taut resistance, yet smooth, wet flesh.

Moaning, she took more of me, her pussy a throbbing grip, dripping, slippery, yet fiercely tight.

As I slipped fully inside her, I felt the Valti rise. Not in anger. Merely a part of my own mind, my own desire.

“My mate!” she cried. “I want to have all of you!”

The flush of her skin, the arch of her back, her racing heartbeat told me she was on the verge. But I held back, some instinct telling me to let her reach pleasure by her own means.

Hips squirmed against mine. Grip on my hands turned painful. She made grunting, sobbing sounds as she ground her pelvis against me.

Her words were lost to animal sounds, but the beast within me understood well enough.

And responded.

## LITA

“Your bruises, your cuts,” I whispered, tracing my fingers over Drax's face and chest.

Gray morning light poured through the open shutters, revealing his dark skin now miraculously unmarred. Just last night he was battered and bloodied from the ambush. Now there was no sign of swelling or bruising. Even the ugly gashes faded to faint white lines.

I touched his cheek gently where it was grossly discolored. He blinked awake under my caress. Our gazes locked and held. I still wore only my thin linen shift from last night.

Slowly, Drax's hands slid around my waist and pulled me into a deep kiss. His movements were sure and strong, no longer hampered by injury. I sank into his embrace, rejoicing in this confirmation of his restored vitality.

Rolling me onto my back, he trailed kisses down my neck, nuzzling me through the thin fabric of my shift, touching, nipping. I gasped and arched into him.

Clearly, the way Drax was responding this morning, I needed to have a talk with Mistress Downin about some fancier undergarments. Or perhaps even plainer, more sheer?

Just as our kisses grew more heated, a loud knock sounded on the tower door below.

Drax pulled back with a groan. “Have I mentioned how much I despise castle life?”

I smiled ruefully. “I'm coming to understand why.”

Reluctantly, Drax buckled on his sword belt and strode downstairs to unbar the door, leaving me breathless atop the rumpled sheets.

“Put some pants on!” I called after him teasingly. Though looking at my own elaborate dress piled on the floor, with all its intricate laces and fastenings, I wasn't sure I could manage it any quicker than he.

I hurried after Drax, grabbing a robe to cover my sheer shift. He was speaking with a liveried guard at the door.

“...vital that you meet with us,” the guard said. “The sooner arrangements are made, the better.”

Drax sighed heavily, raking a hand through his tousled hair. “I can handle this myself.”

The guard looked skeptical. “Every time, Your Highness?”

Drax scowled, but finally relented. “Fine. This shouldn't take long.”

He turned back to me as the guard hurried off to gather the others. “Shall I send one of the maids up with something to break your fast?”

My stomach rumbled at the thought of food, but I shook my head. “I can wait for you.”

Drax nodded and pulled on a wrinkled tunic draped over a chair. As he dressed, he said, “Ashur being confined to the barracks, it seems new security plans are needed. But I will join you as soon as I am able.”

He buckled on his vest and weapons and pulled me close for a swift kiss. Then he bounded down the steps, leaving me alone in the tower rooms.

I looked around at the disarray left behind in his absence. Fine dresses were strewn across cushions and furniture, cast off without care. Likewise, Drax's limited wardrobe lay scattered about, showing the typical untidiness of a man without servants.

“What a mess,” I murmured. If we were to make this place livable, clearly some organization was needed.

First I found a suitable dress for myself amidst the piles left by Mistress Downin's girl. It was a refreshingly simple garment—just a chemise and kirtle without endless layers to contend with.

After washing and braiding back my hair, I set to work tidying the haphazard clothing littering every surface. But what exactly should be done with it all? The tower rooms were not outfitted as permanent living quarters. There were no wardrobes or chests for storing garments or possessions.

This was a space designed for nothing more than lazy lounging and trysts—expecting servants to quietly appear and disappear to tend to every need. Hmm. Perhaps not such a terrible life, when you stopped to think about it.

I folded the last tunic when another knock sounded at the door.

I checked that my knife was in place before I walked over. “Yes?” I called through the wood.

“Milady, Prince Drax thought you might need a distraction.”

Oh? I opened the door. Three palace guards stood there, dressed in uniform cloaks. I didn’t recognize them. But then, Ashur was confined to the barracks.

“What sort of distraction?”

“A visit to the market,” he said. “It’s in the eastern quarter this morn.”

I’d been dying to visit the city proper. Only from the distance of the terrace off the lounge had I viewed it since our arrival. The place teemed with color and life. It was so much bigger, so much busier than Infinity Circle.

“I would love that,” I said.

“Perhaps you could find an armoire,” the guard said, glancing at the dresses I’d stacked up. “No clothes horse is Prince Drax.”

From afar, the market swelled with excitement. I tried to hide my own enthusiasm. As much as I wanted to see it all, I didn’t want to do it alone.

“Will Drax meet us in the city?”

“Of course,” the guard said. He moved into the room and took my cloak from the peg. “It’s all been arranged. Ashur being restricted, new plans needed to be made. He will join us before long. Come. We have villarts saddled and waiting.”

A visit to the city market *and* a ride on a villart?

There were a few coins on the basin table. Secreting them in my skirts, I walked out with the guard. “Let’s go.”

We descended the tower steps, past the warren of halls in the barracks and servants’ quarters at the base.

I saw Mistress Dowin’s girl, Yezette, in the halls.

“Thank you for the dress. It’s lovely,” I said. “And thank your mistress.”

Yezette curtsied. “Milady.”

Before we could continue outside, my guard addressed one of the others.

“Stanz,” was all he said.

“I will be just a moment, Commander Blik.”

The guards led me downstairs to the cavernous stables carved into the rocky slopes below the castle walls. As promised, four villarts were held by grooms, saddled and hung with the blue and silver of Zashi. They stomped and snorted at our approach.

“Yours is a very tame, gentle one, best for a new rider,” the lead guard

assured me.

I gathered up my skirts and awkwardly jammed my foot into the metal stirrup as I'd seen Drax do. Gripping the horn of the saddle, I managed to pull myself up and swing my other leg over the scaly beast's back. Luckily my dress was voluminous enough to drape over the villart's sides once seated.

After an unsteady start, we trotted across the bridge and through the massive gatehouse, the guards throwing back greetings to the men posted there. As we descended the steep winding road down the granite spire, I clung tightly to the leather reins, adjusting to the creature's rolling, swaying gait.

Once at the base of the rocky outcropping, we passed through an area of grand manors enclosed by high walls before turning onto a broader thoroughfare. Common folk made way for our small procession, and I noticed many staring and pointing at my pale complexion and hair—so unusual here. I tugged my hood lower, uncomfortable under their scrutiny.

The sounds of the market soon reached us, a rising din of shouts and bleats and barking that drowned out even the clopping of the villarts' claws on the paving stones. The street opened into a large square thronged with hundreds of merchants' stalls and tents, with buyers and lookers milling everywhere in between.

My head swam trying to take it all in at once. Vendors called out over tables laden with strange fruits and vegetables, spices heaped in baskets, fragrant blooms, live animals in pens. Musicians played lively tunes to entertain. And the smells—of roasting meat, fresh baked bread, sweet pastries. My stomach rumbled again.

“Carpenters will be towards the far end,” the lead guard shouted over his shoulder, pointing towards where the tents thinned into more permanent wooden stalls.

I followed, weaving slowly through the crush of shoppers. A tiny minart pulled a hay cart across in from us, and I yanked the reins to halt the villart before we collided. Up close, the minart's wooly face and curling horns reminded me of the siu I helped tend back home, just on a slightly larger scale.

The din gradually faded as we left the main food stalls and entered the artisans' booths. Here craftsmen sold furniture, pottery, woven goods, and other handmade wares. I scanned the rows until I saw several carpentry stalls up ahead, their tables laden with chairs, shelves, and cabinets of all sizes.

I saw several tall armoires and dismounted. Studying the tall cabinets made for holding armor, I saw a few that would suit dresses.

Passing through the crowd, nearly all taller than me, I marveled at their deep bronze skin, hair and eyes every color of the rainbow.

“You look pale, child,” a rough-handed carpenter smiled at me. “Are you ill?”

“Um. No. I rarely see the sun.” I pulled my hood forward. “I’m looking for an armoire, to hold dresses. Something with a curved back?”

“Curved back?” the carpenter scowled at me.

“For a tower room,” I said.

The man bowed slightly. “Milady. We’ve heard of Prince Drax’s mate coming to our city. I apologize for not recognizing you. I have none with a curved back here, but there is a suitable one at my shop. Following market, I will have it brought.”

I reached in my hidden skirt pockets. “I only have a few coins—”

He held up a hand. “I’ve provided for the palace castle before. There’s no need.”

“Really?”

“Of course. Prince Drax will take care of it.”

“I thank you very—”

Wait. Why was he here?

Leaving my mount, I hurried toward the tent across the way.

I was sure it was Prince Tharon I saw slipping into this tent. I looked around, but he was gone, nothing but a collection of oil lamps, hearth tools, and other used wares.

“That man,” I whispered to the old woman who stood in a corner. “Which way did he go?”

Wordlessly, she pointed to the back, where a flap still moved slightly.

Was this part of Tharon and Kiha’s plot against Drax? Were they meeting someone here in the market, away from prying eyes?

I had to find out.

Creeping towards the flap, I peeked through to the small open courtyard beyond, a single narrow path leading away to a different section of the market. But no one was there.

One cautious step, then another...

Until a strong arm wrapped around my arms from behind me, pinning them to my body while a hand covered my mouth.

Thrashing in my captor's grip, I kicked and squirmed, his hold loosening just enough for me to catch a glimpse of his face.

Tharon!

But... no.

This was a stranger, the cast of his features so similar to Tharon's, I stopped fighting.

"Who are you?"

But the only answer to my muffled question was a sharp blow to the side of my head.

And then darkness claimed me.

## DRAX

“I didn't summon you,” Ashur said, brow furrowing in confusion. “Why would I?”

We stood in the nearly empty barracks hall, most of the guards already out on their posts. A few men slept in the dim rear chamber, catching what rest they could before their night watch.

“Guards came saying you wanted to discuss changes to Lita's security detail now that you're confined to the barracks,” I explained. “That I or a man of my choosing could take your place as the fourth in her guard.”

Ashur slowly shook his head. “I sent no one, Drax. The men I already chose would serve well enough.”

My pulse quickened as I grasped his meaning. “You didn't send for me this morning?”

“No. I swear it.” Ashur glanced around anxiously. “We shouldn't speak of this here. Come.”

He led me into a small side room used for storing armor. Once the door was shut, he faced me, eyes grave. “This does not bode well. You were lured away under false pretenses.”

I raked a hand through my hair. “Gods be damned. Lita could be in danger right now.”

Without another word, I turned and raced from the barracks. Taking the servants' passages, I sprinted straight for the central tower, mind racing. Who would dare such treachery within the very castle walls? What sinister aim did they have?

I bounded up the tower steps. Halfway up, I stumbled to a halt, my blood turning to ice.

There, sprawled face down on the cold stones, lay one of Mistress Downin's girls, the hilt of a dagger protruding from her back.

“Summon a priestess!” I bellowed down to Ashur. “Now!”

I rushed to the maid's side, gently rolling her over. Her eyelids fluttered weakly at my touch.

“Hang on there,” I urged. Scooping her up, I carried her swiftly to my tower chambers.

After laying the gravely injured girl on the lounge couch, I frantically searched the rooms for any sign of Lita. “Where are you?” I cried out, though only silence answered.

I threw open the hidden door and took the stairs two at a time up to the loft. The bedroom was empty.

Lita was gone.

I dashed back down to the whimpering maid. A priestess had arrived and was already tending to her, hands pressed to either side of the embedded blade. I recognized her as Vahnn, an older woman with kind eyes.

“Can you help her? Her name's Yezette, one of Mistress Downin's girls,” I said.

Vahnn's brow creased in concentration. “It was wise not to remove the blade. What happened here, Your Highness?”

Ignoring her question for the moment, I rushed out onto the terrace, scanning the bustling castle grounds below. No sign of Lita anywhere. My gut twisted with dread.

Returning inside, I told the priestess tightly, “Men disguised as guards lured me away this morning. Now Lita's been abducted.”

Yezette's eyes fluttered open at my words. “The market...” she rasped.

I crouched beside her. “What's that? Who took Lita to the market?”

“Hush now, child,” Vahnn soothed, placing a glowing hand on the maid's forehead.

“Let her speak!” I said sharply. “She clearly knows something.”

Yezette's face contorted in pain, but she forced out, “Guards...castle guards escorted her.”

“What treachery is this?” I growled.

Vahnn shot me a piercing look. “Worry about the whys later. Right now you must go to her. Hurry!”

I turned to rush out, but suddenly the main door crashed closed. I heard the bolt slide home, locking me in.

“Find another way!” Vahnn urged. “I will tend to the girl. Go!”

With a roar, rage and fear kindled the Valti's fire deep within me. Power flooded my limbs as my shoulders swelled and bones shifted. Deadly claws extended from my fingertips and fangs from my jaws.

My first instinct was to batter down the stout door barring my way. But even in the grip of bestial fury, I realized the heavy oak planks would not quickly yield. I fought to tame the wild impulses rising up, trusting in Lita's teachings. There must be another path.

“You've been with your mate long enough to have gained some control.” Vahnn's calm voice cut through the haze of fury. In her hand, she held a glowing lodestone device. “Let her faith in you guide the way now. Hurry!”

I closed my eyes, drawing deep, steady breaths until the vise around my chest eased. Lita needed me to keep control. I had to leash the animal, bending its power to my will.

When I opened my eyes, the way forward was clear. I raced out onto the terrace and vaulted up onto the crenelated wall, overlooking the sheer drop to the rocks below. Calculating the distance, I leapt out and grabbed the first of the steep, narrow stairs cut into the sheer granite face.

The wind buffeted me dangerously as I descended, using my enhanced strength to keep my balance on the precarious stone ledges. Far, far below, the sea crashed against the rock.

Reaching the base of the spire at last, I rushed to the gatehouse and unlocked the windlass, lowering the drawbridge across the dry moat. Then I raced down the serpentine road leading from the castle heights to the city below.

Cresting a rise, Zashi spread out before me, the morning sun just breaking over the strange angular buildings. The riot of smells hit my heightened senses, but beneath it all, I detected Lita's delicate scent. She passed this way, toward the market.

The Valti's savage keen senses took over, instinct guiding my steps unerringly through the winding streets. The market soon came into view, thronged as always with merchants and buyers. I vaguely heard alarmed shouts as I shoved through the crowd, letting her floral perfume pull me along like a tether.

Rounding a corner, the scent trail led me to a stall filled with wooden furniture and cabinets. Lita was here. My inner beast stirred, rumbling protectively. Mine.

“Lita, my beloved,” I shouted. “Who has seen her?”

An older man approached me warily. “Prince Drax? She was just here. The lady, Lita, purchasing a cabinet.”

“Where did she go?” I demanded. “Tell me!”

A young boy clutching the carpenter's leg pointed a small hand. “There. The tent with the metalwork.”

I bolted in that direction. The indicated tent stood abandoned, the wares still laid out on the tables. Lita's scent permeated the enclosed space. But now there was an acrid note of fear woven through it. She was afraid here. Rage simmered in my blood.

“Who owns this place?” My bellow sent several merchants scurrying away. But no one claimed the tent.

Jaws clenched, I closed my eyes and inhaled slowly, filtering through the riot of smells. The men who took her had also been here. One in particular...something about his scent nagged at my memory.

Passing through the tent's rear flap, I followed the trail into a winding back alley. It led to a wider street where carts and horses passed. But her scent ended abruptly at the edge of the road, trampled under the traffic of the market.

A wordless roar broke from my throat. My claws lengthened, ready to shred flesh. I would tear this city apart stone by stone to find her.

No! I forced my raging breath to slow. Violence would not help Lita now. I had to stay in control, use my senses wisely. The trail was not yet lost.

Closing my eyes, I focused on the lingering scent of the man who seemed familiar. Perhaps I could backtrack, find their origins.

The first trail ended at the castle gates. Rage spiked hotly again before I reined it back. I had to keep searching.

The second scent led nowhere I could trace.

But the third took me deep into the armorers' stalls. And there, on a sword, I saw it—the insignia burned into the grip of my mercenary blade. Emblazoned in red and black, a swooping raptor, claws reaching, wingtips nearly touching in a circle.

Two brothers sat sharpening blades, their muscular arms and shoulders marking them as smiths.

Grabbing the marked sword from their table, I slammed it down in front of them, making the men jump.

“This blade—who did you make it for?” I demanded. “Which band of

mercenaries?”

“Mercenary trade is illegal here,” the elder said evasively.

I slammed my fist down, toppling their table. “Who then?”

The man gripped his hammer warily. “Depends who's asking.”

I let the Valti surge forth, blackening my eyes and elongating my fangs until the men cowered.

“The queen's guard!” the younger one squeaked. “S-she's expanded their numbers to patrol the borders.”

“You lie!” I thundered. “Her guard serves in the palace, not elsewhere!”

In one motion, I flipped their table and grabbed the elder brother by the shirtfront, hauling him off the ground. “Tell me the truth or I'll tear you apart!”

“Her summer residence!” he choked out. “The mountain keep! Please, don't kill me!”

I dropped him in disgust. Of course—the queen's retreat in the mountains. I had never been invited there. But if she kept her own soldiers...

The Valti strained against my control, threatening to overtake reason with snarling fury. I wrestled it down. Rage would not help me get to Lita any faster. I reached out with my heightened senses instead, connecting with a beast that could.

A villart tethered nearby lifted its head, hearing my unspoken call. Though it was unknown to me, it sensed and submitted to my dominance as alpha. The creature broke free of its bonds and charged toward me, rearing up fiercely.

I seized its reins and swung onto its back in one smooth motion. With a thought, the beast wheeled and shot off, carrying me swiftly toward the foothills southwest of the city. All I knew was Lita's life was in peril. And I would tear down the very mountains to save her.

## LITA

The manacle clamped tightly around my wrist with an ominous clank as General Krall stepped back, surveying his work. My arms were now chained high above my head to a damp wall of the dungeon I'd woken up in. I tugged futilely against the bonds but they held fast.

“What are you doing? I’m not a creature of legend. I’m no danger to you.”

Krall's eyes roamed over me, his gaze flat as he slowly stroked his thick beard. “No, you're clearly no danger. But you'll be a useful tool, nonetheless.”

I stared at him in confusion. What was this about?

The general moved closer again, reaching out to grip a lock of my hair. I flinched but he held tight, sawing through it with a dagger. Krall held up the severed tress with a satisfied smirk.

“Kramm, the note, if you please.”

“Yes, Father.” A young man emerged from the gloom of the dungeon. The one I had briefly mistaken for Prince Tharon at the market. My heart spiked with fear.

Krall carefully placed my lock of hair in a folded piece of parchment, sealing it with wax. A ransom demand, I understood with dawning horror. With a glimpse of this stranger, anyone would swear the note came from Tharon.

I licked my dry lips. “Tharon would never do this.” I mean, sure, he wasn't my favorite person, but I'd never felt in danger from him. “But when Drax learns of it—”

“Your beloved will surely kill his brother in a mindless rage,” Krall said

casually. “Then Drax will meet his fate on the headsman's block for killing the heir to the throne. And in the resulting chaos, the queen shall become regent.”

I gasped as his plot became clear. “Then you mean to kill King Sarl as well!”

“I doubt it would take much to finish that frail old man.” Krall smiled coldly. “But my queen will need to expand Zashi's borders during her rule, to ensure the people's support.” His eyes bored into mine. “Starting with your homeland in the south.”

My blood turned to ice in my veins. Terr's defenses were pitiful, the city ripe for conquest. Our guards were minimal. We'd never even realized there was a potential enemy waiting for us on this planet.

“Deliver this to the useless tower,” Krall instructed his son. “Once Drax is apprehended, inform me so we may move forward.”

“Yes, father.” The young man melted back into the shadows and I heard his footsteps fade up the winding stairs.

Krall turned back to me, his smile predatory. “Unfortunately, given the climate, we'll have no choice but to offer you as a sacrifice once the prince is in custody. Can't have the populace thinking their future queen had anything to do with your demise.”

He shrugged as if sentencing me to a gruesome death meant nothing. I strained against the merciless iron shackling me to the wall but it was useless.

I bit my lip, mind piecing together the only answer to the puzzle. “Tharon is not the king's son, he's yours, isn't he? Which means Kiha has no real claim to the throne.”

Krall waved a dismissive hand. “Technicalities. With both of his 'sons' dead, Sarl won't last long without an heir to cling to.”

His lip curled in a sneer. “And a war against creatures of legend will serve as a powerful distraction. We should be thankful that you arrived in Zashi.”

Anger mixed with shame roiled inside me. Had I really doomed the human city just by my presence here? Nonsense. I hadn't done this. These crazy people were to blame.

Krall eyed me up and down lasciviously once more. “I suppose I should give you to my men for sport before handing you over to the mob. But the queen will surely want to gloat first.”

“As much as I enjoy the sight of you chained, I have much to attend to. A

coup can't run itself, you know. But I'm sure the queen will want a final visit with you before you're thrown to the whivven. It's ironic how many Valti this dungeon has imprisoned over the years."

With that, he stepped back into the dark. I heard his footfalls on the stairs.

The only sound was the guttering of the torch in its sconce.

I was the catalyst to the queen's plan. Terr was her excuse to maintain the power she seized. My bond with Drax freed him from his curse, and thus made him more dangerous to Kiha. His choice of a monster for a mate would only turn the rabble against my love.

I was so weak!

"Dammit!"

What was that? My angry gesture...

I looked down at my hands. They'd slid halfway out of the manacles.

Weak. They thought I was weak, and small.

But maybe small was a strength.

So many Shakai mistook me for a child. They probably didn't chain up too many children in the dungeon.

Gritting my teeth, I strained against the rusted iron, twisting hard even as it scraped my skin raw. The blood made my arm slick, allowing me to slowly work it free with agonizing effort.

"Ow," I whimpered, although elation flooded me.

Now, to get totally free. Using my right to hold the chain steady, I pulled with my left. Oh, that didn't feel good at—

With a *clink*, the chain pulled from the stone.

I squinted in the low light. Apparently, years of binding Valti damaged the wall, the manacles. Chain dangling, I moved even closer.

A breeze blew through the small hole.

Unlike the windows of our useless tower, this wall wasn't feet thick, but inches.

Grabbing the cuff from my right hand, I pulled. Put my feet on the wall. Heaved with all my might.

Weak! Don't be weak—

This one pulled free too, sending me falling on my butt.

Grunting, I gained my feet. Now, there were two tiny holes in the wall.

I felt a web of stress cracks from mighty Valti trying to yank free. This was no wall of stone blocks, but of brick.

Still, what was I against a brick wall?

Using the manacle as a tool, I chipped away. Bit by bit, the hole widened. Of course, bit by bit would take me a hundred years to dig a hole big enough to squeeze through—

A chunk of it gave way, falling on the other side.

Those Valti of old must've really put a hurt on these bricks.

I thought of Drax when the beast rose in him. Thinking of him pulling free of these chains spurred me on.

Now using the chain, I pounded away. Chunks of stone flew into my face, bit into my skin. I kept on.

It didn't take long to break into a sweat. My left hand was freed from the cuff much quicker than the first. Now I beat the cuff end of my bond against the wall with full swings.

Uncounted blows later, the cuff exploded into pieces.

But I could fit my hand through the hole I'd made.

I beat the other cuff against the wall, chipping, nipping, until that cuff, too, fell apart.

With a bare chain, I continued on.

Instead of the holes, I focused on the stress cracks in the mortar. Then I wiggled a brick. It pulled free.

"Yes," I said, wiping my palms on my dress.

With the blood smell of iron in my nose, I clenched my teeth and wailed away. Though I whipped as hard as I could, concentrating on the cracked mortar—

Another brick fell. Shoving and wiggling, I pulled several others free.

Once the dust settled, I put my face in the hole. Dim on the other side, torchlight flickered from an unseen torch. A corridor?

I worked until sweat flowed into my eyes. Whipped the wall until my arms ached, my shoulders sang. Finally running out of breath, I sank to my knees.

Still not enough.

Looking at the cracks, I thought I might make more progress if I had something to pry with. Examining a cuff, I saw it was too thick to work.

The knife!

I had no chance to use it on my captors. Pulling it free from its hidden spot in my bodice, I eased it into one of the cracks. Then the manacle half served as a hammer.

With much less effort, I pried a brick free.

What if I...

There were cracks much lower. I set the point of the knife into one. Pounded the blade in. Then pulled it out, moved it over, and tried again.

I was certain I dulled the knife past the point of usability. Yet the lower bricks loosened. Wiggled.

A one-foot section of wall fell. The two holes were connected. Putting the damaged knife back in hiding, I tried to squeeze through.

My head and shoulders fit through. I was halted by my breasts. I'd always thought my breasts were a little too big for my body. Now I knew I was right.

"C'mon," I said through my teeth. Holding my breath, I pushed with my feet, pulling with my hands. Squirmed left and right. Bricks dug into my chest, scraping my back.

"Cloak," I groaned, too late.

No way would I allow myself to get stuck. Kicking and writhing, I shoved my way out the same way I'd knocked the holes wider—bit by bit.

For a moment, I slid freely. Then my hips found the edges.

Letting out a breath, I got ready for another round of painful squeezing.

Then a frightening sound reached my ears.

The trod of boots on the stone floor of the dungeon.

## DRAX

The villart huffed and snorted as we climbed the winding mountain road. Her hooves beat a rapid rhythm on the hard-packed earth. Though the jungle foothills blazed with the vivid colors of autumn foliage, she nearly stumbled more than once on the steep grades.

I pushed the creature to exhaustion getting here so swiftly. As the riotous jungle growth gave way to stands of tall evergreens, I eased up to allow her a walking pace. She tossed her antlers gratefully.

Through the gaps in the trees, I caught glimpses of Zashi far below, tendrils of cooking smoke wafting up from the morning fires. The sea beyond the pale castle walls rippled calm and turquoise. In the west, a line of dark clouds piled on the horizon—another storm approaching.

I had no clear idea what awaited me at the queen's remote mountain estate. Never before had I been invited to the so-called summer palace. Now, I could only hope I was on the right trail to where Lita was taken.

When the villart's path wandered toward the burbling of a stream, I let her drink her fill while I splashed the crisp water on my face. The saddlebags contained no provisions, not even a waterskin for the journey. Reckless. I should have planned better. But nothing could temper the desperation that had spurred me from the capital.

As the villart grazed on mountain scrub, I pondered my next move. Whoever abducted Lita seemed to have at least half a day's lead on me. How long that head start was depended on precisely when the deception took place. And whether they pressed hard for the keep or took a more leisurely pace.

Clearly someone highly placed was behind this—someone who knew I

had entrusted Lita's security to Ashur in recent days. A handful of decoys in stolen uniforms were enough to divert me completely while the true threat stole my bride away.

The girl, Yezette, identified the palace guard. So they must have worn the uniforms. This, even though the smiths told me they worked for the queen at the keep.

But to what end? What possible reason could anyone have for taking Lita prisoner?

A chill ran through me as I recalled the smith's words—the queen has soldiers here. Did Kiha stand to gain from Lita's disappearance? But how? Nothing made sense.

“All right, girl. Break time's over,” I said, gathering the reins to guide the villart back to the road. She tossed her antlers grumpily but followed.

The sun had passed its zenith, angling afternoon light directly across the steepening slope. Scanning the verge as we climbed, I noted occasional smudged hoofprints visible in the patches of softer dirt. The tracks of a cart were now evident as well.

A scent teased my enhanced senses—the sweetish dusty aroma of hay. Why would Lita's abductors haul hay up this remote track?

Understanding dawned. They used it to hide her, concealing her scent while transporting her secretly away from the city. Clever. It meant they likely knew I would come in pursuit.

Further up the incline, my eye caught a flash of color amidst the evergreen needles carpeting the way. I guided the villart wide, realizing it was a purposefully covered pit trap of sharpened stakes. My mouth flattened in a grim line. Another confirmation I anticipated.

As the lower growth thinned and we rode beneath looming pine boughs, the terrain grew rockier, with stone spires and cairns flanking the narrow track. I moved slowly now, my wary gaze raking the surrounding cover. This was ideal country for an ambush.

A flicker of movement in the shadows under the trees brought my sword hissing from its sheath—but it was only a foraging mountain cat slinking off into the underbrush.

Rounding a sharp bend, the road hugged the rim of a cliff overlooking a dizzying drop. I reined the villart to a halt, spying a gap in the trees far below that marked the valley floor. No doubt a deadly plunge for any horse or rider going over the edge.

Craning my neck, I examined the craggy face rising above, culminating in the pale outer curtain wall of the estate. I saw no guards patrolling the parapets or narrow balconies overhanging the road. But neither could I proceed safely while hemmed in by the precipice.

I nudged the villart forward cautiously, scanning for any sign of disturbance. As we crept along the curve, the mountain's shadow fell over us, the trees beyond sunk in gloom.

“Easy there, girl,” I murmured, keeping a light grip on the reins so she wouldn't sense my tension. My sword remained naked across my thighs.

A sudden cascade of stone directly above made my heart seize—but it was only a free ranging villart dislodging rubble as it picked its way down from a crag. Still, the animal within remained on edge.

Relief washed over me as the cliffside trail wrapped around, the drop falling away behind. Dense forest rose ahead all the way to the keep's outer walls. I considered whether to press on directly or bypass the main entrance when the villart let out a shrill whinny and reared up without warning.

I hit the unforgiving ground hard, barely maintaining my grip on the sword. Behind me came a deafening crash—an avalanche of boulders hurtling down, sweeping the stricken villart over the precipice. As she fell, I glimpsed the crossbow bolts puncturing her neck.

I rolled to my feet, senses flaring. My headlong pursuit ended the instant I let my guard down. No more blind recklessness—the hunters had now become the hunted.

The attackers would need a moment to reload their crossbows. Crouching low, I bounded swiftly between the trees, letting instinct guide me uphill toward my foes. The dense woods could hide them, but not their scent.

Pressing my back against a broad pine, I inhaled slowly, filtering out the resinous aroma of the needles. And there—on the other side—the unwashed stench of a man, overlaid with the bitter oil used to maintain crossbow strings.

I circled soundlessly around the massive trunk just as the hidden soldier leaned out for a glance downhill. My sword took him straight through the neck before he turned.

Rolling away from the toppling body, I snatched up his fallen crossbow. Not a moment too soon—the thunk of a bolt burying itself in the pine marked where I stood a heartbeat before.

Coming up in a crouch, I swiftly tracked the source of the shot uphill. But

my hasty return bolt went wide as the man ducked behind another tree. Cursing, I discarded the cumbersome crossbow. Such weapons had never been my forte.

Drawing my sword again, I charged uphill full-tilt. The soldiers' confidence was their undoing—only three awaited me in the hollow behind the tree, unprepared for my swift assault.

My first strike knocked aside a crossbow leveled at my chest. Without breaking stride, my elbow smashed into the shooter's jaw, sending him reeling.

The other two freed their swords just in time to meet my whirling steel. The ring and skirl of blades echoed through the mountains as we slashed and parried.

My opponent wielded an elegant longsword, but I knew the weakness of such fanciful weapons. Lashing out viciously, I sheared through the thin metal halfway down the blade, leaving the man gaping at the useless hilt in his hand.

In the same motion, I spun to block a blow from the third man's plainer soldier's blade. We traded blistering strikes, neither able to break through the other's guard.

Until I stepped in close unexpectedly, driving my knee up between the man's legs. He folded with a choked groan. I slammed my sword hilt into his temple, sending him sprawling senseless.

Despite being weaponless, the first man gamely charged straight at me. I sidestepped his headlong rush, angling my sword tip precisely through the gap at his collar. He tumbled past, blood fountaining and sword falling from his nerveless fingers.

Panting, I whirled just as the man I kneed struggled to his feet, longsword weaving unsteadily. Still disoriented from the head strike, he was no match for my point sliding smoothly between his ribs.

I straightened from his collapsing form, gulping air. My limbs trembled from the wash of fading adrenaline. Savage triumph still coursed through me, the predator reveling in the kill. I could almost taste the hot blood in the air—

No! With an effort, I chained the gruesome primal urges down. I took no pleasure in killing, no matter what foul face the inner beast wore.

Breathing deep in the mountain air, I mastered myself and turned uphill. But sudden movement in the trees brought my sword tip snapping back to guard.

“Don't kill me! I'll tell you whatever you need to know!” A survivor lay sprawled on the needles, broken leg bent at a grotesque angle. I didn't bother telling him his plea came far too late.

I pointed my blade at his throat. “How many more of you are there?” My voice came out as a guttural rasp.

“Only Krall, his son, Kramm, and two archers in the gatehouse!” the man gasped out.

General Krall—one of the queen's trusted commanders. So her hand was in this after all.

Before I could ask more, the guard's eyes glazed over, his final breath rattling out. Cursing silently, I straightened from his body.

Two archers left. I did not like those odds while trying to breach the gate. But no fortress was impenetrable, and the scent of Lita was intoxicating now, so close. She was inside those very walls.

I would find a way to her. The shadows of the dense trees concealed me as I slid from trunk to trunk, circling the base of the keep. The postern gate stood open, the portcullis raised.

Edging into the gatehouse, I found the winch chains for the heavy grate strewn with caltrops as expected—no easy sabotage. So I continued on, through the empty stables and towards the squat central tower.

The sight within made me hesitate. Far more villarts were tethered here than should be for a lightly manned summer estate. Even a handful of armored bagarts. A covered carriage was hitched near the doors.

So the dying guard had lied. This was no skeleton crew—the keep housed at least a company of soldiers. I should have expected the duplicity.

Retreating to the gatehouse alcove, I considered my options. The obvious path was usually the deadliest. I studied the peaked grate, noting places where the thick chains crossed. A careless invader triggering the portcullis would be impaled by the iron teeth.

Lita was inside somewhere. Every fiber of my being strained to reach her, to protect what was mine. But I could not let that yearning drive me into recklessness. They expected a berserk Valti brute. It was time to prove otherwise.

Clearing my mind, I closed my eyes, drawing in the riot of smells that surrounded this den of my enemies. And beneath the reek of horses, oil, and armor—there it was. Faint but unmistakable.

The sweet perfume of my mate.

## LITA

I had to find a way out, and fast. Wiggling my hips, my toes slipping on the uneven ground, I finally managed to squirm through the hole I carved in the dungeon bricks.

Sprawling onto my belly, I quickly glanced left and right down the dim passageway. Which way led out?

Heavy boot steps echoed from one direction—guards coming to check on me. No time to hesitate. I scrambled the opposite way, toward a flickering light in the dark.

Rounding the first corner, I found a torch sputtering in an iron sconce. I snatched it up, shielding the flame with my body as I hurried on. The footfalls receded behind me.

When silence returned, I risked shining the torch to examine my surroundings. The flames illuminated a corridor of rough stone, with no distinguishing features. But I pressed on, certain I felt a breath of fresher air from up ahead. There had to be a way out.

After some time, I realized the way forward was lit by more sporadic torches. Finding another empty sconce, I abandoned my makeshift brand.

At last the passage ended in a narrow staircase winding upward. Daylight! I climbed swiftly, heart lifting at the growing brightness above. At the top landing, the hall branched left and right.

I turned left first, finding a row of open doorways leading into empty, dusty chambers. Clearly an unused part of the keep. But to my right stood a single closed door. And unlike the disused wing, this door had a sturdy bolt—which was not currently thrown.

The right-hand path was my best option. As I neared the solitary door, a

draft swirled my hair. Beyond lay freedom, I sensed it.

With a deep breath, I pulled the handle. But instead of swinging open, the door held fast. I reversed direction and pushed instead, expecting blue sky to meet my eyes as it swept wide.

“Whoa!” I barely caught myself from tumbling straight off a narrow ledge with no railing. Heart hammering, I stepped carefully out onto the precipice and eased the door shut behind me.

Spread below was an astounding panorama. The mountain face dropped dizzyingly away, giving way to a sheer cliff plummeting to a rocky valley choked with trees. Far, far in the distance, the jungle foothills blazed in vivid autumn hues. And on the coast, the palace castle rose atop its lonely spire, the city laid out in a maze of blue rooftops all around it.

I had achieved my freedom, after a fashion. But I was far from safe yet. Edging carefully along the ledge, I rounded the first corner, hoping for stairs or a ladder down. Instead, the I was featureless.

Steadying my nerves, I continued around the next bend. And there, at last, was my destination—the front entrance of the keep. I stood atop the gatehouse, overlooking the courtyard and stables.

Escape was tantalizingly close now. If I could just get down from this precipitous perch, I could lose myself in the woods...

The sudden harsh clang of a bell made me flinch. Shouting rose from below. Did they know I was free? There was no more time for caution.

I eyed the slate roof of the gatehouse directly under me. The drop was not too far. I could do this. Turning, I lowered myself until I hung from the ledge by my fingertips. Then I let go.

I hit the roof hard, tiles cracking under my feet. My knees absorbed most of the impact, though my teeth snapped together painfully. I froze, listening. But no alarm was raised, it seemed.

Scrambling to the roof's peak, my passage dislodged more tiles to clatter noisily down the slope. The bell rang again, voices shouting. Hurry!

The next drop to the guardhouse door was farther than I would have liked. But I steeled myself, eased over the edge, and pushed off.

For an endless moment, I fell through empty air. Then I crashed down onto the small stone porch, tiles exploding under me. I lay in a breathless heap, dazed but intact.

One more drop separated me from freedom. I envisioned the routes Drax and I had taken over the rooftops of the castle. If I could survive those playful

climbs, I could survive this.

Shakily, I got to my feet. The tiles provided scant holds, so I simply let myself hang as long as I could bear before releasing. I hit the ground hard, barely keeping my feet under me as I crumpled to my hands and knees against the wall.

Gasping for breath, I leaned into the cool stone at my back. The impact knocked the wind out of me, but nothing seemed broken. I did it. I was out!

My elation vanished instantly as I turned around. A dozen sword points hovered inches from my face. And between the bristling steel stood Kiha and General Krall, regarding me like foxes at the mouth of the den.

“I thought you locked her in the dungeon,” Kiha said dryly.

“We did. Chained her to the wall,” Krall insisted.

The queen’s perfectly sculpted eyebrow arched. “Apparently not well enough.”

At an impatient wave from her delicate hand, the guards reluctantly lowered their weapons. Kiha looked me up and down with a hint of grudging appreciation.

“Resourceful girl. You would have made an interesting daughter-in-law, I’ll give you that.” Then her expression hardened. “Bind her.”

The soldiers shuffled their feet and avoided meeting my eyes. Kiha made a sound of disgust.

“Honestly. She’s no magic monster. Just get me some rope, I’ll do it myself.”

As one of the men hesitantly handed Kiha a coil of rope, Krall suddenly became engrossed in something in the distance. The queen rolled her eyes and gestured for me to turn around.

With expert precision, Kiha wrapped the rope around my wrists, then drew the line taut between them. I winced as the bonds bit cruelly into my already abraded skin.

Unexpectedly, Kiha pulled my bound arms above my head and pressed close against my back. I shuddered as her hand trailed almost tenderly down my cheek before gripping my jaw.

“Pity you’re no fun, girl,” she purred in my ear. Then she huffed and released me with a little shove. I sagged back against the wall, skin crawling.

Kiha handed the rope’s trailing end to her lover like a leash. “Now, what to do with her?”

Krall rolled the line in his hands.. “Well, she clearly can’t be contained in

the dungeon...”

“No, she’s much too fond of heights.” A slow, cruel smile curved Kiha’s painted lips.

“The scavenger house?” Krall asked.

Kiha brightened up. “An excellent idea. Have my room moved to the top story. I want a view of her suffering.”

Her lover lifted my bound hands. “The blood will draw them quickly.”

Who or what was she talking about?

## DRAX

Coward's lofts, hidden trapdoors, secret safe rooms—these had been my favorite places to explore as a child in the sprawling palace castle. I would spend hours searching them out, finding new nooks and crannies to temporarily escape my stifling royal duties and family obligations.

Never did I imagine those misspent hours of my youth would prove so useful in a real life or death situation. But now, as I scrambled down the mountainside, I sent up a silent prayer of thanks for the experience those secret spaces gave me. For just ahead, half-hidden behind swaying rushes, a dark opening yawned in the hillside.

It was not a natural cave, I realized as I drew nearer. The arched shape and fitted stone gave it away as a constructed passageway. Doubtless it served some clandestine purpose, though no records ever mentioned such a concealed entrance.

Not that this remote mountain estate had ever, to my knowledge, faced attack or invasion. Still, it was a perfect spot for a hidden door. Even with battle raging at the gates above, soldiers flooded with fury and bloodlust would likely never spot this cunningly disguised tunnel entrance.

I didn't hesitate, quickly ducking inside. Blinking to adjust my vision, I waited motionless until the drumbeat of my heart slowed. This was my chance, I had to be cautious.

Rapid footfalls scuffed on stone, echoing up the curving passage from deeper within. I froze, listening intently. Just one set of steps, moving with purpose. Friend or foe? I couldn't risk being caught unawares.

Taking a deep breath, I embraced the power of the Valti, feeling strength and perception heightening. My sword slid soundlessly from its sheath.

Whoever approached in the dark, I would be ready.

The flickering glow of a torch preceded the stranger around the bend. Illuminated in the wavering light was a face so familiar that I gasped in shock.

“Brother?” But no, this was not Tharon, though the resemblance stunned me for an instant. Before I could recover my wits, the torch swung violently toward my face.

I narrowly deflected the blazing brand, singeing my hair with the force of the blow. But it allowed the false Tharon the opening he needed to draw his own blade.

The imposter attacked with my brother's characteristic lack of discipline, immediately aiming a vicious swipe at my groin. I desperately parried the underhanded strike, my mind racing to analyze my enemy.

In close quarters, his swordplay matched Tharon's precisely. His features were near duplicates of the prince's, close enough to deceive most. But subtle details marked him as a fraud to my heightened senses.

Pressing his momentary advantage, the newcomer drove me back down the curved passageway. His sword wove and darted as I frantically worked to fend off each strike.

The guttering torch kept me constantly blinking and dodging its heat, preventing any counterattack. My earlier injuries throbbed in protest under the fresh onslaught. I was tired, and we both knew it.

With a desperate idea, I whipped my blade out recklessly, slicing off the burning end of the torch. It tumbled to the floor, plunging the tunnel into near darkness.

Now on more even footing, I slid into the shadows, using my senses to track my foe while concealed. From the sound of his steps, I could tell the lack of light distressed him.

“Afraid of the dark?” I taunted, smiling grimly as the bravado in his renewed attack quickly turned to frustration. In the blackness, his vision was useless while mine sharpened.

But he was not so easily goaded into folly. With probing steps and targeted strikes, he deftly tracked my position by sound. A risky gamble nearly took me through the ribs, forcing me to slide farther down the passageway.

“You're just an animal,” the fake snarled. “I know you, Prince Drax.”

I barked a harsh laugh, sidestepping another blind thrust. “Then defeating

me should be simple, if I'm just a beast. Come on!”

In truth, I could not lure him much deeper into unfamiliar blackness. It was time to end this charade. Silently, I stilled my breath, blending into the darkness.

When he foolhardily rushed forward, my sword was waiting to neatly impale him. Shock slackened his features as he collapsed to his knees. But with his dying exhalation came ominous words.

“Too late...too late...”

Too late? I felt no victory surveying my fallen foe—only dread at what new devilry was at work here. What urgent errand had this spy in half-brother's guise been bound on?

With closer examination, I confirmed the strong resemblance to Tharon. But the hidden belongings on his body raised only more questions. Dice, a concealed dagger, and a sealed letter tied around...a lock of Lita's sable hair.

Breaking the wax seal, I scanned the ransom note within, supposedly penned by my brother's hand. Such a foolish act would condemn Tharon, no matter the reason. None of it made sense.

But those mysteries would have to wait. Lita was here somewhere, and in dire jeopardy. That certainty drove me racing on into the benighted depths, trusting fate to guide my feet.

The sloping passage soon ended at a hidden door which opened into a maze of corridors. I crept toward voices drifting ahead, praying Lita's scent would lead me to her.

Two men, soldiers by their talk, stood over the unmistakable hole she had broken through a wall to escape. It was a near thing, but surprise allowed me to cut them down from behind before they could raise the alarm.

Now I had her trail—up the winding stairs, her floral perfume pulling me along like a hooked fish. At the top, my heart sank. Her path ended at a sheer drop with no way down but a perilous ledge.

Could I dare such a route, or would the stone crumble under me? But her fading scent gave no alternatives. I steeled myself to follow where she had gone so bravely before.

A flicker of motion above caught my eye—a wooden beam extended out over the precipice. And then a stab of fear lanced through our bonded souls, confirming Lita was somewhere up there, in mortal danger.

I would tear down this cursed fortress stone by stone to reach her. But the quickest way was back through the maze of halls, searching for stairs

upward.

Lita's terror spiked with each racing heartbeat. I strained every muscle, desperate to reach her in time.

## LITA

“It's simply called a drop,” Krall said, gesturing overhead to the wooden beam projecting out from the parapets. A tangled mass of ropes dangled from its end, which his men were busily working to untangle.

I peered over the edge and spotted a small wooden platform on the roof far below where the ropes originated. At Krall's prodding, I hesitantly stepped onto the rickety wooden slats.

With a loud groan and clatter of chains, the platform abruptly jerked upward, the ropes rising to encase me in a sort of flexible cage. I clutched at the swaying, creaking ropes uneasily as I ascended.

“You see,” Krall called down, “this mountain is prone to rockslides. With this beam, we can safely dislodge rubble to block the road whenever we want.”

I rose past the roofline, the dizzying drop reeling beneath me. High above, Krall leaned casually over the parapet, taking in my obvious fear.

“Oh good, you can see the mess down there. Looks like there's already a slide covering the switchbacks. No chance of rescue now.”

My stomach dropped as I took in the sheer mountain walls choked with debris far, far below. We were terribly high up on this craggy peak...

The platform jolted to an abrupt halt, leaving me suspended in midair. My pulse pounded as I called up to Krall, “Are you going to drop me?”

His answering bark of laughter echoed off the stone battlements. “No, that would be far too quick an end for our lovely captive. The queen devised a much more entertaining fate.”

Entertaining. I shuddered at the sinister implication—but Krall's attention shifted skyward. One of his men pointed upward excitedly.

“Here they come already!”

I followed the guard's gesture, spotting tiny dark dots wheeling lazily above in the brilliant blue sky. Before my eyes, they rapidly grew larger, resolving into the unmistakable shapes of broad-winged scavengers.

“You see,” Krall called with obvious relish, “these beasts usually feast only on carrion. But a live victim in the net provides a rare treat.”

Horror clawed at my throat as the first massive shadow swooped overhead. This close, its wicked hooked beak showed vividly, designed for dismembering flesh. And I was to be their next gruesome meal.

More hulking forms circled down from above as Krall and his men quickly withdrew into the tower keep. But not before I glimpsed the queen framed in a high window, gazing down intently to enjoy the show.

The first attacker dove straight at me, its stench preceding it. I barely managed to lurch aside in the swaying net, fumbling desperately for my hidden knife.

From the parapet, I heard a soldier warn, “She's armed herself! Should we retrieve the blade?” Krall only laughed louder.

“Let her keep it—it will make the spectacle last longer!”

The creatures grew bolder, the men forgotten in their lust for violence. When the next scavenger screamed down at me, I sank my short blade into its scraggly neck before it could snap through the ropes that caged me.

I gagged at the hot blood that splattered my face as the mortally wounded brute flapped heavily away. But already another took its place, eager to sample live flesh.

I couldn't keep this up for long. However wildly I slashed with my tiny knife, I was no match for these frenzied monsters. I had to get out of this deathtrap, no matter the risk.

Sawing desperately, I managed to sever one of the suspension lines. But before I could attack another, the platform suddenly dropped and swung me beneath the parapet edge.

Heart in my throat, I stared up into Krall's stunned face as he leaned over the parapet. And silhouetted behind him, a blessedly familiar broad-shouldered figure, fresh blood glistening on his bared sword.

“Drax!” I cried out, nearly dizzy with mingled relief and fear for my unexpected savior. Krall swore no rescue was possible, yet here Drax stood against all odds.

Snarling, Krall whirled to confront this new threat, his own blade flashing

free. "It's fine if you die now," Krall said. "The end will be the same."

Drax's answering roar sent a visible ripple through the ring of circling scavengers.

"Because you sent the message from Tharon?" Drax said, keeping his sword ready. "It wasn't received."

"My son—"

"No more." Drax shook his head.

With a shout, Krall hacked at Drax.

Drax managed to turn the sword aside and make his own stab.

Krall parried, thrusting again.

This time, Drax only barely avoided death. He turned sideways, leaping back. Krall ran past him.

But the queen's lover looked only at the winch. With a mighty hack, he cut the rope.

I screamed as my rope cage lurched. But I didn't drop. The rope from the windlass blew in the wind.

"You'll never swing her back before the scavengers finish her," Krall said.

Drax charged. "Bastard!"

But even though I saw the Valti, Drax's shoulders swelling, vibrating with unnatural strength, Krall easily blocked his strike.

He returned the attack, three strikes blurred with speed clanged off Drax's weapon. My mate was forced back by the ferocity.

He was tired, wounded. How long could he last?

I had to help him.

One of the ropes of my cage was already cut. If I severed another few, I could crawl out.

Looking down, I saw that the fall looked no less far.

Still, with the windlass line cut, how else could I get out of this thing?

Planning, I saw where to use my knife. Like my prison cell, if I made a hole I could just squeeze through, the whole thing wouldn't drop. Then I could climb the ropes on the outside of the cage.

Would it be suicide, or my only salvation?

## DRAX

**K**rall was good. Better than me. Far better. The raging power of the Valti was the only thing keeping me alive against his blistering assault.

I couldn't fail Lita. Even if I was utterly outmatched by this veteran swordsman. Krall knew it, too—he wisely kept his distance, wearing me down with precise strikes just out of reach instead of closing recklessly.

What could I do? I was no expert duelist. The best I could hope for was to weather the onslaught until he tired or made a mistake. Though in my condition, exhausted and injured, I wasn't sure I could outlast him. The general clearly had stamina to spare.

Krall came at me again, feinting at my eyes before dipping low. Only a last second lift of my guard saved me from losing my left leg at the knee—one of the fancy forms drilled into me by the castle sword masters.

From that high block, I managed to riposte, aiming for his now-exposed neck. But Krall was too fast, recovering to bat my counter aside and instantly lunging back in.

I barely turned the lightning quick stab with a clumsy parry. Krall flowed smoothly into his next series of strikes, driving me back under the blistering assault. Through our bond, I felt Lita's stark terror kindle.

Risking a glance away from my opponent, I saw her dangling from the ropes, having cut her way free of the scaffolding cage. But she was stranded there on the damaged support lines, unable to reach safety.

Whipping my attention back to Krall, I saw triumph flare in his eyes at my distraction. But somehow my stumble worked in my favor. My awkward recoil caused his next swing to go wide, opening a sliver of space.

I slashed desperately, my blade carving halfway through his left forearm

before he could skip clear. Krall stumbled away with a howl, pressing his spurting stump to his chest.

“Lita!” I shouted urgently, risking another glance upward. She climbed recklessly up the netting, making for the parapet. We were running out of time.

Enraged by pain, Krall came at me again heedless of defense. I barely turned aside the berserk thrust, though his blade tip raked along my ribs. The white fire of the cut almost dropped me.

But at last, the advantage was mine! Slamming a hand down on his wrist, I smashed the sword from his right hand. Bones cracked under my crushing grip.

Snarling, Krall's left hand whipped a dagger from his belt, slashing at my face. We would die together at this range.

His knife hand suddenly went limp and the blade clattered to the stones between us. Krall's knees folded gently and he toppled like a felled oak, Lita's bloody knife protruding from his back.

“I—” She gaped at Krall's body, horrified. I swept her into my arms, eyes raking the mountainside below.

“My brave, beautiful mate. But now more guards are coming, we have to move!” Already, I saw men clearing the rockfall from the road where my poor villart had plummeted.

Lita clutched at me with trembling hands. “The queen will kill us for this. She sent a ransom note in your brother's name—if we disappear, he'll be blamed!”

I exhaled harshly. “While my love for Tharon is slight, he will not be accused.” I shook my head at the tangled web Kiha had woven. “The message will never reach the castle. But before we worry about any of that, we must escape.”

The sun kissed the distant sea. Night came swiftly in these high places; we had to reach cover before full dark.

Lita touched my slashed face tenderly. “You're hurt badly.”

“I'll manage. Movement helps.” Taking her hand, I strode toward the tower door and the wooded slopes beyond. My limbs protested, but I locked my knees and schooled my face.

We crept past the outer buildings, giving the stables a wide berth. I longed to steal a pair of villarts, but the valuable mounts were all unsaddled. The delay would doom us.

We were nearly to the gatehouse when a shout rose from the guardhouse. “There! After them!”

I cursed vehemently. Two mounted soldiers charged across the bailey toward us. We wouldn't get ten yards on foot.

Unless...

“The small gate, beside the main portal—go!” I gave Lita a shove in that direction. “Get to the trees, I'll draw them off!”

As soon as she slipped through, I turned to wave my arms wildly at the riders, pulling their attention. With thunderous speed, they angled toward me, intent on their trampling quarry.

I fled toward the main gate and the beckoning forest beyond. But a glance back showed my tired legs insufficient—the powerful villarts rapidly closed the distance.

Perfect.

At the shadowed gateway, I leapt nimbly over the nearly invisible wire strung across my path. Without slowing, I hit the ground and rolled under the descending iron teeth just as they crashed down, crushing both riders under an avalanche of steel.

A heartbeat later, I stumbled to my feet, swaying with reaction. The grisly scene behind was rapidly cut off as the portcullis slammed into place. Darkness took me as the sun finally slipped below the ridgeline. But Lita was free. We won.

From the left came the thunder of new arrivals on the cleared road. No time for rest yet. I plunged into the trees, skirting the treacherous switchbacks. Somewhere above, Lita made her way down...

Her faint cry snapped me alert. I charged heedlessly up the wooded slope, bellowing her name. Had she run afoul of the queen's men, or a hidden snare?

“Here, down below!”

I followed her thin voice to a gap in the winding path, a single stone missing from the ancient stairs. In the pit below writhed a tangle of vines that seemed to quiver in anticipation. My heart clenched.

Dropping to my belly, I grabbed Lita's wrists just as her strength gave out. “They've trapped the whole mountain,” I grunted, heaving her up over the crumbling edge.

Her wide eyes flashed past me. “Drax, behind you!”

Before I could react, fiery pain speared through my back, straight into my heart. With a gagging gasp I collapsed, clutching at the wound. Manglethorn

—the toxic thorns left wounds that burned from within.

A chilling voice purred above me. “I've always let others do the bloody work. But for you, dear Drax, I'll make an exception.”

Queen Kiha's smiling visage swam into view as I thrashed weakly on the stones. “The poison is slow, but too painful to allow any heroic last stands.” Her laugh was like broken glass. “I should have done this years ago.”

Casually, she took hold of Lita's arm, idly inspecting her blade. “Now, what to do with you, little Frostling? A quick death? Or shall I offer you to the vines below?”

With viper speed, Lita whipped her hidden dagger up, forcing Kiha back a step. But the queen merely bared her teeth in a gruesome approximation of a smile.

“A fan of the knife, are you? Good. Everything else has gone to hell. Might as well make your death a fun time, you frail, pathetic *human*.”

## LITA

I killed a man. Krall. Stabbed him in the back while he fought my love.

Even knowing it saved Drax's life, my hands trembled, knees weak with shock. I didn't have time to process it—the act or the consequences.

But now there was no time for introspection. Drax was unmoving, his skin pale beneath the bruises and blood, his injuries echoing my own blood, slowing me down. I had to get him away from this cursed place, to a healer who could treat the unseen venom in his veins.

Kiha circled me like a jungle cat, matching my wary stance. Our blades flickered out in the gathering dusk, testing defenses. Could I bring myself to kill her as well? The cold hatred in the queen's eyes left little doubt she intended me dead.

“Krall was worth ten of you monsters,” Kiha said. Her smile held no warmth. “I'll honor him by killing you both.”

I shoved down a swell of shame. A warrior would feel no regret at an enemy fallen in fair combat. But the memory of my knife sliding traitorously between Krall's ribs made my stomach roil.

Kiha's smile turned feral, sensing weakness. “Notice I stab only from the front, girl.”

I steeled myself. “What poison did you use on Drax?” There had to be an antidote, some way to save him.

“Manglethorn,” she said, almost lazily twirling her blade. “Also called painfang. It lives up to the name—unimaginable agony until the mind finally breaks.” Her eyes glinted with cruel delight. “No recovery, no cure. He's as good as dead.”

Fury honed my concentration to a keen edge. I fainted, testing her

reactions. But my anger was unfocused, not the controlled rage of a true killer. Kiha easily parried, responding with a cut at my arm.

Knife fighting was more a contest of small wounds than plowing through defenses. I had to draw blood, wear her down. But the predatory queen was in her element; her greater size and experience gave her the advantage in hand to hand combat.

Our deadly dance stretched on as I desperately worked to fend off each strike. But my frantic blocks grew clumsy, strength fading. And all the while, my love lay suffering, each moment bringing him closer to insanity or death.

Through some wild swing, I managed to nick Kiha's hip, but she shrugged off the scratch. Pressing in, her blade darted at my eyes, my throat. I threw up hasty blocks, losing ground beneath her unrelenting assault.

The ringing blow to my temple was unexpected. Stars bursting across my vision, I staggered under her follow up kick to my gut. Gasping, I dropped my knife.

Sensing victory, Kiha closed in, teeth bared in a rictus grin. But I still had one hidden card left. As she raised her knife to finish me, I snatched my arm sheath free, whipping the curved dagger up and across her body.

Howling, the queen reeled away, clutching at the deep slash through her robes. Crimson seeped between her fingers. "Cheater!" she spat accusingly.

From somewhere beyond the trees, I heard approaching hoofbeats. Reinforcements coming, and I was tiring swiftly. But I held my ground between Kiha and my helpless mate. I had to end this quickly.

With a wild yell, Kiha came at me again, feinting and slashing relentlessly. I barely managed to fend off each strike, the knife growing slippery in my bloodied grip.

I stepped to block. But her war shout was only to throw me off my rhythm. Her blade seared over the back of my hand. Slippery with blood, I lost grip on the handle. She put the point to my neck, and grabbed my hair.

Over.

"Drop it, Mother."

Tharon?

"No. I need to finish this," she spat.

"Archers, take aim at the queen. If she doesn't comply, shoot her down."

And Ashur at Tharon's side?

Bow strings creaked taut.

"Stand down, my son. You don't know how tenuous your hold on the

throne is,” Kiha said, her eyes locked on mine.

“Archers ready?” Ashur said, his voice flat.

“What have you done to Drax?” Tharon demanded.

“Something you never had the stomach for,” the queen snarled.

“He’s poisoned,” I said, the knife pricking me as I spoke. “He needs a healer now.”

“Don't make me kill you, Mother,” Tharon said, voice tight. “I don't want to do that.”

“I do,” Ashur said, voice still without emotion. “She’s murdering an heir to the throne and has a knife to his mate’s throat.”

Tharon let out a long sigh.

At that sound, Kiha’s eyes flickered away from mine. She heard the resignation as well as I did. Backing away, she dropped the knife. Men surrounded her, binding her hands behind her.

“I definitely prefer to be the one binding,” she whispered.

Ashur was at Drax’s side as quickly as I was.

“She called it manglethorn, painfang,” I said.

His face was grim as he carefully withdrew the embedded thorn from Drax's back, flicking it into the writhing vines below. “A brutal way to die. It would be a mercy to end his suffering now.” He placed a gentle hand on Drax's brow.

“No!” My voice broke. “Please, we have to try!”

Ashur sighed heavily, but nodded to someone in the party. Priestess Vahnn slipped silently to us, placing a glowing hand on Drax's chest.

I clasped her arm desperately. “Vahnn, you healed him before. Please, there must be some way...”

She grasped my hands. “I can brew a treatment to draw out the poison. But it may take too long. The pain will drive him mad first.”

I blinked back tears, looking down at my love's tortured face. Unless... “What if I shared his pain? Lessened it?”

Ashur smiled sadly. “Always shouldering more pain than he deserves. He's not as strong as he believes.” He squeezed my shoulder. “But neither are you, little one.”

“At least I'll get to see both of you suffer.”

I ignored the queen's taunts.

“Take her into the keep. Don’t take your eyes off her,” Ashur ordered.

Before I slipped into a trance, I looked Tharon in the eye. “Your mother

isn't lying. There's someone you should see. A dead man in a secret passage from the ground."

"Don't listen to her Frostling tricks! She has shadow allies beneath the ground. You know the stories, Tharon!" Kiha said as they dragged her off.

Tharon didn't look her way.

"It won't be pleasant," I said. "But it will make you understand what they hoped for, I think."

"I've spent many winters here. I know the passageway," Tharon said. He turned his mount to ride around the keep.

Finally, I sank into deep thoughtlessness. Trying to mirror the state I was forced into at the temple, I felt the entry and exit of my breath.

Concentrating on only that.

I closed my eyes, reaching for Drax with my spirit. Please, let me help bear this.

But he recoiled from my questing thoughts. Along our bond flashed white-hot agony, and a desperate denial—he would not let this touch me.

"He resists to protect you," Vahnn said gently. "The only way is to persuade his deepest self, the primal spirit."

Of course—the Valti! Beneath the pain, I sensed it lingering. Summoning my courage, I opened myself fully. Take me, I can endure this.

The primal facet rushed into my mind, not gently. Our contact seared like a grasping flame. Yet I held firm.

And then anguish exploded through me. My every nerve caught fire, flesh slashed mercilessly.

It was all the pain I'd ever felt, combined in a single excruciating sensation.

Women knew suffering. Better than any man. Maybe I was no warrior, no courtier, no royal. But I could stand this.

Being with him changed me. Even if I couldn't live up to my own expectations, here was something no other could do for Drax.

Slashing, cutting, burning, crushing, I took all the Valti would give me and more. I felt the animal spirit comforted that at least some of his suffering abated.

It went on, as pain did, almost eternally.

Completely taken by it, I tried to live with it as best I could. How many days passed? How many nights?

Here, dab some in his wounds, Ashur. Pick any.

I sensed a voice more than heard it. Many hours passed before I heard the priestess again.

Some needs go in his blood.

How much more could I take? Still, I held fast as time slowly elapsed.

We need to get him to drink the remainder.

Relief!

Bit by bit, the clench of torment loosened.

Until at last, blessedly, the white-hot waves ebbed. The death grip on my soul eased as the poison leached away. In the quiet left behind, I drifted up toward wakefulness.

I expected to find myself in the palace healers' hall. But instead, I lay beneath a bruised sunset sky, surrounded by guards and villarts. Vahnn sat close by.

“Sorry for the delay. Rare herbs had to be found,” she explained. Delay? Mere moments seemed to have passed. “But the danger has lifted. He will recover.”

“Drax?” I turned to see him resting peacefully, the shadows and lines of pain erased from his face.

“The venom tormented him for some time,” Vahnn said. “But he is strong. And he had you to share the burden.” Her wrinkled face creased in a smile. “Well done, brave one.”

Leaning on Ashur's shoulder, I gingerly sat up. My body felt bruised and tender, though unmarked. Lingering echoes of the toxin's fire prickled just beneath my skin.

Ashur followed my gaze to the reddening sky. “Too late to return to the city. We'll have to camp here tonight.”

Despite everything, I huffed a weary laugh. “Shouldn't you be locked in the barracks now?”

He smiled slyly. “It took some time to convince Prince Tharon.” His face grew serious. “But for all his carefree facade, he's no fool.”

“Make a litter,” the priestess said to the soldiers. “Let's move Drax out of the cold.”

## DRAX

**D**ings and sprains were something of a relief as I rose from my pallet. Torches burned, revealing the great room of the keep. Lita lay next to me. Surrounding, soldiers snored on the floor.

What awakened me was Tharon.

He stood over me, staring, a hand on his sword grip.

“You saw Krall’s son,” I guessed.

Tharon blinked. He pulled an envelope from his vest. I saw his broken seal, the lock of Lita’s hair still pressed into the wax.

“Mother would have you kill me,” he said. “Justice would take you. I assume she wanted to rule as regent.”

“It might have avoided some awkward questions about your claim to the throne,” I said.

“There are only a few who know the secret.”

Was he threatening me? I wasn’t in any condition to fight. The only way he might take me on.

“There is only one who cares,” I said.

“She’ll be tossed into the oubliette for her crimes,” Tharon said. “Perhaps a fate worse than your poisoning.”

“People will say Kiha’s gone mad,” I said. “It would benefit you to augment that sentiment.”

“There will be talk regardless. Once Father dies—”

“You’ll wear the crown,” I said. “I’m nobody’s king, brother.”

“Mother says you protest too much. That none could resist the power of the throne.”

I tried to rise. Gave up. “You know me, Tharon. And you have a mind of

your own.”

He smiled sadly. “If it’s true about my parentage... Perhaps she expected me to be more of a warrior.”

“You have a mind of your own. Like I said.”

“Trying to talk me out of killing you while you’re helpless.”

“Nah. You’ve had plenty of chances. There’s probably no better quality in a king than mercy. Or wisdom.”

Tharon shook his head. “How am I wise?”

“You listened to Ashur. Who’s probably smarter than both of us.”

The silence stretched on.

“I want you to remember this moment,” he finally said. “The moment of my greatest stress, the point where I’ve lost all identity. I’m letting you live, despite your grave threat to me. But should you turn usurper—”

“You have the backing of the priestesses, my prince.”

Vahnn appeared out of the darkness. His eyes twitched her way before meeting mine again.

“I won’t bloody my hands. This you know. But there are others who follow me. Who would see me secure on the throne.”

Nodding, I said, “I’ll remember.”

He didn’t look satisfied with my answer. But he turned and vanished where the torchlight didn’t reach.

Beside me, Lita let out a held breath.

When I pulled back the covers, I saw her clutching her knife with both hands.

“My tiny protector,” I said.

“Are you mocking me?” She frowned.

“Not at all. None would defend me nearly as ferociously.”

Lita faced the priestess. “You would support Tharon?”

“Long has the Order known the true heir. But we admire your love of freedom too much to force reign upon you. Nearly as much as we fear your impulsiveness,” she said. “Healing is our business, not politics.”

DESPITE THE POTIONS and the Valti healing, I still ached as I rode beside Lita. Seeing her face brighten made me forget about my pain.

“So much to see!” she gasped.

This week, the market was in the north quadrant of Zashi. For some reason, this location attracted the most merchants. Even with frost on the leaves. Trees smoked with the sunlight.

“Oo, look at those bolts of fabric!”

Lita leaped off the villart. I grabbed up the reins before the beast could wander off and feed from some fruit merchant’s stall. Finding a hitching post, I joined her.

“Do you think Mistress Dowin could make me a dress from this? Maybe something simple?” Lita gushed, fingering a bolt of bright red fabric.

“I hope so. You would look ravishing in it,” I said, gently touching her back.

“You say that about every fabric.” She laughed.

“Because it’s true.” I shrugged. “How about some silk for under shifts?”

She elbowed me. “Degenerate.”

“You love it,” I whispered in her ear.

Leaving her smiling to herself, I wandered toward the leatherworkers’ stalls. I needed saddles for a long ride. Panniers. Smaller saddlebags.

Lita had begun to train again with Ashur. She also took riding lessons, both on villarts and the larger, more dangerous bagarts. She deserved a reward.

Together, we wandered toward the smell of grills and meat. Strange spices drew us as we walked the animals through the crowd. I recognized the aroma of Wandering Nation food. The greasy, well-spiced skewers of meat, mushrooms, and vegetables were my favorite.

“Food on a stick?” Lita smiled. “You sure know how to treat a girl, big spender.”

But I knew she loved it, too. I felt it through our bond. It became stronger than ever, through pain, through fear and trust, especially through our love, which grew equally powerful throughout the cold.

Signs of the warmth hung in the air, a balminess to the breeze, the cloudless green of the sky.

I hadn’t stopped at these stalls merely for their meat on a stick. Wandering Nation people made the best travel food. No more pemm for us.

Moving past other cooking stalls, through the shouting hawkers, the steady murmur of bargaining, we saw the produce stands ahead. We paused, watching a juggler play with fire. Lita oo’d every time it looked like the jester

was going to burn his face off.

Her reaction made me chuckle.

“We should get some plesples for the villarts. They’re in season, right?” she asked.

“We’ll have to see. If they are, we’ll need a bushel or so sent to the castle.”

“We do?” she asked. “Why?”

I lifted her chin. Kissed her. “It’s a surprise. You’ll see.”

“Plesple pie?” She grinned.

“Better.”

“You aren’t going to tell me, are you?” she asked into our kiss.

“Nope.” I let her mouth slide along mine, biting her lower lip.

Her hand squeezed my butt under my cloak. “Bet I can get it out of you.”

“Bet you can,” I said.

## LITA

“Lita, errors have corrupted the system. Why have you abandoned us? We are in danger.”

In the dim of the temple, I recognized Niam by her reddish hair, her thin frame. She shook me. I rose from the cot.

The other girls crowded close. Mila and Denna held low burning torches. Laren hugged her robe around her.

When had Laren been brought here?

“What’s the matter?” I said, reaching for my own robe.

My hair was roughly grabbed. I was thrown to the floor. Oorvlach Eilar hunched over me, threatening me with his cane. “You’ve thrown the temple out of harmony, selfish child!”

On the wall behind him, a panel lit up. Huge eyes gazed at me.

“You’ve led the outsiders to us.” I heard Branna’s monotone. “Error.”

“What have you done, Lita?” Laren cried.

“Error,” Niam shouted.

I screamed as Eilar’s cane swung down toward my face...

...and sat bolt upright in bed, throat raw. I pressed trembling hands over my galloping heart. Just a dream. No, a nightmare dredged up from the darkest memories of my ordeal at the temple.

“What’s wrong? What’s frightened you, my bound soul?” Strong arms encircled me from behind as Drax drew me back down into the mussed sheets.

I let out a shaky breath, focusing on the familiar textures and scents of our bedroom to ground myself. “A bad dream. I’m okay now.”

Drax pulled me close to share his warmth, nuzzling the nape of my neck.

“What darkness dares haunt your dreams? Together, we have braved far worse than shadows.”

His confidence made me smile. “Just old ghosts. They cannot touch me here with you.” I nestled into his strength, secure in our unbreakable bond.

Whatever vestiges of trauma lingered from my ordeal, Drax's love had largely healed those wounds. I would not surrender progress to bad dreams.

“You're shivering. Let me build up the fire.” Drax rolled out of bed and crossed the cold floorboards, giving me an enjoyable view of his sturdy backside. It made me smile.

It made me something else as well.

I rose as he returned. Then gasped. “Oh, look!”

Flinging open the shutters, I took in a view of the beach in the moonlight. Snow covered the sand. Dinva trees swayed, their high branches weighted with white. Beyond, the sea roiled red beneath the full moon.

“It's breathtaking,” I breathed. Drax came up behind me, wrapping me in his arms.

“Not as beautiful as my tiny mate,” he murmured, nuzzling below my ear as he swept aside my tousled hair. My sigh became a hum of pleasure.

“I thought you were admiring the view,” I said even as I tilted my head to allow him freer access down the curve of my neck.

“The only view that concerns me is right here.” In one smooth motion, Drax swept me up and carried me back to our disheveled nest.

“I've wanted you all to myself for so long,” he said, kissing down my body.

Fisting his hair, I guided him more quickly. I needed his love to drive away my nightmares.

After the bonding ceremony, I thought our heat would diminish.

It only grew hotter.

He shoved my legs apart.

“I love it here. Love being with you here,” I moaned as he kissed my inner thighs.

He surprised me with a trip to the abandoned fishing village. We thought the weather warmed, but apparently the cold still held on.

Better for snuggling.

Better for—

“Ohhh! Yes!”

My back arched automatically, my fists in his beautiful blue hair urging

him on.

His tongue rhythmically circled my clit until I became sopping wet.

Little orgasms burst over me. I ground my teeth with pleasure. "Don't stop," I begged.

He continued on, tongue tip relentless until more bliss shuddered through me. I groaned and kicked, a slave to the sensation.

When he lifted his wet face, the Valti stared at me with hunger.

"I know what you want, little girl," he growled.

The glow of his eyes, the sharpness of his fangs, aroused me further. "I want you. All of you."

With my fists still in his hair, I pulled him until he was above me. Then, I wrestled him onto his back.

"Kiss me," I begged, yanking his head closer.

When I did, I felt his rock-hard cock against my pussy. He let out a long, low moan.

His hands squeezed and massaged my breasts. The claws tingled as they raked my soft flesh. I felt them trail down my sides, over my hips, down my legs. Goosebumps rose in the claws' wake. I shivered with the sensation.

"Please, my love. Don't be gentle," I said in his pointed ear.

As he bit my nipples, I suppressed the urge to cry out. In my head, I felt his growing need as he felt mine.

Our time together ignited bravery in me. Hand in hand, a feral side of me awakened. Especially during our love making.

His teeth savaged me. Claws raked my ass.

Our connection, loving and savage, left us frequently, satisfyingly, bruised and clawed in the afterglow.

With a single motion, I angled my wet folds against his throbbing head to take all of him. The sweet pressure, a twang of delicious pain, and I enveloped him fully.

He growled into my chest at the sudden sensation.

Instantly, we coupled like predators in a dangerous jungle. He knew what I wanted. Gave it to me forcefully.

I let out a scream as he rammed me. Gripping his arms, I rode him, each powerful thrust threatening to buck me off.

"Come in me!" My words were barely understandable under my fierce growl.

I clenched his big cock as he bucked against me, my own pleasure

reaching a tipping point.

He drove on, not holding back.

In seconds, we came together, our howls harmonious.

I was certain that birds took flight and prey species fled at the sound of it.

Strong arms cradled me. Our kisses became softer. I didn't let him slip out of me yet, enjoying the heat of him.

It took some time for us to catch our breath.

After a while, he hugged me harder. "You're as much Valti as I."

I kissed his cheek, his ear. Pushed a tangle of hair from his forehead. "The priestesses say a shared burden is easier to bear. Although at this moment, I wouldn't call your Valti a burden."

He chuckled, voice still inhumanly deep. "No, I wouldn't, either."

Gentle kisses turned firmer, longer. I felt him harden inside me again.

"Round two?" I gasped.

"I was about to throw you face down on the bed and take you," he rasped.

I smiled. "Yeah, I know."

Waking in his arms, I pulled the blankets over us. The house was chilly, the fire died back to coals. Given the cold hanging on, I was glad we had provisioned for this trip.

I heard the snort of our bagarts in the stable. Soon, we'd have to feed them before they broke out of their stalls and ate each other.

Rising was the last thing I wanted to do. Cradled in warmth, the soft sounds of Drax's breathing, the seep of early morning light through the shutters—was there anything better than this?

Stirring, stretching, Drax's multicolored eyes met mine with a smile.

"How long can we stay?" I asked. Did I really want to know?

"Father seems to be much healthier since they tossed his wife into the oubliette. I hear he's even visiting the royal harem—what's left of it. There's no need for us in Zashi. I think a moon at least. Maybe two moons if nobody bothers us."

I sighed contentedly at the thought of uninterrupted weeks alone together. "Let's hope Zashi remains boring for as long as possible then."

Drax idly twined a lock of my hair around his finger. "You won't miss the comforts of court? The fine clothes and cushy beds?" He gave me a sly look. "Though I do so enjoy removing those courtly garments from your exquisite form."

I laughed. "I made sure to pack more of the underpinnings you're so fond

of than voluminous court dresses. And some hose you like...”

Drax growled playfully and pulled me in for a lingering kiss. “Insatiable temptress. I’ve created a monster, I fear.”

I nipped his chin in reproach. “If anyone drove whom to lust, you debauched my innocence first, you wicked prince.”

Our tender wrestling was interrupted by the bagarts loudly announcing their displeasure at being kept waiting. I collapsed into helpless laughter.

“Duty calls, it seems. They’re worse than court gossips!” Reluctantly, I slid from Drax’s arms to find my clothes.

Once the beasts were placated with breakfast, I took in the ethereal beauty of the snow-mantled village. It was a view I would never tire of. Drax came up behind me, wrapping me in his strong embrace.

“I love you, my tiny monster,” he whispered fondly, his breath warm on my cheek.

“And I love you, my wild beast.” I turned my face up expectantly.

Obligingly he kissed me, then drew back, his expression serious. “I’ll be with you forever, Lita. Here or the castle, it matters not—you are my home. You’re everything I’ll ever want or need.”

My vision swam at the quiet fervor in his words. I clutched the crude necklace he gifted me, nestled secretly beneath my cloak over my heart. “And you’re everything to me, Drax. I’m devoted to you only, my mate, my husband.” I rose on tiptoes to kiss him again.

We held each other close in the falling snow, serene in the knowledge that our true refuge was not in any walls or finery, but here in each other’s arms.

THANKS so much for joining me on this new adventure! I have lots of fun stories planned... Well, fun for us, probably a little tense for our heroines and their mates. But I’ll make it up to them :)

WANT to see Lita and Drax’s wedding day? *Really* want to see their wedding night? **[Click here for the bonus chapter!](#)**

AND UP NEXT, Ashur's story! [Click here to order](#), or keep reading for a sneak peak.

XOXO,

Elin

## SNEAK PEEK OF ALIEN HUNTER'S FATED MATE

**M**ila

I LAY under a structure like a metal mushroom, my hands squishing through the stuff that would be gills.

The Tomb had provided instructions, and I followed.

Small nubs were hidden in the squish of the under parts. Rough ones needed to be removed. I replaced them with smooth ones from a bucket.

On the other side, Denna, the other temple girl, did the same.

The work was reminiscent of cleaning fish. Cold and slimy. Different stink. *Eew.*

But the instructions in my head could not be ignored.

“You’ve noticed that things are getting weirder in the temple?” I asked Denna.

“It’s nothing but strange in here.” Denna turned her head, spitting and swiping at her face. A drop of goo landed on her.

We both sat up. The curved top of the device lit with blinking lights. Bright without fire. Smooth squares like ice without chill scrolled with unknown symbols.

“Is it working now?” I had no idea about what anything in the temple did.

Denna still swiped at her face. She hiked her shoulders. “It’s blinking now.”

I studied the hidden thoughts imparted by the Tomb. No other instructions followed.

“You don’t see how things have changed?” I asked.

“Since lightning struck the temple?” Denna said. “Since that temple girl just walked off?”

“Lita,” I remembered. “There is only one left from last five.”

Every year, five girls were given to service in the temple. I had drawn my lot two years before. Between skinning and tanning hides or shoving smooth bits in a mushroom machine, I couldn’t decide if one life was better than the other.

Denna was the last survivor of her five, her lot drawn the year after mine.

The latest sacrifice was spending a lot of time in the Tomb. We hadn’t met her yet. Or maybe she couldn’t learn to learn. The temple had other uses for girls.

I turned my mind from that thought.

Where the other girls ended up—the idea brought a chill. We were lashed with firewhips if we enquired.

“How could she just walk away?” I asked.

“She put on her robe and departed,” Denna said. “Simple as that.”

“Is it?” I asked. “Could we do the same?”

Denna’s lips disappeared, her eyes twitching toward the corridor.

“Oh, don’t panic, Denna. I’m not going anywhere. Where would I go?”

In truth, there was a whole world out there. As a girl, I had roamed the woods that rimmed Infinity Ring. If I were discovered, it was the switch for me. It didn’t keep me from wondering what lay beyond the ringed city of Terr and the forested boundaries.

It wasn’t something I admitted out loud much. Some would find such thoughts less than sane.

“Don’t even consider it. Just think of Branna,” she said.

I shivered. I didn’t know what happened to Branna, but her voice now came out of windows in the inner temple walls. Spooky.

The two of us stared at the unknowable mushroom machine. Blinking lights and windows were near mesmerizing. “We’ve never finished maintenance early before,” I said. “It’s too soon for supper.”

“I’ve got gray goo on my robe,” Denna held up a smeared sleeve. “There may be fresh clothes in the cells.”

We headed into the corridor to the spiral stairs. The temple was the tallest building, its three towers rising high above the center of Terr. It had many more floors than the eight rings of the city. We worked below ground level

today.

After rising a few floors, we reached the level of our cell.

Five rough beds with straw mattresses, a basin in the corner, a curtain over the garderobe chamber, high windows, and a single shelf comprised our living quarters.

While I had never seen it move, the shelf held fresh clothing for us once a week. Like magic. But there was no magic to be had currently.

“Gods be damned, I’m going to smell like gray goo for days,” Denna moaned.

“Maybe you can rinse it off in the—”

I was interrupted by footfalls. A dragging sound.

Three figures entered the cell. Father Zarak and Father Aronn carried a limp girl between them. Without ceremony, they dumped her naked form on a cot.

I saw fresh firewhip marks across her torso. My arms itched, the similar scars there responding sympathetically.

“Who is she, Fathers?” Denna asked.

The priests wore deep hoods. I’d never seen their faces. Only their whips, and the pleasure they tried to hide while using those weapons.

“Laren,” was all Zarak said.

Then the men turned and walked off.

“Always a friendly bunch,” Denna said under her breath.

I went to the bed, covering the new girl. She was the last of the five, though it had taken months to indoctrinate her to the Tomb. Some girls didn’t survive. I had almost forgotten there was a girl remaining.

She had waves of deep brown hair, pale skin, pretty features.

I felt sorry for her. Then wiped that emotion from my brain. It was pointless.

“Denna. Stay with the new one.”

I spun toward the door.

Niam, the Oracle, stood there, her usual silent approach startling me. Her presence was rarely a good omen.

“Of course, Oracle,” Denna said, but tossed me raised eyebrows and a downturned mouth.

“Come,” Niam said to me. She turned without seeing if I followed.

“I was just in the Tomb!” I whispered to Denna.

She held her hands up. What was there to do?

The Tomb was where instructions, knowledge, repair information was given to us. It was a grave-sized hole in the floor filled with warm, salty water. A huge stone slab moved to cover it, creating utter darkness.

Cut off from sensation, on the brink of madness, the priests could then violate the brain.

In my years of service, I had learned to attain the learning trance before the visions started. But not completely. Strange faces appeared in the blackness. I felt a call to my heart, a melancholy beckoning.

It was something I didn't understand. Definitely something to ignore.

But being familiar with the Tomb did not make it any less unpleasant.

When I turned toward the stairs to the first level, I saw no sign of the Oracle.

"Here."

I faced the other way, seeing her at the far intersection of the corridor. She vanished around the corner.

Hastening, I followed down the pale stone hall. Windows without view studded the rock at regular intervals. Each glowed and beeped as I passed.

Again, I didn't see the Oracle. As I moved down the hall, I was grabbed from behind.

Yanked into a room I'd never seen before, Niam gripped my shoulders.

I thought it was to steady me.

"Your physical presence is confirmed," she said. Then her hand touched a dull metal pad. A door slid closed behind me. It looked like a seamless part of the wall.

It wasn't my place to ask questions.

Niam had white, freckled skin, though the pallor indicated she'd never seen the sun. A whisp of flaming red hair revealed itself from under her hood. I could see she was painfully thin, even beneath the shapeless white robe.

Her eyes took a moment to focus on mine.

"A task," she said.

"I've only just received the Tomb," I said, hoping I wouldn't be punished for my insolence. My whining.

"There." She pointed at a tall, narrow table with a metal box on top.

I walked over to it. At my touch, the lid of the box dilated open. Wanting to leap back from it, my eye caught a gleaming object within. Tentatively, I withdrew a necklace.

It bore a segmented chain, the pendant gleaming with a mirror polish.

When I touched the bauble, hidden lights glowed to life.

“You have explored beyond the borders of Infinity Ring.”

It wasn't a question.

Would I be punished for it? We were alone. The Oracle carried no whip.

“Into the woods, Oracle. When I was a girl. I know it's forbidden.”

Infinity Ring was a euphemism for “outside,” as in beyond the ringed city walls. Flat farmland spread for miles outside Terr, the hem of trees a distant, dark line. But despite the idea that the land went on forever, only the bravest woodsman would enter those distant trees.

Some did not return.

I had seen evidence of the monsters that dwelled beyond civilized lands.

All citizens of Terr knew not to stray.

“You will go beyond the woods.”

I gaped at Niam's words. “Beyond?”

Above the table was a control I hadn't seen. Niam touched it, revealing a square window. Within the glass, a vision appeared.

It stood at an impossible slant, unbalanced, ready to tip over. Vaguely egg-shaped, there were intricate twists to the smooth surface.

Niam took the necklace from my hand, looping it around my neck. “The tracker will lead you to it. Find the artifact, Mila. That is your task.”

“Find it? Out in the wilderness? And then what?” I asked.

The Oracle's eyes went distant. “Error,” she said.

Uh oh. This was part of the strangeness since the lightning strike. Niam, who was already more like a temple machine than a girl, kept having these fits.

“Will I have access to supplies?”

“Calculating,” Niam said.

“When should I leave? Tonight?”

“Error. Affirmative.” Niam stared into space. Then her eyes met mine again. “Go quickly. And do not let the priests learn of your task.”

“Don't—”

The Oracle pressed the panel, opening the door. She pushed me out. “Go.”

I walked back into the corridor. “What do I do when I find it?”

“You will be found,” Niam said before the door slid fully shut.

## ASHUR

I still thought my cousin, Tharon, next for the throne, was playing some joke, only amusing to him. It wouldn't be the first time.

Murbai honked, twisting her antlers. Dropping the reins, I let her have her head.

Maybe my bagart knew the way to go. Gods knew I sure didn't.

Sent as a spy to these southern dry woods beyond the Canyonlands to observe...

Nothing. No one. The dry forest was empty of settlements, or people. Only monsters of notable size and disagreeable flavor wandered this part of Ryhn. That, and the spring weather had brought tangle vines to life.

They swiped at me from time to time, thorny branches dripping with sleep-inducing poison meant to turn me into future fertilizer for the plants.

Monsters of notable size and tangle vines must be favored by the gods, there were so many of them.

I hadn't even seen a brigand, which these lands were supposedly haunted by, since finding my way from the canyons. Why had the prince sent me?

Except it felt like I'd been here before. Not in dreams. More than a sense of *déjà vu*.

My pulse raced for no reason. Anticipation built as I passed into new areas. Yearning. But for what?

At the back of my mind, a shape danced into awareness. Female. Both familiar and unknown.

As I rode, I saw it through the trees. It made me gasp in recognition. At first, three blue spires above the foliage. Reaching thinning woods before a broad plane, I saw steel walls.

Round steel walls in rings telescoping upward.

The city was Terr, I knew, from my other cousin's mate. An alien place filled with her kind.

Though I'd only met one of her kind—her—I wondered if the rest of the denizens were as attractive.

And as pale as Frostlings.

Yearning and anticipation lived behind those walls. I knew it with certainty. But how?

I needed to know more than my Shakai senses would tell me. Dangers likely lingered close to the steel walls.

Breathing deeply, I sought the inner beast. It was like gently sliding a hand into a spiked gauntlet, summoning its senses without waking the animal.

Color fled my vision. The surrounding forest let loose a foreign song. Breezes flooded my scent with information.

Here were people, not Shakai, but...

What did Lita call herself?

Human. With their own smell.

Freshly turned soil, blooms, plants breaking ground, manure—the smells of farming; tannins, oils, charred wood, the tang of worked steel, the stink of refuse pits—the smells of civilization.

“What am I supposed to do with this?” I asked aloud.

Within me, I felt my savage side stir. Another scent. Familiar, and gently tugging at my chest.

The other side of me dragged my eyes from the alien city. And back into the woods. For the moment, I remained gentle, not fighting the instincts of my Valti.

But at the slightest hint that the animal might take over my consciousness, I would rein it in, hard.

I followed the strange and familiar scent. How did I know it? From a dream, mayhap.

Near the cleared fields, I spotted signs of activity. Bright wood freshly cut. A drag trail of loaded sledges. Ruts of carts. Fuel for the circular city.

Deeper in, such signs vanished. It was as if the dwellers of the city feared venturing beyond their tamed fields.

Not that I blamed them. Plenty of danger lurked in the deep wood.

My legs pressed the sides of the bagart, not of my own will. The mount picked up her hooves.

That scent—I couldn't ignore it. It grew stronger as we left behind a sledge trail.

Here, the land stepped and sloped down to my right. Water rushed, out of sight behind the leaves. The Valti caught the smell of it.

Water wasn't the source of my dark side's urgency.

Descending, Murbai picked her way through muddy, loose ground. In a few moments, we reached a narrow river. Without my guidance, the animal moved to the bank to drink.

Looking around, I dismounted, gripping the hilt of my sword. Yet nothing stirred, save the breeze.

So where was that scent coming from?

I filled my waterskin near a low waterfall. Drank half of it, and filled it again. All the while my eyes took in the forest.

“Some help your senses are, Valti,” I said.

That undeniable scent hung in the air, so close it drove me to madness. Madness was a place best not visited. I withdrew from my animal self.

This time, the Valti did not fight me for control. I wandered uphill from the river. It had to be here somewhere.

Still—where was it?

Where was...

*She?*

Fruit!

Even without brute senses, I could smell the sweet tang. There, just up from the bank, a leather pack. Something that looked like golden plesples had rolled free. I grabbed one and took a bite.

Very much like plesple.

Murbai nickered and hooted at me. I grabbed another, swinging my arm to indicate a toss. I threw it underhand. She caught the fruit, devouring it messily with her sharp teeth.

Searching the pack, I found a tinderbox, a candle, some kind of bread rolled in leaves. A waterskin. No weapon?

Well, that might be a reason that the pack survived its owner.

There was no suitable place to camp. And no footprints. So where had this pack—

My heart leaped. A pale limb, dangling. the pale garment that it stuck out of. Up in a tree, a figure lay over a branch.

Studying the area above, I saw what must have happened. Walking in the night, you might miss the ground suddenly dropping away.

I climbed the tree. Studied the pale, shapely leg, the hard travel boot. The hood of a robe had fallen over the head, but I still saw a spill of ink-black hair.

Like a Frostling's.

Just to make sure, I touched her leg, felt the warmth. A pulse. With a gentle hand, I explored for broken bones.

She was so soft.

I was distracted.

Then, as I carefully lifted her from her perch, her scent fully roiled into

my nose.

Inside, the Valti gave a distant roar. It almost sounded triumphant.

But I tamped down my blacker heart. In order to get her out of the tree, I would need to focus.

Pulling back the hood, I saw that her jaw was colored with a rainbow of bruises. She'd knocked herself unconscious during the fall.

Lifting her from the branch, I heaved her over my shoulder. Climbed down. Patted myself on the back for not falling or dropping my prize.

As I carried her to Murbai, her hood dropped away.

My heart nearly stopped.

I'd dreamed of this girl. I thought her pallor, the tarry black of her hair, just imaginary. But she was real. Her weight more present than her maddening scent.

Delicate, soft features gave my heart a stab. Her nose was too large, and must have been broken at some time. Her lips were far too wide, too full. Bruised chin too prominent. Lashes black and ashen lay against the deathly white curve of her cheek.

"Beautiful," I whispered aloud.

Placing her gently in a drift of leaves, I looked up at Murbai. "Watch over her. And don't eat her."

She snorted in displeasure. Bagarts, though omnivorous, tended to lean toward meat eating.

I hurried over for her pack and put the spilled plesples back, then heaved her and her belongings up onto the saddle. I got behind her.

"Where are we going?" I asked no one.

Taking the reins, I urged Murbai back up the ravine. Once at the top, I had few options.

I should probably take her to that city. Maybe leave her near the gate. Hopefully someone would find her before it rained or something.

Or I could ride until I found a place to camp. Maybe tend her wounds if I could.

But her animal magnetism left me no options, really.

I had never seen her before. Didn't know her name. Hadn't heard her speak.

But my heart spoke truly.

This was my mate.

Alien, pale as the legendary creatures who haunted Shakai lore, I felt as

drawn to her as a hatchling bridil to its mother. Was this part of her dark magic? Did it matter?

I was smitten.

Damn my cousin.

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## ALSO BY ELIN WYN

I've got a few series out! All of these are completed, so feel free to dive in and enjoy!

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### **He was unexpected.**

No.

Our ship getting blown up was unexpected.

Crashing on a planet filled with murder-goats was unexpected.

Being rescued by a copper skinned, winged hunk with golden eyes and not wearing much more than a leather kilt and a weapon harness was so freaking miraculous that I wondered if I'd actually fallen off that cliff.

This was just some sort of hallucination to keep my mind busy before I died, right?

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As secrets unravel and enemies draw nearer, Adena may be the key to understanding the truth of Crucible.

Can a wounded healer and an embittered soldier come to trust each other in time to forge a new beginning for them for both?

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**I'm on the hunt for my bounty, not my mate.**

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When the delectable human female is thrown into my path, I can't help but want to protect her.

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Taste her.

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**He shattered her world. Can she trust him with her heart?**

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For Jeneva, it's just another day trying to survive in the jungles of Ankau.

Until the sky ripped open, and the true monsters came through.

Now her world is under attack, and the only place of safety may be at the side of a rock-hard scaled alien.

But he's filled with secrets - how can she trust him?

Vrehx cares for nothing other than the destruction of the Xathi hordes who burned his home and killed his family.

But when a weapons test goes horribly wrong, the battle spills over to an uncharted world.

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The thought makes her body tingle with dread-or is it heat?

Mercenary Davien has one focus: do whatever is necessary to get the credits to get off this backwater mining colony and back into space. The last thing he wants is a smart-mouthed thief - even if she does have the clue he needs to hunt down whoever attacked the floating lab he and his created brothers called home.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I love old movies – *To Catch a Thief*, *Notorious*, *All About Eve* — and anything with Katherine Hepburn in it. Clever, elegant people doing clever, elegant things.

I'm a hopeless romantic.

And I love science fiction and the promise of space.

So it makes perfect sense to me to try to merge all of those loves into a new science fiction world, where dashing heroes and lovely ladies have adventures, get into trouble, and find their true love in the stars!

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