



Tribes
Hungry
Heart
Book #2

Laura S. Fox

Tribes
Hungry Heart #2
By
Laura S. Fox

*To Dave,
Only the greatest readers
Are the ones powerful enough
To give the true value of a book,
Laura S. Fox*

*To Laura,
The road is long and epic
But our heroes are strong and full of love
And your writing is a tapestry of magic and imagination
Thank you,
Dave Kemp*

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M/M Romance

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This book contains graphic depictions of sexual intercourse and it is not meant for readers who are less than 18 years of age.

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Chapter One – No Longer Strangers

A new day rose over Shroudhabor; no cloud was in sight, and little could tell a stranger about the upheaval that had shaken the city by the sea not so long ago. Varg scouted the azure sky with keen eyes, but nothing tainted, not even a speck of white, the infinite blue. After Narissa the sea demon had withdrawn her hold on the city, the citizens had taken it upon themselves to destroy the house of merchants stone by stone, until nothing of the white façade was left to dominate their settlement.

In its place now rose a monument on which depictions of the sea battle that had taken place could be seen. And on one face, the image of a fisherman holding a little girl's hand had been struck by the tools of a sculptor to make the people of the place remember Neel's sacrifice and one single man's valiant effort to save the others' souls.

"Things appear to be so different now, don't they?" Duril asked from his right.

They were at the outskirts of the city, the call of adventure once again strong in their hearts. They had yet to bid their farewells to the people they had come to know in Shroudhabor, but their leaving was imminent. A bit of respite had been in order for them to gain back their strength. Varg could tell by the surreptitious looks Toru and Duril stole of each other that something might have happened between them, and most probably one of the pleasant kind of somethings. Therefore, he was finding it hard not to tease them. Each time he caught one of them looking adoringly at the other, he pretended to look away, but not without winking at Toru or offering Duril an open smile.

"These people have been under the thumb of evil for so long. From now on, they should be the tailors of their destiny," Varg said.

"Will they be all right?" Toru asked. "They were ruled by those nasty merchants for a long time."

"They will learn," Varg replied. "It may not be easy, and they have to find new ways of doing things, and new beliefs."

"I venture to say that they found at least one," Duril said and wrapped his hand around Toru's arm. "I thought I wouldn't be so vain as to appreciate being celebrated as heroes, but I'm happy they recognize Toru for who he is."

"I'm not that sure who I am," Toru said and scratched his head.

"One hell of a kitty, that's what you are," Varg teased him playfully.

"I know that," Toru retorted. "But Duril's monk friend didn't tell us much about me. He just spoke weirdly like that old witch Agatha."

Varg grinned as he remembered Toru's short encounter with the librarian. Elidias had examined him shortly and told him that he would be a great tiger; at which, of course, Toru had replied that he was already great, making the old man laugh wholeheartedly.

They had spent the last few weeks helping the people carve a new path for themselves. The pearls and other gemstones gathered by the merchants were, indeed, gone, much to the chagrin of the captain of the Greed of the Sea, Margrave. The pirate ship was also gone, eager, without a doubt, for a new adventure. That was something they all felt the need of as the days were growing lazier, and there was less and less for them to do. He could read the same restlessness in Toru's eyes. Duril was more accustomed to the rhythms of a human settlement, as he hadn't been that much of a traveler before they had left Whitekeep together, but he and the tigershifter both could feel the call of the road once more.

A new purpose was growing like a strong tree within their hearts. Varg could tell that the bond between them was also increasingly more powerful. The battles they had carried so far didn't leave them as much with scars as with the knowledge that there was a path of greatness before them. They only had to walk it.

"What do you say, my friends?" Varg asked. "Do you reckon that we should finally take our leave and head over to where the road takes us?"

"Oh yeah," Toru said enthusiastically. "We might just get fat and lazy if we only stay in one place." He patted his belly and smoothed down his shirt while throwing a critical look at his girth.

"Are you complaining about having too much to eat? That will be the day."

As far as Varg could tell, the tigershifter was unchanged, but maybe he only needed an excuse to depart from Shroudharbor without feeling guilty about leaving newfound friends behind.

Speaking of which, Varg stole a short look behind them. Claw was leaning against the outer wall protecting the city, and while he pretended to be lost in a world of his own, it was easy to tell he was keenly listening to their conversation.

"I would like to visit Elidias one last time and thank him for all the help he gave us," Duril said.

"And I promised Moony I'd play with him all afternoon," Toru added.

"That little boy will have you promise that you'll come back," Varg reminded him.

Toru nodded solemnly. "I won't forget anyone."

No, he was wrong to say that there was no change in the tigershifter. He was as handsome as ever, and all the hardships they had gone through had yet to put their mark on his youth, but he was no longer the same drifter from before. His eyes now lit up with kindness when he looked at people, and Varg could tell that room had been made inside that young heart for everyone that had come to depend on him and his valiant actions.

"We'll travel back the same way once we're done vanquishing that evil thing," Toru said. "And we'll visit everyone."

“Moony might grow up to be a man in his own right by the time that happens,” Varg said. “I have a feeling that the road before us is neither short, nor narrow. So we’ll have to decide where to go next. Duril, maybe you can convince Elidias to offer more than strange words of wisdom.”

Duril laughed. “You’re giving me quite the task. I doubt I can come back victorious from this quest.”

“You battled a sea demon,” Varg pointed out.

“Battled wouldn’t be the right term. I only spoke to her.”

“And that helped her find her heart and return to her true self. It was more than enough to enable us to win the battle.”

“You make it sound like I did everything, and it’s not true,” Duril protested. “I only did my part.”

“You’re too modest. A fair share of this fairytale belongs to you,” Varg said.

“I say so, too,” Toru agreed. “Shall we find each other later?”

“Yes, and kitty, get ready to say your teary goodbyes now. By tomorrow, we should be hitting the road like there’s no other thing to hit in the entire world.”

“Who’s going to cry?” Toru bristled.

Varg patted him on the shoulder. “Not you, I’m sure. But everyone here that is already enamored with you will surely shed a few tears.”

That was enough to make Toru hide his claws. Varg could understand the tiger’s vulnerability when it came to trusting people, but it was something he truly needed to discover how to do. The world could give back as much as it was given, and while the orphaned tigershifter from a long time ago might not be willing to acknowledge it, the day by day reality was changing his heart with all the proofs of love that came from others.

Duril and Toru hurried to their visits, leaving Varg alone with Claw. He had been quite surprised, and even a tiny bit jealous, at how well Toru had gotten along with the bearshifter. They both appreciated teasing him just the same, which wasn’t much appreciated back, but he could tell neither did it because of ill intentions. If anything, there was some similarity between the two that made Varg believe that if he asked a certain question, he would receive the desired answer.

“Where to from here, Claw?” he asked directly.

Claw’s eyes lit up the moment he was addressed. “Eager to have me out of your hair, puppy?”

“Nothing like that.” Varg leaned against the wall and observed the other. “Will you go to that place you mentioned you were from? The Quiet Woods?”

“I miss them,” Claw admitted. “There’s no place on earth like it, I can tell you that.”

“No place like home,” Varg agreed. “Any soul on the face of the earth would say the same.”

Claw squared his shoulders proudly. During the last few weeks that they had spent in Shroudhabor, the bearshifter had managed to fill out his clothes more, although he had yet to achieve what was probably his usual appearance, by what Varg would guess. “You should see those woods, puppy. Fish frolicking in streams, bunnies and deer hopping and grazing through the trees, and ah, the smell of summer. To be there and feel the air, just that, and you’d be able to know what happiness means.” He raised his nose as if he could smell that scent of home, brought by the wind.

“Bears, as far as I know, are solitary creatures,” Varg said. “Do you have others you wish to return to?”

Claw’s eyes fogged for a bit. “Three hundred years of solitude might be enough even for a bear. And don’t forget that I’m a shifter, just like you. The part of me that’s human draws me to others.”

Varg nodded. “Are there human settlements around The Quiet Woods?”

“There used to be one, mostly hunters and fishermen, but who could tell now?”

Whoever those humans had been, even if they had enjoyed long lives, they could no longer be still alive to welcome their longtime acquaintance, if Claw had used to befriend them in the past. That was the law of nature, and shifters were blessed with long lives.

“Where are The Quiet Woods? I’ve never heard of them, let alone traveled there,” Varg admitted.

“They are far to the east.” Claw stretched one arm to point out the direction. “Where will you head next?”

“We hope that the librarian will tell us more about the next step of our journey. If not, we’re free to roam in search of our next challenge,” Varg explained.

“It is quite a noble quest you have,” Claw said.

“We don’t like to brag,” Varg replied with a small smile. “How would you feel about having some companions for the road ahead?”

“You think you’ll travel east, then?”

“We might all want to see The Quiet Woods if they’re as beautiful as you say they are. That is, if there’s no urgency that demands us to be someplace else.”

Varg could tell that Claw liked the idea quite a lot. He didn’t want to let it show, but he was obviously happy about being invited to join the group if only for a road trip.

“You helped us back there. I had no idea bears could hold their own so well in a sea battle, on the deck of a ship thrown about by stormy waters.”

“This bear can,” Claw said proudly. “I owed it to these people,” he added, a bit more quietly. “Three hundred years ago when I set foot in this place, I was young and reckless and served as a tool for those knaves that pretended to be merchants. Now I’m a changed bear.”

“They fooled you like they fooled everyone,” Varg offered. “As for being changed, except for no longer being a spring chicken, I don’t think too much could be different.”

Claw laughed and patted his belly. “Don’t mention chicken. This stomach got so overly used to lizards and rats. Now I feel like I should have a second breakfast.”

Varg patted his shoulder. “If you come with us, fear not. We could go hungry every now and then, so your appetite for small crawling creatures might again be found to be useful.”

“If you say so, puppy. Hunger never scared me.”

Varg nodded. “You’re quite the bear, flea bag. Not many would have remained sane in that labyrinth.”

“Are you trying to throw me a compliment?”

“Yeah, why not? Toru likes you. That’s enough for me to have you come along with us, or us with you.”

Claw let out a small sigh. His eyes wandered to the east. “To think that I’d ever grow to miss being around people. But things change, and so do I.”

Toru took in the straight streets at the center of Shroudharbor that lost themselves in much more sinewy and less manicured ones as he headed over to the fishmongers’ neighborhood. During the last few weeks, he had become a fixture at Naella’s house, and even her husband, Teutron, was welcoming him with open arms, so much so in fact that he was starting to feel like a freeloader who always ate the lion’s – or better said the tiger’s – share. When he had once expressed his worry that he was leaving them without much needed food, Teutron had just patted his back and laughed wholeheartedly. “You saved my little boy. You are welcome to my beard and ears, too, if you want them.”

At that, of course, he had made quite a face, which in turn had caused another bout of laughter to erupt from the man’s large belly.

Naella never spared a thing to make him feel welcome. While she was a few good heads shorter than him, she was babying him like a good mother. It was strange to feel like such a child around

her sometimes, but he appreciated it nonetheless. No one in that family thought it weird that Naella put him at the table and caressed his head while placing plate after full plate in front of him.

The little boy, Moony, was, however, Toru's softest spot. He was a cheerful child, always up to new games, of which Toru was a constant part. The moments he had spent at this family's household were happy in a carefree way that reminded him of the childhood he hadn't had.

Yet, he was not sad. Every day was filling him with a new sense of wonder and warmth, and he knew he loved all these people and that he was loved back.

Moony was first to welcome him the moment he set foot inside the family's yard surrounding the small, but clean, house. "Toru," he shouted excitedly, "look!" The boy softened the r sound in his name as he couldn't still pronounce words clearly, but Naella praised him for how fast he learned everything. Toru could only agree, and it wasn't just Naella's pride as a mother that painted the little boy in that light. He was truly smart for his age, and also brave, as Toru recalled how he had kept on his back with his tiny hands while he was fighting the evil shroud at the house of merchants.

He crouched by the child's side and they both looked at the shiny bug walking slowly on a blade of grass. "Never seen one like it," he said.

"He's so pretty," Moony declared.

Only a boy that age could find bugs pretty, but Toru wasn't about to debate that with Moony. Seeing the world through the eyes of a child offered him a new way to discover everything around him.

Naella was in the door, wiping her hands on her apron. Teutron, most probably, was at the harbor, waiting for the fishermen to come back. "Are you hungry, Toru?" she called out. "The fish stew is just about ready."

He would have thought that he would get sick of eating so much food coming from the sea, but nothing like that had happened. It could be Naella's cooking that might have prevented that, or he simply felt so welcome that denying food from these people would have felt like bad behavior on his part. Or maybe he really liked the fish stew they made in Shroudharbor, even if a little spicy.

"I can wait," Toru said. "And Moony just found a new bug."

Naella laughed. "He's much into bugs these days."

Toru stood and allowed Moony to observe the bug with the fascination of a child. He followed Naella into the house. "I came to say goodbye." The word lodged in his throat, and he looked away for a moment.

The woman stopped her moving about and faced him. Her eyes were sad but also filled with gratitude and kindness. She grabbed the edge of her apron and dabbed at them a couple of times.

Then she gave Toru a smile as big as the sun shining above Shroudharbor. “We knew you couldn’t stay forever.”

Toru cleared his throat. “I’d say that I ate enough of your supplies of food.”

Naella laughed and waved a towel at him. “Don’t you ever say a word about that. Teutron especially shouldn’t hear you talking such nonsense or he’ll get mad at you. Where are you lads heading out next?”

“We don’t know yet, but there must be other places where that evil might be rearing its ugly head as we speak.”

Naella’s eyes wandered briefly. “You did us a world of good by coming here. I suppose we cannot keep you for ourselves, as much as we wouldn’t mind doing that.” With that, she walked closer and gave him a tight hug. Then she gestured for him to lean toward her so that she could kiss his forehead.

Toru blushed, a bit embarrassed by so much affection coming from someone who had only been a stranger until not so long ago. “I don’t know how I’m going to say goodbye to Moony,” he admitted.

“I’ll help you, don’t worry. Don’t be surprised to see Teutron crying more than him.”

Toru began laughing. “I don’t think he will. He’s a rough and tough man, your husband.”

Naella nodded. “He is, but he also has a heart of gold, as little as he might show it to people he doesn’t know. But we’re no longer strangers, are we?”

“We’re not,” Toru agreed. “We’re good friends now.”

Naella hugged him one more time and finally let him go. “Sure thing, he’ll just say that something got in his eye and he might act all brave, but rest assured that he’ll shed a tear.”

That was just what Varg had told him. He would just keep it a secret from the wolfshifter that he might have shed one of his tears, too, while saying goodbye to this friendly family that had welcomed him as one of their own.

Duril sat across from Elidias in the bell tower, sipping from his cup of tea and feeling at peace after all the upheaval from before. The librarian fretted about, while searching for something that he had yet to disclose to his visitor. “Where did I put that?” he mumbled to himself while opening and pushing back drawers and occasionally scattering papers around.

There was something welcoming and pleasant in the disarray Elidias left in his wake. He didn’t appear to be the most orderly person, but Duril liked it there, in the bell tower, feeling the warm

wind on his face. Not so long ago, he had stood in the same place, but at the horizon a storm was brewing, and they were just about to face the biggest battle of their lives to date.

He waited patiently for Elidias to finish his rummaging so that he could ask him about the pearl they had taken from Claw's belly. After placing it inside his pouch when they had been trapped in the labyrinth, Duril had expected the pearl to disappear just like the rest of the gemstones gathered by the greedy merchants. And yet, that large pearl had remained tucked away and showed no signs of wanting to disappear like its siblings.

"Ah, finally here." Elidias came back to the table with a small pouch of what looked to be tea herbs.

"Did you put yourself through that ordeal only to give me the tea leaves I asked for that time?" Duril asked apologetically.

"Ha!" Elidias exclaimed. "I've got plenty of that for you. But this, my friend, is different than that. Keep it with you and use it only in the direst of moments."

Duril accepted the offering and felt the pouch a little. There appeared to be nothing but dried leaves inside. "Do I make it into a tea or --"

"You must set them on fire and have the one affected smell the smoke," Elidias explained.

"Affected by what?" Duril asked.

For a moment, the librarian appeared to ponder and took a long look at the bell hovering above them. "That I cannot tell you."

Well, he hadn't let his hopes get too high anyway, so he took what he could.

"I wanted to ask you about something," Duril started and took the pearl they had taken from Claw out of his pouch. He had wrapped it in a piece of cloth, so, when he revealed it, the pearl had the same translucence as if it had been brushed to a shine. Not a speck of dust could be seen on it.

"Where did you get this?" Elidias asked, visibly astonished with the appearance and size of the pearl.

"I didn't ask you about it before because I was expecting it to disappear just like the rest of the gemstones gathered by the merchants. But it looks like nothing of the kind is going to happen. Forgive me for not coming to you with it sooner."

Elidias just nodded and pursed his lips as he took the pearl and examined it closely. "This is quite impressive, my friend," he commented. "Where did you say you got it?"

"It was lodged inside Claw's wound. We took it out when we met him in the labyrinth at the house of merchants."

Elidias continued his careful perusal. "It must be because it was not the merchants but you who took it out the bear's belly. That is quite interesting. Let me find something." With that, the librarian began to rummage again through his large collection of tomes and scattered papers. This time, it didn't take him long to find what he was looking for. "Aha," he said with satisfaction, "I found it."

Duril waited patiently for his host to go through the text written in tiny ant-like letters on the yellowed pages.

Elidias leaned back and smiled as his eyes moved over the paper. "It appears that you uncovered quite the artefact, dear friend. This pearl will show you things and distant places that you wouldn't normally be able to see with the naked eye."

"Like the titan's eye," Duril whispered, mostly to himself.

"No," Elidias contradicted him with unhidden glee. "Much better than that. You can ask the pearl what you want to see. And its hidden farsight can reach much farther than any titan's eye in the world."

Duril was rightfully intrigued. "And all I need to do is ask it?"

"Who was the one to extract the pearl out of the bear's belly? It was you, right?"

Duril nodded. "Yes." Then he paused, remembering, "And Varg. I started and Varg finished."

"The pearl demands a bond. Given its origins, the price it asks for is blood. Don't let that scare you. You see, even if this pearl was brought into existence by a dark curse, it is a pure gem, as much a part of the heavens as it is of the sea. The fisherman who gave his life for the giant pearl that washed up on these shores knew that."

"What is the bond it demands?" Duril asked, now avid to learn more about it.

Elidias cleared his throat. "It says here," he began reading, "that under a full moon, those who helped the pearl emerge should pour a drop of their blood on it."

"Is that all?" Duril asked, unsure of whether a thing of such a great importance shouldn't require a lot more from the one handling it. "So, only Varg and I have to pour drops of our blood on it?"

Elidias gave him an unreadable look. "It isn't only you two who helped the pearl emerge into existence."

"Of course," Duril realized. "Claw is its rightful owner."

Elidias waved. "There is no such thing as an owner. This pearl, like any magical artefact, is only lent to you by powers beyond our comprehension. And it is the matter of the bond I want to talk to you about."

“Please, continue. I apologize for interrupting so much.”

Elidias shook his head like he wasn't bothered in the least. “The bond required must happen between you, Varg and Claw. Without it, the pearl won't reveal its wisdom. And I don't have to tell you that the blood of all three of you is needed for the ritual.”

“The bond, what is it about?” Duril asked tentatively. “One of friendship?”

“It needs to be much stronger than that.” Elidias linked his hands over the top of his belly and scrutinized Duril, his shrewd eyes twinkling under his caterpillar-like eyebrows.

“But what could be stronger --” He blushed and looked away. What was he thinking, blurting out impossible things in front of the old librarian? He barely knew Claw.

“That is also something you will need to figure out if you ever want to use the pearl. Unfortunately, there isn't much else I can tell you.”

Duril shook his head to get rid of the strange fantasies his mind was attempting to conjure. “Can I ask you something else?”

Elidias wrapped the pearl carefully back into the cloth and handed it back to Duril so that he could place it inside his pouch. “Go ahead. I already know you came to say goodbye, and I wish to help you as much as I can before you take your leave.”

Duril didn't stop to question how the librarian knew that. “Where should we head to from here?”

Elidias let out a small chuckle. “How did you find your way so far? What brought you, the wolf, and the tiger to Shroudharbor?”

“We mostly followed our instincts and Toru's nose,” Duril admitted.

“That worked quite well. Continue to follow what your hearts tell you. And I can tell you this. Accompanying a friend always makes the road feel shorter.”

Duril could blame it on a trick of the light or his own eyes, but he could swear that Elidias had winked all-knowingly at him.

“Drink your tea,” Elidias encouraged him. “You lads will find your way.”

For their last night in Shroudharbor, they decided to sleep outside, under the clear sky. None of them was keen to stay indoors in such sweet weather. Varg was waiting for Toru and Duril around a small fire he had built with Claw's help. They were at the outskirts of the city once more, so that they could decide on the next step to take on their journey.

Having the bearshifter as company for the entire day had proven much more pleasant than the wolfshifter had first imagined. Claw had told him tales from The Quiet Woods, and Varg had responded in kind with stories from Whitekeep. As much as they had teased each other, they appeared to have a lot in common, besides being shifters.

Toru and Duril emerged from the shadows, holding hands. They must have met somewhere before coming here, and Varg could only guess what sweet words the two exchanged when no one was listening.

“Have you said your goodbyes?” he asked them after greeting them.

Toru sighed and reclined on his back. He placed his hands under his head and looked at the sky. “It wasn’t easy,” he admitted quietly.

“Did you cry a lot?” Varg teased him.

“Not me,” Toru retorted. “But Teutron did, even more than Moony.”

“Get out of here!” Varg laughed. “That burly surly man?”

“I swear,” Toru replied. “He kept hugging me like he wasn’t going to see me again forever! And Naella couldn’t take him away from me as easily as she did with Moony!”

Varg shook his head. “So it was a teary goodbye, after all. There will be even more tears tomorrow, when the entire city will see us off.”

“I don’t like to see people crying,” Toru said.

“They cry because they’re happy to have known you,” Duril hurried to appease the tigershifter’s sadness.

“Or maybe they’re happy to get rid of us,” Varg said with another laugh. “I was talking to Claw, and I don’t see why we shouldn’t travel east with him until he reaches his home, The Quiet Woods. What do you say? Did Elidias tell you anything about our next destination, Duril?”

Duril shook his head. “As expected, he didn’t say much, except to follow our hearts as we’ve done so far.”

“Then the choice is easy,” Toru said cheerfully. “We’ll go with Claw to The Quiet Woods.”

Duril was the only one who hadn’t said a word about this decision.

Varg set his eyes on him. The healer seemed preoccupied with something. Maybe he couldn’t speak about it openly, which meant that later, he would have to take him aside and talk to him. “What do you say, Duril? Should we go with Claw and see his home?”

“Of course, of course,” Duril hurried to say. “We should do as you all say.”

Yes, definitely, something was up. Suddenly, the healer opened his pouch and took out the pearl they had taken out of Claw’s belly.

“How come it didn’t disappear like the rest?” he asked aloud what the others were thinking.

Duril stared at the pearl, holding it in his palm for everyone to see it clearly. “Elidias says it’s a magical artefact that could help us see far and wide.”

Toru came closer, excited by the prospect. “Like the titan’s eye Onyx had?”

“Better than that, according to Elidias. Only that,” Duril hesitated for a moment, “some things are needed to make it work.”

“What things?” Varg asked.

He followed Duril’s eyes as they moved to Claw. So, he thought, he wasn’t wrong to assume that the bear would be sticking with them for a while.

Chapter Two – Our Bond

Duril fidgeted before attempting to explain to them what was required for the pearl to work as an all-seeing eye. He was the most troubled, without a doubt, about how Toru would react to that. As any orphan, feeling left out from that bond wouldn't sit well with him, so Duril was now struggling to find the right words so that his fragile heart wouldn't feel wounded.

He held the pearl, looking at it for any sign of the magic inside it, maybe something that could advise him how to go about this troublesome task. In the end, he drew a long breath and began talking. "When we were in that labyrinth," he said as he turned toward Toru and looked into his eyes, "Varg and I extracted the pearl from Claw's belly wound."

Toru nodded and smiled. "So you helped him get rid of it? It was like a curse from those merchants, right?"

"Pearls are symbols of wisdom and purity," Duril said, "and even if the way they were brought into this world on land was through ill means, their nature doesn't change. However, to be able to make use of the magical power of this pearl, Elidias told me that between those involved a strong bond must develop. The ritual requires that all those linked by the bond must let a drop of blood fall on the pearl on a night with a full moon."

"A bond?" Toru asked. "Between you and Varg and Claw?"

Duril nodded.

"What kind of bond?" the next question came.

"That was something Elidias couldn't tell me," Duril admitted in all honesty.

"So like him to leave the most important things out," Varg commented.

Claw was following their conversation with keen eyes. "You have an artefact that appears to be of doubtful use. I like you and puppy here, but I intend to go home, not travel the world with you."

Duril nodded thoughtfully. "Still, it is an item of significant importance, and we cannot leave it behind. Maybe during our long road toward The Quiet Woods, we will be able to unravel its secrets. After that, of course, we will leave you at your home and see about our journey, wherever that may take us."

Claw shifted his weight from one foot to another. It appeared that something was bothering him.

Varg was the one to nudge him playfully in the ribs. "Something on your mind, flea bag?"

Claw scratched his head. "Call me a silly bear, but I don't like talking of goodbyes just yet. Good thing the road to my home is, indeed, a long one. We can figure out what the bond requires of us

while we're heading there. And it might be a boon for you to figure out where you are supposed to travel from The Quiet Woods if the pearl proves of any use."

"It could light our path. So far, we've walked through a fog, although Toru's nose has not faltered on us," Varg admitted.

"It did a good job at getting us into trouble," Toru said.

Duril let out a small laugh. "I hope you're not upset about being excluded from this bond required by the pearl," he said, relieved that Toru didn't appear to care.

The tigershifter shrugged. "Why would I be? I have my bond with all of you."

That was true, and it could be that even without knowing it consciously, Toru had said a wise thing. Their bond was already formed, and not even the one needed for bringing a magical artefact to life could rival it.

"Well, we'll have plenty of time to figure out what all this is about," Duril concluded. "It's getting late and since there's a long road ahead of us starting tomorrow, I suppose that you all agree with me that it's time for us to catch some sleep."

The others murmured in agreement. Everyone must be already thinking of what waited for them and what the next day would bring, and maybe went to sleep wishing to dream of new adventures.

Toru caressed Duril's elbow, waking him up slowly. The healer shifted in his sleep, so Toru embraced him from behind and kissed his neck, dabbing his nape with his tongue. That appeared to have the desired effect because Duril finally stirred to wakefulness.

"What is it?" Duril whispered. "Can't sleep?"

"Varg woke up a while ago. I think he went for a little walk under the moon." He pointed at the sky above. The dark canvas was peppered with stars and the moon hung off the roof of the world, not yet at its fullest, but getting there.

"We haven't told him," Duril said quietly so that they didn't wake up Claw with their chatter. "About us."

"We didn't quite have the time, but I think we should," Toru replied. "And, if you agree," he leaned in so that he could whisper, "we should seal our bond tonight."

He hoped that Duril understood what he meant without the need for additional details. His heart was ready, and so was his body. For a while now, he had been waiting for an opportunity and wanted to go for it without doubting himself for a moment. He stood and offered Duril his hand,

and the healer took it. Under the light of the stars, they could see each other well, so all he needed to know was written in those kind eyes staring back at him like no one had ever done before.

Varg sat on a mossy mound and tilted his head back. The moon was not yet full, but his heart, once more, was filled with longing. He had traveled a lot in his lifetime so far, but it didn't mean that he never missed his home. He had missed it, more often than not, and the sensation that his roots were left farther and farther behind came upon him strongly in moments like this. Tomorrow they would leave again, and he wouldn't have any more time to spare to think such thoughts.

His keen hearing caught the sound of footsteps carefully treading in his direction. "Who's there?" he asked in an authoritative voice, although he had an inkling who it was sneaking close at this hour.

From the forest behind him, Toru and Duril emerged, walking hand in hand.

"You two young lads should sleep," he said, pretending to speak in a fatherly tone now.

"Who are you calling young?" Duril asked, to his surprise. The healer had a small secretive smile on his face as he moved nearer.

"You are much younger than me," Varg pointed out, and made room for his two late-night visitors on his mossy mound.

"Shapeshifters live such long lives, indeed," the healer admitted.

Duril sat by his right, and Toru by his left. First, he was surprised by how Toru suddenly dashed his head right into his shoulder. It didn't hurt, and there was something playful in how he did that. Duril, on the other hand, caressed his thigh gently but firmly.

"What are you two up to?" Varg asked, his voice going husky and low.

Toru rubbed his head against him a couple of times as if he was able, in human form, to imprint his particular scent on Varg. When he snuck one hand along Varg's thigh, it lacked the surety of how Duril moved his, but made up for it with enthusiasm.

"Now, wait a minute," Varg barely had the time to say thickly before he was pushed down on his back, and his legs were claimed by strong ones, entangling themselves around his. "Are you two trying to pick a fight?" he asked in a playful tone.

Whatever those two miscreants had in mind, it clearly didn't even come close to anything resembling a fight. Their hands were now on his chest, tugging at his shirt and rubbing the hard muscle beneath it. Varg let out a small laugh, but Toru bit him, delicately but still, on the neck, turning his laughter into a short gasp. "Kitty," he whispered breathlessly, "what are you doing?"

Toru thought it wise to move and straddle him, while Duril moved closer to his side and began to pepper his cheek and the side of his neck with small kisses, his hand moving up to caress his shoulder and then down his arm.

“You two are in quite the naughty mood tonight, aren’t you?” he asked, although it was getting harder and harder to talk while being attacked so sweetly.

“We thought,” Duril whispered in his ear, “that it was about time we sealed our bond. It was Toru’s idea. But I like it, too.”

Varg didn’t doubt that the tigershifter was the naughtiest of the two of them. He was now kneading his chest like he was trying to make dough out of it. Clearly, he was getting a bit frustrated with having the shirt in the way. Toru grabbed the hem of his shirt and began pulling it up until it went over his face. Varg laughed. “Toru, I can’t breathe!”

“Then you should undress already,” Toru replied in his usual prickly voice which he used when something wasn’t quite to his liking.

A kitten through and through. It had to be his way, or else, he would make it his way. Varg struggled to get out of his shirt, which he eventually succeeded in removing with Duril’s dutiful help. “So, you thought of making me part of your little pact?” he asked. “I noticed you two sneaking about, like two lovebirds.”

“We’re not birds, and we’re three,” Toru argued.

“Far from me to believe us to be owners of beaks and feathers, then,” Varg acquiesced. “We’re all fur, and claws, and growls, right?”

Toru roared, but in his human form. He wasn’t quite as impressive as he was when he was a tiger. But, at this point, Varg didn’t want to draw his attention to that.

“And we are also gentle and kind,” he added, as he turned his head to look at Duril.

Toru was much pleased with having Varg with his chest bared so he could lean in and rub his face against it, beginning to purr. The kitty was marking him in all possible ways, it seemed, and it didn’t bother him in the least.

Or, better said, he was a bit bothered, but that kind of bother was of the sweetest kind. Toru was rubbing his entire body against him now and it was turning his skin hot and his body taut. Varg pulled Duril in for a kiss and let it linger until Toru growled, interrupting his purr, to be paid attention, too. “Are you sure this is what both of you want?” he asked unsteadily.

“It is,” Duril confirmed and his eyelashes fluttered.

It was so like the gentle healer to admit to such things while being embarrassed. There was something more powerful than his embarrassment, it seemed, as he didn't move away and, instead, placed another tentative kiss on Varg's lips.

"Of course it is," Toru gave his reply, too, and the next thing Varg knew, his trousers were removed from his legs and the tigershifter began rubbing his body against other areas that were much more bound to show their satisfaction in being treated like that.

"And do you think it's fair, you naughty ones, to remain clothed while you lay me bare and at your mercy?"

Toru snickered at that with the naughtiness of youth that was on his side. Varg knew at that moment that his regrets from before were slowly starting to fade and melt away. Who said that home needed to be a place? Just as easily, it could be two other people, those who held him dear, and who he held dear, as well.

He didn't have time to reflect too long on that. Toru undressed hastily and Duril moved away from him just enough to discard his clothes. Now, they were three naked bodies, enjoying themselves and drinking from one another to slake the thirst in their souls.

It was Toru who took matters, as they say, into his own hands. Varg hummed appreciatively as those loving, calloused hands moved over his manhood and grabbed it, teasing it roughly, but not with less than complete adoration. He knew a devoted lover when he saw one, and he knew that Toru must have been waiting for that moment just as much as he had.

All this time, Duril didn't sit idly by, and he started to caress Varg's chest, running his fingers through the coarse hair with timid desire. "I won't break if you're a little rough," he whispered into the healer's ear.

"Good to know," Toru replied in Duril's stead.

Varg was just about to protest that it hadn't been meant for him, but the words died in his throat when a hot mouth descended over his manhood and swallowed half of it in one go. "Should I worry?" he asked no one in particular.

"No," Duril hurried to assure him. "Toru is amazing at..." he stopped and swallowed his words.

Varg chuckled as his desire soared. Toru spared nothing to make his manhood and entire body tremble with newfound passion. When Duril began doing the same thing to his nipples, he groaned in disbelief. There he had been, only moments ago, feeling sorry for himself, for leaving a world he knew behind, and now he was made whole by lips and fingers that uncovered him and his longing slowly but surely.

Duril left a small trail of kisses as he moved lower, and Varg could tell that his two companions were using his manhood as the ground for a fierce battle of tongues. "Kitty, I hope you know what

you're doing," he mumbled as he threw one arm over his eyes and moaned in unbridled ecstasy. "You too, Duril."

"We know," Toru replied as if it was some kind of impudence even to imply that he would be bad or unknowledgeable of such a thing.

"Then go a little slower if you don't want me spent so quickly."

"The night is young, and we believe that someone like you should have no trouble finding more passion in himself," Duril said breathlessly.

Toru's love must have awakened a new man inside the healer's body. Never before could Varg remember having imagined the silent shy half-orc ordering his potions down at the market to be such a passionate being. He was a better self, someone new, with all the qualities of the one he had been before, but also with more to show for only a lucky few to see.

Varg was grateful for being among those few. And he was even more grateful now for the hot lips indulging in his release as neither Toru nor Duril shied away as his manhood reached its point of no return.

He was given kisses as he struggled to have his breath return to a normal pace. The night was young, indeed, he thought as he looked at the moon above. And it was one for firsts, even in his long and adventurous life.

As his two naughty companions moved to each side, he wrapped his arms around them and gave each a loud kiss. "How come you thought of making me part of this?" he addressed the question to Toru, who was clearly in charge of the sweet attack tonight.

"You were part of it already, I mean, a part of us," Toru replied and nuzzled his cheek with unhidden affection.

"Does it mean that you're going to stop teasing me from now on? No longer calling me 'mutt' and all that?"

As expected, a small snort was the answer. He grinned and Toru kissed him fiercely.

"I will call you 'mutt'. And I will tease you," the tigershifter promised.

"So, bad of me to think I could get a little more out of this deal. Then I should take advantage of tonight while you're still so mellow toward me and you let me do things to you."

He turned the tables on Toru and rolled, catching him underneath. At the same time, he pulled Duril near and let his hand wander down to a plump behind. He kissed the healer and then asked him, "Did Toru make love to you like this?" His hand became more daring, pushing apart the cheeks and seeking something.

“He did,” Duril admitted in a short whisper.

“Do you want Duril first?” Toru asked but wrapped his long legs around him, letting him know he wanted everything and he wanted it right at that moment.

It was the healer’s turn to laugh. “I think I will let you have that pleasure first. You two,” he added, his voice a bit hitched as Varg continued to explore him with his fingers, “are already like this. And I... I’d love to watch you together.”

“From up close, I hope,” Varg joked while holding Duril in a grip that glued him to his body.

He continued to play with the healer’s firm behind as Toru altered his position to better align their bodies so that they could fuse into one.

“I must be dreaming,” he murmured breathlessly, as a myriad of sensations blossomed throughout his entire body, at any place he was in contact with another warm person.

There was no other place in the world he would rather be, he realized, as Toru’s warmth engulfed him. They moved so slowly at first, and he was lucky to have Duril to hold him because otherwise, he might have made a fool of himself by toppling over Toru and finishing too soon.

Like this, he was held between two people who also embodied his two most important certainties in life. He was there because it was a choice he had made with his heart, and he was also there because a twist of fate had made it so. Nonetheless, there was nothing for him left to regret. The wound of his heart was slowly closing. It would turn into a scar, and he would never forget why it was there and who put it there, but he wouldn’t have to tend to it all the time, picking at the scabs.

Toru’s body was warm, firm, and quickly pulling him in. And he was purring loudly now. That was enough to drive him mad with so much desire. He breathed deeply and began increasing his rhythm, all the while Duril was kissing him and allowing him to use his body to heighten his arousal.

Later on, when he was again on his back looking at the stars, with both of them by his side, he was as happy as he could ever recall being. Of course, due to the mischievous nature of his bond sharers, he was barely allowed a breather, and Toru was helping Duril climb on top of him and use him.

“Toru, I’m afraid I’m too heavy,” Duril expressed his worry.

“The mutt can take it,” Toru replied to his protests in the same matter-of-fact manner.

He could, indeed, and to prove that without talking anymore, he took hold of Duril’s hips and pulled him close so that their bodies could become one just as he had done before with Toru. Duril’s breathing deepened, and it appeared to be in synch with his own. They were not different souls and different bodies tonight.

Toru didn't appear keen on sitting idly by while he and Duril made love. He naughtily pushed his member close to Varg's face, and he accepted it gladly.

"You two are so beautiful," Duril whispered as he moved to the same rhythm as Varg.

"We are all beautiful together," Toru decided and pulled Duril to him by the back of the neck so that they could kiss.

Between the taste on his lips and the pressure on his manhood, Varg could not say if one sensation was stronger than the other. It was a constant battle, and neither appeared to be the victor. Not that he minded, seeing how he could easily draw pleasure and be held at its peak by both people who were loving him right now, in the most physical sense.

It was the fusing of their hearts that mattered more. It was because of them that he could be happy once more, free of the pain from before. To walk forward, one needed to close each room of his heart and seal it, not to forget about it, but to be able to live and honor the living.

He could feel warm droplets pouring over his chest and belly, and he increased the intensity with which he lavished Toru's member with the movements of his mouth and tongue. He was aware of Toru and Duril kissing above him, and he was certain it had been the tigershifter's skilled hand that had helped the healer release his passion all over him.

Toru followed close behind, and then, there was no longer room for him, or stamina, to postpone his own. They lay together in a sweaty heap, struggling to find their breaths.

"I said it before," he began in a kind voice, as kind as he could muster given the circumstances, "you two are my pack, but I want to say it once again. Know this, Toru and Duril, you are my tribe now."

"We are honored to have this responsibility," Duril whispered and kissed his cheek.

"You're not the leader, though," Toru took care to remind him right away. "We're equals."

Varg laughed, his breath still having some trouble getting back to normal. "I will let you have it, kitty, if it's so important to you."

"It is," Toru confirmed and pinched his side just to stop his chuckling.

"You two taught me that, too," Varg admitted. "That it doesn't matter how big and strong you are. It is sometimes wits and kindness," he said as he caressed Duril's head, "and other times, impetuosity and rashness, that can get the job done."

"You're more than big and strong." To his surprise, those were Toru's words, not Duril's. "You have wits and kindness, too. And, I don't know, you came with us on this trip. I think you must be rash, too, even though you might not care to admit it."

“For your sake, I will admit it,” Varg replied. “You two are something else, teaching me so many things. I’m eager to learn and to move forward like never before in my life. And here I was, thinking that I might have lived enough.”

“You’re not old, mutt,” Toru said with a snort. “Yes, yes, I know, older than me, but that doesn’t mean much since I’m a shifter, too.”

“If you say so. I must have this silver in my hair for nothing then,” Varg said and laughed.

“It is not for nothing, and Toru is right. You have wisdom, too, and it has helped us through thick and thin,” Duril said.

“I can only hope that it will continue to do the same,” Varg said. “What do you say about the road ahead of us?” He looked at the stars above and they blinked back at him in complicity. It was the most beautiful night of his life.

“No matter what dangers, we will face them all head on,” Toru promised.

“We will prevail, I’m sure,” Duril said with the same certainty. “As long as we’re together, we will do so.”

“I’m glad to have such strong people by my side,” Varg said as he pulled them close so that he could kiss them on the cheeks.

“You’re still the strongest.” Toru poked him in the ribs with playful viciousness. “Ah, wait, as long as Claw is with us --”

Varg stopped him from talking more by biting him gently on the cheek. “Say one more word,” he growled, “and I might do something.”

“Like what?” Toru asked, completely unfazed by such toothless threats.

“I might have to brawl with Claw, just to see who the toughest of us is.”

“Psh, he’s stronger,” Toru argued right away. “I’m sure he can play with you as I would play with a thread ball.”

Duril laughed, and Varg grinned. “Did you just admit to like playing with yarn, kitty?”

No wonder there, Toru bristled right away. “It is just a way of saying. I’m a tiger, I don’t play with yarn.”

“I’ll have Duril find some for you, and then we’ll see whether that’s true or not.”

“I’m telling you,” Toru began, but then he stopped and pointed at the sky. “What’s that? Is it a shooting star?”

“Quick, make a wish,” Duril said, as they all stared at the thread of light unfurling on the night sky.

He knew exactly what his wish was. To be together with Duril and Toru all his life, from here on out to all eternity.

“What do you know of the road to The Quiet Woods, Claw?” Toru asked first thing in the morning.

All his life, he had welcomed the unknown, and he wasn’t afraid of it. But now, he was curious. It was early morning, and they were gathered around the extinguished fire, preparing to say their last goodbyes and be on their way. Varg and Duril were already inside the city to gather supplies, as much as they could carry, as the people of Shroudharbor had promised them. Varg had said something about needing to be with Duril so that the gentle healer didn’t end up accepting everything, only to discover that they couldn’t carry as much as the people were willing to saddle them with.

That was also the reason why he had stayed behind, too. If the people saw him, they were bound to try to get him to accept all sorts of gifts, and while he enjoyed the attention, he was inclined to agree with Varg’s more practical nature in this regard.

“It is a long road. The Quiet Woods are far, far to the east,” Claw explained.

“What is it like between here and there? Are there many human settlements?”

“Not so many,” Claw continued. “The weather changes and so does the land. Enjoy the look and smell of these forests and the sea, as we won’t see much of them again for a long time. In one week, at most, we will notice the first signs of the great desert.”

“The great desert?” Toru felt his ears perking up at that. “Does it have a name?”

“Some call it the Badlands. Some only refer to it as the Great Barren. But its true name, the one given by the only beings that can live in there is --”

For some reason, Claw stopped, his eyes scouting the horizon like he could see the great desert already.

“Well, what is it?” Toru asked.

Claw threw him a curious look. “It’s Zukh Kalegh.”

Toru murmured the name, turning it in his mouth like it was a morsel of food he couldn’t decide whether it was worth eating or not. “That’s a strange name,” he eventually concluded.

“Strange doesn’t cover it. For many people, it drives the fear of gods and hells eternal into their very bones. You see, young tiger, Zukh Kalegh is not just a place. It’s a moving city; it’s the creatures that move with it.”

“A moving city?” The concept intrigued Toru more and more. “What kind of creatures are you talking about?”

“They move on two legs, but they’re not human. So much less so, even in their hearts that are tainted by bloodlust and hunger to plunder and kill. No, nothing is good inside their black hearts.”

“But what are they?” Toru insisted.

Claw gave him another long, hard look. “They’re orc, my friend, and we do better for ourselves if we stayed clear of their horde and malicious ways.”

Toru now understood the meaning of that look. “So, they’re like Duril.”

“Ha!” Claw didn’t appear in the least amused as he let out that exclamation. “Duril is only half if I’m correct, and for the good of everyone who has ever come to know him, his blood seems to have forgotten the origins of his sire.”

“He is kind and gentle.”

“Indeed,” Claw agreed, “even more so than humans and other races I have come to meet in my travels. He’s unique in his own right. And his mother must have been a beauty in her time.”

Toru nodded. “Yes, his eyes are very beautiful. I never asked him, but he must have gotten them from his mother.”

“That is the saving grace,” Claw said meditatively. “While his appearance at first sight might be enough to scare some unaware children, his soul is nothing but kind. For him, the challenge of meeting his kin on his father’s side might be quite great.”

“Why?” Toru asked, more and more curious about what Claw was trying to tell him.

Claw reclined on his back and looked ahead, like before. He was probably thinking of things of his own, but he didn’t speak of them. “When we see our kin, they are a mirror held in front of us. What we see may not always be what we want to see.”

“But Duril is not an orc. He’s more human.”

“He shares their blood. He might not be glad to face their evil ways.”

“You say that he’ll be sad to see what horrible monsters they are?”

Claw nodded solemnly.

“Then we’ll make sure to stay away from them. I bet they’re stinky, just as they’re big and ugly. We’ll be able to smell them from miles and miles away.” His knowledge of orcs was very sparse, and he didn’t know what needed to be done to stay away from them. “And I bet that you can hear them from miles away, too.”

“Don’t underestimate their cunning nature,” Claw warned. “The desert is their home. They’re honed by battle, they don’t mind pain, and they can march for nights without feeling thirsty or hungry.”

“For nights? Not days?”

“They seldom move in daylight. Some say that it’s because their skin can get too hot and their blood boils in their veins. But I don’t believe any of it. I’d say they like the night because they use its darkness as their veil of terror as they descend on their prey.”

Toru shuddered at that. Claw patted him on the back.

“In all truth, I haven’t been there for the last three hundred years, and the people here don’t appear to live under the orcish threat. So, who knows? Maybe they’ve become extinct.”

Toru had many other questions, but seeing Varg and Duril coming, he decided to keep his mouth shut.

Chapter Three – War Stories

The entire Shroudharbor was there to see them off. Toru didn't want to admit it, but he was overwhelmed. During his travels, he had never lingered for too long inside cities, the closed hearts of their residents being the main reason. He had always preferred smaller human settlements, where he could easily find a warm bed and a plate of food, as well as the occasional lover.

Dozens of hands reached to touch him from the sidelines, and he touched them back, squeezing them briefly, as the people, some happy, some in tears, wished him and his companions a safe journey, or expressed their hope that he would find his way back to them. Naella with Moony and her husband were sitting a bit farther back from the rest of the crowd, and they were waving at them. The woman's kind heart probably decided for her entire family that they had had the luxury of a proper goodbye. Still, Toru wished he could just walk over to them and give them one last hug.

Varg's heavy arm hooked around his shoulders. "It is goodbye, but only for now, friends," his voice boomed, cutting through the ruckus of the crowd. "We can't say when we'll be back, but what we know is that we will back, without a shadow of a doubt. In the name of my companions, I want to address my deepest gratitude to you for having us here."

Toru no longer listened, as his eyes just moved over the people gathered there. Everywhere he looked, there were only friendly faces, and in his life, he would have never thought such a thing to be possible for him, to be welcomed in one place and loved by so many.

They were seen off with wishes of goodwill and flower petals, and it was only after they were at a fair distance from the city that the reality of the new road ahead began to settle in.

"My nose," he exclaimed and touched it like there was something he could do to make it show them the way.

"What's wrong?" Duril hurried to ask him.

"I'm not smelling anything," he said. "What if I can't sense where we need to head to?"

"We're going to The Quiet Woods for now, and the road is long, as Claw told us," Duril hurried to assuage his fears. "And it's not like you sensed that scent you told us about all the time, right?"

"Oh, all right," he admitted, feeling a bit silly over getting worked up about such a thing.

Varg laughed and patted him on the back. "Are you starting to feel responsible for all the lives you've saved so far, kitty? I'd say that feeling should have come first."

Toru poked Varg's side with two fingers, making the wolfshifter wince and move away from him.

“Varg is just teasing you,” Duril said. “But you don’t have to worry. There are some things we’ve noticed so far in regard to our faceless enemy, aren’t there? First of all, no matter where we went, it surely had a way to find us and confront us, whether it so wanted to or not.”

“That’s true,” Toru admitted. “What if I’m the one that keeps dragging it from where it lays? What if --”

Varg shook his head. “Toru, it’s not you. This evil, whatever it is, has been here for hundreds of years. Actually,” he added, “it feels like it surfaced about three hundred years ago. In Fairside, when Onyx got trapped by that evil spirit, and here in Shroudharbor --”

“—when the pearl was washed up on the shore,” Claw completed his words. “I wasn’t, so to speak, on the face of the earth for the last three hundred years, so what you people are telling me is quite strange. Shouldn’t the world have succumbed to madness and this evil during all that time?”

“It almost did,” Varg replied. “Eawirith is a large continent, but throughout this time, there have been wars everywhere. Until only forty years ago, we up north were also engaged in a long and gruesome conflict.”

“What was it about?” Claw asked.

The bearshifter was eager to hear some war stories, and Toru had to admit that he was curious, too. He knew that Varg and Duril had been combatants in such an event, but they had never had the time to sit and talk at length about it.

Varg hiked up the large bag on his shoulder filled with supplies the city dwellers had managed to ply them with, after all. Toru thought that the wolfshifter wouldn’t have to worry about carrying the burden for long, as he planned on feasting on some of the most perishable foods quite soon.

“We’re hard people up there,” Varg began. “We do not get easily frightened, and our lives are never easy. But the war.” He stopped for a moment, as his eyes became misty. “I have to admit that until I joined Toru in his fight against this horrendous evil, I thought that I would never face the same atrocities I had to while fighting alongside my comrades.”

Duril seemed to remember those things all too well. Toru felt him shivering by his side. “Those were indeed bleak times,” he confirmed. Toru wrapped an arm around his neck and pulled him a little closer.

It was strange to imagine an all-engulfing war while walking a sinuous path through the lush forests stretching east of Shroudharbor. The start of summer was already there, and it was Toru’s favorite season. The days were long, the food was plenty, and he could bask lazily out in the sun for hours.

But those days were gone, he told himself. Now, he was responsible for something much greater than he had ever faced in his entire life. Still, the pleasant coolness of the shadows thrown by the trees as the sun moved across the sky on its journey made him take a long and deep breath and

enjoy the scents of the flowers and grass. The birds were chirping happily, and the bugs hummed their own tune.

“I don’t know about the other wars fought in different part of the continents,” Varg began talking again. “But ours was bloody, wretched, and it tore our souls apart.”

Claw nodded thoughtfully. “That may be the sole thing I don’t regret about being trapped in that labyrinth. What am I saying?” He laughed to himself. “I would have been part of it if it happened that the sanctity of my forest was threatened.”

The bearshifter fell silent. No one had to say it, as they were all thinking it. Who knew what could have happened on the other side of the continent after such a long time?

“The Quiet Woods deserve their name,” Claw continued. “Few people live there, as they would have had to cross and survive Zukh Kalegh to get there.”

“In a way, the horde keeps any other monsters at bay,” Varg concluded. “Talk about a bad thing being a good thing.”

Toru stole a quick look at Duril, to see if the mentioning of the orc horde had any effect on him. But the healer had the same serene look on his face, and he didn’t appear in the least bothered by it. Toru wasn’t sure if Duril knew of Zukh Kalegh, and what it meant, but he wasn’t about to bring the topic up just like that.

“I suppose,” Claw said with a small chuckle. “The woods are quiet because they never heard the clamor of battle. Those living in the desert don’t care for the sweet water in our rivers, or the smell of the forest. They are used to the aridity of their place, so they never invaded ours. Who was engaged in your war, Varg?”

“On our side,” Varg began again, “we had humans and shifters, mostly wolves. We are the kind used to the harsh northern conditions. We keep to ourselves, and we see about our business. But there wasn’t anything we could do to prevent the conflict that descended upon us like a curse.”

Duril sighed. “So many good people died.”

Toru knew that had also been when the healer had lost his arm. He shivered at the thought that his now close friends and lovers had been in so much danger. It seemed like such a whim of fate that he had been allowed to get to know them and had them become so close to his soul right now.

“It all started,” Varg continued, “with what seemingly could be considered a random event. Far to the east of Whitekeep, at Gaelnarum, a pack of Vrannes launched a raid. That wasn’t unusual at all, as their kind favors thievery and violence.”

“What are Vrannes?” Toru asked.

Claw was, as it seemed, all eyes and ears, as well.

Varg let out a long sigh. “They are also dwellers of the north, except that they live far to the eastern part of the icelands. Their home was Knaeus, mostly mountainous and peppered with rotten woods. I’ve never been there, but so people talked about it at the time. It rains so much there that the trees grow together with fungi, always soaked, their bark splintered and exposing the soft wood underneath.”

“Brrr,” Toru shivered, “I can tell these Vrannes couldn’t be a cheerful bunch, forced to live in a place like that.”

“Nobody forced them,” Varg commented. “And they are part trees, part creatures. They come alive from that mixture of a fungal forest with other living creatures. Or, at least, that was how we thought everything happened during that time.”

Toru was getting more and more curious about the Vrannes, but he didn’t want to hurry Varg, as the wolfshifter seemed to be having a little bit of a hard time remembering all those things from such a long time ago.

“What do they look like? Not too appetizing, I guess,” Claw said.

Duril was the one to reply, as Varg was lost in thought at that moment. “At first glance, you’d think that the forest decided to uproot itself and come loose. Their bodies are long, of a dark color, and their skin is nothing but rotten bark. But they do have legs and arms, but not like a human, mind you. Their members are gnarled branches, and from them sprout sharp claws and fangs.”

“They have fangs in their hands?” Toru asked. “That’s so disgusting.”

“And frightening,” Varg continued. “To the unaware person, seeing a Vranne for the first time can be a near death experience. The Vrannes count on it; they use their abhorrent appearance to make their victims tremble in fear before them and lose all will to fight.”

“Can they be vanquished?” Claw asked, but it sounded as if he was simply musing about it without expecting an answer.

“They can,” Varg replied. “They aren’t the most courageous types, but their power lies in numbers. Laid,” he added after a short while. “We might have exterminated them, for all I know.”

“After the war, there were no more signs of Vrannes to the east,” Duril said.

“Tell us more about the war,” Claw urged them, and Toru was, once more, all eyes and ears.

Varg was the one to take upon himself the task of recounting the events. “As I was saying, their first attack was on Gaelnarum. The place was nothing but a farm. The people there raised cattle, goats, and pigs. They only grew corn, and only they knew how they had managed to survive in

their harsh surroundings. The Vrannes came at the break of dawn, just as the farmers were waking up, ready for a new day of hard work.”

The wolfshifter took a short break while collecting his thoughts. “They slaughtered everything and everyone. They went through all the animals and people alike, like they wanted nothing but their blood. They left everything else; their flesh, their guts, their hair, their bones.”

“There were no survivors,” Duril said.

“Then how did you know it was the Vrannes who massacred that settlement?” Claw asked.

“A milkman from an adjacent town had traveled to Gaelnarum that morning. He was horrified by the scene playing out in front of his eyes as he set foot there. It was suddenly a ghost town with no living souls anywhere to be seen. But he didn’t run when he saw the first bodies. You see,” Varg said with a small frown, “he was a young man with more guts than wits. He began going through the entire town, searching for survivors. At one point, he reached a large enclosure where one of the biggest herds of cattle was corralled in Gaelnarum. There he saw a group of Vrannes tearing cows and humans apart and sucking at their bodies, draining them of blood.”

“Do they have heads? And mouths? These Vrannes?” Toru asked.

“There is a mouth, but it’s placed in the middle of the body,” Duril explained. “Unlike the members that have claws and teeth, the large mouth only has a long tongue that can be used to wrap around a victim and strangle it.”

“The milkman saw them and, needless to say, the next thing he did was to run away screaming. He was plain lucky that the Vrannes must have been already satiated with the many animals and people they had killed. They didn’t follow him, and so he lived to tell the rest of the world what he had just seen.”

“Rumor has it,” Duril continued, to help Varg piece those memories together, “that something must have pushed those Vrannes out of their native lands. You see, since they were creatures of the earth, they weren’t well-equipped for movement over long distances. Very few people were brave enough to seek them out to study them in their native soil.”

“Brave enough or crazy enough,” Varg said. “That’s true, indeed. The Vrannes didn’t enjoy being awakened from their slumber. They drew all their nutrients, all they needed, from the soaked soil and trees of their homeland. And they considered it their duty to protect it.”

“If they were such a peaceful bunch with no ambitions to invade others, why did they have such a horrible appearance?” Claw asked.

“To deter anyone who wanted to take over their forest. I wouldn’t call them peaceful. There had been incidents before, but few and far between. Time and again, a Vranne would lose its mind and start to wander. Killing cattle, scaring the children, all that. But that attack at Gaelnarum was

different. No one had ever seen such a large group of Vrannes before until they had ventured to their forest. And no one had ever known them to be bloodthirsty, either.”

“What happened afterward?” Toru could feel the disquiet growing inside his companions, little by little, as they recalled those bleak times. Even the wind passing through the branches, a summer breeze and nothing more than that, seemed to whisper in a wailing voice, changing its tune.

He shook off the sensation and focused again on Varg’s words.

“Up north, we don’t believe in kings and nobles who do nothing but prey on the wealth created by the rest of us. We keep to ourselves, each to their town, their tribe, their kin. But we do recognize the harsh nature of the north in everyone who lives there. So, when Gaelnarum fell to that horrendous fate, word got around. All of a sudden, the peace we had known for so long was no more. There was another enemy besides the cold and poor crops and wild creatures that we needed to be wary of.

“Gaelnarum was the start of it all. After that first attack, others blossomed. In Whitekeep, we learned of the horrible acts of the Vrannes after one year or so. By then, the north had caught fire.”

Toru could tell by the solemn quality of Varg’s voice and the way his eyes wandered that those events had been forever etched on his heart.

“And it’s not just a way of saying,” Duril continued as Varg’s silence lingered. “The Vrannes appeared to have become prey to a madness of sorts, one that urged them to set everything ablaze, no matter where they went.”

“But they were trees, right?” Toru asked. “Why would a forest like fire?”

Duril shook his head. “That was why we called it madness. It was like nothing we had ever seen before. And the Vrannes just kept on feeding on the blood of humans and animals. It was like there was an unsettling thirst forcing them to act that way. They tore apart everyone standing in their path, drinking the blood straight from their necks.”

“And when there was no drop left, they filled their ugly mouths with the soil soaked in blood and sucked from it like they couldn’t live another moment more without devouring everything they could.” That was Varg again.

“So you called all surviving people and raised them to war?” Claw asked.

Varg nodded. “For some reason, the Vrannes stayed clear of shifters. They didn’t dare attack them, and being the cowards that they were, they attacked only small settlements like Gaelnarum at first. But soon, they became bolder, more organized. Their groups moved in throngs, and from afar, it looked like there was an entire forest moving toward you.

“Once they were done with a settlement, they set it on fire. They didn’t stay behind to watch their destruction, and they just moved farther and farther, guided by nothing but that abominable thirst that seemed to have taken possession of their minds.”

“How did you win against such mad creatures?” Claw asked.

“We fought fire with fire,” Varg replied. “A way of saying, but one that would take shape later. I’ll tell you about it. We soon noticed that the Vrannes set fire to all the places they destroyed only to run away from them like they feared being flayed by an army of demons. That was the nature of their madness and destruction. At first, small groups fought their attacks. Settlements were taught how to organize their defenses. And humans pushed back.”

“Yet, their attacks were relentless. People were starting to wonder whether their lives would become nothing but ceaseless warmongering. Some decided to try and destroy the Vrannes, not by waiting for them to attack, but by searching for them in their temporary lairs,” Duril continued.

“There are many forests up north, so there was no shortage of places to hide for the Vrannes. The war gave birth to adventurers, people who sought fame and glory by trying to defeat those creatures. But it was no use trying to confront those abominations in their nests.” Varg nodded thoughtfully as he recalled all that.

“What happened to those people who tried to find the Vrannes?” Toru inquired.

Duril exchanged a meaningful look with Varg. They appeared to be in accord over what the wolfshifter said next.

“No one really knows. They never came back from their quests. And it was like the same madness was creeping into people’s minds, too, because the more adventurers didn’t come back, the more wanted to join their ranks in that tenebrous end they had surely met.”

“Then new legends appeared,” Duril added. “Stories about how the Vrannes could no longer live on soil alone, and how their taking to blood was transforming them. Some thought that all those adventurers were now part of the army of Vrannes populating the woods. Those were just tales, but --” he broke off abruptly and turned toward Varg again.

The wolfshifter let out a long sigh. “I wish that they were only stories. As we went against the Vrannes, more and more people began reporting that they had seen human faces trapped inside the rotten bodies of our enemy. It could have been nothing but hallucinations, as it appeared to be reported only by those who were of human descent. I never saw a human face in all the Vrannes I killed in battle. Did you, Duril?”

The healer shook his head. “No, I can’t say that I did.” He touched the arm he no longer had whole with his only hand in an absent-minded manner.

“How did you lose your arm?” Claw asked, startling the others. “Was it during the war?”

Toru let out a small protective growl.

“Claw,” Varg warned in a stern tone that brooked no contradiction.

“It’s all right,” Duril hurried to appease everyone. “It’s not a story I like remembering, but I’ve never liked being treated like a curiosity, or a... freak. I lost it in battle, yes. It happened as the war raged on, so the least I can say is that I did my fair share of fighting.” The chuckle that followed was devoid of any trace of humor.

No one pressed the healer to talk about it and waited patiently.

“We had just received a lot of wounded people. They were all in bad shape. With their thirst for blood, the Vrannes had become shrewder, more dangerous. If before they had used their fangs and claws mostly to defend themselves, now things were completely different. They were vicious and determined in their madness. Their claws had grown longer, their fangs sharper. So we had a lot of people with deep cuts, severed members, and the like. We were amputating what couldn’t be salvaged like we were inside a butchery, not a camp for treating people and saving them.

“The Vrannes attacked us so suddenly. To witness such a thing,” he said and closed his eyes. “It was as if the earth had decided to open up and swallow us whole. We didn’t stand a chance. The patients we were treating, even less. I suppose I was lucky I survived. A Vranne cut through my arm like it was butter. I thought I was as good as dead. I had been closing a wound. The man I was treating, he was so young. I can still recall how his face turned white like snow when the Vranne rose behind me. Little could I do. To my shame, I lost consciousness immediately after I lost my arm. When I woke up again, I was in a wagon dragged by oxen, together with all the people that had been found still breathing.”

“Do you know who saved you?” Toru asked. “Those people in Whitekeep were pretty mean to you.”

“Not all of them. It was Rory’s grandfather. Kindness runs in that family like the good sap inside the body of a strong and healthy tree. He sat with us as we traveled back home, telling us stories.” Duril laughed at the memory. “We were in such great pain, all of us. But he didn’t just sit there, offering compassion and condolences. He knew that the last thing we needed was a constant reminder of what we had been through. So, he told us happy stories that didn’t include anything about the war or horrible creatures attacking in the dead of night. He helped us live and look forward to living again.”

“How did it all end?” Claw asked.

Toru held Duril by the shoulders, not knowing what comfort to offer in the light of such horrible memories. Duril looked at him with loving eyes. “It’s all right now. It’s all left behind, in the far distant past.”

Varg paused, allowing the small exchange between them before continuing. “It wasn’t easy, that I can tell you. The more Vrannes we sent to their graves, the more appeared. Forests came alive with them, and up north, we have nothing but forests all around. And the fact that the woods were infested with their abomination made it hard for us shifters to find food during those lean times.”

“But I thought you said they didn’t attack shifters,” Claw reminded him.

“True, but they were thinning our numbers in other ways. Shifters found themselves moving closer to human settlements. They had to uproot their lives as they knew them, and it wasn’t everywhere that they were welcomed with open arms. So we offered our services in battle, in higher and higher numbers.”

“That must have changed the course of the war, didn’t it?” Claw asked.

“We evened the odds, but there seemed to be no end to the overwhelming numbers of our enemies. And we began to lose some of our brothers and sisters, too,” Varg said. “Something had to be done, but what? And then Agatha --”

“The old witch!” Toru exclaimed.

Varg smiled and ruffled his hair. “Yes, the old witch. She started asking the earth what it wanted from us. In all honesty, not many thought that there was anything worth listening to in her gibberish. It’s not like she makes it easy for anyone to understand what she is saying.”

“I guess there is a price for any gift,” Duril remarked. “She only wants what’s good for us, regardless of how she chooses to manifest her goodwill.”

“There is an old witch in The Quiet Woods, too,” Claw said. “Or, at least, there was. I wonder what she might be doing now.” He said the last words as if he was saying them to himself.

“She talks to the earth, too?” Toru asked, filled with curiosity.

“No, but she might have been talking to the water. More often than not, I saw her bent over the rapid river waters, resting against her cane, one wrong move away from falling in and being dragged away.”

“Did she ever fall?” Toru asked again.

“No, not as far as I know,” Claw replied. “And she might just as well have been talking to the fish for all I know. I never talked to her, only saw her from afar. But she was part of the forest, so I guess I cannot imagine my home without her. How did the war with the Vrannes end?” he asked Varg. “What did your old witch do?”

“She taught us how to fight fire with fire,” Varg said with a small smile. “It was so simple that we should have thought of it already. Trees don’t like fire, indeed. She had us make a huge pit and

throw into it every piece of wood we could find. And when I say huge, it was something like none of us had ever seen. At her advice, we turned the layers below into burning coals and then we covered the pit with leaves and branches. We had to mark the place so that we didn't end up wandering straight into our own trap."

"And the Vrannes fell into the pit?"

"It was a hard task to lure them in. They had grown shrewder, as I told you. But the moment the first of them fell into the pit, the others followed. It was an incredible sight. While the ones fallen inside were being engulfed by flames struggled to get out, the others were falling on top of them as if they couldn't stop. And the noises they made, it was like the belly of the earth had been split open. Agatha prevented us from trying to kill the ones on top that seemed to be still alive. She said something about it having to endure the pain of fire, as that's where it came from."

"It?" Claw asked the same question that had been on everyone's minds.

"I didn't pay it much attention at the time. Agatha says whatever she wants whenever she fancies. So, no one paid any attention to her words, except when they served us to get rid of that scourge."

"Could it be that she knew about this evil that seems to lurk beneath the surface of the world?" Duril asked. "Since I was still recovering from my wound, I wasn't present at the end. The echoes of the war traveled quickly to Whitekeep, nonetheless. I remember so well how relieved I felt when news of our victory came. We were all so happy, like we had just been born again."

"What did you do with the giant pit?" Claw inquired.

"For days and nights, it continued to burn. Agatha stood there, by the edge, her eyes never faltering. All of us went to sleep, took shifts, but she remained there. The smoke didn't bother her. But she may be one with the earth if what people kept gossiping about her is true. She had us mix the ashes with tar and resin gathered from healthy trees, while saying something about impurity. Now I wish I paid more attention to her, while she was mumbling on and on."

"If it's any consolation, I doubt you would have understood more than she wanted to let out," Duril offered.

"Why do all witches talk weird like that?" Toru asked with a deep frown on his face. "And that monk in Shroudharbor."

"He's a librarian," Duril corrected him. "And Elidias wants only the best for us, just like Agatha."

"They swore an oath," Claw intervened before someone else had a chance to reply to that. "That's what I know. People who turn to witchcraft are not allowed to share their knowledge with the world. They must go about speaking it in roundabout ways. And more, it appears that it is ever their duty to use what they know for good, but doing so may be an arduous and difficult task."

“Then we should consider ourselves lucky for understanding as much of what Agatha tells us as we do,” Duril said. “Good thing that war is long past. Not gone from our memories, it’s true, and we could never forget about it. But the Vrannes, they might have been destroyed for good.”

“What lies in Knaeus now?” It was again Claw asking the question.

“Who knows? After the war, no one had the guts to venture there. Could it be that there are still Vrannes out there?” Varg addressed the last words to no one in particular. “I wouldn’t bet on it, but I’ve been wrong before. But enough of war stories. We have a new road ahead of us. It wouldn’t serve to let us be held back by memories and whatnot.”

Chapter Four – Scents in the Wind

Toru and Varg were frolicking happily in the nearby river, while Duril was busy preparing lunch from the last remains of the perishable foods the people of Shroudharbor had sent them away with. Claw approached him with another load of forest fruits and young nuts in his arms. He nodded appreciatively and smiled as the bearshifter carefully laid his harvest on a piece of cloth Duril had placed on the ground for that particular purpose.

“There will be nothing for us but dried meat and little else as we travel through the desert,” Duril stated as soon as Claw had sat by his side.

“The road is long indeed, and we should be careful to ration our supplies,” Claw confirmed.

“We will fill everything we can with water so we can take it with us, but I must confess to you that the thought of ending up without any worries me,” Duril said.

All shifters were incredible, and they could go for days and even weeks without food and water, but Duril had never been forced to go without such necessities for prolonged periods of time, and he felt a bit selfish for bringing it up. Nonetheless, Claw was a master survivor since he had managed to live for hundreds of years on nothing but the small creatures he had found wandering through that labyrinth.

“In any desert, you will find an oasis here and there. And there are creatures we can hunt, even in a place as arid as the one that we will soon have to face.”

“That’s good to know,” Duril murmured as he moved the wooden ladle in the stew. “What was it like when you traveled through the desert all those years ago, Claw?”

“I was with a caravan, not alone. Merchants truly know their business, and they had all the oases mapped out, so we didn’t have to worry about drinkable water and such. Good thing I have a great memory.” Claw smiled slyly as he looked at him.

Duril stopped moving the ladle and returned the look. “I hope you’re not just joking. I’m in charge of keeping everyone fed and happy around here. Having enough water to go around is one of the things high up on my list as we’re approaching the desert.”

Claw patted him on the back. “I’m not joking. Up here,” he tapped his temple, “everything is in its rightful place. It wasn’t like I had much to think about while I was lost in the labyrinth. When one has only memories to live on, they are all he’s got.”

It was Duril’s turn to smile. “Did you just admit to having been lost in there?”

Claw laughed wholeheartedly. “It would be the honest thing to say. For hundreds of years, I’d found no escape from it, until you and puppy came along. You saved me there, so it’s my turn to watch over you while we’re going through the desert. Although, I must warn you. Three hundred

years is a long time. Some oases get swallowed by the desert; it happened hundreds of years ago, and it could happen now, too.”

Duril nodded. “Nonetheless, your guidance will be invaluable. Would you mind telling me a bit more about Zukh Kalegh?” He could tell Claw was holding back whenever their conversations moved in that direction. A simple guess was that the bearshifter didn’t appear keen to talk to him about the orcs inhabiting the Great Barren.

Claw shifted in his place and looked away.

“I’ve seen a few,” Duril began, seeing how the other was still hesitating, most probably thinking that he would hurt him by telling him the truth. “Orcs, I mean. It happened during the war against the Vrannes.”

“Oh, they were part of it, too?”

“More in it just for the easy killing and plundering,” Duril explained. “There were only small packs, not an entire horde, so I don’t know much about their motivation. But it could be that the scents carried by the wind had let them know of all the bloodletting that was happening during that time.”

“Not a friendly lot, orcs,” Claw said. “You must have taken the brunt of the hate all humans have toward their kind in your life, my friend.”

Duril had no intention of hiding the truth. “Indeed. But it served me as a good motivation to prove my worth again and again. To show everyone that I’m not anything like an orc.”

“And yet, you are one.”

Duril shook his head. “I believe that I may be only in appearance, although Elidias told me something strange.” He stopped for a moment, as he remembered the librarian’s words. “He told me that I’m human, and that I’m orc, too. And that if I ever find myself in need of replying to anyone asking, I should choose the truth and nothing but, and I would never be wrong.”

“Then it means that you’re an orc, too. But one of a kind,” Claw added.

“You’re being courteous.” Duril returned to his stew and threw in some spices. It had to be just about right if he wanted it to turn out exactly the way Varg and Toru liked it. As much as they enjoyed quarreling over all the little things, the two shapeshifters were very much alike in the kinds of food they preferred.

“No, I’m not just teasing you. Who has ever heard of a healer orc? There must be no one like you all across Eawirith.”

“I suppose,” Duril admitted and hid his blush by pretending to tend to the stew. He could always blame it on the steam rising from the pot. “Now, please, tell me about Zukh Kalegh. What is it like out there? I’ve never traveled through a desert, so it will be a first for me.”

“It is as bad as you imagine, if not a little worse.”

“A little?”

“Now I’m teasing you.” Claw raised his head and smelled the wind. “Hot by day, cold by night, not meant for humans.”

“Then we must be thankful that we’re not entirely human,” Duril pointed out.

“And then, there’s the horde,” Claw said. “You’re a handsome orc, Duril, but those who live out there are much bigger than you. They must be at least a few heads taller. They wear heavy armor made from metal and leather and not much else.”

Duril smiled sheepishly at the praise. “When I saw those orcs in the war, I did notice their armor. How do you think they get it? They appear to be driven by nothing but their bloodlust in all their dealings.”

“Some are master blacksmiths,” Claw replied. “Indeed, they are consumed by dark fury inside them, but they can be clever, too. And just as some are, as you say, driven by their bloodlust, others take to fire and metalworking like no one else in the world.”

“The horde, how large is it? Have you ever seen it?” Duril asked after pondering over Claw’s words for a while. For so long, he hadn’t given any thought to orcs, as much akin to him as they might be. Now, he realized that soon enough, he might have to encounter them whether he liked it or not.

“And lived to tell the tale?” Claw grinned. “I’ve seen it from a distance. They travel by thousands and thousands. A dust storm rises as they march, that heavy their steps are. And their voices,” he stopped for a moment and shivered, “they roar like thunder.”

“At least, that’s enough warning for any who might not want to stand in their path,” Duril commented. “They simply let their presence be known.”

“More like using it as a weapon of war. Feeble creatures freeze in place when they hear the orcs’ war cry. Believe me, my friend, when I’m telling you that you haven’t heard anything like that in your entire life.”

“Then we should be happy that we’re not feeble creatures. Do they have a leader? How is the horde organized?”

“There are chieftains, and it’s not unusual for them to fight for dominance. As bloody as they are in their dealings with the ones that have the misfortune to become their victims, they behave just the same when they are dealing with their own kind. When there’s a challenge, they fight to the death. Not only does the leader of one group falls then, but so do all the others with power who have taken his side.”

Duril didn’t care to ask what that meant, as he could easily imagine what fate befell those who lost the challenge. “We should make sure to stay clear of their path, then.”

Claw let his gaze wander into the distance as if he was attempting to read the future. “If we can, my friend. If we can.”

“I thought kitties hated water,” Varg teased him as he caught him and tried to push his head under the water one more time.

Toru would have none of that, though. Deftly, he avoided Varg’s underhanded attack and dodged to one side, only to move fast, sliding around to land on the wolfshifter’s back. Now it was his turn to force Varg down and have him take a gulp of water just as he had planned for him only a second earlier.

But Varg was strong, and it challenged and pleased Toru to try his hand at pushing him down and overwhelming him. They ended up sinking together, laughing. When they emerged again, Varg was looking at him with new fire lighting his eyes. Toru grinned and grabbed the wolfshifter’s chest hard. That was enough the turn the look in Varg’s eyes into something else, and that was exactly what he needed. He came closer and just as their lips were about to touch, he again suddenly pushed Varg’s head down under the water, laughing.

This time, when the wolf emerged, he could tell he was in deep trouble. Varg lunged at him but, instead of taking his revenge, he pulled him into a hard kiss. He giggled and fought to get free, but only half-heartedly.

“Duril is busy cooking, and we’re fooling around,” Varg chided him affectionately when he finally let go.

“He told us not to bother,” Toru pointed out. “That he’d rather be the only cook. I think he secretly wants to put some cabbage in the stew,” he added in a low voice.

“Oh, the horror,” Varg said with a smirk.

A bird cried, its voice piercing the languid laziness of the afternoon. Toru followed it with his eyes. It was a bird with dark feathers, but he wasn’t too knowledgeable about such creatures to know what it was. “Was that a crow?” he asked.

“A raven, even,” Varg replied. “It must have sensed some carrion somewhere.”

Toru shivered despite the river waters not being that cold. “A dead animal?” It happened all the time in the forest, and it was just the cycle of life. Yet there was something unsettling about the cry of that raven that was making him think, irrationally so, that it wasn’t just the carcass of a decaying dead creature of the forest calling for that bird to dine on it.

Varg seemed to share some of his dark thoughts. “It could be anything. We’re getting closer and closer to the Great Barren. Do you see how the river turns?” He pointed ahead, and Toru could clearly see the water bending to the right, as if it couldn’t pour itself into a natural course. “Soon enough, we’ll have to say goodbye to fooling around like this. So, I also believe Duril will forgive us for not helping him with the food.”

Toru was thankful for Varg’s arm around his shoulders. Having someone strong like that nearby was like balm to a soul that had been alone for far too long.

“Varg! Toru!” Claw called for them from a distance. “Duril is waiting with the stew!”

They waved at the bearshifter. Toru threw a long look around as he and Varg got out of the water, and then took a deep breath. He had been in many places, but he had never crossed a desert. His heart was slowly filling with growing excitement, accompanied by just as much dread. He held his head high. No adventure was too great for him, and if he were to face the entire horde of Zukh Kalegh, he would do just as he had done with everything else so far.

“Can you smell it?” Claw asked as he lifted his nose high and inhaled.

Varg followed his example. During the last few days, the landscape around them had changed a lot. The forests were gone, replaced first by shrubbery, and even that was growing scrubby and scarce while the desert claimed the land. Their feet sank in the sand, but they were marching on. “There’s a slight scent of ash,” he agreed.

Toru scrunched up his face. “Why can’t I smell it? Is my nose broken?”

Claw squeezed his shoulder. “No, it’s not, but puppy here and I just happen to have been cursed with a sharp sense of smell. It helps a lot when you’re chasing food.”

Varg could only agree to that. “Or staying away from trouble.”

“Is there any trouble we should be aware of then?” Duril asked.

Varg wished he could put everyone’s minds at ease, but he had never been one to hide the truth, no matter how dangerous. He began walking again and talking at the same time. “We should get as far away from the source of that smell as we can.”

“Isn’t that the surest way to get lost in a desert?” the healer questioned. “Claw said just earlier that we should keep to a straight path.”

“Not when it leads us directly into the face of danger,” Claw replied. “Ash means smoke, and smoke means fire.”

“Is it the horde?” Toru joined the conversation. There was something like the excitement of a child in the way he spoke.

Varg took him by the shoulders and squeezed him one time, hard. “Do you want to face the horde, kitty? They might ruffle your fur in a way that you won’t like.”

“Like they could catch me. I bet they’re all fat and cannot run.”

Claw laughed at that. “They might not be as nimble on their feet as you are, but can you run faster than a boomerang?”

Varg threw Claw a pointed look. “A boomerang? As far as I know, they prefer their short, curved blades.”

“Not all of them,” Claw explained. “I’m glad for you that you haven’t seen a lot of orcs in your lives. They live for warfare, and only heavens know what weapons they might have invented during these hundreds of years.”

“But isn’t there a possibility that they’re no longer around?” Varg asked, mostly to himself. “The people in Shroudharbor didn’t appear to be aware of the horde and its depredations.”

“Elidias knew of Zukh Kalegh,” Duril replied. “He asked me if I was from there.”

“He might have meant it as a joke,” Claw said. “Librarians are a strange bunch.”

“He’s some sort of wizard,” Toru interjected. “He’s weird just like Agatha, and she’s an old witch.”

Varg scouted the horizon to their right with worried eyes. That was where the scent was coming from, a warning ominously rolling through the air. They needed, indeed, to put as much distance as they could between them and whatever was the source of that scent. It could be the horde or not, but it wasn’t, by any means, a wise idea to stick around and see what it was. Claw was right about maintaining a straight path to avoid losing themselves in the desert, but to be walking blindly into the arms of danger was not an alternative to consider even for a moment.

“Isn’t it too soon for us to be noticing their presence?” Duril asked after a while. “We’ve barely left the forests behind.”

They all turned then and looked over their shoulders. Varg didn’t let any of his surprise show as he saw no trace of the lush forests behind them, not even a good distance away. There wasn’t even

a sign of the scarce shrubbery that had accompanied them for a while. All the eye could see was nothing but the desert. Even their footprints in the sand were soon erased by a low blowing wind.

They had been thankful for the slight breeze. After all, the sun was up, a disc of pure heat, and Claw had warned them not to look directly at it and also not to walk with their heads down as the sand reflected the light and could hurt their eyes. But Varg had risked looking up once, and although he couldn't tell what was different, he knew that it wasn't the same sun that shone kindly over Whitekeep throughout the gentle summers. It wasn't even the same sun they had left behind in Shroudharbor, a harbinger of summer.

Everything around them was hostile. They were all hardy people, even Duril who hadn't been as honed in the forge of battle as he had been, or Toru who still had the light of youth in his beautiful eyes. Claw was walking in front, acting as their guide, and Varg was secretly grateful for having him with them. Toru liked to tease him over how Claw was bigger and stronger than he was, but Varg didn't mind having such an ally. If need be, he would be someone to depend on, as he had proven during the sea battle at Shroudharbor. They needed people like that with them, as Varg had known all his life. Their pack was getting stronger, and that mattered a great deal.

The wind began to pick up. It was hard to predict the changes of weather in the desert. The naked sky above them began to darken, and Varg looked around them. There was no cloud in sight, so why was the light becoming dimmer?

Claw turned back toward them. "We need to hurry. There's an oasis I know of to the left, and it would be best for us to get there as fast as we can."

"How far to the left?" Duril inquired.

Claw made a vague gesture, like that was a detail he couldn't tell precisely. Varg understood that much, and he knew that the others were well aware of the same thing. They needed to take shelter.

"If there are no clouds," Toru began, "how come it's getting darker?"

"There's a sandstorm approaching," Claw replied. "Less talking and more walking, kitty."

Varg smiled. Toru didn't mind at all being called that by the powerful bearshifter, and he liked that. It meant that at least some of the banter he engaged in with Toru would remain his and his alone. Nonetheless, he couldn't indulge in such pleasant thoughts at the moment. Whatever caused the sandstorm could be of natural origins, but the smell of ash not so much, which meant that they were facing two dangers, not one. They just had to decide which was the less dangerous.

They walked in single file after Claw, Varg making sure to tighten the line so that he could keep an eye on the entire group. Duril looked back at him now and then, to make sure that he was still there, and despite the light protests he kept on making, he was secretly pleased that someone was looking after him, too.

They had walked for the entire day, and while they were all used to traveling in less than favorable conditions, fatigue was obviously appearing on the faces of his companions. Duril stole surreptitious looks at them, to see if any of them showed signs that they couldn't go on or needed a break. As far as he was concerned, he was more than surprised at his own ability to walk through the scorching desert that burned the soles of their feet. The dry air filled his lungs and gave him new strength, and while he could tell that his body was getting tired, and his feet heavier, it felt like nothing would stop him from marching like that for as long as it was needed.

"Someone looks like he's not as exhausted as the rest of us," Claw teased him.

"I'm as surprised as you are," Duril replied. He must be looking quite peppy compared to the rest of them if it was so easy for Claw to notice.

"It must be your orc blood," the bearshifter said. "That means that our passing through the Great Barren may not be as hard on you as you might have worried before."

Duril looked at Toru and Varg who were walking at the end of the line. They kept their heads low and they marched on stolidly, but they would soon need to take a break. "Then that's something I should be thankful for. If you all want to take a break, it is fine with me."

"We should reach an oasis soon if my memory still serves."

"And if the place is still there," Duril said quietly. Oases, as Claw had explained to him while traveling, were wonders of the desert, rare flowers blossoming in the harshest of circumstances. But any oasis could be swallowed by the sand now and then, and he shared Claw's opinion that they should keep their expectations and hopes low.

"It is," Claw replied and patted his own nose. "I can sense the scent of summer fruits, and my nose rarely fails me when it's about food."

"Fruits?" Toru scrunched up his nose, making a displeased face.

"The kind of tree that grows meat is yet to be discovered," Varg teased him. "Trees mean shade, and they also mean that we will be able to drink some fresh water. Are the oases in the Great Barren inhabited?" he asked Claw.

"Caravans come and go, or at least they used to, but, as you may expect, they're rare. Not many merchants venture out into this harsh waste, not when the chances of meeting the great orc horde of Zukh Kalegh are so great."

"What lies beyond The Quiet Woods? Where do all the merchants come from?" Duril asked. His nose was nothing like Claw's formidable one, but he could sense a small change in the evening breeze. Soon, they would find water, and that was a soothing thought.

“There are human settlements and even large cities if you travel south of The Quiet Woods,” Claw explained. “If you’re seeking more knowledge about your quest, once we reach my home and we part ways, you will surely find plenty of places to travel to.”

“What lies up north?” This time it was Varg asking. “We never ventured beyond Knaeus, the home of the Vrannes, and many talked of it as being the end of the world.”

Claw seemed pleased to be the one offering them information on parts of the world they had never visited before. As his steps guided them toward the oasis, he continued talking. “Knaeus must be like a slice through the northern part of Eawirith, then. North of The Quiet Woods there’s nothing but snowy mountains. It could be because almost no one lives there, humans, I mean, that not much is said about them.”

“What are they named?” Duril asked, more and more curious and excited about all the places he had never traveled to before. He would have never pegged himself as someone suffering from wanderlust like Toru, but now, as Claw spoke of all those things, he felt a new hunger was growing inside him. Just like the new life that appeared to infuse his bones as he walked on the never-ending sand, this excitement was equally fresh and surprising.

“The Scarlet Peaks,” Claw replied.

“That’s quite a strange name for a range of snowy mountains, isn’t it?” Varg said.

Duril had to admit that he was just as intrigued as the wolfshifter.

“It is the view they offer when the sun rises over them,” Claw explained. “I had to see it with my own eyes to admit that the name is well-earned. The few people who have ventured up to their peaks couldn’t explain what causes that effect, but when the sun appears above them, their crowns glitter red like they’re made of ruby.”

“But isn’t there snow up there?” Duril asked, voicing the same thing all of them must be thinking.

“At any other moment of the day, it looks like it,” Claw confirmed. “Some say that the crown of the Scarlet Peaks is home to some fantastic tribe that built their homes from precious gemstones. Nonetheless, the few travelers who have been there couldn’t bring back any proof of such people. So they must be nothing but stories.”

“A tribe? And they would never come down from there?” Toru asked. “Don’t they like to travel or something?”

Duril could understand Toru’s hunger for traveling much better now and was in accord with his question.

Claw shrugged. “As I told you, I don’t think there’s any truth in that tale. And it’s not the only incredible story people tell about the peaks of those snowy mountains.”

“What other stories do they tell?” Duril asked.

“Each one more incredible than the other.”

“Is there one you believe?” Duril continued his inquiry. Claw was so calm all the time that he was inclined to have trust in the stories the bearshifter agreed with.

“Let’s say that there is, but I can wager that you will all start to make fun of me once I admit to it.”

“Go ahead,” Duril encouraged him.

As the bearshifter had predicted, Varg and Toru began snickering. “I bet it’s something to do with fairies,” Varg began. “Tiny little fairies that get inside your ears and make you growl like a bear awakened from his sleep.”

“Or there’s a big pot of honey,” Toru said, “with fried meat in it! And the pot is made from ruby!”

Duril tried not to laugh at them. As much as he liked to indulge the two troublemakers in their shenanigans, he was more interested in finding out what Claw thought to be the true legend behind the name of the Scarlet Peaks.

“As I thought. These two are only fit to travel with the circus,” Claw said and shook his head, but Duril could tell that he was barely keeping in a laugh, too. “I don’t think there’s an entire tribe out there, or fairies, or pots of honey.”

“What do you think is there, then?” Toru asked, his eyes gleaming with curiosity.

“If there is someone living there,” Claw said, “it must be a hermit. A sage who finally found a place that provides the quiet he needs so that he can listen to all the thoughts inside his mind.”

“A sage? Like a wizard?” Toru questioned again.

“Wizards can make new things from what they know. A sage is more like someone who can give you advice drawn from all the knowledge that lives inside their head.”

“That sounds like someone we should seek,” Duril said. “In Shroudharbor, I read as much as I could in Elidias’s books, but I can’t say that what I learned is more than a grain of sand when compared to all of the knowledge that exists in our world. A sage would definitely be someone I’d gladly meet.”

“Provided that he would be willing to part with his knowledge in any shape or form,” Claw said. “That’s why I’m saying that it must be a hermit, and hermits don’t take well to visitors.”

“If he knows anything about our quest, we’ll make him talk,” Toru said with determination and slammed one fist into his other palm.

That gave Varg the perfect opportunity to twist Toru's ear playfully. "Not everything gets solved by brawling, kitty."

"It's worth a try, especially if he's the kind who doesn't like to talk," Toru retorted, poking the wolfshifter in the side in return.

"Or maybe you should let the cleverest of you do the talking," Claw said, pointing at Duril.

"I wouldn't say that," Duril protested.

"It's true," Varg and Toru agreed almost simultaneously.

"See?" Claw smiled at him. "There's no arguing with that." Duril turned pink at the unexpected praise.

"But why would a sage exist if he doesn't share his knowledge?" Varg asked, and Duril was interested to hear the answer to that, too.

"He might be waiting for the right person to ask him the right questions," Claw replied. "But, as I told you, all of these might be nothing but stories, even this one which I deem as the only one worthy of being considered. If nothing else, at least I managed to make you forget about your tired bones for a while. Look there."

They all stopped and looked in the direction indicated by Claw's extended arm. Varg and Toru cheered happily at the sight of the copse of trees in the distance. Duril sighed in relief, too. He had been worried for his friends. Tonight, they would sleep well, and tomorrow, they would be ready for another hike through the merciless sun.

Only for him, he pondered, as he looked up, it wasn't so merciless. The sun was now setting over the dunes, and no one could have guessed from its soothing orange flickers that only a little while ago it had been up above them, bringing the sand beneath the feet of travelers to scorching temperatures.

"Have you ever talked to someone who had scaled the peaks of those mountains?" Varg asked Claw.

The bearshifter replied with a shrug, "There was one person, yes. But he appeared to be so out of his mind that no one cared to listen."

"But you did," Duril pointed out. "Who was he?"

"A hunter," Claw offered. "One who'd seen his fair share of winters. He was from The Quiet Woods and lived among the creatures of the forest as if they were closer to him than his own humankind."

Duril's curiosity was piqued again. Little time was left before they would reach the oasis, and then, they would be too busy making their nightly arrangements to indulge in exploring stories. "What did he tell you?"

"An incredible tale," Claw replied. "He told people, not just me, of this sage living at the top of one of the peaks. He never gained entrance to his hut, but he could see that the place was inhabited."

"How did he know there was a sage there, and not someone else?" Duril asked.

"He said he had just followed the trail described by other stories he had heard. But let me tell you all about it another time. Tonight we'll dine on dates and peaches."

Duril laughed. "Make sure Toru doesn't hear you."

"I heard!" Toru replied right away. "I'll leave them all to you, and I'll just take the meat!"

"You'll eat what Duril lets you have, kitty," Varg taunted the tiger with affection.

Duril turned and looked at the desert. While the oasis was calling for them to rest, he could feel a strange pull toward the sands rising and dancing in the distance.

Chapter Five – Freedom

The oasis was a sight for sore eyes. Varg allowed Toru to run ahead and let out his enthusiasm through loud shouts ringing in the evening air. Already, the weary travelers could feel the gentle shade offered by the tall date palm trees while the evening was setting in fast. The sand beneath their feet was no longer scorching hot and Varg was more than thankful for having reached the oasis in time for their overnight stay.

In the desert, Claw had explained, the nights can be horrendous, the temperature dropping so fast and low that they would have to huddle together to enjoy some heat. At that, of course, Toru had laughed and told them that he would hold them all in his arms, but Varg knew that the bearshifter wasn't joking. While they were all hardy people, and a bit of cold shouldn't scare them, none of the challenges appearing in front of them should be dismissed or overlooked.

They stepped inside the oasis, and Duril let out a small sigh as soon as they heard the small bugs singing their evening song.

“There is even water here,” Toru called to them. “It's like a small lake!”

Varg grinned at the evident enthusiasm in Toru's voice. “Make sure not to drown in it!”

“Like I'd do that,” Toru threw at him with a snort. He hunkered down onto his belly and began scooping up water with both hands and bringing it to his lips.

“Look at him, slurping like he hadn't drunk one drop in days,” Varg teased him.

“Shut up, mutt, I'm thirsty,” Toru replied.

Varg knew that the tiger must not have asked Duril for the water pouch for a while since he had become aware of how they needed to be mindful of their supplies. As much as he liked to talk about eating all the food, Toru was obviously feeling very responsible for not burdening the others with his behavior, and that made him all the more endearing to everyone. Without a doubt, he wasn't doing it for that reason, but because, indeed, during their last adventures, Toru had grown a lot and was now more careful than ever to ensure that the others enjoyed his company.

Varg knew he would never mention this to Toru and embarrass him, but it was enough to recognize it and enjoy the change he saw in the tigershifter as they journeyed together. He let out a sigh of his own, as he felt the soft grass beneath his feet. There were a few scattered peach trees, and Claw, being the tallest of them all, took to picking the fruits from the crowns that were the ripest and tastiest.

Toru approached him carefully. “What are those?” he asked as he leaned over to stare at the fruits gathered by Claw.

“These are peaches,” Claw explained. “Try one. I promise you they’re not that bad, and the human part of you will enjoy it, for sure.”

Varg hid a grin as he noticed Toru scrunching his nose in that adorable way of his. Nonetheless, the tigershifter took one peach and took a bite out of it with a satisfying crunch-like slurp. “It’s sweet!” he exclaimed.

Varg reached to take one, too. Claw then turned with his open palms filled with the fruits toward Duril and offered him one. It was one more reason for Varg to hide his smile; the bearshifter seemed to be taking quite a liking to the healer. They shared some of the same serious nature that made them so alike, and Varg had noticed that they often spent time together, lost in conversation. Toru had the curiosity of youth, while Duril had the curiosity of a scholar. They both had a lot to learn from Claw, so it wasn’t just his brawn and warrior spirit that made the bear such a great addition to their little group. In a world on the brink of change like theirs, someone with old knowledge was needed, just as much as the impetus of youth.

Duril set up a small dinner and they ate their meal from palm leaves while enjoying the sweet air breezing through the tall trees of the oasis. After a short debate, they had decided not to make a fire so that any possible creatures roaming the desert at night, on either four or two legs, wouldn’t be drawn to their resting place or sniff their presence.

“We’re quite the assortment of people,” Varg began as they lounged around, their bellies full, and now only one short story away from closing their eyes and drifting to the world of dreams.

“Indeed we are,” Claw replied. “A kitty, a puppy, a bear, and --” he stopped and looked at Duril.

Varg observed with increased interest as Duril shifted a little and scratched his head.

“Duril is awesome,” Toru intervened.

“That he is,” Claw agreed with a small laugh. “I think the best way to describe us would be a group of very interesting humans.”

“We all are humans, too, yes,” Varg agreed. “And it is something we shouldn’t forget, although it looks that at least the three of us,” he pointed at himself, Claw, and Toru, “may be more in touch with our shifter nature than with anything else.”

“I don’t think I’m in touch with my orc side,” Duril said, taking them a bit by surprise. “I know that Elidias told me that I’m an orc, too, just as I’m a human being, but I don’t know what part of me, except for my appearance, that would be.”

Claw patted the healer on the back. “Maybe you haven’t discovered it yet.”

“I’ve been on the face of the earth for so many years,” Duril commented. “I should have discovered it by now, don’t you think?” He was watching Claw with honest curiosity, not because he thought he was absolutely right.

“All our lives, we go through changes,” Claw replied.

As Varg had noticed already, the bearshifter was a fountain of wisdom that would serve them all well to quench a different type of thirst.

“And there could be parts of us that have not yet emerged until there’s a need for them,” Claw added.

“I would like Duril just the same if he turned into a complete orc,” Toru said.

Everyone laughed at that.

Toru bristled. “What? I would,” he protested.

“We all would, kitty,” Varg teased him and caressed his head.

Toru rolled toward him and rested his head on Varg’s chest. It had become, as it seemed, a much-preferred way of sleeping for the tigershifter. It could be because Varg always ran his fingers through the golden hair slowly, making him purr and fall asleep quickly.

“It looks like we should call it a night,” Claw said and laughed. “The young ones need their sleep.”

Duril came to rest against Varg from the other side, and between his two lovers, he felt sleep coming to him fast.

He couldn’t recall the reason why he had suddenly awakened in the middle of the night. Duril moved carefully, so as not to wake up his companions, and walked toward the edge of the oasis. It was such a strange new sight for him, greenery and the sound of bugs floating on the face of the lake on one side, and the dryness of the desert stretching in front of him for as far as eyes could see. There was so much to the world he didn’t yet know, and his thirst for knowledge was just growing greater with each passing day.

The more he knew, the more he wanted to learn. When he had embarked on this journey with Varg and Toru, it hadn’t been for any reason other than he had finally found something worth living for. He hadn’t stopped to weigh his feelings too much, and he knew that he loved his companions wholeheartedly.

But this journey was starting to become important for him in more ways than one. Yes, he wanted to help Toru on his quest and be with the men he had come to love, but along the way, he had begun uncovering a new side of himself, one he had struggled to quench during his much younger

years. Burdened by the others' reaction to his appearance, he had chosen not to dwell on the feelings of anger they sometimes caused to take root in his soul.

Now, after battling evil side by side with his companions, Duril sensed a new power growing inside him. In a way, he was a bit scared of it. Far from him to become too proud and reckless, too confident of this change, as it could mean that years of building his own self into what he was today would go to waste.

Maybe Elidias was right, and he shouldn't deny the orc part of him. According to the librarian, it wasn't a part of him that was orc, but it was intertwined with his entire self, and he would do well not to deny it. Not that he knew what that meant. Humans appreciated his gentle demeanor, how he never talked back or growled or did things only a wild beast would.

Yet, out here in the desert, a strange call had risen in his blood and was starting to grow more powerful and proclaimed its right to be heard. Duril took a long look at Varg, Toru, and Claw, who slept soundly and didn't appear to be aware of the conflict overtaking their companion. They couldn't know, Duril decided. They loved and appreciated him for who he had worked hard to be all his life. What would they think if he suddenly wanted to live like an orc?

He frowned and mulled over that thought. Where did it come from? He didn't know how orcs lived, let alone if he wanted that, and yet that strange idea had come to him unbidden. One step forward and he was out of the oasis, right at its edge still, but wanting, no, needing to take another and follow the call singing in his blood.

The desert sand was cold under his feet at this late hour. Claw was right about the place becoming cold and inhospitable at night; and yet, Duril didn't find it so. Instead, as he walked, the new power he sensed within began growing. Without even realizing it, he suddenly broke into a sprint and started running. The sand brushed past his ankles, and his lungs filled with the frigid night air.

Freedom, he thought. This was what freedom felt like, new life in his veins, sweet, sweet air in his lungs, and everywhere the eye could see...

His land. His home. The true one, the one he had never known before. Duril didn't look back for a moment, as his feet carried him farther and farther into the Great Barren.

Toru shifted in his sleep and brushed his cheek against Varg's chest. He wiped the drool from his mouth and tried to get closer to the wolfshifter. Even inside the oasis, one could feel the coldness of the night and he wanted more of that body heat so that he could sleep comfortably.

"Kitty," Varg growled quietly. "Stop it."

"I'm cold," Toru whispered.

Varg put an arm around him and pulled him closer. "Is that it? Or you can't sleep for other reasons?"

Toru held Varg tightly. "We shouldn't wake the others up," he said cautiously.

"Then just hop on me and I'll take good care of you," Varg said.

Toru hesitated for a moment. What if Duril wanted in? He never wanted to be selfish.

"Let the others sleep. After all, I want you for myself for a bit," Varg whispered, and Toru's decision was made.

He slowly straddled Varg and united his lips with his. They kissed slowly, although it wasn't hard to tell that their desire was growing. His ears perked up, listening for the slightest sound, as he didn't want to make too much noise.

He let out a small gasp when Varg moved his mouth along his jawline and suddenly caught his ear. The wolfshifter knew very well that his ears were sensitive and, still, he never left them alone, finding every opportunity and taking advantage of it to torture them.

"Cut it out, mutt," he mumbled. "We're going to wake them up."

Varg let go of his ear and returned to kissing him gently. "So," he teased in a playful voice, "now you want my knot?"

Toru scoffed. "It's not like that."

"Then how is it?" Varg teased him some more.

"It's, um, I just like you, is all," Toru said quickly.

Just as they were about to get more serious, Varg surprised him by pushing him gently away.

"What?" he asked as he tried to get another kiss.

"Duril's not here."

Toru turned his head and began looking around, too. "You're right. Do you think he couldn't sleep either? I didn't hear him get up or go anywhere at all."

"Then maybe we should go look for him a little and see if he's up for some fun," Varg suggested.

"Yeah, let's do that," Toru whispered, "but be careful not to wake up the bear. What if he wants in on it, too?"

That earned him another quick ear bite from Varg. "You mutt," he growled under his breath.

"You like Claw, huh?" Varg said with a small chuckle.

“Not like I like you or Duril.”

“I’m sure of that. Well, then maybe you should ask Claw if he likes you back.”

“No way. He’s too...” He let his words hang, as he didn’t know how to express what he felt toward the bearshifter just yet.

“Impressive? Big?” Varg offered to help him.

“Something like that,” Toru said quickly. “Hey, didn’t you want us to go search for Duril? Let’s go already.”

They stood quietly and began moving about, searching through the trees and tall grass for their companion.

“You go that way, and I’ll go this way,” Varg suggested. “This oasis is not that big. Maybe he just fell asleep under one of these big trees.”

Toru nodded and went to the right side, while Varg went to the left. After a while, they found themselves face to face. All of a sudden, his senses prickled with apprehension. “Varg, where is Duril?” he asked hesitantly.

Even in the dark, he could tell that Varg’s face was all a frown, and his first sensation of wariness and unease turned into full-fledged anxiety.

Duril had never known that he could run so fast. His feet had wings, and it appeared that he could conquer vast distances in the blink of an eye. He stopped for a moment at the top of a dune, tilted his head back, and let out a victorious growl. His blood ran hot, and not even the cold night air could do anything to keep it from boiling over.

He needed something, even though he had no idea what it was. But it had to be out there, within reach, over the dunes, deep in the heart of the desert.

His ears perked up when he heard a sound in the distance. Was that a horn? It sounded like it. Without hesitating for a moment, he rushed toward the source of the sound. The horn blasted through the air, louder and louder, calling for him to follow.

Something swished through the air, taking him by surprise. In a split-second, a burning sensation cut his temple, and Duril brought his hand up and winced as he felt blood there. What could that have been? He stopped and looked around. When he heard the roaring of a hurried march, it was too late. Two creatures on two legs were hurrying to him, and his instincts commanded him to turn on his heels and run. He couldn’t just stand there and watch them come for him, as their bad

intentions were evident in how they darted toward him with their arms raised with what looked like some sort of weapons held in them.

He had barely managed a few steps when something hit him hard from behind. As he fell face first into the sand, his two pursuers reached him and he was forced into the ground with a knee against his back.

“We got him, Winglog,” a raspy, somewhat high-pitched voice said enthusiastically.

A growl followed and something that sounded like a slap. Duril had expected to feel more afraid, but he was quite calm given the circumstances.

“Let’s see him,” the one named Winglog growled.

Duril was lifted from the ground by the back of his shirt as if he was a feather, and he was brought to eye level with a monstrous face from which a pair of large tusks jutted. They were orcs!

“What is he? Can we eat him?” the other asked excitedly.

“Does he look like he’s any good to eat?” Winglog moved Duril so that he practically dangled in front of the other.

Duril then saw the other orc. This one was considerably smaller than Winglog, and there was something servile in his attitude and the way he kept his arms held together in front of his chest and twisted inward. He also had a hunched back, and one of his tusks was missing, but his eyes shone with devilish intelligence.

“Ewww, what kind of orc is he?”

“You’re stupid, Sog,” Winglog said and gave the other a shove with his foot. “How can he be an orc? His tusks are too small.”

Sog didn’t seem bothered too much by being kicked. “But he has them. He’s a very ugly orc.”

Winglog turned Duril toward him to examine him some more. Then he suddenly grabbed Duril by the hair on top of his head. “And he has hair!”

“And he doesn’t have an arm. Disgusting,” Sog continued to catalog his shortcomings and began bouncing up and down. “Are you sure we can’t eat him, Winglog? We’ll skin him anyway, right?”

“Do you usually eat your own kin?” Duril asked, as his initial shock began to wear off.

Sog jumped back, executing a funny somersault through the air. “He speaks!”

“Yes, I do,” Duril said. “You speak, too. How is that a surprise?”

Winglog shook him a bit and studied him with a curious look on his face. Then he finally asked, “What are you?”

Duril now understood the meaning of Elidias’s words. He was in danger, these two orcs could kill him in the blink of an eye, and yet, he was still not afraid. “I’m an orc,” he replied calmly.

“You’re not from Zukh Kalegh,” Winglog said.

“No, I’m not. I traveled here from a place called Whitekeep.”

Winglog scrunched up his face, making it appear even scarier than before. “That doesn’t sound like an orc place.”

“It’s not. It’s a human settlement.”

“Did you raise humans there to eat them?” Sog inquired.

That earned him another smack over his head from Winglog. “We’ll take you to Yarag. He’ll know what to do with you.” And then he spoke to Sog. “Tie him up.”

Duril debated with himself as to whether he should resist or not. The fire in his blood had calmed down a bit, but now he was curious to learn more about his orcish brethren. He blinked for a moment, hesitating. Behind him, somewhere, were his companions, but why did they feel like a faraway dream? All his senses commanded him to move forward, but there was still something at the back of his mind demanding his attention.

He shook his head, and then the memories came flooding back to him like a knife piercing through his soul. When Sog approached him, he pushed the orc away and tried to dash into the desert, but Winglog was fast.

“Stupid Sog! Can’t you do one thing without my help?” Winglog pushed Duril down and forced a thick rope around his neck and shoulders, and then downward to his waist.

In no time, he could only move his legs. Winglog forced him to his feet.

“A spy, aren’t you? You must be, with all that ugly hair.”

“I’m not a spy.” Duril tried to move away from Winglog who continued to run his large paw through his hair, sometimes pausing to tug it somewhat painfully. “I was just passing by.”

One thing he hadn’t learned after all of these years was how to lie, and it was clear that he wasn’t doing a good job now, either, because the two orcs began laughing.

Sog produced a small dagger from his belt and began pushing it against Duril’s back. “Walk, you ugly spy. Yarag will surely want to cook you.”

Winglog slapped Sog upside the head. “He’s not to eat. He looks too much like an orc.”

Sog mumbled something that Duril couldn’t quite catch, but seemed to have something to do with a special marinade that the smaller orc must have known how to make.

“I’m not a spy,” Duril insisted. “I’m just crossing the desert.”

“By yourself?” Winglog pulled at the end of the rope and forced him to walk. At the same time, Sog was digging the sharp tip of his dagger into his back, enough to make him walk faster. The obsessed orc was mumbling incoherently; Duril could only make words here and there, all having to do with food preparation.

“Yes, by myself. I need to get to the other side,” he said. “I suppose your leader has better things to do than to be bothered with someone insignificant like me.”

“You talk like a spy,” Winglog decided. “No more talking.”

“Where is he?” Toru asked in an anxious voice. “Should we start calling for him?”

Varg couldn’t deny that he shared Toru’s worry. It couldn’t be possible that Duril had just up and gone for a stroll in the desert, as he knew as well as they did how dangerous that could be. That left open another alternative, and that was worse. Could it be that someone had snuck into the oasis and kidnapped Duril? But how could they sleep through that? No, a more reasonable explanation had to exist.

“Let’s look around some more. Maybe he just needed to stretch his legs a little,” he told Toru.

“Stretch his legs? We walked for days,” Toru pointed out.

“He must be close,” Varg insisted. “We’ll go in circles. There are dunes around, and he could be behind one.”

“Varg, do you think that maybe he ran away from us?” Toru asked.

“Why would he do that?”

Toru shook his head and looked down. “The people he belongs to are here. What if he wanted to go see them?”

Varg tousled Toru’s hair. “The only people, as you call them, here are orcs. They are bloodthirsty creatures that Duril has nothing in common with, as he told us just yesterday. Why would he want to see them?”

“What’s with all the noise? How come you’re not tired enough to sleep?” A baritone voice chided them from the copse of trees behind them.

“We cannot find Duril,” Toru said in an agitated voice. “We woke up, and he’s nowhere.”

“He may be around,” Varg insisted. “We’ve barely started searching for him, but we didn’t want to start shouting his name because we didn’t want to wake you up.”

“I’m up,” Claw said matter-of-factly. “Let’s start searching for your healer.”

Toru started calling for Duril right away. He was so agitated that he began running around the oasis, shouting at the top of his lungs.

“What do you make of this?” Varg asked Claw, as Toru’s loud calls went unanswered.

Claw’s face seemed all a frown. “His bag is here.”

“So he mustn’t have walked away of his own accord,” Varg added, following up with the explanation Claw seemed to be looking for.

“That’s not necessarily true,” Claw said, much to his surprise. “We’re in their lands.”

Varg didn’t need anything else said to understand what Claw was saying. All the while, Toru was making rounds, going farther and farther into the desert.

“Stop the kitty from wasting his breath. We need to think this one through,” Claw recommended.

“Toru,” Varg called for the tigershifter right away. “Let’s group up and have a talk with Claw.”

Toru hurried to them, albeit reluctantly. “It’s like he disappeared,” he said. “And there are no traces in the sand, no tracks or anything. And my nose,” he said as he raised his head and sniffed the air, “doesn’t tell me anything.”

Claw surprised them by shifting suddenly into his bear. Then he began sniffing the air. “My bear nose is not lying. The horde is nearer than we thought.”

“The horde? Did they take Duril from us?” Toru asked. “But why?”

Claw shook his head. “We couldn’t have slept through an entire horde going through our little improvised camp. And I don’t think they would have just left us alive. So something else is at work here.”

“What aren’t you saying, Claw?” Varg insisted, sensing that the bearshifter appeared to be keeping something to himself.

“His conversation with Elidias,” Claw finally said. “About him being an orc. You know that’s true, right?”

“Duril is not an orc,” Toru protested. “He’s nothing like those ugly, bloodthirsty monsters.”

Claw shook his head. “Sorry to be the one to break it to you, kitty, but Duril is an orc, too, just as he is human. He may not be a shifter like us, but he belongs to two kins, not one, and that’s in his blood and he cannot deny it.”

“What do you mean?” Toru demanded to know.

Varg knew well what Claw was getting at. He didn’t want to believe it to be the truth, but the alternatives were so horrible that he couldn’t deny that it was actually preferable.

“Duril must have felt the call of the desert,” Claw said simply. “Didn’t you all notice how he has been the least tired of us ever since we entered the Great Barren? And there was something new growing in his eyes as we walked deeper and deeper into the desert.”

“You mean that he left us for the orc horde?” Toru asked, more and more disquieted.

Varg put a hand on his shoulder. “He didn’t leave us. It must have been a strong call for him to heed it and walk away in the middle of the night like this.”

“But he told us that he doesn’t feel like an orc at all,” Toru complained some more. “Was he lying?”

Claw rested a comforting hand on Toru’s other shoulder. “No. Your friend is an exceptional person. But all his life, he kept on denying the orc in him, and that means that he couldn’t have been prepared for the call of his tribe at all.”

“And you thought of all this before?” Toru said, curling his hands into fists. “And said nothing?”

Varg squeezed Toru’s shoulder in sympathy, but also in warning. “Claw couldn’t have foreseen something like this.”

“I didn’t. I was much inclined to believe your friend when he told us that he was no orc. But I’m also never one to deny the truth when it lies in front of my eyes. And right now, the truth, my friends, is that we need to find a way to get Duril back from the horde, and that without losing our hides.”

“Can we be sure he is with them?” Varg asked. He hated to think of Duril wandering through the desert until his feet could no longer carry him, in search of something that he must have been wishing for all this life.

“It is our best bet,” Claw said. “I’ll carry his bag so that you two are not encumbered with more. We should get going.”

“How do we know where to go?” Toru asked.

“I’ll travel in my bear shape,” Claw said. “This nose doesn’t lie. And I can already smell them. We’ll keep on their tails and think of a way to get inside and convince Duril to come back to us.”

“Why should we need to convince him? Doesn’t he love us?” Toru asked.

“That’s not the point, kitty,” Claw said firmly. “We all yearn for the place and people we belong to, whether we want to admit it or not. I long for The Quiet Woods and have been longing for them for a long time.”

“And I, for my pack,” Varg confirmed. “I found my pack in you, that’s true, but that doesn’t mean that I’m not thinking of my brothers and sisters every day.”

“But I don’t,” Toru said with resolution and his fists clenched tighter. “I don’t care for my kin. They abandoned me. Why would Duril care for those flesh-eating abominations? His father abandoned him!”

Varg exchanged a glance with Claw. The tigershifter needed to be handled carefully. His fear of abandonment was rearing its ugly head, now that Duril was gone. And, unfortunately, they had no time for heartfelt talks and easing him gently into understanding that nothing like that had happened.

“Duril loves us,” he began.

“Then why did he leave?” Toru asked belligerently.

“It’s like when you followed that scent, Toru,” Claw intervened. “Duril didn’t have much more choice than you had when the call of his tribe reached him.”

Varg was thankful for Claw’s help. He knew very well that much more would be needed to allay Toru’s worries and fears, but, for now, that explanation had to do, and they needed to be on the move. At least by traveling at night they didn’t have to worry about the scorching sun.

“You don’t have to push me, I’m walking,” Duril told Sog who seemed to take great delight in using his dagger to force him forward all the time.

“Not fast enough,” Sog mumbled.

“He walks fast enough,” Winglog said. “You keep your dagger away, Sog, you stupid orc.”

“Why do you call him stupid all the time?” Duril asked.

Winglog growled. “You’re clearly not an orc. Orcs don’t like to talk so much.”

“I’m an orc. Maybe you could be nicer to him,” Duril insisted.

Winglog stopped abruptly, forcing the entire line to an abrupt halt. Sog bumped into Duril. “There’s no such thing as a nice orc, spy. And I call him what he is. Stupid. Should I call him One-tusk?” Winglog leaned toward him so that they could be at eye level.

Duril looked over his shoulder at Sog, who was self-consciously touching the left side of his mouth where there was no tusk. “No,” he said quietly.

Winglog straightened up. “No more talking,” he ordered and began pulling at the rope again.

Chapter Six - Zukh Kalegh

Duril walked as fast as he could, with Winglog pulling at the rope in front and Sog behind him, murmuring to himself words only he could make any sense of. All the time, his senses remained alert, and he observed his surroundings with growing interest. Anyone saying that the desert was nothing but the same thing for miles and miles had to be wrong. When he first entered the Great Barren he thought that stretching in front of him, as far as eyes could see, there were only dunes and flats, not one different than the next.

But now, he saw it all with new eyes. Winglog had to know where they were going, his steps were sure, and it had to be not only the result of the same low rumble Duril sensed in his blood, but also because he knew these lands. They were their lands. A large dune was followed by two smaller ones, and here and there, the sparse vegetation changed its color. As they were traveling at night, he shouldn't have been so capable of noticing all these details, but his sight was more acute than ever before. Everything around him had a sharpness that he recognized, a few boulders scattered about, the way the sand felt beneath his feet, sometimes finer, sometimes coarser.

Even the desert appeared in different hues as the sun began to appear at the horizon. The meaning of time was different, too. Duril couldn't say that he felt tired, at all, and he appeared to be very similar to his companions at this point, as they walked without complaining, as well.

He remembered what Claw had told him, about orcs preferring to move at night, and wondered briefly whether Winglog would stop once the sun was up. But as the disc of heat above them gained in power and began shooting its rays across the desert, Winglog showed no signs that he wanted to stop and rest. They continued their march in the scorching hot temperatures, just as they did at night.

Duril couldn't help wondering at the hardiness of orcs. He was experiencing it, too, on his own skin, as he needed no sip of water, no food, and no rest, although they had been traveling for so many hours. The oasis must be far behind them now, and Duril fought to prevent his thoughts from scattering, causing him to forget.

Winglog was large and wore armor made of many leather straps crisscrossing his back and overlapping. In the middle of his back, as well as in the front, he wore a plate of metal that seemed to have been battered by seeing many battles. The lower part of his body was covered by a leather skirt made from strips of leather adorned by metal rivets. Apart from his armor, he was barefoot and didn't have any other garments.

What impressed Duril even more, however, was the number of weapons Winglog carried. A curved blade was scabbarded across the metal plate on his back and a bola was attached to his belt, which must have been what he had used to take down Duril when chasing him. His entire belt was hung with sheaths, each serving to accommodate small daggers and knives of different

sizes and shapes. The little time he had had at his disposal to observe Winglog from the front had allowed him to see that about a dozen spears appeared to have been woven through his armor on that side.

In contrast, Sog was considerably less armored and carried only that dagger, at least as far as Duril could tell. He only had a leather loincloth fastened around his midsection by means of a coarse rope. Where Winglog was at least several heads taller than Duril, Sog was about the same height as him, or maybe just a smidge above. But it was the two orcs' difference in appearance that surprised Duril. Winglog had large arms as thick as trees, and his feet made the ground tremble as he walked. His girth was impressive, as were his chest and back that were large enough to compare favorably to the north wall of a house in Whitekeep. Sog, on the other hand, was willowy and bent from the waist, which might have been the reason why he appeared to be so much shorter.

He could only assume that Winglog was someone important on the food chain, while Sog was at the bottom of the hierarchical structure of the orc horde. The manner in which the leader addressed the other left no room for interpretation. Sog was a subordinate, and not even one with much value.

They reached the crown of a large dune of a more reddish color than the surrounding desert. Duril examined the sand with growing interest, and a small shudder traversed his spine. The reddish tint must have had a source that had nothing to do with natural causes. Between the grains of sand, clumped here and there, Duril could see small fragments of bone. Zukh Kalegh had to be close.

And then he saw it, a large valley stretched at their feet. The ground was almost black here, and the horde was present with a vengeance. All of a sudden there was clamor, deafening sound, as if the large dune they had just climbed had served as a shield of sorts to contain the noise within what Duril now perceived to be an ancient caldera, mostly eroded away and filled with packed sand. He stopped, impressed by the sight in front of him, and Winglog pulled at the rope hard, almost making him stumble forward, to get him on the move again.

There was no easy way to describe the horde gathered there. First of all, Duril couldn't recall ever seeing such a large mass of people at the same time. From that distance, little distinction could be made between one body or another, as they all shared the same complexion and type of armor, more or less. Yes, from where he stood, the horde looked like a mass of metal and green skin with thousands and thousands of heads.

"What are they doing?" Duril asked, forgetting that he was supposed to be silent and not allowed to express his curiosity.

Since the sun was already up above their heads, it had to be about lunchtime or even later. The horde appeared to move haphazardly, waves and waves of orcs following different trajectories as

they went about tasks which only they knew what they were, like schools of fish dragged to and fro by interior forces.

“Shut your trap, spy,” Winglog barked at him.

“They’re getting ready for the challenge,” Sog whispered from behind him.

Duril tensed for a moment, expecting Winglog to have heard that and punish the inferior orc accordingly. But nothing like that happened, as the noises of the horde were louder and louder as they drew near and appeared to have drowned out Sog’s comment.

“What challenge?” he whispered back, happy to find a partner for conversation after walking through the desert like that without exchanging one word with his captors.

“For becoming Grand Chief,” Sog explained.

Duril didn’t stop to consider why suddenly Sog was so interested in talking to him after dreaming for hours of different ways to cook him. Nevertheless, he was thankful for the orc’s change in attitude. The sooner he managed to forge some alliances, the better. He couldn’t tell what fate waited for him once he arrived at the final destination of this imposed journey, but he still was experiencing the same strange calm as before.

Orcs were impressive creatures, the kind nightmares were made of, but it might have been all those times when he had looked at himself in the mirror that made him immune to their appearance. As they drew closer and closer to the bustling throng, he began observing more details.

The orc horde had an obvious hierarchy. At the edge of each gathering of orcs, there were a few not much different in aspect than Sog who busied themselves with polishing weapons, carrying buckets filled with dubious waste, and even cooking. They were either very young, Duril noticed, or very old. And some were like Sog, scrawny and underfed, many at times with a missing limb, and an overall deplorable appearance.

If everything Claw had been saying about the orcs and their customs was true, a battle for becoming Grand Chief could only be bloody and violent in the extreme. Suddenly, all the war-like sounds coming from the groups of orcs moving about made perfect sense.

“Why is a challenge taking place now?” Duril whispered to Sog, hoping for another answer.

But before the orc could speak, Winglog pulled at the rope hard forcing him to stumble forward quickly so that he wouldn’t meet the ground face first. Sog remained quiet, and Duril didn’t dare to ask the question again. The big orc marched in front, grunting a greeting to some he met in his path, but never once stopping for conversation.

It was easy to see that Winglog's large size was enough to make him an imposing figure in front of the other orcs, but if he were not mistaken, there was also a certain hostility in how everyone watched them pass. They didn't ask Winglog about his prisoner, although curious looks rested now and then on Duril.

To their eyes, he had to look quite hideous, which was at least a bit amusing seeing how most humans had always feared his appearance and hated his resemblance to his sire. Maybe Elidias was wrong, and he didn't truly belong anywhere, except with the friends he had made lately, and whose memory he currently struggled to retain with all his might.

While everyone seemed to be engaged in vivid activity, the place where Winglog finally took him was nothing like that. It appeared that the orcs here were quiet, although their position in the hierarchy, far away from the edge of the camp, must have meant that they were privileged in some way or other. Their armor was as heavily adorned as the one Winglog wore and they carried all sorts of weaponry; they were taller and larger than the rest.

Nonetheless, there was a dark veil over their faces, like they were mourning someone. The way they stood directly on the ground, their shoulders hunched, their hands brought together in front, had to mean that an unfortunate event must have taken place not so long ago there.

"What happened to make everyone so sad?" Duril asked, loud enough for Winglog to hear him.

The orc turned only to slap him lazily upside the head. "Yarag will see you now, spy."

It was then that Duril noticed the presence of a large tent somewhere in the back, as they moved through the rows and rows of dejected looking orcs. They didn't raise their heads to salute Winglog, and even the presence of a prisoner seemed to do nothing to shake them out of their strange stupor.

Winglog entered the tent with Duril on his heels. The inside of the tent was dark, but Duril's eyes grew accustomed to the lack of light quickly and he began to notice details. The tent was tall, and if he looked up, he could see that its ceiling was high above their heads.

On the ground, numerous pillows and blankets lay, something Duril found particularly odd given the hardy nature of orcs and their disdain for any sort of comfort other species favored.

"Grand Chief," Winglog said out loud, "I caught a spy."

"A spy?"

Duril felt a small chill run down his back at the sound of that cavernous voice, and only then did he notice that there was someone there, an orc, much larger than Winglog, who lay on a stack of pillows, on one side. His skin was a dark shade of green, much darker than the other orcs' he had seen so far. His mouth was large and when he spoke, sharp rows of teeth were visible. His tusks were even more memorable, and Duril wondered briefly whether he used them as weapons of

war. Just imagining that large orc rushing toward the enemy, his tusks lowered and ready to impale everything and everyone that happened to be in his path, was enough to make him break into a cold sweat. While until now he had been calm and even curious about his surroundings and this large tribe of orcs with whom he shared half of his blood, he now experienced the icy tendrils of fear spreading everywhere throughout his body and gripping his insides.

“Come closer, spy,” the raspy voice beckoned.

Winglog stepped out of the way and then pushed Duril forward.

“Who are you spying for?”

Duril could smell a stench coming off the Grand Chief’s skin, a smell that seemed much like that of a dying creature. It was heavier, thicker, than what he had often experienced with humans, but it couldn’t be mistaken for the natural way an orc would smell. If his first guess was right, Winglog’s superior was on his deathbed. It could be that he was old and approaching the natural last days of his life, but somehow Duril doubted it. The hostile looks everyone had thrown at Winglog on their way there now acquired a different significance.

The Grand Chief’s rule must be approaching its end, and that meant that the other groups would dethrone him soon and begin a fight for dominance. It appeared that he had landed there at the brink of an impending all-out war.

“I’m not a spy,” he began.

“You don’t sound like one.” The Grand Chief laughed but then stopped when a cough forced his gigantic body into convulsions. “But we’ll treat you like one anyway.”

Duril was certain he wouldn’t like that fate at all, whatever it was that orcs usually did to spies. Seeing how cruel and ruthless they could be toward their own, he doubted anyone considered an enemy would be treated better. Worse was more like what he suspected. Much worse.

“Grand Chief Yarag,” a voice called from outside. “The heads of the clans want to have a word with you.”

“Do they wish to feast their eyes upon this dying flesh?” Yarag called back, his thundering voice still strong despite his failing body. “I do not have time for them.”

It appeared that the clan leaders had something else in mind. Noises of a fight broke out, and soon, a group of heavily armored and armed orcs rushed inside.

“Yarag, you’re not fit to lead us,” one of them spoke.

“Says who?” Yarag shot back, forcing himself to his feet.

Duril watched in disbelief as the gigantic orc raised himself to his full height in front of him. Having such a tall tent made complete sense now. All the others, including the belligerent clan heads fell silent as the colossal shadow of the de facto leader fell over them.

“We say,” the orc who spoke first replied, but his voice was shaking already.

“Be gone,” Yarag ordered. “You’ll do more good for yourselves to barge in here when there’s no more breath in this body.”

“We’re here to challenge you,” the orc said, his voice more and more unsure.

A moment of complete silence followed, but it was broken by a swish through the air. Duril could feel his eyes threatening to pop out of their sockets at that display of skill. Yarag, despite his obvious state of severe illness coupled with his large heavy-set body had been so quick to throw an axe that no one had had the time to react.

The next moment, the orc who had spoken earlier fell to his knees and then collapsed onto the ground. The axe had gone straight through his forehead and in his fall his head split open like a ripe melon. Duril unconsciously moved a few steps away, and Winglog had to pull on his rope and force him back.

“Take this scum out of here,” Yarag ordered. “Does anyone else dare to challenge me?”

The others didn’t dare to speak another word, let alone offer challenge. They grabbed their fallen companion and rushed out of the tent as if it were on fire.

Duril couldn’t tear his eyes away from the puddle of blood on the floor that was slowly absorbed by the sand beneath.

Yarag collapsed back on his pillows. After a long silence, he finally spoke again. “Tell us what you know, spy, or we will make sure to tear you apart so slowly that you’ll wish you’d never been born.”

“Do you really think Duril ran away to join the horde?” Varg asked Claw as they stopped for a short break, and Toru took it upon himself to run to one of the nearby dunes, climbing it so that he could see if the horde was anywhere in sight.

“The call of blood is loudest in those who have never heard it before,” Claw replied with a small nod of the head.

During their stops, Claw changed to his human self. Varg wondered briefly whether the desert was too taxing on the bearshifter, given how he had spent three centuries underground in the darkness and now was being forced to walk through the sun.

As if Claw could hear his thoughts, he began speaking. "Bears are not creatures of the desert. The fur on my back gets me so hot it's hard to breathe," he explained.

"Then travel like this," Varg recommended.

Claw shook his head. "It is my bear nose that can keep track of the horde, and we're lucky that they're not moving just yet. I can assure you that it would be almost impossible to detect them if I were to be in my human shape."

"You're doing it for us," Varg said matter-of-factly.

"Indeed," Claw confirmed. "So it's worth it."

Varg nodded at him in acknowledgement and gratitude.

"There is something I'm going to tell you since we're briefly alone," Claw continued. "The young one doesn't need to know it just yet so that he doesn't get any wrong ideas in his unripe mind."

"Feel free to say what you think," Varg urged the bearshifter as his eyes followed Toru, who was out of earshot at a good distance away at the top of the dune.

"Let's say we reach the horde. Let's say that we manage to get through it and walk about without anyone asking us what business we have there. And let's say that we find our friend."

"No one believes that it would be that easy."

"I know. But when we find him, he might not behave like the Duril we know. The desert began to change him the moment we set foot in it."

"Duril is much stronger than that," Varg protested. "And I say that because I've known him for a little longer than you."

"True," Claw admitted. "But I want us to be prepared for the worst, even if we are forced to drag him out of there, his mouth gagged and his limbs tied up. We might have to get him out of the desert before the orc blood in him quiets down again."

"Is he truly turning into an orc? As we speak? Is this what you believe is happening?" Varg asked.

Claw nodded. "Do you remember how it was when you first started to shift?"

"It's been a long time, but yes."

"We're born as cubs and pups," Claw said. "We're not too keen on handling our human side. At least, I wasn't," he added with a small laugh.

“You weren’t the only one, I can assure you of that,” Varg replied. At first, he had refused to spend any time in his human shape, as much as the leaders of the pack insisted. He had been used to seeing them as humans, and he had thought that it would be so amazing to do the same, but the first hours spent inside his human skin had been horrendous.

“But we learn to deal with it, to embrace it. We have our elders and our way of life that teaches us,” Claw said. “Who did Duril have to help him understand the change in him that must be happening, yes, even as we speak?”

Varg sighed. He had to agree with Claw. “Shouldn’t we have had this talk with him before?”

“We couldn’t even tell if he would hear or heed a call from his true tribe. He seemed so human that I sincerely believed that he wouldn’t be the kind to leave us in the middle of the night and hurry toward the sound of the horde’s horn. He seemed so balanced, so well-adjusted to his condition.”

“Will he simply forget about who he was once he’s with them?” Varg pointed in no direction in particular, as only Claw could sense where the horde was. His nose was useless in this situation, as much as he had counted on it on so many occasions in the past.

“His mind will be altered, without a doubt. But I wouldn’t lose hope. We have here,” Claw patted Duril’s bag, “the objects he loves most, and we also have the people he loves most, isn’t that so?”

Varg nodded. Their conversation had to be cut short as Toru hurried down the dune and back to them. Claw didn’t discourage him from running about and doing everything he could in their quest to find the healer, although they were all depending on the bearshifter’s incredible sense of smell to get them where they needed to be. And Varg could appreciate the wisdom of keeping Toru busy and feeling like he was helping find their beloved Duril, along with many of the bearshifter’s other contributions to their expedition. Their newest companion had proved to be dependable both as a close friend and an ally.

Toru scouted the horizon with worried eyes. How could he have been so silly before, secretly wishing that he would meet the orc horde, see it with his own eyes, and then live to tell the tale, like the hero of a children’s story? Now, the reality that Duril was out there with them was starting to sink in and self-loathing filled his mind.

Even if Duril had left of his own accord, which he still found hard to believe regardless of what Claw was saying, that didn’t mean that those bloodthirsty orcs would just welcome him with open arms. Most likely, right now, he had already been captured and tortured. That was what his heart was saying, although he didn’t want to believe it because he was afraid he might go crazy at the thought of the gentle healer in pain. And he certainly didn’t want to think that Duril was

now an orc of the horde who wouldn't want to throw as little as a look backwards at his life as he had known it.

Could he really blame Duril if that were the case? His life among humans had been nothing but a long string of hardships, always abhorred, always overlooked, and sometimes even worse. Although there had been a few people who had been nice to him in Whitekeep, Toru had seen very clearly that Duril hadn't been much loved although all he had ever done was to help them and serve them without saying a bad word or lashing back at them as they deserved.

And then there was this damned desert, which he had been so impatient to see. He hated it, with its never-ending dunes and sand that got so hot that the soles of his feet were now painful to step on. If it weren't for his inner tiger working to heal him fast, they would have been covered with blisters by now. And that was nothing compared to what Duril might be suffering at this very moment.

Only the thought that his friend and lover would get up and leave like that without one word of goodbye made his soul clench so hard that he couldn't even breathe. That was why he didn't want to believe what Claw was saying. The Duril he knew would never abandon them like that.

It was useless to scout the horizon with his eyes. Nothing different from what they had seen so far appeared. They all counted on Claw's bear nose and how it could lead them to the horde.

He would go through it from the first to the last orc to find Duril and bring him back home, where he belonged. His home was with them, not with those creatures of the desert with nothing but killing and plundering in their hearts.

With that decision made, he strode back to Claw and Varg, ignoring the burning of the soles of his feet. They spoke little as they traveled, the only words uttered coming from Claw, who told them when the scent of the horde was getting stronger.

If Claw hadn't been with them, they would have been in real trouble. But even if he were there only with Varg or alone, he would still scour the desert from one end to the other to find Duril. And that was something that nothing would ever change.

"Have you seen anything?" Varg asked him.

Toru shook his head. At this point, he was aware that the wolfshifter was just humoring him since they all knew they depended on nothing but Claw's nose to find their way to the horde and Duril.

Claw nodded and shifted into his bear. Varg adjusted Duril's bag on the bear's back, and they began their grueling march through the ruthless sun without another word.

“I’m not a spy,” Duril said again. “I’m from a place called Whitekeep, and I must cross the desert.”

Yarag barked a wheezing laugh. “Whitekeep. It’s only humans there. You want me to believe that you lived among them, without being hunted down like the beast you are?”

“I’m not a beast,” Duril said simply.

Yarag leaned forward. Even as he lay there, on one side, he was still at eye level with Duril and observed him keenly. It wasn’t farfetched to guess that Yarag must have secured his place as Grand Chief not only through sheer power but through smarts as well. An intelligent spark lit his bloodshot eyes, but Duril knew better than to mistake that as a sign of kindness.

“What are you, then?” Yarag asked.

“I’m a healer.”

Yarag broke into another wheezing laugh. “You think trickery like that will help you, spy? Let me guess. The next thing that will come out of your mouth is that you can help me, expecting me to be a dum-dum who would accept poison from you under the pretext of a miraculous treatment.”

“I don’t know if I can help you unless you tell me your symptoms and how you became ill.”

Yarag’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “We have a clever spy here. Put him in the pit. I need to think of what best to do with him.”

He waved them out. Duril guessed that the Grand Chief must be too tired to question him properly after his earlier exertion. But that didn’t mean that his reprieve would be long-lived. The horde was seething in the anticipation of violence, and Duril felt he was caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place.

Sog pushed him into a hole in the ground that barely allowed him any room to move. If he had been an orc as large as Winglog, he would have found it difficult to do anything else but stand, something that was bound to wear down even the hardiest of the orcs.

“Hey, Sog,” he called, when he noticed that the orc sat by the edge of the pit, probably put in charge of guarding him.

“What do you want, spy?” Sog asked, his voice a croak. Since the theory that Duril was someone who wanted to infiltrate into their midst with the intention of finding some important secrets, the smaller orc took it as the truth.

“How did you lose your tusk?” Duril asked gently.

Sog stared into the pit, at him, and there was curiosity in the way he blinked and continued to sit there, examining the captive. “Sog won’t tell you a shameful thing like that.”

“I don’t have an arm.” Winglog had thought it inadvisable to release him from his bonds, so he could only move his legs.

“Did something eat it?” Sog asked, after a short deliberation with himself.

“No. I was in a war, and the enemy sliced through it.”

Sog let out a ragged laugh. “And did they eat it, after?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Too bad,” Sog said with a heartfelt sigh. “I would have turned it into a delicious stew.”

“Are you a cook?” Duril wished he could steer their conversation away from the topic of how tasty he would be if Sog were allowed to drag him to the pot. Even so, he needed to do it slowly, without letting the other know of his real intentions.

“A cook, yes,” Sog said with excitement. “I’ve always been a cook.”

“What will happen to you if Yarag dies?”

Sog looked fearfully around. “No clan will want Sog.”

“Then you surely care that he survives, right?”

Sog leaned over the pit, craning his neck and staring at Duril. “Yarag is the Grand Chief. He dies, and Sog will be hacked to pieces and fed to the crows.”

“Then how about I teach you how to heal him?” Duril couldn’t be sure of his plan, but it was the best he had. If Yarag died, chances were that chaos would break loose in Zukh Kalegh. And that could easily mean his demise.

“You only try to poison him,” Sog said with determination.

“I won’t do that. But he’s dying anyway. He smells like death,” Duril said quietly.

Sog shifted and moved his head about as if he was trying to wrap it around what Duril was saying.

“You’re a great cook, I bet,” Duril continued.

“The best cook, Sog is the best cook,” the orc began to sway his body forward and backward while holding his crossed legs with his hands.

“So you’re the one who gives Yarag the food he eats, right?”

“Yes, yes, even though Sog only has just one tusk left, the Grand Chief doesn’t want another cook. Sog is the best,” he added with conviction.

“Making a healing potion is not that much different from cooking. But first, can you tell me what happened that made Yarag fall ill?” Duril prayed inwardly that Yarag wasn’t only dying from old age, and he had miscalculated everything.

“You’re a spy,” Sog reverted to his initial speech. “I can’t tell you that.”

“Sog, if you’re the one to heal Yarag, he’ll be thankful. Maybe he’ll give you more than a dagger to carry.”

“More than a dagger?” Sog said slowly, considering the idea and probably finding it tempting.

“Yes, definitely more than a dagger. Maybe a curved blade,” Duril insisted, hoping that sounded good enough for Sog.

By how the orc started to fret and mumble incoherently, owning a curved blade appeared to be a good thing. If that were all he had to work with, he would just have to make it work.

Chapter Seven – True Nature

“How long and far could he have traveled?” Varg asked, but it was a question he was pondering on his own without expecting an answer.

“In the desert, it’s not only about how long and far you’re traveling,” Claw replied. “What matters the most is that you know the path you’re traveling.”

“Please don’t tell me that we’re lost,” Varg said with a grunt.

Their trip through the merciless desert sun was taking a toll on all of them.

“We’re not lost, but my nose can only sense the scents brought by the wind. And if the winds change their direction, our path cannot be even or straight.”

“So, will we get where we need to be?” Varg asked again.

“We will, and we’re lucky that the horde doesn’t appear to be on the move. Even if we get delayed, we will still reach our destination.”

“How can you know that?” Toru joined the conversation. “That the horde is not moving?”

Claw lifted his nose and closed his eyes for a moment. “There is a staleness in the air, like food being cooked and consumed, and also a brew of restlessness.”

Varg wasn’t sure he liked the sound of that. “What could make them restless? Will they be on the move soon?” Again, he was only half-expecting answers.

“That’s not something my nose can tell,” Claw said in an apologetic voice.

Toru patted the bear on the back. “You’re helping us a lot, Claw.” He seemed much more chastised than before when he had gotten mad at the bearshifter for not telling them sooner about how Duril might become affected by the call of the desert. Most probably, just like him, Toru had realized that he couldn’t depend on his senses, as sharp as they might have always been. They depended on Claw and his keen sense of smell, and for that, even the proud tigershifter was willing to let go of his pride.

“Wish I could do better, kitty, wish I could do better,” Claw said quietly.

Varg observed Toru from the corner of his eye. He could tell the young tiger was boiling with curiosity, but he didn’t yet have the courage to question Claw at length about what he wanted to know.

“Claw, do you know many orcs?” Toru finally dared to speak up.

“Know? I don’t have any friends among them if that’s what you want to find out,” Claw replied with a small chuckle.

“No, not like friends... but were you ever close enough to them to... get to know them a little?”

“Are you planning to get chummy with Duril’s kin?” Claw asked, and then laughed. “They’re not the kind to form such attachments,” he explained. “Even among themselves, there are no such things as friendships.”

“What do they have?” Toru asked stubbornly.

“They have a grand chief, clan heads, other leaders in charge of small bands, and then, there’s the chum, of course, the lowest of the low. Most of them only serve in the big structure that is the horde, and they don’t question their lives and purpose. They are there only to serve the bigger orcs, always at their beck and call without questioning. If I could use a term to describe their situation, it would be similar to that of slaves.”

“If Duril becomes one of them,” Toru started and then stopped, hesitating for a moment. “If he becomes like them, what will he be?”

“That’s a bit hard to tell. He’s not as big as them, nor as strong.”

“Will he be nothing but chum?” Toru asked, this time more anxiously.

“He’s wise and charming,” Claw countered. “Who knows? A leader with at least half a brain could see his usefulness.”

“But, still, those orcs, they will never be his friends,” Toru insisted.

Ah, so that was what the kitty wanted to know, Varg realized. He wished to confirm for himself and not only for himself that Duril would never replace them with his orc horde. That was a small sliver of hope to hold onto, but it existed, and Varg was just as willing to accept it, and even grab onto it. Duril wouldn’t have friends in the orc horde, only orcs bigger and stronger than him, as well as orcs that sat lower than him on the food chain.

“As I said,” Claw confirmed what he was thinking, “orcs are not creatures prone to forge friendships among themselves. And for that part, our friend would be, undoubtedly, hard pressed to find someone he could call close in the entire horde.”

“Sog,” Duril called softly at first. “Sog!” He raised his voice to make himself heard by the enthusiastic orc who was performing a strange dance around the pit, still drunk on the idea that he might get his own curved blade.

Sog finally noticed him and knelt by the edge of the pit. He stared down curiously. “Will Sog have a blade? He’ll be a big warrior?”

Duril hated to lie to him like that, but he saw no other choice. “The Grand Chief won’t forget who helped him in this time of need.”

At that, Sog turned thoughtful. “Orcs aren’t weak. The Grand Chief isn’t weak. He doesn’t need help from anyone.”

Duril cursed inwardly at his poor choice of words. “He doesn’t, that’s true. But he’ll live to fight many other days if you do as I say.”

Sog leaned over the pit, and Duril watched as his ears began to perk up. “Yarag is a great warrior. The greatest,” he confirmed.

“I don’t have any doubt about that. But now, please tell me, how did he come to fall ill?”

There was a chance that he couldn’t help the Grand Chief even if he knew everything about his illness. He was tied up and stuck inside a pit, with no access to his tools of the trade. Also, the desert well-deserved its name of the Great Barren, and that meant that finding medicinal herbs and whatnot was close to impossible. Still, it was the only chance he had and wanted to use it to the best of his abilities. He hadn’t gotten this far only to give up.

“A snake bit him. One of those hiss-hiss and duh-duh ones,” Sog explained and gesticulated to describe the slithering way of snakes moving around.

There had been few snake bites he had treated in his life, so at least he knew the basics. Duril pondered for a bit. By chance, during the little time spent in Shroudharbor, he had perused several medical texts kept by the library, and he had stumbled upon a peculiar, yet seemingly effective, method to cure such ailments.

“How did it happen?” he asked, in search of as many details as Sog could give him. “And when?”

Sog scratched his head and then swung it from one side to the other, as if he either couldn’t recall the circumstances of his leader’s falling ill or he didn’t want to share them with a stranger.

“Hey, Sog, look at me,” Duril said. “Don’t I look just like you?”

“Yes,” Sog admitted. “But you’re an ugly orc, with hair.”

“That’s true, but I’m still an orc, and like any other orc, I must pledge loyalty to the Grand Chief.”

That line of reasoning seemed to convince Sog. He leaned a bit more over the pit so that he could stare properly in Duril’s eyes. “You’re an orc,” he eventually declared. “You belong to the Grand Chief.”

“Yes, so you see, just like you, I want him to live. The other orcs wouldn’t want me,” Duril added quickly, although he had no idea about that. The chances were that they would want to turn him into stew, just as much as Sog seemed enamored of the idea. As much as the Grand Chief believed him to be some spy, he was still a better bet than the rest of the horde.

And there was, again, that calling inside his heart that told him that his fate was right here, with this clan.

“How did Yarag get bitten by the snake?” Duril insisted.

Sog looked to his right and then his left. He whispered as he lowered his head to be as close to Duril as possible, “Someone put snakes in the Grand Chief’s tent. We didn’t see who. Sog saw nothing.” His eyes shifted nervously.

“The other clan leaders, right?” Duril asked.

“Sog could be in trouble if he talked,” Sog said quickly. “I didn’t see anything.”

The poor cook would probably be punished if he said anything, and ratting out the other clan leaders would eliminate his slim chances of anyone wanting to take him in after the Grand Chief died.

“You said that there were more snakes?” Duril asked cautiously. He didn’t want Sog to back down, especially since he was so close to finding out the truth.

Sog nodded.

“But only one bit him?”

Sog nodded again. “Yarag smashed its head. Like this.” The orc smacked his fist into the ground, making dust spread and fall on Duril’s head. Taken by surprise, he broke into a cough.

He was about to say something to get out of Sog as much information as he could when a shadow fell over the pit. Suddenly, the orc was lifted by the scruff of the neck and thrown like a little girl’s rag doll. Instead of Sog’s shifty eyes, Duril raised his own to meet Winglog’s cold stare.

“The Grand Chief is going to shake you for all you know, spy.”

Toru observed with growing anxiety that Claw grew quieter the more they walked forward. The bear kept his muzzle held down and marched forward stolidly, but to anyone who cared to look it was evident that he was tired, more so than him and Varg. Could it be that the centuries weighing on the bear’s shoulders had become too heavy? He didn’t dare to ask, but he grabbed Duril’s big bag from Claw’s back and hooked it over his own shoulder.

But the bear needed a break. As much as he wanted nothing more than to hurry and find Duril so that he could feel whole again, Toru understood as much. But they were far away from the oasis they had left behind, and it seemed that the desert stretched endlessly in front of them.

His eyes scanned the horizon for any sign of shade. Then he began blinking them furiously. He could almost believe that his eyes had started to play tricks on him, but no, ahead of them, something like a line of trees whose crowns were swaying softly to the rhythm of the wind appeared.

“Look!” he shouted and pointed at the trees. “Let’s go there and rest a little.”

“Young one,” Claw called after him, but Toru had already leapt away and hurried toward the promise of fresh water and shade.

He ran and ran, but the trees didn’t seem to get any closer, no matter how fast he was going. To be even faster, he turned into his tiger, but still, the trees remained at a distance, out of reach.

“Toru,” Varg shouted from not far behind.

He turned his head to see his friend hurrying to catch up with him in his wolf shape.

“That’s nothing but a mirage,” Varg added. “Come back. We’ll lose the track Claw’s nose has been following if we don’t stay with it.”

“How can that be? It’s right there.” Toru turned his eyes toward the trees dancing in the wind. “Claw needs to rest,” he added, this time quietly.

Varg fell in beside him. “I know it very well.”

“So, he must rest,” Toru insisted. “His nose will catch the horde’s scent later. Am I the only one that sees those trees?”

“You’re not.” That was Claw’s voice, coming from not very far away.

Toru felt guilty for forcing Claw to run after him. “But if we all see them, how can they not be there?” he inquired.

The bear walked closer to them. “That oasis has no scent I can detect. It cannot be real.”

“And if I told you it can be?” Someone suddenly hissed the question at them.

All three of them took a step back. Toru was first to notice the giant head belonging, as it seemed, to a large snake, larger than all of them. He growled and tipped his muzzle down while keeping his eyes on the snake. His golden eyes shone like precious stones, and from his mouth, a split tongue darted in and out, now and then.

Most of his body was covered in dark green scales and was coiled in a spiral on the sand, but his head was held erect, his unblinking eyes resting on the group.

“Is this snake a mirage, too?” Toru asked.

The snake hissed, and this time the way he did it made him sound amused. “My name is Demophios, young tiger, and I assure you, I’m no mirage.”

“That’s what a mirage would say,” Toru promptly retorted.

“Toru, stay back,” Varg warned.

“Toru? So that is his name,” Demophios said as if he were speaking to himself.

Claw surprised everyone by jumping in front of the snake and growling. “Stay back, you fiend,” the bearshifter warned.

Demophios laughed, his tongue darting in and out in a way that told Toru that he was very pleased with himself. “A bear, a wolf, and a tiger walk into the desert. What are they searching for?”

Toru was about to mention Duril, but one stern look from Varg convinced him that it was for the best to remain silent.

“Surely we’re not looking for a snake,” Claw replied aggressively.

“Ah, but do you have a choice as to what you may find when you walk into a place you don’t belong?” Demophios said. “I see. You’re not good at riddles, any of you. Then consider it a token of my generosity. The answer is that the place chooses what you will find for you.” He laughed out loud, if the strange hissing sound he was making could be taken as laughter.

“That’s stupid,” Toru shot back.

Demophios appeared taken aback. He moved fast, and Toru was soon staring right into his golden eyes from up close. “Stupid.” He said the word as if he couldn’t understand its meaning. “Stupid is not to see the truth for what it is.”

“What is the truth?” Toru asked.

“The trees, the oasis you see, Toru, they are real,” Demophios said. “You only need to believe it.”

“Don’t trust him,” Varg warned. He had moved closer to Toru, clearly determined to join the fight if one broke out.

“I don’t. But I want to hear his lies.” Toru stared into the golden eyes without holding back. “Is this all you got? Some mirage only children would believe?”

No matter how only a little while earlier he had rushed toward the imaginary oasis. Now that he knew he was facing an enemy of sorts, Toru cared nothing about such details.

“I can take you there,” Demophios said, and the tip of his tail rattled. “All you have to do is find the answer to my question.”

“I don’t care for questions,” Toru said with determination. “We’ll be on our way.”

Demophios seemed, however, to have other plans. He uncoiled his long body and encircled them quickly. Toru growled and jumped out of the enclosure, but Demophios was fast, and soon, he found himself trapped again.

“I do not mind playing with you until you tire yourselves out of your minds,” the snake hissed. “I have all the time in the world.”

Toru growled and tried to bite, but Demophios’s tough scales seemed to be made from impenetrable granite, and his fangs slid right off them.

“Young and reckless,” Demophios said with self-satisfaction. “You’ve had it easy so far, Toru.”

“You don’t have any right to speak my name like that.” He couldn’t tell what annoyed him the most about the way the snake hissed his name, but he was always one to speak his mind, regardless of the consequences. A giant snake was not enough to make him change his ways.

Demophios just laughed at his rebuke. “How much have you depended on your friends so far?” The snake wove his head around. “There should have been another with you.”

Toru froze.

“The healer,” Demophios said triumphantly. “Do you know what I am, young tiger?”

“No, and I don’t care. And this is all of us,” Toru said quickly.

“I am the key to you finding your true nature,” Demophios replied, ignoring his denials. “All your life, Toru, you’ve counted on no one else but yourself, is it not so? Why would you give up on your true power to become a weaker version of yourself?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Toru shot back.

“You do. Ever since you set foot in that place up north, your power has grown weaker by the day. What use does a strong tiger have for companions? You are the author of your own destiny.”

All the while Toru and Demophios talked, Varg and Claw struggled to escape the enclosure made by the snake’s body, but to no avail. Toru watched with dread as they were soon trapped by the coiled, elongated body and separated from him.

“What are you doing?” he shouted at Demophios. “Leave them alone!”

“Run, Toru!” Varg called out to him, but soon the snake’s body was coiled around his head and he disappeared completely from sight.

“Varg! Claw! What did you do to them, you ugly snake?” Toru roared, turning all his anger on Demophios.

“Nothing so far. Don’t worry. While you may not be able to see them or hear them, they are completely safe.”

“I don’t believe you,” Toru growled.

“You have no choice but to believe me. As you can see, you are completely powerless in front of me. Were you as strong as you used to be, without worrying about others, maybe you could win against me. However,” Demophios continued unabated, “seeing how your friends are in my power, and I have the power of life and death over them, you need to tread carefully and not make me too mad. Isn’t that so, young tiger?”

“You’re making my head hurt with all this talk,” Toru retorted. “What do you want?”

“As I told you, I am here to help you find your true nature.”

“I don’t know what you mean. I know who I am,” Toru said proudly. “Varg and Claw are my friends. Release them, or you’ll regret it, snake!”

He made another attempt at lunging at Demophios but, as before, his claws and fangs made no dent on the scaly body. The only thing he managed to do was to cause the big snake break into loud laughter.

“You’re proud, indeed, and strong,” Demophios said, “but is it enough? You see, Toru, you may believe that I’m the enemy, but all I want is for you to succeed in your quest.”

“I was doing just fine until you appeared, you desert worm,” Toru growled again. “Release my friends!”

“I suppose I could let you tire yourself out by trying to claw and bite me to no avail, but that is not my purpose.”

“Is your purpose to annoy me?”

“No, of course not. But, you see, Toru, I am much interested in setting you on the right path, the one that is going to help you complete your quest.”

“Why?” Toru gritted out, clenching his teeth as his eyes moved frantically to and fro in search of an opening. While this damned snake kept him talking, Varg and Claw were probably losing their breath.

“Because,” Demophios moved closer to stare into his eyes, “when I succeed in helping you discover your true nature, I will become immortal.”

“You look like a big snake. Are you sure you haven’t lived long enough?”

The only answer was a cackling sound. “I’ve lived, it’s true, for thousands and thousands of years. So I am very much used to being alive, and I don’t care about... not being.”

“All things have a beginning and an end. Living things, too,” Toru said stubbornly.

“Don’t you want to live forever?” Demophios hissed and circled him, making Toru move so that they could keep eye contact. “What more wonderful wish could one have?”

“To live a life that’s worth living, not stealing others’ friends and suffocating them,” Toru retorted.

“They are fine, for now,” Demophios said and his golden stare bored into Toru’s eyes again.

“What do you want so that you will let them go?” Toru asked. He would have loved to solve this by clawing and biting and fighting very much, but it looked like that was, unfortunately, out of the question.

“To find your true nature, and the answer to my own quest, you should either give up on your friends or --” Demophios stopped abruptly.

“Or?” Toru’s ears perked up.

“Or find me an answer to this question. How can I become immortal? See, I’m giving you a choice. If you want your friends to be returned to you safely and you to fail your quest, I don’t really mind.”

“I thought your purpose was all about seeing me on the right path,” Toru said crossly.

“I can see it in your eyes that you’re determined to save those pathetic companions of yours. I do not wish to jeopardize my own desire by foolishly trying to convince you about the justness of your quest.”

“You’re just lying,” Toru said. “How can I trust you that you’ll release my friends?”

“Trust is a fickle thing, young tiger,” the snake hissed. “Difficult to gain, easy to squander. Make your choice. Walk toward the oasis in front of you,” he moved out of the way to allow Toru a long look at the vivid image of the trees swinging in the wind, “forget about your friends, and it will be

there for you. Or find an answer to my question, and I'll release them. What happens after that, I won't care."

"How can you be so selfish?" Toru asked. "This world, you should care about it, too. Maybe you ate too much sand, and that's why you're crazy."

He kept on dallying. How would he be able to find the correct answer to such an incredible question? On top of everything else, he was alone and couldn't count on the wisdom of his friends. Claw would surely know what to say to this horrible snake. Varg, too, with his long life experience, would know as well. And Duril was so clever, knowing so many things...

Why did he have to be the one to find the answer to such a difficult question, when all he knew was how to use his claws and fangs, and not much else?

Duril was pushed in front of Yarag for the second time that day. The Grand Chief didn't look any better than earlier, and his breath was coming in quick gasps. He lay on one side like before, and the short nap he must have taken after sending him away to the pit didn't seem to have helped him much.

"Bring him up," Yarag said with a small wave of the hand.

Duril wasn't given the time to ponder over what the Grand Chief could mean, as Winglog attached another rope to him and threw it over a wooden beam that was part of what kept the tent standing. As the orc pulled on the rope he was forced to soar into the air and swing back and forth. From that position, Yarag could look at him without straining his neck. The intelligent eyes observed him for a while.

There were many reasons to be afraid, but Duril felt less overwhelmed than before. The simple fact that Yarag didn't just order him killed was enough to argue that he might live to see another day.

"Spy, where are you from?" Yarag asked, making a small gesture which brought Sog running, from where Duril couldn't tell, carrying a bucket filled with water. The Grand Chief took a large gulp and handed the bucket back to Sog. The small orc rushed out of the tent, probably to fill it up again.

Did they have wells? But was that water? Duril couldn't tell for sure. As far as he knew, Yarag could drink the blood of his enemies to increase his power.

"I'm from Whitekeep," Duril said with determination.

Yarag snorted and gave him a little flick with the back of his hand, making him swing a little faster and in wider arcs. Apparently, that to and fro motion amused the Grand Chief because he grinned, displaying rows of sharp teeth.

“Whitekeep is only humans.”

Then it crossed Duril’s mind that he knew something the big orc leader didn’t. “It used to be, perhaps, but it was also my home. Now, there’s nothing left there but ruins.”

Yarag raised his eyebrows and searched Duril’s face for clues that he might be lying. Since he already thought Duril was a spy and didn’t believe a word he said, it was strange that he was pondering over that particular thing.

“You’re telling the truth,” Yarag said.

“So, do you agree that I’m not a spy?” Duril asked. “It would be nice if you untied me so that I could find a way to cure you.”

“Quiet!” Yarag barked. “Spies, clever spies, they always wrap their little lies in the shroud of truth so that not even my keen eye can tell them apart. I’ve seen spies like you, orc.”

“At least you admit that I’m an orc, like you,” Duril said simply.

Yarag stopped for a moment and then broke into loud laughter. The sound coming out of him was so overwhelming that Duril felt his ears starting to hurt. The tent shook and stopped only when Yarag was done laughing.

The Grand Chief pushed himself up to his feet and towered over Duril who was already lifted up into the air. “What of you makes you like me, orc?”

“We share a bond of blood,” Duril replied.

Yarag laughed again. “Blood? The same flows through chum like Sog. Are you saying that Sog is also like me?”

“Yes,” Duril said simply.

The clatter of something being dropped interrupted them both. Sog was there, and the bucket was on the ground, spilling the liquid it contained. Duril felt himself relax a bit more. Whatever he had feared was in that bucket, he could put his mind at ease. There was clearly nothing but water, now soaking the sand at Sog’s feet.

Yarag grabbed Sog by the scruff of his neck and lifted him into the air. The small orc flailed all his limbs frantically. “That is blasphemy, Grand Chief! Blasphemy! I don’t know this ugly orc or why he’s saying such abominable things! Your Bloodthirstiness, please, please, forgive Sog! He never once thought to be even as like you as your smallest toe!”

“You see?” Yarag turned his face to Duril and dropped Sog suddenly, making him shout in pain as he crashed into the ground. “Not all orcs are alike.”

“Indeed,” Duril said fiercely. “While Sog cares that you live and are healthy, you care nothing about him. Although he is your loyal and humble servant, you have nothing but disdain for him.”

“His purpose is to serve,” Yarag replied.

Duril had half-expected to be pushed again and swing through the air like a hanging toy, or even worse after saying those things to the Grand Chief’s face, but nothing like that happened. Instead, it looked as if he had just given Yarag something to think about.

“Yes, to serve, I understand,” he said. “As is mine, and Winglog’s, and even yours.”

“Mine?” Yarag asked. “I serve and bow to no one, orc.”

“You serve the horde,” Duril insisted, holding his chin high. “Isn’t it for the horde’s good that you kill and plunder? For its glory? For it to keep on going?”

Yarag sat, making the ground shake as he did so. Winglog was standing by the entrance and pretending to be nothing but stone, but Duril could tell that the orc warrior was all ears. Sog retreated to the entrance, too, nursing a hand close to his body and mumbling to himself.

“You’re one clever spy,” Yarag said.

“I’m not a spy,” Duril insisted.

“If you’re not a spy, then what are you?” Yarag asked.

“A healer.”

“I don’t believe a word. Orcs are not healers. Yes, they can chop a limb off when needed and pour deathgrass concoctions on oozing wounds, but they are no healers.”

“I am,” Duril said.

Yarag suddenly turned his attention on Winglog. “What do you say? Is he what he keeps yapping about?”

Winglog was so stunned to be asked a question directly that he didn’t utter a word for a couple of moments. “I don’t know, Grand Chief.”

“Does he look like an orc to you?”

“Yes,” Winglog replied.

“An ugly orc,” Sog interjected and cowered away the moment Yarag’s attention turned to him.

“Not uglier than you,” Yarag replied. “So be it. If he’s an orc, then he’s part of the horde now. Bring him down.”

Winglog hurried to obey.

“Release him.”

The orc warrior hesitated for just a moment, and then quickly proceeded to unwrap Duril from the rope that had kept him immobilized for the last several hours.

“Thank you,” Duril said as he moved his arm to get the blood flowing. “Would you allow me to see how I can cure you now?”

“No. You’re going with Sog. Since you believe all orcs are the same, you will start by being a servant to the lowest of the low.”

Duril hadn’t expected that, but he was grateful. Yarag no longer thought him a spy, or else his decision made no sense.

Sog surprised everyone as he began to jump up and down, still holding his injured hand close to his body. “Sog got a servant! Sog got a slave!” He threw himself at Yarag’s feet. “Oh, wise lord, Your Bloodthirstiness, thank you, thank you!”

“Show him what he needs to do. If he’s not a spy, he needs to prove himself,” Yarag ordered.

Duril walked toward Sog of his own accord. Sog grabbed him by his good arm and dragged him away, happy and mumbling weird things to himself, like always.

He took one look back. Yarag collapsed on his side again. He was impressive in size and strength, but how long did he really have? Duril knew he needed to use his wits to get Sog to help him deliver a cure to the Grand Chief before it was too late.

Chapter Eight – Not-orc

The first and single thing he was suddenly aware of was darkness. Varg knew he couldn't move his limbs, but with that knowledge, no stiffness of his legs and arms came. It felt more as if he were caught in a tangle of soft vines all wrapped around him, without hurting him but rather providing a comfortable, yet undesired, cocoon.

“Toru, Claw,” he called out tentatively. It was strange to hear his own voice, as he'd been half-expecting it to come out muffled or not at all.

“I'm here,” the bearshifter's sonorous voice rumbled from somewhere near.

“I don't want to sound like a scared pup, but where are we? The last thing I remember is how that giant snake wrapped his long tail around us.”

“Demophios,” Claw agreed. “Yes, it looks like he wanted to have a bit of private talk with Toru a lot. Hence our current predicament.”

Claw's relaxed voice eased his own fear a bit, but at the same time annoyed him. “How come you appear to be not affected by how we're drowned in a well of darkness that seems one step short of death?”

“If Demophios wanted us to meet our end, he would have sent us to it swiftly, with no need for artifice.”

“Or maybe he likes his prey scared properly before ingesting it and going to sleep,” Varg retorted.

Claw chuckled. “Always the one with his hopes high, aren't you, puppy?”

“Hey, I'm just saying how things are.”

“Hmm, but we're not at all uncomfortable, are we?” Claw voiced the question that kept on bothering him, as well.

What was the point of lulling them into a sense of security only so that they would be thrown into the snake's belly later? “Snakes are sly and deceitful,” he replied. “Maybe he's keeping us thinking that he would release us all alive and well only to have a laugh when he actually reveals his true nature.”

“Aren't you contradicting yourself a little there, puppy?”

“You know that I could live without your teasing for once, don't you? Since we're in mortal danger and all that?” Varg pointed out.

To his annoyance, Claw laughed some more. “I doubt that. This is a trial, one meant for Toru, the way I see it. Demophios or whoever sent him to guard this part of the desert wants to test our little brave kitty on his own, without us to guide him.”

“But why would this master of giant snakes want such a thing? And is he a force for good or evil?”

“Snakes are, as you said, sly and deceitful. There is good, and there is evil in the world, yes, but someone must link the two parts, hold them together and provide pathways that allow us to understand.”

“To understand what?” Varg asked. He tried to move, but his entire body appeared to be like that of a giant baby swaddled properly by a careful wet nurse.

“Evil would have overcome this world a long time ago if such messengers hadn’t come and gone, puncturing their tiny holes into the fabric of what’s dark and restless. Because of the nature of their path, they get tainted, so we must be grateful for Demophios not swallowing us whole just as a down payment for the work he must be doing with Toru as we speak.”

“You appear so sure of yourself. Is this truly Demophios’s nature? I’d very much like to believe that, flea bag.”

Claw roared with laughter. “If you have a place on your tongue to call me endearing names like this, then you must be feeling good enough.”

“If all you say is true,” Varg said as he chose to ignore the bear’s teasing, “what is our role right now?”

“All we can do now is wait. And hope that Toru will find the answer the snake is seeking.”

“What answer can kitty have for an ancient creature like that?”

“Who knows? I bet Toru will tell us all about it, hell, even brag about it, the moment he saves us and the day.”

Varg wanted to share Claw’s surety about the outcome of the test Demophios must have created for Toru, but the soothing comfort surrounding him couldn’t allay all his doubts. He wished to say something, about how they should remain vigilant, but his eyelids grew so heavy when a faint voice began humming a sweet lullaby in his ear that he fell asleep on the spot.

“Tired yet of avoiding the truth?” Demophios hissed as he circled him lazily.

There were obvious advantages to being a slithering creature like that. Toru envied Demophios for his ability to move his head around while leaving his body behind, all for a deceit that led his prey on the path of no return.

But he was no prey, and Varg and Claw needed him, just as he had needed them. Seeing how he couldn't make a dent in the hard armor encasing Demophios' crawling body with fangs and claws, he decided to shift into his human form.

That appeared to please the giant snake. "Just as I was about to lose all faith that you would even try to give me an answer."

Ah, so being human was supposed to help. If asked, Toru would have said that in his tiger body he had always felt the strongest and the quickest in both wits and brawn. But it appeared that Demophios was much more interested in the human part of him, and that meant that he was on the right path.

Could he use his human fists to pummel that giant head in and be done with the threat?

Demophios surprised him by breaking into laughter. "You will have to use your head, young tiger." He bumped playfully against Toru's forehead, making him stumble backward a step or two.

"Stop playing," Toru growled and wiped the skin where the snake had touched him with his moist and disgusting nose.

"Oh, do you truly believe I'm playing?" Demophios taunted him, moving around in lazy circles. "I could end your friends' lives at any moment. Will you continue to think the same thing if I do that?"

"Don't you dare, disgusting worm! I'll kill you if you harm them in any way!"

"How, exactly? Your power means nothing here. You cannot harm me, and that's because you need me."

"I don't need you," Toru said through his teeth. "The only thing I need from you is to return my friends safe and sound."

"Very well, then. Answer my question. What do I have to do to become immortal?"

"How should I know that?"

"Think, young tiger, think. I have all the time in the world, but your friends don't."

Toru began thinking indeed, while his hands curled into fists. He needed to clear his head of the growing anger rising inside; but he wouldn't think of such an impossible thing as making

Demophios immortal. Even if he did know the answer, he wouldn't give it to the giant snake. Creatures like him were an abomination, and no one was supposed to live forever.

Duril walked behind Sog, who was prey to the same excitement as before when Yarag had decided that he should be in charge of their unexpected guest. The orc was quick on his feet and stopped only now and then to gesture at Duril with impatient hands. "Come, come, slave, don't dally! We need to fetch the water. Hard work, hard work."

It was a bit unsettling to find himself moving farther and farther from Yarag's tent through the sinuous invisible pathways of the horde camp. Curious looks followed him, not any less hostile than before, and Duril noticed with unease how the orcs huddled together in groups, each with his own band and clan. The divisiveness gripping the large horde was growing stronger, he realized. The clan leaders might not make another move against Yarag anytime soon, but the rumors about the state the Grand Chief was in must have spread like wildfire.

"Sog," he called his handler while struggling to keep up with him. As much as he had felt the call of his kin, his feet were not yet as fast, nor his blood as quick to spill another's as he could easily read in the others' eyes.

"Quiet, slave. Slaves don't talk," Sog said, but his voice lacked the authority that was supposed to go with such words. It came out whiny and fearful, and Duril had known people like that, afraid of their own shadow. For that reason, he couldn't hold it against Sog that he was treating him unfairly at the moment. Duril decided to indulge the orc until they reached the well or wherever it was that they had to draw water from. After that, he needed to talk to him again about the Grand Chief and what they could do to keep him alive and even cure him of the poison that was now flowing freely through his veins.

As lost in thought as he was, he stumbled upon something and plunged forward, ending up sprawled on his belly. Dust got in his mouth and he coughed, only to have more of it thrown in his face. Only then did he notice the presence of two large feet that were responsible for tripping him.

"That's Sog's slave. Leave him alone!" He heard Sog complaining.

Mingled laughter, harsh and unforgiving, followed. "Where did you find him, Sog? He's not your slave."

Duril tried to shake off the large paw that grabbed him by his hair and pulled him upward. Soon, he was staring into a pair of mean eyes, sunken inside a large skull. This orc had large teeth, protruding and yellow, and the skin was stretched on his face as if a capricious hand had decided to pull it over a head too big.

Sog grabbed Duril by his good arm and began yanking hard. The mean looking orc slapped Sog away, sending him sprawling on his behind without seemingly any effort. “Chum like you don’t have slaves.”

“Urk, he’s mine,” Sog whined. “The Grand Chief gave him to me.”

“The Grand Chief? He’s dead,” Urk said and shook Duril while still holding him by the hair. That was truly starting to hurt. Next thing, the orc grabbed his stump and looked at it. “Is he any good to eat? Did you cook his arm already?”

“That’s an old wound,” Duril said. “I belong to Sog, and the Grand Chief is alive and well. Now put me down before Yarag hears about it and strikes you where you stand.”

“He talks!” Urk exclaimed and turned toward his bandmates who were keeping a bit of distance. It could be only his imagination, but it appeared that his words about the Grand Chief hadn’t been missed. They stared down, and their laughter came out as gurgles, rather than snickers.

But why were they always so surprised that he could talk? Could it be that they had never met other half-orcs? In all truth, Duril didn’t remember if he had seen others like him, but orcs must have mated often with others outside their horde, given their nature and taste for plunder.

“Such an ugly orc,” Urk concluded. “Or maybe he’s a not-orc. I will make him my pet. What tricks can you do?”

Duril stilled his body, as something new and foreign began growing inside him once more. As he searched the other’s face and saw not even the slightest sign of kindness, he balanced himself and then suddenly kicked Urk in the chest with both his feet. The attack took the orc by surprise, and he doubled over, dropping Duril in the process.

Sog was quick to seize his arm and pull him hard and fast after him. “We must run, we must run! Urk is going to eat us!”

Duril doubted they could outrun Urk and his clan fellows, as their angry yells followed them right away. But the newness of what he was feeling inside began to grow all-encompassing, so he stopped brusquely and turned on his feet. He growled loudly, taking Urk and his companions by surprise.

“I’m going to dine from your skull tonight, not-orc,” Urk hissed and pulled his curved blade from his back.

Sog took Duril by surprise by jumping in front of him. “You’re not taking him from Sog,” he shouted. “Yarag gave him to Sog!”

“And I’m taking him from you. I don’t mind a bit of chum in my soup.”

Duril had no time to react as Urk raised his blade, bent on driving it through Sog. But just as his eyes grew wide, focused on the glint of the steel and the promise of death in it, Urk stopped, arms above his head, his grotesque face twisted in a snarl. It all lasted a second, and the head slid off his body, falling with a thud. The rest of Urk followed, but not before his head rolled down to Sog's feet.

The orc grabbed it and raised it over his head. "Sog's enemy is dead, is dead!" he shouted victoriously. "Death Hand himself killed him where he stood for daring to touch what's Sog's!"

Urk's companions were all silent. They turned away without a word, as Winglog sheathed his sword in the scabbard on his back, without even bothering to wipe off the new blood.

Duril watched Winglog push away Urk's body with a well-aimed kick. Then, the orc warrior grabbed him by the shoulder and turned him around. "Death Hand doesn't care for chum." He prodded Sog to walk so quickly that the smaller orc dropped Urk's head. Sog hurried to grab it again, but Winglog kicked him in his behind, making him stumble and roll down. "You two are lucky I do."

Duril couldn't contradict him even if he wanted. Without a doubt, Urk would have killed Sog without thinking twice, and by nightfall, he would have become that mean orc's pet or worse, his dinner. Even as Sog held his behind with one hand and walked limping ahead, the other clutched tightly around unfortunate Urk's head, he couldn't help thinking that Winglog had just saved them both from a far more horrific fate.

"Are you coming with us?" he asked tentatively, as Winglog continued to push him to walk in front.

A grunt was the immediate reply. "Yarag needs water. Lots of it."

A worrisome development, Duril thought but didn't dare to share it just yet. Sog might be easy to convince, but what about Winglog? The orc warrior was hard to fool and had a distrusting nature, for which he couldn't blame him seeing what kind of species orcs were.

There was no well but a pit in the ground, and they had to descend inside, finding small protrusions in the calcareous walls to use as rungs for their feet so that they could go deeper and deeper. Even the merciless sun began losing its power as they moved closer and closer to the surface of the water. It wasn't the cleanest, for sure, but it didn't look like orcs worried about hygiene too much. Winglog sent them inside and stood by the edge. Up there, dozens of empty buckets were stored inside a small shed, and only then it dawned on Duril that he hadn't even realized that Sog had left with him earlier empty-handed. His mind had been elsewhere.

Winglog was the orc to talk to, but how could he convince him that he only meant the Grand Chief well? He had to earn their trust, but as a not-orc as Urk had called him, he couldn't inspire much of it, for sure.

"Sog," he called quietly, "you haven't told me everything about how Yarag got his wound."

"Don't talk, slave," Sog croaked as he descended nimbly along the walls. Duril noticed how dexterous the orc was. A heavily armored orc like Winglog wouldn't have been able to get in there and draw water for sure. Sog was much more important than he thought.

"Don't you want your own curved blade anymore?" Duril did his best to entice him.

"Yarag gave Sog a slave. It's much better than a curved blade."

"But if Yarag dies, the other clans will kill us, won't they?"

"Maybe you, 'cause you're not-orc." The only legacy Urk had been able to transmit, it seemed, was that moniker. Duril didn't think much of it and no longer believed it a good fit. He felt as orc as Sog, Winglog, and even Yarag.

"What about you?"

"I'm chum. They all want more chum."

"So you'll just change masters, you think? You told me otherwise."

Sog sank his bucket into the muddy water and gestured impatiently for Duril to follow his example. It was difficult to keep his balance as he had no hand to grasp the small indentations in the wall, but he managed to fill his bucket, too.

"Yarag will die if we don't help him," Duril insisted.

"Hey, you two," Winglog shouted from above. "If you lazy around more, I'll whip you until you bleed."

"He does that," Sog confirmed as he hurried up the wall. "Winglog has a mean whip. It cracks your skin like that." He snapped his fingers.

Duril followed Sog up, without another word.

They executed the same grueling task about a dozen times. Once above the pit, Duril noticed that they had managed to fill almost all of the empty buckets available. Winglog used a long thin log, balanced it on his shoulders and gestured for Duril to pick a similar one from the shed. Sog hurried to hang the buckets from the ends, one at a time until Duril felt that it would be a feat of

strength to take even a step encumbered as he was. Winglog grunted and gestured to Sog, and the smaller orc loaded all the remaining buckets on a yoke of his own under which he slid with dexterity and then pushed himself up. They were ready to return now.

“Since when do warriors carry water?” Duril asked.

“Since they must help the Grand Chief,” Winglog replied without threatening him for talking, much to his surprise.

That was the occasion he had been waiting for. “If you want that, I can help.”

“Hold your tongue, spy, or I’ll cut it out,” Winglog spat.

“I’m not a spy. Yarag himself said it,” Duril reminded him.

Winglog harrumphed as he moved steadily. “He spared you for reasons only he knows. To me, you’re still a spy.”

That wasn’t too encouraging, but Duril knew he wouldn’t give up so easily. The only enemy he had right now was time, as even a large orc like Yarag wouldn’t be able to fight poison for long.

No one dared to bother them on their way back. Winglog’s impressive presence, as well as the blade on his back stained with still fresh blood, was enough to convince the other clans to leave them alone.

When they reached the Grand Chief’s tent, Duril noticed the stench right away. Soon enough, Yarag would begin to fail in his fight against the poison, and then his time would be up. They hurried to place the buckets filled with water on the ground, and the large orc grabbed one after the other, gulping them down like they were merely drops of rain.

They were all silent, and Duril recognized the tension in the air for what it was. He was about to step outside for a bit of fresh air when a hissing sound drew his attention. Only then he became aware of the wooden basket stashed in a corner. “Sog,” he whispered, “are these the snakes that bit the Grand Chief?”

He approached the basket carefully and peered inside. Indeed, a few reptiles raised their heads and fixed him with their cold eyes the moment he came near. Why was the Grand Chief still keeping them there? Wasn’t he afraid that they could slither their way to him and bite him again?

No, afraid was the wrong word. No orc would ever be afraid, at least not one as big and fearsome as Yarag.

Sog hadn’t noticed him, nor heard him, as he was busy pushing a fresh bucket toward the Grand Chief. Winglog supervised his every move with keen eyes. Then, in a moment, Duril realized

that the tent of someone as important as Yarag should have swarmed by now with those loyal to him. Yet, no one except these two orcs stood by his side.

Duril had so many questions on his mind, but no time or person to ask them. He moved cautiously toward the basket with snakes and hovered for a couple of excruciating moments. When one of the snakes struck, he grabbed it by the neck and ran with it outside, hoping no one had noticed him.

He stopped after several steps and waited. Maybe he was reckless, but he remembered well what kind of anti-poison he needed to concoct. The next thing he needed would be harder to procure, and seeing how the others saw him as a stranger he couldn't move around freely without being asked questions.

The snake wrapped its slithering body around his arm, and Duril could sense its strength. The way he held the creature forced the snake's mouth open, so its bifurcated tongue dashed out at intervals, but it couldn't make a sound.

“What are you doing?”

Duril almost jumped out of his skin at the sound of Sog's voice. The orc was staring over his shoulder at the snake with fascinated eyes.

“I'm making a cure. Don't stop me,” he said curtly.

Sog licked his lips and stole a furtive look toward the tent. “You caught the snake. I saw you.”

It appeared that the orc exhibited signs of shrewdness once in a while. Duril could tell that his actions must have impressed him.

“I need a rat,” Duril said. “Where can I find one?”

Sog licked his lips again, but this time, his eyes shone in a different way. “Rats make good stew.”

“You're the cook. You must know where to find one,” Duril insisted.

“Sog is the best cook.”

“Good. So get me a rat.”

Sog straightened up and stared at him suspiciously. “Do you want to cook? You cannot cook.”

“I'm making a cure. But you can help me with the cooking part,” Duril suggested.

“Hmm. Come with me.”

Duril wasn't keen on walking around with the snake wrapped around his arm like that, but he had no choice. He followed Sog behind the tent where a small cage stood. The orc put one hand inside and caught something by its tail.

"Hold it," Duril said and moved the snake close.

Sog took a step back. "Do you want the snake to bite Sog? Lie like Yarag and hope to die?"

"Just stay still," Duril demanded. "I only need to have the snake bite the rat a bit."

"I thought it was your pet and you wanted to give him a fresh meal," Sog said.

Duril gave up on explaining to Sog that he was working on a cure for the Grand Chief. He didn't wish to deceive the other, but there was no other way, and he was running out of time. "Just bring the rat closer."

Sog extended his arm as far from his body as he could, and Duril finally managed to bring the snake close enough. He watched as the fangs sank into the furry body, making the rat squirm and squeak. Swiftly, he withdrew the reptile and watched the poison pour down the long fangs. If the cure described in Elidias's books was any good, he would find out soon. For the good of the entire horde, he hoped that it was.

"Hold the rat, Sog," he said.

"Your snake didn't eat it. Isn't the rat good? But it makes good stew," Sog insisted and shook the rat while staring at it dubiously.

"I surely hope so," Duril said. "Now put the rat back."

"Put it back? It's going to die and stench the place. Sog has rats there for three stews."

Duril pondered for a bit. "All right. Just hold it but help me kill the snake."

"Why?" Sog threw him another suspicious look.

"We're going to make a stew with both rat and snake in it."

"Rat and snake?" Sog shouted in disbelief.

"Yes. And just be quiet. Winglog might hear you."

"What are you two doing here?" Winglog walked toward them right then. For good measure, he swatted both Duril and Sog over their heads.

"We're making stew," Sog said in a whiny voice.

"With snake?" Winglog asked.

“Not-orc stole one because he’s hungry for snake stew.”

That appeared to make the orc warrior stop scolding them. “I don’t remember ever having snake stew.”

His plan wasn’t the cleverest, after all, Duril thought. If orcs didn’t eat snakes, he was in deep trouble and needed to come up with something else to make Yarag eat the cure he intended to prepare.

“I always eat the snakes raw,” Winglog said in a thoughtful voice.

“Not-orc says is better than rat stew.”

Duril didn’t remember saying anything like that, but he was willing to play along with Sog just so that Winglog didn’t end up ruining his plan. “It’s good for those with an illness,” he offered right away. “The Grand Chief will like it.”

“He eats his snakes raw,” Winglog insisted. “He grabs them and eats the head first, and then swallows the rest.”

It could be that it was for that purpose that the basket of snakes had been left inside.

“But it would be better if he ate them with a bit of rat on the side.” He couldn’t believe he was saying such things. The most surprising part was that he didn’t find himself disgusted by the thought. As Sog continued to present the rat and snake stew in the most delicious light to Winglog, he felt that he was getting hungry, too.

“Then just make the stew,” Winglog ordered. “Be ready with it before nightfall, or I’ll serve your heads to the Grand Chief.”

“We’ll get to work right away,” he promised, while Sog took his dagger out and began tickling the rat’s belly.

“Cut off the snake’s head first,” Duril suggested. “And let’s cook some stew.”

The Grand Chief still lay on one side when they entered with the steaming pot. Duril had to stop Sog from trying to put aside a plate for himself since he wanted Yarag to eat everything. Seeing how huge he was, he needed a treatment that was sufficient to cure his body. On the other hand, it was for the best that someone who hadn’t been poisoned in the first place didn’t eat it at all.

Winglog shook the sleeping giant. “Grand Chief, your meal is here.”

Yarag opened his eyes with difficulty and sniffed the pot. Sog lifted it above his head, and Yarag grumbled, his words not making any sense. For a moment, Duril feared that Sog might tip the pot

over, or that the Grand Chief would refuse to eat, but that ended when a large paw curled around the pot and its contents poured down the orc leader's throat.

Yarag threw the pot away and turned over on his other side. Duril let out a breath. Now, the only thing left to do was wait for the cure to take effect. He still didn't have a clue if it would be enough to put the Grand Chief back on his feet.

Sog was trying to scoop up what was left on the bottom of the pot. Duril hurried and grabbed it from him. "No, don't eat it." Sog tried to reach it and began to fight him for the pot.

Winglog suddenly turned his attention to him. "Why shouldn't he?"

Duril felt dwarfed by the orc warrior who loomed above him. "Because I want to eat it," he replied.

Winglog examined him with shrewd eyes. "Then eat." He pushed Sog away and gave Duril the pot.

He stared at its bottom. There was still something left, by some miracle. Duril steadied his breathing. Cures were meant to treat those who were ill but, in his experience, they could be just as bad as poison for those who didn't suffer from the affliction they treated.

"Surprise me, young tiger," Demophios hissed while moving around him.

"Why don't you stay still?" Toru asked in an irritated voice. "You're making me dizzy with all your moving around. And how come, after you've lived for so long, you don't know how to become immortal?"

"Maybe I know, and all I have to do is eat a young tiger."

"Ha, if that had been it, you would've eaten me by now," Toru replied.

Demophios laughed, if the strange hissing sounds he was making could be considered that. "I still might."

"You won't." Toru wasn't keen on thinking so much, so he was struggling to find a way to fool Demophios into releasing Varg and Claw. "But what makes you think that I'm the one to give you the answer? Varg and Claw are much smarter than me, and they lived longer."

"You see, young tiger, I was told that I would meet you, and you'd be the key to my immortality. So it has to be you."

Hmph, that hadn't worked. "Your key how?"

“I wasn’t told that. So, think, young tiger, think. Unless you want to say goodbye forever to your friends and walk the path of your destiny alone from now on, you’ll find my answer.”

Toru rubbed his forehead and struggled to think of another way to trick the giant snake. “Maybe you just need to eat a lot of cabbage,” he said.

Demophios bumped against his forehead again. “I’ve eaten everything there is to eat on the face of the earth and underneath it.”

“Everything? Like really, really everything?” Toru asked, as an idea began to form inside his mind.

“Everything,” Demophios said with conviction.

Toru grinned. “You’re wrong. There’s something you surely haven’t eaten ever before.”

Chapter Nine – The Key to Immortality

Duril held the pot, his arm heavy and stiff.

“Weren’t you hungry?” Winglog taunted him. “Eating the Grand Chief’s leftovers is an honor.”

“I need to move it to a plate. I only have one hand,” Duril argued.

All this time, Sog continued to complain that he was entitled to all the leftovers from the Grand Chief’s table since he was the cook and always had been. Winglog spared little effort to send him sprawling on his back each time the smaller orc tried to get near the pot, drool pouring down his chin, and his eyes seeing nothing else but the object of his undying affection. Food.

“Don’t you want me to give you a fork and a silk napkin while you’re at it?” Winglog continued to taunt Duril.

Sog neighed like a horse, finding the orc warrior’s words amusing by the looks of it. But Duril could feel the mop of hair on his head getting damp with sweat. He put the pot down and scooped the remains on the bottom with his fingers. Winglog was watching him intently, and Sog was jumping up and down with excitement, asking for the pot to lick it clean.

Maybe he would be lucky and live another day. Just as he brought the hand to his mouth, a rumble shook the earth under their feet. They all turned toward Yarag who suddenly rose up from his deathbed and growled, an inhuman sound that made Duril’s hair stand on end. The orc chief stood tall inside the tent, frothing at the mouth, his eyes bulging out of their sockets.

“Grand Chief?” Winglog asked tentatively. And then his mean eyes turned toward Duril and narrowed. “What did you give him?”

“A cure,” Duril said bravely and wiped the dirty fingers on his pants.

Yarag growled another time and began walking out of the tent, each step he took making the earth shake. He seemed no longer to be the master of his senses, and his eyes were like glass, while his limbs were stiff.

“You’ll die for this,” Winglog said and drew his curved blade.

Duril took one step back, then another. Then, quickly, he grabbed the pot from the ground and threw it at the orc warrior who, taken by surprise by his attack, barely had time to sidestep and dodge. But Sog, in his silliness, threw himself over the pot, his tongue hanging out, eager to devour the last remnants of food, oblivious to what was happening around him.

“Sog, no!” Duril shouted and jumped to kick the pot out of the orc’s way.

That, however, put him right in the path of Winglog’s sharp blade, and Duril ducked at the last minute, apparently even more agile than he remembered himself to be. Nonetheless, that forced

him to slide and land on his back, and the following moment, Winglog towered above him, his blade raised.

Duril wished he was capable of closing his eyes, but something inside him, an overpowering feeling, ordered him to watch. His fascinated gaze slid down the sharp edge.

“Now you die,” Winglog growled, but just as he was about to drive his blade right through Duril’s chest, he was picked up like a toy and tossed away.

Duril looked up and met Yarag’s glassy eyes. The next thing he knew, the Grand Chief grabbed him and carried him outside, holding him by a leg as if he were a little girl’s doll.

The world swung around, and Duril was thankful for not having eaten for many hours, or else the contents of his stomach would have surely demanded to be released by now. The orc camp appeared to his eyes in twisted and splintered images, and a feeling of helplessness overcame him.

It all lasted but the blink of an eye, as he was suddenly lifted and it took him moments to realize that Yarag had perched him on his shoulder by his neck, as if he were a parrot resting on a pirate captain’s shoulder.

Yarag continued to growl, and around them, the orc camp was falling quiet, all heads turning toward the Grand Chief. Duril had had little to do in his life with victims of snake poisoning, thus he had little basis to compare with what was happening to the supreme leader of the orcs. From where he stood, it all appeared jumbled and madness, but he had never before treated an orc, so he had no idea what to expect.

All of a sudden, Yarag was on the move again. The orcs around scampered out of his path, afraid of being caught under the Grand Chief’s large feet, and sounds of fear arose everywhere. Duril held himself steady with the only hand he had clutched on the coarse fabric of Yarag’s shirt, but as the orc moved, he was bounced to and fro, more than once coming close to falling and managing to remain glued to the other through force of miracle alone.

Yarag stopped as suddenly as he had started walking, in front of a large tent. The orcs fell silent again, and the much-needed break allowed Duril time to examine the place where they stopped. It appeared to be the place where one of the most powerful clans resided, or at least its leaders, if he were to judge by the intricate skull arrangement that adorned both sides by the entrance.

Another growl, and this time Duril realized that he understood what was happening. Yarag didn’t look like himself, as prey to madness as he appeared to be, but his intentions were obvious. He was challenging his challengers, and that could only mean one thing. The poison was leaving his body, and Yarag must have felt the power growing inside him once more.

Since he had set foot inside the orc camp, Duril had only known the Grand Chief as someone almost overcome by poison and illness, but now he was getting a front row seat to witness the greatness that Yarag had to be. To say that he was in a state of stunned awe was insufficient to describe what he was feeling.

And all this time, he noticed, he didn't feel one smidge of fear. The only overwhelming feeling he experienced was exultation. The growls leaving Yarag's throat intermittently and with meaning now made his own blood boil.

Yarag demanded retribution. Yarag demanded blood. And Duril wanted the same, so even in his much more subdued voice, he began to ask for them, as well. Behind them, the tribes still loyal to the Grand Chief started to chant.

"Well, what is this thing you believe I've never eaten?" Demophios hissed and circled around him, undulating his giant body.

"Yourself," Toru said and crossed his arms, setting his chin high.

Demophios stopped for a moment and then started laughing. "Why would I do that? Do you believe I would fall for such a cheap trick?"

"You say you've lived forever," Toru said, a bit miffed that the giant snake didn't easily fall prey to the cleverness of his plan. "So it's the plain truth that you need to eat yourself to become immortal."

If he could only make Demophios take a huge chunk out of himself, the snake would be out of commission long enough so that Varg and Claw would escape his deadly embrace. That was the plan, but Toru cursed his lack of a sweet tongue that could have helped him convince his enemy to do that.

His claws and fangs couldn't cut through those tough scales. But Demophios had to be strong and his fangs sharp enough. At least that was what he was counting on.

"You think yourself clever," Demophios hissed. "You believe that I would hurt myself for your sake so that you can save your friends without giving me what's rightfully mine."

How long was this snake anyway? Toru's eyes traveled along the scaly body, but it was hard to say where the end was. "Hurt yourself? If you took a little bite out of this huge body of yours, I bet you wouldn't even feel it," he said stubbornly.

Demophios let out another hiss. He no longer appeared as amused as earlier. "I don't plan on falling prey to such silly tricks, young tiger."

“All right,” Toru said with a sigh. Another idea was struggling to reach the surface. “A snake as wise as you wouldn’t, indeed.”

“The answer is inside your mind, Toru,” Demophios hissed lazily. “I know it for sure, but it is up to you to find it. So, think, young tiger, think.”

Toru frowned and pretended to be lost in thought. Somehow, he needed to use Demophios’s own outstanding power to beat him since he couldn’t through his strength alone. “You are so long,” he said with admiration he only half-faked. “I can’t even see your tail.”

“My tail? Do you want to see my tail?”

“Yes,” Toru said with determination. The giant snake had to circle him all the time in that manner maybe because his body was so heavy and he couldn’t move it all with ease. That was what gave him another idea, and this time, he hoped it would work.

Demophios uncoiled slowly, and Toru’s eyes searched in vain for his comrades. “Where are Claw and Varg?” he asked.

“You won’t be able to see them until I allow it.”

So, it had to be a trick or a magic of sorts like the one that could make the oasis appear although it wasn’t there, only that this time, it worked backwards, and it hid from view what should be there.

He prepared his entire body, muscle and sinew and bone, as Demophios spread out until Toru began to see the end of his body. “Ha! It’s such a puny tail,” he said. “Nothing like mine.”

“Do you wish that I indulge you in such games? I do have time, young tiger, as I told you. It is you and your friends that do not have the same luxury I enjoy. Behold my powerful tail.”

Toru smirked as Demophios brought his tail near to show it to him. All of a sudden, he struck, grabbing a hold of the humongous tail and straddling it.

“What are you doing?” Demophios shouted. “I am not some seahorse for you to ride.”

Toru held the tip of the tail and examined it furtively. The scales there, as he suspected, were tough and sharp, hardened by the many times Demophios must have molted with the passing of millennia. He held it as a weapon. “If you don’t want me to ride your tail, just make me stop.”

“Stubborn child,” Demophios roared and tried to bump Toru off with a frontal attack.

Laughing, Toru slid around with ease and came up on top again. This snake would have to do better if he wanted to escape. If only he could guide the sharp tip of the tail and drive it through Demophios’s scaly body. He doubted it would be enough to put the giant snake out of

commission for long, but it was his best idea right now. Varg and Claw needed him, and wasting time was not an option.

“Come and eat me,” Toru taunted his enemy and waved the giant tail. Just as he suspected, it took Demophios a great deal of effort to use that part of his body to shake off the unwanted rider, and that was what he counted on.

“Don’t challenge me, young tiger,” Demophios hissed.

He was quick as he thrashed, trying to knock Toru off. Too bad for him, Demophios had no idea who he was dealing with. Toru was not some weakling, and he had traveled high and low, fighting and earning his living with fangs and claws, but, as he realized at that moment, through wits, as well. As impetuous as the young blood coursing through his veins was, his mind was clearer now than ever before. He grabbed Demophios’s tail with all his might and began to use it as a spear, launching it toward the giant snake’s head again and again.

“Stop this silly game right now,” Demophios warned, but Toru just laughed and pointed the sharp tail toward the sky.

“Do you want to live forever, you ugly snake? Not if you’re going to choke on your own tail.” He had bided his time long enough, and now he suddenly tipped the tail lower, taking Demophios by surprise and pushing his improvised weapon forward.

Annoyed by his actions, Demophios had just made the mistake of trying to dash against him once more from the flank, but he only found himself where Toru wanted him to be. The sharp tip went straight into his open mouth, and Toru, first yanked forward by the force of the thrust and the impulse that must have coursed through Demophios’s body, barely recovered and forced more of it down the giant snake’s throat.

A gurgling sound emerged from Demophios’s gorge.

What are you doing to me?

The snake could no longer talk, but he was speaking directly to Toru’s mind and there was no escape from his voice.

“I’m just saving my friends,” Toru shouted in reply. “Your fault for getting in the way and trying to hurt them. No one hurts my friends!”

Demophios’s eyes glittered dangerously, but the more he tried to close his mouth, the more he appeared to choke. And when he tried to open it more, Toru was right there, pushing more of his tail in, until the cold eyes began dimming. The enormous slithering body shook and convulsed, and it took Toru all his power to hold on and continue his work mercilessly, until Demophios no longer moved and his head fell to the ground, heavy like lead. Toru jumped to the ground at the last moment, as in a last ditch effort Demophios attempted to crush him under his weight.

“Ha! That’s what you get for going against me,” Toru shouted victoriously.

The giant snake shook and trembled a few more times and then went stiff. Toru wasted no more time and began running around the collapsed body, in search of Varg and Claw. Fear began rearing its ugly head, as his eyes saw nothing but endless scales wherever he looked. Could it be that Demophios had eaten them anyway? That they were now trapped inside that giant body, slowly suffocating?

Varg woke up with a jolt. There was a rumbling sound, all around him, and, for a few moments, he struggled to get his bearings. “Claw?” he called in a gravelly voice, as if he had been asleep or on his sickbed for too long.

“Right here, puppy,” the bearshifter’s voice came from somewhere near, but sounding as if woken from a deep slumber like his.

“What’s happening?” Varg opened his eyes wide but saw nothing but darkness.

“If only I knew,” Claw replied.

Just then, as if their waking up was the key to trigger something else, Varg felt his body tumbling from a height, although he couldn’t tell where up and down were, not as his entire being appeared to be thrown out of balance and beyond his power to control it.

He bumped into something, and it took him moments to realize that it was actually Claw who was tumbling down by his side, both unable to stop whatever was happening to them. Any questions he could have at this point, he needed to forget them, as the only answer that mattered came right away.

Soon, his body met hard ground, and a grunt was forced out of him as Claw landed on top of him. Disoriented, he accepted the offered hand once the bearshifter got to his feet, and then stared around. Demophios’s scaly body lay stiff around them, high as a citadel’s walls.

“Toru!” Varg called out, and soon Claw joined him.

Could it be that kitty had managed to defeat the giant snake? It wasn’t impossible to believe, but Varg bet that Toru now had quite a story to tell. By his side, Claw walked toward the snake’s stiff body and slammed his fist against it.

“You two don’t have to yell that much,” Toru replied from above, perched on the apparently dead snake and looking down at them. “I have two good ears,” he added and grinned.

“Why don’t you help us up and I’ll count them for you,” Varg said and let a huge grin split his face. Toru would always put a smile on his face, but right now, he was the happiest he had ever been when seeing the young tigershifter.

“How did you defeat Demophios?” Claw asked as Toru lay on his belly and extended his arm so that he could help them out of there.

“With his own tail,” Toru declared and puffed out his chest. “But you’ll have to see it to believe it.”

As soon as he got up, Varg embraced Toru hard and kissed him on the lips, making him blush. No matter how naughty and daring Toru was when they were alone and could play with one another, the fact that Claw was there and could see them was enough to uncover a shy part of him.

And Varg loved all parts of him, shy or daring, and especially because of his unwavering courage that must have been at the root of this rescue mission. Just to tease Toru a little bit more, he nuzzled his neck and kissed him again. The tigershifter didn’t push him away, although his cheeks just got redder and hotter.

“Thank you for saving us, kitty,” he whispered.

They descended on the other side and walked along the long and sinewy body until they reached the head. Claw approached the monster carefully and stared into the stony eyes that had used to glitter with ill intent before. His large mouth was open wide, and his long body disappeared inside. Just as the bearshifter, Varg walked around it, observing it from all angles.

“I’ll be damned, kitty, you’ve done it,” Claw expressed his satisfaction. “You truly beat this old monster with his own tail.”

“Didn’t I say so?” Toru bristled a little but then he came by Varg’s side and brushed his head against his shoulder. “So glad to see you two alive.”

Claw nodded as he stood by the giant snake head, his thoughtful eyes peering down.

“We should get going,” Varg suggested out loud. “Now that Toru moved another obstacle out of our way, we should continue without delay. What do you say, Claw?”

“Demophios is an ancient creature,” the bearshifter said, suddenly pulled from his reverie. “I don’t doubt that he’s dead, but --”

His words were cut short by a sudden gust of wind that brought with it hot pinching speckles of sand that began to pelt their faces. Varg raised one arm to shield his face while using the other to pull Toru close. Claw came to embrace them and they stood together, waiting for the wind to die down.

“This wind is not natural,” Claw said.

Their foreheads were almost touching, and they had done a good job of keeping the sand away by positioning themselves like that.

Toru moaned in displeasure. “It’s like this desert wants to keep us away from Duril. When it’s not giant snakes, it’s nasty winds. When are we going to see him again?”

Just as he said the words, the wind died down, as quickly as it had come about, but they remained in their tight embrace for a bit longer, waiting for some other thing to strike. Toru was right. The desert was against them, an unfriendly place teeming with mysteries, but they were stronger, as the tigershifter had just proven.

Claw was the first to move, and they followed right away.

“Where is the dead snake?” Toru asked.

Varg and Claw stared dumbfounded at the empty space where Demophios’s body had been only moments earlier. The snake was nowhere to be seen.

“That’s not a nice thing to say, young tiger,” a faint voice intervened.

They looked at each other, apparently all alarmed that they might be hearing voices that weren’t supposed to be heard.

“I am far from dead,” the voice continued.

Claw was the first to notice the small silver pendant on the ground. He grabbed it and held it high, the hot sun making it shine.

“Demophios?” Varg asked and moved closer.

The object Claw held had a circular shape, and at a closer look, it appeared to be a snake... eating his own tail.

“How can he be? I defeated him,” Toru said stubbornly.

Small laughter was the answer. “I knew you were the key. Now I’m immortal.”

Toru scrunched up his nose. “You’re a brooch or something. Is that really you, ugly snake?”

“Mind your manners, young tiger. Yes, it is I. And now I belong to you for the remainder of your road.”

“Ewww, I don’t want to carry a dead snake with me,” Toru argued.

The pendant sighed, although there was no sign of movement in the inanimate object. Inanimate was a figure of speech, since the voice came clearly from there, without the slightest doubt.

“I am an endless fountain of knowledge,” Demophios replied. “You gave me what I wanted, so in turn, I’ll help you in your quest.”

“We have enough people who are friends, not like you. You’re annoying,” Toru declared.

“Wait a little, kitty,” Claw intervened. “Given the importance of your quest, nothing that happens to you can be discarded as unimportant. I’d say you should give the snake a chance to convince you.”

“I’ll take you to where your healer is. After all, your strength, young tiger, is in these bonds you keep on forging,” Demophios said promptly. “Including the one with me.”

Toru didn’t seem all too convinced. “Weren’t you saying that I should be alone?”

“Did you believe me?” Demophios said suavely.

“Not for one moment,” Toru said back.

“So. You learned something important about your strength, and I received the gift I’ve been seeking for so long. Now it’s my turn to return the favor. Unless you want to wander through the desert and end up without your healer once he starts moving with the horde.”

Toru sighed. “All right. But if you dare to trick us, I’ll find a blacksmith and have him turn you into coffin nails,” he threatened.

“That is definitely not a fate I’m willing to choose,” Demophios said. “Worms are hardly great companions for all eternity. Or skeletons.”

Claw threw the pendant at Toru who caught it deftly. The tigershifter examined it for a bit and then discovering that a pin was attached to it, he stabbed the fabric of his shirt and hung it there.

“Wise choice, young tiger, wise choice,” Demophios said. “And it was a marvelous idea that, in order to become immortal, all I needed to do was to devour myself.”

Toru growled, much to Varg’s amusement. “When I told you, you didn’t believe me.”

Demophios laughed. “Admit it. You only wanted to get rid of me.”

“No,” Toru denied and set his chin high in defiance. “I was very wise.”

Even Claw had to laugh at that. Varg had no choice but to follow. Wise or not, Toru was amazing, and it had been only through his choices and quick wits that he and Claw were still breathing now, without a doubt. He had his fair share of questions he wanted to ask Demophios,

but he decided to keep them to himself for now. As Claw had explained to him about the giant snake, such forces were at work that could help them but only if used wisely. If Toru caught a little whiff of the possibility that Demophios had planned on devouring him and Claw – something he guessed by himself – he might choose to leave the snake behind, and his knowledge would be lost to them as a consequence.

“A symbol of infinity,” Claw remarked as he examined for a few moments the decorative ornament Demophios had turned into. “All lives end, but all life is eternal.”

Demophios offered a small laugh. “That is what I call wise. Silly stubborn tigers trying to fool me into devouring myself aren’t that.”

Toru bristled at that right away. “Say whatever you want, snake. This silly stubborn tiger just turned you immortal. Unless I turn you into coffin nails after all.”

“Ha! I’d still be immortal even then,” Demophios replied. “I would just be useless to anyone until I was discovered again. Mind you, it’s all the same to me, but it’s your choice whether you want to use me or not.”

“You dare to talk only because I chose to take you with me,” Toru shot back, determined, as he seemed, to have the last word.

“True,” Demophios acquiesced. “I’ve been stuck around this desert for too long, so I won’t mind a new adventure. Nothing is more enthralling than being part of saving the world.”

“Stop talking so much, you’re making my head hurt,” Toru complained. “Now tell us quickly where Duril is.”

“We need to keep the path to the north. It is only there that the orcs find the water pits so that they can cook and satisfy their thirst.”

“Do they eat and drink water like everyone else?” Toru asked, curious just like Varg, about learning new things about the strange creatures calling the desert their home.

“Not quite like everyone else,” Demophios explained. “They are among the hardiest creatures to populate our world. They can march for days and nights without drinking a drop of water. But when they stop, like right now, they do so by the water pits that we’ll find by walking north of here.”

Varg clicked his tongue. “Too bad we’re not as hardy as them, and that we still need water and food, at least every several days.” He wasn’t saying that for his sake, but mostly for Claw who seemed to be suffering the most ever since they had set foot in the desert.

“Then it’s a good thing I’m with you. Check your water pouch, master wolf,” Demophios recommended.

Varg pulled the water pouch from the bag and shook it, not believing his eyes. It was full. “Is it real? Not one of your mirages?”

Demophios let out a snort. “I can bend reality, it’s true, but I assure you that I can do more than just make mirages appear as real in front of your eyes. Slake your thirst, saviors of the world. This immortal snake can do much more for you.”

“You’re so full of yourself,” Toru commented. “If that water isn’t real, I’m going to turn you into nails myself.”

“Just go ahead and try it,” Demophios said. “As long as it quenches your thirst, it must be real, right?”

Varg took a small gulp. It was water, fresh and sweet, as if it had just been drawn from a well, and he had no qualms about it, even if it were a mirage of sorts, after all. Then he passed the pouch over to Claw, who took it with trembling hands.

“Drink and gain back your strength,” Demophios encouraged them. “And in that big bag, you’ll find some fruit, as well.”

Varg opened the bag and looked inside. A few ripe peaches were there, and the sight of them made his belly growl. It had been a while since they had left the oasis behind, and they had determined to be mindful about their supplies until they reached more abundant places.

Claw wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and the look of relief on his face told Varg what the bearshifter hadn’t dared to say. For some time, Claw must have been exhausted, but he had said nothing of it, just continuing to help them in their quest of finding Duril. That was enough reason to be thankful for meeting the giant snake.

“Do you know how to make meat?” Toru asked.

“No. I can make oases appear out of thin air and pull the morning dew to make water, or snatch some peaches for you to keep your strength up, but that’s all,” Demophios said.

“What kind of immortal snake are you?” Toru taunted him. “You can’t even make meat.”

Demophios laughed. “I leave the hunting to the hunters. And I’m here not to keep your belly full, but to help you on the path that will get you where you need to be.”

“What do you know of Zukh Kalegh?” Varg asked. The snake could set them on the right path to reach Duril, but that didn’t make things any easier once they would be there and forced to confront an entire horde of bloodthirsty orcs.

“Old tribes,” Demophios replied. “The orcs are made from mud and sand. They mixed with blood and came into being. But I can only guess that you’re not interested in the learning of ancient history.”

“Maybe another time,” Varg suggested. “What can you tell us that will help us to get our friend back?”

“Ah, the answer is easy, yet difficult at the same time,” Demophios said. “Your friend went to join his brothers of his own accord. As we speak, he’s not forced into slavery or anything of the sort. All of his actions are nothing but the direct result of his choices. And it will be his choice to come back to you.”

“Doesn’t he want to come back to us right now?” Toru asked. “He must be thinking of us.”

Varg tensed a bit, expecting Demophios’s answer to be blunt and unforgiving. “His mind now belongs to his tribe,” the snake began. “He needs to pledge his loyalty and earn his place with them. That doesn’t mean that he no longer belongs with you.”

“So, it’s like he just needs to visit his family, right?” Toru said, his voice filled with hope.

“It is a way of saying that,” Demophios admitted, much to Varg’s relief.

The snake’s words were giving Varg hope, as well. Demophios had no reason to lie, and he appeared to be no stranger to saying things the diplomatic way. All in all, they would have their chance to convince Duril to come back to them.

Chapter Ten – Belonging

Duril no longer experienced the world around him through the senses he was used to; instead of hearing the noises around him, he felt them as tiny drums beating along with his heart. His eyes were seeing more than just the shapes of orcs around him; they saw the bloodthirst in their gaze, some's fear, and others' rage, all in a spectrum of reds.

And more than anything, he felt the thrumming in Yarag's huge body being transmitted to him with each move, no matter how slight, the Grand Chief made. In a strange way, his entire being appeared to be, at this point, just an extension of the other, and, at the same time, he was part of the tribes chanting behind him.

The clan leaders who had been earlier that day at the Grand Chief's tent only to retreat with one of them killed stepped in front and growled at Yarag in the same fashion. The others made a circle around them, allowing them enough room to move, and soon the Grand Chief began to move slowly, clockwork-wise, while the clan leaders grouped together, protecting their backs and drawing their curved blades.

In contrast, Yarag was unarmed, but Duril didn't believe he needed a weapon to begin with. As soon as the noises around them died down, the Grand Chief raised his fists and dropped them on the group of challengers who scattered away like chickens. He lunged forward as he did that, and the force of his movement left him uncovered on the flanks.

"At your right," Duril shouted, and Yarag turned growling and slammed against one of the clan leaders who had tried to stab him as soon as he noticed the opening.

Yarag was only one, and the clan leaders were many. Yet, still, as the Grand Chief stood tall and rotated his body around while releasing a blood curdling war cry, his opponents stepped back and clutched their hands on the hilts of their swords, postponing their attacks.

No, Yarag wasn't alone, Duril realized.

"Not-orc," someone shouted at him from the sidelines, and his eyes searched frantically for the source of the sound.

The fight in the improvised ring had already made the dust rise so high up that Duril couldn't see clearly. He stood on Yarag's shoulder, keeping his balance with much difficulty.

"Not-orc," the same voice called for him, and finally, he noticed Winglog who was pushing against the orcs gathered around to witness the challenge. "Catch!"

Duril barely had the time to brace his entire body and raise his arm as Winglog threw his curved blade at him, turning it, in the blink of an eye, into a spear of sorts. He caught it just as he was about to tumble down Yarag's arm and steadied himself. The blade dug into his palm drawing

blood, but he felt no pain, only noticing the red color and the clammy sensation that followed. After that, he clutched the weapon in his hand, just as he had seen the others do.

It should have felt like something unfamiliar, to carry that kind of weapon. Not that he had never wielded a blade in his life, but he had never been a warrior, only a healer. Yet, at this moment in his life, the pommel of the blade fit into his hand like he had held it an infinite number of times before. He swung it around to test it, and the sharp blade cut through the air with a swish.

At that moment, one of the clan leaders managed to sink his blade into Yarag's thigh, and the Grand Chief shook under the force of the attack. That was enough to make Duril lose his balance and end up on the ground on his back.

The clan leaders shouted something, and Duril didn't wait to try and understand what they were saying. Still clutching the blade, he jumped to his feet and began to swing it around, keeping the assailants at a distance. From Yarag's leg, blood as dark as wine poured. The Grand Chief knelt and let out angered growls, but as soon as one of the challengers tried to find his way to land another hit, Yarag did as little as move his arm in a sweeping fashion, and the attacker was pushed away like a wooden figurine on a table. By how he cried out, rolling on the ground, the force of that blow must have caused serious damage. He was holding his sides, as if he had a few broken ribs.

Duril wasted no more time watching the orc howling on the ground and turned his entire attention on their opponents who were approaching them with enraged snarls contorting their faces.

He raised his arm just in time to counter a blade that descended upon him with the clear intention of slashing through him like he was nothing. As he pushed back the orc, he growled in the same way they all did, and swung his blade, managing to graze the other's arm and make crimson blood blossom where it bit.

As a healer, all his life, he hadn't even thought of being in this position. As much as he was aware that he was doing nothing else but fight for his life and defend himself, he felt a new sensation growing inside him. He launched his own attack, shouting and aiming for the other's shoulder.

His opponent barely managed to move away at the last moment, and Duril's blade met the ground. It was just his luck that the clan leader that had attacked him was now injured and didn't move fast enough to lunge at him again. No, that wasn't luck, he realized, but his own self that somehow knew how to use a sword and even be good at it.

Yet, the attacker had no qualms with continuing to attack him. Not far from them, Yarag was swinging his arms, knocking over the rest of their assailants. Of all of them, only the orc in front of him, watching him with his bloodshot eyes, was interested in hurting him or worse.

This time, he didn't wait only to react to his opponent's moves, and lunged forward, deciding to attack, as well. A few times, his blade met nothing but air but, all of sudden, his blade met

something hard and Duril watched in disbelief as the steel in his hand was half-buried in the other's shoulder. The orc stood still, his mouth wide open in shock, and then he fell on one side. Duril pressed his foot against his chest and pulled his blade free.

The sight of fresh blood on the hardened steel only made the new feeling inside him grow. This day, he was no longer Duril the healer, Duril the gentle. He was an orc warrior who knew how to wield his sword and protect the horde from those that wished it harm.

He raised the blade and hurried toward Yarag and his opponents. His feet barely touched the ground, and he was only slightly aware that the inhuman shouts he heard so clearly were coming from his own throat.

He took one of Yarag's opponents by surprise and slashed through his arm, making the severed limb drop to the ground, gushing out blood. The wind of the desert, its power, coursed through him and he shouted and shouted, unable to stop, forgetting, memories once dear slipping through his fingers like sand.

"Not-orc! Not-orc!" the tribes chanted now, while Yarag and Duril continued their attacks, making the clan leaders scatter around, scared now of the collective power that poured out of the Grand Chief and his unlikely partner.

Power, Duril thought, this was what it felt like. The blood pumped so fast through his veins that it was making him dizzy. But he had power, he was an orc, and he was fighting for his home, his kin, like he had never done before.

Toru didn't dare to bother Demophios with questions, at least not as long as Varg and Claw could hear him. He had to ask some embarrassing things and didn't want the others to think that he was like a toddler crying for his momma. So, all he needed right now was for a chance to be alone with the giant snake and find out what his heart most desired to learn.

His luck was with him. Demophios had conjured an oasis so that they could rest. Claw was already feeling better after drinking fresh water and eating some fruit, and that meant that the snake didn't mean them harm as he had suspected before. Although he still found him suspicious and wouldn't place all his trust in him, he wanted to discover new things and Demophios was the only one to offer him the answers he desired.

For a while, he waited for the others to slip into a nap that their tired bones much needed, and only then he removed the pin from his shirt and held it between his fingers. "Demophios, are you there?" he whispered.

"I'm always here," the snake replied as if he should have known that.

“I didn’t know you were awake,” Toru added, a bit miffed over each time the wise ancient creature chose to taunt him over his childish ways.

“I’m always awake,” Demophios said again.

Toru hesitated. Suddenly, he was no longer that much in the mood to talk to the snake since he was so annoying and all-knowing about everything.

“Speak what’s on your mind, young tiger,” Demophios encouraged him, his harsh voice a bit gentler now.

“So, Duril went there because he was missing his family, right?” Toru asked, deciding that maybe he should give the snake a chance to prove himself.

“These are your words. Duril is an orc, and the pull of his blood is as real as for any other creature on the face of the earth.”

“Does that mean that you want to be with other snakes and do snake stuff with them?” Toru asked, annoyed that Demophios kept calling Duril an orc. He was much more than an orc, and ever since they met, he had behaved not at all like one. Not that Toru knew that much about orcs and their habits, but they were bloodthirsty creatures, and Duril was not.

“No, my appearance is that of a snake,” Demophios said calmly, yet still managing to make Toru feel like a hard-headed child who needed to have everything explained. “It has always served a purpose.”

“Forget about that, then. Tell me what you see. What’s Duril doing right now?”

“That is not how my insight works, young tiger.”

“How does it work? Can you even tell me anything?” Toru asked, a bit frustrated with how Demophios talked. Was he just like Agatha and Elidias, speaking in riddles and making everyone’s head hurt?

“Yes, I can tell you many things. Just ask the questions that weigh heavy on your heart.”

“Will Duril come back to us? Does he love those ugly orcs more than he loves us?” Toru blurted out.

“It is in your power to make him come back to you. And the love he has in his heart for you is different from the one he nurtures for his kin. You cannot compare the two, as they are not the same thing.”

“But which one is more powerful, then?”

“Do you love your healer? With all your heart?” Demophios asked.

“Yes,” Toru replied, not a shadow of doubt in his heart as he said that.

“Then you should give your love freely, without waiting for something in return. And if you love Duril the way you say you do, then you should understand why a part of his heart belongs with his tribe.”

Toru wanted to argue with that, when he felt a warm hand resting on his shoulder. Varg was already awake, which meant that they were only waiting for Claw to gain back his strength a little so that they could continue. Quickly, he put Demophios back where he belonged and closed his eyes, to pretend that he was sleeping.

Varg sighed and embraced him from behind. “I know that you miss him a lot. I do, too.”

No point in faking being asleep, then. “I wish that we could reach the horde already. I’ll bring him back.”

“We’ll bring him back. Don’t ever forget that you’re never alone in this, Toru,” Varg chided him, but with affection.

The wolfshifter’s large body offered him comfort, and Toru felt himself relaxing into that embrace. Varg caressed his chest slowly and kissed the back of his neck.

“You were talking to Demophios, weren’t you?” Varg asked.

“I was. He’s not saying a lot, though. He’s just like that old witch Agatha.”

“I do mind the comparison,” Demophios intervened.

Toru huffed. It was easy to forget that the giant snake who was no longer giant, but very tiny, really, was always there, awake and alert. That made him feel a bit self-conscious of how comfortable he was in Varg’s arms, so he stiffened.

“I think I’m going to put you in the bag for now,” Toru decided.

Varg lay on one side and watched him as he placed Demophios inside the bag, despite his protests.

“Demophios says some strange things,” he began as soon as he was back. “That Duril loves those orcs, too.”

“They’re his kin,” Varg confirmed. “It is the same with me and my pack. I’ll always love my brothers and sisters.”

“But,” Toru hesitated for a moment, “who do you love more?”

Varg chuckled and caressed Toru’s hair, tucking a few strands behind his ear. It was only this much he could take before he would start purring, so he moved slightly away.

“There is no possible way to compare the two. They both have a place in my heart. They are my heart. Do you think anyone could ever live with only half of it?”

Toru shook his head. He knew that Varg’s words made sense, and the wolfshifter was telling him the same thing as Demophios, but he didn’t find it easy to accept their truth. It seemed that Varg understood his torment as he reached for him and continued to caress his hair and his ears in a soothing way that made him close his eyes.

“Rest a little. We’ll need all our strength once we meet the mighty orcs and their horde.”

“What will happen then?” Toru asked in a voice as anxious as what he felt inside.

“We’ll see. But we’ll bring Duril back to us, don’t worry. It is our most important quest right now, and if I have to drag him away, I’ll do it. For you and me and us,” Varg promised.

That put a smile on Toru’s face. He lay by Varg’s side and fell asleep as the wolfshifter continued to caress his face.

Yarag tilted his head back and released a loud cry. The chanting stopped for a few moments, and even the opponents stopped. Duril clutched the blade in his hand hard and waited, his entire body turned into a sling waiting to be released so that it could reach its target. Then, all of a sudden, Yarag dropped his fists to the ground, making the ground shake and his attackers broke into a dash toward him. It would only last a blink of an eye, Duril thought as he watched them rushing toward the Grand Chief.

It was now or never. He shouted and sprinted toward the others from a flank. First, his blade met one of the attacker’s shoulders. He pulled it out quickly and moved it through the air, making it drop again and meet flesh once more. A burning sensation cut through his middle, but he paid it no mind. Yarag moved his head to and fro and swung his fists, crushing his assailants with unbridled force.

Never had he been part of anything like that, Duril thought. To have his entire body shake from too much power, power that needed to be released and needed to find its way out. He continued to slash and dash about, while the Grand Chief continued his own path of destruction.

And then, there was silence again, and Duril found himself standing, breathing hard, his eyes burning in his head. By his side, Yarag stood victorious as well, while their opponents lay on the ground, some motionless, some still writhing in agony.

The crowd broke into cheers, a sea of curved blades flashed above a sea of heads. Duril looked around, his heart filled with pride, but gasped when he was grabbed again by the Grand Chief and perched upon his shoulder like before. They walked through the crowd that parted before them,

and Duril watched them from above, believing to the tiniest part of his being that he belonged there and was part of it all.

Yarag took him off his shoulder only after they reached the tent. Clan leader after clan leader walked inside and made an offering, retreating quickly to allow the others waiting to have their turn. Some offered food, others strange ornaments and jewelry made from bones. Duril stood by the Grand Chief's right, silent, not daring to speak a word. He was, however, all eyes and ears, all the time, his chest rising and falling to the rhythm of the drums still pounding in his ears.

Winglog and Sog stood by the entrance, motionless and quiet, just as him, and Duril mimicked their stance regardless of the honor the Grand Chief had decided to bestow upon him. He would have to return Winglog's curved blade, he thought. After all, it saved his life and helped him achieve his purpose of fighting for Yarag and what his name stood for.

After the bloody fight, Yarag appeared somewhat appeased, his eyes no longer as glassy and filled with madness, but he wasn't talking, either. He offered nothing but grunts each time a clan leader entered and presented his gifts.

The last clan leader retreated and Winglog then hurried to pull closed the side flaps of the tent and seal them inside, or so it felt. Duril still waited for a sign, this ritual unknown to him, as much as his heart burned to learn it.

"Not-orc," Yarag finally spoke, "you belong to my clan now. Come here and kneel."

He hurried to sit in front of the Grand Chief and pressed his knees against the ground while holding his head low.

"Raise your eyes. Today, only pride will live inside your heart. And you deserve your curved blade."

Duril stared directly into Yarag's eyes. Yes, the madness was long gone from them now. They shone with cleverness, but they were still dark, only the gleaming of the fire lit inside the tent reflecting off them. "This is not my blade," he said simply and placed the weapon on the ground. "It belongs to Winglog."

Yarag barked laughter. "No. It belongs to you now."

Duril didn't hesitate. He didn't have to understand the tiny whispers coming from Sog mostly. What he was doing right now was probably unheard of in the horde. "Winglog just lent it to me."

"Winglog," Yarag said slowly, "had no choice. The only reasons I'm letting you speak now are that you don't know our customs and you proved your worth fighting by my side."

“It is true,” Duril admitted. “And I’m honored to be part of your clan, Grand Chief. But the blade should return to its rightful owner.”

Yarag shifted and growled impatiently. “A blade doesn’t change owners unless there’s blood shed. Could it be that you knew that?” He turned his clever eyes on Duril, expecting an answer.

Duril shook his head. “No. I felt the call of blood and came to find the horde.”

Yarag laughed again. “I remember that you were dragged here by Winglog and his useless servant.”

“We met, it’s true,” Duril said. “They didn’t harm me and helped me reach you faster. It must have been fate, too. My cure --”

Yarag stopped him by cutting the air with one hand. “Silence,” he barked. “One never speaks of death but at the death’s door.”

Duril said nothing. There were so many things he had yet to learn about the horde and its customs. And if the Grand Chief didn’t let him talk about the cure he had made, so be it.

“To have the blade, to honor it, you must do one last thing,” Yarag said. “Winglog,” he called sharply.

The orc warrior stepped in front and knelt, keeping his head down.

“Now.” Yarag again talked to Duril. “Bring the blade upon his neck and claim it for yourself.”

Duril stood, his hand still clutched on the pommel.

Yarag’s eyes glinted in the dark, the reflections of the fire burning like hell’s embers. “Yes, like this. To be born a warrior, you must kill the one before you. Raise your blade and embrace your destiny.”

Duril clutched the blade tightly and his arm moved up, but then he dropped it, making it sink into the ground right in front of Winglog. “I refuse to earn my place by killing off the most loyal warrior the Grand Chief has.”

He waited, his entire body calm now. The Grand Chief would probably ask for his head instead and maybe put Winglog up to kill him, instead, but he couldn’t bring himself to care. He wouldn’t be part of a horde that had such a ruthless ruler who didn’t see who those loyal to him truly were.

“I’ll kill you where you stand for disobeying,” Yarag said.

“Then I’ll accept my fate,” Duril replied. “Do as you wish with my life, as it belongs to the horde, and the horde belongs to you.”

Yarag picked up the blade with a low grumble. It looked so small in his hand. Duril turned toward him and didn't close his eyes, as Yarag played with the blade, making it glint dangerously. Then, all of a sudden, the Grand Chief raised it and then it descended quickly.

Duril waited for the pain to slash through him, but only the blunt edge smacked against his shoulder, making him wince and stagger. He raised his eyes, confused about what the Grand Chief's true intentions were.

And Yarag started laughing. "Orcs," he said cheerfully, gesturing for Winglog to stand and Sog to come nearer, "we have a noble in our midst!"

Duril blinked a few times, not understanding. He would surely get a bruise where Yarag had hit him with the blunt edge, but it was nothing that wouldn't heal in a few days.

The Grand Chief handed Winglog back the blade, and the orc warrior sheathed it quickly. While Yarag continued to be amused, Winglog and Sog appeared wary, probably not used to the things happening in front of their eyes.

"You did well, Not-orc, not only when fighting by my side, but right now, as well," Yarag said as soon as the last bouts of laughter died from his voice. "No orc should shed another orc's blood unless challenged. But you will need a blade of your own. Take the useless slave. Go with him and choose your rock. From it, you'll make your blade. Now go."

Duril didn't wait to be told twice. The fire burning inside the tent produced enough smoke to make his eyes water. How the Grand Chief and the other two orcs could manage to breathe that air was beyond him, but probably it was something learned, which he would also get accustomed to, exposed to it enough.

He went out into the evening air and breathed in deeply, filling his lungs. The events of the last hours were fresh in his mind, but that didn't make them feel any more real, and his mind struggled a bit.

Sog gestured for him to move along. "Let's go, Not-orc, let's go and find your rock."

The orc walked in front, only turning from time to time to urge him to hurry. Duril could only guess what was inside Sog's heart. "You're not useless," he blurted out.

Sog turned toward him and flapped his arms about. "The rock, the rock, we must find you the rock."

"You helped me cure Yarag," Duril insisted.

Sog's big eyes grew even larger in his head, to the point that they looked like it would take little for them to pop out of their sockets like marble rocks. "You tricked Sog," he said quietly after that.

“I had no choice,” Duril replied honestly. “He was dying.”

Sog shifted his weight from one foot to another. “We’re not supposed to talk of it.”

Duril nodded. “I know. But it’s just you and me now.” They had walked rapidly out of the camp, and they were in the open, in a sand field that was peppered with rocks of various shapes and sizes.

Sog didn’t appear to be fully convinced. “What if someone hears us?”

“Who?” Duril pointed around them, as far as their eyes could see. “Whatever we talk about, it will be only our secret.”

Sog brought his hands close to his chest in the same defensive manner Duril had seen him use before. “A secret? The horde should have no secrets.”

“And yet, those clan leaders conspired to murder Yarag, didn’t they?”

Sog nodded thoughtfully. “Secrets are bad.”

Duril sighed. That wasn’t what he wanted to say. “But this one is good because it’s ours. Together, we helped heal Yarag. He is now in good health, all powerful, because you cooked that stew that cured him from the poison in his blood.”

“I did,” Sog confirmed and his face contorted into a sly smile. “It was good stew. He ate it so fast. I wish I could have eaten the leftovers.” His chest heaved with a heartfelt sigh.

“No, that could have killed you. That’s why I didn’t let you have it.”

Sog’s eyes lit up again. “Sog has a strong belly.” He patted his midsection with pride. “I can eat anything.”

Duril felt compelled to explain. “I believe that, but given how strong the poison that put Yarag down was, there was a chance you could have fallen ill, too. I just didn’t want to risk it.”

“Why?” Sog cocked his head and gave Duril a long look.

“Because you’re part of the horde and my people, too.”

Sog laughed at first, then he pushed one hand against Duril’s shoulder. “The Grand Chief just made you part of the horde. You’re my people,” he said with pride and emphasis.

There was no way to argue with that, so Duril nodded. “I didn’t want anything to happen to you.”

“To me?” Sog’s amusement turned into wonder. “But I’m nothing but chum.”

“Yet, you’re important. Say, could Winglog have made the delicious stew you cooked for Yarag? Or could I have? No, it was you. You’re as important to the horde as anyone else.”

Sog's face stretched into a large smile. "Sog is important. Sog is not useless."

Duril nodded, encouraging him. "And even now, Yarag asked you to help me get my rock. Why would he do that?"

Sog perked up his ears, waiting avidly for an answer.

"Because," Duril continued, "he wouldn't entrust this task to anyone else. You see?"

Sog grinned, his face nothing less than an expression of pure happiness. "Sog is good at picking rocks. You'll have a great blade, Not-orc. Let's see, let's see now."

Duril followed Sog as he sauntered away through the field of rocks. "How are these even suitable for making blades? They're nothing but stone."

"Ha! You know nothing, Not-orc," Sog replied, visibly proud of his knowledge. "The heart of each rock is made of iron. We'll take it to the fire and burn it until it turns into hot honey."

As he talked, the orc moved around, stopped from time to time by one rock, sniffed it, kicked it, and then walked forward. Duril was quite curious about the entire process. "How will you know which rock is good for making a blade out of it?"

"Sog has his secrets," the orc said slyly.

"And I thought you said secrets were bad," Duril pointed out.

"Will you tell on Sog?"

"No. We have our secret, too, about how we saved Yarag, don't we?"

Sog nodded with enthusiasm. "For you, I will pick the perfect rock. Your blade will be the sharpest. You'll cut through enemies like they're made of butter." He laughed, delighted with that image. "And Sog will cook them."

Duril somehow doubted he wished to be part of that particular arrangement but he didn't want to ruin Sog's obvious happiness at the prospect. He waited patiently for the orc to stop by a rock.

In the meantime, he raised his eyes to the sky on which the first stars twinkled like tiny precious stones. They belonged to him, he realized, the same feeling of bliss and freedom flooding him as before.

And yet, there was a tiny part of him, one he could no longer understand, that felt as if it was a long-forgotten friend he hadn't seen in many years. This tiny part was pulling him back, wishing for him to remember.

But to remember what? On the canvas above one star lit and began burning a shimmering trajectory as it fell from the ceiling of the world. Another quickly followed.

“Shooting stars,” he said as his eyes took in the spectacle.

Sog stopped and looked at the same thing. He suddenly became frantic. “Let’s choose your rock fast. It’s bad omen, bad omen, Sog knows.”

“Bad omen?” Duril asked. “I thought you could make a wish upon a shooting star.”

Sog shook his head as his large hands felt the rocks impatiently. “And what if someone wishes for the world to be rid of orcs?” he asked.

Duril said nothing. Orcs didn’t wish upon shooting stars, did they? A sudden sensation of loneliness coursed through him, but lasted only for a moment.

Chapter Eleven – By Fangs and Wits

Duril stood close to the large fire Sog had made, unwilling to stray too far from the fascinating process happening under his very eyes. Orange flickers rose and died in the air above their heads while Sog kept feeding the flames and humming to himself. His long arms were streaked by thick veins that bulged under his skin as he worked fast. The rock he had chosen for Duril had been placed into a large metal bowl, and Sog pushed it around with a long stick.

“We must have it hot,” the orc said. “So hot that it will turn into blood fire.”

Duril said nothing. How would that turn into a blade? The thought filled him with unexpected happiness. A curved blade of his own. Now he understood why Sog had been so happy at the prospect of getting one, and why it was part of who all orcs were. His hand itched to grab the hilt again, to feel it in his hand, and only hours of assiduous work separated him from it.

“How can I help you?” he blurted out.

“Sog works alone. Sog works his magic,” was the reply.

“I can’t just sit around and do nothing. There must be something I can do,” Duril retorted.

Sog pursed his lips then smacked them. “Tell Sog a story.”

“A story? What about?”

“One of your own.”

Duril first smiled but quickly frowned. Who had he been until today? His mind muddled through memories slippery like fish, and he couldn’t hold onto one if it were all that mattered. He had a remembrance of being a healer, but when had that happened? And where? “I was born today an orc,” he said.

Sog nodded in agreement. “Tell Sog the story of the fight.”

“The fight from today? But you were there.”

“I couldn’t see much. I’m not a big orc,” Sog said mournfully.

“All right, then let me tell you how it all went down,” Duril began.

At times, Sog interrupted him with questions about this and that, expressing his delight each time one of their enemies was defeated and shouting angrily each time one of them landed a hit. Duril felt his chest swelling with pride as he retold the events through his eyes, reliving everything like it was the only memory that mattered.

“We must be on our way,” Claw said as he shook them gently from their nap.

Varg groaned and rubbed the last grains of sleep out of his eyes. Toru continued to pretend to be asleep, so he had to pinch his lovely butt to make him stir. “To think that you didn’t even want to sleep at first, kitty,” he teased him.

Toru stretched and yawned. “What is that?” he pointed at the sky, as he was now on his back.

Varg raised his eyes and noticed the streaks of silver crossing the night canvas. “Shooting stars.”

For centuries, wiser minds than his had struggled to find meaning and significance in the rare event. Some said that you could wish for anything, a long life, riches, the return of a loved one. It seemed appropriate, given their circumstances. But, at the same time, Varg also recalled others, just as wise and long-lived, saying that shooting stars could be a sign of the heavens weeping when a new wound was split open by evil’s work. He kept his silence, not wanting to give Toru’s troubled mind more reasons to worry. It was a blessing that he had found a bit of rest in the midst of all that upheaval.

“Where is Demophios?” Claw asked.

By the look in the bearshifter’s eyes, he could tell that he wasn’t the only one who knew of what the meaning of the shooting stars could be.

“I put him in the bag because he was really annoying,” Toru said promptly.

“We need his guidance, so let’s get him out of there,” Claw suggested with a small smile.

Toru pouted for a moment but obeyed quickly. Varg couldn’t help but notice that Toru was much more inclined to listen to Claw than to him, but he wasn’t the kind to hold grudges. The tiger was still so young, and it was a truth he was painfully aware of. He would have to grow up fast, but, at the same time, Varg realized that he loved how Toru and his carefree laughter appeared to remain the same even at the heart of chaos.

All the more reason he didn’t want to see that handsome face marred by sadness at the thought of their companion being now with other people, even if those were his kin. He stood and patted down his clothes to brush away the blades of grass stuck to them. “Let’s not waste another moment. Duril must be wondering by now where we are and how come we haven’t reached him already.”

That put a smile on Toru’s face right away. “He must be,” he said and nodded. “Demophios, come on, what does your nose tell you? Where’s the horde?” He held the pendant between his fingers, eyeing it closely.

“I don’t have a nose. And let’s continue to travel north,” Demophios said promptly. “We are not very far now.”

“Do you see the sky?” Toru held the pendant up. “All these stars falling?”

“You don’t have to show it to me. I see it with the eyes of my mind,” Demophios replied.

“What are they all about?” Toru asked.

“The skies are weeping,” Demophios said, much to Varg’s dread.

So it would be a prophecy and forewarning for something bad, after all.

“What for?” Toru insisted, oblivious to how his companions had stiffened by his side.

Claw was thinking of the same thing, for sure, Varg thought.

“Destruction,” Demophios offered his reply.

“Did it happen yet? Or will it come?” Toru asked.

“It has already started,” Demophios said.

Toru groaned. “Do I really need to pull every word out of your mouth?”

Demophios chuckled. “Tigers and their curiosity. You’ll patch the sky one day, Toru.”

“What does that mean?”

“You’ll know it after the deed is done.”

Even Toru had to see that the wise snake was in no mood to share any more than that, so he gave up. Varg was still in awe over how the tigershifter had brought Demophios to heel, and it was all because of his unbridled nature and honesty. In the pursuit of his love for Duril, he would spare nothing. But Toru also loved him, and the surety of it all made Varg’s heart swell in his chest with old and new feelings alike. There was enough love in the tiger for everyone, no matter what he said, and it was because of that he had been chosen to save the world.

After their refreshing nap, they were all walking with a bit more determination. Toru was happy beyond what his words could tell, with each step they took. Of course, he kept pestering Demophios with questions over how long they had until they reached the horde. His companions, however, were quiet. He stayed back and waited for Varg.

“Are you worried, mutt?”

He tried to make light of his words, but it was true that the chances were that they would go against an army like no other. The horde, Demophios explained, was made from different clans, each one

with leaders and their caste of warriors, which meant that it had to be like nothing Toru had ever seen in his life.

“I must admit that I am. We’ll reach the horde soon. And that means that we will have to negotiate our way through to get to Duril.”

“Do orcs trade?” Toru asked.

Claw intervened. “The correct question would be if we have something worth trading. All nations trade, one way or another.”

“What do orcs like?” Toru was all eyes and ears.

“They prefer steel and flesh.” That was Demophios who only rose from his silence whenever he deemed appropriate. Toru had put him back in his place, pinned to his shirt, so the snake could be privy to all of their talks.

“We don’t have either to spare,” Claw pointed out. “Do you have any advice for us, Demophios?”

“Only to be honest. And just so you know, orcs do not easily go against shapeshifters. They’re part of bigger nations in their eyes, so they won’t stir a pot they don’t intend to feast from.”

“Ah, so they’re just afraid that Varg would come after them with a large pack? Are they scared of mutts?” Toru laughed.

“Do not provoke them,” Demophios warned. “Their pride as warriors tramples all. Do not expect them to give Duril back willingly.”

“Are they keeping him prisoner?” Toru asked worriedly.

“No. He went to meet them of his own accord, don’t you forget, young tiger.”

Duril would surely want to come back. Maybe they could stick with his big family of orcs for a few days if he so wished, and Toru would allow it, but only after having Duril swear that he would never do something like that again, leaving him alone.

He stole a glance at Varg. It was true that he wasn’t alone, but Duril was still a big part of his heart, and hadn’t Varg said something about how no one could live with a heart that wasn’t whole? And there was also Claw, with his impressive presence and wise words, who appeared to care for him just as much.

No, he wasn’t alone, but it still felt like a part of his heart was missing ever since Duril had woken up in the middle of the night and decided to join his tribe. Although it was barely night again, the events from the last day felt like they had taken a lot longer. He could feel the tiny scars they had left in their wake, the fear when Demophios had separated him from Varg and Claw, the longing he felt for Duril.

He wouldn't dwell on such things when the road lay in front of him. Secretly, he was proud for defeating Demophios, although the giant snake, without a doubt, would have told it otherwise. His pride had nothing to do with his battle prowess, this time, hence its different source.

Varg and Claw were now here because of him. Before, he had dealt in quests and whatnot, offering his services when it suited him, or the need for a temporary shelter and a warm meal in his belly was too great. A new purpose blossomed in his life, and it had to do with those he held dear, something he would have never said before.

Demophios had offered them keen advice on how to talk to the orcs once they reached the horde. Varg still grasped the hilt of his sword, his unease only growing greater as they approached their destination. The wind had changed, something in how it smelled bringing back to them new scents. Claw sniffed the air and offered him an understanding smile when they exchanged a glance. There was reassurance there, and Varg, albeit not admitting it for the world, was grateful for it. They had each other's backs, and they wouldn't walk into danger by themselves.

The caldera opening at their feet took his breath away for a moment. The clamor of metal on metal, the sounds late in the night, a sign that orcs needed a lot less sleep than other species, announced that they were finally on the last leg of their journey.

"They are so many," Toru expressed his wonder. "How will we find Duril among them?"

Demophios offered his reply, regardless of whether the question had been addressed to him or not. "A half-orc like him, we're sure to find just by asking. His arrival didn't go unnoticed."

"So, are they going to take us to him right away?" Toru asked, without hiding his excitement.

Varg wished he could share the same sentiment, but he knew better than that. "Kitty, keep your eyes peeled, and your claws and fangs at the ready. This lot is not to be trusted, and don't forget about how bloodthirsty they are."

"Demophios said they wouldn't touch a hair on your mutt back," Toru replied.

"As much as I'd like that to be the truth, I know very well that it's not."

"Be cautious," Claw added. "This bunch is not known for their kind feelings. It would be better if we didn't drop our guard."

With that unanimous decision, Varg stepped in front and began the descent toward the horde camp. Fires bloomed everywhere, which meant that many orcs had to be hard at work, polishing their weapons, crafting new blades, and preparing for a new day of their chaotic ways.

Duril couldn't believe it. Sog called it magic, and rightfully so. First of all, he would have thought that a blade like that should have taken ages to make, but there it was. Sog dropped it in a bucket of water, making the air hiss, and the water rise as mist, and then pulled it out and held it high above his head.

For a few moments, Duril didn't know what the orc was doing, until he saw the light of the moon reflecting on the edge. It was a sight of wonder, indeed, and he felt giddy at the thought that the blade would belong to him. It was just as much as he could do not to reach greedily for it and try it out for size by swishing it around. He did have just the one hand, but it had proven battle worthy only earlier that day, and there was nothing else that mattered now.

"You'll cut stars with it, Not-orc," Sog said while handing him the blade.

Duril felt the hilt and his fingers wrapped tightly around it. "This is a wonderful blade, Sog. Thank you. It feels like it was made for me and me only."

Sog puffed out his chest in a gesture that signaled that he was proud of his hard work, as he should be. "I knew that rock was for your blade. She held it in her heart," he added.

Duril moved the blade around, fascinated with its movement. "If you're such a great blacksmith, why don't you make a blade of your own?"

Sog's shoulders dropped, and his eyes darted sideways, afraid and cautious. "Chum don't deserve blades. They're for the warriors. You're a warrior now, Not-orc."

That he was. He couldn't remember feeling this elated ever before, not that he remembered much of a life that seemed to have happened so far away in the past. Only that now, the silver-like reflections of old memories fading no longer bothered him.

He was born an orc, and an orc warrior for that matter.

Toru kept near Varg and Claw who were flanking him like they knew that he needed their protection. If asked, he wouldn't have admitted it as the truth, but the sight of the horde camp, now within their view, was part frightening, part exciting. So many warriors in just one place. Who was the strongest? Whose blade was the quickest? He wanted to challenge them all and prove his worth to Duril who must have thought this tribe more worthy than him.

Demophios had warned him, however, about stirring up trouble, which meant that he needed to be on his best behavior. Not an easy thing to achieve, not with his need to see Duril again only growing stronger the closer they were to the camp.

"Halt," a voice called from the dark, and a group of four orc warriors hurried toward them, their weapons drawn.

Toru felt his tiger stirring, wanting nothing but to bare his fangs and show these orcs a thing or two about who was the bravest. Varg's hand on his shoulder made him ease back a bit.

"We are here in search of our friend," Varg spoke for the entire group.

The orcs barked laughter, and they approached, showing no sign of wanting to sheath their blades. "A friend? Among the orcs? You bunch smell like shapeshifters to me," one said.

"And not the kind we'd like to eat," another chimed in.

Toru ignored Varg's silent warning and stepped up. "His name is Duril, and he's kind and gentle. He's half-orc."

"An orc, kind and gentle?" The orc guards broke into laughter. "Go back where you came from, shapeshifters. There's no such thing here."

"He's not an orc like you," Toru insisted. "He has brown hair here," he gestured to the top of his head, "and big kind eyes. And he's only half orc. His tusks are smaller than yours." He continued to gesture with his arms, trying to explain to those orcs what Duril looked like.

Three of the orcs laughed, but one examined Toru with keen eyes. He slapped his companions upside the head so fast that their laughter stopped abruptly. He appeared to be their leader since the others growled at the disciplinary action but fell in line behind him.

The leader of the guards crossed his arms over his chest. "You're here to see Not-orc."

"His name is Duril," Toru insisted.

"Then you're not here for Not-orc," the orc said, proving that he wasn't particularly bright.

Varg moved forward, too. "What does Not-orc look like?"

"His skin is light, and he has hair. But his name is not Duril."

Toru wanted to protest again.

"Can we see Not-orc?" Varg said before he had a chance to get another word in.

At that, the orc barked laughter, and his companions followed. "Not-orc belongs to the Grand Chief. He proved his taste for battle and victory today by his side."

"That doesn't sound at all like Duril," Toru said. "Maybe he's not here and just went another way."

Varg didn't want to argue with the tiger in front of the orcs. Claw came to the rescue. "Our friend is brave, indeed. We're not surprised that he earned himself a place by the Grand Chief's side. We must see him."

The leader gave them a long thoughtful look. “Zukh Kalegh never opens for those who aren’t orcs.”

“And yet,” Claw argued but all the while keeping his voice smooth like butter, “you accepted Not-orc as one of your own.”

“He’ll never be one of our own,” the leader said, setting his chin high.

“Do you disagree with your supreme leader?” Claw asked calmly.

That was enough to make the orcs exchange looks between them.

The leader had a nasty grin on his face. “Who’s going to tell him if we do?”

Toru knew by instinct alone to shift that very moment, at the same time with Claw and Varg. One of the sharp curved blades aimed at his throat cut through nothing but air, that fast he had turned into his tiger.

He growled and jumped at the leader’s throat, sinking his fangs into the tough skin with a vengeance. The taste of fresh blood did nothing to appease his anger. How did they dare speak of Duril belonging to someone else? If the healer belonged to someone, it was him and Varg, not some faceless orc, be he Grand Chief or not.

He dropped the lifeless body on the ground and turned in time to see Varg and Claw doing the same to two other orcs. That left one who hadn’t been attacked yet, and Toru lunged after him as he tried to run.

“Don’t let him escape,” Claw warned. “He’ll raise the entire horde against us!”

That had been his thought exactly, and within a few bounds he was jumping on the runner’s back, bringing him down and executing him as ruthlessly as he had done with the orc before.

Claw and Varg had to drag him back from the corpse. “Toru, we don’t have time to waste,” Claw warned. “If these guards need to report to others, which is most likely, the ones that are in charge of getting a signal from them will sound the alarm.”

These guards must have been in charge of protecting the perimeter, as they were still at a fair distance from what looked like the edge of the camp. Toru took in his surroundings with wild eyes; if need be, he’d leave a trail of bodies behind him until he reached Duril.

Varg wasn’t happy about the bloody resolution they had to exact on those orc guards, but they were a nation that only knew one language, the one of violence. Claw was right. They needed to move fast now, reach the heart of the camp, as it was there that Duril had to be at the moment if what those guards said was true.

“Now would have been the right time for getting a disguise,” Claw said, and Varg couldn’t say that he didn’t agree more.

“Indeed,” Demophios suddenly said, albeit keeping quiet throughout their conflict with the orc guards.

“Well, do you think you could help us with that?” the bearshifter pressed, when the wise snake said nothing.

“Yes.”

Varg was as surprised as Toru. “You can? Then what are you waiting for? And why did you let us fight these guards if you already knew you could make us pass as orcs?”

Toru grumbled in agreement at every one of his words.

“Pass as what orcs? Only now you can. Take their armor and dress up,” Demophios said.

Varg tipped his head in apology. “Forgive us for being quick to get angry,” he offered. “You are indeed wise.”

Unlike him, Toru scoffed. “Demophios is just like the old witch Agatha. He waits for us to ask him questions, and even then, we have to ask the right ones.”

“Would you like to win by fangs alone?” Demophios asked. “And I’m not allowed to put any thoughts in your head, only so that later you could consider them yours. I would taint your minds, willingly or not.”

“What’s wrong with winning by fangs alone?” Toru bristled.

Demophios laughed. Varg and Claw were quick to strip the armor from the dead orcs and put it on. “I thought you took great pride in having wits, too.”

Toru huffed but added nothing. Varg handed him the leather strips and metal plates and helped him into them.

“Are you sure the others will think we’re orcs?” Toru asked, letting his suspicions show.

“For as long as needed, but you will have to be fast. Now think up a lie to tell the others who will ask why you left your guard duty,” Demophios suggested.

Varg nodded. The great snake’s plan was excellent. But, indeed, they needed to get through the entire horde by wits, as well, since not even they could take on an entire angry horde of orcs armed to the teeth.

Toru knew Demophios was right, so he kept his mouth shut and his head down, as Varg explained to another group of orcs guarding the perimeter that they needed to deliver important news to the Grand Chief, news related to shooting stars that had just crossed the sky. When pressed for more details, the wolfshifter cleverly avoided answering on the basis that only the ears of the supreme leader were entitled to hear them.

The horde was like nothing he had ever seen before. One who looked closely could easily see their hierarchies, their division between clans, the occasional bouts of violence even between those belonging to the same group. Toru eyed everything with unease. Some orcs appeared to be at the bottom of the food chain, as they carried considerably less armor and weapons, and they were pushed around by the others. Was Duril now a slave like them? He didn't want to think of anyone treating the healer in that manner.

But the guards they had killed spoke of something unfathomable, of a Duril called Not-orc who had fought some important battle only today. Unless a wizard like no other had the power to rearrange time and while he, Claw, and Varg had walked here only for an entire night and day, Duril must have been here for a long time during which he had been forced to become a fighter and a warrior.

Otherwise, that didn't sound like Duril at all, so Toru felt within his rights to wonder whether they weren't here on a wild goose chase, wasting time when they should search for Duril in other places. Yet, Demophios was adamant about the healer having walked here of his own accord, to be part of this tribe of bloodthirsty creatures.

Duril couldn't get enough of his blade. Although night had fallen a while ago, he kept on slashing the air with his new sword, experimenting with different moves, while Winglog offered him curt, but well-intentioned advice from the sidelines. Sog was there, too, blabbering continuously about how he found the perfect rock for the perfect blade.

Yarag stood at the entrance of the tent, arms crossed over his chest, and although he was silent, Duril could tell that there was something in the Grand Chief's attitude that told him that he agreed with him. That alone was enough to make his chest swell with pride again.

Winglog suddenly stood to his feet and sniffed the air. He growled under his breath low and menacingly. "Someone's coming," he said.

Yarag remained impassive. "Go see," he said shortly.

Sog was an orc of many more words. "Who's coming? Orcs or foes? If they're foes, are they good to eat?"

Winglog slapped Sog lazily upside the head as he walked away. Unlike before, Duril didn't think that was a manifestation of violence; he had seen worse and done worse, too, and, in a way, he noticed that such things were part of the bond the orc warrior and Sog shared. Sog never minded being put in his place, neither did he stand there for too long.

Duril wasn't curious at all about who was coming. He needed to perfect his blade technique, and that was the only thing on his mind right now.

Toru was all eyes and ears as they approached the Grand Chief's tent. Demophios had guided him through quiet whispers so that they didn't appear unknowledgeable of the workings of the horde camp. Without meandering for long, they finally reached the core of the horde, where a proud, tall tent stood. He wondered why anyone would need a tent this big, but maybe there were many orcs who lived there, under the same roof. Or maybe the Grand Chief needed a lot of space because he was fat and ugly.

A giant orc warrior, bigger than the others he had seen along the way, stopped them before they could move farther. Toru wanted to jump up and down and look over his shoulders, as a sort of high enclosure surrounded the tent, unlike the other places he had seen so far around the camp.

"What do you want?" the orc warrior asked them directly.

Varg spoke for all of them. "We have news to deliver to the Grand Chief."

The orc warrior's nostrils flared. "Weren't you on guard?"

"We left one behind to stay there until the shift changes. The matter we want to discuss with the Grand Chief will suffer no delay," Varg insisted.

"Why didn't you leave three behind and only one of you came all this way?" the orc warrior questioned.

Toru scrunched up his nose. He didn't like this orc warrior; he was too clever, asking questions like that.

"The information we have is too important to be left to just one," Varg explained. "It is about the shooting stars tonight and the ill omen they bring with them."

The orc warrior moved his nostrils and appeared to be sniffing them. That Toru didn't like either. It was as if the orc was trying to sniff them out as imposters. They were so close and couldn't let that happen.

Finally, the orc warrior moved out of the way to allow them entrance. The mention of the shooting stars seemed enough to convince him that the information was worthy of being heard by the Grand Chief's ears.

Still, he needed to rein in his impatience. If it were up to him, he would push the orc warrior out of his way and reach inside that enclosure to see if Duril was there, indeed, or if they should have been looking someplace else.

The damned orc was so huge that it was hard to see around him. Varg caught his arm as he had stepped forward a bit too fast. "Easy," the wolfshifter whispered.

It would be bad to blow their cover right now; he knew that. So he reined in his impulse and stood slightly behind, allowing Varg to walk in front as their leader.

His thoughts were brought to a halt by the sight in front of him. In front of the huge tent stood a creature like no other. It was still an orc, but one as large as three. He stood and towered above them. "What news do you say you bring?"

As per their understanding, Varg began to speak. "The shooting stars, Grand Chief. A desert snake whispered to us that destruction is in its wake. It'll reach Zukh Kalegh within a matter of days."

"Destruction? What destruction?" The Grand Chief sniffed the air.

Toru began looking around, and then he saw him. Duril was not far away, his eyes intent on a blade he swished through the air. His feet made him move of their own accord. Yes, it was Duril, but what was he doing with a blade?

And why did he seem so enraptured, not paying any attention to anything around him?

Toru rushed to him before Varg or Claw could stop him. He caught Duril in his arms and hugged him fiercely. Then he released him and stared into those eyes that held only love and kindness in them.

Yet, now, they were filled with nothing but confusion.

"Who are you?" Duril asked him and made his world turn upside down.

Chapter Twelve – The Scent of Memories

“I’m not an orc,” Toru said, remembering that Demophios had cast that disguise on them so that they could sneak inside without being questioned or worse.

“I can see that,” Duril replied.

“They’re not orcs!” Someone suddenly yelled, and Toru barely had time to jump to one side as a heavy blade cut the air where he had stood only moments earlier.

In the blink of an eye, angry shouts filled the air. Varg and Claw were cornered by the Grand Chief, while the orc warrior rushed toward him with his blade pointed at him. Toru leaped through the air, shifting and landing on all paws. He growled and dropped his muzzle down, to prepare his counterattack.

But just as he was about to leap at the orc warrior’s throat, Duril jumped between them. “Stop!”

As if that single word was enough, the ruckus died. Even the Grand Chief turned toward them, his fists still raised and about to descend on Varg and Claw who had shifted, as well.

“Who are you?” Duril asked again.

The Grand Chief growled. “Not-orc, you better have a reason to stop me from destroying these enemies.”

“They seem to know me,” Duril said simply.

“They’re spies,” the orc warrior growled, too.

“Put them in the biggest pit,” the Grand Chief ordered. “We’re going to question them.”

“I’d think twice about that if I were you,” Toru said.

Under his horrified eyes, the Grand Chief swept both Varg and Claw into his arms and began squeezing them. His friends were struggling to get free, but to no avail. “I don’t mind killing you all on the spot, either.”

Toru was about to launch an attack on the Grand Chief, when pain flared in one of his back legs. Another orc, one smaller and thinner than the other two, had one single tusk buried in his left leg from the back and stared at him with madness and viciousness. He roared and tried to shake his leg free, but the evil creature didn’t want to let go. While he was busy with that, the orc warrior grabbed him, moving so fast that he didn’t know how he ended up on the ground, tied like a hog.

Varg and Claw didn’t have it any easier. The Grand Chief threw them on the ground, and the orc warrior did the same to him. He could shift, Toru thought, but as he did so, the rope around his

body still fit snugly, preventing him from moving any better in his human shape. It looked like his companions thought the same thing, and now they were all helpless, lying on the ground.

The orc warrior didn't waste any time and picked them up one by one.

"Wait, Duril!" Toru called out. "It's me, Toru! Don't you know who I am?"

Suddenly, it seemed that Duril found him a stranger, and the thought was simply unbearable. The eyes he knew so well were now opaque when they looked at him. "I'm sorry, but I don't know who you are. Grand Chief," Duril said as he turned toward the giant orc, "please spare their lives."

An annoyed rumble coming from that huge belly was the answer. "If they're spies, I'll know, Not-orc. They'll meet their end."

"And I will cook them," the smallest orc shouted with glee.

"They're shapeshifters, and not the kind we eat," the orc warrior commented.

The same thing as the others had said, Toru remembered. He couldn't stand the thought of someone even considering devouring shapeshifters of any kind. But that wasn't the most unsettling thing. Duril was there, but it was as if he weren't himself anymore. He looked like him, but his eyes were a stranger's now.

He had to be under some spell. Were there any orc wizards of some kind? As they had walked through the entire camp, they had seen only warriors and their servants, and not much else. The hierarchy of the horde was based on steel and the prowess to use it for bloodletting. A wizard would be as out of place there as a –

But of course, Duril wasn't supposed to belong there! He wasn't an orc, as the others had noticed, and that was why they called him Not-orc. That still didn't explain why Duril couldn't remember them.

Before he had any more time to reflect on that and what it meant, he was dragged away and thrown into a hole in the ground, together with Varg and Claw. At least they were together, and surely his companions were wiser than him and could think of a plan to get Duril to remember.

He wouldn't lose his hope that easily.

Varg couldn't say he was surprised that the orcs had finally sniffed them out, so the outcome of their being thrown into that pit as a means to imprison them didn't come as a great shock. However, what he couldn't wrap his head around so easily was how Duril appeared to not recognize them at all. The healer had told Toru as much, and his eyes had glided over him and Claw like they were people he had never seen before.

It was good that they were thrown into this pit together as they needed to talk and find a way to get out of there, and with Duril in tow, as much as he would probably struggle at first. Varg could only imagine what was in Toru's heart right now.

The small orc, the one who had the audacity to bite Toru's leg, hovered above them and stirred up some dust, making it fall over their heads. "You spies came to take Not-orc," he threw at them viciously. "Not-orc belongs to us now."

"No, he doesn't!" Toru shouted back. "His name is Duril, and he's a healer."

The orc leaned dangerously over the mouth of the pit. "Not-orc is a big warrior. Four clan leaders he ran through today. And I made him the most beautiful blade that he'll bathe in your blood!"

Toru growled and was ready to counter each of the words thrown at him, but Varg pushed his shoulder against him to stop him. "Let him gloat. If we don't talk to him, he'll get bored. We need to plan."

"You're lucky the Grand Chief wants to sleep," the orc threatened them from above. "Or else, you'd be stew. Sog will make a delicious stew out of you tomorrow."

"We're not to eat," Toru replied, ignoring Varg's advice.

"Sog tasted you," the orc said. His eyes were glinting with hunger. Varg wondered why he was so skinny and underdeveloped compared to the other orcs. It had to be because he was just a servant and never allowed to eat his fill.

"You bit my leg, you filthy creature! Wait till I get my fangs in you," Toru growled.

The orc neighed like a horse, prey to a bout of laughter. "I'll eat you. I'll lick your bones clean."

"Sog, is it?" Claw intervened.

The orc perked up his ears at the sound of his name as if he hadn't been the one to say it to them. "Yes," he said cautiously.

"What battle did Not-orc fight today?"

Sog puffed out his chest. "The biggest. A challenge for the Grand Chief. He fought side by side with Yarag, and they won."

"How did he fight? Where did he get a blade from?" Claw asked calmly.

It was good that the bearshifter was talking because, that way, they could learn more. This orc seemed easy to fool, but unfortunately, Toru was also easy to stir, and someone with authority had to intervene. Therefore, Claw was a balancing presence and one that would help them out of their current predicament. He remained silent and listened carefully. To his relief, Toru did the same.

“Winglog threw his blade at him, and he caught it, like this.” Sog waved one of his long arms through the air. “And then he slashed and stabbed and killed.” He gesticulated wildly, to portray the events. “Sog made him a blade of his own. Yarag told Sog, ‘go help him pick his rock’, and Sog went, and then he saw the most beautiful rock with a blade in her heart and grabbed it for Not-orc.”

Varg found the account astonishing, and if he hadn’t been witness to a new Duril who seemed so engrossed in practicing with his blade the moment they had reached the Grand Chief’s tent, he would have found everything truly hard to believe.

The skinny orc was pushed away and the warrior that had to be the one called Winglog, if his guesses were right, stared down at them. “Sleep on what you’ll say to the Grand Chief tomorrow.” With that, he pulled a large lid over the mouth of the pit, leaving them in complete darkness.

Their eyes adjusted slowly, but it wasn’t like it was hard to tell where everyone was, not with how close they were forced together.

“I’d say we’re in quite a pickle,” Claw began.

“You can say that again,” Varg said tersely.

“Why doesn’t he remember me?” Toru complained. “Any of us? They must have used some foul wizardry to make him forget like that.”

“Did you look around, kitty? Do these orcs appear to you as capable of anything else but mayhem and bloodshed? I don’t believe there’s any magic involved.”

“Then what is it?”

Claw sighed. “Maybe we should ask our wise companion. Demophios?”

There was no answer. Varg searched for the glint of silver on Toru’s pendant which was actually the wise snake. None was to be found. A new wave of unease coursed through him. “Toru, where is Demophios?”

As well as he could, Toru put his chin to his chest and tried to scout the front of his shirt for any signs of the magical artefact that had helped them so far. “I don’t see him.”

“He must have fallen while we were busy fighting the orcs,” Claw said. “And they grabbed Duril’s bag, too. Demophios might be in their paws.”

“This is bad,” Varg murmured.

“What should we do?” Toru asked. “If they had only let me talk to Duril, I would have made him remember.”

“I’m afraid that’s not something they’ll let us do anyway. What we need to focus on right now is to make a plan about what we are going to tell Yarag. The Grand Chief, let’s admit it, doesn’t appear to be a very reasonable orc.”

“What had Demophios told us? That we must be honest?” Varg said. “Then that should be our strategy.”

“But what if we’re honest, and he doesn’t believe us?” Toru asked. “And he gets to keep Duril all to himself?”

“Duril must have felt the call of blood all too powerfully,” Claw explained. “His loss of memories may just be temporary. A new life has just opened to him. Given time --”

“We don’t have time,” Toru interrupted him. “And that foul creature wants to eat my leg.”

Sog hadn’t been that particular about wanting just the one leg, but Toru wasn’t far off. They didn’t have time, and now they were minus one ally.

“We could ask them to let us open Duril’s bag and show him all the things dear to him,” Varg suggested.

“Like cabbage?” Toru asked.

Claw chuckled. “Maybe that would help, too. But Duril has many wonderful things in there, doesn’t he? His tome, his herbs, right? Once he touches them with his own hand, maybe he’ll remember.”

“More than by touching me?” Toru said, his tone making it clear that he took affront at that.

“I doubt Yarag, the Grand Chief, will let us get too chummy with Duril. For them, he is Not-orc, and they appear to lay their claim rather fiercely.”

“Yes, because everyone loves Duril,” Toru said with a huff. “But he should only love me.”

“If I could, I’d bite your ear so hard right now,” Varg warned.

“Fine, and you, too,” Toru admitted. “So that’s the only plan we have? We convince these ugly fat orcs that Duril needs to sniff his cabbage, and that’s all?”

Varg bit his lips not to laugh. It wasn’t unfathomable that Toru failed to see the subtleties of their plan. He had come up with the idea, but he was more than willing to have the others chip in if they had any helpful thoughts at all.

“The Grand Chief, as frightening as he appears, seems to be reasonable for an orc,” Claw commented. “Let me do the talking, and I will try to convince him that their Not-orc is actually

our Duril. I wonder how Duril was welcomed when he came here yesterday, and the Grand Chief saw him for the first time.”

“Yes, it is quite astonishing to find him by the Grand Chief’s side after he’s been gone only for one night and one day,” Varg agreed.

“Because Duril is amazing, that’s why,” Toru offered his opinion.

“I think the same,” Varg said, “but how could these orcs see the same thing as we do? In all truth, it appears that Duril showed them a different face of himself, don’t you think? According to Sog, he fought an incredible battle.”

“He’s a healer, not a fighter,” Toru said. “That foul creature is lying.”

“You saw Duril with that new blade in his hand. He moved it like he was born to wield it.”

Toru huffed, but Varg could tell that the tigershifter couldn’t contradict him and that was why he remained silent.

“The call of blood is powerful indeed,” Claw added. “Duril must have discovered the legacy his sire left for him down to the marrow of his bones.”

“Does it mean that Duril’s father used to be a great warrior?” Toru asked.

“Yes, that is exactly that. And his sire’s blood, coursing through his veins, has helped him discover this part of himself that he didn’t know existed.”

“But he’s so different now,” Toru complained. “It’s like he doesn’t even remember who he really is.”

Claw sighed. “We’ll see about that. As much as he’s an orc, he’s our friend and human, too. Surely, that part of him is still in there, and we’ll make sure to bring it out again.”

Yarag had them all sleep under the roof of the big tent, and he hadn’t dared to leave, as he had felt the Grand Chief’s eyes on him only until a little while ago. The strangers had left him with an unsettled feeling in the pit of his stomach. It appeared that Yarag, Winglog, and Sog had been fooled into believing that the strangers were orcs, but he had seen nothing of that disguise. The handsome young man with hair like gold who had hugged him and asked him if he didn’t remember him had appeared nothing like an orc in his eyes. Neither had the other two, the wolf and the bear.

They seemed like good people, too, and while Duril didn’t feel as bothered about not remembering the times before he had been born anew as a part of the horde, the simple fact that they were so keen on having him remember planted a seed in his heart.

It wasn't doubt, he pondered, as he lay on his back listening to the desert wind far in the distance. He was sure in his heart that he belonged to the horde. But the despair in the beautiful golden eyes of the tigershifter made him feel like he should have, at least, listened to them. Yarag had been adamant, however, about their fate. They had to be in a pit much similar to the one he had been thrown in, but much bigger. Where that was, he had no idea, unfortunately.

"Where are the prisoners, Sog?" Duril asked quietly.

Winglog and Sog had arrived earlier, and Duril had waited patiently for Winglog to start snoring, accompanying the sounds coming from the Grand Chief in a slightly higher key. Sog had taken it upon himself to lay close to his side, which was a good thing because he wanted to be able to talk to him without attracting the others' attention. Although he would have a chance to see the strangers tomorrow when Yarag intended to interrogate them, he would much like to have a chance to talk to them before as well.

"They're stashed away," Sog whispered back.

"But where? Can you point me to the pit where Winglog put them?"

"No," Sog said petulantly. "They want Not-orc. They can't have Not-orc. Not-orc belongs to us."

"I want to talk to them a little," Duril insisted. "Only you can help me."

To his surprise, Sog turned his back to him. "No. The Grand Chief will eat Sog tomorrow if I do that."

"I doubt it. Aren't you my friend?"

"Sog won't let you talk to them." There was a finality in the orc's words that made Duril understand that he would struggle in vain to change his mind. "And don't go wandering about, because Sog sleeps with one eye open."

He would wait until Sog was truly asleep, then.

Duril woke up with a groan. He pushed the heel of his palm into one eye, then the other. A look toward the entrance of the tent showed him that it was already day and he had slept like a log for the entire night. He stood and walked outside, where Winglog was pushing the prisoners to kneel in front of the Grand Chief. Yarag sat directly on the ground, his legs crossed, and by the frown on his face, he appeared ready to interrogate the strangers.

"Who are you, spies, and who are you spying for?"

The tallest of the group, the one Duril had seen turning into a bear, began talking. “We are not spies. We are Duril’s friends. We were traveling together when he must have felt the call of the horde and came here.”

Yarag examined him with keen eyes. “You say you were passing through Zukh Kalegh? Without our knowledge?”

“I’m from a place called The Quiet Woods, north from here. Going through the desert is the only way to reach home,” the bearshifter said simply.

Yarag rubbed his chin in thought. “The Quiet Woods are far. No one has traveled there in dozens of years.”

Duril was all eyes and ears. The world was so vast, and there were places beyond the desert. A small surge of longing seared through his chest, but it was gone as soon as it came.

“Why?” the bearshifter asked. “Caravans used to pass through --”

Yarag interrupted him with a bark of laughter. “Caravans? Through Zukh Kalegh? Here, we reign supreme. You’re the first travelers in many, many years. And I caught you.”

“You caught us only because we came to you,” the tigershifter intervened.

“Silence!” Yarag barked again.

“We mean no harm to the horde,” the bearshifter spoke after a while, using the same appeasing tone. Where the man with the golden hair was all fire, this one was calm and collected. “We’re only here for our friend Duril.” He pointed at him, and Duril shifted in his place. They knew his name, but it was like even that meant little to him. He was proud of being Not-orc, the one who could fight side by side with the Grand Chief and win against their enemies.

“Not-orc is not this Duril you’re talking about,” Sog yapped from his place.

The smaller orc was keeping a bit farther away. Duril only then noticed something glinting in his hand. From time to time, Sog brought the thing to his lips and tried to bite it with his tusk, only to discover that it wasn’t possible. Duril wondered what it was. Some piece of jewelry? But who wore jewelry out here, in the desert? The object appeared so out of place that Duril had a hard time tearing his eyes away.

“Chum isn’t wrong, but he shouldn’t be speaking out of turn,” Yarag said. “Winglog,” he said shortly.

The orc warrior walked over to Sog, grabbed him by one ear and pushed him away. Sog tumbled, but then he recovered and sat on his bottom, completely undisturbed. His fascination with the glinting object in his hand continued.

Duril waited with bated breath now for the Grand Chief to continue his interrogation.

“We have proof that he should be with us,” the bearshifter continued to plead. “We had a large bag with us, and it belongs to him. In there, you will find things from his life that he surely remembers.”

“What bag?” Yarag barked.

Duril didn’t remember seeing one, either. But he couldn’t help but notice how Sog stopped trying to munch on the piece of jewelry in his hand and perked up his ears. He had an inkling about what had happened to that bag if it did exist. With a surreptitious look at the Grand Chief, he began walking slowly back to the tent. If Sog had pilfered the bag, it had to be in there, somewhere.

There were many places where Sog could have hidden the bag, so Duril took on the arduous task of checking every crate and pot that lined the walls of the tent. It looked like Sog liked to collect all kinds of strange ingredients, or maybe some of those things were meant for different purposes. He didn’t have time to ponder what the bulbous eyes collected in a jar or what looked like flakes of skin kept at the bottom of a crate were there for. What was most important was to find that bag.

“What are looking for, Not-orc?”

Duril turned to see Sog, who stood at the entrance of the tent, examining him with keen eyes, his head cocked to one side. “I’m sure they came in with a bag. Maybe they dropped it around here,” he said.

“They weren’t allowed in here,” Sog pointed out. “And there’s no bag. They’re spies, and they’re lying.”

Duril didn’t want to argue with Sog over some strangers, as their bond as orcs prevailed, but it nagged him too much that they could meet a foul end before having a chance to be believed. After all, Yarag had thought him to be a spy, too, and then things had worked out to prove he wasn’t. Could it be that they felt the same call of the desert as him? But no, they were just travelers, and they belonged to a life that had been Duril’s long before, as well. In a different life, they must have been friends.

The pull he felt was mostly toward the young man with golden hair and eyes. His handsomeness was so striking, like a small part of the sun had been snatched by his dear mother upon his birth and caught in his hair. Duril couldn’t tear his eyes away, and his heart beat a little faster when he remembered the way those golden eyes had looked at him with so much affection that it made him question whether it wasn’t a bad thing that he couldn’t remember anything.

“Sog, you took the bag,” he said without thinking.

Sog gathered his hands to his chest, turning them inward in a defensive gesture. He hunched his shoulders and his ears pulled back. "Sog didn't. Not-orc hates Sog for no reason."

"That's not true," Duril protested. "I don't hate you. I just want to see what's in that bag. I promise that anything of value that's in there belongs to you. I only wish to see it."

For a moment, Sog seemed hesitant, but he recovered quickly. "There's no bag. They're just lying spies. You can look all you want, and you won't find a thing."

That meant that the bag wasn't there, and Sog must have hidden it someplace else. At least, he wouldn't waste any more time searching for it inside the tent. "If you say you didn't take it, then I believe you," he said and walked out.

"Sog says there's no bag," Sog insisted.

Duril ignored him. He was a bit upset that Sog was keeping something from him. Wasn't he the one who said that secrets were bad? And now he held one of his own, and Duril felt a growing curiosity about the bag the strangers had brought with them and what it contained.

Varg could tell that even Claw, despite his calm demeanor, was starting to lose some of his confidence. The Grand Chief let out only grumbles and snorts as they told him about Whitekeep and what happened there, as well as a short recounting of their adventures in Fairside and Shroudharbor. Without letting on too much about the importance of who Toru was and his role in a quest that was as large as life itself, Claw had his tacit agreement that he should let Yarag know about the evil gathering upon the world, a world that the horde belonged to, just as much as anyone else.

"Astonishing tales you have, strangers," Yarag said, "but they are nothing but tales. The bag you're speaking of doesn't exist, and that means one thing only. You are liars. You'll be trialed in the afternoon, and if found guilty, you'll suffer the punishment."

Varg wasn't keen on learning what the punishment was.

"The punishment is death," Yarag added, dashing the faintest hope he had that they would have it easy.

"You've seen the shooting stars," Claw said in a cutting voice.

"Kill us, and the whole world is dead," Toru intervened.

Yarag laughed. "Then let it be dead. More of it for orcs."

"Grand Chief," Varg decided to intervene, "my friends are right, but I know that orcs don't care about the rest of the world."

Yarag turned his bloodshot eyes toward him.

Varg continued. "I fought in the big war against the Vrannes. The orcs came in packs, to kill and plunder. And I killed my fair share of your kind."

He didn't have to look to know that Claw was staring at him, most probably wishing him to shut up.

"If you find us guilty of spying, we only have one wish. We're warriors. We want to go down fighting."

Yarag gave him a long look, but one in which a certain respect could be read. Varg was well aware of the language of violence being the only one the orcs understood. He painted himself as an enemy of the orcs, thus pulling Claw and Toru along with him, but he knew that his friends would only agree with him.

"Your wish is granted," Yarag said with a nod. "There's nothing more fitting then to drink from your enemy's skull at the end of the day. You'll fight. But I'll send warriors against you, as many as the grains in the sand. The only way to escape alive, if that's what you're thinking of doing, is to kill the entire horde."

"Then we'll do it," Toru said proudly.

Yarag sneered, but then he broke into laughter. "If you hadn't been spies, I'd have liked you."

Toru felt his blood boiling. He would fight the entire horde if need be. Varg had been right to suggest it.

"We'll kill these orcs," he said, as soon as they were alone again. "We'll kill them to the last one."

Varg smiled at him, but his smile was strained. Claw was silent.

"What?" he asked aggressively. "You don't believe we can defeat them?"

Claw shook his head. "You're one hell of a kitty. And Varg is one hell of a puppy. But we're going against the horde of Zukh Kalegh. On the upside, there's no bigger glory for a warrior than to fight such a battle before being called by the god of war to rest at his bosom."

"We'll kill them all," Toru said with conviction. "If you don't want to fight, just say so."

They had been thrown into the pit again, but they were no longer restrained. Yarag had said something about wanting them to have a fighting chance or else there would be no entertainment.

Claw chuckled. "There's no better place in the world I'd rather be right now."

“Not even The Quiet Woods?” Toru asked, challenging him.

“Not even,” Claw said. “Home is where your heart is, kitty. And now that I know I’ll never see The Quiet Woods again, my home is here with you, my friends.”

Duril had been busy searching for the bag for what felt like hours now. He had heard of the Grand Chief’s decision, and desperation had begun to form inside his heart. The strangers had used to be his friends, and he felt guilty for the fate they were about to meet.

As he looked around behind the tent for the tenth time, wondering where the bag could be, his eyes fell on a shiny object resting on top of a cage in which some small creatures were kept. Curious, he approached and picked it. The object appeared to be a silver pendant, carved so delicately that Duril immediately realized that it had to be the jewelry that Sog had been so enthralled with earlier.

He raised it and looked at it. It looked like a serpent devouring his own tale.

“Duril,” a voice called.

He looked around and saw no one.

“I’m in your hand.”

The pendant was talking? Duril brought it closer to his eyes. “What are you?” he asked cautiously.

“That would be a long story. Quick, I know where Sog hid your bag. Your friends are here for you, to save you and the horde.”

Duril opened his mouth to ask a thousand questions but decided against it. “Where is the bag?” he asked instead.

Duril spotted Sog from a distance. He had made a huge fire and was busy stoking it from time to time. By his side, a large leather bag lay. Sog picked objects from the bag, sniffed them, and then threw them into the fire as they didn’t appear to interest him.

He ran toward him. Suddenly, what Sog was doing felt like an intrusion of the worst kind. “Sog, stop!” he yelled.

The orc saw him and froze for a moment. Then, he suddenly grabbed the bag and threw it on the fire.

Duril couldn’t feel his feet touching the ground as he felt like he was flying toward the other orc. From the fire, sparks flew, and with them, the sweetest smell.

The scent of memories.

Chapter Thirteen – The Battle of Warriors

Varg couldn't say he was surprised at the verdict. Their so-called trial had lasted little time, and it had consisted of nothing but accusations of their being spies sent by the horde's enemies. No other details had been provided by Winglog's sonorous voice, who appeared to serve as a mouthpiece for the Grand Chief, as well. The crowd had been incensed against them from the beginning, and thousands of orcs had cried out, demanding their deaths.

Therefore, their current predicament was nothing else but what he had expected. The three of them were inside an improvised ring of sorts, at the heart of it, back-to-back, surrounded by the horde getting crazier and crazier with promised bloodshed. Yarag had yet to command the first pack of orcs to attack them, as it appeared that the whole thing served as twisted entertainment.

Claw and Toru were taking in the vile shouts, the opened mouths enraged with bloodlust, the tusks glinting in the sun. There were still hours before the sun would set, but could they survive to witness another moon rising in the sky above them? Varg steeled himself. Although he couldn't deny the truth in Claw's words that they were condemned either way, he still nurtured a deep belief that this day they wouldn't meet their end.

His thoughts were occupied mostly by Toru, his purpose, his meaning for the world. They had gone through incredible adventures together, and it seemed cruel to be stopped in their quest by a bunch of orcs with no discipline and nothing but pure fury coursing through their veins. Their end would not be here, he decided, as he gripped the hilt of his sword. At first, he would only tire his human, allowing the beast inside him to feed on the same bloodlust he could read in the eyes of their soon to be attackers. Then, when his wolf emerged, he would be hungry for orc flesh, and he would not go down without taking hundreds with him.

"Are you still keen on your plan, puppy? They seem to be quite numerous," Claw commented.

"Keener than ever," Varg replied.

Claw chuckled. "We'll use our humans first, right?"

"I know I will."

"My tiger wants to kill this horde," Toru growled under his breath.

"Varg is wise, kitty," Claw said. "Let our beasts have a taste later. And we can alternate between our shapes so that we can rest in-between and kill as many of these bastards as we can."

"You're still talking like we cannot win," Toru growled again. "For Duril, I'll kill them all."

"Then I'll stick by your side just to see us do that," Claw replied. "Do you think they'll be gentlemen and come at us one by one?"

Varg's grip on his sword tightened. "I wouldn't count on that."

No matter how seasoned he was in the heat of battle, the first loud war cry made his hair stand on end. Coming from all sides, around a dozen orcs rushed toward them.

Duril felt warm heavy tears streaking his cheeks as he pushed Sog aside and stuck his hand into the fire to save the tome in which he had so painstakingly written their adventures during the short reprieve they had had in Shroudharbor. Sog whined and tried to reach for the tome to throw it back into the fire. "No, bad Sog," Duril shouted at him and pushed him again. "These are my things!"

Elidias's secret herb must have been the reason why he had suddenly recalled who he truly was. The librarian mustn't have known that no one other than Duril would have to be saved in that manner and recall who he truly was, and it seemed like such a gloomy thought that instead of saving that precious herb for a dire time, it had had to be wasted like that. It all happened because he had let his heart and mind fall prey to new alluring promises, of belonging to this horde.

He didn't have time to think what all of that meant. Toru, Varg, and Claw would be on trial soon, as he had heard the others discussing.

"They're already fighting for their lives."

That was the talking pendant, the one that looked like a snake. He had pinned it to his shirt so that he could save his belongings from the fire.

"What? But their trial --"

"They fooled you so that you didn't intervene," the pendant replied.

Duril stood and wiped his tears. He grabbed Sog and shook him. "I thought you were my friend."

"Not-orc is Sog's friend," the orc replied but did nothing to release himself.

"Take me there. Take me to them, now."

All his things were scattered around, the pearl from Shroudharbor, the tome, his herbs, but they were no longer threatened by the fire. They meant nothing without his friends, anyway; without Toru and his beautiful smile, and Varg with his warm and kind heart. Even without Claw, their most recent friend, who had guided them here through his wisdom.

And he had failed them. He had abandoned them, heeding a call that he had heard for the first time in his life, forgetting them like they weren't truly his heart and destiny.

There was no time to wallow in self-pity and guilt. He grasped Sog with all his strength and dragged him away from the fire, despite the orc's protests and fighting. "You'll no longer be my friend if you don't take me where they are right now."

It should have struck him as odd that there was so much silence around, but he had been so absorbed with searching for the bag and its contents that he had failed to notice that everyone else appeared to be gone.

"Sog takes you, Sog takes you," the orc pleaded with him. "Just let me take you there."

He let go of Sog who rushed in front, making him increase his pace to a full run. "You better not fool me, Sog, or I will cut you down." As the words left his lips, he knew that he would never be able to act on such a promise, but was that how things still stood?

As the old memories returned, the new ones hadn't faded. He could still recall the new power surging through his body as he had wielded Winglog's blade and driven it through enemy after enemy, severing limbs, opening bellies and sending heads flying. A shiver moved through him as he recalled all that, but there was nothing he could do to change it. From someone who had sworn that he would always help others, heal them and soothe their suffering, he had turned into nothing else but a wild beast with bloodlust in his mind and heart.

"I'll take you, I'll take you," Sog repeated like a mantra, as they ran through the deserted camp.

Duril no longer needed Sog's help to get where he had to be. In the distance, at the edge of the caldera, right before the walls rose as tall as hills, the clamor of battle could be heard, and the vastness of the horde was visible with the naked eye.

Despite the burn in his lungs, he hurried, running faster, and leaving Sog behind.

"Not-orc!" Sog shouted after him. "Don't leave Sog alone!"

Despite the obvious plea in the orc's voice, Duril didn't stop. How could he? Through his recklessness, he had put his friends in harm's way, and now they were in mortal danger because of him.

Toru didn't usually use a sword when he fought, but anything that could serve as a means to destroy this enemy that dared to steal his Duril from him fit him like a glove. A broken blade was in his hand now and the surge of bloodlust rushing through his veins was only growing in power. He growled as he grabbed a large orc warrior and buried the broken blade into his chest to the hilt.

Without bothering to pull it back, he grabbed the orc's long dagger and used it as a spear to send it flying straight into the head of another who was trying to attack Varg from behind. His companions were as deadly as he was, and around them, heaps of bodies began to rise.

The smell of orc blood was a worse enemy than their blades. It fizzled like dragon's spit as soon as it touched the sand and caused thin smoke to rise, getting in their eyes and making it hard to see.

"Is this the famous horde of Zukh Kalegh?" he shouted, opening his arms wide and taking in the large crowd around them, from which new attackers came like wasps from a nest. "By nighttime, I'll be done with all of you!"

Mad growls replied to his taunt, and more and more orcs rushed toward him.

"Are you trying to make us look bad, kitty?" Claw laughed as he threw a shiny blade at him, which he caught deftly. "Don't keep them all to yourself."

The bearshifter used the force of his large arms to catch his enemies and squeeze them until they had the breath crushed out of them. Varg had doubled his trustworthy sword with a curved blade in his other hand, and he was wielding both weapons with masterful precision.

They were comparable in strength, and the heaps of bodies around them rose equally high. Toru was in awe of his companions who not only kept up with him but pushed him to do better, too. These orcs were nothing but a bunch of mindless creatures.

Only that they were many, so many, and Toru felt his arms growing weaker, not by much, but getting there. After listening to Claw's and Varg's advice of holding back on their beasts until their humans couldn't take the toll of battle anymore, he realized that he wanted that moment to be as late as possible. The more they lasted, the more of the horde they took out.

And if they reached the point where they needed to confront the big orc that had squeezed Varg and Claw in his arms like they were nothing but a little girl's dolls, they would need all their strength. He was the only one Toru feared, although he wouldn't admit it for the world.

Something suddenly changed in the horde's strategy. Their numbers increased, and he had wanted that, after all. But what was strange about it was how there were no longer only warriors sent against them, but also skinny orcs armed with nothing but small daggers.

Could it be that they had already run through their warrior elites and now were sending the lower ranks against them? That was a refreshing thought, and Toru grinned. Was this truly the great horde they had been so afraid of?

He pushed one small orc with the heel of his foot, sending him flying. The orc tumbled and remained on the ground in a heap of bones. Then two rushed against him.

Then three.

Soon, he was surrounded, and he couldn't spare a moment, always needing to cut through one, or kick or hit. They were soft-bodied, unlike their armed warriors, and easy to kill, but something

about the viciousness in their tiny eyes reminded Toru of the one from earlier that had sunk his only tusk into his leg. They were armed with small daggers and when they managed to prick him with them, they felt like nothing short of bee stings.

He looked at his companions, and it appeared that they were surrounded by similar swarms of small orcs that tried to reach them with their weapons, succeeding only from time to time.

Toru winced as another dagger pricked him. The sting felt deeper now, reaching somewhere well under the skin, and making pain flare. It was an unnatural type of pain, one that didn't stem from the cut slashing the skin, but something else.

“Their daggers are poisoned,” Claw warned.

“We'll have to shift!” Varg shouted. “Now!”

Their beasts could handle poison, Toru remembered. So the orcs' strategy had been to force their beasts out. They weren't thinking right, anyway; in their beast form, they would be even more dangerous, deadlier. If the Grand Chief of Zukh Kalegh thought he would wear them out faster this way, he was wrong.

Just as they shifted, the swarms of small orcs retreated. For a while, no other orcs were sent their way. Toru closed ranks with Claw and Varg, and examined their enemies. “What do you think they're planning?” he asked.

“I think we'll know soon enough,” Claw replied. “They didn't drag out our beasts for nothing.”

A low deafening roar rose from somewhere behind the crowd surrounding them. Toru felt his hackles rising at the sound and dropped his muzzle down, preparing to fight.

A sound like no other made Duril feel his blood curdling in his veins. He couldn't see the source; was it a wild beast of sorts? What was it?

“Sog,” he asked, “what kind of beast roars like that?”

“It's Wepir,” Sog replied. He rushed to catch up with Duril and caught him by the arm. “Don't go there. Wepir doesn't stop until its belly's full. It'll eat everyone!”

“Did they release something like that upon my friends?” Duril didn't need any more explanations. That roar was enough to tell him everything.

“They must die because they're spies,” Sog said, more and more agitated and trying to keep Duril from running farther. “They're shapeshifters; Wepir will love their juicy meat. Nothing will be left for Sog to make a stew,” he added mournfully.

Duril pushed him angrily. "I don't know how I could believe I was like you! You're nothing but a mindless, ugly beast!"

Sog stopped fighting against him, and his eyes went wide. Duril almost felt regret for his words, but he steeled himself. His friends, his lovers, were in mortal danger, and he had nothing left to spare for this pitiful creature that probably didn't deserve his anger now, but he just couldn't stop.

If anything happened to Toru, Varg, and Claw, his life was over. He didn't deserve to live after putting the ones he held the dearest in harm's way like that. And it wasn't only because he loved them; he put the entire world's fate in danger if Toru didn't live to fulfill his destiny.

That thought alone was enough to make him choke with despair, and his legs started moving faster and faster, while fresh tears flooded his eyes.

"Does that answer your question, kitty?" Claw said as a strange creature rushed into the ring, snorting and huffing, and moving its three heads around like a swarm of flies had gotten in its ears.

Toru froze for a moment. The thing rising on its hind legs, towering above them, could only be made of nightmares. It had hooves like a goat, and dark fur that covered its twisted body, but its heads were nothing like a goat's. Rich manes the color of the abyss adorned the heads, and in each one, four eyes glinted with malice and thirst for killing. Large muzzles opened to show rows and rows of sharp fangs carved from alabaster.

"Anyone who has any idea what this thing is and what's the best method to fight it better say something," Claw said.

"I've never seen anything like this in my life," Varg admitted. "Do you think they thought of giving us a fighting chance by forcing us to turn into our beasts?"

"I wouldn't hold them in such high esteem," Claw replied. "Something else must be afoot, and I'm not sure I'm keen on learning what."

The creature finally spotted them and turned its entire attention on them. The three heads lowered and performed a sweeping motion, trying to scatter them like toys. They were forced into three different directions, and Toru noticed only briefly how Varg and Claw barely evaded the creature's heads.

He didn't like this. Orcs might be mindless creatures, but the big orc, the one in charge, had a vicious mind. That meant Claw was right, and it wasn't by whim alone that this nightmare creature had been sent against them in their beast forms.

It was more than its appearance that could make anyone freeze in fear; it was also that deafening roar leaving its throat that announced to its prey a horrendous end was near. Toru had never been

prey in his entire life, and he had no intentions of becoming prey now, no matter how frightful this beast was.

As the creature did nothing but swing its heads to and fro, apparently with no aim or purpose, Toru began to stalk around it, searching for an opening, something to sink his fangs and claws in. Any beast, no matter how powerful, had to have a weakness. Slowly, taking advantage of how the creature appeared to be interested in chasing his companions, he approached swiftly and bit one of the hooved legs. Unlike Demophios who had been a nasty surprise with his tough scales, this creature had soft flesh and his fangs encountered no resistance as they sank into it.

With as much viciousness as he could muster, he pulled and took with him a chunk of the creature's flesh. His action didn't go unnoticed. The beast roared again and all of its three heads turned toward him. However, he was already on the run, circling it, making it turn too fast and fall on one side.

"Good one, kitty!" Claw shouted at him.

For a couple of moments, the beast appeared to have a tough time recovering from Toru's bite, but soon, it was back on its feet again, swinging its heads menacingly, just like before.

Emboldened by his earlier success, Toru began running around the beast, to bite it again. Claw and Varg were hard at work drawing its attention to them. He searched for a trail of blood; the creature must have felt that bite quite badly, but to his surprise, only a few droplets of blood could be seen on the sand. Much to his dread, when he looked up, he saw that there was no bleeding wound on the creature's leg where he had bitten it just earlier. The flesh had regrown somehow, and Toru then realized what kind of opponent they were dealing with.

"It heals itself!" he shouted at the others to let them know of his findings.

As soon as he heard Toru's words, Varg understood why that creature had been sent against them, and why they had been forced into their beast forms. He had never seen anything like it, indeed, but he knew what sort of creature it was. As a young pup, he had gotten scared many a time when the elders of the pack were telling the youngest stories of a creature so foul, so horrendous, that it fed on nothing but shapeshifters.

All shapeshifters, no matter their beasts, had the ability to heal themselves fast. And this creature fed on shapeshifters and had perfected that ability to the extreme. Feeding on nothing but shapeshifters, it could become invincible. Seeing how fast the one in front of them had healed after Toru had taken such a large bite from its leg, Varg could only assume that it had fed on many shapeshifters throughout its existence.

"I know what this thing is," he told Claw who was busy, just as he was, trying to tire the creature by forcing it to follow them.

“Do I want to know?” Claw asked.

“No, but you’ll hear about it, anyhow.” Varg stopped for a moment as Toru managed to land another bite and make the creature stumble and fall, giving them a small reprieve. “It’s called a wepir, and it feeds on nothing but shapeshifters.”

“And I was right. I didn’t want to know,” Claw replied. “Don’t worry, puppy. Let’s just make sure that we’re hungrier than it is.”

“Sounds like a great plan.”

Around them, the horde appeared to be having a great time watching their struggle. Varg searched with his eyes for the Grand Chief. Where was Duril? He would have expected to see the healer by Yarag’s side, but during their mock trial, he hadn’t been present, not even for a short while. Varg suspected that he must have been prevented from witnessing their trial and punishment. Could it be that the Grand Chief knew that they told the truth about Duril? Toru’s opinion that the horde wanted to keep Duril for themselves no longer appeared to be a farfetched conclusion.

If that were true, then it also meant that Yarag expected Duril to start remembering once he rested his eyes on them, once friends and lovers, now strangers, for enough time. But had the Grand Chief gone as far as to imprison Duril temporarily just to keep him away?

The time for questions was gone when the creature lunged toward them once more. His memories of those long-forgotten childhood stories were of little importance now.

Except, Varg thought, as something of that mud of reminiscence gave way to a particular event described by one of the elders of having had happened, and not just in someone’s imagination.

“Friends,” he shouted at his companions, “I’m about to do something crazy. Don’t you dare stop me!”

With that, he shifted back into his human. By now, his wolf must have dealt with the poison from the small orcs’ daggers, and he felt strong enough to do what he intended. He rolled on the ground and picked up two curved blades, his trusty sword lost somewhere in that heap of bodies. He began swinging them alternately while he approached the beast cautiously.

“Varg!” Toru shouted at him. “What are you doing?”

It was crazy, it had small chance of success, but only the daring would succeed. He could only hope that the old tale from his childhood told by an elder who had sworn that he had been attacked by such a creature and still lived through it to tell the story, was true.

He waited until the beast lowered its heads and opened its three mouths. Varg only needed one opening. Without hesitating, he jumped high in the air and rolled down a slimy tongue, tumbling down one of the creature’s gorges as if he were on a slide.

Toru watched in disbelief and despair as Varg disappeared inside one of the beast's mouths and got swallowed like a mouse by a giant snake. "Varg!" he shouted and rushed toward the creature, with the intention of slashing open its belly and freeing his friend.

Claw jumped in his path, and they both ended up rolling on the ground. "Kitty, Varg knows what he's doing!" the bearshifter yelled at him while struggling to hold him down.

"Let me go! It swallowed him! I'll lose him, too!"

"Trust your friend," Claw insisted.

Toru now hated the bearshifter for preventing him from doing what he needed to with all his body and soul. He had already lost Duril; he couldn't stand the thought of losing Varg, too, and Claw couldn't understand because he hadn't been with them while fighting evil so many times. He tried to bite the other, but Claw was stronger and kept him down, making him go mad with fury and helplessness.

Duril pushed orcs out of his path, growling and shouting. The sounds of battle were ubiquitous, but he wasn't getting any closer, or so he felt as he waded through the sea of green bodies. Whenever one orc tried to push him back, he hit him with the fist curled around the pommel of his blade, and soon, he was left alone.

The growls of that horrible creature were getting louder, but Duril, being shorter than most of the orc warriors around him, had yet to see it. His entire body was stretched taut, and his desperation pushed him forward.

And then, he finally saw it. Wepir, as Sog called it, rose three heads above the crowd, and it looked like it was struggling to swallow something. Ominous thoughts seized his mind; he could only hope that his friends were still alive. If not, he would never be able to forgive himself. Worse than that, he didn't know if he could live if something happened to Toru, Varg, or Claw.

How could he have been so blind? How could he forget? He pushed himself against the mass of orcs until he reached the enclosure formed by their bodies, only to witness a horrendous sight. Heaps and heaps of green corpses lay everywhere, and he could see Toru and Claw engaged in a battle of their own for reasons he couldn't fathom.

Varg was nowhere to be seen, and Duril's heart sank. Could it be that he was too late, after all? With a growl he didn't recognize as his own, he rushed against the creature, his blade drawn, his mind focused on nothing else but saving Varg who, for all that he knew, must have been swallowed by that nightmare.

He sank his blade into the beast's left flank, drawing blood, but as soon as he pulled it out, the wound began to close under his very eyes.

“Duril!”

That was Toru's voice, the one he knew and loved so much. “Where is Varg? Did this thing swallow him?” he asked, shouting at the top of his lungs.

Both Toru and Claw rushed toward him. “He jumped inside, saying that he'd do something crazy, and we couldn't stop him,” the tigershifter explained. “Duril, do you remember me? Us?”

Duril nodded. “Yes, and I'll spend my life pleading with you to forgive me, but now let's save Varg. What have I done?”

“You discovered yourself,” Claw said briefly.

Toru turned into his human and embraced Duril tightly, but only for a moment. Then he grabbed another blade from the ground. “Let's split open this creature and save our mutt!”

Claw helped with his paws and sharp claws, while he and Toru struggled to carve a way inside the beast. The thing tried to bite them, making their actions difficult, but they dodged swiftly, working together and managing to make the thing topple on one side.

“Not-orc!” Duril heard his name being shouted. “What are you doing?”

That was Winglog, who sat perched on a tall rock, by Yarag's side.

“I'm saving my friends!” Duril yelled back. He had no time for the Grand Chief or anyone else.

“You'll die with them!” Winglog shouted again.

“Then I will!” he replied, his hoarse voice carrying over the ruckus of the crowd.

The orcs had all gone wild the moment they had realized who was there, in the ring, fighting the three-headed creature side by side with the strangers. They were strangers to them, the horde, but to Duril, they were the most important people in the world.

Their struggles seemed, however, destined to fail, each wound they carved into the creature's soft belly filling with flesh quickly as if it hadn't been there at all.

“We need to work faster,” Duril said, prey to more and more despair. How much time had passed since Varg had been swallowed? He didn't dare to ask, but it felt like he had been there, sinking his curved blade into the thing's belly over and over, for hours.

“You have Demophios!” Toru exclaimed as he brushed the back of his hand against his forehead and looked at Duril with desperation that matched his own.

“What?”

“The wise annoying snake,” Toru said and pointed at the talking pendant. “Demophios, how do we kill this beast?”

“The master wolf knows what he’s doing, and he works from the inside. But you need to help him, and you need more hands to take this wepir apart.”

Duril was no longer surprised to hear the pendant talking, and it looked like some astonishing things must have happened to Toru and his other companions while he had heeded the call of the horde.

“But how are we going to get more hands?” Toru asked. “We’re surrounded by enemies.”

Duril felt his desperation growing. Indeed, because of his recklessness, they were now about to lose everything. And he would lose the new life that had begun for himself the moment Toru had come to Whitekeep.

“Sog helps.”

He was startled by the orc who had somehow made his way to them, although Duril had long left him behind. Without another word, Sog pushed his dagger to the hilt into the wepir’s side.

“Chum, what are you doing?” Winglog shouted from above. “You’re dead to the horde if you side with our enemies.”

Sog pulled his head between his shoulders and just continued to use his small dagger to dig into the wepir’s flesh. At least, because of their concentrated efforts, the creature could no longer attack them, as it looked like it used all its energy to heal its wounds.

And all this time, Varg was there, inside, probably having less and less air to breathe, while their attempts to set him free proved useless.

All around them, the crowd was growing delirious with madness. For them, it was a spectacle, something that fed their thirst for suffering and blood. How could he have believed for one moment that he was part of this? He could only blame it on the fury in his blood that had rested quietly until now, on the legacy of his father, but above all, he mostly blamed it on himself.

He gave up on cutting the wepir’s tough skin. He walked to the middle of the ring, to make himself visible. Then he raised his blade and shouted, “Yarag, because of me, you are now king! I saved you when you were at death’s door, so save my friends now!”

The crowd’s noise died down. Yarag stood up from where he sat on the tall rock and looked down at him. Then, with a loud growl, he jumped into the ring.

Chapter Fourteen – What Is Lost Can Be Found Again

He was surrounded by nothing but darkness, something about it reminding him of the time when he had been taken by Demophios with Claw. However, while the snake's trick had let them feel cradled by a false sense of security, there was nothing of the kind in the creature's belly. Varg knew he had to be fast if he wanted to succeed in his quest. The beast's stomach was a lake of burning acid that took its toll on Varg's skin even as it worked to heal itself. He could have shifted, but he knew not to do that since the creature from the old tales much preferred the flesh of shapeshifters, which could only mean that its body was adapted to devour any such treat delivered right to its door quickly.

Therefore, Varg had chosen to act against it as human since therein lay his only chance of winning. He slashed with his sword, carving an opening in the wall of the creature's stomach. He couldn't say he was surprised seeing the wound closing since that was what the beast was best at doing.

That meant he needed to focus his efforts and be faster. With all the strength he could muster, his breathing shallow so as to not inhale the fumes rising from the acid lake, he began moving his arm, cutting and cutting in the same place, going deeper and deeper, the creature's natural ability of healing itself slower than the rhythm of his hits.

The dust rose around Yarag where the Grand Chief had landed. The entire crowd went completely silent, and no orc moved or even dared to breathe, or so it seemed. Duril kept his eyes trained on Yarag, without blinking.

The Grand Chief growled in his face, making the hair of his head stand on end, but he still didn't take one step backward. Instead, he closed his fist harder on the hilt of his curved blade with determination.

"How dare you speak of such things?" Yarag thundered. "I warned you!"

"My friends are in danger because of you. Is it too much of a payment for the Grand Chief of Zukh Kalegh to let them go free in exchange for my saving his life?"

Yarag growled again, showing sharps teeth, his tusks glinting dangerously in the sun. But still, Duril didn't move.

"You'll be dead to us, all of us, Not-orc," the Grand Chief warned him.

"Then I will be dead, but my friends will live," Duril shot back. If that was what Yarag wanted, his life in exchange for his companions, it was a small price to pay, and he would pay it willingly.

"You will be hunted down like prey," Yarag warned again. "Your lying mouth will never speak again."

Duril knew that an admission he had been close to dying was too much for Yarang to make, but he was in no position to press his luck, so he fell quiet and just sustained the hardened stare until he could feel the surface of his eyes drying and cracking in the merciless desert wind.

Yarang growled again, seeing how no reply was given to his words, and went straight for the creature lying on its side. Inside its belly, there was movement, a sign that Varg was struggling to get out like an unnatural unborn kit from a womb. On the other side, Toru, Claw, and Sog were trying to dig in the same place, their arms moving relentlessly, without reprieve.

The Grand Chief pushed them aside, making them scatter around like toys at the whims of an angry child. Then, with another inhuman growl, he raised his arms, curled his fingers, and then descended upon the beast's belly at incredible speed. Duril rushed closer, as did the others.

Yarang was digging inside the creature's body, his strong arms pulling apart the flesh, making it rip, and they all hurried to grab the folds of skin and the meat underneath to help him prevent the wound from closing again.

"Help us," Duril shouted at the crowd, but no one moved.

Just one stepped forward, and Duril recognized Winglog who hurried to them and began helping. The Grand Chief could always give the order so that the others would come about and help, but he didn't seem keen on doing that.

Duril insisted, nonetheless. "Help us! Help us!"

He couldn't offer a solid reason for which those bloodthirsty creatures would help him, an outsider, yet he continued to plead with them. At first, a couple of strong orcs moved away from the crowd and approached cautiously. But, soon, their numbers grew and they all descended on the fallen creature, drawing their curved blades and releasing angry cries.

The wepir began convulsing, its limbs shuddering as blade after blade sank into its tough skin. Yarang did the most damage, his arms as thick as boulders bulging under the strain, the veins along the muscles so taut that they threatened to burst at any moment.

Even as worried as he was about Varg's fate, Duril couldn't help but admire the feat of strength needed for such a task. Yarang was truly the Grand Chief because no other was like him in the entire horde.

The beast then shook off all its attackers like they were nothing but pesky flies, taking them all by surprise. It rose on its hind legs and let out a growl that made everyone, orc and shapeshifter alike, fall silent. Then it stood like that, making strange gurgling sounds, blood oozing from a thousand cuts, until its belly began growing and moving.

"It's Varg!" Duril shouted. "Just one more time!"

But before he could manage to make another dash with his blade toward the creature, its belly burst open, and Varg tumbled down and rolled at his feet, in a puddle of horribly smelling liquid.

The creature gave its dying breath with one last growl and fell on its back, making the orcs gathered around it scatter in all directions. Victorious shouts could be heard from Toru and Claw, and soon Sog and Winglog joined them. Enticed by this new display, the horde began growling in response, expressing its collective joy.

Duril didn't have time to take in the others. He dropped to his knees by Varg's side and despite the foul smell clinging on his clothes and hair, he took him in his arms and shook him. The wolfshifter's eyes were closed, and Duril feared the worst. Could it be that they had taken too long to help him out of that prison of flesh? He let his tears flow freely and closed his eyes for a moment.

"Do I gather that you're not happy to see me, Not-orc?" the familiar voice he knew so well teased him.

He opened his eyes, let out a strangled sob, and squeezed Varg in his arms. "You're alive!"

Varg embraced him, too. "I am, and I believe that it's thanks to you."

They pulled apart only so that they could look at each other.

"I'm so sorry, Varg," he began and choked on too much emotion racking his body.

The wolfshifter rested his hands on Duril's shoulders and squeezed in sympathy. "No need for that. Now we'll all have something to tease you over. We heard that you're a big warrior now."

Duril laughed and cried at the same time. "A fool and nothing but, that's the only thing I am," he retorted. "How can you forgive me so easily?"

"I've made my fair share of mistakes in my life," Varg replied. "And yours is not by far the worst I've ever seen burdening someone, be him beast or human. But you'll have to make up to someone else, much more than to me."

Duril turned, following Varg's eyes. Toru towered over them, and his golden eyes were burning.

The tigershifter knelt in front of him and took him in his arms. "You're my Duril," he said with conviction and held him tightly.

"If you still want me," Duril replied, still choking over his heart growing so fast and large inside his chest.

"How can you even think that?" Toru chided him while still holding him so tightly that they were both in danger of losing their breath. "When I would kill the entire horde for you."

“I’m sure you would,” Duril replied and caressed Toru’s hair gently. “You can do everything. And I must beg you to forgive me for having done what I did.”

“You will have to convince me,” Toru said without letting go. “You will have to promise that you’ll never do that again, leaving me, us, like that.”

“I promise,” Duril said through his tears.

A shadow fell over them, and Duril raised his head to see the Grand Chief towering above. His eyes were filled with barely contained anger. “Take your friends,” he spat, “and leave. You’re not welcome here anymore. And don’t expect mercy if we ever cross paths again.”

With that, he moved away. “These strangers,” he pointed at them, “will leave now. For today and tomorrow, none will follow them. But after that,” Yarag turned again toward them, “hunt them down and bring me their hearts.”

Duril didn’t expect any less from the Grand Chief. He had committed a mortal sin in his eyes by letting the others know that Yarag was still alive only because of him. That kind of transgression was not something the Grand Chief of Zukh Kalegh would ever live down. So, he wiped his tears quickly and helped Varg to his feet. “We must go, my friends. Because of me, we must now flee.”

He had succeeded in averting the horrible fate awaiting his companions at the hands of the horde, but only for a short while. Now, they were fugitives, and he had just added a redoubtable force to their list of enemies, as if they didn’t already have to fight the evil that lurked all around the world as they knew it.

Claw put one heavy hand on his shoulder. “Leave regrets behind, Duril. You have no need for them. And we’re with you, through thick and thin.”

Fresh tears gathered in his eyes, but he didn’t let them fall this time. Those words meant a lot, especially since they came from Claw who was with them by a whim of fate alone. Varg and Toru came to his side. “Let’s put as much distance as we can between us and them,” the wolfshifter said. “And Claw is right. We’re not only with you, we’re a whole. We’re glad to have you back.”

Duril nodded, overwhelmed by so much love and understanding. Toru took him by the shoulders, possessively and growled a small warning as they walked through the throngs of orcs that watched them with bloody eyes, snarling at them and throwing promises of future violence at them as they passed.

The desert was, once more, open in front of them, for as far as the eyes could see. Toru didn’t believe that he would ever come to miss the vastness at their feet, but after that grueling battle against Zukh Kalegh, his chest filled with the hot air and was thankful for it. Duril was by their side again, and everything was all right with the world.

So far, they had been busy running, as fast as their feet could carry them, to get as far as possible from the horde. Even though he didn't want to admit it, the orcs were a fearsome bunch, with their tusks and curved blades. And they were so many! Never before had Toru seen such a large mass of warriors. They had fought against them and killed hundreds of them, but still their force couldn't be ignored.

And now, they were a frightening enemy that could move for days and nights without stopping. That big orc had been clear that they would be considered prey from now on. That didn't bother him so much. What did, however, was that they might want to steal Duril from him again. The Grand Chief of Zukh Kalegh had wanted Duril by his side, that much Toru could tell. But then, who wouldn't?

He held Duril close, deciding not to let him stray away from him ever again. The healer didn't protest one bit, and kept his arm around Toru's waist in turn, looking just as unwilling to let go. Toru knew that Varg would want to hold Duril, too, but it would have to come later, because right now he couldn't allow the healer to get even a little distance away from him.

After their glorious fight and victory, weariness was creeping into his bones, nonetheless. "Demophios," he asked, "can't you make a place with water and a bit of shade again? I'll take a mirage over having to spend another hour without water."

"I suppose you could use the respite after that battle," the snake replied from his safe place, pinned as he was to Duril's shirt.

"Demophios belongs to you, Toru," Duril said, only then probably realizing that the material form of the wise snake had remained in his possession.

But Toru didn't allow him to move his arm to remove the pendant. "Keep him. He tends to be so annoying sometimes."

"I do take offense at that," Demophios said in that haughty irritating tone of his. "And I am your burden as much as you dislike me."

"I don't exactly dislike you. I just don't like you much," Toru replied.

"How did you come to have such a wise companion with you, Toru?" Duril asked. "And if Demophios doesn't mind, I don't mind holding onto him for a while."

"For a while," Demophios agreed. "And as to the story of how we came to be together, you will have to hear it after our brave warriors have gotten a bit of rest."

Like before, in the distance, the mirage of an oasis appeared, and Toru almost wanted to spend the last remnants of strength in his bones and flesh to hurry there. Varg and Claw expressed their agreement with his suggestion.

“We don’t mind a bit of rest indeed,” Varg confirmed. “Thank you, Demophios,” he added gallantly, making Toru snort.

Claw laughed. “It is easy to see who’s the closest to his cub years in our group.”

“What do you mean?” Toru bristled.

Claw ruffled his hair from behind. “We need this, the impetus of youth. Only because of you, kitty, puppy and I went through that ordeal of confronting the orc horde.”

“Indeed,” Varg added. “But it wouldn’t hurt for you learn to a bit of manners toward your elders, kitty,” he teased Toru.

“Demophios is not an elder,” Toru protested. “He’s an ancient snake who got bored of lurking around in the desert, waiting for his death.”

He could tell that Duril was growing increasingly curious, and he had so many things to tell him. Although they had been apart only for a little while, it felt like they had lived entire lives and had so much to say to each other. But, before that, he had other plans. Boring stories about defeating ancient wise creatures would have to wait until he was satisfied, and his heart was once more back in its place and beating with ease.

Duril sighed, making him turn his eyes on him. “My bag is lost,” the healer said mournfully. “The tome with our adventures, and the pearl from Shroudharbor, all gone.”

“Did the orcs destroy it?” Varg asked.

“No. But I left it behind and everything that was in it because I could only think of being reunited with you.”

“Who’s up for going back and taking it back from those bloodthirsty orcs?” Claw asked and laughed.

“Don’t count on me,” Varg replied in kind. “We’ll find another tome for you to write in, Duril. As for the pearl, I believe that our bond with this bag of fleas is growing stronger no matter what. What could it do, anyway?”

Toru knew that Varg was trying to make Duril feel less disappointed in losing his bag, so he felt the need to add his bit. “If you still had some cabbage in there, it’s no loss.”

All his companions laughed at the same time. Even Demophios joined in.

“Don’t worry, healer,” the snake said. “Things that are lost can be found again.”

Toru perked up his ears. “What is it you’re not telling, snake?”

“You’ll see,” Demophios said enigmatically.

Another sigh from Duril followed. “I left something more important behind, or better said, someone.”

“Who?” Toru asked, much intrigued by that.

“Sog, that orc with a single tusk.”

“That vicious beast?” Toru raised his voice in disbelief.

The coolness of the oasis conjured by Demophios was already enchanting them with its sweetness and promise of rest.

“He’s just a poor soul,” Duril said. “And I’m afraid,” he choked for a moment, his eyes wet, “that Yarag won’t show him any mercy like he showed us.”

“Don’t cry over him,” Toru said and pulled him close, not knowing what to do.

“How could I not? Because of me, he got himself into this. He helped us first, and Winglog told him what fate awaited him.” Duril turned his head to look over his shoulder and out into the shifting sands. “Demophios, in your wisdom, what do you believe? Was Sog punished by his kin for helping me?”

To everyone’s surprise, the wise snake let out a small laugh. “The small orc is not as helpless as you believe him to be, healer. He’s more resourceful than many of his horde. If only they saw him for what he truly is.”

“He’s an ugly thing with only one tusk,” Toru said petulantly. Then he swallowed his words when he realized that Duril must have bonded over his own missing limb with that foul vicious creature who wanted to turn his leg into stew.

“And also the one who made Duril his amazing blade,” Demophios pointed out.

In all truth, Toru was curious about the weapon that Duril seemed to handle with ease like he had been born for doing so. That part of the healer, the orc who could fight and run his blade through enemies like a true warrior, was unknown to him yet. But he planned on getting to know it through and through, with no delay.

Because if Duril wanted to be a great warrior and that was his destiny, Toru would still love him with all his heart.

Varg was thankful for having Demophios with them, and he was just half-joking when telling Toru that he should behave with a bit of deference toward the wise snake. So far, he had helped them in

many dire situations and despite their rocky beginnings, he had proven a valuable ally, even though he couldn't handle a sword and didn't even have a real body anymore.

Wisdom was a precious commodity, and Varg was grateful for it in all its forms. He stole a look at Claw, who was resting with his back against a large tree, his eyes closed. Even if he was completely still, Varg could tell that the bearshifter wasn't sleeping. Since he wanted to allow Duril and Toru some time by themselves so that they could get reacquainted after the intervening adventures, it was a good opportunity to learn of Claw's take on everything that had happened so far.

He stood and walked over to where the bearshifter was resting and took a place next to him.

"Leaving the two lovebirds alone?" Claw asked.

"Yes," Varg didn't deny it. "There will be a time for me to get together with them, but Toru's too young to be patient. Or willing to share when the needs of his heart are too great."

Claw chuckled. "That's one truth we can't deny."

"So, we fought against the mad horde of Zukh Kalegh," Varg started, wanting to bring the bearshifter around to willingness to share his insight.

"A mission for people out of their right minds, but we pulled through," Claw confirmed.

"What do you think? Will the orcs hunt us down by nightfall tomorrow?"

"Duril drove a spear of the most painful kind through the Grand Chief's heart," Claw explained.

"What do you think that was all about? The Grand Chief must have known we were telling the truth. He knew their Not-orc was our Duril."

"No doubt about it. Duril saved Yarag's life, from the little we could gather from our gentle healer."

"And fought side by side with him," Varg added.

Toru had been particularly possessive of Duril ever since they had walked away from the horde, so they had had little chance of learning what transpired there. But Varg wanted to have an idea about their newly acquired enemy, sooner rather than later, so chatting with Claw seemed like the right course of action.

"Each tribe has its legends," Claw explained. "I cannot tell you if Duril is part of one or creates a new one as we speak. Imagine that, puppy. Duril walked in there, claiming to be an orc and a healer. What could have those orcs have thought about him?"

“According to him, that he was some spy. But why would such a thing be hard to believe? I mean, Duril is clearly only half, hence the name they gave him, Not-orc. And despite what the Grand Chief must have thought of him, I doubt many of those bloodthirsty tribesmen would have seen him as their equal. As you recall, the guards we killed when we got close to Zukh Kalegh had no lost love for him.”

“True,” Claw confirmed. “But didn’t the Grand Chief strike you as being cleverer than just another orc?”

Varg could only agree. “He saw us as a threat and decided to eliminate us, and I cannot truly blame him. It is possible that he believed us capable of becoming a cause for tearing through the edifice he had built for the horde by letting us go without a trial and throwing us in that ring for what appeared, at first glance, to be nothing but mere entertainment.”

“See, puppy? You don’t really need to ask me about these things,” Claw teased him.

“I do,” Varg replied firmly. “Two heads are better than one, and yours is bigger and wiser than mine.”

“I appreciate your trust, then,” Claw said courteously. “Duril did what no other orcs could do for Yarag, even if they wanted. He turned him back from death’s door, and that’s an unforgivable thing.”

“Unforgivable? What do you mean?” That appeared to be such a strange thing to say, Varg thought.

“Orcs are born in blood and forged in battle. They meet their fate, heads up, without fear. Death doesn’t scare them. When the old lady with the scythe comes knocking, they’re ready for it. Hundreds and hundreds met their end today when they went against us. Did you read fear in anyone’s eyes as you fought?”

“No, I cannot say that I did. And that made them all the scarier,” Varg admitted. “To see their comrades fall by the dozens and still march on, that’s something you must admire, as twisted as it is. No other species can take pride in such determination in the face of death.”

“So,” Claw said, “Duril gave the Grand Chief a dangerous gift. A different side of things. Orcs don’t have healers. Why do you think that is?”

“The moment a warrior can no longer fight, he’s useless. Is that what you’re trying to tell me?”

“Yes. But a healer changes things. They treat small orcs like Sog like slaves, and yet, is Sog nothing but a mindless creature to be treated like that?”

“The little vicious thing gave Toru quite the fright when he bit his leg,” Varg said and laughed.

“Just don’t let kitty hear you laughing about it,” Claw warned him but did so playfully, like between comrades.

“I wouldn’t dare. He’ll stare at me with those angry eyes until he makes my teeth tingle and want to munch his ears. But what do you mean about Sog? Demophios told us that he was the one to make Duril his blade. I haven’t had the time to examine it closely, but it appears to be the result of a feat of craftsmanship.”

“And that is exactly what I mean,” Claw said. “In that tribe, Sog is the lowest of the low, and yet he hangs around the Grand Chief, preparing his meals. Yarag must have seen him as something more than just chum, as they name those that don’t belong with the warriors. And he’s a master blacksmith, something you would think orcs would appreciate above all.”

“I’m afraid it’s not our place to question the horde’s ways,” Varg said. “Duril worries for the friend he left behind. And I worry that his fate wasn’t kind.”

“That appears to be true,” Claw confirmed. “He chose it for himself, nonetheless. And that takes courage. If he had been nothing but chum, would he have made such a daring decision, sealing his own fate?”

“He must have valued Duril’s friendship more.”

“And that is one of the many powers of our healer friend.”

Varg remained silent for a while. “Do you believe whatever happened there changed Duril?”

“I’m certain of it,” Claw replied. “How couldn’t it have? The call of blood is not something anyone can escape. It is a law of nature, and one of the heart, as well.”

“I couldn’t agree more with you, my friend,” Varg said in kind. “So, should we act surprised the next time Duril jumps into the thick of battle with his curved blade poised to cut through enemies of all kinds, or should we treat it like that’s the real him?”

Claw let out another small laugh. “Part of him belongs to his sire, even though he has never met him. And that part of him is a great warrior, not a simple orc.”

“I must admit that the idea is not as unappealing as I would have thought it to be. Duril has always pulled his own weight, but now we have another allied blade. And I’m grateful,” he added as he placed a hand on Claw’s shoulder, “for having a strong bear with us, too.”

Claw opened his eyes and looked at him. Varg couldn’t help but notice how handsome the bearshifter was. Something in the other’s eyes told him that his appreciation was mirrored and returned in kind.

Duril didn't protest for a moment as Toru dragged him to a place that was hidden from the others' eyes. There was no point in asking what he wanted because he was being guided by the same desire.

The tigershifter approached him with shyness, in spite of the fact he had been so determined to get him there, in the thick and lush greenery. Duril wrapped his arm around Toru's shoulders and held him close. Gently, he made him kneel on the ground and pulled him in for a kiss. Varg had gone to talk to Claw and most probably wouldn't notice that they had gotten away for a while.

"Toru," he said tenderly, "will you ever be ready to forgive me?"

"I already did," the tigershifter replied and teased his bottom lip, easing them back into a kiss as impatient as their hearts. "Wait," he said. "Let's put Demophios away, as I don't think he wants to see us kissing."

"I've seen many things in my long life, young tiger," the wise snake replied promptly, as soon as his name was mentioned. "Nothing is new for me."

"I don't want an old geezer to peep on us," Toru said with conviction, taking Duril's shirt off, folding it and placing it behind a tree. "There, now we won't be interrupted by that annoying snake."

Duril laughed softly and caressed Toru's cheek as he let himself be lowered to his back. Their kisses were so familiar, yet they felt so new and exciting. How could he have been so blind and a fool to forget how he felt in Toru's arms? He didn't need a horde to feel powerful. It was enough for this young tigershifter to look at him with his eyes full of love to make Duril know that he was ready to conquer the world and turn it on its head if need be. With Toru and Varg by his side, everything was possible.

He continued to murmur small pleading words, asking for forgiveness, and Toru shut him up each time with his impatient lips. It was the sweetest way to be made to forget all of the things he had done lately, although Duril wanted it to be just a small reprieve for now. He would remember everything for as long as he lived, and he would never allow it to happen again.

Even if a part of him felt like it was left behind. It wasn't the most important part of him. It just was. And he had made his choice long before he had even known there was a horde and a call of blood that had the power of making him aware that he belonged somewhere, and that there was home in the ancient sense of the word, somewhere on the face of the earth.

Toru's kisses grew more urgent and demanding, and Duril responded to them in kind. Their breaths mingled, becoming one. This was love, and this was home, as he had discovered it. "I will never leave your side, ever again," he promised as Toru took his body slowly, helping them settle into the same rhythm that lovers from before time had always known.

“Never,” Toru whispered. “Always and forever, mine.”

“Yours,” Duril confirmed. “Yours till the end of time, Toru.”

The joining of their bodies only confirmed what they both knew. That they were in love, and that they would always be lovers and share the deepest bond ever known. Duril felt at home, the regret lingering in his heart slowly fading away.

Chapter Fifteen – Past, Present, and Future

Toru enjoyed the feeling of lying in the grass, with Duril by his side. It was easy to forget about the scorching desert as they lay there, under the tall trees with branches swinging gently in the breeze. He had no idea how Demophios managed to do all that, but he wasn't keen on finding out since the snake had a tendency to speak in weird turns of phrases just like the old witch Agatha.

However, someone was more curious than him.

“How can Demophios conjure places as wonderful as this?” Duril asked. “Would you mind if I asked him, Toru?”

He let out an exaggerated sigh but then he smiled and reached for the silver pendant. Secretly, he was proud that he could present such an interesting find and ally to Duril, who was a scholar in his own right and always liked reading books and discovering new things. Toru didn't know how to read and didn't care to learn. His fangs and claws were enough as weapons. Maybe his mind wasn't the sharpest, but he didn't mind that, either, although he had felt a bit out of place when Varg and Duril had learned about his not knowing the letters. And he had beaten Demophios fair and square, hadn't he? And he had used his own mind for that.

“Here. He'll make your head this big with his strange words,” Toru said, making a large circle in the air after he placed the pendant inside Duril's open palm.

The healer smiled and looked at the pendant with consideration. “Demophios,” he called gently, “are you awake?”

Toru smirked. So Duril had to ask the same questions, just like him, and he'd probably be just as annoyed by the snake's haughty tone.

“I am always awake, master healer,” Demophios said with deference.

Wait a minute. That wasn't how the snake talked to him, Toru thought and pouted. “Why am I not a master tiger, too? You call Varg and Claw masters...”

“Because you are yet to become a master tiger,” Demophios replied promptly. “They have reached their mastery.”

“I doubt I deserve that title,” Duril intervened. “I am but a mere healer.”

“A mere healer who healed the horde of Zukh Kalegh,” Demophios pointed out.

“Just their Grand Chief,” Duril insisted.

“Yes. You are correct. Sometimes, the past, present, and future all come to me together,” Demophios said.

Toru perked up his ears. “Will Duril save the entire horde? But they want to kill us and turn us into stew.”

“Orcs don’t eat shapeshifters. Not usually anyway,” Demophios said, obviously ignoring his question. “Bad blood runs free and is forgotten, but good blood flows forever.”

“I told you he speaks all weirdly just like Agatha,” Toru told Duril. “See if you can find anything out from him. I’ll eat my tail if you can make him string one sentence together that makes any sense.”

“I won’t question the wisdom of Demophios’ words,” Duril said politely. “And I will struggle just as you do to find the sense in them. It is, after all, our solemn duty to discover it.”

“A tongue as sweet as your mind is sharp.” Demophios seemed to lack no compliments when it came to other people except him. “Young tiger,” the snake talked to him, “you will find that the road, as perilous as it is, will bring you a lot of joy and satisfaction. And among your friends, you have the most room to grow, and that will be part of your adventure.”

Toru said nothing right away. Was Demophios trying to make fun of him, somehow, with those words? But no, he sounded genuine. “And I’ll be a master tiger then?”

“A long way from here, and stretching into the future, yes,” Demophios confirmed. “And Duril will also learn of new and wonderful ways to heal wounds and make souls whole.”

“Toru has yet to tell me the astonishing tale of how he met you,” Duril intervened.

“Ah, you see, he killed me so that I could live forever,” the snake replied.

That earned Toru another look of complete admiration from Duril. He puffed out his chest and smiled, beginning to purr.

The slight shift between them would be difficult to notice for anyone but themselves.

“Puppy, you have two wonderful friends,” Claw said.

“And who’s to say that I don’t need a third?” Varg asked, now more daring since he had seen the sharp glint of desire in the bearshifter’s eyes.

Claw laughed and looked away for a moment. “I’ve seen that kitty. He’s nothing if not possessive. Seeing how he cares not for material belongings, I’d say that the people he loves are all the more important to him.”

“So,” Varg teased, “are you afraid of the kitty’s claws?” He knew what Claw was hinting at and couldn’t say otherwise. If anything ever happened, it would only be with the complete accord of all three of them.

“Afraid? Maybe a little,” Claw joked. “He is quite fierce, our hero. I have a confession to make, puppy. As we fought against the horde, with no hope of prevailing, I realized one thing.”

“What thing?” Varg asked.

“That I was starting to hope, to believe, that we could win.”

“You cannot tell me that it’s the first time you were thinking such a thing. After all, you traveled the labyrinth under the house of merchants for hundreds of years. If that’s not resilience, I don’t know what it is.”

“You’re showering me in compliments today. Truly, you don’t mind presenting me with a temptation of the sweetest kind.”

“By simply telling things as they are?” Varg didn’t mind the to and fro at all. He might have felt challenged before by the bearshifter’s superior strength and wisdom, but not anymore.

“By looking at me with those eyes. I can tell you’re up to no good.”

They both laughed, and Varg punched Claw playfully in the shoulder. “Here we are, laughing and joking like there won’t be an entire horde on our tails by tomorrow night.” It was so strange to think of that as a reality when they sat there, enjoying the sweet air of the oasis and tasting its fruits. It could all be a mirage, but one that filled their bellies and slaked their thirst. That was the sort of miracle Varg didn’t mind getting any day.

“We deserve it, I’d say,” Claw commented. “And, in all honesty, I believe that the Grand Chief might have acted like that out of jealousy.”

“You might want to keep that to yourself when Toru’s around. He could easily start thinking that the Grand Chief would like Duril as a lover.”

“Now that would be a true challenge for our kitty,” Claw agreed. “No, you know what I mean. The Grand Chief found an ally in Duril, he’s one of a kind. Why else would he have taken him to the arena to protect his title? He could have picked that scary looking orc, armed to the teeth. Why didn’t he?”

“We’ve yet to be told all the details of that incredible battle,” Varg said. “I wasn’t expecting Duril to turn into a warrior overnight, but it looks like the Great Barren is nothing short of a place created for spawning miracles of all sorts.”

“An orc, a healer, and a warrior. All in one.” Claw fell into a meditative state for a few moments. “But you are right about the Great Barren. As a cub, I only heard the tales of those having traveled across the desert. And believe it or not, I wanted to be one of those travelers.”

“An adventurous bear,” Varg said with a smile. “Not one only for the sweet waters and delicious fish of The Quiet Woods, were you?”

Claw sighed. “Indeed. And now I yearn for them, for the place I used to call home.”

“Things must have changed even there,” Varg said. “The world is a new place every day, let alone every century or more.”

Claw nodded. And then, he grabbed Varg by the shoulders and pulled him close. “I’ll treat you to the best my forest home can give once we reach there.”

That was a not so well-veiled reminder that they would have to part ways eventually. Maybe Claw was smarter than him in that respect. Why let their mutual attraction take its course when their time together would be cut short eventually?

For the moment, they would be friends, the best kind, and they would travel this desert side by side, an entire orc horde on their tails or not.

Duril was simply astonished by the tale of how Toru had defeated the powerful snake. Since the tiger seemed taken with playing tag with some butterflies around when he didn’t sit down, once in a while, to kiss him on the cheek, and then stand again, Demophios was the only one to recount those astonishing happenings.

“I would have written this story down, too, in that big tome Elidias gave me,” Duril said mournfully. “But I guess I will have to find another. Are there other cities with libraries where I could get one? I mean, somewhere relatively close to here.”

“Do not worry,” Demophios replied. “Your tome will find its way back to you.”

“But how? I don’t expect Yarag to keep it. As soon as they find my belongings, they will surely finish what Sog started when he threw them all in the fire.”

“You spent little time with your kin,” Demophios said. “Not all orcs are the same, as you must have seen, without a doubt, during your time with them.”

“True,” he admitted. “I admire the Grand Chief. For all his brutality, I believe the future of the horde should stay with him. He is the most powerful of all.”

“And the wisest. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“He didn’t order my execution on the grounds of being a spy, so I’m thankful for it. Also, he must have seen more in me than just a stranger happening by.”

“And Winglog, what did you think of him?” Demophios asked.

Duril had to admit that Demophios’ manner of asking him questions to make him see the truth was stimulating. It made him see things in a different perspective and understand them down to a deeper level. “He helped me free Varg when he could have just stayed aside.”

“And do you believe that this newly found brother and friend of yours would raise his blade to kill you?”

“If it’s for the good of the horde, I believe he would,” Duril offered his most honest belief on the matter.

“Indeed. Wise answer. What about Sog?”

Duril blinked and looked away. He didn’t want Toru to see him crying over Sog. After all, no one but him in all their group had spent enough time with the orc to see his good parts. For Toru, he was just a vicious creature who liked to bite people’s legs and taste them for making stew. “He used to make one hell of a stew,” he said quietly.

“A good cook. That’s great praise for a bunch used to eating dirt for breakfast, lunch, and dinner,” Demophios pointed out.

“And an excellent blacksmith,” Duril remembered. “It was so easy for him to whisper magic into the blade he gave me.”

“Not magic, but exceptional skill,” Demophios pointed out.

Duril nodded. “I’ll miss him. I wish we didn’t leave him behind. I wish I had a choice.”

“Save your tears, Duril,” Demophios said in a gentle voice. “As much as he saw a friend in you, and you in him, Sog is still an orc. Not one to understand tears,” he added enigmatically.

Toru paid little attention to the conversation between Duril and Demophios since, as expected, the snake was talking in tongues, and Duril was doing his best to understand what the snake was saying. After running around for a bit to let out some of the happy energy in his body, curious about the healer’s blade, he took it from the grass and looked at it. He had never been one to get schooled in the art of wielding a sword, but as he had gone against the horde, he had taken hold of more than just one blade.

“I saw you with this,” he said. “You know what to do with it. How come you learned so fast?”

Duril shrugged and blinked in apology. “Everything that happened to me over the course of the last days is a mystery to me.”

“Not so great a mystery,” Demophios intervened. “Your sire, master healer, was a great warrior.”

“So Duril is like a noble among the orcs?” Toru asked.

“The horde works in a different way than societies built by humans,” Demophios explained patiently. “They do not have nobles.”

“But what do they have?” Toru insisted.

“They have their elites of warriors. Duril’s father was one of them.”

“And what happened to him?” Toru asked and then regretted the question. Duril’s father couldn’t even have known that he had had a son that was half-orc, half-human. And Duril must have known as much.

“That would be hard to say. Even an immortal wise snake can only see so much,” Demophios replied.

“I don’t mind not having known him at all,” Duril intervened. “I knew what my mother used to do for a living. When I grew up enough to understand, of course. But maybe I don’t mind the legacy he left me if his blood is what makes me yield a blade with so much ease. I would only use it to defend myself and my friends, though.”

“Quite noble of you, Not-orc,” Demophios said in a playful voice. “The Grand Chief must still be scratching that big melon of his trying to understand what kind of orc you are.”

“The kind who’s not an orc,” Toru pointed out. “And don’t call him Not-orc. His name is Duril.”

“I am sure I will be teased frequently and not only by Demophios,” Duril said. “After all, to my shame, I abandoned all of you so that I could run toward something I am yet to understand.”

The call of blood, Claw called it. Toru knew that he had felt the call of the road before and that he had yielded to it, but a call of kin, that was something he hoped he would never live to experience.

“We are all who we are,” Demophios began as if he could read his thoughts. “Blood never turns into water, nor does it flow like rivers. It is a home, solid like a rock.”

“And he begins speaking all strangely again,” Toru said and shook his head. “I’ll never feel the call of blood,” he decided. “I don’t care about tigers who forget about other tigers. Why should I?” He scooted closer to Duril and wrapped his arm around his. “You’ll never leave me for those orcs again, right, Duril? Or anyone else?”

“Now that he has found his true roots, he will never leave your side again,” Demophios confirmed before Duril had a chance to tell him all that he needed to know.

Duril turned his head and kissed him gently. “I won’t,” he said simply.

Toru smiled and pressed his head against the other. “If you ever do that, I’ll just come get you and beat another horde.”

Even Demophios laughed at that. They could consider it a joke all they wanted. It was his determination to do everything in his power and even more than that to ensure that Duril would always be with him.

Claw took Toru to the side to show him the best methods of catching an enemy unawares and breaking his bones, so Varg was thankful for being allowed to talk to Duril by himself. Now that the tiger had had his time to enjoy the healer’s company and get all the assurance he needed that Duril would never leave again, it was his turn.

“So, are you ready to tell me the whole story?” he asked with a smile as he sat next to Duril on the grass. “About how you became the most fearsome warrior of Zukh Kalegh?”

Duril laughed and looked down. “You are such great friends, all of you. I was expecting at least Toru to be furious at me. And maybe you to be disappointed in me, and want to bite my ears,” he added and looked away.

Varg moved near. “I could do that if you’re yearning for it so much,” he said in a teasing voice. Playfully, he caught Duril’s ear between his lips and pretended to bite it. A small shudder running through the other let him know all he wanted. Their time apart had been, indeed, too long, as short as it would have seemed to anyone else.

“Let’s take a small walk around. Demophios created such a beautiful place for us. I’d like to see more of it,” Duril said and stood.

Varg accepted the offered hand and pushed himself up. Duril had his modesty, and while Toru would probably like to join in, there was also the matter of having a fourth with them, and the healer, in his delicate manner of thinking about and treating everyone, didn’t want to make Claw feel excluded.

“I’ve never experienced such a feeling before. I mean, I wished with all my heart to follow Toru in his quest, and I left the only place I had ever known on the face of the earth for that, but all that I did with both my heart and mind,” Duril began.

Varg just nodded and made a small sign for the other to continue. It was not the easiest conversation for Duril, but Varg could be an excellent listener.

“I woke up in the middle of the night, and my feet took me out of the oasis, away from you,” Duril said in a deep voice. The emotions in there were still a bit raw. It was easy to forget that everything had happened in a matter of days. And it was natural for Duril to feel the aftermath still, of what he had come to discover about himself. “It was such a powerful call that I couldn’t resist it, not for one moment.”

“And did you discover the horde? On your own?”

“I was probably heading in that direction anyway, but it was actually Winglog and Sog who found me. Or better said, they took me as their prisoner. All the while, I had the same feeling that I was walking in the right direction even though I was tied up and hauled around.”

“Quite strange that they didn’t kill you on the spot. But I suppose that’s your magic,” Varg said with a smile.

“I rather think that fate was on my side. Winglog and Sog were quite intrigued by my appearance, hence the decision of taking me to the Grand Chief. Although I’d say that Winglog is not one to draw his blade quickly. He is smarter than most orcs, I believe.”

“And Sog? Didn’t he want to make stew out of you? He seems to have his mind set on certain culinary delights.”

Duril laughed and discreetly wiped away a small tear from the corner of his eye. “That’s true. But there’s more to him than just his ability to make good stew. The Grand Chief questioned me and decided to give me a chance to stay with the horde. But I did notice right away that he was sick and found out from Sog that some clan leaders had made an attempt on his life by putting poisonous snakes in his tent.”

“A quest fit for a healer,” Varg commented.

“Yes, although I have to admit that I wasn’t expecting at that point for it to be necessary for me to draw a blade to see to its end. Or that my memories would start to fade. I wasn’t even aware, not too much at least, of them sliding through my fingers like sand. It was like all of you and my life before belonged to a different history, one from a long time ago.”

Varg placed a warm hand on Duril’s shoulder and squeezed gently. “We had our fair share of adventures on our way to you if that helps.”

“Demophios told me about the astonishing battle between him and Toru. Our friend is more than just claws and fangs, isn’t he?”

Varg nodded. “And there’s good reason for him to puff out his chest and brag about it. I don’t hold it against him. Claw and I were practically helpless, trapped as we were by Demophios. And he saved us.”

“And you saved me from forgetting you. It looks like we are meant to be together.” Duril paused briefly, and then continued his story. “I had to fool Sog into helping me concoct a remedy for Yarag, but in the end, much to my relief, the special stew we made together for the Grand Chief achieved its aim. And then, I must admit that one of the most incredible things happened to me. I was practically enlisted to fight a battle for the title of Grand Chief of the horde.”

“What did you think then?”

“Not much. I was turning into something else if you can believe such a thing.”

“I surely can. The call of blood was loud in your ears.”

“Indeed,” Duril agreed. “I found myself in an arena of sorts, surrounded by the clan leaders who wanted to take Yarag’s place. Just imagine that, Varg, me, a healer from Whitekeep, with only one good arm, set against a bunch of powerful orcs with murder on their minds.”

“I am a bit confused about this part,” Varg said. “Did you already have that beautiful blade of yours?”

Duril shook his head. “No. I was given to Sog, to be his servant. And chum of the horde are not allowed too many weapons, let alone a curved blade. Those are reserved only for the elite warriors of the horde. That was when Winglog proved his loyalty toward the Grand Chief once more, and, in a way, his friendship of sorts toward me. I was right there, unarmed but ready for battle, and Winglog threw his blade at me. I caught it, and it felt like it belonged to me in a way that’s difficult to explain. I needed that extension of my arm, a reason for my existence if I could call it so.”

Varg nodded and offered Duril a look of admiration that made the healer blush a little and look away.

“And I fought,” Duril said, his voice vibrating with emotion. “I gave that fight my all, and I’m afraid a part of me was lost there.”

“You gained something in turn,” Varg hurried to assuage Duril’s worries. “You found a part of yourself you didn’t know to be inside you. It’s not a loss, my friend.”

“I want to believe so. But I did my fair share of killing, and I thought that I was part orc only slightly in appearance and nothing else. It was such a surprise to realize – later, not then – that I could be a bloodthirsty orc, too.”

“You fought for the good of your tribe. As much as I want to dislike Yarag for putting us through the ordeal of having to fight the horde and that wepir, I have to admit that he gave us a fighting chance and that says something important about his character.”

“I think so, yes. And he did help us when I asked it of him, although now he hates me, and because of me, you as well.”

“Do not worry so much. We’ll make sure to put as much distance between them and us as possible, and it will be quite the day that a healer, a tiger, a wolf, and a bear, get caught by a bunch of orcs, right?”

“I admire your confidence and am thankful for it,” Duril said. They stopped by the edge of a small pool. Duril took Varg’s hand and they stood by its side and then knelt one in front of the other. “And now I need to ask you to forgive me once more.”

“There’s no need for that,” Varg protested gently and caressed Duril’s ear, running the tips of his fingers around its contours.

“Really?” Duril said and snickered like a mischievous child. “Not even if it means that I do this?” He leaned in and placed a small kiss on Varg’s lips.

“Ah, this is a language that I understand quite well. You should have started with it.” Varg didn’t hesitate as he took Duril’s mouth slowly. “Are you sure Toru wasn’t a bit too vigorous when you apologized to him earlier?” He hoped not, but it was his duty to ensure the wellbeing of his friends at all times.

“I am orc by half,” Duril said with a smile. “We have a reputation for being hardy creatures.”

Varg embraced him and pulled him close into his arms. “I would never insult the reputation of a half-orc.”

From there on out, no other words were needed between them. Their bodies fit so well together, and Varg felt his desire and love were finding their vessel as usual with the other and he poured them inside him. The change spoken about was evident not only in Duril’s amazing feats of bravery with the horde of Zukh Kalegh. It was also more than apparent in the steady moves of his body, in the firmness of his grip, and Varg enjoyed this part of his lover even more than before.

Gentle Duril could be a little fierce, too, he thought, as the small tusks grazed his jawline teasingly. Laughing, he pulled Duril on top of him and helped him find his rhythm. They were all whole again, and Toru must have felt the same thing, only earlier.

Duril rested against Varg’s chest, breathing hard at the end of it all. “I promised Toru, so I will promise you the same thing, Varg. I will never again leave your side like I did. I will never forgive myself completely for what I put you through during these few days.”

Varg caressed his head slowly, running his fingers through the mop of brown hair. “Well, if you ever pull another trick like that on us, at least we’ll be prepared. You know, now that we fought an entire horde for you, it feels like other challenges will only pale in comparison.”

Duril chuckled. “Toru told me that he would fight another horde any time. I believe that you two are very much alike.”

“We wouldn’t be in love with the same orc warrior otherwise,” Varg teased him.

“I’m not an orc,” Duril protested but without force. “And I’d rather remain a healer and friend in your eyes.”

“And have us miss out on the glory that is Not-orc swinging that awesome blade? No, I think not. Now, whenever we have to fight beasts of all kinds, rest assured, we’re counting on your blade and warrior skills.”

“Who knows if I still have them, now that I’m away from the horde?” Duril expressed his doubt.

“Oh, I’m sure you do. I can barely wait.”

“I don’t,” Duril riposted. “Frankly, I like this reprieve offered by Demophios. And spending some time here, with you all.”

“That’s true.” Varg placed a small kiss on the crown of Duril’s head.

He looked through the trees, the green canvas broken here and there by the rays of the powerful sun above. For a few moments, the expanse of azure remained unmarred, but then, a glint appeared and blinked, and then another.

“Duril, are my eyes playing tricks on me or is there something strange happening to the sky?” he asked.

Toru was busy trying to topple Claw over, and the bear seemed to be made of nothing but pure granite. Putting all his strength behind it, he clasped his hands together, his arms around the big bear and then managed to lift him off the ground. Then, with another push of all his muscles, he threw Claw over his head, making him roll through the grass laughing.

“I beat you,” Toru shouted victoriously and jumped on Claw’s chest to straddle him and assert his dominance.

“Indeed you did, kitty,” Claw said and just as effortlessly as before, he grabbed Toru by the waist and set him aside.

“Ah, that’s not fair,” Toru complained. “Did you just let me win?”

“No, not by far,” Claw denied. “Do you think anyone could so easily lift me off the ground like you just did?”

“Hmm,” Toru appeared to consider the question. “I’m sure Varg can, too.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it.” Claw smiled. “You might be stronger than puppy.”

Toru puffed out his chest. "I might be," he agreed.

Claw tipped his head back and laughed, but then his laughter began to die down.

"What is it?" Toru asked.

"The bad omen is returning," Claw said in a low voice. He pointed at the sky above, and Toru followed his extended arm.

At first, he saw nothing, but then small slivers of silver light flashed and disappeared. "Are those shooting stars?" he asked. "In broad daylight?"

Claw nodded. "It looks like it. Maybe our time to dally and fool around is up already."

Toru was about to add something to that, when his ears perked up upon catching something. To the far left where the oasis ended and the desert began, there was movement. He turned into his tiger and, without hesitation, rushed there.

Duril and Varg hurried to their friends upon hearing shouts coming from their direction. Within less than a minute, they were with them.

Duril couldn't believe his eyes. Toru in his tiger shape was pulling furiously at something, something that was held with all his might by no other than someone who he had thought already dead. Sog was baring his only tusk and pulling back.

That was his bag. Duril hurried to the fighting couple. "It's all right, it's all right!" he shouted. "You can let him be, Toru!"

Chapter Sixteen – The More, the Merrier

Both Toru and Sog seemed to be completely deaf to his pleas for them to let go of one another, and they just continued to growl and pull at the leather bag. Duril sprinted toward them and took hold of the bag as well. The two adversaries must have been so surprised by the sudden jerk from a different direction that they let go of the bag at the same time. Duril stumbled backward and rolled on his back under the force of his own pull.

Varg laughed and helped him to his feet. Toru lunged toward him, shifting into his human form. He immediately took Duril in his arms, pressing the bag between them. The tigershifter looked over his shoulder at the intruder. “Get out of here, you filthy disgusting creature!”

Duril pushed Toru gently away. Sog was holding his hands to his chest, turned inward, as he did when he felt ashamed or scared, as Duril knew by now.

“Toru, please, don’t call him that. He is my friend,” he said.

The young tiger didn’t appear so easy to convince. He stubbornly placed himself between Duril and Sog, trying to stop him from moving toward the unexpected guest. “Don’t get any closer to him, Duril. He just wants to eat you.”

“He doesn’t,” Duril protested and began laughing.

Sog’s ears were twitching, and something like a smile was curling his lips. His eyes were wide, and he appeared to be much pleased with being called a friend. The fact that Toru appeared so adamant in his efforts to keep Duril away didn’t bother him, by the looks of things. Still, he didn’t dare to move from his place, and his eyes flicked to Varg and Claw time and again, as he was probably impressed by the size and power of the other two shapeshifters.

“Toru, believe me. Sog may like his stew a lot, but he values friendship more. Isn’t that so, Sog?” Duril called to the orc.

Toru reluctantly allowed him to walk toward Sog. Duril took one of Sog’s hands and squeezed it tightly. “Why are you here, Sog? And why did Yarag let you come?”

Sog pulled his hand away shyly and brought it to his chest again, like before. But this time, Duril wanted none of that. He took Sog’s hand once more. “It’s all right. I’m glad to see you’re still alive.”

Demophios had told him something about orcs not understanding tears. But could they understand hugs? Duril was willing to risk that, so he let go of Sog’s hand only so he could pull him into a hug.

He didn't dally and let Sog go after a short while. However, he still kept his hand on the orc's shoulder and looked him in the eyes. "So, what do you have to say for yourself?" he asked in a playful tone.

His friends gathered around, and Sog hunched his shoulders, his ears flat against his head, his eyes once again filled with fear. Duril didn't want him to believe that the others would hurt him in any way. "It's all right, Sog. You're among friends here," he insisted.

"Friends?" Sog croaked, like he hadn't spoken for a while.

"I'm not friends with this ugly orc obsessed with stew," Toru said with a huff.

"And we'd like to hear his story first," Varg followed.

Duril could tell that the wolfshifter didn't want to have Toru think that they were all too friendly too quickly with the orc just so that the young tiger could be eased into this unexpected friendship.

"I came to bring the bag back to Not-orc," Sog blurted out. "I followed, yes, Sog followed, he's good at it, at seeing tracks." Now that he started talking, the words were tumbling out of his mouth like stones down a hill.

"This creature followed us?" Toru asked in utter disbelief. "How come Claw didn't smell you, creature?"

"Toru, please, his name is Sog," Duril insisted and took Sog by the shoulders so that the others could see that he didn't want them to believe him to be an enemy.

Varg had lifted his bag from the ground where he had dropped it to hurry back to Sog. The wolfshifter looked inside and then presented it to Duril. "Is it everything in here?"

Duril looked. The tome had its cover and the edges of the pages a bit burnt, but otherwise, it seemed fine. The pearl was there, too, and some of his herbs, the ones that hadn't been devoured by the fire. Nothing of value had been misplaced, which meant that Sog must have gathered all the things and put them back in the bag so he could bring them back to Duril. Maybe the orc didn't know exactly why he had done that, but his good heart was in it.

A small detail that Duril wouldn't say anything about. The chances were that Sog would consider that an insult rather than a good thing. Orcs didn't value good hearts, without a doubt, and Duril didn't need the wisdom of Demophios to know that.

Only that this orc with his lanky body, a single tusk, and a penchant for making stew, had a good heart. If needed, it would be a secret Duril would never share with any orc from any horde on the face of the earth.

“Nothing’s missing,” Duril confirmed and blinked one time to let Varg know that everything was fine.

He got a subtle nod in return.

But Toru wasn’t one for subtleties. He grabbed the bag from Varg’s hand and looked as well. One arm buried inside it, he scrunched his nose and pursed his lips in all kinds of amusing ways. “That’s not true!” he shouted in indignation. “Where is Duril’s cabbage?”

Sog, much to the amusement of Varg and Claw who started to chuckle under their breath, made a disgusted face. “Cabbage’s not food. I threw it away.”

The wolf and the bear no longer held it in, and they burst into laughter at the same time. Varg gave Toru’s back a friendly slap. “You and Sog must be of the same mind,” he said.

Toru dropped the bag and crossed his arms over his chest while pouting in the most adorable way. Duril wanted so much to kiss him right now, but he didn’t want to encourage more of the young tiger’s shenanigans, especially when he acted a bit spoiled like right now.

“Thank you for returning the bag to me, Sog. But how did Yarag let you leave the horde?”

At that, Sog’s eyes darted sideways in fear, and the gnarly hands turned inward in a defensive gesture. Duril felt the need to comfort him. “Did you run away?”

“Sog grabbed Not-orc’s bag. He didn’t know what to do,” Sog whined. “So, I ran, ran and ran, sniffing Not-orc’s tracks. Yarag would eat Sog for breakfast if he could. So, Sog ran.”

The slipping in and out of talking about himself like a different person was another sign indicating how distressed Sog had to be.

“My friends,” Duril said gently, “I know I’m asking for a favor like no other, but would you really mind if Sog joined us?”

“Join us?” Toru stared at him in disbelief. “He’ll eat us in our sleep!”

Varg was, once more, the voice of reason. “Kitty, are you afraid of Sog?”

“Am not!” Toru protested right away. “But he’s like a vicious dog!”

Varg growled playfully under his breath. “Watch it, kitty. Do you really want to pick that bone with me?”

“I’m not eating any bones,” Toru continued his protests. “You can have them all. But when this thing,” he pointed at Sog, “comes sniffing your leg at night and takes a chunk out of it for his stupid stew, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“Young tiger.” They all fell silent at the sound of Demophios’ voice. “Sog’s heart is full of good intentions.”

“And his belly’s empty,” Toru retorted. “Who told you you could butt in?” he added for good measure.

“I’m your companion, not a pet,” Demophios pointed out with the same calm manner and slightly patronizing tone he appeared to use only when talking to Toru.

Duril had a hunch that the wise snake was not entirely above petty teasing, but in a way, he didn’t mind it. Toru’s rambunctious ways were bound to make some frustrated, especially an ancient being who must have felt at least a bit slighted by being vanquished by someone so young.

Toru said nothing, so Duril looked at Varg and Claw with pleading eyes. He would have to mend things later with the tigershifter. Sog was a good orc, and even among humans, he would prove better than a lot of them. Duril would make Toru see it, even if it took a lot of convincing.

“The horde is after us anyway,” Claw pointed out. “And Sog appears to have some interesting abilities. Indeed, not even my nose managed to pick up his scent.”

“I know how to follow,” Sog said. “Sog walks and walks, not right behind, so that the wind doesn’t catch with him. And he walks the path that’s still and the air doesn’t move,” he explained.

Duril watched as Toru turned his back and walked away. He exchanged a quick look with Varg, who immediately understood and took Sog by the shoulders. “Tell us more about that,” the wolfshifter told the orc and gestured for Duril to hurry.

Young hearts tended to bleed quickly at the slightest wound. And Duril had promised himself that he would never let that happen again, not when it was Toru who was bleeding.

Toru sat on the grass at the edge of the oasis. How could Duril like that ugly beast? He was so bald, and his skin was creased everywhere. He was disgusting, he decided, although he could still feel Varg’s judgmental look thrown his way. What was the wolf about anyway? How could they not see that beast for what he was? That horde was made of nothing but bloodthirsty creatures, and that orc was no better.

But he did bring back Duril’s bag, and that meant that he did like Duril. Anyway, that didn’t mean that Duril was allowed to like him back. Just when he thought he had saved the healer from the curse of that horde, the horde was catching up with them again.

Duril surely pitied that creature. He knew how to make himself look pitiful with those big liquid eyes and his single tusk. Toru huffed and crossed his legs and arms. And Varg and Claw were both so annoying! How could they take in Sog so fast?

Lost as he was in his own imaginary battle against his companions, he missed someone creeping up on him. Duril's warm hand on his shoulder took him by surprise, but he relaxed right away after tensing for a moment.

"I want to talk to you about my time with the horde," Duril began.

"But I don't want to hear about it. You're mine now," Toru replied, wincing at how harsh his words sounded. Like he wasn't interested in Duril's things and life. It wasn't true, but he was...

"You have no reason to be jealous," Duril said, just as if he were reading his mind.

Toru bristled at that. "I'm not jealous! Sog is ugly and an orc. And you don't like ugly orcs, do you?"

Duril remained silent for a moment, but then he sighed and began laughing softly. "Sog is just a friend. He's not to me the way you and Varg are. Do you think I'm that kind of person, going about, collecting lovers?"

The idea of Duril collecting lovers wasn't as farfetched as the healer tried to make it sound. Everywhere he went, all kinds of creatures fell in love with him, even orcs. That Grand Chief, the big orc, he hadn't wanted to let go of Duril at all. Because of that, they had had to fight for their lives and send hundreds of orcs to their deaths.

"You could," Toru accused.

To his surprise, Duril slapped his shoulder. "I cannot believe you!"

Ah, that must have sounded like Toru thought Duril had an easy heart. "That's not what I wanted to say," he backpedaled immediately. "It's just that you cannot help it if they all want you."

"Who are they?" Duril questioned. "I don't understand--"

Toru turned abruptly and hugged the healer tightly. "No, you don't, because you don't realize how easy it is for everyone to love you. But I'm sharing you with Varg, and Varg only."

Duril caressed his hair slowly. "Oh, Toru," he said, and his voice was filled to the brim with love. "You are the one in my heart. And I love you because you're brave and you know to do the right thing. Isn't it because we both want only the good to win in the world, never evil, that we love each other so much?"

Toru had to admit it. But he had no idea where Duril was going with that. "Yes," he said slowly.

"Sog is not evil. He's not bad. Sometimes, he's just really, really hungry. That was why he bit your leg that time. But orcs don't eat shapeshifters. Sog likes meat, just like you, but not the kind that comes from creatures who think and talk. Now let me tell you about how he and I came to become friends. Would you do this for me? Would you listen for a while?"

Toru fidgeted for a bit. He didn't want to know, not really, but it was Duril asking, and he couldn't just say 'no'. "All right," he murmured but chose to pout just to make sure that the healer understood how he wasn't in the least interested, but he was doing him a favor.

"When I set foot in the horde camp, Yarag thought I was a spy. But he reconsidered it and gave me to Sog to be his slave."

"That creature was your master?" Toru clenched his fists tightly, but Duril placed his hand over them to stop him.

"He could have treated me badly, but he didn't. Instead, he was happy to have someone with him. You see, Toru, in the horde, chum are not considered to be the same as warriors. They are ignored, despised, trampled upon, and used."

"They are so bad, these orcs," Toru confirmed his belief. "You never want to go back there, do you?" He threw Duril a suspicious look.

His belligerent streak was quickly subdued by a kiss from the healer. "Never. I belong with you forever. Now listen for a bit. I cannot agree with how they do things in the horde, and I could never be part of it, but these are their ways, and it is not my place to question them."

"But they always kill, and plunder, and enslave," Toru pointed out. "Others, not their own."

"Which is why I suppose they have the bad reputation they do," Duril said and chuckled. "And also why I strongly believe that I will never be a part of them, not completely. Sog was never mean to me. He helped me, albeit unwillingly, to concoct the remedy for the Grand Chief, when he was ill. And after I fought side by side with Yarag and helped him secure his position in the horde, Sog made that amazing blade for me."

"He knows how to work with metal?" Toru felt his ears perking up. Varg's sword was getting a bit dull. Maybe Sog could help and give Varg's blade a new edge. He quickly brushed the idea aside. Sog didn't belong with them, even if he was as skilled as Duril said.

"He has his own kind of magic," Duril replied, cutting his thoughts short. "Demophios calls it skill."

Toru threw a brief look at the silver pendant, but it appeared that the wise snake didn't care to butt into this particular conversation. "We don't need weapons," Toru said cuttingly.

Except for Varg, and now Duril. They carried blades, so they could find a use for Sog and his metalworking magic.

"Maybe not," Duril said in a placating tone, "but Sog risked his life so that he could help us when we needed to free Varg from the belly of that creature. And again to bring back my tome and the pearl from Shroudharbor. His life with the horde is forfeit, and all because of me. If I had never

hurried to meet the horde because of the call I felt in my blood, he would have never come to be in this sort of predicament. It is my fault that he--”

Toru couldn't stand another moment of listening to Duril chastising himself for what he had done by leaving them for the horde. Varg was wise and Claw, too, and they believed that Duril couldn't have fought that call of blood even if he had wanted to with all his heart.

So he stopped Duril by kissing him. “Do you want the stew-crazy bastard to come with us?” he asked.

Duril nodded, his eyes full of hope.

“Then he comes. But if I catch him anywhere near my leg, or anyone's leg--” Toru let the menace hang in the air. It wasn't Duril who needed to hear it, but he was sure that the healer would do a much better job of explaining to Sog what he could and could not do now that he was part of their group.

“Thank you, Toru. You have such a good heart. And Sog, you'll see, he can be a friend in his own way.”

“We'll see,” Toru replied, still a bit miffed. “I'll keep my eyes on him. If he tastes as little as a toe, even one as hairy as Claw's, I'll have him eat only cabbage for a week.”

Duril laughed wholeheartedly at that. “I think it will be enough to threaten him with such a great punishment, and he wouldn't even dream of doing anything like that, no matter how hungry. Which reminds me,” he said and pushed himself to his feet. “We should have something to eat.”

“Meat?” Toru asked, his eyes full of hope.

“We'll see what we can do,” Duril said with a secretive smile on his lips.

They had no meat, so what was Duril smiling about? Toru scrunched up his nose and was about to comment on that when his eyes were drawn to the skies above. The stars continued to fall from the heavens.

Varg hadn't asked Sog to do anything, but the orc had taken it upon himself to grab a flint stone and Varg's sword, to get himself busy and probably show that he was willing and able to earn his keep. It was true that the blade had been in terrible need of a blacksmith's care for a while now, but he hadn't thought that he would find one in the middle of the desert.

Sog was working fast with his hands. His arms were long and wiry, nothing but stringy muscles, and his fingers were gnarly, but he knew what to do with them. Varg had to admit that he was a

bit impressed by the nimbleness of those hard-ried hands. By his side, Claw was watching the same thing.

“I should gather some wood to make a fire,” Claw said. “I saw the mushrooms you brought earlier. Those will make for a tasty treat. I believe that not even Toru would say ‘no’ to those.”

“He might protest against the lack of meat, but these oases brought to life by Demophios only lack one thing,” Varg commented. “But we shouldn’t complain. The water is sweet, and the fruits even sweeter.”

He could tell that Sog was attentively listening to their conversation. Varg smiled as an idea came to him. “You’re a cook, right, Sog?”

The orc stopped brushing the flint stone across the blade for a moment and looked up. “Sog cooks,” he confirmed.

“We have mushrooms, fruits, and some herbs. What should we do to make this meal better?” Varg asked directly.

Sog looked around. “Meat,” he said shortly. “I’ll bring.”

He abandoned the blade, and Varg watched him go with curious eyes. Then he took the blade and looked at it. He pressed his thumb against it, the familiar sting letting him know that he shouldn’t press any harder. He huffed and put the thumb in his mouth.

Claw laughed. “Your sword turns into an orc’s blade. The latter is known to cut through everything like butter.”

“Sog is really good,” Varg pointed out. “I don’t think my sword was ever this sharp.”

“He’s making himself useful.”

Varg nodded. “He may be considered chum by the horde and its chief, but he’s an intelligent one.”

“Agreed. And right now, I bet he’s coming up with some pretty eccentric ideas about the meat we’re going to have on the table. But, as the old saying goes, the more, the merrier, right?”

Varg laughed. “You ate all kinds of things while you were trapped in that labyrinth. I doubt anything he brings will surprise you.”

“True,” Claw admitted. “And you know exactly what to do to help Sog win over Toru.”

“Indeed, that was my thought. I can only pray that Sog will keep his mouth shut about the provenance of the questionable meat he finds. Toru might not be keen on eating anything that he has never tasted before.”

Claw smiled and looked around. "Toru and Duril have been gone for some time. Do you think our kitty needs a lot of convincing, or he is using this as a ruse to have Duril plead with him some more? You know, just for the sake of having more assurances from our beloved healer."

"Toru is possessive, and you know it," Varg commented. "But I think that, this time, Duril needs to use his sharp mind to convince Toru that Sog has only good intentions at heart."

"It is quite the leap of faith. I mean, it is enough to take a good look at any orc, and you wouldn't think twice of cutting him through before he manages to do that to you, right?"

"I can only agree with you, friend," Varg admitted. "But Sog is a friend of ours now, I believe."

"You better believe it, yes," Claw replied with a small laugh, "because I think that Duril can be as fierce as our kitty when it comes to people he cares about."

Varg was in complete agreement with that. And Sog had to be a special type of orc, too, because it was unheard of for a member of a horde as large as Zukh Kalegh to abandon his kin only so that he could follow a friend.

He didn't know a lot about orcs, not about how they lived, or the things they cared about, but what he knew was enough to tell him that Sog, pathetic skinny Sog, had done a brave thing to give up the protection the horde offered, even to chum like him, and chase after a friend only so he could give him back the bag he had stolen in the first place.

Lost in thought for a moment, it took him a bit to realize that Claw was still scouting the skies with keen eyes. Then he remembered. As distracted as they had been with the appearance of Sog and Duril's presumably lost bag, they had forgotten about the bad omen appearing in the sky in broad daylight.

"When heavens weep, the earth aches," Claw said slowly, as if he was reciting something he remembered from a long time ago.

"The shooting stars. How is it that we can see them like this, while the sun is still up in the sky? They must be burning like a furnace."

"A furnace hurtling through the skies," Claw confirmed. "It is a sign, my friend, so let's enjoy ourselves for as long as we can. I'm afraid we'll have to prepare for another battle soon."

Duril watched with undisguised pleasure as Toru attacked another fried mushroom and a stick on which an unfortunate lizard had been impaled. It looked like there was a truce of sorts between the tiger and the newcomer, as Sog had proven to be quite useful in finding enough meat to stave off their hunger for a bit longer.

While they were busy devouring their meal, Duril couldn't help looking up at the skies time and again. He wanted to ask Demophios what he thought of it, but he didn't want to disturb the others while they were still eating. Whatever it was, it could wait for a bit. Or could it? The thought alone was enough to give him goosebumps everywhere, and not in a good way.

Sog helped him clean around the fire, while the others lay on their backs, their bellies full and satisfied now.

"Sog," Duril asked gently, "did you see Yarag and Winglog before you left?"

Sog shook his head violently. "They would have eaten me."

"I don't think so," Duril retorted.

"Grand Chief said 'you're a traitor', that's what he said. And traitors get eaten."

Duril had his doubts about that, but a fate that wasn't any kinder than being devoured surely awaited anyone who dared to cross the mighty ruler of Zukh Kalegh. "You didn't betray the horde, Sog. I'm so grateful that you came to me and brought my things back. I truly am."

Sog made a guilty face. "Sog should have given you the bag."

"I don't think it would have made a lot of difference. Maybe Yarag would have just thought it a good idea to throw me in with my friends to fight that beast."

A gurgle-like sound came from Sog's throat. It took Duril a few moments to realize that the orc was laughing. It was their way, to be cruel and unforgiving, so Sog thought it completely possible that Yarag would easily choose to put him to fight to the death against the entire horde.

Duril knew that Demophios would be a source of knowledge if he wanted to ask about the signs blazing their way across the sky, but as Toru had pointed out, the wise snake couldn't be always reliable. His, Agatha's, and Elidias' convoluted manner of delivering information could be taxing for the unwary solicitant. The truth was in there, but you needed to be clever to unravel it for what it was.

Since he didn't consider himself that clever, Duril thought that it wouldn't hurt to ask a question. "Sog, have you ever seen the sky like this?"

The orc straightened up and stared at the sky. Duril admired the orcs' ability to stand the heat and even look at the sun directly as Sog did right now. They were creatures like no other, and their astonishing resilience made them redoubtable opponents.

"We must hurry and leave this land," Sog said and turned back to his work of cleaning the place of all the signs of their last meal.

"Why? What will happen?" Duril asked.

Sog seemed slightly surprised that his knowledge on the matter was required. “The biggest storm of sand. Wind will make it rise,” he explained while gesturing to illustrate his words better. “Not-orc, you’re not a full orc. And the others are not orcs at all,” Sog added.

“We’ve lived through some astonishing adventures,” Duril said. “What is it about this sandstorm that we should be so afraid of?”

Sog shook his head. “Sandstorms can kill everything. Each grain of sand can turn into a blade as it spins and spins.” Again, the orc made a gesture as if he were churning food in a large pot.

“It cuts through the skin?” Duril asked, a new sensation of apprehension gripping him.

“To the bone,” Sog confirmed. “But not orcs. They have hard skin.” To make a point, Sog grabbed the skin on his arm, pulling at it. Indeed, it appeared leathery and tough, an armor in itself.

Duril didn’t mind telling his companions to gather their things and hurry as far as they could get, but something of Demophios’ words stayed with him, something about how he would have to heal the entire horde of Zukh Kalegh. With the wise snake, maybe some things could be seen as unreliable, due to lack of proper interpretation, but that didn’t make them less true.

If he were to be the healing power to the horde, he needed to stay. Could it mean that he would have to make another impossible choice? If he stayed, his friends would suffer. Duril didn’t doubt Sog’s words about the sand turning on them, guided by the eye of a new storm. But what if it were a sandstorm like no other?

What if the horde wasn’t as protected as Sog believed?

Toru had to admit that Sog wasn’t all that bad. Throughout his travels, he had eaten less or more savory things, but he wasn’t one to back down from eating a lizard or two if they were properly fried. He patted his belly and sighed contently.

Varg and Claw seemed to be as satisfied as he was. But at the same time, they kept talking about something and pointing at the sky. They were worried about that bad omen.

“Demophios,” he started, knowing that the snake would be awake, “what’s this bad omen all about? The shooting stars and all?”

He doubted he’d get a straight answer, so he was surprised to hear the wise snake talk.

“A storm is brewing and it will engulf Zukh Kalegh,” Demophios replied promptly.

“Do you mean, the whole desert?” Toru asked.

“I mean,” Demophios said, “the whole horde.”

“Ha, that’s good,” Toru commented. “It will get it off our backs, right?”

“You and your friends are here, too,” Demophios pointed out.

“So? Let the sandstorm eat the horde. I don’t mind.”

“You don’t, but what about Duril?”

Toru pursed his lips in frustration. Why did Demophios have to put his head to thinking like that? No wonder he never asked him anything.

Chapter Seventeen – Burning Skies

Varg could tell the air was changing. The sudden warning from both Sog and Demophios had intruded upon their little break, bringing with it what he had already understood. The Great Barren demanded its tribute in blood. Maybe that was a reason why the caravans had become scarcer, and now no one traveled anymore across the desert, except for people like them who had a reason to face such hardships.

By his side, Claw was lost in thought, his lips pursed, his eyes still on the azure canvas above them.

“How should we get ready to face this storm?” Varg asked, bringing the bearshifter back to more practical matters. “Or away from it? Do we even have a chance to do so?”

“The storms of Zukh Kalegh,” Claw said in a noncommittal voice. “I heard stories as a cub, but I cannot say that I ever saw one with my own eyes.”

“Do the stories you heard have any good advice for us now? The skies look clear, but I wouldn’t be surprised at all to discover that the sandstorm Sog is talking about is already upon us and we don’t even know it.”

“Our new friend’s rush to have us all on the move is quite evident. You might be correct.” Claw didn’t waste any more time and followed the others’ example of drinking a last mouthful of fresh water.

Varg fell in line with the bearshifter, curious to hear what he had to say about the sandstorms of this place. A deep frown creased Claw’s forehead, hinting at the dark clouds now gathering inside his mind.

“Flea bag, are you worried?” Varg tried to keep his voice light and teasing, although he already knew the answer to his question.

“These sandstorms,” Claw began, “they’re like nothing you’ve seen, puppy, I’ll tell you that. They’re an enemy you cannot fight against.”

“We’ve made it through terrible things already. What’s one more?” Varg offered, his way of keeping the morale of the group up.

Claw laughed wholeheartedly at his comment. “Indeed. And you’re a bunch like no other I’ve ever encountered.”

“At least we have that,” Varg joked some more. “Since you’ve been keeping company with nothing but lizards and rats for the past centuries, it’s good to know that we’re above those creatures in your book.”

Claw hooked an arm over Varg's shoulders. "I think I know why you've always been a pack leader. Why you were born one, puppy!"

"Feel free to tell me," Varg eagerly replied, wanting to hear what the bearshifter truly thought of him.

"Duril is the heart of your group," Claw said. "Toru is the impetus of young blood, the courage and bravery. But you're the wisdom, the one to keep everyone together, never letting them falter."

"What are we left with if we forgo hope?"

"Indeed. And you even gave this old bag of fleas some of that, too. You have plenty of hope in your heart, puppy, and that without being reckless. Our kitty might bristle at my calling you the alpha of this pack like no other on the face of the earth, but you're the one in charge. Leaders of the world everywhere should take after you."

"If I ever find the time, I'll write a book on the important affairs of ruling kingdoms," Varg joked.

"Or have your scholar deal with the tedious task of putting everything down in ink," Claw said and pointed at Duril.

The healer walked in front, he and Toru being led by Sog whose steps were weighted by purpose. Unlikely alliances were bound to take life even under the merciless sun of the Great Barren. Or maybe a place like that was needed for them to blossom like the rare flowers of the desert.

Some of Sog's impatience to leave the oasis and its cover behind was infectious, and Duril felt it, too. They had gone through so many trials during their time out here in the desert that feeling fear seemed like something that only happened to other people. Yet, at the moment, Duril understood that a sandstorm that could kill with the force of thousands of flying blades was enough to send the fear of all that was holy into the marrow of their bones.

Toru kept up with Sog, walking fast as well, and pulling Duril after him as if they had a special place in mind where they needed to arrive. "Sog," he called out, "do you know where we are going?"

"Far, far," Sog replied impatiently, "as far as we can go."

"The skies above us are still crystal clear. If we rush right now, we might deplete all our strength before we're far enough."

"Not enough time, not enough time," Sog whined and flailed his arms widely, like he could make them move faster by that alone.

“This ugly orc better be right about this storm or I’m going to wring his neck,” Toru mumbled. “And couldn’t you say there was a storm coming the moment you came to us, orc?”

“It’s a big one, big one,” Sog continued in the same manner. “The sky bleeds, the earth reeks.”

“Reeks?” Toru scrunched up his nose in disgust. “Why?”

“Death, she’s a mistress to the dead,” Sog said.

“Are you sure you didn’t pick up this crazy one from some library or witch’s tent?” Toru asked Duril pointedly. “He speaks in tongues, just like Agatha and that old man in Shroudharbor.”

“Sog,” Duril intervened. “Tell us more. What do you mean? Why is this storm bigger? And why are you so afraid all of a sudden?”

Sog stopped suddenly, as if it only then occurred to him that he had forgotten something. He turned and raised one stringy arm, pointing somewhere behind them. “Sog didn’t see that until the big bear looked at the sky.”

Duril felt chills down his spine before even turning to see what Sog was pointing at. But Toru was quicker than him, and now he stood there, wide-eyed. “What’s that?”

Claw and Varg who walked behind them stopped as well, curious about why they didn’t continue on their hurried journey. And it was a damned good reason to stop because the sky at the horizon burned.

At first glance, it appeared as if the fire came from the desert, the surface of the earth, but any flame had to come with smoke, and there was none of it. Even more, the flames blazing in the sky at a far distance for now were not yellow, but quickly turning orange or red. Duril blinked a few times, trying to chase away any mirage that could be playing tricks on his sight. But no, there was no mirage, only a sky burning with tendrils of blood.

“Have you ever seen anything like this?” he addressed the question to no one in particular.

“Sog never,” the orc complained as if it were his fault that any of that was happening. “But Death, Death is coming. She’s black but she wears red, and she’s going to swallow the sun!”

“There must have been something weird in those fried lizards,” Toru declared, seemingly not as impressed as everyone else by the sight in front of their eyes. “I saw him sprinkle some crushed bug legs,” he added defensively when Duril looked at him. “It’s only a red sky.”

He had known Toru for a long enough time now to tell that he was making himself a good serving of courage with those words.

“We should hurry,” Claw said and turned toward them. The look in his eyes told Duril what he needed to know; the incoming storm was extraordinary, and the usual in the Great Barren had to be pretty bad to begin with.

Duril threw one last look at the red flames licking the sky, turning it slightly black wherever their tips touched. Or it could be something conjured up by their imaginations, their minds already frightened by prophecies of times past. Whatever it was, their safety was the most important thing now, and Claw’s was sound advice.

“You know what it means,” Varg said the moment they were on the move again. “Your old stories, Claw, what can you tell us about them?” Even if the other three companions walked in front, they could hear the bearshifter clearly. Whatever this thing was, this new challenge that they were supposed to face, it was better to walk into the fray with more knowledge than the little Sog could offer them.

The orc was scared, and for a hardy creature like him, even one that had been born to be nothing short of a slave, it still said something about the danger they would soon meet, whether they liked it or not.

“I do, but are you ready for more tales of doom?” Claw asked.

“We just escaped an entire horde bent on tearing us limb from limb. I’d say that there’s no better moment than right now,” Varg pointed out.

“True,” Claw admitted with a small smile. “You’re wise beyond your years, puppy. Is everyone else willing to hear what waits for us, according to old legends?” he asked, raising his voice a little to be heard well by the others.

“I do want to hear,” Duril replied right away.

“Is it a story where everyone lives happily ever after at the end?” Toru asked.

“No, I’m afraid it’s not that kind of story,” Claw said. “In this one, everyone dies at the end.”

“Then I don’t want to hear it,” Toru said hastily.

“Sog doesn’t want, either,” the orc added as he continued to sprint in front, gesticulating continuously for the others to follow.

“Two against two,” Claw said like he was weighing the matter. “It appears that it’s all down to me, if I want to tell this story or not.”

Varg grabbed his arm. “Tell it, Claw. Don’t mind the children.”

Toru turned with fire in his eyes. "Who's a child?"

Varg smiled slyly. "You are since you're so keen on listening to nothing else but bedtime stories."

Toru huffed. "If it's something we must fight, we'll fight. No need for stories that only say how we don't stand a chance."

The young tiger was right to a fault about that, but Varg appreciated knowing fully what they had to face, no matter how desperate the portrayal of such things sounded in the ears of those about to be trampled by unexpected twists of fate.

"And I'm too old for bedtime stories," Toru added to spite Varg a little.

That earned him another pointed smirk. Varg didn't mind teasing the tiger whenever the opportunity arose. "Yes, indeed. You're fonder of different exertions before going to sleep."

The golden eyes narrowed. "What do you mean, mutt?" Quickly, he understood, and then his eyes grew wide. "Duril, Varg is teasing me," he complained to the healer right away.

"We should let Claw tell us the story," Duril said. "Even if it's not a happy one, it will help us understand what we must do."

Sog seemed much more scared of listening to Claw's story of doom than Toru. In the tiger's case, Varg suspected that it had more to do with Toru's stubbornness and wish to sometimes go against the rest, just because he was used to doing so. All his life, those traits must have come in handy while the world around him treated him like an outsider. Little by little, Toru was showing that he trusted them, but such habits were nothing but an instinct honed by the meanness of those he must have met along the way.

"All right," Toru mumbled. "But if you get scared, you'll let me hold you close all through the night, yes?"

The question was directed at Duril, and Varg observed them with keen eyes. It would take some time for Toru to truly give the healer back his usual freedoms. Regardless of what effect Claw's stories would have on Duril, the healer was still bound to sleep at night with the tigershifter coiled around him like a snake.

"I wouldn't have it any other way," Duril replied with obvious tenderness in his voice.

"It looks like it's time for you to tell us a story, Claw," Varg said.

Claw nodded. "Very well, then. Story or not, what I know about what we can see burning on the sky if we only turn around has come to my knowledge as being the storm of the end of the world."

"No, no, we shouldn't listen," Sog pleaded, this time more agitated than earlier. "We'll die, we'll die!"

“Orcs die from listening to stories?” Toru taunted him right away. “No wonder you never learn anything, and you’re all so mean. Nobody ever told you stories.”

Sog ignored him and just tried to run in front, away from them. Duril was the one to hurry after him and convince him to fall in line with the rest while talking in a low soothing voice.

Varg wondered whether Sog knew of another story, or a different telling of the same one. His fear was like a presence on its own even from that distance.

Duril had a tough time trying to get Sog to be less scared. “Sog,” he spoke gently, “my friends and I have gone through some incredible adventures until now, and I know that we are all going to fight to the last breath to survive. And we’ve survived and come out as victors from all our challenges.”

Sog shifted from one foot to another, jumping slightly and shying away from Duril’s touch. “Death comes. She never forgives and never forgets. You think you can fool her, but you cannot, not more than once.”

Duril threw a concerned look toward the rest of the group. Claw was waiting patiently for him to finish bringing Sog back so that he could tell his story. “You’re with us now. We’ll never leave you behind.”

Sog swung his body to and fro like a willow in the wind. “The horde, the horde,” he said like a little chant.

Duril didn’t need more words to understand what Sog was so wound up about. They were putting as much distance as they could between them and the evil rising at the horizon, but in doing so, they were getting farther away from the horde of Zukh Kalegh as well. Sog might have left his brethren behind in fear of getting punished for his betrayal by Yarag, but that didn’t sever the bond he had with his entire kin. Even Duril could feel it now after spending a while apart from them and understood more about what the call of blood meant. The only difference from before was that he could rein in the pull his heart strings experienced and choose to stay with the ones closest to his soul.

What was happening in Sog’s heart was another matter. Orcs were not sentimental creatures, but what made them powerful was their sense of belonging, of being one with the horde. The more distance they put between them and Zukh Kalegh, the more unbearable things had to be for Sog. The orc couldn’t voice them, express his feelings, but his state of heightened agitation was the obvious sign that severing his ties with the horde would cost him a lot.

“We are your horde,” Duril said, remembering how he and Toru had become Varg’s pack when many of the wolfshifter’s brothers and sisters had perished at Whitekeep. If need be, they would all be orcs, too.

That appeared to have more of a calming effect on Sog, and the orc no longer tried to get away from his grasp. Duril managed, even if with some difficulty, to get him to walk side by side with him. Toru appeared next to them, too, but he was a lot less courteous as he grabbed Sog’s other arm and forced him to walk slower so that Varg and Claw could catch up with them.

Toru dug his fingers deep into Sog’s leathery forearm to keep the orc from dashing away. A cowardly one, he was. But he knew how to make Duril care for him, and that meant that he was also sly. On the one hand, Toru wanted to let Sog run away, even give him a little push so that he disappeared from Duril’s sight and life forever, but on the other, he knew that such a thing would break the healer’s heart. For all of Duril’s assurance that he didn’t care for this orc as he cared for Varg and Toru, the old green-eyed monster still played with his heart.

“Are orcs all cowards like you?” he scolded Sog.

“You’ll be a coward, too, once you hear about it,” Sog said. “Just you listen, tiger, just you listen. The blood will curdle in your veins,” he added in a cavernous voice, “and you’ll fall dead where you stand. Sog heard about it, he did.”

“What did you hear? And how come you’re still alive if you already heard this story?” Toru asked, growing irritated with the orc’s antics and the struggle to keep him from getting away again.

But Duril couldn’t hold Sog by himself, not without overexerting himself, so it was up to Toru to deal with this annoying creature.

“I didn’t hear the story,” Sog whined, “but what it can do to you if you hear it. You tell it, and you summon it.”

“What do you summon?” Toru insisted. Getting something out of this orc was a feat, but he wanted to get to the end of it, for the group’s sake.

“Death, Death, the mistress of the dead,” Sog’s words wept like the wind starting the rise.

Toru sniffed the air for a moment. Something was changing. A short look at Duril told him that he wasn’t the only one to sense it, and Varg and Claw appeared to have started to hurry and close the distance between them, too.

In his life, he had traveled, spent his days and nights on long roads that led to nowhere in particular. But now, he had a purpose in life, something to look forward to, and that something was to cross the desert with everyone else and himself included alive and well. If for that, fate required that he

drag a useless orc around, so be it. And it seemed that not all that the orc feared was part of a tale meant to scare children.

“What does that story say, Claw?” he asked in a loud voice.

Sog shook him and Duril away but only so that he could cover his ears. At least, he made no other attempt to run away, but he began swinging his head to and fro with his palms cupped over the sides, to block any sound.

Toru ignored the orc and turned impatiently toward the bearshifter. “Well, what’s this story all about anyway?”

He wouldn’t admit it for the world that Sog’s reactions were making him a bit uneasy. Not frightened, not as the poor orc was, but it filled him with apprehension of the worst kind. Danger came in many shapes, as he had come to understand ever since he had entered Whitekeep and his new life had begun. Evil could lay low in the ground, in the pits of the earth, in the trees, and the corpses of those not fully dead, not alive either. It didn’t come straight at you, ready to grab you by the throat and strangle the life out of you. It was deceptive and clever.

Like someone he had come to know. “Demophios,” he asked, thumbing the silver pendant slowly, “what do you think? Should we hear Claw’s story?”

“Without a doubt,” came the prompt reply.

“Will Sog die if he hears it?”

“No, he will not.”

That was enough and quite clear seeing how, usually, Demophios cared not for giving such a straight answer. “Do you hear that, silly orc?” he said and shook Sog a little. “This snake who’s very old and wise says nothing will happen to you if you listen to Claw and his storm story.”

Sog let his hands down slowly, which meant that he had heard everything up to this point just fine despite his protests. “I won’t die?”

“No,” Toru said with importance. “Nobody dies from listening to stories. They’re nothing but stories. Nothing makes them real unless you’re a silly orc who believes in such things.”

Sog didn’t mind the insults, and his mouth just stretched into a smile. Toru couldn’t suppress a grin of his own. Sog was that helpless, and no wonder Duril cared for him. Maybe they would keep him around, as a blacksmith and a cook of sorts, although he much preferred Duril’s cooking. Fried lizards on a stick would do in a pinch, though.

It appeared that Toru had managed, together with Duril, to calm the orc some, so Varg nudged Claw in the ribs. “It looks like you finally have everyone’s attention. I’d rather hear this awful story of yours before the real thing catches up with us.”

“You can feel it, right? The wind,” Claw pointed out.

Varg nodded gravely. Any lighthearted conversation they used to make the situation appear less dire than it was still couldn’t deny what would soon follow. He inspected his companions quietly. Claw was a bear who had lived hundreds of years, trapped in a labyrinth, and his value in battle was proven. Toru was brave and strong, while Duril was compassionate and kind. They now had a new friend with them, and that friend was scared out of his wits by what Claw was about to say.

“The story,” the bearshifter began, “may seem like one of the many about how the world would end.”

“And isn’t it so?” Varg questioned, intrigued by the introduction.

It was easy to read denial in Claw’s posture. “Whenever this story was told, those who ushered the words out of their throats were gripped by a strange fever and they became part of the story.”

Varg stopped for a moment and caught Claw’s arm. “What do you mean?”

His question was echoed, a moment later, by Toru’s mirror question.

“I can only promise that I will try not to scare you much while I tell it,” Claw explained. “I might not sound much like myself at times.”

“And when were you going to enlighten us about this strange power of your story?” Varg asked, rightfully annoyed with the flea bag for keeping it a secret. “Then I would rather you don’t tell it at all.”

“Agreed,” Duril confirmed.

“Sog told you, Sog told you!” the orc intervened.

“You all agreed that you wanted to hear it,” Claw warned them. “Now there’s no turning back. And weren’t you all convinced that you wouldn’t become scared by a mere story? Toru, didn’t you call Sog a coward for not wanting to hear it?”

Varg increased his grip on Claw’s arm. “Why the ruse? Why the deceit?”

Claw sighed. “It is the unspoken rule. When one asks about the story of the storm of the end of the world, the one who knows it is bound to tell it. I searched for a way around it, by asking you to cast your vote on it, but you all insisted, and that is why I cannot refuse.”

“What a strange thing,” Varg commented. “And how did you come to be bound by the telling of this story?”

Claw offered him a lopsided grin. “Have I ever mentioned what kind of bear I was as a cub? My naughtiness brought this upon me.”

“Of course, you had to be a naughty bear,” Varg said with a sigh. “Before you begin, please tell us what to expect, and how you came to know the story.”

“Ah, at least this one is easy to tell,” Claw said. “It must have been around the time when I had barely getting used to my powers as a shifter. I liked the strength it gave me, how fast and far I could travel, mingle with humans, and listen to their stories.”

“And I bet it was from this thirst of yours for stories that this predicament came about,” Varg expressed his belief.

“You guessed right, puppy. One of the places I liked to travel was a city called Edgehelm. Mostly a place for merchants of all kinds, it’s on the road to the heart of Eawirith, Scercendusa.”

“Scercendusa? I’ve heard of it. The uncrowned jewel of our world, don’t people say that?” Varg asked.

“Yes, indeed. No ruler or king can say his word as loud as needed for the entirety of Eawirith to lean its ear toward, but Scercendusa is as close as it can be to be considered the beating heart of this far and wide place we all call our home.”

“Have you ever been there?”

Claw shook his head, and Varg recognized nostalgia in that simple gesture. “I’ve always wanted to see it but never got the chance.”

“You’ll see it, my friend. But first let’s get out of here. Nothing’s more entertaining than listening to some story while we hurry as far from that thing as we can.” Varg gestured with his chin slightly, without turning. He didn’t need to face that horizon burning to know that there was no more time to dally.

“Then let me start by telling you how I got into this terrible predicament of being forced to tell a frightening story about the end of the world whenever someone asks.”

Varg nodded in acquiescence. He could tell by how the others threw short looks toward them that they were as curious as he was to hear that story.

Claw began. “I was no longer quite a cub when I started traveling like that. Such a young thing I was, and one with little in this big melon,” he knocked all-knowingly against his head, “but a lot

going on here,” he added and placed one hand over his chest. “A thirst for adventure consumed me, and I fed on the stories humans told as they traveled to Edgehelm from all corners of Eawirith.”

“I also like to travel everywhere,” Toru pointed out. “But I’m not looking for stories, but for meat,” he added with emphasis.

That naturally earned him a few good laughs from everyone. Varg noticed how Sog was staring at them with keen eyes, curious eyes that told the story of someone who hadn’t been included much in discussions of this kind.

“I can tell you that if you ever reach Edgehelm, there are plenty of places where you can enjoy the best steaks you ever tasted,” Claw replied. “They have everything; beef, lamb, rabbit, pork, and deer. And even pheasant if the season for it is right.”

Toru smacked his lips in the most convincing manner. “And all I had today was some fried lizard,” he complained.

“It was good,” Sog protested. “Big fat juicy lizard. Keep your pork and deer.”

“Just go on with your story, Claw, or these two will end up fighting over meat they don’t have,” Varg said. “Kitty, shut up or I’ll munch your ears.”

Toru huffed, but it looked like he was just as curious, so for once in his life, he did as he was told.

“I happened to be on my third or fourth visit to Edgehelm, enjoying the fantastic food one of the inns there offered, when at a table near me, three merchants took their seats and shortly after ordering, they began to engage in hushed conversation. I don’t know what of me wanted to hear what they were saying, but I leaned in, and having been blessed with the ears of a shifter, I could hear them quite clearly when any other human being couldn’t have made out one word of what they were talking about.”

Claw took a small break and eyed his audience as if to see if he had their attention. No one said a thing and all ears were perked up, ready for the story. “By the sorry state of their clothes, I could tell that they had just crossed the Great Barren. They had sand up to their eyeballs, and their travel clothes were in terrible need of a wash. They had to be hungry, and it appeared that the inn at which I was dining at the time was their first stop.

“One of them appeared shaken, and the other two were exchanging strange looks. ‘That story,’ one of the two commented. ‘Could you imagine a stranger thing?’ ‘No,’ the other replied. At this point, my curiosity had made me shift my chair slightly closer to hear more. The shaken one mumbled something under his breath, but I couldn’t hear what he said. Nobody could, I suppose, because his companions didn’t even pay him any mind.”

“Had that merchant heard the story?” Toru asked. “Will it make us lose our minds?”

Varg had to admit that it wasn't farfetched to believe such a thing. Stranger occurrences took place all the time, as it seemed.

“No, it won't. I heard it, and nothing except for the curse of telling it happened to me. And that merchant wasn't out of his mind, either, just scared. Allow me to continue. The first merchant finally spoke, and his voice was clear as crystal, something that took me by surprise, seeing how ever since their trio had set foot inside the inn, he appeared to be so out of it. He said, ‘You don't have to speak as if I'm not even here.’ The other two appeared quite chastised and invited him to talk about it. ‘Could you tell us the story that got you into such a state, my friend?’ one of them urged him. ‘If I do,’ he said, ‘you'll be bound by the same curse as me.’ Needless to say, this is what I'm about to tell you now. You'll hear the story from me, and you'll be bound by it.”

Varg nodded gravely. Duril and Toru turned to confirm their stance on the matter, while Sog shivered and wrapped his arms around himself.

“You'll be bound by it, and so will we since we asked for it,” he spoke for everyone and stared directly at Claw to encourage him to talk.

Chapter Eighteen - The Storm of the End of the World

Their steps in the sand disappeared as soon they lifted one foot to put it in front of the other. The wind whispered louder now, but its voice was as foreign in their ears as it must have been to any traveler for centuries and millennia before them. It wasn't the wind of the desert that the people living there came to know as soon as they opened their eyes. No, it was different, a presence from a different world that existed hidden by a veil that protected those outside of it rather than those inside.

Duril shivered and wrapped his fingers harder around Toru's hand.

"Are you cold?" the young tiger asked and let go of Duril's hand only so that he could wrap his arm around him.

"Feel free to laugh at me, Toru, but I believe my trembling comes from fear."

"I'll shelter you from the storm. Just see how big I am," Toru said and puffed out his chest.

"I do not doubt it," Duril replied with a smile. "I just have the feeling that whatever story Claw is about to tell us will set in motion events that we should have left asleep."

Toru looked over his shoulder. They were all walking in a line now, drawing closer to one another, aware of the thing trying to reach them from behind. Duril didn't have to follow Toru's example to know that the tendrils of red crossing the sky were not only still there but growing closer at a much faster pace than they could walk.

"It isn't our choice what evil does," Toru said.

Duril stared at the handsome profile of the tiger's face. Sometimes, a cleverness, a wisdom even, shone from what the shapeshifter did or said, and right now was one of those times. For Toru, the truth of what he had said was self-evident, not apparent to most others. For that reason, among many others, Duril couldn't stop being in awe of him, of the simplicity of his way of thinking that divided right from wrong without a shadow of doubt.

Because of that, because he knew what the kindness in Toru's heart was capable of, Duril had hope for the horde they had left behind. Nothing brought everyone together better than a common enemy. What they could do together to face it, Duril didn't know, but he hoped that with his friends, they would be able to live through this new challenge of fate thrown at them. And, in the meantime, they might forget about the bad blood between them and the horde, and unite for a common purpose.

"You're right," Duril told Toru. "It's not our choice. What we can choose is how to beat it."

Toru grinned and squeezed Duril by the shoulders. "First, we must find one way, and then we'll go from there."

This was the best advice for now. And as unprepared as anyone must have felt to hear Claw's story, it was time to begin.

Claw began, his low pleasant voice accompanied, gently for now, by the whispers of the wind.

Varg didn't know if it helped in any way, but he took Claw's large hand in his, telling him, without words this time, that his story could be told.

"The merchant who said that he was bound to tell the story since he had been asked leaned over the table and gestured for his two companions to do the same. 'My friends,' he said, 'what I'm about to tell you is a cursed tale. We wouldn't want anyone else to hear it, for fear that we might end up spreading this curse.' Do you believe that such a thing as a curse was enough for me to heed that warning? I was all the more curious."

"At least, you have one flaw," Varg teased.

As frightening as the thought of hearing a cursed story was, it didn't mean that they should lose their spirit.

"One flaw, you say?" Claw grinned at him, happy with being complimented. "And there I was, thinking that you believed me to be nothing else but a bag of fleas."

"Just continue the story, flea bag."

"You hold me by the hand so tightly, I find it hard to believe that you mean any of that."

Varg laughed under his breath. They would defeat this sandstorm or whatever it was, and then a certain bear would pay for all this teasing in full.

Claw sighed and continued since the others were all eyes and ears waiting for him to tell the cursed story. "So, while I pretended to see about my meal, the merchant began talking again. They were reasonable in assuming that no one could hear them since they couldn't have known that a shapeshifter was sitting so close to them. My blessed sense of hearing helped me pick up each and every word they said.

"The merchant took one long sip from his tankard of ale, wiped the cuff of his shirt sleeve over his mouth and hesitated for a mere moment. 'I heard this story, my friends, while you were sound asleep at the oasis. For reasons I don't understand fully, I couldn't close one eye. So I woke up and wandered to the place where those old witches conferred.' His friends were all eyes and ears, and so was I, as you can easily imagine.

"The merchant continued. 'The witches didn't sense my presence at first, so I stood there, hidden behind a date palm and listened to their conversation. They were in an upheaval of sorts, their lives

having just been upended by the horde of orcs moving about.’ At that, one of the two listeners interrupted. ‘They were a long way from any horde, though, those witches.’ The storyteller didn’t contradict him but put up a hand as if he wished to explain everything when the right moment came.”

Varg perked up his ears, as the wind appeared to pick up a little more. It was insidious and strange the way this wind moved. It appeared to be nothing but a whim of nature announcing a storm like any other, but underneath its ordinary façade lay something of malice that Varg couldn’t bring himself to ignore. For a moment, he wondered if Claw didn’t want to stall his story only so that they would be farther and farther away from the evil riding behind them.

“As his companions fell silent again,” Claw picked up the thread of his story with flawless ease, “the merchant placed both his palms flat on the table and started to tell his tale. And this is how I will tell it to you, and you will hear it through my voice.”

Claw appeared to stand taller than before, his hand trapped in Varg’s turning slightly colder and stiffer. His voice rose over the wind and became harsher.

“Once upon a time, the world was blessed. It held no evil, only good. Everywhere you looked, there were nothing but islands and water. On the islands, food was plentiful, and no creature was in need of anything. But then, one day, an evil which had been lurking for some time underneath the turquoise waters of the lagoons decided that its exile had lasted for too long.

“For evil to exist, people must let go of the good in their hearts. So this evil, dark and cunning as it was, couldn’t convince anyone, although its voice was sweet, and the innocents that came to stumble upon it in the lagoons stopped to listen.

“Until it realized that promising riches and a life beyond the most fantastic dreams wasn’t enough. Each time it offered something, the people said that they had everything they wanted and could possibly desire for the duration of their lives. But the evil was cunning, as I told you. It learned the truth about the people never wanting for anything because they had never felt what it was like to be lacking or in need.”

“So what did the evil do?” Toru asked in an eager voice. “It’s not like you can convince people to love you when you’re ugly and dark and say nothing but bad things.”

Duril and Varg both chuckled slightly at Toru’s interruption, but Claw said nothing. Varg was starting to understand something was happening to the bearshifter. His body was stiffening, and his legs moved like they were made of wood.

“The evil started planting seeds of discontent in the ears of anyone who cared to listen. And people lived then in a state of such innocence that they couldn’t believe that someone would mislead them and want to harm them. What evil did was to make them look at one another and see who had the

most. Who just picked the juiciest berry? Who had the softest bed? Who found the most sheltered spot from the rain?"

As Claw asked these questions, his body was growing more taut with tension. It was as if he could feel something that none of the rest of them could. Varg strengthened his grip on the bearshifter's hand, ready to act if anything happened or Claw suddenly tried to get away from him.

"In time they became envious, and they started to quarrel. All the while, the evil's power grew and grew. It turned the water in the lagoon where it first emerged, first into a dark green that fascinated anyone who came near with glints of gemstones. People would walk into the lagoon, trustful of it as always, and evil began to drag them under, feeding its power, helping it grow.

"It took people a while to notice that some of them went missing. They worried and feared something they couldn't understand for the first time in their lives. At the same time, their fascination with the lagoon only grew greater. And more of them entered its emerald waters never to make it back to the surface again."

"All this happened in just one place?" Varg asked, hoping to gain back some of Claw's consciousness that appeared to be slowly engulfed by the story.

"No, not just in one. The evil had the ability to be in many lagoons at the same time. And it successfully cast its lures for thousands and thousands. Still, it was not enough. For evil to rise and break the spell that keeps it under, it needs a lot of souls."

Varg could tell when he exchanged a short look with Duril that they both understood that Claw spoke of it as if it was something happening right now.

"It needed to manipulate more than just poor souls falling prey to envy and yearning for the imaginary gemstones that blinked falsely inside the dark waters summoned. Then, after some thinking, the evil began to move the sand beneath the lagoon. With each tide, it would send some of the sand onto the shores and spread its poison. And still, it was not enough."

The last words were said by Claw in a low, unnatural voice. The pleasant timbre of the bearshifter's voice went through changes, and new inflections could be heard that hadn't been in it before. Varg stopped Claw for a moment. "My friend," he asked cautiously, "are you all right?"

"You asked for the story," Claw barked at him suddenly, taking them all by surprise.

Varg could read the same unease he felt on the faces of their other companions. Duril's eyes were filled with worry, Toru became apprehensive, and he was looking sideways as if to be prepared for the strike of an invisible enemy. Sog walked as fast as possible, more and more agitated, but he was silent, bound, as they all were, by the curse of listening to the story until its very end.

“We did, it’s true,” Varg admitted to appease Claw, but just like Duril, inside he worried, and just like Toru, inside he began getting ready for whatever would follow. Claw would have told them if he had known, but now he was no longer himself, and the time for questions had passed.

Claw returned to his story as if nothing had happened. His voice dropped to the same monotonous rhythm as before.

Toru hated with a fiery passion things he couldn’t understand. Why had this evil such a great need to sneak inside his friends’ souls and toy with them? He looked at Varg and Duril, too, and they were just as troubled as he was by what was happening to Claw. Although the bear had warned them that, at times, he might not sound like himself, and given them the assurance that they wouldn’t die all of a sudden or go insane, it was truly troubling to see someone as calm and steady as Claw falling prey to a dark anger that had no apparent cause under their very eyes.

Sog touched his elbow. “The big bear is strong. He can walk.”

Toru didn’t know what to say. Half if not more of what Sog was saying made little sense. Why was it so important for Claw to be able to walk? If he were to lose himself, what difference would that make?

As if he could read his thoughts, Sog pointed behind them. “It will catch us, soon. He must walk.”

Toru just nodded, not really knowing what he could say to that. Claw was returning to his story after shaking off Varg’s interest in his well-being, and he wanted to hear the rest.

“Since it was not enough, it was never enough, the evil had to do something more. It had to make the sand move and rise above their heads, everyone’s heads!” Claw suddenly shouted at the end of that sentence, startling them all.

“What’s wrong with him?” Toru asked under his breath, knowing that he would get no answer.

“Death, the goddess,” Sog said with reverence, “she’s seeking for him, she wants him.”

“What are you saying?” Toru asked.

“The big bear, he’s clever,” Sog said and patted his temple while his eyes rolled in his head, shaking like marbles. “He fought Death and beat her. But now that he opened the gates with his story, now she wants to catch him because she never forgets those who leave her.”

Toru stopped abruptly and seized Sog by the shoulders. “Stop talking in tongues. Who’s trying to do what to Claw?”

The sky above them was now bleeding. He and Sog both looked up, as did everyone else, except for Claw.

“Hear my story!” the bearshifter ordered, his voice a howl as loud as the wind. “The sand rises,” he continued in the same manner, “to make newborns to serve it!”

Toru let go of Sog and hurried toward Claw. The bear had managed to break Varg’s hold, probably by taking him by surprise, and stood tall, his arms stretched to the sky. And right behind them, the sand was rising.

Varg hadn’t expected Claw to shake him off that easily and suddenly, so he now tried to grab the bearshifter’s arm and bring it down. Not that he didn’t know that Claw was stronger than he was, but he was still surprised to find that he couldn’t budge the bear from his place not even by a smidge.

The others sensed the trouble and they all rushed to Claw. Toru grabbed the other arm, and Duril stood by Varg’s side to help. Sog chose to go round Claw and try to push him from behind. “He must walk. He can’t stay here!” the orc shouted. “Death will speak through him soon if we don’t move him!”

“I have no idea what he’s saying, but he’s right!” Toru roared as he put all his strength into making Claw lower his arm.

Varg and Duril both struggled on their side.

“The storm of the end of the world will soon rise,” Claw declared in a hollow voice. “The horde of Zukh Kalegh is joining me!”

Duril could feel tears at the corners of his eyes although they dried fast. The wind was blowing with a long wail now, and there was no doubt what fate awaited them if they didn’t do something. So, he surprised everyone, including himself, when he planted himself in front of Claw and struck him hard and fast across the face.

“What was that for?” Claw complained right away and shook his head. His arms dropped to his sides of his own accord, which promptly made Toru and Varg tumble to the ground.

The sand that had risen behind him ebbed away, but not too far. The bear put pressure on his cheek, rubbing it hard.

“I’m sorry,” Duril mumbled, “I truly am, but it seemed to me like you were channeling a really bad thing.”

“Did I tell the story?” Claw asked and stared around, at Toru and Varg who were scrambling to their feet. “Was it so bad that you had to punish me like that?”

Duril could feel his hand hurting. The skin on the palm burned where it had come in contact with Claw's face. "You could say that, but it's not punishment," he said quickly. "Just something I learned from an old healer. A method to wake up someone from a curse when they appear not to be themselves anymore. And there's a chance that they might still be saved," he added quickly.

Claw grinned at him while still holding his cheek gingerly. "I'd say it worked."

Sog was grunting and trying to make the bear move. "Walk, big bear, walk," the orc begged him.

Only then did Claw become aware of what was going on around them. "That storm, it's coming!"

The wind was blowing its hardest now, and tiny grains of sand began hitting them, pushed by it and guided by an unseen force. Duril put his hand to his cheek and brought it away speckled with blood. A single look at everyone else told him that they felt it, too.

"Close your eyes!" Claw ordered.

Duril didn't protest as the bear grabbed all of them under his large arms and pushed them forward. Sog ran after them, caught the bear by the hem of this shirt and climbed on his back. "Faster, faster," he cried out, "she's coming!"

If there was a time, when the power and advice of an old as time snake were needed, this had to be it.

"Demophios!" Toru shouted from the top of his lungs. "Shield us now or I'll turn you into coffin nails!"

His voice, as loud as he meant it to be, was engulfed by the ghastly wind, and the sand now turned into their enemy, hitting them everywhere with the stinging of a thousand cuts, getting in under their clothes, under their nails, embedding itself into them like it wanted to reach their insides and feed on them.

The wind suddenly stopped, and Toru waited for a heartbeat to open his eyes. They were all there, but the storm, where was it?

Only then did he realize that they were behind a see-through wall that could have been glass or nothing at all. What mattered was that the storm was raging outside still, as Toru could see the gnarly fingers of wind made of flowing sand rushing around them, without touching them.

"Ha, it worked!" he said loudly. "Duril, are you all right?" He hurried to the healer's side, offering a helping hand.

Duril caught his arm and straightened up. He appeared to have been knocked over by the force of the wind or something else. Toru turned toward Varg who waved to reassure him that he was fine.

Claw brushed his hands over his clothes, making them shed sand everywhere. They all had dots of red on their cheeks, where the sand grains had hit them before Demophios raised that fantastic shield to protect them.

The only one who seemed to have escaped unscathed was Sog. His leathery skin must have been his blessing. Duril quickly searched his bag and began to dab Toru's cheeks with something that stung at first but then felt good.

Toru caught the healer's arm. "Do yourself, too. You're bleeding."

"After I'm done with all of you." Toru huffed his displeasure but submitted to Duril's tender care.

Toru turned his attention toward Sog again. The orc was sitting on the ground, his arms wrapped around himself. He was rocking back and forth, like he wanted to offer himself comfort for something. Toru pointed him out to Duril. "Maybe you should talk to him a little."

His heart swelled as Duril's warm eyes filled with gratefulness. "I'll be right back."

"Old snake," Toru growled as soon as Duril had his back turned, "did you really have to wait so long until helping us?"

"You had to listen to the story to its end. Not that the master bear had the chance to tell it all. Your healer made sure to wake him up before that."

"Not like he had a choice," Toru said pointedly. "Claw was as good as gone. How could you just sit idle and watch?"

"The story is important," Demophios continued in the same placid voice.

"And caused this," Toru added and pointed at the mayhem pouring around them without touching, as they sat there in their little bubble of stillness.

"No," Demophios contradicted him. "Just hurried things a bit."

"Not like we needed that," Toru shot back and crossed his arms, feeling rather miffed at the old snake's strange choices.

"You couldn't have outrun it anyway," Demophios pointed out. "And this confrontation is something I have waited for a long time."

It took Toru only two heartbeats to catch what the snake was saying. "You waited? What's this confrontation you're talking about? And what's your hand in this?"

"Easy, young tiger," Demophios warned him. "I am not the cause of this sandstorm, as I am not the force behind what makes the sun travel over the sky, or the hand that rules people's destiny. I

am a traveler, like all of you, but one who has traveled back and forth between the different worlds the master bear talked of in his story.”

Toru munched on his lower lip in thought. “Varg, Claw,” he called out. “Come here and listen to my snake because I don’t understand anything he’s saying and my head hurts.”

“I’m not your snake. I’m not some pet,” Demophios bristled.

Good, at least he could show some feeling even if it was feeling caused by not being paid the proper respect.

Varg and Claw came near, and Toru submitted to the way the wolfshifter touched his face, shoulders, chest, and the rest of his body, to make sure that he was still in one piece. Even the big bear, as Sog called Claw, appeared to be a little shaken by what was happening to them.

“What is Demophios saying?”

“He knows more than he lets on,” Toru said, happy to leave the matter of the snake’s strange words in other hands, much abler than his.

“I am only speaking the truth,” Demophios said, his voice still a little annoyed, much to Toru’s satisfaction.

“Please, tell it to us, then,” Claw asked eagerly. “And thank you for saving us from what could have been a slow and painful death.”

“Indeed. You are more than welcome, master bear. A certain hothead could surely benefit from being taught some manners by you.”

Toru huffed and set his chin high. He wasn’t sure if Demophios could see how annoyed he was with him, but he surely hoped he did.

“Tell us the truth,” Varg insisted.

Even if he didn’t want to admit it, Toru was curious to hear what the snake had to say to them. It was true that Demophios had saved their hides by conjuring the bubble around them that kept them safe, but since he seemed so sly and slippery whenever he felt like it, Toru believed that he would rather bite his tongue than thank the old snake.

“The truth, master wolf, is that the evil Claw talked about in his story about the storm of the end of the world, is now summoning a great power. It chose to do so here, in the desert as many prophecies foretold, because the world from the story, the one made of nothing but blessed islands and the calm waters of a sea, is no more. In its place, the Great Barren rose, dry and unforgiving. The evil must have waited for your passing through to rise.”

“So we’re to blame,” Toru pointed out, no longer in the mood to stay silent.

“No, young tiger, you are not. Evil knows no boundaries, knows no time. It can wait forever. If you had come tomorrow or a week from now, or even an entire millennium in the future, it would still have been here, waiting. You see, the evil must defeat what’s good in the world to proclaim itself its ruler. And the good, that’s what you are. That’s what you all are.”

Demophios’ voice had grown warm with those words. Toru shifted his weight from one foot to another. “Thank you for saving us, Demophios,” he blurted out. “But you could have done it sooner,” he added quickly.

“I accept your gratitude,” the old snake replied graciously, ignoring the obvious reproach at the end. “Now, please let me continue. The Great Barren rose from the plunder the evil did. That is why it’s so dry and impossible to live in.”

“But orcs do live here,” Toru pointed out.

“They’re the only ones. And now the evil wants to forge them into its tools of destruction. The storm of the end of the world, the one Claw talked about in his tale, will engulf the whole world – or so it is said. But to do so, it must make sure that no one will stand in its path. You, young tiger, together with your friends, are what will stand against it. That is why it waited until now to emerge.”

“What’s this, about the horde?” Toru asked, aware of how unsettling those few words were. He stole glances in Duril’s direction. What would they do if Duril felt the call of blood again? If it were up to Toru, he would let them all rot in the heart of their horrible desert. Varg and Claw had to be of the same mind after being forced to fight to the death against the orcs. But Duril was different. He was one of them, for better or worse.

That could only mean that if they needed to save that entire horde of bloodthirsty creatures, they would do it, no questions asked.

Demophios appeared to have a keen sense of what he was thinking. “We cannot abandon the horde.”

“Why not?” Toru asked quietly, his eyes darting again toward Duril.

“Because it would not be called the storm of the end of the world if it weren’t carried by an army like no other. From the Great Barren, the evil will spread, it will engulf the world, and the power it will instill inside the very heart of the horde will cause it to grow so big that it will vanquish anyone daring to oppose it.”

“And you just sat here, in the desert, for thousands and thousands of years, on this truth,” Toru reproached the snake.

“And what was I to do? Do you believe, young tiger, that I haven’t tried to lure this evil out into the merciless sun so I could rid the world of it?”

“I don’t know what to believe,” Toru said, feeling pretty miffed over how his head wasn’t good enough to think of things like that. What someone as old and wise as Demophios had done for millennia while stranded in that desert was beyond his powers of comprehension.

“Well, I did my fair share of trying, that I can tell you. So, finding you, discovering your power when you were able to make me into the immortal being I am now, that was my true purpose and I will never deny it. Still, as much as none of you will want to hear this, the mere fact that the master bear didn’t succeed in telling the story till its end robbed us of an opportunity to make the evil show its hand before time.”

“What do you mean?” Toru asked, as anxious as the rest of his companions.

Demophios remained silent for a moment more as if he needed to make sure that he had the attention of everyone present. Duril and Sog were a bit farther away and couldn’t hear every word, and Toru wished that they wouldn’t. Yet, that was not a choice for him to make.

“The storm rages on, yes, but this is just a small warning compared to the maelstrom that will soon form in the heart of the Great Barren. As we speak, the hearts of the orcs, down to the last one beating in Zukh Kalegh, have been taken over by darkness.”

“And should we pity them?” Toru asked. “I’ve seen enough of their hearts. Their blood runs dark as it is. For all I know, the evil could have made them turn into its army whenever it felt like it.”

“Orcs may be its children, but even children go against their parents when they’re as unnatural and twisted as this one,” Demophios said.

Toru took no satisfaction in being told what was right.

“As dark at soul and heart as you may see them, young tiger,” Demophios continued, “even they wouldn’t be evil enough to wish for the destruction of the entire world. Because it would mean that once that purpose is fulfilled, there would be no more need for them.”

“Hmph,” Toru huffed for lack of anything else to say. “I saw them - how they throw themselves at death. No wonder one like Sog believes death is a goddess feeding on their souls. If you think that is all that’s keeping them from being part of this storm that you call the storm of the end of the world, I’d say that you are wrong.”

“Not all orcs deserve to die, do they, Toru?” That was Claw’s voice, calm and soothing as always.

Toru looked at Duril and Sog, and felt guilty. “No, not all,” he admitted.

Chapter Nineteen – Black Sun

Duril stood by Sog's side, listening carefully. Only a few steps from them, Toru was engaged in an argument with Demophios, and their words, while spoken quietly, could still be heard.

"Sog," Duril said gently, "what are you afraid of? What is the story you know?" He had an inkling that the orcs knew something very similar to the tale told by Claw, but maybe told through someone else's eyes and tongue.

"No story," Sog whined and caught his head between his large paws, swinging it from side to side in despair. "It is the prophecy that one day will come, and it will kill all orcs of Zukh Kalegh and beyond."

"You know of other orcs beside your brethren?" Duril asked, trying to approach the truth slowly and cautiously so that Sog didn't lose himself in fear and taint the story with nightmarish visions of his own.

Sog shook his head again. "We all share the same blood. Once she gives you a kiss, you're dead, dead, dead," he whispered, and his eyes grew wide as if he could see that force of destruction unfurling right in front of him.

"She?" Duril asked and regretted his question right away. Without a doubt, Sog could only mean the one he called a goddess.

"Death," Sog confirmed, speaking the name quietly, his eyes darting sideways as if frightened that whatever that entity was could hear him and strike him where he stood that very moment. "Orcs don't fear to die," he continued, "but her kiss is more than that. Orcs can die, but the horde should live forever."

Duril stole a glance at his friends. Toru was angry, Demophios was talking about the fate that awaited them, while Claw and Varg were listening, all eyes and ears. "Something worse than death," he murmured.

"No more orcs, never again," Sog continued in the same pleading voice.

And no more humans or others either, Duril concluded for himself. Whatever the goddess Sog was speaking of intended, he understood it to be the destruction of all life, and that was why Claw called the sandstorm raging around them "the storm of the end of the world".

"Then we will fight her," Duril said and patted Sog on the shoulder.

"You cannot," came the pained reply. "She's in the sand, rising and getting under your skin."

"Then we mustn't let her do that," Duril said promptly. He tried to sound courageous, but what could one do against such a powerful, insidious enemy?

He took in their surroundings with growing disquietude. The sand was rising further, making it hard to see. Although it was supposed to still be noon, and the sun should have been bestowing its merciless love upon the desert, around them a twilight of sorts descended, accompanied by a chill that made Duril shiver for a moment. The dark blanket surrounding their protective bubble grew ever thicker and it had to be nothing but a matter of time until it would be pitch black.

“Demophios,” Duril asked, “do you know what this is?”

The usually serene voice of the wise snake carried none of its reassuring quality. “I have heard of it, seen it in the fascinated eyes of witches, but never witnessed it. The worst is yet to come.”

Eyes of storm rose and faded in the swirling sand. Nevertheless, they could hear nothing, and that created a sense of anticipatory dread that was only increased tenfold by Demophios’ ominous words.

“Are we just going to sit here and do nothing?” Toru inquired.

Duril could tell that the young tiger was itching to fight. It was, after all, in his blood, and it was also his way of dealing with everything. But many times thus far, it had been proven by whims of fate or destiny that things were never simple enough to be fought head on. A different kind of evil lurked around them, one that was incapable, for now, of striking them directly and bringing doom upon their heads. But that didn’t mean they were protected for all eternity, and in his straightforward manner, Toru was right.

“Soon, young tiger, soon. They will come.”

Demophios’ voice seemed to possess an uncanny ability to summon the shadows that began to appear around them.

“What are--” Varg stopped mid-sentence, swallowing his words.

They all stared into the new nightmare manifested right outside their unnatural shelter. The shadows rose, became bigger, and suddenly a face plastered itself against the invisible wall that stood between them and the world.

Duril took one step back. Sog began to wail.

“Is that... an orc?” Toru asked, his voice hesitant.

The apparition could be considered such, but its features were distorted, belonging to a nightmare like no other. The skin had been pulled over the cranium so tightly that it appeared to be one moment away from splitting and revealing all the flesh and bone underneath. The mouth of the apparition opened wide, showing rows of sharp teeth, but while the creature should have inspired nothing but fear and visions of pain in those gazing upon it, instead its entire visage was contorted in a scream of pain or a cry for help.

Sog surprised them all by jumping to his feet and hurrying to the transparent wall that kept them protected from the poor souls outside. He stretched out his arms and fanned his fingers as if in an effort to pull that apparition together and make sense of it.

Duril grabbed him from behind and tried to pull him back, but it was tough to do with just one arm, and Sog stubbornly opposed the restraint, too fascinated by the creature on the other side of the invisible wall to care.

They had seen armies of darkness before, Toru thought, as he took in the many faces now sliding around them, some stopping for a few moments, others stopping in place, refusing to go away, all with their mouths open in cries that could be of despair or something even deeper. He could understand the pity Duril felt for his brethren, and Demophios was helping no one with his words of doom.

It could be, however, nothing more than another deceit, one whose sole aim was to make them lower their guard so that it could strike them later. The evil they had confronted thus far spared nothing when it came to tangling them in a web of lies, and Toru believed that this desperate horde of orcs was nothing but one of the many deceptions crafted by that unnatural being.

Duril was trying in vain to pull his orc friend away from the barrier, so Toru hurried to the rescue. He grabbed Sog and dragged him back. The orc fell but didn't show any sign of getting mad at him. Instead, he shook his head, then grabbed it between his paws and turned away from the visions around them.

"Thank you, Toru," Duril whispered.

"Demophios," Toru called out to the wise snake again, "now would be a good time for all that wisdom you talk about until my head hurts."

He could tell that Varg and Claw felt as clueless as he did, but there was no sense of satisfaction in that. What he needed was for the snake to point out the enemy so that he could crush it and save all his friends.

"Your friend has an essential artifact that will help you," the snake replied.

"What artifact?"

It was so very strange to see all those apparitions marching past but hearing nothing of what had to be their cries of fear and despair. They were being taken, molded into something else, and thrown into a battle surely not of their choosing. Toru, as a warrior at heart, could understand the dread that lurked under those crazed eyes, now bloodshot and threatening to burst out of their sockets. A true warrior always fought his own battles, not someone else's, whether by belief or choice.

“The pearl?” Duril asked and took the precious stone out of his bag.

A small light flickered inside it, but it seemed so bright that it hurt their eyes as the darkness grew thicker and thicker around them.

“Yes,” the wise snake confirmed.

“But I thought it is something to be used after a bond has formed between Claw, Varg, and Duril,” Toru said. “And under a white moon, not a black sun,” he added and pointed above them.

In the sandstorm, the sun seemed a faint dream, somewhere far away, its power gone.

“It is useful in many ways and will serve the present purpose,” Demophios said. “And the bond already exists. You’re the best of friends that ever walked the earth. Few friendships are truly tested against the test of death.”

“What do we have to do with the pearl?” Toru asked, knowing the truth of the snake’s words to the deepest crimson folds of his heart.

For a moment, Demophios appeared to hesitate.

“You like to talk so much when no one wants to listen,” Toru exclaimed. “How about you tell us about the pearl and how we should use it?”

“It is a powerful artifact. Its effects will put the greatest fear of all into your soul,” Demophios said quietly.

“Ha! I fear nothing,” Toru replied and crossed his arms. “Save your breath.”

“If you’re so keen to charge ahead...” Demophios replied, and, for a split moment, Toru wondered whether it wouldn’t have been better to listen to the snake for once.

They had no time to spare. Demophios could keep all his cautions and premonitions to himself. Toru touched the pearl as it sat in Duril’s open palm, its otherworldly flicker growing stronger and stronger. “What do they have to do?” he asked the snake.

“Their blood must touch the pearl. It will combine and become one,” Demophios supplied right away.

“That’s all?”

“That is what is required if their purpose is to make the artifact come alive,” Demophios confirmed. “Yours will start shortly after,” he added.

“That’s what I wanted to hear,” Toru declared with determination.

He didn't need to tell his friends to gather round. Varg and Claw drew closer and watched as Duril placed the pearl on the ground carefully. "We need something small and sharp."

Sog hurried to them then and handed Duril his dagger. Toru watched as the healer held his palm open for Varg to cut a thin line across. From the shallow wound, a few droplets fell on the pearl and the fire within dimmed for a moment only then to blaze brighter. Varg followed suit and did the same, with Claw going last.

Dark waters swirled inside the pearl now, and the blood on it turned into a thread made of three crimson strands. It rose into the air, split into three and suddenly shot at the chests of Duril, Varg, and Claw.

Toru shouted as his friends fell to the ground, motionless. "What happened? What's this?" He took Duril in his arms and shook him, but his head just lolled back, his eyes closed. "Demophios!" he bellowed, prey to a new kind of despair.

"Young tiger, you don't have the luxury of time."

"Are you mad? Duril... Varg... Claw..."

"They're orcs!" Sog suddenly shouted. He pointed a gnarly finger and Toru stared, not wanting to believe.

Duril's skin was turning greenish, and so did Varg's and Claw's.

"You perfidious snake!" he yelled. He grabbed the pendant from his shirt and squeezed it in his fist, trying to crush it into dust, but the metal held.

"Toru, stop!" Demophios ordered.

Something in the old snake's voice made him do as he was told.

"They're not dead yet, and you will save them. Now look," Demophios added.

Toru's eyes fell to the pearl on the ground. The thread of blood was pulling its tendrils back and the pearl was now slowly transforming into something resembling a sword. Its blade shone so bright that Toru had to shield his eyes, he who had never been afraid of the sun.

"Quickly," Demophios said hurriedly. "Grab it!"

Toru didn't hesitate for one moment. His skin burned when it touched the hilt of the sword, and it felt as if it was trying to make itself one with Toru's hand, but still, he didn't dally. For what it was worth, Demophios had proven to be on their side, and a weapon meant that he would get to fight, which was the thing he knew how to do best.

As much as his heart tugged at him to stay back and watch over his friends, his determination stood resolute. The sword began to pull itself up and Toru with it as well.

“Now,” Demophios continued, “put me inside that small nook in the hilt.”

“What nook?”

Above them, the bubble that had protected them was growing thin because Toru could feel the wind in his hair and the smell the fetor of putrefying bodies.

“Look,” Demophios said, but his voice was growing faint.

Toru felt someone climbing up his back and, before he could protest, Sog snatched the snake pendant from his shirt and pushed it inside a tiny hole that his quick eyes must have seen. The blade jerked and pulled him up harder, all while Sog hung on Toru’s back.

“Get off me, orc,” Toru shouted, trying to shake off his passenger.

“No. Sog saves the horde, too,” the orc replied and only dug his fingers and nails deeper into Toru’s shoulders.

Toru ground his teeth, but there was no more time to fight the silly orc because they were up in the air. He felt the tiny sand grains cutting through his skin and he groaned in pain. At first, they only seemed to be prickling his face, but they did hurt, more and more as time passed. Sog threw one large paw over Toru's eyes. “Up, up, tiger,” he said, “Sog will be your sight!”

If those grains of sand got into his eyes, he would be blinded. Toru tightened his hold on the hilt, Demophios was quiet now that he had been made part of the sword. He could only sense through his fingers how the blade continued to slash through the air, reaching higher and higher, as there was no sight he could use.

Sog removed his hand, and then Toru realized that they were so high that the desert was far below. He spared only one look at the earth beneath them and then set his eyes back in the direction the blade was guiding them. A single thread of sand was moving ahead of them, turning into a hand that covered the sun.

Toru no longer needed Demophios to tell him what had to be done. His grip on the sword assured him that the weapon was one with him.

“There, tiger, there,” Sog said and pointed high above them.

He followed the orc’s outstretched arm and saw what he meant. A hand of black sand blocking the sun and trying to engulf it whole seemed to break at a point along its unnaturally formed wrist. Toru willed himself higher, as it was only the power of the blade that appeared to move them. Like magic, the blade changed its direction slightly. “I’m your master!” Toru shouted victoriously.

“You’re not my master,” Sog protested right away.

“I wasn’t talking to you,” Toru replied.

“Who were you talking to?”

Toru didn’t waste time replying to the silly orc and raised the blade, his entire body tensing. The air was stiller here, and it appeared as if the sandstorm was conserving its power, focused on maintaining its assault on the sun in the shape of that deformed hand with fingers sharpened into claws.

“Now, tiger, now,” Sog shouted, more and more agitated.

Toru didn’t need an orc to tell him what to do. As they were moving past the weak point Sog had pointed out, he slashed the blade one time, hard and fast. The sand thread jerked violently, the unnatural life inside it seemingly surprised by the attack. A bellow came from below, cavernous and wailing, as the fingers stretched over the sun loosened their grip and began coming apart.

“We did it!” Sog cried out. “Zugh Kalegh lives!”

Toru wanted to smack the orc upside the head so badly, but he was too happy to see how the thread below them was unfurling and coming apart. The sun was shining bright and unhindered once more. For a moment, he wanted to smile in triumph, but the warmth on his face turned into a burning nightmare, and despite himself, he let out a cry of pain.

In a split second, his face was covered again, but this time, it appeared that Sog was shielding him with his entire body, having changed positions swiftly when the sandstorm lost its grip on the sun.

“Sog protects silly, big-mouthed tiger,” the orc said with self-importance.

“Just because you have tougher skin,” Toru protested, his words muffled as his face was forced against Sog’s sunken chest. “You stink.”

Sog’s laughter was nothing short of the neighing of a horse. Toru didn’t have time to reprimand the orc further, as they appeared to be dropping fast. When they landed on the ground, he groaned, his back crashing against it and making his entire body jerk.

Nonetheless, he was alive, and the sandstorm appeared to have lost its power considerably. He pushed Sog away, grunting and protesting. “Ha!” he shouted victoriously as he jumped to his feet. “Take that, storm of the end of the world! You’re no match for me!”

His happiness, however, was short-lived. His eyes fell on his comrades, and they looked as if they were in the same deep sleep as before. Toru hurried to them, touching their chests, leaning over to feel their breath. They weren’t dead, but they were so deep in sleep that they were as good as that.

“Demophios,” he shouted in despair, “why aren’t they waking up? I defeated that ugly storm!”

No reply came. Toru reached for the blade that he had dropped while traveling back to the ground, and on the hilt was the nook where the snake pendant had been placed, but no sign of the metal snake could be seen. “Demophios?” he called. “Where are you? You’re not dead, are you? You can’t be dead. You’re immortal, remember?”

Nothing but silence answered him. Toru frantically searched the shifting sands but no sign of the ancient snake could be found. Toru’s eyes filled with moisture as his heart filled with despair. He had only one ally left, and he seemed to be lost, if not worse.

Toru wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and squeezed the hilt of the sword, not wanting to shout in despair again.

“Tiger,” Sog said and pulled at his elbow.

“Let me be, orc,” Toru spat. “Can’t you see everyone’s as good as dead? Don’t come near me unless you know how to wake them up.”

“Sog knows.”

Toru dropped the sword back to the sand and turned toward the orc. “You do?”

Sog nodded eagerly. “Mud cakes.”

Toru felt his face contorting in disgust without willing it to do so in any way. “Mud cakes?”

Sog continued to move his head up and down with enthusiasm. “Orcs are made of mud. If you want to wake them up, they need mud cakes.”

“You’re just a silly orc,” Toru said with irritation. “Nobody eats mud cakes.”

Sog didn’t appear deterred in the slightest by being contradicted. Instead, he grabbed Toru by the wrist and began pulling him. “Must find water. Water and sand make mud cakes.”

Toru threw another look at his friends. They all appeared to be dead to the world. At this point, he didn’t have the slightest idea what to do, and Demophios was lost. Toru couldn’t believe that the wise reptile was destroyed. Immortal snakes living in the desert couldn’t die, could they?

He stopped Sog. “Wait, we have water here.” As far as he knew, Duril always carried a skin of water with him, in his bag, and as cautious as he was, he must have filled it at the oasis the last time they stopped. Toru searched through the bag and showed Sog the water pouch.

Sog grabbed it, sniffed it, and then opened it. “Too little water. Not enough for all the orcs.”

If this silly orc thought he would start making mud cakes for the entire horde, he had to be out of his mind. But Toru didn’t want to contradict him further. “Let’s just make some for Duril, Varg, and Claw. Then there will be more of us to make mud cakes for your horde.”

Sog mustn't have missed the disdain in his words, so he stared at him curiously. He pointed at the still sleeping Duril. "Not-orc is the horde, too."

"No, he's not," Toru countered right away.

"Yes, he is," Sog insisted, putting his chin up and looking like he was itching for a fight.

"Make those mud cakes already," Toru replied and raised his voice.

That seemed to be enough to spur the orc into action. He crouched and began making a small hole in the ground, digging with his hands. "Mud is blood, and blood is life," he began singing, as he splashed water inside.

His gnarly fingers worked quickly. Toru felt like gagging when Sog spat into the strange dough he was making. He decided that he didn't need to know about making mud cakes, so he turned his back and went to check on Duril again. He took the limp hand into his and began talking to him. "I know that you can hear me. I defeated that ugly storm."

"It was Death, Death, Death, we vanquished Death," Sog chanted as he went about his making mud cakes.

"I vanquished Death," Toru said. "Stop putting silly ideas in Duril's head."

Sog snickered, and his hands continued to move fast. Aligned in rows around him now stood about a dozen mud cakes. "Not-orc knows Sog is a brave orc."

Toru mumbled something under his breath, but he had no time to argue with Sog. "Did you make those disgusting mud cakes?"

"I did, I did," Sog confirmed, grabbed one and hurried with it to Toru. "Open his mouth and stuff it in."

Toru threw Sog a worried look. "Are you sure? He might choke."

Sog shook his head. "He's an orc. Any orc likes mud cakes."

Toru shrugged. Duril was still deep asleep, and the others showed no sign that they would wake up soon. He took the mud cake from Sog's hand, tore off a small piece and pushed it gently between Duril's lips.

"More, more," Sog insisted and took the entire cake.

Toru didn't have time to intervene, and Sog pushed the whole thing into Duril's mouth, stuffing it with it. Annoyed with the orc's strange ways of waking up those sleeping, Toru smacked him one time hard over the head. Sog squealed and jumped away, turning away from him.

He was about to scold him some more, when his eyes fell on the angry red marks on Sog's back. His entire skin there was an open wound, but Sog didn't seem to be bothered by it.

"What is that?" he asked, but he knew what it was as soon as the words left his mouth.

Duril was right about Sog. The orc must have endured all the strength of the sun while protecting his face, taking the brunt of it without complaining or asking for his actions to be recognized in any way.

Sog faced him and grinned. "Sun is wicked. He gave Sog blessing marks."

Toru sighed and smiled at him. "Thank you for not letting the sun give me those. You're still a silly orc, though. How long are these mud cakes supposed to be taking?"

"As long as needed," Sog replied with self-importance.

"Why are you two fighting?" Duril's groggy voice made them stop.

Toru paid Sog no more attention and hurried back to Duril. He quickly wiped away the remains of the mud cake around Duril's mouth. "You're awake!" he exclaimed and pulled the healer into a tight hug.

Sog appeared by their side right away. "We vanquished Death, and Sog made mud cakes!"

Duril looked confusedly at Toru, then at Sog, and then shook his head. His mind was so foggy. He grabbed his head between his hands and pressed his fingers against his temples. The last thing he remembered was...

"What happened?" he asked as he noticed Varg and Claw on the ground, seemingly lifeless.

He struggled to his feet, and Toru hurried to help him. "You three spread your blood on the pearl, and then you all fell to the ground, turning into orcs, and then a sword appeared, and I grabbed it, and then I vanquished--"

"We vanquished," Sog piped in.

"We vanquished," Toru relented, "the storm that was Death."

Duril blinked a few times. "Turning into orcs?" At a closer look, Varg and Claw appeared to have a greenish tint to their skin that hadn't been there before. "And you two," he whispered, as his eyes finally cleared and noticed that there was no more storm raging around them, "you saved us?"

“You, at least,” Toru said and looked down. But then his handsome face lit up again. “But Sog knows how to make these very disgusting mud cakes, and we fed you one, so we only need to give Varg and Claw some, too.”

Sog looked very happy when Duril’s eyes fell on him. “Sog and Not-orc and tiger then make mud cakes for the horde,” he said with conviction.

Toru made a face that told Duril everything he needed to know about the young tigershifter’s supposed involvement in that particular operation.

“It looks like I missed a lot,” Duril said. “Did Demophios tell you about the mud cakes?”

Toru looked away and bit his bottom lip, a sign of worry that Duril had come to recognize over the time they had spent together on the road. “Demophios might be lost. Or maybe he’s sulking somewhere nearby. I think he’s just upset that we don’t call him ‘Your Majesty’ or something like that,” he said quickly.

Duril didn’t want to investigate this further right now. There had to be a solid reason why the wise snake was silent and couldn’t be found, and he would discover what it was later. Now, waking Varg and Claw from the same slumber he had been engulfed by only until moments earlier was of the utmost importance.

“I make mud cakes,” Sog said again.

“Great,” Duril praised him. “Would you please hand me one so that we can wake up Varg? And you two are the best friends anyone can have on the face of the earth.” He kissed Toru’s forehead and gave him a hug.

Then he pulled Sog into an embrace as well. The orc protested and squealed for a moment, but eventually went limp and relaxed into the hug and said nothing else.

Duril dared to look around only for a moment. Varg and Claw didn’t seem to be the only ones asleep. He feared the most for the horde. The smell that came from the fallen bodies around them didn’t indicate that they were still alive.

He took a mud cake from Sog and walked over to Varg. Duril felt unease as he lifted the wolfshifter’s head and rested it against his knee. The same smell of death seemed to be coming from him, too, but he had to be wrong because that scent was so strong and overpowering all around them that he could be mistaken.

“Come on, Varg. You might hate me for it, but I really need to feed you this mud cake,” he said gently.

“This disgusting mud cake,” Toru insisted.

Duril hid a smile. With someone like that by his side, how could he lose hope? Only moments ago, he must have been as good as dead, just like Varg and Claw, and yet, here he was, kicking and breathing, proof that their friends were only deeply asleep.

Toru and Sog gathered close, as anxious as he was to see the wolfshifter opening his eyes. Varg growled something in his sleep, appeared to chew for a while, but then he spit it out and returned to his state from before.

“Why is the mud cake not working?” Toru asked. “Did you put something different in this one?” he questioned Sog. “Like more spit?”

Duril felt his stomach lurching for a moment but willed it to settle. Whatever Sog had put in his special mud cakes, it had definitely worked in his case but wasn’t working for Varg. “Can you bring me another one? Varg is so big, maybe he needs more than me.”

“And you must shove it all in his mouth in one go,” Toru added.

Sog hurried to obey right away and came back with another mud cake. Duril took it and tried to put it all inside Varg’s mouth, but his teeth were clenched now and no sign of life save for his steady breathing could be detected.

He exchanged worried looks with Toru and Sog. “Where is Demophios?” he asked, hoping his voice wasn’t shaking much.

“I told you,” Toru said, “he’s lost and he isn’t saying anything.”

Toru then pointed at something on the ground, going to grab it. It was a sword of exquisite craftsmanship, unlike anything else he had ever seen. Its sharp blade was as white as snow, but translucent at a closer look. However, the intricate design of the hilt grabbed all attention. Toru pointed at a small hole.

“That’s where I put the snake pendant. But he must have fallen out when we fell from the sky.”

Duril didn’t know what to say for a moment, but then decided that he wasn’t there to wallow in despair. “We must find another remedy, it seems,” he said. “And Demophios said that I would save the horde, right?”

“Yes,” Toru said and nodded eagerly. “You will. Varg and Claw, too, because they’re orcs now.”

“Starting with them.” Duril placed Varg’s head gently back on the ground and reached for his leather bag. “Demophios might not be with us for the moment,” he said, careful to protect Toru’s feelings, “but we have some wisdom with us, as well.”

The tome had special powers, as he recalled the story shown to him by Elidias, the one in which the legends came alive. He could only hope that some answers were in there as well.

Chapter Twenty – Guarded By Destiny

They were nothing but three heads gathered over the tome in search of answers. Toru didn't know what Duril was looking for, and he watched the ant-like symbols on the yellowed pages just because Sog did the same. He secretly hoped that the orc was as unknowing of the significance of those symbols as he was, but he couldn't ask directly.

“Not-orc knows the signs?” Sog asked as he bumped heads with Toru in an obvious effort to stare more into Duril's face than the other.

“I do,” Duril said. “You two can care for Varg and Claw while I'm trying to find a clue about what we can do to save them.”

“What if the book doesn't tell you how to save them?” Toru questioned.

“Then we'll search for the answer somewhere else,” Duril replied promptly.

Toru stole a look at Sog. The orc was licking his fingers, probably in search of the last remnants of those terrible mud cakes, but his face was all scrunched up in thought, which meant that he was concerned about the situation being as serious as it was.

“Come, Sog,” he said curtly and grabbed the orc by the arm to drag him toward the sleeping shapes of his friends.

Duril needed his quiet to focus on the mysterious words, and the least the two of them could do was to stay out of the way. He took in, for a long moment, the healer's hunched shoulders and the way he stood there, perusing the text with his warm and clever eyes, realizing all over again why he loved him.

He turned away and knelt by Varg's side. The wolf's skin had turned green completely, and a pair of tusks peeked from under his upper lip. Toru touched them briefly.

“All part of the tribe, now, all part of the tribe,” Sog said and nodded thoughtfully.

“Have you ever seen anything like this before?” Toru asked.

“Yes, yes, Sog saw, orcs can become, all blood and bones and skin,” the orc replied.

“How? And why?”

Sog stared into his eyes. His ugly face seemed lit up with intelligence, and his eyes shone. His horde might have thought of this creature as someone that could be overlooked, neglected, treated as nothing but a slave, but Toru began to understand what made Sog different from his brethren. Even if what he knew of fate made it seem as if only chance had brought together Sog and Duril, it must have been more than that. Toru seriously doubted that many orcs could take pride in being as clever as this one, no matter how bad his table manners and strange way of speaking were.

When he had fought the orcs before, they had all seemed to him just a mass of mindless creatures, bent on spilling blood and nothing else. Maybe Sog was better now that he no longer had a horde to mistreat him and walk all over him, while he was made to believe that it was there, at its bosom, that he belonged.

“Orcs are not humans,” Sog replied to his question and nodded again.

Toru snorted. “That’s not hard to miss. Sure, they’re not humans.”

“They make orcs out of mud,” Sog continued, ignoring him, “and they make orcs out of blood.”

“Who are they?” Toru asked. Perhaps he had hurried too quickly to believe Sog to be an orc who had succeeded in climbing out of the well of stupidity that held his entire kin. Except for Duril, but Duril didn’t count because he wasn’t an orc-orc, he decided quickly.

“The gods of war,” Sog whispered and looked around.

The bubble that had protected them before was gone now, gone like Demophios, and the wind whispered to them and carried the smell of the putrefaction of the horde. They needed to save Claw and Varg and make a run for it. This place was turning into nothing but pestilence through and through.

“Everyone’s already dead,” Toru said without thinking.

“No, no, no, not dead,” Sog denied and shook his head rapidly. “They’re just sleeping.”

“Varg and Claw are just sleeping,” Toru said and touched Varg’s forehead, searching for a remnant of warmth to convince him that his friend wasn’t gone. “But the rest,” he pointed around, “they’re done for.”

“Sog and Not-orc save the horde,” Sog said with emphasis. “Silly tiger can sit and watch.”

Toru growled under his breath. “Who are you calling a silly tiger? You’re silly.”

“No, you’re silly.”

“Just shut up,” Toru muttered, annoyed already. “Duril needs quiet to understand the signs.”

At that, Sog nodded solemnly. If it were about Duril, he didn’t hesitate to obey, as long as it meant that he could help the healer.

Duril could hear Toru’s and Sog’s quarrelling not far from him, but it didn’t bother him. “Elidias, Agatha, Demophios,” he whispered while leaning over the page, “if you can hear me, wherever you are, lend me your wisdom. We need it more than ever.”

He caressed the pages as he turned them, but nothing that he hadn't written or read already appeared in front of his eyes. If the tome remained silent, what choices did they have to save Claw and Varg? They would probably have to carry them out of the desert to a place where they could be cured, but did they have the time that would take? And Sog, he would surely become desperate over hearing that they would leave the horde behind, as good as dead.

Duril grimaced as a sting in his palm suddenly pierced through him. He stared at it, at the thin red line that welled up across it, and then closed his fist. A tiny drop of blood fell on the page. He was about to reach for a small cloth inside his bag to wipe it off, but then he froze.

His blood blossomed on the page, turning into a drawing, first of a black stalk, and then of a full-fledged plant with a flower at its top. The flower bloomed with speckles of red and ended with a full crown of a deeper shade of crimson.

"Toru, Sog, you should see this," he called out.

The two stopped their fight immediately and rushed to him.

"Was this flower here before?" Toru asked.

"No," Duril replied. "I felt a cut on my palm stinging all of a sudden and when I closed my hand, a drop of blood fell on the page. And then this happened. I believe this is a sign, don't you think?"

"Could it be the cure you've been looking for?" Toru asked.

"Sog knows this flower," the orc intervened.

Duril and Toru both snapped their heads toward him fast. "You do?"

"Yes. It is guarded by destiny," Sog said with importance, happy, without a doubt, to impress them with his knowledge.

Duril grabbed the orc by the shoulder. "Then we must find it. Can you take us to it?"

The corners of Sog's eyes fell. "It is guarded by destiny," he insisted.

"What do you mean by that? Speak clearly," Toru commanded.

Duril was eager to learn the same thing, but he knew Sog had his own way of talking, and they needed to have patience.

Sog pointed toward the sky. "The destiny decides when and where its flower blooms."

"Great," Toru commented. "It wasn't enough to have old witches talking strangely, now Sog is one of them, too."

“Does the flower appear only when it rains?” Duril asked, remembering some of the things he had read during their short respite in Shroudharbor.

“It’s not the rain, it’s the wind that tells you,” Sog continued. “He speaks the tongue of destiny.”

“Well, then tell us what he says,” Toru demanded impatiently, grabbing Sog by one arm and shaking him.

“He says you’re a silly tiger,” Sog said and shook his arm free.

“Sog,” Duril said reproachfully, “can you tell us where to find the flower? It is the key to finding a cure for everyone.”

“Sog must listen.” The orc turned on his heels and walked a fair distance from them. Then, he plonked down and sat there, head in his hands. “You be quiet!” he yelled shortly after that.

Duril made a sign for Toru to remain silent. The tiger snorted and looked away. Then he began speaking in a low, quiet voice. “Duril, you know that you cannot save them.”

“The horde, you mean?” Duril whispered back.

“Yes. Look at them, does anyone look alive to you?”

“We’ve been through many strange things. I don’t dare to not believe anything at the moment. And Demophios said that the horde would find their saviors in us.”

“He meant you. Only you. And I think he might have flaked now and then,” Toru insisted. “I mean, look at him, all lost right now in all this sand. If he was so clever, he should have known not to disappear like that.”

It made sense that Toru was upset by the wise snake’s disappearance. Duril didn’t have an answer for him, and he didn’t dare prod at such a recent wound. For all the bickering between Toru and Demophios, it was clear as day where everyone’s loyalties stood. The young tiger knew how to tell right from wrong and good from bad, and he must have known for a while now that Demophios was truly on their side.

“I must try,” Duril said. He hadn’t dared to look around much. The sight of all those unmoving bodies was enough to shake his faith in the purpose the old serpent had sketched for him in so few words.

Toru didn’t appear to agree but didn’t contradict him outright this time. Sog jumped to his feet and shouted victoriously, “I know!”

Toru patted Duril on the shoulder as he stood. “I’ll go find this flower. Varg and Claw need it. You stay with them.”

Duril nodded. "Please take care, Toru. I couldn't bear--"

He didn't dare to finish the words. Their path was dangerous, peppered with enemies at every corner, and while he didn't have the same sense of foreboding as before, he didn't want Toru or any of them, for that matter, to let their guards down.

"I'd come back to you if I were in pieces," Toru assured him.

That was all he needed to know. Toru held his hand in his for a moment and then he marched toward Sog who was already jumping up and down with excitement, talking to himself.

"So, orc, where is your flower?" Toru asked.

"Come, come, Sog will show you," the orc gestured for him to follow.

Toru's eyes fell on Sog's back, and his heart softened. The red lashes crisscrossing that leather-like skin were still oozing, and even if the orc didn't seem bothered by them, it didn't mean that they hurt less than they looked. Sog had done that for him without thinking twice, and Toru felt chastised even without anyone saying anything to him.

"Duril will give you something for those," Toru said out loud.

"What?" Sog asked, half-turning toward him.

"For the blessing marks left by the sun on your back," Toru replied.

Sog threw him a lopsided grin. "Later, later, first the horde."

The poor thing, he still believed that all those dead orcs could be saved. Toru didn't have the heart to contradict him, not this time. Later, he would probably kick and shout, and Toru would have to drag him away from that appalling sight, but for now Sog needed to ride on that wave of hope that still carried and guided his steps.

"What did the wind tell you?" Toru asked, curious about Sog's impressive ability to know what the wind of the desert said to anyone with the right ears to listen.

Sog shook his head. "Come, come, tiger. No time to chit-chat."

Toru shrugged. He didn't like talking mindlessly much either, not when Varg and Claw needed that flower that had to be the cure for their current affliction. He winced as he stepped on bodies. Sog didn't appear to mind. Orcs had to be used to the face of death so much they wouldn't be bothered by a thing like that.

Toru didn't know whether he should admire Sog for it, or pity him. These orcs, they were Sog's people, and yet he didn't spare them a glance as he walked in front, muttering under his breath things only he could make sense of. That had to be how he kept his hopes high, ignoring what was not his to change for now.

Or ever, Toru thought but didn't say it, not in front of this orc who shouldn't have cared less if someone like him got blinded by the sun or suffered a worse fate.

A slight unsettling sensation gripped him as they walked away from the sea of putrefying bodies. They were leaving it quickly behind, as Sog was fast, and his long legs could take him far seemingly without any effort. Toru was a bit annoyed by how he had to increase his pace only to keep up with the orc.

"Is it far?" Toru asked.

"Quiet, silly tiger, quiet," Sog whispered, "we must hear the wind. He keeps telling us."

"Maybe he tells you," Toru muttered and looked behind. "Aren't we getting too far from Duril and the rest?"

Sog waved both arms above his head like he couldn't be bothered with such things. "We'll walk and walk until we find it."

"I thought the wind already told you where it is," Toru accused. "Your horde might not have enough time for us to scurry the desert to and fro as your ears fool us into doing."

"Sog and silly tiger move fast," the orc argued. "We'll find the cure by the time the sun sets. But first, we need to fight destiny."

Toru had an increasingly strange sensation about what or who Sog called destiny. Something told him that it would involve using his strength and will to fight again. Only that he would have liked, for a change, to know what he was going against. "Sog, what is destiny?"

"Destiny has claws, destiny has teeth," Sog chanted.

Ah, so it had to be some sort of animal, Toru decided. "How big is it?"

"It goes round and round and round," Sog replied promptly.

"I didn't ask you about its shape," Toru insisted in an irritated voice. "And what do you mean, it goes round and round?"

"And round," Sog completed the sentence.

Toru was about to give the half-witted orc a piece of his mind when Sog suddenly broke into a sprint. He appeared to have a definite destination in mind now as his entire body cut through the air like an arrow speeding to its target.

Toru ran after him, decided not to let the orc out of his sight for one second. Even if Sog had proven to be a good ally, who could say what these fickle creatures would do from one moment to another? They came from a different stock, not having anything in common with humans or shapeshifters. That they were made by malevolent gods of war was no surprise to him. They belonged to the violence that bred them, and their hearts worked in violent ways, too.

“Here, here,” Sog repeated, gesturing for Toru to follow him closely.

He stopped and crouched and then, with what looked like anxious caution, he lay on his belly and stretched his body taut.

“What are you doing?” Toru asked.

Sog hushed him and gestured for him to do the same. He obeyed, all the while mumbling unflattering words that involved a certain orc with only half a head.

“Can you hear it?” Sog placed his head on one side, pressing his ear against the ground.

Toru did the same, but for a while it seemed that nothing but the desert wind spoke at that hour. However, as he focused on any sound that could be set apart from the noises around them, he began to hear it. It was a low din, buzzing to a tempo, and it took him little to realize that it came from more than one creature. He frowned. More than one creature? The sound multiplied, reverberating through the ground, suddenly clear and coming from so many different places.

“Bees?” he asked, holding his breath.

There weren’t many things that scared him, and he wouldn’t start to feel scared now, but there was something about bees that made him want to find a path that took him around them if possible.

“Destiny,” Sog said solemnly.

“They sound like bees. You don’t know what destiny means,” Toru shot back at him.

“Yes, Sog knows. Your destiny is finished once you see.”

Despite the orc’s strange speech, Toru understood as much. Whatever those bee-like creatures making all that noise were, they had to be deadly, and Sog meant exactly that. “How are we going to fight them? And is the flower in there?”

“Many,” Sog confirmed. “Many flowers filled with sweet nectar. Destiny loves the nectar.”

So they were bees. “We will have to make them leave so that we can get the flowers.”

“They guard the flowers. They won’t leave,” Sog said with certainty.

“Oh, they’ll have to leave because Varg and Claw need those flowers,” Toru replied.

“And the horde.”

“And the horde,” Toru agreed, although it wasn’t like him to lie like that. “What does your kin do when finding a beehive like this?”

As much as he wanted to rush in there, tear away a few flowers and make a run for it, Toru knew that he shouldn’t be that rash. If he’d been alone, he would have done it, and laughed later for the sake of a dare, but now he was no longer alone. Whatever the way of fighting destiny, as Sog called the beehive, he had to put his head to work, like he had done that time with Demophios. A jolt pulled at his heart as a sudden desire to ask the old snake for his take on the situation overcame him. But no, Demophios wasn’t there anymore, and Toru only had Sog to help find a way to fool those bees into finding a different home.

“We don’t go against destiny,” Sog replied to his question. “Orcs are not dumb like tigers.”

Toru raised one hand and slapped the orc one time, short but firm, upside the head. “If you’re so clever, how do you say we should take the flowers from these bees?”

“Sog doesn’t know,” the orc complained, suddenly not so sure of himself.

“Then you’ll have to listen to the dumb tiger,” Toru said with satisfaction.

“Sog listens to the dumb tiger.”

No time for putting the orc in his place, Toru decided, although his hand itched. “I need to think first. How about you think, too? These bees are here, in your home. Are you trying to tell me that you’ve never dealt with them? Ever?”

“Sog is not stupid.”

“Only a coward,” Toru provoked him. “Were there any stupid orcs that ever tried their luck against the bees?”

Sog thought for a few moments, licking his upper lip and smacking his tongue against the roof of his mouth time and again. “There were,” he finally said.

“And what happened?”

“They died.”

Toru was starting to think that he couldn’t place too much hope in any help coming from Sog’s knowledge of how to approach the savage bees buzzing right under their bodies. That meant he

really needed to use his head, and as much as he disliked to count on something that wasn't what he usually depended on, this time, he had no choice.

He straightened up and then sat with his legs crossed in front of him. How did Duril, Varg, and Claw find it so easy to be clever? It was like their words flew out of their mouths in strings of pearls of wisdom while Toru preferred to open his mouth mostly to eat.

"Are you thinking, tiger?" Sog asked.

Toru growled. "I would only if you didn't bother me all the time."

"Sog thinks that we should put a hole into their home and find their queen."

"Put a hole in there, and right away, destiny will come out to eat our faces," Toru said promptly. "And how do you plan on finding their queen, just by stuffing a stick into their hive?"

Sog sighed. He seated himself by Toru's side. Each time Toru moved a hand or a leg so that his body didn't become numb, Sog did the same, and if he hadn't had a serious look on his face when he did so, Toru would have thought the orc was imitating him just to spite him.

The problem with thinking was that it didn't come easy, not to him. When he had fought Demophios, at least Toru had been engaged in a battle of sorts, and thinking had come to him naturally. But this sitting around, all idly and thumb-fiddly, didn't help.

"We should blast a big hole and destroy their entire hive," he said.

"But then we will destroy the flowers, too," Sog countered right away.

Toru felt rightfully deflated. "Do they always live underground like this?"

Sog nodded.

"Are you hungry, tiger?" the orc asked, suddenly, pulling him away from his thoughts.

"Even if I was, we don't have time for dinner," Toru replied, although his belly growled to contradict him that very moment. "We must find the flower for the cure and go back to Duril fast. Plus, are you going to fry something and make a lot of smoke--"

Even as he said the words, Toru realized something. He remembered the words of the humans who had taken care of him as a young cub at that place where they kept all the strays. They used smoke to chase away insects of various kinds. Could smoke work on bees? Toru didn't know, but it was an idea.

"Sog, do you know how to make fire?"

The orc puffed out his chest. "I'm the Grand Chief's cook," he said with pride. "How couldn't I know how to make fire?"

"Then starting making one." Toru had no idea how Sog would manage that, without any wood around.

It appeared that, just like Duril, the orc carried many things on himself. Around the cloth that covered the lower part of his body, hanging down to his knees, Sog had a wide belt, and from it, he began taking out all kinds of astonishing things.

Toru watched him as he got to work, drawing a circle in the sand and creating a small place for the fire. He couldn't tell what exactly the orc was doing, but after some cussing, mumbling, and prancing around, right in front of them, a tiny flame began to burn.

"We need to have enough smoke to chase them away," he told Sog.

The orc nodded and pulled his dagger from his belt. Then, he stabbed the ground, right where earlier he and Toru had listened to the unsettling buzz of the bees. Toru then watched in disbelief as Sog put his hand right into the flame and pinched a small fragment of what kept it burning. He didn't have time to say a word. The orc pulled out his dagger and dropped the still burning fragment, now letting out a thin thread of smoke, through the hole dug into the ground.

He quickly covered it with his palm, and Toru heard how the buzzing increased.

"Now who's the dumb one?" he asked.

Sog shrugged and grinned at him. However, the following moment, his face scrunched up in pain. Toru could only guess why that happened. He pursed his lips and gathered all the fire base into his palms. "Move," he shouted at the orc and Sog lifted his palm right away.

Toru saw the angry bee coming straight at his face but closed his eyes. He felt Sog grabbing his hands and placing them over the hole. Soft bodies and stinging needles crash against his burning palms, but he resisted the urge to pull away. Sog helped by holding his hands down and using all his body weight to keep him there.

The sole bee that had gotten away was buzzing around them. "Keep your eyes closed," he yelled at Sog.

"It will be just a little sting," Sog drawled softly, "just one. Come to Sog, little bee, show how his destiny will be."

"You are just so dumb," Toru cussed at him. "Leave it alone, maybe it'll go away!"

"No, no, she needs to bury that needle in something, or she won't leave."

“We’ll take care of it. Just swat it with something. I can keep my hands here by myself,” Toru said quickly.

The buzzing stopped. “Too late,” Sog said softly, and Toru felt his leathery hands move away from his.

The ruckus under his palms died away, as well. Toru opened his eyes to find Sog fallen to the ground, one of his eyelids swollen and covering the eye entirely. He hurried to him and shook him although his palms were aching with a dull pulsing pain. “Sog, don’t you dare go to sleep now! Don’t you have a horde to save?”

Sog mumbled something, so Toru had to lean in to hear him.

“You hurry... take the flowers... go back... don’t bother with Sog...”

“Like I’d leave without you after all the insults you hurled at me,” Toru said through his teeth.

He hurried back to the hole Sog had made in the ground with his dagger and began to scoop handfuls of sand. The hole was getting bigger and bigger, but he was in too much of a hurry to care. He growled as he managed to make a wide enough entrance into what must have been the bees’ home until only a few minutes ago. He crawled inside and began searching the walls. Soon, his hand wrapped around soft stalks and he began to pull at them, his fingers shaking from too much impatience. “Easy,” he said to himself, “let’s get these to Duril.”

He threw stalk after soft stalk outside onto the ground. How many were enough? He decided that all of them would be about right, so he held himself by the edge with one arm, while he extended the other to continue the plunder. From not very far away, he could hear the buzzing coming back, which meant that he was pressed for time and needed to work faster and faster. He grabbed crowns and leaves, hoping to get as many as possible, while the ominous sound of the bees returning told him that he had no more time left.

He pushed himself up with the last strength he had and then brushed sand into the hole. It went through, but as Toru could see by now, the large enclosure built by the bees wouldn’t be so easy to fill. The flowers he had gathered lay in a pile not far from him, and he needed to be careful not to push them inside with the sand and destroy all his hard work, as well as any hope that Varg and Claw would open their eyes again.

“Damn bees, damn destiny,” he said through his teeth and continued to push as much sand inside as he could.

“Get out of the way, tiger.”

Toru didn’t have time to feel happy upon hearing Sog’s voice. The orc was pushing a large boulder which he must have found who knew where, and Toru hurried to help him. Together, they covered the hole just as the ominous sound of the bees arriving was growing the loudest.

They both laughed and leaned with their backs against the boulder.

“We won,” Toru said. “And you’re alive.”

“It takes more than a little sting to put Sog to sleep forever,” the orc said proudly.

“You’re tough and brave,” Toru admitted solemnly. “I thought you were just a hungry silly orc.”

“I am hungry,” Sog admitted.

From time to time, Sog seemed to become aware of his own person and stopped talking about himself like he was someone else. Toru couldn’t tell for sure, but it looked to him like Sog was finding himself more and more during their latest adventures. Maybe his destiny wasn’t to be stung to death by a hive of angry bees, after all.

“I’m hungry, too,” Toru said. “But we will eat later. Now let’s gather all these flowers and get them to Duril. He must be worried sick, thinking that we had to fight some kind of monster, when all we did was run away from bees.”

“They were scary,” Sog stated. “But they make a delicious soup.”

“Do you make soup out of bees? You don’t know what good food is,” Toru retorted.

“Sog knows all the good soups and stews.” The cheerfulness was back in the orc’s voice. “He’ll make one so good that silly tiger will lick his fingers clean.”

Right now, he was so hungry he would have eaten bee soup along with the bowl it came in, but he wouldn’t let himself think of food too much. “I’ll believe it when I see it,” he said with a smirk and pushed himself away.

He took off his shirt and improvised a basket from it to place all the flowers inside. Sog limped by his side as they started walking.

Toru could barely wait to reach Duril and give him the flowers. He would have a laugh once Varg opened his eyes again. He’d tease him so much.

He only noticed that Sog was behind him a few good feet when he realized that he could only see his shadow ahead of him on the sand. Sog was still walking, but the sun’s blessing, the bee’s sting, and carrying that boulder from who knew where, must have taken their toll on him.

“I’ll carry you,” he said and grabbed Sog, throwing him over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

“Thank you, silly tiger,” Sog said in a whisper and fell asleep right away.

Toru didn’t care. At least he’d have a break from hearing about stew for a while.

Chapter Twenty-One – The Desert Knows Your Name

Duril was getting busy, moving about, checking on Varg and Claw now and then, and searching the horizon for signs of Toru and Sog. Sometimes, it was harder to wait, and although he didn't stop his pacing for a moment, the soft tendrils of fear began to wrap around his heart. This desert wasn't his home, he decided, and looked up, at the merciless sun. Under its unforgiving rays, the fallen orcs around him were slowly turning into nothing but decaying corpses, and while part of him rebelled against the fate of Zukh Kalegh, another knew that Toru had a point when he told him that they should only save Varg and Claw, and then find their way out of that place.

How much had he changed since entering the Great Barren? Duril looked at his hand. Its palm was more leathery now, the lines covering it deeper, as if his destiny had chosen to make itself known with all its mysterious power. Toru had heard the call of the road what seemed like such a long time ago and come to Whitekeep, and from there, Duril's destiny had taken shape, as well.

But wasn't fate a harsh mistress, after all? Duril didn't regret having met his kin on his sire's side, but it had been only for a short time, and it ended bloodily. Did they bring with them the evil that roamed the land? Toru had feared the same thing in Shroudharbor, and now Duril felt like he was, at least in part, guilty for what was going on with the horde he belonged to with half of his soul, no matter how much he wanted to deny it.

They were destined to be travelers, and their home was nowhere. Yet, he would fight for this one, another to be left behind, with everything he had. Would it remain in ruins, like Whitekeep? Duril hoped not, but hopes had served no one ever.

He knelt by the side of Varg's head and caressed it. So strange it was to stare into that face he knew so well and see it tinged with the greenish tint of orc skin. The tusks hadn't grown too long, but they no longer appeared out of place as part of Varg's handsome features. Why were they turning into orcs? It was just another mystery, but Duril couldn't tell if it were the magic of the desert, or another trick of the evil they were hunting.

He placed a small kiss on Varg's forehead. "Do not worry," he whispered. "Toru will come back soon, and I'll make a cure for you and Claw."

It wouldn't be the first time he talked only so that he could hear his voice and find reassurance in it when no one else was there for him. How tremendously things had changed for him. Toru had filled his heart with wonder, Varg with fondness. They were parts of a whole, and now they traveled the world, in search of the highest meaning of all.

"Duril!"

Toru's voice made him raise his head. Duril's heart skipped a beat when he noticed that Toru was carrying Sog over his shoulder. Could it be that they had just lost another? He hurried to the young tiger.

“He’s only sleeping,” Toru said quickly once he noticed the expression of worry etched on his face. “Here are the flowers.”

Duril was grateful to take the improvised basket from Toru’s hand. “How did you get them?”

“It wasn’t easy, but I’ll tell you all about it later. Can you make the cure for Varg and Claw?”

Duril didn’t know exactly if the recipe he was supposed to concoct had other ingredients, and he could only assume that the most important thing was to make a potion the way he knew how. Nonetheless, he nodded.

“Then hurry,” Toru said and hugged him briefly with one arm while he held Sog with the other.

Duril placed Toru’s shirt on the ground and brushed lightly over the flowers to spread them out. They had a strong scent, somewhat peppery and very refreshing. If his knowledge of plants with the power to cure an ailment served, they had to be truly effective. He took the concave stone from his bag and the small hammer and began to crush the stalks and the petals.

Toru put Sog down and watched closely over his shoulder.

“Now it’s all up to me, Toru,” Duril explained. “You can rest. There’s no need to tell me that you two were in a fight.”

Toru remained unmoving and continued to watch him work. “Do you have something in your bag for burns?” he asked.

Duril threw him a questioning look and, right away, he noticed Sog’s back. He nodded. “Yes. It’s that brown bag. You’ll find some crushed leaves inside. Blend them with a bit of water and make a poultice. I’ll show you how.”

“No. You continue to make the cure for Varg and Claw. I’ll take care of it.”

Duril smiled and gave Toru a quick kiss. “I knew you two would get along.”

Toru scrunched up his nose, but then he smiled. “He’s not bad for an orc.”

That was a start as good as any, Duril decided. He continued to crush the flowers of destiny, while he gave Toru guidance on how to make the poultice for Sog’s back.

From the corner of his eye, he observed how Toru turned the orc gently, laying him on his belly, and then spreading the concoction over his injured back. How could he ever lose hope, when he had someone with such a big heart by his side?

Toru wasn't sure his poultice worked and studied Sog's back with a frown. "How long does it take for this to work?" he asked Duril.

The healer was almost done with a large pot of cure made from those flowers he and Sog had brought, a sign that he wasn't letting go of the idea of saving the entire tribe of orcs. Toru ignored the fallen bodies around them, focusing on treating Sog's skin. For Duril's and Sog's sake alike, he wouldn't say another word about the horde no longer being fit for saving. If Duril asked him to go around and stuff potions down the throat of rotting bodies, he would do that.

"It will help the skin heal," Duril explained, "but things won't change if you keep watching. All cures take time to work. Come here."

Toru moved closer to Duril.

"Can you see this?" Duril whispered. "I think it's working."

Indeed, Varg's tusks seemed to withdraw slowly. "And you said all cures take time. This one doesn't," Toru pointed out.

Duril laughed and kissed his cheek. "It may be because it's a cure you brought. Everything you touch is magical."

Toru smiled, pleased with being flattered like that. Then he looked over his shoulder at Sog. "Your friend is so brave, Duril," he said softly. "I'm sorry I treated him badly."

"I don't have to forgive you because I've never been mad at you," Duril said. "But you can tell him."

"No way, he likes to call me a silly tiger."

Duril laughed. "It doesn't matter. You two became friends, too, and that means that there is a stronger bond between you than mere words. Now help me pour some of this potion down Claw's throat, as well."

Varg blinked and groaned as he felt the sun on his face. How had he fallen asleep under the naked sky like that? He rolled over on his side and immediately was grabbed and pulled into a tight hug. He didn't have to open his eyes wide to know who that was. "Kitty," he said, "you're about to suffocate me."

Toru pushed him away, looked at him intensely, and then pulled him back into another hug, just as fierce.

"Have I been dead?" Varg asked, realizing that would be a good explanation for why Toru was squeezing him so roughly.

“As good as,” someone else replied.

“Duril?” Varg asked, and finally looked around.

They appeared to be surrounded by stillness and death. Varg felt his chest growing small even as his nose refused to breathe in the foul air.

The healer came to his side, too. “Varg, we’re so happy you’re alive.” He hugged him just as hard as Toru. “Claw is coming to, as well, but we have our work cut out for us.”

“What happened?” Varg asked. He rubbed his forehead as his friends and lovers allowed him the freedom to move. “The last thing I remember is that we used the pearl--”

“The pearl turned into this gigantic sword,” Toru began to talk quickly, “and I grabbed it, and Demophios wanted me to put him in the hilt, and Sog did. Then we slashed through the black hand of sand that had a hold on the sun, and we fell from the sky. Demophios is lost, and Sog got blessing marks from the sun.”

The tiger stopped for a breath only then.

“So a lot happened,” Varg concluded. He would hear all about in detail, later, as it looked like right now they had to get moving. “What do you need me to do?”

Duril’s eyes shadowed with pain for a moment. “Demophios said I would save the horde, but--”

He didn’t continue and just looked around.

Varg nodded. “Let me get that bag of fleas, and we’ll help.” He had lived long enough to know that hope was never lost. Even if the horde seemed as good as dead, the words of the wise snake couldn’t have been spoken in vain.

Toru and Duril helped him to his feet. His mouth was so dry, he thought, and ran his tongue over his teeth. He stopped for a moment. “Is it my imagination or do I have some really overgrown fangs?” he asked.

“You were almost an orc until moments ago,” Toru explained.

“So, I almost had a pair of tusks?” he asked.

“You had, not almost,” Duril said. “I think your teeth will go back to normal completely. And your skin is no longer green.”

Varg chuckled. “It looks like I missed my chance to see how it would feel to be in an orc’s skin.”

“You were an orc, but a dead one,” Toru said and squeezed his shoulder hard.

“You don’t like dead orcs?” Varg joked. His friends looked like they needed a bit of laughter. “What about those that are still alive?”

“I like them much better now,” Toru said solemnly.

Only then, Varg noticed that there was someone on the ground, lying there, not far from them. “Is that Sog?” He didn’t appear to have become a corpse like the rest of his kin, but his back was covered by a horrendous layer of puss and blood turned crusty.

“He breathes,” Toru assured him. “I put the poultice on him Duril taught me how to make to treat Sog’s blessing marks that he got from the sun.”

A lot, indeed, had happened, or Toru wouldn’t speak so fondly of an orc who wasn’t Duril. Without sparing another word, Varg hurried to Claw’s side and helped Duril and Toru to open the bear’s mouth and pour some potion down his throat.

Claw woke up with a sputter. “What are you doing? Trying to kill me in my sleep?”

Varg laughed and pressed a loud kiss on the bear’s hirsute cheek. “No, just wake you up. Don’t you think you slept enough?”

The bear looked around, just as confused as Varg had been earlier. “What is that stench? Is everyone dead?”

Toru hushed Claw quickly. “They’re not dead,” the young tiger whispered.

“They’re not?” Claw didn’t seem convinced at all.

“We have Duril’s potion, and we need to give it to everyone,” Toru explained.

The bearshifter was the kind to catch on fast, and he didn’t ask for more explanations. He pushed himself up from the ground while taking Varg’s offered arm to steady himself. “It looks like we need to get to work then.”

They truly needed as many hands as they could get to spread the potion around. Even if it were a fool’s errand, they still needed to try, Varg decided and took a soaked cloth from Duril’s hand.

“Pat it on their lips, so that it gets to everyone,” Duril said.

Varg nodded. “Let’s get this done.”

Duril had sworn he wouldn’t be the kind to despair easily, but Toru, Varg, and Claw returned from their run-arounds with the same frown on their faces. Did they need to make a stronger potion?

But the flowers were all gone now, and the large pot in which he had made the concoction only had little left in it. Duril could already see the bottom.

“Any sign?” he asked softly.

The shaking heads told him all he needed to know. They sat in a circle, around the pot.

“I cannot believe it,” he said. “I knew it would take a miracle, but--”

“Did Not-orc make the potion to wake up Zukh Kalegh?”

They all turned toward Sog who had just awakened from his slumber and was padding toward them with a large smile on his face.

“I did, and we’ve been treating everyone,” Duril said, trying to school his face into a neutral expression.

Sog looked around, his arms swinging about. “So why are they still sleeping?”

No one said anything. Sog’s smile faded. “Sog saved the horde,” he whispered. “No, no, no, they should be alive!”

Toru jumped to his feet to catch Sog who was swinging his head about. “Duril did everything he could. And the rest of us, too.”

Sog moved swiftly away from Toru. “No, you’re lying, you’re lying to Sog!”

“You’ll come with us, and we’ll be your horde,” Toru insisted and tried again to catch Sog.

“Who wants a silly tiger as a horde?” Sog shouted stubbornly. “Sog wants Zukh Kalegh to live!”

Duril held the pot, showing it to the orc. If they were all dead, Sog was the last of them. So many lives, wiped away by that evil. Duril couldn’t pretend that he could wrap his head around the significance of such a senseless thing. Maybe some would think that the world was a better place now that this horde of bloodthirsty orcs was no more, but Duril saw it for what it was, a proof of what that evil could do, wiping out an entire race like it was nothing.

Sog stared into the pot and remained silent for a moment. Then, he grabbed it and smashed it against the ground while howling in despair. Toru jumped on him from behind and held him tightly. Varg and Claw hurried to help him restrain the desperate orc.

And Duril looked down, prey to the same feelings as Sog, but without daring to let them out because he was afraid he would be split in half on the spot. His eyes stared at where the last drops of potion fell. He couldn’t believe it, so he rubbed hard against his eyelids. From them, flowers had begun to grow, so fast that at Duril’s feet, a mass of tangled stalks and beautiful crowns of petals soon appeared.

“Everyone, look!” he shouted in surprise.

They all halted their efforts to try to restrain Sog.

“They’re spreading!” Toru exclaimed. “Everywhere!”

The pleasant scent of the flowers fought against the stench of decaying bodies. Duril followed them as they gave birth to others and others, running like water around the corpses, spreading like a tide.

Even Sog remained quiet, as they watched the incredible thing happening before their very eyes.

“I believe that Demophios’s prophecy was true, after all,” Varg said and pointed somewhere in the distance.

Duril brought his hand to his mouth to stop it from trembling. Were his eyes playing tricks on him? But no, it was as clear as day. Heads were starting to lift, limbs and heavy armors rose, and with them, came the sound of life.

“They’re alive,” he whispered at first, not wanting to give voice to some figment of his imagination and nothing more. “They’re alive!” he shouted.

The same words broke free from the chests of all his friends. Duril grunted as Toru crashed into him and then lifted him from the ground like he was nothing. Sog began running round and round, grabbing an orc here and there, helping him to his feet, and shouting unintelligible things.

Duril had a bit to object to about Demophios’s prophecy nonetheless. It had been Sog, after all, who saved the horde, even if through an act of rightful anger. That was the part of the horde, he thought, and understood why having such amazing companions with him mattered so much. He was never alone, and Sog wouldn’t be the last of Zukh Kalegh, either.

They were surrounded by the horde, again, but this time, they weren’t out for blood. Duril held Toru by the hand, while Varg flanked him from the other side. Behind them, stood Claw, proud and tall as he was, but also menacing. And somewhere, Sog was with them, too, but Duril couldn’t search for him, not now when they were all under such an intense scrutiny from all those eyes.

The crowd parted and allowed the Grand Chief to walk toward them, with Winglog to his right. Yarag didn’t look like he had just been dead until not so long ago. None of them looked anything like the corpses they had been, and Duril wondered, for a moment, if they hadn’t all been prey to some incredible nightmare that had seized their minds and turned them into its toys.

“It looks to me like you made me cheat death twice, Not-orc,” Yarag bellowed in his usual, sonorous voice.

“I’m afraid I’m guilty of that,” Duril admitted and felt his chest swelling as Toru squeezed his hand.

Yarag laughed and then scratched his head. “Since you’re not one for the horde’s ways, I guess this is the part where you ask something from me in return.”

“I’ll ask something, too,” Toru said. “You stop sending your orcs after us. We saved you.”

Yarag laughed and slammed one closed fist over his armored chest. “Consider it done. Not-orc, what is it that you want?”

Duril let go of Toru’s hand and went round Claw to find Sog hiding with his hands both wrapped around his head as if he feared even to listen to what was said. He took him gently by the shoulders and brought him face to face with Yarag.

“He had an important role in saving the horde.” Duril turned Sog around slowly. “He fought the sun and got burned.”

The crowd murmured, and they seemed to acknowledge Sog’s sacrifice.

“He got stung by the bees of destiny.” A collective gasp of surprise came from the horde. “And he lived so that he could bring the cure for all of you.”

Duril waited a few moments as he took in the faces of all the orcs gathered there. “For that, Grand Chief, I ask you to take Sog back and consider him a warrior from now on.”

Sog jolted as he heard him talking about a thing he must have considered astonishing. “Not a warrior, Sog,” he whispered.

“Yes, you are a warrior,” Duril insisted.

“Hmm,” Yarag said and crossed his arms over his chest, while his eyes glinted with mischief. “What kind of warrior is he if he doesn’t have a blade of his own?”

Duril smiled. The Grand Chief was still trying to test him, even now. He pushed Sog at arm’s length and then he grabbed the blade he carried on his back and in one swift move he pulled it from its scabbard. He offered the hilt to Sog, who looked around with scared eyes. “Take it,” he said with conviction. That was between him and Sog. Not even the Grand Chief could intervene, unless he forgot his honor, and Duril knew that he wouldn’t.

Winglog took a step forward, much to his surprise. Then, he dropped to the ground on one knee, his head bent. “Warrior Sog, you are this tribe’s pride and glory. Accept your sword and join us.”

Sog stared in disbelief, his hands pulled against his chest. Around them, more and more orcs did the same.

The only one standing at the end was Yarag. Duril knew that he wouldn't ask the Grand Chief to kneel. But he knew what Yarag was doing when the orc took the blade from his hand and then grabbed Sog.

"You'll still be my cook, warrior," the Grand Chief said as he slapped the hilt to Sog's palm and forced him to take it.

Everyone broke into loud cheers, while Yarag took Sog like he weighed nothing and placed him on his shoulder.

"I had no idea orcs knew how to feast," Toru said and hiccupped.

Varg pulled him close, holding him under his arm like a mother bird's wing. "We learn something new every day, I think. What did you learn, kitty?"

The details of the amazing fight Toru and Sog had carried were still fuzzy, as they hadn't had the time to sit together as a group and talk about their adventures in depth.

Toru fell silent and serious; Varg tipped his chin up to look into his eyes. "You're never sad. What's wrong? Duril is with us, we made peace with the horde--"

"I lost Demophios," Toru blurted out and tried to turn his head away.

Varg held him in place and kissed him on the forehead. "It wasn't your fault. And who's to say that it wasn't his purpose to serve you during such a trying time and then disappear from your life for now?"

"For now?" Toru asked, his speech a bit blurry from all the liquor served freely by the orcs to their saviors. "Do you mean he might just reappear one day?"

"Nothing's impossible," Varg pointed out. "And he's immortal, isn't he? Thanks to you."

"I guess," Toru admitted. "What was it like being a dead orc?"

Varg laughed. "Is that what you truly want to ask me?"

"Yes. You were away from us, and I thought you'd never come back."

It appeared that sweet wine could make the kitty's tongue come a little loose. Varg didn't mind that at all and, to the contrary, he wanted to take a bit of advantage of that. "Did you miss me?"

"Sure I did," Toru admitted.

Varg caressed his cheek slowly and then brought their lips together for a kiss. Toru got bolder, and Varg decided that it was no longer up to him to pull away. He leaned back to allow Toru to climb on his lap so that they could kiss more deeply.

“I missed you, too, kitty, even while asleep,” he admitted in a quiet voice as Toru rested his head against his shoulder.

“If you’re here so that you can hear more expressions of gratitude from us, save your breath, Not-orc,” Yarag said.

Duril smiled as he sensed the unhidden cheerfulness in the Grand Chief’s voice. “No, I’m not here for that.”

He was back in Yarag’s tent, and Winglog and Sog were both there. Sog was cradling his blade in his arms, talking to it like it was a living thing. Winglog stared at him, slightly amused, but he was silent.

And the Grand Chief dwarfed everyone as usual with his mere presence.

“I came to say goodbye.” He cleared his throat as moisture suddenly gathered in his eyes.

“Ah. Off to new adventures, then? You might be the most traveled orc of Zukh Kalegh,” Yarag said.

“It’s nice to be good at something,” he replied and smiled. Teary goodbyes surely weren’t the thing for bloodthirsty orcs.

Yarag leaned forward so that they could somewhat look into each other’s eyes, if Duril tilted his head back far enough for it. “You’re part of Zukh Kalegh, healer. Don’t you forget that.”

“I might never return here,” Duril said. “I don’t know where the road might take us.”

Yarag nodded. “Think nothing of it. You’ll be welcome here anytime, whether it might be a year, a century or a millennium from now.”

“Are you saying that you’ll be here, waiting?” Duril teased.

“Orcs don’t wait. And all orcs die. But even if every soul you saved today is no longer here, to welcome you when coming back from your travels, fear not. The desert knows your name.”

Duril nodded and struggled to stave off new tears. The orc part of him had to accept it, even if the pull toward this strange race was strong.

“I’ll be on my way at the break of dawn,” he said. “I’m glad I got to know my kin,” he declared.

Yarag just nodded.

Duril made a bow and walked out of the tent, but hurried steps behind him made him turn. He smiled as he saw Sog and Winglog coming after him.

“Did you mean to leave without giving us a proper goodbye, Not-orc?” Winglog asked.

“I thought orcs didn’t like such things,” Duril replied. “I was afraid I might have overstepped by coming to tell that to the Grand Chief.”

“Come with us,” Winglog said. “You’re a warrior, and there’s a tradition you surely don’t know.”

“Come with Sog,” Sog added. “Warriors fight under the moon. The silly tiger can wait.”

Duril didn’t argue. He knew Toru and the others would understand if he came back late. Now they moved through the horde with no fear. As unfathomable as it was, the horde of Zukh Kalegh carried friendship toward them in its collective heart now.

“So fast asleep,” Claw commented as he took in Toru’s unmoving shape, protected by Varg’s arm.

“He went through some incredible adventures today, and without us,” Varg replied.

Claw sat by his side, brushing his shoulder against him. “A frightening thing, whatever this evil is. And I had believed that fighting the entire horde of Zukh Kalegh was enough of an adventure for this part of our journey.”

Varg could sense that the bearshifter had something on his mind, and it wasn’t just the fact that they were now supposed to have a clear path to The Quiet Woods, his home.

“What’s on your mind?” he asked directly, never one to beat around the bush.

“The world has changed, and not for the good,” Claw began. “When I was young, I used to think that it had to be a good place because I was in it.”

Varg chuckled. “I’ve been known to suffer from the same affliction of pride. That’s the fault of younger years, I suppose.”

“It’s true for some,” Claw replied and gestured lightly toward Toru who shifted in his sleep, mumbled something and then threw one arm over Varg. The wolfshifter just pulled his precious charge closer.

“Indeed.” He waited for Claw to continue.

“I sometimes go to sleep thinking of the place of my birth,” the bearshifter started after a short moment of reflection. “And I dream about it, the way it used to be. But can I truly hold onto the hope that nothing has changed? I’ve lived outside of the flow of time for so long.”

“We won’t know until we get there,” Varg offered an honest answer. “And know this, Claw, that you can always join us if you’re so inclined. Even if The Quiet Woods remained the same, would you want to spend your days hunting salmon and searching for honey? With us, you’ll always be in danger of losing some fur off your back, so it’s clear which choice is better.” He grinned.

Claw laughed at his joke. “You sure know how to convince someone to join your party. A life of peace and quiet, or one full of adventures?”

“And us. Don’t forget us. We’ll always be around to make sure you don’t get enough peace and quiet even when we’re resting.”

“Stop tempting me, puppy,” Claw said in a gruff, but playful voice. “You make a good point, though. After you released me from the house of merchants, I thought the only thing I needed in my life was to get back to the place of my origins and live the rest of my days as part of it. I’m just not so sure anymore.”

Varg nodded. He wouldn’t insist on more than he should. That was a decision for Claw to make. All he could do was to assure him of his and the others’ friendship if he ever chose to join them.

He was walking down the path of the same dream again. The unshakable conviction that the dream was trying to show him something was still with him, and this time, Toru tried to look around.

All he could do, however, as the walls like mirrors seemed to close in on him, was to look straight ahead. In front of him, on the ground, his shadow stretched, clear and dark, an elongated shape that made him appear taller, bigger than he knew himself to be.

“What do you want?” His voice was only in his head, and the part of him that struggled to make sense of this insisted that he ask the question.

There was no reply, so his dream self tried to squeeze his eyes shut. A gust of wind surprised him, and he stood there looking down the narrow path. Beside him, another shadow now walked.

Toru turned his entire attention to it, as he couldn’t move his head. The shadow, much shorter than him, walked in the same cadence as his steps.

Its shape became clearer, the more he looked. It was a tiger, but somehow, with the power of foresight only dreams could lend, Toru knew it wasn’t his tiger shape. This one belonged to another, and he sensed a great power coming off his companion, a new strength that entered his blood.

“Father?” he asked, unsure.

The wind blew again, and Toru blinked. When he looked around, he was at the orcs’ camp, and Varg was holding him from behind in a warm embrace. He had the strange sensation that he had just learned something important, but his mind remained blank. He couldn’t remember what he had dreamed of.

Chapter Twenty-Two – Moments of Happiness

“Which one of me do you like best?”

Duril stopped for a moment, his hand poised above the tome, and looked at the handsome head lying in his lap. Varg and Claw were somewhere around, probably engaged in more entertaining activities than watching someone scribbling on paper. Toru had insisted on sticking around, although Duril had urged him to go with the rest of their group and have some fun.

Through no magic of Demophios, they had found another oasis and collectively decided that a break was something everyone needed after their incredible adventures across the Great Barren. Duril had welcomed the respite with all his heart since a part of him itched to find the time to sit down and write their adventures while they were still fresh in his mind.

The air, filled with the rustling fronds of the date palms, was sweet, and it was such an unfathomable thing to believe that only days ago they had been engaged in another life or death battle with the evil that lurked beneath the surface of this beautiful world.

“Hey, Duril,” Toru called to him, somewhat reproachfully. “Did you hear me?”

Caught up in the beauty of the place, Duril had allowed his mind to wander for a moment. It looked like that wasn’t something Toru could live with. Duril put his quill down, making sure not to spill any ink over the yellowed page. Elidias had given him all the tools needed for the craft of chronicling their adventures, and he was starting to suspect that they had to be magical since the small ink container didn’t appear to have suffered a dent in its quantity despite Duril having used some so far.

He caressed Toru’s hair, running his fingers slowly through the silky golden strands and enjoying their feel. “I heard you, but I can’t say I have a favorite.”

“What do you mean?” Toru began to purr softly while Duril scratched his scalp slightly. “You must.”

“How could I prefer you over you? It’s not possible. Your human is very handsome and playful and nice. And your tiger is fierce and can make armies tremble. Both of your shapes are strong and beautiful, and your heart is always the same, always amazing. Always Toru.”

“My tiger is very playful,” Toru insisted. “Do you want me to show you?”

The youngster didn’t wait for a reply and suddenly shifted, making the improvised writing table shake. It was something Varg had made for Duril using a couple of logs Claw had slashed through with his strong claws. The tome almost fell from it, and the ink container teetered, too, quite dangerously. Duril barely had time to catch it.

Tiger Toru froze and then sat back on his hind legs, wrapping his tail around himself, all the while wearing a guilty look on his face. The tip of his tail began to tap the ground, waiting for a reaction from Duril.

“I can see that you can be very naughty, too,” Duril chided him with affection. “I can imagine that you were a fast grower as a child. Even now, sometimes, I think that you don’t know your own strength.”

“Sorry,” Toru said quietly.

Duril patted his head. “It’s all right. Nothing happened. Now, do you think you can sit by my side while I’m writing down our latest adventures? I’d love for you to do so, but if you would prefer to go after Varg and Claw--”

“No,” Toru cut his words short. “I want to sit with you.”

“Then come here,” Duril said and gestured for him to come closer.

The young tiger moved cautiously this time, making sure to avoid the table and placed himself by Duril’s side, at a fair distance.

“Closer,” Duril insisted.

Toru moved another inch.

“Oh, come here,” Duril said with an amused snort and pulled Toru next to him until their bodies were glued together. Then the tiger slid around the healer, curling about him to provide a comfortable and solid support.

Toru’s warmth was enough to remind him why he was so much in love with someone like that. The tiger sighed and stretched, and then placed his head back on Duril’s lap. The only wandering part of him was his tail, which immediately found a way to wrap around Duril’s waist. “Do I make you hot?”

“Not in a bad way,” Duril replied. “I like it when you cuddle with me like this.”

“I’m not bothering your writing or anything, right?” Toru asked, raising his head and looking straight at Duril with his golden eyes.

“That would be impossible. You’re what made all this happen. And I enjoy writing about our times together. Do you know, Toru? I feel like I’ve lived a life ten times over ever since we met.”

“Does it make you happy?”

“Of course, it does. I never even imagined that I would go on an adventure, and look at us now, so far from Whitekeep.” Duril stopped for a moment, his eyes watering, and he discreetly wiped a tear away with the back of his hand.

A furry paw came to rest on his knee and offer him comfort.

“Don’t mind me. Life is always like that. And I can say, hand on heart, that the good I have now in it, by far outweighs the bad.”

“Even if we have to fight all the time?” Toru asked.

“Not all the time,” Duril replied. “There are also moments like these, when we sit together and breathe the sweet air.”

Toru’s head was heavy and warm against his thighs. “I’ll sleep a little now,” the tigershifter announced. “But as soon as you finish writing, wake me up. I don’t want to lose any of these moments with you.”

Duril laughed and placed a short kiss on Toru’s forehead. “I don’t want that, either. And I promise that I’ll write as fast as I can.”

Toru stretched a little more and yawned. “You don’t have to hurry. I know you love playing with those ants on paper. And I could use the rest.”

Duril was sure it was true. Toru was strong and he could go for days through the desert without complaining, just as he had done before, but any hero needed a reprieve now and then in a life full of adventures. This one was more than welcome.

He tipped his head back, leaning against Toru, and looked at the sky through the leaves that provided shadowy comfort while the desert was still their companion. His hand rested for a while on Toru’s forehead until he heard unmistakable snoring. Then, he set to work again. Their road was merely in its beginnings, or so it felt. And the tome was thick, which meant that Elidias envisioned a long road ahead of them, together. It would be a road peppered with dangers at every corner, without a doubt, but Duril felt happy precisely because it was long and came with the unequalled benefits of friendship and love.

After those harsh days of days crossing the desert, Varg groaned in pure delight as he sank his entire body under the water. He and Claw seemed to be of the same mind, as the bearshifter was engaging in the same pleasures as he was, and not that far away.

He stole a glance at his companion. The bearshifter hadn’t changed much since they had met in Shroudharbor, but the paleness of his complexion had been replaced with a tan that made his eyes sparkle with a new fire. In the beginning, Varg had felt annoyed and slightly challenged by this

new addition to their group. Especially, the fondness Toru had shown toward Claw threw him off-balance, but those feelings were as good as gone. Nowadays, more and more, they had been replaced by something new.

“Have you thought about it?” he asked with no further preamble.

Claw ran his hands through his shaggy hair and then over his face. “About joining you?”

“What else? I don’t know if you’ve realized it just yet, flea bag, but I’m like a bad cough. You won’t find it easy to get rid of me,” Varg joked.

“A bad cough?” The bearshifter moved through water as if it was his true home and approached Varg, swimming in slow circles around him. “You don’t remind me of anything like that when I look at you.”

“I don’t?” Varg grinned. He recognized that for what it was. Not that he hadn’t been overt about it to begin with, but he was not usually the one to elicit that kind of attention. Usually, he was the initiator. It was natural for him to approach others. Claw’s behavior opened doors to new possibilities.

“Aren’t you going to ask me what I’m thinking about?” Claw teased, while the circles he swam became smaller and smaller, the hefty snake between his legs growing larger and larger.

“I fear that it might not be something too flattering,” Varg replied and dropped his eyelids, watching Claw through his eyelashes.

The bear came to a stop right in front of him. “Then you’ll be surprised to hear the truth.”

But Varg wasn’t surprised when Claw leaned forward and closed their mouths together. Yes, this was new because no matter who his lovers had been all his life, he remained the one on top and surrendered power and control only to special people, like Duril and Toru.

Whatever Claw had in mind, it felt nothing like Toru’s playful attitude, or Duril’s gentle coaxing. No, Claw was bigger, stronger, and he could overpower anyone Varg knew if he so wished. The simple realization of that fact brought with it a new feeling, one of trembling anticipation and excitement.

So, he said nothing and did nothing while his mouth was assaulted with determination, but also with infinite gentleness, something that surely no one seeing Claw for the first time would believe him to be capable of. Varg was glad to be among the select few who knew the truth, the deep, intimate reality of this bearshifter who had roamed the labyrinth under the house of merchants in Shroudharbor for centuries.

The kissing stopped, and their faces hovered close, while they gazed into one another’s eyes.

“Well?” Claw asked in a ragged whisper.

“I didn’t hear any question,” Varg teased him. “No words left your mouth.” Just as he said that, his eyes traveled to the said mouth that had met his in one of the most mind-blowing kisses in his life.

“I did use my tongue to let you know the truth,” Claw pointed out.

“Ah, sure. So, this is it?” Varg asked, hoping that he would be contradicted right away.

“Not if I can help it and you don’t bite,” the reply came.

Varg wrapped his arms around Claw’s shoulders, pulling their bodies together, their thickening lengths brushing together in the warm water. “Are you sure you don’t want me to bite? I’d say that you have the thickest hide I’ve seen in a long, long time.”

“Do you plan on biting my ass?” Claw teased him, laughing.

Varg smirked in kind. “Not only that.” To make his point, he angled his head and went straight for the bearshifter’s thick neck.

He bit playfully, earning a sucked in breath from the other in a moment. So, the bear could be teased too if needed. The thought was comforting. Varg wasn’t ready yet to lose all control over what was happening. Even more, having someone as strong as Claw surrender to his whims, even if of the sweetest kind, offered its own rewards.

The bear suddenly hoisted him in his arms, and Varg protested half-heartedly while he was dragged to the shore and placed on his back in the tall grass. “Hey, I couldn’t have bitten you too hard,” he said. “I made sure not to break the skin.”

“Good thing you didn’t,” Claw growled above him. “I would have repaid you in kind and taken a chunk out of one of your butt cheeks.”

“You can’t mean that,” Varg said and laughed. “How would I be able to walk around, with a chunk missing out of one of my butt cheeks?”

“You’d get used to it,” Claw pointed out and spread his legs, holding Varg down with the weight of his body, their hard shafts pressed together.

Varg laughed and buried both hands in Claw’s shaggy mane. Their mouths clashed again, and this time, it was needier and stronger than before. Maybe he wouldn’t get an answer about Claw’s intentions to join them or not just yet, but at least he would have this. Varg didn’t mind a snack before the banquet, he thought, and reconsidered calling what Claw was wielding a snack the next moment as Claw pressed his hips down harder.

“A lot of time spent with nothing but your paw as company?” he teased the bearshifter.

Claw growled in his ear and this time bit on it hard, making Varg yelp and beg to be let go. “I have you now, and you’ll get more than my paw ever endured.”

Varg didn’t pretend he didn’t like it as their bodies came together, a groan sounding from deep within him as the larger man entered him. That was the power of a man, of a shifter, one stronger than him, and surrendering was all that mattered at the moment.

“Do you think your kitty lover will get jealous?” Claw asked him while moving carefully yet powerfully above him, in and out, with slow controlled moves.

Varg felt sweat forming on his skin, pouring from all his pores from the exertion of welcoming the other’s large girth and length. “You know he will, and yet, you came on to me like this without hesitating.”

“You’ve flaunted that delicious rump in front of me long enough, I reckon,” Claw said. “The kitty will have to forgive me.”

“Being sorry about it won’t cut it with him,” Varg said through his teeth, as he fought both the pleasure and the almost unbearable intensity of having someone built like the bearshifter invading his body.

“Who said I was sorry?” Claw replied in kind and grunted. “I know I only had my paw as company for centuries, but what have you done with this ass, puppy? Kept it like a precious flower?”

“Nothing like that,” Varg said and snorted. “Just that all my lovers usually expect me to be the initiator, not the one to welcome them inside my body.”

“Ah, I see. I might have surprised you, after all, then,” Claw whispered and kissed him again.

“I hoped you would surprise me like this,” Varg replied in turn and kissed back. “I’m glad my rump, as you call it, won’t remain neglected while you’re still with us.”

“And I promise that I’ll remain with you at least for a while.”

It wasn’t a clear answer, not that Varg expected one, not in the throes of passion as they were right now. Still, it was something, and it meant that the bearshifter only needed to be nudged in the right direction to finally cave in and admit that he wanted to be part of their little group.

Just like Toru and Duril had the uncanny ability to complete him in the most incredible ways, his body came together with that of the bearshifter like no one else in the world could make it happen.

Toru shook his head, flicked his ears, and yawned, as Duril prodded him gently to wake up.

“Have you finished writing?” he asked.

Duril stretched a little and worked a kink in his neck. “Not just yet, but it’s almost dinner time, and I bet that everyone would like something warm in their bellies.”

Toru set his chin on Duril’s thigh while he stretched on the ground. “I’m hungry, but not that hungry.”

“Are you all right?” Duril asked in a teasing voice. “I never thought the day would come when you would say something like that.”

“I’m still hungry,” Toru protested. “Only that...” he trailed off, unsure of how to ask the question that had been plaguing his mind lately.

“Yes?” Duril rubbed one of his ears, and then the other, making him purr a little more. “What is it, Toru?”

“Do you believe in dreams? I mean, can they come true? No, that’s not actually what I want to ask. Is there any truth in them?”

Duril took a few moments to ponder over his question. “There are witches that could tell you more. I don’t know a lot. But I do believe that there is power in dreams, as there is in our minds.”

Toru sighed. “It’s just that I have this dream that comes to me over and over.”

“A dream that repeats itself can hold the face of the future. That is something I once heard a witch say,” Duril explained. “I don’t know if that means that our dreams can predict what awaits us, but I think that some truth exists in such words.”

“If spoken by an old witch, they definitely can,” Toru admitted. “Old witches are weird but useful. Like Agatha.”

“Yes, like Agatha. What can you tell me about your dream?” Duril asked. “I’m no dream reader, but maybe it would help if you talked about it.”

“That’s the thing, that it comes and goes, but I never seem to remember clearly what it was about. It’s all about walking a path, that’s all I can tell you right now.”

“Then it must have everything to do with the path of destiny you’re walking on right now,” Duril offered his opinion. “What else do you remember?”

“There’s someone else with me. Not you or Varg, or at least as far as I can tell.” Toru stopped for a moment, searching his mind for the elusive memories. “It’s another tiger,” he added, wondering at the power of his words as he immediately felt his heart swelling in his chest.

“Another tiger? Not your tiger shape?” Duril asked.

“No, that’s what I feel. It’s another tiger,” Toru said with conviction.

“Now that we’re thinking about it,” Duril began, “the tome Elidias gave me in Shroudharbor, and we have with us, talks about another tiger, too, right?”

“Yeah.” Toru felt the need to scratch his head in thought, but he was in his tiger shape, and letting Duril caress his head felt too good to change. “Who do you think that is?”

“Maybe the tiger from the legend? The one that keeps on repeating? It could be one of your ancestors,” Duril suggested.

Toru pressed his chin against the healer’s thigh. “I don’t want to have anything to do with anyone who abandons shapeshifters while they’re cubs.”

“I’m not talking about your parents,” Duril said. “This ancestor could be someone who came a long time before them. And you don’t know for sure what happened to prevent you from meeting the ones who gave you life.”

“The people who raised me said they abandoned me.”

“What if they didn’t know the truth? What if they were simply being cruel?” Duril pointed out. “Deceit and lies live in many hearts, no matter if we want to believe it or not.”

Toru wasn’t ready to let go of the dark feelings he nurtured toward those who hadn’t loved him enough to care for him, regardless of the difficulties in his life. How could a small cub be a burden to them? When he was very young, he didn’t even eat that much.

“Maybe,” Duril continued while stroking his fur, “this quest will bring you close to answering the questions you have about your childhood, too.”

Toru shifted into his human shape and turned his back on his friend and lover. “I don’t have any questions about that. I hope this dream that comes to me over and over is more than that. Else, I don’t have any use for it, and it should stop coming to me anymore.”

It appeared that Duril knew him too well to insist. A warm hand rested on his shoulder.

“How about you help me with dinner, after all? A bit of warm food will make you feel better.”

Toru turned and hugged Duril tightly. “You are my family, you and Varg. But I cannot help you with dinner because I might end up eating everything before you even manage to start cooking.”

Duril laughed and rubbed his back. “Then how about you go spend some time with Varg and Claw? I bet they miss your company already, left alone as they’ve been all day long. That way, you will also help me keep a couple of other hungry mouths away from my cooking preparations.”

That he could do. Toru smiled and kissed Duril briefly. “I’ll go. I’m sure they ate a lot of fruit, those two. How can they not like meat as much as I do?” he wondered out loud.

“I think they do,” Duril replied. “Only they’re older and used to eating whatever is available so they don’t go hungry.”

Toru scoffed. “I’ll only eat fruit if there’s nothing else.” He could be as grownup as Varg and Claw if that was what it took to gain more of Duril’s love and respect.

What he earned right away was another kiss and a pinch on the cheek. “Just go. I need some time to get the food ready. And don’t worry; there will be meat in it. Claw found some desert spiders and scorpions and got enough from them.”

“Eww.” Toru scrunched up his nose. “I don’t need to know everything that goes into your pot. But you’re cooking, so it will be delicious, I’m sure,” he added quickly.

It was true. Not only because he loved Duril, but also because the healer truly knew how to be a good cook, and everything he made had the best taste Toru had ever experienced in his life.

What could have those two done all day long while Duril slaved over the pages of his tome, and Toru slept to regain his strength? Now that he thought about it, Claw and Varg had acted pretty strangely around one another at times. Clearly, they had a secret, Toru decided, and he was determined to find out what it was.

So, he turned quickly into his tiger shape and stalked quietly through the grass, belly to the ground, making sure not to make a sound. Whatever the secret the two shared, they would soon learn not to keep him and Duril in the dark. If they thought they could do that, they had to think again.

The wind brought him the unmistakable scent of his companions, and Toru approached the body of water carefully. He raised his head only when he was close enough to find Varg and Claw sleeping naked on the ground, wrapped in a tight embrace.

Toru licked his lips and his nostrils flared. So, that was the secret, he concluded, and leaped soundlessly from his hiding place, right on top of the two sleeping shapes.

Varg yelped instantly, and Claw woke up with a growl. Toru avoided their swinging arms effortlessly and brushed his tail right across their faces as he executed a quick playful leap through the air.

“What are you two doing?” he asked, fighting hard not to laugh out loud.

Much to his amusement, both Claw and Varg looked away guiltily. Ah, this was a golden opportunity, after all. Toru tensed his body as if he were about to exact punishment on trespassers and lowered his muzzle. “You two were doing something naughty,” he accused.

Suddenly, the two shapeshifters began to talk, both at the same time.

“I told you he’d be jealous!”

“And yet, that didn’t stop you!”

“What are we going to do now?”

Toru’s eyes moved from one to the other, his amusement growing. So, they had thought that getting together like that, away from prying eyes, would make him jealous. Strangely enough, it didn’t bother him, not in the least. Of course, if it had been Duril sneaking around with Claw, he would have been very jealous. Anyone who wanted to have anything to do with Duril had to go through him for examination, and only in his presence was anything of the kind allowed to happen.

Not that he loved Varg any less, but he couldn’t quite explain what was going through his head right now. All he knew was that he was very much amused by how the two strong shapeshifters were so busy acting guilty and throwing funny accusations around as if Toru were at the point of jumping them and biting their ears for not thinking for one moment to have included him.

Ah, that was it. He faked a menacing growl and jumped between them, making them split and move away from one another. Varg’s expression was simply hilarious. His eyes were wide as saucers, and he seemed to be at the point of offering explanations of various kinds. Claw, on the other hand, didn’t look half as terrified. Toru didn’t like that the bearshifter could see through him so easily, so he growled some more, swinging his head to and fro, making sure that his two companions couldn’t get close to one another again.

“You two,” he bellowed, “went behind my back and did this! What would Duril think of you now?” Yes, he was having so much fun, but he couldn’t mess it up by suddenly breaking into laughter.

“I’m sure Duril would understand,” Claw intervened in an appeasing voice.

“No, he won’t,” Toru insisted. “Duril does only what I want.”

To his dismay, Claw began laughing. “Really? Does he know that?”

Hmm, it looked like he hadn’t thought through his plan of punishing the two carefully enough. “Yes, he does,” he said, his voice more and more miffed. “And he’ll be so mad once he finds out.”

“Duril mad, I’d like to see that,” Claw said.

The bear couldn’t be fooled. Toru felt rightfully annoyed. Now Varg didn’t look impressed by his act anymore, either. Why did they have to be so infuriating? Even if Toru was young, it didn’t mean that he wasn’t a grownup. Their problem was that they were ancient, just like Demophios who liked running his mouth about this and that all the time.

Lost as he was in his own imaginary flights, he missed how Varg snuck behind his back and suddenly jumped him. He growled and tried to push back, but Claw rushed to the rescue, and now he was pinned down by two very strong shapeshifters.

“You two are so mean,” he blurted out as he fought to escape. He wouldn’t use his fangs and claws because they were friends, but still, they could use less force to keep him locked in their arms like that.

“And you’re no good at trying to fool us,” Claw said with a chuckle. “I wonder why you’re not jealous at all.”

“Why would I be jealous?” Toru struggled a little more.

“I’m a bit disappointed, kitty,” Varg growled in his ear before sinking his teeth into it, making him yelp. “You only care about Duril sneaking around? What about me?”

“You’re a mutt. Of course, you’d be sneaking around ‘cause that’s how mutts are. But Duril, he’s too soft, and if someone said, ‘let’s run away together’, he just might do it.”

“Do you think that little of me?”

They all stopped at Duril’s voice. He was armed with a ladle, but he didn’t look any less dangerous than if he had been carrying a long, two-handed sword. The frown on his face announced nothing good, and Toru realized, as an afterthought, that he had managed to make Duril mad after all, not Varg and Claw.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” he whined.

“I should punish you by giving you no dinner,” Duril said, swinging the ladle to point at him.

“No dinner? No food?” Toru no longer felt amused.

“And maybe I should go back to Zukh Kalegh and ask them to make me part of the horde.”

Claw and Varg both shouted in disbelief as Toru shook them off like they were nothing but ants climbing the foot of an unaware farmer. In an instant, he was all over Duril, pushing him down to the ground and pinning him with his paws against his lover’s shoulders. To his surprise, the healer started laughing. “Toru, you’re just too easy to tease,” he said in a tone that begged for his forgiveness, but also sounded amused.

“So, were you joking, just now?”

“Yes, I was. I told you I’d always stay by your side. But what exactly did Varg and Claw do that caused them to hold you down like that?”

Still, the situation could be saved, and he could emerge triumphant. “These two,” he started and gestured toward Claw and Varg, “have been sneaking about without us.”

“Ah, is that really what’s been bothering you?” Varg asked and laughed. “That we didn’t include you?”

“I didn’t say anything like that!” Toru protested right away. “It’s just that you two are not allowed to have secrets.”

“Only the two of us?” Varg leaned closer and grabbed a handful of the fur on Toru’s back. “What about you?”

“What about me? Duril and I were busy all day writing in the tome.”

“Did you write one letter even?” Varg teased him.

“I helped,” Toru said.

“He did,” Duril came to the rescue. “I couldn’t have done as much work as I did today if he hadn’t decided to take a long nap.”

Toru shifted into his human form so that everyone could clearly see the pout on his face. He pushed himself up and away from Duril and turned away from them all. “I’m not a burden,” he said.

Suddenly, they all fell silent, and instantly Duril’s arm was wrapped around his shoulders. The healer’s gentle face was close to his. “You’re anything but, Toru. We wouldn’t all be in this adventure, having the time of our lives if you hadn’t come to upend everything we knew, love us and cause us to embark on the most important quest of all.”

“What’s that?” Toru asked, still fishing for compliments, now that Duril saw how easily he could hurt him if he so chose.

“The quest of saving the world,” Duril said with solemnity.

“It’s true, kitty.” Varg and Claw went around them and stood in front of him. “Because of you, we’ll become legends. Forgive us for enjoying joking around a bit too much.”

Toru pretended to be upset just a little bit more, but he couldn’t keep up the act for long. He opened his arms, and soon he was embraced by his other two best friends. They weren’t entirely right, though; he was the lucky one to have such incredible companions to walk the dangerous path that lay ahead with him.

Chapter Twenty-Three – What Your Heart Tells You

The air of morning always brought with it the promise of new and exciting things. Duril stirred the contents of the pot he used for making a bit of herbal tea. Unlike the unforgiving middle of the day, the dawn was still a bit chilly and it would serve them well to have something warm in their bellies before packing and heading out to complete the last leg of their journey before reaching The Quiet Woods.

Everyone else was still asleep, their chests rising and falling with steady peaceful breathing. Toru had insisted on sleeping between Varg and Claw, just to tease them, but, in the middle of the night, he had snuck by Duril's side, claiming that the others were keeping him way too warm. Duril had said nothing, too sleepy to tease Toru, and snuggled into his lover's embrace from behind; held in that furnace-like hug for the rest of the night.

He had extracted himself from the tiger's loving arms with some difficulty, but, in the end, he had managed to do so without waking up the sleeping beauty. Duril gazed upon that face he knew and loved so well, lost in slumber. How lonely had he been before? Few had been the moments when he had indulged in self-pity while contemplating his own fate, empty of another's touch.

And now, he had so much, so many people caring for him. Fate was a fickle thing, after all. So Duril intended to hold onto everyone he held dear with every ounce of his heart and soul.

Behind them lay the Great Barren. He knew that a part of him would always remain there and he was very aware that the connection he had with that place would never be severed or tainted, whatever the future had in store for them.

But the road ahead tugged at the strings of his heart more than he cared to admit. Had he turned into an adventurer, someone without roots? Duril pondered for a few moments over the changes in his heart. Had he truly felt at home in Whitekeep? Few people had shown him kindness. They did matter, after all. Not that he hadn't wept at the sight of the place in ruins, because he had, but the knowledge that it was in his power to build a new and different home on his own terms had surpassed the sorrow, allowing it to settle like leaves on the ground at the bottom of his heart.

He let the fire wane as steam rose from the pot. Soon, he would have to wake up everyone and their laughter and loud voices would fill the morning air. The time for dragging out the past and mulling over it was gone, and he didn't regret it, not one bit.

He brushed a bit of dust from his apron and walked over to Toru. It was so easy to love someone like that, someone who could look so peaceful while asleep, and yet so fierce while awake. "Hey, Toru, wake up," he called softly.

Toru scrunched up his nose in his sleep but refused to open his eyes. It looked like a less gentle approach was required. Duril smiled and pinched the tigershifter's cheek. "Come on, I have breakfast ready."

Toru's nostrils flared, in an attempt, without a doubt, to detect the smell of food.

"Come on, you big kitty, you cannot sleep all day. We might have to leave without you."

At that, Toru's eyes opened suddenly and he gave Duril a hot stare. "I'm not a kitty," he retorted.

"Is that really the thing that bothered you out of everything I said?"

"Claw and Varg like to tease me, calling me a kitty. But you're not mean like them," Toru replied.

"They're not mean." Duril brushed Toru's hair away from his eyes. "You shouldn't be bothered by their calling you that. We're the only ones who know this sweet part of you."

That seemed to convince Toru. He smiled. "Then you should call me that, from now on."

Duril caressed his cheek and laughed. "I might get into that habit, and it wouldn't always be a good thing. For example, when we meet strangers they should recognize you for the mighty tiger you are, and not as someone who is spoiled rotten by the people who love him."

Toru grinned in delight and even stuck the tip of his tongue through his teeth. "Spoiled rotten? That's almost not true at all. Only just this minute you wanted to leave without me because I didn't want to wake up and drink tea."

"Ah, so you were awake," Duril said and pulled Toru's ear playfully. "There are some leftovers from dinner that we can have with the tea I just prepared."

That appeared enough to motivate the tigershifter to stretch and yawn, and then rise to his feet. "Look, Claw and Varg are still sleeping," he pointed out. "Couldn't you have woke me up last?"

"They'll be much easier to convince, I'm sure," Duril replied.

"Let me do it," Toru said with determination and strode over to their sleeping companions. He stopped for a moment, poised over Claw and Varg, hovering for a moment. Duril realized too late what the naughty tiger wanted to do.

"We're under attack!" Toru suddenly bellowed. "The horde is coming!"

Claw and Varg jumped to their feet, ready for battle, and it took them a few confusing moments to realize that they had just been played. Toru's cheeks were streaked with tears of laughter, and he was slapping his knees while roaring and having the time of his life.

"That's it, kitty," Varg growled and shifted so fast that Duril took a step back.

Toru toppled over in an instant, with the wolf landing on his chest, pinning him to the ground. As expected, the tiger shifted, too, and soon there were bits of fur flying through the air, and growls

that would have put the fear of doom into the hearts of anyone witnessing the scene, save for those who knew the two combatants well.

“Don’t you feel tempted to join in?” Duril asked Claw, who was taking in the fight between Toru and Varg with a broad grin on his face.

“I’m a bit too old to be playing like that. When I wake up, I’d rather enjoy a few quiet moments first before jumping into the heat of a new day.”

“Then I guess you don’t mind joining me for a cup of tea while those two finish settling their differences,” Duril suggested.

“I would like that,” Claw said courteously.

Ignoring the two brawlers, they sat by the fire, and Duril handed Claw a cup and then poured one for himself. “You know,” Duril began, “I’ve always wondered how an adventurer like you came to have such pleasant manners.”

Claw chuckled and cradled the hot cup between his large hands. “One learns.”

Duril looked over his shoulder at Toru and Varg who were still fighting, but more and more playfully. “Some need more time than others, I venture to say,” he replied with a small laugh.

“I’ve dealt a lot with merchants in my time,” Claw started. “While I never cared for their sycophantic ways, I realized quickly that a tactful approach had its merits more often than not.”

“We learn even from those we don’t believe we have something to learn from, right?” Duril said pensively.

“Yes, you are right,” Claw confirmed. “Now, what did you say about that breakfast?”

“Ah, so you heard me talking to Toru,” Duril said with a small smile.

“Yes, but I like to watch them playing,” Claw confirmed and gestured with his chin at the two rambunctious friends who were now nuzzling each other’s noses, after having shifted into their humans several moments ago.

“You know I could beat you if I wanted to,” Toru growled. His protests had turned into small purrs as Varg teased his jawline with kisses.

“I don’t know about that, kitty.” Varg took hold of his ear but didn’t nibble at it. “Duril must be thinking that we really don’t want any breakfast.”

“Speak for yourself. I want breakfast very much.” Still, it was pleasant to let Varg think he could overpower him like that. It allowed them both to enjoy the closeness of their bodies and their warmth.

“Then let’s not keep them waiting. I think they are already eyeing us like parents who cannot believe their children still don’t understand that there’s a time for everything.”

“Like eating each other’s ears?” Toru said and took advantage of Varg’s lack of attention to finally exact some punishment of his own. He sank his teeth hard into the wolfshifter’s ear and pulled at it.

“Ouch! Kitty! You’re going to rip my ear off!”

Toru let go of it, but not without reluctance. “One day, I’ll get it, just so you know.”

“I don’t understand why everyone wants a piece of me,” Varg said lightly, while a small secretive smile passed over his lips.

Toru narrowed his eyes. “What do you mean by that? Who else wants a piece of you?”

Varg pushed himself to his feet and offered Toru his hand to hike him up, too. “Weren’t you hungry? And I know you’re not the type to refuse Duril’s cooking, even if it’s cold and from yesterday.”

That was enough to get him moving. However, he still wanted to get to the bottom of all the secrets that appeared to live inside Varg’s head lately, ever since Claw had joined them. Toru would have thought that the stern bearshifter would be more inclined to play with him, or even with Duril, and less with the hard rock Varg was. Still, it appeared that others were perfectly capable of seeing the wolfshifter for the tender creature he knew him to be, despite his gruff appearance.

He didn’t mind it at all, but his curiosity was far from being satisfied after witnessing those moments between the two. Maybe he would ask Claw about it all later; that would shed some light on why Varg felt so shy. That had to be it. Toru only needed to bide his time.

They were all, once more, gathered around a fire, with the clear intention in their hearts of following the call of the road. Varg examined his companions one by one. Each of them had changed lately, and for the good if anyone were to ask him for his opinion. Claw was stronger now, a fuller being than the bear they had found under the house of merchants in Shroudharbor. Toru’s golden skin was darker, and his eyes shone with new lights, not all of them as playful as before, but deeper and wiser. One of them had to shine for Demophios, the ancient snake that had been with them for such a little while, guiding their steps through the desert when they needed it the most. Another was lit for Duril, as it must have always been, ever since the two had met in

Whitekeep. This light was fiercer, too, and held shades in it, now that Toru had known the pain of loss, but also the joy of finding the same one he had lost and winning him back.

And there was a light for him. He knew, deep down in his heart, that Toru loved him. The connection they shared was tinted with red, a sign of the passion moving between them. Sometimes, he tended to think in colors, Varg mused and felt laughter swell inside his chest. Duril sat by Claw's right and had Toru by his other side, the tigershifter leaning his head against the healer's shoulder and casting loving looks at him.

Varg sat across from Claw, so their eyes often met over the waning fire. The tea prepared by Duril settled like healing in their bellies, giving them strength and courage to face a new day and a new adventure.

And still, the same question lingered in the air as the morning was giving way for the afternoon sun to unleash its merciless power over their heads. Varg knew not to ask it, not until the moment was ripe, and although he thought he knew the answer to it, he didn't dare to raise it again.

However, Toru had no such obstacles preventing his young mind from asking whatever he wanted, without second thoughts. "Will you be coming with us, Claw?"

The bear laughed softly. "Where do you want me to come with you, kitty?"

"All over the world. You heard Duril. We are going to save it, and don't you want to be a part of that?"

"That sounds quite tempting. And my heart tells me that I should stick with you, amazing friends, now that I have found you," Claw replied.

"Then it's easy. You just need to do what your heart tells you," Toru said promptly.

The bearshifter sighed and took a moment to look at everyone. His gaze lingered when it reached Varg, wise, but also loving. "I'll tell you what. Let's reach The Quiet Woods first. While I would very much like to join you in your adventures, my heart also yearns for the place of my birth and childhood."

Toru remained pensive for a little while upon hearing the bearshifter's words. "I don't have such a place," he said, his voice a combination of longing, anger, and anxiety.

"You have your place with your friends now, and that's all that matters," Claw replied before Varg or Duril had a chance to intervene and bring peace to his young heart.

"It's true," Toru admitted. "And there's room for you, too, especially now that you and Varg got together like that."

Claw chuckled. "You're not going to let us forget about it, are you?"

“No. You shouldn’t forget about it. Because Varg really likes you. And we like you, too.”

“Are you speaking for your Duril, too?”

“Sure thing I speak for him,” Toru said like it was a natural thing to admit that.

Duril shrugged off the golden head only so that he could flick him over his ear teasingly. “Although I don’t remember surrendering my ability of speech to this naughty tiger here, I can say it, with all my heart, as well, Claw. You are more than welcome to join us, and I do believe that together we will be even stronger. The adventures awaiting us ahead are bound to put us on the path of danger often, but I believe you’re not one to refuse a challenge or step back when your bravery is put to the test.”

“The puppy told me as much,” Claw said. “Not in so many flattering words, for sure, but he took care to let me know that I might not get a moment of peace once I decide to join you.”

“We’ll let you sleep,” Toru intervened. “I can’t say that the mutt will do the same, though…”

Varg laughed and threw a small pebble at the naughty tiger. “Stop scaring Claw. Is this how you are planning to convince him that it would be good to join us?”

“You’re right. The mutt will let you sleep, Claw,” Toru promised solemnly. “I’ll take care of him by sleeping right on top of his chest. He won’t be able to move a finger.”

“Only to tickle you,” Varg threatened playfully. “And are you sure you’re going to leave Duril by himself all night? Night after night?” He said the words slowly, eyeing Toru and his amusing reactions.

“Maybe I’ll tie you up before we go to sleep. Then you won’t be able to attack me with your tickling either,” Toru said, quite satisfied at having found a solution to keep Varg from Claw through the night.

Claw interrupted their banter with his sonorous laugh. “What if I don’t want to be left alone at night?”

Varg grinned as Toru’s mouth dropped open in surprise. “Then I can spar with you at night. I don’t like sleeping a lot when the moon is up.”

“And yet, you’ll be sleeping,” Duril said and pulled him close by the shoulders. “We will all be on our best behavior, regardless of whether Claw wants to be bothered or not. We’ll have time for, um, other activities,” he added and choked a little on his words, “when rest is not so dearly required.”

“Is there something in your throat?” Toru asked and began patting Duril on the back, almost making him topple forward.

“No, but you might have made one of my lungs move out of its place,” Duril said and laughed, straightening up.

Varg shook his head with mirth. Their group was one of a kind and among the most playful bunch he had met in a long time. Duril might have to amend his plans of having everyone on their best behavior at night.

The desert lay once again in front of them. They were on the move, but maybe they had become friends with this merciless sun because their skin could take its blessings better, and they no longer moved like they had rocks tied to their feet.

“How long until we reach The Quiet Woods?” Toru asked in the impatient manner of young people.

“We still have some road to walk in front of us, kitty,” Claw replied. “But I can make our journey easier by telling you more about the place.”

“Tell us, yes, tell us,” Toru encouraged him.

Duril was just as eager to hear about it, and he could tell by how Varg slightly turned his head that he wanted to learn as much as he could about The Quiet Woods.

“Are they really that quiet? Why are they called that?” Toru began his rain of questions.

“Compared to other places, you could say that,” Claw replied. “Even the humans who sometimes settle there have a way of life that doesn’t go against the ancient rhythm of the forest.”

“It sounds like paradise,” Duril said. “After traveling through the Great Barren for so long, our eyes might have trouble adjusting to a place like that.”

“Are there a lot of shadows? Does the sun reach the ground? Or is it a very dark forest?” Toru asked.

“There is sun, and there is shadow, like everywhere else. But that doesn’t make it a place like others,” Claw continued. “You won’t find rivers as crystalline as its rivers if you walk all over Eawirith.”

“Is there a lot of food? Meat?” Toru’s eyes were shining with excitement.

It looked like someone was hoping for more than spider leg stew and fried lizards, Duril noticed with a smile of his own.

“A lot,” Claw confirmed. “And sweet, sweet honey.”

Toru scrunched up his nose. “I don’t want honey. I want meat!”

“Talk to us about how you lived there,” Duril gave Claw a friendly nudge. “Who were your friends? What about that witch you mentioned?”

Toru, while still appearing not at all convinced about the amount of food available in The Quiet Woods, chose to remain silent and listen to the bearshifter and his stories.

“If they’re still around, I might introduce you to them. But we should be on our way and leave stories for the times when we need something to make us sleepy.”

Duril understood what was happening inside Claw’s heart at that very moment. The closer they got to The Quiet Woods, the more the longing in his heart grew. Maybe there were other ways to put the bearshifter’s strong heart at ease.

They knew they had to walk for a few more days and nights to reach their destination. Around them, the desert was changing its face, and the dunes now made room for flatter patches of sand, through which, snaking like fingers fanning out from a point of origin they still couldn’t see, clumps of small bushes and grass appeared.

“It appears that we must settle for the naked sky as the roof above our heads tonight,” Duril announced.

Toru shrugged. “That’s how I like it best. Do we still have enough wood to make a fire?”

Claw had been adamant about having enough firewood with them, and he had carried it on his back, tied with improvised rope made from the bark of the trees that had been so plentiful in the oasis they had left only a couple of days ago.

Given that they had been walking relentlessly for two days and nights, it was a fine thing to take a break. Toru had spoken quietly to Duril about the apparent restlessness that gripped Claw for a while, and the healer had told him about why that happened. No one wanted Claw to be in pain over being so close to his home, and yet still not there.

That was the reason why Toru had decided what to do as soon as everyone was asleep. Maybe he wasn’t that good with words, but he knew how to use his body to show what his heart told him was right and good.

And right and good now meant that Varg should no longer shy away from showing his affection for Claw, and that they could all be together.

He pretended to be his usual self while enjoying the dinner put together by Duril and Varg, who both had excellent skills when it came to cooking, no matter how little food was left, and how harsh the conditions were.

Once more, the fire was dying out, and they were sleeping around it, their heads full of dreams. But Toru didn't feel like sleeping tonight, not when he knew that Claw might just decide that living in The Quiet Woods was a much more desirable future for him than joining the group on their adventures. So, this was one of their last chances to spend time together, not as separate people that would soon part ways.

He pushed against Duril's shoulder gently. "Hey," he called out in a whisper.

The healer opened his eyes and smiled. "Not sleepy just yet?"

"Admit it, you weren't sleeping either."

"Not that I could, not with you fidgeting so much. What's on your mind?" Duril asked.

Toru moved closer until his and Duril's noses touched. "Claw might not come with us after he sees his home."

"It's true," Duril confirmed his doubts. "We all like Claw and would like him to stay with us, but it is his choice, after all."

"It is," Toru admitted. "So maybe we won't have many more occasions to spend time with him. Should we squander the time we have left by sleeping?"

He bit his bottom lip as he said that, and Duril rewarded him with a warm smile. "You have something naughty on your mind, haven't you?"

"I just don't want him to leave us, and it's a way to feel close to him, isn't it?" Toru said.

Duril ran his hand through Toru's hair, making him feel pleasure rise and spread throughout his body. "I always want what you want."

"Also," Toru whispered, "I think that Varg felt a little guilty when I caught them, and he hasn't gotten together with Claw after that."

"Then we should put everyone's minds at ease," Duril suggested. "As always, you're in charge."

Toru smiled with satisfaction. He knew he could count on his friend and lover, even when his mind was taking him to naughty places like right now.

He moved slowly, and Duril followed. They approached the sleeping shapes of Varg and Claw. There was a bit of space between them, just as Toru had noticed lately. Maybe he liked to play a

lot and behave like a spoiled child, but he didn't want Varg to think that any pleasure was denied him only to keep Toru from getting upset.

Duril nodded when he pointed at Varg, and he moved farther, stopping by Claw's side. He was never shy, but he had to admit that a small tremor of anticipation and something else coursed through his body as he began to untie the string holding the shirt Claw was wearing together. Under his fingers, coarse hair appeared, and Toru reached for the skin, in search of warmth.

Claw growled quietly and grabbed Toru's hand hard and fast. "What are you doing, kitty?" he asked in a drowsy voice.

"You look like you feel too hot. I'm just taking off your shirt so that you can be more comfortable," Toru replied, barely keeping in a grin.

Claw answered with a lopsided smile of his own. He guided Toru's hand to his nipples, first to the right, then to the left, making him feel the nubs of flesh rising under his teasing. Toru stared in fascination at the changes in the bear's body, under their ministrations.

Duril was doing a similarly great job of waking up Varg. Hushed conversation and small laughter could be heard from their direction.

"You're all in on this?" Claw asked as he unceremoniously guided Toru's hand toward his nether regions.

Getting inside the bearshifter's pants was no easy feat, especially since Claw didn't let go of his hand, so they both had only one left free. However, soon enough, Toru sighed in satisfaction as his fingers curled of their own accord on unmistakable hardness.

"You see, kitty?" Claw asked in a heated voice. "I was ready for you. What took you so long?"

Toru giggled and enjoyed moving his hand up and down, squeezing hard only for the joy of hearing Claw hiss in mixed pleasure and frustration. "I wasn't sure you wanted it," Toru replied.

"How could I not? You're some of the most handsome men I've met in a long time. All of you," Claw added and threw a look at Duril and Varg who were already engaged in heavy kissing, while almost completely undressed.

Varg turned his head and smiled at them. "Toru likes to spring such surprises on the unaware," he said with a chuckle. "And here I thought I had to be on my best behavior so you didn't get jealous."

"I told you I wasn't jealous," Toru said quickly. "Maybe a little, but only because you didn't let me watch when you and Claw got together."

"How about showing us?" Duril suggested. "Just like Toru, I must admit that I felt a tiny bit left out. And even a little jealous, too," he said and teased Varg's jawline with his lips.

“Aren’t you two something else?” Claw muttered as his eyes grew wide.

Toru recognized that for what it was. Claw’s hard member in his hand was pulsing with want. “Show us,” he ordered and pulled away.

Claw and Varg exchanged an unsure look. Why was it hard for those two to go at it? But they were a bit funny, shy like that. Toru laughed and moved between them, pulling them up and kissing Varg first, and then Claw. Using both hands, he took their shafts in his hand and began to rub them together, turning them both into quivering messes.

Duril didn’t hesitate to join in the fun. He moved behind them and began to kiss their shoulders and backs. Toru had an idea about what other teasing things the healer did to them, but he couldn’t stop and watch. “Who was on top?” he asked heatedly. “Claw, did you put the mutt on all fours?”

Varg let out a strangled growl. Toru grinned. So that was the reason for the mutt’s shyness. Always the top dog, and still he didn’t mind being overcome and pressed down by a strong body. Toru felt ravenous with renewed curiosity and excitement.

“Now you two really have to show us,” he insisted.

A short look was exchanged between Varg and Claw, and then the bearshifter turned the other slowly, until his back rested flush against the bigger man’s hard body. Toru gasped and grabbed his own crotch as Varg arched his spine, and Claw’s rough hands grabbed his hips, guiding him into a position ideal for what would happen next.

Duril came near him and began helping him with his hand. Toru closed his eyes for a moment, enjoying the sensation, but then opened them, eager to soak in these moments and the scene happening in front of his eyes.

Varg was still as strong as ever, but they were seeing a side of him that was only now becoming apparent. There was vulnerability, too, in how he surrendered and threw his head back while Claw impaled him from behind.

Toru grunted as Duril moved down on his body and began to tease him with his lips. Claw pushed Varg forward, making him land on all fours and then he slammed into him hard.

His dark eyes moved to Toru’s, holding their hot gaze. Breaking away with difficulty, Toru looked at Varg, who looked back at him with a question in his loaded stare.

“I want you like that, too,” Toru blurted out.

Varg let out a small moan, and his lips stretched into a smile. “Then you can have me, kitty,” he whispered.

“Another time,” Toru groaned out while Duril engulfed him in the heat of his mouth over and over. “I’m too close now.”

His eyes drank in the scene as Claw continued to make Varg’s body shake with each thrust, and the wolfshifter made the most arousing sounds while being ridden like that. That would be him soon, too, and Varg had promised.

And it was what he wanted, the four of them together like this, taking in what was happening to them as a beautiful gift that only life could give. He let out a loud moan as Duril drank him dry, all the while witnessing Claw spending himself inside Varg’s body, as the wolfshifter reached the peak of pleasure himself and spilled his seed on the ground.

“Was it everything that you wanted, kitty?” Varg asked him later.

The wolfshifter was nuzzling his neck, and they were all ready to go to sleep now, with no empty spaces between them. Duril was by Varg’s other side, and Claw was close to Toru, his breath warm on his cheek.

“Not all,” Toru retorted.

He wanted more, and he would have more. He pulled his companions even closer, enjoying their scent all around him now, and went to sleep.

To dream of the path again, opening before him wide and long like the promise of a life worth living.

THE END OF HUNGRY HEART BOOK TWO (TRIBES)