



ALANA ANKH

FRACTURED  
SOULS

ELEMENTAL LOVERS 2



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By ALANA ANKH

All's Fair in Mate Bonds and Publishing  
Electrify His Heart  
Soul of a Merman

ELEMENTAL LOVERS

Beyond the Rift  
Fractured Souls

Published by DREAMSPINNER PRESS  
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ALANA ANKH



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Fractured Souls

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# Glossary of Terms and Locations

## SPECIES

Andari (native land, Anderra)—Race of mages gifted in defensive and summoning magic. Andari are fair-skinned, their faces soft, heart-shaped. With few exceptions, all Andari wear their hair long in traditional hairstyles that identify their relationship status. They are of lighter build, not prone to physical combat. A specific feature of Andari physiology is their heat, a period of extreme sexual desire. Considered shameful by Andari, it is the reason for their restrictive rules on sexuality.

Aranken (native land, A'rankin)—Race of powerful elemental mages. While they are originally from the Eastern Realm, a group of Aranken traveled to find a new home and became the ancestors of the Nikari. The Aranken settled in the Eastern Realm lived on, despite their increasingly difficult circumstances. Their main form of combat is through the use of magic, although they are also far less restricted in it than Andari and Nikari.

Ndara—Extinct race distantly related with the Andari; no magic abilities, but strong in physical combat, agility and speed

Nikari—Powerful species born from the union of the Aranken and the Ndara. Nikari are gifted in elemental offensive spells as well as physical combat. Despite being a relatively new species, through this unique blend of abilities, they managed to defeat the other races on their continent. Dusky-skinned, with sharp, angular features, they retain some Ndara traditions (specifically hair-braiding very similar to Andari). Their eyes are always black but rimmed with different colors (gold, bronze, silver, etc.). Like the Andari, they also have powerful impulses. However, theirs are not sexual, but violent. When they are particularly dangerous, their eyes glow. Many Nikari bond with interdimensional creatures called nightwolves.

Andari Half Blood—Nikari and Andari half-breeds, Half Bloods are weaker in magic than both Nikari and Andari, although their abilities vary greatly from individual to individual. Certain provinces in Anderra treat Half Bloods dismissively, whereas in others there are Half Bloods with an acknowledged Nikari ancestry and wealth and land that compensates for their less potent magic.

## SPECIFIC TERMS

### *Andari-related*

*Awaye*—Dance of Andari origins, very sensual, specific to couples

Father (Andari family)—male who contributes additional magic to the offspring; involved in anal penetration with a female *odale*. Through the magic caused by the process of conception, both the sire and the father have direct bloodline connection to the offspring.

*Malynsa*—a sweet fruit native to Anderra

*Odale*—Temporary concubine used by a couple (usually same-sex) for procreation. Odale organize in guilds and abide by contracts that give them no rights over the resulting offspring. Female odale are used by homosexual (male-male) couples. Male odale are used by both lesbian couples and heterosexual couples. In the case of heterosexual couples, male odale are sought out for the purpose of improving the magical proficiency of the offspring.

Reysen—the deity most species believe in, also known as the Creator

Sire (Andari family)—male who is the genetic parent of the offspring, involved in vaginal penetration with a female odale

Wave-wayfaring—method of long-distance travel used by the Andari, involving creating a corridor through the fabric of time and space. It is more stable than dimensional rifts and not as dangerous but is less time-efficient.

### *Nikari-related*

A'Mora—consort of the former Morai, mother of the current Morai (equivalent of the queen mother)

*Darach*—a long, curved dagger, the traditional weapon of the Nikari

Morai—the Emperor of the Nikari Empire



Moris—the male consort of the Morai

Mora—the female consort of the Morai

*Moraistele*—from *stele*, concubine; concubine of the Morai

Nightwolf—large interdimensional beast in the shape of a huge, mount-sized wolf. Nightwolves bond with certain Nikari, creating a unique telepathic connection between them. The color of a nightwolf's eyes is usually the same as the rim of a Nikari's pupil.

*Reada* wine—a Nikari drink, very spicy and potent, allowed only to Nikari past their age of majority

Rift—method of long-distance travel used by the Nikari, involving cutting a hole in dimensional space. Dimensional travel is instantaneous but can be very dangerous for untrained users and often causes physical pain.

*Sharani*—endearment, Nikari for beautiful one.

### *A'rankin-related*

#### ARANKEN MAGIC

Aranken magic is based on a combination of elements. Different types of mages are as follows:

Fire Starter: mage with powers over fire and air

Destroyers: mage with powers over earth and fire

Life mage: the only type of Aranken mage that can control all of the elements

Latent: an originally weak Aranken with an affinity toward a single element who suddenly gains a very strong awareness of that element. Latents are very feared because of their nigh-absolute power in their respective element and their lack of control over it.

Nurturer: mage with powers over water and earth; usually has potent healing abilities

Storm Caller: mage with powers over water and air

Aranken Wards: a shield that surrounds A'rankin from all directions, protecting it from non-Aranken intruders

#### ARANKEN DEITIES

Aranken worship the elements, as follows:

Aether—the element of air  
Ignis—the element of fire  
Oceana—the element of water  
Terra—the element of earth

#### SUB-DEITIES

Anima—union of all elements, known as the soul of the elements, patron of Life mages  
Gaia—union of Water and Earth, commonly known as Oceana and Terra's daughter, patron of Nurturers  
Sol—union of Fire and Air, commonly known as Aether and Ignis's son, patron of Fire Starters  
Tempesta—union of Air and Water, commonly known as Aether and Oceana's daughter, patron of Storm Callers  
Volcana—union of Fire and Earth, commonly known as Oceana and Terra's daughter, patron of Destroyers

Note: While generally addressed as either male or female and choosing to appear in certain forms, Aranken deities aren't truly limited to a gender.

Some elements, such as fire and water, are incompatible and can only be used in tandem by Life mages.

#### ARANKEN TITLES

Aranken titles have three parts—the first name, the last name and the middle particle, which acts as both an identifier of nobility and a general term to separate the classes. As a rule, the shortest particles identify the highest ranking and most powerful Aranken.

Or—royalty (example, Tynare'Or'Therar)

Kel—powerful nobility (example: Seyan'Kel'Fezenda)

Enth—part of the peasantry (example: Ansel'Enth'Derada)

# Prologue

## Anticipation

“THEY’RE FINALLY coming. The Nikari are coming.”

Tynare crossed his arms over his chest and waited for the king to elaborate. The news didn’t exactly come as a surprise. For weeks, Tynare had been telling him to be prepared for this development. It irritated him that his father was acting like he hadn’t expected it in the slightest.

“We need to handle this with care,” the older Aranken continued. “This might be our chance to gain a foothold in the west. The Nikari are powerful, and if we draw them to our side, we can finally strike back against those blasted latents. Those abominations need to be weeded out of our land.”

Tynare suppressed the urge to roll his eyes, accustomed to his father’s usual rants. Yes, he was well aware of the dangers the latents brought to Aranken society. He’d felt their chaotic power himself. But it frustrated him to listen to the king drone on, always hammering the very same points home. It reminded him of things he’d have much preferred to forget.

The Nikari’s arrival would be an interesting diversion. Not to mention that his plans required their presence, as unpleasant as the thought might be. “What are your orders, Your Majesty?” he asked smoothly.

“I’m told the Morai’s cousin and the A’Mora are already traveling toward A’rankin,” his father replied, stopping midrant. “You will approach them and befriend them. I know you’re quite capable of being very charming.”

Tynare ignored the latter part of the reply and focused on the first. “His cousin? I do believe you mean his half brother.”

King Rynald grunted. “Make sure you avoid mentioning that. As you well know, it’s a sensitive topic.”

“I understand, Father,” Tynare replied with a smile. “You know you can rely on me.”

The king scrutinized his face with tired eyes. The doubt seemed obvious, but unfortunately for the Aranken sovereign, he didn’t have any offspring other than Tynare. “Yes, of course,” he said, his voice thick with reluctance. He plopped down on his throne, his shoulders slumped. “Of course I can rely on you.”

He wasn’t even speaking to Tynare anymore, instead attempting to force himself to believe his own words. The king’s capability for denial and self-deception both amused and frustrated Tynare. It allowed him to do whatever he pleased, but it was also one of the reasons behind his current situation. Indeed, all amusement aside, he had other priorities that went beyond his personal entertainment.

“With your permission, Your Majesty,” he told his father, “I’ll start making the preparations.”

King Rynald looked up and offered Tynare an obviously forced smile. “Please do. And make sure you have Etera to help you.”

Tynare easily translated those latter words as his father making sure he was being watched and kept out of mischief. Tynare would have resented it—he didn’t like being seen as an errant child—but in the end his father’s opinion of him mattered very little. He already had his guardian right where he wanted her, and he could go through with his plans with very little to fear from the king.

Nevertheless he found no reason to shove this knowledge in his father’s face. “Yes, Your Majesty,” he replied politely. “As you know, Etera accompanies me everywhere.”

Rynald nodded, a touch of relief flashing in his eyes. “Very well. You’re dismissed.”

Tynare bowed and turned on his heel, already planning his next move. As he left his father’s throne room, his retainer-cum-shadow fell in step behind him. “Is everything in order, Your Highness?” she asked.

For the first time since he’d gone to see his father, Tynare allowed himself to truly smile. If nothing else, the Nikari’s arrival would be a challenge. He had every intention of befriending them, albeit not for the reasons his father thought. “Yes,” he told Etera. “Everything is exactly as I wish it.”

# Chapter One

## Shores

“PROMISE ME you’ll be careful. If anything goes wrong, come home at once.”

Shuri would have laughed—he’d forgotten how many times he’d made that promise in the past few weeks—but he could never be dismissive of Ivy’s words and feelings.

He peered into the beautiful green eyes of his brother’s lover, the same ones he’d fallen madly in love with. “I promise,” he said.

“Stop worrying, Ivy,” Katara piped up oh-so helpfully. “I’ll be with him, remember?”

Shuri gritted his teeth, hating that he hadn’t managed to escape whatever plan she’d devised. The last thing he needed on his trip to A’rankin was the presence of his nemesis. Alas, it couldn’t be helped, especially since Ivy seemed relieved by the A’Mora’s reassurances.

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” he told Katara. “That means more than you know.”

Over Ivy’s shoulder, Kris stood silently, watching the scene. A few weeks ago, he’d made the announcement that Ivy, his former *moraistele*, would become the future Moris. While that came with a measure of freedom for Ivy, Kris seemed more possessive of him than ever.

Shuri hated having to leave the Empire under such circumstances, but it couldn’t be helped. Still, the knowledge that he’d be abandoning Ivy into Kris’s clutches made him act impulsively. He pulled Ivy into his embrace and held him close, inhaling deeply to commit his scent to memory.

For a few moments, Ivy tensed, but then he hugged Shuri back. Shuri knew better than to interpret that romantically. Ivy was too blinded by Kris’s tricks to see Shuri. But Shuri still had hope that someday, after he

returned from A'rankin, he'd be able to act as serious competition and maybe earn Ivy's love.

Judging by the growl that sounded from Kris, Shuri held on to Ivy far longer than Kris would have liked. Of course, he didn't particularly care about Kris's sensibilities, and when he let go, he did so because he didn't want to make Ivy uncomfortable.

Meeting Ivy's emerald gaze once more, he said, "You take care of yourself too. I'll miss you." Not waiting for a reply, he looked at his brother. Since he didn't want Ivy to hear anything hostile, he mentally reached out to Kris. *Don't you dare hurt him again. If you do, nothing, not distance, not your title or the entire Empire will protect you from the consequences.*

*It's not fear of you that will keep me from harming Ivy,* Kris replied. *Believe it or not, I love him.* Out loud, he said, "Good luck, brother. Keep us posted if you find out anything."

"Once we get there, we should be able to use rifts to travel back," Katara offered. "But if that's not the case, we'll contact you in a more traditional manner."

Kris grimaced, obviously not pleased at the idea that his beloved mother might not have a quick way out of a hostile environment. In all likelihood he'd have said something more, but Katara's nightwolf, Fegala, growled, as if to remind everyone she was there. Up until this point—much to Shuri's relief—she'd stayed aside, together with Kris's mount, Attcha, and Ivy's miniature beast, Reisl, but now, she seemed to have decided her presence was required.

Kris chuckled. "Yes, yes, I know. You'll take care of Mother. My apologies."

Shuri doubted he'd benefit from the same courtesy, but he didn't trust nightwolves in the first place. He'd have much preferred it if the damn A'Mora had left her pet home, but no one had asked him for his opinion. Then again, few people ever did.

However, nightwolves did have their uses. While Kris was distracted by Fegala, Shuri focused on Ivy again. "Ivy, I need a favor," he said. "I know this is a lot to ask, but would you check on my uncle from time to time?"

Kris's smiled melted away as if by magic, but Ivy nodded. "Of course. Be at ease. We'll make sure he is well cared for."

A wave of gratitude and affection flooded Shuri. Predictably, his uncle had been furious at his decision, to the extent that he hadn't even dropped by the harbor to see Shuri off. But he'd also lost his imperial privileges—and his arm—when he'd attacked Kris and Katara, and without Shuri to worry about him, there was no telling what would happen.

Resorting to Ivy's assistance might not be entirely appropriate, since Ivy had reasons to loathe Phura. Nonetheless, Shuri didn't have anyone else he could trust. "Thank you," he told Ivy, wondering how his brother could have ever made Ivy fall for him.

He wished he could say more, so much more, but Ivy wouldn't want to hear the truths bubbling in Shuri's throat. He was almost relieved when the crew of their ship announced they'd completed the preparations for departure. Almost, but not quite.

"Well, that's our cue," Katara said. She hugged Kris and Ivy tightly, her reassuring smile never leaving her face. "Make sure you take care of this son of mine, Ivy. He tends to get into trouble when I'm not around."

"Yes, Your Majesty. I will keep a close eye on him."

Shuri didn't feel joyful or optimistic enough to tease. He just nodded in acquiescence of his brother's orders and smiled at Ivy. "Until we next meet. Farewell, Kris, Ivy."

Together, he, Katara, and Fegala boarded the vessel. Shuri could have gone below deck, but instead, he leaned against the banister, still taking in the sight of Ivy's beautiful figure. As the ship began to move, Kris impassively watched their departure, his gaze fixed on Katara. Attcha and Reisl woofed—presumably to see Fegala off—but Ivy waved at Shuri. "Good luck!" he called out.

Shuri couldn't speak, so he kept looking at Ivy until the young Andari became only a small dot on the horizon. Finally, when the beaches of Darach melted away altogether, Shuri shook off his dismay and melancholy and focused on his plans.

Turning toward Katara, Shuri said, "I trust you won't jeopardize this mission just to spite me."

Katara scoffed. "Don't be ridiculous. I'm not as petty as you seem to think."

Shuri doubted that very much, but he had no choice but to live with it. “It’s not going to be easy. The culprit behind the conspiracy is probably already prepared for our arrival. I propose a truce until we’ve returned to the Empire.”

The A’Mora rolled her eyes. “Don’t tell me you missed the fact that I already suggested this when I offered to come with you. It would be quite foolish to be at each other’s throats when there are bound to be other people there just waiting to stab us in the back.”

Shuri arched a brow. “And yet even if you know this, you still decided to join me.”

Katara didn’t acknowledge his words. She petted Fegala’s large head and stared out into the distance. “I wonder how long it will take us to reach A’rankin,” she mused.

Shuri would have liked to know that too. Unfortunately, they were traveling into the unknown, in more than one way. The ship itself was unique, propelled through a mix of water magic and science. As a rule, Nikari used offensive spells, which had been useful during the war and had allowed them to build the empire that now spanned the entire Western Realm. However, their focus on battle abilities left them with little flexibility when it came to more regular usage of elemental magic. Not only that, but most Nikari employed dimensional rifts for transportation and showed little interest in long-distance travel via waterways. The ships existed largely due to Nikaret’s proximity to the river Endana, which had encouraged research in that field. It was definitely a stroke of fortune. Rifts couldn’t have helped Shuri and Katara get to the Eastern Realm, simply because no one alive had ever been to A’rankin before. Creator, the only thing they had for reference was old maps and the correspondence between Kris and the Aranken crown.

“If nothing else,” he commented, “this is definitely going to be interesting. It is high time we give the Aranken a little lesson.”

“For the first time, Shuri, I agree with you.” Katara smirked. “I wonder if they’ll think the same.”

THE TRIP lasted five days—days that were far too long, if Shuri did say so himself. In spite of the size of the vessel and his resolve to cooperate with



the A'Mora, he soon found that their truce didn't extend to the two of them actually liking each other. He spent most of his hours avoiding her and her blasted animal, thinking about Ivy and wondering if they'd gotten lost already.

Mercifully, on the morning of the sixth day, Shuri caught sight of land. At first, he thought he was imagining things, but the excited calls of the crew soon confirmed his find.

Katara came up on deck as well, with Fegala trailing her like a particularly large and ominous dog. "Well, well. It seems the game is finally starting."

"This isn't a game," Shuri snapped at her. "You're a fool if you think that."

The A'Mora laughed. "Am I? I disagree. I've lived longer than you, Shuri, and I can tell you this. All politics is exactly that, a game. If you don't play by the rules, you lose. Keep that close in mind. It might answer some of your questions."

Shuri understood the reference to his dead mother, and he felt awfully tempted to wring the A'Mora's neck. Fortunately—or unfortunately, depending on perspective—the ship was approaching Aranken shores, and Shuri was forced to direct his attention to more practical matters.

Even from the distance, he could see a crowd gathered in the harbor ahead. The town itself didn't impress through its size, at least, not as far as Shuri could determine. Most of the area beyond the beach seemed swallowed within a forest that almost appeared to be a barrier against the intruders.

While that couldn't be described as remarkable, something about the way the sun fell onto the waves created a rainbow-like filter through which the sights in the distance became almost surreal. It made the view beautiful, special, echoing a place in Shuri's heart he hadn't even known was there.

Upon closer inspection, Shuri realized it wasn't a trick of light after all. The closer they got, the more solid the rapidly changing colors became. "What in the world is that?" Katara inquired.

Shuri's guess was as good as hers, but it looked like they were about to find out. The phenomenon finally came into full view, and Shuri felt the proximity of the strange barrier in every inch of his body. Pure magic

crackled through the air, the waves around them seeming to evaporate, boil, and reemerge within the blink of an eye.

Fegala growled, and Katara reached for her *darach*. Shuri knew the weapon wouldn't help them. This was a force unlike anything they'd ever encountered. And yet it didn't scare him, and after one tense moment, Katara seemed to relax too. As paradoxical as it was and despite the fact that the phenomenon itself was alien to them, its energies simply felt familiar.

Sadly, their ship didn't agree, as it came to a halt, the jolt almost sending Shuri and Katara flying off deck. "It seems we won't be able to pass through this barrier," Katara commented, pointing out the obvious.

After several days of traveling, Shuri was more than a little irritated by having yet another obstacle in his path. He felt tempted to leap into the water and swim to the shore or to just tell the crew to head back to the Empire—if they could make the vessel work, of course.

He didn't have to make any unpleasant choices, because another ship was already heading their way. It bypassed the shield easily and came to a halt right next to them. Shuri would have liked to claim he immediately took in the possible threats when it came to this new development, but he was too busy gaping at the figure standing on the deck of the Aranken ship.

Ivy had given him a general description of the Aranken prince Tynare'Or'Therar—because the man Shuri now faced could be no one else—but it didn't prepare Shuri for the meeting. The sharp angles of his cheekbones were reminiscent of Shuri's own looks, but that was about the only similarity between them. The prince's bright red hair fell to his shoulders in a curtain of flame, framing his fair-skinned, aristocratic face. His ornately embroidered breeches clung to his slender form, managing to be tight fitting in all the right places while still disguising his groin and his ass. His shirt showed less consideration for decorum—at least, from what Shuri could tell—because the cut of the garment was so low Shuri could almost glimpse the man's nipples.

Their gazes met, and Shuri found himself falling into the aquamarine depths. His cock hardened and he instantly hated himself for it, for the way this arousal betrayed his affection for Ivy. That self-loathing helped him shake off his trance, and he straightened his spine, forcing himself to become the messenger his people and Ivy expected him to be.

“Greetings, Your Highness,” he called out. “I am Shuriden Fezenda of the Nikari Empire, and this is Her Majesty, the A’Mora Katara Fezenda. It seems that we’ve run into a little problem.”

The prince left the deck of his vessel, a soft breeze carrying him onto the Nikari ship. “Welcome, Your Highness, Your Majesty,” he said. “I am Prince Tynare’Or’Therar. You have my apologies for the harm your vessel has suffered.”

“No need to apologize, Your Highness, unless it is your magic that made it stop,” Katara commented.

Tynare chuckled. “I’m afraid I have no claim to such abilities. A’rankin is surrounded on all sides by an elemental shield. It cannot be passed by non-Aranken. I imagine Nikari won’t encounter any problems, but your vessel is unusual enough to be affected by it.”

Shuri arched a brow. “I see. Might I ask why you deemed it necessary to erect such a shield?”

Tynare’s eyes widened, although Shuri couldn’t tell if the Aranken was genuinely surprised or not. “Surely you must be aware of our conflict with Shyrn,” the prince said. “It was the reason your ancestors fled A’rankin, after all.”

Nikari history provided sketchy information on the whys behind the decision of the first Fezenda to relocate on the Western Realm. Still, admitting that felt an awful lot like surrendering a battle. In specific, Shuri didn’t like the implication of cowardice on the part of his ancestors. “That was a long time ago,” he replied. “Both the Nikari and the Aranken have changed a great deal. Was this shield even in place at that time?”

A spark of irritation—or was it interest?—lit up the prince’s dark blue eyes. “Actually, no,” he admitted. “The shield itself is a more recent development, or, at least, recent in reference to the departure of your ancestors. But come. We can talk about this a different time, in a more comfortable location. With your permission, I would be more than happy to escort you to the shore.”

Shuri found no reason to refuse, but he still wanted to do so. Something about Tynare put him on edge. Perhaps it was the painfully physical reaction he had to the other man or the fact that his arousal didn’t in the least bit match his actual opinion of the Aranken heir. His words might be welcoming enough, but the twist of those full lips seemed

arrogant, almost mocking. To make things worse, Tynare must have noticed Shuri's reaction to him, because he leaned in closer to Shuri, invading his personal space. "I would be very interested in giving you a taste of Aranken hospitality."

Shuri's treacherous dick responded to Tynare's words—damn the idiotic member anyway—but Shuri stood his ground and pasted a neutral smile on his face. "You're too kind, Your Highness. Her Majesty and I would both appreciate it."

Tynare didn't seem particularly frustrated by Shuri's veiled refusal to a more intimate acquaintance between them. He smiled and nodded. "My men will help with your bags. For the moment, please follow me."

The so-called plea turned out to be superfluous, since the breeze that had first transported Tynare onto the Nikari vessel manifested once again, this time carrying Shuri and Katara in the reverse direction. Tynare followed, but Fegala didn't seem to appreciate being ignored.

The nightwolf leapt off the deck of Shuri's vessel and landed onto the Aranken ship. Aranken crew yelped as the animal landed in their midst, and even Tynare took a step back, obviously aware of the danger a nightwolf could bring—if not through actual information on their kind, at some instinctual level. It almost amused Shuri, or it might have, if the episode didn't bring back too many unpleasant memories.

He didn't know what he'd have done had Katara not intervened and smoothly made the introductions. "This is my dear friend, Fegala. She has been my loyal companion in many dangers. I realize it's unusual for you, but I can assure you that as long as your people keep their distance, she poses no threat."

Tynare nodded and smiled pleasantly, as if he dealt with interdimensional canine monsters on a regular basis. "I see. Well, I'll make all the arrangements that are needed to ensure her a pleasant stay. Is there anything in particular I would need to know?"

As Katara related Fegala's likes and dislikes, Shuri carefully watched Tynare's face and wondered: Was this his opponent? Was this the man who'd tried to kill Ivy? If so, his cock could go fuck itself, because Shuri had every intention of making sure Tynare would never be a threat to Ivy, or anyone else, ever again.

His wariness turned out to be correct, if not for the right reason. The waters around the ship started to swirl alarmingly. Tynare stopped midsentence. “Get everyone off the Nikari ship,” he shouted. “Now!”

His crew shot into action at once. The men and women on Shuri’s vessel were transported onto the deck of the Aranken one. Not a moment too soon, either, because just as the last person landed next to Shuri, a huge, serpent-like creature emerged from the water. Its tail wrapped around the Nikari vessel, crushing it.

For a few moments, Shuri gaped in shock. He’d never seen such a creature in the Western Realm. Katara seemed just as taken aback, and she turned toward Fegala, who peered at her with strikingly intelligent eyes. Undoubtedly, the beast was acquainted with this new monster.

But now was not the time for explanations. With the Nikari ship destroyed, the serpent directed its attention toward the Aranken one.

“Quickly,” Tynare ordered to his men. “Toward the harbor.”

Shuri guessed the creature must be connected to the conflict Tynare had mentioned. If that was the case, simply reaching and bypassing the shield should solve their problem. However, the serpent seemed to know this too, because the motions of its body made the waves splash on the deck of the Aranken vessel, hindering its progress. The shield might not be very far, but the distance still seemed impossibly difficult to cross.

Well, Shuri hadn’t come all the way here to be thwarted by a fucking animal. No matter how big and threatening it might be, he refused to let it stand in his way.

The Fezenda held very strong air and water abilities, oriented toward lightning-related offense spells. It was Kris’s specialty. However, Shuri had always been more inclined toward fire magic, his affinity to water unremarkable at best. His uncle claimed his element expressed his anger and frustration, and while Shuri hadn’t particularly appreciated the analysis of his psyche, he always fell onto using his fire magic.

Today was no different. Out of thin air, he created a fireball. The foreign energy of the nearby shield fueled his power, and Shuri embraced it, letting it feed the spell. Once he was satisfied with the result, he threw the fireball at the monster. The serpent screeched in pain, but it didn’t go down. “Its scales are very resilient,” Tynare shouted at him. “No weapon we could

wield may harm it, and the fire magic needed to penetrate them is nigh impossible to summon.”

Shuri could see that. Some of the Aranken had been trying to cast their own magic at the beast, but the waves and lightning bolts they used were useless. Shuri’s own spell had just made the serpent creature mad. It lunged for him, ready to grab him in its jaws. It moved strikingly fast for a creature of its size, and Shuri was so taken aback that he didn’t avoid its attack in time. At the last moment, Katara tackled him, sending them both to the floor and narrowly avoiding the serpent’s deadly fangs.

The creature might have still caught them, but Fegala leapt on it, clawing at its serpentine neck. The water serpent swayed, obviously trying to shake off the nightwolf. For all the power of the legendary Nikari mounts, the snake’s size won out, and Fegala was thrown off, only to hit the deck with an alarming sound.

“Fegala!” Katara cried. She rushed to her nightwolf’s side, but before she could get there, a large wave swept over the deck, striking her at full force. She hit the wall hard and slid to the floor, unable to reach her pet.

Shuri despised Katara, and he didn’t much like nightwolves, but them being injured at this time would be more than a little inconvenient. He knew better than to think the blow had seriously hurt the A’Mora, but that could change if he didn’t do something. An idea occurred to him. He’d never attempted the method, and he had no idea if it would work. But if it did, they’d all be saved. Then again, if he failed, he might cause them all to be torn apart.

That thought made Shuri hesitate. During this moment of vacillation, the serpent focused on Fegala. Before the serpent could consume its new prey, Tynare tossed a fire bolt of his own at the creature’s gaping maw, causing the monster to change targets for the third time.

Shuri would never reach Tynare in time to save the Aranken from the jaws of the serpent. Making a decision, Shuri focused on the creature, sent a prayer to the Creator, and slashed his hand through the air.

He had not known if dimensional rifts would work here, and to a certain extent, his fears proved justified. The rift didn’t obey him in the sense that it didn’t appear within the creature, as Shuri had willed it. But Creator, that sort of thing was difficult under normal circumstances—and this situation seemed as far from normal as one could get. Thankfully,

Shuri's plan still worked. The rift manifested behind the serpent and sucked the creature in. The chaotic energies of the portal could have destroyed the Aranken and their ship too, but Shuri willed the rift into compliance, focusing its power on sending the serpent to a small, uninhabited island that they'd run into on their way here. Whether the creature reached it or not was a mystery, but the rift closed behind it, so Shuri counted it as a success.

Once the portal and the creature vanished, the water around them became calm. It was almost eerie after the battle, and if not for the remnants of the Nikari ship—the parts that hadn't been sucked in with the serpent, at least—still floating in the water, he'd have deemed the whole thing a dream.

Suddenly feeling exhausted, Shuri slid onto the deck. Shit, he was out of practice with rifts. He needed to learn how to control them better, because it seemed obvious he'd need them here.

For the moment, though, the danger had been averted. The confused, frightened people started to get organized again. Katara tended to Fegala, while the Aranken crew directed the vessel toward the shield.

Shuri would have appreciated some privacy, but the Aranken prince didn't seem to agree. He crouched down by Shuri's side and stared at him with those blue eyes that summoned images of stormy skies and the deepest, darkest depths of the ocean. The flirtatious comments and the coy smile were gone, leaving behind a mysterious inquiring expression.

Tynare threaded his fingers through Shuri's and looked at their entwined hands. Shuri should have probably freed his palm from the Aranken heir's grip, but he didn't. He'd have liked to blame it on the fear of an international incident, but at some level, he admitted he wanted to push Tynare's hair out of his face a little too much for comfort. He had to clench his fist so he wouldn't do so with his other hand.

Was it their brush with death that caused him to act in such a way? Perhaps. For one moment there, he'd had a flash of a different time and a different place, when Ivy had nearly died. The comparison seemed flawed to say the least, and Tynare wasn't Ivy, but Shuri didn't want to lose anyone ever again. Tynare might be his foe, but Shuri still wanted him to be safe. How fucked up was that?

A heartbeat later, Shuri realized his concern might have been justified. Suddenly, Tynare's legs gave out, and he collapsed on top of Shuri. Shuri

caught the other man before he hit his head or Creator knew what else. Turning Tynare around, he scrutinized the prince's face, only to find his eyes tightly shut in a grimace of pain.

A woman Shuri hadn't noticed until now made her appearance and dropped to her knees next to Tynare. "We need to get him below deck at once," she said. "Please give us some space, Your Highness."

Feeling helpless, Shuri complied. The woman summoned other members of the crew, and they picked Tynare up with excruciating care. Shuri just stood there and watched as they carried the prince away and left the deck.



## Chapter Two

### Arrival

FEGALA TURNED out to be, for the most part, uninjured. Katara did fuss over her pet for a while, and it seemed obvious the nightwolf enjoyed the attention. Beyond that, everything appeared to be in order.

In a startling development, the crew no longer showed any apprehension toward Fegala or the rest of them. Even as they directed the ship toward the shores, they kept throwing glances at the door their prince had disappeared through.

Shuri had to focus on giving commands and reassuring his own men, but at the back of his mind, he kept wondering how he could have missed Tynare's injury. When had the serpent hurt the Aranken prince? How bad was it? The thought simply refused to go away.

And then the ship passed through the shield, and time seemed to stretch endlessly as every nerve ending in Shuri's body came to life. All of the Nikari on deck gasped, some even falling to their knees as the bombardment of sensations overwhelmed them. To remain standing, Shuri held on to the banister, biting the inside of his cheek in an attempt to keep any embarrassing sounds in check. He felt like he was traveling through an unbalanced, chaotic double-rift, but at the same time, he didn't experience any pain. Instead, the power within the shield reached into his very soul, prodding his magic. The fire within Shuri responded, and under his fingers, the banister burned to a crisp.

It couldn't have taken them too long to cross the peculiar barrier, but when they did, the deck looked like a war zone. In several areas, the wood seemed swollen, as if it had absorbed too much water. In others, it had been charred. In a more amusing development, Fegala's fur was standing on end, obviously the result of a shock current going through her.

Judging by his own experience and everything he saw around him, Shuri gathered the barrier must have caused the Nikari to lose control of their powers. Katara must have been touching her nightwolf, resulting in Fegala being shocked by her companion. Shuri hadn't been ready for any of it either, so it took him a few minutes to completely recover. Once he did, his mind went to Tynare once more, wondering how the prince had handled the passage through the strange barrier. The Aranken crew seemed to have fared better than the Nikari and were already going back to their work, but they hadn't been completely immune to it. And Tynare had already been injured....

Much to Shuri's surprise, just as the ship reached the harbor, Tynare made his appearance. Shuri had just been considering how to approach one of the Aranken to inquire about their leader's well-being, so he froze when he saw the man in question emerging from below deck, walking calmly on his own two feet, his flame-red hair unruffled.

"I apologize for the earlier episode," the prince said.

By some sort of miracle, Shuri found his voice. "There's no need for any apology. Are you well? Did you receive treatment for your injury?"

"Yes, thank you," Tynare replied. His expression grew speculative, although he had that coy little smile again too. "I suppose you'll find out sooner or later, so I might as well tell you. I received an injury in a battle years ago, and while I made a miraculous recovery, there were still some long-term consequences."

Shuri felt surprised the Aranken prince had admitted to such a serious vulnerability. He didn't know how to interpret it. Their earlier exchange, or rather, those moments when the prince had held his hand, seemed to clash with the certainty in Tynare's voice.

But perhaps he was making more of things than he should. Undoubtedly, Tynare had been grateful for Shuri's help, but he wasn't comfortable with displaying gratitude. The Aranken prince must be experiencing some wariness as well, especially if he'd been the one behind the attack on Ivy.

The thought steeled Shuri's resolve, and he provided a formal, neutral reply. "I'm sorry to hear that. Rest assured Her Majesty and I will do our best to assist you, as long as we reach a consensus in the matter."

"You are too generous," the prince answered.

Shuri couldn't tell if the response held any sarcasm because the Aranken changed the subject. "Ah, I see that we've arrived. Come. I will show you around our land."

*Our* land, not *my* land. Something in Tynare's inflection told Shuri the use of the phrase had nothing to do with royal address. Was Shuri supposed to interpret it as welcoming? Another confusing comment from a confusing man.

If Katara deemed Tynare's behavior peculiar, she didn't show it. Instead, she offered the Aranken prince a blinding smile. "Thank you, Your Highness. We are quite honored you would escort us yourself."

Tynare chuckled. "I'm the one who is honored that the Empire has decided to respond to our invitation."

With those polite platitudes out of the way, Tynare led Shuri and Katara off the vessel and onto the docks. Fegala padded behind them, but Tynare didn't even blink at that. Instead, he proceeded to guide them away from the ship and into the small town.

"Devele is the closest point to the Western Realm and also one of the few areas where the shield is very near the main settlement," he explained. "As a rule, we've tried to avoid that, but things don't always happen like we want them to."

"So... the shield isn't unique to this location?" Katara inquired.

"Not at all," Tynare replied. "The Great Wards surround A'rankin from every direction. At first, they were created solely to protect the area neighboring the Shyrn desert, but after a while, we began to be attacked from the coast. It became obvious that the monsters from Shyrn were using underground waterways to go around the Wards."

"So creatures like the serpent are a regular problem," Shuri guessed. He was awfully tempted to stare at Tynare, and because of that temptation, he forced himself to do the exact opposite. Even as he spoke to the prince, he looked around, taking in the sights of the harbor.

"Not so much," Tynare answered him. "They can't bypass the shield. Nothing without elemental magic can." He chuckled self-deprecatingly. "To be perfectly honest, I didn't think your nightwolf could pass. This is why I didn't originally transport her onto the deck of my ship."

For all of Tynare's words, the town didn't seem too well developed. Shuri's original assessment with regard to its size turned out to be on the

nose, more accurate than he had expected. As far as he could tell, it was more of a fishing village than anything else. He did note the houses seemed well kept and displayed a style of architecture he'd never seen before. That didn't change their less-than-impressive size, the very few shops within view, and the narrowness of the road that would have been unacceptable for a large settlement, indifferently of the nationality of its inhabitants.

Just the same, Devele had a quaint charm that called out to Shuri, and he decided to share that with the prince. A smile of surprised pleasure lit up Tynare's handsome features. "Thank you, Your Highness. It's quite remarkable, no? To see such a peaceful place so close to something so dangerous."

Shuri wanted to reply, but before he could do so the prince stumbled and almost fell. It was just for a second, and the Aranken righted himself before Shuri could even reach for him. Nonetheless, both Shuri and Katara noticed—it would have been impossible not to.

"Are you all right, Highness?" Katara asked.

This time, when Tynare smiled, the expression was obviously pasted on. "I'm fine. Thank you. Come. My father is very eager to meet with you."

Shuri said nothing, but he made a mental note to watch the prince carefully. There might be more going on here than met the eye, in more than one way. One thing seemed certain. Tynare was definitely hiding something. Whether it had anything to do with the attack on Ivy remained unknown, but Shuri had every intention of finding out.

TRAVELING FROM the small harbor town to the capital took the entirety of the day and well into the evening. There were no convenient rifts to help them, as Aranken relied solely on traditional transportation. Their horses were a larger, sturdier breed than the ones on the Western Realm, something which turned out to be useful as they rode almost without stopping.

Most of the Nikari crew had received horses as well, and the beasts seemed to adapt well to non-Aranken riders. Katara chose to use Fegala, which left Shuri alone in the carriage with Tynare.

Shuri didn't know if things had been engineered to end up that way, but the arrangement didn't please him. He could have asked for a horse of his own, he supposed, but that would have been kind of ridiculous. To top it

off, once they were alone in the enclosed space, the prince's scent assaulted Shuri's senses.

Frustrated with himself, and angry at his own libidinous nature, Shuri reined his desires in and put up a mask of calm. If Tynare approached him, Shuri had to be strong. He might be attracted to the Aranken prince, but his lusts didn't change his feelings for Ivy or his desire to protect him.

As it turned out, Tynare seemed pretty distracted and for the most part didn't make any attempt at seduction. The conversation solely rotated around A'rankin and each area they passed, but it didn't take a genius to realize Tynare still hadn't recovered fully. Shuri felt like an idiot for even considering the prince might be interested in anything sensual.

When they entered Kar'neia, though, Tynare appeared to recover. "I truly must apologize," he said. "I've been poor company."

"Not at all," Shuri replied. It was his own fault his dick wouldn't obey in Tynare's presence. "In a way, it is our responsibility that you were at risk in the first place."

Tynare chuckled. "Hardly. If anything, your presence here brings good tidings for us all. I hope that one day we won't have to fear going past the Wards any longer."

Shuri wondered about that. They hadn't come here to get the Nikari involved in a separate war. In fact, depending on what Shuri and Katara learned, A'rankin might gain another enemy, one they couldn't keep in check with the Wards.

Before he could find a reply to Tynare's comment, the carriage rolled through the palace gates. The royal residence of the Aranken, like Kar'neia itself, was very different from Nikaret. Whereas Nikaret boasted a grid-like, organized structure, with only the occasional exception, Kar'neia had a more eclectic look. Here the cleaner lines of the Nikaret palace had been replaced by a more fluid, ornate architecture. Or at least, so it seemed at first glance. When he left the carriage and looked around, Shuri realized that in the distance, he could spot buildings that looked completely different. One specific area captured his attention. The structures seemed to have been constructed in several dissimilar styles. Some of the buildings were high and with numerous windows, while others consisted of one floor alone, sprawled onto the ground for miles.

Tynare must have noticed his puzzlement, because as he joined Shuri out of the carriage, he proceeded to explain. “Most of the official buildings, including the palace, celebrate a union of all the elements. However, individual homes tend to be dedicated to a certain combination. For example, a Fire Starter will have a tall house, while a Nurturer would be inclined toward a lower built residence. It’s not very obvious on the main road which we went through, but here, it’s most noticeable in the barracks.”

“Ah, I see. That’s where your troops train.”

Katara appeared behind them, interrupting their conversation. “Is there a location where I could take Fegala?”

The stables obviously weren’t an option, both for Fegala’s sake and that of the horses. Also, the doors of the main palace didn’t seem large enough to allow for the nightwolf to comfortably move around. “You can use my quarters in the Fire Starter barracks,” Tynare offered. “They are empty since I completed my training in fire magic, and the building will accommodate your nightwolf’s size. Please, come this way.”

Tynare showed no sign of his earlier weakness as he guided Shuri, Katara, and Fegala toward the barracks. Shuri forced himself to stop scrutinizing the prince and took advantage of the opportunity to analyze the military potential of Aranken warriors.

Today, only a handful of Fire Starters were out training. Flames danced in the air, flaring around them in a dazzling array of shapes and colors. For anyone else, it would have been an impressive sight, but in Shuri’s experience, fire wasn’t a plaything. No doubt about it, the wild blaze held a unique beauty, but using it to show off seemed unwise to say the least.

Then again, Shuri couldn’t be a fair judge of their skills or goals when he still didn’t know much about their ways. He would wait for a while longer before he made an actual assessment. Besides, the most important person to keep an eye on was Tynare.

Fegala didn’t seem pleased with being left in the Fire Starter barracks, even if the length of the trip should have taken its toll. Still, Katara managed to convince her to remain there. At last, after providing the nightwolf with sustenance, Katara agreed to go to the palace. Tynare seemed intrigued by her attachment to Fegala, and didn’t comment on the fact that it would have been more polite to go see the king first. Shuri wondered if Katara had done it on purpose, and not solely out of

consideration for her nightwolf's needs. Sometimes, it paid off to set the tone of an encounter from the very beginning, and all politeness aside, it wouldn't do for the Aranken to think they could use the Nikari for their own purposes.

By the time they made their way into the palace, the hour had grown late. Nevertheless, the king received them immediately. He welcomed them in a private lounge, where an elaborate table had been set. "Greetings, Your Highness, Your Majesty," King Rynald said. "Please, take a seat. You must be exhausted after your trip."

Katara smiled, a beautiful twist of lips that hid the edge of her warrior nature. "A little," she admitted almost coyly. "Thank you for your hospitality."

Shuri didn't feel all that fatigued, but then he'd traveled in a comfortable carriage, while Katara had ridden her nightwolf. Still, Shuri very much doubted the A'Mora would be excessively tired.

"Perhaps it would be a good idea for our guests to rest in their apartments," Tynare suggested. "Unfortunately, a lot of their belongings were lost in an incident along the coast."

The king's pleasant expression vanished. "An incident?"

"A sea serpent attack," Tynare elaborated. "I will have the full report for you by morning, Your Majesty. There were no casualties, but some material damages."

"I see," the king mused. "Well, the important thing is that no one was injured. Your Highness, Your Majesty, taking all that into account, I won't keep you. I'll leave my son to lead you to your rooms. Perhaps after a pleasant bath and a change of clothes, you'll feel a little more like yourselves. I'll have the servants provide you with a private meal, and we can discuss the matters at hand when you're more rested."

"That would be perfect," Katara replied.

After thanking the king again, Shuri and Katara followed Tynare out of the lounge. "I want to reassure you that no effort will be spared to make you feel completely comfortable," Tynare said. "I sent a rider ahead and notified the palace to prepare a complete wardrobe for you."

He had? When? Shuri had been with him almost every second of the day. A doubt niggled at the back of his mind. Could Tynare have known they would be attacked? Well, if that was the case, they had no proof

whatsoever. Just doubts, suspicions, and self-recrimination. Creator, what would Ivy say in such a situation?

Thinking about the young Andari anchored Shuri. There was no point in blaming himself for a superficial, empty attraction. The fact that he appreciated Tynare's beauty meant nothing. It hadn't been Ivy's lovely exterior that had made Shuri fall for him, but his kindness and his strength.

By the time they reached the guest quarters, Shuri felt calmer than he'd been since the attack on Ivy. And as he retreated into the clean, lavishly decorated rooms, he knew that here, he'd find the answers to the questions plaguing him for a long time.

ONCE THE guests were secured in their quarters, Tynare returned to the lounge, where his father was predictably waiting. "So tell me," the king prodded, "how did things go today?"

Tynare summarized his meeting with the Nikari, leaving aside certain key points that he didn't want his father to analyze too closely. Once he finished, Rynald asked, "What did you think of them?"

For a few seconds, Tynare hesitated, wondering what it would be safe to reveal to the king. "That man, he's quite interesting," he replied.

"Is he?" the king inquired. "I didn't particularly notice."

Tynare almost sneered. His father had been too busy drooling over the beautiful A'Mora to focus on their goal. But really, who was he to point fingers? He'd lost it a few times today, as well. It angered him that his weak side had emerged in such a way, but it couldn't be helped. Shuriden Fezenda was dangerous for Tynare. That much seemed clear, but Tynare had every intention of winning this battle. He wanted to see Shuriden on his knees, begging for Tynare's touch. And Tynare always, always got what he wanted.

His father's expression sobered, and he completely changed the topic. "What about you? How are you feeling? I heard you had an... episode today."

Of course he had. Etera might be loyal to Tynare, but some things couldn't be kept from the king. "As you can see, Your Majesty, I'm just fine. You needn't worry about me."

"You are my son," the king replied quietly. "Of course I worry."



Tynare didn't bother to comment on that. They both knew the king's concerns with regard to Tynare weren't solely related to their blood bond. Forcing a smile, Tynare bowed. "Does His Majesty require anything more of me?"

For a few seconds, Rynald just stared at him. Finally, the king shook his head. "Make sure you're mindful of our guests. I want their stay here to be as comfortable as possible. Oh, and be ready for tomorrow's feast."

"Of course, Your Majesty." This time, Tynare did smile. "I am always prepared to fulfill my responsibilities to the crown."

The king acknowledged the empty assurance with an absent nod and dismissed him. Tynare took his leave, already making plans for the next day. He was tempted to slip into Shuriden's bath, but he suspected that would be counterproductive.

He might have known bits and pieces about Shuriden, but in his heart he hadn't truly been prepared for it. An image flashed through Tynare's mind, that of Shuriden standing on the deck of the ship, his black, braided hair swaying in the wind, his eyes glowing fiery bronze, emanating threat and power. Despite himself, he shivered, and not because of fear.

He took a deep breath and focused on the practicalities of the situation. Now that he thought about it, being forced to admit to the unfortunate episode might come as an advantage. For whatever reason, the Nikari had seemed concerned about him. Tynare could use that, even if he had to play a game he usually preferred to avoid.

Shuriden had his own secrets. Like Tynare's, they were the most dangerous kind—of the soul. But Tynare would peel away all the layers of mystery that hid Shuriden's truths. And once he did that, the Nikari prince would belong to Tynare, once and for all.

## Chapter Three

### Latent

THE DAY after their arrival in Kar'neia, the Aranken held a celebration in Shuri and Katara's honor. The palace became flooded with colorfully dressed guests vying for a chance to meet them. Shuri felt like some sort of exotic animal, but it wasn't all bad. The desire of the Aranken to interact with the outlandish Nikari made it easier for Shuri to learn things about them, their land, and their leaders.

Tynare and his father were polite to a fault. The prince had not attempted any overt seduction, and Shuri had the uncomfortable feeling he'd imagined the whole thing. Then again, the cause of his disquiet might have been the looks Tynare's female guard, Etera, kept throwing his way when she thought he wasn't paying attention. Had those glances taken physical or magical form, he might have been burned to a crisp by now.

Shuri was used to acknowledging another person's hatred. However, he didn't remember doing anything to warrant such hostility. Not only that, but even connecting Etera's behavior to the differences between their races didn't provide an adequate explanation. After all, even if she disliked Nikari, she should have hidden her attitude out of tact.

All the unpleasantness aside, Shuri and Katara ate at the king's table, with the rest of the guests filling the ballroom around them. Tynare sat next to Shuri and often engaged him in conversation.

"How have you enjoyed your stay in A'rankin thus far, Your Highness?" the prince asked.

"Well, we haven't gotten the chance to take in all of its beauties just yet," Shuri answered. "What I have seen intrigues me a great deal."

Tynare smiled, and Shuri was far too enthralled with the twist of lips for his comfort. Still, he clung to his resolve, even if he ached to bury his

hands in those flame-red locks. Distantly, he wondered how he could be attracted to two men who were so different. As he thought this, the minstrels started to play a melodious tune unfamiliar to Shuri. The sway of the tones reminded Shuri just a bit of Andari music, but at some level, he wondered if he wasn't imagining the similarities.

On cue, Tynare asked, "Do you enjoy dancing, Your Highness?"

"Yes," Shuri replied, only to realize why Tynare had asked him that to begin with.

It was a bad idea. A horrible idea. Whether or not Tynare had some sort of seduction plan in mind, Shuri's attraction toward him added a dangerous edge to the political game they were playing. He hesitated when he should have just gone through with what Tynare had subtly suggested.

Under the table, Katara stepped on his foot. He doubted she was playing matchmaker. More likely, she'd noticed Tynare's interest in Shuri and wanted to use it to dig for information. It wasn't a bad plan, since beautifully smelling flowers often hid disgusting fungus. Even so, by going with it, Shuri risked losing himself in the perfume of one particular bloom.

But hadn't Shuri decided he'd do whatever it took to find the answer to his questions? Frustrated with his own cowardice and lack of resolve, Shuri turned toward Tynare. "Would you grant me the honor of this dance, Your Highness?"

"The honor, and the pleasure, would be all mine," Tynare purred, his dark blue eyes glittering with a knowledge and an emotion Shuri couldn't quite understand.

Shuri got up from the table and offered Tynare his hand. As they headed onto the dance floor, Shuri said, "I feel I must warn you I'm not familiar with the steps. I might be very bad at this."

Tynare chuckled. "I'm not worried. I doubt you could be bad at anything, even if you tried. Besides, I'm sure it can't be too different from what you would find among the Nikari."

At first, Shuri had his doubts. Nikari dances followed tight rules and were, in a sense, more rigid than the traditional ones of other populaces in the Empire. This stemmed from the unique blend of their extinct ancestors, the Ndara, with the Aranken. As it turned out, even if the song itself didn't sound familiar, Shuri got used to it with a fair amount of ease. His body

knew how and where to move, as if a power echoed within him from the tones of the melody.

By now, Shuri had gotten used to the feeling. He assigned it to A'rankin itself, to the potent magic he'd experienced at a visceral level when he'd passed through the shield. But when he held Tynare, when the prince leaned against his chest, he couldn't help but wonder if there could be more to it than that. Their bodies were molded together, so close Shuri could feel every single muscle. He couldn't keep his dick from hardening, so instead, he forced a little distance between them.

The prince couldn't have missed Shuri's arousal. He licked his lips, and his pupils dilated, but he said nothing on the matter. They moved together in tandem, swaying on the dance floor. Shuri felt thankful Tynare didn't say anything further, because he didn't deem himself capable of coherent conversation. His full focus remained on maintaining the respectful distance between them, even if his libido and his lusts demanded something else entirely.

By the end of the dance, Shuri's back was drenched in sweat, and not because of fatigue. His muscles ached with the tension of having to hold his natural impulses in check. His hand clenched when he released Tynare's. He wondered if Tynare had noticed. Probably. In a way, it would be better, because he couldn't imagine the prince would consider his behavior very appropriate or appealing.

Still, Shuri hadn't completely forgotten his manners. As he stepped away from the prince, he bowed in a Nikari style. "Thank you for a wonderful dance."

"No, thank you," Tynare replied. "You're far more talented at this than you give yourself credit for."

This? What exactly was this? Dancing? Mingling with royalty while trying to spy on them? Keeping his cock from taking over his reasoning abilities? To Shuri, his skill in all these fields seemed a tad doubtful.

"Would you join me on the terrace?" Tynare asked. "I need a word in private."

Shuri arched a brow. That sounded a little ominous. "Of course," he replied.

Tynare led him through the ballroom, to a set of doors that opened to a wide terrace. Shuri had the errant thought that the ballroom in the Nikaret

palace displayed exactly the same structure. He supposed it made sense, since the Morai's residence had been modeled after the Aranken home of the first Fezenda, adding certain details that made it unique.

These particular doors were narrower than Nikari ones, and Shuri experienced a brief pang of melancholy as he wondered what was happening in the Empire. Was his uncle all right? What about Ivy and Kris? Even if he'd only been gone a week, Shuri couldn't help but miss everything—even the half brother he loathed.

And yet, despite that yearning, Shuri found his awareness of Tynare didn't decrease one bit. When Tynare faced him once more, his thoughts faded, focusing solely on this moment.

"What did you want to discuss?" he asked.

Tynare laughed lightly, and Shuri hated that the sound made shivers rush down his spine. "Straight to the point," the prince said. "Fair enough." His expression sobered, and he pinned Shuri with a look that, for once, seemed as dark as the night around them. "You probably think I'm trying to use you. It's true that Nikari help would make sure our people are safe from Shyrn, but we have managed to handle the threat well enough on our own."

"What do you want, then?"

Tynare's lips twisted in an enigmatic smile. "For myself or for A'rankin?"

Before Shuri could try to find an answer to that question, the woman from before stepped onto the terrace and made a beeline for Tynare. "What is it, Etera?" the prince inquired.

Etera leaned in closer to Tynare and whispered something in his ear, so softly that not even Shuri's advanced senses could catch it. Still, it couldn't have been good, because Tynare went rigid. "I see." Turning toward Shuri, the prince bowed formally. "If you'll excuse me, Your Highness, my presence is required elsewhere. Perhaps we'll continue this conversation another time."

Without further explanation, Tynare turned on his heel and stalked away. Etera followed in his tracks, as always the ever-watchful guardian.

Shuri didn't hesitate. He walked back into the ballroom, intending to pursue Tynare. However, Etera must have anticipated this course of action, because several guards got in his way. "Please, return to the party, Your Highness. There is no reason to be concerned."

Shuri wanted to snort. The words were about as truthful as Katara's never-ending claims of innocence. No reason to be concerned. Yes, and Shuri was the A'Mora's best friend.

Not only the prince, but also the king had mysteriously disappeared. Something was clearly amiss. However, Shuri knew how to choose his battles, and making a scene wouldn't help him.

Instead of pushing the guards away—which he could have easily done—he scrutinized the ballroom for Katara. She found him just as he stepped away from the Aranken soldiers.

“Something's wrong,” he whispered to her.

The A'Mora nodded. “Go investigate. I'll distract them.”

Shuri had to wonder how Katara hoped to achieve that, but his answer came when a cheerful Fegala stalked into the ballroom like she owned the place. Nightwolves didn't do that even in the Empire, so Shuri could only guess Katara had summoned the beast.

There were cries all around from the startled Aranken. Shuri didn't know how Fegala had bypassed the guards, but it still made amusement and satisfaction swell inside him. The Aranken needed to learn a little lesson. Arrogance didn't suit them.

Meanwhile, Katara pushed past Etera and went to her nightwolf. “Hush, Fegala,” she said. “It's all right. What happened? Who upset you?”

Shuri hid a smirk at the display. Even if he didn't have a nightwolf of his own, he knew that the A'Mora didn't need to speak out loud to communicate with the beast. Additionally, while Shuri might dismiss nightwolves as pets from time to time, they were quite independent. If someone had truly upset Fegala, she'd have torn the unwise stranger's throat out, not tracked Katara down to complain.

But of course, the Aranken didn't know that. As the guards directed their attention toward Katara and Fegala, Shuri easily slid past them. The stealth and agility inherited from the Ndara were his advantage here, in a land where his elemental magic wouldn't help him much. Pretty ironic, all things considered.

The palace was swarming with guards, but luck seemed to be on Shuri's side. Something else had alarmed them, because they didn't pay much attention to the Nikari stealthily making his way through the

corridors. The reason behind this became obvious when he exited the main palace building.

A hurricane seemed to have manifested in the center of the palace courtyard. Wild winds struck Shuri the moment he stepped outside, although the distance kept him from being harmed. Farther away, though, he spotted people trying to fight it, attempting to make their way to a lone figure standing in the eye of the hurricane.

Shuri's keen eyesight identified the figure as an Aranken young man. As Shuri watched, the stranger fell to his knees, trembling and screaming. His cries increased the intensity of the storm. Shuri had never seen anything like this in his life. The magic here felt so chaotic it reminded him of a rift.

The king himself stood a few feet away from the skirmish, at a safe distance. "How could this have happened?" Shuri heard him ask. "I thought you had him contained."

A man Shuri identified as the captain of the palace guards bowed lowly, spluttering. "We didn't realize.... He is more powerful than we thought."

"Obviously," Tynare commented. From this angle, Shuri couldn't see his expression, but the tone was so cold it chilled him to the bone. "This is quite bothersome when we have guests, Marthus. You know better than to bring latents here."

Marthus looked from the prince to the king. "Yes, but.... Well, I...."

King Rynald intervened and said what the captain was futilely trying to avoid. "I prefer to see to the execution of the latents myself. Marthus was merely following my commands."

Tynare's jaw tightened. He would have likely said something else, but he and the other two Aranken noticed Shuri's scrutiny. Tynare turned toward Shuri first, a frown on his handsome face. "Your Highness, please return inside. It's not safe."

Shuri scoffed, although the howl of the wind drowned it out. He made his way to Tynare's side and crossed his arms over his chest. "I can see that. What's going on? This isn't a normal phenomenon."

"No, it isn't," Tynare replied, "and now is not the time to explain."

He rubbed his eyes tiredly, causing his father to shoot him a concerned look. "There's no reason for you to be here," the king said. "Let me handle this, all right?"

As if on cue, Etera appeared and started to pull Tynare away. Tynare threw one last look toward Shuri, then nodded. For some reason, his haunted expression made Shuri want to reach for him. It felt an awful lot like the moment Tynare had collapsed on the ship, even if this time around the prince hadn't been involved in the battle.

Whether or not Tynare wanted something from him, Shuri didn't get to find out. All of a sudden, Tynare seemed to change his mind. He flipped his hair stubbornly and freed his arm from Etera's grip. "That won't be necessary. This is my responsibility too, as much as it is yours."

As the prince spoke, several mages managed to approach the stranger. They seemed to have an affinity to air, Fire Starters or, perhaps, Storm Callers, since the young man's power had less of an effect on them. In spite of their efforts, they didn't manage to subdue him. Shuri wondered how such a thing could occur, especially since the man hadn't made any attempt to defend himself.

Was this what happened when an Aranken lost control of his magic? Shuri had never encountered the phenomenon among his people, at least, not quite like this.

He wanted to ask, but the question wouldn't come out. His inquiry became irrelevant anyway, because the prince stepped forward, ignoring the wildness of the winds as they slashed at him. His hair danced like flames around his cheeks, and as Shuri watched him, he wondered just how many faces Tynare had.

Much like the other air-connected mages, Tynare crawled his way through the hurricane. A blast of wind shoved him back, but the prince seemed steadier on his feet than his companions. When Tynare did fall, though, Shuri took a step forward, instinctively wanting to help.

A small but strong hand landed on his shoulder. "Don't," Katara said. "We can't get involved in this. If we do, it might cause an incident we cannot afford."

She was right, and Shuri knew that, but right then and there, he hated her more than ever, precisely because he had to agree. Fortunately, before Shuri could do something stupid, Tynare got up. He straightened his back, and a circle of magic formed around him, keeping the winds from reaching him.

There was something majestic about his new posture, something different that made Shuri's breath catch. Shuri couldn't quite put his finger



on it, but when Tynare walked forward, he seemed... peaceful. The roar of the angry storm no longer mattered. Everyone stood there, watching him in awe.

Etera dropped to her knees. “Your Highness,” she whispered, tears trailing down her cheeks. “No....”

In an attempt to protect its owner, the nigh-sentient hurricane lashed out at Tynare, sending everyone else flying back. The king screamed his son’s name, and Shuri cursed, already moving forward. He didn’t give a fuck about causing an international incident. Creator, at this rate, he’d need to intervene to save Tynare’s life, and the king would be thankful.

But even for him, a Nikari with more experience in rift traveling than he’d have liked, approach seemed impossible. Risking opening a portal next to the Aranken young man would kill both him and Tynare, but Shuri saw no other way to get close. Normal elemental magic clearly didn’t work, as the fire bolts the Aranken around him attempted to cast were simply extinguished. Water couldn’t counter air, and the earth mages that showed up and attempted to unbalance the man with their power just succeeded in making the palace and the buildings around them shake alarmingly, without having an effect on the source of the disaster.

In the end, it was Tynare who reached the young man. Tynare offered the stranger his hand. The peculiar Aranken looked up at Tynare, his eyes wide. The prince said something Shuri couldn’t hear, and the other man nodded, leaning against his chest. As the two Aranken embraced, Tynare started to glow, and with him, so did the stranger. The light grew so bright that it blinded Shuri, keeping him from seeing anything. For one moment, white engulfed him, and his senses flared, just like when he’d crossed the Wards.

When he could see, Shuri realized the Aranken stranger had vanished. The winds had stilled, and the silence in the courtyard was almost deafening.

Tynare didn’t look at them. His arms were still in the same position they had been, wrapped around thin air. “Are you happy now, Father?” he asked.

The king had paled, his face ashen and his jaw slack. “Son....”

The word caused an unexpected reaction in Tynare—or perhaps, simply triggered what was about to happen anyway. The prince collapsed

facedown in the dust. That finally snapped everyone from their shock, and they rushed forward to tend to the injured Tynare.

Shuri wanted to do the same, but he didn't. Instead, he stood there, shaken and uncertain.

"Just what in the name of the Creator is going on here?" Katara asked. "Did he just vaporize that man?"

Shuri didn't reply. He feared the answer. He feared he couldn't handle the emotions Tynare brought out of him, after all. What had he just witnessed, and what was Tynare truly hiding?

THROUGH THE veil of distant voices, he tried to gather the last of his strength. It had taken everything in his power to teleport the latent out of the courtyard, and he'd known there would be consequences. But as afraid as he might be, he had to draw the line somewhere.

He wasn't surprised when he heard another voice, one that didn't even register through his physical senses. *That was quite an impressive feat, sweet prince*, it said. *It's also not what you were supposed to do.*

*I didn't agree to killing latents*, he replied, fine tremors coursing through him. Technically speaking, he hadn't agreed to anything, but the creature he was speaking to wouldn't let him get away with that.

*Let's not argue over semantics*, the monster said. *Drawing attention to yourself in such a manner.... It's not what we want, now is it? At least, it's not what I want the Nikari to see.*

The Aranken prince didn't answer. He knew well enough that in the battle with such a beast, he couldn't win. He was powerless, and in the long run, his little rebellion meant nothing. What had he been thinking to try it? His father would probably hunt down the latent again, and his sacrifice would be for naught.

*Just remember you have a choice*, the voice said. *Shyryn or the Empire. Choose wisely. My patience has its limits.*

For some reason, as the creature spoke, an image popped into the prince's mind's eye. An image of a man.... Shuriden Fezenda? Yes, that seemed right.

Shuriden. An impossibility. A mystery. So many questions. What was it about Shuriden that had made everything change?

A flash of another person invaded his consciousness. A beautiful blond man hugged Shuriden effusively. Shuriden embraced him in turn, the hold protective, almost desperate. "Be careful, Shuri," the blond said.

That man.... They'd crossed paths before. Their minds had touched once. Of course. It was the future Moris, his enemy, the man Shuriden loved.

Tynare's vision cleared, and he could move again. The voice faded from his consciousness. His path was obvious to him now. And when he saw Shuriden still standing there, in the courtyard, he knew he had a fair chance of achieving his goal.

## Chapter Four

### Deal

THE NEXT morning, everyone acted like the events from the night before hadn't happened at all. Etera gave the prince the occasional concerned look, but other than that, no one seemed to acknowledge what he had done.

At breakfast, Tynare himself was bright-eyed and smiling, displaying no sign of the grief Shuri had seen and heard in the courtyard. Shuri would have almost thought he'd dreamed the whole thing if not for the fact that Katara seemed as shocked as him.

He didn't know how to approach the matter, since a misstep could potentially get them all killed or at least cause the mission to end in abysmal failure. Tynare must have noticed all the gaping, because he turned toward Shuri. "You look a little taken aback, Your Highness."

Shuri had half-expected Tynare to continue ignoring the proverbial nightwolf in the room, and he nearly choked on his tea when Tynare addressed him. He recovered quickly, although judging by Tynare's widening smile—Shuri had a mix of love and hate for that expression—the prince must have seen right through him.

Well, tactfulness seemed overrated in situations such as this. "I was merely wondering if you were well after last night's events."

Tynare waved his hand dismissively. "I'm fine. I've faced such power before."

The king grimaced but said nothing. Whatever feelings he'd displayed toward his son during the fight had disappeared altogether. He remained focused on his meal, ignoring the conversation.

"We're just not certain what happened to that man," Katara prodded.

Tynare arched a brow. "I would think it's obvious."

Remembering the Aranken stranger, Shuri reached for his tea again and took a sip to rinse the sudden bitterness out of his mouth. “Was he a criminal?” he asked. “What crime did he commit?”

“He was born,” the king suddenly offered. “People like that pollute A’rankin with their malevolent chaos, and need to be destroyed.”

Shuri gaped. “He was killed because of his power?” he asked because he thought he must surely be getting things wrong.

“Yes, it is quite unfortunate,” Tynare replied. “But it can’t be helped, I’m afraid. It’s a little more elaborate than Father explained it. Basically, that man whom you’re showing such pity for was what we call a latent.”

The word “pity” came out dismissively, and Shuri’s hold on his teacup tightened. The delicate material protested the abuse, and he set the cup down before he could crack it. “Latent?”

Tynare jumped at the chance to explain with an eagerness Shuri didn’t know how to interpret. “You see, all Aranken—and by default, Nikari—magic, rotates around a combination of elements. Fire Starters control air and fire. Storm Callers control water and air, and so on. Of course, each individual Aranken, like each Nikari, is born with a certain amount of talent. Some people never get enough affinity for two elements to be able to create elaborate spells. They regularly belong to the peasantry, and what power they do have assists them in day-to-day life, with simple tasks like lighting a fire or watering the plants. These people actually form the bulk of the populace.” He paused, his expression turning serious, almost distant. “But on occasion, an anomaly appears among them. A person with an affinity toward one lone element, seemingly harmless on the surface, turns out to be a latent. That means their bond with the element in question is so strong they can wield it at a level none of us normal Aranken can achieve.”

He blinked, and his vision seemed to focus again. “Latents are very dangerous, Your Highness. That level of power is uncontainable, destructive beyond anything I can explain. That man yesterday had just discovered his magic, and he didn’t yet realize what he could do. But a latent with his powers can kill others by depriving them of the air they need. I won’t even get into what water, fire, or earth latents can do.”

“Your injury, the one you mentioned before.... It was in a battle with a latent?” Katara asked.

Tynare nodded. “I survived, but others might not have been so lucky.”

The king made a noise of disgust and shot to his feet. Without a word, he stalked away from the table. Tynare watched him go with a bemused look. “My apologies,” he said. “It seems I upset my father with mentioning it. He’s quite sensitive when it comes to the topic.”

“I can see that,” Shuri mused. “So in other words, you think these people need to be wiped out.”

“You don’t?”

Shuri turned toward his meal without answering. Perhaps at one point, he would have agreed. He was well aware of the dangers of a threat left unchecked. And yet, going on that rationale, wouldn’t it have been wiser for Kris to execute their uncle? Yes, they were family, and yes, Phura was royalty too, but he remained a traitor to the crown.

That man hadn’t done anything wrong. He’d just found out he had a power, and that was it. The Aranken approach to the matter didn’t feel like securing the interests of the country. It felt like murder.

“Your Highness, you have someone important you want to protect, don’t you?” Tynare asked suddenly.

Shuri faced the prince again, startled. “What?”

“You have something you want to protect,” Tynare said again. “Then you must understand why this is necessary. No, it’s not pleasant, and I can’t say I’m happy to do it, but someone has to.”

Shuri didn’t know which part to address first. First of all, Tynare hadn’t actually repeated his words. “Someone” was different from “something.” What was Tynare trying to say? Why did he keep playing these games?

Well, Shuri needed to remember to stop playing along. “I see. Well, given that your father is indisposed, it doesn’t seem we’ll be making much progress when it comes to the alliance you wanted to suggest.”

“Ah, yes. That.” Tynare’s smile widened. “There’s plenty of time for diplomatic dealings. You’ve only just arrived. Enjoy your stay a little more. I did promise I’d show you around, and we didn’t do much of that yesterday.”

“His Highness is right,” Katara said. “We can’t rush into anything. Besides, I do want to see more of A’rankin.” She wiped her mouth demurely and dropped the napkin. “But for the moment, I’m afraid I need to

go see to Fegala. She was pretty anxious yesterday, and I haven't visited her at all."

"That's quite understandable, Your Majesty," Tynare replied. "Please, take your time. We'll be waiting for you."

As Katara departed, Shuri couldn't help but wonder whether she had left them alone on purpose. No matter how much he tried, he couldn't understand her.

Once she was gone, Tynare got up as well. "Would you like to join me in the gardens while we wait?"

Shuri didn't bother to argue he hadn't finished his meal. He'd lost his appetite anyway. "Yes, of course." Tynare obviously wanted to tell him something, and Shuri might as well find out what it was.

The garden itself boasted a variety of herbs and flowers Shuri didn't recognize. While Shuri appreciated their beauty, it also reminded him of the mysterious potion that had caused Ivy to mistake him for Kris.

Almost as if guessing Shuri's thoughts, Tynare stopped next to a beautiful red flower and inhaled. "I never got to thank you, Your Highness. Etera said you were worried about me."

"I was," Shuri admitted, "but I suppose my concern turned out to be wasted."

"Wasted?" Tynare abandoned the flower, directing his attention toward Shuri once more. "Not at all. I don't consider anything we share to be a waste."

"Your Highness," Shuri said with a sigh, "I don't know what you want from me."

"You're in love with someone," Tynare told him, cupping Shuri's cheek. "It's an impossible love. You know that as well as I do." He stepped closer to Shuri, practically melding their bodies together. "I can make you forget him. I can make you forget about the Moris."

Shuri went rigid. So he had been right. Tynare knew about Ivy. In all likelihood, he had, indeed, been behind the attempt on Ivy's life. He gripped Tynare's wrists and forcibly pushed the other man aside. "No, you cannot. You might be beautiful. I admit that there's a level of attraction between us. But Ivy appeals to me at a level you cannot understand, let alone reach. Besides, I didn't come here for romance."

"Why did you come to A'rankin, then? Who are you hunting?"

Tynare's eyes danced with mirth, and he didn't even try to struggle out of Shuri's grip. "Do you really think you can catch your prey if he doesn't want to be caught?"

"My prey needs to stop taunting me," Shuri replied, squeezing Tynare's wrists so tightly he knew it must be hurting him. Tynare didn't react, just smiled the infuriating little smile that despite himself, Shuri still wanted to kiss away.

His voice lowering into a growl, he added, "I don't necessarily need to hunt him down. I can leave at any point if I so choose, and according to what I tell my brother, you might find yourself with another war on your hands."

Too late did he realize he'd revealed his sibling connection to Kris. Judging by Tynare's unflinching smile, the man had already known. "Can you, Your Highness?" he asked, licking his lips. "Can you leave?"

Shuri's eyes were drawn to that full mouth, and he hated himself more than ever. He released Tynare and stepped back. This was ridiculous. When had his dick overcome his sense of reason? He loved Ivy, and the man in front of him might have been the brains behind the operation that had almost killed the young Andari. He should be disgusted, since he'd already seen Tynare's potential for ruthlessness. And yet, the attraction lingered, crystallizing into a temptation Shuri could barely resist.

Mercifully, Ivy's memory kept him from doing something seriously idiotic. "This conversation is over," he said as he moved away.

He was just about to leave the garden when Tynare spoke again. "I'll tell you what you want to know."

Shuri knew he shouldn't, but he still turned. "What?"

Tynare stood exactly where Shuri had left him, and yet, his gaze raked over Shuri like a palpable caress. "I'll tell you the truth, but on one condition."

Of course there had to be a price. Shuri was quickly learning that whenever Tynare got involved, things would never be straightforward or free. "What condition?" he asked nevertheless.

"One night. You, in my bed."

Shuri gaped at the prince. He couldn't believe his ears, and he couldn't believe he was tempted to say "yes."



Seizing his advantage, Tynare stepped close to Shuri once more. He leaned against Shuri's chest, playing with the buttons of his shirt. "I know you want it. I know you want me. Come on, Shuri. Fuck me. Get it out of your system."

Shuri knew he should said "no," but it startled him that Tynare had chosen to call him Shuri instead of Shuriden. Back in the Empire, no one called him Shuriden anymore, not even his underlings, and the change in address had served as a reminder that he wasn't home.

But no, that excuse seemed flimsy at best. Tynare's scent, his proximity, the proposition.... It hypnotized him. And so, in spite of himself, in spite of what he felt for Ivy, he nodded. "As long as you keep your word."

Tynare's satisfied smirk told Shuri everything he needed to know. "Of course I will. I'll be waiting for you in my rooms tonight, Your Highness. Don't worry. I'll uphold my part of the bargain if you go through with yours."

Brushing against Shuri one more time, Tynare walked away, heading back toward the main palace building. The fall of his flame red hair momentarily drew Shuri's attention, but once his temptation was gone, he snapped out of his trance. Groaning, Shuri buried his head in his hands. Shit. What in the name of the Creator had he just agreed to?

THE DAY passed with striking haste. As promised, Tynare became their guide, showing Shuri and Katara around the capital. Shuri would have probably enjoyed it more, but he was distracted by the Aranken prince's closeness, by the promise he had made, and by the mix of dread and anticipation inside him.

He didn't think he'd ever felt so conflicted in his life. This attraction was like a sickness, one he wanted to rip from his soul, from his mind. Perhaps it would be best to fuck it out of his system like Tynare had said, but that would mean betraying his feelings for Ivy.

For the first time, Shuri wished he had a nightwolf to turn to. He needed a friendly ear, but he didn't have anyone. He realized with a pang that even back in the Empire, the only one with whom he could have shared this was Ivy himself. What did that say about him?

Tynare must have noticed his distraction, because when they reached the palace once again, he placed his hand on Shuri's arm. "Are you well, Your Highness? Fatigued?"

"I have a lot on my mind," Shuri said, more than ever aware of Katara's presence and her watchful gaze. He forced a smile. "Perhaps I'm taken aback by the beauties I've found in A'rankin."

He hadn't necessarily intended it as a compliment to Tynare, but when the prince blushed in charmed surprise, he realized that he meant it. Creator, Shuri couldn't hope to understand himself, let alone Tynare.

"I'm sure the Empire is just as beautiful, if not more so," Tynare replied.

"Perhaps one day, you'll be able to see it."

Shuri didn't know what made him say those words, especially under the circumstances. Katara eyed him with clear suspicion, while Tynare's smile brightened. "Perhaps."

As they entered the palace, it became obvious the king had been doing some thinking of his own. They were welcomed by servants who immediately guided them to the same private lounge they'd seen the day they'd arrived. "I trust you had a pleasant day," the Aranken sovereign said when he saw them.

"Yes, thank you, Your Majesty," Katara replied. "Your son is a wonderful host."

It went without saying that Rynald hadn't been so remarkable in that regard, but kings were often less skilled than their family or retainers. It wasn't the case with Kris—Shuri might dislike his brother, but couldn't in a good conscience call him a poor Morai. It seemed the Aranken weren't so lucky. Shuri had never thought he'd come to appreciate Kris's skills, but apparently he'd been mistaken.

In any case, now that the king had deigned to see them without throwing a fit, it was time for an actual conversation on the future of the two nations. They sat down at the table, whereupon the servants brought them the refreshing drinks and bitesized snacks Aranken consumed before every meal.

"You must be aware by now of the problems we face," the king said. "However, you've also undoubtedly seen our strengths. I believe that

everyone here realizes it would be in the interest of us all to form an alliance. In the end, Nikari and Aranken are the same.”

Shuri tensed at the comment. “That’s a strong assumption to make, Your Majesty. And what, pray tell, could you give us?”

Tynare was smiling his enigmatic smile again, but he didn’t speak. His father threw a look toward the prince, but when he received no reaction, he offered, “There must be a reason why you agreed to come here after all this time.”

“To be perfectly honest, Your Majesty, we’re in the process of deciding whether the Empire should wage war on A’rankin.” Katara got up, the flirtatious, coy mask forgotten. Her face was set in the cool expression Shuri had more than once been the target of. “The Nikari have long ago left behind our roots. I admit your connection to the elements is fascinating, but we have our own ways, and they won’t ever change.”

Tynare intervened before the conversation could get any worse. “And we would never want them to,” he said. “As I was saying earlier, I’m sure the Empire has its beauties as well. My father merely meant that we have a lot in common, and it is a pity not to explore that for our shared benefit.”

“I see,” Katara replied. “And what is the benefit on our side? So far, I’ve seen a nation with enough internal problems to cause imminent civil war, and with an external foe that, if crossed, can bring many dangers to the Empire.”

“Shyrn isn’t solely a problem of A’rankin,” the king answered. “Think about what your ancestors would have wanted.”

“Our ancestors intended to keep us safe from the dangers and chaos in A’rankin,” Shuri said in turn. “It is increasingly obvious why the first Fezenda acted the way he did.”

The king’s face went red, and he clenched his fists. Still, he showed more restraint than he’d displayed in the past. “Your reluctance is understandable. However, you don’t need to make a decision just yet. A’rankin has a great deal to offer to the Nikari, elemental knowledge that has been lost in the Western Realm, power that would be of use to you. I’m sure we can reach some sort of agreement.”

Rynald’s words reminded Shuri of why they’d come here in the first place. Yes, the Aranken did have skills and knowledge beyond those of the Nikari. It was why the ruling family of the Empire had been vulnerable to

outside attack to begin with. If nothing else, Shuri and Katara needed to keep that from happening again, and as such, they had to prolong their stay here, not shorten it.

“Very well,” the A’Mora said, just like Shuri had thought she would. She sat back down and smiled once more. “Perhaps it would be best not to act in haste with regard to any decision.”

From that point on, they wisely fell to more sedate topics. By now, Shuri had grown adept at navigating the murky waters of politics, and he said the right things and nodded at the right times. As he watched the interaction between father and son, it occurred to him that he and Tynare were more similar than he’d have liked to think. His own relationship with his father had been strained at best. Shuri didn’t know much about Tynare’s mother—just that she had died years back under mysterious circumstances. Was that why he felt drawn to the man, because of these similarities?

The answer didn’t come swiftly enough. Before Shuri could gather his thoughts, the dinner ended. “I shall retreat to my room,” Tynare said. “Have a pleasant night, Your Majesty, Your Highness.”

Tynare’s gaze lingered on Shuri as he spoke, and Shuri’s body lit up with apprehension. He muttered something appropriate and watched as the prince left the lounge.

He stayed a while longer, keeping the king and Katara company. A sadistic part of him wanted to make Tynare wait. He still had no idea why he was even doing this. Tynare couldn’t force him into it, and their earlier conversation, no matter how vague, could be interpreted as a confession if Shuri squinted enough. From all the hints Tynare had dropped, Shuri could easily assume Tynare had practically admitted to being involved in the assassination attempt.

And yet even with that knowledge, even aware of all of his responsibilities and the complexity of the political dynamics between the Empire and A’rankin, Shuri still followed through with his earlier promise. A few minutes—or was it hours?—later, he excused himself from the presence of his two companions. “Thank you for a wonderful meal,” he said. “Good night.”

“Good night, Shuri,” Katara said. For some reason, when she looked at him, Shuri had the strange feeling she knew exactly what he was about to do. He ignored it and sketched a bow at King Rynald.

The Aranken sovereign responded with his own good night, leaving Shuri free to depart. He abandoned the lounge, wondering how transparent he'd been throughout the day.

Katara knew him well. She'd proven that more than once. But in the end, did it matter? If he did sleep with Tynare, it would mean nothing for their mission. It would mean nothing, period.

The thought deeply disturbed Shuri, so he pushed it aside. He walked faster, thankful that his excellent sense of orientation allowed him to find his way through the palace without asking for help. It wouldn't have been pleasant if he found himself having to inquire about the whereabouts of the Aranken prince's room.

He did experience a moment of hesitation when he realized guests would most likely not be allowed to just stroll into the royal wing. As it turned out, he needn't have worried, because the guards let him pass with respectful nods. Tynare must have spoken to them beforehand.

Shuri had never been to the prince's quarters, but they were easy enough to find. He identified them as the ones in front of which Etera lingered like a particularly threatening monolith. She glared at him, and her vicious expression contrasted sharply with her polite words. "Greetings, Your Highness. You can go in. Prince Tynare is expecting you."

In spite of Etera's urging, Shuri still knocked at the door. "It's open," Tynare said from inside.

Swallowing around the sudden knot in his throat, Shuri tightened his hold on the doorknob. If he went through with this, there was no going back.

Creator, who did he think he was trying to fool? Himself? Etera? This course of action had been decided from the first moment he'd met Tynare. The attraction between them could only be denied up to a point.

Taking a deep breath, Shuri pushed the door open and stepped inside.

In spite of his advanced senses, he didn't immediately see Tynare. The room was dark, the dim light filtering through the curtains insufficient to cast aside the obscurity. Still, Shuri caught sight of a flash of something through the corner of his eye. He turned, just in time to be embraced by a completely naked Tynare.

"Mmmm," Tynare said as he hugged Shuri's neck, "I've been waiting all day for this."

Shuri's breath caught. In the darkness, Tynare's eyes almost seemed to glow like burning coals—quite striking given their actual blue color. His crimson hair fell to his shoulders in a cascade of silken fire, and the scent of it was already going to Shuri's head.

It would have taken a man stronger than he to resist the temptation. Before he could stop himself, he wrapped his arms around Tynare, allowing his hands to roam over the Aranken prince's body. His skin felt so soft, inviting Shuri to explore more, to take, taste, bite and claim, to leave the marks of his possession all over Tynare.

Following that impulse, Shuri crushed his mouth to Tynare's. At first, the prince's lips were pliant under his, but that changed after a single moment. With a groan, Tynare started to claw at Shuri's clothes. The magic inside Shuri responded to the Aranken's touch, flaring bright, making every inch of Shuri alive with need.

Shuri pushed Tynare against the wall, pinning him there with his larger bulk. He bit Tynare's lower lip so hard he must have come pretty close to splitting it. Tynare didn't seem to mind. If anything, Shuri's angry arousal appeared to excite him. The prince's hard cock insistently nudged Shuri in reminder of that excitement. To top it off, Tynare wrapped his leg around Shuri's hip, and the angle practically exposed the prince's ass to Shuri's touch.

At this point, Shuri had long ago lost control of his actions. He ground against Tynare, needing relief, needing to quench this maddening thirst building up inside him. As if of their own accord, his fingers slipped between Tynare's cheeks, rubbing the hidden opening that promised so many dark pleasures. Tynare hissed, his motions growing more frantic. His tongue dueled with Shuri's as they kissed, the lip-lock angry, desperate, so passionate, and yet resentful of that very same lust.

Tynare suddenly broke the kiss and pushed Shuri away, dislodging Shuri's hold on that delicious ass. Shuri experienced a moment of disorientation, which Tynare used to his full advantage. He dropped to his knees and dived for Shuri's pants, his fingers nimbly working the breeches open.

Seconds later, Tynare's hot hand engulfed Shuri's erection. Shuri's eyes rolled in his head, his knees going weak. Creator, the grip of that silken

palm felt just right, a little on the edge of too tight and yet impossibly perfect.

As Tynare freed Shuri's cock from its confines, the prince licked his lips. He blew a gust of hot air over Shuri's dick, making him hiss in frustrated lust. Tynare didn't tease him for long. He swirled his pink tongue over the head of Shuri's prick, and sensation exploded over him. He buried his fingers in those long, luxurious tresses, encouraging Tynare to go further, to suck him deeper.

Tynare chuckled, but Shuri was too far gone to care or deem that laughter mocking. In fact, even the sound of Tynare's snickers aroused him. His dick throbbed furiously, already leaking nigh-alarming amounts of precum. As Tynare took his cock into his mouth, Shuri groaned in a mix of relief and desperate lust. The slow, lazy suction seemed designed to break his mind. Tynare appeared intent on acquainting himself with every inch of Shuri's dick. While Shuri could definitely appreciate the effort, the sexual tension had been accumulating within him for days. There was only so much of it he could withstand.

Craving more, Shuri tightened his hold on Tynare's hair. He fucked his lover's face, barely giving Tynare enough quarter to breathe. Shuri's roughness excited his new lover, as he moaned around the dick in his mouth.

The vibrations sent shocks of pleasure all over Shuri's body, and he began to move faster, more violently than he'd have liked. He couldn't help himself. The wet heat of Tynare's mouth, the lascivious muffled sounds Tynare made—it all became too much, too soon. His orgasm already buzzed over his spine, pooling in his testes, threatening to overcome him. And maybe he'd have managed to endure it, but he became aware of the motions of the prince's hands, of the fact that the Aranken was jacking himself off.

For some reason Shuri couldn't fathom, that lustful action from Tynare shoved him over the edge. Thrusting one more time into Tynare's mouth, Shuri roared and came. He held on to Tynare's hair as he flooded the Aranken prince's mouth with his spunk.

Distantly, Shuri realized he should have at least warned Tynare about it. However, his new lover surprised him yet again by gulping down every drop of his seed. Even after he'd swallowed Shuri's offering, he took it

upon himself to clean Shuri's shaft of any remaining jizz. Shuri couldn't resist Tynare's debauched beauty. His cock hardened once more, and the fire of his need reignited.

This time, though, Shuri had other intentions for Tynare. He picked his new lover up and draped him over his shoulder, having already identified the location of the bed. As he set Tynare onto the mattress, Shuri took one moment to observe all that beautiful naked skin. His. Everything was his for the taking. Tynare belonged to him.

Already desperate to bury his dick in the haven of Tynare's body, Shuri discarded his clothes as quickly as he could. It turned out to be a bit of a struggle, as he couldn't focus on one single item long enough to remove it. Tynare's hot gaze made him stumble over actions he should have been able to complete in mere moments.

When his garments yielded to his less-than-coherent efforts, Shuri practically pounced on Tynare. He stole a brief kiss from Tynare's delicious lips and reached for the nightstand, where a vial of oil was conveniently waiting.

As he gripped the bottle, however, Shuri finally realized what he was doing. It didn't matter the prince had made the offer. The forcible nature of it had only ever been for show. Shuri was here because he wanted to be, and the power the prince had over him, that too intense lust—it scared him. It was a betrayal of everything he'd come here to do, of his feelings for Ivy and his duty to the Empire.

Through an effort he hadn't deemed himself capable of, Shuri pulled away. He set the vial aside and shook his head. "I'm sorry. I can't do this."

For a few seconds, Tynare stared at him in obvious shock. As those moments passed, though, his beautiful dark blue eyes flared with fire again, this time one of anger. "You're joking. You came in my mouth. You're practically seconds away from fucking me, and now, you're invaded by scruples?"

He crossed his arms over his naked chest, still so impossibly beautiful it hurt. "We had an agreement. Or have you forgotten?"

The cold comment did wonders to calm down Shuri's ardor. "Actually, yes," he replied as he left the bed and found his discarded clothes. "I had forgotten. To be perfectly honest, I don't make a habit of fucking people



who're just waiting to stab me in the back and enjoy blackmailing others into their bed."

Tynare recoiled like he'd been struck. "And yet, you just did. Make no mistake. Even if you leave this room now, you still cheated on your precious Ivy."

Ivy's name on Tynare's lips brought out something angry and vicious inside Shuri. After pulling on his shirt and pants, he faced Tynare without faltering and sneered. "Yes, I did, and I'll own up to that. It was a mistake, starting from the beginning, from the moment I saw you as more than what you are. A cold, manipulative, arrogant bastard. To be honest, right now I wouldn't touch you if you were the last man in your realm and mine."

With that vicious lie thrown in Tynare's face, Shuri turned on his heel and stalked out of the room.

## Chapter Five

### Fear

TYNARE'S FIRST reaction to Shuri's words and subsequent departure was naturally the urge to follow. He'd obviously underestimated Shuri's attachment to the future Moris, but he didn't deem that an insurmountable obstacle. Besides, he couldn't allow Shuri to end their conversation with those words. He absolutely refused to abandon the issue.

He'd have shot to his feet and rushed after Shuri, but something stopped him. *Don't*, a familiar voice said. *Let him go. You can't force anyone to love you.*

Tynare clenched his hands into fists so hard the material of the sheets tore. *What do you know? Do you think everyone loved you because of your charming self? They just wanted to use your power. That's all.*

*Maybe*, the voice replied, *but Shuri isn't like them. And what you've done, that will always be between the two of you. He doesn't love you. He never will.*

*I don't want his love*, Tynare screamed silently. *I just want his dick.*

The voice didn't answer, but the silence irritated Tynare more. His fire magic burst out of him, scorching the sheets, the covers, and the headboard. A powerful gust of wind made the windows blast open, shattering the glass. The mirror cracked as it collapsed on the floor.

The sound must have echoed into the corridor, because the door burst open, and Etera rushed into the room. An inquiry was on her lips. Tynare could almost hear it even if she hadn't uttered it. He had no interest in her words, and in fact, he didn't want to see her, or anyone else.

"What?" he snapped at her. "What do you want? Leave me the fuck alone."

Etera blinked at him, obviously shocked, then backed away and closed the door. Tynare hated her, hated knowing that her loyalty didn't truly lie with him. He didn't have anything but this body, this power, this loneliness.

But unlike the weak man he'd been, Tynare could stand on his own. He didn't need anyone to brave the fight of his everyday life. If he had to sell his soul to achieve what he wanted, he would do so. It was a shattered, useless husk to begin with.

Still naked, Tynare stepped onto the balcony and stared out into the distance. Shyrn. The desert was out there, and the promise he had made. Could he pursue that promise? Could he track down the creature who'd pushed him into the oath?

If so, this would all be over. A'rankin would be safe. Without the threat of Shyrn forcing Tynare's hand, Tynare would eventually manage to convince the Nikari to sign a treaty, at which point the latents would have a place to go. That would cancel several of his problems and would smooth Tynare's path to power.

A'rankin needed to break free from the chokehold of the monsters of Shyrn once and for all. Unfortunately, that plan came with numerous holes. For obvious reasons, Tynare couldn't take the creature by surprise. Laughter echoed all around him, chuckles only he could hear. *Do you really think you can defeat me?* another voice asked. *Don't make me laugh.*

Tynare leaned against the banister and forced himself to keep a check on his temper. *I wasn't aware I'd become the source of your mirth.*

*On the contrary, you've always been both useful and amusing. In fact, if you do decide to come to Shyrn, I might just reward you by giving you what you want.* The feel of a ghostly hand slid over Tynare's side, making him shiver in disgust. *Cock.*

Tynare tried to ignore the spectral fingers, but it became impossible when they started rubbing his ass. He made a hasty retreat into his room and quickly dragged a robe on. The laughter sounded again, and Tynare winced as he experienced the distinguishing feel of a digit rubbing his crease. Another hand was slowly making its way over his chest and toward his groin.

It was physically impossible, he tried to tell himself. It was all in his head. He stared into the cracked mirror, willing himself to acknowledge that

no one was truly there with him. But when he looked at his reflection, the dark figure he saw behind him made him step back in haste and scream.

The shards of broken glass dug into his heels, but he didn't care. He burst out of the room, running into the corridor, wildly looking around, seeking a way out. Where was everyone? How could no one hear his desperate cries? Didn't they care?

All of a sudden, Tynare couldn't see anything anymore. His legs refused to hold him up, and he fell, landing on all fours on the floor. He felt hands parting his ass cheeks, a hard cock against his hip. Elements.... No, this couldn't be happening to him. "Please," he called out. "Shuri, help me!"

Just like that, the figure behind him dissipated into thin air. He felt strong arms holding him close, and he clung to them with all his might. "Help me. Please help me."

SHURI HADN'T meant to go back to Tynare's quarters after he'd said his piece. However, halfway to his guest room, he'd begun to acknowledge the extent of his words. He could still remember the lost and shaken expression Tynare had displayed when Shuri had thrown those venomous lies in his face. Besides, at the end of the day, Tynare had been right in saying that Shuri's self-righteous behavior didn't help one bit. It was hypocrisy at its best, rearing its ugly head after his libido had been appeased.

For that reason, Shuri had returned to Tynare's room, only to find the man writhing under the covers. The sheets and the carpet were scorched, the mirror and the window shattered. And then Tynare had called out his name, and Shuri had forgotten about everything except protecting this man, keeping him safe from whatever plagued him.

He pulled Tynare into his arms, rocking him, trying to wake him from his slumber. It was harder than it should have been, and even when Tynare opened his eyes, his tremors didn't cease. "He's here.... He's touching me. Stop him. Please."

Shuri looked around, but he couldn't see anyone. Was the prince having a nightmare? If so, it seemed an awfully vivid one, and it had followed him into reality. Even if he'd come to, he stared over Shuri's shoulders, not directly at him. His state alarmed Shuri, and he wondered if

he should summon a healer. Why wasn't anyone here? Where had Etera gone? There were always guards at the door, but now, everyone had suddenly left.

Shuri had no way to contact Tynare's retainers, since he couldn't exactly leave Tynare on his own. Desperate and more than a little confused, he continued to rock the trembling Aranken. Thankfully, Tynare began to respond to Shuri's efforts. The tremors ceased, and the prince relaxed against Shuri's chest. When he spoke, his voice was low, shy, as if he feared a higher volume would bring the monsters back. "Is he gone?"

No one had been there to begin with. Shuri's senses would have detected any hostile presence. But the episode had obviously felt very real for Tynare, so Shuri kissed the prince's forehead and nodded. "Yes. He's gone."

As if by magic, something in Tynare's stance shifted. "Of course he is. It was just a nightmare. Thank you for worrying."

He blinked and faced Shuri again, his dark blue eyes now clear of anything resembling terror. Tossing back his ruffled red hair, he smiled. "I don't suppose there's anything I can reward you with?"

It didn't take a genius to figure out what Tynare was offering. Shuri felt torn between relief and disappointment. Tynare seemed to have returned to normal, but Shuri had seen a different side of him now, something Tynare didn't usually show.

"You can tell me what you were dreaming about."

Tynare tensed and pulled away. "I'd rather not," he replied. The walls were already up again, in more than one way. "It's private."

Shuri couldn't argue with that. "Very well. I won't push you. But I am staying here tonight, just to hold you. You can't be alone right now."

The prince opened his mouth, but in the end, no sound came out. He nodded and settled down with his head on Shuri's chest. Shuri pet his soft hair and wondered who the "he" in Tynare's nightmare could be.

HE FELT warm, warmer than he ever remembered being in his entire existence. His body seemed to be curled in the embrace of Volcana herself, the hold comforting, familiar, yet somehow impossibly hot.

He wanted to revel in it forever, but unfortunately, as consciousness returned, he became aware of something very alarming.

A memory drifted into his mind, and Tynare's eyes opened as fury flared within him. He couldn't believe he'd displayed such weakness in front of Shuri, especially after the way the man had rejected him. He felt even angrier when he realized he'd been curled against Shuri's chest, as if they were true lovers, not enemies who shared an unusually strong physical attraction.

Shuri stirred, and the motion snapped Tynare out of his trance. He moved away from the Nikari, more than a little aware that he was still naked, and his body still responded to the man in his bed. Steeling himself for the unavoidable confrontation, he nudged Shuri with his foot.

The Nikari cracked open an eyelid, then the second. Slowly, as if drawing it out on purpose, he stretched, the motion making his shirt ride up and exposing his abdomen. Tynare's hands itched to touch that dusky skin and slide his hands inside Shuri's breeches. Especially now that he knew what they hid, the temptation seemed too much to endure. But endure it he did, and he narrowed his eyes at Shuri. "Get out."

Shuri arched a brow at him. "You're in a good mood this morning. I thought you wanted me here."

"I changed my mind," Tynare snapped back. "Leave before I summon the guards to remove you."

"That won't be necessary." Shuri slid out of the bed, not seeming in the least bit disturbed by Tynare's anger. "I take it you've recovered from what happened."

Tynare clenched his fists, hating Shuri for mentioning his episode. How could he have been so weak? Of course the creature couldn't physically reach him here. The Wards might be weakened, but they still kept Shyrn in check well enough. The nightmare had felt impossibly real, yes, but Tynare should have realized from the very beginning that it was nothing more than that—a bad dream.

"I'll be fine," he said between gritted teeth. "Please leave. I want to be alone."

Fortunately, Shuri respected his desires. Without another word, he departed, leaving Tynare alone in his room. For a while, Tynare waited

there, staring blankly at the walls without seeing them. He felt off today, more so than he had in a long time.

He plopped down on the bed and closed his eyes, not wanting to think or to feel at all. Sooner than he had expected, he drifted into slumber once again.

## Chapter Six

### Twin

TYNARE DIDN'T come to breakfast. Shuri had been looking forward to seeing him, in part because he wanted to apologize for last night and this morning. However, it was becoming obvious the Aranken prince wouldn't make things easy for him, and Shuri might have offended him more than he'd originally thought. Attempting to enter the royal wing again just earned him ugly looks from the guards, and he had no real way to contact Tynare if he didn't want to be contacted.

Frustration urged him into taking refuge in the palace gardens. Was it because he wanted to muse over the memory of his previous conversation with Tynare? He couldn't see why. Creator only knew that being attracted to Tynare was a million times worse than falling for his brother's future consort.

Lost in thought, he walked through the garden, a myriad of memories flashing through his mind's eye. The warmth of Ivy's body, his comforting scent, the beauty of his smile.... Those were the things that mattered, his heart's desire and the reason why he'd come to A'rankin to begin with. Then why did Tynare's tortured gaze keep popping into his brain? Damn it. He just didn't understand the Aranken prince. There were so many questions and so few answers. If Shuri knew what was good for him, he'd return to the Empire and report the attack on Ivy had indeed originated from A'rankin. Why couldn't he do it?

Before he could answer his own question, he caught sight of something glittering up ahead. At first, he couldn't identify it, but as he walked a bit farther, he realized it originated from a building. Erected in the middle of the quiet gardens, it seemed to be a sunroom of sorts, with glass windows taking up most of the space on each individual wall. The architecture of the sunroom was such that Shuri could see inside the



structure without too much trouble. Rows and rows of flowers took up a fair amount of the space. Only the center of the sunroom remained free of the plants. Shuri's heart did a funny leap when he spotted Tynare there, lying down on a low settee.

It would probably be rude to interrupt the prince's private time, but his dispute with Tynare had already escalated beyond what could be controlled through courtly manners. A part of him feared that by going through with this he might make things worse, but what other options did he have?

With decisive steps, Shuri entered the sunroom and approached the settee where Tynare lay. "Your Highness," he said, "I apologize for intruding, but I needed a word with you."

Tynare turned his head but didn't get up. "Prince Shuriden?" he asked. "You're not bothering me. Please take a seat."

Something in Tynare's voice and subdued demeanor felt off. Creator, he hadn't even opened his eyes. Was the nightmare from the day before still affecting him? Shuri remembered how much it had shaken him, and he loathed himself for worrying over his own dilemmas when Tynare was obviously struggling with something far more important.

He plopped down on an armchair located in front of the settee. The position gave him a better look at Tynare, and for a few seconds, he was struck dumb by the beauty of the Aranken prince. The sun's rays danced over his skin, making his crimson hair look like flowing streams of fire. The peaceful smile on his full lips softened the angles of his face. The arrogance and hostility he'd come to expect from Tynare seemed completely missing. Not to mention that Tynare had called him Shuriden again. What did that mean? Was this yet another game?

He wanted to address the events from the night before, but the words didn't come. "It's quite pleasant here, isn't it?" Tynare commented. "I love the perfume of the flowers. I can almost see them in my head when I smell them."

"Aranken nature is, indeed, very charming," Shuri replied. "It's quite different from the Empire, but I find that I enjoy it a great deal."

The prince shot him a knowing smile. "You instinctively feel the proximity of the elements. A'rankin might not be your home right now, but in a way, you're still connected to it." He extended his hand toward a nearby flower, and a vine reached out toward him, bringing the bloom close to his face. The prince cuddled the flower to his cheek like he would have

with a newborn babe and whispered, “Terra is in everything. Gaia is with us. I’m sure you can feel it too.”

Shuri didn’t know what he felt. Tynare’s almost innocent expression contrasted sharply with the man Shuri knew. And since when did Tynare have earth-related powers anyway?

All of a sudden, the prince released a heavy sigh, his smile fading. “I wanted to tell you something, so it’s just as well that you found me here. Don’t trust Tynare. He might be as charming as these flowers, but he’s dangerous.”

Shuri gaped at the prince. That statement was so wrong in so many ways Shuri couldn’t even begin to address it. “I... I don’t understand. What do you mean?”

Before Tynare could answer the question, Etera stalked into the room, her pale, sweaty face speaking volumes of her agitation. “Prince Nari, you shouldn’t be here,” Etera chastised him. “You’re not well.”

Prince Nari? What in the world? And why was she speaking to him that way? Shuri had only ever seen her displaying the utmost respect toward Tynare, nothing like this familiarity.

“I’m fine, Etera.” The prince chuckled. “I’m merely enjoying the sun. You wouldn’t begrudge me that, would you?”

Etera’s expression softened to an almost motherly look. “No, of course not. But... You should have told me you were here. I’d have kept you company.”

“I’m never alone,” the prince replied. As if on cue, the flower caressed the young Aranken’s cheek. “Gaia is with me. And besides, I had a surprise guest.”

In response, Etera turned to glare at Shuri. “I can see that,” she said tightly. “If you don’t mind, Prince Shuriden, His Highness needs his rest. Prince Nari can’t tend to your... preferences.”

Prince Nari. There it was, the strange address for a second time. Shuri looked from Etera to the face of the beautiful Aranken royal, trying to figure out the dynamics of this situation. “What’s going on?” he asked. “Does Tynare have a twin?”

That seemed like the only explanation behind all these differences, including the one in Etera’s behavior. “Something like that,” Nari replied. “I’m sorry for not telling you outright. You’ll stay for a while longer, won’t

you? It's nice to be here, but sometimes, even I get frustrated. Come.... Hold my hand."

Etera grimaced, clenching her fists, but she didn't try to argue against her prince. Truth be told, Shuri could have refused. But even with the knowledge that Nari was only a stranger to him, he couldn't say no. He left his armchair and knelt next to Nari's settee.

Nari offered his hand with a smile, and Shuri took it after a small moment of hesitation. For a few seconds, he analyzed the lines of Nari's palm. It was just like Tynare's, and yet it felt warmer. How could that be, when Tynare was the Fire Starter?

Shaking off his musings, Shuri threaded his fingers through Nari's. He didn't know why, but it seemed to be what Nari had been waiting for. "I'm going to be terrible to you right now," he said, "and ask you for a favor. Do you think.... Do you think you could be my eyes for a few minutes?"

Be his eyes? Shit, no wonder he'd kept them closed. He was blind. "I'll help in whatever way I can," Shuri offered.

"You are too kind," Nari replied with the same gentle smile. "You don't have to pity me, you know. I might not have the use of my eyes or my legs, but I've been given other gifts."

He couldn't walk either. Now Shuri truly felt terrible. He couldn't help but feel compassion for a young man who'd lost so much, even if the Aranken had outright said he didn't want that.

"Not everyone is willing to do this for me, so I need you to understand what it entails," the prince continued. "You'd be showing me what you see. It's possible to delve deeper, to a time in the past where you'd show me your memories. But I promise I won't invade your privacy like that."

Shuri interpreted Nari's explanation as referring to a form of divination. In a way, he didn't think it was safe for Nari to even see his memories—not for Nari or for him. After all, he might not think Nari was up to no good, but Shuri's recollections held not only state secrets but also too much resentment and sorrow. Shuri suspected Nari had quite a lot of pain of his own already. However, his own proficiency in the mind arts gave him mental shields that would keep Nari from prodding into dangerous places.

"That sounds fair," he told the prince. "What do I do?"

Nari's hold on his hand tightened. "Just be here," he said. "Don't go."

Shuri had the sudden overwhelming feeling that Nari was referring to more than just the right now. He wished he could come up with something to say, but for some reason, he felt like no words would adequately express the strange pull he experienced toward Nari. And so, he just held on to Nari's hand, wondered what in the world he was doing here, and nodded.

He couldn't pinpoint the exact moment when he felt the change, but he did. Something inside him shifted, as if he was granted a new awareness of everything around him. He realized he wanted to share this with Nari, who couldn't see it for himself.

Shuri squeezed Nari's palm and did his best to look around, to take in everything he possibly could so that Nari could see it too. He wanted to glance back at Nari, to see the expression on the Aranken prince's face, but he held back, surmising Nari wouldn't want to see himself. Nari made approving, wondrous gasps. "It's beautiful. So beautiful. Thank you."

There was so much joy and honesty in those simple words that Shuri could suddenly see the beauty Nari spoke of. The colors of the flowers seemed somehow more vibrant, and even their perfume became more potent. Was it just his impression, or had something actually changed in the sunroom?

Not wanting to focus too much on questions he couldn't answer, Shuri turned toward Etera, hazarding a guess that Nari might want to see her too. He was startled to take in the pained grimace on her face. For once, she didn't glare at him. Her full attention seemed on Nari, although for the life of him, Shuri couldn't figure out what she was thinking.

Distantly, he wondered if Etera had been Nari's eyes in the past. That was likely, more so because she and the prince seemed quite close. Did it bother her that Nari had asked Shuri to do it in her place? If it did, she didn't comment on it. She just smiled at Shuri—no, at the prince who could now see through his eyes. "You shouldn't strain yourself so, Your Highness. You're still in a very delicate condition."

"I'm fine, Etera. You haven't slept at all, have you? You should go rest. I'll be all right, I promise."

Now that Nari mentioned it, there were dark circles under Etera's eyes, and she did seem a little worse for the wear. Shuri wondered if it had anything to do with last night's episode with Tynare, but he couldn't exactly ask her.

“I can stay with him,” he offered. “It’s fine.”

For a brief instant, Etera’s gaze flashed with the same hatred that she regularly displayed in his presence. The moment passed when Nari released a distressed noise. “Etera....”

Instantly, the woman’s expression changed to one of dismay and concern. “I’m sorry. I’m upsetting you. But please understand. I can’t just leave you alone with this stranger.”

“Do I have to make it an order?” Nari asked, his voice thick with regret.

“Prince Nari....” Etera reached for the young Aranken’s other hand but stopped herself seconds before she could touch him.

“Etera, I promise I’ll be all right,” Nari said. “Go. Leave us.”

The woman winced but complied. On shaky legs, she made her way out of the sunroom and disappeared into the garden beyond. “She’ll probably head straight toward my father to warn him I’m being fickle,” Nari whispered. “I can’t imagine I have too much time left here.”

There was no resentment in Nari’s voice, simply acceptance, melancholy, and maybe even a dose of affection toward Etera. Shuri faced the young Aranken again, taking in his sad, quiet smile. “Do you want to go outside?” he asked. “You’ll be perfectly safe with me.”

Nari visibly perked up. “You think we could? I....” He bit his lower lip in a nervous gesture that reminded Shuri too much of Ivy for his comfort. “I don’t move around much when I’m like this.”

Like this? Like what? Alone? Shuri couldn’t quite make out the meaning of that statement, but he didn’t want to push Nari into anything. For some reason he didn’t dare to analyze too closely, he was protective of the young Aranken. “We don’t have to if you’re uncomfortable with the idea,” he said quickly.

Nari’s hold on his hand tightened even more, his breath coming out a little faster. “No. I want to.”

Shuri was beginning to regret even suggesting it, but now that he’d said it, he couldn’t take it back without seeming dismissive. Cursing himself for a fool, he took Nari in his arms and carried him out of the sunroom.

He didn’t go very far, in deference to Nari’s earlier uncertainties, but the sounds of delight coming from the young Aranken made it all

worthwhile. Apparently, Nari just needed to keep in direct contact with him, not necessarily with his hand, because he kept brushing his fingers over any part of Shuri he could reach. Shuri kind of wished his hands hadn't been occupied with his precious burden, because those innocent caresses were causing not-so-innocent thoughts. Even if Nari wasn't Tynare, Shuri's stupid body kept pointing out their physical similarities and wanted to resume their proceedings from the night before. Suffice to say, Shuri didn't think that would be a very good idea, not with Tynare, and definitely not with Nari.

"The skies are so blue," Nari commented with wonder in his voice. "Did you know not everyone sees the sky the same way?"

Shuri distracted himself from his private analysis of Nari's scent by scanning the clouds with as much attention as he could muster. "How so?"

"Etera never shows too much interest in such things. Destroyers are like that. They're very focused on their goal, something which I suppose might stem from the training they go through. Or maybe it's not the fact that she's a Destroyer. You have a different perspective on A'rankin. It's like seeing it all over again."

"She's the only other person you've done this with?" Shuri inquired. "What about your father? Your brother?"

"My father has a unique perspective too," Nari admitted, "but he's not really comfortable enough in my presence. And Tynare.... Well, I do see a lot through his eyes, and sometimes I need a change."

Shuri knew he shouldn't ask, but he couldn't help it. The two princes intrigued him. "You don't like your brother very much, do you?" he inquired as he set Nari down on the grass.

"Tynare and I are very different, that's all." Nari smiled again and gestured for Shuri to join him. "You don't think so?"

"I don't know either of you well enough to judge," Shuri replied, feeling stupid even as he said the words. He didn't know Nari, and yet he'd offered to let the man see into his head? His mental skills aside, it seemed too much of a risk to take for a stranger.

Tynare would have probably thrown it into his face and confronted him about that statement, but Nari let him get away with it. Shuri didn't know if he felt disappointed or not. Meeting Nari had thrown him off-kilter, and he was inclined to care for the young Aranken because of him being

Tynare's twin. But even that logic made no sense, since Tynare shouldn't mean anything to him. They were enemies, not friends, definitely not lovers.

He realized he must have made a sound when Nari tangled their fingers together. "You're upset. Tynare?"

"Yes and no," Shuri admitted. "I'm a bit confused. Why did you say he can't be trusted?"

"Because it's the truth," Nari replied. "Tynare.... He's trying to do the right thing, but the path he chose is a dark one. You should go back to the Empire, Prince Shuriden. Your brother and his future consort are very worried, and they're already regretting allowing this expedition. Go back. I promise you that no harm will come to your beloved."

Shuri went rigid at Nari's words. They showed too much knowledge of Shuri's private affairs, knowledge Nari shouldn't have.

But then again, hadn't he recognized Nari's "seeing through his eyes" ability as a form of divination? Besides, Ivy had said that in his vision, he'd seen a man lying down in a sunroom, and that the stranger had sensed him. That man must have been Nari. And yet, Ivy had drawn Tynare's name from the vision, not Nari's. How could Shuri have forgotten it all? He was thinking with his dick, and it could be seriously detrimental to his health.

Shuri couldn't imagine someone like Nari reaching out through divination to try to destroy Ivy's consciousness. But what did he know about Nari, really? Nothing. He'd even had to guess the twin thing on his own, because Nari didn't seem inclined to provide any real explanation.

"And now, I've said too much." Nari sighed. "I apologize. I realize you don't want someone like me intruding on your privacy. I mean well."

"I'm sure you do," Shuri answered. "No, that's a lie. I'm not sure of anything. This place... I never thought I'd say this about any location, but it has more secrets and more intrigue than the Empire."

He did want to go home, to see Ivy and his uncle. Creator, even Kris would be a welcome sight. At least with Kris, there were no real surprises. With the occasional exception, Shuri always knew what he could expect from his half brother. Even so, the idea of leaving didn't really appeal. He tried to blame it on his mission to find out what was going on, but any amount of self-deception and denial had its limits.

“I’m not going anywhere, Prince Nari. I don’t know what you’re hiding and what game your brother is playing, but I will figure it out. And when I do, I’ll make an informed decision on my course of action.”

Nari’s face fell, and he clutched Shuri’s arm in an almost painful grip. “It’s too risky,” he cried. “You’ll get hurt. He’ll kill you.”

The despair and fear in Nari’s voice held no deception, but Shuri had no idea what to make of it. “He? Tynare? Tynare will kill me?”

No, that didn’t sound right. This mysterious “he” had to be connected in some way to Tynare’s nightmare. Nari was clearly afraid of it too, and the dark path reference must involve some other person who represented a danger to both Tynare and Shuri.

Unfortunately, Shuri didn’t get to clarify this point with Nari. Etera manifested in the garden once more, followed by the king. The Aranken sovereign stalked to Shuri and Nari’s side, his face almost purple with anger.

“Your Highness, if you don’t mind, I need a word with my son. I would be very grateful if you could retreat to your quarters for the time being. Nari is a sensitive individual, and getting upset might worsen his condition.”

For once, Shuri couldn’t blame the king for his fury. He hadn’t intended to approach such a difficult topic when he’d offered to keep Nari company, but he could tell it had indeed affected the Aranken prince.

Shuri got up and reached for Nari, planning to carry him, just like he had earlier. The king beat him to it, lifting his son in his arms. King Rynald’s livid expression didn’t falter, so Shuri decided it might be a better idea to take his leave.

“I trust you’ll feel better, Prince Nari. It was very nice to meet you. Perhaps I’ll see you again soon.”

Nari’s lips twisted into a small, forced smile. “Perhaps. Have a good day, Prince Shuriden.”

Shuri offered the king a polite bow, then departed, heading back toward the palace. That had been a confusing meeting to say the least. Nari seemed to be the key to finding out the answers to the riddle of A’rankin. But Shuri hadn’t even known about Nari’s existence. Was protectiveness the only reason Etera and the king didn’t want Nari to spend any time with Shuri?



In the end, it was probably a good thing that he ran into the A'Mora when he entered the palace. She pulled him aside without a word, ushering him not toward the guest rooms—which he surmised she must have deemed unsafe for a more discreet conversation—but to a small balcony on the first level of the palace.

“I found out something very intriguing,” she said once they were in reasonable privacy. “I deemed it strange that no one in the palace really mentioned the queen, not even Prince Tynare, so I asked around. Of course, people weren’t very happy to talk about it, and I didn’t know what I was looking for. But then I overheard something quite interesting. It seems that the queen died many years back, and she and Prince Tynare weren’t particularly close. More interestingly, she was a Destroyer, and from what I’ve learned, some Destroyers have trouble conceiving.”

“Were there other considerations that made her marry the king?”

“It seems Rynald needed to bond with a Destroyer so that the Aranken crown would have all of the elements represented. In any case, the conversation suggested the queen wasn’t Tynare’s mother at all, and another Destroyer woman had sired him.”

Shuri had a flash of Etera’s pained look back in the sunroom. “Etera. She’s their mother.”

Katara blinked at him like he’d said something very strange. “Their?” she repeated inquiringly. His other conclusion didn’t seem to surprise her, so Shuri hazarded that she must have guessed it as well.

“Prince Tynare has a twin brother,” he explained. “I just met him now, in a sunroom in the gardens, the one Ivy mentioned.”

“That can’t be right,” Katara said. “Everything I’ve heard so far suggests he is a single child. Are you sure? You say they are twins. Could you have confused Tynare for someone else?”

Shuri arched a brow at Katara. “Prince Nari warned me not to trust his brother. Also, he seems to be a Nurturer, while Tynare is a Fire Starter. Not to mention that they’re completely different in terms of personality, and Nari is blind and paralyzed from the waist down.”

Katara hummed thoughtfully. “I suppose I believe you. If anyone is able to read Tynare, it’s you. The two of you have become quite close.”

The words held no accusation, but Shuri still bristled. “I know my duty, Katara. I want to make sure Ivy is safe. That hasn’t changed.”

“I never said it has,” Katara shot back. “Look, it’s obvious we’re missing something, and it’s far too soon to draw any conclusions. I’m going back to the Empire. Fegala has already traveled through a rift and returned safely. Come with me. We can talk it over with Kris and Ivy and come up with a strategy.”

The idea appealed a great deal. If someone could offer Shuri an understanding ear, it was Ivy. But Ivy’s eyes also saw too much, and this time around, Shuri feared what they might see.

“What we need is a new approach. I have to find out who my mother was in contact with. That person will probably be able to give us the answers we seek.”

“And how are you going to do that? You can’t exactly ask.”

“I’ll start with investigating the poison,” Shuri replied. “There has to be some sort of text here that can give us a clue as to what was used. By now, we know enough of its effects to be able to identify it.”

“You’re probably right,” Katara said. “We’ll look together. It’ll be faster that way, and we can go back to the Empire later on.”

Shuri wanted to say he didn’t need to be babysat, and under different circumstances, he might have done exactly that. However, as much as he loathed Katara, she was, like Kris, predictable. For the moment, her interests coincided with Shuri’s, and in a place where allies were so uncertain, her presence could make the difference between figuring out the truth and staring at the walls in dismay—or worse.

“Very well. Let’s start with the palace library, but we have to be discreet. The Aranken might know why we’re here, but we don’t want them to look too closely at our strategy.”

Today seemed a day of surprises, because Katara agreed with him. They were just about to leave the balcony when Shuri caught sight of someone sitting on a bench in the garden. It was the king, together with Nari. Or, at least, that was what he thought at first, before the so-called Nari left the bench and looked up straight at him.

Even from the distance, Shuri could easily read the teasing expression on the prince’s face. “Greetings, Prince Shuri,” Tynare called out. “I heard you met someone interesting today. He told me you were looking for me earlier.”

Shuri couldn't exactly shout his message for the entire palace to hear. He also didn't think he could address the prince without wanting to scream. "You go on ahead," he whispered to Katara. "I need to deal with this."

The A'Mora narrowed her eyes at him in obvious disapproval but thankfully didn't try to stop him. She turned on her heel and left the balcony, supposedly heading toward the library.

Since Tynare had decided to flaunt conventions first, Shuri decided to respond in the same way. He leapt off the balcony and landed neatly on the terrace below. The two Aranken were still a good distance away, so Shuri wasn't worried that they'd heard him and Katara speak.

"Actually, yes," he said. "I was looking for you, but I didn't expect running into you so soon."

"My father always turns to me when there are problems with Nari," Tynare replied. "You look worried. Don't be. Nari has always been frail, so he doesn't spend too much time outside."

"Where is he now?" Shuri inquired. Now that he was closer to Tynare, he noticed what he should have ever since he'd been on the balcony. Tynare's clothes were very similar to Nari's, but different in color. Their physical resemblance had thrown him off far more than was acceptable.

"Etera accompanied him to the palace," the king told him. "I trust you understand why I was curt with you earlier, Your Highness."

"Yes, of course," Shuri replied automatically, "and I assure you I didn't mean to make Prince Nari uncomfortable."

"I'm certain you didn't," Tynare replied. "Father, with your permission, I believe His Highness had a private matter to approach with me."

Shuri couldn't believe Tynare had said that outright in front of his father. He might not have explicitly stated what Shuri wanted to discuss, but the "private" thing seemed like a dead giveaway. Or maybe Shuri was jumping at shadows. The king didn't even blink at Tynare's words. "Go ahead. We'll speak later. Your Highness, it was a pleasure to talk to you again. Perhaps we can discuss the alliance later today. I'll send word."

Shuri decided he seriously didn't like or trust the king. The man might be well-meaning when it came to his own land, but he meant to use the Nikari, and he wasn't even discreet about disliking them in spite of it. In fact, throughout their stay, he'd displayed such erratic emotions Shuri

deemed him unreliable at best. How did Tynare's behavior fit in with that of his father? It was a mystery, since no matter what Katara said, Shuri was no closer to figuring out the puzzle of Tynare's character than he'd been the moment they'd met.

Tynare guided him into the gardens once again, but this time, in the direction opposite to the sunroom. "What did you think of Nari?" he asked as they walked.

"He was nice," Shuri replied. "Very different from you."

Too late did Shuri realize that answer could come out as insulting. This prince didn't let him get away with it, not like Nari might have. As soon as they were out of sight and safely hidden from onlookers by a series of man-sized bushes, Tynare grabbed Shuri's arm and pressed him against the leaves. "Did you want him?" he murmured in Shuri's ear. "Did you want him like you want me?"

Shuri's breath caught as Tynare brought their bodies together. His stupid cock responded, like it always did. Apparently, for all of his earlier resolve, he couldn't for the life of him tame his libido's response to Tynare. And Tynare knew it, damn him. "You did, didn't you?" He tsked. "Naughty. I wonder if he'd have been so willing to spend time with you had he known what you were really thinking."

Shuri gritted his teeth, hating that Tynare could see right through him like this. "It's a moot point, isn't it? Your father made sure I wouldn't burden your brother with my presence for too long."

"Forget about Nari," Tynare whispered. "Just think about me."

Shuri opened his mouth, knowing he needed to talk about.... Wait, what had he planned on saying? He couldn't remember, not when Tynare's hand landed on his crotch and massaged gently. Shuri groaned, and he couldn't even be bothered to feel embarrassed over it, not when Tynare's scent made his senses drunk with lust and his proximity caused fire to lick over his nerve endings.

Not even Tynare's knowing smirk could put a damper on that arousal, not when the Aranken prince dropped to his knees, right then and there, in the middle of the garden. Anyone could come by. Anyone could see them. They weren't that far from the palace. And yet Tynare rubbed his face against Shuri's clothed dick with no hesitation whatsoever. His nimble fingers made quick work of the bindings of Shuri's breeches. Shuri should have protested. He was getting caught up in Tynare's pace again, and at this

rate, he risked losing himself in the mysterious Aranken's web. But when Tynare's fist slid inside his pants and gripped his dick, he couldn't remember to want anything else except to sate this need, this unquenchable, agonizing thirst that had tormented him from the moment he'd met Tynare's gaze. His despair, his frustration, his urgency, his need, longing, and confusion—it all became irrelevant as passion took over. He buried his fingers in Tynare's soft hair and guided him closer, wordlessly telling Tynare what he wanted.

Tynare chuckled and freed himself from Shuri's hold. "Not this time, Shuri. This time, I make the rules."

Shuri couldn't blame him, since during their last encounter he'd left the prince hanging. Then again, Shuri would have probably agreed to anything as long as it meant getting his cock sucked.

Tynare blew a gust of hot air over Shuri's cock, taking it slow, inflicting a particularly cruel brand of torture on him. Knowing Tynare, that was probably the case. Shuri groaned, trying to usher his lover along. Tynare refused to be rushed, though, and he had the advantage of a position that gave him unrestricted access to very sensitive parts of Shuri's anatomy. As if to point this out, he squeezed Shuri's testes. It didn't exactly hurt, or it couldn't, not when Tynare also decided to be somewhat more merciful to Shuri and slowly took the head of his dick in his mouth.

The pleasure that coursed over him bordered on painful, so maybe Shuri's mind and body couldn't quite grasp the paradox of what was going on. In the end, he stopped being able to rationalize it, his coherent thought processes melting in the heat of Tynare's mouth. The light suction, so wet, thorough, almost lazy, stirred every desire Shuri had futilely attempted to suppress. He bit the inside of his cheek to force himself into motionlessness, to keep a rein on his passion. At this rate, he wouldn't be able to endure for much longer, but he needed to try.

Tynare rewarded him for his patience by tracing the largest vein of the shaft with his tongue, down to the very base, then back up. From there, he proceeded to take the entire member in his mouth and started to bob his head up and down Shuri's cock.

At first, the beautiful Aranken kept up his teasing pace, but soon even he seemed to lose his patience, and he increased the speed and strength of the suction. He practically buried his face in Shuri's pubic hair, taking Shuri's dick down his throat. Creator, it felt so good Shuri almost came on

the spot. An unsated need inside him held him back. As much as he enjoyed the visceral pleasures Tynare's mouth drew from him, he would never get enough until he actually felt his lover's ass tighten around his prick as he came. Nothing but that could satisfy him.

The thought gave him a strength he hadn't known he could muster. Through some sort of miracle, he managed to push Tynare off, freeing his dick from the Aranken prince's mouth. Tynare fell back and blinked up at him, obviously surprised and maybe even a little wary. Shuri realized he loved seeing Tynare like this, watching the genuine emotion behind the arrogant façade. Whatever agenda Tynare might have, he wanted Shuri, and for the moment that seemed the most important thing for him, for both of them.

Shuri knelt in the grass next to Tynare and reached for his garments. The telling bulge in Tynare's breeches encouraged him, since the male body didn't lie. When Shuri gripped Tynare's cock through the material of his pants—much like Tynare had done earlier—the prince let out a sound that made arousal and wicked satisfaction swell inside Shuri. He wanted to hear more of it, to feast on Tynare's passion, to claim everything about the mysterious prince for his own.

He wished he could have taken his time exploring every inch of Tynare's body or that he'd had the patience to torture his lover like Tynare had done with him. Unfortunately, he'd already reached his limit. In an ironic twist of fate, the tremors shaking Tynare's athletic form gave Shuri the patience he might have lacked otherwise. The evidence of Tynare's enjoyment kept him from succumbing to his natural impulses, and he could remove Tynare's clothing without ripping anything off. Shuri counted that as a definite achievement on his part. If he got a little confused when he needed to handle Tynare's boots and breeches, well, who could have blamed him? With Tynare's tantalizing beauty right there, within his reach, he couldn't think of anything except licking and sucking on all that fair skin.

Tynare did lend him a hand, so Shuri was successful in his self-assigned task. At last, he had Tynare naked on the grass, at his mercy. Shuri remained dressed, but he planned to eliminate that problem as soon as possible. Predictably he got distracted by Tynare's nudity. He ended up covering Tynare's body with his own, rutting against the other man like a wild beast. To his credit his lover wasn't in a much better state. Tynare

wrapped his arms around Shuri, grinding and moaning and gasping, making those noises that went to Shuri's head like a potent drug, no longer the seducer, no longer in any role.

"Please," he cried out, "please, Shuri, please.... Elements, please...."

Shuri couldn't have refused that request to save his life. He couldn't remember why he'd ever tried to. There was something free and impossibly beautiful about Tynare's total surrender, something that enslaved Shuri, destroyed any barrier that might have kept him from following through with what they both desired.

Feverish, enthralled by the lustful perfection of his lover, Shuri shoved off his breeches as far as they could go without him having to actually get up. They had no oil, and that gave Shuri pause, since he could really hurt Tynare without something to smooth the way in. He was considering his next course of action when Tynare slid his hand between Shuri's legs, zeroing in on his dick. Shuri bit back a curse at the sinful caress, reminding himself he hadn't come this far to be undone by a simple hand job. A heartbeat later, he revised the thought, since nothing about Tynare was ever simple. More importantly, the unexpected massage provided some sort of slick substance that Tynare spread all over Shuri's cock, in an impossibly thorough way.

Shuri had no idea how Tynare could have procured lubricant—maybe it was an Aranken thing? Shuri himself couldn't create such spells, in spite of the natural affinity to water of the Fezenda bloodline. Either way, he couldn't bring himself to care, not when Tynare sat back again, exposing his nether opening to Shuri's greedy gaze. As if aiming to madden Shuri, Tynare reached for his own hole with two fingers and slid them inside. Watching that tiny opening stretch around Tynare's digits finally caused Shuri to crack. He slid one finger next to Tynare's, the tight heat that engulfed him making him want to throw all caution to the wind and just bury his dick inside his lover already.

Even so, he had to admit he found something sinful and carnal about their current position. Its eroticism might not have been all that edgy, but touching Tynare's hand within his body.... Shuri didn't know why, but it felt so intimate. He didn't think he'd ever seen Tynare's face so open, with no pretense, just welcoming affection and lust.

The strange weight of the moment became too much for Shuri's neglected libido to bear. Fortunately, Tynare was right there with him, and they both removed their fingers from Tynare's body at the same time. "Shuri," Tynare said pleadingly.

Would Shuri ever get tired of hearing his name on Tynare's lips? Probably not. He could easily become addicted to the sensual whisper that somehow managed to convey every emotion in Tynare's heart. "Yes, *sharani*," he replied, barely even acknowledging what he was saying. "I'm here."

He lifted Tynare's legs on his shoulders and positioned his dick at his lover's hole. Slowly, he started to push inside. Tynare's opening, now slick with whatever oil he'd found, yielded easily to Shuri's invasion, but Shuri never looked away from Tynare's face, searching for any sign of discomfort. He found none, Tynare's beautiful features slack with obvious rapture. "Move.... Move, Shuri, come on."

Shuri complied. He pulled out of Tynare and slid back inside almost instantly, unwilling to leave Tynare's body even for a moment. At the same time, he wanted to go deeper, always deeper, to brand Tynare as his own in every possible way. He moved faster, thrusting harder, always aiming for Tynare's special spot. Judging by his lover's mounting cries, he succeeded. Tynare moved with him, impaling himself on Shuri's cock, gripping his shoulders in a hold so tight it would probably leave Shuri with bruises. Not that Shuri minded. Creator, he'd have embraced even the worst possible pain if it came with this amazing ecstasy, if it translated into this union with Tynare.

They fell together in a dance as old as time, as ageless as the elements they welcomed within them. It seemed so strange. Shuri swore he could feel the fire of passion lick over his skin, the sway of a hot breeze scorching his face, the lick of a gentle stream soothing his soul, the strength of a flawless diamond steadying him. He couldn't explain it, but it reminded him of the moment he'd passed through the Wards—only at a deeper, more intimate level.

He didn't know how long it lasted. It could have been an age or maybe just a moment. He couldn't measure time anymore, but its ruthlessness refused to free them, and they couldn't linger in this union forever. Shuri's



orgasm already burned in his balls, sizzling over his skin, flowing into every single part of his body.

Looking into Tynare's dazed eyes, Shuri knew that any moment now, his lover would come. Thank the Creator for that. He wanted Tynare to find his peak first. For some reason, that had become more important to him than his own climax.

Thrusting inside Tynare even harder, he slid his hand between their bodies and gripped Tynare's dick in his fist. As he swept his thumb over the leaking tip—and Creator, he needed to pay more attention to Tynare's cock, because it was as beautiful as the rest of him—he whispered, “Come for me, *sharani*.”

The words, or perhaps the caress, triggered a visceral reaction from Tynare. His body convulsed, and with a loud cry, he arched his back and came. Hot liquid splashed over Shuri's abdomen as Tynare's ass muscles squeezed Shuri's dick in an iron vise. The sight of his lover in the throes of orgasm, combined with that almost too-tight hold, became too much for Shuri to withstand. With one last thrust, he followed Tynare over the edge.

His climax exploded over him with the combined force of the elements. Every inch of him flared to life, as if the potent force of the orgasm connected him to the rest of the world in a way he never would have deemed possible. He could have sworn that even the blades of grass around them and the sky above their heads sang out in recognition of what Shuri and Tynare shared. Deep inside, he thought he could get a glimpse of Tynare's soul. His Nikari instincts reared up, demanding that he claim Tynare for his own. He could do it. Tynare's consciousness seemed right there, within his reach. He could bind them together in the way of his kind.

Tentatively, Shuri reached for it, visualizing it as an ethereal version of Tynare. But when his mental touch slid over the ghostly figure, it dissipated, splitting in several parts like mocking mirror images and then fading into the distance.

The strange phenomenon shook him so much that he found himself propelled back to reality. In an instant, he knew that something had changed. Tynare's earlier open expression had now been replaced by the familiar speculative look. The Aranken prince extracted himself from Shuri's embrace, separating their bodies with a smirk that didn't seem to fit

at all with the man Shuri had held a few moments before. “I think that settled our position on what happened last night, don’t you?”

Shuri lay back down on the grass, the pleasant lassitude of the afterglow cast aside by dread and a lingering taste of betrayal. “This.... This was a mistake.”

Did he even mean that anymore? Creator, he didn’t know. The only thing he knew was Tynare had felt so right in his arms, and now.... Now, it didn’t seem the same.

Tynare snorted at him. “Don’t you ever get tired of saying that?”

The Aranken prince climbed back on Shuri’s lap, and his naked body fit just right in Shuri’s arms. Shuri’s cock nestled in Tynare’s crease, and he wanted nothing more than to bury himself inside the other man again. The Aranken prince bit his ear, making him hiss and causing his dick to twitch in reaction. “I think you realize by now that you can’t hide from what you want anymore, especially not through that excuse.”

He was right, and for all his misgivings, Shuri couldn’t deny his weakness for Tynare. Instead, he struggled to find a reply, anything that would wipe the arrogant smirk off Tynare’s face. He settled for the worst possible thing to say to a lover. “So now will you tell me the truth? I did what you wanted.”

Much to his surprise, Tynare burst into laughter. He pulled away, but he didn’t seem in the least bit offended by Shuri’s attempt to make this into less than it had been. “I think not,” he replied. “The deal was for a night in my bed. As you can obviously notice, it’s not nighttime yet, and we’re not in my bedchambers.”

As Tynare quickly wiped himself down and pulled on his clothes, Shuri sat there, gaping. His orgasm must have killed his ability to find another reply, one that would actually work. Tynare moved with striking rapidity, and before Shuri could even wrap his head around these recent developments, the prince was already leaving. “I’ll see you at lunch, Prince Shuri,” he threw over his shoulder.

Shuri wanted to call out to Tynare, to tell him to wait. He didn’t. Instead, he remained in the gardens, slowly mimicking Tynare and getting cleaned up.

If pressed, he would admit Tynare had won this round, and most of the rounds up to this point. Shuri was done playing. He needed to start thinking

with his brain and not his cock. Hopefully, this little tryst would mean that he'd fucked Tynare out of his system, and he could go back to what he'd come here for. After all, no matter what Tynare thought he had achieved, their relationship had not changed, not because of a simple fuck.

He didn't want to think about the fact that he'd betrayed Ivy with this moment of weakness. No, he'd find out what Tynare had truly been hiding, and once he did that, he could return to the Empire and to the man he loved. Tynare wouldn't stand in his way. Nothing would.

As that thought registered in his consciousness, something inside Shuri reared up and rebelled. A memory returned to him, from a few minutes ago. Shuri groaned in dismay. He'd delved into Tynare's consciousness with the tentative goal of claiming Tynare. He'd called Tynare *sharani*. My beautiful one.

Shit.

## Chapter Seven

### Confusion

LUNCH THAT day was a tense affair, at least for Shuri. Katara kept giving him strange looks, as if she knew exactly what he'd been up to earlier. Tynare focused on his food and acted like nothing had happened between him and Shuri, which should have made things better, but didn't. Meanwhile, Etera stood at the foot of the table, but even the strength of her glare couldn't keep Shuri from remembering the episode in the garden.

The following conversation on their potential alliance continued on the same frustrating note. Shuri focused on acknowledging his duty and did his best to contribute, but whenever Tynare spoke, Shuri's gaze unavoidably went to the Aranken prince. Whenever this happened, his stupid cock twitched in interest, and Shuri forced himself to remember now was not the time to lust for a man who could be his enemy.

Like at lunch, Tynare remained completely focused. His gaze never faltered, always fixed on Shuri's face, and Shuri had moments during which he wondered what the fathomless depths of Tynare's eyes truly hid.

The dilemma eventually urged him to take lead of the conversation. "Let us be honest here," he said. "I've seen good things since I've come to A'rankin. I'm truly fascinated by the bond you have with the elements. But I've also seen bad things, and we need more of an incentive if we are to disregard that."

Katara nodded. "The Empire has been at peace for a long time, since we took Anderra. You're asking us to participate in a battle that is essentially not our own. Leaving aside the fact that the decision is ultimately my son's, as things stand, I can't even suggest it to him."

"That's understandable," Tynare replied. "From a strictly political perspective, ignoring the existing bond between our nations, it might not

seem a very advantageous approach. But things aren't always what they seem."

Shuri wondered whether Tynare referred just to A'rankin or also to himself and more private issues. Trying not to dwell on the thought, he answered, "That might be the case, but we can't go on such vague reassurances."

Tynare narrowed his eyes at him. "I did not mean to be vague. The fact of the matter is that A'rankin has endured without the Empire's assistance for the past two thousand years. That alone is a testament of our strength and wisdom. We believe that we have a lot to offer to the Empire, and in the long run, we could become valuable allies in terms of trade and research."

"Our efforts have actually weakened Shyrn a great deal," the king offered. "Right now, I believe that we could strike at them with high chances of success, but the Empire's military assistance could support us and prevent loss of life."

"I see," Katara mused. "If that is the case, I'd like more details on what you can offer us. Like Shuri said, Aranken magic is fascinating, but we aren't sure yet if it can help us with our own research."

"I'll be happy to assist you with that," Tynare offered.

The meeting ended on that somewhat more promising note. As the king got up, he said, "I'm sure we'll be able to reach an agreement that suits both our peoples."

Shuri replied something polite and noncommittal, all the while staring at Tynare. Tynare stared back, and the weight of what had happened in the gardens lingered heavily between them. Shuri was the first to look away, but as they exited the room they'd used for the meeting, he hoped he'd hidden his erratic emotions well enough.

Unfortunately, Katara read him far too well for his comfort. When they were out of earshot of any Aranken, she released a heavy sigh. "Get a grip," she told him. "You look like you're going to explode."

Shuri couldn't exactly explain his predicament to her, so he just glared. "Stay out of my affairs, Katara. I don't need your advice."

"I would happily not get involved in your life if it didn't affect our mission so much," she snapped back. "Look. I haven't managed to find anything in the library just yet, and I can't imagine it will be easy. We'll

return to the Empire. You need to talk to Ivy. It might give you some perspective.”

This time, Shuri didn’t refuse. Even if he tried to do what seemed best for the Empire, his resolve faltered whenever he was with Tynare. That didn’t bode well for any of them, so maybe he did need a little reminder, something to snap things back into place.

They left the palace and headed toward the barracks of the Fire Starters. Fegala waited in front of the building, licking her chops as if she’d just had a very delicious meal. Judging by the wide berth the Aranken soldiers gave her, one would have thought she’d just eaten one of them. It seemed more likely that she just enjoyed making them uncomfortable.

Katara walked up to her nightwolf and petted the creature’s large head. Fegala nodded in that strangely manlike way nightwolves often displayed. Katara mounted her and wordlessly gestured for Shuri to follow.

In the middle of Aranken territory, it wasn’t easy to find a place to create a rift. It needed to be empty of any furniture or other items, and especially devoid of people. However, Fegala seemed to know exactly where to go, and Shuri surmised Katara must have sent her on a scouting mission. They found a remote corner of the garden, around the place where it met with the back of the stables. The space was clear enough so as not to warrant too much scrutiny, and if any Aranken guards noticed them go here, they didn’t pay it much heed.

Katara slashed her hand through the air, and the rift manifested in front of them, sucking in the matter in its immediate proximity. The grass and ground would probably bear the traces of the rift once it vanished, but Shuri couldn’t worry about that now.

Since the rift had been created by Katara, Shuri reached for the A’Mora’s arm and gripped it. He didn’t much like rifts to begin with—his experiences with them hadn’t been positive in the slightest—and he liked Katara even less, but it couldn’t be helped.

They stepped together into the dimensional portal, and Shuri was immediately assaulted by the onslaught of chaotic energies. After experiencing the welcoming embrace of the elements, being in the rift felt so strange. The distance between A’rankin and the Empire also made it a little painful, but even if he didn’t have Kris’s experience with such travel, Shuri weathered it well.

He emerged safely on the other side, in the familiar rift room in the Nikaret imperial residence. No sooner had the portal closed than Ivy and Kris burst through the door.

“Thank Reysen,” Ivy gasped out. “I was so worried.”

“We weren’t gone that long,” Shuri tried to protest. “We—”

Before he could even finish the phrase, Ivy embraced him, his warm slender arms wrapping around Shuri in a strikingly tight hold. Shuri had grown used to Ivy’s effusive nature—it was one of the things he most liked about the young Andari—and so, he hugged Ivy back. Emotion swelled inside him, and for a few moments, it truly seemed like nothing had changed. The need to protect Ivy had not disappeared. In fact, after seeing the chaotic state of A’rankin, it had become even more powerful. And yet, in spite of that urgency, even if Ivy’s body felt so warm and comforting against him, Shuri let go. An image flashed through his mind, that of Tynare in the garden during their forbidden tryst, so trusting, so open. Creator, Shuri was so confused.

Ivy allowed him to move away, but if anything, he looked even more worried. “What is it? What’s happened? I know something isn’t right. I can feel it. But some sort of strange force kept me from using my divination.”

To a certain extent, Shuri felt relieved Ivy hadn’t been able to track his consciousness, although he truly shouldn’t have been. Then he hated that first feeling—he shouldn’t have to experience any sort of guilt over sleeping with Tynare. Or should he? After all, he’d gone to A’rankin to investigate the man.

When Shuri didn’t immediately answer, Ivy grabbed his hand and pulled him aside. “Shuri, are you all right? Please, talk to me.”

“It’s complicated,” Shuri finally said. “I’m not sure where to start.”

“The beginning would be nice,” Kris offered from behind Ivy.

Kris’s presence frustrated Shuri. He understood why his half brother hovered, since the relationship between Ivy and Shuri was ambiguous to say the least. Their friendship, no matter how strong, remained shadowed by the knowledge that Shuri’s feelings for Ivy went beyond platonic affection. But even if he intellectually understood, it didn’t make him comfortable with his sibling, and it certainly didn’t encourage him to reveal any personal matters.

In the end, Katara took the choice out of his hands. “It’s that man, Prince Tynare. He’s playing all these games, and it’s getting to Shuri, in an... unfortunately intimate way.”

Ivy’s eyes widened, and he made a noise that, under different circumstances, might have even aroused Shuri. Kris’s nostrils flared, and he fixed Shuri with angry eyes. “Wait. You’re consorting with the enemy? I trusted you.”

Anger swelled inside Shuri, hot and bright. “No, you didn’t. You haven’t trusted me in a long time, not that I blame you. But we don’t know whether Tynare is truly the guilty party behind the attack.”

“Can you even hear yourself?” Kris’s voice had almost become a growl. “I thought your top priority was to protect the Empire.”

Actually, Shuri’s priority had been to make sure Ivy was never at risk again. However, unlike Katara, Kris always avoided addressing that, as if pointing out Shuri’s dedication toward Ivy would make Shuri and Ivy closer. For once, Shuri appreciated it.

“I still intend to go through with our plans,” he snapped back. “We just don’t know for sure what’s warranted and what isn’t.”

“Sleeping with him definitely isn’t,” Katara pointed out. “You know I’m right. You yourself realize it’s a horrible idea.”

Before the argument could escalate any further, Ivy intervened. “Stop,” he said. “Please stop. I’m sure there’s a reason why Shuri feels the way he does. After all, the only thing we have as an argument for this man’s guilt is my divination, and I’ve always said that vision was unreliable at best.”

Kris took a deep breath and, after a brief moment of silence, nodded. “Why don’t we sit down and talk things over with more calm? I’m sure there’s more to it than Mother said.”

Shuri would have loved to take that as a reprimand toward the A’Mora, but he knew better. Not that it mattered. To a certain extent, she had been right, but she’d oversimplified the issue because she didn’t know Tynare like he did.

Kris summoned another rift, one that led them to his warded quarters. Once there, Shuri started to explain. “A’rankin is in the middle of a war with the neighboring land of Shyrn. The reason for their earnest messages seems to be a need for allies in this war. We haven’t gotten the chance to



fully assess the danger Shyrn represents to the Empire, but we did run into a sea serpent that originated from there, and it seemed quite... fierce.”

Kris hummed thoughtfully. “And what’s Tynare’s stance in all of this? How is it even connected to Ivy and to us? Why would they want to harm us?”

“That’s one of the main issues we haven’t been able to figure out,” Katara offered. “Tynare definitely knows more than he’s saying, but that doesn’t mean anything.”

The A’Mora gave Kris and Ivy what little information they’d managed to gather. Even as he listened, Ivy kept stealing concerned looks at Shuri. Finally, once Katara finished with her report, he asked, “What do you think, Shuri? You seem to know this man better than any of us.”

“I don’t know what to think,” Shuri admitted. “On one hand, he strikes me as a dedicated leader. However, I can’t deny that he vaporized a man in front of our very eyes. He’s said a handful of things that lead me to think he does know something about the issue with Ivy, but nothing actually conclusive. And then, there’s his twin, who actually told me not to trust Tynare.”

“That’s not very encouraging, is it?” Kris asked. “I didn’t even know he had a twin. But there’s one thing that seems certain. We still need to investigate A’rankin. Do you think you can keep an objective mind on this, Shuri?”

Shuri wanted to ask his half brother if he’d ever been able to remain objective about Ivy, but just the idea that he was comparing the two situations had him reeling. He wished he could have provided any reassurances, but the words simply refused to come. Seeing Ivy again puzzled him more than it helped as he felt more confused than ever about his own emotions.

The silence would have likely stretched into awkwardness, but Ivy answered in Shuri’s stead. “I’m sure Shuri will do what is best, for him and for all of us. If you are drawn to this man, Shuri, he must be pretty special. Follow your heart. It won’t lead you astray.”

As he took in those words, Shuri realized something that hadn’t occurred to him before. Ivy had been the only man to ever show him kindness. Even his uncle’s affection for him had been clouded by a very obvious fact that had followed Shuri all throughout his life. His uncle cared for him due to his enduring devotion toward his dead wife, but he held

some resentment toward Shuri. Was this why Shuri had been so taken with Ivy from the beginning? How did he even feel about Ivy? Was it truly love or protectiveness born out of gratitude, affection, and admiration? What did it say about him that a few days spent at Tynare's side already had him questioning something he'd deemed so certain?

Clearing his throat, Shuri focused on coming up with a reply for the here and now. He ended up pulling Ivy close and hugging him tightly. "Thank you. That helps more than you know."

TYNARE HAD been busying himself with reviewing the new skills of the trainee Fire Starters when he felt it, the knowledge niggling at the back of his consciousness. Shuri had left A'rankin. He'd traveled back to the Empire to see the future Moris.

Tynare gritted his teeth as anger coursed through him. He couldn't believe the damn Nikari had run off to that whore of an Andari mere hours after they'd coupled. Damn it. He shouldn't even be dwelling on it. He'd never wanted more than sex. Emotions complicated things anyway, and Tynare's reason to approach Shuri had nothing to do with affection. Or did it? Elements, he didn't even know anymore.

He grimaced, and fire leapt from his fingertips, striking one of the recruits Tynare had been training. Although he hadn't meant the spell to be so powerful, Tynare still scowled at the Fire Starter when the man failed to block it adequately and fell back under the force of the blow. "If you can't defend yourself against another Fire Starter, what hope do you have against other elemental mages or creatures from Shyrn?"

The man picked himself up and stared at the ground, his shoulders slumping at the reprimand. "Yes, Your Highness. I understand."

With a huff, Tynare waved for one of his lieutenants to take over the training. He knew better than to try to continue it when he was in such an ill mood. The Fire Starters saluted as he headed toward the exit, and he acknowledged their show of respect with a nod.

This was what mattered, his people, his country. Tynare might not be completely selfless when it came to protecting his land, but he understood the necessity. What did he even care about Shuri? He should have gone

along with the original plan, gone through with what A'rankin needed, not gotten intimately involved with a man who was essentially his target.

The thought made every inch of him scream in protest, and he stumbled, suddenly weak in the knees. Cursing, Tynare focused on shutting down his stupid heart, but he knew by now that it didn't work that way. He managed to get to his room before he slid down to the ground, his legs no longer supporting him. Elements, what in the world was he going to do?

WHEN SHURI and Katara returned to A'rankin, a good couple of hours had passed since their departure. They'd ended up spending more time in the Empire than expected, as Katara had wanted to catch up with her son, even if they'd only been apart for a week. Shuri had taken advantage of the opportunity to chat a little with Ivy and then had traveled to his home to see his uncle. He still didn't know how to handle his feelings for Tynare and had no idea what to make of Nari, but he'd decided he couldn't disregard his instinct when it came to the Aranken prince.

They headed back toward the palace in silence, but it didn't really feel awkward, at least, not like before. Shuri had a lot to think about, and even if he resented Katara, his own concerns wouldn't let him focus on her. They went their separate ways in the courtyard, when Katara decided to take her nightwolf to the Fire Starter barracks. "Be careful, Shuri," she said in place of a good-bye. "I don't trust him."

"I know you don't," Shuri replied, "and I can't give you any guarantees either. But I have a feeling there are no simple answers when it comes to A'rankin."

Katara couldn't argue with that, and without another word, she departed. Suddenly, Shuri found that he wanted nothing more than to see Tynare again. In a way, the Creator fulfilled his wish, because the moment he entered the palace, a servant greeted him at the entrance. Bowing lowly, he offered Shuri an envelope. Shuri recognized the seal on it as belonging to the royal Aranken house. Officially intrigued, he dismissed the servant with a wave and opened the mysterious envelope.

The note was written in an elegant, cursive script that Shuri immediately identified as Tynare's. However, its contents puzzled Shuri to no end.

*To His Imperial Highness, Prince Shuriden Fezenda,  
I would very much appreciate it if you could join me in  
the interior garden adjoining the royal wing of the palace, at  
your leisure. I'm sure our earlier meeting left you with  
numerous questions, and I will admit that I myself would like  
to see you again. I will be waiting for you this evening.*

*Yours,  
Nari*

For all the formality of the words in the message, the final address held a familiarity that made Shuri warm inside. It also shocked him and made him wonder what this letter could mean. How had Nari even written it? Had he asked his brother or someone else to do it? In the Empire, there were ways blind people could use to communicate through handwriting, but the letters never looked like this, so smooth and perfect.

Nevertheless, Shuri couldn't refuse the young prince. Nari might not be his lover, but in Shuri's mind, the two Aranken were unavoidably interconnected. It could have been a faulty logic—twins were by no means the same person—but that didn't stop Shuri from tracking down the location of this interior garden.

He found his destination with more difficulty than he'd have liked, largely because he didn't want to stop any servant and ask for assistance. When he stepped into the garden, though, he spotted Nari at once. Once more, he was lying down, but this time, he was directly on the grass instead of on a settee.

Nari lifted his head, obviously sensing him in spite of Shuri's natural stealthiness. "Prince Shuriden," he said. "You came. Please approach."

Shuri followed Nari's urging and plopped down on the ground next to the Aranken. "Of course I came," he replied. "You sound surprised."

"Maybe I am, just a little," Nari admitted with a self-deprecating laugh. "You'll forgive me for selfishly summoning you here? I must confess I had no real reason for doing so, other than my own desire for your company."

"You flatter me," Shuri replied, the words doing very little to convey the strange emotions in his heart. A crimson red lock of hair curled around

Nari's cheek, and for some reason, Shuri couldn't help but reach for it and tuck it behind Nari's ear.

A small smile fled across the Aranken's full lips. "Can I ask you something, Prince Shuriden?"

"Of course," Shuri replied automatically. "Whatever you like."

Nari laughed, the sound reminding Shuri of the whisper of a gentle river. "You should be more careful with what you offer. I could ask you to reveal state secrets."

Shuri smiled back, even if Nari couldn't see him. "I doubt you would do that."

"No, I wouldn't," Nari replied, "but it's still rather private. You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

"Oh, that sounds scary," Shuri teased. "I won't know until you ask."

"Quite." Nari took a deep breath, as if bracing himself for something. "Why do you love Lord Erethe?"

Shuri hadn't expected that, not in the slightest. In fact, the inquiry took him aback so much that for a few moments, he didn't answer. Nari waited patiently, without prodding, but his fingers fisted the blades of grass. The plants seemed to sense Nari's anxiety, because they extended up his arms, as if wanting to embrace him, to protect him.

Shuri could definitely understand the inclination, and he couldn't help but see the irony in his little predicament. He'd gone back to the Empire to talk to Ivy about the Aranken princes, and now, Nari asked him about Ivy.

"You know I went to see him, don't you?" he asked.

Nari's face flamed, but he nodded. "I wasn't spying on you or anything. I just... I feel these things. I can't always control it."

"It's all right," Shuri replied. "It doesn't bother me." Much to his surprise, he found that it truly didn't. "What can I say? Ivy is very special to me. He's very brave, but also kind and sweet, always eager to learn and to help. At first, I thought he was just a beautiful Andari whom my brother had taken as a toy, but he quickly proved us all wrong. He extended his hand toward me even if I didn't treat him very well." It was hard to explain, since he'd had a few revelations about his feelings for Ivy today. "I wish you could meet him," he finished. "I think you'd be great friends."

"He sounds like an amazing person," Nari mused, his voice soft, almost inaudible, "but I'm not sure if I could befriend him. I don't think I'm

that kindhearted.”

“Prince Nari, I admit I don’t know you or your brother very well,” Shuri said, “but I can tell you this. I believe that you’re amazing in your own individual ways. Being here, with you, with him has been a life-changing experience.”

“But you’re still only here because of your concern for Lord Erethe,” Nari answered. “I know that. It’s such a confusing situation for all of us, isn’t it?”

Sadness emanated from Nari, so much so that even the flowers around him seemed affected by it, drooping sadly as if after a drought. Shuri never wanted to see Nari sad, but what could he say that would be absolutely truthful? The ambiguity of their position ensured most words of comfort would be empty of meaning.

Instead of dwelling on a problem he couldn’t solve, Shuri decided to satisfy his own curiosity. “Can I ask you a question of my own now? A somewhat private one.”

Nari perked up in obvious surprise, as if he hadn’t expected Shuri to show any interest in him. The grass swayed around him in a fascinating display. “Of course,” Nari answered.

“The message.... Did you write it or did Tynare?”

It wasn’t nearly as intimate as what Nari had asked, but it still anchored their conversation. “I did,” Nari replied. “You’re curious as to how, given my blindness. Well, it’s quite easy. I’ll show you.”

Nari retrieved a blank parchment from his coat and smoothed it out on his lap. He took a deep breath, and his fingers twitched above the paper. Light filtered from him into the surface of the parchment, and under Shuri’s very eyes, words started to manifest, in the exact script of the message Shuri had received. The letters didn’t spell out anything significant, but the sight still filled Shuri with awe.

“That’s amazing,” he said. “Is it a Nurturer skill?”

“Yes, although not all Nurturers can do it,” Nari replied. “Other elemental mages have tried, but most of the time, it ends up with the paper soggy or bursting into flames.”

“It’s beautiful. I love being Nikari. It’s my legacy, one I’m proud of. But being here, in A’rankin, makes me wish I could have the union with the elements that you do.”

He'd felt that connection when he'd passed through the Wards and when he'd made love to Tynare. It was so precious, but the Nikari had lost it in their attempt to weed out the weakness in their physical bodies. Shuri couldn't say it had been a bad choice, but he wished he could feel that deep bond too. Or maybe it was the bond with Tynare that he craved. He couldn't tell anymore.

"I think you're already experiencing it," Nari answered. "Ignis does not deny anyone, and your affinity to fire already makes you his most beloved child. You know, you are quite unique. Aranken cannot have affinity to both fire and water, but you do. You have a Storm Caller legacy from your Fezenda line, and your own fire magic. I can feel them, your elements, when I touch you."

As if to point out this latter explanation, Nari reached for Shuri's hand. A current of familiarity and lust passed through Shuri as they made contact. Those fingers.... They felt just like the ones that had gripped Shuri's cock a few hours ago. It was too easy to remember them piercing Tynare's body or clinging to him as he thrust into Tynare's welcoming channel.

He tried to tell himself he was imagining it, that the resemblance meant nothing. But when Nari's hold on his palm tightened, he felt the elements dance around him, trying to tell him something. What was it? Creator, he tried to reach for it, for that hidden knowledge, but he couldn't quite identify it. The clash of the power inside him sent him reeling, and he was forced to release Nari's palm.

As Shuri shot to his feet, Nari gasped. "I... I'm sorry. I don't know what happened."

"It wasn't your fault," Shuri answered, chastising himself for allowing the memories to get to him. His stupid body just wouldn't listen and kept insisting Nari was in the perfect position to take Shuri's cock in his mouth. Creator, what kind of lustful beast had he become? Nari lay on the grass because of his injury. It felt unforgivable that Shuri would turn it into something erotic, however instinctual the thought had been.

He couldn't stay here. That much seemed clear. "I think I need to go," he told Nari, unable to contain his regret. Nari's shoulders slumped, and Shuri had never loathed his own libido more. Kneeling next to the young Aranken, he threaded his fingers through Nari's and kissed his cheek. The

power didn't strike him again, although the memories still bubbled at the back of Shuri's mind. "We'll speak later," he promised. "Thank you."

"You have nothing to thank me for," Nari replied softly. "On the contrary, I'm grateful that you came to see me. And before I forget, take this with you."

As he spoke, Nari offered Shuri the paper he'd written on earlier. Shuri took it without looking at it, still enthralled by Nari's expression. How could two men be so different yet so alike? How could Shuri be drawn to both of them?

Shaking himself, Shuri pocketed the paper and got up once more. "Would you like me to take you to your quarters?"

Nari shook his head and lay back down. "I'll stay here for a while longer. It's comforting."

What could Shuri do? Lingering by Nari's side when his emotions were all over the place simply made things more difficult. With a murmured good-bye, he left the interior garden.

It was only when he'd reached his quarters that he started to wonder why Nari had told him to take the paper. He retrieved it from his pocket and stared at it, unable to believe his eyes. This time, the cursive letters held a clear message, very different from the first one.

*Be careful. He's always watching.*



## Chapter Eight

### Emotions

“SO LET me get this straight. This wine you speak of is so spicy it can knock a non-Nikari out?”

Shuri nodded, chuckling at the awe in Nari’s voice. “Yes. *Reada* wine can do that and more. It’s actually forbidden even for Nikari who aren’t of age. It’s a sign of becoming an adult when you drink it for the first time.”

“How interesting,” Nari mused. “We don’t have any custom like that.”

The wind toyed with Nari’s flame-red hair, and he huffed, tucking a few stray locks behind his delicate ears. The sight distracted Shuri for a few moments, but he shook himself and answered. “I believe it hails from the times of the Ndara. In some ways, we’re more alike to the Andari than to Aranken.”

Even as he spoke, Shuri wondered if that was truly the case. Andari didn’t have elemental magic—their abilities were more subtle, with entirely different roots. Their customs might be similar to Nikari ones in some respects, but in others, they couldn’t be more different from each other.

The thought made Shuri remember Ivy, and that memory automatically connected to the one of Tynare. Not that either of the two men were ever far from his mind.

Since the day they’d had sex, Tynare had been giving Shuri the cold shoulder. He didn’t avoid Shuri, but kept their relationship platonic, no longer showing any interest in Shuri beyond a strictly diplomatic one. At times, he would smile at Shuri in that enigmatic way that reminded him of how Tynare’s lips looked when wrapped around Shuri’s cock. But then, that moment passed, and Tynare put that wall between them again. It drove Shuri crazy, in more than one way.

On the other hand, he'd grown pretty close to Nari and these days, they tended to spend a lot of time together. For some reason, Nari's smiles always soothed him. To be fair, being in the presence of Tynare's twin also confused him, but for the most part, he managed to hide his feelings. He hoped.

Unfortunately, Nari read Shuri far too well for his comfort. "What is it?" he asked, his voice thick with concern. "You've grown thoughtful."

What could Shuri say? How could he reveal his predicament when the man in front of him was at the very core of his problem? How could he explain that Nari exerted a deep emotional pull on him, but Tynare drove him crazy with lust?

The twins were like two sides of a coin, so different, yet so alike. Shuri ached to protect Nari, to hold him, to see him smile, to show him the world. If their situation hadn't been so ambiguous, if the two of them had lived in the Empire with no political entanglements to drag them down, Shuri would have already said something. Creator, he might have tackled potential disaster, if not for the fact that he wanted Tynare too.

"I have a lot to think about," he told Nari. "Being in A'rankin has become very confusing for me."

Nari opened his eyes, and those peculiar blind orbs fixed on him. They were just as blue as Tynare's and yet different, truly the windows of the soul. Shuri had the strange feeling that Nari could see him, and for all he knew that might be the case. "Is this about Tynare?" Nari asked.

"You could say that," Shuri admitted. "Why did you tell me not to trust him? He's your twin."

"I'm the one who knows him best," Nari replied quietly. "There are... circumstances in this whole situation, and when he has to choose, he will never follow his heart, not like he should."

Shuri almost didn't want to know, but he had to. It was why he'd come here in the first place, and this might be his chance to get some real answers. "Was he the one to attack Ivy?"

Nari looked away, as if scanning the expanse of the beautiful gardens. Blades of grass twined around his fingers as he spoke. "Would you believe me if I said no?"

"I would believe you," Shuri answered. "Is that what you're saying? That he didn't do it?"

Nari didn't reply, which didn't fill Shuri with any confidence. Under Nari's fingertips, the grass shivered, an echo of Nari's emotions. What did that mean? What did Nari know about Tynare's involvement in the entire matter?

"It's complicated," Nari finally said. "I just... I don't know how to explain." Nari's body shook with fine tremors. "I'm scared."

Shuri pulled Nari into his arms, hating that he needed to put the young Aranken into such a position. "It's all right. You don't have to tell me anything you're not comfortable with."

Nari buried his face in Shuri's shoulder, and Shuri felt hot tears fall, wetting the material of his shirt. "I wish I could be brave, but I'm really not. I'm so useless."

"You're not useless," Shuri replied, threading his fingers through Nari's luxurious red hair. "Don't ever say that. If not for you, I'd have probably lost my mind by now."

Nari wrapped his arms around Shuri, squeezing him so tightly it almost hurt. "I wish I could help you, Shuri, but I can't even help myself. It's... it's too much. I can't face him again."

Whenever Nari became shaken like this, he always tended to mention the mysterious "he" whose identity Shuri hadn't been able to figure out. It seemed clear to Shuri that someone else held stakes in the attack on Ivy. At times, he wondered whether they'd interpreted the reasons for it correctly or if it had been meant to serve an entirely different purpose.

For the moment, those questions would have to wait. Nari's behavior suggested some knowledge on the topic, but it also distressed him so much that Shuri's heart ached. He couldn't forget about his duty, about Ivy and his country, but somewhere along the line, Nari had become important to him as well. He petted Nari's hair as gently as possible, trying to soothe the young Aranken. "Whoever it is that you fear, he can't hurt you while I'm around," Shuri promised.

Nari's tremors finally began to die down. He released Shuri from his death grip and moved away, offering Shuri a tremulous smile. "I want to be strong for you, Shuri. I'm tired of living in fear."

The words held an undertone of decisiveness that reminded Shuri of Tynare. It was disconcerting to say the least, as the twins were fundamentally different when it came to temperament. Pushing away the

thought, Shuri cupped Nari's cheek. "When I was a boy, my father told me something very important. He said 'Shuri, it's all right to be afraid. True strength lies in acting despite that fear.' I believe in you, Nari. I believe that you're stronger than whatever plagues you."

Nari fell silent, and Shuri decided they needed a break from the seriousness of their conversation. His own fears haunted his every step, but being here with Nari steadied him. Hearing Nari's laugh always reminded him why he kept going, why he kept searching even when the clues pointed in a single direction.

Shuri got up from the grass and took Nari in his arms. He reached out with his mind toward Nari, making the offer without pushing. It was a delicate balance, because a thick mental wall existed between the two of them. Shuri could have probably broken through it, but he respected Nari, just like Nari respected him.

Nari's fingers sneaked under Shuri's hair, and Shuri suppressed a shiver of his own, reminding himself of the real purpose of this exercise. As their flesh came into contact, Shuri felt that moment when Nari's mind connected with his. He looked around, taking in everything he possibly could, acting as Nari's eyes.

For the longest time, they didn't speak. They didn't have to, because Shuri could practically sense Nari's excitement vibrating through him. It was only when he reached the very edge of the gardens that he finally stopped. He felt exhausted, not so much because of carrying Nari here—as a Nikari, his physique allowed him to complete far more strenuous tasks. No, his fatigue had other causes, mostly the difficulty he always encountered in trying to understand his emotions when it came to Tynare and Nari. The scent of Nari's hair was getting to his head, and he could too easily imagine brushing his lips over those of the younger man.

How would the beautiful Aranken respond? How would he taste? Would he be as wildly passionate as Tynare or shier, more submissive? Creator, why was Shuri even thinking about this? Nari was so innocent, so beautiful and kind that Shuri's heart instinctively reached out to him. But they were just friends, and that would never change. Even if Nari had started to call him Shuri, even if Nari's body felt just like Tynare's in Shuri's arms, the twins were two different people, ironically both forbidden to Shuri.

Still, he wasn't willing to give up the comfort of Nari's presence. "How long have we been here, do you think? Is your would-be guardian likely to chase after us?"

"Possibly." Nari smiled at him, although the expression held a hint of sadness. "To be honest, I'm torn. On one side, I love spending time with you, but on the other...."

Nari didn't finish the phrase, but he didn't have to. Shuri suspected what the young Aranken planned to say. Nari had shown concern for him many times in the past, ranging from that strange, still-unexplained message, to more discreet hints.

Shuri cupped Nari's chin, wishing more than ever that Nari could see him. Usually, he didn't look at Nari when he acted as Nari's eyes because it could be confusing for the young Aranken. Now, he did so on purpose. "Can you see it?" he asked. "Can you see yourself through my eyes? That's why I can't go."

Nari's lower lip trembled, but he didn't try to pull away. "Shuri, I don't deserve this, any of it. Why would you show me any affection? You don't even know me."

Nari wasn't telling him anything Shuri hadn't told himself. Both twins were impossibly mysterious, always dodging his questions. If Shuri had listened to his rational side, he'd already be back in the Empire, having explained to Kris the most logical conclusion of this entire debacle.

But neither logic nor political considerations guided Shuri to be here, to hold Nari and want so much more than peace between their nations. "Do you allow just anyone to be your eyes?" he asked.

For a few moments, Nari hesitated, as if afraid of the answer. At last, he shook his head. "You know I don't."

"There you go. You have your answer."

"But, Tynare...." Nari started to protest. "He... I...."

Shuri could already imagine what the young Aranken would say, and that was one thing he couldn't counter. "I can't deny I care about your brother too. But... it's not like with you."

That didn't sound quite right, and Nari must have sensed it too because he freed himself from Shuri's grip. "Shuri, I—"

Before he could finish the phrase, Shuri's prediction came true and Etera manifested within view. "Your Highness, you can't be here. We've

spoken of this before. It's not safe."

Nari turned toward her, facing the Aranken woman without faltering. "I'm not a child. Please stop treating me like I am."

Nari's voice was soft, but some of the hesitant shyness he usually displayed in any interaction had disappeared. Etera took a step back, obviously shocked. "Your Highness...."

Their conversation had obviously affected Nari, and Shuri didn't want that. His confused emotions could easily create a rift between Nari and Tynare.

"It's all right," he whispered soothingly. "I'm sure she didn't mean it that way."

Nari shook his head. "She did, but.... It doesn't matter. Perhaps she's right."

Shuri wished he had an answer ready for that, but his affection for Nari kept him from pushing. It made sense that Nari would want to support his brother. In the end, Nari and Tynare didn't have any reason to trust him either, and his lack of focus and confusion only hurt them all in the long run.

Still, he couldn't let Nari berate himself for something that wasn't his fault, nor could he allow yet another problem to undermine Nari's confidence. "You're stronger than you think. Don't let anyone tell you different."

The words earned him a ghost of a smile from Nari and a tight look from Etera. "I'll remember that," Nari said.

Seeing Nari's lips twist in that sweet expression almost made Shuri utter that word, the very same one he'd berated himself for using when it came to Tynare. That just contributed to his confusion and the turmoil of emotions inside him.

In the end, it was Nari who put an end to the conversation. He nodded at Etera, and the Destroyer woman rushed into action. She picked Nari up and without another word, walked away. Shuri watched them go, all the while wondering how many more mistakes he'd have to make before he could truly find a path that wouldn't tear them all apart.

TYNARE STALKED out of his quarters, the fire of his anger flaring at his fingertips. As he walked, servants shied away from him, obviously noticing his dire mood. Seeing their reaction, Tynare stopped and took a few deep breaths. Soothing the blaze inside him took effort, but he fell back on his training and tamed his emotions. He couldn't explode at his people every time Shuri said or did something. Other Fire Starters counted on him to be an example, and he hadn't done a very good job since Shuri's arrival.

He couldn't believe Shuri had displayed such dismissiveness toward him. Not only did he have to compete against the Moris, but also against his own... his own.... Against Nari.

Tynare had told himself that he would not approach Shuri again in a personal capacity, but he simply couldn't help himself. He did, however, manage to hide his anxiety underneath his carefully cultivated façade. When he thought he could talk to Shuri—or anyone else for that matter—without making a fool of himself and disappointing everyone who counted on him, he followed his instincts and tracked Shuri down.

He found Shuri talking to Katara on the terrace. When they saw him coming, they ceased their conversation. Tynare surmised the two of them might have been discussing him, or elements knew what ploy Katara had planned. She smiled pleasantly as he approached, but he could see past that mask and detect the viper hiding underneath.

Still, he could play the game as well as Katara could, so he smiled back. "Greetings. I apologize for not being able to see you today. I trust my absence didn't inconvenience you too much."

Since they had tentatively agreed on exploring a possible alliance, Tynare had continued to act as a guide for the Nikari. It made things all the more difficult when it came to Shuri, although paradoxically, it also helped him be more clearheaded. Most of the time at least. There were certain moments, when he couldn't quite gather his wits, and the results popped up with alarming regularity.

"We understand that you have duties elsewhere," Katara replied. "Besides, the palace is in itself a fascinating place."

Tynare had no doubt Katara put their free time to good use. She was nothing if not resourceful. A part of him wanted to ask if she'd found what she was looking for in the library, but he knew better than to taunt her, just like he knew the answer to that question.

Of course, he couldn't approach the issue he wanted to discuss with Shuri while in Katara's presence, and Katara didn't seem inclined to give him the opening he needed. Therefore, Tynare decided to make the offer she seemed to expect.

"My duties aren't over," he said, "but I'd love to have you accompany me."

The two Nikari agreed, and together, the three of them made their way to the stables. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to leave your nightwolf behind, Your Majesty," Tynare told Katara.

The A'Mora narrowed her eyes at him. "Is she an inconvenience?"

"Today, she might be. You have my apologies. I understand your affection toward her, but it's a necessity."

Katara nodded jerkily, although she obviously didn't like it. The three of them selected horses from the palace stables and then rode out toward the city.

Tynare loved Kar'neia. He always had, perhaps because it resonated with every aspect of his magic. He'd never explained that to Shuri and probably never would, but in a way, he liked sharing the sights of the city with the other man. He wished he could come up with a method that would help him shake off Katara, but that would have to wait.

He hadn't lied when he'd said he had duties in the city. It wasn't all that urgent, but it needed to be done nonetheless, and Tynare hated that he'd dropped it in favor of chasing after Shuri like a child with a toy taken away.

Still, this could be a good thing, since it might give the Nikari insight into A'rankin that would influence their way of thinking. No matter what course of action Tynare decided to take, that would be useful.

"Where are we going?" Katara inquired as they bypassed the gates and progressed onto the winding streets of the city.

"As you know, we Aranken believe the elements are everywhere," Tynare explained. "However, we do have temples dedicated to our deities. The priests act in our stead as watchmen of the community. They assist Aranken as we discover their powers. Gaia's priests also contribute to our medical system."

Katara nodded, actually managing to look interested. Shuri's bronze-rimmed gaze fixed on him, filled with as many questions as always. "But I take it you still have duties within this system," he guessed.



“In a way, yes,” Tynare answered. Even that part of his life had changed after the fateful day of his injury. “Today, I need to go to the temple of Sol. The head priest there requested my advice.”

He didn’t elaborate on the topic of the issue that demanded his presence, and the two Nikari didn’t ask. Perhaps they were too busy taking in the sights of the city. Tynare explained more things than he’d have liked, just because he wanted to have Shuri love A’rankin as much as he did.

Soon they reached their destination, the temple of the patron of Fire Starters, Sol. Shuri took in the tall building with obvious interest. “Are all temples like this?”

Tynare chuckled, knowing what Shuri was referring to. While regular homes incorporated the symbolism of elements in a more practical manner, the temples went beyond that. Sol’s temple itself boasted a circular shape, with smaller triangular buildings coming toward it from every direction, mimicking the sun. Two other structures stood behind it, the individual temples of Aether and of Ignis. The fiery red of the brickwork on Ignis’s temple entwined with Aether’s white, and for some reason, it reminded Tynare of Shuri.

“Do you like it?” Tynare asked the Nikari in question.

Shuri nodded. “Very much.”

“It’s fascinating,” Katara added. “I take it there are temples for Storm Callers as well.”

Tynare felt a pang of reluctant approval at her interest. “Yes, although not in this sector of the city. As you might imagine, Tempesta’s governed area borders that of Sol, so I can take you there later if you want.”

As they dismounted, Gerrol, the head priest, came out to meet them, bowing at Tynare and greeting the two Nikari with a lot of enthusiasm. “I understand Your Highness has an affinity toward fire,” he told Shuri. “Welcome. The elements embrace all of their children, including Nikari.” Turning toward Katara, he added, “Your Majesty, I believe you would feel most at home in Aether’s temple while here. I do know that Tempesta’s priests are eagerly awaiting a visit from you, so in your own time, do make sure you go there as well.”

“We appreciate your generosity,” Katara said. “I will.”

“I’m afraid I must rob you of Prince Tynare’s presence,” Gerrol said, “but feel free to explore.”

“You will forgive me for briefly abandoning you,” Tynare added apologetically. “Hopefully, you won’t deem it too rude.”

“I’m sure we’ll be able to find a way to entertain ourselves,” Katara answered, sounding distracted.

With a nod of acknowledgment, Tynare followed the priest inside Sol’s temple. For a few minutes, neither of them said anything. The silence felt thick with the secrets they kept, but also comforting due to Sol’s presence all around them.

Predictably, the priest guided Tynare to his private quarters. Located in the uppermost ray—as the triangular buildings were called—Gerrol’s rooms boasted all the comforts any Aranken noble would have in his home. But then, that didn’t come as a surprise, given Gerrol’s noble lineage.

As soon as they were behind closed doors, Tynare read the expression on the older Aranken’s face and said, “Let me guess. You’re worried about me.”

“I’m always worried, Prince Tynare. My sister, the elements have her in their embrace, cared for you, and with her gone, I see it as my duty to watch over you in whatever way I can.”

As the now dead queen’s brother, Gerrol often approached Tynare with those exact words. Tynare knew he meant well, and Gerrol’s loyalty had helped him in his quest, but he always replied in the same way.

“And I appreciate that, but I assure you I have the stoutest of guardians already.” He cleared his throat. “In any case, that is not why I came here. Did you find him?”

Gerrol nodded, although his glum expression made Tynare more than a little apprehensive. “He did arrive here and was cooperative at first. Unfortunately, before I could assist him in controlling his power, he began to lose focus again. I helped him out of the city. I shudder to think what would have happened if his presence had been discovered.”

Tynare rubbed his eyes tiredly. “I just know that if more people focused on helping the latents instead of hunting them down, we wouldn’t have this problem to begin with. In any case, I haven’t heard anything from Father. Hopefully, that means this particular latent is safe.”

It had been a very close call for the air latent whom Tynare had miraculously managed to rescue. Hopefully, the man wouldn’t brave the

borders with Shyrn in an attempt to flee A'rankin. That wouldn't bring about good results for anyone.

"I do appreciate you helping me with this," Tynare said.

"You know the priesthood of Sol is by your side, Your Majesty," Gerrol said. "We will support you in whatever you deem best."

Yes, Tynare knew that, and he didn't miss the change in address. The priesthood was one of the forces he'd planned to use to assist him in taking over the throne from his father. But now, the situation had become more complicated. If he didn't go through with the original plan, the threat of Shyrn would remain in place. Claiming the throne while A'rankin remained at war would unbalance the country even more and destroy what little peace and happiness his people had managed to cultivate.

"Things are changing," he told Gerrol. "The visit of the Nikari brings forth new opportunities."

"Do you think they would be willing to help the latents?"

"Perhaps," Tynare offered vaguely. "It's too soon to tell."

As much as he wanted to trust Gerrol, he couldn't explain the full extent of his plans to the older Aranken. Gerrol might have faith in him when it came to leading the country, but those opinions would change if he saw Tynare's less-than-controlled side. Tynare's relationship with Shuri was definitely a topic that needed to remain a secret, as well as the unfortunate imbalance that had been gripping Tynare as of late.

"I should go," Tynare said. "I can't leave our guests alone for too long."

Gerrol tightened his jaw, obviously not happy with Tynare's choice to dismiss his concerns. Tynare couldn't leave things this way. He squeezed the head priest's shoulder in a gesture that spoke of their long-time closeness. "Gerrol, trust me. I know you don't want to fail Mother, and you aren't. You're helping me do what is best for A'rankin, and your support has been invaluable."

"When it comes to the latents, perhaps," Gerrol replied. "But when it comes to you...."

"I'm the luckiest man in the world, Gerrol. I have all elements watching over me. Don't forget that."

"I know," Gerrol said. "I just... I heard some things about.... Well, about Nari."

Tynare narrowly managed not to do or say anything stupid. As the head priest of Sol, Gerrol was among the few who knew the exact details of the relationship between Tynare and Nari, but Tynare had never liked discussing the issue with him. He liked it even less now, after Nari's conversation with Shuri.

"There are reasons for everything," he said, miraculously managing to keep his voice steady. "Nari has talents I don't. You know this."

Gerrol blinked, as if the thought hadn't occurred to him. "Ah, yes, of course. I didn't realize... I apologize. I should have more faith in you."

Tynare smiled at Gerrol, allowing his relief to melt in an approving expression. "There is no need for an apology. But now that you understand, I truly must go."

This time, Gerrol didn't protest. He seemed to have believed Tynare's lie—which was fortunate, since Tynare couldn't have explained the real causes of the issue that concerned Gerrol.

"As for the other matter," Tynare added, "make sure to keep an eye out. If there is any news, please inform me."

"Naturally, Your Highness. I am, as always, your faithful servant."

Gerrol led Tynare out of his quarters. Instead of abandoning the building, though, Tynare parted ways with the priest, instinctively knowing where to go.

Shuri stood in the wide cavernous room that made up the largest part of Sol's temple. Katara was nowhere to be seen—she must have gone to Aether's temple like Gerrol had advised her—so for a few moments, Tynare allowed himself to watch the Nikari, to admire the athletic lines of his body. It was too easy by far to remember the one time they'd had sex, the moment Tynare had realized that he'd begun to discard his previous priorities, all because of his misguided affection toward Shuri.

His knees went weak, and Tynare shook himself, anchoring his consciousness in the reminder of what he wanted to talk to Shuri about. It worked, although it also made his earlier anger return with a vengeance.

When he stepped forward, Shuri turned to face him, not seeming surprised at Tynare's presence. "That was fast."

Tynare had to admire the superiority of Nikari senses. Even if Tynare had thought he hadn't made any noise, Shuri had obviously heard him. Still, that just meant Tynare needed to be even warier of him, more so than he'd

managed thus far. "I merely needed to speak to the head priest," he said. "All Aranken visit the temples from time to time."

Both things were true, albeit unconnected. If Shuri realized Tynare had come here for a different reason, he didn't show it. Instead, he scanned Tynare's face with those deep eyes that had started to gain a bronze sheen.

In the silence of the temple, Tynare felt connected to Shuri by a force stronger than his own doubts. But not even Sol could change what Shuri himself had admitted to. "I hear you and Nari had a very interesting conversation today," he began.

"I thought he might tell you." Shuri arched a brow. "You sound upset."

Tynare shrugged, affecting a nonchalance he didn't feel. "Do I? To be perfectly honest, I don't know what to make of it. I wonder if you just enjoy playing games or if you truly believe the things you say."

"If I'm playing games, I must have had a pretty good teacher," Shuri shot back. "Look, you made it clear after last time that you had no interest in me beyond what already happened. I'm not going to lie and pretend I didn't enjoy it. At this point, that would be absurd. But I will also admit that what I feel for Nari is different."

Tynare would have laughed if he could muster any amusement. "If you only realized how ridiculous that is... I don't even know how to express it."

He didn't know, because explaining it would imply telling Shuri the truth, and for obvious reasons, that wasn't an option.

Given his less-than-kind tone, Tynare expected another scathing answer from Shuri. In a way, he would have preferred it. But Shuri was always very good at taking him by surprise. Instead of getting angry, he sighed. "I didn't come here to fall in love, Prince Tynare. You know that, just as well as I do. This... thing between us.... You've acknowledged in your own way that it's detrimental to what we're trying to do as leaders."

Tynare narrowed his eyes at the Nikari. "And yet, you don't have that problem when it comes to Nari."

"You and Nari are very different," Shuri answered. "You were right in saying I cannot be irresponsible enough to hide from what I feel. Rest assured that I don't have any plans to push my emotions onto your brother. It is as unwise as pursuing our sexual liaison had been."

"So let me get this straight. You want to fuck me, you're in love with Nari, and you know both things put you in a worse position than you

already are.”

Shuri didn’t reply, but perhaps that was for the best. What else could they say to each other at this point? Tynare would be the first to admit he’d been very rash in behaving the way he had. He should have just picked an approach and stuck with it.

But if he’d been able to do that, he wouldn’t have ended up in this position to begin with. Shuri might be struggling with a great deal of confusion, but compared to the turmoil Tynare experienced every day, it was nothing.

Then again, wasn’t Shuri’s battle directly connected to Tynare’s? And wasn’t it all a moot point? Shuri might not have found out the true answers to his questions, but Tynare hadn’t exactly been pretending to be innocent. The fact of the matter was that they never should have been in this situation. Allowing this emotional debacle to get to him meant A’rankin would be in danger.

It would be easy. It would be so easy to do what he’d been meant to. Shuri would never see it coming, and by the time he did, it would be too late. But.... Tynare’s options and priorities were no longer as clear as before. How could he? How could he harm the man who’d come to mean far too much to him?

“Let me ask you something, Shuri. Right now, if you had to choose.... What would you pick? Me and Nari or the Empire?”

Shuri clenched his jaw. “It doesn’t matter. The possibility of that choice doesn’t exist.”

“You’re dodging the question,” Tynare pointed out.

“Perhaps I am,” Shuri admitted. “But again, it’s a moot point, since you’ve already made your choice, and I don’t blame you for it.”

They stared at each other, having now reached a deadlock. For Tynare’s part, he realized his question had been foolish. Shuri might lust for him, but in the big picture that meant nothing.

And yet, even knowing that, he was thrown by everything Shuri had told him. No, thrown wasn’t the right word. Even anger didn’t seem the right emotion to identify what he felt. Pain? Frustration? Yearning? Jealousy? Or better yet, everything wrapped into one.

It shouldn’t have hurt to know that Nari called out to Shuri more than he himself did. It simply didn’t make sense to be jealous under the

circumstances. But combined with everything else, with his own insistence to focus on his people and Shuri's quest for the truth, it grated, possibly more than Shuri even realized.

Still, they were within earshot of anyone who wanted to listen in, and it wasn't a good idea to continue this conversation here. The temple provided privacy, yes, and Tynare could count on Gerrol to make sure no one spied on them. That didn't make it all right for Tynare to use this holy place for his own purposes. He was already being disrespectful by arguing with Shuri here.

Kneeling in the center of the large room, Tynare closed his eyes. He centered himself and focused on the presence he could feel so strongly here. Shuri was silent, waiting patiently until Tynare got up and faced him once more.

"The two of us have our duty to our respective peoples," Tynare said. "In some regards, we might be on opposing sides. Oh, and remember what Nari said? That you can't trust me? He was probably right." He smiled pleasantly. "Now, Prince Shuriden, where else do you want to go? Perhaps Tempesta's temple? The Fezenda were originally Storm Callers, after all."

For a few moments, Shuri watched him in silence, and then he finally nodded. "That sounds perfect. You have my thanks."

As they headed out of the temple, Tynare ignored the pang in his heart and the nudge at the back of his mind. This was how things needed to be. No matter what path he chose to follow, he and Shuri couldn't have a relationship. Tynare was and would always be the heir of A'rankin first and a man second. Nothing, not even his own emotions, would change that.

## Chapter Nine

### Imminence

IN THE following days, Shuri saw very little of Nari. He asked King Rynald about the young Aranken, but the sovereign always dodged his questions. Tynare distracted him every single time, and on the rare occasions he saw Etera, the woman ignored him. When he and Nari did meet, it was always in the sunroom or in the interior garden, at Nari's summons. They didn't talk about Shuri's feelings again.

Alliance negotiations proceeded at an excruciating pace, with Katara nitpicking every single detail. For his part, since his visit to the temple, Shuri had decided to get a little more acquainted with Aranken culture. Their ongoing expeditions to the palace library and even to bookstores in the city yielded no results when it came to finding any clue on his mother, but they did provide him with more insight on Aranken history, politics, and traditions.

Apparently, two thousand years ago, A'rankin had stretched way beyond its current borders. At one point, however, something had happened. To this day, no one knew why, but the southern part of A'rankin had suddenly begun to turn into a desert. Odd, monstrous creatures appeared out of nowhere, taking over what had once been a lush fertile land.

The inhabitants of the area—the original Fezenda line—had desperately requested assistance from the king, but had been denied. History books didn't say it explicitly, but it seemed the Aranken had been completely unprepared for such a foe and had left the Fezenda to their fate. In the end, the Aranken in the area that would eventually become Shyrn had boarded boats and fled their homeland, heading toward the Western Realm. Centuries later, as Shyrn expanded more and more, the Aranken leaders had finally gathered the most powerful mages and created the Wards.



Of course, none of that information helped Shuri figure out the puzzle of Tynare's character. If a book could have provided such answers, Shuri would have paid any sum for it. But the things that mattered were rarely easy, so he still lacked a clear strategy. He and Tynare had both stuck to their decision to stop any intimate relationship between the two of them. And yet, in spite of it all, with every second that passed Shuri felt a deeper companionship and a closer connection to the Aranken prince. He was drawn to Tynare like a moth to the flame, and he often ended up watching the prince as Tynare gave his men instructions or went about his day-to-day duties. He tried to remain discreet, but unavoidably, he found himself failing.

Three weeks after his arrival in A'rankin, Shuri interrupted his frustrating quest through the library to go for a brief walk. His steps led him to the Fire Starter barracks, where Tynare was busy chastising one of the new recruits.

"You need to focus," the prince said. "Fire magic is very potent and explosive, but you can't let it control you. You have to tame it, to direct it at your opponent. Work with your element and unleash it toward your foe. Do you understand?"

The neophyte Fire Starter nodded, but even Shuri felt unconvinced of his reassurances. Tynare must have noticed as well, but he made no comment on it. He gestured for another Fire Starter to come forward and spar with the first one. As the two Aranken began the battle, Tynare made his way to Shuri's side.

"That was interesting advice," Shuri said without preamble. "Even when I read up on the elements, I rarely find these methods of training."

"Elemental magic is different for each class," Tynare explained. "Fire needs to be tamed. Water has to flow. Wind is more elusive, so it requires extra concentration. Earth is welcoming and solid, but it only yields to Aranken with an iron will. Getting used to the elemental combinations takes time and effort."

The topic didn't have any intimate implications, but still, Shuri felt very comfortable with Tynare, more so than ever before. "I wonder how you'd explain Nikari magic through that filter."

Tynare's lips curved into that familiar, coy smile. "Didn't we already establish that Nikari, and you in particular, are special?"

It was a strange thing to say, since Nari had been the one to call Shuri that. But Shuri had gotten used to Tynare making such references. It was still a puzzle to him and a huge source of frustration, since no one gave him straight answers about the twins. It was all the more annoying given his enduring pull toward both of them.

“I don’t know how special I am,” he replied. “I can’t seem to figure out the answer to the biggest dilemma in my life.”

“Answers don’t always help,” Tynare said, “because there’s always a different question waiting around the corner.”

“It’s still better than permanent uncertainty.”

On the field in front of him, the neophyte Fire Starter tried to cast a spell at his opponent. He failed, and the wild blaze escaped his control. The man’s opponent dodged, but the fire came straight at Tynare. Shuri didn’t even think. He lunged at his lover, sending the other man to the ground. As they landed on the grass, Shuri sought out his own fire magic, shielding both of them from the blast.

In the end, his spell absorbed the one that had gone astray. Shuri took a deep breath to control the magic, but he found it a bit hard to concentrate when he was right on top of Tynare and he could feel every muscle in Tynare’s athletic body. In some ways, fire, however violent, also meant passion, the same lust that always struck Shuri whenever he touched the Aranken prince—or rather, either of the Aranken princes.

Tynare couldn’t have missed the inopportune erection that sprouted in Shuri’s breeches, but he didn’t try to move away. “My savior,” he said with a grin. “You do realize his spell couldn’t have harmed me too much?”

Shuri’s face flamed in a combination of arousal and embarrassment. “Mock me if you must, but I can’t help but want to protect you.”

Tynare’s smile faded. “I can take care of myself, Shuri,” he whispered as he cupped Shuri’s cheek. “You need to watch out for yourself, not me.”

Another cryptic warning. They popped up more and more these days, in different forms, but all designed to point out there was a serious threat lurking. Tynare didn’t say it as much, which all things considered, made sense.

Even so, in spite of Tynare’s self-admitted untrustworthiness, Shuri attempted to reach out to the Aranken prince once again. “Just tell me the

truth,” he replied, unable to contain the frustration in his voice. “Let me help you. Surely by now you realize that you mean something to me.”

Tynare didn’t reply. He just slid from under Shuri and smoothly got up, brushing dust off his garments. He was already focusing on his men once more. “Return to the barracks,” he told the Fire Starter who’d failed in listening to his instructions. “I’ll have a word with you in private.”

Shuri watched the Fire Starter go, hoping Tynare would let the soldier stew in his own fears for a while. Predictably, it didn’t happen. After acknowledging Shuri with a nod, Tynare followed after his underling and disappeared into the building.

More confused than ever, Shuri felt like he was running in circles, never finding the solution to the dilemma that plagued his days and his nights. How could he help a man who didn’t want to be helped? More frustratingly, what would he do if it turned out that man was also his enemy?

He knew he probably shouldn’t follow, but he did so nonetheless. The other Fire Starters guarding the barracks didn’t try to stop him, and Shuri surmised Tynare must have given them instructions not to. Or so he hoped, until he found Tynare talking to the neophyte Fire Starter in a stern but calm voice.

Tynare caught his eye when he spotted Shuri approach, and something in Tynare’s gaze told Shuri his presence wasn’t wanted. Not that it took a genius to realize that. Without a doubt, Tynare needed to reach out to his confused underling without outsiders embarrassing the man even more.

Respecting Tynare’s duties, Shuri waited farther back, out of earshot, careful not to eavesdrop. His patience was put to the test, because Tynare didn’t rush his conversation. Shuri knew better than to deem himself the cause of it. Tynare cared about his men, which was why he put so much effort into training them.

At last, the neophyte Fire Starter headed back outside, his spine ramrod straight, his body tense with what seemed renewed resolve. Tynare watched him go with a small smile. For some reason, he suspected the Aranken wouldn’t have further problems taming his magic.

That thought faded when Tynare sauntered to his side, his lips twisted in a small, unreadable smile. “Why did you follow me?” Tynare asked.

“I wish I knew,” Shuri replied. “You’ve been fucking with me since I came here. I don’t understand you, your brother, or even myself anymore. Can you ever give me a straight answer? How can I ever know where I stand if you keep playing these games?”

Tynare arched a brow. “Perhaps I would answer your questions if I knew that was what you truly wanted.”

The coy, flirtatious look in Tynare’s eye awoke the thirst inside Shuri that had never truly been quenched. He grabbed Tynare’s arm and shoved him against the wall, pressing their bodies together. “Are you trying to distract me?”

“Maybe,” Tynare admitted. “Is it working?”

Shuri noticed with no small amount of satisfaction that Tynare sounded a little breathless. Not that Shuri could point any fingers. His cock had responded to Tynare’s words and proximity with embarrassing eagerness, just like before in front of the barracks. “You know it is,” he whispered in Tynare’s ear. “Why in the world do you enjoy doing this to me?”

“I could ask you the same thing,” Tynare replied. His dick nudged Shuri’s insistently, and Shuri wanted nothing more than to touch it, to touch every inch of Tynare.

Much to Shuri’s dismay, Tynare wiggled out of his hold, shaking his head. Shuri could almost understand the reason—hadn’t they decided against doing this already?—but his body simply refused to listen.

For once, Tynare seemed to agree with him. “We can’t stay here. Anyone could walk by and interrupt us.”

And that would be a very bad thing, indeed. “Where can we go?”

Tynare took his hand and started to drag him deeper into the barracks. “My room. I still have one here.”

Shuri followed after Tynare, now unable to focus on anything else save the warmth of Tynare’s hand, the fall of his hair, the memory of his touch. Once they found a private area, he could finally have what he’d craved for what seemed like forever.

Unfortunately, they didn’t go too far before Tynare froze in his tracks, cursing. “Damn it. I gave my quarters to that nightwolf.”

Shuri almost laughed when he realized both of them had forgotten that important little tidbit. He wasn’t sure Fegala would be there at this hour, but

it didn't matter, since he doubted Tynare wanted to have sex in the lair of a nightwolf. "What now?"

Tynare turned to face him, and his eyes seemed ablaze with the same fire burning inside Shuri. The Aranken didn't speak. He just manhandled Shuri, pushing him into the room closest to them.

Shuri half thought they'd end up running into a random number of Fire Starters, but the Creator helped them. The room Tynare had found seemed a storage area of sorts, with Aranken garments, sheets, training dummies, and other such miscellanea. It wasn't the most romantic setting in the world, but romance hadn't really worked out too well for them, at least not in a traditional sense.

In the end, what did the setting matter? Here they were, the two of them, finally together. Shuri couldn't wait to lick Tynare all over, to reacquaint himself with his lover's body and bury himself inside the young Aranken.

For once, Tynare didn't seem to agree with him. He pushed Shuri down on a spare mattress and climbed on top of him. For a split second, Shuri didn't know what Tynare had in mind, not until Tynare whispered it in his ear, "You're mine now. I want to fuck you so badly."

Shuri's heart raced. He'd never had another man inside him. With previous partners, he'd always been the dominant partner. But Tynare was different. Like Shuri, Tynare held a position of responsibility and understood the concept of their sworn duty.

To Tynare, Shuri could yield. True enough, their relationship had always been rocky. Their conflicting interests had them in a perpetual and exhausting battle of wits and hearts. Tynare got on Shuri's nerves with his never-ending chameleonic dance of 'guess the guilty party.' And yet, at the most basic level, Shuri felt he could trust Tynare.

Then again, it could be just his libido talking—when it came to Tynare, his brain was rarely the one making decisions. He was nodding and agreeing before the idea of protesting could even cross his mind. "Yes.... Fuck, yes!"

He must have sounded pretty enthusiastic, because Tynare released a low chuckle. It occurred to Shuri that he really wanted to give Tynare a taste of his own medicine. Not to mention that he owed the beautiful Aranken a blowjob.

The idea gave him the strength he needed to push Tynare off him. Tynare yelped, having obviously not expected the move. As Shuri straddled him and trapped his legs, Tynare somehow moved jerkily, trying to brace himself or perhaps making an attempt to reach for Shuri. The result was entirely different, as Tynare's elbow almost struck Shuri straight in the face.

Shuri ducked at the very last moment. He caught Tynare's arm and kissed his wrist. "Careful now, *sharani*. You wouldn't want to hurt my mouth before I put it to good use."

Tynare arched a brow at that. "By all means, proceed. I had other plans, but I wouldn't dare to...."

His words trailed off into a choked groan when Shuri squeezed his still clothed cock. They could have probably gone on to argue and debate forever, but really, Shuri was tired of it. No matter what happened after this, no matter how these moments would change them, Shuri just wanted to embrace the ecstasy of having Tynare in his arms without worrying about anything else.

Of course, when it came to the two of them, nothing could be that easy. Even as he reached for the binding of Tynare's breeches, Shuri remembered how Tynare had teased him, the way those full pink lips had wrapped around the head of his dick as Tynare sucked him. Fellatio could be just as much about power as politics. Tynare had definitely proven more than once that he had power over Shuri.

At this point, though, Shuri was beyond all that. He wanted this—whatever this was—to have meaning only in a very private sense. No more splitting hairs and analyzing, no more double guessing and finding hidden motivations. Not here, not now. Now was for the two of them, and the silent faith they did have in each other, no matter how much they tried to hide it.

Thrusting all caution to the wind, Shuri simply stopped thinking. He quickly worked Tynare's pants open and gripped his lover's erection in his fist. As he rubbed his thumb over the leaking tip, Tynare groaned. "Shuri, come on."

Shuri didn't need any further coaxing. Freeing Tynare's dick from his breeches, he knelt between Tynare's legs and took the hard member in his mouth.

Tynare's cock was just as beautiful, and possibly just as proud as its owner. Rosy, long and slender, it jutted from between Tynare's legs, practically demanding attention, attention Shuri gladly gave. He bobbed his

head up and down the shaft, drunk on the taste of Tynare's precum on his tongue, dizzy with the scent of Tynare's sweat.

His lover's hands landed in his hair, guiding him along without forcing the pace. Perhaps Tynare felt the same need as Shuri or realized what Shuri wanted. Feeling Tynare's slender fingers threading through his locks aroused Shuri more than he would have expected. His cock throbbed in his pants, as if the stupid thing had a mind of its own and was imagining that hold touching it, not Shuri's tresses.

For the moment, Shuri ignored it, choosing instead to focus on Tynare's pleasure. He rolled Tynare's testes in his palm, reveling in the feel of the wrinkled sac under his fingertips. Tynare's cries increased in volume, and Shuri took every single moan, groan, and gasp as a cue. He paced the rhythm of the sucking, alternating long hard sucks with faster ones, greedy for the taste of Tynare's seed.

Before he could claim his prize, Tynare's hold on his hair tightened. The Aranken pulled his cock out of Shuri's mouth, shoving him down for a second time. "I can't... I need to have you now."

Shuri couldn't argue against that, not when the fire in Tynare's eyes seemed to scorch and brand his very soul. He nodded, managing to muster enough coherence to realize that what Tynare had in mind implied nakedness from both of them. Tynare was already throwing off his boots and completely discarding his pants, not bothering with his shirt. Shuri followed his example, thankful that Nikari wear, whether casual, ceremonial or military, focused on practicality and could easily be taken off in spite of its tightness.

Tynare fell upon him like a ravenous nightwolf eager to claim its prey. No sooner had Shuri freed himself from his pants than Tynare crushed their mouths together, the kiss almost painful in the desperate passion it evoked. Shuri responded with just as much need and desire. As their tongues dueled, Tynare rubbed two slick fingers over Shuri's opening.

Shuri bit his lover's lip, wordlessly telling Tynare to get on with it. He might not have experience with bottoming, but he was a Nikari soldier. He'd been trained to deal with pain. He knew to expect a level of discomfort, and he didn't care.

Tynare broke their kiss and arched a brow at him. "Did you want something?"

The expression held a level of familiar teasing, but the open need in Tynare's eyes couldn't be denied. His breathless voice displayed honest desire, all traces of empty, mocking charm forgotten. Shuri's body and soul responded to this man with such urgency it surprised even him. "Actually, yes. Fuck me."

Tynare took mercy on both of them. He thrust two fingers inside Shuri's body, and Shuri fell back, groaning as untried muscles succumbed to Tynare's mastery. Somehow, even if they'd never done this before, Tynare managed to zero in straight on Shuri's special spot. His fingers mercilessly rubbed Shuri's gland, making shocks of pleasure burst through every inch of him.

Shuri attempted to move into the intimate caress, to impale himself on his lover's fingers and demand more. He couldn't quite vocalize his desires, but maybe Tynare understood anyway. The Aranken did spend far too much time stretching Shuri, adding more of that unknown-source oil, preparing Shuri for invasion. Even so, after what seemed like forever, he pulled his fingers out of Shuri's body. Shuri lifted his legs, welcoming his lover, and Tynare positioned himself better, placing his cock against Shuri's hole.

For a few seconds, Tynare didn't move. He just looked at Shuri, and his expression held something that went beyond carnal passion. Shuri wanted to identify it, but before he could do so, Tynare pressed inside him, and Shuri's thoughts scattered once again.

Tynare didn't rush. He moved slowly, giving Shuri time to adjust to the penetration. To a certain extent, Shuri needed it, but not because of the pain. The invasion did burn, but that just made everything better, brighter, fueling the flame inside him. That very same fire stirred a whirlpool of emotions deep within his heart, some of which he couldn't hope to understand.

Those feelings kept rising and amplifying the deeper Tynare went inside him. When Tynare's shaft fully impaled him, Shuri felt on the brink of something momentous, life changing. Tynare had never looked freer and more beautiful than he did right now, with his sweaty hair curling around his cheeks, his eyes fixed on Shuri's face, and his body tense with strenuous arousal. And as Tynare began to move, something that already seemed perfect became even better.

Every single one of Tynare's thrusts struck Shuri's prostate. Shuri met Tynare's motions, fucking himself on Tynare's dick, reveling in Tynare's



uninhibited passion. Trapped between their bodies, his cock made contact with Tynare's still clad torso, and the somewhat frustrating caress added another ingredient to the cocktail of sensation already mixing inside him.

All the while, Tynare kept whispering his name, over and over, like a prayer, and Shuri had never been more certain that this was right, that no matter how they came together, they simply fit.

Distantly, Shuri wondered why in the world they hadn't done this before. And then he couldn't wonder about anything, because he was coming, coming so hard he almost felt like he was dying. His consciousness faded, unable to register the reality around him. Shuri remained aware of only one thing, well, a handful of things that he couldn't quite tell apart—his pleasure, and the feel of Tynare's cock inside him, Tynare's dick thrusting one last time into his body, Tynare's spunk flooding his channel in hot spurts.

Instinctively, Shuri's heart reached out to Tynare's, and his mind prodded at Tynare's shields. In truth, he should have known better, and if he'd been thinking, he would have. Tynare withdrew out of him, as elusive as always in more than one way. The high of Shuri's orgasm finally began to dissipate, and reality settled in once again.

With his body still buzzing with carnal satisfaction, but also with a heavy heart, Shuri turned toward his lover. He couldn't say he was surprised when he found Tynare lying back with a very smug look on his face.

"Say what you will, *sharani*, and pretend all you like," Shuri told Tynare, "but you can't deny this. You can't hide anymore, just like I can't."

Tynare's self-assured façade cracked. His smirk slipped off his face, and a flash of pain passed through his eyes. Without another word, he grabbed his clothes and jerkily pulled them on. He stumbled out of the room without looking back.

If their exchange had been a game, Shuri would have probably won this round. He didn't feel like a winner. More confused than ever, he buried his face in his hands and struggled not to scream.

LATER THAT day, Nari lay curled in bed, feeling miserable, guilty and helpless. "Stop sulking," Tynare told him. "What would you have wanted to do? Tell him the truth?"

“It would be safer. Better. Anything would have been better than seducing him out of asking.”

“Oh, and I suppose you have a more appropriate solution,” Tynare snapped at him. “None of what you’ve done really helps, you know. You telling him not to trust me, getting all cozy with him.... What do you think he would say if he knew the truth?”

“Do you mean to tell me I was wrong to warn him?” Nari countered without acknowledging the latter question. “He already doubted you.”

“He came to A’rankin because he doubted me.” Tynare’s words held a venom that Nari felt pooling into his veins. “Because of that damn Behnivyr Erethe. All things considered, how can you even think about revealing everything? He’d never forgive us.”

“I simply want him to be safe. What we feel doesn’t matter.”

“It’s funny you should say that,” Tynare shot back. “Shuri is attracted to me, and you knowingly cultivated his affection toward you. So don’t be self-righteous now. Regrets won’t help us. You just want to feel his touch like I did.”

There was no denying Tynare’s anger now, and it lashed out at Nari like a living thing. Tears flowed down Nari’s cheeks as he struggled to control his emotions. “Well, for obvious reasons, I can’t. I can’t even see him, only through you.”

“But you want him just the same,” Tynare shot back knowingly. “You can’t lie to me, so don’t even try.”

“Why are we even talking about this? You know as well as I do that his days are numbered if he lingers here. Cryptic messages won’t help. It just makes him want to stay. He won’t go unless we do something drastic.”

“But if we do explain, it might just push him into hunting down that creature. That won’t end well.”

Nari didn’t know what to say or do. He’d always hated the original plan, even when Tynare had deemed his actions justified. It was why he’d tried to warn Shuri away. However, now they were adrift. The Nikari’s obvious affection toward him changed everything. Shuri’s offer to protect him, the warmth of his touch, the moments they’d shared.... It all seemed so incredible, especially given the comments Tynare had thrown in his face when Shuri had just arrived. But not even Shuri’s strength could stand against the threat they faced.

Nari reached out to his elements, seeking Terra and Oceana's comforting embrace. Their daughter, Gaia, the patron of Nurturers, always welcomed him, soothing his wounded soul. This time around, Terra showed him something else, though. As she spoke to him, Nari felt an approaching rider, frantically heading toward the palace. He could sense the fatigue of the horse and of the man he carried, and to a certain extent he thought he could even get a glimpse of their urgency.

That brief flash faded as soon as it appeared, as Nari didn't have the abilities needed to read a person's state of mind or his thoughts. Still, the divination gift that had come to him with the loss of his eyesight proved helpful, and he knew there was something seriously amiss.

As the rider entered the courtyard of the palace, Nari released the vision and took a couple of deep breaths, steadying himself. He always felt a little off when he pushed his power like this, as if his body couldn't quite align to the intricacies of divination.

Finally, the sensation settled, and not a moment too soon. As a knock sounded at the door, Tynare opened his eyes and left the bed. "Yes?"

He couldn't say he was very surprised when Etera entered the room. "What is it?" Tynare asked without preamble.

Even if she'd been the one to come here, Etera hesitated. Tynare arched a brow and heaved a sigh. "Come on, Etera. I already know something is wrong."

"It's just.... A messenger has just arrived from the borderlands. A group of children went foraging close to the Wards and didn't come back. All evidence points that they were drawn into Shyrn somehow."

Dread pooled in Tynare's stomach, but he struggled not to let it show. His people relied on him. If he could not lead them against Shyrn, no one could. "We'll leave at once," he said. "Go. Have my horse saddled and ready for me. Does Father know?"

"He's been notified, yes. He's making preparations to join you."

Tynare grimaced. He might not like his father very much, but he didn't want the older Aranken going into Shyrn. In fact, Rynald would probably make things more difficult with his perpetual hovering.

"Listen closely. I need him to stay here, with the Nikari. Can you convince him somehow?"

"I can try, but you know he doesn't want you crossing the border."

Tynare shrugged, affecting a nonchalance he didn't feel. "I'll be fine. It's nothing I haven't done before. Him being there would just make me worry that he'd get hurt."

That wasn't exactly true, but Etera knew better than to point out the lie. "I promise I will do my best," she replied. With uncharacteristic hesitance, she then inquired, "Will you at least allow me to accompany you?"

"Of course," Tynare answered. "A capable Destroyer is always a good soldier in a battle."

If she minded having her status reduced to that of a mere soldier, she didn't say it. Then again, she never did, which was why she would never become more. It was why, in spite of everything, Gerrol's position remained that of his uncle, and Tynare always called her by her given name.

She nodded in acquiescence like an underling would do to her superior officer. Tynare dismissed her with a wave and, once she left the room, he started getting ready for battle.

No matter how many times he had to go to Shyrn, it never got any easier. It reminded him of things he preferred not to think about, of a different time when he hadn't carried the burdens he shouldered now. But regrets or fears wouldn't help those missing children, and Tynare might be many things, but he wasn't a coward. Even if he needed to face his worst nightmares to save them, he would do so.

Taking refuge in the familiarity of the tasks he needed to accomplish, Tynare dressed and packed a small bag. They would have to travel lightly for the purpose of reaching their destination at utmost speed. He didn't actually require much for the expedition, other than the charm he always took with him when he went to Shyrn—Anima's symbol.

Tynare didn't have the right to wear it anymore, but he couldn't give it up, not wholly. He slid the charm around his neck, next to those of Sol and Gaia. After that, he stepped out onto the balcony and focused on finding his elements. The union of fire and air always came easily to him, and that hadn't changed. Even now, it burst it into him, heating his blood with battle lust and courage. Sol assured him he could handle this. He could face whatever Shyrn threw his way. He'd done so many other times before.

With the elements' comforting caress guiding him along, Tynare left his quarters and rushed into the courtyard. He found Etera and his father

already there, together with a group of assembled soldiers. “I trust you’ve realized this is my role, Father,” he said without preamble. “You are the king. We cannot afford risking your life on an expedition into Shyrn.”

“I’m not happy with you doing that either,” Rynald shot back, “but... I understand why you must. We need to help our people.”

And Tynare had been the first man to ever return alive from Shyrn. Even if he was the crown prince, the sole heir of A’rankin, he’d made it his duty to ensure none of his people went through what he had. That confrontation had left him scarred for life, but he’d still survived it. Of course, some people who knew the truth would be inclined to debate the intricacies of that survival, but right now his men were counting on him for guidance and leadership. Tynare couldn’t afford to falter.

“I will do everything in my power to bring those children home safe,” he said. “I can definitely promise you that.”

His father squeezed his shoulder, then stepped aside, giving him room to go to his horse. Etera mounted her own beast, but just as Tynare planned to do the same, Shuri stepped out into the courtyard.

Seeing the Nikari struck Tynare harder than he’d expected. It could have been because of his increased awareness of the threat toward Shuri or maybe due to the moments of passion they had shared. Tynare hadn’t meant to fall under the spell of his attraction toward Shuri again, but he had, and remembering it hammered home the truth of Shuri’s words. He couldn’t dismiss this thing between them as irrelevant, no matter how much that might affect his future.

For that reason, he hesitated instead of taking Etera’s example. It couldn’t have been very long, but it gave Shuri time to approach them. “Is anything wrong?” the Nikari inquired.

Tynare could already see his father preparing a scathing reply that would tell Shuri to mind his own business. “There are some problems at the border,” he quickly explained to stop his father from blurting out anything untactful. “I need to go handle it.”

Shuri scowled. “I thought your neighbors couldn’t bypass the Wards.”

“They can’t, but if someone mistakenly leaves the safety the Wards provide, all bets are off. Wish me luck.”

Shuri looked at the soldiers waiting behind Tynare, then again at him. He must have wanted to say something more, and his fists clenched and

unclenched. He seemed to be keeping himself from reaching for Tynare, and that made an uncomfortable warmth fill Tynare's cold heart.

"Good luck," the Nikari finally said, "and come back safely."

In spite of the simplicity of Shuri's answer, Tynare heard the unsaid words, the phrase Shuri wasn't willing to speak. *Come back to me.* Tynare couldn't speak either, so he just mounted his horse and nodded. Forcing himself to turn away from Shuri felt physically painful, but he did so just the same. "Move out, men," he told his assembled soldiers. "We have a long journey ahead of us."

Without looking back, Tynare guided his horse ahead, toward the border with Shyrn. He didn't want to think about the questions he'd seen in Shuri's eyes and the decision he'd have to make. Right now, he'd focus on the road and handle his mission one step at a time.

*This is crazy,* a tiny voice whispered. *We're going straight to him.*

*Do you want to go back?* Tynare replied in a murmur no one else could hear.

*No,* Nari answered. *We can't go back.*

A sense of calm flooded him. Yes, today he'd finally face his fears and put an end to this debacle. It was high time that the creature who deemed itself his master learned the truth, anyway.

SHURI HAD never thought he would hate not having a nightwolf at his beck and call. Without his own mount, he was reduced to asking his hosts for transportation, and this time around, it could be a real inconvenience.

He had tried to do some soul-searching in the hours since he'd last seen Tynare, but he hadn't reached any conclusive result beyond the fact that he still needed to find out the truth. He felt like he was running around in circles, a puppet dancing to a tune invisible figures played, much to their amusement. Worse, he didn't even know how Tynare fit in all this. Was he a puppet too, or a puppeteer? Which option was better?

All those questions needed to wait because of the immediate, very palpable threat. As he watched his lover depart, he knew he couldn't stay behind and twiddle his thumbs. He might not have any authority here, and rationally, he grasped that he could be making another huge mistake. But the memory of Tynare's eyes wouldn't let him go, and he couldn't just wait.

He turned toward the king, ready to say his good-byes, but he found Rynald already staring at him. “You want to go after him, don’t you?” Rynald asked.

Shuri saw no reason to lie, since the Aranken sovereign must have realized there was something between him and Tynare. “Yes, I do. My intervention might not please you, but—”

Rynald interrupted him before he could finish the phrase. “I know Tynare, probably better than he might think. He feels something for you. This request.... It comes from a father, not a king. I know that even if I’d joined him, my presence wouldn’t have helped, but you might be able to do what I could not. Go. You might manage to save him.”

There was no anger left in the king’s eyes. In fact, he seemed drained, tired, and older than Shuri had ever seen him. Rynald’s obvious concern confirmed what Shuri had already guessed on his own, that Tynare needed help.

“I’ll need a horse, as soon as possible.”

“Visit the stables and pick a steed of your choice.” The king swallowed convulsively. “Be careful, and please understand I can’t guarantee your safety. Shyrn is dangerous, even for a Nikari.”

Shuri nodded. “I appreciate the warning, and the trust you placed in me. I will help him, no matter what I have to do.”

Unwilling to have any further formalities delay him, Shuri sketched a bow, then rushed toward the stables. Once there, he zeroed in on a fast gelding he’d noticed in the past and started to saddle him.

He was about halfway through the process when Katara burst into the stables. She ushered everyone else out and approached Shuri. “I need a word with you. I think I found something in the library.”

Shuri kept going with his task but didn’t ignore Katara. “News on the poison?”

She shook her head, not that it surprised him. He doubted their foes would just leave clues out in the open to find. “Nothing on the poison so far, or on your mother, but I did run into a register of the royal family’s bloodlines. Officially, it seems Prince Tynare is said to be the son of the dead queen. But more interestingly, there isn’t any twin brother, Shuri. He’s a lone child, just like I told you.”

Shuri remembered Tynare, then compared him with Nari in his mind. He cared for them both, and he couldn't imagine either of them going through such an elaborate deception. "It can't be. They're two different people."

"Shuri, be reasonable. I know Ivy advised you to follow your heart, but this is ridiculous."

"It might seem ridiculous to you, but I know what I saw and what I felt." He finished saddling the horse and quickly mounted the animal. "I have no doubt that he has secrets, some of them very painful. But right now, I refuse to distrust him. He needs me. I just know that."

Katara likely wanted to say something more, but Shuri urged his mount forward, ignoring the A'Mora's protests. He almost trampled her, but she was Nikari, so she managed to avoid it.

Two guards waited in the courtyard, already mounted on horses, and next to them was King Rynald. The Aranken sovereign wore a travel coat that masked his regular rich garments, and when he saw Shuri, he got on his own horse. "I decided you needed a guide anyway, so I might as well go along," Rynald explained.

Shuri didn't have time to engage in any debates on the wisdom of this choice. The king might lack faith in Shuri's abilities, or he could simply be so concerned for his son that he couldn't remain in the safety of his home. Whatever the case, Shuri had to admit a guide would be helpful. "Lead the way," he said.

The king rode ahead, flanked by his two guards and with Shuri following. As royal caravans went, it wasn't in the least bit impressive in terms of safety provided. The king might have been better off riding with his son. But that seemed irrelevant now, since both of them hoped to catch up to Tynare.

The prince had only left a few minutes ago, so in theory, they shouldn't have had too much trouble with that. But Tynare rode like the wind, and unfortunately for Shuri, one travel coat didn't keep the Aranken from realizing their king was in their midst. They kept stopping to gawk, called out and got in the way, and while they usually didn't take long to realize they needed to move, every delay counted. By the time Shuri's party managed to escape the capital, he was fuming and wishing he'd told the king to stay home like Tynare had.



“We’ll make it,” the king said from in front of him. “We’ll find him.”

Shuri didn’t know who Rynald was trying to convince, but he hated relying on people who didn’t realize their own responsibilities and limits. Unfortunately, Shuri was stuck with him due to the rather unfortunate fact that he had no idea where to go.

Unless.... Unless he could find another guide. But who could he turn to in this foreign land? The only ally he had was Katara, and even if she’d wanted to help him, which Shuri didn’t see as very likely, she couldn’t have done so. No, that didn’t feel right. Nari’s smile and his words popped into Shuri’s head. He was never alone. The elements were always with him. He just needed to reach out and accept the assistance they offered.

It was easier said than done. Until now, Shuri had never interpreted the elements as sentient entities, not like Aranken did. But since coming here and especially since meeting Tynare, he’d gained a different awareness of them.

Visiting the temples had given him perspective, and Shuri now tried to reach out to Ignis, the deity of fire. Of course, it didn’t come easy to Shuri. Nikari worship focused on the Creator, the basis of all elements, not the elements themselves. He kept trying to look closer at forces he hadn’t considered approachable before, and it took a great deal of effort. It certainly didn’t help that he was mounted on a horse and he needed to be careful not to burn the damn beast while attempting to have a religious epiphany.

Creator, why did everything in life have to be so hard? For once, he just wanted some clear answers. No, this time, it wasn’t answers he sought. He needed to have Tynare in his arms, safe again.

That desire burst out of him almost angrily, with the flare of a passionate fire that settled within Shuri and much to his surprise, melted into words. *It’s all right, child*, he heard a voice say. *Just ride. The path will lead you to what you seek. But be cautious. Emptiness awaits at the other side. You might not like what you find.*

Shuri hadn’t known what to expect from the soul-searching he’d decided to do, so the disembodied whisper took him by surprise. It held warmth but also a hint of threat, as if the elements were also telling him “get a move on, or else.” In a way, it made sense, since fire was like that. It

could be kind and provide comfort, but it could also destroy—and it often did.

Shuri understood it, at a level he never had in the past. Suddenly, he knew where to go, what path would lead him to the border. Without bothering to wait for the king or even offer the Aranken sovereign an explanation, he urged his horse into gallop and rode on alone. He only hoped he would not be too late.

## Chapter Ten

### Confrontation

THE BORDERLANDS village where the missing children originated from turned out to be a small community of Aranken with limited elemental powers, led by a handful of Destroyers and Nurturers. The lack of air-oriented inhabitants was a huge disadvantage, as the message about their predicament had reached the capital far too slowly. By the time Tynare's party entered the village, in the early hours of the next morning, the children had been gone for at least a day and a half, if not more.

The villagers greeted him with a mix of panic and relief. "Your Highness, thank the elements you've arrived," the mother of one of the children said, her eyes swimming in tears. As he dismounted, she dropped to her knees in front of him and kissed his hand. "Please help him. Help my little boy."

Many people had once deemed it strange that he personally handled every expedition in Shyrn. It would have been unthinkable for the prince of the realm to take such risks, at least, before that day, so long ago. Now, though, he'd become the only hope these people had when it came to getting their loved ones back. In some ways, he'd used the expeditions to gain their trust for the unavoidable moment when he would take the throne from his father, but right now, all power motives had slid aside.

He knelt next to the crying mother and helped her up. "I will do my best," he promised. "Now come. Show me where they went."

Since they'd ridden the entire day before and throughout the night with few breaks, everyone in Tynare's party—both man and beast—displayed clear signs of exhaustion. However, he couldn't afford to wait, not when he knew that in this fight every second counted.

No one protested as they left the village and headed toward the Wards. They passed some older, uninhabited buildings, decrepit crumbling ruins

where a real Aranken garrison had once been. The sight of it made Tynare's heart clench. In spite of the Wards, they'd still lost many people to the war and sometimes to his father's enduring hunt of the latents. If only he could have told everyone the truth, instead of hiding behind assumptions and accusations.... But no, he couldn't wish for impossible things right now. He needed to focus on the immediate task.

Soon Tynare spotted the beautiful, multicolored glow of the Wards protecting A'rankin. Their power didn't immediately fade, so beyond them was a lush, dark forest. Unfortunately, that didn't always bring A'rankin any advantages, since some less informed or unwise citizens bypassed the Wards to explore the forests, thinking the danger could only strike them in the desert.

The villagers led them up to the Wards and stopped right before going through. "We tried to explore beyond this point," an elderly Aranken Destroyer said, "but we ran into serious resistance. A flock of wyverns descended on us once we were far enough from the Wards. We managed to retreat without any deaths, but the children.... We simply didn't get the chance to find them."

Tynare nodded, acknowledging the efforts of the Aranken villagers. They had probably done their best but were simply no match for Shyrn monsters. Still, it would be useful to at least have information on what they would face once they passed the Wards.

"Is there anything else you can tell us? How many wyverns attacked you? Were there other creatures?"

Unfortunately, the villagers didn't have further information. The old Destroyer looked quite dismayed because of this, so Tynare squeezed the man's shoulder. "It's all right. You've already been very helpful. We can handle the situation from here."

A part of him wanted to offer reassurances, but at this point, the children had been gone for a long time. Shyrn was dangerous even for adult, well-trained Aranken. Children would be easy prey for the monsters there.

But Tynare had every intention of continuing to try until he knew for a fact that those innocent souls were lost. Turning toward his companions, he said, "You all know what's at stake here. You all know what lies beyond the Wards. But each and every one of you is a child of the elements. Even

beyond the Wards, Gaia and Volcana will be with you. There is no place where they do not support you. Remember that.”

The other Aranken cheered, taking heart in Tynare’s words. Well, most of them. Etera’s claps seemed perfunctory, and her expression held more concern than optimism. But then she was more informed with regard to the effects of his previous expedition in Shyrn than anyone here. Fortunately, she hid her skepticism well, just like Tynare had known she would.

Tynare understood her fears, but he had no intention of letting his past get in the way. He forced a confident smile onto his face and continued, “Leave your horses here and follow me.”

Taking refuge in the knowledge that so many people were relying on him, Tynare crossed the Wards. Elemental magic rippled over his skin, so intense it made him want to retreat to the warm, welcoming safety of his land. He didn’t, and instead, he progressed onward, finally landing at the other side. In truth, it probably took a few seconds, but it felt far longer. It always did, and for a good reason. Beyond the Wards, a whole different world awaited.

The change wasn’t immediately noticeable, yet another reason why young Aranken were sometimes tempted to cross. Tynare advanced through the forest, and the farther he went, the more he sensed the ominous dangers stalking his every step. But the elements were still with him, all around him, and he would not falter, not again. He would face his mistakes, save the children who needed him, and hopefully find a solution to his predicament.

It took quite a while for them to cross the forest, and they weren’t immediately attacked by wyverns like the Destroyer had said. In fact, they kept walking for hours on end, the rustling of the leaves the only sound that broke the heavy silence. At one point, even that light breeze died. The tension in Tynare’s companions seemed to grow exponentially the more they advanced. Etera stuck as close to Tynare as he allowed, and through the corner of his eye, Tynare could sometimes see the rest of his men clutching their elemental pendants. He kind of wanted to do the same, but he couldn’t afford the slightest show of uncertainty.

The forest ended abruptly, as if the thicket had been cut off by a strange force. As Tynare and his men stumbled onto the sand, memories flashed through his mind’s eye. He hated that every time he stepped on

Shyrn territory, he unavoidably recalled these things, but he was stronger than his past. He could do this.

Instantly, Tynare felt that they were being watched. It wasn't anything new. Just like he'd once told Shuri, the creature always kept an eye on them. The power of Shyrn might not be able to bypass the Wards, but some things couldn't be kept at bay even by elemental magic.

"Be careful," he told his soldiers. "It won't be long now."

For all his words, they were forced to walk farther into Shyrn before they found any sign of it being inhabited. It wasn't even a Shyrn monster, but the body of a cat man, one of the nomadic tribes that had the courage, or perhaps the stupidity, to make the desert their home. There were certain pieces of the cat man missing, and a brief analysis of the nomad's wounds did nothing to reassure Tynare. "A salamander," he said. "If it is still around, don't engage it. Should you need to defend yourself from it, use earth magic to trap it."

In Tynare's experience, it was the one thing that worked, since salamanders were immune to both fire and water magic, and their scales protected them from most air spells. Tynare's men were all either Destroyers or Nurturers, so they would be able to fight if they needed to. Ironically, in Shyrn, the best weapon an Aranken had was the sand.

Of course, all of Tynare's elaborate preparations proved to be for naught. Suddenly, the world seemed to tilt on its axis, the sand dunes beneath their feet swaying like watery waves. A wall very similar to the Wards—except completely opaque—appeared between Tynare and the rest of the Aranken. Tynare heard Etera cry out, and then he was alone, the figure from his nightmares appearing in front of him.

The leader of the Shyrn hadn't changed in the slightest since Tynare had last seen him. He'd always struck Tynare as all the more grotesque because, for the most part, he looked very much like an Aranken. The differences were very noticeable, and the horns, leathery black wings, and snake-like eyes changed what would have been a classically handsome look into something monstrous.

"Well, well. If it isn't Prince Tynare. I haven't seen you in quite a while. You look... well."

Tynare clenched his fists to control the magic that wanted to lash out at the creature. "You're too kind," he said blandly. "Please release the children you've taken. Once you've done so, we'll discuss other matters of interest."

The man-shaped monster laughed, and the sound sent unpleasant ripples down Tynare's spine. "Since you're asking me so nicely, how can I refuse?"

On cue, a wyvern descended from the sky, carrying a small cage. Tynare had no idea how he hadn't seen the wyvern from the very beginning, since there were no clouds that could have masked the animal. Still, he'd long ago learned that things didn't always make sense when the leader of Shyrn was involved.

"Here you go," the creature said as the wyvern landed next to him. "I have no interest in Aranken brats." He shot the imprisoned children a look. "Perhaps next time, they will learn not to attempt to go somewhere they shouldn't."

Inside the cage, the children were clinging to each other and weeping but seemed otherwise unharmed. Tynare truly feared the creature might use them against him, but by some miracle, it didn't happen. Instead, the Shyrn leader waved a hand, and the wyvern opened the cage with one claw. A hole appeared in the wall separating Tynare from his men. The children stumbled out of the cage and shot Tynare terrified, inquiring looks.

"Quickly," Tynare encouraged them. "Go. Your parents are waiting for you."

That was all the encouragement the children needed. They fled, rushing through the small hole that sealed as soon as they were gone. Tynare had enough time to see his men on the other side, trying to reach him, before he was once more cut off from them.

The Shyrn leader plopped down on the sand, and the wyvern curled next to him, placing its large head in his lap. As he pet the winged beast, Tynare's nemesis shot him a smirk. "So here we are again. I believe you and I are long overdue on this conversation."

"I can't say I disagree," Tynare admitted, albeit with some reluctance.

In spite of the beginning of their exchange, the manlike monster didn't say anything else. He just sat there, completely comfortable in the sand, still focusing on the wyvern and ignoring Tynare. Even knowing that he was succumbing to his foe's game, Tynare couldn't help but snap at the Shyrn leader. "I don't want to do this anymore. I—"

"Wait for it," the creature interrupted. "We're not ready yet."

Tynare blinked, not knowing what to make of his nemesis's words. The way the creature smirked certainly didn't seem encouraging, for him or anyone else.

"Ready?" he repeated despite himself.

"Oh, yes," his foe answered. "We have a guest of honor approaching. He's quite close now." He looked up at Tynare and gestured for him to sit down. "For the moment, why don't you relax? You seem far too tense."

The sand shifted underneath Tynare's feet and he narrowly avoided falling. When he leapt back, though, the Shyrn leader was right next to him. Tynare had forgotten how fast the creature could be. His nemesis grabbed his arm and forced Tynare to kneel in the sand.

"I can help you with that if you're having trouble," he whispered in Tynare's ear.

His enemy's touch made Tynare's skin crawl. Seeking out his power, he cast the strongest fire spell he could muster at the Shyrn leader. The magic struck his foe with no real effect, but the impact did send the creature reeling back, giving Tynare the opportunity to free himself. "This is between the two of us," he said as he got up. "Don't you dare involve anyone else."

"Oh, but it's far too late for that," the monster replied, flicking his wings at Tynare. "Our agreement involved other people to begin with. And here comes one of them now."

The creature looked past Tynare's shoulder, and with a heavy heart, Tynare followed his gaze. A portal opened in front of him, sucking in the sands, and as Shuri emerged from it, Tynare knew he'd made a very big mistake.

WHEN SHURI stepped out of the rift, the first thing he registered was sand. A huge desert stretched as far as the eye could see. In the distance, the heat made the horizon dance, as if the limit between the ground and the sky had started to blur. The unsurprising desolation told Shuri he'd been successful in his risky endeavor.

Technically speaking, rifts were impossible to open if the Nikari attempting the process didn't have personal, firsthand knowledge of the destination. Therefore, when he'd decided to use a portal, he'd kind of



doubted it would work. He'd taken refuge in the guidance of the elements and allowed them to lead him—and here he was.

It took him less than ten seconds to process all of this, and after that, he could only focus on the two figures standing a few feet away. He recognized one of them as Tynare, but the other was a stranger—an unfriendly one, if Shuri had to guess by Tynare's tense stance and, perhaps, by the mysterious man's wings and horns.

Shuri approached steadily, keeping an eye on Tynare and his unwelcome companion. It felt unsettling, not right, because the stranger could see him, and the smirk on his face seemed to say he knew something Shuri didn't. To make things worse, he looked awfully familiar—wings and horns aside—but Shuri couldn't quite pinpoint how or why.

Tynare met him halfway and grabbed his arm. "Shuri, what are you doing here? You need to go back to A'rankin."

"Did you really think I'd abandon you?" Shuri snapped back. "You might have countless secrets, but I make my own decisions, and I'm done waiting."

In front of them, the stranger laughed lightly. "How touching. A lovers' spat. I have to say, you're not exactly what I expected, Prince Shuriden."

Shuri faced the man he'd identified as his foe—in all likelihood the "he" Nari kept trying to warn him about—without flinching. "It seems you have an advantage over me. You know who I am, but I don't know who you are."

"Ah, where are my manners? Let me introduce myself. My name is Nilswryn Essteka, and I have the honor of being the leader of Shyrn, the Guardian of the Spawn."

The Guardian of the Spawn? Shuri had no idea what that meant. Nothing he'd read on Shyrn suggested the creatures now living in the desert had any sort of organization. In fact, Aranken chronicles suggested most of the Shyrn inhabitants were beastlike. The few manlike tribes that made this place their home actually originated from Altea, the land beyond Shyrn and home of the beastmasters. Apparently, the Aranken had neglected to notice some very important facts.

This left Shuri in quite a conundrum. He stepped in front of Tynare, doing his best to shield the other man with his larger form. "What is it that

you want?" he asked his foe.

"Oh, how quaint. Is this where you ask me about my evil ploy to harm your lover?" Nilswryn tsked. "And here I was hoping you'd do something more interesting. After all this time spent fighting Aranken, one gets bored, you know."

"Well, perhaps you'll indulge me just the same," Shuri said sarcastically, "since I'm a guest and all."

"I would be happy to help you out," Nilswryn shot back, "but I thought your lover might appreciate having one last chance to say it for himself. Maybe it would make you feel less like an idiot."

Shuri narrowed his eyes at the Shyrn leader. "If you're trying to turn me against Tynare...."

"I'm not trying to do anything," Nilswryn replied. "Your lover already helped me out in that regard. Come on, Tynare. Tell him."

The misery on the Aranken prince's face didn't bode well for either of them, but Shuri tried to be encouraging. "It's all right," he told Tynare. "Don't let him get to you. Whatever it is that he has on you, you can just tell me. We'll surpass it together."

Tynare still didn't answer, so in the end Nilswryn spoke in his stead. "It was him. He arranged what needed to be done for your father's death. He provided your mother with the poison she needed."

In his heart, Shuri had always expected something along that line. At the back of his mind, he'd never quite let go of that time he'd seen Tynare vaporize the air latent, so he'd known Tynare was capable of killing. He'd always wanted to ask Tynare about it again, but he'd never found the right moment. Or perhaps he feared what he'd hear.

Still, he didn't believe things were as clear-cut as Nilswryn made them out to be. "Tynare?" he asked, wishing he could say more but not trusting his voice.

"It's true," Tynare said after a pause that lasted far too long. "It was... I swear there's an explanation. I know you probably don't want to hear me out, but I need you to at least understand that I... I never... I didn't want anyone to get hurt, not really."

Nilswryn burst into laughter. "You agreed to help me kill off the Fezenda, sweet prince. Or have you forgotten?"

Tynare turned angry eyes toward Nilswryn. “Stop. Stop talking. It wasn’t like that, and you know it.”

For his part, Shuri felt sick. He’d truly believed there was a connection between the two of them. Then again, maybe he hadn’t been wrong about it. All this time, Tynare and Nari had been warning him off, telling him there was more about the situation than it seemed. He thought about his mother, about seeing her crushed body after her so-called fall off the rocks. He thought about his father, remembering him bleeding to death in Katara’s arms. He recalled Ivy, getting between Shuri and Kris and almost dying for his trouble.

Had Tynare also been the one to stage the attack on Ivy? It seemed likely. But even as he thought this, Shuri recalled something else—Nari’s tremulous smile, Tynare’s voice telling him to take care of himself, that open expression on Tynare’s face when they’d made love. He didn’t have a clue why he was mixing the two brothers in his head—perhaps because of Katara’s words before his departure?—but in the end, it didn’t really matter. He wanted to truly understand and not make a rushed decision, no matter how much it hurt to have to face his worst fears.

“Why? Why did you help him? What is the point of all this?”

“He wants the Empire,” Tynare said quickly. “He claims to be directly connected to the Fezenda line, and once you’re all gone, he can take the throne for himself.”

The reply didn’t address Shuri’s most important questions, but at this point, Shuri didn’t even know if he cared about the reasons. Meanwhile, Nilswryn scoffed. “It’s not a claim. It’s the truth. But it doesn’t matter anymore, not for you two. I’m afraid I’ve lost my patience. I did hope that you would do better than this, Prince Tynare, but it seems my power and my trust were wasted. So it looks like I’ll just have to take matters into my own hands.”

Nilswryn lifted his arms, and the wyvern that had been lying at his feet shot into the air. Several reptilian creatures Shuri recognized as salamanders emerged from the sand. A huge snake very similar to the one Shuri had fought during his journey to A’rankin joined them a few moments after that, its large mouth opening to display fangs dripping with venom.

It didn’t take a genius to realize they were wildly outnumbered and overpowered. They needed to get out of there, at once.

He slashed his hand through the air, summoning up a rift and aiming it toward Kar'neia. He'd have prepared to retreat all the way to the Empire, but that kind of long-distance travel would hurt Tynare, so he needed to fall back on the Aranken capital.

Nilswryn seemed to expect that plan, however. Tsking, he flicked his fingers, and just like that, Shuri's rift closed. "Did you really expect it would be that easy? You truly have no idea what you're dealing with here, do you?"

The beasts didn't even have to do anything, because one wave of Nilswryn's hand sent a bolt of powerful magic toward Shuri and Tynare. Completely unprepared for it, Shuri had no hope of avoiding the blast. He readied himself to find refuge in the elements, much like he had the time the Fire Starter's spell had struck him.

Comparing the two situations turned out to be quite foolish, since Nilswryn's magic was nothing like the Aranken's. Trying to find the two powers similar was like equating a stream and an ocean, or rather a tiny river and this endless desert. No, even that couldn't describe what Shuri felt upon being hit by Nilswryn's spell. It wasn't cold, hot, or anything really. The only word Shuri could have used to explain it was... nothingness.

The nothingness surrounded both him and Tynare in wide spheres that separated from the world, a sort of bubble-like barrier keeping Shuri from reaching out for help from the elements. Judging by Tynare's expression, his lover experienced the same predicament.

Nilswryn walked to their side, looking from Shuri to Tynare. "Comfortable? No? That's too bad. I promise I won't prolong this excruciatingly. Say your good-byes, and this can all be over."

"Stop," Tynare said in a breathless whisper. "Stop, please. There has to be another way. I'll do whatever you like. I'll find another solution. Just let Shuri go."

Nilswryn's expression melted from that wicked amusement to a thoughtful frown. For some reason, it made him seem more... like a person. Something clicked in Shuri's mind, and he finally recalled why Nilswryn looked so familiar. He reminded Shuri of the portrait that still hung in the palace in Nikaret, the painting of the very first Fezenda Morai, their ancestor, Seyan'Kel'Fezenda. Shit.

Oblivious to Shuri's revelation, Nilswryn leaned in closer to Tynare. "You know by now that sometimes there is no other way. As a leader, you have to do what's expected of you. I thought you understood that." He paused, tilting his head as he peered closer at Tynare's face. "Oh.... This is interesting. How did that happen? I might just keep you after all. I have no idea how you managed to shake off my magic."

Tynare blinked at him, as if he didn't have any idea what Nilswryn was talking about. Shuri tried to use the Shyrn leader's distraction to claw his way out of the strange bubble, but just touching the edges of the sphere hurt, threatening to peel the flesh off his bones.

"Tell me, sweet prince," Nilswryn was saying now, caressing the edge of Tynare's sphere. "How did you do it? I thought I'd broken you for good."

Tynare took a couple of deep breaths, staring at Nilswryn with wild eyes. "What? I don't understand."

"You really don't." Nilswryn shook his head, as if disappointed by Tynare's attitude. "Well, then I'll do you the favor of telling our honored guest the truth." Turning toward Shuri, he smirked. "You see, Prince Shuriden, Tynare owes me his life. Decades ago, he chased a latent here, beyond the Wards, into my territory. The ensuing battle was quite interesting, but it drew all the wrong attention. Your beloved won in the confrontation with the latent, but a salamander found his power very interesting."

As he spoke, one of the creatures in question approached Tynare's sphere, its split tongue snaking out. Tynare didn't even look at it. His eyes were solely on Shuri, and they reminded Shuri of the few times they'd been together in an intimate embrace.

Nilswryn continued speaking, undeterred. "You might be aware salamander venom cannot be cured by anything, even by the healing magic of Nurturers and Life mages. He was dying when I found him and... fixed him." A shrug. "Unfortunately, my magic isn't quite suitable for healing purposes, so there were certain aftereffects."

The pieces of the puzzle finally began to slide into place. He felt like such an idiot for not having realized it from the beginning. "Nari? Nari and Tynare are the same person." The same man, with two different personalities.

“Yes and no,” Nilswryn replied. “In any case, it’s a moot point now. It’s quite unfortunate. I would have liked to get to know you better, since we are, after all, related, and you seem to have some hidden talents I did not expect. But alas, we’re on different sides in this tale, and my enemies never win.”

Suddenly, Shuri couldn’t breathe anymore. A strange pressure crushed his chest, and his lungs couldn’t draw in air. He made another attempt to reach out to his elements. The Fezenda were Storm Callers. Surely that could help him with his breathing problem.

It didn’t. Air couldn’t reach him in the sphere, and Shuri started to lose himself to the nothingness. Even if it hurt, Shuri placed his hand on the edge of the sphere. “Just... let Tynare go.”

He didn’t know if anyone could hear the words, but for some reason, he felt they needed to be said. While he still didn’t fully understand what had happened in the past, he didn’t blame Tynare for the death of his parents. Nilswryn had told him outright that he’d manipulated Tynare into it. In all likelihood, his lover still blamed himself, though, and Shuri wanted to tell him.... To tell him that.... What did he want to say? *I love you*, perhaps.

Love. The mysterious thing he’d wondered about more and more since meeting Tynare. He wished he could have answered his own question sooner, because now it seemed far too late to even regret it.

By some sort of miracle, he managed to speak out a single word. “*Sharani....*”

He tasted something coppery and realized it must be his own blood. His vision began to dim, and he tried to focus on Tynare for as long as he could.

Ironically, Shuri had never been afraid of dying. Since his parents’ demise, he’d remained constantly aware of the fragility of life, but what he feared wasn’t his own death. Being left behind, losing people who meant something to you, it hurt far more. He didn’t want Tynare to have to go through that. And most importantly, he wanted the Aranken to keep on living, because there was so much more he could offer to the world.

Next to Shuri, beyond the barrier keeping him trapped, Tynare released a barely audible sound of dismay. All of a sudden, he started to glow, much like that day when he had faced the out-of-control latent. Nilswryn lifted his

hand, as if intending to stop Tynare's efforts with one single blow of magic. Shuri couldn't allow that. He might not be able to access the strength of the elements from the outside, but didn't he himself represent a conduit, a living manifestation of the union between them? Fire, water, air, and even earth, within him, in his magic, in his blood, in what air he could still breathe and in his bones. He reached deep within him and exploited it all, pooling it into a common core of energy. Every inch of him screamed as the four elements coalesced and clashed inside him. Shuri focused on it, on that power, remembering the advice Tynare had once given him, albeit indirectly. Tame, focus, flow, iron will—yes, just like that. It was easier said than done, since his urgency added a whole new layer of difficulty. But Shuri used it to his advantage, melding it into a force that he could use for his benefit. Finally, when the pressure became too much for him to endure, he released the power.

It wasn't a controlled spell, not in the slightest. He couldn't boast having the ability to command the elements like that, even when they resonated with his own sense of self. He could only direct the entire force of the blast at the sphere keeping him contained and hope it would work.

The barrier of nothingness absorbed some of his power but couldn't keep the entirety of Shuri's magic contained. In the end, the sphere yielded, like a glass that had taken too much water and had finally toppled, unable to contain the incoming stream. Shuri's efforts caused Nilswryn to turn his attention toward him. Shuri directed every ounce of magic he had toward his opponent, and succeeded in making him stumble.

The beasts roared in obvious anger, but Shuri couldn't have cared less. His efforts had only inconvenienced Nilswryn, but they'd given Tynare enough time to focus and gather his own energies. The glow of Tynare's magic increased, becoming brighter and brighter. The intensity of it made Shuri's eyes hurt and his heart clench. He didn't know why, but while the light struck him as the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen, it also seemed very sad.

Under Tynare's strength, the sphere around him simply melted away. The wave of light hit Shuri, and the lingering confusion and pain melted away like it had never been. But even as Shuri got up, Nilswryn straightened his back and sighed heavily.

“I feel like I should be impressed, but you two just make me weary,” he said. “Surely you must realize you can’t escape. Life magic hasn’t helped you before, Prince Tynare.”

“Things have changed,” Tynare replied. “I won’t allow you to use me ever again.”

Nilswryn hummed thoughtfully. “So this is what you’re really like. I think... I liked you better when you were useful. But no matter. You’re still in Shyrn, and your lives are mine.”

Unbreakable chains suddenly wrapped around Shuri, draining him of all strength. They seemed crafted from the same material as the spheres. Trying to shatter them proved to be an exercise in futility, and they hurt far more than the sphere. The areas of skin where they touched Shuri burned, scorched away by the magic. A glance toward his lover told Shuri Tynare was in the same predicament.

Shuri endured the pain, but it broke his concentration and kept him from fighting back. Time seemed to slow. Nilswryn lifted his hand, and dark energy swirled around his fingers, black tentacles ready to destroy Shuri.

At this point, Shuri didn’t have any other ideas. He’d gambled and lost. This man was far too powerful, and Shuri had been arrogant to think they could face him on his own turf.

He hated giving up, yielding to Nilswryn, especially since he didn’t know if his lover would survive. So he tried to fight just the same, but his efforts only earned him more pain and blank looks from Nilswryn.

When the Shyrn leader finally cast his spell, Shuri took a deep breath and readied himself for the agony he was sure would follow. Except, it never came, at least not outside what he currently felt. For a few moments, Shuri couldn’t understand the reason, but then he saw it, as if through a filter that made him process each individual piece of information at an excruciatingly slow pace. Even if he didn’t want to, even if he tried to deny it, he saw Tynare get between Shuri and Nilswryn and receive the full brunt of the blast.

Shuri didn’t know how Tynare had managed to shake off the chains, but right now, it didn’t matter. However it had happened made no difference. It didn’t change the truth of what was happening in front of him, the disaster he could no longer deny.



Something inside Shuri snapped. He heard someone roaring, and he distantly realized it was his own voice. As he watched Tynare crumble down to the ground like a broken toy, he had a flash of Ivy's injury. Only this was worse, so much worse, and Shuri felt it at a level he hadn't deemed possible.

A crushing pain filled his chest, unconnected to physical agony. He couldn't even think anymore. He just needed.... He needed to be with Tynare, no matter what he had to do.

His erratic emotions bubbled into something so powerful that it tore right through the control Nilswryn exerted over Shyrn. A rift opened behind Shuri, one he didn't consciously summon. Somehow, the power of the portal absorbed the chains of Nilswryn's magic, freeing Shuri. Or maybe he did it himself, pushing through the spell. Right now, he felt capable of doing anything and everything.

No longer would he take any step back. No longer would he even think of yielding to death. How could he have done so even for a second, when Tynare was relying on him?

His thirst for vengeance, the one he'd always felt toward Katara and Kris, became even more potent, like a poisonous fume threatening to choke him if he didn't let it out. A fire blast exploded all around him, sending the Shyrn beasts reeling back.

At the same time, from within the rift, a dark gray nightwolf emerged. His presence didn't surprise Shuri, although he couldn't understand the causes. He just knew a friend had arrived, and while he would have rejoiced at the assistance, he was too busy worrying about Tynare.

He dropped to his knees next to his lover and turned him over as gently as he could. Shuri couldn't see any visible bleeding wound, but a dark circle now lingered over Tynare's heart. It slowly expanded as Shuri watched, and Shuri knew he didn't have much time at his disposal if he wanted to save his lover.

The nightwolf now faced Nilswryn himself, with one of the wyverns writhing on the sand in obvious pain. Several of the other beasts circled them, looking a little worse for the wear but not as bad as the one the nightwolf had attacked. Nilswryn seemed livid, his slitted eyes glaring daggers at the nightwolf, then at Shuri. However, he didn't immediately engage Shuri's unexpected friend and instead knelt next to the wyvern, placing his hand on the creature's scales.

With Nilswryn distracted by the strange healing, Shuri took advantage of this opportunity to make a hasty retreat. He didn't hesitate for a single moment. Even if this might have been his chance to catch Nilswryn off guard, his main priority was Tynare, and Tynare needed medical attention, fast.

The problem was that in Shyrn, no retreat could truly be hasty. The distance between their current location and the Wards canceled any chance they might have had to make a break for it on foot, something Nilswryn likely realized. Their only other option, the rift, could hurt Tynare even worse than Nilswryn's magic.

Unfortunately, it didn't seem like they'd have much choice. Nilswryn was already getting up, slowly, like he knew he had all the time in the world. Shuri didn't wait to see what other plans their opponent had for them. He picked Tynare up, not for the first time wishing he could have a nightwolf cloak like Kris's. Since he didn't, he held Tynare as closely as he could, shielding every exposed side of the Aranken's body. Praying and hoping for the best, he jumped into the rift, mentally directing the energies to find the Wards.

Instantly, Shuri realized it felt different than in the past. It could have been because he was more aware of the elements than ever or maybe due to his encounter with Nilswryn's powers. However, he now realized the energy of the rift felt an awful lot like the magic Nilswryn had used.

He had no idea what to make of that, but he was tremendously relieved when they reached the other side, landing on the grass right in front of the Wards. The mysterious nightwolf joined them a few moments later, and the rift closed behind him.

When he placed Tynare down, he found the darkness had expanded, and he tasted terror in his mouth as he realized he truly might have made things worse. "Oh, Creator.... What have I done?"

An unfamiliar yet welcoming voice drifted into his mind. *Not warm one's fault. Void magic already in flame hair's body.*

Shuri faced the gray nightwolf, the only one who could have spoken to him. *I don't know what to do*, he admitted, falling into mental speech with more ease than he expected. *I'm not a healer.*

The nightwolf nudged Shuri's shoulder with his large head. *Sharp claws get black fur and white fur. Nightwolf soul help.*

For some reason, even if he'd never met this particular nightwolf before, Shuri knew exactly what he meant. *Yes, get Ivy. I'll carry Tynare through the Wards. The elements are our best bet now. And... thank you.*

*Warm one no need thank sharp claws. Sharp claws waiting for warm one.*

Seeing the fierce, bronze eyes of the nightwolf changed something inside Shuri. He hadn't truly understood what it meant to have such a being by his side. He realized now that he'd completely misjudged nightwolves in general, because in that welcoming, understanding gaze, Shuri found a support that steadied him, chasing away his panic.

*That doesn't mean I shouldn't thank you,* he replied, already focusing on Tynare again.

Another rift opened, and the nightwolf disappeared inside. For his part, Shuri carried Tynare back into A'rankin. Or at least, that was the plan. As he passed through the Wards, he found himself rooted on the spot, not because he couldn't go forward, but due to the sudden knowledge that this was where he needed to be.

The assault of the elements felt impossibly powerful here, in the core of the shield that protected A'rankin from its foes. Just a little farther away, A'rankin itself stretched out, but Shuri knelt in the very center of the shield, holding Tynare close.

He hadn't realized before the thickness of the Wards allowed a person to actually stand within them. But then, he hadn't realized many things, including what Tynare meant to him.

Nilswryn had told him some things that truly boggled the mind. He believed them, though, and he could see now that he'd been foolish in not putting things together from the very beginning. After all, Nari sounded like just a nickname, a short form of Tynare.

He'd failed Tynare, in more than one way. The shock of what he'd learned had made him falter. It was so much easier to forget and give up, instead of being forced to face his own past and his own future. His parents, Ivy, Katara and Kris, Tynare—they all formed a web in Shuri's mind and soul that he simply couldn't disentangle.

But now, Shuri had truly grasped the most important truth in his life. He only wished it hadn't taken such a sacrifice on Tynare's part for him to open his eyes.

As he set Tynare in his lap, he turned all those emotions into energy. He might not be a healer, but he wasn't an earth mage either, and he'd managed to use the element just the same. In a way, he became a conduit for the raw power the Aranken Wards provided. To his relief, he saw the darkness on Tynare's chest slowly begin to retreat.

He didn't know how long he'd been sitting there when another rift opened at the other side of the Wards. The nightwolf Shuri now identified as his stepped out, followed by Attcha and Reisl, with Kris and Ivy mounted on their respective beasts. Reisl was still a little smaller than Attcha, having not reached full maturity yet. However, Shuri's nightwolf didn't have that problem, which made Shuri wonder just how long he'd made the beast wait.

That matter would have to be set aside. As Shuri carried Tynare out of the Wards, everyone's attention remained on Shuri's lover. Ivy released a sound of distress. "Oh no. What happened?"

"Your nightwolf mentioned a handful of things," Kris explained, "but he wasn't very clear on the details."

"Just tell us everything you know about how he got the injury," Ivy urged him. "The rest can wait."

Shuri explained the situation with Nilswryn as best he could. Ivy listened but didn't look at him. By now, he was bent over Tynare, his hands glowing brightly as he poured healing magic into the Aranken prince.

"This void magic you've mentioned is just like the one I felt during my attack," he said as he worked. "I think it's safe to say we've identified the force behind it."

"We need to know more about this Nilswryn Essteka person," Kris said, "and preferably as soon as possible. But first, we have to get a message to Kar'neia. I will go myself. I'll leave Attcha here to help, in case something else happens."

Even knowing Kris's decisions made sense from a political perspective, Shuri still sensed his brother's genuine desire to help him. It shouldn't have surprised him as much as it did—after all, Kris had gone through something similar with Ivy, so if anyone could understand, it was him. However, Shuri had just understood these things. He couldn't believe Kris had seen it all before he himself had accepted it.

He had no words to reply, not right now at least. Kris didn't seem to require an answer anyway, since as soon as he'd spoken, he went ahead to

do exactly what he'd said he would. True, he pressed a kiss to Ivy's forehead first, but the sight of it didn't make Shuri's heart clench like before.

As his brother disappeared into the rift he summoned, Shuri knelt next to Tynare and took the young Aranken's hand. "What do you think?" he asked. "Will he...."

He trailed off, unable to finish the phrase. Ivy replied just the same, although he did so after a pause that seemed far too long. "I have no doubt he will live. He's very strong. I can feel his magic even now. But.... What condition he'll be in when he awakens.... That, I cannot say."

Shuri's breath caught at Ivy's words. He struggled to focus on the good part, but it wasn't exactly easy, when he knew all too well how hard the spell had struck Tynare and how difficult it had been for him to endure it.

Squeezing Tynare's hand, he scanned his lover's face and found it a bit less pale than before. "Come back to me," he said. "Keep your promise. Just... come back."

# Chapter Eleven

## Revelations

EVER SINCE his birth, Tynare had always been very aware of the elements. Terra, Oceana, Aether, and Ignis had all gifted him, in their individual ways. And then there was Anima, his blessing—the special guardian of Life mages.

Losing that perfect balance had been the most traumatic event in his life. For that reason, when he first awoke, his main focus was on one thing alone. He could feel them again, all of them, just like before.

Joy bubbled inside him, and he wanted to pray, to celebrate, to sing and dance. Except.... He couldn't dance. Elements, he even had trouble moving. He couldn't see, and he couldn't move his legs. Oh.

The feeling wasn't unfamiliar to him. He'd been living with this burden for decades now. He'd hated the helplessness then, and that hadn't changed, but it didn't shock him as it might have if he'd been wholly unprepared for it.

Unlike before, he could no longer fall back on his healthy side to protect himself and move around. That scared him, of course, but in a way, it also felt... right.

A voice startled him from his erratic musings. "Tynare? *Sharani*, are you awake?"

Tynare might not be able to see, but he could sense his environment through his elements. In an instant, he figured out he must be in a sick room at the palace, all the while finding Shuri's location with ease. He turned his head in that direction and nodded. "Yes. I.... What happened?"

"Don't you remember? We were fighting that... man. And you, well, you were hit."

Oh, right, he'd gotten in front of the spell that had been meant for Shuri. He remembered it now. He'd just known he could not let anything happen to his lover, and suddenly, he'd shot forward, free of the magic that had restrained him.

Had it been then that he'd regained the full use of his power? Tynare couldn't quite pinpoint the moment. That was the problem with what had happened to him. Other than the magic, he didn't feel in any way different.

Shuri probably didn't know that, though. Then again, Shuri didn't know many things, including the details of what had truly occurred back then. He obviously felt guilty about Tynare being injured by Nilswryn—and that wouldn't get any better when he realized the seriousness of Tynare's condition—but Tynare had no intention of using his predicament for the purpose of begging Shuri's forgiveness. In the end, all circumstances aside, he had indeed contributed to the death of Shuri's parents. That was something he could not expect Shuri to ever forget.

For now, Shuri didn't seem to want to mention it. "How do you feel?" he asked instead.

Tynare saw no reason to pretend or lie. "Well, pretty much like I've always felt—when I was Nari. I can't see or move my legs."

The extended pause that followed told Tynare his guess must have been correct when it came to his lover's unavoidable self-chastising. "It's all right," he said softly. "It's not your fault. You can't blame yourself."

"I brought you through the rift," Shuri replied in a soft, barely audible whisper. "I knew it could hurt you, but I did it just the same."

"Well, then, I'm indebted to you, because if we'd stayed in Shyrn, we wouldn't have survived." A thought flashed through his mind, a memory he never should have lost track of. "My men! Etera!"

"They're fine," Shuri hastened to assure him, although he still sounded shaken. "It seems that after our departure, Nilswryn lost interest in them and retreated. Everyone is safe and sound, back here with us."

Tynare heaved a sigh of relief. "Thank the elements. The last thing I wanted was to involve someone else."

He already carried enough guilt over what had nearly happened with Shuri. The idea that his men, and especially Etera, could have suffered the consequences of his actions horrified him. "So I take it you saved me and took me back to Kar'neia?"

“Something like that. You were in pretty bad shape, even after I used some of the energy of the elements to help you. I had Ivy come here to stabilize your condition.”

Tynare went rigid at the mentioning of Behnivyr Erethe. He had not forgotten what Shuri had told him about the future Moris, and while he was less liable to have fits of anger about it, he realized that now more than ever, he was no match for the future Moris. Not to mention that whatever feelings Shuri must have had for him had probably disappeared after he had figured out the truth.

“I see,” he replied tightly. He shook himself, knowing he had no right to make any demands or hope Shuri would ever love him. “Did you tell them?” he asked, shocked when his voice came out level. “Did you tell them it was me?”

“Not just yet,” Shuri answered. “I wanted to talk to you first. I still.... Much of what happened still makes no sense to me. But it can wait for a while longer. You need to recover.”

Tynare reached for Shuri’s hand and found it with only a little fumbling. “Shuri, I won’t ever be better. This is it for me.”

“What? No, that can’t be right.” Shuri threaded his fingers with Tynare’s, squeezing tightly.

“Didn’t I tell you? It’s just like in the case of the Nari you met. I know. You probably thought it might have been psychosomatic. But... it doesn’t work like that. It all started fifty years ago....”

### *Fifty years earlier*

*FIRE EXPLODED around the latent, consuming everything in its path. Tynare created a shield around himself, narrowly avoiding a blow that might have blasted a different man into oblivion. In a way, it was a good thing his men had been unable to pursue the latent, because his chaotic tendencies toward destruction seemed to be getting worse.*

*The fire latent laughed at Tynare, and a lion of pure flame manifested behind him. Tynare stared at the oddly lifelike being, willing it to submit to him. Of course, it didn’t work. It never did.*

*“Your power means nothing, Prince Tynare,” the latent said. “I’m free now. Free to do whatever I wish, without the restraints of your society.”*



*Tynare had to try to reason with the man one more time. “Stop, please. Cease this senseless chaos. We can still find some sort of middle ground.”*

*“Middle ground?” the latent repeated, practically sneering. “There is no ground for me at all, Prince Tynare. There is only fire, and everything will burn, just like I am.”*

*Tynare’s heart fell. Unlike his father, he didn’t believe latents were evil or that they set about to destroy A’rankin as a whole. But the power of a latent reached such heights that it often took over. The people who became latents had no training whatsoever, and all of a sudden, they became conduits for a magic they couldn’t even understand. Many times, their minds couldn’t endure it, and they turned into the very worst nightmare of an Aranken, an unleashed offensive elemental force that could not be controlled.*

*Something inside Tynare shattered whenever he ran into such cases. Fire wielders were particularly vulnerable to it because of the nature of the element. This Aranken already seemed beyond aid.*

*But no, Tynare couldn’t believe that. There was always hope, and while Tynare remained standing, he wouldn’t give up on this man or on any of his people. When the moment came for him to act, he did so without faltering. The fire lion lunged at Tynare, so he mentally created a water spear, piercing it straight through. He had no intention of killing the latent. He hadn’t followed the man into a dangerous expedition in Shyrn to end his life. On the contrary, he believed the other Aranken could be brought back. Maybe if Tynare managed to do that, his father would agree to give latents another chance.*

*Summoning Oceana in Shyrn was quite exhausting, and it didn’t provide guaranteed results. Fire evaporated water just as well as water extinguished fire. It all depended on degrees of power, so Tynare needed to be careful and pace himself, lest he run into quite a bit of trouble. He might have to resort to using earth magic, since sand was everywhere in Shyrn.*

*The latent’s eyes flashed with anger at being thwarted. Behind him, a dragon made of pure flame emerged. It roared at Tynare, and a stream of fire emerged from its snout. Tynare extinguished the dragon’s attack with water, but attacked the beast itself, and the man controlling it, with earth. He made the sands beneath their feet swirl madly, ordering it to keep his opponent trapped. However, at this point, the latent emanated such heat that the sand turned to glass. Sharp-edged shards flew at Tynare and*

*harmlessly shattered against his shield. The dragon flew up above, hovering over Tynare, its claws trying to bypass the magic protecting him.*

*The latent was already summoning other creatures to his assistance and creating more direct spells to throw at Tynare. At this rate, they'd attract unwanted attention. As much as he hated it, Tynare needed to go all out, throw aside the defensive approach and do what needed to be done.*

*Ignoring all the fire rushing his way, Tynare took a step forward, then another. He extended his shield around him, absorbing the latent's power and using it to feed his own. His life magic responded openly, allowing him to manipulate energies that would have been overwhelming for anyone else.*

*As a follower of Anima, Tynare was blessed with being able to use all four elements. For that reason he could face latents in battle, and while their raw power surpassed his, he could absorb the energy they gave out, and sometimes even use it. Being in Shyrn made things more difficult, and the advance was tortuously slow, but every inch gained encouraged him and made him even more aware of everything that weighed on his shoulders. The fire dragon roared in distressed anger seconds before it was consumed by Tynare's magic. At last, after what seemed like forever, Tynare reached his opponent.*

*By now, the flare of madness in the latent's eyes had grown even more intense. Wrapping himself tightly in his elemental shield, Tynare pressed a hand to the other Aranken's shoulder. Instantly, he felt it, the pain, the burn, the despair, the inability to think and to control a power far too intense to comprehend. Deep inside, the latent remained the same man he'd always been, a lone blacksmith with a happy, simple life. He didn't want to harm Tynare or A'rankin. He feared his new ability meant the elements were cursing him, forsaking him.*

*Tynare mentally soothed that fear, sucking in some of the power while trying not to get too ambitious. He needed to wade through a labyrinth of fire, to grit his teeth and endure the assault of the out-of-control element while trying to reach the core of the latent's magic. It was a risky endeavor, since even he had his limits, and being careless when absorbing a latent's magic could result in disaster. Thankfully, the energy within the latent began to respond to Tynare's presence, and he managed to calm the wild fire and stop all the mindless destruction.*

*A few moments later, the latent collapsed right there, in Tynare's arms. Tynare quickly checked him over using his magic. He was still alive,*

*elements be blessed. It might not be too late to save him.*

*Since he couldn't kneel in the middle of shards of glass, he carried the latent aside, to a portion of sand unaffected by the fire. Absorbing the overwhelming energy of the latent hadn't been easy, but he needed to stabilize the other Aranken's condition.*

*Taking a deep breath, Tynare sought out his healing skills and poured magic into the latent. He needed to completely separate his fire energies from the rest of his abilities, which would have been more than doable under normal circumstances but exhausted him now. Still, his training helped, and he dedicated himself to helping the latent. Halfway through the process, though, a strange ominous feeling encroached on his consciousness. He put a halt to the healing and turned, just in time to see a deep red reptilian creature emerge from the sand.*

*There might not be a great deal of information on Shyrn beasts and where they had come from, but Tynare still identified this new opponent as a salamander. The animal was about half as tall as a horse, but its bulk far surpassed that of a regular Aranken mount. Its red-scaled body must have been twice the length of a horse, and as it approached, Tynare also noticed the scarp claws it boasted on its feet. Similarly, its long, sinuous tail displayed brightly colored spines that also appeared on the reptile's back.*

*Tynare supported the unconscious Aranken on his shoulder and slowly started to back away. Normally, he might have been able to take on a salamander, but his power wasn't in full balance anymore. One wrong move could leave him vulnerable to an attack from the beast. Healing the latent right out of their battle had been rash, given that the two of them remained in Shyrn, where anything could happen. Even if the reason behind his decision to come here had been his desire to help the latent, he should have waited.*

*Too late for regrets now. Tynare wrapped a shield around him and his burden and kept going back. The reptile followed. It didn't immediately try to attack, but the speculative look in its slitted gaze told Tynare it would do so soon. Watching for it, Tynare didn't take into account a very significant and worrisome factor.*

*The latent he'd just defeated stirred, and the fire inside him flared brightly once again. The explosion caught Tynare off guard, and he lost his*

balance, dropping the other Aranken. Meanwhile, the salamander saw its chance and lunged forward, strikingly fast for a beast of its size.

Tynare managed to dodge the claws and the fangs, but the spine over the creature's tail raked right over his back. Cursing, Tynare summoned his water magic and struck the beast with an ice bolt, but it didn't help. Shit. How could he have forgotten? Salamanders were immune to both fire and water.

Desperate, Tynare resorted to earth, trying to get the sand to take back the salamander it had spat out. That might have worked, but his current opponent seemed to have summoned friends, and before Tynare's spell could have any effect, three more of the creatures emerged from the deep. By now, Tynare was shaking, and his focus faltered. He couldn't quite get a grip on his magic anymore, not with the certainty he'd used in the battle with the latent. The salamander's spines carried venom, and it was already making its way through his body.

With more effort than should have been warranted, Tynare steadied himself. He tried to reach for the other Aranken, but the other salamanders had already surrounded the latent, who now attempted to fight them off with fire magic. Naturally, it didn't work. The intensity of the spells did deter the creatures, and the fire beasts summoned by the latent distracted them, but it didn't take the salamanders long to bypass the latent's defenses.

Was it Tynare's impression, or had even more of them gathered? Damn it, they must have been drawn by the outburst of fire magic. At this rate, he and the latent would be completely overrun, and with the venom coursing through his body, there was very little Tynare could do about it.

Tynare tamed his panic and focused his healing magic on controlling the damage done by the venom. It wasn't a permanent solution, but it would have to do, at least for now. The world became a little steadier. Taking a deep breath, he summoned earth and air to his assistance.

Normally, the two elements clashed, just like fire and water, which was why only Life mages could use them together. For him, they obeyed, and in the desert, he had plenty to work with. The sky darkened, and at Tynare's command, the wind sped up, pushing the creatures back.

Unfortunately, the salamanders seemed to have been frenzied by the fire magic. Their claws couldn't anchor them to the dunes, so they leapt at Tynare and his companion in one last attack. Tynare managed to direct a

rush of sand at the ones fighting him, but the latent wasn't so lucky. Several salamanders landed on him, digging their claws into his flesh. One of them used its tail to spear him right through. The sickening sound, coupled with the latent's screams, almost made Tynare hurl. He sent a burst of magic toward his companion, trying to free the man from his attackers.

To a certain extent, it worked. By now, the wind had picked up and the sandstorm surrounded them, taking away the salamanders, tossing them aside like useless toys. But the other Aranken now lay in a pool of his own blood, not even screaming anymore.

Tynare crawled to his companion's side and dropped to his knees. On the edge of consciousness, the former blacksmith reached for his hand. "Prince Tynare," he said, "forgive me. My wife... Help my wife."

"Be at ease," Tynare replied. "Your wife will be fine. You'll be fine."

Even as he spoke the words, Tynare knew that the latter part of his reassurance was a complete lie. Now in the eye of the storm, he tried to stabilize the other man's condition, but it seemed a futile effort, as the latent had suffered wounds far worse than Tynare's. Everything inside Tynare rebelled against the thought of giving up, and he tried and tried, focusing on the latent's face until at last, he couldn't focus anymore.

He couldn't see at all, he realized, and he registered that fact dispassionately, too absorbed in his healing to give it much thought. It was only when the latent drew his last breath that Tynare realized some things about his own body and his own fate.

He couldn't see, and when he tried to get up, he couldn't make his legs move. The salamander venom was too strong for his healing magic to combat, even if he had been at his full power. At most, he'd managed to prolong his companion's life and his own, but that wouldn't save him, just like it hadn't saved the poor blacksmith.

If he could make his way back to A'rankin, the Wards might reenergize him. They might at least slow down the progression of the poison. There would be Nurturers nearby who could assist him. But it was useless to think about that now, since the Wards were very far away.

He didn't want to die here, not like this, and neither did he want to abandon the blacksmith's body for beasts to eat it. But neither of these wishes mattered much, when he could do very little to fulfill them.

In the end, he begged for the air to help him one last time. Both he and the dead latent started to float, heading in the general direction of A'rankin,

toward the edges of the desert. It might have worked, if Tynare had preserved enough power to keep the spell going. Alas, he didn't, so a little while later, he collapsed in the sand, spent, disheartened, and wishing he'd at least said better good-byes to his family.

Tynare had been the only Life mage in the royal family since the king that had so painstakingly managed to create the Wards, and now, he'd failed his ancestors, his people, and his land. To know that hurt more than the effect of the poison. A warrior always needed to be ready for death, but a leader also acknowledged his life was worth more to his people than to himself. He didn't want to abandon them, not now, when they needed him so much. Latents in particular needed someone to fight for them, but in all likelihood, Tynare could no longer be that person.

Unfortunately, when the strange feeling of hot and cold invaded him, he couldn't identify it as the comfort provided by the elements. The fever propelled him into memories and increasing regrets. He thought he could see the latent again, the desperate plea in his eyes changing into blazing hatred. He thought he could feel the cold hand of the dead man squeezing his wrist in anger. So much guilt, so much pain—and Tynare couldn't control it, any of it.

When he first heard the footsteps, he thought he must be imagining it. After all, who could have possibly reached him here? His men had been instructed to wait for him, and even if they had decided to follow—perhaps due to the sandstorm—they couldn't have reached him so soon. Besides, their magic had been exhausted by fighting the latent back in A'rankin, which was why Tynare had followed the now dead Aranken into Shyrn on his own.

It was probably just the wind, or more worryingly, another creature, drawn to the scent of death. It would have been nice to at least die on Aranken soil, but it seemed that instead he would become lunch for a Shyrn monster.

That stray thought dissipated into uncertainty when an unfamiliar voice sounded somewhere next to him. "Well, well. What do we have here? A sweet Aranken prince, lost in the desert. Are you the one to cause such a mess in my home?"

In the throes of fever, Tynare didn't know what to make of the words. However, he instinctively sensed something off about the speaker. As a rule,

*Tynare could feel the elements with or within any individual. Not so with this man. And when the stranger touched him, Tynare only felt emptiness.*

*He might have screamed, tried to pull away, or both. It didn't really matter because the new arrival didn't allow him to escape. He held on to Tynare tightly, threading clawed fingers through Tynare's own.*

*A strange power slid inside him, unlike anything he'd ever experienced. At first, it confused Tynare, because, while alien, it soothed the pain caused by the poison. However, when his mind cleared a bit, he realized that relief didn't come without caveats.*

*The soothing wave that had chased away the fever reached the core of Tynare's magic. All of a sudden, Tynare felt speared through, as if his very soul was being torn apart by the dark emptiness. The excruciating pain made him wish he truly had died before this creature had gotten to him.*

*He tried to resist, to summon his elements to his assistance, but it didn't work. The ruthless power slid through his defenses with the precision of an icy knife, peeling away each individual layer of consciousness, crawling into him, inescapable. Tynare writhed and attempted to claw at his foe, but the only thing it earned him was a bout of laughter from the stranger.*

*At last, something inside Tynare snapped. He blinked and found he could see again. Upon wiggling his toes, he realized he could use his legs too. But.... Something was wrong. He couldn't sense her at all. He couldn't sense Anima.*

*He looked up at the winged creature that stood next to him. "What did you do to me?" he asked as he got up.*

*"I healed you, of course," the creature replied. "Young people these days. No gratitude."*

*"I hardly think you would help anyone out of the goodness of your heart," Tynare said, sneering. Anima's absence took him aback, but he needed to take each problem at a time. It could be just exhaustion getting to him.*

*The creature—Tynare truly couldn't think of it as a man, even if it didn't look all that different from an Aranken—laughed. "Indeed. My name is Nilswryn Essteka, and I want you to do a little favor for me."*

“WHAT DID he ask of you?” Shuri inquired once Tynare finished his story.

“Exactly what he said when we were in Shyrn, to help him destroy the Fezenda. At the time, it seemed a great idea.” Tynare sighed heavily. “You might not have noticed this, but the Wards aren’t as strong as they used to be. Have you ever wondered why your nightwolves were able to come into A’rankin even if the Wards should have kept them back? That’s why.”

“They struck me as very powerful, but then, my perspective is different. Do you know why? Is it Shyrn’s doing?”

Tynare shook his head. “In my conversations with Nilswryn, he denied it, and I believed it. The thing is, Shuri, he knew about the Wards even then, and he didn’t seem interested in exploiting this opportunity. He just wanted the Empire, and that was fine with me. As long as A’rankin was safe, I didn’t care what happened to the Empire. But then, after what he did to me, I didn’t care about anything except my own interests.”

“You can’t blame yourself for that,” Shuri argued. “After all, by that point, you weren’t really... you.”

“No, Shuri. I never stopped being me. How should I explain this? I was always both Tynare and Nari. A real person has many sides, and for me, Tynare was the face I displayed in public, to my people, the Aranken leader I needed to be for my people’s benefit. Nari was... my private desires and fears. And that’s fine, you know, because I’m sure most people are like that, especially in royal families. But after what happened, my two sides were separated. My soul was fractured.”

Shuri released a dismayed noise, and Tynare had never wanted to touch him more. With his free hand, he reached for Shuri’s cheek, taking in the sharp contours of that face he knew so well. In his mind, he could imagine the contrast Shuri’s dusky skin made with his own, and for some reason, it comforted him. “It’s why my elements were separated, as well, with Tynare being a Fire Starter and Nari a Nurturer, when I could originally control all elements, as a Life mage.”

That was what had hurt the most, to lose the perfect balance he’d always had with his power. No longer able to hear Anima, adrift without the guidance of the soul that kept everything in this world together, he’d made so many mistakes he didn’t know how Shuri could stand to be in his presence.



“As Tynare, I tried to pursue my political goals without too many scruples. In a way, you could say Nari became my conscience. But it wasn’t ever quite that clear cut. Tynare was my stronger side, the one who could face day-to-day life, the side my people needed to see. By comparison, Nari was fearful and weak.”

“This will sound weird,” Shuri said softly, “but I never felt Tynare didn’t have scruples or that Nari was weak.”

“That’s because of you. Whenever you were around, the line between the two blurred. Remember how I kept stumbling when we spoke? The truth is that, whenever you said or did something that shook me, Nari came to the fore.” He chuckled bitterly. “I suppose it’s a little ironic that you loved only one side of me.”

Shuri said nothing, which could have been for the best. Tynare didn’t want to fall into self-pity or try to convince Shuri of anything that might not be true, so he changed the subject. “But that’s probably not what you want to know. Back to what you asked.... To be honest, the first thing Nilswryn mentioned to me referred to your mother. He wanted me to provide her with a poison that could madden your father’s nightwolf. She and I met in Shyrn. It seemed she’d been there before and could open a rift just like you did.”

Shuri couldn’t have missed the obvious attempt to distract him, but he allowed it. “Do you know why she wanted it?”

Shuri’s voice held a quiet pain that made Tynare hate himself for prodding this still bleeding wound. Maybe Shuri didn’t need to know absolutely everything. After all, what was the point now? His mother had died long ago, and Shuri must have a very different image of her than Tynare did. Tynare didn’t want to take that away from him.

Shuri almost seemed to guess his thoughts. “It’s all right. Tell me.”

Tynare didn’t want to, but Shuri’s tone had turned decisive, and he couldn’t refuse. In the end, Shuri deserved to know. Otherwise, Tynare wouldn’t have brought it up to begin with.

“She didn’t say much, at least not to me. But Nilswryn briefly arrived just before she left. They seemed... intimate, and he told her that she would not have to suffer any longer, that she’d soon be his empress. I believe she must have grown tired of living in the A’Mora’s shadow, although I can’t imagine she realized her lover planned to take you out as well.”

“My mother was no fool,” Shuri answered, “but our less-than-ideal situation strained her. It angered her that Father still displayed affection toward Katara. But... to think that she’d go to such extents boggles the mind.”

“You don’t have to believe me,” Tynare said quickly. “I might have misunderstood. She could have been manipulated by Nilswryn. There are a million possible reasons for her actions.”

“You mean, kind of like in your case?”

Tynare couldn’t read Shuri’s voice, and he feared what that meant. He feared how Shuri would judge him, and although he knew he needed to accept it, it didn’t make things any easier. He didn’t think he could answer without saying something stupid or embarrassing, so he stayed silent.

“Who are you now?” Shuri asked again. “What do I call you? Tynare? Nari? Neither of the two?”

Tynare forced a small nervous laugh. “Personally, I was pretty fond of *sharani*.”

Hearing Shuri call him that meant more than the Nikari would ever know. His fractured soul had been his burden and his shame for so long. He’d used his magic to disguise his outfit whenever it was needed, to hide his secret, but now that he didn’t have to.... It was impossibly liberating.

Shuri had been the one to make him truly feel whole again. Since his unfortunate first meeting with Nilswryn, Tynare could count the times he’d been able to use Life magic on the fingers of one hand and still have fingers left, but Shuri’s affection seemed to have removed the block that kept him from it.

Did Shuri even realize it? Did he realize who the man he’d made love to had been? Because no matter how their sexual encounters had started and what they’d involved, they’d been about making love. And what about the Life magic? Had Shuri made the connection between his confrontation with the air latent and the power Tynare had unleashed in Shyrn to protect them both?

Perhaps he had, because he brushed his lips over Tynare’s in a soft, gentle kiss. “*Sharani* it is, then,” he said.

Shuri’s words made Tynare ache deep inside. Perhaps Shuri understood the reasons behind Tynare’s actions, but that didn’t automatically guarantee him affection. Worse, it didn’t guarantee him

Shuri's forgiveness. Even if Shuri had come to Shyrn for him, the bond forming between them could not endure all the lies Tynare had told.

As if to confirm this, Shuri released Tynare's hand and cleared his throat. "Can I ask you a question, Tynare? There's always been something that puzzled me."

It was telling that Shuri had called Tynare by his name instead of using *sharani* as he himself had said he would. Tynare lay back on the pillows and clenched the sheets in his fists so as not to show how much it affected him. "Of course," he replied. "What is it?"

"From your story, I gather you were always very worried about latents. I just... I keep thinking about that man."

"Oh." The air latent. Shuri still thought Tynare had killed him. "I actually teleported him out of here. It's almost ironic. If only I'd been able to do the same with the two of us, we'd have managed to escape Nilswryn without too much of a problem. Unfortunately, I don't have the sort of power needed to cast it. Back then, I absorbed the air latent's magic and used it to feed the spell. In any case, as far as I know the air latent is alive and well."

"I should have known." Shuri chuckled self-deprecatingly. "You're no killer."

Tynare was humbled by the fact that, in spite of everything, Shuri still displayed so much trust in him. He'd have liked to say something, to explain to Shuri how much that trust meant to him, but a knock at the door interrupted their conversation before he could even attempt it.

"It seems they found us," Shuri commented. "Wait a minute. I'll talk to Kris and tell him to—"

"You don't have to," Tynare said, interrupting Shuri. "I need to speak to your brother sooner or later. I owe you, and him, that much."

In all honesty, he dreaded this confrontation, but what could be gained by avoiding it? He was as healthy and as ready as he would ever be to meet the man he'd been planning to kill.

Shuri didn't try to dissuade him again, something for which Tynare felt grateful. He went to get the door, although he didn't let Tynare's guests inside immediately. In fact, he stepped out into the corridor and closed the door. Tynare could have probably used his magic to eavesdrop, but he

didn't deem it necessary. He could easily guess what Shuri was telling his brother.

Of course, he wished he'd done it anyway when Shuri returned to the room, followed not by one, but by three people. Even without seeing, Tynare identified them as the Morai, the A'Mora, and of course, Behnivyr Erethe, the very last person he wanted to meet under these circumstances.

They walked up to the bed, and Shuri sat back down, taking Tynare's hand. "Tynare, meet my brother, His Imperial Majesty, Kristelien Fezenda, and his future consort, his Lordship, Behnivyr Erethe. Kris, Ivy, this is His Highness, Prince Tynare'Or'Therar."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Your Highness," a male voice said. "I only wish circumstances had been better."

Tynare recognized the words as coming from the Morai and nodded in the general direction of the Nikari emperor. "I agree, Your Majesty. But friendships have been known to appear even in stranger situations." Not that they were likely to become friends, but Tynare wanted at least the beginning of this meeting to go well.

"How are you feeling?" another, softer voice inquired. Undoubtedly Behnivyr.

"To be perfectly honest, I've been better," Tynare replied. "But you're not here to discuss my condition, are you? I'm sure you have questions."

The answer probably came out a little more biting than would have been preferable, but neither the Morai, nor his consort or his mother mentioned it. "Indeed," the Morai said without missing a beat. "What can you tell us about this man who calls himself our ancestor? Is there any truth to the claim?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. To a certain extent, his looks do resemble that of an Aranken, and the Shyrn lands used to belong to the Fezenda lords before they left. But beyond that... I'm afraid all we have is his words."

He didn't expect the Morai to let him get away with just that, but it was the A'Mora and not her son who sought further information. "And yet, I'm under the impression you know him better than any of us."

"That might be true," Tynare admitted. "He and I were... allies of a sort. Suffice to say, we had a falling out."

The future Moris released a sound of distress. At the opposite side of the spectrum, the Morai remained silent. Perhaps he'd expected something like this, because when he spoke, his voice sounded completely level. "Allies? In what way?"

"We had a mutually beneficial agreement. He promised he wouldn't touch A'rankin, and in turn, I would assist him in disposing of the Fezenda line."

The Morai snorted in obvious disbelief. "And you believed him? Surely you must have realized he was merely using you against us. He would have turned on you eventually."

That had been one of the many questions plaguing Tynare's nights, even when he'd tried to convince himself he was doing the right thing. "I hoped that, by then, I would have managed to take over the throne from my father and figured out a way to strengthen the Wards." He shrugged. "I needed the delay, and that creature kept his word up until I stopped obeying our agreement. As my father mentioned before, it's one of the reasons he contacted you. He believed that, with your help, we could take Shyrn back since the beasts there have been less hostile as of late."

"I wouldn't exactly call them less hostile," Katara argued, "given what we ran into when we first came here."

"That was a test from Nilswryn," Tynare answered. "I believe he expected and even wanted a war between A'rankin and the Empire, to distract you from all the spies he placed among you."

"Spies like Akolo," Behnivyr said, speaking for the first time since his inquiry into Tynare's health. "You were behind that."

"Not me," Tynare was happy to answer. "I did provide your manservant with the substance he required, and I was aware of the plan, but other than that, I pretty much just stayed back and watched the show."

Literally, sometimes, through the strange gift of divination he'd received. He'd have to check if he still had it. Since his Life magic had returned, he might have lost that power, which would be somewhat unfortunate. It would have definitely come in handy now.

"In any case, Tynare can't be blamed for what happened," Shuri intervened. "He was manipulated by that monster from Shyrn."

The Morai addressed his brother, but this time, he used a distinctive Nikari dialect different from the language they normally used. "And that's

supposed to make things all right?" he fumed. "You told me you were loyal to us and to Ivy. I know how you feel, but the fact remains that he's our enemy. He said so himself."

Tynare had the benefit of understanding the Morai in spite of the change in languages, and while he deemed the Nikari's approach rude, he couldn't say he blamed the man. "With all due respect, Your Majesty, I didn't say that," he offered calmly. "I might have been your enemy then, but things have changed."

"You can understand why I'm not inclined to believe you. I nearly lost Ivy because of your machinations. That isn't something we can just sweep aside with an apology."

"You will note that I didn't apologize," Tynare answered. "I did what I thought was best at the time. My reasons might not have been ideal, and perhaps to a certain extent, I was influenced by someone who wished me ill. However, my loyalties lie with A'rankin, and I aimed to safeguard my land's position. You can't honestly tell me you wouldn't have killed the leader of another country if you'd thought it would keep your people safe."

Of course, he might have been less inclined to go through with the plan if Nilswryn's magic hadn't cut off his conscience from the rest of him, but he had no intention of saying that. The Morai fell silent, since he obviously hadn't considered things from that perspective. His mother, however, showed no sign of backing down. "That might be the case, but in such a situation, the two lands are clearly enemies. In other words, even if we empathize with your loyalty to A'rankin, our own interests bring us to a position of hostility toward you, which makes your original argument void. Don't you agree?"

"You are completely at liberty to think what you want of me. I will only say this. I am not Shuri's enemy, and by extension, as long as he deems you family, I am not yours either." He smiled at Katara. "Of course, you might not be included in that, given your somewhat ambiguous relationship with him."

Tynare couldn't say he hated the A'Mora. However, he was predisposed to disliking her because her actions had brought Shuri great pain. If she wanted to be self-righteous, she should go ahead and admit her own deeds and stop hiding behind lies no one believed anymore. Even he,

who hadn't been directly involved in the aftermath of the death of the Morai Spatha Fezenda, had figured out she'd been the one to kill Shuri's mother.

No sooner had he said the words than he regretted them. The last thing he wanted was to poke that spiny matter, not out of any misplaced respect toward Katara, but because of what it might do to Shuri. Even if Shuri's mother had killed his father, he had loved her and undoubtedly he still did. Nothing could ever change that. "Again, you're under no obligation to believe me," he added quickly, "but that doesn't change the fact that I'm telling the truth. Not because of you, but because of Shuri."

He might not have gotten away with evading his gaffe, but Behnivyr unexpectedly jumped to his assistance. "I think Prince Tynare has no reason to lie. Whatever might have happened in the past, he is on our side now."

The Morai released a long-suffering sigh that suggested he and Behnivyr must have had this conversation more than once. "Ivy, *sharani*... I know you're always inclined to see the good in people, and I am the first to admit that your kindness balances me. But this time around, you have to realize things aren't so easy. He himself told us that he planned to kill the entire Fezenda line."

"I know," Ivy replied, "and that doesn't make me happy at all. But.... Shuri is a Fezenda too. I might not know Tynare well enough to judge his actions, but I know Shuri, and he wouldn't make a choice that would jeopardize us all."

As he spoke, the bed dipped, signaling that he had sat down on the edge of the mattress. Tynare tracked his motions through his magic, but he was still surprised when the future Moris reached for his hand.

If he hadn't been so taken aback by the gesture, he might have reeled away. Instead, he just sat there and only realized what was happening when Behnivyr touched him.

An electrical current seemed to go through him, and suddenly, Tynare lost track of his physical reality. The jolt propelled him into a different plane of existence. Another presence accompanied him, one Tynare recognized even if he'd have preferred not to. A few moments later, he could see again, although just through his mind's eye. What he saw made him wish he truly had delayed this little meeting between him and Shuri's family.

Behnivyr stood in what seemed to be a copy of the gardens here in Kar'neia. He looked around in awe, nudging a flower with a slender finger. His fascinated expression melted into dismay when he finally noticed Tynare approach.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to do that."

Tynare had seen the future Moris before, but never in person. The divination process truly didn't do him justice. Yes, he was beautiful, so much so that Tynare could definitely see why the Morai clung so zealously to his prize. However, there was something special about him, something Tynare couldn't quite pinpoint or understand. Honesty? Gentleness? He couldn't tell, but it made him all the more aware of how different the two of them truly were.

With a sigh, Tynare plopped down on the grass. He brushed his fingers over the blades, distantly noting that they felt just like they did in real life. But then, that made sense, since this was all in his head.

Tynare wanted nothing more than to will Behnivyr out of his mind, but he was fairly certain the Andari's divination abilities were stronger, and he didn't want to risk something going wrong. And so, he gestured for the future Moris to sit down by his side. "I believe you, even if I'm not too happy about it."

After a few moments of hesitation, Behnivyr joined him. "You don't like me very much, do you?"

"It's not that I don't like you," Tynare replied. "I'm just jealous you have something I never will."

Even as he spoke, he felt horrified he'd allowed himself to display such weakness in front of Behnivyr. His emotions still seemed all over the place, because before his recovery, the other Tynare would have never revealed his vulnerability to a man who was essentially his rival.

"You're referring to Shuri, aren't you?" Behnivyr asked, his voice so low it might have been inaudible in the real world.

Tynare didn't answer. There was no reason to do so, since the Andari had obviously figured things out on his own.

Behnivyr squeezed his arm once again, and this time, Tynare freed himself from his hold. "Your Highness, I'd rather not get into this debate with you. I thank you for your earlier support, but this matter is private."



Alas, Behnivyr simply couldn't let the issue go. "Shuri doesn't love me, you know, if that is what you're thinking. I don't know if he ever did, but right now, I'm not the one he wants by his side."

Tynare narrowed his eyes at the Andari. "And how would you know that?"

"I see how he looks at you," Behnivyr answered. "I don't think he ever looked at me that way."

A spark of hope lit up in Tynare's chest, but he squashed it before it could fully flare into being. "It's pointless. There's very little I can offer him. Whether he wants to admit it or not, I was involved in the plot against the Empire. Besides, I'm blind and paralyzed from the waist down. He needs someone who can truly support him, not a burden that would drag him down."

It was Behnivyr's turn to glare at him. "Do you deem Shuri's affection for you so shallow?"

The Andari had a point, given everything Tynare and Shuri had been through. Shuri had loved Nari, and right now, Tynare's true personality had returned to the point where Nari had become a part of him again. However, Tynare didn't know if that made things worse or better. "He might not be shallow," he answered. "If you are right, he might be inclined to support me. But can you honestly say that is what you would have wanted for him? To be a crutch for a man who can no longer stand on his own?"

"I've only ever wanted him to be happy," Behnivyr replied without missing a beat. He looked away from Tynare's face and lay down on the grass, staring up at the strange, darkened sky. "In hindsight, I went about it all wrong. I wanted to help him and Kris reunite. Kris just loves him so much, even if they're only half brothers." He vacillated and threw Tynare an awkward look. "Oh, dear. I shouldn't have said that."

Tynare waved a hand dismissively. "That Shuri is the Morai's brother? Don't worry. We knew about it already. Why do you think he receives such honors? If he and the Morai had only been cousins, we wouldn't have considered him a prince to begin with."

"Oh. I suppose I'm constantly underestimating A'rankin." Behnivyr sighed and bit his lower lip. "I think that's my problem. I grew up somewhat secluded, and while I try my best, I'm not always sure how to act

under certain circumstances. Her Majesty has been very helpful, but... with Shuri, I think I made a mistake.”

“You encouraged his feelings toward you,” Tynare guessed. He’d caught glimpses of the two men together, and even if at the time he hadn’t known Shuri well enough to care about him, their relationship had struck him as close.

Behnivyr nodded. “I only wanted to help him and Kris mend their relationship, but in the end, I made things worse.”

The uncertainty in Behnivyr’s voice made Tynare remember that time when he and Shuri had spoken of the young Andari. “He does think highly of you. But you couldn’t have known how things would turn out. If we are afraid to take a step forward and act out of fear of failure, we’ll never get anywhere.” He paused, realizing he’d somehow ended up encouraging Behnivyr. “This doesn’t mean I’m happy with your friendship with him, by the way,” he added.

“That’s all right,” Behnivyr replied. “I’m not happy with you trying to kill me and Kris. But we are all the products of our circumstances.”

The Andari got up and smiled toward Tynare. “I know it seems impossible now, but you can’t give up. I’ve felt your power, and I’ve read your injury. There has to be a way to mend it. But in the meantime, we need you. He needs you. Surely you must realize that.”

Behnivyr offered Tynare his hand, and for the longest time, Tynare just stared at it. If anyone had told him a few days ago that he would be having a heartfelt conversation with the future Moris, Tynare would have laughed in his face—or maybe even said something less than flattering, depending on his mood at the time. But now, things had changed. Here, in this strange mental hideout of Tynare’s, he hadn’t been the only one to bare his uncertainties and hopes. Behnivyr had done it too.

Tynare took the Andari’s hand and got up as well. “I’m still not sure where I stand with Shuri,” he admitted, “or if he’ll truly forgive me, but I want to help. That creature needs to be stopped. I don’t want anyone to go through what I did.”

“Then we understand each other perfectly,” the future Moris replied, a grin lighting up his beautiful face. “And by the way, you can call me Ivy.”

Just like that, Tynare resigned himself to the inevitable. “Then I suppose you can call me Nari. In the end, we are in this together.”

As he spoke, the world started to swirl around them once more. Whatever had triggered this, whether it had been the elements or their own subconscious minds, released them now that they'd agreed to their truce, and they could return to reality.

Tynare's vision died once more, and that would have disheartened him had the blindness not come accompanied by the familiar warmth of his lover holding him close. "Get a healer," Shuri was telling a nearby guard. "Quickly. We need help."

"A healer would be wasted on me," Tynare intervened before Shuri could alarm the entire palace. "Ivy and I just had a short conversation. I'm perfectly all right."

In the background, he could see—or rather sense—the Morai holding Ivy, tenderly cupping the Andari's face and ascertaining his lover was all right. Shuri's focus remained on Tynare, and this time, he didn't seem inclined to believe Tynare's reassurances. "No, you aren't," he answered, his voice shaking with obvious anxiety. "I knew this was a bad idea. You need more rest. And for the record, I think a healer is the one person you should have seen first, especially after recovering from such a serious injury." He paused, as if he'd just realized what Tynare had said. "Wait... Ivy?"

Before Tynare could clarify Shuri's obvious confusion, the door burst open. Tynare half expected it to be the fabled healer his lover had summoned, but that impression faded the moment the people in question approached.

Tynare might have been blind, but his elements still identified the new arrivals. He'd expected to have to face his father sooner or later, but there was tension around the group that shouldn't have accompanied a concerned parent coming to see his sick son.

"I see you've recovered," the king said. "That pleases me greatly."

His voice held a bland tone that made Tynare want to ask, *Does it really?* Instead, he straightened his back and replied, "I thank you for your concern, Father. I realize these past years haven't been easy for any of us, and the next ones might be even more difficult, but I have faith that together, we'll be able to surpass all difficulties."

The words sounded formal even to his own ears, but he had tried to hint that he'd gotten his Life magic back. His father didn't know the real

reason behind his original injury—Tynare had deemed it unwise to mention that creature up until this point, since he'd seen a real risk of his father putting two and two together and figuring out Tynare's less-than-scrupulous alliance. Perhaps now, he'd finally be able to have a real conversation with his father and settle on a real strategy that would benefit A'rankin.

Or maybe not. Tynare's tenuous hopes were dashed when his father said, "I would be inclined to say the same, but it has come to my attention that you've been keeping secrets from me."

Still holding Tynare, Shuri went rigid. Tynare could feel every tense muscle in the Nikari's chest, and it anchored him to know the other man would support him if need be.

He wished he could see his father's expression so he could judge exactly what the king knew. His divination skill didn't help him with empathy, not right now, so he could only take guesses and hope he wouldn't give himself away. "Secrets?" he repeated.

"Come now, son." The king heaved a sigh. "Let's not start this all over again. You know exactly what I'm talking about."

Tynare shook his head. "I'm afraid I don't," he answered. He wasn't even lying. He didn't know which secret his father had learned, since Tynare had too many to count.

"Does the name Ansel'Enth'Derada sound familiar?" When Tynare didn't react, the king elaborated, "Perhaps I should refresh your memory. We found a certain air latent wandering around the borders of Shyrn. It seemed he was worried about his savior and wanted to learn more information on your condition. He managed to escape... again."

Tynare almost wanted to laugh. How ironic that his father would mention the air latent today, exactly after Shuri had asked him about it. "What do you want me to say, Father? I won't apologize for trying to help him. He hadn't done anything wrong. This mad quest you're on needs to stop."

"Latents are a bane to our society!" his father roared. "They're destroying the Wards, and you're trying to tell me I should just leave them be? You know, I almost preferred your previous version. At least that man had some sense."

Tynare couldn't be offended at that, since his father had never truly understood the reason behind his apparent two personalities. He'd hated the Tynare who usually took over, as he'd instinctively known he couldn't trust

the charming but manipulative leader. But anger did many things to rulers, and Tynare's return to his normal self seemed overshadowed by his father's hatred toward latents.

Tynare sighed heavily. "So where does this leave us? What do you want me to do?"

"For the moment, these men will take you into custody," his father answered. "You'll have a healer at your disposal, and you'll be assisted with everything you need. You're still my son, and I care about you, but I can't have you sabotaging policies I know are right. A'rankin comes first."

Tynare wouldn't have blamed his father for his decision, and might have actually submitted to Aranken justice, since his cooperation with Nilswryn did amount to treason. However, his father's ideas were a danger, one he'd always struggled against.

"I don't believe latents are behind the Wards failing," he said, "and I won't stand for you continuing to hunt them down. I might be a broken man, but Anima is still with me. Don't force my hand, Father. Don't take this path. You won't like what you find at the end."

He felt the guards fan out in the room as his father released an angry growl. "Are you threatening me?"

"Call it whatever you like. Just know that I'm not willing to back down while you wipe out the latents."

That comment might have been more impressive if not for his lack of sight and inability to move, but like he'd told his father, he would not allow his state to get in his way. More amusingly, his father seemed to have forgotten altogether that the Nikari were in the room and this conversation revealed issues he might not have wanted known.

In fact, the king only realized this when Shuri moved and placed himself in front of Tynare. Shuri had done this before, back when they'd been in Shyrn, and it never ceased to surprise Tynare that the other man would be protective of him after everything that had happened.

His father didn't seem in the least bit happy about it. "Perhaps we should discuss this in private. I'm sure our guests don't want to hear about our private disputes."

"I'm afraid you're mistaken in that regard, Your Majesty," Shuri replied coldly. "Anything that concerns Tynare concerns me as well."

“We offer our full support to Prince Tynare in all of his endeavors,” the Morai added smoothly. “I’m sure we can reach some sort of agreement that will benefit both our nations.”

Tynare was beyond amused, since not five minutes earlier, Shuri’s brother had professed to not trusting him. It seemed Tynare might not be the only one who knew how to play the political game.

“I appreciate the help you’ve provided, Your Imperial Majesty,” the king said, “but this is an Aranken matter, and my son is an Aranken citizen. Above all else, he is subject to our laws and my leadership. You cannot change that, just like he cannot make arbitrary decisions based on what he deems correct.”

Unfortunately, his father had a point, and Tynare needed to stop this before he made things worse. “I’m not an enemy of A’rankin, Father. Surely you must realize that.”

“Perhaps you think you aren’t,” the older Aranken replied, “but it is clear to me that you are mistaken.”

This was truly a terrible situation. At this rate, a conflict would begin between the Empire and A’rankin, and the circumstances couldn’t be worse for it. In fact, Tynare wouldn’t have been surprised if he found out Nilswryn had somehow influenced this entire development.

There was only one thing Tynare could do. “Very well,” he said. “You are my king, and I will submit to your judgment. Just know that you are making a huge mistake.”

His father didn’t acknowledge Tynare’s latter comment. Instead he said, “Guards, take my son to his quarters. I want him under permanent watch, and he is not to leave his rooms without my explicit permission.”

Shuri released a growl that sounded more like an animal snarl rather than the address of a coherent, rational being. “Over my dead body.”

Tynare squeezed his lover’s hand, hoping it would help comfort the other man. “Shuri, it’s all right. This is only temporary. You have other more important things to worry about right now.”

“*Sharani*, I can’t just abandon you while your father makes you a prisoner. Plainly put, this is ridiculous, unwarranted, and unacceptable. You’re sick. Your family should be tending to you, not confining you to your quarters.”

Tynare wondered if his father even realized or cared about his condition. In all likelihood, his paralysis came as a stroke of luck for the older Aranken, so Tynare couldn't rely too much on his family when it came to that.

"I'll stay with him," Ivy offered, as if guessing his thoughts. "I can assist him with healing should he need it and keep him company while you decide our next move. Would that be agreeable to you, Your Majesty?"

For a few moments, Tynare's father considered the offer, but Tynare already knew what he'd answer. Undoubtedly, he saw the future Moris as just a pretty face with convenient healing magic. That guess was confirmed moments later, when the king replied, "Very well. I see no harm in Tynare having a friend by his side."

"I appreciate that, Father," Tynare replied. In fact, he appreciated it more than his father would ever know, since Ivy would undoubtedly prove very useful in the coming days.

Forcing himself to take heart, Tynare used the element of air to float off the bed. He felt strong enough in his magic to move around like this, which was a good thing since he didn't want to require anyone's assistance for something so basic. But then, he'd managed just fine even as Nari, with only water and earth to assist him. This wasn't anything new.

What had changed, though, and what hurt was his separation from Shuri. The Nikari didn't make it easy. His voice sounded broken when he said, "*Sharani...*"

Warm hands cupped Tynare's cheek, and Tynare distantly wondered how he'd ever doubted Shuri's affection toward him. "I'll be fine," he repeated. "I'm relying on you to do what needs to be done. I trust you."

Wrapping himself in the comfort provided by the elements, Tynare headed toward the exit, flanked by the guards and followed by his new, unlikely friend. As he left the room, he wondered what in the world Nilswryn was planning to do next and how they were ever going to stop him.

## Chapter Twelve

### Ancestors

*A few weeks later*

THE COURTYARD bustled with activity, soldiers of all nationalities mingling like never before. Tynare watched the display from his balcony, so distressed he could barely keep himself aloft.

“This is a mistake. It will never work.”

By his side, Ivy released a noise Tynare tried to interpret but couldn't. The young Andari squeezed Tynare's hand tighter, though, and it didn't take a genius to understand what that meant.

Still, when Ivy spoke, his voice didn't shake. “We need to trust them. This is not the first conflict they have faced.”

“It's not the same,” Tynare protested. “War isn't a solution to everything. And with all due respect for you and your people, Shyrn isn't Anderra.”

“I know that,” Ivy replied quietly. “I must admit I'm not very happy with Kris risking his life like this. But in the end, Nikari are warriors. They are too proud to skirt away from the battlefield. This is how they built an empire, remember? And alas, none of us have been able to come up with any better ideas.”

Tynare didn't miss the biting undertone of Ivy's words, and he immediately regretted bringing up the complicated political situation of Ivy's native land within the Empire. “I apologize. I truly meant no offense. I'm just worried, since I know what they'll be up against.”

Not for the first time, he wished he could see Ivy's face, but the only times he managed to do so was when they both used divination. Right now, that would separate them from the real world, which was something they



could definitely not afford, more so since Ivy had agreed to be Tynare's eyes when it came to watching what was happening in the courtyard.

"I never thought I would consider you a friend," Tynare added, "but I do. You can't imagine how much I appreciate your help and your kindness."

"I'm not very sure it's kindness that urged me into it," Ivy replied, his voice softening. "But as you say, I do consider you a friend now. Come. We should try to practice some. It'll make you feel better."

As always, Ivy had sensed one of the root causes of Tynare's frustration. He felt useless since, in spite of all of his power, he couldn't join Shuri on this campaign. Not to mention that for the life of him, he hadn't been able to convince his lover to stay behind.

Tynare could help in only one way, and that involved healing from his enduring injury in the salamander attack. "That sounds like a great idea," he told Ivy.

They headed back into Tynare's quarters, with Ivy walking while Tynare floated behind him. Ivy never let go of his hand, so Tynare could see where he was going without using the elements. When they stopped in the center of the room, Tynare's vision died as Ivy turned toward him. Ivy had closed his eyes so as not to make the process confusing for Tynare.

"All right," the young Andari said. "Here we go."

Tynare took Ivy's other hand as well and braced himself for today's session. He felt Ivy's magic slide into him, seeking the core of the problem, attempting to mend the wound the salamander venom had left behind. Unfortunately, it wasn't that easy, and not because of a lack of skill on Ivy's part. Many healers had tried helping—including Ivy's mother, Anfarasha, who'd briefly been brought here from the Empire. But Nilswryn's magic had caused the injury to heal all wrong, and while it had saved his life at the time, it made it nigh impossible for any other mage to undo. The venom itself had been cleared from Tynare's body, but its consequences lingered.

Even so, Tynare couldn't afford to abandon hope. He used his own Life magic to reach for Ivy. As their powers entwined, a shock of familiarity and a not wholly wanted intimacy passed through him. Ivy shuddered as well, and Tynare knew the young Andari felt the same. The complexity of this process reminded Tynare a great deal of the natural flow of magic that occurred between two lovers, and while it had made him trust Ivy, it never stopped being a little uncomfortable.

Still, the sessions seemed to help, and Tynare started to feel his legs. Clinging to the warm power of Ivy's magic, he decided to take a leap of faith. He temporarily gave up on Aether's assistance and stood on his own two feet. For a few moments, it actually worked. His legs supported him even without his elements keeping him aloft. It didn't last, and he stumbled forward, collapsing right on top of Ivy.

The bond of magic between them broke as they fell back. Ivy yelped, obviously taken by surprise. Tynare had the time to cushion their fall somewhat, once more with the help of his air element, but he still ended up draped all over Ivy.

"Sorry about that," he said. "I lost my balance."

"But it did work," Ivy replied, not seeming very bothered that Tynare was squashing him under his larger bulk. His eyes glittered with enthusiasm, and his full lips split into a grin. "That's amazing progress. You're doing such a great job."

Ivy's words made Tynare realize that, elements, he could even see, but just as that thought registered, his eyes stopped working again. He couldn't help a disgruntled sigh. "We still have a long way to go."

Before Ivy could answer, approaching footsteps notified Tynare they had a visitor. The guards always posted outside opened the door without too much fuss—they were used to these visits by now, and they still respected Tynare a great deal—allowing Shuri to enter.

Shuri stepped into the room, only to freeze a few feet away from them. "Well, this is an interesting development."

Tynare realized he was still on top of his friend, and his face flamed. He used his elemental magic to climb off Ivy and explained, "We were practicing. As you know, Ivy is helping me with surpassing my paralysis problem."

Shuri plopped down on the floor by their side and found Tynare's hand, threading their fingers together. "And? How's it going?"

"Pretty well," Ivy answered. "He managed to stand a while on his own today."

"That's excellent news," Shuri replied, hugging Tynare close. "I knew you could do it."

Tynare might have also known that he could recover, and maybe it gave him a small measure of satisfaction. Unfortunately, his slight glee

dissipated when his lover's enthusiastic tone turned apologetic. "I wish I could stay and be here with you, but I can't. We've already made plans. The troops will be departing later today."

Tynare immediately started to protest. "So soon? But.... You've barely had enough time to train together, to organize your forces."

"The longer we stay, the more prepared he'll be."

"They're already expecting you," Ivy blurted out. "This is a terrible idea, Shuri. What happens if... if...." He trailed off, not able to finish the phrase. "You're walking straight into his trap, making it easy for him to go through with his plan. It's far too risky, for you, for the Empire."

"Neither Kris nor I have any plans to succumb to Shyrn. We have too much to live for."

Tynare would have said the Nikari were just being arrogant. No one planned to die, not really, and Shuri's claim of being above such things seemed like tempting fate. But like Ivy, Tynare knew by now this was the way of the Nikari, and they would never back down from a fight. Unlike Aranken royalty, they were prepared to lead their troops in combat. At times like these, the consorts came in handy, as administrative affairs were taken over by the Mora or the Moris. Since Ivy hadn't become an official consort yet, the A'Mora had been granted these responsibilities, and had traveled back to the Empire.

But none of that made Tynare feel any better. "I just think you're being rash. You'll be fighting on Shyrn territory. You've seen his magic, what he can do. The creatures he has at his beck and call are far more numerous than the ones that surrounded us."

"More numerous than our combined force?" Shuri asked. "Have some faith. We're not alone in this."

As if to confirm Shuri's words, another couple joined them in Tynare's quarters. Tynare didn't know them nearly as well as he did Shuri, and, in fact, they confused him, but they hadn't come here for him. He'd grown to understand Andari customs, but the people themselves.... That was another story.

Ivy's two male parents embraced their son. "You must have heard the news from the prince," Ivy's father, Titexe Erethe, said. "We'll be leaving within the hour."

Within the hour? Elements, that was far sooner than Shuri had said. Tynare suddenly wanted to throw up. “I want to come along.”

“I agree with Tynare,” Ivy bit out with uncharacteristic anger. “I won’t just sit here and wait while everyone I love goes to war.”

“I think this time around, the Morai will disagree with you,” Ivy’s sire, Rasami, argued. “Please, Ivy. Just stay here where it’s safe.”

Tynare understood their concern, but he wouldn’t revise his position, and he knew Ivy felt the same. “I realize I’m not in the best position to go to war, but we’re not asking to be on the front lines. We can assist with healing. Judging by what I know of Shyrn, you’ll need every able-bodied individual you can get.”

“*Sharani*, you can’t even travel,” Shuri tried to protest. “Going through the rift made you worse last time.”

“I can go with the Andari party,” Tynare argued. “They won’t be using rifts, will they?”

“No, we bend space through a different technique,” Rasami replied. “It’s called wave-wayfaring. But truly, Your Highness, isn’t it a moot point? We’re not the ones you need to convince. His Majesty, King Rynald, still has you under house arrest, and the Morai would rather die than see Ivy on the battlefield.”

The choice of words might not have been the most tactful one, but Rasami had a point. There was no reason at all for him to have this conversation with Shuri, since he didn’t need Shuri’s permission to do anything. However, the people in charge of this expedition would be as reluctant as his current companions.

Ivy had fallen silent too, obviously realizing the truth of his parents’ words. However, something about that silence made Tynare wonder if his friend had a plan. Whatever it might have been, it likely couldn’t help them with what they needed, because Ivy said, “We’ll see you off.”

A different time, Tynare might have been annoyed that Ivy presumed to make decisions in his stead. However, the feeling that niggled at the back of his consciousness kept him from acting on such an impulse. He remained silent, since if he spoke, he might be liable to break down completely.

“*Sharani*, I promise I will come back,” Shuri murmured.

Even if he’d told himself to be strong, Tynare couldn’t help but react to those words. He removed his pendant from his neck and pressed it into

Shuri's palm. "Did I ever tell you about Anima?" he asked. "She is the soul of all things, the light that allows all other elements to merge, the patron of Life mages. Wear this. It will protect you."

Ivy had the presence of mind to look straight at Shuri, so Tynare managed to catch a glimpse of his lover's face as Shuri took the pendant. His heart clenched at the pain that briefly contorted Shuri's handsome features. His eyes glowed bronze, which usually happened when Nikari were on the brink of losing control over their violent natures. The glow didn't last, but Tynare could still tell the pain of their separation affected Shuri too. Tynare wished that had been a comfort.

After that, they couldn't say much more. Touching Shuri intimately felt awkward with Ivy and his family there, but he did brush a kiss over the Nikari's cheek. At this point, anything further seemed extremely difficult, and not just because of Tynare's inability to walk. In his heart, he still felt he'd wronged Shuri, and that might never change.

Shuri seemed to have to force himself to go, but in the end, he did leave, and Ivy's family departed with him. Once they were in private, Tynare took a deep breath to gather his wits, then directed his attention toward Ivy. "What are you planning?" he asked.

"Nothing," Ivy replied automatically. "It just.... Something occurred to me. Shuri said the rift made you sicker. He also told us that in the beginning, the Nilswryn creature managed to keep you both from using a rift. We assumed it must have been because you were on his territory, but what if there's more to it than that?"

As Ivy sat down on a nearby couch, Tynare used his air magic to join his friend. "Let me see if I understand this. You believe rifts are similar to the void magic Nilswryn Essteka uses."

"It might be," Ivy replied. "I've never felt a rift on my bare body. Whenever I've physically traveled through one, I was with Kris and wrapped up in a nightwolf cloak. But I did test a rift through my divination abilities, using Attcha as an anchor, and the feeling wasn't unlike the magic that attacked me through Akolo. Not quite as powerful or as angry, but definitely similar."

"And yet, you didn't tell Shuri or the Morai about it," Tynare pointed out.

“This might be nothing, just me making wild guesses,” Ivy replied. “Besides, I have no idea how either of us could even check if there’s anything to my suspicions or not. We have next to no information on the nature of void magic.”

Tynare mused over his friend’s words and decided to finally reveal something that had been bothering him for a while. “Well... I think I might know who to ask. Do you know who first identified Nilswryn’s power as void magic?”

“Shuri,” Ivy replied. “Shuri mentioned it to me when I was healing you.”

“Shuri had no way of knowing what it was called,” Tynare answered. “I didn’t even know, even if I’d come in direct contact with it more than once. It was Shuri’s nightwolf who said it first.”

For a few moments, Ivy didn’t answer. He seemed shocked at the idea that Tynare would even bring the nightwolves into this. It wasn’t exactly surprising. In fact, this was why Tynare had hesitated in mentioning it to begin with.

“Hynte?” Ivy asked. “How do you know this?”

“Actually, Shuri told me, a few days ago. The detail made me suspicious, but I had no idea how to bring it up again.”

“If Hynte or the other nightwolves had known something, they would have said so,” Ivy immediately protested, just like Tynare had expected. “They realize how hard we’ve been trying to find a solution to all this. They wouldn’t have hidden important information from us.”

“Maybe you’re right, and maybe you aren’t. We won’t know if we shy away from trying.”

“You want me to ask Reisl,” Ivy guessed. “I suppose.... It’s worth it to make the attempt.”

It was a testament to the extent of Ivy’s concern that he had agreed to speak to his nightwolf. Tynare hadn’t truly expected that, since it involved a level of distrust shown toward nightwolves as a whole. But in the end, Ivy did go through with it. Tynare felt him get up and step out into the balcony. In mere moments, a rift opened there, just far enough from the balcony doors so as not to do any permanent damage to them. The nightwolf stepped out and, together with Ivy, made his way back inside.

Nobody spoke, or at least, no one said something Tynare could hear. He was fairly certain Ivy and Reisl must have been talking, but through that specific method Tynare couldn't use. Tynare relaxed on the couch, focusing on the elements to take his mind off his concern.

He didn't know how long he lingered there, in his trance, but he'd almost drifted into slumber when a strangely phrased sentence drifted into his mind. *White fur know, but is secret. White fur want tell brave one, but forbidden.*

Even if the voice felt unfamiliar, Tynare could immediately identify it as belonging to Reisl. He knew he shouldn't snoop, but he hadn't slipped into this mental connection on purpose. Perhaps the earlier session with Ivy had left a lingering aftereffect, allowing him to get this glimpse of the conversation.

*Forbidden by whom, Reisl?* Ivy asked. *I don't understand. What could possibly compel you to keep something like this from us?*

The nightwolf released a wounded noise, and through his expanded senses, Tynare could almost see the beast nudging Ivy with his wet nose. *White fur sorry. Brave one forgive?*

That wasn't a real answer to Ivy's question, and Ivy must have noticed it as well. *I just don't understand, Reisl. This is more than just about void magic. You must have a grasp of who that man truly is and if there's anything to his claim of being related to Kris.*

Reisl vacillated, then finally replied, *Child of void speak truth. Child of void son of greedy one ancestor.*

*But that's not possible,* Ivy protested. *That would make him... two thousand years old. Not even Nikari live so long.*

*Child of void not Nikari,* Reisl pointed out, as if that hadn't been amply obvious. *Child of void like dark one.*

At this point, Tynare had pretty much lost track of three quarters of what was being said, but he understood the basics. He might have gotten things a little clearer in his head, but the nightwolf sensed him at last, and Tynare couldn't hear the conversation anymore. He became aware of the rest of his environment, and as he shook off the strange haze, he also registered Ivy sitting down next to him.

"You shouldn't have done that," Ivy told him, a hint of anger straining his voice.

“I didn’t do it on purpose,” Tynare replied. “Besides, it’s not me you should be angry with. Have you somehow forgotten Kris and Shuri are leaving in an hour, if that? I know what they face. Elements, you know too. You’ve seen what it did to me. Do you want them to end up like this? Broken? Shattered?”

“Don’t say that,” Ivy cried. “Please, don’t.”

“Which part?” Tynare continued relentlessly. “That I’m broken or that they’ll follow my example? To be perfectly honest, I think I was lucky. I had my Life magic to sustain me, and that creature did help weed out the salamander venom from my blood. But will they have that, I wonder? In fact, any of the people there, your parents, your soldiers, do you think they stand a chance? Assuming Kris and Shuri can hold their own in front of Shyrn forces, do you have any idea how many people might die in this conflict?”

He realized all too well that he was pushing his friend. Ivy understood the seriousness of the situation, but he also cared for his nightwolf and was naturally inclined to respect Reisl’s fears. Even if Tynare hadn’t overheard much of the conversation, that had been obvious to him.

Thankfully, Tynare’s approach worked, in that it made the nightwolf pad to their side. As Ivy wept silently, the beast set its large head on Ivy’s knee. Tynare couldn’t exactly see him, but he could feel Reisl’s approach. His heart clenched, and he wished things could have been different. He loathed himself for having to resort to such manipulative methods—this wasn’t his way, not anymore—but for Shuri, he’d do this and anything else he needed to.

As Ivy’s hand landed in Reisl’s fur, the disjointed speech of the nightwolf once more slipped into Tynare’s mind. *White fur not allowed to tell secret to Nikari. But brave one and flame hair not Nikari. White fur can show.*

To Tynare’s ears, that sounded like a matter of semantics, and he could still sense a trace of apprehension within the nightwolf. But he didn’t question it and neither did Ivy. He did, however, swear to himself that whoever Reisl feared wouldn’t touch him. This whole matter seemed more complicated than Tynare had originally expected, and there had been enough suffering already.



Ivy gripped Tynare's hand tightly. "Focus on your divination magic," he instructed. "It will make things easier."

Tynare had a vague idea of what Ivy planned, but that didn't prepare him for when it actually happened. Reisl padded away and opened another rift, but when he entered it, Ivy's and Tynare's minds were anchored to him.

Pain erupted through Tynare, and when he sought out the comfort of the elements, he couldn't find them, at least, nowhere around him. He took a deep breath, reminding himself that his body remained in his quarters, and this journey was like any other divination session. Besides, he always had Anima's support within him, in the very core of his magic.

Once his emotions settled, his vision cleared, and he could see once more. In front of him, the white nightwolf advanced on swirls of chaotic energy, and his leaps seemed so graceful it almost reminded Tynare of a dance. He would have been inclined to deem the experience beautiful, but like Ivy had said, the pull of the rift did feel very much like Nilswryn's magic, albeit a far more sedate version of it.

At last, a bright light loomed ahead of them, and Reisl disappeared into it. Tynare and Ivy followed, and once they bypassed the gateway the rift's energies settled down. It was a good thing too, because it allowed Tynare to focus on the magnificence of the place Reisl had taken them to.

Tynare and Ivy seemed to be floating over a reproduction of bits and pieces of A'rankin and perhaps of the Empire. A large portion of it resembled the forest that bordered Shyrn. Tynare recognized much of the vegetation. A stretch of ocean filled with marine life somehow gravitated around them, and Tynare had a moment when he registered the truly surreal nature of his location as a three-finned angelfish swam right past his head.

*What is this place?* he asked.

*Nightwolf home,* Reisl explained. *World not remember, but rift always remember.*

Tynare would have liked to ask more, but the white nightwolf had already walked away. Reisl guided Tynare and Ivy through the forest, and the dark shrubbery seemed so familiar, yet so very different, like a beloved friend one saw after a long time of being apart. The rift always remembered.... What did that mean? That A'rankin had been like this once?

He remained silent and lost in his thoughts until they came to a familiar-looking sprawling mansion. At that point, Tynare stopped

walking... or floating. His muscles or his mind refused to assist him into moving, and he couldn't help a gasp. The house wasn't quite like he remembered it—the one time Tynare had seen it, during his meeting with Shuri's mother, it had been surrounded by dark, spine-covered walls, with bubbling pools of tar all around it—but it remained, without a doubt, Nilswryn's residence.

*Ivy... I'm not sure about this*, he finally said when he could find his voice.

*Safe*, the white nightwolf assured them. *White fur not risk brave one and brave one friend.*

Tynare believed that, and he'd already asked a great deal of Ivy and Reisl. And so, he squashed his hesitance, and when the doors of the house opened, he trusted Reisl and followed Ivy and the nightwolf inside.

He half expected to be ambushed the moment he stepped into the structure, but of course, that didn't happen. In fact, the foyer of the building, while empty, made Tynare realize something very important. The spacious, airy feel of the mansion, the big windows and tall archways suggested it belonged to an Aranken with an affinity toward Aether. The flowing curves of the columns and the winding staircase up ahead pointed to a worshiper of Oceana. Tempesta's symbol appeared on blue banners and the tapestries decorating the walls. A Storm Caller's residence, then.

That should have made him feel better, and maybe to a certain extent it did, but it also stirred the dread in his heart to a pulsing feeling of fear. Right now, he didn't fear for himself, though, but rather for Shuri, for what the secrets they learned here would do to his lover.

It was too late to back down, though, far too late. Reisl led them up the staircase, to a room with a beautiful wooden door, engraved with Tempesta's symbol. One nudge of Reisl's paw opened the door, revealing a sort of library-cum-study hidden beyond.

The room smelled like knowledge, that distinctive scent of ink, paper, and magic that Tynare usually found in the library of the palace in Kar'neia. At a different time, he'd have been very tempted to investigate the tomes, but his attention was drawn to a man sitting at a nearby desk, an Aranken lord judging by his build and garments.

The lord leafed through a book, occasionally making notes on a scroll of his own, mumbling under his breath. "There has to be a way. I know it. There just has to."

Tynare's stomach roiled when he realized just how much the stranger looked like Nilswryn. But there were no portraits of Fezenda lords in A'rankin, so he couldn't be certain as to the man's identity. "Is this...."

"Yes, that's Seyan'Kel'Fezenda," Ivy replied before Tynare could finish the phrase. "There's a portrait of him right next to the throne room in Nikaret."

The somewhat stationary image faded, and Seyan's figure manifested again, this time in the center of the library. Seyan took a deep breath, as if bracing himself for what he was about to do. He hesitated for a few moments, but then, he seemed to take heart. He whispered an incantation under his breath, something Tynare couldn't quite hear. His body began to glow, and even if Tynare wasn't actually there, he could swear he felt a drop in temperature. At last, Seyan slashed his hand through the air in the very same gesture that, by now, had become familiar to Tynare.

Just like Tynare had expected, a rift opened in front of Seyan. Unfortunately, the Aranken lord had picked a poor location to summon the portal, because the energies coming from it started to suck the shelves and the books in. Tynare instinctively winced at the sight, since he'd always hated the waste of knowledge. But the books aside, the message of the summoned images seemed quite clear and more than horrifying.

Tynare kept watching, hoping he'd be proven wrong. If anything, though, the truth turned out to be worse than his original suspicions. A humongous creature emerged from the rift, its shape manlike but its height easily twice the size of a regular Aranken. The wings and slitted eyes were reminiscent of Nilswryn, and Tynare wondered if this was Nilswryn's real form, beyond the illusion that made him look so similar to Shuri's Aranken ancestor. Nothing else made sense.

In the memory, the creature approached a horrified-looking Seyan. The Aranken had obviously not expected this result, but he snapped out of his trance and directed a lightning bolt at the monster. The beast summoned his own magic, a dark wave that swallowed Seyan's spell and advanced toward him, threatening to swallow Seyan whole.

Seyan dodged the tendrils of darkness before they could reach him and tried again, with an even more powerful spell. The creature just laughed. "Cute," it said. "I love it when my prey fights."

The voice sounded like death brought into being—deep, cold and ruthless, unyielding, a branding knife ready to pierce flesh and spear bone. It was different from Nilswryn, Tynare realized. Someone else, then, someone worse than Tynare’s longtime nemesis. The horror of it shook him to the core. Even if the creature couldn’t see him, Tynare still took a step back, attempting to shield himself and Ivy from a threat that no longer existed.

By his side, Ivy trembled, perhaps realizing as well the true seriousness of the nightwolf’s secret. Meanwhile, in the ongoing scene, Seyan kept trying to fight the creature, to no avail.

In the end, the summoned monster got tired of playing the cat-and-mouse game with the Aranken lord. He flicked his wrist, creating a sphere of magic very similar to what had contained Tynare and Shuri in their battle with Nilswryn. Seyan attempted to free himself, but he didn’t have any luck. “Oh, elements,” he whispered under his breath. “What have I done?”

Seyan’s figure melted into nothingness, and Tynare wished he hadn’t found that so depressingly symbolic. *What happened after that?* he inquired. *Is that creature the one to truly lead the forces of Shyrn?*

*No,* Reisl replied. *Dark one not here. Flame hair be patient. White fur show.*

Reisl led them out of the now-oppressive mansion, but as they moved, Tynare noticed a handful of things changing about it, as if just the summoned memory of the creature affected its state. Tempesta’s symbols vanished, replaced by dark banners. Through the shadowy windows, Tynare caught a glimpse of the walls he’d once seen in Shyrn, just beginning to grow.

There were no people, and Tynare felt grateful for that small mercy. From a winding corridor, they emerged into a small garden. The beautiful fountains sent jets of sparkling water flying into the air, but under Tynare’s very eyes, the translucent liquid darkened and thickened, becoming pitch-black tar.

Another image manifested in front of the tar fountain, again of Seyan and the foe he himself had invited into his world. At one point, the monster must have released him from the sphere, because he now stood free of his trap. “I will not allow you to destroy A’rankin,” Seyan shot at the creature. “I will die before I let you take over my land.”

The monster laughed again. “And what do you truly think you can do? You are helpless. I’ve only let you live so that you can see the destruction your arrogance and lust for power has wrought. Do you think that if you’d been a threat you would be standing now?”

Seyan clenched his hands into fists. “You deem me arrogant, creature, but so are you. There is always a chance, and hope always dies last.”

“Charming, albeit useless optimism.” The monster pointed to the distance, where the forest had begun to surrender to the desert. All around them, Tynare could suddenly hear the cries of hundreds of beasts, salamanders, wyverns, chimeras, manticores, and many others. “The Spawn will claim this land as their own. Soon the rift you opened will absorb everything, and its power will travel over the great ocean, to the Western Realm. Everything will be mine, and you and your people will be my slaves.”

“A Fezenda will never be a slave,” Seyan spat, “not to you or anyone else.”

All of a sudden, a rift opened behind the monster. The creature turned, a smirk on its black lips. Obviously, it wasn’t too worried about anything Seyan could do, because it moved slowly, its wrist already sketching that motion Tynare had seen Nilswryn use to seal a rift. It didn’t manage to complete it because Seyan physically lunged at it.

The Aranken lord must have realized Storm Caller magic couldn’t harm his opponent and would just be absorbed by the powerful being. However, kinetic energy, or rather brute strength still affected the beast. The two men—if that creature could be called a man—fell together inside the rift.

Tynare couldn’t imagine the Aranken lord having too much luck with containing his foe through such an ill-advised move. This time, Tynare watched the entire scene in the black tar, and the taste of bile filled his mouth as he took in what had happened to Seyan within the rift. The chaotic energies of the dimensional portal tore at his flesh, threatening to vaporize Seyan. Worse, the creature didn’t seem very happy with Seyan’s daring. Its—his?—void magic slid into Seyan, making the Aranken lord writhe and convulse like a mad man. Tynare knew all too well how that felt, could still remember it in his nightmares. Blood seeped from Seyan’s mouth and nose, and his limbs snapped, inches away from being torn right off.

However, Seyan seemed to have a plan, because as the creature became distracted with torturing the Aranken lord, nightwolves descended upon him. They came from every angle, swarming the two men. Fangs and claws ripped the monster away from Seyan, freeing the Aranken lord from his torturer's hold.

Or perhaps things would have been that way, but the monster didn't seem inclined to give up his prey so quickly. Its claws dug into Seyan, refusing to let go. A doorway opened within the rift, and as the nightwolves ushered the creature toward it, Seyan was dragged along as well.

Tynare would have deemed Seyan's fate sealed had he not known the Aranken lord had escaped and eventually become the ancestor of the Nikari Morai line. Indeed, at the very last moment, Seyan ripped himself free from his foe's hold. Blood and flesh clung to the monster's claws as it finally disappeared behind the barrier.

The image in the tar pool faded, leaving Tynare more shaken than ever and with so many questions he didn't even know how to begin. Reisl helped with one of them. *Nightwolves seal dark one, he said. But dark one use essence of rash one. Out of it and his own seed, he make child of void and send here. Child of void Guardian of Spawn.*

Ivy was already shaking his head. *How is that even possible? That creature might be a monster, but it seemed male. Two men cannot breed.*

*Is like with brave one,* Reisl replied. *Two fathers. Child of void just not have mother like brave one. Mother void.*

Tynare understood now. It seemed this odd creature had used magic to create Nilswryn as a union of the Aranken Fezenda line and his own cursed kind. Through this, he'd circumvented the binding the nightwolves had placed on him. That certainly answered the question with regard to Nilswryn's identity, although Tynare didn't know whether or not it helped them in any way. If anything, he now wondered whether they had another opponent that, up until now, they hadn't even been aware of.

*Is this creature still sealed?* he inquired.

*Yes. Nightwolves guard. But still very risky. Old rift still not closed. Rifts very risky.*

Ivy turned away from the tar fountain, his posture so rigid Tynare wondered how he could even walk. *This is what you didn't want to tell us, isn't it? Nightwolves didn't reach out to Nikari because of a sudden affection. They came to make sure other rifts like this one didn't open again.*

Reisl didn't answer, but he didn't have to. Ivy's words echoed heavily in the sudden silence, like a weight on all of their souls.

Tynare didn't have a nightwolf of his own, and had never quite known what to make of the beasts. After his experience with salamanders, he'd become wary of most creatures displaying that kind of power. However, Shuri had grown quite close to Hynte, his nightwolf, and this betrayal would crush him.

*So what do we do now?* he asked quietly. *We can't keep this a secret from them. It's too important.*

*I agree,* Ivy answered. *It might prove instrumental to the war. But at the same time, Kris's bond with Attcha strengthens him. Losing that... Losing Attcha... I don't know what it'd do to him.*

*Let's think things through,* Tynare suggested. *There's no reason why anyone has to lose their nightwolves. After all, it's not like we can't understand why they acted the way they did. This was clearly very important. Can you imagine what would have happened if the story had repeated itself on the Western Realm? Anderra might have suffered the fate of A'rankin.*

Ivy shivered, as if he was imagining his native land being turned into a desolate desert, like A'rankin almost had. Reisl took the offered opportunity to intervene. *Nightwolves guardians of rift,* he said. *But nightwolves also friend of Nikari. White fur friend of brave one.*

*Oh, Reisl...* Ivy hugged his nightwolf's large head and buried his face in the beast's mane. *I know that. I know.*

Unfortunately, while Tynare and Ivy understood this, there was no telling how their respective lovers would react to it. For the moment, Tynare just wanted to get out of here. He didn't know why, but the atmosphere felt increasingly oppressive. Perhaps his memories were getting to him after all.

He opened his mouth to suggest their departure, but before he could say anything, Reisl's large body began to twitch. The motions became so violent that Ivy ended up thrown away from his friend.

A disembodied voice reached Tynare's ears, echoing all around them. *You didn't truly think your little rebellion would come without consequences, did you?*

Tynare couldn't identify the speaker as male or female, but it didn't matter. Reisl seemed to be choking, and Tynare could swear he saw a

glowing chain tightening around the nightwolf's throat.

Anger exploded through Tynare. He was done stepping back and allowing everyone else to make decisions, to think they could hurt and destroy just because they were powerful.

A wave of magic tried to knock him back, but Tynare managed to erect a shield just in time. The elements were always with him, just like they had been when he and Shuri had forced their way past nearly impenetrable shields. Similarly, Ivy shot to his feet, undeterred by the strange magic. He rushed to his friend's side, gripping the ethereal chain and attempting to free Reisl from it.

Instantly, the young Andari recoiled, hissing as the chain burned his palms. *Foolish creature*, the voice came again. *Do you think your power can touch us?*

*Actually, yes*, Tynare replied, joining his friend. Together with Ivy, they tried again, finding the collar that hung from Reisl's neck and searching for any visible clasp.

He didn't expect to find it, and he didn't, at least not at first. The voice continued to mock them. *There is a price that must be paid for disobedience, and this creature went against our specific instructions of secrecy.*

*If secrecy had meant so much to you, you'd have kept him from saying anything*, Tynare pointed out. *You're monsters, pretending to be well-meaning, when all you have is self-righteousness.*

*We don't have to defend our decisions in front of you*, came the answer. *You're nothing more than an insect.*

*If we're that weak, why don't you show yourselves?* Ivy taunted. *Afraid?*

Tynare's respect for his friend increased even more, as Ivy's voice didn't shake in the slightest. He couldn't possibly imagine such a simple retort would cause any reaction, but it did. A glowing silhouette manifested in the middle of the now barren garden. Tynare had never seen anything like it, and in fact, he had trouble processing its nature and existence. It seemed to absorb light, while at the same time emitting it so brightly it would have blinded Tynare all over again—had it been possible in this realm. When he tried to get a better glimpse of it, he found that he couldn't. His eyes refused



to obey him, as if the silhouette was cascading into a thousand mirror images distracting him, preventing him from focusing on a single one.

*Do you have any concept of the promise this being has jeopardized? it—he?—asked. His rashness might endanger the already tenuous balance the Nikari struggle with.*

*And what would you know about Nikari?* Ivy trembled as he faced the mysterious creature. *Kris and Attcha share a deep bond, just like I do with Reisl.*

*We understand more than you know,* the new arrival replied.

Suddenly, Tynare could distinguish the features of the person in front of him, and he gaped as he realized it was the same Aranken lord he'd seen fighting minutes earlier, in the pool of tar. *You?*

*Yes, me,* Seyan replied. As he looked at Tynare, his eyes cleared of light and turned the regular blue they had been once. *Do you truly think I could rest at ease when I knew what I had unleashed? How could I? I tried to do right by my kin, but even my Nikari son was corrupted by the power he felt he could find within the rift.*

*Her Majesty told me once,* Ivy whispered. *He killed you.*

*Yes, he did,* Seyan answered, *because I forbade him to use the technique. I knew what it would do to him, to everything we were struggling so hard to build. But the Nikari were still so unstable then.... You will never know, Behnivyr, and you should consider yourself lucky for that.*

Tynare didn't understand anything anymore. *But how can this be? How can you be alive after all this time?*

*You misunderstand, Your Highness,* the Aranken lord replied. *My soul bonded with the rift the very first time I begged for the help of the nightwolves. Did you know? This place, everything you see.... It is sentient. I am merely an avatar of it, a mortal consciousness tied to something far greater than me, than us all.*

*And yet, the rift is bound to Nilswryn as well,* Tynare said skeptically. *I've seen it myself.*

*It was unavoidable. Nilswryn is closer to me than you will ever be.*

Hysterical laughter bubbled in Tynare's throat. *Of course he is. After all, you're his father. And yet, we're supposed to trust that you mean well. You'll understand if I don't deem you very trustworthy under the circumstances.*

*I care little of your opinions, Prince Tynare, Seyan answered. To be perfectly honest, when I was in life, I didn't even know he existed. If I had known, I might not have left. But that's beside the point. What matters is this. The nightwolves are the one barrier that keeps your world from the corruption of the Essteka.*

*No, they aren't, Tynare countered. I'm here now. Shuri is here, and his brother. We can do this. We can face this threat.*

*Can you? Somehow, we doubt that. Even as he spoke, his eyes and his skin began to glow again. His veins became darker, then translucent in a paradoxical display that would have made Tynare's eyes hurt if he hadn't been in spiritual form. As he finally settled onto a shape, the strange being continued, But very well. We acknowledge your vow. It might be time for a change. After all, nightwolves have proven more resourceful than I originally thought.*

Just like that, the chains around Reisl disappeared. The white nightwolf could stand again and predictably padded to Ivy's side. He licked Ivy's face, then hesitantly turned toward his former master and asked, *White fur.... Free?*

*Yes, you're free, Seyan—or the figure taking Seyan's form—confirmed. What you do next is your choice. Will you stay with your friend? Will you participate in this war? It's your world you defend now.*

Without another word, the silhouette vanished. As it did so, the light began to engulf the strange house, and this time, Tynare truly was blinded. He only realized the blindness went far beyond a temporary thing when he became aware of scents far too familiar to belong in an interdimensional rift. Just to be sure, he checked his guess by trying to move his legs and predictably found that he could not. They were back in the real world.

Tynare hadn't felt any sort of transition between the two locations, but that wasn't the oddest thing that had happened to him in the past hour or so. Ivy seemed to think the same. "Creator be blessed," he said. "I don't even know what to make of that."

"Me neither," Tynare admitted, "but we do have to tell Shuri and Kris about it. Understanding the nature of one's foe is of utmost importance in a war."

Tynare didn't have to see to know Ivy's face showed only agreement and determination. "I will go," the young Andari offered. "I will speak to

them.”

It seemed so strange, but Tynare had even forgotten he was forbidden to leave his quarters. With a sigh, he nodded at his friend. “Thank you.”

Ivy squeezed his shoulder in wordless reassurance and then departed, with Reisl trailing behind him. Tynare remained on the couch, mentally poking at what they knew from every angle while struggling not to feel useless.

He was busy musing over the possible weaknesses of Nilswryn’s power when he felt his friend approach once more. Something seemed different about Ivy’s gait. It was different, far more rushed, almost frantic.

With the assistance of the elements, Tynare got up just as Ivy burst into the room. “What’s wrong?” Tynare asked without preamble.

“It’s Shuri,” Ivy replied. “Shuri is missing.”

“Missing?” Tynare repeated dumbly. “How could he be missing? What happened?”

“Apparently, he decided to use a rift a few minutes after we spoke,” Ivy explained. “He.... He never came back, and he didn’t reach the Empire as he’d intended.”

Even if Ivy didn’t say it, Tynare knew exactly what his friend must have been thinking. Their little expedition within the rift had likely caused some sort of imbalance that had led to Shuri’s predicament. Well, whatever the cause of the problem might be, Tynare had no intention of abandoning his lover. “We need to find him, right now.”

Ivy settled down next to him and as they threaded their fingers together, Tynare became aware of Kris entering the room as well. He disregarded the information as irrelevant and focused on finding Shuri.

Shuri, who’d showered him with so much trust and affection in spite of everything that had happened. Shuri, who’d remained steadfast even when faced with Tynare’s lies. Shuri, who’d given Tynare hope that one day, he could be whole again.

The bond that existed between them flared to life, and Tynare suddenly knew beyond the shadow of a doubt what had happened to Shuri. He didn’t even need Ivy’s assistance to pinpoint the other man’s location. His connection with Shuri acted like a beacon, guiding him to his lover.

When he returned to the real world, he found his companions waiting for the information. Tynare wasn’t about to let them, or rather Shuri, down.

“I know where he is, and we need to hurry. We don’t have much time.”

# Chapter Thirteen

## Void

SHURI LOOKED up at the dark ceiling and blinked, trying to clear his vision. A migraine pounded his skull, and he groaned as he tried to push past the pain.

The last thing he remembered was entering the rift with the intention of briefly traveling to the Empire. He'd received word that his uncle wanted to see him, and he couldn't go to war without saying good-bye to the man who'd raised him.

However, as they'd passed through the portal, something had gone seriously wrong. His nightwolf had started to rear wildly, and the rift almost seemed to respond to it, the energies becoming wilder, more chaotic.

He'd clung to Hynte's fur as the rift had thrown them around, all the while wondering whether this was it, whether he'd end up torn apart like his father or his uncle. And then.... Well, the next thing he knew, he was waking up here.

Speaking of which.... Where had he ended up? Shuri took a good look around, but he didn't recognize the room. It held the airy feel of an Aranken abode, but the lack of ornaments went more along the line of what Shuri's people would do. Then again, the rift might have sucked up several items. Three-quarters of the furniture in the room—and wasn't it strange-looking furniture indeed?—had been destroyed by the rift. The portal seemed to have emerged in the very center of the room, as pieces of a couch now lay scattered about among splinters of wood that might have once been a table.

Next to one of the cushions of the couch, Shuri spotted the large form of his nightwolf. As he watched, Hynte got up, shaking himself in a manner that reminded Shuri more of a person rather than a big canine. Shuri

followed Hynte's example, when it came to standing at least. *Hynte? What happened?* he asked. *Where are we?*

The nightwolf tilted his head and scanned the room with his piercing too knowing eyes. *Sharp claws not know. But sharp claws suspect... and not like it.*

Shuri trusted his friend's assessment, more so since he himself had a bad feeling about their current location. *We're definitely not in the Empire and possibly not in Kar'neia either. We need to get out of here at once.*

Hynte nodded and padded to the door. He nudged it open with his snout, then peered outside. No one seemed to be in the corridor beyond, so Hynte left the room, and Shuri followed.

In the past few weeks, Shuri had gained a new understanding of nightwolves. In fact, he'd gotten quite close to Hynte. Oftentimes, when his confusion and heartache got to him, he took refuge in Hynte's companionship. Hynte's presence had definitely helped soothe his guilt, and it helped steady him now.

Wherever they'd arrived didn't feel like a very welcoming place. The palace in Nikaret held a distinctively disciplined way of decoration, but the taste of this home's owner bordered on creepy. Every item, from the occasional mirrors to the armors adorning the corridor, displayed two distinctive features—the complete and utter use of black and all the sharp angles, so many sharp angles. Everywhere Shuri looked, he saw anger and hatred.

To a certain extent, he wasn't surprised when upon slipping into a different corridor, he caught sight of a figure that seemed manlike but actually wasn't. In spite of its bipedal nature, its head looked bovine, and the hands holding its spear displayed claws as sharp as Hynte's.

*We're in Shyrn, aren't we?* Shuri whispered to his friend.

It was a rhetorical question, but Hynte still nodded. *Shyrn. Yes.*

Shuri didn't know if this was a stroke of luck, another ploy of Nilswryn's, or an unfortunate accident that might finally lead to his demise, but he needed to try to make use of this opportunity. If there was even the slightest chance that he might be able to catch Nilswryn off guard, he couldn't waste it. *Be careful,* he told Hynte. *We can't be seen. We have to track him down.*

His ability to communicate mentally with his nightwolf came in handy, as they were in synch when it came to making their way through the building. It wasn't easy to bypass the demonic guards, since the half-bovine creature turned out to be only the first of the numerous ones posted. Truth be told, Shuri felt surprised none of them had overheard the rift opening, and the suspicion that this might all be a trap never left his mind.

In the end, his concern seemed unwarranted, at least in that regard. Hynte appeared to know where he was going, and Shuri made a mental note to ask his nightwolf exactly why. For the moment, he kept going, and the faith he placed in Hynte led him in the right direction.

As they evaded what must have been the third patrol in the place, Hynte froze in his tracks. A large door in front of them started to open. Shuri and Hynte had time to retreat behind a column before the sound of Nilswryn's voice reached his ears.

"The wyverns are guarding the borders with A'rankin, but right now, I'm thinking of reassigning them."

He seemed to be talking to someone, but when Shuri peeked around the edge of the column, he couldn't see anyone else. "I know, Uni," Nilswryn went on to say. "We've discussed this before. I'm well aware of what I have to do and the dangers we face."

A pause followed, and this time, Shuri thought he heard a small voice, like the twittering of a bird, speaking softly. However, he couldn't hear the words.

Maybe he could have learned more about Nilswryn's plans from the not quite one-sided conversation, but he'd obviously underestimated Nilswryn's senses. The Shyrn leader stopped a few feet away from them, humming thoughtfully. "It seems a rat has sneaked into our abode, Uni. I might need to clean up house a little before I can deal with the outside threat."

A blast of magic shattered the column Shuri had been hiding behind. Shuri managed to avoid its power simply because Nilswryn's words had made him move away already. Still, several pieces of rock flew toward him and Hynte. One of them landed on Hynte's paw, making the nightwolf release a distressed howl.

Nilswryn chuckled at the sight. "Not so clever now, are you, pet? Perhaps, in the future, you'll reconsider sneaking into places you should

have never braved.”

Shuri didn’t bother to mention his arrival here had been nothing but an accident. “Do you think I’m afraid of a man who talks to himself?” he inquired. “Your power might be great, but your heart is weak. You can’t win.”

Nilswryn rolled his eyes. “Not this again. Your little speeches are quite charming, but you yourself don’t believe them. I’m not the one with a lover I can’t even touch. I’m not the one with a vendetta you can never achieve.”

Shuri clenched his fists and reeled in his anger, struggling not to let it get to him. “Revenge isn’t everything.”

“It isn’t?” Nilswryn arched a brow. “That isn’t what you thought when you left the Empire. Tell me, Prince Shuriden, do you remember what happened before Lord Erethe’s injury? Yes, that’s right. He told you he loved you.”

“It wasn’t real,” Shuri replied, “and my relationship with Ivy is none of your business.”

“Oh, but it is, since the two of us are related. I feel I have some sort of responsibility in this matter.” Nilswryn grinned, his slitted eyes glittering with malice. “Knowing that, knowing your dear Tynare was the one to make the potion allowing that unfortunate incident, how can you be sure he didn’t use the same thing on you?”

Shuri felt like he’d just been stabbed in the heart. “W-What?” he stammered.

“You heard me,” Nilswryn replied. Sparks of dark magic now danced over his fingertips, but he made no attempt to direct it at Shuri. “You were so in love with Behnivyr Erethe, and then you suddenly weren’t anymore. Even the knowledge that Tynare contributed to your father’s demise and eventually to that of your mother didn’t suffice to shake your loyalty toward him. You were completely dedicated to finding the guilty party behind the attack on Behnivyr’s life, and yet you absolved Tynare of his involvement in it after a simple apology. What does that tell you?”

Doubts stirred in Shuri’s heart as he remembered everything Nilswryn mentioned. Yes, things had happened just the way the Shyrn leader said. Tynare must have done something to manipulate him. Shuri could see it now, the ease with which the Aranken prince could have slipped something into his food. Hadn’t they always been together, from the very beginning?



They'd had lunch countless times. Creator, even Tynare's other personality had told him the Aranken prince couldn't be trusted.

Everything pointed to one simple conclusion. Tynare had taken him for a total fool and used him to stir a war that perhaps would have never happened otherwise. In fact, Shuri might have been better off communicating with Shyrn directly instead of approaching A'rankin for an alliance. Politically, it would have been far wiser than risking an outright conflict with a leader whose magic they didn't understand. Yes, Tynare had manipulated him, and if Shuri had any sense, he'd return to A'rankin right now and tell Tynare....

Shuri's train of thought came to a grinding halt when he finally realized the conclusions he'd reached. "No, this isn't right," he whispered. "Get the fuck out of my head."

Some sort of instinct made him strike out, reaching around himself and trying to identify the source of this manipulation. He half-expected not to find anything, but his fist struck flesh, and Shuri caught sight of a small one-horned creature flying through the air. It hit the wall with a crack, and Shuri experienced a jolt of satisfaction as he watched it slide down to the floor amongst the rubble. Its power must have affected Hynte as well, because now that the small creature had been immobilized, the nightwolf moved again.

Hynte shook off the stone that had struck his paw and stepped between Shuri and Nilswryn, growling. In turn, Nilswryn's smile faded into a glare. "You should know better than to get in my way, creature. You forget I know your little secret."

The nightwolf didn't move from his previous position. *Secret not matter. Warm one sharp claws friend. Sharp claws protect.*

Nilswryn tilted his head, as if listening closely. It was the first time that anyone without a bond to a nightwolf or a nightwolf's chosen pack displayed any sign of hearing the speech of the magnificent beasts. However strange it might have seemed, this peculiar talent couldn't be denied, not when Nilswryn actually answered Hynte. "And I respect that, truly I do. Your sacrifice will be honored."

Shuri didn't like the sound of that, and he created a counter-spell just as Nilswryn shot another bolt of magic. When their powers met, Shuri almost faltered. There was anger in his opponent that hadn't been there

before. How odd. A consequence of Shuri harming his underling, perhaps. Shuri wouldn't have expected any show of emotion from the man, and he distantly thought he might be able to use it to his advantage. As Nilswryn's power began to consume his, though, Shuri revised that assessment. It didn't seem like angering Nilswryn would be in his best interests, after all.

Shuri focused on the elements, gathering pure energy and melting it into the spell, hoping that a strong enough enchantment would stop the nothingness. It didn't work. It barely even slowed Nilswryn down. The black tendrils seemed to eat Shuri's magic, and with every second that passed, it advanced more and more.

To make things worse, his attempt at stealth had long ago been sabotaged. Demonic guards poured into the corridor, surrounding them from all angles. Hynte took over the task of keeping them away, and he seemed shockingly good at it. One sweep of Hynte's self-dubbed sharp claws sent them reeling back in fear. But Shuri had no doubt that their luck would not hold forever and that even with the demons' inability to engage Hynte in melee combat, the creatures would find another way to take them out.

Right now, though, Shuri needed to worry about himself and his confrontation with Nilswryn. Unfortunately, Nilswryn's magic outmatched him, and while Shuri knew the other man must have some weakness, he couldn't find it. During their previous battle, escaping the void sphere had taken up all of his energy, and it had only helped him long enough to create a rift and flee back to A'rankin. Why had he thought the results would be different this time around?

At last, the tendrils of darkness reached Shuri, sucking up his magic. His knees started to shake under the onslaught of the alien power. Much to his shame, he collapsed, unable to continue the fight.

"Well, so much for your zeal," his opponent told him. "I can't say I'm awfully surprised at your poor performance. Truly, for all the fabled skill of the Nikari, you and your kind have been quite a disappointment."

"So you say," Shuri replied, getting up, "and yet, so far, you've been unsuccessful in killing us. I wonder why that is."

Shuri should have known better than to taunt the Shyrn leader. The creature's wings twitched, and he narrowed his gaze at Shuri. "Perhaps you are correct. After all, if you're ready to die, who am I to question it?"

Ironically, this was not the first time they'd had this exchange. It mimicked their previous conversation almost to perfection. Shuri had no intention of giving up. He realized he needed to get out of here and regroup. But at the same time, something told him he still had a chance, that for Tynare, for everyone willing to fight this war, he needed to find a way to handle this foe. If he couldn't do it, what hope did any of them have? If the void magic swallowed indefinite amounts of energy, how many of Shuri's people would have to die to contain Nilswryn?

Yes, he might have been able to flee. Even as Nilswryn lifted his hand to deliver another spell, Shuri realized that. But he also knew that Nilswryn underestimated him, and underestimating an opponent was never a good thing in any battle.

Before he could come up with another strategy, a rift opened right there, between the two of them. Under Shuri's horrified eyes, Tynare stumbled out of it, nearly collapsing due to his enduring inability to walk. He steadied himself at the very last moment, using the element of air like he regularly did but almost as an afterthought. His full attention seemed to be on Nilswryn and Shuri.

"No!" he said. "Stop. Stop this."

Nilswryn released a heavy sigh, but he lowered his hand. "Just how many times do you plan to get in my way? You do realize there's nothing you can do that can keep me from claiming his life if I so wish it."

"I don't think so," Kris shot back, emerging from the rift as well.

Shuri watched his loved ones appear from the portal with no little amount of dismay. This was exactly what he'd been trying to avoid, why he'd wanted to face Nilswryn on his own. Yes, he might have stumbled upon Nilswryn's lair by accident, but he'd hoped to end this without anyone else having to get hurt. That had become impossible now that Tynare and Kris had tracked him down.

Nilswryn shook his head at Kris and Tynare, as if bemused. "You Nikari.... You would risk your life for one of your kind, even knowing there might be no way to come back. It seems you've inherited the rashness of your ancestor."

"You would know, isn't that right?" Tynare asked. "You know him better than we ever will."

Once again, Nilswryn's wings twitched, something Shuri had begun to recognize as a sign of annoyance. "I grow weary of this," he said. "Let us

end it once and for all. Prince Shuriden and I have a battle to finish.”

“I agree,” Shuri offered, watching Nilswryn without faltering. “But this has to stay between the two of us. Kris and Tynare have nothing to do with it. They shouldn’t be involved.”

Nilswryn arched a brow at him. The small one-horned creature climbed on his shoulder, but Nilswryn didn’t move. He scanned Shuri from head to toe, as if assessing his abilities, and likely finding him lacking.

At last, he grinned. “Tell you what. You’ve managed to amuse me, so in a sign of respect for your little visit, I’ll increase the stakes. If I win, you acknowledge I am the rightful ruler of the Empire and grant me the title of Morai.” His slitted eyes zeroed in on Kris. “And everything else that comes with it, including a certain *moraistele*.”

Kris growled at him, but Shuri got between Nilswryn and his brother before Kris could do anything stupid. “And if you lose?”

Judging by Nilswryn’s expression, the other man didn’t even consider that an option. “You get to live.”

“That’s a pretty unequal deal as far as I’m concerned,” Shuri said. “It would just bring us to the point we were before. Whoever wins, this ends here. You give up all pretense to the Empire and abandon this foolish campaign against us and against A’rankin.”

Nilswryn snorted. “Arrogant, aren’t you? I believe the last thing you should worry about right now is the fate of your lands.”

“I thought you said you were weary of conversation,” Shuri shot back. “Besides, this was your idea to begin with. Yes or no. Or are you afraid?”

“I am too old to be afraid of you or to be truly angered by your childish taunts,” Nilswryn answered. “But very well. We have an agreement.”

Nilswryn waved a hand, and the demonic guards blocked every access point to the area. Even if Shuri had wanted to, he and his loved ones couldn’t escape. The small one-horned creature leapt off Nilswryn’s shoulder and ushered Kris and Tynare back.

“You must be jesting,” Kris said, staring between the odd being and Nilswryn. “I’m not just going to stand here and watch you battle my brother.”

“Ah, but you have to learn something, my dear Morai. In life, you won’t always have what you want. You *will* stand there, and you *will* watch,

or else our deal is void, and you will all die.”

Tynare opened his mouth, perhaps intending to protest. Similarly, Hynte growled, snapping his jaws alarmingly close to the one-horned creature. The strange being somehow managed to leap on Hynte’s back. There was one single moment during which the creature grew in size, and he used his longer limbs to kick the nightwolf’s snout. The change gave Shuri a better look at the peculiar being, and he was struck by the contrast between his fair, almost marble-white skin, and the deep midnight black of his wings. He distantly wondered if he could use the creature against Nilswryn in some way, but he didn’t get the chance. The one-horned being once more retreated into its miniature shape, snickering even as the white of his skin grew oddly reddish in color.

Nilswryn ignored the interaction, and Shuri redirected his attention toward his true opponent. “You’re not leaving Shyrn if I don’t allow it, Kristelien Fezenda,” Nilswryn said. “These are my terms, and I do not even care if you agree to them or not.”

Kris clenched his fists, but Shuri shook his head. It seemed more than obvious that they didn’t have much choice when it came to this deal. But Shuri definitely preferred it to the alternative. He didn’t know if Nilswryn would keep his word after the battle—the creature definitely couldn’t be trusted—but his heart told him he needed to try.

“I’m going to fight you,” Shuri said, “and you will learn the true strength of a Nikari.”

“Shuri, you can’t,” Kris shouted. “He’s too—”

Shuri threw a gaze toward his brother. “Trust me, Kris. I can beat him. He won’t touch Tynare or Ivy. I’ll make sure of it.”

Nilswryn faced Shuri, flapping his wings and cracking his knuckles. “We shall see.”

For the longest time, neither of them did anything. They just circled each other like two predators waiting for the other to make a move. Shuri knew by now that any direct elemental spell from him would be absorbed by Nilswryn’s power, so he needed to use the magic in different ways if he wanted to defeat his opponent.

When Nilswryn moved, Shuri was ready for him. He dodged the first blast of dark magic thrown his way. The tendrils scattered, as if anticipating his motions, and one of them struck Shuri’s arm. The pain somehow

managed to be both scorching hot and ice cold, but Shuri endured it, pushing it to the back of his mind to focus on the ongoing battle.

Before visiting the Eastern Realm, Shuri hadn't truly been able to make use or even connect to all four elements. Earth in particular had eluded him, and that hadn't completely changed. He still couldn't summon Terra at will. However, the steadiest of elements still helped him under difficult circumstances, as if in direct response to his need. Even now, the floor cracked as the ground opened, trying to incapacitate Nilswryn, or at least to slow him down.

It might have even helped, with someone other than Nilswryn. The creature just launched himself in the air, avoiding the power of the element that had intended to come to Shuri's assistance.

Of course the asshole could fly. He had wings, didn't he, and he could do pretty much everything else. The sight of it shook Shuri about for an instant, but it sufficed, giving Nilswryn the opportunity to attack.

This time, when the bolt of magic struck Shuri, he hardly saw it coming. He only caught a glimpse at the very last moment, but he didn't manage to move out of the way fast enough. As the dark energy raked over his side, Shuri lost his balance and fell, the pain settling into an alarming numbness that threatened to take over. He took a couple of deep breaths, forcing himself not to panic even if he was aware that the void magic could stop his heart and keep his lungs from drawing in air. He focused on every individual inch of his body that had been affected, shoving the darkness away, working it out of his skin through the familiar strength of the fire in his blood.

It seemed to take forever, but the process couldn't have lasted more than a few moments. Otherwise, Nilswryn might have executed him. When Shuri could focus again, he found his opponent still in the same position, hovering in the air. Meanwhile, Tynare extended his hand, seemingly wanting to reach for him. Kris's fingers crackled with energy, and he might have cast a spell at Nilswryn if the one-horned creature hadn't gestured for various demonic guards to strategically place themselves in front of him. In all likelihood, both Kris and Tynare could have pushed past the guards if forced, but they settled down when they saw Shuri begin to recover. Tynare even threw a small, tremulous smile toward Shuri.

It was a display of trust, one that strengthened Shuri more than Tynare would ever know. As their gazes met and locked, Shuri could swear Tynare saw him. The talisman Tynare had given him warmed against Shuri's skin and began to glow softly.

Shuri didn't know what to make of it, especially since no one else seemed to notice the peculiar phenomenon. And then that concern became unimportant when he caught sight of something even more unusual.

A little girl stood right between Nilswryn and Shuri. Barefooted, wearing only a flimsy shapeless white dress, she looked so out of place and fragile that Shuri instantly wanted to protect her. *Run*, he tried to say. *Get out of here while there's still time.*

She must have misunderstood him, because she shook her head. *You don't need to run. You don't need to fear. Your fate has led you up to this one moment, and you are more than capable of standing up to this foe.*

All right, so she might not be just a lost, trapped little girl. *I want to believe I am*, he replied, for the first time becoming aware that he wasn't speaking out loud, *but I have no idea how to fight him. How do you battle someone you cannot touch?*

*The Nikari way*, she replied. *Be proud of who you are, Prince Shuriden. Acknowledge yourself, the mistakes and the gifts of your ancestors, and you will succeed. The elements and I will always be with you.*

The girl disappeared, but Shuri swore he could feel hands helping him up. As he finally stood, Shuri grasped the meaning of what she'd said. His magic might not work, but Nikari had other gifts. Two thousand years ago, Seyan'Kel'Fezenda had chosen the Ndara for a reason, and selective breeding had made Shuri's entire body a weapon.

In every conflict on the Western Realm, Shuri had grown used to a liberal application of offensive spells. Now, he disregarded them as useless and instead used the support of the elements to expand his senses, to feed and support his weary body.

Shuri reached for his daggers, the *darachs* he'd abandoned for the benefit of perfecting his elemental magic. Yes, he was Nikari, and that hadn't changed. He loved the Empire, his history, and even the past that had brought him so much pain. Here, in A'rankin, he'd found his legacy, and

he'd found a possible future, but nothing said that Shuri's Nikari side rejected this new connection with the elements.

When he slid his *darachs* out of their sheaths, the twin daggers seemed ablaze. His opponent remained above him, big wings beating lazily and holding him aloft. Shuri almost felt surprised the corridor accommodated his wingspan, but the spacious build of this residence almost seemed designed to allow flight.

For his part, Nilswryn didn't seem particularly impressed by Shuri's refusal to stay down. Pinning Shuri with that surreal, slitted gaze, Nilswryn shot another bolt of magic at him. Shuri didn't try to dodge this time. Instead, he brought his two daggers in front of him, catching the tendrils on the flaring blades. The void attempted to consume the metal, but Shuri willed the elements into it, fighting it with everything he had.

The empowered daggers slit right through the tendrils of darkness, keeping Nilswryn from hitting Shuri again. The Shyrn leader didn't seem taken aback by this, though. He threw more magic at Shuri, this time not only from the front, but also from Shuri's right and left. Shuri was once more forced into the defensive, fighting back the void magic that continued to come at him as if from a never-ending pool of darkness.

Instead of just cutting through the bolts of magic, Shuri pushed forward, going on the basis that the best defense was offense. However, Shuri soon realized that engaging Nilswryn in melee combat posed a very real problem. While he could have handled the claws well enough, the wings were far more powerful than they seemed, and the spines on them reminded Shuri of the ones he'd seen on other beasts in Shyrn. Shuri had to assume they were envenomed as well. Not to mention that they held Nilswryn largely out of Shuri's reach.

He couldn't use his *darachs* as throwing knives, so in the end, it seemed to be down to one thing. What was he willing to risk? Did he feel up to sacrificing his own life in a battle he might lose?

It was a useless, futile question. The answer had always been yes. Otherwise, he would have never agreed to this confrontation to begin with. He might have told Nilswryn that revenge had no meaning, but it did. This man's intrigues had led to the death of Shuri's father. Nilswryn had planned to start a war that could very easily lead to the death of thousands. Most importantly, he'd torn apart Tynare's soul, and that was something Shuri could never forgive.



He took a few steps back, pretending to be overwhelmed by the admittedly powerful magic. His strategy worked, because Nilswryn's defenses faltered. When he caught an opening, Shuri ran forward, gathering momentum as he moved. Finally, he jumped, landing straight on Nilswryn.

The corridor might have been spacious and high, but it didn't allow Nilswryn to fly out of Shuri's reach. Nilswryn didn't even try. Perhaps he believed the move wouldn't work. He intercepted Shuri, the spines on his wings digging into Shuri's shoulders.

A less determined man would have been thrown back or at least prevented from acting further. Shuri simply embraced it and allowed the appendages to pierce his flesh, physically forcing himself onto the spines so he could reach Nilswryn. In turn, he used his *darachs* and stabbed Nilswryn in the stomach.

Void magic or no, the Shyrn leader remained vulnerable to hard steel, which Shuri now realized must have been the reason behind the first Morai's decision to breed with the Ndara. Perhaps Nilswryn would have managed to shield himself from Shuri's attack if he'd been ready for it, but in hand-to-hand combat, Shuri was faster. Or perhaps Shuri's despair had worked to his advantage. Whatever the reason, Shuri seized the moment and exploited the opportunity that presented itself. He removed one of the *darachs* from Nilswryn's stomach and stabbed him again, this time aiming for his opponent's heart.

Nilswryn collapsed, unable to keep himself and Shuri aloft any longer. Still impaled on the spines of Nilswryn's wings, Shuri felt the fall too, in a very unpleasant manner. Nilswryn fell on his side, and his wing made a cracking noise that suggested a bone breaking. Shuri wouldn't have particularly cared about that, but the proximity between them and the angle they'd fallen in made the spines rake deeper into Shuri's flesh. The pain became so intense that Shuri saw stars. He pulled back, freeing himself from the spines. Actually getting up seemed too much of an effort, but he did so nonetheless, more than ever aware that he needed to finish this.

Once more, he retrieved one of his blades from his opponent's flesh. His vision went a little hazy as he did so, but he blinked, and the sensation vanished. Just a while longer. The dagger might not be a big weapon, but it was more than capable of separating Nilswryn's head from his body. Soon it would all be over. Tynare would be safe. He'd never have nightmares again.

Just as he readied himself to dispatch Nilswryn, though, the most unexpected thing happened. The small being that had tried to hypnotize Shuri in the corridor rushed between Shuri and the fallen Shyrn leader. “He saved your lover’s life,” it said. “You owe him.”

“Just end it, Shuri,” Kris urged him. “End it, and we can go home.”

The tightness in Kris’s voice spoke volumes of the difficulty Kris had in keeping hold of his control. Still, even knowing Kris had a point, Shuri hesitated, remembering what Tynare had told him of that day when he’d been attacked by the salamander. Whatever reasons Nilswryn might have had for his actions, he had indeed kept Tynare from dying. Tynare had paid that debt tenfold, but at some level, Shuri did, indeed, owe Nilswryn.

The vacillation cost him. Nilswryn opened his eyes, his gaze instantly fixing on Shuri. Due to the proximity between them, Shuri couldn’t hope to dodge, and as the spell struck him, he staggered, losing hold of his blade.

In the background, he heard Kris curse and Tynare shout. However, the magic didn’t seem focused enough to truly drain him. Shuri’s elemental powers endured the attack of the void. He straightened his back, watching as his foe’s blood-slick hands gripped the handle of the *darach* still embedded in his flesh, trying to pull it out.

Truth be told, Shuri didn’t know how the other man was even conscious. Even if Shuri had missed his heart—which now seemed to be the case—the stabbing should have definitely incapacitated him. And indeed, the still burning *darach* appeared to harm him, burning his flesh when before it hadn’t even touched him.

However, even with his wounds, Nilswryn managed to get up. “Stay out of this, Uni,” he told the creature. “I’ll handle it.”

Shuri refrained from pointing out the little thing had likely saved Nilswryn’s life, since at this point, he didn’t know if that was the case. Besides, his vision had started to go blurry again. The spines truly had been envenomed. Damn it. If all of this had been for naught, if Nilswryn lived while Shuri died.... Shuri couldn’t imagine the consequences.

Through some sort of miracle, Nilswryn at last succumbed to his injuries. His eyes rolled in his head and he collapsed to the ground, remaining completely still. The small creature shot Shuri a baleful look, and Shuri almost thought that gaze must have caused the piercing agony running down his spine. Almost, but not quite.

Tynare must have realized Shuri's condition, because he rushed to his side, much like the strange horned creature had done for Nilswryn. Shuri wanted nothing more than to close his eyes and fall asleep in Tynare's arms, except he highly suspected he might never wake again. He couldn't surrender, not now, not ever. He needed to be sure his lover and his people were safe.

Drawing on a strength he didn't know he had, he faced the gathering demonic creatures without faltering. "Your leader lost. As per our bargain, he has surrendered all claim to the throne of the Empire and abandoned this foolish war."

It was a little hard to have a political debate with creatures who couldn't seem to understand him, let alone reply. However, the one-horned being—who seemed to be a second-in-command of sorts—nodded. "Go."

The single word didn't provide any reassurances, but it didn't take a genius to realize that staying to negotiate would mean pushing his luck. Whatever had made the one-horned creature decide to comply with the bargain they'd made, Shuri would just have to be satisfied with it and hope for the best.

Kris summoned a rift, and just the sight of the portal made a mix of dread and relief fill Shuri. He didn't know if he could brave its energies right now, but at the same time, that doorway meant freedom, home, and more than anything, safety for Tynare.

He didn't hesitate. He took his lover's hand and dragged him toward the portal. Kris accompanied them, holding tightly on to Shuri's arm. It could have been solely due to the fact that as the creator of the rift, Kris needed to guide them along. However, Shuri suspected it had more to do with his brother realizing Shuri was seconds away from falling over. Hynte followed in their tracks, occasionally shooting distrustful glances at the demons.

Up to the point they entered the rift, Shuri truly thought Nilswryn's underlings would hunt them down and avenge their fallen leader. They didn't. They allowed Shuri and his companions to enter the portal without making a single move to stop them.

Ten seconds later, Shuri almost wished the demons had gotten in their way. Pain rushed over him as he stepped into the rift, pulsing in every inch of his body that had been touched by the void magic. His blood seemed to burn in his veins, and even breathing became a chore.

Rift travel didn't take very long, but to Shuri it felt like an age. By the time they left the portal, Shuri didn't even have the strength to scream anymore. He just collapsed and would have probably hit the floor if his brother hadn't been there to catch him.

He felt distantly aware of Kris setting him down on a soft surface, perhaps a couch. Tynare's hand cupped his cheek with almost excruciating tenderness.

"Shuri.... Shuri, can you hear me?"

Shuri opened his mouth and tried to make a noise, to say Tynare's name, or at least anything that resembled a coherent response. However, his vocal cords refused to obey him, as did any muscle in his body for that matter.

Warmth emanated from Tynare's palm and into Shuri's body, and it soothed the agony taking over every inch of Shuri. And yet Shuri instinctively wanted to pull away. He knew what that touch meant, and he realized Tynare couldn't afford to sacrifice his own magic for Shuri's benefit. It certainly didn't help that, while Tynare's life magic numbed Shuri's pain and kept him from completely succumbing to his injuries, it wouldn't be a permanent solution.

"We need Ivy for this," Tynare said, as if in confirmation to Shuri's thoughts. "The venom is too strong for me to heal on my own."

By now, Shuri could barely move, but Tynare's voice anchored him, kept him from drifting into unconsciousness. He focused on Tynare's face, wanting to drink his fill of his lover's beauty. There was still so much they hadn't spoken of, still so many things that had been left on standby while they handled the immediate threat. Nilswryn had used some of it in his attempt to manipulate Shuri, but now it just made Shuri even more aware of everything they could have had and might never achieve. Dying after the actual battle was over would be ridiculous, or so he thought, but in the end he might not have much of a choice.

In the background, he heard Ivy's frantic voice as the young Andari leaned over Shuri. "I'm here." His warm hand landed on Shuri's shoulder. "Creator.... Kris, you should have let me come along."

"There was nothing you could have done." Kris had only sounded so angry and crushed two times in his life—after their father's death and when

Ivy had been injured. “The fault is mine. I should have prevented that deal. I... I failed him.”

“Don’t talk like that,” Tynare snapped at them both. “He isn’t dead yet. Your Majesty, get some more Nurturers here. Ivy, help me. We can’t let him die. I refuse to let him die.”

Die. Shuri didn’t want to die either. He tried to open his heart and his mind to Ivy and Tynare, and his affinity with the elements helped. But it was not enough, not nearly enough, and soon Shuri found himself drifting further and further away.

There was no pain here, but also no warmth, no beauty. The emptiness didn’t scare Shuri—by now, he’d grown accustomed to it—and it didn’t anger him. It wasn’t like the void magic that Shuri had come to associate with nothingness. It felt... peaceful, or perhaps inviting.

The strangest thing seemed that he couldn’t identify any color here. Even black and white were missing, although Shuri couldn’t figure out how he realized it. He floated through something that managed to be both viscous and without substance, a paradox of empty space and layer after layer of this peculiar, soft and deep... unknown.

Was this death? If so, Shuri could think of worse fates. In an odd way, being here reminded him a little of Tynare. He’d never known where he was going when it came to his relationship with the Aranken prince, and much like here, he’d often tried to make progress without having the slightest notion of even “up” or “down.”

A pang of distress coursed through him at the memory, and it burst into Shuri like a tiny explosion of pain. Suddenly, Shuri could identify boundaries around him again. The space above him turned black, and a myriad of stars lit up all around him in familiar-looking constellations.

The strange not-quite-substance that had been keeping Shuri aloft melted into blades of grass. Shuri blinked a few times, all the while testing if he still had the use of his limbs. He did, and unlike before, he experienced no pain while he moved. Slowly, he even managed to get up.

As he did so, he caught sight of something that made his breath catch. He seemed to be in a grove of sorts, a grove that, like the constellations, looked very familiar. Two figures sat behind a nearby tree, one of a woman and the other of a child. The woman’s hand was extended toward the night’s sky, pointing to the stars as if she wanted to bring them down just for him.

Almost hypnotized, Shuri walked forward, trying to overhear the conversation. He never got the chance, because as he approached, the image of the child dissipated like it had never been.

Shuri would have thought he'd imagined the whole thing, but then, the woman turned toward him. "Hello, Shuri," his mother greeted him.

She looked just like Shuri remembered, her dark hair framing her face in a cascade of black, her dusky skin as smooth as on that last day he'd seen her alive. After she'd plummeted from the cliffside, her body hadn't been nearly as beautiful, but Shuri didn't want to think about that now.

He just stared at his mother, wondering if he'd died, aching to reach for her and yet afraid to do it. "Are you real?" he asked.

"I don't know," she replied, with a small, mysterious smile. "Am I?"

Shuri plopped down in the same place where the small version of him had been. "I wish you were. I wish you hadn't died."

His mother laughed. "You and me both." Her expression softened as she took his hand. "But it's such an old story now, Shuri. You can't hold on to resentment over it."

"Resentment toward who?" Shuri couldn't help but ask, pulling his palm out of her hold. "Tynare? Katara? You?"

"All of us, perhaps," she answered, looking away from his face as if she couldn't bear his scrutiny. "You know, I didn't want this for you, Shuri. I never wanted you to pay for my mistakes."

Hearing her speak made anger rear inside him, a fury and a hurt he'd tried not to acknowledge. "Why did you do it? Why did you kill him?"

His parents' deaths had poisoned his soul for as long as he could remember, but he'd always preferred to blame Katara and Kris for it rather than think about what his mother had done. He couldn't hide from it now, not anymore.

"I loved your father," his mother replied, "but... he didn't love me. Even when he shared my bed, it was only because he'd had one disagreement or another with Katara. I suppose what made me truly angry was that I knew I couldn't truly expect more, since I myself had responsibilities toward Phura. Even after you were born, things didn't change, and I always felt he gave Katara's son more attention than he did you. Whether I was right or not.... That's debatable."

Shuri's head swirled at the information his mother provided. Had he always known this at some level and was just remembering it in this peculiar, disturbing way? Or had his mother truly come to him to give him the answers he sought? Hoping to at least figure that out, he asked, "How did Nilswryn Essteka get involved?"

"When I met him.... When I met Nilswryn, I felt I'd found someone who could understand me. We weren't lovers, you know, not at first. But in some respects, Nilswryn reminded me a lot of Spatha, and well.... Things kind of turned out that way."

"People don't get killed without a reason," Shuri bit out. "I don't believe that."

"Of course there were reasons." His mother defended herself, facing him once again. "Your father found out about my little indiscretion. He wasn't happy. I don't know if he'd learned Nilswryn's identity or if he just suspected I had an affair with someone outside the Empire, but he accused me of allowing my heart and my loins to make me forget my duty toward Nikaret. He was planning to take you away from me. I couldn't allow that. I just couldn't. And Nilswryn.... He said he'd help me, that once Spatha was out of the way, we could make you Morai. I loved Spatha, but I loved you more."

Shuri's stomach roiled. He didn't want to hear his mother justify her actions through her love for him. Maybe she was being honest, but it had been easier to believe that Nilswryn had forced her into the whole thing. He wished he'd at least known if this was real or not, because under current circumstances, it made him more confused than ever.

"Don't say that," he snapped, clenching his hands into fists. "Don't you dare make me your excuse. You killed him. It's as easy as that."

"You know as well as I do that things are never easy when it comes to the Nikari." Her voice trembled, and her shoulders shook, as if she wanted to touch him but was forcing herself not to. "I'm sorry, Shuri. You're right. There are no justifications for what I did. I put you through horrible pain, and if I could change it, if I could go back and keep myself from going through with it, I would. In fact, I would die all over again for it, for you." She smiled bitterly. "But as you know, it didn't even help the first time. It only made you hate Katara and your brother more."

"How could I not, when she took the last thing I had?" The fury and the pain bubbled so strong inside him that Shuri felt he was choking. "Of

course I hate her. That won't ever change."

"I know." His mother sighed. "Would it help you to know that she regrets it now? It's why she never told your brother. What happened then.... It was probably the only time Katara truly acted like a Nikari. She was in so much pain.... She loved Spatha, and it maddened her. To be perfectly honest, I felt the same. I should have fought her, I realize that now, but I was weak. The guilt was choking me. I should have lived for you, but I didn't, and I don't even have the right to ask you to forgive me."

Shuri wished he could have given her the solace she so badly needed, but he couldn't, not yet. "Why are you even telling me this?" he asked instead.

"Because you need to know. You need to be at ease with your own heart if you want to go back, and there's still too much for you to do there."

"You mean with Tynare."

His mother nodded. "Quite. When I first met him, I didn't realize what he would come to mean to you. Perhaps, if I had, things would have been different."

Shuri couldn't help but scowl. "Different how? It wouldn't have changed anything, not really."

"I don't know," she answered. "Maybe if I'd been granted a different perspective of the future, I would have realized you didn't even want to be the Morai."

Shuri didn't reply. He didn't think he could. He stared up at the night sky, taking in the stars. "Do you remember how I used to teach you about the Creator?" his mother asked.

Shuri did remember. For obvious reasons, his uncle hadn't gotten very involved in raising him, so he and his mother had been quite close once. But now, when he looked up at the stars, he no longer thought about the moments he and his mother had shared, or at least not just about that. Within the glittering lights, he saw his lover's smile. "I want to go back to him. I want to hold him, and be with him, and build something with him."

He extended his hand, reaching up for the stars, knowing that even here, he wouldn't be able to touch them. "But I don't know if I can."

"Of course you can," his mother replied. "You just have to be brave enough to admit how you feel."

"Even if he did contribute to what happened to you and Father?"



“Oh, foolish child. You already know the answer to that. Why are we even talking about this?”

Why, indeed. He’d already decided he would stand by Tynare, come what may, so why in the world was he reneging on that self-made promise?

It wasn’t even all that hard. He’d tried his best to not think about the implications of Tynare’s revelations, much like he had in his mother’s case. He’d accepted that Tynare couldn’t be blamed for his actions. And yet, it still hurt to fully acknowledge what Tynare had done. Looking at his mother’s face, remembering Tynare’s piercing blue eyes, he realized he felt guilty for falling in love with the same man whom he’d once deemed his enemy.

“Oh, Shuri. I know it’s not so easy to discard something you’ve wanted for so long, even for someone you hold dear,” his mother said, as if guessing his thoughts. “You aimed to make sure he was safe, and now he is. If you go back, you’ll have to face something far harder than any foe—confronting your own feelings and his. But your love, unlike mine, is stronger than hatred, and you love him.”

“I do,” Shuri whispered. “So very much. So much I sometimes fear it.” He let out a self-deprecating laugh. “That sounds horrible, doesn’t it?”

“Not at all. There’s no weakness in admitting you care about someone.”

Shuri looked away from the stars and focused on her face again. “This isn’t just in my head, is it? You’re really here.”

She nodded. “We are Nikari. By virtue of the covenant our ancestor once made, a part of our souls can remain bound to the rift. It doesn’t always happen, but well... I’ve had my reasons for staying behind.”

Shuri didn’t know if he’d ever felt so conflicted about anything. He still loved his mother, but at the same time, he resented her for what she’d done. Even so, after seeing her and speaking to her again, it seemed unbearable to have to leave her again. “Is this a one-time thing?” Shuri asked. “When I go back, will I ever see you again?”

His mother must have noticed he’d said “when” not “if,” because she smiled at him. “To be honest, I hope you won’t have to. I don’t know if you’ll ever forgive me for what I did, and I won’t even ask for that. But don’t let my past get in the way of your happiness. The two of you can make things work. I believe that.”

Shuri took a deep breath and got up. His mother followed his example and lightly touched his arm. "I love you, son. I always will. Remember that."

Shuri nodded. On impulse, he hugged her tightly, inhaling the familiar scent that had accompanied him into slumber when he'd been a child. He had missed her so much, and he always would. A part of him might never forgive her for what she'd done, but that love would never disappear.

Right now, though, someone else needed him, someone alive whose affection had given Shuri new hope for the future. Their relationship might not be perfect, and maybe Shuri still had a lot of doubts and concerns. Maybe back in the real world, Shuri would be physically broken, more so than Tynare had ever been. But all hesitance aside, Tynare had shown him a loyalty beyond anything Shuri ever expected. He'd saved Shuri, in more than one way, and right now he meant more to Shuri than a past he should leave behind.

Above him, a star shone brightly, the light almost dazzling in its intensity. "Go to it, Shuri," his mother told him as Shuri broke their embrace. "Go to him. Oh, and one more thing. Tell Katara that if she keeps bullying you, I'll start haunting her."

Shuri blinked at his mother, not sure if she was serious or not. It baffled him that his mother didn't seem to hold any resentment toward Katara. "Can you even do that? Haunt her?"

"I have no idea." She shrugged. "Probably not, but she doesn't know that."

She kissed his cheek, and power burned through Shuri, one he couldn't deny or withstand. "Mother.... What?"

"Just go," she insisted again. "Accept this gift. I need you to be safe. You've always been the most important thing for me, and that won't ever change."

Those were the last words Shuri registered before he started floating toward the sky. He lost sight of his mother, her figure seemingly dissipating into the wind. The stars melted away as well, all save one, that bright sun guiding him home, guiding him to Tynare.

Shuri followed it, clinging to the warm welcoming glow. It was where he belonged, and he shouldn't have needed his mother to tell him that. Yes, it would have been much easier to drift away into oblivion, where there

could be no lies, no pain, no deception. But love didn't come without a price, and trust needed to be earned. Now that he had Tynare's trust, he couldn't fail his lover, his *sharani*.

A burst of energy swallowed him whole as he imagined Tynare's hesitant smile when he'd asked Shuri to call him that. At last, Shuri opened his eyes, and he found himself looking up at the familiar ceiling of his room in the royal palace of Kar'neia.

Tynare lay next to him on the bed, holding on to Shuri's hand so tightly Shuri was surprised he hadn't lost all feeling. The beautiful Aranken didn't speak and didn't move. He barely seemed to breathe, and even his flame red hair had lost some of its regular luster. Shuri's heart clenched as he realized Tynare must have used the full extent of his elemental magic to try to bring Shuri back.

There were other people in the room. Shuri heard Ivy crying softly, and when he looked past Tynare's shoulder, he saw the young Andari in Kris's embrace, his shoulders shaking with sobs. Oddly, Katara had arrived as well, and her lips were pressed in a thin line as she watched her son and his future consort. Kris held on to Ivy tightly, petting his hair, but it seemed unclear whether he was comforting Ivy or taking comfort in Ivy's presence.

Tynare was the first one to realize Shuri had awakened. He lifted his head in a jerky, uncoordinated motion that didn't make much sense since, as far as Shuri knew, he was still blind. "Shuri? Elements.... Are you...."

"I'm fine," Shuri rushed to reassure his lover. "I'm... not hurt."

The exchange drew everyone's attention to him, and in a heartbeat both Kris and Ivy reached the bed. Ivy embraced him with his typical enthusiasm, while Kris smiled at him. "Welcome back, brother. For a moment there, we thought we'd lost you."

Shuri had almost lost himself, but that would never happen again. Seeing Tynare made him hate that he'd succumbed to his doubts even for a moment, but it also solidified his decision to accept his feelings for his *sharani*. "Don't worry. I'm not going anywhere. I have too much to live for."

As he spoke, he turned toward Tynare and squeezed his lover's hand. He wanted to say so many things, maybe even to apologize for his moment of weakness. But he couldn't do that, not right now, not until they were in private.

Unfortunately, it didn't look like his wish would be granted anytime soon. The door flew open, and Etera stalked into Shuri's quarters. Her wild, panicked eyes instantly fixed on Tynare. "You need to go," she said. "The king knows about you going against his order. Somehow, he's become convinced that you've been plotting with Shyrn and the latents to destroy A'rankin."

"That's insane," Shuri said, wondering if they'd ever get a break. "Tynare has only ever thought about what is best for A'rankin's people."

"Sadly, what's best for the people doesn't always benefit sovereigns as much," Tynare replied. "I don't want to endanger any of you more than I already have. I need to face my own mistakes, and I have to start by speaking to my father."

Etera shook her head frantically. "You haven't seen him. He's furious. He's... not himself. I truly fear what he might do."

Shuri frowned and wrapped a protective arm around his lover. He didn't like the sound of that. Even on a good day, Rynald's anger would have been a problem. Right now, Tynare's exhaustion made him a vulnerable target. If Etera was to be believed, it didn't seem in the least bit wise to allow this meeting.

"Where is he now?" he asked.

"Coming this way," Etera replied. "I set a handful of traps to hold him off, but I can't imagine he didn't expect it. He probably has other Destroyers with him that can neutralize my spells."

In a way, the situation reminded Shuri of his own relationship with his mother. Yes, she had done many questionable things, but in the end, she had loved him. Etera stood by her son, but her loyalties had always seemed divided, at least until now. She'd definitely taken some pretty big chances to come here and warn Tynare.

Tynare seemed to acknowledge the risks inherent in her choice, because he sighed heavily. "You should not have disobeyed him. He remains your king. You know that as well as I do."

"A part of me will always be loyal to him," Etera said stubbornly, "but you're my priority. You always have been."

Tynare looked from Etera to Shuri, then back to Etera again. "I'm sorry, Mother," he said. "I know this isn't what you want, but I cannot run. I've done enough running."

Etera gaped at Tynare, obviously taken aback that the prince had admitted to the relationship between them. For his part, Shuri's mind focused on Tynare's latter words and his seemingly senseless decision.

"*Sharani*, you can't be serious. We finally have a chance. Why would you—"

Tynare brushed his fingers over Shuri's lips, interrupting his words. "I need to do this. It's been fifty years since I turned into a slave to that creature's whims, but I cannot always pretend that all my actions and decisions were because of him. I have to own up to it."

Shuri thought about himself, about the plans he'd made when he'd left the Empire. He had wanted to steal Ivy from Kris, and that would have been possible in only one way. How could he look down on Tynare for his actions when he himself had almost fallen down the slippery slope of bloodlust and revenge?

Was it closure that Tynare needed or was it atonement? Whatever the case, Shuri understood. "I'll stand by your side. Always."

Tynare opened his mouth, as if intending to protest, but truly, he should have realized it would be a wasted effort. Kris did, because he groaned tiredly. "I never thought I'd say this, but A'rankin seems to have even more warmongering than the Empire."

A loud explosion sounded somewhere nearby, as if to confirm Kris's words. Shuri surmised it to be Etera's traps trying to halt the king. They failed and, in fact, King Rynald reached Shuri's quarters so fast he managed to overhear the latter part of Kris's words. "It is not warmongering to want to defend my country from any perceived threat," he said as he proudly walked into the room. "I did not want to do this, Tynare. I did not even want to think it. But I can no longer deny that it is the truth. You've sold us out to Shyrn."

"Shyrn is no longer a problem," Shuri replied when Tynare didn't immediately answer. "Their leader has been defeated."

"Shyrn doesn't have a real leader," the Aranken sovereign replied. "We've long ago established that. I appreciate you trying to assist my son, but he is no longer an official representative of A'rankin. You are merely jeopardizing your political position here by remaining his ally."

The entire conversation seemed so off. On the one hand, the king accused Tynare of being at the core of a conspiracy aimed at him, and on

the other, he didn't believe Shyrn to have an organized hierarchy. The two concepts simply didn't match. Not to mention that, by now, the king should have been aware of Nilswryn's existence. Shuri and Tynare hadn't reported it, but there had been other people there. The Aranken children had seen Nilswryn up close. The information could no longer be called a genuine secret.

"Father, let's not start this again," Tynare said, suddenly sounding very tired. "Didn't I tell you once? My only goal has been to help A'rankin. I do admit that I had contact with Shyrn, but it was never by my choice. They.... That time, when I was hurt, it was the Shyrn leader who turned me into what I became. But now, I'm myself again, and all I want is for us to work together for the good of our people, latents included."

King Rynald seemed to have fallen ill with a serious case of selective hearing, because he only took in bits and pieces of his son's explanation. "So you admit to it," he said, sparks of lightning already traveling up his arm. "I... I can barely believe my own ears."

Or so he said, but he obviously believed it. Otherwise he wouldn't have been here, hunting down his own son and threatening him with elemental magic.

Shuri stepped between Tynare and his father, idly wondering just how many times he'd have to do that before he and Tynare could get a moment of peace. "That's quite enough. I must inform you that Tynare will soon be my consort and as such, a citizen of the Empire. Any sort of attack toward him will qualify as an attack against me and the Empire as a whole and will be considered an act of war."

Rynald's eyes went so wide Shuri thought they'd leap out of his face. More than ever aware of Tynare's presence behind him, Shuri reminded himself that he'd deal with the consequences of this conversation once he made sure Tynare was safe. He had no doubt his lover would be furious—they hadn't even discussed a real relationship, let alone bonding. Not to mention that Tynare had outright said he wanted to face his father on his own.

Fortunately, Tynare didn't deny Shuri's claim. His hand landed on Shuri's arm and squeezed it tightly, but somehow, Shuri knew the hold didn't have anything to do with anger. If anything, it seemed more related with a need for support.

Kris took Shuri's proclamation in stride, though. In fact, he was the one who broke the heavy silence that had fallen over the room. "I believe it is time for us to leave A'rankin," he said. "We are grateful for your hospitality, Your Majesty, and we look forward to improving relations between our two peoples. Having the Aranken line united with the imperial Fezenda family is no doubt a sign of good things to come."

He spoke as if he hadn't even heard any of Rynald's threats, but Shuri knew that wasn't the case. Once again, Shuri mentally apologized to his brother and vowed to approach Kris once they returned to the Empire. Kris had given him more support than Shuri had ever expected, and Shuri would never forget it.

Rynald straightened his back and turned his suddenly icy eyes toward Kris. "We are in agreement, Your Majesty. I trust that you will care for my son and build him a new home in the Empire."

He didn't state it, but it seemed clear that Rynald no longer considered Tynare to have a home in A'rankin. What had he planned before Shuri had blurted out his offer? Shuri half wished he'd waited, but at the same time, he knew he'd done the right thing. Tynare meant more to him than politics ever would.

Unfortunately, they were both members of ruling families, and that came with responsibilities neither of them could deny. It would have been easy to just leave A'rankin behind and retreat to the Empire, but Tynare's people still needed him here. There was no telling what would happen to the latents if Tynare abandoned them.

"A'rankin is still my home," Tynare protested just like Shuri had known he would. "I love Shuri, but I also love my people."

"You've already made your choice," Rynald answered. "Just be thankful you have a lover with leverage. I don't abide traitors in my house. Perhaps the Nikari are more understanding."

The latter word held a barely veiled insult that almost made Shuri attack the Aranken king. The only thing that held him back was the knowledge of the delicate political balance keeping the conflict between Tynare and his father from erupting.

Nevertheless, Nikari—particularly fire-oriented ones like Shuri—weren't known for their calm tempers, and Shuri couldn't quite tame his tongue. "Or perhaps the Aranken crown should revise its view on treason. It

is dangerous when a king deems the welfare of his people against his interests.”

Rynald’s answering glare held an icy fire that might have made a lesser man frightened. After facing Nilswyn Essteka, though, Shuri couldn’t be scared of the Aranken king. The expression just... puzzled him. A few weeks ago, Rynald had been so concerned about his son that he’d risked his own life to ride out and join him in Shyrn. The fury in that gaze didn’t match the worry it had once held. It was almost like witnessing the Tynare-Nari case again, except this time around no void magic and no injury had caused Rynald’s sudden change of heart.

“You are the one who revised his priorities,” the king in question told Shuri. “You will find you’re taking a viper into your own home. He will destroy the Empire, just like he destroyed A’rankin.”

“I may be a lot of things, Father,” Tynare replied, “but I’m not the one who went against our own people. You are.”

Just like that, chaos exploded in the room. The windows shattered as lightning crashed down upon them from the now darkened skies. Kris leapt in front of Ivy just in time to keep a lightning bolt from striking the young Andari. He managed to catch the lightning with his bare hands, his own affinity toward water and air assisting him in what should have been an impossible task. But not even the Fezenda or the Nikari were completely immune to the elements, and when a second bolt struck him in the shoulder, Kris grunted and staggered back.

Obviously wanting to protect Kris, Ivy threw a shield around himself, Kris, and Katara. Unfortunately, Shuri and Tynare were too far away to benefit from Ivy’s assistance. At this point, Tynare seemed to have trouble keeping himself aloft through the use of his own elements, so it would be up to Shuri to protect him. He grabbed Tynare’s hand and pulled his lover into his arms, making sure the damaging blasts wouldn’t harm Tynare.

King Rynald took a step forward, perhaps intending to pursue them. He was forced to stop when the floor suddenly crumbled beneath his feet. Even without following the cracks to their source, Shuri realized all too well where they must have come from.

Rynald, on the other hand, didn’t seem to care about Etera helping her son. For all his claim of weeding out traitors from his house, he didn’t even turn toward the Destroyer woman. He remained completely focused on



Tynare, almost as if he couldn't see anyone else. The hatred now twisted his features into something completely unrecognizable.

For the first time, Shuri experienced a measure of relief that Tynare couldn't physically see. His lover's elemental abilities might help him when it came to moving around, but actual expressions probably eluded him.

Or so he thought, until Tynare released a pained gasp. "What happened to you, Father?"

"You did," Rynald replied. "You and your treachery."

Tynare flinched like Rynald had struck him. Shuri had heard enough. Guilt, accusations, intrigue, treason.... None of it should have ever touched Tynare's soul. Shuri himself had allowed his doubts to nearly separate them. Not anymore. Never again.

Fire burst from his fingertips, creating a wall between Rynald and the rest of them. The fierce blaze made Rynald lose control of the gathering storm, and it swept wildly over the room, attacking everything in sight. With what must have been his final strengths, Tynare wrapped an elemental shield around himself and Shuri and went boneless in Shuri's arms.

In the chaos, Shuri caught a glimpse of Ivy as the young Andari's own shield faltered. Shuri guessed Ivy must have assisted Tynare in an attempt to stabilize his condition, which made him just as vulnerable as Tynare. To make matters worse, judging by the battle sounds coming from outside, the Aranken troops had received specific instructions to prevent the rest of the Nikari forces from interfering.

Shuri glanced over at his brother, who nodded in understanding. They'd probably be able to take Aranken mages in combat if they needed to, but that would bring about results no one wanted. At this rate, people were going to die and not even because of Nilswryn Essteka and Shyrn.

"*Sharani*, we need to go," Shuri whispered in Tynare's ear. "There's no way to convince him to listen. We'll figure out another plan to help your people, but it can't be here."

Tynare's breath caught, and his fist clenched in the material of Shuri's shirt. His hesitation only lasted for a moment, and then he nodded. "Yes. We need to retreat."

As if on cue, a huge rift opened in the center of the room, and four nightwolves emerged from it. Kris mounted Attcha and helped Ivy on top of Reisl, while Katara went to Fegala. In turn, Shuri mounted Hynte and

pulled Tynare into his lap. As their companions disappeared within the portal, Tynare looked up at Shuri. For a few moments, it seemed as if the mist over Tynare's vision cleared, and he could actually see Shuri. "Take me with you," he whispered.

By rights, Tynare didn't even have to tell Shuri that, but Shuri suspected the meaning of the words went beyond what it seemed. Just the same, he didn't have to be told twice. As Shuri guided Hynte toward the portal, Tynare called out to Etera. "Mother, come on!"

The woman didn't hesitate. She somehow managed to make her way across the room and grabbed Shuri's arm in a tight hold. As they leapt inside the rift, Shuri didn't look back.

*A few days later*

TYNARE LOUNGED on the chaise, breathing in the sea air, taking in the sound of the waves and trying not to think about the fact that every passing second put more distance between him and A'rankin. He realized all too well that it had been a necessary step. Following his father's shocking change in attitude, Tynare's enduring presence in A'rankin had become counterproductive. That didn't make it any easier for him to abandon his homeland and the people who relied on him to keep them safe.

A heavy ache had settled in his chest ever since their ship had crossed the Wards and left Aranken waters. He felt like he'd finally committed the worst kind of betrayal, fleeing when he should have stayed and fought for the rest of the Aranken.

The pain in his heart settled when a familiar presence joined him on deck. Tynare almost resented it—he didn't want or deserve the comfort. "You know you could have just returned to the Empire through the rift," he said. "I'd have been fine. Etera is with me."

"I know," Shuri replied, his voice so low Tynare could barely hear it over the sound of the waves. "But you've been alone for too long. Can't I stay by your side from now on?"

Tynare would have liked to say that he'd never been alone, not really. For the better part of his life, Etera had always supported him, and the

elements never abandoned him. Even so, Tynare didn't answer. He knew in his heart that Shuri's words referred to something entirely different.

In the ensuing silence, Shuri sat down next to him. "I realize this is hard for you, but you have my word we won't abandon A'rankin or the latents."

Tynare believed Shuri meant well, but he couldn't imagine how they'd be able to assist latents from the Empire. The Nikari would probably lack interest in getting involved in Aranken affairs again. "Everyone here has agreed to assist me because of you," he said, "but I doubt their willingness to help will extend to that."

Shuri's big, warm hand landed on Tynare's shoulder. "No matter what reasons he might have had to approach you, Ivy genuinely likes you now. True, helping the latents holds some deep political connotations that might have held Kris back, but we can't exactly abandon A'rankin. We have a responsibility in what happened."

The somber note in Shuri's voice made Tynare wish he and Ivy could have kept the nightwolves' secret from their respective lovers. However, both of them had decided they didn't have the right to hide it, no matter how much revealing it might hurt. The Fezenda had been horrified upon learning the sources of the entire war between Shyrn and A'rankin. Still, that hadn't stopped the Morai and his mother from traveling back to the Empire using rifts, so Tynare didn't quite know what to make of the situation.

"I'm not so sure they agree," he admitted. "It's been a long time. What happened wasn't your fault or that of your people. Your ancestor did his best to contain the damage, and to a certain extent he succeeded. Beyond that.... Your choices are your own."

"Yes they are." Shuri threaded his fingers through Tynare's. "And I've already made mine."

Tynare didn't know what to say to that. He hadn't forgotten his lover's words to his father, but he'd made them out to be solely an excuse that would keep Rynald in check. During the journey, though, Shuri had displayed more affection toward him than Tynare had ever imagined.

Tynare wanted nothing more than to accept what Shuri offered, but now more than ever he knew that he could not. He freed his hand from Shuri's, already shaking his head. "Why are you doing this, Shuri? You know I'm not right for you. I can't be with you."

“And why is that?” Shuri asked, not sounding surprised at the protest.

“You already know why.” Tynare clenched his jaw, hating the choked tone of his own voice. “Are you truly going to make me say it?”

“Yes,” Shuri insisted, “because then maybe you’ll realize how stupid it is.”

Tynare couldn’t imagine having an epiphany by admitting out loud how broken and useless he’d become. When he didn’t speak, Shuri sighed heavily. “Did I ever tell you what happened that time, after I fought Nilswryn?”

The non sequitur somewhat surprised Tynare, not to mention that it brought back memories he’d have much preferred to forget. Back in A’rankin, in spite of all of Tynare’s efforts, Shuri’s heart had stopped. It still seemed miraculous that Shuri had come back to him and with no aftereffects to boot.

Tynare shook his head, even if the question had obviously been a rhetorical one. Shuri kissed his forehead, as he often liked to do these days, and said, “I saw my mother.”

Tynare went rigid. Out of everything Shuri could have possibly said, those words shocked Tynare the most. The death of Shuri’s parents remained one of the issues that widened the abyss between them, more so since they hadn’t discussed it much since Tynare had told Shuri the truth.

Shuri seemed to expect some sort of reaction, so Tynare forced himself to speak. “You saw her? You mean.... Through your near-death experience?”

“I suppose,” Shuri replied. “It didn’t really feel like I was dying, not at the time. When I spoke to her, I truly wondered.... Can I come back here? Can I be what you need? Do I even want to?” A sigh. “I loved my mother, you know. I love her still. What happened... I know the two of us haven’t really talked about it. But her death wasn’t of your making. She chose her own path, and in a way, she determined my father’s as well.”

“If I hadn’t been there, if I hadn’t supplied her with the potion....”

Shuri cupped his cheek gently, shaking his head. “You know better than to say that, Nari. There is always a way. I admit that I had my doubts. I carried so much hatred in my heart, for everyone involved, maybe even for you. But when I was there I realized that I can’t hate any longer, not when you showed me how to love.”

Much to Tynare's shame, a tear rolled down his cheek. "Shuri... I don't think.... This isn't a good idea. You deserve better."

Shuri scoffed. "Now you're just being stubborn. I would start off by telling you all my faults if I wasn't worried it would just make you even less enthused about being with me. If that is even possible."

"Don't be ridiculous," Tynare snapped at his lover. "You know my feelings for you are not the problem."

Shuri took hold of Tynare's hand again, this time keeping him from escaping. "Then bond with me, *sharani*. I never asked this of you officially, but I want you to be mine. Everything you are, Tynare, Nari.... Your past, your present, and most of all your future. I want them all for me, and in turn, I will give you my own."

Tynare blinked, his gaze fixing on Shuri's handsome, familiar face for the first time in what seemed like ages. "Why? Why would you ask such a thing?"

"Didn't I tell you already? Because I love you." Shuri brushed his lips over Tynare's in a ghost of a kiss. "You don't have to answer me right now. Take your time to think about it. No matter what happens, no matter what you decide, know that I will support you when it comes to helping your homeland. That won't change."

Shuri moved to pull away, but Tynare tightened his hold on Shuri's hand, keeping the other man from leaving. He took a deep breath, reminding himself to breathe. "What did your mother tell you?"

Shuri hadn't revealed the actual conversation, only that it had led him to take a chance on trusting Tynare. Maybe Tynare was simply trying to stall, to both keep Shuri with him and not give him the only answer he could offer. Either way, Shuri went with it and settled back down next to him. "Mostly, we spoke about her reasons for doing what she did, and then, of course, about you."

"And what did she think?" Tynare inquired, licking his suddenly dry lips. A different time, he might have deemed this conversation surreal, but after meeting Seyan himself, he couldn't say Shuri's tale surprised him.

"She thought you're important to me," his lover answered, "and that I was too afraid to admit the exact extent of it, which is perfectly true. I think she helped me with some of her power since when I recovered I didn't experience any of the symptoms you had." He paused, his bronze gaze never faltering from Tynare's face. "But I realize now that you were the one

to give me strength, throughout all this. When I was fighting Nilswryn, it is you I thought about. Whatever else happens, I hope you always know that.”

Tynare’s heart just about broke. Witnessing his lover bare his soul like this made him regret delving deeper into Shuri’s reasons. His hands itched to grip the tight warrior braids of Shuri’s hair, to cup Shuri’s face and trace the lines of his cheekbones. But no, Tynare needed to stop this conversation before he went against his resolve and did something that would ultimately hurt Shuri more.

“I can’t,” he managed to choke out. “I want to be with you, Shuri, but I can’t. I’m sorry.”

Shuri just looked at him, his eyes piercing Tynare’s very soul. The silence seemed to stretch on forever, but when Shuri spoke again, his voice held no accusation. “No, I’m the one who’s sorry. I shouldn’t have pushed you. But it’s all right. I can wait.”

Once again, he kissed Tynare’s forehead and without another word, departed. It was only when Shuri had already walked away that Tynare realized something very important. When Shuri had asked him to be his bond mate, Tynare had seen. The damage done to his body by the void magic had stopped mattering. His yearning for Shuri had simply been stronger.

Even now, Tynare could get up and follow Shuri. He didn’t. Instead, he closed his eyes and focused on the sound of the crashing waves. He’d done the right thing. In time, Shuri would thank him. In time, they’d both find their own paths.

# Epilogue

## Future

*Six months later*

TYNARE STOOD on the pier, forcing himself not to pace even as he watched the approach of the ship. He'd been here since the early hours of the morning, but the more he waited, the slower time seemed to pass.

By his side, Ivy nudged him with his elbow. "Calm down. He'll be here soon."

Tynare didn't really acknowledge his friend's words. He knew that, but it didn't make the wait any easier. When it came to Shuri, his heart never agreed with his mind.

Since his arrival in the Empire, Tynare had managed to establish a constant naval route between the two continents. It had taken some work, a lot of stealth on his part, and Gerrol's hidden assistance, but most latents were now leaving A'rankin and taking refuge on the Western Realm.

It wasn't an ideal solution, and perhaps what made it all the more frustrating was that they couldn't allow the ships to navigate unsupervised. Since Tynare and Etera had been officially banished from their homeland, Shuri ended up the leader of these expeditions, making the long journey to A'rankin every single time to help Tynare's people.

They'd tried every other way, including using the Andari wave-wayfaring. Neither that nor Nikari rifts had worked too well, as latents tended to panic when separated from their element. Waves didn't affect latents quite as badly as rifts, but the long distance made them unreliable and risky.

And so, here Tynare was, forced to wait as Shuri returned from another of his trips to the Eastern Realm. No matter how many times they repeated

the process, it never got any easier.

To distract himself, Tynare turned his attention toward Ivy. “When are you and Kris finally going to organize the bonding ceremony? I’m pretty sure the entire Empire is anxiously waiting for it to happen.”

Ivy shrugged. “We decided to wait a bit. There’s been so much going on, and we didn’t want to rush into things. I realize that the bonding of the Morai will naturally have something political in nature, but I’d prefer it to be *our* day.”

Tynare had no doubt Ivy did indeed want that, but he also knew the decision to be connected with Tynare’s own relationship with Shuri, or better said, its absence. Tynare had expected a level of awkwardness between them after his refusal to bond with Shuri, but that didn’t mean it hurt any less. In a strange way, Shuri’s extended absence came as a relief—or it would have if not for the nightmares the trips gave Tynare.

Shaking off the thoughts, Tynare forced himself to answer his friend. “You should tell him that. I think he loves you a great deal, and he should know how you feel about your bonding.”

Ivy shook his head. “I don’t want to make him have to choose between my wishes and the Empire. Kris has enough problems without my selfishness adding to them.”

Tynare thought about that and his own situation with Shuri. In a way, he and Ivy were a lot alike. Ivy had concerns about Anderra, which likely burdened him more than he admitted. At the same time, as the future Moris, he couldn’t show too much favor to his own land. Meanwhile, Tynare’s Aranken loyalties would always define him. Unlike Ivy, he had used Shuri for his own purpose. What did that make him?

Before he could try to find an answer to that question, the vessel finally reached the harbor. Tynare’s enthusiasm chased away his remorse when he caught sight of a familiar figure on the deck of the ship.

He had to force himself to remain composed and not start waving at his former lover. Ivy had no such qualms, and he greeted Shuri with the same openness he seemed to use in most of his interactions with his friends. “Shuri! Over here.”

Shuri had obviously seen them already, as he mounted his nightwolf and leapt onto the pier. Tynare opened his mouth to offer Shuri an official greeting, but Shuri didn’t give him the chance to say anything.



“You’re walking,” he whispered, scanning Tynare from head to toe as if he expected Tynare to collapse any moment now. “*Sharani*, you’re walking.”

Faster than the eye could see, Shuri dismounted and pulled Tynare into his embrace. In spite of knowing that he should probably not allow the hug, hearing Shuri call him *sharani* again made Tynare weak. Even aware of all the eyes on them, he couldn’t help but lean into Shuri’s hold. “Ivy has been helping me. You know that.”

“Yes, but you still had some problems before I left,” Shuri replied, his hold on Tynare tightening. “I didn’t expect this.”

“You’ve been gone a long time,” Tynare pointed out. Far too long. Longer than ever before and enough to make Tynare wonder what could be the cause of the delay. It certainly hadn’t helped that Shuri’s regular visits through the rift had become rarer and rarer and in the past weeks completely absent. But Tynare had no right to complain or ask questions, not when Shuri’s whole reason for leaving the Western Realm was his dedication to Tynare’s cause.

In fact, he seemed so focused on his task that he’d truly worn himself out. Dark circles under his eyes spoke of many sleepless nights. Even Hynte’s fur looked ragged, which would have never happened under normal circumstances.

Tynare focused his elemental powers and flooded Shuri’s body with magic. Ivy had advised him to be careful when it came to complex spells, but Tynare wasn’t about to allow Shuri to suffer if he could help.

Shuri jerked in his arms, perhaps intending to pull away. Tynare held on, even if the embrace was becoming far too intimate, even if it made Tynare remember different times, painful, beautiful, or both.

When they finally broke apart, Shuri gave him a narrow-eyed look. Tynare arched a brow and didn’t falter, which earned him a sigh and a smile from Shuri. “Thank you for that, *sharani*,” Shuri said. “And yes, I have been gone for a long time. It’s unfortunate, but things have become quite complicated. Your father was giving us a hard time, since we needed to venture deeper into A’rankin.”

Ivy released a gasp of concern. “You don’t think he’ll start a war over this, do you?”

Technically speaking, their battle before their departure from A'rankin would have entitled the Nikari to demand retribution. Upon close consideration, the Morai had decided to wait for further developments and make sure the latents were safe on the Western Realm instead of initiating a conflict that would kill many people on both sides. So far, Tynare's father seemed to concur with this train of thought. "He might hate me, but he just wants the latents gone," Tynare told Ivy. "He probably believes the Nikari will harm themselves by taking them in."

"More fool him," Shuri replied. "We can help them, and they realize that."

Indeed, the Nikari ways had turned out to be exactly what the latents needed. Due to their mix in genes, Nikari nature could be unstable, so their training included a great deal of techniques of mental and physical discipline. With Tynare's help, and that of Nikari tutors, many of the latents were already getting used to their overwhelming power. It would never be easy to control, but they no longer represented a danger to themselves and others.

For the moment, the Morai had assigned them their own settlements, under Etera's watch but away from Nikari cities, just in case something went wrong. Tynare could understand the precaution, but he hoped that in time each and every one of these exiled Aranken could become valued members of Nikari society.

"We'll discuss this more when we return to Nikaret," he said. "Right now, we have a lot of confused people to lead to their new homes."

In his heart, Tynare just wanted to stay with Shuri and forget about everything else. However, his life had never truly been about his own wants and needs. He'd taken responsibility for every person the Nikari brought here, and that came with duties he could not skirt.

Shuri obviously wanted to accompany him, but Tynare stopped him before he could even make the offer. "You still look exhausted," he said. "Go on ahead with Ivy. I can handle the rest."

It was a testament to Shuri's enduring fatigue that he didn't protest again. "Very well. Just be careful, all right?"

Tynare chuckled. "I always am."

Or so he said, but as he watched Shuri depart with the young Andari, he knew he hadn't been careful, not at all. At least not with his heart.

WHEN SHURI reached the imperial palace, he went straight for his brother's office. He knew Kris would be expecting a report, and he wanted to get the process over with as soon as possible.

As he entered the room, though, Kris greeted him with an unexpected question. "What are you going to do about Tynare?"

"Hello to you too," Shuri told his brother, more than a little frustrated with Kris's insistence to interfere in his private life. "And what would you want me to do? I'm waiting for him to come to me."

Kris looked up from the papers he'd been studying and narrowed his eyes. "Ivy refuses to go through with the ceremony until the two of you have solved your problems. You know it breaks his heart to see you at odds with Tynare."

Shuri plopped down on his brother's couch, trying but failing to relax. "I know Ivy means well, but it's not so easy."

"Love is never easy," Ivy's reply came from the doorway. When had he approached? Shuri hadn't heard him. He must be even more tired than he'd realized.

Shuri abandoned the couch, helplessness and frustration swelling inside him. "I can't force him to bond with me. Do you think I don't want to be with him? But what good will it do if I start making demands when he's already so torn?"

By the end of the latter phrase, he was practically screaming, and he only realized it when Ivy gave him a shocked, hurt look and took a step back. Kris stood up from his desk and walked to his side. When he gripped Shuri's shoulder, the tight hold warned Shuri to tread carefully.

"I know these past months have been difficult for you," Kris said, "but you have to realize Ivy and I are only trying to help. Losing your temper with us won't do you any good." Through his mental powers, he added, *And don't scream at Ivy. I don't like it.*

Shuri took a deep breath, struggling to keep himself from saying something he would regret. There were still some things he hadn't told his brother, issues he always delayed as he focused on helping the Aranken latents. To this day, Kris believed him to be mistaken when it came to the causes of his mother's death. His unexpected meeting with her had given

him a level of closure, but he still might have approached the issue with Kris if not for his awareness of his own mistakes.

In the end, that very same awareness made him shy away from the entire conversation. “I appreciate what you’re trying to do, but I didn’t come here for this. I merely wanted to let you know what’s been going on in A’rankin.”

His brother scanned his face as if hoping for a different answer, but finally nodded. He released Shuri and took a step back. “Tell me.”

“The king seems to have pretty much gone berserk since Tynare left,” Shuri said, thankful he could rely on complicated political entanglements to free him from needing to deal with well-meaning friends and relatives. “He’s hunting down all the latents, and has pretty much made it clear that right now they’re the enemy. Rumor has it that once they’re eliminated, he plans to strike at Shyrn.”

“I’m not sure that would be a good option for him,” Kris said with a scowl. “I looked into the information Tynare gave me, but Nilswryn’s spies seemed to have disappeared without a trace. I don’t think we’ve seen the last of him.”

The idea of Nilswryn’s return made Shuri revise his previous assessment of politics. “Do you think he’ll make another bid for the throne?”

“Anything’s possible. Right now, I want you to get every single latent out of there and stay within the Empire, once and for all. A’rankin is more unstable than ever. It’s not safe for you to keep traveling to the Eastern Realm.”

“We all do what we must.” Shuri forced a smile. “Don’t worry about me. I’ve survived worse.”

Neither Ivy nor Kris looked too convinced, but when Shuri made for the door, they let him go. Shuri took advantage of this unexpected miracle and fled the office. He left the palace altogether and headed toward the nightwolf dens.

When Tynare and Ivy had told them the real reason why nightwolves watched over the Nikari, a part of Shuri had felt betrayed. Kris had not been happy either, but he’d gotten over it with an ease Shuri envied. He and Attcha knew each other so well by now that even this secret hadn’t been

able to shatter their bond. Shuri, on the other hand, had just met Hynte, and the news had made things a little harder for the two of them.

But Shuri also appreciated that nightwolves made their own choices and had their own minds. No matter what reasons might have influenced their original pact with the Nikari, the fact remained that in the here and now, a true bond existed between the species. So whenever Shuri needed a shoulder to cry on, Shuri went to Hynte—even if Hynte didn't quite have the shoulders of a biped.

His nightwolf seemed to have expected his presence, because he waited at the very edge of his den when Shuri approached. Unlike others of his kind, Hynte didn't have a normal den, since he'd appeared from a rift back in Shyrn. However, he'd still been given the regular enclosure, and few people actually knew the logistics of that decision.

The moment Shuri entered Hynte's den, the big nightwolf nudged him with his snout. *Warm one upset. Sharp claws help?*

*I don't really know if you can help, Hynte. Kris and Ivy want me to talk to Nari, but he's still so focused on A'rankin. How can I truly draw him away from that?*

*Flame hair want to be with warm one. Just afraid and ashamed.*

*I thought so too. Shuri buried his face in Hynte's fur, hating the helplessness weighing heavily on his heart. I also thought that if I waited long enough, he would change his mind. So far, that hasn't been the case.*

*But flame hair better now. Walk again. See again.*

Shuri perked up at the reminder. Hynte was right. He should be celebrating Tynare's recovery, not bemoaning his lack of success when it came to the Aranken prince accepting him. *Yes, that was amazing to see. You know, Hynte, I realize something now. Things are moving along, slowly but steadily. Even if Nari and I never bond, I just want him to be happy. That's what matters.*

*Flame hair be happy with warm one. Warm one just need wait.*

Shuri stayed in the dens for a while longer, chatting with Hynte, making plans. When he finally left, he had a firm decision in mind. He would just have to continue being patient. Everything would fall in place given time. Eventually, he and Tynare would be together.

As Shuri headed back into the palace courtyard, however, he caught sight of something, or rather, someone he hadn't expected to see. It was

Ansel, the air latent Shuri had met back in A'rankin. Shuri had finally managed to track him down during one of his previous trips. Last he'd heard Ansel was making good progress with controlling his power. Even so, Ansel's presence seemed unusual, since as a rule, latents stayed within their own settlements. He'd obviously bypassed the Nikari guards with relative ease, but that didn't surprise Shuri given the level of power most latents could control. For that reason, and many others, Shuri headed toward the latent. "Ansel, is anything amiss?" he asked as he pulled the other man aside. "What are you doing here?"

Ansel shot him an embarrassed look. "Nothing is wrong, Your Highness. I wanted to talk to you."

"To me?" Shuri repeated, completely befuddled. "Why?"

"When we were in A'rankin, everyone used to say you'd decided to help us because of Prince Tynare. And I respect him a great deal. He saved my life. He gave me a new chance. I admit it hurt a lot to have to leave A'rankin, but coming here, being able to start over.... It's helped a lot."

"I'm happy for you," Shuri answered, not sure where Ansel was going with this. "It is what His Highness and I always wanted."

"I know." Ansel bit his lower lip, fidgeting in obvious discomfort. "But.... Elements, I need to finish this before I lose my nerve. The thing is, since coming here, I've been doing a lot of thinking. Since I realize now that Prince Tynare and you are just close friends, I was hoping.... Well, I'm very attracted to you, and I was hoping you might consider a more intimate relationship with me."

Before Shuri could even process that unexpected offer, Ansel had already molded their bodies together, wrapping his arms around Shuri's neck. Shuri opened his mouth to protest, but the Aranken must have taken that as an invitation since the next thing he knew, Ansel was kissing him.

Shuri hadn't kissed anyone in a long time. He only wanted to have that level of intimacy with his *sharani*, and Tynare had emphasized more than once that he didn't deem it wise. That might have been why he didn't immediately move away. Or maybe it was the total shock, having yet another issue springing up on him out of nowhere. He hadn't expected this, especially not after he'd spent the past hour or so steeling himself for a few more months of patient waiting and, yes, sexual frustration.

Either way, that hesitation cost him because just as he was about to move away, he heard a sound behind him. Freeing himself from Ansel's embrace, he turned, only to see Tynare standing there, wide-eyed and pale. "*Sharani*," he tried to say, "I... This isn't what it looks like."

Tynare didn't say anything. He just pivoted on his heel and ran like the entire army of Shyrn was after him. Ansel released a sound of distress. "Oh, I... I didn't realize. I'm sorry."

Shuri didn't know if that was the case or not, but he didn't have time to talk to Ansel. "We'll speak of this later. Please stay out of sight for a while longer. I need to find him."

More than aware that every passing second could make the situation worse than it already was, Shuri followed Tynare. Thankfully, his former lover seemed too intent on putting distance between them to try to hide his destination. Shuri tracked him down with ease, and he couldn't say he was too surprised when he found Tynare in the gardens of the palace.

Shuri had noticed before that the gardens appeared to be one of the few locations in Nikaret where Tynare didn't display an obvious amount of discomfort. He'd once told Shuri that the palace reminded him a great deal of Shyrn, which upon close consideration Shuri could understand since the actual structure of the building—leaving aside architectural specifics—had been modeled after the original residence of the Fezenda.

At present, he didn't seem too worried about his environment. When Shuri found him, Tynare had knelt on the ground, burying his fingers in the grass, taking in deep breaths of air. It reminded Shuri of very different days, when Nari had been more than a nickname, when Shuri hadn't accepted his feelings for a man he understood so little.

As he approached, Tynare let go of the blades of grass and straightened his shoulders. It was strange, but in moments such as these, Shuri could see the fluid transition between the strong leader and the vulnerable, loving man hiding underneath that façade. Both of them formed part of Tynare, and Shuri loved both parts equally, which was why the only identifier that could truly work for Tynare was *sharani*. Three-quarters of the time, Shuri called his former lover both Tynare and Nari, which likely confused everyone, even himself.

It was the prince he faced right now, a prince trying to keep a serious wound from showing. "Your Highness." He greeted Shuri as he got up. "I

didn't realize you were currently engaged in a relationship. I suppose congratulations are in order. Ansel is a good man."

"Yes, he is," Shuri agreed. "He is also not the one I'm in love with. But you know that already, *sharani*, don't you?"

For an instant, pain and yearning flashed through Tynare's deep blue eyes. The moment passed so quickly that if Shuri hadn't been watching for it, he would have missed it. "I shouldn't have reacted like that," Tynare said. "I have no right and no claim to your time and attentions."

And yet he was jealous. Like Hynte had said, Tynare wanted to be with Shuri.

This could be it. This could be the moment that would make or break their relationship forever. "Do you want to? Do you want to have that claim?"

Tynare's calm façade cracked, replaced by frustrated anger. "Shuri, I didn't know you had it in you to be cruel," he snapped back.

"I'm cruel? *Sharani*, we've been going around in circles for six months now. You feel guilty, and I feel torn, and we never reach any real conclusion. We want to help your people and to keep mine safe, and every single time, our feelings somehow manage to become unimportant. I'm tired of it. We deserve better."

Tynare stared at him, his eyes very wide and so very blue, reminding Shuri of oceans he could easily lose himself in. "Shuri...."

"Just tell me once and for all." Shuri cut his *sharani* off. "I understand duty. I understand helplessness. But there's more to it than that, isn't it?"

For the longest time, Shuri thought his former lover wouldn't answer. He forced himself to stay rooted in his place instead of walking over to Tynare and shaking off the man's stubbornness. Mercifully, the wait-it-out strategy worked this time. Tynare's shoulders slumped and he said, "You'll hate me. As time goes by, you'll keep remembering what happened, and you'll come to hate me. I'd rather not have you at all than end up in that position."

Shuri might have scoffed at Tynare's concerns, but he could definitely understand where they came from. He plopped down on the grass and lay back, staring at the sky. "Come here," he told his *sharani*. "Sit with me."

After a small moment of hesitation, Tynare complied. He was so close that Shuri itched to reach for his hand. Instead, he focused on the clouds



above, studiously not looking at Tynare. “Do you remember when we first met, back in A’rankin? I had the hardest time, because I couldn’t understand why I was attracted to two different people. Looking back, I sometimes laugh at myself for being such an idiot.”

“You’re not an idiot. In a way, I was two people. To this day I’m not 100 percent certain on how that condition disappeared.”

Shuri rolled around to look at his former lover. “You know what I think? Your two sides were always at odds with each other. And then they weren’t, not when it came to me. Am I wrong?”

Tynare shook his head, his fingers idly playing over Shuri’s arm. “You’re not wrong, no.”

Shuri suspected Tynare didn’t realize what he was doing, so he remained very still. “So what do your two sides think now? Your heart and your mind? What are they telling you to do? Are they at odds again?”

“Yes and no,” Tynare answered. “I just want you to be happy, Shuri, and I know that with me....”

Shuri couldn’t bear to hear Tynare berate himself any longer. “No, *sharani*, you don’t know that. Give me a chance. Give us a chance. You’re my happiness. I’ve known that from the moment I lay there, in your arms, dying, and I saw a star above me shining so bright. I was so afraid, *sharani*. You have no idea. I hated everything and everyone so much. When I left the Empire, I could have killed Kris if I’d found the opportunity.”

Tynare’s eyes widened as if he couldn’t believe what Shuri was telling him. “Shuri, you shouldn’t even tell me such things.”

“Not telling you doesn’t make it any less true. I understand why you’re reluctant. We were enemies once. But I think that what the two of us share is too strong to let the past get in our way.”

Tynare just gave him this... look, as if he’d have liked nothing more than to agree but couldn’t quite bring himself to do it. In that moment, Shuri realized something he should have noticed before. Words wouldn’t convince his *sharani*. Words would do nothing more but create more confusion, more reasons for them to be apart.

Aching to show Tynare how he felt, Shuri rolled on top of the beautiful Aranken and pressed their mouths together. It might have been a horrible idea, since his *sharani* had been more than clear in not encouraging sexual contact between them. Shuri risked everything, including Tynare’s respect

and affection. But in his heart, he knew that actions spoke louder than words. The truth of their love for each other lay right there, between the two of them. They just had to reach out and grab it.

At first, Tynare went rigid. Shuri had one moment during which he thought he'd completely misread the situation. Fortunately, his *sharani* proved him wrong. That second of hesitation passed, and Tynare melted in his arms, surrendering to the rightness of their embrace.

Drunk on Tynare's acceptance, Shuri licked over the seam of his *sharani*'s lips, demanding entrance. Tynare eagerly gave it, no longer showing any restraint whatsoever. He seemed to have abandoned the doubts that had plagued him in favor of focusing on the simple perfection of the moment. For all Shuri knew, Tynare didn't even remember their previous argument, and Shuri couldn't say he minded.

That assessment turned out to be false. Shuri spent an inordinate amount of time kissing Tynare, reacquainting himself with his *sharani*'s taste, his tongue tangling with Tynare's in a passionate duel. When they broke away to breathe, Tynare surprised him by rolling them both around and climbing on top. "I don't want to doubt this anymore. I'm so tired of pretending I don't want you. I'm so tired of being just Tynare. I was fractured, Shuri, and you made me whole. I can't go back to being what I was, not even for the good of my people."

"Oh, *sharani*...." Shuri breathed out. "You've been theirs long enough. Now, you can be mine."

TYNARE FELT like he'd fallen into a dream. Not an hour earlier, he'd been in the latent village, telling himself to focus on the matter at hand and stop thinking about Shuri. In spite of his efforts, he'd been so distracted his mother had sent him back to Nikaret. Now, he was in Shuri's embrace, blurting out the emotions he'd tried to hide for months.

Maybe he should have been wary. Maybe he should have been afraid. But the decision he'd made brought him a sense of relief and freedom he had not expected.

He had not forgotten about Shuri's kiss with Ansel, and thinking about it made unexpected possessiveness rear up inside him. In his heart, he didn't actually believe Shuri had any interest in the latent, but seeing them

together had made Tynare realize what a fool he'd been. True, he'd only wanted the best for Shuri, but he now realized neither of them could be happy without each other.

When Shuri spoke those magical words, it felt like some sort of fog had finally cleared. *Now you can be mine.* Could it be that easy? Could they disregard the weight of their past like Shuri wanted?

*Be mine.* It all came down to that simple offer. It wasn't the first time Shuri asked it of him, and yet it seemed so different from that moment six months ago, when they'd been on the ship leaving A'rankin. Tynare had recovered from his injuries, yes, but this feeling, it went beyond that.

With trembling hands, Tynare cupped Shuri's cheek. He wanted to scream "yes," to tell Shuri how much he ached to belong to him. But he had wanted that before, and he'd still said "no."

Well, it was high time he accepted the obvious and stopped denying what he'd always known to be true. His eloquence abandoned him, but he didn't need it. For once he could just follow his heart like he'd always wanted.

Throwing all fears and all caution to the wind, Tynare pressed his mouth to Shuri's. Shuri groaned in obvious arousal and impatience, but he still let Tynare lead the way. Tynare allowed himself the luxury to explore, breathing in the scent of Shuri's lust for him, reveling in the sensual energy connecting them at a visceral level. His elemental magic responded to Shuri's presence, to the emotions Tynare had finally opened himself to. Slow, lazy, the lip-lock nevertheless stirred a deeper burning need inside Tynare, that need he had suppressed for far too long.

Shuri seemed to feel the same urgency, because when they broke apart for a second time, he flipped Tynare onto his back again. As Shuri's bulk settled on top of him, Tynare realized he never wanted to be anywhere but here, with Shuri, in the handsome Nikari's arms. He could afford to let go and trust because Shuri would never disappoint him.

Shuri's eyes glowed with the fire of arousal when he spoke next. "I love you, *sharani*," he said. "I hope you always know that."

After that, there were no more words. Tynare couldn't reply, because Shuri kissed him, cutting off all possibility of speech. Tynare didn't have a chance of mustering the resolve to go against that and instead surrendered to it completely. Shuri's heated touch chased away the thoughts swirling

madly in Tynare's brain. Whatever fears might have withstood his decision melted away in the fire building between them.

The kiss quickly progressed from an unrushed lip-lock to an outburst of lust and emotion. Tynare couldn't pinpoint the moment when it all changed. All of a sudden, they were desperately grabbing for each other, rolling in the grass, tearing at their clothes. An all-consuming thirst had awakened inside Tynare, and he felt like he could only quench it within Shuri's kiss, within the complete union of their bodies.

Skin to skin, elements, he needed skin to skin. He ached to feel Shuri inside him, burned for it just like he had in A'rankin, before he'd even acknowledged how he felt for his lover. Anima help him, why did he only have one mouth and two hands? He wanted to touch, suck, and lick everything at the same time, but no matter what he did, he couldn't quite get enough.

Somehow, he managed to end up on top of Shuri again, although he couldn't have said how it happened. He didn't even think about what he did next. Using his air magic, he snapped the bindings of Shuri's breeches and pulled them off altogether. The damn things seemed resistant to less destructive methods of disrobing, and Tynare didn't have enough patience to keep trying.

As he freed Shuri's hard cock from its confines, Tynare's mouth watered with the need to sample a taste. By now he couldn't have kept himself from following this urge. Unfortunately, it meant they needed to stop their frantic kisses, but it would be worth it. Elements, it would be so worth it.

Tynare broke the lip-lock and crawled down Shuri's body. The Nikari groaned once more when Tynare unwittingly rubbed his ass over his naked dick, and in that moment, Tynare wanted nothing more but to tear his own clothes off and impale himself on Shuri's erection.

He didn't know how he snapped out of that trance of lust, but he did. It took more control than Tynare thought he could muster, but he focused on his wish to make this last, to reacquaint himself with his lover's body in every possible way. Even now, six months after he'd last sucked Shuri's dick, he could still remember how good it had felt, how much he'd loved the weight of the thick member on his tongue.

He wanted it again. He wanted everything Shuri had once given him and more. He was starved for it, and when he delved down and finally took his lover's cock in his mouth, he did so with such greed that he almost gagged.

Shuri must have realized it, because his hands landed in Tynare's hair, the hold gentle, contrasting sharply with the erratic, wild desire. "Slowly, *sharani*. Don't rush it."

A strange emotion crystallized in Tynare's chest, his heart clenching at the words. How could Shuri be so intensely passionate and yet so kind and warm when it counted? Once, Tynare would have blamed it on Shuri's fire affinity, but he knew plenty of Fire Starters who weren't like that. Connected to the elements or not, it was so uniquely Shuri that Tynare couldn't help but fall a little more in love with the Nikari.

Of course, when it came to Shuri, his affection couldn't truly be separated from his carnal impulses. Even if Shuri had urged him to take it slowly, Tynare followed his previous instincts. He began to bob his head up and down his lover's shaft, hollowing his cheeks as he sucked. It felt just as amazing as he remembered, no, better, because now, the dark clouds looming over them had disappeared. Tynare could focus on Shuri's taste and simply revel in the absolute freedom of being who he wanted, of doing what he'd dreamed.

Drugged on the flavor of Shuri's precum, Tynare went back to suckle at the head, gathering every drop on his tongue. He swirled his tongue around the glans, employing all the tricks in his arsenal to hear that distinctive hitch in Shuri's breath, that husky tone in Shuri's voice.

And oh, did he hear it. "*Sharani*.... Yes!" his lover groaned.

As much as Tynare liked Shuri's gentler side, he couldn't deny he found something particularly intoxicating in being the focus of the Nikari's unleashed passion. He knew the moment Shuri's control finally snapped, because his grip on Tynare's hair tightened to a nigh-painful extent. The burn in Tynare's scalp pooled right into his testes, feeding his own lust and wanton needs.

It certainly didn't help that Shuri took over, thrusting into Tynare's mouth when earlier he'd allowed Tynare to set the pace. He started to fuck Tynare's face with a violence that reminded Tynare of the eruption of a

volcano. Tynare embraced it, loving every single moment of it, craving the taste of his lover's seed.

Fortunately, Shuri didn't let him wait. A few thrusts later, his muscular body went rigid and his cock pulsed in Tynare's mouth, sending hot streams of cum down Tynare's throat. Tynare drank it all down, almost finding his own peak at the knowledge of his lover's pleasure.

In a promising twist that didn't shock Tynare in the slightest, Shuri didn't even soften. Tynare had counted on that, since having a Nikari lover came with perks he'd appreciated from the very beginning. Even as he released Shuri's dick from his mouth, the still erect member twitched, as if demanding Tynare's attention.

"I hope you don't think you're going anywhere, *sharani*," Shuri said.

Tynare smiled at the lingering huskiness of his lover's voice. "Not at all. I'm done running."

Shuri's fists clenched and unclenched, as if he was barely keeping himself from reaching for Tynare once again. Tynare had no intention of teasing Shuri any longer. He did pull away, but only because he needed a little bit of distance to disrobe without tearing his clothes off altogether.

Stripping for Shuri was an intensely sensual experience. Tynare had planned to discard his garments as quickly as possible, but as he tossed his shirt—a little scorched from their earlier frenzy—onto the grass, he became aware of the lust with which Shuri watched him.

Even if he hadn't come yet, Tynare lingered over every garment, scanning Shuri's face as his lover drank in every inch of him. Sexual tension crackled between them, so intense it took Tynare's breath away.

And yet Tynare would have kept going if Shuri hadn't extended his hand and said, "Come to me, *sharani*."

Any sort of desire to tease vanished through those four simple words. Elements, the latter one would've likely been enough. It was Tynare's weakness, hearing Shuri say the endearment that held every emotion the Nikari had revealed to him. Unable to deny himself and Shuri, Tynare took off the rest of his clothes. When he focused on Shuri again, he found the Nikari already naked and waiting for him. Shuri's nudity propelled Tynare into action. He straddled Shuri again, ready to impale himself on his lover's cock.

Shuri stopped him before he could do what they both craved. “Wait. We need.... We don’t have oil.”

Even now Shuri worried about him. Tynare wanted to kiss his lover so badly it hurt, and he found no reason to contain that impulse. He kept the lip-lock brief and when he broke away, he winked. “It’s all right. Remember there are advantages to me being a Life mage.”

Shuri blinked, and Tynare wondered if it was only now that the Nikari realized whom he’d made love to in A’rankin. He didn’t seem awfully surprised, so he must have at least suspected. He didn’t speak, but he didn’t have to, because the look in his bronze-rimmed eyes said more than words could ever accomplish.

A quick incantation had Tynare’s hand slick with oil. It was actually one of the first complex spells he’d learned in his teenage years, as a young prince just discovering how his body worked. It had come in handy then, and it was even more useful now.

Shuri hissed when Tynare’s fingers came into contact with his dick. Grinning, Tynare slowly jacked his lover off, rubbing his thumb over the tip, distantly wondering if he could make Shuri come like this and still have Shuri fuck him. His body screamed for completion, though, so he decided he would have to experiment at a different time.

To free himself from the temptation, Tynare quickly finished oiling Shuri’s cock and released the thick member. Just a little longer, and they’d be together once again, like they should have been for months. Feverish with arousal, Tynare might have disregarded the last step if not for the knowledge that it would make Shuri worry unnecessarily. He couldn’t muster enough concentration to oil himself up with a mere thought, so he shoved two fingers inside his channel. His own touch drew a moan out of him, and he made no attempt to contain it. The method also came with an additional advantage, as it aroused Shuri beyond belief. Even as Tynare finger-fucked himself, Shuri’s hands swept over every inch of him they could reach, tweaking his nipples, traveling down his abs only to zero in on Tynare’s cock. Identifying Shuri’s intentions, Tynare shook his head. “Don’t. If you touch me... I’ll come.”

Every syllable came out punctuated by a gasp, but Shuri understood him regardless. He respected Tynare’s plea, gripping the blades of grass as a sort of anchor. Tynare didn’t take too long with his brief preparation, but by

the time he pulled his digits out of his body, Shuri trembled with the effort to contain his urgency.

Tynare could certainly empathize, and he'd already waited long enough. Supporting himself on Shuri's chest, he positioned his body over his lover's dick and pushed down.

Shuri's cock popped past the ring of muscle guarding the entrance to Tynare's body. The invasion burned so beautifully, the slight pain reassuring Tynare when he'd have deemed all this a dream. Shuri's hot big hands landed on his hips, both guiding and steadying him, keeping Tynare from harming himself in his zeal.

Tynare couldn't complain about the slower pace. It made him feel everything even deeper, at a visceral level, through every cell of his body and into the core of his being. As he took more of Shuri's dick inside him, he remembered Shuri's earlier words. Shuri's. Finally, Shuri's, forever.

Tynare fully lowered himself on his lover's member, taking a few deep breaths to ride out the overwhelming sensations. Shuri didn't rush him, although it couldn't have been easy to remain completely still. He just waited, his hold on Tynare tight and never faltering.

Tynare couldn't muster the same level of patience as Shuri. He lifted himself up and shoved back down, moaning as the motion caused Shuri's cock to brush against his special spot. Shuri grunted and thrust up into him. Soon they were moving together in perfect synch, falling into a dance as old as time, coming together like they'd never once been apart.

Somewhere at the back of his mind, Tynare was aware that if anyone passed through the gardens, he and Shuri would be giving the person quite a show. Then again, hadn't things been similar in A'rankin? Both times they'd been together, they'd risked discovery. Some things never changed, at least not when it came to the two of them.

No, that wasn't right. Things *had* changed, a lot. In the gardens of the Kar'neia palace, he should have never pulled away. In the Fire Starter barracks, he should have never put up his deceitful mask. He should have told Shuri the truth. But he hadn't, and he'd almost lost Shuri because of it.

Never again. Never again would he allow doubt to get in his way when it came to Shuri. Without Shuri, he'd never have had the strength to fight his way back to health. He had loved Shuri when he'd been blind, when he'd been two different people, when he'd been a broken shell of a man, as



a leader and as a healer. He had loved Shuri when he'd known Shuri loved another. He'd loved Shuri in A'rankin, in Shyrn, and in the Empire, on two continents and through the journey over an ocean almost as deep as his love. Those feelings would never change, and no one, no one could love Shuri more.

Pushing the memories away, Tynare focused on the here and now, on the emotions and sensations swelling inside him. He rode Shuri with abandon, every thrust making him soar higher and higher on the peaks of pleasure. And then his eyes settled on Shuri's face, and his entire world seemed to shift. He didn't know what it was about this particular moment that caused it to happen. It could have been his final acceptance of the true extent of his feelings for Shuri, or something else entirely. Tynare couldn't identify the cause, but it didn't matter. He couldn't even think about it, not when his senses melted in a surreal kaleidoscope. He suddenly saw himself and Shuri through eyes that didn't seem to belong to him. He could now get a glimpse of his own form impaled on Shuri's cock, his head thrown back, his hair fanned over his back in a curtain of red. He could see Shuri from more than a dozen angles, and when his lover gasped, he guessed Shuri must be experiencing a similar phenomenon.

Up, down, right, left, flesh and bone, sky and grass—everything came together within Tynare, within both of them. The elements were with them. Tynare felt it so clearly, even more so than when he used his life magic. It reminded him a little of being inside the Wards, communing with the elements in that one place where their power became palpable. He sensed the similarities in every individual lock of hair, in every bone in his body. Paradoxically, he also sensed the very significant differences. He and Shuri might be a part of something far greater than them, but they were more than their abilities. In that moment, Tynare stopped being a warrior, a leader, a healer, even a Life mage. His past as an Aranken mattered only insofar as it defined him as a person but ceased to have any relevance beyond that. He'd found something—or rather someone—more important to him than his loyalty and his duty to his people.

It should have been confusing to see things through so many perspectives, and maybe to a certain extent it was. Tynare closed his eyes so that he could focus on this gift the elements had decided to give him. It was just like his divination ability, except so much stronger, mingling with the power of Shuri's love for him.

Lost in it, lost in Shuri, Tynare started to rock onto Shuri's erection once more. He'd have never thought anything could reach the level of perfection of the two times they'd been together, but he was wrong. They moved with the fluidity of a flowing stream, with the passion of a burst of fire. In each other, they found the steady affection of the fertile earth, the freedom of the wind as it danced through the leaves. But beyond the elemental bond lay an even deeper link, one Tynare didn't have words to describe.

Shuri's dick stretched Tynare's passage, filling him to the brim, but Tynare's soul also felt full, as if every thrust tightened the connection between him and his lover. He could no longer tell where he ended and Shuri began. At one point, he stopped trying. He stopped bothering to come up with ways to identify the way he felt and just embraced the experience. Warmth, need, passion, his love for Shuri—those were the only things that mattered. Shuri's scent, his sweat, his weight on the grass and their combined cries fed wild energy into the bond between them.

When his orgasm came, Tynare opened himself to it, every single nerve ending flaring to life, his senses awake with an awareness he'd never deemed possible. Shuri thrust one last time inside him and followed him over the edge. As wet heat filled Tynare's passage, a strikingly familiar mental touch slid over his consciousness, and Tynare welcomed it, knowing what it meant, knowing what Shuri wanted.

For one brilliant, beautiful moment, time seemed to stop and memories and feelings not his own flooded Tynare. He was both himself and Shuri, and their emotions came together in a whirlpool that nearly stopped his heart.

It was one instant, during which Tynare saw himself through Shuri's eyes, remembered that day when they met, agonized over every awful thing he'd said, and finally understood that Shuri had let go of the past. Shuri had forgiven him a long time ago, understanding that Tynare had never wanted anyone—neither Ivy nor Shuri's parents—to get hurt. How strange that Shuri had grasped this when Tynare himself hadn't been able to. He also saw Shuri's anxiety and frustration, the desperate yearning he'd tried so hard to contain and his own guilt over his previous interactions with Kris.

Tynare's heart reached out to Shuri's and Shuri's to Tynare's. At some level they both acknowledged that their guilt and problems wouldn't just

fade in one day, but that was all right. They were people. They made mistakes. And together, they could be stronger. They could face the entire world without fear, without doubt. Their love would not allow them to succumb to hatred ever again.

One single word echoed in Tynare's mind. *Mine*. It settled over Tynare like a mantle of contentment, and at last, he began to descend from the high of rapture, his consciousness separating from Shuri's.

Tynare collapsed next to Shuri on the grass, still breathing hard and overwhelmed by what had happened. He'd heard about the way the Nikari claimed their intended bond mates, but he'd never thought it would be so beautiful and so intense.

Shuri wrapped his arm around Tynare's shoulders, pulling him close, just holding him. *Thank you sharani*, he whispered. *Thank you for trusting me with this gift*.

Tynare realized Shuri hadn't spoken out loud, and the intimacy of this new method of communication almost made him weep. Instead, he tentatively sent out his reply to Shuri. *No. Thank you for loving me, even when I didn't love myself*.

Shuri must have heard him, because he smiled and kissed his forehead. Their new bond glowed with Shuri's affection for him, and Tynare's magic vibrated with the surreal satisfaction of the elements. Happy for the first time in memory, Tynare closed his eyes and finally allowed himself to believe.

"IT WORKED, didn't it?"

Rubbing his hot cheeks, Ivy opened his eyes and looked up at Kris. He hadn't really wanted to spy on Shuri and Tynare, but he'd been too curious and anxious, so he'd ended up using his divination abilities. It had eloquently answered his questions and Kris's. "You know it did," he told his lover. "You expected it."

Kris shrugged, but beyond the pretend nonchalance in his demeanor, Ivy saw relief. "There was always a chance that the plan would just make things worse."

Yes, Ivy knew that, but he also realized Tynare and Shuri were meant to be. It had physically hurt to see them yearn so much for each other and

still be apart because of their own insecurities. Not that Ivy blamed them. He and Kris might have had different circumstances, but they'd put in quite a lot of work before they'd found the balance of a healthy relationship.

It had been worth it, though. Everything Ivy had been through—from the disdain of his kind to the injury that had nearly killed him—just served to make him stronger, to truly show him and Kris how to be together. But since he knew how many difficulties Shuri and Tynare had already fought against, he'd wanted to help them along.

Kris had come up with the idea of enlisting someone to nudge Tynare into a fit of jealousy. They'd ended up choosing the air latent whom Tynare had saved, who had been more than happy to help. Still, up to the very last moment, Ivy had wondered if they'd truly done the right thing.

Kris seemed to guess his thoughts. He brushed a kiss over Ivy's lips, smiling softly. "Sometimes fears can be far more difficult to defeat than any other enemy. We just gave those two a little wake-up call. They'll thank us."

"If they ever find out it was your idea."

Kris chuckled. "They will, eventually, even if we don't tell them. Shuri is no idiot. I doubt that he'll get angry at us for interfering."

Before Ivy could reply, a knock sounded at the door, and Kris called out, "Come in."

Their unexpected Aranken ally stepped into the office, bowing lowly. "It worked?" Ansel asked without preamble.

Ivy nodded. "Thank you. We couldn't have done it without you. I know it will mean the world to Tynare."

A shadow of pain coursed over Ansel's face, but when he spoke, his voice sounded steady. "Prince Tynare has given me more acceptance than I found in my own loved ones. This was the least I could do." Ansel cleared his throat and offered Ivy a sedate smile. "In any case, it seems time for me to return to the village. I might be here with leave from you, but I don't want to make anyone anxious."

Kris nodded. "Speak to Sai if you need anything. We'll keep in touch."

As the Aranken latent departed, Ivy watched him go with concern. "I do hope he'll find a way to be happy too."

"He will, in time," Kris said. Plopping down on the couch, he pulled Ivy into his lap. "Now.... Can I get you to agree to finally bond with me?"

Ivy couldn't hold on to any concern when he was in Kris's arms, but he did like to tease his lover. "Well.... Maybe," he said, pretending to think about it. "I feel you haven't tried to convince me long enough."

Kris growled at him, and the next thing Ivy knew, he was lying on his back on the couch, with Kris on top of him, kissing the very breath out of him. In that moment, as he surrendered to their passion, Ivy felt happier than ever, and more so because he knew that across the palace, in the gardens, two other people shared his bliss.

NILS WAVED his hand over the scrying mirror, unsurprised at the developments in the Western Realm. "Well, that took them longer than expected. I was beginning to lose my patience."

From his place on Nils's shoulder, Uni scoffed. "I don't like them. I have no idea why you even care whether they bond or not."

Nils laughed at his familiar. "Well, we are family." When Uni arched a brow at him, he abandoned his façade of amusement. "To be perfectly honest, Tynare's affection for Shuriden is a factor that will influence my plans. It will help him cut the ties he still has with A'rankin."

Not to mention that it was very bothersome to be the target of Tynare's hatred. True, he'd wanted to use the Aranken prince, but it wasn't anything Tynare wouldn't have done if he'd been in Nils's position. To this day, Nils couldn't understand why in the world Tynare even had nightmares about him. The Aranken could be very strange creatures.

"I suppose that makes sense," Uni answered. "But I still don't like him. He could have killed you."

Nils chuckled. "You do realize I factored in that little show. Besides, I've lived too long to be easily slain. You know that."

He had not expected breaking his wing and almost getting stabbed in the heart, but the risks had been necessary for the success of his modified plan. "On the whole, I believe it went well."

Uni nodded sagely. "I suppose. And you wouldn't leave your favorite familiar alone, right?"

Nils sighed at Uni's antics, wondering what had possessed him to accept Uni as his companion to begin with. "You're my *only* familiar, Uni."

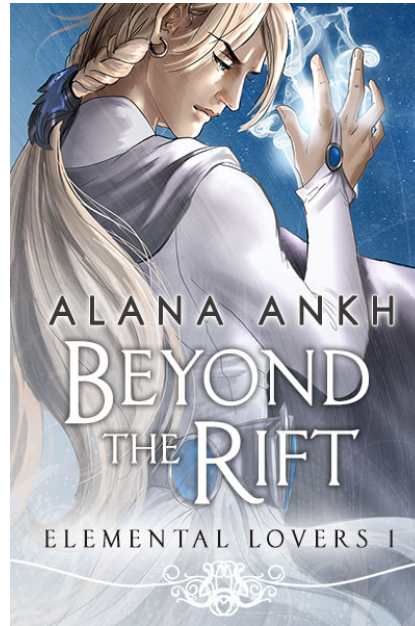
“And I plan for things to remain that way,” Uni answered. His tone sobered as he leaned against Nils’s ear. “So now what? What do we do?”

Nils hummed thoughtfully. “For the moment, we’ve bought ourselves some time. I’m sure he won’t be happy about it, so we’ll just have to wait and see what happens.”

The Nikari were gone now, and they’d mercifully taken the latents away with them, beyond the reach of Shyrn. Nils’s gamble had worked, and as an added bonus, he hadn’t been forced into assassinating his own blood once more. But he needed to find a more permanent solution to his predicament. The Spawn relied on him, and whether they realized it or not, so did the Aranken.

Don't miss Book 1!

## *Beyond the Rift*



Elemental Lovers: Book One

By Alana Ankh

Across the centuries, the Nikari, a race of vicious elemental mages, have built an empire, bringing an entire continent to its knees. The course of history seems set... until one innocent Andari mage changes everything and claims a greater prize—the heart of the Nikari emperor.

Behnivyr “Ivy” Erethe knows his duty is to wed another Andari Pure-Blood. Craving one moment of freedom before his loveless bonding, he escapes his father’s suffocating protection and goes to a masquerade ball, only to unexpectedly meet a mysterious Nikari named Kris. Kris makes Ivy ache with a need he barely dares to acknowledge. One kiss, one dance—and Ivy’s life changes forever. Unbeknownst to Ivy, Kris is actually Kristelien Fezenda, the Nikari emperor. Forced to make a difficult choice, Ivy picks love over duty and becomes Kris’s concubine.

Poorly prepared for the whirlwind of emotion Ivy summons inside him, Kris now faces the hardest battle of his life. In a ruthless world where all

weakness is exploited, where allies become enemies in the blink of an eye, where love can mean death, he will have to defeat more than his own personal demons to breach the rift between him and Ivy.

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ALANA ANKH is a hopeless romantic. Once upon a time—no, not in the Stone Ages, but when Alana was a nosy teenager—she lived and breathed mainstream romance, but after she discovered m/m.... Well, her fate was sealed.

Regardless of the genre, Alana thinks love can be painful, heartbreaking, but also fun, corny, and a little silly. Love is different for everyone and anyone—and in her books, she tries to celebrate that.

Alana also loves sci-fi, fantasy and paranormal. But even if her boys have scales, fur, claws, fangs—or whatever else occurs to her—they're really very nice people. Most of the time. Well.... Most of them are nice, but all of them deserve love and a HEA.

When Alana isn't feeding her addiction to happily-ever-afters and hot men, she's randomly slaying monsters in MMORPGs or thinking up the next idea to share with readers.

You can find Alana at <http://alanaankh.wordpress.com/> or on Facebook (which she does try to monitor) at <https://www.facebook.com/alana.ankh>.

# *All's Fair in Mate Bonds and Publishing*



By Alana Ankh

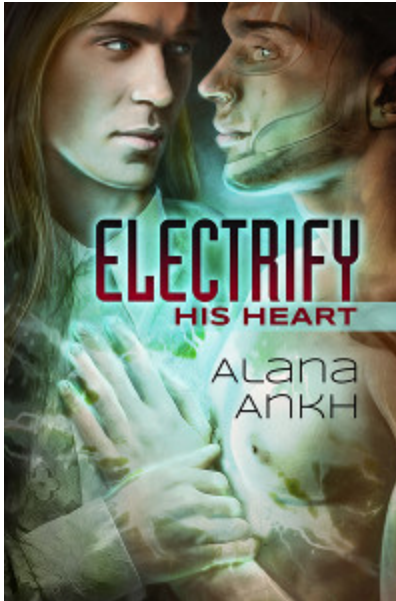
For Killian Marsden, werewolf romance is overrated. After all, he should know, since he's a half-werewolf and an editor for a romance-publishing house. He's tired of reading mate bond fairytales, because real life doesn't work that way. In the real world, Alphas abandon their half-breed children. Not that Killian's jaded or anything. Simply realistic. So when werewolf Alpha Brett comes knocking, demanding explanations on a rejected manuscript, Killian reels away, or at least tries to.

Brett is a walking, talking Alpha cliché: big, possessive, and growly. His last name is Wolfe, for crying out loud. But Brett is also trustworthy, devoted to his pack, and a little silly when in love. Soon, Killian discovers that maybe, just maybe, he might love Brett in return.

Unfortunately, Killian is not the only one who wants to claim Brett. He will have to set aside his beliefs about mate bonds and deadbeats if he wants his own happily ever after werewolf romance.

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# *Electrify His Heart*



By Alana Ankh

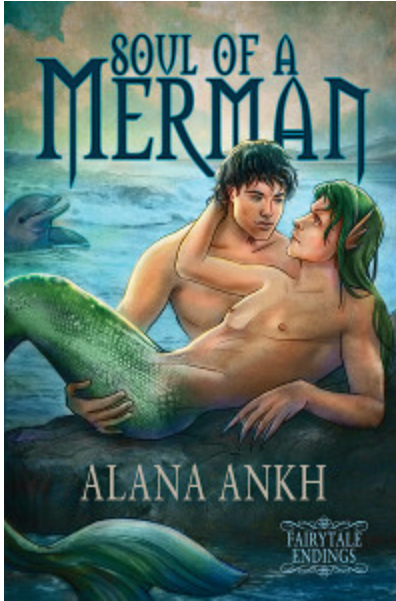
It is the year 2441. A deadly virus has swept over the planet, short-circuiting cybernetic implants, killing billions. In the aftermath, the newly formed state of Eden is led by the one newborn that survived that dreadful day, Uriel Noah of the House of Zion—the Guiding Light. Unbeknownst to all, Uriel lives in a gilded cage, deprived of basic affection, used as a pawn, craving freedom and love.

Cyborg Raze Hartman is the leader of the resistance. His kind—cyborgs with a high cybernetic coefficient—were hit hardest by the virus, the few survivors crippled and enslaved by the purist system. Struggling to keep his father alive, Raze resorts to investigating the Guiding Light, the symbol of cyborg oppression. What he finds changes his life, and Uriel's.

After sneaking into a purist ceremony, Raze sees past Uriel's façade of strength and aloofness. He sees the lonely young man behind the mask of the Guiding Light. The instantaneous attraction between them is literally electric. But a chasm separates them, as wide as the difference between flesh and metal, and the secrets of Uriel's past may be the undoing of them all.

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# *Soul of a Merman*



By Alana Ankh

Centuries ago, the sorrow of a spurned mermaid cursed the ocean. Now the fate of the sea rests on the shoulders of her great-nephew, Prince Caspian of Atlantis. Upon inheriting his ancestor's magical voice, he is also entrusted with breaking her curse by finding true love with a human. But Caspian doesn't believe love comes at the swish of the tail, at least, not until he meets oceanographer Stefan Firth.

In spite of the bond that forms between them from the beginning, Stefan's skepticism and his heartbreak over a lost love keep him from even considering a relationship with Caspian. Caspian has no choice but to follow the path his great aunt once did and resort to the Sea Witch's assistance. He must help Stefan love again if he is to break the curse and bring them their fairytale ending.

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