



Tethered Thrones (Tethered Souls #3)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Not all monsters live in the shadows I've come to learn that the darkest, most evil of all, can sit on a throne.

We, the people, have been lied to, tricked and tortured. And somehow even the monsters we have fought for so many years are victims of this wrongdoing too.

But with the help of my nocturnal harem, I will not rest until the land of Naran is finally free.

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SYAORAN

I crept to the door, trying my damndest to move silently, just like I had always imagined the former spider no king would move. Like a shadow.

Everyone knew that there was now a giant centipede on the monstrous throne that had overtaken our land, but the thought of that creature sent a shiver down my spine even more than King Hadi had.

I shook those thoughts away and concentrated on my slippers moving over the marble palace floors, sure they weren't making a sound until I reached the small gap in the door that advisor and strategist An had carelessly left open.

Once upon a time, Father had been open about his plans. He had practically boasted about the war. Even when things weren't going well, he would rage in public, screaming and shouting. Lately though... lately something had changed, and I wanted to know what.

Things in general were changing. There was something in the air.

Holding my breath, I peeked through the small gap in the heavy wooden doors, witnessing a sombre scene.

My father, Emperor Gaulu, was bent over a large, detailed map of Naran. I could see his worried face, the lines deep between his brows. In this lighting, he looked older, and he looked scared.

His strategist, Advisor An stood with his back to me. I could only see the gilded edges of the robes hanging over his shoulders and the salt-and-pepper hair tied in a knot atop his head, but I could tell by his stooped shoulders that he was just as concerned.

“According to our sources, they are heading east, here.”

He indicated the spot on the map with the tip of his pointing stick and looked at the emperor.

“Do you know if Sun has contacts in Jade Moon Village? It is barely even a village.”

“The Batu Sun has contacts everywhere. He became a living legend in this war. He is favoured by the people,” Emperor Gaulu said. “He was favored by me too.”

His voice sounded so heavy.

Whatever had happened, it was serious, and it seemed that it had something to do with the famed noc killer, Batu Sun. I had seen the warrior many times, but he stayed close to my father when he visited, and he never seemed to smile. I had always felt that he was hard and serious with little room for anything else in life but killing monsters.

“Well apparently, he is favored by nocs now too,” An sneered. “It seems that he must be irresistible to all.”

I had to hold back a snort at that assessment. There had always been rumors about Batu Sun being easy, but I couldn't really imagine it of the older man. Then I realized the implication of what he said. Batu Sun mingling with nocs? I had no great feelings for the man either way, but it couldn't be true. He was too unwavering. Too loyal. A strange uneasy feeling squirmed in my gut.

“What do you propose that we do?” my father demanded.

An straightened his shoulders, looking down at the map briefly before pointing to arrangements of soldier figurines on the map that represented our various armies.

“We send word to the generals in the west first, then the others. We tell them that Sun has defected, that he is a traitor—”

“No. No one will believe it.”

“Surely, if the news is from the emperor himself—”

“We must find him and destroy him!”

Emperor Gaulu's voice echoing through the room with such sudden volume nearly made me gasp, but I held a hand over my mouth to stop any noise.

“Surely executing your top soldier without warning or explanation will cause unrest amongst the people of Naran.”

“I don't care about the people of Naran!” Emperor Gaulu spat, seething. “This world was meant to be mine! I made sure of it twenty years ago! Yet the nocs took our capitol and they took Yin Valley. They have taken my top soldier from me and now he has both godstones!”

This time, it was impossible to keep the shocked noise I made from escaping.

My father's gaze flew to the door and our eyes met through the gap. Red hot fury filled his eyes.

I stumbled back, but it was too late.

The door flew open, nearly catching me.

“You insufferable child!” he bellowed. “How much did you hear?!”

“Nothing father!” I insisted automatically. “I just—I—I was—”

“I—I, what , you bumbling fool?!” he mocked harshly.

The beaded bracelet slid off my wrist automatically without even trying. I was used to lying on my feet, especially to spy.

“Goodness, father,” I managed, lifting my hand to show him. “I was only looking for my bracelet. I thought it might have fallen off somewhere around here. Then I heard yelling and looked up.”

Somehow, I managed to keep my voice level and light, even surprising myself.

My father's face froze. Behind him, An approached, sneering at me down his long, straight nose.

“Come highness, we have important business to finish.”

My father hesitated and then sighed and shut the door firmly in my face.

“I'm sure your son couldn't even follow what he heard,” An remarked laughingly from behind the door.

I heard my father chuckle in return.

“No, I suppose not...”

My heart was beating hard, and my hands were trembling a little bit, but I turned on my heel and walked briskly through the palace, ignoring everyone I passed until I reached my bed chambers.

The moment the doors closed behind me, I collapsed against them, breathing hard.

Batu Sun had both stones? But that could end the war. He could wipe out all the nocs at once. Unless my father was right and he was with the nocs now, but then surely, he would have taken out us humans...

And what had my father meant that he had ensured he would keep the throne over twenty years ago?

Immediately, I thought of the nocs. They had arrived on our land twenty-five years ago now. But how could he have anything to do with their arrival?

None of it was making sense to me but a deep, bone chilling cold filled my body and I felt suddenly ill.

Distrust of my father was not a new thing. He had never loved or cared for me as far as I could remember, but he was still my father. Surely that meant I should stand with him.

But what if he had done something so bad that there was no excusing it? What if this war and bloodshed and darkness that had stretched on for so many years was directly from his hands?

Perhaps Batu Sun knew something that no one else knew. Perhaps that was why my father was so afraid...

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Chapter 1

Sun

C clinging to the king of nocs, we set out to slay my emperor in the direction of the rising sun.

Flecks of ice coated the worn sleeves of my uniform, battered and damaged from the long climb up the mountain. I wondered if I'd ever own another clean pair of pants and a robe that would not end up ripped to shreds again.

Each breath we took came out in puffs of frost. It would not be very long before we needed to rest. My nocs were strong, stronger than me, as much as I hated to admit it. But they were not immortal and prone to frostbite like any other creature, even if they refused to complain about it.

It dawned on me, as I squeezed Hadi's stomach harder, that we were worse off the closer we got to Kari, and the further away we fled from Black Lantern Prison back in the direction of Yewan. We had one more resurrected body to fight with, with the addition of the spider king, sure, but we'd brought more enemies, curses, and devastating revelations along with us on this treacherous journey.

And now this long nightmare is finally going to reach its climax.

I wondered if I had truly made it out alive from that hellhole of a prison, or if I was just living some fantasy inside my mind. That is until the heat of Hadi's body was ripped away from me, jolting me back to attention. He maneuvered me so I could

slide off his back, and I grumbled my dissatisfaction from losing his warmth and silent support.

“What?” I asked as everyone came to a stop behind him for a change. Seeing him lead and my nocturnal harem follow felt odd when they usually rallied behind me.

I raised an eyebrow at Kiar, Bracken, and Clem, who all wore matching expressions of pity and concern.

“Your hot breath murmuring against my neck is annoying—” Hadi grunted, stopping himself from saying vermin or human, I was sure. “Sun. Spit it out. What bothers you so?”

I frowned at that because there was no easy way to explain what I was going through or what dark thoughts I was thinking, either. I moved my lips to speak and faltered, so I pivoted to something even more pressing than the war.

“We need to rest,” I said, my voice shaking as if I were still crying like a damn child. How embarrassing. That’s why they looked at me this way and followed Hadi instead.

“Why?” Kiar asked, slithering beside me, wrapping part of his tail around me as he’d done a million times by now. “We are not far now.”

“Define not far. By noc or human standards?” I rebutted, as Bracken and then Clem decided to chime in.

“By noc standards, a few days if we’re not overwhelmed by the vermin or traitors. But at your delicate speed, a few weeks if we don’t pick up the pace,” Bracken added.

“Though, if you’re tired, Sun, let’s rest! However, I don’t think a dirt road is best, and

I'm not sure if we should scale a snowy mountain again to find a burrow or... Hmm..." Clem said, turning blue as he nibbled his bottom lip worriedly.

I rolled my eyes at all of them.

"The soldiers we met at the bottom of the mountain have probably already alerted a garrison, and that garrison has probably already sent a messenger bird directly to the emperor," I said as Kiar hissed, and Hadi peered down at me through hooded eyes.

"So?" Hadi said, and I pinched my throbbing temples.

Were they all acting purposely stupid, or had being in the presence of the goddess sucked away their good sense?

"What I'm saying is, they'll know before we arrive! Before we can even tell our story and hope for support and probably cause a civil war. We may face opposition or an ambush along this road. Scratch that, we will."

I turned towards the setting sun, noticing a thin trail of lantern light igniting further down along the mountain pass.

"Our small squadron of five isn't strong enough alone against the ruler of Naran," I added to drive my point home.

But instead of flaring with rage at the thinly veiled insult, Hadi stated matter-of-factly, "But we are not alone."

I stilled as Hadi crouched his enormous body brushing against me as Kiar stroked the back of my head. The spider king looked at his palm with disgust before reaching for me, stroking a strand of my hair. It stole my breath away, and I gulped.

Hadi didn't have to follow it up with, "Because you have us, and we you," but I felt it in the strength of his hands stoking my head, deep down in my bones.

"General Kovit is dead, and since he won't return, Daaku will know about us soon. He probably already does if Kovit was wise enough to alert the false king," Kiar mused out loud as Bracken nodded, scooping up Clem, who seemed unusually tired.

"Agreed. Sun has a point. We will be encircled soon enough, potentially trapped between our enemies. Let us be at full strength," Bracken stated, and I was thankful someone agreed with me.

No one argued, and I sighed with contentment to rest my weary bones. All in agreement now, we began to walk, looking for a good spot to rest.

After just a few minutes, when I saw a string of lights in the distance and realized how far we'd come, relief filled me.

"We rest there," I said, pointing. "After a drink."

As I reached for Hadi, he lifted me into his arms but didn't move to put me on his back. He held me at arm's length with a curious look.

"A drink of what?"

"Liquor. What else? We're already damned fools trying to slay two mad rulers. Might as well not be sober marching to our deaths."

I didn't mean for all that bitterness to leak out immediately. But Hadi didn't admonish me; if anything, his expression softened.

Madness. If there was one thing I knew about Hadi, it was that there was nothing soft

about him. He cursed out a goddess for being deranged. He was fearless and foolish compared to even me.

And yet, I couldn't deny the tenderness by which he positioned me so I could crawl back on his back. Without another word, they followed my command.

The familiar rest stop was nestled between the winding mountain passageway that once connected Yewan to Kari, the heart of travel between the capital and the second-largest city on the continent. It was an extension of Jade Moon Village in the mountains, a frontier village established before the war. Now, it was home to isolated bandits and disloyal subjects who rebelled in the early days of the war against the emperor. If only I knew back then...

Now, primarily, raiders frequented these roads, but I knew a place that would still welcome us and a man who stubbornly refused to leave this dying town.

The few people who stayed at the foot of the mountain were loyal to the emperor, including my friend. That gave me pause, trepidation creeping into my spirit as we neared the fluttering, tattered sheet acting as the bar's doorway.

I'd never been unsure of anything until now and being in a constant state of fear was unnerving. I hadn't felt like this since I was a child. Until hearing the truth from Tsuki, I hadn't wept that hard since then either.

"It looks ransacked," Clem whispered as he fluttered from Bracken's shoulder to my side.

"I assure you we are open and at your service, young man," a voice called out as Clem and I walked in, hand-in-hand. Clem startled, shifting green with embarrassment as he clutched my shoulder.

From behind a beaded curtain behind the bar came Uncle Ryota, a man who practically helped raise me, if serving me drinks underage as an enlisted teen passed as parenting, that was. I fondly recalled sharing stories deep into the night while my elders were passed out drunk.

His top knot was bleach white now, deep-set wrinkles replacing the man I had met over a decade ago, already past his prime. Ryota hadn't looked so frail back then, stooped over as he approached the counter. As I stepped closer, dragging Clem along with me, I toyed with the tips of my white strands and wondered if he grayed early because of stress, like me.

"Uncle Ryota, it's good to see you," I said as Clem anxiously pulled his hand from mine.

The others were stirring behind us, trying to repress their animalistic noises. I must've seemed crazy to them, bringing nocs before a human, but they'd know he wasn't a threat soon enough.

"Hello, old friend," the bartender said, finally opening his milky, unseeing gaze and staring straight through me, slightly turned left to his better ear.

"Oh..." I heard Hadi breathe as they confirmed why I wasn't afraid.

Blindness didn't make nocs undetectable. But Ryota was blind, going deaf, and generally didn't have the same defenses around me. Trust was the best weapon to disarm a man. He wouldn't expect nocs to be awake before nightfall fully descended, let alone for them to come into a human bar for a drink.

Uncle's mind couldn't wrap around something as insane as that. And seeing as I brought them, the famed noc slayer, he'd never guess.

“Sun, my boy, how have you been?” Ryota asked as he cleared his throat, lifting his worn sleeve to his mouth.

I smiled, recognizing the pattern. I’d dropped off that fabric and many others two years ago during my last mission near this part of the country. But Ryota’s disarming smile didn’t hide the tension in his shoulders, and he inclined his head downward.

“You’ve brought friends?”

I chuckled, nodding even though he couldn’t see.

While Uncle was loyal and affectionate to me, he was always uneasy when a large group of men came in. For one, large groups didn’t come anymore, and two, they were sometimes bandits who’d tailed me after a mission.

Gods only knew why he hadn’t banned me by now, for the number of times I’d dragged a fight to his establishment only to drink off the soreness of battle right after. Some of the poorly patched furniture testified to those brawls.

“Yes, friends. Real friends this time,” and I shocked myself by how much I meant it.

This pleased Clem, who stopped shifting from foot-to-foot and switched to snuggling against me, all pink and perky but having enough common sense not to click. How embarrassing. I was glad he couldn’t see this.

As if on cue, Bracken and Kiar seemed to materialize beside us. Bracken ordered a surprisingly hard brew and ordered berry wine with a side of bellflower beer for Clem. Not surprising. It smelled and tasted fruity, like the nectar he craved.

Kiar? He didn’t touch a thing, twisting his nose and lifting his chin at everything Bracken offered him.

I glanced over my shoulder and nearly burst out laughing at Hadi's sour expression. He seemed tired from being left out, and for once, I couldn't blame him since he physically couldn't enter the bar without his ass tearing the frame asunder.

"Ah, you're blinder than a bat but can mix a mean drink," Bracken quipped in between sips.

"Don't be rude," I snapped, but Ryota laughed.

"Kiar can't handle his drinks, or he'd take part. Our friend to your far right. Don't take it as rudeness that he's declining," Bracken said, ignoring me.

Arrogant ass bat. I reached around Clem and slapped his back, but he just cackled.

My own beerse went down far too easily and soon, I was sitting back in my seat, feeling like I could unwind for the first time in months.

"Ryota," Hadi suddenly spoke from the doorway. I spun in my chair to see him resting on it, his upper arms on the top frame and the lower set parting the curtain and holding the wood.

"Yes?" he responded while prepping what had to be Bracken's tenth drink, the glutton.

Clem, for his part, looked buzzed off of one, and Kiar still refused, his eyes never leaving Uncle's face.

"Why do I smell naga venom on you? Were you recently attacked?"

I froze. What the hell kind of question was that? Kiar and Clem perked up while Bracken just sighed, muttering under his breath. "Always starting shit, my inflexible

lord.”

“Ah yes,” Uncle chuckled as if it were all a joke, but I knew he knew Hadi was asking a serious question.

“It might seem strange to you city folks, but we rub their venom on us for a reason,” he continued, motioning to his eyes next, horrifically scarred even now. “We are alone here, left defenseless for the most part. And so, we must forage in the forest and mountains when supplies run low like now. Even in the winter, I am careful to conceal my smell. If not for Sun here, I would not even be breathing, let alone blind.”

I stiffened, this conversation heading to familiar territory I was desperate to avoid. Damn old men and their need to repeat the same old tales.

“If you’re wondering about a naga pit nearby, don’t worry. Sun eradicated most of them around this area. Did he not tell you that he destroyed the largest nest in Naran at fifteen? Beheaded dozens, burned the rest. They hung them from spikes and paraded them down the streets in Kari. What a joyous day.”

I flinched hard as our companionable drinking shifted into something heavy and unforgiving.

“I remember this day clearly, you know. Sun isn’t one to brag, but I’ll brag on our champion’s behalf. It’s been so long, this war, some children don’t even remember the fullness of his legend, the radiance of his sword slashing through those monsters.”

With a shaky hand, Uncle went to serve Bracken another drink, but Kiar snatched it from his hand and drowned it. Slamming the porcelain cup down, he grunted, wiping his lips as his fangs forced their way out.

I shuddered. He was angry. He had every right to be.

“Uncle, let’s—” Before I could stop him, he’d already prepared two more drinks and was babbling on, excited.

“The nagas found our town when he was around fifteen. Sun, I mean. They decimated this village.” Uncle shrugged. “Unfortunately for me, one got to me before Sun could. But know I would be dead if not for him. Did I already say that? No matter. Our holy emperor had to triage this village afterward, you see. Most soldiers had abandoned this outpost, but Sun would not leave us to our fate. He found their nests and set fire to them while they slept. The ones that woke, wham! Slash! Hack! Sun ran through them with his deerhorn daggers like a beast. He took some down with his bare hands.”

His face shifted, beaming as he said, “Sun and General Hideyoshi always made it a point to protect us when they could, when military campaigns crossed our borders. Most have left us now. I guess we’re mostly a ghost town. But this would have been a mass grave if not for Sun.”

He pointed in my general direction and smiled with nothing but endearment. But my legend only filled me with unease now, purposely avoiding Kiar’s heated gaze on my face, I turned away from him, shrinking behind Clem and Bracken.

I hung my head lower, feeling shame when I shouldn’t. It was kill or be killed back then, and there was nothing wrong with righteous retribution. An eye for an eye.

But that didn’t change the fact that I felt horrible, allowing Kiar to hear how bodies of his kind had been paraded like prizes back then.

“...You didn’t answer my question, old man. You smell like venom now. I’m asking if there are nocs nearby.”

I couldn’t find it in me to reprimand Hadi at that awful moment.

“I see you’ve gotten to know some ill-mannered men, boy. But that’s good. You’ve always been strung a little too tight,” Uncle said with a snort.

Uncle chose his next words carefully.

“Sometimes, I can still feel that monster’s venom and smell the decay of my flesh. No self-respecting human should want to smell like this, but I rub it on me for deterrence now. We stored it in jugs, wringing the dead naga’s venom from them and diluting it. We still have old passageways and abandoned nests of other nocs nearby. Nightwings mostly, but the villagers kill enough that they don’t attack much these days. And they hate the smell of naga venom.”

He coughed and spoke in a weak, wheezing voice, “When you go out foraging if you smell like them, those monsters tend to pass you over. It’s the least I can do, seeing as Sun here has worked so hard to save me and us. The least I can do is try and stay alive. So, no, you have nothing to fear other than a real snake’s bite for now. However, that doesn’t mean a noc may not come out tonight. So, stick close.”

“I must add,” Uncle said, smiling at Clem, who was shifting between green and blue at a rapid pace, “I’m happy I went foraging today. I was out of dried bellflower. Maybe the gods knew you’d be here, and that’s why these old bones found the courage to gather what was left in the fields before it was all consumed by snow.”

The silence wasn’t just deafening, it snatched our collective breaths away. We all seemed to be waiting for hell to break loose as Uncle cleaned our spent glasses, unaware of who he was talking to.

“Um, Uncle?” I asked, wetting my dry lips, trying desperately to find a way to leave what used to be a place of refuge for me. “Is the innkeeper still here? We’d love somewhere to rest.”

I hoped he wasn't, but it was worth asking. Otherwise we'd have to make camp in the freezing cold again.

"The innkeeper has left to get provisions from Jade Moon, but I'm sure he wouldn't mind you and your friends resting there for the night free of charge. Now might be good since the night is still young, and you all can enjoy the hot springs alone."

In translation, he was getting tired. The sun had already set, and for justified reasons, Uncle never kept the lights on for long at night. His gnarled hands probably ached, and I bowed my head in shame.

"Sorry to impose."

"Never. I welcome every visit from our savior. And don't dare offer me gold. The protection you give us is more than enough, Sun. It means the world."

He bowed to me, and I bowed lower, so low that my forehead knocked against the counter. The awkward silence became more oppressive. Impressive, I would've thought that impossible.

"Well, guess it's time to hit the hay," Bracken blurted out, slapping his knees before he stood, never one to shut up and sit in tension for long.

But for once, I was grateful.

As we got up to leave, Ryota's unseeing gaze lingered far too long above my shoulder, in the direction Hadi hung from the door with a glare in his black gaze and a snarl on his full lips.

"Be well, Sun. I am always here for you if you need me, son."

I swallowed the lump in my throat, brushing aside the feelings of warmth I always felt to be referred to as Ryota's son. Sometimes, when my vision swam in the haze of my drunken state, I'd imagine my father's face on his withered body.

"I will come again once this war is finished," I said, leaving without another word, followed by my harem.

Little did he know it would come to an end before the frost thawed from the ground.

I just hoped that I could keep my promise.

It didn't take us long to reach the inn. There wasn't much to see at the rest stop, and it was hard to get lost.

And by the time we arrived, I was done thinking, worrying, and strategizing. I needed to be alone with an empty head if I had any hope of filling my hollow heart with something other than dread.

Because this was my future, wasn't it? Bound to monsters, rejected by humans, in this toxic web of lies, I kept spinning that everything would be normal once I finished my new mission—slaying Emperor Gaulu.

"You're usually more relentless than this," Hadi mused as I thrust a bamboo door open to a medium-sized room. Clem and Bracken walked away from us, probably to find larger accommodations, as Clem shot nervous glances behind his shoulder until they disappeared around a corner.

Kiar was nowhere to be seen once we reached the inn—a small blessing. I couldn't face him after what Uncle had told him.

"Yes, but even warriors must rest. I'm drunk and tired, Hadi," and I don't want to

argue went unsaid.

“No, you’re not drunk. Maybe tired, and that doesn’t change the fact this little detour is eating away at precious time. You can rest on my back as we move.”

I signed, turning towards him fully.

“Go first to the springs. I need to lie down for a while. You join the others. We’re staying here tonight.”

Hadi hovered beside me, crouching low so as not to burst through the ceiling of the empty inn.

“Come with us,” he demanded. He was so used to that, it seemed, demanding what he wanted—and getting what he wanted at his command.

But Hadi had met his match in me.

“No, you go . I’m tired. I just need to rest my eyes for a bit,” I repeated for the last time, moving out of reach of his wandering hands.

Hadi scowled, murmuring something too low to hear.

“It’s better if we stay together,” he tried to reason with me, but there was more in his voice as if he yearned to say something else.

Now, it was my turn to scowl. I didn’t want to play mind games right now, so I relented a bit.

“Fine then. Wait for me if you want, but I’m going to lay down,” I said, turning on my heels.

By the time I settled in the sheets, Hadi's massive shadow had eclipsed the sliding doors.

It occurred to me briefly that he had it in mind to protect me, blocking the entrance while I slept as he wedged his body inside awkwardly. It almost made me laugh.

But as I drifted off, it seemed more reasonable he was protecting himself. He thought me weak and saw me sniveling like a child. Hadi probably assumed I was in no shape to be alone.

And he was right. But I would die before I'd admit I wanted company if only to vanquish the voices inside my head leading me into despair.

"Rest," he commanded, coming forward so close I could feel his breath on me. "Rest, Sun."

I didn't fight my exhaustion any longer, blowing out the candlelight.

The hot spring would do us all well. We needed to relax. And I'd join them soon enough. I'd lived from battle to battle for so long, hanging on by a thread. Meeting the goddess was just the beginning of the inevitable. Now, it would all come to an end.

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Chapter 2

Hadi

I curled my long legs beneath me and watched Sun as he drifted to sleep.

Life—including my brief experience in the afterlife—had always been full, but in these moments, when I watched Sun, everything seemed to slow down.

There was only us here. His breathing becoming slow and deep and even, his muscles relaxing, and me over him, shielding him. Like I was his protector.

I would have laughed but... everything had changed.

I was Alhadya, the king of the nocs for years. Feared and loathed, I had ruled my people and destroyed those who had opposed me. I would never belong to Sun the way the others did, and I knew he would never bow to me. Yet here we were, wrapped around each other's souls. Five very different beings made one. Somehow, I wasn't even upset about it. I could use it to my advantage even if that meant taking Sun along with me for the journey.

The door suddenly bumped against my back legs as it slid open, and I knew at once that it was Clem. He was the only one who moved so silently. All mothians had that trait.

He bumped the door against my leg again, clearly wondering what was in the way of it opening.

Scowling, I lifted to my feet and turned around, gripping the top corner of the door to glare down at him.

Clem looked up at me with innocent, surprised eyes.

“Oh, Hadi,” he said loudly. “I just came to—”

“Sh!” I hushed, irritated. “Sun is sleeping.”

Clem blinked.

I blinked.

For a moment, I was surprised with myself, shushing someone for disturbing the human, then Clem's expression shifted from surprise to delight, and I cringed.

“How sweet,” he whispered, smiling up at me. “Let me in, I want to cuddle with him.”

I frowned, glaring down at the delicate creature that had become part of my entourage.

“No.”

Clem stared for so long that I nearly closed the door in his face. Then, he seemed to come to some sort of conclusion and lit up as though I had said something marvelous, and I wished I had closed the door in his face.

“Oh, of course! You haven't had enough alone time with Sun,” he agreed. “This is good.”

I held back a groan and moved to slide the door closed, but he was standing in the way.

“It's good for you spend time with him. See if you can get closer to him.”

I groaned softly.

“Leave us be,” I ordered but Clem had long stopped taking anyone's orders other than Bracken's occasional barks.

“Sun acts so tough, doesn't he? But he is soft inside, you will see. He will love you too.”

With that, Clem turned on his heels and then fluttered back through the dim hallway, beaming.

He left me standing there, all four hands gripping the open door, staring after him, my heart in my throat.

Sun couldn't love me. That wasn't what I wanted.

Yet my body felt strange. My fingers trembled when I finally shut the door, and my heart was racing.

Turning back around, I found that Sun was still fast asleep, his face toward me, his dark brows relaxed, and his lips parted. Those lips... he would do anything with them.

He would stretch them around Bracken or Kiar without a second thought. He would even take Clem's mothian cock between them and drink his nectar.

And yet, he wouldn't so much as touch me. Not like that. He would ride my back but

that was out of necessity.

It wasn't fair.

I was as much a part of this group as anyone. None of them would even be here if not for the fact that I had been targeted.

I deserved the fun that the others partook in and... since when had I needed permission to get what I wanted?

It was Clem's words affecting me, making me feel something I had been trying to suppress since leaving that mountain.

Sun should want me on his own. I shouldn't, wouldn't, beg for him. I wouldn't even ask. It was beneath me.

But maybe I could convince him without words.

Swallowing, I lowered myself at his side, watching him closely. He must trust me to sleep so deeply in my presence. When one of my hands touched his wrist, he only sighed.

For a moment, I was unsure what I planned to do before my webbing shot out. I wrapped it carefully around his wrist, then took his other, tying them close together.

Then, a near frenzy over taking me, I shot more out, wrapping his legs at the knees and ankles.

Seeing him lying there, wrapped in my thin white ropes, a feeling like peace washed over me. This was how it was supposed to be. I was just as much spider as I was man and I needed my meals wrapped up tight, like a present. Especially the particularly

delicious ones.

My body shook with the desire to keep going, to string him from the ceiling and tie him up in such a way that only the most intimate parts of him were exposed, the rest of him held still while I used him until we were both screaming with pleasure.

But that was too much. Sun wouldn't like it. I wanted more but, how much would he allow? How much would he give me if he were to wake right now? Had I already done enough to make him dismiss me with a mocking laugh and a line about how he knew I wanted him.

I nearly untied him at the infuriating thought, but I couldn't. Not now.

My long, black cock was hard, stretched between us as proof. Sun did something to me. Something deep and tied to more than his human body.

I had seen it with the others, how they fell victim to him one by one. Now I knew I was following suite, and I couldn't even bring myself to care.

Slowly, as silently as Clem, I crawled over him, placing his legs beneath my underbody as I lowered myself.

He stirred as my weight held his legs down, but still did not wake.

When I pushed my cock down, allowing it to nestle into the silky black fabric he wore, I shuddered.

Sun's thighs and stomach were warm and welcoming and his cock, soft first, quickly hardened against my own.

He shifted, moving to free his body from my weight, letting out a deep sigh as his

cock dragged against my own.

I had probably gone too far now, but I could not back down. If I showed him even subconsciously how good I could feel against him, perhaps everything would change. Perhaps, he would want me.

I reached out, webbing slipping through my fingers. I used his robe to clasp my cock down against his, then pinned it onto the thin mattress on either side of his hips.

One thrust against his sweet cock, so much smaller than mine, I had to bite back a moan, fangs digging through my lip.

With the next thrust, Sun gasped softly, lifting his hips against the bindings, crushing our lengths together.

He moaned, a ragged sound that was finally enough to wake him with a start.

For a second, he thrashed, as though under attack.

Without thinking, I shot more webbing out, catching his bound wrists and pinning them up above his head.

Sun gasped, his gaze flying to mine.

For a moment, he was frozen, eyes fixed on mine. Then he looked down, saw my cock tied to his and his entire body sagged with relief.

A breathy chuckle burst from his lips, and I had no idea how I should react.

“Oh, Hadi ,” he sighed. “What do you think you are doing to me while I sleep?”

My jaw clamped shut, keeping any instinct to make excuses or get defensive to myself. He could see exactly what I was doing.

“Well,” he said after a minute of silence, “carry on or get off of me.”

My jaw nearly dropped, and amusement filled Sun's gaze almost playfully .

“What? Did you think I would be mad? Is that what you wanted?” He chuckled. “I've been tied to your kind for some time now. If I can handle Bracken, I can handle this. Finish what you started.”

The invitation was more than I had expected but I wouldn't question it or give him enough time to change his mind.

With renewed vigor, I started to thrust, all control leaving me with the realization that Sun actually wanted this. He knew it was me, he knew exactly what was happening and he'd told me to finish.

He gasped, thrusting up, fighting against the webbing, but not really, not to get free, just to feel them. Then, his head fell back, eyes squeezing shut and through only the thin layer of silk between us, I felt his cock jerk and empty.

My thrusts lost all momentum as the wet heat of his cum soaked against my length and I groaned.

“Not on my clothes,” Sun moaned, but I ignored him because he did not know about my kind. Besides, I couldn't stop myself from jerking and finishing with a cry, my cock spraying all over his chest, the white sticky, web-like substance that held my seed.

He cursed, still panting.

“My clothes are already dirty enough,” he muttered.

“I will send Clem to wash them,” I promised, regretfully extracting myself from the binding that held us together. “But I did not make them any worse.”

While he watched, I reached down and pulled my cum from the front of his robe. It came off easily, just like my web when I reached for it next, releasing him.

Balling the material, I threw it to the corner of the room.

Unsure what to say next, I glanced over at Sun and a soft smile touched my lips.

His eyes were closed again.

And a tenderness I had never felt washed through me.

“Sleep now, Sun,” I whispered. “I will keep you safe.”

He let out a soft sigh.

“Thank you, Hadi...”

I watched him drift to sleep once more and shook my head.

This could only be trouble.

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Chapter 3

Sun

I awoke with a start, glancing down to find the remnants of Hadi's release still stashed away in the corner, and it shattered any delusions I had that the dream-like encounter with my king was just that, a dream.

It shouldn't have been any different with Hadi. By now, it felt natural to do what humans would indeed deem unnatural with them.

But this time felt different in a way I couldn't explain and refused to explore any longer as I stood and stretched my renewed body. Sex had a way of making me feel better, and now it physically rejuvenated me.

It felt more manageable that way; it felt safe to ignore the spark of something more I saw in his eyes than what my rational mind conjured up to replace it.

Hadi took what he needed from me and left. We were no longer enemies but were now the most temporary of my acquired acquaintances. Because, in the end, once the emperor was dead, would Hadi rest until he ascended the throne once more?

No.

Would I allow him so he could murder the rest of the humans of Naran?

Of course not.

So, just as I warned Clem not long ago, we were allies now. In the future? Only the gods knew.

...Is what I would've said before meeting the goddess face to face. Now, I wasn't sure if any being, mortal or supreme, could decipher what was in our future.

No need to overthink, I thought while most definitely overthinking. Just go with the flow. Take pleasure when you can. Dole out pain when necessary. I'm sure he's just tired of sitting on the sidelines.

At least, that's what I deluded myself into thinking, ignoring everything that went unspoken as his enormous cock rutted against me and after he marked me with his web-like seed, fangs flashing in his frenzied release.

There was something more left unspoken between us in the heat of Hadi's embrace.

Feigning ignorance was the best route, I decided. It was easier to keep my lust in check than examine the overwhelming emotions of the strange relationship I'd entangled myself in with not one but four nocs. I had to keep my beast in check, I reassured myself, trying to put up feeble defenses around my wounded heart still raw from betrayal, too tender to surrender to that...

"Fuck my feelings," I gritted out, slapping my cheeks as I approached the doorway, left slightly ajar. Hadi must have decided it was time to join the others, which was somewhat annoying... as if I wanted him to remain with me until I woke.

I tried to shake all those emotions away, but Hadi's eyes lingered in my mind. What were we now? Mortal enemies to what? Lovers? That sounded absurd even to me.

Mortal enemies to convenient partners suited us better. We would stick with that until Emperor Gaulu's head hung from a spike as the traitor he was to the holy throne.

And speaking of my soon-to-be-dead emperor, my rest did not provide new answers to that conundrum either. I had little doubt we'd be ambushed before we reached the border of Kari. It was a matter of when, not if.

And what then? If we managed to survive, we'd surely be injured. It took a series of miracles to make it this far, and the goddess Tsuki seemed all out of miracles to bestow upon us now.

No matter. I yanked off my filthy robe and pushed the doors open, the cool breeze freezing on my nude skin.

"Emperor Gaulu will not rest until I'm dead. I can't retreat into delusions; I must face reality head-on, sword drawn. But for now..." I trailed off, my body yearning for the hot springs and dreading the war ahead for the first time in twenty-five long, hard years.

Those were tough words, but even after resting my weary eyes, I was still no closer to figuring out how to carry out the most important mission of my life. All I was doing was spinning my wheels, coming to the same hopeless conclusions.

Had I lost my warrior edge in the madness of discovering treachery as wretched as his?

"Enough whining," I scolded myself, looking up the empty hallway as I closed the door behind me.

By the sound of low voices and splashes drifting to my bedroom, my nocs were still in the hot springs. Walking on shaky feet, I followed the sound, hoping a relaxing bath would allow my mind to settle long enough to formulate a plan of action.

My memory carried me through the motions of preparing for the hot springs,

cleansing my body before the long soak to ease my aches and pains. I stared into the rippling water of my wash bucket as Hadi and Clem's voices grew louder and clearer, bodies obscured by the steam.

I wondered if Bracken and Kiar bothered to wash off before they entered the springs. There was evidence Hadi and Clem at least knew what to do, with about twenty empty buckets surrounding me. I chuckled softly, thinking of Clem clumsily floating, trying to clean off Hadi's large body.

"Guess I'll find out soon enough," I said aloud, hoping the water wasn't clouded with dirt from the other two as I finally entered the springs properly.

The scene that greeted me brought a weary smile to my lips. Clem lounged on the water's edge, a sparkle in his large solid black eyes as he dipped a finger in the pool and nothing more. His master, Bracken, took up an entire half of the large enclosure, leaning against the rocks, wings stretched out, arguing with Clem.

Kiar? He was missing in action, but I expected nothing less. He couldn't handle his liquor, to my surprise, as he swerved hard on the walk here, eyes fuzzy, and was probably dozing off somewhere by now—that or patrolling as he often did, all to avoid me.

Ouch , that stung, so I stopped thinking about it.

Which left Hadi, who was staring directly at me as I crept closer. He could've taken up a whole pool by himself, but they had chosen the largest spring, so Hadi and Bracken took up half of each end. His brown hair was wet and slightly curled, delicately framing his rugged features. His tan skin and muscles rippled with water.

Hadi's gaze was always unnerving, but when our eyes met, I felt something flutter in my gut rather than twist in anticipation of battle like before.

How strange... The others didn't make me feel like this after the first time. At least, I don't think. Get it together, Sun. You're coming off weak, I thought as I reached the water's edge and understood what the argument was about.

"I... don't like bodies of water much," Clem whispered, and I frowned as his body shifted to a deep melancholy blue. "You know this, master. Stop teasing me."

Bracken shot me a half smile, but he seemed distracted. Then the batbeast huffed, and both of my larger nocs turned their full attention to Clem.

He was more gloomy than usual, that was for sure. But if Clem didn't want to bathe, I didn't see why that was such a big deal.

"You have to be stronger. You can't always count on me to fight your fears and chase away your shadows, Clem," Bracken said, a surprising tenderness in his tone as I slid into the pool near him and as far away from Hadi as possible. Which wasn't very far, to be honest.

"I know..." Clem sighed, antennas drooping.

I felt bad for suggesting the springs at all. I didn't think Clem's hesitation to get in the water was based on fear. Why he was that way, I wasn't sure.

A mini wave hit my back, and I turned to see Hadi nodding, splashing water over his backside with his lower set of hands as he crossed the upper set.

"Your bonded speaks the truth. You've conquered the grave, Clem. A bath is beneath you. It should not inspire fear."

And, as if reading my mind, Hadi added, "You'll cause Sun distress, getting so upset when he brought us to this place as much for us as for him. Your awakening is in the

past. Get over it and bury the awful memory away.”

Now Clem shifted from bright blue to bright green as I turned back to gaze at my mothian. Abruptly, he tossed his legs into the water, visibly shaking.

“I’m sorry, Sun,” he said as I waded over to him, brushing against Bracken’s fur, and gripped his knees, Clem’s upper hands on my shoulders.

“Don’t be. I didn’t know. I should be sorry,” I tried to reason, but that only seemed to upset Clem more as he gently slid into my arms until we were both waist-deep in the water.

His breath sped up, and he trembled violently in my embrace. I held him closer, rubbing his back, confused about how to comfort him.

My mind began to spin as I recalled that word. Awakening. I’d heard it before when Clem explained the appearance of the nocs, shuddering all the while. He was born by the sea and had a bad association with water because of it, I gathered.

For some reason, this new information made me feel sour. Each was a whole world, my nocs, who had lived an entire life before me. Where did I fit into their world after all of this was over? Abandoned by my closest friends and now my ruler, where would I fit in anywhere?

“Sun?” Clem whispered, snapping me from my troubling thoughts. His lips were near mine, causing my heart to race as he leaned in to whisper something into my ear...

Only to blow my eardrum out with a screech.

“brACKEN!” Clem shouted as we were submerged out of the blue.

Bracken had poured two of his large palms full of water onto us as Clem screamed in horror. I suppressed a laugh as he tore away from me to beat at Bracken's chest, which must have felt like twigs being thrust against a sturdy trunk. I caught Hadi doing the same, trying to suppress a laugh, as his expression hardened instantly.

"It's not so bad, right Clem, when you join us and be brave?" Bracken drawled, snickering at Clem's obvious displeasure. "All it took was Sun to convince you, huh?"

Bracken must have found it so funny he didn't correct Clem for shouting his name instead of his title, or hitting him, for that matter. That was unlike him, who was quick to punish and discipline since I'd known him. It was a pleasant development.

To my shock, Clem shifted bright red, whining, "Don't be a bully! Sun and I..." he glanced at me, "...were having a moment. And you ruined it."

I had never seen that color before or heard him shout so loudly. Was he angry? But he couldn't be. Clem didn't get angry with Bracken, not to this degree.

Or maybe he had in the past, and once again, I was learning about how they were before me.

Bracken reached down and scooped Clem up by his neck. He licked him from his chin to his lips, and I flinched, knowing it wouldn't be long until their eyes and hands and mouths were on me next.

"Don't be angry, Clem. Relax. Hard times are ahead. Sun prepared this place for our pleasure, no? So, relax," Bracken said as his tongue went from tasting Clem's skin to entering his mouth as my mothian faded to a pleasant shade of pink. The vice grip on his neck appeared painful, but that seemed to turn my mothian on even more.

Damn them, always making up by screwing each other's brains out!

I needed to leave but was trapped in place by the feral look in Hadi's eyes as I turned to flee. It was hunger, but not the kind that was a prelude to filling his stomach. No, I had the sneaking suspicion he wanted to fill something else up as he rose, creating a higher wave as his lower body breached the surface.

My heart sped up, out of control this time, feeling dizzy and disoriented. Why the hell was I like this? Control the beast . If I succumbed now, I'd probably end up a crying mess.

I felt raw enough after what me and Hadi had done together. Seeing him in such a humane light had shaken me.

If we did more now, I'd beg not to be confronted with my years of foolish loyalty. I'd become so very, very weak if I allowed Hadi to break me, curling into his arms, sobbing like a child as he came inside of me.

Marked me. Claimed me. He'd make me confront head-on how Gaulu's lies had blinded me for years with a self-righteous sneer.

"Join—" I cut Bracken off by raising my hand as he released Clem long enough to reach for me.

"Later." At his indignant huff, I added, "I promise. For now, leave me out of it."

Scrambling out of the pool, I traveled to the furthest spring without looking back, hoping to be alone with my thoughts for once. Truly, alone.

Since meeting my nocs, I hadn't had a second apart, and it was starting to wear on my soul. When I was with them, all I could think about was fighting or fucking, and I

needed to focus!

Removing my white towel for a second time, I quickly submerged myself in the new spring. It was much smaller, about two arms wide in each direction, but cozier for me. When I emerged, I headed straight for the change rooms however, the moment I stepped through the door, I was taken by surprise.

“Ha—!” Silenced by a hand over my mouth before I could speak, something long, thick, and wet curled around my waist.

I reached down to claw at it but was held back as a voice rugged with need whispered into my ear.

“Stay with me, Sun.”

“Kiar!?” I said as he uncovered my mouth and releasing a trembling breath as his bulging cocks pressed against my backside from within their sheath.

By the slur in his speech, I could tell he was still drunk from the bar. He quickly nestled me into his body, hands, and tail wrapping around me until I was trapped. And though I should’ve fought him off like I did the rest, my guilt over what he had heard in the bar ate me alive and I remained rooted to the spot.

“Stay with me,” Kiar repeated as if I could free myself from being woefully entangled by him, body, and soul.

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Chapter 4

Kiar

I f Sun noticed the way I wobbled, sliding side to side from the alcohol coursing through me, he didn't mention it. Instead, he put his hands on my tail and gave me a weak push.

“You are an insatiable fiend,” he growled. “The lot of you. There are more important things afoot.”

“Then why are you getting hard?” I whispered, flicking my long, thin, forked tongue into his ear.

He shivered, giving one last half-hearted push.

Good , if he kept fighting, I would have gotten mad. I already was because I could smell Hadi on him.

While we had been left behind, he had clearly snuck off with our former king to have a little fun. Pretending to be so serious and heroic, pretending to only tolerate Hadi when he clearly didn't mind his advances...

Then again, our own relationship had started the same way.

Sun gave in to desires of the flesh because he was weak to them. That was who he was. It was something I'd liked about us, about our group as a whole. We were one in

many ways, with Sun as the physical anchor that connected us.

I held him against my chest, lips pressing to his cheek, and then gently biting his jaw. I was unsure how to process the overwhelming feelings Sun gave me. On one hand, he felt delicate and soft on the other, he was capable of wiping out nearly all of my kind.

It shouldn't make me feel as strange as it did. I had killed many humans too, although probably not as frequently. After all, I had been in the palace giving orders more than I had been on the battlefield.

Sun was a warrior and the key to the liberation of the entire kingdom of Naran.

I couldn't change him, and I couldn't own him, not completely... but perhaps I could share him with the others, even Hadi, if that meant he owned all of me .

“What is wrong with you?” he asked, his voice heavy as he began to give in to my touch.

His hands were suddenly on my cheeks, then in my hair and his lips took mine with some command, demanding my full attention.

“What is running through that head of yours, Kiar?” he asked against my mouth.
“You can tell me anything.”

“ You ...” I did not even know what to say. Damn alcohol. There was a reason I didn't drink or partake in parties as much as the other nocs did. I needed to be sharp, and I couldn't be like this.

“I need you,” I managed, and he chuckled darkly, pressing his hips forward, jutting his cock against mine.

“I noticed that part.”

I groaned and wrapped my long tail around him, holding his hips there for me to rut against.

“I'm yours,” I told him on a gasp, and he didn't seem to understand the severity of what I was saying because he only grinned.

“I noticed that part too,” he told me.

I shook my head, sure that he didn't get it, but suddenly, he tangled his hands into my hair and his mouth was on mine again, kissing me, tasting me, biting me.

He moaned, tugging on my bottom lip with his blunt teeth.

“I was trying to be good for once, but it seems I have a taste for needy, desperate, Kiar.”

I groaned, overtaken, my cocks desperate for release, held too tightly in their sheath.

Sun reached down, stroking his cock, still warm and damp from the hot water he had been relaxing in.

It wasn't small for his size, it was good and strong, hard, long and soft to touch. Compared to Bracken and Hadi's manhood, yes, his was tiny, but it was enough to make my mouth water now with the desire to swallow it down whole.

Without warning, I unraveled and dropped, lowering until it was there, right before my eyes, hungry and needy just as mine were.

“Kiar,” Sun whispered as I parted my lips around his length, unhinging my jaw and

loosening my throat so that it could slide all the way to the back.

All the air left Sun's lungs, his hands suddenly fisted my hair with the effort to stay standing.

“Fuck,” he groaned. “ Kiar ...”

The sound of my name on his lips like that, like I was something special, incredible, made me moan with delight and the need to give him even more.

I sucked around his length, each swallow making me hungrier and hungrier as he started to fuck my mouth. His cock was unforgiving as he drove into me with abandon, holding my head in place as he took what he needed and what I was so eager to give.

But it wasn't enough. I wanted, no, needed more. I needed him to give me all of him. And he had by now in all ways except one.

The moment the thought struck me, I shoved myself back, releasing him and sending him stumbling back, nearly tripping over my tail before I caught him with it.

His face was flushed, lips parted, his gaze dark with suspicion.

“Why did you stop?” he demanded.

In answer, I laid back and braced on my elbows to look up at him.

“Come here.”

My voice was gruff from the abuse of his cock, the same way it sounded when I'd swallowed a big meal. But from my tone, perhaps he could tell that he would like

what was to come.

He came over to me eagerly, getting onto his knees and straddling me, probably ready to take my cocks the way he normally did.

But instead of pulling them from their sheath and sliding them into him, I gripped his hips and led him to the thin slit of the hole that kept my cocks hidden.

Sun's cock dragged along the slit that held their bulging lengths and his eyes widened dramatically as he understood that this time, I wanted him inside me.

Without speaking, he pushed his tip down, sliding it against the long line of my entrance. A shiver passed through my body both from the sensation and the fact that I had never allowed anyone to do this to me before.

“If you tell anyone about this, I'll kill you,” I panted.

Sun smirked and pressed into me.

The moment his tip forced me open, we both gasped and stilled.

“I won't fit,” Sun gasped, shaking his head.

He moved as though to pull back, but I didn't let him, instead, using my tail to roll him forward, forcing him in deeper.

Sun's cock drove into me. Too tight, he was right. Yet having him inside me, nestled into my most intimate parts, made me ravenous with want for more.

I cried out, bucking up into him and Sun lost all composure, falling over me, bracing himself on his elbows and moving so sensuously, drilling in and out in an unbearable

dance.

I clawed his back, unable to take it, but desperate for it to never end, arching up for more as he took me, owning me completely. Finally.

“Sun,” I hissed.

“Yes,” he moaned, “keep saying my name.”

I did. Following his orders like a good, subservient naga.

From the head advisor in the strongest court in all the land, to Sun's personal slave. With as much dignity as a mothian on the battlefield, I was willingly consumed, crying out Sun's name while I took his cock and begged him for more until we were wet with sweat, and clutching each other desperately.

“Don't stop,” I groaned, clutching his back, pushing up to meet each of his sinewy thrusts, so fluid, like a Naga's. He grunted in response, and started kissing me everywhere his lips would reach.

I was delirious, taking all that he offered, tongue flicking out to lick the sweat from his skin until suddenly, he was clutching me harder, moaning as he buried his face into my neck. His cock spurted into me, flexing in the tight glove of my hole, massaging my cocks as they became slippery wet with his seed.

“Yessss,” I hissed, more snake than man as I lost my senses, quickly following him over the edge as the entire world faded and pure unadulterated pleasure became my entire being.

My cocks spilled, soaking our lengths. Cum splashed from the edges on my hole, dripping over my sleek scales and Sun's muscular thighs.

He let out a low sigh, his body relaxing over me, showing no signs of releasing me.

Instead, after a moment, he held my face in his hands and looked me in the eyes until my heart picked up its pace again, and then kissed me deeply.

“Remind me to get you drunk more often,” he whispered against my mouth.

I snorted and then shook my head, looking up at him.

“I don't think this had much to do with the alcohol,” I admitted.

No, giving myself to Sun in all ways had probably always been inevitable.

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Chapter 5

Sun

“Get the hell up.”

I woke more sluggishly than usual after falling into a rare deep sleep.

We were back in one of the rooms, a grand one fit for a traveling noble with plush blankets and pillows, even though the patterns of the fabric were dated by years compared to what was fashionable in the new capital.

I untangled myself from my harem, dazed and confused. There was something so soothing about feeling their heat late into the night and into the wee hours of the morning. It made me feel safe and secure in my place in the world again after being cast adrift.

...But not when Hadi glared daggers at me from the doorway. I wondered if Kiar and I made our way back or if he'd found us overheated and covered in cum in the changeroom. Either way, I wanted to die on the spot.

Clem woke next, beaming at me with a mischievous grin, casting me a meaningful look before his eyes flicked to Kiar. I knew then Hadi had found us, and if I were smarter, I'd fall on my blade before I explained a damn thing to him.

As Hadi snapped orders at Clem to get me clean and ready to leave by bringing my clothes, I gazed down at Kiar's flushed face. I was amazed alcohol had such a

profound effect on him. He was sprawled over all of us as if his tail would never end, and it struck me that this might've been the first time I saw it completely uncoiled.

As my eyes trailed down the length of Kiar's exposed body, Bracken clinging to his back, I wanted to feel the heat of another part again rather than be fucked to sleep.

Proud, arrogant Kiar allowing me to enter him?

Unspeakable until last night. And I liked it very much. Maybe, just maybe, he'd let me do it again if I took a jar of fermented fruit with us?—

“Ahem ,” Hadi's rough voice filled the air, clearing his throat.

I jumped and whipped around to face him like a child caught stealing cookies from a jar. Hadi had already seen me as a hypocrite, but it felt worse for him to witness me gawking at Kiar.

“Time to leave?” Bracken murmured, rubbing sleep from his eyes as Kiar rubbed pain from his throbbing temples, no doubt.

“Yes, let's go,” I offered, never working up the courage to meet Hadi's gaze again.

It didn't take us long to get ready and gather at the back of the springs, as I was still worried the innkeeper might somehow fly down the mountain fast enough to find us. Taking the back entrance was the best route.

As everyone gathered, I etched what I could remember of the military map of this area into the snow. We'd take the path along the mountain, not too high to freeze, but high enough to avoid foot soldiers patrolling for the most part. And then...

“And then...” I paused as my twig brushed against the human capitol of Kari and

obliterated it.

“...Are you still torn, Sun, about committing treason? Be assured you can’t betray a traitor,” Hadi said, much too kindly, and I nodded sharply, keeping my eyes trained on the ground. But as his eyes bore a hole into my downturned head, everyone’s lower bodies shifting uncomfortably, I was forced to look up.

I smiled at him reassuringly, eyes slightly averted, “No, no. I am...” I swallowed hard, “I am afraid to do what must be done, but I am committed. He will die. It’s what comes after that frightens me more.”

There, I said it. To my surprise, everyone sagged with relief at the admission. Maybe I had been brave, not a coward, to admit we had no plan and absolutely no idea what to do if this crazy scheme of ours succeeded. Despite repeated attempts to promote me and drag me from the frontlines, I was a soldier, not even a general.

I could not even envision the day after tomorrow, let alone what would happen to this realm when the leader of the last quarter century lay butchered in the throne room.

“It’s not our fault or yours,” Clem whispered. “Humans and nocs should be able to get along, right? More bloodshed will be regrettable, pointless, in the face of the truth.”

He was right and wrong, and posed the question so innocently, I sighed. With the godstones in hand, I wished I could have all of Naran before me to proclaim the truth, to spark a just revolution with words only.

“Yes, but we will not change decades of hatred through a strongly worded sermon,” I said out loud, and Clem clicked and turned his head in a near-complete circle up at me. “To redeem this world, we must put our faith into action.”

Everyone grunted their approval and nodded, and we set out to do just that. As we moved to leave, the sun not at its zenith but not too late to be afraid, Kiar slithered beside me and fell into step.

My naga's hand brushed against mine, and I smiled, elated honestly by his presence and the throbbing of his bite marks in my flesh. I was a man, one free with my body, and had been confessed to a fair number of times. But it felt unique to... to be allowed to do what I did. It felt like something more profound than a confession could ever contain.

"You will feel more confident whenever we do get to the battlefield," Kiar said softly and slinked away, and I brought my fingers to my chin to stop myself from bringing them to my lips. Then I grimaced, understanding he meant slaughtering more nocs would show me at my best, and I didn't even have a chance to react to that when a vile hiss filled the air.

I flinched, instinctively reaching for my dagger only to meet Hadi's face towering over me. The others weren't far from us, but far enough, they most likely didn't notice the murderous look in his eyes.

Hadi was not pleased in the least. And I knew why, no matter how much I tried to deny it. I'd left a potential party with him, Bracken and Clem and run off to Kiar...

I turned on my heels and started walking, trying to keep pace with the others and ignore him so we wouldn't cause a scene. And we did just that for some time until Hadi caught up with me and forced me onto his back. My feet were cold, so I welcomed it until panic settled like a knife in my gut.

Clem glanced back and beamed and either didn't see or chose not to comment on the look of sheer unease on my face.

Luckily, I didn't think Hadi was the type to force an awkward discussion.

"Why?" he suddenly demanded and I cringed. Never mind.

I remained mute, and his pincers flicked by my knees.

"Did I not make you cum hard enough that you fled to Kiar?" another guttural whisper turned my cock hard as stone.

Fuck!

"Stop it. I don't want to talk about it right now." I tried to sound harsh, but I was too quiet to pose much of a threat.

"Why not? Jaw sore from helping Kiar last night," he mocked me.

I did not appreciate him making me feel bad for it. But I didn't know what else to do but take it. When I denied Kiar and Bracken, we were enemies. Hadi wasn't my enemy any longer and I had accepted his touch once already.

"It's more... complicated with you, is all. I said no to Bracken and Clem, too! And Kiar at first—" he cut me off.

"Oh, I'm sure you put up a good fight."

"I will not be guilted into your web," I snapped.

Hadi grumbled, falling silent, seething, and I let my face dig into his shoulder, wanting to bite him and mark him, too, if it would make the arachnid shut up and stop arguing about our sex life close enough that the others might hear us.

If I allowed that final barrier to fall... maybe foolishly, deep down, I thought by guarding this last wall around my heart, my people would accept me again someday. In their eyes, if the no king didn't debase me, maybe I could be forgiven.

"You are mine," Hadi said, so firmly and absolutely that I feared he read my mind. "You are mine now and forever, and you will never escape. Get used to it already. I can be gen—" Now I cut him off.

"Now that sounds ominous," I said, chuckling without mirth.

"This is no time for jokes," he barked loudly enough that everyone was forced to look back at us.

"I'm not joking. You're scaring me," I admitted quietly, not because he felt like a threat but because the resolution in his tone told me all I needed to know. My defenses were useless; I was his, and he knew.

Hadi fell utterly silent at that, recoiling as if I slapped him. He marched us to everyone's side, clicking his pincers nonstop. Everyone seemed uneasy, sensing the tension, and I ignored them all to rest...

When I opened my eyes again, we'd traveled a great distance, far past Ri to the west, the third largest provisional capital, and approaching Hae, the second largest, over the mountains. The Yang River was also thinning, which meant we were nearing the mighty dams that helped power and protect our new capital in Kari.

Hadi's breath was slightly labored, and I realized we had climbed a rugged pass, one that was very dangerous but helped us avoid the slower, more winding pathways through the mountains.

All while I slept like a babe on his back. I spat.

“We should rest. It’s alright. We need a plan anyway.”

Besides, it was a little too convenient we hadn’t been intercepted yet.

“No. We move,” Hadi said, ignoring the fatigue on Bracken and Kiar’s face as I turned left and right to look at them.

I grimaced; they were warrior princes, which meant they would follow orders, as I sat like Clem, a dainty protected thing on their back.

I tried to struggle off Hadi’s back, but the sharp click of his pinchers said he’d have none of it. I opened my mouth to argue, only to slam it shut as something large and black leaped from the sparse treeline above us in our direction. I hardly had time to speak before it was upon me.

And then, I was tumbling off the side of the mountain, wrapped in the claws of a snow-white beast.

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Chapter 6

Sun

H adi's claws slashed through my sleeve, trying to catch me as I was flung from the cliff's edge. He desperately shot out a web to grab me, but it was already too late. The shadow and I spiraled mid-air before slamming into a tree, the air knocked out of me. But I didn't have time to recover as we dodged a swooping nightwing, and then another and another until a swarm of them were upon us, claws and fangs bared.

Everything was happening too fast for my instincts to kick in, least of all my training. I groaned as a cobalt blue nightwing nearly took off my nose and a good chunk of my face. But then, the mighty beast that had captured me sprang into action.

A sickening crack of bone was very shortly followed by wails of terror as flesh was torn and teeth and claws rained down like snow. It, whatever and whoever this noc was, was defending me to the death.

And I knew it was a noc even without being able to fully grasp what kind, the flashes of white speckled fur yet oddly human shape unmistakable. When our attackers were butchered, the noc grabbed a hold of me again with surprising strength left in its body after dealing so much damage.

My chest burned, trying to tear away from him to no avail. My arm was like a toothpick in its huge paws, and I'd never been a wisp of a man.

The panthera, I realized, leaped from the canopy as shouts and protests sounded

above from my nocturnal harem. He took the brunt of the blow as we fell to the forest floor, and when he released me, I was propelled into a nearby tree from the force of the impact. This skirmish had ended in our victory, but I needed to put some distance between us immediately.

It had taken Kiar, Bracken, and me to take down the tiger-like panthera who had chased Clem. Alone against the solitary creature, I knew I would meet my match. I reached wildly for anything to defend myself with, but it was useless.

Thankfully, the godstones were still safely tucked away in my pockets. However, my dagger was lost in the mayhem, and in the chaos of the crash, any other tools and weapons I'd stashed on me had disappeared in the fray.

It was me and him, hand to hand, and grappling with a snow leopard now would end with me losing my head.

I sucked in a sharp, steady breath, hoping Hadi and the rest made it to me before then, or else we were all goners. I could've laughed, escaping that hellish prison, fighting tooth and nail through Yin Valley, communing with the goddess... only to be mauled by a leopard and left for dead—an unceremonious end to an epic journey.

But as I waited for him to pounce, the beast standing to its full height, so large my neck strained to look up at him, he did...

Nothing.

One steady eye tracked me as I circled, and the other was unseeing. Scarred. Gods, he was so horrifically scarred! A chunk of ear missing, tufts of fur ripped out and burned long before battling the nightwings who lay dead in heaps around us. A scar curled above his lips as he snarled at me.

It was as if he'd tussled with every noc known and unknown to humanity and emerged triumphant. Only then did I see what was looped around his waist in a crude belt made of rope decorated with glass beads. He was carrying chunks of meat and the severed head of a...

"Panthera," I breathed, and his ears twitched.

The eyes were gouged out, the face slackened in horror, a still life of the moment before its death, and yellow-orange fur matted with blood. But there was no mistaking it was a lion—a lion panthera, but a lion, nonetheless.

That wasn't unusual. Pantheras were naturally loners and known to eat their own without hesitation, a trait unusual even among nocs. But I had never seen one carry another like some macabre trophy on a belt!

Something glinted in the snow, and I dove for it, bewildered when the panthera didn't give chase. He only grimaced then grunted in a rhythmic way, similar to language. Fear colder than the freezing air pulsed through me at that thought.

Was it calling others? Was this an unusual panthera that hunted in a pack, and were his brethren not sated by the butchered beast on his belt?

I gripped the onyx shard until it cut into my flesh. The predator stalked me in a circle now, toying with its prey. Because that's what I was, prey, only able to stave off my inevitable death, not win this battle without—

"Sun!" A demonically low voice sounded from above.

It was Hadi and wave after wave of relief flooded through me. But he was bruised and bloody, and I looked up in horror to see Bracken battling. But he wasn't alone. Something, ah, another nightwing was fighting... with him?

None of this made any sense.

I lifted my arms as Hadi arrived like a long-gone cavalryman come to rescue me, and gratitude filled my trembling heart as he swept me into a tight embrace. I crawled onto his back, and even from this vantage point, the panthera before us appeared unnaturally large and tall. He was a monster in every sense of the word.

“You’re hurt,” I whispered, shocked by the shallow wounds on his body. They weren’t just from swinging down the mountainside.

Hadi had been wounded, but by what? By who? The nightwing? But how had so many even spotted us? Had Daaku finally ambushed us? That didn’t make sense either because if these were Daaku’s noc soldiers, why in the world were some of them defending us rather than taking our heads?

Without thinking, I slipped from Hadi’s back before he could protest and flung my shard of blood onyx towards the panthera. It whistled through the air, and he dodged, allowing the shard to strike and splinter a tree trunk behind him, licking the shallow wound I’d made on its cheek. Still, the panthera did not move; his moss green eyes circled in sky blue, filled with something unreadable as he continued his rhythmic grunting.

Was the panthera trying to communicate with me? But why?

“What are you doing?” Hadi hissed with disdain at the panthera, who inched closer and closer until he was within arm’s reach of me.

“We should wait for the others,” I insisted, staring into those glittering, jewel-like eyes, one milky and one sharp. “Something isn’t right, Hadi. This panthera isn’t attack—”

Hadi bristled, not allowing me to finish. He swept me back beside him with a flick of his wrist, pinning my legs and dragging me onto his backside, shouting, unable to kick. Then, he glued my legs to his waist with his web. The next thing I knew, he was rampaging, intending to kill the panthera as brutally as possible.

“We don’t need to wait for them! You have me! I will protect you,” Hadi shouted between strikes and made good on that promise, slamming a long, spindly leg into the nameless panthera, drawing blood. It growled, howling in pain as it was brought to its knees.

But still, it was not fighting back. It was taking Hadi’s blows without moving an inch, balled in a protective stance against the spider king’s attack.

It pleased me immensely to watch him kill for me, but I needed this panthera to live. Something was amiss.

“Hadi, stop!” I begged, forced to straddle his back, and watch the panthera be brutalized and soon ripped to shreds.

“Why do you defend this thing!? I will kill it, and then you will be safe with me,” Hadi insisted, and even I sounded insane to myself, pleading for my captor’s life. “You are safe with me! I am on your side.”

“I know, I know, but can’t you see it’s not attacking us!” I shouted as a feminine voice cut through the clash of claws and battering of fangs with flesh above.

It couldn’t be. I was surely hallucinating now. But the voice grew louder and closer, and there was no denying it when I whipped around and faced the panthera pinned under Hadi, knowing now she was coming from behind the beast in the forest.

“Sun!” she shouted, crashing through the tree line with a nightwing’s head pierced

through a nagin, a long polearm with sharp blades fashionable among female nobles holed away in feudal castles, who too had to take up arms to defend against the nocturnal invasion.

Something spiraled from the trees, narrowly avoiding her, and sliced too close to Hadi's leg for comfort. A starblade! It was the preferred weapon of spymasters.

Hadi retreated only a step, recognition slowly dawning on his face as the panthera limped away. After all, he'd seen them too, even as a mere shadow in my cell.

"Leave master alone, Zihan! Now!" a male voice joined her shouts, and froze in shock.

My heart skipped a beat, sure I was imagining the owners of these voices. But as Hadi was distracted long enough, I ripped away at his web and flew from his back, showing my back to a hostile foe like some amateur soldier as I bounded over the fallen panthera.

It was unmistakable! It was them.

"Atlan! Jia!"

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Chapter 7

Sun

As they emerged from the trees, their faces greeted me with equal parts disbelief and relief, their eyes glassy with unshed tears, and I knew without touching my freezing face that my tears were already rolling down my cheeks.

We embraced in a tangle of arms and legs and nearly fell over, Jia discarding her weapon. My dearest friends, alive, Atlan walking after being so injured he couldn't stand, and both of them... both of them didn't harbor a shred of hatred for me in their hearts, for their eyes overflowed with joy and gratitude all directed at me.

We pulled apart long enough to hear Hadi howl. But not in pain. He was furious as we whorled around to see the panthera attempting to gnaw off his leg.

"Zihan! Heel!" Atlan shouted, marching up to the creature without a lick of fear.

I tried to stop him, but Jia stopped me, shaking her head. Her hair was loose, almost down to her back, and it was striking as she had always worn the traditional top knot of all warriors for as long as I knew her. She looked petite and feminine. It didn't feel right for such a skilled warrior.

"Friend," Atlan mouthed slowly as he sank to his knees, holding his hand to the panthera. He motioned from his lips to his heart in a sweeping motion, palm down to face up, scooping inward.

It clicked as Atlan repeated the word until the panthera's chest rose and fell more evenly, bloodlust leaving him.

He wasn't speaking the southern dialect of Yewan, the imperial dialect imposed on all of Naran. Atlan spoke the western tongue, his regional mother tongue I hadn't heard in a decade. It wasn't exactly like that heard in the provisional capital of Ri, but vaguely familiar.

He had spoken only Rin during his training days, earning derision from his fellow conscripts. It was a sign of backwardness, they'd jeered; I scolded them, then beat out any backtalk after that. But after that, Atlan forced himself to speak in the heavier baritone of Yewan, slower, with the words less slurred together.

And that's how Jia and Atlan bonded, I recalled, as she was from Hae and learned the hard way that although the north and south had been united by Emperor Gaulu, remnants of their independence would not be tolerated. Kari and Hae had fought fiercely against what Gaulu had then called reunification but was merely conquering their territory before the war with the nocs even began.

One empire, under a mad emperor. I closed my eyes and willed away the bile. My closest friends were little more than prisoners to the most powerful warden of the land, one I had served unflinchingly, unquestioningly for years to feed my bloodthirst, to kill as many nocs as I could.

I reopened my eyes and watched in wonder, wandering back to Hadi's side as Atlan began to stroke Zihan, as he called him, speaking in broken Rin paired with...

"Signed language?" I asked Jia, and she nodded with a smile.

She walked toward me and muttered, "He cannot speak, probably. His throat is slashed under the fur. But Zihan understands us and awakened near Ri, so Atlan has

been trying to teach him some.”

I vaguely remembered about Atlan being adopted by a very elderly couple, an orphan of the war. He’d shown us those hand movements that had proved helpful in war when we had to be silent. He taught our squadron, for his adopted father was deaf, and he was good at that universal silent tongue. Atlan’s hands resembled modified military signals more than language this go around, other than the movement for friends, but I got the gist.

Friend.

No attack.

Heel.

Zihan was like a tamed tiger wrapped around its master’s feet. Or, more accurately, a leopard, as it pawed at Atlan’s hip and sat in the snow, large tail curling around. He shook his blood-stained white locks and peered up at him expectantly.

Jia had to hold me up because I did falter, almost slipping and sliding in shock as Atlan kneeled and ruffled his hair like a child. He pressed his cheek to Zihan’s with an affectionate smile, and the panthera purred in return.

Zihan’s eyes found mine, and they softened, the grunts turning into scratching of his large, clawed paws in the snow. When Hadi stepped forward to shield me, Zihan growled low—asking forgiveness while giving me a clear warning for Hadi to stay away from Atlan. At least, that’s what I thought he was doing.

“Well, things are getting interesting. Those bastards weren’t lying when they claimed to be our allies. Useless as they were in the fight.”

We all glanced upward in unison, adrenaline pumping, as Bracken reached us, his large black wings spreading out like a dark halo as he landed not far behind Hadi, Jia, and I. Clem was riding tucked in Kiar's arm, holding something, as they were dropped to the ground in a heap of wings and scales rolling on the ground.

When they righted themselves, Clem clutched the bundle in his arms tighter, cloaked and covered from the frost with wonder in his eyes. And Kiar looked like he would hurl, injured but shockingly unscathed to have dealt with such an onslaught of attackers.

They were all shockingly unscathed, given the number of nightwings, and it was thanks to Zihan and, wait...

"What do you mean, they said they were allies?" I asked Bracken, looking to Atlan and Jia, who wore tight smiles. Something like anger was sparked in their dark gazes.

"I still cannot stand flying," Kiar murmured, dry heaving, his jaw unhinging, until he hacked up what looked like a partially digested shoulder blade, feathers still poking out. I turned so I wouldn't spill my guts and add to the putrid smell.

Suddenly, the incessant, rhythmic grunting from Zihan grew louder, his green-blue eyes flashing with dismay. Jia came to his side, abandoning me, and we stood separated, my friends and their pet leopard on one end, me and my men on the other.

"It's okay. They're all friends," Jia said, stroking his head. It was unimaginable. The only one who I knew matched the ferocity of my hatred of nocs was Jia, and yet she was all but babying one. An apex predator!

The panthera stood, towering over even Atlan, and unlocked the heaps of flesh and the head from his belt, tossing them in Bracken's general direction like an offering. We all stared, mouth gaped, but Bracken whistled low with delight.

“It’s a friendly gesture, you know. You pampered princes wouldn’t know what it’s like outside Yewan. You were always attached to Hadi’s ass even then, Kiar,” Bracken said, reaching for the bloody mass of flesh without a second thought. “Power submitting to power. Alliances formed with bloodshed. He wants to share a meal and become friends. Rare for his kind. It’s rare for any noc. I like him already.”

Before he could chomp it down, Clem stopped Bracken, kicking his leg fiercely as Kiar’s face twisted up like he’d hurl again. Zihan grunted his approval, crouching beside Atlan’s leg again, waiting, expectantly.

But even Hadi shot Bracken a disapproving glare, and he rolled his eyes, tossing the meat as he whispered, “Apologies. They don’t share our exquisite taste.”

I wondered if it was poisoned until my stomach flipped, meeting Jia and Atlan’s uneasy gazes. Of course. It was noc meat. Pantheras were known to eat it for substance, natural born cannibals, and batbeast...?

Well, now I was beginning to understand why they were both known as the most sadistic and cruel among their kind.

I could’ve sworn Zihan’s ears folded, his body slouching in defeat, and Atlan patted him gently, saying, “I-It was a good present. Don’t worry. We’re all friends now.”

“Come, let us sit and wait for the others,” Jia offered, shrugging off a heavy bag I had just noticed on her small back. I noticed that she was shockingly thin as if she hadn’t put on a pound since escaping captivity.

Everything felt so surreal as we sat around, soldiers and monsters making a truce like it was nothing. Atlan sat beside me, pressing his thigh against mine, and grinned, tears stinging the corners and finally falling down his face with transparent waves.

“Master, I’m so grateful you’re alive,” he finally gushed.

His boyish features seemed thinner, harder. I reached up and traced the long scar down Atlan’s right eye and shuddered with rage. It had not been there before, just like all the other scars and wounds and burns from the lightning rods now littering his backside.

Jia was worse for wear, what looked like a burn peeking through her collar. Both were dressed in fur-lined tunics I’d only seen on mountain villagers, white as snow, to help blend in with the elements.

Jia and Atlan were no longer the doe-eyed new recruits permanently etched into my mind, until now.

Horror haunted their once-shining eyes. Unlike me, they had not forgotten the torture they’d endured by their overlords. Nor forced themselves to like I had. Even as they sat, civil, even smiling at my nocs who shot them venomous looks, I could tell those scars would remain for a long time. Possibly forever.

This was another testament to my failure of leadership. I was too ashamed to meet their eyes after that.

“Master, I have so much to tell you,” Atlan began, and I shook my head sharply.

“Sun. Just call me Sun. Both of you,” I demanded.

He beamed, and so did Jia, though confusion colored their faces along with the ruby red of their flushed cheeks.

I wanted them to drop the formalities since I felt unworthy of the title. Master? What master was I?

The god stones glowed in my pocket, and I reached for them without a second thought. Hadi or Kiar, or maybe both, hissed in warning, but I showed them to my friends. I needed to regain their trust fully. I expected shock, I expected to have to explain everything and how my world had collapsed on the mountaintop.

But their eyes were dead, lips pressed in thin, hard lines even as a trickle of wonder sparked from beholding the moonstone we fought so hard to recover and the sunstone we'd fought so hard to protect. I flinched because they knew.

Somehow, they knew of Gaulu's betrayal. The secret of the noc creation. Everything. They didn't have to say anything for me to realize they knew.

How?

My silent question went unanswered as Atlan burst, pressing his forehead to mine and then his lip to my ear. Growls, hisses, clicking, and the screech of claws on bark filled the air, followed by Zihan's warning growl. But I ignored them all.

Atlan wasn't flirting, the jealous fools. He was speaking in rushed whispers, too fast, too many, like a torrent turning into a tidal wave and finally transforming into a tsunami of information about everything that had happened to them until now.

Of escaping and confronting a pack of pantheras. Of waking in a strange mountainous village, they had mistaken as Jade Moon. Of capture, reimprisonment, and finally, freedom among nocs who lived with humans! And finally he spoke of a name that I hadn't heard since my imprisonment. One I hadn't given any serious consideration.

"You have to speak to General Hideyoshi. He will help you!" Atlan finished.

"General Hideyoshi will help me?" I repeated incredulously as Atlan nodded his head so hard he knocked his top knot out of its crude tie, his hair tumbling down to his

mid-back.

My eyes widened in shock. How had their hair grown so long while their bodies remained malnourished and frail under the heavy, downy fur they wore?

“He will help you! Here!” he offered me some food from his backpack and a spare pair of boots that would be pure bliss on my raw sandaled feet. I also spotted the beginnings of crude weapons needing more sharpening within the lifesaving bag.

“Food and weapons. We meant to take it north, to help Tao, and then free the others at Black Lantern Prison. We’d take Jia as far as we could, then split off but... This changes everything. You need it more.”

“Hold on!” I grumbled. “Why would the general help me?”

“You hold the godstones! Even without seeing them, we forgave you once we learned the truth. I–” he choked, a fierce blush painting his face pink.

I’d nearly forgotten being caught in such a compromising position with Kiar, Bracken, and Clem and blushed profusely in return.

“He has always been your supporter, and anyway, even Jia came around. And there are whispers, rumors that made it up the mountain that you control the king of nocs!” Atlan said, and Hadi growled as he tried to tuck his large body against my other side possessively. “That alone deserves an audience with the general, don’t you think?”

“I supposed it does,” I said, my mind reeling with this glimmer of hope, a new way forward.

Then, in a soft voice, Jia spoke slowly.

“Atlan must’ve told you my former cellmate, Sai, is dead. He was killed during the escape. Tao... I need to get him to a doctor far away, or I’d join you all to slaughter Gaulu, the traitor! There is a woman in the noc village who has patched him up the best she could, that child’s mother—a human mother, Sun. There’s too much even to begin to explain the horror of that. How astonished I had been.”

She drifted off, leaning into me, and I instinctively threw an arm around her shoulders. We huddled together, Atlan wrapped in his leopard, and I barely grasped her referring to a child who wasn’t there.

No matter, I thought. Nothing else mattered but this moment, the haunting words flowing from her chapped lips stunted by hiccups.

“Either way, I need medicine, and we cannot find it up there. Atlan, Krish, and I decided to escape, and only Zihan followed to protect us. But then he heard something, something worse than the lion butchered on the ground. A mighty swarm, and he smelled you, Sun! We tried to teach him your scent so that if one day we reunited... Forgive me. I did not know; my eyes were closed and my heart hard when I rejected you, dear leader,” Jia finished, finally allowing her tears to flow.

“Who is Krish?” I asked, the onslaught of new names and faces dizzying.

As if on cue, a mountain of a man came barreling through the forest. I was too numb then to flinch, but my harem closed in on us even and Zihan growled, fur-raising, daring him to cross over to our side.

The man before us was at least a stone taller than Atlan, who was always the tallest in a room. Atlan stood immediately to greet him, and I flinched as the panthera unfurled himself and drifted until he was lying in Jia’s lap. My hand trembled slightly, but he was well and truly tamed. Even more so than my nocs, who looked ready to strike at any moment.

Hah! Who was I kidding? We lived together as equals, as much as possible: me and my men. However, this panthera, this Zihan, was nothing more than a pet. It was astonishing.

“Atlan! Those bastards will be here soon. I knew we should’ve taken the longer path below the mountain. What a mess.”

“Secondary, it’s fine,” Atlan said, and my eyebrows shot upward. That was an elite status. Spymasters, emissaries, and a handful of generals. I was the only first rank, but very few in the armed forces held the title of secondary.

“Oh, mother’s mighty wave, return me to your watery grave,” he whispered, a sailor’s saying, as the stranger’s dark brown eyes found mine, flecked with gold that resembled the sun. “Zihan wasn’t joking when he said he scented the chosen one was near.”

His voice was brutally deep, like gravel tumbling over cobblestone. Krish wrapped his arm around Atlan’s shoulder as I stood, then hooked it lower as I drew close, around my junior’s waist, and I frowned. His waist-length, wavy black hair fluttered in the wind, and he was wearing a matching white fur-lined tunic with heavy fur boots. But I noticed his skin was tan, permanently sun-kissed like the islanders far south residing on islands in the Shakmir Sea.

The rank two soldier was packed with muscle and smelled vaguely of salt. A tank of a man not fit for the delicate statecraft of most rank two warriors I’d met. I swept my eyes back up to meet Krish, and he smiled. They were upturned, his smile mischievous, a feline appearance resembling the panthera wrapped around Jia’s feet.

“The great rank one, Batu Sun. The Noc Slayer,” a reptilian glaze shadowed his dark and stormy eyes that lit up with the thought of me slaughtering nocs. “You’re shorter than I thought you’d be, but otherwise, just as I’d imagined during my training days.”

“Krish! Respect,” Jia and Atlan scolded at once, and I couldn’t help but laugh. I thought instantly I would love to get to know him more, but the fate of the world hung in the balance now. I didn’t have time to chit-chat for much longer. And the sun was beginning to set.

“Where is the boy? I gave him to the mothian before the batbeast flew them all to safety,” Krish said, panic overtaking his features. “Gods, Atlan, I didn’t know he’d followed us this far into the wilderness.”

“Is this the boy?” Clem asked, and Krish’s face lit up, the rustling of unwrapping cloth filling the air.

A sharp inhale of breath from my nocs sent the hair on my forearms on high alert as a tiny wail filled the air, the whining of a young child that sounded too similar to a newborn infant in pitch. Too high, and... no, it couldn’t be, but I heard the sound of clicking that most certainly wasn’t coming from Clem.

I gasped, turning to see Clem holding up the child in question, who looked no more than five years of age. He had large, solid black eyes and, more shockingly, three sets of tiny arms wriggling about. He grabbed at Bracken with two, squeezed Clem’s upper hands holding him, and the other two dangled by his side.

Kiar threw himself away from it, and Hadi’s face, for the first time, glazed over in slack-jawed shock. Even he couldn’t muster up the appearance of indifference at the appearance of a child noc.

“Put him down, mothian,” a new voice called, and Hadi tried to drag me behind him, but I shrugged him off.

Atlan, Jia, and Krish were at ease, and the panthera was quiet. This was another one of their so-called friends.

What the fuck is going on?

“Where were you two!?” Atlan barked, eyes narrowed. His tone would be nagging if his eyes didn’t flicker with hatred. “Damn you, Nguyen! Damn you, too, Shizumi, for going along with that nonsense. You drew those monsters to our master. If you didn’t want us to leave that way, you should’ve told us clearly it was a nightwing nest, not spoken in your—your fucking riddles!”

I blinked. Atlan wasn’t one to curse. Maybe these were foes, not friends after all.

Two straw hats appeared, and they were wearing matching monk attire. And when the tallest tipped his head upward, I gasped.

“We were nearby, watching your reunion and assessing if it was worthwhile to lose our heads for your foolishness to save that dying man. But then we saw the chosen and heard the screams of the child. We had no choice but to come. Be grateful. You’d be dead by now if not for us.”

His voice wrapped around me like a whisper, as if chanting an incantation, and the air blossomed with the heady scent of incense. It was the monk from Tsuki’s temple, the one who had hidden his footsteps in the snow and told me the right words to say.

He removed his hat to reveal the downy jet-black feathers of a nightwing, sharp golden gaze holding mine with a manic expression, all bared fangs, that I had to assume was an attempt at a grin.

The smaller noc, still very tall, removed his hat, and another brutally scarred face greeted me with deep-set black eyes that reminded me of stars set in the night sky. He tapped his black walking stick, tail twitching to and fro, and electricity burned the ground around him—a lightning rod held by a black-furred rat like our former prison guards. I shuddered as he grinned.

“Don’t mind this zealot, chosen,” he addressed me, and I squared my shoulders, stepping in front of Atlan, who was still seething. Krish and Jia busied themselves, making a point to ignore the newcomers.

Another commotion, a blur zooming under Atlan’s spread legs, then around me, and the crawler-like child scrambled into the rat’s arms, cooing, “Big brother!”

The disgust and confusion must’ve shown on my face because the rat—Shizumi, was it?—chuckled. But one side of his face was stiff, like he’d had a stroke, and made the laughter look more gruesome than it should.

“Don’t mind Thiên. He thinks everything taller, and male is a brother right now,” the rat nodded to the nightwing, who hadn’t looked away from me yet.

“And he’s a bit of a blowhard regarding his goddess, but he means well. I didn’t think you’d survive, but I suppose you truly are the mortal meant to join light and dark and redeem this world and the other...”

After that, a stony silence filled the air, and a more burdensome stone settled in my gut. This was too much to process, too much all at once. I had to anchor myself to this moment and the next steps, not concern myself with child nocs, hidden villages, and monks who used black arts.

My nails dug into Atlan’s wrist, and he looked down at me expectantly. I brought his face closer, like him, having the urge to whisper even though their hearing was leagues better than our own.

“You will tell me everything in your own words, in your story, later. But for now, we need your help destroying Gaulu. Only important information, got it? Where is General Hideyoshi? Why do you believe he will follow me beyond the godstones?”

Noc and humans together. That's what Tsuki had wanted. I guessed this was the test run, and Atlan was my guide to this brave new world.

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Chapter 8

Clem

If Hadi could make daggers appear out of thin air rather than his spider's web, he would.

He leveled a piercing, venomous glare at Atlan's pale back as he shared a lingering hug with Sun under the growing twilight. The sun quickly lowering while they were lost in their conversation. The tension between the rest of us was palpable, to put it lightly. There were too many strange people and nocs to keep the story straight.

I fluttered about, worried our king would attempt to cut off Atlan's head, but Atlan's nocs circled him protectively. If Hadi got any ideas, there would be another, much deadlier and bloodier brawl, and Sun would have none of it.

Atlan's nocs ... What a strange thing to witness, but the proof was plain.

We stood around, Jia and the taller human, Krish, having already turned to pack supplies and sharpen tools for Sun's journey, splitting them so they had some on the way back to Black Lantern. But us nocs? We were left to circle our humans like hungry predators, as they were lost in their own world, conversing in rushed whispers.

I teased my lower lip with my teeth and couldn't help but laugh as Hadi's attention was ripped away from his new mortal enemy by a screech of glee. The child crawler was attempting to crawl up one of his legs.

The strange noc-child, Thiên, squealed with joy every time Hadi attempted to shake him off until our king gave up, visibly bewildered as the boy crawled up to his back and lifted his six arms high in the sky towards his brethren as if to say, “Look, I have conquered a great mountain!”

Shizumi smiled sweetly at the boy, approaching Hadi without a shred of fear, “Now, now, naughty boy. Enough of that. The King of Nocs is not a toy you can play with or on,” he cautioned.

He used his proper title. However, it was evident to everyone how the rat noc truly felt, referring to Hadi mockingly.

Shizumi leaped into the air with surprising quickness, plucking the crawler off our king’s back. He landed near the panthera, Zihan, and twirled Thiên by two of his arms on the ground, spinning and spinning, those three now lost in their own little universe as well. They were carefree, as if a lowly rat touching Hadi wasn’t a big deal.

Hadi’s simmering anger boiled over, the total lack of subservience to him infuriating.

Shizumi ignored him, tossing the child to the panthera to look after as he joined Jia and Krish in their preparations. Thiên happily nestled in the panthera’s spotted white fur, rambling about how smooth the king’s butt was.

“What the hell is this?” Kiar hissed softly beside me; the absurd scenes unfolding before us distracted him from Atlan and Sun.

Bracken was quiet, pensive, which was an unusual emotion for him. Neither of us answered Kiar. How could we? We had no idea what was going on either. Nocs who disrespected Hadi were simply not a thing before he was deposed. But this went further; it was as if Hadi was insignificant to them all, like dirt under their sharp nails.

And a child noc? It was inconceivable only hours ago. But it was undeniable as the five-year-old babbled to his older brother, motioning with all six arms simultaneously.

Maybe the world was healing, just as Tsuki had wanted from us. Noc and humans together. The only way forward. Yet, it was all so strange.

“Enough!” Hadi shouted as Sun pulled Atlan down to kiss his cheek.

Kiar’s chest flared, his jealousy tinging the air with something like acid, and Sun grimaced, snapping back, “What is it?”

Hadi’s lips flopped like a fish under Sun’s withering gaze, his lips finally twisting in a snarl as he gritted out, “We need to move. If this general can help us, we need not waste more time with farewells. And they have a mission to carry out as well. Remember, we are wanted men. We should not stay here uncovered for long.”

Sun couldn’t argue with that, though it was clear he didn’t want to let Atlan or Jia go. He didn’t seem to want to leave them again at all. But then, Atlan did the hard work for Sun, cupping his former master’s cheek, his smile radiant and overflowing with affection.

Friendship. Admiration. And yes, something like love shone in the warrior’s steady gaze. It was all visible, pure, sweet emotion as he whispered to him.

“Be well, Sun. Go now. We believe in you. And we will do all that we can so you can remove Gaulu’s rot from the throne. This war ends now.”

Sun nodded, clasping Atlan’s scarred triceps a little too harshly, as Jia and Krish approached, a hand on each of Sun’s shoulders. The humans were all united.

“He’s right... Sun,” Jia hesitated to say it. Sun’s command to call him Sun, not master, not by his army rank, was causing conflict deep in her soul. “We have to go. We’ve already lost sunlight, and it’s dangerous to move at night, even with nocs among us. We must set up camp, dig in, and fortify our defenses, then set out at first light in opposite directions. They will head south and I west to save Master Tao, and then we’ll join the war effort north. I will die beside you if I must during our final stand.”

Sun gritted his teeth, biting back tears as Krish offered him a satchel weighed down with weapons and foodstuff, “We will not fail you. We will not fail Naran.”

They all emphasized you and Sun’s name, so there was not a shadow of a doubt about who they served and who they placed all their hope in now.

I shrank into myself and felt Bracken, Kiar, and, yes, even Hadi do the same. It was a special moment, a moment reserved for Sun and his human companions with no room for us in the equation. There had not been a moment since we were tethered that Sun felt separate from us, heart, body, and soul.

This feeling, this moment... It was lonely to be forgotten, even for a moment, as Sun said his farewells to his dearest friends, his heart on his sleeve, overflowing with the certainty that it would not be their last goodbye. He’d make sure of it, I knew.

I glanced at Hadi as the humans broke apart, and Sun crossed the invisible threshold separating Atlan and his allies from us. Even though other nocs’ emotions didn’t show on their skin like mine did, Hadi’s heart was clear to read, too.

He was horribly jealous, more so than Kiar and especially Bracken, and no matter what aide Sun’s companion had given us, he wanted nothing more to do with them. If Sun wouldn’t stab him in his aching heart for doing so, Hadi would probably dispose of the other nocs, and especially Atlan, brutally to sate his frustration.

But he couldn't, no, wouldn't. Hadi had changed, just as we had, willing to swallow his pride and play nice with those beneath him for Sun's sake. For his affection, as Sun reached up and took Hadi's hand.

"You're right. I don't want to go, but we mustn't waste any more time."

Sun didn't turn around as he marched off in the other direction, joined first by Hadi, who coaxed and hoisted him onto his back, then Kiar, and finally Bracken. But I did, turning to see the departing backs of the humans and nocs, shocked to catch the gaze of the one noc who never crossed over to greet us, who had watched the whole awkward exchange silently.

Nguyen, the nightwing.

I expected him to be watching the others, those closer to his level, but he was watching me. I hadn't noticed; I was too wrapped up in our groups silent and not-so-silent exchanges. Nguyen smirked and slowly moved his lips as he noticed me becoming aware of him.

But no sound came out. He mouthed the words to me and then turned sharply on his clawed feet, joining the rest in the opposite direction.

I trembled in fear, shocked as Bracken's claw tapped my cheek, leaping away from his grasping hand. I stared up at him, and he looked down at me curiously, grunting, "We must go. Are you tired? I can carry you too, Clem."

"No, no," I shook my head and quickly slipped my hand into his. We walked away quietly, but I couldn't shake those words from my head. Coming from a total stranger, I had no idea why they were so devastating. Or, more importantly, how he knew.

Tsuki's pathetic emissary; it's a shame our fates are tethered to you.

I hung my head in shame because how could I deny what I was, or the magnitude of the purpose thrust upon me, an insignificant, lowly mothian?

That night, when we made camp, the atmosphere was almost hostile. Almost because Sun was utterly oblivious to our shared dark and puzzled mood. He floated with the wispy clouds in the night sky, determination in his gaze as he sharpened blood onyx blades and arrows given to him by his retreating companions, chewing on berries and venison as we sat around the crackling fire in tense silence.

It was as if we were ghosts again, invisible, as Sun immersed himself in strategic planning and weapon smithing while we stewed. I sat closest to him, Kiar wrapped around us both, reaching for Sun occasionally as if to drag our warrior into his lap. But Kiar's hand would always flutter back to his side, biting on his bottom lip.

Hadi sat beside Kiar the best he could, his body crushing bushes and bending a sapling to the point I was sure it would snap. Bracken stretched out in front of us all, his expression still largely unreadable but still in a lousy mood reflecting ours.

I lifted my eyebrows at Sun, who yanked out a gourd, popped the cap, sniffed its contents, and grinned. The strong scent of berries filled the air, but the fermented kind.

I sighed.

"Drinking again?" Hadi asked, grumbling and shifting, his backside not used to roughing it in the wild, I was sure. And we had been for over a month now. Our king was usually pillowed in silk and the bones of his deceased enemies, not frostbitten, and exposed to the elements.

Compared to Sun's neglect, I didn't think the cold bothered him at all, to be honest. I could feel the way he was drifting from us, Sun's mind and soul pulling away from the tether as Hadi desperately tried to weave his way around our knotted bonds and control them.

"Give me a break, Hadi," Sun said between hearty gulps of the wine. "I just found my friends alive when I assumed them dead and I was given a shred of hope in this futile mission to slay the emperor by pleading with General Hideyoshi for help. Let me have my moment."

Sun hiccupped as he took another long swig, surprising me as he had shown us, he could hold his liquor. How potent was the concoction the strangers had whipped up?

"Let me revel in the joy of this moment before we march back into war."

Hadi had no retort for that, and we were again plunged into a deafening silence as Sun hummed and drank himself into a stupor. And he could without a worry in the world because even drunk, he was deadly. More deadly and vital than a worthless, pathetic mothian like me, tether or no tether. My mood went off a cliff at that sobering thought, and it had already been in a pit.

Why had Tsuki chosen me? Was my role truly just to form the tether and act as a perpetual dead weight to my bonded during this war?

"What are you thinking about, Clem?" Sun asked, slurring a bit as he shoved me with his shoulder. "The atmosphere is shitty enough. Usually, you offer me a smile when they're in one of their unfathomable moods."

Ah, so he could tell we felt terrible, at least.

"Thinking about how much I want to kiss you right now," I said, a half-truth.

Sun was shining and lovely and relaxed, and I wanted to share a kiss to relieve myself of my self-pity. Bracken snorted, and Kiar's tail tightened on my hip, shoving me closer to Sun, who laughed earnestly. Hadi, in turn, seemed pleased as a smirk overtook his sour expression.

I realized they thought my initiating would open Sun to sex, to his favorite distraction, and our tired and true method of making up. And they weren't wrong as Sun grinned and grabbed the back of my head, kissing me sloppily, the gourd falling empty to the forest floor.

His lips tasted entirely of the crude wine, and his scent was just as sweet as my new master forced his tongue into my mouth. Then, a rogue, forbidden thought entered my mind as I seized his shoulders and kissed Sun instead of allowing him to devour me as he always did.

I suppressed a giggle of glee as he acquiesced, a slight confused sound replaced by a moan of pleasure as I reached up to toy with one of Sun's exposed nipples, robe slipping downward. Sun allowed me to, but it felt so good and right to possess him for once that I lost myself in the kiss, climbing into his lap, gripping his head with my upper arms, roaming his chest, and squeezing his hip with the other. Kiar's tail tightened around my waist, and I squeaked as suddenly I was yanked back by the fur of my collar.

I panted, eyes wide as I stared into the fire lit in Kiar's blue and red eyes.

Gulping, I tried to turn to Master Bracken for help, wondering if I had somehow made him mad too, but Kiar's grip gentled, and he stroked my cheek with the back of his hand before clutching my chin.

"Suck," he hissed.

Before I could react, he forced my face downward, dragging Sun into his lap. He squeezed us tight, so I straddled Sun fully, whose back was pressed to Kiar's chest. I sucked on Sun's neck as Kiar instructed and teased his nipples. Kiar hissed lower this time, filled with lust, as he grabbed Sun's rugged jaw and forced his face upward so that they could kiss while my lips drifted down.

Kiar's clawed fingers strummed through my hair, urging me to be lewder, to suck harder. He was enjoying this. And I had to admit, his fingers felt good combing through my fur so gently, not an ounce of his usual irritation with me in his touch.

Kiar never touched me when we mated, not like this. Not on purpose, anyway. Bumping together while we all rutted didn't count. But the initial shock wore off soon enough. He did so because he could take from Sun and direct me to please.

That felt natural enough. It's what always happened when we mated in the end. So why was I so thrown off by being forced to relinquish Sun's delicious lips? It was like I was adding yet another master to my roster, and Sun's words echoed from my memories.

You cannot serve two masters? Then what about me, who now seems to serve four?

"Now, this is what I like to see," Bracken said, voice gravelly, cutting into my mounting despair.

I wiggled enough that Kiar loosened his tail. Turning, I found the tip of Bracken's huge, hard, purple cock poking through his furs near my head. I caught myself flashing green before returning to neutrality, embarrassed as if this wasn't always the order of things.

Granted, Kiar was a little touchier than he usually was with me, holding me now by my shoulders as he ravished Sun's lips, urging me to continue my teasing of Sun's

exposed neck and nipples. But this was more or less the order of things.

So why... why was I so disturbed?

I was ravished by Sun or Bracken, or both of them at the same time, and that started a chain reaction that ended in mutual bliss. But I felt strange as I was forced to the sidelines, waiting to pleasure Sun or Bracken as usual. I would be pampered after they found their release, but...

Oh! I wanted to be alone with Sun. I realized this immediately as he was taken from me fully.

Kiar unfurled himself just enough so that Bracken could snatch me up. The naga looked at me with hooded, confused eyes as he finally released Sun's kiss-swollen lips, wondering why I stopped, no doubt. I never stopped when it came to my sole task—bringing pleasure to my masters.

I pushed away from Bracken, who didn't care too much as he dove for Sun instead. He was so sure I'd come around like I always did.

I was left in the cold, my cock unfurled but my erection wilting, watching as Sun surrendered to Kiar's touch, shielded by Bracken's wings, under Hadi's shadow, who was reaching for his angry erection with a twisted smirk. And this scene sparked something far darker and uglier in me than any emotion I'd felt in my life.

Possessiveness.

I felt possessive and wanted Sun all to myself. I shook away that insane thought, but it clawed at me and sank into my flesh until I was heavier than stone. I hadn't felt like this even in the prison when I was the only one of his tethered court awake. I hadn't felt like this need so deeply, so much so I was flashing red! As if I had the right to be

angry.

Foolishness!

“I... I need some fresh air,” I offered, needing to be alone with my thoughts, pulled towards the darkness of the treeline and the shaft of moonlight, not a stone’s throw away penetrating the thick canopy of trees overhead. “You all continue.”

My voice was small and weak as if they’d care in the throes of passion if I crawled an earshot away.

But Bracken and Kiar immediately stopped, pausing their coxing of Sun, whose eyes were fuzzy and body pliant like puddy in their arms.

They commanded me as one.

“No, it’s dangerous,” they said, and there was no room for discussion.

I recoiled, scolded, before bristling with anger, shocking myself once more. They were right. It was dangerous, and I was practically defenseless even in my right mind, even a hair’s breadth away. It wasn’t wise, but damn it, I just wanted to be alone for a moment! Was that too much to ask?

“I will go get some air,” I said, a little louder but far too meekly to be taken seriously.

I panted with frustration as Hadi crouched down as low as he could and dragged Sun upward, joining in kissing him now. “I will call for you all to protect me if there’s trouble.”

Bracken snorted, and Kiar’s frown deepened. I started to crawl backward and then stood, wanting to hold onto a shred of dignity, standing my ground on something so

silly. My original master growled as part of my wings disappeared through the brush.

Hadi released Sun, who slid like a wave to the ground. On hands and knees, Sun leaned forward to suck on the head of Bracken's cock, coaxing it further from its furry sheath, as he grumbled, "...Fine. Don't stray far."

Then, gripping a fistful of Sun's head as his hips pumped back and forth lightly he glanced at Kiar.

"What is wrong with him?" I heard him whisper to him.

I flinched at that but ignored it, as I always did when his words weren't meant for me, even when I could clearly hear them. Kiar shook his head, transfixed with kneading Sun's supple ass as Sun ground against the naga's emerging cocks.

Hadi's gaze never left Sun's face, though the tiniest twitch of his fingers in my direction indicated he was dismissing me. An acknowledgment but that of flicking off a gnat getting in the way.

I screwed my eyes shut and walked away from the heat of their embrace.

Chapter 9

Clem

The tether cooled as I put distance between us, untangling myself slowly from the emotions of my bonded mates. My emotions were dark and stormy, matching my environment as I leaned against a great oak tree and waited under the veil of moonlight, close enough to hear their moans but far enough that I could breathe without being suffocated by the weight of the tether.

Waiting ... for what, I couldn't put into words, but I suddenly, I just knew...

He was coming, scratching at the corners of my mind as if we were tethered, too.

I closed my eyes, licked my dry lips, suppressing my clicks, and focused on the pinprick of light taunting me. So close, so close and warm and dark and dangerous as tendrils of shadows fanned out from that spot in my mind's eye. Like a portal opening wide and darkness flooding in, consuming the light, and transforming it into a void.

I shuddered as suddenly Nguyen's voice materialized with the whistling wind, a gentle caress against my antennae and ears as a shadowy presence became solid on my back until his claws scrapped my neck.

"Greetings, weakling. I knew you would come to me eventually. Once you felt the pull," he hissed, and I quivered, unable to open my eyes and turn to him.

"What is it?" I asked.

“Magic, of course,” he responded, but it didn’t even begin to answer my question.

“What do you want?” I asked instead because now I knew this wave of self-loathing and anger was brought on by the bond the nightwing had thrust upon me. And I needed to know why as much as I needed to know what this was.

“You’ve taken from the chosen one like a parasite, like a leech. A weakling like you honored as the goddess’s emissary. Pathetic!”

His dark feathers brushed against my body as he bent forward, and I shuddered. I still couldn’t bring myself to meet his hostile gaze.

Coward!

“Yes, you fucking coward,” he read my mind in a measured tone, and I shook, wondering if he could read all of my thoughts.

“It’s a wonder you dared to defy Daaku and had enough sense, enough power, to tether your soul to Sun’s might. A mothian, so unworthy of being born under that righteous star,” Nguyen gritted out, the outline of his wings eclipsing my body as I braced myself to peek. “But the goddess, our goddess, does not make mistakes. And if she intended for me to cross paths with one as useless as you, she must have trusted I would empower you to unlock all her secrets.”

“How do you know Sun and I were born under the same star?” I asked, knowing it wasn’t necessary in the grand scheme of things since he teleported his spirit across a great distance to speak to me in a way so real that I could feel him. I had more important reasons to fear him than his accurate sense of astrology.

I gasped as a rush of darkness passed through my body, reforming in front of my eyes. Eyes I couldn’t close like invisible fingers had pried them open against my will.

He glared at me down his nose, folding his arms before his willowy chest. Nguyen looked to where my heart beat as if he could see something I couldn't. And then, to my shock and horror, he physically seized the tether and yanked me forward!

"The same color," he said.

"Wh-what is?" I asked, voice wobbling as all the color drained from my body.

Despite not ripping me to shreds back then or now, nightwings were second level predators, and I heard mothians had once been their favorite food choice.

"Your souls share the same color and tragic fate beyond the tether, Clem," he mused cryptically, circling me with poise and grace befitting the stealthy nightwings, holding my end of the tether like a leash.

He had called me by my name. I straightened my shoulders, unhunching my body, trying not to buckle under his critical gaze.

"All that responsibility placed on such fragile shoulders. Surely, the gods are crazy after all," he said, stopping in front of me so my forked toes pressed against his clawed feet.

Nguyen's eyes suddenly flicked to the night sky as if anticipating a bolt of lightning, "Forgive me. You are righteous, and I was wrong to say that."

Then, he stared at me. Something sinister lurked behind his golden gaze framed by dark, feathery hair that fell just past his narrow shoulders. He was graceful, elegant even, and I hadn't taken a second to appreciate him earlier in the evening. With the tongue of the most venomous viper and fanaticism of the most fervent follower, Nguyen was an enigma. I could not read the colors of his soul while he read mine like an open book.

“Speaking of books, here,” he said.

I groaned as a heavy weight filled all four of my hands. I tilted forward as he stepped back so my face wouldn’t collide with his chest. Then, I whipped back as the black mass of swirling shadows solidified into something small and portable, able to fit in one hand.

“Travel-sized, just for you. All the secrets and spell work I have gathered over the years. All my notes from audiences with Tsuki, and all the ways a weakling like you can outwit the powerful, to bring to heel the strong with her gift,” he pointed to the moon. “Magic most pure. Now, I must return. It is hard to send my avatar this far, and frankly, you’re not worth wasting another breath. The least I can do is honor the chosen and the goddess by making you less of a noose around their necks.”

With that, his body began to break apart.

“Leaving so soon?” I said much too forcibly.

“Why not?” he asked, cocking his head to the side at a near-full tilt, “We’re done here. Go back to play with your heathens.”

Mirth danced in his eyes now, and laughter, too. I knew he was laughing at me that I dared speak angrily after receiving such a gift.

“Well,” I began quietly, “It feels as though you have more to tell me.”

“Perceptive.” he clapped, the mockery grating now. “Maybe that’s why Tsuki made you her emissary,” he said, and the jealousy in his tone was undeniable now.

“Alas, I wouldn’t want to bear that weight either, so feeling betrayed is foolish,” Nguyen murmured, examining dirt underneath a perfectly curved nail.

“But I want to help m-more,” I whispered in a small voice, clutching the book a little too tightly. Too small, too insignificant. I raised my chin a hair and said a touch louder. “If you teach me more, I can help Sun. Help the goddess, Tsuki, too. The nocs. The humans. Peace. Surely, if you can do all this, your avatar can teach me more before we reach the capital city.”

Nguyen sneered, but there was no malice in his eyes this time. There was something like affection almost. Oh! No, I knew that look, that slow smirk over sharpened teeth and dilated pupils paired with fluttering breaths and flaring nostrils.

Madness. Hunger. But not for food. Not for sex either. A sadistic sort of glee I hadn’t even seen on Bracken’s face directed towards me. Bloodlust. But why?

“You will help by sacrificing greatly, little moth. Tell me, emissary, are you willing to do whatever it takes to keep that light shining bright? To suffer beyond what you can bear for the greater good? Be a hero, Clem, to nocs and humans?”

He lifted his dark wing skyward towards Tsuki in his purest form, moonlight, and sighed, enraptured by visions of my suffering that somehow I could see in my mind.

I hesitated and then said as forcefully as a mothian could to a nightwing, “Yes, of course.”

“Goood,” he purred. I would’ve mistaken him for a panthera in that heated moment.

I shuddered as Nguyen’s claws scraped gently against my chin before piercing ever so slightly as he snatched me by the fur around my neck. His tongue darted out to lick my tears—when had I begun crying?—and I forced myself not to wail in fear. I knew enough now to know it would only excite him more. Despite his mission to help Tsuki by arming me, Nguyen may yet rip me to shreds.

Then, just as quickly as his assault began, he went rigid. His head hung at perfect tilt. Before swiveling around completely, his neck twisting and flesh bunching at the base. I grunted in fear and wondered if this was the same revulsion Sun felt the first time he saw the unnatural angle of my neck snapping to and fro.

A figure emerged.

“Get. Away. From my Clem,” Bracken breathed through flaring nostrils, suddenly gripping Nguyen’s arm and then sliding down, allowing his claws to shred his robe. “Before I gut you and string you from a branch with your intestines, loathsome filth.”

He stood up to his full height, towering above Nguyen, who didn’t flinch as he turned his neck back to me. Instead, he yawned and waved his free hand dismissively. But I saw it, that brief moment of surprise, of confusion.

It dawned on me that a grandmaster of magic wouldn’t have left us unprotected. I hadn’t heard the sounds of Sun, Kiar, Bracken, and Hadi mating, even though they were so close to me. Had Bracken smashed through some invisible shield to get to me when I hadn’t returned quickly enough? I didn’t even know how long I’d been gone. And my eyelids were heavy and misty, as if he’d cast a mirage and trapped us in another mirror world as Tsuki had before.

I beamed at my master. The bruising pressure he was applying to Nguyen’s wrist was a far cry from snapping it in two, as he would’ve done not too long ago, making me watch as he used the bones as toothpicks. He was being diplomatic, as much as a batbeast could, because he too could sense the importance of the nightwing’s presence, though he didn’t display an ounce of shock on his face.

“You brutes bore me to tears,” Nguyen snapped. “Let go.”

“You forget your station, wretch,” Bracken growled, and Nguyen huffed.

“Oh, great deposed prince of the Noc Kingdom. I only serve one master. A mistress, in fact. My avatar must return, lest Atlan, and I fail to liberate Black Lantern, and your human chosen one wouldn’t like that, would he, beast? Now be a good pet and let go.”

He was either crazy, stupid, or both, but I couldn’t help but admire him too. Nguyen was strong in the face of power, while I always cowered behind my master’s wings and claws and then Sun’s sword and fist.

Bracken’s upper lip curled, and the faint rumbling he emitted was now a vicious snarl. His patience had snapped.

“No!” I shouted just as he lunged, but to my relief, Nguyen melted into mist. Our heads snapped up as a branch shook above us, and he was hanging from it, grinning too wide, lips pulled over sharp teeth.

“Bye bye, beast. And be well, emissary. Don’t you dare disappoint her. Tsuki watches over loathsome creatures like you, too. Bear her blessing well, Bracken, and you too, Clem. Her will is just and absolute.”

“Shut the fuck up before I pummel you into tears. And stay away from Clem!” Bracken shouted as the nightwing disappeared with the wind.

Bracken was furious, but he didn’t even attempt to give chase. He could sense the danger I could, something psychic and mystic still lingering in the air.

“Bastard! I should’ve ripped some feathers from him as a warning. Fanatical nonsense. If only he knew his moon princess was mad, a mere shadow of her former glory. I’m sorry I wasn’t fast enough to protect you.”

I wanted to say I didn’t need him to protect me, that if Nguyen had wanted to kill me,

he would've. But it was silly to say I didn't need his protection, so I swallowed my protest and let it die before it reached my lips.

I cradled the book of shadows and secrets. The magician had ignited a silent longing in my soul that was loud and furious now. I wanted to change. I wanted to...

"Protect," I whispered.

"What?" Bracken squawked as he tried to drag me back to camp.

"N-nothing. Um, is everyone..." I trailed off, and he grimaced.

"No. Sun got queasy when we turned him upside down to take turns with him. So, there is no mating tonight. Just a babbling bundle of joy reminiscing about old stories we weren't a part of. Damn, that insufferable, gorgeous bastard. My cock is throbbing."

"I'm sorry you didn't find release," I offered, waiting for his order to help him right here in the woods before we returned.

But Bracken just eyed me quizzically, like he couldn't figure me out. Then he knelt so we were as close to eye level as possible.

I could count how many times my master had kneeled before me on my fingers. And it had only ever been for the rare occasions he got it in mind to pleasure my cock. It had never before been to talk to me.

"I'm sure you'll take care of me in the morning, Clem, when you are feeling better? And tomorrow, I will find some berries for you, even if they're the smallest stragglers left behind in this brutal cold. Whatever is troubling you, worrying about it more won't help," Bracken said with a level tone laced with concern.

“If I can’t, you have my word that I’ll... I’ll even put you into my mouth and suck you until you can’t walk. Whatever you need to return to normal. I do not like this nasty shift in your mood. Smile for me, hm? The road is long and hard, and I cannot focus on protecting Sun and worrying for you at the same time. You’ve always been too strong to need that.”

I was stunned. So stunned that I couldn’t speak, not even squeak, as his tongue flicked out to lick my lips before capturing them in a long, searing kiss. Just as quickly as it began, it ended, and Bracken stood, brushing off his knees, and I stood there trembling, in a stupor.

It wasn’t phrased as a question, but I heard an unmistakable lift in his voice, master wondering if I’d pleasure him in the morning. Asking me, not ordering, as if I could say no. Then it slammed into me abruptly and brutally, he said I could say no if it would make me feel better. And I wouldn’t be reprimanded.

Master—no— Bracken was asking me what I needed and wanted for once.

“Why?” I breathed, refusing to move, knowing he allowed me to stay as he tugged on my antenna to leave.

Bracken shrugged.

“I suppose... since we all... I mean you, Sun, Hadi, and Kiar, and I, are more like... don’t spout any unusual ideas again about unhinging jaws. Loathsome,” Bracken spat.

“We’re bonded?” I offered.

“Yes,” he said immediately, with absolute certainty. “I didn’t understand it fully until recently, but I know we are all bonded now. We have eternity together after we win

this war—no need to rush the smaller details of our union. After the tether is broken, we have time to figure everything out. Until then, we must stay united, alright?” Bracken said as unbothered as usual.

“I love you, too,” I said.

Bracken was startled.

“Who the fuck said that? You need your ears checked.”

But I couldn’t hear him admonishing me. Over twenty-five years, had I ever said it? Of course not, but that didn’t make it less true. And wasn’t that what he was saying, more or less? That he loved me and cared that I wasn’t feeling myself and we needed to stick together as truly bonded mates, not just as master and slave?

Maybe I had always felt unworthy of anything more than the life and title of a slave. And now, with so much new knowledge, I was unhappy with that life. That could be the root of this little rebellion. Rather than possession, I felt an inkling of freedom on this long, uncertain road I desperately clung to.

I, too, had forgotten my station in life and now felt unsettled and unhappy, unlike the last quarter century with Bracken, Kiar, and Hadi. Sun had upset that delicate equilibrium between us, and I should thank him on my knees for this.

“And stop letting that false priest fill your mind with nonsense. You are important and worthy. That crazy bitch wouldn’t have entrusted you with the fate of the fucking world if you weren’t. He’s nothing, insignificant and jealous. Glean his secrets and discard that fool’s taunts, Clem. Be stronger.”

I kicked a rock to keep myself from throwing myself into his arms. We’d gone one step forward and two steps back, then leaped into another planet altogether. Master—

Bracken was being so contradictory.

“I mean it, Mas—” I caught myself. “Bracken, I love you, and I love Sun, too.”

He rubbed his face, and I could not read his emotions again. What was wrong with me tonight?

“So, tell him. Why tell me?” he asked.

Now it was my turn to grimace, whispering ruefully, “I did.”

“Enough of this! You’re making my head spin, Clem. You used to look at me as if I hung the stars and set the moon into motion. But after Sun, you’ve changed. Don’t push your luck; come back to us now.”

And with that, he ended any chance of me conveying my more profound meaning. To be acknowledged as his equal, because being bonded was not the same as that. To say he loved me, to be worthy of that from Bracken, would mean more than a slave or a servant, or yes, even a bond mate would.

He stopped abruptly as we were about to step into our camp.

“I will protect you, Clem. With my heart and soul, I swear this to you. Now pull yourself together.”

But I was too lost in my thoughts to grasp his confession fully. I would be respected if I could unlock more power. I was sure of that. Respect was earned. Wasn’t that how it was in the human world where power was more equal? Only social customs and traditions differentiated them much. But in noc society, only physical power mattered.

Even a lowly crawler now had crawled onto the throne because of power. Secrets he might have gleaned from an ancient book of spells like the one I clutched behind my back, under my wings, hiding them from my master as if he hadn't seen it already, trailing behind his mighty steps.

I wanted to transform into someone new and different and feel worthy of the great cause thrust upon me.

Respect.

As we reached our camp, the word thudded in my mind like a drum. The tether was warm and inviting as we approached, shedding the overt lust from earlier.

Whatever ugly mood that had descended had lifted as Sun laughed, leaning into Kiar, who stroked his hair and breathed in his scent with tenderness in his gaze. And Hadi was close, kneeling, hands flexing, wanting to touch but content to be so close to Sun, who chatted with him as if they were old friends about stories we weren't involved in.

Me and Bracken glanced at each other in unison.

Sun was... Sun was so very?—

“Happy,” we whispered.

“I don't want to ruin that with whatever that was. So as long as that creep doesn't come back, let's keep that between you and me,” Bracken sighed, and I nodded in agreement, transfixed by Sun.

He had never smiled that openly before, and now he did, not because of us but because he had met Atlan and Jia again. His friends were alive and well.

And we had all been too jealous to soak in the bliss of seeing the center of our world so unburdened.

Of course, I'd do whatever it took to protect his light. Nguyen was right. I would read his book cover to cover, learn all I could, and be more than dead weight. I would be more than an idiot savant who had cast a spell he didn't even understand. I'd master the dark magic fluttering like crystals in the air as Nguyen's mirage was fully shattered.

Bracken and I rejoined our bonded.

I would harness new powers and command respect like Nguyen and Shizumi did, even though they were weaker than all the other nocs here.

I clutched the book of spells to my beating heart as Bracken drifted to sleep by the warmth of the campfire and willed this future into existence with all my might.

Chapter 10

Bracken

It was a small grace that I didn't return from the hunt empty-handed nearly two weeks after our rendezvous with Sun's friends and their strange nocs. Winter had set in, in force, strangling what little life had been struggling to survive in the Celestial Forest. Kiar and I had separated this morning on the prowl, but the prey I brought back wouldn't fill us for more than a night.

Thankfully, death and sex filled our bellies while tethered, and Sun had been on something of a rampage by the second day we'd been traveling to this General Hideyoshi. Fucking our brains out, that is, like he was worried he could never do it again. Not that I would ever complain.

At first, we hadn't tried after that failed night when Clem had been acting so strangely. What did that human put in the wine? Poison? For a few days, Sun had been unable to stiffen his puny cock for us, prone to dizzy spells. He'd refused us, claiming he'd hurl until Clem nearly fainted from hunger, and then he'd been on us every night.

But not the complete, penetrative bliss we could usually partake in. I didn't know what was worse, Sun the tease, partially for our survival, or Sun the slut who robbed me of any other desire but to fill him again and again until he wrung my balls dry.

So, we hunted as much as we could, so we wouldn't all be driven mad from the kisses and touches and sliding of slippery cocks without ever getting to finish inside him.

Sun cared more about reaching Hideyoshi before the whole of Naran's standing armies got to us first. He was relentless about reaching him, and we all fell in line.

Oh, Sun , I thought as I gazed up at the sun, landing near the River Yang. It would never cease to amaze me how strange it felt to move during the day.

Despite my mounting sexual frustration, I was pleased that neither Kiar nor Hadi had been able to take him either. I'd enjoyed watching Sun get under Hadi's skin and the sexual trysts we'd had since. The way Hadi received a kiss for his efforts to court Sun instead of lips wrapped around his dick infuriated our lord. Now, he was a perpetual bundle of cooling embers constantly ready to reignite, waspish at every turn.

Maybe it was my natural born sadistic temperament, but watching the king silently seethe as I had, unable to enter Sun or break through his defenses, filled me with glee.

Though eventually, he would have his turn, and Sun would cave. Goddess above I hoped I was there to watch Sun get split open then. It would be...

"Delicious. Delightful," I said out loud. More so than the rabbit head I ripped off, eating the body whole, the crunching bones drowning out my thoughts.

But we had no time to think of sex, according to Sun. World-ending battles and the like should be our only concern.

There was so much to be concerned about; I knew this; I was not a fool. But damn if I didn't care. Saving the world and nation-building after we burned it to the ground took away from what I wanted to do—have my mates on their knees at my beck and call.

I felt nothing when I rampaged and slaughtered those little worms who used to defy Hadi. I needed a challenge. I needed to feel my blood pumping through my veins and

guide my wings in battle. And the war of the flesh was the most sumptuous battlefield I'd ever met, better than all my kills.

In other words, the only battle I needed to win right then was taking Sun to bed.

"Who's there?" I called out as leaves rustled beside me from within the forest. Sun had told us the clearing meant we were close to the human encampment, and I braced, not wanting to slaughter human vermin today.

Or ever again, if I could avoid it, the thought knocked the wind out of me.

"It's me."

Sun emerged from the shadows, and all my coiled tension unraveled all at once. His hair was slightly damp, and he smelled of soot. He must have heated snow for a quick bath. He did not like to be dirty, which I found amusing, seeing as Sun was some legendary warrior who'd dived head-first into naga pits and slashed his way through battlefields bloodied from head to toe.

It boded well for our future. Once this was all over, he wouldn't have to fight anymore. He'd be more pampered and locked away. I thought he would enjoy that as I rubbed the backside of my furred hand down his hair, and Sun sighed, using it as a makeshift brush. He nuzzled me with affection, defenseless, and the low grumble I emitted signaled my pleasure at watching him groom himself against me.

I marveled at a flexing pec peeking from his robe, a deep bite mark embedded around his nipple, one part of me wanting to wrap him in my furs to stay warm, protective with the urge to pamper, and the other half that warred with me to force his face into the snow and fuck him senseless. My blue balls were at historic levels. He had been with Kiar, maybe Clem too not too long ago, but not with me.

“Hence the wash,” I thought out loud.

“Huh?” he asked. I brushed his question aside.

“Where are the others?” I asked, not too concerned with finding them. The feeling of fullness before eating the rabbit meant the rest of the meal I caught would be put to use another day. Sun must have found them before me.

“By the river still, where the ice is thin and breakable. Clem said he needed a fish and water that flowed from the Ice Dragon’s left claw or something like that, for a spell.”

I sighed. The meeting with that fellow winged bastard had changed my sweet Clem into something approaching a fanatic. He would sit, snuggled in Kiar’s tail, and pepper the naga prince with questions he couldn’t begin to answer.

It would be endearing if it weren’t paired with a slightly crazed look in Clem’s solid black eyes as he read spells and spouted nonsense from his little black book of secrets.

One day I’d find that Nguyen and wring that chickenshit’s neck. I hadn’t caught everything he’d said but saw him mouth ‘pathetic’ to my mothian. Clem’s face had crumpled, and I almost tore off the nightwing’s head before Clem schooled his expression and walked away.

But now he couldn’t seem to get the other noc out of his mind, and I couldn’t untangle feelings of jealousy from my murderous intent. His thoughts should be filled only with us, and primarily with me.

“I see. Well, hopefully, his spellwork comes in handy again,” I said in a measured tone, and Sun agreed since his rudimentary spells had proven more than helpful. Maybe Nguyen was onto something, whether I liked the bond they had formed under

my nose or not.

I wondered what they'd talked about the last time they were left to themselves by the river but quickly shook the thought away. The closer Kiar became to Clem, the better. I'd decided that a while ago. I no longer cared about passing our pets between us, within reason. And Kiar was a very reasonable naga.

Kiar protected what was his with bloodthirsty fierceness. Since he didn't like much of anything, and I'd never known him to direct a loving energy towards another being rather than things he hoarded in his nest... Not before Sun, anyway. If he liked Clem, he'd protect and kill for him, and that set my heart at ease.

"Where is our reclusive king? Where is Hadi? I don't sense him in the trees. Did he slack on guard duty?" I teased, and Sun half-shrugged, avoiding my gaze. He'd told me that Hadi was supposed to always stay near him while Kiar and I hunted, yet here he was, alone.

"Oh, that? I lied. Hadi never agreed to watch me," he said matter-of-factly. "Don't worry; I waited for Kiar to return before leaving Clem."

"You what?" I growled.

"Hadi was too busy scowling at the clouds, and I was hungry, and you were far. It's not the end of the world, Bracken."

I wanted to smash his head against the rocks and force some sense to seep into the crack in his skull. Did Sun not realize how small he was, how fragile even now? The image of him sobbing curled into a tiny ball on the mountain, was seared into my mind.

How many times had he slipped away from us for the briefest moment only to be

physically and emotionally wounded?

“You should be punished,” I said before I could catch myself.

“I should be. Thoroughly.”

He flashed a vivacious smile and reached up and over much too boldly, stroking the pocket of fur that sheathed my cock. My moan of surprise erupted without warning.

“We should finish what we started. I... I’m sorry I’ve been so distant. But we’re close now. So close to General Hideyoshi. Once we’re there, there... I think we should?—”

I growled.

“You wouldn’t let me,” I said too forcefully, already ready for more. How was I possibly that pent up when I’d been ravishing Clem in the meantime during this long sexual drought?

“I know, and I’m sorry for that. I wanted it, you know,” he whispered, and his eyes flicked up, framed by his long eyelashes. It should be illegal to be so gorgeous. “I wanted you.”

He got closer, so both of his hands were on me now. He stared intently at the thick black fur that hid my cock and licked, enraptured as he rubbed the slit harder and harder, my cock head peeking out, his eyes widening with lust.

“Don’t try to seduce me when you lied to Kiar and Clem,” I moaned again, pushing him away from me as gently as I could.

He huffed, and I reached to hold him to stop him from stroking me any longer. Sun

had it in his mind to suck the fur-lined pocket that held my cock from view. I didn't know where he'd gotten a new kink for touching me there, but I did not like it. It was too close to being fucked by him, and that would never happen!

Sun folded nicely into my arms. Perfect, like puzzle pieces slotting together. Could he not see it now?

"Ouch!" I released him at once. Something hard and stiff and most definitely not a cock nicked my thigh.

"Oh shit, sorry, Bracken," he said in a rush, a razor-sharp dagger falling to the ground.

I sucked my teeth. Sun had fashioned an impressive arsenal, deadly to nocs and humans. And I could tell, by the darkness haunting the corners of his eyes, that he would kill anyone and anything that stood in the way of taking the false emperor's head. And the thought of killing humans unnerved him.

Sun stilled beside me, fingers flexing for some invisible dagger. Knowing my little warrior, he'd probably stowed one away in his boot, gifted to him by his friends, near his ankle for good measure.

"Do you hear that?" he whispered.

"Hear what?" I asked, feigning ignorance like I didn't know Hadi was leaping through the woodlands nearby.

Instinctively, Sun stepped in front of me, and I suppressed my snort. I had to concede he was strong and worthy of the warrior title by human standards. But every time he moved to protect me, I couldn't help but laugh.

The rustling of leaves stopped, and Sun exhaled a sigh of relief. Though he shouldn't. Hadi was near, and he was not pleased. It never ceased to amaze me how such a large body maneuvered so quietly, damn near daintily. All the better to rip his prey's heads off without warning. It was probably only because of the tether that Sun heard him at all.

"You should show Clem more affection," I said to distract him, curious to see if Hadi would come closer. "He's been lonelier than all those jealous fools combined."

"His nose has been buried in his book. Where did he get that thing, anyway?" Sun asked as I began stripping him bare, like a present wrapped up for me—no need to wait anymore.

I didn't answer, pivoting the conversation.

"Why don't you strip down yourself? I'll keep you warm," I offered, and he tugged away.

I frowned.

"Bracken..." I peered down at my bonded with hooded eyes, elated to see him peering up at me with a heated gaze.

A horny Sun was always more welcome than one who was moody or lost in the minutiae of battle strategies. So why did he pull away?

"What?" I asked as he approached again, stroking the skin above my fur, on my belly, while his tantalizing lips hovered too close to my cock. So close, in fact, I couldn't suppress a growl in anticipation.

For Sun would always be a better fucker than he'd ever be a killer in my eyes, no

matter how many he slayed.

My bonded was skilled, quick, and efficient, learning how to manage our combined lust as if he were king of a tiny lecherous court. And I supposed he was the center of our sexual universe... and our hearts. Though once again, I'd never admit how deeply I felt for Sun other than at the doorway of death.

He cleared his throat, coughing, wetting those full lips that needed to stop talking and start sucking before I burst.

"We're nearing General Hideyoshi's encampment, and you know how it is between us," he said, waving his hand up and down my body. "I figured the others are away, so?—"

"We might as well play?" I finished because, for once, he was too shy to be straightforward when he was always so bold. He'd lost his nerve from even a moment ago.

It was almost endearing, this change of pace, this shyness as I lifted him into my arms and kissed him gently, knowing we had an audience but no longer caring if I appeared weak and foolish to my undead king.

I tasted him and groaned, that taste of bellflower coating his lips. It was confirmation that he'd been with Clem not long ago since everything was dying or dead in this frozen forest by now. I clutched his firm ass and ground that puny cock against mine as my cock exploded from my furs. Sun nipped at me and grunted, growing more needy and demanding.

This was more like the Sun I knew.

"We'll be close to the general soon," he repeated breathlessly, and I rolled my eyes.

Was he drunk again? Repeating himself over and over again...

It was then I fully gathered the double intent behind his words. We'd either be hunted down and slain or supported by those vermin. And Sun was more confident than not we'd be dead.

"So, you're going around fucking our brains out as a last goodbye, just in case? You're one delectable, horny pet, but even you should have limits."

He growled, and I matched his growl with a sneer. I'd never been mistaken as an optimist, but his lack of belief in us was beginning to rile me when he was usually so sure of himself and his ability to win. I supposed the fact that we'd all died once didn't exactly inspire confidence. But by now, Sun should know that not I, nor Kiar, nor Hadi, or hell, even Clem would stop short of death to keep those vermin's filthy hands off him.

We may not live through what was to come, but as Clem learned, our dying did not endanger his life if he uttered the right spell. Another fact I tucked away and didn't share, least Sun sink into depression again. He was our sun; we would revolve around him alive or as corpses like Naran to the stars in the heavens above.

"That's not what I was thinking, you know," Sun said as I allowed him to wiggle out of my arms and onto the ground.

"Oh?" I taunted.

"I meant we won't have much time alone. And it takes more prep with you than with the others."

He was not a convincing liar, but I was done holding back.

“Sure... Well, enough talk, get naked and bend your ass over,” I barked as he stiffened, glaring.

“Batshit asshole. It’s cold you know,” he said, even as he eagerly stripped naked. “So, keep your promise to keep me warm.”

“Your insults are so creative,” I sneered, helping him. “But you’re the lunatic that approached me, not the other way around.”

He never propositioned me directly, and that used to piss me off. But it clicked, after a couple of rutting sessions, that he was afraid of what the barest hint of submission meant when it came to me. To Hadi, too, I’d gleaned from their bickering and other interactions.

Brilliant, lovely Sun, so afraid of his emotions.

I swept him up in another searing kiss and faltered at the ravenous look in his eyes as we pulled apart.

“I want you inside of me,” he breathed as we separated to share a breath.

I scented the air and nearly drooled. I didn’t know if humans called this scent pheromones too, but try as he might to deny it, Sun loved a bit of bullying. He loved being ordered around.

He had the fate of the world on his shoulders now. If I could take it off of him just for a little while, as he begged on his knees and gave into my orders, he felt relief. His embarrassment was just a little treat on top.

“I will do everything to please you. I will warm you from the inside out.”

He preened at that. So transparent.

Sun was happy and horny, the best possible combination. I let him slide from me and groaned. As he bent over, I took him into my arms and rolled into a ball. I lifted him and finally ate my fill. I suckled his puckered hole, holding him mid-air, and then lavished his straining cock with affection as he hung in front of me, alternating as Sun moaned and whimpered.

He complained with that filthy mouth of his, but Sun adored getting his ass eaten and his cock stroked, milked until he was trembling and crying for more.

“Mine,” I groaned and meant it deep in my soul. He parted his cheeks wider for me, as best he could upside down like he was the batbeast hanging from a tree.

I didn’t waste time prepping him for long since it was clear that Kiar had been inside him already. Taking him to the ground, I laid Sun out on my belly. He turned his face towards my cock, and I sucked him greedily as I squeezed his cheeks. He came in record time, abandoning even the pretext of pleasuring me, too, as his seed shot into my mouth.

But I didn’t mind. Pamper. Protect. I was in a good mood, too.

After his climax slammed into him, I spun him back around. I forced his essence between his stubborn lips, and he moaned loudly now, shivering body eclipsed by my own as I kept him as warm as I could, wrapped in my arms.

“Why did you make me swallow my seed?” Sun asked, slightly disgusted.

“Remember, it’s not a punishment if you enjoy every last second of it.”

He smirked. A challenge. Vexing little thing.

I held him close, squeezing the air out of him and wiping that naughty smirk from his face. I knew he preferred to be on his knees, but we'd do things my way today. Without much fanfare, I fisted my cock and forced myself inside his clenching hole all at once, taking immense pleasure in the sob that broke into a scream muffled by my chest.

And I didn't hold back, slamming into him, eyes rolling back as he quickly sprayed my stomach with another load. But I wasn't finished with him yet. My thrusts were deeper and more erratic than they'd ever been. I couldn't control myself. I was completely and utterly lost in him.

Before, I had resisted the tether, believing him some weakling. But Clem, my sweet Clem, had found something else impressive in that dreadful book. A tether could not be formed against one's destiny. Against their will, yes, but a tether was the physical manifestation of a shared fate.

A soul bond deeper than even the bonds nocs uttered to declare their claim on another. That's what Sun and I, as well as Kiar, Hadi, and Clem, shared.

"You're my bonded. Our bonded. My fated. You're mine," I growled, driven faster to climax by the familiar bulge of his stomach as I squeezed myself inside. It was so intoxicating to feel myself stretching him beyond his limits. We were limitless now.

"You keep, ah, using that word. If you love me, you can say it now— Fuck! Bracken!"

I paused my thrusts and ministrations. It was so very... human, that damnable word. Love . Bonded was better, stronger—fidelity beyond lust or the fickle desires of the heart.

Another rustle. Another rush of air. I suppressed a manic grin, wondering when Hadi

would finally breach the trees.

“Open for me, bonded.”

“That word again,” Sun whimpered as I commenced pounding his hole into sweet oblivion again.

Did he take too many knocks to the head? What was so hard to comprehend?

“It’s similar to a husband in the human tongue. Similar but not quite the same,” I offered a clue, and hell, maybe I was going to die soon because it was as close to confessing as I’d allow. “And you are my bonded now and forever, Sun.”

Sun went absolutely still, then squeezed me so fucking tight, so viciously, I could do a little more than whimper. Whimper! It was outrageous, and I couldn’t hold it anymore. My climax came all at once, like tipping over a mighty mountain and letting the winds guide me back to the peak.

We lay in a perpetual state of bliss for a long moment. Then, someone stirred again in the forest, menacing, and I smirked.

I wanted to use Hadi this time to the fullest extent and savor how hard Sun would come apart at living out his darkest, most forbidden desire?—

To be made low, like a whore, before his mortal enemy, the king of nocs.

But he hadn’t noticed him, too thrown off by me, no doubt. And he hadn’t cum again, even as I soaked his insides. Sun whined low and hard, trying to prolong the pleasure, as if I wouldn’t fuck him again and again until he couldn’t stand anymore if he desired it. And I wanted to, but...

But Hadi decided for me it was his turn now to taste him.

He propelled from his nest in the trees and landed beside us as I finished in Sun. My seed gushed from his slick hole as I was forced to pull out until only half of my cock was inside him.

I stared up at Hadi and nearly gasped. He was downright feral and wasted no time ripping the rest of Sun's clenching hole from my cock by grabbing him. Sun made a weak, mewling sound, ready for the taking, too delirious to care.

But Hadi had his wits about him, even as his bigger purple cock strained in the air. I stood and immediately took my favorite position with Sun when we were with the others, plundering his backside as he took another cock in his mouth.

Sun made a gurgling noise deep in his throat as Hadi forced too much of his web-slick cock into his throat. A grand finale for Sun, I mused, who'd also gone a very long time without our cocks. It turned me on more, as my cock raised to attention, and I buried myself back inside him.

As much as I hated to admit it, Hadi, the bastard had more girth than even me. Imagining the ache Sun felt, his hole stretched wide and filled to the brim, and his mouth struggling to open for Hadi just sent volts of sadistic lust shooting down my spine.

How could I protect him from Hadi's lust when I was a slave to this desire?

We exchanged no words, and we didn't have to. I knew Hadi had pleased himself in the trees, watching us. Our mutual lust reinforced the tether and, with it, the force of our rutting and thrusting inside our Sun.

And we both exploded back to back, and I trembled from head to toe. Sun couldn't

hold any of it, too full of cum. It slicked his thighs and dripped out of his mouth as Hadi released him as if burned as if ripped from a trance.

I didn't fault him for it; it gave me time to capture Sun and horde him for a bit longer, all to myself.

It felt somehow... improper to lick Hadi's cum, even if it was splattered all over Sun's gorgeous face and my prize, his kiss-swollen lips. I didn't have to force him this time to open his mouth and swallow the gossamer cum whole as our tongues warred for dominance.

"Freak," Hadi breathed, but there was no hiding his delight at the twisted display.

Ultimately, we were sated after that. Sun's eyes drifted, unfocused, then rolled into the back of his head. He snuggled contentedly into my fur, just as I always wanted, of his violation.

I spared a glance at Hadi and frowned. Something dark flashed in his gaze as he murmured, "I'll fetch the others. I'll carry him as we move tonight. No need to stop now. We are close."

Hadi was angry that I was holding him, and I couldn't stop myself from rolling my eyes as he moved to swing away, allowing Sun's warmth to sink into my bones.

His fragile light was quickly extinguished despite our lives depending on him if Clem couldn't master his magic. It was time for the others to get their heads out of their asses, for Sun's sake. Why be jealous? He was ours !

But for now, I'd savor being his one and only master, the one he leaned on for protection, comfort, and warmth. The noc who made the slayer submit. It was fitting in a cosmic sense, just like our bodies pressed together, made for one another.

Chapter 11

Sun

Riding into an active battle zone on the back of nocs was perhaps my first mistake. The second was not acknowledging the fact that after months in prison before beginning our journey, borders and locations had changed.

I was out of the inner military circle now. Where once I lived and breathed battle strategies on a large scale, now I had one focus, and it was on me and my plans with four noc companions.

That was why, as we continued toward where I thought the general and his battalion would be located, I was caught completely off guard as we were suddenly surrounded.

First, an arrow flew past my ear in a rush of wind. Still on Hadi's back, I was unsure if the arrow was meant for me or him. Then, before I could do more than turn my head in the direction it had come from, Bracken shouted, "Down!"

He leaped into the air above us all, spreading his wings to shield us from the sudden rainfall of arrows.

The moment they landed, hitting the ground like thick balls of hail around us, there was a simultaneous war cry from the trees as more humans than should have been able to sneak up on us emerged.

Despite myself, I was proud.

These were General Hideyoshi's warriors. That much was clear for they had not only managed to sneak up on me, but on each of my four nocs too.

A spear nearly wedged itself into my waist and I left being impressed for a later time as I only escaped being skewered by inhaling at just the right time.

I leaped to my feet atop Hadi, for a moment forgetting the fact that he would probably hate me jumping around on top of him as though he was furniture.

If he did mind, he did not say anything. All of his arms were held back to protect me as he dodged attacks.

Bracken was already fighting, but in the gentlest way the batbeast could, only sweeping the soldiers back with his massive wings every time a group descended upon him.

Clem was up in the air, diving anxiously out of the way of arrows and spears and Kiar was wrapped around a group of five, pinning their arms down so they could not hurt us. There were more though, and they were angry. I knew the fury in their eyes because I had always had the same feeling rushing through my blood all these years. Nocs meant savagery, despair, the end of humanity. If only I had known the truth sooner.

"It's me!" I shouted, nearly wanting to laugh at the severity of the situation. Being attacked—rightfully so—by the very people I longed to liberate was nearly too much. They should attack us. They should kill us in fact. Me, a human soldier with nocs was treason. I only hoped that my name held some weight here.

"I am Batu Sun! I come with news for General Hideyoshi!"

If anyone heard, they did not respond.

Bracken was getting fed up, now throwing the soldiers with too much force, hurting them.

On the other side, Kiar let out a shout as one of those he subdued freed his hand and sliced through his smooth tail.

I saw the blood and red flashed through me.

Without knowing I was moving, I was leaping from Hadi's protective back and in front of Kiar's captives, fury coursing through me.

“Listen you fools! I am your superior! Surrender now unless you want to get hurt!”

“We will not listen to traitors!” one of them shouted and my heart sank.

But I had their attention—the ones in Kiar's hold anyway, so I pulled the god stones from my pocket and held them both up into the air.

“I was gifted the stones from the gods themselves!” I shouted. “If that is not enough to at least have your ears before you try to kill us, then keep fighting.”

A stillness fell over the group.

Stunned that had worked, I turned in a slow circle, looking at all the faces. There were about thirty of them. The battalion's western security. Each of these men and women had been through hell, but they were listening. Good.

Taking a deep breath, I spoke in a loud, clear voice.

“The things that I have learned directly from the mouth of the gods will change the course of not only this war, but our very history.”

My words rang out and the silence was impenetrable. The weight of what I was saying was nearly too much to bear. It still hurt that we had all been betrayed for so long by our own emperor. I couldn't even bring myself to say it now. It was doubtful that they would even believe me. But as we had decided, if the news came from their very own general, perhaps they could be swayed.

“I promise that you will know everything that I know very soon, but I must speak with General Hideyoshi first. It is important.”

I exchanged a look with Kiar, who was still holding his captured soldiers tightly. He pursed his lips but released them without me having to say anything.

The group of them looked shocked and uncomfortable, exchanging looks and glancing at my nocks as though expecting them to attack.

I glanced back at Bracken, and he caught my gaze, grimacing but folding his wings back and taking a step back from his guarded position.

Hadi smirked, crossing both sets of arms and watching me with something like pride in his eyes.

I searched the gazes of all the humans next, trying to find someone with understanding or at least interest in their eyes. They were all so guarded, but one, I realized, stood slightly ahead of the others, his dark eyes fixed on my face. I assumed he was in charge of this platoon, so I stepped toward him.

“Will you take me to the general?” I asked.

He didn't answer for a long time, then glanced uneasily at Hadi.

“The nocs stay here,” he said sternly but I shook my head.

“They are part of this, I will not leave them behind. Besides, they follow my orders, isn't that right?”

The look on Hadi's face nearly made me laugh out loud. I had to bite my lip to stop myself. Luckily Clem, as always, was my ultimate supporter and immediately backed my brazen statement.

“Oh yes!” he said enthusiastically, still fluttering above the scene. “Sun is our light! We will follow him everywhere!”

That seemed to shock the humans enough that now no one knew what to make of me. The human soldiers all looked at the nocs one by one, and then at me. Finally , I saw more than disdain on their faces. Some of them looked confused, some impressed, some even looked hopeful.

Taking charge, their leader finally nodded.

“You stay in position,” he told the ones Bracken had been fighting. “The rest flank us.”

Then turning to me, he nodded.

“Follow me,” he told me.

He waved two others over and together they began to walk. My nocs fell into line behind me and the other humans around them.

For some time, we walked in silence until the patrol leader glanced back at me without missing a step.

“You know, we heard rumors that you had defected and joined the nocs.”

The very idea made me feel sick and perhaps he could see that on my face because he snorted.

“I should have known there was more to it than that. General Hideyoshi told us not to trust rumours, and I should have guessed that our most revered warrior wouldn't sway so easily.”

He glanced back at my nocs with great interest.

“Tell me, how did you come to get these nocs under your control? It could be beneficial in battle to make them fight their own kind.”

Kiar hissed softly behind me, and I shot him and the others a warning look.

“That is a story for the general's ears first.”

General Hideyoshi, my long-respected mentor and friend... I couldn't believe I was about to reunite with him. My stomach knotted as we neared the camp. What would he think when he heard the news? Would he even listen, or would he order the entire army to descend upon me?

The answer became clear as we neared. The sight of us, humans and nocs—including the former spider king—walking straight into the human camp must have been too miraculous to be real.

Instead of a battle, a crowd formed, soldiers emerging from their tents and gathering

to watch in awe. Perhaps me and my harem appeared to the others to already be prisoners.

I searched the faces as we were led through, recognising some, but not seeing the one I wanted most. Finally, I saw his tent before us, adorned in the green of the Naran flag.

My heart was beating hard as we drew near.

This could be a trap. It could be the end of our mission and the disastrous completion of our quest if he didn't believe me. Why had I listened to Atlan and come here?! I almost wanted to turn around and tell Bracken to carry us far, far away. Somewhere where the entire future of our land did not fall on our shoulders. But that wasn't me. I had been weakened by finding out the truth. Without my hatred of the nocs to fuel me, I was different. Now my strength had to come from the knowledge that no matter how this ended, I was doing the right thing.

The tent door flew open. General Hideyoshi stood there, right before me, older than I remembered. His hair was almost entirely white, and he looked so very tired, with bags under his eyes I could see even from a distance. He looked out in shock, his sharp eyes skimming the scene, not lingering on the nocs, instead settling on me.

Something crossed his face, and I was reminded of a father seeing his son for the first time in too long and my chest ached.

As long as I had been in this life, General Hideyoshi had always known me. He had taken me under his wing and given me respect simultaneously. I owed him so much and seeing him now, knowing with one look that he would at least listen to what I had to say warmed my heart.

Covering his expression, he lifted his chin and walked forward to meet us, this time

focusing on the patrol leader.

“What is this?” he asked as we reached each other.

“Batu Sun has returned General, and he comes with the god stones and the power to control the nocs—”

“Sh!” the general chastised, glancing around. Others had clearly heard though and a murmur ran through the people now watching in awe.

General Hideyoshi met my gaze.

“Come, we must discuss what has happened in private.”

Relieved, I nodded, following him as he led me toward his tent. Only at the door did he stop and glance back, looking surprised to see that Clem, Hadi, Kiar and Bracken were also following.

“I said we needed privacy,” he said, giving them a suspicious look.

I grimaced.

“They really must remain near me,” I explained.

He paused, then glanced at his patrol leader.

“Be sure they don't go anywhere,” he ordered.

“Yes, sir.”

“You four may remain outside my door.”

There was a note of warning in his tone, and I knew that Hadi and Bracken were probably already grinding their teeth, but they were on their best behaviour because they only nodded.

Satisfied, the general entered his tent. I paused long enough to look back, somewhat anxious that they would be dragged away the moment I was out of sight. You must trust General Hideyoshi, I told myself.

“I will explain everything to him and hopefully gain his support,” I said quietly. “If not, then be ready.”

With that, I entered the general's tent, ready to make my case.

He stood, leaning back against his table, covered with maps and markers. For a moment, it was like I had never left.

His eyes were trained on me like a hawk.

“Tell me Sun,” he said, “have you betrayed us?”

I shut my eyes and shook my head, searching for words that could convey the truth of what I truly felt.

“All I have ever wanted—all I still want—is justice for our land. For this war to end. For peace... and I will not stop fighting until I have met my goal. Even if every man in the emperor's army is now against me, I will keep fighting.”

General Hideyoshi suddenly sagged.

He shut his eyes and held onto the edge of the table, and I realized that he was overcome with relief.

I too was overcome.

I swallowed and approached him, and he reached out, clasping my shoulders tightly, searching my face.

“My boy,” he said kindly. “You have no idea how happy I am to see that they did not break you. That you are still the remarkable young man I always knew.”

He shut his eyes, took a deep breath, and visibly collected himself before releasing me, ready now for business.

“Now,” he said, “tell me the rest. How did you come to be controlling the nocs who followed you here?”

“You are not going to like anything I have to say,” I admitted. “But please, be open minded as I explain.”

He graced me with a nod, and I began, flying over the details in the prison, the tortures, the shadows in my cell. I told him of Clem's magic, how he attached them all to my soul. I told him that we were bound as one and it was all to save the noc king who now stood outside his tent.

General Hideyoshi went pale as I explained. When I got to the part about making a deal to visit Tsuki, I finally faltered.

“What is it, Sun?” he pressed. “You have not held back yet, what is making you hesitate now?”

I shut my eyes.

“What I discovered has been hard to accept,” I admitted, “for there was a betrayal in

all of this, one much bigger than any of us could have imagined.”

“What, Sun?”

Swallowing, I forced myself to go on.

“Tsuki did appear to us,” I admitted, “and she was angry.”

General Hideyoshi wasn't breathing now, hanging on my every word.

“Her powers have been diminishing, as she is now so rarely worshipped. She used what was left of her strength to explain that she did not call upon the nocs and bring them to our land. A human did twenty-five years ago, and she has suffered ever since. Me, Hadi, Kiar, Bracken and Clem... she tasked us with restoring balance to the land.”

“Sun,” General Hideyoshi said, frowning. “Don't leave out the most important detail. Who could have done such a thing to us, and why ?”

“Only someone in possession of both of the stones would have had that power,” I hinted. “And back then, the only person who had it was—”

“Emperor Gaulu,” he realized.

All remaining color left his face as I nodded.

“Apparently there was political unrest at the time. He wished to keep his throne. A war—”

“What a perfect distraction,” he whispered. “What a perfect way to force unity. Us against them.”

“Yes,” I agreed. “And we are all his victims. Humans and nocs alike.”

“If you are saying to suddenly befriend the nocs—”

“No. Not that. They have been fighting us for years. But, they were put into this position too. I don't know the solution yet but—”

“But it is up to you to find it.”

I nodded, watching General Hideyoshi closely.

“So does this mean that I have your support?”

He shut his eyes.

“Let me think, Sun... I need time to decide what comes next.”

I did not want to push him. I wasn't sure exactly what he could do. Could he sway his entire army? Could he spread word to the rest of the human army and to the rest of the people of Naran? Coming from the revered general, combined with the striking vision I had now become—the noc killer, now with four noc “pets” and a mission from the gods themselves... perhaps, it would make a difference.

Maybe, just maybe, we could make this work. That was, if the general deemed it a worthwhile cause and not an unnecessary reason to create even more unrest.

But if it took a civil war to get our corrupt king off the throne and to make real changes, then wouldn't that be worth it?

When I stepped into the outside air not long later, there were people guarding the tent. Others sat nearby, waiting to hear more.

To my relief, most of the soldiers were spread out again, carrying on the daily grind of being at war, but I knew that all were on edge, waiting to hear their general's words for how to proceed. After all a group of nocs were sitting amongst them and I knew from experience, it took time for that to feel in any way normal.

My nocs were sitting together on the hill overlooking the soldiers. They were surrounded by guards even though I doubted anyone could stop them very easily should they decide to attack.

All four of them had their eyes fixed on me from the moment I emerged into the daylight. Seeing their forms waiting for me soothed me.

Taking a breath, I went past the guards to be with them rather than with the humans.

Clem rose as I approached and took my hand, simply to hold it. His wide eyes bore into mine.

“What did he say?” he asked quietly.

I shook my head, glancing between all of them.

“We will have to wait and see. He wanted time to think about it.”

It wasn't the best of news, but we knew that none of this would be easy.

Clem pulled me to sit in between them all and I didn't bother to resist. The soldiers looked but no one said anything to us. Whatever they thought, for the first time, it didn't matter to me. I wanted their support, but I was too tired to want their approval as well. These four nocs, I accepted them unapologetically for now.

Perhaps later, after all was said and done, if Hadi betrayed me the way I had always

thought he would, then I would change my mind about them all. The thought alone was suddenly gut-wrenching in a way it hadn't been before. I hadn't cared much about his opinion of me but at some point, that had changed. At some point, seeing his massive form in the dark, pincers and all, had ceased to be intimidating and instead had become comforting.

Huh . It never failed to amaze me how much change I was capable of in such a short time. Life had turned completely upside down, but I had transformed most of all.

Here, sitting amidst the same battalion I had often been a part of, it was especially obvious. I was not the same Batu Sun who had been captured months ago. I was less rigid. My eyes were more open.

“What are you thinking?” Clem asked curiously.

I noticed the other three also watching me and realized they were all worried in their own ways. Yet they were keeping it to themselves. It was so unlike them to hold back in any way that I smiled at their good behavior.

“I'm thinking of myself,” I finally answered. “I'm sitting right where I used to be, eager to do nothing but kill your kind. Now, here I am again, not only with you as my friends and allies, but willing to risk all our lives by turning against my own emperor.”

I shook my head and a strong, sinewy limb pressed comfortably against my back. I didn't have to look to know that it was Kiar's tail. On either side, my largest nocs, Bracken and Hadi both swelled up as though to offer me their own type of comfort in safety.

It helped. Having such an entourage was not something to bat your eye at. With them, I was protected.

Suddenly, my attention was drawn to the general's tent just as he emerged. He did so silently but commanded such presence that I wasn't surprised that everyone in the vicinity turned to watch and see what he would do.

He didn't look towards me, and my chest tightened with nerves. My entire body was strung tight as a drawn bow as I watched General Hideyoshi move to the front of the hill his tent was erected upon.

Below, the soldiers began to gather even before the horn was sounded for attention.

Despite the number of people there, the air was thick with the silence. The sound of my own tense breathing was nearly all I could hear.

“It has come to my attention that all is not what it seems.”

General Hideyoshi's voice rang out over the crowd, loud and clear as a bell. I had no doubt that it was heard on all corners and that each person hung on every syllable he said just the way that I did.

“From the mouth of someone I trust with my life, I have learned of a great betrayal that shakes the ground I walk upon.”

He paused there, to think of how to word what he was going to say next, I thought. My hands shook, the string ready to snap with relief because it seemed like maybe this was going to work in our favor...

“Our emperor has betrayed us all by bringing the nocs into our world, bastardizing the goddess's own powers and beginning an unending war.”

A murmur ran through the crowd. Disbelief and shock radiating throughout them all. General Hideyoshi did not speak until silence fell again.

“In all my years knowing him, Batu Sun has been unwaveringly just and loyal to the cause. He has fought to find the truth and has proven that the nocs are not always what we have believed them to be.” He waved towards us, clearly indicating that I sat surrounded by four who were not trying to actively kill or torture me. “He is no liar. I believe him. I will be working with him to stop Emperor Gaulu.”

This time, a cry of disgust and betrayal rang through the air, but I didn't care. The general believed me . He supported me. He was on our side!

“You have a choice!” He shouted over the commotion. “You can leave here now, turn your back on this battalion, find a new one to join, and carry on with what you have been doing for years to no avail. Or! You can stay, join me and Batu Sun, in finally ending this war.”

Again, a pregnant pause.

No one moved.

“He has come with proof from the goddess’s mouth herself. He was chosen and I will not betray the Goddess Tsuki again. She and the sun god Taiyo himself have given Batu Sun this mission. If you trust me as you have all these years. Then you will stay and hear my plan.”

General looked out over the crowd, seeming to pierce each soldier with those sharp eyes.

“Choose now.”

With that, he glanced at the man with the gong and nodded.

He hit it again. The loud note reverberated over the field. For a minute, no one moved

and then, one by one, people started to leave.

I couldn't breathe as the ones against us began to file off the field, probably ready to run to the other battalions to tell them what had transpired here today. But then... the stream of people stopped and I realized in awe that nearly every one of them had stayed.

It couldn't be... and yet, only a handful of people had left.

Gratitude and amazement nearly choked me.

Finally, General Hideyoshi glanced back at me, and the smallest hint of a smile touched his lips.

“Come,” he told me. “Tell them what you did for your meeting with the goddess and what she told you.”

Trembling, I stood and walked to him.

I was handed a bull horn to speak into which I was glad for. My voice was not as strong as General Hideyoshi's was to begin with and especially not now when I could scarcely contain my emotions.

Somehow, when I began to speak, my voice was surprisingly steady though. I didn't give much details, less than I had told the general, but I told them what mattered. That me, Clem, Hadi, Kiar and Bracken were given this shared task.

And then the General began to speak on what was to come next. He was the one who knew war inside and out. There was no need for my council. I agreed with him entirely.

He wanted to send word to the other battalions, to gain more followers and to spread word amongst the people before storming Kari, the capital. We would meet the opposition of those who remained loyal to the emperor, but we would be ready because we had the truth on our sides.

The general turned to me and whispered under his breath, “You five are the key. Go ahead of everyone. Remain hidden as best you can. Keep safe. I will send soldiers to protect you from behind. And an army of your supporters will meet you at the doors of Kari.”

I stood there listening, trembling with excitement and disbelief as he elaborated on all the plans he had so quickly constructed.

For the first time, none of this seemed like a lost cause.

Perhaps it wasn't as impossible as I'd thought it would be.

Chapter 12

Bracken

One thing I would never fault Sun for being was hopelessly optimistic. His former slave, Atlan, had done well in leading us to General Hideyoshi for help. Unfortunately for us, even with the battalions who had joined our cause, we weren't enough. I had a sinking feeling we would lose even as I bolted skyward to assist the next strike.

"Stick close," I growled as Clem plastered himself to my back, my wings a shield from flaming arrows as we surveyed the battlefield from above.

It had only taken a few days for the word of Emperor Gaulu's betrayal to travel and as I had expected, there was more resistance than General Hideyoshi would have led us to believe.

The emperor's army was not so easily swayed. And unfortunately, we were easy to find when everyone knew exactly where we were headed.

Kari was north so that was where we headed, but it was also where both our human and nocs opposition knew to find us.

Luckily, against humans, I had only to worry about their pitiful offenses like arrows and rocks. And for once, I could take in the totality of the battle below without interruption from flying nocs.

No matter how you sliced it, we were losing, and sourness filled my gut. I was acutely aware of Sun's fear through our bond.

We had slogged our way north along the River Yang, facing battle after battle after battle. But we were well rested, and Sun wore fresh new clothes that suited the weather better and oddly enough, Daaku's forces never caught up with us. I took it as a sign that Atlan and those strange nocs had successfully sieged Yewan.

They had revealed no concrete plan to destroy the tower and escape the new nocturnal throne's fury after liberating those humans, from what I had heard in their whispered conversation. But the warlocks, the rat, and the owl were strong enough that even I believed they'd pulled something out of their sleeve and snatched victory from the jaws of defeat.

Yet the tide of humans against us kept coming.

It truly felt like the whole of the human world was against us. The tide had turned, our forces thinning, even as more and more humans joined our cause everytime they saw Sun riding upon Hadi with the god stones raised high in the air.

More often than not, we were met not with defiance or allegiance but neutrality. Civilians fled, and armed soldiers deserted. And this pattern continued the closer we marched toward Kari until, if General Hideyoshi was right, our forces would be evenly matched.

I soared higher in the sky, searching for Sun, Kiar, and Hadi in the chaos. The smell of carrion was thick, and I felt ravenous to eat, to kill, but there was no time for that right now.

It seemed that we had ignited the unrest running through the land and a civil war was spreading. But instead of leading this wing of the war, we were now woefully caught

in the fray.

“Blessed be...” Clem hummed, lost in some incantation. I didn’t have the strength to be irritated, as his spells had helped some. Landslides, concealment against trees, lighting strikes. They were nothing miraculous but powerful enough that even the other humans who fought with us began to defer to Clem, not just us, the more powerful in our pack.

And I had been proud of him, up until today. His irritation was palpable, demanding we drive deeper and deeper into enemy territory despite our protests.

Tsuki’s emissary? Clem was becoming one of her devoted loons as her blessing seemed absent now. The only thing stopping Gaulu was our corporeal steel, blood onyx, fangs, and claws slashing through what remained of our enemies.

“Bracken, there!” Clem shouted over the boom of my thundering wings, releasing a war screech as humans lined their catapult our way.

I swooped left and ducked low, a familiar back side coming into full view, Kiar defending his rear, while Sun, bullheaded, fought in front of our undead king. Odd fissures dotted the landscape around them as I swooped lower, and I could hear Clem murmuring against my neck, his hot breath branding me as magic melded with the air.

“Hold tighter. Hold steady,” I demanded, the sky darkening too fast for mid-day. The sun was not supposed to set for a few more hours. It was all so strange.

“She’s near,” Clem interrupted, squeezing my neck tight. “She’s coming. She’s coming, and she’ll... She’s... Goddess, please...”

“Clem? Oh fuck! Oh no. Clem! Clem don’t you dare faint on me,” I demanded as we

nearly collided with a flaming ball of rock.

At the worse possible moment, Clem went stiff. Terror seized my heart as he jerked, and I was forced to plummet lest he fall to his death.

“You come with your visions at the worst possible moment,” I sneered as we fell faster, the sky nearly pitch-black when it should still be painted in yellow, orange, and red hues.

I made eye contact with Kiar, and he lifted on his tail as high as he could, taking Clem into his arms as I barreled towards a formation of human soldiers rushing him. Then I landed, shielding them both.

We fought, all surrounding Hadi and Sun, but Kiar was handicapped without the use of the arm holding Clem. Javelins broke through my defenses and pierced him. But he never let go of him.

“Up there!” Hadi shouted, a tiny bluff able to hold us all and get us away from the rows of soldiers clashing on the battlefield.

I took Kiar and Clem with me, and Sun leaped onto Hadi’s back. By the time we made it, the earth was shaking violently, and I wondered if Tsuki and Taiyo would destroy our world now since we seemed set to fail in our mission to redeem it.

“What is wrong with Clem?” Kiar demanded lips pressed to Clem’s sweaty forehead as he convulsed.

I swept the battle with my eyes, Hadi and Sun pressing in on us so we all shielded Kiar and Clem. Our enemies’ eyes were on us, ravenous, swinging hooks onto the rocks to climb, and we were trapped, unable to move Clem without one of us sacrificing our full fighting abilities. And Kiar was badly injured already.

“What’s wrong with him?” Kiar asked again, panic setting in as blood gushed from an open wound on his shoulder, his lips pressed to Clem’s cheek now, fangs erect.

Sun flew to their side and took over, holding Clem so that Kiar could stem the bleeding in his shoulder.

“Tsuki’s blessing, I suppose. Just pray she has a sliver of sanity left, or this is all about to go straight to hell.”

Chapter 13

Sun

I held Clem tightly while his body continued to quake and shiver. His eyes sometimes opened and sometimes closed as the visions continued to overtake him.

We all knew what was happening at once this time when he fell into the spell. That didn't make the situation any less tense, or the timing any less unfortunate.

It had felt like a betrayal to leave those that fought with us to handle the emperor's men on their own. The fighting could still be heard close by, but Bracken had moved us a little bit deeper into the trees where we would be less easily seen.

"We should be fighting," I murmured, but Hadi shook his head.

"You are no longer just a soldier, Sun. More rides on your shoulders."

"He's right," Kiar agreed. "As you know, if one of us was killed trying to keep Clem safe it would all be for nothing."

His shoulder was still bleeding and the slash across his tail from days ago still shined white against the black of his scales, so I didn't have the heart to argue.

I looked up at the sky at the dark, angry moon. It was so strange to see it blotting out the sun like that. A miraculous vision in the midst of all the chaos.

“What are you thinking Tsuki?” I wondered aloud.

“She is playing with us,” Bracken spat. “With Clem in particular.”

He was pacing, occasionally leaping into the air to scout our location but never venturing far from me and Clem. His eyes sought us out more than they searched the area. He was more worried now than I had ever seen him.

At some point the monstrous batbeast had become our warm protector and that fact still surprised me.

“We cannot remain here long,” Hadi whispered. “There is something whispering beneath the earth.”

My eyes flew to his face, searching in the strange glow of light for whatever that could mean.

Neither Bracken, nor Kiar looked remotely surprised and suddenly I understood their agitation on a whole new level. There was something happening. Something that could not be felt by humans. Something that only animals could feel. Noc senses were attuned in the way that an animal’s would be. They were half made of the creatures of the night after all.

“What is it?” I asked, foreboding filling me, but none of them seemed to have an answer.

I looked down at the ground I was sitting on. Clem's shoulders and head were cradled in my lap, but the rest of him stretched out on the beaten earth.

Nothing good remained beneath these soils. There had been too many battles fought and lost here.

The worst of which had seen every steed wiped from our army at the hands of the nocs in a particularly cruel strategic move. My beloved Haru had been lost that day after so many years riding together. And over the years the casualties had grown. Humans and nocs alike falling right in this very spot.

“We must leave this place,” I said with sudden urgency, struggling to lift Clem's stiff body.

He moaned and his eyes flew open, still unseeing. He did not rise, still taken by the visions that Tsuki was sending to him.

“Where will we go?” Bracken demanded. “The very earth is angry.”

I shook my head.

“We can fly—”

“Bracken is right,” Kiar said, softly. “Whatever it is, it stretches long and far.”

“There is no escaping,” Hadi added.

“So, we wait?” I demanded. “We wait for a legion of fallen nocs to rise from the earth once more to finish us all?”

The three of them watched me, stricken.

I forced myself to my feet, leaving Clem sprawled across the ground, chest heaving.

“After all this, after how far we've come... No. We must act now before it is too late.”

But the earth suddenly quaked beneath my feet. Not a moment later, a loud moan,

like air escaping from deep underground filled the air and I realized that it already was too late.

“No!” Bracken shouted and he dove toward me, suddenly hoisting me into the air and catching Clem by the arm just as the ground split open beneath us.

I cried out, reaching for Clem to pull him in closer as Bracken leaped into the air with each of us held tight.

I glanced around frantically, finding Hadi and Kiar both at the top of a tree. Shouts from the battle rang through the night. Clearly, we weren't alone in having the ground moved from beneath us.

For a moment, we all watched each other, breathing hard, but silence rang until Clem suddenly gasped, his eyes shooting open.

“Wh—what happened?” he asked breathlessly.

Relieved, I looked at his confused face and shook my head. I was glad to see that his visions had passed but there was no time to address what he had seen.

Looking out over the trees and the battle grounds beyond, as far as the eye could see, cracks ran through the land.

“Fissures,” I whispered. “The earth... It's releasing something.”

Clem took a sharp breath, following my gaze.

“It's Tsuki's doing,” he whispered. “She is using the last of her energy to help us.”

“To help us?” Hadi repeated, sounding incredulous. I agreed with his doubtful tone.

There was something uneasy in the air, something sinister and my instincts were proved correct when a sudden war cry sounded.

At the very least, it was the human one, but that didn't change the fact that another battle was starting right now.

An arrow suddenly whipped past me, nicking my cheek.

Without having to be told, Bracken dropped from the sky.

Perhaps driven by the distraction, they decided to attack now. Perhaps that was always their plan and not even the ground opening was enough to stop them.

Either way, the four of us, up so high, were such easy targets when we should still be hiding.

“There!” Kiar shouted and leaped down as a wave of human soldiers came upon us again just as our own side caught up, joining the fray and taking the fighting up another notch.

I joined easily, moving on instinct, using my dagger to slice through flesh as it came close enough to touch, wiping from my mind the fact that these weren't nocs. These were my own people, yes, and right now, they were my enemies. Life wasn't black and white or good and evil. It wasn't as simple as that and I leaned into that new way of thinking, striking them down to protect me and my own.

Nothing could distract me during battle normally, but this was no ordinary night and a sound unlike anything I'd heard nearly stopped me in my tracks. It was like thunder but not coming from above. The sound rose from below.

It seemed that Tsuki was not done yet after all.

I tried to keep focused, to get through the wave of people attacking, to keep any other bit of my attention on my comrades. But the rumble beneath us grew and grew until everyone stopped, simply trying to remain on their feet as the ground shook.

That was when the first shocking wave of beings suddenly emerged from the earth.

In a thundering stampede, hundreds of horses burst from below.

Shocked, I watched as they ran between us, each seeming to be on a mission as they barreled through the field in different directions and only then did I realize that the horses weren't right.

They were decayed and deformed. Bits of bones, fur and flesh hung and a green tinged them.

They seemed unbothered but the sight was horrific, hardly the gift that Clem seemed to think it was supposed to be.

I held my breath in disgust and confusion, turning to take them in until one drew my gaze like a magnet.

I didn't know how I knew so quickly, but it was Haru. She wove through the horses and people, heading straight to me before stopping in front of me.

“Haru?” I whispered and suddenly the fact that she was an undead abomination of what she had been didn't bother me. My beloved horse was back, right in front of me. Tsuki had done this for us. She had raised our most loyal allies from the dead.

The pain of losing her was nothing compared to the sharp feeling that lanced me as I set eyes on her again and saw the affection in her round eyes as she gave me a look as though to say, I'm back. What next, master?

I took a breath, trying to breathe through the sharp pain of her resurrection but the pain didn't go and suddenly, I realized that Clem was screaming bloody murder and Kiar was shouting something to Hadi and Bracken and then, just behind me, there was the sound of someone choking and the sharpness I had felt in my ribs slipped free.

I fell back, caught by familiar arms. Hadi had crouched down to catch me. And he had killed the soldier who had stabbed me. Of course, that must have been it. The shock of seeing Haru had completely derailed me. I had let my guard down and now... now ...

“Sun!” Hadi said urgently. “Don't close your eyes!”

My lids were heavy, but I forced them open.

It was all I could do. My entire body felt limp.

“Haru,” I managed to choke.

He shook his head helplessly.

“What?”

“My horse... she came back... I don't have to ride you anymore.”

I laughed and metallic liquid splattered from between my lips.

Hadi's eyes widened in horror.

“Clem!” he shouted.

Suddenly, I was being lifted into the air. The world spun around me. I couldn't make sense of up or down as he bound over the field, trying to reach our most magical member for help.

Suddenly I saw him. Clem was a bright white light, like moonlight was shining off of him, but his entire body was red. He was angry.

I wanted to tell him not to worry, but suddenly I was falling away.

Hadi's hands tightened on me. Two held me firmly around the middle, one cradled the back of my head, another held my legs in place.

I heard him gasp as we were swallowed by darkness and then the sudden jarring feeling as we hit solid ground, reminding me that this was all real and not a dream, even though it felt like it was.

“What happened?” I whispered once I found my voice.

“We fell into one of the fissures,” Hadi said, voice tight. “Don't worry Sun. I will get you out of here. You will be okay. I promise.”

I could feel his heart pounding against me. Nothing had set him on edge yet the way this had.

“Look at you...” I found myself saying into the dark. “It seems you really do care.”

One of his hands loosened and suddenly was on my cheek, stroking gently. I could see nothing in this darkness, but it wouldn't surprise me if he could see me at least a little bit.

“Keep talking,” was all he said.

“Haru returned,” I found myself saying in answer. “She came back.”

“Yes,” he agreed, and I felt the familiar sway of him walking.

“Why did Tsuki bring back my horse?” Then another more troubling question hit me. “What will happen to her? She is up there without me. A zombie horse in the middle of the battlefield. What if someone kills her again...?”

I trailed off, the thought exhausting me.

“You're hurting me,” I whispered, trying to wiggle free, but Hadi's hard grip on my back tightened.

“Don't,” he snapped. Then, with a hiss, I felt something cold and sticky suddenly seal over the spot he had been holding.

I gasped and remembered.

“I was stabbed.”

“Yes. But you will be fine. We will be fine.”

He cursed and we slipped. I was jerked in his arms and felt the wound more clearly now. My body felt cold, wet with sweat. I was shaking now.

“This is not good.”

“Don't panic,” he said sternly. “We just need to find somewhere to climb, or...”

His voice trailed off.

“What is it?” I asked.

“There is something here.”

Chapter 14

Kiar

Above ground was complete pandemonium. The humans all fought each other, rabid. Bracken, Clem and I were forgotten as we hid in the branches above them. Just as well. There was no way that I could fight now. Not when Sun was gone.

Not when they'd fallen and the earth had collapsed on top of them...

"He's weak," Clem said, his voice in a panic. "He's fading."

He was shaking so hard that I could see his red light flickering from the corner of my eye but to my surprise, it was not from fear, but from anger.

"Where were you when Sun was stabbed?!" he suddenly demanded. "Why was no one there to protect him? There are three of you!"

"Clem!" Bracken warned.

"No. He's right," I agreed. "We failed him."

And now Sun was dying somewhere below ground with no one but Hadi to keep him company.

It was obvious that Hadi had warmed to him, that perhaps he was starting to feel for Sun the way that the rest of us did.

That was little comfort.

If Sun was dying, then I should have been there, holding his hand.

“What about your damn visions?” Bracken demanded. “Surely Tsuki should have warned you about this!”

“She didn’t!” Clem wailed. “I saw our allies rising, humans, horses, nocs. She showed me the future should we succeed?—”

Frustrated, Bracken shot into the air before he could finish, immediately exposing our position.

Arrows flew at him from the commotion below. A moment later, Clem barely escaped being hit. Then, to my surprise, an arrow cut clean through his wing, and he flicked it off like it was nothing more than a gnat. I watched, enthralled as the red light intensified around the wound and quickly closed it like nothing had happened.

Was that Clem's power growing? I wondered. Or was it Tsuki's eclipse?

“There!” Bracken shouted, pointing.

I followed his gaze, suddenly seeing the fissure he pointed to. One large enough to take us in even though it wasn't the one that Sun and Hadi had fallen into. No, that one was sealed shut.

The moment my eyes landed on it, Bracken swept down, scooping me up like I was weightless and diving down toward it, Clem following tight on his heel.

Without hesitation, he threw himself—and subsequently me—into the pitch-black hole.

A moment later red light flooded it as Clem entered behind us.

We landed on the uneven earth, quickly looking around with disappointment to see that there was nowhere to go. It was simply a hole. A few cracks ran through it but nothing large enough to crawl through and when Clem's light shone into the spots, there was only more dirt anyway.

“Dammit all!” I cursed, hitting the wall. “Sun needs us.”

“We'll dig through to them!” Bracken suggested and without even knowing where to start, he dug his large fists into the muddy walls.

“There's no need.”

The quiet sound of Hadi's voice stopped us all dead.

Looking around, there was no sign of where his voice had come from.

“Where are you?” I demanded.

“There!” Clem said, pointing to one of the cracks along the side.

We rushed to it and Bracken started to dig frantically again, until Hadi spoke, and we realized that he was below us at an angle.

“I seem to have found some sort of abandoned passageway,” Hadi said. “I don't know where it leads.”

“Stay there!” Bracken shouted down to him. “We are coming.”

He began to dig with renewed vigor, but Hadi didn't say anything for a minute. When

he eventually did, we couldn't hear him over the sounds that Bracken made.

Clem placed a hand on his arm, stilling him.

“What did you say?” he called into the crack, and we strained to listen and hear Hadi's voice.

“Sun says that it is an old abandoned military passageway... apparently it follows the river above. There should be an exit.”

Relief flooded me for more than one reason. Sun was okay. He was awake and talking. That was a very good sign.

“We will follow the river above,” Bracken said firmly. “You follow it below.”

I nodded.

“If you get to the entrance first, wait there. The last thing we need is to lose you again.”

“And if we reach it first, we will enter the passageway to find you.”

“We're going now,” Hadi's muffled voice said.

“Go fast,” I said. “And Hadi, keep Sun safe.”

There was a long silence.

“I give you my word,” he said. “Now go! I don't know how much time he has left.”

Every cell in my body protested leaving them behind.

Right here, at least we could talk to them. Right here, I knew where they were even if I could do nothing for them. It was wrong to walk away and it was our only choice.

The same conflict was clear on both Clem and Bracken's faces as we turned to each other.

“There is no time to waste,” Bracken said somberly. “I will fly us along the river.”

Clem lifted into the air and flapped his fluttery wings to Bracken's shoulder, taking a seat on one and lacing his arms around his neck.

“Go fast,” he said. “Avoid getting hit.”

Bracken nodded and offered me his other arm.

I slithered to him, putting an arm around his other shoulder, and wrapping my tail around his waist.

Looking down at the fallen earth that blocked us from Hadi and Sun with one last regretful look, he leaped into the air with a gust of wind from his broad wingspan.

We shot into the sky like an arrow, up into open blue as the moon finally released the sun and the world was doused with bright sunlight again. Through the humans who still fought against each other, we went. I did not know who was winning. I hoped that it was our side, but caring about that detail didn't matter right now. All I cared about was Sun and, I realized, Clem, Bracken, and Hadi too.

We had leaned on each other for long enough that there was no way I could disentangle my feelings from them now.

I had blamed Sun for making me care so much, but perhaps this was a natural

development. We were all one, revolving around Sun, but doing it together.

It would be such a shame for us all to lose our chance at this second life now, after everything we had been through together.

“There,” Clem whispered.

I didn’t know how he spotted the river through the trees as we left the battlefield behind us. When I finally saw the streak of water catching the light of the sun, it was in the distance.

My heart sank.

“It's too far,” Bracken said, reading my thoughts. He sounded so disappointed that my heart ached. “They'll never make it to us in time.”

“Then we shall have to be the ones to make it to them as quickly as possible,” I said. “Swoop to the river Bracken and we will not rest until we find the entrance.”

“But we have no idea how far the passageway goes,” he argued. “We have no idea where to start our search. What if we miss it entirely?”

“I won’t let us,” Clem promised.

His eyes glowed red now as he searched below us, and a shiver traveled my spine. Clem was changing and I did not know what to think of that. He had always seemed so meek and now, looking at him, I wondered... How far would his power truly grow? Surely, there had to be a limit.

Swallowing, I pushed the thought down.

It didn't really matter. Clem was one of mine.

“Lower down there, at that hill,” he said suddenly. “We're getting close.”

Bracken followed his order, another shocking development. We were all on much more even footing now.

The thought was nothing but comforting. We were in this together, in life and even death. But not tonight. Tonight, we were finding Sun, and Clem would heal him. We would live to fight another day and we would not stop until our goals were met.

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Chapter 15

Hadi

I walked forward, hoping that Sun was right. He was half delirious, his eyes drooping and then opening again and again, but I had no choice but to trust him.

Suddenly, his head lolled against my shoulder and despite myself, I stopped breathing, waiting.

“Sun?” I whispered and he startled, lifting his head again before resting it tiredly on my shoulder.

“Where are we?” he asked.

I swallowed and shook my head at the sound of his groggy voice.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said, continuing.

My footsteps echoed, a steady set of eight in a clipping pattern, back and forth over the walls of damp rock and mud. I couldn't make out exactly how big the tunnel was, but the fact that I could walk comfortably suggested that it was quite big. Big enough for an army to sneak through, I bet. That was comforting at least. Perhaps Sun was right.

He started awake once more and then hissed in pain.

I bit my tongue and kept walking.

It would have been faster and easier to have him sitting on my spidery back, his warm arms around my waist, his chest against my back the way I had gotten used to. But I did not dare rest him there with the hope that he would stay put and not slide off and get even more hurt.

“It's cold,” he whispered and that nearly undid me.

I stopped dead, straining in the darkness to see more. We were in complete darkness, but my ability to see in the dark made it so that I could make out a small bit down here. I couldn't see the whites of his eyes anymore. They were closed. And he was indeed cold.

Even at the top of the mountain, after walking through snow in slippers for days, Sun had not complained of the cold. He was stronger than that. He was stronger than this.

“Sun,” I whispered, but he did not answer.

I cradled his body closer, sinking down to wrap around him, hoping to offer him a small bit of my warmth.

His head lolled back, limp as the rest of him.

A breath shuddered from my lungs.

Was this it? I wondered. Would it all come to an end now in the dark? Sun and I alone, cradled together helplessly.

I had to admit, there was some poetry to it. The no king and the top human warrior, reduced to nothing, not even seen as they faded from life together.

“Sun,” I whispered, and there was an unexpected ferocity in the sound. Anger that I hadn't noticed coursed through me, a last-ditch desire to fight. “Don't you die on me, Batu Sun. My life is in your feeble hands...”

But even as the words left my mouth, the anger faded, revealing itself to be a facade of what I truly felt: despair.

Sun's body felt too cold against me. Any minute now, he would be gone and that... That was so damn unfair. I'd only just—

“I've only just started to know you,” I found myself saying to his deaf ears. “And you've only just started to know me .”

Not as the king of the nocs, not as the great Alhadya, not as his enemy. He had just started to see me , and I was only now realizing that no one ever had before. He was the first to look beyond what was presented and see what lay beneath and I wanted more. It was so unfair to get a taste of what Clem, Bracken and Kiar all got just before it was all taken away.

I'd fooled myself into thinking it was about sex. That I wanted to claim him and to own him but that wasn't it at all, was it? I wanted Batu Sun to want me. I wanted our bond to mean more than a means to an end.

It had happened so fast. One minute I had been ready to destroy him, then he'd looked straight through me, challenged me, made me want him and now... now I would do anything I could for just a bit more time. I would beg.

“Please. Stay. We still have so much to accomplish together...”

I shut my eyes, feeling foolish, but out of ideas.

“Goddess of the moon, Tsuki,” I whispered desperately. “Please. Don't let him go like this.”

My voice felt heavy in the silence and of course nothing happened. I had never been the praying type. I didn't think I had ever done it before, but here I was, praying to the goddess at the very end and expecting results.

Was it really too much to ask though? Hadn't she chosen us? Hadn't she brought back that monstrosity of undead horses at that battlefield, and for what? For Sun to be so distracted that he was fatally wounded?

“This is your fault!” I suddenly bellowed into the silence. “Do something!”

My voice echoed back to me, full of vitriol.

Suddenly, there was light.

It was dim, even in the pitch black of the tunnel and coming from somewhere on Sun.

Shaking, hoping , I searched frantically through the layers of Sun's new robes, trying to find where it came from.

When my hand closed around a cool, round stone, I laughed, unable to believe it.

“That couldn't have worked,” I said aloud, but sure enough, I pulled the moonstone from Sun's pocket.

It was glowing weakly, the light flickering like it was barely able to remain lit. Of course. Tsuki had used the last of her strength on those horses, hadn't she? That was what Clem had claimed, anyway.

For a moment, I held the stone, waiting for something to happen, for Sun to spring to life once more. Nothing changed. When I held the light close to his face, I saw that his jaw was slack and his lips were pale and parted. There was no color on his skin. He already looked like a corpse even though I knew he still clung to the last threads of life.

“Wake up, Sun.”

I held him steady, stroking loose strands of hair back as I crouched there, searching for any sign that he was recovering.

Frustrated, I clenched the stone in my fist.

“What do you want me to do with this blasted thing?” I asked Tsuki. Surely, she wasn't activating it for entertainment.

I pressed the stone to Sun's forehead and his brows flexed for a moment. I held my breath, but his face went slack again.

“Come on, Sun, wake up. Please.”

Unsure what else to do, I rubbed the stone over his face. When that did nothing, I traced it over his neck, then his chest. He inhaled sharply, then sagged, his breathing stronger.

I stared, heart racing as I finally realized what to do.

Pulling him forward into a proper embrace, I held Sun's sleeping body to my chest and felt for the wound. His blood had long soaked through the webbing I had plastered to the deep cut. It was cold now and coated my hands, making the stone slippery as I held it to the spot.

For a long time, I did not move, my cheek pressed to Sun's. Every instinct I had was fixed on him. His heartbeat against my chest, the temperature of his skin, the sound of his breathing. Any change would be felt straight away. I had never been so focused.

Then, the light of the stone suddenly weakened.

“No!” I hissed as the damn thing flickered out, leaving us in darkness, Sun still limp in my arms. “Dammit! You blasted goddess, come back!”

I was breathing hard, barely holding my anger and frustration in check as hopelessness rushed through me.

“Sun... Shit .”

I sagged.

“Don't tell me this is the end after all...”

“...You can't get rid of me that easily.”

I nearly dropped him in my shock.

Sun's arms suddenly closed around me, stilling me.

“Whoa,” he chuckled breathlessly. “Easy.”

“I'm not a horse,” I spat. “Don't talk to me that way.”

And then I wrapped all four arms around him and clung to him with abandon.

I didn't care what he would think. I felt weak with relief.

For a long time, Sun was still, then he stroked my back gently and rested his chin on my shoulder.

“What happened?” he asked. “Where are we?”

“In a tunnel,” I managed. “An abandoned tunnel under the battlefield. We fell into a hole—”

“When the horses rose and—and I was stabbed,” he said, remembering. “Is that why I feel like I was trampled by a stampede?”

I nodded.

“Yes. And you were nearly dead. We all were.”

He was silent for a long time.

“And you were worried.”

I couldn't exactly deny it. My instinct was to pretend all I had cared about was myself, but it was too recent, and it was too dark. It was like none of this was real. All we had was sensation and feeling.

“Did you heal me?” he asked.

“You have Tsuki to thank for that.”

“Tsuki. I see...”

I turned my face toward him, my nose pressing into his silky hair.

“We should go find the others, I'm guessing,” he said.

I forced a nod even though I had no interest in releasing him. This was the first time I had felt like this; like Sun was all mine. It was just us in this underground world. How often did I have him all to myself? The others were normally a stone's throw away.

“Hadi,” he whispered softly and suddenly his hands were weaving into my hair. “I'm okay. I promise. Don't worry.”

“You nearly weren't,” I informed him.

“I had no idea you cared so much,” he mused.

I felt a rare blush heat my cheeks and was grateful that the dark was there to hide it.

“Come on, then,” I said. “Let us continue to the end of the tunnel.”

I released him, perhaps a little bit too quickly because he hissed in pain as his feet touched the ground and he reached out blindly, steadying himself on my arms.

I held him, regretting letting embarrassment control me.

“It's not your fault,” Sun said, as though I'd said it aloud. “You're not used to having emotions, I know.”

I didn't bother arguing.

“Can you walk?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said, but as soon as we had taken two steps, I heard him stumble.

“Get on my back,” I ordered, but when he attempted to hoist himself up, he cried out and ended up on the ground taking short, sharp breaths.

“I thought you said that Tsuki healed me,” he gritted out.

“She did her best with what energy she had left, I suppose,” I said, crouching down to find Sun on the ground.

“Gentle!” he hissed as I lifted him.

“Sorry,” I said, holding him still.

He didn't move for a long time, still trying to regain his breath.

“Wow,” he finally breathed. “I've been stabbed before, but never into the ribs, I guess.”

His voice trembled nearly as hard as the hands clinging to me.

“You need to rest,” I decided.

He started to argue, but I cut him off.

“There is no point rushing. No one knows we're here aside from Kiar, Bracken, and Clem, and I imagine they will not rest until they find us.”

That seemed to calm Sun at once and despite myself, it stung. I was here, but I was not enough. I should not have been jealous, I knew we were all one, but I had never really been one of the group. Not properly. I had always been on the outside, first, a shadow, then an enemy, then a grudging ally.

I tried to push the feeling down, but I could not help but want more.

“Let me take care of you,” I whispered and before Sun could argue, the way he clearly wanted to, I threw my web up to the ceiling, creating something of a hammock before carefully lifting him into it.

He didn't say anything for a moment and then chuckled softly.

“You are so full of surprises,” he informed me. “I truly didn't think you had it in you to be so...”

“What?”

“Sweet,” he informed me, and my defensiveness evaporated. “Come here.”

I stepped up to the hammock, reaching for him. I could see only the white of the webbing, but that was enough. My hands found him, tracing his skin through his silky clothes.

“Are you comfortable?” I asked.

“MmHm. Do you want to climb in with me?” he asked.

He probably did not mean anything suggestive by it, after all, he was in pain and recovering from nearly dying, but I could not help hearing it in that way. Besides, I was far too weak to resist him right now, so I did not bother trying.

I leaned close to him, finding his face with two of my hands and holding him still to kiss his smooth cheek.

He let out a soft chuckle again, then his hands were on my face, and he turned me,

catching my lips with his.

“You know,” he said gently, “back in that cell in Black Lantern Prison, sex rejuvenated the others...”

My breath caught.

“I don't need to take any of your energy Sun,” I argued weakly.

“They were weak, so they took from me,” he said calmly. “I'm the hurt one here. Who's to say it won't work the opposite way right now.”

I shook my head, but he pulled me into another soft, lingering kiss and I knew I could not resist him any longer.

“If we do this, it is going to be my way,” I whispered.

He let out a soft sigh.

“Okay... and what is your way?” he asked, a touch of nerves in his voice.

Without answering, I once again used my web, allowing some to slide free before using it to wrap his wrists.

“This again?” he asked, but then, as I continued, he fell silent. I could hear his breath sharpening as I wrapped him up, spreading his legs apart and holding them open with my webs, then wrapping the rest of him, attaching bits here and there until he was held tight, his position secure and open for me.

“Okay,” he whispered. “This is different, I admit.”

My heart was pounding, but the simple comment made me feel so good. He had three other lovers and yet what I was offering him was already unique.

I wished I could see his face, but at least I had all four hands free to feel what I couldn't see.

Reaching out, I took my time feeling his body wrapped in clothes and web. When I reached his cock, it was already hard, aching for me and all I could think was that this time, I needed to feel it and to taste it.

I managed to get his silky pants loose with little effort, exposing him to the damp air. Sun held very still, scarcely even breathing. Before, I would have thought he was a little nervous of me still, not quite trusting what I would do, but now I knew it was different. It was anticipation.

The moment my lips touched his cock, he sucked in a sharp breath of surprise.

“Hadi,” he started, but I sucked it down, all the way to the base interrupting whatever he had been about to say.

A moan sounded deep in my throat at finally getting a taste of what I had been lusting over. Sun groaned and jerked, and pleasure spiked through me because he could not escape. I had him tight in my clutches, wrapped up, trapped, the very best way to devour a meal as I always thought, and this one was a particularly tasty one.

I could feel him trying to relax, to let me do as I pleased until I got my fill of his cock and slipped lower, tasting his sweet hole with my tongue.

He jerked again, this time, trying to get closer. Each time he did, I pulled back just enough to tease him, to never let him get enough until finally, his moans sounded so frustrated I was sure he was close to breaking. That was when I pulled back entirely.

Sun made a pathetic whine, completely by accident and then, in his frustration, he thrashed in my web, trying to free himself.

“Yes,” I whispered, gripping his hips. “Try uselessly to break free, little Sun.”

He moaned and sagged, giving up at my words until I lined my cock with his wet hole.

“Oh fuck,” he gasped. “Yes. Do it already.”

I didn't need any more encouragement than that. Hopefully now, after training himself on Bracken and Kiar, he would be more than able to take me despite our size difference. Either way, now was the time to find out, so I held him still and pushed my hips forward, careful with my pincers near his sensitive human skin.

For a moment, his body resisted me and then— heaven .

My eyes shut, head falling back in pleasure.

I was finally inside of Sun, one with him the way that I was meant to be. It was too much all at once and the control I normally had, especially with my meals, vanished all at once.

Gripping him with all four hands, I began to fuck him harder than I should have, harder than I had been planning to abuse his healing body. He cried out, thrashing now, trying to break free, or perhaps just in reaction to my abandon.

I reached for a rope of webbing and pulled, hoisting his hips up higher, changing the angle and Sun completely fell apart.

He cried out a string of curses that turned into nonsense words and then his entire

body stiffened, and he climaxed, my cock alone pounding his orgasm out of him.

His body constricted, his hole getting impossibly tighter, making the pleasure border on pain and that was what it took for me. My body strained forward, chasing the overwhelming feeling of his hole chocking my cock until finally, I released the thick strands of web. It was more automatic than anything how I pulled out as the thick stream of my release continued, filling Sun, and then sealing his hole as I removed myself and the last strings sprayed free.

Sun was still moaning, each breath a deep heave followed by an almost wounded sound.

“Did I hurt you?” I asked, still trying to catch my breath.

“You did something to me,” he whispered breathlessly.

I stroked his body, feeling the warmth of his exposed ass and just letting myself touch him for a lingering moment before I took hold of the webbing smeared across his skin. I pulled it, gently extracting it from inside him.

He gasped and jerked as the last of it slid from his hole and then fell back, limp.

I wondered if he had fallen asleep until he yawned softly.

“You should cut me down now,” he suggested.

“Of course. We should keep going.”

“Yes,” he agreed sleepily.

I used my hands and hip pincers to free him and then helped his stiff body onto my

back. It was easier from this height for him to hoist himself onto me, but as soon as he was seated with his thighs around my waist and his head against my shoulder, I felt him sag with the weight of sleep.

“Rest now, Sun,” I whispered. “You're safe with me.”

“I know I am...” he whispered in return.

Chapter 16

Clem

“It is useless,” Kiar sneered as we dodged yet another volley of flaming arrows that burned out in the riverbed as we retreated to the relative safety of the trees. “We will not find them in time. I can feel it. Sun is—”

“Shut up!” I demanded, Kiar’s eyes widening in surprise as Bracken took us airborne, and we landed at another entrance, the final one.

Bracken released us as gently as he could, which was still roughly, and I immediately tore away from Kiar to inspect the hole. But Sun and Hadi must have been too deep underground. I could barely sense their lights anymore, their connection to the tether was weak, and that terrified me.

But Hadi hadn’t been hurt when they fell? Or had he? Each possibility I imagined pushed me closer and closer to a full-on panic attack.

“Watch your tongue,” Bracken huffed as he, too, inspected the only entrance left along with Kiar.

My body was bright, still humming with the remnants of Tsuki’s incomprehensible visions. Bright enough to act as a light in the darkness. I ventured as far as I could, hoping to be a beacon to them when they emerged; they had to appear, Hadi and Sun. I did not have time to decipher her vision entirely, her strange message. We had to find Sun and heal him. Only then would I give myself time to think about it again.

Across us, the rushing waters were stained with blood. I could tell we were very close to the human's new stronghold. And this was the end of the surprise tunnels they'd dug into cavernous walls. If Sun and Hadi didn't emerge here... Surely then...

"Apologize to Kiar," Bracken growled as I ignored him.

Why? That wasn't important!

"I will not. Hopelessness will not help us now," I grumbled, and Bracken's palm connected with my ass and part of my backside.

"Ow!" I whined and then straightened, embarrassed. It had been over a decade since I was spanked like that for being disrespectful.

"Brats will be punished on and off the battlefield. Now part your lips and apologies to him before I force you, Clem," Bracken growled, pointing to a gory wound I had not seen on Kiar's arm until now, and I hung my head in shame.

"You master a little magic and lose your mind. Kiar has done nothing but shield you; his body is torn and bloody from protecting you as your mistress sent her visions," he scowled, spitting out "visions" derisively. "You will not disrespect him in your grief. None of us! He has done more than enough to earn your respect."

I tried to puff up, be brave, and snap back. But my bravado was just that, bravado when I was forced to turn and look at Kiar thoroughly. And then I looked up to Bracken, and crestfallen couldn't begin to explain my emotions.

Bracken was not mad. No, master was... I shuddered. It was far worse than anger, disappointment was palpable in the air. Kiar's eyebrows knitted together, his breathing labored, weak, weary. I'd been an ass.

I balked, my light illuminating Kiar more fully as he approached. His underside was torn and bloody, and his chest littered with scars. He was more hurt than both of us combined but hadn't complained once other than to voice his sorrow that Sun was slipping away from us.

I fell mute, and Bracken smashed his fist into the cave wall, grumbling, "I will dig deeper and make the hole wider for when Hadi carries Sun here."

He left Kiar and me behind, my light still bright as Bracken dug and dug, desperation radiating from him.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered as I healed Kiar slowly, my powers draining from me, and I was afraid I'd be too weak if I used anymore now. But I had to help him.

I couldn't meet Kiar's slit eyes. Master... Bracken... All I wanted was to be seen as their equal and treated like a real bond worthy of the title, and as soon as I gained a little strength, I let it rush to my head, drunk on power.

"Don't listen to that bastard," Kiar crooned, the back of his cool palm brushing against my cheek, the scales on his tail rippling beside me as he nestled me into his tail like a chair. "He has the most disrespectful mouth in the kingdom and berates you about manners? Beyond belief."

He rolled his eyes, but I shook my head, still not meeting his gaze as I finished healing him faster than the bond would usually allow.

"No, Master," Kiar cocked an eyebrow, and I bit my lip, as I hadn't called him that in weeks, "Bracken was right to correct me. I was weak before, and now I feel strong. I shouldn't have lashed out at you."

Kiar's gaze softened, and I was shocked to feel his arms wrap around me

affectionately as Bracken slung mud and dirt over our heads, “No, you were right, and I was wrong. No matter how we feel, we shouldn’t give into despair. We are still breathing. That’s proof enough that they are, too. We wait. Hadi is strong. He’ll protect him just as I’ll protect you. You don’t have to fight for anything to prove yourself to us. We are with you.”

I nodded, smiling as his tongue glided from my chin to the corner of my eye and back to my cheek. It was like a kiss, about as sweet as a naga usually gave, a kind Kiar didn’t usually share with Sun, who would indeed look at him like he grew another head. I didn’t know when everything had changed between us, the exact moment, but I grinned, realizing I was chasing what was already beside me. It felt so right.

I was a part of them as much as they were a part of me. They didn’t rule me but protected me. In my desperation to prove myself, I’d forgotten this.

“Sun!” Bracken shouted, and we bolted upward, my head and wings clipping Kiar’s chin as we tumbled closer to the entrance.

Sure enough, our warrior rode triumphantly on Hadi’s back below us, who smiled. Healed! Another miracle from our goddess of darkness.

Lord Hadi smiled, and it was quite... beautiful. I grinned back just as happily, and by the way Sun shielded his eyes, my glow must have intensified.

With our help, they broke through the mounds of mud and dirt, and we were all over each other as we sighed and moaned our immense relief. But we did not have time to savor this moment. We had a war to win.

“Where are we?” Hadi asked looking around.

“North,” Sun said proudly. “Nearly at the gates of Kari.”

“Yes,” Bracken agreed. “And there is already an army waiting to meet us there.”

He hadn’t mentioned seeing anything like that while we flew, but looking at his face, I just knew he hadn’t wanted to worry us even more.

“You should rest,” Kiar told Sun, but he shook his head.

“The longer we wait, the more time they have to gather Emperor Gaulu’s followers. We go now.”

“Then we simply follow the stampede,” I said as we all exited the cave mouth, following what was left of the military tunnel above ground.

They looked at me, puzzled, not hearing the hoofbeats I could hear thundering not far ahead. But they obeyed, trusting me, which made my chest swell with pride.

We would be at the gates of Kari in no time. Soon, we’d all be heroes. The world would be made anew. Daaku slain. Gaulu killed.

It would all be so perfect. I squeezed the spell book to my chest as I rode Kiar’s backside, Bracken taking to the air to shield us, Hadi and Sun swinging and galloping ahead.

I squeezed Kiar tight, and he emitted a low, rumbling hiss of reassurance. But he didn’t need to. I’d done my part, unlocked the secrets, and watched for the signs.

Tsuki’s blessing was righteous, and her will was just! Nguyen was right. We would win. And if things got bad...

Well, I had one more trick up my sleeve. For with or without the physical tether, our bonds would never break. Of this much, I was confident.

Chapter 17

Sun

I knew that the furthest point of the tunnel emerged close to Kari. That didn't leave much time to collect myself.

I'd seen my beloved mare resurrected, had been stabbed, saved by the goddess and then finally, I had given in to Hadi.

My fingers trailed up his chest as we walked, and I wondered... what had I been so afraid of ?

Giving myself over completely had worried me so much. Somehow, I'd felt like I would lose myself, but when Hadi fucked me, it was like we were both equal, both giving in, both finding a connection beyond what we had expected.

I shook my head and tried to push the thoughts away.

The emperor was surely in Kari right now, in his palace of lies, awaiting our arrival.

Soon, no doubt, we would be surrounded once again. I only hoped that General Hideyoshi kept true to his promise to meet us at the gates with our supporters.

Sure enough, the familiar sounds of battle were soon easily distinguished as shouts, clanking metal, and cries of despair filled the air.

All of us tensed as we walked toward it.

Every other thought vanished from my mind as we turned onto the path that led directly to the city's sweeping entrance.

From a distance, we moved toward the large clearing where the battle was taking place.

My heart was in my throat as the walls and most importantly, the doors came into sight.

The large gray bricks rose all the way into the sky, nearly as high as the palace walls themselves and the doors were even more immense and intimidating. Tall, black and metal. Designed to keep even the craftiest of nocs from getting into Kari too easily.

They were sealed shut and archers no doubt held position in the lookouts from the top. But we would find a way through, and we would open those doors for our supporters.

Emperor Gaulu would very shortly know the menace we could be.

"We should go straight through," Kiar said. "Let the others fight for us. We won't stop moving forward until we are in the palace."

My body was still sore and stiff, but it was now or never. He was right.

"Then let us go quickly, before we are seen."

The others nodded and with that, we ran forward.

Hadi was fast when he needed to be, all eight legs blurs as he carried us into the

edges of the fray. Kiar shot ahead like a whip, his body just as hard to decipher unless he paused and above Clem and Bracken shot through the air like arrows, leading the way.

It didn't take long before we were noticed. A well-aimed spear nearly caught me and sent me tumbling from Hadi's back.

Rather than taking the time to climb back atop him, I began to fight, pulling my new dear horn weapons free and silently thanking Hideyoshi for stocking me up.

"There!" Clem shouted, pointing.

I couldn't see what he was seeing from his vantage point, but I still went where he told me to, fighting my way through, ignoring the stiffness in my muscles from holding me back.

Hadi moved ahead of me, clearing the way, Kiar followed, protecting us from behind while Bracken dove down, attacking relentlessly. When I glanced back at him, the humans against us were using concentrated efforts to get him now, spears and arrows shooting through the air toward him, but I didn't worry. Despite his size, Bracken was agile.

Instead of worrying about any of them, I concentrated on getting to wherever Clem was pointing.

And suddenly, it was upon us. Distracted by the battle as I had been, I hadn't seen the horses until they were right there, a multitude of them with soldiers on their backs.

I gasped and paused, watching the warriors cut down our enemies from the back of horses that didn't look quite as dead as they had before.

“Sun!” a familiar voice shouted.

I searched for the source, not seeing Jia until she was over me, riding a steed I had seen her on many years ago, before our beloved horses were taken from us.

She offered her hand.

“Quick! Get on!”

I took her hand, allowing her to help swing me onto her stallion.

“This way!” she shouted, and I realized in shock that she was talking to Hadi and Kiar who were behind me.

They were truly on our side, I realized once more as she kicked her stallion forward, sending us bounding through the battle until we were surrounded more by our allies on horseback than the humans who were against us. Somehow, it was still hard to fathom.

“I’ve been looking for you everywhere!” Jia shouted back to me. “It took us too long to remember the tunnels that lead here. Just as well. You got here just in time.”

“Where did you come from?” I demanded. “And the horses? Are they truly ours?”

“They’re ours!” she said, grinning back at me. “This old boy was lost to me in that treacherous time, and he found me again, just like that. And it’s not just the horses, Sun. Humans rose too. Not all of them, but our allies.”

I shook my head, feeling lost.

“There’s no way—”

“Sun!” Clem shouted and I spun around, deflecting a flying arrow with my arm. I got a shallow slice through the forearm, but better than my head.

I looked back, heart racing at the sight of Hadi, Kiar and Bracken, still in the thick of battle.

“There are too many of them!” I shouted.

“Don't give up yet!” Jia said. “We're nearly there!”

She pointed forward and I realized then where she was taking me—right to the gates of Kari. She, and her platoon were going to get those doors open. I had no doubt. Inside there was where this would all end.

“General Hideyoki went south with his battalion. I don't know if he'll make it back in time. I took Tao south toward Hae and then veered off and rejoined this group once my stallion found me. Sun, you wouldn't believe the things happening through the land. Everything is already changing.”

“Bracken!” I shouted and my large bat beast, attuned to my voice, rose into the air, shaking free of the humans trying to grab him to pull him down.

Instead of continuing to fight, he swept through the air towards me.

“What is it, Sun?” he asked from above us.

“Make way to the gates!”

My entire harem leaped in the direction I pointed, making easy way with our allies towards the tall metal gates gleaming in the distance in the afternoon sun.

Bracken led the way, clearing those who tried to stop us as they became less and less concentrated, the majority falling behind us. The battle was already primarily at our rear and what felt like victory was before us, close enough to taste.

Soon, only the wide stone path into the city lay ahead of us with nothing and no one barring our way. They'd thought their soldiers would stop us. Ha! They underestimated me, my harem, my supporters and the goddess Tsuki. Just like the many battles I'd taken part in before, being underestimated would prove to be our greatest weapon.

“Get those doors open!” Jia shouted to her comrades as we drew nearer. They hurried ahead on horseback, arrows pointed to the watch boxes.

As a group, we slowed to a stop, waiting.

No one appeared in the boxes to tell us we were not welcome, and no one opened fire on us.

“They're hiding,” she said in disgust. Then, louder, she shouted. “Open these doors, or we will do it ourselves!”

Silence rang in response.

“Open the doors!” she instructed her men.

Without hesitation, arrows were shot over the top of the door. They had hooks attached to the front with ropes attached to the ends. They had planned this part better than I had, after all, I had a flying beast to carry me over the wall. But going in with the large group would be better for us. If we charged the palace as one, there would be no way for the palace guards to stop us.

Heart pounding, I watched as the many ropes were gripped and pulled taut.

Still, no alarms sounded. No one appeared to stop us.

“On three!” Jia shouted and when the number was announced they all began to pull as one.

For a moment, there was no response and then with a great, metallic creak, the doors began to part.

Still, silence.

Had the city been evacuated? By now, they had known we were coming. Was all of this effort for nothing?

But no... It hadn't been long since General Hideyoshi had taken our side. That wouldn't be enough time for an entire evacuation. If the entire populace of Kari had left, wouldn't we have heard or seen something ? Wouldn't Jia have heard something?

The towering doors pulled further apart, the momentum suddenly swinging them with more force just as I finally realized.

“No!” I shouted. “It's a trap!”

The moment the words left my mouth, a chilling, inhuman sound reverberated through the air, so loud that all other noise was drowned out. It was like the clicking of a thousand locusts surrounding us and with it, like a swarm, countless nocs came spilling from behind the walls. Every type of bug-like monster, coming toward us, the mass so thick that it was hard to see where one ended and the next began.

And from their midst, a creature so large and hideous that I gasped, emerged.

It was a noc unlike any I had ever seen. Its body stretched as tall as the very walls surrounding the city, long and thick with small legs, hundreds of them, and at the top, a misshapen, hideous human face.

“Daaku!” Hadi shouted and I could scarcely believe it. This was the new noc king. The one who had taken Hadi's rightful place. He was terrifying, absolutely intimidating, but it was hard to fathom strategy coming from such a monstrous creature.

“Run!” Jia shouted, but it was too late. The nocs were upon us and another battle beginning, but all I could think as Jia's horse reared in fear and as I swung my weapon at anyone who came too close, was that Emperor Gaulu had exposed himself.

He was letting the world know that the current noc king was his ally. Why else would he be here, fighting to protect Kari and the emperor himself?

If we could make it out of this alive, everyone would know the truth. No one else would try to stop us.

This was good.

The moment I thought the gloating thought, a scream tore through the air, piercing me, and I knew without even seeing that it was one of my nocs.

My blood went cold as fear shot through me.

I searched in vain to see where the sound had come from and saw at the last moment as Bracken fell from the sky.

Chapter 18

Bracken

My world collapsed into a blur of fangs, fur, and blood as I tumbled through the sky as if I'd been tossed by a catapult. It had happened so fast, my body moving independently, surging towards Daaku. Because down below, they couldn't see it, but I could.

A phantom rider, a puppet master clinging to Daaku's hideous, malformed body, like thousands of crawlers fused into one twisted shape that screamed relentlessly. Screamed in many tongues, cried in the voices of nocs and humans, a demon of incomprehensive evil.

How exquisite! I had to admire the suffering one pathetic sorcerer could enact.

The surge of black magic had been overwhelming, so vile I had vomited as I closed in on Daaku in a flash. He was herding them, my bonded, Sun and Clem, my hearts, Hadi and Kair, towards a large magical circle painted in black ink that seemed to span most of the city, ending near the palace in the distance.

I had heard her, a faint dying whisper weaving its way from the abyss. Tsuki, that bitch was made of pure iron will, worthy of her title. And she had summoned me to my final task. One I wouldn't have avoided even if she told me back in the mirror realm, if she had given Clem visions he could understand.

"Stop the summoning. Fulfill your destiny. I am sorry, child of darkness, but you

must,” she had said. So, I did, blindly, not understanding what it would cost me, but knowing without fully comprehending, I would meet my brutal end, no doubt.

My body thudded against Daaku, who screeched as my claws ripped through hundreds of faces frozen in horror, desperate to hang on. But I couldn’t grab hold, continuing to freefall. But I had taken what I needed from him, his master of shadows wailing and joining the infernal suffering, the chorus of the damned filling the air as I ripped a swirling, misty white jewel from his ghostly hand.

The surge of crawler nocs and all sorts of insect-like creatures I couldn’t recognize stopped. It was as though I’d closed a hellmouth when I barreled toward the crystal, crushing it in my sharp claws, and inhaled the magic within, only to lose... to lose...

I was fading fast, blood seeping into every part of my vision as, finally, I fell into a bloody, broken heap near the city gates. I couldn’t tell who reached me first. The tether was alive, and oh, it was so beautiful, glowing bright white. I could now see it when I could only imagine it before. The remaining black bugs surged skyward, blocking out the darkened sky, and the only light I could see was my soul tethered to four.

“Bracken!” the brokenness in Sun’s voice would’ve broken me if I could feel a thing. But I couldn’t. Maybe it was her magic; perhaps it was the fact that I’d lost too much blood and was too cold to feel much of anything.

Why? Why me?

I knew now what I had done; thousands upon thousands of insect-like creatures were devouring me from the inside out. That magic would die in me, the overwhelming force of creatures summoned to slay my lovers and friends. Was it even worth asking why in the end? It was always meant to end like this. At least this time, I could comfort Clem.

Solemnity. Certainty. I was dying, but I was dying for them, for them to finish what we had started.

“Again,” I groaned, hacking blood and bile so dark it looked black instead of the bright crimson it should’ve been.

Inside were pockets of what could only be larvae, their white husks shedding, fearsome, deformed black creatures emerging with human faces of babes and no bodies. They snapped, sizzled, and wailed like children, catching on fire and burning away.

I tried to warn the others that something more evil than Daaku controlled him, and that they could not save me. Whatever Tsuki had done when she brought me back, she had made me for this purpose, my body a grave for Gaulu’s demented ambition. I wanted to tell them that I had fulfilled my part in this story, and they need not cry for me. Rather than dying from a sneak attack, a warrior’s death was fitting. They had all the reason in the world to be proud.

“Ahaah!” I gagged on those words, insects and blood and hell, maybe even my guts spilling from my mouth.

It's a pity I won't see that bastard Gaulu torn to shreds like I'd seen Kovit.

“Do not speak! Bracken, do not utter another word,” Kiar shouted, wrapping around me, winding and winding, applying pressure to a gaping wound that gushed more blood beside me.

But it was no use. My wing, my precious wing, had been ripped off and it had severed something deep within me when it was taken. I couldn't lift a claw or twitch a toe on my left side. Even my eyelid was heavy.

I was paralyzed, and something sick and twisted was seeping into my flesh, fanning out through my veins—some sort of poison.

And the bleeding wouldn't end.

A batbeast without their wings was more than useless, they were better off dead. I had not a single honorable bone in my destroyed body, but if I could reach for one, I'd impale my faintly beating heart on a sword.

Their pity was misplaced. I'd won, not failed this time. They needed to move, to kill.

"Live..." another wave of nausea followed by blood erupted from my gaped mouth.

Breathing was too hard now. Through the haze of my death, I could see Clem screaming, covered in my blood. But I couldn't hear him. They all sounded so far away, and I sank deeper into the earth, water rushing through my ears.

"Wake up! Wake the hell up, Bracken! You will not die here. I will not allow it," Hadi hissed, breaking through the sea surrounding me, pressing his body over top of Kiar's.

Maybe he was trying to stop the blood, too, as Clem muttered useless spells.

I would've laughed if it wouldn't make my lungs collapse. In the end, he ordered me around. But what more could he want? I'd died for Hadi not once but now it would be twice.

He didn't need to worry so much, after all, Tsuki had implied it would just be me to go. I wanted to tell them, but I couldn't speak.

"Enough... puppet," Sun silenced me now, stroking my face, his hands joining the

others, and they were not listening! I did not have many words left in me, my chest filling with the darkness and the horror, and my mind swam with a vision of an afterlife more brutal and demented than the shadowland we'd resided in.

Only someone as wicked as me could survive there, maybe thrive there as an underworld king. Tsuki had at least thought ahead that much, and for that, I was grateful.

"I'll fix this, I'll fix this, I'll fix this," Clem was chanting, rocking over me, his magic trying to push out the evil, but he couldn't. A child of darkness couldn't end it. He was too weak.

Clem had asked me once if we had mothers and fathers. I had firmly said no, so sure of myself back then.

But I'd been wrong...

And her arms around me are so warm, her skeletal frame plush like a pillow, her gnashing black teeth beautiful.

For once, I surrendered to a power greater than me without a fight. We had eternity once they joined me beyond the grave if I escaped that hellish land. I would meet them again someday...

Chapter 19

Sun

This couldn't be right. It just couldn't. But the truth was forced upon me, whether I liked it or not.

I sat immobile, covered in blood that stank of something I couldn't name, and maggots born from the bile, malicious and snapping, burning away like paper charms, lit on fire by an invisible hand one by one. It was disgusting and inconceivable, and Bracken was dying because of them. I could feel it in every bone in my body.

"No," I wailed as a soldier knocked into me, rushing into the fray. I could hear the fight against Daaku behind us like it was from a far distance.

"He's dying," Hadi said, mirroring my thoughts, words I could not bring myself to speak.

Something like poison, but worse, was spreading everywhere through the tether, corrupting our souls.

I could barely bring myself to look at Bracken. Tendrils of what had to be black magic curled around him from his open wound. He looked worse than the undead horses who'd charged from the cracks in the Earth.

Another wail pierced the air, and I was sure it was Clem. But it wasn't. It was Kiar who stopped trying to stem the bleeding and just held him. Bracken looked peaceful,

eyes white and fading gray, a familiar empty gaze I'd seen hundreds of times over the years.

But his stomach contorted, bulged, and misshapen. Something was trying to break free of him. And with the last of his strength, he was keeping it in, dragging them with him to the grave.

Hadi, too, sat immobile, realizing we were all going to die, no doubt, his commands worthless now. And Clem, my precious Clem...

Clem was flashing every color of the rainbow, and then he went white. Bleach white. Bone white. I ripped my eyes away from him unable to look.

"I..." a sob tore from Clem's trembling body, Bracken's black blood seemingly etched onto him like tattoos, "I c-c-can't fix this!"

Clem's face fell into his palms as I made myself look at him again, the other set of hands covering his ears as he sobbed and sobbed. Hadi's face twisted, shaking his head no, whispering, "Do something, Clem. Beg her. She has helped us so far. She is a goddess!"

"She can't!" Clem shouted, never lifting his face, gasping for air between every whimpering breath. "She has nothing left. She tried to warn me. Even Taiyo tried to warn me! I... I can't."

I shuddered at that. No, no, there had to be a way. One missing wing shouldn't kill him, but whatever curse Daaku placed on Bracken seemed to have done the trick. Clem just needed to break it!

"You can't die on me. You said you were my master. You can't protect me if you're dead," I begged as I leaned over Bracken.

Beyond the sorrow in Kiar and Hadi's eyes swam fear. Fear any moment now, their hearts would stop beating with Bracken's, and we'd fall into one mass grave.

"I...love you too, Sun," he murmured, Bracken's voice suddenly clear and resolute.

But his eyes were so misty and so very, very far away.

Deliriously, he lifted a claw to my chin, his hand swayed and jerked uncontrollably. "So utterly human. I detest it... But I love you."

"Don't say that," I demanded, because those were the words of a dying man and he didn't need to say it. None of them did. I already knew they loved me. It was clear as day.

His eyes widened, and genuine fear, fear I'd never seen on his face before, eclipsed the telltale signs of death.

"Clem!" he begged, "Kiar, Hadi, I'm—"

I thought he would say he was afraid, but then Bracken stiffened, head snapping back and forth, body jerking. Kiar tried to hold him down, then I joined and Hadi, but Bracken was too strong, shaking like a man possessed.

And then it stopped, all at once, and he lifted his head at an unnatural angle, his face pointed to Kiar, but his eyes trained on Clem.

"Why are you afraid?" he said, and I shuddered because Bracken was not speaking anymore. The voice was too weary, soft, and tinged with regret to be his.

"Why are you afraid..." the raspy voice continued, "my emissary?"

Clem screamed, the sound so sharp and heavy I threw myself at him and forced his face to the ground. All around us, those bugs swirled, and soldier after soldier threw themselves at Daaku, who raged above, with the swirling dark clouds, a vengeful demon who could not be stopped. We'd be dead before we could end him.

Tsuki, possessing Bracken, breathed deep, "Only way... to stop... the hellmouth must be closed. Magic he should not possess, stolen from me."

She wasn't making any sense to any of us, but as Clem tore at and then ripped out the fur around his collar, I knew he knew what she meant.

"There has to be another way!" he begged. But even speaking through Bracken, she looked so weak, and I knew; Tsuki was dying, too.

"Eternal night overtakes the land, and the children of light surrender to the darkness," she said.

"Warrior, consume the evil; close the hellmouth forevermore. A soul dies for many souls. Eclipse the darkness, devouring gods."

I blinked away my tears and grimaced. Her words conjured up old stories sung by traveling bards in the good days when I was too young to understand the messages in the music.

And then, she dropped a bombshell worse than Gaulu's betrayal on me.

"Sever the tether, so the warrior of light may live."

"What?" Hadi exclaimed, but Bracken's eyes rolled back, but with a gasp from Bracken, she was gone as quickly as she came.

I shook Clem, demanding he finish the riddle that wasn't a riddle.

"Break the tether? Didn't you say that couldn't be done?"

Clem raised his head, and now even his eyes were white, and I drew back. His sobbing had ended, and he was so very empty, like a corpse.

"...I was tricked. The book said the tether was an unbreakable soul bond, but there is one way..."

"Enough riddles," Kiar shouted as Bracken wheezed, his eyes finally fluttering shut.

Clem looked at each of us, and then the book of spells appeared in his palms, trailed by glimmering moonlight, "A way to sever the tether. I thought it would save us one day. And it will."

I waited, wondering why he wasn't doing it, and then it hit me all at once.

Hellmouth? I didn't know much about divine affairs, but I knew of souls now.

"Will... Bracken be gone forever?" I demanded, and our breaths hitched as Clem nodded.

"Gone. Gone... the only way I know how to save you," Clem whispered. "And he will never be with us ever again."

"Unacceptable. Find another way," Hadi demanded, and Kiar's head fell, resting on Bracken's chest. His breathing was so shallow now. We didn't have much time. Our choices were damn Bracken's soul, or die with him. And Clem just dropped his head into his lap, defeated.

I stood resolute. Daaku would die. Jia and the others could and would find a way to assassinate Gaulu and build a new world. I was never much of a statesman, so I would do what I did best— kill.

“Keep him alive, Clem. Keep him alive until I have that bastard’s head. Hadi, Kiar, follow me.”

I didn’t look back as I jogged towards Daaku, drowning out Clem’s screams to stop, to come back. Then I broke into a run that would surely blister my feet. The world vanished outside of my target. And then there was only one emotion left inside of me.

White hot rage !

Chapter 20

Sun

Fury blinded me. Anger unlike anything I had ever felt coursed through my veins.

My family had been slaughtered before. That anger had driven me for all my years, but it was nothing like this. This was vitriol. It was poison.

My Bracken. A literal part of my soul being taken from me and for what?! For a corrupt emperor. He had done this.

I had minutes, maybe even less than that left but I would not go without taking every last person who opposed me with me. I would not leave this earth with Daaku breathing. I would not rot while Emperor Gaulu remained on the throne. I would not damn Bracken in exchange for my soul.

If the emperor appeared before me now, I would tear his heart from his body with my bare hands. But for now, I had Daaku, the disgusting beast that towered over us all. The one who had made Bracken fall.

With a cry, I dove forward with the wave of soldiers, all of us focusing on Daaku's monstrously large frame.

He fell forward, hitting the ground, crushing those in his way and we closed in on top of him, stabbing him, slicing him, tearing off limbs.

If he felt any of it, he did not respond, instead, lifting back up, throwing people off of him and slamming back down once more, crushing more bodies.

When he lifted again, I clung to him, hands around two of his tiny limbs so I was gripping something. He lifted high in the air. Even after often flying with Bracken, I was surprised by the sudden height, but an idea struck me.

Using his limbs as foot and hand holds, I began to climb him like a ladder.

Our attacks on his body had done little to nothing, but perhaps his head was weak.

He threw himself down once more. My legs went flying into the air, but I held tight, not allowing myself to let go. Not even when he slammed into the ground and my body collided with his hard shell, winding me.

When he lifted up into the air again, I began to climb as though nothing had happened, determined to kill the bastard while I still had the chance.

He moved to fall once more, but I was so close, dammit. With a burst of speed, I hoisted myself, throwing myself higher, catching him around the thick throat just as he began his descent.

But my blade was ready and I knew this was it.

Without hesitation, I sliced through the bastard king's neck, pulling the blade clean from one side to the other. I felt how deep it cut into his flesh, the satisfying release of blood and gore as black gunk sprayed from within him.

I hit the ground, still holding tightly to Daaku, feeling his body twitch beneath me and a cry of celebration filled the air from those who had been fighting him with me.

I'd done it. I'd defeated the false no king at least and by some miracle, I was still here... which meant that Bracken wasn't quite dead yet, right?

Unless Clem had severed the bond... but no, he wouldn't have without our consent. And I would have felt Bracken leaving us. I was sure.

Before I could dwell on it, Daaku's body gave a great heave, a last sign of his life draining away, or so I thought until suddenly, he lifted again, carrying me up into the air as though nothing had happened.

"What the hell?" I shouted.

His deformed head fell back limply, exposing bones and flesh. His eyes were open and unseeing.

What was happening ?! It was like something was controlling his lifeless body.

For some reason, I looked beyond the city walls and that was when I saw him .

Emperor Gaulu.

He stood on the fountain by the entrance just out of sight of the battle, but close enough to watch the proceedings and he held a book in his hands.

He read from it with such focus and determination, his hand raised in the air. Then, with a sweep, he moved his hand down and with the movement, Daaku fell, taking me with him.

That bastard.

He was controlling Daaku and it occurred to me, he probably had been controlling

him from the start. Hadi's kingdom had been too strong. They had been winning. Perhaps that was why he had finally decided to intervene, replacing the king with a being under his literal control. Everything that had happened, every moment of this war that had stretched on for years had been carefully orchestrated by the emperor.

Well, it ended now.

I threw myself from Daaku's back, not thinking about the landing until I was soaring through the air. I pulled myself into a ball at the last minute, hitting the ground and rolling onto my feet, unwilling to waste a moment.

I would not be distracted by Emperor Gaulu's puppets any longer.

I tore through the city gates with a cry of success. Satisfied by the way the emperor jumped when he looked up and saw me.

I expected him to run, I wanted the chase, to land on his back and slice through his neck the way I had done to Daaku. I doubted that he would rise again the way the puppet had. After all, he was the master.

He did not run though. No, instead, he whispered something quickly under his breath and suddenly, a shadow fell over me.

I looked up, barely diving out of the way on time as Daaku suddenly slammed down where I had been standing.

I hit the ground with even less grace than I had before, jumping to my feet, still fixated on my ultimate prize, Emperor Gaulu. But the bastard was running now, back to the palace like a little frightened mouse and Daaku...

The emperor had fixed Daaku's focus on me alone. Instead of lifting and slamming at

random, he slithered toward me, his dead head still lolling.

“Damn you!” I shouted, but the emperor was gone now, leaving all of us to finish the battle on our own.

But how?! How could I stop a giant centipede that could not be stopped even in death?

“Sun!”

It was Jia again, accompanied by others, some on horseback, some on foot. A cascade of soldiers pouring into the city to help me. More than before, I was suddenly sure just as General Hideyoki rode in on horseback at her rear.

My heart soared at the sight of him. He had arrived just in time to end this battle for our side. Even if I was gone before I could see it, they would fight on.

“You made it!”

“Wouldn’t miss it, Sun!” he shouted to me in return.

Just in time too, because with sudden agility that I hadn't believed Daaku could possibly possess, he wrapped himself around me, catching me in his thick body.

“Tear it limb from limb!” Jia shouted. “If he cannot be killed, at least we can stop him from moving!”

His hold was tight, but not tight enough to stop me from fighting back, from stabbing into his hard shell and taking Jia's advice to pull and tug and cut at his limbs.

With a sickening crunch, one leg broke free in my bare hands. Around me, humans

piled atop Daaku, attacking his body mercilessly.

With a hard push, I somehow managed to wiggle and kick free, even angrier now than I had been before, torn between ripping Daaku apart with my bare hands and going after Emperor Gaulu before he managed to make an even bigger mess somehow.

Daaku began to thrash, his movements growing in violence, making my decision for me because I could not leave my comrades.

I moved toward Daaku, ready to fight him until the end but a wretched feeling suddenly tore through my chest.

It was like everything bad in the world. It was like death and loss and despair hitting me with one solid swipe, a knife straight to the heart and I knew.

“ Bracken! ”

His name tore through my throat, taking me to my knees as life simply lost all meaning.

Damn it. Clem had failed. I was out of time.

I was fading.

Chapter 21

Clem

Keep him alive. Keep him alive. Keep him alive.

Sun's final command echoed in my mind, but I couldn't bring myself to move a muscle as the book of shadows dissolved into a black mist that scattered away with the rush of soldiers storming the open gate.

I was empty. Worse than empty. A cavernous tooth-filled pit had opened inside me, sucking away at everything bit by bit. The world itself lost any color, and I gazed at the rest of my lovers washed in muted shades of white, black, and gray, swarming with hopelessness as I clicked.

Even the blackness of Bracken's blood seemed darker. And if I had more tears to cry, I would wail until I collapsed at the sight of that.

But I had nothing left.

I couldn't contain the sorrow, anger, and fear within me anymore. And that bastard's voice was inside my mind, taunting me.

Sacrifice, Clem. Bear her blessing well, Bracken.

I'd have to sacrifice significantly as Tsuki's emissary. That's what that nightwing had told me. But I was not honorable like Sun. I could not and would not bear this loss

with my head held high. I couldn't do it. Yet I knew I had to use the spell to sever the tether now.

But that isn't what Sun told me, I thought. He said to keep him alive. But why? So that Bracken can suffer longer? I can't do that to him. I just can't!

But my inaction was having more or less the same effect as he wheezed, his chest fluttering, then going up and down slower and slower still. His face had twisted into something horrifying when Tsuki left him. I didn't dare imagine where he had gone, at the lip of the hellmouth awaiting endless suffering without a shadow of a doubt.

Where we'd all end up if I didn't act.

His tether was but a spider's web, thin and shining, snapping. I had to break it now. I had to, or Sun, Hadi, and Kiar would die!

I reached for it, and Kiar snatched my hand away, his spots and two-toned hair more pronounced in the colorblind dystopia my eyes had glazed over to.

"No. Keep him alive," Kiar demanded, and I shook my head, clawing at him, trying to wrench my wrist away.

"I must sever the bond! We are running out of time!" I pleaded as he shook his head vigorously.

"We go together or not at all. Just give us enough time to slay him," Kiar pleaded, and suddenly, pressed his lips to mine.

His desperation leaked into my mouth and tasted much sweeter than the poison welling up inside. And then he was gone, dashing after Sun, hacking and slashing his way through the city guards and the demonic creatures summoned from the

hellmouth portal.

I looked after him helplessly, shaking. Why were they leaving me one by one? Why were they all leaving me alone if we were meant to go together?

Sensing my distress at their absence, Hadi kneeled and took me into his arms. His white irises swam in the familiar inky black pool of his eyes, and I could not tell if it was tears or blood streaming down his face now.

“You can do this. Remember, you’re one of us. Tsuki’s emissary. We will fight, and you will defend this bond to the death.”

Hadi folded me into his chest, all four arms trembling, and I squeezed my eyes tight. I did not want to remember the last of Tsuki’s essence flowing through Bracken until she was but a wisp of moonlight.

Moonlight? I looked up and over Hadi’s shoulder and saw the moon sitting in the blue sky, a pale whisp of nothing in the daylight. So dull and exhausted.

Our mother was so very tired and blameless when the whole of Naran cursed her name for something she had never wished for.

I couldn’t bring myself to squeeze Hadi back as he released me, and I fluttered weakly to Bracken’s side. And he, too, left, charging into battle while I rested my head on my dying master’s chest.

I wished the tears would return if only to wash away the bloodstains. The tether was so weak now, each of us dying bit by bit. I reached for Bracken’s strand, not to snap it, but hold it firm, and my hands passed through it.

Like a ghost.

I closed my eyes and focused. This time, I grabbed onto it and held it.

Bracken jerked, his eyes fluttering open, and he looked at me with fear. Fear a batbeast should never have. Fear my master should never have. Especially, not toward me.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered because what else could I say? All I had left to do was prolong the inevitable.

But then, he reached for me weakly, trying, gurgling curses. And though he couldn’t say it, I read his lips slowly.

You... cannot... die... no... there... I... I will...

Another splattering mist of blood, but I received his message. Wherever the hellmouth led, he wanted to protect me from it. He wanted me to sever the bond. He wanted to protect us, even now.

Suddenly, my mood took a seismic shift that seemed to shake the earth with it. Bitterness morphed into rage and then fury, and my whole body burned, blood red, like an avenging god.

Why could we not have it all? Why should we have to forfeit a soul? We had been asked the impossible and met every challenge, and we would not die like this. There had to be something I could do.

I have to protect them!

No sooner did I think it, then Bracken finally succumbed to his injuries. I felt it, just like the first time he had died, his soul slipping from his body, the tendril in my hand slipping through my fingers. It affected me this time, making me feel instantly weak.

Moments from my own demise.

“Help!” I shouted, looking up just as our invading army and the one defending the city met in a brutal wave that just... stopped.

Frozen. No, that wasn't it. They had slowed.

Time had slowed.

Someone or something was granting me more time, but it wasn't enough! I didn't need time, I needed power!

“More,” I demanded, my eyes cast to the sky, to the wispy moon and bright sun, and shouted, “You will give me more!”

More power! I needed more power, and I could not take another drop from Tsuki's heavenly springs. Not a speck of power could be gathered from the dust of their son's earthly body. So, there was only one other eternal source, an immortal being to turn to, released from his chains, reunited with his wife through the stones Sun held.

“Give me more!” I screamed.

And he did just that.

A surge of mana flowed into me, pinpricks of light shooting through the air towards me, holding the tethered souls of hundreds of thousands in and around the capital that erupted into a pillar of red light.

I screamed. This portal was different, more powerful, as if we'd been swallowed up into something much, much worse than the hellmouth Bracken had closed and consumed on our behalf.

“Sun God Taiyo!” I shouted as the mana pierced the sky, swirling, opening. My whole body jerked in primordial terror as I looked upon his eye, his flaming eye that held the sun and the universe within it.

I screamed, shutting my own eyes as they burned. But I didn’t care. I kept shouting through the pain.

“You are a god, and we, your mediums! You will seek vengeance. You will make a bridge,” I said and was met with silence as more waves moved in slow motion, charging, my eyes stinging as I forced myself to open them and didn’t shut them again. “If not for your human creations, for us nocs, for your wife, for your son, before this world is swallowed whole! Save us! Give me the power to save them!”

Nothing. He did not respond.

I slumped, damned. But Hadi had not been punished for calling our mother a bitch, so I felt good calling upon and demanding salvation from our father. If anything, I was just ignored.

Why would Taiyo help us nocs? We were the reason his people had long suffered and his wife had been driven to madness.

“I failed,” I whispered. A moment later, a piercing pain shot through my chest.

This was it! Like the ticking of a mighty clock, life was slipping away. I threw myself over Bracken and clutched my dying hearts.

This was it! We are going to—

“Ah fuck. Next time, ask that bastard for mercy, not power. If only you knew what he flung me through. My whole body feels ravaged, Clem.”

Huh?

My eyes flew open, fixing on Bracken, who watched me with sharp eyes.

“Ahhhhhhh!” my scream of terror pitched louder, harder, and then burst into squeals of utter delight as I looked upon him.

“Master Bracken?”

“In the flesh. Next time I go through something like that, I’m staying dead. No more second chances, Clem, you hear me?” he said snarkily, his face radiant, and his wing!

Oh my. The black bile had crystalized, a wound on his shoulder scarring. His new wing was made of sheer black crystals, glittering, with the souls of tiny demons scratching and bursting inside, creating thin flaming lines of magma sealed within.

It was grotesquely glorious, utterly miraculous. My manic laughter filled the air as Bracken let me go to avoid a flaming boulder that had been shot from the battle. But he couldn’t dodge it all the way. It slammed into his side and did...

“Nothing,” I gasped as he snatched it, leaped into the air, spun, and hurled it back down to the earth, cackling all the while.

I studied him in confusion and saw it. Ripples, like time itself, had created a shield around us, and we were outside of it now. Tendrils of Taiyo’s magic filled every inch of the air. I didn’t know if that meant we’d die after the time capsule lapsed or if we’d have many, many days of nursing injuries. Either way, Taiyo had done his best.

Everyone had. All of us five, all the humans fighting with us, and all the weakened Gods. And now the rest was left to us, nocs and humans, fighting side by side.

I ascended, stronger, climbing higher than any mothian ever had. I was sure of this. And I met Bracken in the sky as we embraced and kissed, the world bursting with color again, overflowing with shades I had never seen before that couldn't possibly be real but were.

And all of Naran seemed to stretch below us, an endless symphony of creation I had helped to protect.

Chapter 22

Kiar

For a moment there, I had thought it was all over. It wasn't the first time that my life had come to a brief end only to be brought back by Clem's magic.

This though, the surge of strength and power that wasn't dimming or diminishing, was far preferable to waking up as a shadow in Sun's cell with my soul barely intact.

I laughed aloud, forgetting where I was, forgetting that I was still surrounded by enemies. It didn't matter in the least. A winged necro beast swiped past me, stabbing me with pincers and even without deflecting, it was like my skin had armor. I felt the attack, but it deflected off of me as though my skin was a shield.

Grin growing wider, I turned, meeting the surprised gaze of my attacker.

“Oh, is that all?” I asked gleefully and leaped at him, catching him by the wing and tearing it off like it was made of paper.

The creature screamed but I did not have sympathy for my enemies, especially not right now when we had nearly lost it all.

With sharp claws and limitless strength, I cut through his flesh until he stopped moving.

Only when the last twitch ran through his fallen body, did I finally look up again,

searching the scene for any of my comrades.

Hadi was on a rampage, stronger than ever now, throwing bodies left and right. And in the air above us, Bracken flew, a truly magnificent creature with a new wing that may as well have been made from starlight.

Overwhelming love and satisfaction filled me as I watched him explore his new speed and agility with wonder, shooting through the air faster than an arrow while Clem—beautiful Clem—clapped excitedly.

I understood.

It was hard not to feel celebratory, but this wasn't over yet. We had to kill the emperor.

Where was Sun ?

I found him almost at once as a great cheer rose from the crowd near the entrance. Spinning to see the commotion, my grin only grew at the sight of Sun.

He was covered in black blood, his eyes gleaming as he ripped Daaku apart with his bare hands. Our new strength was a delight to see especially on my human lover.

Laughing triumphantly, I slithered through the people to get close enough to watch the manic display as Sun continued, showing no signs of stopping.

He dug his hands between the plates of the giant's body and with bulging muscles pulled him apart, shouting and grunting as he did it again and again, leaving the creature literally in pieces.

I moved to get closer and only then noticed that someone was following me.

Spinning to catch them, I stopped dead as I came face to face with a horse. For a moment we looked at each other until her dark, discerning eyes told me everything I needed to know.

“Haru,” I said, and she huffed in response. “So, you have come all this way following your master?”

I glanced over her, not surprised to see that her flesh had regrown. Now only patches of missing fur remained to tell her tale of falling on the battlefield and being resurrected years later to rejoin the war. Tsuki had done something truly amazing.

I reached out, smiling, and patted her neck.

“I know what it is like to be brought back,” I informed her. “And yes, I do share my soul with your master, but you should save this reunion for him.”

She huffed again and I could see the excitement in her eyes.

“Come,” I said, and turned on my tail to hurry to Sun.

He was dismembering Daaku's large head from his body now, his teeth grit and bared with the force of his concentration.

“It is done,” I said loudly. “Daaku is not coming back now, Sun. He poses no threat.”

My voice seemed to pierce through his concentration, and he finally paused and turned to look at me.

All the various parts of Daaku remained alive, writhing uselessly wherever they had been thrown.

“It is hard to believe that this bastard was the one who had us overthrown and killed,” I spat venomously.

Sun shook his head fervently.

“It wasn't him. It was Emperor Gaulu. He has been controlling not only Daaku, but probably the entire noc side. Keeping the war going. Keeping himself on the throne. That bastard! He ran toward the palace as soon as I was upon him.”

I could hear the frustration in his voice and reached out, squeezing his shoulder.

“Then we shall waste no more time,” I promised. “Let us go after him. Now.”

Sun nodded, finally looking at me and freezing at the sight of Haru, just as his horse gleefully skipped to him, head-butting him and nuzzling him.

“H–Haru?” he asked, and I nodded.

“Your steed has been through a lot to reunite with you,” I said. “Take her now. Head after Gaulu.”

His hands stroked Haru reverently. He couldn't even look away.

“But the others—”

“I will gather them. We will follow close behind you. Go .”

It felt momentarily strange to push Sun to ride away to face another unknown danger, and atop a horse instead of Hadi. But with the new found strength that Clem had somehow given us all, my worry was greatly diminished. He had torn apart the noc king with bare hands, after all.

“Meet me at the palace,” Sun said, worry across his face.

I wanted to comfort him, but there was no time.

“Go!” I said, smacking Haru's backside. “We are behind you!”

Finally, Sun turned his gaze forward, leaping through the city streets on his beloved horse's back, his long hair flowing over his shoulders.

My heart ached watching him go. Sun was right, we should all be together, but if Emperor Gaulu was controlling the nocs, there was no time to waste. He may have other plans up his sleeves to make it even more difficult. If we didn't catch him soon, he could get away. We couldn't allow that to happen.

With sudden urgency, I spun around.

Bracken and Clem were now embracing high up in the air.

“Bracken!” I shouted. “Clem!”

But the fools didn't hear me. They were still too busy celebrating. I understood that the new feelings surging through us were almost euphoric, but the battle was still at hand.

Instead, I shot through the crowd toward Hadi.

When I came upon him, I didn't need to say anything. The moment his gaze landed on me his eyes widened.

“Sun,” he said simply.

“He has ridden his steed to the palace to face the emperor alone.”

Hadi cursed and suddenly, without even saying a word to me, he reached down and pulled me, hoisting me onto his back and leaping through the crowd.

I held on tight, not used to this new sensation of jumping so high and then landing with a crash. I had never been on Hadi's back before, but then again, his landings were somewhat more graceful than Bracken's and I could get used to it.

“What is happening?!”

Clem's urgent voice drew my attention, and I looked over, realizing that he and Bracken were flying with us now.

“Finally!” I chastised. “Sun has ridden off to the palace to face Gaulu.”

Clem's eyes widened but Bracken's face darkened with determination. Goddess, I was glad to see the bastard still alive.

“He's not facing that asshole without me,” he promised and shot forward, going ahead of us.

Good. We would catch up with Sun fast. He would not face the emperor alone.

He would not face anything alone. We wouldn't allow it.

Chapter 23

Sun

Haru galloped up the stairs to the grandiose palace with me on her back. I could feel her fiery nature, her determination, so familiar even after years without her.

She didn't care about the guards pointing arrows down at us. Like me, she did not fear death. As long as I could take the emperor with me, it would be worth it.

Still, I had no shield to block their strikes, I had no weapons to fire back. All I had was my horned dagger and I needed that. I needed it to slice through the emperor.

An arrow hit me, glancing off my shoulder as though I was made of metal, and I laughed in shock.

What had Clem done to us? And whose power now flowed through my veins? Surely not Tsuki's. The moon goddess dealt in darkness and mirrors.

But the sun god Taiyo, he was all power. Perhaps he had stepped in to help assist his wife's chosen ones.

“Go!” I shouted, kicking Haru to go faster as we reached the top of the staircase.

There were more guards than I'd realized. Hopefully, we could survive a rain of arrows, but there was no need to find out because suddenly Bracken dropped down, landing atop one of them and making quick work of the others by spinning, sending

them flying with his new strong wing.

“Bracken!” I shouted, grinning. “Looking good!”

“Better than ever!” he laughed. “Now get inside!”

“I’ve got the doors!” Clem shouted.

I glanced over my shoulder just as my mothian threw his hands forward, catching the heavy wooden palace doors with white light and then pulling them back. The doors swung open easily and despite the guards' best efforts to stop us, we were inside the palace.

I knew it well. I had been here more times than I could count as a revered guest. I had been treated well, sweetened and buttered up, right in the emperor's palm.

He'd played me easily, just as he had played the entirety of the empire.

Trembling with rage, I directed Haru forward at a slower pace, registering the stillness as her hooves clicked upon the marble.

The place seemed almost deserted, but it could easily be another trap.

“Where are Hadi and Kiar?” I asked Clem.

“They were right behind us,” he said quietly, looking around.

The long marble corridors echoed Haru's steps but nothing else.

“Do you sense anything?” I asked.

Clem's soft feet landed on the cold floors next to us. He rested his hand on Haru's muscular brown neck, looking around intently.

“There,” he whispered after some time, pointing at a small door.

It was a semi-hidden door that matched the green paint on the walls as though we weren't meant to give it any attention.

I climbed from Haru's back as we neared it, wondering if this was where the emperor had run to. Perhaps a secret staircase led to a dungeon of torture.

Jaw grit, I took hold of the handle and pulled—and froze.

It wasn't the entrance to a staircase, it was a cleaning closet, filled with musty mops and dusters. And there, huddled amongst the dirty rags was the bratty prince, Syaoran.

He winced when I opened the door, looking so small, pathetic and weak, shivering in fine chiffon and gold, looking up at me with wide, scared eyes.

My lip curled.

Of all the people who had profited from the war, the emperor's firstborn was top of the list. He lived in lavish comfort while the rest of the kingdom fought to live.

“Get up,” I said, and my voice came out hard and unforgiving.

He followed my order, trembling so hard that I nearly felt sorry for him. But there was no room for that now.

“Wh—what are you going to do to me?” he demanded, attempting that ridiculous

imperious tone that he always used.

“I'm letting you live,” I said, “but not here.”

His eyes widened.

“What—”

“Get out.”

He didn't seem to be able to comprehend my simple words.

“I—I have nowhere else to go.”

I almost laughed but it was too ridiculous.

“This palace no longer belongs to you or your father,” I spat.

He flinched violently.

“Go!”

Another jump and this time, he went running, leaving the palace with nothing but the clothes on his back.

Next to me, Clem let out a little sigh.

“...I almost feel sorry for him.”

“Don't. He was part of this. He probably knew what his father was up to but didn't care.”

“Maybe,” Clem said doubtfully.

Suddenly, a new sound echoed down the deserted corridors. Laughter .

As one, we turned toward it and there, at the very end of the corridor, the emperor stood, head thrown back, his laughter growing.

“Good riddance to the snivelling brat!” he shouted, and his laughter was a bellow now.

He looked the same as always, regal, with his gray hair pulled into a tight bun atop his head, his mustache and beard perfectly trimmed, his outfit immaculate.

But his eyes, they were so damn twisted. How had I never seen it before?! How had I been so blind?!

“Your time has come to an end!” I shouted and he fixed his dark gaze on me, his teeth bared.

“Oh no, Sun, I am afraid it is you who will now meet your end.”

He lifted the book, still in his hands, whispered a quiet word and suddenly, black smoke billowed from him, quickly submerging him, hiding him.

“No!” I shouted and ran forward, straight into the thick fog, almost immediately choking but still pushing forward.

“Sun!” Clem cried and then suddenly wind buffeted against my back, clearing the stuff away.

To my surprise, Clem was using his wings to create the windy protection.

Behind him, Haru followed anxiously as we moved forward, pushing the smoke back further and further until suddenly, the emperor was once again exposed.

His eyes widened, going fully round as we made eye-contact.

“You just keep underestimating us,” I said as we drew closer.

I pulled the blade from my pocket, and he started to read from his book with growing urgency.

Suddenly, to my disgust, a rat no burst from the smoke, then a mothian.

They both dove for us, but it was ridiculous.

Haru alone, rearing with a screech stomped on the advancing rat and he crumbled and then burst into smoke again and before the mothian could even reach us, Kiar suddenly slithered before us, finally having caught up. He blocked the thing and easily broke its neck. It hit the floor and disappeared into the smoke once more.

The whole while, we were advancing, never hesitating.

“What next?” I asked.

The emperor didn't answer. No, with a sudden flourish, he turned and ran, bolting into his chamber, only turning to slam the door behind him, but Kiar was too fast for him. He caught the door and with one quick swipe, he ripped the book from his hands and threw it down the hall.

The smoke evaporated leaving nothing but the pathetic sight of the once great emperor realizing that his reign of terror had finally come to an end.

His eyes were panicked, his movements even more so as he stumbled back and then turned toward the large windows, ready to throw himself through them just as the last of my harem made their appearance.

Hadi rose to his full height from the back of the room, having to bend his head to stop from being on the ceiling. I was reminded of what an intimidating creature he was at first, a massive spider's body, a human torso, four arms, black eyes with red irises, and pincers on his hips. There was a reason he had been feared far and wide.

Then a shadow darkened the doorway, and I realized that Bracken had arrived, the guards finally taken care of.

The emperor turned, terror written across his face as he looked from one to the other of my harem and then eventually, settled his pathetic gaze upon me.

“Sun,” he said, his voice shaking. “Please...”

The sound of his begging, oh , it was like music to my ears.

I stepped toward him, coming closer.

“Please what, Gaulu?” I asked slowly. “Please show mercy? Please spare you? Please give you the same empathy that you showed our people for all these years?”

His eyes widened as he realized what I said, sweat beading on his forehead as he began to cower as I reached him.

Satisfaction rumbled in my chest. This was it. This was the end.

Finally.

“I will give you less than you deserve,” I whispered and slid the dagger into his chest.

He made the familiar telltale sound of someone's last breath. The last moment that air left lungs. The whole while as he sank to the ground, his eyes were fixed on me. I, Batu Sun, his greatest pawn had found the truth and served justice.

And with that, we were free.

I stood there, looking down at the former emperor's body as it slowly began to cool. As all the warmth of the living left him, my wrath cooled.

His blood soaked the lush carpet, wetting my boots, and still, I could not move.

After a while, a hand touched mine, waking me from the strange moment.

I looked at Clem.

He was watching me with those beautiful, soulful eyes of his.

“I am so proud of you Sun,” he whispered, and I nearly broke down.

It was unexpected, catching me completely off guard. A wave of emotion too strong to suppress even though I tried.

I took a shuddering breath and tears stung my eyes and suddenly, they were all around me. Kiar wrapped around me comfortingly, Bracken stroked my hair and Hadi lowered before me, pressing his forehead to mine.

“What now?” I asked when I could talk, and my hands instinctively clung to the fur on Clem's hip on one side and onto Kiar's arm on the other because they were who I could reach. I wished I had an extra two hands to make sure that Hadi and Bracken

weren't going anywhere either. Luckily, they showed no signs of moving away.

“The nocs who were being controlled are free now,” Clem said gently. “The humans now have the truth to accept. We all must find a way to live in peace with one another.”

“How?” I asked.

“Together,” Hadi whispered, and I looked up at him, glad someone had finally said it.

“All five of us,” I said, needing more confirmation than that.

“Of course,” Kiar said matter-of-factly.

“We aren't going anywhere,” Bracken agreed.

Clem smiled against my neck.

“The goddess meant it when she said we are one, Sun. No matter what happens, we do it together. Always.”

Relief filled me.

Everything was about to change. The entire world would be turned on its head. I was glad for it, but I couldn't do it all alone.

“In that case, I have an idea...”

Both the human and noc thrones were free. The goddess wanted balance and harmony.

What better way to unite the light and the dark, than to rule them together?

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:39 am

HADI

It turned out that when you ended a war and freed the world from a monstrous dictator who had been quietly murdering all the people of the land for years, you weren't met with much resistance.

I was the former king of the nocs. I had fought against humans, slaughtering their kind for years, and yet no one seemed to have a problem with me moving into the human palace.

To be fair, they had been slaughtering us right back. Perhaps everyone was just accepting the fact that we had all been manipulated.

It was the truth after all and whether they knew it now or not, having a joint human-noc throne was their best option.

"Ready?" Sun asked.

I looked away from the window, where countless humans and nocs were gathered, peacefully waiting. I had only ever seen so many of us mingling on battlefields before and it was a strange sight to wrap my head around now.

But all other thoughts vanished when I saw Sun standing next to me in his coronation robes.

Green suited him. Being clean and well-rested suited him too. He looked lovely with his long hair tied up in braids and jewels adorning his skin. Although I had to admit, I

liked him more when he was naked and flushed with pleasure, his hair down and messy. Just Sun, and us, his lovers, and soulmates. When we were all cuddled up in bed, that was when we were the most ourselves. Of course, for us to fit at the same time, the bed had to be more of a very comfortable mattress spread across almost our entire bed chamber like a carpet.

“You look good,” Sun breathed, looking me up and down.

My stomach fluttered at the praise, and I glanced over at the mirror.

“Do you think so?”

I still felt silly with my hair combed so neatly and the human top covering my torso.

The seamstress had made custom silken adornments to drape over my spider hind side and although they were made with care, it still seemed strange as a noc to wear clothes at all.

As though to prove me wrong, Clem suddenly danced into the room, decked head to toe in silky human clothes, the same delighted pink that he was tinted all over.

“I’m surprised you haven’t eaten that outfit,” I mused, and he giggled.

“It’s very tempting, but far too pretty.”

Smiling sweetly, he hugged Sun and kissed his cheek.

“Thank you for the outfit!”

He had been thanking Sun profusely for every scrap of expensive clothing he’d given him since we’d moved into the palace. Of course, after a day or two, he always

chewed holes in them, so they were no longer presentable, but no one seemed to mind. I had never seen a happier mothian.

“You look lovely,” Sun informed him, squeezing him tightly. “Where are Bracken and Kiar?”

“They're out there waiting for us to go to the coronation room together. I was sent to fetch you both.”

Sun nodded, then, with a fortifying breath, he led us from the room.

Kiar and Bracken both grinned when they saw me.

“You look so presentable, Hadi,” Bracken laughed.

I shoved him lightly, smiling.

“Don't forget you are quite the image yourselves,” I said, pointedly looking at Bracken's uniform and Kiar's flowy robe.

They laughed and even Sun smiled through his nerves.

“You'll all get used to the human clothes,” he insisted for the hundredth time. “And the four of you do look good enough to eat.”

“Not fair to say that when we have things to do,” Bracken pouted.

Sun chuckled, leading the way toward the coronation room.

“We'll have plenty of time for whatever we want to do after the ceremony,” he said.

“Until then, be on your best behavior.”

As we reached the doors out of our private rooms, some of our newly appointed servants stood in waiting to lead us to our new thrones. A mothian and two humans. I was still in awe of how quickly our people were adjusting.

They led us down the corridors which were still being upgraded to make room for us and to make it our home rather than the fallen Emperor Gaulu's.

Windows were being enlarged to fit Bracken's form through because he had been complaining about needing to leave the palace by the front doors in order to fly. Silken curtains were being hung for Clem to chew on. The sharply cut stone stairways were being covered in carpet so that they would be more comfortable for Kiar to glide over.

I didn't care much about the aesthetic though and neither did Sun. All we were focused on was this next stage of life.

At the doors to the coronation room, we were all stopped.

Listening to the announcements being made on our behalf as they echoed through the curtain to us, I was finally hit by the nerves that Sun was clearly experiencing.

He shifted from foot to foot and shook his head before looking up at me.

“Me,” he whispered, “as the emperor... I cannot believe this is happening.”

“It is what the people want,” I reminded him. “And they're right to.”

“And they want you too. The nocs were happier with you on the throne.”

I nodded, pleased by his words.

“Yes. Before they were being controlled, the nocs supported me and my advisors.”

I glanced over at Bracken and Kiar. They beamed at me proudly.

“And of course, if I had known your resolve, power, and loyalty Clem, I am sure you would have been supported by the nocs as well.”

His pink color deepened.

“Thank you, Hadi,” he whispered sweetly.

“Now, I call forth, the new emperor of Naran.”

Sun was waved forward, and the curtains parted for him.

I could see his hands trembling as applause erupted, but he clasped them tightly together. When it was time, he walked forward and the curtains closed, leaving us behind in the dark.

“I call forth the new king of the nocs.”

Smiling at the others, I walked past them to stand where Sun had been standing.

The curtains parted and applause erupted for me too. I was surprised to see that not only nocs clapped, but humans too as I stepped forward, walking the long carpet through the audience toward the thrones on the other side of the room. To my surprise, I passed countless faces that I knew. A few from my former life on the noc throne in Yewan. Some from the battles since; General Hideyoki, Jia, Atlan and his noc friends. Somehow, their presence didn't bother me as much this time. I was even glad that they were here. We could not have done any of this without them...

I was directed to the larger platform and took my seat at Sun's side. Our eyes met.

This was really happening.

“And now, the royal couples’ consorts, and advisors!”

Turning forward, I watched as the curtains parted once more and our three other lovers were exposed.

For the first time, I understood the clothes. They embellished three already lovely beings, making them glitter in the light showing that they were as special as they were.

Together, Kiar, Clem and Bracken walked through the seats until they reached us and were directed to stand behind us.

Clem took the spot visible in between our thrones and Bracken and Kiar stood on either side.

Finally, the human official approached us with two equally intricate golden crowns.

“With the blessing of the humans and nocs of Naran, I offer you, Batu Sun, this crown and my loyalty,” he promised and carefully placed the crown atop his head.

Sun shut his eyes and when he opened them again, it was like all the nerves had vanished. Then the human gave me the same speech and placed my crown atop my head, and I understood.

The weight of it, along with all the obvious support was worth more than the gold and jewels the crown was made from. It was like everything clicked into place. Everything now made sense.

The roundabout way we had taken to get here was the best path possible because it had led right to this moment.

We were exactly where we were meant to be.

I had heard before that when something was meant to be, it was easy. Was this one of those cases? Me and Sun on the human-noc throne, had been met with no resistance. It was like with the former emperor out of the way, we had fallen into place, right where we should be.

Whatever the reason, I was not going to question such a good thing.

For the first time, I was truly happy and content, and I had these four to thank for it.

They meant more to me than any throne ever could.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:39 am

SUN GOD TAIYO

“That was kind of you,” Tsuki said gently. Her pale hand wove into my elbow, and she leaned on my shoulder, looking down at the group.

“What was?” I asked, feigning innocence.

She was always pale, glowing and radiant... Or at least, she always had been. Finally, some of her true essence was returning. I still found it hard to forgive what had been done to her.

One corrupt king had used our own stones and our own powers against us and the people that we took care of had turned on her so easily. No one on earth had been able to figure out the truth all this time. It didn't help that our son was so young. Earth was his domain, but he wasn't yet the best at crisis management.

Still, I had to admit as I gazed down at the scene below us that my wife had chosen her champions wisely.

Batu Sun Sat upon one throne, Alhadya sat upon another. Their other parts were around them, their support. Everyone needed support.

Tsuki sighed softly, watching them.

“You didn't need to help Clem,” she said, not letting the conversation go. “He could have severed the bond, and the outcome would have been the same.”

“Perhaps,” I agreed, gazing down at the five of them. “But how would you feel if my demise was the only way for you to have your freedom.”

I felt her shiver and she looked up at me with her wide, glowing eyes, despair clear in them.

“Don’t say such a thing,” she chastised.

I chuckled.

“Exactly... and all this time, I have been living with the fear of losing you for good.” Sighing, I looked down at Bracken’s new wing. “Besides, the little burst of power I gave them was the least I could do for them for trying to save my wife.”

She squeezed my arm.

For a while more, we watched them. The coronation was over now, and they were leaving the room, ready to lead the collected world of the humans and the nocs into the future.

They emerged onto a balcony and waved at all those who had gathered to watch and celebrate. There was an eruption of applause.

When I looked down at my love, she was smiling, but her eyelids drooped.

“Come,” I whispered. “These last twenty-five years have been long. Let us rest. It is all over now.”

THE END