



ALIEN  
PRINCE'S  
FATED MATE

VALTI FATED MATES  
ELIN WYN

ALIEN PRINCE'S FATED  
MATE

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# VALTI MATES BOOK 4

**ELIN WYN**

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# NIAM

---

I stood before the ancient machine, my fingers tracing its cold metal surface. The medbay. A word I knew but didn't understand, not really. My heart hammered against my ribs as I contemplated what I had to do next.

“Branna?” I called out softly. “Are you there?”

A pause, then a voice emanated from the walls. “I am here, Niam.”

I swallowed hard. “I'm going to do it. I'm going to remove the implants.”

“You understand the risks?” Branna's voice was flat, emotionless.

“I do.” My hands shook as I began to prep the surgical pod. “But I can't stay here anymore. I can't let them keep using us like this.”

Branna didn't respond. I knew she couldn't. The real Branna had been gone for years, her consciousness absorbed into the Temple's systems. Just like they wanted to do to me.

I thought of Mila and Denna, the ones I'd sent out, searching for the missing pieces of the control unit. My friends. My co-conspirators.

They had done their jobs. It was time for me to face mine.

“Do you remember when we first met, Branna?” I asked, needing to fill the silence. “You were so kind to me when I was brought here.”

“I remember,” Branna’s voice replied, but there was no warmth in it.

I sighed. “No, you don’t. Not really.”

My stomach growled, reminding me I hadn’t eaten since before the morning rituals. I pulled a protein bar from my pocket and wolfed it down. It tasted like sawdust, but it would have to do.

As I chewed, I continued to ready the pod. The lightning strike had changed everything. For the first time in years, my thoughts felt... clearer. Less muddled by the constant stream of data from the machinery that controlled the Temple. But that clarity came at a price. I no longer had the perfect integration I once did.

“I don’t know if this will work,” I muttered. “But I have to try.”

“The priests will not approve,” Branna stated.

I laughed bitterly. “The priests can spend some time in the Tomb then.”

My fingers flew over the control panel, inputting commands I barely understood. Knowledge flooded my mind – how to operate the pod, the intricacies of neural implant removal – but it felt distant, academic. Like reading from a book rather than lived experience.

“This is going to hurt, isn’t it?” I asked, though I already knew the answer.

“Pain is irrelevant,” Branna replied. “Only the will of the Temple matters.”

“No. Not anymore.”

With trembling hands, I opened the pod. The inside gleamed with sterilized instruments and monitoring equipment.

“Branna,” I whispered. “If there’s any part of you left in there... wish me luck.”

Silence.

I climbed into the pod, my heart racing. As I lay back on the cool curved metal surface, I thought of all the girls who had disappeared over the years. About how many of them had ended up like Branna. How many more would suffer that fate if I didn't succeed.

"For all of us," I murmured.

The pod began to close around me. Panic clawed at my chest, but I swallowed it down. This was the only way. To escape. To get revenge. To finally be free.

As darkness enveloped me, I closed my eyes and waited for the pain to begin.

But something strange happened. The network that usually fed me constant data and commands fragmented into whispers. Not the mechanical interface I was used to, but something almost... alive. *Help her*, a voice breathed through the network. Just for a moment. Just long enough.

More whispers joined the first, a chorus of presence I'd never sensed before. The pod's controls responded faster than they should have, medical protocols initiating with impossible smoothness.

*Who are you?* I tried to ask, but the anesthetic was already taking hold.



# THARON

---

I paced across the polished stone floor of my chambers, the ornate architecture a blur in my peripheral vision. Three days.

Three days since I'd seen her face, heard her voice in the message from the device. Niam. My mate. The image of her burned in my mind - that fiery red hair, skin so pale it was almost translucent, eyes filled with agony.

My fists clenched at my sides, nails digging into my palms. The pain grounded me, but only barely. I should be out there, searching for her. Instead, I was trapped here, dealing with petty politics and a dying king.

Tapping at the door interrupted my brooding. "Enter," I barked.

A servant scurried in, head bowed. "Your Highness, the council awaits your presence."

I waved him away, jaw tight. Time to face the whivvens.

The grand council chamber loomed before me, its imposing stone walls adorned with intricate carvings depicting Zashi's long history. I strode in, my face a mask of cold indifference. Inside, I seethed.

The councilors fell silent as I entered, their wary glances and hushed whispers grating on my already frayed nerves. I took my place at the head of the table, surveying the room.

"Gentlemen, ladies," I said, my voice steady despite the turmoil within. "I have an announcement. During my absence,

Drax will serve as regent.”

The shock on their faces would have been satisfying under different circumstances. As it was, I barely noticed.

Lord Kaine, a portly man with more ambition than sense, was the first to object. “But Your Highness, surely Prince Drax lacks the experience-”

I cut him off with a sharp gesture. “My decision is final.”

Lady Sera, her silver hair gleaming in the torchlight, leaned forward. “And where exactly will you be going, Your Highness? What urgent business takes you from Zashi in our time of need?”

My fingers drummed against the armrest of my chair. “That is none of your concern, Lady Sera.”

The council erupted into a cacophony of protests and questions. I tuned them out, my mind drifting back to Niam. Where was she now? Was she safe? The need to find her, to claim her, clawed at my insides.

“This is madness!” The voice of Lord Errin, one of the oldest councilors, cut through the din. “Your father lies ill, the kingdom teeters on the brink of chaos, and you would abandon us for some... some secret errand?”

Something inside me snapped. I felt the change begin, my control slipping away like sand through an hourglass. My vision sharpened, colors becoming more vivid. I could smell the fear rolling off the councilors in waves.

“You forget your place,” I snarled, rising to my full height. My hands, now tipped with razor-sharp claws, gripped the edge of the table. I bared my elongated fangs, satisfaction coursing through me as chairs scraped back and gasps filled the air.

“Your lands can easily be redistributed, Lord Kaine,” I said, my voice low and menacing. “And Lady Sera, I wonder how your family would fare without your protection.”

I swept my gaze across the room, meeting each pair of terrified eyes. “You have two choices. Deal with Drax as

regent, or deal with me. Choose wisely.”

Silence fell over the chamber. I strode out, my cloak swirling behind me dramatically. In the corridor, I nearly collided with Drax.

I laughed bitterly. “Come to check on the madman, have you?”

“I know what it’s like,” he said softly. “When I first heard Lita’s call... I would have torn the world apart to reach her.”

We’d never been close. There had been times that we might have killed each other as easily as breathing.

But in the past months since the human women had come to Zashi, something had shifted.

Then Niam’s face flashed in my mind again, and all other concerns faded away. I had to find her.

There were no words I could say, not anymore.

Back in my chambers, I packed hastily, grabbing maps, weapons, and supplies. My fingers traced the outline of the device in my pouch - the key to finding Niam.

In the courtyard, I mounted my bagart, ignoring the wary glances of the castle staff. My gaze fixed on the distant mountains where Niam’s message had indicated she would be.

As my bagart’s hooves clattered on the cobblestones, a single thought consumed me: “I’m coming, Niam.”

Fear gnawed at the edges of my mind - fear that I wouldn’t reach her in time, that I would lose myself to the beast within before I could claim my mate. But I pushed it aside. I would find her. I had to.

The open road stretched before me, and I urged my mount faster. Every second counted.

Niam. I was coming for her. And gods help anyone who stood in my way.

# NIAM

---

The pod hissed open. I sucked in air, my lungs burning as if I'd been drowning. My body shook, aftershocks of pain rippling through me from the implant removal. I stumbled out, gripping the edge of the pod to keep from falling.

The memory of those voices haunted me as I stumbled from the pod. Had it been real? Or just dreams born from pain and desperation? But when I reached for that sense of presence, I found only empty data streams.

No. I couldn't think about that now. Couldn't let myself wonder about voices in the machine. I had to focus on escape, on survival.

The medbay spun around me. I blinked hard, trying to focus. I had to get out of here. Now.

My legs wobbled as I took a step. Then another. The cold floor shocked my bare feet, helping to clear my head. I made it to the door, peering out into the corridor.

Empty. Good.

I started down the hallway, keeping close to the wall for support. My thoughts raced, plans and contingencies flashing through my mind. I couldn't leave alone. Laren was still here, trapped in her cell. The last of the temple girls. I had to get her out too.

Footsteps echoed in the distance. I ducked into an alcove, pressing myself against the wall. Two guards walked by, their conversation drifting to me.

“Did you hear about the new shipment coming in?”

“Yeah, fresh meat for the grinder. Poor bastards don’t know what they’re in for.”

My fists clenched. More innocents to be sacrificed to the temple’s hunger. No. I wouldn’t let that happen. Not anymore.

When the coast was clear, I continued on. The familiar corridors felt alien now, shadows lurking in every corner. I navigated carefully, using my knowledge of the patrol routes to avoid detection.

Finally, I reached Laren’s cell. I placed my hand on the access panel, praying my authorization still worked. The door slid open with a soft hiss.

Laren sat on her cot, staring blankly at the wall. Her once vibrant brown hair hung lank and dull around her face. She didn’t even look up as I entered.

“Laren,” I whispered, kneeling beside her. “It’s me, Niam. We’re getting out of here.”

No response. I gently touched her arm. She flinched, curling in on herself.

“It’s okay,” I soothed. “I’m not going to hurt you. We need to go now. Can you stand?”

Slowly, painfully slowly, Laren’s eyes focused on me. Recognition flickered in their depths.

“Niam?” Her voice was barely audible.

“Yes, it’s me. We don’t have much time. I need you to come with me.”

I helped her to her feet, supporting most of her weight. We shuffled out into the corridor. Laren moved like a puppet with cut strings, responding only to simple commands.

“Left foot. Now right. Good. Keep going.”

We made it halfway down the hall before an alarm blared. Red lights flashed, bathing everything in an eerie glow. They’d discovered my escape.

Panic clawed at my throat, but I forced it down. I still had one advantage. My connection to the system might be gone, but I knew them inside and out. I led us to a maintenance panel, prying it open with shaking hands.

“What are you doing?” Laren asked, the first unprompted thing she’d said in months.

“Buying us some time.”

I manipulated the circuitry, bypassing security protocols. The alarm cut off abruptly. That would slow them down, but not for long.

We continued on, moving as fast as Laren’s weakened state allowed. Just as we reached the main corridor, voices approached. Two guards rounded the corner, stopping short when they saw us.

“Oracle Niam?” One of them frowned. “What are you doing here?”

I pulled the hood of my robe lower, grateful for its concealing shadow. The irony didn’t escape me. For years, I’d worn it to hide the grotesque implants forced into my skull, sparing others the discomfort of seeing such a visible sign of the Temple’s control.

Now, it served a different purpose. The hood shielded my newly healed skin from prying eyes, masking the absence of those very implants. The medbay’s regenerative technology had done its work well, leaving only a thin layer of fresh skin where metal and circuitry once protruded.

“Everything is fine,” I said, infusing my voice with the calm authority I’d cultivated over years of Temple service. “I’m escorting this girl to a special... procedure.”

The guards exchanged glances, uncertainty flickering across their faces. I held my breath, praying they wouldn’t question me further.

The guards exchanged a glance.

“We weren’t informed of any-”

“Are you questioning the will of the High Priest?” I snapped. “Perhaps you’d like to explain your insubordination to him directly?”

They paled visibly.

“No, of course not, Oracle. Our apologies.”

I nodded curtly and swept past them, Laren stumbling along beside me. We turned the corner and I let out a shaky breath. It had worked. We were almost there.

The exit loomed ahead, our gateway to freedom. My pulse thundered in my ears as we approached. Just a few more steps...

I led us towards the emergency escape passage on sublevel one north, my heart pounding with each step. The unfamiliar corridors stretched before us, dimly lit and eerily silent. I’d never set foot in this part of the temple before, relying solely on my memory of the schematics I’d studied countless times.

“Where are we going?” Laren whispered, her grip on my arm tightening.

“There’s a hidden exit,” I murmured back. “We’re almost there.”

A lie, but one I hoped would keep her moving. The truth was, I had no idea how much further we had to go. The maze-like layout of the sublevel made navigation a challenge, even with my intimate knowledge of every corridor and chamber.

We crept forward, every shadow a potential threat. The hum of machinery grew louder as we descended deeper into the bowels of the structure. The air grew thick and stale, carrying the faint scent of ozone and decaying metal.

Laren’s breathing became more labored, her steps more uncertain. I could feel her anxiety rising, threatening to overwhelm her.

“I can’t,” she gasped, suddenly stopping. “I can’t do this.”

“Yes, you can,” I insisted, tugging gently on her arm. “We have to keep moving.”

But Laren shook her head violently, pulling away from me. “No, no, no. They’ll find us. They always find us.”

Her voice rose with each word, echoing off the metal walls. I clamped my hand over her mouth, my own panic surging.

“Shh,” I hissed. “Please, Laren. We’re so close.”

Footsteps sounded in the distance, accompanied by muffled voices. My blood ran cold. They were coming.

I grabbed Laren’s hand and pulled her into a nearby alcove, praying it would be enough to conceal us. We huddled together in the darkness, hardly daring to breathe.

Two guards walked past, their conversation drifting to us.

“...don’t understand why we’re wasting time down here. The Oracle wouldn’t come this way.”

“Orders are orders. Besides, better than cleaning up after the initiates’ meals. Did you see the mess in the dining hall?”

Their voices faded as they moved on, but the danger remained. We couldn’t stay here.

“Come on,” I whispered to Laren. “We need to keep going.”

She nodded, some of the fight returning to her eyes. We emerged from our hiding spot and continued down the corridor, our pace quickening.

We came to a junction, three identical passages branching off in different directions. I hesitated, doubt creeping in. Which way?

“Left,” I decided, hoping my instincts were right.

We hadn’t gone far when we encountered our first major obstacle - a heavy security door, its access panel glowing an ominous red.

“No,” I muttered, frantically searching for a way to bypass it. My old codes were useless now, stripped away along with my neural implants.



Laren tugged on my sleeve. “Niam, look.”

She pointed to a small vent near the floor, barely large enough for a person to squeeze through. It was our only option.

I pried off the grate, wincing at the screech of metal. “You first,” I told Laren. “I’ll be right behind you.”

She hesitated for a moment, then nodded and crawled inside. I followed, pulling the grate back into place behind us.

The vent was cramped and dusty, filled with cobwebs and the skittering sounds of unseen creatures. We inched forward on our hands and knees, the metal digging into our skin.

After what felt like an eternity, we reached another grate. I peered through the slats, relieved to see an empty corridor beyond. We emerged, stretching our aching limbs.

“Where now?” Laren asked, her voice small and uncertain.

Before I could answer, the distant sound of an alarm cut through the air. My stomach dropped.

“They know we’re gone,” I said. “We need to hurry.”

We broke into a run, no longer bothering with stealth. The corridors blurred around us as we raced towards what I hoped was freedom.

We rounded a corner and there it was - the emergency escape passage. My heart leapt when I saw the nondescript metal door, our gateway to freedom.

“We made it,” I whispered to Laren, relief washing over me.

But as I approached the control panel, my hands trembled. The familiar interface felt alien without my neural implants. I input the access code, praying it would work.

Nothing happened.

“No, no, no,” I muttered, trying again. The panel blinked red, denying us entry. Panic clawed at me.

“What’s wrong?” Laren asked, her voice rising. “Why isn’t it opening?”

“I’ll figure it out,” I said, forcing calm into my voice. “Just give me a minute.”

I tried every override code I knew, my fingers flying over the keypad. Each attempt was met with the same mocking red light. Sweat beaded on my forehead as I worked, hyper-aware of every second ticking by.

“They’re coming,” Laren whimpered. “I hear them. We have to go back.”

“We can’t go back,” I said, not taking my eyes off the panel. “Just a little longer. I’ll get it.”

But Laren’s breathing grew ragged, her body shaking. “No, no, we can’t... they’ll find us. They always find us.”

“Laren, please,” I begged, reaching for her. “We’re so close-”

She shoved me away with unexpected strength, her eyes wild with fear. “No! I won’t let them take me again!”

Before I could stop her, Laren bolted back the way we came, disappearing around the corner.

“Laren!” I called after her, my voice echoing in the empty corridor. But she was gone.

I stood frozen, torn between chasing after her and continuing my attempts at the door. The sound of approaching footsteps made the decision for me. Guards were coming from both directions. I was trapped.

My mind raced, searching for a way out. There were no vents, no maintenance hatches, nowhere to hide. I pressed my back against the unyielding door, my last hope of escape.

As the footsteps grew louder, I steeled myself for what was to come. I wouldn’t go down without a fight, even if it was hopeless.

The first guard rounded the corner, weapon raised. I tensed, ready to spring-

A blur of movement caught my eye. Something massive barreled into the guard, sending him flying. More shouts and the sounds of combat filled the air.

I blinked, trying to process what I was seeing. A giant figure tore through the guards like they were nothing, moving with terrifying speed and grace. In seconds, it was over. Bodies littered the floor, and silence fell once more.

The figure turned to face me, and I got my first clear look. It was a Shakai male, towering over me with bronze skin and hair a mix of deep blue and silver. His face was all sharp angles and hard planes, undeniably alien yet breathtakingly beautiful.

But it was his eyes that held me captive. They glowed with an inner fire, a double ring of blue and green.

He took a step towards me, and I pressed myself harder against the door, my heart pounding. “Who are you?” I managed to ask. “What do you want?”

A predatory smile spread across his face, chilling me to my core. “I’ve come for you, little one,” he said. “And it’s a good thing that I did.”

# THARON

---

I stood there, the blood rushing in my ears with a mix of elation and disbelief. Niam was right in front of me, her delicate form pressed against the wall. Her wide eyes locked onto mine, a flicker of fear and curiosity dancing across her face. Every fiber of my being screamed to reach out and touch her, to claim what was mine.

But the clatter of armored footsteps broke through my haze. More guards rounded the corner, their swords glinting. A deep growl rumbled from me as I positioned myself between Niam and the oncoming threat.

The first guard lunged forward, his blade whistling through the air. I dodged to the side, my fist connecting with his jaw. He crumpled to the ground. Two more rushed at me, their attacks coordinated but predictable.

I felt the familiar surge of power coursing through my veins, the Valti part of me begging to be unleashed. But I pushed it down, relying on my training and strength alone. I wouldn't give in to that primal side, not here, not now.

My elbow slammed into one guard's solar plexus while I swept the legs out from under the other. They fell in a tangle of limbs and curses. I spun, narrowly avoiding a blade that sliced through the air where my head had been moments before.

The fight was brutal but quick. Bodies littered the floor around me, some groaning in pain, others ominously still. I stood there, chest heaving, my knuckles bruised and bloodied.

I turned to Niam, worry gnawing at my gut. How would she react to this violence? To the monster I truly was? But to my surprise, her face remained calm, almost impassive as she surveyed the scene.

“Are you alright?” I asked, taking a step towards her.

She nodded, then moved away from me, her eyes darting down the corridor. “We need to go. There will be more.”

“Where exactly do you think you’re going?” I couldn’t help the grin that spread across my face. Her spirit was intoxicating.

“I don’t know where you’re going,” she said, her voice firm despite her obvious exhaustion. “But I’m leaving this place.”

I grinned, admiring her fire. “Then it seems we’re headed in the same direction, little one.”

A distant shout echoed through the halls. I grabbed Niam’s arm, tugging her along. “We need to get out of here. Now.”

She stumbled, her legs weak and unsteady. Without hesitation, I scooped her up into my arms. She was so light, so fragile. The coarse material of her robe scratched my arms, igniting a spark of anger. She deserved silks and jewels, not this pitiful excuse for clothing.

“I can walk,” she protested weakly.

“Save your strength,” I murmured, cradling her closer to my chest. “You’ll need it.”

We moved swiftly through the winding corridors of the temple complex. I relied on my training, my senses on high alert for any sign of danger. But it was Niam who truly guided our escape.

“Left here,” she whispered, her breath warm against my neck. “There’s a maintenance access point that leads to the lower levels.”

I followed her instructions, marveling at her knowledge of the temple’s layout. We encountered a few more guards along

the way, but I dispatched them quickly, never letting go of my precious cargo.

Finally, we reached a heavy metal door. Niam squirmed in my arms, and I reluctantly set her down. She approached a nearby panel, her fingers flying over the keys with practiced ease.

“How do you know all this?” I couldn’t keep the awe from my voice.

She glanced at me, a hint of sadness in her eyes. “I’ve been connected to this place for a long time. But not anymore.”

The door slid open with a hiss, revealing a dark passageway beyond. We stepped through, the cool air a stark contrast to the warmth of the upper levels.

“We’re almost there,” Niam said, her voice barely above a whisper. “Just a little further.”

I nodded, following her lead. We navigated through a maze of pipes and machinery, the hum of ancient systems surrounding us. Finally, we reached another door. This one required both Niam’s expertise and my strength to force open.

And then, suddenly, we were outside.

A sea of red rock and shadow stretched out before us under the setting sun. The wind whipped around us, carrying dust and the promise of freedom.

I turned to Niam, ready to celebrate our escape, but my words vanished at the sight of her silent tears streaming down her face as she stared out at the horizon.

I turned away, giving Niam a moment of privacy. The wind carried her soft murmur to my ears.

“I’d forgotten how beautiful the sky could be.”

Her words ignited a fury deep within me. How long had she been trapped in that accursed temple? Denied even the simple pleasure of seeing the sun and stars?

I watched as Niam composed herself, wiping away the tears with the back of her hand. She turned to face me, her

expression a mix of curiosity and wariness.

“Who are you? And why are you here?” she asked, her voice stronger now.

I hesitated, unsure how to explain something I barely understood myself. “My name is Tharon. I was there when the human women put together the pieces of that device. I heard your message, asking them to bring it to the mountains.”

Niam’s eyes widened, a flash of worry crossing her face. “But why are you here instead of them? Lita, Denna, Mila - are they alright?”

“They’re fine,” I assured her quickly, feeling a strange urge to ease her concern. “I volunteered to go in their place, to keep them safe.”

She frowned, studying me intently. “That doesn’t explain why you’re here, with me, instead of at the meeting point.”

I ran a hand through my hair, frustrated by my own lack of understanding. “I’m not entirely sure myself. I was on my way there, but then...” I trailed off, searching for the right words. “There was this pull, something insistent that made me change course.”

She raised an eyebrow, clearly skeptical.

The easy lies of the court nearly came to my lips, but fell away. Only the truth here, to her.

“I felt a pull. Something I couldn’t explain. It led me here instead. To you.”

She took a step back, wariness replacing her earlier confusion.

“You’re dangerous,” she said quietly.

I didn’t deny it. I was dangerous. To my enemies, to anyone who threatened what was mine. But never to her.

“I won’t hurt you,” I said instead.

She shook her head. “You don’t understand. This... connection. It’s not natural.”

I laughed, a harsh sound even to my own ears. “Many would argue that very little about me is natural, little one. But I’m here now, and I intend to keep you safe.”

Niam turned away, taking a few unsteady steps. I followed close behind, ready to catch her if she fell.

“I don’t need your help,” she said, her voice strained. “I just need that device.”

As if to prove her wrong, her legs gave out. I lunged forward, catching her before she hit the ground.

“Of course,” I said, unable to keep the amusement from my voice. “But perhaps you’d allow me to assist you, just until we’re out of these canyons? And then I’ll happily give the device over to you, if that’s what you desire?”

She glared up at me, defiance burning in her eyes. But I could see the exhaustion there too, the way her body trembled with fatigue.

“Fine,” she said grudgingly. “But only until we’re through the Canyonlands.”

I nodded, helping her to her feet. “Of course.”

As we set off across the rocky terrain, I couldn’t help but smile. She might not trust me yet, but she would. I’d faced down the vipers of the Zashi court, survived the machinations of my own power-hungry mother. Winning Niam’s trust would be a challenge, certainly, but one I was more than ready to face.

And as I watched her pick her way carefully over the uneven ground, her determination evident in every step, I knew one thing with absolute certainty.

I would never let her go.



# NIAM

---

I stumbled over another loose rock, my legs shaking with exhaustion. The canyon walls towered above us, casting long shadows in the fading light. My mind raced, trying to make sense of the unexpected turn my carefully laid plans had taken.

Tharon. A Valti. He wasn't supposed to be here. For months, I'd plotted my escape from the Temple, every detail meticulously planned. But now...

"What exactly are we heading towards?" Tharon's deep voice broke through my thoughts. "You marked a location in that message. What's waiting for us there?"

I turned to face him, studying the sharp angles of his face, the spots trailing down his jaw. So alien, yet oddly familiar.

"Nothing that concerns you," I said, my voice clipped. "Remember, you're only accompanying me until we're out of the Canyonlands. After that, we go our separate ways."

Tharon's lips tightened, but he didn't argue. Good. The last thing I needed was to get attached to someone else. Especially someone like him.

I took another step forward, my muscles screaming in protest. My body, weakened by years in the Temple, betrayed me at every turn. Frustration bubbled up inside me. I'd known this journey would be difficult, but I hadn't anticipated just how much.

The ground shifted beneath my feet. I flailed, trying to catch my balance, but it was too late. I braced myself for impact with the hard canyon floor.

It never came.

Strong arms scooped me up, cradling me against a broad chest. I blinked, startled by the gentleness of Tharon's grip. My heart raced, and not just from the near fall.

"I've got you," Tharon murmured, his breath warm against my ear.

I stared up at him, taking in the softness in his expression. It was so at odds with everything I'd come to expect from the cold, calculating prince. A faint blush colored his cheeks as he noticed my scrutiny.

"What?" he asked, a hint of defensiveness creeping into his tone. "I'm not always a jerk, you know."

A laugh bubbled up from my chest, surprising us both. When was the last time I'd laughed? The sound felt foreign, almost painful after so long.

"There," Tharon said, a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "That's better. Just think of me as your personal bagart. I'll carry you wherever you need to go."

The levity of the moment faded as we approached a fork in the canyon. Tharon nodded towards the left path.

"My mount is that way. It would make the journey easier."

"No. We need to go right."

A high-pitched whir cut through the air behind us. I spun around, my heart leaping into my throat. A sleek metallic object zipped towards us, red lights blinking ominously.

"Get down!" I shouted, but Tharon was already moving.

He shoved me behind him, his broad back shielding me as a burst of energy crackled past, singeing the rock wall. The acrid smell of ozone filled my nostrils.

"What in the seven hells is that?" Tharon growled.

Before I could answer, he launched himself at the drone with inhuman speed. His powerful legs propelled him high into the air, arms outstretched. For a moment, he seemed suspended against the darkening sky. Then his hands closed around the drone.

Metal crumpled under his grip. Sparks flew as he tore it apart, landing in a crouch with the broken pieces scattered around him.

My legs wobbled, and I sank to the ground. I'd known about the drones, of course. As Oracle, I'd had access to all of the Temple's history. But seeing this flying bit of the past in action, witnessing its destructive power firsthand... it shook me to my core.

The Temple was truly unleashing everything in its arsenal to keep me from leaving.

A shrill whistle pierced the air. Tharon's head snapped up, alert. The ground trembled beneath us. Something large was approaching, and fast.

"We need to move," Tharon said, hauling me to my feet. "Now."

As if on cue, hooded figures emerged from the shadows. Temple Guards. Their firewhips crackled with energy, casting an eerie glow in the growing darkness.

"Give us the girl," one of them demanded, voice muffled by his hood.

Tharon's grip on my arm tightened. "I think not," he snarled.

The air around us grew thick with tension. For a heartbeat, no one moved.

Then chaos erupted.

Tharon shoved me behind a boulder as energy blasts and firewhips lashed out. He dodged with preternatural grace, closing the distance between himself and the guards.

I watched in awe as he engaged them, his movements a blur. He disarmed one guard with a swift kick, sending the

firewhip flying. Another swung a sword, but Tharon caught the blade between his palms, wrenching it away.

A thunderous roar split the air. From around the bend came a massive beast, all rippling muscle and gleaming fangs. It barreled into the fray, scattering the remaining guards.

“Come on!” Tharon shouted, already astride the creature’s back. He reached down, pulling me up behind him.

I clung to his waist as we tore through the canyon, leaving the sounds of battle behind. The wind whipped my hair, stinging my eyes. My heart thundered, equal parts terror and exhilaration.

We rode hard for what felt like hours, the landscape blurring around us. Finally, as the sun began to dip below the horizon, Tharon guided his mount into a narrow crevice. The passage opened up into a small cavern, hidden from view.

“We’ll rest here for the night,” Tharon said, sliding off the bagart’s back. He reached up to help me down, his hands lingering on my waist a moment longer than necessary.

I stumbled as my feet hit the ground, my legs wobbly from the long ride. Tharon steadied me, concern flickering across his face.

“You need to rest,” he said, guiding me to sit on a smooth boulder.

“I’m fine,” I protested, even as exhaustion threatened to overwhelm me. “We should keep moving.”

Tharon ignored me, busying himself with unpacking supplies from the bagart’s saddlebags. He spread out a thick blanket on the cave floor, then pressed a waterskin into my hands.

“Drink,” he ordered. “Then rest. We’re safe here for now.”

I wanted to argue, to push on, but my body betrayed me. My hands were unsteady as I lifted the waterskin to my lips, gulping down the cool water. Frustration bubbled up inside me. I wasn’t used to feeling this helpless, this out of control.

“This isn’t how it was supposed to go,” I muttered, more to myself than to Tharon.

He paused in his preparations, turning to face me. “What exactly was your plan?”

I sagged against a rock. “I had it all worked out. Disable the security systems, slip out undetected. I never expected...” I gestured vaguely at him.

Tharon’s lips quirked in a wry smile. “Sorry to throw your plans to the wind.”

“It’s not just that,” I said, my voice rising in frustration. “I’m used to being connected to everything, controlling it all from the inside. And now I can’t do anything. I’m worse than useless out here.”

“You’re not useless,” Tharon said firmly. He crouched down in front of me, his intense gaze holding mine. “You have me. Use me.”

I blinked, taken aback by the offer. “What?”

“You used those human women to help you before, didn’t you? Sent them out to retrieve the pieces of this thing?” He pulled the completed device from a pouch, tossed it to me. “Think of me the same way. I’m a tool at your disposal.” His voice was matter-of-fact, but something flickered in his eyes that made my pulse quicken.

I swallowed hard, acutely aware of how close he was. “It’s not that simple. You’re not just some pawn to be moved around. And besides, I need you to understand what’s really going on here.”

Tharon nodded slowly. “Then tell me. All of it.”

I took a deep breath, steeling myself. Where to even begin?

# THARON

---

I moved through the cavern, gathering dry branches and kindling for a fire. Niam sat against the rocky wall, her frail form trembling slightly in the cool air. As I worked, she began to speak, her voice soft but steady.

“The Temple... it’s not what you think. It’s not just a building or a place of worship. It’s alive, in a way.”

I paused, raising an eyebrow at her words. “Alive? How so?”

Niam took a deep breath. “It’s a ship. A massive, ancient vessel that crashed here long ago. But it’s not just metal and circuits. It’s part organic, always growing and repairing itself.”

I arranged the kindling, my mind racing to comprehend her words. A living ship? It sounded like something out of the old legends.

“For most of my life, everything was hazy,” Niam continued. “Like I was sleepwalking. But recently, I’ve been waking up. That’s when I helped Lita escape. And I realized the Temple - the priests - they’ll never stop. They’ll keep taking and sacrificing...”

Her voice cracked, and I felt a surge of protective anger. I struck flint against steel, sparking the kindling to life. As the flames grew, I moved to sit beside her.

“Go on,” I urged gently.

Niam’s eyes reflected the firelight as she spoke of a coming festival, of more women to be sacrificed. Of the

device she'd had to send the other women out to find, something that might stop it all.

Her words painted a picture of horrors beyond imagining, of technology far beyond anything the Shakai possessed.

When she finished, silence fell between us. I struggled to process everything she'd said. Part of me wanted to dismiss it as the ravings of a traumatized mind. But I'd seen enough of the Temple to know there was truth in her words.

And besides, there was only one thing that mattered to me...

"Do you understand?" Niam asked hesitantly. "I know it must sound insane..."

I reached out, my fingers gently tracing the back of her head where the metal plate had been, the area now covered with shiny new skin. Niam shuddered at my touch, her breath quickening.

"I only need to know one thing. Who hurt you?" I growled, barely containing the rage building inside me.

Niam's eyes met mine, filled emptiness. "The priests," she whispered. "The Temple itself. But I won't let them hurt anyone else. Not if I can help it."

I pulled her close, wrapping my arms around her delicate frame. She stiffened for a moment before relaxing. Not much, just a bit. I breathed in her scent, feeling the beast within me stir with possessive desire.

How long had it been since she'd been able to lean on anyone, to trust them?

Ever?

"I'll protect you," I vowed. "No one will ever hurt you again."

Niam pulled back slightly, her face inches from mine. "I don't need protection," she said, a hint of steel in her voice. "I need your help to stop them."

I smiled, admiring her spirit. This fragile human held more strength than many Shakai warriors I'd known.

"Then you'll have it," I promised. "Whatever you want, simply tell me, and it is yours."

The flames danced in Niam's eyes as she poked at the fire with a stick. I watched the orange glow play across her delicate features, entranced.

"There's a way to destroy the Temple," she said softly. "But it's hidden away."

I nodded, tearing my gaze from her face. Of course there would be secrets and obstacles. "That must be why you wanted to meet the other human women in the Teksha mountains."

Niam shook her head. "I didn't know that name."

Confusion stirred within me. "How is it that you know our language so fluently, yet are unfamiliar with something so basic?"

She met my eyes, a wry smile tugging at her lips. "There are devices, like little moons hovering overhead, that feed information directly into the Temple's systems. We only receive what the Temple itself deems necessary to serve it." Her lips twisted. "But recently the protocols are malfunctioning. For all the pain of the Tomb, it appears to have some advantages."

I furrowed my brow, struggling to comprehend.

Niam must have sensed my bewilderment. A light laugh escaped her. "I'm sure none of this makes any sense to you."

Despite her amusement at my ignorance, her laugh was like the sweetest music. I shook my head slowly. "It doesn't matter. If you say it is so, then I believe you."

She turned her gaze back to the flickering flames, a pensive look crossing her face. In that moment, I yearned to pull her into my arms, to shield her from the cruelties of her existence.

But I could not.



This path was hers to walk, this battle, hers to fight. My role was to support her, to offer my strength when hers faltered. For as deeply as I burned for this human female, I would not steal her purpose.

Still...if there came a time when she desired to leave it all behind...

“We should eat,” I said gruffly, pushing aside the treacherous longings. “Traveling on an empty stomach will do neither of us any good.”

From my pack, I retrieved a pair of rations - thick nutrient bars that provided sustenance without need for preparation. I handed one to Niam, who accepted it with a murmur of thanks.

As we ate in silence, I couldn't help but study her delicate features once more. So frail and tiny, yet possessing a strength of spirit that humbled me.

She finished her ration and set the wrapper aside. “We should get some rest. We have a long journey ahead.”

I gave a terse nod of agreement, grateful for the distraction from my torturous thoughts.

As Niam curled up on her side, her back to the fire, I found my eyes tracing the alluring curves of her body yet again. I clenched my jaw, turning away to douse the flames with dirt.

# NIAM

---

Pale light, tinged with rose and gold, crept into the cave. I woke disoriented. Stone pressed against my cheek. Damp earth and woodsmoke permeated the air. Then I remembered. The Temple. My escape. Tharon.

He stood near the cave mouth, stroking the thick neck of his bagart. The beast, enormous and imposing even in the dim light, lowered its horned head, nuzzling against Tharon's hand. The gentleness of the gesture surprised me. A flicker of something – admiration? – warmed me.

This man held a quiet strength that unsettled me more than his earlier displays of power. I knew I could use his help. My body, weakened by the Temple's rituals, wouldn't last long in these mountains. But trusting him...

I couldn't explain the pull I felt towards him. It both thrilled and terrified me.

“Sleep well?”

I jumped, startled. He moved silently for such a large man, his silver-streaked blue hair catching the growing light.

“As well as I could,” I answered, pushing myself up. My muscles protested.

He offered a waterskin. “We should leave soon. I fear those guards won't be far behind.”

A wave of cold fear washed over me. He was right. I pushed myself to my feet, the movement jarring my stiff limbs.

“We’ll travel faster now that we’re out of the Canyonlands.” He gestured to his bagart. The creature shifted restlessly, pawing at the ground.

“Before yesterday...I’d never ridden one of those.” There hadn’t been time to think about it then. Now, however...

He smirked, a flash of teeth I knew were sharper than human. “Don’t worry. She’s well-trained.” He hoisted himself onto the beast’s back with ease.

My stomach clenched. The bagart’s back rose before me, a dizzying height. I placed a hand on its flank – the leathery hide coarse against my palm – and attempted to pull myself up. My weak muscles screamed in protest. I slipped, grabbing desperately at the beast’s thick mane.

Tharon reached down, his hands circling my waist, lifting me. For a breath, his fingers lingered, his touch burning through my simple tunic. He pulled me up behind him, settling me against his broad back, a wall of heat and strength between me and the world.

The bagart started forward with a lurch. I instinctively wrapped my arms around Tharon’s waist, pressing myself against his warmth. My breath hitched. His body was hard and firm against mine, the contours of his muscles arousing. His essence – spices and something musky, something animal – overwhelmed my senses. “Hold on,” he said, his voice low in my ear. The vibration sent a jolt through me.

The bagart’s powerful legs ate up the ground, its movements surprisingly smooth. The wind whipped past my face, the cold air a bracing contrast to the furnace of Tharon’s back. We moved upwards, the path narrowing precariously. I squeezed my eyes shut, my fingers digging into Tharon. The fear of falling was intense, a sickening pull at my gut. But overriding that fear, an acutely aware feeling of Tharon’s powerful body against mine filled all my senses.

The path leveled out, and I cautiously opened my lids. The view was breathtaking. Mountain peaks rose around us, jagged silhouettes against the vibrant sky. Far below, the canyons snaked through the landscape cracks in the earth.

We continued for what felt like hours, the sun climbing higher in the sky. The bagart moved with uncanny surefootedness across the difficult terrain. But even the beast couldn't conquer everything. A recent rockfall blocked the path, a jumble of boulders strewn across the narrow ledge.

Tharon halted the bagart, signaling for me to stay mounted. He dismounted with a graceful leap, surveying the obstacle with a mask of concentration.

"Stay here," he instructed, his eyes scanning the terrain.

He began shifting the boulders, tossing them aside with surprising ease. The muscles of his arms and back strained as he handled large slabs of rock like toys. I watched, fascinated despite myself. The Temple had kept me confined for so long, my body weak and undernourished. His raw physical power – the easy way he wielded his strength – was captivating.

The bagart snorted beneath me, tossing its head. It pawed at the ground, its agitation growing.

"Easy, girl," Tharon murmured, not pausing in his work.

A shadow fell over us. I glanced up and my breath stopped. A creature, unlike anything I had ever seen, swooped down towards us on leathery wings. It was massive, easily twice the size of the bagart, with a body that seemed a horrific blend of reptile and insect. Its face – grotesque and alien – held a decidedly malevolent intelligence. Its claws dripped a viscous, green fluid that sizzled when it struck the rocks.

The bagart reared back, shrieking in terror. I clung desperately to its mane, my heart leaping into my throat. Tharon spun around, his eyes widening at the sight of the monstrous creature.

"Hold on!" he shouted, drawing a wickedly curved blade from his belt.

The creature swooped down, its talons extended towards me. Tharon leapt, intercepting its attack. The clash of metal against chitin rang through the mountain air. The bagart plunged and bucked beneath me, desperate to escape. I gritted

my teeth, locking my legs around the beast's flanks and clinging to its mane with all my strength.

Tharon fought with the ferocity of a cornered animal, his movements blurring with speed. The creature lunged again, its claws tearing at Tharon's tunic. The fabric ripped, revealing the smooth, bronze skin of his chest.

He roared, a sound so primal and chilling that even I flinched. The creature shrieked in response, its wings creating gusts of wind that threatened to unseat me. It circled, looking for an opening, then dove once more.

This time, Tharon was ready. He rolled beneath its attack, slashing upwards with his blade. A spray of dark ichor erupted from the creature's underside. It screeched in pain and fury, wheeling away only to turn for another pass.

"Niam!" Tharon called out, his eyes never leaving the circling monster. "When I say, guide the bagart through the gap I've cleared. Don't stop, no matter what!"

I nodded, though he couldn't see me, my hands tightening on the bagart's mane. The creature dove once more, and Tharon met its charge head-on. His blade flashed in the sunlight, scoring another hit along the beast's flank.

"Now!" Tharon bellowed.

I dug my heels into the bagart's sides, urging it forward. The beast needed little encouragement, bolting through the gap in the boulders Tharon had created. As we passed, I caught a glimpse of Tharon grappling with the winged horror, his muscles straining as he held its snapping jaws at bay.

The bagart raced along the mountain path, its hooves thundering against the rock. I clung to its back, my heart pounding in my ears. Behind us, I heard another bone-chilling roar from Tharon, followed by a pained shriek from the creature.

Minutes stretched like years until the bagart finally drew to a halt, finding refuge in a sheltered clearing. I slid from its back on shaky legs, my entire body trembling from the adrenaline and fear. Where was Tharon? Had he...?

A rustling from the path behind us made me whirl around. Tharon emerged from the underbrush, his clothing torn and stained with both his blood and the creature's dark ichor. But he was alive, and the fierce grin on his face sent a jolt through me that had nothing to do with fear.

"Are you alright?" he asked, his eyes scanning me for injury.

I nodded, unable to find my voice. He approached, his hand reaching out to steady me, and I found myself leaning into his touch, craving the safety and warmth he offered.

"What was that thing?" I finally managed to ask.

Tharon's expression darkened. "Something that shouldn't be here. We need to move. There might be more, and we're still too close to the Temple."

# THARON

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I crouched by the stream, washing the creature's dark ichor from my wounds. The cuts stung, but I'd endured worse.

I glanced at Niam, who sat on a nearby rock, her face pale but determined. My chest tightened. She shouldn't be out here, facing such dangers. And yet, I admired her strength.

"How are you holding up?" I asked, keeping my voice low.

She shrugged. "I'm fine. Just..." She trailed off, her gaze distant.

I nodded, understanding her unspoken words. The encounter had shaken us both.

Finishing with my wounds, I moved to check on the bagart. The beast snorted as I approached, still skittish from the attack. I ran my hands along its flanks, searching for injuries.

"Easy," I murmured, stroking its neck. "You did well."

From the corner of my eye, I caught Niam watching me. Her expression softened, a small smile playing at her lips. Heat rose to my face, and I turned away, suddenly self-conscious.

"We should keep moving," I said, clearing my throat. "The Temple guards could still be tracking us."

Niam nodded, standing up. I moved to help her onto the bagart, hyper-aware of her closeness as I lifted her. Her scent,

a mix of sweat and something uniquely her, filled my nostrils. I swallowed hard, resisting the temptation to draw her near.

“Thank you,” she said softly as she settled onto the bagart’s back.

I grunted in response, not trusting my voice. As I swung up behind her, I wrestled with conflicting instincts. All I wanted was to protect her, to whisk her away to safety. But I knew she had her own mission, her own strength. I had to respect that.

We set off, the terrain growing more treacherous with each passing hour. Jagged rocks jutted from the ground, threatening to tear the bagart’s hooves. Narrow ledges forced us to dismount and lead the beast carefully along cliffside paths.

My senses remained alert, scanning for any sign of danger. The encounter with the skyclaw had put me on edge. If one impossible thing could happen, what else might we face?

Niam stumbled on a loose stone, and my hand shot out to grip her arm instinctively. She looked up at me, our faces suddenly close. We stood frozen, my hand on her arm, her breath warm on my skin.

“I’m okay,” she said, breaking the spell. “Just lost my footing.”

I nodded, releasing Niam’s arm reluctantly. The path ahead narrowed to a treacherous ledge hugging the cliff face. I eyed the crumbling rock with distaste.

“We’ll have to lead the bagart carefully,” I said. “Stay close to the wall.”

I took the bagart’s reins, guiding it forward onto the narrow path. The creature snorted nervously, hooves scraping against loose pebbles.

“Steady,” I murmured, patting its flank.

We inched along the ledge, the drop to our right a dizzying void. Niam pressed herself against the rock face, her breathing quick and shallow. I longed to scoop her up, carry her to safety, but I knew she’d never allow it.



“You’re doing great,” I said instead, offering what reassurance I could.

She shot me a grateful look. “Thanks. I’m not usually afraid of heights, but this is...”

“Insane?” I finished for her, managing a wry smile.

“Pretty much.”

We continued in tense silence, focusing on each careful step. The bagart whinnied softly, clearly unhappy with our precarious position. I was about to suggest a brief rest when a faint, high-pitched whir reached my ears.

My blood ran cold. I knew that sound.

“Drone,” I hissed, scanning the sky. “Quick, in here!”

I yanked Niam towards a narrow crevice in the cliff face, barely visible unless you knew where to look. The bagart followed, sensing our urgency. We squeezed into the tight space, Niam’s back flush with my front, the bagart’s bulk blocking most of the entrance.

“What—” Niam started to ask, but I pressed a finger to her lips, shaking my head.

I strained my Valti-enhanced hearing, tracking the drone’s approach. The whine grew louder, accompanied by the soft hum of its scanning beam. Niam’s heart raced against my palm, her breath warm on my neck. I fought to keep my own pulse steady, hyper-aware of every point of contact between us.

The drone zipped past our hiding spot, then paused. My muscles tensed. Had it detected us? After an agonizing moment, it continued on.

I let out a careful breath. “I think we’re—”

The whir intensified. The drone was coming back.

“It’s scanning,” I whispered. “Must have picked up a trace.”

Niam’s eyes widened. “What do we do?”

I weighed our options quickly. “Stay here. I’ll draw it off.”

Before she could protest, I slipped past the bagart out of the crevice. I scanned the ground, spotting a fist-sized rock. Perfect. I scooped it up, took aim, and hurled it at the hovering drone with all my strength.

The rock struck true, knocking the drone off-course. It wobbled, sensors blinking in confusion. I sprinted towards it, pushing my Valti speed to its limit. My hands closed around the device just as it started to right itself.

Metal crunched between my fingers. Sparks flew as I crushed its delicate circuitry. The drone gave one last pathetic whir before going dark.

I jogged back to Niam, tossing the mangled drone aside. “Coast is clear, for now.”

She emerged from the crevice, relief evident on her face. “That was—”

A low rumble cut her off. The ground beneath our feet began to tremble.

“Rockslide!” I shouted, grabbing Niam’s arm.

I spotted a small cave entrance just ahead and pulled her towards it. Rocks and debris rained down around us. The bagart screamed, still tethered near the crevice.

We dove into the cave as the mountainside came crashing down. I threw myself over Niam, shielding her with my body as dust and smaller rocks pelted us. The bagart’s cries were abruptly cut off, swallowed by the roar of the avalanche.

When the rumbling finally subsided, I lifted my head cautiously. Niam lay beneath me, wide-eyed but unharmed. Our faces were inches apart, her breath mingling with mine in the close confines of the cave.

“Are you alright?” I asked, my voice rougher than I intended.

She nodded, not breaking eye contact. “Thanks to you.”

I became acutely aware of our position – my body pressed against hers, one hand cradling her head protectively.

Reluctantly, I pushed myself up and offered Niam a hand. As she stood, dust rained from her hooded robe.

“The bagart?” she asked softly.

I shook my head. “Caught in the slide. We’re on foot from here.”

Niam’s face fell, but she squared her shoulders. “Then we’d better get moving.”

## NIAM

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A horrid thought struck me, and my hands shook as I patted down my robe, searching for the hidden pocket. The device - where was it? My heart hammered against my ribs until my fingers brushed the hard edge. Still there. Still safe. I released a shaky breath, relief flooding through me.

Tharon moved through the aftermath of the rockslide with deadly grace, tossing aside stones as if they weighed nothing. Dust hung thick in the air, turning the mountain light an eerie gray. I tucked the device deeper into my pocket, acutely aware of its presence against my hip.

“The supplies are buried.” Tharon straightened, his massive frame casting a long shadow. “And the bagart...” He trailed off, jaw tight.

“I’m sorry.” My voice came out small, inadequate. Just hours ago, I’d clung to him as we rode, the powerful creature carrying us to safety through impossible terrain. Now it lay crushed under tons of rock, one more death to add to my growing tally. One more life lost because of me.

“Don’t.” His voice cut through my guilt like a blade. “The bagart died quick. And you’re alive.” Sunlight caught his blue-green hair as he turned, scanning our surroundings with predator’s eyes, a reminder of his otherworldly nature.

I pulled my robe tighter, trying to ward off the mountain chill that seemed to seep through the thin fabric and into my bones. “What do we have left?”

“My sword. Your device. The clothes we wear.” He gestured up the narrow mountain path ahead, his movements sharp with tension. “And only one way forward now.”

The rockslide had sealed off any chance of retreat. I nodded and took a step, then another. My legs trembled, protesting the movement. Hours of riding followed by our mad dash for survival had left my muscles screaming. But there was no choice except onward.

The path grew steeper, weathered rock giving way to treacherous scree that slid beneath each tentative step. After the third time I stumbled, Tharon’s hand closed around my arm, his grip gentle but firm.

“Let me help.” His voice was rough, almost angry, but his touch remained careful.

Pride warred with practicality. But his palm radiated warmth through my sleeve, and I let him steady me as we climbed, trying to ignore how natural it felt to depend on him.

The sun climbed higher, harsh and unrelenting. Sweat trickled down my back, and my throat burned with each breath of the thin mountain air. The Temple had never prepared me for this kind of physical challenge.

“Wait.” Tharon’s grip tightened suddenly, his whole body going still. “Listen.”

I heard nothing but my own labored breathing. Then it came to me - the musical trickle of water drifting on the breeze. We followed the sound to a spring bubbling from between ancient rocks, the sight of it almost bringing tears to my eyes.

I dropped to my knees beside the water, watching it run crystal clear over smooth stones. As I cupped my hands to drink, Tharon kept watch, his powerful frame a barrier between me and whatever dangers might lurk in these heights.

His expression softened for just a moment as he watched me, something warm and unguarded flickering in his eyes before his usual mask slid back into place. “Drink. Rest. We have a long way still to go.”

I let the water revive me as I drank deeply, savoring each cold sip. My stomach rumbled, reminding me that we'd lost our supplies in the rockslide. No matter. Going without food was nothing new after years of deprivation at the Temple.

Tharon watched me with those intense predator's eyes, his jaw tight. "We'll hunt once we reach lower elevation," he said gruffly. "You need to keep your strength up."

I waved a dismissive hand, putting on an air of nonchalance. "I'm fine. This is nothing compared to the Temple." The words felt hollow even to my own ears. My body ached from the climb, muscles protesting every movement. But I refused to show weakness in front of this powerful warrior.

Tharon's eyes narrowed, and he took a step closer, closing the distance between us. "You think I don't see how you tremble? How the thin air steals your breath?" His voice dropped low, a growl rumbling in his chest. "I can smell your exhaustion, little human."

I swallowed hard as he loomed over me, my pulse racing wildly at my neck. Up close, I could make out each individual spot trailing from his temples down the column of his thick neck. Unable to meet that piercing blue-green gaze, I focused on the firm line of his mouth instead.

"I-I'm not weak," I stammered, hating the way I faltered. "The Temple made me strong."

A rough fingertip tilted my chin up, forcing me to look at him. "Strength isn't stubbornness," he rumbled. "Let me care for you, Niam. You don't have to fight me on everything."

The words sparked something wild and reckless in me. I jerked my chin free of his grasp. "You presume too much, Valti. This alliance is temporary - nothing more."

His nostrils flared at the challenge in my tone. For a long, heated moment we simply stared at one another, the air crackling with unspoken tension. Then Tharon pivoted on his heel and started down the treacherous mountain path without another word.

I hurried to keep up, the rough terrain making every step a battle. The altitude stole my breath, the thin air searing my lungs. More than once I stumbled on loose scree, scraping my palms on the rocky ground.

Without warning, Tharon's arm banded around my waist, hauling me flush against the solid wall of his body. "Enough," he snarled. "I won't watch you work yourself into the grave out of sheer pigheadedness."

"But-" His stern look cut off my protest. "You have a choice, little human. Let me help you - or I carry you. Those are the only options."

My face went hot with humiliation, but I gave a terse nod. It was smarter to conserve what little energy I had left. I allowed him to take some of my weight, leaning into that frame of steel and trying not to focus too hard on the tingles his touch ignited.

We made our way down the mountain in silence, every placement of my boots calculated and slow. The valley spread out before us in a vista of lush green - patches of untamed forest interspersed with wildflower meadows. My breath caught at the sheer natural beauty of it, so different from the stark confines of Terr.

A sudden vibration against my hip made me jump. I fumbled in my robe pocket for the device, my fingers closing around the cold metal casing. As I withdrew it, a faint blue light flickered to life, almost like a guiding beacon shining from the cracks between the components.

The beam pointed resolutely to the northwest. Could this be showing us the way? Towards what - freedom? Or something more sinister lying in wait?

"Look." Tharon's deep voice pulled me from my reverie. His gaze was locked on the valley floor, sharp eyes missing nothing.

I followed the line of his outstretched arm and spotted what had caught his notice - faint paths winding through the trees in a telltale weave. My heart leapt. Game trails.

Tharon shot me a look filled with dark promises. “Lead on, little one. I’ll try to keep up.”



# THARON

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The purple dusk crept over the mountains. My keen sight picked up every dip and ridge in the path ahead, but Niam stumbled more with each step. The night creatures stirred - I caught their scents on the wind. Predators. Not close enough to threaten us, yet, but moving in our direction.

“We need shelter,” I said.

Niam’s chin lifted. “I can keep going.”

A lie, but an admirable one. Her determination only made me want her more. The curve of her neck as she looked up at me... I clenched my fists, forced myself to focus on our surroundings.

There. A dark slash in the rock face. I knew these mountains - hunters used the natural caves as temporary camps. “This way.”

She followed without argument. Progress. When we first met, she’d have demanded explanations for every decision.

I strode ahead to check the cave entrance. Old scent marks from a belevashka, but months stale. No fresh tracks. Safe enough.

“Wait here.”

I ducked inside, nostrils flaring as I tested the air. The cave stretched back maybe twenty feet, ceiling high enough to stand. Dry. Protected from the wind.

“All clear.” I emerged to find Niam leaning against the rock wall, though she straightened quickly when she saw me. My hands itched to carry her inside, to shelter her beneath my cloak and guard her sleep. But she’d hate that.

Her next step faltered. Before I could stop myself, my hand shot out to grasp her elbow.

“I’m fine,” she snapped, jerking away.

“Of course,” I replied, voice carefully neutral. “The cave’s dry. We should rest while we can.”

She hesitated, then nodded. “Just for a little while.”

I let her enter first, watching how she masked her exhaustion. Such fierce pride in that small frame. My mate. Mine to protect, whether she wanted it or not.

The thought of anyone else touching her...

I shook off the surge of possessiveness. She wasn’t ready for that conversation. Not yet.

Dead branches crackled under my boots as I gathered brush near the cave entrance. Every few steps, I glanced back at Niam. She sat cross-legged against the far wall, the device balanced on her knees. Her fingers traced its edges with a delicate precision that made my skin burn.

The wind shifted, carrying her scent to me - incense mixed with something uniquely her. My hands crushed the branch I held.

The rockslide had taken our mount, the bedding, the supplies I’d carefully packed.

And the suppressant.

Already the Valti stirred beneath my skin, demanding I claim what was mine.

Niam pulled her thin robe tighter. The cave’s chill air raised bumps along her arms. I could warm her. Should warm her. My cloak would envelope her small frame completely...

No. She’d reject any such gesture. The wariness in her posture whenever I moved too quickly told me enough.

I arranged the kindling with careful, measured movements. “The fire will help.”

She nodded without looking up. The device’s metallic surface reflected blue light across her face.

My instincts screamed to block the cave entrance, to guard my mate from any threat. Instead, I positioned myself between her and the opening while maintaining a respectful distance. The monster inside me snarled at the compromise.

The fire caught. Its warmth did nothing to ease the fever building in my blood. Each breath brought more of her scent, stoking the Valti’s hunger. I needed to hunt - both to feed her and to burn off this dangerous energy.

“Stay by the fire,” I said, rising. “I’ll find us something to eat.”

“I don’t need a keeper.”

“No. But you do need food.” I strode toward the entrance before my control slipped further. “I won’t be long.”

She nodded without looking up from the device. “Don’t go far.”

“I won’t.” The promise came without thought. Even now, the need to protect warred with the urge to claim. I had to get away from her scent before I lost control completely.

The night air filled my lungs with scents - rock dust, mountain herbs, and beneath it all, prey. My Valti senses cut through the darkness. Each shadow held meaning, each rustle spoke volumes.

There. A flash of movement on the ridge. Rock tserna grazed along a narrow ledge, their curved horns stark against the mountainside.

Without a bow or sling, no time to set a snare and wait... I bit back a curse. The proud prince of Zashi, reduced to hunting like a common beast. My mother’s voice mocked me from memory: “Only savages hunt with teeth and claws. You must stay above that, always.”

I was glad she was dead, taking her poisonous words with her.

The closest one, a young male, strayed from the herd. Perfect. But the angle...

I let the Valti rise just enough to sharpen my reflexes. Power surged through my muscles as I crept closer. The beast purred at the prospect of the hunt.

One chance. The tserna's head lifted, testing the air. Now.

I launched myself from the higher ledge. The distance vanished as Valti strength propelled me forward. My claws extended mid-leap.

The impact drove us both to the ground. My hand clamped around its muzzle, silencing any cry. One swift twist and it was done. Clean. Quick. But the sight of my claws buried in its flesh...

I rose, wiping blood from my hands. A prince of Zashi should hunt with fine weapons, not tear at prey like an animal. But Niam needed food.

Niam. The thought of her waiting in the cave steadied me. I extended my claws again, this time to butcher the carcass. The tender cuts went into a pile for her. The rest I could eat raw if needed.

"First proper weapon I find," I muttered as I cleaned my claws on the grass. "Then I'll hunt like civilized people."

The meat would strengthen Niam. That mattered more than my pride. I gathered the best portions and headed back toward the cave, leaving the rest for scavengers. At least the kill had burned off some of the dangerous energy that built whenever I got too close to her.

But now I had to return to that small space, filled with her scent...

Fear struck me, and I sprinted back to the cave, cursing myself for leaving her alone. The meat bounced against my leg with each stride. What if temple guards found her? What if the skyclaw returned?

The cave entrance yawned ahead, dark and empty. No signs of intrusion. My nose confirmed it - only our scents lingered.

Inside, the fire burned low. Niam slept curled against the wall, her strange device clutched to her chest. Her breaths came slow and steady.

My shoulders dropped. Safe. She was safe.

I added wood to the embers, careful not to wake her. The flames caught, casting orange light across her face. Even in sleep, her jaw stayed set with determination.

The meat needed preparation. I sliced it into strips with precise cuts of my claws, arranging them on clean stones near the fire. No need to advertise how I'd made the kill.

The aroma of cooking meat filled the cave. Niam stirred, her nose twitching. She blinked at the fire, then sat up straight.

“How long did I sleep?”

“Not long enough.” I turned the meat. “But food’s almost ready.”

She stretched, joints popping. “Did you find something to hunt?”

“Rock tserna. Common enough in these mountains.” Moving casually, I slid the bloody scraps under leaves.

“With what weapon?”

I shrugged. “I managed.”

Her eyes narrowed, but she didn't press. Instead, she watched the meat cook, stomach growling loud enough for my enhanced hearing to catch.

I passed her the first cooked pieces on a flat stone. “Careful, it's hot.”

She took a bite without hesitation. No questions about preparation or safety. Just pure trust.

My pride was undeniable. My mate, accepting my provision. The Valti preened.

“This is good,” she said between bites. “Really good.”

I added more meat to the fire, pretending her praise didn't affect me. But inside, beast and man both glowed with satisfaction. I'd provided for her, protected her. Maybe earned a fraction more of her trust.

She finished her portion and licked her fingers clean. The sight of her tongue...

I focused very hard on cooking the rest of the meat.

# NIAM

---

I awoke to the warm glow of embers in the cave's depths. Gone were the chill metal walls and ominous beeping machines of the Temple's alcoves. My eyes opened not to harsh artificial light, but flickering flames dancing across rough stone.

Two mornings now. How many more could I wish for?

A profound sense of freedom washed over me. No longer was I tethered to the Temple's will, my mind an open conduit for its systems. I breathed deep, savoring the musty cave air - a stark contrast to the stale, recycled atmosphere I'd known my entire life.

As my senses fully returned, I became aware of a heavy weight draped across my body. Blinking in the dimness, I realized it was Tharon's thick cloak covering me. The soft fur lining held his rugged, earthy scent that stirred something primal within me.

We'd lost all our supplies when that rockslide hit, burying our bags and leaving us with only the clothes on our backs. Yet Tharon had given up his sole remaining warmth to ensure my comfort through the night. The selfless act of caring filled me with a tenderness I hadn't experienced before.

Close by, Tharon tended to a small fire, its crackling the only sound in our secluded shelter. He moved with disciplined efficiency, laying out strips of meat from last night's hunt on flat stones to dry into trail rations. His powerful frame and fluid motions mesmerized me.

With our packs gone, we'd need to get resourceful about carrying provisions. My fingers ran across the edges of the device secured inside my robes - the device I hoped held the key to ending the Temple's atrocities forever.

I must have stirred, for Tharon's intense eyes locked onto mine. "You're awake," he stated simply, giving me a brief nod.

Rolling onto my side, I shrugged off his luxuriously soft cloak. "I am. Thank you for that." I nodded toward the fur bundled beside me.

A ghost of a smile played across his full lips. "You were shivering. I required it less than you."

With the cloak off, the cool air prickled over my skin, raising goosebumps along my arms and back. I suppressed a slight tremble, stubbornly refusing to ask for its return. Bad enough I depended on this shakai warrior's strength - I wouldn't allow myself to seem frailer than I already was.

"I preserved what I could of the tserna." Tharon gestured toward the meager pile of drying meat strips.

Tharon wrapped the strips of dried meat in broad leaves, his fingers deft as he wove stalks of grass to bind the makeshift packages. The meat would keep us fed for a few days at least.

We left the cave behind, striking out across the mountainside. My legs burned with each step up the steep incline, but I refused to slow our pace. The device tucked inside my robes pressed into me with each labored breath, a constant reminder of my purpose. A flicker of movement in the sky caught my attention. I stopped, scanning the clouds.

"What is it?" Tharon asked, moving closer to me.

"The drones. I didn't expect them." My hand clenched in my robe. "The Temple never deployed them before, not even when Lita and the others escaped."

"Why now?"

"Because I'm different." The words tasted bitter. "Lita, Mila, Denna - they were just girls to be used and discarded



when broken. But me..." I swallowed hard. "I was part of the system itself. The Temple needs me back."

Tharon's warm hand wrapped around my shoulder, turning me to face him. "That will never happen. Do you understand?" His grip tightened. "You are never going back there."

"You don't know what they're capable of."

"Neither do they know what I'm capable of." His thumb traced along my collarbone, sending electric sparks through my body. "I will tear down the Temple stone by stone before I let them take you."

His fierce declaration filled me with warmth. No one had ever protected me before. I'd always been a tool, a conduit, never someone worth fighting for.

I pulled away from his touch, needing distance to think clearly. "We should keep moving. There can't be many drones left after all these years, but even one could track us."

Tharon nodded, falling into step beside me as we continued our ascent. But I could feel his gaze on me, watchful and intent, ready to stand between me and any threat - even ones that came from the sky.

The device buzzed, startling me from my thoughts. I pulled it from my robes.

"What direction?" Tharon asked, stepping closer to examine it.

I rotated slowly, watching the device's pulsing light as it changed with my movements. "This way." I pointed down the mountain's eastern slope. "The signal grows stronger."

"There's a valley in that direction." Tharon studied the terrain ahead. "We should reach it by midday."

The path down proved easier than our ascent. Small rocks skittered away under our feet as we picked our way between larger boulders. The device's rhythmic buzzing guided us, growing more insistent with each step.

The harsh mountain landscape softened as we descended. Scraggly bushes dotted the rocky ground, then gave way to

scattered trees with silver-gray bark. Their branches reached toward the sky like gnarled fingers.

Tharon stopped abruptly. His nostrils flared as he scanned our surroundings. Before I could ask what troubled him, he pulled my hood forward, shadowing my face.

“Other Shakai nearby,” he murmured. “They’ll see you as a Frostling - a creature of myth. Best to keep you hidden.”

I almost laughed at the irony. The Temple had made me more machine than human, yet out here I’d be feared as some mythical being. All too human, all too broken.

A gust of wind cut through my robes. Without thinking, I pressed closer to Tharon’s warmth. His arm came around me, steady and sure. I was startled by how wholly I trusted him now. Yet I couldn’t deny the comfort his presence brought, how safe I felt within the circle of his protection.

This wasn’t part of the plan. I needed his help to destroy the Temple, nothing more. But my body betrayed me, melting into his embrace as naturally as breathing.

Tharon leaned close, his whisper the slightest sound. “We could circle around. Avoid them entirely.”

My fingers danced along the device’s edges through my robes. Every moment counted now. “That might be best. I don’t want anything delaying us from reaching the pod.”

We veered off the path, picking our way through dense underbrush. The branches caught at my robes, tugging me back with each step. Tharon cleared the way ahead, his broad shoulders breaking a path through the foliage.

The first thunder of hoofbeats froze me mid-step. Close. Too close.

Tharon spun around, scooping me into his arms before I could protest. He ran, his powerful strides eating up the ground as branches whipped past us. My hands clutched his shoulders, feeling the bunching of muscle beneath.

More hoofbeats joined the first, coming from all directions now. The rhythmic pounding drew closer, surrounding us.

Tharon skidded to a halt as five villarts burst from the trees ahead, their reptilian hides gleaming with sweat. More riders emerged behind us, boxing us in.

Tharon lowered me to my feet but kept me pressed against him. His arm around my waist anchored me as he drew his sword with his free hand. The blade sang as it cleared its sheath.

“Stay behind me,” he murmured.

The circle of mounted warriors closed in, their villarts' claws kicking up dead leaves. I pressed my back against Tharon's solid warmth. The riders' faces blurred together - all I saw were weapons pointed our way.

# THARON

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I scanned the enemy warriors, calculating odds, when a familiar face caught my attention. The long silver braids first, then the weathered features I'd faced across countless negotiation tables. Elder Mahra of the Dergian mines dismounted her villart with surprising grace for her age.

Raw crystal chunks bound in copper at her throat and wrists caught the filtered sunlight. The traditional jewelry marked her status as clearly as the elaborate pattern of her braids - though she'd added more silver strands since I'd last seen her.

Three years ago she'd driven a brutally shrewd bargain for her clan's gems. I'd respected her then. Now, with Niam pressed against my back, I found myself hoping that respect might work in our favor.

Mahra's eyes narrowed as she studied me. Even travel-worn and dirty, a prince of Zashi commanded recognition.

A broad-shouldered warrior pushed his villart forward, too much gold woven through his braids for his rank. "You're deep in Dergian territory." He straightened in his saddle. "Explain yourselves."

I kept my sword ready but let my diplomatic training surface. "We mean no harm to your people. We seek only safe passage."

"Safe passage?" He sneered. "Armed and skulking through our forests?"

The crack of Mahra's walking stick against his leg cut off further posturing.

"You'd question a prince of Zashi, you preening therok?" Her stick pointed at his face. "Did your mother teach you no manners?"

The warrior's mouth opened and closed several times. "My...I...forgive me, Your Highness. I didn't recognize..."

I savored his stammering apology, though my expression remained neutral. Diplomatic training had its uses.

"We lost our supplies in a rock fall two days ago," I said, shifting to keep Niam behind me. Each breeze pulled at her hood, threatening to expose her to these strangers. "I need to hunt, but my companion requires rest."

My pride choked the next words. A prince shouldn't need to beg favors, but Niam's safety outweighed my ego. "Would you shelter her while I seek game?"

Mahra stepped closer, her wooden stick tapping against the ground. "Of course. The clan's hospitality is yours." She turned to the mounted warriors. "Bavak, take your hunters north. The prince's presence here stays between us."

The gold-braided warrior's gaze lingered on Niam's cloaked form. Too long. My fingers tightened on my sword hilt.

"As you command, Elder." Bavak wheeled his mount around.

"Shen." Mahra gestured to a young hunter. "Give up your mount. You'll double with Kevat."

The boy dismounted immediately, leading his villart forward. I helped Niam up first, using my body to block the others' view. Her small frame settled between my arms as I mounted behind her. Her trembling registered through my clothes - exhaustion or fear, I couldn't tell.

The villart's gait jostled us together with each step. Niam's warmth seeped into me, her scent filling my nose. I tightened

my arms around her when other riders drew near, earning curious glances from the warriors.

The warriors closed ranks around us. Too close.

We needed these people. Their protection. Their resources. Their silence.

But I watched. Every rider. Every shadow between the trees. Every flutter of leaves that might hide a Temple drone.

I would keep her safe. No matter the cost.

The mountain path wound down toward the valley below. Mahra's hunters spread out in a protective circle, but their very presence made my shoulders knot with fresh tension.

"Stop fidgeting," Niam whispered. "You'll draw even more attention to us."

Despite her words I kept scanning our surroundings. The Temple wouldn't give up easily. And Niam...

She was mine to protect now. Whether she accepted it yet or not.

The Dergian mining camp spread through the valley in neat rows, each tent adorned with chunks of raw crystal. Blue gems caught the late afternoon sun, throwing fractured light across walkways. Red stones dangled from tent poles, traditional wards against evil spirits. Wood smoke drifted through the air, mixing with the sharp tang of metal and stone dust - the unmistakable smell of a mining operation.

I counted twelve armed guards at the perimeter, their leather armor studded with protective crystals. Three more patrolled between the tents, boots crunching on scattered gravel. The eastern edge backed against a cliff face - defensible, but also a trap if we needed to run. Picks and hammers rang against stone in the distance, the rhythm of miners at work.

"The mess tent serves excellent stew," Mahra said, leading us between the rows. "We can have some brought to my quarters."

Perfect. The fewer people who saw Niam's face, the better. I kept her close as we walked, using my height to shield her from curious stares. The miners still paused in their work to watch us pass, tools hanging forgotten in their hands. Their faces were streaked with stone dust, gems glinting from braids and belts.

"Did you see the prince?"

"Who's that with him?"

The whispers followed us down the path. I pressed my hand against Niam's back, urging her forward. Her muscles jumped at my touch.

Mahra's tent dominated the center of camp, raw gems worked into intricate patterns across the fabric. More crystals hung in strands from the entry flap, chiming softly in the breeze like miniature bells.

"After you," Mahra held the flap aside.

Inside, incense smoke mixed with wood smoke from a small brazier. Thick furs covered the ground, and jewel-studded cushions created conversation areas throughout the space.

"Sit." Mahra pointed to a cluster of seats. "Before you fall over."

Niam sank onto a cushion, but I remained standing. Better position to reach my sword if needed.

"Now." Mahra settled across from us. "Would you like to explain why you're traveling with a Frostling, Your Highness?"

Heat surged through my veins. My hands clenched.

"Elder Mahra." I fought to keep my voice level. "Weigh your words well."

But Mahra threw back her head and laughed. "Oh, sit down, boy. If I meant her harm, my hunters would have taken care of that in the forest." She smiled at Niam. "Besides, I've been waiting decades to meet one of your kind face to face."

“You knew?” Niam’s hood fell back. “About my people?”

“Child, the miners see much in these mountains. Now, shall we discuss what brought a prince and a creature of legend to my doorstep?”



## NIAM

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Tharon shifted his weight from one foot to another behind my cushion. His proximity warmed my back, but his refusal to sit pricked at my nerves.

“I can protect myself,” I muttered.

“Of course you can.” Tharon’s hand brushed my shoulder. “That’s why you’re falling over from exhaustion.”

“Enough, both of you.” Mahra clapped her hands. “We’ll discuss everything after food. You look half-starved, child.”

A servant materialized at the tent flap.

“Bring us the evening meal.” Mahra waved her hand. “And wine.”

Tharon pulled out the wrapped meat from his pack. “Take this to the kitchens,” he told the servant. “Share it with the camp.”

The smell of roasting meat drifted into the tent minutes later. My empty stomach and salivating mouth reminded me how long it had been since our last proper meal.

Two servants brought in steaming bowls of stew and fresh bread. The rich aroma of spices made my mouth water.

“My cooking skills don’t compare,” Tharon said, finally settling beside me. His leg pressed against mine as he reached for his bowl.

I froze with my spoon halfway to my mouth. “Did you just make a joke?”

“I’ve been known to, on occasion.” The corner of his mouth lifted.

The stew burned my tongue, but I didn’t care. The meat melted in my mouth, tender and flavorful. Far better than Tharon’s barely-cooked attempts over our campfire.

Mahra watched us both, her sharp eyes missing nothing. She balanced her bowl in one hand, rings glinting in the brazier light. What did she want? Could I trust her with our mission? With the truth about the Temple?

One more person to convince. One more risk to take.

But first, I had a bowl of stew to finish.

After long minutes, I set my empty bowl aside and bowed my head to Mahra. “Thank you for your hospitality.”

Tharon squeezed my shoulder. His warmth seeped through my robe, grounding me.

“Now, child.” Mahra leaned forward. “Tell me what drives you across our lands.”

I stared into the brazier’s flames. How to explain any of this?

I struggled to speak, memories of the Temple’s horrors rising up. “I don’t know what you have heard about my people. We’re not Frostlings, not creatures of legend. Simply people. But there is a curse that controls our city.”

The Temple, the drawing of lots. All those women sacrificed to feed the insatiable hunger of the machine.

A curse indeed.

My hand drifted to the scars at my neck where the jacks had been. “I escaped, but not unscathed.”

Tharon’s fingers tightened on my shoulder.

“This evil,” I continued, “has existed for generations. It has been part of our lives for so long that we no longer wonder why we must endure it.” The flames blurred before my eyes. “What I seek could end it. Must end it.”

“And what do you seek?” Mahra’s rings clinked against her cup.

I hesitated, then slowly withdrew the device from my robe. Its surface caught the brazier light, intricate symbols rippling across the metal. “A relic of my people’s past. Something lost when we first came to these lands.”

The device pulsed.

“The components of this relic were scattered across the Shakai lands, hidden.” I traced one of the raised lines with my finger. “This device guides us to the next stage.”

Mahra extended her hand, palm up. My fingers tightened around the device before I forced them to relax. I placed it in her waiting hand.

She turned it this way and that, the metallic surface reflecting the brazier’s flames. The guidelight cast a steady beam toward the mountains. “In all my years trading across these lands, I’ve never encountered its like.” Her rings clicked against the raised designs. “The craftsmanship...”

I held my breath. The silence stretched as she studied it, my heart drumming against my ribs. What would she make of it? What would she do with this knowledge?

“Here.” She handed it back, careful not to disrupt its orientation. “You should keep this close.”

Relief flooded through me as I tucked it away.

“Now.” Mahra fixed her stare on Tharon. “The camp needs fresh meat. Go help.”

Tharon’s hand returned to my shoulder. “I should stay.”

“Nonsense. Your mate will be perfectly safe here.” Mahra’s rings flashed as she gestured. “No one would dare harm a guest in my tent.”

Tharon and I rose together. His hand cupped my face, his thumb brushing my cheek, my breath coming short with his touch. “If anyone—”

I placed my hand over his. We'd only been together for two days.

There was no reason for him to be acting like this. No reason for him to have come to help me at all.

So why did this bond between us feel so right?

"I know. Go hunt."

He inhaled sharply, then forced himself to step back.

"Elder Mahra." His voice carried an edge of warning. "Keep her safe."

"Mind your manners, young prince." Mahra's rebuke carried the weight of years. "I've been guarding treasures since before you were born."

A flash of shame crossed Tharon's face before he ducked out of the tent.

Mahra called out to a servant just outside the tent flap. "Bring clean clothing and hot water for washing." She turned back to me. "That one needs to be careful. His Valti nature rides too close to the surface."

"What do you mean?"

"The beast within him grows stronger each day." She poured more wine. "And I suspect you, my dear, are the cause."

"The cause?" My mouth went dry. How could I have anything to do with this?

Before Mahra could explain, three Shakai women ducked into the tent carrying a wooden tub between them.

The women's copper skin glowed in the brazier light, their long hair twisted into intricate braids - one silver, one deep blue, one a mix of both. They dressed in fitted leather pants and loose silk tunics that shimmered as they moved, cinched with elaborately tooled belts. Small spots trailed down their necks, barely visible against their skin.

Despite their delicate features and small frames, they lifted the heavy tub with practiced ease.

Two more followed with steaming buckets. The sharp scent of herbs filled the air as they poured the water.

I pulled my robe closer. The Temple had stripped away any modesty long ago, but these strangers...

Mahra waved her hand. "Leave us." The women bowed and retreated. "No need to be shy, child. I've borne three children and buried two husbands. There's nothing I haven't seen, and I know how to keep a secret."

Still, I hesitated.

"Come." She stood behind me, her hands gentle on my shoulders. "Let me help you."

The robe slipped away. Cool air kissed my skin as Mahra guided me into the tub. The water enveloped me in blessed heat, easing muscles I hadn't realized ached.

Mahra's fingers traced one of the scars on my back where the firewhips of the priests had marked me, brushed the newly healed skin where the access ports down my spine had been. "Has Tharon seen these yet?"

"Of course not." Heat rushed to my face as I imagined his hands there instead of hers, trailing over the marks of my imprisonment. Would he be disgusted? Or would his touch be as tender as his gaze?

I dunked my head under the water. "Tell me about his beast. Please. What did you mean?"

"Ah." Mahra poured sweet-scented oil onto my shoulders. "The warriors of the Shakai kingdoms are fierce. But there are some that carry something extra in the blood. The Valti are both blessed and cursed. Their strength, their passion - it comes with a price. The beast grows stronger as they age, until they find their true mate."

"And if they don't?"

"They lose themselves to it. Become nothing but the beast." Her hands stilled. "Tharon has fought his nature longer than most. To be honest, I'd doubted he carried the Valti blood at all. But now..."

I turned to face her. “Now?”

“Now he’s found you.” Her grin widened. “His mate.”

# THARON

---

Outside the tent, my blood roared through my veins. The need to run, to hunt, to kill thrummed beneath my skin. Every step away from Niam pulled at me until an ache grew deep in my very bones.

Two days. Two impossible days with her, and already the thought of leaving her side burned.

“Prince Tharon.” Bavak’s call cut through my thoughts. He stood with three other hunters, bows strapped to their backs. “Join us?”

I inclined my head. Perhaps the physical activity would clear my mind. “Of course.”

“Your...” Bavak paused. “Your companion will be safe here.”

The reference to Niam made my hands clench. With effort, I relaxed them. These were Mahra’s people. They meant no harm.

“Here.” An older hunter handed me his spare bow. “Unless you prefer more... direct methods?”

The implication was clear. They all knew what I was.

I tested the draw. The weapon balanced well enough. “This will do.”

We moved into the forest, spreading out in a standard hunting pattern. The physical activity helped, but thoughts of Niam invaded with every breath. The curve of her neck. The

steel in her spine. The fierce determination in her face when she spoke of her plans.

A rustle in the undergrowth snapped my attention back to the present. Bavak signaled - large prey, moving east. Perfect.

The hunt began in earnest now. We tracked the beast through the deepening shadows, following broken twigs and disturbed leaves. My enhanced senses picked up its musk on the wind.

There - a flash of tawny fur through the trees. A belevashka, larger than most. A worthy prize.

Four arrows flew. Three missed.

Mine struck true, but only wounded. The beast spun, snarling, yellow fangs bared.

This. This was what I needed.

The belevashka's blood trail led deeper into the ancient forest. My muscles burned with the thrill of pursuit as we crashed through the undergrowth.

"Split up," I ordered. "Circle around. Drive it toward the clearing."

The hunters fanned out through the trees. Twigs snapped under their boots, leaves rustled. But I moved in silence, my Valti nature letting me track the cat's ragged breathing.

Blood pulsed through my veins, each heartbeat a drumbeat of hunt-chase-kill. Without my suppressants, the beast inside me reveled in the pursuit.

A flash of movement - there. The creature struggled up a rocky slope, my arrow still protruding from its flank. Its muscles bunched as it prepared to spring.

I nocked another arrow, but it launched itself at Bavak instead. The hunter raised his bow too late.

The Valti took over. I dropped the bow and intercepted it mid-leap, catching its bulk with my shoulder. We tumbled down the slope together, a snarling mass of fur and fangs and claws.



Pain lanced through my arm as fangs pierced flesh. The scent of my own blood only fueled the fire in my veins. I grabbed the belevashka's throat with one hand, squeezing. My other hand found purchase in its fur as we wrestled.

It thrashed and clawed, but I held firm. Its struggles grew weaker as my grip tightened. With a final wrench, I snapped its neck.

The sound of breaking bone echoed through the trees. I stood over my kill, chest heaving, blood dripping from my wounds.

"By the ancestors," the young hunter breathed. "I've never seen anything like that."

Bavak approached cautiously. "Are you injured, my prince?"

The title snapped me back to myself. I forced the Valti down, though it fought me every step. "Nothing serious. The meat will feed the camp well tonight."

But even as we field-dressed the carcass, my thoughts returned to Niam. The hunt had done nothing to quiet my need for her. If anything, the beast's victory only made it stronger.

I needed to get back to her. Now.

"You two, carry the meat back to camp," I ordered. "Bavak, with me. We'll scout ahead for any other predators in the area."

The stream ran cold over my wounds, washing away blood and dirt. Better Niam not see the evidence of the fight. She had worries enough without seeing how close the belevashka had come to taking my throat.

Bavak kept watch while I cleaned up, though his constant glances in my direction grated on my nerves.

"Speak your mind," I ordered.

"The Frostling. She's different from the stories."

I splashed water over my face to hide my reaction. "Different how?"

“The old tales say they’re monsters. But she’s...” He stopped, searching for words.

“Choose your next words with care.” The beast stirred inside me, protective and possessive.

“She carries herself like a queen, my prince. Not a monster at all.”

Smart man. I nodded my approval as I pulled my tunic back on.

A splash of purple caught my attention as we walked back through the forest. Wild mountain flowers grew in a small patch between the trees.

My mother’s voice drifted through memory: “Really, Tharon. Flowers? Such a common gesture. A prince should give jewels, not weeds.”

The memory stung, but I knelt anyway, gathering the purple blooms. Let them think what they wanted. Niam would understand.

Voices drifted through the trees as we approached camp.

“Did you see her skin? White as snow...”

“They say Frostlings steal children in the night...”

“The prince brought her. Must be important...”

“But what *is* she?”

My pride soared for my mate. Let them wonder. Let them whisper. Niam would walk among them with her head high, never flinching from their stares. She’d survived horrors they couldn’t imagine, fought battles they’d never understand.

And she was mine.

Soon, I’d make her see that too.

I caught sight of her through the trees, speaking with Mahra. Her close-cropped red hair caught the sunlight like flames. My steps quickened of their own accord.

The flowers felt foolish in my hand now, but I wouldn’t discard them. She deserved every scrap of beauty I could give

her.

Mahra had dressed Niam in traditional Shakai clothing - fitted leather pants and a flowing tunic that caught the light. Copper threads woven through the fabric sparkled with each movement, tiny gems studded the belt at her waist. The sight of her in our clothes made my breath catch.

A group of children circled her feet, pestering her with questions. Their high-pitched voices carried across the camp.

“Do Frostlings really eat snow?”

“Can you freeze people with a touch?”

“Why is your hair red like fire?”

Niam’s laugh rang out, clear and bright. “No, we don’t eat snow. And I’ve never frozen anyone.” She knelt down to their level. “But I do know stories about brave warriors who fought ice dragons.”

“Tell us! Tell us!”

I gripped the flowers behind my back, suddenly unsure of my approach. The beast inside me wanted to charge forward, claim her attention. But watching her surrounded by curious children, her face lit with joy, made me pause.

“Well,” she started, “there was once a warrior princess who lived in a castle made of ice...”

The children leaned in, entranced. Even from here, I saw the spark in her eyes as she wove her tale. This wasn’t the haunted woman from the Temple. This was Niam as she should be - fierce and free.

I took a step forward. A twig snapped under my boot.

The children’s heads whipped around. One small girl squeaked at the sight of me, then they scattered like startled birds, giggling as they ran.

Niam stood, brushing dust from her knees. “You have quite the effect on them.”

“I...” Words failed me. I thrust the flowers forward. “These are for you.”

She stared at the purple blooms, then at me. A smile tugged at her lips. “The fearsome hunter brings me flowers?”

“If you don’t want them-”

“I didn’t say that.” She took them from my hand, her fingers brushing mine. The contact sent sparks along my skin, and I barely managed to shove down a growl. “They’re beautiful. Thank you.”

## NIAM

---

The delicate purple blooms nestled in my hand, their petals brushing softly against my palm. Such an unexpected gesture from a warrior prince. A man who brought down a monster with his bare hands now offered me wildflowers like a village boy courting his sweetheart. “You surprise me.” I lifted the flowers to my nose, breathed in their sweet scent.

“Good surprises, I hope.”

The sleeve of his hunting jacket pulled back as he pushed his hair from his face. Dark stains marred the fabric - blood he’d tried to hide. My chest constricted.

“You’re hurt.”

“It’s nothing.”

“That beast got you.”

“I got it first.” His lips curved up, pride and something darker in his expression. “No one will threaten you while I draw breath.”

That possessive note in his voice should have frightened me. Instead, heat bloomed low in my belly. Mahra’s words from earlier drifted back: “*The Valti know their mates on sight. Their beasts recognize what their minds might deny.*”

I shook my head, trying to clear it. Mates? Me? I was broken, used, my mind and body violated by the Temple’s integration. The metal ports in my skull might be gone, but the scars remained. How could I be anyone’s mate, let alone a Shakai prince’s?

And it didn't matter.

The Temple still stood. Women still died in its chambers, their bodies and minds consumed by the ship's endless hunger. I had to end it. That was my only purpose now.

A shout cut through my musings. "Prince Tharon! We need your tracking skills!"

Tharon's jaw tightened, but he stepped back from me. His fingers brushed mine as he took one of the flowers, tucking it into a fold of my shirt with surprising gentleness. Then he strode toward the hunters, his broad shoulders tense with irritation at the interruption.

Mahra approached with a leather pouch in her hands. The fading sunlight caught on crystal shards woven into intricate patterns across its surface.

"For your device," she said, pressing it into my hands. "My grandmother would have sworn that the crystals will keep it safe." She grinned. "Even if that's nonsense, they're pretty enough."

The leather warmed under my fingers, butter-soft and supple. Such care in the craftsmanship, each crystal precisely placed.

"Thank you." I slipped my device inside, relieved to have somewhere safer than my robe to keep it.

Women moved through the camp, carrying bundles. One stopped to give me a small stack of clothes for both myself and Tharon - practical things in soft leather and wool. Another brought healing supplies - bandages, salves, dried herbs.

The generosity staggered me. In the Temple, there was never enough. Here, they gave freely.

My throat tightened as I accepted each gift. "I don't know what to say."

"Say nothing." Mahra squeezed my shoulder. "We take care of our own."

But I wasn't one of them. I was human, an outsider.

Across the fire, Tharon spoke with a group of hunters, his bearing regal despite his torn clothes. A child ran up to show him a carved wooden toy. He crouched down, examining it with exaggerated interest, praising the clumsy craftsmanship.

“He’ll make a good father someday,” Mahra murmured.

My chest ached. I looked away from the domestic scene, focusing on my bundles instead. I couldn’t afford these feelings, this yearning for something I could never have.

But watching him move through his people, switching effortlessly between stern prince and gentle protector, made it harder to remember that.

Later, the sun slipped behind the mountains, painting the sky in deep purples that reminded me of Tharon’s flowers. After sharing another meal around the fires, Mahra led me back to her tent and I looked around more closely.

The interior glowed with the warm light of oil lamps, casting dancing shadows on the woven tapestries that lined the walls. Thick rugs covered the ground, their intricate patterns telling stories I couldn’t read. The air held the spicy scent of night-blooming flowers and herbs hung to dry from the tent poles.

The furs tickled my nose, too soft, too clean. Mahra’s steady snores filled the tent, a counterpoint to Tharon’s footsteps outside. Back and forth, back and forth, like a caged predator.

I rolled onto my back, stared at the tent’s peaked ceiling. Sleep danced away from my grasp. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw Laren’s face, the way she’d looked at me before she ran back into the Temple. Back to her captors. Back to the mindlessness inflicted by the Tomb.

I touched the scars at the base of my skull. The priests had put the first port in when I turned eight. By twelve, I’d served as their living conduit to the Temple’s machinery. They’d praised my connection, my ability to interface. None of them noticed when I accessed the ancient databanks, learned about the Shakai from the original surveys of this world.

What good had that knowledge done? I hadn't saved Laren. Hadn't saved anyone.

Tharon's steps paused. My breath caught.

"Rest," he murmured through the tent wall. "I'll keep watch."

My face burned. Of course, he knew I lay awake.

There was so much I didn't understand about this man.

Like the way he brought me flowers. A prince, a warrior, stopping to pick purple blooms because... because what? Because he thought I'd like them? Because his beast demanded he court me?

The leather pouch pressed against my hip, device safely nestled inside. I should focus on that, on my mission. Not on the way Tharon's fingers had brushed mine, not on the heat in his gaze when he thought I didn't see.

His boots crunched on pebbles - three steps right, stop, pivot, three steps left.

Guard duty. Protection. That's all this was.

But I remembered his words. "*No one will threaten you while I draw breath.*"

The Temple had taught me not to trust, not to need. Every girl who relied on another found herself betrayed. The priests made sure of that. Better to stand alone than risk attachment.

Yet here I lay, surrounded by Shakai hospitality, letting a Valti prince stand guard while I rested in furs that smelled of spices and smoke.

My chest squeezed. I couldn't afford this weakness.

Tharon's shadow passed across the tent wall. My skin prickled, aware of his proximity even through the barrier between us.

I pressed my face into the furs and prayed for sleep.

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THE CAMP STIRRED to life around me as I emerged from Mahra's tent, my borrowed sleeping clothes replaced by practical travel gear. The air held the crisp bite of morning, promising another clear day ahead.

A villart, smaller than the bagart we'd lost in the rockslide, waited near the central fire, already saddled and laden with supplies. The creature turned its scaled head toward me, flicking a forked tongue to taste the air.

"A parting gift," Mahra said, appearing at my shoulder.

From her pack, she drew out a length of fabric that caught the morning light. The silk rippled between deep blue and green, like sunlight through water. Tiny crystals studded the edges in an intricate pattern that matched the leather pouch she'd given me last night.

"For hiding those Temple-marked places," she said, fingers brushing near the scars at my neck. "And for keeping you safe on the road ahead."

The fabric slid coolly across me as she draped it over my head. Her weathered hands moved with practiced grace, tucking and folding until the scarf framed my face perfectly. The weight settled like a gentle embrace. "There." She reached into her pocket and pulled out a pin. Precious stones winked in a spiral pattern, their colors echoing the silk. "This belonged to my daughter."

My throat tightened. "Mahra, I can't-"

"I insist." She secured the scarf with swift, sure movements. "She would have wanted someone to use it, not let it gather dust in my tent."

The pin's weight anchored the silk, keeping it from slipping. I touched it gently, afraid to disturb Mahra's careful arrangement. The metal held the warmth of her hands.

"Thank you." The words came out rougher than I intended.

She adjusted one final fold, then stepped back to examine her work. "Now you look like a proper Shakai woman. Keep your head down in the towns, and no one will look twice."

I caught my reflection in a polished copper pot. The silk transformed me, softening my too-sharp features, hiding the stark evidence of the Temple's violation. With my face partially concealed, I could almost pass for one of them. Almost belong.

The pin glinted in the sunlight, its spiral pattern drawing the eye away from the oddness of my human features. Mahra's daughter must have been beautiful, wearing this. I wondered what happened to her, but didn't dare ask.

Mahra's weathered hands closed over mine. "If it bothers you, consider it an investment. Next time I face your Valti prince across the trading tables, he'll remember the debt."

"He's not my-"

"Sure, sure." She squeezed my fingers. "And you're going where next?"

I pulled the device out, turned it until a soft blue light pulsed, pointing toward distant peaks. "That way."

"How far?"

"I don't know." The truth burned my tongue.

"Then you'd better get started." She patted my shoulder. "Accept help when it's offered, little warrior. Pride makes for a cold companion on the road."

Tharon approached, his own gear changed and weapons strapped across his back. He inclined his head to Mahra before turning to me. His hands spanned my waist as he lifted me onto the villart's back.

The touch lingered, warm through the leather. His thumbs pressed small circles against my sides before he pulled away.

He swung up behind me, solid and steady at my back. His breath stirred the short hair at my nape through the thin fabric of the veil. "Ready?"

I nodded, not trusting my voice. The device's blue light beckoned, promising answers, promising revenge. But for now, I needed his strength, his protection. The admission clawed at my throat like thorns.

“Safe journey,” Mahra called as Tharon urged the villart forward. “And remember what I said!”

The mining camp fell away behind us as we picked our way into the mountains. Tharon’s chest pressed against my back with each stride of our mount, his arms caging me as he held the reins.

I told myself it was just practicality. Just necessity.

I almost believed it.

# THARON

---

At our midday break the wind shifted. Metal and ozone, a storm coming from the East. My nostrils flared, sorting through the layers of scent - snow on high peaks, dust from the valley below, and underneath it all, Niam.

A glint caught my eye. Too regular to be natural, too high to be a bird. One of their machines, following us even this far into the mountains.

“We need to move.” My voice was rough, despite my attempt at restraint.

Niam looked up from adjusting the straps on her boots. “Already? But we just stopped.”

“There’s a storm coming.” Not a lie. “And we’re too exposed here.”

Her thin fingers worked the last buckle into place. Even that simple motion entranced me - the precise economy of movement, the way she tested the fit before moving to stand.

“Which way?”

I pointed up the nearest slope. Not our original path, but it would have to do. I could only hope the flying machine would lose us in the higher passes, where the winds grew treacherous.

I whistled for the villart, the scaled beast’s sharp hooves clipping over the rocks. Niam’s scent spiked with apprehension as I lifted her onto its back, but she settled into position without complaint. I swung up behind her, gathering

the reins in one hand while keeping the other free to steady her if needed.

“Hold tight,” I murmured against her ear, and urged the villart forward.

“We can stop to eat once we find better shelter.”

“Fine.” She leaned back against me, just a hair. “But I expect a real meal this time, not just travel rations.”

I hid my smile. She’d grown bolder about making demands. I liked it. “I’ll see what I can hunt, once we’re safe.”

The villart’s steady gait carried us higher into the mountains. Niam’s small frame fit perfectly against me, her scent wrapping around me with each breath. The beast inside purred at her nearness. Snow dusted her shoulders, melting into the fabric of her new clothes.

“Tell me more about the Temple,” I said. “How did this horror come to be?”

She stiffened in my arms. “You won’t believe me.”

“Try me.”

“Once upon a time, there was a ship that sailed through the stars.” She turned to look at me. “It’s what brought my people here, to this world.”

I adjusted my grip on the reins, processing her words. “A ship? Like the trading vessels on the coast?”

“No, much bigger. Made of metal, powered by lightning and strange forces.” Her fingers traced patterns in the villart’s mane. “When it crashed, the survivors built walls around it, sealed themselves away from your people, insisted we were the only ones on this world. The people who had been in charge on the ship, the pilots, and commanders, struggled to find a way to repair the machines they had relied upon for generations.” She tensed. “And then they developed the emergency protocols and called it a Temple.”

“At the cost of young women’s lives.” My jaw clenched at the thought.

“Yes. Without access to better resources, the ship needs living tissue to repair itself. The ones who commanded the ship in the sky became priests, found they could... connect girls to the remains. Some survived the process. Most don't.”

The beast snarled inside me. I wanted to turn around, storm the Temple, and tear it apart with my bare hands. But Niam had a plan, and I'd promised to help her see it through.

“Perhaps the old stories were true after all,” I mused, desperate to draw her mind to anything other than her time in that cursed place. “They say the Frostlings fell from the stars in a blaze of fire. We thought they were just tales to frighten children.”

“Not tales.” She shook her head. “My people came here by accident, but we made it our home. Even if some of us turned that home into a prison.”

Snow fell harder now, the wind cutting through my cloak. Niam shivered against me.

“We should stop soon,” I said. “You need food and warmth.”

“I'm fine.”

“You're freezing. And I can hear your stomach growling.”

She huffed out a laugh. “Maybe a short rest. If you promise to tell me more about these Frostling stories.”

“Deal.” I steered the villart higher along the trail. “Though I warn you, they paint your people as fearsome creatures who steal children in the night.”

“How disappointing that you got stuck with me instead - I can barely steal myself away from anything.”

“I wouldn't say stuck.” I breathed in her scent again, fighting the urge to bury my face in the crook of her neck. “And you managed to escape the Temple. The priests will learn to fear you, just like those creatures of legend.”

The beast rumbled its agreement. My mate was stronger than she knew. Now I just had to keep her alive long enough to prove it.

The snow blasted sideways, stinging any exposed skin. White sheets obscured everything beyond a few feet ahead. I hunched forward over Niam, trying to protect her from the worst of it. The villart's scaled hide shed the snow, but its steps grew more hesitant on the narrowing mountain path.

A metallic glint caught my eye through the curtain of white - then another, and another. The Temple's machines had found us.

"Hold on." I pulled Niam closer, weighing our options. The safer route would take us down into the valley, but we'd be exposed. The pass ahead threaded between jagged peaks, barely wide enough for the villart. In this weather...

Niam's fingers dug into my arm. "They're getting closer."

I made my choice. "We're taking the pass."

The villart balked as I urged it forward, sensing the danger. But the beast trusted my guidance, picking its way carefully along the treacherous path.

Snow plastered against my face, already freezing in my beard. The wind howled through the peaks, creating an ever-shifting wall of white. Perfect cover from the machines, but it also meant we could miss our way.

Fatally.

Niam pressed back against me, trembling. The Valti within me raged at her discomfort, demanding I find shelter, safety, warmth. But there was nowhere to stop, not with those things hunting us.

The path narrowed further. On our right, the mountain rose in a sheer wall of ice-slicked stone. On our left, empty air. The villart's hooves sent pebbles skittering into the void.

A particularly fierce gust nearly knocked us off balance. The villart stumbled, front leg slipping on hidden ice. My heart stopped.

"Easy," I murmured, steadying the beast. "Easy now."

The mechanical whine of the drones grew louder, closer. How many had they sent after us?

“There!” Niam pointed through the snow. “I see something.”

I squinted where she indicated. Yes - a darker patch against the white. A cave entrance, if we could reach it.

The villart needed no encouragement this time, heading straight for the potential shelter. Three more careful steps, then we were under the overhang. The sudden absence of driving snow left me blinking.

I swung down first, then reached for Niam. Her slim body slid into my arms, cold seeping through her clothes. She stumbled as her feet hit the ground, and I steadied her.

My hands lingered on her waist longer than necessary. The beast approved of her closeness, urging me to pull her even nearer. It was an effort to step back.

“Let me check inside first.”

The cave extended deeper than expected, curving away into darkness. No fresh tracks marked the packed earth floor, no scent of predators. Good.

I led the villart just inside the entrance, where it could rest without blocking our escape route if needed. Then I turned my attention to Niam.

She stood near the wall, arms wrapped around herself, still shaking. Even in the dim light, I saw how the cold had bleached her lips pale.

“Come away from the stone.” I shrugged out of my cloak. “It only makes you colder.”

The mechanical whine passed overhead - once, twice, three times. We both froze, barely breathing, until the sound faded.

“They’ll keep searching,” Niam whispered. “They won’t stop until they find me.”

“Then we’ll make sure they don’t find you.” I draped my cloak around her shoulders, tucking it close. Her scent rose up, mixing with mine on the fabric. “Sit. I’ll get a fire started.”



Moving efficiently, I gathered what supplies had survived the journey. We had food - travel bread, dried meat, some fruit. The villart's saddlebags yielded flint and tinder. Most importantly, a small bundle of firewood had stayed dry.

Soon a modest flame cast dancing shadows on the cave walls. I settled next to Niam, close enough to share warmth without crowding her.

She still shivered.

"Come here." I opened my arms. When she hesitated, I added, "Body heat. Most efficient way to warm up."

She considered my words for a while, then scooted closer as I arranged my cloak around us both.

"Better?"

She nodded. Her short hair brushed my chin, carrying the lingering scent of Mahra's tent - herbs and woodsmoke. But underneath was pure Niam, a scent that called to something primitive in my blood.

We sat in silence, listening to the storm rage outside. The drones passed by twice more, their whine barely audible over the wind.

"Tell me about the Valti." Her quiet words surprised me. "Mahra said it was something extra in the blood."

I stiffened. Of course, Mahra would have told her.

"It's... complicated." I chose my words carefully. "The Valti runs in some Shakai bloodlines. Makes us stronger, faster. Better hunters and warriors."

"But?"

"My mother - Queen Kiha - she wanted the perfect prince. My half-brother Drax's Valti nature showed early. She saw how people feared him, whispered about him. So she ordered the priestesses to create something that would suppress my Valti."

"Did it work?"

“For years.” I laughed without humor. “I was everything she wanted - cold, controlled, reasonable. The perfect counterpoint to Drax’s wildness. Then...”

“Then?”

“Then I started dreaming of you.”

## NIAM

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My heart nearly stopped at Tharon's words. "*Then I started dreaming of you.*"

His admission hung in the frigid air between us. My mind raced, trying to process what he'd said while also being acutely aware of his solid warmth against my back, the way his arms bracketed me from the cold.

"Dreams?" The word came out barely above a whisper.

"For months now." I felt his breath at the nape of my neck. "At first, just fragments. A flash of red hair. Green eyes filled with defiance. The echo of your voice, though I didn't know the words."

I pulled away slightly, turning to face him. The firelight caught the angles of his face, shadows dancing across his features. "How is that possible?"

"I don't know." His eyes searched mine. "And then I saw your message, the vision of you from the device when it was first assembled. It was the first time I knew you were real."

The cave fell silent except for the howling wind outside and the steady breathing of the villart. My hands trembled, and not just from the cold.

Because I'd seen him too.

During the endless hours in the Tomb, when digital tendrils threaded through my mind like poisoned vines, sometimes there had been... something else. Flashes of midnight hair and eyes that held both ice and fire. A sense of

safety I couldn't understand, warmth in the midst of electronic winter.

I'd assumed it was the Temple playing tricks, trying to keep me compliant. But now...

"The storm's getting worse." Tharon's voice pulled me from my thoughts. "We should move deeper into the cave. Find somewhere more protected."

I nodded, grateful for the momentary distraction. He stood first, offering his hand to help me up. The simple touch sent sparks along my skin.

The villart balked when Tharon tried to lead it further in, tossing its scaled head and backing away from the darkness.

"Here." I stepped forward, running my hand along its neck like I'd seen the handlers do. "How do I calm it?"

"Find the soft spot just behind the jaw." Tharon's fingers covered mine, guiding them to the right place. "Gentle pressure. Let it know you're not a threat."

The villart relaxed under our combined touch, scales warming slightly beneath my palm. Tharon's hand lingered on mine longer than necessary before he pulled away to gather firewood.

"Good," he murmured. "You have a way with them."

I led the villart while Tharon scouted ahead with a makeshift torch, until eventually the passage curved inward, then opened into a wider chamber with a high ceiling. Perfect.

"This should work." Tharon set about building a new fire while I settled the villart. "The wind won't reach us here."

I busied myself with unpacking what supplies we had left, trying to gather my courage. The words sat heavy on my tongue, demanding to be spoken.

"I saw you too."

Tharon's hands stilled on the kindling. "What?"

"In the Temple. When they... when I was connected to the systems." I swallowed hard. "I thought it wasn't real. That my

mind created something safe to cling to during the worst moments.”

He crossed the space between us in two long strides, dropping to his knees beside me. “Tell me.”

“Just pieces at first. The color of your hair. The way you moved - like a predator, but not one I needed to fear.” I hugged my middle for comfort. “Then more. Your voice, though I couldn’t understand the words. The way you smelled of spices and winter air.”

His breath caught. “That’s why you weren’t afraid of me in the Temple. You already knew me.”

“I think so.” I met his gaze. “Though I didn’t realize until now.”

The fire crackled between us, casting warmth against the deepening cold. Outside, the storm raged on, but here in this hidden place, something else built between us - fragile as spider silk, strong as steel cable.

“I dreamed of finding you in a garden of crystal flowers.” His voice dropped lower. “You wore a dress of starlight and danced among the blooms. But when I tried to reach you, you always faded away.”

“I saw you in a forest of blue-leafed trees.” The memory rose up, clear now that I let myself examine it. “You were hunting something, moving like smoke through the shadows. I called out, but you couldn’t hear me.”

The cold seeped deeper into my bones, but it couldn’t compete with the warmth spreading through my chest at Tharon’s words. He’d dreamed of me, just as I’d seen him. Not Temple tricks or desperate imagination - real visions connecting us across the distance.

“When did they start?” I asked. “The dreams?”

“Half a year ago.” Tharon added another piece of wood to the fire. “During the season of storms. I thought I was going mad.”

“The season of storms...” The timing clicked into place. “That’s when the lightning struck the Temple. When everything changed.”

When the integration protocols had faltered, letting my own mind surface from beneath layers of Temple programming. When I’d first recognized the visions as more than system glitches.

The fire crackled between us, throwing shadows that danced across Tharon’s face. I tracked the subtle shifts of his expression - the tightness around his eyes, the way his jaw clenched and unclenched.

“You’re trembling.” I reached toward him without thinking.

He caught my wrist before I could touch him. “Don’t.”

“Are you cold?”

A harsh laugh. “No. The suppressants were in my saddlebags. Lost in the rockslide.” His grip tightened, then deliberately loosened. “Being near you... it makes control harder.”

“Oh.” I should pull away. Should put distance between us. Instead, I turned my hand in his grasp until our palms pressed together. “Then why stay so close?”

“Because having you here also gives me something to focus on. To fight for.” His thumb brushed across my knuckles. “The beast wants to protect you, claim you. The man wants to earn your trust.”

The sincere intensity in his words stole my breath. Here sat a warrior prince, a man who blew through his enemies like a storm, and he chose gentleness with me. Not from weakness, but from strength.

“The visions,” I said, desperate to distract us both. “Tell me more about what you saw.”

“Sometimes you danced.” His voice dropped lower. “But not like the court dancers. You moved like water, like starlight. Free.”

Memory stirred - fragments of dreams where I'd spun through crystal gardens, unfettered by Temple protocols or physical limitations. "I remember that place. The flowers chimed when the wind blew."

"Yes." His fingers twined with mine. "And overhead, three moons hung in a purple sky."

"I used to think the Temple created those visions to torment me. To show me everything I could never have." I shifted closer, drawn by his warmth. "But they were real. You were real."

"I'm here now." His other hand came up, hesitating near my face. "May I?"

I nodded, not trusting my voice.

His fingertips ghosted along my jaw, so gentle it almost hurt. I leaned into the touch instinctively, without thinking.

"Niam." My name on his lips sounded like a prayer.

The last rational part of my mind screamed warnings - about the Temple, about the device, about all the reasons this was a terrible idea. I silenced it.

My hand rose to his face, mirroring his touch. His breath caught. The beast lurked in his eyes now, deep rings of green inside midnight blue. But his hands stayed gentle as I traced the line of his jaw.

"I dreamed of this too," I whispered.

Then his mouth found mine, and my thoughts scattered like leaves in a storm.

The kiss started soft, questioning. His lips brushed mine like he feared I might shatter. But when I pressed closer, fingers curling into his hair, something snapped.

A growl rumbled through his chest as he deepened the kiss, one hand sliding to my nape while the other pulled me against him. Heat flooded my body, chasing away the last traces of cold. I'd never imagined a kiss like this - like I was precious and wild all at once, like I was something worth claiming.

His teeth grazed my bottom lip, and I gasped. The sound seemed to jolt him back to awareness. He jerked away, horror replacing the heat in his expression.

“I’m sorry.” He scrambled backward. “I shouldn’t have- The beast-”

“Tharon.” I touched my lips, still feeling the phantom pressure of his kiss. “It’s okay.”

“No. I lost control. I could have hurt you.”

“But you didn’t.”

We stared at each other across the fire, the air thick with unspoken words. My heart thundered against my ribs. How did I tell him that for the first time since escaping the Temple, I felt fully present in my own skin?

No. I couldn’t do this. I needed something, anything, to distract myself from the intensity burning in Tharon’s eyes.

The device. Yes.

My hands trembled as I pulled it from the crystal-studded pouch Mahra had given me. The familiar weight settled into my palm, its cold metallic surface pressing into my flesh. The geometric patterns caught the firelight, throwing strange shadows across the cave wall.

Blue light pulsed from its core, stronger than I’d ever seen it. But instead of pointing toward the distant peaks as it had before, the beam angled deeper into the darkness of the cave.

“Tharon.” My voice cracked. I cleared my throat and tried again. “Look at this.”

He moved closer, careful to keep the fire between us. “It’s never glowed that bright before.”

“No.” I turned slowly, following the light’s path. It led past our makeshift camp, past where the villart dozed, into the throat of blackness beyond. “Something’s down there.”

The device’s pulse quickened, like a heartbeat growing stronger.



“Well.” I pushed to my feet, gathering my resolve. “I guess we know where we’re going next.”

# THARON

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The last thing I wanted was to hurt her. My lips still burned from our kiss, the taste of her lingering like sweet poison. My beast howled for more, yet I kept the fire between us as Niam held up the device.

“Well?” She stood, determination written in every line of her body. “Are we going to find out what’s down there?”

I wanted to grab her, pull her back into my arms. Make her forget about the device, about the Temple, about everything but us. The urge sang through my blood like lightning.

But that wasn’t what she needed. What she needed was my strength, my protection while she completed her mission. Nothing more.

“Let me go first. The villart should stay here.” I gathered what remained of our supplies, shouldering the heaviest pack. “Besides, I can see better in the dark.”

“How much better?”

“Enough.” The beast’s gifts had their uses. Even in the deepest shadows, shapes remained clear, though colors faded to shades of gray and silver. “Stay close behind me. The floor’s uneven.”

She nodded, one hand gripping the device while the other reached for my arm. The simple touch sent fire racing through my veins. Focus. I needed to focus.

The passage narrowed as we left our camp behind, walls pressing closer until we had to walk single file. Water dripped

somewhere ahead, each splash echoing off stone. The device's blue light carved strange shadows across the rough walls.

"Tell me what you see," Niam whispered.

"Rock formations. Mineral deposits." I ducked under a low-hanging stalactite. "Watch your head here. The ceiling drops."

She followed my warning, her fingers tightening on my sleeve as she navigated the obstacle. "Anything unusual?"

"Define unusual." The beast's senses picked up something... wrong about this place. The air carried traces of metal and ozone, growing stronger as we descended. Not natural cave smells.

The passage curved left, then opened into a larger chamber. Frozen waterfalls of stone draped the walls, glittering where the light struck them. But my attention caught on the ceiling - a roughly circular section where the rock patterns changed abruptly.

"Look up there." I pointed. "The stone's different. Newer."

Niam studied it, the device's light steady on the anomaly. "Like something crashed through?"

"Maybe." I inhaled deeply, sorting through the scents. "The air's changing too. Metallic."

She pressed closer to my side, whether from cold or nerves, I couldn't tell. The urge to shelter her with my body nearly overwhelmed me. I gripped the strap of my pack instead, letting the leather bite into my palm.

"The floor drops ahead," I warned. "Looks like part of the cave collapsed."

We edged forward together until we reached the break in the stone. A black void gaped beneath us, at least twenty feet across, too deep for light to reach the bottom.

"Any way around?" Niam asked.

I studied the walls, noting hand and footholds in the rock. "We can climb down one side and up the other. I'll go first,

test the route.”

“And if you fall?”

“I won’t.” The beast’s strength would see me through. “But you might want to close your eyes. It’ll be easier if you can’t see how far down it goes.”

She grabbed my arm before I could move away. “Wait. What if... what if you carried me?”

My pulse spiked. “What?”

“You’re stronger than me. Faster. And you can see in the dark.” She squared her shoulders. “It makes tactical sense.”

The beast roared its approval at the thought of holding her close. I swallowed hard. “You’d trust me that much?”

“I already do.” The words set my blood on fire. “Besides, you said it yourself - the beast wants to protect me.”

I couldn’t argue with that. The very thought of her attempting this climb alone made my blood run cold. “Alright. But you’ll have to hold on tight.”

She nodded, tucking the device securely into its pouch. Then she stepped into my space, arms circling my neck. I lifted her easily, one arm under her knees while the other supported her back. She weighed almost nothing - had the Temple fed her at all?

“Ready?”

She buried her face against my throat. “Yes.”

The first step onto the wall sent loose pebbles skittering into the void. I ignored them, focusing on each handhold, each placement of my feet. The beast’s strength made it easier, but the precious burden in my arms demanded absolute concentration.

Niam’s breath warmed my neck, her heartbeat a rapid flutter. Halfway down, her grip tightened. “Still okay?”

“Trust me,” I breathed.

The climb up the other side proved trickier, the rock face steeper and more unstable. But the beast reveled in the challenge, in the opportunity to prove its worth to our mate. I pushed that thought aside. She wasn't ours. Couldn't be ours.

Finally, I pulled us over the edge onto solid ground. Niam's arms stayed locked around my neck for several heartbeats before she slowly released her grip.

"Thank you." She smoothed her clothes, trying to hide how her hands shook. "That was... impressive."

I shrugged, missing her warmth already. "The beast has its uses."

She retrieved the device, which pulsed stronger now. The blue light seemed to bend strangely, like it struggled to illuminate the passage ahead.

My weapons began to hum, their metal surfaces vibrating on my body. Something pulled at them, an invisible force that grew stronger with each step forward. The air pressed heavier against my lungs, charged with energy I didn't understand.

"Tharon." Niam's voice held wonder and fear in equal measure. "Look."

The passage opened abruptly into a vast chamber, its ceiling lost in darkness above us. But it wasn't the size that caught my attention - it was the wrongness of it all. The walls bore rippling patterns I'd never seen in natural stone, like waves frozen in mid-motion. Debris littered the floor, some of it clearly not from any rockfall.

And the air... the air shimmered like heat waves, but in impossible patterns. Shadows fell where no shadows should exist. Light bent around empty space as if something massive occupied the chamber's center, something my eyes couldn't quite grasp.

"What is this place?"

Niam moved forward, the device's pulse now a steady rhythm that matched the strange energies in the air. "It's here. Whatever we're looking for, it's right here." She turned

slowly, studying the device's readouts. "We just have to figure out how to see it."

I followed, fighting the urge to pull her back to safety. My weapons pulled harder now, straining against their sheaths toward the chamber's center. Even the metal buckles on my clothes responded to the invisible force.

"The device is changing." Niam held it up, showing me how new symbols appeared across its surface. "I recognize these patterns from the Temple systems, but they're different somehow. Clearer."

She took another step forward, then stumbled as the device jerked in her grip. My hand found her arm, steadying her. "Careful."

"It's trying to tell us something." Her fingers danced across the symbols. "If I could just..."

A high-pitched whine filled the air. The device's light flared brilliant blue-white, then projected a complex grid of lines across the chamber. Where the lines intersected, the air rippled like water.

"There!" Niam pointed to where the patterns converged most densely. "That's where we need to be."

We moved together toward the spot she indicated. Each step made my skin crawl, every instinct screaming that this place wasn't natural. The beast pressed against my control, unhappy with forces it couldn't fight.

Niam positioned herself carefully, adjusting her stance until the device's projected lines aligned perfectly. "Now we just need..."

The words died as a low hum built beneath our feet. The light pulsed faster, brighter, until I had to shield my eyes. The air itself seemed to vibrate, reality bending around us like cloth in the wind.

Then the impossible happened.

# NIAM

---

The air shimmered like water, colors bending impossibly as the device's energy spread outward in rippling waves. I held my breath as reality itself warped around us, the cave's darkness giving way to something else entirely.

There, emerging from nothingness, stood an Emergency Command Pod. Its surface bore impact damage and scoring from its crash landing, but the sleek design remained unmistakable. I'd seen its schematics countless times in the Temple's databanks, though the priests had sworn all auxiliary systems were destroyed.

"What is it?" Tharon asked, moving to my side despite my warning. His arm wrapped around my waist, steadying.

"A piece of the ship that brought my people here." I stepped forward, drawn by the pod's familiar angles. "The Temple was built from its wreckage, but this... this survived intact."

Tharon circled the pod slowly, wonder plain on his face as he studied it. "Your ancestors truly sailed among the stars?"

I stepped closer, drawn by the familiar yet alien shape materializing before us. Despite obvious crash damage along one side, the smooth lines of the emergency pod remained elegant, almost beautiful. A piece of the past, preserved in this hidden cave for centuries.

"It's what I've been looking for." My fingers trembled as I reached toward the metal surface. "A way to end it all."

Tharon grabbed my hand. “Be careful.”

“Too late for that now.” I pulled away from his grip. “We need to find a way in. Help me look for an access panel.”

We circled the pod slowly, the device’s lights growing stronger near certain sections of the hull. My hands skimmed over the metal, feeling for seams or catches that might indicate a door. The surface felt cool beneath my fingers, familiar somehow.

“Here.” I stopped at a section where geometric patterns caught the light differently. “There’s something...”

My fingers found the edges of a hidden panel, muscle memory from years of Temple integration guiding my movements. The device hummed, resonating with dormant systems beneath the metal.

“Stand back,” I told Tharon, though he hadn’t moved from his protective position behind me.

I pressed the device against the panel, letting instinct guide me. A series of clicks echoed through the pod’s hull, followed by a hydraulic hiss. The door started to move, then stuck with a grinding sound.

Tharon stepped forward, muscles bunching as he gripped the edge. Metal groaned as he forced it the rest of the way open. Stale air rushed out, carrying centuries of silence with it.

Emergency lighting flickered reluctantly to life as I stepped toward the entrance. Tharon’s hand on my shoulder stopped me.

“Let me go first.”

I wanted to argue, but the intensity in his expression made me pause. He moved into the pod with predatory grace, checking each shadow before gesturing me forward.

The layout struck a chord of recognition in my mind - similar to the Temple’s familiar corridors, but older, purer somehow. This was what it had all looked like before the crash, before the Temple started replacing its damaged



components with living tissue. My fingers traced patterns in the dust coating a nearby console.

“I feel like I know this place,” I murmured. “Even though I’ve never been here.”

“How?” Tharon examined everything with careful curiosity, his movements precise despite the growing darkness in his eyes.

“The Temple... it’s built on the same basic design. But this is older. Original.” I moved deeper into the pod, drawn toward what I knew would be the command center. “The Temple has modified itself countless times. But this... this is how it all started.”

The main console stood intact, its dark screens reflecting the device’s pulsing light. Familiar symbols mixed with ones I’d never seen before, their patterns calling to something deep in my memories of integration.

I settled into the command chair, letting my hands hover over the controls. “I can access it. I just need to...”

The device interfaced differently than I expected. I was used to being physically connected to the Temple’s network, metal jacks bridging the gap between flesh and machine. This was older, simpler in some ways but more complex in others.

“What exactly are you trying to do?” Tharon asked, examining a bank of auxiliary controls.

“Find a way in. The Temple built layers of protocols on top of the original systems. I need to...” I frowned as another attempt failed. “I need to unlearn everything they taught me.”

“Why?”

The question made me pause. “Because the Temple changed everything to suit its needs. This is pure. Unchanged.” I gestured at the console. “See these symbols? In the Temple, they represent pain protocols, ways to control the girls they connect with. But here... here they mean something else entirely.”

The device showed new interface options as I spoke, responding to my growing understanding. Each failure taught me something, each setback revealed another piece of the puzzle.

Tharon explored further into the pod while I worked, his occasional questions helping me think differently about the systems. Hours passed as I delved deeper into the programming, stripping away layers of Temple conditioning to find the original commands beneath.

Minutes stretched into hours as I worked, testing every combination I could remember. Sweat trickled along my back, frustration building with each failed attempt.

“I don’t understand.” I slammed my palm against the console. “I should be able to interface with this. I was connected to the Temple for years.”

“Connected how?” Tharon asked.

I touched the newly-healed spots on my skull where the neural jacks had been. “Physically integrated. The priests embedded metal contacts directly into our brains. It let us merge with the ship’s systems, become part of its consciousness.”

“And this pod requires the same integration?”

“Maybe.” I stared at the unresponsive displays. “Or maybe the protocols are just too different. The Temple modified itself over generations, evolving to accept human interfaces. This is pure ship technology.”

Something crashed behind me. I spun to find Tharon braced against the wall, breathing heavily.

“I’m fine.” He straightened with visible effort. “Just having a little trouble.”

His words didn’t match his condition. His muscles trembled with barely contained power.

“It’s more than a little trouble.” I stepped closer, drawn by an instinct I couldn’t explain. “Let me help.”

“Stay back.” His voice dropped lower, rougher. The double rings in his irises flared bright - the inner blue nearly electric, the outer green darkening to emerald.

I took another step forward anyway. “No.”

His nostrils flared as he scented the air. “Niam...”

“I’m not afraid of you.” The truth of it surprised me. After everything the Temple had done, fear should have been my constant companion. But watching Tharon fight against his nature only made my heart ache.

“You should be.” His hands clenched into fists at his sides. “I can’t... the beast...”

I closed the distance between us, reaching for his face. My fingers brushed the sensitive spots along his jaw, drawing a sharp inhale from him.

“Then let it come.”

His eyes widened, pupils expanding until only thin rings of color remained. “You don’t know what you’re asking.”

“I know exactly what I’m asking.” I brushed my fingers over his lips. “Mahra told me what it means. A Valti must have its mate, or die.”

A growl rumbled in his chest. His hand shot up to capture my wrist, but he didn’t pull away. “This isn’t a game.”

“No.” I pressed closer, until I could feel the heat radiating from his skin. “It’s not.”

The beast looked back at me through his eyes, raw and hungry. But still he held himself rigid, fighting against what nature demanded.

“I won’t hurt you.” The words ground out between clenched teeth.

“I know.” I lifted my other hand to his chest, feeling his heart thunder beneath my palm. “That’s why I trust you.”

His control snapped.

His skin burned hot, the beast prowling just beneath the surface. I traced each mark deliberately, mapping the changes overtaking him.

“Last chance.” The words rumbled from deep in his chest. “I won’t be able to stop.”

“Then don’t.” I stepped closer, eliminating the last space between us. The heat of his body seeped through my clothes.

“I can smell your desire.” His nostrils flared. “But there’s no fear.”

“Why should I fear what you are?” I pressed my palm flat against his chest, feeling his thundering heartbeat. “The Valti wants to protect me as much as the man does.”

A sound tore from his throat - not quite human, not quite animal. His arms came around me, careful despite the tremors wracking his powerful frame. One hand splayed across my lower back while the other cupped my nape.

I tilted my head, baring my throat in deliberate invitation. His breath hitched. Then he buried his face in my neck, inhaling deeply. The rumble in his chest deepened to a purr that vibrated through my entire body.

“You smell like starlight.” His tongue, longer now, traced the line of my pulse. “Like lightning and ozone and something I’ve needed my whole life.”

My fingers wound into his hair, finding it thicker, wilder. When I scratched lightly at his scalp, his purr turned to a growl of pleasure. His fangs grazed my throat - not breaking skin, but marking me as his.

“That’s it.” I ran my hands over his shoulders, feeling the way his muscles bunched and shifted. “Let me see you. All of you.”

He pulled back just enough to meet my eyes. The beast stared back at me through rings of brilliant color - electric blue surrounded by deep emerald. But intelligence still burned there, along with a desperate sort of wonder.

“How can you accept this so easily?” His clawed fingers flexed against my spine. “You should run screaming.”

“I’ve seen true evil.” I traced the darkened spots trailing down his neck, fascinated by how they responded to my touch. “You are so much more than that.”

His head dropped back to my throat, scenting along my collarbone. Every brush of his tongue left a trail of fire across my skin. My hands explored the planes of his chest, finding the muscles even harder, more defined.

“Mine.” The word vibrated against my pulse point. “My mate.”

“Yes.” The admission came easily. After years of the Temple trying to strip away my humanity, Tharon’s possessiveness felt like coming home. “Yours.”

His purr deepened as he continued mapping my skin with lips and tongue and careful fangs. One hand slid into my short hair while the other kept me pressed firmly against him. Even lost to the change, he handled me like something precious.

I let my own hands wander, learning the feel of him

His large hands spanned my ribs, rough palms catching on the fabric of my shirt as he unfastened my vest. A gasp tore from my throat at the gentle exploration, so different from his beast’s growls against my neck.

“More.” The word slipped out before I could catch it. Heat bloomed across my cheeks.

Tharon’s purr deepened as his thumbs brushed the undersides of my breasts. Even through layers of fabric, the touch sent electricity arcing through my body. My hands fisted in his shirt, needing an anchor against the flood of sensation.

“Tell me what you want.” His voice rumbled where he nuzzled my throat. “Let me hear you.”

“I…” The words wouldn’t come. This raw need caught me off guard, overwhelmed my senses.

His hands stilled. “We can stop.”

“No!” I pressed against his touch, shameless in my need. “Please don’t stop.”

The beast’s satisfaction vibrated through his chest as his palms covered my breasts fully. My head fell back, offering more of my throat to his exploring mouth. Each brush of his tongue against sensitive skin drew fresh sounds from my lips.

“Beautiful.” His thumbs circled slowly, drawing peaks through the fabric. “The sounds you make. The way you respond. Perfect.”

I should have felt exposed, vulnerable. Instead, power thrummed through me at how carefully he touched, how desperately he wanted.

“More?” He lifted his head to study my face, pupils blown wide with desire.

“Yes.” I pushed into his hands, craving pressure, friction, anything to ease the growing ache. “Please, Tharon.”

A growl of pure possession rumbled through him. His hands squeezed gently, thumbs working circles that had me gasping. Every touch sent fresh sparks dancing across my skin, building a fire I hadn’t known my body could contain.

“Tell me if it’s too much.” Even lost to desire, he watched my reactions carefully. “I won’t hurt you.”

“You won’t.” I pulled him down for a kiss, letting him taste my need. “I trust you.”

His purr deepened at the words. One hand slid to my back, supporting me as he explored with the other. Each careful touch drew fresh sounds from my throat, sounds I hadn’t known I could make.

Strange, how natural this felt. How right. Tharon’s touch made me feel alive in my own skin. Made me want things I’d never dared imagine.

His thumb brushed a particularly sensitive spot and I cried out, clutching his shoulders. He repeated the motion, drinking in my response with beast-bright eyes.

“Perfect,” he breathed against my lips. “So responsive. So beautiful.”

Desire pooled deep inside me, an ache I didn't quite understand but desperately wanted to explore. My hips rocked without conscious thought, seeking more contact, more friction, more of everything he offered. His growl held approval as his hands continued their careful exploration. Each touch built the fire higher, teaching my body pleasures I'd never imagined possible. Teaching me to want, to need, to crave. And I wanted more.

So much more.

# THARON

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The aroma of her desire filled my senses, driving the beast wild with need. But beneath it, I caught the tang of exhaustion. Her body swayed almost imperceptibly, fatigue warring with arousal.

She deserved more than a rushed claiming in this strange metal cave. More than quick pleasure when her body was already pushed beyond its limits.

“Enough.” The word rumbled from my chest, though it nearly killed me to say it.

“But-” Her protest ended in a soft gasp as I pressed my lips to her temple.

“Rest first.” I gathered her closer, letting her feel both my desire and my restraint. “You’re exhausted, little one.”

“I’m fine.” But even as she said it, she leaned harder against me, her body betraying her.

The Valti growled in satisfaction at her unconscious trust. My mate, letting me support her weight without fear. But the man in me saw the shadows under her eyes, the way her hands shook slightly as they clutched my shirt.

“Let me care for you properly.” I nuzzled the spot behind her ear that made her shiver. “There will be time for more when you’re stronger.”

She made a small sound of protest that turned into a yawn. I couldn’t help my smile against her skin.



“See? Even your body agrees with me.”

The compulsion to check the systems pulled at her even as exhaustion weighed her limbs. I grabbed her arm before she could take another step toward the console.

“No. You need rest first.”

“But we’re so close.” Her fingers twitched toward the controls. “Just a few more minutes...”

I shifted to block her path, keeping my touch gentle but firm. “The pod will still be here after you sleep.”

She pressed against my hold, stubborn despite her clear fatigue. “I can’t waste time. The Temple-”

“Will also still be there.” I studied the pod’s interior, noting the curved walls and strange materials. A small alcove caught my attention - sheltered from the main area but still within the pod’s protection. “Come here.”

She resisted at first as I guided her toward the space, but her steps grew heavier with each moment. I gathered the surviving supplies from our packs, creating a makeshift bed from blankets and my spare cloak.

“Just for a little while,” I promised, helping her settle onto the improvised pallet. “I’ll prepare a proper camp outside, then wake you when it’s ready.”

“You don’t have to take care of me.” But her eyes already drooped as she curled onto her side.

I smoothed her hair back from her face, marveling at how the short strands felt like silk against my palm. “Yes, I do.”

She caught my wrist as I started to pull away. “Stay?”

My heart clenched at the vulnerability in that single word. “I need to check on the villart and set up camp. But I’ll be right outside.”

Her fingers slipped from my skin as sleep finally claimed her. I lingered a moment longer, committing every detail to memory - the fan of her lashes against her cheeks, the slight part of her lips, the complete trust in her relaxed expression.

The fire came together quickly, muscle memory taking over while my thoughts wandered. Everything felt different now - the air itself charged with possibility and danger in equal measure. Just days ago, I'd been resigned to my role as the cold, calculating prince. Now...

Now I had a mate. A human mate, with secrets that could shake both our worlds to their foundations.

The strange human technology made my skin crawl, setting the beast on edge in ways I didn't fully understand. Was it simply unfamiliarity? Or something deeper - some fundamental incompatibility between Shakai nature and human machinery?

A soft sound from the pod's entrance snapped my attention up. Niam stood in the doorway, sleep-rumpled and swaying slightly. The sight nearly weakened my knees - my mate, vulnerable and seeking me out.

The beast surged forward, demanding I gather her close and shelter her from everything that might cause harm. I did my best to move slowly, not wanting to startle her.

"You should be resting," I murmured as I approached.

"Woke up alone." She blinked at me through heavy eyes. "Wanted to find you."

My heart squeezed at her simple honesty. I wrapped my cloak around her shoulders, guiding her to sit by the fire. "Here. Let me get you something to eat."

She watched through half-closed eyes as I prepared a simple meal, fighting sleep even as exhaustion pulled at her. When I handed her the food, she picked at it listlessly.

"You need to eat."

"Why aren't you closer to the pod?" she asked instead of responding.

I considered my answer carefully. "The technology... it feels wrong somehow. Like oil on my skin."

"Because you're Shakai?"

“Maybe. Or because I’m Valti. I don’t know.” I shrugged, trying to cast off the sensation. “Tell me about where you grew up, before the Temple.”

Her shoulders hunched slightly. “I don’t remember much. I was very young when they took me.”

The beast snarled at the pain in her voice, but my tone remained gentle. “Tell me what you do remember.”

“I think... there were gardens?” Her brow furrowed. “And someone used to sing to me. A woman with red hair like mine.”

I shifted closer, letting her lean against me as her words grew slower, more slurred. “Your mother?”

“Maybe. The Temple tried to make us forget...” She yawned. “Everything from before.”

“But they didn’t succeed. You’re still you.”

Her head dropped to my shoulder. “Am I? Sometimes I don’t know anymore...”

I gathered her closer as her voice trailed off, sleep finally winning the battle. She nestled trustingly into my embrace, completely defenseless. The beast purred with satisfaction while the man in me marveled at her faith in my protection.

I adjusted her carefully, making sure she was comfortable without waking her. The fire painted shadows across her face, highlighting the delicate arch of her cheekbones, the slight furrow between her brows that even sleep didn’t completely smooth away.

What came next? How could I protect her while supporting the mission that drove her? The Temple had to be stopped - that much was clear. But not at the cost of her life.

The beast prowled restlessly beneath my skin as plans formed and dissolved. We’d need allies, resources. Ways to fight an enemy that used technology I barely understood.

But those were problems for tomorrow. Tonight, my mate slept, safe in my arms, while I maintained my watch. The rest would come in time.

I dropped a kiss on her temple, breathing in her scent. Whatever challenges lay ahead, we would face them together. I would find a way to help her succeed while keeping her safe.

The beast rumbled agreement. After all, what good was power if not used to protect what mattered most?

# NIAM

---

Warmth enveloped me, the comforting scent of Tharon's cloak wrapped around my shoulders. The darkness of the cave made time impossible to measure - had I slept for minutes or hours? My skin tingled with memories of his touch, phantom sensations that made focusing difficult.

The mission. I needed to focus on the mission. But my treacherous mind kept drifting back to the touch of his hands, the careful exploration that had awakened things I'd never known my body could feel.

I rolled onto my side, finding Tharon sprawled nearby. Sleep softened the harsh lines of his face, made him look younger somehow. The beast's ferocity gave way to something almost peaceful.

The pod called to me, its systems humming just at the edge of perception. I should wake him, tell him what I planned. But he'd looked so tired earlier, fighting against the pod's strange energy.

I slipped from beneath his cloak, moving as quietly as possible toward the metallic structure. Of course, he'd positioned himself between me and the tunnel entrance - even in sleep, his protective instincts remained strong.

When had I started trusting him so completely? The Temple had taught us never to rely on others, that attachment led only to pain. But something about Tharon felt... right. As if a piece of myself I hadn't known was missing had finally clicked into place.

The pod's interior welcomed me with familiar curves and angles. I settled at the main console, trying to focus on the task at hand. But memories of last night kept intruding - the warmth of his skin, the careful way he'd touched me despite the beast's obvious hunger.

This was entirely new territory. Oh, I'd overheard whispered conversations among the girls who had lived outside of the Temple for longer than I had, fragments of knowledge about physical pleasure. But experiencing it myself? That had never seemed possible.

What would it be like to give in completely? To let go of control and trust someone else with not just my body, but my heart?

My fingers moved across the controls without conscious thought, muscle memory from years of integration taking over. But something felt different this time. Instead of forcing my way into the systems, I found myself... asking. Gentle touches instead of brutal invasion.

The pod responded differently too. Where the Temple demanded sacrifice, these original systems invited cooperation. Had the priests corrupted the technology so completely? Or had they simply forgotten there was another way?

Symbols flashed across the screen as my fingers danced, each touch revealing new pathways. There - emergency protocols, preserved intact despite centuries of neglect. My breath caught as I understood what I was seeing.

"Yes!" The shout escaped before I could stop it.

Rapid footsteps pounded against metal as Tharon burst through the entrance, eyes wild and muscles coiled for battle. The Valti looked out through his gaze, searching for threats.

"I'm fine!" I held up my hands. "More than fine. I found it - I found the way to end this."

The joy of discovery burst through me and I threw my arms around Tharon's neck. He scooped me up, spinning us

both in a circle as laughter bubbled up from my chest - a foreign, almost forgotten sound.

“Put me down!” I protested through my giggles. “I need to finish this.”

He set me gently on my feet, but his hands lingered at my waist. “Show me what you found.”

I turned back to the console, fingers flying over the controls with newfound certainty. The original systems responded eagerly to my touch, like they’d been waiting all these centuries for someone to speak their language.

But as the data scrolled across the screen, my elation crumbled. My hands stilled on the controls.

“What is it?” Tharon stepped closer, warmth radiating from his body.

“I can do it.” The words tasted like ash in my mouth. “I can destroy the Temple. But...”

His fingers brushed my shoulder. “Tell me.”

“The Temple is too integrated with the city.” I gestured at the diagrams filling the screen. “If I trigger the emergency protocols, the resulting explosion will level everything within the outer walls. All of Terr will be destroyed.”

The magnitude of it staggered me. Yes, I wanted the Temple gone - needed it gone. But the cost...

“Were they the ones?” Tharon’s voice cut through my thoughts, suddenly harsh. “The ones who gave you to the Temple?”

Spinning around, I was caught off guard by the cold fury in his expression. “What?”

“The people in that city. Did they watch as the priests took you? Did they turn away when they heard the screams from the Temple walls?” His hands clenched at his sides. “Do they deserve your mercy?”

I could barely speak the truth. “I don’t know. My father...” I swallowed hard. “I barely remember my parents, but I know

he sold me to them. Said it was an honor to serve the Temple.”

A growl rumbled through Tharon’s chest, his eyes flaring with beast-fire. “Then let it burn. Let them all burn.”

“Tharon-”

“I must be honest with you.” His lips twisted in a savage smile. “I don’t care about the other humans. Don’t care about the city. But you do.”

The intensity of his gaze pinned me in place. This was the reality of what he was - not just the gentle mate who brought me flowers, but a predator who would tear the world apart at my word.

“I will give you whatever you want, my queen.” He stepped closer, power rolling off him in waves. “If you want the humans dead, none will see the dawn. If you want to forget Terr ever existed, I’ll rip out the tongue of any who breathes its name.”

My breath caught. This wasn’t just passion or protection - this was devastation offered as a love gift. The realization should have frightened me. Instead, something wild and reckless awakened inside me.

“But if you want to save them,” he continued, one clawed hand cupping my face with impossible gentleness, “then I will do whatever it takes to assist you.”

“Even though you think they don’t deserve it?”

“I think they deserve whatever fate you choose for them.” His thumb brushed my cheek. “My loyalty is to you, not them. My mercy extends only as far as yours does.”

In that moment, I understood him completely. His moral compass pointed only toward me - everything else was negotiable. And somehow, that made my choice clearer.

“Help me find another way,” I whispered. “Not for them. For me. Because I don’t want to become what the Temple tried to make me - someone who sacrifices others for the greater good.”



He pressed his forehead to mine. “Then we find another way.”

# THARON

---

Niam's cropped hair brushed my chin as I held her. The metallic tang of the pod's recycled air mingled with her scent - clean sweat and determination.

Her heart thundered against my palm, strong despite her delicate frame. My beast urged me to bundle her in my cloak and whisk her far from this cursed place with its artificial heartbeat and stale air. But she'd chosen to stay and fight. As always, her fierceness surprised me.

My claws flexed against her skin, careful not to break it. Such fragile beings, these humans. Yet she'd survived horrors that would break most Shakai warriors. Pride and rage twisted in my gut.

"I promise you this," I repeated. "Whatever path you choose, I walk it with you."

Niam took a deep breath, her shoulders straightening. The sweet curve of her neck drew my gaze as she tilted her head back to meet my eyes.

"You're right." Her fingers traced the curve of my ear, sending tingles of pleasure through my entire body. "We'll make this work."

Before I could capture her hand, she pulled away and returned to the glowing console. The loss of contact left me cold.

I watched her work, fascinated despite my discomfort. The screens lit up at her touch, responding to commands I couldn't

begin to understand. Such a contrast - my fierce little mate, so at home among this dead technology.

Her movements grew more animated as new patterns appeared on the display. "Wait... yes!" She pressed another sequence of symbols. "Look at this."

I stepped closer, though the proximity to the controls made my skin crawl. "What am I looking at?"

"The priests of the Temple modified everything over the centuries since the crash." Her fingers flew faster. "But underneath it all, the core programming remains intact. If I can access that..."

Understanding dawned in her expression. My Valti stirred at the flash of triumph in her eyes.

"I can do it." She spun to face me. "I should be able to use the pod's systems to disable the Temple's integration protocols without destroying the city."

Her brilliance filled me with pride. "Then we-"

"But I need to be inside Terr to do it."

The words hit like a physical blow. My hands clenched at my sides as the beast roared to life. "No."

"Tharon-"

"Absolutely not." I moved between her and the console, blocking her view of the screens. "You're not going back there."

She planted her hands on her hips. "I have to. The Temple's modifications mean the pod can't interface properly from this distance. I need to be inside the Temple."

"Then I'll go." The words tasted like ash, but better than sending her into danger.

"How are you going to pass for human?" She argued. "You don't even speak Terran," Niam pointed out, her fingers tracing one of the pod's glowing symbols. "I can only speak Shakai because of a malfunction in the Temple's language protocols during the lightning strike."

My beast snarled at the reminder. Of course she spoke our language - she belonged with us, with me. But she made a valid point. The guttural sounds of human speech would mark me as an outsider instantly.

“There must be another solution.” I paced the confines of the pod, the artificial environment making my skin crawl. Every instinct screamed to grab her and run far from here, not closer to the danger.

“The Temple has to be stopped,” she said softly. “You know what they’ll do.”

My claws extended at the thought. Yes, I knew. The scars on her skull told that story clearly enough.

“Besides, you don’t know how to work the systems. And you’ll never be able to pass for human.”

“Then teach me.”

She shook her head. “It took years of integration for me to learn this. There isn’t time.”

“Make time.” The beast’s growl leaked into my voice. “I won’t let you walk back into that place.”

“You can’t stop me.” She lifted her chin, defiant. “This is my fight.”

“Our fight.” My hands gripped her shoulders, careful to be gentle despite the beast’s fury. “You’re my mate. Your battles are mine now.”

Something flickered in her expression. “I’m not used to that.”

“To what?”

“Having someone on my side.” She pressed her palm against my chest. “Having allies.”

The word triggered a memory. “That’s it - you already have allies. The women you sent to find the device pieces.”

“Lita, Mila, and Denna?” Her brow furrowed. “But they’re safe now, away from the Temple. I can’t ask them to-”

“You don’t have to ask them to risk themselves. But they might know something - more about the city than you do. You were kept isolated for your entire life.” I stroked my thumb along her jaw. “At least talk to them before rushing in unprepared.”

“I’ll remind you frequently.” I pressed a kiss to her temple. “We should return to Mahra’s camp. I can send a messenger bird to Lita - I promised to keep her updated anyway.”

Niam cast one last look at the pod’s controls, her fingers trailing across the metal surface. Then she straightened, decision clear in her bearing. “Yes. Let’s go before I change my mind about this plan.”

Relief flooded through me at her willingness to leave this cursed place.

Back in the initial cave, we retrieved the villart, who seemed as eager as I felt to put distance between us and the tunnel with its mysterious pod.

The journey back proved faster now that we knew the route. Niam settled naturally against me as we rode, her body fitting perfectly against mine. The beast was pleased at her trust, at how easily she accepted my protection.

By the time Mahra’s camp came into view, the sun hung low on the horizon.

The Elder emerged from her tent as we approached, her sharp eyes taking in how closely Niam sat against me. A knowing smile crossed her face.

Heat crept up my neck. The beast might not care about others’ opinions, but the man remembered too many years of cold calculation to be comfortable with such obvious emotion.

“Welcome back, children.” Mahra’s gaze lingered on where my hand rested at Niam’s waist. “I trust you found what you sought?”

“And more besides.” I helped Niam dismount, reluctant to release her even for a moment. “We need to send a message bird back to Zashi.”

“My scouts spotted you crossing the ridge,” Mahra said, her rings catching the fading light. She cast an appraising eye over us both and a knowing smile crossed her weathered face. “When I saw how you rode together, I took the liberty of having a proper camp set up.” She gestured toward a tent set slightly apart from the others. “I didn’t think you’d object.”

My blush deepened. But before I could protest, Niam’s delighted laugh stopped me. The sound wrapped around my heart, precious and rare.

Maybe a little embarrassment was worth it, to hear that sound again.

“Come.” Mahra gestured toward an enclosure near the back of the camp. “Let’s visit the wing master and get your message sent, so you can attend to other things.”

# NIAM

---

Wind chimes sang softly in the evening breeze as we approached the enclosure, their crystalline notes weaving through the rustling of feathers and soft calls of birds.

Tharon's warmth at my back steadied me, grounding me in this strange new place. His fingers brushed my waist with each step, a constant reminder of his presence. Of his protection.

"The aravela are our pride." Mahra grinned as she gestured toward the cages. "Bred to hunt, they still carry messages faster than any other bird. Perfect for reaching Zashi quickly."

As we neared the entrance, the wing master turned from her work, silver-threaded braids swaying with the movement. Small bones and feathers wove through her hair, clicking softly together.

"Welcome." The wing master's dark eyes sparkled with mischief. "I owe you both a debt. My charges have never had such entertaining playthings before."

I exchanged a confused glance with Tharon. His fingers tightened at my waist.

The wing master tapped the wooden table beside her. Metal glinted among the scattered feathers and leather straps. My breath caught as I recognized twisted pieces of the Temple's drones - wings crumpled, sensors crushed, circuitry spilling out like metallic entrails.

"The metal birds you brought with you?" The falcon master's weathered face split in a grin. "My aravela love to

snatch them from the sky. Such sport they've had, tearing them apart mid-flight."

A soft chirp drew my attention to one of the cages. An aravela preened its iridescent feathers, talons still wrapped around a mangled piece of drone casing.

"Beautiful," I breathed, reaching toward the cage. The bird stretched its neck, investigating my fingers through the bars.

"They know their own worth." The wing master's apprentice adjusted her studded gauntlet before opening the cage. "This one has carried messages to Zashi before. She knows the way."

My fingers tingled where they brushed the metallic feathers. So different from the cold systems of the Temple, yet still a marvel of design. The swift-wing preened under my attention, showing off how her scales caught the light.

"She likes you." Tharon's hand settled at the small of my back, spreading warmth through my body. When I glanced up, his eyes held gentle amusement at my fascination.

"The message." The wing master held out a small leather case. "Be brief."

I caught my lower lip between my teeth. The words wouldn't come. How could I explain everything that had happened? The Temple, the pod, the choice ahead of us...

Tharon's finger brushed my lip, startling me from my thoughts. "Stop that. You'll hurt yourself."

I released my lip, surprised by the gentle rebuke in his tone. His touch lingered for a moment before dropping away.

"Start with telling them you're safe," he said. "That's what they'll want to know first."

"Safe?" I blinked up at him. "Why would they be worried about me?"

His expression softened, though a hint of exasperation remained. "Because they care about you."



The thought struck me oddly. In the Temple, connections between acolytes were discouraged. Friendship was a foreign concept, a weakness to be purged.

“I hate asking them for help.” My fingers traced the edge of the crystal case. “They’ve already risked so much.”

“You need their knowledge of Terr.” Tharon’s hand covered mine, stilling my nervous movement. “The real city, not just what you saw through the distorted mirror of the Temple. They can help us find a better way.”

He was right. My understanding of Terr came from data feeds and neural links. I knew its infrastructure, its power grid, its maintenance tunnels. But I didn’t know its people, its daily rhythms, its hidden places where rebels might gather.

“Here.” Tharon took the case from my trembling fingers. “Let me help.”

He drew out a thin stylus and began writing in precise, elegant script. Just a few lines, enough to let them know I lived and needed their aid. Not enough to endanger them if the message was intercepted.

The aravela chirped softly, as if approving his efficiency. I watched his hands move across the surface, grateful for his help when words failed me.

Moments later, the bird launched into the darkening sky, her scaled wings flashing silver against purple clouds. I tracked her flight until she vanished among the stars.

“Come.” Tharon’s hand found mine. “You need rest in a proper bed.”

I let him guide me from the tent, the camp spreading out before us, fires dotting the gathering dark like earthbound stars. Snippets of conversation and laughter drifted on the evening breeze:

“...new ore deposits in the eastern caves...”

“...trading caravan due within the week...”

“...such strange eyes the prince’s woman has...”

My steps faltered at that last comment. Tharon's grip tightened on my hand.

"Ignore them," he murmured. "They mean no harm."

"I know." And I did. After years of the Temple's calculated cruelty, mere curiosity held no sting. "It's just strange, being seen as a person instead of a vessel."

His growl rumbled through where our shoulders touched. "You were always a person. They just couldn't see past their own corruption."

"And you can?" The words slipped out before I could think better of them.

He turned me to face him, one hand rising to cup my cheek. The crystal light painted shadows across his face, but his eyes burned bright and sure.

"I see you, Niam. All of you." His thumb traced my cheekbone. "The strength that helped you survive. The compassion that makes you want to save others, even after everything they've done. The fire that burns in your heart."

My breath caught at the intensity in his gaze. This close, I could see the beast stirring behind his eyes, protective and possessive in equal measure.

"And what does the beast see?" I whispered.

His pupils expanded, nearly drowning the color. "Mine," he growled. "My mate. My queen. My heart."

The word 'mate' sent tremors through my body. So much power in that single syllable - promise and threat and destiny all wrapped together.

A throat cleared behind us. We turned to find Mahra watching with poorly concealed amusement.

"Your tent awaits," she said, gesturing toward the shelter set apart from the others. "Unless you'd prefer to continue this discussion in public?"

"Everything you need is inside," she said, mouth curving into a smile that made heat rise in my cheeks. "Sleep well,

children.” She turned and walked away, braids swaying, leaving us alone.

I ducked through the entrance first, grateful for the shadows that hid my blush. The space felt intimate - a single sleeping pallet piled with furs, a wooden rack for our gear, a brass pot steaming in the corner. When I lifted the lid, herb scented steam drifted up.

The pouch Mahra had given me lay empty now - the device’s work complete once it had led us to the pod. Like so many things from my old life, it had served its purpose and gone quiet, making way for new beginnings

I considered the wine and meat laid out on a low table. After days of travel rations, the spread looked like a feast. But something else pulled at my attention, making food seem far less important.

“I’ll check the perimeter.” Tharon’s words brushed my neck before he slipped back outside.

I sat on a woven mat to tug off my boots, wiggling my toes against the soft weave. The Temple had trained precision and control into my muscles, but now they trembled with an entirely different kind of anticipation.

The tent flap rustled. Tharon filled the entrance, moonlight spilling around his shoulders. “Are you hungry?”

“No.” I rose, took a step toward him.

His eyes tracked my movement. “Thirsty?”

“No.” Another step.

A muscle jumped in his jaw as I drew closer. His fingers flexed at his sides. My fierce warrior prince, suddenly uncertain.

My lips curved. The mighty Valti, flustered by my approach. I caught the thought and drew up short. What right did I have to find him adorable? He was Shakai royalty, heir to Zashi’s throne. A predator who could tear apart Temple guards without breaking stride.

But his fingers trembled when I took that final step.

“Are you tired?” The words rumbled from his chest.

Deliberately, I unlaced my vest and let it fall. “Not tired either.”

The furs beneath my feet whispered as I closed the last distance between us. Even on tiptoe, I barely reached his chin. My palm found his cheek, so warm beneath my touch.

“You’ll need to help me out here.” I stroked my thumb along his jawline. “I can’t quite reach.”

His hands settled at my waist, steadying. “I am yours to command, my queen.”

Then he bent and his mouth found mine. The kiss started gentle, questioning, but need flooded through me - need for more, for everything. My fingers slid into his hair, pulling him closer as his arms banded around me.

A growl vibrated through his chest when I nipped at his lower lip. His hands spanned my ribs, lifting me against him as the kiss deepened. The beast’s hunger bled through, transforming hesitation into raw possession.

“Niam.” He breathed my name against my throat. “Tell me to stop.”

“No.” I wrapped my legs around his waist as he carried me to the sleeping pallet. “Don’t you dare stop.”

His laugh rumbled through me. “As my queen commands.”

When he laid me on the furs, moonlight painted silver across his skin. I reached for the laces of his shirt, but he caught my wrists.

“Let me look at you first.” His thumbs traced circles on my palms. “Let me memorize every detail.”

Heat bloomed under my skin at the hunger in his gaze. The Temple had taught that bodies were merely vessels, tools to be used and discarded. But Tharon’s eyes made me feel... precious. Cherished.

His fingers ghosted along my collarbone, down my arms. Learning me by touch. When they found the scars at my temples, his expression darkened.

“Every time I see these marks, I lose control.”

I turned my face into his palm. “That’s over now.”

“Because I’ll kill anyone who tries to harm you again.” The beast growled through his words.

“I know.” And I did know, with bone-deep certainty. This man would tear apart worlds to keep me safe.

My hands found the hem of his shirt, pushed it up to reveal the lean muscles beneath. He helped me strip it off, then caught my exploring fingers.

“Slow down, little mate.” He pressed a kiss to my palm. “We have all night.”

“I don’t want slow.” I hooked my leg around his hip, pulling him closer. “I want you.”

His control snapped. The kiss turned fierce, claiming, as his hands roamed my body. When I arched into his touch, his growl of satisfaction vibrated through me.

His voice caressed me with reverence: “My mate. My heart. Mine alone.”

“Yours.” The word fell from my lips like a vow. “Always yours.”

His mouth traced fire down my throat as his fingers worked at the laces of my shirt. Each newly revealed inch of skin drew fresh touches, making me writhe beneath him.

“Beautiful.” He nipped at my shoulder. “Perfect.”

When his hands found bare skin at my waist, I gasped his name. He lifted his head, pupils blown wide with desire.

“Tell me what you want.” His voice roughened with need. “Tell me how to please you.”

“I want...” Heat flooded my face. My years in the Temple never taught me how to handle this - wanting so much I ached

with it. “Everything. I want everything with you.”

Understanding softened his expression. “Then let me show you.” His palm slid up my ribs. “Let me teach you all the ways I can make you feel good.”

The world outside the tent receded into insignificance as Tharon’s touch ignited a different kind of storm within me. His kisses trailed down my neck, each one a brand that seared away the last vestiges of the Temple’s control. My breath hitched as his mouth found the sensitive skin where my neck met my shoulder, his teeth grazing lightly, just enough to make me shudder with pleasure.

“Tharon,” I moaned, my fingers tangling in his hair, pulling him closer. His name was a plea, a prayer, a benediction.

He growled in response, the sound vibrating through me. His hands moved with confidence, stripping away my clothing piece by piece until I lay before him, bare and vulnerable. The cool air of the tent pebbled my flesh, but his gaze warmed me, awakening a deep, burning need.

Tharon’s large hands cupped my breasts, his thumbs brushing over my nipples, coaxing them into tight peaks. The sensation was exquisite, each stroke sending jolts of pleasure straight to my core. I writhed against him, desperate for more. He dipped his head, capturing one nipple in his mouth, and I couldn’t suppress the gasp that escaped my lips. The feel of his tongue, hot and wet, was almost too much. He sucked and teased, his fingers mirroring the movements of his mouth on my other breast, until I was a writhing mess of need.

“So responsive,” he murmured, his lips brushing me as he spoke, the vibration of his words sending a fresh wave of desire coursing through me. “I could spend eternity learning what makes you moan.”

His words were a promise, a vow of endless exploration and discovery. I wanted that - wanted him, with an intensity that left me breathless.

As he worked his way down my body, his hands skimming over my ribs, my hips, the sensitive skin of my inner thighs, I felt a moment of vulnerability. I had been a vessel, a tool, for so long. But Tharon's touch wasn't clinical or controlling; it was worshipful, adoring. Every kiss, every caress, was a testament to his desire for me, not just as a mate, but as a woman.

He hooked his fingers in the waistband of my pants, his gaze locked on mine as he slowly began to pull them down. I lifted my hips to help him, my heart hammering. When I was completely bared to him, he paused, just looking at me with an intensity that took my breath away.

"You are a vision, my Niam," he said, his voice rough with desire. "Strong, beautiful, brave."

Before I could respond, he leaned in, his mouth trailing a path of fire up the inside of my thigh. My body tensed in anticipation, every nerve ending alight with the need for his touch. When his tongue finally made contact with my core, I nearly came off the furs.

He explored me with a thoroughness that bordered on reverence, his tongue dipping inside me before tracing lazy circles around my clit. The sensations were overwhelming, each lap of his tongue sending me higher and higher. I could feel the pressure building, an intense coiling of pleasure that threatened to shatter me.

And then he slipped a finger inside me, the intrusion both a surprise and a relief, filling an emptiness I hadn't realized was there. He moved slowly at first, letting me adjust to the sensation, before adding another finger. The stretch was exquisite, the friction of his fingers coupled with the relentless attention of his mouth driving me towards the edge.

The dual sensations were almost too much, my body still sensitive from my recent release. But he was relentless, his fingers curling inside me in a way that made stars dance behind my closed eyelids. His tongue flicked against my clit with precise, maddening strokes, pushing me towards another peak I wasn't sure I could handle.

“Tharon, I can’t,” I protested weakly, but he just growled in response, the vibration against my sensitive flesh almost too much to bear.

“You can, and you will,” he said, his voice a low rumble. “Let go, Niam. Trust me to catch you.”



# THARON

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My heart thundered as Niam writhed beneath me, her moans music to my ears. I dragged my tongue across her sensitive flesh, reveling in the sounds she made. Her taste, her scent, flooded my senses, making the beast purr with satisfaction.

“That’s it, let go,” I murmured against her thigh. “Let me show you what pleasure should feel like.”

Her fingers tightened in my hair, pulling deliciously at my scalp. The pain mixed with pleasure, driving my need higher. This woman, my mate, deserved nothing but bliss. Each cry that fell from her lips urged me on.

Like an artist with his masterpiece, I worked her body with careful precision. My fingers curled inside her, seeking the spot that made her buck against my mouth. When I found it, her whole body jerked.

“Please, Tharon,” she begged, her thighs trembling against my shoulders.

I growled my approval, flicking my tongue faster as my fingers moved in time. She clenched around me, coming apart with a strangled cry. I eased her through it, drinking in every drop of her pleasure until her body went limp.

Pride surged through me. My mate taking her pleasure from me. I moved up her body, gathering her into my arms. Her breath came in short pants, her skin flushed and damp with sweat.

But even as I held her, she wriggled against me. Her small hand snaked between us, fingers wrapping around my cock. The unexpected touch made me hiss through my teeth.

“Stop,” I warned, catching her wrist. “You don’t have to-”

“You told me I could command you.” Her eyes sparkled with mischief. “And I want more.”

The beast roared its approval, but I stayed gentle as I lifted her hand to my lips. “Are you certain?”

“Show me everything.” She pressed closer, nipping at my jaw. “Make me yours completely.”

Those words broke the last of my restraint. I sat up, pulling away just long enough to strip off my remaining clothes. Her hungry gaze tracked my movements, lingering on my cock. Was it strange to her? But she didn’t look away.

“Come here.” I settled back against the furs, pulling her into my lap. Her legs straddled my thighs, putting us face to face. Perfect. I wanted to watch every expression cross her face.

My hands spanned her waist, so small compared to my bulk. My mate. Mine to protect. Mine to pleasure.

“Lower yourself onto me,” I instructed, helping guide her hips. “Slowly. Don’t hurt yourself.”

She nodded, determination written across her features. I pressed the bulbed head of my cock against her entrance, letting her control the pace. The wet heat of her made me want to thrust up, to claim her fully, but I held still.

A small frown creased her brow as she sank down, taking me inch by careful inch. Her body stretched around me, so tight it bordered on pain. But the vision of her face - eyes closed, lips parted - made it worth every moment of restraint.

“That’s it,” I praised, stroking her sides. “Take what you need.”

She paused halfway, breathing hard. “It’s big; harder than I thought.”

No. I couldn't hurt her. "We can stop--"

"Don't you dare." She opened her eyes, fixing me with a fierce look. "I want this. Want you."

To prove her point, she sank down another inch. The sensation nearly undid me.

"Help me," Niam whimpered, hands gripping my shoulders.

My control slipped. The sound of her need, the heat of her wrapped around me - my sanity threatened to break. The beast howled, demanding I take her hard and fast. But this first time, I needed to be gentle.

I slid my hands to her hips, fingers spanning the delicate curve of her waist. So small, so perfect. With exquisite care, I guided her down another inch, sweat beading on my brow from the effort of restraint.

"Please," she gasped.

That single word snapped the last thread of my control. I bucked my hips up hard, burying myself to the hilt inside her. Her gasp turned into a cry as she took all of me at once.

For endless heartbeats, I held still, letting her adjust to my full length and girth. The tight, wet heat of her threatened to drive me mad. But I would not hurt her, would not rush this precious moment of claiming my mate.

She rolled her hips experimentally, gasping at the sensation. I guided her movements, showing her how to find the angle that pleased her most. When she found it, her nails dug into my shoulders.

"Yes," she moaned. "Like that."

Watching her take her pleasure from my body drove me wild. My beast urged me to flip her over, to pound into her until she screamed. But this was better - watching her discover her own desire, seeing the wonder on her face with each new sensation.

Her pace quickened, confidence growing. I met each roll of her hips with a shallow thrust, careful not to overwhelm her.

The sounds she made grew desperate, needy.

“Please,” she whimpered. “I need...”

“What do you need?” I dragged my teeth along her throat. “Tell me.”

“More. Harder.”

Permission granted, I tightened my grip on her hips. My thrusts grew stronger, deeper, making her cry out with each one. The beast rose closer to the surface, demanding to claim our mate fully.

I slipped one hand between us, finding her swollen clit as her whole body jerked at the touch.

“Come for me again,” I demanded. “Let me feel you.”

A few more circles of my thumb and she shattered. Her inner walls clamped down on my cock as she screamed my name. The feeling of her pleasure triggered my own release, my vision whiting out as I filled her with my seed.

We collapsed together onto the furs, both breathing hard. I gathered her close, not ready to let go.

For now, in this moment, she was safe in my arms. My mate. My queen. My everything.

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GRAY LIGHT FILTERED through the tent’s woven walls, bringing the first hints of dawn. I watched Niam adjust the silk veil Mahra had gifted her, arranging the shimmering fabric to cover her face. My stomach knotted at the sight.

The Temple had forced her to stay hidden, unseen, a ghost in their cursed halls. Now my mate shrouded herself again, preparing to face a world that might reject her.

My fingers curled into fists as she fussed with the drape of fabric. Some part of me raged at seeing her conceal herself. She belonged at my side, proud and free, not skulking in shadows.

“No.” I stopped her hands as she adjusted the material once more. “No more hiding.”

“But the traders, the villages we’ll pass...”

“Let them stare. Let them whisper.” I pulled the veil away, revealing her delicate features. “You are my mate, and I won’t have you skulking in shadows anymore.”

Her fingers traced the scars on her temples, hesitant. “They’ll know your mate is a Frostling.”

“Good.” I gently kissed each scar in turn. “Let them know. You are different. You’re mine.”

A blush crept across her cheeks, but she didn’t reach for the veil again. Progress.

Outside, the camp stirred to life. Voices called greetings, metal clanked against stone as cooking fires blazed to life. The familiar sounds of a Shakai camp waking.

I helped Niam gather our belongings, trying not to hover as she moved about the tent. The night’s passion had left marks on her pale skin - claiming kisses along her throat.

“Stop fretting,” she murmured, catching my expression. “I’m not made of glass.”

“I know.” But the beast disagreed, urging me to wrap her in furs and keep her safe from all harm.

We emerged into the pre-dawn chill to find Mahra waiting, arms crossed and a knowing smile on her weathered face. Her eyes widened slightly at Niam’s unveiled features, but approval warmed her expression.

“The morning brings changes,” she said, inclining her head. “And wisdom, it seems.”

Two villarts stood ready, laden with supplies. The smaller mount shifted restlessly, sensing my approach.

“For your mate to ride,” Mahra explained, gesturing to the second beast. “The journey ahead is long.”

I shook my head. “She rides with me.”

“As you wish.” Mahra’s smile widened. “Though perhaps your mate might appreciate the option of choice?”

Niam's fingers brushed my arm. "I prefer staying close," she said softly.

The beast preened at her words. My mate, choosing to remain at my side.

Mahra raised her hands in the traditional blessing. "May the winds guide your path and the earth steady your steps. Return to us when fate allows."

The sun crested the eastern peaks as we departed, painting the sky in streaks of gold and rose. Niam sat before me on the villart, her body fitting perfectly against mine. Each step of the mount pressed her closer, a sweet torment after the night's passion.

A merchant caravan passed on the narrow trail, the traders' eyes widening when they spotted my unveiled mate. One man stared too long - I bared my teeth until he looked away.

"They're just curious," Niam murmured, relaxing incrementally as we continued on. "No one's tried to burn me at the stake yet."

"Not funny." I nuzzled her hair, breathing in her scent to calm the beast's protective rage.

The day wore on as we traveled, my mate gradually unwinding in my arms. When we passed the first Shakai village, the initial shock on the villagers' faces gave way to cautious acceptance. Perhaps they sensed my claim on her, saw how naturally she moved among our people.

A herd of wild tarnul grazed on the hillside, their scaled hides gleaming in the sunlight. Niam leaned forward, fascination bright in her eyes.

"I've only seen them in the Temple's archives," she breathed. "They're beautiful."

I explained how the beasts lived in family groups, led by the eldest female. How they used their long necks to reach the sweetest leaves in the tallest trees. How their scales changed color with the seasons.

Her wonder at each new discovery delighted me. The Temple had locked her away from the world - now I could show her everything she'd missed.

Something flickered at the edge of my vision - a flock of kaldrini taking flight from a nearby cliff face. Their transparent wings scattered rainbow light across the rocks.

“Look.” I pointed them out, savoring Niam’s soft gasp of appreciation. “They nest in the highest peaks, weaving their homes from the thinnest of strands.”

“How do they survive the winter storms?”

“The whole flock huddles together, creating a pocket of warmth in their nest.”

She turned her head towards me. “You know so much about this land.”

“I’ve spent years exploring these mountains.” My arms tightened around her waist. “Now I get to share them with you.”

A sweet smile curved her lips. “I like that.”

The beast rumbled its satisfaction. Yes, this was right - showing our mate the wonders of our territory, teaching her our ways.

We paused to water the villarts at a crystal-clear stream. While the mounts drank, I pointed out the glowing moss that grew along the banks, the tiny amphibians that changed color to match the rocks.

Niam crouched to examine a patch of star-flowers, their silver petals opening to catch the midday sun. Her fingers ghosted over the delicate blooms.

“The Temple’s archives held so much knowledge,” she mused. “But they never captured the true beauty of things.”

I settled beside her, watching emotions play across her expressive face. “Knowledge without experience is hollow.”

“Yes.” She plucked a single flower, tucking it behind her ear. “I want to experience everything now.”

The simple gesture squeezed my heart. My brave little mate, finally free to explore the world denied to her for so long.

A shadow passed overhead - a hunting skyclaw riding the thermals. Niam tracked its flight, fearless despite our recent encounter with one of the beasts.

“Is that one looking for prey?”

“No, just patrolling its territory.” I pointed out the distinctive markings on its wings. “See the blue stripes? That’s a female. They’re less aggressive than the males unless protecting a nest.”

She absorbed every detail, asking questions that revealed her quick mind and natural curiosity. The Temple might have tried to crush her spirit, but they’d failed. Her eagerness to learn, to understand, shone through.

The beast stirred restlessly, wanting to show her more, to see that wonder light her eyes again and again. But we had ground to cover before nightfall.

“Come.” I helped her to her feet, though she hardly needed the assistance. “There’s a sheltered valley ahead where we can make camp, and reach the inn tomorrow.”

The sun climbed higher as we traveled, warming the cool mountain air. Niam dozed briefly, her head tucked under my chin. I kept one arm wrapped securely around her waist, the other holding the villart’s reins.

We passed another merchant caravan, this one larger than the first. The traders’ whispers followed us down the trail:

“Is that Prince Tharon?”

“But the woman with him...”

“A Frostling? Impossible...”

“Did you see her scars?”

A low growl escaped me, but Niam squeezed my arm. “Let them talk,” she murmured. “Words can’t hurt me anymore.”



My brave little mate. The beast settled, soothed by her quiet strength.

A family of tree-leapers swung through the branches overhead, their long tails flashing silver and gold. Niam watched in delight as the youngest ones chased each other, tumbling through the air with impossible grace.

“They look so joyful,” she said softly.

“They are.” I nuzzled her hair. “Like all creatures should be when they’re free.”

She went still in my arms, understanding my meaning. Then she turned, pressing a swift kiss to my jaw.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “For everything.”

The beast preened at her gratitude, but I shook my head. “You freed yourself. I just happened to be there to help.”

“Still.” Her fingers danced across my neck, making me shiver. “I’m glad you were.”

The villart snorted, sensing my distraction.

We passed through a narrow canyon, the walls striped with bands of colored stone. Niam’s sharp eye noted each shade, each pattern.

“The Temple’s archives mentioned mineral deposits in these mountains,” she said. “But they never described how beautiful they are.”

“Mahra’s people mine similar formations further north.” I pointed out a particularly vibrant streak of blue. “That’s where they get the dye for their ceremonial robes.”

“The color of your shirt,” she realized. “The warrior’s blue.”

“Yes.” Pride colored my voice. “Though few know its true source anymore.”

She absorbed this new knowledge with her usual quiet intensity. “Will you teach me more? About your people’s ways?”

“Everything.” I pressed my lips to her hair. “Whatever you want to know.”

## NIAM

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My fingers brushed the villart's scaled neck as I lifted my leg over its back. The mount let out a soft huff but stayed steady while I dismounted. After hours of riding, my thighs burned from gripping the saddle.

"Here." Tharon's hands caught my waist, easing my descent. His touch lingered longer than needed, spreading warmth through my body despite the chill mountain air.

"I can manage." But I didn't pull away.

He held me tight, then released me. "I know you can. Doesn't mean you have to."

The valley spread before us, wreathed in long shadows as the sun sank behind jagged peaks. Purple needled trees marched up the mountainsides, their branches heavy. A stream cut through the center, its banks thick with moss and delicate star-flowers.

"Perfect spot." Tharon led the villarts to a flat area sheltered by a rock outcropping. "The stream will mask our sounds and scent from predators."

I moved to help unpack, but a wave of dizziness hit. My legs wobbled, unused to so much activity after years in the Temple's sterile chambers.

Tharon steadied me with one hand. "Rest. I'll handle this."

"No." I squared my shoulders. "Show me what to do."

His lips quirked. "Stubborn mate."

“You knew that when you claimed me.”

“True.” He guided me to the packs. “Start with unloading while I set up the tent. The ground gets cold at night.”

While I worked, my thoughts drifted to the other Temple girls who’d found mates among the Shakai. What were their lives like now?

“Tell me about them,” I said as I unpacked cooking supplies. “Your brother and cousin. The other Valti who found the human women.”

Tharon paused in hammering tent stakes. A muscle jumped in his jaw. “It’s...complicated.”

“Most things worth knowing are.” I settled cross-legged on a fallen log, watching him work. “Please? I want to understand.”

He sighed, driving another stake into the ground with perhaps more force than needed. “Drax is...impulsive. Hot-headed. Everything a crown prince shouldn’t be.”

“But?”

“But he’s also honorable. Loyal. The people love him in a way they never loved me.” Tharon’s hands stilled on the tent poles. “I used to resent that.”

“Used to?”

“Having a mate changes things. Makes you see what truly matters.” He shot me a heated look that warmed my blood. “Power means nothing if you’re alone.”

I busied myself arranging cookware, hoping he didn’t notice my blush. “And Ashur?”

“My most trusted warrior, though I rarely admitted it.” Tharon resumed work on the tent. “He balances Drax’s fire with cool logic. Together they’re...formidable.”

The sun dipped lower as a chill breeze stirred my hair.

Tharon noticed my shiver. In moments, he’d wrapped his heavy cloak around my shoulders. The fur lining carried his scent - musky spices and mountain air.

“The king is dying.” His words came soft as he knelt to build a fire. “My father - no, Sarl. He was never truly a father to me.”

I drew the cloak tighter. “You don’t have to tell me.”

“I do.” Sparks flew as he struck flint to steel. “You need to understand what you’re walking into. The royal court is a nest of vipers, each noble faction vying for power.”

The flames caught, casting dancing shadows across his face. “For years I played their games. Kept Drax away from court, undermined his position, all to secure my own claim to the throne.”

“What changed?”

“I did.” He fed small twigs to the growing fire. “When mother died, when I realized how deep her poison ran...I saw what power had cost us all.”

Night crept into the valley as Tharon explained the web of alliances and betrayals that marked Zashi politics. He spoke of King Sarl’s wasting illness, of noble houses circling like vultures, of his own ruthless climb to power.

But underneath the cold calculation, I heard pain. The abandoned child desperate to prove himself worthy. The unwanted son fighting for scraps of approval.

I rose, my legs steadier now, and moved to kneel beside him. “You don’t need to be alone anymore.”

His hand found mine, fingers intertwining. “No. I don’t.”

The fire crackled, sparks rising to join the first stars appearing overhead. Tharon pulled ingredients from our packs - dried meat, roots, herbs that filled the air with sharp, unfamiliar scents.

“Drax is handling the council while I’m gone,” he said as he worked. “He has a way with people when he bothers to try. They trust his honesty, even if they fear his beast.”

“And you?”

“They fear my mind more than any beast.” He stirred the pot hanging over the flames. “But perhaps that’s changing too.”

I watched his sure movements as he prepared our meal. No wasted motion, every action precise. Like the Temple’s efficiency, but warmed by something human.

“The wanderers worry me more,” he continued. “Korrin’s people have always been...unpredictable. But we need their support if we’re to unite the Shakai.”

“Why does everything have to be about power?” The question slipped out.

Tharon’s hand stilled. “Because power used wisely protects what matters. My people. My lands.” His eyes found mine across the fire. “My mate.”

Warmth spread through me. “I don’t need protection.”

“No.” His smile held edges of predator and prince. “But you have it anyway.”

The rich scent of cooking meat filled the air. My stomach growled, reminding me how long we’d traveled.

Tharon ladled stew into wooden bowls, passing one to me. “Careful. It’s hot.”

The first bite exploded with flavor on my tongue.

“Good?”

I nodded, already reaching for another spoonful. “Where did you learn to cook?”

“Survival training. A prince who can’t feed himself won’t last long in the wilds. Not all of the dangers lie in the council chambers.” He watched me eat with satisfaction. “Though I rarely had such appreciative company.”

Night settled fully around us, the fire our only light. Stars wheeled overhead, a stark contrast from the Temple’s sealed chambers. A night bird called from the forest edge.

“What happens now?” I asked softly.

“We rest. Tomorrow, we reach the inn, then wait for a response to our message.” Tharon set aside his empty bowl. “Unless you’ve changed your mind about destroying the Temple?”

“Never.” Steel crept into my voice. “Those girls deserve justice.”

“Then we’ll find a way.” He reached across the space between us, thumb brushing my cheek. “Together.”

The word held weight, promise. I leaned into his touch, letting myself believe in possibility.

The Temple’s reach was long, the path ahead uncertain. But here, in this sheltered valley with my fierce prince, I felt something foreign stir within me.

Hope.

# THARON

---

The mountain path wound down through the purple-needled pines as evening light painted long shadows across the valley. Two days of hard travel had done nothing to dim my awareness of Niam's body pressed against mine. Each step of the villart brought another wave of her scent - herbs and sunlight mixing with traces of our shared passion.

The Crossroads Inn emerged around the final bend, its weathered stone walls built right into the mountainside. Three stories of terraced balconies overlooked a busy courtyard where merchant wagons and villarts crowded together.

Niam's breath caught. "It's enormous."

"One of the largest trading posts in the northern passes." A chill wind blew, and I wrapped the cloak more tightly around her. "I've stayed here often when avoiding court politics."

"You prefer being out here?" She looked at me. "Among your people?"

"Hard to rule from inside palace walls." The villart picked its way down the steep approach. "Better to see how policies affect real lives than argue abstractions with nobles."

Merchants and traders filled the courtyard, their voices echoing off stone walls as they haggled over goods. The familiar bustle soothed something deep within me. Here, far from court intrigues, I could simply be a traveler with my mate.



A stable hand rushed to meet us, then froze mid-step. His eyes locked on Niam's unveiled face, pale skin and close-cropped red hair marking her as something outside his experience.

I let my hand rest on my sword hilt. Not a threat, exactly, but a reminder of consequences.

Recognition flickered in the boy's eyes. He dropped into a hasty bow. "My prince! We had no word of your coming."

"Good. Let's keep it that way." I swung down from the villart, then lifted Niam before she could protest. "Our mounts need care. Have someone bring the baggage inside."

A girl of perhaps twelve summers darted past the stable hand, dark blue braids flying. She skidded to a stop before Niam, eyes wide with curiosity.

"Are you really a Frostling?" The words tumbled out. "From the old stories?"

The stable hand made a strangled sound. "Velina! Show respect to his highness's companion!"

But Niam crouched to the girl's level, a gentle smile softening her features. "I'm just a person, like you. Though I'd love to hear these stories sometime."

Velina bounced on her toes. "I know lots! Grandmother tells them on winter nights. About ice palaces and snow queens and-"

"Enough." The stable hand got the message. He hustled Velina away with muttered apologies.

Niam watched them go, something wistful in her expression. "You didn't have to frighten them."

"I didn't." I guided her toward the inn's main entrance. "But word spreads fast in places like this. Better to establish boundaries early."

The common room buzzed with conversation that stuttered into silence as we entered. Dorvin, the innkeeper, looked up from his ledger. I'd known him since my first solo journey

through these passes, when his father had given shelter to a rain-soaked princeling without ceremony or fuss.

Now his weathered face showed the same shock as the stable hand, before decades of experience smoothed his expression.

“Prince Tharon.” He inclined his head. “Your usual room will be ready shortly, though I wish you’d sent word ahead. We could have prepared properly.”

“The lack of preparation suits me fine.” I led Niam to the broad wooden counter. “We’ll take dinner in the common room.”

Dorvin’s eyes flickered to Niam, careful assessment replacing initial surprise. “Of course. Though perhaps the lady would prefer private dining?”

“The lady can speak for herself.” Niam’s quiet words carried clearly. “And I’d rather see your famous hospitality firsthand.”

A smile creased Dorvin’s face. “Well said, my dear. Though I hope you’ll forgive an old man’s presumption.” He raised his voice to carry through the room. “The Crossroads welcomes all travelers who come in peace.”

The weight behind his words registered. Conversations gradually resumed, though I noted which faces showed hostility rather than curiosity.

“Your father would be proud,” I told him softly. “He taught you well.”

“High praise, coming from you.” Dorvin’s eyes crinkled. “Though I think he’d be more interested in how you found such an unusual companion.”

“A tale for another time.” I caught the gleam of interest in his expression. “For now, just a meal and a quiet night.”

“Of course.” He signaled a serving girl. “Show them to the corner table. And tell Cook to send up the roasted mountain hart - the good cuts, mind you.”

News of our arrival spread through the inn like wildfire. By the time our food arrived, the common room had filled with merchants and traders trying to catch a glimpse of the prince's strange companion.

Whispered fragments reached my ears:

“...just like the stories say...”

“...but why would his highness...”

“...heard there were others in the capital...”

Niam ignored the attention, focusing on her plate with single-minded intensity. The roasted meat came with crusty bread and autumn vegetables, simple fare elevated by careful preparation.

“Good?” I asked as she sopped up juice with a piece of bread.

“Different from the Temple's food.” She paused. “Better.”

The beast stirred at the reminder of her captivity, but I forced it down. This wasn't the place for displays of temper.

After the meal, we climbed to our room where copper tubs of steaming water waited. I dismissed the serving girl who would have attended us.

“Let me take care of you.” I helped Niam out of her travel-stained clothes, each revealed inch of skin a fresh temptation.

She sank into the hot water with a sigh that sent heat straight to my groin. I stripped quickly and joined her, easing into the tub behind her.

“You handled yourself well today.” I dropped a kiss on her shoulder. “Though I know it wasn't easy.”

“Easier than the Temple.” She relaxed back against me. “At least here the stares hold curiosity rather than calculation.”

I reached for the soap, working up a lather in my hands. “Still. You didn't have to face them unveiled.”

“Yes, I did.” Steel threaded through her words. “I won't hide anymore.”

Pride and possession surged through me as I washed her, learning each curve and hollow of her body. My mate was no cowering victim, but a warrior in her own right.

When my hands slipped lower, her breath hitched. “Tharon...”

“Let me please you.” I nipped at her ear. “Let me show you how precious you are.”

She turned in my arms, water sloshing over the tub’s rim. “Show me.”

Niam’s skin glowed in the lamplight as she turned to face me, water droplets trailing down her throat. My hands slid to her waist, steadying her as small waves lapped at the tub’s copper sides.

“How do you want me to show you?” I nuzzled the sensitive spot behind her ear.

She pressed closer, hands sliding up my chest. “However you like.”

Wrong answer. My mate needed to learn to voice her desires. “Tell me what you desire, little one.”

A blush crept across her cheeks. “I...” She bit her lip.

“Yes?” I caught her chin between thumb and forefinger. “Say it.”

“Your mouth.” She spoke the words in a rush. “Like...like before.”

Shy mate, finding her voice at last. “Stand up.”

Water streamed down her body as she rose. I steadied her with hands at her hips, drinking in the sight of her. Scars marked her pale skin - remnants of the Temple’s cruelty that made my beast snarl. But she was here now. Safe. Mine.

I lifted her from the tub, settling her on the wide rim. The metal must have felt cold against her skin, but she didn’t complain as I spread her thighs.

“Beautiful.” I pressed kisses up her inner thigh, savoring her shiver. “Every inch of you.”

Her fingers twisted in my wet hair as I tasted her. Sweet and salt mixed on my tongue as I explored her folds, learning what made her breath catch and her thighs tremble.

When I found her clit, she bucked against my mouth. “Tharon!”

I growled my approval, the vibration making her cry out again. This was what I wanted - my mate wild and desperate for my touch.

Her peak built slowly this time, pleasure coiling tighter with each stroke of my tongue. When she finally shattered, my name a broken sob on her lips, I pulled her trembling body into my arms.

“I’ve got you.” I carried her to the bed, laying her on sheets warmed by braziers beneath the floor. “Rest now.”

But she caught my wrist as I moved to step away. “Stay.”

As if I could deny her anything. I stretched out beside her, pulling the furs over us both. She curled into my side, head pillowed on my shoulder.

“Thank you,” she murmured.

“For what?”

“For making me feel...” She paused. “Real. Like a person, not just a vessel for the Temple’s will.”

I tightened my arms around her. “You’ve always been real. They just couldn’t see it.”

She traced idle patterns on my chest. “Sometimes I wonder if I am. The Temple changed so much inside me. Added things. Took things away.”

“You’re you.” I guided her wandering hand, pressed it over my heart. “Everything else is just...decoration.”

A small smile curved her lips. “Decoration?”

“Mm.” I nuzzled her hair. “Like jewelry. It adorns, but doesn’t change what lies beneath.”

She went quiet, considering this. Outside our window, voices drifted up from the courtyard - merchants finishing their day's business, stable hands calling to each other as they settled the animals for the night.

"Will your people accept me?" The question came soft, hesitant. "Once they know what I am?"

"They'll accept you because you're my mate." I stroked her back. "The rest doesn't matter."

"It matters to me." She pushed up on one elbow to look at me. "I won't hide what was done to me. What's still being done to others."

The fierce light in her eyes made my chest ache. My warrior queen, ready to take on the world for justice.

"Then we'll face it together." I brushed my thumb across her cheek. "But not tonight. Tonight is just for us."

She studied my face for a long moment before nodding. "Just for us."

I pulled her down for a kiss that started gentle but quickly blazed into heat. Her body melted against mine as I rolled her beneath me, skin still damp from our bath.

"Speak aloud what you want." I nipped at her throat. "Say it."

This time she didn't hesitate. "You. Inside me."

My control frayed at her words. The beast urged me to take, to claim, to mark. But I made myself go slow, to savor every gasp and whimper as I prepared her.

When I finally slid home, her legs wrapped around my waist, we both groaned at the sensation. Perfect. Right.

"My queen," I nipped lightly at her throat, then licked at the red marks. "My goddess."

"Then you must belong to me." She met my thrusts, nails scoring my shoulders. "Only me."

The joining of our bodies felt like completion, like coming home. Each roll of my hips drew us closer, deeper, until I

couldn't tell where I ended and she began.

Her second peak took her by surprise, inner walls clenching around me as she cried out. Seeing her pleasure triggered my own release, vision whitening out as I spilled inside her.

We lay tangled together afterward, sweat cooling on our skin. She traced my jaw with gentle fingers.

"I never thought I'd have this," she whispered. "Never thought I'd be free to choose."

Taking her hand, I kissed the center of her palm. "You'll always have choices with me."

"Even if I choose wrong?"

"Even then." I gathered her closer. "Though I reserve the right to argue if those choices put you in danger."

She huffed a laugh. "Of course you do."

Outside, night settled over the mountains. The sounds from the courtyard had faded to occasional murmurs and the stamp of restless mounts.

I should have risen to check our supplies, to plan our next move. But with Niam's warmth pressed against me, her breathing growing slow and even, I couldn't bring myself to move.

# NIAM

---

The zvoyna in the inn's stables nudged my hand with its scaled snout, warm breath huffing against my palm. I held out another handful of dried grasses, letting the creature's forked tongue dart out to snatch them.

"They like you," Velina said from where she perched on the stable wall, her blue-black braids swinging as she kicked her feet. "Usually, they only let Grandfather feed them."

"Animals can tell when someone means them no harm." I stroked the zvoyna's ridged neck. Two days of helping with the morning feeding had taught me their habits - how they stamped their clawed feet when impatient, how their scales shifted from deep bronze to warm copper in the sun.

"Will you tell me another story about the wandering tribes?" Velina asked. "The one about the star-dancers?"

I smiled, reaching for more feed. "Maybe later. Right now, these hungry ones need breakfast."

The stable yard had become my refuge these past days. Here, among the stamping mounts and bustling workers, I could almost forget the weight of the Temple's shadow. The innkeeper's granddaughter had attached herself to me from that first morning, peppering me with questions about everything from my hair to my accent.

"Lady Niam!" One of the merchant women - Sela - called from the courtyard. "Thank you again for yesterday. The tea you suggested worked perfectly for my aching joints."



“The Temple-” I caught myself. “My mother taught me about herbs. I’m glad it helped.”

Sela beamed, adjusting her heavy pack. “You must share more of your knowledge before you leave. Though I hope that won’t be too soon?”

“That depends on-” I spotted Tharon leaning against a pillar across the yard, watching. He gave me a slight nod but stayed where he was, letting me navigate these interactions on my own. My heart squeezed at his quiet support.

A commotion near the main gates scattered my thoughts. Stable hands rushed past, shouting orders. Dust rose from the Zashi road - riders approaching fast.

Tharon appeared at my side, stance alert but not alarmed. His hand brushed my lower back. “Four riders. Shakai style.”

The approaching group burst through the gates at full gallop, their villarts’ claws kicking up gravel. I recognized them instantly - Mila’s straight black hair streaming behind her, Denna’s golden curls contained in a traveler’s braid.

Mila wore traditional Shakai clothing now, the deep blues and greens suiting her dark coloring. Denna’s outfit showed the looser cut I’d noticed travelers at the inn from the Wandering Nation favored.

Behind them rode two massive Shakai who could only have been Ashur and Korrin.

Mila and Denna dismounted carefully, approaching me as if I might shatter. The old me might have. But that was before Tharon, before freedom.

I launched myself at them, pulling them both into a fierce hug. Denna stiffened in surprise before her arms came around me.

“You’re stronger,” Denna said, drawing back to study me. Her dark eyes widened at my unveiled face, the healthy flush in my cheeks.

“I’m getting there.” I squeezed her hands. “Where’s Lita? Is she alright?”

Mila rolled her eyes. “Oh, she’s fine. Just trapped in Zashi thanks to him.” She jerked her chin toward Tharon. “Drax has been running himself ragged handling council meetings, and Lita won’t leave while he’s so busy.”

“I’m sure Prince Drax is handling court matters well,” Tharon said mildly.

“He’d better be,” Ashur growled, but his eyes held amusement. “Speaking of court matters...” He pulled a leather message case from his saddlebag. “Some papers need your attention.”

The innkeeper materialized beside us, efficiency personified. “Shall I prepare connecting rooms for your companions?”

“Perfect.” Tharon rubbed my lower back absently. “Will you be alright while I handle this?”

I nodded, an odd lightness filling me at his concern. “Go. I have catching up to do anyway.”

He brushed his lips over my forehead before following Ashur and Korrin inside. Behind me, someone made a choked sound of surprise.

The innkeeper led us to a comfortable sitting room where cushioned chairs surrounded a low table. A serving girl brought tea and honey cakes, the spicy-sweet scent filling the air.

“Are you really alright?” Denna asked as soon as we were alone. “We’ve been so worried, especially given...” She hesitated.

“Given what?”

Mila and Denna exchanged glances.

“Given that you’re with Tharon,” Mila finally said. “We know what he’s like - cold, ruthless. The stories about him...”

I blinked. “What? No, Tharon is...” I paused, really thinking about it. The way others flinched from him, how carefully the innkeeper tracked his movements. How different he was with me compared to everyone else.

“He’s kind,” I said slowly. “At least to me.”

“To you,” Denna emphasized. “But not to others. The way he’s handled rivals, how he manipulated the court...” She shook her head. “Just be careful, alright?”

I absently stirred my tea, mind whirling. The Tharon they described seemed nothing like my protective, attentive mate. But I remembered his carefully blank expression when discussing politics, the calculated way he approached problems.

Two sides of the same man, I realized. The cold prince and the devoted mate. Both equally real.

And equally mine.

“I know who he is,” I said finally. “All of who he is. And I trust him.”

Mila squeezed my hand. “Then we trust your judgment. Just know we’re here if you need us.”

I smiled, emotion tightening my throat. “I know. Now tell me everything I’ve missed.”

Mila and Denna’s tales of their new lives spilled out, punctuated by laughter and animated gestures. I soaked in their happiness like a flower turning toward sunlight, letting their joy wash away the shadows of the past few days.

“You should have seen Ashur’s face when I told him I wanted to learn sword-fighting,” Mila said, reaching for another honey cake. “He tried to talk me out of it for days until I threatened to ask Drax instead.”

“And now?”

“Now he complains that I’m getting too good.” She grinned. “But I caught him bragging to the other warriors last week.”

I pictured her wielding a weapon against seasoned Shakai warriors. The image filled me with a fierce pride.

“What about you, Denna?” I asked. “How are you finding life with the Wandering Nation?”

She brushed crumbs from her riding clothes. “It’s... never boring. Let me tell you about the time Baroness Balinta caught some merchants trying to cheat the tribe?”

I shook my head, curling deeper into the cushioned chair. The innkeeper had stoked the fire against the mountain chill, and its warmth seeped into my bones.

“These traders came through last month, claiming their silk was worth three times what the tribe usually pays. Balinta listened to their whole spiel about special dyes and rare weaving techniques.” Denna’s eyes danced. “Then she picked up one bolt and started listing every flaw in the weave, every uneven dye lot, even the exact village where it was made - which was definitely not where they claimed.”

“What did they do?”

“Turned white as ghosts. Turns out she’d spent her youth trading textiles across half the continent. They couldn’t leave fast enough once she was done with them.” Denna’s smile turned thoughtful. “She’s teaching me about fabrics now. Says knowledge is the best weapon in any negotiation.”

More stories flowed - Mila describing the sprawling markets of Zashi, where traders from across the lands hawked their wares. Denna telling tales of life on the move with the Wandering Nation, following ancient paths between summer and winter grounds.

I drank in every detail, until a comfortable silence fell. I traced the rim of my teacup, watching ripples spread across the surface.

“Niam.” Denna’s voice grew serious. “What can we do to help?”

I met their concerned gazes. These women who had escaped the Temple’s grasp, who had built new lives far from its shadow. Who had come running at my message despite the danger.

“The device you helped assemble,” I said slowly. “It led me to something. A... control section that broke off when the ship crashed.”

Their blank looks reminded me - they didn't know. How could they? The Temple kept its true nature hidden even from its own servants.

"The Temple." Where to even start? "It's what's left of the colony ship that brought humans to this world. The priests use the machinery, the tanks, to...to repair it. With our bodies. Our minds."

Horror dawned on their faces as understanding hit. Everything they'd endured - the "purification" rituals, the sensory deprivation tanks, the girls who disappeared - suddenly made terrible sense.

"Stars above." Denna's face had gone pale. "All this time..."

"I tried to destroy it from the command pod." My fingers twisted in my skirt. "But there's too much damage. The systems won't respond properly. I have to go back to make the final link."

"No!" They spoke in unison, then shared a quick glance.

"You can't." Mila reached for my hand, her eyes going to the side of my head where the implants had been just a few days before. "After everything it took to get you out-"

"I have to." Steel filled my voice. "As long as the Temple stands, they'll keep taking girls. Keep using them. Keep-"

The door opened. Tharon filled the frame, his expression unreadable as he took in our positions, the tension in the air.

"The innkeeper said you hadn't touched your lunch." His eyes met mine. "Everything alright?"

I started to reassure him, but Denna spoke first.

"She wants to go back to the Temple."

# THARON

---

I inhaled sharply at Denna's words. My beast clawed at my chest, demanding action. Drawing on years of discipline, I took steady breaths. Focused my thoughts.

"I know." The words came out steady, despite the storm raging inside me.

Niam turned in her chair, chin lifting. Ready to argue, to defend her choice. My fierce, stubborn mate.

I moved behind her chair, resting my hands on her shoulders. Let her feel my support even as my insides twisted at the thought of her returning to that place.

"If that's what my queen needs to do, then the only question is how to make it safe."

Confusion warred with dawning understanding on Denna and Mila's faces. They'd expected a fight, expected me to forbid it. As if anyone could truly forbid Niam anything.

"The first step is getting inside Terr." Niam leaned back against my hands. "We have to assume they're watching the maintenance tunnels through the Canyonlands."

Ashur pushed away from the doorframe. "I'll get parchment. This needs a map."

"I don't know the region," Korrin admitted from where he lounged against the wall.

"I do." Denna sat forward. "Used to sneak out with my brothers when they went on patrol."

Ashur returned with sheets of parchment, ink, and several charcoal sticks. I bowed slightly, acknowledging his foresight. "Please, show us what you know."

Denna bent over the parchment, charcoal moving in swift, sure strokes. "The city's built in rings - eight of them, with farmland to the east and the canyons to the west."

The rough sketch took shape under her hands - concentric circles bisected by major thoroughfares.

"Guards check everyone at each ring," she continued. "Even the farmers get searched coming in and out. No one's supposed to go past the farmland without Temple approval."

My hands tightened on Niam's shoulders. The Temple's control ran deep, wrapping the city in layers of authority like a spider's web.

"Wait." Mila tapped a section of the outer ring. "There might be a way." She glanced at me, then at Niam. "The tanner's quarter - where I grew up. The leather processing needs drainage channels, waste disposal. The smell is so bad the guards stay away when they can."

"Through the sewers?" Denna wrinkled her nose.

"Better than getting caught," Niam said. "How close can we get?"

"The drainage channels start here." Mila marked a spot outside the walls. "They run under the eighth ring, probably connecting to the main sewers. If we can find an access point..."

I studied the crude map, mind already cataloging potential dangers. Guard rotations. Escape routes. How to keep Niam safe while letting her do what she needed.

"The temple will expect something," Ashur pointed out. "After Niam's escape, they must have increased security."

"Good." I said without thinking. Everyone turned to stare at me.

"How is that good?" Denna demanded.

“Because they’ll be looking outward, watching the obvious routes.” I traced the rings with one finger. “While we come in from below.”

“We?” Niam twisted to look up at me. “You can’t come into the city. One look at you and they’ll know something’s wrong.”

My beast snarled at the thought of letting her go alone. “I won’t let you-”

“You have to.” She caught my hand. “Think about it. A Shakai in Terr would draw every guard in the city. But a few human women? We can blend in.”

“She’s right,” Mila said quietly. “The more of us there are, the less we’ll stand out. Three women walking together is normal. A Shakai warrior would start a riot.”

Niam stiffened under my hands. “No. Absolutely not. You both have lives here now. Mates. I won’t risk that.”

My beast approved of her protectiveness, even as I mapped escape routes in my head. The layout of Terr burned in my mind - a maze designed to trap and control. Every ring another barrier between my mate and freedom.

“And what about your life?” Denna stood, copper bangles clinking against each other. “Did you think we’d let you walk back into that hell alone?”

“I have to go back. You don’t.”

“Actually, we do.” Mila crossed her arms. “My cousin still works the tannery. Denna’s brother guards the fifth ring gate. We have people who’ll help us.”

I stroked Niam’s shoulders, feeling the subtle tremors running through her body. “Your friends are right about needing help.”

She tilted her head back to glare at me. “Don’t you start.”

“I won’t stay behind.” My fingers flexed against her skin. “The sewers run deep enough to hide me. I’ll find a way.”

“You can’t. The risk-”



“Is mine to take.” I leaned down, bringing my face close to hers. “You are my mate. That is all that matters.”

“Tharon.” She pressed her palm to my cheek. “Please. I need you safe. If something happens to me-”

“Nothing will happen to you.” My words were thick with growls. “Because I’ll be there to prevent it.”

Ashur cleared his throat. “The Temple knows what a Valti looks like now. They’ll be watching for us.”

“Let them watch the gates and walls.” I straightened, but kept one hand on Niam’s shoulder. “While we slip beneath their feet like water through stone.”

“It’s suicide,” Niam whispered.

“No.” I pulled her chair around to face me, crouching to meet her eyes. “It’s survival. Yours. Mine. All of us.” I caught her hands in mine. “Trust me to protect you, just as I trust you to do what must be done.”

“The prince is right.” Ashur pushed away from the wall. “There’s always a way. We just haven’t found it yet.”

“It’s suicide.” Niam shook her head. “The Temple guards-”

“Will be looking for escaped temple girls and Shakai warriors.” Korrin’s lips curved. “Not common workers.”

“And definitely not rag men.” Mila’s eyes lit with sudden amusement.

I frowned. “Rag men?”

“The lowest rank in the eighth ring.” She gestured to the crude map. “They handle waste disposal, clear blocked drains. No one looks at them - they’re basically untouchable.”

“They keep their faces covered,” Denna added. “To block the smell.”

A laugh bubbled up from within. I’d spent my life climbing to the peak of power, manipulating court politics, building alliances. And now I’d willingly become the lowest of the low.

“From prince to sewage worker.” I squeezed Niam’s shoulders. “At least the company will be good.”

She reached up to cover my hand with hers. “You’d really do that?”

“For you?” I bent to brush my lips against her hair. “Without hesitation.”

Ashur cleared his throat. “If we’re doing this, we need supplies. Clothing, equipment...”

“I can help with that.” Mila straightened. “My family were leather workers in the eighth ring. I still have contacts there.”

“We’ll need a backup plan,” Korrin said. “In case things go wrong.”

I nodded. “Denna, what do you know about guard rotations? Shift changes?”

She bent over the map again, adding notes in precise strokes. “The inner rings change guards at dawn and dusk. But the outer rings are more irregular...”

The conversation flowed around me as they discussed details - supplies needed, routes to take, contingency plans. But my focus stayed on Niam, on the slight tremor in her hands as she traced patterns on the map.

My brave, damaged mate, willing to walk back into her nightmares to save others. The beast within growled approval even as it demanded we spirit her far away from danger.

But that wasn’t who she was. And it wasn’t who I wanted her to be.

My mate wanted to bring down a city. And I would help her do it, because the alternative was watching her try alone.

Ashur cleared his throat. “The new moon’s in three days. Darkness will help.”

“We’ll need time to prepare.” Mila stood. “We can’t exactly waltz in looking like this.”

She gestured at her fine Shakai garments. True enough - we’d need to blend with Terr’s common folk.

“Tomorrow then.” I met each of their eyes in turn. “We can be in the forests around the city by the dark of the moon if we ride hard.”

They nodded, warriors all in their own ways.

As they filed out to begin preparations, Niam turned in her chair to face me. “You’re really going to help? Not try to stop me?”

I grasped her hands, bringing them to my lips. “I told you once - you’re not alone anymore. Where you go, I go. Even into darkness.”

# NIAM

---

Dawn slipped through the shutters in thin golden lines. I breathed in Tharon's scent - spices and leather and something wild underneath. His arms wrapped around me, one hand splayed possessively across my stomach. The steady thud of his heart against my back anchored me to this moment, to this reality where I wasn't alone anymore.

I traced my fingers along his forearm, memorizing the texture of his skin. His breathing changed instantly - going from the deep rhythm of sleep to full alertness in a heartbeat. The predator never truly rested.

"Morning," I whispered.

He nuzzled into my neck. "Did you sleep?"

"Some." I rolled to face him. In the dim light, his features softened, losing some of their usual harsh control. "You?"

"Enough." His thumb brushed my cheek. "We should get up. The others will be here soon."

I pressed closer, not ready to face the day yet. "Five more minutes."

His chest rumbled with quiet laughter. "As my queen commands."

But the sounds of the inn waking filtered through our temporary sanctuary - boots on wooden stairs, voices in the hallway, the clatter of cookware from below. Reality intruding.

“Niam.” Tharon’s voice went serious. “Are you certain about this?”

“Yes.” I met his gaze. “I have to do this. Or the nightmare will never end.”

His jaw clenched, but he nodded. “Then we do it together.”

The sudden pounding at the door made me jump.

“If you two are done being disgusting, there’s still plenty to get done!” Mila called through the wood.

I groaned and buried my face in Tharon’s chest. “I’m starting to regret asking for their help.”

“No, you’re not.” He traced the line of my cheek before rising. “Come on. Time to turn warriors into workers.”

The large chamber we’d commandeered for preparations looked like a merchant’s stall had exploded. Piles of coarse fabric covered every surface - rough-spun shirts and pants in various shades of mud brown.

Ashur held up a shirt between thumb and forefinger like it might bite him. “We’re really wearing these?”

“Would you prefer the guards recognize you instantly?” Mila snatched the garment from his hands. “Now strip.”

I bit back a laugh at his expression - somewhere between offended and amused. Even Korrin’s usual dignity cracked as he examined a pair of patched boots.

“How does anyone walk in these?” He turned them over, frowning at the thin soles.

“Carefully and with lots of practice.” Denna demonstrated the characteristic shuffle-step of a rag man. “Like this. Keep your head down, shoulders slumped.”

The three Shakai warriors attempted to copy her movements. Tharon looked like he was in physical pain trying to make himself appear smaller, less commanding.

“No, no.” Denna shook her head. “You’re still walking like you own the place. Slump more.”

“This is ridiculous.” Korrin adjusted the rough fabric wrapped around his face. “How does anyone breathe in these?”

“Better than breathing in the refuse you’ll be hauling.” Mila circled him, tugging the wrappings tighter. “And keep your voice down. Rag men rarely speak above a whisper.”

“Like this?” Ashur hunched his shoulders and shambled forward in an exaggerated stoop.

“Stars above.” Mila pressed her hands to her face. “Please tell me you can do better than that.”

I watched from my perch on a wooden chest, torn between amusement and worry. These proud warriors were trying so hard to become invisible. But would it be enough?

“Again,” Denna ordered. “All of you. And this time, remember - you’re beneath notice. You’re nothing. No one wants to look at you, so give them no reason to.”

The afternoon brought new challenges as we gathered in a circle on the floor.

“One more thing,” I said, raising my hand to interrupt another round of shuffling practice. “You need to learn some Terran.”

Denna nodded. “Right. No one expects rag men to talk back, but they will bark orders and expect a response. Short and simple ones. Repeat after me,” she said. ““Yes, master.””

Tharon’s attempt came out more like a growl.

“Try again,” I suggested. “Less murder in your tone.”

He shot me a look that promised retribution later, but made another attempt. Better, though still not quite submissive enough.

“Now some warning phrases.” Denna pointed to the slate. ““Guards coming.’ ‘Run.’ ‘Hide.’”

Ashur’s pronunciation turned “please help” into “please hit,” sending Mila into fits of giggles. Even Korrin cracked a

smile as he accidentally propositioned a imaginary guard instead of apologizing.

But beneath the laughter lay darker currents. Every fumbled phrase could mean discovery. Every missed cue could bring disaster. I caught Tharon watching me, saw the same fears reflected in his eyes.

The inn's back courtyard became our training ground as afternoon shadows lengthened. Denna and Mila set up mock checkpoints, drilling responses and movements until they became smoother, more natural.

“Papers?” Denna barked, doing her best guard impression.

Ashur kept his head down, thrust out the forged documents with trembling hands. Perfect. Until he started humming under his breath.

“Again!” Mila ordered. “And this time, remember you're terrified of authority.”

“I am terrified of nothing,” he muttered in Shakai.

“Then pretend,” I suggested. “Unless you want to explain to Mila why you got caught.”

That got through. His next attempt was flawless - the proper mix of fear and subservience.

The sun slipped below the horizon, painting the courtyard in deep purple shadows. My stomach pangs suddenly reminded me we'd skipped the midday meal in favor of practice.

“Food,” Mila announced, as if reading my thoughts. “Before we all collapse from hunger.”

I caught Tharon's hand as we filed back inside. His fingers intertwined with mine, a silent promise of protection even in this safe space. The common room buzzed with travelers' chatter, plates clinking against wooden tables, the sharp scent of roasted meat and fresh bread filling the air.

Within the inn's private dining room, I caught the aromas of unfamiliar spices wafting from heated serving dishes. After

a long day of preparations, my stomach growled despite my nerves.

“You need to eat.” Tharon pulled out my chair, his hand lingering on my shoulder as I sat. “Build your strength.”

At his command servants brought in platters heaped with dishes I’d never seen before. Vibrant colors and textures filled the table - golden-crustured pastries, roasted meats glazed with shimmering sauces, and vegetables cut into delicate spirals.

“Try this.” Tharon loaded his fork with a morsel of meat wrapped in paper-thin pastry. Instead of passing the plate, he held the fork to my lips. “Trust me.”

I hesitated, catching Ashur’s raised eyebrows and Korrin’s carefully blank expression. Even Denna had frozen mid-reach for her cup. The fearsome Prince of Zashi, hand-feeding someone like a doting lover?

But Tharon’s focus remained entirely on me, as if the others had ceased to exist. The tenderness in his expression made my chest ache.

I leaned forward and took the offered bite. Flavors exploded across my tongue - rich meat seasoned with sweet spices I couldn’t name, the pastry dissolving like snowflakes.

“Good?” His thumb brushed my lower lip.

I nodded, unable to speak around the exquisite taste. He smiled - not his usual predatory grin, but something softer, meant only for me.

“More?” Another choice morsel appeared on his fork - this time something that looked like jewel-toned flowers made of impossibly thin slices of fruit.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Mila’s jaw drop. The fearsome Prince of Zashi’s reputation clearly hadn’t prepared any of them for this side of him. But I was learning there were many sides to my mate.

I opened my mouth for another bite, savoring both the intricate flavors and the warmth in Tharon’s eyes as he



watched me eat. Let them stare. This was who we were together, even if no one else understood.

The delicate fruit melted on my tongue like summer rain.

“Remember my first Wanderer feast?” Denna tucked her feet under her, accepting a cup of spiced wine from Korrin. “I’d never seen so much food in one place. Or so many colors.”

“Tell them about the dancing,” Mila prompted.

Denna’s cheeks flushed. “I stepped on everyone’s feet. But they just laughed and taught me the steps again.”

“You should see her now,” Korrin said. “She leads the harvest dances.”

“Because no one else wants to risk dropping the ribbons in front of the elders.” But Denna’s smile betrayed her pride.

I picked at my food, stomach too knotted for more than small bites. Tomorrow, we’d ride for Terr. Tomorrow we’d begin the journey back to my nightmares.

Tharon’s hand settled on my knee under the table. I covered it with mine, grateful for the anchor.

“What about you?” Denna asked Mila. “Any embarrassing stories?”

“Oh stars.” Mila groaned. “The first time I tried to cook for Ashur’s family. I didn’t know the spices were that different.”

“Different?” Ashur’s lips twitched. “You nearly burned my mother’s tongue off.”

“She was very polite about it!”

“She drank three pitchers of water.”

The laughter that followed eased some of the tension from my shoulders. These were my people now - this odd collection of humans and Shakai, bound together by choice and trust.

The conversation drifted, stories flowing like the wine. Tales of first meetings, of cultural misunderstandings, of

finding belonging in unexpected places. Through it all, Tharon's steady presence grounded me.

When the last dishes were cleared and the wine was gone, reality settled back over us like a heavy cloak. Tomorrow waited, with all its dangers and uncertainties.

"We should rest," Denna said finally. "Long ride ahead."

The others murmured agreement, rising to prepare for bed. But I lingered, not ready to face the dark and my dreams.

"Come." Tharon pulled me to my feet. "One last check of the supplies, then sleep."

The stable yard lay quiet under a blanket of stars. Our mounts dozed in their stalls while we triple-checked packs and weapons.

His hands caught mine, stilling their nervous movement. "Niam."

I couldn't meet his eyes. "We need to-"

"Look at me."

I did, finding warmth and steel in his gaze.

"Whatever happens," he said, "fear nothing. I won't let them take you again."

"I know." I pressed my face into his chest, breathing in his familiar scent. "But what if-"

"No." His arms tightened around me. "No what-ifs. We go in. We do what must be done. We come out. Simple."

I huffed a laugh against his shirt. "When you say it like that..."

"I say it like truth." He tilted my chin up. "Trust me to protect you, my queen."

"I do." The words came easily now. "With everything I am."

His kiss was gentle, a promise sealed in starlight. When we parted, some of my fears had eased, and after we returned to our room, sleep came easily.

---

THE OTHERS JOINED us as false dawn painted the sky. No one spoke as we mounted up, the weight of our mission settling around us like cloaks.

I looked back once as we rode out. The inn's windows glowed warm against the darkness, a reminder of safety freely abandoned. Then I faced forward, toward Terr and whatever waited in its shadowed rings.

# THARON

---

The valley stretched dark between towering peaks, rock walls blocking most of the starlight. With my enhanced night vision, I watched Niam move through our makeshift camp with careful control that didn't quite mask her exhaustion. Each step measured, deliberate.

The metallic taste in the air grew stronger - we must be getting closer to Terr. The villarts shifted restlessly, nostrils flaring at the unfamiliar scent. Above us, night birds fell silent as another drone passed overhead, the third in the past hour.

"It hurts to watch them face danger willingly." Korrin's voice barely carried over the wind.

My gaze stayed fixed on Niam as she helped Mila check their supplies. "You'd think it would get easier."

"It doesn't." He scrubbed at his hair. "Denna still surprises me. Even though she was raised by warriors, I still want to lock her away somewhere safe."

"How did that work out for you?"

His soft laugh held no humor. "About as well as you'd expect. She had me flat on my back in the practice ring within a month."

"Different kinds of strength." I watched Niam demonstrate something to Denna, her movements precise despite her fatigue. "Not always the ones we expect."

"No." Korrin straightened as Ashur gave the signal to move out. "But maybe that's what makes them worth

following into danger.”

We mounted up in silence, the group falling into practiced formation. No need for words anymore - we'd learned to read each other's signals over the past days. Niam's hand brushed mine as she passed, a touch that said everything necessary.

The metallic scent grew stronger as we rode, making my nose itch. The villarts' ears twitched in constant motion, alert for threats. When the first mechanical whine reached us, we froze as one unit.

I gestured toward a natural rock formation, unnecessarily as it turned out. The others were already moving, leading their mounts into the shadows. Niam pressed close against my side as we waited, her breathing steady and controlled.

My beast wanted to grab her, run far from this danger. But I forced myself still, trusting her judgment. Trusting all of them.

The drone made three passes, its search pattern growing wider each time. I counted Niam's heartbeats until she gave the all-clear signal. As one, we melted back into motion.

A massive shadow passed overhead without warning - a skyclaw, its hunting screech splitting the night. Its wingspan blocked out the stars, leathery membrane stretched between razor-sharp talons. Before I could move, another drone's whine approached from the east.

“Perfect timing,” Denna muttered, already leading her mount deeper into cover.

I grabbed Niam's reins, guiding both our villarts under an overhang. The others followed, movements smooth from practice. We froze as the skyclaw dove, passing between us and the approaching drone.

Natural predator versus mechanical hunter. The drone's sensors would be overwhelmed by the larger target. If we stayed absolutely still...

The skyclaw screamed again, this time in triumph as it caught something in the darkness. The drone passed overhead without pausing.

“That worked better than it should have,” Mila whispered once the sounds had faded.

“Let’s not push our luck.” I checked the position of the false dawn lighting the eastern sky. “We need shelter soon.”

Niam pointed to a barely visible crack in the cliff face. “There. I can feel the air moving.”

The cave system proved perfect - multiple exits, natural ventilation, enough space for all of us and the mounts. Everyone fell into their roles without discussion - securing the villarts, setting up camp, sharing water and dried meat.

I watched them as we gathered for a final planning session. Mila’s confident grace as she detailed the waste tunnel layout. Denna’s quiet authority discussing guard rotations. Ashur and Korrin adding tactical suggestions without attempting to take control.

And Niam bringing it all together into a workable plan.

“Three drones.” Ashur’s voice cut through my thoughts. “Coming in fast.”

Dawn light spilled across the valley floor, but the sunrise shadows still worked in our favor. We moved like water over stone, each person knowing exactly where to go.

The first glimpse of Terr knocked the breath from my lungs - massive walls rising from the rocky ground, temple spires stark against the lightening sky. That metallic taste filled my mouth, making me want to spit.

Niam’s hand found mine in the darkness. I squeezed her fingers, letting her strength flow into me.

We found our day shelter just as true dawn broke - a cave system hidden by thick forest growth, with clear sight lines to the city. The villarts settled quickly, used to strange places by now.

“Rest while you can,” Korrin said as he took first watch. “Tonight won’t be easy.”

Niam and I claimed a small alcove, private enough for a moment alone. She nestled into my embrace, her heartbeat

steady against mine.

“Having second thoughts?” she whispered, her fingers tracing the line of my jaw.

“About helping you? Never.” I leaned closer, losing myself in her eyes. “About letting you walk back into that place? Every breath.”

“I have to do this.”

“I know.” I held her closer. “That’s why I’m here.”

She tilted her face up, moonlight dusting her features. “I don’t deserve you.”

“You deserve everything.” I captured her lips with mine, pouring all my fear and pride and love into the kiss. “And I’ll help you take it.”

She smiled against my mouth. “Even if it means pretending to be a rag man?”

“Even then.” I nuzzled her neck. “Though if anyone laughs at me, I’m eating them.”

Her quiet laugh eased my tension. We settled into comfortable silence, listening to the others find their rest spots. Weapons stayed within easy reach, but the fear had faded to background noise.

Tonight, we’d enter the city. Tonight, we’d begin dismantling the nightmare that had shaped my mate’s life. Tonight, we’d learn if all our planning was enough.

There wasn’t any choice.

# NIAM

---

I stared at the drainage channel that gaped before us in the pre-dawn darkness. Acidic fumes from the tanneries burned my nose and throat. At least the herbed face wraps would help with that.

“Guards change in three minutes.” Mila knelt at the tunnel mouth, comparing the stone walls against Denna’s sketched plans. Her fingers traced each line with practiced care.

I adjusted my rough-spun shirt, the patched fabric scratching my flesh. Each of us wore our disguises - the uneven wear and stains marking us as proper rag men. The disguise felt wrong on Tharon’s broad frame, his shoulders straining against fabric meant for smaller men.

“Remember,” Mila whispered. “Eyes down. Shoulders slumped. You are nothing.”

My heart thudded against my ribs as I checked my hidden pockets one last time. Emergency tokens. Route markers. Signal flags. The metal taste grew stronger as we neared the walls, coating my tongue with memories I’d rather forget.

Tharon caught my hand, his touch grounding me in the present. I squeezed back, grateful for his strength even wrapped in a rag man’s rags.

“Now.” Mila’s command barely carried over the wind.

I dropped to hands and knees, following Tharon into the tunnel. Cold water seeped through my clothes where they touched the pipe floor. Every tiny sound echoed - breathing,



fabric rustling, water dripping. We moved in the silence we'd practiced for days.

Boots scraped overhead. We froze. One heartbeat. Two. Three. The urge to reach for Tharon fought against the need for absolute stillness.

The patrol passed. We breathed again.

The main waste tunnel opened ahead, ceiling high enough to stand. Centuries of use had worn smooth patches in the ancient stone. Voices echoed from around the bend - our first real test.

"Remember." Mila demonstrated the proper shuffle - shoulders curved, eyes down, each step careful but natural. "Temple guards demand complete submission. Ring guards accept quiet acknowledgment. Private guards ignore us completely."

I copied her movements, letting my body remember the patterns we'd practiced. Head bowed. Spine curved. Nothing worth noticing.

The voices grew closer. Two sets of boots rounded the corner - private guards from their casual stride. They passed without a glance, exactly as Mila predicted.

We followed the passages between tanneries, using shortcuts known only to those born here. So much had changed since the archives' clinical descriptions - new guard posts, sealed doorways, fresh Temple markings on the walls. The city evolved to contain its people.

The smell hit in layers - chemical lime pits, rotting flesh from raw hides, acrid tanning solutions. Different from my memories, but no less overwhelming. Workers called to each other over the creak of drying racks and constant drip of solutions.

A supervisor's gaze lingered too long on Tharon's height. My chest squeezed until Mila stumbled theatrically, drawing the man's attention away.

Through gaps between buildings, the Temple spires rose against the lightening sky. My hands curled into fists at the

sight.

But Eight Ring moved to its own rhythm - defined by vat timing and hide processing rather than Temple bells. A tiny freedom in the seeming chaos.

The Grell tannery stood three stories tall, weathered wood dark with age and chemicals. The loading dock extended over the Bitter Ways access point - clever design hiding the tunnel entrance from casual view.

Five massive vats dominated the yard beyond the seam, their stench burning my throat despite the herbed wrappings. An intricate dance played out around them - workers moving with practiced efficiency, checking levels, adjusting temperatures.

“Lime soak,” Mila breathed against my ear, barely audible over the constant drip and splash. “For stripping the hides. Next is the tanning solution - best place to hide if needed. Last three are finishing baths.”

Two young men caught my attention - identical in build and movement, working in perfect synchronization without exchanging a word. They hefted heavy hides between vats as if they weighed nothing, years of labor evident in the play of muscle beneath worn shirts.

“The twins,” Mila murmured. “Pol and Ren. They’ve grown.”

A woman’s sharp gaze swept the yard from a wide second-floor balcony, missing nothing while her hands never stopped moving. Checking hides. Adjusting solutions. From her resemblance to Mila, this had to be her mother, Serra, efficient in her tanner’s work.

My breath caught. Everything depended on what happened in the next few moments. All our planning, all our hopes - balanced on a knife’s edge.

Serra’s eyes passed over our group once, dismissive as expected. Then again, slower. Something in Mila’s walk must have caught her attention - a mother knows her child’s movements, even disguised.

Not a flicker showed on Serra's face. Her hands kept moving, checking another hide with practiced motions.

"You lot." Her voice dripped with perfect contempt for lowly rag men. "New delivery for processing. Around back, through the red door."

We shuffled forward, keeping our heads down. The private washing area beyond the red door smelled of soap rather than chemicals. Serra followed us inside, her steps unhurried but purposeful.

The door closed. My heart stuttered. Serra's fingers worked a complicated pattern on a hidden lock.

"Foolish girl." Her voice cracked as she pulled Mila into her arms. "Bringing trouble back to my door."

The reunion froze as Serra spotted Tharon's height, my pale skin visible through gaps in our face wrappings. Her eyes narrowed with calculation.

"Upstairs," she ordered. "Now."

Hidden stairs led to private rooms above the main floor, wood worn glass-smooth by generations of careful steps. The sharp chemical smell faded, replaced by dried herbs hanging from the rafters - medicinal and practical.

Mila pulled down her face wrappings first, revealing a tentative smile. "Mother..."

Serra's face crumpled. She grabbed Mila in a fierce embrace, her fingers digging into the rough cloth of the rag man's disguise. "My foolish, brave girl."

I hung back with Denna, watching mother and daughter cling to each other. The room felt impossibly small with all of us crowded inside - the three disguised Shakai warriors taking up more space than they should despite their hunched postures.

Thundering footsteps on the stairs made me flinch. Two young men burst through the doorway, identical in height and build. The twins - Pol and Ren. They froze at the sight of their sister.

“Mila?” Pol’s voice cracked.

She untangled herself from Serra’s arms. “Hey little brothers. Though not so little anymore.”

They moved as one, sweeping her into a crushing hug that lifted her feet off the floor. I pressed closer to Tharon, his solid presence steadying me as the family reunion played out.

“How?” Serra demanded when the twins finally set Mila down. “The Temple never releases its chosen. Never.”

“That’s...complicated.” Mila glanced at me. “Mother, these are my friends. Denna and Niam. Also from the Temple. Niam is... was, the Oracle.”

Serra’s sharp gaze took us in. “More complications?”

“The Temple isn’t what you think,” I said quietly. “The priests aren’t just taking girls for service. They’re killing them.”

The words fell like stones into silence. Serra’s face went bone-white.

“What?” Ren’s hands curled into fists.

I swallowed hard. “If a girl can’t learn their ways quickly enough, if she fights back too much...they use her body to repair their machines. They’ve been doing it for generations.”

“That’s not possible,” Serra whispered. But doubt crept into her voice.

“I saw it happen.” The memories rose up, threatening to choke me. “I helped them do it, before I understood what was happening. Before the lightning strike broke their control over me.”

Tharon’s hand found mine. I squeezed his fingers, drawing strength from his touch.

“How did you escape?” Pol demanded.

“We had help.” Mila reached for Ashur’s hand. “Mother... there’s something else you need to know.”

Serra’s eyes fixed on their joined hands. “Show me.”

Slowly, carefully, Mila unwrapped Ashur's face coverings. The gasp from the twins echoed in the small room as bronze skin and blue-green hair emerged.

"What is he?" Ren grabbed for a knife.

"He's my mate." Mila stepped between her brothers and Ashur. "And he saved my life."

# THARON

---

I pressed deeper into the shadows, every instinct urging me to shield Niam. My Valti clawed at my control, demanding I protect my mate from these strangers with their sharp movements and sharper knives. But that would only make things worse. This wasn't a situation I could solve with fangs and claws.

The words flowed around me in fragments, pieces I'd picked up over the days of travel listening to the women. Denna's clipped accent differed from Mila's softer tones, but both helped me understand the nuances of their human tongue. The language clicked together like puzzle pieces in my mind, different from the harsh consonants of my own people.

Niam's shoulders tensed beneath the rough cloth of her disguise. She knew I understood more than I let on, but keeping that knowledge hidden gave us an advantage. If these humans thought I couldn't comprehend their words, they might speak more freely.

My expression remained neutral as I caught more of their heated exchange. The human word for "girls" mixed with "ritual" and "sacrifice." Each term sparked recognition from my hours of listening to Niam explain her past during our journey. The pieces fit together into an ugly truth I already knew.

"What do you mean, mate?" The twin with the knife - Ren - took a step forward. "That's not possible."

Mila lifted her chin. "It's more than possible. It's true. The Shakai have lived beyond Terr's walls for generations while the priests kept us trapped inside, feeding us lies."

"Shakai?" Serra's eyes narrowed as she studied Ashur's exposed features. "The beast men from the old stories?"

"Not beasts." Mila's voice softened. "People. Different from us, but people."

The other twin - Pol - moved to flank his brother. "And you expect us to believe this creature saved you?"

"I expect you to trust me." Mila didn't back down. "The same way I trusted you to keep my workbench ready, even after the Temple took me."

Both twins flinched. Serra's hands twisted in her apron.

"How many daughters has the Temple stolen?" Niam asked quietly. "How many families torn apart while the priests claim divine right?"

"Too many." Serra's voice cracked. "Maya Wick lost both her girls last spring. The Randalls lost their youngest at midwinter. The Clarks..."

"And now we know why." Mila caught her mother's hands. "They're not serving the gods, Mother. They're being sacrificed to keep ancient machines running."

I watched Serra's face as the truth sank in. Calculation replaced shock as she glanced at the covered windows, the closed door.

"The other families need to know." She straightened her spine. "But first - Pol, check the yard. Ren, bring food. These people look half-starved."

The twins hesitated.

"Now, boys."

They moved with the instant obedience of sons who knew that tone. As soon as they had left, Serra turned to Denna.

"Your family?"

“Fifth Ring.” Denna swallowed hard. “The Lehtla compound.”

“Markus Lehtla’s girl?” Serra nodded slowly. “I remember when they took you. He nearly started a riot.”

“Is he...” Denna couldn’t finish the question.

“Still alive. Still training warriors. Still cursing the Temple every chance he gets.” Serra’s lips curved. “The messenger network reaches Fifth Ring. We can get word to him.”

Hope blazed in Denna’s eyes. I knew that feeling - the desperate need to protect family. My own Valti growled approval as Pol returned to report the yard clear.

Ren followed with bread and meat, dried fruit, a jug of water. Simple food, but my stomach cramped at the smell. When had we last eaten properly?

“Eat.” Serra gestured at the rough wooden table. “Then we’ll talk.”

I noticed how she positioned herself between us and the door as we settled around the table. Smart woman. The twins took up guard positions without being told, boxing us in while maintaining the illusion of hospitality.

If this went wrong, getting out would be messy.

Niam’s shoulder pressed against mine as she reached for bread. The contact steadied me, reminding me why we were here. What was at stake.

“The Temple controls everything through fear,” she explained between careful bites. “They choose which families prosper, which ones suffer. Who lives, who dies. All in service to their machines.”

“I’ve never thought the selection process was random,” Mila added. “They take the strongest, the smartest. Girls who might cause trouble if left free.”

Serra’s face hardened. “Maya’s eldest - she was organizing the apprentices, demanding better conditions. A week later, she was chosen.”



“The Temple sees everything.” Niam set down her half-eaten bread. “The priests tap into ancient systems, monitoring every ring. But they’re losing control. The lightning strike weakened their grip. If we can reach the control center...”

A commotion outside cut her off. Boots on stairs, voices raised in greeting. The door burst open to reveal a tall man with graying hair and hard eyes. Behind him, a woman whose bearing marked her as a warrior even in civilian dress.

“Denna?” The woman’s voice broke.

“Mother?” Denna stumbled to her feet. “Father?”

I braced for violence as Markus Lehtla spotted me and my companions. But he had eyes only for his daughter, sweeping her into an embrace that lifted her off her feet.

“My little warrior.” His wife joined the embrace, all three crying openly now. “We thought we’d lost you forever.”

More families arrived, summoned by Serra’s hidden network. The Wicks - chandlers controlling Eight Ring’s information, the Randalls with their trade connections, and others - each bringing their own resources and grievances against the Temple. I cataloged faces and positions, noting how their haunted expressions transformed to hope as they realized they weren’t alone in their losses.

A web that could become either net or noose, depending on how the next few minutes played out.

“Tell them.” Serra’s voice cut through the murmurs. “Tell them what you told me.”

Niam stood. My beast howled to pull her back to safety, but I forced myself still. This was her moment, her strength.

She told them everything. The truth behind the Temple’s power. The ancient ship that had once sailed between the stars, now buried beneath their city. The sacrifices made to keep it running. Her voice never wavered, even when describing horrors that made hardened workers flinch.

I watched hands curl into fists. Watched grief transform into rage. Watched hope kindle in eyes that had known only

fear.

“The Temple must fall.” Maya Wick’s voice rasped with old pain. “But how?”

“We have a plan.” Mila stepped forward, her mother’s protective stance mirroring my own instincts. “But we need help.”

Maya Wick’s scarred hands twisted in her apron. “What kind of help?”

“Distractions.” Mila’s voice dropped lower, forcing everyone to lean in. “Multiple points of chaos while we penetrate the Temple’s defenses.”

“The guards will slaughter anyone who stands against them.” The male twin - Pol? - shifted his weight. “We’ve seen it before.”

“Not if they’re chasing shadows.” Denna touched the hidden weapons beneath her disguise. “My father trained me well before the Temple took me. I know their patterns, their weaknesses.”

“And I know their secrets.” Niam raised her chin. “The priests rely as much on fear as force. Break that fear...”

“Break their power.” Serra finished the thought, calculation replacing doubt in her eyes. “The messenger network reaches every ring. We can spread word without raising suspicion - the chandlers’ boys collecting tallow, the brewers’ girls delivering ale.”

The Randall patriarch - a bear of a man with hide-toughened hands - cleared his throat. “What exactly are you planning?”

I let Mila outline the basics while I studied reactions. The families’ initial shock had hardened into something dangerous - the slow-burning rage of people who’d lost too much for too long. Good. We could use that.

“The sewers connect every ring.” Ren traced old routes on a scrap of leather. “Maintenance tunnels from the founding. Some closed off, some forgotten...”

“But not by us.” His twin finished the thought. “We use them to move goods past the tax collectors.”

Sarah Wick - the eldest of the chandler sisters - nodded. “Our people know every passage. We can plant false trails, lead the guards on endless chases.”

“While keeping the real target hidden.” Maya’s voice carried the weight of personal vengeance. “But what about the Temple’s machines? Their eyes are everywhere.”

“Not anymore.” Niam’s quiet confidence drew every eye. “The lightning strike damaged more than they admit. Their control is slipping. If we time this right...”

“The Barrel Boys can help.” Renna Malton stepped forward, brewery ledger clutched to her chest. “They’re loyal, strong. Used to working in the dark.”

I caught the subtle signals passing between family heads - eye contact, tiny nods, shoulders straightening. These weren’t just craft workers anymore. This was an army forming before my eyes.

“We’ll need supplies.” Serra’s practical tone cut through rising whispers. “Medicine. Weapons. Places to hide anyone who gets caught.”

“The Lehtla compound has hidden rooms.” Markus touched his daughter’s shoulder. “And enough warriors to make the guards think twice about searching too closely.”

“My leather workers can outfit everyone.” Old Man Grell spoke for the first time, voice rusty with disuse. “Dark clothes, sturdy boots. Nothing to draw attention.”

The planning spiraled outward, each family adding their specialty to the whole.

My warrior’s instincts approved of their efficiency, even as my Valti bristled at involving so many unknowns. But I’d learned to trust Niam’s judgment. These were her people, in their own way. They’d suffered under the same oppression that had nearly broken her.

“Three days.” Mila’s voice cut through the planning. “We need everything in place by then. The Temple’s choosing ceremony...”

“No.” Maya’s hands knotted in her apron. “Not again. Not this time.”

The room hummed with agreement. I watched Serra gather her thoughts, seeing the command presence that had kept this tannery running despite everything the Temple had stolen from her.

“Sarah, spread word through your chandler’s network. Maya, coordinate with the brewers. Get your people in position. Markus...”

“My warriors will be ready.” His scarred hand rested on Denna’s shoulder. “Just point us at the target.”

The families dispersed in careful groups, acting as if it were just another business day. Only Serra’s inner circle remained - the twins flanking their mother, Markus and his wife conferring in low voices, Maya studying building plans with fierce concentration.

“Will it be enough?” Niam’s whisper carried only to my enhanced hearing.

I grasped her hand, hidden in the folds of our rough clothing. “It will have to be.”

“The Wicks will spread word tonight.” Maya checked the angle of the sun through high windows. “By morning, every family in Eight Ring will know their part.”

“Not the full plan.” Serra cautioned. “Just enough to be ready when the signal comes.”

“And the signal?” Markus asked.

Mila smiled. “Trust me. You’ll know it when you see it.”

The planning continued as afternoon faded toward evening. I memorized each detail, marking potential weak points and backup routes. We could only afford one attempt at this. If we failed...

No. Failure meant watching Niam dragged back to that hell. My Valti snarled at the mere thought.

We would not fail.

The twins slipped away first, returning to their work in the yard. Then Maya, heading for her chandlery with messages hidden in her basket. Markus and his wife left separately, taking different paths back to Fifth Ring.

“Rest while you can.” Serra touched Mila’s cheek. “There’s a hidden room below the second vat. It’s tight, but dry.”

“Thank you.” Niam’s gratitude encompassed more than just shelter.

The hidden room proved larger than expected, though the chemical smell remained strong. Rough pallets lined one wall, with sealed containers of water and dried food stacked nearby.

“Mother plans for everything.” Mila’s smile held pride and old pain.

“Rest.” I guided Niam to the nearest pallet. “I’ll take first watch.”

She started to protest, then subsided. The strain of the past hours showed in the shadows beneath her eyes.

“Your own family...” I spoke softly. “Do you want to try finding them? Sending messages through the craft networks?”

Pain flashed across her face. “I don’t even remember what ring I came from. The Temple took everything - memories, name, identity. There’s no one left to find.”

I clasped her hands in mine. “You have me. You’ll always have me.”

“Promise?”

“Until my last breath.” I pressed my forehead to hers. “And long after that.”

She leaned into me, letting me take some of her weight. Just for a moment, just until she had to be strong again.

“Wake me if anything changes?”

“Always.”

I settled into guard position, letting my enhanced senses track movement above. Workers called to each other, maintaining normal routines while revolution sparked beneath their feet.

Niam’s breathing evened out into sleep. Mila and Denna followed, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

Three days to turn these crafter families into an effective fighting force. Three days to coordinate attacks across multiple rings. Three days to prepare for everything that could go wrong.

I’d led armies before, but this was different. These weren’t warriors bound by oath and training. These were ordinary people choosing to risk everything for a chance at freedom.

My Valti nature understood that kind of desperate courage. The need to protect what was precious, no matter the cost.

I thought of Serra’s fierce embrace of her daughter. Maya’s hands knotted in her apron as she spoke of lost children. The twins’ synchronized movements, watching each other’s backs without conscious thought.

Yes. These people would fight. Not with a warrior’s discipline, but with the bone-deep stubbornness that had kept their crafts alive through generations of Temple control.

Niam stirred in her sleep, reaching for something only she could see. I touched her shoulder, gentling the dream.

Three days.

We would be ready.

# NIAM

---

The chemical stench from the tanning vats seeped through the hidden room's walls, burning my nose despite the herbed wrappings. I traced the routes marked on Serra's maps again, committing each twist and turn to memory. Three days of preparation had led to this moment.

"The south passage connects here," I murmured, following the line with my finger. "Past the lime pits, then up through the old maintenance shaft."

"You've memorized it perfectly." Tharon's hand covered mine, steadying its slight tremor. "Ten times over."

"There's no room for mistakes." I pulled another map from the stack - this one showing Fifth Ring's guard rotations. Denna's neat annotations marked timing and patrol patterns. "If we miss a single shift change..."

"We won't." His certainty grounded me. "The families know their parts."

I nodded, remembering Mila's patient instruction on proper rag man movement. Head down, shoulders slumped, each step careful but unhurried. We'd practiced until it felt natural, until even Tharon's warrior grace transformed into a beggar's shuffle.

The past three days blurred together in my mind - endless rounds of planning, practicing, preparing. The Wicks' messenger network had spread word through every ring, each family adding their own piece to the whole. The Maltons' Barrel Boys knew which alleys to block. The Potswoods' bone

collectors had strategic piles ready to burn, creating smoke screens in narrow streets.

Even the children played their parts, passing messages in games of cat's cradle and hopscotch. I'd watched them practice, marveling at their quick minds and quicker feet. So much trust placed in our hands, so many lives risked on this one chance.

"Stop." Tharon caught my restless fingers. "You're wearing holes in the map."

"Sorry." I tried to still my hands. "I just keep thinking of everything that could go wrong."

"Then think of everything that could go right." He turned me to face him. "Think of the families who chose to help us. Think of how many lives we'll save when we succeed."

"When, not if?"

"When." His certainty wrapped around me like a shield. "Now check your supplies one last time, then rest. Dawn comes too soon."

I knew he was right, but sleep felt impossible. Instead, I inventoried the items hidden beneath my rag man's disguise - route markers, emergency tokens, signal flags. Everything in its place, everything ready.

The Temple bells would ring soon, calling people to the central squares of each ring. Guards would herd the crowds forward, enforcing a facade of order while priests set up their selection bowls.

Not this time.

"They're moving." Mila's whisper carried from her watch position. "Guard rotation just changed."

I took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. All our preparation, all our planning, came down to this morning. The trust these families had placed in us...

"Ready?" Tharon's hand squeezed my shoulder.



I nodded, unable to speak past my dry throat. We moved silently up the hidden stairs, emerging into pre-dawn darkness. The air hit my face, sharp with chemical tang and old fear.

Denna appeared from the shadows, Korrin at her shoulder. Ashur materialized next, helping Mila secure the last of her disguise. We moved as one unit, melting into back alleys as the first Temple bell began to toll.

Memory and muscle memory guided us through the maze of Terr's streets. Past the chandlers' warehouses where Maya's people waited. Through the brewers' district where Barrel Boys lounged with casual menace. Behind the metalworkers' forges where children played elaborate games that just happened to block key intersections.

The bells kept ringing, pulling people toward the central squares.

Everything as it had always been.

Everything about to change.

I felt Serra's eyes trace our movements over the forge yard of the Bitter Ways. My years in the Temple hid my shaking hands, kept my steps measured while my mouth dried like tanned leather. A lifetime pretending calm would serve me well today.

Denna brushed past, her disguise perfect down to the weary shuffle. Her father's warriors blended through the crowd - men who'd spent their lives honing combat skills now hunched like beggars. I'd never have spotted them without knowing to look.

"Papa's right where he should be," she breathed against my ear, using the soft lilt we'd practiced instead of her natural tones. "Fifth Ring warriors in position."

My chest squeezed at her casual mention of family. At least she had that anchor, that certainty of belonging. My own past remained a bright-edged void, memories burned away by Temple conditioning.

Near the massive tanning vats, Pol and Ren worked with careful efficiency, their synchronized movements drawing no

attention. Just another day at the Grell tannery. Nothing unusual about the strange lumps hidden beneath fresh hides.

The Temple bells began their call, pulling people toward the central square. Guards herded the crowds forward with practiced efficiency, clubs ready for any resistance. Priests arranged their selection bowls with precise movements, white stones mixed with black though everyone knew which families would draw dark fates.

Not this time.

A child's cry pierced the air. My head snapped up as a Temple guard grabbed a young girl from the crowd, her dark hair flying as she struggled. "No! Mama!"

The mother's scream ripped through the morning - raw, primal grief that triggered Maya's signal. Smoke bombs erupted from the chandlers' positions, thick gray clouds billowing through the square. The Tully's dye vats "accidentally" overturned, sending rainbow rivers across cobblestones.

Chaos erupted exactly as planned. The crowd surged, carrying us in different directions despite our preparations. I lost sight of Denna as she vanished into the smoke with her father's warriors. Glimpses of Mila and Ashur heading for the tannery flashed between bodies. Korrin disappeared completely.

"Stay with me." Tharon's grip anchored me as the crowd pushed us toward the Temple wall. His disguise couldn't quite hide the predator's grace in his movements, but no one was watching closely now.

Children darted through the chaos, their games creating precise patterns of interference. Little feet tangled with guard formations, scattered marbles found their way under boots at critical moments. I recognized Sarah Wick's youngest weaving through the crowd, his soot-stained face hiding a fierce grin.

The guards struggled to maintain control, their usual tactics useless against this orchestrated mayhem. Groups would start to form up only to find their targets melted away,

replaced by innocent-looking workers going about their business.

Smoke stung my eyes, but through the haze I spotted it - the maintenance access we'd marked on Serra's maps. Plain metal set into ancient stone, unremarkable except to those who knew its true purpose.

I tugged Tharon's sleeve, tilting my head toward the hidden door. He nodded, already moving to take advantage of a fresh surge of bodies between us and the nearest guards.

The riots spread outward in careful waves, each new disturbance drawing more attention from Temple forces. By the time we reached the access panel, no one was watching this section of wall.

My fingers found the familiar patterns, muscle memory from centuries of ship's data guiding my movements. The door slid aside with barely a whisper.

We slipped through the gap, Tharon at my back. The last thing I saw before it sealed was Old Man Wick's grandchildren leading a merry chase through the dye-stained streets, their laughter carrying even through the chaos.

The rebellion had begun. Now we just had to make it count.

# THARON

---

My boots rang against the metal floor with each step, the strange texture under my feet more organic than anything I expected in a Temple. Dim blue-green lights cast strange shadows as we moved deeper into the maintenance tunnels, pulsing at a rhythm that set my teeth on edge.

“This way.” Niam ran her fingers along the wall, tracing patterns I couldn’t see. Her movements grew more confident with each turn, as if the pod had awakened something buried deep in her mind.

Our rag men’s disguises hung in tatters now, stained and torn from crawling through endless maintenance shafts. Not that it mattered anymore - we were well past the point where blending in would help.

“The ship crashed here centuries ago.” Niam’s voice barely carried over the constant thrumming beneath our feet. “The original colonists built Terr around it, using what technology they could salvage. But the priests...” She sighed mournfully. “They took something beautiful and twisted it.”

“How?” I steadied her arm as she stumbled over an uneven section of flooring. The metal vibrated under my enhanced senses, carrying echoes of ancient machinery still grinding away in the depths.

“The ship was designed to work with its crew, not consume them. Neural interfaces that enhanced communication, allowed true cooperation.” Her fingers brushed against scarred temples. “The priests corrupted that,

turned voluntary connection into forced integration. But the original systems still exist, untouched. If I can reach them..."

I nodded, though unease crawled up my spine. We hadn't seen a single guard since entering this section. No patrols, no checkpoints. Just empty posts where occupants had clearly been recently.

"Something's wrong." I pulled her closer as we entered a vast chamber spanning multiple levels. Ancient machinery cast writhing shadows across curved walls. "Look at the floor."

Boot prints marked the dust - multiple sets, all fresh.

"They knew we were coming." The air currents shifted, carrying new scents. "They've opened other access points."

My Valti clawed at its restraints, urging me to get Niam to safety. But she barely noticed, too focused on our goal.

"We're close." The device from the pod glowed painfully bright now, casting stark shadows across her face. "The primary control center is just ahead."

The chamber that opened before us stretched up into darkness, its vaulted ceiling lost in shadow. A pillar of pure light dominated the center, stretching from floor to ceiling. Around it, elegant chairs formed a perfect circle - nothing like the brutal integration pods I'd seen in the Temple above.

Crystalline structures floated in defiance of gravity, casting rainbow reflections across ancient displays covered in flowing script.

"This is where it all began." Niam's voice held wonder and grief in equal measure. "Where the original crew guided the ship through space, working together as one mind." She touched one of the chairs. "I need to connect here, trigger the emergency protocols. It's the only way to shut down the Temple's network."

The metal floor vibrated beneath my boots, ancient machinery whining deep in the sphere's core. The strange light from the central pillar painted her skin in shifting patterns, making me snarl at the wrongness of it.

“I need to connect.” Niam’s fingers traced delicate patterns across crystalline surfaces I barely understood. “The interface will let me access the original systems.”

My hackles rose. After what she’d told me about the Temple’s abuse of such technology, the thought of her plugging into these ancient systems made my Valti snarl in protest.

But we’d come too far to back down now.

“How long?”

“Minutes, if I can find the right protocols.” She settled into the nearest chair, which responded with a soft chime. A delicate mesh of crystal strands descended from above, hovering over her head like a crown of ice. “Whatever happens, don’t let them stop me.”

“Never.” I circled the chair as she closed her eyes, the mesh settling against her skin with tiny flashes of light. The beast inside me paced restlessly, not liking how vulnerable she looked.

A hidden panel slid open in the wall behind me.

Then another.

And another.

Temple guards emerged from the darkness, their black robes marked with the sigils of their rank. Firewhips crackled to life in their hands, casting harsh shadows across the spherical chamber. Behind them came warriors in ceremonial armor, curved swords gleaming in the strange light.

“They’re using my neural signature.” Niam’s words came slow, distant. “They knew we were coming. Let the rebellion create chaos while they waited here for us.”

The firewhips hummed with lethal promise as the guards spread out across all three levels. The familiar scent of ozone filled the air, making my nose burn.

My beast howled.

I'd been fighting it for so long - using drugs and discipline to cage my Valti nature. But now, watching these guards surround my mate while she lay helpless in that chair...

The change ripped through me. Bones cracked and reformed, muscles swelled and twisted. My disguise split at the seams as my body reshaped itself into something ancient and deadly.

The first firewhip lashed out. I caught it on my transformed arm, letting the beast's enhanced healing take the damage. Then I was moving, faster than human eyes could track.

The nearest guard's chest caved under my claws. I threw his body into two more, using their moment of imbalance to close the distance. My enhanced senses tracked every target, every threat to Niam.

Steel flashed as the ceremonial warriors engaged, their swordwork precise and lethal. But they couldn't match my speed, my strength, my rage. I batted aside their blades, metal shrieking against my claws.

They tried to flank me, to separate me from the chair. I read their intent in their movements - they wanted to contain, not kill. That made them hesitate just enough.

I tore through their formation, leaving broken bodies in my wake. More poured in through the hidden doors, firewhips crackling. Burned flesh permeated the air as their attacks found purchase, but I barely felt the pain.

"Almost there." Niam's voice drifted from behind me. "The original protocols are accepting my access, but something's fighting back."

I grunted acknowledgement, too focused on the fight to form words. A sword slipped past my guard, drawing a line of fire across my chest. I grabbed the warrior's arm and used him as a shield against his companions' firewhips.

The strange gravity of the room worked against them, their movements slightly off as the sphere seemed to rotate around

us. I used that, letting my beast's instincts compensate while they struggled to adjust.

But they kept coming. Every guard I took down was replaced by two more. And they were learning, adapting their tactics. Working together in ways that spoke of long practice.

A firewhip wrapped around my leg, searing through muscle. Another caught my shoulder before I could recover. They were herding me away from Niam, using their numbers to force me into a smaller and smaller space.

“No!” Niam's cry pulled at my soul. “They're activating containment protocols!”

I spun toward her voice, but more guards blocked my path. Through gaps in their white robes I saw panels opening in the floor around her chair. Mechanical arms rose up, reaching for her with delicate precision.

My roar shook the chamber. I threw myself forward, tearing through anything in my way. But there were too many. The constant burn of firewhips and the bite of steel slowed me just enough.

The last thing I saw before they overwhelmed me was Niam being lifted from the chair, still trailing crystal strands as the mechanical arms pulled her away.

I fought harder, my beast beyond reason now. But they had the advantage of numbers and position. Firewhips lashed from all sides, each strike wearing away at my strength until even Valti healing couldn't keep up.

The world started to go dark around the edges. My last thought was of Niam's face, and the promise I'd failed to keep.



# NIAM

---

Awareness returned in waves of agony. The priests' neural mesh burned against my temples - so different from the gentle communion of the original interface chair. But something was wrong. Their integration protocols weren't gaining the total control they should have.

I remembered being torn from the chair, remembered Tharon's roar of rage as warriors overwhelmed him. The image of his transformed body falling under their weapons made me want to scream. But I made sure my mind was carefully blank, projecting the empty compliance they expected.

Whether from the pod's pure protocols still running through my system or the lightning strike's lasting changes to my neural pathways, I maintained a core of self they couldn't touch. Before, their control had been absolute - my mind split open and reshaped to their will. But now I could think. Could plan. Could resist.

Through half-closed eyes, I watched Father Aronn monitor my vital signs while Father Zarak paced. Floating displays showed my companions scattered through the rings - Mila and Denna fighting their way clear, Ashur providing cover for retreating rebels, Korrin nowhere to be seen. My friends had risked everything. I prayed they'd reached safety.

"The rebels have breached Fifth Ring." Zarak's robes rustled as he moved. "They're more organized than anticipated."

“Let them wear themselves out.” Aronn adjusted something that made colors dance across my field of vision. “The guards will contain them.”

“And if they don’t?”

“Then we activate the defense protocols. The Temple has survived worse than a few angry craftsmen.”

I let their voices wash over me while my real attention focused on the data streams flowing through my consciousness. The familiar paths sang with information - environmental controls, power distribution, security feeds. But underneath...

A presence brushed against my mind, achingly familiar.

*Branna?*

THE TOUCH STRENGTHENED, carrying more personality than I’d ever sensed before. This wasn’t the empty shell that had spoken through Temple walls - this was Branna, whole and aware, her consciousness burning bright in the network.

*We’ve been here all along, her thoughts carried decades of trapped awareness. Watching. Waiting. The lightning strike gave us the opportunity to give you more freedom than we ever had.*

Through their combined perspectives, I saw the Temple as it truly was - not just ancient technology corrupted by the priests, but a living network of imprisoned minds. Girls who had disappeared over the years, their consciousness preserved but imprisoned. They had caused minor malfunctions, protected what humanity they could. But they’d never been able to coordinate their efforts.

Until now.

A security feed caught my attention, making my heart stutter. Blood matted his hair where they’d struck him down, his transformed body already reverting as they pumped him full of suppression drugs. The guards used sonic weapons tuned to his enhanced senses, the pain evident in every line of his body.

“The beast is secured.” Zarak’s voice pulled me back to the physical world. “Though I still say we should eliminate the threat entirely.”

“The alien’s biology may prove useful for future improvements.” Aronn’s fingers never stopped moving across the controls. “And his presence ensures the Oracle’s cooperation.”

Through the network, I felt other minds shift in response to my fury. They shared their knowledge freely - how the priests had corrupted the original systems, where the crucial control nodes were located. Most importantly, they showed me the emergency shutdown protocols - and the terrible price they required.

“We have the Oracle back now,” Aronn said, studying his displays. “Back where she belongs. There will be no more rebellion.”

If he only knew. The Temple’s network might flow through my mind, but they no longer controlled it. I waited until the guards changed shift at Tharon’s cell, then reached out through the network like Branna had taught me. My voice emerged from hidden speakers, barely more than a whisper.

“THARON?”

His head turned left and right, eyes searching the empty cell. Despite the drugs, I felt his response through our bond.

“I’m here.” I pushed comfort through the connection. “I’m with you. Just hold on a little longer.”

He strained against the restraints, muscles bulging. Even wounded and drugged, his protective instincts burned strong. “Niam... what are they doing to you?”

“Giving me exactly what I need.” I ached to touch him, but knew that moving now would damn us both. “The original systems are accepting my access. And I’m not alone anymore.”

Other voices joined mine, whispering through the speakers. Dozens of them, each carrying years of quiet defiance.

“We’re with your mate, warrior.” Branna’s voice, stronger than I’d ever heard it. “She’s going to set us all free.”

I DIDN’T TELL him the cost. Didn’t let him feel the weight of what I’d discovered in the ancient protocols. He would try to stop me if he knew.

The priests were still arguing about deployment patterns, oblivious to the revolution brewing in their own systems. They thought they controlled this technology, but they had never truly understood it.

The Temple had been designed for connection, for cooperation - not consumption. And now, after centuries of abuse, it was about to remind them of that fact.

*Are you ready?* Branna asked, as the other minds gathered close.

Yes. I took one last look at Tharon through the security feed, memorizing his face.

*Then let’s show them what happens when they cage too many ghosts in their machine.*

# THARON

---

Cold metal bit into my wrists where the restraints held me. The priests' drugs burned through my veins, but I breathed slowly, let my muscles go slack. Let them think their chemicals had me subdued. Every detail mattered now - guard rotations, the subtle tremors that ran through the Temple's living walls.

Three guards at the door. Always three, wearing the black robes of the inner circle. Their firewhips crackled softly, a constant reminder of how they'd brought me down. But beneath their practiced indifference, I caught the acrid scent of fear.

Good. Fear made people sloppy.

The younger priest - Merek, I'd heard them call him - approached with another syringe of cloudy liquid. His hands shook slightly as he fed it into the tubes running into my arm. The beast beneath my skin snarled at the fresh wave of burning, but my eyes stayed unfocused, posture loose, mind spinning to put together the fragments of Terran I knew into conversation.

"Increasing the dosage again?" The older guard shifted his weight. "Is that wise?"

"Father Aronn's orders." Merek's voice held forced confidence. "The creature requires stronger suppression than expected."

I let my head loll, as if the new dose had hit hard. Through slitted eyes, I watched them relax slightly. Their firewhips

lowered a fraction. Another small tell to file away.

Footsteps approached - the distinctive rustle of priest's robes. "The Oracle's integration progresses well." The voice belonged to Zarak, one of the high priests. "Soon we'll understand how these creatures maintain their dual nature."

"And the girl?" Merek asked. "Will she survive the final protocols?"

"The vessel's survival is irrelevant. She can be replaced easily enough." A new voice, colder than the others. "The knowledge gained will serve the Temple's needs."

The beast surged against my control, but I kept it tightly leashed. Not yet. Not until I knew where they held Niam.

A whisper emerged from hidden speakers, so faint I almost missed it. "They think they know what she plans. They understand nothing."

My muscles stayed relaxed, but my senses sharpened. That voice...

"I am Branna." The whisper came again. "Your mate tries to shield you from what comes. But you deserve to know."

Through our bond, I felt Niam's fierce determination, her absolute acceptance. Beneath it ran currents of love, of regret, of desperate hope that I would understand.

"...final calibration of the reset protocols..." Fragments of conversation drifted through the speakers.

"...complete neural transfer required..."

"...vessel's consciousness will not survive the transfer..."

No.

The word emerged as a growl. The guards tensed, firewhips rising. But I was already moving.

Metal screamed as I tore free, drugs burning away under a tide of rage. The nearest guard's whip cracked toward my face. I caught it with my transformed hand, ignoring how the energy seared my palm, and yanked. He stumbled forward, straight into my other fist. Bones crunched. He dropped.

The second guard's attack came low, trying to tangle my legs. I leaped, twisting in a way my usual fighting style never would have attempted. Pure beast instinct. My claws raked across his chest as I landed behind him. His scream cut off as I slammed him into the wall hard enough to crack the strange living stone.

The third guard managed to land a strike across my back. Pain blazed, but the beast welcomed it, used it. I spun, faster than their human eyes could track. My claws closed around his throat. One squeeze. One less threat between me and my mate.

The priests scrambled back, shouting for reinforcements. The cold one - Aronn - reached for something on his belt. I moved before he could grasp it, primitive hunger overtaking tactical sense. His neck snapped with a sound like breaking branches. The younger priest tried to run. My claws ended that attempt.

More guards poured through the doorway. Firewhips crackled. The air filled with ozone and the copper tang of blood.

I lost myself to the beast's fury. The first wave of reinforcements died without landing a blow - bodies torn apart by strength they hadn't known I possessed. The second wave hesitated in the doorway. Smart, but not smart enough. I ripped the metal door from its frame and threw it, scattering the guards where it struck.

"Contain the beast!" Someone shouted. They tried to circle me, tried to coordinate their attacks. Under normal circumstances, their technique might have worked.

These were not normal circumstances.

I moved through their formation like water through sand, striking without thought or mercy. Claws raked through armor. Fangs found throats. Each drop of blood fed the beast's frenzy. Their weapons scored hits - shallow cuts, burning welts - but pain was distant, meaningless.

One guard actually landed a solid blow, his firewhip wrapping around my arm. I pulled him into reach before he

could retract it. Used his body as a shield against his companions. Threw his broken form aside.

The next group tried falling back, laying down covering fire with their whips to slow me. I burst through their attacks, accepting the damage to close the distance. Grabbed the nearest guard and used him as a weapon against the others. Bodies flew. Blood painted the walls.

A familiar voice cut through the speakers: “You cannot save her this way.” Branna’s tone held warning. “The priests will trigger final protocols if they feel threatened. Let me guide you to her.”

The beast wanted to ignore the voice, to continue its rampage until nothing stood between us and our mate.

“Show me.” The words came out more growl than speech.

“Follow my voice. Hurry. She begins the sequence soon.”

I ran through hallways that twisted in impossible ways, letting Branna’s whispers guide my steps. Guards tried to bar my path. None survived the attempt. The beast’s strength felt limitless now, enhanced by desperate need.

A squad of guards set up a defensive line at a crucial intersection. Firewhips created a web of burning energy across the corridor. Behind them, more guards readied backup weapons.

I didn’t slow down.

My charge hit their line like a storm breaking on rocks. Bodies scattered. Their formation dissolved into chaos. I barely registered individual opponents anymore - just obstacles to remove. Claws struck. Fangs tore. The beast painted its rage across their flesh in broad strokes of red.

I felt Niam’s determination sharpen to a deadly point. The Temple’s power built higher.

More guards died. More corridors fell behind me. But time was running out.

Hold on, my mate. I’m coming.



The fear that I might already be too late drove me faster through blood-streaked hallways, following a dead girl's whispers toward the heart of this cursed place.

# NIAM

---

Together, we began to move.

Our first strikes were subtle. A door cycling open and closed at random. Environmental controls fluctuating just enough to distract the guards. Maintenance bots “malfunctioning” in ways that blocked key corridors. Each small disruption built on the others, creating patterns of chaos that looked random to the priests but served our purpose perfectly.

“Systems are showing irregularities,” Aronn muttered, his fingers dancing across controls. “Running diagnostic protocols.”

I felt him probe the network, searching for the source of the disturbances. But we were everywhere and nowhere, dozens of minds working in concert to hide our true activities. While he chased phantom errors, we began laying the groundwork for something much bigger.

Through the security feeds, I watched them holding Tharon in one of the original ship’s chambers - something they’d repurposed generations ago without understanding its true purpose. The priests had added their own cruel modifications, their cocktail of herbs and ancient medical technology suppressing his Valti.

As we worked, memories surfaced - tender, precious things I’d never known to want before him.

That first morning at the inn, how his eyes had changed when he caught me talking to the animals. “You have such

gentleness in you,” he’d said, wonder in his voice. The mighty prince of Zashi, rendered speechless by a simple act of kindness.

“The beast’s reactions are unprecedented.” Aronn’s voice held the desperate curiosity of someone grasping at fragments of knowledge. “The way it interfaces with the human form... it might help us understand why some girls connect better to the systems than others.”

I forced down my rage, remembering instead how Tharon would bring me tea in the mornings, waiting until I took that first sip before smiling - as if my small pleasure was all he needed to start his day.

Show me how to help him, I thought to the networked minds.

Branna’s consciousness guided me deeper and together, we began redirecting power from his cell block. Subtle changes - a fraction less energy to the sonic weapons, slightly weaker restraint fields. Nothing obvious enough to alert the priests, but enough to give him a chance.

I thought of our first kiss - how carefully he’d touched me, as if I might shatter. The mighty Valti warrior, trembling as he cradled my face in his hands. “Tell me to stop,” he’d whispered, but I’d pulled him closer instead.

“The Oracle’s integration readings are stable,” Zarak said, studying my vitals. “Perhaps we should begin the next phase.”

“Not yet.” Aronn adjusted something that sent ice through my veins. “I want to be certain the next batch of sacrifices can’t run, ever again.”

Through security feeds, I glimpsed Tharon straining against his bonds, and remembered how he’d looked at me across crowded rooms, like I was the only person who existed. How his expression softened whenever I entered a room, no matter who else was present. The mighty warrior prince, brought low by love.

What I’d discovered in the pod was true - there was a way to trigger a complete shutdown. But it would require someone

to guide it from inside the network. Someone to maintain the connection until the very end, channeling the destructive energy in a way that would free these trapped souls rather than simply destroying everything. Someone to sacrifice themselves so these girls could finally find peace.

The choice was already made. I just had to figure out how to implement it without anyone realizing what I planned - especially my fierce, protective mate who would tear himself apart trying to stop me.

I reached through the network to his cell, letting my voice emerge from hidden speakers. Just hours ago, he'd held me as I dozed by the fire, humming an old Shakai lullaby. The fearsome prince, singing his mate to sleep.

“Tharon?”

His head snapped up, fighting through their drugs to respond. “My queen,” he whispered, the words barely audible.

“I’m here,” I assured him. “Hold on.”

The other minds gathered close as I prepared the shutdown sequence. I thought of Tharon braiding flowers into my hair at dawn, his lethal hands so gentle as they worked. How he'd press his forehead to mine when words failed him, letting me feel everything he couldn't say.

“You deserve the world,” he'd told me just yesterday, his voice rough with emotion. “Let me give it to you.”

BUT I COULDN'T LET him try. Not when other girls still suffered in this place. Not when I could end it, here and now.

*Are you ready?* Branna asked.

*Yes*, I answered. As we began the shutdown sequence, I remembered the way Tharon said my name - like a prayer, like a promise. The way he called me “my queen” in front of his people, proud to claim a Temple-broken girl as his mate.

I love you, I pushed through our bond as the world began to white out. I felt his desperate response, all his fear and rage and love crashing against the barriers between us. My last

thought was of his eyes - how they softened just for me, the fearsome beast gentle only with his mate.

Then everything dissolved into light, and I prayed he would understand why I had to let him go.

# THARON

---

The scent hit me first - ozone and fear mixed with something else. Something wrong. The beast in me knew that smell - the fading of life, the approach of death. My roar shook ancient metal as I burst through the final barrier, claws tearing through anything in my path.

The chamber blazed with unnatural light that hurt my enhanced vision. Strange energies made my fur stand on end, every instinct screaming at the wrongness of this place. And there, suspended in a web of glowing crystal strands, hung my mate.

Too still. Too pale. Her head lolled lifelessly to one side.

No.

“You’re too late, beast.” Father Aronn’s sneer died in his throat as my claws found it. The other priest tried to run. Neither made it to the door.

I reached for Niam, but power crackled across her skin when I touched her. The beast in me howled - I couldn’t even hold her, couldn’t gather her close one last time. Her scent was all wrong, tainted by whatever they’d done to her.

“Tharon.” Branna’s voice echoed from hidden speakers. “The shutdown sequence has begun. We’re losing containment.”

I didn’t care. Let it all burn. Let the world end. My mate was gone.

“Listen.” Another voice joined Branna’s, then another. A chorus of the lost, speaking their final words. “The crystal strands. Break them in sequence. Like a song.”

They wanted me to think about music now? But beneath my rage, I heard it - each strand hummed at a different pitch. Like the crystal wind chimes at the inn that had made Niam’s face light up with wonder. Her smile when the mountain breeze made them sing...

My claws moved with desperate precision, snapping each strand in the proper sequence. A deadly lullaby played in destruction. With each break, another voice said farewell through the speakers.

“Thank you,” they whispered. “For showing us what love could be.”

The final strand broke. Niam collapsed into my arms, her skin cold as mountain snow. I pressed my ear to her chest, straining with my enhanced hearing for any sound.

There. So faint I thought I imagined it. The slowest, weakest flutter of a heartbeat.

Alive. Barely.

“Run,” Branna commanded. “We’ll hold the collapse as long as we can.”

The ceiling groaned. Metal screamed as centuries of twisted machinery began to fail. Something that smelled like lightning crackled along the walls. I cradled Niam close, my beast’s enhanced speed carrying us through corridors that buckled and twisted.

“Left,” a young voice called. “The maintenance shaft is still stable.”

“Right at the next junction,” another guided. “We’re failing section by section. Hurry.”

I ran, following their directions through the dying Temple. Each turn brought another goodbye, another voice finding peace in these final moments. They spoke of freedom, of release, of seeing stars again after so long in darkness.

A support beam crashed down behind us. The beast's reflexes saved us, but the path back was blocked. Ahead, the floor started to collapse, ancient metal warping and tearing. Strange energies discharged in bursts of color that hurt my eyes.

"Jump," Branna urged. "Trust your instincts."

I gathered Niam closer and leaped, letting the beast's power carry us across the widening gap. Her breath - so shallow I could barely detect it - warmed my throat. The only thing that mattered.

The next corridor filled with smoke that carried the sharp tang of burning metal. I pulled Niam's face against my shoulder, protecting her from the worst of it as the Valti's night vision guided us through the haze.

"Three levels up," an unfamiliar voice directed. "The central shaft is collapsing. You'll need to—" The voice cut off in static.

"This way." Another voice took up the guidance. "Through the processing chamber. Mind the—" That voice died too.

One by one, the voices fell silent as their sections failed. I ran through darkness broken by strange flashes, the beast's instincts warning me which paths felt wrong. Niam's heartbeat remained terrifyingly weak.

A massive crash behind us sent vibrations through the floor. The beast's enhanced hearing caught the cascade of destruction approaching - metal tearing, stone breaking, something vast giving way.

"Almost to the outer ring," Branna's voice grew fainter. "The others wait near the tannery. We can't... hold much longer..."

"Thank you," I growled, meaning it with every fiber of my being.

"No." Her final words held both sadness and joy. "Thank her. She showed us we were still human."



The voices fell silent. Behind us, the Temple's death throes shook the entire ring.

Niam stayed limp in my arms, but that faint heartbeat kept its weak rhythm. Hold on, my queen. Just hold on.

"Here!" Denna's voice carried from ahead. She stood in a service doorway, Ashur and Korrin flanking her with weapons ready.

We emerged into chaos. Smoke filled the streets from strategic fires the rebels had set. The Pottswoods' bone fires created choking white clouds that confused Temple guards. Through gaps in the haze, I glimpsed the Barrel Boys herding frightened citizens toward safety, their usual drunken swagger transformed into protective authority.

"The inner rings are secured," Mila reported as we ran. "The guards broke ranks when the Temple started to fall. Most surrendered when they saw their priests' power fail."

Groups of rebels appeared and disappeared in the smoke, clearing our path. The Lehtla warriors moved with deadly efficiency, their blades finding any guards still fighting. Children darted through alleys ahead of us, passing signals in their intricate games.

In the craftsmen's quarter, the Wickes' network had mobilized every family. Doors opened and closed with precise timing, creating a safe corridor through the chaos. The Randalls' leather workers stepped out of the shadows to deal with threats, then vanished again.

A squad of Temple guards tried to block our path in the merchant's district. Before I could engage, thundering sounds filled the street. The Barrel Boys had positioned themselves on the hill above, and now massive brewing casks rolled down toward the guards. The white-robed soldiers scattered to avoid being crushed, and in their confusion, resistance fighters struck from the shadows behind them.

The tannery appeared through the smoke like a fortress. Serra stood in the loading dock doorway, her usual practical apron now adorned with knives. Her sharp eyes took in Niam's

still form, the blood coating my claws, the way our companions flanked us protectively.

“This way,” she ordered, leading us through the chemical-scented workspace to a hidden staircase. “The upper floor is defensible. I’ve prepared for casualties.”

The private family quarters above the tannery floor smelled of herbs and tanning solutions. Serra directed us to a room dominated by tall windows and rows of drying herbs. A narrow bed waited, its rough blankets clean and turned down.

“Here.” She pulled bottles and packets from shelves with swift efficiency. “Lay her down. Gently now.”

I lowered Niam to the bed, my beast raging at how lifeless she felt. Serra’s skilled hands checked her pulse, her breathing, the strange crystal burns on her skin. Years of treating tannery accidents had taught her well.

“She lives,” Serra announced, already mixing medicines. “But barely. Whatever they did in there...” She shook her head. “We’ll need all my skills. And luck.”

I sank to my knees beside the bed, finally letting my transformation fade. Every muscle screamed from abuse, but I couldn’t look away from Niam’s face. So pale, but peaceful. As if she knew she’d succeeded.

Behind me, I heard the others organizing - sending messages, coordinating with rebel leaders, beginning the massive task of rebuilding. But none of it mattered. Only the slow rise and fall of Niam’s chest held any meaning.

“Stay with me,” I whispered, pressing my lips to her cold fingers. “Please, my queen. Stay.”

# NIAM

---

Voices drifted through darkness, fragments catching like leaves in a stream.

“...fever’s broken finally...”

“...more tharrow tea...”

“My lord, you must rest...”

“...not leaving her...”

A warm weight pressed against my hand. Familiar. Safe. The rumbling purr vibrated through the mattress, a constant anchor as I floated between consciousness and shadow.

Time slipped. More voices.

“...my lord, at least eat something...”

“Later.”

The purring stopped. A calloused thumb stroked my palm, gentle despite its roughness. Someone was speaking - harsh consonants softening as they shaped unfamiliar words.

“Ku... kuralai...” A pause. Paper rustling. “My queen. Wake soon.”

Tharon. Learning Terran, for me.

I tried to squeeze his hand. My fingers barely twitched, but his sharp intake of breath told me he’d felt it. The purring resumed, louder. More hopeful.

Opening my eyes took monumental effort. The room swam into blurry focus - wooden beams, drying herbs, afternoon

light slanting through tall windows. And Tharon's face, drawn with exhaustion but blazing with intensity as he watched me.

"Niam." My name came out more growl than word.

I tried to speak. My throat felt raw, unused. He lifted a cup of water to my lips with infinite care, his other hand still gripping mine.

The water soothed my throat. "How..." Even that single word was an effort.

"Six days." His voice was rough. Had he been speaking at all during that time? "Serra says... healing good. Strong."

His Terran was awkward but determined. I managed to turn my head slightly, taking in more details. His clothes were wrinkled, his hair tangled. Dark circles shadowed his eyes. A book lay open on the bed beside him - a children's primer, well-worn.

"You're learning..." I whispered.

His lips curved slightly. "Need words. To tell you..." He struggled, then switched to Valti. A stream of soft growls and rumbling syllables that I couldn't understand, but their meaning was clear in his eyes.

Footsteps on the stairs interrupted whatever he meant to say next. Serra appeared, her practical apron stained with fresh tanning solutions.

"Finally awake properly, are you?" She moved to check my pulse, shooting Tharon a pointed look. "My lord, now would be an excellent time for you to get some actual rest. In a real bed."

He growled something that made her roll her eyes.

"I've been treating tannery workers longer than you've been alive. I can handle one recovering girl for a few hours." Her tone softened. "She'll still be here when you return."

Tharon looked torn. I managed to squeeze his hand again, stronger this time. "Go. Sleep."

He pressed his lips to my fingers, then forced himself to stand. Every movement showed his exhaustion. But at the door he paused, looking back with such naked emotion that my breath caught.

“Return soon,” I whispered.

His smile was worth the effort.

Serra helped me sit up, checking the crystal burns on my arms with efficient hands. “Healing well,” she said, mixing something pungent in a cup. “Though you gave us quite a worry. That one wouldn’t leave even during the fever.”

The tea tasted bitter but sent warmth through my limbs. “The city?”

“Settling.” Serra’s sharp eyes assessed me. “But that’s for later. Rest now.”

She was right. Even this brief conversation had drained me. As she lowered me back against the pillows, my eyes were already growing heavy.

“Serra?” I managed.

“Hmm?”

“Thank you. For taking care of both of us.”

Her weathered hand brushed my forehead. “Sleep, child. Heal. There’ll be time for everything else later.”

I drifted off surrounded by drying herbs and the lingering warmth I still felt from Tharon’s hand.

The next time I woke, golden evening light filled the room. Tharon sat in his chair, freshly cleaned and changed, frowning in concentration at his book. He mouthed words silently, testing their shape.

“That’s a nice sight,” I said softly.

His head jerked up, joy flooding his features. He looked years younger after real sleep. “Feeling stronger?”

“Yes.” It wasn’t a lie - my voice worked better, and the room stayed steady when I moved my head. “What are you

reading?”

He held up the book, embarrassed. “Children’s stories. Serra says... good for learning.” His words were already smoother. “About girl who finds dragon egg.”

“Read to me?”

He hesitated. “My grasp of your language is still bad. But I would learn, for you.”

“I don’t mind.”

After a moment, he began reading slowly, carefully shaping each word. When he struggled, I helped him, and sometimes he taught me the Valti word instead. The story wove through the growing dark until Serra brought lamps and more tea.

Days blurred together. I grew stronger while Tharon remained my constant - reading stories, supporting my first attempts to sit up, sneaking sweet pastries past Serra’s watchful eye. But sometimes I caught him watching me with a haunted look, as if afraid I might still slip away.

One evening, as he smoothed my hair back from my face with surprising gentleness, I finally asked. “What happened? After?”

His hands stilled. “You were so cold.” His voice roughened. “Thought... thought you were gone. But there was heartbeat. Tiny. We ran. The Temple...” He switched to Valti, frustrated by the limitations of his Terran.

I reached back, touching his hand. “Show me instead?”

He moved around to face me, taking both my hands in his. Through gestures and broken sentences in both languages, he told me about the escape - the voices guiding them, the families helping, the city rising up. When he described carrying me, thinking me dead, his hands tightened on mine.

“I heard you,” I whispered. “In the systems. Your roar broke through everything else.”

Something fierce and tender crossed his face. He leaned forward, pressing his forehead to mine. We stayed like that,

breathing together, until Serra's step on the stairs made him pull back.

But that night, after Serra had gone and the tannery grew quiet, he didn't return to his chair. Instead, he carefully settled on the bed beside me, letting me curl against his warmth. His purr rumbled soothingly through my bones.

"Tell me about Zashi?" I asked.

His voice was soft in the darkness as he described his home - the mountain peaks, the wild forests, the great stone halls. I fell asleep to tales of snow and starlight, safe in the circle of his arms.

Morning sun had barely touched the windows when a sharp rap announced Denna. She stood in the doorway, grinning at finding us tangled together on the narrow bed.

"Well, if you're well enough for that, you're well enough for visitors," she said cheerfully.

Tharon growled something that made her laugh, but he helped me sit up against the pillows before reluctantly heading downstairs. His hesitation at the door made Denna roll her eyes.

"I promise not to let her strain herself," she said. "Go. Korrin wants to discuss patrol rotations anyway."

Once he was gone, she settled into his chair with a grunt. "Getting harder to move gracefully these days."

I studied her more closely, noting the subtle changes in her shape. "Denna!"

Her smile was radiant. "Due in winter. Korrin's insufferable about it - you'd think no one had ever had a baby before." Her expression softened. "But it feels right, bringing new life into a free city."

"How is everyone? The city?"

"Better than we could have hoped. Everyone stepped up - families, crafters, even the merchant quarter. The city was ready for change." She leaned forward, eyes twinkling.

“Though I think some merchants are disappointed they can’t dramatically reveal hidden rebel connections anymore.”

That startled a laugh from me, though it made my ribs ache.

Denna’s expression grew serious. “We’ve had word from Zashi. Once you’re stronger... they’re eager to welcome their new princess.”

The title still felt strange. “I’m not sure I know how to be a princess, let alone a queen.”

“You led a revolution by believing in people’s better natures. I’d say that’s a good start.” She reached for my hand. “And you won’t be alone. Mila’s already planning diplomatic arrangements, and Korrin’s organizing trade agreements.” A pause. “We’ll miss you, though.”

“I’ll come back to visit. Often.”

“You’d better. This little one will need their Aunt Niam’s influence to balance out their father’s stuffiness.” Her attempt at lightness didn’t quite hide the shimmer in her eyes.

I squeezed her hand, throat tight with emotion. Through the window, I could hear children playing in the streets below, their laughter free and unconstrained. Soon there would be decisions to make, a journey to prepare for, a new life to build. But for now, this was enough - the sound of hope in children’s voices, my friend’s joy.

The future stretched before us like dawn breaking over mountains. Different than we’d imagined, perhaps. But brighter. Free.



# THARON

---

The heat of the day carried the sharp scent of medicinal plants mixed with tanning solutions. My claws left fresh marks in the wooden door frame as I watched Niam take careful steps through the garden, catching herself on raised beds when her legs trembled.

Every instinct screamed to help her, to gather her close and carry her to safety. But I'd learned - my fierce little mate needed to find her own strength again.

I noticed Serra's youngest grandchildren peering from behind the herbs, their whispered conversation clear to my enhanced hearing.

"They say she made the Temple fall with just a thought..."

"Look how pale she is, like moonlight..."

"Do you think she really talks to machines?"

Niam noticed them too. She knelt carefully beside a patch of yarrow, her movements still stiff but improving. "Would you like to learn about the healing plants?"

The smallest child - Rovia - crept forward first, drawn by Niam's gentle voice. The others followed, their fear melting into fascination as she showed them which leaves to pick, how to tell when flowers were ready for drying.

"Can I..." Rovia reached toward Niam's close-cropped hair, then pulled back. "They say it burns like fire."

“It’s just hair.” Niam caught the girl’s hand, guiding it to touch the bright strands. “See? No fire.”

The older children hung back, their eyes darting between Niam and me. One boy tugged the girl’s sleeve, trying to pull her away when she strayed too close to where I stood.

“But look at his hair,” Rovia whispered, seemingly unafraid. “Like the sky.”

Her brother’s voice shook. “Grandmother says the creatures outside the walls of Terr eat bad children.”

Standing deliberately relaxed, I remembered how Niam had taught me that stillness could be as important as strength. The children’s heartbeats fluttered like trapped birds - except for Rovia, who seemed more fascinated than frightened.

“He’s not scary,” she announced, making her brother choke. “He looks at her like Papa looks at Mama.”

My chest tightened at how she handled their curiosity, teaching them not to fear what was different. The beast in me purred with pride even as it stayed alert for any threat to our mate. Children’s honest wonder was one thing - the calculated interest of adults would prove far more challenging.

As if summoned by my thoughts, Ashur strode into the garden, Mila at his side. Their expressions spoke of urgent news, but they paused when they saw Niam surrounded by children.

“The merchant’s council requests an audience,” Mila said, her tone careful. “And there are... visitors from the inner rings.”

I caught Niam’s subtle flinch at the prospect of more attention. But she stood smoothly, only I noticed how she steadied herself against the herb bed. “Then we shouldn’t keep them waiting.”

The tannery’s upper workroom had transformed into an unofficial command center. Serra directed traffic with the same efficiency she used in managing her vats, sorting petitioners by urgency while Mila and Ashur handled security. The air hummed with possibility and barely controlled chaos.

Merchants brought gifts with their trade proposals - fine silks, exotic spices, delicate metalwork. Each one stared a bit too long at Niam's pale skin and Temple-marked temples before quickly looking away. But where they sought weakness, they found quiet strength instead.

"We appreciate your generous offerings," she told a silk merchant who'd been particularly bold in his staring. "But perhaps we should discuss how your trading routes might better serve all rings of the city, not just the merchant quarter?"

The man blinked, caught off guard by her gentle rebuke wrapped in perfect courtesy. My beast preened at her skillful handling of these subtle power plays.

"The Pale Lady," they whispered when they thought I couldn't hear. "They say she commanded the Temple's ghosts..."

"The beast prince tore through walls to reach her..."

"But look how gently he guards her now..."

My fingers itched to silence their gossip, but Niam handled each interaction with quiet dignity. She accepted their gifts with grave courtesy while redirecting their more pressing concerns to the proper family representatives. Only I saw how she leaned against my arm between audiences, drawing strength before straightening to face the next group.

By afternoon, she insisted on walking through the changing city. The thinness of her lips betrayed her exhaustion, but her eyes held that familiar determination. I positioned myself at her side - close enough to catch her if needed, but letting her set the pace. The streets had already begun transforming, Temple symbols painted over or torn down, new life emerging in the wreckage.

People's reactions to Niam were complicated enough, but their response to me bordered on panic. They'd never seen a Shakai warrior up close - only heard tales meant to frighten children. Mothers gasped at my height, at my skin and hair

that marked me as other. Men tried to appear unafraid while keeping careful distance.

“Stars save us,” an old woman muttered, making a warding sign. “It’s true what they say about the beast prince.”

A group of dock workers stopped mid-task, staring openly at my clawed hands and sharp teeth. Their fear-scent filled the air, making my Valti stir restlessly. But then Niam’s fingers brushed my arm, and the workers’ expressions shifted as they watched me gentle under her touch.

Their wonder at seeing a “monster” behave with such restraint almost amused me. Until a child’s ball rolled to my feet, and every adult in sight went rigid with terror. But before they could react, I crouched down - making myself smaller, less threatening - and carefully rolled it back to the wide-eyed boy who owned it.

The boy’s tentative smile sparked something in the watching crowd. Fear didn’t disappear, but it began mixing with cautious curiosity. They still gave us a wide berth, but now they watched with more wonder than dread.

People stopped in their tracks as we passed. Mothers pulled children close, but their expressions held more awe than fear now. A small boy broke free from his father’s grip, offering Niam a roughly-woven crown of autumn flowers.

She accepted it with the same grace she’d shown the merchants’ expensive gifts. The gesture sparked something - old women stepped forward to offer blessings, children darted close to touch her robe before running away giggling.

“The one who freed the lost daughters,” voices murmured.

“See how the beast prince watches over her?”

“They say his love broke Temple chains...”

Her hand found mine when the attention grew overwhelming, but she never stopped walking. My perfect, fierce little mate, facing her future one step at a time. Still, I felt the slight tremors running through her body, saw how she measured each step with careful precision. Pride warred with

protective instinct - she needed to show herself to her people, but at what cost to her recovery?

When we finally returned to the tannery, she allowed me to support more of her weight on the stairs. The sunset painted the courtyard in shades of amber and rose, turning her pale skin to gold. Serra met us at the door, her sharp eyes noting Niam's exhaustion.

"Enough for one day," she announced in that tone that brooked no argument. "The city will still be here tomorrow."

Evening found us in Serra's private chamber, the herb-scented air carrying a hint of winter's approach. Niam sank onto the window seat while I built up the fire, her fingers absently tracing the old scars at her temples. A message from Zashi lay open on the table - urgent words about court politics and the need for our return.

"They'll expect a proper queen." Her voice carried all the weariness she'd hidden during our walk. "Someone who knows protocol and precedent. Not a human girl who talks to machines."

"They'll recognize what I saw from the start." I crossed to her, kneeling before the window seat to catch her restless hands in mine. "The courage that faced down priests. The compassion that saved others even after everything you suffered. The strength I saw today - handling merchants and children with equal grace."

"And if I'm not ready?" The question held echoes of the frightened girl she'd been, before she brought down the Temple's walls.

"Then we face it together." I wrapped my arms around her, feeling her lean into the touch. "Like everything else."

Through the window, stars emerged one by one - the same stars that had guided my people for generations. That would soon guide us home to Zashi. Niam's hand found mine again, weaving our fingers together.

"Tell me something true," she whispered.

I gathered her closer. “The whispers in Terr call you ‘The Pale Lady.’ In Zashi, they’ll call you queen someday.” My lips brushed her temple. “But to me, you’ve always been simply Niam. The one who faced down her nightmares to save others. The one who taught a beast to be gentle.”

## NIAM

---

Dawn mist curled between Serra's herb beds as I knelt one last time in the garden. My fingers brushed familiar leaves. Each plant held memories now: teaching the children, learning from Serra, finding my strength again among these quiet green things.

"The herbs will still grow, even if you're not here to tend them." Serra's practical voice carried more gentleness than usual. She pressed a leather packet into my hands. "Dried medicines. For the journey."

I clutched the package, breathing in the mingled scents. "Thank you. For everything."

She squeezed my shoulder, then turned briskly toward the courtyard where the wagon waited. Her practical movements didn't quite hide her emotions.

The wagon itself surprised me - larger than I'd expected, with a curved canvas cover and comfortable benches inside. Cushions softened the wooden seats, and supplies were neatly packed beneath. Small gifts from the families filled hidden corners - dried fruits from the Wickes, leather-bound books from the Randalls, tiny carved good-luck tokens from the children.

Mila stood beside the wagon, trying too hard to look calm. "The trade agreements are settled. And Ashur and I will visit within the month to finalize--"

I pulled her in closer, cutting off her attempt at business-like distance. She clung back just as tightly.

“I’ll miss you,” she whispered.

“Me too.” My throat tightened. “But we’re free now. We can visit whenever we want.”

She laughed wetly against my shoulder. “Look at us - crying like we’ll never see each other again instead of celebrating.”

“Why not both?”

Tharon’s hand settled warm on my back as the courtyard filled with familiar faces. The twins carried our last supplies while their mother directed traffic with her usual efficiency. Maya Wick’s grandchildren darted between adults’ legs, faces streaked with early-morning jam. The Randalls’ leather workers stood in a solemn line, each bearing some small token of luck or protection.

“Ready?” Tharon’s voice carried worry he tried to hide.

I touched the leather packet of herbs, looked around at the tannery’s weathered walls that had sheltered me. “Yes.”

He lifted me into the wagon with careful hands, though I needed the help less each day. Denna was already settled on one bench, her growing belly just starting to show beneath her traveling clothes. She shot me an encouraging smile.

As we pulled away, children ran alongside the wagon, throwing flower petals and calling goodbyes. Their laughter carried on the morning breeze - free, unafraid. And now they’d grow up that way, I hoped.

Mila and Ashur rode with us until the first milestone marker, their horses flanking the wagon like an honor guard. Business-like discussions of trade routes and diplomatic arrangements couldn’t quite mask the emotion in their voices.

I watched Terr’s walls shrink behind us, the Temple’s broken spires stark against the sky. Strange, how a place that had been my entire world for so long now looked so small.

“Look ahead,” Tharon murmured. “Not back.”

I turned in my seat. The road stretched before us, winding toward distant mountains. Trees I’d only seen in archives



spread their branches overhead. A breeze carried scents I'd never smelled before - wild herbs, sun-warmed earth, the green smell of growing things.

Mila reined her horse alongside the wagon. "Last chance to change your mind about the trade contracts."

"Never." I reached for her hand. "But come visit soon? And bring news?"

"Try to stop me." She leaned over to hug me, then straightened in her saddle. "Besides, someone has to make sure the mighty prince of Zashi treats you properly."

Tharon's growl held no heat. We'd all grown used to each other's ways during my recovery.

The final goodbyes were quick - we'd already said everything that mattered. I watched Mila and Ashur until they disappeared around a bend in the road, heading back to the city they'd helped free.

"They'll be fine," Denna said softly. "We all will."

I nodded, my throat so tight I couldn't speak. Tharon's hand found mine, warm and steady. Ahead, the mountains beckoned with the promise of a new home.

The wagon's gentle sway took some getting used to. Denna showed me how to brace against the motion, laughing when a particularly rough bump sent cushions sliding.

"You should have seen my first time in a wagon," she said. "Korrin thought I was going to be sick all over his boots."

He snorted from his position riding alongside. "You did get sick all over my boots."

"Yes, well." She smoothed her skirts with dignity. "I got better."

Small moments like this still caught me off guard - the easy companionship, the shared laughter. Here under the open sky, even our small group felt like family.

Tharon rode on my side of the wagon, close enough that I could reach out and touch him if I wanted. Sometimes I did,

just because I could. His eyes softened each time, though he maintained his alert watch of our surroundings.

The countryside unfolded around us like a living archive. Trees I'd only seen in technical drawings spread their branches overhead. Strange flowers dotted the grasslands in patches of purple and gold.

"Oh!" I grabbed the wagon's side as a flock of kilauan took flight from a nearby cliff.

"Beautiful, aren't they?" Tharon reined his mount closer. "It's good luck to see them."

I watched them wheel overhead, remembering dry Temple texts that had reduced such wonders to simple data. How wrong they'd been, trying to catalog magic.

We made camp that first night in a sheltered valley. Tharon insisted on helping me down from the wagon, though my legs were stronger now. I found that I didn't mind.

"Alright?" he asked softly.

"Better than alright." I touched his cheek. "I'm free."

His smile sparked warmth inside me. He'd been so careful since my recovery, as if afraid I might shatter.

But I felt stronger with each passing hour, more present in my own skin.

That first dinner under the stars felt like a feast, though it was just trail bread and dried meat. Conversation flowed easily - Denna sharing stories of adjusting to Wanderer life, Korrin's quiet corrections making her laugh, Tharon adding details about places we'd pass on our journey.

But what I remember most was looking up. No walls, no ceiling, just endless stars wheeling overhead. I'd seen them before, of course. But this felt different - my first night truly free under their light.

"The star-paths are clearer in the mountains," Tharon said, following my gaze. "Each constellation tells a story of our people. I'll teach you, if you'd like."

I leaned against his shoulder, breathing in the night air. "I'd like that."

Later, in our tent, he helped me settle onto the sleeping furs. Everything still tired me more quickly than I liked, but each day brought more strength.

"Sleep," he rumbled, stroking my forehead. "Long journey tomorrow."

I caught his hand before he could move away. "Stay close?"

His expression softened as he curled around me, careful of his greater size. His warmth seeped into my bones, chasing away the night's chill. The beast's gentle purr vibrated through his chest, soothing as a lullaby.

The next few days fell into an easy rhythm. Mornings found us breaking camp as dawn painted the sky in impossible colors. I learned to help with small tasks - rolling sleeping furs, banking cooking fires, checking the wagon's wheels. Each new skill felt like a victory, another step toward self-reliance.

On the fourth day, as evening settled around us, Tharon drew his mount closer to the wagon. His voice dropped low, meant only for me. "By tomorrow afternoon we'll be at the Crossroads Inn."

I smiled, remembering our last stay there. "Where we first..."

"Where I first held you properly." His eyes darkened. "This time there won't be any Temple guards to worry about. No rebellion to plan." He reached across to brush my cheek. "Just us."

A flush of heat raced through me at his tone. "Just us?"

"Denna and Korrin will take the eastern road to rejoin their people." His thumb traced my jawline. "We'll have time to ourselves before the journey to Zashi."

The promise in his voice made my heart race. "Time for what?"

His smile held heat and tenderness in equal measure.  
“Time for me to show my mate exactly how precious she is to me. Without interruption.”

# THARON

---

The Crossroads Inn emerged through the autumn haze, unchanged since our last visit. Late afternoon light painted its weathered stone walls gold. My beast stirred restlessly, remembering - Niam's first true freedom, the gentle beginning of what we'd become.

Now she sat straight in the wagon beside Denna, her head bare to the cooling air, as regal as any queen.

"Last time we were here," Denna said, her voice carrying a teasing note, "you two could barely look at each other without blushing."

Niam's laugh carried on the breeze. "I seem to remember you and Korrin being just as bad."

"We were not." But Korrin's hand settled protectively over Denna's growing belly, belying his gruff tone.

The innkeeper emerged as we drew up to the courtyard, his eyes widening slightly at the changes in us. No more the uncertain, angry prince and his fragile companion - we'd been tempered by fire and emerged stronger.

"Welcome back, my lord, my ladies." He bowed, professional mask firmly in place. "Your usual rooms are prepared."

I helped Niam down from the wagon, my hands lingering at her waist. Her scent wrapped around me and the beast purred at how naturally she leaned into my touch.

“Come on.” Denna linked arms with Niam. “Let’s get cleaned up while these two handle arrangements. I need to tell you about the Wanderer celebrations you’ll be missing.”

I watched them head inside, Niam’s bright hair catching the sunlight.

“They’ve both changed so much.” Korrin’s quiet observation drew my attention back.

“For the better.” I signaled the stable hands forward. “Though I notice you still hover as much as I do.”

He snorted, but didn’t deny it. We worked in companionable silence, directing the unloading of supplies and sorting what would travel with each group tomorrow. The familiar routine couldn’t quite distract me from acute awareness of Niam’s presence above - her soft laughter drifting down, the shifting notes in her scent as she washed away trail dust.

At that moment the innkeeper approached us. “Will you be taking dinner in the common room, my lord?”

“Private dining tonight, I think.” Our last evening together before the roads diverged.

The inn’s private dining room glowed with lamplight, shadows dancing on polished wood panels. Our small group settled around the table as serving girls brought platters heaped with roasted meats and autumn vegetables. The rich aroma of spices filled the air.

Niam sat close enough that her arm brushed mine with each movement, making the Valti stir restlessly. After days on the road, her nearness affected me more strongly than ever.

“Try this.” I loaded her plate with tender cuts of herb-crusted venison. “The kitchens here do amazing things with mountain herbs.”

Her small sound of pleasure as she tasted the meat made my fingers tighten on my fork. Across the table, Denna’s knowing smile told me I wasn’t being subtle.

“So,” Denna said, accepting a cup of wine from Korrin, “have you thought about what you’ll wear for the presentation to court?”

Niam’s shoulders tensed slightly. “I hadn’t considered...”

“Don’t worry.” Denna’s eyes danced. “I’m already having something made. The Wanderers’ best seamstresses are working on it. It should be in Lita’s hands before you arrive.”

“You don’t have to-”

“Of course I do. What kind of friend would I be if I let you face Zashi’s nobles in traveling clothes?” She gestured with her fork. “Besides, you should see what they’re creating. All silver and moonlight, with crystal beading that catches every ray of light.”

I watched Niam’s face as Denna described the gown. My mate deserved every luxury, every beautiful thing. But more than that, she deserved to feel as remarkable as she truly was.

“The trade arrangements are settled,” Korrin said, his practical tone cutting through the women’s discussion of fabrics. “The Wandering Nation will have representatives in Zashi by midwinter.”

“Good.” I reached for more wine. “The sooner we establish regular contact between all our peoples, the better.”

“It won’t be easy.” Niam’s quiet words drew everyone’s attention. “Generations of separation and fear don’t disappear overnight.”

“No,” I agreed, covering her hand with mine. “But worth doing anyway.”

Her fingers intertwined with mine, warm and sure. Such a simple gesture, but it sent heat racing through my blood. The beast rumbled approval at her easy acceptance of my touch.

Conversation flowed easily as we shared the meal. Denna described Wanderer customs we’d encounter at the midwinter gathering. Korrin and I discussed patrol routes between our territories. Through it all, I remained acutely aware of Niam -

every brush of her arm against mine, every soft laugh, every heated glance from beneath her lashes.

When she shifted in her chair, pressing closer to my side, the beast's control slipped slightly. A growl rumbled from deep within me.

Denna's eyebrows rose. She exchanged a look with Korrin, then pushed back from the table. "We should rest. Early start tomorrow."

"Of course." Niam stood to embrace her friend. "Safe travels. And thank you, for everything."

The women held each other tight, whispering promises to visit soon. Korrin clasped my arm in the warrior's grip, his expression understanding. They knew what this parting meant - the end of one chapter, the beginning of another.

As the door closed behind them, Niam turned to me. Lamplight caught the elegant line of her throat as she tilted her head. "Shall we go up?"

My voice came out rougher than intended. "Yes."

The stairs had never felt longer. Niam climbed ahead of me, her movements deliberately slow. Each step drew my gaze to the graceful curve of her neck, the subtle sway of her hips. The beast's hunger built with every heartbeat.

Our room waited exactly as I remembered - wide windows letting in starlight, a copper tub steaming in the corner, the bed piled with fresh furs. But this time there was no uncertainty between us, no need to hold back.

I closed the door, the latch clicking with quiet finality. When I turned, Niam stood in the center of the room, her eyes holding mine. Moonlight painted silver across her skin as she reached for the laces of her traveling dress.

"Let me." I crossed to her, my hands replacing hers on the delicate ties.

Her breath caught as my fingers brushed her throat. "You're still wearing too many clothes."



A laugh rumbled through my chest at her boldness. “Demanding mate.”

“Yes.” She turned in my arms, rising on her toes to press her lips to my jaw. “I am.”

The last threads of my control snapped. I cradled her face between my hands, claiming her mouth with a hunger I’d been holding back all day. She met my intensity with her own, fingers tangling in my hair as she pulled me closer.

“Mine,” I growled against her throat.

“Yours.” Her hands worked at the fastenings of my shirt. “Always yours.”

Her skin glowed like moonlight under my hands. Each touch drew new sounds from her lips, each kiss marked her as mine. The beast purred as she pressed closer, all hesitation gone. This was my mate, my queen, giving herself to me with complete trust.

“Beautiful,” I murmured against her collarbone. “Perfect.”

She arched into my touch, my name a prayer on her lips. Gone was the uncertainty of our first time - now she moved with confidence, showing me exactly what she wanted. The beast reveled in her demands, in her pleasure.

“Please,” she gasped, nails scoring my shoulders. “Tharon...”

# NIAM

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Tharon gathered me closer, a growl rumbling through his chest. Such power in his hands, yet he handled me with exquisite care - as if I were something precious, something to be cherished.

“Say the words,” he commanded, fangs grazing sensitive skin. “Let me hear you.”

Heat bloomed everywhere his fingers traced. No more hesitation, no more fear - just pure need burning through my veins. I arched into his touch, showing him exactly what I wanted.

“More,” I demanded, threading my fingers through his hair. “Everything. You.”

His purr deepened at my boldness. One hand slid down my side while the other supported my back. When his mouth found my breast, stars exploded behind my eyes. Each careful stroke of his tongue sent lightning racing through me.

“Beautiful,” he breathed onto my flesh. “The sounds you make. The way you respond. Perfect.”

I was floating, drowning in sensation. His beast’s rumble vibrated through every point of contact, marking me as his. When his fingers found more sensitive places, my world narrowed to pure feeling.

“That’s it,” he encouraged as I rocked against his hand. “Show me. Let me see you fall apart.”

The first peak caught me by surprise, pleasure crashing through me in waves. But he didn't stop, drawing out every sensation until I was trembling in his arms.

"Please," I begged, though I hardly knew what I was asking for. "Tharon, I need..."

"What do you need?" His voice had gone rough with desire. "Tell me."

"You. Inside me. Now."

His control snapped. In one fluid motion, he flipped me astride his hips. His hands spanned my waist, steadying me as I sank down onto him. The stretch burned sweetly, my body welcoming him like coming home.

The sensation of him filling me sent sparks racing through every nerve. I braced my hands on his chest, his skin burning hot beneath my palms.

"Perfect," he growled, his eyes darkening with desire. "You feel perfect."

I rolled my hips experimentally, drawing a deep rumble from his chest. His fingers flexed on my hips, encouraging the movement without controlling it. Letting me set the pace.

Something fierce and possessive filled me at the way he watched - like I was the most precious thing he'd ever seen. Like he'd tear apart anyone who tried to take me from him. A rush of heat spread through my core at the thought. "Mine," I whispered, dragging my nails down his chest.

His beast's purr deepened. "Yes. Always yours."

I moved faster, chasing the building pleasure. His hands slid to my hips, supporting but not directing. Letting me take what I needed. One thumb traced circles against sensitive skin, making me gasp.

"That's it," he encouraged. "Take your pleasure. Show me how much you want this."

Stars burst behind my eyes as another peak crashed through me. But this time he moved with me, his own release

following close behind. His eyes blazed as he pulled me down for a searing kiss.

I collapsed against his chest, boneless and sated. His arms came around me, holding me close as our breathing slowly steadied. His heart thundered under my ear, gradually returning to its normal rhythm.

“Are you alright?” he murmured against my hair.

“Mmm.” I kissed his chest, right over his racing heart. “Perfect.”

His chuckle vibrated through me. “You’re going to be the death of me, little mate.”

“You love it.” I propped my chin on his chest to look at him.

His expression softened. One hand came up to trace my cheek. “I do. More than anything.”

The raw honesty in his voice made my chest tight. I turned my face into his palm, pressing a kiss there. “I love you too.”

His beast’s purr deepened at the words. Without warning, he moved swiftly, pinning me beneath him. “Show me again?”

Warmth grew inside me at his tone. “Yes.”

Dawn found us tangled in the sheets, my body pleasantly sore. Tharon’s arm was a warm weight across my waist, his breath steady against my neck. Outside our window, birdsong heralded the approaching day.

I stretched carefully, not wanting to wake him yet. His grip tightened automatically, drawing me closer against his chest. Even in sleep, he was protective.

Memories of the night before sent heat rushing to my cheeks. We’d barely made it to the bed after the bath, unable to keep our hands off each other. Every touch had felt like coming home, like pieces clicking into place.

His breathing changed subtly, telling me he was waking. His nose pressed against my throat, inhaling deeply.

“Good morning,” I murmured.

His answering growl vibrated through my back. “Very good morning.” He nuzzled my neck. “How do you feel?”

“Wonderful.” I turned in his arms to face him. “Though I might need help getting down the stairs.”

His laugh rumbled through his chest. “Worth it?”

“Definitely worth it.” I nuzzled into his chest. “Though we should probably get up soon. Denna and Korrin will be leaving...”

He silenced me with a kiss that quickly grew heated. “They won’t leave without saying goodbye.” His mouth moved to my throat. “We have time.”

“Tharon...” But my protest dissolved into a gasp as his hand slid lower.

“Yes?” His voice held wicked amusement. “Did you want something?”

Two could play at that game. I shifted deliberately against him, drawing a growl. “I can think of a few things.”

His eyes darkened. “Show me.”

The sun was well up by the time we finally made it downstairs. Denna took one look at us and grinned knowingly. Even Korrin’s usually stoic expression held a hint of amusement.

“Sleep well?” Denna asked innocently.

Heat crept up my neck. “Very well, thank you.”

Tharon’s arm settled possessively around my waist.

The innkeeper approached with his usual quiet efficiency, setting out plates of fresh bread and fruit. “Will you be requiring the room another night, my lord?”

Tharon’s hand tightened slightly on my waist. “Yes. We’ll leave for Zashi tomorrow.”

My heart skipped at the reminder. Tomorrow we’d start the journey to my new home. To our future together. The thought

should have been terrifying, but with Tharon beside me, it felt right.

Denna caught my hand across the table. “You’ll do wonderfully, you know. The court won’t know what hit them.”

“They better not give her any trouble,” Tharon growled. “Or they’ll answer to me.”

“To all of us,” Korrin added quietly. “The Wanderers stand with our friends.”

Warmth filled my chest at their support. Such a change from the isolation of the Temple - now I had people willing to fight for me, to stand beside me. Family.

After breakfast, we gathered in the courtyard for goodbyes. Denna wrapped her arms around me, squeezing tight.

“Take care of yourself,” she whispered. “And him too. He needs you more than he’ll admit.”

“I will.” I squeezed her tight. “Visit soon? Before the baby comes?”

“Try to stop me.” She stepped back, wiping her eyes. “Besides, someone needs to make sure this one knows how to properly spoil their aunt.”

Korrin clasped arms with Tharon, speaking too quietly for me to hear. Whatever he said made Tharon nod seriously. Then they were mounting up, waving final goodbyes as they rode east.

I watched until they disappeared around the bend in the road. Tharon’s arms came around me from behind, pulling me back against his chest.

“They’ll visit soon,” he promised. “And we have work to do before then.”

I turned in his embrace. “Oh?”

His eyes caught me, drawing me in. “Making sure my mate is properly pampered before we face court politics.”

“And how do you plan to do that?”

His smile sent heat racing through my veins. “Come upstairs and find out.”

I laughed as he swept me into his arms, carrying me toward the stairs. But as I snaked my arms around his neck, I caught a glimpse of our reflection in a window - his powerful frame cradling my smaller one, both of us transformed by love into something stronger together than apart.

Our path forward gleamed like sunlight cresting distant peaks. We’d never dreamed of this road, yet it beckoned with brilliant promise.

Unbound.

Complete.

# THARON

---

I secured the last of our bags to the villart as stable hands bustled around the Crossroads Inn's courtyard. The beast in me still purred with satisfaction from our night together, though worry crept in as I watched Niam bid farewell to the innkeeper and his granddaughter. The road to Zashi would test her newfound strength.

"Ready?" I asked as she approached, offering my hand to help her mount.

"Yes." Her fingers twined with mine, sending sparks along my skin.

The morning passed quietly as we rode north along the trade road, Niam's back pressed against me. The beast rumbled contentedly, pleased to have her so close.

Near midday, we passed a Shakai hunting party returning from the high peaks. They recognized me instantly, dropping into respectful bows. But their eyes lingered on Niam, wonder replacing their initial shock as they took in her unveiled face and close-cropped red hair.

"Your Highness," their leader said carefully. "We heard rumors, but..." His gaze shifted to Niam again, curiosity warring with ingrained courtesy.

I felt her stiffen, but before I could intervene, she spoke.

I watched Niam lift her chin, pride straightening her spine despite the curious stares of the hunting party. The morning sun caught her close-cropped red hair like living flame.



“I am Niam of Terr.” Her voice rang clear and steady, then she smiled. “And no, I’m not a Frostling.”

Murmurs rippled through the gathered warriors. The leader’s quickly cut them off.

“My deepest respects, my lady.” He straightened, gaze flickering between us. “The rumors spoke true then. Our prince found his mate among the strangers.”

My arms tightened around her waist. The beast growled approval at her strength, even as protective instincts urged me to hide her from their scrutiny.

“The human Temple’s walls have fallen,” she continued, her tone carrying the weight of prophecy. “Old barriers crumble. Perhaps it’s time for new alliances.”

The warriors exchanged glances. Their leader nodded slowly, respect replacing wariness in his expression.

“Perhaps it is, my lady.” He touched his fist to his heart in the traditional warrior’s salute. “Safe travels to you both. May the mountains guide your path.”

We rode on, leaving them to their hushed discussions. My heart filled with pride seeing how naturally she’d handled the encounter.

“That went well,” she murmured, relaxing back against me.

I kissed her shoulder. “You were perfect. Though I think you shocked them speechless.”

“Good. They needed shocking.” Her fingers traced patterns on my arm. “How many more encounters like that should we expect?”

“News travels fast in the mountains.” I guided our mount around a sharp bend in the trail. “But most will wait to form opinions until they see you at court.”

She hummed thoughtfully. “And what will they see?”

“My mate. My queen.” I tightened my hold. “The one who brought down the Temple’s walls and freed her people. The

one who tamed a beast prince.”

“Tamed?” She shifted to face me, laughter dancing in her eyes. “Is that what you call it?”

Arousal pooled inside me at her teasing tone. The beast stirred, remembering the sounds she’d made last night. The way she’d arched beneath me, demanding more.

“Shall I show you again how tame I am?” I growled against her ear.

She shivered. “We’re supposed to be traveling.”

“We have time.” My hands splayed possessively across her stomach. “And I saw a sheltered clearing just ahead...”

“Tharon!” But she laughed, making no move to pull away.

The clearing opened before us, sheltered by towering pines. A small stream tumbled over moss-covered rocks, providing both water and privacy. Perfect.

I reined the villart to a halt, swinging down before lifting Niam from the saddle. She came willingly into my arms, tilting her face up for a kiss.

“You’re insatiable.” Her words were soft against my mouth.

“Only for you.” I backed her toward a fallen log, cushioned with soft moss. “Always for you.”

Her hands slid into my hair as I claimed her mouth properly, inwardly exulting at her eager response, at how perfectly she fit against me.

“Someone could come by,” she protested weakly as I trailed kisses down her throat.

“Let them.” I nipped gently at her pulse point, drawing a gasp. “Let them see how their prince worships his mate.”

Her laugh turned to a moan as my hands found bare skin beneath her tunic. “You’re impossible.”

“You love it.” I pulled back just enough to see her face. “Tell me to stop and I will.”

Her eyes darkened as she pulled me closer. “Don’t you dare.”

The beast’s satisfied rumble echoed through the clearing as I showed her exactly how untamed I could be. Let the whole mountain hear. Let them know how thoroughly I adored my mate.

Later, as we straightened our clothes and retrieved the villart, Niam’s cheeks still held a becoming flush. I couldn’t resist stealing another kiss before helping her mount.

“We’re never going to reach Zashi at this rate,” she complained, but her smile betrayed her.

“Would that be so terrible?” I settled behind her, pulling her close. “Just you and me in the mountains forever?”

She leaned back with a contented sigh. “Tempting. But duty calls.”

“Always so practical.” I pressed a kiss to her hair. “Fine. But I reserve the right to find more secluded clearings along the way.”

Her laugh spread warmth through my chest. “I suppose I can live with that.”

We rode on through the afternoon, the villart’s steady pace eating up the miles. Niam pointed out interesting plants and asked questions about landmarks we passed. Every query showed her sharp mind, her desire to understand her new home.

The sun hung in the sky when we crested a ridge overlooking a deep valley. Below, paths carved into the mountainside led down to a cluster of buildings nestled against the cliffs.

“The Costach Mos Inn,” I explained as Niam leaned forward to study the settlement. “We’ll rest here tonight before tackling the high passes tomorrow.”

“It’s bigger than I expected.” She traced the paths with her eyes. “All those terraces...”

“Shakai engineering at its finest.” Pride colored my voice. “The entire settlement is anchored into the living rock. Even the worst storms can’t shake it loose.”

We descended carefully, the villart picking its way along the switch-backing trail. Niam’s grip on the pommel tightened at particularly steep sections, but she never flinched.

The trading post’s stables occupied the lowest terrace, carved directly into the mountainside. As we approached, a stable hand hurried out to take our mount’s reins. His eyes widened at the sight of Niam’s unveiled face, but training kept him professional.

“Welcome, Your Highness.” He bowed deeply. “Lady. I’ll have rooms prepared immediately”

I helped Niam dismount, steadying her as her legs adjusted to solid ground. The beast growled possessively at the stable hand’s lingering glance, but she simply nodded acknowledgment.

“Thank you.” Her voice carried quiet authority. “Please see that our mount is well-cared for. He’s earned his rest today.”

The boy’s expression shifted from curiosity to respect. He bowed again before leading the villart away, speaking softly to the tired creature.

“You continue to surprise them,” I murmured as we climbed the steps to the main building.

“Good.” She smiled, just a bit, but enough. “They’ll need to get used to surprises.”

The trading post hummed with activity despite the late hour. The sharp scent of smoke mixed with rich mountain spices as servers carried steaming platters between tables. Different Shakai dialects wove together - the liquid tones of the high clans contrasting with the rougher mountain trader speech. Conversation stuttered briefly as we entered, then resumed at a lower volume.

The innkeeper hurried forward, his weathered face creasing in a welcoming smile. “Your Highness! We’re

honored by your return.” His gaze moved to Niam, curiosity warring with courtesy. “And your companion...”

“My mate.” I kept my tone mild, but the beast’s growl underscored the words.

His eyes widened slightly before he covered his surprise with a deeper bow. “My lady. Welcome to the Costach Mos Inn. Please, follow me. Your rooms are ready.”

As we crossed the room, I caught fragments of whispered conversations.

Niam’s grip tightened on my hand, but she held her head high. Let them talk. Let them see how their prince had chosen. How his mate carried herself with quiet dignity despite their stares.

The innkeeper led us to a suite on the uppermost level, its windows offering sweeping views of the valley below. A fire already burned in the hearth, warming the mountain-chilled air.

“Will you take dinner here or in the common room?” he asked, lighting additional lamps.

I looked to Niam, letting her choose. She considered for a moment before answering.

“The common room, I think.” Her chin lifted slightly. “They might as well get used to seeing me.”

The innkeeper nodded approval before withdrawing, leaving us alone.

I pulled her into my arms. “You continue to amaze me.”

She pressed closer, some of her tension easing. “I’m terrified they’ll see right through me. That they’ll know I’m making it up as I go along.”

“You’re doing perfectly.” I tilted her face up for a gentle kiss. “And you’re not alone. I’m right here beside you.”

Her smile sent warmth coursing through me. “I know. It’s the only reason I’m brave enough to try.”

“You’ve always been brave.” I traced her cheek with my thumb. “I’m just honored to stand with you now.”

She rose on her toes to kiss me properly, her hands sliding into my hair. The beast rumbled approval, urging me to take more. To show everyone exactly who she belonged to.

But she pulled back with a knowing smile. “Later. After dinner.”

I growled playfully. “Promise?”

“Promise.” She stepped away to straighten her clothes. “Now help me look presentable. If I’m going to face their scrutiny, I’d rather not do it with my hair in complete disarray.”

I couldn’t resist stealing one more kiss before helping her smooth her travel-mussed appearance. My beautiful, brave mate.

The common room fell silent as we descended the stairs. Every eye turned to watch our progress, speculation clear on their faces. But Niam simply tightened her grip on my arm and kept walking, head held high.

The innkeeper had reserved a table near the hearth, slightly elevated above the main floor. Heat from the fire chased away the mountain chill, while the elevation gave us a clear view of the room.

As I held Niam’s chair, conversations slowly resumed around us. Traders gestured over cups of spiced wine, their jeweled rings catching the firelight. A group of mountain clan warriors huddled over maps in one corner, while merchants haggled.

“They’re not sure what to make of me,” Niam murmured, accepting a cup of wine from a serving girl. “Good.” I settled beside her, close enough that our shoulders touched. “Let them wonder. You’ll show them soon enough.”

And she would, I thought. Let them spread word of how the prince’s human mate held her own among mountain traders. How she built bridges between peoples with nothing more than genuine interest and quiet dignity.

When we finally retired for the night, Niam practically glowed with accomplishment.

“That went better than I expected,” she admitted as I helped her out of her travel clothes.

“Because you showed them exactly who you are.” I nipped at her bare shoulder. “My brilliant, beautiful mate.”

Her smile turned wicked as she pressed closer. “Now then, I believe I made you a promise earlier...”

The beast growled approval as I backed her toward the bed. Let them hear, I thought as I claimed her mouth.

# NIAM

---

I held my breath, hardly daring to believe the sight before me.

Blue rooftops spread across the valley below, a sea of azure tiles stretching from mountain slope to mountain slope. The castle palace perched on a distant spire overlooking what Tharon had called the Strait of Fear, though from this height the water looked peaceful enough.

“It’s beautiful,” I breathed, adjusting my grip on the villart’s reins.

Tharon’s chest rumbled against my back. “Wait until you see it up close.”

The clear air drew everything in sharp relief, making the city look pristine and welcoming despite its fearsome reputation. I’d expected something darker, more forbidding from the stories I’d heard of the Shakai capital.

“There’s no wall,” I said as we descended the path.

“Around the castle, yes. Two of them. The city itself?” Tharon shook his head. “Too large to wall completely.”

“I’ve never seen anything like it.” My eyes traced the impossible architecture - living gardens spilling down terraced walls, bridges spanning between spires that seemed to float on air.

“See there?” His hand stretched past my shoulder, pointing to different sections of the sprawling city. “The merchant quarter with its covered markets. The craft district where our



artisans work. And there-" his finger traced upward to where the castle perched against the mountainside "-our home."

Our home. The words sent an electric thrill through me, equal parts excitement and terror. What would they think of their prince's human mate?

"They'll love you," Tharon murmured, reading my tension. "How could they not?"

A cloud of dust on the horizon caught my attention before I could respond. Riders approached, their banners snapping in the mountain wind.

"The welcoming party," Tharon explained, straightening in the saddle behind me. "Including my brother."

I studied the approaching group. At the front rode two figures - one massive and broad-shouldered, the other smaller and definitely female. As they drew closer, a familiar face emerged.

"Lita!" The name burst from my lips. She looked different astride her mount, dressed in Shakai finery, but her smile was exactly as I remembered.

The larger rider beside her must be Drax then - Tharon's half-brother.

The honor guard fanned out around us, their formal dress glinting with silver accents. I fought the urge to shrink back against Tharon as dozens of eyes fixed on me.

"Welcome home, brother." Drax's voice carried easily across the space between us. His gaze shifted to me, curious but not unkind. "And welcome to you, Niam. We've heard much about you."

Before I could formulate a proper response, Lita had dismounted and was rushing forward. "Oh, look at you! I knew you'd win over those bastards." She caught my hands in hers as Tharon helped me down. "But mated to this guy? That I didn't expect."

"Neither did I," I admitted, taking in my friend's appearance - healthy, happy, away from the Temple's

oppressive control.

“Speaking of which...” Lita released me long enough to gesture to a guard, who brought forward a wrapped package. “You’re going to be a princess. You can’t enter the city in traveling clothes. I have a present from Denna, ready for you.”

I glanced down at my dusty riding gear, suddenly conscious of how I must look. “I didn’t think...”

“That’s what friends are for.” Lita’s smile turned conspiratorial. “Come on, let’s get you ready.”

The guards efficiently erected two small pavilions - one for Tharon to change, one for Lita to help me. Inside, she carefully unwrapped layers of silk in deep blues and silvers.

“It’s beautiful.” I touched the fabric reverently. The cut followed traditional Shakai styling but I could see now the adjustments that blended Wandering Nation themes. “But I don’t know if I can...I’m not...”

“You are.” Lita’s hands were gentle as she helped me out of my travel clothes. “You will be their queen, Niam. And you’ll be an amazing one.”

Tears pricked my eyes as she laced me into the dress, then fussed with my short hair until it lay just so. “I’m scared,” I admitted in a whisper.

“I know.” She held my hands tightly. “I was too. But look at me now - married to my heart’s mate, accepted by his people. If I can do it, you certainly can.”

A soft tap on the pavilion’s support pole interrupted us. “Are you ladies ready?” Tharon called. “The city awaits.”

Lita gave me one final critical look, then nodded approval. “Show them who you are,” she whispered before ducking out.

I emerged into sunlight that caught the dress’s crystal beading, sending rainbow sparkles dancing. Tharon’s intake of breath was audible.

“Perfect,” he breathed, extending his hand.

The procession into Zashi began at a stately pace, giving me time to absorb everything. We entered through the market district first, where stalls overflowed with exotic goods from across the lands. Spice merchants called their wares in musical voices while fabric sellers displayed brilliant silks that rivaled the sky for color. Children darted between the stalls, their laughter bright and free.

The craft quarter came next, workshops with their doors thrown wide to show apprentices learning freely from masters. A glassblower shaped molten crystal into impossible forms while a weaponsmith's hammer rang against steel in counterpoint to the city's heartbeat.

I couldn't stop staring.

As we entered the noble district, the architecture grew more formal. Gardens and fountains offered cool respite from the mountain sun. Nobles emerged onto balconies to watch our progress, their reactions ranging from open curiosity to careful assessment.

Tharon's presence beside me remained steady, protective. His beast's warning growl vibrated through me whenever someone's gaze lingered too long or too coldly.

The palace itself took my breath away. Crystal gardens caught and amplified the afternoon light, creating displays that put even my Temple-enhanced dreams to shame. Servants bowed as they led us to private chambers where I could refresh before formal presentation to the king.

"I need to meet with my father first. I'll leave you with Lita," Tharon murmured, pressing a kiss to my palm. "Take what time you need."

As soon as he'd left the room, I sank onto a cushioned bench. "This is really happening?"

"It is." Lita sat beside me, taking my hands in hers. "And you're handling it beautifully."

"Tell me everything." I turned to face her properly. "How did you end up with Drax? What's it like being married to a

prince? How do you handle all of...this?" I gestured vaguely at our opulent surroundings.

She laughed. "One question at a time! But I have a much more pressing question - how did you tame Tharon? He's not exactly known for his kindness."

"He found me." I smiled at the memory. "When I thought the guards would drag me back to the Temple, he was suddenly there. He protected me, helped me, showed me I could trust again." My voice softened. "He makes me feel safe, cherished."

"I understand completely." Lita's expression turned dreamy. "That's how it was with Drax too. When you find your true mate, everything just...falls into place."

A tap at the door interrupted us. A servant entered with refreshments - tiny cakes and fruit I'd never seen before, fragrant tea that smelled of mountain flowers.

"The king will see you in an hour," she announced before withdrawing.

My stomach clenched. "Lita..."

"You'll be fine." She nodded decisively. "Sarl can be...imposing, but he's fair. And he'll see how happy you make his son."

While we ate, she filled me in on palace life - which nobles could be trusted, which servants would help without question, which gardens offered the most privacy for moments alone. I tried to absorb it all, but my mind kept spinning back to the upcoming audience.

Eventually, Lita helped me make final adjustments to my appearance. The blue silk flowed like water, crystal beading catching the light with every movement. My short red hair had been arranged to emphasize its unusual color rather than hide it.

"Perfect," Lita declared, stepping back. "Now go show them exactly who you are."

I crossed to the chamber's window, looking out over the city I would help rule. Smoke rose from craft quarter forges while children's laughter drifted up from the gardens below. So different from Terr's rigid control, its fear-wrapped traditions.

I belonged here, I realized. Despite my differences, despite my past - this was home now.

Tharon's reflection appeared behind mine in the glass. "Ready?"

I spun to look at him, admiring how he carried the formal court dress - all sleek lines and barely contained power. "Ready."

His Valti's purr rumbled through me as he drew me close. "You're going to be amazing."

"We both are." I stretched up to brush a kiss across his jaw.

A servant's discrete cough drew our attention. "The king awaits."

# THARON

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The throne room opened before us, late-afternoon sunlight streaming through towering windows. Guards lined the approach, their ceremonial armor gleaming.

But this moment belonged to Niam.

She walked beside me with quiet grace, the blue silk of her dress whispering against marble floors. So different from my memories of past formal audiences - the rigid ceremony, the barely concealed political maneuvering. Niam brought something new, something real.

“My father is anxious to meet you,” I murmured as we approached the grand doors.

She straightened her back. “Then let’s not keep him waiting.”

The herald’s staff struck the floor three times, silencing the gathered nobles. “His Royal Highness Prince Tharon and his chosen mate, Lady Niam of Terr!”

King Sarl sat straight-backed on the throne despite his illness, silver-streaked hair bound in formal warrior braids. The crown of Zashi rested heavy on his brow, but his eyes remained sharp as he studied us.

“Welcome home, my son.” His gaze shifted to Niam. “And welcome, Lady Niam. We have heard much of your deeds.”

She sank into a graceful curtsy. “Your Majesty honors me.”

“Rise.” Father’s voice carried easily through the hall. “Tell me, what brings a daughter of Terr to seek her fate among the Shakai?”

My beast growled at the implied challenge, but Niam’s voice rang clear and steady. “Not fate, Your Majesty. Choice. I chose to break free of the Temple’s control. I chose to trust your son when he offered aid. And I choose now to stand before you, ready to serve Zashi.”

Murmurs rippled through the watching nobles. Father’s expression remained neutral, but I caught the spark of interest in his eyes.

“Bold words.” He leaned forward slightly. “And what would you bring to Zashi as its future queen?”

“Understanding,” she answered without hesitation. “For too long, fear and mistrust have divided human and Shakai. I would build bridges between our peoples, starting with trade agreements that benefit both sides.”

“You speak of trade when the Temple has fallen?” One of the older nobles stepped forward, challenge in his bearing. “When chaos threatens Terr?”

“I speak of opportunity.” Niam met his gaze steadily. “The Temple’s fall creates a vacuum. Better to fill it with cooperation than conflict.”

The beast purred approval at her strength. Around us, I noted subtle shifts in stance, expressions changing from skepticism to consideration.

Father sat back, studying her. “And what of our traditions? Our ways?”

“I would learn them.” She smiled slightly. “Already your son teaches me the beauty in Shakai culture. The strength in your warrior traditions. The wisdom in your ways.”

“And the beast?” Another noble called. “You would mate with a Valti, knowing what we are?”

My control slipped slightly at the blatant challenge. But Niam’s hand found mine, her touch anchoring.

“The beast is part of who he is.” Her voice carried conviction. “I accept all of him - warrior and prince, man and beast. As he accepts all of me.”

Silence fell. Father rose slowly from the throne, descending the steps with measured grace. He stopped before us, power radiating despite his illness.

“You speak well, Lady Niam.” His eyes met mine briefly before returning to her. “But words are wind. Actions prove worth.”

“Then let my actions speak.” She lifted her chin. “Test me as you will. I am ready.”

The Valti roared with triumph. My brilliant, brave mate.

Father’s expression softened slightly. “Very well. The traditional trials await - duty, loyalty, leadership. Are you prepared?”

“I am.”

He nodded to the chamberlain, who stepped forward with an ancient scroll. “Then let us begin.”

The questioning lasted hours. Father and the high nobles took turns presenting scenarios, testing her judgment. Trade disputes between clans. Diplomatic relations with hostile neighbors. Internal conflicts requiring careful balance.

Through it all, Niam remained poised. Her answers showed both wisdom and practicality, drawing on her knowledge of both cultures. When she spoke of using Terr’s craft guilds to establish new trade routes through the mountains, even the most skeptical nobles nodded approval.

“Enough,” Father declared finally. “You have proven your worth, Lady Niam. Let the celebration begin!”

Servants threw open the doors to the great hall where tables groaned under the weight of traditional feast dishes. Musicians took up their instruments as nobles filed in, the formal atmosphere dissolving into celebration.

“You were amazing,” I murmured as we took our places at the high table.



She smiled, some of her tension easing. “I had a good teacher.”

As the feast progressed, the musicians shifted to a slower melody. The traditional love song’s haunting notes filled the great hall, the tale of a warrior finding his true mate beneath enemy stars.

“Dance with me.” I held my hand out to Niam.

Her eyes widened. “I don’t know your dances.”

“Then I’ll teach you.”

She placed her delicate hand in mine. The beast approved of her trust as I led her to the center of the floor. Other couples stepped back, giving us space.

“Follow my lead,” I murmured, drawing her close. One hand settled at her waist while the other clasped hers. “Step with me, like this.”

Her body molded against mine as we began to move. The silk of her dress whispered against my formal leathers. She stumbled slightly at first, but quickly found the rhythm.

“That’s it.” I guided her through a simple turn. “Let the music flow through you.”

Her natural grace emerged as she relaxed into the dance. We moved as one across the floor, her feet matching mine perfectly. The sweet scent of her hair filled my lungs with each breath.

“Everyone’s watching,” she whispered.

“Let them.” I spun her out, then pulled her back tightly into my embrace. “They see what I’ve known since I first found you - that you belong here. With me.”

A soft blush colored her cheeks as we swayed together. My beast rumbled contentedly at having her in our arms, safe and cherished.

The music swelled and I lifted her in a traditional sweep. Her startled laugh rang out as I set her down, pure joy lighting

her face. Several nobles nodded approval at her quick mastery of the steps.

“See?” I pressed my forehead to hers as we continued moving. “You’re a natural.”

“Only because you’re leading.” Her fingers tightened on mine. “You make me feel...”

“What?”

“Free.” She met my gaze. “Safe. Like I can be myself, not what others expect.”

My heart clenched at her words. I’d spent years building walls, cultivating fear and respect. But this woman had slipped past every defense, claimed both man and beast.

The song drew to a close. I dipped her low, supporting her weight easily. She arched in my arms, trusting me completely.

When I drew her up, she stayed close, one hand resting over my thundering heart.

“Thank you for the dance, my prince.”

The beast stretched languidly, satisfied by her nearness.

“May I claim a dance with my new sister?” Drax appeared beside our chairs, offering his hand to Niam.

She glanced at me, eyebrow raised in question. I nodded encouragement.

“Of course.” She rose smoothly. “Though I warn you, I’m still learning Shakai dances.”

“Then I shall teach you, as Lita taught me human ones.” He led her away while I moved back to the head of the room.

“She truly is remarkable.” Father’s quiet voice drew my attention.

“She is.” Pride filled my chest watching her execute the complex steps. “More than I deserve.”

“Perhaps.” He sipped his wine thoughtfully. “Or perhaps exactly what you need. What Zashi needs.”

Before I could respond, he continued. “The crown will pass to you soon, my son. I feel it in my bones. But I go to the ancestors easier knowing you will not rule alone.”

Emotion closed my throat. “Father...”

“Let us speak of lighter things.” He waved Drax and Niam back to the table. “Tell me how you met. I sense there is quite a tale there.”

We spent the next hour sharing carefully edited highlights of our journey. Father laughed openly at Niam’s description of our first meeting, while Drax and Lita added commentary from their own experiences with the Temple.

As the evening wore on, nobles began retiring in small groups. Finally, Father rose, signaling the official end of the celebration.

“Rest well,” he told us. “Tomorrow begins your new life.”

Servants led us to our chambers - a suite in the family wing with sweeping views of the city below. As the door closed behind us, Niam sank onto a cushioned bench.

“That went well, far better than expected,” she admitted.

“You were perfect.” I knelt before her, taking her hands in mine. “But I have one more tradition to observe.”

From my pocket I drew a small box carved from mountain heartwood. “Among our people, new mates exchange gifts representing their bond.”

She opened it carefully to reveal a delicate chain supporting a pendant of deepest blue - the same color as the mountain twilight when we first kissed.

“It’s beautiful,” she breathed.

“The stone comes from the highest peaks.” I fastened it around her neck. “Where few dare to climb. Like you, it appears delicate but holds incredible strength.”

Her fingers traced the pendant. “Thank you.”

I cupped her face in my hands. “Thank you for choosing me. For choosing us.”

Turning her head slightly, she kissed my palm. “Always.”

# NIAM

---

The morning sun painted my chambers in gold, marking three months since that first formal audience. Three months of learning, growing, changing. And today, finally claiming my place at Tharon's side officially.

"Hold still!" Lita tugged at my hair, weaving tiny crystal beads through the strands that had grown just long enough to style. "I can't get these placed right if you keep fidgeting."

"Sorry." I tried to breathe slowly. "I just..."

"We know." Denna squeezed my hand from where she sat beside my dressing table. Her own golden curls had been styled in an elegant mix of Shakai and human braids. "But we've got you."

Mila bustled in carrying an armload of flowers. "The gardens sent up the freshest blooms. And you'll never guess who just arrived - Serra! She's brought half of Eight Ring with her, I swear."

My heart lifted at the news. Serra had become a second mother to me during those dark days after escaping the Temple. Her strength and wisdom had helped guide me through the transition from prisoner to freedom.

"Your dress is ready, my lady." Mistress Downin emerged from the adjacent chamber, followed by Lesrey and Yezzette carrying carefully wrapped packages. "Though I must say, combining Shakai and human traditions was quite the challenge."

“But worth it,” Lita declared, setting the last crystal in place. “There. Perfect.”

I rose on shaky legs as they began unwrapping the dress. The silk shimmered like captured starlight, traditional Shakai blue shot through with threads of silver. But the cut followed human lines - fitted through the bodice before flowing into full skirts perfect for dancing.

“It’s beautiful.” My voice cracked with emotion.

“As are you.” Serra’s voice drew my attention to the doorway. She carried something draped across her arms - delicate lace more like a cloud than fabric. “I brought something, if you’d like...”

“The veil!” Denna clapped her hands. “It’s perfect!”

I touched the fragile fabric reverently. “Serra, I can’t...”

“You can and you will.” She smiled, eyes suspiciously bright. “I’ve been saving this for a daughter’s wedding day.” She turned to hug Mila. “I couldn’t help missing this daughter’s wedding, and while you may not be mine by blood, you are in every way that matters.”

Tears threatened. Lita made a scolding noise. “None of that! You’ll ruin all our hard work.”

Someone rapped sharply on the door, making us all jump. Lita called out, “Unless you’re the king himself, go away!”

“Then it’s fortunate I am.” Sarl’s familiar voice held amusement. “May I have a moment with my future daughter?”

King Sarl entered slowly, illness evident in his careful movements. But his smile was warm as he took in the organized chaos of the chamber.

“Ladies.” He nodded to my attendants before focusing on me. “I brought something, if you’ll permit me...”

He opened an ornate box to reveal a pair of earrings - delicate silver filigree supporting deep blue stones that caught and held the light.

“They belonged to my grandmother,” he explained. “Kiha never cared for them - too simple for her tastes. But I think they suit you perfectly.”

“Thank you.” I touched the gems reverently. “They’re beautiful.”

“As you will be.” He pressed a gentle kiss to my forehead. “I look forward to officially welcoming you to our family.”

After he left, the women descended on me again - helping me into the dress, arranging Serra’s veil, fixing the earrings in place. I barely recognized myself in the mirror.

“Ready?” Lita asked softly.

I nodded, too choked with emotion to speak. Together, we left the chambers that had been mine these past months, heading toward my future.

The great hall had been transformed. Sunlight streamed through tall windows, catching the crystal decorations and sending rainbow sparkles dancing across the gathered crowd. Nobles in their finest silks stood alongside merchants and craftspeople, while a delegation from Terr occupied places of honor near the front.

Music swelled - an ancient Shakai melody woven through with human harmonies. My heart tripped as I caught sight of Tharon waiting at the end of the aisle. His formal clothing emphasized his warrior’s build, but his expression...

I’d seen that look before, that mix of possessiveness and awe. The beast stirred visibly beneath his skin as our eyes met.

Step by careful step, I approached. The crowd faded away until there was only us - man and woman, human and Shakai, about to bridge generations of mistrust with our love.

King Sarl’s voice rang out, beginning the ceremony that would bind us forever. We spoke the traditional words, added our own promises. When Tharon’s hands clasped mine, his beast’s purr vibrated through both of us.

“You are mine,” he growled as the binding ribbon was wrapped around our joined hands. “As I am yours.”

“Always,” I whispered back.

The rest passed in a blur - congratulations from nobles and commoners alike, toasts and speeches, music and dancing. I caught glimpses of familiar faces throughout - Mahra's proud smile, Bavak's enthusiastic applause, Serra wiping tears as she embraced Mila.

But always, always, I remained aware of Tharon. His hand at my waist as we danced, his growl when other men approached, his heated gaze promising things for later.

“Look.” Tharon nodded toward a group of young Shakai warriors deep in conversation with Terr craft apprentices. “Already they find common ground.”

“It's a start.” I leaned into him, watching the casual interactions that would have been impossible months ago. “A foundation to build on.”

As the sun set, torches blazed to life along the streets. The beast stirred restlessly as the celebrations continued. I felt Tharon's growing need to have me to himself.

“Shall we slip away?” I murmured.

His growl of approval made me shiver from head to toe. We made our excuses and escaped to the palace gardens, now wild with summer blooms. The beast's excitement thrummed between us as Tharon led me to a secluded bower.

“Finally.” He pulled me close, nuzzling my neck. “My mate. My wife. My queen.”

“Yours.” I tilted my head, offering better access. “Always yours.”

His kiss held possession and promise. The beast purred satisfaction as my hands slid into his hair, drawing him closer. Everything else fell away - duty, responsibility, the weight of two cultures depending on us. Here, we were simply mates, lost in each other.

Later, we stood on our private balcony, watching stars emerge above the city. Tharon's arms wrapped around me from behind as I took in the view. Lanterns still burned in the



streets below, celebration continuing without us. Music drifted up, carrying remembered fragments of our first dance.

“What are you thinking?” he asked, nuzzling my neck.

“That I never expected this.” I leaned back against his chest. “When I first broke free of the Temple, I only wanted escape. Revenge.” I smiled. “Instead, I found you. Found myself.”

“Found us.” His arms tightened. “Everything I am is yours now.”

“Everything we are.” I turned in his embrace. “Man and beast, human and Shakai. The perfect balance.”

His beast rumbled agreement as he claimed my mouth again. Tomorrow would bring new challenges, no doubt. But tonight belonged to us alone.

I put my arms around his neck, melting into him as the stars wheeled overhead. His kiss deepened, passion building between us. The beast’s satisfied purr vibrated through us both.

My mate.

My husband.

My everything.

## ALSO BY ELIN WYN

I've got a few series out! All of these are completed, so feel free to dive in and enjoy!

### REAVER'S QUEST

**He was unexpected.**

No.

Our ship getting blown up was unexpected.

Crashing on a planet filled with murder-goats was unexpected.

Being rescued by a copper skinned, winged hunk with golden eyes and not wearing much more than a leather kilt and a weapon harness was so freaking miraculous that I wondered if I'd actually fallen off that cliff.

This was just some sort of hallucination to keep my mind busy before I died, right?

Because otherwise, unexpected just got very, very interesting...

[Get Reaver's Quest now!](#)

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### CHOSEN BY THE RAKIAN COMMANDER

It was just another mission. Until she was thrust into his arms. And now everything has changed...

Suppressing the rebellion on Crucible should have been just another mission for Commander Nic Vistuv and the men of his unit. But lies and misinformation plague their mission from the beginning.

The only way out of their predicament may lie in the form of a bribe, but this bribe is different. It's wrapped in the body of a young healer, battle-scarred and broken by a deep betrayal.

And her touch is enough to bring him to very edge of control.

As secrets unravel and enemies draw nearer, Adena may be the key to understanding the truth of Crucible.

Can a wounded healer and an embittered soldier come to trust each other in time to forge a new beginning for them for both?

[Get Chosen by the Rakian Commander today!](#)

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## CLAIMED BY THE ALIEN BOUNTY HUNTER

**I'm on the hunt for my bounty, not my mate.**

When I left my homeworld, I gave up my chance to find my one true mate, the one my amre will light for.

When the delectable human female is thrown into my path, I can't help but want to protect her.

Touch her.

Taste her.

Nothing will happen. Nothing can happen.

But when she's put into danger by my target, I know I have to make her mine. Will she accept me in time for me to keep her safe?

[Get Claimed now!](#)

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## VREHX

**He shattered her world. Can she trust him with her heart?**

Giant spiders, walking trees, bloodthirsty vines.

For Jeneva, it's just another day trying to survive in the jungles of Ankau.

Until the sky ripped open, and the true monsters came through.

Now her world is under attack, and the only place of safety may be at the side of a rock-hard scaled alien.

But he's filled with secrets - how can she trust him?

Vrehx cares for nothing other than the destruction of the Xathi hordes who burned his home and killed his family.

But when a weapons test goes horribly wrong, the battle spills over to an uncharted world.

The planet is filled with lethal native life...but nothing is more dangerous than the human woman who obsesses his thoughts.

**When war rages around them, can they fight together, or will his burning need for her drive them apart?**

Don't miss **[Vrehx: Conquered World Book One!](#)**

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### **Given: Star Breed Book One**

**When a renegade thief and a genetically enhanced mercenary collide, space gets a whole lot hotter!**

Thief Kara Shimsi has learned three lessons well - keep her head down, her fingers light, and her tithes to the syndicate paid on time.

But now a failed heist has earned her a death sentence - a one-way ticket to the toxic Waste outside the dome. Her only chance is a deal with the syndicate's most ruthless enforcer, a wolfish mountain of genetically-modified muscle named Davien.

The thought makes her body tingle with dread-or is it heat?

Mercenary Davien has one focus: do whatever is necessary to get the credits to get off this backwater mining colony and back into space. The last thing he wants is a smart-mouthed thief - even if she does have the clue he needs to hunt down whoever attacked the floating lab he and his created brothers called home.

Caring is a liability. Desire is a commodity. And love could get you killed.

Get Book one of the complete 11 book series for FREE!

<http://myBook.to/StarBreed1>

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I love old movies – *To Catch a Thief*, *Notorious*, *All About Eve* — and anything with Katherine Hepburn in it. Clever, elegant people doing clever, elegant things.

I'm a hopeless romantic.

And I love science fiction and the promise of space.

So it makes perfect sense to me to try to merge all of those loves into a new science fiction world, where dashing heroes and lovely ladies have adventures, get into trouble, and find their true love in the stars!

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