

Ch2. Training and Growth.

Agrok was tired, far more worn out than she had ever been in her life. Even during the battle she had fought before training she didn't get half a work out as when she studied her martial skills with Malehk. He held nothing back in what he expected of her as a student, or when they sparred to see her development. When he connected, he used as much force as he would use with any male. As much as her battered and bruised body would claim otherwise, she knew it was out of love and respect. She may have been getting the full negative effects of the training, but she got the full learning and conditioning out of it as well.

Only to a warrior would love and respect mean you are willing to clobber your wing sister. But then, I wont be going out into the world unprepared for what I will really feel at the hands of a foe. I know it certainly helped me handle Vrestehk when he got huffy about losing that match.

As her mind wandered she stepped into the wonderfully relaxing waters of the hot-spring Malehk had shown her. The hot water seeped into her feathers and down to her skin, drawing her blue eyes to close to mere slits in relaxation. Large trees grew in the area, being in the far eastern reaches of Titania, the Rentuh lands had the only forests of the plains. A sweet tang of sap wafted on the breeze to bring her to further levels of relaxation, nearly bringing her to sleep as the warm water dulled the aches of her bruises and strained muscles. She was quite thankful that her muscle tone had developed a bit more and lessened the impact these rigorous training sessions had on her. Kahlah claimed that she had developed a more attractive figure about her with the new curves. Males still seemed to ignore her however, leaving her in a lonely state. Malehk had tried hard to keep her from feeling alone, but he was Tahkra's. He could not give her what she really needed, much the same with Saltriss and Kahlah.

Agrok laid perfectly still in the water pretending to absorb the heat. It was definitely there, extremely faint, but there none the less. Not until her sense of smell picked up the familiar reptilian scent did she overtly acknowledge the snapping twig she had heard.

"Don't you dare Saltriss, I'm in no mood," she growled softly to her unseen mentor, "Come on out and have a seat, I **will** enjoy my soak after what you and Malehk put me through today."

The drake stepped through the brush with an approving grin, "Very good Agrok, your senses are becoming sharp even in states of exhaustion and relaxation. I'm very pleased with your advancements already, far quicker than any other I've seen. It's like you were born for this, like some higher being created you just to be a warrior of a different shape."

Agrok let out a soft sigh as her eyes opened to stare off into the gradually thickening woods, "A different shape of warrior. A lot of my problems come from being a different shape for everything, Saltriss. It is why I was cast out of my family, why I am left to feel so lonely. I'm not as large or powerful as I should be to handle sparring with Malehk and the other males. I have to give everything I have just to keep up."

"You were cast out for your mother's stupid pride, not for anything you did or failed to do," the elder drake growled softly, still angered by the day she was cast out, "You are not shaped wrong Agrok. If you were shaped wrong and malformed, you would not be beautiful even to the eyes of this well traveled drake. As for keeping up with everyone else in the warrior's training, I said it already. You are advancing far quicker than any student I've seen, your skills are outstanding even this early in your training. The reason you have to give so much to keep up in sparring, is because you give so much that you force your opponents to give all they have just to keep from looking the fool at your talons. That includes Malehk himself, he's already admitted to me that he has a hard time handling you in the training ring."

She looked at the drake and smiled, "You are a well sculpted figure of your species. Now get out of sight until I say to come back out."

Saltriss gave her a rather dumfounded look, as if he were struck from behind, "I beg your pardon?"

"My aches are as soaked away as they are going to get and I would like to get out of the spring now," she explained with just a hint of tart to her voice, mostly from her tired state of mind, "My feathers are completely soaked and will not cover me as normal."

The drake blinked at her, still not grasping the concept, "But you are a gryphon, you are always nude. Everything humans hide you don't really have need to, nor do you."

Agrok gave a small giggle as she sat up in the spring, still submerged up to her wing joints, "Well, wise old Saltriss, A gryphon's feathers soften body shape and hide some finer curves and lines in the body. These lines and subtle curves are usually only felt by a lover, as that's the only time one's body would be pressed that tightly to another. It's become a modesty thing for my kind, unless you would

like me to explain to Kahlah how intimately you would know my shape once I get out."

She didn't think it was possible through scales, but he did indeed blush as he stammered his reply, "Um no that's fine, I'll just go over behind those bushes and let you do whatever you do."

She smiled at him as the elder drake stood up and made his way behind the nearby stand of bushes he had indicated. She really liked him, more than a mentor, kind of like an uncle. It was just as well since the drake pair had taken to watching over her since she was cast out. She pulled her wet self out of the water as she let her mind wander. Streams of water rushed down her soaked feathers, plastering them to her skin and showing off her true curves and wonderfully toned shape. She paused again to reflect on her new family of sorts. Her entire family consisted of Malehk and the drake pair, with Tahkra showing up when she could. Her sister spent most of her time traveling these days, speaking with all the other tribes and trying to unite them. The last she'd heard of her sister's activities about the plains, she was trying to get a meeting of the chiefs together so they may discuss with Saltriss and Kahlah the nature of the newly landed foe upon their world.

Her mind drifted back to her current activities. Grasping the ground she began to shake herself furiously, sending droplets of water flying every direction and soaking the area to leave herself only a bit damp. She caught herself starting to think back to her parents and how they were holding up, but quickly cut herself off.

No Agrok, they cast you out and ended your previous life. You have a new life ahead of you, don't look back. Never look back or they will hold you back in a wounded spiral, trying to get things back to the way they were before. You are forging a new family, and you have a place in this new life you have begun. Don't let the past slay you even before you begin to live.

She let out a long sigh before she called to the drake, "Alright Saltriss, you can come out now, I'm merely damp."

"Well it's about time," He complained, "I was beginning to wonder if you'd forgotten I was back there."

"Sorry old lizard," Agrok allowed herself a bit of a giggle at the drake's humor, "Have you heard word of Tahkra and her gathering? Last I heard of her she was meeting each tribe individually to try and get a gathering together."

"I've heard a bit," Saltriss replied with a very slight undertone of deception to his voice, "Not much more than that and nothing specific. A few have agreed, a few resisted, nothing more nothing less. What I do know is that Kahlah has something special on for tonight, she found some wonderful herbs growing about. We should head back to catch supper while it's hot."

He was hiding something, she was sure of that, but she surely would find out soon enough, "Gryphons generally eat their meals raw, but I certainly won't pass up Kahlah's delights. One thing is bothering me though."

He paused and looked back at her over his shoulder, already having started to leave, "Oh? What is it that bothers you, dear pupil?"

"Kahlah is absolutely sure Malehk is mounting me when Tahkra is not around," she replied with a hint of annoyance. "Nothing could be further from the truth. Mating with Malehk would not only be crossing my beloved sister, it would be like mating with my brother."

Saltriss gave a hearty laugh as Agrok joined him on the path home, "Well she sees you two as a constant together. It doesn't help her any that you two are indeed so close and affectionate. Hell, if I didn't know Malehk as well as I do I would think the same thing about you. I'll have a talk with her, but honestly Agrok, you'll have to set her straight yourself. I can say as much as I want, but it will stick best if you speak to her female to female."

Agrok did not make a reply, her mind was simply too active on the sum of her life at that moment. She simply walked beside her favorite elder, something about his presence let her think more clearly. She was already certain of one thing already, she would have to deal with Kahlah's misconceptions on her and Malehk. The situation could grow to harm Tahkra's position and efforts if others adopted Kahlah's views. Tahkra had gained much reverence in the eyes of more than just the Rentuh and Kreestak tribes, tales of her uniting the two most bitterly aggressive tribes had reached far on the plains. All the warriors of the Rahltehk, Miyehk, Chiktahl, and Drazjah tribes referred to her as "Lady Tahkra", as well as a whole host of entire tribes. She was confident that Tahkra could bind the entire plains as a nation. From what she had seen of the new threat exterminating the humans in the neighboring nation of Krautz, or rather what was left of it, the gryphons and refugees of the plains would need to be unified to survive. Thus far there had not been any major incursions into the plains after the loss of the regiment that had pursued the fleeing humans who

now took refuge with the Kreestak and Rentuh tribes. The few scouting parties that showed up on the plains never had a chance to send any type of message back to their superiors, the warriors of the two allied tribes made sure they never lasted long or got far enough to see the gryphons themselves. But her mind was stuck on just one thing she knew Saltriss had not told her.

"Sal," she spoke his nick name as a question, one she knew he would consider to be an ominous question. As they walked and he did not answer right away she began to wonder if he had been lost in his own thoughts.

"Yes Aggy?" He finally replied just before they reached the final hill before the cup in the plains that housed their tiny training village. He had stopped, a sign to Agrok that he figured something of what she was going to ask. It also told her he wished his answer only to meet her ears, for now at least.

"Who are these people who are razing Krautz?" she asked bluntly, "Surely they can't be just humans to have crushed all of Krautz in eight hours. What is it that we are truly up against, and nothing cryptic."

The elder drake let out a long sigh, "I knew this would come, and I really wish I could find a way not to tell you just yet Agrok. Telling you what is out there now, still pouring through a rip into this realm onto your world, it makes me apprehensive about training you specifically to fight it."

"They killed Kenten, they hurt the people of my world, and they threaten my home. I don't care what they are, I'll stop them. I would just like to know what I'm bracing myself to face," she reassured him firmly.

"Humans, much like what you faced, only more skilled," he replied evenly, "More evil minded drakes than myself and Kahlah. Worst of all, there are dragons of terrible might and magics far greater than anything this world has ever seen. There is a whole host of other creatures scattered throughout their ranks from other worlds they conquered and enslaved."

She took a deep breath as her mind absorbed all the images she was constructing from his words, "What is it they want from our world, we have nothing such a great conqueror could want."

"You have yourselves, your lands, and once they find out there are gryphons here, they will be hungry to add you to their enslaved numbers. Your kind holds much strength and mobility in all the legends of you lot," as he neared the end of his explanation he lead her to the top of the hill to look out upon the spectacular sunset over the plains, "and such beauties as this will be sacrificed just to win your entrapment, absorb the powers of your mages when they devour their souls. All must bend to the dreaded will of the dark dragon mage GahlByrn. We of Skanshial had no idea what he really was when he was permitted to learn the gate spell that punches through the fabrics of the realms themselves to reach other worlds. I'll tell more at the gathering once Tahkra gets it put together, but for now, you know what you fight against."

Agrok stared out over the plains as the sun sank over the horizon, painting the sky in many rich oranges, reds, and pinks. Her mind struggled to think of such dark beings that would devour the soul of another just to gain power, just so they could seek more to devour for more power. Agrok just couldn't comprehend that kind of thinking, she didn't even know such vile acts were possible until Saltriss had told her. In light of these revelations no one could really fault her for giving up her new path and taking wing into the wilds to hide. She stared out over the village, Village of Beginnings was what the Rentuh had named it. Such a tempting little target, small and isolated, any small band of raiders could take it. Yes they could take it indeed if every being in that village were not at least mildly trained gryphon warriors, and none who tried to take it would ever live to tell what they had found. It was a clever trap that made for decent defenses of the borders of the plains, as well, it kept the training young warriors away from any rival tribes that would actually be able to make a real strike on them. This defense was holding true against the new foe as well, at least while they were only sending small scouting parties.

The eradication of the regiment and the many lost scouting parties must have the unknown enemy believing that an incredibly powerful force was guarding the plains, perhaps even a deity zealously protecting their wild domain. Thus far they had not figured out that it was a mere two hundred gryphon scouts and warriors who were protecting the border from their horrid might. If they were ever to be found out, the beginnings of a unified gryphon nation would never see any motions at all. The only future they would face would be blood and fire as each tribe was crushed in turn.

She knew what was in her heart after thinking all this over, "They threaten my homelands, they punish innocent people upon my world, they hurt those who have done nothing on other worlds, and they threaten the ones I love. Saltriss, know this now, I will fight them. I will fight them with every drop of blood, every bone, every fiber of muscle, every beat of my heart, and every pulse of my soul. I will beat them back off my world, and when I do I will keep pressing into each world they run to. They won't be

able to hide from me, what they took from me they took from so many before me. Never again will they go unchallenged on our plains to take a gryphon life or the life of any one under our wings. I want to learn how to fight them, and I want to fight them until they are no more."

The drake scowled at his young pupil, "Never fill your heart with hate Agrok, it is nothing more than a stronger expression of fear and it will destroy you. However fighting for the right reasons can give you a strength of heart and soul that will empower your body to great feats never before achievable by yourself. I will teach you soon my dear soft scaled nestling, but you must answer this question properly first. For what do you fight?"

Agrok looked her mentor and last beloved father figure in the eyes and spoke her answer in a tone that could not be questioned, "I fight for the children that were fleeing those monsters. I fight for the weeping widows mourning their slaughtered mates. I fight to protect the young lovers who have yet to feel the caress of their suitors, the growing generations of younglings who must grow in the face of this conflict, the mothers who will have to send their sons and daughters into this madness. But most of all, I fight for the basic right to live, for every being, these bastards have no right to take that away just for their own greed and lusts."

Saltriss smiled at her, his eyes bright with relief, "No, it is not fear in your heart at all, but the will of a champion. You will be like an avenging angel to fall upon these fiends when you start to fight them. It is not hate, but conviction that boils your blood so furiously. You are mentally and emotionally ready for my training now sweetling. Come, let us go and greet the rest of our little family."

Agrok did not smile, she could not at that point; she nodded instead. As they made the remaining hike back to the training village, one thought kept resounding in her head.

Our family...

* * *

Malehk couldn't help but eye the glorious haunch of meat that Kahlah had prepared. He was simply not sure what he exactly thought of it. It did invoke his hunger for it was most obviously meat of a natural game beast of the plains. However, under the other wing, the scents that it put off were enticing, but not in a way that made him wish to eat. He had never tasted prepared foods before, the only sweets he had ever had was sweet clean water from a glorious spring. Yet here before him was a wonderful spread the humans would have been grateful to ever see let alone feast upon. The quantities were indeed necessary, for there were three gryphons to feed as well as two drakes. The drakes didn't seem to eat much more than a human, but the larger bodied gryphons ate quite a bit to fuel their greater energy needs.

"Remember Malehk, you said you would keep an open mind about things I wanted to try," Tahkra reminded him with a teasing tone, and a most loving sparkle in her eye.

"I know, I know," he grumbled, somewhat regretting that statement, "But there is bread here, and vegetables. Gryphons eat meat not plant, we eat things that eat plants. That is how we get our nutrition from plants!"

"If we drakes can do it, you birds can too," Kahlah declared sternly as she hefted a large bowl of some strange spear-like green plants onto the table.

"We aren't birds," Malehk returned, taking a prideful pose, "We're raptors! We hunt on the wing."

"You don't look like a raptor to me, raptors are a kind of those reptiles the people of Tarsus call dinosaurs. You look more like a giant eagle trying to pass an equally giant cat with little success," the drake mage replied tartly.

Malehk was going to give a retort when the door of the very large hide dome they met in opened. Agrok and Saltriss walked in with not a single word, though the drake looked quite aglow at something. Agrok on the other hand looked so darkly serious that Malehk felt uneasy under her presence. He could only wonder what had happened, or had passed between the two to have them at such opposing moods. The large broadwing decided to hold his tongue until he knew what had his newest tribe sister looking so dangerous and determined. What he had to tell her would indeed shock her quite a bit, and challenging her stability with that grim look was not his idea of comforting.

"Aggy?" Tahkra asked gently, taking care not to anger her sister, "Is everything alright? You look so very riled up and ready to pounce and rend at any moment."

"Tahkra!" Agrok immediately brightened and pounced for her sister, catching her in her forelimbs

and rubbing her cheek to her sister's, "Oh my gods Tahkra, I'm so glad to see you again! I'm alright, I just got done talking to Saltriss about some of the things he's seen. It just got my blood boiling and made me sick to think what some people will do to others for such petty reasons. I just want to stop them all so badly, I guess I was wound like one of those handed time telling devices the humans use."

"You have changed, more than Malehk admitted," she leveled a slightly hard look at Malehk, "But all of it for the better I think, you've gotten more bold about your convictions. Before, you would have been struck with sadness at such things, not anger. And the changes in your body, I think I might have to start working out with Malehk, you look so stunning with that beautiful curvy tone to you. I must say I'm a bit envious of your physique dear sister."

"That is all very flattering, but I'm still not drawing any attention from the young males about," Agrok sighed softly as she settled by the table next to her sister, "The older males ignore me as well, I'm about as attractive to them as a homely human girl. I think at this point I would give in to the first advance I got, I have newly found hungers that are slowly becoming needs."

Malehk cleared his throat to express his discomfort at the statement, "You make it very hard to be so close to you Agrok. I could not stand in the least to think of the first male to take notice of you to be someone looking for quick pleasure. Oh if you wanted to take the chance to sate your needs I would most definitely stand aside. However, it doesn't mean that someone treating you like meat will ever be heard from again."

"I agree," Kahlah added her bit to Malehk's decree, "If Malehk doesn't get to them first, I'll be damned if someone is gonna get away with simply using my little starling."

Agrok turned her blue eyes to the female drake, "That does remind me dear scaly mother hen. Malehk and I have not and will not ever mate. It is a brother and sister relationship we have, nothing more and nothing less. I want you to stop speaking your speculations that I might be a mistress of sorts to Malehk."

Kahlah looked dumb struck as she blinked back at Agrok, her reply was simple, "Very well my starling, I do apologize for misunderstanding your feelings and actions."

Malehk choked down his chuckle and decided to change the subject, "Kahlah, why do you call Agrok your little starling? It seems rather odd to me."

"Yes, why do you call me that?" Agrok echoed the question with a deeply puzzled look on her face.

Saltriss cleared his throat and took over the question, "It really is simple, in our seventy five years together we have not been able to have children of our own. Kahlah and I have tried almost desperately, even using her magics to weave powerful fertility spells, but we have been denied the family we so desire. We hope you don't mind, but we kind of adopted you in our hearts Agrok. You are a simple and honest beauty like that of a starling, so to us you are our little starling."

Malehk grinned, even as Tahkra fixed him a large plate of the foods Kahlah had prepared, "This is good, Agrok couldn't build a better pair to stand in as parent figures. But one thing bothers me, you have been together for seventy five years. Just how old are you two and how old will you get to be?"

It was Kahlah's turn to answer the question, "Well dear Malehk, I am one hundred twenty seven years of age and Saltriss is one hundred fifty nine. I know he was robbing the cradle when we met to your eyes, but to drakes who live to be between two hundred fifty to three hundred years of age, it is really not that big an age difference. Being famous among our people gave us both such grief in the love game until we finally met."

Malehk nodded and poked at the strange spear-like vegetable with a talon as Kahlah helped Agrok fix a plate for herself. He was tempted to pass it by, but he caught the twinkle in Tahkra's eye and that sweet, sweet smile gracing the base of her beak. She was watching him as she helped herself to all the foods the drake had prepared. When he seen those beautiful eyes and that loving smile, he simply could not allow himself to disappoint her. With the same hardened heart he would face a battle, the great warrior faced the vegetable and bit into it with a crunch. Every part of his face that could, twisted into a grimace as the intensely bitter flavors struck his tongue like a shot from a catapult strike.

As he swallowed the offending plant Saltriss stared at him wide eyed and shaking his head, "Malehk, we were going to explain how to eat some of these foods. Not everything here is found on your world, so we didn't expect you to know how to eat it. That Casheean asparagus was supposed to be peeled and the soft center scraped out with tooth or beak. I'll be amazed if your tongue isn't numb after that!"

"Well it will allow you to bolt down your veggies without having to taste them," Tahkra suggested sweetly, "Don't worry, I had planned to make sure this meal would not be what you remembered of

tonight."

"Are you trying to be suggestive?" Malehk asked with a gaping grin. Contrary to what anyone would have believed, Malehk and Tahkra had not done more than cuddle under one another's wings or nuzzle sweetly. They both had agreed that they were different than any the other had ever met before. They simply wanted to be absolutely sure of their hearts before they added that portion of coupled life to the equation.

"I'm not being suggestive, I'm telling you what is for desert," Tahkra gave him a beautifully confident smile that gave her eyes a most wonderful sparkle. It was clear where her heart lay after that, and he suddenly realized the gravity of her words and her actions. His acceptance of her body would be far more than that, he would be accepting her heart body and soul for life. He would be taking her not as a trysting partner, but as a life mate.

He smiled back at her, even as his heart thumped about in his chest. All he could do was spread a wing over her back as she leaned against him. The others in their little bunch had no clue of their previous agreement of course. To them it was nothing more than two young lovers enjoying one another after a gathering of family and friends. One thing was certain through the jumble of emotions that made him feel as though he were pairing off with his first partner again, Saltriss was right in the numbing of his taste buds. He decided to take his lady's advice and take in as many of his veggies as he could before the effects wore off, as well as using it as a cover to stall for all he had to address this evening.

"So Malehk has some big news for you Agrok," Malehk wished to harm Saltriss very dearly as the drake spoke, "It involves you and training, as far as what's needed and what's expected of you. You already know that I wish to begin your training in the arts I myself use."

"Oh?" Agrok asked as she turned those curious blue eyes on him, catching him with some orange, round vegetable tuck to the hooked tip of his beak, "What is it Malehk, have I done something wrong or need some sort of special tutelage in a specific technique?"

Malehk swallowed his beak full of plant matter and began to feel oddly warm all about his head and shoulders, "Ah.. well... it's come time for your review. I have several complaints. You perform every technique entirely too flawlessly and with entirely too little practice. Your learning time is way too short and I have run out of techniques to teach you. As far as your application of the techniques, I beat you today Agrok, but only just. I'm afraid you will make short work of me next time we face off in sparring. In short, my complaint is this, you have exceeded your trainer in skill and knowledge. As such, I planned to head off with Tahkra to the Elrahn and Hiesktan tribes, they have been violent toward any one crossing their borders for any reason lately. I'll be making sure she's safe along with a Kreestak mage, Krinzehl, so I will be unable to conduct classes. I would like for you to take over my classes for me while I'm gone."

Agrok stared at him with eyes so wide they could have been used to serve a meal upon, "I'm done with my training? And you want me to WHAT? I'm not good enough to teach others!"

"You're more skilled than I am," Malehk replied, "Your execution of every technique is far superior to anything I could hope to achieve. You also have a different view point for how things are done, what I cannot fix easily among your former classmates, you just might be able to."

Kahlah smiled gently at Agrok as she rested a reassuring hand on her shoulder, "I'm an experienced mage trainer, Saltriss is an experienced martial instructor as well, and we'll both be right alongside you to make sure you are alright. Besides, you could do to have a little more respect around this place. Who knows, you may just find a teacher's pet for yourself."

Agrok shook her head gently, "Very well Malehk, if Kahlah says I can do it, I'll give it a shot. She does know me better than I consciously do sometimes, kind of like the mother I should have had."

"Well, Agrok, warrior of the Rentuh tribe," Saltriss declared with a huge grin, "You have a place to stay with Kahlah and I tonight so these two can get to tending one another back at Malehk's home."

"No and no, dear scaled parents," Agrok replied with a shake of her head that caught Malehk by surprise, "I am of the Kenjaya tribe, even if my family has cast me out. I could no more deny my blood as I could deny my heart toward any of you here tonight. As far as me staying with you, I know you and Kahlah have been far too busy as of late to tend to one another as well. Between training me, and keeping an eye on our new foes, you simply rise, work, and fall asleep. I shall take a walk instead and sleep out on the plains beneath the stars."

No one challenged Agrok's decision, for taking this new foe on alone would have been an easier task. Instead they fell into a lighter tone of conversation and discussed what gossips Tahkra had brought from other tribes. After all was said and the meals had been finished, they all helped pack up and extra for the morning meal and headed toward their respective dwellings. Malehk wasn't positive of the direction,

but he was fairly certain he seen Agrok walking in a direction she had always avoided. Tahkra had watched her too for a moment before she ducked into his hide and wood house. As he followed he thought he heard the crisp ruffling of wings taking to the sky.

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Tahkra awoke feeling very rested, very sore, and quite blissfully content in what had happened between herself and Malehk. He was so wonderful to be around, and he proved a most spectacular lover. Most of all, he had accepted her offer to be his, as well as giving of himself to her. Everything seemed so much more wonderful with a mate, even the air was sweeter. She could still smell his wonderful scent on her, something about that made her wish to visit with Agrok and the drakes. Her mate, yes her mate, was still sound asleep, exhausted from the heavier exertions he had given in their dance of acceptance and love. The need for another being she cared about was strong and she found herself heading directly to the drake's dwelling. She had made it a point to carry one of Malehk's discarded primaries under her wing as she made the short trip of only two dwellings over.

As she reached the door, it occurred to her that they may well have spent their night just the same as her and Malehk. She rapped gently on the framing beam just to the left of the door. It was indeed a door of framing and hide, unlike the flap that had been the doors back at the camp so long ago.

"We finished hours ago, you may come in, but be gentle of voice. Sal is still asleep," Kahlah answered her knock with a hushed tone.

"Sal is sleeping off his desert too huh?" she asked with a smile as she entered the drake's home on her world. It was much different than the usual hide house, the central room was pretty much every room for them since it housed only the mated pair. They did have a separate domed chamber for guests, but it was only used by Agrok when she wanted to leave Malehk and her sister alone.

The drake mage smiled at her from under her mate's arm and wing in their bed, "Yes, he was very enthusiastic about pleasing my desires once I made my intentions known. Poor dear wore himself out trying to keep me pleased until I fell asleep."

Tahkra made her way to the bed of grass mattress and hide comforter on the far right of the round room to lay near her companion, "We both know we feigned sleep just so they could let themselves collapse. I must ask though, do you have any leather and leather working skill?"

Kahlah cocked a scaly brow at her from her pillow, not having moved to let her mate sleep off his exertions, "I have thin strips, but I'm no leather worker. If it is something simple I could likely force it to be with a bit of magic if you need it."

"Oh I do but I don't," she explained as she produced a black primary tipped with gray, to Kahlah it would have been obvious that it had come from Malehk, "I need this as an ear tuft adornment, Malehk and I finally took ourselves into the physical relations. We promised not to do so until we were sure of our hearts."

She blushed lightly at the nares as Kahlah's eyes widened as the significance struck her, "You mean you and Malehk, I suppose this is akin to our matching trinkets or a humans wedding ring?"

Tahkra nodded softly, "Yes, it shows I hold a piece of his heart inside of me, and he holds a piece of my heart inside of him. Bearing a primary of a significant other declares a life-long mateship. We cannot take another even if we decide to part."

Kahlah carefully lifted Saltriss' arm and extracted herself from her mate, pausing to give a soft kiss to his lips, "Rest love, I'll return shortly. Tahkra I would be honored to create the marker of your life long declaration of bonding. I can make a reasonable clip myself, but I'm going to strengthen and preserve it with some spells for you."

She smiled at the drake as she moved like a living white and crimson puddle to a bag hanging on a rack that held her amulet and Saltriss' sword, "Thank you dear friend, but don't be offended when I do not put it on myself. As beautiful as I'm sure it will be, Malehk must place it on me and I must place his upon him."

"Of course, that is as it should be," Kahlah said cheerfully. "I'm not him to truly decide that you deserve to wear his primary. And don't fret little beauty, no matter what you may have indulged in before, you have quite a beautiful heart and goal. I'm fairly certain that he'll claw through anyone or anything to clip the feather to your ear. Do you have a primary of your own to make one for him?"

"No, my only molted feathers are back at my parent's house where I used to live," she ground her

beak a moment then let out a nervous sigh as she spread her left wing, "I'll deal with being flightless until my next molt. Please make sure to clip it rather than pull it out."

"You'll do no such thing," the sound of Agrok's voice made her start as she looked over her shoulder to see her younger sister in the entrance of the dwelling, "I guessed you might have been making this step with Malehk soon, so I picked up your molted primaries when I took my trip last night."

She nearly pounced Agrok as she produced the all important feather from her carry pouch, "Oh thank you Aggy! Thank you so much, I don't think Malehk would have been happy to know I gave up flight for his adornment. But one thing bothers me, you went to mother and father's to get this, how were you able to get them to let you in?"

Agrok continued to wear her smile, but she seemed a little darker than cheery in her eyes as she replied, "I didn't go there to do that to be honest Tahk. I went to inform our chief that I had completed my training with Malehk and the rest of the younger Rentuh warriors. I was rather coldly told that the Kenjaya do not hold treaty with the Rentuh and that I must inform mother and father of my tribe casting me out as well. On my walk over to the house I remembered yours and Malehk's little display at dinner, so I decided to get your molted primaries after I talked with them."

She clicked her beak with worry as she watched her sister's eyes grow a little glittery in the early light, "Are you alright Agrok? I mean it was another exile for you, and you were forced to go back to our parents who already exiled you."

"Believe it or not, it was good for me," she looked back at Tahkra with an honest stare. "Tikhana was asleep, so I did not have to deal with her at all. I did however have a very long talk with our father."

Tahkra took note of the gleam in Kahlah's eyes when Agrok referred to their mother by name rather than family title, "That is perhaps for the best, your biological mother was not the most motherly person I have met."

"Not when we started to develop," Tahkra corrected the drake, "but when we were younger little fuzz balls, there could have been no better mother."

Agrok let out a slow sigh, "Yes, you're both right. She was a perfect mother, so long as we were perfect traditional children. As far as father goes, I can grudgingly admit that he is a good father. What I cannot do as of yet is forgive him. He is very apologetic for what he did, and he was even overjoyed to see me again. He did however, stick to his reasons and refuse to accept me again."

"He is a fool," Kahlah hissed a very reptilian hiss of disdain, "He should be proud to the hilt of BOTH of his daughters, for you both break new ground and forge legacies of your own."

"I do agree, he is very foolish not to take pride in you Aggy," Tahkra said gently with great compassion in her voice, "Tales of your bravery on that harsh day have actually won me friends among tribes. A lot of the chiefs are intrigued by a female warrior. I once told mother that, she was very angry at the mere mention of it. Something about that particular change threatens her somehow and she reacts quite harshly."

"Yes," Agrok said as though she were simply stating an observation of another family, "Father did admit that much of what was being whispered was only heard through Tikhana's ears, or from the beak of her closest friend. I never did like him, that cocky broadwinged son of the chief. I can only wonder if there's a connection to why the chief of our own home tribe resists the efforts of one of his own to unite the tribes. Kenjaya would gain oh so much by it, being how father is their only real effective warrior."

"Indeed, they would gain real military might instead of the threat of individual gryphon strength," Kahlah observed, "Did you not say they had a rather aggressive nation to the south?"

"Yes, the nation of Grasolahn," Tahkra replied with a shudder, "They refuse to regard gryphons, or any non human creatures, as more than mindless beasts to be slaughtered for their sport or irritation."

An expression Tahkra could not read fell over Agrok's face as she added her bit, "Father had just returned from dealing with a hunting party in Kenjaya territory. I made myself clear in that I did not forgive him, but I did tend to his minor wounds with all the care one would expect of a daughter. I think I may approach Chief Asmaht and ask for help to be offered to the Kenjaya for their Grasolahn incursions, even if I have to be the one to head there myself."

"Will you be emotionally sound enough and capable enough to continue your training if you end up doing such a thing?" Saltriss asked from his bed with no signs of sleep in his voice, though he was slowly blinking his eyes open.

"I thought you were asleep, oh scaly steed of our favorite mage," Tahkra teased her favorite male, aside from Malehk of course.

"I was, but you ladies can chat up a storm and I decided I'd learn more by listening," he replied

with a humored grin, "Malehk should be rising soon, we males can bounce back from treating a lady faster than you give us credit for."

"I'll set these bonding symbols for you right away then dear Tahkra," Kahlah said quickly as she gathered all the feathers she needed and began preparations. The drake was simply glowing with excitement and pure pleasure to be creating such a happy pair of items.

"I think I'll be okay Saltriss," Agrok started to answer before her new instructor cut her off.

"Sensei, Agrok," Saltriss corrected her, "This is not a basic warrior training, this is a true and structured martial art for taloned creatures that I will be teaching you. I may have become your father figure, but our relationship must change during the real training times in which we work."

"Very well, sensei," Agrok corrected herself, which surprised Tahkra for her sister never submitted so easily to anything before, "I will be fine to work around and even with my father. Even with what he did to me, I love him, and I can't stop worrying about him. I got to look into his eyes, and he hurts to think of me having to go, just as much, if not more than I do having to be cast out. Even if he didn't welcome me back into the family, I think I could forgive him if he were to admit he was foolish to cast me out in the first place."

"Your heart never ceases to amaze me Aggy," Tahkra said with a shake of her head, even her relationship with their father had become strained by the exile of her younger sister.

"Actually, I'm not surprised in the least," Saltriss said with a smooth calmness that proved the truth of his words to Tahkra, "Agrok has the heart of a hero beating deep within her chest, she will not hold onto such things as hatred. Her loving side yearns to show itself, and your father was one of the very few who she could show it too. The likely hood of her never forgiving him is rather slim."

"But I won't forgive him if he doesn't admit his foolishness," Agrok said quickly, her brow wrinkled in confusion, "He holds strongly to what he believes is the situation and what was the right decision. How is the possibility slim for me to forgive him?"

Saltriss gave a cool smile, "Because he is a warrior, we never stop looking for someone to strike at us. His mate's odd actions toward one daughter alone and a lack of direct negative reaction to you in his presence, it will seem wrong to him. You have also given challenge to his decision, at some point he will have to give it a deeper look to honor you as his daughter or deny his honor as a father."

"Tahkra has told me that the relationship between her mother and father has become rather strained since the exile," Malehk added smoothly as he entered the shelter far quieter than she felt a creature his size should be allowed to be, "You know, I never thought I'd be so happy to greet a day. Somehow I feel as though part of a great weight has been lifted from my shoulders, but only half of it, like I'm not finished yet."

Kahlah picked up her work before Malehk had a chance to see them and headed for the guest chamber, "I know exactly what it is, and I'll tell you as soon as I'm done."

"I thought father was too busy to have any intimate time with his mate," Agrok said in tones that were obviously more to herself, "I wonder if he's even been able to bring himself to touch her since that fateful day."

Tahkra found herself feeling rather uncomfortable about the subject, and even less comfortable that she had an actual answer, "Well, I do try not to think of my parent's love life, but I do know the answer. They have not gone anywhere together since that day, he will not go in her company. They barely sleep in the same room, I have found our father sleeping in the family room or just sitting there refusing to sleep. I also have not heard the sure sounds of them in an intimate moment." She knew Agrok was trying not to let her past love of their father hold her heart back as she learned to fight for her and everyone else she loved. Which was precisely why she had not told her the further truth of where she had found their father more than any other place. More than he slept in the rest of the house combined, she herself had covered him in Agrok's old room. Never had she found him with dry feathers on his cheeks, whether he was asleep or just staring at the memories of the love he knew he would never have again between himself and the daughter he had truly been most proud of.

Tahkra knew there had always been a further kinship between Agrok and Reyfis, it was the mutual interest of protecting others that drove their bond deeper than the average father and daughter. It didn't bother her in the least, she knew for a fact that he didn't love her any more or less, there was simply the shared mind set. Tahkra could never bring herself to tell Agrok the truth no one realized yet, Reyfis Asreigh was dying of the wound that the act of exiling Agrok had left on his heart. He had no life in his eyes, except when he spent time with Tahkra, even then there was a heart wrenching pain behind the loving gaze he held for his eldest daughter. Their mother was quickly gaining a fierce hatred in her oldest daughter, not as great

as Agrok's, but quickly gaining heat and venom. She had been rather callous toward the pain their father was feeling. Tikhana had not supported and stood with him in the least, to be truthful she had been angry that he seemed down and rarely slept in the same room. No one but her parents would ever know that Tahkra nearly came to blows with her mother when she tried to coax their father into amorous activities while he sat in his memories in Agrok's empty room. She needed to get him away from her, Tahkra knew this, if she did, she might even be able to get him to admit his folly in Agrok's exile.

"I'm not sure how I feel about that," Agrok admitted with a sigh, "He does not deserve to go so completely without such pleasures of a mate's loving touch. Tikhana, on the other hand, does not deserve even a kind word from a passing stranger."

"Seek not vengeance and ill tidings Agrok," Saltriss cautioned, "Those who do generally find them falling upon themselves instead. I am glad to hear that you have not lost the love of your father, it shows the core of your heart to be truly kind, generous, and forgiving. As well, it shows the love in your heart is strong and undying, when you say you love someone you mean it."

Tahkra had an idea but she needed to know one thing before she could decide on or against it, "Aggy, how did you leave father feeling about you when you left him? Did you make it clear that you did not forgive him for what he did, but still loved him none the less?"

"Yes, I told him that I despised the sight of him for what he did to me," Agrok replied with an uneasy tone, "Immediately after I held tight to him and told him how beautiful sight he was to me even still. It was a strange, yet very warm feeling to be there under his wings again."

"I want to move in with Malehk, but I had to make sure Daddy knew you still loved him," Tahkra explained herself, "Now that he knows you still hold love for him, I do believe it is safe for me to move out and let him stand alone with mother. I want to keep a close relationship with him though, which would mean having him come here from time to time. Would you be able to handle that Agrok?"

"There is only two things I need to ask," Agrok replied thoughtfully, "First I must ask that you tell him he is not to approach me if I wish time in his company I shall come to him or a gathering where he is present. I would really need things on my own terms to remain in control of my mental state for Saltriss' training regiment."

Every one stared at her for a moment before Malehk finally asked, "And the second?"

Agrok gave a slight grin as she eyed both the males, "I'll need my own dwelling built as I wish to remain blissfully unaware of how loud or long you can make Tahkra sing your praises." It was then that Kahlah returned with the bonding adornments. "And finish accepting each other as mates already, I have a lot to do today."

Tahkra smiled and blushed softly as she reached for the adornment meant for Malehk's ear tuft and he did the same. They looked dead into one another's eyes as they fastened the ear tuft adornments to their mate's ears. She found it hard as she stared into his emerald eyes as they blazed affection around her reflections. To her they were like two deep pools of pure clean love, and after seeing them she felt no guilt about having giving him her body the night before. It was not a tryst, it was pure beautiful mating and it was right.

* * *

The sun shone high in the sky as Reyfis walked along side the laden supply wagon. The humans who had sought asylum with the Kreestak and the Rentuh had wasted no time in finding ways to be useful to their gryphon saviors. They immediately set up supply lines to the out laying training villages, as well the architects and masons set about creating stronger dwellings for the gryphons. He was rather impressed with the speed the slow beasts of burden they used for their wagons were able to chew distance. They had nothing to fear on the plain especially with a gryphon escort, nothing out on the plains hunted even gryphlets.

He was rather tired after the long night, both physically and mentally, he had not slept. After Agrok's most wonderful and horrible visit he decided he would not get aid from the Kenjaya chief to seek aid for their borders with Grisolahn. The only solution was to go out and speak as the senior warrior for the Kenjaya tribe. So he set out immediately, exhausted, hungry, and sporting minor wounds, he flew as hard as he could to the chief of the Kreestak, which was closer. He had detailed his situation and that of his dwindling brethren, with the surges of hunters from the Grisolahns and the lack of cooperation from their own chief. He was rewarded with a long drink of Penaya juice, well known for it's energy and nourishing

properties, and an offer of trade. He was to escort this caravan of masons to a Rentuh training village, a resident there who was close to the chief was having a home built and he wanted to see that nothing delayed the work. In return for the personal favor to Chief Asmaht, he would offer the freshest of his own warriors set to come from this very training village. Since Reyfis was not bearing the blessings of the Kenjaya chief, the only thing Asmaht could do was a personal favor. He owed Reyfis nothing, and aside from returning the young warriors once things settled down, he would likely not see Reyfis again. Thus the traveling on foot with humans and strange beasts.

"They just keep plodding along at the same pace from start to finish, eats huge ground you see," The human who drove the beasts on explained with pride in his seemingly mindless servants.

"So I see," Reyfis replied as he roused his deep brown feathers, taking note that the dust had caused a dry tan hue to his white wing and chest markings. The human had been right, they had covered far more ground than he had expected. They would reach their destination late in the afternoon of the same day they left. He would have to find a place to sleep in the village for he had not the strength to return home, but he would get there with the chief's decree that day.

The rugged looking man stared at him for a moment before he finally asked a strange and entirely unexpected question, "Yer the one who disowned Agrok aren't hey?"

"Unfortunately, yes. But, how did you know anything of that?" he replied with great confusion and a little concern.

"I suspected when I first seen yeh," the black haired human explained, "I didn't want to say a thing in front o' Chief Asmaht. Ye seemed like ye really needed help for yer people, an' ol' Chief Asmaht hates you personally. I suspect he'd have knocked yer beak to the other side o' yer head had he known who ye were."

"Has my decision to protect the other two members of my family really made me so unpopular?" he asked with emphasis on the protecting his family.

"Well, can't say as I see it the way some one must o' fed it to ye," the driver replied, "Agrok, Malehk and the drakes are very much loved by us poor refugee's. We owe them our very lives, she is a hero to us and among the two tribes that take care o' us. Can't rightly see how casting a hero out o' the family would protect them. 'Fact I would have imagined ye'd want her near the home to keep things safer there, what with the way she fought an' all."

"I have never received word of that tale, even from my other daughter," Reyfis admitted, "I was told there was a whisper campaign discrediting our family and harming my other daughter and my mate, all because of the unique situations with Agrok."

"Well feller, ye be losin' a whole heap o' fame now," the human said just before he spit a wad of some leaf a lot of these masons seemed to enjoy, "Story goes that lil' Agrok came with the drakes who said they would help, and two big ol' male griffins to save us poor non-soldier folk bein' chased by those jackals who burned our homes down. No one know'd it then, but she never learnt to fight a proper. But she was bigger and meaner than our most ornery folk, so she reckoned she'd do better again' those wicked men after us. Bless her brave soul, she known not a thing about how, but word is she fought like a demon, moving so fast they cou'n get close to 'er. She lost her mate out thar though, right sad and we feel we owes it t'er to give her anythin' we can offer. I tells ye, when we looked up an' seen those big males followed by a lil' lady just as pretty as can be, we were sure the drakes had found us some angels to save our souls. People be sayin' that all o' the Asreigh's, 'cept Agrok an' Tahkra, be the biggest fools an' so heartless that we may as well find the rest o' yer clan with them dragins."

Reyfis couldn't believe his ears, and his heart sank even further when he looked back on what he had been forced to do. Had he any notion of what had happened to her out there he would have turned on Tikhana to shut up or leave herself. Now he fully understood her mixed emotions even less, he had wounded her in so cruel a way and she still loved him even as she despised him. All the reasons of right that held strong in his heart for his decision crumbled. Tahkra was succeeding, not in spite of, but because of her bond with her sister. In trying to protect his family and their name, he had nearly dealt their honor a death blow. It seemed that only Agrok and Tahkra's honor and deeds were holding the faith in their line alive at that point.

He could not bring himself to converse much more than short answers for the remainder of his trip and, thankfully, the humans found many other things to discuss other than his own dishonor. One conversation that spread through the whole caravan did keep his interest however. It had seemed the human's interest in Agrok had gone to her love life as well, for they spent a great deal of time discussing what kind of male she would favor, and who among those they thought would wise up and realize just how

beautiful she really was. Reyfis found himself wondering the very same thing, surely it would have to be some cast that had a good intellect. He could see her fancying a large strong warrior for a short time, but her sharp mind would cause some insecurity with her rumored fighting skills attached as well. Not to say that warriors were short on intellect, for he himself was well tutored by the high priestess of the Hencaney tribe. But most did spend nearly all their time on their physical attributes. Agrok would definitely need someone who was an intellectual match for her, like an artist, a scholar, a lore keeper, or even a mage. But then her fallen mate had been a warrior, so he could have been wrong, or perhaps that male was a remarkable young lad.

As his mind wandered his body faltered a bit and he stumbled to his chest, his hind quarters staying in proper balance, "Whoa, we know ye to have been a fool to our hero, but we'd like ye to get that in one piece hey? Mehby ye like to ride on in the back o' the wagon?"

Reyfis shook his head as he slowly forced himself back up to a standing position, "No, it's quite alright. I'm just a bit weary from my battle and travels."

"Suit yerself," the dusty driver said with a shrug befitting his middle-aged frame, "But if'n ye fall again I'ma tie ye up and toss he in back muh self. The I'll be askin' ol' Asmaht to make sure the guards he be sendin' with us be at least half alive!"

"I'll be fine," he assured them again, "The village is within sight, we'll be there soon enough." After he spoke it dawned on him that the humans couldn't possibly see the village, it was on the far edge of his long range vision. He simply was not used to having anything but other gryphons about, not taking into account for keener sight, taste, and hearing.

"Oh, ye can see it eh? Hear that lads, we're bout half way 'cross the plains from the village!" The driver shouted with a good humored tone to his voice, teasing his gryphon escort. Reyfis did not rise to it however, he simply stayed deep in thought as he made a fast walk alongside the grunting beasts. There would be nothing else to force his mind back to the caravan and their conversations for the remainder of the trip.

As they climbed the last small hill that opened down into the small bowl that housed the village, Reyfis could hardly keep pace with the wagons. He felt as though his legs were going to ball up like clay beneath him. He was in no way used to such long walks, let alone traveling under the physical conditions he was under. The small wound in his left forelimb began to leak a slow ooze of fresh blood all along the dressing. His sides heaved in heavy panting as he half hiked and half stumbled down the hill to the edge of the village. His vision went blurry a couple times on the way down to the hide domes that made up the dwellings.

As they neared the first dwelling a huge deep gray broadwing fell in their path, "Who goes! We heard no word of a caravan, and what is wrong with this gryphon?"

Reyfis drew himself up as tall and sturdy as he could manage, "Reyfis of the Kenjaya tribe escorting masons from Chief Asmaht of the Kreestak tribe. I was asked to escort them here to construct a home for an important personage, at least to Asmaht himself. I was also to give a message to the lead trainer here."

"Follow me then," the iron gray sentry turned and headed to a large clearing in the center of all the dwellings. Reyfis wasn't sure he would survive the remainder of the trip, though some how he managed.

When they reached the training ground, the trainers were facing away from them, "Malehk, a messenger from Chief Asmaht is here with a caravan of masons. He claims to have a message for you."

"Really now? How odd of Asmaht to send masons out here, don't they work in stone?" The large trainer said as he turned to face them. Reyfis couldn't believe his eyes, it was the same young warrior who had floored him like a fledgling.

He was shocked even further when he realized who was standing next to him as his assistant, "Agrok?"

She blinked back at him, just as stunned, "Father? What the hell do you think you're doing here? I did not seek you and I will not tolerate you seeking me!"

"Please Agrok, you have it all wrong," he said quickly, "I didn't come here seeking you, I already knew if you wanted to be found I'd have known where you were. I am truly here on the business of Chief Asmaht, he sent these masons to build a home for someone and I was asked to escort them."

Malehk eyed the older warrior dubiously, "How did you come to be in the presence of Chief Asmaht if you weren't looking for Agrok? Relehn, the masons are fine and I can handle the elder. Back to your post."

"Right sir," with a nod the sentry pounced off and winged his way back to his post.

Reyfis tried to stare Malehk strait in the eye, but his kept blurring, "I came to be in his employ as a favor, so that he could rightly do me a favor in return. The Kenjaya are in trouble, we have so very few warriors left from lack of those wanting to train in the field. Grasolahn has been sending a rather large amount of hunting parties into our lands, specifically; we've taken many injuries and a few dead as of late. I was to ask of your freshest graduates to help bolster our ranks and steel ourselves against the tide of hunters. I asked our chief to seek aid, but he refuses to believe we are so bad off from 'a few hunters'."

"Agrok is my only graduate and I need her here soon to run the training when I leave," Malehk half thought and half warned, "I do have a good bunch about to graduate to patrols, they should suffice to stop hunters. We have been working on fighting those who can take down flying targets."

"That is far better than I had hoped to gain. You have my thanks and the thanks of those who won't bury skinless relatives," Reyfis smiled with relief at the aid, but his smile quickly faded as he started to sway and fell over onto his right side.

"Father!" Agrok quickly rushed to his aid as he tried to shake his head clear, "What's wrong, are you ill, are your wound bleeding too much, or infected?"

He shook his head no as Malehk helped him up, "I haven't slept or eaten since before I fought off that party that wounded me, I foolishly decided to make the journey to the chief which ended up in far more travel than I anticipated."

"Malehk bring him to the drakes dwelling," she said gently to the younger male, "I'll take care of you until you've had two good meals and a good night's rest. After that you'll need to find your way home from here."

"Is that wise? I'm not sure Saltriss would be so pleased with his presence," Malehk said with real concern as he helped Reyfis walk toward a specific dwelling.

"That is why I'm going ahead to let them know, and to burst Kahlah's bubble and tell her we need the evening meal raw tonight," Agrok replied as she trotted ahead, "Did we have any lunch left?"

"Yeah, Kahlah put it in her cold box," Malehk called to her before she ducked inside their goal, "Well, since we're alone I just wanted to say sorry for over reacting last time we met. In my own defense I had fought alongside both Agrok and Kenten, so things were already quite emotionally charged for me."

"Well I'm glad you think so," Malehk said with an odd grin, "Because my primary hangs from Tahkra's ear, making Agrok more than just my wing sister."

"Perhaps in time we'll get to know one another," Reyfis said absently as he started to get dizzy again, "sometime when I'm not so off my tier."

As they neared the door, Malehk gave one piece of advice, "I must warn you, while your presence is tolerable here, do not even mention your mate. She is not welcome even in passing mention here, you are viewed as the fool at the end of her strings after all."

Reyfis sighed softly, "I am beginning to wonder if I have not been that fool. I cannot heal this wound on my heart at all, I spend most my free time in Agrok's room. I can't help but remember the things that used to be there, the things I helped her put up or even make in some cases."

"I know I shouldn't be telling you this," Malehk spoke quietly as they neared the drake's home, "but Agrok wants to have as close to a father daughter relationship with you again. Granted, your relationship won't be as tight knit ever again. This exile has damaged her heart in a way that can never truly heal. I know what it would take for her to forgive you, but I can't tell you..."

"Good, I'd rather figure it out myself," Reyfis interrupted the younger male, "I would much rather figure it out on my own. If I manage that, no, *when* I manage that, there can be no question that I fought hard for my daughter."

Malehk gave a snort, "You know you confuse the hell out of me, you show so much wisdom in what is right by your family now. But when poor Agrok came to your door that way you played so much the fool at the unnamed ones whim. But I can still respect your struggle to be a father again."

"Doing what I did took a lot of thinking," Reyfis explained, he could feel his throat growing tight with the pain of what he had done, "*She* had worked a long time in making me believe what she said was true. We argued many a time when the girls were out on their play or business. But now, now I don't know what to believe. I can't sleep next to her any more, I see Agrok's face drain of all life and emotion again every time I close my eyes."

Malehk stopped and Reyfis was wondering what was to come next, until the young warrior spoke, "She's a heroine to the humans who take refuge here. The Rentuh and the Kreestak respect her for her bravery and her terrible loss, they even respect her natural talent at her talons. No one has shown amorous or romantic interest in her just yet, but that may change all a sudden with her new-found respect and all the

new males she will be meeting. What I'm trying to say is, all *her* reasons have been proven wrong by Agrok's own merits toward her own dreams. Perhaps it is time to discuss Agrok's return to the family with the nameless one. If she refuses, then I would say it is time to question the viability of your mateship."

"You know, I believe you are right Malehk. For the first time in my life I question my mate's heart and her care toward myself and our daughters." Reyfis admitted with a heavy sigh.

The younger male said nothing more, he simply continued the short remainder of the trip and scratched softly at the door to the drakes dwelling. It was opened by a strongly built drake, Reyfis guessed it to be a male, he looked grim but in control of his emotions. He guessed him to be the Saltriss fellow Agrok had mentioned, he looked familiar somehow. When Reyfis spotted the strange blade sitting on the tripod style stand, he realized this drake was the same one who had drawn on him the day he cast Agrok out. It was no wonder at all why the tension had been so heavy in the room that it weighed on his back and wings.

"Settle him at the table first Malehk," a new voice sang like the sweetest music from behind them. When the owner came into view he found himself a little awed by her, yes definitely a her, she was a drake of crimson markings. Her form was beautiful, even to the gryphon's eyes and she carried a faint sweet scent about her. He was not surprised when she kissed the male drake so tenderly on his lips, it made sense after all, beautiful female and a powerful and impressive male.

"Sure thing Kahlah," Malehk said in a polite tone as he guided Reyfis to a small table that was obviously only meant to serve no more than four at once.

Reyfis sat down next to the table, suddenly feeling much older than he really was. He looked around the room, there was little beyond the table and the stand for the drake's blade. A simple spice rack stood near a sleeping mat in the opposite end of the dwelling as well as a strange box with a latching door near the center of the room. The female drake moved to the box and opened it with ease, removing a platter with a decent piece of raw meat. It was a haunch of one of the leaping herbivores that swept over the plains; it looked so enticing to the hungry gryphon.

"Here," she said quickly as she set the platter before him, "It's cold, but it will help you get your strength back up. I know it's just a snack, but there will be a more proper meal this evening."

Reyfis looked at the oddly beautiful reptilian face, "Oh I am most grateful for this offering milady. I am quite aware I'm not popular about these lands, and with good reason I believe. This is far more I could have asked, and is far beyond what would have been considered decent of you and your mate."

The male drake snorted as he moved to his mate's side, "We are battle hardened, not heartless. What I do for you, I do out of respect for life and for the wonderful wing bonded child we have gained in Agrok. For the sake of introductions, I am Saltriss, and this is my mate Kahlah."

Reyfis was about to speak when Agrok came from within a side room that lay to his left as he had come in the door, "Sal, I trust you are not trying to intimidate my father, it would be oh so unkind of you toward me. Reyfis rest your wounded forelimb on the table, I wish to check the dressing."

"Saltriss and Kahlah have been most kind," Reyfis replied gently as he laid his forelimb on the table for her to examine, "I must say, I'm most glad you have parent figures about to help you cope with the times Agrok. I am eternally in their debt, and I'm very proud to hear of your stand for the refugee's. I kind of wanted to ask, I'm looking into the claims made by your mother. So far I have a lot of evidence against her claims, but I haven't asked about our home village. If they turned out to be false, or even on such a level is equal to your fame about the plains, then I would wish your permission to confront your mother about retracting the acts that were committed that fateful day."

She used a talon with precise skill to cut open the old soiled dressing on his wound, "That depends on several things father. First of all, if this is truly what you want to do should you find things not nearly as critical as *She* says. You foolish bird, you've torn it open a bit more. When you get home you are taking some time off to rest aside from emergencies."

He stared at the once shallow wound that had torn a bit deeper, though his thoughts were more on his daughter's detached tone, "I can't afford to, and we simply don't have the personnel. Even if I did keep to your edict of emergencies only, I'd still be out almost every moment of every day. To answer your condition, I do want to do so Agrok, I pray I find out I was wrong. But I must know, what are your other conditions?"

"I'm gonna have to stitch this up to help you heal better and to help keep it from ripping so easily then," her response seemed equally as detached as she began to reach into the canvas pouch that he had not noticed around her neck before. It was easy to miss since it was the same very dark shade of brown as her feathers. "As for my other conditions, one is mine. I cannot accept Tikhana as a member of the same family

as myself ever again."

Reyfis looked up at her, taking note that they seemed to have been left alone while he was looking at her work on his forelimb, "If I find that she had lied to me and worked against you, I'm not sure I could share a name with her either." As his youngest daughter laid out the salve and the healers cloths she needed, he steeled himself for the cleaning. He took in a sharp hissing breath as the first cloth dug gently into his opened flesh to take away any dust or dirt that may have been in there, "I simply can't accept a mate that would work against my own daughters so underhandedly. To find her to be doing that, would truly reveal who brings dishonor and harm to the family. But you said that this was the only one that is yours. What is this other condition?"

Agrok paused to take a few breaths, still looking at his opened flesh before she answered, "I could never come to your home, I have been exiled from the Kenjaya tribe by your chief, I'm not to be let back on your lands." She had kept her tone detached, or at least tried to. Reyfis picked up the almost inaudible waver in her voice.

"What reason could he have had to do that?" he growled deep in his chest, even as the needle she had threaded bit into his flesh for the first stitch. "He may have said it, but he also knows he can't lose me. I will not completely abandon any hope of having my daughter back, he forgets that I myself am of Hencaney stock. I have received word that my home tribe is indeed supporting Tahkra and seeking treaty with the combined Kreestak and Rentuh. I'm fairly certain they would love to have me back."

She breathed for a moment, though she did not pause in her stitching, "That is rather bold of you, I know you've spent most of your life with the Kenjaya." She ground her beak a little, an obvious sign that she was considering something. Finally after she had stitched half the long wound, she spoke softly, "I'm not sure I have the pull with the Rentuh, but I could get you in with the Kreestak if Hencaney refuses you. So you would surely have some where to go. But father, don't just use me as an excuse to leave. You must truly believe in your heart that you no longer belong there."

"If it keeps me from you, then I do not belong there Aglebug," he replied as matter of factly as he could, his vision blurring again.

Agrok reached out and helped to steady him as he wavered in his balance, her frame more sturdy and balanced than he had remembered, "You start eating and you are off to bed as soon as I finish this and you have something in your belly. I believe Kahlah is preparing foods tonight, there will be raw meat as Malehk had to tough through one prepared meal last night. I will be out with my trainee's until supper time. You'll use my bed mat until then."

"I'm sorry I used our old nickname," Reyfis sighed softly as she continued to stitch, sliding his free fore claw to grip the cold meat, "I thank you for everything though, it is far more than I deserve from you." He bit off his words by sinking his hooked beak into the cold flesh of the meal and wrenching a good bite free of the bone to gulp down.

"You have earned this much respect and care from me father," she revealed to him with a somewhat sweeter tone of voice, "I see the father I loved so dearly in there. I see where you could easily come back and take me under the wing of my daddy once again. But you must find the key to my heart yet again Reyfis Asreigh. Slowly you find bits and pieces, and now you've earned that nick name again. I can indeed handle it and remain on my path. No more talk though, eat and I'll finish up here. I want you to at least live long enough for that day to come."

He obeyed his daughter and simply tore into the light meal. As he ate she finished the stitches, giving a thin coat of healing salve and re-wrapping the wound. She stayed by his side while he finished the offered meat, and helped him to her own sleeping mat. As he finally sank to lie down sleep struck like a mantis, or perhaps a coiled snake, seizing him ruthlessly. He was conscious a mere matter of seconds, but as he fell he thought he could scarcely feel a gentle nuzzle.

* * *

Grenz sat stone still, his great gray eyes riveted on Malehk as the instructor held the whole of the class in a hard challenging stare. He was the top of this particular group, and from what his respected instructor had just told them all he was the top in all the training classes. His only rival had graduated early, but that was not the only stinging news. Agrok, the *female*, was to be their instructor while Malehk left on a political mission. The huge broad wing had rather mixed emotions about that particular arrangement. At the fore front of his thoughts and feelings was the fact that she was female, a female that defeated him. The

shame of that day was endless and weighed heavily upon his pride, he had lost control against her. He fought for real, really trying to put her down in a rage, and was taken down as easily as he had handled the other students. That also brought him to what was under the other wing, she did not back down or show an instant of hesitation. She saved him some face by treating it all as if they were simply sparing, no one but Malehk could have had any notion that he had lost it and was trying for blood. He knew he had connected a wing strike, but she took it and rolled with the blow. She was every bit the warrior as any of them in that training village, or, as Grenz would wager, the entire plain.

His eyes drifted from Malehk to the distant form of their new instructor as she made her way slowly toward the central training square. He was mildly surprised when he looked at her, she summoned none of the feelings of animosity he would have expected. Instead she brought a feeling of grudging respect and mild admiration. He knew he would always view her as a rival, but as he realized the respect he held for her as a warrior he felt a feeling of anticipation growing inside him. She was good, damned good, even Malehk admitted that she had the skills to put him down. She would naturally view things from her own point of views on what could and could not be done, and he was growing hungry for the challenge of meeting them. He entertained the idea of requesting harder expectations, just in case she already figured for body difference in size and agility. She held the keys to stopping larger foes and he wanted to absorb at least part of her secrets. If he could to that then one day he could indeed surpass her in achievement and recognition.

"Ahh, here she comes," Malehk announced without looking behind him to see Agrok's approach, "Miss Asreigh, you took a little longer than I expected, is there anything we should discuss after your first session as an instructor?"

"She's not an Asreigh, her father tossed her out!" The fresh young candidate directly behind Grenz barked quite rudely.

He whirled on the younger warrior in training, striking him with an open fore claw, taking care not to connect with his talons, "You have no right to make such comments!" Grenz spat his words at the flattened male, his victim was nothing more than a cowering mass of dark cream colored feathers with dark brown flecks all about. He was bristling and he knew it, he didn't care. This spineless lad was not going to take down his rivals pride with such a childish attack. If he would let anyone take down her pride it would only be himself, and it would be through besting her accomplishments.

Before he could even begin to ream into his victim a deep brown blur appeared between them and two deep blue eyes blazed like twin flames in his field of vision, "What in the infernal pits do you think you are doing Grenz!"

His crest fell as he stared into the face of his rival, the face of his new instructor, he growled his reply, "He has no right to make such an attack, true or not he has no right to force it down your throat. Female or not, you are our instructor, and you have proven that you are far more skilled than any of us here."

"You're right, he doesn't." She said simply, but then she took on the role of the instructor with a strength he found he admired even more, "But that is my business and my personal life, which you are not part of. I can handle myself and an unruly pupil. He would have bought himself one hell of a week under impossible expectations with grueling tests and routines. Now I can't very well do that because you have caused him pain and shame, you made him afraid in front of all his classmates. You will get back to your place and leave all disciplinary actions to those of us who are in charge of training, is that clear?"

"Yes," he replied, staring straight at her, his stance falling to one of relaxed composure and subordination.

Those hard blue eyes held him in a stern strangle hold as she pressed her authority further, "Yes what?"

His talons dug into the hard dry earth, but he knew if he wanted to complete his training he had to submit, "Yes Ma'am, it won't happen again."

She reached up a fore claw to rest it on his deep iron gray shoulder, "I appreciate the sentiment Grenz, I really do, but sometimes you have to let people fight their own battles. Now I would be willing to over look this if you would help Hankerey back to his feet and get back to your positions."

"Yes ma'am, I'll see to it right away," he clamped his beak tight on anything else he wanted to spit back at her. Rival or not, female or male, she was the instructor and he had to behave himself. As he helped the much younger male to his feet and took his own place, he couldn't help but think that Agrok looked a bit on the lovely side when she was angry.

He sat still once again, his eyes riveted on the small female as she introduced herself for the sake

of the new arrivals and to put herself in light as a trainer to her former classmates. It was a run of the mill introduction speech, with the exception of her telling her harsh facts of life, and how she will not tolerate any one trying to use it against her in any way shape or form. Then his heart began to pound and his tail flopped in excitement as she declared that she would be tough until she gauged her training style properly. As she had put it, she'd rather make competent warriors who would return than make friends who would die. He decided he was going to enjoy the new turn in his training, even if he was about near the end of it.

The rest of the afternoon was spent with her sparring every last one of them in turn to see where they stood on their training. He insisted on going first, but Malehk refused to allow that for the moral of the rest of the class. He was however in the first five to face the new instructor and he agreed whole heartedly with Malehk's reasoning when she got a hold of him. He had not a chance at matching her impossible speed and agility, it was only worse that she had a full mastery of her bodies movements. As feared as he was by the others, had he gone first no one would have had the heart to try against her. His respect for her as a warrior grew even further and his desire to meet her expectations as a trainer. He was a little disappointed that they would not have anything else to do that day as far as training, but he was pleased with the direct methods his rival showed as an instructor.

As Agrok called the end of the training day, the sun was setting and the first of the twin moons was rising already. She had made one last request of a feather from each of her pupils with their name on it so she could organize notes and personalize training expectations and focus. As the others handed in their feathers and began to clear out, Grenz decided he needed to speak with Agrok and waited around.

He hurried after her as she and Malehk made their way toward the shared dinning dwelling they used with the drakes, "Agrok, I need to speak with you and perhaps bring some things to light."

"What's on your mind?" she asked in reply, pausing right where she stood next to Malehk, who stopped as well, "If it's a rematch I'm afraid I'm far too tired and I have some things to attend to this evening as well."

"No, I understand you are exhausted and frankly if I were to beat you I'd want you at your best for it," Grenz reassured her as best he felt he could. "I just wanted to make it clear between you and I, that I am indeed your rival. I will beat you some day, and I will top your achievements. When I do, I will be greatly disappointed if you don't beat me out later on in the running to keep me fighting harder. I will not let anyone else beat you, nor will I let harm come to you. I respect you as a warrior and my current trainer. I am not, and do not wish to be your friend. However, I wish my rival to be strong and unburdened. If you need anything that I can help with, you see me about it. Last, but certainly not least, I am your rival but you can depend on me out there to watch your tail in the field. Before I leave here, I would wish to know if there is anything you want me to keep in mind."

Her brilliant blue eyes stayed locked to his gray blue eyes for a moment before she answered, "Yes, there is one thing I want you to know. Do not question me in my handling of my father, he is here and I am addressing things myself. What does exist or may come to pass in our relationship as a father and daughter is indeed our business and between us. That is all I ask of you beyond the general respect as a pupil and living being. Last of all, thank you Grenz. Thank you for making it clear on where we stand with one another and being the most kind and truthful about it."

He smiled at her, "Contrary to popular belief or what I may come off as, I'm not a bad gryphon. Just between the three of us, I'm quite the nice fellow. Just don't go telling anyone, I like my privacy."

The small female gave him a lovely smile and nodded, "Understood, if there's nothing else I've got to get all these notes done before I take the evening meal."

He nodded and started to back away, "That is all, I'll see you at tomorrow's training sessions. Rest well Agrok Asreigh of the united tribes."

As he turned he seen a thoughtful look cross her face, but he didn't linger to make sure. He had a meal to eat, feathers to groom, and rest to seek. Training would be harsh at his new instructor's desire to ensure a high survival rate. Grenz couldn't help but grin with anticipation.

* * *

Agrok heaved a huge sigh of relief as she stared at the finished stack of notes and their feather place markers. She had spent quite some time putting all her personal findings down, thanking all the powers that be that she had a good memory. She stretched as she pulled herself up off her sleeping mat,

finally allowing herself to leave her sleeping quarters. She slipped out of the drake's empty dwelling into the slightly chilled night air, frowning a little when she had seen how late it had gotten. She surely missed her share of the evening meal Kahlah had prepared, she would never hear the end of it. But as she entered the shared gathering structure, she was amazed to see every one smiling at her. They had waited for her, and the faint glow of the serving dishes told her that Kahlah had taken pains to make sure the meal was still fresh.

"You waited for me?" She asked in astonishment, "I expected to find nothing but full bellies and tired faces."

"What kind of friends and family would we be if we did that to you on your first day as an instructor?" Malehk said softly, his great green eyes showing a soft expression. "You were working hard to get your flock in order, Kahlah would not stand for you to miss out at all."

"You deserve a good meal after the day you put in sweetheart, the rest of these preening peacocks can wait for you while you finish up," Kahlah said sweetly as she began to serve out what she felt everyone should eat.

Agrok took her place next to Kahlah on the end of the rectangular table, she was quite surprised to see that Saltriss was around the corner from them on the table rather than next to Kahlah. It didn't take her long to figure out why either, Reyfis was on the far side of him with Malehk to bracket the elder gryphon with males. She would have been annoyed by Kahlah's overly protective uses of magic, using tiny gates to hand out the servings rather than moving from her side. She would have been, if not for the long scaled tail curled so lovingly and protectively about her back, much like a mothers wing over her young. With such tender care and minor sacrifice staring her strait in the eyes, Agrok could not deny that she had been adopted by the female drake as her own.

"Agrok, this is called a mage message," Kahlah's voice seemed to melt into her mind from the very air, much different than the mind speaker that had come through her home village when she was younger. "Only you can hear this. I'm twisting the flows of magic to give you and you alone my words. I know you want your father back, and Sal knows it too. He won't try to take that place, but damn it all Agrok, you are like our own to us. I'll be damned if I let anyone get to you, if you need us just come to us. And for what it's worth, I'll try to be the mother you don't seem to have had."

She could only nod in acceptance of the private message as she watched the expression on Malehk's face when Kahlah portioned out his share of the meal. He stared mournfully at the small portion of raw meat next to the large chunk of spiced and roasted plains deer. Reyfis seemed to read something in Kahlah's servings and declined any of the raw meat, which was a succulent fawn.

"I'll trust the hostess and show my respects by trying and eating the meal she has cooked this day," He said with a bit of a smile.

Agrok watched quietly as the rest of the odd little group began chatting and discussing possible returns for Reyfis and visits from Tahkra and Malehk to him. She stayed quite as Kahlah simply set the remainder of the raw meat in front of her as her meal. She knew the drake would not allow any protest or accept any thanks for the act. It didn't bother her really, she felt she had dealt with quite enough to deserve it, as petty as it was compared to what she truly needed. She was certain she'd feel guilty the next day, but for now she was too hungry to really care much. As they all ate and talked, Agrok was pleased to note that no one spoke to her unless she felt the need to add to the basic gossips of the village. She really didn't feel like talking anyhow, she was worn out, both physically and mentally. She was amused to see that her father was greatly enjoying the prepared meat, and not just to appease Kahlah either.

Agrok kept an eye on Reyfis as she tore her hooked beak into her meal. He savored every morsel of the hot well spiced meat, even the vegetables seemed to bring him great pleasure to consume. She couldn't help but giggle at Malehk's expression when Reyfis figured out the same vegetable that had given him trouble just the night before without mishap. She let her mind drift fully to her meal as Reyfis and Malehk began to discuss which of the training groups would be best to either complete their training in the field with him or even to graduate just after his return from escorting Tahkra her meeting. As she focused on the sweet and salty taste of the bloody flesh that she tore from her meal with her deceptively dainty beak, she felt a twinge of guilt that she should be in that conversation. She was simply too wore out from the day already to think about such things however, trying to give an opinion on her former classmates while still adjusting to think of them as pupils was beyond her scope at the moment. She was certain of one thing, Grenz would be torn on the situation. He was more than ready to meet combat to polish his already good skills, but she also knew he was relishing higher performance standards and tougher training regiments. All she could do was continue eating and hope the effects of Grenz's little talk would hit

Malehk.

She growled a little as she swallowed a decent beak full to help her cut into the conversation that was not coming any where near Grenz, "Sorry to interrupt Malehk, but you keep forgetting Grenz. He would love a chance to get at combat as well as meeting the training I plan to subject our pupils to. I think he would be most pleased if we could arrange some way for him to travel out for a tour of a few days while we complete his training. It would do him some good to have opponents he can really let loose on as well to grasp his full range of strength and power. I can focus on his speed and agility during training, that would make him a disastrous force against any foe."

"I like that idea," Malehk said with a nod of agreement, "He has a little aggression I'd like to see vented. As well it will make him feel like he's doing something over you in the defense of the plains. Perhaps we could even have Reyfis give him his final tests, if Agrok has high standards I think you would have high enough standards to put Grenz through."

"Wait, Agrok is training warriors now?" Reyfis asked a bit shocked, "But she could only have started training a few months ago, how could she possibly be done and of the level of an instructor?"

Saltriss gave a slight growl as he replied, "She learns rather quick, and her natural talent for combat is really quite remarkable. I warn you not to sit and disbelieve her achievements, she's already more of a fighter than you old buzzard. After I get a hold of her for training she will be a force to be reckoned with, even to the best of our enemy's fighters."

Agrok was about to cut in, but Reyfis beat her to it, "You misunderstand me, I don't doubt it for a second, I'm simply amazed. I only say that I'm proud now because you and your mate are between me and Agrok, with what I have so foolishly done, she would be well within her rights to flatten me for taking pride. Knowing a strong and skilled warrior as Malehk trusts her with his students, I have no doubt she could make short work of me too."

"You misunderstand me father," Agrok said quietly as she picked at the remaining bits of her meal, "I actually like the idea of you being proud of me, I don't want you showering me with praise and boasting about anywhere. You also speak of me as if I were a raging hot head, I am not, I still could not bring my talons against you unless it was a dire situation. As much a father as Saltriss has been to me these past few months, he will refrain from fighting my battles for me because he respects me. Am I correct?"

"Sorry feathered kin, it won't happen again," Saltriss offered his apologies with a bit of a blush, "Kahlah and I will clean up this meal mess before we go tonight, I hope you will be fine on your own Agrok?"

She turned her gaze to look her recent mentor's eyes, "What do you mean, where are you and Kahlah going?"

"We may be mostly autonomous, but we are still part of a larger force sweetheart. We have to go make our report on what we've seen here. I would have told you but we got the contact while you were working on your notes," Kahlah answered in motherly tones that Agrok found comforting in a way she herself could not understand.

"This is sudden, but I think I should be alright by myself, I'm a big girl after all," she smiled at her self-appointed mother hen, "So how long will you two be gone for? I will need Sal's help handling the trainee's until they fully respect me as an instructor."

"Well it will be for several hours that we have to give our report and answer questions, but we will be back by morning," Saltriss reassured her, "However, we will have missed an entire night's sleep so we won't be good for much until the following day. I can look mean enough though. I hope you don't mind, Kahlah and I took the liberty of arranging the plans for your new home from the masons, we felt there are certain things you should have and will need that might not be in their standard structures."

"That is fine, I do trust you to do what would be good for me," the small female gave a yawn as she spoke, "I think I should look into getting some rest though, we'll talk more on the matter when you get back. I'm fairly certain you'll be able to handle that much activity."

"I'll help you two clean up so you can be on your way and get back faster," Reyfis offered, "Perhaps you can manage a nap before anything happens here. Besides, I should make myself a spot to sleep so I can rest before my flight tomorrow."

Agrok thought for a moment then gave her father a stare of protest, "You can't sleep in here, there is no proper sleeping mat and no blankets if the night gets to be chilled. You come with me now, good night every one, I need sleep and I have to show my father where to sleep."

Kahlah nodded to Agrok as she started to rise, releasing her from her tail, "Very well kitten, you go and follow her Reyfis. Your plate is empty, you need rest, and I don't want you underfoot while I clean up. I

could find you likeable and possibly be a friend in the future, but right now your welcome rests with Agrok."

Reyfis nodded and stood to follow Agrok, "I quite understand, I'm not sure I welcome my own company either. Please lead on Agrok, I wouldn't mind a good sleep and a good early start to my return journey. I know it's gonna take a while to explain why I took off all this time."

"Come along father," Agrok nodded a goodnight to Malehk and Tahkra before she moved to hug Saltriss like a human would. After her good-nights she headed out the door of the leather walled dwelling into the cold night air. It was getting to be fall, and soon winter would be upon them. The plains were a lesson in extremes, hot in the summers and frigid in the winter. The cold night air was the only reason she knew her father was following just behind to her left, she could feel the warmth of his body radiating from that direction. She wasn't sure about what she was doing as she lead him to the dwelling she shared with the drake pair, but she needed the comfort that she remembered so long ago as a downy little one. They both stayed in an uneasy silence as she lead him inside and to her own room.

"Lay down on my sleeping mat, I'm gonna redress that wound and then we can get some rest," she ordered in a gentle, yet stern tone.

"But where am I to sleep this night?" he asked as he settled himself down on the sleeping mat, taking care of his wounded forelimb.

"You're laying on the bed you'll be sleeping in. I may be upset with you, but I'm not going to let you sleep in the dinning place until I get you a proper mat and blankets," Agrok replied as she gathered her minor healing supplies from a box near the door flap. She set the roll of gauze and salve in her neck pouch to walk back to her father's side.

He watched her as she settled beside him and began the work of removing and changing the dressing of his wound, he gave a deep sigh and spoke in quiet tones, "Agrok, about that. I wish I could take it back, I sorely do, but there is just no way I can make it right. I wish I could, I wish with all that is in me that I could turn back time and stop myself."

She felt his breathing beginning to speed up a bit and take on an irregular pattern. She wanted to lay her wing over him and comfort him, but she knew she had to let him feel the pain; it was the only way he could understand and heal. She had to let him know her pain for which she had no such comfort. But she had to make sure he didn't fall apart on her this very night, "Father, you can never make it fully right, but you can earn the place as my daddy once again. I want so badly to comfort you right now, but I can't, do you know what that feels like? To know someone you loved all your life is hurting for something they have done to you, to know that you hurt even worse and won't receive any such compassion? You have to hurt so you can understand what you did to me, so you can actually see what your decision did to our family."

She expected him to cringe, silently weep at the worst, she never expected what he did next. She had to jerk her talons away from his wound as he opened his wing and closed it on her in a comforting embrace, "I'm so sorry Agrok, I don't know what it will take, but I can't let this sleep until I have the family as intact as it can be. I won't let it rest until I find a way to earn your forgiveness, at least what amount is reasonable to hope for. I want my little Aggy back and damn it all, I want to see you fly into battle. I want to fly at your wing as you carve your name and honor in the tales of the Rentuh and Kreestak. There is nothing wrong with you Agrok, you are everything that was right with our family, I'm going to take back my declaration, but I need time to try to work on your mother. She is my mate and I love who she once was, I owe it to our past vows and bonds to at least try."

Agrok was shocked, she could not speak, she had way too much to digest in his words and the emotions they stirred up in her. She absorbed herself in the task of tending his wounded forelimb and redressing it before she finally gave her response to his bout of emotion, "I would not believe you to be my father if you did not try, I fully understand that need and obligation. I think we are started well on the road to recovery for our family. Tonight, for this night alone I honestly feel as though I have my father back. We both needed this I think, but I'm too tired for emotional events."

"I would have to agree, it has been one long and strange day, rest is very much in order. Good night sweet Agrok," her father kept his wing over her, but he did not move to give her the parental caress of an ear tuft nibble. He simply rested his head on his forelimbs and closed his eyes to seek the sleep they both needed.

"Good night, daddy," she whispered so low she herself could barely hear her own voice as she nuzzled her beak into his neck. She drifted quickly to sleep snuggled into her father just like she would when she was still a downy coated youngster.

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Reyfis woke with a tingle running through his neck, causing his neck rough to bristle. Someone was moving about the dwelling, and they were trying to be quiet. All his instincts as a warrior were all bringing his awareness to a heightened level, even against his grogginess of being awakened at the odd hour. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he realized that Agrok was missing. He debated on whether to call out for her or not, if she was out and someone else was moving about the dwelling it would be a mistake. The broadwing rose to his feet and quietly stalked his way to the door flap of the room, very cat like in his fluid like movements. His ear tufts tilted toward the door, trying to catch the tell tale sounds of the intruder and their location.

He gently poked his beak out the soft leather flap that covered the entrance to Agrok's new room, to see Agrok facing away from him, "Hello father, you have found me at something no one else knows about."

He let out the breath he didn't realize he had held and moved to her side to sit next to his daughter, "Is everything alright Agrok? I didn't hear you get up, I just had this feeling that someone was moving about the dwelling."

"This is the blade that slew Kenten," She said quietly as he followed her line of sight to see she was staring at the drake's blade, "Saltriss didn't need it for giving a report so he left it here with me. But that very day you cast me out, this blade pierced the base of Kenten's skull to end his life in an act of mercy. In a way, this is all I have left of him, for his blood stains this blade's past. I still mourn his death, every night I sit and stare at this blade. I sit and try to call out to his spirit with my heart, but I have not yet felt an answer." She gave a shuddering sigh, and Reyfis could see the faint glitter of tears in her rare blue eyes, "I miss him so much, and this would be the time that I would need him the most. Those murdering bastards took him from me just as we had realized what we meant to one another, I will fight them until the last falls. I won't let them hurt anyone else like they hurt me, no child should grow to have the fear of watching the ones they love die before their eyes. No good and honorable warrior will have to feel the weight of having to give that form of mercy."

He couldn't resist the urge to put his forelimb around her and give her shoulder a comforting squeeze, "I had no idea Agrok, words cannot begin to describe how sorry I am for what I did to you that day. But I can say you have proven stronger than anyone could have guessed. Rather than being crippled by Kenten's loss, you have gained a strong conviction and focus for your urge to defend and protect. I want to help you in that Agrok, if there is any way I can. if you will allow me to be that involved."

"I don't know what you could add to my training, Malehk has taught me all the techniques we currently have for our warriors," she replied in a detached tone, as if she were lost in another time or place inside herself. Reyfis could guess where she was, it could only be one of two places, both during her time with Kenten and she likely was alternating between the two.

"Did he go over grapple counters? Evading them and turning them to your advantage?" he asked, riding on a hunch that played on what he knew as a warrior. Most trainers had all big powerful broadwings to train, so they simply left it up to strength to break grapples rather than teaching the techniques that did exist.

"No, we didn't go over that in our training classes," she shook her head and turned her gaze to him, her eyes showed him the calculating behind them, "But even if you did try to add that to my training, you don't have nearly the time it would take to cover it all."

Reyfis gave his youngest daughter a fatherly smile, "Well, you take to training quickly, so, by my estimates, you should be able to get the basis of grapple breaking down if we were to head out to a quiet place and go over it now. We're both awake for the moment and could likely use to be tired out again. Besides, it will also give me a chance to spar with you to see what you can do, and you'll get a chance to see if you can slap your old father around a bit."

She reached up and touched a talon to the tip of his beak to quiet him, "I do not wish to slap you around, but I am more than willing to accept what you can add to my training. I will accept the sparring match as well, just so we understand one another as warriors. Think of it as a gift, you'll get to see me in action first hand. I know where we can do this."

He nodded and followed his young daughter out into the chill night air. It was late, near midnight by the position of the twin moons, and it would be later before they returned to bed. They had a few hours

of things to work out, and there was the matter of sparring with her to see what she knew. Part of him was nervous about that. He had heard from the female drake, Kahlah, that Agrok was every bit a match, if not more dangerous than the young male who throttled him so easily. That was not what had him nervous, however, she was still angry with him in a place she kept closed away. Everything he knew told him that it was smoldering, and entering combat, even at the level of sparring, just might put him at the mercy of a fighter who was rumored to be far his superior. He did know, however, that she was his daughter and she had stated that she had no wish to hurt him. The elder male was still not sure if that was the one thing that kept him moving behind his daughter as she led him through the tiny village and out into the long grass of the surrounding plains.

Agrok stopped abruptly and stared off at something in her own mind, or perhaps she was listening to something. "Just ahead is a clearing. Are you sure this is what you wish to do father? I know you prided yourself as a warrior when I was not yet fledged, if I were to beat you to badly here and now, what would it do to you?"

She turned and faced him, her blue eyes boring into his heart as he reached for some kind of reply. "Well, it would sting a bit to be beaten by the little one I used to wrestle with so long ago, but I do believe I could take pride in knowing that my daughter has become such a strong warrior."

She stared at him for a long moment before she leaped into the air without warning, far swifter than he could have done, or reacted to, and propelled herself backwards with one quick wing thrust, "You already make mistakes old bird, I am not strong, I am fast."

Reyfis shook himself out of his awe struck stupor and pressed forward, only to find himself in a clearing that had been covered over with sand in a perfect sparring ring. Agrok was in a crouching stance at the far side, the skid marks where she had landed were the only sign of her arrival in the ring. He stalked out into the ring and took a place opposite of her, he didn't bother with a stance, he was expecting a speed fighter to be reactive. When her claws, all four sets, struck his beak in one blinding strike he realized how wrong he had been. He tried to recover from the shocking blow by grabbing her. Already he had underestimated her tactics and abilities; this was going to be one hell of a match for him. She had fully sprang off his beak, and broke his balance. He knew she was coming back, and likely quicker than he could react to. He had to get a stance up to face her from. It appeared she had leaped too far off, for he was able to get his stance up. But as he looked across the ring at her, she was right back where she started in her opening stance. He waited a moment after regaining his balance and taking his own stance, but she didn't make a move. Her message was clear in the solid planting of her feet and foreclaws. It was his turn.

Reyfis hesitated a moment; her display made him question his own skills. He was by no means a weak fighter. In fact, he was almost as well known as Malehk. Before he could react, she had struck him in the most easily guarded place on his body. However, he was still game; so he lunged into a charge and tried to bear down on her before she could scamper away. Agrok did not try to evade him, much to his surprise. Instead, she met him head on and put her foreclaws up in his as she threw herself backwards. Reyfis thought she had made a fatal mistake, until he felt her hind paws connect just below his keel bone, thrusting him over her with his own momentum. He landed hard just beyond her head, crumbling into a mass of feathers and limbs as Agrok rolled away to her right. Reyfis couldn't tell which way that was in reference to himself; the impact with the ground had him mildly dazed. He did notice that Agrok had failed to capitalize on his crumpled state and disorientation. When the elder male made it to his feet, he caught sight of his daughter, taking another defensive position. She was keeping herself well covered. Such a tactic was normally only seen in those who were about half trained; they often believed their elders always had some sort of trick under their wings. Reyfis couldn't help but question the completion of her training with such a habit.

He read her body again, she was not about to move. However, he was not a fool to fall for the same trick twice. Instead of rising to her bait and attacking, he braced to take whatever she would eventually throw at him. Her patience was great though; it took a long moment before she made her move. Again, she took him by surprise by simply walking up to him. Even in his surprise, he didn't let his guard down for a moment. She had already proven crafty and this was no exception. Agrok made a low swipe at his forelimbs, causing him to react by rearing up a bit to avoid her outstretched talons. It proved to be a feint as she bunched her legs and sprang up at him with a wing strike square in his chest, with one graceful movement. He toppled over quite easily with his balance being offset by the dodge he had been performing. He recovered quickly, but this time the young female pressed the attack and met him with a flurry of talon strikes. It was all the elder male could do to block and parry her attacks as she laid into him.

Reyfis thought he had a chance at gaining the upper hand for a brief moment. Her foreclaw hit the inside of his and he wasted no time in trying to grasp it. Those hopes were quickly shattered when Agrok shoved herself off his foreclaw to roll away from him. She landed in a loose stance before she sat down and smiled at him.

"Excellent warm up old bird, now are you ready to get this match going?" The smaller female asked casually.

"Warm up? That display was just a warm up?" He could not believe his ears or his eyes; she had not even began to pant after all those high energy moves. It only reminded the elder male of how much energy he had burned trying to counter her already. His sides heaved as his mind raced through everything he knew about combat, but he could find nothing to give him an edge for what was about to come if her words rang true. If that had really been a warm up he was in serious trouble against her. "Might as well get this over with then. I'll try to give you all I have."

Agrok nodded and moved into a full on charge without hesitation. The move seemed simple enough, and all he had to do was judge her commitment at the right moment to meet her in the attack. Reyfis began to believe he had a chance after all against this impossibly fast fighter. As he read her commitment to a right side attack and reacted to meet her, his hopes were dashed in one graceful display of speed and agility. Agrok did not move one of the three ways he knew she would be moving, quite the contrary she moved a fourth direction. As he struck where she should have been the young female jumped strait backwards and set herself up right at his defenseless side and belly. She wasted no time, and before he even finished falling on his back in a wasted attack, she made the mock strike that would have spilled his entrails on the sand.

"Does that satisfy your wish to spar?" she asked him calmly. He knew she had only toyed with him and still had "killed" him with as much ease as he would have taken a tender fawn. All he could do was sit there and stare at her for a moment as the blue light of the full-moon mingled with the dim violet on her crisp healthy coat.

"Are you really the little girl who wanted to be just like her father when she grew up?" Reyfis could not believe what had just happened, he had expected to lose. But he never imagined she would take him so easily that he offered no fight at all to her.

"No I'm not, I'm the adult who used to be her fifteen years ago," the young female replied, "I do believe you owe me your half of the deal old bird. Those grapple counters and evasion techniques would be quite handy in the unlikely event someone does lay a hand on me."

He nodded and stepped over to her, "Right, first to break out of a grapple we have to put you in one so you can see what twists and tiny motions can offset the hold."

The night went on in the same mechanical motions of training and practicing that he remembered from his days in training. During the course he held her in holds he though he never would use on his own daughters, and she broke them with ease, even under his far greater strength. She really did learn fast, and he was amazed that he had taught her more than a quarter of what he knew in those two short hours.

"That is enough for tonight father, I am growing quite tired now," Agrok announced as he moved to place another hold on her.

Reyfis gave her a nod and settled himself down to sit next to her, "You really do learn as fast as they say Agrok. We've covered weeks of training in a few short hours."

She stood and started to walk away, "Yes I know, Saltriss says it is almost like I was meant to be a fighter and merely had to awaken the knowledge. Kahlah says it is just because I'm doing what is in my heart now."

Reyfis watched her for a moment, taking in how she moved and carried herself. She was beautiful, sleek, powerful, and elegant in every way possible. He felt his heart shatter as he realized she was the perfect daughter only to be matched by her beautiful and intelligent sister. Her image blurred as tears of sorrow for what he had done to her filled his eyes. He had always been strong, but now he was crumbling under his own foolishness.

"Father, what is wrong?" he heard the voice before he felt the dainty fighting claws press against his shoulders to hold him up.

Agrok's face came back into focus as he let his sorrow for what he caused her spill from his beak, "Oh Agrok, you are just perfect. A father could ask for no better daughter; so strong, confident, brave, beautiful, kind, and just perfect. You did nothing but what I've always taught you, and I repaid you by tossing you out by the word of your mother. How could I ever have been so foolish? I'm so sorry my little huntress, you were not what was wrong with the family, it was your mother."

She held him up, but she did not hold him in a comforting embrace, "I cannot comfort you father, as much as my heart yearns for it I cannot. You need to feel this pain and know it, only then can you truly begin to fix what wound you left on my heart."

He shook his head in understanding, "I know Agrok, but I must take it all back. You are not cast out from this family. You and Tahkra are my family, and what your mother must prove is if she is part of that family as well, or if she wishes to leave us."

"Daddy, until things are settled in my heart and with Tikhana, know that I can't think of you as the daddy I knew growing up," Agrok whispered softly, "But I do love you as my daddy even as I heal."

"I love you too Agrok, my dear daughter," He resisted the urge to embrace her, he knew that if she had wanted him to she would have already done so herself. "Let's get back inside to that warm bed mat and finish resting for the night shall we?"

She nodded and led him back into the tall grass to seek the warmth of the dwelling Agrok shared with the drakes. They both knew that they also sought the warmth of the first thread of re-bonding between father and daughter.

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Tahkra let her throat and chest rumble softly with her purrs of peace and affection as Malehk preened her crest and neck. They had such a long and wonderful journey together, and this same situation had come about many times before. The outcome would be vastly different this day however, this preening was to ready her for the meeting with the chiefs of the Elrahn and Hiesktan tribes. She herself had already tended Malehk's plumage under his half hearted protests. He felt it was more important to clean her up for this, but they both knew neither would ever deny a chance for affectionate attentions and caresses from the other.

"There you go my taloned angel, all groomed and ready to impress The Great Consorts themselves," Malehk whispered into her ear as he nuzzled his beak into the feathers just behind the feathered tuft.

She purred softly and reached up a foreclaw to rest it on his beak, "Mmm.. thank you my wonderful warrior. Hopefully we will have plenty to celebrate and get to muss up all this grooming we have spent all this time on."

"Now that would be a pleasant way to end this day I would think. But we would have to get back as soon as we could to see that Agrok isn't left too long trying to train the young warriors," the large male purred to her in reply as he pressed close to her, being very mindful of her grooming.

A shadow crossed their door and the sound of a throat clearing announced the arrival of Krinzehl, "Lady Asreigh, Malehk, it is time to meet with the chiefs of the Elrahn and Hiesktan tribes. I do not believe they wish to be kept waiting, as much as I would relish in making them do so."

Tahkra tried not to giggle at the elder female's acidic remark as she had been subjected to the warlike chiefs the entire time of the grooming, "Very well Krinzehl, we are coming out now to join them."

Malehk opened the flap of the hide shelter to let Tahkra out into the amused stare of the mage, "You owe me for this one little girl, although I could consider the debt paid if you were to head back in there and paw all over one another so I could bring that cause for delay back to those prudes."

"Oh no, we need to get this done and I'm afraid we may have a long night ahead of us with these two hot heads. I will make it up to you somehow when we get back," she gave a look of apology to the pale yellow eyes of the black feathered falcon based female.

Krinzehl only snorted in response and fell in to her place at Tahkra's right, while Malehk walked at her left. She blushed ever so lightly at her nares as she felt like a bright precious bauble between her two dark feathered guardians. Part of her wondered if that was why Malehk had picked Krinzehl, to make such an impression, but she knew better. Malehk was a being of strength and efficiency, images meant nothing to him in strategic choices and she knew that. Krinzehl was there because aside from Kahlah she was the best mage they had access to. When they came into the presence of the two warrior chiefs Tahkra was rather grateful that she was there. For the two chiefs were rather large broadwings who showed their trials of combat in several scars on their bodies. The big brown fellow on the left with white wing markings even had a scar over his left eye, the orb it's self was white and dead behind those scarred lids. Tahkra presumed him to be Chief Reltuh of the Elrahn tribe. The one on the right was a handsome fellow who only showed a

bit of scarring over his forelimbs, not a single blemish marred his pristine tan coat.

Seeing the second chief told her exactly which chief was which for she had seen him before, so she bowed to each in turn as she made her greeting, "Chief Reltuh, Chief Erneze, I am so glad you had me here today to present my offer and ideals to you. You have been most hospitable to myself and my escorts."

"Enough with the niceness girl, what is it you wished to speak to us about Kenjaya?" the big half blind chief growled.

Tahkra fought the urge to shrink back from him, she needed to appear strong to them, she knew that much, "I have come to do nothing more than respectfully request your presence at a meeting of all the tribes chiefs, there are things happening that affect the entire plain. We the gryphons of the Titanian plains need to make a large decision with what I have seen looming on the horizon."

"What could possibly be looming over the next cloud that we, the combined tribes of the Elrahn and Hiesktan, cannot handle together? Surely you cannot be speaking of Grasoahn," the huge maimed male nearly roared at her, although Chief Erneze was unusually quiet.

"The fool is he who assumes a foe he has not yet seen, warrior," Malehk intervened to add his knowledge to the conversation, "There is a new foe moving through the human nations, they crushed Kedrahn in a mere eight hours. I fought their ranks myself to expel them from the plains, and I lost my dearest friend and brother in arms to them. They are cruel, ruthless, and cunning foes. You would do good to hear what Lady Asreigh has to say."

"And what of it if some foe is crushing the humans? They have done nothing but try to slaughter our own people. Let them taste the steel for once!" the huge broadwing spat back at Malehk, "We would never aid the humans, nor would we ever aid those who do so."

"Then I must sadly say we can no longer aid one another brother clan," Erneze spoke in a soft richly resonate voice, "For we already harbor refugees from the wars raging in Bekraut, Lady Asreigh, I will attend your meeting and hear your words."

"What? We have stood together for centuries and never lost ground to the human scum!" Reltuh roared in anger at the entire gathering, "What could you possibly offer that could give us more than that? What could be worth breaking this tradition that has kept that keep over the ridge there from wiping us all out?"

The half blind male pointed behind him to the ridge and as they all followed his aim, Malehk had to ask the obvious, "You mean where the smoke is rising in a thick black torrent?"

"What?" Reltuh and Erneze turned in unison just as the fleeing peoples crested the ridge, clearly visible to the gryphons keen eyesight.

As the two chiefs focused in the humans atop the ridge all fell seemingly from nowhere, but as they tumbled it was clear their bodies were pierced with arrows of an unknown fletching. Black feathers bore red speckles on the rears of the arrows as they cut down the fleeing humans. Tahkra's heart plummeted as she realized none of the fleeing people wore any armor or weapons, these once again were non-fighters being butchered. Before the archers even crested the ridge Krinzehl was already casting her spell.

"Damnation! All warriors up to repel the invaders, the fighting ones, these people can be run off once they are gone!" The half blind male began issuing orders that both tribes warriors were quick to follow.

Krinzehl released her spell, an arching bolt of lightning that struck the first few archers as they crested the ridge. The spell jumped from body to body, making them dance in a violent burning dance of death. Much to Tahkra's horror a woman took her eyes off the ridge to stare pleadingly at the gryphons and scream for help, losing her footing and tumbling down the ridge. Her broken body came to rest in the camp that was situated right at the base of the mountain. Another hail of arrows cut down the remaining humans on the ridge, save for one small boy climbing desperately from under his mother. The archers did not see the gryphons who had gone aloft in time to reload and send a volley their way, they were too absorbed in their kills. Before most could reload the gryphons fell upon them and shredded the butchers in a display of ruthlessly efficient killing techniques. The small boy made it down the ridge just before Reltuh only moments before the final arrow that was loosed pierced his tiny body. Tahkra was not sure, but she suspected the spot to be about the liver on a human. It was to be a slow painfully frightening death for the little one.

The half blind male caught the falling child and held him in his huge foreclaws, a grim and sympathetic look in his living eye, "I got you lad. Be brave now, and tell me your name, I'm Reltuh."

Tahkra latched herself on to Malehk as she could not bear to watch the slow death of such an innocent being. She buried her eyes in his feathered shoulder as he held her to comfort her.

"H..hello mistew gwiffin. I..I'm Jacob," Jacob sobbed in pain and fear as he surely felt the life draining from him.

"Jacob I can't lie to you, we don't have the healers to fix you, they are all way too far away. What I can do is stay here with you, so you don't have to be so alone and scared when this is done. Soon the pain will go away and you will be able to be with your mommy and daddy again. And you can tell them you got to touch a real live gryphon before you came to them," the previously aggressive male was unusually soothing toward the poor dying child.

Tahkra spent what seemed like an eternity listening to the warrior chief talking to and soothing the child as she sobbed silently into Malehk's shoulder. It was too much, these monsters that were doing this needed to be stopped, and she believed the tribes together could do it, if only they would band together.

"Lady Asreigh?" her own name coming from the throat of that big male brought her to look back at him, "I can already suspect what your meeting is about, but I wish to hear it from your own beak."

Tahkra stared at the limp body of the boy in those big trembling foreclaws and sniffled to get herself back under control, "I wish to unify the tribes, because I believe we have the strength to do so, your two tribes have been so strong, imagine what all the tribes would be like to face."

Reltuh's voice caught for a moment, "This is intolerable, the blood of a child, even a human child, should never be spilled on any lands, or on the talons of any chief. Yet he blood of this child flows over mine. Tell me Lady Asreigh, if we unite and become one nation, will we stop the bastards that did this?"

Tahkra nodded silently for a moment before giving her vehement reply, "They will fall before the might of the tribes of Titania when we band together as a whole"

"Then when you have your meeting I will be there, and I will be the loudest voice in your favor. Let them fall before the might of Titania, so this may never happen again," the grim look that he locked her with touched even his dead eye, "I must atone for being the fool this day at the cost of these people's lives."

Tahkra nodded as the one word echoed in her mind.... *Titania*.