

Ikran Makto (Dragon Rider) chapter 1 "As you know, Ikran": My sister and I our wings outstretched to bask in the midday sun, appreciated the view from our perch atop one of the highest of the floating islands. Some of the ground is hidden by clouds, but up here the sky is clear and we can see places a day's flight distant. We cleaned the last of our meal of funny groundbeast from our talons. (I had flushed it out of hiding and she had caught it and brought it here to share with our kith and kin.) We talked of hunting smaller flying creatures for sport and afternoon snack.

We Ikran are the proud masters of our skies and of any groundbeast small enough to lift. (The large and the poisonous are only worth the effort on special occasions.) The ambitious among us frequently challenge one another for dominance in the hierarchy in contests of speed, skill, and mind linking. We link with one another from birth, parent to child for comfort and teaching, siblings and friends to share thoughts and feelings more directly than words can. Youngsters find it quite funny to link-tickle each other until one falls over or emits gas from one end or the other. The competitive adult version of this game - who can make the other bow down - is the main basis of the hierarchy. I have a strong sibling bond with my sister after linking with her for so many years. This makes us effective huntmates, able to link deeply when planning and anticipate each other's moves in the air. Likewise our leaders, who have often linked in competition with each other, are bonded and work well together.

Chapter 2 Two-Legs:
Throughout the morning all have been chattering about a group of two-legs slowly climbing the islands. Even though we guess their likely serious purpose, it is tempting to laugh at their puny efforts. In the time it took for us to fly all the way to the ground, hunt, return, and share our meal, they made little progress. They are small, only the size of my rear leg, like ants climbing a tree. Wingless, a small slip could send one plunging to its doom. We recognize them as ~~trailing~~ ^{trailing} creatures and do not hunt them but it is hard to take them seriously as rivals. (Story titled for "A Challenge Begins")

Chapter 3: "A Challenge Begins": In spite of their obvious shortcomings, a two-legs occasionally dares challenge one of us for dominance, to tame one, to become ikran makto, rider of ikran. Finally the climbers reach the closest waterfall. My sister and I, as honor requires, gather with those of us not yet mated and wait to see who will be challenged today. The most unlikely two-legs steps toward us. I recognize it as the worst climber I have ever seen. ~~It seemed~~ It seemed tentative as we watched it, ^{flinched} surprised to survive each leap. It often looked lost in childlike wonder as though it had never seen the floating islands before. Even when walking on level ground it acted pleased to be able to do such a simple thing. Now a companion was starting instructions, though surely it had learned everything about the challenge during the years it prepared for this moment. Why would they send such an unready simpleton into the challenge? Did they want it to die? Did this seem to them an honorable way to dispose of it? I wondered whether any two-legs could even begin to understand our honor, hierarchy & society. Suddenly I realized the oafish two-legs was starting to challenge me! Of course I knew that some day I might be challenged, but these occasions are rare and I never thought it would happen to me. To back away would be disgraceful, so I faced it. I toyed with my challenger briefly, but we all knew I must let it mount my shoulders once, to show I had given it a sporting chance, before killing it. After a short tussle, it sat astride my shoulders. I looked around to make sure all witnessed this point of honor, then, as I felt it reach for my link, I forcefully threw it off of me and over the cliff. As it disappeared over the edge, I felt a moment of pity for the poor little wingless creature, but surely in challenging me it had expected to die. I worried that this victory had been too easy, this two-legs too small a challenge for my status to increase. I turned to my sister and the others, studying their expressions to see how they viewed the result. Were they at all impressed? Did they realize how inferior this challenger had been? Would I forever be known as the one who defeated the most incompetent challenger ever? [Next: "More Challenging"]

Chapter 4: "More Challenging": Just as I had been surprised out of my thoughts by the challenge only minutes before, again I was under attack! What was happening? Had another of them started to challenge me so soon after my victory? That is not how challenging is done! I whirled around furiously at the breach of etiquette, and was stunned to see my challenger somehow returned and vigorously resuming the flight. But it had no wings! How could it be here? It should still be falling the impossibly far distance to the ground! I was so perplexed it was hard to concentrate on ~~the~~ repelling the renewed attack. I was soon mounted again, my link was lifted and joined... to his. His.

This was nothing like the nurturing link with a parent, the clumsy but earnest link with a child, the comfortable and familiar link with a sibling, or the challenge of a peer. All the links I knew were carefully limited, respectful of privacy, focused on one topic or activity. This new link was a complete sharing of everything. I felt like I was falling out of myself and into him, into Jake. I could see through his eyes and he through mine. I felt him holding his breath for a moment and he felt me doing the same. From wingtip to wingtip, snout to tailtip, he could feel every fiber of my being and I could feel his. We trembled with emotions - shock, fear, shame for losing the challenge, pride for winning, uncertainty: what happens next? Chapter 5: Fly! Neytiri - I now knew the nearest two-legs through him, felt his awe and admiration and love for her, saw his recent memory of her helping him back onto the cliff - now she was saying we must fly to complete the bond. Fly! His confusion and fear mixed with mine. Could I, could we, fly in this state? His sense of balance competed with mine and we both felt dizzy. I was not sure I could even remain standing. His thoughts returned to falling off the landbeast the first several times he tried to link with and ride one. This memory did not help our confidence. Neytiri hurried us off the cliff and we started to fall like dead prey, bouncing heavily off the cliff face, his pain and mine echoing through both. He screamed in my ear and in my mind. He tried to think of flying, but his experiences were of being in a machine. I knew I loathed those machines. They are not at all like flying creatures - so loud, so graceless, travelling in an unnaturally straight path, and so hard to fight when they challenge our mastery of the sky.

Chapter 6: Seze: Those thoughts were a distraction from true flying. Finally I reminded us we had plenty of altitude and therefore plenty of time. Calming us a bit with that thought and a deep breath gave me enough clarity to unfurl my wings purposefully and catch some air. As our fall turned into a glide, his panic turned to elation. We were flying! This is what flying really is! Feeling not at all like riding in a machine. Our combined joy of flying and not falling to our deaths was intoxicating. Neytiri and Seze caught up with us. Seze! My childhood friend with whom I had shared a special bond. We were age mates and one day a few years ago we were excited to be challenged to our first two-legs challenge. My excitement turned to anxiety when she was in the roosting place of makto-banded ikran, but I found it difficult to talk with her. I was ashamed to be seen visiting those who no longer had honor among us wild ikran. She no longer seemed to care about honor and instead was eager to tell me of her new makto-how glorious it was to fly with her bond and how hard it was when they were apart or when her makto was troubled. Words alone could not make me understand her new life. Linking with her to show me was of course impossible. Their dishonor is contagious, so such a link would be as devastating as losing the challenge myself. I had not remembered Neytiri, all two-legs look so similar, but now I saw that she was Seze's challenger, her rider, her makto. She had taken Seze from me, from us, just as I was now being taken. I had worked so hard for honor and status in the hierarchy and all of that was slipping away. I would never again be respected if this bond succeeded. Killing my challenger during this flight was my last chance to avoid ~~Seze's~~ Seze's shameful fate.

Next: Chapter 7: Rebellion

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Chapter 7 Rebellion: I rebelled by purposely running into the side of the island to dislodge him, but he was in my **mind**. He could see my intent and he held on tight. Instead of fighting back, he mentally pushed me to look through his memories, his plans, his experiences, his fears and his hopes. Such complete access felt indecent to me. He had seemed so simple from a distance, but inside he was bewilderingly complex. There were too many details to comprehend the whole situation immediately, but I saw his grand mission that could affect not only we ikran but all the creatures, the trees, Eywa herself! He truly believed he could steer us all to a better future and I believed him. He was risking his honor with his kind for the greater good and so would I. We both poured ourselves into this new bond. We would face together the dark times he foresaw. Chapter 8: First Flight: I let him guide our flight as suggested by Neytiri. We started with simple directions and worked our way up to acrobatics, showing him how flying works so he could feel and direct every nuance of our flight. He and I and Neytiri and Saze shared a gloriously fun time flying for the sake of teaching and learning... Lost in our own world, learning much about each other in addition to the afternoon flying lesson, we made a huge mistake. Below us, Toruk's cry of rage pierced the air. We had cast our shadow on him, a clear affront he could not ignore. Toruk, the only of his kind seen in a generation, is truly massive. His wingspan, and talons are twice the size of ours and we yield to him when he is in our skies. I recently heard the tale of a flying machine losing to him with a horrible noise, leaving a smoking hole in the jungle below. There was no way for us to simply withdraw. The space between him and the sun belongs to him. All must stay clear or suffer his wrath. In the open sky he would catch us easily, so we traded altitude for speed, diving toward the canopy of trees. He followed us into the tree tops.

Next: Chapter 9: Canopy Chase

Chapter 9: Canopy Chase: Travelling much too quickly for safety, we crashed painfully through branches. My rider chose which gap to head through next and left me the details of getting through it with minimum damage and maximum speed. We followed Seze and Neytiri, they followed us, or we chose different paths, but never far apart. We preferred the smallest spaces we could manage, knowing they would make it harder for Toruk to easily follow. He flew through the larger gaps, went back above the canopy, or crashed through and made a small gap larger. Finally there was a moment when he was slowed down long enough for us to get ahead. We found a place to hide and hung there as quietly as we could while breathing heavily from exertion and fear. Toruk overflew us and did not return to seek us out. We and any who witnessed learned to show him more respect. Relieved and giddy, we two had definitely formed a strong new bond.

He is my makto. We four had also started building another kind of bond. Chapter 10: Ever After
We makto-bonded ikran roost close to the two-legs dwelling so we can hear them call and can join them quickly. I see my sister occasionally, but she is still fiercely wild and proud and it is hard for her to understand me. I try to explain how fulfilling my ikran-makto bond is, that I am not tamed or dominated, rather we are a team that works together, combining our abilities and thoughts for the greater good, but she believes bonds with other ikran are the only ones with honor, and I am sadly lost to her.
Seze and I have renewed our bond to each other. It is impossible to express how wonderful and valuable our bond is to us. So much has changed for us since we thought each other lost, we have more to share between us now. Our makto bonds have both benefitted from our learning from each other how they work. She has shared what she has learned of Neytiri's people and I have shared what I understand of the humans. We are proud that we may make a difference in the difficult time ahead. When we four fly together we feel the love our makto feel for each other and they feel the love between me and Seze echo back. We are not like any other family, but where there is love there is a way.