



ALIEN MASK

Fated Mates of the Sea Sand Warlords

URSA DAX

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NOTICES



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ALIEN MASK



Fated Mates of the Sea Sand Warlords
Book Twelve
By Ursa Dax



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Thank you, as always, to all my readers and new friends on this journey.
Thank you to my partner and parents for their unending support.



TRIGGER WARNINGS



CONTAINS BATTLE SCENES, WEAPONS, INJURIES, BLOOD, AND SUTURING ON PAGE. MENTIONS OF POISON. PARENTAL DEATHS AND RELATED TRAUMA. ABDUCTION OF THE HEROINE, BOTH BY THE HERO AND BY OTHER PARTIES. INHUMAN ALIEN HERO.



CHAPTER ONE

Priya



Zaphrinax never failed to dump one catastrophe after another on our heads. This new territory was no exception. But at least the copper-gold desert of the Sea Sands was familiar in its dangers. Zeelk and krixel and heat. Even the Death Plains, with the unseen quicksand pits and invisible paths, felt somewhat safe now that I had mapped it all out.

But this new land? Beyond the Death Plains, beyond the spiked fields of ablik?

We had no bloody clue what we were up against.

We'd been in these foreign plains, so vivid and blue with their odd silver mushroom trees, less than a day before chaos descended.

And it literally descended. Slicing through the air in the shape of three huge winged creatures, each commanded by a solitary rider.

"Into the tent!" Varrow snarled at Camille, his mate and my good friend. His one arm drew a weapon, slashing it through the air as he sprinted from our little camp area. Our tents had been erected, all safe and cozy, in a cluster of the bonkers silver mushrooms that bloomed as high as trees did back home.

But as Varrow; followed by Gahn Razek; the other Sea Sand warriors Oxriel, Vaxilkai, Bariok, and Dalk; and the Bitter Sea warrior Kohka; plunged out of the camp to face this new enemy, I realized that the sense of safety provided by the plants had been an illusion.

"Shit, they have arrows!" Jocelyn cried, her eyes wide as she scanned the sky. A horrible screech split the night, making me flinch, and my gaze followed hers. In the desperate whirl of dark wings on an even darker sky, I could make out the twangs of bows, followed by the flashes of arrows.

My heart rammed in my chest, my breath burning. Outside the grove of mushroom plants, I heard Gahn Razek, Jocelyn's mate, trying to call up a message to the riders.

"We are here to speak to your Gahn in peace!"

It was why we'd come all the way out here. To find the life signs we'd seen on the scanners back at our base. To try to expand our alliance and make peace with whichever warriors we could find before the Earth forces came back to blow everything to hell.

But these new warriors didn't seem to care about our plans for peace. Gahn Razek's message did nothing to quell the rain of arrows. I watched, frozen and shaking, as the warriors we'd come with – men who'd become my friends over the weeks of travelling together, knocked the arrows aside with their deadly blades.

But how long can they keep that up?

We had the advantage of numbers – six Sea Sand aliens and one massive Bitter Sea lizard alien to take on these enemies. But the opposing side had, presumably, home advantage, not to mention the fact they were flying around on massive feathery alien things and raining down arrows like it was going out of fucking style.

"We need to take shelter," Jocelyn said, her voice fraught with tension. But even as she said it, her body seemed to completely disobey her words. She stepped forward, towards the fray, not away from it, her eyes glued to Razek's back. Camille, I suddenly noticed, was doing the same, ignoring her mate's rather prudent earlier command to get into the tent.

These girls are mad.

Mad in love, but mad all the same.

Since I had no buff alien boyfriend out there, and I was therefore the only one with half a brain currently in my head, I'd have to be the one to get this situation under control. I didn't want any of the men we'd come with to get hurt – I cared about all of them. But I also recognized the fact that we three puny humans had absolutely nothing to offer in a battle like this. At best, we'd get in the way. At worst, we'd cause someone else's death or our own.

"Come on!" I shouted, shaken from my own frozen fear by the thoughts of my two friends in danger. I grasped Jocelyn's arm in my left hand, squeezing her forearm tightly. Her head whipped towards me, her eyes flashing from where I held her arm to my face. She took a harsh breath and then nodded gravely.

I was about to reach for Camille, too. But something made me stop. Made us all stop and stare.

One of the huge winged beasts had landed just a few metres beyond the mushrooms that encircled us. Its rider leapt to the ground with powerful ease

and stalked towards us.

I was too terrified to scream. I couldn't move. Now, it was Jocelyn's turn to pull at my arm, breaking the spell of terror that locked my limbs. Together, we stumbled backwards, further into the shadowy grove of mushroom plants. A small spark of relief warmed me when I saw that Camille was retreating with us, moving inwards and away from the approaching warrior.

But that little spark was extinguished quickly.

There was nowhere to hide and nowhere to run. That warrior would catch us. Even if we ran for all we were worth, he would reach us barely moving at a jog. He looked to be similarly built to the Sea Sand men. Which meant he was seven feet of long-legged, vicious muscle.

But as soon as he entered into the cluster of mushrooms, he collapsed forward. I heard Camille gasp from nearby as her mate Varrow became visible on top of the fallen warrior, yanking a blade out from where he'd lodged it in the warrior's back.

Varrow may have only had one arm, but the bloke was brutal. And by the way his eyes, feral with protective need, kept flashing to Camille nearby, I knew the other guy didn't stand a chance as they fought.

But there are still two more of them. They could still come for us.

They could find the...

"Shit! The maps!" The words exploded from my mouth. I tore away from Jocelyn, sprinting for my tent. I'd been making detailed, careful maps of every step of the journey we'd taken over the Sea Sands and Death Plains. If one of these warriors found them...

It would lead them straight to our settlement.

That horrifying thought was a shot of straight adrenaline through my body.

We didn't know exactly how many warriors were out here. If they wanted to attack, the Sea Sand and Bitter Sea men back at the Cliffs of Uruzai would probably be able to hold their own in an attack.

But there were women there, too. Children. And many of my human friends were now pregnant – Cece, Theresa, Melanie, Serena, and Zoey – all waiting to start a strange and hopeful chapter of their lives, fostering tiny new futures inside them.

If the people in this territory meant us harm, then there was no way I wanted them anywhere near my friends.

I snatched my backpack from just inside the entrance to my tent, clutching fiercely at the canvas fabric straps. I held the whole thing tightly against my chest as I stood and whirled, knowing all the maps I'd created were kept safe in a folder inside.

But now what?

Hide them? Destroy them?

We'd skipped making a fire tonight out of an abundance of caution, and I cursed that fact now. Clearly, we'd been found by these attacking warriors, fire or not. And now, I had no blaze to chuck the maps into.

I took a few frantic steps forward. I could tell panic was sawing away at my ability to reason and form a plan of action. But I couldn't do anything about it.

And it wouldn't have mattered anyway.

Because the next breath I took was crushed out of me as a massive muscled arm caught me about the waist. It was all I could do to gasp wildly and hold tight to my pack as the ground whooshed downward away from my feet.

No. The ground wasn't moving. *I was.*

The sky that had been above me was now all around me. I choked out a scream as my stomach jolted. My bum slammed painfully against the solid curve of the flying bird alien's spine, its wings beating out a mighty rhythm on either side. Like the irkdu the Sea Sand people used, this huge bird creature had dozens of centipede-like legs. Those legs curled inward under its body as it flew.

Yes, flew. With me. On its bloody back.

Frantically holding tight to my pack, as if that would somehow keep me from falling to my death, I craned my head back to get a glimpse of the enemy warrior who'd snatched me.

I swallowed another scream, shocked by the sight of him.

White bone, gleaming silver under the moonlight, encased most of his face. Two horns curved up and away from the top, piercing the night air. The only part of his face visible beneath the skull he wore was a mouth set in a grim line and a hard jaw. The shape of the bone mask, and the angle I looked at him from below, meant I couldn't see his eyes.

"Let me down!" I cried, finally finding my voice in the insanity of the situation. I promptly lost it again when the alien bird swooped downward, making my guts lurch. I realized the man's arm was still locked around my

waist, holding me steady. My back was pressed to the broad expanse of his chest. The fabric of my jacket crinkled as I tried to wiggle away from him. Not too much, though. I wasn't crazy. A quick glance down told me that breaking out of this guy's grip would be a death sentence.

Skull Boy didn't answer me.

Dread sank in my chest as I noticed the sounds of battle had completely disappeared. All I could hear now was my own ragged breathing, the beating of the bird creature's wings, and the night air rushing past. The cold wind made my eyes water, and I blinked viciously, trying to get a sense of where we were now and where we were going.

But it was impossible. The asteroid ring and stars above provided a shockingly decent amount of light, but the landscape was moving too quickly beneath us to make sense of. Like a bolt of black and blue sari silk being yanked by the practised hand of a seamstress, it rippled and slid, its landmarks zipping out of sight below us almost as soon as they appeared.

The only constant was the range of mountains ahead.

And the fact that I'd now left all my friends, and everything I'd known on this planet, far behind.



CHAPTER TWO

Lerokan



A few moments earlier...

The Vrika had come for me once again.

I stood, dragging the back of my hand across my mouth, wiping away the last remnants of my evening meal. I stared out from behind the bone confines of my mask, the one Gahn Errok had thrust down over my face the day he'd cast me out of the mountains of my birth. Those mountains loomed behind me at the horizon, a shadowy line of stone under the rising moons.

Even at this distance, the glow of the Vrika was unmistakable, a white gleam rippling through the darkening air of late evening. As it got closer, the light emanating from its body rivalled the blinking eyes of the stars and the bright, jagged spheres of the moons.

This was the third time the creature had tried to summon me.

And it would be the third time I ignored its call.

I could still hear the words of the man who'd once been my Gahn. They echoed inside my skull now the way they had in the mountain hall sixty-two days ago.

Until you heed the sacred call of the Vrika and honour our people by taking your rightful mate, you are banished from these mountains and this tribe.

Unlike Gahn Errok, the Vrika was not content with exiling me and forgetting about me. It had come to me for a second time not long after I'd left my people. And now, here it was once more.

How many times must it come before it realizes I will not follow it?

I had no need for its spells and summonings.

Because I did not need a mate.

“Come, Breena,” I grunted at my braxilk. The six eyes lining the sides of her head swivelled to me, and her beak parted with a soft screechy yip. She uncurled her many legs from beneath her frame, rising to her full height and stretching her wings.

I gathered my belongings. This did not take long as there were so few of them. My bow. My arrows. My blades were already strapped upon my back and my roll of bedding hides was still tucked against Breena's side, secured by hide straps.

Once everything was safely stowed, I leaped up onto Breena's back. A slight shift in the set of my knees and a click of my tongues and we were off the ground. Breena's wings beat, sending deep blue dust and pebbles scattering beneath us. Even with my weight, she climbed easily up into the heart of the sky.

The Vrika followed us through the air, gaining on us quickly. I twisted on Breena's back. The Vrika's large white eyes locked onto mine, and my breath caught. I shook off the unnerving sensation and smiled, waving my bow jauntily at it.

"Thank you for your consideration, Vrika!" I called. "But I have no use for a mate. Please summon one of the other warriors in my stead. Perhaps Gahn Errok. The stars know that man is desperate for a woman! And it would be a great boon to the tribe, too! I'm sure getting his cock wet would vastly improve his disposition!"

It was true. Gahn Errok was half out of his skull with longing for a mate. I could not help but think that his harshness in my own banishment was only partly due to the customs of our people, and was perhaps more to do with his jealousy that I'd been chosen when he hadn't.

I'd rejected what he so badly wanted.

Well, he can have my mate. The Vrika just needs to bond her to him, not me.

The Vrika did not seem deterred by my words in the slightest. Normally, I'd admire that sort of optimistic precociousness. But right now, it made my smile falter, replaced by a frown of irritation.

Fine then.

"Onwards, Breena. The Vrika has no interest in my sage advice tonight."

Breena and I sped over the gravelly area where we'd been sitting, heading for the Deep Sky plains. During the day, those plains were a much deeper shade of blue than the sky. But at night, the plains were brightened by the stars and moons, the dark blue ground shimmering with spilled light.

With a crank of my head, I realized some of that light was spilling down from the Vrika. It was larger than Breena, with a longer wingspan. And it carried no rider. Thus, it continued to close the distance between us.

“I’ve already told you I am not interested,” I grumbled, more to myself than the Vrika.

I turned my attention forward once again, then jerked, realizing the plains below and the sky ahead were not empty as I’d thought. In the distance, three braxilk swooped and dove, their riders raining down rapid arrows.

I grunted, tapping Breena’s rump with my tail. She banked, flying wide around what appeared to be a battle ahead so I could get a closer look. It did not take long for me to see that these were not Gahn Errok’s men, but Gahn Thaleo’s.

I held my bow ready, making sure my arrows were easily within reach on my back. Gahn Thaleo’s men were ruthlessly territorial. They would bear me no glad tidings. Even if it had been men of my own tribe, I would not have been welcomed warmly. My banishment, and the mask that marked me as an exile, meant that no man would be a friend to me now. But that still would have been preferable to Gahn Thaleo’s warriors.

I will have to escape their notice for now. Slip out of sight while they are occupied.

Occupied with what, was the question.

I did not recognize the men on the plains. My sight stars pulsed, my gaze widening, when I saw that one of them was barely a man at all. Two heads taller than any man I knew; with hide that glinted like glittering stone; a long, fanged snout; and fists that swung like hammers.

He was the only strange beast of a man. The other warriors below, six of them, looked more like me and my fellow men of the Deep Sky plains and mountains. But I could tell they were not of either Deep Sky tribe.

I jolted, shock coursing through me when I saw three others. Three children, small and taking cover in a cluster of plump silver harlok trees. One of Gahn Thaleo’s men spotted them, too, along with what looked like their camp. The warrior landed, dismounted, and stalked towards the children. The three small creatures stumbled backward and away from his drawn blade.

Cursed skies.

All plans of evading the Vrika and Gahn Thaleo’s men forgotten, I hissed and punched my upper body forward, commanding Breena into a wild dive downwards. The air whistled through the cracks in the bone mask and made my long hair snap behind me.

Before I could kill the warrior who came for the children, one of their allied men, a parent, perhaps, cleaved down upon him. Despite only having

one arm, this warrior fought with relentless fury. But there was another rider coming this way, now. The beast-man lumbered after him, and other warriors threw their spears. One narrowly missed me, no doubt taking me as part of Gahn Thaleo's group who'd attacked their party.

A warrior with the sides of his head shaved had rushed to the side of one of the other children. The one-armed warrior was up, now, hugging a second child.

The third...?

The third child emerged from a tent, arms clutching something fiercely against his chest. I could not see his face well – he wore an odd cloak with a hood. But something about his terrified stance, the way he clutched at whatever he held, made a protective instinct rise up inside me. When one of Gahn Thaleo's men drew near, Breena and I swooped between them.

I could not simply attack Gahn Thaleo's men and help these others. For all I knew, these strangers would then just as quickly turn on me. I knew nothing of them. But if I fled, this child, the only one with no man standing beside him to protect him, could be killed.

I did not spend too much time weighing the possibilities and outcomes. I simply let instinct harden in my blood, shaping the action of my limbs. I bent low as Breena skimmed over the ground. An arrow whizzed just above my head – directly between the two horns of my mask. The child was almost within arm's reach, now. I pulled my bow down over my head and one of my shoulders, letting it loop around my torso, the string across my chest.

Another arrow. Another surge of battle cries and clanging weapons in my ears. Another pulse of my heart.

Almost... Almost...

My arm snapped out.

A moment of strange stillness descended when my arm made contact. The body, solid but so impossibly small, curled forward, bending around the power of my arm. For a beat, we were frozen like that, almost in a sort of embrace.

But then the world, with all its sound and motion, caught back up, unrelenting hunter that it was.

I dragged the boy up onto Breena's back, dropping his rump down between my thighs as we ascended. A glance back told me that at least one of the arrows had found its mark. The one-armed warrior, who a moment ago

had been hugging the other child, now lay motionless and bleeding on the ground while the child sobbed.

I had no clear sense of who would win this fight. Talons of shame tore at me when I realized there would be no way for me to go back to help the other two children. Breena was a large braxilk, but even so, two riders (even one so small as the boy with me now) was her limit.

At least I saved one of them.

Now I need to get him away from the battle.

We fled into the night, Breena's body like a spear. The boy screamed at some point, a shockingly high and piercing sound that made my ears ring. It seemed an odd reaction to me. What boy was unfamiliar with a braxilk's flight?

I then became aware of twisting and squirming, accompanied by the sudden cry of, "Let me down!"

My heart jumped in my chest.

Though the voice was high and shaking, the commanding tone of it did not sound like a child's. Certainly not like a boy's.

It sounded like my aunt when she thought I'd done something immensely stupid and was judging me accordingly.

The realization slugged me like the butt-end of a spear to the temple.

This wasn't a boy.

I'd picked up a female in the fray.

And now I had absolutely no idea what to do with her.



CHAPTER THREE

Priya



The adrenaline of the battle and being scooped up onto this giant bird soon turned to churning nausea. I'd never exactly loved heights, and this flight took my fear of heights to... well... new heights. I had no idea where we were, and every time I did try to look over the side, vertigo gripped me so badly it felt like I was falling despite being held tight by the warrior behind me. The thin air up here, compounded by the fact that Zaphrinax already had less oxygen in its atmosphere than Earth, made me woozy. My head swam, and my arms shook as I tried to keep hold of my pack. Skull Boy, perhaps sensing my weakness, adjusted his arm so that it was wrapped around the front of my pack, too, holding it flat against my chest.

Gee. Thanks a lot.

I'd lost my earlier boldness from when I'd told him to let me down. It had been entirely swallowed up by the rushing landscape below and the battering of wind all around me. I gagged on a sudden influx of saliva, trying desperately not to vomit all over myself.

Maybe I should just let go and hurl. Maybe then he'd have to stop and let me down...

But I couldn't be sure of that. There was an urgency to this flight. Like we were fleeing something.

Fleeing the battle, I guess?

But why take me?

My stomach threatened to empty itself all over again when I thought about the only real possibility left.

Does this guy think that I'm his mate?

What other reason would a strange warrior have for grabbing me and whisking me away the way he had? Why would he not have stayed behind and fought in the battle, like the other flying warriors? Why just take me, *only* me, and leave? There was no way he could know about my maps. What other value would I hold to this foreign warrior?

A flash of anger helped restore my strength, just a little. Anger about being taken from my friends. At being stolen, like some object from a bank vault. The warrior behind me still hadn't said a single word, focused solely, it seemed, on steering the winged creature below us as quickly as possible.

Well, if he is supposed to be my mate, he can bloody forget it. As soon as we land, I'll make him see that I need to get back to my friends. I'm not staying with some random bloke who grabs girls right off the ground!

I tried not to think about what may have happened to my friends in the battle.

I'll make him take me back. No matter what.

Time lost meaning as we flew. Eventually, I screwed my eyes shut, hunching down over the backpack, dying for this flight to end. The man's arm tightened further around my pack and me, and finally, he said something above me. I didn't catch whatever it was he'd said. I was too focused on staying conscious while I sucked in the thin air.

But something changed. Slowly, I became aware that we were losing altitude. *Please, please let this mean we're landing!*

A jolt told me we had landed.

Thank you, thank you thank you...

I panted, unable to fully open my eyes, my head feeling both heavy and impossibly light.

Hands gripped me, lifting me down to the ground. My legs buckled immediately, and the hands tightened on my waist, holding me upright. I was only just able to dump my pack off to the side before crunching forward in his grip and vomiting profusely. A cry of irked surprise filled the air. The hands flinched against me, as if wanting to draw back. But they didn't let go, continuing to hold me steady.

I forced my eyes to open, blinking against my swimming vision. Reality took foggy shape before me. A lean, muscled torso. A grey hide loincloth. Two long, strong legs.

All of it glistening with my sick.

"Sorry," I slurred, coughing.

Wait, why am I saying sorry? He's the one who dragged me away from my friends! He's the reason I've barfed in the first place!

"What's wrong with you?" came the gruff reply.

I sucked in another steadying breath, feeling a bit better after puking and getting my feet on solid ground. I bristled at his question.

“What’s wrong with me? What’s wrong with *you*? You’re the one who abducted me!”

“No. What’s *wrong with you*? Why did you up spill?”

“Up... What?”

It took me a moment to realize that it wasn’t my disorientation making this guy hard to understand. He had quite a different accent from the Sea Sand men. I’d grown up in London, used to the London accents of my schoolmates and the Punjabi accents of my family. Talking to Skull Boy reminded me of when we went on a trip to Northern Ireland when I was a kid, and I’d had to get used to the accents and the different uses of some words there.

“Are you ill? Why did you up spill?” He angled his head down, peering at his body through the eye holes of the skull he wore. “And why could you not have directed the spill a little better?”

Through the unusual accent, I could detect both irritation and, more subtly, a hot spiral of concern.

He’s worried.

Well, he bloody well should be, especially if he thinks I’m supposed to be his mate!

“I *threw up*, or up spilled, or whatever you call it, because you snatched me off the ground and took me on an insane death flight!”

He made a grunting sound of annoyance before using his grip on my waist to ease me down to the ground. I would have fought him on that front and jumped right back up to deal with him if it weren’t for the fact that sitting on solid ground felt pretty fucking brilliant after tumbling about on the back of that big bird. I watched Skull Boy closely as I spit and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. I drew my pack closer to my side, taking deep, slow breaths. *Thank goodness I grabbed this.* Apart from my maps, my pack also had all sorts of human necessities. My bedding hide was rolled up and attached to the bottom of the pack, and inside were some snacks and valok gel, extra clothing, first aid supplies, and stuff for my period.

Skull Boy turned away from me, and I used his moment of distraction to try to finally get my bearings now that I was feeling a little better. The winged creature we’d ridden was quite near to me, on the right, standing but looking fairly relaxed, its massive wings tucked against its sides. It had a long, curving neck that actually made it look more like a dragon, or like some kind of long-necked dinosaur, than a bird. Like the desert irkdu, it had a

bunch of legs, each ending in a clawed foot. The legs were longer at the front of its body, the rear ones shorter, which only added to its long-necked appearance. It looked down at me with large gleaming eyes, six of them, three on either side of its narrow, beaky head.

I gulped under the creature's gaze, but there was nothing inherently aggressive in its stance from what I could see. It really was huge, though. Frighteningly so. Its head was easily two and a half metres from the ground in its current position.

Since the winged dragon/dino/centipede alien didn't seem to want to eat me for the moment, I tentatively took my eyes off it and glanced around me, trying to take note of anything that might be useful. *Like how the hell to get back.*

We'd flown into the centre of what appeared to be a shallow sort of valley. The ground beneath my bum was basically flat but littered with gravelly pebbles. Stone formations, even taller than the winged alien, stood dark and spiky in the night, looming around us. I squinted as I looked at the rock in front of me. I couldn't make much out. The stone reminded me of thick brush and trunks of trees, creating a knotted forest of rock that I couldn't make sense of. It was the same thing to my right and my left. I twisted, turning to look behind me.

This, at least, I could somewhat orient myself with. Behind me, I could see the stone growing higher and higher in the distance, rising to dizzying peaks. *These are the mountains that had been on the far horizon when we arrived in the plains.*

I was glad to finally have a sense of what direction we'd gone. But at the same time, my heart sank when I realized just how far from my friends we'd gotten.

I swung my head forward once more. *It's time to tell Skull Boy to take me back.*

But I gasped instead of telling him what I'd meant to.

Because the sight of his bare torso was not what greeted me, nor was the long, horned, animal skull he wore.

It was his bare fucking bottom.

My mouth hung open as I stared.

He stood about two metres away, his back to me. He was vigorously beating a scrap of fabric against a boulder, muttering to himself the entire time.

Realization dawned on me and I smacked the palms of my hands over my eyes. *That's his loincloth!*

Come on, Priya! You can do this. Don't hide. Just because you've never seen a naked man's bum before, either human or alien...

I slid my hands down a little, peeking out from between my fingers. My stomach swooped, but not in the same way it had a few moments ago when I'd been sick. Heat bloomed under my skin despite the cold night air.

The skull mask covered the top and half of the back of his head, solid and white. His hair was long – longer than some of the other alien men I'd seen. Though it was tangled from the windy ride, I could tell it was pretty much stick-straight. Thick and dark, the ends of it brushed his...

Fuck me.

The ends of his hair came all the way down to the top of his ass, the muscles of which tightened with every movement of his arms and upper body. His tail did little to cover things, swishing back and forth as he tried to clean his loincloth. I immediately jerked my eyes away when the movement of his tail afforded me a glimpse of something *else* swinging between his strong thighs.

“Could you please put your clothes back on?” I asked weakly. I kept my gaze pinned firmly on the backs of his calves and the high bend of his kangaroo-like ankles. I knew I wasn't exactly in the position to be demanding things, but I didn't see how I was going to be able to look him in the eye, or anywhere else, for that matter, if he remained naked apart from his mask and the blades strapped to his body.

“Well, I would,” Skull Boy replied, angling his head back to look at me from behind his mask, “but you've up spilled all over my cock cloth. And I only have the one.”

Oh.

I let my hands drop away from my face, still focusing on his ankles.

“Well, I said I'm sorry. And I am. I didn't mean to. But I couldn't help it! Also, did you just call it a cock cloth?!” I was all about being practical, but the name *cock cloth* felt just a little too blunt.

“Clearly, you are not from these lands.” The man sighed. “Your accent is strange and you don't call it a cock cloth. Plus, you are so smidgey.”

“Smidgey?” My head pounded, but I couldn't tell if that was leftover sickness from the flight, or from trying to figure out what this guy was saying.

“Smidgey. Like a child.”

“You mean... Small?”

“Yes. Smidgey. I thought you were a cub when I saw you below.”

I felt my brows furrow in sudden confusion.

OK, so he clearly didn't think I was his mate, then.

I was about to ask him more – about who he was, about why he'd taken me – when he spun without warning. I gave a horribly undignified squeaky sound and smacked my hands over my eyes once more. I was vaguely aware of him coming to a stop before me.

“Remove your hands and your hood so I can look at you,” he said.

My heart went batty in my chest.

“Look, I realize I don't have much in the way of bargaining chips right now, but you have got to put some clothing on before we continue this conversation,” I groaned. I risked another peek through my fingers only to find him crouching directly in front of me, his elbows on his knees, his thick thighs spread, his loincloth *nowhere in fucking sight*.

At least he doesn't have an erection. That's something, right?!

“I told you,” he replied, apparently completely unfazed by his nakedness and this entire situation. “I only had the one. No matter how I clean it now, I doubt I'll ever get the stench out. For such a smidgey creature, you up spilled with impressive force.”

Gritting my teeth, I snatched one hand from my face and reached blindly to the side for my pack.

“You just stay there,” I warned him, trying to infuse my voice with sternness. I wasn't exactly sure that I was successful, but he didn't seem to get any closer.

I managed to grasp my pack without looking at it, pulling it with one hand while keeping the other firmly over my eyes. I reached under the top flap, rifling through until I found a piece of clothing. It felt soft and thin – one of my grey tank tops.

“Here!” I cried, yanking it out of the bag and flapping it at him. “You can make a loincloth – cock cloth – out of this!”

I felt the tank top slide from my grip as he took it.

I lowered my hands and squinted, using the fringe of my thick eyelashes as a sort of visual shield, trying to keep track of what he was doing without getting too much of an eye full.

But my eyes widened of their own accord when I realized what I'd just handed him.

Not a tank top.

A pair of my own fucking knickers.

Just kill me now.



CHAPTER FOUR

Lerokan



I studied the tiny scrap of fabric in my hand, unsure of exactly what it was or what it was meant to do. She'd told me to make a cock cloth out of it, but...

How?

I held the small thing up in front of my face, tugging the exceptionally thin, soft fabric, testing it. It had one large hole, then two smaller holes. Experimentally, I plunged my hands into the garment so that my wrists went through each of the smaller holes.

The garment was so small it forced my wrists together.

Reminds me of when Gahn Errok had me bound before him, right before I was banished.

“No! Wait! Give that back!”

The female still had a hand plastered over her face, the other one flailing wildly in the air before her. I cocked a brow, my gaze roaming over the back of the hand that hid her face.

“Does the sight of my bare body burn your eyes or something?” I asked, sliding the weird little fabric thing she'd given me off of my wrists and dangling it between my claws.

“You have no idea,” she groaned in reply., her accent strange and lilting. “Would you please just give that back and I will find you something else to cover yourself with?”

“Take down your hand and your hood,” I said, ignoring her words and repeating my command from before. My curiosity could not be satisfied just by listening to this female's questions and complaints. If she wanted whatever this item was back, she'd have to show me her face. I needed to know whom I was dealing with.

She muttered something in a tongue I did not understand, then, as if it took a great amount of effort or she was fighting against some invisible force, she whipped her hood down and then clasped her hands firmly in her lap.

My fingers went slack with shock. I dropped the bit of fabric.

A completely foreign face stared back at mine.

The shape of it was mostly familiar, as were her lips. But her nose was all wrong – narrow with a high, bony bridge and twin tiny nostrils. Her eyes were the strangest of all, their shades reversed from what was considered normal and healthy. Instead of dark, with bright sight stars that spun in the centre, they were white. Black sight stars bored into me, only one in each eye.

All in all, the features combined into something confusing and confronting. And so small. Just like the rest of her.

Maybe she is a child after all. Or just a little older...

Cursed skies. I've saddled myself with a deformed adolescent.

“How old are you?” I growled, feeling like I’d made every mistake possible tonight. Nay, not just tonight. My entire life of foolish endeavours had led up to this moment of colossal confusion.

“I’m twenty-four *years* old,” she said, narrowing her bizarre eyes at me.

“What does that mean?” I snapped. “What’s a *year*?”

“It’s three hundred and sixty-five days.”

I grunted, shoving a claw beneath my mask and scratching violently at my cheek as I attempted to undo the riddle of her response. Three hundred and sixty-five days was about three and a half ages. So, she was twenty-four three and a half ages old...

“I’m not a child,” she finally said with a forceful huff of breath. “I’m a feather.”

“You’re... a feather,” I repeated. *Skies above, not only deformed but rather slow in the head as well.*

“Yes! A feather! An adult female. A feather!”

“I can barely make out a word you’re saying,” I scoffed. *Alright, so perhaps not too dense of mind. This seems to be another failing of language, like the cock cloth thing.* “Where are you from? Who are your people? Who are the warriors you travelled here with?”

She pressed her lips together, staring at me. My questions echoed, unanswered.

“Fine, then,” I said, standing. “Answer my questions or do not. It makes no difference to me.” That wasn’t exactly true, as my curiosity had deepened into a gnawing irritation. But I didn’t want this scowling female to know that.

I approached Breena. She tossed her beak, rustling her wings before fixing her eyes on me.

“Do not give me that look,” I said under my breath. “I can’t force an impossible female to speak. And even when she does speak it makes little sense. She told me she was a feather!” I poked at the feathery fluff on Breena’s neck to emphasize the absurdity of it all.

I checked Breena’s large body for injuries. Thankfully, despite the flying of spears and arrows in the battle, she seemed unharmed. As I moved, I was aware of the strange female’s eyes on my back the entire time.

“You’re not the only one with questions,” she finally called.

“Tell me your question and I will decide if I should deign to answer it,” I replied.

She muttered something that sounded an awful lot like cursing, though I could not hear the words, before saying, more loudly, “Why did you even grab me and take me away if you were going to be like this?”

“Like what?” I asked, turning towards her once more. I leaned back against Breena’s broad side, crossing my arms and staring at the seated female.

“So... Naked and annoying!”

“As I have pointed out many times now,” I ground out, “the reason I am naked is you and your up spill. And, as I thought I’d already made abundantly clear, when I flew over the battle, I was under the clearly *wrong* impression that you were a child. I thought you were in danger, and as I was neither friend nor ally to either party involved, I thought the best course of action was to get you away from the fray. The other two children had men at their sides whereas you did not, and I wouldn’t have been able to fly with more than one of you, anyway.”

“They weren’t children, either,” she hissed.

“If they are half as difficult as you, I’ve done myself a great service leaving them behind.”

As soon as the words left my lips, I knew they were wrong. That I did not mean them. Whether they were children or adult females, they were still clearly in need of protection and care. This one had no weapons, and I assumed it was the same for the other two like her. I’d felt the guilt, the shame, when I’d realized I could not help them all. And I still felt it, now.

In a moment, the tiny creature was on her feet and moving with a speed and strength I would not have thought her capable of. She planted herself

before me, her odd eyes flashing under the gleaming moons and stars.

“Take me back. Right now.”

I sighed, almost wishing I could. *I should have thought this through a little better...*

“I cannot,” I said. “If Gahn Thaleo’s men were victorious in battle, then they will be happy to tear me limb from limb next.”

Her dark brows rose.

“So those men weren’t from your tribe? I thought... I mean, you all flew on the same... Whatever you call *that*.” She jerked her chin behind me.

“I call *her* Breena,” I replied.

“Right. You were all flying Breenas. So, I just assumed-”

“We were all flying braxilk,” I clarified through clenched fangs. “Only I was riding a Breena because that is her name, not her species. No other man can claim such a thing because Breena, much like myself, is one of a kind.”

Her brows rose even higher, surprise evident even on such foreign features.

I expected her to argue further, or to complain. But instead, she turned from me entirely, speaking to Breena.

“It’s very good to meet you, Breena. Perhaps you’d be kind enough to take me back the way we came.”

Breena lowered her beak.

“Careful!” I cried, lurching forward. “She bites-”

But now it was my turn to be shocked. I’d once seen Breena lop the entire hand off one of Gahn Thaleo’s men who’d threatened me in battle, and I’d seen her snap the necks of smaller creatures with little effort.

But she did not do that now.

Instead, she closed four of her six eyes and nuzzled this strange female’s cheek. The woman before me made a shocked laughing sound, then raised her hands to pat either side of Breena’s neck.

“Traitor,” I muttered to my mount. “I see how it is now. Ages of friendship between beast and rider mean nothing after a sparse few moments with some strange female. I suppose she is your mistress now, and I no longer your master.”

Breena opened all her eyes and gave me a look that felt far too much like confirmation for my liking.

“What’s your name?” I finally asked. I wanted to pretend I did not care, but I couldn’t hold the question in.

Still patting Breena's neck, she turned her face towards me once more.

"It's Priyanka. My friends call me Priya." Her mouth tightened into a frown. "So, you can call me Priyanka."

"Well, Priyanka, whose friendship I do not desire and certainly do not seek, you may call me Lerokan the brave. Or perhaps Lerokan the mighty. Lerokan the saviour, who pulled you, unbidden, from danger's claws. Lerokan the handsome would also work. As would Lerokan the hero."

"How about Lerokan the humble?" she asked, fixing me with a flat stare.

"Hmm. I am not sure that is fitting. I prefer only the truest of monikers. And I've never aspired to be humble."

"Well, if you're so brave and mighty, then you can take me back!" she said, her voice vicious. "Those were my friends back there! I have to get back to them and make sure they're alright!"

I stared down at her for a beat, mulling over her words. If her party had survived, it would be best to get her back to them if possible. I had no specific reason to keep her by my side and did not want to take responsibility for her any longer. I could not offer her the protection of a tribe. I could keep her alive if needed, certainly. But I had a feeling she would be the death of me before any other causes took their natural course.

Perhaps if we fly low... Flee at the first sign of Gahn Thaleo's men...

Honestly, at that point, even an enemy spear through the guts seemed preferable to continued dealings with Priyanka.

"Fine," I replied. "Get your pack."

Priyanka's scowl faded, giving way to surprise once more.

"You mean it? We're leaving?"

I adjusted my mask, pulling it down further over my face as I jerked my tail in agreement.

"We're leaving."



CHAPTER FIVE

Priya



I hurried to grab my pack, moving quickly so that it was done before Lerokan the massive bloody prat changed his mind. When I saw my knickers lying in the gravelly blue dust, I cringed. In the heat of our conversation, I'd somehow forgotten he was still in the rudie nudies. I snatched my knickers up, dusted them off a little, then plunged them back into the pack. I rummaged around, trying to figure out what other item of clothing I could sacrifice on the altar of Lerokan's giant alien dick, but his voice interrupted my movements.

"Come on. There is no sense in counting dust."

"Counting dust?" What a ridiculous idea. There had to be trillions of specks of dust underfoot right now!

"Counting dust. Not moving with haste," Lerokan clarified from behind his mask. *He thinks I'm dawdling.*

Lerokan leaped up onto Breena's back, settling his broad, bare thighs across her width.

"I thought I told you I would find something for you to wear," I said, cheeks hot as I trotted up to Breena's side.

"Why bother? From what I've seen so far, your items are tiny. I doubt anything in that pack could contain me."

My mouth flopped open like a goldfish's. A stunned, offended goldfish. OK, yeah, I'd caught a few glimpses, and though I had nothing to compare him to I could tell he was big. But the idea that nothing, not even my freaking bedding hides, could cover him?

"That's absurd," I stammered. "I'm not sitting with you while you're like that!"

"You are the one who is wasting time for someone who says she is so eager to return to her friends," Lerokan countered smoothly.

A spike of shame went through me.

“You’re right,” I said, steeling myself. If this guy wanted to play nudist, so be it. I had more important things to worry about. Like finding my friends.

And maybe Lerokan can even help us. We did come here to find more warriors and allies. He said he wasn’t a part of the tribe who attacked us...

“Where’s your tribe?” I blurted. “You said Gahn Thaleo’s men weren’t from your tribe. Who’s your Gahn?”

If I bring him back to our group, maybe he could talk to Gahn Razek, take us back to his people and act as a liaison...

Lerokan stiffened, his claws rising to touch his mask before he clenched his hand into a fist and let it fall.

“I am currently... Unattached,” he said.

“What do you mean? Are we having another language barrier moment?” Lerokan was different from the Sea Sand men in some ways, but in others they seemed remarkably similar. They clearly had tribes and Gahns out here. I frowned, thinking hard. I couldn’t think of a single Sea Sand man who lived apart from a tribe. The only one who’d been on his own for a while was Kor, Zoey’s half-Sea Sand, half-Bitter Sea mate. But he was part of our group, now.

“I follow no Gahn now,” Lerokan said.

I waited a moment, looking up at his unreadable face, shadowed by bone. But he said nothing else.

Well, I tried. At least he’s offering to take me back.

This guy may have been possibly the most arrogant alien I’d ever had the displeasure of dealing with, but he was willing to work with me now. And at least he’d been trying to save me back at the battle. He’d swooped in, at his own risk, to save what he’d thought was a vulnerable child, so he had to be at least a halfway decent sort of bloke. And he wasn’t, like I’d worried before, thinking that I was his mate and expecting me to whip my knickers off for him the moment we met.

Although you did just hand them to him...

Let’s not think about that now.

I pursed my lips, trying to figure out the best way to haul myself up onto Breena’s back. I didn’t have long legs with kangaroo-esque feet and ankles like Lerokan. And I didn’t want to pull on Breena’s feathers and hurt her. From what I could tell, she appeared to like me, and I had to admit I was starting to like her, too. She seemed intelligent and rather gentle. It had been an odd moment when Lerokan had told me her name. I’d had an aunty in

India named Beena, and the similarities between the names had given me a pang of nostalgia that hurt and made me feel closer to this big winged alien in equal measure.

I flinched as a strong, claspng grip closed around each of my upper arms. The ground pulled downward away from me, and I was plopped unceremoniously onto Breena's back, my hips between Lerokan's spread thighs. I stiffened when I felt something hard pressing against my lower back. *Uh oh. Is that his...?*

I squirmed forward, wrenching my head back.

Oh.

I sighed in relief, realizing Lerokan had rather artfully arranged his quiver of arrows to sit between his crotch and my bum. That's what I'd felt pressing against me. *Well, it's no loincloth, but it's better than nothing.*

"You cannot ride that far forward," Lerokan said. I yanked my gaze up from the quiver of arrows at his groin, past the straps and huge bow looped across his chest, to his face. Within the shadows of the mask's eye holes, I could see his sight stars pulsing inward, focusing on me.

"Fine," I said. I faced forward once more, sliding carefully backwards along Breena's spine until my body was just about flush with Lerokan's. My breath caught as a solid arm lowered in front of me, tightening against my waist like the safety bar on a roller coaster. It felt just as hard as a bar like that. But warmer. I could feel the heat of Lerokan's body through the fabric of the jacket I wore.

Lerokan adjusted his position, too. His thighs inched forward until they met my own. He leaned down, the muscles of his chest brushing my jacket and making the stiff fabric crinkle.

I slid my eyes to the side. Because he was leaning forward, his face was now beside and just a little higher than my own.

"Do you have to be so close?"

"Do you have to complain so often? This is how I fly," Lerokan shot back, turning his head so that the beaky snout of the skull he wore nearly took my eye out.

"OK, OK. Fair enough," I grumbled. He may have been the one to have snatched me without permission in the first place, but I had to admit he was doing me a solid by taking me back to the scene of the battle when it could be dangerous for both of us. "Thank you," I said stiffly.

Lerokan turned his face to me once more, this time being more careful of the mask. We stared at each other for a moment. Then, beneath the bone contour of the skull, his mouth split into a broad grin. It was a cocky grin if I'd ever seen one, but it was undeniably gorgeous. Wide and crooked and creating a small dimple on one side, the little divot of flesh deepening with the shadows that clung to it.

"Finally, some civility!" he said, his grin widening further, his sight stars buzzing, his fangs gleaming in the silver-drenched night. "I expect to hear that phrase many more times before this night is through!"

"We'll see if you earn another 'thank you,'" I said crisply, tearing my gaze from his face. I'd been having trouble looking away from his smile. An alien that annoying had absolutely no right to have a smile that nice.

I wonder what he looks like without the mask...

Nope. Doesn't matter.

"Alright, then," he said. "Try not to up spill again this time. I've already lost one cock cloth. It was a good cock cloth, too. Kept me warm through all the cold day deaths."

Day deaths? Nights? Evenings?

"I'll do my best," I said, swallowing hard. In all the rush to get back to my friends, I'd pushed the whole flying thing out of my mind. My palms started to sweat.

"Good! Because if you up spill again, based on the way you are facing--"

"Yes, yes, I know. If I'm sick again it will be all over myself this time. Thank you for the concern for my clothing and, once again, I'm sorry about your loin – cock – cloth."

"I care not a whit for your clothing," he responded jovially. "But I'm not keen on combing your up spill out of Breena's feathers when we land."

It took me a second to figure out the feathers thing he'd said. It sounded exactly like the Sea Sand word for "women."

I stroked my fingers along the long, smooth feathers of Breena's back.

"I don't want that either," I said honestly, hating the idea of puking on her. "How about this? If I feel sick, I'll reach around and grab the mask off your face. That would make a great barf bowl."

Lerokan's response to that was to urge Breena into sudden flight. I clutched at her feathers, my heart hammering, lungs clenching in fear.

"Can we stay lower this time?" I asked, hating the way my voice was already reedy and shaking.

I expected Lerokan to ignore me, but to my surprise, he agreed.

“That is my plan. If Gahn Thaleo’s men were the victors, they have likely made camp for the night. I do not expect them to be flying now. And if your people were the victors, I want to be low enough so that they can hear you calling to them, telling them that I am a very good sort of warrior who does not deserve to be knocked off his braxilk by one of their spears.”

“Great,” I said, swallowing a rush of saliva. Staying lower would help with the heights thing, and also with the lack of oxygen issue. *Hopefully this time I can actually try to learn a little more about the landscape as we fly. And I’ll be able to see the others more easily as we approach them.*

I squeezed my elbows inward against my pack, holding it steady as I dug my fingers deeper against Breena’s feathers. My stomach plummeted as Breena’s wings beat harder, making us rise faster. I screwed my eyes shut, unable to keep them open.

“I thought we were staying lower,” I squeaked out.

“This is lower!” Lerokan retorted. I could hear that blinding, arrogant smile in his voice.

He’s enjoying this, the bugger.

I just had to trust that Lerokan was staying true to his word and taking me back the way we’d come. Because I could not, no matter what I tried, force my eyes to remain open. Every time I cracked the lids apart, dizziness overtook me and my stomach revolted. I could tell we were moving quickly, at least. And Lerokan didn’t seem to fancy the idea of spiriting me off anywhere else, so I seemed safe enough in my assumption he’d carry me back to my friends.

But we hadn’t been flying long when I became aware of a stiffening in Lerokan’s body. He hissed and we suddenly banked to the left, before slowing into what seemed to be a wide, circling holding pattern.

Clenching my teeth and breathing deeply, I willed my eyes to open. *If there’s danger, I need to see it. Is it Gahn Thaleo’s men? We hadn’t gone nearly far enough to connect with my group, even if they’d been travelling on foot in search of me. So, what had made us stop?*

I was saved from looking down to see if there was danger down there. Because the reason for our sudden halt wasn’t below, but straight ahead. The slow burst of a shooting star heading right for us. The light took shape as it got closer. Not a star, though just as bright. Serpentine and graceful, with a

wingspan that took my breath away, the Lavrika cut through the dark curtain of the sky. We were fixed in its sights.

It's coming for us.

Or him.

The Lavrika came to summon Zaphrinax warriors to its pools to see their mates. But, wait... Did it have wings? And if it came all the way out here to summon these men to its caves, how come they hadn't run into any of the Sea Sand men on their trips to the Lavrika's pools?

Unless...

Unless Lerokan and the tribes out here had their own Lavrika, just like the Bitter Sea people had the Kell.

Whether it was the Lavrika of the Sea Sands or another entity entirely, one thing was abundantly clear:

It was coming this way. And fast.



CHAPTER SIX

Lerokan



Cursed skies.

I thought the Vrika had given up on me this night. Apparently not, as its great wings were now propelling the massive creature towards us.

“I really do not have time to deal with you now,” I called over to it. I used my free arm, the one not holding Priyanka, to gesture forcefully at the mouthy female’s head. “As you can see, I am occupied!”

“Is that the Lavrika? Or your version of it?” Priyanka asked from in front of me.

“If the Lavrika you speak of is a sacred being whose sole purpose of late is to plague me into misery and madness, then yes,” I muttered. The Vrika slowed and then undertook a wide holding pattern that mirrored Breena’s.

“Can you try to fly around it?” Priyanka asked.

“Oh, shockingly good suggestion!” I retorted. “Such a thought never would have occurred to me!”

“Well, sorry, but you don’t seem to be doing anything except making me nauseous by flying back and forth like this!”

Without warning, I urged Breena into a dive downward. Priyanka choked back a scream, shuddering against my arm. I clicked my tongues, and Breena halted her descent, using all her momentum to arrow forward. The Vrika was larger and longer than Breena. If it wanted to stop us there would be no way to fly around it. But under...

Breena squawked, her wings thrashing out to the side, buffeting the air as she halted her forward motion. The Vrika’s long tail had snapped downward, blocking our path.

For such a giant, it sure is quick...

Grinding my fangs, I commanded Breena further downward. We skimmed right over the ground, but once again had to halt and scramble backwards, clawing at the air, this time blocked by one of the Vrika’s wings.

“Why doesn’t it want me to get back to my friends?”

Priyanka's voice cracked. She sounded distraught.

Oh no. If she gets upset, she'll be even more difficult than before.

"Let us pass, Vrika!" I snarled. I knew I went against every law of our people by doing such a thing. One could not question or confront the sacred Vrika. Its will wove the bindings of our world. To flee from its call was bad enough, and had earned me my banishment and this mask. But to actively stand against it this way...

Most men would never dare to dream of such a thing.

But I was not most men.

And I had a pointy little thorn of a female to return to her people tonight.

A snapping order left my lips and Breena jerked her head back, beating her wings furiously as she flew straight up. I squeezed my thighs doubly hard when Priyanka's weight, slight though it was, crashed back against me. At this angle, she was basically lying atop me, her back to my front. Jaw tight and every muscle fighting to keep us both steady, I urged Breena faster.

But the Vrika met every beat of Breena's wings with its own. Its body became a vertical column, stretching up and down, its belly a mere breath from Breena's as it shot upwards.

We couldn't continue this straight-up flight for long. The Vrika was too long of body and far too quick. And judging by the rapid increase in the speed of Priyanka's breathing, she was not handling this well.

"Down, Breena! Retreat!"

She responded instantly, good braxilk that she was. She arched hard to the left, swooping and aiming her body back the way we'd come. We launched through the air, back towards the rocky outcroppings at the base of the Deep Sky mountains.

"Wait! This is the wrong way!" came a panicked cry from Priyanka.

I ignored her words the way I hoped the Vrika would now ignore us.

But it didn't.

It pursued us as the rock grew higher and darker. I frowned, steering Breena through valleys and under crags of rock, through shadow and starlight, holding tightly to Priyanka the whole time.

If the little female fell, I refused to let it be on my account.

Soon, Breena's wings began to flop rather than flap. We'd flown a lot tonight on top of the flights from earlier today, and now she carried two riders. *She's losing strength.*

"Is she alright?" There was genuine concern in Priyanka's question.

“We have to land,” I growled down at the top of Priyanka’s head.

“Fine!” For once, her “fine” was not laced with irritation. She sounded almost as worried about Breena as I felt.

We skirted around a large, dark peak, then plunged down into a valley. Near the bottom, almost impossible to see, was one yawning mouth of shadow darker than the rest.

A cave.

I whipped my tail forward to tap the side of Breena’s neck, then snatched up an arrow from between my legs, pointing with the weapon.

“There!”

I could feel the sag of relief ripple through my mount’s body as she headed for the cave’s opening. A few weak flaps of her wings helped us slow enough so that we didn’t crash too violently to the ground. Though I had to admit it was not one of Breena’s more light-winged landings. If it were not for the strength in my thighs and my fierce hold on her, Priyanka would have certainly tumbled to the stone below.

Sensing that Priyanka was feeling even wobblier than Breena, I tossed my quiver of arrows over my shoulder before adjusting my arms so that I held her cradled against my chest. *How can a fully-grown woman of this world be so frightfully small?*

Her form was not corded with muscle the way mine was. She was all slender limbs with twig-like bones, wrapped in soft and squishy flesh. One of my thumbs had hooked beneath her cloak when I’d adjusted my grip, and it inadvertently brushed her bare, warm skin. I pressed my thumb gently (though not inadvertently this time) into the curve of her hip, trying to make sense of all that softness.

But her voice wasn’t soft as I leaped down with her to the stone.

“What are you doing? Let go of me!”

“You want me to let go of you?” I asked as if I had not just heard her and did not already know the answer. And as if I did not already know what would happen when I *did* let go.

“Yes!”

“Fine. Remember, it was your command, not mine.”

I placed her upon her tiny flat feet and then swiftly pulled my hands away. As expected, her weak little knees buckled immediately, just as they had the last time I’d set her down after a flight.

My hand shot out, gripping the front of her cloak and yanking her upright before she hit the ground.

“You are lucky I have a strong warrior’s reflexes,” I said as she stumbled forward against me. “And that I am a generous sort of fellow. Otherwise, you’d be dealing with a very bruised bottom right about now.”

Priyanka panted against my chest for a moment before wrenching her head back to scowl at me. But her angry look faded into something much more resigned as her gaze snagged somewhere behind me.

“Turn around and tell me again how lucky I am.”

I swivelled to look back at what she saw, snaking my arm around her waist to keep her steady as I did so.

Not twenty paces from us, in the dark base of the valley, the Vrika landed.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Priya



The valley wasn't dark anymore. This winged Lavrika (which I was now more and more certain was a separate being from the Sea Sand version) turned the black spikes and crags of stone all around us into shards of reflective crystal. Thousands of facets twinkled like we'd been cast down into a deep bowl made of broken mirrors.

I breathed heavily, still feeling weak and disoriented from the second flight of the night. But even stronger than that was stabbing confusion and grief. The question bubbled out of my throat for the second time, this time addressed directly to the being that stared placidly at us.

“Why don't you want me to go back to my friends?”

I was probably breaking all kinds of rules by talking directly to what was essentially an alien god. This being, like the Sea Sand Lavrika and the Kell, had powers I couldn't even fathom.

And motivations I couldn't fathom, either. For example, the motivation that made it so apparently hellbent on trapping me in a gloomy cave with this naked alien idiot.

“It is not here for you, but me,” Lerokan said, his voice low.

I twisted in his grip to stare up at his face. Though it was more like staring at the side of his jaw and the bottom edges of his mask. The bloke was bloody tall.

“What do you mean? Is it summoning you to find your mate or something?”

“So, you know what the Vrika does? Yes. This is now the fourth time it has come for me.”

“Fourth time?! Are you telling me you've already had three mates?” My legs were strong enough to support my body, now, and I wiggled out of his arm's grasp, glaring at him suspiciously. Most of the men I knew at the settlement hadn't even gotten one mate yet! “So, what, you get to have four mates all to yourself? Or...” A horrifying thought entered my mind. “Or did

you just let the first three fall off Breena's back during your crazy flights and now you're on to the next one?"

Lerokan whirled on me, sight stars flashing behind his mask.

"I didn't let *you* fall, did I?" he snapped. "And I had a lot more reason to drop you from a height than I would my own mate! Surely my mate would not be so troublesome as you have proven." He took a growly, irritated breath. "This is the fourth time the Vrika has come to me because I have refused its first three calls."

"You did? Why?" This alien warrior was full of surprises, that was for sure. The Sea Sand men were desperate for mates. The ones who'd been bonded to a human mate by the Lavrika had been both hilarious and almost kind of sad to watch as they openly pined and attempted to woo my human friends. The ones without mates were even more sad. There was a sort of broken resignation that hung over most of them since there were so few Sea Sand women. The arrival of our ship had sparked a new hope, but that hope dwindled every time a human was paired off with an alien warrior. There weren't enough women, alien or human, to go round, which made being summoned by the Lavrika a massive blessing and honour to each warrior it called.

And here Lerokan had been called not once, but four times? And four times he'd refused?

Maybe the culture really is more different here than I'd thought. Maybe being summoned for a mate isn't considered the blessing here that it is in the Sea Sands...

"I don't need to explain myself to you," he muttered.

"OK, well, you need to do *something*," I pointed out. "Because it seems like we're going to be stuck in this cave until you do your sacred duty or whatever!" I'd gotten so close to seeing my friends, to finding out if they'd survived the battle. I'd convinced Lerokan to take me back, we'd even gotten partway there...

And now we were pressed even further into the mountains than we'd been before. The Vrika remained in its place, not budging.

Lerokan didn't answer, but his jaw grew tighter.

"Seriously," I said, my words growing faster as anxiety knotted inside me. *We have to get out of here. We have to find my friends!* "You just said that a mate would be less troublesome than me, right? Well, go get your mate vision or whatever it is you guys do here, then the Vrika will leave us alone

and you can take me back to my friends and be rid of me! If the Vrika has already come to you four times, it doesn't exactly seem like it's going to let this go. You should get it over with. Rip off the Band-aid."

"What's a *Band-aid*?"

I groaned. "All the good points I just made, and that's what you latch onto?"

Lerokan's voice grew loud, thundering through the valley as he faced the Vrika.

"I do not need a mate, nor do I seek one. A man's fate should rest within the circle of his own claws. I will not have my path chosen by anyone. Not by you, Vrika." He turned to me then, fangs flashing. "Nor you."

My throat tightened, tears burning at the back of my eyes. His argument was fair. Just because all the men I knew longed to be called by the Lavrika, didn't mean he wanted that destiny. I could even understand it. Unlike some of my friends, like Theresa and Camille who'd always wanted a mate, I was one of the humans to whom the idea of a mate really didn't hold that much appeal.

I couldn't force him to go with the Vrika.

"Alright," I choked out.

Lerokan looked down at me grimly. His expression, what I could see of it, slackened into surprise when I turned and walked away from him, directly towards the Vrika.

"Wait! What are you doing?" he called. I ignored him.

I'd asked Lerokan to help me, and he'd tried. If he couldn't take me any further, then I'd have to find another way.

I slowed, picking my way unsteadily over the rock of the valley until I finally came to a stop directly in front of the Vrika.

I stared in wonder for a long moment, unable to formulate words. Being this close to the massive holy creature made my breath catch, and made more tears threaten to spill from my eyes. Its body was long, winding, and serpentine, curled elegantly where it sat. Two translucent glowing wings nestled against its body, starry connections of bone webbed throughout the moonlit flesh. Its long neck was poised upwards, its wide, dragon-like head angling down to pierce me with vast, all-knowing eyes.

Those eyes flayed me. Made me feel puny and filthy and selfish. I was brutally aware of how little I had to offer the Vrika. No flowers to place in

offering, the way I would at the shrine in my parents' or nani's house. No water to wash its feet (though, I noticed now, it had no legs or feet).

Maybe it doesn't matter anyway. The Vrika wasn't a Hindu god. *Maybe Earthly forms of worship need not apply.*

"Please," I said, my voice shaking. "Please, would you take me back to my friends? Back to the people I came with?" I left out the second part, unable to form the words: *If they're still alive.*

The Vrika didn't move and made no answer.

"Please!" I cried, louder this time. All the worry I'd felt over what had transpired in the battle was growing larger and thornier, expanding in my ribcage.

But the Vrika still made no answer. At least, not a verbal one. It did finally move, though. It uncoiled its long tail from its body and beat its massive starlight wings, rising into the air.

My heart leapt. *It agreed! It's going to take me back!*

But it didn't.

It turned and carved a path upward, flying faster than such a huge thing should have been capable of. Half a heartbeat later, it was a mere echo on the air, the light of its body fading as it disappeared into the distance.

No!

For the third time that night, my knees gave out.

And for the third time, a strong set of hands stopped me from hitting the ground.

"You've managed to scare it off. Well done!"

Lerokan's voice was much more cheerful than it had been a few moments before. His hands gripped me under my armpits, holding my body up.

"I wasn't trying to scare it off. And I'm pretty sure that's not what happened," I grumbled. I sighed, shaking my head, exhaustion worming its way through my limbs. "Well, since it's gone now, can we try again? Head back for the battle scene now?"

Lerokan didn't answer. I felt his fingers tighten under my arms before he grew still as the stone around us.

"What? What is it?" I asked, forcing strength into my legs so I could hold up my own weight without Lerokan's help. Even when I made it obvious I could stand again without him, he didn't let go. I turned around in his arms, throwing him a questioning look.

His lips were pulled back from his fangs, his sight stars two vibrating points of intensity as he stared viciously up at the sky.

The expression was a fearsome one, and I was about to ask him what was wrong again when I became aware of a shift. A sudden quieting, followed by a keening in the distance. A crack of thunder shocked me so badly that I collapsed into Lerokan's arms. My heart crashed in my chest. *If I go into fight or flight mode one more time tonight I'm pretty sure I'm just going to keel over.*

The world around us burned with sudden explosive light. It was so terrible, so blinding, I half-wondered if a bomb had gone off somewhere. Another detrimental boom of thunder, directly overhead, made my skull scream.

Lerokan's movements were almost as explosive as the lightning burst had been. His hands snapped down to my waist, tightening before he hauled me up onto his shoulder. I choked and sputtered as the hard curve of his shoulder knocked the wind out of me.

I gasped, my head now upside-down over his back, my legs dangling down his front. I didn't have time (or the breath) to complain about the undignified position. Lerokan moved swiftly, leaping through the valley on long, surefooted legs.

We reached the mouth of the cave just as the wind picked up to disastrous speeds outside, hurling rocks and pebbles like bullets. Lerokan barely slowed as he entered the cave, sweeping his free arm down to snatch his quiver of arrows and my pack from the stone floor. He carried me deeper into the darkness and Breena followed.

As much as I was dying to get back to my group, I counted myself extremely lucky to have some shelter from the sudden dangerous storm outside. And as much as Lerokan and I had clashed so far, it was good not to be alone right now.

At least, that's how I felt until I realized that I was now trapped in an enclosed space with him.

And he was still fucking naked.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Lerokan



The cave went deep. This was a good thing. The Deep Sky dust storms could be brutal, and to be without shelter would be a death sentence. When the howl of wind had dulled to a muted battering and the thunder was suitably dimmed, I stopped. Having grown up in these mountains, I was used to traversing caves and stone. My eyesight did not fail me in darkness like this.

The same could not be said for the wiggly woman atop my shoulder.

“Where are we now? I can’t see a *bluddy* thing.”

“We’re in a large cave system,” I answered, easing her off of my shoulder and setting her down. I watched her closely, primed to reach out and grab her if she showed yet more signs of wobbliness in her limbs. But at least for now, she seemed steady upon her own feet.

This section of the cave was a large enough area with exceptionally high stone ceilings. The open space narrowed at the back and appeared to wind onward into further shadowy tunnels. I was satisfied that we weren’t deep enough below ground to be bothered by predators like the borog.

All in all, things could have been much worse.

I suppose I cannot complain too much about the Vrika, now. There was no way the sacred being hadn’t sensed the storm coming. It had forcibly directed us right into the shelter of this cave.

My kind feelings about the Vrika’s intentions soured.

It probably just wants to make sure I survive long enough for it to finally saddle me with a mate.

Whatever the reasons, we were here now. We’d have to make the best of it. A storm like this could last hours, days, or even longer.

Food might become a problem, I thought scratching idly at my ear, bent under the bone bowl of the skull on my head.

There should at least be felkora and their eggs in here to sustain us for now.

I sighed, mentally doubling the food I'd have to provide now that I had Priyanka with me. She was small, but judging by the amount of up spill she'd produced, she probably ate like a braxilk. Breena could handle herself and could easily hunt in the larger caves for small creatures. But something told me Priyanka would be about as skilled at hunting as she was at flying. So, essentially useless.

"It's cold," she said, further confirming my impressions of her weakness. I sniffed the air and stilled, letting my skin take note of the temperature.

It wasn't that cold. Comfortably cool at most.

"You have layers of clothing on and still it is not enough?" I asked, about to remind her that *my* only clothing was now lying sullied and soiled out in the dust because of her.

"I'm *human*. I can't help it!"

Human? What in the piercing peaks of the Deep Sky did that mean?

"I will build a fire," I said. "On one condition."

"What?" The word was equally suspicious and hopeful.

"I want answers. About who you are, who you came with. Why you're here at all." It was all well and good to try my best to ignore her and her perplexing features and origins. But it looked like we were going to be spending some time together, now. I could no longer dump her back with her people and forget this had ever happened. My curiosity about her was quickly outpacing my need to appear impassive and unbothered.

"Deal," she muttered. In the darkness, I watched her settle herself on her rump. Immediately, Breena sat, too, directly behind Priyanka. Priyanka leaned back into Breena's warm solidity, sighing.

"I suppose that means you are not helping forage, then," I said to my mount.

I did not need her to close her six eyes, ignoring me, to be reminded that she'd flown her heart out for us tonight. Breena had earned her rest.

"Alright. I'll be back soon," I said. I dropped Priyanka's pack and then I slipped my bow off of my body, holding it ready in my grasp, before slinging my quiver over my shoulder. As I turned and headed for the narrow tunnel that led further into the caves, I stopped.

"Here," I said, walking swiftly back to the other two. I took a blade from my chest – the smallest one I had – and held it out handle-first to Priyanka.

"What is it? I can't see you."

“It’s a sweet bar of moonbark, a gift to honour your unending patience and wisdom,” I said with a slight sigh.

Flat silence met my remark, and she didn’t lift her hand.

“It’s a blade,” I said.

“What’s a blade?”

Yet another word we do not share.

“A blade,” I repeated. “A knife. A dagger. The smallest sword-like thing I could find to fit in your absurdly tiny hand. A weapon. Something sharp to stab someone with.”

“I get it!” she said, cutting me off and raising her hand.

“You get what? You haven’t even gotten the weapon yet.”

“No, I mean, I understand.”

“Well, good. Took enough explaining to get you there.”

There came a few mumbled words about who exactly the sharp end of my blade would be meant for that I did not appreciate. But despite the obvious and imminent danger to my own person, I passed the blade into her hand. As I did so, my fingers brushed her palm. *Smooth as caveworm silk. You wouldn’t even need a blade to cut skin like that. The barest brush of a claw would do it.* Inhaling sharply, I snatched my hand away, curling my claws into my own tough and calloused palm.

My curiosity grew, pummelling me like the winds of the storm outside.

“I will go now,” I said quickly. The faster I prepared the fire, the faster I’d get answers.

“OK. Lerokan...”

I stiffened. That was the first time she’d said my name without a hateful sort of defiance. I ignored the unnerving way the sounds traipsed down my spine to the base of my tail, choosing instead to focus on the way her accent had absolutely butchered the syllables.

“Do you think I’ll actually need to use this?” She raised the blade in front of her face. “What would I be up against? I can’t even see anything.”

“Hmm. How’s your hearing?” I asked brightly.

“Not good enough to make up for total blindness!”

“That is bad news indeed. Ah well! I’m off, then!”

I turned from her, grinning as she sputtered.

“Wait!” she cried. A clumsy shuffling sound let me know she was getting to her feet. “I’ll come with you then!”

Ah. Well, this has backfired. I was rather looking forward to a few moments without her. I needed some time to think without her incessant questions ringing in my ears.

I turned back to her, settling my hand instinctively on the top of her head.

“Do not worry,” I said, giving her a little pat that seemed to incense her, her brows drawing together sharply. “We are not deep enough for the truly brutal beasts to sniff us out. The biggest thing up here is Breena, and she’s a worthy fighter in her own right.”

The fearsome set of Priyanka’s brows relaxed somewhat.

“OK, then. Just... Be careful.”

“You too,” I replied, withdrawing my hand from her head. “I do not relish the idea of pulling my own blade out of my guts tonight. So, when you hear someone approach you, be careful it is not me before you do anything hasty. Though I’m sure your aim is terrible, I won’t risk my life on that assumption.”

She shook her head back and forth in an odd little gesture and gave a weary chuckle. *So, she can laugh, then. And not just when delighted by Breena’s nuzzling.*

I watched her as she returned to her spot. She sat down and leaned back against Breena’s side once more. She drew her knees up towards her chest, holding the blade with both hands atop them.

She looked... So tiny. Fragile. Especially dwarfed as she was by Breena’s bulk. But an undeniable determination squared the set of her shoulders and tightened her grip on the blade’s bone handle.

She won’t need to use that blade, I reminded myself.

My words to her had been true – she’d face no real danger in this cave without me, especially with Breena at her side.

It was an annoyingly comforting thought.

I’ve made myself responsible for her and now my concern grows too deep.

I knew it. Could feel it.

Because it was only the chafing comfort of that truth – the truth that she’d be safe – that allowed me to finally leave her.



CHAPTER NINE

Priya



Lerokan was gone a long time. At least, it felt that way. It was a bit hard to tell. I didn't have a watch or any human tech to pass the time or to keep track of it. I just sat on my immensely sore bum, shivering and staring into darkness that was so thick it seemed as if the knife in my hand should have been able to slash it into velvety ribbons.

I thought about untying my bedding hides from the bottom of my pack but worried that if I got too warm and comfortable, I'd fall asleep. Trying to sleep with Lerokan present would be bad enough, but it would be my only safe option. Sleeping on my own in an alien cave where I couldn't see and could probably barely defend myself, even with this knife, would be a shockingly bad idea.

Breana seems to think it's just fine.

I couldn't see her well, and who even knew if braxilk did sleep? But her positioning, from what I could feel behind me, suggested one of repose. She kept her wings snugly pinned against her sides, her long neck bent to rest her head on top of the wing that was directly behind my back. Her breathing was deep and even, and I was grateful for the bit of warmth I got from her large body.

"You are my new favourite alien," I whispered to the sleeping giant, smiling. I'd never had a pet back home, but I wondered if this is what it would have been like. The Sea Sand guys had their irkdu, of course, but the irkdu didn't seem to have as much intelligence and personality as the braxilk species. When Breana looked at you, you could tell there was some kind of alien cleverness in her gaze.

I sighed, adjusting my position and wincing. Now that I was cold and still, the tumultuous nature of the night was making itself known in my body. Loudly. My legs shook from exertion, and every tremor made my thighs and backside shoot with pain. I'd been so tense on Breana's back that even my

chest, back, and arm muscles were feeling the effects now. And no doubt my lower half would be mottled with bruises by morning.

A fire would be nice. Really nice. The next best thing to a hot bath and a painkiller.

Oh!

I had some painkillers in my first aid kit.

Almost tearing up at the joy of that fact, I pressed the knife into my left hand and started rummaging around in the pack with my right. I realized quickly that I wouldn't be able to figure out what was what in the darkness by touch alone – there were a couple of different small bottles in there.

Have to wait for that fire...

If it ever gets here.

I tried not to be too pissy. As I went over the night's events, I had to admit that Lerokan had already stuck his neck out on multiple occasions to help me. He was probably tired, too, yet he was now off exploring the caves to find something to make a fire with just because I needed one, not him.

He really is a decent bloke, despite the snark.

Normally, I wouldn't be so testy with somebody like him. I was generally known as one of the quieter humans, often more absorbed in my work than any drama or arguments. But the circumstances of our meeting hadn't been ideal, and the stress of not knowing what had happened to my friends had pushed me over my usually stable edge.

When he gets back, I'm going to be nicer to him, I decided. If he makes that possible, that is... I was already imagining all his flippant, sarcastic remarks and feeling my blood pressure rise slightly. I hadn't had many conversations with Sea Sand men, but I'd always gotten the sense that they didn't really get sarcasm. Lerokan certainly did. Whether that was another difference of culture between the Sea Sands and the mountains, or just a quirk of his own personality, I couldn't tell.

A noise at the back of the cave had me gripping the knife with two hands once more. In my haste, and not seeing what I was doing, I sliced the tip of my index finger. Gasping, I curled my right hand into a fist, keeping the knife ready in my left hand.

“Do not stab me,” called a familiar voice. “It is merely I, mighty Lerokan, bringer of fire to the darkness.”

I lowered the knife, sagging in relief. Behind me, Breena stirred slightly, giving a little *bvvvvrp* sound in sleepy greeting.

“You don’t need to worry about that,” I groaned, feeling my hand grow slippery with blood.

I sensed Lerokan moving towards me – good grief he was quiet.

“What’s that smell?” he asked.

“What smell?” I asked, rather defensively. I knew I probably smelled alright. I’d had a quick cleaning with some talka gel when I’d been back with the others. *Feels like an eternity ago, even though it hasn’t even been a day since I last saw them...*

“Smells sharp and bitter. The scent was not here last time.”

A clattering let me know Lerokan had dumped some stuff out of his arms to the floor of the cave. I was vaguely aware of him moving about but couldn’t keep track of where he was.

Until he spoke from directly in front of my face.

“It’s you. The scent is coming from you. It doesn’t smell right. What is it? I am intimately familiar with the scent of your up spill, now, so I know it is not that.”

His mention of vomit made me think of bodily fluids, and I realized just what it was that he smelled.

“It’s probably my hand. I cut it on the knife,” I said. Using my uninjured left hand, I blindly untied my bedding hides to help stem the flow of blood. I wouldn’t be able to do much without light, though. I didn’t even want to use the hides directly on the wound to stem the bleeding for fear of infection.

“Where? Which hand?” Lerokan’s voice was uncharacteristically serious, a barking growl. His fingers closed around my wrists like vises.

“Hey!” I cried. He ignored my complaint, dragging my hands upward between our faces.

He let my left hand drop (presumably when he realized that one was fine) and used both his hands to hold my right one. Pain pulsed in time with my heartbeat, but though his touch was firm, it was surprisingly gentle. And warm.

“Even I cannot see the wound well enough in this light. Hold on.” He bodily pulled me sideways, then guided my elbow to rest on Breena’s body so that my hand was held up at the level of my head. “Keep it up there,” he commanded. A swish of cave air let me know he had turned and moved swiftly away from me.

A few sounds and sparks later, and I could suddenly see again.

The fire was small at first, but after the pitch-blackness, it was almost blinding. I blinked, getting used to the light in the space as Lerokan built up the fire with deft, expert movements.

I turned my attention to my hand. My stomach dropped when I saw how much blood there was - my injured finger and palm were running with rivers of red.

The hand has lots of blood vessels, I reminded myself stoically. And you haven't been able to stem the bleeding with anything clean yet. It might not be too bad.

Well, I could stem the bleeding now.

At least, I would have been able to if Lerokan hadn't jogged over, crouched down, and snatched my hand again.

He gripped my wrist, his jaw set, his mouth quirking downward.

"I have no Vrika's blood," he said quietly. All the usual traces of sarcasm and joking were gone from his voice and his expression. He looked and sounded as grave as the skull he wore over his face.

"I have the next best thing," I said, hoping I was right and my first aid kit would be enough.

Lerokan didn't seem like he was going to let go of my hand anytime soon. He was staring at the blood like it was something he could fight. Like he was getting ready to do battle with my wound. The fire steadily grew, brightening the space further, and I had enough light to figure out what was in my pack with only one hand. A few moments later, I'd grasped the first aid kit.

I tried, unsuccessfully, to open the small plastic box with only my left hand.

"Can you open this, please?" I asked. Like Lerokan's, my tone had shifted, too. The panicked demanding of the evening had faded from my voice. Now there was just quiet need. A tired, sincere plea from one person to another.

Lerokan snapped his sight stars up to my face, apparently shocked by my tone and use of the word "please." *He probably thinks it's a sign I'm about to die or something.*

He took a moment to stare intensely at the first aid kit, but if he had questions about it or what it was (which I was sure he did) he kept them to himself, focusing on getting it open.

I was about to explain how the latch worked when, with a grunt, he successfully opened it. Unfortunately, the guy didn't know his own strength, at least when dealing with human stuff. Bottles and other items exploded out of the kit as it opened, scattering to the stone in a clatter of clinking glass, metal, and plastic. My heart stopped as I stared down with wide eyes. I breathed out shakily when I saw that nothing had broken or burst open as it fell. Thankfully, the sterile gauze was inside a sealed plastic bag, so it hadn't gotten dirty, either. *The last thing I need is to get sepsis out here.*

Lerokan had already busied himself collecting each small item from the floor. He placed them with hurried but focused care back in the kit before holding the kit out to me, splayed open. The two sides reminded me of a wingspan.

All that flying today. I have wings on the brain.

"I do not know what to do with any of this," Lerokan muttered.

"Well, I do. You just hold it open, please." I grabbed the bottle of wound disinfectant, squeezing it between my knees and unscrewing the cap. Once open, I slowly poured the stinging stuff on the tip of my finger, gritting my teeth against the burning pain.

I took out some gauze, drenched it with the solution, then cleaned up my hand, trying to get a sense of how bad things were.

Lerokan edged closer and closer to me as I worked. It almost seemed as if he weren't aware of it. His head dipped, leaning downward as if pulled towards my wound by magnetic force.

The wound wasn't too bad. It had bled a lot, making it look much worse than it was. It was only about a centimetre long, and not too terribly deep. Hopefully, it would stop bleeding with the gauze and I wouldn't need a stitch.

I'm right-handed. The only person who could put in a stitch or two is...

Oh, no thank you.

"It does not look bad to my eyes. But you are so smidgey, and your blood is red, which cannot be good."

I laughed shakily.

"My blood is always red," I told him, pressing gauze tightly to the cut.

Lerokan looked at me like I'd grown a second head. *I need to remember that we're the aliens on this planet.* I'd gotten so used to living on this planet that it was becoming all too easy to forget.

"Your blood is always red?" Even with his mask, I could tell there was a disturbed wrinkling of his nose happening. "The colour of poison..."

“Oh. Yeah. The axrekal berries? I guess you guys have those in the mountains too, then?”

“Do you mean axroka? Yes. Brutal red poison.”

“Well, just don’t drink any of it and you’ll be fine,” I told him primly.

He made a cartoonish face of affronted disgust.

“Certainly not. What kind of man with good sense would lick poison-coloured blood off of a strange female he found?”

I snorted. I was pretty sure that exact scenario had happened with one of my human friends. In my exhaustion, I couldn’t remember who.

I started wrapping the gauze tightly around my finger, but realized quickly I’d need help to tape it in place.

“Grab that white roll in there,” I directed Lerokan, nodding down at the small circle of medical tape. Lerokan placed the first aid kit down on the stone floor and then took out the tape. It took a couple of rounds of me explaining what to do for him to get the hang of it. But after a few false starts, he pulled the tape from the roll.

“Wait, wait, not that much!”

He’d unspooled more than a metre of tape, now. He cast me an unsure look, and in that moment let go of the roll of tape. The weight of the roll caused it to unroll even further. Lerokan hissed something unintelligible, flailing to catch hold of the tape roll and yelping in confusion when the long ribbon of it he’d pulled stuck to his fingers.

Every time he pulled the tape off of one finger or part of his hand, it stuck to another.

“What nonsense is this?” he grunted, swiping at the sticky strip and shredding it with his claws.

“Careful! I need some of the tape to actually survive so I can use it!”

“Then tell it to unhand me!”

I pressed my lips together and started to shake.

For the first time tonight, I wasn’t trembling because of fear or anxiety or pain.

It was laughter.

It burst out of me in a long, broken howl. I couldn’t stop it, couldn’t quiet it. It got louder and louder until my stomach muscles burned and tears dampened my gaze.

Taking a quivering breath, still chuckling, I shook my head.

“See?” I said, grinning. “I get the sense you think I’m just some useless human you’ve had to drag around all night. But I have skills, too, you know. Like using tape properly.”

“If I am incompetent with this *tape*,” he said sharply, “it must be because of your completely inadequate instructions.”

That sent me into another dizzying fit of laughter because it was so comically untrue. I’d told him the stuff was sticky – it was meant to be!

When my second bout of laughter died down, I told him to just start over.

With a resigned sort of sigh, he managed to untangle himself, using his fangs to unstick the tape from his hands. Once free, he threw the now-ripped and dusty strips into the fire, looking as if he’d just vanquished a mortal enemy.

“OK. Let’s try that again. Just use the tips of your claws, maybe. Try not to touch the sticky side too much this time. And-”

Lerokan turned back to me and held up a hand.

“No. No more instructions. That experience has taught me more than your words ever could.”

“If you say so,” I said with another small laugh. I watched him closely, half-expecting a repeat of what had just happened.

But no matter how cocky the guy seemed, he hadn’t exaggerated just now. He did in fact seem to be a quick learner. This time, things went much more smoothly. He unrolled a small portion of tape with his claws, his sight stars thrumming and laser-focused on the task. Once a decent length had been pulled, he raised the roll up to his face, biting into the strip of tape. My eyes lingered on his mouth, his teeth, the decisive movement of his strong jaw as he tore the tape from the roll.

Lerokan crouched in front of me with powerful grace, long legs bending, muscles bunching. I cleared my throat, forcing my gaze back to my own hand, trying to keep my mind off the fact that in all the commotion we still hadn’t found or fashioned clothing for him. *That’s next on the agenda...*

“Finger,” he grunted.

I adjusted the gauze, making sure it was wrapped properly, then held it all together as best I could while making room for Lerokan to wrap the tape.

“Just in case it needs to be said, the sticky side goes inwards,” I said. I was mostly kidding, but I didn’t want any more accusations of having given crappy directions.

Lerokan didn't seem to appreciate the note, cocking his head slightly and making a growly *hmmph* sound that felt a lot like a human's dismissive "uh huh."

"Just making sure," I murmured.

He worked with an impressive quickness, his movements steady and sure. I hissed when pressure made the cut pulse with pain.

He stopped instantly.

"Too tight?" His sight stars bored into me.

I shook my head.

"No. It's good. It will stop the bleeding. Thank you for checking." It was nice to have him wanting to help, to have him be concerned.

"It is not for your benefit I ask, but my own," he grunted. "Because if I'd done it wrong and had to unroll yet more *tape* to start this all over again... Well, you'd have to rely on Breena to help you in that case. Because I would be too busy flinging myself off the nearest mountain peak."

"You are so dramatic," I muttered, grinning once more. "And for the record, I don't think I believe you. I think you really are at least a little bit concerned about me."

My words fell heavily between us, and awkwardness descended. I'd poked a hole in his brash joking words, deflating the tentative ease that had grown between us.

Lerokan finished wrapping the tape and then stood, thankfully turning and striding away before I got too much of his cock in my face.

"Well," he said gruffly, crouching on the other side of the fire and fiddling with something on the floor there, "I'm the one who took you from the battle, after all. Don't suppose I can let you die now, after all that."

I brushed the fingers of my left hand over the tape job he'd done, nodding wordlessly. Then I pushed off of Breena. I scooted forward on my bum until I was closer to the fire. I couldn't tell what he'd started the fire with, since it had been burning for some time, now. But I could see long, tubular black things piled in a conical shape, allowing for the current blaze.

I held my hands out to the flames, letting the heat work its way into my bones and sighing.

I looked up, meeting Lerokan's eyes above the blaze.

"Thank you, Lerokan," I said, meaning it. "I realize we've gotten off to a rocky start. And I'm still really worried about my friends. But I do appreciate you trying to help me. Trying to get me back to them, building the fire,

helping me with the gauze and tape.” I could have ended up with someone violent, someone terrible. I could have ended up completely alone after the battle, or trapped in the jaws of a predator. Instead, I’d gotten stuck with a bit of a blustering goofball, but more and more it was becoming obvious that he was a good chap.

“How much blood have you lost?” he said suspiciously.

“I mean it! I’m not delirious or something. I appreciate everything you’ve been doing. Thank you.”

He watched me for a long moment, the flames dancing between us. Then his face melted into that heart-stopping crooked grin of his.

“Well, good. I am glad you finally recognize how grateful you should be. And you can add ‘procuring sustenance’ to my long list of good deeds.”

“It wasn’t that long a list,” I said raising a brow. “Although, food would be really good, now that you mention it.”

I couldn’t exactly say that I was hungry, but after throwing up and the exertion of the evening, I knew I needed to eat.

Lerokan rose, circling around the fire, crouching once more.

“Here. Felkora eggs,” he said. In his hand, he held what looked like eggs – huge and blue. “They’ve been cooking on the other side of the fire.” He gave me a deadpan look. “And *just in case it needs to be said*, the shell has to come off before you eat it.”

“Alright, alright,” I said. “Thanks.”

He placed two eggs into my outstretched hands. Each one was easily the size of my fist. I was glad to see it was something eggy. I mostly ate rakdo meat and human stuff scrounged from the ship. Dakrival meat, which was a Sea Sand staple, was too close to beef for my liking, something I never ate back on Earth.

“Do you need any valok gel?” I asked, putting down the eggs and grabbing a valok husk from my pack. “I have some.”

“What is *valok*?”

I held it up for him to see.

“Ah. You mean valikir plant. That’s alright. I found the mountain version in the caves and brought some back.”

“Sounds good,” I said. I got to work peeling the shell off my eggs. Thankfully, it wasn’t too difficult, even with my bandaged hand. Lerokan returned to the other side of the fire and sat down. I was glad to have the flames once again blocking my view of his nakedness.

“Hey, Lerokan?”

He looked up from his own eggs.

“When I said my friends call me Priya... You can call me Priya, too.”

“Because I’m your friend now?”

For some reason, the question made me feel all warm and itchy.

“Well, yes. I guess so,” I stammered. “Don’t make it weird or I’ll take it back!”

“Fine,” he replied. “But you should know what my friends call me, then. It is only fair.”

“Oh? And what would that be?”

His mouth quirked up, his dimple appearing as he answered. “Lerokan the courageous, Lerokan the virile, Lerokan of the deadly aim, Lerokan the-”

“Well, as your new friend, I am telling you right now I’m not calling you any of those ridiculous things,” I shot back, cutting him off.

But there was no bite to my words.

Just warmth.



CHAPTER TEN

Lerokan



After eating, I showed Priya two smaller caves in the tunnel at the back that could be used for passing water or other functions of the body. Once that was done, we returned to the blaze of the fire. This cave was large, with a high, conical ceiling that led up into a crack of sky, so no chance of smoke sickness.

The Vrika certainly could have chased us into a less desirable cave, that is for certain...

On my initial exploration, I'd found lots of supplies for fires, as well as mountain valikir to drink and good options for food. We could weather the storm well here and then try once more to get Priya to get back to her people.

If they're still alive...

And if they're not?

I glanced over at her, rubbing my chin, wondering what I would do then.

Priya was seated beside the fire. She shucked off the strange cloak she wore, revealing slim brown arms, delicate shoulders, and...

"Are you with child?" I blurted, tail jerking in surprise, my gaze catching on the small but undeniable curves of breasts.

Her dark sight stars shot up to mine.

"What? No. What are you..." She slammed her arms over her chest.

"Don't look at me like that!"

"I wasn't looking at you any sort of way," I hissed. "But I could not help but notice the rather obvious sign of pregnancy... *there...*" I flapped my hand vaguely in the direction of her chest.

"It's not a sign of pregnancy for my people," she said, snatching up her cloak and holding it against her front like a shield.

"Well, you cannot blame me for noticing something right in front of me," I muttered. "Besides, do not pretend like it does not take all your effort to keep your gaze off my cock every time I turn towards you."

Her eyes went huge, her mouth falling open then closing several times before she sputtered, “Well that’s because you’re *bluddy* naked! We need to make you a new cock cloth!” She twisted in her seated position, grabbing for her bedding hides. “Here. You can use my bedding hides. I’m the one who *barfed* all over you, after all.”

“I’m not going to use fabric from your bedding hides,” I scoffed. “Thank you for the offer, but I don’t want to hear you moaning about how cold your feet are because your hides are shorter than they once were. I’ll use my own.”

Her expression softened. “OK. If you’re sure that’s alright.”

“It is.”

I unrolled my bedding hides, noting the difference between hers and mine. Hers were thinner but looked durable, brown and pliable. I did not know what sort of beast produced hides like those. My own hides were grey, with a thin, fluffy layer of broilka wool. I selected a swatch of hide that would work and began cutting and fashioning the garment.

As I worked, my sight stars flitted over to Priya between slices of my knife. Now that I was occupied with something other than, in her mind, ogling her chest, she’d let her cloak fall back down to the ground. Currently, she was taking down her hair. Once her hair was loose, she combed her slender fingers through it, sighing as black waves tumbled about her shoulders.

She was so different from my kind, but I couldn’t deny that any woman of the Deep Sky would be considered quite beautiful with hair like Priya’s. So long and thick and dark. I found I couldn’t look away as the firelight worshipped the strands, burnishing them and making them gleam.

I let my gaze trail over her other features. Now that she wasn’t sick or frightened out of her wits or glaring at me like she wanted to murder me with the power of her eyes alone, I could get a better sense of what she really looked like. When I’d first encountered her, I’d thought there was maybe even something wrong with her, her face was so shocking. But that reaction was wrong, I realized now. It was just my initial impression born out of the jarring nature of our meeting. Now that I could look at her face in the quiet firelight, I could admit that her features all seemed to fit together into a foreign sort of harmony. A narrow jaw that led up to tiny little shells of ears, smooth brown cheeks, dark brows and all that lovely hair. The eyes would take some getting used to. Not being able to track the movement of many sight stars made her harder to read.

Well, I'll never need to guess when she is displeased, at least. She'll certainly let me know it.

Those eyes of hers were focused on the fire, now, the light glimmering in their depths. Her expression morphed into something flat and grim. Nearby, Breena shuffled her wings in her sleep, giving a throaty little murmur. Priya's expression changed instantly at the sound, her lips pulling into a small smile, her cheeks bunching prettily.

Prettily?!

I forced my eyes back to my work. I had a suitable piece of cloth, now, and got to work scraping the fluffy wool away with my knife so the garment would be smooth. Once finished, I tossed the scrapped fibres of wool into the fire, stood, and tied my new cock cloth about my hips.

Priya moved her head up and down in a gesture that seemed to indicate approval. Satisfied that I would no longer have her griping about my nudity, I sat back down across the fire from her, crossing my legs at the ankles.

"I have built the fire and clothed myself," I said. "Now it is time for my questions."

Priya sighed but did her up-and-down head motion once more.

"Alright. That's fair. Why don't I give you the big picture, and you can ask questions as we go?"

This was agreeable.

So, she began.

She spoke of things I could not fathom and had trouble imagining. Other worlds and flying carcasses called *ships*. Other tribes, too, including huge scaled men from a place she called the Bitter Sea. I would not have so easily believed her, if not for how she was obviously not of these lands. Plus, the fact I'd seen the other men, including the Bitter Sea warrior, with my own sight stars.

"How many other warriors are out there, allied with you?" I asked, already wondering about what threat they might pose to my people. Gahn Errok may have banished me, but that was still the tribe of my birth. My aunt Tilka, my late mother's sister and my favourite living relative, still lived with the tribe in the mountains.

"I'm not actually sure how many there are. I'm sure Chapman could tell you. But with all five tribes of the Sea Sands, plus the Bitter Sea warriors, I'd say maybe two hundred? But that's just my guess. There's probably more. Plus, there's the women, the kids..."

Two hundred warriors...

There were about one hundred strong warriors fighting for Gahn Errok. Although if these other men tried to attack, they'd also have to fight Gahn Thaleo's tribe, too. Gahn Thaleo's tribe was smaller, and he was no ally of Gahn Errok, but he and his men would fight to the death to protect these mountains.

"We're not planning to attack," Priya said, breaking through my thoughts. "We came to meet whoever was out here in peace. And hopefully secure an alliance for the real threat."

The real threat, it turned out, was Priya's own people. I felt my lips drawing back from my fangs in a territorial snarl as she described the motivations of the Gahns of her world.

"Even with this potential attack," I said, forcing my voice into something low and controlled, "you would not have gained an easy ally with either Gahn Errok or Gahn Thaleo. Even less so if you'd asked both of them to join your ranks, for the hatred between them runs deep. These Sea Sand Gahns must be soft indeed, to so easily put aside their territories and histories of bloodshed to live together at the..."

"Cliffs of Uruzai," she reminded me. "And, no, they're definitely not soft. It was *not* easy. There are some differences between you and your culture and the Sea Sands, but there are also a lot of similarities. You do not want to mess with the Sea Sand Gahns."

"So then how did this alliance take shape?" The idea of Gahn Errok and Gahn Thaleo being persuaded to ally with each other, live alongside one another, was beyond farfetched. If these Sea Sand Gahns were of a similar sort, what could have convinced them? Even the threat Priya spoke of would likely not be enough. Each Gahn would likely choose to remain in his own territory and fight for his own people should the time come.

Priya had gone still and quiet and she now avoided my gaze.

"What?" I asked, placing my elbows upon my knees and leaning forward. The heat of the fire blazed over my skin, sparks snapping in the air. "Why do you hesitate?"

"Well... I don't know why this is so awkward to talk about but... You know how you have the Vrika? There's one in the Sea Sands, too, called the Lavrika. There's even a Bitter Sea one called the Kell. But, basically..." She paused, her mouth twisting as she scratched at her scalp. "Basically, the

Lavrika has assigned every Sea Sand Gahn, and some Bitter Sea warriors, mates from among the *human* women.”

Silence descended, not plush and cushiony as silence sometimes was, but with the force of a hammer.

“Impossible,” I finally croaked, the information she’d just given me reverberating through me. “Unless the men you speak of are half the size of normal warriors.”

Her brow furrowed, perhaps in confusion.

“No. Didn’t you see any of the men I was with when you flew over the battle?”

Cursed skies, she was right. They’d all seemed like healthy, well-proportioned men. And that beast, who must have been a Bitter Sea warrior, was larger than any man I’d ever seen.

What powers do these new women possess to take such mates? I wondered, dragging my eyes critically over Priya’s small form. My eyes were drawn to her pelvic region and lower abdomen, suspicions mounting that she was somehow larger on the inside than she appeared on the outside.

“It’s not impossible,” she repeated, shifting under the intensity of my gaze. “Would you stop staring like that? In fact, the two other women with me had mates in the group.”

Ah. The two small figures who, unlike Priya, had had men at their sides. I’d assumed they’d been young boys with their fathers.

“So, the fact that the Sea Sand Gahns all had mates from among your tribe meant they were all willing to leave their lands and ally with each other?”

The sacred mate bond is frightful indeed. I am even more glad I have not succumbed to it now.

“That’s right. The Gahns didn’t stand a chance. *Human* women can be notoriously stubborn.”

“Shocking. Never would have guessed such a thing,” I mused dryly.

Priya smirked at my words, then smiled more sincerely.

“Plus, we like to stick together. We told the Sea Sand tribes it was all of us or none of us.” A flicker of pain passed over her face. *She’s probably thinking of the ones we left behind in the battle.*

“Is it OK if we sleep now?” A weary grief had seeped into her voice. “I can answer more questions tomorrow.”

“That is agreeable,” I replied. I had more than enough stunning new information to chew on this night. I rolled out the remainder of my bedding hides and Priya did the same, snuggling into hers until she was entirely hidden but for a few dark locks of escaped hair. Breena woke enough to shuffle closer to Priya, draping the tip of a protective wing over my strange companion’s little body.

For some unknown reason, the scene of the two of them together made my chest squeeze.

Whatever the feeling was, I masked it with barbed tongues.

“So, I am truly no longer your master, then. And I cannot even count on your warmth to sleep now, Breena? Woe is Lerokan.”

I didn’t need Breena’s warmth to sleep comfortably, especially in the cave with the fire (dying down now, but still emitting wafts of golden heat). But Priya didn’t know that. Her voice piped up from somewhere in the tight roll of bedding hides, muffled by the fabric.

“She has two wings, you know. Just go on the other side.”

Another chest squeeze.

I have been away from my tribe too long and it is starting to get to me, I decided. Because the idea of joining the two of them and sleeping beside someone who spoke with more than just six expressive eyes and the toss of a beak filled me with...

Longing.

Being banished from my people was beginning to affect me more than I’d realized. I hadn’t felt especially lonely over the past 62 days, especially with Breena at my side. And I’d always figured somehow, someday, I’d be granted permission to return to the tribe even without taking a mate anyway, so my exile and the accompanying loss had never felt permanent. But then what was this bone-deep ache that drew me to where Priya slept?

I pulled my mask more firmly down against my face as if to physically block the unnerving sensation.

“No. I will sleep nearer where we entered the cave.” I’d explored the back areas and tunnels enough to know there were no predators to threaten us there. But there was always the chance that the storm could cease while we slept, and a threat could enter the cave from the outside. Like another of Gahn Thaleo’s warriors. Or a bobxkill.

I dragged my bedding hides over to the other end of the cave so that I’d be ready to greet anyone or anything who happened upon us.

As I settled into my hides, I glanced over at Priya and Breena once more. The two of them laid utterly still. Priya had likely already joined Breena in sleep.

Except she spoke once more, shattering that illusion.

“Good tail, Lerokan,” she called sleepily.

I snorted, rising up on my elbow as I responded.

“I do have a very good tail. Thank you for noticing.”

A slight wiggle of the hides accompanied Priya’s next words, and I grinned, perfectly able to picture her expression of irritation in my mind’s eye.

“What are you talking about? I just wanted to say good tail. Or... *Shit.*”

“I think you mean good *night*,” I prompted, still grinning. “Although if you wish to give compliments to any of my other parts, I will not stop you.”

She ignored my words, choosing to mutter to herself. “Tail and night... Interesting. I guess they’re both at the end of something? Wish *cee cee* were here, she’d probably love this...”

I laid down once more, adjusting the straps and blades across my back to be more comfortable. Despite all the activity of the evening, I was not quite ready to doze yet. I fixed my eyes on the dying fire, beginning to untangle all the shocking tales Priya had told me of her past, her people, these other Gahns.

So, when Priya spoke once more, this time most quietly of all, I almost missed it.

“Good night, Lerokan.”

My sight stars flicked over to the tight tube of hides that was her.

“Good night, Priya.”



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Priya



I woke with a cry as I slammed to the ground. My breath tore in and out of me as I fought to figure out where I was. I was certain I'd been falling. The cold wind whipping past my face had felt so real.

I cried out again when a deep voice spoke from directly above me. "What's wrong with you?"

The question felt familiar, an echo of something someone had asked me last night. And the voice was familiar too...

I wrenched tightly-wound hides away from my face, scraping hair back from my forehead. Lerokan's face loomed over me. He was in his usual crouching position, elbows perched on his knees, thighs spread. Thank goodness, the thing between those thighs was now safely covered.

"Nothing's wrong with me," I muttered, taking a shaky breath and trying to will my heart to calm down. Waking up from dreams like that was the worst, especially when coupled with the reality that you actually could have fallen to your death the night before.

"Also, is it rude to ask a question that way in your tribe?" I said, sitting up. "It's considered rude among my people. You could ask, 'Are you alright?' instead."

I worked my arms out of the tight casing of bedding hides now that I was sitting up. I thrust the hides down my body, like peeling the wrapper down an ice lolly.

"Why would I ask if you are alright?" Lerokan said, tilting his head slightly. "You made a ridiculous sound and looked like you were fighting the hides. It was obvious you were *not* alright. Therefore, it was more efficient to ask what was wrong with you."

"Alright, alright, Mister I-Have-An-Answer-for-Everything," I replied. I rubbed viciously at my eyes. "Sorry if I woke you up. I was dreaming that... Well. Just, sorry."

Lerokan sliced his hand through the air, a gesture I recognized from the Sea Sand men that usually meant “no.”

“You did not wake me. I have been awake for some time. It is morning.”

“It is?!”

I kicked the hides off then squirmed completely out of their casing. I shoved my feet into my boots and stood. I realized then that I didn’t have to crawl out from under a large, feathered wing.

“Where’s Breena?”

“Off hunting in the deeper caves for her breakfast,” Lerokan replied, standing now that I was up. Cor, the bloke was so bloody tall. I knew that all the alien men were. But other than riding on Kohka’s back on the journey here, I hadn’t had a reason to get very close to any of them. I gulped, feeling suddenly awkward, taking a small step back.

“Oh!” I cried, whipping my head around to search for the way we’d come in. Lerokan had rebuilt the fire a bit, so there was light enough to see. “Is the storm-”

“Still raging,” Lerokan said.

My breath fizzled out of me, leaving me feeling rather like a deflated balloon. *Shit*. I’d hoped the weather would have improved since last night so we could try to find my friends again.

“It’s really bad, is it? No chance of flying through it today?”

“Come on,” Lerokan said, sweeping a clawed hand down to the floor to grab his bow and quiver of arrows. “If my word is not enough, I can show you.”

I nodded tightly. He’d helped me out and proven himself trustworthy. But I still needed to see for myself. Really see if there was no way out of here today.

We left the main cave we’d slept in, winding back through the tunnel that had brought us here. Partway, I mentally kicked myself for not having brought a piece of whatever was burning in the fire to act as a torch. After the firelight, the tunnel was darkness of unfathomable solidity. I blinked and squinted and widened my eyes to no avail. Nothing changed the uniform velvet black before me.

While the darkness didn’t change, the sounds did. The distant, dimmed battering of wind and sand and rock became sharper. Louder.

“Ouch!” I cried in English when I collided face-first with stone.

“Forgot you were blind as a caveworm in the dark,” said the stone. I’d walked into Lerokan’s broad back. Fingers closed around my shoulder, leading me presumably around to his side.

“This is as far as we go,” he said.

“Why? I thought we were going to see the storm.”

“That is the storm.”

I looked forward once more. If I squinted hard enough, I thought I could just make out a whipping motion in the blackness ahead. It was a good ways away, though I realized now I could feel a stirring of wind against my face and clothing and could hear the rat a tat of little rocks being flung against the inner walls of the cave ahead of us.

“I thought you said it was morning,” I whispered.

“It is,” came the simple reply.

Lerokan was right. There was absolutely no way to go out there. It was as dark as the cave around us out there. Plus, the wind...

And thunder, I was reminded, flinching and smashing my palms to my ears when the boom broke out overhead, loud enough to shake the mountain itself.

Lerokan released my shoulder. I couldn’t see him, but I could hear and feel him moving beside me. A twang and a swishing sound let me know he’d fired an arrow. I couldn’t see the arrow, but could guess its basic trajectory out of the cave.

In an instant, like a kraken from the deep snapping a tentacle up to smash a ship, a hot strike of lightning forked down, obliterating what I assumed had to have been the arrow. The resounding clap of thunder made me cringe, my ears ringing.

“The sky veins are ravenous,” Lerokan said after the sound had died down. “I do not know about you, but I do not wish to be the one to feed them.”

“Me neither,” I said gravely. Sky veins, lightning, whatever you wanted to call it – that power would incinerate us in an instant.

“Oh, no!” I cried, whirling towards where I thought Lerokan stood in the darkness. “Do you think my friends are caught in this storm right now?”

If they were out on the blue plains in a storm like this, they’d be in trouble. Those mushroom things wouldn’t provide much shelter against winds like this.

“It is hard to say,” Lerokan replied. “These storms are often quite localized. If they survived the battle and followed us into the mountains to retrieve you, it is possible they met the storm, yes. But they may also have found a cave, like we did, in that case.”

I held onto that for dear life. The fact that they might have found a cave, too.

“They may not know these mountains,” I said in a rush, “but there is no way Gahn Razek or Varrow would let their mates get hurt in the storm. They definitely would have found shelter.”

Lerokan hesitated, and I could sense him stiffening beside me.

“What is it?” I asked, suddenly terrified. This guy always had a smart reply to everything. Why was he so quiet now?

“I must tell you... I saw one of your party’s men fall in the battle.”

The darkness closed in around me.

“No, you didn’t,” I said, denial bubbling like acid. “If you’d seen that, you would have told me before now!”

“With all the distractions that have happened since the battle, I did not think to tell you,” Lerokan said. “So much was happening. And the death of one man did not mean the rest of the party did not survive. I figured that if your party lived, they could be the ones to break the news to you when you met them.” For once, his voice was soft, measured. Maybe even kind. But I couldn’t hear the kindness in it. I could only hear the horrible things he said. “With the storm, it is unlikely you will meet your group anytime soon. So, I thought that I should tell you, now.”

“Who was it? Which man?” I hissed into the abyss.

“I do not know his name-”

“Who was it?!” My cry of anguish rang through the cave, throwing itself back to me, a bitter echo.

“He had only one arm. And one of the other women wept for him.”

Varrow.

Fuck.

The tears came hot and quick, sluicing down my cheeks as I shook. I wouldn’t have wanted any of the men to die. But knowing it was Camille’s mate, the man she loved...

It was a bloody tragedy. Camille was one of the kindest, sweetest women in our group. And she’d wanted a mate the most of anyone. A true romantic

at heart, she'd been the sunshine to Varrow's grim storm of a personality. To think of her hurt now, grieving for him, made my heart shatter.

"You're sure?" I asked, my voice breaking.

"I am," he said quietly. "I saw an arrow go clean through him. Through the heart."

I practically felt that same arrow slicing through my chest now.

Fighting to breathe around the pain, I turned and started walking blindly back the way we'd come.

It didn't take long for me to collide with stone - actual stone this time. Gritting my teeth, I felt along the wall, wincing every time my injured finger bumped a knobby bit of rock.

"Would you like to hold my bow on the way back?" Lerokan asked from beside me, easily keeping pace with his long fucking legs and fucking alien night vision.

"No," I gritted out. I could see firelight ahead, now. And frankly, I didn't want to be anywhere near the masked warrior beside me. Right now, I was grieving and furious. Furious at Lerokan for telling me the truth, even though it hadn't been his fault.

Although...

"Why didn't you help them?" I asked, whirling on him once we were back in the light of the main cave. "You saw him get shot down, saw them all fighting. Why didn't you do anything?"

Lerokan's face was impassive under his mask. When he spoke, it was clipped and controlled.

"I will remind you that I *did* do something. I saved you."

"Well, maybe I didn't want to be saved!" I barked. I knew I was acting out of shock and sadness, knew that what I'd said wasn't fair to Lerokan. I was glad to be alive and to have him to help me now. Ultimately, no matter what had happened to the others, I wouldn't have wanted to die on those plains.

But I bet Camille did.

A fresh wave of emotion for my friend, and guilt at being the only one who was whisked away from the battle, made more tears roll from my eyes.

Lerokan's sight stars snapped in the dark confines of the skull's eye holes. He stepped closer, capturing my face in his large hands.

"What is-"

“There’s nothing wrong with me!” I exclaimed. “Well, there is. But the tears are normal!”

“Tears,” he repeated slowly. His bright sight stars flickered up and down my face, tracing the path of the tears. “So, you bleed bright poison and…”

“And cry,” I said, sniffing hard and glaring at him. “Yes, humans cry when we’re upset! Unlike you, we actually have emotions.”

Once again, I knew this was unfair. Lerokan did seem rather blasé, but he obviously had feelings, too. At the very least, he’d felt protective enough over what he’d thought was a child to save me from the battle.

His face hardened, growing as firm as the bone of the mask.

“Well, I am very sorry for you, then,” he spat bitterly. “In my experience, emotions have only ever been a burden. A waste of energy and the cause of terrific inconvenience. Much like what I am experiencing now.” The bitterness faded from his voice, replaced with a scoffing sort of indifference. “The next time you are in the path of an oncoming arrow, I will not act as abominably as I apparently did last night.”

He let his hands fall from my face, and I swiped at my running nose and eyes, trying to ignore the way my cheeks felt so cold without his hands there. *They’re just cold because they’re wet, you dunce.*

I pushed past him, heading for my hides.

I collapsed into them, pulled them over my head, and closed my burning eyes.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Priya



When I woke up, I felt like hot garbage. My tongue stuck to the roof of my dry mouth. My head and my right hand pounded in time with my heartbeat. I sat up slowly, my head swimming. The cave was just as it had ever been. Large and shadowy and flickering with firelight. The lack of natural light disoriented me.

“How long was I asleep?” I croaked at Lerokan, who watched me from across the fire. A little chirruping sound let me know Breena was back, now. I turned my head, my neck horribly stiff, and smiled weakly at her where she sat nearby.

“A long time,” came Lerokan’s reply.

I nodded haltingly, feeling like my brain had been replaced with sweet dodha burfi – everything dense and sticky and slowing down my thoughts. I pushed the hides down my body and freed my legs. I groaned when I realized how matted and tangled my hair had become. Grabbing fistfuls of it and tossing it behind my shoulders, I noticed something on the ground beside my bedding. Two more large eggs, already cooked and peeled, as well as what Lerokan must have been talking about when he mentioned the mountain valok plant. It was deeper in colour than the greenish-grey valok plants I was used to. It had been sliced open already, its two sides splayed, its gel insides shimmering with firelight.

“Did you bring me this?” Wow, my brain really was slow. Who else would have gotten the food, cooked it, and prepared it for me? Breena?

Lerokan stood, grabbing his quiver of arrows and pulling what looked to be a rock from its depths.

“Eat it or don’t. Makes no difference to me,” he said, seating himself once more. He busied himself using the stone to sharpen a blade he pulled from his back.

Guess he doesn’t want to talk. I didn’t buy what he’d said, though. If he truly didn’t care if I ate or not, he wouldn’t have brought me food. I cringed

when I remembered what I'd said to him - when I'd implied he'd had no feelings. *I may have been dealing with a lot of grief in that moment, but I'm pretty sure I was a royal fucking bitch. I need to apologize.*

I just didn't have the energy right now.

I took up one of the mountain valok plants and gave it a sniff. It smelled quite pleasant. Taking an experimental sip, I felt my brows rise in happy surprise. The gel inside was good. Really good. Much less bitter than the strong green tea flavour of the desert valok plants. It was still vaguely tea-like in flavour, but closer to a sweetened milky black tea.

I gulped down one side of the plant, then the other, not realizing how thirsty I'd been. *Makes sense. I didn't eat when I woke up earlier, and Lerokan said I'd been sleeping a long time since then.*

My eyes shot over to him as I put down the empty plant husks. If he noticed me looking, he didn't react, focused entirely on sharpening his blade.

Alright. Guess I'll eat now.

I reached for one of the large eggs, taking the fist-sized thing into my hands.

I nearly dropped it in repulsed shock when I noticed its golden-beige flesh was streaked with crimson. My heart pounded, my eyes going wide. *Axrekal berries...?*

He wouldn't...

There was so much of the red stuff that it was all over my hand, too.

Uh oh.

My finger had bled through and soaked the gauze.

Shit. Shit shit shit.

I would need a stitch after all.

Well, I certainly can't ask him now. Not after all that fuss I made about not wanting his help, not wanting to be saved. What was that he'd said? He wouldn't bother helping me even if I was in the path of an arrow?

Like his comment about the food, I was fairly certain he didn't mean that. That it was a mask of bravado to hide his anger, or maybe even a slice of hurt. But even so, I felt like too much of an asshole to beg him for help now.

My left hand is steady enough. I can put a stitch in. We'll just ignore the fact that anytime my mum tried to teach me how to sew, I failed miserably.

It's just one little stitch. I can sort it out.

I took a steadying breath while I dragged my pack over to my side and fished out the first aid kit. There was a small suture kit in there. I got it open

and laid it beside my crossed legs, casting a quick look over to Lerokan. He was continuing to studiously *not* look at me, absorbed in sharpening his blade.

I made sure I had the disinfectant ready as well as more gauze. I placed fresh gauze on my knee, then rested my injured hand on it. With my left hand, I used a small metal pair of scissors to carefully cut away the tape and gauze. I tossed the soaked gauze to the floor.

Oh. That's a lot of blood.

Now that the gauze and tape had stopped exerting their pressure, the bleeding had increased. It really didn't look like that bad of a cut, but clearly, it was deep enough to bleed like fucking crazy.

My stomach rebelled. I swallowed hard, feeling a sudden sickly chill sweep down my face and neck. I swayed, black spots dancing before my eyes.

I pitched forward.

A hard nub of something collided with my forehead, stopping my head's forward descent. The nub pushed back, forcing my head back up once more.

It was the tip of Lerokan's index finger. The rest of his fingers were curled into a fist directly in front of my eyes, his index finger propping up my wobbly head. He pushed a little harder, forcing my head further back. Still feeling woozy, I lost my balance, pitching backwards this time.

His other hand snapped beneath my head before it hit the floor. He lowered me carefully down.

"Lie down and stop being a fool. I will do this."

"Are you sure?" I whispered. The floor rose and fell beneath me as if I were on a ship at sea. Or on Breena's back.

"Of course, I am sure," he scoffed, casting a frown down at me. "I am Lerokan. And I am always sure."

"Thanks," I said. The word was so quiet I wasn't even certain I'd said it. I forced some strength into my voice. "Open that bottle and clean your hands with it, then clean the wound. Please."

Lerokan grunted his response, fiddling with the lid of the disinfectant bottle.

"You have to push down and twist clockwise at the same time."

"What is *clockwise*? No, I have got it now."

I watched him slosh the disinfectant over his fingers and claws before using some clean gauze to dry off. Then, he gingerly took up my bleeding

hand. I flinched, thinking there would be more pain, but he was gentle. Even so, at my reaction, he softened his grip further.

He held my hand out to the side a little, carefully pouring disinfectant over the injured finger. He was putting a lot more care into it than I would have anticipated. I kind of pictured him as the dump it all out first, ask questions later type.

He made a tsking sound, his tail jerking behind him.

“Piercing peaks, you’re bleeding like a fresh kill.”

“I need a stitch,” I said, turning my heavy head towards the suture kit.

“I may not be a healer, but that much is obvious, even to me,” Lerokan growled. “Breena! Come here.”

Breena rose from where she’d been sitting, striding over on her many legs.

“Stretch your wing out here so I may elevate her hand.”

Breena did so. Even in my dizzy state, I found the energy to be amazed at her understanding of language. I cast her a grateful, but probably wan, smile.

Breena bent her wing in such a way that Lerokan had a mostly flat work surface, elevated off of the floor. He knelt on the other side of Breena’s wing, lining the feathers’ surface with fresh gauze. But he didn’t move fast enough. Drops of crimson splattered and soaked into Breena’s blue, white, and grey feathers.

“Sorry,” I said, fighting tears. It was an absurd overreaction, but in that moment I hated that I was bleeding on her. Hated myself, too. I knew it didn’t actually have that much to do with Breena and had everything to do with Varrow and Camille and the others, but that couldn’t stop the onslaught of emotion. I squeezed my eyes shut, not wanting to cry in front of Lerokan again.

But his next gruffly quiet words had me opening my eyes once more.

“Breena has had my blood in her feathers more times than I can count. She will be fine.” He angled his head fiercely downward so that I could see his eyes through the mask. “And so will you.”

I couldn’t respond with words, so I simply nodded.

“Now stop moving and talking and apologizing for things you cannot help and let me do this.”

Lerokan kept his grip firm but gentle on me. But I could still feel the tension driving through him as he used his other hand to fish out the needle

and thread for the stitch. His mouth was set in a thin, bloodless line as he got the needle ready and brought it towards my finger.

“You... You know how to do this, right?” I asked, suddenly overcome with the urge to yank my hand out of his.

“I thought I told you to stop talking and let me work?” he muttered.

“I’m just checking...”

“I made myself a new cock cloth, didn’t I? And if I may say so, it is a fine garment indeed. A fine garment for a very, very fine-”

“OK! I get it. You can do this.” I chose not to mention the fact that creating his new loincloth had required no sewing at all.

“I have no choice but to do this,” he grumbled, his sight stars slicing into my gaze. “It was either I do it, or watch you skewer your own eye by tipping over with the needle in your hand.”

“I’m not normally too bothered by blood,” I replied, feeling defensive. “I should have eaten something first, that’s all.”

Lerokan looked unconvinced. He turned his attention back to my hand and made a frustrated tsking sound once more.

“Can you tell your finger to stop bleeding so I can get a cursed look at what I’m doing?” He put down the needle and thread, snatching up more fresh gauze and pressing it to the wound.

“Finger, stop bleeding,” I said with as much mock sternness as I could muster.

I was rewarded by a small, surprised quirk of Lerokan’s mouth. A shadow of his usual cocky smile, but a smile nonetheless. It was nice to see. *Really* nice.

“Let us see how well your finger listened,” he said, whipping away the gauze. A muttered curse let me know my finger hadn’t listened at all, of course.

His voice turned serious.

“There will be pain. I will be quick.”

Two short vows, both of which turned out to be true.

My muscles spasmed, and my head pounded as pain lanced through my hand. I refused to scream, refused to cry. I bit down on my lower lip until it bled, too.

I barely blinked and could already tell that it was over. Lerokan pressed more gauze to the wound.

“It already bleeds less,” he said, sounding satisfied. “Now the greatest challenge of all comes.”

“What’s that?” I asked, wondering if he meant avoiding infection, or just the healing process in general.

He gave a defeated-sounding sigh.

“Now comes the tape.”



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Lerokan



I vanquished the tape much more quickly this time, securing the sticky stuff around the tightly-bound white bandages. I was immensely relieved to see how much less blood already flowed from the wound. *She's so tiny that she probably has barely any blood left at all.*

The thought was a disturbing one. I was more concerned for her well-being than I wanted to admit, and the idea of her losing too much blood, of her dying in this deep, forgotten cave...

That won't happen.

I'd saved her from the battle. I'd keep her alive now no matter what. I would even, I realized grimly, return to my own tribe and beg for their help if needed, knowing the price I'd have to pay.

They would make me go to the Vrika.

Hopefully, things would not come to that. I laid Priya's freshly-bound hand atop Breena's wing so that it could remain elevated, then looked down at her face to get confirmation that she would not in fact die here and I would therefore not be forced into a scenario I'd hoped to avoid at all costs. *But not at the cost of her, it turns out.*

The appearance of her face did not lend me comfort. Her cheeks and lips, normally a rich brown, seemed to have lost their lustre, turning ashen. There was one bright place on her face though.

"Now what?!" I cried, seeing the blood trickling from her lower lip. "I will have to stitch up every part of you at this rate! Would you kindly attempt to keep at least *some* of your blood inside your body?"

"I'm fine. I just bit my lip."

"So those tiny little teeth can tear after all," I muttered, shocked by her proclamation. But much of her shocked me. Frankly, she had been one shock after another, keeping me eternally off-balance.

I rather liked retaining my balance.

What I did not like? The look of her now. The dulled complexion, the bleeding lips, the lovely hair all damp and limp, stuck to her forehead and neck.

“You do not look well,” I said, sighing and rubbing my hand along my chin. A sharper tang of blood in the air made me realize I’d just streaked my own face with the stuff. I reached for an unused white bandage to wipe it off, then stopped, my claws in midair. *Better to save those for Priya. I can cut out a strip of bedding hides to clean myself.*

My poor bedding hides. There’d be nothing left of them at all if things kept up like this.

Priya had closed her eyes, ignoring my comment on her appearance.

“Tell me what else you need,” I commanded, crouching again and poking at her shoulder. I did not like this Priya. This extra weak and sickly one. This Priya made my guts twist, my heart stutter.

“I just need some rest,” she groaned. “When I’m less nauseous I’ll eat something.”

“Fine,” I said. “But hurry up. Hurry up and get better so you can bother me some more.”

Her lips stretched into a smile, making dried blood crack on her skin.

“I’ll do my best.” Her smile faded, her eyes opening and searching for mine. Shadows of pain loomed in their dark depths. “Lerokan. What I said before. I didn’t-”

“You told me you need to rest, so rest,” I snapped, fixing her with a glare. “You can take back everything you said and rain praise down upon my head for my heroics when you have more strength.”

“Well, I hadn’t planned to go *that* far,” she said, her smile returning as her eyes slid closed once more. The return of that smile thrilled me. Sent giddy relief spiralling through my limbs. A dying woman would not smile at me like that, would she?

Skies alive, Lerokan, pull yourself together. She had one admittedly very messy but very small cut on her finger. She will not die.

Despite the logic in the thought, I could not convince myself. Not yet.

Not until she was arguing with me at full force the way she had been before.

Priya’s breath evened out. I was not sure if she was asleep or merely resting with her eyes closed. Once I was satisfied that she needed nothing else for the moment, I got to work. I tossed the bloodied egg into the fire,

fighting off a shudder at how it looked so clearly to my eyes like it'd been poisoned. The other egg looked fine, so I left it there for now, knowing she'd have to eat soon. *She'll have to build up her blood somehow.*

I cleaned my hands with yet more of the sharp-smelling stuff from the strange, skinny jar before collecting all the bits and pieces of Priya's healing paraphernalia. I picked up the needle and a tiny set of two shiny little blades fastened together, both darkened with drying blood. I cleaned them, then returned them to the little shell. I screwed the top carefully back onto the jar of liquid and put it back, too, along with the cursed tape, until everything was as close to how it had been before as I could get it.

Once that was done, I slid the closed shell back into Priya's pack. As I withdrew my hand, I paused, wanting suddenly to look inside the pack. I would have been well within my right to do so. I was the one who knew these lands and therefore had to be the leader of our group. I needed to know what supplies we had and what might be useful. I felt myself grin when I thought of how Priya might react if she saw me rifling through her bag while she was unaware. It would probably earn me a shriek and one of her stiff foot-shells to the face.

I left it for now, knowing she and I could go over our supplies when she awoke and was stronger. I did not believe I needed to check the items as a precaution either. If she had a weapon in there, clearly she hadn't been bothered by me enough to try to use it. In fact, the blade I'd given her was nearby on the floor, I noticed. If she hadn't sunk it into my back by now, I figured I was safe.

I closed her pack, then scrunched and bunched it until it created a mound on the stone floor.

"You'll be able to move your wing in a few moments," I said to Breena. "You must be getting stiff by now."

She held her wing at an awkward angle to keep Priya's hand so high. She gave a chirp, and I knew that the loyal creature would stay like that all day and night if needed.

I reached for Priya's hand atop Breena's feathers, taking her slim wrist in my grip. An odd lurch went through me at the contact. A surge of discomfort at how frail her bones were. My forefinger and thumb went around her wrist with too much space to spare. Being supremely gentle, as gentle as I was capable of, I eased her hand down from Breena's wing and onto the elevated mound of her bag beside her. Breena slid her wing away, stretching the limb.

Priya made a small sound when I released her wrist, and my sight stars snapped to her face.

A small divot had appeared between her dark brows, but otherwise, her expression was unchanged. I studied her face. Some of the richness had returned to her complexion, and her lower lip had stopped bleeding.

All the dried blood remained on her skin, though.

Right.

I realized I would not have to sacrifice yet more of my bedding hides after all. There were a few fluffy white squares of Priya's bandages still littering the ground. They weren't really dirty, but they weren't clean enough to save for binding a future wound.

I stood and then jogged around the fire to where my supplies were. I snatched up a valikir plant and then hurried back to Priya's side. Opening the plant with a claw, I used the gel inside to dampen a white square. Once sufficiently wet, I sat down beside her, careful not to disturb her hand. I crossed my legs at the ankles and leaned forward, wet bandage held carefully in my claws.

I hesitated, the bandage hovering above her chin.

Why did this feel so... Oddly intimate?

I'd just sewn her back together and it hadn't felt like this. I swallowed, staring at the curve of her lips, the dainty point of her chin.

Either get to it or leave the mess for her to clean. But you cannot remain here staring as you are.

I grunted, forcing my hand into motion.

I opted to swipe the bandage over her forehead first. For some reason, her skin was all sticky. Yet more odd fluids seeping from her body, no doubt. So far, we had the poison blood, the completely baffling tears, and now whatever this stuff was.

What a bizarre waste of fluids. That, coupled with how much she bled, and no wonder she's so weak. I'll have to get her up sooner rather than later to drink more and eat.

I swiped the bandage until her forehead was no longer all shiny and sticky. The bandage was now grey-ish blue with dirt. I tossed it into the fire and grabbed another one, continuing the cleaning motion along her temples and cheeks. I eased damp tendrils of hair away from her skin, again struck by the disorienting sensation that this was intimate. Too intimate.

She has claimed that you are friends. A friend would help another when they were ill or injured.

I'd certainly helped male friends before, back in our mountain home or in battle. I couldn't ever recall stroking a damp bandage down a man's face, though, tracing every curve with care.

Well, she isn't a man, is she? She's a frail little female who could topple over if I don't make sure she stays standing.

I tossed this bandage, too, into the fire, drawing a third from the floor and dampening it. I probed gently at her lips, jolting when I realized just how plush they were against the flat little edges of the teeth in her mouth.

So, it is not the fact that her teeth are actually sharp, but that this skin is so soft, that it began to bleed when bitten.

Priya gave a croaking little moan, and my tail jerked in shock, the sound digging inside me. I moved more quickly, needing this task to be done. I swiped the cracked blood from her lip, cheek, and chin. I considered cleaning whatever the stickiness was from her neck, but something in me rebelled at that. For some reason, the idea of stroking down her slim pulsing neck, of pulling her hair away from those fragrant places, felt as if I'd be entering enemy territory. There was some hidden danger there. Though I could not name it.

She's clean enough.

But then I glimpsed her hand and arm on the pack.

I'd been staring at her blood so long I'd grown rather numb to it. But now that I'd been looking at the clean brown surface of her face, the dark red coating her hand and arm was garish.

She's... Almost clean enough.

Cleaning her hand and arm did not feel as strange as dabbing at her face. Focusing on her little hand, it was almost like I was cleaning an object. Like I was still sharpening my blade. I could detach it from Priya's person and just focus on the job at hand without getting distracted by pretty, tangled hair or plush, bloodied lips.

I had bandaged her entire finger, so I didn't have to worry about getting too close to the wound while cleaning. I continued to work quickly. Efficiently. The blood cracked and came away from her skin until her hand and arm were as smooth as her face. I placed it back down once more.

I could not stop my sight stars from trailing up her arm, following the long bend of the limb. Even though she was small, proportionally her limbs

seemed fairly long. There was a certain grace of shape in that. My eyes tracked along her upper arm to the bare roundness of her shoulder, cutting over to the smooth shelf of her collarbones above the neckline of her sleeveless tunic.

When my eyes dipped lower, completely of their own disobedient accord, to her breasts, I hissed and spun away from her.

I was immensely grateful that her blood had not soaked her tunic and that I did not need to clean her there.

Blood roared in my ears, my sight stars buzzing at the thought.

No. Certainly not. Even if she needed cleaning there, I would not do it.

That would be far, far too intimate. And the way Priya had tried to cover her chest when I'd first noticed it implied there was a sense of modesty around that part of her body. I would be dense beyond words to think I could lift her tunic and clean her without her consent while she slept.

So why was I now entirely plagued by the thought of doing just that?

I closed my eyes and forcibly shook my head, trying to dislodge sudden questions of what the curves of those breasts looked like when bare. Questions about whether or not she had nipples, and if she did, what did they look like? She was not with child and had no cub, so did her breasts produce milk, too? Or did they serve some other mysterious purpose?

I rammed my fist against the side of the skull mask, scattering the questions in my brain. Nearby, Breena made a half-concerned, half-judgmental sound. I opened my eyes to find all six of hers on me.

“Oh, you quiet down over there,” I huffed. As I spoke, the skin along my chin and jaw tightened. I remembered then that I had some of Priya's blood streaked across the lower half of my face.

There were no more little white bandages left on the floor.

So, I will have to sacrifice yet more of my bedding hides after all.

I stalked over to my bedding, grasping the blade I'd been sharpening and cutting a small bit of cloth from the hides. I smeared valikir gel and then wiped along my chin and jaw. The hide came away stained a deep brown-ish red.

I turned to throw the dirtied rag into the fire, then hesitated.

Once again, I could not name it.

Could not name the urge that had me folding and stowing the bloodied rag among my things for safekeeping.

“I will dispose of it soon,” I said out loud to Breena, feeling her eyes yet upon me.

She gave a throaty scoffing sound, ruffling her feathers.

She knew it was a lie.

So did I.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Priya



I stirred sometime later with the bump of a sticky wet something under my nose.

“Wake up. You need to drink and eat.”

That voice could only be Lerokan’s.

I didn’t need to wake up because I hadn’t been fully asleep while I’d laid on the hides. I’d rested, sometimes dozing lightly, but was mostly awake and aware of Lerokan puttering about the cave.

During one of my dozing periods, I’d dreamed my mum had been here, wiping a damp cloth over my brow and down my cheeks. Feeling a tug of sadness for the parents I’d lost, amplified by the fading dream, I reached up and touched my face to replicate the sensation.

My skin felt smooth, cool, and clean.

It was him?

I didn’t have much time to contemplate the question, because the thing bumped my nose again.

“Come on.”

I opened my eyes, forcing them to focus on what was brandished beneath my nose.

It was an opened mountain valok plant. Lerokan crouched beside me on the floor, wafting it under my nose as if trying to rouse me by the smell alone.

I eased upwards into a seated position, making sure I wasn’t still too light-headed or nauseous. I cast a hesitant glance down at my right hand as I drew it into my lap. I sighed in relief to see the bandages were clean, dry, and white, no seeping of blood to be seen.

I took the plant, struggling to remember the name he’d given it.

“Thanks,” I murmured, slurping down some of the gel. Just those few sips had me feeling better already. The sweet milky tea flavour was truly delicious, and it reminded me of home. “When I was a kid,” I said, “my mum

used to have a drink that tasted a lot like this ready for me when I got home from school.”

Lerokan looked at me quizzically, and I could tell he was about to start asking questions about where my home was, what school was. Who my mum was.

“Nevermind,” I said weakly, drinking more of the gel. I wasn’t even sure why I’d shared that in the first place. Between the dream and the taste of the gel, the nostalgia had overwhelmed me and had formed words without my permission.

“Now this,” Lerokan said firmly, taking the now-empty plant husk away and replacing it with an egg. I swallowed, then once again felt relief when I saw it wasn’t the one I’d gotten my blood all over. I ate it slowly at first, testing the will-I-be-sick waters. When everything seemed to settle alright, I ate faster, hunger rising rapidly.

“Hold on.” Lerokan rose and strode away. I watched him, wondering what he was doing. His tail swished, his strong legs and back flexing as he moved. He crouched on the other side of the fire, then came back with another egg. He sat down and started to peel it, tossing hunks of shell over his shoulder. Somehow, without even looking where he threw them, the shell bits landed perfectly in the centre of the fire every time.

Once peeled, he handed me the second egg, which I wolfed down, too. I sighed contentedly when finished, wiping my hands off on my trousers.

“Thank you,” I said again, drawing my own legs into a crossed position that mirrored his. My body was stiff and hot, but I was already feeling better from the food and drink.

“Not just for the meal,” I clarified. “For helping with my finger, too. And... Everything else.” The words came haltingly, but once they got past the stuck plug of shame, they flowed quickly, tumbling over one another. “I really didn’t mean what I said earlier. About not wanting to have been saved. I’m grateful to be alive right now, even if...” A pulse of pain. I pushed it down. “Even if some of my friends aren’t.”

Lerokan hadn’t moved, his expression unchanging as I continued.

“And I’m sorry for what I said about you having no feelings. I know that’s not true. I was lashing out because of the shock about Varrow.”

“Varrow. That was his name?”

I nodded, then added a verbal yes, remembering the Sea Sand people didn’t nod and I hadn’t seen Lerokan nod, either.

“When the storm ceases, and we journey back to see if we can find your group, I will give him a deep rest if the others couldn’t.”

“A deep rest?”

Lerokan mimed shovelling. “I will deep rest him in the ground.”

“You mean you’ll give him a burial?”

Lerokan’s tail jerked behind him.

A burial. He would give Varrow, a man he didn’t even know, a burial.

I scrunched my eyes shut to stop from crying yet again. I lurched forward, but unlike last time, this was intentional. Lerokan stiffened, making an *oof* sound of surprise when I tossed my arms about his neck.

“Thank you,” I said, pressing my face to the place between my shoulder and his neck. I’d said the word so many times, and I couldn’t stop saying it now. My grief and gratitude and guilt and hope all mixed into an overwhelming concoction that threatened to explode out of me. I needed something, someone, solid to anchor me. Keep me moored in the sea of the emotions pummeling the inside of my head.

“What... What are you doing?” Lerokan asked stiffly.

“I’m giving you a hug,” I choked out, my throat burning. “I’ll stop if you want me to, though.” I hadn’t exactly asked him if he’d wanted a hug. It had just happened.

Lerokan’s throat and chest rumbled pleasantly against my body when he replied.

“I have begun to learn that you are too stubborn to stop. You may continue.”

I almost said thank you again, but that just seemed to be getting excessive, now. Instead, I smiled tearily, snuggling closer. I’d never been a huge hugger or the overly social sort. But after everything I’d been through, *we’d* been through, it felt so good to hold someone. To have a friend to rely on, even if Lerokan was the last sort of friend I’d expected to gain. His heat melted into me, the rhythm of his breathing calming my heart and my nerves.

“This is nice,” I murmured, sighing.

Lerokan made an unintelligible grunting sound.

I guess he really doesn’t like this. I’ll stop...

I was about to pull back when a large, heavy hand fell to the top of my head, patting awkwardly. I snorted, laughing, remembering how he’d patted my head that same way the other night when we’d first met. But the movement quickly changed from what it had been before. The patting grew

slower, softer, until it became a long stroke down the length of my tangled hair. His hand settled on my lower back, and the base of my spine exploded in a shower of zinging sparks.

The hug was no longer soothing.

But electrifying.

Oh, no. No, no, no.

Was I attracted to Lerokan?!

Gasping, I pulled out of the embrace. As I did so, the top of my head bumped the beaky snout part of the skull mask, knocking it askew. For the first time, I was afforded a little more of a glimpse of his face. Strong high cheekbones, and a nose that was a lot like the Sea Sand noses - somewhat flat, and reminding me of a lion's nose.

"Why do you wear that mask?" I asked, cheeks hot, as I scooted backwards to sit on my hides.

Lerokan ignored my question for a moment, fixing his mask. He shifted awkwardly then yanked a long knife from his back and slammed the flat of the blade onto his lap, over his groin. He frowned, staring down at the blade as if it needed urgent inspection.

"Did you hear my question?" I pressed. I wouldn't keep bugging him if he really didn't want to answer, but I was growing more and more curious, now. Not once had he taken the mask off. It didn't seem like it was meant to cover anything up, the way some people might choose to wear an eye patch, for example. And besides, the warrior culture here, at least in the Sea Sands, didn't have much of a hide-your-scars vibe. The scarred Gahn Taliok walked around as bare-chested as the rest of them, despite the vicious, ragged stripes clawed into his skin.

"I heard you," Lerokan said, never taking his eyes from his blade. He scratched the tip of a claw at some invisible speck of dust on the weapon. "I wear this mask because none in this world would be able to handle the shocking beauty of my visage."

I burst into laughter. At the sound, Lerokan's sight stars finally came back to my face.

"Alright, alright, I get it," I said, still chuckling. I wouldn't bother him about it again right now. It felt so good to have the usual cocky Lerokan back that I was willing to drop it, despite how curious I'd gotten. The dynamic between us was finally going back to normal, whatever normal for us even was.

The painful exchange that had happened between us could be forgotten, now.

And so could the hot pulse of arousal I'd felt from having him stroke my hair.

"So," Lerokan said gruffly, seemingly wanting to change the subject. "You have all these tools and some knowledge. Are you a healer among your people?"

I shook my head.

"Nope. Just a grad student majoring in geography."

"I think you've lost too much blood. None of those words could be put together to form any kind of sense." The words were snarky, but there was genuine concern in them. Lerokan leaned forward over the blade in his lap, sight stars pinned to my face.

"No. I'm feeling a lot better, actually, thanks to you. I'll explain."

With my uninjured hand, I reached for the pack and drew it over. I remembered my fear about these maps falling into enemy hands. But Lerokan wasn't my enemy. He apparently didn't even have a Gahn or tribe to share this knowledge with.

I pulled out the folder in the pack, filled with the maps I'd made.

Lerokan remained leaning forward, watching me shuffle the papers with interest.

"These are maps. Renderings of the landscape. I've made a bunch of them of the Sea Sands, but those are back at the settlement. These are the ones I've made on my travels from the Sea Sands here."

I laid the papers out, putting them together when necessary, completing the puzzle of the weeks of travelling I'd done with the others. Dark lines, jagged peaks, swaths of cracked ground, safe passages through quicksand. It was all there. Every step I'd taken.

My work had ended at the ablik fields, just before we'd entered the blue plains where we'd been attacked. Lerokan noticed this right away.

"I recognize this," he said. "This is the black border of the Deep Sky Plains."

"Yes. They're ablik fields. Beyond them," I pointed to the grey land Gahn Razek ruled, "are the Death Plains."

"An apt name," Lerokan said with a grunt.

"Oh?"

“Men who have attempted to explore beyond the black border have disappeared. Swallowed up by the ground.”

“Yes, there’s quicksand. You have to know the safe path through.” His words sparked a question. “You guys have your braxilk. You can fly. How come you never explored the Death Plains and beyond? You didn’t even know about the tribe living in the Death Plains.”

“A braxilk can only carry its rider so far before it must land and rest,” he countered. “No man wanted to land in the wrong place and be swallowed. Besides, the land always looked so empty and dead. Meanwhile, these mountains are rich with resources. There was no need to forge into those hostile lands.”

I nodded. That made sense. The Death Plains were a huge, sprawling, uniform spread of chalky grey land, brutal and barren. Beyond them were mountains just as deathly grey. The tribe that had lived in the Death Plains – Gahn Razel and Varrow’s tribe – was the smallest of the Sea Sands, so it didn’t surprise me they would have escaped a Deep Sky warrior’s notice, especially if said warrior got sucked into quicksand before he found them.

I turned my attention back down to the maps, trailing my finger through the Death Plains portion.

“The Death Plains men know the safe paths through. And I recorded them here, too.”

Lerokan’s sight stars scanned the paper, following the path my finger took.

“You created these?”

“Yes,” I confirmed.

“It looks like land as seen from Breena’s back. And yet, you did not fly.” He looked up from the paper. “How did you do it?”

“Well, that’s the geography thing I was talking about,” I said. “I’ve trained to do things like this. Geography is a field of study where I come from. Study of the landscape, inhabitants, natural phenomena, people’s movements. Human geography is of particular interest to me. The way the world and our movements within it shape our lives. My parents emigrated from their home in Delhi to London before I was born. I’ve always been amazed by their journey. By the journeys of people in general, to be honest. Tracking those paths over the world, making them into a visual medium... It’s why I focused so much of my studies on cartography – making maps. I wanted to... To map out my family’s journey, I suppose. And be able to do it

for myself and my own journey, too.” I let out a shaky laugh. “Never thought that journey would take me to another bloody planet, but here we are.”

“So, you came with the group to make these maps of the new land you encountered.”

“Exactly,” I replied. “Like you, the Sea Sand and Bitter Sea men didn’t know there were other tribes out here until recently. So, we came to communicate with whoever we found.” I squeezed my hands into fists. “Obviously, that didn’t go as planned.”

I forced my hands to relax when my finger throbbed, and then collected up all the papers, stuffing them into my bag once more.

“You can look at those anytime you want,” I said. “Like, if I’m asleep or something, feel free.” He was probably pretty curious about the lands beyond the borders he’d always known. And Lerokan wasn’t an enemy who’d use that info against me. He was an army of one, and if he wanted to launch an attack on the Sea Sands, he’d be sorely outnumbered. I couldn’t see it happening. I didn’t see what he stood to gain by using the info for nefarious purposes. He’d also seemed genuinely interested, maybe even a little impressed, by the maps I’d made.

A little flicker of pride warmed my chest and made me lift my chin after the maps had been safely stowed away. *See, I wanted to say, I’m clever. I have skills. I’m not some useless dolt who throws up and faints and hurts herself nonstop.*

I didn’t say it out loud, of course. That just felt far too pathetic.

After that, Lerokan and I readied ourselves to sleep. Lerokan cut the empty mountain valok plants (valikir, he reminded me) into fibrous strips we could use to clean our teeth. After a quick bathroom trip to the little human toilet cave, I was ready to collapse once more. But I felt better than I had in some time. Better than I had since the battle. My hand wasn’t bleeding, and all my faintness and nausea had faded, replaced with weariness.

I finger-combed my hair, wincing at the tangles as I kicked off my boots. *Oh well. I’ll deal with it tomorrow. I’m too tired, now.*

I’d need to have a quick Zaphrinax shower, which consisted of using talka gel as soap and shampoo. I had one stalk tucked into my pack. I’d have to ration it as I’d use it for both my body and cleaning my clothing.

I caught a whiff of myself as I tucked myself in for the night.

Oof. Yup. Definitely need to do that tomorrow.

But right now? Right now, it was time to just relax. We'd done everything we could do for now. I had Lerokan's promise that we'd go back out to find my friends once the storm stopped, and I couldn't do much before that happened. Even now, as drowsiness pulled my eyelids shut, the keening of wind was a constant dull roar above the mountain.

Breana shuffled closer and tossed her wing over me the way she had last night. I sighed, feeling safe and warm under the roof her feathery wing created.

I realized that we were in a slightly different configuration this time. Breana was lying lengthwise across from the entrance to the cave. I was tucked against her left side, nearer to the fire. Lerokan unrolled his bedding hides a few paces away, on Breana's right side, sleeping once again nearer to the entrance.

In case any threats come for us.

My stomach swooped with a strange combination of awe and anxiety at the thought of Lerokan fighting off enemies in the cave to protect me. And suddenly, I couldn't bear the idea of him being by himself so far away. Even if he wasn't really that far away at all.

"You should come over here," I called softly as I sat up and looked over Breana's back. "Come sleep on Breana's right side. You'll still be close to the cave's entrance in that spot."

The firelight glanced off the bone curves of this skull mask before sinking into the eyeholes, making his eyes gleam.

"Hmm," he said, rubbing his jaw as he looked over at us. "Well, it is abominably unfair that you have entirely claimed Breana's feathery warmth for yourself. Plus, I suppose I'll be able to keep a better eye on you from a closer vantage point."

I nodded, grinning at him.

"Exactly!" I snuggled back down into the hides, listening as the soft pad of Lerokan's footsteps, punctuated by the clacking of claws, came over.

He settled himself with a sigh, and I couldn't help but raise up in a seated position once more to sneak a peek over at him.

He wasn't lying down yet, but rather sitting up, his back against Breana's side, facing the dark entrance of the cave. Despite Breana's immense size, his shoulders were visible from my spot, as was the black gleam of his long hair and the top curve and horns of the skull mask. He settled further against

Breana, wiggling his shoulders in a shockingly human-looking and frankly fucking adorable gesture.

I slammed myself back down to the hides, cursing the giddy flutter taking wing in my chest. It was an echo of the pang I'd felt in Lerokan's arms earlier. When he'd lost some of the blustering bravado and had stroked his hand so slowly down –

Stop.

He is your friend and he is helping you for a few days, tops.

Then, it's back to your group.

That's what I wanted. What I'd hoped for. I was desperate to find them again and make sure they were alright.

And I wanted to return to the Sea Sand settlement.

Back to the desert.

Where I'd never see Lerokan again.

That's what I want. That's the plan and that's what I want.

I said the words over and over again, a chant to lull me into sleep.

But with each iteration, each chorus of the chant...

It felt less and less true.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Priya



The prod of a full bladder woke me sometime later.

Ugh. Was there anything worse than having to drag your tired ass out of bed to get to the loo when you were all warm and cozy?

But this was not a situation that could be ignored until morning, whenever that was. Sitting up, I saw that Lerokan was still in his seated position, though he'd slid down a little.

Asleep.

I eased out of the protection of Breena's wing and hurried to the designated human toilet cave.

On my way back, my gaze got stuck on Lerokan. My feet altered their course, moving closer to him entirely on their own.

He was seated, back against Breena, his long, muscled legs stretched out straight in front of him. His arms were crossed over his chest, and even in the relaxed, slouching position, the hard cut of the muscles in his lean form was evident. *This bloke could make a killing as a fitness trainer on Earth... Although his exercise regime probably just consists of fighting battles and mouthing off. Burns lots of calories, I'd bet.*

His chin had tipped upwards, the back of his head resting against Breena's side. His mask was tilted down and covered most of his face. The pose reminded me of a human man napping with a baseball cap pulled low over his eyes to block the sun.

I wonder why he wears it...

The line about being too handsome had obviously been bollocks. Lerokan didn't seem like the type to be humble or to try to hide any of his assets. The way he'd strutted around for so long with no loincloth was more than proof of that.

I crept over to him, my sock-clad feet silent on the stone. I carefully manoeuvred over one of his legs until I stood between his splayed thighs. I crouched, wobbling and stifling a curse as I almost toppled over and woke

him. I caught my balance, though, and let out a slow, quiet sigh of relief, tucking my hands between my knees.

His breath was deep and even, his chest rising and falling in a hypnotic movement.

It's not fair that an asshole this cocky actually is so handsome, I thought to myself, rather irritated. The mask distorted things somewhat, but I could still tell that he was fucking beautiful. Even sleeping with his head tipped all the way back like that, his mouth wasn't hanging open. No drool, no snoring. Just the deep, controlled breathing, the bulging crossed arms, the thick column of a muscled neck leading up into a squared-off jaw.

First, my feet had brought me over here of their own accord, and now my own hand was betraying me, too. I left my injured hand down between my knees, but my other hand rose into the air, reaching for him. I brushed my fingertips over the curved brow of the skull so tentatively I wasn't even sure I'd made contact.

But clearly, it was enough to wake Lerokan.

Should have bloody known, I moaned internally as one of his hands shot up, his long fingers closing around my wrist. *Should have known his fucking alien spidey sense for Priya idiocy would have woken him up.*

Lerokan tilted his head forward slowly, almost languorously, while I yanked futilely in his grip. He adjusted his mask and then fixed me with still, focused sight stars.

"What are you doing?" he asked, voice low.

"I'm sorry," I stammered, feeling like a right git. My palms sweated and my wrist burned in his grip. "I didn't mean to wake you up. I don't even know why I came over here in the first place. And I wasn't trying to take the mask off, just so you know! It's obvious you don't want to, you seemed to set a bit of a boundary about it, so I would never dream of-"

"Take a breath before you fall over again. My finger still hasn't recovered from propping up your wobbly head," Lerokan cut in.

I breathed out shakily and smiled. *OK. He's making dumb jokes. He's not mad.*

But he still hadn't let go of my wrist.

And I still hadn't answered his question.

His gaze narrowed in the darkened pools of the eye holes, sight stars swirling in glittering slits. Those eyes were way too intense, so I dropped my

gaze. But then my eyes were focused on the curve of his lips. Really fucking nice lips.

This is so messed up. Why couldn't I have just gone back to my bed like a normal person?!

"I'm not even sure what I was doing," I said honestly. "I swear, it's almost like my feet and hand moved all on their own. I guess I just..."

Lerokan cracked a dazzling smile, dimple puckering in his cheek.

"See, this is why I wear the mask. I am so attractive you are drawn to me even in sleep. I am sorry, Priya. I cannot help this force I exert. But I do my best to dampen it with this." His free hand came up to tap a claw against the mask's brow area.

"Oh, come off it," I grumbled. Annoyingly, he was at least partially right. I hadn't been able to stop looking at him. I had drifted over here as if drawn by some magnetic force. *But he doesn't need to know that. His head will get so big even Breena won't be able to help him lift it.*

"I think I came over here to try to figure you out a little," I said. As the words spilled from my mouth, I knew they were true and that was at least part of the reason I'd come to him. I'd reached for the mask to try to understand its purpose, and by extension, something of him. "I've told you so much about myself, my friends, my home planet and other parts of this world. And all I've gotten from you is some nonsense about being so handsome you'd blot out the sun. I am sorry for waking you. I am. But we're stuck together now, and you could give me something real to go on, you know."

I'd told myself I wouldn't push this, but suddenly, knowing so little about Lerokan made me feel vulnerable. Not because I worried about secrets that he might be keeping, or because I didn't trust him. I already did trust him. Maybe too much.

No, it made me feel vulnerable because I'd slowly but surely opened myself up to him.

And he hadn't done the same to me.

"Nevermind," I muttered, trying to tug my wrist from his grasp once more. "I guess I'll just add 'Lerokan the enigma' to your long list of titles."

Lerokan still didn't let go.

"You want to know why I wear it?" he asked sharply. "What it represents? Fine. I have been banished from my tribe. My Gahn placed it upon my head before my exile and there it is to remain."

I was.... Not expecting that.

I remembered now that he'd talked about "following no Gahn" but I hadn't thought too deeply about it at the time, thinking he was some kind of loner.

"What did you do?" I whispered. I knew the culture was different out here, but I hadn't heard of anyone being banished from their tribe. *It must have been really bad...*

His mouth pulled into a mirthless smile.

"You look at me as if I've eaten the innards of the tribe's children."

He finally let go of my wrist, and I plopped onto my bum, seated between his thighs.

"Well, I am shocked and disappointed that you would think me to have such an unrefined palate as *that*," Lerokan said, crossing his arms over his chest once more. Breena gave a sleepy chirrup behind him. *I feel like Breena's a good judge of character. She wouldn't be loyal to a rider that did something truly horrible, right?*

And in all the time I'd known Lerokan, even if it had only been a few days now, he'd come to be a reliable if arrogant buddy. My friend.

But dread prickled under my skin, making goose pimples brush over my bare arms despite the fire nearby. Because the reality was that, other than judgments I'd made based on our interactions, I knew almost nothing about my new friend.

"You actually know the cause of my banishment already," Lerokan added cryptically.

I frowned, cocking my head. "I do?"

His tail jerked on the floor beside Breena's backside.

"Yes. I have been banished for the heinous crime of ignoring the Vrika's call and refusing to take a mate."

Oh.

The dread dissipated, replaced by a pulse of relief so hard and sweet I knew it wasn't just because I'd learned Lerokan wasn't a murderer or something. There was also an edge of relief at the fact that...

That he hadn't wanted to take a mate. Which meant not only was he essentially single, but he obviously didn't have any romantic feelings for anyone back home that he wanted to solidify with a mate bond.

I should not feel so happy about this.

“Seems a bit harsh,” I said, forcing down my giddy relief and feeling a wave of sympathy for him. “To get kicked out of your home just because you didn’t want a mate.”

“Will you take over as Gahn?” Lerokan said, so deadpan it took me a second to realize he was making a joke. He sighed, digging a claw under his mask and scratching his cheek. “Generations ago, people began refusing the Vrika’s call. It quickly began to destroy our numbers and strength. Fewer babies born meant fewer warriors to protect our territory. And fewer females, which just compounded the issue.”

“It’s the same in the Sea Sands,” I said, nodding at the familiar story. “So, the men here can only produce offspring of one biological sex, right? A man can only father all sons or all daughters?”

“Precisely. Too few babies were born, and too many of those were male, for several ages. Powerful laws were enacted to keep history from repeating itself and restore balance.”

I chewed my lip, wincing slightly, forgetting the skin was still broken from being bitten. I knew answering the Lavrika’s call was super important in the Sea Sands, too. But I hadn’t heard of any actual punishment for anyone who’d refused the bond. In fact, I vaguely remembered Cece, the first one of us to get an alien mate, saying that her mate Buroudei had told her she didn’t have to live as his mate if she ultimately chose not to. But then again, she was a woman and not a member of his tribe yet. Maybe there would be a punishment for a man who didn’t take a mate there, too.

“I get that it’s to protect your numbers, but it still feels severe to me,” I said. I was probably being beyond ethnocentric by judging Lerokan’s tribe against my own human standards, but I couldn’t help it. All Lerokan had done was wanted to remain single. His shouted words to the Vrika from the other night resounded in my head. Words about wanting to choose his own fate. He just wanted to be the master of his own life. And now here he was, cut off from everyone he knew and forced to wear this skull, Man in the Iron Mask style.

“I agree,” he said. “But it is our way. And the Gahn and I... We’ve always had a rivalry between us, and this was a grave insult to him. He wants desperately to be called by the Vrika. Between us, he is the older and I the younger, plus he is the Gahn. In his eyes, and by all accounts I agree, he should have been summoned first. So, I was probably banished faster than other men would have been. But it does not matter how swiftly he brought

the punishment down upon my head. I still would not have answered the Vrika's call. And I do not plan to, no matter how many more times it summons me."

Lerokan's crooked grin returned, making my stomach clench.

"You should be very happy for my punishment. It is because I was out there alone that I was able to spot you in the battle and grab you."

I remained quiet, absorbing this information.

It was so insane to me, how every little dip and turn of someone's life led to the present moment. If I hadn't chosen geography as my major, I probably wouldn't have come on the journey out here with Camille and the others. I might not even have been abducted from Earth at all. And if Lerokan hadn't been banished, he never would have been there to take me from the battle.

"OK. So, the mask is a mark of your banishment, then? Why can't you take it off now that you're away from the tribe?"

Lerokan sliced his hand through the air.

"To take it off would be an act of cowardice. This mask shows any man who meets me what I am – an outcast warrior. I am not ashamed of the choices I have made, nor of my exile, nor the mask. But to remove the mask before the end of my exile is considered weak and shameful behaviour among my kind. I will not do it."

So, this guy will break the law and subvert his people's expectations when it comes to having a mate, but not taking off the mask. Well, I guess keeping a mask on does have less serious consequences than letting the Vrika choose your life partner.

"So... Why don't you want a mate?" I asked, suddenly unable to meet his eyes. "In the Sea Sands, men are basically just *waiting* to get called. It's a huge blessing for them." And it turned them into total fucking simps, which was absolutely hilarious to see.

I knew Lerokan had talked about wanting to choose his own fate, but I wondered if there was something deeper. More of his words echoed.

Emotions have only ever been a burden.

Maybe he's had his heart broken before?

The thought made me feel oddly protective of him.

"You are full of questions tonight," he grumbled.

I chuckled.

"I'm always full of them. I'm just feeling well enough to bother you with them all, now. And I seem to recall you telling me to get better specifically so

that I *could* bother you.”

“So I did. Fool that I was then,” he sighed.

I laughed again.

“It’s OK. You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to. I can actually relate. Some of my human friends really wanted mates once they found out it was a thing. I’m not like that, at least not yet. I wasn’t like that on Earth, either. Like, if I met someone incredible, sure, I’d maybe want to be with them. But I’ve never actively sought that out.” *We’ll just ignore the fact that being a homebody who spent all her time doing homework or watching K-dramas meant that the chances of meeting someone cool were slim to none...*

“Then in this, you and I are alike,” he said. “You are much cleverer than I’ve given you credit for.”

“Hey!” I cried, glaring at him with mock anger, knowing he was joking.

His sight stars swirled over my face, heating my skin.

“Do not worry, I have given you the credit you are due,” he said, all traces of joking gone. “I’ve seen your maps. I do not believe an ordinary mind can paint the world as if from above but from below.”

“Well, good. I’m glad you acknowledge my genius, then,” I said smugly. *Geez, who’s the cocky one now?*

But I couldn’t stop the buzz of excitement from his words. Being complimented on my work was always nice. But from this attractive, arrogant alien who seemed to always have a snarky remark? It was a compliment on steroids, pumping through my body with physical force.

Fuck me. I really do have a crush on this idiot.

The resignation of that realization made me clear my throat and stand.

“I guess we should get back to sleep, then,” I mumbled, staring at my nails.

“Yes. Morning is still quite far away.”

My head jerked back up to look at him.

“Oh yeah? It’s good that you can tell what time it is without any light. I’m completely disoriented in here.”

Lerokan gave me a flat look, and I felt that under his mask he had to have been raising a judgmental eyebrow.

“I take back what I said about you being clever.”

I gasped. “Rude! Anytime you forget, I’ll just have to dangle the maps in front of your face again, I suppose.”

“Hmm. Do the maps make up for the shocking lack of ability to internally understand the length of a day? I’m not so sure.”

“Well, maybe I’d be able to on Earth,” I said, planting my hands on my hips. I knew I would be just as disoriented in a dark cave on Earth, too, but I kept that to myself. “I’m not from this world, remember? I can’t help that my internal mechanisms don’t line up with the rise and fall of an alien sun!”

Lerokan smirked.

“Alright. Such a shortcoming can be forgiven, then.”

Bloody bastard.

“It’s not a shortcoming and I certainly don’t need your forgiveness,” I said, turning on my heel and whipping my hair behind my shoulders with finality.

Lerokan didn’t reply with a word, but with a deep, throaty chuckle that made my toes curl in my socks.

I hurried back over to my side of Breena’s body and stuffed myself into the bedding hides. Despite what Lerokan had said about morning being hours away, I knew I wouldn’t be able to sleep anytime soon.

I was too wound-up and floaty after our conversation.

I really do like him, I thought to myself with a shake of my head.

And now I am totally screwed.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Lerokan



The next morning, the first thing I did upon waking was rise and stride over to the other side of Breena. I was fairly confident now that Priya was on the mend. But a niggling claw of worry kept me from being able to do anything else before I made sure she had survived the night and hadn't had her hand fall off due to my tape-job.

It was hard to get a look at her. She really seemed to like encasing herself with the hides while she slept, twirling them around herself the way a pattarak wrapped its body tightly around its prey. Breena shifted, waking and removing her wing from overtop of Priya's form. Breena rose to her many legs and stretched her wings before wandering away towards the tunnels that led into the other caves, searching for her breakfast.

Breena's movements, or perhaps the sudden loss of her body heat (though why that should bother Priya with all those hides was a mystery) caused Priya to stir, too. She wiggled. The whole tube of hides wiggled with her.

"Do you require assistance to get out of there?" I asked, not entirely joking.

"No, I've got it," came the muffled reply. The hides slowly peeled away from her face. She sat up, swiping at her hair with her little clawless hands, shoving it all behind her shoulder.

"Good morning," she said, tossing me a smile.

"I see you are well enough, then," I replied, suddenly too irritated to return her morning greeting.

Irritated because of the second thought that had passed through my brain upon seeing her face.

The first thought was, *ah, she looks well.*

The second thought was, *blast, she looks pretty.*

But she did. As annoying as it was, I was finding more and more beauty in her features the more time I spent with her. Which was bizarre and unexplainable. And therefore, maddening beyond measure.

As Priya worked herself out of the rest of the hungry mouth of hides, I turned away from her, facing the direction Breena had gone.

“I will go get us something to eat.” I could hear the wind above us and therefore knew the storm would protect her from anyone entering the cave, so I felt secure leaving her alone.

“Oh, brilliant. Can you take your time coming back? I want to clean my clothes and have a quick scrub.”

“A... Quick scrub?” I looked back at her over my shoulder.

She snatched her pack, opened it, and brandished some kind of plant towards me.

“It’s talka gel. We used it in the Sea Sands to clean our hair and bodies.”
Cleaning... Her body...

Her naked body.

“Fine,” I said. “I will do the same.” I’d spied stone moss in the deeper caves. Our version, I supposed, of this talka gel.

Without another word or glance back, I trotted away and into the dark.

The tunnel that led away from the main cave wound through the mountain, branching off into smaller caves the entire way before culminating in one more large cave, as large as the one where we’d been sleeping. I found Breena there, in that last large cave, chomping on the small winged body of a felkora. As this cave was deeper in the stone, there was more moisture which allowed for the growth of the stone moss and the other plant life I used for the fires.

I noticed the eggs left behind by the now Breena-breakfast felkora. I’d bring those eggs back for Priya and me.

I stripped out of my cock cloth, draping it over a nearby rock. That rock, on its sides, had the slippery stone moss I needed. I scraped some off with a claw, then got to work kneading the stuff into my skin until it dissolved and turned milky and smooth. I used my cock cloth to wipe away the suds, then used more stone moss to scrub the cock cloth itself. Once that was done, I beat the cock cloth against the stone wall of the cave to finish cleansing it and help it start to dry.

I was beating the poor garment with much more force than was strictly necessary.

“Why do I find her pretty, Breena?” I suddenly snapped, whirling towards my mount. “It is terrible and unnatural. Her features may be nice enough in

their own way, but she is not of the Deep Sky. Besides, she is weak and loud and needy.”

Breena finished eating, gulping the last bits of carcass down her beak. Then, she swung her great head to pin me with all six points of her gaze.

A gaze that seemed to say, She may be weak and loud and needy. But she is also loyal and clever and true.

And pretty.

“Oh, you be quiet,” I said, flapping my cock cloth in her direction.

I dragged the cock cloth back over my hips and tied it viciously, huffing out a dramatic breath.

“It does not matter. Soon, the storm will cease and I will get her back to her people.”

Breena’s gaze remained heavy upon me, forcing me to face the question that grew bigger and bigger inside my own head.

What if her people are gone?

What if you are the only one she has left in all of the Deep Sky?

Not long ago, that thought would have sent me into a spiral of panic.

But now...

Now, it did not seem so entirely horrible a possibility.

I did not want her to grieve even more for her friends if it turned out they’d all died. But apart from that, I was not as repulsed by the idea of being stuck with her as I’d once been. *I suppose I could situate her here. Maybe one day Gahn Errok would even welcome me back to the tribe, and I could bring her, too. She could find her place here.*

With me.

I tensed, a hiss building at the back of my throat.

Those were not the kinds of plans a man made for a mouthy foreign female he’d made the mistake of saving.

Those were the kinds of plans a man made about his mate.

And I did not want a mate.

I will go back to the cave, now. I will give Priya plenty of chances to annoy me while this storm rages, so that I am once again filled with joy at the thought of returning her to her people.

With that firmly in mind, I clomped out of the deepest cave.

The firelight of our sleeping cave glowed ahead as I walked. My tail lashed the stone, and my fangs ground together. It was just as I reached the entrance into our cave that I realized I’d left the eggs behind.

Cursed peaks. I'll have to go back. I'll just let Priya know what I am doing...

I leaned out of the shadows and into the light of the cave.

And utterly froze.

I'd returned too soon

Priya was naked.

My sight stars spun so hard they practically vibrated in my skull. Tension rolled down my body in a hot, spasming line. My nostrils flared, and my tail jerked.

She was seated on her bedding hides, nude, and was combing her slender brown fingers through the glorious mane of her dark hair. My sight stars tracked every movement those little fingers made, wondering what that hair felt like.

Wondering what those fingers felt like.

The fire was between us, and it kept me from seeing her bare legs and, piercing peaks, her cunt. But she was visible from the waist up.

My gaze dipped to her collar bones...

I wrenched myself around, lurching back into the shadows before my gaze hit her breasts.

I knew Priya would not like me staring at her naked form. She seemed especially modest about her breasts. Frankly, I couldn't believe I'd been stuck for so long staring at her the way I had been. I was usually a warrior of much greater control than that. At least I had the control not to ogle her breasts. I'd only gotten a blurry glimpse of their curves, and the indication of brown nipples, as I'd turned away.

It is no wonder she is modest about her breasts when you react this way, I hissed internally. You make jokes about wearing a mask to cover your beauty, but in reality, you cannot handle even glimpses of hers.

It was true. I could not handle it. Not in a way befitting a warrior of my calibre. Not in a way that made me proud.

It did make me hard, though.

I gritted my fangs harder, feeling my jaw crack as I faced the dark wall of the tunnel. I planted my hands flat upon the cool surface, breathing heavily.

This isn't the first time, either...

When Priya had thrown her arms around me the other day, when my patting of her head had instinctively turned into petting of her hair...

I'd gotten hard then, too.

But this time was nothing like that other one. That had been a minor bout of arousal, easily quelled.

This?

This was an arrow of desire so fierce it left me gasping.

I curled my fingers against the stone wall, my claws digging.

This won't work. She's still nude in there.

I wouldn't do it, but even now I felt a monstrous tug, low in my pelvis. Tugging me back to take another look.

Adjusting my cock cloth, I stormed back down the darkened tunnel.

This time, it was not just to fetch food. Nor was it to bathe.

It was to stroke myself with a murderous fist so that I could regain some semblance of sanity.

So that I could come back and face Priya like the controlled and unaffected warrior I knew myself to be.

Or, at least, the one I'd once known myself to be.

Because I was not so unaffected, now.

And I certainly did not feel in control.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Priya



The storm lasted an entire bloody week. A week spent sleeping and eating and starting to generally go out of our minds in the confined space. There were times when Lerokan's gaze was so intense when he looked at me that I wondered if he'd actually started to hate me after being cooped up like this together. Unfortunately, my crush on him only continued to grow. This turned me into a moody whirlwind, giddy and happy with him one moment, then sulky the next when I remembered how temporary this all was.

If the storm ever fucking ends, that is, I thought.

But end, it did. And on the eighth day, we woke to the sound of no sound. No screaming wind, no knocking of pebbles against stone.

I sat up cautiously, almost as if moving too quickly would make the storm wake back up, like it was a sleeping hound in the corner.

Lerokan was awake, too, already up and out of his hides. He stood with his back to me at the entrance to the cave, body tense, tail twitching.

"Is it over?" I asked. The same way I'd been cautious about sitting up slowly, the words were tentative, too. It felt like asking the question would smash the silence and make way for the winds once more.

But the silence continued, deafening and disconcerting after days of battering wind outside.

"I think so. I will check," Lerokan said, glancing at me over his shoulder.

"Wait!" I kicked my hides off (no easy feat) and crawled out from Breana's wing. Breana tucked her wing to her side and raised her head, clearly noticing what we had noticed, too.

"I'll come with you," I said, slamming my feet into my boots and jumping up.

Lerokan watched me through his eye-holes as I jogged over. When I reached his side, I was slightly out of breath. I cleared my throat and tried to smooth my hair somewhat, aware that it was probably a mess after sleeping.

"Alright. Come on."

We headed into the blackness of the tunnel that led to the cave's exit. I gritted my teeth, wanting to ask to hold onto Lerokan so that I didn't fall on my ass or run into a wall, but I was too afraid to do it. Last time we'd been in this tunnel, I'd been so upset about Varrow I hadn't wanted his help.

So I kept silent.

But then I veered off course and actually did collide painfully with a jag of stone. Lerokan clicked his tongues and grabbed my shoulders from behind me, centring me in the pitch-dark tunnel once more.

"What, am I your human shield or something?" I joked in regards to our positioning.

"Hmm. You're not nearly big enough for that. You'd be a terrible shield," he mused.

I shook my head, laughing, as he released my shoulders.

"Here," he said, his voice an echoing whirl as he moved in front of me. I blinked and squinted, trying to locate his form without success.

I gasped when his warm hand closed over my uninjured left one, drawing it upwards.

"Hold on to this," he said, his voice a low growl. I felt my hand get tugged as he turned around, facing forward in front of me. With his arm behind his back, he led my hand to a leather weapons strap there.

"Keep your grip in that one spot because I am wearing blades. Try not to slice another finger off," he said dryly.

"Hey! I never sliced my finger off! Just sliced *it*! And I'll have you know it's healing very nicely, thank you!"

"The fact that it is healing is entirely due to my skills and should not be confused with your own efforts or strength," he remarked. I could hear the haughty smirk in his voice.

I groaned, knowing he was at least partially correct. His efficient and tidy stitchwork was probably why my wound was already closing over so well. No sign of infection, either.

"Well, whatever. I feel weird about walking like this." Now he seemed to be the human, or, er, *alien* shield as we started walking once more. His broad form would be the first target when we reached the exit if something nasty waited for us. "We should at least walk side by side like equals!"

"That would imply that you are my equal. I certainly cannot have that," he scoffed.

“OK, now you’re definitely out of line!” I muttered, pushing my knuckles into his back.

It did abso-fucking-lutely nothing, of course. The bloke’s back was like a brick wall. If brick were covered in smooth, warm hide.

“Am I?” Lerokan asked, his voice cutting through the darkness as we continued forward. “You think you are my equal in size, strength, or fighting power? My equal in cleverness, perhaps, though that is sometimes debatable. Greater than my equal in beauty. But in hardness of limb? Really? You think you’d be my equal when it comes to taking a spear through your guts and remaining upright?”

“Well, if a spear goes all the way through your guts it would hit me like this anyway,” I grumbled. My hand tightened on the strap, and I almost tripped over into him as my feet suddenly seemed to forget how to work. “Hold on. Did... Did you just say I was beautiful?”

I felt the muscles of Lerokan’s back tighten below my knuckles.

“I didn’t say that,” came his terse reply.

“You did! You said I’m your equal in cleverness, though I’d like to object to that ‘sometimes debatable’ remark! And then you said something about beauty!”

“I said you are nowhere near my equal in beauty,” he replied quickly. Too quickly.

“That’s not what I heard,” I said.

“Well, we both know that you are not my equal when it comes to hearing, either.”

I pursed my lips, shutting up for the moment as my brain ran manically over the words he’d said. But he’d said it all so fast that it was already fading. Had I really misheard him? Yikes, that would be humiliating if he literally hadn’t even said it.

But he did... Didn’t he?

I was having serious doubts, now. And the more I thought about it, the less it made sense. *This is Lerokan we’re talking about. Cockiest alien known to womankind. I doubt he’d admit anyone was prettier than him, let alone some random human girl he picked up.*

Lerokan was a looker and he fucking knew it. Even with the mask.

I breathed out, heat simmering in my cheeks, ears, and neck. Heat that was a combination of embarrassment and the still-alive hope that what I thought I’d heard had truly been said.

But even if he had called me beautiful... What would that even fucking mean?!

We both knew, his whole bloody tribe knew, that he didn't want a mate.

Um, getting a little ahead of ourselves, aren't we?

Lerokan and I weren't mates. We were awkward-new-acquaintances-to-reluctant-allies-to-friends. And even the friends bit seemed on shaky ground lately, with the odd tension that sometimes snapped between us.

But a new question rattled my brain, nearly knocking the wind out of me.

What if you are supposed to be his mate?

Sea Sand and Bitter Sea men had human mates. It made sense a Deep Sky warrior could also get assigned a human mate, too. I hadn't considered it before because I'd been so focused on finding out what had happened to my friends.

But... What if...

Hold on, I thought you didn't even care about getting a mate?

I didn't care about having a mate. At least, I didn't think...

And Lerokan definitely didn't want one. He'd made that abundantly clear to pretty much everyone he'd ever come into contact with, including the Vrika itself.

If you are supposed to be his mate, which you probably aren't, it doesn't even matter anyway.

He'd already refused the call of the Vrika. Several times.

Which means that if you're the one, then he's already rejected you.

Well, good. I wouldn't be able to stand his smirking cocky ass as my mate, anyway.

But the words felt hollow. And they were quickly overwhelmed with other thoughts. Thoughts of what Lerokan would be like under the sway of the desperate, all-consuming mate bond.

My stomach soured, my mouth thinning into a grim line.

That's messed up, Priya. It's not fair to hope he'd have feelings for you because some alien god made him fall in love against his will. That's why he's fighting the Vrika's call in the first place. To have a choice.

That was all any of us could hope for. A choice.

And now, my choice was to put all of this out of my mind.

Luckily, bright light ahead helped me to do just that. The searing brightness made me scrunch my eyes shut, even protected by the shadow of Lerokan's form.

“Stay here.”

Still blinded, I couldn't fight Lerokan when he reached back and disengaged my hand from his strap. I could hear the soft pad of his footsteps and the crunch of rock under his claws as he prowled forward, moving further into the light while I remained safe just inside the cave.

It took me a while to be able to open my eyes.

And when I finally did, I was blinded all over again.

By *him*.

Up until now, I'd only ever seen him in the cool, bleaching asteroid and starlight, or the dim orange tint of the fire.

I'd thought he was basically the same as a Sea Sand warrior, just from the mountains.

But I was wrong.

In overall shape and form, yes, he was indistinguishable from a Sea Sand man. The same seven-foot-tall frame, the same jacked-up body-builder physique, the same high kangaroo-like angles and three-toed feet and the same swishing tail.

Where he differed was in his colouring.

Where the Sea Sand men had skin swirling in shades of copper and bronze and brown and black, Lerokan's hide was actually tinged slightly blue, a sort of stony violet colour. The end of his tail, his hands, and down his legs to his feet, the skin melted into something deeper, more like indigo. The hair that I'd thought had been black was actually a deep, inky blue, the sun making the strands gleam with electric cobalt highlights, contrasting with the chalky white of the bone mask.

“I sense no predators, nor other warriors.” Lerokan turned towards me from his place in the sun. “It is safe.”

Lerokan hadn't gone too far out into the sun, so I could see his eyes quite clearly. Like his hair, I'd thought his eyes were black, but they weren't. They were the deepest blue you could possibly have before black. His sight stars glowed and spun, opalescent and almost pure white, like shattered stars reflecting on a nighttime sea.

I stumbled forward as if drawn to him by a magnet.

When I caught up to his side, he grinned down at me. That crooked smile with the little dimple was even cuter in the sunlight, and I couldn't help but smile back, shading my eyes as I looked up at him.

“It feels good to be back in the open air, does it not?” Lerokan asked. He took a huge breath, filling his lungs and then exhaling in a whoosh. He did it a few more times, his broad chest puffing out then sinking, his abdominal muscles crunching inward, as he breathed heavily out.

“It really does,” I said. I realized I was happier in this moment than I’d been in days. Being freed from the storm, and now standing here like this with Lerokan, really did feel marvellous. I knew he was asking me about how the fresh air felt, not what it was like to stand here with him, but I couldn’t extricate the two. Lerokan was spiralling adrenaline and smiles drenched in sun and the rush of fresh air over your face as you screamed.

My eyes remained on him as he looked out over the valley.

I’m now absolutely certain he didn’t say I was better-looking than him. Because fucking look. At. Him.

I was so busy drooling over Lerokan that it took me a moment to realize just how brutally the sun was heating my skin.

Gasping, I careened away from Lerokan, crashing back into the shadows of the cave.

“What is it?” Lerokan said. He drew a blade from his back, his muscles snapping to attention.

“Nothing, it’s fine. I just realized I’m not wearing my jacket,” I called from the cave.

He relaxed slightly, the blade lowering.

“Your cloak?” he asked, clearly confused.

“Yes!”

“Tell me you are not cold,” he replied, disbelief underscoring his voice.

“Definitely not,” I said with a shake of my head. I wasn’t sure if it was because it was still morning, or because of the mountain territory’s natural climate, but it didn’t seem to be quite as hot as the Sea Sand desert. But it was still hot, and that sun could fry me like an egg on stone.

Speaking of stone...

I’d been so idiotically distracted by Lerokan’s pretty colours that I hadn’t examined the landscape around us. That was a disconcerting feeling. Usually, it was the opposite. I always took in the landscape first, orienting myself. Anchoring myself. Figuring out my place among the sand and stone and sky. But not this time. This time, Lerokan had been the anchor point. The point I held most tightly to and used to understand everything else.

I shook off how odd that feeling was and looked around us.

The mountains around us pierced upward with dramatic beauty.

The mountains we'd travelled through in the Death Plains to get here had been jagged and rocky, but much lower than these. Some geographers might have even called them hills, because they were not so high as the mountains we found ourselves in now, though they were just as pointed, with cliffs and peaks. They'd reminded me of fangs, sharp and hungry and the colour of chalky bone.

These mountains, after those greyish-white ones, stunned me with their grandness and their saturated hues.

The floor of the valley, and the imposing peaks rising up all around us, reflected back cobalt, sapphire, and inky indigo, the different shades of blue crackling off of each other. In some areas, a deep glimmering turquoise stone streaked through the darker blue. The colour of those streaks reminded me so much of a piece of jewellery my mom had once brought me back after a trip to India. A gold dolphin pendant swinging on a delicate golden chain, its eyes made of teal-coloured beryl stone.

"Deep Sky," I whispered, truly understanding the name.

"If you are not cold then why do you need your cloak?"

Lerokan's bark of a question made me jump. My head snapped over to find him now standing beside me, looking down the beaky snout of his mask judgmentally.

"It's the sun. If I'm not careful it can damage my skin."

Lerokan's sight stars pulsed with what I assumed was surprise. His shimmering gaze slid from my face to my neck, remaining at my collarbone for a long moment before skimming down my bare arms. Something flickered in that gaze, something that made my heart go all batty in my chest. I crossed my arms, unsure of what else to do under the sudden intensity of his sight stars.

Lerokan made a small throat-clearing sound and stepped subtly away from me. He frowned up at the sky.

"Well," he said gruffly, "though it is nearly unbelievable, somehow I am not surprised that someone as smidgey as you can be injured by something essentially invisible."

I was saved from having to defend myself with a bunch of scientific facts about UV rays by a loud squawk behind us.

I spun around, cortisol spiking, then breathed out when I saw that it was Breena. She'd followed us out here, probably after having some food.

Breena's colouring, like Lerokan's and that of the mountains around us, came to effervescent life in the daylight. I'd originally found her rather dragon-like because of her size and the long curve of her neck. But I realized now what would be a more apt comparison. A blue heron. A massive alien one with six eyes, that is.

Most of her feathers were a pale dove-grey with some flecks of white. But down her throat to her belly and along her wings were vast, feathered stripes that blushed lavender before shifting sharply to royal blue. Her many legs were a deep blue colour, too, as were her eyes. She didn't have sight stars, but rather gleaming silver pupils shaped like an Earth reptile's, or a cat's.

She launched upward with a throaty cry, soaring into the crystalline blue of the morning sky. Breena had been such a calming presence this whole time that I hadn't really considered just how cooped-up she must have felt in the cave. She was meant to fly. Meant to cut through the air with the blades of her wings. She swooped and dove and climbed again, pure joy radiating from her movements.

I looked up and sideways at Lerokan to find him beaming at his mount as she flew. For once, his grin wasn't arrogant or snarky or teasing. It was so real. A slice of sincerity beneath his mask.

I was smiling, too, as I turned to watch Breena's triumphant flight of freedom.

I could stay like this forever...

But no. I couldn't. Now that the storm had ended, I had my friends to find. And if that went well...

I'd be going back to the Sea Sands.

Without him.

Lerokan knew it too.

His face turned serious.

"We should pack up," he said.

I nodded and sighed.

"Yeah." I wanted to find my group. I needed to make sure they were OK. But even so, dredging up my next words was like speaking past a stone in my throat. "It's time to go."



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Lerokan



We ate, washed, packed up the cave, then waited for nightfall before leaving to scout the plains for Priya's group. I had not seen evidence of Gahn Thaleo's warriors out there today, but I still wanted to move with an abundance of caution, using as much darkness as we could for cover. Hopefully, the storm had driven any enemy warriors into the shelter of stone, as it had done to us, and we would be the first to emerge onto the plains. In all honesty, I still wasn't sure why Gahn Thaleo's men had been out on the plains in the first place. Their territory consisted of the far peaks of mountains, opposite from Gahn Errok's territory. The Deep Sky plains, and the central stretch of mountains where the Vrika nested between the two tribes, was all considered neutral territory.

Being banished, I'd thought I was the only one who'd had reason to scout, hunt, and remain in the tribeless territory.

Why were they out there? Why attack the others in neutral territory?

Questions for Gahn Thaleo. And I had no interest in seeking him out to ask such things.

Once we were all ready and night had suitably soaked the sky, I led Priya out of the cave for the final time. Breena had already gone ahead of us, desperate to take in as much fresh air as possible. So, it was just Priya and I stepping through the tunnel of stone.

Her little hand was curled around one of my weapons straps, her dainty knuckles bumping my back with every step. Every skirting drag of those impossibly small knuckles made my skin heat strangely, tingles running down my spine to the base of my tail.

Luckily, the disturbingly sensational contact did not last long. As soon as we stepped into the light of the moons and stars, Priya let her hand drop.

I got to work fastening her pack and my few belongings to Breena's side. Normally, I'd fly with my bow ready in one hand. But I'd learned it was impossible to use a bow, an arrow, and keep Priya stable on Breena's back at

the same time. Priya could not be counted upon to hold herself steady, either. Ultimately, I tied my quiver to Breena's side, too, slinging my bow across my body and instead choosing to hold a long blade that I could throw one-handed like a spear if needed.

Hopefully, it will not be needed.

I was a skilled warrior. I could hold my own in battle.

But with Priya to look after, to protect, the thought of an attack was less a thrilling one and more... Terrifying.

This bothered me greatly. I could not understand it.

I hadn't been truly terrified before in all my life.

Even when scaling the side of a jagged cliff as a child, when my feet had faltered and I'd almost fallen, barely catching myself with the claws of one hand, I hadn't felt true terror. Just the hard smack of my heart against my ribs demanding that I survive. And I knew I would.

I always did.

Priya was a survivor, too. I hadn't noticed it at first, but I could see it now. I could see it in the determined set of her dark brows and delicate jaw. Could see it in the way she'd braided her hair, neat and tight, for a flight I knew she dreaded. But even that flinty survivor's spirit could not keep her soft body alive out here. She had no claws to catch herself on stone before she fell.

But I did.

So much responsibility for such a small package, I thought, frowning at her.

I could feel the fondness behind that frown of concern.

I was not even sure what terrified me most.

The thought of Priya getting hurt.

Or the fact I was so terrified of her getting hurt.

Well, obviously, I'd want no female to come to harm, I reasoned with myself as I watched Priya gently pat Breena's feathers, murmuring softly to our mount.

Our mount?

Enough of this. It's time to find her friends.

An obnoxious little voice growled at me from somewhere in the back of my skull.

But you're her friend, too.

I physically shook my head to dislodge the words.

We'd become friendly allies out here, certainly. But I had no real claim to her. Even if I had grown a little too pleased by the sight of her smiles, the sound of her voice, the little annoyances and inconveniences she caused me.

"Come on," I said. *The faster we get going the faster we get this over with.* "It's time."

Priya turned from Breena, her gaze catching mine. Her eyes were luminous and huge, her dark sight stars twin pools that drew me deeply inwards. Threatening to drown me.

She bumped her head up and down in that odd gesture of hers.

"I'm ready."

I stepped up to her, placing my hands on her waist.

She gasped softly at the contact. Maddeningly, her little sound went directly to my groin. Even through the stiff fabric of her cloak, I could feel the narrowness of her waist and then the flare of her hips under my claws. I could feel her tension, too, vibrating through her narrow frame. Her breaths came shallow and quick.

"What is it? I need to lift you up," I growled through clenched fangs, doing everything I could to ignore the sweet scent of her recently washed and braided hair.

"I know!" she stammered. "I just... I wasn't ready!"

"You just said you were ready!"

She pressed her plush lips into a thin line, avoiding my gaze.

"I meant I was ready to *go*, not ready for..."

"Not ready for me to lift you up so that we actually could go?" I asked flatly. The fact I also did not seem entirely ready for the effect her nearness had on me was beside the point.

"Just lift me up, will you?" she muttered, smacking her palms against my chest. I was sure the movement was meant to demonstrate her particular brand of feisty human stubbornness. But with such weak limbs, it felt more like a gentle little pat.

She didn't take her hands away, staring at where her small fingers splayed on my chest.

She seemed as unable to remove her hands from my chest as I was unable to remove my hands from her waist. It was as if the deep core of her drew my fingers inward against her curves, locking my grip in place.

Lift her and let her go, Lerokan.

Curse me, it was difficult.

But I'd always been a strong warrior. And I could do difficult things.

Without letting myself get sucked further into this embrace, I lifted her without warning and swung her over onto Breena's back. Her hands slipped off my chest as she cried out in surprise. I removed my hands from her waist as soon as possible after making sure she was settled.

I grimaced when I remembered that just letting go of her wouldn't sever the contact. Because now I had to leap up and settle myself behind her, holding her tightly against me. I hadn't given such a position a second thought our first night together when I'd snatched her from the plains.

But things...

Things had changed since then.

For some incoherent reason, I found her beautiful, now.

And that made such nearness... Challenging.

It is too bad she is not a woman of the Deep Sky. She could fly Breena without my help, I thought sourly as I dawdled, checking the straps on our belongings once more. I could feel Breena's six-eyed gaze upon me. She knew as well as I did that the straps required no checking.

Women of the Deep Sky did not usually travel on braxilk out of tribal territory, but they were trained from childhood, as boys were, to fly with a mount. They usually used such skills to travel to other valleys and caves for foraging while males did the majority of the hunting.

I tried to picture Priya as a Deep Sky woman. Tried to shift her features into something more familiar.

But I did not like the result.

Her features already had become familiar to me.

And as irritating as it was to accept the betrayal of my body and my blood and my cock around her now, a small part of me was glad she needed me. I had saved her. I had the skills to help her. I was a worthy male who could prove his strength to her with ease.

Perhaps it is not so small a part that wants her to need me.

"Are you coming?" Priya asked, gazing down at me from Breena's back.

"Yes," I grunted. There was no more stalling to be done. No more straps to quadruple check even though the first check had been sufficient.

I leaped up onto Breena, my thighs spread wide across her.

Instinctively, Priya scooted backwards, getting closer so I could hold her properly. A pang in my groin and the rapid thickening of my cock had me scrambling for some sort of cover between us. I snatched my quiver of

arrows from Breena's side and jammed it in front of my betrayal of an erection just as Priya's small rump bumped it. Luckily, she said nothing about the quiver of arrows there. *Perhaps she thinks this is how I usually fly since I did it last time, too.*

I kept my one spear-like blade ready in my left hand and looped my right arm around Priya's front, drawing her further back against me. Unlike our last flight, her pack was safely strapped to Breena's side. This freed her hands to grasp my forearm. Little tingling veins of fire snaked under my skin, originating where every one of her fingers touched my bare hide.

I could not afford to get so distracted by her. It was time to fly.

I clicked my tongues and Breena responded instantly. Her many legs crunched downward then snapped straight, propelling her up as her wings beat.

As we ascended, Priya's grip got harder on my arm.

"This flight will be smoother than the last," I said, leaning down to speak next to her ear. This time, as far as I could tell, we wouldn't be blocked and chased by the Vrika. At least for now, the great being was nowhere to be seen.

The cold whip of the wind, and the force of focus required to watch for enemies, soon distracted me from the swelling at my groin. Priya remained silent, concerned with her own thoughts, as we flew through the last of the peaks and soared over the plains.

It soon became apparent that the storm had not actually ended, just moved. At the far edge of the plains, where the ablik fields began, the night turned solid - a dark, whirling wall lit occasionally by streaking sky veins. The resulting booms met our ears slowly due to the distance.

We were nearly at the battle scene, now. Corpses came into focus. A grim fist of dread squeezed my heart.

Priya's friends.

But...

No. They were not Priya's friends.

The remains of three men littered the plains, along with the bodies of three braxilk.

I did not even see the body of the one-armed man I'd seen fall.

After casting my gaze about once more to make sure the area seemed secure, I ordered Breena into a controlled descent. We landed beside the grove of harlok trees where I'd first seen Priya and the two other women. A

quick glance between the harlok grove told me their tents and belongings were now gone.

Priya wrenched her eyes open now that we'd landed, her head whipping back and forth.

"Where are we? Is anyone - oh."

Her words died as her gaze settled on the fallen men and their mounts.

"I saw no other bodies," I told her softly. "And your group's tents are gone."

She twisted where she sat, looking up at me with painful hope carved into her features.

"So, that means they're alive, right? Maybe even Varrow, too!"

I highly doubted Varrow had survived his hit. That would likely have been a lethal hit even with a skilled healer and Vrika's blood ready at hand, which I doubted they'd had.

"At the very least, it appears your group was victorious in the fight," I replied, avoiding the question about Varrow. "Whoever among them survived clearly had enough strength to pack up the tents and leave with any injured or fallen men. Where they went from here now becomes the question."

Because the storm had swept from the mountains out over the plains, any recent tracks had been obliterated. It had been eight days since her group had presumably been here, and finding them now would not be easy.

"Well, it's likely at least some of them went back to the settlement," Priya said, turning to face forward again, squinting at the dark wall of the storm ahead. "No way Gahn Razek would keep Jocelyn and Camille out here after being attacked. They probably took my two friends back to the settlement. Varrow, too." Her voice cracked a little on the fallen man's name, but she kept going. "I honestly don't believe the entire group would have gone back and left me here, though. There were seven male warriors in the group, and obviously, none of them are lying dead here. I think it's likely at least a couple of them stayed behind to follow you and try to find me."

That made me gnash my fangs. Which was absurd, really. The entire point of coming out here was to return Priya to her group. The fact she believed some of the men had remained behind to find her should have been good news.

It did not feel like good news.

"I will not be able to track those men now," I hissed, my voice much more vehement than I'd intended. "The storm has swept any trace of them

away. And this territory is vast. Besides, if more of Gahn Thaleo's men found them, they may not even be alive now."

Priya twisted around again to stare at me.

"Can you just let me have a little moment of hope and happiness? Please?"

Her eyes glimmered, threatening to spill her unnerving tears. I hardened myself against her sadness.

"I am trying to be sensible about what the next step is," I said firmly.

Are you? Or are you trying to convince yourself, and her, that it would be easier to just stay with you, now?

Priya sighed, sagging, looking even smaller than before.

"You're right," she said softly. "Gahn Thaleo clearly doesn't like outsiders around here, and every day I'm out here looking for the other men, men we don't even know are still alive now, is putting both of us in danger."

She squared her shoulders and met my gaze once more.

"I suppose there's just one thing left to do then."

Yes. Stay here, I thought.

"I need you to take me back," she said, her voice unwavering.

"Back?" I repeated, wanting to clarify that she meant back to the mountains we'd just come from.

"Back," she reiterated, her eyes fierce. "Back to the Cliffs of Uruzai."



CHAPTER NINETEEN

Priya



I was asking a lot of Lerokan. I knew it. So did he.

The words turned the air between us thick with tension. His sight stars spun, his mouth an unhappy line pressed across the bottom half of his face.

“I know it’s a lot,” I said. “Really, I do. But we just established that it’s not safe for me to stay out here. You know how to survive, you know how to avoid Gahn Thaleo’s men. I’m just going to get in your way out here. It would be better if you took me back. With Breena, the journey would take a fraction of the time that it took us to get here on foot.”

Lerokan let out a grim, growly breath through his nostrils, his mouth never relaxing from that hard, thin line.

“That seems like the best option,” I said. “The journey back is dangerous too, don’t get me wrong. But I’ve got my maps. I know where the quicksand is if we need to land in the Death Plains. And we can just fly over most predators out there, like the ablokoi. The other tribes won’t attack you if they see me with you, I promise.”

Still nothing.

“Well, I suppose we don’t have to decide right now,” I said, swivelling to face forward once again.

I should have been ecstatic that it looked as if most, if not maybe even all, my friends had survived the battle. But... I wasn’t. My throat thickened, my eyes wet and hot.

I was about to cry. Because I had to leave Lerokan.

If he agrees to take me back there...

He had no obligation to do so, of course. But I believed that what I’d said was true. I’d be a burden for him out here if I stayed. Without the support of his tribe, or my human friends, he’d be stuck looking after me, protecting me, hunting for me every single day.

I knew he probably already felt enough regret and resentment for picking me up in the battle and now being stuck with me. I didn’t want that

resentment to grow even bigger if he were stuck with me forever.

Even if the idea of staying with him was a temptation so sharp it made my breath catch.

“That is not the only option,” Lerokan said slowly from behind me. I blinked rapidly, trying to make the tears go away.

“Really?” I asked, not letting myself look at him. Not letting myself hope that there was some option that allowed me to be with both my friends and him.

But there is, isn't there?!

“Wait! I know what the other option is!” I cried before he could speak. Again, I found myself wrenching around to look at him. “You take me back. And you stay there. Stay with... With us.”

I'd almost said, “With me.” *Caught myself just in time.*

Lerokan did not look impressed with this suggestion.

“Why not?” I asked, the tears back again. Humiliatingly, one of them slipped down my cheek. I watched Lerokan's sight stars track the salty wet drop as it rolled to my jaw. I swiped furiously at my eyes, then focused on him again. “You've been banished from your tribe. You're all by yourself out here. You could come back and join us as an ally. That's why we came out here in the first place. To gain allies.”

“Even with everything you propose, the journey back would still be an arduous one,” he said. His face was even more unreadable than usual beneath his mask. “And when I said there was another option, that is not what I meant.”

“Oh.” The word was a hard croak. I sniffed and wiped my eyes some more, trying not to linger on the sting of rejection. I'd asked far too much of him. Asked him to take me all the way back, and to abandon the lands of his birth in the process.

“I could take you to Gahn Errok.”

I whipped my hands away from my wet face, staring at him in shock. That hadn't even occurred to me as an option because... Well, it seemed the least likely to make either of us happy.

“He banished you,” I said slowly, trying to understand his logic.

“Yes,” Lerokan confirmed, his voice giving nothing away.

“So... You'd either drop me off and leave me there to continue your exile, or...”

“Or I'd have to answer the Vrika's call.”

“But you don’t want to do that!” I cried. “That’s, like, the worst-case scenario for you, right?”

In all honesty, it kind of was for me, too. Either I’d be stuck with a tribe who didn’t know me and potentially didn’t even want me, utterly friendless with Lerokan banished. Or, I’d have to watch Lerokan answer the Vrika’s call and probably fall madly in love with another woman right in front of me.

“No.” Lerokan’s voice was a brutal scrape down my spine, ripping me from my thoughts. “No, the worst-case scenario is I put you in unnecessary danger, either by keeping you with me out here, or by taking the long journey back. You may have your maps, but that land, with all its monsters, is unknown to me. Besides, even if I wanted to take you back, the storm would not permit it, at least not for some time, yet.”

Shit. I hadn’t even considered the stupid storm. It raged beyond us, lightning spiking down every few minutes, punctuated with delayed booms of thunder that rolled over the plains. There would be no way to circumvent the storm. We’d have to once again wait for it to move on before we could even attempt to get past the ablik fields and into the Death Plains.

“So... That’s it, then? You’re just going to drop me off with the guy who banished you and then disappear?”

“I have not yet made my decision.”

“Well, do I get any say in this? At all? Because it’s my life, you know!”

“Exactly!” Lerokan snarled, fangs flashing.

I gasped, flinching. This was the first time I’d ever seen him truly, viciously angry. Other than when he’d yelled at the Vrika, that is. But this was the first time it was directed solely at me.

“It *is* your life,” he snapped, his sight stars a tempest that matched the one ahead of us. “And it is precisely your life which I am trying to preserve. When it comes to what you want and what will actually keep you alive, I will choose the latter. Every time.”

There was no sarcasm and no boasting in his words. No mocking claims of leaving me in the path of an arrow, like he’d said in our fight before. This was his raw and naked truth. He would keep me alive no matter what.

Even if it meant misery for both of us.



CHAPTER TWENTY

Lerokan



Apart from a brief conversation on what to do with the bodies of Gahn Thaleo's slain men, we were silent as we prepared to depart for the mountains once more. Priya, in some foolhardy soft-heartedness, wanted to bury the men who'd attacked her own party.

"I have only blades, no shovel," I'd told her, slicing my hand through the air. "I could have done it for one man, like Varrow. But it would take all night to do this now, and I don't want to be out here without cover that long."

Deep Sky warriors were entombed alongside their mounts. Burying all three men and their mounts would be a terrible task. Messy, too, as both scavengers and rot had gotten their teeth into the bodies. I'd told Priya I would have buried her one-armed friend, but asking me to spend all night burying my enemies was too much, even outside of the danger it posed.

"What about a pyre?" Priya had asked. "That's what they do in the Sea Sands. Similar to what my people do, too. My parents were both cremated."

I tried to hide my shock at the idea of burning your dead ones. I would not have bothered to hide it if she'd merely told me about the strange Sea Sand men. But I did not want to dishonour her parents.

"Too risky," I replied. As much as burning Gahn Thaleo's men gave me a sick sort of satisfaction, a fire out here would be a beacon to any nearby warriors with hostile intent.

Priya sighed harshly, facing away from me on Breena's back. Over and over tonight, I'd made her unhappy. I did not think I was at fault in this, but still, it irked me.

"With the storm that's passed over them, they're half buried in the dust already. Besides, I would not be surprised if Gahn Thaleo sends men to fetch them," I told her, trying to give her some relief from the clear unease she felt.

Even Gahn Thaleo would not leave his men to rot out here if he could help it. Likely, the storm had kept his warriors from the scene just as we'd been kept away. But now...

“In fact,” I added, haste hardening my voice, “I think that possibility is very likely now that the weather here is clear. We must go.”

I scanned the skies uneasily and commanded Breena to ascend.

Every beat of Breena’s wings that took us back towards the shelter of the mountains was a balm to me. We’d be safer there for now.

And I’d be able to figure out just what in the piercing peaks I was going to do.

I held fast to Priya as my brain churned over the options.

What I’d told Priya had been true. Handing her over to Gahn Errok and the tribe would keep her safe. They’d take care of her. In fact, once they found out her kind could be mated to men similar to ours, she’d likely be welcomed with raised tails of respect and gratitude. That did not make me feel better, though. Quite the opposite. The idea of Errok eyeing her as a potential mate, for him or any other man, made my claws curl painfully into my palm around the blade I held.

The only way around that would be for me to rejoin the tribe as her personal protector. But in order to do that, I’d have to submit to the Vrika and get bonded to a mate I did not want. How would I even look out for Priya if my feelings were entirely devoted to another, against my very will?

Those feelings may not be for another...

I tensed.

Could the Vrika...

Could it bond me to Priya?

I waited for the instantaneous repulsion I always felt at the idea of being bonded by fate to one I did not choose.

It never came.

Priya... My mate...

Confusion clawed at me. For so long, my purpose had been to avoid the mate bond. The mask I wore as a result had become a part of me. But perhaps... Perhaps...

Perhaps the mate bond would not be so bad if it were with her.

Have you gone mad? I thought to myself as we flew through towering peaks and swooped into valleys. *A mate bond with this puny, tiny, stubborn little thing?*

I tried to make it sound terrible.

I failed.

But can I even take that chance?

If I were to submit to the Vrika, there was no guarantee it would bond me to Priya. It had been coming to me for more than half an age before Priya had even come into these lands. And the Vrika had only ever bonded us to Deep Sky women. Otherwise, we would have known of the other tribes out there, because our warriors could have been bonded to women of the Sea Sands.

The more I thought about it, the more it seemed unlikely the Vrika would have chosen Priya as my mate. And the more the idea of submitting to its call became as unacceptable as it had been before.

This is impossible.

I would have continued chewing on those thoughts with such focus that we may never have landed. But Priya said something to me, and I lowered my head to hear her.

“What did you say?”

“Water! I think I saw water down there!”

She probably had. There were springs in these mountains, both open to the air and below ground. Some cold, some warm.

I clicked my tongues and directed Breena to bank left, angling back the way we’d just come. After a few moments of backtracking, I saw the glimmer of water Priya had mentioned. After a cursory scan of the ground revealed no predators or other warriors, I urged Breena to descend.

We landed, not on ground level, but on a high, raised area of flat dirt and stone. On the left side, the mountain rose up in a dizzying peak. On the right, the stone platform dropped off into a cliff, the side of which plunged down into a dark valley. The natural pool of water shone in the centre of the area. Two streams attached themselves to the pool. One that trickled down the side of the mountain from an unknown origin, feeding fresh water into the pool. The other stream, similar in width, ran from the pool off the edge of the cliff beside us, creating a waterfall down the stone.

“I haven’t seen water in weeks,” Priya said, a nostalgic sort of desire thick in her voice. “And even that water wasn’t running water like this.”

I leaned forward, observing her expression from the side. Her eyes slid closed, the frown that had been on her face most of the evening melting into a smooth expression of peace.

“I love that sound,” she whispered.

I stilled myself, listening.

I did not close my eyes as she did, though.

I was not yet willing to let the sight of her go.

The moonlight drenched her profile as if made of water itself. Shelves of bone and curves of soft brown flesh turned shimmering silver. Every little hair of her brows and her lashes gleamed like something precious. Something that would take great effort to mine and even greater effort to care for.

Her eyes opened without warning, and I reared back, terrified she would see me staring.

She instills far too much fear in me for someone so tiny and weak.

Needing to find some distance, I tossed my quiver of arrows to the stone then leaped down off of Breena's back. I turned around to find Priya already swinging her leg over, preparing to slide down Breena's side.

"Don't!" I growled, reaching for her with my free hand, the other still holding a blade. *Has she forgotten that her legs always seem to collapse under her when she hits the ground after a flight?*

But Breena was faster than me. She snapped her wing out on an angle, creating a smooth slide down for Priya. Priya landed somewhat clumsily, but she did not fall over. She straightened, then patted Breena's side.

"Thank you," she whispered with a smile.

And there it was again. That disorienting squeeze in my chest. A flood of emotion so swift I could not tell if its currents were pain...

Or desire.

Priya noticed me staring this time.

"What?" she asked, meeting my gaze. Breena looked at me, too, over top of Priya's head.

I frowned, pointing at them with my weapon.

"When you two look at me like that, I feel outnumbered. It is not a pleasant sensation," I grumbled.

Priya chuckled wearily. I could hear the exhaustion, the frustration in it. But I could hear the mirth, too. My ears twitched under the mask, searching for more of that sound.

But no more came. Because the water had once again captured Priya's attention. She walked over to the bank of the pool and knelt. I crouched beside her, the smell of fresh water, dust, stone, and her combining into a sweetness that made my tongues lash against my fangs.

"How deep do you think it is?" she asked, furrowing her brows as she looked down at the rippling, reflective surface.

"Let's find out," I said, standing. I slipped my bow over my head and tossed it to the ground before wading into the water.

“Wait! What are you doing? What if there’s something in there?”

I sloshed further until I was at the centre of the pool. Waist-deep for me. Probably shoulder-deep for her.

“Something like what?” I asked, turning back to face her. This pool was a decent size, but not large enough to sustain any predators in its depths. There were likely little mountain water creatures scuttling away from my feet even now, but nothing that would be able to harm either one of us.

“I don’t know. Your planet has all kinds of weird stuff,” she mumbled, eyeing the water suspiciously.

“And yours does not?”

Her mouth scrunched up.

“OK. Yeah. Well played.”

“If it makes you feel better, I will wade around the perimeter to deter anything that may want to have a nibble on one of your many tiny toes.”

I’d seen her toes. Why so many of them, when they didn’t even seem to improve her clumsiness or weakness? No one knew. They’d been bizarre at first glance, but now I begrudgingly considered them to be cute in an odd sort of way. So round and tiny and clawless on her flat little feet.

Between her toes and mine, I suspect hers would be more appetizing for some water creature to try to swallow. At least, they’re more defenceless, I added hurriedly, now entirely too preoccupied with the idea of her toes in someone’s mouth.

But not *my* mouth. Certainly not. Never.

Ever.

I waded through the water, all around the shallower edges of the pool, then back in towards the centre. The stone bottom was smooth, without sharp stones or dips for a flat-footed female to twist her ankle. If there were any little water creatures, they were the skittish sort and did not bother any part of me.

“See? All is well.”

Now that I was back in the deeper area of the pool, I bent my legs, submerging myself for a moment before coming back up for air. The water was exquisitely cold. It soaked my hair, biting along my skin and dripping over and under my mask. I blinked the water from my eyes, shoving my fingers under the mask to wipe the last remnants of moisture away.

Priya’s eyes dragged from the surface of the water to my body as I splashed more of the cold stuff along my shoulders. I understood Priya’s

excitement at seeing the water. Using moss was good and got one clean enough. But being in water like this was far superior. Nearly as pleasurable as flying through fresh air.

I rubbed my hands all over my chest, cleansing myself, stroking beneath the straps and between them. I wouldn't have taken off my weapons straps. I had to be ready to fight off an enemy at a moment's notice. But I was now regretting wearing my one and only cock cloth into the pool. It was soaked.

Normally, I'd have had no problem whipping it off and remaining nude until it dried. That's exactly what I'd done before, when Priya had up spilled on my old one.

But now I had to contend with a ferociously disobedient cock that seemed to swell at the slightest provocation. And I did not have the energy to explain to Priya why my impressive cock was suddenly even more impressive and... *enthusiastic*... around her.

Even now, trapped in the soggy, cold clutches of my soaked cock cloth, it was reacting to Priya. Although, in all fairness to me and my shaft, she was also ogling me in a rather intense way. Her blunt teeth dug into her lower lip, her eyes sliding from my jaw, down my neck, down to my chest and abdomen. When her gaze hit the water, it bounced back up again, starting the track over from the beginning.

"Stop looking at me like that," I called over, an echo of what she'd said to me when she'd surprised me with her breasts.

She snapped to attention at my words, then forced her gaze back to the rippling water.

"Sorry. I wasn't... I'm just surprised you like the water, that's all. The Sea Sand men hate it."

"Really?" I asked, rather surprised. What was there to hate about water? It was refreshing in the heat, warming at night. Slippery and silky and pleasant on one's skin. "These Sea Sand men are odd indeed. Not nearly as fierce as I'd expect if they fear something as simple as water."

"I don't think they fear it. I think they don't like the feeling of being wet. Like a *cat*. And besides," she dipped her hand into the water, swirling it gently before splashing a wave my way, "they were fierce enough to win the battle on the plains."

"True," I said. Despite the fact there had been more of them, it was still an impressive feat to have killed three of Gahn Thaleo's men on their

mounts. Fighting from the ground while others flew and used arrows had put them at a grave disadvantage. And yet, they'd been victorious.

*With this in mind, perhaps some of them truly are still alive out here.
Looking for her even now...*

That thought exhausted me. I turned slowly in the pool, examining our surroundings. A little ways beyond us, the mountainside cracked open into what looked to be the narrow entrance to a cave.

I left the pool, water pouring down my body, dripping from my hair and cock cloth.

“Stay here with Breena. I will check this cave.”

The cave was small but serviceable. Unlike the last one, it had no long winding tunnels, but it had what we needed - valikir plants at the edges, felkora nests and eggs in high corners. There was not much ventilation, though, and no materials I could see that would sustain a fire. But with our bedding hides, that should be no problem.

Satisfied, I exited the cave and then stopped short, staring.

Priya knelt at the side of the water. She'd removed her cloak and was splashing her face. She used the excess water on her hands to rub sensually down her neck to her delicate collarbones. She stroked water along her slim, bare arms, too, her skin glistening under the adulation of the moons and stars. She shivered. My tail snapped behind me, my jaw cracking, when I saw her nipples pucker and harden under her sleeveless tunic.

It was only the heavy, frigid weight of my sodden cock cloth that kept my erection under control.

Somewhat.

This is bad. Last time I was this aroused merely by the sight of her, at least she'd been entirely nude. She is still clothed now!

But there was enough – enough of that glorious wet skin, enough of her soft sighs and shivers, enough of her budding nipples – to make me react. Like this, peaceful and shimmering, her beauty was like a blow to the head and a stroke of the softest feather, all at once.

She looked like a deity. A dream.

Something ethereal and not of this world.

That is because she is not of this world.

I'd grown so used to having her beside me that that fact was hard to keep in mind. That she came from somewhere else entirely, beyond the skies, beyond the stars. Beyond everything I'd known.

But now that she was here, I wanted to keep her here.

I just needed to figure out how.

Give her up to Errok and never see her? Or submit to the Vrika's call and be bound to someone else, just so I could be near her with the tribe?

I knew, and I'd already told her, why I couldn't keep her out here with me in exile. *Look at that tiny pretty face, the luminous skin that tears so easily, the eyes that lose fluids for every little hurt. Even with me, she'd be too much at risk. And if something ever happened to me out here...*

It would be a death sentence for her.

Piercing peaks, a sickening thought. Suddenly, images of Priya alone in the mountains, trying to fend for herself, burst in my mind.

My feet moved of their own accord, stomping back into the pool, sloshing through it. I waded across the pool until I stood directly before her.

The cold water dulled the swelling of my cock.

But it did nothing for the chaos of my heart.

Priya stopped her washing, hands dripping, staring up at me.

“What is it? Does the cave seem alright?”

The cave was not alright. Because *nothing* was alright.

I was not supposed to feel this way. I was supposed to still find her obnoxious and ugly. She was supposed to be a burden to dump into the arms of another man as soon as I was able.

I tried to dredge those feelings up once more, but could not. All I could focus on now was the glisten of moon-cooled water on her fine skin, the sheen of her hair, her cursed, cock-swelling scent.

“Priya,” I said, kneeling in the water and clamping my hands down on the ground so that our gazes lined up.

“Yes? Lerokan, you're being weird. What's going on?”

I'm not being weird. I just feel weird!

I had no way to put the clattering confusion inside me into words.

I wanted her. I wanted her in ways a man wanted a mate. But I'd never wanted a mate!

I never wanted this.

“Priya,” I said again, more quietly this time. I lifted a hand from the stone to catch one drop of water before it slipped off the point of her chin. My hand remained there, cupping her jaw.

Her eyes got huge, and she drew in a tiny, shuddering breath. She shivered again, the motion a thrum under my hand that made me want to

warm her...

And made me want to peel off more of her clothing so that she would do it again.

What do I do now?

I had come over here with no kind of plan. I hadn't even decided what to do with her yet. Or rather, what to do with myself. She needed to go into Gahn Errok's territory for her own safety, that much was certain.

But would I be with her?

Or not?

"You told me," I said, the words coming unbidden, "that I could call you Priya because I had become your friend." My thumb shifted upward, the tip of my claw gently probing her lower lip. "But what if," I rasped, fighting the urge to push my thumb into her hot mouth, "what if I don't want to be your friend?"

That was the closest I could get to naming the overwhelming waves crashing against my ribs. I couldn't say more, not yet. I couldn't say I wanted her as my mate because I'd built my entire history, my identity, running from that fate. And yet...

And yet, this friendship was not enough.

Not anymore.

A flash of unhappiness crossed her face.

"You don't want to be my friend?" she asked.

She pulled away from me. I let my hand drop as if burned.

So, it is only me, then. Only me who'd grown too close, too attached. Priya wanted things to remain as they'd always been. No wonder she was so keen on returning to her people at the desert cliffs. Leaving you is no great hurt for her.

Why had it become such a great hurt for me?

The answer to that remained hidden.

But something else echoed in its stead.

The call of an unmistakable word, a *name*, from the valley below.

A name I'd grown to know all too well, wrapped in the maddening fist of another man's voice.

"PRIYA!"



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Priya



My head snapped to the side, my eyes scanning the darkness madly.
“Priya!”
There it was again! I hadn’t imagined it.

That sounds like...

“Oxriel!?” I cried.

“Stay there! We are coming!”

He said, “we.” Not, “I.”

They’re alive.... They’re alive!

I was so overwhelmed by grateful relief that I almost missed Lerokan’s mad dash out of the water. In an instant, he’d swept up his bow and knocked and arrow, aiming it down into the darkness of the valley.

I ran over to him, getting in front of him, between him and the edge of the cliff. The point of his arrow, for the tiniest second, was a hair’s breadth away from my forehead.

His sight stars exploded.

“Have you lost your wits?” he exclaimed, dropping his bow and arrow to grasp my shoulders. He spun me around until I was behind him, closer to the pool and far from the edge. “Never get in front of an arrow! Or that close to the edge!” He turned, bent, and retrieved his bow and arrow, getting ready to fire once more.

“Have I lost my wits? What about you? You are acting insane! Those are my friends! The ones I’ve been wanting to get back to this entire time!”

Lerokan let out a tight breath but did not lower his bow and arrow.

“I swear, Lerokan, if you hurt one of them...” I said.

They’d been through so much. The journey here. Winning the battle. Surviving the storm while potentially injured. And they’d still kept pushing, kept searching, for me.

I wrapped my arms around Lerokan’s extended arm, the one holding the bow straight out ahead of him. I lifted my feet right off the ground, grunting

and hanging off of his arm, hoping that my weight would be enough to make his elbow buckle.

Spoiler alert. It wasn't.

"Would you stop distracting me," Lerokan hissed, jiggling his arm to try to dislodge me. "I will not shoot first."

First...

Shit.

What if one of the other guys thought Lerokan was a bad guy? If they thought he was one of Gahn Thaleo's men who'd attacked them on the plains, they'd probably try to kill him on sight.

The sound of scraping claws and skittering pebbles told me the other men were scaling the side of the cliff to get to us. And fast.

"Guys! Oxriel, Dalk! Vaxilkai, Bariok!" I screamed. I couldn't see them, but I imagined they probably all had blades between their fangs, ready to hurl them right at Lerokan's head the moment they leaped up onto this stone platform. "Don't fight! Don't hurt him! He has a bow and arrow, don't draw your blades!"

"Is giving away a tactical advantage common among your kind?" Lerokan said flatly, giving his arm another good shake. This time, I was forced to put my feet down on the ground.

"We don't need a tactical advantage! They're not going to hurt either one of us!"

Lerokan's grip on his bow never wavered.

"I trust you, loud little Priya," he said quietly. "But I do not yet trust these men."

I guess it's up to me to play diplomat here...

The scraping sounds got higher. Closer. Hard breathing and the occasional grunt met my ears.

A flurry of motion ahead made me jump. In a burst, Oxriel leaped up onto the platform. As I'd pictured, he had a blade ready between his fangs. He drew it so fast the movement was a blur.

He stalked towards us, tail thrashing, his sight stars swinging between Lerokan and me.

Lerokan grew tenser. The bow and arrow practically thrummed with the strength he had coiled in that shot.

"Do not do it, Lerokan," I said through clenched teeth. I turned my attention to Oxriel. Only it wasn't just Oxriel, now. Dalk, Bariok, and

Vaxilkai had arrived up here, too, all with weapons ready.

“OK, everyone, just relax!” I called. I attempted to move out from Lerokan’s side so I could get in the middle of all the simmering alien testosterone. But Lerokan’s tail snapped out and hooked around my waist, forcing me behind his back with more strength than I would have thought possible. Breena crowded in behind me, too, trapping me against Lerokan’s back.

I wrestled with the tail to no avail, finally giving up on that and peeking out under his raised arm, the one holding the taut string of the bow and the arrow.

“Surrender the new woman,” Dalk snapped. He was one of Gahn Fallo’s men, and apart from Varrow, had probably been the grumpiest one in our group. Clearly, his mood had not been improved by this situation.

“Put down your weapons,” Lerokan countered.

“Not until you release her,” Oxriel joined in, his voice a deadly growl. It was so odd seeing Oxriel like this. He was generally a kind, friendly, optimistic sort of warrior. That smiley man had been replaced with someone I didn’t recognize. Someone who came closer and closer without a single thought for the arrow pointed right at his chest.

“Stop, Oxriel!” I screamed, terrified that Lerokan would release his shot.

“Any one of us would gladly take an arrow to retrieve you, Priya,” Oxriel said, his sight stars focused fiercely on Lerokan. “And there are four of us and only one of him. He cannot shoot fast enough to take us all down.”

“Let’s test that, shall we?” Lerokan growled.

This was insane! We’d all worked so hard to survive out here. And now, after everything, people were going to get hurt, maybe even die, because of this? Because of *me*?

“Lerokan, if you shoot... I don’t even know what I can do to you, but it won’t be pretty. And you guys! Lerokan has helped me. He’s taken care of me. If any one of you hurts him... I won’t go with you.”

Lerokan inhaled sharply at my words but made no other movements.

Oxriel paused his steady forward prowl, flanked by Bariok and Vaxilkai.

Dalk bared his teeth from beside the others.

“Does not matter,” Dalk said, the venomous determination in his words making me shiver. “We will drag you back if we have to. Our orders are to retrieve you no matter what it takes. Or die in the attempt.”

Clearly, Lerokan didn't like what he'd just heard. He swung his arms so that his arrow was now aimed at Dalk.

I realized quickly that there would be no reasoning with Dalk, Oxriel, and the others. They'd been ordered to literally get me back or die trying. They'd never be able to return to their tribes without me. Their honour as warriors depended on this. Which meant they'd fight. They'd die.

But Lerokan... He had no real stake here. He was the only one who could put his weapons down first.

I switched tactics, focusing solely on Lerokan.

"They're not going to put their weapons down while you have an arrow pointed at any of them. Right now, you look like my captor, especially holding me with your tail like this." I pushed against his tail in vain, then sighed in frustration. "There's four of them and one of you. You will die."

I thought it would be hard to say those last words, but it wasn't. They'd needed to be said. I had to make him see that he couldn't win this.

"I have Breena. She is worth at least two desert men, I am sure," Lerokan muttered flippantly.

"I don't understand why you're doing this!" I cried, shoving uselessly against his back. "These are the men we were looking for tonight! Why would you put yourself at risk, and Breena too, just to suddenly keep me from them?"

Lerokan did not move. Did not look at me. His muscles remained bunched beneath his blue-ish tinted hide, his massive bow straining with the force of his stance. For a disorienting moment, he reminded me of Rama, the blue-skinned god whose bow and arrows never missed their target.

But he wasn't Rama. He was Lerokan.

Not a god. But a man.

A man who could die right in front of me.

A man I'd grown to care for deeply. Probably too much.

This isn't working.

I need to get through to him some other way...

I stopped pushing against him. Instead, I wrapped my arms around his waist, pressing my cheek firmly to the warm skin of his back in the space between straps and weapons.

"Please, Lerokan," I whispered. My voice was so quiet. But I knew he'd hear it. "You have to put down your bow. You have to let this go."

You have to let me go.

I didn't say that part. I couldn't.

All five warriors remained in their positions, a tableau of calm before the storm.

But the storm broke before it could kill us.

With a muttered curse, Lerokan released the tension in his bow and sliced it downward through the air.

He'd only just let go, sending the bow and arrow clattering to the ground, when the others swarmed him.

His tail shoved me back into the protective shield of Breena's wings.

"Don't hurt him!"

My scream was so raw, so desperate, that I was sure my throat should have bled from the force of it.

One of the warriors, Oxriel, detached himself from the struggle, swiftly coming my way. Breena lowered her great head and snapped her beak, making him stop short before he reached me. Her feathery wings were like iron bars in front of me. Holding me back and trying to keep me safe at the same time.

Oxriel ducked as she snapped her beak once more, directly in front of his face.

Thank goodness it was Oxriel who came over here. I feel like Dalk would have tried to hurt Breena by now...

Oxriel stepped to the side, just out of the reach of Breena's beak. His sight stars met my gaze in the chaos.

"Oxriel!" I cried. "Go over there right now! Make sure they aren't hurting him!" My voice was already rising in panic by the end of my demands, threatening to turn into a scream again.

Oxriel turned back to the others and saw the same thing I did. Lerokan, trapped against the side of the mountain. Dalk's blade was at his throat. Vaxilkai and Bariok held the tips of their spears against his sides.

Lerokan's chest heaved with ragged breaths, but he wasn't fighting. Apart from his heavy breathing, he was perfectly still, his back to the stone, his hands loose at his sides.

His sight stars on me.

Before Breena could react and stop me, I slipped out from under the wall of her wings, running to the others.

"He surrendered! He dropped his weapons!" I cried, tugging at Dalk's arm the way I had done with Lerokan a few moments ago.

Lerokan watched me silently, his mask casting long shadows down his jaw. Something sparked in his gaze, just for a moment. A fleeting pain. It melted into resignation, then solidified into impassiveness. A perfect mask beneath the physical one of bone.

“If you’re going to slit my belly open you may as well get it over with,” he remarked coolly, his gaze sliding from my face to some blank point in the sky above. He raised his hands, which made Dalk snarl a warning. But he didn’t grab a blade. Instead, he settled his hands behind his head and tilted his chin up, causing his mask to slide slightly down. It was a pose of ultimate blasé relaxation – like he was about to take a fucking nap. He’d even closed his eyes, leaning back against the mountainside.

“What is he playing at?” Dalk snapped.

It took me a moment to realize that Dalk was talking to me.

“That’s just his personality. You’ll get used to it,” I muttered, shaking my head at Lerokan’s antics. Instead of trying to help me diffuse this situation, he was, what, trying to create some idiotic bluff? Dalk and the others were clearly all fired up. They did not need any encouragement when it came to killing him.

“But you can see that he’s not a threat now, right?” I asked tiredly. Now that the shock of their appearance and the ensuing drama was wearing off, the adrenaline dumping out of my system left me knackered. “Can you please just lower your weapons? His bow and arrow are way over there.”

They were still on the ground where they’d been dropped near the pool.

“He has other weapons,” Vaxilkai muttered, using the tip of his spear to nudge at a blade poking out from behind Lerokan’s back.

“And so he should,” I retorted. “How do you think he’s kept me alive this whole time?”

The three of them made irritated but thoughtful sounds. They may not have liked my arguments, but they at least understood them.

I sighed, speaking to Lerokan now. “You could help your case a little, you know. Tell them you’ll be peaceful so we can all just relax.”

“I am already perfectly relaxed,” Lerokan chirped back.

“You are such a git sometimes,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“I do not know that word, though I assume it is an insult,” Lerokan retorted, cracking open his eyes and staring at me. “I am not the *git* here. If anything, it is these men who are the *gits*. I have lowered my weapons and I did not fight them when they cornered me with blades. I could have ordered

Breana to gut them like her favourite mountain fish, but I did not. All of this, all of this peace, I have already offered. Because you asked me to. What have they offered me but their blades and their promises to drag you away?"

"They won't have to drag me away," I said wearily. I turned to Oxriel, who stood beside me, then looked at Dalk, Bariok, and Vaxilkai, each in turn. I forced my gaze back to Lerokan when I spoke my next words.

Even though it hurt.

"I'm going back with them."



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Lerokan



Her declaration should have resolved all the confusion in my head. Should have made everything clear. I would now no longer have to choose between leaving her alone with Errok and the tribe or facing the Vrika to stay beside her. And my worries about taking her through unfamiliar terrain to the settlement no longer applied, either. These four men had already travelled the path here. They knew the dangers, knew where to hunt for food, knew how to kill the native predators. And there were four, so even if three of them turned out to be incompetent idiots and got themselves killed somehow, there'd still be one left to chaperone Priya.

She was going back with them. The way we'd always planned she would. This was the most ideal outcome.

She is no longer my concern.

Even trapped by blades as I found myself now, her words should have freed me.

They didn't.

They left me reeling.

I'd been so sure that, at the very least, she would be remaining in this territory, even if it was not with me. But now...

Now she'd be gone. Entirely gone.

A few more words of conversation occurred that I did not really notice. All I could hear was the echo of Priya's words. *I'm going back with them.*

"Are you listening?" hissed the extra-annoying one, the man Priya had called Dalk.

"No," I sighed. "Should I be?"

His sight stars flashed, and his blade pressed a little harder beneath my chin.

"Considering that we are discussing the terms of lowering our blades, I would say so."

Cursed peaks, these desert men were tiresome. *They'd get along well with Errok.*

"Lower your blades or don't. It makes no difference to me. In fact, I'm rather comfortable." I tipped my head forward, resting my chin on the flat of Dalk's blade so that his weapon held my head up. "Ah. Thank you. That's even better."

"How did you manage to survive out here with him, Priya? The man hasn't got half a brain in his head," sneered one of the men holding spears, Vaxil-something.

"And I suspect there's more brains in Breena's dung than rests between your ears, but alas, I suppose there's nothing to be done about that," I replied.

Vaxil-something's fangs snapped, and his spear came dangerously close to slicing between my ribs. A hot trickle of blood ran down my side.

"I would like to add another condition to the lowering of blades," said Dalk. "The condition that the mountain warrior holds his tongues fast."

I was about to give a scathing retort to that when I caught sight of Priya's face. I expected her to look irritated, but she didn't. Instead, exhaustion was carved into her features so deeply it almost looked like grief.

"Stop worrying about my tongues and look to the woman you claim to be here to protect," I hissed.

Dalk glanced back at her. "Priya. You should rest. We have a long journey ahead of us."

"As if I could rest while you guys are out here at each other's throats!"

I sighed. We couldn't remain like this forever. It would drive Priya mad and she'd never get the rest she needed.

"Fine. What are the conditions, then?"

Dalk's sight stars snapped back to my face, his gaze narrow with suspicion.

"You may retain your weapons, but must warn us if you need to use them for some reason. Do not initiate any brawls. And when we leave," he leaned in closer, his nose practically bumping mine, "you do not try to stop us. And you *do not try to keep her.*"

Perhaps not just dung between this one's ears, then. Because he'd seen past my brashness, my bluffing, my mask of not caring, to the poisonous desire beneath.

The desire to keep her for myself.

I could strangle that desire, though. I was sure I could.

I had to.

And if I couldn't...

One of these four men would surely do it for me.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Priya



I was fairly certain I was on the verge of a bloody stroke from the stress these five were causing me. But ultimately, everyone simmered down enough to lower their weapons. Dalk, Vaxilkai, and Bariok backed tensely away, blades still ready, if Lerokan made any hasty moves. Oxriel seemed a little less wary, though still diligent, his eyes on Lerokan, too.

The four warriors from the settlement got their hackles up when I made a beeline for Lerokan, but when it became obvious he wasn't going to use his tail as a giant lasso around my waist like an alien cowboy again, they eased up a bit.

Lerokan was still leaning back against the stone. The hands that had been behind his head were now under his armpits, his arms crossed over his chest.

"That was intense," I said, breathing out slowly and looking up at him. He didn't return my gaze.

Something fractured.

Whether it was something inside me, or something between us, I wasn't sure. But whatever it was, it broke. I could practically hear the crack, like ice. It left me breathless with cold.

He won't look at me.

And now, I'll be leaving...

An odd chattering sound filled the air. Lerokan must have noticed me looking around for the source, because he finally looked at me again.

"What's wrong with you?" he asked, peering at me through his eye-holes.

I frowned at him, about to ask just what had happened to that super alien hearing he was always talking about. Surely, he could hear the rhythmless tap tap tap? It seemed to get louder every second.

"Your teeth are knocking against each other," he said, more softly this time. "Is that why they are so blunt? Have they ground themselves down from whatever this motion is?"

“I’m cold,” I stammered, the suddenness of my trembling making it difficult to speak.

Lerokan pushed off the wall and walked away, leaving me to wrap my arms around myself.

I guess this is how it’s going to be, now. Maybe it’s for the best. Maybe I can stop all my feelings for him from getting even stronger before I have to leave...

Luckily, Oxriel noticed my distress and hurried over as the other three spoke in hushed tones near the edge of the cliff.

“This shaking. It means you are cold, yes? Perhaps I can find something for a fire.”

I nodded jerkily.

“That would be great. Thank-”

My words were cut off by the crinkle of stiff fabric. For a moment, I couldn’t see. Fabric settled around my shoulders, pulled snug at my front. A quick, precise claw scooped the edge of my hood back from my eyes.

“There’s nothing for a fire in the cave,” Lerokan said. He was speaking to Oxriel, but looking at me.

Please. Please, just keep looking at me.

But it wasn’t the same as it had been before. There was a distance, now. The concern in Lerokan’s gaze was clouded. The easy humour had vanished, replaced with something bitter.

I felt even colder than before he’d put the jacket on me.

“It’s fine,” I murmured. “I’ll just snuggle up in my hides next to Breena. She’ll keep me warm.”

At the sound of her name, she trotted over from where she’d been closely watching the situation. Oxriel and the others stiffened, but she ignored them, coming straight to where Lerokan and I stood.

“Come on, my darling,” I whispered to her. “Let’s get some rest.”

I patted her neck, and together we went into the cave.

Like I knew she would, she kept me warm.

But it turned out it just wasn’t enough.

I doubt they’d let me bring Lerokan in here, I thought as I snuggled more tightly into Breena’s feathered side. The Sea Sand guys were very strict about no man being alone unchaperoned with a woman who wasn’t his mate. Since Lerokan was on rough footing with them already, I knew I wouldn’t hear him come padding into the cave tonight if they had anything to say about it. And

the cave wasn't large enough for all five of the men, plus Breena and me, to sleep. So, it had to be just me on my own in here, plus the soft and fluffy Breena to help keep me warm.

Even if I wanted him to come in here, I don't think he would.

Things had become strained between us so quickly. I'd thought we had a strong connection. I'd thought...

But he told you he didn't even want to be your friend.

So maybe something had shattered between us before the others had even arrived.

This is the best outcome. Now, I'll go back to my friends at the settlement. And Lerokan can do whatever Lerokan's gonna do.

The thought was not a comforting one. And despite my exhaustion, it took hours for sleep to find me.



I WOKE UP TO PINKISH dawn light turning the cave's blue walls rosy and voices outside.

I sat up quickly, wrenching down the hides and listening closely. *Other voices? Where's Lerokan? Who-*

Last night came back, a whirlwind in my head.

The others were alive. They'd found me.

It truly was bittersweet. So, so sweet that they'd survived and that we'd been reunited.

Bitter because of what I'd be leaving behind.

I sighed, finger-combing my hair and tying it into a messy bun on the top of my head. I crawled out from Breena's wing as she roused herself, too.

The words from outside began to take shape.

"I have brought her breakfast every single day. I will do so again today."

I grinned. That was Lerokan.

"You do not need to, now. We are here," came a growly voice. Probably Dalk.

"I'm not convinced you could find her a felkora to eat if it laid an egg on the top of your head," retorted Lerokan. I smacked my hand over my mouth to keep from laughing.

"Vaxilkai and Bariok are out hunting for breakfast now. Somehow, we've managed to feed ourselves this entire time and today will be no different,

even with the addition of one more mouth,” Dalk said.

“So, you will keep her hungry until then? Who knows how long those two cloud-brains will take?”

My smile pinched, turning painful. It felt so weird and prickly and *nice* to hear Lerokan worried about me. To think that some of his beef with the other warriors wasn't just about being territorial, but was maybe about me, too. *He wants to bring me breakfast...*

And I suddenly wanted nothing more than to eat that breakfast.

“She is not hungry. She is asleep,” Dalk rebutted.

“I'm awake!” I called out of the cave. The cave opening was narrow, and I couldn't see the men from here. I shoved my feet into my boots. Based on the light coming in here, the sun hadn't fully risen, so I'd be alright without my jacket and some extra sunscreen for now.

I hurried out of the cave.

And got smacked in the face with one of the most gorgeous sights of my lifetime.

The platform we stood on was much higher up than I'd realized. Mountain peaks spiked up all around us, but I could see over the lower mounds and the valleys from here. The sun rose directly ahead, a coral-coloured pearl sending ribbons of lotus-flower pink and apricot orange streaming over the mountains. Every place a beam of light hit the blue stone of the landscape, it exploded in crystalline fragments, lighting every surface, every angle, until the mountains glittered. The remaining light, growing stronger every moment, coated the valleys with golden dust between their shadows.

The colours overwhelmed me. The warm tones of the sunrise contrasted perfectly with the saturated blue shades of the mountains and valleys. The light spilled onto our platform, turning the pool and streams into rippling liquid copper.

The beauty of it all choked me, made me grateful and heartbroken and happy and homesick all at once. The brighter and more solid the colours became as the sun rose higher, the more they brought back intense memories. Memories of my mum opening her chest of saris to re-fold them so they wouldn't crease too deeply, while I admired the way the sunlight came through the window and shimmered against the beads and silk.

I only became aware of the tears running down my cheeks when Lerokan spoke from directly beside me, making me jump.

“What’s wrong with you?”

I laughed tearily, wiping the moisture away.

“I thought we talked about how rude that question is,” I said, turning to face him. My ribs squeezed at the sight of him. Cast in warm, spilling light from the sunrise, his deep blue hair gleamed, his skin shone. Deep shadows folded into the spaces between each carved muscle and drenched his jaw beneath his mask.

“I’m just trying to understand you,” he said. My breath caught at the poignancy of the statement.

Of course, he had to ruin it with a snarky remark.

“I know your skin is so weak that even the sun hurts it. I did not realize the morning sun could pull tears from your eyes, too.”

“It doesn’t. I mean, it does, it can, but that’s not the point. That’s not what’s happening.” I sighed, crossing my arms and looking out towards the sunrise once more. Even in that brief moment I’d been looking at Lerokan, the colours had shifted rapidly. Buttery yellow and blue dominated now instead of pink, orange, and shadowy indigo.

“Haven’t you ever been overwhelmed by something beautiful?” I asked him quietly.

His answer was even quieter than my question.

“Yes.”

I turned once more to find his sight stars pinned to my face. My stomach swooped. I wanted desperately to rip the animal skull off of him and drag his face to mine. To feel the heat of his mouth, the searching grip of his hands. To find our way back to where we’d been, to regain the easy authenticity of our previous connection, and go beyond it.

I wanted something real. Some truth. Something other than the mask.

But the truth, I realized, would probably just break my heart.

Lerokan wouldn’t come back with us. I already knew it. Could sense it in the distance between us.

I would leave. And he’d stay here.

And that reality hurt far too much. This was more than leaving behind a new friend, more than leaving behind a crush.

Well, great. You’ve gone and fallen in love with this fool. Good job, Priya.

Before I could sink too deeply into the utter demoralization of that thought, a scuffling sound at the edge of the platform made both Lerokan and

I turn our heads. He pushed me swiftly behind him.

Luckily, it wasn't any sort of predator. Just Vaxilkai and Bariok climbing up over the edge with a few large rakdo strapped to their backs.

Between the sunrise and Lerokan, I'd forgotten that anyone else existed. I hadn't even been aware of Dalk and Oxriel, who stood very near to us. I cleared my throat, smiled, and said good morning to them. They returned the greeting – Oxriel cheerily, Dalk with a growl.

Vaxilkai and Bariok got to work cleaning and butchering the rakdo while Oxriel and Dalk crouched down to help.

Lerokan crouched, too, and I looked down to see what he was doing.

"I thought there wasn't stuff for a fire," I said, surprised to see a small bundle of plant matter that nursed a spark.

"I found a few abandoned felkora nests," he said, nudging the mound until the fire crackled with more strength. He grabbed a flat rock and placed it at the edge of the fire to heat, then laid six things on the rock. I knelt beside him, leaning closer to see what he was cooking.

Six small fish laid on the stone. Their scales gleamed a bright bubble gum pink.

I guess this is the breakfast he was talking about before.

I was looking forward to it. After so many days in the cave eating felkora and eggs, it would be a welcome change.

The fish cooked quickly, and Lerokan sliced them open, taking out the bones inside. The inner flesh was pink, too, slightly lighter in colour than the scales.

"Thanks," I said, taking a chunk of fish once it had cooled a bit. I took a tentative bite, shocked by how tasty it was. The skin had turned crispy while cooking, and the meat was tender and mild in flavour. *This would be perfect for Amritsari fish*, I thought as I chomped through the breakfast. My mum had made Amritsari fish quite often when I was a kid, and she'd always emphasized that you needed milder freshwater fish, not saltwater fish, to make it properly.

By the time the rakdo were butchered, cooked, and ready, I was full from the fish. I thought, but couldn't be sure, that Lerokan smirked in satisfaction that I'd eaten his breakfast and not the stuff caught by the others.

After eating, the warriors gravitated towards the edge of the platform, staring off into the distance.

“What? What are they looking at?” I asked Lerokan, who was still beside me.

“Checking on the storm’s trajectory,” he replied, looking off in the same direction at the others.

“Oh. How does it look?” I asked. I was curious, but also dreaded what he’d say. The dread solidified when he told me the storm had moved significantly during the night and that we could probably leave safely tomorrow morning.

Tomorrow morning...

That’s so soon.

But it turned out to be even sooner than that. The storm continued to whisk itself into the invisible distance over the course of the day.

And so, it was decided.

We wouldn’t leave tomorrow morning.

We would leave tonight.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Lerokan



The night arrived on swifter wings than usual. At least, it seemed that way to me. Too soon, the other warriors were drawing Priya into their group, telling her that it was time to go. They were right. The night would provide good cover as they moved through lands that more of Gahn Thaleo's men might be patrolling.

But I did not like it.

It was too sudden. Not enough time to prepare for her departure. How would I get through my exile without her irritated frowns and tinkling laughter? Her yelps and up spill and poison blood and tears?

Don't be foolish. You will get through this just fine. You'll finally get some peace again.

But it appeared I no longer wanted peace.

I wanted...

"Well, I guess it's time." Priya stood before me in the setting sun. Already, the mountains drenched us both in shadow.

The other four men stood behind her. Dalk held her pack. And that made me angry.

When Oxriel knelt for Priya to clamber onto his back for the long climb down, that anger exploded into the foulest rage I'd ever known.

"I will take her," I barked, stepping forward.

Oxriel and Priya paused in their movements. Dalk took a step forward, baring his fangs.

"Oh, put your fangs away," I snapped. "Climbing is slow and dangerous. It would be far safer for me to take her down on my mount."

There was no hint of exaggeration in my words. These men were from the desert. They seemed to be able to climb up here well enough, but it was not a practiced movement for them.

"I will not trust Priya's safety to the climbing skills of a man from the flat desert lands," I added firmly.

“My tribe hails from the Sea Sand mountains,” Oxriel replied.

For some reason, that annoyed me even more.

Thankfully, Priya saw the sense in my suggestion. This kept me from going totally out of my idiotic mind and attempting to fling all four of the other men off the cliff.

“Lerokan’s right. That would be safer,” she said, turning to Oxriel and Dalk. “He can take me down and then you guys can meet me and then we’ll all go on together.”

Dalk’s sight stars swung between Priya and me.

“What if he tries to steal you? The way he did in the battle?”

I didn’t steal her in the battle. I saved her, you dimwit.

Priya replied before I could say the words out loud.

“He won’t.”

Her response cleaved through me.

I did not *think* I would be so insane as to do such a thing. Part of me wanted to and I knew it. But Priya had made her choice. She’d decided to go back to her people in the Sea Sands. This time if I took her, I would not be saving her, but trapping her somewhere she did not want to be.

With a man she did not want to be with.

She does not want what I want.

I’d have to learn to accept that. I just... Hadn’t learned quite yet.

But I was clever enough. I’d get it eventually.

I hope.

“If I’d wanted to steal her,” I said flatly to Dalk, “I could have swept her away on my mount at any point this entire time. You have spears which I am confident I could dodge, and no arrows. You would not have been able to stop me.”

“We would have stopped you! We would have-”

“OK, enough,” Priya exclaimed, throwing up her hands. “Dalk, I’m going to fly down with Breena and Lerokan. It’s the safest way. I’m not even sure I trust the strength of my own arms around Oxriel’s neck, and he’ll be too busy climbing down to help hold on to me. This way is better. I’ll see you down there.”

She turned away from them in a movement that filled me with smirking pride.

At least, in this one small thing, she’d chosen me.

I hoisted her up onto Breena in a movement that had become quite natural for us, then leaped up to settle myself behind her.

Priya started to say something to the others, something like, “See you down there,” but I commanded Breena into flight immediately, sucking those words into the wind.

I clutched Priya against my chest as we descended, keeping her closer than I ever had.

This was the last time I’d get to touch her.

I would admit to no one but myself that I extended the moment slightly. I did not urge Breena to land immediately at the base of the cliff that the four warriors now scaled down. We flew a little further into the valley beyond, eventually stopping in a smooth, shadowy place.

If Priya noticed how far we’d flown, she didn’t say anything as I dismounted and then helped her down.

We both glanced back down the valley. The desert men were about halfway down the sheer side of the cliff, now.

“They won’t be much longer,” Priya said, her gaze still on the other men while mine was fastened entirely to her. Even with her unusual, high-bridged nose, or perhaps because of it, her profile was an elegant one. She held her chin high and her gaze was serious. Her beautiful long hair had been bound in a braid for the journey. I wanted to take apart that braid with my claws, tell her there would be no journey. There would be nothing but these mountains and Breena and me for her, now.

As the men reached the base of the cliff and started jogging this way, my fingers found their way to her chin, forcing her eyes to mine.

They widened at my movement, my touch, shock clear in their depths as I cupped her jaw.

She does not like this.

I went to remove my hand, but she snapped her own little hand up in response. She slammed her warm palm to my knuckles, keeping my hand in place against her unbearably soft skin.

“Come with us,” she said.

She’d asked me to come with her before. It had not been a good option then, because I did not trust the lands and the journey.

But now, we had more men, men who knew the way and could help protect her.

My jaw tightened as I looked down at her beautiful, hopeful face. Yes, hopeful.

She hopes I'll say yes.

“Why?” I asked leaning down and forcing her to tip her head back.

She'd chosen the other men, her people. She'd chosen to go back.

Was this her way of also somehow choosing me?

Or was this pity?

“Why do you care why? Do you want to come with us or not?” she asked. Curse me, her eyes were doing that tears thing. It made my guts clench.

And it made my other hand rise to the other side of her jaw.

“I need to know if you ask out of pity, or merely for the alliance your people want. Or if there's something else,” I said, leaning down lower with every uttered word until my mouth was a mere breath from hers, the snout of my mask angling to one side. “Because there is something else for me.”

“Something else... Something like what?”

Her breath on my mouth was a revelation. The sensation had me swallowing a groan as it glanced down my spine like sun reflecting off rippling water. Tingles shot straight to my groin, my tail, and all the way to the tips of my claws.

“Something,” I murmured, my lips actually brushing hers this time.

Something I never thought I wanted. Something I'd spent so long running from. Something that found me anyway.

My mate.

The words were a boom of thunder in my head, shaking me to my core.

They shocked me. Frightened me. And yet were the truest ones to ever speak themselves into being.

For once, I did not try to run. I did not turn away.

Her lips parted. The softest moan escaped, heating my skin.

And I was lost.

My fingers turned to stone at the sides of her face as my mouth slammed to hers.

Thank the peaks, she did not pull away. Her arms flew around my waist, dragging me harder against her. My cock immediately hardened to a painful spear, the tip prodding against her belly.

I took several steps, driving her back against the stone until she was trapped beneath my bulk.

Curse me, her mouth was dizzyingly wet. Impossibly sweet. She opened herself to the onslaught of my three tongues as they dove and stroked and tasted.

I'd never done this with a female.

Never really wanted to.

The instincts inside me now were so powerful, so feral, that I almost did not recognize myself.

This is madness, I thought as another moan from Priya made my hips buck against her.

No. This is the mate bond.

I realized belatedly that the other warriors were coming towards us. And I was probably about to get a spear through the side of the head for crushing Priya against the stone like this and ravaging her sweet little mouth.

But it would have been worth it. Would have been worth it to see my brains dashed against the stone just to have had this final moment.

This was the mate bond. It had to be.

I'd always thought I didn't want it.

But this was not the work of the Vrika. No instant bond had formed out of thin air.

Perhaps this is what I've wanted all along. The chance to choose.

And I could choose. Choose my fate.

Choose to be with her.

I drew back from the temptation of her mouth, only for the briefest moment, to speak tumbling, urgent words against her lips.

"I will come with you. I'll go to the settlement. Cursed peaks, Priya, you can't keep me away."

Now that I'd chosen her, chosen this, no one could keep me from my path.

From her.

She gave an answering cry, the sound twanging through my ribs. There was relief in it, and hurt, and hope.

"Lerokan! I'm so happy. You have no idea. I thought you didn't care that much. I thought that you'd be happier without me. I thought-"

"You think too much," I whispered, pressing my mouth to hers once more. Her lips gave way to my mouth immediately, sucking me back into her hot depths.

So much blood rushed to my cock I wasn't exactly sure how I remained upright, but I did. My left leg bent, my knee urging between her thighs until the juncture of her cunt was firmly pressed to the top of my leg. Even through her clothing, I could feel her desperate heat.

"This is the 'something else,'" I told her, dragging my lips hungrily along her delicate jaw. "I don't want to come back as your ally. I don't want to come back as your friend."

She gasped. I groaned, bending further to suckle at the frantic pulse of her throat.

"So... So that's what you meant," she whispered. I paused, then pulled my head back up to look at her face. She was beautiful like this. Mouth wet and swollen. Eyes glazed but still focused on me.

"The other night?" I asked to clarify. Yes, I had said those words to her the other night. And she'd looked confused and hurt. As if anything beyond friendship were impossible.

"I thought," she panted, "that you were rejecting me. I thought that if you didn't even want to be my friend, then... Then I may as well just go back and forget all about you."

"As if you could forget about me," I teased.

I felt her smile as my lips sought hers again. But she spoke, stopping me from stroking inward with my tongues.

"There's no way I could. I love you, Lerokan."

The statement was an arrow through me, hot and sharp. Priya made a grunting sound and her eyes got huge with panic as she looked at my shoulder.

Oh. No, that was an actual arrow.

I spun, hissing, crowding her even closer to the cliff behind my back, ignoring the throb at my shoulder. Six men on braxilk dove through the air, arrows raining down so fast it was like a shower of glinting stars streaking through the night.

Fool. You were so wrapped up in her that you completely lost all use of your senses.

"Stay here," I commanded, twisting around to look at her. She shook her head up and down in that human gesture of agreement.

"Breena, keep her safe," I ordered my mount. The order was unnecessary. Breena had already stepped closer, ready to put her body between Priya and the night air.

I took a few steps forward while simultaneously snatching my bow from where it was slung across my chest. With my other hand, I went to grab an arrow from the quiver at my back.

The hand did not move.

Grunting, I tossed down my bow and grasped the arrowhead poking from the front of my right shoulder. Gritting my fangs, I pulled harder and harder until the entire arrow had slid through my joint. Blood flowed freely, and there was great pain, but I could mostly move my arm again.

Grasping my bow once more, I fired a volley of arrows into the night. But my aim proved poor, my arm weakened from the injury.

I glanced down the valley to see the four Sea Sand warriors fighting vigorously.

They'll lose, I realized. Despite the strength of the Sea Sand men, this time, they could not win. They'd been victorious in the last battle against Gahn Thaleo's men, but they'd been greater in numbers and they'd had the monster of a Bitter Sea man with them.

I was almost instantly proven correct. One Sea Sand man, then another, and another, were incapacitated and pulled up onto the backs of the enemy braxilk. Dalk was the last one left standing, but a swift blow to the head sent him to the ground. Soon, he was pulled up, too.

They're not killing them. They're taking them...

There is no fight now. I need to get Priya out of here.

There was nothing I could do for those men.

And keeping Priya safe eclipsed every other priority.

I turned back to her.

"We have to go."

"But!"

"Now," I hissed. I grabbed Priya and dropped her roughly onto Breena's back, haste making my movements clumsy.

Ah, well. A bruised bottom is better than the alternative.

But the alternative arrived despite my best efforts. Just as I leaped onto Breena's back, a braxilk dove and carved past us. A man's arm shot out, snatching Priya up and out of my reach.

Priya screamed my name. Screamed it so hard that it branded me. Marked me as forever hers.

I did not need to command Breena into motion. She beat her wings mightily, rising rapidly, flying faster than she'd ever flown as we pursued the

group.

All six of the enemy braxilk were ahead of us, and based on their direction, they were heading back to Gahn Thaleo's territory.

No. They cannot take her. Cannot have her.

I'd only just gotten a taste of her.

Only just begun to love her.

Her sweetness was in my blood, now. And it lent my wounded limb strength enough to send arrow after arrow into the sky ahead.

We were gaining on them. With only one rider I was therefore lighter and faster than most of their group.

But too soon, I'd run out of arrows.

They hadn't.

I cursed and ducked as their projectiles zinged past my head

My stomach clenched as we suddenly dropped.

"Breena!"

An arrow had found its target in the meat between her body and her right wing.

Loyal mount that she was, she beat her wings furiously despite the injury, trying to regain altitude.

But another arrow followed swiftly after the first, completely immobilizing her wing.

The shadows of the valley rose up all around us.

Swallowed us.

Down, down, down we went.

Down, until there was nothing left but vicious dark and the echoing scream of my name on the wind.

Down, until we crashed.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Lerokan



Breena was an utter marvel. During our fall, she managed to use her good wing to steer us towards a steep incline of mountain stone. We crashed into its side, near the bottom of the valley, and she kept beating her working wing to slow us as we careened down. That way, we slid rather than plummeting straight down.

When we hit the ground, it was forceful enough to rattle my fangs, but I didn't break any bones.

My mount, however, had not fared as well.

I leaped off of her back immediately, helping move her away from the stone. Luckily, it did not seem as if her legs were damaged. She took a few steps, her right wing dragging.

I held my breath as I got closer to inspect her wing.

The crash into the stone had left her much worse off than before. Now, instead of two arrow wounds that would have healed well enough with Vrika's blood, she had an utterly mangled limb.

That was very bad. Bad for Breena, who now had to be in immense pain.

And bad because we could not immediately take back off in pursuit of the others.

I curled my claws into my palms, roaring with fury and frustration.

I allowed myself that one thing. That one moment.

Then I got to work.

I tore my bedding hides from where they were strapped to Breena's side. I cut a long strip and then bound my shoulder to help stem the bleeding of my wound. I then fashioned yet more strips, bringing them to Breena's destroyed wing.

She cawed in agony as I probed the wing.

"Can you get it against your side? I won't leave you here, but we can't have it dragging the way it is. That will make things worse and slow us down."

We could not afford to be slowed down. Not with Priya in enemy hands. After a few false starts, she managed to ease her wing against her side. Working as quickly and as gently as possible, I strapped her wing firmly in place with the hide.

“There. Now we’re both in good enough shape for what comes next.”

She blinked her agreement and began to trot rapidly away from me.

“Not that way!” I cried, realizing she was going in the opposite direction, away from the way the other braxilk had flown.

I turned and started sprinting towards Gahn Thaleo’s territory, my chest on fire, blood pumping hard and soaking into my makeshift bandage. My breath hissed between clenched fangs as I pushed myself faster, my feet flying over pebbles and boulders and dust as I leaped and ran.

Breena’s insistent caw made me slow down to look back. She wasn’t following. She jerked her beak back the way she’d been going before.

Towards Gahn Errok’s territory.

“No!” I screamed, grinding to a halt. “There’s no time! It will take days to reach them! And they won’t even help me, anyway!” As an exile, I had no right to access the army and resources of the tribe.

But Breena did not budge, her eyes calm but determined.

Slowly, slowly, reality sank down upon me. The weight of it was vast and sudden. My knees nearly buckled.

I cannot help her. Not like this.

Just as it would take days to reach my old tribal territory, it would also take days to reach Gahn Thaleo’s territory on foot. And when I got there, what could I possibly achieve in such a state? I would be a single injured man with a one-winged, flightless braxilk up against Thaleo’s fit and flying army.

“What I lack in strength and circumstance, I make up for in spite,” I spat viciously. “I will get there. And I will kill any and every man who had a hand in taking Priya.”

But Breena did not believe me. I could see it in those six deep eyes.

She wants me to submit to Gahn Errok and ask for his help.

I bit back a hiss, already picturing Errok’s smug face as I prostrated myself before him.

But what if it was the only way to get her back?

If I go alone like this, I’ll take an arrow through the head before I can even get close to her...

I hated it.

But I would do it.

I'd do it a thousand cursed times to save her.

All I can hope is that Gahn Thaleo has enough honour not to hurt a female, even one as strange and argumentative as her...

I sprinted to Breena's side and we both cast our eyes homeward.

"You are right. We need Errok," I muttered darkly, despising the words as I said them. We started to jog, then run, neither of us wanting to waste a moment.

It was time to go, and go swiftly.

Time to face the Gahn.

The man who'd thrust this mask down over my face. The man who'd tried so hard to control me.

The man I'd known from the moment of my birth.

Prepare yourself, older brother.

Lerokan returns. And he is full of rage.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Priya



If I'd thought flying with Lerokan was chaotic, this was ten times worse. I wasn't even sitting up! The bastard who'd grabbed me had tossed me over his lap like a sac of bloody potatoes. Thankfully at least, unlike some of my flights with Lerokan, we weren't dodging or avoiding anything. The flight path was straight, which meant my awkward position was uncomfortable, but not rib-breakingly so.

Even so, the nausea overwhelmed me. I did everything I could to keep my eyes open, to track where we were headed, but I couldn't. I squeezed them shut.

There's got to be only one place they're taking us now.

Gahn Thaleo's territory.

Lerokan would know how to find us.

If he's alright...

He'd taken an arrow through the shoulder, that much I'd seen. And I'd seen him jump up onto Breena, taking off into the air after us.

But then I'd closed my eyes.

And the next moment I could open them, he was gone.

I tried desperately not to think of all the things that could have happened to him and to Breena during that short pursuit.

If I did...

I'd fall the fuck apart.

And I couldn't afford to do that. Not now. I was alive. And maybe I could still help him somehow.

I lost track of time, of distance, of how far we flew.

Exhausted and trembling, I forced my eyes open when we eventually slowed.

We're descending.

Dawn rose, just as beautiful as it had been the day before. But this time its scorching loveliness lit up a new, different landscape.

We were still in the mountains, the peaks slicing their blue tips through the air all around us. But these were different mountains. We passed over a tight knot of peaks before continuing to descend to a large, circular, stony clearing, ringed by high peaks. The stone floor of this circle was a bright, clear aquamarine.

And it wasn't empty.

Warriors stood in a group, weapons drawn and ready, as we landed.

The jolt of the landing sent my nausea over the edge. I vomited over the side of the braxilk and onto the brilliant pale blue of the shimmering, translucent stone floor. At my back, I could feel the sun growing hotter, and was immensely grateful I was wearing my hooded jacket. Because I'd been face-down over the rider's lap, the hood had fallen forward over my head. It was still on now, giving me some shade and obscuring my face.

"Get that one down!" called a clear, commanding voice.

The rough hands of the rider behind me grabbed hold of my cloak instantly, hauling me off the braxilk as he jumped down. I knew it would happen, but it didn't make it any more pleasant – my knees buckled and I collapsed to the stone. My palms smacked the stone painfully. My hip throbbed. Luckily, I hadn't fallen into a pool of my own vomit. *I should have aimed better. Should have puked all over the prick who took me.*

"I did nothing to hurt this child. I don't know why he up spills and now falters," the rider beside me said. He grabbed the back of my jacket and wrenched me up into a standing position, holding me there. "What are you doing?" he hissed as black dots swam before my vision. "Raise your tail before the Gahn."

Was he serious? Through that entire flight, he hadn't noticed I didn't have a tail? What, did he think I was hiding it down one of my trouser legs or something?

"I can't," I croaked. I tried to force some strength into my limbs, my voice.

"Set him down." That was the same commanding voice as before.

The rider released some of his support so I could sit down. I breathed heavily, down on the stone, trying to clear my head and focus.

Morning light blinded me when someone wrenched back my hood. I gasped, scrunching my eyes shut as a firm hand found my chin and tilted my face upwards towards the light.

Sharp inhales and hisses of surprise ran through the gathered group.

The thought of going through this whole rigmarole – explaining who and what I was – with yet another group of aliens filled me with exhaustion.

I just want to get back to Lerokan!

But I couldn't do that if I was stuck here and weak. I forced my eyes open.

Buzzing sight stars filled my vision, the same glittering, pale teal colour of the stone I sat upon. Blinking, I slowly took in the rest of the man's face.

This was the first mountain alien I'd seen up close without a mask.

His features were generally the same as a Sea Sand man's and the same as what I had seen of Lerokan's face under the bone. Strong and stony jaw, dark brows, lion-like nose. His hair flowed long and loose, gleaming blue-ish black, but there was a streak of white at the front. From the base of that white streak, a ragged scar ran downwards, cutting through the man's left brow, across his eye, and slicing into his left cheek. It took me a moment to notice that the sight stars of his left eye weren't quite the same colour as the sight stars of the right. They were paler, and moved more slowly, as if damaged.

Like Lerokan, his hide was more on the blue and purple side than the Sea Sand men's bronze. A deep mix of stone-blue and lavender that deepened to indigo at his claws, feet, and tip of his tail. He crouched in front of me, perfectly still and balanced, wearing a grey hide loincloth and nothing else but a huge, elegantly carved bow slung across his chest.

Effortless authority poured out of this man.

This had to be Gahn Thaleo.

"Who are you?" the Gahn asked, his sight stars totally absorbed by my face.

"I want to see my friends." I took a quaking breath. I was scared down to my fucking human toes, but I wasn't going to start talking to this guy, Gahn or not, until I found out what happened to the others.

Gahn Thaleo remained frozen in his crouch for a long moment. It seemed impossible for him to remain so still. Like a man carved from the stone of the mountain itself.

Finally, he stood.

"Bring the others down."

I sat up straighter, my head snapping back and forth, trying to figure out what was happening.

The Deep Sky men behind Gahn Thaleo numbered about twenty, not including the six on the braxilk who'd just landed.

I twisted, looking over at the braxilk as four of the riders dismounted, dragging Vaxilkai, Dalk, Oxriel, and Bariok with them.

I gasped when I saw the state of them.

All four had had their hands and feet bound during the flight and were bleeding from various places. Oxriel and Vaxilkai both collapsed when their captors let go of them, their black blood seeping onto the beautiful bright stone. Bariok looked like he was about to join them down there, swaying, one of his legs bleeding and badly bruised.

Dalk remained standing, though he was bleeding, too, from a nasty-looking wound across his chest. He raised his chin, staring down the Gahn defiantly. Then, his tail snapped out, toppling the rider who'd bound him.

Instantly, two other Deep Sky warriors grabbed his shoulders, forcing him down into a kneeling position. They did the same to Bariok.

Now all four were on the ground. The six braxilk riders stood in front of them with their bows ready, arrows aimed at the bleeding bodies of my friends.

“No! Don't kill them! If they get hurt you won't learn anything that I have to tell you. And there's lots,” I cried, stammering in my haste.

I had information. I could use it to my advantage and help the others.

Besides, the whole point of coming out here was to find allies.

So far, Gahn Thaleo hadn't killed us yet. That had to be a good sign, right? Maybe he'd be reasonable and listen to me.

“Perhaps I do not need anything from you. Perhaps I can learn enough from this.”

From what?

My heart sank when a warrior jogged over with my pack. *Shit. That's right.* Dalk had been carrying my pack. Not Lerokan.

Which meant the maps...

Gahn Thaleo already had the maps in his claws, holding them up to see the ink lines clearly in the light.

Back in the battle, the last thing I'd wanted was for those maps to fall into enemy hands. But now, it seemed as if it was too late. *Might as well use this to my advantage.*

“Put all those maps together and you'll see how far we've travelled. We come from an alliance of tribes – many, many warriors – who are loyal to us. If we don't return, they'll come looking for us.”

Gahn Thaleo didn't answer, didn't give anything away. He sifted through the pages slowly. Thoroughly. Tracing the shape of each mountain, each plain, with patient, relentless sight stars.

This guy is not someone I want to mess with, I thought grimly. There was a deep intelligence, there. A careful strength that I knew would only strike when it could totally destroy.

"I can tell you more," I said again. "We originally came here to find you and make contact with you. We have information, resources, news you need to know." All of that was true. If he was willing to play ball, I'd tell him all about the alliance, the humans, everything. I'd give him the info we'd come here to share in the first place.

"But you have to promise to release us," I said, forcing my voice to remain level. "And my friends need healing. And," my voice finally cracked this time, but I cleared my throat and kept going, "and there was another man with us. I want to make sure he's alright, too."

Finally, Gahn Thaleo put all the maps down, the papers stacked between his clawed feet. Then he crouched once more, leaning down so his gaze was level with mine.

"You negotiate fiercely for one who holds no power here. What makes you think you can negotiate with a Gahn this way, in his own lands?"

"We weren't in your lands when we were attacked and taken," I shot back, anger helping me to be bold. "We were in neutral territory. What right did you have to take us?"

There was an incremental pulse of his sight stars and a very slight cocking of his head.

He knows I'm right.

"Three of my men and their braxilk were killed out on the plains recently. We only just recovered their bodies. After this egregious act, I had every right to take you all prisoner and interrogate you."

Prisoner.

That was not a good word.

"But that happened in neutral territory, too!" I cried. "Those men attacked us! We had to defend ourselves!"

"But why? Why are you in these lands to begin with?" A hard edge had crept into his voice.

"We came here to find you! Like I said, we have a lot to tell you!" *I guess I'll just have to start laying it all out on the table to get anywhere.* "There's

an alliance. Five Gahns have already joined. We came to-

“Impossible,” he cut in sharply. “There have only ever been two Gahns of the Deep Sky.”

“Not Gahns of the Deep Sky,” I replied, “but the Sea Sands. And the Bitter Sea, too, though their leader is called the Hakah, not the Gahn.”

He narrowed his gaze, sight stars focused as he mulled over my words.

“Just look at the maps. Look how much there is. So many different places, and they’re all there. The Sea Sands, the Bitter Sea. Other mountain ranges. There are other tribes out there, just like here. And if you make yourself their enemy by keeping us, by hurting us, you’ll have six tribes of warriors to face.”

Gahn Thaleo’s nostrils flared slightly.

That certainly got his attention.

I couldn’t say for sure that his entire army of warriors was present here. But if this was all, or even most of them, they wouldn’t stand a chance against an attack from the Sea Sands, even with their braxilk and arrows.

“You tell me of this alliance. You want me, as Gahn here, to join,” he said slowly.

“Yes. And if you agree to heal my friends and promise to let us go, I’ll tell you even *more*.”

I emphasized that last word, trying to make it sound juicy, all too aware of the creeping spread of black blood beneath the bodies of my friends.

Gahn Thaleo rose without warning.

“Take those four warriors to the healers, but keep them bound. See to it they are fed when they are well enough to eat.”

Yes. Yes! It’s working!

I watched with fretful hope as Dalk and the others were half-marched, half-dragged out of the aquamarine clearing. They went into a crack that led deep into the largest blue mountain ahead.

“As for releasing you all, that I am not so sure of.”

Shit.

“I might consider your release,” he added, making me perk back up, “and consider your alliance. On one condition.”

“Which is?”

“You help me kill Gahn Errok.”

My eyes widened. *No way. That won’t work.*

But I can't just say no, can I? It'll fuck over my friends. He'll probably stop healing them and never let us go.

"I... I'd have to speak to the other Gahns, of course," I said quickly, trying to recover.

I seriously doubted the other Gahns would go for that. The alliance of one small mountain tribe wouldn't be worth embroiling their armies in a conflict out here. But it looked like that was all I had for the moment. And I had to hold on to it.

"Very well," Gahn Thaleo replied. "You said yourself that they would come for you. So let them come. And I will speak to them myself."

Damn it! I guess we're stuck here for a while longer.

I started doing math in my head. If Gahn Razek and the others had headed back to the Sea Sands at full speed after the battle to tell the others what had happened...

It would be at least five more days until they even got back to the settlement on foot.

I breathed out in resignation, realizing there was no quick way out of this.

Gahn Thaleo turned to go, saying something to the others. Suddenly, I was hoisted to my feet from behind by two huge hands.

"Wait!" I screamed. The Gahn paused, but did not turn back to look at me.

"What about my other condition?" I said raggedly. "The other warrior who was with us! I need to make sure he's alright!"

Gahn Thaleo cast a questioning glance over at one of the braxilk riders who'd remained behind out here.

"One of Gahn Errok's men," the rider explained. "He wore a skull of an exile."

That made Gahn Thaleo spin to look at me once more.

He collapsed the distance between us with large, rapid steps.

His expression stayed carefully composed, but storms raged in his asymmetrical sight stars.

"You were with one of Gahn Errok's men? Perhaps you have in fact allied with them instead, and this is all some ploy?"

I shook my head over and over as the hands of the warrior behind me, still holding me in place, clamped down harder on my shoulders.

"No! Like that guy said, he had the skull! He's in exile with no tribal support or loyalty! The tribe banished him, so he joined up with us when he

found us in neutral territory! We've never even been in Gahn Errok's territory!"

"Based on where we found the bodies of our warriors, and where we found this group, I believe that to be true," said the rider. When Gahn Thaleo's thunderous gaze snapped over to him, the warrior hesitated, but then kept going.

"We know our hunting party was slain about ten days ago on the plains. There would not have been time for them to travel all the way to Gahn Errok's mountains and back to the place we found them in that time. Only the exile had a braxilk. The others all travelled on foot. And the storm would likely have kept them in place for some time, too."

"Yes! The storm! We were stuck in a cave for eight days!" I said, hoping that he would believe me.

Gahn Thaleo seemed to relax ever so slightly, but he definitely didn't look happy. Then again, I had a feeling this guy never looked happy.

"Gahn Errok's exile. What happened to him?" Gahn Thaleo asked.

I held my breath, trying not to cry as I waited to discover the fate of the man I'd fallen in love with.

"I shot his mount twice in the wing and they went down. I did not circle back to see if he had died or to deliver a death blow."

No! Shot twice in the wing... Breena!

And if they'd fallen from any significant height... Both of them could be...

I can't think about it. I squeezed my eyes shut as if that would make all of this go away.

But when I opened them again, I was still in the same freaking place with the same angry men.

I didn't stay in that place for long, though.

Because the next moment, they marched me into the darkness of the mountain.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Lerokan



It took five merciless days of travel to reach the mountains of my birth. We moved as quickly as our limbs would let us. Luckily, Breena required far less sleep than me. Our breaks were short, merely to eat and let her rest. The little sleep I found was upon her back as she walked and climbed through the treacherous stone.

If she had hurt more than just her wing, if her legs had been broken, it would have been a true tragedy. A braxilk could only survive broken legs under the care of healers at the mountain. Way out here, there would have been no way to help her or drag her back. I did not like to think of the blade-sharpened mercy I would have had to have given her if that had happened.

But apart from her damaged wing which had taken the brunt of our slide down the stone, she was not badly injured and was strong enough to walk. And she walked quickly. Her many legs propelled her large body over rocky inclines and down steep valleys with remarkable speed and grace.

She wanted to get help for Priya too. Cursed peaks, she loved my little mate even more than she loved me.

I cannot blame her.

I knew as clear as mountain water that I'd take an arrow through the heart for Priya.

I love her more than I love me, too.

I wondered if my brother would even believe me. I could already picture the incredulous quirk of his brow, so similar to my own.

Little Lerokan loves someone other than himself? Impossible.

He'd probably find it even harder to swallow considering I hadn't answered the Vrika's call and had no mate bond.

But that wasn't right.

I *had* a mate bond. One that had taken time to grow, but one that had wound itself around my heart and my fists and my cock with just as much force as any other man's bond.

And it was that bond that drove me forward, drove me harder, as I bled and cursed and stumbled through the rocks and dust.

But finally, late on the fifth day, just as the sun dipped and made evening shadows bloom, we arrived.

Gahn Errok's territory, the territory of my homeland, was found in the highest peaks of this region.

Since we'd been travelling on foot with injuries, we'd travelled through valleys and avoided scaling rock as much as possible.

But there was no other way to reach Gahn Errok and the tribe than to climb, now.

The largest, highest mountain in this dark and pointed group stood before me. I couldn't see it from here, but I knew by heart the large, open cave partway up the incline that served as the Gahn's hall.

The easiest way to access the hall was by flying up to it. On the back of a braxilk, the ascent would take mere moments. Obviously, I could not do that now.

There was one other way to get up there, meant for the injured or those outside with no braxilk, but it was not open to me as an exile. At the base of the mountain was a small opening, no larger than my fist. If a person shouted into that opening loudly enough, the echo would travel up a snaking tunnel of stone into the Gahn's hall. Someone would then fly down on a braxilk to assist whoever was at the bottom. If I tried such a thing, they'd take one look at me with my mask and would turn right back around. It was possible they'd take enough pity on Breena to send down a healer for her. But I couldn't be sure.

I decided to try it anyway.

I crouched at the hole, calling into its tiny opening of darkness.

"Send a healer down for my injured mount!" I shouted, my words ringing up the tunnel. I wouldn't need to announce who was speaking. The brother of the Gahn had a voice any and all would instantly recognize. "And prepare the Gahn for my arrival. I want him ready to face me the moment my claws reach the floor of the hall."

I withdrew and gave Breena a quick but tender stroke along the feathers of her neck, feathers now terribly stained with my blood.

"You stay here. A healer will come for you soon."

Even if no one answered the call of the Gahn's exiled brother, once I was up there, I could convince a healer to tend to her. It might have been easy

enough to ignore the echoing ghost of my voice in the tunnel.

It would prove far more difficult to ignore me in person.

They'll have to fling me off the cliff before I back down, I thought as I started to climb, my shoulder screaming, my head swimming from blood loss. Getting flung off the cliff was a distinct possibility, in all honesty. My rebellion with the Vrika had outraged my brother to no end. And now I was coming back, still without having obeyed his law, demanding help to retrieve a mate that the Vrika had not chosen for me.

This is not going to go well.

But despite the potential flinging that awaited me, I kept climbing. Every time I thought I'd fall, I thought I'd never make it, I remembered Priya's scream as they'd taken her.

She needed me.

And who was I, if not mighty Lerokan, Lerokan the hero, just as I'd told her?

I'd failed her in the battle.

I would not fail her now.

And so, with almost no strength left in my body except the squeeze of a little brown fist around my heart, I pulled myself up over the edge and into my brother's hall.

My brother's voice greeted me as I rose to a standing position once I'd hoisted myself up from the edge.

"Greetings, brother."

I followed the sound of his voice with my eyes, finding him in the centre of the hall. The hall was a massive natural cave, its entire front wall open to the air. A cavernous dome of glittering blue rock, it felt incredibly empty. Usually, there were more people in the hall at any given time, but right now it was just my brother and his right-hand man, Zakkar, who stood a few paces behind him. A fire at the far end of the hall crackled, sending sparks and flickering light through the high-ceilinged space and across my brother's features. The sun had set while I'd climbed, and now the fire was the only source of light, glancing off of every stony wall and every blade worn by the two men before me.

"My mount needs a healer. Send one to her," I said tersely, needing to get that out of the way first before I launched into the larger demand: the demand that my brother rally an army to retrieve my mate from Gahn Thaleo.

“Not even a raised tail and already you make requests of me?” Errok’s gaze snagged on my poorly bandaged shoulder and the streaks of black blood painting my side. “I see the world out there has made a mess of you, Little Lerokan.”

Little Lerokan. Piercing peaks, I hated that name. Probably because, in a way, it was true. I was not small compared to most. But most were small compared to my brother. In many ways, the two of us were alike. Similar facial structure, the same moonbeam-coloured sight stars. The same long hair worn the same way – loose. But Errok was broader of jaw and shoulder and thigh. Taller, too. Between the size difference and the fact he was older than me, he’d been the Gahn over me my entire life. Even before he officially received the title.

“You want a raised tail? Fine.” I snapped my tail up in front of my eyes then let it fall.

Errok watched the gesture, then strolled towards me as if there were nothing pressing happening between us at all.

When he stopped before me, my patience snapped.

“Did you hear me? Breena’s injured! She-”

“Lerokan,” Errok interrupted, sight stars sharp upon me. “If you think I’ll let Breena suffer for your poor choices, you are even more foolish than I’d thought. As soon as I heard your call through the tunnel, I sent a warrior to fetch a healer from the roosting cave for her.”

Oh.

“Thank you,” I ground out. As much as I hated relying on my brother for anything, when it came to Breena and Priya, it was worth it. The words were ash on my tongues but the gratitude was real.

“I presume that is why you came back here? Help for Breena?”

“No. Not entirely.” I’d been so fiercely focused on getting back here, every bit of strength and mental energy devoted to the journey, that I had not considered just how I would explain myself.

As the words poured out of me – words about desert men and a tiny strange female whom I now somehow, some way, had grown to love; words about Gahn Thaleo striking out into neutral territory and taking her – it became clear I really should have planned this better.

“You don’t believe me,” I said slowly when I’d finished telling my tale. I knew I’d encounter resistance. I knew I’d have to beg him for help. But I hadn’t anticipated that he would not believe me about Priya at all.

“I grow concerned that the blood loss has affected your mind,” Errok said. “It is obvious from your wound that you did have a run-in with Gahn Thaleo’s men. But all this about a mate from beyond the stars... Do you take me for a fool?”

“My mind is fine,” I hissed, though by now my mind felt anything but. If he didn’t agree to help me, if he didn’t rally his men to get Priya back, I really would go mad with rage. “Maybe I should gut you here and now, take the title of Gahn, and command the army into action myself,” I said, my voice so low and threatening it made my throat ache.

Errok’s sight stars pulsed, and his brows rose slightly. But my words struck no terror into him, despite the way Zakkar knocked an arrow to his bow and aimed it straight at me.

“You’d have to be truly mad to try to take a Gahn’s title by killing him. But fine. You wish to challenge me, brother? To kill me? Go ahead,” Errok said with a smirk. He raised his arms out to the side, muscles flexing, his hide shining in the firelight. “I will even let you land the first blow. Based on how weak you look, I doubt you’d even draw blood.”

“You know not the kind of strength that drives me now,” I growled.

Something shifted in Errok’s gaze. I knew how to read my brother well. What I saw was not fear.

But he was taking me more seriously than before.

He lowered his arms, looking at me appraisingly.

“Even if I did believe you,” he said, “and even if I did want to help you rescue this mystery female who sounds like a myth you made up, you are exiled. Our law demands exile in entirety. I will heal Breena. But until you submit to our laws, I cannot give tribal resources to this mad mission.”

Zakkar gave a warning growl, his bow twanging with tension as he drew his arm further back, ready to shoot me down. He’d seen me start reaching for my blade. Seen me grow desperate and violent and feral.

But all three of us froze when sudden, bursting light flooded the hall.

Zakkar and Errok stared beyond me, awe plain on both their faces.

Zakkar raised his tail, and so did my brother, which shocked me greatly.

I turned, already knowing what I’d find there.

The Vrika beat its great wings outside the hall, rippling back and forth in the air.

“Here is your chance, Lerokan,” Errok spat, jealousy evident in his bitter tone. “Your chance to rejoin the tribe and gain access to the resources you

seek.”

“You ask me to abandon Priya with my heart in order to retrieve her with my body,” I said stonily. Once I went with the Vrika, my feelings for Priya would be overtaken by the force of the mate bond erupting through my body. It seemed impossible that I could feel more for anyone than what I’d grown to feel for Priya. But the Vrika would use its great power to fuse me to the destiny it chose.

Not the one I’d chosen.

I can still choose her. I am strong. I can use that strength to reject the mate bond.

“You have to give me this, Lerokan,” Errok said from beside me, interrupting my thoughts. “You have to give me something. You cannot expect me to put our men in danger for something as far-fetched as what you’ve told me, some fever dream of your injury. But give me this – submit to the Vrika, end your exile – and I’ll do it.”

His words were the smash of a boulder upon my head.

But even in that devastation, I heard myself respond as if from somewhere far away.

“I will do it.”

Errok sent Zakkar to fetch me a healthy braxilk. Not long afterwards, he flew up to the hall from the outside and led a male braxilk towards me. I mounted the beast, noting the differences between this braxilk and Breena. It felt all wrong.

Everything about this felt wrong.

But if this was the only way to save Priya, I would do it.

I’d do anything.

I didn’t say anything else to my brother as I took flight.

But oddly, the Vrika did not move.

“You have summoned me so many times. Now that I am going with you, you will not budge?” I roared. I directed the braxilk into a holding pattern while the Vrika stared at me.

Then it turned its head, its large glowing eyes focusing on my brother.

A spasm went through Errok’s broad frame.

“Me?” he asked, the question a mere whisper.

The Vrika did not answer with words, but its gaze gave a clear answer:

It had come for Errok. Not for me.

“My mount!” Errok bellowed. Zakkar disappeared once more. He returned swiftly with Errok’s braxilk, a male named Togo. Zakkar barely had time to dismount before Errok had leaped up onto Togo’s back.

His commands into flight were quick and desperate.

“Can this not wait, brother?” I cried. “Time is of the essence! I cannot leave Priya with Gahn Thaleo a moment longer than necessary! I can tell you from experience that if you ignore the Vrika’s call, it will come back for you again another time.”

Errok banked his mount to glare at me.

“Selfish Lerokan,” he spat. “You’ve thrown your own good fortune into the shadows of the valley too many times, and now you ask me to forgo mine? I will not do it. Not for an exile who weaves non-sensical tales about even more non-sensical females.” With that, he faced back towards the Vrika.

But still, the sacred being did not move.

Except for the swing of its head back to me.

“It summons you both.”

Zakkar’s steady voice drifted to us from where he stood at the edge of the hall.

Will this cursed moment never end?

“Fine! Fine, let us both go, then! Let us go and be done with this so we can make our plans for Priya!” I shouted harshly.

Finally, the Vrika moved. Errok dove to follow it.

And so did I.



CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Lerokan



We pushed our braxilk to the limit following the Vrika, Errok out of a long-held desire to get a mate, and me out of the desire to be done with this so I could end my exile, beg for tribal resources, and retrieve Priya.

The Vrika's nest was at the top of the tallest peak in the centre of the neutral territory of the mountains. The braxilk brought us most of the way, but Errok and I both knew from the tales mated men had told us all our lives that the final stretch of the journey was a treacherous climb.

We directed our braxilk to the last ledge where they could land and let us off before we had to climb the rest of the way up the narrow spire of stone. At the top, the Vrika settled, staring down at us.

More climbing, I thought sourly, my shoulder throbbing. At this point why don't you just take a sword and shove it up my –

"Come on!" Errok called, already scaling the stone. The wind whipped his hair and the fabric of his cock cloth as he ascended. Gritting my fangs and internally apologizing to my shoulder, I followed him.

The climb was brutal. Far more difficult than the climb up to Gahn Errok's hall. Although, blessedly, this one was shorter. The Vrika rested not far above of us, curled into a tight bundle at the top of the peak.

"We're nearly there," Errok said. A single-minded determination hardened his features. His sight stars strained upwards towards the Vrika as his muscles propelled him.

I didn't want to be nearly there. I didn't want whatever the Vrika had in store for me.

Perhaps my body listened a little too closely to my mind.

Because I slipped.

It was the tiniest falter, and normally, at full strength, I would not have fallen.

But I did fall.

I jerked to a stop, then swung forward, colliding heavily with the stone. Beside my head, the claws of Errok's feet dug desperately into the cliff-face as he struggled to hold both my weight and his own.

He'd grabbed me. Reached for me as I'd fallen and snagged his claws under the weapons straps across my back.

I scrabbled against the rock, finding my footing once more, my hands settling into cracks for purchase. Breathing heavily, we stared at each other for a moment before he spoke.

"It is not your fate to die that way, Little Lerokan." For once, the nickname did not have its usual snap of condescension.

But of course, he was Errok, and the condescension returned soon after.

"The wind and the rock have no right to kill you. If anyone has earned that pleasure, it is me."

"Cloud-brained fool of a Gahn," I muttered. But still, despite both his words and mine, the tension between us had eased somewhat. Begrudgingly, I yet again felt gratitude for my insufferable older brother. First, for helping Breena. And now, for saving me.

And in saving me, by extension, saving Priya. Because obviously, I would not be able to help her if I were splattered across twenty paces of stone at the bottom of the valley.

The last stretch of the climb went quickly. Soon, we had reached the top of the peak. We pulled ourselves up onto the ledge of the narrow platform.

The peak of this spire of stone was a tiny, flat area. The Vrika's curled body took up most of the space, leaving Errok and me only a foot's-width of flat stone to stand on. The night wind howled around us, trying to drag us both back down the way we'd come. If the stars and moons were out there, I could no longer see them.

The Vrika's light obliterated everything.

And all that light, along with its winding body, was centred around one thing.

No, *two* things.

Two eggs in a shallow pool of Vrika's blood. The same Vrika's blood that streamed down the inside of this mountain and collected in a larger pool in a cave system at the bottom for our healers to harness.

Errok and I glanced at each other. We'd both heard the tales from our father and other men. You had to crack the shell of the egg to get your mate vision.

The fact there were two eggs was the final arrow of confirmation in my chest.

The Vrika really had meant to call both of us, even though calling more than one man at the same time had been unheard of up until now.

It had two mate visions ready. One for each of us.

“I feel drawn to that one,” Errok said, gesturing with his tail towards the egg on the right.

The Vrika dipped its head slightly, and Errok took that as confirmation of his choice. My brother sucked in a quick, sharp breath, then reached for the egg with eager hands.

My own hands felt like stones had been strung from their claws. My reach was lethargic, my guts filled with dread as I took my egg. It was huge, larger than my head. And yet, despite its size and the weight upon me, it seemed to weigh nothing at all.

I glanced at my brother to see he’d already broken his egg into two halves. Whatever he saw within had stunned him into utter stillness.

My tail jerked with anger and grief and the horrible feeling that I was about to betray Priya in a terrible, unforgiveable way.

I cracked the egg.

It broke into two uneven pieces. The small top piece seemed to give me nothing, so I turned my focus to the larger piece. The inside of the egg swirled, glowing and milky like Vrika’s blood.

My breathing turned ragged. I swallowed hard, staring deeper, as a face began to take shape in the shifting whiteness.

Dark, flowing hair.

And...

Those eyes.

Eyes that had laughed at me, judged me, been angry with me, and searched for me dozens of times before.

Priya’s eyes. All big and beautiful and shining beneath her dark brows.

It’s her. It’s only ever been her.

My ribs cracked right open, my heart feeling as wide as the sky and twice as deep.

There she was. Right in front of me.

Just as she’d been this whole time.

Just as I’d known she should be.

Everything – my instincts and my heart and my claws and my cock – everything that had reached for her, called to her, throbbed for her, had been *right*.

My face stretched strangely. I realized I was smiling for the first time in days.

For the first time since I'd last been with her.

Not only did this vision mean that she was truly mine, and I hers, but it also meant that she was still alive out there.

Now we just need to bring her back.

I placed the two pieces of my egg down before the Vrika's long snout.

"I probably owe you an apology, Vrika. I am sorry I doubted your judgment," I said, still grinning like a fool. Grinning because it was Priya. Always Priya.

Only Priya.

Errok laid his egg pieces down, too. In the explosive crescendo of the moment, I'd entirely forgotten he was there.

"You said your lost female has a high bony nose? And white rings in her sight stars?" Errok asked me urgently.

"Yes. And I just saw her again, Errok! In my mate vision. She really is meant to be my mate. You must believe me now!" *Wait a moment...* "Why do you ask about her features?"

Errok didn't answer my question, instead speaking rapid plans into the air.

"We must return to ready the army immediately. We'll fly as soon as we are able. We can reach Gahn Thaleo's territory by tomorrow morning if we push ourselves."

"You'll help me then?" I asked, stunned by his sudden change of heart.

His eyes were like sky veins when they found me, bolting straight through my skull.

"Yes," he vowed. "Because your mate is the only one in these mountains who can tell me where mine is."

That means...

He's been bonded to a new woman.

We stared at each other for a beat before I turned to scale back down the stone. Before I could get down over the edge, Errok stopped me by grasping my shoulder.

He lifted the mask from my face.

Cold air shocked my skin. My ears twitched at the sudden freedom.
I felt oddly naked. Even more naked than if I'd lost my cock cloth.
Errok turned and hurled the mask into the night with all his strength. I
watched it spin until it was a mere shard of bone falling into darkness.

And then it was gone.

“Welcome back, Lerokan,” he said.

I didn't want to admit it, but those words moved something deep inside
me.

My homeland, my people, were mine again.

And now they could be Priya's, too.

I clasped his elbow with my good arm.

“Thank you.”

“Come now,” he said grinning briefly. Then, the expression faded into a
determination so fearsome it almost looked malevolent. “Let us go together
and do this thing.”

As we descended, Errok's last words from on the high peak echoed in my
skull the entire way down:

We will fly. We will fight.

And we will claim our mates.



CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Priya



I had to admit, being a prisoner of Gahn Thaleo's was actually pretty cushy. At least, it was when you were a weak little human woman who didn't have claws or weapons or the strength to really hurt anybody. I doubted Oxriel and the others were quite as comfortably kept as I was, but I'd been assured many times by the warriors who brought me food that they'd been healed and were receiving adequate meals as well. They'd even sent a healer to put finishing touches on my finger. I knew it was good to have that injury completely sorted out, but the pain had been more than physical when the healer had taken out the stitch. Like she was ripping Lerokan right out of me.

Even knowing the others were healed and fed, I couldn't stop picturing them bound in some dark cave completely unlike my own. That, coupled with the fact I still didn't know what had happened to Lerokan and Breena, meant I couldn't appreciate any of the comforts of my temporary new digs.

I glanced around the cave I'd been trundled into back on that first day here. I hadn't left since then. This was the sixth day of captivity.

The cave wasn't huge, but was spacious enough. The bedding hides were warm, soft, and clean, and resembled the ones Lerokan had slept with. Instead of brown suede-like material, they were fuzzier and grey, almost like wool. The bedding hides fit perfectly into a long trench that had been carved into the stone floor. Of course, the bedding trench thing had been sized for an alien, so it was far too big for me. But with all the hides, it had been comfy enough. Not that I'd been getting much sleep, though. Every time I closed my eyes, I either saw Lerokan with an arrow through his shoulder.

Or I imagined his mouth moving ravenously against mine.

Beside the bed was another much smaller, shallower carved basin that had a decent amount of fresh, clean water continuously trickling in and draining out, allowing me to clean myself and my clothes when I was left alone.

Which was most of the time.

The inner walls of this cave gleamed in the same deep blue shades as the rest of the mountains. One huge section of the cave wall was the same aquamarine-looking stone I'd seen outside. It created a gigantic natural window. The translucent bright-teal stone allowed me an expansive view out over the mountains. Based on what the window showed me, my cave was pretty high up, but not so high that the thin air posed much of a problem. If I looked down far enough, I could see that big round area surrounded by the ring of peaks where we'd landed on the braxilk. For the first few days here, I'd remained glued to the natural window, staring outwards, hoping for any sign of Lerokan. Hoping that, if he came this way, he could see me, too.

I'd been informed, rather tersely by Gahn Thaleo during his one and only visit to my room, that while I could see well enough out, due to the nature of the stone, nobody would be able to see in.

I sighed, thinking of that one visit the Gahn had paid me. By now, I'd told him pretty much everything I knew. While I wasn't thrilled at being trapped here, and even though the Gahn was about as readable as a boulder, he'd seemed rational enough so far. He hadn't hurt us or held us accountable for killing his men back on the plains. Even though they had attacked us first, I could think of at least one Gahn with crazy red eyes who wouldn't have given a flying fuck about the circumstances and would have probably torn our heads off over it. So, in my mind, Gahn Thaleo had proven himself at least somewhat reasonable. And he'd seemed amenable to the alliance I'd mentioned earlier, although to be fair that was under the impression we'd help him kill Gahn Errok. But still. We'd come out here to share information and gain allies.

I would do it. I figured that the more he trusted us, trusted me, the more likely he'd eventually let us go.

So, when he'd come to my room to ask me more questions, I'd answered as many as I could. I told him where I'd come from, told him about humanity and also about the threat human forces posed. None of that caused any visible reaction in him.

The only thing that *did* cause a slight flicker of visible tension was when I'd told him about the human women being mated to the other Gahns. *I guess if his tribe is anything like the others I've encountered, they have a rather serious lady shortage, too.*

I leaned forward where I sat on the stone floor, my forehead bumping against the smooth, glassy stone of the big window. Even after what Gahn

Thaleo had told me, that no one could see in here, I still spent most of my time looking out.

Hoping to see Lerokan.

Part of me didn't want to see him. Because he was only one man, exiled from his people. He wouldn't be able to face Gahn Thaleo's forces alone, especially with the injuries he and Breena had sustained.

And even so, even knowing all of that, I still gasped and smacked my palms to the window every time I saw a felkora or one of Gahn Thaleo's men on a braxilk, thinking it was him.

But no matter what I saw out there, it was never Lerokan.

I hoped that was a good sign. That he had holed up somewhere and was recovering. That he wouldn't go on what would essentially be a suicide mission to find me.

I miss him.

I missed him so much that it hurt. My stomach ached most of the time despite the food being perfectly fine. My chest tightened with every breath. During the few bouts of sleep I did get, I woke myself up grinding my teeth and reaching into the darkness for a masked man who was not there.

I tried not to miss him too much. I tried to put nothing but good vibes out into the universe, as if to manifest that he was just fine out there somewhere. And that we'd find our way back to each other someday. Someday soon.

I pulled my forehead back from where it had been smooshed to the window. I rubbed at the skin that now felt tingly and numb from the pressure. Then, I let my fingers drift further down my face to my mouth, tracing my lips and melting into a memory.

That kiss with Lerokan had been astounding. Electrifying. It had changed everything.

Or maybe it hadn't really changed anything at all. It just made things *clear*. Made what already existed between us more real.

He'd kissed me like he'd been starving for it, for me. The ferocity of his desire had alarmed me as much as it had aroused me. For so long, I'd thought he'd been hardly more than indifferent to me. For so long, I'd thought he'd barely liked me, maybe even actively disliked me. That I was a burden he couldn't wait to get rid of.

But then he'd kissed me like *that*, blowing everything I thought I'd known about him, about us, out of the water. I'd burned under the blistering heat of him. Felt the greedy sweep of his tongues in my mouth. The

possessive grip of his strong hands on my body. The ardent throbbing of his cock against my belly as he backed me up against the stone.

And he'd chosen to come with me. To leave everything – his tribe, his Gahn, the Vrika – behind and journey with me to the settlement.

My throat constricted as I thought about how fucking close we'd gotten. I went over and over the details. *If only we'd left a little earlier. Or maybe if we'd gone a different way...*

Then we might be together right now, heading for the settlement.

That was a cycle I found myself trapped in more and more often these days. Of going over what had happened, obsessing about the could-have-beens. I could feel myself falling into that anxious agony even now. It was only the dark, dispersed blur of something in the sky ahead that kept me rooted to the present instead of sinking deeper into the past.

I squinted, leaning so far forward that my forehead was once again plastered to the window. Something smudged the clear, searing blue of the morning sky. It almost looked like a smattering of dark dusty particles on the window itself. The particles moved. Getting closer and closer until I was crying out and rising hastily to my feet.

Braxilk.

These weren't Gahn Thaleo's braxilk. I was certain. They were too tiny when I'd first glimpsed them, coming from too far away. And in too great of numbers. Gahn Thaleo's tribe seemed on the small side, and the hunting and patrolling parties I'd seen come and go usually had no more than six riders.

This is way more than six riders.

The group flying this way was easily ten times that number, more than fifty braxilk slicing through the air. Coming straight this way.

Now my nose was crushed to the window, too, as I tried to see what was happening.

Tried to see who was coming.

The braxilk and riders took clearer shape as they got closer. I scanned the group of them desperately.

I don't see a mask.

He isn't with them.

My heart sank, and so did I, all the way down to my knees on the stone. I tried to make sense of what was happening, of what this meant.

What it meant if Lerokan wasn't with the army flying this way now.

This had to be Gahn Errok's army – there were no other braxilk-riding Deep Sky tribes who would come here to attack.

But Lerokan had been exiled. So, they wouldn't come out here if he'd asked them to. And even if they had helped him for some reason...

Lerokan would have been leading the charge. No matter what. Even if badly injured, there was no way he would have stayed behind.

I tried harder and harder to avoid it, get around it, think beyond it.

But the circumstances pointed to only one possible truth.

Lerokan's gone.

Explosive grief hollowed me out. Left me so empty I couldn't even cry.

For the first time since I'd been put in this cave, I didn't care about looking out the window. I didn't care about the men attacking or about the men holding me here. In that moment, I didn't even care if I never left this place again.

I turned my back on the window, on the entire outside world, and closed my eyes.



CHAPTER THIRTY

Lerokan



We flew all night, all through the morning, until we'd reached Gahn Thaleo's mountains. The shining circle of bright turquoise aguir stone, ringed by his home peaks came into view, which drove our flight all the harder. I still rode the male braxilk Zakkar had fetched for me. Breena had remained back in our territory, being tended to by the healers.

I commanded my braxilk faster, faster, intense need driving me. Like Breena, I'd taken some time to be healed, too. I hadn't bothered seeking out a healer – that would have taken too much time, and I had not a moment to lose. But Errok and I had stopped very briefly at the pool of Vrika's blood in the cave at the base of its peak. The wound in my shoulder had closed, though there was still some pain, and I had been weakened.

But even a weak Lerokan was stronger than most men. And I would prove that now. To my brother. To Gahn Thaleo.

To Priya.

As we got nearer the circular platform of aguir, I searched the landscape frantically. I knew that Priya wouldn't be out here. But I couldn't help myself.

"Eyes up, brother," Gahn Errok called from Togo's back. He flew beside me. On his other side was Zakkar, who was already knocking an arrow to his bow.

I wrenched my eyes up from the stone below to see a dozen of Gahn Thaleo's men flying straight for us. Arrows zinged through the air, and I hissed, sending my own arrows rapidly at them in return. My shoulder throbbed. I ignored it.

We would win. I knew we would. Gahn Thaleo's tribe was much smaller than ours. The men flying towards us comprised half his army. Meanwhile, Errok and I had more than fifty men at our backs, ready to fight.

My eyes locked onto Gahn Thaleo, leading his men. His arm was swift and deadly, his gaze calculating as he launched arrow after arrow into our

midst. I heard at least one of those arrows find its target somewhere behind me, a man crying out in raging pain.

“Give us the woman you hold captive, Gahn Thaleo!” I roared, forging forward. My braxilk beat his wings powerfully against the bright morning air.

Gahn Thaleo’s gaze turned to me as I called for him. But maddeningly, he ignored me, knocking another arrow and aiming it somewhere else.

Errok.

Cursing, I banked hard to the right, drawing a blade and knocking the arrow out of the air before it reached my brother.

Errok sped forward to my side.

“I could have knocked that arrow away,” my brother grunted, ducking as another flew by his head.

“Yes. Just like I could have saved myself from falling at the Vrika’s mountain,” I retorted, now ducking to avoid an arrow myself.

Errok smirked, then turned his attention back to the enemy Gahn who was nearly upon us. Gahn Thaleo swooped towards Errok’s mount, this time with a long, brutal blade drawn.

Errok swooped, too, dodging. He tossed his bow around his neck and drew his own blade, diving towards Gahn Thaleo.

As much as I hated to admire anything about my older brother, he truly was a magnificent flyer and fighter. Gahn Thaleo was, too, but their styles differed greatly.

Where Gahn Thaleo was controlled, precise, and as brutally consistent as water pummelling stone, Errok was looser, quicker, and as unpredictable as the shifting wind. My brother twisted and dove while Gahn Thaleo advanced methodically, swinging his blade harder and closer with each beat of his mount’s wings.

Now that Gahn Thaleo was distracted enough by my brother, I knocked an arrow, aiming for him. But *blast*, my brother was so all over the place with his rolling flight pattern that every time I got Gahn Thaleo in my sights, Errok’s stupid face got right in my arrow’s path.

I kept flying, dodging arrows as I fought to keep my own steady.

Kill the Gahn and the army will falter. Kill him and you get Priya.

The words pounded through me so hard and fast they became a thrum. A vibration building in power until my limbs trembled and my fangs rattled.

But no...

This was not something inside of me.

The sky is shaking.

The vibrations grew more and more intense, a whooping rattle in the air. The braxilk began to panic at the sound, the fight becoming less coordinated.

Gahn Thaleo's endless focus on killing my brother finally broke. He searched the sky with his mismatched sight stars.

But none of us could see whatever caused the terrible sound. It had grown so loud that my ears rang.

I pointed my arrow upward, now, trying to aim it at whatever this was. But sudden winds buffeted me so hard my aim had no stability, no power.

Errok held his blade out towards Gahn Thaleo, his gaze swinging back and forth from the enemy Gahn to the skies. His hair whipped in a frenzy around his face as he called something to me, but I could not hear it.

I have to find Priya.

The sound, this power in the sky somewhere above us, or maybe all around us, was no storm. Was nothing I knew how to protect myself from.

But I would find a way to protect her. No matter what it took.

While the other warriors were distracted looking up, I dove down. Down, down, down to the aguir platform. Down towards the entrance into Gahn Thaleo's mountain. She had to be somewhere inside.

I would find her. *Now.*

But before I could land, the bone-shattering thrumming grew even stronger. My braxilk suddenly ignored my commands, turning from the path I'd chosen for us.

I yelled, trying to command him back down as he started to ascend once more.

But I should have trusted the braxilk's instincts. Because directly below us, where we would have landed a moment ago, something exploded into existence. I cried out in shock, raising my bow in front of my face as empty air transformed into... *Something.*

I could not name it. Long and large and silver, it was vaguely arrow-shaped, but not as pointed. The tempest-level winds and deafening, vibrating roar ceased. The sound of dozens of clattering arrows hitting its shining body filled the new silence.

Both armies had ceased fighting each other and were now focused on killing whatever this thing was.

I knew this had to be something to do with Priya's people. She'd told me about the wingless corpses that helped her people travel through the skies.

What had she called it? A skip?

Whatever it was, the thing's side split open, drawing territorial cries and growls of shock from the warriors circling overhead.

I did not envy Gahn Thaleo in that moment. Not only did he have our army to contend with, but now also this thing that had landed directly at the base of his home mountain.

Evidently, he'd decided that Errok and I could wait for now. Like the others, he loosed arrow after arrow at the thing below us, aiming for the opening.

But the two creatures who stepped out of that opening proved completely impervious to the arrows.

I recognized their kind instantly. I'd seen one like them on the plains during the battle when I'd taken Priya. *Bitter Sea men.*

The one on the left was golden in colour, with what looked like a mountain fish's scales all over him. He also had brown spikes extended along his arms, neck, and powerful tail. The one beside him had scales and spikes, too, but he shone a brilliant crimson, his spikes black. They both glittered like stone. It wasn't just the quality of the scales that reminded me of stone, but also the strength – our arrows glanced off of them like the deadly weapons were nothing but wind-tossed grains of sand. Each of them raised an arm to protect their large eyes, but otherwise, they needed no shielding. They did not even wear cock cloths! I knew they could mate based on what Priya had told me, but they had no obviously visible genitalia.

The golden one began to speak, the powerful boom of his rocky voice stilling the arrows for a moment.

“I am Tok, here as emissary for the Bitter Sea King, Hakah Gog. With me is the warrior Grim. Our vessel carries two Gahns of the Sea Sands, Gahn Taliok and Gahn Fallo, as well as the Gahnala Chapman and warrior Valeria. We speak on behalf of three more Gahns – Buroudei, Baldor, and Razek.” His voice grew even louder. I could only imagine the irritation building in my brother at having this stranger address everyone with such authority here.

“We have come to reclaim the new woman named Priya,” the golden giant continued, “as well as the warriors Oxriel, Dalk, Bariok, and Vaxilkai. Whoever rules here, we bid you come down and speak with us in peace.”

They've come for her.

I wouldn't let that happen. I'd already had her taken from me once.

No one will take her from me again.

My gaze skirted around the so-called vessel to the entrance into Gahn Thaleo's mountain. But it was almost entirely blocked by the vessel. I'd never be able to get past it unnoticed to fetch her.

As I tried to figure out what to do, movement below caught my eye. Something, *someone*, shoved between the two Bitter Sea giants.

This was a man much more familiar than Grim and Tok. He resembled the four warriors who'd come for Priya – warm-toned skin, black hair tied into dozens of braids. He was large – easily as big as my brother, and had an extraordinary number of blades strapped to his body. From where I flew, not too far from the ground, I could see that his sight stars gleamed a vicious, poisonous red. He drew a blade and slashed it through the air in a pointing gesture, aimed up at us on our beasts.

“Who rules here? Come down and face me like a true Gahn!”

I did not like the look of this man. He seemed to pose even more of a threat than the gigantic, indestructible Bitter Sea men. Not because of his physical features – the Bitter Sea warriors were far more physically intimidating. But because of the feral glint of madness in his whirling sight stars.

Clearly, Gahn Thaleo did not like the look of him either. His face expressionless, he immediately shot an arrow at this red-eyed Gahn's chest.

The new Gahn reacted with stunning quickness, knocking the arrow to the ground with nothing but the power of his own fist. A fist now badly torn and bloodied by the arrow's edge that had caught him.

But he didn't even seem to notice the injury. He picked up the arrow from the ground – and *grinned*. Then, he launched the arrow back at Gahn Thaleo as if throwing a spear. If Gahn Thaleo had jerked his head to the side even half a breath later, that arrow would have gone right through his skull.

I was certain he would command his men to attack once more.

But a sudden high, firm voice cut through the air, staying his words.

“Stop antagonizing them! We're here to negotiate in *peace*!”

The red-eyed Gahn's head jerked down forcefully, and I noticed a tiny white fist around some of his braids, pulling.

The voice, clearly a female's, grew louder, calling out from behind the Gahn whose braids she held. Her hand gripping his hair reminded me of a warrior yanking on the training reins of a particularly feisty braxilk.

“Like Tok said, we are here for Priya and the others!” continued the hidden female. “We want to negotiate in peace. But you should know that if

you continue shooting at us, or you do not release the people we came for, we will be forced to fight. We have powerful weapons – far worse than arrows.”

Gahn Thaleo remained silent on his braxilk, frowning down at the vessel.

No one needed proof of their weapons. The vessel proved their power, plus the Bitter Sea men themselves looked like they could shred through half the men and braxilk present without gaining a single scratch.

A moment later, Gahn Thaleo descended. He landed in the aguir circle and dismounted.

“I am Thaleo,” he called. “Gahn and ruler here.”

My brother suddenly jerked his braxilk into motion, too, landing and dismounting nearer the vessel.

“And I am Gahn Errok of the far mountains. If you wish to discuss the fate of Priya, you must discuss it with me. Because she is part of our tribe, now.”

I felt simultaneous swells of affection and irritation for my brother. Affection because of the way he’d so quickly and easily claimed Priya as part of our tribe. And irritation because if anyone was going to speak on her behalf, it would be *me*.

I dove downward, too, landing closer than any of the others, directly before the open side of the vessel. I stood so close I could see the single expanding sight stars of the Bitter Sea men fall upon me. And could count each tiny white finger wrapped around the braids of the Gahn in the middle.

“These two may be Gahns,” I said, pointing my bow backwards over my shoulder at them, “but if anyone comes for Priya, they must first get through me.”

The red-eyed Gahn snapped his jaws, fangs catching the light. I was sure the only thing that kept him from stalking towards me and gutting me for my insolence was the hand that tightened on his hair.

“Who are you to dare address us thus?” snarled the red-eyed Gahn.

I stepped closer, determination hardening my guts and lifting my chin.

“I am Priya’s *mate*.”

The Gahn’s sight stars pulsed and whirled. From behind him came a harsh sigh and a word I did not entirely understand but had heard from Priya many times before:

“*Shit.*”



CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Thaleo



I stared at the strangers, wondering if this was all some impossible, terrible dream. But if it were a dream, it would have to have been days long, starting with the arrival of the strange new woman Priya.

Everything she told me has been proven true.

The evident power of her people. The alliance with the so-called Bitter Sea men, who looked more like monsters than any man I'd ever seen. There really were five more Gahns out there, one of whom was before me now, clearly itching to kill the first man who got close enough.

I'd thought Gahn Errok was irritating enough. If this red-eyed man was any indication of the others, I was due for many future headaches.

The high, clear voice, presumably belonging to the white hand that leashed the feral Gahn, spoke again.

“Will you command your warriors to land? Or at least to lower their weapons so we can talk?”

I considered her request. Every instinct told me not to do it. We were a small tribe, but mighty and fierce in our defences.

But I did not want to test the power of these people's weapons on the backs of my men. There were too few of us to waste even one life.

My tail jerked in acquiescence, and I called the command to my men, telling them to land.

Gahn Errok did the same. His men crowded together on the other side of the aguir circle. My men flanked me, a much thinner crowd.

We all watched each other, tension roiling as we waited for someone to break the temporary ceasefire.

But no one did.

And soon enough, the hidden figures from the vessel emerged.

The red-eyed Gahn stepped forward and the Bitter Sea men moved aside to make way.

First came the white-handed woman, who now released the hair of the Gahn from her grip. Her appearance shocked me. I'd assumed Priya's kind would all look like her. But this woman was frightfully pale all over, and had hair like orange flame, pulled back from her face. Another woman exited the vessel. Her hair was more familiar – dark like Priya's, also tied tightly back. There was one more man, the other Gahn they'd spoken of. He was scarred even more severely than me, with ragged stripes dragged down one side of his body, from his face all the way down to his cock cloth.

Such an odd band they presented. A mixture of shapes and sizes and colours and kinds. But they all stood together as equals, allies.

I broke the silence.

“Priya told us of the proposed alliance. We would hear your terms.”

The red-haired woman opened her mouth to speak, but Gahn Errok cut in first.

“Alliance? Why would they ally with you? My tribe is larger and stronger, clearly the better ally. Besides, my brother is mated to one of their new women. And not only that...”

I watched him step closer, his white sight stars vibrating with intensity.

“I have a mate from among the new women too.”

I breathed out tightly through my nose.

This was not good news. Having not just the brother of the Gahn, but the Gahn himself mated to some of their women would cement their alliance and leave my people vulnerable to a newly strengthened enemy.

I could feel a thunderous growl building in my chest, but I bit it back when the flame-haired woman spoke again.

“We actually want to ally with all of you.”

Gahn Errok and I spun to face her again in unison.

Both of us? Both tribes of the Deep Sky join this alliance?

“Never,” I hissed. The condition I'd had to join their alliance in the first place was having them help me kill Gahn Errok. I'd hoped that by killing him and destabilizing their tribe, I'd get what I wanted. What my people needed.

But perhaps there is another way...

“Unless,” I said quickly, changing tactics, “our conditions are met.”

“What conditions are those?” came the question, this time from the scarred Gahn.

“We want more territory.”

Gahn Errok's tail snapped aggressively.

“You cannot be serious. You think I would agree to this? You are the smaller tribe. You have no right to expand further into neutral territory, even though your men have apparently already been doing so.”

I remained still and stony, not wanting to say any more. I wouldn't give away too much to Gahn Errok or these strangers. I would not reveal our weaknesses.

But Gahn Errok, though he often appeared to be a mere cocky buffoon, was actually ruthlessly clever. He saw through my request almost instantly.

“The storms have been raging heavily over the plains and on your side of the mountains as of late,” he said slowly, his sight stars boring into me. “I imagine it makes hunting and foraging difficult.”

I tensed, gritting my fangs.

My people were not to the point of hunger.

Yet.

But he was right. The storms had been unusually merciless in our lands, often trapping us inside our mountain for days upon days upon days. There was only so long felkora and eggs could sustain us, only so long we could venture out to hunt and gather supplies in the narrow bands of lands not ravaged by the frequent storms. We'd exhausted much of the hunting areas here. Thus, my men had expanded out into neutral territory. I knew Gahn Errok would not have permitted such actions – no Deep Sky tribe had ever been granted hunting access in the neutral territories close to the Vrika. But I'd vowed to kill him before I'd let my people starve.

“Alright. So, you're saying you need more territory, to what, hunt? Feed your people?” the flame woman asked.

“Yes,” I ground out, still staring at Gahn Errok.

“And what about you guys? Any conditions?”

Gahn Errok whirled on her, earning a warning growl from the red-eyed Gahn. I realized then that those two were mated. He was too protective of her, and she too confident in controlling a man who otherwise did not seem easy to control. They had mentioned one of the women was a Gahnala.
Gahnala Chapman.

“You cannot be seriously considering this,” Gahn Errok seethed. “They have no right to expand into neutral territory. This would be a grave insult to our tribe.”

“Well, why don't you expand too, then?” the Gahnala asked. “If both of your tribes submit to our alliance and there's peace, why don't you both just

expand into the neutral territory and use the resources you need? That's what we've done in the Sea Sands. All five Gahns now live and share resources in the neutral territory of the Lavrika at the Cliffs of Uruzai."

"That would not work," I said, slashing my hand through the air. "The grievances, the histories between our two tribes are too deep. Too bloody."

"And you believe our grievances are not?" asked the scarred Gahn, his voice dark with barely-controlled rage as his sight stars flicked to the other Gahn. "But we have agreed to put everything aside to protect the new women and face the oncoming threats their people pose our world."

"Then there is more pride in the Deep Sky than the Sea Sands," snapped Gahn Errok. "I refuse to bend myself to another Gahn the way you all have."

Gahnala Chapman's face smoothed into a calm, impassive expression.

"Fine. Then you won't have access to your mate."

Gahn Errok's younger brother Lerokan made an expression that could only be described as *now you've done it*.

Gahn Errok's eyes darkened, and he stalked swiftly forward. The red-eyed Gahn stepped in front of his mate, drawing a black blade in each of his hands.

"You can draw a hundred blades against me," Errok hissed. "It does not matter. I have waited for a mate. Waited and hungered and yearned for far too long. Now that I have seen her, now that she is within my grasp, I will not lose her. If you deny me, we will fly to you. Will fight. We will take her by force."

"No, you won't," said the Gahnala coolly, her voice barely audible above her mate's warning snarls. "You may be the larger tribe out here, but you're not larger than our alliance. You would not be successful, and even if you were, *human* women do not take kindly to being abducted."

Lerokan stiffened oddly at that last statement. Gahn Errok's chest heaved with barely controlled rage. Finally, with a growl, he turned from the red-eyed Gahn and prowled back to his brother's side.

"And what of my mate?" Lerokan asked, stepping forward. "Unlike my brother, my mate knows me. Even now, she is likely waiting for me in Gahn Thaleo's mountains. *I must get to her.*"

Gahnala Chapman peeked out from behind her mate, looking at Lerokan.

"Fine. But Gahn Taliok, Grim, and Valeria will go with you."

"I did not agree to this!" I thundered. All eyes swept to me.

Gahnala Chapman's were very odd – white and grey and black in colour.

“It doesn’t matter what you agree to or not,” she said. “Whatever happens, you can’t keep our people prisoner.” Her eyes narrowed, and her mate slashed his blades through the air. “If you don’t give Priya and our four warriors up without a fight... Well, let’s just say we will win that fight.” Her hand drifted to a black object at her hip. *A weapon?*

It is not worth putting my men at risk for the female and her four escorts. She was not my mate, nor that of any of my men. She had proven to be no threat on her own. Her people, though, and this alliance, was the real threat. Even greater a threat than Gahn Errok’s forces.

“Fine,” I agreed, waving over one of my warriors to show them the way. “Consider this an act of my good faith in our negotiations.”

Despite Gahn Errok’s protestations, I was still willing to consider this alliance, with him or without him. If it meant more territory, more hunting grounds, for my people, it would be worth it. And maybe a few of the new women would be mated to my men, too. That would be a bounty indeed. The last female of mating age in our tribe had just been bonded to a warrior, leaving many other men without hope for a mate.

The scarred Gahn, whom I now knew to be Gahn Taliok, Grim the red Bitter Sea warrior, and the dark-haired new woman called Valeria went with my warrior and Gahn Errok’s brother to the entrance into the mountain. Aware that once they had Priya back, I’d lose some of my leverage, I turned my focus back to Gahn Fallo and his Gahnala, speaking quickly.

“We will join this alliance provided our conditions about expanding our territory are met. Whether Gahn Errok chooses to join or not, we expect your warriors to help us uphold the borders of our new territory should he oppose them.”

I could see the storm raging in Gahn Errok. A proud Gahn like him would not want to join this alliance, would not want to see my tribe expand. But I also knew he desperately wanted his mate. And the temptation of that mate now kept him in check.

Unlike Errok, I cared not for things like pride. What little ego I had I would willingly slay for my tribe’s future.

I would do this thing.

I would join these people.

And I would save my own.



CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Priya



I didn't think anything would interest me enough to turn towards the window again.

I was wrong.

Because when the undeniable whir of a ship got louder and louder in the distance, until it was no longer in the distance but seemingly right outside my window, I had to turn to look.

I didn't see anything at first, besides the confused chaos of the warriors trying to control their panicked braxilk.

Then, the cloaking tech deactivated, revealing Valeria's shuttle on the bright aquamarine stone.

I shook, my breath quickening.

They've come for me.

I suddenly realized I did care if I got out of there. If I was going to fall into a great big pit of despair over Lerokan and Breena, I'd at least be safe with my own people. My friends.

Unfortunately, I couldn't hear anything that was said from up here. They were too far down. I saw the flashing scales of two Bitter Sea warriors, along with what I thought was Chapman's red hair. There was another woman – that had to be Valeria – and two Sea Sand men with them. Gahn Fallo, probably, but from this distance I couldn't make out the other.

The Deep Sky men all landed, and there seemed to be a conversation happening.

Well, no one's shooting at each other. I guess that's a good sign?

A bitterness crept through me at that observation. Why couldn't the ship have shown up sooner, before anything bad had happened to Lerokan?

I knew it would have been physically impossible. It was approximately a two-week journey on foot back to the settlement from the plains. Gahn Razek and the others would have only just recently gotten back there, and the ship probably took off immediately, tracking all the life signs into the mountains.

I knew it wasn't their fault, but I couldn't help but be angry, feeling like they'd come too late.

I watched a small group from the ship break off and come towards the base of the mountain, disappearing directly beneath my cave.

This is it. They'll be here soon. It's time to go.

I swallowed against a thick, aching throat, casting my gaze upward away from all the people and over the mountains. *I can't believe I'll never watch another mountain sunrise with him.*

I can't believe this is how it ends.

I hadn't been able to cry before.

But the tears came now.

Slowly, steadily, coursing down my cheeks.

I wiped vigorously at my face when I heard a man's voice say, "She's in there."

I turned, expecting to see people I knew.

Instead, I found a Deep Sky man I'd never seen before.

Oh no. Maybe they sent a warrior to move me, to hide me, so the others can't find me!

"Who are you?" I whispered, backing up until I hit the stone of the window. My fingers splayed over the smooth surface behind me as I watched the man. He'd been walking towards me with fury carved into his features, but he froze.

"Priya..."

That voice!

"Wait. You don't recognize him? Hold it right there, buddy." Valeria swept into the cave, coming between us, pistol drawn. Gahn Taliok and Grim flanked the warrior before me.

Not just any warrior.

"Lerokan!"

My agonized cry made Valeria whip her head back to look at me.

"Hold on. So, you do know him?"

"Yes! I just... I didn't recognize him!" I cried. I put my hand on her shoulder, tugging, urging her to lower the weapon. She did, partway, her gaze moving back and forth between Lerokan and me.

"You didn't recognize him?" she asked slowly.

She's probably wondering if I have head trauma or something.

"He had a mask before. And I thought he was... It's a long story!"

I didn't have time to explain this now.

But then again, I had all the fucking time in the world.

Because Lerokan was alive. *Right in front of me.*

Lerokan stared fiercely at me over Valeria's head.

"You're crying," he said softly. Then, he gave me one of his heart-stopping grins. "I told you my face without the mask would prove too overwhelming for you."

Now I was laugh-crying, doing this horrible snort thing, and I didn't even care.

"You would say something ridiculous right now!" I exclaimed, wiping away yet more tears. When I looked at him again, his grin had softened, turned into something tender.

"Alright. I guess everything looks good here. I'll give you two some space and station myself outside with Grim since they're still talking out there. Gahn Taliok, maybe you'd go with that warrior and find Oxriel and the others?"

"Yes," Gahn Taliok replied. "I have been anxious to check on my man Oxriel for some time."

"Alright. Let's move out."

"Thank you," I finally remembered to say, just as the three of them reached the cave's narrow exit.

Grim and Gahn Taliok both grunted at me, leaving, but Valeria turned her head and gave me a deeply sympathetic smile. She knew what it was like to be separated from the warrior you loved. We nodded at each other. Then she left.

And it was just Lerokan and me.

"I have so many questions," I said, shaking my head in wonder at the sight of him. I couldn't stop staring at his face. Memorizing every new angle and feature. It was so strange to see him without the mask, without the horns!

One less thing between us now.

Lerokan crossed the final distance, catching my face between his hands.

"Save your questions until after I've asked mine," he said, sight stars snapping, dragging over my face. "Were you safe? Were you mistreated? Because if Gahn Thaleo has done anything to you, I'll go back down there and gut him where he stands and-"

"No! I mean, yes, I'm alright. Yes, technically I was a prisoner but I was treated with respect. Three square meals and all that jazz. Nice cozy cave to

sleep in.”

Lerokan raised his gaze to look around the space.

He wrinkled his nose. “Not as nice as my cave. *Our* cave.”

I blinked away more tears. I liked hearing him call things *ours*.

“So, if you have your cave back, and no mask... Your exile is done?”

I reached up to gingerly press my fingertips to his cheekbones, sliding them down his jaw.

“Yes.”

“That’s great!” I said. “Hold on... Wait. Is it great? That means you had to...”

“I submitted to the Vrika. I answered its call.”

I froze.

“What does that mean?” Icy dread drenched me. He hadn’t wanted to do that. He’d been forced into it, presumably to be accepted by the tribe and bring the other warriors here to find me. And he might have even been bonded to someone else...

“Remember when I told you that you think too much?” he murmured gently. “I can tell you’re doing it again. *Mate*.”

Mate.

He actually just said that, right?

My heart pounded, joy expanding in my chest, replacing the dread.

But the dread boomeranged right back.

“What is wrong with you, now?” Lerokan asked, poking the tip of his finger at the furrow that had once again appeared between my eyebrows.

“Oh, wait. I believe the preferred question is, ‘are you *alright*?’”

“I... I just know you didn’t want to go get the mate bond! You’re not going to wake up tomorrow completely resenting me, are you? Because you never wanted a mate.”

Lerokan’s sight stars pulsed at my questions, a flurry of bright white shards in his dark gaze.

“Correction,” he said, bending lower, his breath feathering over my skin, “I never wanted a mate until I met you. Before I submitted to the Vrika, I’d already chosen you.” He smirked against my mouth, lips brushing mine. “It proves I am rather clever, does it not? I did not need the Vrika to find my fate. I found you myself and was only proven right in that choice.”

I snorted.

“You seem to be forgetting the fact that after you ignored the Vrika a bunch of times, it finally decided to corner you with me in a cave during a storm for days on end. Seems the Vrika was determined to make this happen whether you listened to it or not.”

He withdrew slightly, a thoughtful frown on his gorgeous face.

“You are right. Perhaps I am not so clever as I claimed. If I’d just gone with the Vrika in the beginning, I would have known you were my mate the entire time.”

“But that would have changed everything,” I replied. “Completely changed our journey, changed our story. It was easier to forgive you for saving me from the battle because you were just trying to help some random kid. If I’d known you’d taken me because you thought I was your mate, it would have been a much weirder start for us.”

“Yes, but you would have had the mate bond right from the beginning, too.”

“Nope,” I said. “Humans don’t feel the mate bond.”

Lerokan leaned even further back, his hands still at my jaw, studying me carefully. Suspiciously.

“You do not feel the mate bond?”

“No. We have to develop feelings for someone more slowly. We fall in love.”

“So right now, you...”

I smiled.

“Don’t worry. Somehow, between all the snark and sarcasm, you made me fall in love with you, too.” I took a shaky breath. “I love you, Lerokan. Vrika or not, I love you.”

“Love,” he said his expression sobering. “What I feel... It is love. Yet it is more than love. Harder than love. Both brighter and darker. More devoted. Maybe even dangerous.”

“Dangerous?”

“It is dangerous to feel so intensely connected to another. I’ll have you know that all the instincts I once had related to keeping myself alive have gone off the edge of a cliff. My hunger, my thirst, my blood and my pain, none of that matters now. Lerokan the hero is now Lerokan the servant. Eternal servant to Priya.”

“See, this is why I worry about the resentment thing,” I said with a shaky laugh. Lerokan slipped one of his hands down until the pad of his thumb

came to rest on the pulse point beneath my jaw.

“No. I could never feel resentment for something I chose. And I chose you, Priya. I still choose you. I’ll choose you every day. Every moment.”

“I choose you, too,” I whispered.

Something that almost looked like pain crashed over his face. Seeing him without the mask, seeing the full range of his expressions, made me dizzy. It was like I’d been looking at him with dark sunglasses this whole time.

And I could finally see him in the light.

His mouth found mine, and my lips parted instantly. The slam of arousal through my body at the contact was sudden and brutal, my heart thundering, the place between my legs throbbing. My hands dragged down his chest as his tongues invaded my mouth.

Lerokan’s chest and abdomen muscles grew tense as rock beneath my touch.

His cock was like rock, too. A hot, hard prod against my abdomen. The feeling of that urgent hardness sent a deep ache through my core. Lerokan’s fangs grazed my lower lip and he withdrew slightly, dragging his hot, searching mouth along my jaw to my neck. I tipped my head back until it bumped the clear stone of the window. The hungry drag of Lerokan’s tongues along the side of my neck had me moaning, skittering tingles running from my ear down to my clit. My feet slid apart on the stone, and Lerokan’s thick thigh filled the gap immediately, pressing firmly up between my legs.

I cried out at the pressure there, gorgeous and pressing and perfect. Instinctively, I started rocking myself along the ridges of his quad muscles, heat building between my legs.

Lerokan groaned. His hands slid upward into my hair, and he groaned again, even louder.

“Cursed peaks, your hair is lovely,” he rasped. He took a handful of my hair and pressed it to his face, inhaling deeply.

It was so fucking weird. And hot as hell. With every intake of breath of him smelling my hair, his cock noticeably jerked against my belly.

Licking my lips, as Lerokan continued to salivate over the scent of my hair, I tentatively reached down to touch his cock through his loincloth. I sucked in a breath, my skin heating, when it eagerly jumped against my touch.

Lerokan froze, a fistful of my hair still pressed against his nose and mouth. I stroked gently over his swollen tip, watching his face closely. His

eyes fell closed, his brows furrowing. His hips rocked harder, silently begging me for more.

“Can I... Can I take this off?” I stammered, embarrassment and desire and anxiety all co-mingling. I mean, I’d never exactly done this before. And my first time was with a freaking alien?!

But not just any alien.

Lerokan.

His tail snapped on the stone behind him.

“Do whatever you want with it,” he rasped, eyes opening once more, his gaze feverish. “Burn it. Be sick all over it. Toss it from the highest peak into the deepest valley. I don’t care as long as you *take it off.*”

I fumbled with the fabric, biting at my lip.

Evidently, I was going a little too slowly for Lerokan’s taste. He moved my hands out of the way and then roughly undid the knots of fabric, letting it fall to the stone floor.

My mouth went dry. My brain emptied out. Pretty sure I even stopped breathing for a second.

Holy fucking shit.

I knew in that moment that even having sexual experience with a human man would not have prepared me for *this*. Even the few glimpses I’d caught of it flaccid couldn’t prepare me.

His shaft was a sleek, deep blue, darkening to black-ish indigo at the tip. At its base, I could tell I wouldn’t even be able to get my fingers all the way around it. It tapered at the tip, all one smooth organ, no foreskin that I could see. Beneath the shaft hung two dark, heavy testicles, the skin there looking velvety-soft. And on either side of the shaft...

Cock spears.

Two long appendages, one on each side, stood straight outward, parallel to his thick, hard dick. Royal blue in colour, they were about as thick as my index finger, tapering to a point that stopped about a third of the way up the length of his cock. I’d heard some of the other girls describe the shape as generally trident-like, and I could definitely see that. His cock tall and thick in the middle, the two spears pressing outward on either side.

I gasped quietly as, right before my eyes, a shining bead of moisture appeared on the dark tip of Lerokan’s cock. His breath shuddered out of him, his abs clenching. Another bead of moisture appeared, causing the first to slip out and dribble down over his engorged tip.

“I know I’ve got a very nice cock,” Lerokan rasped, “but I’d rather hoped that you’d asked to take my clothing off to do a little more than stare.”

I raised my hand slowly, the tip of my finger hesitantly smearing the moisture that beaded from the small slit on his tip. The ensuing curse that tore out of Lerokan’s throat emboldened me, filled my core with liquid heat. I wrapped my fist around his head and experimentally squeezed.

Lerokan cried out, then slammed his fangs together.

“Stronger than that little hand looks,” he gritted out.

“Sorry! Did that hurt?” I cried, immediately letting go.

He growled, grabbing my hand and putting it back.

“Not as much as you stopping would hurt.”

His sight stars bored into me. They dragged down from my eyes to my neck, then to my collarbone, then to my breasts.

That pained look of need crossed his face again as his gaze snagged on my tingling nipples.

“I’ve wanted to know what you felt like here from the night I met you,” he admitted, his voice thick with lust.

“Really?” I gasped, stroking down his cock with a much looser grip this time. “But you didn’t even have feelings for me then.”

“Not ones of love, not like this. But after the shock of your features wore off- ah!” his words tapered into a long, gravelly moan as I started stroking him harder. He breathed out harshly, then continued. “I found beauty in your face that very first night in the cave. And I... I wanted to know what you looked like *here*.”

His hands covered my breasts, stroking and shifting until his thumbs circled my nipples.

I arched into his touch, my hand stalling on his cock as my eyes scrunched shut. Fuck, was it supposed to feel this good when someone touched your nipples? The stroking of Lerokan’s thumbs, growing harder every moment, had me grinding myself needily against his thigh.

I forced my eyes open to find his sight stars buzzing and absolutely glued to his hands on my breasts. I found myself immensely thankful I hadn’t bothered with a bra today.

It made me want to show him more.

“Here,” I said, hooking my fingers under my tank top and slipping it off over my head. Lerokan’s hands hovered in the air, his sight stars like two

bullets as he stared at my chest. His breath caught, and his throat visibly bobbed as he swallowed.

Once again, he reached out. He pinched each nipple gently between his forefingers and thumbs, groaning deeply when I cried out at the pressure. It was as if my nipples and my clit were connected by copper wire, electric charges rushing back and forth between the sensitive places as Lerokan squeezed and stroked.

“Is there... Is there milk in there?” he asked gruffly.

“Wait, what?!” I cried, shocked by the question.

“Our women use these for... For milk. For cubs.”

“Oh. Yeah, it’s the same for us. But – ah! – but that happens when you’re pregnant and after you give birth.”

“Just checking,” he panted. “I... I want to suck you.”

Fuck me. The dark tremor of need in his voice made my pussy clench.

I nodded wordlessly, holding my breath in anticipation as he moved to his knees. He grasped my hips, his hands commanding as they tugged me down, making my knees buckle as I slid down the stone behind me. Because of our height differences, I didn’t need to bend my knees much for his head to be at my chest. His hot, calloused hands drifted up to my bare waist, clenching there, as his head dove inward.

He dragged his nose up and down the valley between my breasts, once again huffing my scent like it would get him high.

“Curse me, your *scent*,” he growled against my bare skin, making me shiver. “It’s so sweet I want to *eat* it. I want all my food to taste the way you smell.”

Wow, maybe my scent really is getting him high.

“You’re mad,” I whispered, burying my fingers in his hair. Even though it was tangled from the flight, the strands were still so silky against my skin.

“Didn’t think I was before I met you,” Lerokan mumbled between wet kisses against my sternum. “These days, though, I am not so sure.”

With that, he jerked his head over to the side, capturing my right breast in his mouth. I wasn’t a particularly curvy girl, and Lerokan managed to get my entire breast in his heated mouth. His fangs pricked my skin in the most alluring way possible, his tongues swirling over my mound of flesh and sliding over my nipple. His hand moved up to cup my other breast, kneading desperately.

The whirlpool of hot suction on my breast, and his callouses on my other, had me close to coming. When I felt his free hand tugging at the waistband of my trousers, I immediately helped him along, pushing the clothing down over my hips until it pooled on the floor around my ankles.

Lerokan groaned, making my whole chest vibrate. He released my breast with a slick popping sound, sliding his tongues desperately over the swollen brown tip as he stared up at me through a greedily narrowed gaze.

“So, this is where the most delicious scent comes from,” he growled.

Wait... He cannot be serious!

But evidently, he absolutely was serious. Because before I could even react, he bent further, his head dipping between my legs. He buried his face in my pubic hair, inhaling deeply.

Too shocked and embarrassed to speak, I stared down at him, eyes wide. *He’s sniffing me! He’s sniffing me there!*

When I saw the way his right arm was moving, jerking his own cock, my embarrassment gave way to an intense thrill.

For so long, I’d agonized over how he felt about me.

Now, it was clear as the morning light of the mountains.

He loves me. And he really fucking wants me.

While Lerokan’s one hand kept stroking his swollen erection, his other skimmed up my thigh. Being careful of his claws, he slipped the pads of his fingers back and forth over my folds.

“Wet,” he huffed, his hand jerking himself faster. His fingertips slipped and slid.

I wasn’t just wet. I was absolutely soaked for him.

I whimpered as he pressed his face harder against my groin. His nose bumped my clit, turning that whimper into a loud cry.

The cries just kept coming when Lerokan unleashed his tongues against me.

He tore his hand away to make room for his hungry tongues. His fingers slammed against my hip, gripping my ass cheek fiercely as he explored me. When his tongues found my clit, and I reacted, he concentrated harder on that spot, swirling over the sensitive nub in a clockwise motion that made my legs tremble.

I was so fucking close. Teetering on that explosive edge. My breath dragged in and out of my raw throat, my skin pricked and burned. A deep, dark heat swelled inside me, expanding through my pelvis, stroking up my

spine and down my legs in time with Lerokan's surging tongues. One of his tongues slipped back, probing until it nudged inside me. His fingers clenched my ass harder as he pressed his tongue further inside, its girth stretching me until he was deep enough to start stroking me from the inside. His tongue slid in and out, curling forward until it pressed on some deep, secret point of pleasure.

I hunched forward, grabbing onto his head for support as my insides swelled, then shattered, against his tongues. I ground my hips helplessly forward against his face, which only made his tongues lick and stroke harder, faster. His fangs bumped my clit, prickly heat zinging in every nerve as I came, clenching, around him. He moaned into my pussy, his outer tongues going slack. His centre tongue slowed, then jerked, inside me as I squeezed it.

A hot surge of wetness spurted against my leg. Panting, I opened my eyes to find Lerokan helplessly fucking his own fist, his tail twitching on the stone, his ass grinding against his heels as he rocked back and forth on his spread knees. The wetness was *him*, exploding over and over onto my bare skin. The greedy snapping of his hips, thrusting his still-spurting cock into his hard fist, fuelled something primal inside me. Another orgasm followed my first, tumbling through my weak, shaking body. Lerokan drew his tongue out of me, and I would have whimpered in complaint, but he fastened his mouth hungrily onto my clit, suckling hard, until I was gasping and writhing and desperate for him to either stop or to keep going until all I could feel, all that was left, was him.

Eventually, though, his mouth and his rapid hand movements on his cock slowed. I leaned back against the stone, feeling the sweat on my back seal me to the sun-warmed, glassy surface. A hot thrill ran through me when I remembered that it was a window. People may not have been able to see in, but there was still a tangy exhilaration to the fact that I was naked and pressed against the translucent stone, the brightly-lit world spread below my pleasure-slackened body.

Lerokan stood. He drew me firmly against his chest, his long arms completely enveloping me.

"Maddening, perfect Priya," he murmured against the top of my head.

"Maddening Lerokan," I said with a smirk against his chest, purposely leaving out the *perfect* bit.

He made a *hmmph* sound of mock irritation and drew me even closer. I shivered, but not because I was cold, when his fingers stroked slowly down

my spine to my ass. His cock twitched, still half-stiff and thickening further against my bare belly.

I sighed, tipping my head up to welcome a kiss, already aching for more touching, more tongues, more him.

But a sound outside the cave made us both freeze.

“Are you two decent in there?” came a familiar voice. *Chapman.*

“Just a minute!” I called, pulling back against Lerokan’s grip. But with the stone window behind me and the muscled wall of his chest in front of me, there was nowhere to go. He made another *hmmph* sound, and this time the irritation was real as he yanked me closer again.

“Not ready,” he growled.

My cheeks flamed.

“I know. But we have to go out there. We’ll have lots more time for... This stuff.”

“We’d better,” he muttered moodily. With rather dramatic reluctance, he finally stepped back to let me go.

I shuffled over to the little pool of water, trying not to trip over the clothing still circling my ankles. I knelt and splashed water on my face, then dragged sticky strands of hair away from my neck. I tied my hair in a messy bun, then moved to wash Lerokan’s now-drying come off my leg. But he stopped me, crouching behind me and gripping my wrists.

“No,” he muttered, the deep roll of the word making my nipples prick. He released one of my wrists, then drew a languorous claw over the pearlescent residue contrasting with my brown skin. “Keep it there. I want you marked as mine.”

“When did you get so possessive?” I murmured, enjoying the slow stroke of his claw on my skin.

“I’ve always been possessive,” he said. “I’ve just never had something I wanted to possess so badly before.”

“Well, you have me,” I said, twisting to look at him. The brutal throb of his sight stars made my stomach clench. “Come on,” I said, turning forward once again. “If we don’t get dressed now, we never will. And as amazing as this was, I don’t really want to stay here any longer than I have to.”

“You’re right,” Lerokan said, rising to his feet behind me and pulling me up with him. “I, too, want to leave this place.” He leaned down, pulling my hair aside to speak against my neck. “The first time I fully claim you, it won’t be here, in another man’s cave.”

Fully... Claim...

The unmistakable swell of his cock against my lower back was a physical vow, echoing the promise of his words.

I nodded, now wanting to get out of here more than I would have thought possible.

“Come on,” I said, reaching for his hand and lacing my fingers with his.
“Time for us to go.”

And so, we dressed.

Without a look back, we left.



CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Priya



We began the long trek down through the mountain to the main entrance at the base. When I'd been led up to the cave I'd been staying in so far, we'd come up using a rough pulley system rigged up like a sort of primitive elevator. We took a different way down – on foot. One of Gahn Thaleo's men led us. Valeria and Grim walked directly behind him. Chapman hung back a little, filling Lerokan and me in on everything that had happened while we'd been... occupied. I tried to focus on what she was saying, but it was difficult. Lerokan kept doing this maddening thumb-stroke across my inner wrist as we walked.

The way wasn't dark, surprisingly. All along the walk, the same stone windows like I'd had in my room let shafts of light into the mountain's gloom.

"So, the gist of it is that both the Gahns have agreed to join the alliance," Chapman explained as we descended. "But it was iffy for a bit, there. Thank goodness at least one of them has a human mate. Not that I'm here to barter a woman off or something, but it made Gahn Errok a lot more reasonable than I think he would have been otherwise."

Lerokan snorted beside me.

"A thought has just occurred to me," he said, his dimple doing that cute little dimple thing. "You said the new women do not feel the mate bond automatically, correct?"

"Correct," Chapman and I answered in unison.

"So, Errok is going to go swaggering and slobbering up to his woman, and she will feel totally indifferent towards him?"

"I mean, pretty much. She might feel a bit of physical attraction. Or maybe not. Who knows?" I told him.

Lerokan's grin got bigger, his dimple deeper.

"Ah, this is good news indeed. I can already picture Errok's face when he realizes she does not worship him as expected."

Now Chapman was the one snorting.

“Classic little brother,” she said, tossing a grin back at me.

Little brother?

“Hold on!” I said, stopping. Lerokan, stopped, too, as did the others when they’d noticed we weren’t following. “Does that mean Gahn Errok is your *older brother?*”

Lerokan pursed his lips, hesitating for a moment, before saying, “Yes.”

“And you didn’t think to tell me that important bit of information?” I asked, poking him in the ribs. How many times had he mentioned the Gahn who’d exiled him?! Dozens! Never once had he called him his brother.

Chapman cleared her throat and turned away from us, no doubt feeling awkward about bringing this up.

“It did not ever seem relevant,” Lerokan replied, rather poutily I must say.

“How is that not relevant?” I shot back.

Lerokan sighed, running his claws through his hair with his free hand.

“My brother is bigger than me. Taller, older. Some cloud-brained fools may even say he’s more beloved. My exile was the first time in my life I did not exist in his shadow. I met you during that time, and... Maybe I didn’t want you thinking about my brother the mighty, idiotic Gahn. Maybe I just wanted you to think about me.”

I frowned at him. His explanation made a certain amount of sense, but still!

“I don’t like being lied to,” I said, shaking my head. “I won’t tolerate it.”

“I promise I have hidden no other brothers from you. And if it helps, I did not exactly consciously keep this from you. The opportunity just... Never seemed to arise, and...”

His words faded away helplessly. *Pretty sure this is the first time I’ve ever seen him without some whip-smart comeback.*

“I am sorry,” he finally added. He said it stiffly, as if not used to the words.

I breathed out and squeezed his hand.

“I forgive you.” Not long ago, I’d thought he was dead, and my heart had been totally shattered. Compared to that, him hiding a portion of his family tree was pretty small potatoes. But it did get me thinking about how little we knew about each other. We knew each other’s essences by now, had glimpsed the deep, authentic shards of each other’s souls. But when it came to practical and logistical details, things were hazy.

As we resumed walking again, I peppered him with questions.

“OK. So. One brother, Errok. What else? Who else do I need to know about?”

“I have an aunt, my mother’s sister, named Tilka. She and her mate have two daughters, my cousins.”

“Parents?”

“Dead.”

See, this is what I’m talking about. I didn’t even know that his parents are dead!

I tightened my hold on his hand.

“I know what that’s like.”

He smiled wanly down at me from the side.

“I would like to tell you about them. And hear more about your own mother and father. But not right now. When we are alone.”

I nodded. That was fine by me. And the timing worked out, anyway. We’d reached the end of our long descent through the mountain. The tunnel levelled off, leading us back out onto the bright, circular platform of aquamarine stone. I screwed my eyes shut, my free hand coming up to shield them from the intensity of the sun reflecting off the stone. Being up in the cave, even with the window, had been darker than I’d realized. This light was a shock to the system. Lerokan released my hand and pulled up my hood. It helped cast some shade onto my face, and I slowly opened my eyes, still squinting.

“Are your sunglasses in your pack?” Chapman asked, pressing dark lenses onto her own face.

“They should be. But I don’t have it anymore.”

“Right. Gahn Thaleo’s men had it. We gave them a chance to study the maps while we talked, but you’ll get it back now,” Chapman explained.

“It is here.”

I recognized that voice. Gahn Thaleo walked slowly but purposefully forward, holding my pack out. I reached for it, but Lerokan’s hand intercepted, snatching it from the Gahn.

“Kindly keep your filthy, thieving hands away from my mate,” Lerokan hissed, baring his fangs.

Gahn Thaleo’s sight stars pulsed, his nostrils flaring. His men, standing in a group behind him, knocked arrows to their bows, all aiming directly at Lerokan.

Chapman and Valeria's hands flew to the guns at their hips, ready for violence. I grabbed Lerokan's arm and pulled.

"Do not do anything stupid," I begged him. "I already thought you died. I'm not ready to watch it actually happen!"

Lerokan didn't seem to hear me. He growled at the Gahn, tail thrashing. If his sight stars could have caused physical damage, even someone who looked as strong as Gahn Thaleo wouldn't have survived the blow.

If Gahn Thaleo was angered by Lerokan's outburst, he didn't show it now. Face like stone, he released my bag into Lerokan's grip, then smoothly stepped back. A raise of his hand to his men had them lowering their arrows and bows.

Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Chapman and Valeria relaxed slightly. So did I, but I kept a firm grip on Lerokan's arm even as he rifled through my bag. With a grunt, he pulled out the sunglasses and pushed them onto my nose.

The sunglasses helped a ton. Now I could actually open my eyes all the way and take a look at all the surroundings instead of just squinting at the people directly in front of me.

Behind Gahn Thaleo and his men was the shuttle, and Tok, Gahn Taliok, and Gahn Fallo were standing near it, though Gahn Fallo had now started moving this way to join Chapman's side. There were more warriors standing with their braxilk, and I realized quickly that these were Gahn Errok's men. There was too much tension between the two groups for it to have been otherwise. One of the men from Gahn Errok's side strode this way.

I did a double-take as he got closer and then turned to make sure Lerokan was still beside me. He was. But the resemblance was uncanny, even for siblings. I knew based on the uproar Cece's twin pregnancy had caused that people here didn't seem to have twin or other multiple pregnancies. Plus, Lerokan had said Gahn Errok was older, so I didn't think they were twins. But they really were so much alike. Same swaggering walk, same swirling opalescent sight stars, same square jaw line, though Gahn Errok's was slightly wider. Everything about Gahn Errok was just *bigger*. Like Lerokan on steroids. And Lerokan already kind of looked like he could be on steroids.

Lerokan's beefy older brother stopped before us, a frown carved into his familiarly handsome face.

"They will not bring my mate to me," he complained to Lerokan, tail twitching in irritation. "Instead, they want me to abandon our mountain and

go meet her.”

“Then do it,” Lerokan purred, placing a possessive arm around my shoulder and drawing me into his side. “You’re the one who’s been going out of his skull for a mate his entire adulthood. What’s one little trip out of the mountains?”

Gahn Errok’s frown deepened. “I should have known you would not have the brains to see any problems with this. Leaving a tribe without a Gahn leaves them too defenceless. Especially if I am travelling far, into unknown lands, to meet unknown Gahns who may wish me harm. This could be a trap.”

“You really don’t need to worry,” I piped up. When his bright sight stars swung down to my face, a wave of nerves hit me, wondering if I’d been too insolent or something. I’d gotten used to human women talking to the Sea Sand Gahns pretty much however they wanted to. But he remained silent as if waiting for me to continue, so I did. “If you’re part of the alliance now, no one’s going to try to cause you trouble as long as you stay peaceful.”

“But that is just the thing, Little Lerokan’s mate. If she chooses not to come back with me, like these others say she might, I do not see how I could remain among the others in peace.”

Little Lerokan’s mate? OK, I could see why this guy had been such a thorn in Lerokan’s side that he hadn’t even wanted to mention him. Trying to keep the unimpressed scowl off my face, I reminded myself of cultural differences and not to be an ethnocentric human twat. Although I had a feeling that even among this culture, Gahn Errok was kind of a cocky asshole.

Which is pretty much what I thought of Lerokan when I met him, to be fair.

“We already told you. No taking women from the settlement!” Chapman barked. “That’s a core tenet of our alliance. If she agrees to come back here, that’s a different story.”

Fallo bared his vicious fangs beside her. “You are only one Gahn to our five. We will destroy you if you even try.”

“Well, I bid you a good journey, brother!” Lerokan said cheerily, smiling widely. “Try not to get your head lopped off!”

Gahn Errok stared back at him flatly, then looked at me once more. “You see what I have to deal with?”

I couldn't help but smirk. *I see Lerokan's not the only one with a flair for the dramatics.*

Gahn Errok's voice softened slightly, and a genuine smile overtook his features. No cute little dimple, though. "It is very good to meet you, by the way, Priya."

OK. Maybe he's not an entirely unlikeable prat.

"Who's your mate?" I blurted, realizing that hadn't been addressed yet.

Gahn Errok sighed, his hulking shoulders rising then sloping with the movement. "That is part of the problem. I've described her face to the others but apparently, a few women share her features. Which seems absurd to me, since clearly, my mate is unique even among her own people and is above all others. And they refuse to round up and deliver all the women who meet the description to me!"

OK. We're back to the prat thing.

"Looks like you'll have to go and get her then. *And* convince her to come back with you," I said sharply.

"I do not understand why everyone keeps reminding me of this," Errok said, glowering. "She is my mate, she will agree. She will want to be with me, to come with me."

"We'll see," Chapman said ominously, her voice clipped.

"Go, brother," Lerokan said. "There is no other way to claim her. Go find your mate the way I have already found mine." Lerokan's arm tightened around my shoulders, and he raised his chin, chest puffing out. I couldn't help but smile and shake my head at the obvious pride he had holding me at his side. The one thing he'd one-upped his brother in, apparently. Growing up as an only child, I'd never really seen dynamics like this up close and personal outside of shows on the telly. My mom had had a sister, Beena, but whenever they got together they bloody loved it. They always laughed so hard together that one (or both) of them inevitably ended up doing a bit of a wee.

"Besides," Lerokan added smoothly, "I am no longer an exile. I can keep the tribe running and protected in your stead."

"That makes me want to leave even less," Gahn Errok retorted. He narrowed his gaze at Lerokan, his mouth thinning into a grim line before he snapped his tail in finality. "I will go. I will win her. As I have won everything else."

With that, he turned and swept imperiously away back towards his men.

“I do not like that one,” Gahn Fallo seethed, watching Gahn Errok’s retreating back.

“Do you like any of the other Gahns?” Chapman countered.

“No,” was his growly reply.

“Well then, this should be no different,” Chapman shot back, poking him in the side. Then she turned to face Lerokan and me.

“So,” I began, unsure how to put what I was feeling into words. I wanted desperately to see my human friends and everyone at the settlement. But even more than that, I wanted to stay here. At least for a while longer. With Lerokan. “So, if Gahn Errok’s mate decides she wants to, she can come back here? Even stay here?”

We’d all agreed that the human women would stay together at the settlement. We’d made the Gahns upend their lives over that rule.

But Chapman nodded, confirming my words.

“Yeah. We’re actually going to set up a human base in the neutral territory out here. Well, the last bit of territory that remains neutral now after those two Gahns argued endlessly about the borders.” Her grey eyes flicked to Gahn Thaleo, who I realized was still standing quite near, watching and listening, utterly still.

“We’re going to take the shuttle back to the settlement for now,” Chapman continued. “We’re not quite ready to just stay out here. But pretty soon, we’ll bring the shuttle back here, park it near the base of the Lavrika’s, or, shoot, the *Vrika*’s, mountain, and use that and the surrounding caves as our base. We’ll have tech to communicate with the main ship in the desert. Since we think the Earth forces want the Lavrika’s blood, and there’s evidently more of the same stuff out here, it makes sense to keep at least some kind of post active in these mountains. There’s no guarantee Earth forces will attack at the Cliffs of Uruzai first. There’s also the Kell’s milk, but since the source of that supply is deep underwater, I think that’s a less likely target.”

I nodded, all of that making sense and buoying my hopes.

“So... If I wanted to stay here... Before this new base is ready...”

Chapman’s orange eyebrows rose slightly. She rubbed her chin thoughtfully, looking at the pair of us.

“Alright, well... You’ve accepted him, then?”

“Yes,” I breathed, feeling warm from more than just the sun beating down.

“Hmm. I still don’t like the idea of leaving you alone out here, though.”

“She isn’t alone,” Lerokan growled.

“But still,” Chapman said, frowning. She turned to look back towards the ship. “Oxriel! Come here, please.”

I gasped, joy stretching my face into a smile to see Oxriel jogging over.

“Oxriel! You’re alright! I didn’t see you over there!” I cried. I wiggled out from Lerokan’s hold and tossed my arms around his waist. He made a little laughing sound of pure, shocked joy and returned the embrace, being careful not to crack any of my weak human ribs with his strength.

“I am glad to see you well, too, Priya. We worried endlessly for you. They had to keep us bound and guarded the entire time, otherwise we would have fought our way out to find you.”

“Yes, well, that worry was entirely unnecessary, thank you. Because *her mate* came to find her,” Lerokan seethed.

Lerokan’s looming shadow drenched Oxriel and me, the darkness of it so heavy it almost became a physical sensation. Oxriel cleared his throat and let me go. I noticed Dalk, Vaxilkai, and Bariok too, standing in the shadow of the ship. *Thank goodness! They all look healed and healthy. Gahn Thaleo held up his end of things.*

“Oxriel,” Chapman said, “you can stay here, too. I’d like to have a familiar face around here if Priya’s going to stay.”

“What?!” exclaimed Lerokan. “Is my face not yet familiar enough for you, Gahnala?” He bent down so his face was level with hers, prompting a snarl from Gahn Fallo. The snarl was ignored.

“Here, take a good look at it,” Lerokan said, moving his head around so she could see his face from multiple angles. “Make my face familiar. I do not want *this man*” - he jerked a claw at Oxriel - “staying here as some sort of guard for *my mate*.”

“Oh, trust me. Your face is very familiar to me now,” Chapman said, staring him down. “It’s pretty much the same as your brother’s, and I’ve been arguing and trying to negotiate with him all morning.”

Lerokan jerked back as if Chapman’s comment had been a direct strike to the face. Or ego.

He muttered something about a grave insult, but Chapman talked over him.

“Oxriel is staying.”

“Is that OK with you, Oxriel?” I asked. “You’ve been out here a while now.”

He smiled. “It is fine, Priya. I have no mate or cubs waiting for me. I am happy to go wherever needed if my Gahn approves.”

Chapman called over to Gahn Taliok, clearing the plan with him, and he grunted his agreement back at her.

“Alright, that’s all decided, then,” Chapman said, nodding. “So, you’re good to go, Priya? You’re sure you don’t want to come back with us today?”

“I’m sure,” I replied firmly. I knew I’d be back to visit at some point in the near future, and it sounded like I’d see some of my friends in the mountains soon anyway, at the new base.

“Alright then,” Chapman said with a nod. “We’re going to get going. I want to try to find a non-quicksand spot to touch down and check on Varrow.”

I gasped.

“Hold on. *Varrow*?”

“Yeah,” Chapman replied. “He’s been recovering from an arrow wound in the Death Plains. Camille and Kohka are with him.”

Tears sprang to my eyes, and I grinned widely at her. Lerokan and I had been reunited, peace was tentatively reigning in the mountains, and now the news that Varrow had survived the battle? *Best fucking day ever.*

“I am glad but surprised at this news,” Oxriel said slowly, sounding bewildered. “I saw him take an arrow right through the heart. Not long after that, I was distracted by the fighting and then commanded to follow the man who’d taken Priya.”

“It’s pretty wild,” Chapman replied. I stared at her, totally agog, hanging on her every word. “Apparently the Lavrika – *Vrika* – was flying by and touched down and healed him. He wouldn’t have survived otherwise.”

“Ah, yes. We saw the *Vrika* on its flight,” Oxriel replied, his warm sight stars misting into a thoughtful haze.

“I suppose the *Vrika* does not only meddle in the affairs of the Deep Sky men, but those of the Sea Sand men too,” Lerokan mused.

“And thank goodness it does,” I said, my cheeks aching from my wide smile. Hearing about Varrow had been the cherry on top of this day.

Now, I could finally truly relax.

I turned to my mate.

“Come on,” I said, placing a hand on his chest. “It’s time for me to see my new home.”



CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Lerokan



When the final conversations and agreements concluded, those of us not native to Gahn Thaleo's mountains prepared to leave. We watched in wary wonder as the large vessel ascended, taking the strangers with it. My brother had refused the offer to fly back with them, saying that he wanted his mate's first view of him to be on the back of his own braxilk, not being escorted like some sort of child. It was determined that he would fly back to our mountains with us, then prepare for the journey from there.

And, since my brother was convinced I would somehow turn the mountain upside down in his absence, he commanded that his closest advisor, Zakkar, remain behind to act as his stand-in. This may have annoyed me at one point, but not now. *No, let Zakkar busy himself with the mundane tasks of leading the tribe. Meanwhile, I will busy myself licking my mate's perfect cunt.*

I thought about it the entire flight home. I held Priya more tightly to me than ever, relishing the feel of her narrow back against my chest and abdomen. The whipping winds tore away her scent as we flew, forcing me to bend my head and breathe it in directly from the source as we went.

She kept her eyes closed much of the time, her face scrunched at yet another flight. Meanwhile, I kept mine wide open, letting in the light and the brutal beauty of these mountains. Everything felt more saturated, more clear, more meaningful with Priya on my mount with me. *This is destiny. This is what a man's life should be*, I thought as we sliced together through the bright sky. This was true goodness. Boundless skies above, flashing peaks below, and my mate pressed against me.

Once, I had fought this. I had fought it with every fang and claw.

But no more.

I was ready to embrace this. All of this. This new life. This new woman with all her strange loveliness.

We flew a little more slowly than we had on the way to Gahn Thaleo's. Now that we had no battle song in our hearts, and no woman to rescue, we did not have to go at such a break-wing pace. The result was that we did not approach our territory until the sun began its descent. By the time we approached the main mountain of our home, flying towards the open wall of the hall, the light had all but disappeared.

"We are here," I murmured against Priya's ear. She forced one eye open and then sagged backward against me in relief as we landed in the hall.

The hall was large, but not large enough to accommodate the entire army landing with their mounts. Most of the warriors continued flying upwards to the open-roofed roosting caves above where their braxilk would rest, showing Oxriel the way.

Therefore, it was only Gahn Errok, Zakkar, and I who drove our mounts to land in the hall.

Gahn Errok dismounted immediately. I did, too, helping Priya down. A hot frisson went through me when her feet hit the floor. *She's here. And she's mine.*

"Rest now, Togo, before we depart," Errok said to his mount. Togo took off into the evening sky, his wings a dark spread against the indigo and fading orange. Zakkar's mount soon followed.

"I will get ready to depart tomorrow morning," my brother said, turning to face us. "Priya, I require your maps."

How dare my brother demand anything of my mate?

I stepped between them, hissing.

"Make your own maps, brother," I sneered. "Though I doubt you're clever enough to do so."

Pride flared at the reminder of my mate's skill in this area. Something I knew few could replicate. That pride kept me planted before my brother, firm in my refusal.

His sight stars flashed, and I did not doubt that a painful wrestling match was in my near future.

But Priya's voice from behind me made us freeze just before my brother leaped into a tackle.

"It's fine. Gahn Thaleo already got a chance to study the maps, so it's only fair Gahn Errok gets to look, too. You don't want your brother getting swallowed up by Death Plains quicksand, do you?"

"I refuse to answer that question," I replied moodily.

Gahn Errok did not look pleased by my retort, but his expression eased when Priya undid the straps holding her pack to the side of the braxilk we'd ridden. My claws tingled, my fangs grinding as she took out her maps and handed them to my brother with a sweet smile. In order not to drive my fist through Gahn Errok's smug face, I busied myself removing the extra weapons from the braxilk. But perhaps that was a bad idea, because now I had spears in my hands to drive through Errok's face instead of my fist.

I realized Priya was glaring as she walked back to me.

"What?" I asked innocently, tossing the spears down to the floor with a clattering sound.

"May I remind you that your brother risked his life and the lives of the army to go into Gahn Thaleo's territory to get me back?" Priya whispered.

"And so he should. What use is a Gahn if he won't defend the mates of his men?"

"You should listen to your mate, Lerokan," Errok called over from where he looked at the maps. "She is very wise. Why the Vrika chose her for you, I'll never know. Perhaps it sensed your lack of brains and hoped to make up for it in your mate. Your cubs at least have half a chance at cleverness, now."

It was a very good thing indeed that I'd already tossed down the spears.

"Come, Zakkar," Errok said, turning his attention from Priya and me. "We must strategize about my journey and subsequent absence from the mountains."

The two of them walked away, their claws clicking on the stone. They moved to the back of the hall, beyond Errok's carved throne, and into the tunnel that led further into the mountain.

Priya breathed out once they were gone and began turning in a slow circle.

"This place is really incredible," she said. She spoke quietly at first, then grinned and called out a word that sounded like *ekk oh*. The word reverberated back to her, the melody of her voice filling the air.

I looked around the space, too, trying to see it through the eyes of a new arrival.

The evening fire burned heartily at the far end of the hall. Most nights, this was where Gahn Errok and all the unmated warriors feasted. Most mated men and their families chose to eat in their own caves, though families sometimes joined the hall fire. Apart from the fire, and a few seats and benches carved into the stone walls, including Errok's throne, the place was

an empty cavern, its blue glittering walls rising up into half a dome before us, the other half open to thin air behind.

Priya turned to face that open air, now. I caught the way she shivered, and drew her against my side.

“Does anyone ever fall off that edge?” she asked with concern, pointing to where the floor dropped off into the steep cliff.

“No one in my memory has ever fallen far enough to be badly injured,” I answered. “We are taught from when we are cubs not to wander to the edges of stone. Although, most children do not heed this warning. So, the next thing we are taught is how to catch ourselves when we do fall.”

She shivered again, more strongly this time.

“Well, I will be keeping far, *far* away from that edge, thank you very much.”

“Good,” I said quietly, clasping her clawless hands in mine and drawing them to my mouth. I’d meant to just press her knuckles briefly to my lips and be done. But we were alone, and she was so near to me, now, her scent rich, her eyes dark, her skin so painfully soft...

I sucked one of her fingers into my mouth.

She gasped, eyes widening. I couldn’t help but moan when my gaze landed on that soft open mouth.

“I think I’m ready for the rest of the tour,” she breathed.

I released her finger from my mouth, sliding my tongues down her palm to her silken inner wrist.

“Tour?” I murmured before kissing the quick rhythm of her pulse.

“Yeah. I want to see your cave. *Our* cave.”

I let go of her hands, snagging her now map-less pack from the floor. Then, I picked her up, cradling her to my chest.

“Hey!” she cried, half in laughter, half in complaint. “I can walk!”

“Not as fast as I can,” I growled, striding out of the hall. “And I can’t wait any longer.”

“For what?” she whispered, her breath tingling along the underside of my jaw and neck.

My answer was a single word.

It was a vow and a plea. A prayer and a claim.

It was the binding of my entire future. Everything that led me, bled me, tore me apart and made me whole. Everything that mattered.

“*You.*”



CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Priya



Lerokan was right. He was a hell of a lot faster than I would have been. His long legs carried him purposefully through dizzying halls. *I'm going to need to make maps just so I don't get lost in this place...*

Thankfully, Lerokan knew where he was going. And as much as I'd protested earlier about being carried, this was nice. My legs were shaky and sore from the flight, and after days of not being with him, I clung to this closeness.

We started going up a sloping tunnel of stone. At this point, the fire from the hall had long since disappeared behind us, and I couldn't see a bloody thing. We turned sharply to the right, and suddenly, things got brighter. Lerokan kept walking and then stopped, finally setting me down.

"This is your cave?" I asked in awe.

"Our cave," he corrected.

This could have passed for a 5000-quid-per-night luxury rental in, I don't know, Iceland or something. There was a rustic feel to it, of course. It was a cave. But the natural beauty of the space and the night sky beyond made up for the lack of modern luxuries.

It was a large cave, much larger than the one I'd been staying in in Gahn Thaleo's mountain. Vaguely oval in shape, it had to be at least ten metres across at its widest point. We stood in the centre of the cave now. Straight ahead, instead of a clear stone window, was a gigantic window of nothing. The band of asteroids cut across the large open space in the wall, casting shimmering light inside, illuminating the space so I could see. There was no fear of falling out of that open space. Unlike the hall we'd been in earlier, the open space was a good metre or so off the floor, the cave wall beneath the window acting as a guard rail.

A gust of wind came in through the window, rustling my hair and clothing.

“What happens during storms?” I asked, thinking of the battering winds we’d endured for days.

“Storms are not too terribly frequent in our area of the mountains. But when they happen, I just go into a deeper cave for a few days to wait it out.”

I nodded, tearing my eyes away from the striking expanse of bare sky before me. On the far side of the cave was something instantly recognizable, because it looked like a human bed. Unlike the carved trench I’d slept in for the past few days, this bed was in a naturally higher rectangular area of stone. Fuzzy hides were stacked atop it, and beneath them look to be...

Score! A mattress!

I rushed over to the bed. It was higher than it had appeared from where I’d stood before – about chest-high. I reached out and pressed my hands downwards, gasping at the plush feeling of the hides and mattress.

“Braxilk feathers,” Lerokan explained from behind me. “When braxilk die, we try to use what we can from them before we lay them to rest with their masters.”

I withdrew my hands from the mattress and turned to face him.

The stark silver light kissed down his form, illuminating every curve of muscle and plane of bone. That night turned his stony violet and deep blue skin to metal – highly polished chrome bleeding into bright platinum where the light hit strongest. His eyes gleamed, my very own starscape in the darkness. Behind him, the air wafted thickly, a billowing halo to highlight his beauty.

Hold on.

No. That’s steam!

“Is there a hot spring in here?” I asked quietly, trying not to get my hopes up. Lerokan smirked, then stepped aside.

I had totally missed it when we’d first come in, distracted by the window and then the bed. But at the other end of the cave, the starlit plumes of steam were unmistakable. The steam mostly obscured the surface of the water, but I could still see it a bit, smooth and silver.

“You could try it out, you know,” Lerokan said huskily. “But I have a rule for this hot spring.”

“Oh?” I asked, my nipples pricking, my core tightening as Lerokan crowded in behind me, reaching around my front to undo the zipper of my jacket.

“Yes. The rule is that no clothes are allowed to be worn in it. Not even your little undergarments.”

“What a convenient rule,” I chuckled. My laughter turned into a low moan as my jacket dropped to the floor and Lerokan’s hands rose to cup my breasts. His cock pressed ardently into my lower back as his fingertips dragged over my hard nipples, teasing them through my thin tank top.

The resounding pang of arousal between my legs made me painfully aware of another sensation – a very full bladder.

“I just need a minute,” I gasped, pulling out of his maddeningly pleasing hands. “To... You know.”

“Ah,” he said. After spending so long confined in a cave together, he’d grown used to my human bodily function schedule, so thankfully I didn’t need to explain too much.

“Behind the hot spring,” he told me. I squinted through the steam, noticing now a wall of stone that mostly closed off one little area. I hurried over there. Just as I reached the little room of stone, warm, sparking light filtered over to me, guiding my path into what would have otherwise been a very dark little area. I looked back to see Lerokan preparing a fire in a pit beneath the window.

I hurried into the little cave toilet. Enough of the fire and asteroid light reached in here so that I could see. The room wasn’t entirely closed off – the wall of stone encapsulated it in a rounded shape and there was a gap to get in and out. *I’ll still probably want some candles in here*, I thought, looking around.

I was relieved to see the toilet system was the same ingenious setup I’d gotten used to in Gahn Thaleo’s cave. A little bowl was carved into the floor for squatting over. Above that hole was a hatch of sorts – a plug of a cork-like material pushed into a hole in the stone wall. When you pulled the cork out, water gushed down to rinse the bowl and the contents disappeared down into a natural drain.

I quickly did my business and “flushed.” I noticed some of the soapy moss stuff on large rocks on the floor and scraped some off to suds up my hands. Then, I rinsed them with some of the clear gushing water I’d just used. The hole with the cork was high enough above the little toilet that there was no chance of any splash back, which meant the water remained clean for washing.

There was no mirror in here, of course, but I still took a few moments to try to blindly tidy myself up. I washed my face with the cold, clean water. I undid my completely wind-destroyed hairstyle, wetting my hair and detangling it as best I could. After that, I decided to undress completely in there, using more of the frigid water to splash under my arms and between my legs. By the time I was finished, I was freezing my arse off and was more than ready to jump into that hot spring with Lerokan.

I kicked all my clothes and boots into a messy bundle, vowing to deal with them tomorrow.

My instinct was to walk out shyly, my arms crossed over myself. But at the last moment, I forced my hands down to my sides. I wanted to see his face when I walked in there completely naked.

I took a steadying breath, tossed my hair behind my shoulders, and walked around the stone partition into the main area of the cave.

Well... That's underwhelming.

Lerokan didn't do any of the things I'd hoped he'd do when I rounded that corner.

Because the bloke was fucking *asleep*.

I shook my head, smiling at his long, muscled form. He hadn't even made it over to the bed. He was stretched out along one edge of the heated pool, on his stomach. His right arm had flopped over the edge and dangled in the water.

Water.

Teeth chattering, I hurried forward. I sat on the edge of the pool across from Lerokan, easing in slowly. It wasn't terribly deep, at least where I landed. The water just came up to cover my nipples.

I sighed, bending my knees so that the hot water sloshed over my shoulders. I tipped my head back, soaking my hair. The water was silky against my skin and had a slight fragrance to it. Something slightly mineral, but not salty or overpowering. I let it soak into me, undoing the tension that had knotted the muscles in my back and easing the ache of my thighs from the flight.

After a long, hot moment of eyes-closed bliss, my gaze wandered to Lerokan once more.

With a jolt, I realized this was the first time I'd ever seen him asleep without his mask.

Poor thing.

From what I'd gathered about the time we'd spent apart, he and Breena had travelled tirelessly to reach Gahn Errok. Then, they'd flown all night to reach me this morning, and then we'd flown most of the day to get back here.

This is the first real rest he's gotten in days.

I did a knees-bent underwater-style walk around the edge of the pool until I was beside him. My movements sent little tidal waves of hot water slapping against the skin of his dangling arm, but he didn't stir.

His face was turned towards me, his left cheek pressed into the stone floor. All the snark, the bravado, was gone, his face slack and peaceful.

Adoration expanded in my chest, making me feel even warmer than the water. I raised a dripping hand, gently tracing the hard line of his jaw.

His eyes snapped open, his sight stars buzzing slowly and sleepily until they focused on my face.

"Sorry," I whispered. "You can rest more if you need to."

He lifted his head from the stone and drew his hand out from where it had plunged into the water. Cupping my face with his wet hand, he leaned forward and kissed me.

His kiss grew harder, hungrier, no traces of sleepiness remaining. I moaned, tipping my head back to give his tongues greater access to my mouth. Hot water caressed my skin as his hand stroked down my neck, setting my nerves on fire.

He pulled back from the kiss briefly. I watched him through a heavy-lidded gaze as he sat up. His eyes pinning me with relentless focus, he deftly undid all the straps holding weapons to his back and chest. When those had fallen to the floor, he stood, stripping out of his loincloth and tossing it aside.

Another first. The first time I've seen him completely naked with no weapons.

The sight of him, tall and muscled and totally bare, his cock already jutting out, swollen and ready for me, made my pussy clench. I stumbled backwards as he entered the pool in front of me. He kept advancing on me, and I kept moving backwards until I collided with the other stone edge of the pool behind me. His hands rose to the stone edge at my back, caging me in on either side.

"I feel as if I have not woken," Lerokan muttered, his voice guttural and low. "You're like a dream, Priya. Wet and beautiful and naked for me like this." His sight stars raked down my face, down my neck, to my chest. I realized that I'd straightened up a bit when I'd hit the stone behind me. My

breasts peeked above the water line, my nipples turning to taut pebbles under his dark gaze. We both watched my chest rise and fall with my panting breath.

Lerokan's hands slid inward from the stone, skimming over my arms until they covered my breasts. I cried out as my sensitive nipples hardened further against his calloused palms. He kneaded my flesh, groaning. I arched against his touch, my head tipping back. My stomach dropped when he leaned in and started stroking his tongues up and down my wet throat. White-hot need built deep inside me. It filled me and simultaneously left me feeling emptier than I'd ever felt in my entire life. I whimpered, squeezing my thighs together when I remembered the way his tongue had felt inside me earlier.

"Tell me what you need," he growled against the soft, sensitive place behind my ear.

I moaned.

"Words, Priya," Lerokan growled. "You've never been shy about demanding things from me before."

"Well, now I feel even more shy!" I cried. Lerokan chuckled, soft and low. The sound went straight to my clit, making it throb. My need for him soon won out over any shyness.

"Can you... With your tongues again?" I said.

The next thing I knew, Lerokan had disappeared. I cried out as strong hands gripped me beneath the water and something, no, *three somethings*, prodded at my clit.

"What the fuck?!" I cried. I smashed my hands down into the water, grabbing fistfuls of his hair and yanking.

His head emerged from the water.

"What are you doing? I thought you would lift me up onto the stone ledge or something!"

"This was faster. Let go of my hair," he growled.

"No way! You're going to drown down there, and then I'm going to have to explain to your brother and the whole freaking tribe how you died!"

"When you tell them what happened, please tell them I pleased you so greatly that I drowned in your fluids and not the water," he said, totally deadpan.

"Lerokan!"

He smirked at me.

“Do not worry, mate. I have very strong lungs. Besides,” his voice got husky, “I know all your secret places now. I do not suspect this will take very long.”

He dunked beneath the water once again.

The ego on him!

In the next moment, though, it became abundantly clear that, at least in this area, he had absolutely earned that giant ego. His strong fingers dug into my ass, his thumbs pressing into my inner thighs until I eased my legs further apart. His tongues got to work immediately, finding every sensitive spot, just like he'd claimed they would. They swirled over my clit until I was quaking, pulses of pleasure drawing me tighter and higher. Then, all three tongues slipped back and pressed inside me. I gave a shocked shout at the stretching sensation. My flesh burned, but there was no pain. Just sweet fullness. When his tongues started gently scissoring apart, stretching me further, I cried out again. While his tongues swirled and spread inside me, his hands slid possessively up my shaking torso until his thumbs found my nipples. He pressed firmly, rolling the sensitive brown peaks under his thumbs.

Instinctively, I reached down for his head again. I found it, burying my fingers in the swirling tendrils of his hair. I gripped his scalp, writhing, my hips bucking helplessly against him. Between his touch and his tongues and the silken swirl of the water on me and all around me, I lost myself. *Fuck, if he drowns it'll probably be me that's done it*, I moaned internally as I came, spasming and rocking needly against him. My pussy clamped down on his tongues, forcing them back together into one spindle of strong but pliant flesh.

Lerokan's hands tightened on my torso.

Terrified that that was a sign he was about to pass out, I immediately let go of his head. Clearly, he was still going strong down there, though, because he didn't immediately pop out of the water gasping for breath. In fact, he kept going, giving a few more stretching strokes of his tongues, which milked more orgasmic aftershocks out of me.

“Oh, now you're just showing off,” I mewled, my pussy fluttering against his tongues.

After what seemed like way too long, he finally slipped his tongues out and rose from the water.

He breathed heavily, but not unduly so, as he straightened. The firelight gleamed in the water on his cheekbones, his jaw, his heaving chest. His hair

ran like a drenched river of midnight behind his shoulders.

“It’s not fair. You look way too good for someone who was just underwater that long,” I panted. “If I tried that I’d looked like a half-dead rat afterwards.”

“What’s a *rat*?” Lerokan murmured, stepping closer and once again caging me in against the stone. “It must be something beautiful.”

“They’re Earth animals. Now that you say that, they’re actually kind of cute,” I blabbered. “They get a bit of a bad - ah!”

My words cut off in surprise when Lerokan gripped my ass, lifting me until my legs went around his waist. But it wasn’t him lifting me that had made me cry out.

It was the hard nudge of his cock against my pussy.

He remained utterly still, his fingers digging into me. We stared into each other’s eyes for a beat.

This is it. My first time with Lerokan. My first time ever.

I’m ready.

I gave him a tiny nod.

Evidently, he’d been holding his breath. It shuddered out of him when I nodded.

With careful control, he nudged his hips upward until he pushed inside of me.

A pang of burning pain shot through my pelvis, and I scrunched my eyes shut.

Lerokan froze.

“What’s wrong?” he hissed. He kept his hips still, but his cock throbbed, jerking inside my tightness.

“It’s just... It hurts a bit,” I panted. “Stay still for a second.”

“If it hurts, I’ll take it out!”

“No! Not yet!” I cried, clawing at his shoulders. “It’s hard to explain. It also feels... Good.”

The sudden pain was already easing, melting into oozing heat. My breathing quickened as the heat intensified. I squeezed my thighs around Lerokan’s waist and angled my hips slightly. Lerokan tensed when he slid a little further inside. This time, the pain was less, the burning overtaking every other sensation.

“Curse me, you’re so small everywhere. Even here,” he rasped. “I do not want to hurt you.”

“Is it... Is it much different than a Deep Sky woman?” I asked, unable to help myself.

“I wouldn’t know,” Lerokan replied. “I’ve never been with one.”

“Hold on. This is your first time?”

He grunted, adjusting his hold on me. His cock nudged ever so slightly deeper and I clenched around him.

“Yes.”

“I thought... Didn’t you say Lerokan the virile could be your nickname or something?” I moaned, beginning to rock in tiny motions against him. Fuck, he was huge – way bigger than the girth of his tongues. But I still needed more. More movement. More friction.

“A man does not need experience to be virile,” Lerokan panted, his hips beginning to move and meet my gentle rocking motion. “He needs only energy. And *enthusiasm*.”

His hips started pulsing a little faster, a little harder, driving him deeper with each controlled thrust. He growled, the sound rumbling deep in his chest, as he pressed me against the stone, plastering our chests against one another. My nipples dragged over his slick, smooth hide, adding to the building heat between my legs.

“It’s... It’s my first time too,” I stammered between gasping breaths. “You’re my first.”

“And your last,” he replied fiercely.

A slight shift in Lerokan’s pelvis created sudden, delicious friction against my clit. I realized it was his cock spears, being bent upwards between our bodies, converging on my clit beneath the hot surface of the water.

When I cried out at the pleasure, Lerokan froze.

“Am I hurting you now?” he whispered tensely.

“No,” I sighed, my thighs quaking, my clit pounding.

There was still tightness, but the pain had all but faded, replaced with a deep ache. An ache that demanded more. I wrapped my arms around his neck, squeezing.

“You can go a little harder,” I murmured.

A huge splash sent a tidal wave of water to the other side of the pool when Lerokan’s tail thrashed. His hips shuddered, his cock throbbing inside me. He rocked harder into me, faster, until my own wetness and the satiny water made everything so slick that he could thrust in and out with ease.

I'd never felt this overwhelming, pounding sort of pleasure. It felt as if my whole body would come apart and tighten up all at once. Like I was both floating and sinking.

Lerokan's hips drove faster, sending pleasure coiling tighter through my pelvis. One of his hands slipped from beneath my ass. He grabbed a fistful of my hair, tugging back until my throat was bared to him. His mouth latched onto the side of my neck, suckling greedily. His hips lost all semblance of rhythm, of control. But by that point I didn't care. I needed his chaos, his fury, the intense driving desire of his swollen cock. I wanted him to lose himself in me the way I was losing myself in him. I wanted him to come totally undone.

My orgasm roared through me. My eyes flew open, staring unseeing at the rock ceiling of the cave as pleasure soared through every muscle, every nerve. For a long, blinding, moment, the pleasure just built and built. I wasn't clenching down on him – not yet. The orgasm hadn't crested yet. My mouth dropped open in a soundless scream as pleasure seared through me. It felt like my whole pelvis was swelling and easing open, drawing him deeper. He answered eagerly, his hips snapping, moaning against my neck. My clit screamed under his cock spears. My pussy remained open and aching and burning until finally, *finally*, everything shattered. I shouted, every single muscle in my body tensing, my pussy clamping down on him like a vise. Lerokan detached his mouth from my neck with a strangled cry.

“So tight,” he choked out, “Cursed peaks, Priya, yes.” A tremor ran through him, sending a vibration through his cock and deep into my core.

The rapid movements of his hips suddenly ceased. His whole body went as taut as the string of his bow.

Then he exploded.

Giving a long, drawn-out moan, he jerked his pelvis, resuming his previous motion, thrusting through each orgasmic spurt of his throbbing cock. I kept my arms wrapped tightly around him, keeping him close. Taking everything he had to give.

Everything.

Until there was nothing left.

We panted, sagging against each other. Between what had just happened and the heat of the water, I wasn't sure I would be able to walk again tonight.

Maybe ever.

“I’m probably going to need you to carry me to the bed,” I breathed shakily.

“I can do that. In... Just a moment,” Lerokan muttered. A small moan tore from his mouth and his cock twitched inside me.

It took more than a moment for him to regain enough strength to ease himself out of me. But my strong mountain mate rallied, holding me safe against his chest as he exited the pool.

We tumbled into the hides, getting them wet and not caring one bit. The fire had warmed the air in here nicely, so that even with the big open window, it wasn’t too chilly.

Besides, I had a great big furnace of a man now spooning me from behind. *A virile furnace*, I thought to myself with a quiet snort.

The last thing Lerokan did before dropping off into a stone-deep sleep was drag a fuzzy grey hide blanket up over us while murmuring something about *love* and *night*.

“Goodnight. I love you too,” I replied.

But by the time I said that, I was certain he was already asleep.

Exhausted and blissed out and feeling truly safe for the first time in days, I quickly followed him.



CHAPTER THIRY-SIX

Lerokan



After the exertion of recent events and the exquisitely satisfying experience of claiming my mate, I would have been content to sleep for three days straight.

My pretty mate, however, did not feel the same way. I drifted out of sleep, or was rather nudged out of it, by a tiny finger poking my cheek.

“Lerokan,” came a little whisper, “I’m hungry!”

I groaned, opening my eyes.

Now this is a sight worth losing sleep over.

Priya’s naked form was pressed against mine, her soft thigh hooked over my hips as we laid on our sides facing each other. Her hair was a gorgeous tangled spread around her small face. Dawn spilled through the open wall of the cave, painting her lovingly in shades of gold and pink, shimmering on her perfect skin. I skimmed my fingertips up her bare arm, watching with interest as little bumps appeared in the wake of my touch.

“If my mate is hungry, she will be fed,” I vowed. “But first, you must provide a mere token for your mate as payment.”

“Oh?” she replied, her dark brows rising slightly.

“Yes,” I said, leaning inward until my lips brushed hers. She made a tiny sound, parting her sweet lips for me.

Our lips and tongues moved against each other slowly. Sensuously. The desperate grappling need from last night had diminished.

But the needs of my cock evidently had not. It swelled immediately, bumping against her spread cunt.

“I... I don’t think I’m ready to go again so soon,” she panted, pulling back. “But maybe...”

She slid her thigh down from where it had been hooked over my hip. Then she rolled over, wiggling until her back was pressed to my front. I groaned deeply as she squeezed her thighs around my shaft.

My cock responded before my mind could even catch up, surging forward, already needing release. It was fascinating, and almost alarming, how close I already felt to spilling seed, just from the silken press of her thighs around me. Wetness built along her crease, soaking my shaft. I reached around her front, wanting some of that wetness on my fingers too. I stroked against her sensitive little nub. This earned me a moan and a tighter squeeze of her thighs. I stroked faster, my hips pumping, until Priya moaned and arched her back.

She cried out sharply, tensing against me.

Her climax thrilled me. I slid my hand back to grip her hip, pounding harder between her thighs. My testicles slapped against the backs of her legs, the sound more erotic than I would have thought possible. Priya writhed and panted, continuing to squeeze her legs around me as pleasure burst out of me. I spurted, hot and hard, biting back a roar at the dizzying intensity of the sensations.

I could have stayed there with her all day. Could have kept her confined to the bed until I'd discovered every single way to pleasure her luscious body.

But she was hungry.

And frankly, so was I.

So I dressed quickly, headed to the main hall, and collected valikir plants, smoked mountain fish, and felkora eggs from the fire there. I did not see my brother, and I rather hoped he'd left already.

When I returned to the cave, I found Priya completely clothed, which disappointed me greatly. By this time, the sun was trekking higher in the sky, making the blue interior stone of the cave shimmer with clear morning light.

We ate quite ferociously, both of us having worked up a great appetite. After eating, I was ready to fall back into bed with her, but she rose and walked to the cave's exit.

"Come on," she said, tossing me a look that had me standing, too, helpless to do anything but follow her. She grabbed my hand when I reached her side. The feeling of her tiny fingers interlocking with mine made my chest squeeze painfully.

"I want to go see Breena," Priya said.

I jerked my tail. It was a good idea. I knew Breena was in good hands with the healers, but I still needed to check up on her, too.

"Alright," I said, leading Priya out of the cave. "Then let us go."



CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Priya



Lerokan told me that Breena was healing up somewhere called the “roosting cave.” The roosting cave, it turned out, was a massive room of stone with a gaping natural skylight. It reminded me of the Colosseum – a huge circular space with the stone walls rising up in a sloping ring all the way around. Along the walls, crags and cracks formed natural shelves, and those shelves were dotted with big nests constructed from the same tubular plant material Lerokan used to build fires.

Despite the cavernous nature of the space, it didn’t feel empty. Braxilk swooped and drifted in the open skylight area, and others slept or walked along the shining blue stone floor. Some of the nests, I noticed, contained gigantic bright blue, white, or grey eggs, and a couple of nests held squawking babies already the size of Earth ponies. Loud, cawing cries echoed all around us.

There were people here, too. Two women, I realized. One of them seemed on the younger side, her blue-black hair braided and then wound into a tight bun on the top of her head. The other woman, who seemed older, had no hair at all, her scalp shorn close to the skin. They both wore trouser-style bottoms and vests made of the grey woolly hide that seemed ubiquitous in the mountains.

“You have to be careful of your hair when helping tend the young braxilk,” Lerokan explained about their hairstyles. “Otherwise, they try to eat it. Most of the braxilk healers wear their hair tightly bound, but my aunt decided some time ago to shave hers off entirely.”

“That’s your aunt?” I asked as the hairless woman noticed us and smiled.

“Yes, Tilka,” Lerokan confirmed. When he noticed me tucking my braid into my coat and pulling up the hood, he smirked. “Do not worry, my mate. I won’t let anyone eat your hair. Even me, despite how delicious it smells.”

“You are so weird,” I chuckled as his aunt strode towards us. I smiled back at her, then gave a small whoop when I saw the braxilk behind her.

“Breena!”

Breena began to trot, overtaking Tilka quickly. She stopped in front of us, dipping her head down to our level.

I hugged her neck, burying my face in her feathers. “I’m so glad you’re OK!”

Lerokan patted her neck. “It is good to see you, Breena,” he said warmly. “How does she fare?” he asked his aunt, who had now reached us.

“Very well indeed. The wounds have all closed and the bones have been set. She will need training to regain her strength, but she will fly again.”

I sighed in relief, giving Breena another quick squeeze before letting her go. I peeked at her side, seeing one of her wings bound tightly to her frame. Otherwise, she looked just as she had before.

“So, you are Priya, then? My nephew’s new mate? Here, let me have a look at you.”

“Hello. Yes! I’m Priya. Nice to meet you,” I said as she looked at me intently.

I couldn’t help but do the same to her. She was the first Deep Sky woman I’d met. She shared a lot of features with Lerokan and Errok. Her eight stars gleamed with the same pearly white colour, and something about the shape of her confident smile seemed to be a family trait. Her skin was slightly paler than Lerokan’s, but in the same bluish-violet hues. There was a large gap between the two sides of her vest. Hide straps crisscrossed between the two flaps of the vest, tying them closed, but with no breasts, there was no cleavage on display. And, of course, she towered over me, her indigo tail swishing.

“Hmm. Very good, then,” she said, apparently satisfied with whatever she’d gotten from looking at me. Suddenly, her gaze shifted behind Lerokan and me.

“Ah! And there is my other nephew! I am glad you knew better than to leave without saying goodbye to your aunt, Errok!”

Lerokan sighed, and I squeezed his hand. The younger woman at the other end of the cave made an *eep* sort of sound and raised her tail in our direction.

We turned around to see Gahn Errok striding into the roosting cave. Weapon after weapon was strapped to his chest and back, and he carried a huge, beautifully carved bow.

“I am about to leave,” he said by way of greeting.

“Go safely,” said Tilka, raising her tail and then letting it fall. “And make sure you drop some of your ego as you fly. Just because you’re a Gahn doesn’t mean you’re not also a fool sometimes. Plus, it will weigh Togo down and tire him out faster.”

I slapped my hand over my mouth to keep from bursting into laughter. Lerokan didn’t bother trying to hide it – he laughed out loud.

Ghan Errok scowled at him.

“Come, Lerokan,” he commanded. “Zakkar has told me I should inform you of the details of my journey.”

“Fine, fine,” Lerokan said, still grinning. He and his brother stepped away to talk. Tilka and I watched them.

“It feels so sudden, both of them having mates, now. I am happy for them both. Errok has wanted this for so long.” She paused, eyeing me from the side. “Lerokan... Less so.”

“Do you mean he didn’t want anything to do with having a mate? Yeah, I know all about it,” I said, laughing. When she saw that I didn’t feel awkward about the subject, she visibly relaxed, smiling again.

“I am glad he has changed his mind. Or perhaps you changed it for him.”

“Not sure anyone could change Lerokan’s mind for him,” I mused, admiring his profile and the tumble of his long hair down his back as he talked to his brother.

“Perhaps this is true,” Tilka replied with a sigh. I glanced at her, seeing a flash of pain cross her face.

“When my sister, their mother, died,” she said, “it destroyed their father. He couldn’t hunt, couldn’t fly. He barely ate. He died not long afterwards. Lerokan swore from that moment on he’d never have a mate. He never wanted to lose himself in that kind of love or that kind of pain.”

I bit down on my lower lip, staring at Lerokan. I knew his parents had died, just like mine. But I didn’t know that part of the story.

“That must have been incredibly difficult. I’m so sorry,” I whispered.

“Why do you say sorry?” she asked, looking confused.

“Ah. It’s a human thing we say about other people’s losses.”

“Well, I am just glad he has found you,” she said softly. Both of us turned our gazes back to the brothers. “He’s happier, now,” she added. “He reminds me of the way he was before. Before they died.”

So *that was it*. That was the wound inside him that had made him throw up so many walls. That was why he’d pushed so hard against having a mate.

That was the reason for the mask.

It wasn't even a mask at all. But a shield.

He was protecting himself.

Breena must have sensed I was about to start sobbing like an idiot. She leaned down and bumped my cheek gently with her beak. I chuckled tearily in surprise, snuggling my cheek against the side of her face.

A moment later, Gahn Errok turned and swept out of the roosting cave. I watched him go, struck by the oddest feeling. The feeling that, even though he was huge and strong and intimidating, by going to find his human mate, he was walking into the lion's den.

Why do I get the sense that he's going to completely crash and burn before he maybe gets his shit together enough for a human woman to accept him?

Oh well. Not my problem to worry about, now.

No, the only alien man I wanted to worry about now was the one right beside me, taking my hand in his and holding it like it was the most precious thing in the world.



THE REST OF THE DAY passed in a blur of touring the caves and tunnels and meeting the other tribe members. By the time Lerokan and I retired to our cave after an evening meal in the hall (a meal blissfully free of brotherly pissing contests now that Errok had left) I was ready to drop into bed. Or maybe the heated springs first. Preferably with Lerokan.

But there was something I had to talk to him about first.

“Your aunt told me about your parents,” I said quickly as we entered the cave. *Might as well just rip the bandage off.*

Lerokan shot me an unreadable look.

“What did she tell you?”

I undid my braid, finger-combing my waves while Lerokan watched my movements with the focus of a panther watching prey.

“She told me that your dad... That he got really messed up after your mom died.”

“Yes,” Lerokan confirmed.

“And that's why you didn't want a mate.”

“Well, my other reasons about wanting to choose my own destiny still stand. But ultimately, yes. I did not want to fade away the way my father did. A mate meant losing myself entirely.”

“Do you still feel that way?” I whispered. Cold air whistled into the cave, making my hair shift about my shoulders. Lerokan stepped up to me, catching stray strands between his fingers.

“I have utterly lost myself in you,” he said softly. “But in doing so, I have found everything I was ever meant to be. It has all been worth it. *You* are worth it.”

I lifted my hands to cup his face “I love you so much,” I whispered. “And besides,” I added, lifting a teasing brow, “I’ve already decided. When my time comes, whenever that may be, I’m dragging you along with me.”

I was absolutely joking, but Lerokan looked deeply relieved by my words.

“Good,” he breathed out. “I would not have it any other way.”

“But seriously,” I said. “I’m not going anywhere.”

I tightened my grip on his face, tugging him down.

His mouth crashed into mine, his hands clutching at my waist. Heat flooded my core as one of his hands dipped between my legs, grinding his fingers against my clit, using the seam of my trousers as friction. I sighed, breaking away from the kiss to unzip my jacket and let it fall away. I stripped my tank top off overhead, too, before tossing it to the floor.

Lerokan’s hand quickened between my legs, and I cried out. I felt puffy and swollen down there after last night and this morning, but that made me even more sensitive. I could feel my knickers growing wet against my tender flesh as Lerokan stroked me.

When I was on the verge of coming, I grabbed his wrist and backed up.

“Wait,” I panted. The look he gave me – one of pure, feral, aching need – almost made me come on the spot.

“Go lie down on the bed,” I told him. He walked to the bed backwards, never letting me out of his sight. But he did what I asked. First, though, he took off his loincloth, letting the dark swell of his erection bob free.

I kicked off my boots and shimmied out of my trousers and soaked panties. I walked to the side of the bed, nude, then climbed up, straddling Lerokan’s hips so that the underside of his cock was pressed against my clit.

“I don’t think I’m ready to go too hard again. But if I’m on top...”

Lerokan watched me through the glittering slits of his eyes. His lips twitched, fangs flashing, as I adjusted my positioning. I'd never been in this position before, obviously, and I found it rather awkward for a moment. Lerokan's hands slid reverently up the outsides of my thighs, settling on my hips, steadying me. I eased back and gasped when his engorged tip bumped my ass.

Lerokan grunted, whipping a hand off of my hip to grasp his shaft. He guided it to my wet, swollen entrance.

I sank down on him so, so slowly. So slowly that I could tell it was torture for both of us.

But I needed that easy sink down onto his cock. Even with my arousal and gushing wetness, I didn't want to go too fast.

Lerokan's breath hitched. Darkness pooled in the deepening crevices between his abdominal muscles as he tensed. We hadn't lit a fire, so it was just the cold wash of the asteroids and stars on his skin now, contrasting against the deep ink of shadows.

Lerokan had returned both his hands to my hips. I clutched at the back of those huge hands, breathing heavily. His grip helped support me as I began to rock, trying to get more of him inside. I flushed as his gaze dragged down my front, settling fervently on the place our bodies were connected. He stared at the way his cock slowly disappeared into my body, his gaze alternating between what looked like tenderness and brutish lust.

It was a heady combination for me. To be both cherished and so greedily desired. It made me quicken the movement of my hips. Made pleasure rise inside me once again.

Lerokan's cock spears were bent backwards with my weight and movements, brushing over my ass, sending tingles erupting along my spine. I could tell Lerokan was using every scrap of alien strength to stay still, to stop himself from flipping our positioning and ramming into me. His breaths were quick, punctuated by harsh little moans. His grip hardened on my hips while he fought to keep his own in place.

My right hand fell between my legs, working my clit as I ground against him faster. My flesh down there wasn't raw or unbearably painful, but everything was so tender. The pleasure twinned alongside a sweetly bruising pain. It made my orgasm build deeper, made my moans louder, made my fingers faster.

And suddenly, I needed more. Needed Lerokan's hardness urging up into my swollen, sensitive flesh. Instinctively, I lifted my hips, a wordless invitation for him to drive up into me.

He let out a haggard breath, then began to move.

He cursed gutturally, keeping his hands firm on my hips, holding me in place as he thrust upwards. This new angle was perfect; it was *everything*. Hitting deeper places, filling me further. I planted both my palms on Lerokan's stomach, giving in to the burning stretch of his girth.

Giving in to all of it. All of him.

"I trust you." I didn't realize I'd said it out loud until Lerokan responded.

"I'll take care of you," he whispered thickly. "Always."

And he did.

He kept his rhythm slow and controlled, stroking up into me with such heated devotion it felt like he was worshipping me from the inside out. The sensuous roll of his hips; the slick, slow drag of his cock; and the brush of his cock spears; left me breathless. My muscles quivered, and if I hadn't been putting so much of my weight onto my palms on his stomach, I would have collapsed.

But no, I wouldn't have. Not really. Because he was holding me now.

"Priya," he choked out. One of his hands drifted up to the side of my jaw. He drew me downward and raised his head up until he could kiss me.

The way he moaned when his tongues entered my mouth finally sent me tumbling into the clutches of the orgasm that had been circling me this whole time. My mouth went completely slack as I groaned, my jaw falling wide open and giving him full access. He shuddered, his hips hitching slightly harder. He regained his previous smooth rhythm quickly, though, this time going even slower. His cock bucked precisely, deliberately, in and out of my spasming core.

Lerokan pulled back from the kiss, dragging me down with him until I was lying on his chest, my thighs spread widely across his pelvis. He kneaded my ass, his hot breaths stirring strands of my hair as I quivered against him and around him.

"My mate," he said, the words so strangled by his need I barely made them out.

Then Lerokan grunted, his hips rising right off the bed. His cock strained, nudging further inside. Every muscle in his torso hardened, his jaw tensing, the tendons of his neck bulging.

He threw his head back and shouted. All the tension in his body hardened further, as if crystallizing. Then it all broke apart.

His hips rammed back down to the bed and then rocked desperately up into me as he came.

“Yes,” I whispered against his smooth chest as his tail thrashed, his fingers digging into my flesh. “Yes, Lerokan, yes.”

It felt so good to say yes to him.

To finally say yes to each other after saying no for so long.

As his movements slowed, I couldn’t get the word out of my head. It echoed, as if someone were shouting it from every corner of the cave.

Yes. Yes. Yes.

Yes, to Lerokan. Yes, to love.

Yes, to the future splayed dazzlingly before us, all richly shaded landscapes and winding lines.

Yes, to the map of us. To everywhere it had already led.

And everywhere it would lead.



Thank you so much for reading Priya and Lerokan’s story! I can’t wait to share the next book with you soon – can you guess whose story it will be? (Spoiler – it will involve a certain very cocky older brother!) To stay up to date with my releases, to receive bonus content, and be the first to know when books are released, make sure to sign up to my newsletter at

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Until the next Sea Sand love story,

-Ursa



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"I will be her keeper, her guardian, her guide. And I will keep her safe no matter the cost..."

[Book 10 ALIEN CLAW](#)

"I will go wherever you are. Even if I have to follow you forever. Even if I have to hunt you down..."

[Book 11 ALIEN HEART](#)

"I had nothing left to lose. Until her."

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