



INTO THE WASTELANDS

Gwynn Marssen

Love's Landscapes 2014

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

INTO THE WASTELANDS

By Gwynn Marssen

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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INTO THE WASTELANDS

By Gwynn Marssen

Photo Description

A simple sepia drawing of a lean man lying naked and unconscious on a sand colored background. He has one hand curled up next to his head, one leg bent.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Riding through the desert on a routine patrol, I come across this... He's been left in the sand to die... by who? What is his crime? And dare I rescue him? He won't survive the heat of the coming day. It would be so easy to let the sun make my decision for me, and truly, that's what I should do. But there's something about him... I find I cannot turn my back on him.

Fantasy or post-apocalyptic/dystopian sci-fi would be awesome... other than that, go for it.

Sincerely,

Jaye

Story Info

Genre: post-apocalyptic, dystopian, fantasy

Tags: adventure, tattoos, intercultural, animals, gods, first time, magic users, a smart-ass pony, corvidophobia

Word Count: 54,269

Dedication

This one is for Jaye McKenna for the awesome, awesome prompt that helped me create a world that is too interesting to leave after just this one book. So yes, I have a sequel planned ;)

Acknowledgements

Thumbs up for the Love's Landscapes crew who gave up all their free time to make this event so freaking awesome!

I want to thank Rick for your thorough beta-reading and helping me see problems I would've never spotted on my own. Also many thanks to Nicole from Angel Edits for the amazing edit job you did.

And Karen: thank you isn't enough for how grateful I am for all your help. Without you, the book wouldn't have been what it is now. I highly doubt I would've finished it, and even if I had, the process wouldn't have been half the fun.

INTO THE WASTELANDS

By Gwynn Marssen

Chapter 1

I was bored. And lonely. And although I was getting mightily sick of the way my life had turned into a pit of emptiness with nothing to entertain me, I was diligently ignoring both sensations, since there wasn't anything I could do about either. I was stuck here until my uncle *or my mother*—I still wasn't sure which of them had come up with this punishment—allowed me to come home. For three long weeks, I had been alone in the middle of nowhere, right where the driest, most barren part of our lands bordered on the Wastelands.

Over a thousand years ago, the Great Cataclysm had obliterated the world. It was so long ago no one truly knew what had happened—no one but me. A cruel twist of fate had given me visions in which I witnessed the past, and forced me to live through all the horrors of the world's violent history. In those visions, I'd seen the rest of the Earth evolve and recover from its wounds until it finally settled into some sort of equilibrium.

The Wastelands, however, had remained dead and empty for many more generations. Only during my lifetime had plants and small animals returned here. Granted, all the plants looked somewhat off, the colors too bright, leaves moving even though there was no wind. It felt like everything was still changing here, and in a way that was too fast and slightly wrong.

I had to admit the Wastelands were beautiful in an almost otherworldly and disturbing way. The endless miles of red sands and bizarre rock formations constantly changed color as the unforgiving sun made its lazy way through the ever cloudless sky. Not that the beauty of the scenery made me enjoy spending time here. The fact that I didn't foresee an end to my forced isolation made me cringe in misery whenever I thought about it. But even the all too likely reality of being stuck here until I died of boredom had me no closer to changing my mind about any of the disagreements I had with my mother and uncle. I had no intention of helping to reproduce the ancient technology my uncle had found in those priceless old books of his—machinery which had helped create this broken world in the first place.

Not that I was able to give them the information they searched for anyway. They very well knew this and chose to ignore it. I had no idea why sending me to patrol the Wastelands' border with just my loyal pony, Bane, for company was supposed to have any effect on my capacity to focus my visions of the past.

Perhaps they figured I was only being stubborn and faking my complete inability to give them what they wanted.

I agreed—and that could very well be the only thing we had ever agreed on—with their repeated arguments that it would be “nice” to have more control over the visions flooding me with the terrors of the past. I would like not having to spend half my life immersed in horror, and to be able to see what I wanted to see, when I wanted it. If they’d only be honest and admit they didn’t give a fuck about my well-being—or my sanity, that I was hanging onto by my fingertips—and simply desired to use my dysfunctional brain as a means to conquer the world.

So far, I had made no progress, mostly because I hadn’t even tried, and also because this place gave me the creeps. The heat and eerie silence were getting to me, as was the constant itching of the lines etched into my skin. The air itself felt charged, something that had gotten worse and worse as the days went on. It made me restless, jumpy, and simply miserable. Things had happened here. Terrible memories hovered just beneath my consciousness, leaving me half-immersed in visions all day, and had me suffer haunting dreams at night.

The endless morning turned into an endless afternoon, and following a brief break for a meal and a nap, I turned around to retrace Bane’s steps through the same mind-numbing emptiness. Going insane with boredom, I decided to discard all warnings and take a shortcut home through the Wastelands.

“I’m going in,” I mumbled to Bane who didn’t answer because, of course, he was a pony.

Bane refused to obey my orders. The stubborn beast kept going the same way he had been walking for the past hour, following a line that only he could see. He walked with his head stretched out, nose not quite to the ground, now and then taking a bite out of whatever seemed appetizing to him, one ear pricked towards the Wastelands, the other towards me. I always rode without a bit and mostly without a saddle too. My leather riding pants, a thick blanket and simple halter were all I needed. The fact that these mountain ponies had survived the disasters that almost ripped the world apart practically unchanged was evidence enough for me of Bane’s intelligence. So if he wanted to run from something, I was going to let him. Which was why I didn’t force him to go into the Wastelands and instead, wished something, anything, would happen.

The loud cry of a carrion bird shocked me from my half-slumber when I was about an hour away from the cabin I now called home. I halted Bane and

peered into the direction of the noise. As expected, it was not just one bird. An entire flock of what I supposed were ravens circled a spot about half a mile away in the desert. I hesitated. I was not much interested in what they were preying on, but the birds themselves made a pretty good meal for those crazy enough to hunt them.

Once again, I tried to get Bane to walk into the Wastelands, and now that wacky pony obeyed, ears pricked forward. He even quickened into a trot. That was weird. Horses normally hated the huge, black birds that preferred their meat dead and ripe but weren't above attacking a fully grown horse if hungry enough. The ravens were highly intelligent and more than a bit nasty, and I wasn't too proud to admit they scared me a little.

I grabbed my bow from my back and fired a quick volley of arrows. Most found their goal with a little nudge of my mind. That not all did, said something about the intelligence of the ravens and more about my incompetence. My twin brother wouldn't miss. He'd probably hit several birds with a single arrow. And my little sister didn't even need a weapon. She'd take a handful of sand and kill the entire flock by sending the particles at them with such speed, the heated grains would roast the birds while killing them. But neither of them had to try keeping visions of horror and pain at bay at the same time.

I guess my attack was impressive enough for the birds which fled after a last cacophony of croaks. I didn't like the fact that they headed further into the Wastelands. Things that spent time inside the Wastelands changed. The thought of ravens even bigger, more intelligent, or with evolved powers of their own freaked me out.

I halted Bane and slid off his back to gather my supper, my mouth falling open now that I really had the opportunity to study my surroundings. I stood at one end of a half-circle of ten-foot-high mushroom-shaped, pink-striped rock formations with pointed hats. They surrounded a hollow containing sand that was so white it looked like chalk. Only when I was crossing the sand to get to the fattest of the ravens, I saw what the birds had been circling. It was a man, naked, and near death. He was obviously left in the sand to die, considering his predicament was an all too common form of punishment.

But by whom? My clan had no villages close by, even though this was technically our land. No other clan would dare to cross our lands, not even in a place where we didn't do much to enforce the borders. And even if they did, they had no reason to come here to dispose of a criminal.

For the first time today, I extended my senses. My tattoos came to life, feeling like burning ropes across my skin and giving off a white light that was even visible in the bright sunlight. The power of the reaction scared me, but I resisted the urge to shut it down. I wasn't all that certain I could. In the span of ten heartbeats, my awareness magnified until I could sense everything alive for miles around me.

Curiously enough I felt no humans nearby, not even the man lying at my feet. That was pretty odd considering I could see his chest moving in labored breaths. I didn't think too much of it. This place was obviously adding even those of my powers that should be fully functioning. And my talents had always been a bit different from everyone else's. Erratic, unpredictable, and uncontrollable. The same way my brain worked. The same way this place felt.

I pulled back my senses before the visions could overwhelm me. The haze of memories was already creeping in at the edge of my vision, but for once they were kept at bay. Maybe it was the sight of the man in front of me. His skin was almost as white as the sand he was lying on—at least in those few places where it wasn't blotched red from the exposure to the sun. His blond hair was only a shade darker than his skin, and it was long enough to cover him like a blanket.

I wished there was something I could do to help him. Having no idea what his crime was, who his people were and what they were capable of should be enough reason to back off. I didn't know of any clan that went easy on others meddling in their affairs. Not to mention, there was no saying what my clansmen would do to him when they finally came to test my progress with my visions—and to see if I was done being stubborn—if they found me sheltering a stranger. We Nahuel had no mercy on the weak and most certainly no mercy on the enemy. The man most probably was both. It would be easiest to let the sun make the decision; that way it wouldn't be on my conscience. He wouldn't survive another day in this heat.

With a last glance I whistled to Bane, who took his time munching on something neon green before plodding toward me with bright green drool dripping from his mouth. I jumped back before he could push his nose against my face, so he settled for nuzzling the pale man. The man moaned and shifted, which just about killed me, as the movement revealed well-formed, long limbs that made my mouth go dry. Bane might've agreed with me because he snorted, splashing the man with the bright green muck.

"Leave it, Bane. We're not keeping him," I said to the horse, while I bound two of the ravens to Bane's surcingle. My pony whinnied in protest and nudged

the man again. I shook my head and scratched him behind his ears. "You're too friendly, boy. Not everyone is meant to be loved by you."

I turned Bane away from the naked man and mounted the pony. I felt horrible about it, felt I should leave the stranger a blanket or some water, but knew that would only delay the inevitable. Bane seemed as unenthusiastic about leaving as I was. He pranced and even bucked a bit, constantly trying to look back as we rode away. It was almost like the horse knew we were leaving the man to die.

"Stupid Wastelands," I muttered. "Stupid place with your stupid mysterious powers. Stop driving me nuts."

Bane whinnied in agreement and turned his head back again, as if to check on the man. I groaned and turned my horse around. I might as well live up to my reputation of acting foolishly and illogically and rescue the stranger. At least it would be a welcome break in the endless monotony of my isolation.

"Yeah, boy, we'll take him home. I'm probably going to end up dead because of it, and you're gonna get eaten."

Bane snorted, which I interpreted as him saying he was much too cute to be eaten, and I agreed. If only I could be sure it applied to me as well. Didn't I hear some rumors about a cannibalistic tribe a while ago? Of course, that might as well be some contrived nonsense my uncle used as an excuse to wage war on innocent people.

I bundled the man into the blanket I had brought for my much coveted after-lunch nap and draped him over Bane's hindquarters at my back. If I was going to get myself killed, I refused to let that happen after spending the last five miles lumbering home next to a pony that was perfectly capable of carrying us both. Bane might be small, but he was strong, and I highly disagreed with attempts to mess with nature by breeding mightier horses. In my not so humble opinion, there was nothing as mighty as a five foot pony that could carry near his own weight without a problem.

Bane pointed his nose in the general direction of my hut and started walking straight through the Wastelands. That oddball of a pony didn't need any encouragement to do so and seemed to feel right at home now. He stopped every once in a while to grab some suspicious looking plants, and I let him. I highly suspected Bane was smarter than me. And who knew, maybe he'd sprout wings or something equally cool.

It took some effort, but Bane, the mysterious man and I made it back to my hut in one piece. After taking care of Bane, I slung the man's dead weight over my shoulder, brought him inside and dumped him on the bed. The wooden cabin was roomy and far more comfortable than I had expected before I was abandoned here. It was equipped with sturdy wooden furniture: a bunk bed, a cabinet and a table with four chairs, as it was meant to give hunting parties or scouts protection from the elements and the predators that roamed freely in the night. The air was stale and warm in the hut, but at least he was out of the sun here. I opened the little window to allow some fresh, though even hotter, air in.

And now what? Dehydration seemed to be the stranger's most immediate concern, so I dripped some water onto his lips. I took it as a good sign that he swallowed and didn't choke on it. Upon further inspection, I found no evidence of injuries other than the sunburn, meaning my new friend had somehow allowed himself to be stripped naked and left in the desert without a fight.

Strangely enough, the sunburn had already disappeared in places, giving the man a weird spotted appearance. It looked too random to be some kind of advanced healing system. In fact, it looked a lot like someone had sneezed on him. Another mystery, unless... Bane had dripped the juice from those odd neon-green plants on him. Could it be that?

I rubbed him with an ointment that my clan used to treat burns, though it didn't work nearly as well as the neon-green plants had—if indeed the plants were what produced that almost miraculous healing. The only other thing I could do was give him water. Since I had no grasp of my powers whatsoever, learning how to heal had never appealed to me. It was an all too easy way to die. He didn't regain consciousness, so I decided to let his survival be up to nature and went to take care of myself.

I peeled off my leather pants and linen shirt, both soaked with sweat, and took a quick shower in the outdoor bathhouse, which was nothing more than a rainwater tank with holes in it. It was yet another thing that I missed about home while living in this primitive hut. I might not always see eye to eye with my uncle, but I had to admit his view on hygiene was admirable. He built amazing bathhouses in our capital of Masahiro, with hot and cold running water, steam rooms, and saunas, where only the Tattooed were admitted. I never minded using the privileges that came with my position, but I would have liked to share these luxuries with all my friends. Hell, I'd have settled for even being allowed to hang out with all my friends, rather than just the ones my family approved of.

I wandered back inside stark naked, the tattoos that covered my entire body glowing a soft white to dry my skin. A sharp cry had me jumping into a defensive position with my hands raised and my tattoos blazing blood-red in reaction to my fright. My reaction had the stranger whimpering and trying to crawl as far away as he possibly could in the small cabin, mumbling words I couldn't understand. He almost looked like he was praying. And then, a vision overtook me, and the hut and everything in it were gone.

I stand in one of the cities of the ancient ones; buildings towering around me so high that although I crane my head all the way back, I can barely see the tops. The sound of explosions around me is deafening, the smell of blood and smoke so thick the taste makes bile rise up in my throat. Mountainous black clouds cover the sky and spit out ash and fire and lava. The earth shakes, the buildings topple over.

I'm too terrified to move, and stare, instead, at the people running around me, trying to find cover. I wish I could tell them it is useless, tell them they are destined to die whatever they do. The Great Cataclysm has only just started, and in a few months the living will envy the dead. I know. I have seen it all countless times.

A man gets hit by a burning rock. I can feel it burn right through him. Another is crushed by a flying metal vehicle. The weight of it squashes my spine as well. A child wails; her parents lost. Her grief is mine. Thousands of people are in indescribable agony, stricken with terror and grieving for loved ones lost, and I feel it all. I beg for an end to the madness, for death to soothe me. The whinny of a horse breaks through the haze, and I wonder what a horse is doing here, in a place that is made of iron and concrete, of glass and smoke.

A splash of water on my face woke me from my terror. I blinked. Shaking my head to rid my eyes of the water, I opened my mouth to thank whoever saved me from the nightmare and saw luminescent blue eyes only inches from mine. I screamed, launching myself away from the man.

It almost started again; the shimmer of another vision already replacing the last. I pushed it back with gritted teeth and a force I never knew I possessed.

"There is something wrong with you." The stranger studied me curiously but warily, like you'd study some unknown species.

"Do you think?" I bit back sarcastically. It shouldn't have pissed me off. After all, it was a remark I was quite familiar with.

The glowing eyes widened, and he took a step back. I didn't blame him. My tattoos began that blood-red smolder again, and the look of concentration on my face to force the reaction down must be frightening.

"I did not mean it as an insult, sir. There is simply something not right about you. I wish I could discern what it is."

I laughed harshly. "I can tell you that, friend. I'm plain crazy. Seeing things that aren't there. Shit like that."

"Friend? You are calling me your friend?" The lilt of the stranger's accent was very alluring.

"Yeah. Just saved your life. Grabbed you from the desert before the ravens had you. We might as well be friends. I swear to you that I'll go mad if I have to spend more time without anyone to talk to."

As usual, the realization of how stupid it was to tell a possible enemy I was all alone—when he might know my tribe and our not-at-all favorable reputation—sunk in just after the words left my mouth. My sister likes to tell me I think too much, only not when thinking is actually required. A smart one, as well as extremely powerful, is my little sis. I tried to blame my shortcomings on poor breeding, but my mother kept insisting we all had the same father, so it couldn't be that.

Another realization finally dawned. I was still butt naked, and so was the strange man. It was hard to keep my eyes on his face, beautiful as he was, even blotched with sunburn like this. Though it wouldn't be the first time I was caught checking out a potential enemy, in the past I always had been surrounded by people that could save my life when said enemy took offense.

Without turning my back to the man, I crossed the room to get some clothes from the wooden chest I kept my belongings in. The man circled so he could keep his eyes on mine. The hut was already half dark, but my mutely glowing tattoos and his eyes lit the room plenty. What was up with that? Could he see in the dark? In all my lessons, I'd never heard of a people with glowing eyes. Granted, paying attention wasn't exactly my strongest suit.

Clothed, I felt a bit more comfortable, and I wished the same for my guest, so I grabbed him some trousers and a shirt and held them out for him.

He looked at the clothes and back up to my eyes. I shrugged with a slight grin. Very careful not to touch me, he took them and fumbled while trying to get them on as quickly as possible. You'd almost think the guy had never worn

pants before. He grimaced with pain when he moved. I had given him the lightest and loosest clothing I had brought with me, though I'm sure even the thin linen felt like sandpaper against his burnt skin. I didn't envy him at all. He might've enjoyed staying naked more, and I would not have objected at all.

He was still staring at me as if I'd sprout horns any moment, and it wouldn't surprise me if he really thought so. For very valid reasons, I actively avoided thinking about how other tribes regarded us.

"I'm Keric," I said. "You probably guessed I'm Nahuel. The tattoos tend to give that away."

"Why am I still alive?"

I chuckled. "Because I was in the mood for roasted raven. And my horse liked you. And as I mentioned earlier, I'm desperate for someone to talk to. Also, I really wanted to know why the hell you were left to die in the Wastelands. Which makes me even more insane because it probably means you're a criminal and you're going to kill me and eat my horse. Or eat me and steal my horse. That reminds me, are you a cannibal? And do you like roast raven? I'm starving."

He stared at me with open mouth and big, unblinking eyes. That happened a lot when I spoke. My powers are not the only thing out of control.

"I was supposed to die. The Gods have destined it," he said, making even less sense than I did. I knew nothing of gods. I only knew politics and manipulation, and as far as I was concerned, those ruled the world.

"Maybe your gods destined for me to save you?" I responded impatiently. "Now, are you planning to kill me? Because otherwise, I'm gonna make us some dinner."

"Why feed me when you are only going to torture me later?"

I groaned. "Look, I don't know what you heard about us.... Well, I can guess, and I hate to tell you that most of it is probably true, but I personally don't go around torturing random people. It might be easiest if you believe me. Anyway, please explain to me why I'd save you, treat your burns and have you walking around free if I had any intention of hurting you? I mean, I have no freaking clue who you are or who your people are, so you might be able to blow me to bits with just a thought for all I know. Now, roast raven?"

"You talk a lot," he said, sitting down in confusion. He grabbed his head. "You talk way too much, sir. My head hurts a bit, I am afraid." His formal way

of talking was amusing, to say the least, and the singsong accent made it even funnier.

I threw him the waterskin. He caught it with an easy motion, betraying the superior reflexes that were expected of anyone who made it to adulthood in a world as deadly as ours.

“Drink. It’ll help. You probably have heat stroke. You’re dehydrated at the very least. I have some herbs that might help with the headache, but water, shade and rest will do the trick a lot better.”

He drank with gusto. “I am named Dolen. I belong to the wandering people of Ehecati. We call no place home but the earth beneath our feet. We try to avoid contact with others that claim to own a piece of the world. My people believe...” He stopped talking, making an agonized sound in the back of his throat. “I guess I have no right to say that anymore. I am Dolen of no people, now.”

Poor Dolen looked crushed. I knew that any good Nahuel would be interested in his tribe, especially if they insisted on wandering through our lands, but I was more interested in the poor guy, himself, and how I could make him feel a bit better.

My stomach grumbled loudly, reminding me that my belly had no intention of being patient anymore.

“Yeah, yeah, dinner first,” I told my stomach, which of course got a startled look from Dolen. I grinned at him with a slight shrug. “Don’t mind the mad man. I talk to myself. I talk to just about anything, in fact. But don’t worry, most of it doesn’t talk back. Yet. Although I’d swear my horse understood me earlier. Guess it’s the seclusion. It’s not natural being alone.” While I talked, and he tried to ignore me, I cleaned and plucked the ravens and arranged them on the spit over the hearth.

There was something strange about the feathers. Earlier I’d have sworn the ravens shone a polished black that gleamed almost blue and red in the sunlight, but now the feathers seemed to soak up the light, creating little black holes in the room. It was interesting, to say the least. With a cloak made from them, I might be completely invisible in the dark. Of course, that plumage also meant that an entire flock of ravens could approach any town unseen, and I didn’t like that one bit. Still, I’d look mighty fine in a feather cloak.

The food was finally cooking and smelled amazing. Wasn’t it great how something so scary was so delicious at the same time? Too bad it’d take another

hour before the ravens were done. I should've put them on before my shower. I rummaged in the cupboard and came up with dried flatbread that I smeared liberally with butter and apple jam. It wasn't much, but it'd keep my belly from bothering me for now.

"Want some?" I asked with full mouth. "Dinner'll take a while."

He shook his head.

"Suit yourself. Best jam in this part of the world. My friend's mother makes it. She..." I sat down across from Dolen at the tiny table. "Sorry, rambling again. Why don't you tell me your story?"

Dolen tilted his head. His eyes were mesmerizing. I wouldn't mind staring into them all night. I felt myself getting tired, dozing off—

"What the fuck? Stop hypnotizing me! I'm not your damn enemy, so stop trying to make me one!" I violently shook my head in an attempt to shake the remainders of the spell off. My tattoos were burning a cool blue color, which was not how they should react to danger at all.

"Excuse me," Dolen said, looking partly confused and partly terrified. "I did not... I have no notion of what happened. I am attempting to figure you out. Sometimes that happens when I look at people. I shall stop."

"In that case, we have a lot in common. A lot of things happen to me without trying as well. Never seen my tattoos do this," I said, studying the pretty blues and greens that now danced over my skin. Curiously, I felt calm and sharp, neither of which were familiar sensations to me. I decided to forgive him. And, once I'd figured out what mysterious talents this man had, I might let him do it again.

"That... It does not occur to me, normally. Sir." The sir was an afterthought. Cute.

"Call me Keric," I said, leaning back and grinning at him. "Nobody in his right mind calls me sir. Now, tell me something about you."

Dolen sighed and looked completely miserable again. Good. He deserved that for trying to bewitch me. But again, he was stupidly silent. If everyone my uncle tried to talk to was this unbelievably stubborn, I almost didn't blame him for resorting to threats and torture. In my experience, though, acting friendly and innocently worked much better.

"Well, I'll start. I'm from the Nahuel capital of Masahiro, and I live with my mother, my amazing little sis Dylwin, and my infuriating twin brother

Yorrit, who thinks he's great but isn't half as powerful as Dylwin is. His attitude's not hard to explain since he'd spent years competing only with me before our sis came along and started kicking both of our asses. I also have a million cousins, uncles, and aunts, who all think they can tell me what to do." Only one of them actually could, and it was his damn fault I was in the middle of nowhere. "Ehm, what else—"

"What are you doing here now?" Dolen asked, shocking me by asking a direct question that didn't have anything to do with me intending to harm him.

In the flash of a moment, I thought of several more or less believable scenarios that didn't completely give away my weakness—and would be less embarrassing—than the truth. I settled on spinning a tale of an isolation ritual that was common for Tattooed my age. Something about finding my inner core and grounding my powers and nonsense like that. When I start fantasizing, I don't know when to stop, and I rarely remember what lies I tell at the time. Most of my friends know when I'm making stuff up, and no one else takes me seriously anyway, so I never get called on it. But considering the attentive way Dolen was listening to my story, I had the idea I'd better try to remember at least the gist of what I was telling him.

"So I've been alone for the last three weeks, with some unplanned visits to test my progress." Not true. I've been alone since I was dumped here. They would come sometime though, and it was safer to let Dolen think I could have backup at any second. Of course, it might very well scare him to death, but I had no way of preventing that. I liked being alive, thank you very much, and I wasn't sure, yet, if I could trust him.

"That must be hell," Dolen said softly. "I have never been alone... before." He looked so miserable it hurt to witness. I don't think I'd ever seen someone in so much need of a hug.

"Tell me, my friend," I encouraged.

He stared at me for a long moment, this time without trying to hypnotize me, and finally laid his head on his arms and started to cry. So I stood up to give him that hug after all. He stiffened at first, but then took the comfort that only human contact can give and started to cry pitifully.

Again my tattoos acted strangely, giving off a soothing warmth that should only happen in close contact with another Tattooed. I didn't give it any more thought, as my powers acted wacky all the time. Still, I wished my sis was here to help me figure things out.

He started talking between choked sobs and anguished hiccups. "I ruined it all... useless... good for nothing... I could not even die when I meant to."

Oops. Sounded like Dolen wasn't a criminal after all. Had I accidentally prevented his suicide?

I tried, "Why did you want to die?"

"I did not want to die," he bit back to my astonishment. "I had to. It will all end because the sacrifice was not completed."

Wait... What?

"Sacrifice? You mean... Why? To whom?" I asked with a frown.

Dolen pulled away and threw me an exasperated look. "To save the world of course. The Gods have willed it."

It took most of the evening, and all through an exceptional dinner, for me to understand what he was talking about. It turned out that the Ehecati believed their "gods" caused the accumulation of disasters that had nearly ripped the earth apart, transforming everything that didn't die. The world was apparently saved only because Dolen's ancestors returned to the old ways of human sacrifice, and those idiotic people believed their sacrifices were why the world kept turning.

It was completely deranged of course. People had been killing each other, and themselves, for as long as the human race existed; so in my humble opinion, Dolen's imaginary gods got all the blood they needed. I knew, having been forced to witness too much of that in my visions. Not to mention, my clan made it their mission to continue those practices. I really didn't understand why it mattered if a death was especially meant for some god. Dead is dead, right?

I learned quickly that arguing with an overzealous devotee that thinks he'll be personally responsible for everything dying—again—is absolutely pointless. What I couldn't understand was why a young, healthy man who still had a lot to offer his tribe was used as a sacrifice. It was a damn waste. Why not offer someone who was old or sick? Or simply offer a horse. In most territories, horses were more expensive than human slaves and a lot less common.

Dolen told me those selfish gods chose him, for some obscure reason, in a ritual that sounded dodgy. The entire thing was something that could've sprung from my uncle's mind, and that's never a promising thing. He was expected to take off his clothes, lie down in the desert and enjoy the process of dying.

“I did not want to die.” He had stopped crying and was now speaking softly. “That must be why the Gods did not deem me good enough.”

So those gods not only expected him to die of dehydration and hyperthermia but also wanted him to enjoy it? It seemed a lot to ask. I said as much, which caused Dolen to stare at me like I was an idiot.

I was a bit taken aback. It was not that I never got that particular look, but now I was pretty sure he was the one being a moron.

“It is an honor to die for the good of mankind,” he said slowly.

“But that doesn’t make it pleasant!” I declared, throwing my hands in the air. “Why not kill you in a less uncomfortable way, like err... slit your throat or throw you from a cliff or pierce your heart...” I ran out of options. I had to admit that most of the killing I was forced to witness, both in the present and in my visions, was not exactly painless.

“The suffering is part of the test. One must stay devoted in times of adversity.”

“I give up,” I said, rubbing my eyes. “Let’s agree to disagree. There’s no way I’m gonna get how you’re supposed to enjoy suffering. I’ve seen too many people suffer, and none seemed particularly happy about it. Not even if they thought they were suffering for the greater good. If you insist, I’ll bring you back to the Wastelands and let you try dying again tomorrow. Now, I’m tired and I wanna sleep.”

“You walk in the sunlight?” Dolen asked me the next morning when I was getting ready for the day.

“Yeah, of course.” I studied him, for the first time thinking about the reason behind his pale complexion. “Your people don’t?”

Dolen shook his head. “The Gods gifted us with the ability to live and survive in the dark. Our histories tell They saved us from dying in the endless winter. Now, we share the night with the moon and wander unnoticed by all.”

“So you can see in the dark!” My excited reaction made Dolen jump back, and I burst out in laughter. “Stop acting like I’ll eat you. I just wondered what the heck the glowing eyes were for.”

His eyes didn’t glow in the daylight, not even in the slightly dimmed atmosphere of the hut. I’d opened the window and door to let in the warmth and the sun and to let out the stale air, but it appeared my guest didn’t appreciate it.

Dolen looked at me with his eyes slitted against the light. His irises were an amazing silvery blue, his pupils mere pinpricks.

“Do you still insist on dying?” I asked him. “I would prefer you didn’t after I went through all that trouble of saving you, but if you really want to?”

Dolen shook his head slowly, looking as depressed as ever. “I think... maybe the Gods have something else planned for me. Perhaps They want my blood to continue to stream through my veins, at least for now.”

“That’s the spirit!” I grinned at him, but he didn’t see anything amusing in the situation. I wasn’t sure what I wanted more: to smack some sense into him, or to make him laugh.

He kept staring at me with those big, morose eyes in a way that made me uncomfortable. “Please tell me that your gods haven’t decided that my blood needs stopping. I like staying in roughly the same arrangement I am now.”

“You have something to do with Their plans,” he said slowly. “But I do not know what. Mayhap I am meant to fix you.”

I burst out laughing. “Good luck with that.”

While I was brushing Bane, I was still snickering with laughter. “He wants to fix me,” I said to the horse with another burst of giggles. “Like I’m some sort of broken toy!” Bane was smart enough to ignore me and kept on chasing the last bits of food in his manger.

Today I had no intention of going on patrol, even though I was curious to see if I could find traces of Dolen’s people. I might be crazy, but I’m not stupid enough to go looking for an unfamiliar tribe all by myself. Instead, I’d decided to go back into the Wastelands to forage some plants to experiment with and to get the feathers from the ravens I’d killed and left on site yesterday.

Dolen posed a problem, though. He was by no means strong enough to come with me and might not even be able to stand the direct sunlight when he was fully recovered. Did I dare to leave him in my hut on his own? There was not much to steal or destroy, but still, I didn’t care to camp out under the sky if he decided to burn the place down. I liked the comfort of a warm bed, not to mention that spending a night outdoors was a great way to become food for whatever happened by.

In the end, I poked my head back inside and tried to look threatening. “I have to go away for a bit. Are you going to be here when I come back?”

Dolen slowly nodded. "If you do not mind, sir. I am not strong enough to travel yet, and I prefer to leave at night. I will depart this evening or the one after, if you allow me to stay that long, sir."

I groaned. "Stop calling me sir." It annoyed me, even though it meant I had managed to look mean. It didn't fit him somehow, like it was something imprinted on him but never quite his own.

"You can stay as long you want to, Dolen. I like the company. And remember, you're not my prisoner. You can leave whenever you want. Just remember that I might be a lot more peaceful than most of my tribe, but I will not take kindly to being robbed. If you're planning on leaving, and take anything more than a waterskin and the clothes you're wearing right now, I will find you, and I will kill you." I glared at him, and he nodded. Uncle Deke would be proud of me.

And then I ruined it all by adding, "Oh, and you can take some food if you like and maybe an extra blanket. And please, please, please, take a shower. You stink. Shower's behind the hut. It's in the shade, so you should be able to handle the light. I've heated up the water for you." Guess I liked taking care of the poor bugger more than frightening him. If only I had been born in a world where such kindness wasn't looked at as weakness.

"I am capable of heating water to bathe myself. You did not have to go to such trouble for me."

I laughed out loud. "Oh man, you are so right." The idea of me taking the time to heat all that water over the fire and then carrying it to the shower in the back was comical. I didn't envy the people who had to go through so much trouble to get clean, which in all honesty, meant most of the population. I had mastered the feat of heating my own water when I had gotten my first tattoos at the age of four, so the concept of not being able to do such an easy thing was completely alien to me.

"It wasn't any trouble, truly." I raised my hand and let the energy streaming through my body heat the air around my hand. The heat was so intense, the air shimmered and steamed in the cool morning.

Dolen blinked at me, and then for the first time, he cracked a smile. "You have used your magic? For me?"

I shrugged. I had no idea what the big deal was. "I hate cold showers," I mumbled, feeling heat rise up my cheeks. "I thought you might too."

“The priests say it is a sin to use magic for one’s enjoyment. However—” Dolen hesitated.

“Lemme guess, they use it to make themselves comfortable all the time? Well, my friend, we Nahuel think that our powers are meant to make living as enjoyable as possible. This world’s wretched enough without having to suffer through cold showers, don’t you think?”

Bane nickered as if in agreement or simply to tell me to hurry up. He put his head over my shoulder so he could look into the hut and uttered another soft nicker in greeting. He’s a social one, Bane is, and I felt bad that this isolation kept him away from his equine friends. Besides trying not to die of boredom, entertaining Bane was the main reason I went on my daily patrols.

Dolen came forward to stroke Bane’s nose, eyes big in astonishment while he pet my horse. He must’ve been one of those people never to see a horse up close.

I studied Dolen’s face, the straight nose, the high cheekbones and his pink, full, soft-looking lips. But the most stunning thing about him were those wide-set, huge, almond-shaped eyes. His eyes shifted from Bane to me, still with the same kind of wonder in them. He was close, so much closer than was comfortable, and I liked the shiver that his proximity sent through my body. For a moment, it seemed like he felt the same thing, that he’d step closer and give in to the moment, push his body against me, fit those pretty lips against mine—

Bane sneezed, and Dolen jumped back to avoid being showered with horse snot. The sound Bane made sounded a lot like laughter when he pulled back and pushed his nose into my back.

Chapter 2

“Huh?” I rubbed my eyes and looked again.

The dead ravens were gone. I was sure I was in the right spot. Those giant, striped, pointy rocks were hard to mistake. As I looked around, I thought this seemed like an excellent place to sacrifice someone. It looked like it could be a god's playground. The entire Wastelands did. Only I knew gods had nothing to do with anything. My dreams had been full of the horrors that had truly befallen this place.

Although strange things happened here all the time, I had never expected ten dead birds the size of newborn lambs to disappear. It was like they dissolved into thin air. If they'd been eaten by scavengers, there would be something left: feathers, blood, or at least traces of the scavengers, but there was nothing. It was too creepy, not to mention terribly inconvenient. The birds I killed yesterday would've been enough for my cape. Now I had to start hunting ravens, and though I had no problem with the principle of killing those horrible creatures, I cringed at the amount of work it would be.

“This place is scary,” I said out loud. This time Bane snorted before taking another bite of a big pink flower that didn't seem to enjoy being eaten. It actually moved its leaves away. Bane snickered at the plant and tried again only to have the plant hit him on his nose. Bane jumped back and whinnied in distress, but after brief consideration, he jumped forward to trample the plant. If ponies could smile, Bane would be grinning right now. Happily swishing his tail, he continued his meal with gusto. The coolest thing was that he deliberately put a hoof on the next flower before devouring that as well. It seemed to me that Bane would be well suited for life in the Wastelands.

I was not so sure I would do as well here. I felt sleepy and restless at the same time, and my tattoos itched like crazy. Something seemed to have put a hook in me and tried to pull me further into the Wastelands, and this feeling scared me as much as it excited me. I'd never been much of an adventurer, but I felt a burning need to explore this place and become one with it.

On an impulse, I pulled off my boots and socks, plunked down onto the sand and buried both my hands and feet. The prickle in my tattoos increased until pure electricity ran through my skin. The sensation was almost overwhelming until it became a part of me. My tattoos burned an intense white light that I had never seen before—on anyone. I hesitantly extended my senses,

terrified of the visions this place could give me. There was that single moment of complete stillness, that moment when you know you're going over the cliff but not falling yet, and then the illusion of control was yanked from me, and I was aware of everything.

I drifted in a place of feeling all, of being one with all the life-forms of this alien landscape, of being one with the present and the past and even witness to the many possible threads of the future. I was everything. I knew everything. I understood everything. This place, that had been insignificant during most of the history of the world, that was deemed useless by humans, now, and in the past, wanted to play a crucial part from now on. It was sick of being ignored.

Bane's nose in my face brought me back to reality. He seemed anxious, prodding at me until I got up. When I did, the pony immediately pushed against me, like he was trying to hide behind me. I blinked while the last remainder of the dream faded away. I was left with the feeling that I knew nothing. That there were things to understand that I didn't. That there was a meaning to it all that I had grasped and lost.

A gurgling croak broke the silence. I looked up to see ravens perched on every rock. All of them repeated the croak at the same time. I extended my senses to them, sending out a wordless question usually reserved for other Tattooed, meant for separating friend from foe. It was answered with hostility and contempt. These beasts didn't want me here, and it felt like so much more than just an animal's need to defend its territory. The cold intelligence behind their enmity made my blood freeze and my stomach clench.

When the first bird spread its wings to take flight, I realized the danger of my situation. Yesterday I had the element of surprise and my bow. Today, all I had was the sand I was still cradling in my hands and the power racing through my veins. Without thinking, I raised my hands to my face and blew.

The sand shot to the ravens. Before I, or the ravens, understood what happened, they toppled from their pedestals as their lives burned away from them. The light of my tattoos flickered and dimmed. I was left depleted and with the feeling that I had lost something important but gained even more: the approval of the Wastelands, a place that understood that death might be the most important thing about life. The sobering thing was that I was not so sure it would not feel the same if I had been the one to lose my life. The Wastelands seemed a cruel place, harsh and unforgiving, a place that would test me until I proved worthy.

I scratched Bane's face and shook the weirdness off. I may not understand what had happened, but at least I had killed enough ravens to sustain Dolen and myself for a few more days and provide plenty of feathers to make myself an invisibility cape. My arrogant brother would be green with envy when he saw me in it.

By the time I exited the Wastelands with Bane, who was laden with plants and dead ravens, my head was even more chaotic than usual, my skin felt like it was a size too small, and I was plagued by images of destruction. I was dead tired and not at all in control. My senses pulsed inward and outward in an erratic pattern that had nothing to do with what I wanted. I rode in a haze, only partly aware of what was real and what was not.

Only the feel of Bane's mane under my hand kept me grounded. The horse paid no attention to the shaking earth, the screaming people, the death and destruction all around, so those must be in my head. Somewhere in the part of my mind that was still sane, I realized I was letting too many important decisions be influenced by a pony, and that had me wondering whether that was smart. A second later, I decided it wasn't about how smart I was; it was about staying alive, and in that, Bane served me well.

A nagging thought emerged from the mayhem. *And what great things are you doing with that precious life of yours?* It was not a thing I often wondered about. I wanted things. I wanted to make the best of the moments not spent in nightmares. I wanted to keep far away from all attempts to bring back what my uncle called the Age of Excellence, hated the idea of the world being tamed, and was getting more and more nauseated by the violence around me. But apart from protesting every step of the way, I never actually did anything, nor had I seen it as my task to. And now Dolen had appeared in my life, blabbering about purpose and fate and shit like that and—

Another vision threatened to overwhelm me, and I screamed in frustration. No wonder I could never finish a thought. No wonder I was deemed useless, a disappointment, a disgrace to my race. No wonder they sent me to this hellhole to drive me mad and make me forget what was important to me. They would mold me until I was that good little Nahuel who did what he was told without a word of protest or an original thought. They wouldn't stop until I didn't question what they wanted to pluck from my mind, until I'd agree to let my body be used to breed others who'd be cursed with these horrible visions. Over

my dead body. Over my fucking dead body. This world was mine as well as theirs, and I would fight to keep it as it was.

The anger cleared my head enough to notice that I was already home. Bane had come to a halt next to his shed and was trying to reach the plants that I had bound on his back behind me. He might not be that smart after all, since he didn't understand that the whole purpose of tying them there was so he couldn't reach them. He pivoted a few times, nearly throwing me to the ground, then settled on eating the grass beneath his feet.

I dismounted and got some water from the well. I dunked the entire bucket over my head. The force of the water flattened my unruly curls against my scalp and shoulders. The cold water cleared my mind, so I did it again and again, until I was shivering in the setting sun, and Bane was pushing the bucket from my hands to get to the water. I locked him up in his shed after feeding and brushing him down, double checking to see that the door was secure against the wolves I'd heard last night and the mountain lion that I had seen traces of a few days ago. It would not hold against anything bigger, so Bane and I just had to hope we would get no visits from a bear or something worse.

"I understand you, now," I said to Dolen as I entered the dim hut. "I get you wanting to save the world. Still don't get why you dying is instrumental, but we'll call that philosophical differences, okay? Anyway—"

The hut was empty. I peered around trying to figure out where Dolen could be, then tentatively poked with my senses and found nothing.

"Well... damn," I mumbled. I couldn't believe he'd left after all. With a deep sigh, I put down the plants and ravens I'd gathered and stripped out of my sodden shirt. Dolen's disappearance was more of a disappointment than it should have been. I had liked talking to someone who talked back, even if he mostly talked nonsense.

After starting a fire to make a stew, I made myself some bread with cold raven and apple jam and attempted to comfort myself with the food. A sorrowful moan had me jumping up from the table, hitting my knee and almost choking on the huge bite I had just taken. The sound came from the top bunk. I crept towards the bed, then stood on tiptoes to look into it. And there, rolled into a little ball and whimpering pathetically, lay Dolen. If he hadn't been making sounds, I'd have sworn he was dead. He was dead to my senses anyway.

Or were my senses dead to the world? What on earth was going on with them?

“Dolen... Open your eyes, Dolen. Tell me what’s wrong.”

Dolen didn’t react apart from a small moan. I reached out to touch his forehead. He felt like he was burning up. Was it a fever, the sunburn, or still the hyperthermia? Did heatstroke cause fevers? I didn’t have a clue. What I knew was that he needed to cool down, that he needed water, and that his burns needed treating. So that’s what I did.

I undressed him, wincing when I noticed that some of the burns had blistered and stuck to the soft linen of the clothes I’d lent him. I covered him with a wet blanket, force-fed him water, and then I turned my attention to the plants I had gathered.

After washing them, I crushed the stems with the blunt end of my knife and was surprised when they disintegrated into a rough, neon-green powder. I had expected something foamy or at least a liquid. This was a stupid experiment. I didn’t discover medical treatments. I was the one who needed them.

Another drawn out moan of pain echoed through the room, and Dolen complained hoarsely of pain and heat and thirst. I gave him water and the reassurance he was not alone, then I turned back to the bowl with the weird powder. Yesterday Bane had chewed the plants, but I had no intention of putting something this alien in my mouth. The only thing I could do was mix it with water and hope for the best. The green muck that resulted looked disgusting enough to be medicinal.

Call it stupidity, or call it heroics, but I decided to test the stuff on myself. I wasn’t quite stupid enough to put my hand in the fireplace, so I took the iron poker, heated the tip and touched it to the palm of my hand, one of the few places on my body that held no tattoos. I wouldn’t risk disrupting the flow of energy that was the basis of my powers.

“Fuck, fuck, fucking hell!” That hurt. I gritted my teeth against the pain and realized I should’ve used a candle, instead, or tried the muck on Dolen. Injuring myself was of no use at all except for proving how unselfish I am to... well, nobody. It was, as with so many things I did, completely useless and illogical.

Still cursing, I dipped a finger in the bowl and cautiously touched that finger to the burn. For a moment, the pain flared up, then it melted away. I let the paste stay on a minute more, then wiped it off. What had been an angry red stain before, was now only a slight redness that hardly hurt at all.

The end result was all I could have hoped for, but, but oh... poor Dolen was not going to like getting there.

Under different circumstances this might have been a very pleasant task. Dolen's body was toned and firm, with long limbs and, as I witnessed on those few places that weren't burned, a beautiful pale complexion that shone like the moon in the late evening light. I could spend hours exploring a body like this, learning taste and texture and reaction.

As it was, neither of us enjoyed this. I hated the way he whimpered in pain, at times not able to catch his breath when I treated an especially vile burn. I tried my very best to ignore his suffering. The fear in his eyes when I picked him up to carry him outside—so I could help him without having green mush all over my bed—was a lot harder to handle. I would happily have traded everything I had, including both my balls, to never have someone look at me the way Dolen did then, like I was pure evil. It made me hate myself and my entire clan. It made me hate my tattoos and my powers and made me wish I was someone else entirely.

I had never voluntarily hurt anyone. I had refused to go to war and thus got saddled with a reputation as a coward and a slacker. I had talked about the value of peace and kindness to anyone who stood still long enough for me to try. I had fought and argued with my mother and my uncle and my peers about the way most Nahuel saw the world, and I had become an outcast because of that. Despite that, everyone who met me was either hostile or scared. I might be stubborn and stupid and most likely insane, but I was not evil, and neither were my friends and family.

Contrary to popular opinion, the Nahuel did not do what we did in the desire to hurt or even out of a desire to rule. My uncle had a grand plan for the world, a plan to make the future better than ever for all of mankind. The main problem—apart from the insanity of striving for a world that was safe and at peace—was that he believed with all his heart, and my clansmen believed with him, that the only way it would happen was with us firmly in charge of as much of the world as possible. And heinous was the best word to describe his methods for getting that grand peace.

“What is this salve?” Dolen asked with a croaky voice when he woke up a few hours after I had treated him with the medicine. He sat up and scratched his arms. Green dust particles exploded from his skin. He startled. “Is it supposed to do that?”

I shrugged. "I don't have a clue. About both questions. I'm glad it helped because it might as easily have killed you." I snapped my mouth shut. Great move, Keric. Scare the poor guy even more.

"Are you a healer?"

"Ha! No way. I stumbled on the stuff and hoped it would help." I sighed. "Wait, it did help, right?"

"It did. But may I wash it off now? It itches tremendously."

"I guess," I said without much conviction. "Maybe you should. I have more of the plants anyway. Want me to heat the water for you?"

Dolen still seemed to find the thought of me using my mojo for mundane things like that mind-boggling. He called it magic, as if he thought it something supernatural, while for me, it came as natural as breathing. Idiotic, because I highly doubted that he found his glowing eyes and ability to see in the dark anything special.

While I waited for him to return from his bath, I continued the work on my cape. It was precise and painstaking work, but I found it grounded me. I soon wished I had Dolen's eyes though, because the feathers had disappeared from view. As long as the sun was above the horizon, they shone in the firelight, but as soon as it had set, the feathers seemed to echo the darkness. I didn't like that one bit. I hadn't had much love for the ravens to begin with—beside their meat—and these too-intelligent, invisible guerrilla ravens inhabiting the Wastelands scared me to bits. They made me want to crawl back to uncle Deke and have him send the army to kill them all.

Dolen's voice broke through my thoughts. "Are you looking towards something specific? I was under the assumption that you could not see well in the darkness."

"Huh?" I realized I had been staring in the direction of the Wastelands which still had some sort of a magnetic pull on me. It took a conscious effort to look at Dolen, instead. And wow... was that a nice view. He was clean now, waist-long hair bound into a loose braid, and his skin was smooth, and so pale it shone red and orange in the light of the fire. He was still naked and didn't seem embarrassed about that at all. I wondered if nakedness was considered normal in his tribe. For the first time, I ogled his body, his broad shoulders, narrow hips, and smooth stomach. He didn't have the bulging muscles that were so desired by the male Nahuel. He was built like a runner instead, sleek with long muscles. If he had hair on his body, it was as light as his eyebrows and hair and

invisible in the dim light. With difficulty, I forced my eyes away from his body—refusing to stare at his crotch and check him out like I'd check out a potential lover—and looked up into those dazzling sapphire eyes.

He either ignored or didn't see my scrutiny. "You were staring into the distance."

I shrugged. "Just staring at nothing. The Wastelands are that way."

"Wastelands?"

"The place I found you."

"I assume you mean the Hollow Plains. Those are sacred lands. You should not venture there, not without the proper rituals and preparations."

"What preparations?" My stomach gave a lurch. Did Dolen know something about the place I didn't?

"We spend a week fasting and praying before we may enter. And one may only enter during the appropriate phase of the moon, and when the Gods have deemed the reasons for the venture worthy."

I bit back a smile. It was simply Dolen's superstitious nonsense, nothing important.

"You should not treat entering the home of the Gods as a joke," Dolen said with an accusatory glare. He walked inside and came back a moment later with a blanket that he wrapped around himself to form a garment. The result looked so simple, but I'd bet I wouldn't be able to repeat his motions. "Do you not honor Them?" he asked, puzzled, while sitting down on the ground. He nearly sat on my bow and picked it up to study it, turning it round and round in his hands.

"No," I said, scratching my head. "We don't really believe in any gods."

This made him look up from my bow, which he was bending slightly to feel its pull. "Then what does your clan believe in?" He plucked at the string of the bow and frowned.

What was going on with that? Had he never seen a bow before?

I thought for a moment before answering. "We don't believe in a higher being that controls the world. My clan... I guess they believe in the superiority of mankind. They believe that the world is ours to tame, ours to control. Having these powers proves that to them. They believe in kill or be killed. They believe in strength and intelligence and doing what's best for the human species. They

believe that the weak have no right to exist, that the stronger you are, the more rights you have. They believe in creating weapons and armies and going back to the days of old—" I snapped my mouth shut before I could go on a rant.

"And what do you believe?" Dolen looked at me with unblinking eyes that showed me he heard more than I was saying.

Bitterness and fear coiled in my stomach as I swatted visions away. "You don't want to know. It's stupid. I don't make sense." That was what my friends always told me when I tried to get them to see things differently. *You're stupid. You're crazy. Those visions are meddling with your mind.* On a good day I could ignore them. But most days weren't good. Most days, the words hit a little bit too close to my own fears.

By now Dolen had untied the string from the bow. "Do you have a knife?" I frowned and gave him one. I just hoped he wouldn't ruin my bow. It was my favorite one. "And Keric, I do wish for you to explain. I want to understand you."

"Good luck with understanding me," I murmured under my breath. "Let me know when you do, so you can explain it to me."

"What did you say?" He was still focused on the bow, rummaging with the string and the knife. He was definitely ruining it. Not that I was in the mood to do anything about it. I'd just fix it tomorrow.

I let myself fall to my back on the ground and looked at the stars. "Never mind." The earth felt cool against my bare back.

"Tell me, Keric." The roll of the "r" in my name made it seem like a lover's caress. "There is something important about you, and I need to figure out what it is. Tell me about how you see the world. I told you what my views are." He gulped and sounded small and miserable. It reminded me that I had practically laughed at him yesterday when he told me about his beliefs, and that I had done so, again, a few minutes ago. I was an asshole, and the realization hurt.

"I'm sorry, Dolen." I didn't elaborate, and I didn't need to. Dolen's small smile said enough. I sighed and guessed I owed him one. "I believe that we shouldn't have survived the Cataclysm. I believe that the world would be better off without humans. If there are gods like you believe in—gods that created this world and everything in it—they fucked up big time by ever creating mankind. I believe that my clansmen have it all wrong. I think that there would be no bigger disaster than going back to being trapped in cities of iron, glass, and stone. I believe the world doesn't want to be tamed. I believe that the world

fought back and that is what nearly destroyed everything. I believe in nature and chaos and that we cannot win a war against the earth beneath our feet. I don't understand why there has to be a war at all. But nobody gets it. Nobody understands what the world was like before." I gritted my teeth to force myself to stop talking. I sounded like I was mentally challenged. Without saying another word, I went inside, undressed and crawled into my bed.

Chapter 3

I woke up screaming, with Dolen's glowing eyes hovering over me. I pushed him away on instinct, blinded by the fear from my nightmares, and—thanks to my stupid out-of-control powers—Dolen ended up on the floor halfway across the room. I tried to catch my breath, not quite back in reality. I was still feeling the toxic fumes scalding my skin, burning in my eyes, choking me. I was still coughing and checked my hands for blisters.

“Sorry,” I said between bouts of coughing. “Bad dream. You scared me.” Talking was a mistake. It robbed me of the little oxygen I had managed to inhale. I took big gulps of breath. Another mistake. I started hyperventilating, desperately trying to keep from suffocating in a gas that wasn't even real.

Dolen pushed himself up and sat down next to me on the bed. He took my head in his hands, fingers outstretched over my temples, through my hair, grasping my scalp. His glowing eyes stared intently into mine. Immediately I felt myself calming down. The last tentacles of the vision released me from their grasp. “Slow breath,” he ordered. “In through your nose. Keep it in your belly five seconds. Out through your mouth. Slowly.” I sucked the air in quickly. “Slower. I will count: one... two... three... four... five... now hold. Hold. Out. One... two... three... four... five... six... seven. Again.”

He counted with me until my breathing evened out. I became aware of the heat of his hands on my face, his fingers touching the roots of my tattoos, the reassuring cool shimmer of his eyes that kept me in the here and now, my tattoos pulsing in blues and greens. Instead of letting myself get dragged away by the calm that seeped from him, I seized that calm, somehow, and used it to rid myself of fear and to wipe away all traces of the vision.

Dolen was trembling when I finished, as if I had sapped him of his strength. His hands fell to my naked shoulders where he let his fingers trace my tattoos.

“I am sorry,” he said. “I want to make things better, but I do not know how. It is what I do. I find out what is wrong with things, and then I make them better. That was what I was doing with your bow earlier. I never had that feeling with a person before. I do not know what to do.”

If he kept caressing my tattoos like he was, I knew one thing he could do to make me feel better. I closed my eyes and concentrated on the tingle his hands sent through my skin. I felt my cock begin to thicken against the soft fabric of the sheet that covered me.

"In my culture, that thing you're doing now is considered seduction," I mumbled.

Dolen stiffened and stopped his movement, but didn't move his hands from my shoulders. I opened my eyes to an intense gaze filled with curiosity, need, and strangest of all, hope.

"Your... Your people approve of a man lying with another man?"

"Yes," I said softly. I reached up to follow the line of his jaw with my finger. "Sex is considered to be for pleasure as well as for reproduction. There are rules about who to reproduce with. There are actually rules regulating who can reproduce. Sleeping with someone of the same gender is considered preferable to having children with the wrong person. There are people who don't, and as many who do."

"You do?" Dolen asked, breathless.

"I do. And I have no need for anything else." I barked out a laugh. "Something that's neither accepted or appreciated by my people. The Ehecari don't allow it?"

Dolen shivered when I loosened his braid and combed my hands through his long mane. It was soft as silk and shone like spun moonlight, so much in contrast to my dark, curly locks.

"We do not. It is considered a sin. Sexual intercourse only belongs in the sacred union of a man and a woman after they are bonded before the Gods."

"But you want something else?" I prodded, flexing my biceps to get his attention back to my body. It worked. His fingers resumed their tantalizing routine.

"I want a lot of things that are not proper," he said, hanging his head. I nudged his chin until he looked at me again. "I want to change things. I question things that do not make sense. They tell me I am a sinner for that. They tell me I am a sinner for asking questions about the world and the Gods and our traditions. I want to meet other tribes and learn from their habits. I want to know what it is like to walk in the sunlight. That I desire men and not women, that I was not able to keep that desire hidden, is the least proper of all."

"Oh, Dolen. No wonder they picked you for a sacrifice."

It was, of course, an acutely stupid thing to blurt out like that. I was pretty sure it was the truth, but that didn't make my comment any less hurtful.

Someone more sensitive and wiser than I, someone like my sister, would have found a way to let Dolen see the truth for himself. But since Dylwin wasn't here to save me from myself, I had made the usual mess of things.

Dolen had tensed after my words, his fingers first digging into my flesh, then releasing me like I was toxic. Without a word he stood up and fled the cabin, stumbling over a chair as he made his exit. If I hadn't been sure I was the last person he wanted to see, I would've gone after him. Instead, I stayed in my bed and thought about what he had told me.

Dolen's soft voice woke me from my sleep. I grunted and turned on my side, trying to see what was going on. He was sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of the open door that admitted the dim, predawn light. For some reason he had shed his clothes. The only sound besides Dolen's voice was the slight rumble of rain on the roof.

Dolen was speaking in a language I didn't understand. One word was repeated over and over again in his desperate plea. "Hadrà." He spoke with a cadence that made his words sound like poetry, his tone rising and falling as in song. There was power in his words. I felt it as a strange pressure on my tattoos, like they became a size too small for my skin. I felt it in the place where the Wastelands had sunk its hook, the exact place in my core where my powers came from.

My tattoos flared a warning red. Even without expanding my senses, I could feel something was present. A being so big, so magnificent, so overwhelmingly powerful, I almost felt compelled to add a prayer to Dolen's. The being reached out to me, and my tattoos flared up even brighter, instinctively bringing up a shield to guard my mind. Immediately, my impressions of the being dulled. That I could still feel it said something about its power. I felt curiosity and sorrow from it. It sent out a feeling of intense need, prodding me like a child that wanted attention. I echoed its curiosity but couldn't get my powers under control enough to release the protection from my mind.

Maybe it was for the best. I didn't want to go home and explain to my family that I had not only not managed (or even really tried) to gain control over my visions, but instead, found I could communicate with a god. And yes, dear uncle, it turns out you are not the most powerful being in the world. The Wastelands are conscious, and there are actual gods roaming about. Convincing Bane to eat bacon might be easier. At least he already liked pigs.

The god—for lack of a better word—radiated disappointment and pulled back its presence from me. My shields thinned, and I could sense the being envelop Dolen, instead. For minutes nothing seemed to change. Then the prayer became less desperate, the pain behind his words disappeared, and he sounded happy and grateful. The next moment the being was gone. It didn't leave. It simply disappeared like it had never been.

“What the fuck was that?” I asked, a little bit too loud. Poor Dolen startled so badly he propelled himself out of the door. I leaned out of bed to see where he had gone to and saw him lying on the muddy ground in a confused huddle. “Are you all right?”

Dolen pushed himself up and glared at me. “I would appreciate it if you could announce your presence the next time.” It sounded snarky, even though it was phrased so politely. I liked that.

“You knew I was here,” I threw back, throwing my hands up in mock protest. “You were the one waking me by summoning those gods of yours.”

“Do. Not. Make. Fun. Of. Me!” Dolen said between clenched teeth. “The Gods are undeniably real, and I will not stand for your mockery any longer. Maybe if you would welcome the Gods in your soul, you would not be so unhappy. Maybe if your people would, you would not see the need to impose your will on others with violence.” Dolen had gone from cranky to pissed off, and I felt like an asshole—again. At this rate I would soon overcome my brother in this regard, and that was one competition I never wanted to win.

“I'm not mocking you, my friend. I felt the being. There was something here in answer to your prayers.”

“Be silent!” Dolen had finally gotten up and was stalking back inside. He would've looked hilarious, covered by mud and dripping wet like that, if not for the look of fury on his face. Oh, and for the fact that he was very, very naked, and that my skin remembered his touch and craved more.

“You have tried to convince me you want to be my friend. Friends do not disregard each other like this. Friends respect and friends try to strengthen each other. It is one's enemies who mock and try to instill doubt.” He glared at me. “I am leaving. I do not wish to ask for your help, but I will not survive without water and clothing. Are you willing to give me a waterskin and some cloth to make a garment?”

That sobered me right up. “I don't want you to leave. I am being dead serious. There was something here. Something powerful that came in answer to your calling. Something I could imagine being a god.”

“Really?” Dolen asked. He tried to keep up his mask of hostility, but the hope radiating through was so intense, I swear I could feel it. “Hadrà came?”

“I don’t know what or who it was,” I answered honestly. “All I know is that it was curious, that it wanted to communicate, but my tattoos didn’t let it in, and that it did something with you that seemed to make you feel better.” I patted my bed next to me. “Come here, Dolen. I am sorry for what I said earlier about why I think you were chosen to be a sacrifice. I didn’t mean to hurt you. I tend to say things that are better left unsaid. You are not the only one who is considered wrong by his tribe.”

Dolen sat down and pinned me with a probing glance. He said nothing, and for once I tried to figure out what to say before I said it. It was useless. My mind was an unnavigable jungle. I was not used to being vulnerable, and I was not used to being honest. And mostly, I was not used to caring about what someone thought of me.

“The reason I’m here is not a ritual. I made that up. It is punishment for not obeying and for not being able to control my powers. It is punishment for not being aggressive enough, for what they see as cowering away from battle and refusing to be what I was born to be. These tattoos”—I raised my arm to show him—“are given to children with the most promise, the most power. The marks focus our powers, amplify them, protect us. My people think I have shamed that gift by not living up to my potential. They are right. Most ten-year-olds have more control and focus than I have. My uncle thinks I’m lazy and immature and only need the right incentive to finally grow up. I was sent here to gain control, and most importantly, learn how to get useful information from my visions.”

“Visions? You have visions?” Dolen interrupted me, looking at me like I was crazy, which I was, but that was beside the point.

“I have visions of the past,” I said. “Not just visions, because I can also hear and smell and feel fucking everything. Not just what happens to me but to everyone else in the visions.” I shuddered. “The visions are there all the time. They are always waiting for me to lose control when I’m tired or angry or scared. Or when I sleep. They are worse here. Maybe because I have nothing to distract me.” Or more likely, because of the strange power emanating from the Wastelands, and the extreme violence that had happened there.

“So that is what happened last night,” Dolen said. “I assume it also happened the day you found me. It is the thing that is wrong with you. I am not certain whether the fact you have the visions is the problem, or if there is

something else amiss causing them to overwhelm you.” He sounded exactly the same as my teacher did when she was trying to figure out who in class was to blame for whatever prank we had played. I did not like his tone, nor the way he was studying me. I was not an object or some sort of mystery in need of solving. “I do not understand,” Dolen continued. “Why do you fear the visions?”

“Because my uncle thinks it makes me a boundless treasure of knowledge about the ancients and all their technology and, although he has never said it aloud, their weapons. And mostly, I fear them because the past is a wretched place, and we should be glad that it’s over,” I said with emphasis.

I rubbed my face and wondered if it would be better to stand up, walk out of the hut into the Wastelands and let the ravens make a meal of me. That would eliminate all the problems my visions caused, if not for the slight complication of me having no particular desire to die. What I wanted was to get rid of those freaking visions and go on with my merry life.

I was done with this conversation, so I pushed Dolen aside to get out of bed and stalked out of the hut to check on Bane. Dolen didn’t follow me, and I didn’t know whether that annoyed me or not. I wasn’t even sure why his question had affected me this much.

The temperature had dropped when the rains started, and I was shivering in the chill early morning air. I had grabbed my leather pants and boots on the way out, but I had been too irritated to bother looking for a shirt or even my cloak. So I wrapped myself in one of the blankets that lay in Bane’s shed and sat down next to the lying horse. Bane welcomed me with a soft nicker and laid his head in my lap, prodding me with his nose until I was scratching behind his ears. I leaned back and let the solid horse take my weight. His body heat seeped through me, and it wasn’t long before I felt myself drifting off.

Chapter 4

Sharp claws dug into my shoulder, and I swatted at my attacker without bothering to open my eyes. My assailant uttered a high-pitched cry. I felt wet fur flutter against my face, and then the beast landed on my other shoulder, chattering excitedly next to my ear.

“Lemme alone,” I mumbled, trying to dislodge the furry thing, but it escaped my grasp and wriggled until it was lodged on my head. It seemed comfortable there and stopped pinching me with its claws. So I let it be. It was only a messenger monkey, anyway. I was already dozing off when the information sunk in.

I sat up straight, startling the monkey into sinking its claws into my head for balance. The pain was immediate and intense, and I jumped up, trying to dislodge the damned beast. Of course, that only made the monkey hold on tighter until I felt the blood dripping over my forehead. I was aware that I was screaming like a girl but couldn't stop.

Dolen appeared in the shed, his wary expression immediately changing into one of amusement. He bit his lip, looking infuriatingly close to bursting into laughter.

“Get this thing off me,” I screeched. “It's not funny.”

Dolen looked like he disagreed, but he came closer anyway and reached out a tentative arm, obviously scared to get hurt himself. The monkey launched itself to safety, pushing off and thus burying its claws even deeper into my scalp, and flew towards Dolen with a single flap of its furry wings. I sighed in relief and wiped the blood from my forehead. Carefully, I examined the wounds on my head and found them not as deep or extensive as I had feared.

The monkey had crawled up around Dolen's neck, making happy humming sounds as Dolen stroked its fur. I didn't blame the beast. I highly suspected I would make noises like that if Dolen's fingers were caressing me. Dolen was still chuckling softly, the grin around his lips completely transforming the man.

As if in a dream, I stepped closer, causing Dolen to meet my eyes. The grin died on his face, the laughter in his eyes replaced by heat—heat spiced with a tinge of fear. His pupils dilated, and his lips opened in a gasp. The fear in his eyes should've been a sign to stop, but the heat took hold of me, and I moved

towards him until he was close enough to touch. For a long moment we simply stood there, looking at each other. Dolen was the first one to move, raising a hand to my bloody cheek.

“Now you look like the Nahuel we fear,” he mumbled. “The tattooed monsters our parents tell us terrifying stories about. Bloody and fearless and cruel to the bone. The monsters that will come and get us when we do not obey. And still, I find that I am not scared of you.”

“And why is that?” I asked, inching ever closer.

Dolen blushed, the pink rising to his cheeks an exciting contrast to his pale skin. “I think I might like danger.” He trailed his fingertips from my cheek to my neck and up into my hair. I felt his fingers tighten around the curls he found there.

“Better not tell you I’m mostly harmless, then.” I was now close enough to taste his breath, a hesitation away from a kiss.

“Why does this not feel wrong?” Dolen asked in a whisper, while pushing his body against mine.

“Maybe because it isn’t.” I didn’t wait for an answer, wasn’t sure if I could have if I tried.

His lips were warm and so soft, and they tasted like apple jam. He made little whimpering sounds into the kiss, and he melted against me. I wrapped my arms around him to pull him close, cursing the fact that, for once, he had decided to wear clothes. Even with considerable effort, I was unable to find a way into his robe, and I had to be satisfied with the feel of his firm body against mine. His fingers instinctively followed the pattern of the tattoos that covered my bare back. His touch sent pulses of charged electricity through my body, right to my crotch. Dolen shifted, and his hard length rubbed against mine, adding to the overwhelming urge to get us naked now. All I needed to do was find a way to manage that without ever having to stop kissing him.

“Ouch!” I shouted, jumping away from him. That nasty monkey bit my ear! It sat on Dolen’s shoulder, chattering insolently. Little bugger didn’t seem to like that Dolen had been giving me attention instead of him. I grumbled, wishing for a moment I was the kind of man that hit defenseless animals. “Stupid beast.”

Dolen was smiling again, a sweet smile of wonder and amusement, and I decided that I wouldn’t mind being assaulted by tiny animals if it kept that look

on his face. The monkey pressed against his head, rubbing its face against Dolen's hair. Its long, fluffy tail was wrapped around Dolen's neck. Only now, I saw the little message tube tied around its neck. I cursed and reached to take the tube from the monkey. It let me without protest, then continued its attempt to crawl into Dolen. I would have liked nothing more than to do the same. What I didn't want to do was read the message. I did not want my isolation to end—not now that I was sharing it with Dolen—and I was definitely not ready to go back to Masahiro to face my uncle.

I sighed, shoved the message tube into my pocket, and stepped close to Dolen again. His breath hitched when he met my eyes.

“You okay to try that again after we've given that monkey something else to chew on?” I said, brushing my thumb against the dash of my dried blood that had rubbed off on his forehead. It made me feel possessive, seeing him marked like that.

Dolen pushed his face into my touch. “Do you not need to read that message?”

“Yeah. Also need to clean my wounds. It's not what I want, though, so don't really care.”

“What do you want?” Dolen asked breathlessly.

“Simple things,” I answered playfully, grabbing his hand and pulling him with me. “Breakfast. Not to get bit by monkeys. To forget about the world for a day. Another kiss. You, naked. Your skin against mine. Things like that. You?”

Dolen sent me another sweet smile. “About the same. I already had breakfast while you were out playing with your horse and your monkey, so that part I can do without.” I laughed at his joke, loving to see the more playful side of him appearing.

“And... will you let me ride your horse?”

I choked on a breath. “Sure, if that's what your people call it.” The image his words conjured in me was enough to get me back to full hardness. “Wouldn't have taken you for the kinky sort.”

He was silent for almost the entire time it took to get to the hut. “I do not understand what you mean? I meant... your horse.” He pointed into the direction of Bane's shelter. “I would like to sit on him, walk around with him.”

I let out a huff of disappointment. “Really? Not a clue?”

He shook his head, now so red he resembled an apple.

“Well, I might just have to demonstrate that later.” I winked at him, and that blush became even brighter. So cute. “Yeah, sure. You can ride Bane. But, man, don’t say stuff like that when you already got my mind in the gutter.”

“I am sorry,” Dolen said with an expression of misery. “This is new to me. I do not know the rules.”

“You mean—? You—? Never—? Oh man, I’m sorry. I didn’t know. Forget I said anything. You set the pace, decide what you want, if you even want—” It made sense considering how his people looked upon men having sex, but I assumed that he had some experience, thought maybe he’d been caught in the act. It never occurred to me he was that innocent.

“I desire... things,” Dolen stuttered. “I have desired a lot of things for a long time, now. But I never dared to even think them. Once, I saw two men together.” He ducked his head to hide another blush. “They didn’t know I was watching. They were doing things. I desire those things.” The last bit was spoken firmly and almost aggressively.

“Then you better put down that monkey and tell me what you saw.”

I grabbed some food for the monkey—flatbread, nuts and an apple—and put it outside the hut. The animal came immediately when I whistled for it, and the moment it was outside, I shut the door on it. I was done with being bitten—by monkeys that was. I turned my full attention back to Dolen. That earned me another blush.

“Are you ready?” I asked with a grin that never failed to have the desired effect. I beckoned him to come to me, and he came so quickly he almost stumbled over his own feet. I laughed. “I guess that answered that question.”

In the middle of the room, we stood nose to nose, not an inch of height difference between us. His eyes swept over my face, moving from my lips and up to my eyes again. He seemed almost too shy to keep eye contact, but too mesmerized to look away. I didn’t mind because when I looked into his eyes, I could see nothing else, and that was such a waste. Dolen was a beautiful man, somehow both delicate and completely masculine. He reminded me of the sculptures that the Ishiou made, a neighborly tribe that paid tribute to us. They sculpted the likeness of their god from marble and worshipped the images. My uncle had one put on the central plaza of Masahiro—not because he respected their customs, of course—but to hold their god hostage.

Dolen met my eyes again, and all thoughts of gods and my uncle were driven from my mind. I couldn't keep myself from touching him and let a finger follow the path of his eyebrows, his high cheekbones, the line of his lips. He trembled under my touch and inched forward until our lips almost met. My hand found its way to the nape of his neck, and with the slightest of pulls he came forward to put a whisper of a kiss against my lips. It was almost too light to feel, and still its touch echoed through my body. I moaned, and he smiled. With another tiny move he brought our lips together again, his bottom lip brushing my upper lip.

He kept teasing, and I kept restraining myself until every muscle in my body was quivering with unmet need. And even then, I managed to hold myself motionless until he made the mistake of lingering for the span of a second, of uttering the faintest of growls, and all my self-restraint was blasted to pieces. Crushing him against me was not a conscious decision, and neither was the way I devoured him. There was simply no other option than to take possession of him. And he gave everything, answered me as hungrily, as fiercely, and almost as aggressively. It was perfect, a moment of battling tongues, another of kisses placed everywhere, a moment of staring and waiting, then diving back into the passionate dance of tongues and lips.

Dolen clutched my shoulders, fingers digging in my flesh. Somehow his fingers had found the lines of my tattoos again, and the connection there sizzled between us. I pushed him back towards the bed, then flipped us around and let myself fall, pulling him on top of me.

“Are you sure you've never done this before?” I asked, as I placed suckling kisses on his neck.

He pulled back and frowned at me, and he looked even more like the Ishiou god. It didn't make him less gorgeous. Not that he could ever look bad, hanging over me with that amazing silky hair creating a tent and sheltering us from the world.

“Of course I have kissed before. I'm twenty-one years of age. I was bonded for three years, until they separated us when we were unable to conceive.”

“You were bonded? To a woman? Like... for real?”

Dolen's face changed into an expression of complete confusion. “Of course it was real. I do not understand how this could be a strange custom for you. It appears you are even more barbaric than I thought. I can explain it to you, but I do not feel like talking at the moment. I assumed you did not either.” And then

the little bastard rolled his hips to put pressure on my cock that was not as easily distracted as my brain or mouth.

“Okay,” I said with a grin. “You get your way, Nighteyes.”

“Nighteyes?” he asked in wonder, halting halfway down to a kiss. I pulled him the rest of the way down and plastered my mouth against his. I kissed him until he was almost boneless, draped on top of me, and then some more. Only when the rasp of his clothing against the naked skin of my chest started to annoy me, did I pull away.

“Yes. Nighteyes.” I traced his cheekbone with the tips of my fingers. “You have the most amazing eyes in the world. Now take off that infuriating outfit of yours. You seemed plenty comfortable without it before.”

Much to my chagrin, Dolen had to stand up to remove the sheets he had wrapped himself in. I did appreciate that unwrapping them from his body was much like seeing a present opened. And what a present he was! I had looked at him when I treated his burns, but this was so much more, and my eyes lingered. Graceful was the best way to describe him. He possessed the innocence of an antelope and had that same skittish aura, as if he would run away at any moment.

Dolen seemed unsure under my admiring look, shifting a bit from one foot to the other. I finished my inspection by finally checking out his equipment, something I had refrained from doing before. My mouth watered at the sight of his swollen cock, long and straight and the faintest of pinks. The head was several shades darker than the rest, peeking out from his foreskin. The veins showed as deep purple lines through his pale skin. I couldn't wait to trace them with my tongue.

I sat up, grabbed him by his hips, and pulled him closer so I could rub my cheek against the satin skin of his cock. He stiffened with a moan. When I looked up, there was nothing but trust and desire in his eyes. I buried my nose in the line between hip and stomach and inhaled his earthy smell. I followed with a taste, dragging my tongue down until I could nuzzle his balls. They hung low and heavy. The musky scent was the strongest here, and I drank it in, savoring it until I felt lightheaded. I lapped at his balls, moaning at the taste of him. His balls were hairless, and his pubic hair was sparse, silky, and the whitest of whites. Dolen groaned roughly when I sucked one ball into my mouth and massaged it with my tongue, his entire body quivering like the tight string of a bow. While I was giving his other ball similar attention, he clenched

his hands in my hair and angled my head so I could meet his eyes. I hadn't seen them glow before in the daylight, but now they did, a narrow ring of blue fire shone round the deep, black pools of his pupils. I abandoned his balls and kissed my way up to his hipbone.

“Anyone ever done that for you, Nighteyes?”

He opened his mouth but didn't seem to be able to form words. Instead he shook his head, fingers massaging my scalp, again instinctively finding the lines etched there. I don't know if it was intended, but there was the slightest of pushes in the direction of his cock. Well, I was not going to object to that. I nibbled on his skin, taking my time to get to my destination and, by the feel of his trembling muscles, he did not disapprove.

The sounds he made when I finally closed my lips around the head, lavishing it with quick brushes of my tongue, tasting and feeling and relishing, were so incredible I could've come from just those. The noises increased when I prodded his slit and dragged my tongue around the head. When I grabbed the base with a firm hand, angled him the way I needed him, and took him straight to my throat, his moans and whines transitioned into strangled groans. I swallowed around him, earning a half shout, then moved up again to feel his cock slide through my mouth, the weight of it on my tongue intensely arousing, his whimpers immensely gratifying. With a glance up I saw Dolen had his eyes firmly closed, his face pulled into an expression of bliss and wonder.

From his tense muscles I knew he was resisting the urge to bury himself in my mouth, and with a hand on his ass I gave him permission. His ass was something else entirely, hard muscle that was simply perfect to hold on to as he fucked my mouth. My middle finger teased his crack and that made him piston forward again. When he pulled out, the salty bitterness of his precum flooded my taste buds. I moaned around him, and the taste increased. I needed more of that, so I brought a finger to my mouth, slid it in next to Dolen's cock to coat it in saliva, and went back to fingering his ass, pushing and pulling and stroking until his movement lost all coordination. I took over then, sliding my mouth around him and sucked hard when I pulled back. One, two, three times and all the muscles in his body tensed and let go in one beautiful move. His cum rushed into my mouth. The sounds he made were all I ever needed to hear for the rest of my life.

When I was lapping him clean, his knees buckled, and he fell forward into my lap. I caught him easily and positioned him so he was lying in my lap, and I was cradling him in my arms. He had the most wonderful smile on his face,

even as his eyes fluttered shut in exhaustion. Dolen's lips opened under mine, our tongues met, and a growl resonated from him when he tasted himself on me.

Had he ever tasted himself on someone else? Had he ever licked his fingers clean after jerking off? Had he even ever beat off?

There was so much I had to discover about his culture, and their sexual habits topped that list.

“Was that what you wanted to do?” I whispered against his lips. His eyes opened widely, for a moment confused, before he smiled shyly.

“The men did not do that. I never imagined—maybe—they did that before I saw them.”

“Then, what did you see?”

“They—I think it would work better if you did not wear those leg clothes,” Dolen said with a slight grin. He rubbed a hand over my leather pants. “They were not naked, but our garments are much more practical for such things.”

“Huh,” I laughed. “And there I was thinking your people walked around naked all the time.”

“We do not wear clothing for bathing. And we bare both our spirits and our bodies to talk with the Gods. But we talk to the Gods frequently, so you might say that we do not wear clothes all that often.” He sent me another bright grin.

I vowed then and there to stop arguing the existence of his gods or his need to worship them, at least if he didn't mind me watching him as he prayed.

Dolen clambered off me and tried to undo the fastenings of my pants. He only succeeded in making a big knot of the woven cords that held my pants up and closed.

“See, your leg clothes are not practical at all,” he said with a frown.

“Pants are plenty practical for hunting or riding horses,” I threw back. “I'll dare you to ride Bane for a day without them. You'll have blisters on your ass as big as your hands. You just need to know how to work them.” I tugged at the cords but failed to undo the knot.

“You see!”

“You broke them.” I grinned at him, before dashing to the pantry to get a knife and cut the colored belt. On my way back to the bed, I grabbed a bottle of sunflower oil to use as a lube.

“What is that for?” he asked, studying the bottle with raised eyebrows.

“Just have a feeling it might come in handy.”

The way he gave the bottle more attention than me was a bit insulting. I dumped the oil on the floor next to the bed and found out that pulling down my pants did the trick.

Dolen took as much time checking me out as I had done with him earlier, maybe even more. Not that I even had half his patience. I lay down next to him and rolled on my side into his warm embrace. After a kiss that was nowhere near long enough, Dolen turned me onto my back and pushed himself up on an elbow to study me. As he was also dragging his long fingers over my skin, tracing the luminous patterns, I had no objection. He seemed enthralled by my tattoos, both by the thin swirling lines that covered my entire body—apart from my palms, the bottoms of my feet, and most of my face—and the way the lights pulsed as I reacted to his touches.

The contrast between our coloring was stunning. My russet skin with its luminescent lines made his seem only whiter. I had never seen anything like it, never met anyone who didn't share a tan like mine. His hands were so soothing I could've fallen asleep, if not for my cock that was getting harder and more impatient with every passing second. I put a hand on his wrist to steer his hand downwards, and he readily obliged.

Dolen didn't give me the release I craved, instead, stroked a careful finger over the fine lines etched there. I groaned at the excruciating tease. It was starting to feel like I was more a scientific discovery to him than anything else.

“Is this what you wanted to do?” I asked with an exasperated sigh.

Dolen seemed to startle out of his daze and snapped his head around to meet my eyes with so much desire, my breath caught in my throat. I pulled him towards me for a fierce kiss, moaning loudly when he wrapped a hand around me, stroking me tentatively. I arched into his touch, helpless under his hands and his kisses. There was something about Dolen that made everything more real, that ground my always chaotic mind to a halt. When he pulled back, I whined and leaned up to take another kiss. He smiled and pushed me back.

“Now, those men,” he started, seriously. “This thing they did, I am apprehensive that you might find it repulsive. I do not know your customs, and I wish you to know that I will not blame you if you do not want to do... that with me.”

I opened my mouth, but he shut me up by putting two fingers on my lips.

“Please let me finish first. I am afraid, otherwise, I will not have the courage to ask.” Poor Dolen was so red now I could’ve used his cheeks to light a candle.

“I... they...” He took a deep breath. “You know how a man lies with a woman?”

I nodded. Not that I had much—well, any—experience with that.

“Well... they did that with each other. I mean... they were standing and one of the... he put his... penis... in... you know?”

It would probably take him another twenty minutes to ask for something I had no problem giving—or receiving—so I grabbed Dolen around the waist and rolled over until I was on top of him. I straddled his thighs and wriggled until our erections aligned.

Rolling my hips to get some well-needed friction, I leaned down to hover above him. “I get it. So tell me, Nighteyes, do you want me to do you, or do you wanna be the one buried inside me?”

His mouth fell open. “You mean—?”

“Yep, not repulsed at all. The opposite, really. I want that, Nighteyes. I want that a whole lot. And if you don’t mind, I kinda want that now.”

His smile was as radiant as the glow of his eyes, and it touched me in a place deep in my stomach. “I want you... in me... if you do not mind. It is something I have dreamt about.”

I dipped down for a kiss. “Someday you’re gonna describe all those dreams for me, and we’ll make them come true.”

I got a feeling it was not just his dreams about sex I was talking about, and the widening of his eyes suggested he heard the meaning behind my words. Or it might mean the guy was looking forward to a lot of sex in his future. I was up for it either way.

I had to get off him to grab the oil and asked him to roll on his stomach. And what a sight that was. If I hadn’t been aching to be inside him, I would have spent a whole lot of time kissing and teasing that expanse of flawless skin.

Despite my impatience, I took my time to prepare him thoroughly, not wanting to hurt him, waiting to ease into him until he was begging me for it, until he was completely relaxed and opened, and everything was shiny with the oil. My dick was leaking a steady stream of precum, adding its own slick to the

mix. And still, I managed not to slam inside him. I don't think I had ever taken it this slow, and I waited until he pushed himself back onto me. His breathing consisted of gasps, sprinkled with whines of need. I held perfectly still as he shoved backward and forward on my cock, every time going a bit farther and farther until I was finally fully sheathed in him. It was not nearly enough.

"More, oh, more, please, Keric. Give me more. Oh please, Kerr..." The way my name rolled on the back of his tongue spurred my need to even greater heights. I leaned forward to press a kiss between his shoulder blades.

"Sure, Nighteyes. Everything you want. Everything for you."

I finally started moving with zeal, and once I started, I couldn't stop. I pummeled him with long, forceful strokes, designed to move as far inside him as possible, meant to possess, to lay claim, to connect. He met my every motion, rocking back and forth to increase his own pleasure. He wasn't quiet for a moment and urged me on with his moans and groans and with a shout of my name whenever I hit his sweet spot.

There came a moment I needed to see him. I needed the added link of his eyes on mine, his hands on my tattoos, and I pulled out, turned him on his back and slammed in again. I took his right hand and put it on the central point over my heart, and his left found my neck and the node there, again instinctively touching exactly the right points. I roared as I took him harder, took his leaking cock in a grip that was too frantic to be coordinated and felt his muscles clench around me, right before his slickness streamed into my hand, and my own release flooded his canal. I fucked us through our orgasms, seeing his eyes widen when the rush of colors shot over my skin, spreading from the lines atop my heart and traveling out to my limbs.

Chapter 5

I can't remember what happened after that. I must have slept, or I might've lost consciousness. The next thing I knew was the itch of dried blood and cum, a straining bladder, my stomach roaring with hunger, and the numbness of a sleeping arm. I didn't mind the numbness much, because it was Dolen who was causing that particular problem, but the rest needed urgent attention.

A shower and a piss later, I was back inside and stuffing myself with bread and cold raven. I also got the message tube out of my discarded shirt but did not open it yet. Once I did, I would have to stop pretending I had nothing to do with that world.

The past few weeks I had been indolent and stubbornly avoided finding a solution to the predicament I was in. If I did not control my visions, if I did not show I had at least made an effort, there would be trouble. It would certainly mean the end of everything my uncle had tolerated from me until now. I'd turn twenty with the coming of the fall, so I wasn't a child in years but had been allowed to keep acting like one. It would not be accepted any longer. This forced isolation was the first sign of that.

I highly doubted uncle Deke thought me suitable for the military, political and diplomatic duties that I was expected to fulfill. I was seen as too annoying, too naive, and too soft to be taken seriously. I had no desire for any kind of official position, so this was about the only reason I did not mind making that kind of impression. My reputation as a coward might even keep me out of battle. But I certainly would be forced to procreate, if only for the slight chance that I would sire children with similar visions, children more docile and useful than I was. My uncle was a patient man, and the plans he had for mankind spanned more than just his lifetime. I would do about anything to prevent fathering children; I had no desire to ever have sex with a woman, but even more than that, the idea of being a father made me uneasy, and I did not wish my visions on anyone, least of all an innocent child.

Most important was that if uncle Deke was done being nice and patient, he would become the ruthless man so many feared. Torture wasn't beneath him. He wouldn't hurt me, not at first. But I had friends among the commons: people who, in the eyes of most Tattooed, were expendable, but who were definitely not expendable to me—something my uncle was very much aware of. And it would be useless. It wasn't only that I didn't want to give my uncle the horrible

fire sticks I had seen in my visions, but I couldn't even if I wanted to. I couldn't decide what to see, or when to see it, and once I was in a vision, I had no way out.

Before I found Dolen, I had seriously considered running away and leaving everything behind. Without him, I had no way to give my uncle what he wanted anyway. Dolen might be the key to fix that problem. He somehow helped me calm my mind. His presence shielded me from the horrors like nothing had ever done before. He might be able to help me attain the focus I needed.

For my sanity, I welcomed that, but I didn't welcome the responsibility of playing a part in spawning another Cataclysm. It would not come during my life or even that of the next few generations, and it might come even without my help, but as long as I had any say, no steps would be taken in that direction at all. I liked the world the way it was, thank you very much.

Maybe I could give my uncle some snippets, some things that were highly useful but not that dangerous. Maybe I could find medicine or new food sources or a better way to warm our houses. Maybe I could teach him to make those big glass windows the ancient ones had. Could I keep my uncle satisfied without handing him another way to bring death to our lands?

And Dolen needed a place to live. He needed safety, people around him, some way to stay useful. If I took him home, I could give him all that and more. It meant keeping him close, being with him, seeing what else could form between us. It would be difficult to persuade my uncle to allow it, to allow a stranger to spend his time in freedom, to have him house Dolen close to me instead of in the workers' camps. But uncle Deke would permit it, if Dolen was the key to my visions. He would, if he thought he could use him to breed scouts who could see in the dark or use his amazing technical ability. And even without the advantages Dolen could bring to the clan, my uncle might simply give in to me as an indulgence to his favorite sister's child, if I handed him at least part of what he wanted.

In fact, if they found out about Dolen, he wouldn't have much choice. Coming voluntarily would make things easier on him, but it wouldn't make much difference in my people's eyes. He was human, so he should make a contribution to what was best for mankind. Would Dolen want that? He was a peaceful man, and he came from a tribe where violence was only a part of his gods' repertoire. He deserved that choice, though, and I hoped being with me would be reason enough to come.

I took a deep breath and opened the message. It was time to face the real world again. As expected, it was uncle Deke's handwriting. It was short and to the point, as was everything about the man.

*It is time to end this nonsense. I'm sending someone to test your progress. They will be there by the time of the new moon.
Dekarius.*

The new moon was less than a week from now, an awfully short time to achieve enough for my plans to work, and I wondered why there was suddenly need to hurry. He'd been quite clear I could stay here forever as far as he was concerned. Not that he expected me to last for long. He knew as well as anyone that I hated being alone, and how easily I got bored. I half assumed he had thought I was only being stubborn and would break before I even left.

I heard the rustling of sheets and turned back to the bed, only to find Dolen was studying me with a look I could not decipher. It was far removed from the moon-eyed stare I had envisioned. Was he having regrets? He'd seemed to be into it last night, more than into it. Had it been a spur-of-the-moment thing for him, something he felt stupid about now? It wasn't that I was ready to proclaim my undying love or some nonsense like that, but I had enjoyed myself tremendously and was hoping that there was more where that came from. It was the best way to defy the boredom I could imagine. Not to mention that I needed his help.

"Dolen, I... err... About last night... Well, this morning..."

"Yes?" Dolen said, pushing himself up and thus revealing that stunning slender body of his. My mouth went dry, and I wished I'd gone through the trouble of putting on more than a loincloth. Like this, it was all too visible what effect that ridiculously beautiful man was having on me. Dolen glanced down, and I felt my cheeks grow hot. He gave no reaction to either my embarrassment or my reason for it.

"I'm... Well... How are you?" I breathed, relieved at finally being able to string a coherent sentence together. It was only three words, but still...

Dolen cocked his head. "I am fine, thank you." He moved experimentally. "A little sore maybe."

"Oh... I'm sorry."

"Are you? Oh... I guess I should apologize as well. I behaved exceptionally wantonly last night. I was out of line. I hope I have not inconvenienced you by

occupying your bed.” I swore he turned red when he said that. I couldn’t be certain, not in the dim light, but he surely avoided my eyes now.

I couldn’t help it, I burst out in laughter. Dolen whipped his gaze back to mine. He growled at me, and that was the cutest sound I’d ever heard anyone make.

“I’m sorry, Nighteyes. I’m not making fun of you. It’s just... the idea of me having any objection to anything that happened between us, and that includes you hogging my bed, it’s hilarious.”

“It is?”

“Yes, it is. It was amazing. At least, it was for me...” Now I was the one avoiding his eyes. To have something to do, I studied the note I was still clutching in my hand.

“I thought it was very pleasurable as well. I am grateful I got to share that experience with you,” he said in a too-serious tone. It made me laugh again.

“Are you always this serious?” I teased him, getting a confused stare in return.

“I do not understand what you mean.” Dolen cracked a smile, so at least I was not accidentally insulting him. “Is it not proper to thank one after sharing an experience like that?”

“Hmm... maybe. But there are better ways to do that. But I warn you, they are a bit less proper.”

“What are your customs in this?” I couldn’t read his expression, had no way to know if he was teasing me or not.

“They are a bit more hands-on. A kiss would do.” A repeat of the experience would be even better.

“I am very comfortable in here,” he said slowly, beckoning me to him. “I have no objection to kissing you to show you my gratitude. But you would have to come here.”

“I think I can handle that. It’s only polite, right?”

“It is.”

I went to him, framed that gorgeous face with my hands and fit my lips to his. I wasn’t sure what to expect, and I got more from him than I could’ve hoped. He opened up to me, pulled me down on top of him, and for a while

everything else disappeared as I got distracted by naked skin and hot kisses. It took a long while before either of us was able to continue our conversation. It was Dolen who came to the matter at hand first, while I was still catching my breath in his arms.

“Now, I thought you wanted to forget about the world?” He pointed at the letter that had ended up in bed with us. “Why did you decide to open the message after all?”

“Because I realized the world is an awfully big place to ignore.” I sighed. “I can’t stay here forever, no matter what I want.”

“And what did the message say?”

I shrugged. “My uncle wants me back home, so someone will be by to test me in a week or so. I was trying to figure out a way to deal with that.” Not that I had any idea what that test would entail. I wasn’t even sure if there would be a real evaluation. More likely, my uncle expected to find me cowed into doing whatever he wanted of me.

“Who is your uncle, Keric? Why does he hold this kind of power over you?”

“He leads us,” I said simply, waiting to see his reaction. People either feared, despised, or sucked up to me because of whose blood I shared. Dolen only blinked, tilting his head in an unvoiced question.

“I see your people haven’t spent much time here, lately,” I said with a pained laugh. I needed to explain things to him, at least if I wanted him to understand what I was asking when I asked him to come home with me.

“We have not. The last time we were in these latitudes was when I was a very young child.”

“So you’ve never heard of the leader of the Tattooed, the great Dekarius?”

He shook his head. “We know of the Tattooed, know that we do not want to cross paths with them, so we keep hidden. We have not spoken to anyone living in this area since we were preparing for our... ritual.” He choked up, and I hugged him tight. I felt horrible for reminding him about his grief.

It didn’t take long before Dolen was back in control and had resumed staring at me curiously. “So you are related to the leader of the Tattooed? Does that make you important?”

I snorted. “It should. If not for the fact I have about as much control over most of my powers as a child, and they think I’m stubborn and don’t have the

best for mankind in mind. I keep arguing that most of mankind would think it best if they stay in one piece and don't have their children stolen to become Tattooed or breeding stock for new powers. My uncle usually says that I don't see the greater picture, and I agree that we see quite a different picture—”

I realized I was going off topic and tried again. “My uncle has this master plan to breed a whole new version of humans, some kind of superhuman species that will, in the end, create peace and prosperity for all. It's a deranged plan, but yeah, I guess he means well. The problem is the way he tries to make those dreams happen. He thinks for it to happen, the Nahuel should rule the world because we are most powerful. From every tribe he conquers, he selects the most powerful people to breed with, to make the Tattooed stronger with every child that is born. He rules by fear and has invented this principle he calls “propaganda”. Make sure enough people say something and soon everyone believes it. He mostly makes an example of only a few, so the rest will follow without bloodshed—”

Dolen was staring at me with big eyes that displayed disgust. Seeing that look in his eyes nauseated me. It was crystal clear this was not the moment to ask him to come home with me. I had not exactly argued my case very well.

“Dolen, come on. Don't look at me like that. Don't look at me like I'm my uncle. I'm not him. I do not agree with him, nor have I ever played a part in any of it. I have always tried everything I could to stop him. But no one listens to me. Everyone thinks I'm insane. If I can control the visions, if I can be useful and stop acting like an idiot, maybe I can change things. My little sister, she could become my uncle's successor. I need to be there to help maintain the balance, but they need to take me seriously first. And I need you for that.” My eyes burned, and it became difficult to breath. “I am not my uncle, Nighteyes. I am not like him. Don't know who or what I am, I have no idea who to become, but I am not my uncle.”

“You are not,” Dolen said softly, moving back into my embrace. “You are more than the man whose blood you share, or the lines etched in your skin. You are more than just your clan. I do not know why, but you are important. The Gods wouldn't have put us together otherwise.”

My mumbled, “Maybe your gods just wanted you to get laid,” got a disapproving look.

“What do you need me for?” Dolen asked seriously, as he traced featherlight touches over my face and neck.

“To keep doing that,” I said to another disapproving stare. He removed his hand, and I pulled it back immediately. “Okay, okay, being serious now.” Not that I wasn’t before. “I think you can help me focus the visions, make sure I don’t get lost. I need to learn how to pick the vision I’m seeking from all the chaos. You do something to calm me, Dolen. Maybe I can use that as a lifeline.”

“Tell me how,” he said, still stroking my face. “I will try to do what you need.”

I thought for a moment, then had him sit up, so I could lie in his lap—a win-win situation either way—and put his right hand over my heart and his left at the nape of my neck, not that much different from our position, earlier, during sex. “Now, look into my eyes and do that calming thing.”

For the first time, the visions didn’t flood me the moment I relaxed my wariness and turned my attention inward. Instead, I felt them as through a thick fog. It was almost like they were trying to make contact. They were ever changing, individual scenes holding for a moment in my subconscious, then popping like a bubble. There were more than I could count, more than I could ever visit even if I spent all my life in the past.

Some felt familiar. Some were so powerful they nearly broke through the shield Dolen’s mysterious powers helped me form, and some were weak, only fleetingly present. The strangest thing was that some radiated happiness. They were the ones that were the weakest, that disappeared in mere seconds. The next time a happy vision came by, I reached out—

I’m in the middle of an excited crowd. Everyone is chanting a name, screaming, whistling, clapping, dancing. There are people being carried on top of the crowd, their heavy boots and flailing arms hurting the people beneath them. I feel both the elation and the pain and irritation. I feel impatience and exhaustion and hurting feet. I feel sunburn and dehydration. I feel drunk and stoned. But most of all, I feel in awe of what is happening, and I feel expectation. Loud music hurts my ears, hard and powerful and incredibly aggressive. The crowd erupts, and so do I. The happiness and the energy send me to a high I ‘d never reached before. I sing along with words that seem written in my heart, my voice breaks with thousands of others, I jump and jump and—

I was grinning from ear to ear, and I had no idea why Dolen looked so sour.

Where was I? What was happening? Why was I cold after being overheated a moment ago?

“What happened, Keric?”

I didn't answer. Turning my attention inward again, I tried to find the vision, but something was wrong. No friendly fog now, no protection from the onslaught of pain.

I'm hungry. My stomach is an empty pit. My legs are too weak to support my weight. My muscles burn and twitch. My mind will not focus. I look around me and see many men in the same state of starvation I am. We all wear blue and white striped uniforms with a number and a colored triangle on our chest. I look at my arm. It has the number 58964 tattooed on it. It is who I am now. A number. My arm is thin as a stick. So are my legs. I am starving. We are. Only then comes the pain. The icy cold. The fear. The choked misery. There's also hate, hot and sharp. Worse is indifference. We are cattle, less than animals, only worthy to die. Those thoughts are so potent, they burn like a whipping across my back and face. I'm so tired. I have a rock in my hands. It has to go into a pit I'd spent three days digging. I hate that pit. I hate this rock. I hate the fact that I want to die. I do not want to give them what they want. Maybe the war will end. Maybe rescue will come. Hope. It is the emotion that hurts the most. A slap falls across my cheek, soft at first, harder and harder as I cower on the floor. Somehow the slaps feel like they don't belong here; somehow they feel alien. I whimper and hide my head. A kiss follows—

I gasped as the world came in focus again. Dolen's hands and lips were lifelines, the only thing that kept me from being pulled back into the vision. The weakness, the hunger, the horrible, pointless hope in the middle of complete helplessness lingered. I reached out to his spirit, needing the reassurance of someone real and good as a balance, and found nothing, I tried again, scrambling for my powers to obey, and failed again.

I gave up and reached out with my body instead of my mind. I held him close, feeling his lips on mine, his hands stroking soothing patterns on my stomach, and the strength and heat of his body erasing the nightmares. I turned us so we were lying side by side, and pulled away to see cheeks streaked with tears.

“I could not get you back, Keric. I tried, but after you closed your eyes you disappeared. What happened?”

“Shush, Nighteyes,” I whispered against his skin as I kissed the tears away. I needed to get grounded in the present before I dared to talk.

“But—”

“No words. Please Dolen? I need...”

I had no words to tell him what I needed, but Dolen seemed to understand anyway. He took the lead this time, hands becoming more sure as they whispered over my stomach and chest, lips finding sensitive spots and eliciting noises out of me that made him smile against my skin, and he did it again and again until I was a quivering mess. I pulled him back to cover me, his weight on top of me making him more real. The smooth skin of his erection slid against mine, and I pushed my hips into the sensation. Wonder shone in Dolen's eyes, and I did it again, taking his hand and guiding it down. We rubbed together, our hands joined and wrapped around both our cocks, building further and further to that high I needed so much.

Only after the force of my orgasm had swept me clean and made my previously tense limbs heavy with relaxation, did I dare to think about anything but him.

Our little experiment had failed. It had started with promise, but in the end I had been as powerless as ever.

“What happened?” Dolen asked again, his voice still rough from the left over passion.

“I screwed up,” I said bitterly. “Whatever you did made me able to choose the first vision, but I lost control almost immediately.”

“You closed your eyes, and your tattoos started to flash. It is fascinating. It is as if the tattoos channel your energy.”

He was correct, the tattoos were intricately connected and conveyed energy from my heart and brain to my extremities and out into the space around me.

“I should speak no more on this. I am not a magic man. I know nothing.”

“You have magic,” I said, tracing his eye socket.

“That is not magic. That is a gift from the Gods, just like...” he slammed his mouth shut and held his lips together tightly. I studied him, curious about his secrets, but not willing to force him into sharing.

“Like that amazing white skin of yours?” I asked, once again admiring the difference between our coloring. “Or the ability to talk with gods?”

Dolen nodded slowly, eyes searching mine to see if I truly accepted his refusal to explain. “The Gods granted us the ability to walk in the endless night,

to survive without sunlight. There are children born with darker skin, but they get sick. They are weak and always tired. Their bones break easily, and their muscles hurt. Those children are always sad. We have learned that they cannot thrive without the sun, so we try to leave them with tribes who live in the sunlight. But we do not have the ability to talk to the Gods. They talk to us when they please, and they taught us the words and the ceremonies needed to be open to them.”

I highly doubted that the being that had visited us yesterday needed words or ceremonies to do whatever it wanted. It seemed to be called purely by Dolen's need. It had no problem reaching out to me, even though I didn't even believe in its existence before. There were so many questions surrounding Dolen, so many mysteries, and the confusion nearly melted my brain. I never liked riddles, didn't have the brain to solve them. What I wouldn't give to have Dylwin here. Well, not here exactly, obviously. That would ruin a lot of the fun, but it would be great to have her camping outside the hut.

“What were you trying to find?” Dolen interrupted my thoughts. He rolled out of the bed and stretched. I appreciated the stretching, though not the getting away.

“What?” I was half-dazed by the spectacle he made.

He frowned disapprovingly. “Focus, Keric.”

The words, especially combined with that look, were all too familiar. I had gotten it from my mother, my sister, my uncle, every one of my teachers, and honestly anyone who spent any time in my vicinity.

“What were you trying to find in the visions? What question did you want to get answered?”

“Question?” I asked, blinking in confusion. I seemed to be missing something.

“You went into the past with a goal. What was it?” His slow, patient tone was also disturbingly familiar.

“I... I didn't have one. A question, I mean. I think my goal was to control, to see what would happen.”

Dolen sighed and rubbed his face. “I think we have been going about this the wrong way. How can you ever have any control if you have no idea what you are doing? It is like throwing someone who cannot swim into the ocean during a storm and expecting him to control the waves.”

“Ocean?” The word was familiar somehow, as if from something in another life.

“You have never seen the ocean? It is the endless stretch of water that has no other side. It is the boundary of the earth on the west. Rumors are that if you travel far enough to the east, north and south you will find the endless stretch of water there as well. They say the lands float on the ocean. I do not know for sure. We have not traveled that far.” He looked so wistful after those words, it made me wonder if taking him home and pinning him down in one place could make him happy.

I found so much water hard to imagine. It didn't seem healthy. “So your people swim in this ocean-thing?”

“The ocean is not a thing,” Dolen said sternly. “It is like the moon and the sun and the sky. It is there for all to see, and still you can never own it. But you misunderstand me. My point is that without something to hold on to in your mind, you cannot expect to know where you are going. You will drown.”

Chapter 6

The next days were spent experimenting with Dolen's idea. It failed more times than it succeeded, for various reasons, most of which had to do with me being unable to keep an idea so strongly pinned in my mind that the emotions from the visions wouldn't wipe it away. It was Dolen who suggested trying to find things in the past I felt strongly about, creating an emotional connection, as well as an intellectual one.

The results I got were weird and unexpected and mostly useless. In my search to find what ravens were like before, I experienced a collection of short memories that lasted mere seconds, composed of playful, intelligent birds that were not even half the size of the ravens we had to deal with in this age, birds that enjoyed the interaction with humans, sometimes to pester, sometimes to be loyal companions. The ravens of the past seemed like useful pets, much like the messenger monkeys, only more intelligent and nothing like the monsters of the present.

When I was searching for a medicine that could cure the poisoning of blood, something even our most skilled healers were helpless against, I saw needles being stuck into people, pills of all shapes and sizes, and white, sterile-looking rooms filled with people wearing long white coats. Most bizarre, were the unexplained visions of moldy bread, mold in little dishes, and mold in large vats. Dolen narrowed his eyes when I relayed that and was lost in thought for a while.

At least until I distracted him with the proposal of going for a ride. He furrowed his brows until I explained that, this time, I did mean a ride on Bane. Because, well, we couldn't spend all our time being useful, after all. Although, I thought showing Dolen the activities two men could do together when they're naked and willing was pretty useful on its own, and Dolen never argued for long.

"You wanted to know what it's like to be outside during the day," I said with a nudge in his ribs. "And I promised you a ride on Bane."

His smile broadened, and he rushed to get dressed in those maddening wrap-around things he insisted were clothes. He had been making adjustments to the sheet he was wearing until it covered him from head to toe. Only his eyes were visible in a thin slit between folds of fabric. He had explained that most of their clothes were in dark shades, and I realized running into the Ehecati at

night would be the fright of a lifetime. You would only be able to see glowing eyes hovering in the sky. I chuckled, realizing the origin of a few ghost stories we told. With a little prodding, I persuaded him to borrow some pants to wear underneath his wrap to protect his pretty ass.

I took my time putting on my leather pants and shirt, and still, I was finished before he was. He had tried to show me how to wear his outfit—he called it a shiresha—but I had been more interested in getting him out of it. Yorrit was right. I was useless when it came to gathering information for the clan. Not that I cared what my arrogant twin brother thought. He was an idiot. And I did learn heaps about Dolen, only not much about the Ehecati. I was not really interested in people who thought killing someone did any good for the state of the world. And that included many of my own tribe.

“Keric!”

I looked up to see Dolen already hesitating by the door.

“You were lost in your head again. It is not healthy. You need some fresh air.”

He didn't make an attempt to step outside, or to even open the door. It was a sunny and bright day, and I didn't blame him for fearing it. On impulse, I took my dagger and sliced a strip of the old shirt I wore when the nights were cold. It was a dark woven fabric that was soft with age and so worn it was practically translucent. I bound it loosely around his eyes. He made a sound of protest, at first, but opened the door only a moment later and laughed loudly. I was immensely proud that I had been the one with a clever idea for once.

In these last few days, Dolen had improved everything he'd gotten his hands on. My bow, that he had tinkered with that first night by the fire, was more accurate and powerful than ever. He had improved my hearth, fixed the creaking door, found a better way to make my raven cloak, and probably did a whole lot of other things I hadn't even noticed. Dolen had that need to be busy constantly, and when my stamina—either for sex or for working on my visions—ran out, he found something useful to do. I liked watching him, so we both kept ourselves amused.

Right before I followed him outside, I slung on my raven feather cloak that we had finished last night. I wished I had a mirror to admire myself in. I had to suffice with marvelling at the gleaming feathers. When I pulled the hood over my head and tried to look menacing, Dolen burst out in laughter.

I pouted at him, but that only made him laugh harder, so I decided to ignore him and called to Bane, instead. I had let him out of his shed earlier in the day, and he was happily grazing under the apple tree. The messenger monkey was sitting on a low branch, plucking apples for Bane.

“Stupid horse,” I said when I reached him and saw he was eating only apples and no grass. “You’ll get a stomach ache.”

In response, Bane snorted chewed apple in my face, and the monkey threw an apple right onto my head. I thought it was an accident until I led Bane away, and another apple bounced off the back of my head. I turned around to scold the beast, and it threw another one that would have hit me right in the face if my reflexes were a bit slower. As it was, I caught the apple and grinned at the monkey before taking a bite of it. I didn’t doubt another volley would have followed if the monkey hadn’t caught sight of Dolen. It immediately launched from the tree and flew towards him, greeting him with excited chitters. Dolen patted his shoulder, and the annoying thing landed there and made itself comfortable.

“Where do you want to go?” I asked Dolen. “Do you mind going to the Wastelands? It’s only a few miles from here, and I want to see what happens to my visions there.” I also wanted to try communicating with the Wastelands again, but that sounded so crazy I didn’t mention it. I wasn’t so sure that the last time hadn’t been some kind of weird dream.

Dolen didn’t answer at first. The cloth around his face hid his expression. And with his eyes wrapped, I didn’t even have them as a guide. “I... I don’t know,” he finally said. “It is a sacred place. I have not followed the correct rituals. I have not fasted. And...” He was quiet for a long time. “I was supposed to die on the Hollow Plains. I do not wish for my life to end anymore. What if the Gods are slighted and decide to take me anyway?”

I bit back my first response. I was pretty sure that telling him not to be stupid would end up biting me in the ass. I knew Dolen well enough now to understand he was truly scared lightning would hit him if he pissed off his gods. “Your god didn’t seem to mind you being alive earlier,” I said slowly, thinking as I talked. “And I think the Wastelands, your Hollow Plains, guided me to you. I’d tried to get Bane to go in before, but he refused until you were left as a sacrifice. I know it sounds absurd, but I think the Wastelands want me there. There’s this pull...” I knocked my fist against the place, halfway between my core and my heart, where I felt the Wastelands’ hook. “Like I need to be there. It’s getting stronger every day. But I understand if you think you can’t.”

The fact that I thought his reasons were superstitious nonsense, didn't mean I didn't understand that, for him, they were real, and I wouldn't push him to ignore them. When you're raised to think a certain way, it takes more than a few days to completely throw that off.

"We can try," Dolen said softly. "If your magic tells you to be there, we should listen."

I gave him a hug that earned me a very dirty look from the monkey wrapped around Dolen's neck and quickly readied Bane. It was already past midday, and I didn't enjoy the thought of getting caught in the Wastelands at nightfall. Even if that meant a perfect moment to try out my new cape, I had no intention of finding out what kind of deadly things roamed there during the night.

It took a while to leave after all, since the monkey had no intention of being left behind, and I had no intention of taking it, and its sharp teeth, with us. Every time I had chased the beast off, it came back to Dolen, and every time I tried to catch it, it flew out of my reach. All my supposed superpowers were no help here. Eventually Dolen, who was laughing so hard he had difficulty standing, saved me from further embarrassment by simply grabbing the monkey as it landed on his shoulder for another cuddle and locking it in Bane's shed.

Finally, we were on our way. I was leading Bane, more for Dolen's peace of mind than Bane needing guidance, and Dolen was sitting on his back. He was a little stiff, almost sliding off a few times. He didn't seem to understand my instructions, and after having to catch him when he nearly fell for the fifth time in as many minutes, I jumped on behind him. Dolen made a surprised noise.

"Bane's more than strong enough," I reassured him. "Especially if we keep going slowly." Bane nickered as if to remind me he would have no problem carrying us a whole lot faster. He seemed eager to go into the Wastelands again, which was more than a little odd considering his earlier reluctance to even come close to it.

Traveling like this was very, very pleasant. Dolen's back was pressed closely against my chest, one of my arms was wrapped around his stomach, my other hand held the reins loosely. Our thighs connected, and my crotch rubbed against his ass with Bane's every step. Dolen soon felt the effect that had on me. He pushed back, and I nuzzled his neck to show my appreciation. I was very glad that we had managed to leave the monkey behind. I was sure that it would've had my nose for that.

“Did you know it is possible to have sex on a horse?” I mumbled in his ear. “Makes me wish I hadn’t talked you into wearing pants.”

Dolen turned around to send me a mocking look that was so obvious I caught it from behind the cloth around his eyes. “You make me wonder if you were dropped on your head as a child. You have the most foolish ideas.”

I grinned at him and took the opportunity to steal a kiss, something that was complicated because of that cloth wrapped around his face, and despite his ridicule, he didn’t exactly discourage me.

“I was merely sharing an interesting fact about horseback riding.”

He snorted, but it didn’t keep him from pushing his ass back against me. The pleasure built up in me, until I was ready to let us fall off Bane to have my way with him in a more conventional position.

But when we went over the next hill, the Wastelands stretched out before us. Dolen stiffened against me. The moment was gone. And not only because of Dolen’s obvious dread. The

Wastelands’ pull was abruptly magnified to almost unbearable levels. Lust and banter were forgotten. I needed to be there. Without considering Dolen, I nudged Bane with my heels, and almost before he got my signal, he broke out into a canter. Dolen shouted in fright, and I pulled him closer against me, making sure his body followed my movements.

Bane kept running until we were deep in the Wastelands, and he saw one of those moving flowers he liked so much. He came to a sudden stop on top of the plant and immediately lowered his head to take a bite, nearly causing poor Dolen to fall. Only my hold on Dolen kept him on the pony. I could feel his fear in the way he tensed against me, in the trembling of his limbs.

“Are you all right?” I asked him while sliding off Bane. I grabbed Dolen around the waist and pulled him off after me.

“Yes,” he said in a tone that made it hard to believe him.

“Are you sure?” I hugged him, but his heart didn’t seem to be in it. Neither was mine. The pull was still there, trying to guide me deeper into the Wastelands. My tattoos tingled all over, and the feeling made me lightheaded. As before, visions hovered beneath my consciousness, but I pushed them away by studying my surroundings. That was one of the things we had discovered the past few days. Trying to push them away barely worked, and neither did trying not to have them. The only thing that worked was finding something physically

real to concentrate on. It was hard for me. I had a lot of trouble focusing my attention on anything and always had. It wasn't surprising I had the most success when I distracted my mind with Dolen, but he had been quite stern in telling me that I couldn't have sex every time the visions bothered me. I hated to admit he might have a point.

So I settled on paying attention to what was around me. Bane had brought us to a place I hadn't been before. It was the first time I had seen water in the Wastelands, and the little pool seemed out of place in the red and white striped rock floor. The ground was wiped smooth by the wind that ruffled the hair around my face. I walked towards it and stared, marveling, into the deep blue-green tint of the water. The surface was moving slightly, but the patterns waved out from the center and didn't seem to be caused by the stiff breeze.

"How do you think the water got here?" I asked Dolen when I felt his shoulder bump mine.

He shrugged. "Probably from beneath the rocks." He didn't elaborate and wandered away to sit on one of the rocks. He sat in the cross-legged position that he used to pray. I opened my mouth to ask why he wasn't getting naked and immediately shut it, realizing he would have no desire to end up sunburned again. Leaving Dolen to his prayers, I reached out with my consciousness, broadening my senses to everything that was alive. To my immense surprise, I could feel Dolen this time, something I hadn't managed before. His presence was warm and soothing, and it kindled as I touched it with mine. He seemed to be reaching out as well, but in a different way. His consciousness sent out tendrils of energy that appeared to be searching for something. His ability to talk to his gods seemed to be some sort of special skill after all.

I turned my attention to the water. The pond was empty of life. Last time I was in the Wastelands, reaching out, I had felt a reaction in my tattoos, and they had flared up with a blinding light. Today, nothing happened at all. I sat down, took my boots off and after a slight hesitation, stuck my feet into the water. I squealed and pulled them out as if bitten. The water was freezing cold! I tried a second time, now sending a bit of heat down my legs, just enough to heat the water around my feet to a bearable temperature. I hoped nothing would happen to set off my powers, or I might end up with my feet stuck in boiling water or trapped in ice. Putting my hands on the smooth stones, I tried to make contact once again.

And got nothing, not even a hint that this place was more than the remnants of an ancient disaster. Was the entire episode I experienced the other day just a figment of my overactive imagination?

Discouraged and more than a little disappointed, I focused my attention on Dolen. The power of his calling increased with every word of prayer he uttered. Most of the tendrils of energy fizzled out in the air, but some found a pathway into the ground, forming brooks of energy that struggled to expand. Experimentally, I added some of my energy to his. The tiny stream grew and grew until it spread everywhere around us, forming a huge network of interconnected energy lines, and with it, my awareness of the Wastelands grew. It no longer felt dead, only dormant. I called to it, tried to make the connection I had a few days ago. It ignored me.

And then some other entity—not the Wastelands, but that god?—touched Dolen's and my combined energy, pouring more into it and sending a question back. The god's attempt to communicate through the streams of energy was so powerful I almost blacked out. My tattoos tried to put up a shield, and with some difficulty, I managed to push the reflex down. Dolen's prayer changed and turned into a call. The being came, or more precisely, was. It prodded me again, and this time I had no defense. It invaded my mind, swallowing everything I was. I could no more prevent it than I could prevent a volcano from erupting with my bare hands.

My feet were freezing. My head hurt. I felt like I never had to sleep again. I knew everything that was around me. Every plant, every small beetle crawling over the rocks, every tiny bird in the sky, every beast resting through the heat of the day. I perceived the thousands of ravens nesting in the Wastelands, felt a turmoil when my mind touched theirs. The Wastelands slumbered below me and all around me. I was sure I would be able to feel the moon and the setting sun if I chose to. My consciousness stretched out for many miles, far beyond the Wastelands, far beyond what should be possible.

Through a haze of indifference, I felt my tribesmen come: Yanou, head shaved to show off his powers, menacing and grim in his usual black leather; Truben, with his greying beard and hair completely out of control; and my beautiful sister Dylwin. They were still over a day's travel away.

The reach of my consciousness continued to expand until it became almost unbearable, and I was stretched so thin I felt I might evaporate if I didn't stop. Slowly I pulled back, and I let myself shrink. There was a moment of resistance, the Wastelands beneath me stirred and went to rest again, and I was back in my own body, only sensing those things in my direct presence: the

reassurance of Bane at my shoulder, and some tiny lizard that was hiding in the grass under his feet. No Dolen, this time, even though I felt his body against mine.

I opened my eyes and gazed at Dolen, feeling confused and anxious. “Why can’t I sense you? I felt everything.” I motioned around me. My gestures were stiff and uncoordinated. My body felt too small for me now, so small and confining. I trembled, my emotions disordered and perturbed. “I could sense you when you were praying earlier. And now, you disappeared again. Why do you keep disappearing?”

Dolen inhaled sharply and started to say something. “We—I—” He swallowed. “It is forbidden. I cannot let anyone find out. It is...,” he said in a small voice. “Forbidden.”

“Tell me,” I pleaded with a desperation I didn’t know I possessed. “I told you everything. I trusted you with everything. Do you doubt me, Nighteyes?”

“I—It will be the death of my people if you know.”

I knew without needing his explanation that by “you” he didn’t mean me, but my clan.

“You can trust me,” I said softly. “I thought you did.”

He didn’t say anything, and I felt my anger boil over. My tattoos shot lines of blood-red fire over my skin, making it look like I was bleeding all over. I jumped up and ran away before I accidentally did serious harm to Dolen. I roared my pain out to the world in a reaction so powerful it caused a temporary distortion in the energy of the Wastelands.

“Keric?” Dolen’s voice sounded from right behind me. Still I couldn’t feel him, and it was torture. “This is very painful for me. The secret is not only mine, and you do not understand the consequences, perhaps neither do I. But I do not wish for you to be angry with me.”

“I’m not angry,” I said between clenched teeth. “My emotions... I’m not all in control right now. And this... it’s so confusing. It’s like I’m missing one of my senses. It’s like you’re not even here. I thought it was me or my powers. But it’s not, is it?”

I turned around to look at him. His eyes shone in the twilight. He sighed deeply. “I tell you this secret because I *do* trust you, and because I am afraid you will not rest before you figure it out. It will do more harm that way, to both

of us. You have called me your friend from the start, and all you have done has shown that you are true in your intentions. You saved my life and entrusted me with your secrets. You have given me immeasurable gifts.”

I bit my tongue to stop myself from interrupting him, because it was obvious he was talking himself into sharing.

“As an Ehecati, I was taught not to trust. We do not have friends amongst outsiders, and a good part of that is to protect us from spreading this knowledge. By telling you this, I place the fate of my clan in your hands. I do trust you not to share this with anyone else, not ever. Do not even mention it after today.”

His seriousness gave me pause. Did I have the backbone to keep a secret this important? I met his eyes, intensely serious and almost scared. And yes, for him I could. “No word will leave my lips, not ever.”

Dolen closed his eyes. He was trembling. “Your powers are not malfunctioning in this. Your tribe is not the only one who can sense what is beyond the physical. There are other men, and there are many predators that can. Back in the endless night, danger loomed everywhere. Food was scarce, and men even turned to hunting human flesh. In the midst of our desperation, Hadrà came to us and taught us not only how to conceal our bodies but to hide our souls.”

“Hide your souls? That’s impossible.” I reached out to him with focused attention, expecting resistance, a hole in the world, or even some sort of shield, but found nothing. Or... well... there was this barely detectable feeling of distraction, a powerful suggestion there was nothing there, combined with a growing awareness of something nearby, in this case, Bane. I huffed out a laugh. “That must be the coolest power ever! It is like you’re telling me, ‘I’m not here so you can’t eat me. Eat this horse, instead.’ Oh my, if uncle Deke ever finds out about this, he’s gonna want to breed a whole army with you.”

Dread filled me.

“Oh no... he’s gonna use you to breed soldiers. He’s going to find your tribe and assimilate them. You can’t come home with me now. I’m so sorry. You need to hide. You need to go far away and stay away. They can’t find you and figure it out. I—”

“Come home with you?”

Oh, yes, I had never worked up the courage to ask him that. I had intended to, but—

“Why do you assume that I would want to join your tribe?” His disgust was a slap in my face. “Your people... I have no wish to join a tribe that worships violence instead of the Gods. I have no wish to be bred. By Hadrà, Keric, why do you want to return yourself? You seem to hate it there.” His face was etched in confusion, brows drawn.

“I—” I shut my mouth. “They—” I tried again. After several more failed attempts, I realized I had no rational answer for him. “It’s home.”

And that was the simple truth. No matter how much I complained, Masahiro was my home, and I missed it. I missed my friends, my family, and most of all, my little sister. And if I looked deep inside myself, I even missed my pain-in-the-ass twin. I missed the evenings spent roaming the city with friends, simply hanging out and being breathless with laughter about jokes that were so old they should have stopped being funny ten years ago. I missed going on communal hunts, helping out my friends’ families with whatever chores they had. I hated the politics, having to listen to my uncle’s speeches that sounded so logical until you really thought about them, detested the way so many of the Tattooed gave me the cold shoulder. But for all I didn’t like about it, it was still my home. I wasn’t ready to walk away from it, not for a man I had known for less than a week. Not even if that man was as incredible as Dolen.

“You think your uncle will use you to create terrible weapons. You will be forced to have children you do not wish your visions on and be forced to fight in wars you condemn. The other Tattooed see you as weak because of your beliefs and because of the compassionate person you are. They have convinced you that you are a lunatic and do not have a right to your own opinions. You have told me that I am slow-witted for believing exactly those same things about myself. Now I am telling you what you told me. You do not belong with those people. You...” He swallowed and looked away. “Something happened when I prayed. I felt Hadrà like I have never experienced before. Some kind of synergism happened. Your powers strengthened my prayers, or perhaps my prayers were guiding your powers. Hadrà came not only for me, but for you as well. I do not know why. I do not assume to understand the intention of the Gods. But, I feel strongly that I need to go deeper into the Hollow Plains, and Hadrà wants you to accompany me.”

What did Dolen want of me? Did he expect me to dance to the needs of yet another entity more powerful than me?

No, thank you!

“I can’t simply run away and leave everything behind. My sister is coming for me.” His blank look reminded me that I had not shared that particular bit of information yet either. “When Hadrà visited us it helped me see far beyond my normal abilities. My sister is nearly here with two of my uncle’s men, who, I assume, are here to take me home. I need to see why Dylwin is here. She wouldn’t come if it wasn’t important. I’m surprised mother let her go at all. And I need to warn my uncle about the ravens. They could hurt so many people. He has the power to do something about them. I have responsibilities to my clan, to my family. I can’t run off with you.”

Dolen stared at me for a long moment, wringing his hands as he slowly backed away from me. There was a look in his eyes I didn’t recognize, one I didn’t like at all. His next words were like arrows into my heart. “When will your clansmen arrive?” Dolen asked with ice in his voice. “Do I have enough time to go back to the hut and to pack some supplies before I leave? Are you willing to gift them to me?”

“They will not arrive before the morning after next. And of course you can have anything you need,” I snapped, trembling with anger and hurt. “Did you think I would leave you stranded without food, clothes or water? I will not leave you to die, not like your own clan did.”

Chapter 7

Needless to say, the ride back wasn't as cheerful as the way there had been. Dolen insisted on walking while I rode Bane. He walked faster than I thought possible, making his way through the, now, pitch-dark without a moment's hesitation. Bane followed in his footsteps and showed his displeasure about having to walk in the dark by prancing and bucking and nickering sadly. After a few attempts, I stopped trying to make conversation and suffered in silence. As if drawn by my current mood, the visions came back, and I let them take me. Because of our hard work, I now managed to remember that the visions were not real, and they didn't overwhelm me like they had before. That didn't do much to lessen the horror of seeing people turn to ashes, of seeing skin boil and blister, of feeling intense pain before the bliss of nothingness. I gagged from the smells of burnt meat and toxic gasses I had no name for. At least I didn't choke on the smoke anymore, managing to remind my lungs that I was breathing perfectly clean, cool air.

Dolen's sharp voice freed me from the misery. "Get a grip on yourself, Keric. I know you can."

When I opened my eyes, I noticed we were back at the hut. Bane was patiently waiting in front of his shed until I got off his back and let him in. Dolen had turned around the moment he saw I was back to reality and was walking towards the hut with big, angry steps.

I had done it again, ruined everything with my big, stupid mouth, and I had the feeling saying sorry wasn't gonna cut it this time. Not that I was the slightest bit inclined to be the only one to apologize. I was more than done with his tenuous faithfulness to me. The moment I refused to do whatever those gods of his wanted, he treated me like vermin, like an enemy.

The rest of the evening was spent in icy silence that was only broken by Dolen asking me for certain supplies. I gave him everything he needed, the first few times looking for an opening to close the distance between us. He never gave one, and I soon gave up. After a quick meal, I dropped down on my bed. I didn't bother to take anything but my boots off. I knew I wouldn't sleep anyway.

Only when he hoisted his backpack on his back and opened the door, did I react. "Where are you going?" I cursed the desperation in my voice.

"I am leaving," he said with a voice that was devoid of all emotion. "I do not want to inconvenience you any longer. I thank you for... everything." His voice shook a little on the last word. It wasn't much, but I pounced on it.

"Don't go. Not like this. Not while you're still angry. It's bad enough we'll probably never meet again. Please don't make this a bad memory instead of a good one."

Dolen turned around and studied me. "Why do you care, if my beliefs are so unimportant, and my people are so simpleminded? I was willing to sacrifice my life to save the world. You ridiculed those intentions. Even after the encounters with Hadrà, you still paid no heed to my belief that our meeting is not coincidence, and that we have a purpose to fulfill. You ramble on about inconsequential birds, wanting to talk to your sister, and not being able to leave a home behind that you never truly belonged in. I lost my home, my family, and everything I ever cared about! The only thing I have left is my faith in Hadrà, and that I have something important to do. Without you I will almost certainly fail, but I will die trying." By the end of this speech, he was quivering with emotion.

"So everything that happened between us was only politics and religion to you?"

"Hadrà—"

"I'm not trying to disrespect your beliefs, Dolen. I have been given free will and a mind of my own. I have spent twenty years defending that freedom from my clansmen who have tried to bend me to their will, and I will not give it up for some god when I don't even know its intentions! But this shouldn't be about any of that, Dolen..." I hid my face in my hands, trying to think about what to say, how to rescue this. I wasn't used to stopping fights, starting them was more my thing. "We come from different worlds, and we're fucking up because of it. I'm trying, but I don't understand shit about your beliefs, and I know you don't get where I'm coming from either. You can't. And I never expected you to understand in the few days we've known each other. But you seem to assume I should. You act like what happened between us was ordained by your gods, and we had no free will in this. Do you even like me, Dolen?"

He staggered back like I'd hit him. "You think I only had... intercourse with you because Hadrà intended me to?"

"You sure got cold the moment I told you I had obligations to my clan, so yeah."

“You were refusing to obey the wish of the most powerful of Gods. That shocked me. I—I have never heard of such a thing. And I had hoped... I do not wish to undertake this quest without you.”

“Because without me your god doesn't get what it wants. I don't care, Dolen. That god scares me. It nearly ripped my mind to shreds. Just go. Just go and leave me alone.” I wished I hadn't even started this conversation. Before, it was only the all too familiar knowledge that I fucked up something good. But, realizing the entire time with me had meant nothing to him made me wish the being had, indeed, taken my mind. I turned onto my stomach, hid my head under the pillow, and tried to ignore the door shutting behind Dolen.

I flew up and nearly bumped my head against the top bunk when I felt Dolen's hand on my back. My tattoos flashed blood red, a clear threat to anyone familiar with the Tattooed. I did nothing to restrain the reaction. Let Dolen see what happened when he pushed me over the edge.

“I never answered your question,” he said, sitting down on the bed, apparently too stupid to heed a warning. “I was hoping it would be easier to say good-bye with anger in my heart, holding on to the conviction that you are an ignorant idiot with no idea of how the world works.” I growled at that, ready for the attack, but Dolen held up his hand and quickly continued, “I find perhaps I am the foolish one. If I did something to make you believe there is nothing true between us, I have wronged you even more than you have me. Being with you is the only thing I have ever done that was solely for me.”

The harsh red glow of my tattoos faded with his words, and I couldn't help reaching out to him, pulling him towards me, filling the horrible hole in my chest by holding him close. “I'm sorry for the things I said, Nighteyes. I am an idiot.”

He smiled, a trembling smile that reminded me of tears. “A thing you say far too often. Have they managed to make you believe that?”

I had no intention of answering, of explaining to him that the more popular opinion was that I used it as a convenient excuse to speak my raving mind. Leaning forward into a kiss seemed like a much better alternative. That first kiss led to another and another until I was no longer counting, but solely feeling. Frantically, we ripped at clothes, not settling down until we managed naked skin sliding over naked skin. Dolen seemed determined to show that he, indeed, desired me and lavished every inch of me with hot kisses and trembling caresses. In the few days we had spent together, he had discovered exactly what

drove me wild, so he went painfully slowly with touches which were barely there, not giving me what I craved until I begged for it. I wasn't exactly keeping time, but I swore the night was over when he finally reached my cock, licking and sucking and moaning around it like it was the best thing he ever tasted.

He looked up, eyes glowing like a solar eclipse. I took his face in my hands, drinking in this moment and forcing it into my memory. Smooth skin against my hands, satin hair brushing my thighs, hot, slick, perfection around my cock. He went so slowly I could've lasted for hours, and I sincerely hoped he'd keep it up. I felt like I was on fire, and the yellow and orange flashing and fluttering over my skin made me look the part, too. I nearly screamed when he pulled away and let the cold air of the hut tease my aching dick.

"There is something I want," Dolen said shyly. "But I am not sure if it is proper."

"I don't give a damn about proper. You should know that by now." I smirked at him, but he didn't seem to buy it.

"I am serious."

"And so am I," I said, sitting up so I could kiss that annoying hesitation out of him. "You can do anything you want with me. At least, as long as you do it soon. Otherwise I'll be forced to throw you on your back and drive into you until you can't remember your own name."

His mouth formed a perfect "o", and it was simply adorable. Another kiss followed, and he needed no more incentive to make up his mind. He slithered down again, pausing only for a teasing bite of my nipple. I whimpered and tried to keep him there, but he evaded me and went further down. He took another break to nibble on the head of my dick and continued his journey down until he was kneeling between my legs and lavishing my balls with attention. I grabbed my ankles and folded myself in half, starting to see, and like, where this was going. Down he went, tongue tickling that space behind my balls. When he arrived at his destination, he hesitated for the slightest of seconds before dragging his tongue around my hole. Stars flashed before my eyes, and the sound I made was unrecognizable.

"Is this acceptable?" he asked, committing the horrifying crime of pulling back.

"Y—Yes," I stuttered. I couldn't believe it took me four tries to get that one tiny word out. "Pl—Please."

His little smirk was priceless. He pushed my cheeks apart and went for another taste. He didn't pull back this time and laid soft kisses on my opening, pressed his tongue against it and massaged it, licked and pushed his tongue in until I couldn't help pushing my ass into his face. From the sounds he made, he didn't mind, and even if he did, I couldn't stop my movements, just like I couldn't stop the frenzied sounds I was making. The pleasure built up in me until his tongue was not enough anymore.

"Want you, Nighteyes. Need you in me." At least that is what I tried to say. Between the moans and groans, the words might have been unintelligible. I grabbed for the bottle of oil that had taken up permanent residence near my pillow and dropped it next to his head. Luckily, Dolen took that hint, hands trembling when he looked up to me and dripped the slick liquid on his fingers, just like I had done so many times this last week. We hadn't yet ventured on to Dolen fucking me, not because I wasn't willing or hadn't suggested it, but because he had been so eager to have me in him over and over again.

I was almost desperate enough to beg him to forgo prepping, but I had no intention of explaining to my clansmen why I wasn't able to sit on a horse. And Dolen's exploring fingers felt amazing, slick and careful and wonderful. He stretched me like I had him, turning all my tricks back on me and inventing some of his own. He did something with his thumb that—oh, wow.

When he finally pushed into me, I had never been more ready, so relaxed and needy, the sting of the intrusion immediately turned into pleasure singing through me. Dolen looked frozen in wonder once he had pushed in completely.

"So tight," he said, struggling with his voice. "It feels nothing like being with a woman."

"So I've been told. But Dolen"—I groaned when a slight move he made echoed through my entire body—"can we leave the scientific discoveries for another time?"

Dolen cocked his head and never even moved. "I still think it is strange—"

"Dolen, fucking move!" I growled in a way that would have been menacing if I hadn't been gasping and writhing on his cock.

There was that little smirk again. The asshole was teasing me. I would not give in to him.

"Please?" I whimpered a few endless moments later. That smirk blew up to a full-scale grin, before he pulled out so slowly it was torture.

It didn't take long for either of us. Very soon, Dolen lost his composure and his rhythm, but as far gone as I was, it didn't matter. I grabbed his hand and clumsily put it on my heart to connect our energies, the rush of release in my veins echoed by the rush of colors running over my skin, and with one last hit to my sweet spot, I shattered into a million pieces.

Chapter 8

We left the bed as little as possible that night or the following morning. I was trying to forget that Dolen would get up at any moment and walk out of my life. By mid-afternoon, he was getting restless. It was a highly inconvenient time for him to get edgy, since he was midway through giving me the best massage I had ever had. I was half asleep on my stomach, savoring his weight on my buttocks. His hands worked on muscles I was pretty sure had always been tense.

“I have to go soon,” Dolen said. He leaned down to press a kiss on the nape of my neck.

“The sun won’t set for hours,” I complained and wriggled to get his attention back to my shoulder blades. He obeyed, and I moaned. “Yeah there. A bit up, another bit.”

“Are you sure your clansman won’t arrive today?”

It was only the fifth time he had asked today and like all those times before, I obediently stretched my senses to their full capacity, which wasn’t nearly as far as I had managed in connection with either Hadrà or the Wastelands. It was far enough to know that nobody would reach us today.

“Yeah, I’m su—”

“Wait,” Dolen interrupted me. He pushed my hair back from my neck. “Use your magic again.”

“It’s not—”

“Do it!” He sounded so panicked that I did as he asked and reached out a searching question to Bane to see if he was still happy.

“It is wrong, all wrong,” Dolen babbled as he slid his fingers over my skin. “Your tattoos here, there is something grievously faulty. The upper part of the node is broken and asymmetric. Some lines are missing and others situated askew. It seems like the energy can’t flow where it needs to go. It reminds me of a creek with a dam in it, where the water is trying to get to where it wants to be, but is only uselessly splashing up against the barriers.”

He took a deep breath. “I think... it could be the key to.... your visions overwhelming you.”

“What?” I exclaimed, turning my head in an attempt to see what he meant, to point out that he was mistaken, but of course it was impossible to see the back of my own neck. I nearly threw Dolen off me and went in search of a mirror. There was one, a little one I used for shaving, but of course that was of little help. I ripped the hut apart in a frenzied attempt to find something else to use as a mirror, but nothing worked. I couldn't see it.

“This can't be true,” I mumbled, by now sitting at the table with my head in my hands. “You're probably mistaken, right?”

Dolen shrugged. “I do not know anything about tattoos. I know about mechanical things. You explained your tattoos are meant to focus the energy streaming through your body. These seem to be malfunctioning. Your physical powers are working normally, are they not? It is when you need to use your mind that things go awry. Are these not the tattoos linked to the powers of the mind?”

I really didn't want to answer that. “I need to see them. I know how they are supposed to look.”

I leaned my head on the table and tried to stay positive. Dolen had to be wrong. But what if he wasn't? How did I get faulty tattoos? Did they have anything to do with my out-of-control powers? Why had no one told me? And who—

“Do you have paper and charcoal?” Dolen interrupted my thoughts. “I can draw it for you. I am not a good—”

I jumped up and hugged him so hard he let out a surprised gasp. “You brilliant man!” I dove into the chest where I kept my personal belongings and handed him a sheet of paper and a charcoal stick. “I also have ink if you prefer that?”

“I have never worked with ink. Only the priests have permission to use it to write down the wishes of the Gods. Charcoal will do perfectly.”

I was trying to sit still while Dolen copied my tattoos onto the piece of paper. It was useless. I fidgeted nervously, multiple times almost standing up before I realized that I needed to stay seated. What should I do if Dolen was right? Go back and confront my mother and my uncle? They must have known. Did my brother know? My sister? My friends? Everyone? Should I run away with Dolen after all? But then I'd never get answers, then it could never be fixed. Was it even possible to alter the tattoos? They couldn't be erased, not as

far as I knew. But really, what did I know? I had never heard of anyone with broken tattoos before. Was I the only one?

“Argg!” I screamed my frustration out. “Are you done yet?” I demanded impatiently.

“Nearly. Now sit still and keep holding your hair off of your neck. I am not an artist, and I want to get this right. I do not wish to scare you even more.”

“Yes, sir,” I answered obediently and did as he asked.

“Are there tattoos under your hair?” Dolen asked. “I wonder if the oddities continue there.”

There were, most of this node was actually above the hairline. “I’m not shaving my head,” I mumbled. “I’ll look ridiculous.”

“And looking handsome is what is most important now,” Dolen threw back sarcastically. “Although, I am sure you will be very pretty with a bald head. Very mysterious.”

“I am not pretty.”

“I disagree,” Dolen said with a chuckle.

I appreciated his attempt to take my mind off my anxiety, but it wasn’t working. I suffered in silence until he was finally done. He laid the picture before me on the table and sat down next to me.

My tattoos reacted even before the message arrived in my conscious brain. Rage and fear raced over my skin and through my veins like a forest fire. The reaction was so strong it looked like I had burst into flames. The drawing must be incorrect. It just had to be.

Most of the drawing looked perfectly in order. It had connections to all the right places and was perfectly symmetrical. Those were the tattoos that were visible to all. A small part of Dolen’s drawing, though—the part illustrating the designs hidden on the back of my neck, always covered by my thick curls—was distorted and incomplete. No way this could have been an accident—not if it was this clear, with only a small part of the node visible. Even if the lines that were in the wrong places were unintentional, they should’ve added the ones that were missing. Especially once they realized my powers didn’t work like they should. What really frightened me were the runes I didn’t recognize and could not guess the meaning of. Our tattoos consisted solely of lines, and I had never heard of the use of runes in the designs.

“Are you sure this is how they look?” My voice was so calm it scared me.

Dolen took a stuttering breath at my question. “I am not a good illustrator. This is the best I can do.”

I wasn't aware of the power of my glare until Dolen flinched away from me, holding up his hands to ward me off. “I understand that. What. I. Am. Asking. Is. If. My. Tattoos. Really. Look. Like. That?” With every word, I stabbed my finger forcefully on the upper part of the drawing.

Dolen nodded, slightly backing up. I didn't blame him. Screaming out my frustration to the world, I slammed my fist against the table, again and again, while violent visions played behind my eyes. Normally, I was helpless in my visions. Normally, all I did was watch and die. But now, I was the one with the firestick in my hand. I was the one that threw exploding apples into a trench where people were hiding. I rained down fire from a huge flying bird, and I released toxic gasses while hiding behind a mask myself. I felt their suffering as always, but this time, I reveled in their deaths, and their pain equalled victory. I became the creature my uncle wanted me to be. Ruthless and invincible. I had turned into my worst nightmare.

This is not right! This is not me! I would never allow that!

I snapped out of it, stepping out of my visions like I had always aspired to do. Was that the key? Was I locked in my visions because I identified with the suffering, with being powerless, with being a victim? Did I really believe myself so weak? Had they convinced me of that, like they had convinced me I was crazy for the things I believed? I did not have time to think about it, so it was yet another freaking mystery added to the pile. I needed to figure out the reason behind the disconnection in my tattoos. I couldn't do that on my own. And in this, Dolen would not have any answers for me. The key lay with the Tattooed.

Looking up, I searched for Dolen. He was standing next to me, even whiter than usual. His lips were trembling, and his eyes glistened with unshed tears.

“It's okay,” I said, close to tears myself. I reached out to grab his hand. “I'm back again.”

“I am so sorry, Keric. So incredibly sorry.”

“For what? I should be apologizing for scaring you.” Holding his hand wasn't enough. I pulled him closer, wrapped my arms around his waist and hid my face against his belly. Dolen stroked my hair and shoulders.

“I am sorry that they did this to you. You do not deserve to be suffering like this. And I apologize for having to leave. You should not go through this alone.” He nudged my cheek until I looked up at him. “Please rethink your decision and come with me.”

“You think this has been done on purpose,” I stated carefully, not giving away my own conclusions.

Dolen nodded. “It is too precise to simply be a mistake. There are no attempts to correct the malformations. And I think you would have been informed if it was not intentional. They have let you suffer without offering help or even honesty. People must have noticed.”

A memory slammed into focus. When I got the cranial tattoos—right after my twelfth birthday—I had been excited to show them off to my friends and everyone else in the clan. It was sign of maturity, of belonging, to get those final tattoos. But due to a bad infection, my head had been wrapped in bandages until my hair had started to grow back, and even after that, my mom and the tattooist had urged me to keep them covered and protected from the sun until my thick hair hid them completely.

I took a deep shuddering breath.

“Come with me,” repeated Dolen. “We will look for answers together. Maybe Hadrà can help you.”

Seek help from a god. Dolen was naive, too naive for someone otherwise so smart and practical. From what little contact I had with the being, it was too alien to understand petty human concerns like wanting to keep control of your own mind. It wanted something. That much I agreed with Dolen, and for some absurd reason it thought it needed me to get it. But where Dolen thought that an exchange would be favorable for both parties, I had no such illusions. The being would get what it wanted as soon as it figured out how, and then I would be abandoned: dead, alive or something in between.

And yet, running away was so tempting. I didn't like the idea of Dolen striking out alone, especially if he decided to go into the Wastelands. I doubted his ability to defend himself against—well, anything. More importantly, I hated the idea of never getting to see him again. And Dolen was right. The home I had longed for had become a trap. The only obstacle stopping me was Dylwin coming: she was the only one I trusted, who listened to me, and who got me. She needed to know about my sabotaged tattoos. Dylwin was smarter than I was, knew and understood more, and maybe she had the answers I yearned for.

“If you are scared they will try to track us, we can fake your death,” Dolen said softly.

“Fuck, no! I’m not letting my sister think I’m dead!” I snapped. “I need to know why she’s here. I will not leave without talking to her. And the only answers about my tattoos are found back home.” Even saying the word “home” made my insides clench so much it hurt. “I have to go back.”

“I need to go now, Keric. I am so sorry, but I need to go. It is getting dark, and I want to be far away before your clansmen arrive. I wish you would come. I wish there was a way not to say good-bye.” He pulled me up and kissed me hard.

“Bye, Nighteyes,” I whispered against his lips. “Promise me you’ll remember more about me than the idiot I am. Don’t forget the good things that happened, and please, please, don’t die. Leave me that slim chance to find you later and make up for not coming with you. I’m terrified I’m gonna regret that choice.”

“Then do not make it,” he whispered back between desperate kisses. “We will figure it out. We will find a way to contact your sister later.”

It was tempting, so tempting. But I knew that there might not be a later. That we would disappear into the Wastelands and likely never come out. I couldn’t die. Not without answers. Not without saying good-bye to Dylwyn. There might be death, or worse, waiting for me at home as well. But what if there was an easy explanation? What if my tattoos were simply different because my powers worked differently? What if...?

One final kiss, one final embrace, one final round of him begging me to change my mind, and he was picking up his stuff, opening the door, walking through the doorway, walking and walking and walking until he was no longer visible.

Chapter 9

The brush against my mind that was my sister greeting me felt like a caress. I reached back to the familiar comfort before I realized that Dylwin would be able to sense my mood perfectly. I tried thinking happy thoughts but gave up immediately. I was too angry and too hurt. And I would not be able to hide those feelings, anyway, once I looked her in her eyes. Dylwin's mind was in a turmoil similar to mine, her fear and iron desperation like pinpricks against my mind. I had been right. Dylwin had come for a reason. It was the first—and most likely the last—sign that I had made the right decision in choosing to stay to meet with her.

Two other minds touched me in greeting: the ice cold Yanou and the slightly friendlier Truben. I thanked Dolen's gods that it takes familiarity to be able to read more than just superficial emotions. They would be able to sense that I wasn't happy, but since the whole intention of my seclusion was to punish me and whip me into obedience...

I made no attempt to hurry or to even pretend I was hurrying, and let Bane find his way back to the hut at his own pace.

After Dolen had left, I spent the night staring at the ceiling—with a pillow that smelled like him pressed to my chest—wondering if it was really possible to fall in love so quickly and completely. Considering the hole his absence left behind, it seemed it was. Screw me for only realizing it now that I had lost him forever.

By the time the sun was up, I realized pining wouldn't help me one way or the other. So I cleaned the hut of all traces of Dolen—even washed the pillow no matter how much I didn't want to—and took Bane out to go hunting.

I struck out in a different direction than Dolen had taken, scared that if I found his tracks I would follow. Not that it was likely he had left traces of his presence behind. His people wouldn't be able to walk these lands unbeknownst to all, if they were careless enough to leave behind signs of their passing. A single Ehecati would remain unnoticed unless he wished it to be otherwise.

The hunt had gone as expected. I was too distracted and didn't really give a damn what I caught, so all I'd gotten was a brightly colored porcupine and some eggs I'd robbed from a distracted pair of giant chameleons. I had thought about taking one of the lizards with me as well but didn't want to kill one and

not the other. It would be a waste, considering these beasts mated for life. On second thought, I put back four of the nearly ten eggs I had taken. I cursed myself for being sentimental enough to forgo an excellent dinner. It was a good thing these huge, highly toxic lizards were so slow and inattentive. Otherwise, I would've ended up chameleon food for sure, seeing how I hesitated near the nest for long minutes.

"I bet you don't feel sorry for the plants you eat," I said to Bane, scratching his neck. "Not even the ones that don't appreciate being eaten."

Bane ignored me and reached to grab a low stem between his teeth. It wouldn't budge, so he pulled harder, dragging most of the plant behind him.

"You could just stop, you know. I don't mind."

Bane whinnied and dropped the plant. Had it bitten him? He whinnied again, this time louder, and sped up to a canter. If I'd allowed him, he'd have broken out into a full gallop, but I didn't want to meet my clansmen looking like an idiot who couldn't control his horse. My horsemanship was one of the only things I was proud of.

When I arrived, it was as I expected. My visitors had already reached the hut, and Dylwin, Yanou and Truben were unsaddling their ponies. Surprisingly enough, my little sis was no longer riding a pony. She had one of the sleek new breeds that looked like it would break in half under my weight. Bane neighed, and the three other horses responded with ears pricked forward and tails swishing. I jumped off my pony before he was even standing still and left him to greet his friends. I ran to my sister, hugging her tightly. I could feel Yanou and Truben staring holes into my head, but they could wait as far as I was concerned.

"You're okay?" Dylwin said in a tone which turned her words into a question.

"Sure I am, Winny," I reassured. "I can take care of myself for a few weeks."

She studied me, and her eyes told me she didn't believe a word of it. "And you are not surprised I am here?"

I shrugged. "Let's just say this place has some interesting quirks. I sensed you days ago."

"How?" Yanou asked immediately, pushing between me and my sister. "What quirks?"

“I’ll tell you later. Let me take care of Bane first.”

“I can’t believe you follow that ridiculous notion of naming mindless animals.”

I ignored him and didn’t hide my grin when Bane stepped on his toes—twice—and then pushed him to the ground.

“I’m so sorry. He can’t help it. He’s just a mindless animal,” I sneered and whistled for Bane to follow me. With a swish of his tail—that hit Yanou right in the face—he came and let me clear his tack away without even moving a muscle, as if he was showing off to Yanou how well-behaved he was. I filled the manger with food for him and the three other horses and left the shelter open so they were free to wander in and out as they wished. I only locked him in at night to protect him from predators and trusted him not to run away during the day.

Only then, did I turn to greet the third member of the party.

“Truben,” I said with a respectful nod. I held out my hand, and he shook it firmly. I liked Truben. He was one of the more sensible people that were close to my uncle. For a Tattooed he was unusually friendly, always allowing the little children to sit on his lap and pull on his beard.

“Good to see you in one piece, kid,” Truben said with his trademark grin. “The popular opinion was you’d have truly gone mad by now. I never understood Deke’s reasons for sending you here on your own.”

“I do,” Dylwin said. “He hoped it would make Keric a bit less annoying.” I laughed with her, never minding my sister’s friendly mocking. If it’d been Yorrit, he’d have eaten my fist for the same remark.

“I hope it worked,” said Yanou coldly. “We have some more kids like him that need to learn some manners.”

“Not a chance,” I said brightly, draping my raven cloak over one shoulder. “Anyone hungry?”

“Nice cloak,” Dylwin said, stroking the soft feathers. “Who did you steal that from?”

“Made it myself,” I answered with a shrug. I threw my arm around Dylwin’s shoulder and guided her with me. “Killed a bunch of ravens for it.” The last bit was aimed at Yanou, who looked at us sourly. I didn’t know what it was about that man, but I never liked him, not even when I was a little kid. He

was a cruel and cold man, who saw compassion as a weakness. And it was a different kind of cruelty than my uncle possessed. My uncle had a goal, a vision for the future, and he felt like he had the right to hurt people to achieve his vision. He honestly believed he was doing what was best, and it was something I could admire about him. I just didn't agree with his plans for the future of the world, or that his goals excused the violence he used to reach them. In Yanou, I sensed a simple lust for power, and worse, a complete lack of empathy, something we Nahuel aren't known for anyway.

The moment we were settled inside, and the porcupine stew was brewing, Yanou went straight to the business at hand. "Have you come to your senses?"

I had just taken a bite of a delicious nut cake Dylwin had brought along with her, and I took my time to finish my mouthful. "Can you be a little more specific?"

"Have you finally decided to share what you see in those visions of yours?" Yanou grunted back. "Are you finally ready to end this nonsense and grow up? Are you done with being a child and ready to do what's right for your clan?"

"That's a lot of questions," I bit back with all the contempt I could muster. "I have always been honest about what I see in my visions. The problem is that you and uncle Deke, and anyone else for that matter, do not believe me. You think because I do not tell you what you wish to hear, that I must be nuts. But if you spent five minutes experiencing what happens in my head, you'd go crazy yourself." Not true, I realized. Someone like Yanou would be the aggressor, never the victim, and he wouldn't feel guilty about it for a second. "But to answer your first question. No, I cannot fully control my visions. They still overwhelm me, and I have difficulty choosing what I want to see. And this is not nonsense to me, it never was. So I guess I can't grow up if it means leaving everything I believe in behind. And to the last question: yes, I've been ready to do what is best for my clan and for all mankind since I was a child. But I will never share your opinion on what's best."

Yanou glared at me, mouth half open as if he was struggling to reply.

Take that, asshole. I have not grown mellow or compliant with a few weeks of isolation.

"What's the hurry anyway?" I asked, directing my question to Truben who was rubbing his face in a way that made clear he was already regretting his decision to come along on this expedition. "Uncle Deke seemed quite happy to leave me here until I rotted. I'd have thought I'd spend at least another month

or two, here, on my own.” And wouldn't that have been fun? Two months to spend with Dolen, exploring the Wastelands, having the time to learn to understand my powers. I sighed.

They didn't answer, and I had no intention of breaking the silence, so I grabbed another nut cake and nibbled on it. I threw a glance at Dylwin who was sitting on my bed, studying the raven cloak. She was beautiful, my sister. Already tall for her young age, slender and strong like a willow. Her dark hair lacked the curls I had inherited from our mother, and it was as long as Dolen's and as black as a raven's feathers. She would look even more magnificent in a raven cloak than I did, and I would make her one as soon as I got the chance.

Dylwin looked up and met my searching look. She quietly shook her head, telling me with a little hand gesture to tone it down. How often had I seen her make that sign? I grinned at her, and she smiled back wryly. Something was bothering her, and I hated that I had to deal with Yanou before I could be there for my sister.

It was Truben who spoke next. “Wait kid, did you say you can't fully control the visions? Meaning that you gained some mastery of that power?”

Damn, me and my stupid mouth. I should have come up with a game plan. I certainly shouldn't have spent the entire past night and day moping over Dolen. I sighed and nodded. “Some,” I said truthfully. “But I don't know how much good it will do me. This place, it has something to do with it. The most success I have had was in the Wastelands.” A lie. I planted it in memory. I had the feeling I had to keep track of the story I spun this time.

“What?” Dylwin exclaimed, much out of character. My sister is not the impulsive type. “You've been in the Wastelands?”

I nodded. “I got bored. And I was in the mood for roast raven. So when I spotted a few, I went to get them. It felt interesting there, so I experimented some. Did you know there's a giant flock of ravens forming somewhere in the Wastelands? I'm talking thousands. I think uncle should do something about that.”

Truben cursed. “Thousands of ravens? And you saw that?”

“Sensed it,” I shrugged. “I guess the Wastelands augment my powers. I also met a god.”

Yanou glared at me some more, Dylwin frowned in that way she did when she was thinking hard, and Truben broke into chuckles.

“You’re sure you’re not losing your mind after all, son?” he asked when he got his breath back.

“I don’t have another word for a consciousness that big and powerful.”

“Did it mean harm?” Truben asked.

“I am still in complete control of my sanity, so I guess not,” I said cheerfully.

“The vote’s still out on that one,” Yanou mumbled.

I huffed at him. “It could’ve ripped my mind apart, and I could have done nothing to prevent it. It didn’t. I don’t know what it is or what it wants. I wasn’t exactly in the position to offer it tea.”

Yanou was the first to break the long silence that followed that comment. He spoke to Truben. “Do you see what I mean now? The boy is useless. If we leave him here for another month he’ll probably think he’s a horse. It’s time to stop being soft on him.”

I grew cold, and my tattoos started that blood-red glow again. I took a deep breath and tried to stay calm—something that grew increasingly harder when I saw Yanou’s menacing smile. “Why would I tell you I met something resembling a god if I didn’t?”

“So everyone thinks you’re the poor little mental kid that we should treat nicely.”

“Everyone thinks I’m crazy anyway,” I bit back. “Contrary to popular opinion, it’s not an impression I enjoy making. I told you because it might be important to uncle Deke.” Well, honestly, I had no idea why I shared that particular piece of information. The ravens, yes. I desperately wanted my uncle to handle that problem. And even that felt like a betrayal to the Wastelands. But telling them of Hadrà or whatever it was? It was yet another example of not knowing when to shut up. I sighed and dragged my hands through my hair. “Believe me or not. It’s probably not important anyway. As long as someone goes to kill those ravens.”

Yanou scowled at me. “Dekarius has more important things on his mind than killing some birds simply because you are easily spooked.”

I only managed not to explode because I was looking at Dylwin. That warning look in her eyes was as obvious as any sign she could give. I shut out the rest of the conversation. They must’ve asked me questions, and I might’ve

replied, but I made our voices unimportant background noise to the visions playing in my mind.

Relegated to the floor by Truben and Yanou taking the two available beds, I couldn't get comfortable, or relaxed enough to get even close to sleep. I stared up at the ceiling and tried to figure out what would happen to me. From what I overheard Yanou and Truben discussing, now they thought I was sleeping, my uncle needed me for something he thought was important. Yanou and Truben disagreed on what needed to be done before I was ready for that. Truben was in favor of taking a detour into the Wastelands to see what effect it had on my powers, and if it affected theirs as well. He also wanted more information about the ravens. Yanou thought I was only spouting nonsense and wanted to "teach me to obey" on the way back home. I had no difficulty imagining how that would work out. Neither of them said anything about the reason Dylwin had come. I highly doubted she had come to see her brother get tortured. Maybe my uncle wanted her to have a lesson in leadership? More likely, it was to test her. Was she distraught because she knew what was planned to make me submit to my uncle's will once and for all?

Argh! All these questions and no answers. I got up and went to the shed. Being with horses calmed me, and even that annoying messenger monkey was better company than Yanou's snoring.

It didn't surprise me when Dylwin followed me there not much later. "I knew you'd sneak out."

"You know me. More mindless animal than proper Nahuel." It didn't come out quite as lightly as I had planned.

"What happened to you?" Dylwin asked, sitting down next to me, against Bane's side.

I shrugged. "Not much. Been bored mostly. Killed some ravens. Met a god. Rode around on Bane." Fell in love. The most important thing of all, and I had no idea how to tell her.

"You really think there are gods?"

"There's one at least. Maybe the Wastelands is one, too. Or that god is the Wastelands. This place is too bizarre to be true."

"You make no sense."

"Nothing makes sense. Least of all, why you are here. You know that Yanou's gonna hurt me bad, right?"

“And you’re gonna let him?”

“Not much I can do about it.”

“You could run away.” Dylwin’s eyes glistened with unshed tears. “That’s why I came. I need you to leave.”

“What?” I nearly shouted, but managed to keep my voice quiet at the last possible moment. “You want me to... go? Why?”

“Uncle found something in an old book. I’m not sure exactly what, but it is a terrible weapon that is supposed to be easy to make with ingredients which should be readily available in nature. He’s been very excited since it was brought to his attention, not long after you were dropped here. Uncle’s been trying to find the recipe, but when he didn’t soon enough—”

“He remembered his crazy nephew with a door into the past. What kind of weapon is it?”

“Something that reminded me of a story you told me a long time ago. A weapon used to blow holes into rocks or buildings or sling heavy iron balls at people with unbelievable speed.”

I didn’t even have to close my eyes to remember what a weapon like that could do against people who couldn’t see it coming. It was something I had lived through countless times.

“And there’s more. The Ishiou are revolting. They have a new leader who has rallied the population, and they have even recruited some other tribes to help them fight us. Uncle expected to quell their resistance in a week or so, but it’s not going well. Yorrit...” Dylwin’s voice broke.

“He’s dead?” My voice shook. Strange, I often thought I didn’t care about my twin at all.

“No. Not as far as I know. But he’s being sent there. Or I think he asked to be allowed to go. You know him. It’s hard to get a straight answer from him. But he is going, and he will be taking dreadful risks to prove himself.”

I gulped. Both of us knew he was desperate to show everyone how different he was from me.

“I can’t save Yorrit from his stupidity. But I can save you. If you go back, you will be forced to discover how to make that weapon. If you won’t or can’t, you’ll be sent into battle. Uncle is done being lenient with you.”

I didn't know what to say. In the end, I said nothing. I turned the back of my head towards her and lifted my hair. I expanded my mind until I could not only hear Dylwin sob but feel it in my bones. The pale light of my tattoos lit up the room. Her reaction chilled me. It gave me the confirmation that something was wrong. Our minds connected, and our fear, anger and confusion mingled into one giant tangle of hopelessness. She traced the lines, followed the missing connections, touched the runes. Every touch felt like a million pinpricks.

"You didn't know?" I asked hoarsely.

"I don't understand how this has been kept hidden. How did you find out?"

A flash of heat ran through me. I hadn't wanted to betray Dolen's existence. "I don't want to lie to you," I finally said. "And I can't tell you."

Dylwin turned my face back to her and looked into my eyes. "It's not important," she said softly. "You have to leave."

"But if I don't go back, I'll never find out why this was done to me. I'll never find a way to fix it."

"This was done to hurt you, Keric. How and why, I can't comprehend right now. I'll try to find out as much as I can for you. Maybe I'll find a way to get that information to you. Maybe I'll find a way to follow you later."

"Come with me now. Please?"

"I can't. Not now. Uncle will definitely come after us if we both go. But if it's just you, he might not do anything. He's busy. He's got a war to fight. He's not that sure you'll be useful anyway. I'll give Truben and Yanou the impression you ran away to avoid torture. I love you so much, big brother, and I'm as sick of the violence as you are. But I have to fight it from the inside."

"I won't let you do that alone," I said fiercely.

"You won't be any use to me when they break you, and break you they will. Break you or kill you. You're not subtle enough, Ker. That's always been your weak point. You're so passionate, but not much of a strategic thinker. And you're too impatient. Let me handle what happens. And find somewhere to be happy. Try the Quidan. They're less than a week away if you strike through the Wastelands. I wish you hadn't told Yanou and Truben the place is safe to go into."

"With any luck, their horses will refuse to go in anyway. Bane didn't want to at first. Now, he loves it."

“Well, that might buy you time. You need to leave now, Keric. You need to be far gone before they wake up.”

I swallowed. All the reasons not to leave with Dolen had been eliminated in a ten-minute talk with my sister, a talk that had brought me nothing but more questions and more misery. And now, I might never find him again. He might already be dead.

“I need to get some supplies from the hut,” I said, pushing back the tears I had no time for now.

“Already took care of that,” said Dylwin. “I packed supplies for you back home. I had to suffer through Yanou nagging about spoiled little girls who didn’t know how to travel light. Not that he noticed I’ve been wearing the same outfit since we left.”

She stood up, walked to the back of the stable, and pulled out a backpack that could also be tied on the back of a horse and two filled waterskins. I came to my feet as well, nudging Bane to wake from his slumber and to stand up. I fed him some oats so he wouldn’t hate me for waking him up and forcing him to go outside in the dark, and quickly saddled him with riding blanket and halter. I tied my supplies behind the riding blanket, and after a moment’s thought I took the bridles of the other horses and bound them to Bane’s surcingle. “I don’t think Yanou can control his horse without a bit. You can though, right?” I refused to endanger my sis, no matter what.

She scowled at me. “I ride as well as you do, and you know it.”

“On a real horse, yes. I don’t trust that showy thing.”

“Sapphire behaves better than that clumsy beast of yours.” She was caressing Bane’s ears while she said it, so we both forgave her. “Go now, big brother.”

“I’ll miss you,” I said, pulling her into a tight hug. “I wouldn’t know what to do without you being all smart and wise.”

“It’ll be boring without you,” Dylwin sniffed. “That’s for sure. But we’ll find each other, I’m certain about that. Be safe, find answers, and please... never, ever change who you are.”

Two days before, I had ridden this way immersed in visions, and I’d been terrified of those, not of the real danger all around me. Tonight, I was acutely

aware of my surroundings, and fear crawled in my stomach. The night was never quiet in these lands, and sounds of predators and their prey fighting for the right to live surrounded me. Bane was tense beneath me, obviously on the verge of breaking into a frightened run.

If I hadn't been even more terrified of discovery, I would've opened my senses to the pitch-black night, and let my tattoos flare with that blood-red light—a warning that any smart beast would heed. Now, I felt blind and defenseless in this dark, moonless night. I held my bow on my knees, an arrow within reach, a knife in my belt close enough to grab on a moment's notice. I wished I had thought about taking a small axe but didn't dare to stop and check the bag Dylwin had packed. The raven-feather cloak was wrapped tightly around me, the hood pulled up to hide as much of me from sight as possible. It might've been smarter to take Dylwin's black horse, as Bane's golden brown coat and his blond mane could very well be the thing that led to my capture. But leaving him behind would have shattered my heart in even smaller pieces.

After a mile or so—and after crossing a hill that would, hopefully, keep us from being heard and spotted—I expanded my mind, and I felt for danger around me. The abundance of life I felt astonished me. It appeared most animals had adjusted to the night. The world felt alive and vigilant, and many a creature panicked when my mind found it. A pack of wolves howled when they felt my energy. I sent them the smell of dead wolf and pain, and the next time I heard them they sounded further away. I pulled my awareness back to my immediate surroundings, enough to be wary and defend myself but not enough to let the predators know I was here, alone and vulnerable. Too many animals had developed senses beyond the ordinary.

Long before the sun came up, we crossed into the Wastelands. I felt the change in energy, welcoming, beckoning, guiding me deeper and deeper.

The screech of some unknown raptor rang out in the night, reminding me there was a difference between being welcome and being safe. The call came again, closer this time, and the warning I sent out touched a mind that had no way to feel it. A third screech, and the bird's speed increased as it fell out of the sky for the kill. Bane bolted before I could give him the signal, and that was a lucky thing. I didn't want to engage a bird of prey big enough to think I was supper. The bird adjusted, and it kept coming closer despite Bane's speed.

Think, Keric, think.

I nocked an arrow, desperate enough to try to shoot a moving object I couldn't even see while sitting on a panicked horse. I let the arrow fly, trying to

steer it in the direction I felt the bird. Miss. I tried again and missed again. I threw my entire mind against the bird, trying to push it off its course. It ignored me completely. I whipped my bow around, forcing heat through the bow, trying to shoot lightning from it, a feat I had never managed before—and didn't manage now. The bow, itself, would've burned the bird if it had been close enough. In the bow's glow I saw its ominous shape, a few feet behind and above. It swerved to keep away from the bow but didn't give up the chase. I screamed at it, and it screeched a challenge back. A few lazy flaps of its powerful wings was all it took to keep it hovering above my swiftly running horse.

I was ready to jump off and risk a broken leg, or worse, when Bane came to an abrupt halt. The bird overflowed us and hit the ground with a loud thud. Pushing back from Bane's neck, where I had slid in the sudden stop, I sent just enough energy into my tattoos to light my surroundings. I could now see the giant eagle, leathery wings spread in defiance, looking more than a bit confused. Bane was slowly backing up when I took an arrow and shot it through a wing. I had aimed for the chest but was shaking so hard I missed. Not even the improvements Dolen had made to my bow could help with that. The bird uttered a sharp cry of agony, flapped his wings in an attempt to fly away, managed to lift a few inches off the sand, then fell down again. I grabbed another arrow to finish the poor beast, wondering if the eagle would make a decent meal, but before I could release it, the ground started moving all around the eagle.

Immediately, Bane stopped moving, standing as still as possible. I made more light and had to resist a scream. I had to resist very, very hard. The floor around the bird was crawling with insects, red ants the size of my thumb. The otherworldly clicking of their jaws echoed through the night. Within seconds, the red horde had engulfed the eagle. It uttered a scream that betrayed a terrible agony and went quiet. The bird was shrinking before my eyes, getting smaller and smaller as the ants devoured it. I tried to get Bane to move, but he refused, ears flat against his head, trembling all over and never taking his eyes off the ants.

When the eagle had been devoured completely, I hoped against reason that the ants would disappear with it. For a moment it seemed as if that would happen. The crawling mass stopped, going completely motionless for one, two, three seconds. I blinked, and the next moment, they were moving as one single being, a carpet covering the sandy ground, coming towards me and Bane.

Again, I tried to get Bane to run, slammed my heels into his sides as hard as I could and cried a loud “hiyah!” But the terrified pony didn’t move a muscle. Before I could get off Bane and make a run for it, the insects had surrounded us, a glinting, heaving mass of gruesome death. Being tortured by Yanou suddenly seemed like a very pleasant thing. I braced myself, ready to throw myself off Bane the moment the insects attacked him. Useless probably, but I was not going to sit quietly as these mutant ants devoured us.

The attack never came. The loathsome insects streamed around us, not even a foot of distance between Bane’s hooves and the edge of the swarm. It was like they were waiting for a signal, for a sign to attack. What would chase things like this away? Fire, maybe, but I had none. A rain storm, but again, not something that I could call up. Heat might work, but I needed a connection to the sand to make it burn, and I didn’t dare get closer to the ants. Heating the air enough to kill would only harm Bane, instead. Cold wouldn’t work for the same reason.

I was going to die. I could hear nothing but my heartbeat rushing in my ears, my chest tightened so much it hurt, every breath I took was a struggle. If I was lucky, I would drop dead before the ants even attacked, and Bane would escape while they ate me.

The red glow of fear from my tattoos mingled with the red of fear behind my eyes. Every instinct told me to run, to fight, to pull my mind close around the core of my being and protect myself. I fought that instinct and fought the flashes of visions that transported me to other places during the worst possible moment. Without Dolen’s coaching, I couldn’t have brought my focus back to the here and now that was worse than anything I had ever seen in my visions.

I sent out a searching mind to the ants and met, not a crawling mass of individuals, but a single entity that extended deep into the ground. I reached out for contact, and felt the mass shiver as much as I saw it. There was a consciousness there, stranger than anything I’d ever felt before. It only held one emotion that was familiar to me. Hunger. An overwhelming, all encompassing need for food. It was so strong it echoed in my stomach, feeling empty and bleak and insatiable. Hunger. No explanation why it didn’t attack. No explanation of what would stop it. Nothing *could* stop it. Even if I killed a million, there would be countless millions more.

I gave up. I’m not a fighter, not a thinker, never a hero. I’m just a guy who can see the worst of history. I opened myself to my visions, preferring the

horrors of the past to the horrors of reality. Maybe I wouldn't even feel death when it came to me.

It is so dark I can't see anything. All around me are people. We are crammed into a place that is too small to fit so many. It stinks of unwashed bodies, sweat and perfume. It stinks of fear. The panic is so thick it smothers me, smothers everyone in the room. The only other emotion I feel is grief. Grief and terror. That's all that is left of humanity.

In here, are only small sounds. The sound of crying, of quick, fearful breaths, of pounding hearts. The whisper of a mother trying to comfort a child. The sound of praying to a god that has proven it doesn't care. Outside, are bigger sounds. The screech of an alarm, high pitched and ringing. The rumbling sounds of faraway explosions.

The next explosion sends a convulsion through the ground I sit on, the wall I lean against. The sound is so loud I feel it more than I hear it, pain ripping through my head, rattling my teeth and every bone in my body. The panic around me rises to such intensity, I can't take it anymore. I scream so hard my throat burns and my voice breaks. The second explosion is even worse, even louder, even more terrifying and causes the room to start shaking. This time it doesn't stop. Earth rains down on me. I roll up in a ball, protecting my head against the falling debris, trying to do the same against the screams and the mindless fear all around me.

Someone opens the doors which are meant to stay locked. We are supposed to be protected here, safe from the destruction going on above ground. Another explosion, and the concrete I sit on starts to crumble beneath me. I fight my way through the people, caught in the urge to flee that now possesses everyone inside.

The door is now open, throwing a strange, flickering light into the room. Fire. The smoke billows in with it, making it even more difficult to breath. I don't care. I would rather choke than get burned alive. A flash so bright it burns my eyes out is followed by the loudest explosion of them all. I can't see the fire racing through the hallway, but I can feel its heat before we are engulfed by it.

I snapped out of the vision, warned by Bane's snort of distress. I was close to falling off his back, into the mass of ants. They still hadn't come closer. There was light now in the east, the land still dark, but the sky coloring red with a sliver of bright yellow. The waiting felt endless as the sun painstakingly

creeped its way above the horizon. The line of light moved closer and closer until it finally touched the ground before me. The ants disappeared into the sand as one, and the Wastelands seemed peaceful once again

Only then, did I notice what had saved us: Bane was standing in the middle of a perfect circle of smooth stone. We were completely surrounded by a broad expanse of the red sand that was so commonplace here. The spot where the eagle had crashed was sand as well. Could it be the ants could only travel on and through sand? If so, Bane had saved my life.

I leaned forward to hug Bane closely. “Thank you! You clever, clever beast.” Bane whinnied and—without any more hesitation—started walking further into the Wastelands, precisely in the direction I still felt compelled towards.

I halted Bane and slid off to lead him, giving him a well-deserved rest. I didn't dare let him walk free as I usually did, so I turned the reins into a long leash. Clearly, Bane was my best instrument for survival here.

Chapter 10

By midmorning, the haze of fear had finally cleared from my head, but by now, exhaustion was catching up with me, making everything feel distant and fuzzy. Hidden in the shade of one of the massive rock formations, I found a place to rest. I felt safe enough to let Bane walk free again, allowing him to feed and rest and roll in the fine sand to clean his coat of sweat and insects. I was acutely aware I needed sleep soon, but every time I closed my eyes, I either felt an itch somewhere and woke up half-panicked with the image of my body crawling with ants, or I sank back into visions of explosions and fire and light too bright to survive seeing, of people and animals changed beyond recognition. I saw women dying as they gave birth to children with two heads, men covered with sores the size of my hands, bizarrely deformed and mangled animals, and countless other abominations. I had seen visions like these before, I had even witnessed scenes like this in real life, but never as potent, never as many together, and I wondered if it was the Wastelands recounting its history.

I finally gave up on sleep and focused on the problems at hand. It was not reassuring that the visions almost felt less disturbing than my current reality. During the day, the Wastelands felt empty and safe. As long as it was light, the biggest danger I had come across was the ravens; and even they felt less threatening in comparison to the eagle, the ants, and whatever else there was out here at night.

And still, not ending up as something's dinner was the smallest of my problems. I had no idea where to go. East was the direction the Wastelands were pulling me, and east was the shortest way to the Quidan. But not knowing what was between here and there was not a good feeling. And then, there was the not at all insignificant fact that I had no idea whether I was being tracked. And maybe the worst one—having no way to locate Dolen. I couldn't sense him. I wouldn't be able to track him, even if he had left tracks, because I had no idea where, or even if, he had entered the Wastelands. If he was even still alive.

"How did I end up in this mess?" I complained to Bane, who was grazing close by. He snorted and extended his neck to sniff a cactus with deadly looking thorns. "Leave that thing," I told him. "You don't want to hurt your nose." Bane bucked and went back to eating the orange grass he seemed to like.

Okay, back to the problem at hand. I needed to be able to see more than I did now. With my usual methods, I couldn't locate Dolen, and I'd risk Yanou

and Truben sensing me. When Hadrà had possessed me, and I sensed their presence, they hadn't been aware of me. I had no intention of connecting to the being ever again, however, wary that it would damage me irreversibly or find some way to control me. I reached out to the Wastelands, instead, but was too tired to focus and got lost in horrifying images again.

When I finally escaped those, I stood up and studied my surroundings. Bane was now chewing on some plant that was so juicy the liquid dripped from his mouth. I hoped that meant he wouldn't need water soon, because the absence of that was another huge problem. I was surrounded by open land for miles, although far away—both south and north—I saw a misty wall that might mean cliffs, mountains, or clouds. The direction I was pulled in was mostly open as well, land that was flat and almost featureless. Here and there were huge rocks, pillars like the one I was standing under right now, offering shelter and protection from being spotted. I had practically unobstructed vision for miles, and if I was being tracked, it wouldn't take much to find me. Traveling under cover of darkness made the most sense, if it wasn't such a likely way to die.

If my clansmen weren't tracking me, I could simply focus on finding Dolen and getting through the Wastelands alive. I would find some safe rocky place to sleep, build a huge fire—that maybe Dolen would see and come towards—and I'd travel in the daylight. For a moment, I allowed myself to feel the bitter loneliness of his absence. I had been so stupid. I could've been somewhere cozy with him, instead of in this wretched place composed of nightmares. I could've benefited from his wisdom, his knowledge of living off the lands and, most importantly, I would have been soothed by the simple pleasure of his company. He had wormed his way further into my heart than I could ever have thought possible in the few days we had spent together, and it was my own fucking fault that we were both alone and miserable.

I used the day to cover as much distance as I could without completely exhausting Bane. I tried to lead him over as much rocky ground as possible to leave no tracks, but we had to cross a few large stretches of sand to avoid having to backtrack for miles. On the first stretch, I managed to influence the sand with haphazard nudges of my mind, to create random patterns that didn't look like a horse's footsteps, but the second and third expanse of fine sand completely resisted my attempts to alter them. Since I was half-asleep by then, I didn't bother finding another way to erase our tracks, hoping the winds or the Wastelands would do it for me.

By the time the sun was setting, I had just arrived at another rock formation, and for once, luck was with me. I found a narrow cave that was just big enough

to hold me and Bane. The floor was made of smooth stone and would hopefully grant me safety from the ants. I prodded it with my mind and found it empty of anything big, aggressive, or hungry. Very carefully, I wedged myself in, tattoos glowing and knife out. The walls of the cave were as smooth as the floor, almost soft to the touch. They reflected the light from my tattoos, making it seem secluded and safe. A draft meant it would even be possible to light a fire without suffocating in the smoke. When Bane didn't hesitate to follow me in, I felt reassured enough to sleep there.

Sometime during the night my dreams changed from fitful and scary to a stillness and calm that was alien to me. I was drifting in space, the only sound a slow, rhythmic, all-encompassing rumble. Everything around me was a beautiful, bright blue. I felt shielded and welcomed and wouldn't have minded spending forever in this peace.

Life pulsed through my veins. Not just my own, but everything that was connected to these lands. I opened my awareness and let everything in, feeling as much a part of the Wastelands as the ravens were, as were the ants, the giant eagles, the plants, the birds and all those animals I hadn't encountered yet. This place was teeming with life, creatures deadly and creatures innocent, crucial to it all.

My scope expanded, and I saw the land stretched out below me as if I were a bird flying in the night's sky. Underneath me, I saw Dolen sitting cross-legged on a patch of sand, lines of energy radiating from him. As I watched him, the streams of energy suddenly branched out over the lands, finding the link he needed, happiness radiating from him. I tried to make a connection to him, to tell him I was alive and looking for him, but I was prevented. We might both belong here, but we had different paths to take right now.

I blinked, and another image bloomed before my eyes: a man, armed to the teeth, riding a horse that only kept running on because of the spurs driven into its bloody flanks. They had no place here, and only the pony was smart enough to realize it. The man's tattoos glowed a dirty, bloody red, showing off his rage for all to see. He was riding hard through the night, and his anger was horrible enough to chase predators away. Behind him, I saw the evidence of one who had not been chased away. Some sort of catlike beast was dying of a cracked skull. It wouldn't die of its injuries. The ants were already coming.

I struggled against the consciousness of the Wastelands, trying to force it to send the ants after Yanou, but again that was forbidden. Yanou's presence,

here, was my challenge, my fault, my problem to solve. My life meant nothing to the infinite patience of the Wastelands. It would find another, if I didn't accomplish whatever it wanted from me. The knowledge of my purpose floated outside my reach, as did the way to safety and Dolen's location. The only thing I knew was that Yanou was coming fast, and I shouldn't count on the Wastelands to dispose of him for me.

I woke with a racing heart and an impending sense of danger. At first, I thought it was the memory of my dreams, then I felt a heavy pressure moving on my chest. I opened my eyes and felt myself immediately getting dreamy again. The large eyes I looked into soon encompassed my entire world. They were so pretty—yellow, with horizontal pupils of the purest black. They swayed back and forth, taking my world along with them. I would go to sleep now, a nice deep sleep and wake happier for it. Yeah, I would just close my eyes. I did.

I wondered why. I wondered what that weight was on my chest, what that hissing sound was, why I was trying to fall asleep when a—a giant snake was trying to eat me! I reacted instinctively, tattoos lighting up to resist the hypnosis, mind forming a blade against the snake's consciousness, driving inside it, making it screech in agony until the coiled muscle on top of me relaxed. I jumped up, pushed the heavy snake off me, grabbed the hand axe—that Dylwin had indeed packed for me—and hacked its head off. At least I tried. The snake was so big it took me two tries before I was certain it was dead. Its blood gushed out of the gaping wound, filling the cave with an acrid odor. I haphazardly gathered my belongings and fled the cave, pulling my terrified horse after me.

The remainder of that day was blissfully uneventful. The moment the sun was fully up, all became quiet and still, only plants and very small animals moving in the daylight. I noticed the lizards and mice, the tiny, fuzzy, flightless birds that looked cute until you saw their razor sharp teeth, and all the other tiny inhabitants of the Wastelands become more common the farther I traveled. They also grew wackier. Mice with two tails, lizards with several heads, birds with scales or plates and plants that moved of their own volition became commonplace.

They paid no attention to me and Bane, and Bane didn't mind most of them, but we steered away from a large group of bright blue and green scorpions, and the big flesh-eating plants that stood in little clusters. I was mesmerized as I watched one move a beautiful-looking flower to hover above an unexpected

lizard, then grab it from the ground with movement so quick I could barely believe what I was seeing.

I assumed the rest harmless enough. I studied them, linking them to the visions I had lately. Animals that had changed, but not the pitiful, starving beasts from the Wastelands' past. These had perfectly adapted. I spent some time looking at a lizard with three heads. One of the heads was looking around, scanning its surroundings, while the other two devoured a nest of what looked like bird eggs. When a large dragonfly buzzed past it the third head snatched it out of the air.

What would happen if I spent too much time here? Would I change into something unable to live, or would I become stronger, healthier, better adapted to a place so dangerous and strange? Were the Wastelands consciously trying to turn these creatures into something better—not unlike what my uncle was trying to do with humans—or was it pure coincidence, the simple result of natural selection? These were questions I might never find the answers to, questions that felt important for some reason and helped me keep my mind off the desperation of my situation. I didn't succeed nearly often enough in hiding my tracks, was quickly running through my water supply, and had no idea how to survive the next night. No amount of thinking would give me the answer to those worries. So yeah, studying a group of brightly colored birds that hunted tiny scorpions was the better option.

I also lost myself in memories of Dolen, trying to relive every moment we had spent together. I cringed when I remembered my insensitivities and all those stupid things I had done. I didn't skip over them, though, or push them away and try to forget the bad things. No, I needed to imprint everything in my memory before it was lost. And I had to remember, had to make sure never to make mistakes like those again, needed to find ways to make it up to him when I found him. I tried to stay positive that we would meet again, the brief glimpse of him in my dreams enough to keep me hopeful. It was the only thing that dulled the pain of missing him, the only thing that distracted me from the anger and grief I felt over the betrayal by my own people. It was a pain I locked away for later, if there would be a later. Escaping and finding Dolen were the only two things I needed to focus on.

I was going almost directly east, the direction I was still pulled towards. Curiously enough, I never had to point Bane in the right direction, and I wondered if he felt the same pull I did. We only took detours when the terrain was impassable and went as rapidly as possible, alternating between a fast trot

and a walk when Bane needed rest. I hunted a little, kept my eyes open for any signs of water, and noticed how the walls of the mountains on both sides crept closer.

The third night I spent in the Wastelands, I didn't sleep. I found another cave, made another fire, and forced myself to stay awake in any way I thought possible. The next night, I fell asleep even after dragging a knife over my skin in order to keep my eyes open. I was immediately, almost impatiently, drawn into the Wastelands' vision that showed me Yanou still forcing his exhausted horse forward, leaving destruction and death in his wake. His horse wouldn't last long like this, and I grieved for her. She deserved better, but Yanou's cruelty served a purpose: he was gaining on me. He was not stopping for the night, and he was still filled with a murderous rage. It was starting to look hopeless. Yanou was an experienced ranger with complete control over his powers and highly proficient with weapons as well. I had counted on the Wastelands to keep him out or at least hinder him, but it had turned out Yanou was a much better match for this wretched place than I was.

The Wastelands showed me my location and the place it needed me to be. A perfectly round crater of magnificently gleaming rock of all colors. All around it I could feel the presence of ravens, nesting on the cliffs and rocks nearby. I soared higher, looked farther, saw the tiny village that was my destination not far beyond its borders. The Wastelands centered my perspective on the crater again, a feeling of purpose echoing through my mind. It was the clearest attempt from the Wastelands to communicate with me.

"Dolen," I sent back. "Dolen, first."

A feeling of bewilderment surged through me, and I sent it an impression of the man I missed so much. I brought up my longing, the way I felt when he first smiled at me, first kissed me. I sent it the sound of his voice, the smell of his skin, the taste of his kisses. I sent his flawless looks, his razor-sharp intelligence. I sent it the shape of his consciousness, however limited my familiarity with it was.

A moment later I saw him, this time so close I could've touched him if I had been there in the flesh. He looked older than when he left me only a few days earlier, and I growled when I noticed he was limping badly, obviously hurt. Cliffs towered over him, but otherwise I couldn't get a sense of his location, only felt that he felt trapped and scared and lost.

Helped by my desperation, and using the energy of the Wastelands, I forced my mind away from its grip and touched Dolen. He stopped in his tracks and

looked around as if he heard something. "I'm here, Nighteyes. I'm coming for you." I tried to send to him. Before I could see if he got my message, I was yanked back to my body.

I risked riding through the next night, letting Bane lead the way, hoping he would keep me from the most looming danger. I expanded my senses as far as I dared, trying not to sense in the direction Yanou followed, but that would be an impossible feat. My senses went everywhere or nowhere. The visions were almost constant now, the Wastelands showing me the history of the ground I was walking on. I had no idea why it was important, didn't understand half of what I saw, but since I had no way of doing anything about it, I stopped wasting effort by trying to push them away. As long as the visions didn't overwhelm me, and I could keep somewhat focused on my surroundings, I didn't care. It beat being frightened by the sounds of predators all around.

The night went on too peacefully, and I started dozing off. Bane whinnied in distress, the sound loud and ringing though the empty lands. I screamed when I saw the huge, red, glowing eyes of a crouching mountain lion ready for the jump. Reflexively, I flashed bright white light back at it. *Predator*, I screamed at its mind, *I'll kill you before you kill me.*

I regretted doing it immediately, realizing that I had just showed Yanou precisely where I was. Okay, the lion thought better of eating me, but I could've fought the beast off quietly. I had my bow in my stupid hands, after all, ready for exactly this sort of situation.

Not much later, I felt the consequence of my careless action. A cold presence touched my mind, and I was too late to throw my shields up. Stupid again, deciding that knowing what was around me was more important than protecting myself from the animal that chased me. Yanou's rage strangled me, and for a moment I was unable to move. The tattoos, the wrong ones on the back of my neck and skull, flashed with blinding pain.

How was that possible? It was impossible to hurt someone from a distance. It should be impossible, anyway. So why was it happening? Were the designs meant to inflict pain and suffering? Why? Who would etch such evil on a child's skin?

I nearly fell off Bane, tumbled forward and grabbed him around his neck, wrapping the reins tightly around my wrists, whispering for him to run. And run he did, strengthened by my fear and despair. It took too long for Bane to outrun the reach Yanou had on my mind, whispering all the things he was

going to do to me once he captured me, hurting me already through my tattoos. Once I got out of Yanou's grip, I fainted, only my bound wrists keeping me on my horse.

The next thing I was aware of was hitting the ground with a loud and painful thud. Bane snorted at me and shook his head, reaching for one of the plants we both got our moisture from. I was lying next to his head, so I must've fallen off. The sting on my wrist alerted me that Bane's reins were still wrapped around my arms. My wrists were bruised, and my hands were stiff and swollen and hurt terribly. The tattoos on the back of my neck stung like a bad burn.

Slowly, what had happened came back to me. And as soon as I remembered, my blood went cold with dread. I was in more danger than I had ever expected. Yanou knew how to use my tattoos to hurt me. He was in on plans I could not guess the scope of, plans that somehow involved a need to control me.

Why me? No time to think about it now.

Now, I needed to find a place to hide from Yanou. Or I needed to sneak up on him and kill him.

No! I wouldn't kill another human.

My uncle's complete disregard for the value of human life was exactly what had sickened me the most about his philosophies. My convictions shouldn't change simply because someone set out to hurt me. Not if there still was another way. Not if I could escape.

Looking around me, I realized why Bane had stopped. Over the past days the cliffs had come even closer together, and tonight I had reached the point where they nearly touched. There was a narrow canyon leading between them, but not one Bane could navigate. It was littered with rocks, large and small, and overgrown with vines the likes of which I had never seen—thick, dark green branches with speckled red leaves. The pull was still here, getting stronger and stronger as I hesitated. Urgency ripped through me—not mine, the Wastelands'—and a vision of Yanou running flashed before my eyes.

The cliffs were towering over me, and I couldn't even see the top. I could either go on without Bane or go back and fall into Yanou's clutches. It wasn't a real choice.

Chapter 11

I hugged Bane's neck, swearing I would make them pay: Yanou, my uncle, and everyone else who was responsible for getting me in a situation where I had to leave my last friend behind. I didn't know how. I didn't know when. But I would, and it would not be pretty. Bane nickered, pushing his head in my hands so I could scratch him behind his ears.

"I'm so sorry, Bane. I wish there was another way. Don't get eaten, you hear me! Maybe there are other horses around. Or, run home. You know the way home, right?" I embraced him even tighter, and the horse leaned against me, showing a confidence in my strength that I didn't deserve.

I sorted my possessions, taking only what I desperately needed and could easily carry, hid the rest, and set Bane free. I hugged the confused horse once more, trying to push him away at the same time. Having Yanou follow Bane's prints was the only way I had to distract him, to win some time to flee. I could only pray that Yanou wouldn't capture him and use him to catch up to me. Bane would be smarter than that, though. He knew not to trust my clansman.

Giving Bane a last stroke over his soft nose and receiving a last nuzzle in return, I braced myself and stepped away from him.

I clambered over the first rock into the canyon and begged Bane to flee, to run along the cavern's edge until he found freedom. His desperate neigh slashed through me and echoed from the cliffs. A last soft nicker and he started running as if possessed.

"Good-bye, my friend." I whispered, not bothering to wipe away the tears that streamed over my face.

Navigating the canyon was every bit as difficult as it had looked. It involved climbing over and under huge boulders. I had to hack through vines the size of my upper arm, stumble through knee-deep, loose sand that luckily held no ants, or at least none that tried to devour me. I felt only plant life and tiny pinpricks of consciousness that betrayed the presence of countless insects beyond me. I didn't dare feel too far but didn't dare to keep my mind shielded either. There was no telling what would come out of this overgrown tunnel. Soon my awareness paid off, as I sensed the giant snake right before I grabbed its body to pull myself up to climb over a rock. I yanked back my hand as if bitten and shielded my mind before looking at it. It was the same kind that had attacked

me days ago, but even bigger. It was at least fifteen feet long, and thicker than my thigh, a beautiful, bright purple with hypnotizing golden eyes. It looked at me for a few moments, hissed in frustration when it had no effect on me, poison dripping from its long teeth, and lay down its giant head to rest. I went around it and only noticed when I stood next to it that its body was swollen to monstrous proportions. It had just eaten and would be no threat as long as I let it be.

The canyon grew darker and darker, and when I looked to see where the sun had gone, I saw the cliffs had truly met and formed a tunnel. The loss of light was inconvenient, and the idea of being underground was oppressive. Too many of my latest visions had been of underground rooms caving in. At least I found water for the first time in days. At first it was only dripping from the walls and in occasional shallow puddles on the ground, but after a while, a stream ran along one side of the walls. I took the opportunity to drink my fill and wash my face and hands in the blissfully cold water.

I set out again, navigating the now slippery rocks, only going on because of my insane belief that the Wastelands' pull would somehow lead me to Dolen. The darkness was almost complete, now, but for the luminescent fungus clinging to the walls and the slight shine from my tattoos. I lost my footing and went down hard, a shocking pain tearing through my knee. I lay there for a moment, close to giving up. My pants were darkening with blood already. There was no saying what creatures the smell would attract. Even that wasn't enough to make me go on. I was just going to lie here and close my eyes. I was done caring.

An incredible sense of need that wasn't mine possessed me, urging me to go on. I wasn't strong enough to resist the pull, and I stood up. At least I tried. The moment I put weight on my knee, it buckled beneath me, and I had to stifle a cry of agony. I tried again, and this time it held, and I staggered on, limping and trying to keep as much weight as possible off that knee by grabbing onto the wall on my left side. I didn't know what the fungus would do to my skin, and I couldn't care.

I walked for hours through the near dark, the clicking of insects, the squeaks and squeals of tiny life forms all around me. I sat down on a rock when I couldn't go any farther, pulling my raven cloak around me and watched myself disappear in the darkness. It was a good feeling, that feeling like I was gone. If it would only hide my mind as well.

Far behind me, I heard a thud, followed by the rattle of stones falling and then faint footsteps. More footsteps followed, now fast and secure. For a second

I thought it was Dolen, then I cursed myself for being foolish enough to hope. My mind now closed, I tried to imagine it being a globe of the hardest glass.

There's nothing here. There's nothing here. There's nothing here. It became the mantra I repeated as I stood and walked on as quietly as possible, still grabbing the wall for support.

The wall unexpectedly ended, and I tumbled into a narrow tunnel leading away from the main one. The thud of my fall resonated through the passages and in the silence that followed, Yanou's footsteps quickened. Ignoring the pain throbbing through my knee from the fall, I crawled deeper into the small tunnel. It twisted and turned, until it narrowed so much I was scared I wouldn't be able to get out if I took another step. I pressed as far into the crevice as I dared, wedging in sideways, hiding myself with my cloak and begging that he wouldn't be able to feel me.

Yanou's heavy footsteps came closer and closer until the sound of it was all around me. My heart beat in the same rhythm as the steps, terror once again choking me.

Nothing here, I sent out, even though I knew he should be able to feel my panic. The footsteps passed my narrow canyon and went on. *Not here!* I tried when his mind brushed mine. I braced for the assault, but it didn't come. Amazed that the ploy worked, I continued my desperate plea that I wasn't there and pushed deeper into the crack. All my attention was focused on keeping Yanou's mind out, so I didn't feel the tickle of little, hairy legs on my hand at first. When I felt it, I couldn't entirely restrain my scream and made a sound that wasn't completely human. My tattoos blazed red, something that Yanou wouldn't miss, but when I stared at the giant spider crawling onto my arm, I didn't care. It was a smooth black, with iridescent purple legs, and close to the size of my hand. It had countless eyes that seemed to watch me. I shook it off violently, and it crashed with a sickening splat against the walls of the cavern. I couldn't stay here, unmoving. Not anymore. Yanou would come soon. And there was never merely one spider. Never.

I tried to crawl further into the crevice, praying that I would fit through it, that I wouldn't get stuck and be at the mercy of both Yanou and an army of poisonous spiders. Behind me I heard Yanou coming closer, his mind now finding mine and beginning a battering assault. I kept pushing, making myself as thin as possible. I breathed out and had no room to breath in again. My shirt tore and then my skin, hot pain streaming over my chest. Yanou kept up his attack on my mind, and as he came closer, I felt my defenses failing. With a

mighty effort, I mustered all the strength I had left and shoved as hard as I could, fighting to get to the other side of the crack. Red dots danced before my eyes, the lack of oxygen making me dizzy. I pushed hard again, and I fell into another tunnel on the other side of the crevice. Taking deep, painful breaths, I realized a moment too late my mind wasn't shielded anymore.

It was taken in an iron fist and squeezed tightly. I screamed and clawed at consciousness. The pain Yanou had inflicted before was nothing to what he did to me then by crushing and twisting my mind. I could only see red and, for a moment, I thought there was blood dripping from my eyes. I curled into a tight ball and hid my head in my arms.

“Stupid, stupid boy,” Yanou shouted from the other side of the crevice. “You're gonna pay for making me chase you through this demented place. I'm going to retrain you like the dog you are. Now. COME HERE!”

He stopped the torture and took over control of my body, something that should've been as impossible as the agony he was giving me. All of this should be impossible. My arms moved without my volition, pushing my body up. I fought it and stopped my movement, managed to crawl back a bit, bumping into a wall. Yanou doubled his effort, and I kept fighting him. I wasn't able to do more than resist my limbs moving where Yanou wanted them. The agony in my head, the feeling that it was getting smaller and smaller and smaller until it would disappear into nothing, made resistance seem futile. Close to giving up, I kept moving along the wall, until, suddenly, I was tumbling through thin air, sliding down faster and faster. Yanou's roars of fury accompanied my descent.

Ache. A terrible, dull ache in all my limbs and agony in my head. Everything was too bright. I shifted in an attempt to find a more comfortable position. The floor beneath me was hard as a rock, with numerous small sharp objects digging into my skin. I opened my eyes and was immediately blinded by the sun. I shut them and waited until the spots dissolved. With my arm covering my face, I tried again, opening my eyes to slits, this time careful not to look directly up.

Wow! The ground was almost as bright as the sky—a gleaming black with countless gemstones embedded in the smooth rock, resembling an enormous jewel. Blinking a few times and slowly sitting up, I looked around me. I was in the middle of some sort of bowl, at least a mile across and perfectly round. It was deep, at least a hundred feet, probably more. It was familiar somehow, and

powerful in a way I had never felt before. The power drummed, strummed through me, feeding me. I tried to connect to it and felt my aches subside. My tattoos lit up and became blinding like the sun. With my energy, my memories returned, and I slammed my shields up, expecting Yanou's assault. I looked around me but saw no trace of him. Great! I might be able to outrun him after all. Or maybe he had gotten stuck in the narrow crevice that only just allowed me to get through.

I stood up and studied the bowl, looking for a way out. There was no obvious escape route. I kept the sun at my back and walked to the place where the bowl started to arch up. Every step was agony. It felt like I was walking through quicksand. The Wastelands was pulling me back to the center of the bowl, and I realized that there was no longer a pull to the East. I had arrived at my destination, at least as far as the Wastelands was concerned. I took another step—the first step up the steep slope. The next step proved impossible, though, as my foot moved but my body didn't. It was like someone was dragging me back by a rope bound around my spine. The moment I pulled too hard, a nauseating pain shot through my body, and it felt like if I pulled even harder, my spine would be ripped from my body. I tried another spot, a little bit to my left, with the same result. And another spot, until I was panting in exhaustion. This wasn't working. I needed to find out what the Wastelands wanted from me, or I would die before I'd get out of here.

I turned around and walked back to the center of the bowl, this time pulled forward so harshly I had to jog to keep from tumbling over. I sat down in the middle of the basin, pulled my boots off, placed my bare feet and hands onto the ground and tried to make a link to the Wastelands. There was an instant connection, the power drumming in my veins. I went deeper, farther, spreading my mind. I felt the icy touch of Yanou's rage as he ran through endless tunnels. I braced myself for an assault, but it never came. He couldn't feel me, connected to the Wastelands like this.

A little farther, and I found ravens, thousands of them, minds pushing back at my intrusion on their space. And then... There. There, something familiar. Trickle of energy being fed into the earth, into the sky, searching, always searching. A prayer. Dolen! I connected to that flux, adding my augmented power to his, creating a raging torrent of energy that flushed the lands. A moment of quivering anticipation and hopefulness. Then the god answered our call, slammed into me and pushed me wide open. It released a wordless cry of power into the world to which the ravens reacted, the cacophony of their croaks so loud it echoed through the bowl.

They were coming!

The god searched my mind, looking through visions and memories, searched my world. I was floating, exalted in this nexus of power, happy to be nothing.

Abruptly, agonizing pain slammed me back to the earth—pain, both in my mind and in my leg. I looked down and didn't understand why an arrow was sticking out from my leg. The next moment, Yanou was on me, pummeling me with both fists and mind, trying to grab me in an iron hold.

I pushed, or the god pushed, or we both pushed. Yanou flew off me, landed with a thud, screaming in frustration. Almost instantly he was on his feet again and launched towards me, diving with outstretched hands towards my throat. I rolled away, and searched desperately for a weapon. I grabbed at the knife that was bound to my thigh but found I couldn't move my hand. Horrible, unbearable pain flashed from the runes on my neck and all over my skin, as if I was burning alive, when Yanou resumed the attack with his mind. His weight fell on me again, one hand pinning me to the ground by my throat, one fist raised for a punch. It hit me, and for a second the world disappeared. When I came to, everything around me was spinning. My consciousness was lost in the midst of Hadrà and Yanou fighting for control of my body and mind. I, or the god—I couldn't see the difference anymore—freed a hand and clawed at Yanou's face, the fingers pulsing with heat that caused Yanou to shriek in agony. For just a moment, his grasp on my throat loosened, long enough for me to draw one shuddering breath, and then the pressure was back. His fist went up for another blow, and I closed my eyes and waited for it to come.

Before it could connect, a cacophony of noises exploded through the gemstone bowl. Hoofs hitting against hard stone made a sound like thunder. An enraged man cried out his frustration, and thousands of ravens called out as one. In a split second, I got a glimpse of Dolen roaring out a battle cry while desperately trying to stay on Bane's back. The sky was blackened by the ravens, their presence threatening, their intentions unclear.

Yanou made the mistake of taking his eyes off me, of allowing me another lung full of oxygen. I shouted out, slamming my mind into his with all the power I had, through the connection he had formed himself. Hadrà came with me, adding incredible power to mine. Yanou screamed without sound, went completely still, and crumbled on top of me.

I pushed at him, fighting to get him off me. Drained as I was, I didn't manage until Dolen was there to assist me.

"You are alive," he said, kneeling down next to me.

"Barely," I croaked between coughs. "And only thanks to you. Is *he* dead?"

Dolen leaned over Yanou to check. "He is still breathing. Very shallowly." He looked at me with a stoic expression. "What do you think we should do with him?"

"I don't know," I said, shaking with pain that was invading me now the adrenaline was wearing off. "I guess... we should kill him."

"Murder an unconscious man?" Dolen said, with scarcely hidden disgust in his voice.

"It's not that I want to. I just... I don't see another way. He'll keep following me until he captures me."

"We can restrain him and deliver him to justice."

"What justice? Whose? Who will dare to deny a Nahuel the right to do whatever he pleases?" I sighed and closed my eyes. Reassuring blackness was hovering near the edges of my vision, and I wanted to let it take me. It would be better than the pain. It was also better than experiencing what the being was still doing in my head. It was anchoring itself into my mind, sending in tiny barbed tentacles of energy. I tried to struggle against it, and a soothing feeling smothered me. I was too tired and in too much pain to deal with all of this.

"Please stay awake, Keric." Dolen was next to me again, pulling my head into his lap. "What should I do? I do not think I can kill someone, and I agree we cannot take him with us."

"I don't know. I can't deal with this right now," I said, pushing myself up and looked at the arrow piercing my thigh. "That thing needs to get out."

Dolen swallowed and repositioned himself to check the arrow wound. He was cutting my pants to see the amount of the damage, when Bane's terrified neigh broke through our little bubble. We looked up and saw the sky darken as an immense flock of ravens flew over, and a horrendous sound assaulted us.

"We need to go," I said with a groan, trying to push myself up. I wasn't sure if Dolen could hear me over the noise, but I think he understood my intentions. I whistled for Bane, and he came running.

"You cannot ride a horse now," Dolen complained loudly.

"It doesn't look like I have much of a choice."

Dolen swallowed and stood to help me get on the horse. I screamed in agony, seeing red and black flashes as my stomach emptied itself. The moment Dolen mounted behind me, Bane started running. Not much later, the world went blissfully dark.

Chapter 12

The next thing I felt was the agony of the arrow being pulled out. Before losing consciousness again, I registered that I was lying on a stone floor, Bane's distraught nickers echoing around me.

I woke up to the disturbing feeling of my tattoos crawling on my skin. The only normalcy was the creamy white hand clutched around my dark hand with the shifting black lines. I didn't think much of it, because the entire cave-like room was distorting oddly.

"I want to go home," I mumbled, through lips that felt like sandpaper.

"I am not sure if that is a viable option," Dolen said. "How are you feeling?"

I felt my face and found it swollen and tender to the touch. I carefully examined my nose. Not broken. My eye sockets, painful but hopefully not shattered.

"Sore," I tried. "Thirsty."

I felt a waterskin pressed against my lips. "Drink, my love."

I did, soaking my lips and tongue until they felt somewhat close to normal. I closed my eyes, ready to fall back into a slumber when I felt something strange in the back of my mind. I prodded it, and it prodded back, unfolding and filling my mind with power and a consciousness that was most certainly not mine. I opened my eyes and sat up so abruptly everything spun violently.

"I have something in my head!" The being in my head radiated contentment and went back to whatever it was doing. I tried to figure out what and felt tiny tendrils connecting to all parts of my body. "What is it doing? Get it out!" I clawed at my head, only to have Dolen pry my hands away. I was so weak I couldn't even fight him.

"Clawing your eyes out will not help you. What do you mean you have something in your head?"

"I mean that god of yours has found a way to invade my mind. Tell it to get out! Now!"

The look in Dolen's eyes changed from puzzlement to devotion. I wouldn't have minded so much if the look were meant for me and not for the monster hijacking my brain. "Don't look at me like that. Get it out!"

“Hadrà has made you his vessel?”

“I don’t care what you call it. Tell it to get out!”

“Your tattoos are transforming,” Dolen said slowly, pointing to the shifting lines on my hands and arms. “Maybe the change will be positive? Hadrà does no harm.”

“How can something making my head its home be a good thing? Would you like being invaded like this?”

Dolen shrugged. “Of course.”

I sighed. “Well, at least I don’t have to be scared of you leaving me again anytime soon.”

“I would not anyway,” Dolen said softly, tears choking him. “I have never felt more alone than when I thought you were dead.”

“Dead? I tried to send you signs. Didn’t you get those?”

“I thought I was dreaming that!” Dolen exclaimed, too loudly. It felt like a kick to my head, and I covered my ears. Dolen looked mortified and hushed his voice as he continued, “I assumed I was having hallucinations caused by a fever. As far as I knew, you were on your way home, back to your people. And then, I found your horse and knew for certain you had perished. I could not think of any other reason you would leave Bane. I was praying for your soul when Hadrà called me to your aid. Do you remember what happened?”

I thought hard and found only flashes. “Not much. Tunnels. A lot of pain. Some weird crater with gemstones. Yanou trying to kill me. You coming to my rescue on Bane. Ravens. Wait! Where are we?”

“In one of the tunnels near the crater. I did not dare to move you any further because of your injuries. You have been unconscious for most of the day. I was afraid you would not wake up again.”

“When can we leave? I don’t like being underground.”

“Not yet. You are unable to travel. Tomorrow, hopefully.”

“Can we go during the day, please? I’m sick of everything trying to kill me at night.”

Dolen nodded, and I closed my eyes again, exhausted by our short conversation.

“Come here?” I asked Dolen. “Come lie with me?” I moved to make a place for him on my bedroll, and he hesitantly came, careful not to touch me. Had he changed his mind about us, now he knew I held his god in my mind?

I turned to him, seeing only those mesmerizing, hypnotic eyes looking scared and hesitant. “Hold me, please?” I begged, deciding my dignity was nonexistent by now, anyway.

“I do not want to hurt you.”

“You can’t make it worse, only better. I promise.” I tried a smile and got one back. Better yet, I got him pressed against my side, arm slung over my chest. And yes, it hurt, but it was worth it. With some difficulty, I cradled the back of his head with my hand and pulled him close enough for a kiss. I didn’t dare to risk it, scared of rejection, and halted before our lips would touch. He closed the distance between us, lips soft and warm and oh-so tender on mine. He pulled back with a jolt, looking baffled.

“What’s wrong?”

Dolen shook his head and kissed me again, this time lingering, tasting, exploring. After he pulled back, he rested his forehead on mine. “All my life,” he said softly, “I was told that the Gods would not allow me to be who I was and desire who I did. Now, I see that so much of what the priests said were lies.”

I had no answer for him. The god was, indeed, not even paying attention, but telling him that seemed rude for such a momentous discovery. I was very glad of it, though. Having a god in my head was bad enough, I wasn’t sure what I would’ve done if Dolen’s superstitions had been correct, and Hadrà had been homophobic.

I closed my eyes and pulled him as close as possible. This was a great moment for a nap. As soon as I started to relax, the images of what had happened started rushing back. “Wait. What happened to Yanou?” I asked, trying to force protection around my mind.

“I do not know. We had to flee the ravens. They probably killed him after we entered the tunnels.”

Where had the ravens come from? Why had they come? Had Hadrà called them to our aid?

I sincerely hoped it wasn’t the latter. I doubted I’d be able to handle having to deal with ravens on a regular basis.

“Good,” I said with a sigh. “How’s Bane?”

“He is right outside eating dangerous looking plants.”

“And what happened to you? Are you okay? In one of my visions I saw you were limping.”

“Talking can wait, my love. We will have time for that later. You need to sleep and heal so we can leave this place.”

“My love?” I asked with a smile.

“You heard me.”

“Love you, too,” I mumbled, before finally falling asleep.

The next day, I refused to rest any longer and insisted on leaving as soon as I awoke and noticed the sun shining into the tunnel in which Dolen had hidden us. Dolen had to help me get on Bane, and I saw in his frown that he was about to tell me we needed to wait another day. So I urged Bane to a walk and didn’t look back at Dolen until he had caught up to us. He walked next to me, hand on my thigh. As long as Bane went slowly, most of the pain was—for now—manageable, and I preferred that to the prickling fear I got while staying below the earth.

“Tell me what happened,” I asked, hoping it would get my attention away from what was happening with my tattoos. A disturbing substance was oozing from the back of my head, and that could not be good. My other tattoos had at least stopped moving and didn’t look too different. By now, I took things like that as good news. Also, the pull the Wastelands had on me had disappeared. The bad news was: the absence of the pull might mean the Wastelands intended for me to turn into Hadrà’s new home. I had been right not to trust its intentions. It would not do me much good to have a god in my head, I was sure of that. I had no idea what purpose it had for me, and I had no interest in playing that game. I simply wanted it out, no matter how delighted Dolen was with me being a vessel for his beloved god.

“Surprisingly little befell me,” Dolen started. “After I left you, I went straight into the Hollow Plains, back to that pond where we were earlier. I prayed there, trying to discover what Hadrà desired of me, but did not find any answer—only a feeling I needed to go on. So, I did. I walked all night and as long during the day as I could manage and prayed every time I felt safe enough to stop and expose my soul.”

“How did you get safely through the night? I nearly got eaten like... well, way too often,” I interrupted.

“A lot of predators are confused when they can see something but can't feel it. I did not get through unharmed, however. I got attacked multiple times and was lucky to escape with only a wound on my leg. I do not wish to linger on my terror, now. It feels unimportant, now I have you back.” He threw me a smile that made me even woozier than I already was. “Several times as I was praying, I thought I felt your presence. One time, I even saw you standing in front of me. I had a fever and was not praying, so I thought I was hallucinating. But then I found your horse, or better said, your horse found me while I was sleeping. That was when I thought you were dead. I was not certain I would be able to go on anymore. It was only because Bane would not leave me in peace that I resumed my travels. I didn't bother concealing my soul anymore and kept praying for Hadrà to keep your soul safe. Hadrà gave me you, instead.” Another gut-wrenching smile followed, and he held his face against my thigh for a moment. “Tell about your adventures, now.”

“I don't like adventures,” I complained. “I want to find a nice and comfortable town to settle in and never spend a night outside again. I want a shower, or even better, a hot bath. I want a soft, warm bed with you in it. I want things to stop trying to eat me. I hate heights and tunnels and snakes and ants and spiders and sand and three-headed lizards and gods and landscapes trying to get me to do something. And I hate hating everything.”

Dolen chuckled. I grumbled at him and swatted playfully at his head. He caught my hand to push a kiss on the palm. “Tell me, my love, it will make you feel better.”

So I did, leaving nothing out, but maybe exaggerating certain things a bit, maybe making a few situations a bit more dangerous and interesting, maybe adding a head, or two, to a certain snake...

Chapter 13

It took another three days to finally get out of the Wastelands. We went slowly, me riding Bane, and Dolen walking next to us. We rested more than we walked, and even then, I was almost delirious with exhaustion, and well, maybe a fever that I tried to hide from Dolen at all costs. I wanted out of here. I wanted back to civilization, and I wanted that horrible god out of my mind.

The unwelcome occupation of my mind was what was making me sick, I was sure of it. The arrow wound still hurt, but it was healing well, no swelling, no heat, no sign of infection. There were no other wounds that could be infected, no wounds but the oozing tattoos on the back of my skull. Dolen cleaned the bandage every night, but he said nothing about how bad it was. He didn't have to. My powers were gone. I couldn't even extend my senses. The visions had also stopped, something I had wished for all my life, and I had expected to be worth any price. Maybe it would turn out to be worth it, if I at least found my physical strength again, and I stopped being helpless and invalid and useless.

When we finally reached the end of the Wastelands late on the third day, I felt the change in my bones, the shuddering of the god through my being. It was scared. Somehow it was linked to the Wastelands, and it was afraid what would happen if we went too far. I hoped it would decide to leave me and go back home.

Hadrà wasn't the only one hesitant to leave. Bane also halted, looking back and neighing loudly.

"He really liked it there," Dolen said, putting a hand on Bane's neck.

"He belongs there. Too bad there are no other horses. I might leave him otherwise."

Bane snorted and started walking again without encouragement.

"Or not. Your choice, silly beast. Maybe I'll find you a nice mare and leave the two of you to make super-ponies."

Dolen started a reply and halted, taking a step closer to me, pressing against my thigh. He pointed, and I tried to see what he was looking at.

"A village," he stammered. "There is a village over there."

“Well, let’s go. I hope they have a hot bath ready. I’ll settle for a hot shower, though.” I’d probably have to settle for a cold one, with my powers still nonexistent.

“What if... what if they do not approve of us being together?”

“Then we’ll move on. You can show me that ocean of yours. Somewhere between here and there, someone will accept us.”

Dolen didn’t react.

“Hey,” I said, again to deaf ears. With some difficulty, I slid off Bane so I could look Dolen in the eyes. I had to lean against Bane to keep from falling. Sometime during the day the last of my strength had seeped away.

“Listen to me, Nighteyes. I have not gone through everything only to have someone else tell me what to do, and neither have you. We need help. I need rest—”

“You need healing.” Dolen frowned.

Okay, maybe I hadn’t really managed to hide how sick I was. “Yeah, that too. But those things are temporary. I will not hide who I am or who I love. I couldn’t if I tried. I’m a terrible liar. They will accept us, or they won’t. But we need to try, Dolen. I can’t go on much longer.”

Dolen nodded and kissed my cheek. He helped me back on Bane, and I slumped forward, happy to be able to sit. He started walking, and Bane followed him eagerly, ears pricked forward.

We were met before a closed gate by three men holding axes and a woman with a big curved dagger. Two other men held bows aimed on us from a platform next to the gate. The village wasn’t big, but it was surrounded by a palisade made of pointed sticks and a moat filled with brambles with impressive prickles. Smart people. I already liked it here.

“You came from the Wasted Lands. It’s impossible to have the sun set on you in there and live to tell about it,” a big man with a bushy beard exclaimed.

I tried a smile. “Not impossible, but pretty hard. Not going to try that again, that’s for sure. Never been this scared, or this sick.” *Can’t believe I ended up with a god in my head.* What would happen if I said this out loud? Would they kill me, lock me up with the crazy people, or gaze at me in devotion like Dolen did when he thought I didn’t notice?

“We are looking for a place to rest,” Dolen said. He was shaking with exhaustion, so pale he looked pretty much dead. “My friend is injured and sick. Our horse requires food and shelter.”

“It is not often you see a Nahuel traveling with one of the Ehecati,” the woman said carefully, still not lowering her knife.

“You know my people?” Dolen asked, perplexed. “How?”

“They passed through here not so long ago. We traded with them. We have done so in the past. But it has been years. You are welcome here. But he is a different story.”

“I mean no harm,” I said. “I left the Nahuel behind.”

“Why?” This time the eldest man spoke, pushing forward to study me. “He is ill. Close to death, if I’m right. Let him in.”

“Not before he answers your question,” the bearded man grumbled.

“Because I didn’t agree with their... well... everything. I’m sick of violence and people dying for no good reason.” The world spun again, and I vomited what little food I’d eaten today. I leaned over and noticed, too late, that I was falling. The ground came closer and closer until warm arms wrapped around me and softly put me down. “I don’t feel good,” I told the spinning blue eyes that hovered over me.

“Help him!” the spinning blue-eyed man shouted. I wondered what he was talking about.

“How do you feel?” Dolen asked. He looked crumpled and tired, the bags under his eyes standing out like bruises. He sat next to my bed on a wooden chair that seemed terribly uncomfortable. The room, itself, was nothing special. Stone walls, stone slab floor with a sheepskin for comfort, a small window with the shutters closed, and in the middle of the room, a table with three chairs, like the one Dolen was sitting on. Several cabinets and a wooden chest stood against the walls.

I thought about Dolen’s question. “I’m not sure. Better?” I reached up to check the back of my neck and felt the bandage had been removed. The skin was tender, but no longer sore. I moved my hand up and felt a smooth skull. “You let them shave my head!”

Dolen laughed softly. “It was necessary to treat your illness. We could not see the full scope of the problem with your hair covering most of the infection.

But I was right. You look very striking like this.” He stroked a hand over my head, and I shivered under his tender touch.

“My... my tattoos there? How do they look?”

Dolen hesitated. “Different. The runes are gone, the shape is symmetric now, and the connections make more sense now. But—” He halted, and looked away.

I went cold with dread. “But what?”

“They look very different from the other designs, and I cannot guess the meaning. Your tattoos are luminescent again, so I think that is a good sign.”

Without reacting to him, I turned my attention inward and felt like screaming when I felt the lingering presence of Hadrà. The entity was hidden away deeply in the caverns of my mind, with little tendrils spreading out everywhere. For now it was dormant, only radiating a deep satisfaction as I poked it. It seemed to have no intention of leaving me anytime soon. It showed no sign of its purpose, didn't even show it had a purpose. But I knew that couldn't be true, knew it had to want something. I prodded it again, harder this time, turning my consciousness into a pointed stick. Hadrà reacted, filling my mind with images.

I was in the middle of a vast crowd, color all around me. I glanced down and saw that I too was decked out in bright reds, blues and yellows. We were dancing to the uplifting sound of flutes and drums. It was hypnotizing, purposeful, joyful. There was this all-compassing need to please. Please what? I wondered. The answer came when the presence of Hadrà swelled in my mind.

I stepped out of the vision. *So you want to be worshipped again?* I asked the god silently.

It sent me no words in return, only a need so great it nearly flattened me.

Selfish, I thought at it.

More images filled my head. Images of bloodshed, of sickness, of mass murder. This time the desperation I felt didn't belong to the people I saw, but to Hadrà. It experienced unbelievable pain over being unable to save its people. I saw flashes of the Cataclysm, of a string of volcanic eruptions and earthquakes ripping the earth apart, leading to sickness and wars more horrible than any the world had ever witnessed before. Mushroom-shaped clouds popped up everywhere, and diseases were spread on purpose as the endless winter continued. I witnessed Hadrà reach out countless times to the remaining

humans wandering the scorched earth. It got no response until it came across a sad bunch of dying people trying to cross an area that looked a lot like the Wastelands. These images were familiar. The Wastelands had shown me these malformed humans before. This time, Hadrà managed to make contact, and the reverence the people showed the god strengthened it as well. It connected to the Wastelands, and together they shaped the humans so they were fit to survive. They gave them white skin and glowing eyes, and they gave them the ability to converse with the gods. They also gave them a mission, a mission that they had failed to fulfill.

“It would be easier if you told me what that mission was, you know,” I mumbled out loud. “And what you think I should do about it.”

“What did you say?” Dolen asked, startled. “I thought you had fallen asleep again.”

I shrugged. “I was talking to that annoying god of yours. Apparently there was something it wanted your people to do that you failed to do. Not that it told me anything useful, like what it wants, why it wants it, and what I have to do with any of it.”

“Hadrà is still with you?”

“Yeah, and don't look at me like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like you're star-struck. I like that doe-eyed look, but not when it's directed to that unwanted passenger of mine.”

“We have to figure out what Hadrà wants.”

“Not now.”

I ignored his protests and went back to exploring what had happened to my powers. I extended my mind and felt reassured by the quick response. Even better was the fact that I wasn't flooded with visions immediately. They were still there, and I would experiment with them later. I searched for Bane and found him happy and content in the company of a few other horses. Around me, I felt the presence of the inhabitants of the village. I didn't try to see if I could contact them, afraid to scare or anger them.

Pulling back my mind, I let the energy flow through my body, discovering a rightness to it all. I grabbed a cup of water that stood next to my bed and heated it gradually. The control I had was amazing. Maybe that god wasn't all bad after all.

My stomach rumbled, and I was glad to feel something that was normal. "I'm hungry," I complained.

"I'm happy to hear that," said a woman with black hair, as she entered the chamber. Miraculously, she came bringing food, a delicious-smelling soup. "You need to eat too, Dolen, and a nap would suit you well when you're done." She put a pan of soup on the table in the middle of the room. "Do you think you're fit enough to get out of bed to eat? I'm getting a bit sick of having to feed you."

"You've been feeding me?" I tried sitting up and found the world behaved. It stayed perfectly still, just like it was supposed to.

"Yep, you've been in and out of consciousness for almost a week. This is the first time you're not blabbering something about gods and ants and ravens. Sometime yesterday, those tattoos on your head stopped oozing foulness, and this night they started glowing. It seemed like a good sign, and I guess it was. You're up and awake now."

I blinked at her.

"Yeah, she talks a lot. She reminds me of someone else I know." Dolen smiled and helped me stand up. I felt stronger than I was supposed to and wondered if I had Hadrà to thank for that, or if these villagers had healing powers. My leg felt great, almost like there was no wound at all. I leaned against Dolen even if I didn't need the support, loving the opportunity to be so close to him again.

"You have a great friend in that one," the woman remarked, ladling soup into two bowls. "He hasn't left your side the whole time."

"He's more than just a friend," I said, leaning closer to press a kiss to his cheek. He stiffened. *Oh. He had been hiding. Out of fear? Or necessity?* I glanced at the woman who looked at us with big eyes. She didn't look horrified, only surprised. And maybe, just a little bit disappointed.

She sagged a bit, glancing at Dolen—yes, she was disappointed for sure—and smiled at us. "Well, I guess love conquers all differences. You sure make a striking couple."

"Your people don't mind?" I asked for Dolen, who seemed speechless.

She shrugged. "We don't object to much, here. As long as you don't hurt anyone, we pretty much mind our own business."

“So how did you two cross paths?” The woman sat down with us and looked at us curiously. “I’m Ashia, by the way.”

“Keric,” I mumbled through a mouthful of soup. It was excellent.

“So tell me... It’s bound to be an interesting story.”

“And it’s one the entire village should hear,” an elder man said as he walked in. “Most doubt the wisdom of giving a Nahuel healing. Some say we should’ve let you die. There are even a few who think we should reverse that decision and kill you after all—”

The anxiety boiled up in me, and with it came the familiar red glow in my tattoos. The man took a frightened step back. I took that as a clear sign to try and push down my instinctive response to danger. It took so little effort, it astonished me. No overwhelming visions, either.

I took a deep breath, but before I said anything, Dolen spoke with a firm voice. “Everyone has been very friendly to me. I have been invited to stay for as long as I wish. Now you tell me that you wish to kill my friend? I do not know what to make of such a peculiar show of hospitality.”

“People are scared, Dolen. I get it.” And to think we had been afraid it would be our love that would get us shunned. “Will we be allowed to leave safely?”

“You are right, Nahuel. People are scared.”

“I have a name,” I snapped at him. “It’s Keric. I am more than the clan I left behind.”

“Indeed you are, Keric. I am Palak. I am one of the people saying we should not decide who or what you are before you have a chance to tell us your story. I came here to tell you it is decided to let you plead your case.”

Again, before I could respond, Dolen did, “Plead his case? You are treating him as if he is on trial! Keric is not a criminal, nor a murderer. He is a good man, with more compassion than any other man or woman I have ever met. I will not allow him to be harmed because you don’t like the people he was born to!” What exactly Dolen thought he was going to do about it was unclear, but his defense warmed me.

Palak held up both hands. “I should’ve formulated that differently. I meant that he—both of you—should tell your story so we can decide if we will extend our hospitality to Keric as well. The decision not to kill him has already been made.”

I wondered if that decision could be altered the moment they didn't like what I had to say. "Who makes all these decisions?" I asked, instead.

"Everyone," Ashia interjected cheerfully. "We vote." I looked at Dolen who seemed as confused as I felt. It sounded like a very chaotic way to rule a place. I liked it!

So the next evening, the entire village was gathered on the central plaza. There were only eighty people or so, but it was eighty people who would decide my fate, some of whom wished me dead. Dolen was right beside me, paler than ever. He was shaking so hard, I swore I heard his teeth clattering.

I grabbed his hand firmly in mine and whispered, "Everything will be fine, Nighteyes." I took a deep breath and began, "It all started out with me being bored and lonely. And although I was getting mightily sick of the way my life had turned into a pit of emptiness with nothing to entertain me..."

Epilogue

“Well,” Dolen said, hugging me close in the privacy of the bathhouse. “That turned out surprisingly well.”

I grinned at him. “Told you I’m awesome.”

“For a moment, I was certain they were going to lynch us. You could have broken the subject of who your uncle is more subtly.”

“Nah. Subtle isn’t my style. I’ve got you for that. But I think they’ve taken me in only because they want to use Bane for breeding. Half the people arguing in my favor mentioned him as my biggest asset. Can’t blame them for that. He’s pretty great.” I pecked Dolen’s lips and looked around me. “It’s not bad here. Of course, back home...” I swallowed. Mentioning home still hurt. “In Masahiro, the bathhouses are much more luxurious.”

Dolen gave the room a quick glance, before turning back to me. “I see what you mean. There is much malfunctioning here. Give me a month, and I will make this bathhouse better than the ones you are used to.”

“What? How did you see that so quickly?”

“I am simply that exceptional.” Dolen threw me a teasing smirk.

“Really?”

He laughed. “No. All I spotted was some leakage. But if you tell me it can be better, I will make it so. After all, we have been told to make ourselves useful if we want to stay.”

“Do you?” I pulled him into an embrace, my fingers busying themselves with removing his garment.

“What?” he asked, eyes already darkening in lust. He moved forward to steal a kiss.

“Do you want to stay?”

He shrugged. “I have never spent an extended time in one place. I would like to see what it is like. But I do not mind traveling on if that is what you prefer. We should also take your uncle into account. Do you think he will follow you?”

I shrugged. “I’m not sure. He might send someone after me. But if Dylwin is right, he’s busy fighting a war. He might not care, or he might assume I’m

dead. Dylwin suggested I come here, and she said something about trying to follow me. I would like to wait and see if she does. So, we could stay for a while until we have a reason to go. One day, I'd like to see that ocean of yours." I finally managed to undo his clothing and pushed it down until it pooled around his feet.

Dolen groaned when I stroked the long lines of his back down to his ass, jerking his hips when I cupped it. "The ocean will not go anywhere. It can wait until we feel like traveling. Hadrà will show us our path." He kissed me, tongue asking for entrance, and that eliminated my desire to tell him I had no intention of letting the god decide my fate. I stroked his tongue with mine, sucking it into my mouth while my hands kept exploring. I still didn't really believe we were both alive and mostly in one piece.

"Bathing would be easier if you would remove your clothes as well," Dolen complained, tugging on my shirt.

"Yeah? Are you saying you want me naked?"

There was that delightful smirk again. "I am merely explaining the principle of bathing to you. You seem confused." He stepped back from me, took his loincloth off and stepped into the nearest bath. "See. You get naked and then get into the water."

"You don't say," I said, laughing, and made quick work of my own clothing. I followed him in and gave a shout at the unexpected cold. "This water is freezing," I whined.

"I told you there is much to improve here. I will find a way to heat the water before our next bath. Now be useful, for once, and use your magic before I freeze."

I couldn't resist sticking out my tongue even as I complied. Soon, the water was a comfortable warmth, and steam filled the room. "Here you go, Nighteyes. Hot water as requested. Now resume your explanation of baths. I've often heard of a thing called washing. Maybe you can show me what that means." I pulled Dolen forward until he knelt in my lap, facing me.

"I am afraid that requires a hands-on demonstration. I do not know if that is acceptable to you?" He traced the tattoos on my scalp that were normally covered by hair, causing spurts of delight through my body. The reaction was so powerful, colors shot over my skin.

I moaned. "I think I can suffer through your demonstration. I feel a bit dirty."

"Hygiene is a very important thing. Luckily for you, it is not that difficult," Dolen explained with a laugh. He reached to the bowl of foam that stood next to the bath. "You take a bit of this substance, soap. You spread it all over your body, then rinse it off." He rubbed the soap on my chest and back, and I gasped as his tender hands slid over my skin.

"Hmm. I don't know if I completely understand. Can you do that again?" I chuckled.

"Certainly. I see that you are a slow learner. I will be thorough."

"Oh, yeah, do that." I let my head fall back as he took more foam and meticulously rubbed it over the part of my body that was above water.

Soon, I joined in the fun and started washing him as well. All that time, we stared into each other's eyes, first breathless with laughter and later breathless with desire, as hands dipped beneath the surface, stroking stomachs and thighs and asses. I cried out when he sunk down on me, his hot channel clenching around my swollen cock. The connection between us was almost perfect. Almost.

"Please, Dolen. Can you expose your soul? Let me feel you?"

Dolen went still for a moment, hesitation clouding his eyes. The seconds that passed until he nodded felt endless. I expanded my senses to him and gasped as I connected to him as never before. He was so warm, felt so wonderful. Our souls blossomed when they touched—and impossibly—mingled. I pulled him against me, pushed in as deep as I could, needing the physical connection as much as the mental one. In this span of time, we were truly and utterly one.

We started moving again at the same time, only breaking eye contact to allow for drawn-out kisses. When I came, it was glorious, pleasure rushing through my body, colors shooting over my skin. Dolen's eyes fell shut as he shook through his orgasm. He was so unbelievably beautiful.

So much had happened in little more than a moon's time. I had lost so much: my home, my family, and even the place in my mind that the god now occupied. And still, it felt like a fair price to pay for being with Dolen.

I blinked against the tears that threatened to overwhelm me. "I'm never letting you walk away from me again. I hope you don't mind."

Dolen's smile was broad and a bit shaky. He tried a few replies, then cupped my face with both of his hands, and fitted our lips together for a kiss that was sweet and tasted like forever.

The End

Author Bio

Gwynn Marssen was born and bred in the Netherlands, where talking about the weather is the national sport (although we pretend it's soccer) and a favorite saying is: "To act normal is crazy enough." She likes talking about the weather but is not a big fan of normality. Despite that, she leads a mostly quiet and disturbingly ordinary life and keeps the craziness contained in her head.

As a child she read too much, finding the world of fiction far more interesting than everyday life, and even now, she tries to spend as much time as possible in other people's heads, through books and writing, and through her alter ego as a psychologist. On any given day, you can find her curled up on her couch—on those few occasions the weather permits it—in her hammock with a spicy book, one or both of her two cats, some tea, and ample amounts of Dutch chocolate.

She's been writing for about five years, after she started watching professional wrestling. Those hot and practically naked men invaded her head, became her muses and forced her to start writing. And by forced, she means forced. They woke her up, filled her mind with images she couldn't resist, and, on more than a few occasions, drove her out of bed at five a.m. to write their steamy stories. Eventually, she managed to house-train them, and thus, highly increased the time she could spend procrastinating (which in her opinion is an art in itself). In the little time left over, she writes stories about men living and loving with all her heart.

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