

Chapter 3. Of Rivals and Rio

"So, Malehk said you needed to talk to someone." Kahlah turned from her unopened bundle to face the newly arrived Tahkra, "I am willing to listen, but I may be delayed at times. I am about to work some very strong magics on this item. I will need your opinion on it as well, since it is for Agrok."

The female drake began to untie her bundle as the younger female gryphon crossed the main room of the dwelling the drake pair shared. Kahlah was rather excited about her gift she was enchanting to be a splendid artifact. She was joined by the young gryphoness as they both stared at the item.

"Oh my, she is going to love this. I don't recognize this material though; It doesn't look like something we would find here on the plains," Tahkrah observed as she stared into the bundle, forgetting her troubles for the merest of moments before she looked back to the drake. "So what are you putting on it, something incredibly powerful?"

Kahlah shook her head, "Not so much, just a few practical enchantments to make sure it stays in this beautiful order and a little something extra I think it needs. Speaking of needs, I do believe you needed to talk, did you not?"

"Yes, there was another attack while Malehk and I were at the meeting with the Heikstan and Elraun chiefs," Tahkra began slowly, as though she were fighting herself to push the news out.

"Chieftains, dear, and yes we know about the attack. Malehk gave us a military report," the elder drake gently informed her young companion.

"What do you mean chieftain? I've never heard that word before. Then again I do not spend much time around humans," Tahkra said with a touch of confusion in her voice as she visibly fought the urge to touch the item into which Kahlah would soon be working her spells. "There's more to all that, and that is what is plaguing my mind. Chief Reltuh was vehemently against joining with any other tribes, but he was swayed in a matter of seconds by the death of a human child. What confuses me even more about it all is that he was ready to condemn the entire nation, woman and children as well, to the blades and bows of this unseen enemy. Yet when he held that child and talked him into a much calmer and less terrifying death, it seemed to reach something deep inside him and turn it around completely. Hardened warriors like Reltuh just do not change so easily, especially with something they are jaded to like death and bloodshed."

Kahlah nodded gently as she focused on her spell for a moment, letting her thoughts sort out as she wove the strands of energy in patterns that would have been the envy of any spider or master weaver, "Well it does make some sense to me. I have been around a lot of hardened warriors all my life, and I do understand them a bit better than most. What I can tell you is that in many cases there is something behind every hard face and stone heart that made them weak and forced the need to be as strong and dethatched as they are. This does however, leave them with a real weak point that can crush or completely turn them around. Likely something to do with children in general is what caused this fellow to become what he is. Something about the situation or possibly just the child himself may have struck a tender moment in his past. Whatever it is, by Malehk's report, it seems to have sparked hope and turned an obstacle into an ally. I must say though, these revelations about your language do warrant my looking closer at your dialect when you all speak around me."

The drake cocked a brow as she began setting the first enchantment, finding it easier to endure the giggles of her young companion. "Well I certainly don't mind if you hang on every last one of my words, maybe then someone else can tell me when they are foolish. I find I cannot figure out a single chief's actions, yet everyone seems to be pushing me to the head of all this political shepherding. I even have the chiefs who already joined forces looking to me as though I were some kind of... of... "

Kahlah smiled as she had to abort her second spell, "My smile is genuine Tahkrah, it really is. I love having you here to talk with me. You are interrupting me now with things you should be blessing instead of praising your gods for their deliverance. I am sorry to rush you along, but time dwindles and I need this to be ready for Agrok before Sal gets a hold of her and Grenz."

"Yes, you are indeed right scaled mother. I should be thanking all the powers that be that I have such an ally as Reltuh." Tahkra smiled that lovely, beak-gaping smile of hers and started to back toward the door. "Anything I can do to help you get this done? I want to help at least a little in return for your listening to my rambling about good things."

Kahlah held her concentration as she worked the particular tricky weaving, nearly to the point of setting the spell as her long, graceful tail undulated with her hard mental efforts. "Actually there is one thing you can do to help

ease my mind. Go find Agrok and Grenz; have them wait in the dining dwelling. It will save us time in getting them briefed. I can't tell you why, but time is of the essence, sweetheart."

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Agrok sat nervously beside Grenz, anxious to find out why they had both been summoned by Saltriss and Kahlah. It was common enough for the drake to summon her at varied hours of the day and night for their training sessions, but to have Grenz present was something she had never expected to see. Whatever reason the drakes had for calling them both here was beyond her at that moment.

"So, you have anything to add to this confusing silence to help understand why we are sitting in the dwelling that you eat in?" Grenz asked in a low rumbling whisper.

Agrok shook her head, "No, I was about to ask you the same question. Now this has me truly at odds with what I know of Saltriss' habits. There seems to be no conceivable reason for us to be here."

"Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that you both are the first graduates of Malehk's modified training program and we have a need for your currently unique skills," Saltriss suggested as he stepped into the open dwelling door, that blade that was stained with Kenten's blood resting on his back in its sheath. "We managed to get you birds a little help in the form of a healer, unfortunately the punch gate landed that healer directly in the hands of the Soul Legion. We need her back, and we need there to be no witnesses to who saved her."

Grenz tilted his head a bit, a slight grin threatening at the corner of his beak as he fought to control his elation at the prospects of real action. "But why not send a force and simply overwhelm those who hold the captive? Surely we could sneak enough in fast enough and get out before they know what happened."

"No," Agrok replied for the drake, some understanding starting to come to her as some of the tactical training was starting to shine a little light on the mystery, "They want us to do a little side trip while we are there, hit a mark, neutralize something, then get the healer out. Sort of one stop interference, am I right oh grumpy lizard who trains me?"

Saltriss smiled at her, that approving smile of a fatherly instructor that filled the gryphoness with such pride and warmth. "Yes my young student, general Zetriss is in there, and we suspect the healer will be with him. It is well known that he has lusted and pined over her for some time, and this opportunity is too prime for his obsessed mind not to seize. Luck would have it that some of the masons that are building your new dwelling happened to work on repairing and maintaining the very keep you will be invading. We have some idea of what you'll need to do to get inside. From the sounds of things, Agrok should be able to get over the wall without raising the alarm by only killing one sentry on landing. There is a tower that obscures most views toward the northern sky for nearly all the sentry posts."

The drake unrolled a map of the keep and indicated the tower and angle of the dive she would have to make as Agrok knitted her brows. "But why would they not protect so well against an aerial attack? It leaves them so vulnerable to a gryphon or drake landing right on that lone sentry before he can even utter a sound or nock an arrow."

"They had no need to, and neither does this new enemy," Grenz observed, "At least as far as they know, there are no winged military personnel out and about this world. Well up until now they have been right, no tribe would have dreamed of attacking a human keep, and this new enemy has no notion that we even exist out here. Neither have a viable reason to be concerned with an aerial assault as far as they know."

Kahlah joined the trio as Saltriss continued his briefing, a bundle held to her chest as the male emphasized his words with points and taps on the diagrams of the keep, "Once she's in, Agrok will let you in through this gate here Grenz, it's hidden in a shadow at about half till midnight. Once you are inside take to the halls as quickly as you can, there should be a door on the tower that leads into the halls of the keep. These humans were smart; they did not put the Lord's quarters in some easily attacked tower. You'll find them under ground in the lowest floor."

"I have already scryed and confirmed, your targets are in there regularly as well as the third part of your mission," Kahlah supplied her findings without request.

Saltriss nodded gently, "Yes the third part as well, the communication crystal used to contact other generals and any patrolling units for reinforcements. That is your third part; we need it destroyed along with this general. Once you do that, retrieve the healer and get her out of there and into friendly territory before you assess her condition. Above all else, there must be no witnesses as to what did all this killing and prisoner retrieval. The last thing your people need is to be found out and have the Soul Legion pouring onto the plains in force."

Grenz nodded as Agrok stared at the maps and charts that Saltriss had strewn about the table. "So the forces of this GahlByrn fellow call themselves the Soul Legion, then? Quite appropriate given the abilities of their master. So when do we set out, old friend, and what supplies will we be taking?"

The drake warrior gave a slight smirk, "As soon as you finish this briefing, and you'll be taking your claws and wits. You are both hunters, so taking food is not needed, and our maps show there is water enough on your route to give you plenty to drink. So, as soon as you look me in the face and tell me you accept this mission you are officially on it."

"Not quite, love," Kahlah interrupted her mate as she presented her bundle to Agrok, "Take this sweetheart, I had it made just for you. It should help keep you safe out there in the field."

Agrok reached out her foreclaws to accept the bundle of paper and string, finding it to weigh a bit more than she expected. The young gryphon warrior set the bundle down on the table that held the maps and charts she and her newly appointed partner had to memorize. She worked the paper wrapping away carefully with her talons to reveal a stunning sight indeed. There in the package staring back at her was the most beautiful harness she had ever imagined. Made of thick solid straps of leather like any other harness, this work of art was tooled to look as though it were made of many, many smaller strips braided together. The leathers were tanned to just the right finish that they were noticeable against her feathers, but not so much so that they drew away from her natural form. The rivets caught her eye far more than anything else, however. The bright metal that shined at her could only have been silver.

"It's ... it's just simply stunning, scaled mother, but is it wise to make something meant for battle with such fine design and precious metals? Would not standard steel and heavy leather been more appropriate?" Agrok asked breathlessly as she picked up the precious harness.

Kahlah smiled and drew a talon across the beautifully tooled and finished leather, "We took care of all that. Those are not silver rivets, but a very similar and much, much stronger metal, Kezsherite. Now watch and learn about the leather."

The younger female watched in amazement and gasped as the dreadful scar healed before her eyes, "It heals any damage it takes? That is simply astounding work, scaled mother. But surely you have not wasted too much effort on me. I feel such a wondrous work of art and magic is far too good for a wetwing like me."

"You are the daughter I could never have," Kahlah huffed softly, "You are worth all this effort you have seen and more. I cast the spells myself. They are not the absolute strongest, but they are rather solid. I have added a spell that acts as a lightning rod for any mind altering or controlling spells. The enchantment channels and forces it to target the ground instead of you, so even stronger mages can't power a spell through. I have given you a bit of protection from other harmful spells as well, however that protection still relies on your action. Since there is a whole rank above my own in mage craft, rather than try to counter spells coming at you, the enchantment slows them. It is not enough to give you a lot of time to think of how to avoid the spell, but it does buy you a few seconds to react as though you were dealing with a physical attack."

Grenz gave an amused snort, "If you give Agrok a few seconds to react, she'll have time for a cup of tea and a snack. Speedy little tail flicker."

Agrok's nares burned with her blush as she shook her head, "Oh no, I am nowhere near attractive enough to be a tailflicker."

"Well, I'd imagine you would have the fellas crowding you after a workout. Are you sure you can get a private soak all alone?" her new partner nudged her with a wing as Kahlah gave him the dangerous look of a suspicious mother.

"What is a tailflicker?" Kahlah asked with a smooth, dangerously sweet tone.

Agrok quickly intervened to save her partner and rival, "Be gentle, scaled mother, it was just a jibe between comrades in arms."

Kahlah turned her hard gaze upon the younger female only to have it soften quickly, "But what does it mean sweetheart? I am confused by some of your terms and cultural quirks."

"When a female gets herself worked up and needy, she flicks the base of her tail to show off her bits and waft her scent," Grenz explained with a smile, quite rare on his beak, "She advertises her hunger for a mate. A tail flicker is a gal who is more often seen from behind performing that action."

"So, a whore," Saltriss said flatly.

Grenz shook his head, "Oh no, whores are paid. Hopping on her back is all the payment a real tailflicker needs or even wants."

The drake warrior just shook his head as Kahlah drew her lips to a thin line along her muzzle, "Grenz, you are dismissed to gather whatever supplies you want to add to my kit of nothing. Kahlah will pack for Agrok, she knows enough about her and about warriors to pack accordingly. Agrok, you wait here, there is something I need you to do before you go."

"Bah! You're just trying to empower her by making the male do all the female work while she chats it up with the lead talons," Grenz gave a good natured protest.

"Oh no! You call my little starling a tailflicker and you expect to get away with more?" Kahlah scolded the

big male as she pushed him towards the exit, "You better cool your paws or I will show you an empowered female all right!"

Agrok watched Grenz disappear into the gathered trainees before she turned back to Saltriss, "Sal, what is it that you would have me do that cannot wait until I return? I should be gathering my supplies, not Kahlah."

The drake smiled and gave her a kiss on the cheek, "I have to go help Malehk. You'll know what I need you to do when it happens. For now, you should familiarize yourself with the maps and commit them to memory. Forming a plan of attack would be an excellent idea as well."

Agrok only nodded in reply before the drake left to find his young partner. Left to herself, the young gryphoness tried to calm her nervous stomach by studying the maps of her impending journey. She picked up her new harness and clutched it to her chest while she tried to map out the fastest route to the keep in her mind. Even in her distracted state her conditioning left her more than alert enough to hear the new arrival in the common dwelling behind her.

"Hey Grenz, I'm having a little trouble finding good enough cover for your bulk without taking painfully long detours. Come take a look and help me you lummo," Agrok called over her shoulder.

"I'm not this Grenz, who ever that is, but I can certainly take a look and help you plot a course," the voice was male, and very familiar to her, but it was one she never expected to hear.

"Father?" the young warrior whirled to find her brown and white elder staring at her with a proud little grin parting his beak, "What are you doing here?"

"Saltriss asked me to come. He told me that you had a real mission to perform. He said it was important that we talk before you go," Reyfis explained gently as he stepped further into the dwelling that was doubling as a command tent at the moment.

"Well you are more experienced than Grenz, you'll do," Agrok handed her father the new harness and turned around to sit down, "Help me into this please? I have to look through these maps."

Reyfis gave a nod and lay the harness on his daughter's back to begin pulling the straps into place, "So what are you working on Agrok? My word, this is a nice harness indeed!"

"Kahlah had it made for me and enchanted it herself," she said absently while she continued to go over the maps and charts, "Cursed landscape! How are we going to get through to the place without raising alarm or risking our target?"

"Problem with the travel plans?" her father asked gently as he made short work of tightening her harness. The elder warrior's experience with the protective equipment shined through quite well.

"There seems to be no safe way to the keep from what I can see, not without swinging into heavier patrolled areas," Agrok shook her head as her father took to her side and examined the maps, "Maybe you can see something I have not; you are far more experienced than I am. I would be grateful to you."

"Well now, let's have a look then," Reyfis scanned the map carefully for a moment before he gave a grin. "Agrok my dear daughter, you have a prime path right before you. Simply follow the river, keep to the east and hold it in sight over the forest. That will lead you safely within a league of the keep in question."

Agrok tapped the map at a cut out clearing of farmland and the village it supported, right in the path her father had chosen, "This village is directly along that route, anyone there will see us for certain. We need to get there undetected by the enemy. Going on this route will have us seen with no trouble by this village."

"Ahh my dear daughter, you assume that the people in that village would be sympathetic to their conquerors?" the elder male replied with a cool and soothing tone that could only come from a kind tutor, "I cannot begin to fathom why they would be and they are too far away to raise an effective alarm before you reach the keep."

She felt her nares burn as her assumptions were laid before her, "You are right, we may find aide with the people there, or perhaps talk them into heading into our lands to seek refuge. If we make them move, that will be seen by the keep, however."

"Yes, but it will take a large enough force to go and try to take back the villagers. They can easily make it close enough for us to cut down their pursuers, as well as reducing the number of personnel in the keep. Less you have to deal with," Reyfis beamed with pride as the tactics started to sink in to his daughter.

Agrok was grateful to her father for the advice he shared, but she also felt a twinge of guilt, "Father, I thank you so very much for your advice and the sharing of your experience. I can't understand why you would after I have not yet forgiven you. I hope this is a genuine sharing of knowledge between an elder warrior and a wetwing."

"No, Agrok, this is a father sharing with his daughter," the large male replied with a soft shake of his head, "No matter if you forgive me, or if I truly felt the need to cast you out deep inside my heart, you are my daughter. Nothing can ever change that. I will always feel pride and share what knowledge I have with you. It doesn't matter how you or I feel; this is the truth of our blood and I can never walk out on my duty as your father. My heart could never let me neglect teaching you what I can, even if it makes you hate me. I sit here and I can't help that pride, joy,

and fear. My daughter, my blood, sits so beautiful and strong. You are the essence of confidence and competence, ready to take on an unknown threat for more than just our people. You are becoming something this foe can strike at as well. I feel a father's pride, and a father's fear. I love you Agrok, I always will, but you are not my little girl any more. You have become this grown female with skills and strengths that exceed my own. I threw my little girl out, and now she has become an adult while we were apart. Even if you forgive me, I will never have my sweet little Aggy back. No, from now on, I must address you as Agrok, as an equal."

She couldn't hold it back, she had to throw her forelimbs around her father and hold him in a tight hug around the neck, "I want to be your little girl again daddy; I really do. You are so close to it, but I can't take back Tikhana. Surely you understand why? I am so nervous and scared of what might happen on this mission, and I just want my daddy to tell me it's alright. But he can't, because she stands between us still."

"Agrok," Reyfis spoke softly as he held her tight in a fatherly embrace, "I am leaving Tikhana, as soon as the Hencany negotiate my return, or simply open up their numbers to accept me back, I am leaving her behind. I discovered the source of all the chatter about you, and it was her and the Kenjaya chief. I won't stand for it, and I won't help them if I do not have to. You just do me one favor and return from this Agrok. Please?"

The young female gave a gentle nod and let go of her father, "I will do all I can to return alive and successful. I promise you that, daddy."

"That is all anyone can ask of you," the elder male gave a loving smile, "Two last bits of advice, keep your head down and your eyes up, and that big fella, keep your eye on him. I don't like the way he looks at you."

"I will do that, but it's not like that with Grenz, daddy," Agrok explained, "He's my rival and he wants me intact to challenge him to perform better to keep up with me."

"Well, I still don't trust him," he gave her a loving smile and a pat on her shoulder. "I'll let the two scaly ones in on the village plan so they can help the allied tribes prepare to receive possible refugees. Agrok, no matter what mistakes I have made, I love you with all my heart and I always will."

She left the dwelling at her father's side for the first time in a long time, "I will brief Grenz on the way. I love you too daddy."

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Fog, Grenz hated fog. He hated finding it a blessing even more than he hated the fog it's self, but this wasn't about what he liked or hated. This was a mission; this was about doing his job in spite of what he had to endure. Agrok was scouting a path to the village up ahead of the big male. Her smaller size made her far more suited to the stealthy task than he could ever be. She had told him of the plan to try and convince the people of this village to flee to the plains as a cover for their mission. He agreed, the plan had a good feel to it, but there was a nagging feeling in his gut that told him something was going to go terribly wrong. Right that moment there was nothing to do about it but await the arrival of his pretty little rival to return with a path to follow. The still silence was troubling to him. There should have been some kind of noise coming from the village. Even in the fog there should have been the sounds of humans working or live stock grunting and complaining. But there was no noise at all, not even a barking dog. The silence began to make his skin crawl beneath his feathers by the time his partner materialized out of the mists.

"It looks like simple wood plank houses with thatch roofs," she reported in a hushed tone, "I found a place we can get to the back door of one of the smaller dwellings. However, there is no way to avoid breaking cover for a moment as we get to a door."

"Well it's as good as we can manage, then you've done great, Tailflicker," Grenz accepted the results without a protest as Agrok turned to lead him to the crossing point, "And don't worry, I honestly do not mind this view."

The big broadwing grinned to himself when the small female did not reply to his statement. He had been honest; he really did find her pleasant to look at. The broadwing made no other comment, nor did he really let himself enjoy the view either. Agrok was quick on her feet as she moved with an eerie silence through the fog and brush. It was all Grenz could do to keep her tail tip in sight and maintain a low level of noise from moving through the brush. He nearly toppled over her when she had stopped without warning.

"We are close, we need to be careful from here on," Agrok whispered softly to him.

Grenz nodded softly, the morning air bringing a bit of alarm to the big broadwing, "Right, we don't have much time though. The air is warming, that means this morning mist will soon clear. As much as I hate it, the fog does provide cover."

Agrok tapped his beak with the tip of her tail just as she slipped quietly into the brush, "Then quit crying

and start moving, fussy fledge."

The huge broadwing gave a snort against the jibe delivered by his rival. He knew he was being fussy, but he had great reason to be. Grenz could feel his skin crawl against the uneasy silence of the village as they drew near in the rapidly thinning mists. It was all just wrong, absolutely wrong; there was no sound, no scent of live stock, no traffic to the farmlands, and most disturbing of all, no sounds of younglings playing. Everything about the stillness was wrong and he suspected that he was not the only one who knew it. Neither warrior voiced their concerns as they moved slowly and silently through that last twenty yards. The two gryphons moved so close that Agrok had her tail tip curled around Grenz's forelimb, a common scouting tactic that allowed the lead warrior focus on the path ahead rather than the position of her partner.

The big broadwing loomed up close to the back of his rival when she halted at the edge of the brush. He would note that the wind was at their backs and the morning fog was all but gone to reveal the plain wood plank buildings that had grayed with age. An unfortunate situation for the gryphons, but they were coming up on the back side of the houses on the west end of the village. It didn't take long at all to figure out what Agrok had in mind with this location. Not twenty yards away was an oddly placed house, a bit newer than the others, with a back door that faced almost right at them. Grenz couldn't see any real holes in this short run, except maybe the fruit vendor who had his back to them. The two rivals watched patiently as the human stood stone still, one hand in the fruit cart. The large male couldn't place it, but something about this felt very wrong on more than just the obvious level. They waited for a solid twenty minutes for the statue in the dingy white shirt and stained brown pants to prove itself to be human.

The morning mists were completely dissipated before the partners decided the human was not going to move, for whatever reason he was staying so still for. Agrok counted three for them and they both lurched in a crouching dash to the back door. Grenz covered Agrok while she opened the door and slipped inside first, her smaller size being better suited to cramped combat than his larger frame. As soon as she was inside the broadwing squeezed himself inside and pulled the door closed as quickly and quietly as he could. Inside the furniture had all been looted but one table and chair facing away from them. Agrok rushed the woman in the chair to try and place her foreclaw over her mouth.

"Don't scream, we're not goin to-," the female's trailed her words off as the woman's head fell from her shoulders to roll by Grenz's foreclaws, "Hurt you?"

He stared at the toppled head at his foreclaws, "We're supposed to be gaining their trust, not killing them. Hold back your strength girl!"

"I do not possess such strength! She has been dead for a bit now, quite rotted," Agrok shot back before she shook her head in disgust, before she spoke Grenz smelt it as well, "It seems she was kept from stinking on the outside, exposing the inside seems to have given the stench a way out."

The large male gave a nod as he focused on the woman in the chair. The sight only became more disturbing as he noticed the cords and stakes that held the corpse in place, locking the poor woman into position as though she were preparing to eat. The mockery of her life was not lost on the warrior as he examined the cruel devices used to hold the corpse in place. The very thought of such a deed made his stomach turn with the desire to vacate its contents. All he could hope for the poor soul was that she was already dead when she was propped into position.

Grenz could stand it no longer; he had to get out, no matter what was outside, "We need to move. This house is a tomb, but perhaps all is not lost here."

"Agreed, let us be gone from this horror," Agrok replied quickly, making her way to the door ahead of him.

They both knew they were shaken, but they both stood solid, both mentally and physically. They were predators after all, and warriors beyond that, they had to be stern of stomach to deal with their jobs and their very means of survival. This appalling scene however, was far crueler and cold hearted than they ever expected to see. As soon as the female opened the door, they found their trip through the artwork of this deranged enemy was not yet finished. The whole village seemed to be well alive and bustling with activity. That is to say, it did, until the gryphons noticed that not a single person moved in the village. It was not hard to figure out why, the stench of death and decay hammered Grenz's senses from all sides. The closest figures to the broadwing and his rival were an elderly couple, holding hands. The sharp eyes of the gryphon allowed him to examine them from a distance. The very first things to give away their lifeless state was the color of their skin, a dead gray shade stretched over their bones, and the very stakes, poles and spikes that held them up in their position. Both the gryphon warriors stepped out in the street to circle the pair, examining the grizzly sculpture. It was very hard to determine the color of their clothing. The garments had been stretched by the bloating of the corpses, as well as greatly discolored by the fluids of decay that had escaped their lifeless stands of flesh. There was a darker stain on the man's shirt, a vertical line around the belly region.

"Look, they were killed before they were propped into place. I think we should investigate a bit more, just

to make a proper report back home. More specifically to let those who may have had loved ones here know what has happened to the place," Grenz spoke softly, grimly determined to keep his composure under such a grotesque test of his stomach.

"Right, I know I would rather know than not," Agrok agreed with a slow nod, "I don't believe anything is left here to be a threat to us, so splitting up should make this faster as well. I don't wish to be here any longer than we have to."

"You are preaching to the choir there, Tailflicker," he snorted a bit with his reply, "I'll stick west, you head east, we'll meet back at that oak in the center of town. That sound good?"

"Sounds as good as it can get at this point," the small female gave a gentle sigh as she turned to make her rounds of the eastern side of the village.

Grenz let out a sigh once she was out of sight, he did not like this place at all. Every moment in the village was a new step into the pits of hell and another page in the diary of insanity. The warrior began his scouting patrol of the village remains, growing more disturbed as he moved through the streets and tiny alley ways of the large village. The place was almost a small town or city, perhaps in another dozen years it would have been. Now it was a grim display of some mad being's gallery of what life was like here, every aspect of life was on decaying display for any who happened to wander through. Grenz found scenes of shopping, people doing chores, merchants tending wares, young lovers in a hidden rendezvous, crimes of theft, and even a rape; all frozen in place with propped and positioned corpses. He could not help but wonder if other twisted acts had been performed upon the dead of the village.

Grenz' rounds finally brought him to the center of town and the big oak that stood there. The great bird was greeted by a collection of dozens of young females, all of mature, child bearing age, all dead; they seemed to be begging toward the elder male figure that was picking something from the tree. The Broadwing's blood froze in his veins when his focus turned to the grotesque fruits. He had been so focused on the pleading corpses, that he had missed what had been hung from the tree. Hanging from tiny nooses were the rotting remains of infants. Several looked as though they had been struck repeatedly, or incredibly hard, with a blunt object.

"Grenz? Are you in the square?" The broadwing felt his heart drop and his skin turn cold at the sound of his Rival's voice approaching.

"Agrok, stay back, trust me!"

"Grenz, I am a warrior too, what could be so... by the consort... huyelk," Agrok turned away quickly at the sight of the infants hung from the tree, her stomach quickly emptying its self.

The large male quickly moved to his partner's side and stroked her back to offer some comfort. He knew his own stern stomach was lurching already at what he had seen. It was no surprise to him that Agrok had been stricken with a fit of vomiting. All he could do was sit close and use a wing to shield her from the horrific display behind them.

"Let's get out of here, I'm not sure of how much longer my gut will last either," the broadwing offered as well as asked his small partner.

"Agreed, the sooner we leave, the sooner we can set to work on finding the beasts that did this," the female growled softly with a quiver of disgust and anger to her body.

"No, this was not beasts, this was something far worse," Grenz corrected her as they both prepared for their leap into the skies, "This was done by the worst kind of monster, people. People in search of power and dominance over all things, feeding their sick desires and tendencies. Let us go and continue our work to stop them."

She gave him a determined nod before she leapt nimbly into the skies; he would follow a bit slower as he fought his own bulk to gain altitude. A mission lay before them, and a chance to strike at those who had created the horrifying gallery they had stumbled upon.

* * *

Blood, the scent filled Agrok's nostrils. The blood she had spilled from the hapless sentry in the tower now coated her beak and talons. Perhaps she had been a bit over zealous in eliminating her target, but after her tromp through the village, she felt one could hardly blame her for the violent venting. It was somehow satisfying that they would not be able to display the body if they buried their dead. Now the gryphoness lay hidden in the shadows, watching her new prey and the archer on the wall who provided his cover. The very sight of the man and his blood stained armor padding only enraged the female further. He had the audacity to not even wear his full armor and uniform, as if they already knew they had broken the people anywhere near their position. Agrok suppressed the growl that was trying to force its way out of her throat. She had to be patient; she would have her chance to shatter

this foul being's illusions of supremacy as well as his bones. Grenz lay on the other side of the service gate this man was guarding. He would have to be dealt with for her to let her partner in.

The man paced the stone courtyard between Agrok and her goal, once, twice, a third time. Finally her window arrived. The archer on the wall knelt down to perform some trivial task just as the man was nearing the end of his walk away from her. The huntress made a crouching run, nearly on her belly, silent as a shadow. Just as the man was turning around, she made her strike, pouncing the victim and latching onto his throat with her powerful beak. The gryphon let her momentum force her prey back as she held her ground and his throat with a jerk of her beak in the opposite direction, closing off his airway and twisting his neck until it snapped. However, Agrok found herself with quite a peculiar problem. While her maneuver did manage to break her victim's neck, the man was merely paralyzed rather than killed by the action. Now she dragged the dead weight into the shadow of a wagon near the gate to try and solve her complicated puzzle. The gryphoness dared not let her grip on his neck loosen, lest she risked his ability to scream remaining intact. She could only come to one solution to killing someone who should already be dead. Agrok felt down his chest with her left foreclaw until she located the bottom of where his ribcage met at the breadbasket. She forced a single talon right through his padded armor and deep into his yielding flesh, just under his diaphragm, sinking the talon up to the pad of her digit. Once she reached full penetration, Agrok angled the talon a bit towards his lungs and ripped her claw free of his body, severing the diaphragm and preventing his lungs from functioning.

Agrok let go of the man's neck, no longer having to worry about any sound coming from her victim. She watched as a deep dark crimson welled up and spread through his padding to join the blood stains of his long dead victims. The sensation of vengeance did nothing to cool the fires in her veins, or heat the ice in her heart. There would be further retribution to be had later. Right then she had to open the large iron door for her rival to enter the keep. The gryphoness quickly located the handle and gave it a tug with her foreclaws to turn the latch and swing the door inward. Thankfully it was well oiled and did not squeak or whine when she opened it.

Grenz darted into the shadows with the still living victim as Agrok closed the door, "Damn Agrok, you sure do mean work. Are you simply going to butcher the entire keep while we're here?"

She gave a snort as she watched the archer and took the opening to dash into the shadows of the tower with Grenz close behind, waiting to answer until they were concealed again, "If we have time, yes. These monsters need to suffer for what they did to those people, and if we can do it, then we should."

The huge male grasped her shoulder lightly, "Easy girl, we have a mission to perform. We don't need you going off half cocked and getting our objective killed."

"Grenz, you should know better, I don't get cocked at all," she replied with a touch of bitter humor as she searched the wall with her eyes for the door that would be their entry point.

"I can't imagine why, the fella's should be waiting outside your dwelling every morning. They should be clawing through one another to try and impress you," he was following her lead and searching for their portal into the keep as well.

Agrok couldn't help but blush a bit around her nares. The small female was thankful for the dark shadows as she searched with darkened nares. The lack of the door's presence quickly became a more immediate concern and their search became a touch frantic. Neither of them let the icy talons of panic grip them, instead they remained calm and professional. Upon reaching the end of their shadowy cover, Agrok slinked her way around Grenz to head back the other way. The pair had already agreed upon such movements by virtue of her naturally sleek and agile movements. The duo had their worries laid to rest quickly after they reversed directions, the door was found to be the exact set of paces in the opposite direction as the map had indicated. Agrok had her doubts as she grasped the handle of the rusty iron door.

She gave a hard push, then a pull and shook her head, "It's rusted shut, I can't get it to budge a talon length."

"Move," was all Grenz had to say to get Agrok out of his way so the big broadwing could sit on his haunches at the door.

One massive foreclaw gripped the rusted handle with a vice like grip, while its counterpart braced against the stone frame. Grenz tensed up as he gave a mighty double press against the frame and the handle. Every muscle in his body rippled and coiled, showing through his feathery coat. Agrok found herself enthralled by the sight of that impressively powerful body working before her. She nearly cheered as the latch gave with a small creek, the warmth she felt rising was not a reaction she wanted her rival to be aware of.

Grenz nodded his beak at the stairs leading down, "In you go tailflicker, you have the lead here."

"I know, your butt is too big for you to be any use in a hallway, we discussed this already," she was quick to make the jibe and swat her partner with a back handed pat, "No staring at my tail either!"

He snorted at her and followed her in, "Trust me, everything about me is big. Keep waving your tail about like that and you may have proof."

She gave a growl of annoyance as her nare burned quite hotly. Her rival would note that she walked with her tail tucked under her belly after that remark. The two gryphons descended the winding stairs cautiously, more so for the sake of the big male than that of the agile female. She could hear him hissing softly behind her as his wings would catch every now and then in the narrow passage way. She knew that his foreclaws had to be covering somewhere around two to three steps where hers just barely overlapped one. When they reached the bottom, she felt a twinge of relief for her partner and rival. Agrok did not wish harm upon him, or even discomfort, they simply had a bit of competition between them over their professional path.

Agrok took a left down the 'T' intersection with Grenz close behind for only two doors before she stopped, "It's all wrong, these rooms. Dry storage, linens, they shouldn't be this close to the steps. They are past the door we need by... crap!"

"By what? What's going on tailflicker?" Grenz was baffled by her partially voiced train of thought and her sudden halt.

"It's not past our door, it's before it! The masons built the keep backwards, probably to confound intruders who may have seen the plans. We have to turn around, let me by you," she explained quickly as she turned around and waited for his shift in position.

"Good catch there, clever girl," the large male replied as he shifted and squeezed himself about to force himself to turn around.

He stood as tall as he could for her once he was turned around, so she could wiggle her way beneath him. Agrok had just wiggled her forequarters through her rival's forelimbs when some very dangerous sounds echoed in the hall, the release of a nearby door latch and voices on the other side of that door. Someone was coming, and they were in a most awkward position, certainly not one they could defend themselves from.

Grenz grasped her in a very intimate manner on her flanks, "Follow my lead, I have an idea."

It only took a fraction of a second for her to realize his intended gamble. The moment he lowered himself to press against her back and hind quarters it all came clear, even before he began to rub against her in a feigned mating. Even as her nares burned furiously, she pressed back against him and moved with him to help complete the act. Her soft moaning caught the pair of humans off guard as they entered the hall way. They were quite the contrast to one another, a dark haired female with very attractive features about her slim form. The man was scarred on his face, that's not to say he was handsome before the unfortunate injury had marred him. Pock marks made his face look rather craggy in contrast to his partner's smooth fair skin. She was tall and fit, he was shorter and built quite muscular, to the point of appearing to be a pile of stones wrapped in skin.

Grenz huffed like an annoyed child, "It looks like we have been discovered sweet tail flicker mine."

"So we have, don't stop yet, wait until they stop us," Agrok begged as the two humans stared at them dumfounded.

"What the hell is going on here? What are ye? Why are ye stuffing yer whore here in our keep? I should slice ye up now!" the ugly man began to growl.

"Wait Jerid, let them finish," The woman purred with her eyes riveted to Grenz' powerful form, "I want to see what this big boy can do to his little slut. I might have plans for him."

Something about the way the human talked sparked a smoldering rage inside of Agrok that she had never felt before, "He's far too much male for you, such a small soft skinned human. You can dream all you want, but this handsome sculpted bird is all mine."

The woman snarled at Agrok, her black breast plate glaring at her as well in the lamp light, "Don't you get bold with me, feathered bitch. You enjoy this last time, because you're never going to get to touch him again! I'll take you both as my reward for our conquests here. I'll use him to please myself, and I'll keep you so I can laugh at you while I make you watch! The mages would be happy to make him my obedient pet."

"Damnit Rachel! This is a beastie, ye don't go bendin' over for no animal! That's just sick and wrong! Ye should be givin' that to a real man," Jerid spat at his partner, quite genuinely appalled at what she had just suggested.

"Shut up! No man could ever have a piece of meat between his legs as big as what this bird must be packing," Rachel spat right back, turning her anger on her partner.

In the midst of all the arguing and the feigned mating, neither human noticed that Agrok had wiggled her hips free of Grenz' hind legs. Just as the woman turned her head to look at her partner, readying herself to battle him for her prize, Grenz grasps Agrok tighter around her hips. The big broadwing heaved with all his might and hurled the smaller female at the woman. Agrok's beak connected with the woman's neck and clamped down tight. She did not position for a hold, instead she drove the sharp hook of her powerful beak into the soft flesh of her victim's neck. Her weight forced the woman to the ground where she stood atop of her and jerked her head up violently, tearing flesh in savage tatters. Each time her beak dug a furrow, Agrok bit further down, eventually hooking her beak behind the exposed spine of her victim. She did not stop tearing at her prey until she had completely decapitated the

woman.

While Agrok made her savage attack upon the woman, the male moved to draw his long sword. He would never get the chance to use the weapon on the female gryphon. Before the blade ever left its sheath, Grenz delivered a crushing blow with his fisted foreclaw directly to the man's chest. A strangled, gurgling grunt escaped his throat to mix with the wrenching sound of bending metal coming from the breast plate that crumpled under the huge broadwing's crushing blow.

The small female spat what blood she could from her beak, right onto her victim's still chest, "Nobody is going to enslave my rival while I still breathe, mindless whore. He needs to be free to give me a challenge and good cover."

"Easy there Tailflicker," Grenz spoke in a soothing tone as he tore a piece of the long red sleeve from the male guard's uniform, handing it over to Agrok for her beak, "You're getting a bit possessive there. I mean, thanks for looking out for me, but you sound like she was really taking your lover or something."

"You have no room to talk mister," She gave a snort as she wiped her beak, "I felt that bump against my rear. Thank goodness they gave us an opening so soon or that would have gotten quite awkward."

Grenz gave her a wicked grin, "Oh you would have enjoyed that and you know it."

Agrok shot her partner an icy glare before she unbuckled the woman's sword and shoved the sheath under his harness, "Just for that, hold my trophy. Now, shut your beak and make sure nothing crawls up my tail, including any part of you. Fail to do so and I'll have to hurt you."

The big male grinned back at her, but he did not give anymore challenge to her demands. Agrok took the lead once again and led her rival over the bodies of their latest victims. The man that Grenz had crushed with his fist, still struggling to get air into his collapsed and compressed lungs, grasped at the gryphons as they passed. The huge broadwing kicked his victim over with a hind paw. Agrok felt pity for the man, dying in such a helpless manner; her previous rage seemed to have faded with the savage attack on the woman she had decapitated with her own beak. Enough of her professionalism returned that she felt shame in her overly violent actions.

There would be time for such things when they were done, however; they had a job to do. Agrok stalked down the hall, heading in the right direction now. She held her body low to the ground as her legs carried her swiftly toward the door that should be their way down. The small female frowned at the door; it appeared as light and wide as the other doors they had passed. It was stained in a reddish-brown finish, and far too thin for her partner to squeeze his bulk through.

"I suppose I can keep watch out here and make sure we have a way out of this death trap?" Grenz offered sheepishly.

Agrok sighed softly and turned the handle, "Perhaps, I don't see any other way for you to get inside."

She gave a bit of a huff of effort when she found the door to be much heavier than it appeared. Much more importantly, she found the stairway inside to be quite wide. Following a hunch, Agrok examined the stone wall closely. One block stood out just a touch more than the others at the same height as the door handle. The difference would have been invisible to the human eye, but it was quite noticeable to the sharp eyes of the gryphoness. There was only one thing to do; she placed her foreclaw on the block and pushed.

Agrok smiled as the block gave and the door that had been disguised as part of the wall swung open, "Clever."

* * *

Pascal Roberts gripped the shaft of his halberd idly as he held his position outside the general's quarters. He and his good friend Vernon shared the post that night as they fought sleep and stared out into the empty stair case with its decorative armors. Neither of them were pleased with their new posting, having to stay in the confines of the keep while there were still conquests to be had outside those walls. He was about to start in with gossip, when he saw something quite out of the ordinary. At first he thought he had just been seeing things with his attempts to adjust to the new hours.

Vernon confirmed that what they were seeing was really there, "Hey Pas, am I dreaming or is there some kind of cat bird thing sitting there trying to hide behind a tower shield?"

Pascal leveled his polearm at the massive creature and gripped the shaft tightly, "It's there alright, and it can't be anything but trouble. You there, are you sentient? If you are, throw down your shield and surrender, we will ensure a quick execution."

The beast did not comply, instead it seemed to grip its shield tighter. Pascal was mildly amused by the scene before him, as the massive avian huddled behind a shield that was absurdly small for it to really provide any

protection. Amusing or not, the thing was a threat and needed to be dealt with. He gave a nod to Vernon to advance with him as he moved closer to the beast with his weapon held ahead in case it made a lunge. He never saw the shadow move until it was too late; something from above had dropped down onto them. He felt the talon plunge in between the top of his spine and his skull and the immediate numbness throughout his body told him the spinal cord had been severed. He and Vern both slumped to the ground together as the beast dropped its shield. Pascal felt himself draining away with the spinal fluid that was leaking from the puncture wound in the base of his neck. Only one thought could cross his mind in those final seconds.

Why didn't we look up?

* * *

Rio watched her captor pace the room opposite of her position on the large bed. She was captive, but she was not bound. Her captor had something else in mind. He was a male drake, blue in markings, and he watched her athletic form intently, eyeing her rich violet markings. She knew him from long ago; he was one who desired her more than anything in life. She simply was not interested in his darker mannerisms and blood thirsty ways.

"Come now Rio, why do you resist?" Zetriss asked as he stalked in a slowly closing half circle, "I have power, wealth, I know I am not unattractive, yet still you resist me. What makes such an amorous female as yourself too good for a powerful drake as myself?"

He was right, he was attractive in form, well built, strong, but she knew even as she voiced her reasons, that he would not listen, "You are attractive Zet, but your heart is as ugly as they come. If you had resisted GahlByrn's offers and fought him along side Saltriss, I would have been glad to take to your bed. But now, even if you did repent and try to atone for your sins, your claws are too stained with innocent blood for me to ever want to touch you."

"Saltriss? Saltriss!?" Zetriss roared with pure rage, "You've always chosen him over me, if I had fought at his side you would have praised me by bending over for him!"

"Saltriss was my mate when we met you ignorant fool! Of course I chose him over you back then, he was my mate and I was faithful!" Rio spat back, partially in anger and partially out of a desire to hide her fear.

The male surged forward, forcing her onto her back as he threw himself on top of her, "I gave up my family, my friends, I fought hard for power, wealth, everything you could have wanted, and you reject me? It's time you give me my just rewards, whether you want to or not!"

Rio shoved at her stronger attacker with all her might. She clawed and kicked at him to no avail while she shouted, "No! Get off me, please, no! Help me, someone help, please!"

Neither of them heard the approach in their struggles, but the presence of the huge bird was well known when two massive foreclaws clasped around the general's head and pressed together with all their awesome strength. Rio cringed as she heard the most unpleasant sound of the wet, muffled cracking and crunching of Zetriss' skull collapsing.

"Are you alright lady healer," the huge avian creature asked as he, yes, definitely male, tossed the limp form of the general aside.

Rio eyed the smaller avian that stepped up beside the huge male, most definitely female with such a pretty form as she displayed, "Yes, I am fine, just a sprain in my left wing during initial capture. How did you and your mate even know I was here, let alone a healer?"

The female cleared her throat, "He is not my mate. I am Agrok and this is Grenz. Saltriss and Kahlah sent us to extract you to our territories where you will be safe. We are to eliminate a general here as well, was that him?"

Rio nodded as Agrok gestured toward the lifeless body of Zetriss, "Yes that is him, or it was. Can you manage to carry me out of here if you plan to fly, Grenz? With that sprain I am ground bound otherwise."

The large broadwing looked her up and down for a moment and nodded, "You look light enough, I don't see why I wouldn't be able to. Just watch those talons in my neck when we go to take off."

Agrok began to walk around the round chambers, examining the luxurious furnishings of the room. Rio couldn't begin to guess at what the avian was up to. She decided to examine the large male instead, while the female avian scoured the room for whatever she was looking for. She had to admit, they were a rather attractive species, both male and female. Rio decided she would have to make a further examination of one of the males after she was safely away from the Legion's territories.

"What are these?" Agrok called her mind back to the current reality with a wave at a large crystalline globe.

Rio recognized it, and remembered what she had been told about them, "That is a master sphere for the Legion's communications. One of several, but if you take one down, you ruin the network. I think this one would

trigger the others in this room to explode quite violently if you were to break it. They are tied with arcane threads from the earthen and astral weaves."

"Sounds like a good distraction to me," Grenz announced as he hefted one in his forelimbs and smashed it on the ground to shatter the globe.

"What are you doing?" Rio shouted at the huge male, "They will start to feed back on themselves and build up too much energy."

Grenz stared at her for a moment, "Well, I wanted an explosion to cover our escape."

"Explosion, did you intend one large enough to level the keep?" The drake waved her hands about for emphasis.

Agrok shoved Rio against Grenz's side and hoisted her on his back, "Quit lollygagging and let's move then! I'll take point, stay hot on my tail!"

"Right, hold on lady Rio, we're not stopping until we see plains beneath us!" Grenz said quickly as he bounded after the female avian.

Rio had no chance to answer. All she could do was hold on to the neck of her improvised mount. Her ride up the spiraling staircase was a bit bumpy; however she did enjoy the stalk through the hallway. Every step the huge avian took let her feel his powerful muscles flexing and relaxing against her body through his warm, soft feathers. The drake decided that she must learn more about these lovely avians.

A noise caught her ear and drew her emerald eyes back in time to shout a warning as the guard rushed quietly at the gryphon she was mounted on, "Bird, guy, thing, behind! Armed guard, sword drawn!"

The big male kicked suddenly with a hind paw to catch the human off guard and send him sprawling on his back. The broadsword he had been carrying clattered to the floor at the avian's feet.

"I can't stop him from this angle, I need you to do something to help, anything at all!" the male avian barked quickly as he tried desperately to see behind himself.

The human male had regained his feet and was struggling to retrieve his weapon from beneath the paws of the avian. Rio looked around for anything she could find to protect her savior from the enemy he could not turn to fight. Her frantic eyes fell upon the black leather bound hilt of the long sword in its black scabbard beneath the hard leather harness of her mount. Quickly the drake pulled the weapon, a decidedly nasty example of its type of blade. The blade bore symbols she vaguely recognized as curses of death and doom along the polished blade. One side of the blade had a cruel serrated edge that began about mid blade and continued down to the hilt. She turned just as the human stood back up with his blade in hand; Rio lunged quickly to catch the man unaware. The drake was unskilled and very clumsy with her borrowed blade, but at such close range it would have been difficult to miss. A cold feeling gripped her heart and soul as she watched her blade bury its self down through the victim's throat at a downward angle, wreaking terrible havoc on the vital organs within his chest. It would happen slowly to him, but quickly enough, the healer, the one who had sworn oaths to heal bodies where she found them wounded, had made a fatal strike.

The Legion guardsman gave a gurgling grunt as the drake wrenched the blade free to retrieve it for the avians; they had it, so surely they wanted it back. Tears began to well up in her eyes as she turned back around to see the female fighting for ground in the hall way. They had but a short distance to go, but the opposition was heavy and tough. That small lithe female moved with an incredible speed and grace that made the drake feel awkward and clumsy in comparison. Her fighting skills were incredible as well, and somehow familiar. That small bird made a fatal belly slash even as she dodged a high swing of a heavy battle axe. The movement of her dodge powered the slash in a brilliant fashion. It was not a blind maneuver, either. Rio quickly came to realize that she was several moves ahead of her ever increasing opponents. The slash and dodge had set her up to make a neck bite on the axe wielder in a manner that made him slump right in the path of the crossbow bolt that had been fired at her.

"Hey, that was your first kill wasn't it?" The deep, rich voice of the male came from beneath her to drag the drake out of her enthralled state of watching the female warrior work her terrible arts.

Rio shook her head and nodded, a reaction that she knew he would not see, "yes, I am a healer. I do not fight, and I most certainly do not kill. I protect lives with my arts and skills, not end them."

"Well watch my tail and protect our lives with that blade. They most certainly do not care that you are a peaceful healer," he pointed out as a pikeman arrived and made a lunge at the big avian.

Rio grasped tight as her mount reared and grasped the pike in a vice like grip to stop the advance and jerk the pikeman right over her partner to his waiting talons. She wanted to close her eyes, but something compelled her to witness the deadly actions of her rescuers. It was all she could do to hold the contents of her stomach down as the male warrior grasped the pikeman's helmet and crushed it against the wall with the man's head inside. His victim gave a horrifying sound of what would have been a scream if it had not been cut off by the sound of his skull collapsing. These birds were powerful fighters; that much was absolutely clear. However, the female seemed to run

into something she had no counter for. One of the fighters now facing her was not a simple guard. The battle had apparently awoken one of the line fighters, and he had arrived with his large, boxy line shield.

The small female darted in every direction she could, but the shield created an impenetrable barrier before her as it filled most the width of the hall. Rio felt her heart drop to the tip of her long tail as they started to lose ground against such an obstacle. The small female had fought so hard up until then, the hallway littered with the bodies of her foes. It just struck the drake as purely unfair that her efforts were for naught, literally feet from the short hall to their escape.

The avians were not ready to give up however, "Grenz, I need you to break this wall!"

"Right, brace on it and I'll take care of it," the male, Grenz, as it turned out to be his name, or perhaps his rank, ordered up to his female partner.

The female gave a nod and pounced right onto the shield and held tight to the top with her talons. Grenz, Rio decided it must be his name since they worked as equals, charged the shield and slammed his foreclaws against it on either side of the other avian. The mass of humans and one reptilian humanoid were enough to support the weight of the female, but they crumbled and were easily driven back by the incredible strength of the huge avian. As Grenz drove them back, the female climbed up to stand on his forelimbs so she could reach over the shield and fend off those who tried to attack the big male while he was defenseless in his labors. Somewhere in the melee, the female avian had managed to draw one of the guard's daggers and drive the blade deep into the eye of the shieldman.

Rio let out a deep sigh of relief when Grenz had cleared enough ground to put the escape route at his rear flank. The drake took the moment to look back down the hall to take stock of the carnage. She was appalled by the sight of dozens of bodies lying in the halls. The stench of blood was heavy over the grizzly pile of corpses that had been shredded by talon and beak.

"Grenz, get out the door, I'll cover your tail," the female ordered as she raked her talons across the reptilian humanoid's face.

It turned out to be female by the pitch and resonance of her scream as the large male nodded and prepared for a retreat, "Right, good luck, and make sure you come out that door behind me, Agrok."

"Don't worry about me, you get Rio out and into the air on a path towards home as fast as you can," Agrok replied with an odd gesture that seemed to surprise the large male.

Just before they made their leap backwards, the female gave a touch of her cheek against the male's cheek. Grenz gave a shove and leapt back to make the turn down the short hall. Rio held tight to his neck and offered a silent prayer for the brave female covering their escape out the iron door. No sooner had they broke into the courtyard when an arrow whizzed right toward the healer's face. She only had time to close her eyes before she should have felt the impact. It did not come, instead she felt a warm spatter on her face followed by a harsh curse from Grenz. Rio opened her eyes to see the back side of the huge foreclaw of the male avian flexing uncontrollably in front of her face. Another drop of blood dripped from the head of the arrow protruding from that foreclaw to join the others on her snout.

Rio did not wait to ask, she just grasped the shaft of the arrow and snapped the head off to pull it free, "Hold still, no time for questions and you probably need this claw for takeoff."

The drake cupped the wounded claw with her hands and began to channel her soothing, healing energies into the avian's claw. The healing only took a few seconds, but the increasing volume of the new high pitched hum in the air reminded them of just how much of their time was borrowed from fate.

Grenz placed his foreclaw back on the ground and turned to check on the female. She was locked in a quick dodge and slash duel with a dagger wielding soldier in light leather armor. The small avian made a backwards pounce to avoid a slash and her partner lunged to snatch her by the harness and haul her out of the hall with a mighty heave.

The dagger wielding fighter rushed forward just in time for Grenz to slam the door in his face, "Enough fighting, we have to move Tailflicker, this place is going to blow any second now!"

"Then shut up and take off!" the small female snapped back as she flipped nimbly onto her feet and heaved herself into the air with a mighty leap and a powerful stroke of her wings.

Grenz crouched low and threw himself into the air with a powerful upward pounce, much like his female counterpart, although he labored much harder to gain altitude. Both avians pumped their wings hard to gain distance from the keep, having safely made it out of the range of the archers with the double target ploy. The rescue party did not stop their hard flight until the keep was a shrinking miniature of itself in the distance. Rio looked back just in time to see the keep erupt into a bright blue sphere of energy. The dome crackled out of existence with a few crawling bolts of energy grasping over the site to reveal the empty place that used to be a keep. That ordeal was over. All that was left was to hold on tight while the avians carried her to her new home.

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The air was cool and fragrant with the scents of human cooking and the natural accents of the various gathered species mingled with their chosen bathing soaps. The smoky scent of the bonfire made the mix pleasant to Rio's nose as she sat on a spare sleeping mat next to the large male that had been a part of her rescue. She didn't want to get in his way, but Agrok was not present and she really didn't know anyone else who was safe to keep company with. She knew Kahlah and Saltriss, but her past mateship with Sal was a sore point with Kahlah.

"Thank you for letting me pal around with you Grenz, you are such a dear," the drake spoke cheerfully as the mood of the celebration began to take her, "Blessed be to Agrok for letting me use her cleansing sands too. Where did she go?"

Tahkra gave a smile to the healer, "My dear sister is soaking herself in solitude. I think she is not feeling right around so many males, it has been some time for her."

"Aye, not since Kenten, right?" Malehk added his voice to the conversation, "Poor girl must be seething with urges by now. I don't blame her for not wanting to be around all these young warriors and warriors in training."

"Now why would that be? If I were seething with desire, I would want to be surrounded by potential bedmates," Rio pointed out.

"Sadly, most males do not see the beauty Agrok holds," A new voice announced, coming from the beak of a strikingly handsome broadwing of black with white secondaries and primaries, "Being around so many who simply have no interest with such a seething need, that would be torture."

"Well now, what buffoons. Agrok is gorgeous, I'm a bit jealous of her to be honest," the drake spoke in light, slow tones, bringing a flirtatious undertone to her voice, "Speaking of gorgeous, I don't believe we have met. I'm Rio Tehkmet, who might you be handsome?"

"I already told you, my name is Grenz," the large male that had saved her sighed with feigned irritation.

Rio gave him a light swat on the shoulder, "Oh stop it, you know who I was talking to. We already admitted that you are handsome, but I want to get to know that other bird a bit better. We're not already friends after all."

The black and white gryphon gave a soft chuckle as his bright amber eyes shined with amusement, "Well my lovely lady, I'm Reyfis, warrior of the Kenjaya tribe."

Malehk and Tahkra looked at one another with a kind of look that Rio could not quite make out, "Well Reyfis, if it is okay with my current escort, I wouldn't mind taking to your company for this celebration."

Grenz all but tossed her at the elder gryphon, "Have fun you crazy kids, I want to find Agrok and talk to her anyhow. Something we both witnessed that I know is haunting us both."

Rio gave a light laugh as she stumbled against the handsome male of her interest, "Alright Grenz, if either of you need anything, I'm here, and I'm sure the rest are here for you as well."

The young warrior simply nodded in reply as he rose to his feet and stalked off in search of his partner and rival.

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Hot water. It was so comforting to be engulfed in its warm, soothing embrace. But not even that heat could melt away the things that troubled Agrok. Her mind could not escape the images of the mission from which she had returned. The images that warred in her mind for dominance over her mood were quite contradictory to one another, and one might find her disturbed for them fighting for the forefront of the gryphoness' mind. She could not shake the images of those infants, so cruelly hung from that tree in a display of innocent life lost for nothing more than the desire to kill. It turned her stomach and crushed her heart to know what had been done. The young warrior could only wonder if they would have been able to save the village if they had gotten involved sooner. Part of her knew the truth; they could not have mustered a force strong enough to stop the assailants in time. Agrok knew very well that they would have been discovered and the very same things would have been echoed across the plains. A hot coal still smoldered in her heart. She had vowed to herself that she would stop these monsters from hurting others with every fiber and every drop of blood.

There was the other side of the images in her mind, the ones that embarrassed her in such a solemn time. Agrok could not stop remembering the way Grenz looked when he strained against that rusted latch. She knew it wasn't him specifically, he was her rival and had never really been all that nice towards her until recently, but he was a very well built male. She was just seething with a need that she could not find release for, and that was the most

attractive sight Agrok had seen for a long while. The warrior felt shame in herself for that need and her inability to suppress it in such a time.

A small drop of water hit her beak as it splashed from one of the seven upper tiers of the bizarre hot springs. Agrok knew what those tiers were normally used for. She longed to have that use for them, to take a lover up there for a private moment of passion in the warm waters of the springs. She gave a silent prayer to the deities of the gryphons of the plains, the Great Consorts, any lover would do.

Agrok gave a start as the sound of someone entering the water behind her sent her heart to flutter with hopes that her prayer had been answered. Those hopes shattered the instant she turned around and came face to face with the one male she hoped to never see again. That wet, lighter tan coat, that white patch over his eye that reflected the violet light of both moons.

"What the hell are you doing here Venkey?" Agrok growled at her fallen mate's twin brother, "I am not an easy target. I am a well trained and proven warrior now."

The male gave a wicked grin as he stared right at her, "Well Agrok, I've been watching you for a bit now and I'm certain that I don't have to force you. Poor little wench is so in need, she won't be able to resist the offer of the only male who will give it to her."

The small female growled deeply as her eyes blazed with more than just the reflected moonlight, "Venkey, you are worse than scum, you are what scum vomits. Why are you here? You don't even find me attractive."

"Well, Agrok, you don't like me," Venkey purred maliciously at her as he stalked closer, "You are quite unattractive to me in general, but the very fact that you despise me makes all this so arousing. I simply must have you, because you can't stand having me. You having no other choice makes all this even better! You are desperate, and you know you are going to do this, so be a good girl and get ready for me."

She hesitated for a moment, but she was desperate and she knew it, however she did not turn around quietly, "When I find a real lover, I am going to track you down and shove your malehood up your tail."

"Grasp the side and move your tail like a good little whore," Venkey growled in a soft seductive manner.

Agrok lowered her head and did as she was told, grasping the stone rim of the spring and turning her tail aside for the hated male. It was all she could do to hold back the urge to vomit when his foreclaws touched her flanks. Tears rolled down her feathered cheeks as she begged in her heart to The Consorts for any help at all.

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Grenz was happy to be leaving the celebrating training village; he simply wasn't in the mood for all the noise and merriment. He was going to miss the company of Rio, she was lovely and quite warm hearted. It was best he didn't get mixed up with her, though, such a thing could only lead to trouble. After seeing Agrok in action, he was going to need to be as trouble free as possible to keep up with her. The big broadwing could not place it for the life of him, but he felt an overwhelming urge to keep her company while she sought refuge from the celebration. A gentle breeze caused the grass to whisper to him as he made the long walk to the hot springs. With both the moons in their full glory above, there was plenty of light for the gryphon to follow the path. That red orb and its blue counterpart watched Grenz go, as if they were making sure he went where he was supposed to.

When Grenz approached the springs, he heard voices from his place on the other side of the shielding shrubs. He paused to listen, making sure he was not interrupting his rival with a potential lover.

"You are desperate and you know you are going to do this, so be a good girl and get ready for me," a male voice purred in a strange way.

Grenz fought hard to suppress his growl of rage, although his talons did gouge the turf beneath his foreclaws. He needed to be sure it was Agrok there. If it was, the male in question would most definitely be handled quickly.

"When I find a real lover, I'm going to track you down and shove your malehood up your tail," he heard Agrok spit back at the male, but her voice sounded wrong to be facing away from him, towards the sound of the male's voice.

Grenz found a thin spot in the brush to make a bit of a hole so he could see what was going on just as the male made it verbally clear, "Grasp the side and move your tail like a good little whore."

The big male was able to see his rival comply with the other male, the look on her face was unmistakable as she grasped the side and lowered her head. She was disgusted by what she was doing, but he could not figure out why she was. When a tear escaped her lovely eye, there was a look of pleading there.

Grenz could not let this happen, "I'm coming Agrok, don't you worry, girl. Agrok!"

He could hear them both start as he started to walk around the side of the brush after he had turned his self whisper into a shout.

"Grenz?" she asked with a mingled sound of hope and shock in her voice.

The huge broadwing locked the smaller male in a deadly stare as he stalked toward the pair, they were not positioned right for him to have already taken her, but he did not remove his foreclaws either, "I've been looking for you Agrok, we were supposed to meet up before we came here. I don't know who you are boy, but you had better get your filthy claws off the lady. The look on her face tells me that she doesn't want your touch, and I won't stand for you raping her by her own over neglected needs."

"Who the hell are you? It's not like anyone else will take her, butt out and let her get her lay," the smaller broadwing growled at him.

Grenz struck the fellow square between the eyes with a fisted foreclaw, sending him off balance and allowing Agrok to extract herself from him and up to press against her rival's chest, "Don't you ever refer to her as just a lay, and if I ever hear of you calling her a whore again, well, things happen this close to enemy territory, no one would ever know what became of you. Now git', the only one who might get laid in this pool tonight is me. I'll take care of my partner so she doesn't have to deal with you."

The other male pulled himself out of the pool with a hateful glare at Agrok before he left he decided to make one last threat, "This is not over by any means, I will have your homely tail as my conquest. Dwarfish little wh-

"Say it again and I will tear your throat out Venkey," Agrok growled as she pulled away from Grenz to stand her ground, "I don't need you, there's nothing keeping you safe from me now."

Both rivals stood firm and watched the offending male slink away to return to the training village, "Thank you Grenz, I would have hated myself if I let him touch me like that, but it leaves me in the same state of desperation. He can easily get to me again in a moment of weakness."

"Come on, let's get back in the pool and relax, we can talk in there," Grenz offered as he stepped into the pool carefully and settled to a sitting position.

Agrok hesitated, but she slipped her sleek form back into the spring with him to settle down nice and close. Grenz took it for what it was rather than jumping to conclusions. He knew it was just a show of her trust. He decided to reach out and pull her to him to offer the comfort of a friendly presence.

Agrok didn't resist his pull, instead she rested against him and laid her head on his neck and shoulder, "You must think I'm everything he called me. I know I feel like it. I can't even feel sickened and saddened about that village without thinking about how much I need a male."

"No Agrok, I don't think that at all," he replied softly, "That is why I stopped him. You deserve better than him and you certainly deserve better than what he was doing. You have needs that have been neglected Agrok, we all have them. I know you need it taken care of if you were going to endure his touch to sate it. If you really need it that badly, you can ask me to take care of it for you, I would be happy to. You are my rival and I need you in top form to give me the challenge I need to improve."

She blushed furiously as she tried to hide it from him, "Grenz, you would do that? Are you sure you would do that? It's a bit much to ask of you, I am your rival, and not very attractive."

"Who the hell said you aren't very attractive?" Grenz gave a snort of distaste for whoever started such a rumor, "Agrok, getting to spend a heated night with a girl who looks as good as you would be a distinct improvement in my amorous activities. You are beautiful, both inside and out, and you are so very strong. Believe me hun, climbing your back is no difficult task."

Agrok stared at the water for a long moment before she rubbed herself against his chest to turn around for him. The feel of her back against his chest and the curl of her tail against his belly was a sure sign of her consent.

He found he could not grasp her like he normally would another broadwinged female, so he rested a single foreclaw on her chest, "Just remember, no falling in love or anything, we're still rivals. I'll mount you, but I won't court you."

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Agrok stirred, fighting consciousness as she tried to hang on to the dreams she enjoyed. It was a futile effort, however, she surrendered to waking with a yawn. The warm body pressed against her side was so very comforting, even as she did not immediately recognize her surroundings. She smiled softly to herself, unable to resist a contented purr as her rival stirred next to her.

"Hmmm... good morning Tailflicker," he said with a soft groan of stretching, "How did you sleep?"

"Better than I have in a long time, thank you for that Grenz. Both of those wonderful engagements," Agrok blushed softly as she snuggled into his side.

"Don't mention it, I really enjoyed myself too. Any time you feel that itch and can't find someone to take care of it, you feel free to come to me. I need you in top shape Agrok, not only as my rival, but as my partner as well. I need someone I trust in personality and skill at my back when we have to run group missions," the big broadwing spoke in an honest tone that held none of the playful banter normally shared between warriors of the tribes.

Agrok felt warmth in her heart where there had only been an icy ball of shame in her appearance, a warmth she had not felt since Kenten's brief time with her, "You make me feel so wonderful Grenz, it's hard to explain, but you make me feel, female. You think I'm lovely, you see me as strong, you are happy to sate my needs. I think we need to remember we are rivals."

"Agreed, I adore you from a far, but you would likely stress and aggravate me in close quarters for too long. I think we function best as rivals who tend to one another," Grenz gave a decisive nod.

"Friendly rivals who tend one another's hungers. And I will do the best I can to make sure no one thinks there is a courtship going on," she nudged herself out from under his forelimb to stand up and shake herself out.

"This is a strange rivalry, but I think it works fine for us!" the big male grinned at the lithe female, "Can't believe a pretty little thing like you let me touch her."

"It's not hard to believe Grenz, you are quite the handsome bird," Agrok paused at the door to her rival's dwelling, "By the way, I am quite far ahead of you on the kill count."

Grenz stared at her for a moment then clicked his beak in annoyance, "You are, damn you!"