

LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

HINORI'S JOURNEY

Victoria Zagar

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

HINORI'S JOURNEY

By Victoria Zagar

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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HINORI'S JOURNEY

By Victoria Zagar

Photo Description

An androgynous man stands with a curved blade in hand. He is clearly a warrior who treasures grace and beauty as much as the art of war.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I am from a race that is both masculine and feminine in one corporeal form. Our life's journey determines which traits end up being dominant. Please tell my story and how I find my perfect partner. I ask that the setting be sci-fi/fantasy and that my MC is a warrior, anything else goes.

Sincerely,

Venecia

Story Info

Genre: fantasy, science fiction

Tags: hurt/comfort, prison/captivity, interspecies, coming of age, masturbation, warrior, m-preg, spacemen/alien

Content Warnings: violence, death of non-main characters

Word Count: 14,915

Thank You

Special thanks to Anna for fantastic editing. I really appreciate all the time event volunteers have put in to make Love's Landscapes happen.

Author's Note

Hinori's tribe considers the use of gendered pronouns to be highly disrespectful. Therefore, Hinori uses singular *they* to refer to others, as is the custom in the Naha'i culture.

HINORI'S JOURNEY

By Victoria Zagar

Chapter One

A Chance Meeting

I sat amidst the underbrush, listening to the soul of the Mother-Father as They moved through the life-force of every living thing. I had to break my fast soon; the hunger eating away at my belly was a sign that I had come too far and too fast on my Journey.

I felt the pulse of the deer as it drank from the stream. The sound of rippling water covered my footfalls as I approached the beast. I watched its majesty as its great antlers dipped into the water. A shame to kill such a creature, but the Mother-Father understood that some things must be done. The Naha'i, blessed by Their strength, have been allowed to live on this planet in harmony with life. We give back what we take as much as we are able, but these few years have seen a thinning of the wild beasts that roam these forests.

I slit the beast's throat with one deft motion of my honed hunter's knife. A warrior kills in one motion. We do not take pleasure in torture or torment, but do what needs to be done with as little suffering as possible.

I ate the meat raw, blood running down my chin and across my small breasts. I did my best to keep it out of my blond hair, which was braided down my back in the traditional style of the Naha'i. I could not risk a fire amidst the dry underbrush, especially so close to habitation. The Oracle had sent me to spy on a newly-built settlement called Nemway Two as part of my ritual Journey into adulthood. I intended to do so without being detected. Unsettling rumors had spread about the people who called themselves the Nemway, saying that they did not honor the Balance and instead split themselves into groups based on gender.

If the Mother-Father placed this strange village in our world, They must have had a reason, no matter how unusual and single-minded the villagers might turn out to be. The Oracle insists we learn as much about these people from the north as possible before deciding whether they constitute a threat to us.

My meal complete, I washed in the stream before crossing. It would not do to have Nemway Two's tamed beasts smell the scent of blood on my lips. I crawled up the small ridge upon which the village sat and watched with awe and fear as the people went about their business. The settlement was like nothing I'd ever seen. The buildings were shaped like domes, made out of steel

like my blade. The people wore tight clothing like a second skin, blue for some and pink for others. They wore strange sticks attached to belts at their sides. Odd devices—not living, yet moving without life-force—transported people about the village so that they did not have to walk.

How strange the Nemway were, I thought, and how sadly separate they seemed from one another. Those clad in blue were clearly their warriors. The Nemway in pink were the nurturers, walking the streets with children at their sides and babes in their arms. The two groups seemed at odds with one another, arguing over trivial matters as I watched. I was surprised I could even understand their language, but it was a relief to know I would not have to learn new words.

As I lay in the brush watching them communicate, it seemed almost as though they were speaking a different language from one another. I learned that the two groups were referred to as “male” and “female” from signs on a building. I wondered if perhaps there had been some split in the holy Mother-Father deity to create such a species.

To the Naha'i, one being is both of these two tribes. I am both “male” and “female.” I cook, I hunt, I mate, I clean—if I achieve Balance, I will be able to bear children or father them. The people of our tribe have always been this way—one body, two souls with the purest Balance of Mother-Father. Some lean more one way than the other, depending on their life's work, but equity has always been the key to the Naha'i way of life. To swing one way or the other too strongly is to surrender one's self to savagery or vanity according to the Oracle. To cut off one half of our deity is to throw away a part of one's self.

I watched a young male leave their steel dome. They seemed to be concealing their actions. Their jet-black hair was longer than that of the other males, hanging around their neck instead of being shorn down to the roots. I watched this person with interest as they snuck out of the village.

I backed down off the grassy ridge where I lay, and followed their trail. They made no effort to conceal their tracks. I was able to follow the male for several miles until I reached a ruined village. The disaster looked fresh, the smell of smoke and death heavy in the air. My heart sank as I recognized it was one of our twinned villages.

The Naha'i are spread across the world, our different tribes rarely coming into contact except for the occasion when one tribe needs to trade. In that case, the villages form a bond. In this instance, the people of Vastet needed water. Their well had dried up, so we gave them barrels of water and wine until they

could find a new water source. In return we had received several fine blades, one of which I carried with me as a gift from the Oracle.

The youth stood looking over the remnants of the village, watching the scene with hesitation. They looked down at the ground before kicking up dirt, and running down the hill. They searched the ruins of homes, clearly looking for something. I wondered if they were some kind of scavenger, looting the homes of the dead for personal profit.

Disgusted, I stepped forward from my hiding place, and walked down the hill. I stood behind the youth and waited for them to sense my presence. They turned around and regarded me with shock, falling back and crawling across the ground.

"Explain your actions," I demanded, drawing my knife and brandishing it as I took up my battle stance.

"Please don't hurt me! I didn't do this! I swear!" The youth backed up against the remnants of a stone wall and realized further flight was impossible.

"What happened here?" I sheathed my blade, keenly aware of the effect it was having on the person before me. They seemed different from the other males of their group. While I would have expected a warrior to stand and fight, the youth backed down as though they were defenseless before my might.

The young male seemed to visibly deflate, like a beast releasing its dying breath in defeat. "My people—they sent an envoy here. They were trying to understand how you live like you do. We didn't know there were other people on this planet!"

"What do you mean, 'live like we do'?" I asked.

"You're weird. You have no gender roles. My people saw this as a threat, I guess. Our society is highly segregated into male and female. Each person has their own role to play." The youth shook their head, as if confused by it themselves.

"What defines gender to your people?" I sat down on the charred ash, trying to make sense of the youth's words.

"Um..." The youth struggled to explain. "It just *is*. Everybody has their assigned role at birth. Women give birth to and raise children. Men fight and carry out heavy labor. That's how it's always been."

"I ask you again; what happened to Vastet?"

“We made a mistake. We tried to introduce our way of life to your people. We tried to give you roles—to separate you in ways we understood. You resisted, and this was the final result. Your people went down without much of a fight. Our weapons are superior to anything you have.” The youth’s violet eyes were filled with regret. They hung their head. “My people—the Nemway—think they did the right thing. That’s why I came here. I had to know why this tragedy occurred. I didn’t know any of you survived.”

“What is your name?” I asked. I filed away the information on gender, Vastet’s fate, and the youth’s culture. The Oracle would be most interested in my findings, no doubt.

“Mateo Nivera,” the youth said. “What’s your name?”

“My name is Hinori, child of Hibaka and Avalor. I am not from Vastet. I hail from Grathador.”

“There are more of you?” Mateo’s eyes flashed with hope and they got to their feet. I held out my hand and gripped Mateo’s, steadying the youth until they found their balance. “Where is Grathador?”

“It would not be wise to tell you,” I said. “The Nemway are clearly a threat.”

“You might be right.” Mateo sighed. “I’m sorry. I’m just curious about you. I wanted to learn more, but then war broke out. If we’d just stayed out of your business, everything would be all right now. It’s all my fault. I wanted to learn, but others used me in order to foist their ideas on your people.”

“You should return home. Tell nobody about me.” I was calm, but firm. I had realized that the Nemway meant us great harm, and knew I had to return to the Oracle as soon as I could.

“I’m not going back,” Mateo said with a look of disgust. “I’m done with them and their society. I don’t want to be a man. I don’t feel right when I’m holding a gun or learning to kill. Something inside me protests against my role. Mother says it will pass, but I’m not so sure any more. I’m nineteen years old—how much more will I change? I don’t want to hide who I am just to get through life.”

“The Mother-Father has granted you the capacity for Balance,” I said, feeling sympathy for Mateo. “Do not be afraid. You have been blessed.”

“What?” Mateo regarded me with curiosity. “I don’t understand.”

“The Mother-Father is our deity. Only They can change the balance of gender in a person. The Naha’i teach that in order to be at peace, one must strive to be both aspects of our god. There are no roles cast by society, only those desired by the individual.”

“That sounds like heaven.” Mateo smiled for the first time since I had met them. “How can I become one of you?”

“Nobody has ever joined the Naha’i in living memory,” I said, trying to let Mateo down gently. I felt compassion for the youth, lost as they were in the world and feeling at odds with society. I realized the isolating nature of Mateo’s life. Perhaps that’s why I offered the youth something nobody else ever had. “That doesn’t mean you cannot consult the Oracle. They decide the fate of our village.”

“You’re going to let me come with you?” Mateo asked, their eyes widening until they looked like the sixth moon Venetia, purple and full. They accented Mateo’s hair, and in that moment, I realized the youth was attractive to me. I understood then that maturity was indeed upon me, along with the desires the twentieth year of our lives brought. I knew I had to be careful with those feelings, and keep them in harmony, or the core of sexual aggression would destroy my Balance and send me down a path of madness.

“Yes, you may come,” I said. “On one condition.”

“I’ll do anything.”

“You must tell the Oracle everything about your people. Any question the Oracle asks, you will answer to the best of your ability. Is that understood?”

“Yes, of course,” Mateo said, eyes shining with relief. I knew from that expression that Mateo did not seek to harm me; indeed, they seemed completely non-aggressive. I could only say that I trusted Mateo, charmed as I was by the kindly youth’s words, and equitable nature. There was wisdom on display in Mateo that I had not witnessed in the Nemway’s color-coded village.

We moved quickly through the brush. I took point, skilled as I was in cutting away the branches with my blade. Mateo followed, never far behind. Their eyes seemed to bore into me. I wondered what the source of Mateo’s curiosity was as we travelled towards Grathador.

“We should make camp,” I said, after several hours of silence. Mateo looked to be beyond exhaustion, their body less toned than mine despite being a part of the aggressive masculine tribe within the Nemway. I built a fire. Mateo slumped down beside it, seemingly grateful for the warmth.

“Aren't you cold?” Mateo asked, regarding me with a questioning stare to which I could only shrug. “You're barely wearing anything.”

“I am comfortable this way,” I responded. “It is you who look ill at ease.”

“I hate these jumpsuits,” Mateo said, pulling at the stretchy blue fabric.

“So remove it.”

Mateo blushed, a furious crimson spreading across their face. “I—I couldn't do that!”

“Why not?” I was genuinely curious at this point; nothing less than a straight answer would do. I watched Mateo wrestle with the question across the fire from me, clearly locked in debate with themselves.

“You would see me naked! In our culture, that's just not done.”

“I don't understand,” I said. “Why not?”

“The men—most of them hunger for the women, and sometimes each other. They would never keep their sexual appetites to themselves if everyone walked around naked. It would be obscene.”

“Because their sexual attributes would be on display?” I tried to wrap my mind around such an unbalanced culture and shuddered. Only one who had given themselves over to the most extreme aggressive savagery would ever think about sexual congress without consent. It was proof to me that the Naha'i and the Mother-Father were right and that the Nemway had arrived to show us the follies of such a gendered culture.

“Exactly.” Mateo shivered, and I sensed it had little to do with the cold they felt.

“Such a thing would never happen in my tribe,” I said. “It would take an extremely unbalanced individual to carry out such an act, and they would be banished.”

“How do you deal with it, then? Sexual desire, I mean?” Mateo blushed again, but I sensed their curiosity outweighed their embarrassment. “I mean, you do have sex, right?” Mateo looked at my no doubt quizzical gaze and laughed. “You mate, then? Procreate? You must have offspring, right?”

“The ability to bear offspring is limited to only a few; those who have mastered the Balance and embraced both sides of their being in the true spirit of the Mother-Father. We call this the Quickening. Few ever achieve it, and so our numbers are small. As for mating, we are allowed to express physical intimacy

with whomever we choose, so long as both parties consent. Bearing offspring is limited to a Promised couple—one who has made a vow before the Mother-Father to embrace Balance and one another for life. In practicality, this vow is usually made after it is discovered one partner's womb has Quickened. Some sterile couples Promise out of a desire to commit, however."

It was Mateo's turn to look at me with a strange expression. It was as if they were seeing me for the first time. "You have a womb?"

"As you know, the Naha'i is a society based around equality. We do not separate ourselves as you do."

"But we segregate ourselves because we have different body parts. You're saying you have both male and female body parts—that you're intersexed?"

"I do not know that word," I said, feeling most uncomfortable. I am not particularly known for my vanity, but at that moment, I felt like some kind of animal being dissected out of callous intrigue. "I would ask that you refrain from your curiosity for tonight. We must rest."

"I'm sorry," Mateo said. "I didn't mean to pry."

I felt somewhat guilty as I ended the conversation and laid down on a pile of sticks and leaves. The poor youth had only been driven by the desire for knowledge; who was I to rebuke them? Was it the knowledge of their species' sexual hunger that frightened me? I consulted the Mother-Father in silent meditation and realized I had been acting in a most unbalanced way—defensively at best, like a tiger sizing up its enemy to sink its teeth into later. Mateo was not my foe, and they deserved my compassion, alone in the world as they were.

I heard quiet sniffing across from me, and realized Mateo was crying. My sense of guilt intensified. I sat up, climbing out of my makeshift bed silently, using my hunter's ability to close the distance between us without alerting Mateo.

"Mateo," I whispered. "Why are you crying?"

"Leave me alone," Mateo sniffed. "It's none of your business."

"I shouldn't have shut you out. I'm sorry."

"No, I'm sorry. I'm embarrassed, scared and a long way from everything I know, asking the most stupid questions. Your body is none of my concern."

"You simply wanted to learn about my culture," I said. "That is no crime.

You have done more to bridge the gulf between our peoples in one day than the Nemway have since they moved south. It is to be praised.”

“You think so? You—you’re not offended?” Mateo wiped their eyes, and rolled over to look at me. Their face was red, and blotchy against pale skin, Mateo’s eyes bloodshot from crying.

“Not at all. What I said was a breach of the Balance. I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry too,” Mateo said, their breath hitching as they tried to get their emotions under control.

“It’s okay,” I hushed, feeling tender emotions towards the youth in anguish before me. I leaned down, and caressed Mateo’s cheek. “You’re not alone. We’re both a long way from home. We each have much to learn.”

I stayed beside Mateo until they fell into a quiet doze. I returned to my makeshift bed, and quickly fell asleep, exhausted by the day’s events.

Chapter Two

Culture Shock

“Hush,” I said, covering Mateo’s mouth. Their eyes snapped open, but they understood the threat, laying still and pretending to be asleep while I took care of the intruders. I drew my knife and merged into the shadows, counting the people before me. Six of the males from the village stood in a ring, surrounding our camp. We were hopelessly outnumbered and I had no idea what kind of weapons they were carrying. They looked like much larger versions of the black sticks I had seen holstered at people’s belts in Nemway Two. I knew I had to be cautious.

I made an intentional snapping sound by stepping on a twig. Ducking down into the bushes, I suppressed a cry of surprise as a beam of light erupted from the stick, illuminating the forest as it flew towards its target. One of the males screamed. I smelled the sickening stench of burning flesh. I realized the stick was deadly, its light capable of searing skin and muscle alike.

“You idiot! You hit Luke!” The males shouted amongst themselves, obviously confused and outraged by their mistake.

The males rushed over to the spot behind me where Luke lay bleeding to death. I felt sorrow over the murder I had indirectly been a part of, but I pushed away the urge to weep for a person’s death and instead focused on my survival.

With the villagers distracted, I hurried back to Mateo’s side. Mateo followed me without comment, being careful not to stumble or make noise as I led them into the forest.

“Not so fast.” I felt a stick pressed into my back and knew that if the Nemway fired, I would die instantly. I dropped my knife in defeat, realizing that to keep myself and Mateo safe meant giving up the fight and going with the villagers. Another male stepped forward and took my knife. They leered at me, eyes on my breasts with obvious hunger. I turned my gaze away from them, ashamed for the first time of my own nudity.

“Move!” The stick poked into my back again and I stepped forward. I thought we would have to walk all the way back to the village, but we were led to a clearing where one of the mysterious transportation devices sat hovering a few inches off the ground. I feared riding the lifeless object but realized I had

no choice as I was pushed onto it and forced to sit. They tied me to the steel chair and did the same with Mateo, who sat with their head lowered, unable to meet my eyes. They looked ashamed and disappointed. I wondered if shame was an emotion these males invoked in everyone, though the same hunger they had showed me was not apparent when they looked at Mateo. Instead, their expressions spoke of anger and disgust. I feared for Mateo at the Nemway's hands.

The machine moved with a sickening lurch, and I vomited on myself. Our captors made sounds of disgust and pulled to a stop. They untied Mateo and threw them a rag.

"Clean it off. Hurry up!" I realized with shock that the "it" they were referring to was me, as though I was some kind of object for their amusement. Mateo took the rag and wiped me down. If Mateo was disgusted, they did not show it as they cleaned me off with near tender care. Mateo took the rag and hurled it at the ringleader of the males. I could not suppress a smile as the ringleader made disgusted noises before tossing the rag off the side of the machine.

"Get back in your seat, Mateo!" said the male who had leered at me before. They aimed their gun at Mateo and I realized there was no chance of escape. I shot Mateo a sympathetic glance and they surrendered, sitting down and allowing themselves to be tied up once more. The machine lurched again but I was ready for it that time. Whatever food and water was in my body remained in my stomach.

At the next stop, we remained tied to our chairs while the males ate and drank. They forced water into our mouths from a flask but left us hungry.

"Would you cover up its tits? I'm getting distracted over here." The ringleader ambled closer, throwing a blanket over my chest. I was actually grateful for the relief from the stares and spent the rest of the trip in slumber, trying to ignore the nervousness that came with riding the floating machine.

I woke to darkness and found myself in the village. I was being prodded to wakefulness by the butt of the weapon as another male untied me. I got up and followed them, knowing there was no chance of resistance with so many others close by. The steel was awkward to walk on and hurt my bare feet, but comfort was not on the minds of the people who held us prisoner.

"Take 'em to the lab. Dr. Garvin will be more than happy to take a look at the shemale." The male laughed. I winced at what seemed like an insult. I bit my tongue to counter any retort I might have made.

“What about Mateo?” The male looked at the ringleader for advice. “He’s one of ours.”

“He needs hormone treatments. His mother says he’s been acting out of whack for a while. Little sissy needs to learn how to be a real man. Let Garvin fix him.” I shuddered, barely understanding most of the words that came out of the males’ mouths, but comprehending their tone just fine. They planned to harm Mateo, perhaps more than me. I cringed at the thought of them changing a single thing about the kind, compassionate youth that had dared to attempt understanding of my people.

I was pushed towards a door, sure that I was going to be forced into it, when the door opened of its own accord. I wondered if a person controlled the doors or whether it was a lifeless machine like the one we had rode in on.

The room beyond was full of things my eyes had never seen before and which I did not understand. Glass bottles sat on shelves, filled with various organs. How they stopped them from putrefying, I did not know, but it made me sick to see them separated from their bodies. These were no animal organs, but those of people. Having witnessed our healer dissect a cadaver, I knew what the inside of our bodies looked like, and it was vastly similar to the line-up of specimens on the wall.

I fought down my nausea and instead concentrated on the male milling about like he owned the place. The male’s hair was shorn down to the roots like the others, but they sported facial hair that looked vastly out of place on the bald head. The male I guessed to be Garvin wore the same blue clothing that Mateo had referred to as a jumpsuit, and was only distinguishable from the others by the way their green eyes regarded me with no emotion. Whereas the others had expressed desire or disgust, this being was completely empty on the surface, their gaze revealing no shred of humanity whatsoever. It chilled me to the bone. I wondered if this Nemway was even capable of feeling. I knew we would not live long under this person’s care. I feared for Mateo.

“Put them in here.” A glass cage sat along the far side of the room. The male walked over and pressed numbers on a device. Part of the glass slid aside and we were hustled in, the glass sliding shut and sealing completely. I wondered how we would breathe in this tight atmosphere, but fresh cool air was blowing in from somewhere and my immediate concerns that this was some kind of killing chamber were dispelled.

Mateo shuffled to the back of the glass box and slumped down against the wall, looking defeated and distraught. I knelt down beside them, placing my

hand on their shoulder in a supportive gesture. Garvin had a conversation I could not hear through the glass cage with the males who had brought us in before dismissing them.

"It's going to be okay," I said, with a confidence I did not feel. Mateo didn't buy my words, my voice shaking and echoing back to them in the glass chamber.

"Garvin is a madman," Mateo said. "He's the monster I've been threatened with since I was a child. He fixes people who don't match this society's gender norms. They come back... different."

"I won't let them harm you." I felt a protective force swell inside me as if I was protecting a family member.

"You can't stop him, Hinori. Garvin has free rein here to do whatever he wants. As long as he fixes the Nemway's problems, the people turn a blind eye to his methods." Mateo pulled their knees up to their chin, making themselves as small as possible.

I soon saw why Mateo bundled up as the glass slid open and Garvin walked in holding a long, sharp object that held some kind of liquid in their hand. Garvin walked over to us, a twisted smile on their face as they knelt down beside Mateo.

"Leave Mateo alone!" I yelled with the full force of my warrior heritage behind me. That shout had been known to chase away a pack of wolves, but Garvin was not deterred.

"Shut up, freak, or I'll simply kill and dissect you this instant. I'll make Mateo watch as I carve you up. That'll make a man out of him." Garvin smiled as I backed away, defeated. Mateo looked up at me with eyes of terror as I stepped back and let Garvin close in.

I felt like such a failure as a warrior. I had never backed away from a fight in my life, but for the first time in recent memory, I was afraid. I explored the emotion as Garvin sank the needle into Mateo's arm. I swore to myself if the liquid was poison, I would wrap my hands around Garvin's throat and squeeze until the life departed their body. Such a monster deserved to be a sacrifice to the Mother-Father. They would take Garvin's soul and banish it to the Seven Hells, where those who committed acts of pure evil were banished for eternity.

The injection seemed to have no immediate effect. Garvin backed off, admiring their handiwork.

“We’ll see what happens when I give you a megadose, Mateo. Satisfy my curiosity, and I’ll let you out of here.”

“I’ll never do what you want,” Mateo said, eyes shining with defiance that made me feel ashamed.

“You can’t fight your body’s desires. Soon you’ll be like a dog in heat and nothing will stop you from embracing your true nature. Fuck the freak, and I’ll let you out of here.” Garvin smiled as they left, the glass door closing behind them before I could regain my will to snap the beast’s neck.

“Hinori, I want you to listen to me.” Mateo’s voice was clear and measured, the voice of a person who had accepted their fate and decided to take the only way out. “If I ever turn on you, I want you to kill me.”

“Don’t ask that of me.” My words surprised even myself. I realized the bond between Mateo and I was stronger than I had previously realized. “I will not take your life.”

“I would rather that than the alternative. I would rather die than become a monster. I have seen myself. I know who I want to be now that I’ve met you. I won’t let them take that away from me.”

I edged closer to Mateo, hoping to pull them into my embrace but Mateo pushed me away roughly. “No. Keep your distance. I don’t know when the changes will occur.” I saw the conflict in their eyes as Mateo bowed their head. Out of respect for Mateo’s wishes, I took to the furthest corner, sat down, rested my head on my knees, and allowed myself to fall asleep.

Chapter Three

Fighting Desire

Garvin returned next time with a guard beside them. I realized Garvin had understood the threat I presented. Garvin would not make the mistake of coming alone again. I stood little chance unarmed against a Nemway with a light stick.

Mateo was changing, much to their own personal terror. Thick black stubble was breaking out on their chin, and they were afraid to catch their reflection in the mirrored glass for fear of seeing the change in themselves. Mateo would not let me come close or touch them.

I woke to find Mateo naked, standing up against the wall. Tears rebelliously rolled down their face as they stroked their hard cock. I pretended to be asleep in order to give Mateo some privacy. I remembered the way the males' eyes had roved over me. I did not want to do the same to Mateo, no matter how magnificent I thought their body was.

Mateo's body was mostly a mirror of mine on the outside, only with thick tufts of body hair and a much larger cock. They were lanky, with a flat chest and stomach but without large hips like I have. Legend has it that our people once delivered their children naturally and that wide hips were conducive to this process. Modern Naha'i lack a birth canal, so our children are delivered surgically by the healer. I have small breasts for feeding my offspring but nothing the size of the females in Nemway Two.

I heard Mateo come and fought the stirring of my own cock with meditation. I sensed the Mother-Father in Mateo and realized their equilibrium had been restored—for now. I opened my eyes as if waking and walked over to them as they were pulling their jumpsuit back onto their shoulders.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"I don't know." Mateo's voice was deeper in pitch and sounded like that of a stranger, even to them. "I'm scared, Hinori."

"I know. Let me help you." I put my hand on Mateo's shoulder. They did not shove me off, but came to my arms willingly. Mateo rested their head on my breasts, and I stroked their soft hair, giving comfort the only way I could.

"If you wish it, I will snap Garvin's neck," I said, the urge to protect Mateo overwhelming me.

"He would kill you," Mateo whispered. "I don't want you to get hurt."

"I can't bear to see you suffer either."

"You should... back off," Mateo said. I felt their cock stirring against my leg and fought the urge to give in to my desire. To do so would be a violation of Mateo's rights, taking advantage of them when they were unable to resist. To do such a thing would be a violation of everything I believed, but I cannot say I did not both desire Mateo and feel the need to comfort them by becoming the one to take away Mateo's pain. To have Mateo inside me—our bodies and souls becoming one—was an image I was fighting to keep under control. I had to protect Mateo. I was determined to find a way.

The next day had Garvin seeming annoyed and nervous as they opened the glass door to give Mateo another shot. The enforcer stood beside Garvin as I sat by uselessly.

"Do you feel a man's desire pumping through your veins, Mateo?" Garvin smiled and lifted Mateo's chin in an intimate gesture that made me feel sick. Garvin reached down and fondled Mateo's cock through their jumpsuit, smiling as it responded to their ministrations. Mateo thrust upwards into Garvin's hand, Mateo's mind lost to a haze of need. It was all I could do not to throw myself at Garvin in homicidal rage, whether it was a suicidal act or not.

Mateo whimpered as Garvin stopped, chuckling as they left the chamber. Sweat was breaking out on Mateo's forehead, and they reached down, fondling their own cock until they came. I didn't even grow hard, so sickened was I by Mateo's suffering.

"Mateo," I said softly.

"Stay... away," Mateo said. "I can't control it. I'm losing everything."

I was calm as I stood up and walked over to Mateo, ignoring their protests. Mateo's pulse was hammering against me as I pulled them close. I was worried their heart would burst. Mateo's cock was already hard again. They whimpered in frustration, grinding against me. Their mouth surrounded my nipple, tongue swirling as it became hard in Mateo's mouth. Mateo's other hand squeezed my other breast and I had to remind myself that conscious thought was necessary at that moment.

“Mateo, stay with me. Can you listen to me while I talk to you?”

Mateo withdrew, letting go of me. I felt a loss where their warmth withdrew and realized what I was about to ask was right, was an act of Balance—of desire and protection in harmony.

“Mateo, I am happy to give myself to you, if that’s what you need.”

Mateo shook their head forcefully no, even as their hand pushed aside my loincloth to expose my hardening cock.

“It’s okay, Mateo. I want it too. Don’t be afraid. We’ll get through this together.” My voice was barely a whisper, and Mateo nodded their consent. I captured Mateo’s soft lips in a gentle kiss, which they made deeper, probing my mouth with their insistent tongue. I let Mateo in, let them have whatever they needed of me in order to be safe and sane. I was frightened of Mateo’s aggression, yet I could not deny their hand on my cock drove me to the edge.

“Not yet,” I whispered, knowing that if I came then, the rest would most likely hurt. “Inside me.” I stripped off my loincloth and coated Mateo’s cock with my spit. I straddled them, taking control and carefully lowered myself down onto Mateo’s hard shaft at a speed I could take.

Mateo whimpered, pinned down beneath me, and it wasn’t long before they came, Mateo’s seed spilling inside my ass. The sensation was more than pleasurable, and I crossed a line, able to forget for a moment that we were both prisoners submitting to a cruel master’s desire. I came on Mateo’s chest, seeing white before coming back to myself and grim reality. I slipped off Mateo’s cock and tried to ignore the tears that spilled down Mateo’s cheeks.

“I’m sorry,” Mateo rasped.

“Don’t be,” I said, brushing the tears away from Mateo’s cheeks. I was filled with a warm tenderness for the being sitting beside me, and a fierce urge to protect Mateo and care for them no matter what. Even if we were to spend the rest of our lives in the cage, I was determined to give Mateo whatever they needed from me.

What Mateo really needed was freedom. I knew as I looked out through the glass at Garvin’s wicked smile, I had to find a way out soon—before Garvin got what they wanted and ended their cruel experiment.

Chapter Four

Escape

I can't say how long we were at the "lab," as the males had called it, but I gave myself to Mateo whenever they needed it. They seemed to retreat into themselves, never talking to me outside of mating. I grew lonely in our cage and spent much of it sleeping. My waking hours were spent meditating or watching the lab outside the cage, waiting for a moment when Garvin would slip up and offer us an opportunity for escape.

That day came eventually, as all things must. I was ready to take it. Garvin came without an enforcer, but with a light stick clasped to their belt. I feigned sleep and waited for Garvin to relax. I regret to say that breaking Garvin's neck between my hands was one of the most satisfying things I've ever done. If there was a beast to be delivered to the Seven Hells, Garvin was it, but the act I committed was still murder. A warrior must mourn even a monster according to the rules of the Naha'i, but I could not shed a single tear for Garvin.

Mateo took a moment to respond before looking at Garvin's corpse with an expression of pure hatred. I pulled Mateo to their feet and led the way, taking the light stick from Garvin's belt. I didn't know how it worked, but I hoped the mere sight of it would be enough to make any who opposed us think twice.

We hustled through the lab and out of the front door, which helpfully opened for us. People milled about, going about their everyday business. A female caught sight of our near-naked bodies and cried for help. I held up the light stick as the sun blinded me and the townsfolk backed away. It was long enough for my eyes to adjust. I led Mateo to a nearby machine, hopped on board and tried to work the controls. The machine veered hopelessly into the crowd and towards the lab.

"Mateo, I need you!" I yelled. Mateo seemed to come to their senses and took the wheel, averting disaster and steering the machine out of the village. Flashes from light sticks sped past our heads as we ducked while the machine dived into the trees. Mateo focused on the task at hand and expertly guided the machine through the undergrowth until we lost the enforcers. They seemed not to follow, and I wondered why.

As the machine ground to a halt, I looked at Mateo with an unspoken

question on my lips. I did not understand why the machine had stopped, and I needed Mateo to explain it.

“Fuel cells are empty,” Mateo said, kicking the machine. “It’s useless now.” Those were the last words they said all day as we proceeded on foot. I missed having my knife to cut away anything growing in our path, but we were able to duck most of the overgrown branches.

We made camp for the night. Mateo wordlessly gathered wood for the fire, then slumped down in front of it.

“Mateo, if you want to talk—”

Mateo shook their head, disgust at themselves apparent in the way they moved. Mateo’s shoulders seemed permanently hunched, their self-worth at an all-time low. I wondered about the battle Mateo was fighting inside and knew I had to leave them alone to make their own path through the darkness in their mind.

I slept fitfully. Mateo came to me in the dark, hands roaming over my body in silent question. I let Mateo have what they needed then let them rest in my arms once it was over. I loved the way I felt when Mateo was close to me, but it scared me that they did not speak. I wanted to talk about what we had done and tell Mateo it was okay—that I was not hurt by them in any way—but it was impossible. When I spoke to Mateo, it was like addressing a wall. Perhaps it was easier for Mateo to process their captivity in silence. All I knew is that I wanted them to speak more than anything.

I picked berries and hunted with my bare hands. It was good to have a full stomach again, and it lifted Mateo’s spirits as well. The next few days were spent in quiet companionship as the chemical poison receded from Mateo’s veins and returned them to a more familiar shadow of their former self. Mateo stopped coming to my bed, and I realized I missed their body close to mine.

We were closing in on Grathador when Mateo said their first few words. As we finished making camp, Mateo sat by the fire and watched it burn. I sat across from Mateo and watched them with admiration. I felt warmth glowing in my veins every time I looked at Mateo. I knew something was changing inside myself as surely as it was changing inside Mateo.

“I’m sorry.” Mateo’s words were barely audible, but I knew they were more than the wind when they continued. “I never wanted to hurt you.”

“You didn’t hurt me,” I said. “What I gave was yours to take, Mateo. I gave

myself to you willingly. I have no regrets and I would do it again in a heartbeat if I could keep you safe.”

The sound of Mateo sobbing made me look up. Tears streamed down their face as Mateo buried it in their hands.

“I’m so ashamed. I wanted you. I loved every moment of it. I’m so sorry...”

I stood up and circled the fire. It broke me apart to watch Mateo blaming themselves. I wrapped my arms around Mateo and drew them close to my chest.

“I wanted you too,” I whispered. “You were my only light in the darkness. You gave me hope. The thought of losing you—I couldn’t bear it. If you had died, I would have lost a part of myself.” The truth tumbled out of me. I worried I’d said too much and burdened an already heavy soul.

“You can’t mean that,” Mateo said. “I’m a freak. Look at me. I’m hideous. I’m not a man, but I’m not a woman either. I’m disgusting. I’m—” Mateo paused as he realized he was describing me as well as himself. “I didn’t mean you...”

I took their face between my hands and stared deep into Mateo’s eyes. “Un-Balanced people like the Nemway could never define beauty. They have no idea that the one person they labeled a freak is the most beautiful being I’ve ever seen in my lifetime.”

“You don’t mean that.” Mateo pulled away with renewed sobs. “You’re the beautiful one. I’m nothing compared to you. Look at me.”

“I am looking at you,” I said. “What I see is the purest Balance of the Mother-Father. What I see is a soul who yearns to be free. What I see is the person I love.” I leaned forward to kiss Mateo, eager to show them with my lips if my words could not convince them. It was different from anything we’d ever experienced, slow and gentle, soft and sweet instead of desperate and bruising. I let it go on as long as Mateo needed. We only parted reluctantly for breath. I felt like I was flying, my soul soaring as I expressed my feelings.

“I love you too,” Mateo whispered. “I wanted to die, but the hope inside wouldn’t leave me as long as you were there.”

“I will remain by your side for as long as you want me there.”

“Always,” Mateo said, eyes shining with love. Mateo kissed down my body. I let them take control, knowing they wanted to make things up to me and

understanding that Mateo wouldn't be content until they felt they had done so. My knees almost buckled as Mateo took my cock in their mouth. I let myself cry out at the sweet warmth of Mateo wrapped around me. Mateo moved their head while my hands caressed their hair, loving every moment of pleasure Mateo gave to me.

Mateo pulled themselves away. I felt a moment of despair as the feeling of ecstasy left me, but I let myself trust Mateo as they stood and kissed me. I could taste my own seed on Mateo's lips and feel my erection rubbing against Mateo's leg as I gasped into the kiss.

Mateo pulled back and seemed to be the shy young male I'd met in Vastet once again.

"I wondered if you might take me," Mateo said. "I want you to have my body."

"I would love to have you, if that's what you desire."

"Please, Hinori." Mateo's voice was a pleading whimper. I smiled and headed to a nearby tree, pulling some leaves from it. I crushed them until their sap coated my hands. I rubbed the liquid along the length of my shaft and coated my fingers with it before returning to Mateo.

Mateo looked at my fingers with a shy, sweet smile, and I was lost. I gently pressed a slicked finger into their ass, watching Mateo's face for any hint of pain, but there was only a low moan of pleasure. I added another finger, stretching them until I was sure Mateo was ready. I pressed my cock against Mateo, slowly pushing inside until I was all the way in. I let Mateo adjust to me before thrusting in and out. I reached around and grasped Mateo's cock, pumping it in time with my motions.

We were one being, bound together in the way the Mother-Father intended. I knew I would lay down my life for Mateo. I knew I wanted to spend my life with Mateo. I knew I wanted to bear Mateo's children and raise them to be kind, gentle people who never judged others. Our souls were bound in that moment, and I knew I never wanted to be apart from Mateo again. Mateo was my Balance.

Our rhythm intensified, and I knew I was close. I gasped as I fell over the edge, spilling my seed into my beloved. Mateo came into my hand with a cry and slumped on the carpet of leaves beneath us. I wrapped my arm around Mateo and drew them close. I kissed Mateo's neck and down their back, marking every spot with loving lips until Mateo laughed.

“That tickles!” Mateo said, and I laughed along with them, loving the sound of laughter on the lips of the being I held most dear. We soon fell into a deep, dreamless sleep, unfettered by the memories of the time we’d spent in captivity, because we knew we’d always have one another, and that was all we would ever need.

Chapter Five

Grathador's Demise

The tree houses nested high up in the limbs of ancient oak trees signaled our homecoming. As we crossed the final ridge before the tree-lined valley that was Grathador, however, I knew something was wrong. The village was too quiet. Something in the way the wind blew through the branches of the trees was all wrong. The Mother-Father was signaling a discordance in the Balance, and it made my body tremble to feel it.

“What’s the matter?” Mateo asked, aware of the change within me as my ears pricked up and I ducked down behind a bush. Mateo squatted beside me. He saw the machine first, concealed beneath a pile of branches.

“The Nemway made it here before us,” I said. “That is why they did not pursue us.” I watched in horror as one of my people lowered themselves down from a tree. They wore the clothing of the Nemway females; the pink jumpsuit all wrong on their body. The signs and sigils of a warrior were gone. Horror spread through my veins as I realized the Nemway must have spread their way of life here like a virus.

“We will track them,” I said. “Follow me.” Mateo fell into step as I emerged from the brush and began to track the person leaving Grathador. We followed them to a watering hole, where they took a bucket and began to fill it with water.

I emerged from behind a tree, sneaking up on the Naha’i until I was within speaking distance. As they heard my approach and turned, I recognized the face of Melan, a youth that the Oracle had said showed promise to take their place one day.

“Hinori!” Melan regarded me with a shocked expression. Melan’s warrior braid was untied, hanging around their neck in blonde ringlets. Some kind of face paint accentuated their lips and eyelashes. They looked older than their fifteen years. “How was your Journey?”

“Do not ask me about my Journey when something is so clearly wrong,” I said, stepping forward. Melan took a step back towards the watering hole. “Tell me what is going on.”

“The Nemway have come and shown us a new way of life. They have brought amazing technology to us.” Melan twirled in their jumpsuit, their

vanity obvious. "The Nemway said they wanted me to be beautiful. Their women gave me this makeup and said I can join their tribe, but only if I cast savagery aside and cover my body."

"Melan, this is against our very nature. What of your Balance? What of the teachings of the Mother-Father?"

"Such superstition is outdated, Hinori. You always were old-fashioned. The Nemway's technology can make our lives easier, if we let it."

"We are warriors! We do not rely on machines that have no soul!" I lost the temper I had fought for so long to keep in check and stepped forward. I was heartbroken for Melan, but most of all I was afraid. Afraid for my people, and what I might become in a world that no longer wanted me or my warrior principles.

"Hinori." Mateo seemed to sense my pain, stepping forward and placing their hand on my arm. "Melan is but a victim of a greater scheme. I am sure the Nemway came here to convert your people to their way of thinking. We must go to your leader and try to organize some kind of resistance."

"Of course. We must meet with the Oracle." I nodded, my rage subsiding. "Melan, tell nobody you have seen us."

"Okay," Melan said. "You won't get to the Oracle so easily. The Nemway are holding him in the Meeting Hall." They grabbed the pail of water and headed back to the village. I watched Melan go with pain in my soul. No wonder the Balance in Grathador had seemed so wrong. Melan was even referring to people with gendered pronouns. To speak of the Oracle in such a way was nothing less than the greatest disrespect. It frightened me to my very core that the Naha'i had abandoned their values so easily.

"You're shaking." Mateo slipped their arms around me and rested their head on my back. I took comfort and reassurance from the fact that the one person I needed the most was at my side. If Mateo could resist a lifetime of the Nemway's rules, my people surely stood a chance against their gendered brainwashing.

"Reaching the Oracle will be dangerous," I said, climbing to higher ground and looking out over the village. Nemway males kept the village under guard, light sticks at the ready should intruders come to derail their plan. I hoped that meant there had been some kind of rebellion against the Nemway's scheme.

"Let me help," Mateo said. "I know my people. I know what they want: control. They want to own people and recreate them in their image, like gods. I

can pretend to have had a change of heart. They've wanted me to change for a long time. They won't be able to resist the notion. While their defenses are down, we can take out as many of them as possible."

"No," I said. "It's too dangerous. I won't allow you to risk your life. You're too precious to me. If I lost the one sane person left in this world, I would surely fall to madness."

Mateo smiled, and I felt the Balance swirl within me, offering me new ways of looking at the situation before us. I smiled as an idea struck me; one that was both quick and nonviolent.

"We surrender," I said. "Grathador does not have a jail, so they will most likely take us to where the others are being held."

"Sounds like a plan." Mateo took my hand and led me down into the village. All eyes turned to the two semi-naked figures in the midst of a sea of pink and blue. It didn't take long for the Nemway males to aim their light sticks at us. I followed Mateo's lead, putting my hands in the air with open palms. A light stick was thrust at my back, and I stepped forward through the archway into the great oak tree.

We were led down into the roots of the tree, a place we usually used for storing food since it was cool beneath ground. I saw the Oracle and Healer Mathara under guard along with some youths I knew from around the village. They looked awkward in the Nemway's gendered clothing, each having been assigned an arbitrary gender color based on whatever the Nemway considered their best guess.

We were ordered to sit on the ground and we complied. Jumpsuits were thrown at us, blue for Mateo and pink for me. I looked at the suit with disgust until a light stick was thrust at me. I was forced to shed my warrior's loincloth and put it on. The stretchy suit clung to my body like a prison. I felt like my skin couldn't breathe. The guards relaxed and went back to their duties, leaving us unattended except for one bored and somewhat elderly guard who sat in the corner, light stick held on by a shoulder strap. They wore a blue jumpsuit that fit poorly in all the wrong places.

"Hinori!" The Oracle seemed both overjoyed and unhappy to sense my presence. "Another one as well. This one is dear to you."

"Oracle, it is I. This is my dear friend, Mateo Nivera. Mateo, this is the Oracle, ancient seer of our tribe."

“Mateo, are you Nemway? You smell different from the others, yet I sense Balance within you.” The Oracle’s voice was high-pitched and flowed from their lips like song. I have always loved the sound of our seer’s voice, and was in awe of the things the Oracle can sense without sight.

“I was born with the Nemway, but I reject their ideals,” Mateo said. “I don’t identify with their strict gender roles. I don’t want to live in their box any longer.”

“I sense much anger and sorrow from you, young one. You must hone that emotion into Balance. The anger will not leave you until you accept your true self.”

“I do accept myself,” Mateo protested.

“Yet you still hold onto a piece of Nemway ideals. You believe you are flawed.”

Mateo looked around, conscious of all eyes upon them. “With all due respect, Oracle, I don’t want to have this conversation right now. There are more pressing matters to consider.”

“Indeed,” the Oracle said. “Our very way of life is at stake. The Nemway will not be satisfied until we fit inside these colored suits in both body and mind.”

“How should we proceed?” I asked.

“The Nemway will not be swayed. They are afraid of us and what we represent. Our very existence threatens their social hierarchy. Nothing short of war will drive them from our lands.”

“We cannot fight a war with so few. Vastet has already been destroyed.” I hung my head, sensing defeat in the air. “I fear we are lost, Oracle.”

“Every soul is lost at some point on their Journey,” the Oracle said. “The truth lies within you. If the Mother-Father wills it, Balance will return to this land.”

I felt the Oracle’s words were useless. For the first time, I felt the Oracle had no more idea of the future than I had. “We have to do something. We cannot sit and hope that Balance will be restored by itself. I am a warrior. I will fight as long as my body draws breath.”

“Sit down and shut up,” the guard said. I sighed and slumped down in the corner. Mateo curled up next to me as I slipped into a restless slumber.

I stirred at a noise in the room. I opened my eyes and took in the sight before me, mentally preparing for a fight.

The Oracle and the other Naha'i were snoring soundly. The guard in the corner was asleep. A Nemway female stood before us, dust on their face and sadness in their eyes. The person bore a certain similarity to Mateo, and I realized there was a familial connection.

"Mother, why are you here?" Mateo asked, uncertainty in their eyes. "I won't change. I can't change. I tried so hard to be what you wanted me to be—"

"It's okay, Mateo. I understand. Gralm told me you were sent to Garvin. I feared you might die there. He is cruel beyond measure. I'm sorry you had to endure that."

"Garvin's poison could not change me. I can only be myself. What I am is something the Nemway fear. I am a being with both genders. Can't you see, Mother? When I'm with Hinori, I feel alive. I feel welcomed. I feel *right*."

Mateo's mother hung her head. "Then perhaps this is your destiny. You must always do what you feel is right." They reached down to their belt and unclasped a light stick, handing it to Mateo.

"Mother... why?" Mateo looked up at their mother with confusion. "This is—"

"A weapon? Indeed. Mateo, the truth is that I never wanted my role either. The thought of staying at home and bearing children for a man scared me. In the end, it turned out that I loved you more than I could have imagined, and that eased my sadness, but I still wished every day that I could have had the freedom to choose my own life."

"You still can. Fight with us." Mateo said.

"I am too old and set in my ways to change now. I can't fight against the system I've known my whole life. I wouldn't know how to live without it."

"So learn." Mateo stood and faced off against their mother. Mateo's mother shook their head, their decision clearly already made.

"You must carve out your own path, Mateo. I can't join you." They turned away as noises approached from upstairs. "I wish you luck, my child." Mateo's mother hurried upstairs, leaving us alone in the dark.

Mateo turned over the light stick in their hand, clearly upset. Mateo turned to me, but I could only sit in silence. Mateo's decision had to be made by

themselves. I could not decide the path Mateo would walk, only hope that they would choose to remain by my side.

There was a scream from upstairs and the guard jolted awake. "Stay here," the male ordered, rushing upstairs.

Mateo stood. "We have to make a move." There was certainty in their gaze. "Even if we only flee for now. We can regroup and return later."

I stood and followed Mateo. The others came up behind us, the Oracle guided by Mathara. We climbed the stairs and walked out into the village.

I was ill-prepared for the sight that greeted us. Two dozen or more naked bodies hung from trees at the ends of ropes. The victims' hair was braided just like mine. The guards didn't even notice us, so shocked as they were by the dead and the dying still jerking at the ends of their ropes. A Nemway female screamed at the sight, and children of both races wept openly.

"Is this some kind of execution?" Mateo asked, their eyes wide with horror.

"No," I said. "This is suicide, a sacrifice to the Mother-Father. These people could no longer stand to live this way and have given their lives back to the deity that made them in hopes that Balance might be restored." The sight brought tears to my eyes. I forgot for a moment that I was standing in the midst of my enemies. All I could see were the shadows my people's bodies cast as they swung from the end of ropes in the half-light of dawn. A ritual blade fell to the ground before me. I knelt and took the offering from the dead with pride and a silent oath to bring back the Balance.

"Hinori, we must go," Mateo insisted, but I shook my head.

"No. The time for flight has past. We must stand and fight."

"I know how you feel, but we cannot match the Nemway's firepower. We must go!" Mateo half-dragged me away as we ran into the brush. My body moved of its own accord, my mind still trapped in the village with the hanging souls. My friends had chosen a path of sacrifice. I had to fight for them. I had to protect the ones who remained.

I paused momentarily. Mateo stopped as the others went on ahead. Mateo pulled me into their arms, holding me tightly, and the tears came easily. I sobbed on Mateo's shoulder as they soothed me.

"We will return, Hinori, I promise. When the time is right, we will come back and fight." Mateo held me until I stopped crying, then took my hand and led me to the makeshift camp the others had made in an overgrown part of the

forest. I slept fitfully, my mind straying back to my home and the identity I stood to lose should the Nemway win. I slipped my arm around Mateo, pulling them close. My anchor to the world kept me from sacrificing myself to the Mother-Father. As long as Mateo needed me, I would never leave them behind.

Chapter Six

Appeal To The Nemway

I woke and made my way down to the stream that ran behind our camp. I stripped off the hideous jumpsuit and dipped into the cool water, enjoying the sensation of being exposed to the air. I washed myself thoroughly, cleaning away all traces of dirt that stained my body. Mateo watched me from a distance, afraid to approach after the previous night's events. I beckoned them over, and Mateo came to me. Mateo's hair was wet, and it left trails of water down my chest as Mateo sucked on my nipples, caressing my breasts with their tongue. Their hand reached below the water and grasped my hardening cock, teasing it as Mateo kissed my mouth.

I pulled Mateo onto the shore, and we ducked into the brush. I pinned Mateo to the ground, running my fingers down their flat chest and over their nipples. Mateo looked up at me with a wistful expression as they caressed my balls and reached toward my ass. Fingers probed at my entrance. I gasped as they breached the puckered opening. I reluctantly pulled away and found some of the leaves, spreading the sap across Mateo's cock before I straddled them in earnest. I loved the feeling of Mateo's cock inside me. I wanted to prove it to them. I moved down, staring into Mateo's eyes as I filled myself up with Mateo's shaft. They moaned beneath me, letting all doubt and fear seep away into the day as we slowly worked ourselves up. I touched my own breasts, caressing my nipples as Mateo played with my cock. We came at the same moment, our bodies and souls synchronized with one another.

We lay in the brush, living for the moment. I had sensed something was wrong the moment I had invited Mateo over and now I saw the anguish in their eyes unclouded by desire.

"I have to go back to Nemway Two," Mateo said, their expression dark. "I have something I must say to all of them."

I realized they would brook no argument; Mateo's mind was already made up. "I'll come with you."

"No, this is my burden. I won't drag you into this. I expect I shall die delivering my statement, but I shall be free at last. I will not let the Nemway choose a gender for me. That's my choice alone. The Oracle was right; I still don't accept myself and I won't be able to unless I tell the Nemway the truth."

“Your burden is mine as well. I will not let you face this alone.” I pulled Mateo close, afraid for them once more. I would not let anything happen to Mateo as long as I was still alive. Mateo would deliver their statement and live no matter what.

“Hinori—”

“I love you. If you go, I go.” I put my foot down, and Mateo dropped the argument. I suspected part of them wanted me to come so that Mateo would not have to deliver their speech alone.

“Okay then.” Mateo smiled. “I was thinking we could steal a vehicle from Grathador.”

“A what?”

“A vehicle. Like the one we stole from Nemway Two.”

With plans made, we spoke to the others, who claimed they would be fine on their own. Stealing the “vehicle” was easier than I had thought it would be; with the guards busy cutting down the bodies of the sacrificed Naha'i, they were distracted, and we took off with the machine before anybody noticed we had returned to Grathador.

We sped through the forest at top speed. Mateo was an expert pilot and took us safely beneath low-hanging branches. Mateo had an intense look in their eyes that spoke of their will for the task ahead. I knew what Mateo was attempting was akin to the sacrifice of the Naha'i, but I had promised to stand by their side and I would see my vow through until the end. Mateo was my love, my mate. My Promised. If I had any say in the matter, and I would never leave them alone, even if it meant my death.

We passed the remnants of Vastet, and that only served to bolster my will. Mateo was trying to save the Naha'i in the only way they knew how, with an appeal to the Nemway's hearts and minds. I applauded their courage and kindness even as I feared for their safety.

Reaching the outskirts of Nemway Two, Mateo set down the machine, and we proceeded on foot. I had dressed in the bottom half of the jumpsuit so as not to alarm the Nemway on sight, but I had insisted on keeping my knife close by. A warrior dies with weapon in hand, and I had promised myself I would have that much at least.

A crowd started to gather as we reached the village square. Mateo climbed up on a metal stage and pulled me up behind them. Mateo yelled down to the

crowd to bring their families and listen to what Mateo had to say. Soon the crowd filled the square, and Mateo nodded. I placed my hand on their shoulder and squeezed, offering my support to Mateo's brave venture.

"I returned to this place to say one thing," Mateo began. "I returned to say that you are lying to yourselves. This entire way of life is a sham perpetrated by those who want to keep power in their hands."

The crowd murmured. I kept my hand on the hilt of my knife, ready to draw it and strike at a moment's notice should any being threaten my beloved.

"How many of you can really say you completely believe in the roles you are given? How many can truly say that you have never desired to step beyond the boundaries of your gender and experience the other side?"

"It's not natural!" a female yelled. "If God wanted us to fight, we wouldn't be able to bear children!"

"That is a lie," Mateo said. "I have met a person—no, an entire race of people who do just that. The Naha'i are proud warriors and gentle parents, bearing the burden of their young and hunting for food. They know the fierceness of battle and the beauty of compassion. What you are trying to do is destroy that! While we stand here, the Naha'i are becoming extinct because you are afraid of what they represent!"

"A man who is not a man is nothing but a freak!" a heckler cried.

"Then I'm proud of being a freak." Mateo stood with their arms open wide. "I'm not a man. I'm not a woman. I'm something else. I don't even have a name for it, but I've accepted that this is who I am. No chemicals or experiments can change that. You made me believe that I was the problem, but you were wrong. You're the ones who can't open your minds. You're so set in your ways, so color-coded into the binary of blue and pink that you don't see that when the two come together you get purple. This is who I am and I won't be ashamed of it any longer!"

The audience started to turn, and I knew it wouldn't be long before the situation erupted into a riot. It only took a spark of light from a light stick to set the crowd on fire. A female went down in a pool of blood from a poorly aimed shot. The mob started to climb onto the stage. I drew my dagger and stood in front of Mateo, determined to protect them.

"No," Mateo said, turning. "I am your equal. I will fight at your back until the end." Mateo drew their light stick, firing into the mob that threatened to

overwhelm us. Nemway villagers fell back onto the crowd, slowing their advance, but we were outnumbered and outgunned. A light beam skimmed my head, and I felt a slight burn where it had cut me. I bathed myself in the blood of the villagers, even as I cried for the murder I brought down upon them. Tears streamed down my face, cutting through the dirt and blood that soaked me. I cried for the death I brought. I cried for Mateo, who was doomed to die. I cried for the life we had lost together. I cried for the children we would never have. Finally, I cried for myself, so that the warrior within was tempered by the love and sorrow of a mother's dirge for their child. For I knew, in one terrifying realization, that Mateo's seed had Quickened inside me. I carried Mateo's child inside my womb. I connected with the soul inside me and felt the life-force of our unborn child as I screamed a warrior's battle cry and sank my knife into another Nemway villager.

It was at that moment that something extraordinary happened. The sky seemed to split asunder. The crowd stopped moving towards us and looked up at the great hole in the clouds where a large black object sank down towards the ground. It was bigger than anything I'd ever seen, a giant metal monster that landed just outside Nemway Two.

The black machine opened up and people emerged. I noticed as they entered the village that they wore black armor. They were not segregated as the Nemway were, however; I spotted a female with hair shorn to the roots, carrying a light stick.

The Nemway retreated, and I was glad to see that most of the wounds I had inflicted were non-fatal. A villager tended to their wounds, and I was grateful. I pulled Mateo to me in order to check that they were not hurt, and was grateful to see Mateo was unharmed.

The villagers looked at the newcomers as though they were gods. Some even fell to their knees, to which the black-clad people laughed.

"You don't need to bow to us," their leader said. A booming voice came forth from the person's small stature, and the bowing villagers stood.

"Who are you?" Mateo asked.

"We are humans, just like you. We came to find you. It has been many generations since the colony ship Nemway lost all communications with Earth. It took over two hundred years to find the location of your crashed ship and send a rescue mission across space." The leader looked over the people with distaste. "We have been watching you since we arrived in orbit three days ago.

We do not like what we have seen. This type of hyper-gendered behavior has been seen with other colonies as well, and it always ends in disaster. We think it occurs due to the colony's need to survive and procreate, but it is not acceptable in today's Earth society."

"What's going to happen to us?" A young female stepped forward with doubt in their eyes.

"This was never your intended world to colonize. We do not inhabit worlds that already have life. Therefore you will pack up this village—along with Nemway One up north—and we will return you to Earth, where we will assist you in merging back into society."

"We won't give up our home!" A male stepped forward, and I recognized them as one of Garvin's enforcers.

"You are outnumbered. Any who resist will spend time in the brig, barring special dispensation to stay. Pack your things and prepare for evacuation." The leader's words were absolute as they walked away from the uproar of the crowd.

Mateo dropped the light stick and slumped to their knees. "They might not allow me to stay. I can't leave you, Hinori. I won't!"

"We must negotiate with these people," I said. "Let me speak with them." I strode down towards the leader and took them aside.

"You must be one of the Naha'i," the human said, looking me over. "Explain your situation."

I explained everything, leaving only a few details out, as I used a cloth I was handed to wipe the blood from my body.

"A ship has been sent to Grathador to evacuate the humans there and deprogram any cultural contamination. I am very sorry for what has happened to your people."

"Mateo Nivera is my partner," I explained. "Can they stay?"

"That is up to him," the human said. They beckoned Mateo over, and they ran to my side. I knew I could tell Mateo about the child, but to chain Mateo to this place because of new life would have been cruel. If Mateo wanted to leave, I would raise our child by myself. I loved Mateo enough to let them go if they needed to, though I would mourn for my lost love the rest of my days.

"Nivera, do you wish to stay on this world?" The leader clapped Mateo on the shoulder, and Mateo met their gaze with firm purple eyes.

“Yes, absolutely,” Mateo said. “I don’t want to return to Earth. I have a home here. I belong with Hinori.” I felt joy overwhelm me as Mateo leaned in and kissed me.

“You will have to sign some paperwork and then you are free to stay. I would recommend you return to Grathador as soon as possible to avoid the unpleasantness that the denizens of Nemway Two might give you.” The human summoned another of their crew, who prepared the prerequisite paperwork. Mateo took a pen and signed their name with no hesitation whatsoever.

“Understood,” Mateo said. “Let’s go home, Hinori. I have much to learn about the Naha’i if I am to become one of you.” They took my hand, and we strolled off into the underbrush, eager to find out what had become of Grathador.

Chapter Seven

Promised

We walked all the way back to Grathador. The humans had confiscated the Nemway's technology as part of their scheme to return my world to the way it had been. I felt uneasy on the journey home. A part of me was frightened that my pregnancy would scare Mateo away, but another part of me knew Mateo deserved to know I was having their child. I thought about it long and hard, wondering if Mateo's reaction would be positive or negative.

"Mateo. Stop. I have to talk to you." I paused and Mateo stopped as well. Mateo slumped down on a fallen log. I sat beside them, thinking carefully about my words.

"You want me to return to Earth, don't you? You think I would be better suited there." Mateo shook their head. "I want nothing to do with Earth. I feel like I belong here. You're the only person who has ever accepted me for who I am. I don't want to lose that."

"I don't want you to leave," I said, breaking into a smile. "Mateo, I think I'm carrying your child."

"What?" Mateo nearly fell off the log. They reached over and placed their hand on my belly. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. I felt true Balance as I fought. Our child reminded me that I am a mother as well as a warrior. That I am a protector as well as a fighter, a female as well as a male."

"You can feel it? Wow." Mateo's eyes sparkled with wonder, and I embraced Mateo with open arms. "A child? I can't believe it. I thought you said only some of your kind could bear children?"

"Only those who achieve complete Balance can undergo the Quickening, yes," I explained. "It's because of you, Mateo. You mirror me. You show me the perfect image of what I am meant to be. It is only because you found your Balance and accepted it that I found mine."

Mateo was lost in thought for a moment and bit their lip. "How do you deliver this child, exactly?"

"The healer performs surgery," I explained.

“Oh.” Mateo laughed. “Silly me. I thought maybe it came out of the other end.” Mateo grinned. “Oh my goodness. I’m having a child!” Mateo whooped out loud, scaring the birds out of the trees. Mateo burst into song, their voice the most beautiful thing I had ever heard. I embraced Mateo, pulling them close to me and kissing Mateo deeply.

“I love you,” I said. “Will you become my Promised one, Mateo? Will you stay by my side for the rest of our days?”

“Yes,” Mateo said, their voice choked with emotion. Mateo started to cry tears of joy and embraced me so tightly it hurt. Mateo picked me up and spun me around in the forest. I loved the joy painted on their face. Mateo deserved to be happy, and now, here they were, truly content. We had achieved our Balance, together. It was as the Mother-Father had intended when I set out upon my Journey.

Grathador was a place of celebration when we arrived. All traces of the Nemway were gone including their technology, which had been destroyed and carted off by the humans. Grathador was once again its natural self, restored to the proper Balance. The world was at peace. Young Naha’i danced around a fire and shared tales of their Journeys and legends of the Mother-Father. Things were back to the way they were meant to be.

I saw Melan sitting on a rock, outside the circle of celebration. I left Mateo’s side for a moment, going over to Melan and sitting down beside them. Melan was crying, and I put my arm around them.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “This is the way it has to be. You must find some semblance of Balance, and you will.”

“I’m not sure that’s true,” Melan said. “My faith is weak. The Oracle says I must undertake my Journey soon, but I’m not sure I will succeed.”

“You are welcome no matter what,” I said. “Not everybody gets to complete their Journey. As long as you commit no crime, you will never be banished.”

“Your Journey changed a whole world. The Oracle said so.”

“It was nothing like I expected. The Mother-Father will guide you. That is the purpose of the Journey. You will see soon enough. Why don’t you join the celebration, Melan?”

“Perhaps later. Right now I don’t feel like I can. The Oracle said my Balance has been disturbed. I’m so confused.”

“You will find your way, little one,” I said. I bid Melan farewell and stood up.

I took Mateo's hand, and we headed to the Oracle's shrine. I couldn't stop smiling as I thought about the future. What had seemed so grim just a day ago was now spread out before me in infinite beauty. Grathador was magnificent, and Mateo could sense it too, their eyes wide like two saucers. The firelight glowed in the reflection of Mateo's eyes, and I realized how incredibly beautiful they were to me.

We made our way through a bead curtain and into the Oracle's shrine. Precious gems lined the walls of the grotto, a natural cave that existed below the village and was considered a sacred place. The Oracle sat in the center, awaiting our arrival.

“You have Quickened.” The Oracle smiled. “I feel the Balance in you both that has sparked new life. Are you to be Promised?”

“Yes,” Mateo said. “I want to spend the rest of my life with Hinori.”

“You will become a Naha'i, young one. Are you content with allowing the Mother-Father into your life? The way of the Naha'i is both warrior and nurturer. Are you willing to accept both aspects of yourself equally? Once this is done, you can never go back. The Naha'i do not dissolve their Promises.”

“I am ready,” Mateo said. Violet eyes sparkled with maturity and joy. Mateo had gone on a Journey along with me, growing into adulthood as I had, and now, Mateo was ready to forge a Promise. So much had changed in such a short time that I was awestruck by it.

“There shall be a mighty celebration,” the Oracle said. “Offspring are rare here, especially in ones so young. Congratulations to you both.”

“Thank you,” I said. I took Mateo's hand and led them outside. We started up the steps at the base of the tree that led to our tree house, my home that was now ours.

“So what's involved with the Promising ceremony?” Mateo asked.

“You just saw it. You accepted and have been Promised to me for life.” I smiled as Mateo processed their shock.

“Wow, you don't beat around the bush, do you?” Mateo laughed. “I'm married. I can't believe it.”

I laughed, the sound foreign to my ears but infectious. I embraced Mateo and led them to our home, where we undressed as darkness fell. I reached for

Mateo's cock as they stripped out of the jumpsuit for the last time, throwing it in the fire. Mateo turned to me and we kissed, taking our time to explore one another on our Promised night. Mateo rubbed their hand across my womb in reverence for the life that grew there before proceeding to pleasure me in every way they knew how.

We had all the time in the world.

The End

Author Bio

Victoria was born in the United Kingdom but emigrated to the United States at age 21. She's bisexual, happily married, and still shouts in a British accent. She lives with her husband in Pennsylvania where she spends a lot of time playing and talking about video games, especially Japanese role-playing games.

Besides the Culture Wars series, she is the author of Wings of Destruction, a short m/m asexual romance novella contracted with Less Than Three Press. She loves to write about all colors of the rainbow and celebrate love wherever it may be found.

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