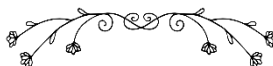


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TALA



FROM THE moment she drew her first breath, Tala had been handed a life scripted by others, determining what she ate, what she studied, the trade she would enter, even the man she was meant to marry.

And from the moment she drew her second breath, she had fought to take back the pen.

Her parents had often joked that her favorite word was “no,” and that she would go the opposite way purely out of spite for having been given directions.

But in truth, she wasn’t obstinate for the sake of it. Given the right circumstances, she could be as agreeable as a nap after lunch.

She merely disliked having decisions made for her.

Life was short, and even if she’d ultimately taken over her mother’s shop or settled down with the blacksmith’s son, she’d wanted to do so knowing there was nothing else out there calling to her. She hadn’t wanted to grow bitter as she aged, wondering what could have been. Experience was the best teacher, after all, and she was a willing and eager student.

That was why, when the Great Father himself had wandered the land in search of someone to help save her people, she had volunteered immediately.

She still remembered her parents’ horrified expressions as she had called out and met the god who walked through their village.

The way her mother had reached out, hoping to catch her hand and stop her before she left their side. They hadn't understood why it had to be her, and she knew they never would.

For it wasn't about it "having" to be her. There was no fate or destiny forcing her hand, nor obligation calling her to duty. It was about her choosing to do this. Her choosing to live a life on her own terms, one that meant something. One that made a difference.

Even if it meant leaving the village for a secluded cottage in the middle of nowhere that she could never leave, or that she might one day be discovered and killed for the secret she harbored, she still woke every morning filled to the brim with contentment and possibility, and the knowledge that her sacrifice was worth it.

Now, three years later, Tala lived a life not of glory, but of the peace that came with carving your own path.

The sun was in her eyes and a thin sheet of sweat already covered her skin as she hummed in bed, freely weighing the day's options in her mind. She could spend the afternoon foraging as she'd planned yesterday or take a dip in the little pond behind her home instead.

She smiled to herself. It still felt like a novelty for there to be no one's schedule to follow but her own, and today, she decided, was the perfect day for a swim.

Tala rushed through all her important chores, the ones always needing done, the ones she knew to do even without someone reminding her of her responsibilities, so she could take a midday break. The timing would be perfect, allowing her to relax at the peak of the sun's heat, right when the water would feel the most refreshing.

It was one of the few luxuries she allowed herself in her simple life, and with no one around to command her otherwise, she would indulge whenever she wanted to.

Once her garden had been tended and her chickens had been fed, she ate a light meal and headed to the pond. She carefully took off her clothes, folding them neatly on a rock, and slipped into the cool, dark water.

Tala let out a deep sigh, dipping her head under and coming back up, wiping her face and flipping onto her back. Her hair spread beneath her like a golden halo as she floated, closing her eyes to enjoy the warmth of the sun on her cheeks.

This was everything she'd ever wanted, but her joy didn't last long.

A shadow passed over her from high above. She opened one eye a crack and saw that damned hawk. It was circling overhead, spiraling down, getting closer and closer to where she swam.

Of course it would have chosen today to finally make its move.

She sighed, annoyed that it was already time to head back. Couldn't that feathered fool have allowed her a few hours to enjoy herself?

Rolling over, she slipped her head into the water one more time as she waded towards the shore. She couldn't make it seem like she was in a hurry, though, or that she sensed what it truly was. That might hasten its descent.

Tala had been warned that someone would be sent for her eventually, once it was discovered what lay inside her. She'd spent the past three years without incident, until finally she'd noticed it a few days ago—a tingly feeling on the back of her neck, invisible fingers prodding and poking and inspecting.

For protection, the Great Father had placed several heavy wards around her cottage against unwelcome intruders. But she supposed that kind of power was its own sort of beacon to a being like the one that now approached her.

Just get out of the water, she told herself. *Make it back to the cottage. You'll be fine.*

Tala exited the water and fastened her skirt, and just as she was pulling her large blouse over her head, she heard a deep, smooth voice.

"Please, don't feel the need to cover yourself on my account."

She turned around and saw a man standing where no one had been a moment ago.

Tala inspected him carefully, her eyes running him up and down and taking in every detail. His well-defined chest was bare, and he wore simple, linen pants. Great, black, feathered wings spread from his back and his ears were pointed. His face was pleasing—too pleasing, if she dared admit it—but she couldn't let it fool her.

Gathering her courage, she scoffed. "So you're the one who's been stalking me all week?"

His eyes lit in amusement, and she could track his reevaluation of her plainly on his face. He'd probably assumed she would cower before his greatness, begging for mercy. He almost seemed glad she hadn't.

"Stalking?" He gasped in mock offense at the accusation, taking a step closer. "No, I was simply admiring. You were the one sunning your gorgeous breasts mere moments ago. I couldn't help myself from getting a closer look."

Now it was Tala's turn to be surprised. The Great Father had never spoken to her, or anyone else as far as she had witnessed, so lewdly before. But if this one wanted to play that kind of game, at least she knew the rules.

She lifted the bottom of her shirt, flashing her chest, enjoying the shocked and strangled moan that he failed to keep from escaping his lips. "There, one last peek for the road—or sky, I suppose." She glanced upwards, then turned her attention back to him, covering herself once more. "Best be on your way, now, little birdy."

His wings shook as they extended further from his back, and his eyes focused on her lips, running his fingers through his hair. As though to scare her, his mouth parted into a sly grin, revealing his elongated, sharpened canines.

Please, she thought. She had spent many days in the Great Father's company, and was well accustomed to the strange appearance of the divine.

But as interesting as this encounter was becoming, it could only end in one of two ways. And she had no intention of dying today.

Even with her back to the cottage, she knew it was roughly twenty paces away. As long as she was touching the walls, she would be protected.

If she ran, gave any indication that she was afraid and knew what he had come for, he would give chase, and even without the wings she had no doubt he could overtake her before she reached safety. She needed to pretend she wasn't in a hurry, but she certainly couldn't dawdle or linger too long.

She picked up her boots and started back towards her home, making it clear she was finished with their conversation.

"I've been looking for you."

She continued her relaxed pace, but didn't turn around. "I don't know what you're talking about," she replied flatly. Was there

any point in lying? Probably not, but if there was a sliver of a chance that he wasn't certain she was the one, feigning ignorance was her best bet at making it out of this alive.

He clicked his tongue against his teeth. "It took me a while, I admit. He's much more clever than I thought."

Ten more paces. She was so close.

But a small gust of air brushed her cheek, and she held back her gasp when he appeared in front of her, carried by the wind itself. She felt his gaze penetrating her soul as he took in her every detail. Could he see it inside her?

"I was about to give up," he sighed.

If Tala didn't know any better, she'd say he might have sounded disappointed. Remorseful, even.

He gently placed his left hand, large and warm, on her shoulder, touching the cool skin exposed by her blouse's wide neckline. His lips lowered to meet hers. Tentative, as though he'd never done this before and wasn't quite sure this was how it worked.

She could see from the corner of her eye that his right hand was moving towards the dagger he had strapped to his belt.

This was it. Her time had come.

He kissed her softly and her heart raced, a single tear falling down her cheek.

Her death had always been inevitable—she was Terran, after all. But she had hoped to live a little longer. Long enough for the Great Father's plan to have worked.

Her body tensed as she waited for the fatal blow. She supposed she could be thankful that he had the decency to keep her distracted, letting her mind focus elsewhere as he carved the secret out of her.

I'm sorry, Great Father.

But instead of the sting of his steel in her side, there were fingers—gripping her hip and bringing her closer. The kiss deepened. He moved his hand from her shoulder to her cheek, cupping her face and angling it to allow him greater access as his tongue gently prodded against the seam of her lips, testing and experimenting. She felt a heat rise within her and whimpered as she opened to him, feeling his body pulse against her. Why was he prolonging this?

Why was she enjoying it?

He paused, withdrawing slightly to rest his forehead on hers.

“I was about to give up,” he repeated quietly as he breathed her in.

A spark, a warmth, an energy—something both brand new and older than the world itself flowed through her. She felt renewed, no longer resigned to what fate had brought her today.

“Maybe you still could,” she whispered. She was trembling, but it wasn’t in fear.

Tala put her weight on her left foot, bringing the right one back a step.

He smiled, his fingers grazing the skin along the column of her neck. “Maybe I will...”

Then Tala swiftly brought her leg back up, hitting him right between the thighs with her knee. His face crumpled in shock, releasing her long enough for her to escape his grasp.

She bounded across the final ten paces to the house, her palm slapping against the lime-washed wall just as he had recovered enough to regain his hold on her shoulder, but now the touch of her skin caused him to hiss and let go in pain.

Panting heavily, Tala turned around and pressed her back fully against the house, grinning at the divine man now furrowing his brow at her in frustration, his hands on his hips.

“I thought you were giving up?” she teased.

His wings shook behind him, his eyes narrowing on hers. “On the contrary, Terran,” he huffed. “I think I might just be getting started.”