

AGE OF THE ANDINNA 7

THE AVATAR'S FLIGHT



INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR
KRISTEN BANET

THE AVATAR'S FLIGHT

AGE OF THE ANDINNA BOOK SEVEN

KRISTEN BANET

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MAVE

Mave stood alone on the path, letting the blistering winter cold try to seep into her bones and chase her back into her tent. She stood strong as she looked into the darkness, seeing how the path disappeared, the red moon missing on this night.

She had snuck out of her tent, hoping to let her husbands sleep. She had tiptoed by Emerian's tent, knowing he was even more watchful than the males she slept beside, thankfully making it past him as well.

Now she stood alone in the darkness and the cold. What should have been lonely wasn't for her. Standing in a place like this, she didn't feel alone at all.

Mave felt at home.

With a deep breath, she closed her eyes and visualized an empty space, pitch black and colder than even the fiercest of winter storms. She had some time to adjust to the new powers that had nestled deep inside her. They were familiar and foreign, part of her and something that wasn't supposed to be there.

Show me the light.

Mave opened her eyes, only to see nothing—truly nothing, an endless black, just as she had envisioned in her mind.

With one exception.

In front of her in the distance was a bright light, brighter than the sun, a beacon of power in the purest white.

Mave smiled and reached out for it and gave a metaphorical tap on the shoulder to the body in the center. Not hard to do since the night was so dark.

“Alchan.”

“I don’t like this.”

Mave nearly laughed at the annoyance in his response.

“Do you think you’ll make it to the crossroads today? You said you would get here yesterday then changed your mind, so I just want to make sure we’re on the same schedule this time,” she asked, using their newfound mental connection. She didn’t have to visualize and reach out to him, but she did it anyway as practice for her abilities. Once they had established the connection was there, they realized they could do it at any time.

Just like the goddesses they represented.

“It’s the middle of the night, freezing cold, and I’m curled up with Rain. I was asleep. I do not want you in my head right now.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“Yes, we’ll make it to the crossroads today. Goodnight.”

She felt him mentally pull away, a sign he wanted to be left alone. She could have forced it. She picked the nighttime to reach out to him because it was slightly easier to work with her powers and visualize in the dead of night.

The world came back to normal, but Mave could still close her eyes and see the bright spot that was Alchan in the distance—always there, even if the world felt too dark, even if she couldn’t see it immediately.

As she turned around to head back for the tents, a blanket was thrown at her. She snatched it out of the air without thinking and wrapped herself in it as she met the emerald gaze of her first husband.

“When you do that, it makes my blood...cold, and I can feel the power you have,” Mat said softly. *“Woke me up.”*

“I’m sorry.” She covered the distance between them and leaned on his chest. Their blood bond hummed with silent emotions as they touched.

“Don’t be,” he murmured, kissing the top of her head. *“How’s Alchan?”*

“Grumpy,” she answered, smiling against him. *“I woke him up, but he said they would get here today. Hopefully, we’ll make it back to the village before the end of winter.”*

“Oh, we have plenty of time. Long winters here in Anden, remember?” He chuckled. “I think you just wanted to get back into the fight, so you’re trying to rush him. Come on. Back to bed.”

Mave looked at the sky and frowned.

“The sun will come up soon,” she pointed out.

“Emerian will do the morning chores while we make sure you haven’t lost any more toes,” he said with a growl, one that was more sensual than angry. “You came out here barefoot.”

“It’s not nearly as cold as the mountain,” she responded, shrugging. *Or the dark power inside me.*

“Just because you can turn into a dragon doesn’t make you invincible. Actually, I was pretty certain being a dragon killed you when you slept for nearly a week the moment you came back to us. You felt so fucking far away, I thought you were slipping away,” he countered but not angry with her...not yet. Her male was only stating facts in a dry way that was almost comical. “I have a feeling *nothing* is as cold as that mountain.”

She tried her best not to roll her eyes. None of them were going to let her live that down. He was right, though. She was far from invincible, and the moment she had regained her own two feet at the temple, she had collapsed, falling into a slumber no one could wake her from.

“I’m not tired. Why don’t we go ahead and get the fire going?” She tried to shake off the memory. “We can take some of the chores from Emerian today, give him a break.” She held Mat where he was, not wanting to go back to rest when she felt so awake and in her element.

Mave watched him work through her request, his eyes flicking to the solo tent that really only fit the one male. Emerian was a complicated matter for the family—not a husband but still her lover. A gray zone in which Mat, Zayden, and Bryn couldn’t fully bring him in, but he was so close, they wanted to. The only thing keeping Emerian out of the family tent was Emerian...and Mave, but her males would never pass the blame to her.

“Fine. Put some boots on, and I’ll grab firewood,” he conceded softly.

Mave did as her husband wanted, knowing he meant well. She was out of sorts, thanks to her new powers, always restless inside of her. That was why she bothered Alchan so often, wondering when he would get to the

group again. She had a strange need for him to be near, just in her space, where she could see him.

Today. He said today. He better get here this time, or I'm going to find him. We don't have all winter.

When she was back in the center of their little camp, Mat was coming back with firewood and quickly got a fire blazing for the day they would spend sitting on their hands again. Mave looked back at the tent, glad she hadn't woken up anyone else before getting on with the business at hand.

"We need fresh water," she pointed out, looking around. "Boiling snow works well."

"Feel free to get that and stay in camp. I'm going to see if the snares have caught us anything edible. We need fresh meat, and maybe today the unlucky streak will finally end." Mat kissed her cheek. "Do you want me to wake up anyone to help you?"

"No, no," she said, waving him off. "I can manage melting snow and keeping the fire going all on my own." She had done it enough on the mountain, the winter road they were camping on didn't seem so challenging.

Mave watched Mat leave, disappearing into the nearby trees to find the snares he and Zayden had scattered through them. Snares weren't a common Andinna hunting technique, and hunting during winter was generally frowned upon, but survival came before tradition. No one could fault someone hunting to survive.

She knew he wouldn't be back for a long time. She worked on melting snow and heating the water that remained so they could drink it. As she worked, something moved in the corner of her eye. When Mave was alone, sometimes the strangest things happened.

Kristanya showed up.

The first time it happened, Mave had thought she was going mad. The second time, Mave had ignored the goddess, unsure what to do or say. Mave felt the same today. She knew no one else could see the vision of the goddess, who stood even taller than Matesh.

Mave watched as the goddess stood very still, looking in the same direction Mave had earlier. Toward Alchan.

Can she see his brightness? The radiant glow of his power through the endless darkness? Maybe she can judge his distance better. I don't know

how far in the darkness he is, only that he's there, and he's coming closer. Does she sometimes yearn to be close to the light like I do?

The goddess stayed as she was, watching and waiting for something. Mave watched and waited as she stared at Kristanya, who was certainly not real. She couldn't be. The goddesses couldn't come to the mortal realm. This had to be a figment of Mave's imagination.

Mave was so absorbed in watching Kristanya stand her silent vigil, she practically jumped when someone touched her back. She turned, her hands going for her swords, but finding only emptiness because she hadn't put them on this morning when she rose to bother Alchan.

"Good morning, Mave," Zayden greeted softly. "You were staring into nothing. What is it?" He looked at her hands, knowing what she had been reaching for. There was no fear in his eyes, but there was concern. None of her males feared her, which remained unchanged since she had come down from the mountain. Their faith in her to never be a danger to them was a blessing.

She looked back at the spot where Kristanya was...had been. The goddess was gone.

"Nothing. I was deep in thought, and you spooked me. I'm sorry." She reached out to him and felt his thick arms wrap around her waist. They kissed slowly, drawing a growl out of Zayden's lips. He deepened it, holding her tightly. She was left breathless when he pulled away, her cheeks a healthy shade of pink. "Well, good morning to you as well," she murmured, staring at his full lips. "Is there something wrong with *you*?"

"No, I just wanted to kiss you," he murmured, leaning down to kiss her again. "Nothing better than having a moment alone with you in the morning. Nothing better."

She chuckled as he kissed her face, every point of her tatua, the scar on her cheek, then down to her neck.

"I'm supposed to be tending the fire and melting snow for water while Mat is checking the snares," she explained to him breathlessly as his hands roamed.

"And you've been doing a fine job of it," he whispered, his hot breath on her neck. "But I'm feeling a bit randy this morning."

"I can tell," she replied as his hands found their way to her ass and squeezed. "Mat tried to get me to return to bed."

“He should have tried harder.” Zayden groaned as he held her, continuing his delicious path of kisses.

“I didn’t want to go back to bed,” she explained.

“We don’t need to. Give me a moment alone with you in those trees over there, and I promise, I’ll be a very happy male.” He gave a satisfied growl as she gasped. He had nipped her skin right before it hid under her armor.

Mave didn’t often feel like this, a wanton young female, but something about Zayden this morning made her want to take him up on his offer. It was a good way to start the day. Something in her ached for more mornings where they could pretend there was nothing wrong.

Or even better, wake up and have nothing wrong in truth—no war, no Empire, none of it—just her enjoying a day with her husbands, letting them treat her like she was a female who was still surprised by their undivided attention.

Someone cleared their throat, causing Mave to step back from Zayden. Emerian was standing awkwardly on his side of the fire.

“Is there anything I can do?” he asked softly, his words hoarse and his expression somewhat unreadable with its one eye and stunning red tatua. Having only one eye, her lover, once her nemari, was oftentimes unreadable. He was a changed male, thanks to his time with her as her nemari, a student of war she had been training. Now, they lived in this strange space where he was with her, but not in her family—something else, something separate.

“I was tending the fire and creating some fresh drinking water,” she explained. “You don’t need to work on it. I have it—”

“It’s my pleasure to help,” he said stiffly, reaching down and doing exactly what she had been avoiding.

Mave tentatively took another step away from Zayden, then closed the distance between her and Emerian, Zayden not making a sound at her doing so. She reached out tentatively and touched Emerian’s chest.

“You’re not a servant,” she whispered softly. “You can let us do some of the chores.”

“It’s the least I can do,” he countered. “For...”

She put a finger over his mouth before kissing his cheek—she liked not having to go to her toes to reach him the way she had to with her husbands

—then laid down the law.

“No,” she said strongly but softly, only for his ears. “Sit down and wait for breakfast.”

He turned ever so slightly, and their lips brushed, then he stepped back.

“Of course.”

She wasn’t having that. She grabbed his chest armor and pulled him back to her, forcing their lips to lock. She felt it—his need, his want. She just needed to remind him she was a willing participant, that she needed and wanted him. This romance was different from her previous husbands, and that was okay. While it was initially fueled by hidden lust, she wanted it built on something more solid.

When the kiss was over, she knew he would be blushing if he could. There was still some part of him that was the out-of-place mutt who didn’t really know the rules, who was still somewhat innocent and beautiful. He wasn’t all damaged warrior.

He sat down silently, rubbing his jaw as she smiled indulgently at his embarrassment, not calling it out. None of them ever did, knowing how fragile the situation was. When she turned back to Zayden, he was now also unreadable, but there was no sign of jealousy or anger, something she took as a positive.

“Bryn is still sleeping,” Zayden said, pointing a thumb back at the tent. “But I’m certain if you give him a kiss, he’ll jump up and get done whatever you need. I’ll go find Mat and help him out.”

“Okay,” she said with a smile, letting Zayden wander off and get on with the day. Marching to the tent she shared with her husbands, she found Bryn lying out, taking up as much space as he could. She went down to him and kissed him softly.

Bryn, though, wasn’t so easy to get away from as Zayden, Mat, or Emerian. By the time he let her out of the tent, Emerian was tending the fire, and her knees were weak as Bryn chuckled in her ear. The rogue knew what he had done.

“The fire was going to die,” Emerian said with a small smile, a little sheepish.

Mave sighed heavily, shaking her head in amusement as she went back to it, shooing Emerian away. By the time the three of them had refilled their waterskins, Mat and Zayden were back with a prize. Finally, they would

have a couple of rabbits to eat—raw meat to cook. Mave was excited after so much jerky.

“Are you going to stew it? Grill it? Dry it out?” Mave looked at Zayden and Bryn, the resident cooks of her family.

“Well, first we have to gut them,” Zayden reminded her.

“Honestly, I would eat one just like that if you let me.”

The males around her laughed. Here, at the campsite, even though the world was falling apart around them and there was a war to win, they could laugh.

It was a fine morning, all in all.

Now, Alchan just needs to get here, and we can head home.

ALCHAN

Alchan didn't sleep. He'd been annoyed with Mave when she reached out to him, but he hadn't been sleeping. Sadly, a fast-flowing stream and a broken bridge had other plans for them, slowing them down considerably. When he had made camp for the night, he knew Mave would reach to him and bug him. His sister could be pushy.

He didn't know about her, but he was still coming to terms with their new situation. As he laid between two bodies, one curled into him and the other only there for warmth, he was still struggling with this massive change in his life.

It wasn't even dawn when he decided he couldn't stand it anymore, wanting to get up and stretch his legs. The maneuvering he had to accomplish to get away from his Consort and Lady Lilliana was masterfully done. Letting them continue sleeping was important to him, and he wasn't going to disturb them if he didn't have to.

No, not Lady Lilliana. Lily. She wants me to call her Lily.

Alchan chuckled softly as he looked down at those in his bed. Lily wasn't supposed to be there, not truly. They weren't lovers. She ended up in his bed because one night, he and Rain had found her shivering in her portion of the tent and couldn't abide that. Even now, with Alchan out of bed, Rain subconsciously noticed and reached out, pulling the small female into him.

It was not the first time Alchan had seen it. He knew Rain wasn't interested in the pretty ahren female the way he was, would never be, but

there was a love there that certainly went beyond the family Rain had wanted to be with her—romantic, but not sexual. His Consort would certainly never admit it, believing himself incapable of those feelings, but Alchan knew what romantic love looked like on his Consort’s face, certainly different from familial love.

An odd situation Alchan knew they found themselves in because Lily was certainly in love with Rain in the same way.

We’ll figure it out.

He left them there, curled into each other, and was amazed his jealousy wasn’t pricked. It should have been. Rain was his, and no one could so much as touch his Consort without Alchan wanting to tear their arms off. Lily...he wanted her to be his with a need that took his breath away. She was exquisite—soft, gentle, and so *bendable*.

All he had ever done, the furthest he would go, was kiss her cheek and listen as it stole the air from her chest. It delighted him to know he had the power to do that to a female.

He would kill anyone for either of them. He would doom the entire Andinna race for them, a need so ferocious, it sometimes worried him. But when they were together, curled into each other the way lovers should be, he felt nothing but happiness as if he never had a jealous bone in his body, as if he didn’t know the meaning of the word.

Which was certainly not the case.

Alchan stood in the cold, knowing he should get a fire going, but waited.

“She waits for us,” a female voice murmured in the darkness of the pre-dawn morning.

“I know,” he replied, keeping his voice low. He didn’t need to speak to this morning visitor if he could even call her a visitor. She was always with him. A piece of her lived inside him now. He could think his words to her, and she would know them, but there was something satisfying about *talking* to her. “She’s frustrated. We should have been there by now, but the road had other plans.”

He’d worked hard to rush their escape from the Capital and get moving back to the south. They were doing double the speed, the horses getting annoyed. He’d already made one lame and released it, a problem for their journey. Then the second horse went lame.

Now Rain pulled the cart, much to everyone's annoyance, most certainly Rain's.

"Sisters can be very impatient," Larianna agreed, stepping up beside him.

He knew Rain and Lily couldn't see or hear her. She was a projection of his mind. She saw the mortal realm through him, could be part of it in a way she couldn't when she had no Avatar. When a dragon god had no Avatar, they could only look from their own realm. Larianna had explained it to him as looking down from a mountaintop, hoping one can discern all the details of the valley below correctly, and sometimes, they were wrong.

"Today is the day," he said, taking a deep breath. "I can see her, you know. A dark...glow coming from her."

"You are her light in the darkness," Larianna said, nodding. "The way things should be. To you, she is a dark spot in the world that you must fill with light, but to her, you must be her beacon, always guiding her. Don't forget that when you see her. You will never crush that darkness, Alchan, but you can guide it, give it purpose."

"I don't want to crush it," he whispered, shaking his head. "Her...I don't want to crush her."

"You say that now," Larianna murmured, "but you will feel the urge once you truly understand just how much more powerful she is than you. You might even fear her."

"You know I don't fear my sister," Alchan snapped, wondering where Larianna's melancholy was coming from. "I refuse to fear her."

"For male pride?"

"No, because I love her," he answered honestly.

"You're going to do fine," Larianna said, and he could hear her smile. She was an arrogant goddess, with her own way of thinking, and had every right to be, but he could never forget she was a mother, a wife, a ruler. Those things tempered the arrogance and made her wise.

"Did you talk like this to my grandmother?" He hadn't thought to ask her before.

"I did," she confirmed. "Not so often, more so during the first war with the Elvasi. I should have talked to her more, truthfully." Her smile was gone.

He had so many questions. He wasn't sure why they had arisen now, but he had so many at that moment, he was unsure how to open his mouth and pick one to ask.

Instead, he shoved his tail into his mouth.

"Is that regret I hear?" he dared to say, refusing to even glance in her direction.

"We all have regrets," she countered. "I might be one of the primal dragon gods, but...it has given me a long time to build many regrets." She stepped in front of him, blocking his view of Mave's dark spot in the distance. She was so much taller than him, an odd thing for him to deal with. He wasn't used to females being taller, and she seemed to be a female Andinna. She wasn't, but that was how she chose to appear before him. "For example, I should have told your grandmother to kill her son when he'd tried to kill you. Instead, I agreed with her decision to strip him of his title. It is hard to kill one's child. Not for *him*, obviously, but for those of us who actually care about our children."

Alchan swallowed, trying to consider his response, but Larianna continued.

"I told her when...*Luykas*,"—she tested his name as if she had never said it before—"was discovered, he needed to be brought to the Capital. He might be a mutt, but he carries my blood. He can't, of course, pass on the great power of the family because it is diluted, but he is my son as much as you are. Of course, she was of the same mind. Your grandmother and I often agreed, one of the reasons I never felt the need to have many long conversations with her. I can't say the same for many of my daughters. Well, that only means mistakes your grandmother made with you were the mistakes I also made with her."

"I..."

"You didn't expect me to admit I've made mistakes," she said, nodding. It wasn't a question. Larianna didn't ask many questions. She knew how he felt, understood him and his mind. "It's understandable. I am what I am, and admitting fault seems counter to that, but I have four husbands and two sisters, all who are more than willing to point them out to me."

"So, like any other family," Alchan muttered.

She laughed, and it sounded the way the sun felt, warm, blissfully warm.

“Yes,” she agreed. “Oh, I wouldn’t have fought you so hard on becoming the first male of my children to be an Avatar if I knew what a dry sense of humor you had.”

“Don’t lie to me.”

Her smile had teeth, and they were certainly not Andinna teeth. He knew better than to question her, but sparring with his patron goddess was a challenge he couldn’t resist when the alternative was talking about his grandmother and his father, two people he was trying to leave in the past.

As they stood there in silence, he finally asked something he hadn’t yet.

“Why was my father still sitting on the throne?” he asked softly.

“A warning,” she answered simply. After a beat, she added, “To you.”

“You didn’t know me if you thought he could stop me.” Alchan would never let his father stop him from saving his people. Maybe from following his heart in love, but Rain was working on that with him.

His duty would never be stopped by the bitter man who raised him.

“No one knew you,” she countered. “Your grandmother certainly didn’t. Your aunts didn’t,” Larianna finished with a growl. “And you...do you remember how you left your grandmother and aunts? Do you?”

“I’ll never forget.”

“Then don’t get snippy with me. You left when you were young, once it was proper for young adult males to run off to their own devices. You returned for small things, events, but you never ate with the family again. Then you left for the war and never returned, promising to return when it was won. You cut them out of your life, and, in turn, you cut *me* out.”

“Then we lost the war,” he whispered.

“Then you lost, and after...you left Anden, out of my sight and reach. I never had the chance to know you, Alchan, so I could only make the best guesses I could.” She reached out, and he felt a whisper of a hand on his cheek. He hadn’t realized she could touch him. “You are my son, and I look forward to knowing you now. I did make you my Avatar after all, thanks to how strangely perceptive you are, how wise the years have made you so young. Soon, there shall be none who know you better than I.”

Then she was gone.

“Love? Why are you out in the cold at this awful hour?” Rain’s voice washed over him. “And who were you talking to?”

“Myself,” he said, swallowing. Damn, if he had known Rain was waking up, he would have turned the conversation to Larianna into a silent one so he didn’t appear insane. “Do you want to head out early today? It’ll be the last day you have to pull the cart and...”

“The sooner we’re on the road, the better,” Rain said with a huff. “Then we can steal two of their horses or something. Do you think our follower will need to be chased off today?”

“Only if you think he’s a danger,” Alchan said, smiling.

“He’s a runt, smaller than me, but he can grow, and even small wyverns can be a problem.”

“He’ll follow my orders because I’m his king,” he reminded his husband. “He won’t eat anyone or livestock if I impress the need for him to hunt wild. I’m not sure why he’s following us, but he hasn’t been a problem yet. And he’s a red. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen a red, especially one like him.”

“Yeah?” Rain stepped further out of the tent and came to his side.

“Yeah. Blues and greens used to be common in the forests and coastlines. Browns and grays loved the mountains and were plentiful. Reds, oranges, yellows, and whites were rarer.” Alchan smiled, looking at the sky. “They might all be rare now. That’s why I don’t want you picking a fight with the young male. He might be the last red.”

“I wouldn’t kill him, just ask him to give us some space. A few days ago, he landed in a field right next to us.”

“We were out of fire range, though,” Alchan pointed out.

Rain glared at him. Alchan might have grown up seeing wyverns everywhere, but he didn’t dare say anything more while Rain was giving him that glare. His husband was half-Ziran, a race of animal shifters born to two forms, two souls. Rain’s mother had been Zayden’s first lover, a pretty short-lived Ziran woman who had run from the clan wars always raging in her homeland. Thanks to Zayden being a full-blooded Andinna, Rain’s forms were predetermined for him. His two souls were Andinna and wyvern, the animal cousin species also created by the dragon gods.

If anyone knew what it meant to be a wyvern, it was Rain. He was, therefore, the expert, even if he didn’t know the little details about colors and ranges. He knew how the mind of a wyvern worked and sometimes lost himself to that wildness.

“You know, maybe he can be your wyvern Consort,” Alchan teased.

Rain’s face screwed up into a look mixed between disgust and held-back laughter.

“You know both my souls belong to you,” Rain whispered as Alchan leaned in to kiss his husband.

“Hmmm...I think the wyvern came first, actually,” Alchan murmured as his lips touched Rain’s.

“I think so, too.”

Alchan didn’t give Rain the chance to say anymore. With Lily in their bed, they hadn’t the time to enjoy each other in so long, and Alchan felt a blinding need.

“Trees?” he asked huskily. “This might be our last chance with only one person as company.”

“Anything,” Rain gasped as Alchan squeezed whatever delectable body part was in his hand.

They were fast, a groping, needy mess of limbs. Alchan tried to keep his Consort quiet, but he didn’t like when he had to do that, so he didn’t try nearly as hard as he should have.

At the end, they were both panting and trying to get their pants back on, but they both knew by the smell of smoke a fire had been started. Lily was awake.

“We’re not staying long,” Alchan said, disliking how gruff he sounded as he walked over to her.

“I just wanted to warm up my hands,” she said, her face flushed, looking particularly warm as it was.

He reached out, trying to be casual, slow, and maybe even a little romantic. He’d done this before for her, so had Rain. This morning was no different. He took her hands in his and rubbed quickly, letting the friction quickly warm them. A good thing, too. She was a small delicate female and was always so blasted cold compared to him and Rain. Her hands were like ice, even though her face was so flushed, he was wondering if she was going to spontaneously combust, but he didn’t tease her. He knew exactly why she looked the way she did and why Rain was sheepishly heading into the tent, looking for a better pair of pants. His were falling down from where Alchan had torn them.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt,” she whispered.

“You didn’t.” Alchan pulled on his power easily and blinked once to reveal her aura. It was the best trick of the abilities he had. He could see the ways it swirled, conflicted and guilty, its colors doing all sorts of jumps through a variety of emotional states. It was just as awkward as she could be.

“I—”

“You didn’t,” he repeated, cutting her off. Then he growled, rubbing her hands faster. “Why are your blasted hands always so cold?”

“I don’t know,” she mumbled.

“When we get in the cart, put them between my—*your* legs.”

Her face went from flushed to blazing red.

Rain could be heard coughing violently in the tent.

Alchan looked at the sky and pleaded for mercy from Amonora. She was the one who made them the sexual creatures they were. He *just* had Rain. Shouldn’t that keep him from desperately wanting to crawl between Lily’s legs for at least half the day? He was too spent for another round, and they weren’t even there yet.

Yet he knew if she reached out and touched him, he would be ready instantly.

Rain stuck his head through the tent, grinning at him over Lily’s head.

“Forgive me,” Alchan tried to say, desperately trying to find some reasoning he would have to say what he did. Truly, he had wanted her to try to keep her hands warm. Her cold fingers bothered him endlessly.

And maybe touch me in the process. I shouldn’t get into the habit of lying to myself...or to her. She doesn’t deserve me lying about how I feel around her. She’s figured it out, anyway.

The very idea was causing his lower half to get a touch too excited.

He let her go, clearing his throat, and silently got to work, reloading everything onto the cart. She continued to warm her hands as he and Rain packed everything away. Once everything was loaded, she kicked out her small fire and joined him in the cart while Rain sighed.

“Last day,” his husband mumbled. Sighing, he stripped off the new clothing he had put on. He dumped them into her lap, not bothering to try to cover anything in front of either of them. Alchan had no problem with it, and Lily seemed to quickly be growing more used to the casual nudity of his husband.

Then, his love was a wyvern. Blue scales rippling in the early morning light, he was beautiful. Alchan never saw this wyvern much anymore, but he was glad for any chance he had. Rain was in control of his beast half, but there was always a threat of the wyvern half gaining control. Alchan no longer worried about that, though.

As the true ruler of Anden, wyverns heeded him as their ruler, just as Andinna did. It was the truth of his position. It was the true power of the queens before him, all Avatars of Larianna. It was also a power he had to be careful not to abuse or overuse. His grandmother had once said it perfectly.

The Avatar of Larianna ruled the wyverns but could never truly contain or control their wild souls, nor should the Avatar ever try. The repercussions could be devastating.

Alchan had actually forgotten about the lesson for centuries because he was never going to be the Avatar. He had a cock. He was fully and wholly male, and that was denied to him, and he'd been fine with it.

Until his people needed him to try, anyway.

He remembered other lessons from his grandmother every day as he rode south. Important little things she had taught him for no particular reason. There had been no reason for her to teach him because he'd been male.

No, not true. She taught me in case I ever had a daughter who needed the lessons. A contingency plan she never expected to need, but she was required to have. Ha. Well, she saw me in the Hall of Queens. Guess she and I can both be glad I got the lessons.

Alchan had no leads to hold. They had a sturdy rope with a loop Rain shoved his head through and started to pull. They were faster with Rain than any horses, but wyverns didn't enjoy walking on the earth. They lumbered with two back legs and two wings, more like a bat than a dragon. He knew Rain didn't like doing it for long periods, but his husband did what was necessary, and they certainly had too much to carry to fly. The distance was also too far in case Alchan or Lily needed to fly beside him.

Alchan rode in silence, leaning back to get more comfortable. His back and legs hurt from days on the damn wooden cart. He knew before Rain had to take over pulling the cart, he was having the same problem. There was only one person in their little group who never complained.

“How are you so comfortable?” he finally asked as they were well on their way.

“I’m not,” she answered softly. “I just don’t want to be a burden. You didn’t need me on this trip. You brought me for my safety since you weren’t comfortable leaving me in the village. I know that, and I got to see so much of Anden and the Capital. For the first time in my life, I got to see the Capital.” She smiled at him. “Why would I complain about that?”

His heart sped up, and he looked away from her.

“You don’t need to be so gracious that you hurt yourself,” he mumbled. “You can complain just like the rest of us. Neither of us would judge you.”

“I have complained about this trip, though. It’s cold,” she pointed out. “I am always cold.” On cue, she lifted her hands, cupped them around her mouth, and blew. Then she rubbed them together and shoved them between her legs.

That was when he realized he had given her the best advice. Her arms did insanely good things to her chest, and his eyes dipped down, going unnoticed by her as she stared ahead.

I’m awful. Mave will give me a good hit across the head, and I’ll be better until we get back to the village.

He couldn’t win a war if he was too focused on the beautiful female next to him.

MAVE

It was the afternoon. After a day of talking about nothing, the exact topic they had for days, Mave lifted her head and looked down the road that led to her and her group. She knew he was close.

Any moment.

“Mave?”

“Sh.” She reached out and put a hand over Zayden’s mouth. At her request for silence, everyone stopped talking and watched her, then slowly began to look down the road.

“He’s coming,” she declared, knowing he was right around the—

Rain was the first one she saw, in wyvern form, pulling something, using a rope. It was surprising to see the large blue wyvern acting as a beast of burden. She wondered the story behind it as a way to keep her feet planted.

Then the cart came into view. Lily and Alchan were sitting in the front beside each other, but not close. Mave figured Lily would be happy to see them. Her eyes focused on Alchan’s face, who caught her stare from across the distance. Something tilted, the world changed, and Mave knew in that instant, everything would be different.

She just wasn’t sure how.

Her heart raced as he stood and jumped from the cart, flying ahead of Rain. Her hands twitched, wanting to go to her hips as he landed only a handful of steps in front of her. She didn’t have her swords, and she wasn’t sure why that bothered her so much. Why didn’t she have her swords? How

could she forget something so important when she knew she would see this male on this day?

No one moved around them.

To Mave, the world disappeared. There was only her and Alchan, staring at each other. Something deep inside of her crawled to the surface—a challenge, a dare. She saw something flash in his eyes, but the emotion was unreadable. His chin lifted, a sign of dominance as he looked down his nose at her...literally. His body went still, and his chest puffed.

“Mave,” he greeted so softly, it could have been lost in a soft breeze. There was something cool about it—no familiarity, no warmth.

For a moment, she wondered when she had called upon the power Kristanya had given her and realized only a second later, it had acted on its own. It had been the thing to crawl forward, a thing with a mind of its own.

It was daring Alchan to take it on. To test who was truly the most Andinna. It wanted to *obliterate* him.

“Alchan,” she greeted in return, also unable to speak with more volume than a whisper. Hers was angry, taunting, and vicious.

“Are you going to attack me? Shouldn’t you kneel to your king?” he asked, his eyes never breaking from hers. She wanted to laugh. Of course, he knew what war was now beginning to wage in her.

She wanted to. Oh, how this new darkness wanted to reach out and crush him. She was powerful. She was the *most* powerful.

There was an odd rumble in her ears as she stared down this challenger.

How dare this bright light come to her, with all its haughtiness and demand submission?

I am darkness. How dare this bright light come to me and tell me to bend? I have craved destruction. This bright light shall be the first.

I kneel to no one.

“No.”

He took another step closer, his eyes narrowing and his chin dropping. Haughtiness gone, now it was anger as he realized she didn’t have to bow at all. She would certainly never go to her knees.

Her power whipped up as the rumble grew louder. Something whispered in her ear that she could destroy this male, snuff out the bright, beautiful light, then, finally, she would be able to take on anything, establish she was the greatest power in the realm.

Then he stopped approaching her, and Mave could watch his internal struggle play on his face—anger, frustration, desperation. He didn't break his stare, but some heat disappeared from it as shock, surprise, and fear entered his face.

Once again, the world tilted, and something changed—for him, not for her. Her mind was made.

“Mave, these aren't our feelings,” Alchan said, his voice low as he took another step closer. “They are not *us*.” Now there was something familiar in his voice, a warmth, a pleading.

She blinked, keeping her eyes on his amber ones. Those words were important, but she couldn't put together *why*.

She was grateful when Alchan kept talking.

“This is how they felt when they met for the first time,” he continued. “Then they fought a seemingly endless war, trying to destroy the other. We don't have to do that.”

“How do we not?” Mave asked, glaring, not understanding why they shouldn't. “Why—”

“Because I love you, sister,” he said urgently. “I did this for *you*. To be worthy of you.”

That knocked the wind out of her. He felt the moment break as she stepped back, taking a deep, surprised breath. It took her another moment to remember the words she had used to slice her brother to the core, the dare she had given him. How had she forgotten that conversation?

No, I didn't forget. I let Kristanya's power overcome me. That's it.

It took even longer for her to stop the rumbling noise, but eventually, she wrestled down her powers and felt like herself again.

“I'm sorry. I've never had her power...try to...” The guilt hit hard as she reached up to cover her eyes, ashamed of her behavior. This was Alchan, her king, and she had promised to serve him. This was the only ruler, the only leader she followed with utmost faith and trust.

More importantly, this was her brother in all ways but blood.

How could she look at him and even consider killing him?

“Don't apologize,” he said quickly, looking as guilty as she felt. “We're past it. It's over. I think it was just an initial reaction.”

Suddenly, Rain was next to them, completely in the buff and already beginning to shiver.

“Why don’t the two of you take a walk and talk about...things,” he suggested, looking between them. Alchan growled in return.

“If you put on something warm,” the king said, his gaze obviously dipping down to take in the entire form of his Consort.

“I will,” Rain promised. “No one else was brave enough to come over here. I’m blasted cold, so the sooner you two head off, the sooner I’ll put on something to wear.”

“How long...” Mave looked past Rain to see Lily still sitting on the cart and all of her males staring in their direction, a few noticeably more pale than normal. “How long were we standing here?”

“You were growling at each other for what seemed like forever,” Rain said. “Go. Take a walk and work out whatever this is. Please.”

Mave nodded and grabbed Alchan’s elbow. He looked down at her touch but didn’t fight as she took a step away from the group, forcing him to do the same. After two more steps, he spun and offered an arm instead, which made her snort and walk faster. She hit the tree line first and took a deep breath the moment she was positive she was out of sight.

He stopped beside her and sighed.

“When I saw you, I wanted to force you to bow,” he whispered. “And if I couldn’t get that from you...” He shook his head. “I was warned, and remembering that warning is probably the only reason we didn’t get into a fight.”

“I can’t believe they feel that way about each other,” Mave said, still breathing a little too hard.

“They don’t, not anymore, and now, we won’t either. I really think it was just an initial reaction. I am positive.” Alchan seemed almost as shaken as she was, but he hid it well.

“Who warned you?” she asked, remembering what he had said. “Who could have possibly...” It dawned on her the only one who could have was his patron goddess or her own. Since Kristanya seemed highly unlikely, Larianna was the only option. “Oh.”

“You seem to have figured it out well enough on your own,” Alchan said softly.

“I...spent days thinking when I saw you, things would be grand, and instead, we both wanted to kill each other,” Mave huffed, hating how she

had looked at him and wanted to destroy him. “This is not going any way like I planned it.”

“You aren’t the only one,” he murmured, putting an arm over her shoulder. “We’ll find a new normal. I bet the longer we’re Avatars, the easier it’ll be to hold back the urges of the goddesses we represent and be our own people. We’ll begin to recognize moments like that sooner. If nothing happened this first time, I don’t think anything will happen.”

“I hope you’re right.” She nodded, though, accepting his logic. “Did you see how scared everyone was? I’ve never scared my husbands like that. What do they feel when they see me? I haven’t thought to ask them.”

“Having grown up in the presence of an Avatar, that shocks me less,” he admitted, shrugging. “I knew there would be some sort of reaction. We’re altered, you and me. They recognize it, even if it’s not physically apparent. I’m just glad we didn’t...” He gave her a pained expression. “For a moment, I wanted to hurt you, and that...that knocked me out of it. I’ve never wanted to hurt you before. Not like that.”

“I wanted to obliterate you,” she whispered, her shame compounding tenfold. “Wipe you from the realm and erase all traces of your existence. It didn’t knock me out of it. Sorry.”

“What did?”

She grumbled and muttered her response, making him frown.

“I see,” he muttered. They both knew he had no idea what she had said.

“You said you...” She pointed between them. “You reminded me of our conversation. The one where...” She sighed, not understanding why it was so hard to talk about it. Maybe because she felt bad for hurting her brother the way she had.

“Sister, did it surprise you that I said I love you?” Alchan chuckled, and she wanted to strangle him. “I thought it would be fairly obvious. I love Luykas as well and have told him, not as often as I should, but I do say it. They’re not words I’ve ever said easily.”

“Well, brother.” Mave nodded slowly and dared to say it back. “I love you, too. I’m glad to have you back. Do you think we can head out today? Our horses—”

“No. Let me give Rain a night off. He’s been pulling our cart for days now. Both of our horses went lame, and we released them. We didn’t have a better option. We’ll have to share with you and your family.” He shook his

head, an amused expression on his face. “Are you really so impatient to get back to the fighting?”

“I’m the Avatar of Kristanya...war is what I do...” She leveled him with a flat stare. A moment later, they were both laughing, although she didn’t really understand why. He threw his arms around her and squeezed her into a hug she couldn’t stop herself from returning. They laughed until they cried, the hug so tight, they both felt their ribs threatening to give way.

This had been what she wanted when she saw him. This was what she had been hoping for. While she could smile at everything, there was something dreadfully cold inside her now, colder than anything she had ever known, but this hug, holding her brother and feeling the bond that had brought them to this moment.

It was like holding the sun.

“We did it,” she finally said. “Oh Skies, Alchan, we did it.”

“Well, we haven’t won yet,” he replied, chuckling as he pulled away, taking hold of her shoulders, and made an obvious show of looking her over. “But you’re right, we did it. Funny, we’ve been talking for weeks, but it didn’t really hit me until this moment. You are the first Avatar of Kristanya. I’m so proud of you.”

She wondered if the glistening in his eyes were tears or just the way the light was dancing through the trees onto his amber eyes.

“I’m really proud of you, too.” She reached up to touch his cheeks. She never touched Alchan like this, rarely touching at all, except to spar and shove each other when she was pissed off. The moment was unexpectedly tender. She knew in her heart, this was the brother she had been meant to be the sister of. There was an odd feeling of destiny in the moment, which was not something the Andinna or their dragon gods believed in.

“Are you?” he asked, smiling sheepishly.

“You are the King of Anden. The *first* King of Anden. How could I not be proud of you?” She didn’t know where the words came from, but she knew being the King of the Andinna and being the King of Anden were two very different things. She didn’t know where that knowledge came from, though. It puzzled her for a moment, but she didn’t let it distract her for longer than a heartbeat.

They fell into silence as Alchan pulled her into a hug once more. Once the hug ended, they stepped back and gave each other space they often did,

staying side by side but not touching.

“Was it hard?” he asked, putting an arm over her shoulder and holding her to his side. She leaned into it, putting an arm around his waist. It was better. “Your journey? And tell me the truth. Don’t play it off like you’re as tough as the very mountain, and it was a breeze. I know it wasn’t *that*. You’ve been surprisingly closed-lipped since we discovered our bond. You bug me about hurrying but never speak about your own journey, so I know there’s something.”

“The hardest thing I’ve ever done,” she admitted softly, thinking back. How could she tell them Kristanya had nearly killed her? How could she frame it in a way that didn’t upset them?

“Will you tell me about it?”

“I will.” She knew he was asking and would accept a no, but at the same time, she knew he was probably the one person who truly had to know, deserved to know the full tale. Her husbands were okay with letting her have this story for herself, but Alchan was another Avatar, and something felt as if he *needed* to know. “Over food. I haven’t spoken much about it to my husbands. Might as well only tell this story once before we get back to the village. I won’t make you wait until I tell the tale to Luykas and the others, but if you’re okay with waiting until dinner, I would much appreciate it.” She needed one more afternoon to really think about it.

Do I tell them about Kian?

“I can wait that much longer,” he promised, and she could hear the smile in his words. “And I’ll tell you about my own. I haven’t explained it to Rain or Lily yet, either. Something felt...off.”

She nodded, understanding that feeling all too well.

Together, they started walking to the main camp again. As they approached, Zayden noticed them first.

“That’s still not normal, but it’s better,” he declared, nodding at us. “You two scared the Skies out of us. Thought you were going to turn into dragons and try to kill each other.”

“Why would I turn into a dragon?” Alchan asked with a deep frown and more than a little confusion.

“Because I can,” she explained. “A big black one.”

His feet stopped, and she tried to continue walking, but his arm on her shoulder was tight enough to make her stop with him, practically jerking

her to a halt.

“You can what?” He very obviously swallowed.

“Turn into a dragon,” she repeated simply. “It’s one of my powers as the Avatar of Kristanya.”

“Well...” She could tell Alchan had no idea what to think of that. “I must see it one day.”

Mave had a very clear warning about using her powers wisely, but this was Alchan. Her husbands, all but Luykas in attendance, had seen it. Why couldn’t Alchan, her king?

The mere thought of Luykas brought an ache from home, something she had been avoiding for days as they waited on Alchan’s arrival to the meeting crossroads where they had parted once before.

“I’ll show you while we’re here. Tonight, even.” She looked up at him, searching his eyes. “You took the message book with you. Have you heard from...”

“He wanted me to tell you, the moment I saw you, that he loves you,” Alchan answered without needing to ask. “But you have a blood bond with him. Certainly, you know how he feels.”

“He’s so far away,” she murmured. “And my powers...they’re doing really odd things to the bond. I think...I think Luykas and I need to redo it. He’s felt even more distant than normal. Becoming the Avatar didn’t mess with my bond with Mat—I blood bonded Mat, by the way—but it’s messed with mine with Luykas.”

“That’s almost a good thing. Now you and Luykas can make the choice on your own,” Alchan pointed out. “Maybe that’s why the powers did it.”

She hadn’t considered that, but it made sense in the strangeness that was their world. She could only nod.

“Speaking of news...” Bryn walked over slowly. “The spy?”

“Lerian. Caught and executed as a traitor,” Alchan answered stiffly. “I had my suspicions, but he played us well. His wife, who he’d left in Kerit, she went to Luykas with damning evidence, not realizing she was being used by him until she got word of Leshau’s death in the coastal city.”

Mave stepped away from Alchan as he rubbed his temples as if a headache was beginning to form.

“Brother?”

“There’s so much, actually. Maybe we’ll start with the pressing stuff, then get to the stories of our last weeks,” he said, looking over her and beyond Bryn. Mave turned to see him staring at Rain and Zayden, who were working together at the fire to build its strength. Lilliana was pointing to a spot for Mat to put down a chest while Emerian worked on putting up Alchan’s tent for his party.

They were all together again, at least partially. Soon, they would be back in the village, ready to finish up winter and create their plans for the coming war seasons. Spring would be decisive. Summer would be dangerous. Autumn would be the finale. She knew the war couldn’t continue longer and had a feeling Alchan knew it as well.

“Well, let’s get started,” she declared.

MAVE

Alchan got started, all right. Mave listened with big eyes as he gave her the news she hadn't realized she was craving. It had been so long since she had heard news from their home.

"Well, Luykas and Kenav got into a fight. Thankfully, no swords. Luykas obviously won, which stung Kenav's pride. Luykas also says we're in for some surprises, all good, but he won't tell me any of those." Alchan rolled his eyes. "He promised to give me any bad news...and there is some," Alchan growled. "Leria headed south. While we've been away, Seanev decided to send her a letter explaining their relationship is over. She's been unhappy with that."

Mave growled, too. She couldn't help it. There was a rift between her and her blood brother, but he was still her blood brother, and Leria...Leria had not been a good wife to him.

"Growling over Seanev but not Luykas getting into a fight? With Kenav?" Rain asked, chuckling as she unceremoniously sat down on a log by the fire.

"I know Luykas can handle Kenav," she muttered, kicking her feet out to keep them close to the warm glow. "Seanev can't handle Leria."

"She has a point," Mat said, sitting beside her but not on the log. He leaned against her thighs, and she couldn't resist touching his hair, running her fingers through the thick black waves he kept now, long enough to cover his ears. "As sad as it is, it's only natural a male will have a hard time

confronting the female he's trying to leave, especially when there's a blood bond and a thousand years of history."

"Just two nights ago, Luykas told me he had Nevyn and Varon glued to Seanev's side. Leria hasn't been able to see him yet. Luykas is hoping to get me back before the confrontation happens."

"We'll need to hurry," Mave said in a hushed voice, looking at the fire as she considered what she would do when she saw this female. Leria, for all intents and purposes, was a fine mativa. By reports, she was a strong leader who kept her Andinna safe and healthy—fed them, clothed them, kept them out of the clutches of the Elvasi. For a thousand years, she had fought hard to keep them the last free Andinna in Anden and had done so with a single-minded purpose that still left many Mave knew stunned.

However, there were ways she had failed. Mave didn't like her. She had forced Seanev to choose between wife and sister, leaving Mave to centuries of brutality. It was foolish to think Seanev could have rescued her, and he had made the best logical decision—the ones he had saved over the one he would die trying to even find.

Then Leria, high on her own confidence, had toyed with Alchan's love life, failing in even more ways. Lady Lilliana, the only ahren in existence, a small submissive female who relied on others to protect her, had been shipped down and forced into Alchan's presence. There was not a single person who denied the danger and foolishness of that situation. To even get Lilliana down south and into the main hub of the war, Leria had used her blood bond to force Seanev's compliance.

Mave, for all her own faults—and she had many—had never considered doing such a thing.

It disturbed her that it was even possible.

It made Mave want to tear the bitch's heart out.

There were several ways she could do it. The really hard part of the decision was whether she wanted Leria alive for the event. Was it possible to keep someone alive while pulling open their ribcage and removing their heart? Mave had no idea, but she had many ideas of how to try.

Glorious, wonderful ideas that sang to the very darkest part of her.

"Mave?" Bryn whispered into her ear. "Are you listening?"

"Sorry, I was considering how I'm going to kill her," Mave explained with a raw honesty that shocked no one in the group except Lilliana, who

gasped. Mave looked at the small female. “You wouldn’t be in attendance, I’m sure.”

Now the small female’s face flushed.

“I wouldn’t mind if I was,” she mumbled. Mave nearly laughed but stopped at a grin, looking around excitedly. Mave was the only one amused. Everyone else was surprised, Alchan especially, his eyes wide as he looked at the little female, his mouth hanging open.

“Then I’ll make sure you’re around,” Mave promised, finding a new appreciation of the ahren she had spent very little time with. “I’ll make it good for you.”

“You’ll do no such thing,” Alchan growled in her direction.

“Why? She wants to see,” Mave countered.

“Kill Leria,” he snapped. “She hasn’t broken any laws.”

Mave growled at that. “She’s a bitch who hurt my brother...*both* of them.”

“She’s meddlesome, arrogant, and takes liberties she shouldn’t. She already knows what will happen if she tests me again. I don’t believe an execution will be necessary. Please, don’t test me on this.” He sighed heavily, giving Mave a desperate look she knew well. He was pleading for her not to start a fight. They both knew if Mave wanted to fight over it, there would damn well be one, and she would probably win.

“This is too normal,” Zayden decided, causing Mave to frown in his direction. “Mave’s normalcy has been bugging me for days. Other than seeing a dragon, nothing has felt different. Nothing feels different right now. Am I the only one who thinks there should have been a bigger change?”

“No...I feel the same,” Mat said lightly. “I’m letting it play out.”

“I mean, how is anyone going to believe these two are Avatars? They don’t feel like Avatars right now.” Zayden frowned at her. “You haven’t for days. Sorry, love.”

“No need to apologize,” she said, shrugging. “Maybe some normal is a good thing.”

“Zayden...” Alchan said, looking across the fire at her husband. Mave watched as Zayden turned to meet Alchan’s gaze.

It happened quickly. One moment Zayden was looking at Alchan as he normally would—respectful, about to drop his eyes in easy submission to

the more dominant male.

The next moment, Zayden was going to his knees, his forehead touching the dirt as he bowed as low as possible to the king in their midst.

Everyone was very still. Zayden was a bit of a traditionalist, who liked Andinna culture and followed it, but he *never* subjugated himself like this, not even to her, his wife. She had to fight him a little because that was something he liked. Even when he was at his most submissive, he didn't put himself on his knees—not to anyone. He wasn't that submissive.

"Being an Avatar is more like using a power than a permanent change," Alchan explained softly. "Many will notice something is different without us needing to do anything, but to do the things of legend, I need to use power. People won't suddenly go to their knees just because I walk into the room, not unless I want them to. Then it takes an active effort on my part to use that power I have now." Alchan relaxed, and Zayden pushed himself up, panting, staring at the ground in shock.

"Why did I do that?" he asked, seemingly to himself. "I...I don't..."

"That is the dominance of Larianna," Alchan said kindly, not haughty or confident. "It did nearly the same thing to me when she appeared before me. Let me help you." Alchan, who had put Zayden in the dirt without even touching him, stood and held out a hand, helping Zayden to his feet. "Look at me." The king's order was soft, but it was still an order.

Zayden did as he asked. This time, Zayden didn't drop down. It was like normal.

"I understand," Zayden finally said, nodding. "Earlier..."

"I tried to do that very thing to Mave. She's the only Andinna in the world who could possibly stay on her feet," Alchan said, throwing a glance at Mave. "I actually put in more effort with her than I did with you."

Mave nodded, understanding what he was implying. He had the dominance of Larianna in his hold, and even that couldn't make the bearer of Kristanya's power feel the need to drop even her eyes.

"Skies," Mat murmured at her legs, shaking his head. "You can do that to anyone, can't you? Force their submission without so much as breaking a sweat."

"Yes, except for the obvious exemption," Alchan said softly. "It's how our queens have done it for centuries."

“Leria said the transition is slow...” Mave mumbled, remembering that old conversation.

“Females of my family are already immensely dominant, and Avatars grow weaker as we use our power because it’s not meant for mortal shells. There have been cases where an Avatar has naturally dropped her eyes to her heir, which is when everyone in my family knew it was time for one to abdicate and the next to step up. Normally, a queen rules until she dies, smart enough to keep her daughters in line.”

“Ah.” Mave understood, but it felt too big and too complicated. She much preferred her own journey to being an Avatar, not wrapped up in thousands and thousands of years of tradition. She went back to the topic at hand, putting aside the strange formalities of Alchan’s family. “So, you can decide when to put someone down. That’s neat. You’ll still be able to have a normal life.”

“Exactly,” Alchan agreed, nodding. “It would make it hard for any of my family to do things like have spouses if the spouse always had to subjugate themselves. Or speak to advisors or anything of the sort that involves other people.”

“Which is most of your job,” Rain said, smiling at his husband as if Alchan was the least scary thing in the world.

Alchan sat down beside his Consort and put an arm over his shoulder. “And you know I’ll never do it to you,” he murmured, specifically for Rain, though the entire group heard it.

“I know.”

Alchan’s gaze found her across the fire again.

“And you, Mave? A dragon...I would love to see it if you’re willing to entertain me.”

“After we finish this conversation,” she said, looking down, not in submission but thoughtfulness. She hadn’t since she jumped off that mountain and used it to leave the terrible storm raging. “Other news from home would be nice.”

“Certainly.” Alchan nodded and seemed to be in thought for a moment. “Trevan is living with Luykas, and they’re getting along well. He mentioned something vague about how the spy is now gone, so Trevan has a new, unique place among the residents of the village. He always had an odd place among us, so I’m interested in what’s changed since we left.”

Mave nodded. “Yeah, me too. I hope no one is giving him a hard time anymore.”

“There will always be someone giving him a hard time,” Mat said gently. “But he’s tough. If you think about it, he’s just as much forged in those pits as you were.”

“Can’t disagree with that,” Rain muttered.

“Pits?”

It was Lady Lilliana who said it, and Mave turned to look at the ahren.

“The tunnel homes of Andinna gladiators underneath the Colosseum in Elliar, capital of the Empire,” she explained in the driest way she could, trying not to think of the place and the horrible lives they’d had down in that damp, tight space. Trying not to think about it meant she had to think of it, losing herself for only a heartbeat. The rich earth of Anden smelled similar to the damp tunnels. For a moment, Mave looked up at the sky and had to remind herself she was in Anden, and the open sky belonged to her.

“It was a terrible place,” Mat said, sighing. “And not a place we talk about.”

“Forgive me.”

“Nothing to forgive. You didn’t know,” Mave said in a whisper, still staring at the sky. Then she broke out of it and smiled at the female. “Since Alchan and Rain haven’t yet...tell me, how was the trip?”

“Oh. Uneventful, but the Capital, even though it’s empty, it’s so beautiful. Have you ever seen it?”

“Not yet,” Mave said, leaning closer to make sure the lady knew she had Mave’s undivided attention. Mave was doing it not just for Lilliana but for herself as well, to push back her natural instincts about ahrens. Dominant females didn’t like submissive ones, and there was no Andinna more submissive than an ahren.

“*An aberration,*” a voice whispered in Mave’s head. It was certainly not her own thought, and it was not masculine. Mave ignored it. She had a nagging feeling she knew who had just spoken in her head, but she refused to look at Lilliana as an aberration. She was Lilliana, and she deserved more than to be judged on the circumstances of her birth. Mave also refused to be the very barbarian Shadra used to tell her she was. To hurt, put down, or ignore Lilliana for her submission would be barbaric.

“Well...it’s really beautiful,” Lilliana said, growing shyer with every word.

“The mountain wasn’t,” Mave said, snorting. “Icy cold in that storm. I felt like I was going to freeze to death.”

“You lost two toes,” Mat growled into her thigh, his emerald stare flicking up when she looked down at him. There was anger there. “Two whole fucking toes.”

“Are you always going to be mad about those?” she asked softly.

“You...lost toes?” Alchan leaned in now.

Mat didn’t give Mave the chance to reply before he yanked her boot off unceremoniously and lifted her foot. She was too stunned by his actions to think to stop him.

“Look!” he snapped. “My perfect, beautiful wife without two very important digits.”

“He’s mad because he used to count them,” she muttered, almost embarrassed.

“Used to do more than count them,” Zayden said, smirking. “And if you think he’s the only one upset by this, you are very wrong.”

“Of course,” she said, yanking her foot out of Mat’s grasp and putting it back in her boot. “It’s just two toes. It could have been my nose or an ear. It hasn’t screwed up my walking, and when we spar, I barely notice their absence.”

“I’m just glad the mountain didn’t kill you,” Emerian said, finally speaking up. “I was damn sure I had gotten you away from the Elvasi, only for you to go kill yourself on it.”

“I’m glad, too,” Alchan said, giving her a hard stare. “Two toes aren’t nothing. I’m glad it was the worst of it—”

“It wasn’t the worst,” Mave mumbled.

“Excuse me?” Alchan sat up straight again, raising his eyebrows in a mix of surprise and confusion.

“It’s...it’s a long story,” she finally conceded.

“Obviously, longer than mine. All I had to do was present myself to the judgment of the queens of old and Larianna, finding the right words to convince them I was worthy.”

Mave sighed. She had promised to tell him, and she had never told her husbands the full story. She started with the trip up the mountain.

“It was so fucking cold, and it never let up,” she said. She tried to keep it short, mentioning a little about the bodies that littered the mountain, previous climbers, now frozen in time on the path that led to the summit. It was barely a path since, most of the time, she was climbing. There was no ability to fly with the strong winds and no animals or plants to eat. She burned clothing off the dead when she could light a fire in a cave, protected from the wind. She told them of the moment so close to the summit, where her foot gave out, and her toes were lost. She even told them how she broke down, not seeing the point in hiding how hard it was from them, how close it was to breaking her. They knew she wasn’t weak, and she wasn’t concerned with giving that impression.

She didn’t tell them about Kian, skipping over him. That was hers. That moment with her chosen, bonded father would always be only hers.

“Then I picked myself up, and I got to the summit,” she said, staring into nothing, away from the group.

“What did Kristanya want from you?” Alchan asked, too smart to think it stopped with the climb.

“To fight. I had to draw one blood on her,” she whispered. “Or die trying.”

That made people drop what they were holding. Bryn had been sharpening their cooking and hunting knives, Rain had been fiddling with something, and Lilliana was mending a pair of pants. All of that stopped as they stared at her.

“You had to what?” Mat asked, slowly getting off the dirt to stand and look down at her. “You didn’t think to mention this since you landed at the temple?”

“I won, didn’t I?” she said, huffing. “I did it. Broken back and all—”

“Broken what?” Zayden snarled.

“Her power healed you, didn’t it?” Alchan was the smart one. “The same way Amonora healed Varon when he nearly killed himself, trying to get her attention.”

“Yes,” Mave confirmed. “She’d...she was the hardest duel I’d ever fought. She was faster, stronger, bigger than me, and to top it off, she used two moroks, probably just to bug me. I couldn’t break past her defenses. She kicked me across the summit, and the power of her kick...It broke my back, and I was done for. Before she made the killing blow, I swung, hoping

to catch her off-guard, and it did. I sliced a line at her ankle.” Mave closed her eyes, remembering that moment of victory. “I technically won, but let’s be honest...I lost. I’ll never be *that* good.”

“She’s the goddess of war,” Alchan pointed out. “Now we know why no one else has ever become her Avatar. I don’t think any warrior I’ve ever met would have gotten one blood on a goddess. I bet there’s never been one to exist.”

Mave smiled a little, grateful for his confidence in her. Not confidence to actually win against Kristanya. Mave was certain there was no one else who could make the climb, then defeat someone who was the true aspect of war. It was part of Kristanya, one of her domains. To beat her, one probably had to actually be a god, and even then, not even Kristanya’s twin could beat her.

Kristanya was going to end the world one day. That meant there was probably no one who could beat her.

“The mountain didn’t help. I was half-starved and exhausted. I got a certain rush when the fight started, knowing I had to win or die, but I certainly wasn’t at my best. I was bleeding black by the end of it.”

Mat groaned and went back to the ground. Bryn didn’t attempt to pick up the knife he’d dropped. Zayden started cursing. Emerian sat silently, watching her with that one intense ruby-red eye, rich red, the color of blood.

Finally, he said something, and Mave hung on every word.

“You’re here now because you don’t know how to do anything but be unstoppable.”

“Don’t encourage her,” Zayden grumbled.

Her eyes flicked away, turning back to Alchan.

“Is there anything else?” she asked.

He shook his head.

“Then let’s have dinner and prepare to go home. I want to get ready for spring as quickly as we can.”

“Agreed, sister.”

LUYKAS

The long winter was seemed never ending for Luykas as he woke up on another chilly morning. The fires had died out overnight, as they always did, and he rushed to get them relit before he froze. He wasn't in any real danger, but he hated the cold stone under his feet and the bite to the air.

The worst part was, he couldn't even wish for spring. Spring meant the war would begin anew, and the Andinna forces were struggling. He needed spring, yet he was dreading it. He needed fresh supplies and needed open fields to train warriors.

He needed his family back. With a desperation he wasn't used to, he needed his family back—Mave and his mayara males, and Alchan and Rain.

A terrible limbo and all he could do was endure it. Alchan had written to him just two weeks before, saying he'd rejoined Mave. They were headed back south, but the trip could take nearly a month. The only blessing was they would certainly be back before the end of the long, cold winter.

Once the fire had warmed his feet, he went into the kitchen to start making a simple breakfast for himself and his friend.

Friend. He frowned. Was Trevan a friend or a brother at this point? They'd stayed together every day since Dave had been murdered. He'd given the Elvasi tatua, and something had changed in Trevan, which only led to them growing closer. Now, Luykas didn't know if he could pass a day without sharing a joke or smart remark to the man.

And here he is now.

Luykas smiled as Trevan walked into the kitchen, only wearing a pair of leather pants, yawning as he waved to Luykas.

“Good morning,” Luykas said as he flipped bacon in the iron pan over the cooking fire.

“Mornin’,” Trevan managed as he fell into a seat. His eyes were still closed as if he had barely woken up and couldn’t be bothered to actually open them. Luykas knew the expression. There was a strong chance Trevan was going to fall asleep at the table.

“Hey.” He took the pan off the fire once the bacon was finished and took no care as he placed it on the table loudly, not bothering to put the bacon on a plate first. The thump of the iron on the wood made Trevan jump and glare at him, his pale gold-and-black eyes now visible.

“Ass,” Trevan growled, sounding more Andinna than Elvasi.

“I know, but we’re eating then heading out. No sleeping in. We’ve got work to do.” Luykas chuckled and went back into his small kitchen to make eggs, hoping eggs and bacon would be enough for the both of them.

We can always head to the community hall and pick up more if we’re hungry before lunch.

When Luykas came back with eggs, Trevan was still only picking at the first piece of bacon.

“You in a mood today?” he asked as he sat down and put two plates and forks on the table.

“I’m in a mood every day. I hate going out there,” Trevan said softly, nodding toward the outside world. “They don’t know how to treat me anymore, and it shows.”

“You’re Andinna now. They’ll get used to it,” Luykas said, trying to sound as if he meant it. By Trevan’s glare, he knew he’d failed. “Sorry. I just don’t want you to feel like an outcast. I did this to you, I guess. I have no idea what the dragon gods turned you into, but that doesn’t matter to me. You’re Trevan. You’re loyal, strong, and intelligent. You’ve seen horrors the same way many of the Andinna have, and you accepted the dragon gods as your own. To me, this...” Luykas waved over Trevan, indicating the most obvious changes to his face. “It doesn’t bother me.”

And what changes Trevan went through. His eyes almost matched Luykas’ now. With black Andinna eyes instead of white of the other races,

Trevan's pale gold almost mirrored Luykas' true rich gold. Instead of a bright color or pitch-black Luykas used to see, Trevan had a strange shimmering rose-gold tatua, curved and pointed in intricate patterns, beginning a story that would one day be read by the goddess, Kristanya, before she cast judgment on the soul ready to pass on.

There were unseen changes as well. Trevan acted more like an Andinna in small ways, but those changes had begun over a year ago, when Trevan began living in Andinna society, working for a people he had spent years near. It was those unseen changes that had been a key factor in Luykas trying to give him tatua. He wondered if they were accelerated or brought more to the surface by this odd shift in whatever Trevan was, but they were there, and there was no point in denying it.

"You're a good male," Trevan said with a wry smile. "But let's be honest. One of the reasons you threw the first punch was because you told Kenav not to call me a freak, and he did, anyway."

"I'm the more dominant male. He should have followed my command," Luykas retorted.

"You can't stop people from having feelings about this." Trevan waved over his own face. "Don't get me wrong, I really enjoy it. I am...grateful beyond measure you offered me this gift, and your gods accepted me as one of their own. However, my gratefulness doesn't change that many Andinna are at a loss what to think or feel about me. They don't know the dragons presented themselves to me. They don't know that you're giving me lessons about everyone in the pantheon of primal dragons. They don't know, I try to only speak Andenna because I want to be one of them."

"They should infer all of that on their own," Luykas growled. "I might be the worst Andinna, but I was given a strong example, and I will never leave someone without the knowledge of our culture that they deserve. You should ask Mave about that the next time you see her. She wanted to strangle me as I bought her jewelry to wear, not that she ever does."

At his words, he watched Trevan reach up and touch a series of clip-on earrings Luykas had designed with Gentrin for him. He had no horns, but they wanted him to have something, another piece of Andinna culture.

"I never noticed that Mave doesn't wear jewelry like the other Andinna," Trevan murmured.

No, you were too busy basking in her presence, weren't you?

Luykas smirked. He couldn't wait to see if Mave returned these affections. The longer he knew Trevan was madly in love with his passionate, dangerous wife, the more he liked the idea of them.

It was a strange love story, but one Luykas really wanted to see play out. A guard and the woman he was supposed to watch. A warrior and the male she wanted to protect. Two different cultures coming together in a union that could stand against the war, showing the Andinna and the Elvasi, they could one day be allies again or even more. Instead of the pain and betrayal and manipulation of his own parents, Luykas could see an Elvasi and an Andinna find love.

I was never a romantic, but war makes us strange, doesn't it?

"Yeah, she's never been one for the pretty things in life," Luykas finally said, looking down at his food. "The fact she plays the flute...When I first heard it, I almost couldn't believe it, but it's the one simple, purely pretty thing she's ever done for herself."

"She never had them before unless she had to hurt herself for them," Trevan mumbled. "Anything pretty in the pits needed to be useful, or it was worthless."

"Good point," Luykas conceded.

They settled into brotherly silence and ate breakfast, working together to clean up. Luykas knew it was brotherly silence because it was a type of silence he often shared with Alchan as they grew up. It was a silence he shared with the rest in Mave's mayara, all his brothers now. He missed all of them so damn much—Mat, Bryn, and Zayden. He missed Alchan. He missed these brotherly silences with those males.

He was grateful he found them with someone new.

It was a strange change from the last war Luykas had fought in, finding himself strangely reminiscent this morning. He and Alchan had stayed somewhat apart from the others, keeping to themselves, keeping their distance, and making very few attachments. They had known Nevyn, Varon, and Kian. They had known Senri when she visited her husband, and he spoke of her at length. They had spent time with Seanev growing up, but this war was different. They had met Matesh, Zayden, and many others during the final battle, scrambling to get as many warriors as they could to safety. Those were just names of fellow warriors back then, warriors who

pledged to work with Alchan and Luykas to continue helping the Andinna survive.

Now, many of them were family.

So is Trevan.

Luykas got brotherly silences from many now.

They finished getting dressed, hoping to fight the bitter cold. Luykas even wore his full armor, hoping to protect himself.

“Are you okay this morning? You’ve been quiet,” Trevan asked as they pulled on their boots.

“I’m fine, just stuck in my own thoughts,” Luykas replied as they strapped on their swords, a morning ritual. Trevan couldn’t leave the cliffside home without killing himself, so they had grown used to getting ready at the same time.

He opened the front door as Trevan got behind him. When they stepped out into the cold, Trevan was so close to him, Luykas could feel his breath on his back. Without needing any prep, the man threw his arms around Luykas’ midsection from behind, and Luykas took off without warning once Trevan was holding on tight enough.

They didn’t do this without reason. The only time Luykas flew with a passenger was to get in and out of his house. He landed promptly in front of Alchan’s home in the grassy clearing at the base of the cliff. Trevan let go the moment their feet were touching the ground, and they started walking, ignoring the Andinna who were coming and going from the different homes. They were young Andinna who took it upon themselves to keep Alchan and Mave’s homes livable. Luykas checked in every so often to make sure nothing was stolen or broken, not that he worried much. He didn’t like going in their homes because it made him miss them more.

He and Trevan made the walk to the war room together, a large building with only one room, an open space with a massive table covered in maps and more. Already, Senri was waiting with Allaina and Yenni, sitting in a corner and chattering on about something. Neither of Senri’s husbands was in attendance, odd because she was heavily pregnant. She was due sometime in spring, though there was a chance she could pop a summer baby out. Spring babies were the most common, summer being the next if the pregnancy lasted a little too long or the female’s fertile cycle was later in the spring. Since it was nearly two years ago, Luykas couldn’t remember

when Senri had quickened her cycle to try for a child. She wasn't his wife, and her fertile cycles weren't his business, but she was also Mave's mother in every way but blood, so he was excited for her and watched her carefully.

"Where are your husbands?" he demanded, walking over to the females with Trevan backing him up. He was going to need the backup for being an overprotective ass first thing in the morning. "You never go anywhere without them, and you certainly need them."

"The baby has been kicking all night. Don't you fucking start with me, Luykas Andini. I'll cut off your fucking cock and feed it to Mave when she returns," Senri growled, her mood snapping from pleasant conversation with her friends to fierce.

"Go away," Allaina ordered, looking over her shoulder at him. "We're not in the mood for cocks today."

"Oh, and what have the cocks done?" Luykas asked, crossing his arms.

"Mine told me they don't want me to quicken my own cycle this year," Allaina hissed, glaring at him.

"And mine deserve a bit of coldness after this," Senri snarled, waving a hand over her massive belly. "This was their fault."

Luykas knew better than to argue with Senri, who had absolutely been the one who decided to have a child and convinced her three husbands. It had been nearly two years, and most Andinna females grew more ornery every passing season with pregnancy. By the end of it, it was always a male's fault. Added to that, Senri was a dominant female, which only compounded the issue, and honed her anger into a sharpened blade, ready to fulfill every threat she could think of.

He stepped back, thinking about how he certainly didn't want her to find a chance.

"Well, I would much prefer if they were in attendance for you. Let them grovel a little, Senri. You know they like it."

Senri's smile was cruel, and he knew he'd made a terrible mistake. He didn't know what yet, but he knew he made a dreadful one.

"I know they do," she said too softly, her words promising violence if he didn't quickly leave her be.

"Hence why they aren't allowed to," Allaina added, giving her own vicious smile.

Yenni, Allaina's ball-busting wife and the fourth member of the mativa's mayara, only laughed, which was the final horrifying note the trio needed to chase Luykas away with his tail between his legs.

"Skies have mercy on us," he muttered in Trevan's ear as he turned away from the trio of dangerous women. He was almost too scared to turn his back on them, but he didn't want them to have the satisfaction of him stepping away as though they were wild animals. He wanted to keep some dignity.

"You asked for it," Trevan whispered back as they retreated to the far side of the room. "I could have told you they didn't want you anywhere near them."

"You're an ass. You should have grabbed me and stopped me from trying," Luykas snapped, trying to keep his voice low.

"Why? It was entertaining, and they know I would never say what you just did," Trevan replied with a humored expression.

"What did I even say?" Luykas growled.

"You mentioned that her males would like something. Do any of those females seem like they're in the mood to indulge a male right now?" Trevan crossed his arms and raised his eyebrows.

Luykas muttered several curses, shaking his head as he saw Trevan's logic.

Luykas and Trevan hid in the far corner as others came in, ready for a day of meetings about supply shortages and training schedules. Kenav looked at Luykas and started for the farthest point from him, then noticed the females were in that corner and blanched. Luykas almost laughed in pity for the asshole. Stuck between a rock and a hard place, Kenav picked the hard place, drifting closer to Luykas and Trevan instead of testing the females with his very presence.

"Where are her husbands?" he dared ask as other unit commanders, nobles, and even a small number of priests walked in.

Luykas shrugged. "You can try to ask her. I wouldn't mind watching the outcome of that."

Kenav growled but said nothing.

The room quickly filled, and that corner remained only for females. There were a number of them in the room now, and they made a literal wall around Senri. The priests hovered, waiting for Varon. Luykas knew Nevyn,

Varon, and Seanev would be the last in the room, and like clockwork, they were. Varon glared at the priests but said nothing as they started talking to him. Nevyn and Seanev headed for Luykas.

“They jump him every day. Eventually, he’s going to lose his patience with them,” Nevyn said, his words full of disdain for the priests.

“What do they want?” Luykas asked. “They don’t come to me for anything.”

“Who the fuck knows?” Nevyn snarled, glancing over one more time.

“I’ll handle it,” Varon finally declared, his words bringing silence over not just the priests near him but the entire room.

There was no helping it. Varon had been mute for three thousand years, having given up his voice to Amonora to gain his sight. Being a mute was far better than being blind as an Andinna. Now, Varon was whole, and everyone knew his status as the Avatar of Amonora. Everyone wanted his favor.

They now understood just how the goddess thought it was an equal trade—voice for eyes. Varon sounded like sex. Luykas had no other way to describe it. He spoke, and people paid attention to the smoothness, and when he was angry or frustrated, it grew husky in perfect ways. It was rich and melodic, and even the simplest of words promised things they shouldn’t. It was a sound that made people fall in love and break their own hearts, enjoying every moment. Even the simplest words made half the room hard or wet, depending on the equipment. The other half of the room had more self-control.

Luykas counted himself as someone with self-control.

“Skies,” Nevyn said, shaking his head as Varon came to him. “If you wanted, the entire fucking village would move in with us to meet your every need.”

“Ah, but I already have someone for that,” Varon murmured, leaning to kiss his husband’s cheek. “The only one I need.”

Nevyn’s smile was full of love.

“Okay, can I have everyone’s attention?” Luykas called out, stepping to block everyone’s sight of Nevyn and Varon. Seanev and Trevan flanked him to join the effort. They tried desperately to give the enduring couple privacy when they could. Since Varon’s identity became public, people were always staring at him, not that he seemed to notice. Everyone wanted a moment to

Speak to the Avatar about love and more, hoping he could somehow do something to stop or fix their current problems.

Then he got his voice back, and it had gotten out of control.

“Wonderful,” Senri growled from across the room.

Luykas was amused that pregnancy made the female immune to Varon. Varon chuckled behind him, obviously having the same thought.

Luykas bit back a groan. He wasn’t interested in males like his brother, but there was only so much a mortal could take when the Avatar of love, fertility, and the arts was right behind him, making that noise.

“Be quiet,” Nevyn hissed, but there was no anger. It was almost boyish, trying to shush his lover to keep anyone else from looking.

“Yes, be quiet, Varon. The rest of us need to work,” Senri said loudly from across the room.

Trevan started to laugh, and Luykas looked up at the sky, wondering if they would ever have a normal meeting again.

“I’ll have your balls, Trevan, if you keep laughing!” Senri snapped.

Trevan went silent, and Luykas wondered if he was breathing.

Then Senri gasped. Luykas narrowed his eyes as she leaned on the table, holding her stomach. Then she winced and groaned as the females around her went wide-eyed.

“Oh, shit,” Senri mumbled. “I guess I’m having a baby today.”

Luykas wondered for a moment if the sky was falling.

“Her water broke!” Allaina yelled. Yenni swept Senri off her feet.

“Meeting canceled,” Nevyn roared over the new commotion as people began to shout instructions to each other. “Clear a path to the healer!”

Luykas was paralyzed for a moment as a realization hit him.

“Luykas? Are we going to help?” Trevan snapped, grabbing his arm. “Luykas, you’re in charge here. Snap out of it.”

“Senri is going to have a winter baby,” he whispered, looking down at Trevan. “Skies, Senri is having a winter baby.” His words sending a chill down his spine, he ran after Yenni, who was practically sprinting with Senri in her arms.

They had to get to the healer—right now.

MAVE

Mave smiled on the sunny winter day they crossed over the ridge on the northern road and saw their village below. Winter wasn't close to done with them yet, but for one blissful day, there wasn't fresh snow falling or a winter storm in the sky. The bright sun reflected on the white that covered everything, making the world indescribably bright, as if she was constantly looking at the sun.

"We're home," Alchan said softly, standing next to her. They were walking this last bit of the trip to stretch their legs. The road had been hard on all of them, but they had shaved an entire week off the trip, thanks to their efforts.

"We're home," she agreed. For a blissful moment, it felt as if nothing had changed. Looking below, the village looked completely normal.

"Any reason we've stopped?" Rain asked, coming up between them. Before Alchan had the chance to claim him, she put an arm around his waist, and he leaned into her. He was much more grown-up now than when she had met him years before in the pits. They didn't need each other anymore since they had their own families.

Rain—her first family, now a strange mix of brother, oddly a son in some ways, and just a friend in others—was still dear to her in a way she couldn't explain. It was complicated, but it was theirs, and for a moment, she wanted him with her, not with Alchan.

Alchan gave a low perpetual growl at her touching him that slowly disappeared before anyone answered Rain's question. Alchan knew she

wasn't a threat to his relationship with Rain, but whenever anyone but Zayden or Lilliana touched the younger male, Alchan growled until he could control himself.

"Just enjoying the view," she said simply, nodding down to the village that had no idea they were there.

"It's a wonderful view," Rain agreed. "We can sit here for a moment. It's only midday. As long as we're all in our beds tonight, I don't care."

"Agreed," Zayden added, coming up on her other side. Slowly but surely, the entire group came to stand and stare down at the valley.

Mave narrowed her eyes on something, realizing she could see...*feel* something so well the longer she looked down, she practically visualized the power spot in the village. It was nothing like Alchan to her mind's eye, but it was similar in an odd way.

"Alchan, do you...see that?" she asked, tilting her head to the side.

"Yeah. It's Varon. I tried reaching out to him the way you and I can communicate, but when I brushed up against his mind, it didn't let me in." Alchan shrugged. "I guess he can't do this the way we can. I'm certain it let him know we were here, though."

"Ah, I should have guessed," she mumbled, nodding.

"No, you don't know nearly as much about Avatars as him and me. I should have pointed him out and let you know before you asked. Like calls to like. He's one of the chosen as well, so we recognize him without needing to see him."

"Do the males ever chose Avatars?" Mat asked, crossing his arms. "I've never heard of it, but I'm curious if maybe the royal family knew more."

"No. The males also don't take on Andinna shape in any story I know. They're not the same as the sisters." Alchan sounded thoughtful. "Maybe one day, they'll have need. I mean, look at how long it took Kristanya to choose an Avatar."

"Well, she didn't choose me, but she has me," Mave muttered. She didn't dream of her goddess anymore, and when she saw Kristanya, the goddess was silent. Mave was almost beginning to believe she was getting the cold shoulder as if Kristanya was still mad about getting an Avatar.

Even now, Mave looked to her left and saw Kristanya at the end of the line, staring down into the valley, completely silent, her arms crossed. Her

profile was surprisingly beautiful, not a word Mave had ever thought to assign to the goddess without wings.

Mave turned forward again as the power in the village began to move. She grinned, ignoring her annoyance with Kristanya, as Varon rose into the air, coming closer. It took several moments for her to realize Nevyn was with him, but it didn't surprise her.

"Varon! Nevyn!" Alchan called, his mood bright as he waved at the approaching Andinna. They landed in front of the group as Alchan stepped forward. "It's good to see you!" He and Nevyn embraced in a bone-crushing hug, then Varon got similar treatment from Alchan. Mave walked forward as well, followed by everyone else, excited to once again see the males.

"And it's good to see you," Varon declared, holding Alchan's shoulders. "You've done it. I could feel it the moment you succeeded. We have a true King of Anden now. I knew you would find the right words. I knew our goddess wouldn't forsake us, just because you're male."

Mave stumbled to a stop, her mouth dropping over. She couldn't break her focus from Varon as he turned to her, leaving Alchan slack-jawed as well.

"And *you*. I'm not sure which of you I'm prouder of," he said, coming to her, closing the distance, and hugging her as well.

"Y-Y-Y-You...you can talk!" she said, pulling away to stare at his face, trying to see if something was different. Something had to have changed.

"Well, that's a better reaction than you get from most," Nevyn said, leaning in to say those words in his lover's ear. "Looks like other than shock, you don't affect Mave and Alchan the way you do everyone else."

"Oh, well, I could have told you that would be the case," Varon replied, laughing.

It sounded like bells or some sort of music. Mave stared wide-eyed, mystified by the sound. At least one male groaned in the background, and Lilliana most definitely whimpered in apparent need.

"Oh," Alchan finally said, looking back at the group. "*Oh.*"

"His voice didn't quite have this effect when he and I met. We think because it was given to him by the gods, and he's Amonora's Avatar, it's been...perfected. Now everyone is a stumbling mess when he talks. People get used to it, though. Don't worry." Nevyn was laughing as he explained.

“It also means I’ve had to beat people off with a fucking stick for weeks. Terrible, I tell you.”

“How?” Mave asked, clearly unaffected by Varon’s voice. She thought it was beautiful and wonderful and certainly understood why others might have the reaction, but it did nothing to quicken her. She wasn’t going to whimper.

“A gift, as Nevyn said. That’s all I really want to say. My meddling earned me a gift,” Varon said, smiling at her. “One I’m not sure I deserved but am grateful to have.”

Mave nodded.

“While you stand here, wondering if this is the most exciting change since you’ve left, I have news...it’s not,” Varon said, spreading his hands out sheepishly. “I am a passing attraction, truthfully. Eventually, everyone will be used to me, and no one will think it strange.”

“There’s stranger than this?” Mat finally said, clearing his throat. He stood behind Mave, and she felt his erection, straining against his leather as if it was going to burst any moment. “Because this is strange.”

“There’s stranger, but there’s one thing I think Mave might want to know before anything else,” Nevyn said, winking at her. “Senri had her baby last week. Mother and baby are fine—”

“That’s early!” Zayden said, rushing forward. “Way too early. Winter babies don’t—”

“Always survive? Yeah, we know,” Nevyn said, cutting her husband off the way he had been cut off. “But it’s late winter. The baby is healthy. A bit small but healthy. Senri was amazing. The moment her water broke, everyone jumped into action, and she handled the delivery well.”

Mave’s heart raced as Varon continued to smile at her.

“You are now a big sister,” he said, a twinkle in his eyes. “But you cannot go see them yet, and we’ll keep the name and sex of the baby to ourselves to keep that part of the surprise.”

“Why can’t I?” she demanded, huffing. Fuck a parade or seeing anyone else. She wanted to see Senri. She was a big sister now, and her mother had to go through the delivery without her. Mave didn’t realize until that moment how much she had wanted to be there.

Now, she had missed it.

“You need to wash up,” Alchan said, leaning to her. “Babies can’t be handled by people covered in dirt, sweat, and other garbage from the road. Clean up, and I’m certain they’ll let you see her. I won’t make you do anything beforehand. This is your family.”

“Well, there is one thing,” Varon said, and Mave heard the chorus of male groans behind her.

It was a passing thought that she should be jealous or upset Varon could evoke such a response from her husbands, but it was almost comical. It was even funnier since Mat continued to press up closer behind her as though he could do anything in front of this group and with all their clothing on. He put a strong arm around her waist to hold her still, and she felt his breath, hot and heavy, on the back of her head as he buried his face in her hair.

“What?” Alchan asked, less demanding than she had been.

“We need to talk about this.” Varon pointed around at the three of them. “And how much we tell them.” He pointed down to the village. “You haven’t considered it yet? Kristanya has never named an Avatar. Are we certain we want to tell everyone that she did, and it’s Mave?”

Mave frowned, having never given it any thought. She never planned to tell everyone but didn’t consider keeping it a secret, either.

“Why would it matter?” she asked as Alchan cursed, looking down. She glanced at him to see Rain holding onto him the same way Mat was holding her.

“They already fear you,” Alchan grumbled. “This might terrify them.”

“And if it gets out, Shadra can learn of it. Amonora and Larianna... we’re normal, but Kristanya? The goddess of death, darkness, and war? Shadra isn’t a fool. She’ll know this is bad news for her.”

“What would Shadra know of any of this?” Mat was able to ask. Mave was amazed he could string together words. Normally, he had a pretty one-track mind when he was this aroused.

Mave was stuck on what Alchan said, her mind going over all the possible outcomes. She was used to being feared.

And she was tired of it.

Mave had wanted to be part of this culture for so long, even if there was a little fear. She didn’t want people to stop letting her play with their children. She didn’t want to be completely ostracized once again. She couldn’t live like that again. She never really integrated well, but she wasn’t

an outsider. People smiled and waved at her, and she held a unique and respected position in their community now.

She didn't want to lose that.

"My father had Luykas with her," Alchan whispered, looking away from the group. "There's a chance she always knew of Avatars, and that's why she's worked so hard to...to destroy my family line. He would have boasted to her. Not only that, but my grandmother used her powers as the Avatar of Larianna to help push back the initial invasion of the Elvasi. She was too weak to do it ever again, but it bought us time to really fight back and make our defense in the Spine originally. At the very least, Shadra knows our gods can grant us great power. She'll be targeting us as she learns about us. Anything to get rid of whatever edge we might think we have." He sighed. "I'm more worried about the reception of the Andinna. Mave, I know you don't care but—"

"I don't want them to be scared of me," she admitted. "I don't. If we keep it a secret, especially what I can do, just for a little while, that would be nice. Let them see that I'm still me. That way, when they do learn, they're less likely to run in terror."

"Wise," Varon said, nodding respectfully. "I'm glad I caught all of you here. I wanted to make sure we made a decision."

"You were always the smartest of us," Alchan said softly, thumping Varon's shoulder. "Later, the three of us shall speak more privately...about us."

"Of course," Varon agreed.

"Now, why don't you all retire to a large hot spring and get washed up?" Nevyn said, jumping into action, walking beyond them toward the two carts they had. "Varon and I will make sure this gets to your homes. If we see Luykas and Trevan, we'll send them your way. Stay together."

"I don't bathe with Alchan," she said, frowning at Nevyn.

"I don't bathe with Mave," her brother said at the exact same time.

She looked at him, and he looked down at Rain to indicate what he wanted. She felt Mat pressed up behind her and couldn't disagree.

"We'll pick those two springs close to each other," he said, his voice unexpectedly thick. He weaved an arm over Rain's shoulders, holding the smaller male. "So Luykas and Trevan can find either of us easily."

"Good idea," she decided.

They all jumped into the air.

MAVE

Mave sighed happily as Mat groaned, sinking deep into the hot water, his eyes drifting closed. Zayden was nearly asleep, propped between two rocks to keep himself upright, and Bryn was actually snoring softly, probably not safe in the water. Emerian was the only one still clearly awake like her, and he was making little circles on her thigh under the water.

“This wasn’t how I was expecting our return,” he said softly as the circles stopped, and his full palm began to massage her thigh.

“You know they would accept you the moment you decide what you want to do,” she reminded him. She was grateful for this hand. She’d just had all four of them practically back-to-back, a couple at the same time. She couldn’t leave them suffering after what Varon had accidentally done to them. Plus, it had been a great way to come home. She just hadn’t been that active in weeks. Group events weren’t easy on the road. Without a doubt, she knew she would be sore tomorrow. “The moment you’re willing to talk to me about it...”

“You haven’t exactly tried to talk to me either,” he countered, leaning in to kiss her kiss-swollen lips. His were as well. He’d been the last to get in on the action but had eventually broken and joined in when he realized the others wouldn’t mind. She’d been happy to feel his hands on her the way her husbands had been.

Now, if only Luykas would show up. This could be the perfect moment.

“What’s there to say?” she huffed at him. “We enjoy each other, and we’re obviously not about to end this. Join my mayara, Emerian. Be a part of this family.”

“We don’t know each other that well,” he whispered, leaning down to kiss her neck. “I’m trying to get to know the real you better and let you get to know me before making big decisions. I don’t want to wake up one day, and you seem to think of me as unsuitable for your family.”

She gave him a small moan as his hand drifted higher until it reached her core.

“We know each other pretty well. We fought together, trained together. I know the story of your family. I know you are sometimes a boy at heart, a hurt boy who doesn’t know where he belongs.” Mave looked down at him and used a hand to gently bring his gaze up to hers. When she stared at him, the rest of the world disappeared. While this wasn’t a private place, speaking of things in front of her husbands was something she was unafraid to do and something Emerian needed to get used to.

“I know you struggled with me, that you found something new in yourself on that mission. I broke you a little, my own heartbreak forcing you to take on the brunt of the work, ensuring our survival. That tells me while you have a hurt boy at heart, you’re also a strong male, willing to make sacrifices for those you care about. I’m honored you enjoy my company, and I want you to stay in my company.” She smirked. “Is there anything else I need to know?”

He groaned and leaned into her, shifting his body, so he was between her legs.

“I don’t know,” he said, hot in her ear, pained by something. “But I think maybe I should stay in the category of lover for a little longer. If that’s all right. I don’t plan on straying. There’s only been you. I’ve never even looked at another female. You...captivated me from the moment we met. I’m just not sure I’m ready for the title of husband.”

“Then stay a lover until you’re ready. There’s a place in my bed for you when you’re ready,” she said, but her mind was made up. She wanted to keep this scarred male for herself and continue to know him more and more. She wanted to breathe him every morning and keep discovering his secrets and see what he continued to become. She would allow him the time to get more comfortable.

For now.

“Thank you.”

He captured her mouth again, growling as she grabbed his shoulders and deepened the kiss, taking control. When the kiss broke off, he reached under her and grabbed her ass to hold her in place as he positioned himself.

“How can you possibly be hard after everything?” she asked, chuckling as he pressed against her, ready to sink into her. She was more than okay with another round, greedy after so long on the road, with only stolen single moments with her different males. Now they were all clean and had a moment to enjoy themselves. She was fine with enjoying them even more, even though the soreness between her legs was already beginning to ache.

“I have no idea,” he admitted.

“Youthful stamina,” Zayden grumbled from across the hot spring. “New lover excitement. He’s insane. All options. Take your pick.”

She laughed at Zayden’s words. Emerian pushed into her, and her head dropped back as he fully seated himself deep inside her. He moved slowly, carefully as her gasps had a small edge of pain to them, thanks to the soreness, which was also so delicious.

“By the Skies,” someone said. She got her eyes to open once more, first seeing Emerian, totally absorbed in his task, then looked further up to see Luykas staring at her upside down. She couldn’t really form words, unable to think as Emerian picked the pace.

He only smiled indulgently as she and Emerian shared a passionate moment with an audience.

She finished first, glad all her males took care to make sure she did. Emerian buried himself into her one more time and finished, panting as he nuzzled her neck.

“Hi,” she finally managed to say to the husband above her. “You know Emerian.”

“I do,” Luykas said, chuckling. “I was so excited to know my wife was waiting in the hot springs for me, but it seems you’ve already had plenty of male affection. You’re going to hurt for a few days.”

She laughed again, so glad to see him. Emerian pulled out of her and kissed her one more time before he settled beside her in the water, now looking much more exhausted. She was fighting the same need for sleep. She knew a little nap would do wonders.

She reached out, met Luykas' hand with her own, and let him pull her out of the water and into a deep kiss, their emotions rushing between them but lacking some of the power they once had.

"The bond is weak," he said as the kiss ended.

"I noticed that as well. I think it's because I became an Avatar." She bit her lip and didn't beat around the bush with him. "Do you want to redo it?"

"I would love that," he said, smiling at her. "I was hoping you'd ask." Then he froze. "Shit." He turned away from her, looking over his shoulder. She leaned to look beyond him to see Trevan leaning against the closest tree, trying very hard not to be noticed.

"Hey Trevan," she said, waving around her husband.

Did he just watch me fuck his best friend?

Mave didn't know where the feeling came from since sex was completely natural, but the guilt sat bitter on her tongue, and she didn't know how to shake it.

"Hey, Mave," he greeted, giving her a kind smile.

That was when she realized he had changed.

"Do you like the tatua?" Luykas asked her. "I did the ritual myself. I see Emerian has his. Looks great. And your back." He made an obvious show of looking at her back, something Mave didn't really think about because she couldn't see it. When she had come down from the mountain, Mave's entire back had been covered in tatua, adding to what Kristanya had already given to her.

She let go of him, barely hearing Emerian's thank you and explanation that Mave had done his. She didn't reply to his words about her own new tatua.

She didn't care that she was naked and paid no mind to the pain she felt as she walked. She walked toward Trevan, who turned a little flushed as she stared at his face, trying to understand. She reached out and touched his cheeks, staring at his eyes. The tatua were certainly beautiful, a shimmering rose-gold, unlike anything she had ever seen, but it was his eyes that captivated her. His pale gold eyes were now set in black, not white.

He was *changed*.

"How?" she asked in a whisper, mystified.

"It's a long story." He took her hands and removed them from his face. His expression was unreadable, but he did her the service of looking her in

the eyes. She realized he was desperately trying not to look at her body, which meant he couldn't drop his eyes, a problem making him uncomfortable. "We'll talk about it later." He turned and started to walk away, leaving her confused and speechless as she watched him disappear into the trees.

"Well, that's not how I expected that to go," Luykas muttered, but when she turned, it was Emerian's face that surprised her. He looked horrified, and before she could figure out the problem, he jumped out of the water and started grabbing all of his clothing.

"What?" she finally managed as Emerian pulled on his pants. He gave her a pained look, then looked in the direction Trevan went.

"He's my closest friend," Emerian said, swallowing. "I'm going to go ask him...about everything since we've been gone. It's been a long time, you know."

She knew he was lying. She could tell when someone was lying, and Emerian was exceptionally bad at it, but she nodded, kissing Emerian's cheek.

It made him flinch, something she tried her best to ignore, then Emerian jumped into the air, holding the remainder of his clothes. She knew from the direction he flew off in, he was chasing Trevan down.

"Well, it looks like things have just gotten very interesting," Luykas muttered, looking in the same direction. "Very interesting."

"Do you know what the hell is going on?" she asked, turning to him and narrowing her eyes on her most cunning of husbands. He knew people better than anyone, even if he was standoffish. It was the Elvasi in him, the thing he inherited from his mother. Maeve loved him deeply, but she knew he had that part of himself that would always come from his relationship with *her*.

"I might be able to hazard a guess, but I don't think now is the time to talk about it. Or if I'm the person who can give you the right answer. I would hate to give you the wrong one and lead you down a path that could get someone hurt," he said, a pragmatic and vague answer that she understood but hated.

"Really." She put her hands on her hips, very much not tired anymore. "My lover just ran off after my friend, after my friend effectively shut me down."

“Lover,” Luykas repeated, testing the word. “So Emerian isn’t a husband.”

“Not yet,” she said, sighing. She gave him the basic explanation, quickly telling him about Emerian and her to get it out of the way.

“Very interesting,” he murmured again.

“Luykas,” she snapped. “This is not helping the case of me bonding with you again.”

He smiled sheepishly. “There are some things you need to let us males work out, my love.”

“He’s right, beloved,” Mat added, sleepy but listening. She had figured him asleep like the others. “I think whatever just happened has more to do with Emerian and Trevan than with you. Emerian is only your lover. You don’t have the right to tread on his personal life the way you can with us.”

She growled, crossing her arms.

“Get dressed,” Luykas ordered, smiling indulgently at her again.

She glared at him.

“You want to meet your new little sibling, right?” he said, chuckling at her expression.

EMERIAN

“**T**revan, wait,” he called out, landing behind his Elvasi friend, who didn’t miss a step or slow down. The guilt had come, and Emerian didn’t know what to say to Trevan, but he knew he needed to say something.

“Trevan, please!” he called out and started running to catch his closest friend. He grabbed Trevan’s shoulder to stop him and get in front, meeting his friend’s new, strange Andinna eyes. They paralyzed him for a moment, seeing them up close and realizing they were real and not a trick of the light.

“There’s nothing to say,” Trevan said without a single readable emotion on his face. Emerian stared at him intently, searching for anything, but Trevan’s words were empty, carefully hiding whatever he was feeling.

“There is,” he said, panting as he realized flying that hard after his previous physical exertion was idiotic. “I’m sorry you learned that way. It’s still new for Mave and me.”

“Congratulations on your new place in her mayara—”

“I’m not in her mayara!” Emerian growled, shaking Trevan a little, trying to make him listen. Trevan’s eyes went wide. “I’m a lover, but I haven’t taken up her offer yet. It’s too fast for me. I want to get to know her better. Get to know...*myself* better. So, I’m just a lover, not a husband.” Emerian watched as the small bit of emotion disappeared once again from Trevan’s face.

“I don’t see why you’re explaining this to me. It’s between you and Mave. It has nothing to do with me,” he said, pulling away from Emerian. Emerian growled as Trevan stepped around him as if he was just some nameless, faceless obstacle.

Emerian grabbed him again and held him in place, with more force this time.

“It does—”

“You fucking Mave has nothing to do with me,” Trevan snapped before Emerian could say anything more. “Nothing. Do you hear me? Go, be happy, and fucking leave me out of it.” Trevan shoved him away. Emerian took two steps before he found his balance again. “We both knew I would never end up with her, Emerian. She doesn’t know how I feel. Even if you do, that doesn’t mean you can’t have your own feelings. She obviously returns them. I’m not a child who is so petty to need an explanation about someone else’s love life.”

“Then why did you leave so quickly?” Emerian asked, trying to understand.

“Because I didn’t...” Trevan groaned, rubbing his temples as he did. “I didn’t...” He leaned on a tree, and the fight left him. Emerian saw how his shoulders sagged, and his expression turned bleak.

“Trevan?”

“Dave is gone,” he whispered, “and now you’re back, and she’s back. Aside from Luykas, you two are really the only friends I have left. I saw the two of you...” Trevan’s face made it obvious. Emerian didn’t need to hear Trevan admit it.

He’d been jealous, practically green with it.

Trevan swallowed. Emerian had always known him as an honest man. Trevan never lied to him or tried to hide anything except for his feelings about Mave and the inner turmoil he faced, thanks to it.

“It’s not my business because I’ve never made my feelings known.” He chuckled, but it was dark and humorless. “I should have known one of you would chase after me. You Andinna don’t know how to leave anything be.”

“Don’t say ‘you Andinna’ because you look pretty Andinna now,” Emerian whispered, aimlessly pointing at his friend. He didn’t really know what else to say.

Trevan chuckled, and something eased between them. “I do, don’t I?”

“You really do. It’s a good look.” Emerian teased him because he didn’t really know what else to do. “And there’s nothing to be jealous of. There isn’t, Trevan. We sleep together. We realized we both had this attraction, but I don’t think I’m ready to be a husband, you know?”

Trevan only nodded.

“Why don’t you catch me up?” Emerian wanted to tell Trevan everything. The trip had been one of the best things he’d ever done. He hadn’t gone on a quest to battle for the power of the gods, but he had other things. He’d gotten his tatua. He’d earned the respect of Mave’s husbands, widely considered some of the best warriors and males of their people. He’d prayed to his gods for one of the first times, in their own temple even, and while that didn’t seem like a big deal, to him, it was.

“Come on,” Trevan ordered, beginning to walk again. Emerian fell into step next to him, taking the trail as they had so many times. The last time they had walked together like this felt like a century ago, even though it was only a season before—before his first mission, before Kian died, and he lost an eye.

“So, what’s new?”

“Aside from me?” Trevan smiled. “Yenni became Allaina’s wife in the midst of everything. You know the two females Mave would spend time with, our mativa and the warrior.”

“Yeah. Good for them.” It was small gossip, but it was something.

They made their way into the village as Trevan told him more, keeping the topics light. How training was going, how short everyone was on supplies, how everyone was certain another winter storm was going to blow in before the end of the week.

“You haven’t told me the good part,” Emerian finally said, stopping Trevan from rambling on about something neither of them cared about. When Trevan looked at him, Emerian looked down at his hands, his thoughts turning dark for a moment. “Or the bad parts.”

“We’re short of supplies. That’s bad.”

“Is anyone going to starve?”

“No,” Trevan admitted.

“What happened to Dave?” Emerian didn’t know the human as well as Trevan, but he’d been one of them. They had been a group, three out-of-

place men trying to find where they belonged and understand the changes they were going through.

Trevan swallowed, closing his eyes as his head fell.

“Have you not talked about it to anyone?” Emerian asked softly, stepping closer to him, casting a wary glance at Andinna around them. They were close to the heart of the village now.

“No,” Trevan said, taking a deep breath. “There were so many other things I had to deal with when it happened...it didn’t really hit me until a couple days after Learen’s execution. After this.” He waved at his face. “I don’t see the need to bring it up because it happened, and we avenged him. Luykas had the traitor executed. What’s the point of continuing to think about that time? That male had been responsible for the deaths of not only Dave but also Kian and Leshaun and probably many more. He’d been feeding the Empire information about the warriors since Seanev. That was how the Empire could ambush that campaign, a thousand strong Andinna.” Trevan threw his hands up. “But we caught him. Dave...Dave is gone. So, what is there to talk about?”

“Trevan—”

“I’m not in the mood for deep conversation today, Emerian.” His friend looked tired.

“What’s really bugging you?” Emerian demanded. “I know Mave and I were probably a shock, but...”

Trevan looked up for a moment, then met his eye, wary and thoughtful. Emerian felt the distinct sensation of being judged, but he didn’t know why Trevan was judging him and what sort of conclusion he was coming to. His friend tapped his chest, right over the heart.

“I feel something,” he answered very softly. “Here. It has me distracted.”

“You’re in love with—”

“It’s not that,” Trevan snapped, keeping his voice low. “I thought it was too, but then I saw her and realized...it’s not her. This is something else. I don’t know what it is, but it’s damn near painful. It’s not emotion. That was one of the reasons I left. I was surprised not just by you and her, but this...I really thought it was her. I had convinced myself of it.”

“What does it feel like?” Emerian asked as Trevan started walking again, pulling him along. “When did it start? Are you healthy? Do we need

to see a healer?” Worry raced through him. He had heard of chest pains before, but normally, people died very quickly of those sorts of pains. When he had been a slave in the fields, it had been the number one way old males had died, clutching their chests as their hearts died on them without warning.

Trevan didn't reply as they made their way to the cliffside that held the homes of the Company. Emerian glanced at Mave's front door, wondering if he was going to remain in the second bedroom while Trevan continued to guide him to a bench. Trevan pushed him to sit down and started to pace.

“Sorry. I didn't want to talk about this in the village,” the Elvasi said, shaking his head. “The feeling. It started, well, when I got this.” He once again waved over his face. “Let me make this very clear, Luykas did me the greatest honor of my life when he did this for me. He offered, you know. He and I have become quite close since you left. After Dave was murdered, I started living with him. We watched each others backs, and once Learen was dead, he offered to do this for me.” Trevan sighed, and for the first time, there was a happy note to it. “I had a vision of the dragon gods when it happened. Without so many words, they wanted me to pledge myself to them, and I did. I woke up to the Andinna eyes and tatua, but, not even a day later, I began to feel this...” Trevan's face screwed up in concentration and annoyance. “*Yearning.*”

“Yearning?” Emerian wasn't expecting that.

“Yes, but I can't fly, and I didn't want to stress anyone by jumping on a horse to find out what I was so desperate to get to. It's as if something has wrapped itself around my heart and is pulling me. It's agony, Emerian. It constantly feels like my heart will be pulled out of my chest if I keep resisting the tug, and I don't understand. It got closer over the last few days, and I was *certain* it was Mave.” He sat down, slumping. “Then I saw the two of you and realized it wasn't her. It was calling me further still from the village. Am I jealous of you and Mave? Yes, but I've always been a little jealous of every one of her husbands. No, what really drove me away was the disappointment that it wasn't her. I had hoped it would be her.”

“Oh...” Emerian was trying to wrap his head around that. It would explain Trevan's insistence to leave. Emerian couldn't even imagine such a terrible pull, and he was drawn to Mave like a moth to a flame. To have

such power over him and it not lead to the woman he wanted more than anything would be a crushing disappointment.

“What if it leads to some other female?” Trevan asked softly, staring into space with a pained and haunted expression. “What if she doesn’t feel this? Or I don’t love her, and she doesn’t love me?”

“Why do you think it’s love?”

“I’ve heard Luykas describe the blood bond, even got to ask Seanev questions about it because he’s been constantly trying to weaken his with... that mativa he was once with...Leria.” Trevan sighed. “A deep yearning, a constant pull. They explained, for those who are new to the bond, it’s hard to deal with. Normally, two people who have bonded don’t go vast distances from each other, but others manage to overcome that hurdle after some years of experience. Mave and Luykas had learned how to put the bond into the back of their minds and focus on whatever needed to be done, for example. When they talked about it, all I could think was...” He tapped his chest. “That is this feeling.”

“Trevan...”

“And I can’t help but think...the goddesses bonded me to someone without telling me.” Trevan’s expression turned bleak again. “And it’s not Mave.”

“We’ll find out—”

“If it’s not her, do I even want to know?” Trevan asked softly.

Emerian didn’t know how to answer that. He knew he wouldn’t want to.

MAVE

She had never dressed so quickly in her life. In the midst of trying to get clean and find a blissful moment with her husbands for the first time in ages, she hadn't really forgotten Senri had the baby. She had put it to the back of her mind, knowing she couldn't rush there.

"I'm ready," she said, kissing Luykas' cheek. "Where are they?"

"Senri's home," he answered, grabbing her to his side. "Leave whatever just happened with Trevan and Emerian to me. Promise me."

She growled, glaring at him. "Because it's not my place?"

"Kind of," he said, shrugging. "Sometimes, meddling just isn't appreciated."

"Fine." She looked at the hot spring and smiled at her males. "Matesh, make sure no one drowns in their sleep."

"We'll be right behind you," he answered, yawning.

She and Luykas launched into the air, flew together to Senri's home, and landed at the clearing in front. She was so excited to meet this new little bundle of life that her family had been blessed with. She knew Senri was an excellent mother. Willem and Gentrin were going to treasure this new child, and she couldn't wait to be a big sister.

When Luykas started walking, Mave was hit with a pain that she hadn't expected as she tried to take her first step.

"Mave?" Luykas frowned at her as he approached the door.

Her chest tightened as she remembered. For a clear moment, she remembered the last time she had been in this spot—right before she told

her mother Kian was gone, and he could never come back.

Luykas knew her too well, back to her in less than a heartbeat, wrapping his arms around her. Not a word was said as he held her for a moment.

She pulled out of the hug first, looking at the door once again, and took a deep breath.

This was coming home. She wasn't home yet. She was in the village, but she wasn't home. In a funny way, she had never made it home from that mission with Kian. She never visited her mother and grieved with her. She hadn't seen her fathers, blaming herself for the loss of Kian.

Now home had someone new for her to meet.

She went to the door first and almost knocked. She hovered for a minute, her fist hanging in the air, then decided against it. She reached for the handle and opened the door without knocking at all because she knew if she did, it would be the first thing any of them said.

You don't have to knock.

She hoped it still applied.

She didn't realize it immediately, but Luykas hung back, hovering at the door as she walked inside, taking in the familiar smells and sights of a home she had grown to know well. This family hadn't raised her, but they were her parents. They kept a room for her, kept space for her. When her heart was broken, this was where she ran and knew someone would hold her without expectations or questions.

She made it to their main room before seeing any of her parents. Willem was in the kitchen, working on something. She watched as he picked up a plate, whistling to himself as he carried it to the table. There were dark circles under his eyes, he was skinnier than normal, and he seemed slower on his feet as though he was dragging them, but his whistling tune was pretty and bright, telling her, while he was physically tired, his spirit remained strong and happy.

He put down the plate of biscuits, and she knew she needed to say something.

"Baba," she called softly. She had never called him that before, but seeing him again made her realize he was just as much her father as Kian, and now she had no Kian. She wanted to know him as well as she had known Kian. He'd bring her tea and remain silent, a quiet presence of comfort, support, and even protective in his own ways.

She still needed this family, and she wanted him to know that.

He gasped, jumping as he looked up and saw her. The tears that flooded his eyes made her own misty. She didn't move, almost scared to, as he hurried around the seemingly vast distance between them.

The last time she had seen him felt like a lifetime ago. They met in a crushing hug, and she knew the truth. Other worries were forgotten at that moment. The males in her life could sort themselves out, and she would let them. She didn't need to be an Avatar, didn't care about the impending battles that would have to be fought.

Her world was right again.

I'm home.

"Mave," he said with reverence. "You're home."

"I am," she agreed, clinging to him.

"We've missed you. We've been so worried."

"I know," she repeated.

"Your baby brother was born," he said, pulling back to look at her. She saw the way he took in everything. "You've bathed already. Clean clothing would have been nice, but you did enough to be perfect. You're always perfect." He touched her cheek.

"A boy? I was told my new little sibling was born, but I didn't know it was another brother for me," she said, smiling as she tried not to choke on the emotion that threatened to overwhelm her.

"A boy," Willem repeated, smiling brightly. "A tiny, perfect little boy. He was early, but everything was fine."

"Can I meet him?" she asked in a small voice.

"Yes," he said, wrapping an arm around her and directing her to the bedrooms. "Senri and Gentrin might be taking a nap, but I know they won't have any problem with you coming in to see him."

"Has she really been okay?" Mave swallowed, knowing from stories childbirth was traumatic for any race, but the Andinna had a particularly hard time of it. Wings and tails made everything more difficult since they formed before the baby was delivered. Andinna horns came in after the birth, a small but much-appreciated thing for mothers.

"She's been tired. She bled, as most females do when they give birth, and you didn't hear this from *me*, but she's pushed it with this child and her own age. She's a little old for these deliveries. We tried to explain that to

her when she wanted to have another baby, but Senri's mind was made, and we couldn't tell her no. I'm just glad in another week, she'll be on her feet again."

"I'll never tell her what you told me," Mave promised solemnly. She had never heard anyone mention that Senri, just over three and half thousand years old, was at risk of having another child. If Mave had known, she would have taken more care with her mother. "What could have happened?"

"It's not..." Willem stopped her from making it to the bedroom door Mave knew Senri would be behind. "The older a female, the closer to old age she is, the more likely there will be a complication. It's not any different from another pregnancy for a younger, healthier female, just more risk. Everyone was surprised by the fact Senri delivered early, but Gentrin and I weren't. We had already begun to make preparations, knowing her age and the stress of the last couple of seasons could possibly bring it early. We could only hope she lasted long enough for the baby to survive without her." Willem was haunted, his eyes betraying how his mind replayed the possible tragedies that could have occurred.

"I'm sorry," she said suddenly.

"Why?" He frowned, surprised.

"For Kian...for losing him."

Willem grabbed her wrist and swung the bedroom door open, pulling her in behind him. He didn't slam the door shut, but it swung closed on its own with a definite thud.

The baby started crying.

"What the hell, Will—"

Mave turned to see Gentrin, his eyes wide and his mouth dropped open. Willem left her there to get the baby, speaking softly as he picked it up.

Mave was frozen by Gentrin's stare.

"Daughter," he said softly, stepping closer and giving her another bone-crushing hug. She had a feeling she was in for many of them.

"Let me see her." Senri was awake, her words alert and clear. This wasn't a female who had been napping.

Gentrin released Mave and angled her to be presented to Senri, lying on the floor in her Andinna styled bed, with pillows and blankets everywhere. Her mother didn't appear to be uncomfortable. She, like both of her

husbands, had dark circles under her eyes, and she was paler than both of them.

Mave took a step closer, spreading her hands, hoping to ask for forgiveness—for all of it, for Kian, for running from them—for everything.

“She thinks she needs to apologize to us,” Willem snapped. The baby boy was now just fussing, his small grumbles, groans, and growls accenting the situation, a strange background music Mave wasn’t used to.

“Excuse me?” Senri asked, not looking at her husband, staring down Mave. Mave was more dominant than Senri, but for the first time since she had met the female, Mave wanted to go to her knees and beg. “Why would you do that?” Senri started to stand as rage entered her eyes.

Mave rushed to her, grabbing her elbow. “You should keep lying down —”

Senri grabbed Mave’s shirt, not for support but to slam her against a wall.

“You want to apologize?” Senri growled, leaning into Mave’s face.

“I didn’t bring him home—”

“It wasn’t your job!” Senri snarled. “His job was to bring you home! He loved you. We love you! We all...” Senri took a deep, shuddering breath and released Mave, her hands falling limp. Mave began to slide down the wall, her eyes locked on her mother’s. “We always knew how Kian would go, Mave. We knew we were lucky he came home from the first war and was able to find us in the chaos afterward. We had already lost a son to it. Kian was ten times the warrior our first son had been, but he did missions with a hundred times the danger. We watched for a thousand years as he boldly did things that would make most Andinna blanch. Mave, you don’t need to apologize for having to witness...” Her words cut off, and she sobbed, her shoulders shaking. “You never have to apologize for that.” She went to her knees in front of Mave.

Mave didn’t realize she was crying until Senri wiped her cheek, then pulled her into a hug.

They clung to each other, and they cried.

“He sent you home,” Senri whispered into her hair. “I’ll miss him every day for the rest of my life, but this is life, and it’s war. We came to terms with it a long time before he died. He wouldn’t have wanted to go out a

better way, making sure our daughter came home to us. Don't ever apologize, my heart."

Mave felt weak, her heart splitting open one last time and releasing the pain she had held on to. She thought she had closure with Kian—and with him, she did—but she had run from this, run from Senri, Willem, and Gentrin.

Eventually, the tears dried, and Mave wiped her own face while Senri did the same. They stared at each other until Senri reached out and touched her cheek again.

"You are different," her mother said, imperceptibly wise, seeing beyond Mave's outward appearance to something deeper.

I have to tell her. I have to tell all of them. They'll know how to keep it secret.

"I am," Mave agreed. "But I want to meet my younger brother."

"Of course!" Senri struggled to stand as whatever energy her anger had given her was now gone. Mave rushed to help her, holding her mother to her side as they looked at Willem holding the little bundle of baby. Mave couldn't see the child, so she took her first tentative step forward.

"His name..." Gentrin looked at Mave, then his wife. Senri nodded, and Gentrin smiled. "His name is Kianev."

Mave pushed back tears as she passed Senri off to the blacksmith. Willem came closer, tilting the baby and showing her the most precious face.

"He has..." Mave reached down and trailed a finger over Kianev's cheek.

"We know," Willem whispered. "That lucky bastard went and was the one who actually got Senri pregnant. An unexpected blessing."

She looked down at little Kianev and only saw Kian's eyes, round and confused, not knowing who this new female was. She smiled as Willem gently pushed the baby at her, and she was forced to hold him.

"Not scared you'll break him?" Senri asked, trying not to laugh.

"No," Mave whispered. Mave was going to make sure nothing ever hurt this boy—not even herself. The very idea never even crossed her mind. She stepped away from the bundle of parents and leaned down to the baby, whispering all sorts of things that came to her mind.

“I’m your big sister. You’re going to get very used to me. I’ll tell you all sorts of stories about him. You’ll know your namesake. I promise.” She lifted him closer and sniffed, enjoying his weird smell. She nuzzled into his bundle, and he grabbed one of her horns, making her laugh. That prompted a baby giggle, and Mave’s heart was completely lost.

“New baby smell.” Senri’s words only held joy—uncontainable, beautiful, bright joy.

“He’s been washed since his last poop,” Gentrin muttered. The parents laughed, but Mave only had eyes for the little thing in her arms, this precious life.

“I’m going to give you the world,” she swore. “All of it and everything in it. You’ll never know hunger or pain or fear. You’ll only know love.”

Her heart was too full.

“*Alchan.*”

“Yes?”

“*I have the most beautiful brother.*” She knew he would catch her meaning, but her need to share this was impossible to contain.

“*Good. What is his name?*”

“*Kianev.*”

“*A good name.*”

She didn’t know how long her parents let her whisper sweet nothings of love, big promises, and lose her soul to her baby brother, but it didn’t feel like long enough. Little Kianev began to fuss, and Senri sighed.

“It’s feeding time,” she declared, coming closer.

Mave was very reluctant as she was forced to hand back the little bundle.

“You can stay if you want,” Senri said gently, smiling at her daughter. “We’ll kick the men out, and I’ll show you how all of this works.”

Mave could only nod, then she remembered her husband. How long had she left him standing there? “I left Luykas at your door.”

“I’ll see if he’s still there and get him a drink,” Willem said with a laugh. “You enjoy, loves.” Willem grabbed Gentrin and dragged him along.

Senri nestled into her bedding and revealed herself. Kianev latched on easily, and that was it.

“It’s very simple,” Senri admitted, grinning. “And I’m not a first-time mother with a baby who scares me. Done this part before, know all the

tricks. His older brother was much more troublesome about the entire affair.”

“Was he Kian’s as well?” Mave asked, sitting down next to her mother.

“We couldn’t tell. He looked too much like me.” Senri chuckled. “But this one...the spitting image of him. I was so glad to see it. We were left with a real piece of him. Not that any of the other options would have been missing something. They would have been raised knowing Kian was once their father as well. It’s just nice to keep seeing his eyes.”

“It is,” Mave agreed.

“So, what’s changed?” Senri asked, cutting right to the point.

“I’m the Avatar of Kristanya,” Mave answered, also cutting right to the point.

Senri stiffened, her eyes leaving Kianev and finding Mave’s face. Mave could only accept her mother’s stare, waiting for judgment to be passed.

“That’s why you left?” Senri looked pained. “You could have died.”

“What was the story you were told?” Mave had never known who knew what, only that she was leaving to complete an impossible task. Whatever story her husbands and friends had spread had been their decision, and she hadn’t cared what they decided.

“You were helping Alchan with something and needed to get out of the village, unable to live with the...the ghost of your father. You needed time away from the war, and Alchan needed to go find something in the Capital.”

“He’s the true King of Anden now,” Mave said, looking away as her head hit the wall behind her. “He’s Larianna’s Avatar, as all the queens had been before him. And I didn’t go with him to the Capital. I climbed the mountain and met Kristanya. I challenged her and passed her test to become her Avatar, something no one has ever done before. I drew one blood on the goddess of war, death, and darkness and became her mortal representative.” She didn’t know why she was still talking. Senri certainly didn’t need all of this information, but once Mave started, she couldn’t stop. “She nearly killed me. I got lucky in the end that she was too arrogant to kick my sword away. I couldn’t even get off the ground. I was going to die. I saw Kian, you know. During my climb, Al Moro Nat must have passed or something, but he appeared before me. He helped me finish the climb. He was there.” Mave closed her eyes and could still remember every detail, every second of her time with him.

“Daughter...” Senri breathed out the word like a prayer. “You didn’t have to—”

“I did,” Mave said strongly, keeping her eyes closed, trying to stay relaxed. “It wasn’t just losing Kian. We were losing. We could still lose this war. I needed whatever power I could get my hands on, and now I have it. I’m no longer just a good warrior. I am an Avatar. I can turn into a dragon. That could help us turn the tides of this war. That could help me make sure all of you live to see another year...another thousand years.”

“You are so young to have this on your shoulders,” Senri said with an aching sadness that penetrated Mave’s heart. “A thousand years to your name is so young.”

“Is it? I grew up fast, Senri.”

“You still have thousands of years ahead of you. I know it doesn’t feel like it, Mave. I know. I’m more than three times your age. Those years, there’s so many, so many potentially amazing years. You are young. Skies, Alchan and Luykas are young. I was worried, you know. A thousand years ago, we had an eight-hundred-year-old king. When you try to find a match with that sort of mental state among someone short-lived, do you know what you get?”

Mave shook her head. She had never really considered it.

“Someone Dave’s age, probably younger. Young. So, hearing about you thinking about how you need to carry this entire war on your shoulders... Mave, my darling daughter, it hurts. It’s so much weight, and I’m not sure how you’re able to keep walking. I’m proud of you, but I’m worried, too. I can’t even imagine the dark powers you can call upon and what those powers might do to you.”

“Why—”

“Look at Varon. We found out he’s the Avatar of Amonora. Now, when he speaks, people go weak in the knees. I’ve been blissfully immune, thanks to my pregnancy, but that’s a lot of power. He has the powers of lovely things, too, a bothersome issue we have to put up with, and it hurts him. You can see it in his eyes. He’s amused, but it annoys him, hurts his friendships.”

“I saw him already,” Mave admitted. “He met us just outside the village.”

“Then you know.”

“I fucked all of my husbands, then my new lover. My new lover... twice,” Mave said, not bothering to hide that fact.

Senri finally let out a shaky chuckle. “You’re going to hurt soon.”

“I already do,” Mave muttered. “I understand your worry, though. I do. I feel it.” Mave touched her chest. “I feel her here, this...oppressive darkness, an inescapable cold, but I won’t let it change me. I need to be a good big sister for Kianev, a good daughter to you. I want to help Alchan fight and win this war. I won’t let these powers take any of those goals away from me.”

Senri leaned over and kissed her cheek.

“I trust you. Now, you probably don’t want to see what comes next, so why don’t you go out with the males? Send Willem back to me to help.”

“What comes next?” Mave asked, frowning deeply as she looked down at Kianev, who had released Senri.

“Nope. I won’t tell you yet. I saw how much you loved him. If you ever try, you’ll make an exceptional mother one day, and I’m not going to traumatize you with this gross stuff yet.” Senri grinned.

Mave felt those words like a sword to her gut. She smiled back, though, refusing to bring that up. No one needed to know. It wasn’t a big deal.

Mave left and did as Senri asked, kissing Luykas as Willem jogged into the back bedroom. Everyone laughed as Willem’s curses could be heard from the main room. She was given a cup of hot tea and sipped it as Gentrin told her all about the wonderful little things her brother liked to do in his first week, foolish things like gurgling and giggling.

She was glad to be home and allowed herself the much-needed respite.

RAINEV

The long dip in the hot spring was exactly what Rain needed, but he didn't let Alchan keep him there for very long.

"I love you, but we both know we can't stay here all day. It's fine for Mave to sneak around and not tell anyone she's back, but you and I...we have work to do," he told his husband, kissing Alchan's neck. Because he was firmly held in Alchan's lap, it was all he could reach.

"You needed something before I let you go out into public," Alchan retorted, then his smile dropped away. "You're right, though. You always are. We do need to go see what we need to do." Alchan frowned and looked around. "Luykas never got to us."

"No. I bet he was detained by Mave, and you know, he's been without her for weeks, months actually. I think we're on our own to see what's going on," Rain said, realizing he had a chance to get out of Alchan's lap. He pulled away quickly, laughing at how Alchan tried to grab him before he could get too far away. Rain dodged the attempt and backed away as Alchan stood and followed him.

There was something wild and primal about the way Alchan moved, especially when he was coming after Rain like a beast hunting. It excited Rain, who knew the twisted and wonderful sensation of wanting to run and be caught.

"Alchan, we really need to get into the village and—AH—"

Alchan lunged and grabbed him, pressing Rain into the closest rock side available.

“I know,” Alchan murmured against his lips. “But I like being a normal male with a wonderful love at my side. I like pretending I’m not the king sometimes. This is my last chance to do that.”

“We still have the cave.”

Alchan winced, and Rain frowned as Alchan turned and looked at nothing.

“We still have the cave, right? What are you looking at?” Rain tried to find something interesting. Maybe his husband just didn’t want to look him in the eye. When Alchan looked back at him, there was only a smile.

“Mave just met her baby brother,” Alchan explained. “Kianev.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful,” Rain said with a happy sigh. “A good name.”

“I said the very same thing.”

Rain knew of the connection Alchan and Mave had now. He had caught them doing it on the road, but never before had his husband needed to look away or at Mave for it to work. Sometimes, they would just start laughing on opposite ends of the camp, nowhere near each other.

“But what were you looking at?” Rain asked as Alchan released him, and they started to get out of the hot spring.

Alchan stumbled and sighed, looking back at the spot.

“You can’t see her,” Alchan whispered, “or hear her, but Larianna is currently in our presence, lecturing me on my duties. While she understands I deserved a private moment before rejoining the madness of ruling, she thinks I need to hurry it along, like my darling husband is also saying. And before you ask, she called you that...my darling husband. I have several other choice words I would use to describe you.”

Rain slowly picked up his breeches and slid them on, processing that explanation.

“So, she’s standing there,” Rain said softly.

“She was. She left when I started telling you about her. She’s always here, though.” Alchan tapped the side of his head. “Not always active or present. Most of the time, I feel blissfully alone in my own head. I am her eyes in this realm, though. She sees the world as I do and uses me to anchor her presence so we can speak. She enjoys doling out advice to her Avatars.”

“So, she knows when we...” Rain swallowed. “And how we...”

“She leaves me alone when I’m with you. This time being the exception,” Alchan said, chuckling. “She’s not rude. Truthfully, I’m amazed

you didn't question my sanity."

"You're an Avatar. What you can do and what the goddesses do, I have no idea. You're the only one who can tell me. Well, you, Mave, and Varon, but I don't think either of them would be so willing to tell me anything. I sleep with you."

"You do much more than sleep," Alchan teased, leaning down to kiss him.

"Well..." Rain couldn't find an argument. "Thank you for telling me that I am sometimes in the presence of a goddess, then hitting on me."

Alchan laughed.

Once they were both dressed, Rain directed them to find Lily first. She had picked a smaller nearby hot spring. He felt guilty about that. He was hoping she and Alchan would be more comfortable with their matching sexual attraction by the time they made it back to the village and would have already had a time together.

So, while he and she had both been deeply affected by Varon's new raw energy, the way his voice slid over them and aroused every piece of them, he knew he would get relief.

She scampered off to another hot spring, saying she was *fine*.

Rain hadn't been fooled. Alchan hadn't been fooled by it. Lily knew she didn't fool a single soul, but none of them had stopped it from playing out the way it had, and Rain didn't like it.

They found her sitting with everything underwater except her nose and eyes, those eyes half-closed, but when he met them, they opened, and she lifted just enough for her mouth to be above the water.

"Hello," she greeted softly. "Are you both heading for the village?"

"We are." Rain extended a hand. "If you want to come with us, let me help you out."

"Oh, no, thank you," she said, smiling. "I'm going to enjoy this until I'm wrinkly."

"We'll meet you for dinner?" Alchan asked, a little stiffer than Rain wanted him to be.

"Of course. I'll probably have it ready before you even think of coming home. You two are going to have a busy afternoon and evening."

Alchan groaned, nodding. "We are. Thank you, Lily, for caring so well for us."

“It’s no problem,” she whispered, looking down.

Rain rolled his eyes at both of them, grabbed his husband, and started walking.

“You need to woo her,” Rain said once they were out of earshot. “Make her dinner or something. Okay?”

Alchan looked down at him and said nothing.

“Fine, worry about other things then. We’re not all dancing around it. She’s attracted to you, you’re attracted to her, but what do *I* know?” Rain snorted.

“I would really like to know, what do *you* know?” Alchan asked, both annoyed and humored.

“I know she felt the exact same way I did, thanks to Varon, and we left her to deal with it by herself,” Rain growled.

“She didn’t want me to help her,” Alchan reminded him. “Or I gladly would have. You know that. Oftentimes, I’m still ready and willing long after you give out. I could have handled both of you, would have gladly done it. Having you both in my tent has been a dream, but she doesn’t want sex, has made no attempt. I won’t suddenly have our first time because I know she needed relief, thanks to Varon.”

“You want her to initiate?” Rain asked in a hiss. “She never will.”

“She has to,” Alchan snapped. “It would be too easy for me to just order her on a night she’s not in the mood. She has to find it in herself to tell me she’s ready. That’s what I’m waiting on, Rain. I’ll remind you that you initiated with me. It’s the only reason I...” Alchan growled. “You know.”

“I do,” Rain replied after a long silence. “Fine, we’ll wait for her.”

“You really want me with her?”

“I do,” Rain said, this time with less heat and more longing. “She’s wonderful. I want her in this family. She needs us, and I think we need her. Someone soft, someone charming and lovely. I like protecting her, and she’s...enchanted.”

“It’s finally happened. You’ve realized you aren’t as submissive as many might think.”

“I’m very submissive,” Rain whispered. He was used to it. It was a part of him.

“Not as submissive as you used to be. You’ve found power, and you’re holding on to it. You’re bold with me, but you still like to bend, and I enjoy

that.” Alchan ran a hand down Rain’s back. “But that small dominant part of you wants to protect her. It wants to hold her, keep her safe, and dote on her.”

“I don’t want her,” Rain snapped. “Or I would have handled what you wouldn’t.”

“I never said you did,” Alchan retorted. “Love is more than sex. You care for her, the same way a male cares for his wife, you just don’t want for physical needs, yours or hers.”

“How did you come to this conclusion?” Rain demanded, crossing his arms and stopping.

“When I would leave the tent, you would reach out to her, hold her. You kept her warm when I wasn’t there.” Alchan kept walking, not looking back. “Even if you haven’t come to the same conclusion...I can see it. I bet if I asked Varon, he could see it, too.”

Rain decided he was going to ask Varon the first chance he had.

I’m not in love with a female. Not like that.

When they saw the war room, Rain hoped they would be able to sneak in without fanfare.

He didn’t get his wish.

“Your Majesty!” someone called, running into his view. Kenav only had eyes for Alchan, though. Alchan stopped and looked over his cousin. Rain just held onto his husband’s arm, trying to seem unassuming. Again, he didn’t get his wish. Kenav finally realized he was there, and something changed in the other male’s eyes.

“Kenav, what a pleasure to see you,” Alchan said politely. Alchan’s polite words seemed truthful.

They were most certainly not.

“I didn’t know you were back, cousin.” Kenav reached out, and Alchan accepted the traditional Andinna shake, grabbing forearms.

“No one does. I only just got back and took a bath to clean myself. Varon and Nevyn caught us on the border of the village and wanted to give us a moment to freshen up from the long travels. Cold streams in winter...” Alchan shook his head in dismay.

“Of course. I was hoping I would get to talk to you when you returned. I’m glad I caught you so quickly.”

“What do you need? I was about to head into the war room and get an eye on the situation my brother has left me to clean up. Allow me to extend my immediate apologies for his assaulting you. He knows better, and I’ll remind him of that.”

Rain raised an eyebrow. It was one thing to joke among the Company, but Alchan never disparaged Luykas or any of the Company in front of others, especially not Kenav.

“Thank you for the apology.” Rain could only describe Kenav’s words as polite, but they felt slimy. “You haven’t seen him yet?”

“No, I believe he was distracted by the return of his wife,” Alchan said, chuckling. “So, tell me...what have I missed?”

“Then you don’t know about the Elvasi or anything.”

“I don’t know about Trevan yet, no. I know the spy was caught and executed. I know supplies are low, but not how low yet. What’s happened with our Elvasi?”

It took a moment, but Rain realized Alchan was playing with Kenav. There was both truth and lie in that statement. They hadn’t seen Trevan yet, so they didn’t know what was going on with him. He kept coming up, but Rain and Alchan had no idea what Luykas had been alluding to. The situation with Learen was already gone over in detail from Luykas’ messages, and so were the exact supply numbers. Rain waited, wanting to see how his husband continued to play this and what his plan was.

“Luykas gave him tatua, and he’s been behaving strangely ever since. I’m sure there’s nothing wrong, but it’s caused a stir among many of the Andinna. There’s talk that Luykas crossed a line.”

Rain felt his eyebrows go up and up and up. Alchan was similarly surprised, but he recovered quickly.

“I’ll look into this. If you’ll excuse me, we’re going to head into the war room. The sooner I catch up, the sooner we can get on with our plans for this year,” Alchan said. Kenav nodded respectfully and backed away.

Rain was pulled by his husband, getting out of earshot from Kenav and into the nearly empty war room. Allaina, her husbands, and Yenni were around, talking over some papers. It was one of Allaina’s husbands who saw them first.

“Your Majesty!” he said with a smile. “It’s good to see you again!”

Allaina jumped up. Rain released Alchan and pushed him forward, chuckling. This was going to happen for a few days since they had snuck around any sort of big event pertaining to their return.

Allaina was the first person Rain expected to hug Alchan who didn't. She gave a low, respectful bow.

"I'm not a queen," Alchan said, the words stiff and hoarse.

"But you are my king," she said, smiling as she straightened. "While you were gone, Luykas quietly let me know what that meant. The secret has been safe with me, but I won't let its status as a secret keep me from giving you all the respect you're due."

"And that's why I know you'll make an amazing mativa for the Capital one day," Alchan replied. He reached back and grabbed Rain's shoulder.

Rain couldn't fit as he was pushed into the middle of the conversation. Allaina hugged him, an odd sensation. He'd never hugged her before.

"Welcome home, Consort," she said with a mature smile.

"Thank you," he said as she stepped away...into the arms of Yenni. Her husbands didn't seem surprised, didn't move at all as greetings continued. Once they were done, Allaina stepped forward again.

"Alchan, I wanted to ask for your blessing, as I already have from Varon," she said, pulling Yenni closer.

"Finally added her to your family, did you?" Alchan chuckled. "Of course, you have my blessing. Has anyone given you trouble about it?"

"Oh, no. Everyone is too scared of Allaina and me for that," Yenni answered with a grin. "But since we're two females, we figured having the approval of Avatar Varon and the king would go a long way to keeping negative opinions where they belong. Unspoken."

"I know it doesn't matter, but how do you three feel?" Alchan looked at Allaina's husbands.

"Yenni is a grand addition to the family," the oldest and definite leader answered with his own smile. "And helpful. She can follow our wife to places we can't go and keep her out of trouble."

The laughter that filled the war room was music to Rain's ears.

"You know, we were just stopped by Kenav—"

Someone growled and cut Alchan off, but Rain couldn't see who it was. Alchan pretended like the interruption didn't happen.

"And he mentioned Trevan."

“You haven’t seen him, then,” Allaina said softly, her entire demeanor changing. “I don’t know what Luykas did, but...”

The door opened, and the Elvasi walked in as if he had been summoned by the very mention of his name. Rain saw him first and gasped. Pale gold set in black, soft rose-gold tatua on his freckled, pale skin. His auburn hair was unchanged in color, but longer and thicker. Rain was so stunned by Trevan, he almost missed Emerian’s appearance behind the Elvasi.

“Look at you,” Alchan said with a mysterious undertone. Rain didn’t move as his husband stepped around him and closed the space between him and the Elvasi. Trevan lowered his head, perfectly respectful. “What did my brother do?”

“He tried to give me tatua,” Trevan answered, lifting his head to meet Alchan’s gaze. Rain could only stand quietly, still trying to take in this new face and understand what had been done. “And your gods took note of his efforts...They offered me a choice, I think.”

“Yes...” Alchan nodded slowly, his gaze unbroken. “You are one of mine now, aren’t you?”

“If you’ll accept me as one of yours.”

“Then it’s settled. I don’t know what you are, but you certainly aren’t an Elvasi anymore. You’ll be expected to follow all the customs of the Andinna now, and we’ll see what we can do about your wing issue.”

“I don’t have any.” Trevan frowned, tilting his head to the side. “Not anymore, at least.”

“Exactly. We’ll figure it out.” Alchan shrugged. “Don’t worry.”

“Alchan?” Rain needed to speak up, his gut telling him his husband knew something the room didn’t. Alchan tapped the side of his head but didn’t answer. Rain picked up on the meaning. Larianna was watching this closely and had possibly said something.

“It’s nothing,” Alchan finally answered as the quiet room just stared. “Let’s get to work, shall we?”

“Well, I was hoping to point out this,” Allaina commented, stepping closer to Emerian. She turned on a charming smile. “Your tatua is just as beautiful as we all figured it would be.”

“Mave did it,” Emerian answered, stepping away from her as she drew closer. Allaina lifted a regal eyebrow and walked around him, looking him over.

“You’ve become a fine warrior, so I can imagine she took great pleasure in doing it for you.” She stopped on her second rotation, her eyes on his back. “A great deal of pleasure judging by the scratches on your back.”

If Emerian could blush, Rain was positive he would have.

“Leave the young male alone,” one of her husbands said, chuckling. “If he and Mave had a bit of fun, it’s not your business.”

Allaina’s smile had teeth. “I didn’t even know she was interested in him. She kept it very close to her chest, it seems. Oh, well, I’ll get her to tell me all about it when I force her to sit down. Where is she, anyway?” Allaina looked at Emerian, who didn’t answer, then at Alchan.

“Visiting her family before dealing with the masses and you, probably,” Alchan answered with a sharp smile. “Nosy female.”

Allaina laughed. “I am, aren’t I? You should visit that family as well. Kianev. Beautiful boy. I want one of my own.” The glare she sent her husbands could tell a story, one Rain didn’t want to get involved with, so he kept his mouth shut as people broke into separate conversations. Alchan remained focused on Trevan, asking how the ritual for his tatua went. Rain listened to the explanation, the dream, and could guess at the meaning behind it. He’d been accepted by the dragon gods as one of their children.

What a world we live in—three Avatars and this change in Trevan, done by their power. I heard stories growing up about our dragon gods, but they didn’t prepare me for just how much magic there really was in the world. Or how powerful our goddesses really are.

Rain found himself sitting quietly as people talked. Once Alchan was done with Trevan, he dove into the reports, talking to anyone who walked into the war room about their supply situation. Rain settled in and watched his husband do what he did best—be a leader.

“We’re going to win this war, right?” Allaina asked sometime later, standing next to Alchan as they looked over reports of how many warriors were available for spring. Allaina would need to make sure any campaign had enough food to sustain a large force, so she was critical to success.

Alchan sighed, and Rain knew he was choosing his words carefully.

“I don’t know, but we’re going to give it our best effort,” Alchan promised.

MAVE

Two days after making it home, Mave was back in the swing of things when it came to life in the village. She and her husbands settled back into their home, with the exception of Luykas, and Emerian remained in the free room her home provided. She knew why Luykas was still out of her bed, but she wanted to fix it.

First, she had to survive her sparring session against Allaina.

“I thought you were the best warrior, but you seem distracted,” Allaina accused, chuckling. “We have a war to fight, Mave. Distracted isn’t a headspace you need right now. What’s on your mind?”

Mave sighed. It wasn’t easy, coming back from the journey she had been on and entering the strange limbo the village was stuck in.

“Luykas hasn’t moved back in with me yet.”

“Well, he lives with Trevan at the top of the cliff. The Elvasi can’t fly, so Luykas needs to help him.” Allaina shrugged and sheathed her morok. Mave put her own away as well, knowing she couldn’t focus.

“It’s not just that,” Mave admitted. “I expected to get back and immediately go out to war, and winter is still here. It feels...slow. Am I expected to just sit around and wait for orders to learn what the plans are? I want to fly, Allaina. I want to go out and fight.”

“You’ve been back for two days,” Allaina countered, elbowing her as they walked to the closest stream to get a drink and rinse off the sweat.

Mave didn’t even know how Allaina had roped her into a sparring session. They didn’t train together, thanks to the vast differences in their

skill level. Allaina was a damn good warrior, but Mave was something else, and they all knew it. Mave barely sparred with her own husbands, thanks to it.

“Two long days,” Mave muttered. “The initial rush and excitement of being home wore off at the end of day two.”

“It’s still *winter*,” Allaina said strongly, grabbing her shoulder as if Mave needed the reminder. They were both knee-deep in snow, and another storm was coming. They would be neck-deep in it tomorrow. “We can’t send anyone out without risking our warriors’ lives, not just to the Elvasi but to *starvation*. Spring will free up the trade roads again, and supplies will come faster. Leria’s here, but she knows exactly what’s going to get here shortly after spring begins. It’s a boon we need. Kerit is still receiving and sending out ships. They have to be careful because the Elvasi fleet is trying to give them a hard time, but the city has a huge stockpile of supplies now. We just need to get them here. That’s what we’re waiting on. Alchan and I talked about it at length when you all returned.”

“I haven’t seen her yet...Leria.” Mave leaned down at the water’s edge and splashed cold water on her face. They might be covered in snow, but sparring still worked up a sweat.

“Good,” Allaina muttered. “I hate having her here. She’s been hanging back, being proper, patient, and helpful, but we all know what she’s here for. To collect Seanev and run off with him. I bet she’s furious she couldn’t get him back before Alchan returned. She’s been even more scarce since then.”

“I’m worried she might succeed,” Mave said as she stood and brushed snow off her knees. “He was with her for a thousand years. I’m glad he’s trying to get away from her, but it can’t be easy.”

“You should talk to him about it,” Allaina said, shrugging. “I don’t spend much time with him. I’m too busy most days to even make my way to the war room. I was lucky to run into Alchan when he returned. I had to hunt you down today.”

“How did you find time off today?” Mave asked, smirking at her friend. Mave would worry about Seanev once she saw him. She spent the last two days playing with her baby brother, so there were several people she hadn’t yet seen.

“I pissed off my mayara enough, they sent me away so they could do everything in my stead,” she answered. “Even Yenni.”

“And how did you do that?”

“I brought up babies again,” she said, looking away. “I’ve been thinking about it all winter. Senri was smart. She decided to take a chance and get pregnant while all her husbands were still alive. She lost Kian, but she would always have Kianev with him. I don’t want to lose any of my husbands before we finally decide to have a family.”

“You went into your fertile cycle less than a decade ago,” Mave remembered, knowing the tragedy. Allaina had been one of the Andinna females captured by the Elvasi in Olost.

“Exactly. I would have to ask a Blackblood to quicken it and hope it worked,” she confirmed. “But...” She looked down at her hands. “I want to hold a piece of them. I want to share that joy with them before I lose any of them.”

There was a deep sadness in the words Mave wanted to avoid, one she was fighting in the back of her mind as well.

“I’m beginning to notice a trend. Do Andinna females ever want children on their own, or is it always about the males?” Mave crossed her arms as they walked to the nearby trail and headed nowhere in particular.

“It’s almost always about our males. Most females, especially us dominant ones, don’t really want children. It’s painful and dangerous. We lose control during our fertile cycle, and our males...well, they aren’t much better during that time. You know the feeling.”

“I do. I’ve only ever had one cycle, but I remember it clearly.” The need. The terrible need. The fear. The looks on the males’ faces when they realized what was happening, what was wrong with her. Now, Mave understood nothing had been wrong with her back then. It had been a natural moment many females dealt with. They were about to enter that season once again, having to hide females from males because of their cycles. It wasn’t that the males were dangerous, just the terrible price the Andinna paid.

“If you gave most single female Andinna an option, most would tell you that they never want children and would gladly never see their fertile cycle again,” Allaina said, leaning toward her.

“I know that feeling,” Mave mumbled. “I thought I was odd.”

“You always do, and let’s be honest, you *are*, but not in this. Most females don’t want children until they find the right males to trust with the responsibility of caring for us in our most vulnerable moments, then it becomes appealing. Then it becomes a possibility. I’ve been there for years, but I was young and wasn’t a mativa yet. I became a mativa and had my fertile cycle while I was in the hands of the enemy. Now...now I want to do it right.”

“What’s stopping you?”

“They’re not willing to take the risk. They’ll do it if I force it, but they won’t be happy with me for going to a Blackblood without me convincing them beforehand it’s a safe decision.” Allaina sighed. “And I want them happy.”

“Admirable,” Mave said, thinking about her own worrisome mayara, with one living outside the home and a lover who refused to come any closer.

“Do you think about babies with your husbands yet?” Allaina asked.

“I...” Mave tried to find the way she wanted to answer that. She had. For one clear moment, when she realized she would never have any, she had thought about it, and it had haunted her ever since. What she hadn’t expected at that moment was the deep sadness of never seeing her husbands filled with the joy of being fathers. She didn’t ache at the loss of her own potential motherhood, but she hurt for them. She knew they would never leave her if there were no children, but now, especially after seeing the joy of Senri’s home, the hurt seemed like something even bigger. Now, Mave knew exactly what her males would miss.

“You have,” Allaina said wisely. “And something troubles you.”

“I’ve had one fertile cycle since I became an adult,” Mave pointed out. “I don’t know if I can have children.” It was a half-lie. She knew she couldn’t, but that truth was her own. Allaina deserved something, though, so Mave gave her a half-truth. “I certainly understand why Senri took her chance and why you are considering it, but I don’t want to bring children into the world until I know it’s perfect for them. Until I know, they would never know hunger, slavery, or pain. I want a free Anden and an end to this war before I consider it.”

“You’ve never wanted to be a mother,” Allaina said, reaching out to hold her hand.

“But I want them to be fathers,” Mave whispered.

“Admirable.” Allaina pulled Mave’s arm through her own, a friendly gesture of support as they walked, shoulder to shoulder. “You and Emerian. We haven’t spoken about it yet.”

“I was attracted to him since the moment he stepped off the ship in Kerit. I just didn’t act on it. I didn’t know him.”

“And you do now?”

“Much better than most here can claim. He’s faceted and complicated. He lost that eye because of me, and before you try to say he didn’t, he actually did. I had collapsed and was paralyzed because I heard my father die. He fought off the Elvasi and took that injury because I couldn’t get up and help him.” Mave sighed. “He became a warrior, and it went from strong attraction to...respect. He was a strong male and a better friend, even when I wanted him gone, just gone—out of my sight and out of my mind. So, I did his tatua, which was my right and honor to do...then we went to bed together. That’s all.”

“Glad for the explanation.” Allaina made it clear she hadn’t gotten exactly what she wanted, but Mave had told her enough for the mativa to drop it.

They walked into the village, their posture and silence clearly telling people they were enjoying a moment together. It didn’t stop the stares and waves, but it did stop people from coming up and asking them how they were. As they passed a group of nobles, Mave’s mind turned to an odd thought.

“Is Alchan’s mother still around?” Allaina knew everything, so the situation with Alchan’s mother wouldn’t have escaped her, even if no one told her the full story.

“No,” Allaina answered with a heavy, relieved sigh. “She and her husbands disappeared back into Leria’s community the first chance they had after you and Alchan left.”

“Alchan was never going to accept her again.”

“No, I don’t believe so,” Allaina agreed.

The topic was dropped as quickly as it came. They were making a pass around the war room when they saw her pacing outside the door, looking lost in her own thoughts.

“Leria,” Mave growled softly, too quietly for the female to hear.

“Let me,” Allaina hissed, then stepped forward. “Leria. It’s good to see you. A nice day.” Her voice was clear and strong.

“A storm is blowing in,” Leria said, looking up. She seemed distant as she looked at Allaina, but Mave knew the moment Leria saw her. Those eyes sharpened, and a touch of anger entered them. “So, the Champion returns from whatever wasteful journey she and the king decided to go on during the hardest winter Anden has seen in centuries.”

“Tell me how you really feel, Leria,” Mave snapped, stepping up beside Allaina and glaring. “Are you mad at Alchan and me for going on the trip, or are you mad you didn’t make it back home before we returned?”

When three dominant females were together, there was always a chance there could be a fight. Mave had fought against those instincts with Allaina and Senri long enough to figure out everyone’s roles in the group and make a bond between them. They knew when they got together how the dynamics worked, and there was never a problem again.

Mave would never like Leria, and she knew Leria would never like her. There was always going to be a battle between them, one of wills, dominance and submission. Even though Mave was clearly the most powerful and dominant female, Leria was used to being on top or close to it and to no one questioning her.

“He’s my husband. My blood-bonded husband. The only one I’ve ever had.”

“And he’s my brother, but that’s not the point. You’re forgetting he’s a grown male who is allowed to make these decisions.”

“He lost an arm! He should be at home, recovering with me, not here in this village, ready to die. He’s too good of a general to be wasted. He could be training more Andinna up north.”

“It’s his choice.”

“No, it’s Alchan’s choice,” Leria snapped. “And Alchan is obviously swayed by his connection to you to not see how all of you are keeping my husband from me.”

“You used the blood bond to force him to do something he didn’t want to do,” Allaina said coolly. “When did you ever think that would be acceptable? You betrayed his trust.”

Leria glared at both of them now. “If anyone gave me a moment with him to explain, I could smooth this over, but no one is even giving me the

chance to speak to my own husband.”

“Because your *ex*-husband doesn’t want to speak to you,” Allaina said, her words ice-cold, frigid with contempt.

“You grow bold because Mave is here,” Leria growled.

Allaina only raised her chin, proving her own power. “If that’s what you wish to believe, so be it.” She walked proudly to the door to enter the war room. “At least I’m not a coward.” She entered the building without a single hesitation, something Leria was having trouble with, skulking about outside.

Mave stepped closer to the female who had once owned her brother’s heart.

“Allaina will cut you down with words,” she whispered, leaning in close. “And you should be grateful.”

“Really?”

“If you push this further, I’ll cut you down to size with the sharp side of my blade,” Mave growled before stepping around the mativa, who was driving herself to ruin. She followed Allaina inside and saw a number of faces who made her immediately calm down and smile.

Seanev was flanked by Nevyn and Varon. Alchan was sitting nearby and looked to be mid-sentence when he turned to see her. Rain, realizing his husband had stopped speaking, turned and waved as well from his place at the table, with dozens of papers in front of him. Matesh, Zayden, and Bryn were whispering something to Luykas, but they went quiet as well. They didn’t approach, but she knew from the looks on their faces, they were hoping she would go to them first. Emerian and Trevan had a place as well, both dedicated to the task of sharpening their blades in silence. That sound continued as she walked deeper into the room, but both of them looked up at her as she passed.

“Is there a reason there’s a meeting going on?” Everyone she liked was in one room. Allaina was at the next door, leaning on it and waiting for her.

“No,” Luykas answered, chuckling. “We just all happened to end up here and haven’t tried to leave yet.”

“Hmmm...With the monster prowling around outside, I can’t say I blame you, but you’re all cowards,” she said decidedly, nodding at her judgment.

“Well, we were discussing what to do about a red wyvern that’s been following us. It was spotted too close to the village for comfort,” Rain said, evenly, not taking the casual insult hard. “Plus, I would rather deal with a wyvern than *that*.” He nodded at the door she had come in from.

“I’m going to send both away,” Alchan said, sighing. “Leria needs to go back to her community and do her job. She’s not doing anything I didn’t expect, but it’s annoying to see her here, trying to get Seanev back when there are more important things she could be working on.”

“And the wyvern?”

“I’m the avatar of Larianna. It’ll go where I tell it to and will probably listen to me better than Leria will.”

Everyone laughed, even Seanev, who kept stealing glances between Alchan, Mave, and the door behind her.

Mave broke her husbands’ hearts and went to Seanev, putting a hand on his shoulder.

“Do you want her sent away?” she asked. Allaina groaned impatiently, making Mave put a hand on her brother to address the other female. “You can go on. Go play with Kianeve for me. I’m going to stay here. Send my love to Senri?”

“Of course. I’ll make sure Kianeve knows I’m just a stand-in for you.” Allaina’s grin was friendly, then she disappeared, heading out back into the cold, through the door that wouldn’t lead to another run-in with Leria.

When she was gone, Mave looked down at her blood brother once again, who chuckled.

“I think you have a sister in her,” he said softly, taking her hand with his remaining one.

“Skies help us all,” Alchan muttered, bringing a chorus of chuckles.

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“Yes, I want her sent away. When I nearly bled out from this...” He lifted what remained of his right arm. “The blood bond weakened enough to make this all easier on me...not easy, but easier. There’s still several centuries of history. I wanted a clean break, though. She’s making it difficult and embarrassing herself.”

Mave nodded, accepting that. It was pretty pitiful Leria out there, pining because she knew Seanev was in here, protected from her attentions.

“It’s not pathetic,” Alchan said softly. “It’s pretty typical for a female to half-lose her mind when a male leaves her. It’s much easier when the female walks away or throws a male out, at least in terms of a normal marriage.” He stood up and looked around at everyone. “I’m going to send her on her way, then head out of the village to deal with the wyvern. Anyone care to join me?”

Mave nearly said no, but as Rain stood, she saw Trevan and Emerian across the room. There was something in Trevan’s gaze that made her think he wanted to go along.

“Trevan? I’ll fly,” she said, staring without blinking until she got any sort of response. Emerian thumped Trevan, who seemed surprised by the touch, breaking them out of the moment.

“I’ve never seen a wild wyvern,” he said as he stood. “I...I think I would like to.”

“Then come along,” Alchan said, wrapping an arm around Rain. “Let’s keep it a small party, though. I don’t want to spook it.”

“I don’t know...we might need to spook the other one,” Rain said mischievously, smiling slyly. “Leave here in full force and remind her that we can take her down—”

Alchan put a hand over his husband’s mouth. “Bloodthirsty and possibly entertaining, but I won’t embarrass her further. There’s no need to rub salt in the wound. I need to remember I’m the king, and she deserves good treatment from me, just as much as anyone here. No matter how much I don’t like her.”

“She meddled in your life,” Mave growled.

“And she accidentally gave me the number one weapon she had to use against me,” Alchan retorted. “Actually, she gave me two of them. Lilliana and Seanev. She has nothing now but her community. I’m not threatened by her, only annoyed. Let’s go.”

“Thank you,” Seanev said quietly as they began to move away.

Varon squeezed his shoulder. “Let me handle this, old friend,” the Avatar said with a vicious smile. Mave had never seen that expression on the serene male’s face. “Alchan?”

“Were you waiting on my permission or something?” Alchan asked with a deep frown.

“Yes, in fact. She’s a mativa who must follow the king before she is a wife who must listen to me. I was hoping you would understand this as a matter of the heart, not her leadership, but I wanted to speak to you before I did anything,” Varon answered.

“Permission granted,” Alchan said, waving for Varon to start walking.

Varon practically stormed for the door, and Mave felt power beginning to whip around the room. This was an Avatar who had been waiting for their king to let him off some invisible leash. Mave waited only a moment for Trevan, hurrying him along and being the last person to leave. She didn’t want to miss this.

What Mave got to witness next was beautiful.

TREVAN

Trevaan didn't know what possessed him to go along. He was constantly pulled by the hook in his chest, unsure where it wanted him to go or what he had to do to ease it. He didn't need to see Leria sent away, but the idea of seeing a wyvern, just the idea eased something, and he had to get up and go with them. He was grateful they would even allow it since he couldn't fly. They would have to slow down for him.

He was forced to leave by Mave, who exited after him and last in the group. He knew he was in the presence of three Avatars. While Mave hadn't told him what she was now, Luykas had, knowing Trevaan would keep the secret. He was good at secrets. He'd proven that well before he knew many of them.

Now I'm in love with the Avatar of Kristanya. Fantastic. Even more distance between us.

"Your Majesty," Leria greeted, lowering her head but not bowing fully as many did now. Those who knew bowed, and everyone else picked it up from them—except Leria.

"Hello, Leria. It seems we need to have a discussion." Alchan crossed his arms, stepping past Varon. "You can't stay here like this, and you know it."

"He's my husband—"

"Ex-husband," Varon said softly, leaning in. He put a hand on Alchan's back. "He broke off the marriage. Ignoring his decision helps no one, least of all you."

“He wouldn’t have if…” Leria looked at Alchan, growling softly. “You’re doing this because I sent Lilliana.”

“Lady Lilliana was hurt by you, and I don’t like to be manipulated, but that’s not why I’m doing things.”

“Then tell me why!” Leria snapped. “You’re the boy-king who has all the warriors. You don’t need my husband. You only need my resources and my support in this idiotic war, we can’t win. I resisted saying it for years now, but I could have told you on day one, this was doomed to fail. You should have hidden with my community—”

“Leria, stop before you say anything more to dig your own grave,” Alchan snarled, leaning over her, tall and more than a little threatening. Leria’s mouth snapped shut, and her head dropped. “Do you feel that? I am as queens before. You don’t get to call me a boy-king because you’re angry with my decisions and want to lash out. You don’t get to question me. You don’t get to do any of it. What you get to do is listen, though not to me. Obviously, that is something you can’t do. You would rather have a queen, as things should be, and that’s understandable. So, I’m going to pretend like you said nothing of importance and leave you to Avatar Varon of Amonora. Hopefully, he will be able to speak reason to you where I cannot.” Alchan made a little gesture. “Handle this, Varon, before I can’t control my temper.”

“With pleasure,” Varon said, smiling as Alchan stepped away, looking at Rain with a desperate expression.

Trevan was captivated. He had more self-control around Varon than any of the Andinna, but Varon with his voice was very different from Varon the mute. Varon the mute had been wise and serene, fine and good-hearted. With a voice? Well, he had a bit of a bite. Trevan wondered if that bite was something that had always been hiding under the surface. Varon could still be wise and serene and was on most days, but the rare moments were the things that stood out to Trevan.

So, Trevan didn’t fall into the sexual haze Varon brought about, but he was still captivated all the same.

“He doesn’t love you anymore,” Varon said, reaching out to touch Leria’s cheek. “You hurt him too many times, and your entire relationship after the war was built on the back of his dead family. A family you forced him to leave to die.”

“I love him,” she said, her voice shaky and eyes wide.

“You use your love as a weapon to hurt him. You use it to keep him with you, where you want him, and obedient.” The gentle fingers curled into claws, pushing down as he grabbed her chin. “I will not let someone use their *love* as a weapon like that. Your love is rotten. Don’t be angry at us for supporting Seanev in excising it from his heart. He deserves better than the poison you’ve made him sip for centuries. Deserves more than the rot you cultivated in his heart.” He yanked her face close to his. “What you have with him may have once been love, but now he’s just a tool for you to use. No more. So says Amonora through the mouth of her Avatar, her most trusted mortal and representative in this realm. You will leave. You will rule your community, and you will try to remember what real love is.” He shoved her away with a look of disgust. “If I ever hear of you hurting another with your love, I shall teach you a painful lesson. I’m just as handy with a blade as my husband, and my arrows do not miss.” Varon put his hands down and fell into an impassive stillness. “Leave, Leria. There is nothing here you can do, nothing I will allow you to do, with or without our king’s permission. Even if he was so foolish to allow you to see Seanev, I am not so kind. I will put myself between you and Seanev every time.”

Leria staggered back as if Varon had struck her with those final words. It took several silent moments for her to regain her composure, turn on her heel, and leave.

“That was harsh,” Alchan said softly, stepping close to the other Avatar.

“Not harsh enough,” Mave snarled. “You should have left her with a few scars as a reminder.”

“It was necessary,” Varon said, watching the retreating female. “She will do what she must to remain a mativa and a strong one. It will become her only focus in life. Expect her to never like you, Alchan, but expect her to serve you. It will be the only honor she has left.” He smiled at the group. “Now, there’s a wyvern to attend to.”

“You don’t need to come for that,” Rain said quickly. “It’ll probably be me and Alchan. Mave and Trevan are just going to be bystanders. Not every day one gets to see a big red wyvern, right love?” Rain’s last line was all for Alchan. Trevan wished he could share a moment like that with someone. There was something private, an inside joke of sorts, made evident by Alchan’s smile and nod.

“It is a rare sight.”

Varon shrugged. “Then I want to see.” Varon winked in Trevan’s direction, making everyone look between the two of them.

“I don’t know what he’s on about,” Trevan said quickly, then froze as Mave touched his arm.

“No one does most of the time,” she said with a chuckle. “Though I love the new talking Varon. I need to know, were you always like that with people, or is what you did to Leria a new thing because you have this voice?” Mave went to the other Avatar and pulled him to start walking with her. “Because I really enjoyed that.”

“The bloodthirsty part of you probably enjoyed it more than anything else I could ever do for you,” Varon said with a laugh. “But the answer to your question...No one has ever made me as angry as this situation. I’ve always had private thoughts only Nevyn was privy to, and I’m certain those thoughts would have surprised many, but Leria is an exceptional case of bad love. She’s a personal affront to the idea of love and marriage. I couldn’t remain silent. I was just waiting on Alchan to allow me to take the liberties I did. She is a mativa. If she wasn’t, I would have handled her weeks ago.”

“Well, I liked it,” Mave said decidedly.

Trevan walked at the back of the group, just watching the exchange with interest. He’d wanted to ask for weeks, and Mave did it only moments after Varon eviscerated the pride of another female.

It was Alchan who noticed him.

“You stand in the back like you don’t have a place here,” the king pointed out. “Get up here. You’re one of us...kind of.”

Trevan had wanted to hear words like those for nearly two years now. He picked up the pace and found himself walking beside the king as they headed out of the village.

“What do you see?” Varon asked, looking over his shoulder. Mave did the same, looking back at him, Alchan, and Rain. She seemed as confused as he felt.

Trevan didn’t understand the question, and Rain shrugged when he glanced across the king to the Consort.

“Alchan.” Varon stopped and sighed, obviously disappointed in something. “What do you see?” He gestured at Trevan. “I see the bonds between hearts, romantic, familial, and otherwise. What do you see?”

“The inner landscape of a person,” Alchan finally answered. “I see their...soul, I guess. Or maybe their aura. And I can turn it off. It gives me a headache.”

“I figured as much. So, what do you see when you look at Trevan?”

“That he’s one of mine,” the king answered softly, repeating words Trevan had heard already.

“Just making sure. Maybe I just don’t like the words ‘kind of.’ It does a disservice to the change our gods made in him. Trevan is an adopted child of our dragon gods. We should accept him as a brother, don’t you think?”

“I do,” Alchan agreed, breaking out into a small smile.

“I love being talked about like I’m not here,” Trevan muttered, making Mave laugh.

“I’m sorry. We’re all just confused, I guess.”

“What do you see?” Trevan asked, bold of him.

“I don’t know yet...maybe nothing,” she said softly. She stopped walking and waited for him to make it to her side. When she fell in step next to him, she leaned in and whispered, “I can turn into a dragon. That’s really all I’ve got so far.”

“That’s pretty amazing,” he whispered back, still in awe of that information. He resisted grinning, finding a way to tease her a little. “But I’ve already seen dragons.”

She shouldered him in that friendly way she did to many people.

They walked together, side by side, all the way out of the village. As they left, he began to rub his chest, feeling the pull grow stronger. It always felt like it was going to pull his heart from his chest, but now, it grew even more apparent. He could barely speak from the intensity of it when someone made a comment in his direction. He could only try to smile and nod or shake his head as the need arose. As they entered a clearing, Mave grabbed his elbow.

“Are you okay?” she asked, the concern on her face apparent.

“I...I don’t know,” he answered, clutching his chest and bending over. “I’ve felt it for weeks, and I...”

“And you’ve told no one because you’re a fool who thinks he must survive on his own lest we throw you out for being a nuisance,” Varon said softly, stepping into Trevan’s view. “I was wondering when it would finally cripple you.”

“What’s going on?” Alchan demanded, looking back at them. His approach was swifter than Varon’s, more urgency involved. He tried to straighten Trevan, but Trevan couldn’t manage it, falling to his knees.

“Varon, what have you done?” Mave demanded, growling viciously.

“Nothing,” the Avatar whispered. “I have seen a bond, and I was wondering how it would play out. I don’t believe Trevan is going to die. He’s never felt this before. I don’t think any of us can truly understand what it feels like when the gods tie two souls together so completely.”

Trevan heard the words. He’d been so disappointed when he realized the pull wasn’t to Mave, and now he was hearing his soul was tied to someone else?

“Who?” he demanded. “Who would they want me tied to?”

“Soul? Not blood?” Alchan went to a knee next to him, then Mave did, both trying to get him off the ground.

“Why do the gods need blood when they have access to our very essence?” Varon asked Alchan. “Also, it’s not a who, Trevan, but a *what*.”

A shadow passed over them, then a resounding thud shook the ground.

“I think we have the answer to that right now,” the mysterious Avatar said simply. “I wondered what the bond led to, but now...well, it makes perfect sense. The dragons’ children need wings, and they accounted for that.”

Trevan looked up. First at Varon, then at the newcomer.

His pale gold eyes met a pair of the exact same shade, the only difference the reptilian slit of the pupil.

“Shit,” Alchan growled, jumping up. He put his body between everyone and the wyvern. Rain roared, suddenly a bigger blue wyvern, cutting off the red one.

“Stop!” Varon snapped. “Alchan, the gods bonded this wyvern to Trevan! Rain, don’t fight it—”

The red wyvern was wild, snapping at Rain, a sudden challenger. Rain snapped back with much more effect, clipping the other wyvern on the neck.

Trevan screamed, feeling it as if Rain had bitten him. His scream stopped everything.

“Learn to block it out,” Mave began to whisper, holding him tightly. “His pain is not your pain. The bond lies. It’s telling you what your match is

feeling, so you can react to get to him.”

“What do I do?” Trevan whispered, sweat breaking out on his brow.

“Go to him,” Varon answered.

It was Mave who helped him to his feet. Trevan looked across the clearing at the red wyvern, a beautiful beast—powerful, regal, a stunning array of reds like living fire.

The claws in Trevan’s heart pulled him to walk to it. After ten steps, Mave released him and let him walk alone. Rain backed away but stayed in wyvern form, retreating toward Alchan. Eventually, Trevan was directly in front of the beast. It leaned forward and nudged his chest with its large snout, breathing hot air over him—and the pull stopped. The moment they touched, it quieted, settled, and became a piece of him instead of an obtrusive pain. He knew he would always feel it, a natural piece of himself, a natural need as simple as breathing.

This wyvern and he were one.

It made an odd chittering sound and nudged him again. He tentatively brought up a hand and touched it, feeling the smoothness of its scales. It chattered again and turned its big head. It wasn’t Rain’s size, but it was still larger than a horse.

Larger than a horse.

“I think he wants you to get on him,” Alchan said, closer than he had been.

“The gods have given you wings,” Varon said from farther away.

“Fly,” Mave whispered, right behind him. “Trevan, you deserve to fly.”

The wyvern stared at him as Trevan rubbed its cheek. He took his first step to its side, and it lowered a wing, creating a step up. He climbed with caution, wondering when it would throw him off, but in the bond, he felt the truth.

It wouldn’t. It would never. This was a connection given to this creature by the gods as well, and it knew the importance of the bond. It was a runt and had no one. It would never survive amongst the giants of its kind, but it could with him, and it wanted that.

Just as he could never survive with the Andinna without wings, and he could with this bond.

Trevan wanted it.

Okay. I’m here, holding on. Now what?

The wyvern jumped off as soon as that thought ended.

The wind hit his face, but he kept his eyes wide open as they flew upward, large wings beating. He could feel them as if they were his own. They went into the clouds and farther, higher than he had ever taken the griffon, Vahn, higher than he ever witnessed the Andinna fly.

He looked down when it leveled out to see the clouds underneath him.

“Oh,” he said, the exclamation lost to the wind. The view was magic.

He lifted his hands and laughed, the wind finally breaking his hair out of the simple tie he used to keep it contained. He’d thought flying with Vahn had been the best moment of his life, and he would always miss the gryphon, but he was one with this wyvern. He leaned silently, thinking about turning around, and the wyvern did as he asked. As they flew, a blue streak came above the clouds. Rain was joining them. Trevan rubbed the red wyvern’s neck as Rain flew close, going around them as if he was playing.

Let’s have fun. He’s one of us, Andinna and wyvern. You can trust him. I’m sorry he bit you.

The wyvern roared in return, and it was all Trevan had to hold on to as the red wyvern joined in Rain’s dangerous flight. They spun in the air, sending Trevan upside down, did flips, and teased each other.

It didn’t take him long to realize he was going to need something better than spikes to hold on to, but he finally found his courage again and laughed as the red wyvern and Rain played in the sky.

Then Rain dove, and his wyvern followed. They flew through the clouds at alarming speeds, and the ground became visible again. Trevan tried to pull, to slow the wyvern down, but failed. It handled the landing how it pleased, hitting the ground and running to bump into Rain, making that chattering noise again. Rain chattered back, then turned into his normal form, Andinna with blue wings.

Trevan felt the confusion run through the bond and chuckled.

“Yes, Rain is special,” he said softly, patting its neck. He was shaken from the landing, but when he looked around the clearing, he grinned at the Andinna who had allowed him to come today. Alchan and Varon were clapping, both with wide smiles.

Mave only smiled, her hands on her hips as she studied them. She was the one who was bold enough to walk forward, coming closer to the

wyvern.

Let her touch you. She won't hurt you. You don't have to let anyone else touch you if you don't want to, but let her.

The wyvern lowered its head and offered its cheek to her. Mave looked up at Trevan, who nodded his encouragement. He watched as she reached out, unafraid and rubbing the large cheek.

"He's beautiful," she whispered. "So beautiful. You're very lucky."

"I know," Trevan said, swallowing.

"And you," she said, leaning toward the wyvern. "He's the bravest male I've ever known, and I know many brave males. You take good care of him. I know he'll always take care of you, so you take care of him, okay?"

Trevan had no words. He swallowed roughly as her words bounced around in his head, echoing over and over again. The wyvern chattered and sent emotion through the bond that Trevan tried to put into words.

"It—"

"It's a boy," Rain said loudly. "He."

"Thank you," Trevan said softly. It wasn't as easy to tell with a wyvern as it was with a gryphon. "I think I'll call him..." Trevan had nothing. He looked down at the person who helped him name Vahn. "Mave, do you have any ideas?"

"He reminds me of fire," she said softly.

"Eldar?" Trevan tested it, then shook his head.

"No, not of actual fire," she said with a chuckle. "Of the dragon, the elemental dragon of fire. One of Larianna's husbands, I don't know their names..."

"He's Keikyn," Alchan said loudly.

"Like...ignite in Andenna," Mave said, her eyes going wide. "Ah. How is that, Trevan?"

"I think the gods will take offense if I use one of their names for him," Trevan countered. "Let me get to know him. He has a personality."

"Of course," Mave agreed, stepping back. "Now, come on down. You don't get to fly around all day. While you were having fun, we were talking about how we could make this work."

His wyvern helped him down, then jumped into the sky again. Trevan watched him go, feeling him fly through the sky through the bond. He would always know where the wyvern was.

“Trevan?” Alchan’s voice broke him out of thoughts again.

“Yes. How this works. Let’s discuss,” Trevan said, turning to the Andinna.

MAVE

Mave found herself chuckling at the dinner table three nights later, seeing Luykas across from her picking at his food.

“Please don’t be upset. He deserved his own place to live, and I wanted you to come home,” she said, leaning over to touch his hand. “Spring is drawing closer, then we have to fight. I want to have all the time I can with you until then. I could lose one of you.”

“When you put it like that...” Luykas smiled in return. “I enjoyed living with him.” Mat came up and thumped Luykas’ back, making Luykas cast him a dirty glance. “Not that I don’t enjoy our family, but he was...he became my brother. Knowing he’s living alone, I don’t know how I feel about it.”

“With a wyvern protectin’ him, he’ll be fine,” Bryn muttered as he fell into his seat. “A fuckin’ wyvern. Our gods gave him a fuckin’ wyvern. Fuckin’ Elvasi—”

“He’s not Elvasi anymore,” Mave said strongly, looking at her rogue husband as the others sat down. Mat took the seat closest to her, and once Zayden was finished putting everything on the table, he sat between Mat and Bryn. “He’s not Andinna, not fully, but he’s certainly not Elvasi anymore. Maybe something in between the two. Our gods thought him worthy enough to adopt into our people. Alchan looks at him and sees that he’s one of us, that he belongs with us. The dragons bonded his soul to that wyvern. Whatever the purpose, I know they wouldn’t have done that without care. So please, Bryn, I need you to try.”

Bryn sighed heavily, looking down at the plate Zayden put in front of him.

“I just don’t understand,” Bryn mumbled. “But that’s for me to deal with, ain’t it?” He looked around the table. “Is Emerian movin’ back in with him?”

“No,” Mave said, also looking at the empty spot at the table. “I think he’s hanging out with him for dinner tonight. We trained all day, so he’s probably hoping to spend some time with Trevan after a long day.”

“What’s Trevan been working on? Zayden and I trained the masses with Nevyn today, and Bryn, you’re back with the scouts, yeah?”

“Aye.”

“And I’m back to my spies,” Luykas said. “Yeah, I haven’t heard what Trevan has been tasked with yet.”

“He’s been told to learn how to fly,” Mave said with a small smile. It was her order. “He needs time to really understand what’s between him and the wyvern. Obviously, like Rain, Trevan will be sent out this year. There’s no way to avoid it. The more power we have, the better this year will go. I don’t know all of Alchan’s plans yet—”

“No one does,” Luykas muttered petulantly.

“But it’s going to involve our new abilities. We tested the wills of the goddesses for a reason. Trevan having another fire-breathing wyvern on our side is a blessing. So, I want them comfortable flying together. And there’s the logistics of having a wyvern in the village. People have noticed.”

“It’s a runt,” Mat said, shrugging. “It’ll eat a deer once a week if it hunts on its own and leave everything else alone. It’s honestly safer here than anywhere else in Anden. I think Rain’s natural presence keeps the wild wyverns from bothering us too much here. It can live under that protection.”

“Is it?” Mave took a bite of her food as Mat nodded.

“Tiny male. Males are normally smaller than females, but he’s either young or small. I’m thinking small. He wouldn’t stand a chance against a big female during breeding season or another male competing for the same privilege. He’s smaller than Rain, who is already a small male in comparison. The red is a runt.”

“Oh. Well, he’s a beautiful runt,” Mave said, continuing her meal. “I’m actually going to check on them after dinner. I’ll send Emerian back.”

Bryn grumbled but said nothing. His complaints Trevan might one day kill her would fall on deaf ears now and piss her off. She was glad he was figuring that out. Trevan had been accepted by the gods. Mave knew the gods weren't perfect, but they weren't foolish. They're insular, so the idea of them accepting anyone new to their 'family' was a big deal.

She ate quickly, then stood and kissed each husband on the top of their heads while they tried to enjoy their own dinners.

"I'll be back."

"Be safe," Zayden called. "I'll keep something out for Emerian if he's still hungry when he gets home."

"You're an amazing husband," she told him as she passed him, giving him one more slow, sweet kiss. He groaned when she pulled away. "I shouldn't be long. I just haven't been able to see his new home and the sleeping arrangements for the wyvern. I'm curious, and a late-night drink is a nice way to wind down."

"You could do that with us," Zayden pointed out.

"I do it with you every evening, though. I have friends, and I haven't spent much time with them in months."

"I know."

She pulled on her boots and headed out without her swords. She didn't have much need for them. If someone stupid attacked her, she had plenty of ways to defend herself, and she was just making the short walk to Trevan's new home.

The cliffside Alchan had claimed when they found the valley was now the home of everyone in the Ivory Shadows. Nevyn and Varon lived high on the cliff. Luykas' private home was also up there. Mave and Alchan both had their homes closer to the ground, easier for people to visit and talk to them. Apparently, there had been a ground-level home ready for Trevan and Dave to move in ages ago, but then Dave died, and everyone thought Trevan was the spy, so it had never happened, forgotten by everyone.

Alchan and Luykas had remembered it quickly enough, once they realized Trevan didn't need to live in Luykas high cliffside home anymore, and Mave had put her foot down. Her husband was going to live with her when she was home. Trevan was also a grown male with a wyvern. He could live alone and nearby.

She walked up the wooden steps to his door and knocked. It wasn't Trevan who answered, but Emerian.

"Are you stalking me now?" he asked, smiling as he leaned on the door frame.

"No, I came to visit Trevan as well. You had a good idea, and I've wanted to see how he likes the new place."

Emerian stepped out of her way, but as she tried to pass him, he grabbed her elbow.

"Hold on," he murmured. "You beat me up all day, and I haven't been able to do this."

She growled as he kissed her, satisfied with this male attention.

"I didn't beat you up," she finally retorted. "We sparred. You're good, but you need to keep working at it."

"I know. We just haven't in a while. I figured you would pass off my sparring to someone else after everything that happened."

"You figured wrong," she said with a grin, continuing into Trevan's home. She didn't find him eating at the table. He was sprawled on a cushion with a drink in his hand.

"Good evening, Mave," he greeted as he stood. "Can I get you anything to drink?"

"Wine would be nice," she said, allowing him to have his manners. She really didn't need anything to drink, certainly not wine, but the offer was made, and she was trying to be a good guest.

He put down whatever he had and jogged into the kitchen, coming back out a moment later with her drink. She sipped, recognizing and liking the flavor.

"It's made in Kerit. Not aged, but they're trying to start to age some for later years. A war year vintage will be great to have in the future," Trevan explained.

"You like wine," she realized by his enthusiasm.

"He was raised Elvasi," Emerian reminded her. "Of course he likes wine. He and Dave used to talk about the vineyard near Kerit all the time, but not when anyone was around."

"It wasn't much," Trevan tried to say, shaking his head. He was clearly embarrassed, but Mave didn't understand why. "We just enjoyed a good drink now and then."

“If you like wine, why not enjoy it? Enthuse about it all you want.” She shook her head at him as she sat down. “Plus...it’s something you shared with Dave.”

Trevan sighed and fell back into his place, grabbing his drink once he was comfortable. Emerian got comfortable near her, his tail grabbing hers.

“What’s on your mind?” she asked as he stared into the fire, seeming lost and far away.

“It was a night like tonight when he was killed,” Trevan whispered. “We’d been given a drink to try out, something thick and spicy. It was delicious. I was exhausted, though, so once I finished my drink by the fire with him, I headed for bed. I woke up to Luykas banging on the door.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I...” She covered her face. In the excitement of getting home and seeing how things were so different, she hadn’t given herself a chance to think about Dave...hadn’t wanted to think about Dave. He had been her human, one in a long line of silent helpers, of friends who had stayed beside her, even when she refused to acknowledge the friendship to protect herself.

“He cared for you,” Trevan said softly, not looking her way as she dropped her hand. “He cared for everyone here. He enjoyed the hard work, and he was nice to...everyone. He didn’t have a bad bone in his body. And the way...”

“You don’t need to say anything. We know how he was murdered,” Mave said quickly. This hadn’t been her intention tonight. She wanted to do something for Dave when she was ready, but she didn’t feel ready to say goodbye to the last of her humans. Part of her just wanted to pretend he was too busy to see her because the idea of walking around the village and admitting he was never going to show up...it was almost too much for her.

“I saw his body,” Trevan whispered. “And this...” He gestured at her and Emerian. “It reminds me of the last night I spent time with him. I’m sorry. I don’t know what came over me.”

“I brought up Dave. I’m sorry.” Emerian stood to help Trevan to his feet.

Mave took a deep breath as the two males looked at each other. They had lost a dear friend they had lived with for over a year. Dave had helped organize their escape. He’d been a good soul.

Mave wasn't ready to confront his death, but life had taught her a valuable lesson she had to remember—no one was ever ready to confront the death of a dear friend or family member. It was impossible to ever be ready. Trevan was still hurting as well.

We can confront it together, then.

"Show me," Mave declared, standing up as well. "I came by to spend some time with you, to see how you were doing here alone. I wanted to ask about the wyvern, but we have the evening. Maybe we can...we can go where he was found. I would like to see it. I would like to know."

"Are you sure?" Trevan asked, giving her a bleak look.

"I've been avoiding it," she admitted. "Focusing on other things. Dave is too important for me to do that, though. I missed his funeral. Luykas never told us what kind he got, human or Andinna."

"Andinna," Trevan said, hoarse. "They gave him an Andinna funeral. It was talked about, but in the end, I asked Luykas to give Dave a chance to fly with the Andinna. He agreed."

Mave nodded. She had never really given funerals any thought, but she knew about them. Humans preferred to be buried in the earth with a marker. The Elvasi preferred to be entombed, the circumstances depending on their social rank.

The Andinna burned, and the ashes were given to the winds. One last flight. No markers were made to visit, not traditionally. All one had to do to know their loved one was still with them was to breathe the air in and fly.

"Good," she whispered, looking down at her glass of wine. She finished it quickly and nodded at the males. "Let's go. Let's go say goodbye to Dave, the three of us. We knew him the best. After tonight, when we say his name, it won't be with aching sadness, but joy that he lived such an extraordinary life, helping us, even when we didn't want to be helped."

"And saving us when we didn't want to be saved," Emerian said softly, nodding.

Trevan only lowered his head.

They walked out together, slowly to make sure everyone was properly bundled from the cold. There was too much snow on the ground for walking to be easy, so Emerian and Mave jumped into the air. Only a moment later, the red wyvern jumped from the top of the cliff and allowed Trevan to climb on.

Trevan took the lead once he was in the air. Mave wanted to enjoy flying beside a wyvern, this one much wilder than Rain. With Rain, she could see him in the eyes. This beast was wild, and it showed in the way it moved. It flew with raw power and looked around like it was always searching for a bite to eat.

Trevan sent them down into the trees, his wyvern making it look more graceful than Mave wanted to believe possible from such a large beast. Her husbands believed it was a runt, but to her, it was perfect. She didn't get to enjoy it for long as Trevan slid down from its back, his face still tight.

"This is where one of Senri's guards brought us. Luykas flew me here," he explained. "We found him..." He started walking and pointed to a cave. "In there."

"Learen had brought him out here, and..." Emerian trailed off, shaking his head. "I'm sorry we weren't here."

"You were protecting Mave, and Mave..." Trevan gave her a sad smile. "There's no fault here unless it's mine. I was supposed to protect him. Vahn was poisoned as well because I didn't take enough care with him. This was my fault."

"No," Mave whispered. "This was Shadra's fault."

It was always Shadra.

She started walking, heading straight for the cave. She knew if she didn't start moving now, she would never see the dark, terrible place where Dave had been taken from them.

As she reached the mouth of the cave, something started to pull on her, and her power was what answered. She walked slowly, feeling it in the air around her, and there was a terrible edge to it as she went further into the cave.

"That's where he died," Trevan whispered, pointing to a spot against the wall deeper in. "I...I saw him...propped against the wall, and he was gone. The things Learen had done to him..."

Mave went closer, her power acting of its own accord as it reached into the darkness. There was something there. She narrowed her eyes, wondering who else was in the cave with them. Her eyesight drew colorless, making it easier to see, but it wasn't natural. Mave was letting her powers change how she saw the world. It was useful.

She jerked to a stop when she saw him.

He wasn't real. He was just like any of the ghosts of Al Moro Nat.

Dave turned to her, his eyes lost, unseeing. She clapped a hand over her mouth to stop a scream. It wasn't Al Moro Nat, and Dave had been human. Why could she see him?

"Mave?" Emerian sounded distant as Mave continued to lose herself in the forlorn eyes of her dead friend.

Dave's mouth opened, and she heard the ear-splitting scream of pain. It nearly took her to her knees as it echoed in her skull.

"Mave, what's wrong?" Trevan asked, holding onto her elbow.

When she looked back up, she didn't see Dave as he had been anymore. She saw what Dave had become. His face disfigured with fire, cuts and bruises covered his skin.

Mave felt ill as her power ached to do something.

No.

She stumbled back, pushed past the males, and ran out of the cave, her heart thudding hard in her chest. In the back of her mind, another female laughed. Before Mave made it to the wyvern, Kristanya appeared before her, forcing Mave to stagger to a stop, nearly losing her balance.

"Did you forget, little girl?" the goddess said with a vicious smile. "Did you think you would get my powers and win the war without needing to find out what they really are?" She spread her arms and laughed. "Did you forget that I was the Goddess of Death before I was the goddess of war? Death came first. I brought darkness. My sister brought light and life, then I brought death and returned her beautiful creations to the darkness."

Mave vomited as Dave's poor, disfigured face stayed in her mind, refusing to give her peace.

"I thought you weren't scared of death," Kristanya taunted, purposefully cruel. Mave could feel that the goddess was enjoying this, enjoying that Mave had gone into the cave without knowing, and it had hurt her.

"I'm not scared of my death," Mave snapped. "I'm not scared of..." She wiped her mouth. "I didn't know...He was human. How can I see him?"

"Death, Maevana, takes all things. There are gods who record death, who shepherd the death, but I am *death*. I see *all*. Get used to it." Then she was gone.

"Mave, who are you talking to?" Emerian asked, finally reaching her. "What happened?"

“You couldn’t see her?” Mave asked, her mouth falling open as she looked up at him. “Kristanya was...Dave...” Mave closed her eyes and saw her human’s face again, a specter haunted by how he died, lost and with nowhere to go, forever in pain as he had been in his last moments. Just the memory of his scream made her ears ring.

“I think we need Alchan or Varon,” Trevan said quickly, helping her as well.

“No,” she said, swallowing. “I don’t need them. I just need a minute.”

She let them hold her elbows as she stared at the spot Kristanya had been. Her power raged in her, wanting to get out, wanting to do something, but it terrified her.

All she had wanted was power to win the war, to help her people.

She finally tore her eyes from the spot where Kristanya had been and looked into the surrounding forests. Her power, still active, raged and revealed to her more.

Through the trees, ghostly deer jumped and left her line of sight. She looked up to see a ghostly owl fly overhead, then disappear into nothing—not just out of sight, but into *nothing*.

The realization hit her hard and made her gasp.

Alchan could see the souls of his people. Varon could see the bonds between everyone.

Mave could see the dead before they moved on. In a world of no color, the wispy white souls floated around. She turned to Trevan and only saw shades of gray, no pale gold eyes or auburn hair. When she looked at Emerian, she felt sick again—not a single hint of his blood-red eyes or tatua.

She didn’t know how to turn it off.

LILLIANA

The days passed, and no matter how much she wanted the feelings to leave her, Lilliana was beginning to realize they were never going to go away. Never. She was stuck with this, and every day, she fell deeper, unable to fight against the tide, or so the saying went. She had never seen the ocean, and what she knew of it was only from reading.

Lilliana sat quietly as the males moved in unison, cooking breakfast as if they had done it countless times. Alchan, a male of many surprises, was a beautiful cook, taking pride and pleasure in food. Rainev, with a heart too big for his chest, liked to help sometimes. They were a living embodiment of love and joy, passionate and caring. Her heart squeezed as she caught Alchan smile at Rain as if the smaller male was the center of the world, his sun, bringer of life.

She wanted a piece of that—just a tiny piece.

“Breakfast is served,” Rain declared a moment later. Two plates appeared on the table in front of her, and Rain’s smile was bright.

Lilliana blinked, trying to shake herself from the deep well of want she found herself in more and more.

“Thank you,” she mumbled as Alchan brought two more plates. “I could have made my own, though. You didn’t need to worry about—”

“Breakfast is my favorite meal,” Alchan said stiffly, cutting her off. “The quiet morning is the best time to cook.”

“I’ll handle dinner,” she said as he grabbed the empty plate already set in front of her and started filling it, her eyes going wide as he did. Food was

important. It wasn't official, but males always made sure their females ate first, even if it was subconscious.

Lilliana wasn't sure why, but she continued trying to convince herself he didn't really want her. He could strip down and take her, and she would still try to convince herself he was only doing it to make her feel better. Rain told her otherwise, even Alchan's actions told her otherwise, but she couldn't bring herself to believe.

"If that's what you wish," Alchan said softly as he made up a plate for Rain, making an obvious show that he was controlling what everyone at the table would eat. In the back of her mind, she knew it should upset her. If she was a strong and dominant female, she might have taken offense, but she enjoyed it. He gave her more food than she could possibly eat and by the look of it, did the same for Rain. While it was controlling, it was also very caring. He couldn't live against his nature of dominance, his excessive need to control and keep things, so he compensated by using it to care deeply for those who relied on him.

He glanced at her, which caused her to drop her eyes and look at her food. She ate quickly, not stuffing herself, but getting enough to last her until lunch.

"I'm going to go for a walk," she said, quickly standing up. "I know to avoid certain areas of the valley and don't need an escort." She looked at Rain, who was already halfway out of his chair. "I'll be fine."

Rain smirked. "Okay."

She nodded briskly and took her plate into the kitchen before practically running out of the house. She was still securing the new belt she wore as she let the front door close behind her. They made her carry a dagger, self-protection, they said. She didn't know how to use it beyond sticking the pointy end into someone else. She hadn't received the same training all the Andinna did growing up.

Lilliana wrapped her wings around her body to protect herself from the morning chill and started walking, one foot in front of the other, breathing in the mountain air as if it were the lifeblood she needed to continue to breathe at all. She had enjoyed seeing the Capital, but the roads through Anden were on lower elevations, so it didn't feel the same for someone who spent most of her life on a mountain, hidden in a temple. On the other hand, as they traveled, the air had seemed wilder. Here, a bustling village, there

were the faint hints of smoke and foods being cooked in every household. On the roads, there was only nature.

Lilliana was careful, walking away from the male-dominated areas of the valley. She knew Alchan and Rain would throw a fit if she got near the single males, many who were once gladiators in the Empire. She was never told the entire story, but she knew enough to take their warnings.

She wasn't paying attention, and a hard thump nearly made her fall back. An arm grabbed her elbow, and the female holding it growled. Lilliana realized she was in the grasp of Mave.

"Don't tip over," the Champion growled. There were dark bags under her eyes as if she didn't sleep the night before or at all in days.

"I'm sorry—"

"No, it's my fault," Mave said, shaking her head. "I was in such a rush. You enjoy your walk." Then she was gone, jumping into the air without another word. Lilliana watched her disappear, then only made it one step before Luykas ran up to her.

"Did you see Mave?" he asked, frowning as he looked around, then up to the sky.

"We just bumped into each other, then she went off. She didn't tell me where she was headed," Lilliana explained, looking up at the mutt. He wasn't looking at her.

"Three days now, she's up and disappeared without telling any of us where's she's going," he mumbled, glaring at the sky. Lilliana assumed he wasn't talking to her. "What the Skies is going on..." He touched her shoulder gently and gave a perfunctory goodbye before stalking off, clearly upset.

She continued walking, trying to dismiss the exchange. The marriage of Mave and her husbands was not one she needed to let consume her thoughts. It wasn't her business. She was never one for meddling the way Rain liked to. The male knew how to meddle with the best of them. If he had seen that exchange, he would have started his meddling right away.

She smiled as she continued walking, watching the dawn sunrise. She enjoyed his meddling ways. He was braver than her. When he wanted something, he reached out and grabbed it, even though he believed himself submissive in terms of most males and definitely most females. He didn't let his standing stop him from taking what he wanted.

Or even just asking for it.

Lilliana, not wanting to end her walk anytime soon, decided to pass through the visitor's area of the valley, home to anyone who was stopping in from Leria's community and Kerit. Nobles who were hoping for a chance to speak to someone and others who were looking for family. Thanks to recent storms, travel was slow, and many were stuck.

She waved at a few faces she knew, priestesses from the temple where she had been raised, but she didn't stop to talk to them. They were around to talk to Avatar Varon.

"Look who it is," a rough female voice growled.

Lilliana tried to keep walking.

"You'll look at me when I speak to you," Leria hissed.

Lilliana turned slowly to see the mativa she had respected for centuries, who had tried her best to lead a female who pricked her instincts. From word around the village, she was still in the process of falling from grace. Lilliana hadn't respected Leria since the mativa forced Lilliana into Alchan's sight, forcing Seanev to go along with it.

But even if she didn't like the female, that didn't mean she could suddenly call on any sliver of courage to meet her eyes. Lilliana kept her head down as the female walked closer.

"You look healthy. They're feeding you at least," Leria said, huffing. "That's good. Heard you went with them on their little...trip."

"I did," she said softly, keeping her eyes on Leria's feet.

"What did you get to see? Was traveling everything you hoped it would be?"

For a moment, Lilliana dared to look up. Leria was less dominant than Mave, but it was harder to look at her. Leria had always enforced the position of her place at the top and everyone underneath her. Mave was dominant but didn't make Lilliana feel small.

When her eyes finally touched Leria's, they dropped again as the mativa bared her teeth in warning. That was when Lilliana decided she owed Leria nothing. Leria didn't know how to not make her feel small.

"Anden is as beautiful as I had hoped. Traveling in a small group was harder than I imagined." The only time she had traveled before was in a large caravan, and Seanev had made sure everything was taken care of for her. The trip with Alchan and Rain had been much different. There had

been more need to survive than leisure. She had adjusted, though. “I must be going.”

“I’m still a mativa,” Leria warned softly. “And I’m trying to have a talk with you. You always wanted to travel, and I would love to hear about it. Even when I’m trying to do something right...”

“You’re not my mativa,” Lilliana whispered so softly, she almost didn’t believe she had said it. “You gave me away,” she said a little bolder. “Now, I answer to Alchan. You made this decision, not me.”

Leria laughed. “Once, there was a time when females ruled, and the males knew their place. Now we have a king who thinks he can fool people into thinking he’s just like our queens of old and takes liberties even his grandmother wouldn’t have. And that mutt of his thinks he’s special when he’s just a plaything, getting in the way of what must be done. What you *need* to do.”

“He’s not trying to fool anyone. He’s trying to lead the Andinna through the dark and keep hope alive that one day, we won’t be caught in perpetual war and fear.” Lilliana looked up now, summoning courage as this mativa insulted the only two males she had ever cared about. “And Rain is a wonderful soul who loves the king. That is the truth I’ve witnessed. Don’t disparage them.”

“Excuse me?” Leria inhaled sharply, taking a step toward her.

“Lilliana!” someone called. “Leria. How wonderful to see you two together on such a fine morning. A mativa and the female she once led. How nice.”

Lilliana frowned as she turned toward the voice, seeing Nevyn and Varon walk up. Nevyn had been the one to speak, but it was Varon’s expression that really caught her attention. He had a cutting smile that was nothing short of polite but still seemed dangerous. They stopped, angling themselves to see both females. Lilliana knew a hunting party when she saw one.

“Yes, these are the bonds that keep our people together,” Varon said softly, reaching out to grab her. Lilliana didn’t have much to say about how he pulled her away from Leria and tucked her under his arm. Between his voice and the touch, her body was suddenly on fire, and need whipped up in her like a sudden storm. She ignored it, trying to seem as though she was unaffected. “But I need to borrow Lilliana today. I’m sorry.”

“Good morning, Avatar Varon. Good morning, General.” Leria gave each of them a polite lowering of her head, making no indication that Varon affected her. “We were just finishing up. I wanted to know about how her travels went because I knew she was so interested in seeing more of Anden. She was surprisingly close-lipped about it.”

“She’s not the most talkative,” Nevyn agreed.

Nevyn kept Leria engaged in a conversation as Varon stepped back, forcing Lilliana to match his movements. Even walking away from a tense situation, she felt very clumsy, but Varon moved fluidly, like water.

“Did she do anything to you?” he asked sharply.

“No...” She stumbled on the word, trying to find speech while in his presence. She found her saving grace in one single thought. *I don’t want him.* “No, she was just being Leria. Angry about Seanev, angry with me, angry with Alchan. She really did ask about the trip, but I didn’t want to tell her anything.” She continued to think that singular thought as they walked until her body remembered this wasn’t a male she wanted, had never wanted. She had looked upon his beautiful face before and felt nothing sexual for him. There was no reason for her to feel that way now, even if he was chosen by the goddess herself.

Varon relaxed as they left the mativa’s sight.

“Good,” he said softly, nodding. “I recently cut her deeply, and I didn’t want to see her take it out on you.”

“Oh, I was told about that. Alchan let me know. It’s not a worry. I know how to keep myself from upsetting her too badly, and I was planning on ending the conversation. She wouldn’t have attacked me. That would ruin her image even further, and I don’t think she could handle that.”

“You’re right,” he agreed, releasing her from his hold. “So, what are you doing out this morning?”

“Walking,” she answered, shrugging. “I am beginning to realize I have very interesting walks, though. I might take to flying instead, so I run into fewer people. Mave, Luykas, then Leria, and now, you and your husband.”

“Very interesting walks, indeed.” He chuckled. Talking to Varon was easy for her now that he was no longer a secret. He was everything she had imagined, hearing stories of him. He was part of the same community, both hailing from lives in temples, protected from the outside world. He was a vision of what she may one day become. Not an Avatar or experienced

warrior, but he was living proof people could leave their sheltered lifestyle and reach further.

“That bitch,” Nevyn muttered as he appeared, rolling his eyes. “She needs to go home.”

“She will once the roads are clear enough,” Varon promised. “She’s already promised that to me.” Varon wrapped his arm with hers and started walking. This time, the combination of touch and the sound of his voice didn’t try to turn her into a puddle, and she frowned at how he held her. “Now, Lady Lilliana was on a walk. Why don’t we escort her, my love?”

“Yes. It’s been a long time since I’ve escorted a female. I can brush up on the skills.” Nevyn laughed and walked ahead of them. “I’ll clear a path for our dear Lady Lilliana.” He turned his back on them.

After several silent moments, Varon leaned down to her ear.

“How did you do it? How did you overcome the magic just now of what I am?”

“I reminded myself I had never wanted you before. Your magic is just that, magic. A powerful and inconvenient gift from Amonora. It’s unnatural, at least for me, to feel that way about someone, so I just kept telling myself it was just that...unnatural. That I didn’t want you, had never wanted you before. It worked.”

“Fascinating,” he murmured. “I could feel the change. A gift as well. I’m very *observant* of the needs of those around me. It was easier when I was mute, and people had no idea what I was. Fewer people wanted a mere mute priest devoted to his husband.”

“So, it’s not just the voice?”

“For many, it is, but there are others who want the body of someone they feel might be the best fuck they ever had.” Varon sighed. “It was... amazing how you turned it off. What do you mean by unnatural, though? Sexual energies are some of the most natural in the world.”

“I...” Lilliana tried to find a way to say it. If there was one person who might understand her, maybe it was Avatar Varon. She respected him, grew up in a community that worshipped his story nearly as much it had worshipped the goddess. He was the Avatar of these things. “It’s difficult to explain, actually.”

“Try me,” Varon said softly.

“I was never sexually attracted to people until I came here,” she said, swallowing her nerves.

“Oh...you’re one of those,” Varon said softly. “There’s...that’s...not in a bad way. I’m sorry, that came out wrong.” He huffed, annoyed with himself for whatever reason. There was no Andinna word for someone like her, only obscure references in texts about love and how a small portion of the Andinna population had no interest in sex or being sexual.

“He gets his voice back and suddenly can’t say the right thing,” Nevyn teased from the front, proving he was listening.

“Yes, I’m one of those,” she agreed, nodding politely. “I had also heard of Andinna like me from the texts I grew up reading. Little sex drive, if any, generally very picky with lovers. For a long time, people thought I was broken. Maybe it was an ahren thing, you know, but I just don’t find sex all that interesting. So, you being able to get that reaction out of me...” Lilliana left that open.

“Feels unnatural,” Varon finished, nodding slowly. “Very well. Now I understand. Thank you for enlightening me. I wish I had known sooner. It makes your situation all the more difficult, doesn’t it? Leria wanted you to have children with Alchan, and she probably has no idea how you feel, does she?”

“She never asked why I’ve never taken a lover or even tried to learn the ways of Amonora’s priesthood. She didn’t care that much. But I don’t want to talk about Leria.” She really didn’t. She wanted to leave Leria in the past and try to figure out her current predicament. That was the entire point of her walk. She needed to clear her head and figure out what she was going to do about Alchan.

“You care deeply for them,” Varon said softly.

“I do,” she whispered. There was no reason to play the fool about who he meant. “And...I finally found someone who...excites me,” she said. She had talked about sex all the time once in her life, but it felt like so long ago. Varon, in a way, was a piece of home. Much of her shyness fell away since she knew he could see it as clinically as she could. Plus, she knew what he could see. He knew more than he would ever say outright. The fact he already knew but wouldn’t say it only made her bolder and more comfortable.

“For the first time in my life, I saw something, and I wanted a piece of it. To join in, to engage. It felt as if I was struck by a bolt of lightning. You can see it. You can admit it, Varon. You don’t have to play coy until I admit it.”

“You want him,” Varon said softly, holding her tightly enough to keep her in place. “I didn’t realize it was so complicated and that he was the first-ever male you have been sexually interested in, but it makes sense. Your need for him has been growing. I saw the spark of it that morning when we caught you outside right after you arrived. Does he know?”

“He does. Rain has made sure that we both know. Rain is convinced Alchan is very attracted to me.”

Varon chuckled. “He’s a smart male, that one. He might seem young, but everyone forgets he grew up faster, thanks to his short-lived blood. Alchan does want you. He’s wanted you from the moment he saw you. He’s been battling that because he doesn’t want to force you.”

“Rain says similar,” she murmured, looking away. “But then why won’t he...” She waved at herself. “All he has to do is ask. I would...I would try.”

“Look at it from his perspective,” Varon countered. “He’s a king who can force the submission of any Andinna he pleases. He’s required to bed a female eventually to produce a child. He could force the compliance from anyone except Mave, who would kill him. He’s not the leader most Andinna want because he’s a male. He’s been taught to hate himself for being a bedru.”

“How did Rain do it?” She frowned. “He’s submissive. If Alchan has such a problem with his position, how did he end up with Rain? They’re mad for each other.”

“What do you love most about Rain? Other than his kind and loving heart.”

That was easy for her to answer.

“He’s submissive and yet bold,” she murmured. “He bends, but he has power to demand what he wants.”

Varon released her with a mysterious smile and nodded politely.

“We’ve reached our destination.” He gestured up, and her eyes followed. She was back home, her walk concluded.

“That’s it? That’s all you’re going to say?” She couldn’t believe it. “You meddle worse than Rain. At least he’s clear.”

Varon laughed. "It is possible to meddle too much. You have to be ready for the answer, and it'll come to you. I've just given you an important piece of the puzzle." Varon reached out and touched her cheek, his expression softening into one of caring and a touch of sadness. "Do you know what your fatal flaw is?"

"What?"

"You don't see what others do when they look at you." He leaned forward and kissed her forehead. A growl made her jump and him step back.

Alchan stood in the doorway, his amber eyes full of something unreadable. He said nothing as he walked down the steps slowly and offered her his arm. She was speechless as she realized he put himself between her and Varon, very clearly staking his claim on her. There was no way for her to explain this away as anything but a dominant Andinna, making sure others stayed away from someone important to him.

"I'm heading to the war room. Would you like to come with me? I'm certain we can find something for you to help with. War efforts and everything. You wanted to help with the war when you got here, didn't you?"

She nodded silently. She had thought he'd forgotten about that. She certainly had.

"Good, good," he murmured. He made a move, reminding her his arm was still waiting for her to take.

"I would love that," she said, accepting his offer. She frowned at Varon as Alchan started to lead her away, but the Avatar of Amonora only winked.

BRYNEC

Bryn looked at his wife, sitting quietly on the bench outside their home. For a week, she woke up and left them to do something, but she never told them what. Something had spooked her the night she went to Trevan's home, and no one would tell him what that was. This was the first time they had caught her in a meditative state in an open place. Normally, once she left, only Mat and Luykas had any idea of how to find her, but even that was a troublesome problem.

"She's dealing with something," Mat said simply, breaking the silence of the four males standing there. Four husbands wondering what they could do to help her, wondering why they were being shut out. "And we need to let her deal with it."

"It would help if her powers didn't obscure the bonds, though," Luykas snapped. "I'm glad she's right there because I hate this new disappearing act she can pull."

"We can only do what husbands are allowed to do. We wait for her to come to us and ask for our help. She's the Avatar of Kristanya now. There are probably some things she's not allowed or comfortable telling us," Zayden pointed out.

Mave stood up and took off.

"Fuck," Luykas snarled. "We scared her off. Shouldn't have said anything."

"She's strong," Mat said softly, stepping out of their hiding spot to look up and watch her fly out of sight. "She used to handle problems on her own."

I know she's not forgetting us. I don't think she ever would. Whatever this is, we just have to wait it out until she's ready to talk."

Bryn only listened, his hand resting on the dagger at his waist. Not his morok, the wickedly curved blade of the Andinna. He had one, but he used that for battle. He wasn't feeling like a battle. He was feeling the urge to slip a knife between ribs and end a problem.

"I'll talk to Alchan and see if he can give me any insight. I don't like this," Luykas said, stepping out after Mat. They had picked a nook in the cliffside to watch her, knowing they weren't well hidden. They just didn't want to be obviously staring at her.

"You don't have to like it. Do you really want to trouble Alchan? He's trying to formulate the plans for spring." Zayden waved around. "And spring is coming. Today, it's warm enough to start melting some snow. We might get one more good storm, then it's over."

"She's our wife," Luykas bit at Zayden.

"And she deserves her privacy," Zayden growled in return. "As her husbands, we need to respect that. There are four of us and one of her. There's a reason we are raised to respect a female's privacy. Do you really want to get her pissed off at all of us?" Zayden shoved Luykas unexpectedly...or not. It was Zayden. "I don't like this either, but I'm not going to make an ass of us by forcing her to talk to us when she's clearly not ready. It's her right as a female."

"It's already been a week," Luykas hissed.

"*Only* a week," Zayden snarled. "For someone like Mave, I think a week is well before the time to worry."

"He's right," Mat said softly. "A week for Mave to be thinking about something or keeping her own council...she did it for a thousand years. If she's not talking to us in another week, I'll let everyone here go after her, and we'll pry. Together. As a team, a unit. We're a family. And she's the Avatar. I know Zayden and Bryn have seen it, but Luykas, since she got those powers, she stares off a lot. The things she probably can do are beyond us, and she's needed time to adjust, probably still does."

"You're only playing nice because she bonded with you," Luykas said softly, but there was no heat. Bryn couldn't resist rolling his eyes at the words.

“No, he’s playing nice because he’s the first of us,” Zayden countered. “It’s his duty to make sure, first and foremost, that her needs are met by everyone in the family. He’s known her the longest. If he thinks we need to give her another week, we need to accept that wisdom.”

“I could be wrong, but...I feel it. Luykas, you probably do, too. She’s distant. Her powers do that. That cold thing you’re feeling in place of her, that’s her powers. Do you really want to interrupt an Avatar while she’s using her powers?”

“No,” Luykas mumbled.

“Then we’ll give her another week. Hopefully, whatever she’s about won’t last that long.” Mat looked around at them. “It’s still early, but I’m going to head to the main training field. Zayden?”

“I’ll go with you unless you want me to grab us a real breakfast first.”

Mat nodded and took off. Zayden stepped out of the pack and jumped off next. Luykas growled, looking at Bryn for a moment.

“You’ve been quiet.”

“I...” Bryn didn’t know what he trusted himself to say. “I’m worried about her, but she’s tough. She’ll figure it out.”

And I’ll erase the thing that caused the problem.

Luykas nodded slowly. He jumped into the air at last.

Bryn had no scouts to talk to. He hadn’t for days. He sent them out as quickly as he could once they had returned, knowing Alchan would need to know everything he could before their plans could really be decided. None of the scouts had gone out over winter, thanks to Bryn’s absence and the supply situation, but they were *all* gone now. He was a bit wayward, thanks to it.

All he could think about was his wife and when this had started. A week ago, she had gone to see Trevan. Emerian had come home and snuck into his bedroom without talking to anyone.

Mave had come home at dawn, looking haunted, and now, no one could bring it out of her, and so began the longest week of his fucking life. Emerian refused to say anything, making it clear his loyalties weren’t to the family as a whole but to her. He made himself scarce after that, coming in and leaving before any of them could say anything.

So, Bryn decided on another target for the answers he wanted. He couldn’t resist. His feet started moving as his hand sat heavily on the dagger

at his hip.

Something with the *Elvasi* left his wife haunted, and he was going to find out what, then he was going to end the problem—permanently.

Bryn found his way to Trevan's home and didn't bother to knock. It was bright outside, and he wanted it to appear natural that he was walking in as if he was a friend. He walked softly, making sure his worn-in leather boots made no sound. He kept his wings and tail close to keep from brushing against anything. He found Trevan standing in the kitchen, still making breakfast.

"What did ya do to her?" Bryn asked.

Trevan jumped, but he didn't run for a weapon when he realized who was in his home. He didn't even seem afraid as his eyes narrowed on Bryn with suspicion.

"Mave? Nothing," Trevan snapped. "I would never do anything to her, Brynec. *Never.*"

Bryn stared him down, growling. He hated the eyes that stared back, pale gold in black, surrounded by rose-gold *tatua* that didn't look right. His long, pointed ears infuriated Bryn.

"She's been avoidin' us since she came to see ya. Somethin' is keepin' her up all night," Bryn snarled. "And you're goin' to tell me why. If I think it's yer fault, ya aren't leavin' this home alive."

Trevan put his hands on the counter and leaned over, looking down instead of at Bryn. It was such a casual way of saying 'I'm not afraid of you'. Bryn growled louder, trying to get something out of this *Elvasi*.

"We visited where Dave died," Trevan finally explained. "She...started acting odd, then disappeared on us. Just jumped up and flew off before Emerian and I could really understand what was happening. I thought someone would tell you. I haven't seen her since. Is she eating?"

Bryn frowned. "That's it? You visited where the human was murdered ___"

"Dave was important," Trevan snapped, glaring at him again. "He wasn't 'the human,' he was Dave. He watched her, like so many humans before him, live through hells I know you understand. Say his fucking name."

Bryn stepped back, disarmed by Trevan's words, his anger knocked off course. He'd come here to kill Trevan for hurting Mave. He hadn't been

expecting to walk in on a story of grief. His wife was grieving—that was it—and he was here, being an ass to someone else who was important to her, someone who understood the importance of Dave far better than he did.

“I’m sorry,” Bryn declared. “I…” He lifted his hand off his dagger and sighed.

“Sit down,” Trevan ordered, and Bryn didn’t resist, falling into the closest dining chair he could find. The moment Bryn’s ass hit the seat, his eyes went wide. He looked up at Trevan, who had the same wide-eyed stare.

“How did ya do that?” Bryn asked.

“Do what?” Trevan asked, playing innocent, but Bryn watched the lump in his throat bob from a nervous swallow.

“Dominate me,” Bryn said very softly, staring at the pale gold and black eyes with more intensity. He wanted to fight it, but his wife was right. He wanted to drop his gaze. He wanted to listen to orders from this…he didn’t know what to call Trevan anymore, but Elvasi felt rude.

“I don’t know,” Trevan said softly, coming to sit down as well, whatever was over the fire forgotten. “I know you don’t like me. I wasn’t expecting you to sit down, but I figured you and I needed to talk, so I just ordered you to. If it pissed you off, I’m sorry.”

“Ya know I don’t like ya?” Bryn tilted his head to the side.

“You made it abundantly clear. I don’t put much thought into it. It’s not my place to tell you to accept me. You have history with the Elvasi, like so many here do. You don’t like me. That’s fine.”

“I hate ya,” Bryn admitted, then shook his head, realizing there was more. If this…not-Elvasi could be honest, so could he. “I hate the *idea* of ya. Yer the hero of meh wife’s story when she talks about escapin’ Elliar. The *Elvasi* hero.”

“I’m not a hero.”

“Ya are, and I hate it. I hate that an Elvasi did more for meh wife than any Andinna. I hate that ya helped free her when none of the Andinna around her would have considered it. Yer the one she wanted to be rescued from the Empire, and our people became an afterthought. Yer the one who made her angry at everyone when she learned ya were in the pits. I hate that yer so damn noble, ya won’t even admit you were one of the biggest reasons we were able to free her, Mat, and Rain. Without ya, we wouldn’t

have been able to do it, and I hate that. And yer just a fucking Elvasi. That's why I don't like ya."

With that off his chest, Bryn stood and looked away from the strange not-Elvasi at the table.

"I'm goin' to go. If yer not the reason she's in her mood, we have nothin' to talk about."

"Have a nice day."

Bryn nodded, refusing to say it back, and walked out. He didn't realize his hands were shaking until he was down the steps. He had been so fucking certain Trevan was the cause, knowing he wasn't pissed Bryn off.

She had the right to grieve, though. I can't take that away from her. Mat was right. We need to give her time. She wasn't here when the hu— She wasn't here when Dave died. She's probably just let it sink it.

"He better be alive," Luykas said softly. Bryn nearly jumped, not just from the sudden words but the deadly threat in them.

"How long have ya been there?" Bryn demanded, turning on the mutt, a member of the family he cared so much about.

"Is he alive?" Luykas asked in return.

"Aye, I didn't kill him."

"I knew something was off with you and flew overhead. I waited outside because I trust you, but don't even consider killing Trevan again. Are we clear?" Luykas glared at him, stepping out of the shadows of the trees where he'd been hiding.

"I just wanted to know what happened that caused Mave to—"

"Listen to me," Luykas hissed, stepping closer. "I hate it as much as you do, but you have lost your mind if you think he did it." Luykas pointed at Trevan's door behind Bryn.

"How are you so fucking certain?" Bryn demanded, growling.

"Because he's madly in love with her," Luykas explained, his eyes flicking around as they looked over Bryn. He was working hard not to give a response but failed.

"No," Bryn whispered. "No," he said louder, growling. "*That* is not allowed to love our wife."

"That's not for us to decide, and you fucking know it. He does, and there's nothing we can do to change it. He doesn't act on it. He doesn't even

mention it. I figured it out for myself, and once I did, it became clear as day.” Luykas shook his head sadly at Bryn as if he was disappointed.

“He’s a good male, Bryn. He had my back while all of you were gone, and he never once did anything, even as this village started to turn against him. I’m just asking you to please not hurt him. He would never do anything to her, and our gods accept him. I’m angry our wife isn’t telling us anything, but that is not Trevan’s fault. He doesn’t deserve the death you would give him.”

Bryn huffed. “We have a war to fight, anyway. He’s not worth my time.” It was a lie. He was angry, furious about so many things, he could barely think. “I’m heading to the war room. Alchan might have ideas about where to send the new scouts, and I need to hear them.”

“I’ll go with you,” Luykas said.

Bryn jumped up, ignoring Luykas who followed closely. When he landed at the war room, Luykas was still on his heels. Bryn went in first, catching everyone’s attention.

“I wanted to see what you need from the scouts in the future. I sent them out quickly, but there’s a few still in training I’m willing to let go out if you need them,” he said directly to Alchan, ignoring everyone else.

“We were just talking about the last known Elvasi locations,” Alchan said, pointing to the map. “She has nearly eight thousand troops in the mountains, and we know she’s going to start marching the rest of her force once the snow lets up.” He pointed at three camps specifically, one of them where Kian died. “We’re behind the curve, thanks to...everything, but we need to get out of it. Did you send anyone to these three places?”

“I did. I took a look at the map as it stood before directing them. I covered these regions as well.” Bryn grabbed map markers and put them down on the areas of coverage he had tried to get with his scouts. It made a giant, multi-tiered wall around the center of the war, the very village and valley they were in. “I assumed she knew where we were based on her placement of troops,” he explained. “With some exceptions.”

“Yeah, she moved some of her forces out farther to try to block Andinna from escaping deep into the mountains.”

“Did anymore escaped slaves get to us?” he asked, looking at Luykas.

“Five hundred,” Luykas answered softly. “Not enough to think about taking her on with Andinna in a major conflict.”

“Not Andinna,” Alchan whispered, seeming lost in thought as he leaned on the table. “We have two wyverns with Rain and Trevan—”

“Still can’t believe Luykas did that,” someone muttered across the room.

“He didn’t,” Alchan growled. “Our gods did. They’re the ones who accepted Trevan, and I expect all of you to do the same or suffer the consequences.”

“How do we know he’s not loyal to the Empire? We just dealt with a spy, Your Majesty.”

“Because he’s loyal to Mave,” Bryn answered, then hated himself for speaking up in favor of the not-Elvasi. “I don’t like him, but he’s given us no...reason to think he’s ever considered betraying us.”

“Back on topic,” Alchan snapped, forcing everyone to look at him again. “Luykas, you’re going to hate hearing this, but...I think we need to funnel her into one spot so that our *strengths* are most effective.”

Bryn’s eyes went wide. “You want to go full force against full force?”

“We can’t let her flank us or get into Anden proper. I’m going to say it. This ends this year. By the next winter, this must be over. The only way we’re going to succeed is if we decimate them in a single fight.”

Everyone lost their minds—every general, both major and minor, every unit commander, and all the other nameless faces in the room—except Bryn, Luykas, and Alchan. They looked between each other. If Nevyn had been in the room, Bryn knew the warrior would be calm. He might even support the plan.

“Quiet,” Alchan ordered softly, but not without power—great power. It flew through the room, and eyes went wide. He smiled. “The ancient powers of the old queens are now mine, but it comes at a cost. Using them nearly killed my grandmother at the beginning of the war. I might not survive two years of this, but I can make sure we have at least one good fight in us.”

“Will you let us think on it, Alchan?” Kenav was bold enough to ask.

“Think fast. We don’t have long. If we agreed on it and want it to work, the first missions need to go out quickly. They need to begin routing the Elvasi forces to the best spot where we can fight them.”

“How do we know Shadra will go for it?”

“She has the superior force, and her people are also starving,” Luykas answered. “She’s also on a time crunch.” Luykas looked around the room. “One of our spies knows there are many nobles who think if she can’t wrap this up quickly, it might be time to depose her and let better minds fix the ‘Andinna problem.’ She would have surely heard the whispers. A full-out fight against us is what she *wants*. She knows she can crush us.”

“But she doesn’t know about our new...assets,” Alchan phrased carefully.

Bryn’s head was spinning, and he searched for a seat. Luykas snapped his fingers at someone, who jumped up and cleared one for him.

“She has...what? Thirty thousand men? Even with everything we have, we aren’t even a third of her forces.”

“A wyvern can burn hundreds at a time,” Luykas pointed out. “We have two of them in our control full time, even if one is the King’s Consort.”

“She knows how to shoot Rain out of the sky,” Alchan pointed out, sighing. “This plan isn’t without its risks.”

“You would risk Rain.”

“If we lose the war, he’s going to die in Anden, anyway,” Alchan growled. “We both know that. He’ll be like any of us, fighting until the bitter end while our people once again try to run. I grounded him last year, and I regret that. I won’t do it again this year. He already knows and is very excited to go out and fight this year, especially since Trevan and Kyn are now paired. Kyn is the red’s name, everyone. Use it.”

Everyone nodded. It had never been mentioned, not as far as Bryn heard. No one dared whisper that Alchan was making a mistake by keeping his love by his side. Rain was half-Ziran, giving him the ability to shift into a wyvern, an incredible asset that should have been used.

“That settles it. Everyone, go think about this. When you come back tomorrow, have an answer. If we go for this, we’ll know our first missions and campaigns tomorrow evening,” Luykas ordered the group. Alchan nodded his agreement, and people began to file out. Bryn stayed where he was.

When they were gone, it was only Bryn with the brothers except for one almost invisible presence in the corner. The ahren, Lady Lilliana, was staring at Alchan with fearful eyes. Alchan turned to her when he realized Bryn was staring in her direction.

“This is war,” he said simply. She nodded. “Thank you for helping with the supply management. I should have set you on it sooner.”

“It’s what I helped with most in the temple,” she said softly. “No one else likes it. I can write up a small report about what sort of supplies we have to feed warriors on the move if you would like.”

“I would,” Alchan said, and when he turned back to Bryn and Luykas, there was a small smile on his face. Luykas reached out and thumped him. Bryn also knew the small smile of a male emotionally invested in someone. Alchan was falling for the little ahren and quickly.

Bryn felt a sinking stone in his stomach as he realized he had seen the same small smile on other faces as well. Trevan when he looked at Mave and Mave in return.

I’ll just stay focused on the war. Maybe he’ll get himself killed, and I won’t ever need to think about him again.

MAVE

For a week, Mave went into the woods and stood outside that damn cave. Everywhere she went, she saw glimpses of the dead, but no matter where she wandered, her feet and her wings always led her to the same spot where she had left Trevan and Emerian. Every single day.

When the sun fell, she would force herself to walk away as her power grew in strength. She resisted, fighting the dark power inside her, not understanding what it wanted.

She turned away and stared into the woods around her, seeing glimpses of the dead animals in her black and gray world, devoid of color. Devoid of *life*. There was something about them that said they were recently dead. Even bugs died and faded away in ghostly apparitions. The animals were different from Dave and the very rare glimpse of a person Mave got. The animals continued to do what they naturally did, then faded away. The people all had the same lost expression as Dave. There weren't many, and they stayed in specific places she now knew to avoid. They were all victims of terribly violent deaths—like Dave.

“The last war,” Mave’s now constant companion said. “The few other souls still hanging around are all from the last war with the Elvasi.” Kristanya came into view and leaned on a tree. Normally, the goddess was silent. Mave now understood things better. Kristanya could hear her thoughts, even reply if she wanted to, but no one else could see her or interact with her. Kristanya couldn’t properly interact with the world. She could touch things but not move them.

“Few?” Mave had seen five of them. Five poor souls, wandering around the valley.

“Their deaths were too traumatic for them to come to terms with immediately. Sometimes, it can take thousands of years before a soul finally lets go and comes to me. Normally, it happens instantly, but sometimes...” Kristanya shrugged as if it wasn’t a big deal. “I don’t have the power to collect them. They must make the decision themselves. Somehow, they do that.”

“Even Dave? Would he go to you?”

“Only Andinna and wyverns come to me,” she said, shaking her head. “But I’m getting tired of this. You have a war to prepare for, and you’re out here, watching ghosts.”

“I can’t leave him like that, and I need...” Mave ran a hand over her face. “I need to figure out how to turn this off. Alchan and Varon can turn theirs off.”

“You are pathetic,” Kristanya growled, giving Mave an impressive look of disgust. “You wanted to be my Avatar. Get over it and get to work. You wanted to save your people, so go do that.”

“Do you even know how?” Mave asked, glaring at the goddess. “Do you even know everything I can do?”

“No,” Kristanya answered without a heartbeat of hesitation. “I don’t know what you can do because I’ve never had an Avatar before. Didn’t I make that clear?”

“No,” Mave grumbled. She turned away from Kristanya and looked at the cave again. “I’ve only seen Andinna in the last week, but Dave is human. Why no other humans or even Elvasi?”

“The Elvasi have a single god who collects them when they die,” Kristanya answered. “Or pulls them to the correct place, really. He’s their gatekeeper to their afterlife or whatever they have.”

“You don’t know?”

“Once they leave this realm, if they don’t come to me, I don’t care where they go, not my problem. Most Andinna think I’m one of those types of gods, and I am, but only for my sister’s children. For the rest, I am just death. The concept and act of dying, of losing *life*, and the soul leaving the mortal shell, that’s my true domain.”

“So, you reading tatua and all that...” Mave frowned, trying to wrap her head around the concept of Kristanya. “Just an act?”

“When the first Andinna soul came before me, I saw the writing of my sister. Wyverns have it, too, you know. She is life, and I am death. She is the act of the first breath, the concept of a soul being formed and entering a mortal shell, whatever it is that truly marks new life. I’ve never asked. When one of her children dies, why would there be any other god than me to judge those souls? You all have a literal piece of me. I had a hand in the forming of that first Andinna to whom I gave my wings. There was no other god for you to go to.”

“Then what about Dave?” Mave demanded, pointing to the cave. “Why didn’t he...get taken or move on or something?”

Kristanya’s eyes became a storm as she stepped in front of Mave and looked down.

“He was tortured and traumatically killed, Mave. I would gamble with your position as my Avatar, he doesn’t know he’s dead. He’s still living in torment, wondering why no one is saving him.”

“Can he see me?” she asked in a small voice.

“The dead trapped on this realm can see everyone and everything, trying desperately to rejoin life until they finally give up and realize they’re dead. Yes, he saw you and your little friends.” Kristanya was like a healer, completely devoid of emotion except the storm in her eyes.

“Can I do anything to help him?” Mave dared to ask.

“I don’t know. I’ve never helped before because I’m not allowed on this plane without...you. Dreams are one thing, but you carry an actual piece of me.”

Mave swallowed. “I won’t be able to focus on anything until I know he’s going to be okay,” she admitted. “And I need to turn this off.” She rubbed her eyes, wondering if there was something Varon and Alchan did for it.

“Pitiful,” Kristanya muttered.

“Shut the fuck up,” Mave snapped. “You’re distracting. I think you’re pissed off that I’m your Avatar when you never wanted one.”

“Yes. It makes your struggle both comical and upsetting to witness.”

“Then go somewhere else,” Mave snarled. “I’ll figure out all of this on my own.”

Then she was gone, and Mave was alone with the dark power inside her.
I can do this.

Mave swallowed and found the courage to walk to the cave and head inside. It was brighter with the daylight than that night with Trevan and Emerian. A week's worth of wasted time as Mave had tried to figure out her powers, but all they wanted was to see Dave, to do something with him. Why him, she didn't know.

"My powers inside you are reacting to your own wants and needs, trying to guide you to something. I think."

Shut up. But thank you.

"It just came to me. You're welcome."

Mave didn't need to go far in the cave to see Dave this time. He was looking around, those lost eyes haunting her every time she closed her eyes. She went closer, and when he saw her, he opened his mouth to scream again.

"Shhh...no, Dave. I can see you. You don't need to scream." She hoped he could hear her. Kian could, so could other dead on Al Moro Nat. Maybe Dave could.

His lost eyes went wide. They were foggy, missing the important spark of life she underappreciated in everyone around her.

Her power yearned for something, and now, she didn't run from shock and sadness as his face turned grotesque. She reached out.

"Give me your hand." She felt the dark power of Kristanya as well, reaching out with the hand.

Dave looked at it, then at her face.

"Please, Dave. Take my hand," she pleaded. "I'm here, I'm right here. I'm so sorry I wasn't before. Dave, I'm so sorry this happened to you." Tears rolled down her cheek as she apologized, her heart breaking again. She had been strong when she heard the news. She had been strong because she couldn't let herself be weak, but now, her heart well and truly broke because she knew what she had to say as Dave reached out to her.

He grabbed on, and she closed the distance between them. She realized she could *touch* him as her power wrapped around and cocooned him.

"Dave, my sweet dear, you died, and I'm so sorry I let it happen. You need to know I would have done everything I could to save you. I'm so sorry I left you here, thinking you were safe."

His arms wrapped around her.

“You need to accept that you died,” she whispered, clinging to him, her eyes squeezed shut to fight the tears. “You need to move on. I can’t leave you like this. I *won’t* leave you like this.”

Her power whipped up, becoming a flurry of power that caused her hair to rustle. It held onto Dave, who held her in the best hug she’d ever had. She never showed him how much he meant, too afraid to give her friendship to another human who would die and leave her.

He had gotten it from her, anyway.

Then her arms were empty.

She staggered, suddenly alone. Her power faded, and Mave felt the ache of emptiness as she realized it was over. She searched the cave.

“Dave?” she called, her voice cracking over tears. When she looked back to the mouth of the cave, Kristanya was there with wide eyes.

“You sent him on,” the goddess whispered.

“Did I?” Mave sagged against the wall. “Did I?”

“You did,” she said, looking amazed. “My powers did that through you.” They met, walking to each other. Kristanya reached out and touched Mave’s cheek, ignoring how tear-soaked they were. “I wonder what else my powers can do through you...”

“We’ll find out,” Mave whispered, her heart still aching at Dave’s loss. He had died, and she had to send him on. Her heart felt as if it would never be repaired, but she knew the pain well now. In time, she would heal. It would never be perfect. She still ached for Kian and everyone else she had ever lost, even her blood mother, Kelsiana Lorren.

Kristanya wiped Mave’s tears away. It was surprisingly gentle. Mave nearly jerked away from the touch, confused at the sudden care the goddess was taking.

“I know the pain I cause,” she murmured. “I can be tender for a moment.”

“Do you think there’s going to be anything else insane I have to deal with when it comes to my powers?”

“I don’t know,” Kristanya repeated, this time more worried than annoyed. “I figured it would be some of the things I can do. I didn’t think you would find completely new uses for my power. That is a new concern. You’re already playing with chance. There is a path where you lose control,

and this fragile and mortal world, as we know it, ends. It concerns me that you can do things I can't."

"I'll be strong," Mave promised.

"Of that, I have no doubt," the goddess muttered. "Even if I say otherwise at other times."

"You're just a bitch. I've already come to terms with that," Mave said with her own shrug. Kristanya was complicated. Mave had realized that, even when they still met in dreams. "Now...I'm going to head back into the village. I'll just get used to seeing the dead and try to...not. You were right. There's a war that's ever-looming over our heads, and I guess I'm the Avatar of that too, right?"

"There is, and you are," Kristanya agreed. "I'll leave you to your own devices."

"If I need you..."

"I'll answer. I have nothing else to do." Kristanya disappeared.

Mave flew to the war room, hoping to distract herself, hoping to focus on something else. She had just sent her friend to whatever afterlife awaited him.

She needed to spend some time with the living.

She landed with a thud and went inside slowly to look around.

"Hey," Luykas said softly, standing up slowly. "Do you need anything?"

"No," she answered. "I came to see if I was needed."

"Okay..." Luykas cast a glance at Bryn, then pulled out his chair farther, moved over, and sat in the next one, leaving a clear implication where her two husbands wanted her.

But Mave wanted a drink, a stiff one. She went to the small shelves on the side of the room, grabbed a wineskin, and started drinking, trying to dull the sharp pain she was still feeling.

"What have you been up to?" Alchan asked, curious but not too curious. He had no suspicions.

"*I just sent Dave to the afterlife,*" she answered him silently. She was hoping it wouldn't be a scene, but Alchan reacted, choking. After a round of thumping his own chest, he seemed as if he could breathe again.

"You did what?" Alchan snapped.

Mave sighed, turning to the group. Nevyn and Varon were also there, and Lilliana was hanging out at a smaller table by the wall, going over

books and scrolls Dave had once managed.

She would never find him here again. She would never find him anywhere ever again.

“I sent Dave to the afterlife,” she repeated, this time for the room. “His death was traumatic, and his soul was stuck here. I helped him find peace, and he...he left,” she answered, her eyes now suspiciously dry. She tipped back and took three more swallows of the thick and rich wine kept for people to drink in the war room during long meetings.

“Mave...” Bryn stood up now, coming toward her, but she evaded him and walked around the room.

“I see the dead,” she declared, laughing a little. “All of them. Do you know how much dies in a moment? The insects are the worst.” At that moment, she caught one out of the corner of her eye. She pointed at it. “Right there, you’ll find the dead body of a beetle.”

Varon jumped up and went to see if she was right. When he looked at her again, his face was pale.

“Did...did Kristanya not think to warn you?” Varon asked softly. “Because you don’t seem like you’re taking this very well.”

“No, she didn’t think to warn me, but it’s not all her fault. She doesn’t even know what I can do because she’s never had an Avatar before. Imagine my surprise when I went to pay my respects to Dave only to be confronted with his ghost.” She pointed at Luykas. “You never told me how bad it really was.”

“There were no words to describe...” Luykas slumped.

“It’s not your fault. How does someone write that?” Mave wasn’t sure what was wrong with her. She took another drink of wine as darkness began to creep into the sides of her vision and take over. “And now, I can’t even turn off this fucking ability. All I see are ghosts. Everything has a ghost.” She rubbed her eyes again before trying to take another drink. The wineskin was taken from her before it connected with her lips. When she tried to reach out for it, a large hand wrapped her wrist.

She snarled, but when she looked up at the male who dared to grab her, she saw her brother, Alchan. The darkness creeping in the sides of her eyes fled as he seemed too bright to stare at.

“Your powers are acting up,” he said softly, stepping too close. He was too hot for her. “Mave, listen to me. Your powers are acting up, and you

need to control them.”

“I’m fine,” she growled half-heartedly.

“Look at me, sister,” he said with unbending kindness. She forced her eyes up to stare at his brightness. He was practically glowing. “I’m sorry about Dave. He was a good man.”

“One of the best,” she whispered.

“Yes. One day, I’ll give you a memorial for him, for everyone we’ve lost.” He took another step, and the heat radiating off him felt as if it would burn her. “Your grief is causing your powers to act up. You need to find and push it down, all the way down. This is something you should have done the moment you got the powers. Learn how to separate and put them away. Do it now before you hurt yourself, someone else or, Skies forbid, lose control.”

“Kristanya is much more powerful than Larianna and Amonora. The fact Mave would have a hard time keeping control of her power is not surprising,” Varon said as if he was going to write it down. She felt him wrap his arms around her, not intimate but as a brother trying to comfort her. “Breathe.”

She gasped for air as if she hadn’t had it for years, then grabbed hold of the power Kristanya gave her and began to wrestle it down. She closed her eyes as it brought her to the mental landscape, that cold dark place. She pushed the power deeper and deeper until she frowned at the odd sensation of emptiness that rose up in its place. It was the same thing she had done when she had become the Avatar. She never thought she would have to continue fighting for control.

When she opened her eyes, there was no darkness encroaching in her vision.

“There,” she said softly, seeing color again for the first time in a week. “I’m sorry. This is a learning process for me. I’ll get the hang of it, and this won’t happen again.”

“You don’t have the same history Varon and I have. I grew up with lessons about the Avatar of Larianna, and there are books about being the Avatar of Amonora. I’ve even read some of them in my youth. There’s nothing like you, so stumbling with the powers is perfectly acceptable.” Alchan was kind about it, but Mave wanted to kick herself.

Alchan and Varon released her, and for a moment, Mave thought nothing was wrong. Then her knees gave out, and she hit the dirt, a wave of exhaustion taking her. Her body felt as if it had battled for the entire week. Her muscles were sore, and her eyesight went blurry.

“Oh, shit,” she mumbled as two sets of hands grabbed her and helped her into a chair.

“I can’t imagine it,” Varon said softly, sitting next to her. “My powers aren’t very intensive on me, but I know Alchan’s can be. You’ve been going at full strength for a week and never collapsed? You need to rest.”

“I wanted to know what everyone was doing here. I want to know our plans.” Mave shook her head, which made her dizzy, but she hoped if she kept her ass on the chair, she would be fine. “I can juggle it.”

“Can you?” Alchan asked carefully. She growled at him.

“I can handle it.”

“Fine. We think we should try to route the Elvasi to meet us in one large-scale fight. Since no one is in the room, let’s speak freely. We have Rain, Trevan, and you as controlled forces of destruction for any battle. We can use the three of you and our normal tactics to slowly push Shadra here.” Alchan pointed at a large valley. “If we can get even two-thirds of her force there, we can engage them and hopefully crush them.”

“Will she be with them?” Mave asked softly.

“Hopefully,” Luykas said. He walked around the table and stopped behind her, massaging her shoulders. “It’s the largest valley near us, so she’ll need it to assault this village. She’ll have to attack this village if she wants to win the war.”

“And she’ll fall for this?” Mave frowned. “She’ll come here and fight?”

“We’re positive,” Luykas promised. “We’ve already talked it out.”

Even as the Avatar of Kristanya, I’m not the military mind of these males.

And you never will be. I’m not that part of war. I’m the warrior, the one who kills, the goddess of spilled blood. Tactics were always my sister’s. She’s the leader.

“Tell me where to go and what to do,” Mave said, trying to stand again. Her legs felt strong again, but Varon was right. She needed to find a bed and rest. She hadn’t realized just how draining her powers had been.

“When I’ve decided that, you’ll be one of the first to know,” Alchan promised.

Luykas and Bryn were now at her side, each offering her someone to lean on. She knew Alchan was watching her, but she didn’t know what to say to him.

“Do you need me for anything?” she asked, leaning on Bryn.

“No,” he said kindly. “Come back tomorrow to see if this plan will even happen. It’s up to a vote with the rest of my war council. Get some rest…” He frowned. “And next time you are having problems with your power, tell me, reach out, do something. You don’t need to handle it alone.”

“Yeah,” she groaned. “I’ll let you know.”

“Bryn, get her home. I’m going to check-in with Mat and Zayden, and…” As Luykas spoke, she turned to her mutt husband with his white wings. “Let them know what’s going on,” he finished carefully under her stare.

“I’m not weak,” she said softly. She sure felt weak, but she refused to believe these powers she had asked for would take her to her knees more than once. She just hadn’t been prepared. Now she knew better, and it would never happen again.

“No one thinks you are,” he countered. “I think you were knocked out of the proverbial air, and I would have been, too. Anyone here would have been if they saw a dead friend when they weren’t ready to confront his passing. Anyone would be if they had to help him pass on while also seeing the dead of the world around them. There’s nothing weak about being taken off-guard and having to work through powers no one understands.”

She nodded stiffly, then let Bryn lead her out. She was half asleep by the time they entered the front door of her home.

For the first time in a week, she fell into a restful sleep.

MATESH

Mat watched warriors go through their forms in silence, taking comfort in Zayden standing next to him. Best friends since his birth and fellow husbands, he and Zayden had been through everything together. They had fought in the War, joined the Ivory Shadows, escaped to Olost, watched Zayden get married and have a son, then lose his wife. Mat had avoided love, then fallen for it. Zayden joined his family properly and became a husband to Mave. They had both been there when Lashaun died.

Matesh didn't think Mave or Zayden offered more comfort to him than the other, but it was different. Mave was his heart, but Zayden was his brother, not by blood but through life. He knew when the world fell down, and mountains sank into the sea, Zayden would be right next to him. There was no question.

Which took him back to the thought about Lashaun. Since returning to the village, he had to come to better terms with the loss of his uncle. He'd avoided it for months. When Lashaun had been assassinated, he'd grieved, then worried about his wife. There was a spy and the war. Now, there was this quiet moment for the first time. He stood in the village, needing to deal with the death of his last family member. Lashaun had been the last blood relative he had, a pseudo-father, a loving uncle, a wise elder. He'd been a treasure. And he was gone.

"It's weird knowing he's not here," Mat finally said. "Knowing the young Andinna Blackbloods won't be running through the village to see him. Knowing there won't be any quiet dinners of just males, letting

Lashaun tell us stories of his youth. I can't get away from home for a minute to go see him or ask for his advice."

"I know."

"He didn't even get to retire." Mat looked down for a moment as emotion rushed through him.

"I know," Zayden repeated. "You're a good husband, Mat—one of the best. Mave claimed your heart, and the bond you two share...it's an honor to live among it. Before you met her, you had drama with Allaina, and every female in the village had a piece of you, but no one took your heart. She did. I think she couldn't have found a better husband, especially for her first husband."

"Lashaun helped me with a lot of that," Mat admitted softly. "Now she's...something is wrong, but there's nothing we can do. He's not here to help me."

"He hasn't been for months," Zayden said, turning completely to him, blocking most of his view of the warriors in the clearing. "When Mave came home, you continued to step up. You supported her, even when we all thought she was going to get herself killed. You swallowed your own grief to help her with hers. Whatever Lashaun could teach you, he taught you. Whatever Mave is going through..."

Zayden stopped and frowned. Mat followed his gaze, having to turn around. Luykas was coming up the path, looking distant and concerned.

"What's wrong?" Mat asked as the mutt stopped with them.

"Mave came by the war room. It was enlightening," Luykas said softly. "Walk and talk with me. Others can't hear this," he said, turning away and beginning back down the trail.

Mat sighed and looked at the warriors he'd been directing all morning.

"Group leaders! Break for lunch, then resume training on your own!"

"Yes, sir!" several called back to him.

Mat caught up with Luykas and Zayden.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"It was her powers," Luykas whispered, his eyes flicking around. "Let's keep walking."

They moved farther and farther away from the other Andinna, slowly making their way to the edge of the village on foot. Finally, Luykas stopped on the trail and leaned on a tree.

“She went to see where Dave died with Trevan and Emerian. She saw Dave’s ghost. He hadn’t moved on, and she had to see what was done to him. Some combination of her powers being too powerful and her own grief turned them on, and she couldn’t turn them off. She...she spent the last week seeing the dead. Then she sent Dave on.”

Mat stepped away from Luykas, his eyes going wide as his fellow husband quickly explained, obviously still trying to wrap his own mind around it.

“She’s been seeing the dead?” Zayden asked. “It’s not Al Moro Nat...”

“Mave is the Avatar of Kristanya, goddess of darkness, death, and war. I think...Al Moro Nat doesn’t really matter anymore.” Luykas ran a hand through his hair. “She was a mess. She walked in and started drinking. Once Alchan convinced her she needed to regain control over her abilities, she collapsed. She’s fine, just exhausted. It’s been draining her for a week. I just wanted to come let you two know, and...” Luykas shook his head sadly. “I don’t know. I didn’t want to see her collapsed onto bed like the, well, like the dead.”

“I can’t say I blame you,” Zayden muttered. “Is there anything we can do?”

“Not you...but Mat, maybe?” Luykas frowned. Mat straightened up, unsure what Luykas meant. “From the moment I realized what was going on, my head started spinning. She and I have a weak blood bond right now, but you have a fresh, strong one with her that wasn’t affected by outside magics. She’s been able to use it to block both of us this last week, but she never mentioned it when she came into the war room. Didn’t apologize.”

“Does she see the need to?” Mat asked in return.

“I don’t think she thought much past how she saw the dead walk among the living and that her friend was trapped in the spot he died after being horrifically tortured and murdered,” Luykas whispered, crossing his arms and looking at his feet. “So, I don’t think she did it on purpose. It got me thinking.”

“Explain,” Zayden ordered.

“Blood is alive,” Luykas said so softly, Mat wondered if he had heard it correctly. “The blood bond is a bond between living things. What if...what if we couldn’t feel her because she was using her powers over the dead?”

Mat felt a chill. “We can’t lose her,” he said strongly. “We can’t lose her.”

“We couldn’t reach her, Mat. We couldn’t follow her. We didn’t know where she was going. You weren’t there, you didn’t see her eyes.”

“What do you mean?” Zayden demanded.

“There was moment...” Luykas rubbed his face. “Alchan didn’t mention it to her, but I knew he realized something was wrong. Her eyes went all black, no color, just black orbs.”

“Are you saying our wife, who has never been stopped by anything, is finally dealing with something she might not be able to handle?” Mat stepped closer to Luykas, searching the mutt’s face. “She survived a thousand years of brutality. She’s dueled a goddess. Are you saying she can’t control her powers?”

“I think she was caught emotionally vulnerable, thanks to her attachment to Dave, and she did lose control,” Luykas snapped, suddenly angry. “We’re lucky Alchan is what he is because if he hadn’t been able to get her to stop moving around and make her push those powers back down...Mat, we would have never been able to find her. Our blood ran cold all week.”

Mat nodded. He had grown used to it after a few days, but it had been his number one indicator something was going on with her and her new abilities as the Avatar.

“How do we stop this from happening again?” Zayden asked, looking between them. “Did you really think I wouldn’t try to help, anyway?”

“I think Mat and I need to think of a way to keep the blood bonds strong, even when she’s using her powers as the Avatar,” Luykas answered. “Even if it’s just time and practice, we have to find a way.”

“You need to redo yours first,” Mat pointed out.

“I do,” Luykas agreed. “She and I already agreed we would, we just haven’t had the chance. I’ll see if she’ll redo it with me before she goes on her first mission.”

“Have any decisions been made?” Mat narrowed his eyes. He enjoyed his role as a smaller commander, settling in as a training expert with Zayden. They both still loved a good mission, but they knew their skills were better utilized making sure others were prepared.

Luykas launched into Alchan's overall game plan, an insane idea to route the Elvasi into one, possibly two locations and practically take them head-on.

"We can't let her flank us, of course," Zayden muttered, massaging his jaw. "And there's no way to push her out. We need a big show of force to make them question if the war is worth continuing."

"The politics and timing work out for us," Luykas said, shrugging. "She needs to end the war...we need to end the war. If we kill her and get someone like my sister in power, we might even have a chance to see real peace and trade between the Andinna and the Elvasi before the end of our lifetimes. That's not one of Alchan's objectives. He just needs this over to keep as many Andinna alive as he can."

"But you're going to start working on it. Where is your sister right now?" Mat had plenty of time to come to terms with Luykas and his family situation. He didn't care, to be honest. Most importantly, Luykas was a member of the mayara and his brother in the family. They were married to the same woman, and if she trusted Luykas, he did, without question. Even if they did have their differences, Mat never turned away from Luykas.

"Still in Elliar. I haven't seen her for weeks because I like having Alchan around when I contact her. Trevan helped me once, but with everything I had to manage while all of you were gone..." Luykas sighed. "It would be nice to see her for the first time after we defeat our mother."

"Do you think you could convince her to join the war effort?" Mat asked, leaning on the same tree. "Maybe she can...help us here instead of in Elliar."

"She has to be careful. She's been playing a long game with our mother. Nyria can use battle magics with a surprising degree of strength. She's much better than I am. Shadra has no idea." Luykas lifted a hand and summoned a small fireball. "I've always been interested in sorcery, but I had to teach myself secondhand with books I stole. She's dedicated to it and has the best in the world surrounding her, but she can't let our mother see her as anything other than a simpering, young female noble with no ambition. It hasn't been easy for her. Lothen treated her terribly, and we all knew her father was a monster."

"Yeah..." Mat elbowed Luykas. "But she's your sister. If she's as good as you think she is, I don't think she'll have a hard time hiding in plain sight

in an Elvasi camp.”

“It would help Bryn with scouting,” Zayden pointed out. Mat smiled his way. Sometimes, they could play the games Luykas was good at, too.

“I’ll bring it up with her. If Alchan is willing to risk Rain, and we’re all willing to let Mave and each other go out and fight, maybe I can convince my sister to find a better place to spy from.”

Mat thumped Luykas’ shoulder. “Let’s get home.”

“Are you sure?” Luykas looked up and sighed. “One of the reasons I decided to tell you out here and not at home was I’m fairly certain Mave is asleep and wouldn’t want all of us coddling her. She was starting to get a bit cranky when I asked Bryn to get her home.”

“She lost control of powers she’s never had,” Mat said, shrugging. He could easily put two and two together. This was Mave, and while she was wonderful, she wasn’t the most complicated female when it came to her feelings about herself. It was part of her charm. “It probably made her feel weak. She holds herself to high standards, and failure has never really been something she likes to deal with.”

“Yeah.” Luykas chuckled. “She made it very clear she didn’t want anyone to think of her as weak, as if any of us ever thought that. We were mostly shellshocked she had dealt with powers and seeing the dead for a week without telling *anyone*.”

“Yeah, that’s Mave,” Mat said softly, unable to find it surprising. Her powers were, but her reaction to them wasn’t.

“I will say...it freaked her out more than I thought it would,” Luykas admitted as they started walking back toward the village. “Mave isn’t scared of death.”

“She’s not scared of *her* death,” Mat corrected. He knew her too well to think death didn’t make her uncomfortable. “The moment I knew Mave cared about Rain and me in the pits was the day we were jumped, and this happened.” Mat touched his broken horn. That chunk at the end would never grow in. Horns constantly grew through life at a very slow rate, but they didn’t repair themselves. “She was so scared for us. I knew her tough exterior was just a protective layer. It was what she had to do to survive. The idea of others dying, Luykas, it’s haunted her since she was a child.”

“When Kian died, she couldn’t come to terms with it. She got mad because she always believed she would die for us,” Zayden added softly.

“She believed it was her job to die for us, not the other way around.”

“She probably still believes that, no matter what we tell her,” Mat murmured. “Her only memory of her birth mother is watching her die when the Elvasi came to capture Mave. She was surrounded by death in the pits, friend and enemy.”

“And everyone who mattered to her early in her slavery grew old and died.” Luykas groaned. “Now she has powers that make her confront everyone dying around her.”

“And she had to send Dave on? Yeah, she’s not going to handle that very well.” Mat loved her for this small thing—this small mortal thing. “Everyone sees her as if she’s completely unafraid, but she is afraid. She’s afraid for us and for our family. Everyone told her the war and death that came with it was her fault. She might not believe that anymore, but it’s left a lasting mark on her personality.”

“Shit,” Luykas mumbled. “I feel like an ass.”

“Don’t,” Mat said with a snort. “Don’t blame yourself. She’s given everyone around her the perception that she’s a fortress and expects you to break her in the hard way. I’ve never really asked her about her fear of us dying. Doesn’t seem like a topic anyone really wants to talk about. I’ve just known her the longest.”

“Zayden put it together,” Luykas said, pointing at the other male.

“Kind of,” Zayden retorted, “but I never put it into words. I thought she was just a stubborn female, who didn’t grow up in our culture, so she didn’t understand. I never considered it was rooted in something deeper. Now, I do.”

As they reentered the village, Mat was leading and decided to route them through the edge of the village instead of the center. He didn’t feel like seeing the crowds. It took them close to some of the other training fields, and in one of those, he caught a glimpse of several unit commanders and one particular general having a quiet conversation.

“This was his idiot brother’s idea. I’m positive of it,” Kenav snapped. Mat stopped, lifting a hand to stop Luykas and Zayden. “We know we can’t beat the Elvasi in a full-scale assault.”

“But we might, now. We have two wyverns who will burn their troops alive and cut their numbers down,” one of the other males said. “We have a

chance. You're going to be outvoted tomorrow, Kenav. This is our only option."

"We can continue the war of attrition just as easily without risking a massive loss of life. I know they're upset because they lost a friend, but that doesn't mean the plan wasn't sound. The spy was caught."

"Thank the Skies for Luykas on that," one of them said, sighing.

"He's an ass and an Elvasi mutt, but he's smart," said the first who spoke against Kenav.

"I don't like him. He's the Empress's son. I don't think he's trustworthy. Look how he spent all winter with that other Elvasi and that other mutt they keep, not the Consort."

"Yeah, Mave's nemari. It's like they don't even care that we're at war with the Elvasi, even though they started the war."

Mat bit back a growl as Luykas grabbed his shoulder.

"I've heard this before. So has Trevan. You don't need to pick a fight. When the war is won, they'll be proven wrong in their beliefs," Luykas whispered close to his ear, so there was no chance it would travel.

"Can you believe Luykas gave him tatua? That Elvasi? Fucking disgraceful, absolutely disgraceful. I hope he answers to the gods about it one day."

"Then he's suddenly flying around on a wyvern. Disgusting. Could have given that wyvern to someone else to manage. It's not anyone's fault the idiot lost his gryphon."

Luykas pulled Mat to keep walking.

"I hate it, but it's how things are. We can't get them for just disliking how we do things at the top, Mat." Luykas wrapped an arm around his shoulder, an uncomfortable fit because Matt was taller than Luykas. He was the tallest in the Ivory Shadows.

As they left earshot of the little group, Mat snarled.

"How do you tolerate it?"

"I don't need them or their approval. I have Mave and our family, and I have Alchan, who knows I will never do anything to betray him. We'll have the support we need tomorrow, and they'll go along with it because they won't have a choice. Plus, I'm on ice right now. Kenav and I already had a scuffle over his disrespect to Trevan, and if I get into too many fights,

others may lose confidence in me, too. I don't need Kenav, but I do need people to see me as a leader."

"So, we just let them talk like that?"

"Yes," Luykas said softly. "Let's just get home to our wife. She needs us tonight."

Mat nodded, agreeing with Luykas, but his job as a male of the family wasn't just to make life amazing for his wife. His brothers deserved his protection and support as well, even if it was in smaller ways. He had a hard time swallowing Luykas telling him to drop it and forget it happened, especially after how many people they had lost recently.

They entered the home to find Bryn and Mave curled together in the bedroom, both resting peacefully.

"That's worth the fight," Luykas said softly, nodding at the pair. He left them there, heading into the main room.

"So are you," Mat mumbled to the leaving mutt, who didn't hear him, before looking at Zayden and seeing he thought the same thing. They had stayed out of the village politics for too long. To help Luykas with his detractors, Mat knew Zayden would be at his side the entire time.

MAVE

Mave woke up the next day feeling like herself again. She blinked several times as her eyes adjusted to the dark room.

“Good morning,” Mat murmured next to her.

“How long have I been asleep?”

“Since Bryn brought you home. Feeling better?”

“Yeah. Luykas probably told you...”

Mat kissed her shoulder from behind. There was no need for him to answer.

“Today is the day we decide on our plans for the spring, isn’t it?” She hoped she hadn’t slept through that.

“I love you, and this is well-meaning, but are you sure you’re ready to take these new powers as Avatar out for a fly?”

“I’m a warrior,” she answered, sitting up and rubbing her eyes. “I did this so I could fight, be more than just one Andinna with a sword. I wanted to be more so I could help end this war. It’s not about being ready, Mat. I’ll be fine, though. I won’t let my abilities get the best of me again.”

“Then let’s get up and have breakfast.”

She sighed and looked around, wondering who else needed to be woken up, only to discover they were the last two in bed.

“You let me sleep in,” she said. “Are we going to be late?”

“No,” he promised, yawning. “You started stirring as they were getting ready. Breakfast is probably nearly done, but we’re not late.”

She nodded and got to her feet, glad to find them stable under her again. She quickly dressed, with Mat's help, as he enjoyed doing.

Going into the main room together, Mave groaned to find Alchan there.

"Why am I not surprised?" she asked, sitting next to him. He, as he always did during these visits, put a mug in front of her, and she could smell the rich coffee.

"I wanted to stop by and talk before today happens. It's a major swing in our plans from previous years, and I needed to make sure you were okay," he explained, pulling a second mug on the table closer to himself. She sipped hers as he slowly turned it in a circle. "Do you like the plan?"

"I'm going to be a dragon for most of these fights," she reminded him. "I don't think it gets much better—"

"One fight," he corrected. "Mave, if everything goes to plan, there's only going to be one major fight this year."

She sipped her coffee again and nodded.

"And you're telling me...why?" She searched his face for an answer. "It doesn't matter if it's one or fifteen in the end."

"It seemed like something I needed to do," he said, shrugging. "You scared me yesterday. Today, I'm going to announce one of the first missions will be sending you out with Rain and Trevan. I need to know you're ready."

"Mat just asked me the same thing." She looked away from him. "What's the mission?"

"You'll be working with the two of them to disrupt one of Shadra's larger forces in the mountains and weaken it, so it has reason to rejoin the rest of her force. It'll be a fast attack, in and out, no messing around. Once it's done, you'll go to the pass and blow it to block their path north unless they want to risk more dangerous routes. They won't. The Elvasi don't know the mountains well enough. They never have."

"Why all three of us?" Mave frowned. "Why not one of us and a support team?"

"Because you and Trevan are untested on this sort of mission. Rain knows his wyvern form, has lived with it his entire life. What would happen if I sent Trevan with a support team and he lost control of Kyn? Or you as a dragon, though admittedly, that is still a worry. I'll break the three of you up later in the year, but for this first mission, I need to know all three of you

are capable, and it's safer to test you together." Alchan gave her a small smile. "It's also Rain's first mission since we took Lothen."

"There it is." Mave smiled in return. "You want to make sure he's safe." She finished the coffee before she continued. "Fine, I'll agree with the mission. You won't hear any debate from me. Will I be allowed to kill as many Elvasi as I want?"

"Mave, if you can manage to do it quickly, I don't care if you kill ten or ten thousand," Alchan replied with a grin. "But when they start shooting those fucking ballista, you will get out of there. We can't risk grounding anyone, not now. If any of you come back with holes in you, I'll ground you until fall. You know I can and will."

"So, I shouldn't try to go fight the war by myself," she said, smirking.

"Definitely not. To even get into the logistics of how that would fail for you..." Alchan growled. "Food, the vast spread of the Elvasi forces, the lack of back up—"

"Yeah, I get it," she said, chuckling. "I'll follow orders. In and out, disrupt a large Elvasi camp here in the mountains, then blow a pass."

"It's an old trade pass, an easy route through the mountains. How it survived the first war is beyond me, but I want it gone now."

"Do you really think we can beat them in a single battle later this year?" she asked as Mat put a plate in front of her.

"Between us and all the wyverns I intend to summon to join the fight? Yes."

"How many?" Mave asked, looking at the plate for a moment.

"We'll find out. The Elvasi have been hunting them down since the end of the War. I'm hoping for at least twenty."

Mave sputtered, and something clattered in the kitchen.

"Twenty?"

That was a lot of wyverns.

"See why I want it to be a single battle?" Alchan smirked this time. "I can't send wyverns all over the place. When my grandmother called them, her only directive was for them to kill every Elvasi they saw in the mountains. It didn't defeat them, only pushed back the Elvasi, who didn't know how to deal with it. These aren't warriors. I point to a map and say, 'attack here.' I need them focused on a single battle, not just for ease of

control but also for my own energy. I don't know if it's a trick I can pull twice."

"Have you been testing those powers?"

"Not really. I'm still deciding how I'm going to do that without flooding the village with hungry wyverns." Alchan groaned. "That's a matter I'll figure out before the time comes." He stood, taking his mug with him. "I'm going to head to the war room. Eat breakfast, then meet me there."

"You can stay and eat," she offered.

"Rain, Lily, and I have already eaten, but thank you," he said with a small smile before walking out. Mave raised an eyebrow as the front door closed.

"Lily," she whispered, mulling over the implications of Alchan's use of a nickname.

"Yeah, Rain gave her the nickname. It's nice to see Alchan using it," Zayden said, sitting where Alchan had vacated. "Now eat, then we'll head out."

She did as commanded, hungrier than she expected.

Her family ate quickly, then left together, with everyone in their full armor. This was an important meeting, and they needed to make a show of it. Apparently, while she had been sleeping, her males had prepared everything, even talking to Rain and Nevyn about it over drinks after dinner. They talked excitedly about it the entire walk to the war room.

Mave went in first, seeing Alchan and Rain standing in Alchan's favorite spot. Lily was tucked away in the back at the small worktable. Next, she saw Nevyn and Varon, hanging close to Alchan, with Seanev just behind them, leaning on the back wall. Kenav was on the other side of the room. Then there was Gentrin, probably a stand-in for Senri since she was still on mandatory bed rest. Allaina was surrounded by her entire mayara. After that, Mave was lost in a sea of faces she didn't know.

She made her way to Alchan's other side and smiled at her husbands as they made a semi-circle behind her. A moment later, Emerian and Trevan walked in. She waved them closer and was glad when Emerian kissed her cheek.

"Did Luykas explain?" she asked softly. Considering everyone around the room was having their own small conversations, she didn't feel bad for talking to him for a moment.

“Yeah. I’m glad to see you up on your feet.”

“Thank you, and thanks for going to get Trevan.” She waved at her friend, who nodded respectfully. “Did you tell him?”

“I will once we’re done with this. I wanted to ask if you were okay with it first,” Emerian said. “I’m going to go take a spot on the wall.” She chuckled as he greeted her husbands, then went behind them to lean on the wall next to Trevan.

She turned back to the room, meeting the eyes of people around the table, almost daring any of them to say anything about her relationship with someone who had been her nemari. It was Alchan who finally said something to her, but he did it smartly.

“He ran out the moment he realized I was sitting at your dining table.”

“I bet that was quite the scene.”

“When are you going to make him a husband?”

“The offer is on the table, but he wants more time as just a lover.”

“Some romances are slower than others.”

“I’m pretty sure something else is going on, but I was asked not to pry too hard and let the males work it out.”

“Who was foolish enough to ask that?”

“Luykas.”

“Hmmm. That’s going to go well for everyone involved.”

She couldn’t stop a small snort, which made some eyebrows go up. There was no way they could know Alchan’s dry sarcasm was still echoing in her skull or hear his silent laughter.

“Order,” he called out, and there was immediate silence. “Is everyone here?”

A round of affirmatives rang out as people checked their groups.

“Good. Today, we’re deciding on our plans for the coming seasons. Yesterday, I put forth the idea that we will bring the Elvasi into a single battle to end this war once and for all. Today, you may put forth your votes on the matter. Make no mistake, however, in believing you have a real say in the matter. The final decision will be mine. This is your only chance to change my mind.”

“Don’t give them hope. We both know they won’t.” Mave didn’t see why he needed to indulge them. She yawned as people began to come forward,

some throwing their support for Alchan's plan or against it, others offering other alternatives.

"If we go to our campaigns as we did last summer, we can do this safely. Bringing all the Elvasi into one place against our numbers is a fool's game. Unless you know something we don't."

"I do," Alchan confirmed for the commander of one of the female units. "I know more than anyone here. By the time the battle comes, you will all know everything, but thanks to the situation we had last year with a spy, I'm going to keep some things confidential among my personal guard and advisors. The masses don't get to know everything anymore."

"The spy wasn't our—"

"Wasn't the only problem," Alchan said softly. "I could also say the spy might not have learned so much if there wasn't such a problem with slippery secrets in this village. Varon never publicly confirmed his identity as the Avatar of Amonora, yet within a few short weeks, everyone in the village will know. So, yes, I know some things you don't. You'll have to live with that."

The female lowered her head in respect and stepped back from the table without saying more. As each person spoke up, Mave realized a good third of the room was against the idea—an entire third. She didn't like it. Then they got to Kenav.

"Will we be reliant on strike teams from here until this fight you believe we need to have with the Elvasi?" he asked, leaning on the table.

"Yes. They'll be routing the Elvasi to us. We've already picked a location to aim for, and there's strong evidence Shadra will follow along."

"But no confirmation," Kenav countered. "She could push north and come around behind us, blocking us from escaping deeper into Anden."

"If that's what happens, we should have already abandoned this village before her maneuvering succeeded," Alchan retorted. "We're fools at that point."

"I'm against this plan. Not only does it seem foolish, and you won't tell us the entire plan, it also goes against what many of us have been training our warriors for. Only a tenth of our warriors know how to do the missions you want."

"We'll keep training them. I'll split up my best to make sure everyone gets—"

“Your best. You mean your friends, favoritism at its finest.”

Several people gasped.

“What’s his problem?”

“He’s used to campaign-style fighting and controlling large forces with little oversight. He loses that glory and power if I take that away from him, which my plan does. I make him secondary to someone else who has to train and command his warriors.”

“You planned this, didn’t you?”

“It crossed my mind, but he shouldn’t have picked fights with Luykas all winter while we were gone.”

Mave smirked. Alchan leaned forward and put his hands on the table, keeping his eyes on his cousin.

“My *friends*,” he said softly. “You mean the warriors who have served in my royal guard since the day I became king? The warriors I have fought with for a thousand and more years to protect and provide for our people? You mean the warriors who follow me without backhanded comments or problems? They fall in line and get it done. I have utmost faith in them because they have proven themselves time and time again. You can call it favoritism, but they have done nothing but prove themselves, while you...” Alchan waved at him in the most disrespectful and dismissive way Mave had ever seen.

Mave felt power ripple through the room, but no one else seemed to notice. She glanced at Varon, whose eyes were wide, showing she *wasn’t* the only one. Alchan, for whatever purpose, had activated his powers as Avatar of Larianna.

“You picked fights with my brother, a member of the royal family, while I was gone, showing constant disrespect for me and the warriors I put around me. Why would I ever want you by my side when you treat everyone who doesn’t agree with you with such contempt?” Alchan straightened up. “For the disrespect you showed my brother all winter and the disrespect you give me today, consider yourself stripped of your position among the warriors. You won’t be commanding anyone. You’re a warrior who follows orders of the more dominant Andinna, first and foremost. Time for you to learn that lesson again.”

Kenav stepped back from the table, stunned. He was silent as the room continued to give their votes for Alchan’s plan.

No one else objected.

It was Varon who announced the final count and the decision. As an Avatar, he was like Mave, only answering to Alchan. Varon was also now the top-ranking advisor of Alchan Andini, and he made a show of it.

“The majority of your advisors and those in leadership positions agree with your plan for the war, Your Majesty,” Varon declared.

“I’m glad,” he said softly, then his volume grew. “This is a bold plan, which relies on the full strength of our people and dedication that is unrivaled. The Elvasi fight because their Empress orders them to, but we fight for another day. They lack motivation and heart. We fight because our future depends on it. They fight because they believe they’re superior, and they call us *barbarians*. We fight because our people will slowly die out, our warriors will starve, and our children will become orphans. The stakes remain as high as they have ever been, and that means we must be *bold*.”

“Even if you disagree with the plans going forward, I must have your complete dedication to the task at hand.” Alchan looked around the room. “We will *not* defeat and dismantle the Empire. To try is to ask for failure, but we can win a decisive fight against them, proving to Empress Shadra we will not bow again. If we decimate her forces, she will be forced to retreat and end this war effort. She will be forced to free our people.” Alchan smiled.

“I believe we, the children of dragons, can do this. I believe Larianna will guide us to victory, and the black wings of Kristanya will give us the strength to defeat our enemies. I believe Amonora will give us the heart to continue this fight, even when we feel all hope is lost. All I ask is that you believe in me and work with me. Together, we shall end this conflict and will do so before we see another hard winter. We will do this before Shadra can try once again to tear us apart. We are the Andinna, the children of dragons, and in all of us is the soul of one, waiting to be unleashed. Let’s show the Elvasi that we take pride in what we are and give them dragons.”

Cheers erupted around the room. Mave patted her brother’s shoulder, moved by his words. Alchan knew how to win a crowd when it was necessary. He could use words to move the soul. In the back of Mave’s mind, she heard clapping.

Is he a good king?

“*He will do,*” the goddess in her mind answered.

“Now, we must talk about our first move!” Alchan roared, holding up a hand to get the attention of the Andinna around them. “In two days, I am sending my Champion with Rain and Trevan to initiate our plans.”

“Two days?”

“I need to ride this high among the other warriors, and we can spare supplies for three warriors. Rainev knows how to hunt wild when it’s needed, and I’m certain Kyn will be comfortable doing the same.”

Mave gave Alchan a mental affirmative.

In two days, she would leave for her first mission as the Avatar of Kristanya.

“Mave, when you return with glory and victory, we’re going to announce your position,” Alchan said softly.

I look forward to it.

ZAYDEN

It happened quickly. Zayden had been moved by Alchan's rousing speech and surprised by his announcement of the first mission. Alchan had given everyone only two days to prepare for the arguable three most powerful forces in the village to leave on a mission. It had happened so quickly, Zayden was left sitting at the dining table the day after Mave, Rain, and Trevan left, still thinking about it.

"I can't believe they didn't take a single horse," he said, breaking into whatever conversation was going on.

"They had a wyvern to help them carry everything," Mat pointed out, shrugging before he shoved more bacon in his mouth.

"Plus, Rain already decided he was going to spend most of the trip in wyvern form. They're fine," Luykas added, sipping on his coffee.

"It's not even spring," Zayden reminded both of them.

"Spring is a few weeks away, yeah, which is why only two other missions will leave next week, and they won't be going to known Elvasi locations. They're just blowing more passes to keep the Elvasi from using them." Bryn sighed. "You're upset they left so fast, aren't you?"

"I might be," Zayden admitted. "But she gave us a couple of good nights before she ran off to her favorite thing. You know, I know she loves us and would do anything for this family, but I'm beginning to realize something really important. We're not her favorite things in the world."

"What is?" Mat asked, smiling as he leaned closer.

"War," Luykas answered, chuckling. Zayden pointed at him, nodding.

“That. She lives for the battle, the blood, the excitement. I think that’s what really makes her happy.”

“It’s wonderful. None of us would love her so much if she wasn’t so passionate about it.” Mat kept eating, talking with his mouth full until Zayden put a hand over it and made everyone laugh except Bryn.

“Yeah, but have we sat down and considered how she’ll feel once it’s over?” Bryn asked softly.

Zayden felt that question to his gut. “We’ll figure it out,” he said, trying to pretend as if Bryn’s question didn’t bother him. “When the war is over, we’ll figure it out.”

“Alchan is giving us land,” Luykas added. “If she never told you. He let me know. I know the place he’s talking about, a small valley that can only support a few households and some farmland. It belongs to the royal family. Once this is all settled, we’ll move there and work it.”

“I hadn’t even considered where we would go after this,” Mat said, pulling Zayden’s hand away.

Neither had he, not for very long. He always imagined they would end up in the Capital with Alchan, maybe even live in the palace, but it never really suited. He just wanted the family to stick together, no matter where they landed.

“We have plenty of time to worry about it,” Luykas said softly. “And Mave...I understand why we worry, but I don’t think it’ll just be her. I think we’ll all need some time to adjust. We’ve spent centuries in endless conflict. Peace...” Luykas shook his head. “I haven’t thought about what I would do with peace since before the first war started.”

“Then let’s not think about it this morning,” Zayden declared, picking up a piece of bacon. “Why don’t we grab Emerian, who is now definitely sleeping too late, and do something together. Bryn, your scouts are still out, yeah?”

“Yup.”

“Luykas, your spies?”

“I won’t hear from them for another few days. They sent in reports yesterday.”

“Good. We’ll do something as a family.” Zayden stood as he shoved the bacon into his mouth and went to get the outsider. It wasn’t for lack of trying on Zayden’s part, but Emerian kept himself separate, and Zayden was

growing tired of it. The younger male was in love with Mave, and everyone was fine with a fifth husband. He knew Mave was fine with a fifth husband as well. She'd made that very clear.

Zayden reached the door and didn't bother to knock. He had once been in the male's shoes, sitting on the outside looking in. He didn't want Emerian to stand on the outside too long because that only made it harder in the end. Plus, Emerian didn't come from the same background.

Zayden wanted to teach him. It was foolish, but he wanted Emerian to know the males of a mayara stuck together, even when they disagreed. Their whole goal was to love the same female and build a family around her. In Zayden's opinion, Emerian was already a part of that.

"Hey, come eat breakfast," Zayden ordered.

Emerian was already sitting up and sniffing the air.

"Thanks," the younger male said, standing and reaching for pants. Zayden wasn't attracted to males, but he wasn't an idiot. He knew exactly why Mave thought this male was a prime pick. He was naturally chiseled and lean and had the same blend Luykas did, something Andinna but too refined to be purely Andinna. Emerian had the same problem Luykas did for years. Females were all about having a good time with the Elvasi mutts because they were pretty, and Emerian was even more different with his dark skin and red features.

"We're going to do something as a family today. You're coming," Zayden said before walking away. He was seated again when Emerian walked in, wary of them.

"Why am I coming?" he asked, sitting down slowly.

"Because you live here, and you're one of Mave's males," Mat answered, falling in with Zayden's plan without needing to be asked or told what was going on. "We'll spar, swim, fly. It's a day for us. Mave left yesterday, and there's a whole week before anyone else leaves. The likelihood Zayden or I get picked for missions in the spring is slim."

"Why?"

"Because we're husbands to an Avatar, and we're experts in the types of mission Alchan wants to run," Zayden grumbled, a little disappointed but understanding the logic of it. "He needs us to train others more than he needs us to risk our lives. Plus, we're still members of his guard, and my

son isn't around. Rain is the best line of defense for the king, but when he's not around, everyone else needs to be a little more attentive to that duty."

"Not that anyone is going to try to assassinate Alchan," Luykas said quickly. "But protocol needs to be observed, so no one thinks we're lax. Some of Alchan's personal guard needs to be around, not that he needs the defense. He's better with a sword than most of us."

"Wait..." Emerian frowned as Bryn put a plate of food in front of him. "Will I be able to go on missions?"

Zayden wanted to curse as he heard the disappointment in the young male's words.

"With Mave, sure," Luykas said. "Without Mave..." Luykas shook his head.

"Just because I'm..." Emerian looked at the room he had just walked out from then back at the table. "Just because I'm sleeping with her, and she's an Avatar?"

"Because you're a member of this family," Mat said quietly.

"That's not f—"

"Don't say it," Zayden ordered, cutting him off with a small growl. "It's not her fault. It's not our fault. You like her, you sleep with her, you accept it comes with conditions. We can't send a male she wants to be her husband off to fight without anyone watching out for him, particularly one of us. Bryn stays home now and is master of the scouts. Luykas is the master of the spies. Matesh and I need to train other warriors, so the war effort is furthered. Alchan can't be wholly reliant on us to run these missions because we have before. He needs more warriors who can. You're a strong warrior, and you have a job. I know Mave released you as her nemari, which is for the best. Without a doubt, you've proven yourself. There will be something here for you to do, even if you don't get to run a mission every season."

"Yeah..." Emerian sighed. "You're right."

"We'll all be fighting at the end of this," Bryn said softly. "It's coming. Shadra spent all last year moving her troops into position to take us on this year. All we're doing is closing routes to stop her from flanking us."

"I know," Emerian said, nodding. "It's not that I want to run missions with random warriors I don't know and can't trust. Honestly, I was hoping I

would get tapped to go on some of these missions with Mave. I didn't really consider I would be left behind."

"You probably will go on missions with her, just not every one."

"I didn't get to go on this first one," Emerian pointed out.

"Yeah, well, no one got to go on this first mission with her," Zayden countered. "We don't turn into wyverns and dragons like they do. My son is on the mission. I would have loved to go with them."

"Or have a wyvern bonded to their very soul," Luykas added. "Skies, I hope those two do all right. Mave is chosen by a goddess, and Rain grew up what he is, but Trevan has barely had time to really understand how things will be between him and Kyn. I know that's why Alchan decided to send them together, to give them a test run, but I'm worried. Kyn didn't like the crowds as they were trying to leave."

"You four really know how to put things into perspective," Emerian said as he started eating. "I just want to get out there and...prove something, I guess."

Zayden tried not to react, but he was the only male at the table who did so. Mat frowned deeply, and Luykas sighed softly.

"Kian's death wasn't your fault," Bryn said strongly. "Sure, your first mission went about as wrong as it could have, but that doesn't make you less of a warrior. I've had missions go wrong. Mat and Zayden have had missions go poorly. Luykas..."

"There was the one mission," Luykas muttered.

"I forgot that it was your idea," Zayden said with a growl.

"What mission?"

"We don't talk about it," Mat snapped. "But Bryn's right. A failed mission doesn't change the fact that you've gone out and proven yourself. Zayden said it too."

Emerian nodded, focused on his food.

Zayden almost smiled as he realized the interesting dichotomy of the male sitting at the table with them. Emerian was tougher than he had been, scarred and fearsome-looking, but there was a flip side, a young male seeking validation. He could be the silent guard, the strong warrior, but when no one was looking, he was a male looking for a community.

Just join the fucking family, you idiot. We have it in spades.

They finished breakfast and cleaned up together. With both Mave and Trevan gone, Zayden could see Emerian was somewhat lost, forced to interact with males he only half-knew. Even on the road, Emerian dedicated himself to tasks and Mave, not the males of her mayara. Now, there was really nowhere else for Emerian to run off to.

“You know...” Zayden emptied a plate beside him. There were things that needed to be said, and he was in a talking mood. “We were annoyed when you wouldn’t tell us what happened with you, Mave, and Trevan, but I understand. You’re loyal to her, and that’s fine. In the end, you respected her need and want for privacy while she dealt with Dave. Thank you.”

Emerian ducked his head. “She’s everything, you know. She needed to work something out and didn’t tell you, so I wasn’t going to.”

“She is everything,” Zayden agreed, nodding. The shyness Emerian had tickled him. This was a male who didn’t know what to do with his feelings. The layers of Emerian’s personality were becoming fun to pull back.

Once they were done cleaning up, Luykas took charge. “We spar all morning, and once it warms up in the afternoon, we can find a pond to jump in. Let’s find an official training field, so we have the appearance of planning to work today.”

They did just that, sparring near a large group of males. Zayden didn’t really care who was around since he was with some of his favorite people.

“Get off my training field,” someone snarled.

Zayden sighed heavily and turned in unison with Mat to see Kenav. Within seconds, Luykas, Bryn, and Emerian were there.

“You never stop, do you?” Mat asked. “You always need to pick a fight or get pissy because you have no self-control.”

“Get. Off. My. Training. Field,” Kenav repeated, walking closer. He was the only Andinna coming toward them, his warriors watching warily.

“It doesn’t need to be like this,” Luykas said calmly. “We were just looking for a place to train—”

“Find another one,” Kenav growled. “Since I got to Anden, I’ve been nothing but a good commander to my warriors, who raised real objections to the way they’ve been treated by the leadership of the Andinna. We’ve been ignored and ostracized by all of you. I brought victory for Alchan last year, then was firmly shut out because I dared not fall in line with *you*. Get off my training field.”

Zayden glared, but Luykas tapped his shoulder.

“Let’s go,” the mutt ordered. “Now.”

Zayden and Matesh both growled, but Zayden relented first, grabbing Matesh by the arm.

“One day, you’ll understand what’s it’s like to be forced to the outside,” Kenav warned as they backed off. “To be thrown out by your own people and nothing you do is good enough.”

“I know exactly what it looks like,” Mat snapped. “I had a front-row seat to how you treated my wife in the pits.”

“Maybe if you didn’t find your way between her legs, you would have taken a moment to understand why she was there,” Kenav snarled. “She’s nothing but a butcher. She doesn’t care about our people. She only cares about herself and her own glory. She only cares about the people who are willing to prostrate themselves for her. Even our *king* bends to her.”

It was out of line and sent the situation out of control. Zayden didn’t fall for the bait, but he knew others would. He grabbed Matesh and tried to yank him back, but the male was massive, the biggest of the Company. Luykas grabbed him next, but none of them accounted for Emerian and Bryn. Zayden half figured Matesh was their biggest worry—he was wrong.

It happened quickly. Emerian made his way around them, and his attack happened quickly. His fist landed on Kenav’s jaw with a crack that echoed in the silence that followed. It didn’t drop Kenav, but it did stagger him. Emerian was breathing hard, every breath punctuated with a growl, a constant rumble that refused to abate. Everyone stood in stunned silence at the assault except Bryn, who walked forward slowly, playing with one of the daggers he always kept on him and stopped next to Emerian.

“Be careful,” Bryn warned. “Between the five of us, you might not draw another breath the next time you insult her.”

Kenav rubbed his jaw as he looked at them once again, both surprised and vindicated by Emerian’s response.

“This is what she teaches her nemari? To attack an unarmed man?” Kenav looked over Emerian with disgust. “Picking mutts and Elvasi over your own people, warriors who are desperately trying to prove themselves to you. Were mistakes made in those pits? Sure. We were all trying to survive, and we were all angry.” Kenav looked over them, that disgust turning into condemnation.

“*You’re* the ones not letting go of the past. None of my complaints since I arrived here have been about the pits, not a single one. We’ve worked to let it go and move forward as Alchan asked us to. You should reflect on that the next time you think I’m just out to get you. We’ve been here for nearly two years, and we’re still treated as outsiders. We’re ignored and condemned. Why?” Kenav smiled cruelly, clearly pained by the reality of existence.

“Ah, yes, because *she* told you to as if she’s the most reliable person when it comes to anything that happens in those pits. And now, all my years of experience are ignored, and all the complaints I put forth for my males about the failure of leadership in this force are denied as petty vendettas, even though the favoritism reeks.” Kenav shook his head and turned his back on them, walking back to his warriors. “Get off my training field.”

“Let’s go,” Luykas snarled at them.

Zayden reached out for Emerian, who was wide-eyed as he turned on them.

“Did I make a mistake?” the young male asked. “He was insulting her —”

“He was baiting us,” Zayden said, glaring at the noble male as he directed his warriors to get into rows. “Right, Luykas?”

“Yeah...” Luykas cast one glance backward. “I need to report this to Alchan before he does.” Luykas didn’t give them any other warning, jumping into the air.

“We should have paid more attention,” Mat hissed as they went into the trees. Zayden didn’t know where they were planning to go, but he also didn’t care. Away from the fight was the only direction they needed.

“He insulted her!” Emerian growled, this time with more passion.

“She insults him all the time, and no one assaults her for it,” Zayden pointed out. “We’re not mad, Emerian. I think you gave him a solid hit. If he had hit back, this wouldn’t look so bad, but...”

“He played us,” Bryn whispered.

“And he did it well,” Zayden agreed. “Let’s head home and keep our heads down. I feel like Alchan will want to have words with us.”

When they got inside, Zayden grabbed two wineskins and threw them to the others of his family. They were passed around as they waited for Alchan to descend on them.

In a righteous fury, he burst into their home without knocking, Luykas following behind him, his head down.

“How hard it is to leave Kenav and his warriors alone?” Alchan snarled as he found them in the main room.

“We were just there to train—” Zayden tried to speak up, hoping his loose ties to the king helped. This male was his son’s husband, so maybe that would help.

“I don’t care!” Alchan roared. “There is a war going on, and keeping everyone alive is already hard!” Alchan ran a hand through his hair as he snarled. “Luykas told me everything that was said, and you know what really pisses me off?” Alchan waved a hand at them. “He’s right.”

Zayden’s stomach dropped like a stone.

“Alchan—” Mat tried to stand and speak, but the stare Alchan pinned him with sent the big male back into his chair.

“Your Majesty,” Alchan said very softly. Zayden winced. Alchan was disassociating from them for a minute, removing their thousand years of friendship and comradery so he could say what he wanted to say without feeling guilty.

“Brother—”

“Go sit with your family,” Alchan snapped at Luykas, who dropped his head and headed into the main room, finding a place to sit beside Matesh. Once everyone found a seat and Alchan had their undivided attention, the king glared at them. “He’s right. I hate that he’s right, but he is, and everyone in this room knows it. Your wife left *yesterday*, not even one full day ago. I can’t fucking believe any of you right now.”

“Will you tell her?” Luykas asked softly.

“She already knows,” Alchan snarled, tapping the side of his head.

Zayden leaned over and put his head in his hands.

“What punishment would you like to give us?” Luykas asked softly.

“Nothing for now. This is your final warning. The tongue lashings he deserves come from me and *only* me. I know he baited you. I know he purposefully got personal because he was pissed off and looking to get you in trouble. That’s what’s saving you right now. You know I have to give him something now. I’ll have to *apologize* to that fucking asshole because none of you had the foresight just to turn the fuck around and leave the fucking field. And one of you couldn’t keep your fucking hands to yourself when he

sent a verbal barb your way.” Alchan kicked their small center table and sent the wineskins sliding off. “He is *never* going to respect Mave. You can’t do anything about that. In fact, you only do her a disservice by losing control and picking the fight.”

“He should—”

“Don’t ever open your mouth unless I give you leave to speak, Emerian,” Alchan snarled. “You’re on thin ice. She might be your female, but I’m the king. I’m the one who has to smooth things over after you nearly put him on his ass.” Something softened in the silence after that. “Good hit, by the way. Luykas says you nearly knocked him out.” Alchan found a seat and sighed.

“Your Majesty...” Mat was clearly uncomfortable using the title.

“Speak.”

“You said he’s right...”

“Not all of it, of course, but he’s right about one thing. You are all my family, and I show clear favoritism to you. He’s a prick who knows how to wield power and say the right things. His warriors believe they’ve done everything they can since they came to Anden, and I’m still treating them as second-class. If I ignore today’s incident, I’m only going to make things worse. I need to give him and his warriors something. So, you’re all going to help me figure out what that is. That’ll be your punishment for taking his bait—give him something you want denied to him.”

MAVE

Mave spent over a week thinking about the exchange without telling the others.

“Your lover assaulted Kenav,” Alchan had said with a mental snarl.

Mave had turned and looked back in the direction of the village, hearing the words but not quite believing.

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me. Emerian and your husbands were looking for a training field to spar and ran into Kenav. It’s complicated, but in the end, he baited them, and Emerian assaulted him. Kenav’s slight was a verbal insult that should have rolled off their backs. Nothing new.”

Mave had carefully schooled her face. Her males knew better. If she could abide by Alchan’s wishes to leave Kenav alone, they could as well. How did they even find themselves in that situation?

It was a while longer before Alchan said anything else, and Mave wasn’t going to scream in his head without knowing all the facts.

“I’m sorry, but I had to do something. Your males have agreed to help me in making the apology to him, and as a token of unity and moving on from the past, we’re going to give Kenav a home on our mountainside. Then we’re going to let him move his most loyal gladiators into the same housing as the other warriors. You’re going to be seeing a lot more of him. It’s a small thing to him, but I know it’s not to you. I will remind him of that if he gives me any lip about it.”

“You’re the king,” she said pragmatically, even as the words tasted bitter.

“I’m your brother, too. I’m sorry it had to be done.”

“Me, too.”

She was still thinking about it as they landed to make a campfire over a week into their journey. They would cut their travel time in half, thanks to the speed and distance they could travel every day. The area they were headed to would have taken over a month on horseback. They were on track to do it in two weeks, maybe less.

“Emerian hit Kenav, and now that asshole is moving into a home on our mountainside. A gift and apology from Alchan for the offense,” she announced as she watched the fire she had started. Rain dropped the hunting knife he was sharpening, and Trevan frowned.

“Did that happen today?” Rain asked.

“No, it happened the day after we left,” she admitted. “I didn’t say anything because...” She shook her head. “I think I was worried I would turn around and go pick a fight with Kenav. Apparently, he slighted me, but I don’t know all the details. Alchan hasn’t told me everything, but if he felt the need to give Kenav something that doesn’t bode well for my husbands or Emerian...”

“How?” Trevan asked. “How do you know about this?”

She looked up and realized no one had told him. She tapped the side of her head.

“Alchan and I can talk to each other now,” she explained. “The distance doesn’t matter. We’re connected, just like the goddesses we serve.”

“It’s weird,” Rain said with a shrug, “but useful.”

“Very useful,” she agreed.

“That’s...well, I would say crazy, but...” Trevan lifted a hand and pointed up. Right on cue, Kyn flew over them, probably looking for something to eat. He smiled. “So, I’ll move on to the other crazy thing about this. Emerian punched him?” Trevan sat down, pulling out his sword to clean it. It didn’t need to be cleaned, but she understood the comfort a good weapon could give, and caring for it was a habit of those who relied on their weapons.

“He did, but as I said, Alchan didn’t give me many details. We haven’t spoken since that happened. He probably doesn’t want to distract me, and I

know he's busy."

"Plus, who really wants to constantly share their head with someone else?" Rain asked, shrugging. "I love him, but I would probably be uncomfortable with Alchan being able to get on my nerves over vast distances."

Mave chuckled, nodding. She got to the nightly business.

"How was everyone today? Does anyone want us to slow down tomorrow?" It was the same thing she asked every night, having promised she would to a number of people. Zayden wanted to make sure she and Rain were safe during the trip, especially since his son would spend most of it as a wyvern. Emerian was worried about her and Trevan.

Rain and Trevan shook their heads.

"Okay, then. We stay on course then." She looked at Rain. "Thanks for letting me hitch a ride every day."

"Well..." Rain shrugged. "You're not heavy, so it's really no big deal."

Mave nodded, accepting that. She tried for conversation, which was easier than silence. Her last mission away from the village had led to the death of Kian. While it wasn't likely any of them would even be injured on this mission, she couldn't shake the foreboding and fear. As the sun set, she stood and walked away from the group, wanting to escape the silence as they settled in for the night. Closing her eyes, she focused on the sounds of nature until they were no longer background noise, and the world seemed loud and alive with owls, mice, the occasional songbird getting ready to rest for the night.

Then she did something she knew she had to do. She reached deep inside herself and touched her powers, pulling them to the surface. When she reopened her eyes, the world had lost its life, the color gone. She watched as creatures moved in the night. An owl swooped down and caught a mouse. As it carried away its meal, the soul of the mouse continued to run, then faded away. She wasn't watching for anything in particular. She had activated the ability and left it on as she watched the world, letting it grow easier for her.

"Mave? We're going to make something to eat," Trevan said softly behind her.

"I'll go back with you. Give me a moment. I was practicing with my power," she explained.

“Okay.”

She wasn't bothered by his presence. Trevan was probably one of the few in the world who didn't bother her, a combination of her ability to ignore people and his ability to disappear. They had spent centuries in each other's presence, and silence was the norm. She hadn't even known his name because he was so good at disappearing in plain sight. The best of the Elvasi guards were silent statues until something forced them to move. Trevan was one of the best. He became the landscape, and she found it easy to just be silent with him.

He could have worked in the palace if he had wanted to. He would have done well there.

Let's get to dinner. I can keep this up on a different night.

Mave pulled the power back into submission and pushed it down into her center. She blinked, and color returned to her vision, the ghosts of the night no longer something she needed to worry about.

“Thank you for waiting,” she said, turning to him.

“Always,” he said with a kind smile.

That kind smile made her smile as well. He was a gorgeous man, and his eyes...she was attached to those eyes. They were lighter than Luykas', but still very much Trevan's shade of gold. The rose-gold tatua was soft and only accentuated his perfect Elvasi features.

“You're not allowed to get hurt on this mission,” she declared, walking beside him toward the camp where they had left Rain,.

“I'm not planning on getting hurt,” he countered.

“Well, you're not allowed to, so that's good.”

“Are you worried about it?” he asked.

“Yes,” she admitted. “You're important to me. Of course I'm worried.”

“I survived freeing you. I survived being an enemy of the Empire. I survived the pits, and I survived the escape,” Trevan said softly. “I know you've all been walking on eggshells with me and my safety because there is a risk I can be attacked in the village, but I am a capable soldier.”

“I worry,” she said, shrugging, trying to play it off.

“I'm grateful to be someone you worry about. It reminds me of something Bryn said to me recently.” He stopped, seeming to regret the words.

She stopped walking, frowning. Bryn *didn't* talk to Trevan. He made a point not to talk to him or even acknowledge his presence on most days.

"What did he say?" she demanded when Trevan stayed quiet for too long.

"Nothing...it's nothing." He shook his head quickly and continued walking. "Don't let it bother you."

"Trevan, please. Bryn hates you. I want to know what he said."

Trevan stopped and sighed. "He said you were furious when you found I was still in Elliar. That you were more worried about freeing me than the Andinna there."

"You didn't already know that?" Mave tilted her head to the side. "I was. You helped save me. You put your life between me and those soldiers chasing us, and we left you there to deal with the fallout. I was furious. I was livid. You had just betrayed your Empire for me, and..." She blinked several times, a thought coming to her. "I still don't really understand why. I know what you've said about it, but there's always been a nagging feeling of something else, as though I'm missing a piece of this puzzle."

"I don't know what to tell you." He chuckled, shrugging as she started walking again, and he let her catch up.

As they entered the camp, Kyn also landed, with a large deer in his mouth. If a wyvern could look pleased, this one did.

"That'll be enough food to last you the week," Rain accused. "You're going to be too full to use your fire if you eat all of that!"

Kyn huffed, and Trevan laughed.

"Really? Will he?" Trevan looked between Rain and the wyvern, who dropped the deer and stood possessively over it.

"Yeah. Slower times to process food. Wyverns don't have to eat as often as we do," Rain explained. "If he'll let me, I can butcher it and give him enough to fill him up, and we can either eat the rest or leave it for scavengers."

"Let him have it," Trevan ordered his partner. Kyn huffed again, staying right where he was.

Mave crossed her arms and watched. Trevan spent his days with his wyvern, which meant she never saw either of them during the day. It looked like they were adjusting to their bond faster than she would have guessed. It had taken her seasons to adjust to a blood bond with Luykas, but Trevan

and Kyn were doing well. She smiled as Trevan reached out and scratched Kyn's nose, who made an odd, pleased little chirp. Kyn leaned into him and nuzzled Trevan's chest.

"Are you going to give Rain the deer?" Trevan asked, taking his hands away. Kyn kept trying for more scratches, but Trevan put his hands behind his back and stepped away. "Give Rain the deer."

Kyn growled, an impressive display, but stepped away from the deer. Rain boldly went to it and started to drag it away by its back legs.

"He really respects you," Mave said as Trevan started to scratch between Kyn's scales again.

"He does," Trevan agreed. "And I respect him. It happened...instantly. We went into the sky, and I knew I would never know a bond like the one I have with him, something the gods gave me. He was looking for a place to belong, and now, we have each other. It felt as natural as breathing. It's been really easy to work with him. That's why I'm not worried about this mission. Like you and Alchan, we're connected. Wyverns are much more intelligent than I was led to believe."

"Really?"

"He has feelings, ideas, even thoughts. He can't speak as we can, but he sends me those things. It's all very animalistic, but there's something I can understand, flashes of images and feelings. He equates things we do to things he's seen in the wild."

"I wish we saw him more in the village," she said softly, stepping closer. "He's beautiful, and I think our people would like to see instead of just hearing about it."

"He doesn't like the village," Trevan explained, smiling at her as if he found it funny. "Too many people and no place big enough to land."

"Ah." She came closer and dared to lift a hand, giving Trevan a questioning glance. He really loved animals. She could see it on his face, a light in his eyes that wasn't there very often. He'd had the same love for Vahn, a bond that he hadn't taken for granted. Now, with Kyn, it was tenfold.

"Come on," he said, grabbing her elbow and bringing her closer. "He's really nice. He likes it right here." He put her hand next to his. "Really scratch. He won't feel it otherwise."

“You’ve already figured out his favorite spots?” she teased. “How *attentive*.” She gave him a sly smile and watched a red blush begin to creep in.

“Well, he lets me know what he likes,” Trevan mumbled in return.

“Is it that easy?”

“Yeah.” He looked away from her.

She smirked, not wanting to bother him too much.

“Deer is butchered!” Rain called out, coming back to the campsite. “Can you two help me divide it up?”

Mave stepped back, feeling as though she’d been caught doing something she shouldn’t have been. It took her a minute, as she hauled meat around, to realize she had been flirting with Trevan.

It had been easy, too.

She dropped the leg in front of Kyn, who quickly snatched it up and swallowed it whole. He chirped and chattered, looking around her for more. Trevan walked up next to her, chuckling as he dropped the second.

“Needy thing,” he accused the wyvern.

She glanced at Trevan, who was still staring at his soul-bonded wyvern with an indulgent smile. She tried to think of something to say, but he turned away and went toward the fire, not noticing her stare.

He’s attractive. But he’s not Andinna. And Bryn...Bryn would be furious if he knew I was flirting with Trevan. I should just put the thought out of my mind.

Mave went to the fire and sat down, letting Rain and Trevan cook, while Rain gave Trevan another nightly lesson about wyverns. She let it distract her from her thoughts, listening to Rain explain wyvern biology and how fire breath worked.

I have a mission to focus on.

ALCHAN

Alchan woke up alone for the fourteenth day in a row. It was terrible. Every day, his mood got a little worse as he reached out looking for Rain, only to be greeted with an empty bed. Every day, he remembered he had sent Rain on a mission with Mave and Trevan.

He dragged himself out of bed, growling as he kicked away the furs he had just for his husband. He dressed and escaped the lonely room, storming through the main room into the dining area. He knocked into a chair and heard a squeak from the kitchen.

He looked up and saw Lily holding a pan over the kitchen fire.

He hated that, too. Walking to her silently, he took the pan away from her.

“I wanted to get breakfast started—”

“I’ll cook breakfast,” he said stiffly, trying to remember his manners. “We’ve talked about this.”

“Yes, well, you’ve been so busy—”

“I will cook breakfast, Lily,” he growled, leaning down as he spoke. “As we’ve already decided, I cook breakfast, and you cook dinner. We’re on our own for lunch.”

“I’m just trying to be helpful,” she said, giving him the most pitiful glare he had ever seen, her nostrils flaring. Only he could be such a raging ass to make the most submissive female in existence angry enough to glare at him. “But *fine*,” she snapped, turning away from him. “You give yourself more work.”

It made his fucking knees weak to watch her storm out of the kitchen, through the dining area, and head toward her room.

“Get back here,” he ordered, feeling the crushing need to explain to her who was actually in charge. He watched her fight it, but she turned around and came back to him, exactly where he wanted her. Without Rain around, everything was worse. He didn’t have his husband to smooth out his rougher edges. He tried, though. As she stared at him, he reached for another pan, fighting the need to lean down and claim her full lips.

“I’m sorry. You can help,” he said, making a concession, trying to keep hold of the beast who wanted her mewling under him as he took her. He held the pan out and waited as she made her decision.

She took it.

“You overwork yourself,” she said simply, putting the pan on the counter, then went into the storage room.

He watched the eggs, keeping them from sticking, wondering if she would have more to say when she returned. She walked out, her head low, the burst of courage completely gone. He didn’t like that.

Everyone assumed Alchan only wanted submissive Andinna who were quiet and easy to bend, and that type was certainly enjoyable, but they weren’t *fun*. Rain made him realize it was fun to have a submissive partner who added spice by also having a bit of a bite—someone he had to work for, someone to play *games* with.

He was intensely attracted to Lily when she was soft, there was no avoiding that, but he really enjoyed it when she started to get a bit of a bite to her.

“I do overwork myself,” he finally said as she laid bacon in the pan, obviously thinking something she wasn’t willing to share with him or was too scared to, thinking it wasn’t her place. “But I’m the king. It’s my job to overwork myself. If I don’t, how can I ask others to? If you have an opinion about that, use your words and say it. I’m more than willing to listen to opinions.”

“You can’t ask it of others, but you have other, more important things to do with your time than cook breakfast,” she said. “Even if you never cooked here, you would still find things to do to make your day busier than any other’s. This is a needless task you’ve taken on.”

“I like cooking breakfast,” he reminded her. “I like cooking.”

“Doing it when you have time is wonderful, but sometimes, it’s okay to let others ease the load of your responsibilities and be helpful. I’m not a warrior, so I can’t fight. I’m not in the position to take over the duties Rain had, but I can manage your house and make your meals, so you can focus on other things or get the sleep you desperately deserve.”

Alchan narrowed his eyes. The last time someone brought up his sleep, it had gone poorly. She glanced up at him, and his silence must have been what she needed to continue.

“You were still asleep when I woke up, so instead of disturbing you or going hungry, I thought I could make breakfast so you could continue sleeping. You don’t get to be upset when people try to care about you. That’s mean.”

He resisted the urge to growl. Fucking logic. It was as if she took lessons from Rain. It took the wind out of his wings, and he sighed.

“Forgive me. I don’t want you working around this house as if you’re a servant,” he admitted. “It makes me uncomfortable.”

“Does it? Why?”

He couldn’t answer that question, but not because he didn’t know the answer. He didn’t answer to keep her from being uncomfortable.

I’m trying my damndest to court you, and I like to treat people as if they’re precious objects that should never get dirty...unless I make them dirty.

And I really want to be the one who makes you dirty.

“Alchan?” She sounded so innocent.

He was tongue-tied. Rain had been able to figure him out easily, but Lily made him feel like a beast who was going to ruin her, and she had no idea what was coming.

He put the pan down.

“Just...don’t act like a house servant. I don’t like it,” he mumbled. “I’m going to head out early.”

“But...” She sounded hurt, but he needed air.

He pulled his boots on and went out, letting the cold air shock him. He didn’t wear a shirt, only pants and boots, didn’t even think to grab his sword belt. As he stood there, breathing in the thin mountain air, letting it burn his lungs, he saw someone land in the clearing.

Kenav was heading out.

Alchan touched his power and let that distract him. He'd been watching Kenav closely, watching the male's aura carefully. He did it to everyone now. Most days, he didn't bother to turn it off. When he had spoken to Kenav when he got back, there had been anger in the male's aura that hadn't been clear in the conversation. That was one of the reasons Alchan got Trevan out on the first mission, knowing Kenav really *hated* what was happening with the Elvasi. His aura had been dark after Emerian assaulted him. Now, it was lighter. Alchan watched as two warriors came out of the trees to greet Kenav, who was puffing with pride at his new privileged living situation. Alchan knew why. They were taking it as the first sign of good things to come for their group of warriors.

They also noticed him, and both bowed in his direction. When Kenav turned in his direction and bowed as well, Alchan gave a respectful nod.

He hated them, hated their way of thinking, but he knew he had taken it too far. He should have started bringing them in when Kenav did well last year on his campaign. Kenav did give Luykas a harder time while his brother was in charge than he should have and had deserved to be chastised for that. But Alchan hadn't been prepared for the dark feelings Kenav had already been fostering when they returned. He could only hope he was making the right decision by giving Kenav something and hoping it eased the tensions.

Alchan jumped down to the grass, sighing as the snow had finally melted. Winter was over, and he had to call it. He needed to send the Blackbloods to the fields and begin the next year of farming and war. Both would start with blood spilling into the earth. The parallels didn't escape him. They never did.

He didn't walk to the war room. It was still too early for that. He just walked down the cliffside, letting his thoughts turn around in circles.

"You are running," someone said softly, landing next to him.

Alchan growled at Varon.

"Where is your husband?" he asked, not wanting to deal with this meddling Avatar.

"Off," Varon answered, shrugging. "Now that I don't need a translator, we've decided to try spending time away from each other. An interesting exercise to spice up three thousand years together. A terrible exercise, truthfully." Varon gave the most dramatic sigh he'd ever heard.

Alchan glared at him. “You’ve spent time away from Nevyn before, so don’t act like it’s such a hardship.”

“Then don’t be so annoyed when I’m not with him,” Varon countered with a serene smile. “You need someone to talk to.”

“I wish you were still a mute,” Alchan muttered.

“It’s about Lily or Rain.” Varon reached out like he was feeling something. “Lily.”

Alchan grabbed that hand and held it up. “You meddled in my relationship with Rainev. Why don’t you leave Lily to me?”

“No,” Varon said, taking his hand away. “I meddled with you and Rain because you were dense. You still are, but Lily is...Lily is one of mine. You’ll be careful with her, and I’ll make sure of it.”

“I am careful with her,” Alchan snarled.

“Her feelings, not her body.” Varon rolled his eyes.

Alchan sputtered and stopped walking. “Varon, I am not talking to you about this. Not today. Not tomorrow. Not ever.”

“You should—”

“I am the one person you are required to answer to,” Alchan growled, turning to get in the other Avatar’s face. Now that he was the Avatar of Larianna, he was once again at the top of the proverbial food chain. Varon needed to listen. “Drop it. I don’t want anyone meddling in this. I don’t want to look back and think someone forced me or her into something we didn’t want. How many times do I need to explain that?”

Varon stepped back.

“But you do want it,” Varon said softly. “I’m trying to understand why you’re still running. We went through this with Rain. Why are you making the exact same mistake?”

Alchan didn’t see it that way.

“Rain came on to me, and I had to realize that he genuinely wanted what I had to offer,” Alchan said softly. “Lily was forced into my lap by a mativa who even you despise. Now, I’ve gotten over that and really taken to her, but...” Alchan rubbed his face. “If Lily decided tomorrow she wanted any of this, I would say get in my fucking bed, but she hasn’t yet! So, I’m not going to ask her. We both know she would say yes, even if she wasn’t really into it, because of what she is, and I can’t *live* with that.” Alchan

turned on his heel, dismissing Varon, and took off into the air. He headed for the war room, intending on getting his day started early.

The moment he landed, he was met by Nevyn.

“I just got done with your husband, so before you open your mouth, think carefully about what you want to say,” he snarled.

Nevyn’s mouth, already open, though, now hung open in surprise.

“Well?” Alchan snapped, his temper fraying.

“I was wondering what he thought was so important that he ran off,” the general said, his shock wearing off.

“Is that what you wanted to say?” Alchan asked, leaning in.

“No.” Nevyn was completely unperturbed by his mood. “I wanted to say that I have a final decision on the next two teams we’re going to send out. Also, Bryn won’t be in today. He stopped by just before dawn. He has scouts he’s hoping will report back in the next few days, so he’ll be out there.” Nevyn waved to the wilderness that surrounded them at all times. “You know, wherever he meets with these scouts.”

“Thank you,” Alchan said, breathing out, letting go of some of his foul mood. Nevyn grabbed him before he could go inside, and Alchan didn’t lose that temper again. This was Nevyn, a warrior first and foremost and one of his most trusted people.

“What did my husband want with you?”

“To meddle with Lily and me,” Alchan answered honestly. “I was already in a mood, though.”

“I’ll tell him to give you a break. He’s even more attached to her than he is to Rain, so...”

“They’ve never met before last year,” Alchan said, a frown forming. “He helped raise Rain.”

“They grew up the same,” Nevyn said softly. “Rejected by their families and given a home in the temple of love, shown things they could never have, hearing about things they couldn’t dream about. He wants her to reach out and take everything he had to fight for.”

“And he thinks I’m the thing she should be reaching to?”

“You’re the only option,” Nevyn said softly. “And I know you hate it. I’m sorry. I’ll tell him to back off, and you won’t hear about this from me again.”

“You know, Seanev said the same thing once. He’d been hoping to introduce her to me, better than Leria had done it. Said she deserved a family, and I could be that chance,” Alchan said, ignoring others walking around them to get inside. After he’d put his foot down about the spreading of information and rumors in the village, there was surprisingly little gossip, and it stayed subdued.

“I know it’s a lot of pressure on a potential relationship. You shouldn’t have to worry about all of that when you’re trying to figure out if someone will work with you or not.” Nevyn sighed. “I’ll tell Varon he needs to back off. From both of you.”

“Can you tell him?” Alchan narrowed his eyes on the warrior.

“Who do you think told him we needed to let Mave and Luykas play out on their own?” Nevyn chuckled. “Skies, remembering how mad we were at that male for blood bonding her...”

Alchan chuckled, nodding. They had been rightfully furious, but it had worked out. It took over a year, but Mave and Luykas had figured it out.

“Let’s get to work,” Alchan ordered. He headed inside the war room, Nevyn at his side. They quickly began working on the missions Nevyn had been asked to find warriors for.

As morning moved to midday, Alchan saw Andinna come and go and found himself thinking about Lily. She never came in. Eventually, he gave up wondering and looked at Nevyn with a groan.

“Can you go check on her?”

“Yeah.” Nevyn patted his shoulder as he walked out.

LILLIANA

Lilliana sat in the dining room, wondering what to do with her day. She had made too much for breakfast, so she donated it to Mave's household. They had accepted it, of course, even if they didn't need it. The gruff one, Zayden, had said something about using it for lunch.

Since then, she had cleaned the entire home because she wanted to, organizing the things Alchan liked to leave around. She had rearranged the storage room based on what they used the most because there was no reason for the bacon to go in the back. She had cleaned up her room as well, disliking how disorganized it had become.

She knew she was needed in the war room, but today felt different, and she didn't have it in her to put on a public face and be around him. Her plans were falling apart.

They had always told me food was a good way to get anyone to pay attention. I always make dinner, and he just says thank you, but I thought making breakfast and doing something nice for him would...

She wanted him. She closed her eyes and tried to come to terms with it because ignoring it didn't work. It took her only a few days after Rain left to realize it was the perfect time for her and Alchan to figure it out, and they needed to figure it out. When he was talking about battles, she could see in his eyes that he fully intended to be in those battles.

She was no broodmare, but she knew there was an axe hanging over the head of the Andinna and over the necks of the males she lived with, over

her neck—Alchan’s lack of heir. His lack of trying made everyone more upset.

It made her decision logical, made it easy for her to take her personal feelings out of it.

Her personal feelings were big and scary, and she knew if anyone hurt her, it would be through them.

She didn’t want *a* family. She wanted *this* family. She wanted to spend her days with Rain, laughing with him. She wanted Alchan to *touch* her, something he did so sparingly, she wanted to cry. She wanted it all, but falling back on the excuse of Alchan’s need for an heir was her last line of defense in case rejection was what she found. Maybe they didn’t want her in their family, but she could still give them something she couldn’t give to anyone else. She fully intended to offer because maybe then, Alchan would actually touch her.

Does that make me a bad person?

She didn’t know, but she was already making Plan B. She knew how some Andinna did it. They seduced the person they wanted. Sometimes, the priests and priestesses needed to seduce people who came to the temple.

A knock made her eyes open, and she was halfway out of her chair when whoever it was walked in without waiting.

“Alchan asked me to check on you,” the general announced. Nevyn was beautiful, but he did nothing for her. He wasn’t Alchan, and for a moment, she almost wished he was. Life would have been easier if she wasn’t attracted to only one male in her entire life, and she knew how to manage these feelings. “Your absence has been noted.”

“Oh, has it?” She groaned. “I’m sorry. I just wasn’t feeling up to that today. The dominant personalities and the demands for numbers and…” She caught a flash of concern come over his face. “I’m fine, though. I just needed a break.”

“Good.” He nodded, satisfied with her answer. “So, what *are* you doing today?” He sat at the table across from her, smiling as he normally was when she saw him.

“I cleaned up…been thinking about some things.”

“Like how much you want to fuck Alchan,” Nevyn said with a grin. “Who I, just this morning, promised I would tell my husband to stop

meddling. He shouldn't have bought it. If my husband isn't meddling, I am."

She tried to hear everything he said, but she was stuck on the first line.

"You make it sound so simple," she said with a huff. "I don't just want to sleep with him...I want..."

"Why have you never been in a relationship?" Nevyn asked, putting his elbows on the table. The question came out of nowhere.

"There's been no one I wanted to be in a relationship with because I can't offer them anything. I'm an ahren, and I'm not...I've never been into sex. What's the point?"

"So, you haven't just kept your body to yourself, you've also kept your heart to yourself," Nevyn said softly. "And now, you're trying to give both away at the same time."

"I've been making a plan to...confront him about us. I need some advice, so you showing up is perfect timing. What if he says no?" she whispered, fearing that rejection more than anything.

"Then move in with Varon and me," Nevyn answered, reaching out to fix her hair. "Rejection is just as natural as everything else you're feeling. It's time for you to summon the courage to try to get it. If you don't, you'll live with regrets for the rest of your life. And if you're rejected, move in with us, and we'll let Rain beat up his idiot husband when he returns."

"Rain can turn into a wyvern," Lilliana mumbled, her eyes going wide.

"Yes, and Alchan would never consider ordering Rain not to eat him," Nevyn said with a trickster's smile.

That made her giggle, and she couldn't stop until tears filled her eyes. Then she sat back and stared off at nothing.

"I love them," she admitted. "I don't know how it happened. Rain and I will never be...like others. How can I love a male I don't want and who will never want me? And Alchan, he's different from any male I've ever met, but all I think about is..." Her face heated. "But he's good, too. He's just different. He loves his people so much. I watched him walk to his potential death without a single sign of fear, and it took my breath away."

"They're easy to love," Nevyn said gently. "And you've finally opened yourself up to the possibility that love was something you could have."

She nodded. His wisdom was sound.

“You’re easy to love, too,” he whispered, kissing the top of her head. “Just so you know.”

“Thank you,” she said in a small voice. “You can go. I’m fine. Really.”

“What do you want me to tell *him*?”

“Tell him I need the day off. I do. I’m tired.” She made a point of trying to summon a yawn.

Nevyn bowed, overdone and extravagant. It made her giggle again as he walked out.

Once the door closed, she went into her bedroom. She didn’t want to do this on someone else’s schedule. She needed to get started with her second plan, and if this one failed, she would move in with Nevyn and Varon by midnight. At least she had a way out when her plan to seduce a king blew up in her face.

Hours later, Lilliana waited in the kitchen, her heart pounding. She had made dinner, then put on her best dress. A deep red with small jewels sewn in, it was tied around the back of her neck and draped delicately over her breasts, giving her cleavage, and left her entire back exposed. It had been given to her by the temple years before, and the priestess said it would make males weep to see her in it. She had never dared to even try it on, but she had never been able to bring herself to lock it away, either. It stayed with her wardrobe, and she would look at it and scoff. She never thought she would ever wear it.

So, it had been the perfect choice for when she tried to seduce a king, or at least make it very clear she wanted him. She wasn’t sure if she could do the whole seducing thing.

Dinner was already on the table, and a plate was made for both of them. She did everything she could think of, like lighting candles around the home and on the table, letting the main fire die. It made her cold, but she wanted the candlelight to make everything seem special.

“Where’s the fire?” Alchan asked, clearly confused. She saw him approach the table and watched his eyes go wide. “Lilliana,” he called, his head going up. He saw her then.

She couldn’t tell what he was thinking as his eyes went wide and his hands clenched. Then his eyes flicked around, taking in the mood and table setting. Realization dawned in his expression. He reached out and touched the side of a candle, letting melting wax get on his finger, then looked up

again and took her in. His eyes drifted over her as if he was memorizing everything. His nostrils flared, and he took on an expression that looked... *hungry*.

"I made dinner," she said, gesturing at the table as she took a step forward. "And..." She lost her courage.

"Why is the fire out?" he asked softly.

"Because I wanted the candlelight," she mumbled.

"You'll freeze," he whispered, his gaze growing dark as he watched her with a hooded stare.

"I'm fine," she said as he started for the main room again. She rushed to follow him, grabbed his arm, and tried to stop him, but he spun around and pulled her against him. "I'm fine," she squeaked.

"Your very attractive nipples say otherwise," he murmured, leaning down. "And I bet you want me to enjoy that dinner and talk before I find a way to take this dress off you and take those into my mouth...which will happen tonight."

Those words didn't go to her brain. They went between her legs.

"Am I right?" he whispered, his lips moving closer to hers. "Tell me what you want, Lily." One of his hands slid off her hip to her lower back, her bare skin just over her tail. She felt his fingers trace the edge of the fabric, all the way down to where it went under her tail and revealed part of her ass.

"Yes. You're right. I want you to take this dress off me tonight and..." She swallowed. "And..."

"Okay," he said softly, keeping her close as he turned toward the fire. "We're going to light that for dinner. It can die again later."

She nodded, and he let her go. Her legs were weak.

She hadn't expected such an immediate response from him and hadn't expected her body to be so okay with it.

"Go sit down," he ordered gently as he put a log into the fireplace.

"But—"

"You have prepared a wonderful meal for us, and I want to talk. Allow me, please, to keep myself under control by sitting down."

She quickly darted away and sat down. She waited and waited, looking back into the main to see him at the fire, adjusting himself. He was straining

against his breeches, and that, too, sent a warm feeling to her lower abdomen. He took a deep breath, and his eyes opened, seeing her staring.

“You are...” He came closer and sat down on the other side of the table. “You are beautiful,” he whispered. “Just so you know. Where did you get the dress?”

“A priestess at my temple had it made for me as a gift.”

“A gift...then I will do my best not to ruin it,” he said softly. “Though I should give that priestess a medal, and maybe should have a second one made for you, just in case.”

Her heart pounded in her ears as surprise continued to find ways to render her speechless.

He started eating, his eyes making it clear he was thinking about something other than the food. When she didn't move, he reached out and tapped her plate with his fork.

“Eat,” he ordered. “And, please, tell me...why tonight? Why now?”

“Rain isn't here,” she answered, not thinking there needed to be any more of an explanation.

He raised an eyebrow.

“I really adore Rain, and I'm not trying to go behind his back. Um...I don't think I would have found the right time or the courage to do this while Rain was here.”

“I see.” Alchan nodded. “You're probably right.” He leaned forward. “Lily, I need to know this is what you really want. I need to know beyond a shadow of a doubt, or else I don't think I'll be able to get out of this seat. You're so nervous.” He looked pained for a minute, then schooled his expression.

“Of course I'm nervous. I'm trying to go outside my comfort zone and tell a king I want to...I want this,” she said, finishing strong. “Um...I've been thinking for a long time that...I know we both disagree with how we met, but I want this. I want to give you my...” She stumbled, but his face clearly told her he would wait all night to hear her say everything.

Rain is bold enough to just tell someone what he wants.

“I want to give you my fertile cycle,” she declared boldly.

“And that's all?” he asked, almost sad at her explanation.

“No, but it's important—”

“Is it?” He looked down at his food, sighing. “I guess it would be...”

“It’s not the most important thing. I want to give it to you because it’s *you*. Not only because you’re the king who needs an heir, but you’re *Alchan*. And I want to...to...” She took a deep breath as he looked up at her again. “I want to be with you, and I want to be in the same family as Rain, who I love so much. I want to be in *this* family, and I didn’t know how to make it much clearer than this.” She waved at everything, including her breasts in the dress. “I want you to touch me. I want to sleep in your bed and be your lover. Before, during, and after my fertile cycle. *Tonight*. I want my first time to be tonight. You’re the first and only person I have ever met that has made me *want* like this. Please.”

I love you.

He dropped his fork, his gaze hot, those amber eyes seeming more like molten lava than cool stone.

“I didn’t want my first time to be on my fertile cycle,” she continued as he stood. “And it took me so long to tell you, even though I’ve been thinking it since we were on the road because I’ve been scared of you rejecting me.” He walked around the table. “But today, Nevyn said if you did reject—”

He yanked her out of her chair and pulled her into his body. She could feel how aroused he was as her breasts were pushed up against his body.

“I will never reject you,” he growled before claiming her mouth in a fierce kiss. He grabbed the back of her head and held her in place as he devoured her. She felt as though she would burst into flames. When he pulled away, he looked more than a little crazed.

“Really?” she was able to ask in a gasping whisper.

He growled and yanked open the tie on the back of her neck. She didn’t try to stop her dress from sliding off her body, catching every curve. He watched the event with interest.

“I was just waiting for you to ask,” he said before claiming her mouth again and picking her up. “Oh, Lily, I’ve just been waiting for you to ask.” He forced her to wrap her legs around his waist and carried her out of the dining room. “I knew I never wanted to ask you, but I’ve wanted you since the moment I saw you, and it’s been driving me insane.”

“Why didn’t you ask?” She couldn’t bring herself to pull her lips away from his.

“Because I didn’t want you to say yes because you felt like you had to,” he whispered.

Lilliana didn’t know if she would have said yes or not, but she understood his fear.

“I don’t like to be rejected, either,” he murmured as he opened the door to the bedroom he shared with Rain.

“Who would reject you?” she asked, feeling his pain. He might be the king and a bedru, but he had a good soul.

“I spent most of my life being rejected by the people who were supposed to love me. We can talk about it later...if you want.”

“I do,” she confirmed, touching his face as he lowered onto his furs.

He kissed her again, and his hands did what she had always wanted them to do, touching her, exploring her curves. She couldn’t overcome how his possessive strength made her feel. She felt like he was taking control of her. Everywhere he touched responded.

“I’ve never been with a female before. I can’t promise I’ll be any good at it,” he murmured in her ear, the heat of his breath giving her chills.

“I’m sure you’ll do fine,” she said, smiling, fully believing in him.

His smile, in return, was beautiful.

“I’m going to have Varon start my fertile cycle tomorrow,” she said as he kissed her neck.

He looked up for a moment, then nodded. She couldn’t help but see a touch of fear there.

“Okay.”

“Rain will be the baby’s father, too,” she whispered, hoping he agreed. “Even though he’s not here.”

The fear fled his eyes, and the shine of tears that entered his eyes meant the world to her.

He wants the same thing as I do. A happy family. A family full of love.

“Skies, I never thought I would find a female who could make me fall in love with her.” He kissed her so deeply, she was afraid she was going to drown in him. “But I think you just did.”

MAVE

Mave was between Rain and Trevan as they stood on the cliffside, staring down at the valley of the Elvasi. The sun had just dropped below the horizon, leaving them in the frigid night air of late winter and early spring. The night was dark, the red moon only a sliver crescent in the sky, cloaking them from the guards and patrols below. They were practically shaking with the anticipation of how their night was about to change from serene to chaos.

“We attack from three sides,” Rain said softly. “I’ll come in from the north. Mave, you’ll flank and attack from the south. Trevan, come in the east, from right here. You’re the most vulnerable, so I want you taking the short route.”

Mave nodded, agreeing with the plan as she thought it over. The valley was an oval shape. North to south was the long route, giving her and Rain the chance to devastate the camp below in just one pass. Then Trevan would cut them into quarters, east to west, taking the shortest route to keep his vulnerable body from being in the fighting for too long. If he made only one attack on the camp, it was enough. They were here to force Shadra’s outpost of soldiers to rejoin the main force.

Mave knew Alchan didn’t care how many of them died in the effort.

She grinned, crouching as she took in the camp below. They were going for a night attack to use the element of surprise. The Andinna had all sorts of rules about honor, but when Mave, Rain, and Trevan had spoken about attacking during the daylight, Kristanya had laughed.

War, the goddess had said, didn't care about *honor*. It cared about *winning*. Honor was for the other gods; she only cared about bringing back victory to her sister.

So, that was all Mave cared about—bringing back victory to Alchan and the other Andinna, night attack or no. She knew no one would really care if they attacked at night. There were no innocent civilians in the camp below as there had been in Kerit, only soldiers who signed up for war against the Andinna. They weren't innocent.

"*Are you ready?*" the goddess asked behind her, her voice only entering Mave's head.

I am.

"Rain, let's get into position first," Mave said softly. "Trevan, once Rain and I pass the halfway point of the camp, you come in."

"That's perfect. It keeps us from accidentally running into him," Rain said softly. "You and I will stick to the right, keeping out of each other's way."

Mave nodded. It wouldn't do anyone any good if they ran into each other, and she hadn't flown with others yet. Not like this. She needed to pick it up quickly, but playing it safe was the best decision for the first mission.

"Trevan, you know how to watch the moon's position?" Rain pointed at the red crescent moon over them.

"I've been taught," he said softly. She was surprised because she certainly had no idea what they were talking about, but it also wasn't the time to ask about it.

"When it reaches the fourth sector of the sky, have Kyn send up a fireball. That will give Mave and I enough time to get into position, and neither of us will stupidly start without the other ready."

Trevan nodded one more time, then turned away, jogging back to Kyn, who hid further in the trees.

Mave stood and headed through the woods and around the camp, flying short distances to speed up her progress. She stopped on the south end of the valley and looked at the moon, wondering when it would enter the fourth sector of the sky.

"There," Kristanya whispered, pointing up at the starry night beside her. "Soon. You shouldn't do this."

“It’s too late for that,” Mave said just as softly. “This is why I decided to become your Avatar.”

“This could kill you,” Kristanya said, staring down at the valley. “And for such a pitiful prize. The wyverns could handle this camp. There are only two thousand down below.”

“You can count?”

“I can see their souls,” Kristanya answered. “But back to the important topic at hand. You shouldn’t do this.”

“You have had plenty of time to tell me that as we came this way.”

“I knew I wouldn’t convince you,” the goddess admitted. “But now, as we stand here, I realized I couldn’t let this happen without saying something. I warned you what the most destructive powers would do to you. Heed the warning, Maevana, and let the wyverns handle this. Save yourself for bigger battles.”

“I have to know what I can do,” Mave reminded her. “I never will if I chicken out to protect myself. What kind of warrior doesn’t risk themselves to find out exactly what they’re capable of?”

“One who survives to fight more decisive battles,” Kristanya retorted. “At least you heeded me to make this a night mission. You’re not invulnerable, and neither are those wyverns. At least you’re at your most powerful right now, in the dead of night. That won’t always be the case.” Kristanya turned to her and looked her over, always judging. “Good luck.” Then she disappeared.

Mave nodded. And she watched. Once the moon drifted into the area Kristanya had pointed out, she stood and began calling on her power. She knew the rush, having done it purposefully once before when she jumped off the mountain into the storm.

A fireball went up, fizzling out as it went high.

Mave ran for the cliffside and jumped, her wings spread wide. She released the power from her control for a moment, letting it change her. She grew heavier in the sky, but her wings were more powerful, taking her up. She looked down, the world seeming brighter as her dragon eyes made better use of the low light of the night.

As she reached the edge of the Elvasi camp, she opened her jaws and blew.

Blue flames slammed into the tents below. Only two heartbeats later, the screaming started. She stopped and took another deep breath, then restarted her line of terrible flame, not paying attention to what happened to those below. They were the enemy, and this was a war. She didn't fly quickly, wanting to make sure her line was as thorough as it could be. By the end of the third breath, she swung up and went toward the sky, her heart pounding. Then she turned, following an urge, and went down for more. Next to her initial line of flames, she started another, this time letting the wind grab her wings and send her soaring over the top of camp at speeds she could never reach as an Andinna.

The screaming fueled her as she turned to go for a third trip over the camp. Rain swooped in, even faster than she was, then Kyn, both roaring as they continued to send flames down on the Elvasi camp.

Mave turned to see if there was anyone trying to attack them. The camp had no ballista on hand, a boon for the team, and if they had, they were already burning.

So, they continued to scorch the Elvasi, razing the earth and setting trees on fire. The valley was a bowl of flame.

She flew high and looked down on the destruction, feeling triumphant. A nighttime attack had been the perfect idea. She had no idea if any Elvasi would be able to escape. She wanted to go back down and continue to destroy them, wanting to make sure every single one was dead, but she resisted the urge as Rain, Trevan, and Kyn flew up to her.

"I think Alchan will be happy with this!" Trevan called out in the night, his voice quiet in comparison to the screams below.

She nodded, then went west, heading back to the spot where they had been. As they landed, she watched Rain shift back into his Andinna form and decided to follow suit. Pulling the power back, she reclaimed her own form.

"That was amazing," Rain said, hugging her.

She could only nod because her legs went weak, and the air escaped her lungs as she fell.

"Mave?" Rain asked, trying to grab her.

"What's wrong?" Trevan demanded, running to them, Kyn following with big lumbering steps.

She didn't really know. Her chest felt as if it was going to explode. She clutched her armor, trying to pull it off to give her chest space, but once Rain helped her get it off, it didn't help.

"Too much power for such a fragile mortal shell," Kristanya said softly.

Mave turned up to her, trying to inhale deep enough and overcome the pain so she could speak, but the pain was unbearable.

"I told you the most destructive of your powers would demand a toll. Look below and see what you have done. Understand," Kristanya said, crouching next to her. No one else could see her, but to Mave, she was the only thing that mattered.

Mave practically crawled to the edge of the cliff and looked at the burning valley below.

Her blue flames were taller than Rain or Kyn's. They consumed the others and burned bright and tall, even as the red flames died off. She could see figures running through the trees, the blue flame killing them as they screamed.

"It will burn for days, and there is no natural force that can put it out. It will burn until it is out of the energy you put into it," Kristanya explained. "Every time you do this, it will slowly kill you because it's too much power for a mortal shell."

Mave blinked, her vision going hazy as she began to understand. She wasn't like a wyvern.

"Wh—" She groaned and fell over, wondering where the pain was coming from. She hadn't been injured.

"Mave, please don't die on us." Rain grabbed her, trying to roll her over, but the touch made her enraged. She snarled as the power in her swirled, trying to fix something or destroy something. She couldn't rightfully tell which.

"Mave!" Trevan cried out as her eyes closed.

She fought the pain, but it was hard. She pushed herself up onto her knees once again and looked at the valley.

She had one important question she needed to ask, but her lungs failed her when she tried to speak.

Kristanya, what powers the flames? Why do they burn like that?

"Your soul, my Avatar. Like all Avatars, your abilities are powered by the strength and depth of your soul. Eventually, if you're not careful, they

will consume it, just as those flames will consume everything alive in that valley until they've run out of energy." Kristanya crouched next to her. "You should let your wyverns take you away from here before the flames come for you. Death comes for all things."

Mave nodded, then passed out.



MAVE WOKE up to the bright sun in her eyes. She gasped for air, grateful air could enter her lungs. Then she coughed, and someone cursed.

"Mave, hold on! Rain, we need to land. She's awake!" Trevan called out.

She realized her hands were tied and wrapped around Trevan's waist from behind.

"Fuck," she groaned, leaning on his back as Kyn dipped. It was a rough landing, heading through trees as they tried to reach the forest floor. Rain crashed through branches next to them. A moment later, Kyn was settled on the earth, and Rain came running naked through the underbrush.

"She's awake?" he asked, looking up.

Mave tried to wave but failed, making Trevan curse again and untie her.

"Sorry. We didn't know how else to secure you for the flight."

"How long was I out?" she asked softly. Feeling her hands freed, she pulled them away, ignoring how they trailed over Trevan's abs and hips.

"Only a day," he answered, sliding off Kyn's back first, then reaching up to help her.

When her feet touched the ground, they didn't give out on her. Instead, she felt surprisingly sturdy, just tired.

"Will you tell us what happened? Do you need anything? Water?" Rain reached out, grabbing her shoulders as he looked her over.

"You can't tell anyone, not even my husbands," she said softly, leaning on Kyn for support, who made a wonderfully annoyed chitter at her. "Stop. I'm tired," she told the wyvern before looking back at the two males who had helped her get away from that valley. "What do you want to know?"

"Why you collapsed," Rain snapped. "That would be a great place to start."

“Kristanya let me learn a hard lesson,” Mave answered, rubbing her face as she doubled over to think about how it had played out. “Why didn’t we camp at the valley?”

“Because the flames wouldn’t go out. Some of them crept up the cliffside and nearly reached us. That was when we realized how unnatural they were,” Rain answered. “Mave...what did...I think Trevan and I need to know everything...like now.”

“As an Avatar, my body is still mortal,” she said softly. “And the powers I have...they take their toll. The fire I used as a dragon was fueled not by what it burned but by me. Apparently, the powers of an Avatar feed on the very soul of the person who uses them.”

Rain stepped back, his eyes going wide. “That’s why Alchan is worried they’ll kill him if he overuses them.”

“Probably,” she agreed softly. “Kristanya warned me that I didn’t need to do the mission, that it was a waste of my energy. Mind you, she warned me right before Kyn and Trevan sent up the signal...” Mave groaned and rubbed her chest, thinking of the terrible pain. “Don’t worry, though. I’ll be fine. I’ll rest on the way home and before the next mission. I’ll be ready.”

“Mave...” Trevan reached for her, seeming so concerned, then his face turned hard. “Are you fucking insane? Ready for the next mission? This mission went as perfectly as it could have, and it looked as if using those powers was going to kill you!” He was screaming at the end.

“I’m with Trevan on this,” Rain said, crossing his arms.

“Look, I’ll figure it out. Now that I know exactly what sort of pain is waiting for me, I’ll be ready for it. It won’t cripple me again. You will not tell anyone about this.” She started to turn away, hoping to go clear her head.

“Why not?” Rain demanded.

“Because it’s none of their fucking business,” Mave roared at Rain, an unnatural rage filling her. “Because I am the Champion of King Alchan and the Avatar of Kristanya, the most powerful Andinna alive, and I will use my powers as I please! I will not be sidelined! I answer to one, and the rest of you will fall in line!”

She stopped, her mouth dropping open. She couldn’t believe she had just said that. It didn’t sound like her. She was arrogant, but this was Rain and Trevan. She didn’t talk to them like this.

“I’m sorry,” she said quickly, wondering where her outburst had come from. She stepped back from them.

“I’m going to keep my eye on you for your own sake,” Rain whispered defiantly. “Trevan?”

He nodded stiffly. “We’ll keep this a secret, but if we think you’re going to kill yourself, we will tell everyone. So, you better figure it out, Mave. You better figure out how you’re going to survive another mission and not let these fucking powers kill you.” He stepped up to her, closing the distance. “Is that clear?”

She nodded, still wondering why she still had a belly full of indignant rage. She kept her mouth shut, refusing to test her own willpower against her emotions. They were right. The powers were dangerous, and she probably needed to tell someone. Something in her raged against the idea of being managed, coddled, and protected from the power she had chosen to take on.

So, she kept her mouth shut, accepting the uneasy agreement without voicing her opinion. She wasn’t actually sure what her opinion was.

“At least the mission went perfect,” Rain finally said. “We can go back and tell Alchan it went well. He’ll know I’m lying, but he won’t ask me to betray the trust of anyone on the mission as long as none of us are hurt or dead. For all he’d know, we could have argued about something, had a disagreement on how to handle the mission, or maybe one of us stuck around too long. It doesn’t matter. I don’t like lying to my husband.” Rain threw his hands up. “He’s going to kill me if he finds out if you drop dead in front of him, Mave.”

“I won’t,” she promised, finally trusting herself to say something. “I’m going to get stronger. By the time he decides we need to start the final battle against the Elvasi, I’ll be stronger than I was last night. I’ll be able to survive it.”

And if I’m not, I’ll die making sure we win.

SHADRA

Shadra sat in her tent, disappointed with how her winter had gone. As the snow finally began to thaw and she enjoyed the cool night air, she couldn't help but think the loss of her perfect spy was by far the most annoying thing that happened during this damn war. He'd stopped sending her information, and she didn't have any reason to believe someone had untied her spell. They would have executed him rather than risk it.

While losing her spy was annoying, she had gotten everything she needed out of him.

In only a few more days, she would begin her army's march into the mountains. They had the perfect route planned to get them to the hub of Alchan's forces by the end of summer. By the next winter, she will have defeated the Andinna once and for all. It was all going according to plan. Her troops were in the right places, and her scouts were verifying the route and would have word back to her soon. She just needed that final confirmation, then they would march.

She closed her eyes and smiled, savoring that thought. It did a lot for her mood. Her days over the winter were filled with pitiful calls about humans starving in the rural areas of the Empire. She didn't really care. They would breed again, and in two generations, they would forget about the minor issues the war caused. They would work her fields again, and if they didn't want to be slaves like the Andinna, they would accept the pitiful money her nobles were willing to pay them.

They wouldn't be starving if they had accepted the payments. It wasn't like I or the nobles let the crops rot in the fields. The humans asked for too much, and no one was willing to pay them more than they were worth. They should have swallowed their pride.

She heard something crack in the night and opened her eyes, wondering who would dare disturb her peace without announcing themselves.

A shadow moved, and she knew what was happening. She summoned a shield around herself as a bolt flew out of the darkness. It clattered against her defense, and she reached out with one hand to blast the assassin with a deadly ice spike, easy to form in winter with ice and snow still on the ground.

When nothing dropped dead, she knew she had missed. She expanded her shield and walked to the bolt on the ground, curling her lip as she picked it up and sniffed the tip.

Poisoned. She threw it up in the air and let it hover over her hand as she walked toward the ice spike she had sent toward her would-be assassin. She grinned viciously as she realized there was blood on the tip. The assassin had barely been able to evade it, and it would be his downfall.

She flung the bolt away, harmless and unneeded now, then ran a finger over the blood, calling out its power and using it to focus on its owner. She focused on it, summoning power from the world around her, then sent it to the mind on the other end of this magical connection. She clawed into the mind and felt a rush of satisfaction as she latched into it and held it in place, then began tearing through it.

A scream split the silence of the night.

Shadra walked as people jumped awake and ran out of their tents. Torches were lit, and footsteps told her the night patrols were moving. Many of them stumbled to a stop and bowed as she walked past, slow and easy. Her shield was still up, not letting any of them close as her mind stayed focused on the one she was assaulting—the one still screaming.

She stopped when he came into sight, clutching his head. She could see the blood dripping out of his nose and ears. Next was his eyes.

“What’s happening to him?” one of her generals demanded, running over and stopping at her shield. “Empress, what’s happened?”

“This man tried to assassinate me,” she answered softly. “Now he’s paying for it.”

“What sorcerer is doing this?” someone asked. “I don’t see any of them here...”

“I am,” she purred. “He’ll tell me who sent him before he dies... whether he wants to or not.”

The man struggled to get up and run, in the end only crawling. He didn’t have magic, so he had no defense. As he crawled, she continued to rip his mind apart and look for the information she desired, smiling cruelly as she drew closer.

“Who sent you?” she asked, knowing all eyes were on her. In her near thousand years of reign, no one had ever been foolish enough to try to assassinate her. Back in Elliar, she had kept a guard at her doors just in case, but aside from the Andinna, there was very little violence toward her. She had brought prosperity and wealth to the Empire, unlike any Emperor before her. They had always been willing to let her do what she felt she needed to without trying to kill her. Assassination attempts were common for Emperors.

Now she knew she couldn’t trust that anymore.

“I won’t tell you,” he said, groaning before she unleashed another vicious and painful assault on his mind. She was strong, calling power from everything around her, but most importantly, from the fool who had tried to kill her. Not only was she torturing him, but his blood gave her the key she needed to slowly draw his life force from him to use against him.

“Then don’t,” she said softly. “I’m one of the most powerful sorcerers in the Empire. I’ll find out and make it much more painful than it needs to be.”

She closed her eyes, knowing she was safe, and watched his memories, picking them apart, looking for the face she needed. She found who gave him the assignment and the gold he was paid for it. They were a good start, but she continued. Screams faded, but she knew they were still going on. She just didn’t care. She wanted to know everything about this man—how he thought, who his friends were, who his family was. Everything. While she ripped through his memories and destroyed his mind, he screamed.

He screamed until she was satisfied he had screamed enough.

Then she lifted her hands and pantomimed the quick motion of twisting something. Something snapped, and she opened her eyes, smiling to see the assassin’s head twisted backward without her needing to get her hands dirty.

She turned slowly to her onlookers and found all of her commanders standing there, wide-eyed.

“Is something the matter?” she asked, smiling.

They bowed without complaint, without even the hint of defiance in their eyes. It was the fastest they had ever done so, even after a thousand years of rule. It took seeing her magic to make them finally prostrate themselves the way she rightfully deserved. And when they bowed, it made everyone else go to their knees.

“Someone, clean up this body,” she said, waving at it dismissively. “Meet me in the main tent to discuss what we’re going to do next.”

As she started walking again, her generals started barking orders at their soldiers the moment she passed them, then came after her. She stopped at her map table inside the main tent and crossed her arms, waiting for one of them to be bold enough to ask the question. Certainly, one of them would be daring enough to ask her how she knew dark magics, which were banned in the Empire.

Now that she was in a mood, she fully intended to make an example of whichever stupid general said anything.

“Empress...” one of them said in a whisper, with a helping of fear.

“Yes?”

“Would you like us to investigate who sent the assassin?” he asked.

She was surprised but pleased by his question.

“No,” she answered simply. “I’m going to send the investigation to the sorcerers. You will continue to support me here with the war.”

“Yes, Empress,” he said, bowing to her.

She went back to her personal tent, power still humming in her veins. It had been a long time since she had used her magic. It wasn’t her style to show off that power to keep everyone in line, saving it for when she needed it.

Well, an assassin did come after me. That was a necessary moment.

She stood in her greeting room, knowing one of her top sorcerers would come to her. He stepped in, bowing low to her, only moments after she poured herself a glass of wine.

“I’ve heard what has happened, Empress.”

“And it took you this long to get to me?” She sipped her wine, looking at him with indifference. She was just giving him a hard time. He was in

charge of keeping in touch with other sorcerers stationed at their different camps in the mountain.

“I’ve been focused on re-establishing contact with the forward base to the northwest, Empress,” he said. “It’s exhausted me. Please, accept my deepest apologies.”

“We still don’t know what happened there?” she asked, frowning. “It’s been three days.”

“I know, Empress. We can assume all the sorcerers we had at the camp have been lost since none of them have attempted to reach out.”

“Well,” she sighed. “Hand that off to your assistant and one of the generals. Someone can send a small unit to see what happened. I need you to figure something out for me.” She waved him closer. “Come here.”

He closed the distance between them and went down on one knee. She touched his forehead gently and pushed the assassin’s memories to him.

“Figure this out,” she ordered. “Put everyone you can spare on it.”

“Yes, Empress.”

She waved him away and watched as he jogged out of the room, off on her task.

She finished her wine and sighed.

Falling onto the supple couch that had been brought for her, she stared off at nothing, her mind going over all the possibilities of who could have considered assassinating her. Humans were angry with her, but they would have bankrupted two villages to pay the gold needed to hire someone as proficient as the assassin had been. He had snuck through the camp, pretending to be a soldier for two days, and made his way to her private area. If she hadn’t been a proficient sorcerer, he would have killed her. The poison he chose was expensive, with no antidote as far as she knew.

She had over a dozen names that could have worked. Any of her generals would kill for the chance to claim the glory of this war, but she didn’t let them, not after their repeated astounding failures. Tonight had been a good chance to scare all of them, but she knew she needed to handle them before the end of this conflict, or they would be a continued problem for her. They would tell the nobles of the types of magic she had used, then she would have to fight against the nobility, who would seek to discredit her reign.

Shadra knew she shouldn't have shown off, but she had wanted to make the assassin regret his decisions.

She finished her wine as a plan formed. She couldn't trust any of them—not a single one. She couldn't trust her generals or her nobles. She could never trust any man.

I should just kill them all and be done with it.

She swirled the wine in her glass.

Yes, that's a fine idea. They'll be sacrifices to the war against the Andinna. Let's see them try to assassinate me then.

MAVE

Mave’s heart soared when she saw the village from her position on Rain’s back. She stood up and jumped off him, letting the wind catch her wings to keep her in the air.

Kyn gave a triumphant call as if the wyvern knew what home was as well. Trevan whooped, and Mave had the distinct feeling they were feeding off each other when it came to the excitement of seeing home.

“Let’s land!” she called out. “Rain needs to get dressed!”

Rain was the first to nosedive toward the ground, followed by Trevan and Kyn. Mave dropped after them and landed between them on the high cliffside overlooking home. She took a moment to reach out to the minds of her fellow Avatars, hoping to let them know she was back. All she could do was poke Varon, who was already moving in her direction. Alchan, however, wasn’t moving, and she felt something hostile from his bright power.

“Alchan? We’re home—”

A mean and protective snarl made her step back and blink several times. Even though she wasn’t even near him, something about his reply made her realize she overstepped in some way.

“Thanks for giving me a chance to get some clothes on,” Rain said as he walked up beside her. “Where’s Alchan? I’m going to go see him.”

“At home, in a mood about something,” she answered without thinking. Rain nodded and jumped off, leaving her standing there before she could warn him off about bothering his husband. She hadn’t liked what she felt,

but Varon was moving so fast to her, she didn't know if she should chase after him yet. Trevan took his place, chuckling.

"Shit," Mave muttered.

"He's probably excited to see his husband," Trevan said softly. "What are we waiting on? Don't you want to see yours?"

"Varon is moving in this direction. He might have something to say," Mave explained, confusion about Alchan's mood making her worried. It wasn't the response she had expected when she returned from a successful mission.

"Really? You two didn't talk the entire time we were gone?"

"No," Mave shook her head. "No. Alchan is my brother, but that doesn't mean I report everything to him. Half the time, he hates when I bother him. Admittedly, it's a little weird to hear someone else in your head."

"Okay." Trevan shrugged and waited beside her.

It didn't take long for Varon and Nevyn to land in front of them. Mave didn't resist hugs from either of them, but Varon's frown quickly made her worried.

"Where's Rain?" Varon asked.

"You didn't see him on the flight here? He's headed for Alchan," Mave answered. "Do you know why Alchan is in a bad mood? I tried reaching out to him to let him know—"

"He's headed to Alchan?" Varon paled. "Love—"

"On it," Nevyn snapped, jumping back in the air.

"What's going on?" Mave demanded, frowning as Varon looked at her, then Trevan.

"Just follow me," Varon said. "I'll explain when we get there." He was up in the air next.

Mave flew after him, staying right on his tail. Trevan took longer, but halfway there, he and Kyn flew over them. Varon landed hard in the clearing in front of Alchan's home. Mave landed next and watched as Nevyn grabbed Rain by his tail and yanked him back out of the house as a roar came from the inside. On either side of the door was a female warrior, one of whom bravely grabbed the door and slammed it shut the moment Nevyn got Rain out of the way. Something hit it twice from the other side, but the door didn't open.

“What the fuck?” Rain said, looking dazed as Nevyn dragged him down to the grass.

Mave looked at the warriors, then at Varon. When she turned back to Rain and Nevyn, Rain was panting, his eyes unfocused and blue scales beginning to show up on his pale skin.

“Breathe,” Nevyn ordered. “Focus on breathing.”

“I was worried this would happen,” Varon said, furious about something as he marched over to them. “Rain, please allow me to apologize for not warning you in time.”

“That smell,” Rain whispered. “It was...”

“Amazing? Yeah,” Nevyn said, leaning on the cliffside. “That’s what a female smells like during her fertile cycle, whether or not you’re interested. You can’t go in there.”

“What is going on?” Mave demanded, tired of being the person on the outside.

Varon looked back at her, then at Alchan’s door.

“Lady Lilliana and Alchan agreed I should quicken her fertile cycle,” Varon explained, turning his back on the door and looking Mave in the eye. “Currently, they’re three weeks into it. No one has gone in or out of that home since the day it began. Because of the situation, it’s important that Alchan be the one to...” Varon looked uncomfortable for a moment.

Mave knew how to do simple math. Two plus two was four. Alchan needed an heir, so he needed to be the one who impregnated Lilliana.

“And he’s a bedru,” Rain said softly, leaning over. “Another male is asking to die by walking in there.” Rain rubbed his face. “Well, not what I was expecting to come home to, but this is good news.” He still looked dazed, but the scales were gone as he tried to straighten up.

“Are you okay?” Mave asked, walking to him. “Your husband is... fucking someone else...” To her, the idea sounded terrible. If she caught any of her husbands with another, she would rip their balls off and feed them to the person she was being betrayed with.

“Mave...” Varon warned softly. “Alchan wouldn’t betray Rain.”

“Isn’t that...” She turned on her fellow Avatar.

“No, Mave, that’s not...” Rain grabbed her arm. “That’s not what’s wrong. I wasn’t expecting the smell of a female in her fertile cycle to hit me

in the face the moment I got the door open. Those two tried to stop me, but this is also my home.”

“Sorry, Avatar Varon. We know the instructions were not to let anyone in, but...” One of the warriors spoke up, then dropped her head. Mave growled at that.

“It’s his home!” Mave yelled, pointing at Rain. “Don’t fucking apologize to these males for that.”

“Mave, you don’t understand,” Rain said quickly.

“What? That Alchan is in there—”

“I wanted this!” Rain snapped, yanking her with power he shouldn’t have. Blue scales erupted over his face. “And you won’t go and ruin it. Okay? I want Alchan and Lily together. I’m just trying to get over the effects of her scent for a minute. I didn’t know they had started this while we were gone. In fact, this is better. This means I probably only have to live out of the house for a week instead of a month. It’s fine.”

“He’s...” Mave frowned, deciding not to finish that sentence. “Are you really okay with this?”

“Yes. I’ve never believed Alchan was mine and mine alone. I’m glad it’s Lily, but...” Rain gestured down, and Mave looked, a piece of the puzzle becoming clear for her. He was aroused by whatever he had smelled in there. “I wasn’t expecting my body to respond the way it did. Nevyn pulled me out because Alchan saw me, and I couldn’t bring myself to move. It smelled too good. I was about to get into a fight with my husband over a female I don’t even want to be with.” Rain flushed. “I’ve never wanted to be with a female.”

“The scent of a female’s fertile cycle doesn’t care about normal attractions. It only cares about breeding,” Nevyn explained softly. “You were raised in a good village, never catching the scent of a female in her fertile cycle who wasn’t your own. The females were hidden from you before you had the chance. Just keep breathing and don’t think about it. You’ll clear your head soon enough.”

“So...we’re okay with Alchan and Lily,” Mave said, pointing to the door, frowning still. She forced herself to stop looking at it from her own perspective.

“Yeah,” Varon said, moving beside her. “We’re happy for them. Once the fertile cycle ends, Rain will move back in, and they’ll be a family.”

Rain nodded. "Where am I going to stay?" he asked, adjusting his pants.

"With us," Nevyn said, ruffling his hair. "I grabbed one of your chests, making sure it would have enough for you to stay out of there for now."

Mave took a deep breath, trying to calm down. She was ready to go in there and kill a king to protect Rain's heart. She took a step back from the others, trying to convince herself it was fine. Everything was fine. This was bound to happen. They had all seen the brewing attraction, and Rain never seemed to have a problem with the situation. In fact, she could think back to moments on the road where it seemed as though Rain was forcing them closer.

"Mave..." Rain called out softly. "It's okay. With Lily, Alchan and I can have a family, so can she. We can have children, and the Andinna will be happy about a royal heir. Hopefully, it's a girl. I wouldn't mind having a daughter." He gave her a dopey smile.

"I know," she said, looking back at him. "I was...looking at it from my perspective and not yours." She smiled because his smile was infectious.

"I'm so happy they figured it out while we were gone," he said, looking at her like his life was complete. "You know I love her, right? She's amazing, Mave. I know you don't know her very well, but she's a good soul."

"She is," Mave agreed softly, not having any evidence of the contrary.

"Lily and Alchan wanted me to tell you that you'll also be a legal father of the child, even though you aren't there for the conception," Varon explained to the dazed mutt.

"Oh, I had no doubt otherwise," Rain said, laughing. "I think I'm fine now."

"Well, now that this has been discussed...welcome home," Varon declared, looking around, his gaze passing Mave to someone behind her. "It's good to see all three of you back safely. I take it the mission was successful?"

Mave turned to see Trevan standing off to the side, silent since he and Kyn had landed.

"Very," Rain answered. "We razed the whole camp. There's no reason to believe there are any survivors. They didn't have the defense to stop our attack."

“Kyn was well behaved for the entire mission. I think we can take him on others,” Trevan added.

“Yeah, it went well,” Mave said when Varon’s gaze landed on her. “The pass was easy to blow as well. The charges worked as intended.”

“Good. Luykas is currently in charge. You’ll find him in the war room.” Varon gestured to Rain. “Those two can give the report of the mission. You should come with us so we can show you your room.”

“Good idea,” Rain said, chuckling. He sent one more glance at the home he shared, then jumped into the air with Nevyn and Varon.

Mave watched them go before turning to Trevan.

“That was interesting,” she said, hearing the two female warriors chuckle at their posts. “What are you two doing? Why didn’t they get expendable males for guard work?” When Senri was in her fertile cycle, Mave didn’t remember there being female guards posted at her door. No one was stupid enough to go anywhere near her home.

“Because females aren’t considered threats,” the taller one explained. “Alchan won’t come out here and attack us while we’re defending them during this vulnerable time.”

“Not that they need it. Alchan is the most dangerous Andinna in the valley right now,” the shorter muttered. “But it’s protocol because he is the king, and this is the future of the royal family.”

“Of course,” Mave said, nodding. “Keep my king safe and put me on guard rotation.”

“Talk to your mother. She’s in charge of it,” the tall one said, smiling. “She’s off bed rest now.”

“Thanks for the update.” Mave waved at them, then turned to walk for the war room. Trevan fell into step beside her.

“You’re right, that was interesting,” he agreed softly as they walked. “Kyn dropped me off and ran for it. I couldn’t figure out why until I heard Alchan roar inside. Not even a wyvern wanted anything to do with that.”

Mave laughed. “Alchan is not scary.”

“Says the one Andinna who can beat him in a fight,” Trevan countered.

She couldn’t argue with that.

“Fine, so he’s a little scary for everyone else. I’m just glad Rain is okay with this.” *Maybe I should ask him how he found so much peace with it. One day, I might need to consider it.*

That sent a pang through her heart, but she ignored it when they saw the war room. Kenav was outside, talking to others, and looked up as they came closer.

“No center of the village celebration?” he asked, frowning at them. “When did you return?”

“We just got back and were distracted by a small situation,” she answered, refusing to give Kenav any details.

“Ah, the mutt is missing. He must have realized Alchan needed to do his duty and is off licking his wounds because he’s no longer going to be the all-important Consort.”

Mave growled, but the door to the war room opened.

“Kenav, rude comments might be your favorite type, but I promise you if they get back to Alchan’s ears when everything is said and done, the king will still kill you for them,” Luykas snapped. “Don’t mistake Alchan’s relationship with either Rain or Lady Lilliana to be your business to draw conclusions about. Keep your mouth shut.”

“Of course,” Kenav said, shrugging. “Tell me, when can I take my men out?”

“Now that they’re back, you can leave tomorrow,” Luykas said stiffly.

“Good. I’ll go finish the preparations.” Kenav walked away, his three friends following him.

“You know, I expected more...joy upon my return,” Mave said softly, watching Kenav disappear down the trail.

“Things have been tense,” Luykas explained as he waved them inside. Mave followed and noticed as Luykas locked them in with him alone. “Once Alchan was caught up in Lily’s fertile cycle, Kenav convinced several unit commanders to swear to follow him, and he’s decided he wants to go on a larger campaign. Two hundred Andinna, attempting to push the Elvasi back into the main force. Really, it’s just a chance for him to get some kills under his belt. It’s fine, though.”

“Is it?” Mave asked, crossing her arms. “He’s going against Alchan’s plans.”

“And he’ll pay for it. Alchan will be out of his current predicament once Kenav is back. He’ll see it for what it is—a grab for glory and reputation. Kenav knows he doesn’t need Alchan to like him for the people to respect him, and he’s a social climber. Now, how did the mission go?”

Mave explained her part, and Trevan repeated what he had said to Varon.

“Good,” Luykas said with a nod. “I’m going to keep you both for a week until Alchan is freed up, but I’m already drawing up plans for Trevan to head out as soon as I can send him. Mave, I know you probably want another mission, but I want Alchan to point you around. Okay?” He huffed. “I really can’t send out Rain without clearing it with Alchan.”

“Another mission in only a week?” Trevan stepped closer. “Where do you want to send me?”

Luykas waved at the map. “Pick a blue marker, and it’s yours,” he answered. “They’re all known locations of Elvasi forces, thanks to Bryn’s scouts. Shadra spread them out farther without us being able to watch them over the winter, and I’m worried they’re going to come together to make a flanking force. As of last week, her main army started marching into the mountains.”

“How do we know?” Mave asked.

“Nyria was told to hurry up and get to her. Shadra wants her with the army when they launch their assault on us,” Luykas explained. “Nyria has been traveling north for two-and-a-half weeks now. They’ve got her moving fast, cutting the travel time down, so she doesn’t miss anything. Apparently, my mother thinks it’s important to her education to see the end of the war.”

“So, we’ve confirmed it. Shadra is coming for us, and she’s coming now.” Mave sighed. “Alchan wanted the battle in the fall. Will we still be able to make that work?”

“We don’t have that much time,” Luykas whispered. “She’s going to get here by mid-summer if she’s pushing as hard as I think she is, which makes Kenav more troublesome. He’s making it hard. Two hundred Andinna take time to move around, and he’s not paying attention.”

“So, you need to send us out sooner to stop these smaller camps from creating a second large force that could flank us.” Trevan hummed, looking over the map. “If I were Shadra, and I remember enough from training, that’s what she’ll do. She’ll bring her main force this way...” Trevan drew an invisible line with his finger, coming at the village from the south. “Then these camps will come together and go here...” He circled a group, then drew a line to hit the village from the east. “And these from the west,” he said, sighing. “That’s troublesome.”

“Even if we stop her main force here, the secondary forces will pinch the village while we’re preoccupied,” Luykas confirmed, pointing at the large valley that was the end goal for the Andinna. “So, focusing on the secondary forces and pushing them into Shadra’s main army is paramount. The only change is we thought we had more time. She’s not giving it to us.”

Mave wished she saw the maps the way they did.

“Just tell me where to go,” Mave said softly.

“WELL, with two thousand Elvasi out of the way, that’s a big deal.” Luykas flicked away a marker. “Good job, to you and to Rain. There are still a few camps with similar numbers. About a third of Shadra’s army isn’t with the main force. About eight thousand Elvasi, mostly foot soldiers and archers. They could flood this village, destroy our resources, cut off our forces from others and get into Anden.”

“A third?” Trevan hissed. “Are you saying she’s got nearly thirty thousand in her army right now? After everything we’ve done against them?”

“She’s pulled as many she can from the different holdings around the Empire, and probably thousands of these soldiers have barely finished training since they joined after we killed Prince Lothen.” Luykas sighed, looking at her. “Welcome home, love. I’m sorry I’m not giving you the welcoming you deserve.”

Mave shook her head slowly. “There are more important things to worry about. You keep up with what you’re doing. I’m going to check-in with everyone else, then join the rotation of guards at Alchan’s home.”

“Of course. Bryn is off rendezvousing with his scouts, but you’ll find the others in the training field closest to home.” Luykas leaned in and kissed her. “We’re redoing the blood bond before you go on another mission.”

“Deal,” she promised, with a smile against his lips. Then he released her, and she turned on a heel, heading for the door.

She was home, but there was still work to do.

MAVE

Mave wasted no time finding Mat, Zayden, and Emerian. She landed behind them, letting the warriors they were directing through training see her first. She knew Mat was aware of her, but Emerian and Zayden were focused on their task.

“Okay, why don’t all of you take lunch?” Mat said, a laugh in his words.

“We’re going to give them a long lunch for the piss poor morning they’ve given us?” Zayden snapped. “They’ve been lazy and awful all day.”

“Zayden has a point,” Emerian said, leaning toward Mat.

Mat waved the warriors away without replying to either male. None of them looked in her direction. Zayden growled and began to turn, and once his eyes fell on her, they went wide. She waved innocently as he looked frantically at Mat, then at her again.

Without warning, he jumped Mat, snarling.

“You could have told us our wife was back, you fucking ass!” Zayden sent both of them to the ground while Mat just laughed, not fighting back all that hard.

Emerian spun to look at her, confused for only a moment before a radiant smile took over his beautiful face. He was the first to get to her, and she let him pick her up and spin her around.

“We’ve missed you,” he murmured, holding her close once her feet touched the ground again. “I’ve missed you.”

She pulled him into a long, sweet kiss.

“And I’ve missed you.” Desperately. She had missed all of them so much. While Luykas was too stressed and busy to give her the greeting she wanted, she knew these males would.

“I wanted you to get stuff out of the way before harassing you,” Mat said as Zayden kept an arm wrapped around his throat. The hold didn’t stop him from smiling. “Especially when I felt you move to Alchan’s. Varon had already asked us to let him break the news, especially for Rain, so I kept them busy.”

“I didn’t wonder, but now I feel guilty,” she admitted. “I figured you were all busy, then I found out about Alchan, and it slipped my mind. Trevan and I went to give our report to Luykas, who had a lot to say.”

“You don’t owe us anything,” Zayden said quickly, letting Mat go and rushing over. “We’re just glad to have you home. This means Kenav can leave, and we won’t have to deal with him anymore.”

“Hmmm...yeah.” Mave nodded slowly. “There were no more fights, I hope,” she said, looking between them.

“I’m sorry. That was my fault. He insulted you, and...” Emerian dropped his head. “He doesn’t know what he’s talking about, and I couldn’t allow it.”

“Thank you for defending me, but don’t do it again. Kenav has always had a sharp tongue for people he doesn’t like, and I am at the top of that list. If I can suffer him day in and day out, so can all of you.” Mave crossed her arms, looking over her males. “Did anything else happen while I was gone?”

“No, not with us, anyway. Luykas didn’t move out this time, an improvement.” Mat chuckled and came toward her. “You’re not mad at us, right?”

“No, not anymore. I was a little annoyed when Alchan told me about it, but that was five weeks ago now. Did nothing else happen? Really?” She was expecting more.

“Aside from Luykas needing to take over because Alchan is...busy, no,” Zayden said, shaking his head. “Missions have been coming in and out. Some of them have been fairly close, trying to destroy some of the easier paths the Elvasi could use to flank our position. Some further out, but every team has less than ten Andinna, and they’re moving fast.”

Mave finally let go of Emerian and kissed her husbands, glad there was no real bad news from them.

“Do you think we can head home and properly say hello?” Mat asked her in a dirty whisper, holding her tightly once he had his hands on her.

“No, I’m going to see Senri. I hear she’s off bedrest and in charge of the guard rotation at Alchan’s. I’m going to sign up.”

“Why?” Emerian asked, a deep frown forming.

“Because I’m his Champion, and he’s my king,” she answered. It felt like the right decision—something to do while waiting for her next mission, a way to serve him.

“At least get lunch with us before you run off,” Mat pleaded, running a hand over her cheek.

“Fine,” she agreed, not seeing a reason to put up a fight.

They headed to one of the three community halls, passing through the market. People cheered to see her, but Mave didn’t feel the same joy of victory they did. Luykas’ news had put a damper on how she felt. There was so much to do and not a lot of time to do it. They had to finish this war in less than two seasons, and there were only so many who could do what needed to be done. She was one of them.

She put a smile on her face and waved at those who were excited to see her, cheering for the Champion’s return. As they entered the community dining hall, they found Luykas and Trevan in the center of a group of excited Andinna.

“How did your Kyn do on the mission?” one young male asked, his eyes shining with hope.

“He did well,” Trevan answered with a grin. “Flying with him must be how you feel in the sky. We’re totally in sync, anticipating every turn.”

“That’s amazing,” the male said softly, his eyes showing just how much he admired Trevan. “To think, an Elvasi is on our side, and he’s flying with the wings of our cousins.”

“I think it’s like the eyes. The gods must have done this,” an older male said, nodding respectfully.

“I do, too,” Mave said, weaving through the crowd with a smile. “I think the gods have gifted my friend a great honor, and he’s finally able to show us how much we mean to him.”

Trevan lifted his drink to her, a silent thank you.

“Now, why don’t we let the Champion, her husbands, and her friend eat?” Luykas yelled, waving everyone to back off. The crowd cleared as Mave sat down between Trevan and Luykas.

“So, this is what you two ran off to do? Tell war stories?” she teased, leaning toward Trevan. “It wasn’t *that* exciting a mission.”

“It was my first mission,” he reminded her. “And we did kill two thousand enemy soldiers between the three of us...with no backup. I think that makes me, you, and Rain, the most effective warriors of Alchan’s army.”

“Oh, now he gets arrogant!” Mave laughed, liking this side of Trevan.

“I’ve never had anything to brag about before. Am I doing it right?” He raised an eyebrow.

“You’re doing well,” she promised, chuckling. “Now, you don’t need to slink around in the shadows of the village. Tell everyone here what you’ve done with Kyn. Force them to recognize you.” She nearly reached out and took his hand but decided against it, unsure how he would take it. “You deserve their respect.”

“That might be pushing it,” he said, looking away with a small smile. “But thanks for the continued confidence.”

Mat, Zayden, and Emerian sat across from them. Two young males ran up and placed plates down in front of them, choice helpings of the day’s dishes. It was special treatment, the ability to not only cut the line but forgo the process entirely. Mave didn’t eat in the community halls often, neither did her males, so she knew it was the chance for the civilians to show some love and appreciation. She tried not to let it go to her head as she grabbed a venison rib.

They all ate in a silence, that she could only describe as perfect. Even though the room around them was loud with conversation and laughter, everyone at her table was quiet, just enjoying the company. They didn’t need to talk about everything under the sun. Sometimes, it was just nice being together. They were only missing one—Bryn, who was working.

“I can’t stay long,” she reminded them as her stomach grew full. “Still need to find Senri.”

“I don’t think you need to worry about that,” Mat said with a small smile, looking up.

“Really?”

“Really,” Senri said, sounding humored. “Because I have found you. Perfect timing. Obviously, I’m a mother who knows her daughter very well.”

Mave jumped out of her seat and found herself in a long hug with her mother.

“Where’s my baby brother?” Mave demanded, looking around for Willem and Gentrin.

“At home with Willem. I didn’t want to wake him up from a nap to come see you. Come on. You can visit him and talk to me.”

Mave grinned as they walked away from the table. Once they were out of the chaos of the hall, Mave and Senri leaned into each other.

“So, I’m going to assume you know about Alchan,” Senri said softly.

“I heard. I actually wanted to talk to you about it.”

“You want to join the rotation of the guard,” Senri said, seemingly unsurprised. “I am in charge of it, but you don’t need my permission. Feel free to be there any time on any day. You answer to him, and he’s in a vulnerable position right now. So is Lily. I’m sure both of them will feel better knowing you’re watching out for them.”

“Will they know? I’ve heard no one goes in or out,” Mave pointed out with a sigh. “Are they getting their rations? Eating?”

“Oh, I promise you, Alchan sticks his head out when no one is looking to grab all of that. His entire world is centered on her right now, and keeping her satisfied is more than just...” Senri gave Mave a look. “A male will feed, clean, and do everything he feels he must to keep a female happy during this time. Sure, it’s a lot of sex, probably six or seven times a day, but between, he’s devoted to her in other ways.”

Mave sputtered. “That’s a lot of sex.”

“Yes. She’ll be walking funny for a few days, but at least she only has only one male to deal with.” Senri’s expression was tired, and her expression distant. “Three was my limit, and you...Well, I don’t look forward to the day you have a fertile cycle, and those males descend on you. There might be fights.” She waved a hand, dismissing the odd mood that came over her. “Either way, don’t you worry about Lily and Alchan’s needs. Those are taken care of, but I think they might appreciate you there for other reasons. Alchan admitted to me a week into it, he was scared he was too much for her. It was a rare moment of clarity, and a bit of fresh air

normally helps the males, even if they want to be there. I think if you stick your head in, he might even let you see her.”

“Do you think she needs to see me?” Mave was certainly worried. It sounded like Alchan was fucking her until she couldn’t move, which didn’t seem all that pleasant—though Mave didn’t think the thought of fucking Alchan to be pleasant at all. She was definitely biased.

“No, but I think that Alchan is in his own head. They went from longingly staring at each other to jumping into her fertile cycle without anyone really understanding what happened. It was fast, that’s all. You know your king, Mave. He’s never given himself the credit he deserves.”

“I’ll put myself on watch then. When does he normally stick his head out?”

“Early morning, right after daily rations are dropped off.”

Mave nodded, and they dropped the conversation as they entered her room. Mave was immediately handed the baby by Willem, who looked like he hadn’t slept in weeks.

“Take him. He’s a nightmare today.”

“What’s wro—”

Just then, little Kianev screamed at the top of his lungs and began kicking his chubby legs with a ferocity that didn’t match his size.

“Oh, no,” Senri declared. “Well, the war of raising a boy never ends. Bounce him.”

Mave started to bounce while Senri checked the cloth diaper.

“He’s already eaten. I used some of our spare milk,” Willem said, rubbing his face. “The only thing I can think of is, he wants a fly around, but our last boy didn’t want that until he was nearly one, and no one was home.”

“Fly around?” Mave kept bouncing, but the little baby’s scream made her feel like her ears were going to start bleeding.

“Exactly what it sounds like,” Senri said. “One parent takes the baby outside and flies low, with another parent underneath in case the baby wiggles out of the hold.”

“Oh.” Mave handed her little brother back to her mother. “Have fun with that,” she said, smiling.

“Oh no you don’t,” Senri growled, grabbing her with one hand while she held the baby with the other. “You don’t get to run when things are bad,

daughter of mine. You get to help in the good times and the bad.”

Senri dragged her outside. Little Kianev was happy the moment he could see the open sky. The crying died down to hiccups, then little happy gurgles.

“Oh, you just wanted to come outside, huh?” Senri chuckled. “Well, we’ll fly you around another day, then.”

“That’s it? He just wanted to see the sky?” Mave frowned at the baby. She loved Kianev with her whole heart and soul, but that noise had been nightmarish.

“Sometimes, they just want to see something new or breathe the fresh air, just like us,” Senri said softly, adjusting Kianev’s swaddle. “Willem was probably too busy to bring him out here. He doesn’t like leaving the kitchen fire unattended.”

“Ah.”

“So, back on topic. Did you hear about Kenav?”

“Yes,” Mave snapped, disliking the sound of Kenav’s name from Senri’s mouth.

“Good, then you know he’s making a play to push Luykas out of power and positioning himself as a war hero who challenges the less traditional leaders of the Andinna. Watch your back, daughter. Eventually, he’ll aim for you.”

“I’m not worried about Kenav,” Mave said in a whisper. “But if that’s really his plan, he should be very worried about me.”

“He’s been playing this game since he got here,” Senri reminded her. “And he’s making ground. More and more unit commanders are looking to him for help than they are to Luykas or even Mat and Zayden, who come from similar circumstances as many of them.”

“I’m the Avatar of Kristanya, given the ability to assume the form of the black dragon. I can see the dead. I am not worried about Kenav,” Mave repeated. “But I’ll keep an eye on him. I just wish I knew why he can’t just accept the way things are. Alchan is a great king, Luykas is an intelligent general, and my males have done nothing to him aside from a fight he picked. It can’t all come back to me, can it?”

“He’s noble born, from the same household as Alchan’s mother. He’s been raised to believe he would do great things, taught to be a leader of other males. He doesn’t like that he’s being ignored because he has history

with you. Your position with Alchan has always irked him, and don't bother to deny it. You used your position to keep him out of a position he feels he deserves. Watch your back, Mave. If not your own back, then the backs of the males who rely on you."

Mave growled, understanding her mother's threat.

"He wouldn't dare hurt them."

"He can, and he would," Senri hissed. "He will force Alchan to acknowledge him as an advisor one way or another. The next time Alchan needs someone to step in, he might have to pick Kenav because he has the biggest sway among the warriors. You don't want that."

"I'll figure out something. I'll talk to my males about it. Maybe we can shift the tide while he's gone on his mission." Mave ran a hand through her hair. "I just got back, and I'm shoved into village politics."

"I'm sorry," Senri said gently, reaching out and touching her arm. "Your males see it, but they won't say anything. Maybe Luykas sees it but thinks it would never go that far, but I've seen this happen before."

"Really?"

"It's how your *father* became the number one general of the Andinna forces, even though there were females in line for it," she said. "And he was able to garner the favor of the queen who had a reportedly terrible relationship with her only son. He positioned himself to fill that hole and was rewarded for it."

"Really? Alchan and Luykas knew him, so maybe they would know the real story..."

Senri shook her head. "No, this was back when I was still a warrior in Kerit with Nevyn and Kian. Before Alchan and Luykas were even born."

"Oh," Mave said softly.

"Kenav doesn't have royal favor as your father did, but he has the respect of the warriors. Eventually, Alchan will need to use Kenav for that, and Kenav knows it. He's positioned himself well."

"I'll have my males work harder to earn their respect," Mave said, swallowing. "Fuck. Have you told anyone else this?"

"I've tried to get Luykas to listen. Seanev knows the most about this sort of situation. You should talk to him." Senri pushed her away. "Now go and take a bath, please. Then worry about all of this. Kenav is about to leave on a mission, so you have time to work through this."

Mave nodded and kissed her mother's cheek then little Kianev's forehead. Then she jumped into the sky.

Getting home hadn't been what she expected at all.

TREVAN

Four days after returning from the mission with Rain and Mave, Trevan already saw a difference in how he was treated. By the end of the third day, he couldn't eat in public without someone coming to talk to him.

And he had accidentally signed up for something he probably shouldn't have.

He finished breakfast and cleaned up before daring to go outside, wondering today, if he might find people waiting for him before he even had the chance to wake up properly. He knew Kyn was already waiting. The wyvern was attuned to him, like a big dog that knew its owner was getting up and couldn't wait for that inevitable moment they would see each other. Except he couldn't rightfully call Kyn a pet. Kyn was independent and intelligent enough to survive on his own, even if he was a small wyvern.

Kyn was a blessing Trevan sometimes didn't know how to feel about. Overwhelmed on most days, though he covered it well. He didn't want anyone thinking he didn't completely appreciate this gift the dragon gods had given him. This soul bond was possibly the best thing that had ever happened to Trevan.

It just came with several unexpected consequences.

"Good morning, Kyn," Trevan said as he walked outside onto the wooden patio.

Kyn bumped him with his nose, and Trevan laughed as he tried to head down the stairs. Kyn wanted to go fly. Kyn wanted to go see Andinna. Kyn wanted to play.

“You’re giving me mixed signals. What do you really want?” Trevan asked as he reached the grass. Kyn leaned his head against him and chittered.

Kyn wanted to see Trevan.

Trevan smiled, leaning into the wyvern.

“Yeah, I’m sorry you don’t fit through the door. Maybe we can find a place one day where you can kind of come inside. Maybe an attached stable for you to sleep in next to the house. Wouldn’t that be nice?”

Kyn lifted his head and turned suddenly, growling softly. Trevan had to step around him to see who it was.

“Hey, it’s just Luykas,” Trevan said, snapping his fingers to get Kyn’s attention. Even though they could feel each other through the bond, it was easier to make a point with real actions. Flying could be left to the bond, but it felt natural to talk to Kyn. Once Kyn lowered his head and stopped growling, Trevan patted the wyvern’s head and looked at his friend.

“Good morning,” Luykas greeted, smiling at Trevan, then casting a glance at Kyn. “Someone in a mood today?”

“No, I think you snuck up on him,” Trevan said, also eyeing his wyvern. “What do you need, Luykas? Something going on?”

“I heard about your plans today,” Luykas answered, his smile turning sly. “Did you think I wouldn’t?”

“Shit…” Trevan groaned. “I was a little drunk on wine, and they wouldn’t leave me alone, so when they asked, I said yes, just to get them to go away. I don’t even know why I thought to eat at the community hall.” He did know why, but that wasn’t something he was willing to share. He hadn’t wanted to come home and eat alone. Since his return with Mave and Rain, everyone had split up into their own groups, and now Trevan was an outsider in a new way. One of his closest friends was dead, and the other was moving into a family that fully intended on keeping him.

“And now you have to take Kyn to the training field and give a demonstration in front of a thousand Andinna warriors,” Luykas said, chuckling. “You made a very bad call.”

“A thousand?” Trevan sputtered. “There were like ten listening to me last night. H-H-How did it become a thousand?”

“Did you think it would stay quiet? If the entire village isn’t there, I’ll be surprised,” Luykas said with a grin. “What are you going to do until

then?”

“I was thinking of going for a walk, maybe even checking on Mave. She’s been camped outside Alchan’s place since we got back, hasn’t she?” Trevan hadn’t seen her since the day they returned. Not with her husbands or her family, just missing, but Trevan didn’t find himself passing by Alchan’s home very often.

“She has,” Luykas confirmed. “I was about to do the same. I wanted to check up on you first when I saw Kyn coming down from wherever he roosts at night.”

“He stays in the trees at the top of the cliff,” Trevan explained as they started walking. Kyn followed, walking on his wings as if they were legs. They walked down the cliffside, passing Matesh, Zayden, and Emerian, all who waved at them.

“Trevan, did you get breakfast?” Emerian called out from his high spot next to their front door.

“Yeah.”

“Okay. You should skip lunch before you go in front of the other warriors. We’ll be there today for moral support!” Emerian grinned, but it looked angry, thanks to his new scars. Trevan was comforted by his words, lessening his anxiety about the idiotic thing he had agreed to. It was also nice to see Emerian so relaxed and watching Mat ruffle his hair was comical.

He’s found a good place for himself. They’re reminding him he doesn’t need to be hard all the time.

The three males jumped off, heading to whatever duties they had for the day.

“They’ll visit Mave around dinner time,” Luykas explained softly. “We split the duties up. Bryn visits her at night, I see her in the morning, and they see her at dinner.”

“Why are you telling me?” Trevan asked, frowning. “I mean, that’s nice of you, but…”

“You should join me every morning. She’ll appreciate seeing you,” Luykas said with a manipulative smile.

“What are you thinking about?”

“Nothing important.”

Liar.

They saw her from a distance, leaning against the cliffside, her eyes half-closed. At her feet was a basket with a blanket covering whatever was inside.

“I see someone already brought you breakfast,” Luykas said as they closed the distance.

Mave looked down at the basket and chuckled.

“You wouldn’t believe who,” she said, sounding exhausted. Trevan felt a bead of worry begin to tumble around in his chest. Was she not sleeping again?

“Allaina?”

Mave shook her head.

“Senri or your fathers?”

Mave shook her head again.

“Kenav? He’s not even here.” Luykas shook his head. Trevan snorted, and both Andinna looked at him, wondering if he had something to say.

“Alchan?” he offered as his guess, and Mave pointed at him, nodding.

“Yup. This morning, supplies were dropped off. A moment later, Alchan stuck his head out, saw me for the fourth morning in a row, and decided he wanted to do something. He took his stuff in without a word, then put this outside, growling that it was for me.” She toed the basket. Luykas leaned down and peeked under the blanket.

“He made you breakfast that can be served cold,” Luykas whispered. “Strange.”

“From what they say, *very* strange.” Mave jerked her head at the two female guards. A different pair than Trevan had seen before, but he knew they were on a rotation. Only Mave was dedicated enough to never leave.

“Why?” he asked, focusing on the basket.

“Mave isn’t his wife, and she’s not the focus of his undivided attention. He should only be thinking about Lily right now,” Luykas explained. “This could be a good sign, though. Lily’s cycle might be in its final day or two if he’s able to think about your needs.”

“I said the same thing,” a guard said, looking down at them. “Males don’t care about females during this time. Either Mave is that important to him, or he’s beginning to think outside of the fertile cycle, which means it’s coming close to ending.”

“It could go either way because it’s you,” Luykas said, smiling at his wife.

Mave only shrugged, then looked at Trevan with interest.

“I heard you have something going on today. I’m sorry I’m going to miss it,” she said with a smirk. The smirk didn’t cover the unmistakable sadness in her eyes. “I would have liked to have seen it.”

“I’m more than willing to give you all the time you want with Kyn,” he said, lifting his hand. Kyn placed his chin there, not putting any weight on it. Trevan scratched the big boy before letting Kyn lean out to Mave, who scratched his chin.

“Yeah, but I wanted to watch the Andinna finally see you the way I do,” she whispered. “And I’m going to miss it.”

“You don’t have to miss it,” Luykas reminded her.

She looked back at the door then to him, shaking her head.

“I need to be here,” she said softly.

The door swung open, and Alchan stepped out, only wearing pants.

Everyone froze.

“Have you eaten breakfast?” he snapped, glaring down at her. Then he noticed everyone else and snarled.

“No,” she answered. “Luykas and Trevan were just stopping by to see me.”

“Eat breakfast,” he ordered. “Then get in here and check on Lily.”

“Is it over?” Luykas asked cautiously.

Alchan took a deep breath, then turned to look inside.

“I think so,” the king whispered. “Um…”

Trevan saw the king’s lost look and decided he could take action. He’d known Alchan for two years and had no reason to think he couldn’t step in and try. Everyone else was waiting for Alchan, but Trevan knew that lost expression too well, having seen it in the eyes of too many gladiators who didn’t know what to do with a difficult situation. For once, the king needed someone else to step in.

“Mave, why don’t you head in with Alchan? With your breakfast.” He reached down and grabbed her basket, ignoring Alchan’s growl. She took it from him slowly, nodding.

“Good idea,” she agreed, looking back up at Alchan.

As the door remained open, a breeze hit and made Trevan stiff as it sent a mysterious smell to his nose. He got hard immediately and considered turning away. It was one of the best things he had ever smelled, and his brain couldn't make sense of it.

"Brother, leave the front door open to let your home air out," Luykas added, his voice a little hoarser. "If it's over, you'll want to get the smell of it out of your home so you don't slip back into it. I'll let someone know to keep others away."

Alchan nodded as Mave made her way up the stairs. She ducked inside without him trying to stop her. Then he turned to the female guards.

"You're dismissed," he said softly. They cast unsure glances at each other, then left, leaving the three males in silence. Trevan tried to block out the scent, ignoring how it was causing havoc with his other senses and his ability to string two thoughts together.

The silence felt neverending, and since Alchan didn't move, neither did Trevan nor Luykas. He felt like he needed to move, but he kept his feet planted on the earth, not wanting to embarrass himself or upset anyone. Eventually, Mave stuck her head back out, looking at Alchan as though she was the center of his world for a moment.

"She's fine, brother," Mave said softly. "You didn't hurt her." Alchan began to shake, but Mave caught him as he began to list to the side. "She knows you're worried you hurt her, but she's fine. She's *better* than fine, I think. Just tired and a little bruised. Both of those are pretty normal, and you know it. She's going to need a couple of days to sleep it off. Just like you."

Trevan glanced at Luykas, who released a long, relieved breath.

"Thank you," Alchan said quietly, leaning into his Champion. "I knew you would be the one who was honest with me."

Luykas' jaw clenched as Trevan watched him. There was no missing the message Alchan really meant. If he had hurt Lilliana, he had expected Mave to punish him.

"That's why I'm here," she whispered, holding him. "But I knew you wouldn't. I knew it." She pulled away, touching Alchan's cheek. "Why don't you go rest at my home? Or Luykas'?"

"Mine is open and has no one in it," Luykas said, jumping in when he had a chance.

Alchan nodded, then glanced inside. "And Lily?"

"She can stay with me, go with you, or stay here. It's her choice."

"I'll go with you," Lily said, peeking out around Mave. "We can let someone come clean up."

Alchan nodded stiffly, reaching out to her. Lilliana exited the home and took a deep breath of fresh air, then looked down at Luykas and Trevan.

"Will one of you tell Rain where we've gone?" she asked demurely, her face flushed. "I'd like to see him. I've missed him terribly. *We've* missed him terribly."

Alchan's wobbly smile was that of a male in love. Trevan looked down, embarrassed to be witness to this.

"I'll get right on it," Luykas promised, then jumped up, heading in the direction of Nevyn and Varon's home.

"You two have perfect timing, you know," Mave smirked at them. "Now I get to see Trevan do an exhibition for a few hundred Andinna warriors."

"I'm glad we could be of service," Alchan muttered, narrowing his eyes on his sister. "Go. Thank you for being here."

"I wasn't going to let you come out of this alone," she said, patting his shoulder, then smiling at Lilliana. "We'll give you two some privacy to get your bearings."

Mave jumped down and landed next to Trevan, gesturing for him to follow her. He didn't know what else to do, so he followed like a lost boy without anything to do.

"Thanks for getting me out of there," he finally said when they could no longer see the king and the lady.

"You looked very out of place, but in a good way," she said, smirking at him. "You got me inside without pissing off Alchan. Good thinking."

"Did you eat breakfast?" he asked, knowing the probable answer.

"No. I wasn't hungry." Mave sighed. "Giving them a way out of that house is probably for the best. Sweet of her to ask for Rain. He'll be excited to see them, and we can all go back to normal."

"Normal," Trevan repeated, not believing there was such a thing anymore. Every day, he and Kyn got closer, and he felt a little less normal. As they got away from Alchan's home, he could finally piece together what he had smelled.

Why could I smell her fertile cycle? Why did it affect me?

“What?” Mave asked, looking at him with a deep frown he knew well.

“Nothing,” he said quickly. “I should go get ready for my exhibition. Lots of things to work out and everything.”

“I’ll help,” she said, wrapping her arm in his. “I’m excited.”

He led her around, appreciating how she was growing more and more casual with him. He knew he would always love her, but he was beginning to grow enough to accept she may never love him back and becoming surprisingly okay with it, as long as they were friends.

As they talked to several Andinna about how the exhibition would go, she stayed on his arm, laughing at his jokes. Once lunch came and went, he finally had to let her go. They stood in the center of a training field, and already, there had to be at least five hundred Andinna around, many hanging out in the trees, filling up the branches, while others hovered around the edge of the large clearing.

“Good luck,” she said with a smile.

“What if this goes wrong?”

“It won’t. Trust your wings.” She stepped back.

Trevan climbed on Kyn, looking at the loud crowd as he settled in place.

“Today, Trevan, the wyvern-rider, will perform an exhibition!” Mave roared, taking the place of a commentator. Andinna cheered. When she looked at him once again, he could see the faith she had in him.

Let’s go, Kyn. Let’s show her we’re worthy.

Kyn jumped into the air, his large wings taking them up. The exhibition would be a short one, showcasing Kyn’s speed and Trevan’s ability to handle him. They had placed four piles of empty crates that would be firewood otherwise and were going to destroy all four.

Kyn took them high, sending out winds that made some Andinna wobble in the air, unable to maintain their hovering. Trevan tilted, letting Kyn feel the movement and see Trevan’s plan in his mind. Kyn reacted and took them into a nosedive, racing to the grass at an alarming speed.

Four targets, four shots, Kyn. We can’t set this valley on fire.

Kyn understood and sent a fireball down on the first one, hitting it and setting it ablaze. Without pulling up, he hit the next two from a distance. It was the fourth one where he went off Trevan’s game plan. Trevan laughed

as Kyn slammed into the crates with his talons, sending bits of wood flying. When they landed on the other side of it, Kyn put his body between the remaining crates and the onlookers, then sent a final fireball, destroying the remaining “enemies.”

“Good job!” Trevan said, his laughter uncontrollable as he rubbed Kyn’s neck. The wyvern ran back into the middle of the field, stopping short of Mave, who had boldly stayed exactly where she had started.

“That was amazing,” she said as Kyn leaned down to her. Trevan wondered why Kyn liked Mave so much, only to receive an image in his mind of her as a black dragon. His wyvern had known who and what she was since the moment he met her.

He got off the wyvern and laughed as she wrapped him in a hug. He couldn’t resist spinning her around in joy as Andinna flew and ran to them, cheering. When he put her down, her face was flushed a light pink of excitement and maybe even some embarrassment.

“I’m sorry,” he said quickly.

“Don’t be,” she whispered, then teasingly pushed him into an Andinna who was close. “Enjoy this. They finally see you the way I do.”

He didn’t know what he saw in her expression, but he liked it. Whatever she saw when she looked at him, he wanted to be that person.

Eventually, his view of her was blocked. No one got between him and Kyn as they asked him questions, some even daring to touch his tatua.

“You are blessed by the dragon gods,” one Andinna said, patting him on his shoulder. “Now that I’ve seen you and your Kyn together, I know it to be true.”

“You have no idea,” he said, still looking at the place Mave had been.

MAVE

She thought she had seen it all. She was named Champion twice, fought countless battles, and endured many nightmares. She had climbed a mountain, met a goddess, and became an Avatar. She made a family with wonderful husbands and parents who were present in her life and loved her.

But for two days, the only thing she could think of was that moment. She thought about the faces of her fellow warriors as they fell in love with Trevan of the Elvasi, the wyvern-rider they now called him. She thought about the pride on his face, the jubilation, and the triumph. She thought about how her heart tried to soar from her chest as he landed in front of her and swooped her up in his arms.

Emerian knew. He saw it in her eyes when she drifted off as they walked to the first morning meeting Alchan would be attending since the beginning of Lily's fertile cycle.

"I'm not even a husband yet, and I'm no longer the fun, new toy," he said, his words light.

"I'm sorry," she said immediately, wincing. "I just can't get it out of my head."

"You and half the village," Emerian teased, taking her hand. His face turned serious. "It's okay. You can take a dozen husbands and daydream about a hundred males. I'm always going to be standing right behind you in case you need me."

"As you've made clear before," she said with a small smile, knowing even in his happiest moments, there would always be that new seriousness

inside Emerian. She was glad to see him coming back to life, letting that serious nature drop, so she could see the part of him that really drew her in. "If only you would become my husband."

He laughed, then spoke quietly. "I'm still getting to know your current husbands. I know you probably don't want me to wait around, but they all knew each other for centuries. For them, becoming a family was probably a natural extension of their friendship." He pointed at them, only ten paces ahead, but just out of earshot of their quiet conversation.

"For all of them, except Luykas, but he's different," she confirmed. For Mat, Bryn, and Zayden, being a part of her mayara was as natural as breathing.

"Exactly, and I'm different as well, and I don't have centuries with them. It's not just about you and me. It's them, too. I want them to accept me." He took her arm and wrapped it in hers. "Not just because you want me. I know they would if you asked them, but I want them to see me as one of them."

She nodded as she stopped on the trail, leaning in to give him the long kiss he deserved.

"I think you're worried more than you need to be," she whispered, her words just for him. She had seen how Matesh and Zayden were taking Emerian under their wings, forcing him to take a role with them training other warriors. She knew when she was busy, they made sure he was never lonely, as good males in the same family did for each other.

"I think you...are probably right," he admitted, just as quietly. "But I need to be sure."

"And if you're never sure? Will you disappear from my life?"

"You're never getting rid of me, so you can take that thought out of your head," he said with a growl.

"Are you two going to drag your feet the entire way?" Mat asked from now twenty paces ahead. Mave looked up and saw him smiling at them. She moved a little faster, dragging Emerian with her. While they walked, Kyn flew overhead, and she knew Trevan would be with the wyvern.

"Wipe that dreamy expression off yer face," Bryn grumbled.

"It's not dreamy," she retorted.

"It's dreamy. I know that face because I see it when ya come to bed in a good mood, and yer thinkin' about all the things yer about to do to us," he

said, crossing his arms as she walked beside him.

“Or all the things you’re going to do to me.” It was the more truthful version of Bryn’s scenario. “And I don’t look at Trevan like that. He’s my friend, and I’m happy for him.”

Bryn huffed, and Mave wanted to strangle him, kiss him, and drag his ass home to put him in timeout like a child. He was making this complicated. She desperately wanted him happy, but she knew he would be happiest if she never said Trevan’s name again, and that was something she couldn’t give him.

She remained silent for the rest of the walk, entering first when Zayden held the door open for her. Alchan was already in his place, with Rain on one side and Lily on the other. Mave watched them, seeing how Rain leaned over and whispered behind Alchan’s back to the small female, who made a clear attempt not to smile.

Mave had been worried but knew there was nothing to be concerned about now. She had known when Rain told her not to, but it had become clearer when Lily had asked for him the day her fertile cycle was over. Now, it was abundantly clear to Mave, they were going to be a solid family that endured the years together. Alchan turned each way to give them looks about whatever they were saying.

“*What’s her title?*” Mave asked Alchan without asking the room. It was something she should have already known.

“*Consort, like Rain. Spouses to a king of the Andinna can only ever be a Consort.*”

“*So, she’s your wife now. I’m happy for you.*” She meant it. Her brother deserved all the happiness in the world for all the pain he was forced to go through to get it.

“*She’s our wife. Mine and Rain’s,*” Alchan corrected. “*But thank you. Truly, sister, it makes me glad to have your blessing.*”

She inclined her head to him from across the room as she took her place across the table from him. With both his sides now taken, she was fine with something a little more distant, so she could look him in the eye, and it kept others from taking such a prime position.

“I shall say it for the room. Welcome back, King Alchan,” Allaina declared. “Your absence was noted, and you were missed, but I do believe everything was managed well while you were away.”

“Allaina, is there anything the village needs of me? Or any of the communities around Anden?”

“No, sire. You are free to focus on the war,” she said, smiling and bowing the perfect way to defer to him without disrespecting herself, her sex, or her rank.

“Thank you,” he said, nodding respectfully to her. Mave knew Allaina held a unique position, not just as the mativa of the community that hosted the war but as the only mativa Alchan was even remotely close to. They weren’t friends, but they weren’t enemies. There was healthy respect, and Allaina had grown up knowing the king when he lived on the outskirts of the village in which she trained. They had an important history.

“Senri, how is the village guard?” Alchan asked, turning to Mave’s mother.

“The village defense is also in good standing and doesn’t require your attention, my king.” Senri bowed for her king, just as Allaina had.

“Then let me get to business...” Alchan picked up a scroll, then tossed it down. “Where the fuck is my cousin?”

“It’s right there, Alchan.” Luykas reached out and pointed at the scroll Alchan had just thrown aside.

“Yes, I’ve read that,” Alchan growled. “What the fuck, Luykas?”

“He convinced several others to back him in a bid to do a larger campaign. I wasn’t going to interrupt you, so I let him take two hundred warriors and gave them a list of objectives they needed to accomplish during the campaign he wanted.” Luykas sighed. “I did what I could—”

“When he gets back, I want him stripped of his rank and put under my direct command,” Alchan snapped. “Is that clear to everyone here? I have a feeling some of you backed him...no, I *know* some of you backed him in pushing my brother into giving him what he wanted. If I hear of anything like this again, I’ll strip all of you of your rank and find commanders I can trust. Am I clear?”

Mave said nothing, but there were a number of males in the room who responded with a perfectly understandable ‘yes, sire!’ None of those males were her husbands or anyone she counted as a friend. She didn’t even know most of their names, but at that moment, they all had one thing in common. They thought of Kenav as a good commander, someone they could follow and respect. The taste left in her mouth was a foul one.

“Tell me one thing, brother...” Mave couldn’t stop herself, that foul taste in her mouth making her want to bite someone. “If you were a queen and not a king, would they have done this?”

“Not so boldly,” he answered.

“Good to know. So, they need a female to keep them in their place. Fine.” She smiled, knowing it looked more like a threat than a sign of a good mood. “Let me know when you need me.”

“I will,” Alchan smirked. “If there are any more problems, you’ll be the first I tell. I’ll leave those future punishments up to your...discerning discretion.”

The shiver of fear that ran through the room brought her immense joy, calling to something dark in her. If Alchan was disrespected, so was she because he was the ruler she would give everything for—her obedience, her life, and her soul. All of it. The dark powers of Kristanya inside her didn’t like that the ruler of its power was treated so poorly. It needed to right this wrong if it ever happened again. Therefore, Mave needed to right this wrong.

“Calm, sister.”

“They do you wrong.”

“I know, but it’s not them. I have a plan for Kenav. He’s searching for glory which will give him power, so I’m going to take the glory from him and leave him looking like a fool.”

“In two days’ time, I want to send out Rain and Trevan on two separate missions.”

Rain didn’t seem surprised, as if he and Alchan had already spoken on this. Neither did Trevan, but she knew he had already spoken at length with Luykas about his upcoming missions.

“Each will pick six Andinna to be their support in these missions. Prepare the necessary rations to support each group.” Alchan pointed to the east side of the map. “Rain, you will head east. I want you to damage these four camps. They’re relatively close. You’ll need to attack them in rapid succession so they don’t have time to come together and assault you.”

Rain nodded, leaning on the map and to read little pieces of paper with numbers, the estimated troop numbers for each Elvasi camp.

“Trevan, you’ll go west and hit these three camps. They’re the largest of her forces there, and you get the same advice as Rain. Go quickly, don’t

give them a chance to retaliate.” Finally, Alchan looked up at Mave. “The report says you attacked at night on the test mission. How did that fare in terms of cover and the Elvasi response time?”

“If they don’t attack at night, they’ll disappoint me,” Mave said in reply. “It was an easy mission because the Elvasi were on graveyard shifts with minimum resistance. They also didn’t have the ballista we know Shadra probably keeps at other camps or with her main force.”

Alchan nodded. “Then you’ll both only attack at night,” he told the two mission leaders. “You’ll also have free rein to decide which order you want to assault each of these camps. Your goal isn’t to decimate these camps. Your goal is to make Shadra’s plan unsustainable. Force her to call them back and give up the positions.”

“Why the small teams?” a bold male asked. There was always one or two every meeting who decided to ask a question, wanting to have a better understanding of Alchan’s plans.

“They’ll move faster,” Alchan answered. “Certainly, faster and more effectively than 200 Andinna ever would. A pity for Kenav, but I believe all of his potential points of attack will be gone by the time he gets there.” Alchan gave the room a vicious smile. “Too bad he’s not on speaking terms with anyone important to my plans. He would have realized we had better ways to handle these troubles if he had just waited for me to be available.”

There was a moment of realization for many in the room. Mave started to laugh, looking around at some of the pale faces. They knew Alchan was right, that Kenav was just wasting time and resources with his large campaign when they could instead make highly specialized attack forces that moved quickly and brought devastation to the Elvasi with minimum casualties to the Andinna.

Mave watched Kenav’s reputation as a strong and intelligent leader crumble. Not only was he going to be stripped of his rank, he was also proven to be a fool.

Mave was the only one laughing, and she put a hand over her mouth, trying to smother it.

“With that decided, this meeting is over. I want my closest advisors to stay in the room for a moment. The rest of you can head out and start your days.”

Mave stood patiently, watching people slink out, trying to keep their heads down. Some were proud, like Allaina and Senri, who knew Alchan needed to keep up with Kenav's ambitions or get swallowed by them.

"Good job," Luykas said once the room was empty.

"Aye." Bryn was grinning. "Makin' fools of all of 'em. Good. They deserve it."

Mave leaned back as arms wrapped around her waist. Zayden put his head on her shoulder, slouching to pull it off.

"What about me?" she finally asked. "Didn't we discuss telling everyone what I am?"

"I'm going to hold off. Rain and Trevan are powerful enough, and I need this done quickly."

"I need the practice," she said, leaning forward to put her hands on the table, making her position with Zayden uncomfortable. He let her go as Mat chuckled in the background.

"I know, but you're the most powerful, and I want to use that when it's the best time to do so. I don't want Shadra hearing about a black dragon flying in the skies. I want her to think we only have Rain and Trevan and not the other wyverns I'll be calling to the fight. I'm glad you attacked at night and decimated that camp because it leaves you a secret for a little while longer." Alchan sighed. "I know you want to go out there and fight, but you're the most important in the final battle. Do you really want to waste your time—"

"It's not a waste of time if I can lessen the load for Rain or Trevan."

"And who would you pick?" he asked softly.

Mave blinked, unsure of what he was talking about.

"You are a weapon capable of massive destruction. Rain told me several things about your mission with him and Trevan. How you spewed blue flames that consumed theirs, which couldn't be put out with water and burned everything alive in their path." Alchan narrowed his eyes. "Which one of them would you take the spotlight from, Mave? I'm not just doing this because it's the best for the war. I'm also aiming to put Trevan and Rain as the war heroes, which will piss off Kenav the most. Everyone knows you'll outdo him every chance you get, so it's not surprising. It just makes you look petty. But Trevan? He's just getting a foothold among the village, both civilians and warriors. If he comes back with stories about how he

razed four Elvasi camps, Kenav's stupid little campaign will get him nothing. He'll be done for...if he's not already."

Mave leaned further and put her face in her hands.

"You know I hate sitting out," she reminded him.

"When we have them where we want them, you'll be more than welcome to unleash everything you have."

"I won't have any practice," she mumbled.

"Do you see me practicing?" he growled. "Do you think I couldn't put together the truth of your mission myself? We're in the exact same position, Mave."

Mave straightened slowly, letting those words paralyze the room.

He knew what she didn't want him to know, what she didn't want any of them to know.

"What truth?" Bryn asked softly.

"Mave?" Zayden whispered behind her. "What's he talking about?"

Alchan glared at her, daring her to question his decision again.

"I didn't want to bring it up, but I'm the one in charge here, and if you don't care about your own life, then I will make it my priority. Now, you can tell them the truth, or I will."

Mave snarled, glaring back at him, giving her answer.

"Mave didn't want anyone to know that when she uses her ability to become a dragon and breath that blue flame, she's slowly killing herself to power it. Actually, not slowly. In fact, I bet it kills her rather quickly," Alchan explained.

Mave snarled louder. "I have to do what I can to help us win this war. Protecting me doesn't solve anything, Alchan. I'm the Avatar of Kristanya. This is why I got this power. I'll get stronger."

"I'm going to use it when it's the most effective, not waste your life on a small camp I could take with twenty Andinna and a wyvern or two that won't kill themselves!" Alchan roared, his eyes locking with hers. "I know that all of our lives are at risk, but I need to keep my best weapons ready for the final battle. You're staying, and that's the last I want to hear about this."

Mave's hands were shaking as the judgment slammed down. Her power reacted to his unbending will, enraged it would be told how and when it could do anything. She snarled again, feeling it rush through her and change

her vision. The Andinna in the room gasped, several stepping back from her.

He gave her a wordless roar, slamming his hand on the table.

“Stop testing me,” he ordered, and power exploded from him. She staggered back three steps and hit the wall, her eyes wide as his order stopped her from even looking him in the eye. Her power was shoved back, proverbially knocked off its feet, leaving her with that empty sensation she was used to ignoring now.

There was a resounding silence in the room as Mave slowly tried to force herself off the wall and stand properly. A moment later, footsteps drew closer to her, and Alchan appeared in front of her.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

She turned and walked away, knowing he wouldn’t try to stop her. She didn’t lift her eyes as she headed for the door, too angry to look at anyone. She didn’t trust herself to speak.

She just walked away.

LUYKAS

He couldn't speak as the battle of the two great powers unfolded. No one in the room had dared speak. As the figurative dust settled, Alchan was left standing where Mave had been. She hadn't stormed out—she was just gone.

Luykas glanced at Mat, the male standing so still, Luykas wondered if he was breathing.

“What just happened?” Zayden asked, the first bold enough to speak.

Alchan sighed, turning to the grumpiest male in their family. He didn't say anything as he stared at Zayden, then headed back to his place in the room between Lily and Rain. He leaned on the table with one hand, looking weary as he rubbed his face with the other.

“My powers tell me to dominate. They tell me I need to control everyone and everything at all times. It's a balancing act. I have to be careful, or I could rob people of their free will. It's the fatal character flaw of Larianna, and therefore, it's the fatal flaw of her Avatars. Compound that with the natural dominance of my family, and you get a deadly combination. A perfect match, which is fitting since Larianna brought my line into existence for the pure purpose to rule the Andinna.” Alchan pushed back off the desk.

“Mave's powers, her connection to Kristanya, tells her she's the most powerful being that has ever existed, that she shouldn't need to submit to the will of anyone around. Mave is the best warrior and feels she should be out there fighting because she is the best. We've had this argument before.

She's also been the most dominant Andinna but outside of our social structure for years. It stands to reason, Mave and Kristanya are just as much of a perfect fit as Larianna and me. Which is going to make our arguments more explosive."

"Because the goddesses themselves have the same arguments," Luykas said, the pieces fitting together nicely.

"Yes," Alchan confirmed softly. "But I shouldn't have called her out to everyone here. Her business with her powers..." Alchan looked at Luykas, then around him, probably at Mave's other husbands. "She just wants to keep all of you safe and not worried about her. I understand that. I shouldn't have said anything."

"She wants us *safe* while killing herself with those fucking powers," Bryn growled.

"In the end, that's the risk she and I both have to take. We're carrying parts of goddesses in us, Bryn. The two most powerful. I understand it makes you angry with me. I'm trying my best—"

"I'm not mad at you," Bryn snapped. "I'm mad at her."

Luykas winced, unwilling to speak again because he understood. He knew why Bryn was angry. He dared to look at Mat and Zayden, seeing their blank expressions. Well, Zayden's was less blank. There was a storm brewing in that one. Mat was more careful.

"I'm going to talk to her," Bryn said, decided in his course of action.

Mat jumped into action, grabbing Bryn and holding him in place. He moved so quickly, he knocked Luykas over, who barely had a moment to grab the table to keep himself on his feet.

"Mat?" Luykas looked at the male, Mave's first husband. Luykas loved Mave with everything he had in him, but he knew if there was one Andinna in the room who truly *knew* her, it was Mat.

"No," Mat said strongly. "You're not chasing after her."

Bryn glared at him. "Really?"

"She's doing this for us. Do you really think she wants to be berated for it? She just lost Kian. That's what drove her up that mountain. Give her some time to cool off, then we'll talk to her." Mat pulled Bryn closer. "She was just shut down by Alchan. I won't have any of us add to that."

"Asshole," Zayden snarled from next to Luykas.

“He’s right,” Luykas snapped at the grumpy ass. He fixed himself and turned to his brother. “You...I can’t say you were wrong to call her out, and thanks for telling us she was keeping secrets. I can’t say you were right, either. We’ll figure this out.”

“I know you will,” Alchan said, letting Luykas meet his gaze. There was a time when they could stare each other down. Luykas had always known Alchan had been holding back, with him, then with Mave, but there was a time when it seemed natural to look his brother in the eye. It didn’t anymore. Now, Luykas knew just what sort of disparity there really was between a royal Andinna and a mutt with a small claim to it. Alchan’s Avatar status only made that disparity grow. Now, it was uncrossable. They couldn’t even pretend to be equals anymore.

And that’s fine. He’s always going to be my brother. We made that promise to each other centuries ago because we knew a moment like this would come, eventually.

“I hate to change the subject, but I do need to stay on task for this meeting,” Alchan said, clearly having a hard time getting them back on track.

Luykas forced Zayden to turn to Alchan, then waved Mat and Bryn to come up to the side of the table as well.

“What do you need?” he asked.

“Rain and Trevan need to pick their six for their missions. Obviously, none of us can go with them,” he said. “So, unless they have ideas about who they might want to go, it’s best we make them a good list to choose from.”

Both males were silent as Alchan looked at each of them.

“Oh.” Mat started to grab a quill and a scroll. Luykas slid a jar of ink to him. He started scribbling down names quickly. “These have been the standout warriors in my training group. I don’t know their allegiances, but I’m assuming Kenav’s most loyal left with him. Plus, we can lean on them being chosen for some of the most important missions of the war to be on their best behavior.” Mat looked down the table and pushed the scroll across Luykas to Zayden. “Do you have any you want to put down?”

“Sure,” Zayden growled softly, grabbing another quill. There was always at least a dozen thrown around the table. He started writing, a little

slower than Matesh. When he was done, he slid the parchment in front of Luykas. “Anyone you would say no to?”

Luykas frowned, looking down. He took Mat’s quill and scratched out two male unit commanders.

“They stood with Kenav,” he explained. “I’m not sending anyone with Rain and Trevan, who is publicly in favor of that asshole.”

“Good call,” Mat agreed. “Maybe we should send both of them with females. They would never fall in line with Kenav.”

“I can ask Yenni to put forth some names. I’m not comfortable sending twelve females out at once, but I’m certain a couple for each team will give Yenni intel the males might not tell us,” Alchan said, nodding. “I’ll be on this for the rest of the day. Trevan, stay with me and Rain.” Alchan turned to Lily. “Do you think you can crunch the numbers? Can we really afford the supplies to send them out after Kenav took so much of our reserve?”

“I just need to know how many weeks they think these missions will take. With the last supply shipment from Kerit and the northern community, we should be able to cover a mission that lasts the rest of spring. Kenav definitely makes it tight, but I’ll make sure everyone gets what they need. I’ll need to consult with...with Allaina about it, but I’m sure she’ll be willing to talk to me.”

“She’s not Leria, don’t worry. Thank you,” he said softly, leaning down to kiss her head.

Luykas smiled, a rush of goofy pride going through him, making him temporarily forget the problems they faced. He was damn happy for his brother—two spouses, both perfect for him.

This is why we fight. So even Andinna, like my brother, have a chance.

And there could be a baby on the way. I’ll be an uncle. We’ll get to be uncles.

“You can all go now. Tomorrow, we’ll have the mission details to review, then we can send out the two teams the next dawn.”

Everyone streamed out of the room without much left to say. As Luykas followed his fellow husbands, he was grabbed by Alchan.

“I need you tonight,” Alchan said softly. “I want to get some updated details from Nyria if we can. How are the other spies?”

“Most are reporting the problems with the Empire, keeping us up to date on the situation there. They haven’t been able to safely run slaves to us for

months, but Shadra is so desperate, she's not killing Andinna outright in the Empire. She needs them working. They're safe where they are, and moving them is too risky. At last count, there are 3,241 Andinna waiting on us to win." It was more than Luykas had hoped for and less than he wished for. Earlier counts had been lower than three thousand, but Luykas knew they would lose many warriors in the upcoming fight. There was a chance the Andinna population would remain under ten thousand for several generations. Enough to survive, but not nearly what they had been.

"Thank you. See you after dinner?"

"Of course," Luykas promised, then jogged to catch up with Mat, who walked behind Zayden and Bryn. "Are they still upset?"

"Yeah, but they understand our reasons for keeping them from bothering her. Am I pissed she kept how bad it really was from us? Yeah, but that's who she is. We can't change her."

"Her willingness to do whatever is necessary is one of the reasons we fell in love with her," Luykas said softly, nodding.

"Exactly. We need to support her, give her a place to rest her head, not become openly hostile. We'll sit her down when she's calmer and have a discussion."

"That's our right as her males. If those two don't like it, they know the recourse they have. She's a powerful female, and they know they won't be able to change her." Luykas had known powerful women his entire life—his mother, his grandmother, and his aunts—and knew the burden they carried. He even saw it in Alchan, the weight on their shoulders. He despised his mother for who she was now, but he couldn't deny she was powerful. Mave fell right in line with all of them—another powerful woman who carried too much weight on her shoulders.

We just need to convince her to hand off some of the burden...when she's calm.

"They would never," Mat said softly. "Disagreeing with her decisions and being angry about it is understandable. Leaving the mayara is...I can't imagine it. They just need to cool down."

Luykas only nodded.

Neither of the males ten paces ahead said anything. They headed for their normal training field, where they found most of their warriors waiting.

Luykas often stopped in to see what everyone was doing, but when they stopped, he realized Emerian hadn't come with them.

"Where is Emerian?" he asked, frowning at Mat and grabbing his elbow before he went to join the group.

"I have a feeling he's with Trevan. They're close friends, and Trevan is about to go on a dangerous mission."

"I didn't think to stop him when Mave left. Do you think he went looking for her?"

"If he's an idiot," Mat muttered. "But he's not someone we really have any control over."

Luykas accepted that and watched as Mat got Zayden on track to train the warriors. They were some of the best-trained warriors in the village, but that didn't mean Mat and Zayden took it easy on them. In fact, they only got tougher, forcing the warriors to work toward the same skill level as Nevyn forced the Ivory Shadows to be. Luykas grabbed Bryn and pulled him to his side.

"You've been in a mood," he said softly. "Since I told you about Trevan's feelings for Mave."

"I'm working on it," Bryn muttered.

"His feelings for her aren't her fault," Luykas growled, leaning down to the rogue's level. "Do you understand me? And her feelings, if there are any, for him, are not something you'll hold against her."

"He's—"

"Chosen by the gods to become a part of our society," Luykas snapped. "Soul bound with a wyvern so he can fly with us."

"Yeah..." Bryn looked down. "I'm thinking of joining him on his mission."

"What?" Luykas snarled, almost forgetting he was trying to keep his voice down.

"I...need to see," Bryn said, huffing. "I'll leave you in charge of my scouts. I need to see him fight for us. I need to be there."

"Are you planning to hurt him?"

"No. Everyone else seems to be over that he's Elvasi. I don't understand. Even the gods..."

"I'm Elvasi," Luykas hissed. "And so is Emerian."

"You're half-Andinna," Bryn retorted.

“And Trevan is about as Andinna as the gods can make him,” Luykas said, trying to get through to Bryn. “But if you need to see...I’ll bring it up to Alchan tonight. Maybe we can put you in the place of someone else. I’ll handle your scouts, just leave me everything I need.”

“Thank you. I’ll go get everything for you to manage them. I’ve told them they can trust any of you, so you don’t need to worry about that.”

Luykas was grateful. Bryn chose odd Andinna for scouts, the ones who were scared to join the community or live in community barracks. They preferred to live off the land because they could trust the forces of nature more than they could trust anything else. It made them very good at what they did, roaming the Dragon Spine without back up and unseen by the enemy.

Luykas let him go, and Bryn jumped into the air. Luykas sighed. Yet another thing to talk to Alchan about once evening came.



LUYKAS WALKED into his empty home and looked around. He saw traces of the day Rain, Alchan, and Lily had stayed, but they had left it relatively untouched and clean. He started a fire, noting the remaining bits of a previous fire, the one spot his brother and family forgot to clean. He was smiling as the new fire started blazing, and Alchan walked in.

“I was just warming everything up,” he told Alchan, who went into the kitchen. Luykas listened to the pouring of drinks and didn’t move until Alchan brought him a mug of wine.

“This should help,” his brother said kindly. “Thank you for doing this tonight.”

“Yeah, and I need you to do me a favor.” Luykas didn’t beat around the bush. “Put Bryn on Trevan’s team.”

“What?” Alchan was clearly confused.

“He wants to...better know and understand Trevan. He thinks working with him will help him overcome his problems with the Elvasi-born male.” Luykas sighed. “It worries me. Bryn is fast with a knife, and Trevan is... important.”

“Yes, he is—”

“He’s in love with my wife, and I want them to be together,” Luykas admitted, interrupting Alchan. “Obviously, he’s important for the war and everything, but...”

“I see,” Alchan said softly. “You want to see them succeed where our father and your mother failed.”

“You know me so well,” Luykas said with a wry chuckle. “But yes.”

“You meddle too much, but I’ll allow it. I think Mave wouldn’t have a problem with him.” Alchan chuckled as well. “He’s honorable and powerful. He would be the perfect finishing touch on a family for her. Yes, I like that. You’re lucky he’s a stable, honorable man, Luykas, or I would have a problem with your meddling.”

“You’re *not* allowed to be more protective of *my* wife than *I* am,” Luykas warned, but there was no heat behind it. “I’m allowed to meddle just a little in my wife’s life. Though, Emerian jumping into the spot of lover almost complicated everything. I was worried, but he’s a good male. Six is a fine number, don’t you think?”

“Seven if you include her,” Alchan said with a bemused grin. “That’s how many dragons there are, and they’re all one happy family...mostly.”

“Three’s a good number, too.”

“Four,” Alchan whispered, the smile turning into a wistful thing.

They stood there smiling at each other like fools for longer than they had any right to. Then Luykas realized what his brother had said.

“You already know? It’s been...two-and-a-half days since her cycle ended. That’s way too little—”

“I know,” Alchan said, looking into the fire. “I knew the moment her fertile cycle was over, and I could think clearly. My powers revealed to me the truth. It’s too early to be too hopeful, so I haven’t told them, but...four. My family is going to be four in two years.” Alchan finished his drink. “Now, let’s get you to your sister. We can play catch up once these missions are sent off. I’ll make sure Bryn is with them.”

Luykas nodded and headed to his empty bedroom. He performed the spell quickly, knowing his brother was watching over him.

He found himself inside a tent with his sister, watching her brush her hair, as she probably did every night. She looked up, unsurprised to see him, and sighed. She put the hairbrush down and grabbed a cloak, then left the tent without saying a word. He followed her, looking around to make

sure no one was watching them. They walked toward the woods, and she didn't go in, but he did, ducking behind a tree.

"Sometimes, I wonder if you just like to see me," she said softly.

"Maybe I do. You *are* my younger sister." And now, he said that like he meant it. They had seen each other, so many times, he truly believed a bond was being built.

"You need information." She didn't let him get sentimental. He couldn't hold that against her, though. She grew up in a home without love, and when there was love, it was a weapon. He hoped one day, he could truly see her, and she could meet the rest of his family. He hoped she would see love not as a weapon used to hurt people but as something joyful.

"I came to confirm information. The camps Shadra has east and west of her main force. Flanking forces?"

"Yes. She'll join them together at the beginning of summer to march on your village and pinch it. You should evacuate, but you already know that. She's coming for you, Luykas. She's forcing me to watch. We won't be able to speak as much once I'm there."

"I know, and don't worry, we have our plans set. You'll probably hear about them after they've happened."

"As long as you know. I want to see this through."

"Have you thought about your role in it?"

Nyria shook her head. "I'm trying not to. I know she'll need to die, and I'm her heir, but no, I don't think about it. It was never about the power, Luykas. It was always just my...my own distaste for the way the Empire does things."

"You'll be able to change things."

"Maybe," she agreed softly. "But that's looking too far ahead. I won't survive if I try to plan so far ahead. One day at a time, one step at a time. Long-term plans are fine, but first, I must not get caught. Speaking of which, they'll notice if I'm gone too long. I hope you've heard what you needed to hear."

"I have, thank you."

She nodded once, the classic gesture of respect, and he sent himself back to his body.

Alchan was waiting for him. Luykas sighed, feeling the wave of exhaustion hit him. His brother hauled him up and started to half drag him

out of the bedroom into the main room.

“We’re still right about Shadra’s plans of creating two forces to flank us. We’re on the right track.”

“Thank you. Get some sleep, brother.” Alchan lowered him onto one of the soft cushions, then grabbed a blanket, tucking it in over him.

Luykas tried to nod, but his eyes drifted closed.

MAVE

Mave left the village. She hadn't known where she was headed when she walked out, only known she needed to go somewhere. She walked until she saw an outer guard tower and growled. She was still within an easy flight back to the village, but night was falling.

She kept walking, ignoring the guard tower because she couldn't stop her feet. She walked until she saw a mountain in the distance, then jumped into the air and started to fly, covering the distance much quicker.

I can still make it back to the village by dawn.

She pressed on and flew around the mountain, even though her wings began to ache. Then she found something that made her land. Ruins, crumbling and being taken over by the very mountain. She walked to them, noting the sheer climb that led to them. Flying was the only way to reach the ruins.

A temple, then. I've found a temple. I wonder if others know this is here.

Walking inside, she looked at the black marble structure that was trying to withstand the centuries of neglect. She stepped carefully, not wanting to disturb anything.

"Deeper, you'll find a sanctuary," Kristanya said, appearing beside her. Mave frowned at her, wondering how the goddess knew that. "This is one of my temples."

"Oh..." Mave didn't know what else to say as she continued deeper. The walls held faded paintings, torn tapestries, and torches. Mave had seen a great temple, apparently the biggest of Anden on the mountain. This one

was much smaller but no less grand. It was more intimate, making her feel as though the things that happened here weren't for crowds.

"My priests and priestesses are often retired warriors nearing the ends of their lives," Kristanya explained as she followed. "Many times, they went unmarried in life, or their loved ones had already passed on. I would have a high priestess that made sure all the temples around Anden were maintained, I guess, technically, as my Avatar, you are my high priestess now. This will fall on your shoulders one day...if you live to see that day."

"Did you want me to come here?" Mave asked, reaching out to gently touch a painting of a wingless black dragon.

"No, you decided that all on your own. Or maybe my powers inside you guided you here. I'm stronger here." Kristanya walked past her, nodding appreciatively at the temple. "They never expected to see me, and I certainly couldn't visit, but in these places, I could see more clearly—a gift to all the dragon gods. In our own temples, we had a closer view of the mortal realm. I guess this translates."

"It amazes me when you admit you don't know something," Mave muttered. All-powerful goddess who existed before the world was even created, yet there was knowledge she didn't have.

"We all have our limitations. They're necessary to maintain the balance of the world. I can't properly come to this realm until I defeat my sister and break through the barrier. You'll die if you overuse my powers. Limitations."

"I bet you had a laugh when Alchan shut me down," Mave said with a small growl.

"No. I've been on your end of that exchange. My sister would rather send her husbands to do something than me."

"What do you mean?"

"A long time ago, there were wars between the gods. I wanted to consume them all, leaving us the only remaining ones. And why not? We were here first." Mave couldn't disagree with that logic, so she didn't interrupt. "My sister disagreed and sent me to our current home realm, forcing me out of this mortal world. Then she had her husbands create this very mountain range, and a simple warning was given to the other gods. If they crossed into our territory, our home, she would unleash me on those trespassers. None of them crossed the line. Eventually, they all joined me in

the next realm. Larianna believed our time among the mortals was over. The world was finished, and the laws of nature ruled all. Our job was complete.”

“Then everyone started to make races,” Mave said, almost as a question, but more of a statement, an educated guess.

“That’s right. First humans came. They didn’t really follow any gods but would, eventually. There had never been life quite like the intelligent human. The gods of the deep earth decided to make the dwarves with humanity as the basis, unable to recreate whatever that human spark was. Repeat that for several pantheons, and last were us and the Shining Gods—the Elvasi created by those vain creatures. The Shining Gods created their people and believed them to be perfect, so they fell into a slumber and never awoke again. They slumber to this day. Finally, my sister wanted to experience the concept of motherhood. It’s in her nature. She created the Andinna and the wyverns, realizing we dragons were of a dual nature.” Kristanya looked around the temple and went to one particularly faded image on the wall. Mave followed her, looking at it closely.

“This is you, giving up your wings,” Mave said, reaching out to trace the black dragon with wings, standing over a wingless Andinna with no features. In the next portion of the image, the black dragon was tearing them off. In the image, those wings were on the Andinna, and Kristanya was walking away.

“I couldn’t experience what my sister did, but I could add to her creation at great cost to myself. I couldn’t allow anything my sister sent into the world never know the joy of flying. The sky is ours. It will always be ours.”

“So, you are the oldest gods, and we are the youngest people.” Mave turned away from the image. “Poetic.”

“Isn’t it?” Kristanya sighed. “Come. Something drew you here, and I truly believe you need sanctuary.”

“Why?”

“When my sister forced submission from me, I ran to the darkness to comfort myself,” she answered so softly, the wind would have stolen the words if Mave wasn’t so close.

They journeyed deeper and finally reached a set of double doors.

“Go,” she ordered. “Find peace. He is the king, and in the end, you *must* answer to him. But in there...” She gave Mave a small smile. “You’ll understand.”

Mave pushed the double doors open and entered the dark room. They softly closed behind her on their own, and she was in a room devoid of even the smallest of lights. She could have walked for miles and wouldn’t know where she was.

To others, such darkness would be scary, but to her, it radiated peace and fed something in her soul. She lowered herself to the floor and didn’t bother to close her eyes to meditate. There was just endless black. She couldn’t even see her own hands.

For a time, Mave found peace. Here, she was in her element. Here, nothing could hurt her. It gave her a space where she could truly clear her thoughts and ease the inner turmoil. Her powers had so wanted to challenge Alchan, but here, she was peaceful enough to understand and accept the wisdom of Alchan’s decision.

She didn’t know how long she stayed, but eventually, she felt ready to stand and turned around. She couldn’t see anything, but she could feel the world of the living beyond the door.

It wasn’t her world, not really. Or it didn’t feel like her world. When she made her way through the door, Kristanya was still there, giving her a sad expression.

“So, becoming an Avatar really does change your nature,” the goddess said.

“Will I always feel this way?” Mave asked, wondering if she dared go too far from the sanctuary she had only just discovered. It felt like home in there as if she had found peace for the first time in centuries.

“You have been touched by darkness. You carry a piece of it inside and will until you die,” Kristanya reminded her. “You will always feel this way.”

Mave felt tears prick her eyes as the world of the living seemed too intimidating. Back to the loud, back to the vibrant, back to a place she had no control over.

Then she felt something else, something calling her back.

Mat wanted to see her, and she held onto that feeling, letting it guide her feet.

“But you have something I will never have,” the goddess said as Mave walked past her. “Connections to the world I can’t make. You’ll always seek darkness, my Avatar. If you’re anything like me, darkness will welcome you far more often than the world of light and living, but you have living connections. You were born to their world. Don’t be afraid to go back to it.”

Mave blinked, realizing it was her blood bonds with her husbands that made her different from Kristanya, that would welcome her back to the world of the living. This goddess knew no love except that of her sisters, but even they could barely tether her to a world that didn’t truly accept her. Darkness had always been traditional evil, feared and reviled. People run from death, always trying to escape the inevitable.

“I’m sorry,” Mave said, turning to Kristanya as realization came to her. This angry, arrogant goddess wasn’t cruel for cruelty’s sake. She could be mean and knew how to strike at the heart of a person with a callous remark and sneer. The only peace she could find was one where no one else wanted to follow her. Her sisters would never find peace in the void. The males loved Larianna.

Kristanya was *alone*, and there was no one who would ever really understand.

“Until you,” Kristanya said. “No one could understand until you.” She gave a vicious smile. “But if you tell anyone, I’ll destroy you.”

“Of course,” Mave whispered. “I’m going to head back. Thank you for the suggestion to...” Mave waved a hand back at the double door.

“There’s one in every temple. Normally, only the most desperate go in, then they...” Kristanya sighed. “They would plead for death.”

“Would you grant it?”

“Sometimes,” Kristanya answered, looking away. “Sometimes, the soul can’t take the burden any longer. I judged them carefully. Many times, I would send them back, hoping my rejection of them would give them a renewed will to continue.”

Mave nodded and headed for the temple entrance. Night had completely fallen, and she had no idea what the time was. She could make it back by dawn, or she could make it back by midday. There was no way to know.

Mave didn’t launch, turning back to the goddess, still in the temple, as if she didn’t want to leave, either.

“I heard you take the souls of children as well,” Mave said. “That your priests and priestesses...” Here, in this very temple, Mave knew what was done. What could have been done to a wonderful male like Varon. She wanted to understand before she left this place.

“I didn’t ask for my priests and priestesses to do that, but...” Kristanya stared off into the distance. “A mother wyvern lays a clutch of eggs, and if one is...if one is destined not to survive, it is a mercy. It’s a cycle. A dark one, I don’t deny. It’s a painful cycle to bring life into the world and see it ended so quickly. My priestesses and priests are not cold-hearted. The child is named, treated well, given toys, and loved. The parents can grieve and say goodbye, something others never have the chance to do with their loved ones. There is no suffering or pain for the babe. The duties I represent, the part of the cycle I rule is the one that brings pain. It can also bring peace... and mercy.”

“They’re children.” Mave had a new perspective on that. She had held her younger brother and fallen deeply in love with the fragile, little life who only wanted to be protected and loved.

“I know,” Kristanya whispered. “Oh, I know.”

“Blindness...”

“Is one of the lesser things I’ve seen,” the goddess said, refusing to meet her eyes. “You don’t wish to know of the others. Blindness is a...curse. It will let them live, but it will never let them fly. And that...that is the ultimate pain for ones of the sky.”

“Varon’s lived a good life,” she snapped, suddenly angry.

“Ask him if he was happy,” Kristanya snapped in return. “While he was locked away in a temple, protected from himself. Ask the charity case if he knew *joy* before he met his love. Not all of them meet a great love. Not all of them get to become an Avatar and be made whole. In fact, he’s the first blind Andinna to survive to adulthood. There’s a reason blind babies are brought to me, Mave.”

“But—”

“They commit suicide before they reach adulthood,” Kristanya snarled, getting into her face. “They don’t make it through puberty. They cry out for the sky, then try to fly when they can no longer resist the urge. There’s a *reason*, Avatar.” Kristanya grabbed her arm. “You don’t have to like it, but when they come to *me*, they can finally *fly*. They can finally touch the sky,

and I can watch them soar the way they were meant to.” She pushed Mave as she released her. “Now, go back to the world you have one foot in. We’re done here.”

Then she was gone, and Mave felt the noticeable absence of her presence.

Mave jumped into the air and headed for the village. She felt Mat’s worry for her, wondering where she was, and their bed was empty, hoping he could see her.

But when she reached the village, just before dawn, she didn’t head home. Landing on the wooden perch, she pushed into Varon’s home without knocking.

He was waiting for her or for something. He didn’t seem surprised by her visit as she walked into the main room and stood in front of him.

“There’s something wrong,” he said simply. “What do you need?”

“I found one of the temples for Kristanya. Apparently, sanctuaries are built into them.”

“Yes.” Varon nodded simply. Nevyn walked out from the back hall, saw them together, and turned around, giving them privacy.

“While I was there, Kristanya explained to me about her priests and priestesses and...”

“You asked her about the young, didn’t you?” Varon sighed. “I see it. You came here to ask me some uncomfortable questions. Well, I should have known this was going to come for me.”

“She said...” Mave had a hard time finding the right words. The way Kristanya had said it was harsh, brutal, like all the things the goddess did. “She said, you’re the first one to make it to adulthood...that others...”

“There’s a reason the priests and priestesses called my parents fools but agreed to take me in,” Varon whispered, turning away from her. “Let’s get something to drink.”

“What were they thinking?”

“That if I was showered in enough love, I would never want to end my own life,” Varon answered softly. “They loved me and hoped even more of that love would save me from the inevitable.”

“Inevitable?”

“Yes. One of the greatest punishments for an Andinna is removing their wings. Normally, they’re executed shortly after, but sometimes, they’re

forced to live without those wings.”

“Shadra does that...”

“And what happened? What does that punishment lead to?” Varon went into the kitchen, Mave slowly following him.

“They waste away.” Mave crossed her arms, holding herself tightly as she thought about the times she had been so close to that punishment.

“A blind Andinna is cursed to that existence from the very beginning of our life. Eventually, I just got used to unending sadness, the deep depression I faced every day. I was locked in a prison of love, Mave. They wouldn’t let me outside the main entrance for fear I would run for the edge and jump.” Varon took a long, shaky breath. “Mave, there were days, I wished my parents had instead sent me to Kristanya rather than curse me to an existence in a world I could not properly live in. When I turned one-hundred and was given my first tatua, I wept because I had broken the record of Andinna like me, not for joy but for the understanding they would never let me die.” Varon leaned over and covered his face. “I lived that way for over five hundred more years, accepting I was in the most loving, torturous life that could be imagined—until Nevyn walked into my life and showed me what love really was.”

“And you beseeched the goddess—”

“I finally tried to kill myself at her altar of love because I couldn’t leave with him, and he had to go. I cut myself open and told Amonora without his love in my life, I could no longer suffer living on this earth. She chose me as her Avatar, giving me the one thing that would keep me alive to be with my heart, and took away the thing everyone had loved me for.”

Mave put a hand over her mouth. Whatever peace she had found in that sanctuary was crushed by the reality of Varon’s life. She wanted to run from the truth.

Kristanya had been right.

Acknowledging that shook her to her core because it meant one day, someone would ask her—someone would ask her to be that merciful death.

She had expected great power, and every time she was confronted by the truth of what she had become, she found herself realizing she had gotten much more than she bargained for.

She thought about little Kianev, and her heart broke in half.

Varon saw her expression, and they had a moment of understanding between them. He had once stood in her shoes, realizing his powers had irrevocably changed him.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“You represent the darkest parts of our culture, the hardest parts of our existence, but it’s not all painful. It’s necessary.” Varon finally grabbed a wineskin and took several large gulps before he leaned on the counter again and sighed once more. “I know this wasn’t the answer you wanted. You were hoping for a way to fight against your goddess and the practice. Go back to that temple whenever you get the chance. Learn more. There are some remaining priests of Kristanya who have the full training required to be initiated into the service. I can send them to you when you’re ready. You hold a needed place in our society, and maybe they can help ease the painful truths and explain things. They can also protect your sanctuaries and maintain places for you to rest when the truths of your position become too painful.”

“Where are your sanctuaries?” she asked, leaning on the wall. At that moment, Nevyn walked back in, looking between them as he made his way to Varon’s side. Silently, he wrapped his arms around Varon’s waist.

“Right here,” the Avatar replied. “I hope my words offered some clarity to you.”

“Thank you for talking to me.”

“Any time.” He leaned forward and kissed her forehead.

She nodded and left. She didn’t rush back to the sanctuary to be haunted by his words. She went home because she needed her husbands. She needed them more than she could breathe, tired of talking about darkness and death and despair. She just wanted them.

As the reality of her new place in the world crashed in on her, the representation of darkness and death, sometimes painful and sometimes a mercy, she ran for her husbands.

She walked inside to see her husbands waiting for her at the table—even Emerian.

“How are you feeling?” Mat asked softly.

She sat down quietly and decided what she would say.

MATESH

Mat believed, without reservation, he knew Mave inside and out. He knew her moods, her fears, her worries, her hopes. He knew what she liked and didn't like, even if she never put those into words because she didn't like to make a fuss about the small things. She never had. The pits had taught her fussing about minor discomforts was a waste, so she silently suffered.

The look on her face as she walked into their home and saw them waiting for her was one he had never seen before.

"How are you feeling?"

She sat down across from him without answering, looking around the room. She was mulling over her response, and he waited with bated breath, wondering if she was finally going to open up to them.

"Overwhelmed. I'm overwhelmed. My powers, what I have to..." Mave sighed. "Maybe I should start from the beginning. Yesterday, I left and just started walking in the direction that felt the best. I found a temple of Kristanya, an old ruin really. It took me most of the night to fly back from it."

"I know of it," Luykas said softly. "We have it marked on the map to rebuild when we're done with this war."

Mat turned to glare at him. Their wife was trying to tell them something important. Luykas looked away. Mat turned back to Mave, who didn't seem annoyed. In fact, she gave a small smile.

“Kristanya and I spoke...about a lot, really. She showed me there was a sanctuary built for people inside her temples, and it was...wonderful, dark, peaceful, but, um...it didn't last long. I asked about something I guess I didn't understand well enough.” Mave leaned over with her elbows on the table, letting her hands hold up her head as she stared down. “I knew a little about what happened in those temples. She got pissed off and sent me to Varon.” She took a deep breath. “Because he would understand it better than anyone, considering he escaped it.”

“Oh.” Mat knew the implication. It was the darkest part of the temple's duties. It was whispered about but never spoken about openly because no one wanted to invite that suffering on themselves.

Zayden fell into the seat beside her, wrapping an arm around her, and she leaned into him.

“I came out of that temple...realizing...” Mave blinked, then closed her eyes. “I don't really belong here anymore, at least I don't feel like I do. It's odd to explain, really. She, and therefore I, find the most peace in a space devoid of light and life. When I left that sanctuary, it felt like I was returning to a world that didn't suit me, as if I had to bring up a mask again, an act to pretend I belong in this world.” Mave rubbed her temples. “And it's fine. I've always been a little out of place, haven't I?” She gave them a wry smile. “I don't act like normal Andinna. It's so...overwhelming right now.”

“Mave—” Bryn tried to say something.

“So, I wanted to say I'm sorry,” she said, swallowing. “I can't do this alone. I can't face this alone, and I thought I could and only hurt everyone in the process, including myself. There are going to be times when I go somewhere you can't follow me. I have one foot in her domains, which are no places for the living. I should have told you the toll her powers take on me. I should have said something. You're the reasons I come back. I can't carry this on my own, and I'm sorry for trying to hide it from you.”

“We love you,” Mat said. “We love you. You have that.”

“I know,” she whispered, blinking back shining tears. “It's horrid, Mat. I talked to Varon, and...” Mave closed her eyes. “I...One day, someone might bring a little baby to me!” She broke down and crumpled, covering her eyes. “One day, I might be that...”

“We’ll be there with you,” he promised. “Every step of the way, Mave. We dragged you out of the pits. We’re not going to let the darkness consume you. We’re not going to leave you alone. We’ll help you.”

“I’m her high priestess,” Mave said as she tried to reclaim her voice. “This is my *job*.”

“Then we’ll join the priesthood,” Mat growled, leaning across the table. “Look at me, Mave.” He watched those sorrowful gray-blue eyes come up. “Every step of the way, we will be beside you. We will nurse you back to health when you overuse your powers. We will be beside you for every uncomfortable, painful duty you have to do. We are never going to leave you. You go into the darkness, but you’re blood bonded to me, and I will always call you back. I don’t care if you have to blood bond every male in this fucking family to get you to come back out of the darkness. You *do* belong here. You belong with *us*.”

She nodded, and he saw his words had gotten to her. She seemed a little more hopeful as he stared at her.

“I’m not used to feeling like this,” she said suddenly. “Like I don’t know how to power through it, fix it, or change it. I hate this feeling.”

“That’s why you have us,” he whispered, reaching out to touch her cheek. “Love, why don’t you go rest?”

“No...there’re meetings, and...” She shook her head. “I need to apologize to Alchan. Did I miss anything important?”

Mat looked at Bryn. He was still trying to understand the rogue’s thought process, but he wasn’t going to stop him from going on the mission, but Mave might. She loved Bryn, but they all knew he hated Trevan. She might be the one who put her foot down to protect her friend from her husband.

Her eyes followed his.

“What’s going on?”

“I’m going on the mission, part of Trevan’s team,” Bryn explained as he sat down beside her. “I need to reckon with my feelings about him. He’s accepted by everyone, even our gods. I need to find a way to accept him.”

“Well, I guess I should be glad you’re going to make an effort.” She huffed. “I’m so exhausted, I can’t even summon the energy to be worried.” She leaned back in her chair, and her eyes remained locked on Bryn. “I am

happy you're going. Well, not completely. You'll be in danger, but I know you'll come back. You always do."

"I do," Bryn agreed, leaning toward her.

Mat wanted to get her into bed, but she looked around and made a face.

"I'm not particularly hungry, but can I get some bread? Just something to nibble on."

He was up and ran for it. When he gave it to her, she picked a little off and nibbled.

"What time is the morning meeting? Did none of you have breakfast yet?"

"We'll pick something up from the community hall after the meeting," Mat promised, looking around to make sure no one argued.

"Are you really okay?" Zayden asked their wife, leaning in to see her face better. "We can ask Alchan for the day off, and—"

"I won't lie and say I'm fine, but I would really like to try to have a normal day without everyone worrying about me. I'll take a nap later. If I'm not going on a mission, there's really nothing for me to do." She frowned. "Well, there might be something, but I'll leave it for after Bryn and the others leave."

Zayden leaned into her fully, his head on her shoulder. She tilted her own to touch his, and they sat there for a minute.

It was in the small things Mat knew none of them would ever leave her. He might have said the words, but every single male who wanted to be with Mave would have said the same. Zayden offering physical comfort, Bryn promising to try to find peace with Trevan. They all had a little something to help take something off her plate or make her feel better. Luykas brought a drink and softly promised he would head to the meeting and buy them some time with Alchan for her to ease her nerves. Emerian just being there, even when he had no cause to be since he wasn't yet a committed husband. It wasn't his duty to be there.

They just stayed there in silence for what felt like an eternity until Zayden shifted and Mave slumped over.

Mat resisted a chuckle as he rushed over and helped him get her out of the chair.

"I've got her," he promised. He adjusted her in his arms, trying to keep a good grip on her as everything was lax. She wasn't even trying to stand.

“I’ll meet everyone at the war room.”

Zayden kissed her one more time, then nodded, waving for everyone to follow him as he headed to the front door. Mat walked with her to their bedroom and kicked the door open, then lowered her gently onto their bed and grabbed a light fur to tuck her in.

“Love you,” he whispered, pushing her hair from her face. “We’ll think of something to help you with this.” He refused to let this be the rest of her life, this pain of power and duty. He had to ease that burden for her.

He went to put on his boots, leaving her with a small fire in the main room to keep their home warm. As he left, he heard her stir and paused for a moment until she went silent again. He headed out, moving fast to catch up with his friends. He was the last in the war room, and everyone looked at him, but no one said anything.

“Mave wanted to extend her—”

“I have been told that twice already,” Alchan replied quickly. “Her apologies are accepted, obviously. I’ll check in with her later today. It sounds as if she had a long night.” Alchan’s eyes flicked off him to Varon, who seemed to be trying his best to hide behind his husband.

“I only answered her questions,” Varon said softly.

“Certainly,” Alchan replied dryly.

Mat shrugged and went to stand between Luykas and Zayden. Bryn was near Trevan, who seemed massively uncomfortable but didn’t try to move away. Emerian was on Trevan’s other side, side-eyeing Bryn.

“Now that we have everyone, I would like to announce that we have the final lists for the teams leaving tomorrow. Lady Lilliana and Allaina have made sure the supplies and horses are set aside, ready to leave. Now, Trevan and Rain can each walk us through their plans to handle each of their targets.”

Rain stepped forward first.

Mat nearly fell asleep. Since he wasn’t going on the missions, he didn’t know why he was attending this meeting. Rain explained his route, which camp he would hit in each order. Luykas spoke up once, asking for clarification about Rain’s plans, but no one else did. When he was done, everyone agreed that Rain had it covered.

Then Trevan stepped up, looking around.

“I’m going to do the exact opposite of Rainev,” he said, noticeably swallowing as eyebrows went up. “Elvasi soldiers are taught to run to their nearest camp to get to safety. If you attack the one furthest out, you risk the ones closer to Shadra getting more time to prepare. So, I’m going to loop around the Elvasi camps and head up from the south.” Trevan used a finger to draw his route. “And push them out of the bigger camps first, scattering them more effectively. They won’t want to run farther from major backup, so some will go to Shadra’s main force, while others will run to the smaller camps. Instead of attacking the largest force last, then heading back north to get home, I’ll hit the largest force first. Here.” Trevan pointed stiffly. “Rain, the problem with your plan is you’ll push the smaller camps into the largest. By the time you get to it, you’ll be road tired, and they’ll be waiting for you.”

“Shit,” Rain said, frowning. “Yeah, you’re right. You have the better way of it.”

“Thank you. I don’t mean to call you out—”

“It’s fine,” Rain said quickly and strongly. “This is why we talk about these things before we go into them. I’ve never been in charge of a mission before.”

“He hasn’t,” Alchan agreed, nodding. “And your knowledge base about Elvasi troops is one to be respected.”

“Thank you, sire.”

Mat checked out as Trevan helped Rain rework his plan. Everyone felt more confident with the missions when everything was said and done.

“Thank you all for being here,” Alchan said, waving them away while he stared at the map.

Mat nodded respectfully to his king and commander, then headed out after Luykas. Zayden and Emerian followed them, and the four of them started the slow walk back home.

“What a morning,” Zayden said with a sigh.

“Yeah...” Mat couldn’t disagree, which got him to the topic he wanted everyone focused on for the day. “We need to figure out how to help Mave more.”

“We can join the priesthood. I really liked that idea,” Zayden said. “I just don’t know how to make really uncomfortable topics any easier for her, though.”

“No one can,” Varon said behind them. Mat turned to see Varon, but Nevyn wasn’t with him. “Knowing her, she’s going to think about it for a long time. None of this is easy for her.”

“You convinced her to do this. Maybe you should have thought about it before you told her to climb that mountain,” Luykas growled, turning as well.

“I know, which is why I’m here to talk to you. I know what I said earlier this morning hurt her. It was my life, my growing up the way I was. She needed the truth, and I gave it to her, but I feel the need to make some amends. I told her I know of a couple of priests of Kristanya. They’ve been relatively quiet for the last several months because many don’t know they’re here. I would like to introduce all of you to them...and Mave. The priesthood will keep her position a secret, but I think they’re in the best position to help her.”

“We’re her males. We’re in the best position to help her,” Emerian snapped, glaring at Varon.

“Fine. Then the priests might be in the best position to help you. I’ll send them to your home. Be ready to meet them.”

“None of us agreed to this,” Mat said softly.

“You were just talking about joining the priesthood.” Varon crossed his arms. “While I don’t do this often, I am the most experienced in these matters and have been the Avatar of Amonora for over three thousand years. I also outrank all of you. You’ll at least meet with the priests and introduce them to Mave. She needs the support of those who understand her goddess and what she represents.”

“Fine, send them over.” Mat couldn’t argue with Varon when he put it like that. The Avatar of Amonora only had to answer to one person, and that was the ruler, in this case, Alchan.

“I shall. Today. While we’re busy with these two missions leaving, that doesn’t mean we should neglect the needs of others staying here.” Varon nodded sharply and jumped, flying off.

“I can’t believe he just pulled rank on us,” Luykas muttered.

Mat couldn’t either.

“Let’s just get home so we can meet them,” Zayden said.

They rushed home. Mat and Emerian made sure they were cleaned up enough for company while Zayden jumped into the kitchen to prepare

something for everyone to munch on. Luykas just fell into a chair and glared at the door.

“This is his fault,” Luykas mumbled.

“Yeah, it is Varon’s fault,” Mat agreed. “But we’re dealing with it.”

A knock made Emerian run for the front door. They didn’t host company—ever. Alchan was the rare exception, but he showed up and made do on his own and never expected them to do anything for him.

Mat was tongued-tied as the two priests walked down the entry hall. They wore black robes, which surprised him. If a black-robed priest was wandering the village, it would have been talked about.

“I am Tanev, and this is Delchan. Avatar Varon asked us to come by in an official capacity,” the taller one said, bowing to them while also gesturing to his partner. The second gave the same bow. “Is there something you need of our priesthood?”

Mat didn’t know where to start. He hadn’t expected them this fast.

“Why do you normally make house visits?” Luykas asked, crossing his legs.

“You’re a prince of the royal family. I’m certain your education covered it,” Delchan retorted.

Emerian snorted. Mat sighed and ushered the priests in.

“Come in. This isn’t a typical visit.”

The priests gave each other a strange look but walked in farther. Mat showed them seats as Zayden walked out with a tray.

“I’ve prepared tea,” he said as he put the tray down.

“No wine?” Luykas seemed particularly upset.

“Tea,” Zayden growled. “You serve proper priests tea when they come to your home on official duties.”

“Yes, for them. I am a grown male in his own house. I am allowed to have wine.”

“To make your mood even worse?” Mat shook his head. “You’ll drink the tea.”

He felt something through his blood bond with Mave. She was stirring. He silently prayed she would stay asleep, but he felt her begin to move.

“Can someone tell us what is going on?”

Mat opened his mouth but didn’t have the chance to say anything. He saw her out of the corner of his eye. His beautiful, fierce wife walking as if

she was stalking prey, her eyes focused on the priests.

“Varon decided we all need a thorough education of the functions of the priesthood of Kristanya,” Zayden explained, not seeing what Mat did. “He sent you to us without giving us much of an option.”

Mat started to shift, putting his body between Mave and the priests. One of them turned, following him. She looked as if she was going to kill them, but when she reached him, she looked up at him, and he decided he wasn’t going to stand between them.

“You’re here because Varon has decided to meddle,” she said, stepping around him. “Apparently, he thinks I need to step up.”

“Champion, it’s a pleasure to meet you. Are you intending on joining the priesthood? It would be a well-suited fit, considering your position to the king—”

“I don’t need to join Kristanya’s priesthood,” she said softly, walking around them. She picked the open cushion next to Luykas. “I’m her Avatar.”

Delchan dropped his glass, and it shattered on the ground.

MAVE

Kristanya had woken her up, telling her to get up and meet her visitors. Mave hadn't wanted to sleep, but once she was in bed, she hadn't wanted it to end so soon. It seemed like nothing was going to go her way anymore. She had gotten dressed and walked out, her mood sour. Mat's attempt to stop her had been cute, but she had no intention of hurting them. She did, however, plan on throwing them out of her house at the first opportunity.

As she stared at the broken mug, she sighed.

"Mat—"

"I'm on it," he said quickly, rushing for the broom.

Neither priest moved as Mat cleaned up. No, they both stared at her in shock and distrust. She couldn't blame them. There had never been an Avatar of Kristanya before, and suddenly, a warrior was claiming she was.

"Do you offer...proof?" one finally asked as Mat got out of the way.

"Would you trust the word of Varon and Alchan?" she asked in return.

"We would...but that begs the question as to why no one in the village knows. If you're the Avatar of Kristanya, you are due a certain treatment among the Andinna. You would rank to the position of only answering to the king and would be our high priestess."

"Well, I'm already in a position of rank, which allows me to answer only to the king," Mave reminded them. "And...since there's never been someone with the same title, we decided to keep it quiet so that...I didn't

scare everyone.” She leaned forward and looked over the black-robed Andinna. “So, you’ll take me at my word?”

“We will...” The taller one, Tanev, if she had heard correctly, looked at her with narrowed eyes. “And that’s why Varon sent us here.” He stood up and bowed to her, going lower than she had ever seen a male bend. The second one jumped up and followed suit.

“You’re in need of an education, then,” Delchan said. “And so are your husbands. As the Avatar and High Priestess, there are certain things you need to know. You’re in charge of the allocation of resources for the entire priesthood, the maintaining of the temples—”

“I don’t think I really have the time for any of that right now,” Mave said with a tight smile. “And I don’t particularly want anything to do with a priesthood that...” She had to stop. Even if her logic could understand, her heart couldn’t. Kristanya was silent, but Mave had a suspicion that the goddess would have words for her later. “I don’t want to be high priestess. I climbed the mountain and achieved my position for one purpose and only one purpose. To help Alchan defeat the Elvasi and free the Andinna from the clutches of the Empire. I came out here to let you know you can leave.”

“Mave—” Luykas tried to speak up, but she reached out and put a hand over his mouth.

“My husbands can learn all they want to. They can join the priesthood and learn everything you think I need to know. They’ll be my support as the Avatar.”

“You have a problem with the way we do things?” Delchan, the small one, frowned.

“Yes.” She wasn’t going to lie about it.

“She’s having a hard time coming to terms with certain...practices,” Zayden said very softly. “Not that I can blame her. They’re the ones no one really likes to talk about.”

Tanev nodded, considering her. She knew when someone was judging her. What she didn’t expect was what he would say. It could go in several directions. She just didn’t *understand* that many thought her ignorant when she didn’t like something as if she was an ignorant fool. This situation, she understood, but she didn’t like it, anyway. She didn’t think there would ever be a time she liked it.

“Do you think we’re a death cult?” he asked, as if he had come across the sentiment before and assumed it of her.

“I don’t know what to think. Kristanya says you’re not cold-hearted, but...” Mave shrugged. “I know death. It’s a cold-hearted thing.”

“Our job isn’t the same as yours,” he said softly. “We don’t bring death for most who visit us. We leave death in the hands of the goddess.”

“Bullshit,” she whispered in defiance.

“We give people the backup they need to face it. We talk to them, give them a drink, a place to lay their head. We ask about their lives and record them, so they feel like they’ve left a mark on this world. And then we show that person to the sanctuary. Kristanya then makes the decision. I’ve never seen someone not walk back out of that sanctuary. Never, even after all we’ve suffered as a people, Kristanya has always sent them back out to keep living. And we help them do that. They walk to death, and we send them back to the light. We don’t take lives without care or cause.” He leaned over and put his arms on his knees. “And, for the young ones...We try our best to make them happy for a moment. Most children brought to us are *already dying*, Avatar. We just make it painless. In the nine hundred years I have been a priest, I haven’t seen a single child come to my temple. It’s the rarest thing about our duty. And the hardest.” He rubbed his face. “I’m not even sure what to say. I was raised with it and never heard anyone take a stance against it.”

“Well, now you have,” she snapped. “You can go. If my husbands need you, they’ll come to find you.”

“Wait...you’re the Avatar of Kristanya. Which is something I’m still... coming to terms with, but it’s really important for us to work together. Have you received any formal education about the goddess? Maybe we can come to some sort of—” Delchan tried with her, but she didn’t want to listen.

“No,” she said simply, standing up. “Now you can go.”

“*You’re a fool.*”

I don’t like it. I’ve listened, I’ve learned, and I broke down about it. I still don’t like it. Call me a fool all you want, Kristanya, but it’s not going to change my mind.

“There are other things they can teach you, about the temples, their service to you. You do them dishonor by throwing them out after they dedicated their lives to me. Just as you have.”

Mave shook her head, trying to clear Kristanya's voice from her head.

"If you do this, I will make you pay for it. You will learn this, Avatar. It's the most basic of things. Even Alchan and Varon, males, have stepped up and taken their proper place as the leaders they're meant to be. This is what you asked for. You will do it to the fullest extent of your ability, or I will end your miserable existence."

Tell me how you really feel.

"I know that you are a stubborn, petulant child that thinks she can have everything she wants without dealing with the repercussions of the decisions she makes. You wanted this. You will accept all of it."

That hurt, and Mave, hearing it like that, could see how Kristanya would make that decision. But she also realized something else, and it was the combination of the two that made her change her mind as she stood in the center of the room, staring at nothing in particular.

"Mave?" Zayden reached out to her.

"Sorry. I'm getting yelled at," she said softly, trying to give him an annoyed smile. He just blinked. Mave sighed and turned back to the priests. "Let me say goodbye to those in my family who are leaving on mission tomorrow. We'll work something out, but I'll say this now. If you want me to act as a high priestess and be the leader, then fine. I'll step up and do it. But we're doing it my way. If there's something I don't like, we're going to work together to change it."

"I'll need to...talk to others about that," Tanev said, standing up as well. "Before we leave...Saying something like this is improper, but I would...very much like to know and record what you can do. To see it. I know this is something new, and you are obviously a private person from what I hear around the village, but I think a record of your life would be a great thing to have for future generations."

Mave pulled her power up and closed her eyes, focusing on keeping it in line. When she opened them, her world was black and gray, but her power was even closer to the surface than that. She felt like something changed, but she didn't know what.

Delchan sank into his seat. Tanev stepped back.

"Love, your eyes are black," Zayden said softly. "All black."

"Is that what I've done?" She frowned as she looked at him, seeing his beautiful face only in shades of gray. Across the room, a fly died, and its

spirit faded away. There had been a fly in her house. She wasn't going to forget that. "I just wanted to show him a little evidence. Something he can write down."

"You've done it," Emerian said from across the room.

She blinked, pushing her power back down. The two priests relaxed.

"We'll talk," she promised. "But remember what I said. Change."

"Of course, Avatar." They bowed before her and then left, their robes sweeping behind them regally as they turned down the hall.

She fell into her seat and groaned. Kristanya was blissfully silent as Mave rubbed her temples.

"Kristanya threatened to kill me if I didn't accept them," she explained to her husbands. "Called me a stubborn, petulant child."

Her males looked at each other, and all quickly shook their heads.

"Never that," Mat said with a small smile. "Stubborn, yes. Petulant child..." He chuckled as she rolled her eyes. "In fact, I think you did the right thing. You're the highest-ranking person when it comes to those who pledge their lives to Kristanya, and you make the rules now."

Mave tapped the side of her head. "Let's see if my passenger is okay with me changing everything about her priesthood."

"I'll withhold my judgment for now," Kristanya answered.

Mave rubbed her eyes. "What time is it?"

"Nearly lunch."

"I'm going to head out," she said. "Love you all. Thanks for standing by me, but I think I need to go for a walk or something."

"Visit your mother," Mat said gently, leading her to the front door. He grabbed her boots for her and held them up.

She nodded as she took the boots and slid them on. She gave her males one last look and then headed out the door.

The day was bright and sunny. The sun was warm on her skin, a welcome change from the chill she had given herself when she activated those powers. She didn't fly to Senri, enjoying the walk under the sun. When she arrived, she didn't bother to knock. She walked right in as if it were her own home, knowing they wouldn't mind her intrusion. If they were preoccupied, she could go see little Kianev alone and let them do whatever they were busy with.

“She’s not here,” Willem said as she entered the main room. “She went to see Allaina and Yenni. Kianev is down for a much-needed nap, so I’m banning you from our room because I would hate to have to fight you over waking him up.”

“Oh, well. I love you, but...” Mave pointed back to the main door. Willem only laughed and waved her away.

“Go, go,” he said.

Mave smiled. She was a little disappointed about not being able to see her younger brother, but she would survive. The parents needed a break, and she wasn’t going to put herself over Willem’s desperate need for some quiet.

As she left, she thought about the time she and Senri brought Kianev out to see the sky—how his crying had stopped, how her mother talked about taking babies on little ‘fly-arounds’ to soothe them.

Mave closed her eyes and wondered how she would feel if she never saw the sky again, and it was such a dreadful thought, she banished it quickly.

She walked for the stream she knew she would find her female friends at. They were sitting together, wineskins in hand and laughing over something.

“Am I welcome here?” she asked as she drew closer.

“Always,” Senri proclaimed. “Come sit down and get drunk with me.”

“She looks like she needs it,” Yenni muttered.

“I do,” Mave agreed, groaning as she fell into her normal seat. “Skies, I’m the High Priestess of Kristanya. Get me drunk and help me forget that fun fact, and I’ll be loyal to you until the end of my days.”

“Oh.” Senri shoved her wineskin over, and Mave started drinking.

“I was wondering when that would catch up to you,” Allaina said, leaning on her wife. “Dark business, the priesthood of Kristanya.”

“Yup.” Mave continued to drink, nearly emptying the wineskin. Now she just needed it to kick in.

“They’re actually really nice,” Senri said softly. “Everyone is wary of them, though, because of what they have to deal with.”

“Have you...ever met any?” Mave asked her mother.

“Oh yes. When...When my son died.” Senri looked off at the stream. “While I was there, there were others. It was wartime, and the temple near

me was, of course, busier than normal. We would sit together and talk about loss, while the priests and priestesses would help us reconcile with our feelings. They're all Andinna who have lost people as well. I don't know another priesthood so different from the actual goddess. From stories of her, Kristanya is...not as kind."

"Yeah, she's a bitch," Mave mumbled. In the back of her head, Mave heard a growling laugh, like Kristanya was both amused and pissed off by Mave's judgment of her.

"They're just difficult to understand until you've needed them. Then it's easy to understand why they do what they do. I'm sure you'll do well as their high priestess."

"I wouldn't be too sure about that," Mave muttered, drinking more.

"What's wrong?" Allaina asked, leaning forward.

Mave lowered the wineskin and sighed. "I don't like some of what they do, and I don't want to keep talking about it."

"Of course," Yenni said, taking the wineskin from her and handing her a fresh one. "Get drunk, but not too drunk. One of your husbands leaves tomorrow, and I'm certain he'll want a proper sending off."

Mave laughed as she took another drink.

"I'll say one more thing," Senri said, leaning on her as she spoke. "I asked one of them once why he joined the priesthood. He said it was because when he lost his wife, he had no one left to talk to, no one to help him because he didn't believe anyone would be able to understand his pain. He'd gone to the temple to ask Kristanya to end his pain. Instead, she spared him, and the priests there helped guide him through his pain. Afterward, he pledged his service to her so that he could help guide others. He started doing outreach in local villages, telling people that the temple was ready to help any of them. Then the war started, and they started getting more people coming for just someone to talk to. Someone who knew the pain. I ended up being one of those people."

Mave just listened. Senri made it sound wonderful. There had been times in her life she had wanted someone to talk to, someone who understood the loneliness and the pain—someone she could lean on. She had trusted no one with that vulnerability until after her freedom, over a thousand years into her long life.

"Can we change the subject?" she finally asked softly.

“Certainly. I’m sorry.” Senri kissed her cheek.

“Then let’s go in the opposite direction! I convinced my husbands to try for a child with me!” Allaina gave them a hopeful smile.

“With a caveat,” Yenni said, looking down at her wife.

“Next year,” she said. “We’re going to try next year. Not as soon as I wanted, but...”

“She also wants to fight later this year, to stand on the line with all of us. We’re not letting her do that pregnant.”

“Good plan,” Senri agreed.

“Are you going to fight?” Mave asked, looking at her mother.

“No. I’m going to hold the defense of the village. Even with all of Alchan’s plans, defending the heart of the village is important. I’m hoping to convince him that we should move other civilians out, but...”

“They’ll all want to stay and fight, even if they don’t go to the battle,” Allaina said, groaning. “Sometimes, it’s a curse that we’re a warrior people. Something we can blame on your goddess.”

“She’s right. I did that,” Kristanya said in the back of Mave’s mind.

Mave drank more. Maybe if she was completely unable to think, she wouldn’t be able to hear Kristanya for a moment.

“Rude.”

She settled in and listened, taking peace in the females around her. Tomorrow, one of her husbands, one of her friends, and one of her family would be gone. She was going to enjoy the rest of her day—everything else be damned.

When the wineskins were empty, the pack of them wandered back into the village, laughing over obscenities that made males blush as they walked past. Mave stumbled and bumped someone as they tried to get through the market.

“Watch where you’re going!” the person growled, probably not realizing who she was.

“Sorry. A bit drunk,” she said, patting the male’s shoulder. He turned and looked down, then his eyes went wide. “Pretend I was never here.”

She smiled as Senri pulled her to keep walking. Her mother dragged her all the way to her front door and pushed her up the stairs. She didn’t knock. Senri opened the door with one hand and shoved Mave in with the other.

“Delivery!” her mother called before shutting Mave inside.

She leaned on the wall and giggled as Mat walked into view, his eyes going wide.

“You’re drunk,” he pointed out, coming closer slowly, clearly judging her mood. She nodded once and closed her eyes, a thought coming to her.

I want to feel alive.

“Find Bryn,” she ordered with an attempt at a sly smile. “I need to tell him goodbye.”

Mat slowly smiled.

EMERIAN

Emerian helped Trevan pack his bag early in the morning. He was worried about this mission for his closest friend. There were so many ways it could go wrong, and he wouldn't be there to help.

"Are you sure you can't kick someone off the mission and let me go?" he asked as Trevan folded a spare shirt, then dropped it on the top of other clothing items he was taking.

"I'll be fine," Trevan said, chuckling. "Kyn wouldn't let any of them hurt me, and you know how bad it would look if they all made it home without me. Plus, Bryn—"

"If you trust Bryn to keep you alive, I..." Emerian huffed. He'd lived with that family for months now and knew one thing for certain. Bryn wasn't the person he wanted watching Trevan's back, no matter what his intentions were by joining the mission. "You know how Bryn feels about you, don't you?"

"Yes." Trevan seemed unperturbed.

"Then why—"

"Bryn loves his wife, and he loves the Andinna," Trevan answered, without letting Emerian finish his question. "He respects his king, and he understands what this mission and missions like it are hoping to accomplish. He hates me, Emerian. I don't even have to guess since he told me so. But he won't let his personal feelings toward me interfere with the objective of the mission. He won't take an arrow for me, but he won't try to get me killed either."

Emerian sighed. He would have trusted any of the others—Mat or Zayden would have been fine, Luykas would have been best.

Anyone but Bryn.

“Emerian, look at me,” Trevan ordered, and Emerian couldn’t resist looking at his friend, knowing a dominant command when he heard one. He looked at those Andinna eyes set in an Elvasi face, a physical sign of what was changing in Trevan. “Bryn and I have already spoken about his feelings about me. I trust him to fight for the Andinna, even if that doesn’t mean he and I will be friends. Besides, you have your own problems to worry about.”

“Like what?” Emerian growled as he grabbed a pair of pants and started folding them.

“Like whatever is going on with you and Mave.”

“I don’t need you pressuring me about that. I get it enough from her husbands. I promised myself I would never leave her, and I meant it. I don’t need to rush into the marriage bed because everyone expects it.” Emerian couldn’t bear to be without her on most days. He was still trying to find the balance of being with her and still having some semblance of his own life, the same way her husbands did. They had lives and duties and always knew she would come back and be with them. Sometimes, he still felt as if he was going to lose her if he turned away for just a moment—like that trip home after Kian died.

But he wasn’t ready to be a husband.

“You got her,” Trevan snapped, narrowing his eyes. “She’s right there, and she wants you, damn it. Why are you dragging your feet? Are you realizing she’s more than you bargained for?”

“No,” Emerian whispered. “It’s not your business.”

“I’ve been your friend since the day we met, even when I didn’t want anything to do with you. I tried to keep you alive in those pits, even while you were actively working on getting yourself killed. The least you can do is tell me what’s stopping you from being happy. It’s a chance at a family, Emerian.”

But it’s not my family. It doesn’t feel like my family. The males of the mayara are great, but they aren’t my family. Not yet.

He didn’t say that to Trevan, couldn’t bring himself to say it. He finished folding the pants and put them on Trevan’s pile. Trevan glared at

him, and it pricked his temper.

“Why don’t you just tell her how you feel?” he demanded, growling as Trevan started putting everything away in his bag. “Instead of getting involved in my relationship with her.” He crossed his arms and glared in return as Trevan didn’t drop his eyes. “You’ve loved her from afar for centuries. You’ve seen her go through hell. You threw away your life to save her from slavery, and you’re the one who’s too damn cowardly to tell her how you feel.”

“Don’t *ever* call me a coward,” Trevan snarled. Emerian realized he had crossed a line. “You’re right. I threw away my life to see her free and fully expected to die, but something about her made her worth it. Still makes her worth it, but I’m not a fool who thinks a single act of goodwill is enough to win the heart of someone who saw me as the enemy for hundreds of years. Our situations are different, Emerian. Don’t ever mistake them as remotely similar again.” He threw the bag to the ground once the neatly folded clothing was inside and closed the distance between them.

“In fact, the only coward I know is standing in this room. I was the one who wanted to come to Anden, into a world that wasn’t made for me, wouldn’t accept me because I *believed* in what was happening here. You came along because you had nowhere else to go and didn’t want to go to Olost alone. Dave, a human who would have been lucky to live another sixty years, had more courage than you.”

Emerian tackled him, but before he could land a punch, Trevan kned him in the balls and shoved him off. Emerian struggled, thanks to his wings, as Trevan got over him and snarled again.

“You found your courage, and I’m really fucking happy for you, but don’t ever call me a coward,” Trevan growled. “You, of all fucking people, know better.”

“Male tempers,” someone said softly. Emerian looked over to see Luykas in the doorway, shaking his head. “Get up, brush yourselves off, and get over it.”

“How much did you hear?” Trevan demanded, not moving from where he had Emerian pinned. Emerian struggled, trying to get the damned wyvern-rider off him, but Trevan held on, glaring down at Emerian.

“Emerian, drop your damn eyes and stop struggling. He’s the more dominant male.”

Emerian snarled, but as Trevan's grips grew tight, he realized Luykas was right. He dropped his eyes, and Trevan was off him a moment later, brushing himself off. Emerian slowly got up, looking at his friend with a new confusion.

"I heard enough to know what the topic was," Luykas finally answered. "You're both males still dealing with the changes going on inside you and trying to adjust. Maybe a little distance will do you some good."

"What would you know about it?" Emerian mumbled, moving away from both of them.

"My brother is a bedru, and I'm...almost a bedru," Luykas answered, shrugging. "Fights weren't uncommon. It took some time for us to realize what not to say if we weren't in the mood for a physical altercation. Eventually, we both got over ourselves."

"What's happening to me?" Trevan asked softly, and Emerian realized his friend was just as confused as he was. "I'm not Andinna. I never had the urge to deal with the positioning of dominance before, but I've ordered Bryn to sit down, and just now..."

"You're changing," Luykas answered. "Into something new, something different. Not Elvasi anymore, but not Andinna, either. Take it from Emerian and me, it's a weird place to be in."

Trevan looked between them, then nodded. "Yeah, you two would know."

Emerian continued to sink into a corner, wondering how Luykas was going to feel once they got into the real discussion. He'd heard *enough*, and it meant he knew *exactly* what was going on.

"There are thousands of Andinna," Luykas said softly to himself as he looked around the room in interest. "Thousands. There are seven males in love with my wife, including me. It could be worse, I guess. At least, we're not constantly beating off suitors when she's with us. She only gets those when we're not around, thinking they can score a one-night romp with her."

"Seven?" Emerian couldn't stop himself from saying it.

"Yes. Me, Mat, Bryn, Zayden, you, and Trevan," Luykas answered. "The seventh is my brother, but that's different. They have a different bond, one none of us can really compare to. It's not romantic in any way, but it's there."

"I don't—"

“Don’t lie to me, Trevan. I figured it out a while ago. Emerian is wrong, by the way. You’re not a coward. Neither is he. You both have hot tempers because you were talking about her, and neither of you agrees on how to proceed with your own relationships. It’s low to hit each other like that, so don’t do it.”

“What are you doing here?” Emerian asked as Luykas stopped his casual pace around the room and stood between them.

“I’m here to check-in...” he answered, obviously having more on his mind. “I was going to talk to Trevan about Bryn, actually.”

“I already tried.” Emerian glared at Trevan again. “He hates Trevan.”

“He knows Trevan is in love with Mave, and I wanted to warn him about that,” Luykas said with a small smile. “You have a reason to worry, but Bryn isn’t going to slip a dagger between his ribs.”

“How would you know? You’re not going to be there.”

“Bryn knows that if Trevan doesn’t come back from this mission, neither should he,” Luykas said, his small smile turning dangerous. “Especially if it’s his fault. Mave loves him, and he’s a wonderful part of the family, but not even she would forgive him for that. He won’t do it. I don’t even think he’s still considering it. He’s going on this mission to fix himself, but...” Luykas turned to Trevan again. “I told him how you feel about Mave, so he would stop thinking you were going to betray us at every opportunity.”

“You told him, but you’ve never asked me about it,” Trevan grumbled.

“Well, I have no problem with it, so I never saw a reason to mention it,” Luykas said, lifting his hands.

“Well, thanks,” Trevan snapped.

“Finish getting ready to leave. I’m going to drag Emerian out of here, so I don’t have to come in on another fight.” Luykas snapped his fingers, and Emerian knew what that meant. He cast one glance at Trevan and sighed.

“I’m sorry,” he said, swallowing.

“Me too,” Trevan replied.

“Don’t get yourself killed.”

“I won’t. Keep working on things here, and I’ll be back before you know it.”

Emerian knew what Trevan was to him—a brother, something he had never had before—and he saw that reflected back in Trevan’s gaze. Before

he left, he remembered a gift he had in his bag. He grabbed it from the main room and went back into the bedroom, ignoring Luykas' grumbles of annoyance.

"Hey, a book for you to read on the quiet nights," he said, holding it out. "I bartered with someone for it in the market. They said it's from Olost."

Trevan took it slowly. "Thank you. I appreciate this."

Emerian nodded and ducked out of the room again, jogging to catch up with Luykas, who was already outside. He stopped in the grass next to the other mutt, who sighed.

"What's wrong?"

"I wish Mave was going with him," Luykas said softly. "I've been trying to figure out how to get them together and failing. I was hoping their mission with Rain would bring them together, give them time to really connect, but they're both denser than I imagined."

Emerian frowned. "You have?"

"Yeah, you almost ruined it, but I won't hold that against you," Luykas smirked.

Emerian rolled his eyes and started walking. "Do they need any help getting the horses ready?"

"No," Luykas answered, moving in the same direction. "Everyone is up and having breakfast at home. Come get some."

"You didn't just come to talk to Trevan, did you?" Emerian eyed the other mutt.

Luykas' smile broadened. Emerian shook his head. He'd been fetched.

"Two birds, one stone, a human saying." Luykas thumped his back. "I knew you would be with Trevan, so when Mave asked about you, I promised to fetch you. It gave me a chance to talk to him as well."

"You..."

"You'll get used to it."

They walked together, seeing the early morning deliveries happen. It was still pre-dawn, but he knew why breakfast was so early today. With Bryn leaving, the males of Mave's mayara were going to make sure there was one more family meal. There hadn't been a dinner. From what Emerian knew, Mave came home in the afternoon drunk and proceeded to drag them into their bedroom. Emerian had fended for himself, seeing them sneak out at different points in the evening for snacks.

As they walked in, he heard laughing in the kitchen.

“Mave, you were a disaster yesterday,” Mat said, as he gave a full chested laugh that made Emerian smile.

“I wasn’t that drunk,” she said, her defense falling flat as she held back a chuckle.

As he rounded the corner and saw them, she smiled in his direction and pulled out the chair next to her. His heart thumped erratically as he sat down beside her. He couldn’t get over her. When she was fierce, there was no softness to her face. When her swords were drawn, her features were carved out of stone. But when she smiled, he knew why he fought so hard to get her back here, why he couldn’t leave her side anymore.

“Good morning,” she said softly.

“Good morning,” he replied as a plate was put in front of him.

“Missed you last night.”

“Did you...even think of me? From what I heard, you weren’t thinking of much.”

“Harsh.” She elbowed him.

“No,” he murmured, leaning in. “Not because you were drunk.”

That made all the males chuckle. She raised a single eyebrow, unembarrassed, and finally nodded and shrugged with one shoulder.

“I’ll give you that,” she said.

They all settled in, and breakfast was dished up. Bryn was silent, but that wasn’t unusual. He wasn’t the most talkative, and he was leaving today. Emerian found himself glancing at the rogue as they ate, and everyone teased Mave for her excess drinking the day before. It was like the priests had never come by, and everything was normal. Emerian couldn’t help but appreciate that. It was a retreat being with them.

But he felt like an outsider, even when they tried to bring him in. He appreciated their efforts, but he was there for Mave, not for them. He didn’t know how to find a place among them.

As breakfast was cleaned up, he headed outside to wait. Mat and Zayden followed him, then Luykas. Bryn and Mave were last, talking so quietly, Emerian couldn’t pick up what they were saying, and he didn’t try.

They headed to the stables. Trevan was the only one not there as Andinna hurried around, giving warriors their horses for the missions. Rain

was talking to Alchan and Lady Lilliana. Emerian looked away as Rain kissed the female's forehead, then his husband.

"Where is he?" Bryn asked, looking at the sky, clearly frustrated with Trevan's absence.

"He probably doesn't want Kyn scaring the horses," Emerian answered, crossing his arms. "He doesn't bring Kyn around them because he's worried Kyn will eat them."

"Oh."

"He'll meet you outside the village," Luykas said with a sigh. "Didn't you talk to him about this already?"

"No," Bryn mumbled. "Maybe."

Luykas shook his head and rolled his eyes at Emerian.

"You'll behave," Mave ordered, stepping up beside Bryn. "Are we clear?"

"Of course. We're going out on these missions to further Alchan's goals to end this war. I won't do anything to screw it up." Bryn leaned to kiss her. "As for the other thing...I won't do anything you wouldn't forgive me for."

"Good," she said, returning his affections. "Get your horse. Go. Before I decide to try to stop you."

"You know I'll come back," he whispered.

"Yeah, but you're all good at making me worry," she said with a small smile.

Bryn stepped away from her, gazing at her face for a long time before walking to the horses. He mounted next to two females also on his team. A moment later, they heard a high-pitched wyvern call and looked up to see Trevan and his wyvern flying above them.

"I guess it's time," Alchan called out. "May the black wings of Kristanya carry you on fair winds and her power guide you."

"In the words of someone not a royal—don't let them catch you, and kill them if they try," Mave yelled from her spot. "Even better, just kill them."

The warriors cheered and pushed their horses to move. Emerian waved, like so many others. Drums started to play, and he turned to see a group of females with large drum sets. They were giving the two teams a proper send-off. Rain was the last to leave, dropping the robe he wore and shifting

into his wyvern form everyone respected. He took off gracefully and followed Trevan in the sky.

“Aren’t they supposed to be headed in two different directions?” he asked, watching Rain chase after Trevan and Kyn.

“They’ll break into two groups as they head south,” Luykas explained softly. “They’ll stick together for a few days as Trevan gets to know the Andinna on his team better.”

Emerian nodded, grateful everyone was looking out for Trevan’s best interests.

“Let’s go,” Mave ordered.

Emerian turned and followed her, letting her set the pace. He fell in with the other males as they walked home together, his thoughts with Trevan.

Come back in one piece, my brother.

RAINEV

The road was boring. It always was. He spent most of it as a wyvern and only landed when he had to pick the place his team camped that night. Then he would wait for them to catch up, groaning about how fast he was making them move.

“We’re supposed to be moving fast,” he said simply on the fourteenth evening. “If we keep up this pace, we’ll hit our first objective in less than two days. How are the horses?”

“The horses are fine,” Kick said with a chuckle. “The young ones are just tired. They’re well-trained but lack experience with fast travel.”

“I’m the youngest one here,” he pointed out.

“And you’ve been doing this for years,” Kick pointed out. “Mat and Zayden told me you were tapped young to join the Ivory Shadows.”

“Well, Zayden *is* my father,” Rain reminded him. Around them, the other Andinna were winding down and settling in for the evening. “I grew up trained by the best and grew up faster than others because my mother was short-lived. I had to become proficient quickly.”

“Heard you were trained with a sword by a king, too.” Kick winked.

“Yes, my husband,” Rain said, laughing as Kick finished tying up his horse for the evening. There wasn’t any rain expected, so no one bothered pulling out the two tents they had.

“You don’t need to remind me of that,” the older male said with a smile. “Maybe some of these males.”

The males in question weren't listening to them. They were setting up a fire, preparing a small dinner, and generally ignoring everything else around them. Mat and his father had picked strong warriors, and he'd like the pick, but he didn't know them, and they certainly didn't know him.

Rain rolled his eyes. There was one who gave him eyes when they camped in the evenings, but he politely ignored him. He wasn't interested, for a hundred reasons, the most important was that he loved his husband. The next most important was definitely Lily. The three of them had a dream of a family together, and nothing would convince him to give that up.

And let's not forget, it would be a great story for whoever did get me to stray from my husband. I don't really want to be that story for anyone.

Rain sat next to Kick, definitely the oldest of the group. It had been talked about among the family. Rain was still considered young by many, even though he was an adult, and the last few years had seen him mentally mature faster than anyone had expected, a lot faster than the Andinna did. Putting him with too many older warriors would make him seem like a child, but too young and closer to his age ran the risk of having an immature team. In the end, most of the males of their group were near his father's age, somewhere between fifteen and eighteen hundred. Which wasn't old for the Andinna. It wasn't even halfway through their life span.

Such was the curse of being a mutt with a short-lived side. There really was no comparison age for him anymore. He was mentally more like Emerian or Trevan in age, even though they were a thousand, and he was just over three hundred.

"You seem lost in thought, Consort," someone said. Rain blinked and tried to identify who spoke to him. The male waved across the fire. "Something on your mind?"

"Nothing in particular," Rain said, shrugging.

"Missing home?"

"Aren't we all?" Rain tilted his head to the side. "My entire family is in that village, but I'm a warrior. This is what I signed up for."

"Good point," the male said, nodding. "I mean, you probably got used to living that good life, right? King's Consort and all that."

Rain nearly laughed. "Good life? You mean everyone coming to me with their problems because they think I'll get Alchan to fix those problems? I live in the same type of home as any of the other Ivory

Shadows. My family and I don't have anything special, even if my husband is the king."

"Yeah, but you're the young one. I mean, they've been with His Majesty for centuries." One of the other males frowned. "No offense, but...you're like three hundred."

"Y'all need to stop," Kick said softly. "He's a warrior."

"No, it's fine," Rain said with a heavy sigh. He wasn't mad. He was used to people seeing him and forgetting he was a well-trained warrior. "They don't know I survived the pits with Matesh when he and I were captured by the Elvasi. That's where we met Mave, and we freed her with us. They don't know I've burned portions of the Elvasi fleet, which is why we don't have problems in Kerit. They don't know I was part of the capture of Lothen. Well, they should know that one." Rain smiled. "You're right, I'm only three hundred, but I turn into a wyvern and could kill everyone here."

The silence he was greeted with pleased him.

"Y'all are fools to think he isn't the best warrior here. He was trained by the best, remember? General Nevyn was considered a weapon master before most of you were even born, and he trained all the Ivory Shadows."

"Well, Luykas trained me more," Rain admitted. "Then Mave, while we were in the pits. After that, Alchan."

"Between those three, you might as well have been trained by Nevyn," Kick said with a chuckle. "Personally, I'm glad to see you on a mission. I was hoping to get to see you in action last year."

"Why didn't you go on a mission last year?" another male asked. Rain didn't spend most of the days with them, but he tried to remember their names. This one was Carkev. Rain was pretty sure he only remembered it because it was like an old fling of his.

Rain thought about that before answering. There were a number of reasons.

"Alchan is a bedru, and we had just done an official ceremony making me his Consort. He's not the type to willingly give up what's his for very long. We needed some time to adjust. After that, as a member of his royal guard who turns into a wyvern and as his Consort, I'm the best to be at his side for his protection, which lets everyone else do other things instead of guarding him all the time, something he doesn't particularly enjoy. With

me, he could pretend I wasn't there for his protection. I bet Mave is going to be at his side most days I'm gone because she has nothing better to do, and she's the next best bet to keep him safe after me."

"You know, that takes on new meaning when you think about how we had a spy all last year," someone said softly. Rain didn't catch who, though.

"It does," Rain agreed, thinking about those possibilities as he had done before—if Alchan had shared wine with Lashaun that night or any number of other things. Everything Alchan had was regulated, though. It went through people before it got to him, even if he didn't know it. It was just assumed, at home, the food and drink were already tested before it showed up on their doorstep. They trusted Allaina with that, who had a special section of the supplies just for the Ivory Shadows and other generals. Mave probably didn't know her supplies were tested, but Bryn knew.

The evening passed quickly, and Rain wasn't spoken to again. He grabbed his bedroll and slept farther from the fire than everyone else.



TWO DAYS LATER, Rain stopped early. They were at the first camp, and he didn't want to risk running into any Elvasi patrols. A blue wyvern was well known to the Elvasi now. They would know to watch for him if Shadra was anywhere closer to the military commander than his husband believed. Luykas also believed Shadra was smarter than Rain wanted to think she was. After he dressed, he crossed his arms and waited on the males, considering what he had seen from her so far.

The problems she had caused with her spy had nearly crippled them. He tried to consider what else was her fault, but when he really looked back on how things had gone, he realized their wins were during times others were in charge. She had pulled off a successful attack on them in Olost, where they thought they had been safe, but a noble in Elantia failed to keep that win for her. Her fleets, run by her admirals, couldn't stop the freed slaves from coming to Kerit. Prince Lothen had made good progress, but it was Rain's father who snuck in and found Lothen's plan, which had spurred them to take and execute the prince. If his father hadn't seen Lothen's plans, they would have never known what was coming for them.

But Shadra...Rain frowned. Her plan in Olost had worked, which had surprised all of them. She had given them several terrible problems and took over nine hundred warriors from them in a single year, thanks to a simple spy she had planted centuries before. Nine hundred warriors were nearly a tenth of their entire race if he included those who were staying in Olost and the slaves still trapped in the Empire.

It filled him with a sense of foreboding. Maybe Alchan and Luykas were right. Maybe she was better than Rain wanted to give her credit for.

We're leading her to a battle she thinks she's going to win. Could this backfire?

Rain knew Alchan's plan, even agreed with it. She didn't know Mave could turn into a damn dragon so big, Rain could walk under her in his wyvern form. When he had seen her on their mission together, he damn near lost track of what he was doing because he couldn't believe it. Shadra also didn't know about Alchan's claiming of the Avatar power his grandmother had before him. Alchan would call the wyverns and all they could do was pray they came to him for the fight.

"We're stopping here?" Kick asked loudly as he led the rest of the team.

"Yeah, we're within flight range," Rain answered, watching them dismount. "Tonight, I'm going out to attack them. You will all come with me but hang back. Help me identify targets, and if I'm injured, get me out. I'll shift back to this form if I can. If not, you might need to pull spears and arrows out of me before I can. Hopefully, we're not met with too much resistance during the attack."

"But we're not going to attack the Elvasi," Kick said, gesturing at himself and the other warriors. "Unless we need to defend you on the ground."

"Exactly. The reports said there aren't gryphon riders at this camp, but there will be in one of the later camps. I can take them on, but they can rip you out of the sky. Three of you have bows, right? If we come into trouble, you'll use those. Keep them on you."

They nodded, listening to him as if he were Alchan or Mave. He didn't let it go to his head because he knew the truth of the matter. He wasn't experienced in leading a team, had actually never done it. The last few years had been a whirlwind of change, from a young member of the Ivory Shadows, still seeing if he was capable of joining completely, to the

husband to a king. He was expected to be good at these things. He could only draw on what he had been told and try to channel the power of those in his life.

I'm not in over my head. This is a clear-cut mission. Attack three camps and keep moving. It's not like I'm moving hundreds of warriors around.

The sun set slowly, and Rain's anxiety continued to ramp up. He had always thought he would be doing these things with his family. Mave had been someone for him to lean on during the last mission, and Trevan was one of the core group now. These were strangers who were judging his every move to tell everyone about how well Alchan's first Consort did.

"Take a breath, kid," Kick said softly, stepping up next to him. "Others haven't noticed, but I know nerves when I see 'em."

"My father and Mat probably weren't nervous at all," Rain said softly, watching the light fade ever so slowly from the sky.

"No, they weren't, but that just comes with years. You might be powerful, but you don't have those years."

"No, I don't," he agreed.

"You need any advice, you let me know. I've been around the mountains a few times." Kick thumped his back again. It hadn't taken Rain long to figure out why Mat and his father wanted Kick on the mission with him—he was level-headed, experienced, and respectable. "You're doing fine. Just keep up the communication."

"Hard to do when I don't have the ability to talk most of the time."

Kick and Rain chuckled together, and Kick nodded in agreement.

"Yeah. Look, I'll tell them what to do when you can't. If I say anything you don't like, you let me know."

"Why aren't you a unit commander yet?"

Kick shrugged. "Never asked to be one."

The sun fell, and Rain walked to the fire, waving everyone to stand and join him.

"Are we ready?" he asked, looking over the males around him. "This is the biggest camp we're hitting. The others hinge on our success tonight. I know that mostly lies on me, but your support of this mission is important."

They nodded, all of them serious.

"If there's nothing to be said, let's get moving," he declared, turning away from them. He didn't bother going behind trees to hide as he dropped

the simple clothing he wore and stretched his shoulders.

A moment later, he was big and blue, adjusting to the new body. The wyvern felt the energy of the night, knowing it was going to bring destruction. Rain let that energy course through him and jumped into the air, taking himself high as the Andinna also jumped up to follow him. He spun in the air, doing several flips as he stretched his wings, readying himself for hard maneuvers in case of a strong defense.

The camp wasn't far, coming into sight once they passed the small mountain he'd picked to hide their arrival. It generally wasn't safe for the Andinna to fly for long periods, but he'd gotten them close enough to make the round trip.

He took one look back, making sure they were keeping up and could see their target. Then he gave two strong beats of his wings and picked up his speed, using the natural wind to help him glide.

The camp drew closer and closer until he knew he was in range to dive.

As he dove, he readied his fire. When he was close enough, he released it, beginning a line of destruction over the camp. He didn't focus on anything except directing his flame, aiming for buildings and tents, didn't think about anything but destruction.

He made his way over, then turned around, passing by one of his team as he made his way back to the other side of the camp, creating a new line of fire. Before starting a third path and knowing the arrows would come soon, he looked for one of his team. They were directed to look for good targets.

He found one waving in the air, using his bow to point down in his other hand. Rain pushed to get there and sent a fireball down at the large building, watching it catch fire, then looked for another Andinna.

Arrows started to come up, but those didn't bother him. He rushed to the next target, this time doing another line of fire. Then he went to the next. By the fifth target, he knew it was time to leave as his fire was beginning to weaken, and the Elvasi were starting to realize what was going on. He watched Kick narrowly dodge an arrow.

Time to get out of here.

He didn't stop at Kick, continuing to fly. He couldn't hover as effectively in wyvern form, but he managed as the Andinna got to him, and he led them home.

By the time they landed at their makeshift camp, everyone was laughing and cheering. Rain shifted back into his Andinna form, panting.

“Good work,” Kick said, coming to him with a pair of pants. “Here. We should probably get moving, yeah?”

“Yeah, we’ll travel north from here. Can I borrow a horse?” His voice was hoarse. He hadn’t expected that. *Too much fire breathing? I’ve never gone that long before. I’ll have to remember it’s a problem. Maybe I can train it up.*

“Yeah, take mine,” the older male said with a smile. “I’ll walk while you rest.”

“Thanks. Water?”

He barely caught a water skin tossed to him. He drank greedily, then looked at the males still celebrating.

“We need to get moving!” he called out, heading for the gelding he knew Kick was given for the mission. “They’re going to send out patrols if they can.”

“Yes, sir!” they all cried, kicking out the fire and stowing their belongings away.

It was fast and efficient and exactly what Rain needed for his confidence. As they rode away, he was almost glad Alchan had sent him to lead a mission. His husband always knew exactly what he needed.

TREVAN

They were already at their second target when Trevan was finally comfortable with the group around him. It had been hard to get used to being with strangers and away from those he believed were safe. In the village, he had seen many of the Andinna who were with him, but he'd never spoken to them. Bryn was the only Andinna in the group he could claim he knew, and that wasn't a pleasant friendship. In fact, three weeks into their mission, it was still cold.

Even as he was listening to one of the older males tell a story, Bryn stared at him, watching his every move as if he was going to get up and attack the group at any point.

"So, that's how I ended up sleeping with an Elvasi," the older male finished, shrugging. "He was a pretty thing, though."

"That was a thousand years before the war, wasn't it, brother?"

"Something like that," the first confirmed. "What about you, wyvern-rider? Any stories of pretty things in the Empire?"

"No," he answered with a chuckle. "I had a few dalliances but nothing that was memorable. Nothing like being a drunk guard for a trade caravan, anyway. One was a girl I grew up with. Another was a neighbor who was a tailor by trade." He wasn't the most experienced, but he was about a thousand years old. He had experience.

"Those were the good old days. Peace between our nations. I know a lot of the younger Andinna don't get it, but I remember the days I would have had a drink with an Elvasi like you, right here in the Dragon Spine in some

tavern nestled in the mountains, on a trade route.” The older male chuckled sadly. “Eleven hundred years of conflict changes things.”

Trevan only nodded. This was why he had the team he did. He’d looked at the list given to him and asked for the oldest names on it. People who remembered the before he had never experienced—a time when the two long-lived nations weren’t enemies. They had never been true allies, not from any history he’d heard, but there was a time when death wasn’t the only gift given between the two. He had hoped he would find some common ground with the older males and was beginning to feel like he was right. It still took three weeks for him to get comfortable enough to talk to them, but it was happening.

“Were there many?” Bryn asked softly. “Elvasi like him?” Bryn nodded in Trevan’s direction.

“Well, there were none exactly like *him* but with the same mentality,” the older male said with a shrug. “There were plenty. Most of them lived along the Dragon Spine and frequently traded with us. If you lived in a southern village, you could take a two-day flight to the nearest Elvasi town and see friends, maybe even find love. I knew a lot of males who found themselves falling for pretty faces of the Elvasi. There used to be a lot more mutts. They were always born with wings, though, and would eventually come back up to the Dragon Spine to fly with the rest of us.”

“There are still some out there,” Trevan said softly. “I knew mostly humans, but there were a few Elvasi in our organization who remembered before the war, before the disinformation Shadra spread.”

“From my understanding, it worked really well down there by Elliar and the southern provinces. They didn’t know us,” another male said, looking across the fire. “The Andinna didn’t like going that far south. No mountains.”

“And too hot.”

“Too boring.”

“And the Elvasi are vain, petty things,” Trevan added, chuckling. “So, it was easy to convince them the warriors to the north, not as pretty or perfect or as advanced, were monstrous barbarians, but not everyone believed it.”

“Well, obviously. You’re here. Chosen by our gods to ride one of our cousins and bear tatua. They even gave you our eyes.”

“Well, I didn’t mean just me—”

“Surprising, even, because you were down in that fucking place those other males talk about. The pits for the gladiators,” he continued. “I mean, you probably saw some terrible things down there from our kind. I’ve heard stories.”

Everyone around the fire nodded.

“It’s the past now,” he said, trying to put it to rest before it turned the evening to darker conversation than he wanted. “The sun is nearly done, so we should start preparing for the attack.”

“Ah, yeah, we should,” the older male agreed.

“Brynec, do you have any intel about this camp?” Trevan asked as he stood, stretching his aching bones. He rode Kyn every day, which made him sore the same way riding a horse would.

Bryn raised an eyebrow without answering and stood. He didn’t reply as he walked to his horse, grabbed a scroll, walked back to Trevan, and shoved the scroll at him.

“Here.”

Trevan managed to keep himself from dropping it as the male walked away.

“He hates you,” someone muttered.

“Yeah.” Trevan saw no reason to disagree and no reason to elaborate. The situation was too complicated. He opened the scroll and held back a groan. It was written in Andenna. Not impossible for him to read, but it took a considerable amount of concentration and thought. He preferred everything in Common.

As he looked at it, though, the translation came clearly. He blinked several times and frowned, confused how easy it was for him to read. It only took a moment for him to figure out it had nothing to do with his own practice, which he did very little because he despised it.

Am I ever going to stop finding things the dragon gods changed about me? Did they really make it easier for me to understand their language?

He quickly got the information he needed. This camp would have the ballista he needed to keep an eye out for. He felt something pulling on his chest and knew Kyn was demanding attention, but he needed to finish reading.

He looked up after a moment to see Kyn standing over him.

“Well, hello,” he said softly. “Can you give me a moment?”

He looked back down, but Kyn stuck his big, red muzzle in the way and huffed, sending Trevan's hair flying.

"Yes, I understand, but—"

Kyn chittered and bumped his chest with his nose.

"Excuse me—" Trevan tried not to smile as the wyvern continued to demand to be petted.

The wyvern reached out, and Trevan barely moved the scroll in time to keep a large, black claw from going through it. Warriors around them laughed.

Trevan turned his back on Kyn, trying to establish a boundary and continue reading, but Kyn's head came over his shoulder and tried to block his view again. Before Trevan could say anything, the scroll was taken from his hands by Bryn, who rolled it back up and went to put it away.

"Can't risk it getting damaged," the Andinna muttered. "There's fifteen hundred in the camp at last count. Might be closer to two thousand now if we think any of the survivors ran from the other camp to this one."

"Thank you," Trevan said, sighing as he reached up to pet Kyn's chin. The wyvern made a noise that seemed more feline than reptilian, but other than that pleased sound, he knew Kyn didn't like Bryn's attitude any more than he did, although neither of them was going to do anything about it. Trevan knew trying too hard would make it worse because he would seem suspicious. His best idea was to continue being himself and hoping Bryn saw it wasn't an act. Trevan had always been quiet and reserved, and he wasn't going to change. Life had taught him that great things could be done without him needing to open his mouth.

So, they would wait for Bryn to come around on his own and not worry about it.

He's never going to like me, and that's okay. I don't need him to. I don't plan on acting on my feelings for Mave, so even if that's the problem right now, he doesn't have anything to worry about.

"All ready to head out?" he asked, looking at the group as the warriors gathered around.

"Yes, sir," they replied in a disjointed chorus.

He only nodded, then climbed onto Kyn's back. Letting the wyvern get used to him for a moment, he gently rubbed Kyn's neck.

You ready, my friend?

The emotions coming back through the bond were powerful. Kyn was ready to continue to prove his worth, not that Trevan needed him to do that. He had the same need to please those around him that he did, though.

They jumped off as the last bit of light faded. Kyn took them to the front of the group and raced through the sky, heading west to their target. Trevan held on tight for the inevitable dive once the Elvasi camp came into view. Kyn attacked as if he was hunting, diving from above to unleash terrible destruction. He had the utmost trust in Kyn as they hurtled to the ground. Kyn knew what this meant for both of them. The ones who were out of place, the ones who didn't have much of a future, but together, they could do great things.

They roared together as they went down and down until Kyn turned slightly, and fire erupted from his mouth. It blasted two wooden buildings on contact, sending chunks of burning debris to several tents. Kyn kept up his fire breath as they made their pass over what seemed to be the supplies for the camp. Even if they couldn't kill as many Elvasi as they wanted, they could make the mountains unlivable for them.

As they finished the pass, Kyn took them skyward again, and Trevan's heart felt like it was going to fall out of his chest. There was no getting over the sheer excitement of flying. Vahn had been a great introduction, but with Kyn, they became one. Trevan could feel everything as if he was the one with the wings.

They turned, and he leaned in again as Kyn took them back down. With two sets of eyes, they were able to find their next target. Kyn chose it and turned sharply, sending only a single fireball to blast whatever it was from existence. They turned again, and Kyn sent another before roaring triumphantly.

"Keep going, Kyn! We can't celebrate yet!" Trevan said urgently, patting his friend's neck. "We can do this. There!" He leaned to give Kyn direction, trying to swing the wyvern toward a set of ballistae at the edge of the camp. Kyn moved and sent another fireball, hitting both in one go.

"Watch out!" someone roared nearby in Andenna. Trevan tried to find which of his team it was but couldn't find them through the rising smoke.

"Kyn, up," he ordered as a large spear flew by them. He cursed as it disappeared from sight. Kyn angled up and sent them up again. Another spear flew by.

“We need to find those and destroy them,” he explained. “Think we can do it?”

Kyn chittered and dove back into the smoke, taking them just over the tops of the camp’s buildings. The Elvasi had gotten comfortable in the mountains, building up structures that showed they had planned to stick around for a long time. Trevan wanted to see them all destroyed by the end. The Elvasi had no place in his mountains.

They found another set of ballistae, and Kyn took them out before they could fire their shots. Another spear whizzed by while they hunted for the next. Trevan hoped the Andinna weren’t already heading back to camp. The smoke was enough to make him want to cough and would drop them from the skies if they weren’t careful.

Kyn and Trevan found three more, but it was more dangerous. A spear grazed Kyn’s leg and made him cry out in pain and anger before he destroyed the ones who were able to land the shot. Trevan’s leg ached in sympathy, but they pressed on.

He coughed hard as they tried to find the rest, knowing there were more, but the smoke was limiting their visibility. Even Kyn was beginning to breathe harder than normal as the smoke was doing a number on him as well.

We need to go.

Kyn listened and started up again, trying to break out of the smoke cover. Trevan wasn’t thinking about anything but getting out when it happened. He was riding a massive red target. While he couldn’t see the Elvasi camping in the trees of the valley, they could see him and Kyn fairly easily.

The spear seemed as if it came out of nowhere from the smoke as if it had just come into existence with one goal.

It slammed into Kyn’s shoulder, and Trevan screamed in pain and fear as Kyn dropped. He clutched a spike on Kyn’s back with his remaining arm as the pain rendered his other completely useless.

“Kyn!” he cried out. “Please!”

Kyn cried out as he tried to right them before they hit the ground. The spear was deep into the muscle, and there was no way for Trevan to pull it out. They didn’t crash into the earth, hobbling through the air as Kyn tried to get them away from the camp.

“Find somewhere to land,” he said, trying to hold on as Kyn was unable to fly smoothly. He overused his uninjured wing while the other seemed nearly useless.

“Land him!” someone cried out. “I can get the spear, but you need to land him!”

Trevan looked up to see Bryn overhead. He nodded and tried to direct Kyn with his thoughts, unable to speak as the pain raced through him like ice when Kyn tried to lift his wing.

Kyn practically tumbled from the sky into the trees. Trevan was tossed off as Kyn whined, grabbing onto the spear with his mouth and tugged.

Trevan screamed as the pain crippled him. Someone shoved a piece of leather in his mouth as someone else held him down.

“Let me help you,” someone said gently. Trevan tried to see what was happening, only to find Bryn approaching Kyn very slowly. “He can’t right now. He can feel your pain. We need to help you so you can both get moving. I won’t hurt you.”

Kyn snarled, knowing Bryn didn’t like Trevan. There was no trust there, and now they were hurting. There was no way Kyn would let Bryn near him.

Please. Please, Kyn, let him help. He won’t hurt you.

Kyn lifted his head and found Trevan with those gemstone eyes.

“Let him help,” he tried to say with the leather in his mouth.

Bryn reached for the spear, moving in elaborate, big movements, making it clear what he was doing.

“I know how this works. I’ve seen it done. It will hurt, but if we take it out, you’ll heal. No one else here knows what this is like, but I’ve seen it before. Trust me, just for a moment.”

Kyn was practically shaking, and Trevan could feel the fear as if it was his own.

He belongs to Mave. You can’t hurt him. He’ll hurt you, but he won’t do it intentionally, so you can’t hurt him.

Kyn whined, and a jolt of pain made Trevan tense as Bryn grabbed the spear with both hands.

“The Elvasi aren’t following,” someone called out. “We’re in the clear for the moment.”

“They’re going to be busy putting out those fires,” someone else fired back. “Help us hold him down. Apparently, they feel each other like a blood bond pair would. There ain’t nothing we can do for either of them until Brynec gets the spear out.”

Another pair of hands and more weight rested on his legs.

Bryn started to pull, but as Trevan screamed, he kept his eyes on Kyn’s. Kyn cried out in pain but didn’t thrash around, although his body was shaking hard.

Good boy. Yeah, you can do it. I believe in you. We’ll help you.

Bryn grunted and struggled, but progress was being made. Kyn continued to scream but eventually sagged as the tip of the spear was finally dislodged. Trevan panted as the sharpness of the pain subsided, but the pain was far from gone. He struggled to get up as the others got off him. One finally dragged him to his feet, and he staggered to Kyn, grabbing the wyvern’s head in an embrace.

“See? Brynec helped you,” he whispered, rubbing over the scales. Kyn only made a weak cry in return, but both of them were grateful for the Andinna.

“Trevan, you need to see this,” Bryn said softly, coming around to them. He was still holding the spear. “We can talk about it more at camp, and we’ll need to take it back with us to Alchan, but you need to see.”

Trevan only turned his head, looking at the spear. His stomach twisted when he saw the metal tip used. It had dozens of sharp points. It wasn’t a standard spear tip but a cruel arrow, designed to slide in easily and tear up the flesh when it was pulled out.

“I don’t know if he’ll be able to fly tonight. You both might be grounded for a couple of weeks as his muscle rebuilds and heals. We’re lucky they only hit thick muscle and not his ribs,” Bryn said gently. The implication was it could have punctured a lung and killed Kyn. “I’ll keep this on me.”

“Thank you,” he said, swallowing. “How long is the walk back to our horses?”

Kyn growled and lifted his wing, struggling with the injured shoulder. Trevan grabbed his own and grimaced. Kyn was determined to make it work and made that apparent.

“He wants to fly back,” he explained to the Andinna. “At least if we do that, we won’t leave a trail for the Elvasi to follow.”

“Then we’ll fly slow, so he’s not stressed,” one said behind him.

Trevaan slowly got back on Kyn, struggling with their shared pain. He constantly reminded himself that he wasn’t the one hit, trying to keep his head clear. Kyn didn’t take off the normal way. He hobbled into a run and was barely able to clear the trees when he jumped off the ground.

They made it back to camp, loaded up their things, and started walking. Kyn never left his side once they were on the ground. He trusted Kyn would never leave his side, and he never intended to leave Kyn’s.

As they walked through the night, Trevaan also thought about Bryn, who had stepped up and helped them.

Maybe we’re finally making a bit of a difference there, my boy.

Kyn huffed in return.

MAVE

“It’s a big update today, so I hope everyone got some coffee before you came in,” Alchan said loudly to the gathered Andinna in the war room.

Mave leaned on the wall behind him, holding her mug greedily as Luykas tried to steal it. She growled when his fingers grazed it, and he chuckled in her ear.

“Mean,” he teased.

“It’s fucking early. The sun isn’t even up, and I’ll remind you I was up long before any of you even considered cracking open a damn eye,” she snarled. She barely got any sleep. With Rain gone, she was the one who followed the damn king around everywhere.

So, when a group of guards who reported to Senri flew into the village, they woke up Senri, then they woke up Mave, then went to Alchan, just to let them know they had done that. Mave wasn’t the only female starting the day in a bad mood. Across the table, Senri’s dark mood was keeping everyone two steps from her.

“What’s going on?” Mat asked her softly, not daring to even look at her mug, pretending as though it didn’t exist. She bared her teeth but didn’t answer as Alchan cleared his throat and everyone stopped talking.

“Kenav will be back at midday,” he announced.

No one cheered.

“He got into a couple of scuffles with Elvasi patrols, killing maybe forty before the patrols could run back to their camps and tell anyone he was

around. He never made a major assault. We will not be celebrating his return to the village. I recommend you all make yourselves scarce before he gets back,” Alchan said as if there wasn’t a sense of foreboding taking over the room.

“Ohhh,” Zayden said quietly. “Well, well.”

Alchan turned slowly and narrowed his eyes on her husband, prompting her to bare her teeth again at him. He gave a shrug with one shoulder, then turned back to the rest of the room.

“*Keep the peanut gallery quiet,*” he ordered in her head.

She reached out and put a hand over Zayden’s mouth, feeling his lips curl into a smile. His tongue came out, and she pulled her hand away, wondering when he had been overtaken by such immaturity.

“What would you like us to do to prepare?”

“Nothing,” Alchan answered simply. “Well, that’s not exactly right. We’ve been discussing sending down some males to clear the valley, so we’ll send them.”

“They will have just come back after six weeks on the road,” someone said softly.

“Exactly, and this is their punishment. Kenav will stay here under my watchful eye, and his males will walk the three days back south to the valley and help clean it up. They’ll be hauling wood, building and will continue to live off rations. Integrate them into the teams we already have prepped.”

“That’s harsh, brother,” Luykas said, leaning in to keep the words quiet and between them. Luykas didn’t argue with Alchan publicly anymore. “Why don’t we send them down in a week with a supply run and give others a chance to come back? They were just following Kenav—”

“They were following Kenav against my orders,” Alchan reminded him. “But fine. A week of hard labor here, then those who seem unrepentant can head south and do more. Allaina—”

“Oh, I know where I can put them,” the mativa cut in with a vicious smile. “The Hornbuckles always need help.”

Mave inhaled sharply. The mine was *harsh*. Mave didn’t know many who willingly went down there to help the Hornbuckle dwarves get iron for weapons and tools.

“Perfect,” Alchan said with a returning smile. “Now, let’s get on with other updates. Luykas, you met with the scouts over the last few days. What’s the report?”

Luykas stepped forward to his brother’s side and started moving the little pieces on the map.

“Shadra’s main force is moving closer,” he said as he rearranged everything. “They’re taking the obvious route, which is good for us. They’ll walk into the valley without a problem, knowing it’s the best route to us.”

“What’s the estimate on when she’ll arrive?”

“She’s moving a little slower than I thought some weeks ago. Late summer, maybe right at the shift to fall. She’ll want to defeat us and breach the mountains by winter, so no later. We should be ready by the time she gets here if the teams going to the valley are also setting aside housing solutions and supplies for the coming battle.”

Alchan nodded to his brother, a promise everything would be handled. Mave finished her coffee and handed the mug to Mat, so she could cross her arms.

“After that, there’s news our missions are proving successful with Trevan and Rain,” Luykas continued. “Two scouts decided to head farther south and found evidence they’ve chased these three camps back to Shadra.” Luykas picked up the three most southern camps and put them with Shadra’s main force. “We’ll overestimate and say most of the Elvasi survived, deciding it wasn’t worth staying where they were.”

“Over estimations are better than under,” Alchan agreed.

“They didn’t want to risk running into the Elvasi, so I don’t know how everyone has done against these.” Luykas pointed at the remaining camps in the region. “We’ll find out soon. Rain will be done before Trevan, and he shouldn’t be another week, based on his plan for travel. Trevan will be another week after him, at most.”

“Good. By the time they’re both back and rested, things will be ready at the valley for us to move the majority of the forces south. We can begin a correspondence with Shadra—”

“What?” Mave snapped, looking up

“I won’t break the laws of war,” he said, looking back at her. “We’ll send her a single missive that she needs to send her army back south of the mountains and end this war or face a battle with our full force. That’s all.

It's not like we would be able to ambush her. She'll already know we're planning to meet her head-on before she gets to the village. Might as well make the attempt."

Mave snorted. "She won't go for it, so it just puts someone in danger."

"It won't put anyone in danger," Luykas said, shaking his head. "I'm going directly to her without being in any danger. She won't be able to touch me. There's no magic for that."

"Okay." She didn't argue, but something in her was angry, though. She understood Luykas and Alchan's logic, but it didn't sink in and stop that angry thing, which just wanted to kill things. She didn't want Shadra to have a chance to back out.

Mave rolled her head, trying to relieve the tension in her neck.

"*Breathe.*" Alchan's voice bounced around in the dark void that was Mave's head.

She took a deep breath, grabbed hold of that sliver of Kristanya, then shoved it into the darkness.

"I get it," she said, shrugging, feeling a little more normal again. "I understand it'll be nice if she suddenly decided it wasn't worth it, and you're going to try before risking all of our people on this fight."

"I knew you did," Alchan said with a small smile.

She tuned out as they talked about logistics, how many to send to the valley, where they would start, what was needed for the entire Andinna force to live near it, and where they would live.

"Like most valleys in the Dragon Spine, there's a sharp cliff around parts of it. Here and here," Luykas said as Mave looked at Mat.

Mat's eyes were half-closed, and Zayden looked just as bored beyond him.

"How is training coming along?" Luykas asked suddenly.

"Good," Mat answered without missing a beat. "We're going into this fight with several hundred warriors I would consider advanced, possibly more, but..." He waved a hand at Nevyn.

"Same for us," Nevyn confirmed. "Between us, we'll probably have a thousand warriors you would want in the initial assault. Beyond that... Varon?"

"We'll have enough archers," Varon said softly. "By my last count, two thousand Andinna will be using bows at the beginning of the assault."

“Good,” Alchan said softly, nodding. He looked up at those who didn’t know everything. Mave didn’t know when they would tell them. Every day, Shadra marched closer, and most Andinna had no idea what Alchan was planning or what Mave could do. “I know it doesn’t seem like a lot, but please, continue with your tasks. We’re meeting Shadra in open conflict, and it will take its toll on our numbers, but I truly believe we’ll be able to take the victory and end this war in our favor.”

“It would be easier if we knew exactly how you’re going to take some seven thousand Andinna warriors and defeat nearly thirty thousand Elvasi,” someone said, brave enough to speak. The female had a good point.

“We’ll have the high ground against the majority of her forces. Elvasi like to fight on open fields. She’ll probably send forces around the edges of the valley to try to pinch us, but I’m going to divert Trevan and Rain to handle those. As for the rest, you’ll just have to trust me a little longer.”

“Yes, sire,” the female bowed out of the argument gracefully, even though she didn’t get the answers she wanted—that everyone wanted.

“*I’m the initial assault on the main force, aren’t I?*” Mave couldn’t resist asking. She already assumed she was, but she had never bothered to ask.

“*Yes. You and whatever wyverns I can call. I don’t want them to think of me as a god king, which is why I haven’t told them the truth of the royal family. There’s always been the idea we’re special, which is why our bloodline rules, but I want to hold off until the last possible moment to keep that tradition of some secrecy.*”

“*It wouldn’t change anything if you did tell them now or later,*” she said with a mental shrug. “*They would be less confused, but you’re the king. They should trust you with or without all the facts. So, I don’t really care that they don’t know.*”

“*Having blind faith is foolish and hard to ask for as a ruler.*”

“*Yeah, but in what world would they have all the facts, and you don’t? You’ll always know more, and they need to trust that. I trust you. You’re the only ruler I’ve ever trusted and probably ever will. It’s not blind faith. You’ve given us a reason to believe you’re a good king, and you know what you’re doing. You organized all of this. You let us help in whatever way we could, but that doesn’t give us the right to know every nuance of your plans.*”

Alchan said no more, but she felt his appreciation, a glimpse at his emotions he freely gave her.

As the meeting wound down, Mave kept her attention on Alchan, ready to give him whatever support he needed. No one else asked him for more information about his plans. Someone would try again in a few days and get shut down again. It was an endless cycle at this point. Mave understood why the other warriors wanted the facts. She had them but wasn't part of the planning. She went and fought where Alchan pointed. That was her duty. At the same time, her understanding only went so far. She was perfectly fine against bad odds, even before she was an Avatar. She would take any fight Alchan gave her without question. Therefore, they should all have been able to do the same.

The meeting ended, and she followed Alchan and Lily out of the war room instead of her husbands.

"Lily, darling, I'm going to send you home today. Mave and I will greet Kenav when he gets here," Alchan said gently, pushing some of the small female's hair from her face. "I don't want you there for the repercussions."

"Okay," she said softly, going to her toes. Alchan's smile was kind and loving as he leaned down to kiss her. "But promise me you'll eat something." She glanced at Mave and looked like she wanted to say something else, then thought better of it.

"Right away," he whispered. "And I'll make sure she eats, too."

Lily nodded quickly before heading in the direction of their cliffside homes.

"Found herself tongue-tied when she thought about telling me to do something?" Mave asked, chuckling as the female disappeared.

"She's trying," Alchan said very softly. "There are so many dominant personalities in our family, and she's still trying to find balance."

"I appreciate her effort." Mave bumped him with her shoulder. "She's very nice, brother. I'm glad you and Rain have found her. A little confused about how it works, but that's not really my business."

Alchan chuckled. "We'll walk, and I'll explain."

"You really don't have to," she said quickly as he offered his arm. She took it, knowing it was just a good-natured gesture.

"You're my sister, and I think it's important you understand my family life with them," Alchan said as they started walking. "Rain and Lily aren't

attracted to each other the way I'm attracted to both of them or the way you're attracted to your husbands and vice versa."

"Of course Rain isn't attracted to her. Rain only likes males."

"And Lily only likes very dominant males and not all the time. In fact, very infrequently."

"Oh?"

"She's not a very sexual person. Since her fertile cycle, we haven't done more than cuddle, and it's not all because of the fertile cycle. She doesn't feel the urge very often. I think it's amazing I made her interested at all."

"Is she okay with you telling me this?" Mave frowned as they walked into the trees and out of sight of the village.

"Yes." Alchan seemed sure of it. "That's all I needed to say. She's not very sexual. Romantic love to her is different than what it is for us. She romantically loves Rain and me the same. She only wants to be sexual on occasion with me. Rain feels the same for her. It's something we talked about after her fertile cycle, making sure everyone's feelings were clear. If there was a mayara, he and I would be in hers."

"And you don't get jealous, my bedru brother?" she asked, looking up until she caught his amber eyes. "I know the dominant rage of seeing someone touch someone that belongs to you."

"They don't touch," Alchan said with a toothy grin that seemed dangerous. "Unless it's casual, a hug or a kiss on the cheek. Those things don't bother me. I know they won't ever strip down and get in bed together without me. There's nothing for me to fear. If I ever have a reason to lose that faith, there are bigger problems in my household."

"Ah." Mave nodded slowly, understanding. "You own them sexually, but you're willing to share the hearts." It was a crass way to put it, but Mave wasn't good with words to put it more eloquently.

"Exactly," he confirmed. "My father had to do similar. He knew he couldn't keep my mother's heart to himself. Hearts are so hard to hold, he didn't even try. He hated her males for touching my mother. It's why he kept her to himself during her fertile cycle. He was very much okay with what he was, though. I've never been comfortable with being a bedru. I think that's the difference. I try to work against it while he allowed himself to be swallowed by that identity."

Mave patted his arm with her free hand. "I have only heard stories, but you are a much better male than your father."

"When we met, I would have called you a fool for saying that," Alchan admitted. "But now, I know you're right. I can't get comfortable in that reality, but I know you're right."

"Then don't ever stop being better than him," she said.

"I don't intend to."

"Good."

They headed past training fields and tents, where some were staying to get out of the crowded communal homes. They passed the rough area of the village, where former gladiators still resided together, many looking in their direction, then turning away. There was still tension in this area of the village.

"Why are we going on this walk?" Mave asked, frowning as more of the warriors in this part of the valley looked up and gave them a short glare before turning away.

"I need to remind the village," he said, keeping his stare ahead of him as if he couldn't be bothered to look at the ones who hated her, "that you are someone important to me, and Kenav is in disgrace. That you're at my side, and he will never be. His sneaky defiance won't be tolerated. I have the most dominant female by my side, and she follows me without question, so he was expected to do the same and failed."

"Ah...I am an accessory today."

"You're doing well," he said with a small smile, teasing her.

"I've done it before," she whispered, staring at the gladiators. She recognized their faces, could remember their numbers, but she never learned their names. They had all known each other's names and hers, but she was never granted the privilege of knowing them.

For centuries, they had denied her everything because she had walked at the side of Shadra against her will, an accessory. She was the prized slave who won Shadra the war, the key figure who helped her outsmart a renowned general.

I was a child forced to survive. I became an adult who only knew survival. It wasn't my fault.

"No, child, it wasn't your fault," Kristanya agreed. "But it takes a long time for those on the outside to see the truth of those on the inside. One can

only see so much through a window into another's life."

It was different with Alchan. Walking beside her brother wasn't a curse she was forced to endure, a thing to be punished for. Beside him, she knew they could take this world and everyone in it. They were two powers, made for each other in a way no others would understand.

From the looks on the gladiator's faces, they were only looking in through a window. They believed a lie they had crafted from only small pieces of her life.

"Thank you for doing this with me. They particularly need the reminder that you're not their perceived enemy anymore. You are my Champion and so much more."

"They will never love me, no matter what I do," Mave finally said, feeling an aching sadness. She had always privately hurt but rarely voiced the pain. For centuries, she buried it, knowing it was impossible to fix.

"They don't need to," Alchan said gently as he looked over her head at those who watched them. He forced them to keep walking, never missing a step, never slowing down for her. "I don't need them to love me, only respect me and in turn, respect you."

"I want them to," she whispered.

"You or Kristanya?" he asked, seeing beyond her surface feelings. She frowned and tried to sort through her emotions as they walked away from the gladiators onto a quiet trail.

"I know it's not her, but it's a good thought. I always wanted them to accept me, deep down. I knew it would never happen, and after so many years, I had given up so much hope, Mat and Rain had to force themselves on me to get me to acknowledge them. Deep down, I had always ached for the loss of something I didn't understand—a place in the community I couldn't have, knowledge I had no understanding of. It's hard to miss something you don't really understand, but I did."

He pulled her closer to his side.

"You have it now, and you will never lose it," he said as a promise.

They walked and walked, enjoying the silence as people just witnessed them together until someone ran up to them. One of Senri's guards, panting as he tried to speak.

"Kenav...just over the ridge. Any moment," he finally said.

MAVE

The news of Kenav's return excited her in a dangerous way. Mave smiled with her Andinna fangs showing, making the guard pale. The guards were strong warriors, but they were missing the sharp edge of other warriors. They were a touch softer and nicer than those who ran off, looking for war. Mave was clearly one of those who went looking for trouble.

"Calm," Alchan said softly, directed at her but not turning in her direction. To the guard, he continued, "We'll head to the center of the village. Direct him and his warriors to us. They'll be expecting a celebration, but Senri already knows I want this done publicly but quietly. Don't rile anyone up, for good or ill."

"Yes, Your Majesty." He took off and flew to the southern half of the village.

Mave wanted to fly as well, but Alchan kept walking.

"We have time, and our lack of excitement will give them a clear sign we're still not happy with Kenav. We don't want to show anything that might give someone the impression we're happy to see him."

"Of course," she agreed, trying to ignore her undercurrent of tension and excitement. It was as though lightning was coursing through her because she was going to see a male she hated, and this time, he was going to be put in his place. She always rode the line of wanting to kill him and still believed that was the best course, but she trusted Alchan. She had to trust Alchan. There was an innate knowledge in her now that if she broke his orders and killed the gladiator Seventy-Two, she would be lost to the

raging power inside her. Her power whispered that truth to her as they walked. It wanted it to happen—wanted her to destroy the world, a primal rage of being the most powerful but out of control.

All she had to do was betray her brother, escape his dominance, and she could have it all.

“Mave,” Alchan said cautiously as they drew closer to the village again. “Are you feeling all right?”

“I want to kill him,” she admitted. “But I’m convincing myself I won’t because you don’t think he should be executed...yet.”

“Ah...” Alchan chuckled. “I actually hate him, and every time he pulls a stunt, I grow closer to killing him. He’s too popular, though. Our hands are tied. I need to try every other punishment first, or I risk upsetting too many Andinna. Things are already tense with Leria, and they’ll always be tense with her. I can’t have these problems from two sides.”

“I understand. I don’t like it, but I understand.”

“Mave, if he does something worth execution, you will know I am on your side,” he said, squeezing her arm. “You’ll know. You won’t even have to ask.”

She nodded as they passed through the quiet marketplace and headed for the center of the village. They stopped together, and no one bothered them. As they waited, Senri and Allaina arrived together. Mat, Zayden, and Emerian showed up next and made a semi-circle behind Alchan and Mave. She smiled back at them. Nevyn and Varon landed on either side of them, then finally Luykas, who arrogantly brought a wooden chair and sat down to the side. He crossed his legs and took on the posture of a noble, waiting to see things go his way.

Alchan rolled his eyes while Mave covered her mouth, stifling a laugh. Luykas was the one who dealt with the brunt of Kenav’s behavior, and he was clearly going to enjoy this. As those in the Colosseum would say—he had a front-row seat and the best view, ready to enjoy seeing the blood hit the sands.

As the Ivory Shadows waited, Mave’s need for blood continued to grow. She fought it, knowing she couldn’t cross that line yet, but still, it grew. Others came to wait with them, but none dared to enter the central festival area of the village. This was the place where they had public gatherings of

all sorts, like the spring festival. This was also where they had hung up the spy, Learen, then Mave's mother cut off his head.

And here would be the place Kenav was knocked down to size for his arrogance.

They saw the approaching warriors, moving slow and tired after being away from home for so long. They had gone through the mountains on foot and horseback, a slow way to travel in a large group. They had wasted supplies and found little to show for it.

Even from a distance, Mave saw the warriors knew their little campaign had been a waste. They wore the disappointment on their faces and the shame on their shoulders.

Kenav led, and she saw the moment he realized who was waiting for him. There were no cheering crowds, no joyous celebration of his return—only Alchan and Mave, flanked by their family, the best warriors, and those who ruled the Andinna.

It was time for a reckoning.

Kenav dismounted and walked the rest of the distance, handing off his horse.

“Your Majesty,” he greeted. “We—”

“Someone has already reported your accomplishments to me, if one can even call them that,” Alchan said. Mave felt his power, and it called to her own, both a perfect match and the perfect rival. “You took advantage of my time away by causing problems for the one I left in charge...not once but twice. You have been disrespectful to those I put in charge, including myself. You have finally crossed a line I cannot allow.”

“Cousin,” Kenav said, desperation already beginning to leak out.

Alchan's snarl had Kenav going to his knees. The power in her sang joyously to see her tormentor for centuries on his knees, ready to beg for mercy.

“I was doing my duty as a royal male, last of the line, and you took advantage of it, using the moment I was distracted, breeding something close to sedition to get your way, with my brother, my second in command. Raised by a queen and the royal family as I was, he is far more qualified to lead than you will ever be. He outranks you, and you let your petty jealousy of others direct you to reach above your station in an underhanded way.

Your behavior brings disgrace to the noble house you were born to, and since I was born of the same noble house, I feel it's only proper I fix this."

Kenav's eyes went wide.

"Alchan..."

"I won't execute you. We are cousins by blood, and I know you have only tried to do what you believe is right for the Andinna. I have faith in that."

His powers are telling him that. He could see the hearts of his people, or so he said, so Mave trusted Alchan's judgment of Kenav.

"You believed it was your right to help guide the Andinna. What you forgot to remember is you are not the ruler. I am. I am the final say in what direction the Andinna take, no matter how many friends you have backing your claims of a better idea. I know everything you do not. The reason you didn't succeed with this campaign was I sent two even faster teams to take the objectives we need. Why would I send out two hundred warriors when I can send out six and a wyvern?" Alchan crossed his arms. "For your arrogance, bred by your ignorance and lack of foresight, I need to punish you. Lord and General Kenav, from this day forward, you will no longer be either. From this day forward, you walk with no rank to your name. You have abused the privileges of your birth, and therefore, you are not welcome to them. You will answer directly to me and will lead no warriors until the time I believe you might one day be worthy of it again. That is my judgment, and it is final. You will report to the war room every morning to ask what I need. You will do nothing with the other warriors until I believe you have been reminded of your place. You may keep your home but have no visitors. It is the perfect isolation for one who craves the acknowledgment of others." Alchan looked over Kenav.

Mave felt the rush of power again, and it made her smile grow wider, more vicious.

"Warriors who followed Kenav. You will report to the small western training field tomorrow at dawn to hear the decision regarding your will to follow Kenav and not your king and his advisors. You will be placed where my generals and I decide, and will do hard labor for at least one week, more if you talk back or try to get out of it. All of you signed up for this campaign, knowing I was against it. I am Alchan Andini, King of Anden, and this is my judgment." He turned away from them and walked away.

Mave turned as well, a step behind him. She could have said something pithy and rude to Kenav—part of her wanted to—but she knew the power of silence. She had used it for years, and now, she made sure Alchan’s use of it worked just as well as a sharpened blade, cutting and bleeding the pride of the warriors in disgrace. Her silence led the others to be silent, falling in behind her and Alchan. They walked until they were back to their cliffside, a single unit. When Mave stopped to see who all followed them, she smiled to see Senri and Allaina, both nodding respectfully to her. As the leading females of the village, they had known the importance of their support of Alchan—they saw all.

“Good job,” Senri whispered when Mave stepped up beside her. “That was needed. I’m glad it’s finally done. With the knowledge he’s in disgrace, no one will speak up for him, and they’ll know Alchan means business when it comes to loyalty.”

“Especially since they were family. If he’s willing to punish his cousin, he’s probably willing to punish any of us,” Allaina added. “It was good of him to mention the relation.”

“We sometimes hate each other,” Alchan said, joining the females. “But I’m glad my most trusted mativa sees wisdom in my decision.”

“It doesn’t matter. Tell me something, Alchan. If Luykas decided to leave with two hundred warriors behind your back, what would you do?”

“Beat the shit out of him where everyone could see it,” Alchan answered immediately. “He wouldn’t, though.”

“Exactly,” she said, laughing. She dared to pat his shoulder. “Now, I need to get back to my job.”

“Have a good day,” Alchan said. Mave repeated it, and Allaina gave them both a breathtaking smile. She was by far one of the prettiest females of their race. Then she jumped into the air.

“I should go as well,” Senri said with a sigh. “That was fun, though. I hate that male.”

Mave laughed. “You hate him because I do.”

“Oh, I did at first, but he’s given me plenty of reasons to hate him since,” Senri countered with a wild grin. “I’m female and like seeing males knocked down a peg when they overstep.”

Then she was gone, too.

“Such is the way of the Andinna,” Alchan muttered. “There’s something perverse about the pleasure those two get.”

“Most males like it, though,” Mave reminded him. “Most males like being knocked down a peg by a powerful female.”

“Fools, all of them.” He smiled, though. Then, it seemed like his mood lifted from serious king to something more akin to Luykas in expression. “Ivory Shadows,” he called. “Why don’t we have a training day? We’ll ask Lily to make something for us to eat.”

“Get your damn swords, and let’s do it!” Nevyn called back with a grin. “But poor Lily can’t feed all of us.”

“You’re right. We’ll help her,” Alchan said, his smile not fading.

Mave went to her husbands, leaning on Zayden because he was the closest.

It felt like rot had been cut out of an infected wound. There was something clean about this afternoon, and she intended to enjoy it. Soon, Rain and Trevan would be back, and they would finish their preparations for their fight against Shadra.

All she had to do was train and wait.

The power in her stirred.

It was growing tired of waiting.

BRYNEC

Bryn followed behind the rest of the team as they left their final objective. Two nights before, they hit the last camp and were now heading home. It was a good thing, too. Kyn was grounded for the rest of the trip, thanks to his injuries. He'd barely stayed in the air for the final camp. Bryn had to bring out the bow to try to stop the Elvasi from taking Kyn and Trevan out of the sky. He'd spent the entire attack killing any Elvasi who tried to sit down at a ballista. In the end, he'd been injured as well, taking two arrows to his wings and one to the thigh.

He felt guilty, though. Two camps in a row, the Elvasi had been able to hit Kyn. Both could have been fatal, and in the last fight, they got dangerously close to doing just that. The wyvern didn't deserve the pain. It was a small male, destined to never find a mate, never to have young unless it grew smarter, wilier than other males in search of a mate. A runt, it was now in a situation no other wyvern had ever been in. Kyn, however, had a childlike personality he couldn't get over. He was nice to everyone, which Bryn really liked. It reminded him the wyverns really were their cousins, children of dragons just like him.

Kyn was nice to everyone...except Bryn, even though he helped Kyn and Trevan when they were down and had protected both of them on the last attack. He wouldn't let Bryn near him unless Trevan asked him to, and Bryn knew why. If someone was rude to his Mave, he wouldn't give that person a chance to apologize. Bryn had been cold to Trevan, who was soul-

bonded to Kyn. Kyn had picked up on it, and now Bryn was the lonely one on their mission, the one they all barely spoke to.

For good reason.

Bryn had come on this mission to watch Trevan. It had been his reluctance that had gotten them hurt, and he knew it. He could have been smart enough to bring the bow out earlier, could have tried to defend them faster instead of letting them take control and defend themselves. He'd been too much in his own head, and now he was suffering for it, trying to handle guilt he never expected to feel.

I'm an ass.

There was really no way around it. He'd known it the moment he saw Kyn get hit while the rest of them were backing off. He'd known it when Kyn snarled at him, and Trevan had to convince the wyvern to let him help. He'd known it as Trevan screamed while he pulled the spear out of the wyvern.

The only reason I didn't see what everyone else could was I made myself blind to it. This has nothin' to do with Trevan and everythin' to do with me.

For days, that truth sat like a stone in his stomach as they walked, camped, and slept. He didn't know how to go about fixing it, either. All of his life, he had left dealing with Elvasi up to others. If they were enemies, he killed them. If they were allies—which he never truly believed—he let others talk to them.

Now, not just for his wife but for himself, he needed to right this. It felt wrong to see the wyvern limping with Trevan after everything they had done, especially on this mission. These two were warriors, and he had let them down because he refused to see what others did.

The group slowed, and one of the Andinna in the front pointed between the trees.

“Clearing up ahead. Let's stop and make camp, so we don't push the horses too hard.”

It went without saying no one wanted to push Kyn too hard. The horses would be fine, but it was Kyn who was forced to walk on the ground when most wyverns spent their days flying.

Bryn followed in silence as they broke through the underbrush into the clearing. He set up the fire, letting others break out their sleeping mats. It

was a small way he could make life easier for everyone when he knew he had failed them.

Not just them. The gods. Everyone kept sayin' Trevan must have been picked by the gods as someone of worth, but I refused to see it.

He finally did. Even at his coldest, Trevan never got angry with him, never made a move to stop Bryn. He was completely himself at every turn, helpful and even kind. He was never harsh with anyone, and when he and Kyn were hurt, he blamed no one.

Bryn knew there were only two ways he could respond to that. He could hate Trevan for being so damn good, something he had been trying to do for two years now and succeeding, or just admit he was an ass and move on, as hard as that was on his pride.

I'm an ass.

"Thanks," the wyvern-rider said as Bryn's fire began to grow. "I've considered asking Kyn to start fires for us, but...I don't know if we really need a bonfire." The not-Elvasi smiled broadly, obviously holding back a laugh at a mental image.

Bryn only nodded, seeing the humor of it but unsure if he had the right to partake in it.

"Maybe when we're back at the village," an Andinna said with a laugh. "Wouldn't that be fun? We can tell them what we've done and party for days and Kyn will never let the fire go out."

There was laughter all around, and Bryn couldn't resist a small smile. He wouldn't be at the parties. He didn't deserve them because he knew he could have done better. He could have done so much better. He was just happy his idiocy didn't get them killed.

I promised Luykas I would do better. I promised Mave I wouldn't do anything to get them hurt, and I failed.

He closed his eyes and sighed.

"Are you okay?" Trevan asked from beside Bryn.

Bryn opened his eyes and saw the others looked between him and Trevan. He looked up at the warrior and tried to smile.

"Fine. Just thinking about getting home."

"Sure," Trevan said softly.

Dinner was eaten in silence. Bryn watched as each warrior moved away from the fire to get some sleep. Trevan was one of the last, and he didn't go

to a bedroll. Kyn curled up, and Trevan leaned on him, protected by a thick, dangerous red tail—sheltered. For a moment, Bryn looked at the sight with wonder.

This was a bond no one could break. The gods had given Trevan a gift. He had walked away from his own people, learned a new language, and was given wings to fly. The creature those wings were attached to loved him. It was like something out of a story, something that should be painted on the walls of a great hall in a temple, an image he knew he would never forget—this Elvasi who proved himself to the dragon gods purely by what was in his heart and soul, with a wyvern as his companion.

Bryn stood and walked away from the camp, heading deep into the woods and hit a stream. He found a rock to sit on and just listened to the water. He had come on this mission to see what others would see and felt as if he had found more than he bargained for.

Trevan was good. Not just a good Elvasi, but a good male, a good soul.

Better than him. Better than he had ever been. From killing people in the shadows to being hateful for little reason, Bryn didn't have that goodness in him. There was no denying it.

There was the hate Bryn felt. He hated that an Elvasi, someone from a race that enslaved them and ruined their lives, was a good soul. Better than him.

She should leave me and have him.

He covered his face and stayed on the rock for longer than he planned. He didn't expect anyone to come look for him. He hadn't planned to stay away from the camp for long, but a rustling in the bushes behind him told him he had stayed away for too long. He turned slowly, knowing it wasn't the enemy. Trevan came out of the darkness, frowning.

"You're not okay," he said, shaking his head. "I know you hate me, but I would like to help if I can."

Bryn felt those words cut to his soul and destroy him.

"How?" he asked softly, staring at the pale gold eyes set in black. The rose-gold tatua seemed to stand out at night. There was no denying this man's claim to something Andinna. As if he was a mutt one step further from Andinna than Luykas or Emerian, but still Andinna.

"How what?" Trevan's frown grew deeper.

"How are ya so good?"

“I...” Trevan stepped closer, then stopped again. “I don’t think I am. All I do is try my best, and...” He shook his head.

Bryn frowned now as well, then patted the rock next to him. Trevan took the invitation and climbed up to sit beside him.

“I let ya get hurt,” Bryn whispered, not looking at those eyes anymore, staring at the surrounding darkness. Once, he would have taken solace in the dark, but now it was just lonely. His wife and the family he shared with her had given him too much light to enjoy the dark anymore, even when he desperately needed it.

“No, you didn’t,” Trevan said with astonishment. “The Elvasi did what they were trained to do. They attacked someone attacking them.”

“I could have helped better. Could have killed people trying to use those damn ballistae.” Bryn rubbed his face. “I didn’t ‘cause I wanted to see what ya did, how ya did. I was too stupid to even think about it.”

“It’s fine. Kyn is healing. I can tell the pain is already fading away. He knows what the stakes are. I think he can feel the mood of Anden and knew something was wrong before he and I were ever bonded.”

“The Empire tried to hunt his kind to extinction, too,” Bryn said, nodding. “Of course, he knew somethin’ was wrong. But none of that changes what I did to ya.”

“What you did was help me and Kyn,” Trevan said, his voice betraying anger Bryn understood—indignant, prideful anger the Andinna were good at. “You didn’t get us hurt.”

“I did, but ya keep tellin’ yerself otherwise,” Bryn said, growling a little. Trevan was becoming Andinna in a quiet way. He’d felt the dominance of the male when he’d gone to his home that morning. Felt it now. “I’m tryin’ to apologize, so don’t ya fuckin’ try to take that away from me. Hard enough as it is without ya arguin’.”

“Fine. Apologize for nothing,” Trevan snapped. Bryn turned on him with a snarl, and Trevan snarled back. “You did nothing wrong. There were hundreds of Elvasi in those camps. Do you really think you could have killed every single one of them trained to use those ballistae? I bet half of those soldiers were trained in it as a precaution. They had more ballistae than we have warriors. A shot was going to be fired. Eventually, one of them was going to hit Kyn and me. It was only a matter of time. You want to be mad, fine, but don’t think I’m going to indulge in a pity party.”

Trevan jumped down, walking away.

Fuck.

Bryn jumped down and went after him. Trevan was walking fast, and before Bryn could grab him, Kyn was there in his face, snarling viciously.

Bryn stumbled to a stop hard enough to fall on his ass.

“Kyn, enough of that,” Trevan ordered, turning to his wyvern. “He’s cranky, but he’s all right.”

Kyn stopped snarling and lowered his head, and Bryn realized something else. The gods had given Trevan a more submissive wyvern as well, someone to let Trevan feel confident in his own dominance and explore what it meant. It was also a good fit for Kyn, who needed someone to help control him, or he could hurt someone. Kyn was an intelligent beast, but he had the mentality of a child. Children had tantrums and base emotions that needed to be explained to them. Proper responses to situations were a learned skill.

Bryn knew the basics because his family made sure to teach him. Particularly Zayden, who had raised both a boy and a beast. He was excited about the possibility of raising more children, that one. He never mentioned it to Mave, none of them did, but it was a small whispered dream.

He wasn’t surprised when Trevan walked back to him and extended a hand. Trevan was too good to do anything else.

“Apology accepted,” he said softly. “Come on. Let’s get back to camp.”

Bryn grabbed the hand he didn’t feel he deserved and let Trevan help him up. Trevan didn’t release him immediately, holding Bryn in front of him.

“You don’t talk about it, but you’ve lived a hard life. No one has ever really told me your story, but I can see it in the way you live and work. I know someone who fought on the sands, saw them for centuries. I never blamed you for disliking me. There’s a lot of Andinna who do just because I’m Elvasi. Sometimes, I hate myself a little because my people have done terrible things. So, you might have made a mistake, and sure, it could have led to me and Kyn getting hurt, but one mistake, even two, isn’t enough to make me angry at you. So, apology accepted, and let’s never talk about this again, okay?” Trevan’s hand squeezed his hand, not painfully, but noticeably. “We don’t have to be friends—”

“I want to try,” Bryn said softly. “Because...meh family has made me as good as they can, but...” Bryn blinked then looked down. “I want to be *good*. Good enough for ‘em, good enough for Mave—”

“You already are.”

“No...They saw ya for who ya are, and I refused to. They might forgive meh for it, but they kept tellin’ me I was blind and was doin’ it to myself. If I was good, I would have trusted ‘em and let this go a long time ago.” Bryn sighed. “Since ya arrived, I’ve slowly damaged my relationship with my wife. It’s been a small crack I couldn’t fix because I didn’t want to see ya, but I do now, and it’s made me realize I’m not good enough. But I want to be, so I want to try to be friends with ya. The only thing I hate ya for is bein’ a male of worth who has pointed ears, and that’s not fair.” Bryn lowered his head in shame.

Trevan pulled him and started walking with an arm over his shoulder, an awkward fit. Bryn was small for an Andinna male, but he was still taller than Trevan. It lasted until they made it back to camp. Trevan grabbed Bryn’s bedroll as Kyn got back into his spot. He put it next to his wyvern, then got into his own spot. Bryn found himself lying down next to a thick red tail, with Kyn’s eyes on him.

“You miss home, and we’re not home, but you shouldn’t sleep so far from the group when you’re used to sleeping with family,” Trevan said softly. “I think. I feel like that’s right.”

“Aye,” Bryn said softly. The tail radiated heat, somewhat familiar but vastly different from where he spent his nights among a pile of Andinna. “You’re right.” He should have slept closer to the others, but he’d felt so guilty—still did.

He could see why Luykas liked Trevan so much. Quiet but passionate, gentle but a warrior, a good soul. A soul Mave would not be wrong to fall in love with. He didn’t just forgive Bryn for his mistakes but also gave him something he desperately needed beyond that.

“I know ya love meh wife,” Bryn said as he stared at the sky.

“I know. Luykas warned me,” Trevan said, his words huskier. “If that’s a problem—”

“It’s not,” Bryn said quickly. “I...I wanted to say that...” He growled softly at his inability to find the right words. It still was hard.

“You don’t have to say anything,” Trevan said with a soft chuckle in the dark. “Thank you for saying something at all, really. I’m heading to sleep. We have another day of walking tomorrow.”

Bryn closed his eyes and knew tomorrow would be better. He’d eventually find the right words. By the time they got back to the village, he would make sure he knew everything about this male and be a *friend*. It was the least Trevan deserved from him for the sacrifices he had made for all of them.

SHADRA

Shadra waited with her generals as they watched the group of soldiers walk slowly down the side of a mountain toward their forces. They looked starved, and there were obviously hundreds wounded.

“What happened?” she demanded of the general closest. Once a lover, now he found himself with her other generals, one of *them*.

“First reports say a wyvern attacked their camp and destroyed their supplies,” he answered, keeping his head down. “Which is concerning, because only last week, we learned our eastern front was also attacked by a wyvern.”

“He should only have one,” she hissed. “A blue one.”

“This one was red...and had a rider,” he explained.

“Did anyone get a good look at the rider?” she demanded.

“Yes,” he whispered. “One of the soldiers stepped forward and told me the rider appeared to be...the rider appeared to be an Elvasi.”

Shadra fought the anger. A cool, collected mind was a mind that could find its way through all challenges and overcome great odds. When she lost her temper, she made mistakes.

“So, he has two. Good to know. I want to triple our count of ballistae. Make sure they all have wheels to get through these blasted mountains. We continue on. There are plenty of trees we can chop down to make them.”

“Yes, Empress,” he agreed. “I’ll also increase the number we have trained to use them. Would you like me to take those forces from the grunt soldiers or the archers?”

“Each ballista needs a pair,” she reminded him. “One archer for the skill with aiming and one grunt to assist,” she said, trying her best not to be snappy. He was *trying*, which was more than she could say of her others. “Get the healthy ones integrated with the main force. Send the wounded south if they won’t be well enough by the time we reach that blasted village. I don’t need wounded going into the final battle.” She turned around and headed into the central tent where the maps were kept.

She looked down and picked up the camps she knew were lost and tossed them aside. Her flanking options were destroyed, and there was no time to rebuild them. She had to penetrate the mountains by winter, or it would take another year for her to set up a flanking plan again. It was smart of the Andinna to ruin that attack plan with their wyverns, but she knew once she had them in open battle, her sheer numbers would crush them.

“Prepare for attacks on the main force,” she ordered to the generals who quietly followed her. “They’re going to try to bring our numbers down before we reach them.”

“Do you think they’ll evacuate the village?” one asked.

“No,” she said with a smile. “They know once we breach the mountains, they’re done for. They’re planning a final stand, the fools. Good for me, stupid of them.” She crossed her arms. “They’re planning something. Showing they have two wyverns now was also foolish. I will not be taken by surprise. Did we ever figure out what happened to the camp early in spring?” The wheels of her mind were turning as she considered the possibilities.

“Only what our scouts said. No survivors from that camp have made it here. Our best idea is that they were all lost to the attack.”

“It makes much more sense if there was more than one wyvern, a test run for the second maybe, with a rider of all things. We’ll have to consider that once we defeat them.” She looked at the route her forces were forced to take to the village. It led into a large valley, where she could put all her forces if she chose. “They want us here,” she said, pointing at it. “We’ll send soldiers along the outside.” She used a finger to draw the two paths. “And come around the sides of their forces to the north, here and here. They might have the high ground against our main force, but they won’t be able to defend all their sides. We’ll flank them and hit them from the sides as they swarm to us in the air.”

“Will the sorcerers be a part of this fight?” one general asked, the fear and disapproval in his voice. Sorcerers trained in useful abilities for war were expensive to train, and after her display of magic, she knew her generals were wary of her and the sorcerers who stayed completely loyal to her. They wouldn’t answer to anyone except her, which scared the man behind her.

“Yes,” she answered. “I’m going to position the majority of them behind the archers,” she explained. “Protection for those of us in the back. I can defend myself and use a sword well enough, but I would rather not ride in on the frontline like a fool.” She had never understood the purpose of a leader riding on the frontline to defeat the foe. It was wasteful and dangerous. She was much more effective from range. “You’re all dismissed. Go help those soldiers. Get them fed and treat their injuries.”

They shuffled out of the tent, and she watched them leave over her shoulder, a whisper of thought in the back of her mind.

One of them, or maybe all of them, had failed to protect her and let an assassin into their camp. She was going to have to deal with them, eventually.

She left the map room, knowing there was nothing else she could do for the day and went to her private quarters, which were now next to her daughter’s.

“Nyria,” she called softly, knowing her daughter would come with the magic she put into it. She was growing lazy, but now that everyone knew her power, she saw no reason to hide it. She needed to use it more often to remind them she was powerful. Not just politically, but truly powerful. They had tried to kill her, and she would never let them forget she could destroy all of them.

“Yes, Mother?” Nyria asked as she walked into the tent, looking out of place. This soft-faced girl wasn’t a warrior. Shadra was disappointed she had raised such a weak child, but she needed to make Nyria ready to control an Empire.

“I just wanted to see you, my precious daughter,” she said with a smile. “Have a glass of wine with me while I explain the importance of never underestimating your enemy. It’s a fine lesson for the day.” She went to the wine bottle and poured two drinks. Her children were the only people she ever served in any way. Luykas, Lothen, and Nyria had not gone to

nursemaids. Shadra had fed them, even when the men in her life thought it was beneath her and a waste. She had bathed them and played with them. Until they went to schooling, she had been their world, and for Luykas, even longer since she had to educate him by herself with the help of tutors.

Just thinking of Luykas made her hand shake as she tried to pour the wine for Nyria. It both enraged her and broke her heart all over again. She would have given him Anden if he had stayed by her side. Her first son. He'd taught her how to truly love something, then shattered her. She had never loved Lothen or Nyria as much, even though she tried. His betrayal had stayed with her for years.

Shadra held out Nyria's glass.

"Thank you, Mother," she said with a smile. "Have the Andinna underestimated us?"

"No," Shadra said with a sigh. "I underestimated them, but they revealed themselves too early. They have two wyverns now. Those beasts."

"The wyverns or the Andinna?" Nyria's smile was cute as she tried to make a joke.

"Both. They consider themselves related to the wyverns. Call them the Andinno, also children of dragons." Shadra snorted. She was well educated in all things about the barbarians in the mountains. "Never underestimate your enemy, daughter. Now, I'm having my generals prepare for even more than two. We'll have enough ballistae to kill off that species once this war is done. They're too dangerous for our Empire, eating cattle and destroying farms." She shook her head, unable to understand how the Andinna survived living in a region full of the monsters. "I have realized they are trying to lead us exactly where we already want to go. Simple enough to follow along, but we must stay vigilant. Just because the Andinna will lose doesn't mean we need to take unsustainable losses. We're going to up the security over the next leg of our journey, and you will practice with a sword. I won't have them kidnap and kill another one of my children."

"Do you think they would try?" Nyria's face told Shadra everything. The girl was bright, but she wasn't *hard*.

"I don't think so either way, but we will be prepared for it."

"Because we don't underestimate our enemies," Nyria said softly, sipping the wine.

“Exactly.” Shadra smiled. “You know, there was an assassination attempt on me before you arrived.”

“Yes, Mother. Have you discovered who was behind it?”

“No,” she said softly, looking at her tent door, wondering who beyond it wanted her dead.

“May I be bold, Mother? I don’t know much about your advisors, but...”

Shadra raised an eyebrow. “Tell me, love.”

“The generals know you control this army and will take all the glory when the Andinna are defeated. It will wipe away the stain of the problems facing the Empire if you win. They won’t be solved, but the people will love you and will forgive you. The generals will take the blame for the failures because you would have stepped up and cleaned up their mess. Now, your plans are complete. They can...” Nyria looked down.

Shadra’s eyes went wide as she followed her daughter’s logic and realized it matched her own. If her daughter could figure it out, her bright girl with not a mean bone in her body, Shadra knew she wasn’t the only one thinking about it. In fact, it made it more probable.

“I knew one of them was behind it. They seemed so surprised by the assassin, but they were more scared of my magic that night than scared for my life. I don’t have any evidence, but I don’t need it. I’ve just been considering how I’m going to kill them before the end of this.” Shadra sipped her wine. “They’ll do anything to see a proper man back on the throne, those idiots. I’m better than ten Emperors. Well, I am the Empress, and they will suffer in some way.”

“Of course, Mother.” Nyria kept her head down.

Shadra ignored her as she stood up and went to her small desk, grabbing a book she kept with her, full of dark magics she tried to stay versed in. There was one she was particularly interested in. Magic came from something. She had to draw the power from somewhere. Andinna blood magic did as well, the Blackbloods, they were called. They used their own blood to do things. Shadra would never give of herself like that, but she could take from others, and she knew she needed to be powerful for the final battle.

Shadra looked back at her daughter, considering her plan.

“You don’t have a husband yet.”

“No, Mother, I don’t.” Nyria frowned at her.

“Maybe...” She walked back to her daughter with a smile. “Maybe you can help me.”

Nyria would be the bait for the generals. If they were planning on overthrowing Shadra, their best bet to stay in power would be to force Nyria to marry them.

“Daughter, if they kill me, they will force you into marriage to legitimize whoever they want to put on the throne. You’ll be the heir, and you don’t have allies. I’m going to need your help to stop them.”

“Tell me,” her daughter whispered, wide-eyed. “Tell me what you want to do. I won’t be forced to marry and bed a man who helped murder my mother.”

“Good girl,” Shadra cooed as she touched her daughter’s cheek. By the time this war was over, Shadra was going to have everything right where she wanted it.

MAVE

Mave’s heart jumped out of her chest as the guard came running up to her and the females she enjoyed spending her time with. Senri stood, and she followed, Yenni and Allaina quickly behind her. They waited as the guard caught his breath.

“The second assault team is back. No casualties—”

Mave didn’t listen any further. She jumped into the sky and saw Kyn with Trevan on his back over the treetops as they landed in the center of the village. At that moment, cheers broke out. Several Andinna followed them, and she could pick Bryn out of them. She pressed to move faster, then dove toward the crowd. As she pulled back to land, Bryn caught her and swung her around.

“I’ve missed you,” she whispered, holding him tightly.

“I’ve missed ya, too,” he murmured in her ear. “Love you.”

“Love you, too,” she said, pulling back to look at his summer-sky eyes.

“He did good, yer Trevan,” he said as they pretended the world didn’t exist around them. For a moment, it was just the two of them, even as excited Andinna bumped into them, and the cheering threatened to drown out their words. “He’s a good male, and I’m sorry for takin’ so long to see it.”

“I knew you would in time,” she said, smiling widely as he returned a sheepish one. “Was anyone hurt?”

“Kyn took a couple of hits, but he’s healin’ nicely. We...” He stopped and turned, grabbing the back of someone’s shirt. She looked around him to

see who it was and caught long, auburn hair. Trevan turned with a wildly happy smile, laughing as Bryn yanked him away from someone else. “Get over here and say hello to Mave, ya fool.”

Trevan looked past Bryn, his smile not fading but changing as he realized something she couldn’t guess. Something had been exchanged between the two males, something they were both thinking about.

Bryn released her completely, and she reached out to hug her friend, holding him just as tightly as she had her husband.

“I’m glad to see you’re okay,” she said.

“Tell her what we learned,” Bryn said.

“Kyn was hurt, and we learned I could feel all of his pain in the same way as a blood bond between people,” Trevan said, chuckling as he sent Bryn an annoyed look. “Don’t I get to say hello?”

“Sure, but we have to report how our mission went. Parties are for after that,” Bryn replied, crossing his arms.

Mave pulled away from Trevan slowly and sighed. Bryn was right. The sooner they reported how the mission went, the sooner they could get onto the next phase of their plans.

“We’ll catch up tonight,” she promised. “Let’s get out of this crowd and find Alchan.”

She led them out, growling to clear a path. It was an effective strategy, considering her dominance made people move subconsciously. She got them down a side road, knowing Alchan had not gone into the crowd. She just followed the bright light in her head she knew was him.

“I’m bringing Bryn and Trevan for reporting.”

“I know. There’s a big wyvern trying to walk through the village to follow you.”

She turned and looked between Trevan and Bryn, laughing as Kyn struggled to get down the side path without hurting anyone.

“Fly!” she ordered with a smile on her face. Trevan laughed with her, watching as Kyn tried to climb a building to use to take off. With some effort, Kyn got into the air, people gasping in awe and amazement, but no one chased after the wyvern, letting him soar without incident.

Mave grabbed Bryn’s wrist and pulled him, and he grabbed Trevan’s shirt as they continued to make their way to the war room. She watched Alchan’s light move in that direction. He beat them there, smiling as she

approached. She pointedly ignored the sullen, furious Kenav behind him. Alchan reached out to shake Bryn's hand, then Trevan's.

"We're going to let the others party," Bryn said with a smile. "But we bring good news. All objectives were taken care of."

"I'm glad," Alchan said with a return smile. There was no one way to be a grouch on a good day.

Mave thumped his shoulder as they headed inside. Her other husbands were already there. Mat grabbed Bryn in a bone-crushing hug while Emerian was the first to reach Trevan. Their embrace was more than most would have expected, but she knew they had a strong bond. Once Mat was done with Bryn, it was Zayden's turn, while Luykas claimed Trevan. Mave could only smile as she followed Alchan to their spot at the table, where Rain and Lily were already waiting. Rain's team had come back a few days before, with no casualties, and it had been a party then, too. Kenav moved into a corner, a dark expression on his face, one that never left since he had come back, and Alchan had given him the reckoning he so deserved.

"With everyone home and our enemies following the plan, we can finally discuss moving the majority of our forces to the valley," Alchan said loudly. "Tomorrow."

Mave raised an eyebrow. She hadn't known he was planning on giving them a day off.

"Bryn, Trevan, tell me how your mission went, then go have some fun," Alchan ordered.

Bryn and Trevan launched into it together, trading sentences as they explained their different battles, Kyn's injuries, and how healing went for the wyvern.

"They don't heal as fast as the Andinna, but they compensate better for injuries," Trevan said as they stayed on that topic for a long moment.

"How is he now?" Alchan was clearly worried. "Emotionally, not just physically."

"Perfectly fine. He's going to have a couple of scars, but he's not frustrated with the injuries. He sees our fights with the Elvasi forces the same way he would see territory fights with other wyverns. He thinks they're intruders, coming to take good hunting grounds and destroy nests. They're a threat, and he's more than willing to destroy them."

“That’s good. I was worried since he’s wild, he wouldn’t see things as we do,” Alchan said, drumming his fingers on the table. “You’re okay with joining the final battle?”

“Sire, if I wasn’t, I would have left long before the gods granted me a partner in Kyn,” Trevan answered. “Anything I can do for the Andinna, I will do. I made that choice a long time ago.”

“And you continue to make it every day, something I am endlessly grateful for. Which means I need to reward you for everything you have done for the Andinna.”

A lot of people gasped at the seriousness of Alchan’s words. Mave wasn’t surprised, but she was curious. What was her brother planning?

“Alchan?”

“He needs more. He’s silently served for centuries. The gods have done their part in bringing him into our society and rewarded him for his faith in us. Now it is my turn. It’s long overdue, I think.”

“As of today, you shall be Lord Trevan of the Andinna, a noble in rank and title,” Alchan announced. “Maybe this rank and your recent victories will help you further find a home in Anden for centuries to come.” Alchan tilted his head to the side, and Mave felt his power rise up, much more controlled than hers ever was. “You have the dominance of a strong male warrior. It is time people recognized you outside of this room. Rain, Lily, write up a proclamation and send it to Allaina. She’ll make sure the word gets around.”

“Of course.” Rain and Lily walked away, hand in hand, and sat at the side table. Lily began writing while Rain read it as she went, making quiet, small corrections in the silence that followed.

“Brynec, I would grant you a title, but…” Alchan gave him a wry smile.

“Aye, I have enough responsibility,” Bryn replied. Her other husbands chuckled, even Emerian.

Trevan was still standing there shellshocked, though. Bryn elbowed him.

“Hey, ya say thank ya to the king,” her rogue snapped.

Trevan blinked several times then bowed. “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Alchan rolled his eyes, pinning Bryn with a glare.

“You know I hate the pomp and circumstance among friends.”

“Aye.” Then Bryn turned slowly and grinned at Kenav before looking back at Alchan. “There’s not only friends in this room.”

Everyone paused as Alchan looked in Kenav’s direction.

“Fine.” Alchan waved a hand. “All of you can go. Trevan, you probably don’t need me to say this, but Andinna noble titles aren’t the same as Elvasi. You’ll be treated with respect among people, but they won’t bend over backward to please you. You’ll still need to prove yourself to them. This will just give them a reason to look at you with respect before they even meet you, beyond the wyvern, which they already love. This is an acknowledgment from me and my advisors that you are key to our continuation as a people.”

“And it’ll bug Kenav and his friends.” Mave smirked as Alchan nearly couldn’t cover up his mean smile—the smile that told her she was right. Kenav and his friends hadn’t given them trouble, but she was glad Alchan was still thinking about that situation.

“Yes. He’ll see that doing right by me will eventually get him back to where he wants to be instead of the course of action he took. By punishing him and rewarding Trevan, I send a clear signal to everyone, I’ll be listened to and respected, and people who do that will be rewarded. I don’t only bring punishment but also advancement.”

“I understand,” Trevan said as he finished considering Alchan’s words. “Are there duties as a noble I need to know?”

“You can talk to Nevyn about that. He’ll give you lessons, but it’s nothing you need to worry about right now. You can leave that for after we defeat the Empire. Now, you’re all dismissed. Get out.” Alchan waved his hand again, and this time everyone listened. Trevan bowed again before letting Emerian and Luykas drag him out of the room. Mat and Zayden were with Bryn, laughing as they talked. Mave’s heart was too full.

“Thank you,” she finally whispered as she found herself alone beside her king, with only three others in the room. Rain and Lily were still working on the proclamation, and Kenav was supposed to be ignored at all times. So, she did just that.

“No need to thank me. He deserved it. He’s been loyal to my brother when Luykas has been left in charge. He didn’t lash out when our people treated him poorly. He was able to see your worth long before I ever knew you. He’s a good male, and he’s done more quietly for our people than

others have done loudly.” Alchan reached out and touched her shoulder. “And truth be told? I don’t want him to leave.”

“You don’t know him that well,” she reminded him.

“I don’t need to,” Alchan reminded her in turn. He tapped his temple. “I can see him better than all others. I know what lies at the core of him. I know the hearts of my people. He is too good for me to let leave. He’ll do our people good if they let him. And he’s a sign that peace can one day be had once again with the Empire. We’re standing on the cliffside, Mave. I can’t only think about the jump. I need to think about the landing. By winter, we’re going to be living in a different world.”

“The days are passing fast,” she agreed. “Fine, but he’s mine, not yours.”

Alchan raised an eyebrow. “I never thought otherwise. I was wondering when you would figure it out, though.”

He walked to his spouses and kissed each on the head, whispering something to them. Rain nodded, then waved his husband away. Alchan snapped his fingers, and Kenav fell into step behind him, and they walked out of the room together.

Mave could hear the party outside and decided to join. It was a good day, and she knew those would be rare very soon.

ZAYDEN

Zayden leaned on Emerian as they drank together at the bonfire set up in the training field. He liked the mutt and made sure the mutt knew it. He showered the damn male in affection to try to get him to join the family completely. Nothing to make him uncomfortable—he had been raised around Elvasi, and they were prudes—but enough to show him they were all willing to allow Emerian to be one of them.

He kicked his legs out onto Mat's lap, next to Bryn's head. Trevan and Luykas were close by as well, not touching any of them, but near enough to make a statement. This was family, and they didn't want others to bother them.

"Where's our wife?" he finally asked Mat, knowing his blood bond was still stronger than Luykas'.

"She keeps getting stopped on her way over here," he answered with a chuckle. "Oh..." Mat tilted his head to the side. "I think she's with Senri, Allaina, and Yenni, actually. They were spending the day together before Trevan and Bryn got home, so those three might have decided to grab her again." Mat gave that arrogant smirk they all knew him for. "Don't worry. She'll get to us, eventually. She always does. We have something those three don't."

"Don't talk like that. My head is down here," Bryn mumbled, moving so Zayden's feet were closer to Mat's crotch than his face.

"Don't pretend like you don't like it," Mat retorted.

Zayden laughed, Luykas joining him, leaving Emerian and Trevan confused. Bryn was the only male in the family who had ever openly enjoyed relationships with males. Mat was very much into females, Luykas never talked about it at all, and Zayden's history with it was casual, something to scratch an itch and not often. It wasn't uncommon for males in the same mayara to form physical bonds as well as emotional. Mave's fathers were a classic example of it. Willem and Gentrin were just as much in love with each other as they were with Senri. Zayden didn't see it happening in his family, not for a very long time at least, but if it did, it would probably be Bryn.

"Never going to happen. Not with *you* anyway," Bryn fired back at Mat.

"You know, if Mave finally convinces Emerian to be her husband, we might need to start doing just that," Zayden pointed out, smiling into his drink. He was just messing around, but then he remembered not everyone in the group was fully educated on the matter.

"Doing what?" Emerian asked, sounding worried and confused.

"Finding enjoyment with each other," Luykas answered, lying down on the grass.

"What?" Trevan coughed. "I know Andinna are...looser than Elvasi in the matters of sexual partners, but I thought marriages are committed to the female."

"They are," Mat answered. "But we're mayara. We're family. Sometimes, that takes on a more brotherly role, and sometimes, it's more a...marriage equivalent. The relationship is unique to the males."

"Some families encourage it," Zayden added, looking at Emerian. "We have high sex drives, and it's safer to look inside the mayara to satisfy that. We've all dedicated our lives to living together, working together, just to be her husband because we love her. Sometimes, that means helping each other with other needs."

"Have any of you..." Emerian's wild look around the group told Zayden the mutt was uncomfortable.

"No," Bryn answered, sitting up to look at the mutt. "We've never, and it's not somethin' expected, just a way these things can play out. I don't think we've ever seriously talked about it."

"We haven't, but that's probably my fault," Mat said with a small, sheepish smile. "I'm not into other males at all."

“Ah.” Emerian nodded slowly. “Okay, so this is just a lesson, not a warning.”

“Yeah, it’s good to know,” Luykas said with a humored sigh. “I’ve been in your shoes. Let me guess, you saw males fucking while growing up, but the Elvasi consider it dirty and wrong, and you didn’t know exactly how to feel.”

“Yeah,” Emerian answered.

“I get it. I didn’t really understand until I walked in on my brother with another male. He had to give me a full education right there about the sexual habits of the Andinna. It helped me understand my own feelings and get over the Elvasi hang-ups my mother forced onto me. Even today, I sometimes have problems with group sleeping, especially when Mave isn’t around. I was raised sleeping alone, not like Andinna children, who stay in their parents’ room until they’re old enough to sleep safely somewhere else. Generally, that isn’t for a decade or more.”

Zayden was always a bit sad when he heard the stories of Luykas’ upbringing, knowing the woman in question was Shadra, the woman who had forced him to learn to paint and a number of other things. Zayden could no longer look at the cards Luykas had made for him and Rain without thinking about that. He tucked them away in a chest and rarely looked at them.

There was only one good thing about Luykas’ experience, and that was how it clearly helped Emerian relate and learn. The younger mutt had come far in the two years he had been in Anden.

“Yeah, my parents kept me with them for a little while,” Emerian said softly, looking away.

“What do the parents do?” Trevan asked, still the most confused in the group. “I mean, a decade without... You all need an outlet...”

“Get sneaky,” Zayden answered without thinking. “This is where larger families pay off. Mom and a couple dads can sneak off for an evening into a separate room or a favorite spot while anyone who stays sleeps with the baby.”

“You were stuck sleeping with Rain without a single bit of love from Summer for... five years?” Mat grinned. “Poor bastard.”

Zayden growled, remembering those dry years. He had loved having a baby with a woman he loved, but damn, his balls had begun to hurt, and he

had become mean in training by the end of it.

“Hopefully, none of this will scare you off from joining the family,” Luykas said with a sly smile.

“No, no,” Emerian said softly. “I just...wasn’t expecting to talk about something like this, never heard about it so openly before. I see Alchan and Rain together, but...”

“Don’t think too hard,” Luykas suggested. “I can’t be worried about you and Trevan.”

Zayden sat up, staring at Luykas as he silently demanded an explanation. Mat was also moving a little closer as Trevan slowly shifted away.

“Wow, you don’t know how to keep a secret,” Trevan snapped.

“Nope.” Luykas shrugged. “Well, I do, but...”

“What don’t we know?” Mat demanded.

“Trevan likes Mave...has for centuries,” Bryn answered. “He’s good. We should try to set ‘em up.”

Zayden nearly dropped his drink, his eyes going wide at Bryn’s casual endorsement of the male he’d hated only weeks before. Then he turned to Trevan, looking over the pale gold set in black eyes and the rose-gold tatua. He could see his shock, the dawning horror as he realized what Bryn had just said. This was a male who hadn’t wanted anyone to know, and now, all of her husbands knew.

“Really? You’ve loved her for that long?” He could feel that. He, who spent a few centuries trying to get over his first wife, could completely relate to an undying love that refused to let go.

“Let’s not—” Trevan went to stand up, but Luykas grabbed him and pulled him back down.

“Let’s,” Luykas said with a vicious smile. “Ask Emerian how we feel about males who love our wife, especially when we approve of them.”

“Luykas, we don’t meddle,” Mat said softly.

“I told him he should just tell her how he feels,” Emerian said with a small smile. Zayden blinked, realizing Emerian must have known for a while since he was completely unsurprised by this new information. “But it’s good to see all of you harass him and not me.”

“Oh, we’ll get back to you,” Zayden muttered, narrowing his eyes on the mutt.

This is complicated. One friend is her lover, and the other has been in love with her for longer than any of us have even known her.

“I’m not talking about it,” Trevan said stiffly. “I *don’t* talk about it. It’s imposs—”

“If you try to tell any of us that it’s impossible Mave could have any feelings for you, then you are talking to the wrong group of males,” Luykas said with a small growl. “She doesn’t like many people. She can’t be bothered to remember anyone’s names unless they’re part of the Ivory Shadows. She sees you as one of her dearest friends.”

Trevan finished his drink, then looked away from them at his wyvern. Kyn was close by, letting other warriors look at him and pet him, soaking up the attention.

There was only silence. Zayden wasn’t sure what to say. A secret love was exposed, and the male wouldn’t tell them anything more. Finally, Trevan got up, and no one stopped him. Kyn got up as well, the Andinna around him backing away. They walked to each other, not missing a beat as Kyn jumped up in the air as Trevan was still trying to find his seat. It looked practiced now.

“Way to call a male out, Bryn,” Mat said softly. He was clearly uncomfortable with what had just happened. “Luykas? I feel like you’re behind this.”

“I’ve known since everyone was gone over the winter. Told Bryn to keep him from killing Trevan because I think he loves Mave too much for us to ignore. And we know she has strong, if private, feelings for him.”

“But not romantic,” Mat fired back. “I’ve never seen anything from her that would point in that direction.”

“We don’t see everythin’,” Bryn reminded him.

Zayden sighed heavily. He had no problem with Emerian and Mave. He had no problem with Trevan and Mave. He had no problem with anything at all but the way they had just outed Trevan without warning.

“If he’s not ready, then he’s not ready,” Zayden said, looking around the group. “Take it from me. When the heart is hung up, forcing it could damage more than it can help.”

“You try to force me into this family all the time,” Emerian scoffed.

“You aren’t hung up,” Zayden retorted. “You don’t know if you really belong in this family, but we’ll convince you in the end because you just

need to make it official. Here you are, in the family. You don't have centuries of silence to overcome, having watched..." Zayden gasped. "He was a guard in the pits."

"Yes," Luykas said, frowning. "That's going to be something we need to discuss—"

"Elvasi raped her day after day, and she couldn't fight back against them," Mat whispered. "I like Trevan, Luykas, but Mave...Mave might never be able to see him like that. What would happen if she woke up to an Elvasi and sees him? There could be blood in our bed. It took her time to overcome other Andinna sharing space with her. I remember those days in the pits."

Luykas paled. "I didn't think about that."

"We'll figure it out," Zayden mumbled.

They went back to drinking, the mood a little darker. This was supposed to be a celebration, and now it was crushed for them, but not for the rest of the Andinna, celebrating loudly around them, drunk and dancing around the bonfire.

He heard her land, but it was Mat's smile that gave her away.

"Why the glum mood?" Mave asked as she walked into the middle of their group and sat down, a drink in hand, her face flushed. "Sorry I'm late. Senri and Allaina demanded we finish our day for the females before coming here."

"Ah, well, there's no glum mood now," Mat promised. Every male in the little circle around her subconsciously shifted to sit closer to her, touch her in some way.

Zayden leaned his head on one of her thighs as her fingers brushed through his hair. His eyes drifted closed peacefully until her hand grew tighter and tugged. It gave him an immediate erection.

"Don't fall asleep on me," she whispered. He grinned but kept his eyes closed.

He'd consider the complicated matter of Trevan tomorrow. Tonight, his family was together, and it was safe. That was enough.

TREVAN

Trevan couldn't sit there and listen to the males of Mave's family. In fact, he had left the party and flown out of the village to a nice, private cliffside where he could just enjoy being back in the valley in peace.

Instead of facing her husbands the next day or the day after, he went back to the cliffside every day, knowing they would tell him if they needed him for anything when he returned. He was easy to find with a large red wyvern beside him at all times.

They all know now. They won't be able to keep it to themselves. I know they won't.

One day, he had gone into the village, seen her, and ducked away. He had never been a coward before, but now he was stuck. He had never considered his feelings for her would get out. And how could he not have feelings for her? They had evolved, certainly, from a distant attraction and admiration into something more dear, more powerful, but there was no way he couldn't love her. She was strong and temperamental, but he also knew she could be kind. She had accepted him immediately when he came to Anden, even if neither of them knew what to do or where to go from there. She made the promise to be his friend and gave him more friends with it. She led him to where he was now, and his heart was fully and utterly hers.

He knew, with certainty, it always would be.

Now, he just needed to figure out how to deal with it. He spent a week going to the cliffside and watching the sun move through the sky into the most beautiful sunsets. Anden was good at sunsets, the rich colors filling

the sky as the sun dipped below the mountains. Only once did someone come out to see him, and it was only to pass along news, they were heading south in two weeks. He wasn't needed for the meetings yet, not until they moved south. Alchan was giving him leave to continue his own training with Kyn.

"What am I going to do, my friend?" he asked as Kyn landed beside him, holding a deer. They were plentiful in the mountains, and Kyn had an easy time grabbing them. His wyvern enjoyed hunting, which was a good thing because it kept their limited supply of farm animals from being eaten.

Kyn tilted his head and sent Trevan images of male wyverns fighting while a female watched. She would then pick the one who pleased her the most to mate with.

"I can't fight her husbands for her hand," Trevan grumbled. "I would lose."

Kyn huffed, disbelieving.

"Maybe I should just come clean," he said softly, staring at the sun. His eighth sunset on the cliffside, he stared at the horizon and took a deep breath.

Kyn sent him images of the things they had done together. They had razed Elvasi villages and touched the clouds. They fought. They were strong. It was clear, Kyn wanted Trevan to gather the courage and get over it.

"Fine," he declared. "I'll tell her. Okay. Tonight. She's not going to love me back, but it's better to say something than let her husbands tell her. They're all good males, but she should hear it from me. Out here. If she guts me, then I'm sorry, Kyn. We had a good friendship." Trevan looked at the sky with a smirk as Kyn gave him something like a mental laugh. "Yeah, I'll show her this sunset. That's...romantic?"

He wasn't ready—at all—but too many people knew. He had hoped no one would ever know. The fact Emerian had kept it secret for so long had been a blessing.

"I don't need to just say I love her." He frowned. "I could just...talk to her about my feelings and downplay them. There's no reason to make her uncomfortable. That's the last thing I want. Just admit I have feelings for her that are stronger than friendship, and they've made me...uncomfortable

because her husbands found out. And that I have no intentions for her, and we can continue our friendship with complete honesty.”

He grew more comfortable with the idea as he talked it out to the wyvern beside him, as he ripped the head off the deer and tossed it aside. Antlers were a problem. Then he tore open the gut of the animal and started eating. Trevan crossed his arms, wondering if Kyn would eat more of the carcass before he brought Mave. He knew Mave wouldn't care, maybe even get a laugh out of it, but Trevan didn't want to talk to her with a dead deer lying beside them.

“When you finish that up, throw it off the cliff,” he ordered, smiling as Kyn huffed in annoyance. “I didn't say throw it now. Finish eating, then go get her for me.”

Kyn looked up, then did the most not-wyvern thing yet. He nodded.

“You're learning, aren't you?”

Kyn had no reply except sending images to Trevan's head of others nodding to agree. It was what people did, wasn't it?

“Yes, it is,” Trevan whispered, letting Kyn know he was right.

He waited patiently as Kyn ate. Once the wyvern was satisfied, he threw the hollow husk and the head off the cliff. Some fox or badger was going to love finding those scraps later.

“Will you get her for me?” he asked, reaching to scratch Kyn's head. “I need to do this if I'm ever going to look her in the eye again.”

Kyn breathed in his face, then backed away. Trevan smiled as Kyn jumped off the cliff and headed toward the village. It was a bit of a flight, so it would take time for Kyn to get to her and get back.

Trevan sat on the cliffside, his feet over the edge as the sun moved slowly through the sky. Really, if he thought about it too long, his feelings for Mave were the only thing holding him back. He was always walking around them, trying to keep them hidden and to himself. He'd hated learning Luykas had figured him out and told Bryn, but it was a little freeing. Even if it hurt his friendships, her knowing would let him focus on other things.

“I've been waiting all fucking day for that wyvern to leave,” someone said behind him. Trevan jumped up from his place to see who his visitor was.

And found himself staring at Kenav.

“Have you? Aren’t you supposed to stay with Alchan?”

“Yeah,” Kenav answered with a bitter smile. “I am.”

“What do you want?” Trevan had a bad feeling. Kenav had his hand on his sword, already drawn from its sheath. Trevan didn’t have his weapon, not feeling the need to grab it when he walked out the door since he spent his days with Kyn.

“You are an abomination,” Kenav snarled. “And you took something that belonged to me. You have the respect of a king who should have put you down the moment you got off the boat. You have the love of our gods when it should have been *me!* And now I’m a *slave* again! TO MY OWN KING!”

The deep rage in those words made Trevan step back, careful of the ledge behind him.

“I didn’t take anything. I only accepted what was offered for my loyalty,” Trevan countered. “We both made our own decisions, Kenav—”

“Don’t you dare say my name,” he growled, stepping closer.

“What should I call you then?” Trevan snapped, his own temper beginning to build, something he actively fought against. He never liked being angry. It made him fuzzy in thought, and he made mistakes. It was only getting worse in recent weeks. “What? Seventy-two?”

Kenav’s roar echoed on the mountains around them, but Trevan knew the village would barely hear it. Andinna roared all the time, and no one blinked an eye.

“I knew you were the enemy,” the Andinna hissed. “Always. I remembered you when you were a guard, then one of us. I should have killed you in the pits. Now you’re here, taking everything from us and having our own king put us in chains, forcing us to live below our stations. You have ruined everything. You have poisoned them against me, against all of us! Even our own gods!”

“You missed your chance,” Trevan said, trying to move away from the ledge. He knew how this was going to play out. Kenav was edging to madness, which was clear in his eyes. This male had plans of leadership and glory. He’d controlled most of the gladiators in the pits for centuries. Andinna lived or died based on whether or not he wanted to give them protection. One of the few Andinna who didn’t need to play nice to him was Mave, who defeated everything he threw at her. He hadn’t been a sexual

abuser, but he'd let it happen if it suited his needs. He controlled. It was all he knew.

Alchan had taken it all away.

Trevan tried to think why he was the target, shifting further away from the cliffside as Kenav stalked him. Mave was generally Kenav's least favorite person, but he could never kill her. He wouldn't kill Alchan, no matter how much he hated him because it was impossible. None of Mave's husbands or the other Ivory Shadows were easy targets, even Luykas. There was a reason Kenav only tried to politically beat Luykas.

But I'm a freak, the Elvasi with Andinna eyes and a soul-bonded wyvern. I have the title he lost, noble among the people. I rose above him while he became a "slave" again. I'm the easy target because he needs to lash out in his madness at his own loss.

Shit.

He'd seen it happen before countless times in the pits. One gladiator would brutalize another, then the victim would find someone weaker to hurt to release the pain, even though it never worked for him. A chain of pain no one could break. Even Mave fell into the cycle. Trevan had never held it against any of them. They had been in a bad place, meant to wear them down mentally and emotionally.

Trevan knew the moment Kenav was going to attack.

Kyn, get help!

He jumped for the trees, knowing all he could do was run. Kenav was over a head taller than him and had a weapon. Even if Trevan had a weapon, he couldn't just kill Kenav without anyone to stand witness. It would look like murder and would ruin everything Alchan had given him, even if it was justified. He was finally gaining the trust of the Andinna. Their respect and offer of community meant so much to him.

Kenav's sword sliced his thigh and made him stagger.

"I'm going to enjoy this," the male growled as Trevan tried to get up. "Hold him. I know the wyvern feels his pain, so we can cripple them both. We can take our time with this."

Trevan felt someone grab him and throw him into a tree. He looked up to see another face he recognized from the dark, damp halls of the pits.

"Time for some payback for all those years," the male growled with a grin, then shoved a fist into Trevan's gut hard enough to knock the air out of

him. He tried to stay on his feet, but another Andinna kicked his legs out from under him. He reached out and grabbed someone's ankle, yanking him to the ground with a roar of his own. It was enough to startle the others for a moment as he forced himself to his feet, snarling as he glared at Kenav.

"These old tricks? Thought you would have learned something new by now." His words were filled with a deep growl he couldn't contain.

Kenav gave him an odd expression for a moment.

"Our gods really are trying to make you one of us." He shook his head slowly. "Disgusting. No, not after everything I've done for the Andinna."

Trevan growled louder, the rumbling in his chest feeling natural. Someone threw a punch, and he caught it, but he only had two hands. He was able to quickly count his attackers—four. They must have snuck up behind him far enough away, the wyvern didn't catch their scents on the winds. One of them he recognized as the messenger from earlier in the week. He wanted to kick himself for not realizing that one was a gladiator. He hadn't been thinking about anything except what to do about Mave and had left himself vulnerable.

He tried to fight, but he was quickly overpowered by fists and feet, including Kenav's. This was how things were done in the pits. Whoever was jumped was beaten to death. It didn't matter that they had steel on them now. They weren't over the centuries of culture they had created in their small world. He realized they would never be over it; some could never get over the trauma. He found himself trapped in the nightmare they were living.

Kyn, please. Ignore the pain and find help. I'll stay alive for you.

MAVE

Mave relaxed in the baths with her husbands, watching Mat and Zayden try to wrestle for dominance over some small argument, splashing water all over Luykas and Emerian. Bryn was closest to her, out of the splash zone. They had decided to go for a midday dip since there was a lull. Lots of people were packing and preparing for the move to the valley, so training was cut short each day. The only person she knew still training every day, all day, was Trevan, who went out with Kyn and wasn't seen until the evening. It was a good thing, though. Any practice was good practice. Really, she was a touch jealous, but she didn't fight Alchan on it anymore.

"You think Trevan likes training alone?" she asked, leaning into Bryn. He wasn't the best male to ask, but he seemed to have lightened up when it came to their wyvern-rider.

"I think he's a quiet, private male who doesn't open himself up to many," Bryn replied. "So, maybe. I don't know how he would train with others."

"Yeah, I was thinking the same," she agreed. "You know, I'm really glad you and he are getting along now. I would like to see it more, but he's been off with Kyn."

"We talked about it. I had to admit he just made me feel bad about me," Bryn said softly, leaning closer to her as well. "I'm...who I am, and he's a good male who doesn't do anything wrong. And he's Elvasi."

"No, he's not," she corrected nicely, kissing Bryn's cheek.

Bryn sighed, chuckling. “No, no, he’s not,” he agreed. “He’s becoming more like us every day. I think the gods did it.”

“Me, too, but I like it. I like knowing he can make his own way with the Andinna, and it doesn’t feel unnatural for him. Alchan’s right. We need to keep him in Anden.”

“Aye, I think he’ll make everyone better...like me. Made me face some things I didn’t like about myself. I can’t change completely, but I can try harder to see the good in people. I don’t trust easily, ya know?”

“I love you no matter what, but I’m really happy to hear you are finding...something to help you to be better for yourself,” she whispered. She never looked down on him for his private ways or his distrustful stares at those he didn’t know. “And I like when two males I care about get along.”

“Aye,” Bryn said, putting his head on her shoulder. “And I’ll keep tryin’ for ya. Because I love ya too.”

“Have you seen Kenav today?” Alchan asked in her head.

“No, why? Did you lose him?”

“Yes,” he snarled in return. *“He reported this morning, then I sent him on an errand. He never came back.”*

“Good luck.”

“Thanks.”

She smiled broadly as Mat made a triumphant noise, and Zayden waved his hands over the water. Kenav wasn’t her problem. Alchan would get him back and berate him for wandering off.

“Don’t drown him,” she ordered. Mat released Zayden, who took a large gasp of air.

“Wasn’t planning to but—” Mat looked up, Zayden’s gaze following. “Looks like Trevan is coming into the village. Wonder if he finally got bored out there training alone.”

Mave stood up and looked around, the hot water only reaching her waist. It wasn’t cold enough to bother her, and she had no shame being naked in front of her husbands or anyone else when she was in the hot springs.

Kyn was flying over the village as if he was looking for someone. She slowly got out of the hot spring as she realized she couldn’t see Trevan with

him, but there was no way he lost Trevan. Their soul-bond would lead them to each other no matter what.

“He’s looking for something,” she said, tilting her head to the side. People weren’t scared of Kyn, waving to him.

She went to grab her clothing as her males followed her out of the spring.

Kyn jerked, then screamed, falling from the sky and hitting a building in the village.

She didn’t put on her clothing. She jumped into the air, letting it fall to the grass, and flew hard toward the wyvern, her heart pounding. Something was terribly wrong.

“*Alchan!*”

“*I saw!*” he growled, not angry but also worried. “*I’m heading over.*”

She flew faster and pushed herself harder as Kyn screamed again, a high-pitched wail of pain. She heard people screaming around the wyvern and saw them running around him, trying to find out what was wrong. She landed without thinking, right beside his head.

“Woah, Kyn!” she said, barely dodging an angry bite in her direction. “What’s wrong? Calm down.”

“There’s nothing wrong with him, but he’s acting like he’s in pain,” someone yelled. “We can’t find anything wrong!”

She tried to grab his head, to look him in the eye, but he cried out again and tried to stand up, staggering around.

“Halt!” Alchan snapped as Kyn’s wings tried to open. Then the poor thing went down again. “Kyn, look at me,” he ordered. “What’s wrong?”

“He’s in pain but—”

“Trevan is hurt,” she said, cutting off the Andinna trying to repeat what they already knew.

Alchan stared into Kyn’s eyes for a moment longer, his own going wide. He turned to her.

“And Kenav is missing,” he whispered.

A dark feeling ran through the air as Kyn cried out again and began to whimper, his body twitching as whatever was happening to Trevan continued to disable the beast.

Alchan turned back to Kyn. “Show us,” he ordered, his words holding power. Kyn tried to lift his head, whining, but following Alchan’s order, he

looked to the north, and that was all Mave needed. Then he cried out again, growing weaker. She could taste death on the air as she realized just how dangerous Kyn and Trevan's bond was.

If Kyn was like this, Trevan was as well. Someone was killing Trevan, and they would both die.

Heedless of her nudity, she jumped into the air. Once she was clear of the village, she called her power to the surface, letting it take over. She shifted above the buildings in front of the valley and found herself flying north in the form of a black dragon. In the background, she heard screaming from the village below.

She didn't wait. She pushed to fly faster than she ever had.

Kristanya, can I find him?

"I don't know," the goddess answered, sounding surprisingly worried. *"But you must try to save him. We picked him, my sisters and I. The males agreed. Someone is trying to destroy a life we consider ours."* The last word was a vicious growl.

I'm trying.

She pushed harder, flying faster. She sniffed the air, wondering if she could get a scent. Then she saw them, dots in the air. She raced for them, watching a body fall back into the trees, and knew the moment they saw her.

She gave them no chance. As she slammed into the trees, she grabbed one out of the air and bit him in half, then spit the body out of her mouth. She swatted the next out of the air, her foot bigger than the Andinna it killed. She saw Kenav dive for the trees, possibly trying to take cover. Before she could kill the last one, Rain came by and snatched the Andinna from the air and crunched. With Kenav hiding among the trees, she looked for Trevan, finding him ten feet in front of her, on the forest floor. She used a single claw to move his battered body closer to her as Kenav came closer, staring in wide-eyed horror. She didn't want to kill him as a dragon.

"No, that death would be too easy for him," Kristanya agreed.

She sniffed her friend's body, knowing he wasn't dead yet. He was holding on, but barely. His eyes were beaten closed, and blood covered him. She had to make sure he would live before she gave into the fury in her blood. He needed to live. This male, all hers—her Trevan, her friend, the guard who gave his life to save her, to free her. He was the one who let Mat

and Rain help her when she was weak, and now, she needed to know he would live through this. After everything, he wasn't allowed to die on her.

Alchan landed next to Rain behind Kenav, who was paralyzed in fear.

"Kenav," Alchan said softly.

Mave watched her husbands land around her and move to get Trevan's body from her protection. Kenav turned to Alchan, then back to her.

"I can't save you this time," the king said without emotion. "I, Alchan Andini, King of Anden and Avatar of Larianna, hereby sentence you to die."

Kenav only stared at her.

She wondered if he realized. He didn't have to wonder long. The rage in her blood began to sing as she listened to her husbands talk about Trevan, trying to help him. Once Trevan was clear from her, she shifted, telling the power to give her the form she needed.

"I shall allow the female who claims this male to do it," Alchan continued. "Mave, my Champion and the Avatar of Kristanya."

She said nothing. She was naked, with no weapons. Kenav was holding a sword, but he took two steps back in fear.

"No," he growled. "No...that's..."

"Are you finally realizing the depth of your mistakes?" Alchan asked, cold. "I'm sorry. I should have seen the truth of how black your heart really was. Maybe we could have stopped this from happening, but now, it's time for you to die."

Mave followed her instincts. Her rage was cold, bitterly cold like the mountain that nearly killed her, like the void she knew existed inside her. They had jumped Trevan and tried to beat him to death. She could have been back in the pits at that moment—her other emotions were pushed so far down, she could only think about what needed to be done. Fury was all she needed.

She didn't know how she did it, but she lifted her left hand and suddenly had deadly claws. She used them to open her right arm and let it bleed. She needed weapons. Her power sang as the blood dripped down to her fingers and turned black. It formed a sword, solid in her hands, all black, a combination of blood, death, and darkness. She used it to open her left wrist and made another, but she didn't stop bleeding. As she walked to Kenav, the blood moved around her and began forming armor. Her power

was the strongest she had ever felt, feeding on her own energy to give her what she needed.

The armor was also pitch black, radiating the power of what she was. It wasn't traditional Andinna armor. It grew spikes and horns as if she was a dragon in Andinna flesh. It was intricate and complicated, hard to create unless it was forged by a master over centuries.

"Fight me, Kenav," she ordered, meeting him in the clearing she had made. Her words were devoid of anything but pure cold rage and power. "Meet your death like a proud warrior, not the coward we both know you are. We never fought on the sands because you were too cowardly to ever face me. Today, you shall die as you should have centuries ago."

He lifted his sword, ready for her, but she didn't rush him. She circled him. She knew what she wanted. When he lunged for her, she gave him a thin cut on his side as she easily dodged his slow attack. She could have taken his head at that moment.

"*What are you doing?*" Alchan asked, confused by her actions.

"*Giving him the death he deserves,*" she answered, following her power's direction—Kristanya's direction. Kristanya wanted this death to be painful, and Mave had no problem giving that to her.

Mave was furious. Furious with how he had been given every chance to change, every chance to do *better*, yet he worked against himself and blamed others for his failures. She was furious that for two years, she had to work with him, knowing how awful he was but promising she wouldn't hold on to the hate that had driven her in the pits. For two years, his snide comments, their rivalry, their distrust, and before that, centuries of brutality between them. Her survival and his power, always at war with each other.

She had been willing to let it all go until this moment. He tried to kill someone who meant so much to her, and that could not—*would not*—stand.

A thousand cuts. For every scar I have from the pits, you'll bleed, Kenav. For the pain you have given my Trevan, you'll feel tenfold.

She lunged for him, scoring him open in six places while he tried to defend against her. She spun around him and cut upward, giving him a thin slice up his back. When she caught a glimpse of the males around her, she saw fear, but that didn't stop her.

She sliced open his legs next, then disarmed him. She was brutal and efficient, watching him fight through the pain. If he was still fighting, she

knew it wasn't over yet. She wanted him crushed, not just physically but morally. She wanted him to know he was bested in all ways. She needed to work out the rage she felt as blood hit the ground.

He wobbled as she hit his ribs with both swords, cutting perfectly matched lines over his bone, exposing his skeleton. She even hit his face, giving him a matching cut to the one on her own cheek, where someone had once tried to blind her on the sands.

By the time he fell to his knees, his body was much like her own—a myriad of injuries covering every bit of his exposed flesh and even some that went through his armor. While hers were only scars left behind from years of fighting, his were fresh, bleeding slowly as his body was drained of its life. His eyes were drifting closed, devoid of feeling. She knew he would be dead before he fell forward on his face.

In one swift move, she severed his spine, and his head rolled away.

Before she moved again from her final stance, she saw his spirit standing in horror at his death. Kristanya appeared beside it with a disgusted sneer.

“He’s so horrified of what awaits him in the beyond, he wishes to stay,” the goddess whispered. “Coward.”

Yes, he is.

Mave pushed with some invisible force and sent Kenav away, and Kristanya gave a vicious smile, pleased with the outcome.

She looked at Alchan but saw Kristanya appear beside her. Alchan’s eyes narrowed as if he could also see her goddess. Beside him appeared a beautiful female with white wings, taller than Mave’s king. The exact same height as Kristanya.

Mave did not need to guess who *that* was. She pushed down the violent response of her power as she felt the power of light and life rise from the pair before her. It was over. There was no longer a need to fight this day.

“Was it well done?” Mave asked her king, spreading her arms as if she awaited his inspection. She heard Kristanya echo the words to her sister.

“It was well done,” Alchan and Larianna answered in unison.

Mave nodded as the goddesses disappeared. She turned away from Alchan and walked toward Trevan as the coldness fled her, and real fear hit her. Her power slowly retreated, and she felt weak, but she kept walking. Her blades turned to dust in her hands, and the wind took them away. Then

her armor, piece by piece, step by step, also fell away and disappeared in the breeze.

“Is he alive?” she asked, knowing the answer but needing the reassurance. She wobbled on her feet.

“He is,” Luykas said, sounding harried and worried.

“Will he stay that way?” She closed her eyes as the exhaustion tried to claim her.

“Yes, love,” Mat whispered. “He will live through this.”

She accepted that and fell, the power’s toll claiming her. She fell into the darkness and let it take her, giving her a place to rest.

ALCHAN

Alchan ran for her as she fell but couldn't make it in time to catch her. She hit the dirt too quickly for even her males close to her to have a chance.

"I've got her," he snarled as Bryn came to her. "Let me get her."

Bryn gave him a confused look as he knelt beside her. Alchan made it to her and scooped her up before Bryn could try since Alchan had put no weight behind the order.

"She just used so much of her power, I think I need to do this," he said simply. He had allowed her to do her duty, and now, he needed to take care of her. "Maybe I can help her recover with my own power."

He didn't tell them the whole truth, only part of it. When she had looked at him, he had seen her on the edge of sanity, the darkness consuming her. He was impressed she had been able to push it down and ask about Trevan, but he was taking no chances. When she had stood beside Kristanya, he had known fear—real fear. Mave was always a powerful warrior, but he knew she could have turned on all of them at that moment. Larianna had seen it as well, knowing the dark powers of her twin all too well. He'd glimpsed at her heart and only saw the void that was her domain and felt a bitter cold. He had no idea what she would be like when she woke up. Even as her powers had dropped her to the ground, all he could feel and see was the void where her heart should be.

He was taking her so he could be her light in the darkness—just in case.

As Rain walked up beside him, still a large blue wyvern, he thought about the powers Mave had displayed. She wasn't bleeding from her arms anymore, but the nasty wounds she had given herself were still there. They would heal, but he didn't like it. He didn't like how she had bled herself and done what she had done.

Sister, I would have given you a sword. You didn't need to nearly kill yourself.

He looked at Rain, then down to Mave in his arms.

"I will carry her," he said softly. "When we get back to the village, one of you will need to get the healers."

"Of course," Luykas agreed, lifting Trevan. "They did a number on him. They beat him pretty badly."

"Hopefully, the healers can do something for him," Alchan said, holding Mave a little tighter. He knew how she felt for Trevan, could see it in the way she reacted to his pain. She was going to be furious again when she woke up and saw him like that.

He jumped into the air and began the flight back to the village, which had been left in an uproar. He'd ordered them to find Senri and defend Kyn from any attacks, but the real stir was Mave's dramatic exit. She had thrown away her privacy and jumped into the sky where the entire village could see, then took the form of Kristanya, the black dragon, before flying off. He understood. If it had been Rain or Lily, he would have summoned every wyvern in Anden to defend his loves.

There would need to be damage control. His people had not cheered in happiness, seeing Mave rise above them. They had screamed in fear.

Kristanya was a respected goddess but not a loved one. She was too dark, represented too much pain. It was one thing for the Andinna to be warriors in her name. It was another for her very powers to walk the mortal world.

As much as he hated to admit it, he had been in favor of keeping Mave a secret for the rest of her life. He hadn't wanted her to face her own people when they knew what she was. Now, there would be no escaping it. She would forever be a feared figure among their people, even if they did respect her. Even if they trusted her with their lives, they would never shake that fear.

He ignored the crowd that had formed in the clearing on his cliffside. He landed at her front door and adjusted to open it, fighting with wings and tails to get her inside. He didn't care about the nudity, but he hated they saw her like this. She was too strong to be seen like this. She fought too hard for them to be vulnerable in front of them.

Rain came in behind him as he laid her down in the main room. His husband held the door for their friends. Luykas was first, holding Trevan.

"He's not doing well," his brother said, rushing the male into another room. Emerian rushed after him, his entire focus on the limp body in Luykas' arms.

"Bryn flies the fastest. He's getting a healer," Mat explained, grabbing several waterskins from the kitchen. Zayden was dragging linen around by the time Alchan saw him.

Alchan nodded as Rain brought him bandages then water. He cleaned off Mave's arms and was nearly done wrapping them when Bryn and two healers burst into the room. Mat called them into the next room.

"Does she need healers?" Rain asked softly.

"No. She needs time," he answered. "Those will scar, but I think she's just exhausted herself."

"Her husbands are probably wondering why they can't treat her," Rain murmured, kneeling down beside him.

Alchan looked up at his love and sighed. "Because I don't know how she'll be when she wakes up, and if there's something wrong, I need to be here to stop it. I'll need to order her to stop..."

"You think she'll wake up angry?"

"I think it's up to Trevan," he admitted. "Whether he lives or dies."

"Ah..." Rain sat down and moved her head into his lap. After a few moments, Lily ran in and came to them, her hand over her mouth as she saw Mave.

"Will she be okay?"

Alchan sighed, so Rain jumped in to explain that, yes, Mave would be fine, that it was Trevan they were worried about. Only a moment later, Nevyn and Varon, then Senri and Allaina entered the home.

"I have guards on Kyn."

"And I have people making something we can pull him on to bring him closer to home," Allaina added. They both stopped at attention, their eyes

on him, but he saw how hard they fought to keep it. They wanted to check on Mave.

He finally stood and moved away from her, letting Senri rush to her daughter. Allaina didn't move, though.

"Trevan...should live," he said, giving those waiting on him what they wanted to hear.

Varon cursed viciously. Nevyn grabbed him but kept his eyes on Alchan.

"Where?"

"They're all in the other room," Alchan answered. "Two healers are already here and tending to him. I guess, while we wait, we can talk about what to do about everyone out there." Alchan nodded toward the door. As he spoke, Zayden, Mat, and Bryn walked out together. They weren't surprised by how many people were suddenly in their home. Instead, Zayden and Bryn went into the kitchen. Lily gave Alchan a questioning look, and before he could ask why, she went into the kitchen as well and began helping them.

"What happened?" Varon asked, sitting down slowly.

"Kenav wandered off today, and I couldn't find him," Alchan said softly, going to the dining table to sit with his old friend and fellow Avatar. "Trevan was out of the village, doing whatever it is he and Kyn do all day...practicing. I saw no reason to call Trevan back in, so I allowed it. Kyn came into the village and dropped. You all saw that."

"Yes, but by the time we got there, you and Mave had already made your dramatic exit, Rain quickly following."

"Rain passed me on the trip, but we found..." Alchan turned to Rain. "Love?"

"Four. There were four Andinna, trying to kill Trevan. Mave killed two before I could close the distance. I killed the third..." Rain went pale and looked down. "They had been torturing him. They dropped him from the sky..." His love's eyes closed as if he was back in that moment. "I saw that."

"I'm certain Mave did as well," he said softly as he turned back to Varon. "Kenav was the only one alive when I got there. He was too paralyzed by fear to run. Mave was covering Trevan, keeping him safe, but

didn't kill Kenav. I think she was considering the ways she wanted to do it." He rubbed his face. "If only you could have seen it. It was..."

"An execution," Rain offered. "One Mave devised specifically for him, one he deserved."

Alchan slowly nodded as Mat put a drink in front of him.

"You should have seen her," he said quietly, turning the drink around in circles. "Faster than I could see. Kenav seemed like a child with a wooden sword, awkward compared to her. She was always good with a sword but untrained. Now..."

"She's like a god," Varon finished. "Kristanya's powers give her more than our goddesses give to us. To be expected, really, since she's the most powerful in terms of raw energy and her domains."

"Yes. It was as if I was watching Kristanya herself with two blades. Mave even..." He didn't know how to explain it all. "She used her own blood and her power to create weapons, two moroks, and armor as if she was dressing in armor the goddess might use. When her power faded, it all crumbled into dust. She bled herself to do it. At that moment, I didn't just see Mave. I saw what Kristanya had once been when she battled other gods. But look at what it does to her." He pointed to her, feeling a rush of desperation. "What happens on the battlefield when she crashes because her body can't take the strain of it anymore? I know our powers slowly destroy us, but her powers are so much more than ours."

"It takes a lot for me to exhaust myself with my powers as an Avatar," Varon agreed. "And you must use the greatest of your own powers to do it. We have smaller abilities to use more frequently. She relies on grand powers. It's going to drain her more. We'll put her males in the sky with her to help her. We can adjust."

"This comes at a bad time. Shadra is still marching on us, and we're leaving for the valley soon for war. The people need to have faith in us. They can't think the best warrior of them is going to drop into a coma in the middle of the fight."

"Well, now they know what Mave can do, so...maybe that will stop them from thinking I'm sending them to their deaths." Alchan didn't know what to say to Nevyn. There was no changing what had just happened. Alchan had done what he had to, but he felt a thread of guilt. "Did I lead to this? Should I have executed Kenav before this?"

“No,” Varon said softly. “She’ll tell you yes when she wakes up, but death is her domain. It will almost always be her first solution.” Alchan saw the hint of fear in his priest. “According to tradition, you did everything you could to teach Kenav his lesson, and he continued to spiral out of control. This was just one of many possibilities.”

“If you had stripped anyone else of their nobility, they wouldn’t have gone off the deep end and tried to kill someone,” Nevyn said as he sat next to his lover. “Alchan, don’t let this shake you.”

“I won’t,” he said. “As long as Trevan lives.”

“Even if he doesn’t,” Nevyn growled.

“Does Larianna believe you did poorly?” Varon asked.

He had not asked, and she hadn’t offered. He knew before Mave woke up, he wanted to speak to her. He sipped the drink he had let sit for too long.

“We should move her to her bed,” Senri finally said, interrupting the quiet.

“I would like to keep a vigil on her,” he said, leaving the drink behind as he stood and walked across the room. He picked her up before her husbands could get there.

“Alchan, there’s a crowd—”

“They can wait until she is up. Send them all away to do their duties,” he growled at Nevyn. He carried her into the back bedroom and entered a room where he had never been. He did not go to a female’s space like this, but he did today. He laid her down and covered her with a blanket to keep her warm. He didn’t know if it would help with the cold inside her, though. She had always had that piece of her, even before she had become the Avatar of Kristanya. Now, it was amplified. Even now, when he tried to look at her heart with his own power, he was greeted by the cold void that was her goddess.

“You did the right thing,” Larianna said to him as he sat down on a chest at the side of the room.

Thank you, but it feels like cold comfort right now.

“I’m sure it does, but it is the truth. As I told you months ago, we will make mistakes. Neither you nor I or any of the dragons can see the future. You gave him the chances he deserved as an Andinna. He failed you, and

yes, my adopted child paid the price of that failure—his, not yours. You did what a proper ruler should. He did not do what a good Andinna should.”

“A very cold comfort,” he whispered. “She will remind me that she wanted to kill him years ago.

“She will, but as Amonora’s male says...that is her way, as it is my sister’s. Balance is key. He failed the living; therefore, he joined the dead.”

Alchan sighed, leaning on the wall. Larianna sat beside him, also watching Mave.

Together, they waited. Varon looked in once to check on him and Mave, Nevyn coming a little later. Mat brought him another drink, which Alchan thanked him for. A while later, Luykas came in, his hands covered in blood. His brother couldn’t see the goddess sitting beside him, but Larianna didn’t disappear when Luykas came in.

“Trevan will live. He doesn’t heal as quickly as we do, but he will heal by the time Shadra is here. Kyn is asleep, right outside the door where Allaina was able to put him with her team. Senri has left guards circling the area.”

“Thank you.”

Luykas nodded and left.

Silently, he waited. He needed to be here for the moment she came out of her slumber.

He let his thoughts wander.

This nearly killed her.

She could die in the final battle. I won’t be able to save her then.

“That’s the risk we take, Alchan. That’s what our sisters do.” Larianna had sympathy, but she only spoke the truth, which was no comfort to Alchan.

I know I can’t protect her, and it makes me scared for everyone else I won’t be able to protect. If I can’t protect her, how can I protect my husband or my wife? I finally find love, and I’m going to lose them to this war. Or our child. I might never get to meet the babe.

“All you can do is what you think is right. If it helps, I think your battle plan is strong. Risky, bold, daring, like you and your brother, but strong. Other options could have worked but held risks in other ways. You committed, and I think that commitment means something. As for your child and your lovers...” Larianna leaned forward, taking a surprisingly casual

pose for such a regal female. "I can't help you. I have no advice on this. I know the pain, though. I have been unable to protect my children for thousands of years," she said before she disappeared.

It was an odd thing to know the goddess wasn't perfect, but he took comfort in it, unlike anything else. Even she had her limits. She worked through it and stayed strong. He could do the same. As he finally enjoyed a moment of silence with his own mind, he tried to think about the problems he was still facing. He needed to protect his family. Rain, he couldn't. That male would fight with him, and there was no stopping it.

But Lily...she was one he could save.

He felt Mave's power surge first, coming back to life and chilling the room. It shocked him out of his thoughts, making him sit up straight, stiff as he tried to understand what was happening.

No, not the room. Just me. I can feel that cold because of what I am.

It lashed out violently, trying to do something but trapped in a body that wasn't able to do much of anything.

She took a deep breath, her eyes opened, completely black, and she turned to him.

"Trevan is alive, and he will heal," he told her softly, hoping it was enough to put that power back to rest.

MAVE

Waking up, Mave didn't feel like she was in control of herself. She stared at Alchan in her bedroom and wondered what was happening.

Then he said those perfect words, words she had needed to hear one more time.

"Trevan is alive, and he will heal."

She used that knowledge to push the power down, her head feeling light.

"That's good," she mumbled, leaning over to hold her head as she fought against the sudden headache and lightheadedness. "Shit."

"You really did a number on yourself," Alchan said, not coming closer. "Keep those bandages on. You haven't been asleep long enough for the healing to begin."

"My power...woke me up," she guessed, thinking about how it had felt when she woke up.

"It did," he agreed. "It surged before your eyes opened. I'll step out and tell your husbands you're awake. You're not needed right now, so if you don't want to get up, don't."

She wanted to see Trevan, just to make sure. She needed to make sure that heart was still beating. Alchan wouldn't lie to her about something so important, but she knew she wouldn't allow herself to sleep again until she made sure.

She struggled to get pants on and barely got on a top. He watched her fight to get dressed and made no attempt to help.

“Asshole,” she mumbled as she staggered into him, and he grabbed her elbow.

“If you failed to get dressed, I was going to order you to lie back down,” he said softly. “You shouldn’t be up right now.”

“There’s too much to worry about and for us to do. I can’t sleep for a week without knowing everything is going to be okay,” she retorted.

“I know.”

“Shadra marches on us—”

“I know,” he growled as they left the room together.

She saw Mat first. He rose to his feet but didn’t walk to her.

“Are you...okay?” he asked softly. She felt him try to touch their blood bond and realized she was so distant from it. She pushed the darkness inside her further away and felt him as if he was right next to her, inside her, so close. The moment she realized she had pulled away and fixed it, Mat also must have felt it. He closed the distance between them and wrapped his arms around her, holding her like a precious artifact he was scared to break.

“I love you,” he said, his words thick. “I’m going to need you to stop scaring me.”

“I’m going to have to scare you a little more before this war is over,” she said, sighing into his chest. Alchan kept a hand on her elbow, but the grip loosened. She got down to what she needed to do. “Where’s Trevan?”

“We put him in Emerian’s room. He’s still asleep, and the healers forced a sleeping draught down his throat to make sure he stays that way for a little while longer. We don’t want him waking and hurting himself.” Mat gently took her from Alchan, who growled but didn’t try to take her back. It was oddly possessive for the king when it came to her, but she didn’t give him a hard time, and neither did Mat.

He followed them, Mat by her side as they crossed the main room and dining area. She leaned down to kiss Zayden’s cheek, then Bryn’s. Luykas came out of the kitchen and gave her a simple but warm hug.

Slowly, she made her way to the second room, and Mat opened the door. She closed him and Alchan out, then turned in the dark room to see Emerian standing in the back. His face was hard for a moment, everything he had become on the mission when Kian had died. He was guarding his

family, and he meant business. If she tried to force him to move or leave, he would give her a fight. This was the side of Emerian people talked about when they said he had become a good male and Andinna.

“I’m not going to hurt him,” she promised, taking a step closer.

His expression softened. “I know, but I need to protect my brother.”

“Of course, you do,” she said, reaching up to touch his cheek when she made it across his room. “I just need to see him.”

Emerian nodded. She turned to her left and saw the broken body of a male she claimed. She had seen her males hurt before but never so badly. The rage she had felt when she saw them drop Trevan came back, trying to rush to the surface with her power.

She ignored it because there was nothing it could do now. The ones who did it were dead.

She went to her knees beside him and took it all in. Bones in his face were broken based on the bruising. His nose had to be set, a pain she knew all too well. He was covered in a blanket from the neck down, so she gently pulled it away and looked at his upper body. She didn’t want to violate his privacy by going any farther, but she had to see the damage. She had to know just how close to death he had come.

His upper body was enough.

Covered in bruises and cuts, it looked as if he had been beaten for days, not just an afternoon. Ribs had been broken, one of his arms. Everything was set, but it was still so ugly.

She leaned in and put her head on his chest, angling, so she didn’t stab him with her horns. She listened to the steady beat of his heart and took joy in how strong it was.

This was her Trevan, and while she was sometimes unsure of him, she refused to lose him—not again.

“I’ll never let you die,” she promised as tears flooded her eyes, and she realized why she couldn’t bear to part with him. It came in place of the rage. This friend—with his gryphon, his wyvern, his soft smiles, and his quiet nature—she would kill for him and die for him, just as he had done for her. “You’re not allowed to die on me, Trevan. Not today, not tomorrow, not *ever*. Not after all we’ve made it through, without even knowing it. I need centuries with you, Skies damn it.”

“He’s going to live, Mave,” Emerian said, his words shaking. “The healers promised.”

“I know,” she said, pushing her forehead harder into Trevan’s chest. “I know. Come here. He’s your brother. You should sleep with him.”

“Will you stay?” he asked as he started to undress.

“I’ll stay. I have to stay.” She stayed dressed because she didn’t know how Trevan would feel waking up next to her naked. She was Mave, the Champion, the gladiator, the warrior, and he was a guard from the pits. While she loved him, she had no idea if he looked at her in the same way, but she was his friend, and she could offer that.

Emerian stretched out behind her, and she turned into him.

“I love you,” she whispered. She meant it, just as much as she meant it when she said she loved Trevan, as much as when she said it to Mat, Zayden, Bryn, or Luykas. Any of them. All of them.

She, who had no love growing up, was full of it, and it helped keep the rage away, helped her focus on the living instead of the dead.

“I love you, too,” he murmured back, pulling her closer to him, their legs tangling together.

Her eyes drifted closed.



EMERIAN WOKE UP BEFORE HER. She wasn’t thinking as she rolled over and felt a second body. It took her a moment to remember where she was and sit up, sighing in relief when she realized she didn’t wake Trevan. This time, waking up was easier, without power and exhaustion battling for dominance.

“Good morning,” her lover said softly, leaning down to kiss her. “He didn’t move all night.”

“Good,” she said, pushing her thick black hair out of her face.

“Everyone is out there for breakfast, Alchan and his family, Nevyn and Varon. Senri never left. Zayden and Bryn are making food for everyone. Lily is helping them.”

She pushed herself up and headed out with Emerian, leaving Trevan to his deep healing sleep.

“We can’t change our plans,” Alchan was saying as she walked into the dining room. She stood behind him as everyone looked between her and him. “I don’t care what anyone wants or thinks about this. It’s not up to us. Shadra is marching, and we have to be prepared. This was, in the scheme of things, a terrible but minor incident. We lost four Andinna, not four hundred. Mave is already up.” He turned and waved at her. “I told you she would be. Mave, do we change our plans because of this?”

She frowned. Not many asked her for advice.

“No,” she said with a huff. “Trevan will heal. He’s strong.”

“And you?” Varon asked, narrowing his eyes on her.

“I’m fine. I’ll be tired for a couple days, but I’m already feeling better.” It was almost a lie. She would be tired for at least a week, but she hated that, so she decided she was going to ignore it. They didn’t have time to be worried about her. “Work with Trevan, though, make sure he’s healed. He’s going to need special care and some extra training for the final fight.”

“We’ve already been discussing that. The healers are going to come in later today and see how the healing sleep is treating him. Our gods made changes within him, and we’re hoping they might speed up the Elvasi healing ability to something closer to ours.”

“We’ll see,” Luykas said softly. “Did you take a look at him before you left?”

“No, we didn’t want to disturb him,” Emerian explained as he sat down next to Nevyn, leaving a seat open between him and Rain. She claimed it before anyone else could.

Senri came up behind her, fitting herself between Mave’s wings, and wrapped her arms around her. Mave leaned back, enjoying the silent affection.

“Then we’ll move on to what happens today. Mave, they don’t know what you did yesterday, and it’s time we come clean about who and what you are.” Alchan didn’t pull any punches. “I know why we kept it secret, and we were right to. I firmly believe that. Everyone screamed in terror when you became a dragon over the village.”

“I don’t care,” she said softly. “In fact, I am perfectly okay with it.” She found a new resolve, facing it down. She looked around the room at all the people who didn’t fear her. They might have moments, but they always came back to her, always knew she would come back to them. “Even more

so, if it means protecting the people I care about, then let them fear me. Maybe if Kenav had known, he never would have tried to kill Trevan.” She crossed her arms. “I didn’t even think about them when I did it. I’m not going to now.”

“Okay.” Alchan nodded once. “After breakfast, we’ll go to the morning meeting.”

Food was brought in sometime later, Lily, Bryn, and Zayden working hard to make sure everyone got enough. Mave ate quickly, wanting to get through this day, so she could come back and keep watch over Trevan. As empty plates were taken away, she went into her room and put on her full armor—the black dragon on stained black leather. She grabbed the royal pin she rarely wore and belt. She took both her blades, taking comfort in them. She had become lax around the village as she waited for her time to fight and hadn’t been carrying them. She wouldn’t make that mistake again.

Her males got ready as well, everyone following her lead and putting on their full armor.

“No matter how they react, we’re always going to be at your back,” Luykas promised.

“I know.”

She walked with them to Alchan’s home, knowing he had gone to get ready as well. She had done well to put on her armor because he had as well, looking proper in his black armor with its white dragon flying across the front. Beside him, Rain was wearing only pants, a reminder to everyone, if he needed to fight, he could just shift into something they had no chance of defeating. Lily wore a simple dress that revealed little and carried no swords, but she was there for her males.

They walked as a unit, heading for the war room. They spoke to no one as they filed inside. Nevyn and Varon came in from the other side.

Mave, watching faces pale as they saw her, smiled. As Alchan found his favorite place, Mave paced. The darkness in her liked this, liked to taste their fear and know none of them would ever challenge her.

Part of her was guilty, knowing she hadn’t wanted this. She hadn’t wanted them to fear her. She would never be one of them, though. She understood that. She would never be a normal Andinna who fit in with the rest. They feared her long before she became the Avatar of Kristanya. Her new power only made it more apparent, sharper.

“Yesterday, you all had the chance to witness something.” Alchan’s voice forced everyone to look at him, ignoring her as she paced around the room. “Trevan was attacked outside the village while Kyn was here. We don’t know why they were separated, but it was taken advantage of. Four Andinna decided they were going to kill Trevan. Their reasons don’t matter. They were executed.” Alchan leaned on the table. “By the Avatar of Kristanya under my order, the Avatar of Larianna.”

A single gasp filled the room, breaking the silence Alchan had left behind.

“You see, that is what my sister and I went to do over the winter. We went to prove ourselves to the gods and claim power, which might help us win the war. Neither of us wished to reveal this publicly for our own reasons, but since you all witnessed Mave’s most destructive ability, we’ve decided it’s time to come out with it.”

“This is why you want the fight with Shadra,” someone whispered, then looked even more fearful as if he didn’t know he had said that out loud until it was too late.

“Yes. I shall, as ruler of Anden, the Avatar of Larianna, try to call the wild wyverns to fight for me. Mave shall channel the power of Kristanya and fight as well. We’ve both been trying to conserve our energy, knowing these powers can eventually kill us if we overuse them. So, I devised our plan to make sure she and I are at full strength going against the Empire.”

“The power of the old queens,” Varon said gently, letting everyone in the room know they had always known about this revelation, just not the specifics. “Alchan was able to convince our goddess to give him the power of our previous queens, the first male to do so. There’s no need to treat him any differently. He is just one of thousands before him.”

A couple of Andinna nodded, but several gave Mave looks. Mave ignored them as she finished her pacing at Alchan’s side, knowing Varon stood on his other side.

“Where’s Kenav?” someone asked as he began to put the pieces together.

“Dead,” Mave answered before Alchan could. “As he rightfully deserves to be.” She met the face of the male who asked.

Alchan lifted a hand, a silent order for her to say no more so he could continue.

“He tested the will of gods. They chose Trevan. When Luykas offered him a place in our culture by trying to give him tatua, they adopted him as their child, agreeing with Luykas’ perception of the male. Kenav and three others decided they knew better than the gods. They paid for that mistake.”

“So, you let the female who hated them the most kill them?” another asked, the brave fool.

There’s always one.

“I didn’t *let* her do anything,” Alchan replied. “I *ordered* her to. Murder is a crime by which execution is the punishment. *Attempted* murder is a crime by which execution is the punishment. She only carried out my orders. She was my blade when the time came to cut his head off.” Alchan looked around. “That’s all I have for today. Our plans continue as they have been. In just under two weeks, we’re moving to our new position north of the valley. You’ll treat Mave with the respect being an Avatar provides her.”

With that, everyone was dismissed. Mave followed him out but didn’t stay with him. Others gave them a wide berth but closed in once she walked away. She didn’t really know what they wanted to talk about.

She led her husbands home. At the door, she stopped and looked at the five males she knew to be her closest allies and truest loves—the family she had built.

“I love Trevan,” she told them without preamble. “I’m going to stay with him until he’s awake. Does anyone have a problem with it?”

“No, love,” Bryn answered, smiling.

“When did you come to this conclusion?” Luykas asked, crossing his arms.

“When I realized he could have died,” she answered. “And I wouldn’t have been able to spend the centuries with him. I want to spend the centuries with him.”

She looked over their faces, and while Bryn was surprising, Emerian was the one who told her what she needed to know. There was so much hope in his expression.

“Of course, ya do,” Bryn said, pulling her attention away from Emerian. “He’s ya hero. He saved ya from the pits and protected you quietly for years. He made ya open yer heart to Mat and Rain by lettin’ ‘em help you. Of course, ya love him, Mave.”

She blinked. He was all of those things, wasn’t he?

Finally, she nodded, then headed inside, emotion choking her. She went into the bedroom where they were keeping him and sat down on one of Emerian's chests. Not long after, she heard her males thumping around and watched as they brought his things in as quietly as they could.

"We couldn't let him live alone, could we?" Emerian asked, leaning down to kiss her. She nodded, settling in for her vigil as they tucked his things near him as he slept.

Once she was alone, she dared to go closer to him and reached out to touch his cheek.

My hero.

LUYKAS

Luykas made sure not to bother his wife for the next three days. None of them bothered her as she stayed in the room with Trevan. They checked in on her, but they didn't call her away from him. She wandered around the house, waiting for him to wake up, and they allowed it because they knew she was just hyper-focused on the need to talk to him.

"Are you going to tell her?" Luykas asked Emerian quietly as they left on the dawn of the fourth day.

"Tell her what?"

"That you're going to join our family?" Luykas finished. "Come on. You know she's going to tell Trevan how she feels, and he'll fall right into those eyes of hers, then be stuck with us. What about you?"

"Oh. I was going to let them work it out first," the other mutt admitted softly. "But, yeah, if Trevan joins the family, you know I'm coming too. It's perfect."

"Yeah, I think so too," Luykas agreed, smiling as they headed for the training field now used as a staging ground for their move to the valley. It was full of carts, slowly being loaded high with gear and supplies. In only ten more days, they would head out to try to meet Shadra in open conflict. Luykas suddenly itched to hold his sword. Years of work was leading to this point, and it was coming in quietly, like a looming storm they had to prepare for. There were no skirmishes in the mountains. Bryn's scouts kept an eye on Elvasi troop movement, Senri was pulling her guards in to protect

the village, and the main force was growing every day as warriors came from Leria's community and Kerit.

While they had some distractions from the clouds forming on the horizon, the storm was still coming, and it was beginning to make Luykas anxious.

"You and Trevan will be her last husbands," Luykas said, turning his thoughts back to his wife.

There was no reason to go over the plans of their upcoming battle again and again in his head. He and his brother had done everything they could without risking their people. He and Emerian picked a cart with barrels needing to be loaded and started getting them up together. Every able body had to take a rotation in the field to help prepare. If one wasn't preparing, they needed to be training among themselves and staying out of trouble. That wasn't proving difficult to enforce because no one wanted to piss off Alchan or Mave. Avatar Varon was easygoing in comparison to those two. Who feared Amonora when Larianna and Kristanya were involved?

"Do you think so?" Emerian wedged the barrel into position and grabbed the next one Luykas put on the cart for him. "I don't really think about the family as a whole, you know. I just think about her..."

Luykas chuckled as he grabbed another barrel and got it on the cart. "Yeah, we know, and we don't care. We just want you to feel welcome. But yeah, I think you two are the last ones."

"Is it unusual for a female to build a family so fast and so big?" Emerian frowned at him as he continued to work on the back of the cart.

"Yes, but Mave is an unusual female. That's why we love her," Luykas said, leaning on the cart. He patted the end for Emerian to sit next to him. They could slack off for a moment. Emerian sat down, his feet hanging off the back. "Females normally romance slowly, but Mave doesn't do anything slowly. She was devoid of love and affection for years. She's not going to deny her own feelings for very long. She doesn't know how. Once she realized she had the power to take what she wanted, and most of us would let her..." He chuckled again. "I think it's good for her, honestly. To have a large family when everything about her life tells her she should be alone. Maybe in a thousand years, there will be a seventh, maybe not, but right now, with everything we've gone through together, Mave's not unusual at all. Look at Allaina, our mativa. She's never shown an interest in females.

Then over just two seasons, she took Yenni to be her wife, to join her mayara. War brings out the strongest of our feelings. It's part of who we are as Andinna, and Mave is a dominant, possessive female."

"You know...hearing Bryn talk about Mave and Trevan made me realize I might be the odd one. All of you have so much history with her—"

"Mat and Mave fell in love in less than a season," Luykas countered, understanding why Emerian might think that way. "You knew her for over a year. Bryn charmed her over a couple of seasons, but it didn't take very long. They were both shy, but Mat was there pushing them together, wanting his wife to be happy with whoever she wanted. We've kept that tone since then."

"Did anyone have a long courtship with her? It felt so easy to fall for her."

"Me," he admitted. "And Zayden. We were the two who took the longest from start to finish if Trevan's six hundred years of pining don't count. She and I had to overcome our blood bond. She didn't ask for one with me. I forced it on her to protect her when my mother tried a nasty bit of sorcery on her. Zayden took time to finally move on from his first wife, a Zira clan woman named Summer. He finally did as his attraction to her grew, and then it took some time for Mave to realize she wanted to keep him. But..." Luykas laughed. "Once Mave decides you belong to her, for whatever reason, there's really no fighting it. Even though I'm dominant, it's nice to have a female claim you."

"Yeah," Emerian agreed softly. "It's an Andinna thing. We...we're made to want females to dominate, aren't we?"

"Yup." Luykas patted Emerian's leg. "It's a funny thing. You just know sometimes, and I have this...feeling Trevan will be the last. Or you, whoever comes second."

"Probably me. I really want Trevan to be with her. I want him happy as much as I want her happy."

Luykas respected that. It made Emerian a good male. His scarred face and lost eye made him seem fearsome, and he definitely had that in him, as they all knew, but he was also a good, young soul, trying to learn and grow into who he would be. Luykas had the distinct feeling that among the family, Emerian would always be the younger brother of the group they'd have to drag around. There was nothing wrong with that. In fact, Luykas

was pretty sure Mave fell in love with the youthful gentle side of Emerian long before she met the warrior part of him.

“You don’t think you deserve it,” Luykas said suddenly, watching Emerian’s face. “Do you?”

“I mean...” Emerian shrugged. “Just feels like it happened really fast. Sometimes, I question how I even ended up in this position with the best female in the village. I never even looked at another one, never *wanted* to. And she thought I was good enough...”

“Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth,” Luykas teased, but he meant every word. Luykas was damn sure he wasn’t good enough for his wife. He was Shadra’s oldest son and a right mess. He lived on his own for weeks at a time, avoiding their family, but she accepted that and loved him, anyway.

He knew Emerian needed to hear something, so he gave the younger male the best he had.

“She didn’t need you to be good enough,” he said softly, shoving a barrel onto the cart. “She just needed you to be you, just like you only need her to be her. That’s enough in and of itself. Love doesn’t need to be more complicated. You don’t need centuries of history to realize you love someone, though it does make a good love story, like our dear Mave and Trevan. Even then, you rescued her just as much as he did. You got her home to us and dedicated your life to her after her father died. She saw that, and she loved you for it. There’s nothing more to it.”

“Thanks,” Emerian said, chuckling ruefully.

They went back to work, Luykas glad to have someone like Emerian with him.

“If you ever feel like you fail at something or failed her,” Luykas whispered, “just remember, you have all of us there to pick you up. We’ll help you. You’re not alone. We’re in this together. This is our family. It’s not just about Mave and each one of us. It’s about us as a whole. You know why Mat is okay with her having so many husbands?”

“Because she wants us, and he would never tell her no?”

“Because he knows she would never let someone close if they hadn’t proven they could love her the way she needs to be loved,” Luykas corrected. “Mave is guarded. Look at how she treats people she sees as outsiders. She doesn’t even know their names. But when she lets you in... she’s already decided that you fit. Female Andinna normally have a good

instinct for who will fit with their family, and Mave's instinct is very good." Luykas smiled, thinking about the beautiful moments she let them in, let them help her, hold her up when she wasn't feeling so strong anymore. "So, Mat adjusts, and he accepts whoever she does."

They finished their shift in silence. As they were walking off the field, they waved at Mat and Zayden walking toward a cart. It was shift change, and they had all gotten caught on different rotations. Bryn was the only one spared, needing to keep up with his scouts as the Elvasi grew closer. Walking home, Emerian seemed distant.

"I really do love her. I would burn this village to the ground for her. Kill anyone she needed me to kill. Fight whatever battles she needs me to fight. I just..."

"I know," Luykas said. "She's your first and your only relationship. That's fucking intimidating when you have no idea how things work and barely know anyone." Luykas laughed and ruffled the mutt's hair. Luykas had gotten lucky, inheriting the Andinna height. Emerian was closer to Trevan's height than a tall Andinna male.

They went inside and made something simple to eat before leaving quickly when they didn't see Mave. Luykas headed for the war room, letting Emerian follow along, knowing Emerian was in an odd place. He'd come to Anden an untrained warrior, with no love or attachment for their lifestyle or culture. Now, he was neck-deep in it and still trying to find his footing. It made Emerian oddly vulnerable, but the younger mutt didn't expose those vulnerabilities to anyone outside the family. As they entered the war room, Luykas felt the shift. Emerian stiffened, making himself taller, his muscles tensing as they saw other warriors. He was imposing when he did that, presenting himself as a warrior who shouldn't be tested.

The room was actually pretty empty. A few unit commanders were talking quietly about which parts of camp they would be living in when they moved out of the village, but Luykas didn't care about them. He went to his brother, seated at a small side table with Lily in his lap and Rain leaning over his head and shoulders, casually holding the king from behind.

If he was a stranger, he would see a large male with two supplicants to please him, ready to bend in whatever way he wanted. An arrogant display to show off what he got and no one else could have. Luykas knew his

brother, though. This was a tender moment for the new family, something Alchan didn't take lightly.

"Do you need me for anything?" Luykas asked as Alchan put down his quill.

"No," Alchan said, sighing as he looked up at him. "I'm...writing a letter I don't want to write."

Lily's face grew hard, and Rain groaned.

"Lily, you know—"

"I don't want to leave the village. I know I can't go south with you but don't send me to some mativa I don't know."

"Emerian, will you stay with Lily and Rain?" Luykas asked as Lily slid off Alchan's lap, clearly upset with her husbands. Alchan glared, first at Lily, then at his lap, then at Luykas. A matter of priority that made Luykas want to laugh.

His brother rose slowly. They were mirror images of each other except for their coloring. Alchan followed him as he left the war room.

"Why are you sending her away?" Luykas asked once they were outside.

"She might need to run," Alchan answered. "She's pregnant. They don't know for sure yet, but I'm letting them assume it's a possibility. If we lose —"

"Then there's no saving the Andinna," Luykas reminded his brother. "We don't get to take another crack at this in a thousand years. You would be saving her only to force her to watch the death of our people with no one she knows."

"You want me to leave her here in case the village is overrun, so she can be slaughtered?" Alchan snarled.

"I think you should let her decide like Rain gets to decide. Like I do, and Mave, and everyone else in this village. You are facing fatherhood, but you can't run over Lily."

Alchan grumbled. "I know."

"Then why are you trying?"

Alchan narrowed his eyes, glaring daggers at Luykas, who took it with ease. He was used to the expression. He even raised an eyebrow.

"Do we need to fight over this?"

"I would win," Alchan snapped.

“Maybe.” Luykas shrugged one shoulder. “Don’t start being an idiot now.”

“Mave scared me,” Alchan whispered, changing the subject faster than Luykas could account for. He blinked as his brother continued, getting to the point quickly. “And I don’t know if we can win. If her powers do that to her in the middle of the fight, she’ll die. Rain could die. I just want to save the one I can. Maybe I can save Lily. She won’t be in the fight. I could send her to Kerit and put her on a ship. Rain promised me if we lost, he would make sure he got her out, but he’s going to be in the fight. Shadra will be aiming for him. So, I can send her now.”

“Ah.” Luykas nodded. “Yeah...don’t.” He meant it. “You can’t take away her choice, Alchan.”

“We’re running out of time,” Alchan growled back. “Stay out of it.”

“Alchan, you will do more harm than good by taking her choice away. You and Rain have spent the last year filling her head with the idea she has control over her own life. You might be the father of the baby she carries, but she is the babe’s mother. She will make the best decision for herself.”

“I—”

“Don’t make me get Mave,” Luykas warned. “Or Varon. They’ll both agree with me.”

Alchan stayed strong for a moment longer, then seemed defeated.

“I’ll tell them to scrap the letter,” his brother said, looking away. Not down, just away, his classic way of trying to bend, to listen, even when he could win every argument. It was that movement that made him a great king and an even better brother.

“Good. Now, let’s focus on the storm we’re about to fly into,” Luykas said, walking back inside. Alchan followed him, and Luykas watched as he whispered to Lily and Rain. Lily’s smile grew and grew. She was the one who grabbed the scroll Alchan had been writing on and tore it in half, then walked over to Luykas and planted a kiss on his cheek. Alchan was barely restrained violence for a moment at her action.

“Thank you,” she said with a bright smile. “Rain, do you want to go to the market with me? *You* can make sure I have everything I need while you’re both away.”

Rain grinned at Lily, stuck his tongue out at Alchan, then offered her his arm, and they left together.

Luykas smirked as Alchan came to his side.

“Adorable,” he teased. Alchan growled, his cheeks beginning to turn pink.

It turned serious the next moment. Emerian got comfortable nearby, watching and listening to learn from them.

“Shadra is coming here...” Luykas began, indicating what they knew of her route.

It was back to business.

MAVE

Mave was there when he woke up. Five days and the bruises were slowly fading. Five days of helping the healers change his bandages. His bones fused together again, and the splints were removed. He didn't heal at the same rate as the Andinna, but he did heal faster than the Elvasi.

She spent five days of thinking.

She listened to him groan, the first sign he was coming to. Reaching up, he rubbed his eyes and tried to push himself up. She watched him wince and fall back, forcing her to move closer and grab him. Without a word, she helped him sit up and lean on the stone wall behind him, which was probably a bit cool on his back. He had spent five days wrapped in bandages and tucked under blankets, making his skin very warm.

For a long time, they stared at each other in silence. She was impressed he didn't feel the need to see the damage done to him. He just stared at her and eventually sighed.

"How long have I been out?" he asked, his voice hoarse.

"Five days," she answered. "But you're alive, so..."

He nodded, then reached out and massaged his neck. She knew he would be stiff, but there was nothing to do for that except get him out of bed and moving again.

"I have you to thank for that, don't I?"

"And Kyn. Alchan, Luykas, Mat, Zayden—"

He chuckled as he lifted a hand. “I understand. Kyn was able to get help. I wasn’t sure. I had faith in him, but...”

“How many times did they drop you from the sky?” she asked, going straight to the painful part. It was traumatic to be jumped, alone with no help, desperate but unable to save one’s self. She knew the pain. She needed to know what she was working with here.

“I don’t know,” he whispered. “I don’t remember they did that. How do you know they did that?”

“I watched it,” she admitted. “Saw it happening as I was trying to reach you.”

He nodded, finally looking down at himself. “Could have been worse, I guess. Could be dead.”

“Yeah,” she agreed. “I thought you were for a moment when I got there. Until I had you under my protection...” She found the words hard to say, so she changed the subject. She needed some answers. Everyone did, really. And she was suddenly scared to talk to him about the feeling that kept her heart beating as she stared into his eyes. Scared of his rejection because she was who she was, and he was who he was. “Trevan, what were you doing out there without Kyn?”

“I had sent him to find you,” Trevan said softly. “I didn’t know Kenav was coming...”

“Why?”

“I wanted to tell you that I love you,” he said without reservation. She didn’t reply, the words silencing her. They were exactly what she had wanted to say, but she hadn’t expected them in return. He took a deep breath, and she watched his shoulders relax. “Your husbands figured me out. I had kept it secret for so long because I didn’t want to bother you with my feelings, but Luykas figured me out, and Emerian already knew. They told Bryn, and Bryn told everyone else. I wanted to be the one who told you, so I spent a few days thinking about how to handle it. I sent Kyn to get you. I wanted to tell you, so they didn’t. I thought maybe we could still be friends. I still want to be your friend, to train with you and watch you give snacks to Kyn and laugh. Please don’t give that up because of how I feel.” Trevan winced as he tried to shift how he was sitting against the wall. “Thank you for saving me.”

Say something, you fucking pigeon.

“I love you, too.”

She watched his face change, going through what seemed like a dozen emotions. His mouth opened and closed. He blinked.

“Do I need to repeat it?” she asked gently, leaning forward. She was careful as she crawled over his legs, not touching him with any of her weight. She was within range to kiss him when she stopped, and he had yet to give a response. “I love you.”

“You...”

“Yes.”

“I’m Elvasi,” he said, the words a condemnation.

“No, you’re Trevan,” she countered. “And you’re my hero.”

Her eyes filled with tears. She leaned forward and closed the distance, claiming his mouth. He kissed her back with a passion she had never experienced. This wasn’t the rush of new love but something more akin to floodgates breaking. He reached up and slid his hand into her hair, holding her to him, and she allowed it, craved it. It sent the heat of need to her belly, and her heart quickened in excitement. She pressed against him with more strength, wanting to touch him, be with him, experience this feeling with him. They only broke apart when they needed to breathe. She wanted everything with him. The heat in his eyes, the power hidden inside him, the passion he kept locked away under his quiet personality and delicate respect he treated everything with.

There was so much either of them could have said, but they were both silent, staring at each other as if the world would end. There was a distinct possibility it could. The world outside the door was still moving, marching steadily closer to a battle they were both destined to fight—a battle where they could both die. Their lives marched parallel to that point.

What a love story they had, she thought as she leaned in to kiss him again. She stopped and sighed, fighting her own need as she looked at his bruises and remembered what had led them to the same bedroom.

“You’re too hurt for this,” she said, trying to pull back. His hand tightened in her hair, then released.

“I don’t think so, but if that’s what you want,” he murmured, watching her with a heated expression. She had done that to him, and he was willing to let her walk away.

She felt bad as she stood up and pushed her hair from her face. Trevan, always willing to let her have her way, always willing to make her comfortable. She had felt that hand tighten as if he wanted to force her to stay and kiss him again. Any of her husbands would have laughed in her face and done exactly what he wanted, kissed her again as if the world depended on it, but not Trevan. They had too much history, too much telling them that this shouldn't be. He would always respect her wishes, so he didn't hurt her.

That made her want him more.

If I walk away now, will we ever be bold enough to come back to this moment? So charged with emotion, we can both barely think, barely breathe?

She didn't think so. They were both too guarded. It felt as if it was now or never between them. So, she trusted him. He didn't think he was too injured, and she would put that to the test.

"You don't think so?" she asked as she began to unwrap her top, slowly exposing her skin. "You've been in a healing sleep for five days, Trevan."

"I think I know my own body."

"I'm sure." She dropped her top and went to her pants, untying the leather strings that held them up, and pushed them down. "Tell me, am I everything you thought I would be?"

"You're more," he whispered as she went down to her knees. "It's not about your body, Mave. It's about your strength. I admired the warrior in the pits who was strong enough to survive, even when everyone was against her. I might have loved you a bit back then, but now...now I *know* I love you. The warrior who puts herself between the enemy and her people. The warrior who is able to be friends with someone like me, even after everything we have seen together. The warrior who took on the load of an immense power, so she could fight harder, even if it meant a great risk to herself. You're not everything I thought you would be. I thought too small because you are so much more."

As she crawled over his legs, he pushed the blanket away. He was already undressed, and she took his excitement as a good sign. If he was healed enough for that response, they could be careful.

She didn't put her weight on him yet as she moved up until she could feel him pressing against her between her legs. His hands found her hips

and started to roam, touching every part of her. He traced her scars and kissed her neck. She let him explore, let him slowly build her need. He didn't move too fast or push too hard, simply petting, and it was getting her excited.

"Is this real?" he asked after he had her panting with need. He slid a hand between her legs and slid two fingers inside her. "Or have I actually died, and this is the afterlife your goddess wants to give me?"

"It's real," she answered in a moan, leaning forward to brace her hands on the wall above him. She wasn't taller than him, but the position left her able to lean on something else. With any male bigger than Trevan, she would have no other option than to lean on him.

He held her close as his fingers worked with his free arm. Even with everything between them, he was dedicated to the task of sending her flying before he had a chance to come with her.

"I love you," he murmured in her ear as she repeated his name like a prayer.

Before she finished, he pulled his fingers out, grabbed her hips, and pulled her down on him. She shattered into a thousand pieces as he filled her, forcing her to put her weight on him. He groaned as waves of pleasure raced through her.

He didn't thrust. He held onto her hips, moving her for both of them. She figured out the pace and took control, angling her hips to give them even more pleasure. It was an excruciatingly gentle and slow pace she could do for what felt like days. It took time, but he started to thrust up and grabbed her hair, pulling her to kiss him.

It wasn't explosive, not a raging out-of-control passion. It was quieter as they fed the flame between them with soft gasps and moans. Trevan whispered how much he loved her, and she took those words greedily, knowing she would never not love this hero of hers.

When she finished a second time, he buried himself inside her and released. It was beautiful. They stared into each other's eyes, filled with tears as years of history stretched out behind them and the prospect of centuries before them.

She slowly got off him, and they stretched out among the furs, her head on his better arm, their legs tangled together. They didn't say anything for a

long time until he looked up and frowned. She quickly realized he had no idea where they were.

“I would ask you to move in, but we’ve already done that for you,” she whispered after a long silence. “We brought you here to meet the healers and for your own safety. My males brought your things in, deciding you were not going back to your own home.”

“It works,” he said, lowering his head once again. “I don’t want to live without you anymore.”

“This is Emerian’s room, actually. You can move into the other room if...”

“Yes, Mave, I’ll be in your mayara. I didn’t think that was something that needed to be clarified.” He laughed, then groaned, grabbing his ribs. She let him settle and the pain fade, not speaking as she soaked in those words. He continued as he relaxed again. “I’ll be whatever you want me to be.”

“Be mine,” she whispered, kissing his chest.

“I always was,” he whispered. “I might stay in this room with Emerian. I know him the best. Luykas is nice, but you do have two bedrooms here, and this one has more space. I’m not used to crowded bedrooms yet. One day, though.”

“Maybe you can convince him to finally settle in,” Mave said with a laugh. “I’m okay with that. Luykas still keeps his own place because he needs it. If you want to keep your own bedroom or have fewer... roommates, I won’t stop you.” She wouldn’t be able to sleep with him every night if he did, but she just wanted him in her life. She would be happy no matter how this turned out.

“Tell me something. We haven’t changed any of our plans, thanks to me, right?”

“No. We’re leaving in nine days for the valley. The village is tense. Shadra will be there in two weeks, and we have to fight her. There’s no turning back now, no matter what happens here in the village—even you nearly dying.”

He nodded and sighed. “I guess that means I should enjoy the time I have with you right now...before the world forces us to face our own deaths again.”

“I guess so.”

He sat up and gently pushed her legs open with his thigh. She watched as the pain flashed on his face.

“You shouldn’t be doing this much physical activity. You need therapy to get back to your healthiest,” she said with little real fight as he settled his hips between her thighs. She didn’t have any fight at all as he pushed into her slowly, finding her still wet for him.

“We’ll consider it part of my therapy,” he murmured as he held himself up and began to thrust. “I finally have the female of my dreams naked with me, and I’m going to enjoy it.”

She didn’t argue.

When they were covered in sweat and Trevan was clearly in too much pain to continue, they had a visitor. He walked in as if he had no idea what was happening, and his eyes went wide as he saw them.

“Oh,” Emerian said softly.

“Are you okay with this?” she asked softly as Trevan stiffened beside her.

“Okay with it? I’ve been waiting for this for days,” he said, his surprise turning to joy. “You’ve been asking me to join your mayara properly. Well...”

“Really? You were waiting on...this?” Mave looked between the two males.

“Yeah.”

Emerian joined them, stripping off his clothing, telling them about his day, then laid on her other side. Trevan seemed completely at ease. They talked about nothing important until she went to get them something to eat. Zayden smiled at her as she grabbed several things she could take back with her.

“He’s up?” her husband asked, his smile too knowing.

“Yeah,” she answered with a smile of her own. She had never smiled so much until she had met these males, and they had slowly become her family.

“Everything is going to work out how you want it to?”

“Yes, I think it is,” she said, kissing him once before heading back. “Tell the others?”

“I will,” he promised, his sapphire eyes twinkling.

MAVE

Mave was pleased how quickly her family adjusted. Mat only gave her that arrogant smirk when she returned to her main room the next night. At breakfast two days later, they all talked and laughed. Trevan fully integrated when he was finally strong enough to walk out of his room. There were talks about rules, those male rules they had. She never interrupted. She was surprised Trevan had one of his own, though.

“They’re both her beds,” he said, wincing as he tried to stretch his legs. “That’s what we’ll do until we’re all comfortable in the same space.”

“I like it,” Mat agreed, smiling at Trevan, then at her as she sipped coffee in the kitchen.

As she watched all six of them fight over the seating arrangement at her dining table for dinner, she smiled. It was perfect, and a feeling of completeness filled her.

This was the family she wanted—this group of men, who marked her in different ways, filling her table, and making the rooms echo with laughter. They left no space for visitors. It was just her males, six men who had changed her life in different ways and found their ways into her heart. It was all she needed.

As the days passed, the village grew quieter. The first of those leaving for the valley moved out on the fourth day. Mave’s mood turned quiet. Her males felt it as well, whispering about how they would handle the final battle together. She only knew her own role, but they knew more of Alchan’s larger plans, what waves would hit the battle. To keep her head

clear, she asked them nicely to keep the rest away from her for the time being.

Mave spent an entire day with Senri and Kianev, watching the baby giggle and laugh. It held its own bittersweetness now that she felt the completeness of her own family.

“How did you know you had the family you wanted?” she asked her mother as she let Kianev grab her fingers and gurgle with a smile.

“When all my needs were fulfilled. When my heart was too full to fit anyone else, and no one else could catch my interest anymore,” Senri answered softly. “You seem to have that expression on your face, which tells me you found that point.”

“I did,” she confirmed.

“Next come babies,” her mother teased with a smile. “If you want any.”

Mave only nodded, then stayed the night with Senri, Willem, and Gentrin. They let her keep Kianev for the night, the chubby baby nestling into her instinctually.

The next day, she helped her males pack up their essentials, being one of the last homes to do so. Alchan’s home was in a similar state, also one of the last to get finished. It took long hours to decide what stayed, under the expectation that they might never see it again. Luykas was the one with the most treasures, something that made everyone huddle around his chests.

“You still have the flag,” Mat said with a laugh. “That damn flag.”

“It was fun for a couple of centuries,” Luykas said, showing Mave what Mat was talking about. It was the flag for their mercenary company, two swords behind an Andinna skull with horns that matched Alchan and Luykas. “That’s not the only weird thing I have in here.” He passed the flag down, watching as it made its way into Trevan’s hands.

Trevan refused to give it back when Luykas reached out for it.

“Show us what else you have,” Emerian ordered, standing beside his closest friend.

Luykas laughed and reached into his chest, the one that was nearly always closed. He pulled out a sketchbook and handed it to Mave.

She knew this one. Luykas was an artist when he had time. She opened it to find pictures of people they both knew, some she didn’t, and even Shadra.

“Luykas is a hoarder,” Mat whispered over her shoulder. Mave snickered, handing the sketchbook back to Luykas.

“Be nice,” she ordered.

They packed and packed, then loaded it onto the two carts they were given.

“I’ll miss this village,” Zayden said as they moved the carts to the staging field.

The hope was they would return once the battle was over, then move farther north into Anden, but there was a stark truth none of them questioned.

They might not come back at all.

The mood continued to grow quieter.

The night before they left, Mave went to Luykas in his home. They redid their blood bond and enjoyed the night together. She wanted to be tied to him forever, grateful to feel him as strong as she once had.

On the ninth day after Trevan woke up, they went to the staging area. They weren’t the last group heading for the valley, but they were the largest. Nearly four thousand Andinna were staged all over the village, ready for Alchan to begin their movement.

There was no cheering. People came out of their homes to wave, and guards saluted the passing warriors. Most of those left behind would be the last line of defense if this battle didn’t go in favor of the Andinna.

It was months, even years in the making, and now, they were heading for a battle they couldn’t lose.

Mave waved at her mother and Allaina when she saw them. Yenni was somewhere in the group leaving, ranking second in the females after Mave. She was also a warrior meant for war. There was no way Allaina would convince her wife to stay in the village, even if their relationship was still new and vibrant.

Mave remained quiet as they moved out of the village and entered the wild mountains of Anden. They settled into the quiet ride together. The trip was only three days to the south on horseback. She spent her meals with her husbands, Alchan, and Rain. Nevyn and Varon made sure everything was going well in the camp, coming in later to report how their large group was doing.

The Dragon Spine was a complicated mountain range, a series of valleys, cliffs, and mountains practically sitting on other mountains. It was a wild and perfect place for the Andinna when they could fly, but it made travel hard. Over a dozen horses were injured on the first day, leaving more people walking on foot. Two Andinna broke bones on the second day. On the third day, three had run, realizing they were at the point of no return and figuring deserting was a better plan. Alchan didn't send anyone to chase the deserters down. There were always going to be some not ready to face the inevitable.

When they reached the plateau where they were going to camp, with the valley in sight, Mave took her first breath in what felt like days.

She walked past everyone as they started building the next stage of their camp, helping those who were already here and had cleared the area. She went to the barren cliffside and looked below at the valley.

“Soon,” Kristanya said, appearing beside her. “Can you taste it on the air? The charge of what is to come, like lightning about to strike.”

“Yes,” Mave answered softly, knowing there was no one too close to hear what she was saying. What Kristanya and Mave could feel was the inevitable end—death was about to be upon them. Whether it was hers or countless others, it was coming.

“This is the point Alchan has been moving everyone toward since spring came. Even while he and you were clearing the rot from the Andinna, this continued to draw closer.”

“That’s how you think of Kenav and his followers? A rot?”

“An infection, a disease in the creation of my sister, yes. She and I have spoken at length since you sent Kenav to the next life, and I could finally judge his soul in its entirety. If it weren’t for you and your king seeing it, there was a chance it could have continued to infect the minds of the Andinna. We hadn’t realized how much this...Empress did to the souls of our people with her cruel intention of breaking the Andinna. Good work.”

“And now, we destroy the Empress,” Mave said simply, staring at the valley still, unable to remove her eyes from it. Through the hard work over the weeks, while she was still in the village, the Andinna who had come early had cleared the valley of its natural forests. There wasn’t a single tree left standing, and they had burned the earth to destroy smaller vegetation. Even along the sides of the closest mountains, they had used fire to clear it,

leaving bare, blackened earth. The work would continue all the way until Shadra arrived and marched her army into their view.

“I am a realist. You shall try, and I shall hold on to the hope that you succeed,” Kristanya said in return. “Finish your business with the living, Mave. I know you cannot allow yourself the thought you might not walk away from this, but if there is anything possibly weighing on your mind, address it.”

“There is something,” Mave admitted. “About my position. You. All of it.”

“If you survive this battle to remain my Avatar until you are old and gray, you may change whatever it is you wish. I won’t fight you, so long as I know your heart is in the right place, and you have all the information,” Kristanya said, turning fully to her. “I don’t speak freely of emotion...but I have turned to rooting for you, all of you. You have given me a picture into the lives of the Andinna, which I could only see once our people have passed on. And you are not...dissimilar to me. Seeing you live such a full life and also be my Avatar has given me something I cannot yet put into words.” Mave felt the whisper of a touch on her cheek. “You are the closest thing I will ever have to a daughter.”

Then she was gone, her words staying with Mave. Mave knew the goddess kept much of her own council, but seeing past the bluster and arrogance to something deeper was always a treasure. They were, in some way, kindred spirits—both warriors who felt out of place among the light. Mave turned back to the Andinna, working hard to prepare for the battle.

She needed to settle her final accounts with the living, and Kristanya gave her leave to do that. If she survived, Mave intended to bring changes to the way things were done. If she died, she would leave those changes in the hands of those she loved and trusted. She walked into the crowd, focused on a power she couldn’t touch.

She found Varon talking to the two priests she had met before.

“I didn’t know you were coming on this trip,” Mave said, having barely spoken to them since she met them. She had done well to keep herself just busy or unavailable enough to avoid them, even after the Andinna learned what Mave was.

“When the priesthood of Kristanya is larger, they send at least two to every known battle to allow warriors a chance for prayer, hoping for her

blessing,” Varon explained, turning to her. “We were just discussing where they shall stay. They have been very busy over the last two weeks since news of you spread through the village.”

“Well, it’s convenient for me,” Mave said. “I wanted to discuss something with you, Varon, and they can listen.”

“You know I always have an ear for you,” Varon replied, smiling.

“I understand the need her priesthood fulfills. I have turned it over in my mind in the quiet moments and have grown used to the knowledge. Now, I’m here to tell you what we are going to do to change it.”

Varon’s eyes went wide, and the priests sat up a little straighter.

“There are great powers in this world, and we can do things many would deem impossible. So, together, the priesthoods, the Avatars, and the Blackbloods of our society are going to find a way to help the children who have long been believed to be lost.” Mave raised her chin, daring any of them to question her. None dared to say anything, so she continued. “Luykas knows sorcery, and I understand it’s taboo in our culture, but it’s a resource we can use. Before I die, I want to see a blind Andinna child fly. I want us to have a solution, even if it means a change in our way of doing things. They all deserve the chance Varon had, and we should find a way to give it to them. How many beautiful souls were lost because the Andinna didn’t know how to fix it? No more.”

Varon stepped closer to her, searching her face. “You won’t let this go, will you?”

“No,” she swore to him, her conviction in the word unbendable. “You lived the life others will face. You can give them hope. Without your support, I can’t do this.”

“Then I shall work with you,” he promised, putting a hand over his chest. He had tears in his eyes. “It is a painful thing in our culture, this curse we have, this need to fly. It is our ultimate doom and our greatest salvation. It fuels our spirits or breaks them. I will personally adopt and raise every child you send to me so they can have the hope of flying as I do. They will be the children Nevyn and I cannot have. But you must promise me one thing, for I know the pain better than everyone here.”

“What would you have me promise?”

“If they want a way out, you will give it to them when they can make that choice of their own free will.” Varon met her gaze again, his eyes

pleading. "For me, Mave. Swear it for me."

It was painful, but it was a promise she could give. There was a rightness to it. He was forced to suffer for ages and had been lucky to find an escape. He wouldn't let her force others if they decided they couldn't continue the fight.

"As the Avatar of Kristanya, I swear it," she whispered. Then she added, "And if you die in this fight, they shall be my children, and I will tell them stories of you."

"And if you die in this fight, I shall carry your goal forward until my own dying days."

The seriousness eased a little between them, and Mave relaxed.

"I'm going to talk to Alchan about letting Luykas do sorcery for this," she said with a small, rueful smile. "Surely, he'll see we can do both types of magic, right?"

"That's for you and him to work out, but I would not be...against using sorcery if it means we can give more Andinna a chance at life." Varon looked at the priests with him. "Do either of you see a problem with this?"

"We would be willing to work on this with the Avatars," one said, bowing deeply. "Now, I think we need to do rounds. With the deserters we had yesterday, there are probably others who might be thinking of running. We're priests of war just as much as we are of death. We'll try to get the feel of the camp and report back if we think there's an underlying problem."

"They're going to make sure we don't wake up tomorrow to a thousand warriors gone instead of a handful," Varon explained to her. The priests went on their business, Mave watching them leave before turning back to Varon.

"Are you ready?" she asked softly. "For this?"

"I'm ready. And you?"

"I am," she said, nodding. "I just wanted to talk about this before... before it was too late to talk about this."

Varon bowed his head. He still did things the way he had when he was mute, exaggerating his physical movements, so no one missed his intention. Three thousand years was more than half the life span of the Andinna, and he'd been mute for just over that. The habits he developed would probably always stick.

Mave walked away, knowing Varon would hold up his end. With that off her chest, she went to walk the valley. She wanted to get the feel of the land.

BRYNEC

Bryn stood quietly, waiting on Alchan to finish reading his report as the moon rose over them. They had been there for five days, and he was swamped. His scouts were constantly running back and forth, getting new intel on Shadra's forces, making sure everything was the way they planned. Every night, he presented his new information to Alchan before heading to bed. They had another three safe weeks before Shadra arrived, based on his estimations. Things were always changing, though. Armies moved differently over different parts of the terrain. There was a chance she reached an easy stretch of road and made more progress than they anticipated, or she found herself held up by a particularly rough bit of country that slowed her down. All they could do was keep an eye on her.

"This is good," Alchan finally said. "If she stays on pace, we'll have the remainder of our forces here a day ahead of her. We'll still be settling in up here as she moves into the mountains. I'll let Luykas know he can reach out to her now."

"Why aren't we ambushing her?" Bryn asked, frowning. Not many would question Alchan, but he could. "I know we can't do a traditional ambush, but why give her any time to set up?"

"Because I need the time," Alchan answered, sighing. "I know it would be better if we attacked her while her soldiers were in disarray, trying to set up camp, but..." Alchan turned to him. "If I call the wyverns right now and they arrive before Shadra, she won't come into this valley. She won't pick the fight here. She'll make us go to her, farther south, making our

preparations nearly useless. The only reason she's willing to engage with us right now is she thinks exactly what we want her to about our forces. She knows what one or two wyverns can do to her forces. She won't walk into a fight with ten of them. We need to appear weak and on our last leg."

"Ah..." Bryn nodded. "So, she arrives, then you call them. Or you call them right before she gets here, so she can't turn around."

"Exactly, and she can't attack us up here. She could try coming around the sides instead of straight up the cliff, but that's easy to telegraph, and we could stop her. It's a waste of her soldiers. We're in a stalemate until I launch our attack, giving us time to see the wyverns come to my call. She'll be on high alert, but it's what we have."

"Why aren't we trying to assassinate her?" Bryn wanted to know everything. If Alchan was feeling forthcoming, Bryn was feeling curious. Many of these questions were whispered among the camp between the warriors.

"You can't," Luykas answered, walking in from the back room of the large tent that was their central command. "She's already killed three Elvasi assassins. There's no way an Andinna can get to her. She's much more protected than Lothen was, so grabbing her under the cover of a wyvern attack would be a suicide mission we can't afford to attempt right now. She has sorcerers with her at all times now, including my sister. Nyria has made it clear she'll help us during the final battle, but she can't risk revealing herself right now."

"Shadra would execute her," Alchan said simply.

"Yeah, and their camp is already tense. Nyria is being kept too close for me to safely visit. She warned me off it a few days ago, and I was nearly caught by another sorcerer." Luykas sat down at the table and lifted his waterskin to his lips. They waited for him to take his drink. If anyone knew what was going on in the Elvasi camp, it was Luykas. "Nyria was telling me how Shadra is going to kill off her generals. She's getting paranoid and probably blames them for the assassination attempts. They won't survive the final battle because she won't let them. They're too politically minded to be trusted."

"What?" Alchan huffed. "They're her generals, and...she's going to kill them?"

“Did I forget to tell you about that? I guess it didn’t seem important. I had to finalize the numbers of the Elvasi troops and match them to the estimates the scouts are bringing in.” Luykas rubbed his jaw. “Shadra is spiraling, or so Nyria says. Three assassination attempts have been made, and Shadra’s paranoid and dangerous. Nyria doesn’t know her exact plan to get rid of the Elvasi generals, but it all stems from this insane thought that Shadra thinks they’re trying to kill her to take the glory of this war from her. She made all the plans, recruited the sorcerers.

“If they kill her, then defeat us, they get to go back to Elliar as glorified rulers. Then one of them marries Nyria and takes the Empire through some very simple political maneuvering. Nyria is powerful, but the nobles of the Empire will take a man over a woman any day. Nyria is allowing Shadra to spiral because, in the end, it helps Nyria. She didn’t admit it, but knowing my sister, she’s probably feeding into it.”

“It helps her in the end. The clearer the field at the end of the war, the easier her rise to power will be.”

“Do we trust her?” Bryn asked softly.

“I do,” Luykas said, leaning back in his chair. “She won’t talk about taking the throne, though. Refuses to even consider that future. There’s a... fear there, I think, as though if she thinks about it, Shadra will know, and everything will be lost. It’s the biggest mystery we’re dealing with right now. We can defeat Shadra and her army here, but what happens if Nyria abdicates? The nobles will slowly rebuild, and...”

“Try to claim the glory Shadra lost by defeating the Andinna,” Alchan agreed. “We need Nyria to take the throne, and she’s young, younger than anyone here. If she takes it, she can rule for nearly five thousand years, and we can develop better relations and strive for peace instead of war. But we can’t think about that. It’s up to her, come the end of the battle, to make her decision.”

“Yeah. We’re in the waiting game now,” Luykas agreed. “Did all of that answer your questions, Bryn?”

“Yeah, thanks,” he said, nodding as he looked at the maps. “I don’t like this, you know. I won’t try anything insane to get us to do something else, but it’s so risky, and it’s slow. We’re not the type of people to do large-scale battles like this. Why not call the wyverns and attack her on the way here?”

“She’ll shoot them out of the sky and kill them, then keep marching,” Alchan answered. “I need the combined force, Bryn. You *know* I need the combined force. It’s the same reason I’m not letting Mave fly south and try it herself. Even if she could get an attack off on the Empire, this isn’t a small camp of one to three thousand Elvasi like we’ve seen. The biggest force we’ve done a mission against was five thousand, and that was when we took Lothen. This is nearly thirty thousand Elvasi.”

“They will have five hundred ballistae,” Luykas mumbled. “And it’s only going to take a thousand of their soldiers to man those.”

“You’ve see the numbers, Bryn,” Alchan said softly, patting his shoulder. “You know they’re building more and more on the road. They have over five thousand gryphon riders. That’s nearly our entire force. If it was just the gryphon riders, we’d be in for a fight, but we would certainly win, which is why I’m not worried about her attacking us, but in conjunction with her ground soldiers, her archers, and the sorcerers...”

“How many wyverns are you hoping will answer?”

“Twenty,” Alchan said softly. “Hopefully, more. Mave already knows her first target is the ballistae. The wyverns will be a bit uncontrollable, so I’m not relying on sending them on a single target. If they just cause chaos and destruction, I’ll live with that.”

“Punching through her sorcerers is going to be a priority,” Luykas interjected. “We need to get to Shadra and the rest of the Elvasi leadership. Those sorcerers will have her well protected.”

“Cut off the head,” Bryn said, nodding. He knew they were telling him this for his own reassurance. They obviously knew what they were doing, but Bryn didn’t often attend the meetings where they broke everything down, too busy making sure they had accurate information. “So, Mave goes in and tries to make the sky safer for the other big beasts by aiming for the ballistae. The wyverns come into the fight. Gryphons will be in the sky the moment Mave shows up, so there’s going to be wyverns going down quickly. We saw how effective they were against Rain.”

“That’s when I launch the assault,” Alchan said, beginning to move pieces around. He had a piece for Mave and several little indicators for wyverns, numbers of different troops, and more, so he could run simulations of the fight. “The wyverns will be chaotic and dangerous enough to keep the focus of most of the Elvasi forces, even if Shadra tries

to direct them. Our warriors skip the ground forces while fighting the gryphon riders and hit the archers and backline instead. This gets the entire Elvasi force turned around. We're aiming directly for her, Bryn. Don't forget that. She'll be at the back because she's not a fool. She wants to walk on our corpses, which is why she's here, but she's not going to leave the comfort of several rows of protection." Alchan moved pieces farther, pushing them into the southern half of the valley. "We get through the fighting, and we punch a hole open through her layers of protection. We kill Shadra, and Nyria calls off the Elvasi troops. We end the fighting."

"It'll take time for the fighting to stop," Bryn pointed out.

"I know. We're going to take losses, Bryn, heavy losses. So will the Elvasi. But Nyria and other Elvasi leaders will know I can call more wyverns. Mave and I can obliterate their army if they try to destroy us. Mutually assured destruction will put a stop to this."

"This is a half-baked idea," Luykas said very softly, "and we know it's risky, but we won't be able to scare them off if we don't come out strong. They need to think if they enter Anden, they'll be devastated by wyverns at our beck and call, and dragons will come down from the sky, living gods, to fight them off."

"We have seven thousand."

"I know," Alchan said, his voice thick with emotion. "I know, Bryn, but we have over three thousand hoping to be free from the Empire's grasp. Another handful of thousands in Olost. We'll take heavy losses, but..."

"You're hoping the numbers break even," Bryn whispered. "Shit."

"I know it's ugly, but it's all we have. There were two options. Force Mave and me to slowly kill ourselves by trying to use our powers repeatedly or one fight that scares the Elvasi so bad, they want to head home."

"Not so slowly in the case of Mave," Bryn countered. "I know. I guess with it so close, it's finally hitting me how bad this is, and I'm scared."

"So are we," Luykas said gently, standing. "Come on, let's go for a walk and see if anyone needs help."

Alchan continued to stare at the maps as Bryn followed Luykas out. Bryn threw the king one last backward glance.

"Luykas, be honest with me."

“We were,” Luykas answered. “We have minor advantages in that we can fly and have several heavy-hitting members of our forces. If Shadra doesn’t try to send forces up the sides, Trevan and Rain will be able to punch into her army and cause even more devastation. The fires will get out of control because we’re not going to attack if there’s a chance of a storm. We’ll wait out the rain if we have to.”

“So, the attack is more of a...what’s that word the humans in Olost used?”

“Blitz,” Luykas answered. “She will expect us to pull out something since it’s our last stand, but we’re going to hit her hard and faster than she’ll expect. If Mave can destroy the ballistae, the wyverns will only be vulnerable to archers and sorcerers. There are only about five hundred sorcerers in her entire force, and archers would need a lucky shot. If it goes our way, I’m expecting more of the Elvasi soldiers will be roasted alive, without a chance to fight a single Andinna.”

“It comes down to our wife,” Bryn said softly. “Of course, it does.”

“She’s very good at putting herself in the center of things,” Luykas said, chuckling ruefully. “She has the need to be the warrior who can save everyone, defeat the enemy, and bring victory.”

“She’s been distant since we got here...focused.” Bryn and Luykas walked among the warriors, but none called out to them, and since everyone knew who and what Mave was, there was no reason for secrecy. “She’s been down in the valley every day.”

“She’s getting a feel for the land, flying over it, trying to judge the distances.”

“I know. I’m not going to disturb her. I don’t think anyone is considerin’ it. She’s—”

Luykas lifted a hand, and Bryn fell silent. It wasn’t often Luykas suddenly needed silence. Luykas jumped into the sky, and Bryn followed, wondering what was going on. They landed at Alchan’s tent. Luykas stuck his head in and called for Alchan, then headed to the cliffside and into the valley. Bryn could barely keep up, and Alchan rushed out to follow as well.

They landed in the valley as someone appeared beside Luykas. She was a pretty Elvasi woman, but not Shadra, who Bryn had seen once before.

“Nyria, odd timing,” Luykas said, standing in the scorched valley. Alchan landed next to him as Bryn hung off to the side, listening but out of

the way. “We were talking about you this morning. Well, we probably bring you up every day.”

“She’s captured the generals for treason,” Nyria said stiffly. “She’s going to use them as energy sources for the final battle.”

“What happened?” Luykas asked. Nyria didn’t look around, her gaze focused on her brother.

“I was asked to...have them over for dinner. One of them made mention of me finally taking a husband, saying when I was the Empress, I would need a good Emperor by my side. It escalated from there, and she decided it was enough to take them for treason. I don’t think they were actually working against her, but it was too close for her. I figured you would like the update. I don’t have long. She’s distracted with them and her sorcerers, so I can’t stay.”

“Well, this is happening quickly,” Alchan said. “Nyria, it’s nice to meet you.”

Nyria seemed surprised for a moment, looking at Alchan, then Luykas, and back at Alchan.

“It’s nice to meet you as well, King Alchan. I must say, I heard you and Luykas looked alike, but it’s much more distinct than I realized.” Then she saw Bryn. “And who are you?”

“He’s my family as well,” Luykas answered. “Married to the same female as I am.”

Bryn nodded respectfully to the princess. She seemed young and inexperienced, her face too soft, but he caught the flash of intelligence in her eyes.

“How many males do you share your wife with, brother?”

“There are six of us in total, but it’s how we do things here in Anden.” Luykas smiled. “Don’t trouble yourself with it. You might get to meet her during the final battle...or after.”

“Or right now,” Mave said, landing with them. “I saw you head into the valley and wondered what the rush was. I see now. Nyria, princess of the Elvasi Empire.” Mave was much taller than Nyria. She walked around the princess. “We’ve met before.”

“Briefly,” Nyria said softly. There was a touch of fear, which only made Bryn realize just how brave the Elvasi princess was. “Very briefly.”

“Yes,” Mave agreed.

“Nyria, was that all you wanted to tell us? If so, thank you very much for the update. You should probably head back before she realizes you’re capable of this magic.”

“Of course.” Nyria bowed her head to Luykas, then gave Alchan a proper bow. “Have a nice evening. I hope the next time we speak, I have better news. Hopefully, this information can help you in some way.”

“Well, I wasn’t expectin’ that,” Bryn said, breaking the silence the princess had left behind. “How much magic can she do?”

“She’s been training in secret for centuries,” Luykas answered. “Just like our mother. They’re both powerful, but Shadra is more experienced and cunning. Nyria doesn’t have the years. I give her tips when I can, but she’s smart enough to know death spells.”

“She should kill her mother for us,” Mave muttered, crossing her arms.

“She’s not that powerful. Shadra would know a magical attack and counter it. It would just get Nyria killed,” Luykas said softly, reaching out to their wife. “But it was nice of her to give us the update on what’s going on in their camp. Alchan and I were just explaining to Bryn about it happening. Shadra is doing exactly what we figured she would.”

“What did Nyria mean about using them as energy sources?” Alchan asked. Bryn frowned. He hadn’t really considered that.

“It means Shadra is going to chain them up and pull energy from them to fuel her spells. It’ll make her stronger, and she’ll be able to do magic longer,” Luykas answered.

“That’s goin’ to make killin’ her harder,” Bryn pointed out. “But at least we know, aye?”

“She’s still an Elvasi, and I am still a dragon. She’ll die,” Mave said with confidence.

“Don’t get overconfident, Mave,” Alchan warned. “Let’s revisit this tomorrow. It won’t change our plans, but at least we have the new expectation she’ll be more powerful than we thought.”

“I’ve never seen her fight. Can she even use a sword?” Mave crossed her arms.

“Who do you think taught Lothen to never expose his strengths and weaknesses to his enemy?” Luykas countered. “She was an Elvasi noble who did diplomatic missions with Andinna. She will know how to use a sword and has probably kept herself practiced for years for her own

protection. As for her magic...well, you know how dangerous that can be. She almost took your mind, and you tried to kill yourself to keep from falling prey to her.”

Mave’s face paled. Bryn remembered that moment, they all did. They were trying to escape the Empire with Mave, and she threw herself off the ship. Then Luykas blood bonded her to get into Mave’s mind before his mother could do it, which had protected Mave since then.

“Thank goodness we redid the blood bond,” Mave said softly, looking away.

“That’s not why we redid it,” Luykas whispered, going to her.

“Why don’t we head back up and get some rest?” Alchan offered.

No one talked back or even talked at all.

MAVE

Mave counted every day, walking the valley below as the feeling of foreboding continued to drive her. It had taken her a week to realize what it was trying to tell her. It took another week and a half for her to confront Kristanya.

“That feeling of death...you’re telling me to handle my affairs. You think I’m going to die,” she said, standing alone in the valley, far from the other Andinna, still working to clear it completely for an easier fight when the Elvasi arrived.

“I...” Kristanya didn’t continue as she appeared at Mave’s side.

“What do you see?”

“The options,” the goddess answered. “There are...several. You could lose control during the battle and destroy both armies, then run a rampage across the world. You could be taken by a lucky arrow to the eye. You could overexert your mortal body, win the war, but die in the process. Paths... there are many, and I want you to be prepared for all of them.”

“And more of those paths lead to my death than not, huh?” Mave rested her hands on the hilts of her blades.

“Yes,” Kristanya whispered. “There’s nothing we can do to change the course that won’t lead to the death of the Andinna. There’s no strategy Alchan can employ that is better than this one, not after all the time put into it. But that’s the risk, is it not? You have faced death before and come out on top against the odds.”

“You would know,” Mave countered, a small smile forming.

“I would,” Kristanya agreed. “You know, I don’t think there was a better Andinna to become my warrior. You are honest about it in a way many others only give lip service. Everyone fears death more than they accept it, except you. You stand there and ask me about your own potential death as if it’s another day.”

“I’m not scared of death. Why fear something I have no control over? If my death can save the lives of thousands, protect those I love, why be scared? I refused to die to the Elvasi for centuries because I had nothing to die for. My own pride kept me alive, my need to never give them what they wanted, but now, I have so much to fight for, I am willing to die for. I’m not scared of that. I’m scared of them dying and leaving me.”

“I know.”

Mave closed her eyes, thinking of everyone she had to lose, faces of those she loved and even some she didn’t. There was so much happiness waiting on the other side of this hurdle they had to overcome. If she died in the process, that was okay. As long as the war was won, she could go peacefully into the afterlife.

“You aren’t thinking about your own future,” Kristanya commented.

“What?” Mave opened her eyes and stared at the goddess.

“You’re thinking about them.” She waved a hand at nothing. “Not yourself. You have a future, too. You have husbands, who I’m certain would like to live the rest of their lives with you. I can feel two of them through you. I know they don’t want you to die, but you aren’t thinking about your own future.”

“Without them, I have no future. Without them, I only have my past, before I ever knew them. They’re the reason I get up in the morning. Without them, there’s nothing for me.” Mave had never relied on others. She spent nearly a thousand years refusing to rely on anyone. She had learned early everyone would leave her. They would either die or betray her.

The truth was, she needed her husbands. They kept her fighting. She needed Alchan because he kept her grounded. She needed Senri, who constantly reminded Mave there was a life outside of being a warrior.

“So, you are okay with dooming them to live without you but not okay with the other way around. Convention shows the females are warriors, but males die for them because the female is more important to the future. You

would really force them to live with the knowledge their wife is dead, and they failed to do their duty as males in protecting her?”

“It’s not like I can give them everything a normal wife can,” Mave snapped. “Why should I be bound by convention? A male dies for his family because the female can have children, and those are too important to lose the chance for. That’s why Kian went to war, even after Senri was pregnant. He was defending the family they built while she couldn’t.” Mave threw her arms open.

“I can’t have children, Kristanya! I can’t do anything to help the Andinna except die for them! I’m only a warrior! It’s all I have!” She didn’t care who might hear her as she roared her fury at the goddess. The aching, secret loss she suffered without ever knowing she lost it, the possible futures she could share with her husbands, taken away before she had ever met them. A chance at a different life, one full of love as she watched them raise a little thing like Kianev. A baby with one of their eyes. Something she could leave behind that wasn’t the death she brought or the fear she inspired. Something beautiful and full of hope.

Kristanya leaned back in surprise. “Ah...so we’re finally going to talk about that.”

“No, we’re *not*,” Mave growled. “There’s nothing to talk about. You told Amonora to take it away. I’m just...” she snarled. “I never wanted to be a mother. It’s not a task I think I’m particularly suited for, actually, but they would make great fathers, and I can’t give them that. Some other female will have to.”

Kristanya nodded slowly. “I was angry...and uninformed.”

It was not an apology.

“Yeah.” Mave huffed. Mave understood. She hadn’t just killed the bad gladiators, she had killed all of them. Good, bad, and everything in between, she had killed them because she had reached the point where they were all the same in her eyes. They had been the enemy—the noble ones who believed the rumors she gave up fighting, the rapists, the tricksters, the glory seekers. She had cut them down to live another day and had done so under the guise that she belonged to Shadra, the Champion of the Colosseum who was standing beside the Empress whenever Shadra needed to display her power. It was easy to see how that could color Kristanya’s perception of her before the goddess had a chance to meet her.

But it hurt and removed a future from Mave she hadn't even considered. She just missed the possibility.

"I can see what you're thinking, and I'm glad you understand."

There was a long silence as Mave tried to control her emotions before she tried to speak again. Rationally, she knew she couldn't continue screaming at Kristanya. She wanted to...oh, she *wanted* to, but Kristanya was an immortal being, born at the dawn of all things, the most powerful of the gods and the bringer of the end of the world, if she was to be believed.

Mave had a piece of her inside her own being, so she believed. There was something feral about her powers, harkening back to the rage Kristanya claimed she felt when she had first come into existence. One day, those darker feelings would take control.

So, Mave knew she could *not* yell at Kristanya and test her patience.

"My understanding doesn't change anything. I can't have children. My husbands would have to ask some other female to do that for them. I would have to be able to overcome the jealousy, and it's not fair to anyone. That's the future I get to look forward to. We're all too young to completely ignore the chance of having children. They already know something is wrong, considering I never had a fertile cycle after my first. Do you plan on fixing it?"

"I'm...undecided on the matter," Kristanya admitted. "And I couldn't. Amonora would have to."

"Then there's no reason to talk about it. Therefore, we're not talking about it," Mave said decidedly.

"Well, you're not going to talk to me about it," Kristanya said softly, looking beyond Mave at something over her shoulder.

Mave frowned at the goddess, wondering what she was talking about, then realized she hadn't been paying enough attention.

"Can they see you?" Mave asked very softly, hoping the words didn't carry.

"No," the goddess said with a smile, then disappeared from Mave's view.

Mave turned around slowly to see her husbands—all six of them. She hadn't been paying enough attention. She should have known Luykas and Mat would pick up that something was wrong and round up the entire family.

Beyond them, she saw Alchan and Varon land together. Had her powers given them a reason for concern?

“You were talking to...Kristanya,” Mat said carefully, coming closer.

“Yeah,” Mave said, wishing the goddess could be seen by others. “I probably sounded insane.”

“Just a little,” Luykas agreed.

She took a step closer to them, then looked at Alchan as he rushed forward.

“I felt your power...” he said, looking at her, then her husbands.

“Argument with Kristanya. Touchy subject,” she explained. She hadn’t told anyone what was wrong with her, but when Varon came around her husbands and stopped beside Alchan, she realized his guilty expression meant something. “You *knew*,” she whispered, the accusation a curse on her tongue. “You...”

“I had suspicions. I got confirmation from Amonora...a long time ago. When we first got back to Anden.” Varon lowered his head. “It wasn’t for me to say, so...”

“You knew she took away my ability to have children and thought it wasn’t for you to tell me?” Mave snarled, approaching him.

“Woah!” Alchan snapped, putting himself between them. “What is going on?”

“I can’t have children,” Mave said, glaring at him, hoping he stepped aside, so she could finally take her anger and heartbreak out on someone. Then she looked at her husbands and felt the pain. “I can’t have children because I upset Kristanya centuries ago without even knowing. She made Amonora take that away from me, and they never gave it back.”

The weight she had felt for seasons lifted as she laid bare the truth to the males who deserved to know. They had to know a future with her would be one without that joy. Zayden would never get to be a father again, and she knew he *loved* children. Mat, Bryn, Luykas, Emerian, and Trevan would never even have a chance, not if they stayed with her.

That was why she never told them. This wasn’t a case of waiting for her to be ready, as they all believed. This was forever. This was her life.

Trevan was the first one to her, wrapping his arms around her. He was there before she even knew her knees were weak, and her eyes were full of tears.

“It’s not supposed to hurt because I never wanted children,” she explained, clinging to him. “But it hurts so much.”

“Is it true?” she heard Luykas demand in a snarl.

“Yes,” Varon answered softly. “That which brings death into the world can’t create life. I figured long ago something was...off about it. Her body is frozen, in a sense. It’s unchanging when it comes to her fertility. When we returned to Anden, I confronted my goddess, and she told me the judgment that had been laid. I didn’t call her out because she’s much like me. We use love to quietly manipulate others. Why she listened to Kristanya isn’t something I know. But yes...yes, the goddesses did this.”

There was a crack.

“I’m fine not being a father. I don’t care if Mave ever has children, but that’s something you fucking tell someone when you figure it out. You don’t leave them to deal with it on their own,” Luykas snarled.

Mave pulled away from Trevan and looked over to see Varon on the ground with Luykas in Alchan’s arms, the king holding him back. Nevyn would probably be there any minute to respond to his lover’s pain.

“Don’t...it’s not his fault,” Mave said. “It’s...It’s not that big a deal—”

“Not that big a deal?” Mat said, glaring. “Luykas is right. We’re with you because it’s you, children or not, but Varon knew something about you he should have told you. I don’t like that our lives are something the gods can manipulate as they please without anyone telling us. You had the right to know. If he knew for so long, he should have damn well said something. Letting you find out on your own and deal with it is not what a good Andinna would do, letting you struggle with this.”

“We’re not going to leave you,” Zayden added. “I see that look in your damn eyes. You think we’re about to abandon you for a female we can have kids with.”

“No...” Only in her worst nightmares did that happen. By the looks on her male’s faces, she had nothing to worry about. Emerian was nodding at Zayden’s words. Bryn said nothing, but when she met his gaze, he crossed his arms in that “don’t even think about it” way.

Zayden continued to talk, stopping her from saying anything more.

“Then it’s whatever. You can’t have children. Fine. Fuck the dragons—”
Alchan snarled.

“And let’s move on,” Zayden finished. “You don’t need to hurt yourself over this. Alchan’s going to pop out a kid, and we’ll all be great uncles and aunt. We’ll adopt. There’s probably going to be plenty of orphans when we’re ready to raise a child. Who cares?”

Mave took a long, slow breath as she listened to him rant. Once Zayden started on something, he wouldn’t stop until he got it all out.

“I mean, fucking really? You’re out here, upset over that?” Zayden ran a hand through his hair. “Mave, a male doesn’t pick a female based on her ability to have children. That’s a blessing for later, not an immediate need. You don’t have to have children. No one here was ever going to ask you to. If you had wanted them, we would have given them to you, but...”

“He’s right,” Trevan whispered in her ear. “I never ever considered the idea.” He pushed her hair aside. “In all the years I’ve loved you, I never really thought about the children we could have. It’s not why I wanted to be with you.”

She closed her eyes and sighed.

“I...” Mave had to dig deep to admit it. Words she told Allaina so easily were hard to say to the males she wanted to spend eternity with, especially now that they knew she was incapable of fulfilling the dream. “I dream at night of you being fathers. I think about it when I hold Kianev. It’s something *I* wanted, not to be a mother, but to see you as fathers.”

As she spoke, Nevyn landed and looked down at Varon, then at the rest of them with fury in his eyes. He said nothing, though, as Varon motioned for him to be silent.

“It’s okay,” Mat said gently. “We’re okay with not becoming fathers.”

“But I’m not,” she snapped, meeting his emerald gaze. “I’m not okay with it.”

“Then we’ll find a way to fix it, gods be damned,” Luykas said as he pushed his brother off him. “Unless Varon...”

“I can’t,” Varon whispered, still on the ground. Nevyn’s eyes went wide. “I can’t fix it. Only Amonora can. If I tried to bring on Mave’s fertile cycle, it wouldn’t work.” He finally got up and brushed himself off. “We’ll go. I’m sorry. Luykas and Mat are right. I could have handled this in a better way.”

“It’s fine.” Mave didn’t want him to feel guilty. He shook his head and jumped off, Nevyn following.

Mave didn't know where to go from here. She looked around and saw Alchan.

"Sorry for the drama," she said. "I never planned for it to get out like this...or at all, actually. It wasn't even why Kristanya and I started talking."

He stared at her, his eyes narrowing.

"You can be an idiot, sister," he growled. "If you thought these males would leave you over the mean manipulation of the gods, then you're an idiot." He sighed as Luykas shoved him. "What? Every now and then, I think it's nice to have a reminder she's not perfect and is still figuring it out as an Andinna. If anyone is allowed to say it, it's me." He turned back to her. "I wish I knew what to say. I didn't know this was going on, but even if I did, I don't know what to say. We'll win this war, then we'll fix this, sister. That's all I can say." He frowned. "I'm sorry you're going through this."

Mave didn't like the attention she was getting. This was feminine and vulnerable in a way she had never experienced before. She wished Senri and Allaina were there instead of the multitude of males, especially now that she knew they were all okay. They were only upset because she was.

"Why don't we just not talk about this anymore?" Mave offered. "Please? I never wanted it to get out."

They all gave her sudden, sharp looks as if she was chastising them and how dare she do that.

"Why doesn't one of you tell me about the fight? How far is Shadra now? When can we expect her? I know it changes every day as the scouts readjust based on her speed and the terrain and..."

"We'll see her in a week," Alchan said softly, crossing his arms.

"Ah, good." She wanted to focus on the thing she could fix. She could free the Andinna. The rest of this could wait for another day.

Only a week. I might only have a week with these males, this family I built.

She knew she had to do something. She couldn't let the last week go to waste. She wanted them to know how much she loved them. She wanted to give them love that would hopefully keep them happy for centuries.

If more paths led to dying than leaving the battlefield, she needed to do everything she could to make sure they knew she loved them with her dying breath.

"Do you want us to leave?" Trevan asked softly.

“No,” she said. In fact, she wanted the opposite. “Let’s head back to camp together. We can have an early dinner and settle in for the night. There’s no reason for me to stay out here.”

Alchan was the one who raised a hand to stop them from moving.

“What were you talking to Kristanya about?” he asked.

“Nothing important.” *Only my own death and how possible it is.* “Let’s go. I’ve been walking this valley for days. I’m pretty sure I know it better than anyone now.” She looked at her husbands and shook her head. “Actually, Alchan, you go on ahead. I want to talk to my husbands.”

Alchan nodded, then jumped off alone. Rain hadn’t come with him, and no one left with him.

“Do we need to keep telling you how much we love you?” Trevan asked softly, his hand drifting over her cheek. “Because we will.”

She kissed him slowly and shook her head.

“No, just stay by my side, and I’ll know well enough how much you love me.” She took a deep breath. “Well...” *I might die in a week.* “I wanted to make an offer, not to Luykas or Mat—they’re blood bonded already—but to everyone else. I love all of you, and you just reminded me how much you love me, not that I needed the reminder, but it was nice. Any one of us could die when Shadra gets here. So, I wanted to offer...if you want a blood bond, I am willing to have it...with any of you. You don’t have to, but I want it. If we had centuries ahead of us without a war, I would wait, and I know I don’t plan on leaving any of you. So, this is me saying if you want to blood bond me, I want to blood bond with you, and let’s do it.”

Zayden was the first one to walk forward.

“Are you sure, Mave? There are six of us and one of you.”

“I’m positive,” she said with a smile.

One week with all of them connected to her if they took her up on the offer. It might be the only chance she had to experience them all with that level of connection.

Emerian came forward next. He had been surprisingly quiet during everything. He pulled a dagger out of Bryn’s belt and held it out, his expression dire.

“I said forever,” he whispered. “Remember that? You would always be my female, and I would always be your male. I know I took all the time in the world to join the family properly, but...” He looked past her and at

Trevan. “I was just waiting on my brother.” His gaze focused on her again. “So, you have me. I’ll do it right now.”

“Aye,” Bryn said softly. “And think how useful this will be durin’ the fightin’. We’ll be able to find ya, and you’ll be able to find us. We’ll be able to help each other if someone gets hurt.” They all laughed at Bryn’s practical manner.

Trevan’s arms tightened on her. “Of course,” he murmured.

Mave smiled.

They got to work—right there on the field where any of them could meet their end, Mave and her males shed the first blood. She felt each of them as the bonds formed one at a time. She watched them get the initial flood of new feelings.

“You’ll need the week to adjust to it,” Mat told them. “Mave, how are you feeling?”

She could feel all six of them. She could pick each of them out in her mind, knew them, and knew she could push them aside as if they were her powers without much worry. Her powers had taught her how to do that, and those abilities forced her to be in control of her own mind at all times.

But for a moment, she just reveled in the fact she could feel all six of them. Zayden’s back was aching for some reason, and Trevan’s heart was going so fast, she wondered if he was okay for a moment. Bryn had a cut on his hand from earlier in the day. Emerian was completely fine, but she never realized the scar of his lost eye had a small ache.

Then she pushed them down, and their pains became part of a distant awareness.

“I’m perfect,” she promised, smiling at him. “I’ll teach all of you how to put the bond aside, so it’s not so...dominating. Between me, Mat, and Luykas, maybe it won’t be an issue.”

“That would be nice,” Trevan said softly, his eyes wide. Emerian nodded beside him.

ALCHAN

Alchan woke up early that morning, too much on his mind as he dressed. Rain was already gone, but he often left early to field the problems Alchan would have to deal with. He didn't let it bother him because he couldn't. He had to compartmentalize the problems and stay focused on the big picture. Everyone else could stress about their personal lives, but he and Rain had to stay in charge of all of them. They didn't have time.

He found Rain in his meeting tent, already sending people away.

"What did they want?" he asked his husband as he sat down.

"More tents, but we're out of tents. With Leria's remaining warriors here and the warriors from Kerit, we're at capacity. We have nothing left. Everyone is going to be crammed until..."

Until some of them die in the battle.

"Yes," Alchan whispered, nodding as he looked down at the report Bryn had dropped to him before sunrise. "Is Bryn still around?"

"He went to see Mave and the males," Rain answered. "But the news there is both good and bad."

Alchan knew with a sense of foreboding what that meant.

"She was two days out yesterday," Alchan murmured, touching the scrolls Bryn had scribbled his news on. They were running out of paper, a commodity made in Kerit. Thankfully, they wouldn't need any more soon. "She'll be here tomorrow."

“Aye,” Bryn said as he walked back in. “I was tryin’ to get back before ya woke up.”

“I won’t need a report tonight,” Alchan said softly. “A lot is going to happen today, and there’s no way Shadra can change her route now. She’s coming to us. You should get some rest. I need Luykas to reach out to Shadra today and see if she will end this before the bloodshed. She won’t go for it, but I won’t *not* try.”

“I’ll let him know to head here,” Bryn promised. “Rain,” he said politely as he turned to leave again.

“Bryn, how’s the blood bond?” Rain asked, looking at the rogue with a raised eyebrow. Alchan wondered what his husband was thinking because he recognized the wishful look in Rain’s eyes.

“Good. Mave’s lucky we’re all fast learners. I mean, it’s different but good. I like knowin’ where she is all the time. Gettin’ used to her using her powers is another fun experience altogether. That’s an odd fuckin’ feelin’, but I think we’ll all be fine for the battle.”

“She shouldn’t have done it,” Alchan said softly. “But I understand why she did.”

“Aye, we all think so, too, but we weren’t goin’ to say no, ya know?” Bryn smiled at him, and Alchan couldn’t resist a small chuckle.

“Of course. Go. Today, you’re no longer master of the scouts. You’re just another warrior.”

“Aye, scouts aren’t very useful when the enemy is at the front door,” Bryn said softly before walking out.

Alchan took the chance to call Rain out the moment Bryn was gone.

“Do you want a blood bond?” he asked, meeting the sapphire eyes of his husband. Skies, he loved Rain. He loved Lily, too, for her immense caring heart, but Rain had taught him how to love and be loved. Without Rain, he would have never found the happiness he had to fight for now. So, seeing that wanting expression in Rain’s eyes meant he had to say something. He would do anything to make Rain happy.

“One day,” Rain admitted. “I would have never turned down the blood bond if you offered it, but you’ve never mentioned it one way or the other, so I decided not to bother you with it. Figured it was just something you never wanted in a relationship.”

“I...” Alchan carefully thought about his response. He had watched Rain flourish into a powerful male in his own right. The responsibility of being the Consort had fit nicely on Rain’s shoulders. Having an outlet in Alchan’s bed for his more submissive side made Rain stronger in other ways, letting his charisma make him a force to be reckoned with among the other warriors. He was personable and friendly, but tough. He made sure people knew he was just as dangerous, if not more so than Alchan. He did it without bragging or posturing, something most Andinna couldn’t do. Dominance was mostly posturing and being able to back it up.

And for all of that, Alchan was more in love with Rain than ever. It was only growing deeper and settling into something that moved past the initial passion. It was a love Alchan knew would last centuries if they had that chance.

Which made Alchan wonder why he never offered to blood bond his husband. The answer was easy to find.

“I never thought I would be with someone who wanted that with me,” he said softly, looking down at his makeshift desk and the piles of crap he had to deal with for one more day. “So, I just never thought to ask even when I did find someone because who wants to be bonded to a bedru?” He gave his husband a wry smile.

“Oh, Alchan...”

He raised his hand before Rain came to him.

“I’ve long shed those insecurities, thanks to you and Lily.”

“I hope so. And I know you’ve been busy, and there’s a lot on your mind. You don’t need to stand there and beat yourself up for not thinking about me wanting a blood bond. I’m with you all the way. And Lily, who is going to have your—”

“Our,” Alchan growled. Rain smiled.

“Our child,” he agreed softly. “But do I want a blood bond with you? Of course. Always. I’ll make you a deal. When our child is born, you and I will do it. We’ll blood bond. Date set.”

Alchan nodded. “I like that. Maybe by then, Lily...”

“Oh, of course, she will.” Rain laughed. “We have a unique, wonderful family, and I wish she was here with us.”

“It wasn’t safe,” Alchan mumbled, but he wished it, too. He wished he could hold her, tell her everything was going to be okay. Instead, he had left

her in the village with Senri and Allaina to protect her. It was the best he could do because Luykas had been right. He couldn't send her any farther away. She was three days away, yet it felt as if it was an ocean, and it would take a lifetime to cross. The only thing he had to do before both he and Rain could go back to her was to win a war that had started over eleven hundred years before.

"I know. Now, what are you planning for today?"

"I need to call the wyverns." Alchan straightened and met Rain's gaze again. "Shadra will come into the valley tomorrow, which means I need the wyverns to start moving in our direction. We might get a couple quickly, but I don't know. That's what makes this so frustrating. I don't know, and there was no way to find out before I tried it."

"Do you want me to get anyone to help?" he asked, leaning over the desk. Alchan shook his head.

"No. Luykas is already on his way here. I know Mave and I have been throwing traditions out left and right, but there's some I would like to keep. This is one of them."

"What is it? I don't think you've told me this one."

"Only the royal family by blood were allowed in the room when my grandmother called the wyverns to war, last time for a single assault to push out the initial Elvasi invasion. It's always been that way. The public knew we were special, but they didn't know the queen was the Avatar, *couldn't* know the queen was the Avatar. I've ruined that, but that doesn't mean I'm going to make a public spectacle out of the powers I was given. I don't want this to be a show. It's a quiet affair."

"Because you don't want to be a god king," Rain said, sighing. "I understand. Don't go too far in case something happens."

"I'll have Luykas," Alchan reminded his husband.

Rain bared his teeth as blue scales ran over his skin, then disappeared again.

"Luykas isn't me," Rain said in a confident hiss.

"I know, but he is my brother and has seen this before," Alchan said carefully, not wanting to upset Rain anymore. They did everything together now, except this. Alchan loved him but couldn't give him this. "My grandfathers weren't allowed in the room, you know. They were mad. I remember how one banged on the door, knowing the powers would hurt my

grandmother because she was, well...past her prime. I promise you, if anything happens to me, Luykas will be there to help me. Then he needs to deal with his own mother.”

“Take Mave and Varon. They’re also Avatars,” Rain demanded. “Please,” he added a moment later.

“Rain, you know how I feel about tradition. Nothing is going to happen. We won’t even be far from camp.”

Rain huffed and leaned back. “Yeah, I know how much you love tradition. It’s not a bad one to keep. I’m just feeling put out.”

“There’s no reason for that,” Alchan crooned as he stalked around his desk. “Certainly, can’t have that,” he murmured as he grabbed Rain and pulled him close. He leaned down and nipped his ear. “I’ll make it up to you.” He was already getting hard at the thought.

“You better,” Rain said with that airy, out-of-control way he spoke when Alchan knew he had the mutt in the palm of his hand.

“You shouldn’t tell me to come here, then force me to break this stuff up,” Luykas said, walking into the room. Alchan turned slowly to see his brother go to Alchan’s seat, claim it, and put his boots on the desk. “I don’t want to see this, but we’ve obviously got important stuff to do today. Bryn gave me the basic update. Shadra. Tomorrow.”

“Yes,” Alchan confirmed, slowly releasing his husband. “We’re going to head out of camp, and I’m going to...call the wyverns.”

Luykas dropped his feet off the desk and sighed.

“I can’t believe we’re already here. It feels like just yesterday we were just theorizing and dealing with Kenav. We knew this was coming, but...” Luykas rubbed his eyes. “Remember when our grandmother did this?”

“I do,” Alchan said gently. Luykas was sensitive about the beginning of the first war. There was no shame in it. It had been a time of strife and pain. His brother had to deal with the fact his mother was invading the land of his father. Alchan remembered the distrustful stares of the family when Luykas had come in with him to witness their grandmother. At a later meeting, the tensions had exploded. Alchan and Luykas had walked away and never looked back. Watching their grandmother summon the power as the Avatar had been one of the last times they had seen her.

“Let’s go,” Alchan ordered. Luykas got to his feet again and followed him out. The sooner this was over, the better it would be for everyone. Rain

would keep everyone happy until he and Luykas were back.

They went north, the safest direction to go, to get out of the camp. While Alchan didn't think Shadra would try, it was the least likely place an assassin would try to come into the camp.

"Are you sure you're ready to do this?" Luykas asked as they found a small cliffside out of sight of the other Andinna.

"There's no being ready, Luykas. There's only doing it and hoping it works."

"And doesn't kill you," his brother snapped.

"Grandmother was old," he fired back. "We aren't even two thousand years old. We're in our prime. I'm at my healthiest and strongest right now. If it didn't kill her, it shouldn't kill me."

"Then get on with it."

Alchan turned away from Luykas and closed his eyes. A hand touched his shoulder.

"Focus, Alchan. Reach out for the things like you but not," Larianna whispered to him.

Do you help everyone?

"Yes," she said. "The first time. There's normally no need for a second."

He exhaled, relaxing his shoulders, and pulled up the power, letting it free. It was an immense feeling to have it right where he could use it.

"Find the ones like you but not," she repeated.

He could feel the mind of his brother. He could feel the Andinna in the camp. So many warriors, all ready to give their lives for him. He could feel the village, but they all felt just like him, and there were so many he couldn't pick one out of the crowd aside from his brother, who was alone beside him.

Then he felt Kyn and realized what he needed to look for. It was primal and powerful in a way the Andinna were not. Kyn was a gentle wyvern by all accounts, and even he fought the call of Alchan's dominance and power through this magic.

Alchan continued to reach and reach, ignoring the Andinna around Anden. He found the other. There were more than he thought but less than there should have been. Once, there had been wyverns all over Anden.

Now, they were spread out in pockets around the nation, growing more common the farther north he could feel.

“Now, call them,” Larianna ordered.

Alchan felt overwhelmed as he tried to focus on the wyverns, then felt warmth on his lip.

Come. Fight for me.

He felt a pushback. The wyverns were wild and didn't want to be brought to order. And now he understood why this power was too much. He held on to the connection because if he lost it, he would prove himself unworthy of them.

Fight for me. Fight for your kin.

No, was their response.

He went to a knee, feeling it crack against the hard earth. The earth. The wyverns were wild beasts and didn't much care for the lives of Andinna, aside from begrudging respect and ability to live side by side, but they would fight for the earth. Wyverns were territorial. He realized what he needed to say.

Please. We need you. We have a chance. Fight under the black wings of Kristanya and in the light of Larianna. Fight for Anden. Protect the land we both call home.

The wyverns took notice. Anden was special, and they had to protect Anden.

There are invaders in the mountains coming to take our territory. Come fight with the Andinna, so we may all have a home. I, the ruler of your cousins and the King of Anden, beg this of you. Come and fight with me.

Then he felt it. They started to move. They would fight for Anden.

They were coming.

He released the power and gasped, grabbing his chest.

“Alchan!” Luykas rushed to him. “Fuck, you're bleeding out of your ears.”

Alchan felt his heart ache painfully but knew he wouldn't die this day. He reached out and touched his face where something wet was pouring down. His nose was bleeding as well.

“They didn't want to come,” Alchan explained, groaning as his head began to throb. “Apparently, I don't order the wyverns to do anything. As Avatar, the power just gives me the ability to communicate the need to

them. They had to decide on their own if they wanted to fight to protect Anden.”

“And you just had to hold on until they made that decision?” Luykas helped him to his feet. Alchan swayed, but didn’t fall as Luykas kept him upright. “Let’s get you to a healer and see if there’s any damage that needs to be repaired. The blood in your ears bothers me.”

“My head is killing me,” he mumbled, the words slurring as he spoke now. “Healer sounds good.”

“Shit,” Luykas snapped.

Alchan’s vision went dark.

LUYKAS

Luykas picked up his brother. They were both big males, which was good and bad for Luykas. He was just strong enough to carry his brother, thanks to his own size, but his brother was fucking heavy. He yanked on the blood bond, trying to get Mave's attention as he positioned Alchan into a position easier to carry and fly with. His brother's nose and ears were still bleeding, which didn't seem like a good sign. Normally, when people started bleeding from those spots, they were in for a troubling healing sleep if it didn't kill them.

He got into the air with a struggle and started flying back for camp. As he drew closer, he saw Kyn in the air with Andinna around him.

"It's Alchan!" he yelled as they got closer. "He needs a healer!"

Kyn and Trevan went underneath him. "Lower him down. We can carry him easier!"

Luykas maneuvered carefully, grateful when Mave and Mat got to him and helped move arms and legs and wings around. Eventually, they had Alchan in front of Trevan, where he could hold Alchan still, then it was a mad dash back into the camp.

"He can't go to the healers. They need to come to him," Luykas explained as they flew fast over the camp, Luykas purposefully leading them to Alchan's private tent. "He's the king, and he can't be seen vulnerable."

"What happened?" Mave asked, growling. "I felt his power. What—"

“Let’s get him in first,” Luykas said as he landed. He helped Trevan get Alchan down. Bryn was already missing, and Emerian rushed to hold the tent flaps open for him. Mat ran off next.

As Luykas laid his brother down, he didn’t give himself time to wonder, cleaning Alchan as Bryn ran in with three healers on his tail. They crowded around and started doing their thing. A moment later, Mat ushered Rain in, who stumbled to a stop to stare at his husband in terror.

“I knew something was going to happen!” Rain snarled, blue scales showing up. Mave was suddenly there, her arms around him, holding the Consort tightly.

“He’ll be okay,” she promised, her lips touching the side of his head as she clung to him. “He’ll be fine, Rain. Just wait and see.”

“Why don’t we go outside and talk—” Luykas stood up and went to them, but Rain pulled away.

“I knew what he was doing. I could feel it. Explain it to them.” Rain jerked his head at the crowd now standing at the tent flaps. His entire family was there, waiting on him and Mave to come out.

“Let’s go,” he said softly. He made his way through them and back into the sun. When he looked at the males of his family, then Mave, he could see the expectation on their faces. “He called the wyverns,” he told them simply. “And it took more out of him than we expected. Apparently, he can’t just out dominate them, so it took longer than expected.”

“Shit,” Mat mumbled, looking toward the tent.

“Is he going to be okay by tomorrow?” Emerian asked, looking worried as he checked out others passing by. Luykas didn’t like the crowd, either.

“You know the news then?” Luykas sighed.

“Yeah, I told ‘em, obviously,” Bryn said with a shrug. “He has a point. Is ya brother goin’ to be okay tomorrow?”

“We’ll find out when the healers are done,” Luykas said softly. He wanted his brother up and at full power by the time Shadra made her way into the valley. Everything would wait on Alchan, but he knew his brother. If everyone else was ready to go, Alchan would fight on one leg if he had to, a surefire way to get himself killed, but Luykas knew if it meant the win for the Andinna, Alchan would do it.

They waited silently, pushing others to keep moving. Problems could wait. Complaints to be made to the king were pointless. None of it

mattered.

“At least Seanev isn’t here to fret over him,” Mave said, sighing. “You know, he didn’t give me any trouble over the Avatar thing. He just quietly accepted it and moved on.”

“He expected it from you,” Luykas said with a chuckle. “You keep surprising him, and he’s stopped being surprised. I’m glad we left him in the village, though.” It had happened quietly. Luykas and Alchan had approached him, and he had agreed. He would only be getting himself killed, so he was defending the village, just in case. This time, if they failed, he would be helping get people out. He’d done it once before and saved over two thousand Andinna. They trusted him to do it again.

“Yeah, he couldn’t fight down here with one arm,” she agreed.

It was meaningless conversation to pass the time. Eventually, a healer came out.

“We’re going to stay with him on rotation,” the healer explained to him and Mave, looking nervously back and forth. “But we think he’s just fallen into a healing sleep, and there’s no lasting damage done to his mind.”

Sagging, Luykas relaxed for the first time since he had left with his brother. Zayden caught him, rubbing his back. Mave leaned into Emerian and Mat, her reaction not as noticeable. He couldn’t live without Alchan. They had gone through too damn much. He couldn’t imagine a world without Alchan, even if they had both finally found their families.

“Well, with that done,” Luykas said, pushing his hair back. “I guess I have to get to work. He’ll be pissed if I don’t reach out to Shadra and report to him on it tomorrow.”

“Really? You’re going to put yourself into a healing sleep, too?” Mave glared at him. “You’ll do it in the tent, so we can keep an eye on you.”

“I will,” he promised. There was no reason not to. He was going to go to her.

“You want to do this right now?” Mave crossed her arms. “Then come on. Might as well before I find some way to disable you and keep you from doing it.”

Luykas looked at the healer, who gave him nothing more on Alchan’s state, then at the males of the mayara. Five mouths stayed firmly shut, refusing to shove their tails in their mouths. Then he looked at Mave, who glared at him for a moment, then started walking.

He followed her like a hatchling wyvern wanting scraps.

“Love, you know I have to do this,” he said as they entered their family tent. It had different rooms, one of the most complex tents they had in the camp. There was no single tent that would fit all of them, so they split the mayara in half and let Mave pick a room to stay in every night. She switched back and forth.

“I do. Get to it,” she said, taking a seat. “Just know, I think the timing is bad, and I hate it.”

Mat stuck his head inside, but no one else followed them.

“We’re going to hang back and help Rain with the camp,” he explained.

“Good luck,” Luykas said, swallowing as his wife kept her cool eyes on him. “Mave...”

“I hate her and don’t think she’s worth the time or blood you’re going to spend on this, but you and Alchan want it, so I’m going to stay right here. Someone has to take care of you.”

“You know that feeling you hate when I do this? It’s the same feeling we have when you use your powers,” he said as he pulled out his dagger. “We do what we have to.”

She said nothing. Was this trip probably pointless? Yes. Did it need to be done? Yes. Shadra wouldn’t take the bait, but he could at least cause a little chaos and maybe even see something Shadra wouldn’t want him to. It was a complicated game. His mother hadn’t yet tried to project to him, but he figured she would. It just showed him how caught up she was in her own plans not to think of it. He needed to take advantage of it.

He moved through the ritual quickly and sent himself to her, focusing on their blood connection as mother and son. He found himself in a luxurious tent, full of furniture he didn’t have in the Andinna camp. He looked around the room quickly and knew there was nothing useful to see.

Damn. Looks like this a pointless endeavor. This is her private quarters, and she keeps everything well hidden in case others come in.

“Of course,” she said, turning to him with a glass of wine in her hand. She wore a dress and plate armor, ready to go to war and looking beautiful while doing it. “To what do I owe this *pleasure*?”

“I’ve come to beseech you to stop your advance on the Andinna forces,” Luykas said as he met her blue gaze. “We don’t need to destroy our people

over this. You can still turn around and let the Andinna free without the loss of life.”

“You’re smarter than that.” She smiled and shook her head. “You’re saying your brother’s words. He wants this to stop, but you know I can’t and won’t stop. You’ve always known, or you would have tried to visit me the moment I joined my forces. How did you like my gift last year?”

“I cut his wings off and hung him up for everyone to see before I let a dear friend cut his head off,” Luykas said, keeping his face schooled and his emotions in check.

“I was truly amazed it took you so long to catch him,” she said, sipping on her wine. “I expected more from you. I guess my firstborn isn’t as great as I once thought he was.”

“I thought I was dead to you,” Luykas countered. “Your heir died under the blades of the Champion, remember? But if I am still your son, then maybe I should call her your daughter-in-law.”

Shadra’s eyes narrowed, and he knew he pricked something in her pride, which was exactly what she was trying to do to him.

“I used to love you,” she hissed. “I don’t know how I ever convinced myself you were a worthy son. Debasing yourself with her.”

“You should remember I’m the second son of yours who has done so,” he said very softly, stepping closer and leaning down to her level. “At least I was man enough to ask if she wanted it. Apparently, you didn’t teach Lothen to respect women or females as you taught me.”

Shadra slowly put her wine down. Luykas knew if he was solid, she would slap him. Without hesitation, she would put him in his place.

“Well, at least you have a daughter. She won’t be debasing herself with any Andinna any time soon. You would have raised her even better than you raised your sons. You’ll make sure she’s married off to some nice—”

“If you have nothing important to say, you should leave,” she snapped. “There is no stopping the battle to come. There is no avoiding it. Whatever love was once between us is dead. You could have had the world at your feet, boy. You threw your future away as surely as you threw me aside because you wanted to know your *father*. Look at how well that turned out. He was a drunkard and an abuser, but that’s better than how this is going to turn out for you. I have over twenty-five thousand soldiers, Luykas. You have what? Five thousand Andinna? Maybe eight? A couple of wyverns

after that.” Shadra shook her head, and her expression grew sad. “I could have given you the world, and this is what you decided. You could have come to me when the first war started, but now, I’ll have to find your body on the battlefield. It wasn’t supposed to go this way, but this is what you decided, not me.”

“You didn’t have to do any of this,” he reminded her. They’d had this argument before, but this would be the last time.

She picked up her wine again and took a slow drink, then pretended as if he wasn’t there. Her profile was as beautiful, withdrawn, and cold as it had always been. Shadra, the mother, could be loving and wonderful, so long as her children were exactly what she wanted them to be. That was the problem she had always had, the thing that had given him the urge to see Anden and meet the Andinna. Her love had always been conditional.

“She loves me unconditionally,” he said softly. “That’s why I’ll never be the son you want me to be.”

“Excuse me?” Shadra raised an eyebrow.

“You’ve only ever loved me if I did what you wanted, behaved how you thought was acceptable. Some days, I was too Andinna for you to love. Some days, I was the perfect Elvasi son, but you couldn’t bring yourself to feel anything. But Mave? She loves me, even when I infuriate her, even when I accidentally hurt her. She’s never taken away her love when I’ve disappointed her or made a fool of myself. She’s never looked at me and wondered if I could be useful. She’s just loved me for who I am, faults and all, mutt or not, half-Elvasi and half-Andinna. It doesn’t matter to her which one comes through at any moment. Even being *your son* didn’t stop her from loving me.”

Luykas stared at his mother one last time, memorizing her face and the blank expression. She had no idea how much his words meant. She would never understand that conditional love wasn’t real love. He didn’t think she truly understood the meaning of the word.

“And it’s not just her. It’s Alchan, Matesh, and Rain...all of them. That’s why I have and will always choose them over you. Always.”

There was nothing else to do or say. He sent himself home and sighed as he found himself back in his tent. The first thing he did was reach for Mave and practically fell on her. She pulled him into her lap and rubbed his head.

“How did it go?” she asked softly. The fury was gone. “I know something is hurting you.”

“I’m feeling heartbroken over having a mother who could never love me,” he admitted, ashamed that this could still come back and hurt him. He hadn’t been in her life in hundreds of years, and she hadn’t truly been in his, yet it was still painful. “Why does it still hurt?”

“She’s your mother, and she was supposed to love you,” Mave whispered. “It’s okay you still hurt. Just know, I’ll always love you. I can’t replace a mother, but I love you.”

“I know,” he mumbled, closing his eyes. If there was one thing he was completely confident in, it was her. She didn’t know how to stop feeling now. She had gone from cold and on guard when they had met to the most passionate person he knew.

He let the exhaustion of the magic take him, knowing she would never leave him.

MAVE

Mave held him for most of the day, her heart pounding as she felt his deep emotional pain, even as he slept. She had never had a mother until recent years. Mave's only memory of Kelsiana was the day she died. Senri had come into her life in adulthood and offered a pure love Mave couldn't resist.

Luykas had a mother who had raised him, then betrayed him. Mave couldn't imagine how deeply that continued to cut. All she knew was she would always hold him when it felt raw. Even if it was Shadra, an easy person to hate, that bitch had once been his mother. Once, Luykas had believed his mother loved him. Before invasions and wars, before betrayals and slavery, he had once believed in the fact his mother loved him.

Mave tried to find a way to relate that deep cut on his soul to her own life.

He stirred on her lap, and she watched his gold eyes open.

"It's not even dinner time," she murmured, playing with his hand and massaging his scalp.

"I guess I only needed a nap," he whispered, pressing his face to her lower abdomen. "Thank you for staying with me."

"I don't ever intend to leave," she repeated.

"She'll be here tomorrow."

She blinked, wondering why they were going to talk about her.

"I realized I didn't tell you what I learned," he said, groaning as he pushed himself up to his knees. She watched as he went from a wounded

man to a warrior in a heartbeat. “She’s coming tomorrow. We need to confirm Bryn’s reports to Alchan and Rain and the others—”

“Alchan is still asleep,” she said, reaching for him. She grabbed his shoulder and brought them chest to chest. “But we can tell Rain and our family. They’ll know what to do. You should still be resting.”

“I don’t plan on resting,” he said. She helped him to his feet as she stood. He was being stubborn. “We’ll be fighting in days, maybe even the day after tomorrow. It’s going to move fast on us now.”

“I know,” she whispered, understanding exactly what was to come. She waited for him to make the first step, then followed him out, keeping a close eye on him.

They went to the makeshift war room and found Rain sighing over papers.

“Bryn was right. She’ll be here tomorrow. She’s not going to stand down,” Luykas said as they walked in. “We will fight.”

“I’ll tell Alchan the moment he wakes up,” Rain promised. “Call in the unit commanders. They’ll need to make final preparations. We also need to pull back everyone from the valley and make sure they don’t go down there again.”

Mave tugged on her blood bonds with her males, bringing them all to her. They looked at her, then saw Luykas on his feet, visibly relaxing, seeing he was okay.

Rain quickly gave the orders, standing in as proxy for Alchan. He managed well, but Mave knew it was because he was talking to males who raised him.

“Good job,” she whispered to him as her mayara ran out to spread the word.

“How are you feeling?” he asked as they stood in the empty tent. “You’re a big part of the plan.”

“I’m focused,” she answered honestly. “I know what I have to do. I’ve long accepted that.”

“Mave?” Rain frowned at her. He probably caught the tone she was using. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah.” She shrugged, taking the conversation casually. She didn’t want them to start worrying, but she could feel the oppressive energy in the air. Very soon, so many would be dead—Andinna, Elvasi, wyverns...so many.

Possibly her.

The fact of the matter was her powers tried to kill her. Not because Kristanya was malicious, but Kristanya had been right. Her mortal body wasn't the perfect vessel for the powers of the oldest goddess. And it wasn't only her. Alchan used a power every queen of Anden had before him, and it put him into a healing sleep as he bled from his ears. These were dangerous powers, and she was going to use them until her body fell apart because she had to win the war, regardless of her own safety. That was the sacrifice warriors made every time they picked up a sword. She knew it was just as likely someone got a lucky shot with an arrow as it was for her to kill herself while fighting.

If she told Rain, she would never know peace. He would do everything in his power to keep her alive, which included telling her husbands, who would fly with her the entire battle when it was dangerous for them. She wanted them with Alchan in the charge, where it would be safer.

Not that it's going to be safe. Safer is the best I can do.

Unit commanders walked in, verified with Rain, and talks began, ironing out plans they had been talking about for months.

Mave didn't listen. None of it mattered to her. She would be the first into battle, alone and powerful. The wyverns would follow her if Alchan could manage them. It would be chaos after that.

Dinner was brought by Bryn, Trevan, and Emerian. She ate in silence while they talked to the unit commanders with Rain, completely focused on how to win the war.

She retreated slowly, letting her powers come up and shelter her, hiding her emotions from them. It made Mat look at her curiously, but he was pulled back into the conversation.

For a moment, the overwhelming ending she was facing made her panic. She crushed that awful sensation and stood.

"I'm going for a walk," she said softly. She left them there and headed for the cliffside, as she had for days. Her wandering feet always took her to the valley.

Once she was on the edge, she closed her eyes and focused on Alchan, knowing he was alive. His powers felt weak, his light in her mind a little dimmer, but that was because he overexerted himself. He was alive, and that was all that mattered at that moment.

“Alchan. You’re asleep right now, and you probably won’t hear this, but I felt you need to know. I need to tell someone and know you’re the only one who won’t stop me. I think I’m going to die. I feel it, thick in the air. I won’t stop fighting until the battle is over and victory is ours. We both know what that could mean.” She took a deep breath and sighed. *“I’m not afraid, but maybe if you do remember this, you can tell my husbands I went into this knowing they couldn’t save me and that it’s okay. The years of freedom you all have given me have been a blessing I never thought I would get. You’ve opened my world up and gave me a path to walk on, and for that, I’m okay with fighting until my death. In the end, I’m just another warrior, and this is what we do. We fight and fight and fight. Only the lucky ones get to grow old, right?”*

Once the sun was down, she had a plan. Her husbands didn’t know it, but she wanted to give them something as a goodbye. With Shadra’s arrival looming, she wanted one night with all of them. They hadn’t done that yet. Trevan was still so new and still trying to grow comfortable.

She went back to their tent, beating them there. She reached into her chest and found the dress her mother gave her. Mave had brought it as a reminder of Senri, but tonight, she was going to make other memories with the slinky, revealing Andinna dress. She slowly dropped her armor. Tonight, she didn’t want to be a warrior. She wanted to be a wife who made her husbands’ mouths water. She wanted to do something new and exciting while she still had the chance.

I can survive a day of soreness. We won’t be attacking tomorrow.

She slipped into the dress, tying it at the back of her neck, then found the jewelry Luykas had bought her ages ago. She decorated every part of herself, trying not to go overboard by remembering how Senri and Allaina did it when they dressed up. Allaina did it more than any female she had ever met. She was a real beauty, and Mave wanted to channel that for her husbands tonight. They would like it, and she knew she would be pleased with the results.

It was a nice goodbye gift.

She wanted to feel alive, and this seemed like a damn good way to do it.

“Hey, Mave—”

She turned to see Trevan stopped in the door flap, his mouth open.

“Where are the others?” she asked softly, crossing her arms as she grew self-conscious under his surprised stare.

“They’re...” He pointed without direction at something not in the tent. “I was...” He blinked twice. “You’re...”

“Can you form a sentence?” she teased as she took a step closer to him. Her mouth felt dry as he also came close.

“Maybe,” he mumbled, reaching out to touch her hip. “You...you look beautiful.”

“Thank you,” she whispered, watching his pale gold eyes as they trailed up and down her body. “I figured...with Shadra arriving tomorrow...we could have a night with all of us, and...”

He nodded but didn’t snap out of his daze.

“Trevan, what’s taking so long? We need Kyn to light the bonfire,” Zayden called.

“Is he going to get her? What’s got him stuck in there?” Mat said. She heard them walking as drums started up in the camp, loud thumping matching her heartbeat. The camp was apparently going to party before they faced death. It would help put everyone in the right headspace for the fight to come, but she didn’t need it. She hoped her males were going to be okay missing it.

“Trevan.” Zayden stormed in and looked around their newest member of the family, his face morphing into the surprise as well. “Well, well,” he crooned after a moment. “Is there a reason for this, Mave?”

Before she could answer, Trevan jumped into action. Wrapping an arm around her waist, he claimed her mouth as his body pressed against hers.

She tugged hard on the blood bonds, harder even than she had before. Zayden groaned next to her and Trevan.

“We’re doing this, huh?” Zayden huffed and started throwing his clothes off as Trevan broke the kiss.

“Yes,” she said, her breathing a little erratic.

It didn’t take long for Mat to come in, giving an arrogant smirk over Trevan’s shoulder.

“I see,” he murmured.

Bryn, Emerian, and Luykas were close behind him.

“Oh.” Luykas looked around. “Oh, yes, I like this plan.”

Mave laughed as Trevan refused to let her go. It only took moments for them to be the only ones with clothing on.

“I think our wife just committed the fastest seduction in Andinna history,” Mat teased as he moved behind her. His fingers trailed over her bare back. “I remember the first time I saw you in a dress like this. This time is much better.”

“I’m wondering what would have been faster. This dress or just getting naked,” she replied, goosebumps breaking out as his fingers made little patterns on her skin.

“This feels more special,” he whispered, kissing her bare shoulder. “The tatua on your back is beautiful. So, I need to ask. What did we do to deserve this?”

She didn’t answer as she started to undress Trevan, keeping her hands busy.

“She’s coming, and I wanted a night for all of us,” she explained once again. “And we’ve never done this, and I’ve never worn this...I wanted to take the chance.”

Someone groaned in the background, and if she knew her husbands as well as she thought she did, it was Zayden.

Trevan was finally naked in front of her, and she stayed focused on him as Mat rubbed her ass. She kissed her hero softly. Focusing on him was her best bet. He’d found her first, and he was the one she wanted the most comfortable.

His grip on her hips grew tighter, and his cock pressed against her, straining with need. Mat pulled her dress up slowly from behind.

“We can leave this on,” he growled in her ear.

“Let’s hope it survives,” Luykas muttered.,

She wanted to laugh at his dry humor, but she was caught in a moan as Trevan’s hand slid between her legs, testing and careful as he always was.

“Relax,” Bryn ordered. “No one here is judgin’ ya performance.”

Trevan’s face heated next to hers, and she continued to kiss him. Mat’s hands were warm on her back, massaging to remove any stiffness, then explored the curves of her ass.

She normally had them in her dark room, but standing in the middle of the room in the ridiculous dress and the jewelry made her the center of attention in a way she had never been before. She was on the spot, firelight

glowing through the tent. It was sexually charged and uncomfortable at the same time. She liked it.

She *loved* it.

Never in her life had Mave felt more desired as she brought six handsome and beautiful males to their knees, waiting on her to take them.

Trevan realized, sharply inhaling as he sank two fingers into her, his thumb on her clit. He moved his free hand to the back of her head, holding her lips to his, capturing every sound she made. Mat held her from behind, keeping her on her feet. Trevan thrust those fingers into her with force as she reacted to him, her muscles tightening.

“Please,” she whispered. “More.”

He pulled them out and guided her to the floor, laid on his back, and helped her straddle him. Mat stayed behind her. She heard someone whispering, but her world was focused on Trevan’s cock pressing against her entrance. She slid down on him, letting their moans override the conversation. Once he was fully seated, she paused, enjoying the sensation.

She felt Mat again, his hand on her belly, his cock pressing against her ass. It was slick with oil they had brought into the bedroom. Sometimes, things got a little wild when that oil was brought out.

“Remember what we talked about?” he asked very softly. “You want something new tonight. It’s the perfect time to try.”

“Yes,” she answered. She had never done both before. It was a loss of control she didn’t normally allow, but tonight, she was an object of desire, and if Mat wanted it, she wanted it. She wanted all of them.

She *needed* all of them.

Mat pushed into her, and Trevan groaned, his back arching as Mave gasped for air, the mix of pain and pleasure bringing stars to her eyes.

“Trevan, don’t move,” Mat ordered.

“Fuck,” the male underneath her groaned.

Mat began to move first, taking her slowly and as gently as he could. Her body was on fire as he took her from behind. Her dress was at her waist, the fabric pooling around her and Trevan. He leaned up just enough to take a nipple into his mouth and nipped it.

Mat took her response as encouragement, moving harder and thrusting into her with more force, groaning in exquisite agony behind her.

“Fuck, I’m not going to last,” he groaned. His thrusts grew erratic as he leaned over her and Trevan, claiming her hard. She grabbed onto Trevan, screaming as the pounding threatened to break her in half.

Then he broke, finishing inside of her. The moment he went over the edge, Trevan grabbed her hips, lifting her a little, and began to thrust upward. Mat slid out of her, but he was quickly replaced, Zayden’s thick arms wrapping around her, sliding in where Mat had left. She gave a combination of a scream and whimper.

“You’re beautiful,” he murmured in her ear as Trevan continued to force her to the peak. “Absolutely beautiful.”

She shattered as her orgasm claimed her and brought Trevan with her. She had no time to regain her own mind as Zayden pulled her back to his chest, keeping his arms wrapped tightly around her. Their wings hit each other, and her tail was crammed between them. It didn’t matter. All she could think about was how he filled her after Trevan slid out of her. They weren’t going to give her a moment to rest.

Bryn came forward and touched her lips.

“May I?” he asked softly.

She nodded and let him slide the head of his cock into her mouth. As she licked, Zayden began to move again. Bryn’s hand wound into her hair, and he groaned as he pushed deeper into her mouth.

For years, they had let her slowly explore her sexuality. Things she had never wanted became things she trusted them with—this was one of them. It had taken her a long time to finally take one of them into her mouth after everything she had gone through. It was still rare, even though it was one of Bryn’s favorite things. With him, it didn’t seem awful. In fact, she loved the control she still had in the position. With Zayden taking her from behind, she knew she had Bryn in her complete control.

She grabbed onto his thighs, her own legs shaking as Zayden took her. Bryn fucked her mouth as thoroughly as Zayden did her ass.

Bryn finished first as her tongue swirled around the head of his cock. He groaned and tried to pull out, but she held him. She didn’t catch it all, not nearly experienced enough, but she gave it her best effort, knowing this might be her last chance to give him this.

He pushed her hair off her face and looked down into her eyes, holding her gaze as Zayden slammed into her without an ounce of mercy. Zayden

groaned, and his body jerked once he was done, filling her, just as Mat had.

Bryn released her, and Zayden carefully helped her lay down as they both panted. Once she was on her back, Zayden kissed her long and hard, then moved for Emerian to claim her next.

She rubbed his cock as he got into position, helping guide him. He surged into her and was rough as Emerian was so damn good at. He didn't know restraint when they were together. Putting his hands over her shoulders, he used them to lock her in place. She wrapped her legs around his waist and rolled them over so she was on top again. He growled, and she growled in return, loving the challenge he gave her.

Luykas reached out and grabbed her hair, pulling her head back to get to her ear, as Emerian thrust into her.

"If you try that with me, I'll make sure you remember it," he warned, his cock hard against her as she bounced on Emerian. The words and Emerian underneath her took her to another orgasm. Emerian didn't stop, though, his grip bruising hard on her hips as he held her and took her. Luykas' breath was ragged in her ear as she cried out from the pounding she took from Emerian.

When Emerian finally filled her, Luykas picked her up off him and dumped her on her back. She knew when he was feeling dominant and tonight was one of those nights. She was grateful he waited to be last because although she had little energy, she had a lot of fight. She kicked out a leg and planted it on his chest, stopping him from coming closer. A chorus of laughter and ohs filled the tent.

"Mave, you don't want to pick that fight with that one," Mat warned, sounding amused and tired.

"Yes, I do," she taunted, smiling viciously at Luykas, who looked offended by her foot. "He promised something I would remember. I want this to be memorable."

"Really?" he asked softly. He grabbed her ankle, so she kicked out her other leg to break his hold by hitting his elbow, then tried to scramble away, excitement lighting her blood, her heart suddenly racing as she crawled. She played this game with Zayden and Mat. They were the best ones at it. Emerian and Bryn were always a touch too submissive, and Trevan was probably confused by the rough ritual.

She had never played with Luykas this way.

He grabbed her ankles and pulled her to her belly and took her knees out from under her, ending her mad crawl to escape. She clamped her thighs together as he held her down and moved over her body.

“Open them,” he growled down at her.

She said two words she shouldn't have, but her dominant nature didn't bend so easily. She wanted him unrestrained. He'd misplayed by telling her not to try. It had been a dare. Now, she was giving him one.

“Make me.”

His pained growl echoed in the tent. She could feel the energy of the space, her other husbands at attention once again as they watched. Whatever exhaustion they had was being burned away by the two most dominant Andinna in the room, going to war over who was in charge at this moment.

Luykas forced a knee between her legs. She bucked and nearly knocked him off. He grabbed her wrists and forced them down. She tried to roll over, fighting with wings and tails to get there.

“I'll make them hold you down for me,” he hissed.

“That would be cheating, and you're not a cheater.”

He forced his second knee between her legs.

“Females,” he growled in the most aggrieved way she could imagine. They both knew she wanted him and was willing. She wanted him to work for it.

In a smooth movement, he pushed her legs farther open with his knees and slid down to get into the right position to take her. With his leverage, he slammed into her, using his body weight to keep her from getting away again.

He was the roughest. He claimed her, winning the little game she started. Adjusting his grip on her wrists, he grabbed both with one hand, then wrapped his free hand on her jaw, easily holding her in place.

He pounded into her as she was locked still for him. She adjusted her hips, a reward for his victory, angling them so he could go deeper. Once she did that, he released her wrists and braced himself on his elbow. She clung to the furs and screamed in pleasure as he fucked her senseless. Fast and brutal, she was unable to hold off her final orgasm. As it rolled through her, he roared and shoved his entire length into her, moving her with its power and came inside her.

There was a moment of stillness and silence before he pulled out and fell to the floor beside her.

She groaned as she curled into him.

“That was better than the bonfire,” Zayden whispered.

Her eyes drifted closed as laughter filled the tent. She didn’t worry about cleaning up. She knew her males would take care of it.

She would hold this night in her heart for the rest of her life—no matter how long it was or how little time she potentially had left.

MAVE

When Mave woke up, there was a terrible hush over the camp. She wasn't alone, but many of her males were already up and preparing themselves, their expressions solemn.

"We were going to get you up once we were done," Mat explained, seeing her open eyes.

Mave sat up slowly, her body sore but her mind sharp. The overwhelming feeling in the air drove her to ignore her body. She didn't let stiffness and the aftermath of pleasure stop her from rising to her feet and beginning the day. She was clean, something she knew she had her husbands to thank for. It meant she didn't need to make a trip to the stream and could get right to work.

"How do you feel?" Trevan asked, reaching for her. He had no hesitation touching her as she grabbed her leather.

"Good," she answered simply before kissing his cheek. "Thank you for last night." The thank you to him was the most important, for he was the one who had pushed beyond his own boundaries for her. Still so new to the family, to Andinna, and to his own changes, he'd done something great for her last night.

"If you ever want a repeat, just let me know," he said with a sensual smile that made her heart squeeze painfully.

I hope we have that chance.

"I will," she promised. She reached out and slapped Mat's ass. "You, too."

“I’ll pass the ‘thank you’ around,” he said with a chuckle as he looked over his shoulder at her. “Not that you need to say it.”

She nodded and started getting dressed. Trevan and Mat helped her once they were done with their last buckles and buttons. She never needed the help, but it was a ritual. Andinna males prepared their females, knowing she would lead them through the day, the battle, and even life. She was the center, and they liked to service, so Mave never denied them unless time was short. It was, in an ethereal sense, but today, she wanted them to have this.

“Where are the others?” she asked. Mat launched into the morning explanation as every one of her husbands did when she asked about the rest of them. They were growing too good at knowing where all the others were. She could feel them in her bonds, but that only told her where they were in relation to her, not always what they were doing.

“Luykas went to Alchan. He woke up in the middle of the night, and Rain came here, but we sent Luykas instead of you. Bryn went to talk to his scouts. He’s putting them with the archers since that’s what most of them train the most for hunting on their trips. Emerian is with Zayden, yelling at someone about getting in line and being prepared. He’s good at it. Zayden’s a known entity, but people are wary of the one-eyed husband when he gets into a mood.”

“He does have those moods.” Mave sighed. “So, you two were left on wife-duty.”

“It’s my favorite,” Mat murmured.

“It’s the most satisfying,” Trevan agreed, tightening her belt, his fingers lingering on an exposed bit of skin, then tugged her chest armor down to cover it. “I really have nothing else to do, so it wasn’t hard to convince everyone to let me stay here with you.”

“Lucky bastard,” Mat mumbled.

The two males began to jostle as they finished helping her. It was beautiful to see—her first husband and her last, her typical Andinna male and her strange one, whose place in their culture was blessed by the gods.

They were still shoving at each other as Mave led them out of the tent and breathed in the stale morning air. Dew still clung to the grass, even in its trampled state. They walked to the war room and found Alchan leaning on the table, with Rain and Luykas flanking him.

“Good morning.” She went to a coffee pot, taking a cup for herself, then leaned on the table. It wasn’t hot, but hot coffee in camp was a gift, not a guarantee. “She arrives today.”

“Not going to ask how I am?” Alchan raised an eyebrow.

“You seem well enough,” she replied, smiling behind her stolen mug.

“Heartless, but yes, I am fine. The healing sleep did its job.” He picked up a scroll, then dropped it. “The Elvasi started marching at night. They’ll be here earlier in the day than I would have wanted. They’ll use the day to settle into the valley and prepare.”

“And we’re waiting on wyverns,” she said softly, staring him down, bold and unafraid. She wanted to test him, see if he really was okay.

“We are.” He didn’t falter under her stare, and she knew he would be ready to fight. She would have done her damndest to keep him off the battlefield if he was anything less. His eyes narrowed after a moment, and a look crossed over his face. “Are you okay?”

“Perfect,” she answered, then broke the stare. “What’s the plan for today?”

“We wait,” he answered.

She sighed. She was fucking tired of waiting and needed something to *do*. After listening for a little while longer, she left, leaving Mat and Trevan to help their king. The air was electric with the anxious energy of a coming battle, but she paid attention to the feeling underneath it—the somberness of coming death. As the sun lit up the sky, there was a darkness in the camp. It had always been there, growing steadily as an army marched closer. It was probably in every war camp, in the village, but she had always been blind to it. She had always been taken by the electric feeling and let it fuel her. This new feeling in the air, though, beckoned her. It was part of her, and she could do something with it.

Mave felt the urge not to go to the cliffside today but to handle something else. The cliffside was full of females with drums, ready to ring in the first sight of the Elvasi army. Mave didn’t feel it was the right place for her today. She went through the camp, looking for the pair in black robes.

She found them with the healers, sitting alone on chests, other Andinna giving them strange looks. She stopped and watched as one Andinna finally approached them and went to his knees. They pulled out a medallion with

the symbol of Kristanya and offered a prayer to the warrior. When the warrior walked away, he seemed lighter.

“Is there any way I can help?” she asked them. “You’re offering prayers to those who want them before they go into battle, aren’t you? People scared of death.”

“Not all of them are scared,” Tanev answered. “Some just want to make peace because they believe it might reunite them with their lost family. Some ask for power in the coming fight to return to those they love and the responsibilities they have at home.”

“Can I help?” she asked, kneeling before them. She wasn’t nice to these priests, but this was something she could help them with. As war loomed, she wanted to help them. “Is there a specific prayer?”

“For you, Avatar, I think whatever comes to your heart will be the right thing to say,” Delchan answered. “Normally, we’re found in black robes...”

“Did we bring them?” Tanev said, looking at his partner.

“I did,” Delchan answered. He stood and opened the chest he was sitting on, pulling out black robes. “I...might have made this for you,” he admitted softly, turning to her. “For whenever you might be ready to try them on. You can keep your armor on underneath, but if you’re going to do the job of a priest today, you should show people that’s your intent. One thing I have noticed in the camp is no one bothers you when you wear your armor. This might help others approach you.”

She took it gently, her fingers enjoying the soft feel of the thick fabric.

“You’re a wise male,” she said in an equally soft voice. “Thank you for this.” She opened it up and was surprised as Tanev jumped up to help her put it on. As it settled on her shoulders, she felt her role change in an instant, but not in a bad way. She could live with this for centuries if she survived the final battle. It wasn’t such a bad thing. Some looked at her as she turned around.

“Why the healers?” she asked the priests, noting their location.

“After the fight...we will be here to talk to the dying and those who might go,” Tanev answered. “It is a great honor to hear their last words and offer them company for the moment they slip away.”

Of course.

“I’ll be here, then. After the battle, I’ll come help with it.” *And send souls who need sending.*

“You are always welcome,” Delchan said. “Go, walk among the warriors. I feel they will more willingly offer their words to you than to us. We’re both retired warriors, so we can relate to them, but you...you will fight with them. We’ll be defending the camp, but you will be in the charge.”

She started walking as he gently pushed her away.

She wouldn’t be in the charge—she would be leading it. Once again, something right settled in place. She would be the first into the battle. It was the least she could do to listen to the words of the warriors who would follow her to their potential deaths.

“You’re a wise soul when you want to be,” Kristanya said.

I...

Mave decided not to try to say something to that. She went with the obvious.

Thank you.

She picked a path far from her own tent. She wanted to see the warriors she didn’t know, the ones who trained day in and day out, hoping to be chosen for a mission or hoping they would never be called on. She was so far at the top, she didn’t know many. In a sense, they were as nameless and obscure to her as many of the gladiators had been. In a sense, her position hadn’t changed, only the people and circumstances. She still stood on the outside, warriors giving her fearful looks as she passed.

Until one bold soul approached her.

“Champ...Avatar...”

“Mave is fine,” she said, reaching out to touch his shoulder. “What do you want to say?”

“I want to ask the Avatar to say a prayer with me for strength from Kristanya and bravery to meet my ending,” he said, his face turning to stone, showing the underlying strength every Andinna had. They were born warriors. While some held more fear than others, the call to fight and die as proud warriors was something they all had in them.

As he bowed his head, she finally saw something else. There was a tiny piece of her own power in him. It held no threat, no ability to awaken and take the world and send it into darkness. It was just there.

Kristanya had truly given them all a piece of her.

She took the warrior's hands and held them between hers, then lowered her own head, touching her forehead to his.

"Kristanya, give this warrior the sight to see what is already inside of him," she whispered, holding the other warrior's hands tightly. "For you gave us your wings and your warrior spirit. Allow him to see through the darkness and reach for what is already inside of him."

The warrior bowed deeply when she released him.

"Tell the others you meet, who might be worried, that our wings are a gift from her, and we are warriors thanks to her. Those gifts she gave us are ones that will never forsake us." Mave continued to walk as the warrior straightened with pride.

After that, Mave found herself sitting and listening to stories of the first war and how many were glad to be at this valley for the final. They had lost wives, husbands, parents, children, and siblings. Some were distant and stoic, staring off as they talked, believing they were going to die, just as she felt about the matter. Others feared because they had children to go home to.

"Mave, I've heard what you're doing. Thank you."

Mave didn't reply to Alchan. She just let the task of listening give her another piece of steadiness to go forward in their plans. She had needed a task, and this seemed to be the right one.

She was a warrior like them. She had faced death over and over again, not with fear but with resolve. She gave the other warriors that.

"This is why I have a priesthood," Kristanya whispered in her ear as Mave started walking once again. *"And you do it well."*

Mave closed her eyes, accepting that she had an understanding that many didn't.

It was midday when Mave heard the drums.

Their enemy was arriving.

Mave couldn't stop her feet. She and dozens, if not hundreds of others, were all moving to the cliff. They let her through to the front, and she found herself beside Alchan, purposefully guided by the crowd.

"There," he whispered, pointing into the distance.

She jumped into the air to get a better look, away from the hot bodies of the other warriors. She wasn't the only one in the air, but she was the only

one daring enough to push forward. If she was hit by a stray arrow, she would miss the cliff and tumble into the valley.

She stared down the army breaking over the southern hills of the valley, her heart pounding.

Someone yelled behind her. She turned in the air and saw it.

A wyvern was flying from the north, a large green beast. It roared as it went over them and landed on an eastern mountainside. Mave followed it with her eyes and watched it stare down the Elvasi army.

Perfect timing, cousin.

Mave landed, and Alchan was grinning. They shared a glance, then watched a second wyvern fly overhead, then a third climb over the western mountains into view.

“They’re here,” Luykas said in awe behind her.

“Not all of them, but yes,” Alchan agreed. “Every day, at dawn, I want a count of the wyverns coming into view. They don’t need to come into the valley. Track male, female, color, and size, so we don’t mix them up.”

“When do we fight?” a male Mave didn’t know asked.

“When our cousins have finished arriving to fight with us,” Alchan answered. “Disperse! Get back to work! No one cause any problems with the Elvasi. Spread the word and keep the camp defended. We can’t have any mistakes!”

The warriors went back to their tasks, and the females picked up their drums. Yenni came to Mave’s side for a moment, and they watched the Elvasi continue their march and begin setting up camp. They watched as ballistae were brought into view and moved into position. The wyverns retreated from view, but Mave knew they were just out of sight, waiting for Alchan’s order to begin their part of the fight.

“Hell of a sight,” Yenni said softly.

“It’s a large army,” Mave murmured.

“Yeah. We can take it.” Yenni was a brave soul. Mave smirked.

“Yes, I think we can. It’ll be hard, and many will be asked to make the ultimate sacrifice, but I think we can win.”

Mave knew somewhere in that camp, Shadra was protected by thousands, closely guarded to keep it from being an easy kill.

I’m coming for you. It’s time we ended this little dance. You’re going to pay for every life lost to your need for power, even if that means I have to

follow you to the grave.

Mave stood there as Yenni was finally pulled away to deal with her female warriors. She stood there in black robes caught in the wind as the sun moved westward.

As night claimed the world, Mave offered a prayer of her own.

Please, let me be enough.

ALCHAN

Sunset on the second day after the Elvasi arrived, he knew it was time. Alchan stood on the cliffside next to Mave.

“Dawn,” he said softly. “We fight at dawn.”

“How many wyverns do we have?”

“More than I could have ever dreamed,” he answered. “Twenty-five. Could have been thirty, but I sent five away.” He watched in wry amusement as her eyebrows went up.

“Twenty-five is more than we hoped, but why send some away?” she asked, realizing the second part of his statement.

“They were young unmated females,” he answered, sighing. “I can’t risk the species. Larger females who have had clutches are also here, but the young females, I can’t allow.”

“Ah. I guess that means I should just go home,” she said, then chuckled.

He tensed when she said it, unsure of what to do with her pain when it came to that but relaxed at her laugh.

If I could fix it...

“No, you’ll be staying here. You’re not a wyvern. You’re a dragon.” He smiled, but it faltered as a shuttered look crossed her face. “Go. I’ll stay here,” he said, knowing she had taken it on herself to watch the valley below and not liking what had just passed over her face. “Tell Rain my orders.”

“Do we want to keep everyone up at night?” She crossed her arms as she stared at him, turning her back to the Elvasi. It was a casual disrespect

only she could offer the massive invading army they were facing.

“Do you think they’re sleeping very well? They’ve been waiting for this order, Mave. They’ll need the night to prepare and get into position. I want us to attack at dawn or shortly after. We need the daylight. Pass along the order.”

She bowed her head a little, then walked away. He listened to her shout at someone, then heard the telltale sound of running boots hitting the dirt with power.

He could have done it the previous night but had held off. Something had told him to hold off. Tonight, he didn’t feel that pressure.

“I’m sorry I can’t help her,” Larianna said gently as she appeared beside him. “If I ordered Amonora or Kristanya to work on fixing it...I might hurt whatever those two are scheming. There’s a reason we don’t meddle in each other’s affairs, particularly with each other’s Avatars.”

“Which is why you killed one of your own because she killed one of Amonora’s,” he whispered, knowing no one was near him.

“That’s right,” she confirmed. “Alchan...you have been a good son of my line. I hope you understand that. Thank you for your understanding on this matter.”

He had already asked her once before, and she had firmly shut him down. He tried not to think about it. The gods were who they were, and there was no way a mortal could change them. They were unending, infallible creatures of power. The forms they took were a choice, but while they looked like Andinna, they were dragons, which made them something else entirely.

So, he didn’t ask his goddess to help Mave a second time.

“I have only done what I felt was right,” he said. “Just like I won’t call my sister out for her words. She’s only doing what she believes is right.”

He secretly agreed with her.

Larianna sighed. “You heard her then.”

“Yes,” he admitted, looking down on the army below. “But what can I do? She is who she is. I need her to be that. I need her to go to the lengths no one can follow. I need her to push herself because without her, I don’t see us winning.”

“She is willing to give it to you. Don’t feel guilty, Alchan. I know you love her. She is your sister and the closest person to you who truly

understands a piece of you, what it is to be lonely in power. But you are also a king who is about to fight a battle that could lead to freedom for all your people or to their demise. One life or all of them.”

“I know.” Oh, he knew too well what was at stake. He had pushed back on the eventual destruction of the Andinna for over a thousand years. “It’s not just her. My brother, my husband, my friends who have become my family. Wyverns, wild beasts who only understand the barest meaning of the war. Warriors who deserve to see old age with their loved ones, raise children...”

“This is why you are a good king,” Larianna said gently. *“Come dawn, you shall give a speech, then you will send them into battle. Even as they start to die, you shall still be a good king because you know the worth of their lives...and their deaths.”*

She left him there to consider her words.

He heard the camp come alive as orders were shouted. It was loud enough to make the Elvasi below stir as well. He heard the very distant shouts, and the Elvasi began to work, torches running through their camps. He had known this would happen, which was why he hadn’t considered an ambush. He could have attempted an insane plan to assassinate Shadra when they arrived, but he knew that would have been a foolish endeavor. She was surrounded by her army, protected from anything sly he could try. They could do some damage, but it would be a waste of lives and likely wouldn’t complete the objective, even if he sent Mave.

No, they were in for a fight. He was asking the vast majority of his people to put their lives on the line for him. Leria’s community and Kerit were skeleton remains of what they had been, only the essentials to work the land and those who couldn’t fight. It left him with seven thousand Andinna, only twelve hundred not in the battle.

Madness. He knew it was madness and that he was clinging to hope. It was all he could do—hope to finish the fight before his entire army was destroyed. He had to hope they won, freeing the Andinna in the Empire and bringing back the remaining Andinna from Olost. Maybe the losses would be worth it if they could bring every Andinna back to their homes in Anden.

Standing there, he knew he would know what to do next by the next evening. Whether it was to die, keep fighting, or begin rebuilding, he would know.

“Love,” Rain called out. “Do you want to come inside and look over everything?”

He turned only halfway.

“No. I know everything. I’ll be here until it’s time.”

“Are you sure?” Rain came closer. It was so dark, it was hard to see the brilliant shade of blue of Rain’s wings, but Alchan could imagine it.

“I’m sure,” he promised. “Can you feel them? The wyverns?”

“Smell them,” Rain answered. “They’re staying out of sight of the Elvasi, stalking their prey. They’re waiting for you.”

“Yes,” he said softly. “Do you think we’re ready?”

“We’re never going to be more ready,” Rain whispered, moving another step closer. Alchan lowered his head for Rain to reach him, and they gently kissed. “I’m going to sharpen your sword and your dagger. It’ll keep my hands busy.”

“Thank you.”

Rain kissed him again, and Alchan could have fallen to his knees. So many important people he could lose. Alchan watched as he walked away.

He didn’t move. His army was following his call.

The night continued, and he began to see them come in their full armor. Some males wore chest pieces like himself, but many only wore leather breeches and went without anything covering their chest, traditional garb. Mave came forward in her black armor, her males around her, except Trevan, who rode atop Kyn. The small wyvern carefully walked into the crowd, then sat down, out of sight of anyone watching the cliff from below.

They came in the hundreds. The Andinna didn’t do ranks or marching. Other than keeping different groups somewhat separate, there was no order. War was chaos, and the Andinna embodied that chaos. Some got into trees around the camp, particularly the archers.

Mave came to his side, her hands on her hilts, her eyes cool and stoic. She was ready. She would start as a dragon, but Alchan knew she wouldn’t stay that way.

Rain approached his other shoulder, wearing only breeches that would be destroyed. His husband didn’t even bother to bring a sword. His husband would fight with the wyverns.

He heard calls as different units reported they had all their members. It went up the ranks, and eventually, people began to call to him.

“Sire, the archers are at the ready!” Nevyn roared, floating beside his husband. Once the report was done, they flew to a nearby tree and landed among its branches. Nevyn would have been a good pick to help lead the charge, but Varon was the best archer known to the Andinna, and his husband would never leave his side.

More called to him, all careful not to shout over each other when talking to the king. Alchan waited for the last one and knew she would come. He might be king, and there might have been more males, but the world of the Andinna always waited on its females. He was no different. The silence felt unending.

Finally, as was her due, Yenni walked through the crowd, males parting for the powerhouse Yenni was. Mave was fairly average in size for a female, but she made up for it in attitude and skill. Yenni could break a male in half if he was too stupid to her.

“Sire, the females are ready,” Yenni said before bowing to him.

“Then we are ready,” he said, bowing in return. She melted back into the crowd, headed for her warriors. He gave her the time to get back to them, careful not to disrespect her position by beginning a moment too soon.

“Now,” *Larianna whispered.*

Alchan took a deep breath.

“Andinna,” he started softly. The hush that took his people made his voice carry. “Warriors!” he continued louder. “We stand here, facing down an Empire that long hoped to defeat us.” He waved a hand at the army waiting for them as the pre-sunrise glow began to enter the eastern sky. “They have failed at every turn! For we, no matter what they do, are survivors! We, donned with wings given to us by a goddess, are warriors! We will fight today to the last body. As we soar with Kristanya’s wings and beside her Avatar, we will show the Empire that our last stand will be their defeat, that we will always dominate the skies of this world, and that we are powerful! As we fight in the light Larianna gave this world, we will show the world we are free!” When he said free, the warriors roared in encouragement. “That we are *undefeatable*. That our gods have not abandoned us but only waited for the right moment. This is that moment!” He drew his sword and raised it in the air as the warriors screamed in excitement. He could feel his powers rise and give them all the

encouragement they gave him. He was lifting them, or the power of Larianna was.

“For once, I can offer you something better than words. We know the dragons have blessed this battle! We know they wish for our victory! Larianna and Kristanya guide our hands, and Amonora holds us in her heart. Even if you fall, go to them with hope in your heart and the knowledge your death is for something more. Know you leave behind free Andinna, no longer under the boot of the Elvasi. Greet Kristanya with a smile, for you have given everything to the people she helped create. And if you see Larianna, just keep your eyes down. Trust me when I say she has no patience for males who think they’re something special, and it *will* be one of you idiot males. We all know our females are too good to die.”

There was a round of chuckles. The females whooped with pride, drums beating hard as they accepted his praise.

Alchan lowered his sword, a small smile on his face as he stared at his people, ready to die on his command. His heart broke for them, but he felt hope, too. His people were tough. They had survived in a world that wanted them to break, yet they were here, ready to give it one last fight.

“I have been honored to be your king,” he said, his volume dropping again. He knew they heard him, though. Every one of them was focused on him. “I hope to see all of you on the other side of this. For the Andinna!” He thrust his sword in the air.

“FOR THE ANDINNA!” the army roared.

He turned to Mave, and a silent question passed between them. This was her chance to address her people, and he wondered if she would finally take it.

“Sister. It’s you now.”

MAVE

Mave watched the cheering Andinna, her brother's eyes on her and his words hanging between them.

She knew what to say.

"Larianna gave us our soul. Amonora gave us our heart. Kristanya gave us our wings." Mave looked over the faces in front of her, all waiting for her to finish and begin the battle.

She told them the truth.

"And they made us *dragons*," she snarled.

As the warriors took a breath to start their cheering, she turned and ran for the edge. She jumped into the air, the dawn light bright. She pulled on her power, changing into a dragon to the deafening cheers of her people.

She went high first, showing her people what they were, what was inside every one of them. Then she dove for the Elvasi army and opened her mouth. Her heart raced as she unleashed blue fire in a direct line down the center of Shadra's forces. Elvasi began to scream.

She continued her line through the gryphon riders to the archers, then the sorcerers. Once she reached them, her fire flicked off something she couldn't see, and she knew that was the end of her initial assault. She turned sharply and felt a large spear fly by her.

It was time to focus on her first objectives. A quick look as she flew showed the Elvasi had been smart about their placement of the ballistae. They were scattered around the army, in no more than sets of three. She

found them and started taking them out with single balls of fire as she passed.

This was her job, to clean up the enemy force enough for the wyverns to join the battle. She was a big target, but she wore the skin of a dragon, which gave her the best defense and the most power. She was fast, and she was intelligent. Aside from her, there were only two others who could do the precise and necessary work required. Trevan and Kyn were vulnerable, thanks to Trevan, and Rain was small and well known to the Elvasi.

Mave knew she wasn't just there to work but to inspire fear. She was a hell of an opening for the fight.

She felt arrows poke at her, but they didn't even graze her tough hide. She would have laughed, but the spears directed at her were more dangerous. As she cut upward to dodge, one grazed her tail and drew blood. Not much, as it was still deflected, but enough to make her take notice.

As she raced for her fifth ballista station, the gryphon riders attempted to come for her. She led them on a chase, using her tail to knock them from the air as her fire continued to ravage the Elvasi and humans below. A gryphon came over her, and she felt the spear hit her shoulder, sliding off several scales before it found a place to sink in between them. It didn't go very deep, but it pissed her off. She rolled and used her fangs to tear both beast and rider out of the air. The roll knocked the spear loose.

As she righted herself, Mave unleashed more fire onto the soldiers below, reveling in their screams as the wave of death she felt coming finally broke over the valley.

She was *power*, and she was going to show Shadra this was the consequence for testing the Andinna.

Dragons had come to fight back.

TREVAN

Trevan waited for the signal, Kyn growing anxious beneath him. The Andinna made a path for his partner to move to the edge of the cliff, while Trevan kept his eyes on Alchan, who had a hand raised to keep them from going farther. The king watched as the Avatar of Kristanya laid waste to the army in front of them. Trevan took a moment to turn toward her, and his breath caught for a moment.

Mave was magnificent. She wouldn't be able to defeat all of them. Eventually, her body would fail her, and that would happen before she could force a surrender from the largest army in the known world. She gave them hell, though. She was a master, coming so far from the woman he had known who couldn't fly and had never touched the sky. Her flames tore through the Elvasi and humans of Shadra's army until it died on its own. Knowing how it was fueled, Trevan hated watching those fires die.

He watched as gryphon riders began to take off, realizing the ballistae needed more protection.

"Ready!" Alchan called.

Trevan hunkered down on Kyn, his hand tight on his sword. Rain stood on the edge of the cliff, ready to jump.

"Now!" the king ordered.

Kyn jumped at the same time as Rain. Trevan held on as they entered a dive together, Rain shifting in the air. They both missed hitting the ground and rose up together. Trevan was just along for the ride as Kyn stuck by Rain's side. They powered through the air toward the Elvasi while roars

echoed off the mountains around them. Trevan whooped as the large green wyvern joined them. Then another, a brown wyvern, darted underneath them, small and fast.

By the time Trevan and Kyn reached the frontline of the Elvasi forces, they were surrounded. Every single one of the wild wyverns started their destruction without particular care as fire crashed into the soldiers.

Kyn, let's find those ballistae.

Kyn turned to the left and went for the closest one as a wyvern dropped out of the sky screaming, hit already. Trevan felt the wind of arrows, and he had gryphon riders on him before Kyn had a chance to destroy their first target. Kyn got the shot off, then angled them upward.

Trevan held tightly to the rope someone had given him. Holding the spikes was one thing, but before this fight, it had been decided he needed more. Maybe one day, someone would figure out a saddle for him, but for now, he had a rope. Kyn took them high, forcing the gryphon riders to follow. When Kyn cut back down, he grabbed a gryphon, killing it quickly, then let it go with its helpless rider. Trevan fought off another that tried to come from above. He deflected a spear in the hands of the Elvasi soldier, and Kyn rose them up, so Trevan could get his sword into the gut of the gryphon.

With a second kill, Kyn started a hard dive back into the fray where the wyverns were attacking anything and everything that tried to take them out of the sky. They had to dodge their own as they tried to find the ballistae, but it was complete chaos. Another wyvern dropped from the sky, and the others roared in fury. Mave blew past them, taking dozens of gryphon riders with her in hot pursuit.

Let's move, Kyn. We can't watch her all battle.

Kyn got back into action. Mave had practically paused everyone with her sudden fly-by, then it restarted as if she had never come by.

It was like their training exercise. Trevan found the targets, and Kyn maneuvered to take them out in rapid succession. Kyn was small and fast, a blessing as they were chased through the sky. All of Shadra's gryphon riders were now in the sky, crowding the space. Wyverns were screaming for help as they were overwhelmed by the enemy. Streams of fire filled the air as well, though, which sent dozens of the gryphons to ground at a time.

Then he heard a roar, or more the sound of thousands of roars, and saw the Andinna jump off the cliff.

ZAYDEN

Zayden had never seen a clash of giants until this day. He had thought the most vicious battle he would ever witness had been the day the Elvasi had crushed the Andinna forces at the end of the first war. He remembered the mad dash for safety as his fellow warriors were butchered.

This was more than that. This was two impossible forces coming together in chaos. As he stood on the edge of the cliff, he knew the battle would be fast. When two great forces met like this, devastation moved quickly. They would fight to the last man—there was no other choice.

“How do we win this?” he asked no one as he watched another wyvern fall from the sky.

Someone grabbed his shoulder. He turned to see Alchan had walked up behind him.

“While our people fight, we’re going to aim for Shadra,” the king whispered in his ear. “Stay on the plan. Stay with me. We kill her, then Nyria takes the command of the Elvasi. It’ll be messy, but we’ll be able to put a stop to the fighting. Keep your eye on the target. We’re not trying to decimate their army, only make surrender a good option to everyone once Nyria gives the order. There are still twenty-two wyverns alive out there. All isn’t lost.”

“Thanks for the reminder,” he said, giving his king a friendly thump. Alchan continued walking down the line. He whispered in Mat’s ear next, and Zayden saw his closest friend nod solemnly.

Luykas was on Zayden's other side, tense and unwavering, his eyes forward.

Zayden turned back to the fight, seeing his wife try to clear gryphons off a wyvern. Her blue flames were impressive, but they were already happening less and less often.

"Andinna!" Alchan roared suddenly. "Are you ready?"

The roar they gave their king in return was enough to shake a mountain.

"CHARGE!"

Zayden jumped, pulling out his sword as he entered the air and let the wind catch his wings. With the army behind him, he roared as he crossed the valley toward his enemy. He stayed close to Luykas and Mat, knowing Emerian and Bryn would be close as well. Alchan raced ahead of them, a king always willing to lead his people into battle.

The gryphon riders were the immediate threat. Zayden was able to get around three before he was forced to attack one. He crashed into it, taking the Elvasi off its mount as he sank his sword into a vulnerable gap of the enemy's armor. He knew the Elvasi was dead as he pulled his sword out.

"PUSH!" Alchan screamed.

Zayden caught a glimpse of Mat flip and gut a gryphon as he flew by. Zayden kept moving, keeping on Mat's tail as Emerian came up beside him. Alchan and Luykas were beside each other at the front of their pack. As they raced through the sky, Rain came up in front of them and blasted several more of the flying Elvasi cavalry in the sky. They scattered but regrouped quickly. Zayden hissed as he felt an arrow skim his leg but didn't go for whatever archer did it. A wild wyvern blasted past him at a high speed, causing him to falter.

Rain stayed with them, then Trevan came, riding Kyn as if he was born for it. He roared as Kyn tried to set fire to the sorcerers, but it was deflected into the archers.

"MAGIC SHIELDS!" Luykas yelled. "Get behind them!"

Zayden pushed to fly faster. He was right behind his king when the gryphon came in from above and tried to knock Alchan from the sky. Zayden threw his sword and hit the rider in the back, but it didn't stop the gryphon from carving at Alchan's back. Zayden caught up and pulled his sword out of the Elvasi's back before the body fell, then shoved down,

killing the gryphon without mercy. When the gryphon dropped, he realized he couldn't find Alchan.

"Alchan!" he screamed, diving to find where their king had fallen. Luykas dove with him. They landed among the archers, who were quickly throwing aside their bows and pulling their short swords to deal with this new threat.

Mat landed next, cleaving open a fool who tested him. Zayden kicked back around before gutting him.

Together, the three males pushed a path through their enemy. Rain cried before sending flames down in another section of the archers, then landed. Zayden, as he pushed to his son with Luykas and Mat, realized Rain could only be doing one thing—defending his husband.

As they continued to push, Zayden watched Emerian and Bryn land near his boy. He felt heat on his back, turning only for a second to check the cause. Kyn and Trevan were flying off, having protected their backs with fire.

Thanks, you two.

He was the second to break through to Alchan, following Luykas. Mat covered them as they ran for the king, who was on his feet, sword up and ready to fight.

"We need to get past those damn shields," Luykas snapped.

"I have someone on it," Alchan answered. "Thanks for the save."

"We've got you," Zayden promised. Alchan nodded to him, then looked up at Rain's large head over them.

"Let me check yer back," Bryn growled, going around the king.

"Don't have time...I'm fine," Alchan replied. As he spoke, Rain started his fire again, turning in a circle, forcing their enemies off with the building wall of flame.

"Who's going after the sorcerers?" Mat asked. "They have the entire back of the army covered somehow. They're protecting themselves and Shadra! They're her personal defense force."

There had been no need to ask. The sun was blocked out as Mave landed over them, crushing whoever was unlucky enough to be in her way. She was so large, Rain stood at full height underneath her, only needing to lower his head slightly. She hit the shields like a battering ram, the resounding boom from her impact shaking the ground.

“Why didn’t you just say Mave?” Mat growled in the direction of their king.

“Figured you would have guessed.” Alchan shrugged and winced. Bryn grabbed him, looking over his back, anyway.

She hit it again...and again.

“Well, if anyone can break it...” he mumbled, unable to tear his eyes off the massive black dragon that was his wife.

“Skies...” Emerian whispered, somehow just loud enough for Zayden to catch it.

“Yeah, that.”

SHADRA

No. She was stunned to watch the black beast beat against her carefully crafted shields. She had been expecting two wyverns—not this.

“Mother, what are we going to do?” her daughter asked in a small, fearful voice.

“We’re going to fight if that thing breaks through.” *It can’t be. Not real. They’re not real.*

“How did this happen?”

“I don’t know,” Shadra snapped. “Males aren’t supposed to be able to call the wyverns to battle. Only the Andinna queens can do that. Behron promised me that no male had ever tried. Hell, he died trying, from my understanding. I had my assassins confirm he was dead on that fucking throne. This is...” Shadra shook her head as another boom shook the ground, and the black beast roared in fury, preparing to hit it again. She saw her lines of sorcerers begin to falter.

She had been expecting two wyverns. Two smaller wyverns, a blue one—the mutt the Ivory Shadows loved so much and now Alchan’s lover—, and a red one, reportedly with an Elvasi rider. Two wyverns.

There were at least twenty in the sky, bringing her forces to their knees. Fire was burning her soldiers alive, and the ballistae were being targeted by the two she knew. White ash was caught on the breeze, and smoke rose over the ranks. Luykas had played her for a fool. He would have known his brother had gone to claim the power of the queens, but it defied all logic to

her. No male had ever done it before, yet his brother had called over twenty of them to this battle.

The wyverns weren't even the most pressing of her problems.

"That thing is going to break the shields," Shadra said, turning to grab her weapons. She was already in her armor. She belted on her sword, then grabbed her staff. She would need to focus her power, and it was made for her to do so. The guild had spent years crafting it for her, able to withstand the amount of power she intended to use.

"How? There's nothing that powerful."

"Apparently, it is."

"What is it?" Nyria asked.

"A wyvern," Shadra hissed. "It's just a fucking big wyvern." She refused to admit it was anything else. It was impossible. There was no way it could be what it seemed to be. "Get your weapons and be ready."

Nyria ran for her sword, and Shadra felt bad for the girl. She could have left her daughter in Elliar. *Should* have left her daughter in Elliar. *Should* have expected something more than she planned for.

I was the superior force by far. This isn't...wasn't possible.

Another boom shook the ground, and Shadra watched as the massive beast staggered this time. So did most of her sorcerers, many of them falling to the ground. Three spears stuck out of the beast, though, which was a positive. Then she watched as the small red wyvern she had been prepared for flew close. The rider on it jumped onto the beast and started pulling them out.

"Mother, it's not a wyvern," Nyria said softly.

"It has to be a wyvern," she yelled at her daughter. "It has to be! There are no other realistic possibilities. It can't be a..." She stopped herself. She wouldn't voice it.

Shadra watched the rider jump back for his own mount, and the beast slammed into the shield again. This time, the entire force of her sorcerers was knocked back, and the shield faltered.

Shadra's mind began to work. She had to win this battle. Failure was not an option. The stakes were higher now, but the glory and claim to victory would be greater. She could ride back to Elliar as a legend. She would be elevated from Empress to...

“Mother, I need to know what we’re fighting.” Nyria’s words interrupted her thought.

“It’s a dragon,” Shadra finally admitted to her daughter, feeling more confident as she watched the beast. It was already exhausted, and the injuries would help her. “And the only dragons in this world’s history are the Andinna’s gods.” She braced for the next impact, glaring at the black dragon. “Today, I shall kill a god.”

And I shall take its power for my own, no matter the cost.

She stepped forward and watched the dragon hit one last time, blasting many of her sorcerers back several feet. It roared, then staggered to the left as it tried to take a step.

It was growing weaker by the moment.

Perfect.

MAVE

Mave got the shield down, but her body felt as if it was on fire as pain raced through her chest and her limbs. She knew she couldn't keep this form much longer, but she had to keep fighting. As her family ran out from under her, she turned to protect their backs, knowing they would do well to get themselves to Shadra. Rain went with them, leaving her alone among hundreds of the enemy. She roared and swatted her tail through archers, soldiers, and sorcerers. As gryphon riders came for her, she snatched them out of the air with fang and claw, killing more and more by the second.

Death reeked in the air. That was all she knew. For all the pain she felt, her power grew as blood was shed. It gave her both strength and pain, but she used it. As her own reserves began to fail, she leaned into the power and let it guide her.

It was more than willing to give her everything she needed to keep fighting.

MATESH

Mat ran behind Luykas and Alchan as they breeched the sorcerers' line. Alchan's back was painful to see, covered in hard lines. Many were on the ground thanks to Mave's powerful hits, and he took advantage, killing as he found them trying to regain their feet. Blood sprayed in a gory mist as they butchered the easy ones. Zayden grunted beside him as he cleaved an arm off one and the head off another. Mat went for center of mass, stabbing for the chest every time to get fatal blows. If they didn't die immediately, they would die quickly.

As they pressed forward, a line of Shadra's personal guard came. Mat met another's steel and roared as he shoved his attacker away. He took the chance to kill another coming for him before focusing on the first, who had regained his feet. Mat overpowered him quickly, shoving his sword through into the vulnerable body beneath.

Then he felt it—his wife had withdrawn and was growing even more distant in their bond. It made him shudder, and he couldn't resist taking a look back at her, wondering what was going through her head. He was completely locked out and couldn't feel anything from her, only the slight awareness she was there.

"You felt that?" Luykas called out loudly as he lifted his sword.

"Yeah!" he yelled in reply before turning to defend himself from another Elvasi who realized he was there.

"We need back up!" Emerian roared.

"Keep fighting!" Alchan ordered.

Mat took a hit, feeling steel run over his thigh. He hissed as it went deep into muscle and dropped him to a knee. He lifted his sword in time to stop a sword from coming down on his head and pulled his secondary dagger from its sheath at his waist. While he held off his attacker with his right, his left hand came up with the dagger and found that weak point at the bottom of the chest plate. He lunged, sending the blade into the Elvasi's gut. With the advantage, he shoved the Elvasi away from him and kicked him down, leaving him to bleed out and die.

A scream grabbed his attention, a sound he knew well. He waited as Kyn came crashing down, Trevan flung from his back in the process. Before Mat could even begin running, fireballs and arrows began to assault the wyvern from every angle.

He started running, ignoring the terrible pain and the limp. He had to help them. If he died in the process, he would at least do something with it.

As he ran, he found Emerian by his side and heard Alchan's roar as the king joined them. They found Trevan on the ground. Luykas yanked him up and pulled him into the group. The warrior was bleeding from somewhere on his head and leaned hard into Bryn's back.

Mat kicked back a strange combatant and was greeted with fire in return. He roared in agony as flames licked up his left arm.

Zayden came around his side and took off the sorcerer's head, then shoved Mat to the ground.

"Roll!" his friend roared in command.

Mat tried, and the fire went out quickly, leaving blistered and black skin behind. His left arm was useless as Luykas helped him up. Once he was on his feet, he watched Luykas raise his sword and light it on fire. With every move, flames trailed the blade. He left scorched wounds in his wake as he forged a path.

Mat followed, trying to watch his friend's back, knowing they were in the last push. His body could fail him, but he had to keep fighting. Zayden took Mat's left, defending his new weakened side.

Trevan's ear-piercing scream gave him chills. Mat tried to find Kyn, knowing the source. The Elvasi would focus on the wyvern.

Rain came back, storming through the enemies, his fire blistering hot. Dozens dropped as they burned. He pushed at Kyn's body, trying to get the little red wyvern up.

Trevan collapsed, hitting Mat's back.

"Are they alive?" Bryn screamed over the fighting.

"I don't know!" Mat roared.

"I've got him!" Emerian called, right next to Mat. Mat glanced back for only a moment to see Emerian checking for life, then went back to fighting the next Elvasi soldier who ran up to him. "He's alive! He needs to get out. They both do!"

Mat knew that, but there was no getting out for anyone.

"Enough!" Luykas raised his sword, and Mat watched it shatter as power rushed by him. Elvasi and humans went flying back, clearing a ring around them. The morok Luykas held high in the air shattered, and the Andinna threw the useless hilt aside and picked up a fallen Elvasi's long sword.

For a moment, there was a blissful moment of stillness. Then Mat felt it, a wave of power running through him. It was overwhelming, dark, and cold. It gave him renewed strength yet left him scared. He knew the source. Trevan woke, his eyes entirely black. Kyn reared up, roaring in fury and pain before sending a stream of molten-hot fire at the closest of their enemies.

Mat ran for the wyvern, dropping his sword to pull out the closest spear. Rain used his teeth to help, ripping out the spears. Trevan jumped on his mount's back. Once the spears were gone, they jumped back into the air.

Mat's power drove him to pick up his sword again and rejoin the fray once Kyn and Trevan were out of the fight. They were supposed to stay in the air thanks to their vulnerabilities, and he wanted them there. He would not lose a member of his family today.

Mat caught a quick glimpse of Luykas, whose eyes were also void black. Then Zayden and Emerian joined the line they were forming, Rain at their back. Bryn snarled, and Mat knew it was an unearthly sound only their wife could make. Alchan looked down at the line, then smiled viciously.

"Goddess of war indeed," he crooned, pleased with what he saw. "Tell me, warriors of Kristanya. Are you ready to fight to the death for king and country?"

They roared in return. Mat knew he still had his mind, but something was off, different, not terribly bad, given their circumstances, but strange. The roar had come from the other something, something primal and

dangerous. But Mat's leg didn't hurt anymore as he ran for the wall of sorcerers. He was faster and felt stronger, as if he could fight for days and days. As if he was an indestructible mountain or the unstoppable force of a storm.

With much of his family beside him and led by their king, they were a nightmarish group, bringing death with them. The foe fell to the ground with little hope of defeating them.

Thanks to her. He knew it was because of her.

LUYKAS

Luykas had always loved sorcery, especially once he found out he was a Blackblood, though for many years, he had barely been able to learn anything. There was a reason it was taboo, banned from the Andinna. The combination of magics was too powerful to describe, but he'd always known it was useful. There was a reason Shadra had dabbled in what sorcery called the darker arts, using blood to do magic. There were very few differences between Andinna blood magic and dark sorcery. One respected the call to use blood, one's own energy to give power, while the other believed in pulling power from other sources.

Luykas could and was willing to do both. As the blood of others fell on him, he robbed it of its power and drove himself, using it to power his magic. He only had a basic knowledge of sorcery, but he knew enough. He'd never released an unfocused blast of magic like that before, and he had a feeling he would never pull it off again. It left him weak and had destroyed his blade, which he had used to channel the power to keep it from killing him. He had to think quickly to make sure he didn't hurt his own.

Only today, pushing their bodies to the limit in a desperate bid for victory would ever drive him to use magic this way.

When she had sent her power, Luykas felt that indescribable rush. He saw the black eyes of his family, knowing they were all riding Mave's wave of power. She had given them something of her through the blood bond. She was truly powerful. With what he knew was only a drop of her power,

he felt as though he could defeat anything the Empire's sorcerers threw at him. To be a shell for such power was both an honor and horrifying.

In the back of his mind, he knew his wife did it because she thought she would need them, which was a sobering thought. Even though he couldn't feel her anymore through the blood bond, he knew his wife's mind well enough after so many years, sharing it with her. She wouldn't tolerate the death of one of her own.

As they charged with Alchan into the final line of Elvasi protecting their Empress, he was the best he would ever be. If he never picked up a sword or did magic again, he would know he stopped at his best. There was no better. The world seemed slow, his enemies moving through molasses as he carved through them and pushed toward their objective.

They knew Shadra was hiding at the back of her army, surrounded by those most loyal to her as protection. If Alchan hadn't fallen into the archers and if the shield hadn't been up, they would have already gotten to her. They had hoped the chaos of the fight would distract everyone from their approach, but that had been a dream.

Part of Luykas knew they were in a fight and knew it was likely to go wrong, but they were so close.

Rain followed their approach, looking relatively unharmed as he wrought devastation, and his flames kept their back safe. Luykas added his own, trying to blast a hole through the line of guards and sorcerers between him and his mother. He was momentarily surprised to see his magic-created flame blue now, eating away at the enemies as the sorcerers fought to control it and use it as their own, to no effect.

Finally, Luykas found open ground, past the dead bodies. As Alchan joined him, they were greeted with a sight that would haunt Luykas forever. Shadra stood, waiting in long chainmail, decorated with gold accents, her golden hair caught in the fierce winds of war. She was regal and powerful. Her eyes were ice, a sword in her right hand, and in her left hand, a long, white staff, beautifully made.

The Empress was ready for war.

This was the first time he had physically seen his mother in person for over a thousand years, and it hit him in the gut. She was more powerful now than she had been at the end of the first war, the last time they had shared

space and could touch each other. He hadn't expected how it would hit him, but it sent a lance of pain through his heart.

This woman had been his mother, would always be his mother, but he hated her more than anything. He was here to see her dead.

Luykas could see the power the staff was drawing to itself as the rest of the team made their way to him and Alchan. Rain eventually forced his body between the team and Shadra's forces, cutting everyone off from helping the Empress with fire.

Nyria pretended to cower behind her mother. Further back, five men were tied to posts, bleeding from dozens of small cuts. They were alive, looking on in horror. They were pale, and their skin was sagging on their faces. After a second, Luykas recognized them as her generals, well-known men of the Empire, respectable men who led armies. This was what she had done to them, making them appear thousands of years older than they really were. She was drawing power from them. She had probably made every one of those cuts on their flesh.

"So, this is your plan," she said, stepping forward, her staff a walking stick. "Kill me and my daughter, even if it means your own demise."

Alchan stood tall as Rain lunged for the Empress. She lifted her staff and slammed it to the ground, sending Rain back, massive wyvern thrown in an instant.

Luykas felt chills, even though everything around them was quickly going up in flames.

"I won't waste all this power on something so...small," she hissed, turning back to Luykas and Alchan. "Son, this is your last choice. Walk over here and join me. You obviously have great power we can use."

"No," Luykas said evenly, his hand tightening on his stolen sword. "I don't want anything to do with the way you use power."

"I tried." Her words were almost flat as she lifted her staff once again. Luykas braced as it quickly swung to point at him.

"Not today," Alchan snarled, shoving Luykas down as a bolt of lightning cracked through the air and went between them before meeting the flame and blowing up something. "No more, Shadra. You don't get to claim another life on this day. This is over!"

She sneered. "It's over when I say it's over. We're only just getting started. Eventually, we'll take down all your wyverns, kill all your warriors,

and I'll see your head on my mantle. It'll become a treasured possession."

Shadra lifted her staff again as Mat, Emerian, Zayden, and Bryn ran for her. She handled them with a simple blast of power, sending them all to their backs. Luykas heard a scream as he hit the flames. He scrambled to find who it was as Rain and Alchan ran to try their own against the powerful Empress. He yanked Bryn out and rolled the small male's body around, praying it wouldn't be fatal. Once he knew the fire was out, he looked over Bryn to see the burns were the worst on his legs.

"You'll live," he whispered, holding the rogue's head to his chest. "You'll live."

Shadra blocked Rain's assault with a blast of lightning that stopped Rain dead in his tracks and sent him into the dirt. Alchan's roar was one of heartbreak. Luykas turned to see his brother running for the Empress, then made eye contact with his sister. She pulled out a dagger.

For a split second, he questioned her loyalty, but in the end, he had no need to. He watched that dagger turn. Its deadly trajectory for Shadra's heart could have ended all of this, but his mother was cunning and knew what was happening. At the last moment, she spun and knocked Nyria away with her shoulder, then sent a blast of power at Alchan, sending the warrior into his husband.

"You," Shadra hissed, turning to see her daughter stand. "Really?"

Nyria's face changed from the mask to the powerful woman Luykas knew her to be.

"Me," Nyria said, her words as flat as Shadra's had been. "For hundreds of years."

Shadra's eyes went wide. "The breakout in Elliar. You were missing for much of it."

Nyria unsheathed her sword and went into a perfect posture, bracing and ready to attack at any moment, her feet light.

"You fooled me for a long time," their mother whispered.

"I learned from the best how to play the cunning games of court," Nyria replied. "And now, I'm going to help my brother kill you."

"No, you'll die just like him." Shadra met her daughter in a fight and had the clear advantage. Years of experience gave her that, and the power she was drawing from her captives was only adding to the problem.

"Go," Bryn whispered. "Go help her."

Luykas nodded and grabbed his sword. He jumped into the air. Following him were his family, those still able to walk and fly. Mat, Zayden, and Emerian were still clearly in the pull of Mave's power, their focus entirely on the Empress. Alchan joined them next, holding his ribs with his free hand. Together they dove for her, hoping to overwhelm her as she fought Nyria.

Luykas was certain his blade would find purchase when another blast sent them all flying backward. As he rolled on the ground, he felt power flow through the air, heading toward his mother.

"I am not going to die this day!" she roared. Fire and lightning surrounded her. A knife flew through the air from Bryn on the ground and hit a shield. "You cannot defeat me!"

"We might not," Alchan called, gaining his feet before any of the others. "But I know one who can. Empress Shadra of the Elvasi Empire, today I judge you for the crimes you have committed against the Andinna. You are guilty, as we both know, and the sentence is death."

"And who will kill me?" Shadra answered, arrogant to the end.

Mave had arrived to the fight.

MAVE

She wasn't in control anymore, the power completely overriding her mind. She could have been helping, but instead, Mave brought only destruction and death to anything that came near her, rampaging through the Elvasi forces and slaughtering them. The moment she had leaned into her power, it had taken command, doing things she couldn't have dreamed. It had been the thing to claim her males through her blood bond, making them into proxies of its own power, wanting more warriors who could be great and powerful like her, needing them to live for that purpose. She had been the one to stop its flood of power from overwhelming and killing them.

She didn't know if she could regain control, and Kristanya was silent in her mind. She could only hope someone convinced her to stop when this was over.

Then a much-needed voice broke through the void that was Mave's internal landscape, forcing her to attention and giving Mave renewed purpose to regain control.

"We have her cornered, sister. We're trying to weaken her, but we can't land a single blow. We need you. Fight for me, Champion."

The call of her king, the command in his words, turned her attention away from the fight with hundreds of soldiers on the ground, trying to bring her down. Not even her power could fight against Alchan, and it relented, listening to the order. Her wings had taken too many hits to fly, holes riddling them from the constant assault of arrows and spears.

She ran, crushing dozens under her feet. Her power drove her hard, relentless in its need for the fight, to see the war through to the last moment.

She saw them on the ground around Shadra's defenses. Fire and lightning. Mave ran at full speed, slamming herself into the shield she figured would be there. If it had not, her family would have already gotten to her.

She knew nothing except killing. Mave had the driving need to destroy, and the Empress was the perfect combatant to test her power—this creature, who brought so much suffering.

Mave slammed into the barrier, and it gave way, but the wave of power that ran through Mave nearly brought her down. Her power was keeping her alive, and it decided it was done with dragon form. It could no longer hold it, and Mave landed on the dirt in her Andinna form.

Mave spared no time to stop and check with others, ignoring their cries for her safety. She pushed herself up off the dirt, her gaze fixated on the wall of flame and lightning. She ran for it, knowing if she didn't make her way inside, Shadra's barrier would come back up, and Mave didn't know if she could bring it down again.

She didn't know pain as she jumped through the flames, letting the power lick at her skin as she dove into the space Shadra kept inside to protect herself. The Empress was still trying to get to her feet as Mave dropped the burning armor she wore, piece by piece at a speed that defied reality. She tossed her swords away as Shadra met her gaze.

"You..." Shadra staggered at the sight of her. "You are the dragon."

"I am Death," Mave corrected, the power of Kristanya giving her the words. "I am the inevitable. I am the darkness of the beginning and of the end, Avatar of the most powerful of gods. And today, Empress Shadra, you will die."

Mave didn't need to think as shadow and blood began to form her armor and her blades. Shadra regained her composure as Mave advanced on her.

They clashed. Shadra was stronger than Mave had thought, and Mave was weaker than she had ever been. Even with power coursing through her veins, feeding her everything it had, her body was failing. Her muscles were shaking as she broke the stance and used a shoulder to push Shadra closer to her own fire.

Shadra returned, sending a blast of power in her direction Mave barely dodged. Her body lit up in pain, not from the attack but from the overuse of her powers. It made her misstep as Shadra tried another attack. Mave rolled, clumsy as she tried to get to her feet.

Kristanya. I need you.

“*You have everything I can give you,*” the goddess whispered in return. “*You know what you must do...I’m sorry.*”

Mave sighed as she focused on the Empress. Diving into her mind, she let the darkness consume her and give her body even more power, making her strong. The world turned black and gray. There would be no coming back from this. Mave knew the moment she tried to release the power and go back to normal, her body would drop, unable to continue. She was half dead as it was, one foot already in the afterlife.

I’ll go to you then. If it means stopping this and saving them, I shall meet you with glory and grace. Death has never scared me before. It won’t today.

“And I shall greet you with open arms, my Avatar, my only child of death and darkness.”

There was an overbearing sadness in Mave’s head for a minute, then it was gone.

Mave roared as she met with Shadra again, steel sending sparks. This time, she crushed through Shadra’s defenses even as lightning raced through her body and made her roar of fury into one of pain. She knew the moment her steel drew blood. It wasn’t enough. She continued to press her advantage, giving the Empress who haunted her nightmares everything she had.

You made me into the perfect weapon. You taught me how to block out pain and hurt. You taught me to be cold and find refuge in my own mind. You have only yourself to thank for this, Shadra. You made me the perfect vessel for the power that could defeat you.

Mave lunged, aiming to stab the bitch through her heart. Shadra dodged, and Mave felt a blade run through a gap in her armor and hit skin. Mave pulled power from the blood until it was black. Her roars were all she could hear as she fought the sorcerer-empress with her magics that brought death. They were suited for each other, but only one of them could be the master of it, and Mave would not let it be her enemy. Mave was the one chosen by

the goddess of death and darkness, having bested the being they paid homage to. Mave was the one willing to give up everything for this victory. She was willing to die for those she loved, accepting death in all its inevitable glory. Shadra had no love. She had nothing but herself to fight for.

Mave would not allow her to win. Not after their years of history. This was the end.

Shadra jumped away, putting space between them. She dropped her staff and touched her blade with her fingers, gathering Mave's blood.

"I thought I would defeat the dragon, but owning it is just as good. Come back and be what you were meant to be...my slave."

Mave felt the mental assault, and instead of fighting it, she let Shadra in. She let Shadra fall into the void of Mave's mind, a perfectly crafted domain for the power of Kristanya, a place where few would ever feel welcomed.

Shadra's scream was music to Mave as she crossed the space between them. Shadra couldn't handle the unfathomable place Mave was holding. She had no idea the power Mave wielded.

She will learn.

Mave tossed Shadra out of her mind and watched the Empress regain herself in the real world, her eyes wide with unadulterated fear.

"What are you?" Shadra asked softly.

"Your executioner," Mave answered in a whisper, plunging her blade into Shadra's chest. She held it there as she watched the life fade from eyes that once mocked her, now frozen in the fear she had once inspired in Mave. Mave remembered screaming out for mercy once and was denied by the cruel Empress.

Shadra would find no mercy from her.

Mave pulled her blade out and let the body drop to the ground, but she kept her eyes on Shadra's, now a soul needing to pass on.

"Not for you," Mave whispered. "You don't get to move on. You end here."

"MAVE NO!" Kristanya screamed, appearing behind Shadra, her eyes full of horror.

Mave raised her black swords and brought them down on Shadra's spectral shoulders. The moment her slash was done, her blades crumbled in her hands, and her armor began to fall from her. They had cut through the

soul of the Empress, and she no longer needed them. They left the standing soul in three parts for a second.

Mave knew souls held great power. She knew the depth and power of her own and figured it was like that for everyone, for it was the core of them.

And she had just cleaved one into pieces, destroying it permanently.

I love all of you so much. Thank you for giving me a family. She hoped someone heard her. She wanted them to know her last words.

The blast hit her chest, but Mave had no idea what happened next.

She let death take her.

RAINEV

Rain felt lost. A week after the battle ended, he sat on the cliff and stared at the battlefield where he had nearly been killed. He couldn't shake it. The battle was over. The Andinna had won with the death of Shadra. Nyria had stepped up, quickly calling for the Elvasi to drop their arms, but it hadn't stopped the killing quickly enough. Another hundred souls on both sides were lost, but eventually, the word was passed. The Andinna retreated quickly back to their cliff, and peace talks started. Rain replayed it all in his mind, trying to find comfort to keep his mind off the reason he felt so lost.

Nyria hadn't been able to save her generals. Shadra had pulled too much of their life force from them, and they had died during Mave's battle against the Empress. Alchan had been severely injured. Rain had taken two days to walk again. Mat lost his left arm because the damage was too severe to save any of the underlying muscle. With no sensation left in the arm, Mat had known, even as they got him off the battlefield. He asked them to do it quickly, so he could get back to helping others.

Bryn would need months to rebuild the muscle in his legs, and they would be horrifically scarred for the rest of his life. Rain knew why Bryn didn't opt for removing them. They had been only a touch more salvageable than Mat's arm, but they were his legs. Bryn wanted to walk again.

Trevan and Kyn were grounded. Their injuries had been more serious than anyone knew. Trevan had been found after the battle, bleeding from his nose, ears, and mouth. The hit to his head would have killed him if they

hadn't gotten him to the healers. Kyn nearly lost a wing, and his sides were going to be covered in scars.

Emerian had come out well, so had Zayden, with only minor injuries. They threw themselves into the task of standing tall. Nevyn and Varon, who had stayed with their archers for the entire battle, guiding them to victory on the open field, had both taken hits, but at the end, they had been able to fly themselves off the field and find healers.

Yenni was dead. Rain leaned into his hands, resisting more tears. He had already shed so many. Her body would be taken back to Allaina, where she would be burned and her ashes spread on the wind by the mativa who loved her. She wasn't the only one dead—so many others. So many maimed or lying on their deathbeds as they tried to resist the end. Healing sleeps and healers could do a lot, but not everything.

The Andinna were going to limp away with only half their numbers. The wyverns had been brutalized, only eight making it out of the fight. The injured wyverns were still around, licking their wounds. Only three were able to fly back to their own territories after the fight, and only one had left since then.

"Rain," someone said gently, wrapping an arm around him. Rain leaned into Luykas and sobbed. He should have been cheering, but he couldn't. He couldn't celebrate. Luykas had been in a coma for two days, thanks to his use of magic. Once the fight was over, he'd fallen into a sleep and scared all of them.

And they were still waiting on her...hoping and praying.

"It's okay," Luykas whispered, holding him tightly. "Let it out, my friend. Let it out."

Rain sobbed as he thought of her broken body. The blast hadn't done her in, but her powers had. She had been emaciated and pale, her eyes closed. Her body had been covered in injuries from the long battle. The bleeding had stopped, but only thanks to the black sludge of dead blood blocking the wounds.

Worse, she had a peaceful expression on her face.

His sister had accepted dying. She had tried to go in peace.

Rain had cried out when he saw her. His father had dropped to his knees. Emerian had been the one to confirm, clutching his heart as he fought the pain of a lost blood bond.

It had been Alchan who realized she was still alive, her heart beating weakly in her hollow chest. Whatever Mave had done, it had not killed her, but it made her unreachable. The healers didn't know what to do as her body slowly healed itself. How it was doing that had been anyone's guess until Alchan had told them.

Her power, *Kristanya's* power, was keeping her alive, repairing her to keep its vessel, even though it had been the very thing that had nearly killed her. Why *now* was a real mystery, but Alchan was at Mave's side every moment he could spare. In five days, the body had completely healed, but Mave hadn't woken up.

No one knew the reason for that, either.

Which was why Rain sat on the cliffside, feeling lost.

He pulled away from Luykas and took a deep breath.

"I'm sorry. I should get back to work."

"I'm handling things when you're not," Luykas reminded him. "I'm also a Prince of Anden, Consort. Don't try to kill yourself overworking when you have me here."

Rain nodded, knowing better than to argue. He needed the work. He needed to take his mind off everything. He stood slowly and headed for the war tent, Luykas following him, nearly stepping on his heels.

"Rain, get some rest," Luykas ordered.

"I will," he promised...after he found a job he could sink his teeth into. As he walked in, the few unit commanders left, talking over their supply problems and when they should move out, looked up and silenced.

"Consort," one greeted cautiously. "Do you have any news for us about ___"

"We will be leaving once..." He didn't know.

The peace treaty had been written and signed. The Elvasi were already moving out of the valley, limping home. They were in a race against winter, so Nyria couldn't stay long. From here on out, official correspondence would be through Luykas until messengers could be trusted for anything less pressing. There was so much the new Empress needed to do. She sent messengers ahead of her, declaring the end of the war and demanding the freedom of the Andinna. All Andinna were required to be back in Anden before the year was over, and their work for the Empire was to stop

immediately. Keeping slaves was once again punishable by death in the Elvasi Empire.

“When our king orders us to move,” Luykas finished for him as Rain was once again lost in his thoughts. “We’re still tending wounded who can’t be moved or need more time before they can walk. We don’t have enough carts to send them ahead of us. Word has already been sent to the village, and we received aid just yesterday, as fast as it could come. Don’t be impatient. This is how war ends. We must do it right.”

They all bowed their heads to the power and conviction in Luykas’ words. They wouldn’t defy the brother of the king and husband of the Champion who had tried to die for them. The tale of her glory had spread through the camp—there had been no stopping it.

It left Rain lost, and a bitter taste entered his mouth as they left him and Luykas alone.

“What’s on your mind?” Luykas asked softly, giving him a strange look.

“She knew she was going to die,” Rain whispered.

“Yes.”

“That doesn’t...infuriate you? That she would do that?” Rain slammed his hand on the table. He hated how he wanted her to come back so desperately and wanted to scream at her at the same time.

“I think...” Luykas sighed as he found a seat. “That’s who she is. It’s why we all love her, even when it hurts us. I can’t feel her anymore...she’s too deep in her powers. But I’ve been thinking...I recognized it before she killed Shadra. She had been pulling away the entire time as she called on more and more of that...darkness.”

“Can you...try?” Rain asked pitifully, clutching the table’s edge until it cracked under his strength. He released it, growling as his wyvern howled inside him, angry they were losing someone who meant so much. She was alive. He didn’t know why he felt as if he was losing her, but he did. Or the wyvern part of him did, and he just accepted it.

“I...I have,” Luykas said softly.

“Have the others?”

Luykas frowned. “What do you mean?” Luykas’ eyes went wide. “You want all six of her husbands to call for her at the same time. She’s in a healing sleep, Rain.”

“Her body is healing! She should have woken up two days ago!” Rain yelled. “Have you seen it today? Have you gone to look at your wife? She looks like she’s lost half her body weight, and that needs food, not a healing sleep. Her injuries are closed. Everything is healed! Why isn’t she awake?”

Luykas stood back up, his eyes wide.

“All six of us,” Luykas said, his words airy and without direction. “Thank you, Rain. Maybe...maybe with Alchan’s help and a little magic...”

“You think we need more magic?” He growled, frowning. “Magic nearly killed all of us.”

Luykas was already running out of the room.

Rain went to his shared tent with Alchan. Mave hadn’t been taken to her own. His wonderful husband had brought Mave to their space, so he could watch his sister.

“What do you need, my love?” Alchan asked as Rain touched his shoulder.

“I think I just gave Luykas a bad idea,” he admitted. “Magic and blood bonds.”

Alchan only nodded, then stiffened. “Blood bonds.”

“What?”

“They’re living,” Alchan said, his jaw dropping. “That’s why she’s not awake. She’s...”

“She’s not dead,” Rain snarled, pulling away from his husband.

“No, but she’s a being with powers over the dead, and she’s retreated deep inside them. That’s why I’ve stayed at her side, brought her here, and slept next to her. I’m her light in that void.” Alchan jumped up. “She’s lost in there, and I can’t reach into the void and grab her. I’m only a beacon of light to her.”

It clicked for Rain.

“And the blood bonds would be tethers.”

“Exactly!” Alchan said, grabbing his shoulders with a smile. “Rain, it’s not a bad idea at all.”

For the first time in a week, Rain saw hope on his husband’s face. They might be able to bring her back.

MAVE

Mave thought she had died, but nothing was right. For some reason, she hadn't gone to Kristanya as she was supposed to. She had come to the void, and all she had was darkness.

Until a bright light began to shine in the distance—a guide. She could feel its power and knew what it wanted from her, could feel its unspoken command. She knew someone was waiting for her, and she had to follow that direction, but the face was elusive.

She was missing something, but nonetheless, she knew the command of the light.

Come back.

So, she fought to get to the light. Every time she thought she was close, she slipped away, unable to claw out of the nothingness that held her. She was too weak, too tired, and desperation wasn't enough.

She grew more hopeless every moment as she tried and tried to reach it, each endeavor growing worse. She felt untethered, as though the currents of the ocean were constantly pushing her away from it.

Then she felt it.

No, not an it.

Them.

She felt the pull in her blood as distant hearts reached for hers and found purchase—living lines between her and the blood of others. She couldn't remember their names, couldn't remember their eyes. She remembered other things, though—moments of joy and love.

The pull gave her a line in the darkness, and it led to the light. She let it help her, knowing whoever was pulling her only meant the best. They wanted her to come back.

She finally crawled closer to the light than she had ever been. The light had a name. It was her brother, Alchan. The bonds she shared were her husbands, her very living husbands. She had gone too far into the void, putting a foot into death, but they were what she needed to get out—her light and her living loves.

She wanted to weep as she reached for the light and her fingers made contact.

Her eyes opened.

MAVE

Mave stared at Alchan with wonder, her first breath filling sore lungs. She reached up and touched his face, unsure why she was so happy to see him. Something lingered in the back of her mind, a dream, but she dismissed it as she threw her arms around her brother and brought him down to her.

He laughed as he held her, gathering her up in an embrace they had never shared before. He laughed until she could feel the coolness of his tears on her cheek and tried to wipe them away.

“Brother?” she asked softly. “Did we win?”

“We won,” he answered, lowering his head.

“Of course, she asks about that,” someone muttered.

She smiled brightly and jumped for the source, finding herself on Mat. He went to the ground, groaning under her.

When she stopped kissing him, she sat up and realized something was wrong.

“Oh,” she whispered, touching the bandages over a shoulder that went nowhere. There was no arm.

“It wasn’t my sword arm,” he said softly. “Trevan was the one who nearly died. And Bryn is over there, stuck in a chair and riding on Kyn because he can’t walk right now.”

She turned and saw them all. Alchan was still where she had left him, Rain behind him with a hand over his mouth, tears in his eyes. Luykas looked exhausted, on the ground with sweat covering him. Bryn was

trapped in a chair, wearing leather breeches, but she could see how thin his legs were now compared to their previous thick power. Emerian and Trevan leaned on each other, watching her with amazement. Zayden was the first to come forward, his happiness turning into a grouchy expression.

“You...” he pointed at her, huffing. “You tried to...”

Die was the word that hung in the empty space between them.

“Yeah,” she whispered. Trust Zayden to be the one to call her out. “I’m sorry. I had to go all the way. I couldn’t hold back. I had to know she was...”

He lunged for her, his arms wrapping around her like vices, hauling her up, and holding her.

“You did it,” he whispered. “You did it, then you wouldn’t wake up, and...”

She held him and knew something about her had deeply hurt the people around her. As Zayden put her down, Nevyn and Varon walked in slowly, Nevyn using a cane.

She frowned at it, then met his eyes.

“I took an arrow to the knee,” he explained. “It’ll heal, but it’s a bit weak. There’s a chance I won’t be going on any more adventures.”

“He won’t be if I have anything to say about it,” Varon said with a sweet smile. “It’s good to see you up, Mave.”

“It’s good to be up,” she said. “Does anyone want to tell me how long I’ve been out? And what’s going on? What did I missed?”

They launched into explanations, and she found herself passed between embraces as she listened to them, so much in the short seven days she had slept. Peace was beginning, and she let it fill her heart with joy.

“*Avatar*,” Kristanya said softly, calling Mave away as everyone realized they needed to get back to work. The single word echoed in Mave’s mind.

“Mave? Don’t you want to come see everything?” Mat asked her gently.

“Later,” she whispered, staring at the goddess waiting for her in the night. “I...”

“Go,” he said with a smile.

She followed her goddess, wondering what Kristanya wanted. When she reached to grab a sword belt, just for security, Kristanya came closer and put her hand in the way.

“No,” the goddess ordered, still speaking mentally. “*The battle had been fought and won. You need time to heal. You won’t be needing that for a long time.*”

Mave pulled her hand away from the sword and followed Kristanya.

“That’s fine. I can just use my powers if I need a sword,” she said softly as they walked alone into the trees outside of the camp.

“No,” Kristanya repeated. “*Mave...Do you feel it?*”

Mave looked away. “What happened?” she asked, knowing Kristanya sensed the same thing she did.

“You...nearly lost yourself in the void.” Kristanya stopped speaking into her mind and spoke clearly, her voice echoing in the shadows of the world. “It’s a bit both of our faults, really. You should have died. I didn’t want you to, but I didn’t think about how much control you gave up to my powers, and they were taking over. You lost control and couldn’t regain it. If it wasn’t for your husbands and your king, you would have been lost, forever locked in the void, which couldn’t wake your body, even though my powers healed it.”

Mave stopped walking, her eyes going wide. *The dream.* It had been *real.*

“Why couldn’t your powers wake me?” she asked very softly.

“I wouldn’t let them. I would have let you stay there until age finally claimed your body before I let you wake up out of control,” Kristanya explained. “So, that comes to our talk. You are still my Avatar, but let me be honest with you. If you try to call those powers right now, you will probably lose control and die. I won’t save you a second time. I shouldn’t have saved you the first time, but your sacrifice was...worthy. You deserve a life of peace. There’s still a purpose to have an Avatar. So many souls are stuck here from the battle. They need someone. It’s one of the softer powers you’ve shown, and I think you can handle it. If not now, then someday when you are healthy. There are lost souls all over Anden, waiting to come to me.”

“I won’t be a dragon again.”

“I don’t think you should try, no,” Kristanya said gently. She reached out and touched Mave’s cheek. “And that’s okay. If you feel the need, you could call it, but you won’t survive it. You traumatized your soul too much.”

Mave nodded as she swallowed that bitter pill. All the power she had inside of her was completely off-limits unless Mave was again willing to give the same sacrifice. It would have to be another great threat.

She quickly got over it because even though she lost something small, Kristanya had given her something more.

“You’ve given me a life with my family,” Mave said, tears filling her eyes.

“I tried,” Kristanya said, spreading her hands. Mave walked to her and embraced the goddess. They were cloaked in the shadows of the night, but Mave didn’t care if anyone saw her holding nothing.

Kristanya leaned into the embrace.

“You will heal and will always be my Avatar,” Kristanya said gently. “And maybe one day, you will know the joy you have unexpectedly given me. But first, you must heal. Are we clear?”

“Yes,” Mave whispered into her shoulder.

“Now, go be among the living. They worked hard to get you back, and you worked hard to keep them here.”

Kristanya kissed her forehead and faded away.

Mave turned back to the camp and found them hanging out in the war room, losing her breath when she saw Senri waiting there. Lily was there as well, standing between Rain and Alchan, but Mave only saw Senri. She embraced her mother, who held her until Alchan cleared his throat.

“We have a lot of work to do,” he said, giving them a hopeful smile. “Can we get to it?”

Mave nodded. He was right. There was still so much to be done. They had to rebuild an entire nation with only scraps of what they had been.

But they would do it. One day, Anden would not just be as it was, but better.

And she would live to see it.

EPILOGUE

MAVE

1000 years later

Mave woke up on a mountain top. After seeing this place in her own world, she could guess she was in another.

“And you would be guessing correctly,” someone said behind her.

Mave turned slowly to see Kristanya. Not an unusual sight, but the visit wasn't normal.

“And what do I owe the pleasure of this...visit?” Mave asked, gesturing around at the summit where they stood. “It's been a long time since I've been pulled into a dream. You normally yell at me in real-time.”

Kristanya gave her a friendly glare, indulgent and humored. They had long lost any real anger they had at each other. Now, Mave looked at Kristanya as an enigmatic friend or mentor. They constantly needled each other, but any threats of violence were half-hearted.

“I guess I need my sister for the explanation,” Kristanya whispered, turning slowly. “We'll give her a moment to arrive.”

Mave couldn't help but wonder why Larianna was coming, then found herself surprised.

A large dragon landed on the summit. She was shades of pinks and reds, and as she walked closer, her form changed from majestic creature and god to an Andinna of unusual coloring.

It wasn't Larianna.
With her smile, Mave's world changed.



THEY LANDED TOGETHER on the palace steps, the front doors wide open and ready for their arrival. They made this trip every year, even if they couldn't all attend. As winter came, Mave and her husbands went to the palace to spend the coldest season in frigid Anden with the entire family. Sometimes, one or two of them were pulled away on some other business. Mave had to take a tour of the temples once every twenty years, which could take an entire year. Luykas taught sorcery and blood magic. Trevan sometimes visited his parents in the Empire, though those trips were becoming more infrequent. Normally, though, they all arrived together, and this was one of those years.

"I'll see everyone in the courtyard, yeah?" Luykas called out, already walking away only moments after they had landed. Mave had no idea what he was running to do, but she didn't really mind. There were a couple of his students, wintering in the palace, he was probably trying to surprise. He loved teaching more than she ever thought he would.

"Of course!" Trevan called back, letting Kyn carry him all the way inside before sliding off. That was the plus to the palace. The front double doors could fit a small wyvern. They could fit any wyvern. Mave had seen Rain enter through them more than once, and he was nearly twice Kyn's size.

Kyn didn't stay long, heading back out the door and taking off to roost in the nearest mountains for the winter, as he did every year. They tried keeping him inside one winter, and no one had enjoyed it.

"I'm going to hunt down Alchan's new boy," Zayden said with a grin as he started heading in the direction of their favorite courtyard. "Lily is probably already showing him off to everyone. Can't believe he didn't let us make the trip in spring when he was born."

"Wait up," Emerian begged, trying to keep up.

"Emerian, he's got baby fever. He's not going to hear you," Trevan said with a bright laugh.

“Mave?” Bryn looked between her and the running males.

“Go,” she ordered, smiling indulgently, and he was gone, running after the rest.

They all have baby fever.

Mat was the last with her, his arm slowly wrapping around her waist.

“Are you waiting for Alchan?” he asked softly, kissing the top of her head.

“I am,” she confirmed with a nod. “Like I do every year. Go see Lashaun.”

“Are you sure? I’ll stay with you. It’s not like he’s going anywhere.”

That’s Mat. First husband to come into my life and the last to ever leave me be, even when I want him to.

“I’m fine.”

“I think I’ll stay—”

“There’s no need,” Alchan said as he entered the main hall and walked toward them. “You can leave her unattended for a moment. I have her.”

Mave rolled her eyes as Mat kissed her one more time and left, following after Zayden, Trevan, Emerian, and Bryn. She watched him go to the side door that led to the hall to their favorite courtyard. It was a journey they took every time they came to the palace for the winter.

“You know, they normally don’t stick to you like that, not even Mat. Normally, coming to the palace, they don’t even question whether you can be alone or not.” Alchan raised an eyebrow, knowing something was a little different this year.

“How interesting,” she said with a small smile, refusing to tell him what he wanted to know. She gave him her arm, and he escorted her as he did every year. This was tradition. They always spent a small bit of time together when she arrived, just the two of them talking about everything and nothing. It would be the only alone time they had the entire winter just to be two Avatars, bonded by duty, loyalty, and heart. He would always be her king and brother, and she would always be his Champion and sister. They needed these moments.

“Are you really going to give me nothing?” he said with a soft chuckle. “Well, I have time to get it out of you.”

“If we’re not interrupted all the time,” Mave said, seeing five others walk into the main hall. Varon and Nevyn, with their adopted son, hung

back as the other adult Andinna closed the distance.

“Father, Aunt,” the female greeted, all the fiery dominance in her words and a clear struggle in her bow to them. Mave sighed heavily as the amber-eyed princess straightened up.

“Daughter.” Alchan sounded only a *little* annoyed, a plus because Mave remembered years where she was certain he was going to strangle her out of love.

“Arianna,” Mave greeted next.

“Have you told her the news, father?” Arianna looked at her father with expectation.

“No, and you won’t ambush us again, is that clear?” Alchan had to be a little tougher with her every year. Mave could feel the same thing he could and understood why.

His daughter was growing into the female everyone spoke of when they thought of the royal family. The world moved on her schedule, not because the princess was spoiled, but because she knew what she was, who she was. She would one day rule, and she carried herself with all the weight and pride of it.

Mave respected the young female, who was quite literally born for the role. She would make a good queen one day. Just not as Mave’s.

“You’re not curious?” Arianna asked her, frowning deeply.

“If it was pressing, Alchan would have already told me. Since he hasn’t, I don’t see a reason to get worked up. He’ll get around to it.”

That was clearly not what the princess wanted to hear, but while Alchan fought with her dominance, Mave pointedly ignored it and had ever since the princess was young. Mave and Arianna had a somewhat antagonistic relationship, loving but antagonistic. It always would be because Mave knew she couldn’t do anything else. Neither of them could. Arianna thought the only person who didn’t have to submit to her was her father, and Mave defied that at every turn. She had been Alchan’s go-to family member to help him raise the princess because of it.

“Well...okay.” Arianna sighed and bowed again.

Mave finally took the chance to look at the other youth and smiled.

“How are you, Kianev?” she asked softly, letting go of Alchan to hug her brother now that the princess didn’t demand her attention.

“I’m fine, Sis.” He was so tall and a spitting image of Kian. Every time she saw him, her heart broke a little, but she knew Kian would be overjoyed to know his son was such a wonderful male.

Mave waved Alchan and Arianna to walk along for a moment so she could ask Kianev a question that had been burning in her for months. Once they were waiting out of earshot, she grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled.

“You became her *husband*?” Mave growled softly in his ear once it was on her level.

“Yeah,” Kianev answered, laughing.

“Are you mad? She’s going to run you over.”

“She does, but I think that’s why I fell in love with her,” he admitted. “I do love her, Mave. More than anyone.”

Mave sighed and released him. Then she fixed his formal shirt and brushed it off, even though there was nothing on it.

“Mother gave her blessing, you know,” he said with a sheepish smile. “So did our fathers.”

Kian would have too.

“Yeah, I know,” Mave admitted. “I just wasn’t ready for you to join a mayara and have a wife...I wasn’t ready.”

“Mother said you wouldn’t be,” he teased. He laughed harder when she popped him in the belly with the back of her hand. “But you know Arianna, and I grew up with her. I think I’ve always loved her, Mave.”

“I know,” she whispered, touching his cheeks. She could still remember the day she had met him, a tiny baby with Kian’s eyes, who stole her heart forever. She would destroy the world for her little brother. Nothing had changed in that regard. “You...you deserve all the happiness in the world, Kianev. I am happy for you.”

“We’re thinking of an official ceremony this winter and having Varon do it. Will you come?”

“Of course,” she promised, her heart too full at his invitation. She sent him back to his wife and took Alchan’s arm again. She watched Kianev and Arianna walk out together, laughing, probably at Mave’s reaction to their love affair.

“They started sleeping together a century ago,” Alchan reminded her. “It was about damn time they made it official.”

Mave glared at him. “We’re not supposed to be old enough for the next generation to start getting married,” she snapped.

“You are just over two thousand years old. I am nearly three thousand. We might have a lot of years left in us, but we’re definitely old enough. You try telling that to Zayden, and he’ll wallop you.” Alchan was laughing as they waved at Varon and Nevyn. Their adopted son turned to them and smiled, waving enthusiastically. He had a bandage wrapped around his head, denoting that he was blind. A hatchling wyvern walked out from behind a pillar and sat down at the young male’s feet, chittering happily.

“You know...we’ve seen a lot of things in our lifetime, but I think that’s my favorite,” Alchan said softly.

“Mine, too,” she whispered. “I can’t believe it’s working.” It had taken blood, sweat, and tears, but her genius husband, Luykas, had figured out how to give the blind eyes. Now, Varon’s adopted son could see out of the eyes of the young wyvern next to him. The boy and the wyvern would have to remain together for the rest of their lives, but it was something. They could fly together.

“He’ll be flying like Trevan one day. I refuse to believe otherwise.”

She believed the same thing.

They walked out of the main hall into a back hall that was rarely used. He escorted her to a small door and opened it. A stone patio with little frills waited for them. She stepped out and let the cold winds hit her face.

“I’ve already brought us drinks and something to snack on,” he said as he took a seat at the small table in the center, with only two chairs. Only two people ever came to this particular patio, and it was them.

Mave sat opposite him and looked down on the courtyard below. Not the city the patio had a view of, which was beautiful in its own right. She could see the entire capital city from her spot, but it didn’t matter. All she cared about was the courtyard that had the same view she did.

It was mostly stone and had a somber look if one didn’t know the joy often in it. It was full of statues of heroes and plaques telling war stories. It had been Alchan’s gift to everyone in the Company. There were life-sized replications of Leshoun, Kian, and so many more. Even a small but intelligent human named Dave found a place here, forever in their memories.

Mave looked down on the courtyard every year, and tears filled her eyes as she watched her husbands and friends, the entirety of her family, visit and have quiet moments at the feet of those statues. At Kian's, Mave saw Senri, Willem, and Gentrin, with Lashaun, Mat, and Zayden. Dave wasn't alone either, with Trevan and Emerian at his feet, looking up at his immortalized face. Allaina stood at the foot of a statue of Yenni, the only female Allaina had ever fallen in love with. After a moment, the quiet broke with the entrance of Arianna and Kianev. The teasing about their union started immediately from Bryn and Emerian. Senri laughed, and it echoed across the courtyard. Then chaos completely erupted when Lily and Rain walked out, a little bundle in Lily's arms. Both had that sparkle Mave knew as the pride of new parents. She had seen it from them once before when Arianna had been born.

"You can go down there, you know."

"You say that every year, but you know I only go down there on Al Moro Nat," she replied as she turned to him. That was also the only day she wore black robes. She was Avatar and High Priestess, but she only officially served as the latter for Al Moro Nat at the palace, for her king and her family. Other times, she played an informal role and helped guide the priesthood where she wanted it to go. "I heard a rumor I haven't told my husbands yet," she admitted softly.

"What was that?"

"Your newborn son has sapphire eyes," Mave said with a mischievous smile.

"Yes, and you'll never get the story behind that." He puffed with pride, though.

"I don't need it." She sipped on the drink he had poured for her when she wasn't paying attention. It wasn't wine, which meant she wasn't going to get out of this conversation without an important topic coming up. He had already figured her out. "But I am glad those sapphires got to go to the next generation."

"I am too." Alchan's smile caused small wrinkles around his eyes. The weight of the crown and the joy of their shared family had given him those lines. She reached out and smoothed them, a very casual touch she only gave him in private. "I also heard a rumor."

“Let me guess. Luykas whispered it to you,” she said, dropping her hand as she leaned back in her chair.

“He’s my brother,” Alchan said with a grin. “Can you blame him? What I want to know is how.”

“First, you’ll tell me your daughter’s important news,” Mave countered. “Or you won’t get a thing out of me.”

“Yes...that is important,” Alchan said with a heavier sigh than Mave was expecting. “I’m stepping down in the spring. She rolled me. She took me off guard and got me to drop my eyes. And...now she has a husband who can support her, to take the load off her shoulders. I’m giving it up and letting her take the position.” He lifted a hand and silenced Mave before she could get a sound out of her open mouth. “She’s ready...and Anden is ready. I’m a male, and even though I became the Avatar, that doesn’t entitle me to a lifetime rule. There are some traditions I wanted to keep. This is one of them. A king steps down when his female heir is ready. She is *ready*.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I was thinking of moving to a little valley I know of, where some of the other Avatars live,” he answered with a smile. “If the ruler of that empty valley will have me.”

“Are you willing to work the field and give up the easy life you’ve lived?” she asked. It was her valley, and while it was her official home, it was also the vacation home of Varon, Nevyn, and their son. It had made things easier while Varon and Luykas had worked to help Varon’s son. They came to the valley at least every other year. Her valley was informally known as the Valley of Avatars now, and Alchan moving in would only make that even more fitting.

“I mean, in a hundred years, yes. First, we’re going to raise Zaynev here. He is still a prince, even if his sister takes the throne.”

“That might be wise,” she agreed. “Considering, when people are in my valley, they are farmers. All previous occupations are forgotten.” That was how Mave and her husbands spent their days, tending their fields to have a small harvest. It was more of a garden than a farm, but it gave Mave an outlet for her time since she hadn’t picked up a sword in a thousand years. Not that she needed the practice. If she picked one up today, she would still be as good as she had once been. She just had no reason to pick one up.

And I like it that way.

“She’s missing some maturity, your daughter,” Mave finally pointed out.

“It’s maturity she has to learn on the throne,” he countered. “I’ll still be around to give her advice whenever she needs it.”

“Anden is still healing.”

“We’ve done everything we can. Now, it’s just time,” he said, reaching for her hand. “Mave, she’s going to be the queen. Nothing is going to change my mind.”

“She’s never going to be *my* queen,” Mave said, trying to pull her hand away. He refused to let her go, forcing her to deal with this change.

“No, I never thought she would be. The relationship you have with her will last until the end. I know that. I will always be your king. I’ve already taken that into account when I spoke to Larianna.” He leaned in close. “We’ve considered you and your needs. Don’t worry.”

“Really?”

“She’s going to leave me with a kernel of power, just for you,” Alchan confirmed gently, squeezing her hand. “So, you always have someone you trust in the dark.”

Mave nodded. “That’s...perfect.” She still needed that light, that firm hand. While she had dropped violence from her life, she was still the Avatar of Kristanya. She would always need that light in Alchan. His daughter was wonderful, but Mave had a personality clash with her. She didn’t have the same unbreakable trust in the young female she had with Alchan.

“I’m glad you understand,” Alchan whispered. “Now, I’ve told you that, so now you get to tell me how you ended up having a fertile cycle this past spring.”

Mave smiled and thought of the dream she had the night before it had begun.

“You brought so much death, and we needed you to do that. I knew there was a path where you could become too broken to be the power we needed you to be. I could also see the path Kristanya and Larianna wished to be blind to, the one where you and Alchan became their Avatars. So, when my sister came to me, I did the punishment she wanted, not because I agreed with her reasons, but for my own,” Amonora said softly, touching Mave’s cheek. “And I broke you, and for that, I am sorry. But it gave you

the chance to find love in a pure way with the males you have found, and it allowed you to be the Avatar of Kristanya I had hoped you would become. Thank you for the sacrifice you made for us.”

“Will I still be the Avatar if you do this?” Mave had long years to come to terms with her so-called brokenness. She and her husbands had never spoken of it, and they didn’t grieve it. It just was. They already had a perfect family, and she had a purpose in peace times as Kristanya’s Avatar. She had gone back and sent on the lost souls once she was healed. She continued to occasionally wander Anden to find others.

She didn’t want to lose that.

“Yes,” Kristanya growled. “Why would I release you from it now?”

Mave laughed at the female. Their bond would end one day, but apparently, not this one. There was genuine caring between them, and Kristanya’s expression softened. A goddess of darkness and death had no daughters, but Mave was almost one. The closest Kristanya could ever have.

“Now...” Amonora reached out to her. “It is time for me to fix what I’ve done. You are ready. If you want it.”

“I do.”

Mave had woken up, and by lunchtime, she had begun her fertile cycle.

“A gift,” Mave murmured into her drink before sipping the juice Alchan had brought them this year.

“And? I can tell when anyone is pregnant, but you...I think your powers hide it from me.”

Mave stood up and went to the railing of the courtyard, looking down on everyone she loved as Alchan came to her side and took in the sight with her. She then looked at the city and the rest of the world beyond.

She and Alchan had worked hard to rebuild Anden and bring the Andinna back. In the Empire, they talked of the resurgence of the great Andinna, the scars of war healing, and their relationships being rebuilt under Nyria, called the Golden Empress for not only her looks but the prosperity she was bringing to her people.

“We’ve done well, haven’t we?” Mave asked her king. “Rebuilding. I heard the Empire ushered in a new age this year.”

“I think so. That’s why I’m so comfortable leaving it to the next generation now, even though it’s only been a thousand years. And they...”

Want to know what they called it?”

“We’re in the Age of the Andinna, right?” She had gotten a laugh out of it. She had laughed until she had cried because she knew the work it had been to bring in this new age.

“That’s right,” he said, slowly nodding as they stared over the world together.

“It’s a fine age to raise a family, isn’t it?” She placed a hand over her belly, keeping her face perfectly blank, a skill she would never lose. “A good time to bring new life into the world, right?”

Alchan turned to her slowly. She could see him out of the corner of her eye with a shocked expression she would never forget.

“Yes, sister, I do think it is,” he agreed, his words thick once he composed himself.

“Good.” She turned away from him and looked into the courtyard once more, thinking of her family and how far they had all come together. How far they still had to go, and the centuries ahead of them that would be filled with love and happiness.

And she smiled.

DEAR READER,

Uh. It's over. Thanks for reading. I hope you enjoyed the story of Mave and her family. Of Alchan and his. Of the Andinna and their gods.

I don't know what to say right now. This has to be the hardest note I've put in the back of a book.

I mean, I guess I could tell you that Mave goes on to have 2 daughters. Her oldest becomes Arianna's top general. The second takes Mave's place as High Priestess of Kristanya (but not as Avatar. That is Mave's title for life and there won't be an Avatar after her). Mave never picks up a sword again, except to train her daughters with it. Mat, Bryn, Zayden, Luykas, Emerson, and Trevan? They're wonderful and doting fathers.

Alchan, Rain, and Lily have a happy family together. That son we met in the epilogue? He can also transform into a wyvern, just like his sapphire-eyed father.

Arianna is a good Queen when Alchan steps down.

And so this series draws to a close.

Thank you for staying with me for seven books. I appreciate every one of you.

Check out my website with my blog(where you can find free reading material from new points of view), and sign up for my mailing list! [**HERE**](#)

Or you can come join me in [The Banet Pride](#), my facebook reader's group.

And remember,

Reviews are always welcome, whether you loved or hated the book. Please consider taking a few moments to leave one and know I appreciate every second of your time and I'm thankful.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR- KRISTEN

KristenBanetAuthor.com

Kristen Banet loves to read books that make people cry. She likes to write books that make people cry (and she wants to hear about it). She's a firm believer that nothing and no one in this world is perfect, and she enjoys exploring those imperfections—trying to make the characters seem real on the page and not just in her head. Worlds of action, adventure, trying times, and true love are the things that get her writing.

She *might* be crazy, though. Her characters think so, but this can't be confirmed. You might want to try asking her husband, two dogs, and cat.



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ANDENA GLOSSARY



Feminine- 'am'

- Amin- Female
- Ami- Baby
- Amra- Mother
- Arra- Mommy/Mom (Informal mother)
- Amara- Daughter
- Amir- Sister
- Amrya- Aunt
- Amyra- Neice
- Amran- Grandmother
- Amanra- Lover/Wife

Masculine- 'bod'

- Bodin- Male
- Bodi- Baby
- Bodra- Father
- Baba- Daddy/Dad (Informal father)
- Bodara- Son
- Bodyr- Brother
- Bodrya- Uncle
- Bodyra- Nephew
- Bodran- Grandfather

Bodanra- Lover/Husband

Alternative Male and Female

Ahin- A gay female

Ahren- A female that is excessively submissive. Normally isn't strong enough in personality to attract males.

Ahyara- Committed female-only relationship.

Bedin- A gay male.

Bedru- A male that is excessively dominate and possessive. Normally considered unsuitable to females due to dominance issues.

Bedyara- Committed male-only relationship.

General Terms

Ahea- Hello

Ohea- Goodbye

Al- The

Ut- You

Uta- Them

Et- Me/I

Rai- The term for the Andinna temper. No real translation.

Mativa- A 'tradition keeper', or someone, normally female, who passes on important cultural knowledge and leads a community.

Olda- Blood

Oldura- Official Andenna word for a 'Blackblood'. No real translation.

Tatua- The Andinna 'ink' normally done by a Blackblood with blood magic.

Mayara- Andinna family unit. The band of males who center on a female to protect serve, and in most cases, love. Generally husbands/lovers, but can also include brothers, fathers, sons, or just close male friends.

Illo- Big, large (Illon- bigger, larger)

Illi- Little, small (Illin- smaller, littler)

Oto- Old (Oton- older)

Oti- Young (Otin- younger)

Ildan- Friend

Ilanra- Beloved

Ildar- Adopted/Adopt/Adoptive in terms of family.

Raki- Mixed blood/mutt.

Ensam- An Andinna without social place. Forced out by the community or by choice.

Mara- Life

Olmara- Birth

Moro- Death

Somaro- Elite warrior

Morok- Classic Andinna curved blade

Svamor- War group of Andinna.

Semara- Soul

Sema- Skies or just the sky.

Sita- Submit/Submissive

Andin- Dragon

Andinno- Wyvern

Vahne- Strong

Nola- King

Lera- Walk (Lerani- run)

Vorha- Mountain

Curses and Sayings

Kak- Shit

Amov/Bodov- Bitch for female and male respectively

Kuk- Ass

Voek- Damn

Linti- Pigeon

Voek al Sema- Damn the Skies

Na al Sema- By the Skies

Skies/Sema- a way Andinna reference their gods without blaspheming.

“Damn the Skies.” “By the Skies.”

Anvea et- I’m sorry or ‘forgive me’

Et anvea ut- Apology accepted or ‘I forgive you’