

TALONS



KING OF
PREY

MANDY M. ROTH

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Talons: King of Prey

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In a place where realms combine and portals open passages to the unknown, a prophecy speaks of fertility being restored to his people through the taking of King Kabril's mate.

The prophecy neglects to mention she lacks something vital to his kind—wings. Kabril, King of the Buteos Regalis has no interest in taking a human mate. His kind believes humans are dirty, vile creatures who rely on machines to lift them into the air. The last place he wants to go in search of his mate is Earth, but he's left no choice.

Never did he expect to find love on a planet with one moon, people who lack wings and a stubborn vixen who makes his heart soar. When he does, he fears the truth about who and what he truly is will steal it away. Little does he know his enemies fully intend on doing the taking.

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Mandy M. Roth

Dedication

To Jaycee, you've had a hell of a year and through it all you've still managed to find humor and love in all around you. You're an amazing mother, friend and author. Anytime you need a late night "lay it on the line" session, my door is always open. Villains got nothing on us, babes. Besides, if all else fails we can find our way "over yonder". I still have no idea what that means. Seriously though, you've been with me every step of the way and for that I'll never be able to thank you enough.

To Michelle, you never flinch when I rope you into another project. You smile and step up to the plate. I hope we never stop getting into trouble together because the bailing one another out is way too much fun to stop now.

To Shannon, you've officially entered paranormal territory. Welcome to the club, hon. A word to the wise, screen your calls. When you see my number, clear your schedule. I can gab with the best of 'em.

To Sydney, may we never lose our writing jitters and always be shocked to be here, doing what we love.

To Angie, we've made it through another project without the need of heavy narcotics. I'm sure my shaking hands and stuttering will subside soon. Sorry for any hair loss I might have caused you. All joking aside, thanks for your insight, edits and shoulder to cry on. They are all much appreciated.

Prologue

Accipitridae Realm

“King Kabril, you cannot stand idly by while your people cry out for you to lead. Our race will not survive unless you take a wife. The mating magik that governs our lands will not grant unions the blessing of children if the leader himself refuses to sire offspring. You know the laws, the way of the land and the demands you must meet as king. The time has come, my lord. This can wait no longer. The people of Accipitridae need you to act now.”

Though Sachin’s words were the truth, they were not what Kabril wanted to hear. No. He much rather preferred hearing all was well and that none of the people under his rule were upset. Of course, those moments were few and far between as of late. Sighing, Kabril leaned back on his throne and stared into the reflective mixture Sachin held in the bowl. He ran his fingers over the scrolled armrest and glanced down at the carved hawks. A slow smile caused by pride moved over his face. Pride in his people, their traditions and their beliefs, even though those very beliefs were the cause of the unrest.

The people of his kingdom assumed their issues with conceiving were due to his reluctance to accept what they deemed to be destiny. Kabril wasn’t a staunch believer, as he should be, but it came from being the one forced to accept a wife he did not want. As their ruler, it was his

sworn duty to do what was best for the kingdom, regardless how much it pained him.

“My lord,” Sachin pressed, his reluctance to let the subject rest putting Kabril’s already taxed nerves on edge.

Taking a deep, calming breath, Kabril reminded himself of how proud he was, and should always be, of his people’s customs and beliefs. Although he was less than pleased with the Oracle—whom they held in such high esteem—choosing a bride for him. According to the prophecies, the Oracle would select a woman fit to lead his people and he was honor bound to obey. It was also said the union would produce children, something their kind sorely lacked. Once heavily populated, his lands were no longer bursting with the sounds of children singing and playing. In truth, Kabril could scarcely recall when it was the sounds indicative of children stopped but he knew it had been far too long.

War had claimed the lives of many of his people. Still others, while immortal to a degree, possessed the ability to pass on to the afterlife should they so choose. There came a time in many people’s lives when they were ready to move on. It mattered not what the cause was, their population was low, as was morale. Riches only did so much to calm the people. They wanted families.

“Cursed Magaious,” he spat, not caring if he took one of the Epopisdeus’ names in vain.

Sachin clapped acrimoniously. “Bringing down the wrath of the bird gods will surely ease your burden, my lord. For if you curse one, they all rise to strike.”

“You push me too far, old friend.” Kabril smoothed his fingertips along the wood of his throne, ignoring the internal nudge to free his temper.

“You do not push yourself far enough.”

Giving Sachin a daring look, Kabril let loose another curse upon the gods. He once again selected the god he knew Sachin honored weekly in hopes of provoking his friend. He was in the mood for a fight and Sachin was always a worthy adversary. The two often sparred until matins. Depending upon the day, Sachin would either continue the match or lay his sword down to go honor the gods. Kabril had long since given up his prayers to higher powers. “A pox on Magaious and those who follow him blindly.”

Sachin merely tipped his head a little and released an exasperated sigh. “Remind me again which of us is older? You seem to be acting like a fledgling, my lord.”

Arguing with Sachin would get him nowhere since it was clear Sachin was not going to take his bait. Kabril drummed his fingers on his armrests, trying to devise a plan for avoiding marriage.

Especially to a human female.

Why was it the Oracle seemed to favor reopening the portal to Earth? The prophecy only stated his need to find his mate. It never said she was an Earthling. It wasn't as if an Earth woman was fit to be queen of his people. Their species was substandard to say the least. They lacked the means to be anything but human.

Kabril shuddered. The mere thought of not being able to shift forms into that of a hawk and soar the skies nearly caused him to lose the meal he'd eaten to break his fast.

The very idea of relying on machinery to lift me into the sky. How repulsive.

Not only that, but humans were foul as well. Their entire world was polluted, overpopulated and riddled with disease. The only thing Earth had less of than Accipitridae was war. His breed, the *Buteos Regalis*, had been at war with the *Falco Peregrinus* for centuries. Longer than even

Kabril could recall the reason why and he was nearing his four-hundredth cycle, though he had only held the throne for one hundred and fifty of those cycles.

What was will always be.

Glancing around the Great Hall, Kabril realized it had not changed much in that time frame. Open saucers with floating wicks hung from the ceiling on chains of gold. The oil within them burned at a steady pace and on occasion he would catch glimpses of a servant scuttling about to refill them.

No. Nothing was easy. It never was. He needed to relax, take time from the demands of the throne even if just for a day and then return to it all. His schedule stopped allowing for rest periods some time ago and seemed to be brimful from morn until night.

Kabril sorely missed the days of roaming about freely, shifting shapes and soaring anywhere his heart desired. He preferred the Tocallie Mountains in the Northern Region of Accipitridae because of their isolation and beauty. Waterfalls cut through the large, foliage-covered terrain creating a serene and secluded paradise. He'd often heard Earth possessed such places of beauty and wonder but had never seen them with his own eyes so he was skeptical.

The Tocallie Mountains were favored by him for another reason—it was one of the largest portals to and from Earth. A place where, over the years, many of the humans' flying machines entered from a spot on Earth they called the Bermuda Triangle. Though rumor had it that other spots fed into the Tocallie portal too. Additional portals throughout his kingdom served as gateways from other regions of Earth but none were as active as Tocallie. As much as he disliked the humans and their flying machines, he did like to learn. Physics and medicine were two of his

favorite areas of study—neither of which a king had any use for. Still, that didn't stop Kabril from seeking out new sources for learning.

Sachin cleared his throat, drawing Kabril from his thoughts. "My lord."

"What did I miss this time?"

A chortle broke free from Sachin. "Did the 'my lord' give it away?"

"Yes." Kabril cast a speculative glance at his long-time friend.

"Good." Never one to refrain from disagreeing with Kabril, Sachin was a breath of fresh air in a sea of followers. "I was saying you should visit your soon-to-be-bride and win her trust."

"Win her trust?" he echoed, afraid his hearing had gone awry.

Sachin's lips trembled. It was easy to see his personal guard and trusted friend found great amusement at Kabril's response. Sachin ran his hand over his black goatee and shook his head. "King Kabril, you must get to know the human, make her love you."

Shocked, Kabril jolted, almost falling off his throne. "Surely, you jest. Get to know *it*? Make *it* love me?"

"Perhaps we should begin with you not referring to your future wife as 'it'." Sachin turned his head and Kabril knew it was to hide his smile. The moment his friend was composed, Sachin touched the dagger on his side. It was a nervous habit Sachin had always had. The man took great solace in the knowledge his weapons were close. His silver gaze landed on Kabril. "Tell me you were not planning on abducting your future wife."

"I was actually planning on sending you to fetch her. I've no desire to visit Earth." The very idea made his stomach turn. Sachin couldn't really expect him to travel to a realm full of heathens. No king would. At best he would linger near the Tocallie portal while he sent one of his other guards through with orders to procure books and other learning tools.

"I am sorry but I will not go unless you accompany me, *my lord*."

“Do you dare to defy me?”

Sachin leaned down and grinned. “Kabril, do not make me knock your pampered arse from that chair. You can and will go with me to find your bride. You can and will get to know her. Befriend her even. You can and will get her to love you. If I can still tolerate you after all of these centuries, I am sure she will at least be somewhat fond of you.”

“Sachin?” he asked, his mouth agape. “Cease your blathering.”

“Do not *Sachin* me, *my lord*. And I will not cease my anything. I have known you all of my three hundred and ninety-five cycles. I am permitted to uncover your veiled eyes when called for.” He assumed a posture of superiority and shook slightly. It took Kabril a moment to realize Sachin was laughing.

Unable to stop himself, Kabril joined him, laughing from the gut. It felt good to release some of the tension he’d had locked away. In truth, Sachin knew him well. He knew that being direct worked to a certain degree. He also had a knack for taking an opposing view on a matter only to get Kabril to argue the point—all the while agreeing with Kabril. “Very well. It may be best for me to learn a *few* Earth customs.”

“Actually,” Sachin said, “I have something better in mind. May I suggest you alert the Advisors you will be on Earth for many moons? Perhaps Iorgos should be contacted to sit in while you are gone?”

“You wish me to call one of my brothers home to rule while I am on Earth for many moons? Now I know you jest. It is clear you suffer from the pull of the moons, Sachin. Mayhap you should seek the council of an old crone.” Since four moons orbited their planet, one so large it was seen even in waking hours, it was always safe to blame them for madness.

Shaking his head, Sachin chuckled. “No, my lord. I do not jest and I have not been afflicted by the moons. There is much work to be done.”

“Work?”

Sachin grinned mischievously. “Ah, the king must learn to speak as humans do, without drawing attention to himself. He must also learn the Earthly art of wooing a woman.”

Kabril cringed. Nothing called “wooing” could be good.

Chapter One

Earth, two weeks later...

Rayna Vogel stared at the old home, reminiscent of baroque styling, and smiled. It had been a long time since she'd seen the sculptures adorning the corners. Layers of dirt and webs had blanketed them to the point she'd long since forgotten how beautiful they were. While visiting her grandmother's house when she was little, Rayna would wander down the street just so she could catch a glimpse of the unique home. Over the years, its ownership changed hands many times and Rayna tried her best to welcome each family. She'd been out of town for business when the newest one moved in.

She held the dish full of chicken divan and prepared to head up the steps to meet her newest neighbors. Never a social butterfly, Rayna had to force herself to get out, stay in contact with people and avoid spending time with only the animals she photographed. Animals were so much easier to deal with than people. They didn't expect her to hold long, drawn-out conversations or to return their phone calls. It was great. She loved her job.

"Can I help you?" a deep, slightly accented voice came from behind her.

Startled, Rayna tossed the dish in the air and narrowly missed dropping it onto the ground. A strong hand gripped her shoulder, and a yelp almost escaped her. Composing herself, Rayna turned and came

face-to-face with a tall man with raven hair, a dark goatee and a body deserving of a magazine cover. His silver gaze, while certainly something she'd never seen before, was captivating and put her at ease. "Umm?"

"Umm?" There was no mistaking the mocking tone of his voice. He put a hand in his pocket and glanced at the dish. His nose wrinkled and for a minute, Rayna thought for sure he'd be sick. "What, may I ask, is in there?"

"It's a chicken dish," she blurted out. "I brought it to welcome you to the neighborhood. I live just down the road a bit. I'm not the greatest cook in the world but I'm not so bad—"

"Chicken?" He gasped, his eyes widening and the blood draining from his face as he reached for the dish. "You brought us chicken? To eat? A bird? For food? For us?"

Puzzled, Rayna took a step back and tried to understand what the problem could be. She came up blank. "Are you a vegetarian?"

"Sachin, how much longer must we endure this gods-forsaken realm? And why must we be—"

The silver-eyed man before her seized hold of the dish and stood at attention. "Kabril, good of you to join us. I was just greeting our neighbor." He stared at her with a question on his face. "I do apologize but I didn't quite catch your name."

"Rayna," she said, eyeing the manner in which Sachin held the dish. He looked as if he thought it would bite him. Unnerved, she glanced over her shoulder to find an equally tall man with the same jet-black hair and striking good looks. This one had eyes of gold, reflecting the mid-afternoon sun back at her. He also lacked a goatee, though he had the start of a five o'clock shadow. Her knees felt weak and her pulse sped as she stared at the man. His gaze raked over her, slow at first, like she was being judged.

“Kabril.” Sachin took a step closer to her and cleared his throat. “Kabril,” he said, this time more forceful than before.

Rayna never took her gaze from the man on the porch. The lightweight, white shirt he wore was unbuttoned a bit, revealing his tawny chest, and the sleeves were cuffed to mid-arm. She licked her lower lip, desperately trying to push thoughts of tasting his skin from her mind. For a split second, Rayna could have sworn she heard Sachin address Kabril as my lord but she was too swept up in the man’s presence to pay much heed to how he was being addressed.

He shook his head. “W-what?”

Sachin let out a low chuckle. “Kabril, this is our neighbor Rayna.”

“Rayna.” Kabril’s accent matched Sachin’s, neither of which Rayna could place. He clenched his hands, causing the muscles in his arms to flex.

She moaned and instantly wanted it back.

Kabril’s golden gaze flashed to Sachin and his brow lifted inquisitively. “Tell me she is the one.”

The one?

Sachin shifted awkwardly and smiled. “The one who brought us dinner? Why, yes. She is. I’ll take this inside now.”

Rayna reached for the dish. “No. I mean, it’s okay. You don’t have to pretend to want it. I get you’re not a fan of chicken. Sorry about that. I just wanted to welcome you and your—” she glanced at Kabril, “—friend to the neighborhood.”

Sachin held firm to the dish. “Ah, yes. Thank you. We are here to open a new practice for Kabril. He’s an avian vet, you know. I’m just his assistant.”

Her eyes lit. “You work with birds? I photograph wildlife for a living.”

“I know,” Sachin said so softly she almost missed it.

Kabril closed the distance between them, his walk that of a refined gentleman but with a tinge of roughness. “I choose this one. She is most pleasing to the eye and...” his gaze slid lower, “...will birth fine sons.”

“Huh?” While it wasn’t the most intelligent response she’d ever had, it seemed fitting at the moment. The more she thought about his statement the funnier it became. Laughter bubbled up from her as she put her hand out to greet him. “Cute. Anyway, nice to meet you, Dr. Kabril. I’m sure you get this a lot but if you have a chance, I’d love for you to stop by my place and have a look at Henry.”

“Henry?” he asked, a jealous note evident.

“Well, maybe Henrietta. I’m not sure if the red-tailed hawk is a boy or a girl. I just know he hurt his wing. He won’t let me near him to check how bad, but he seems okay with the idea of me putting food close by.” A knot formed in her stomach. “Please don’t ask me to go into detail on how I feed him. I called a friend of mine who owns a pet store. He drops off mice for me to put out.”

Sachin snickered. “You care for an injured hawk?”

She nodded.

“I shall see to your Henry and then we will leave this gods-forsaken—”

“Kabril,” Sachin said with a warning.

“I have selected,” Kabril said, as if it summed up everything.

Sachin tapped his fingers on the dish. “Yes, but the choice is not yours to make, Kabril.”

A defeated look passed over Kabril’s handsome face. “You mean she is not the one.”

“Not the what?” Rayna glanced back and forth between the men. Whatever inside information they were sharing with nothing more than odd looks wasn’t something they were letting her in on.

Sachin shook his head before going into the house.

Kabril put his arm out to her and smiled. It looked forced but she didn't question him. "Rayna, I would very much like to see to Henry's condition. Lead the way."

She slid her arm into his. The action was very unlike her but she couldn't deny how good touching him felt. There was certainly something about the man that made her trust him. Her instincts were good, having never led her astray before so Rayna didn't hesitate to go with them. "Thank you."

"The pleasure is all mine, I assure you." The confident smile Kabril cast in her direction warmed her through her toes. "Tell me more of your Henry."

"My Henry?" she mused. "I like the sound of that. Although, I don't own him. He's a free spirit. A wild, beautiful creature I want nothing more than to see back in good health."

"I sense the truth in your words," he said.

The comment was odd to say the least. She kicked a loose stone on the side of the one-lane road as they walked towards the place she now called home. Kabril tugged gently on her arm and used his free hand to point towards the sky. "Look there. Do you see it?"

She looked up and spotted a large bird in the air. The late spring breeze tickled her skin but she ignored the cold as she realized what she was staring up at. "Is that another red-tail hawk?"

"Yes." He drew her closer to him. Heat seemed to radiate from his powerful body. "I believe your Henry is truly a Henry."

Shocked, she shook her head and continued keeping her gaze skyward. "No. That can't be him. He was hurt. I saw him trying to fly but failing."

Kabril chuckled. “That is a female flying above. She’s calling for the male. It involves a courtship of sorts.”

“So,” she grinned, “Henry has a chick?”

“A chick? As in a fledgling?” The serious tone of his voice made her laugh.

“I mean as in a hot woman. A girl. A sexy significant other. A wife. A ball and chain. A...”

As Kabril slid his hand over hers, she stopped spouting off and enjoyed his touch. His golden gaze fixed on her. “A ball and chain? Is that really a description one uses for their mate here?”

“Uh, mate?” Rayna steered him to the side of her house. “Funny, I think your term is stranger than mine.”

Kabril drew in the human female’s sweet scent. His loins burned with the need to find solace in her divine body. Her dark hair was pulled into some sort of a twist, leaving long strands of it free and cascading over her slender shoulders. She stared up at him through eyes so blue they nearly stole his breath. When Sachin had told him of the beautiful women to be found on Earth he’d dismissed him. As he pulled Rayna closer to him, he knew he owed his old friend an apology. Not only was she beautiful, she sparked a primal urge in Kabril that no wench had prior.

The pants, or jeans as Sachin had referred to them, dug at his erection painfully. He wanted to be home, in his realm, in his clothing—discarded of course—bedding Rayna until she cried his name out in ecstasy.

He smiled as the thought of taking her, pleasing her every way imaginable left his blood pumping. Sachin’s words of wisdom beat in his head. He couldn’t steal her away to his realm. Well, he could but according to Sachin doing such a thing would leave a human female

clipping his wings while he slept or unmanning him. Neither was an option.

Perhaps I could chain her until she submits?

The idea had merit.

“Do you see him?” Rayna asked, jerking Kabril from his erotic thoughts momentarily.

It was hard to keep from glancing at her wrists, imagining them bound above her head as he licked his way down her body. He had little doubt he could have her moaning in delight before the sun went down. Her long legs would easily wrap about his body, holding him to her as he pumped in and out. Kabril swallowed hard, his eyelids fluttering and his breathing erratic.

“Hello, Dr. Kabril?”

He jerked, his gaze darting to her lush breasts. “What? Oh, yes. Please call me Kabril.”

She pointed to an oversized tree and winked. “Henry’s up there. He’s not currently perched on my chest.”

Clearing his throat, he tried and failed to keep a blush from staining his cheeks. He was a king. Kings were not embarrassed to be caught admiring a glorious pair of breasts. And, oh what a pair they were. He forced his gaze towards the bird, slightly caught off guard by his randy behavior. “You must be Henry.”

I can heal you, little bird. Do not fear me. He pushed with his mind to the hawk currently staring down at him. *Is that fine by you?*

The bird nodded in agreement and flapped its good wing. Rayna drew in a deep breath and clutched his arm. “Kabril, look. It’s like he understands.”

“Yes,” he said, savoring her tender touch.

The smile that lit her face moved him. “Do you mind if I grab my camera? I’d love to have pictures of you treating Henry.”

It was best she be away while he first worked with the bird since his ways would differ greatly from those of the human bird doctors. Besides, having Rayna away from him, even for just a bit, might help to alleviate his rock hard cock. His dick twitched at the thought of sinking into Rayna’s body and he knew clearing his mind of her was hopeless. “That would be nice.”

Chapter Two

Earth, three months later...

Rayna Vogel walked carefully along the narrow path. The waterfalls around her continued to draw her attention and it was only a matter of time before she either killed herself trying to see their beauty or got the picture she desperately wanted. Hopefully, the second of the scenarios prevailed.

Her boot slid on the loose gravel and Rayna lost her footing. Her heart felt as if it leapt to her throat and blocked the scream wanting to come. A strong hand caught hold of her, plucking her from the air with an ease and strength normal men didn't seem to possess. As she stared into a set of unnaturally golden eyes, she couldn't help but smile. A nervous giggle sounded from her and her cheeks heated out of embarrassment.

"Careful, I would very much like you to remain in one piece," Kabril said, his voice so deep and so sexy that Rayna had to bite back a sigh. She still had yet to place his accent. It wasn't thick but it did tinge his voice ever so. She'd often tried to get exactly where he was from out of him but Kabril liked his secrets and she didn't mind letting him have them.

He set her on her feet and visually inspected her. "Are you hurt?"

"Just my pride." She tipped a bit, losing her balance and seized hold of his forearm. The man didn't seem to have an ounce of fat on him. She

squeezed and visions of having Kabril's powerful body above her, sliding in and out of her filled Rayna's head.

She couldn't tear her gaze from his square face and piercing eyes. When she'd first met Dr. Kabril Kingston he'd seemed a bit on the cold side, almost regal in his mannerisms. He also seemed prone to odd displays of chauvinistic behavior, all of which his assistant explained away as being part of Kabril's unusual sense of humor. Now that Rayna knew Kabril, she realized he was one of the warmest men she'd ever met. Not to mention gifted. He'd managed to get Henry up and flying in no time at all. He definitely had a magik touch. He had a way about him, one that made her feel safe and cared for.

He glanced over the edge. "I am dangerously close to making you wear a safety harness, Rayna. You, unfortunately," he puffed out a long breath, "do not have wings."

"There is a better than average chance I'd wring my neck with the harness so it's best you not."

Laughing, he held her close to him. "I have no doubt you would. You are so very different than most women I know."

"Hey, is that a knock on how clumsy I am?" She grinned, enjoying his teasing more than she should. His warm hands seemed to push heat through her body as he held her close. Rayna shifted awkwardly in an attempt to stop the moisture Kabril was more than capable of producing between her legs. One glance from him and Rayna's body reacted.

"No. Not clumsy. More like absentminded," he whispered, the bass in his voice moving over her, causing her to sigh.

She drew a deep breath in, savoring a mix of lavender, sage and cedar—the scent of Kabril. It took everything in her not to touch him in a way she shouldn't. Not to stroke his massive chest. Lusting after a man she considered a friend was wrong. They'd never actually set friendship

boundaries though. Still, it was wrong. She'd been closer to Kabril in the last few months than she ever had been with anyone else.

"I'm not absentminded. Am I?"

"Rayna, you dropped this," Sachin said as he joined them. He held the lens cap to her camera in one hand and a rather large smile upon his handsome face. The man never moved far from Kabril's side. At first, she'd assumed they were brothers. They even argued as siblings would. She had little doubt Kabril was the older of two. Sachin also tended to goad Kabril whenever possible, as a younger brother often would. She'd been shocked to learn they were not related but rather close friends.

Chuckling, Kabril touched her cheek lightly. "No, Rayna. You are not absentminded in the *least*."

She gave him a fake snarl and pushed past him, mindful of the steep ledge. "And you're not the least bit arrogant. Are we going back to camp or are you two going to start exchanging weird looks when you don't think I'm watching you?"

No sooner did the words come out her mouth than Kabril and Sachin did exactly that. They glanced at one another. Sachin's expression was one of amusement. Kabril's held something else. Something Rayna couldn't pinpoint. It was too cute not to comment.

"See, that's exactly what you do to me. You always make me feel like I'm missing out on an inside joke. It makes me crazy." Lunging forward, she ruffled Kabril's chin-length black hair. His smile warmed her heart. "There. That's more like it. I hate it when you look like the weight of the world is on your shoulders. You dragged me down here because you wanted to document your studies. As much as I'm loving this vacation, I like to see you happy more."

Kabril caught her hand and drew it to his lips. He took her by surprise, planting a kiss on the back of her hand tenderly. Before Rayna

could remark, Kabril had drawn her into his arms. A slow, racy smile moved over his face. “Hello.”

She swallowed hard. Her pussy responded with a spasm and she had to focus on something, anything other than Kabril or risk begging him to fuck her against the rocky wall. “We should get back to camp. It’ll be getting dark soon and I still want to take a bath.”

Kabril perked up. “A bath?” He exchanged another long look with Sachin and nodded. “By all means, camp it is then.”

“You are so weird,” she said, laughing softly as she fell in line behind him. Rayna’s gaze landed upon his luscious ass and she closed her eyes. If gawking at the waterfalls didn’t get her killed, Kabril’s tight butt just might.



Kabril stood quietly, watching from the shadows as Rayna bathed by the river’s edge, silently wishing she were his chosen one—his mate. Sachin continued to assure him they were close to finding the human female and to just be patient. Being around Rayna was making that incredibly difficult. Especially when thoughts of fucking her and no other continued to haunt his every moment.

He was pleasantly surprised that Sachin didn’t argue when Kabril mentioned bringing Rayna somewhere they could have easy access to Accipitridae while still being somewhere justifiable. It wasn’t as though Kabril could convince Rayna to hover thousands of feet in the air on the chance he be called home. He would have some major explaining to do, not to mention she lacked wings vital to pulling that off.

He’d fallen behind in his duties as king but didn’t want to be separated from Rayna just yet. This way, he could sneak off to his realm

and handle royal matters while still managing to make it back to be with her.

Perhaps if I take her home, the prophecy will assume one human female is as good as the next?

No. It would never work and he knew it. Still, it didn't hurt to dream.

He knew it was wrong to look upon Rayna bathing without her knowledge but had rationalized it out several nights after arriving at the campsite. All of his kind possessed varying degrees of magiks. It was no surprise one of Kabril's strongest gifts was that of being able to control other animals. After all, he was a leader by birth. The jungle wasn't exactly safe to wander about alone. Bathing in the river was even less safe. So long as he was near, he could mentally will the other animals away from his mate.

My mate. If only that were true. I would happily accept the human before me.

The words played about in his head. Never did he think they would sound so perfect. Then again, he hadn't planned on finding Rayna. He'd expected something else and would no doubt get it whenever he found the mate Sachin swore was close. He'd get something other than the beautiful, loving woman before him. Rayna was divine. Everything he wanted in a wife and so very much more. Within the first week of meeting her, he'd all but forgotten she wasn't like him. Wasn't a *Buteos Regalis*. It didn't matter. Nothing but claiming her and making her his wife did.

If only I could.

His loins burned with the need to possess her. Thoughts of bedding Rayna plagued his dreams and remained a constant in his waking hours. The woman's scent alone was enough to drive a man insane. Roses and sandalwood. Even now Kabril could still smell her lingering scent on him. His cock dug painfully at its confines and he swallowed hard, hoping his

erection would go down on its own. Seeing her naked wasn't helping matters.

Rayna wore her long, silky, light-brown hair pulled into a loose bun at the top of her head, as she always did when she bathed late at night. His preternatural eyes could see perfectly in any light and it was easy to make out the blonde highlights in her sun-kissed hair. The tiniest of freckles graced her nose and tanned shoulders whenever she'd been in the sun too long. The caramel look the sun's rays left her with was intoxicating. Kabril wanted to lick every inch of her, see if she tasted as delicious as she looked.

Glancing over her shoulder, Rayna stared in his direction. Kabril knew the darkened shadows covered him and didn't bother to move. He let his gaze rake over her slowly, taking in the sight of her breasts. Her nipples were dark and puckered as if waiting for him to take them into his mouth. Reaching down, he undid his pants and slipped his hand in, fisting his rigid cock. He needed release or he'd risk the beast side of him taking over and possibly claiming Rayna—not bothering to wait for this mate Sachin swore was near.

Three months ago, Kabril seriously considered simply plucking Rayna from Earth, taking her to his home and demanding she submit to him. Sachin had been right. The ways of old would not have worked with an Earth woman. Especially not one as headstrong as Rayna. No, she would have removed vital parts of his anatomy. Though, dying by her hand would be acceptable.

He stroked his cock, staring at the small swell of her lower abdomen and imagining his tongue there, licking, tracing its way to the juncture of her thighs. Kabril knew Rayna had only a small thatch of well-maintained hair upon her mound because he spent many a night assuming the form of an Earth-sized hawk and watching her. It was not

exactly comfortable to take on the form of a creature so much smaller than his normal shifted form but he did it all the same. At six-foot-six in human form, Kabril was even bigger shifted, quite a difference from the size of an Earth hawk. Also a significant difference between Rayna and himself in normal form.

Rayna seemed so tiny to him, so petite, that at times he worried if he would harm her should he sink his cock into her and claim her for all time. Sachin assured him all would be well when the time came, should his actual mate prove to be Rayna's size, but Kabril couldn't think past her. *She* was who he wanted in his bed, carrying his sons and ruling by his side for all eternity. Thoughts of hurting her didn't sit well with him. Since Sachin had a tendency to wander from Accipitridae to Earth, when he assumed Kabril wasn't paying attention, and bed human women, Kabril trusted his judgment on the matter.

Kabril watched her closely as he continued to stroke his cock. Every muscle in his body was tight, hungry for Rayna. Her gaze remained locked on his area. Could she see him? No. That was foolish. She was but human and lacked the extraordinary vision of the shifter races. Still, her gaze remained. As he ran his hand down the length of his shaft, Rayna touched her stomach, the same place he'd envisioned licking. As her fingers trailed their way to the apex of her thighs, Kabril's breathing grew shallow. Would she touch herself as well? Better yet, would she think of him while doing it?

That's it, ta'konima—my love. Touch yourself. Show me how you wish me to touch you.

Rayna cupped a breast with one hand and let the other hand slide between her legs to the place Kabril desired to be. As she parted her slit, he had to fight off his orgasm. He should last longer than he did while masturbating. It was almost embarrassing how quickly even the thought

of Rayna could make him come. Holding the base of his cock firmly, Kabril managed to narrowly avoid spilling his seed. The sight of Rayna fingering herself, rubbing her clit while she stared in his direction was too much. He palmed himself and stroked as fast and as furious as he wanted to take her. He wanted to pummel his cock into her silken depths until both their bodies were spent and his seed planted in her.

Rayna rocked against her hand, riding it to the point it glistened with her cream. The scent of her arousal permeated the air, filling Kabril not only with lust but with the carnal knowledge that he would take her and soon. It was no longer a choice. Between his obsession with her and the news coming from Accipitridae of the *Falco Peregrinus*' repeated attempts to take power, Kabril had to return for good—and soon. Leaving without his mate wasn't an option.

She's not my mate. He reminded himself. *But if I have any input in my affairs, she will be my queen.*

It mattered not what the people thought of him should he return home without his chosen bride. All that mattered was that he could not survive without Rayna in his life.

Rayna shook her hips slightly as she arched her neck. From the tiny whimpers to the way her body twitched, he knew she was coming. Stroking his cock faster, he didn't fight it when his body wanted release. Instead, he came with her, sending come jetting from his body into the brush before him, all the while keeping his gaze locked firmly on Rayna as pleasure ripped through her body.

Something rustled across from him, on the other side of Rayna, and Kabril fought with his still erect cock to get it back into the confines of his pants. Rayna apparently heard the noise as well, which was strange considering how faint it was. She dressed quickly, pulling her T-shirt on and slipping into her shorts. The knowledge she wore no undergarments

would consume him the remainder of the night. Visions of her coming by her own hand would grip him for centuries.

Chapter Three

Rayna glanced in the opposite direction of camp and did her best to focus in the darkness. If it weren't for the light of the moon, it would have been pitch black. The jungle had been eerily silent while she bathed, right up until she'd given in to the urge to touch herself. Spending her days and her nights near Kabril was proving to be too much for her. Back home, she could at least get away from the lure of him because he had his practice and she had work. Since he was an avian veterinarian and her passion was photographing birds, it seemed fitting they spend time together. She had to remind herself that while she enjoyed taking pictures of birds, any animal would do. She'd spent months in various remote corners of the Earth, chasing down that perfect picture of whatever animal it was she'd been sent to shoot.

After being charged by two very angry tigers, Rayna had decided to avoid anything bigger than her for a while. In fact, it was Kabril's idea she take some time from her normal work and aid him with his research. He'd even tried to pay her much more than she'd ever dream of charging. Rayna wouldn't hear of taking his money. She lived in her great-grandmother's home, left to her in a will. It was long paid for and she had no family to take care of. Her safaris paid well and her tiny town had little in the way of shopping to tempt her with. While she wasn't rich, she was comfortable.

Looking around at the beauty of the tropics, Rayna knew she'd made the right decision in coming on the trip. The environment was soothing and she couldn't imagine being away from Kabril for the month he had planned to be away. That, more than anything, had prompted her to accept his invitation. She'd grown accustomed to seeing him daily, hearing his laugh and simply knowing he was close. Sachin lived in Kabril's guesthouse and was someone she would have missed as well. His odd sense of humor complimented Kabril's, making him a welcomed addition. He also seemed to watch over Kabril. It was out of the ordinary but Rayna never questioned it.

The sound of a twig snapping and leaves rustling grabbed Rayna's attention. Nothing seemed off yet her inner alarms were going off. She squinted in hopes it would help her see whatever was there. Thoughts of jaguars and other jungle predators filled her head, making her jerk back as fear crept over her.

She stepped onto the shore and dressed as quickly as she could. Her shorts clung to her wet body as did her shirt. As Rayna bent down to grab her boots something splashed in the water. No part of her wanted to dwell on what wildlife called the river home. Still, the urge to glance over at the water bordered on overwhelming. It appeared still and what little moonlight made its way through the canopy of trees managed to reflect off the water's surface.

Something splashed again, this time sounding much closer than the last. The hair on the back of her neck stood on end and the urge to flee was great. Never one to back down from a challenge, Rayna hesitated, sure her mind was playing tricks on her. Taking a deep, calming breath, she nodded.

It's probably a frog or something.

Rayna turned to head back to camp and ran face first into what felt like a truck. A really warm, muscular, fantastic smelling truck.

“Ouch.”

“Rayna?” Kabril asked, the sound of his voice making her feel safe.

Relief swept through her and she tossed her arms around his neck. He stood tall, taking her with him. She dangled for a moment and went to release him. Kabril didn’t allow it. He wrapped his large arms around her and held her off the ground.

His golden gaze locked on her. “Rayna?”

Her mind wanted her to tell him she was fine and to put her down. Her body had something altogether different planned. She swallowed hard and did her best to pull herself together before she did something stupid like beg him to fuck her.

“Umm, Kabril,” she whispered, running her hand through the back of his hair. “You’re going to hurt yourself. Put me down.”

“You are naught but chest high and scarce weigh more than a feather,” he said, his speech suddenly sounding so very different than normal. Thoughts of castles, knights and men of power filled her head.

Rayna rolled her eyes playfully and snorted. “The ‘I could have fallen out of the pages of a medieval romance novel’ vibe you got going is cute. Put me down now.” She pushed lightly on his upper chest but Kabril didn’t release her. “Please...my lord.”

“No,” he said quickly, still holding her. “To you, I am always Kabril.”

Confused but willing to play along, Rayna nodded. “So you’re saying I can’t give you cute lil’ pet names like pookie bear and honey bunches?”

“Bear?” He licked his lower lip and she had to fight back the moan that wanted to come. “Not the animal I hoped for but if you wish. Though, I might take to calling you mine.”

The idea of belonging to him left Rayna shivering in anticipation. She could only imagine what it would be like to have Kabril sliding in and out of her body, taking and giving pleasure until they could no longer move. Her erect nipples poked through the wet material of her shirt as she wiggled to get down. They scraped against his muscular chest and pleasure shot through her, leaving Rayna hissing as if she'd been burned. Kabril slid a hand lower and cupped her ass. Her breath hitched as heat flared through her body.

His warm breath skated over her cheek and he chuckled. "Something wrong?"

"Yes...erm...no." She bit her inner cheek, trying and failing to rid herself of the heat he caused. "I think I'm on fire."

Kabril dragged her against him, causing her to rub along him just right. "On fire?" he asked, sounding all too keen on hearing more.

Denial was futile. She nodded and Kabril lifted her chin, forcing her to face him. Capturing her mouth with his, Kabril left her legs quivering and her holding tight to him for fear she'd fall during his sensual assault. Rayna fed from the sweetness of Kabril's mouth. The kiss was intoxicating, as she knew it would be.

Kabril dominated their kiss, circling his tongue around hers and leading every step of the way. "Rayna," he murmured, continuing his glorious invasion. He held her cheek with one hand and her body with the other. The sheer power in his arms was not lost on her.

"Kabril," she said breathlessly. "Please."

Please put me down was what she was going to say. It wasn't what came out. Good thing considering being put down was the last thing she truly wanted to have happen. He slid his hand under her wet shirt and Rayna didn't stop him. Instead, she ate at his mouth, kissing him with the hunger of a crazed woman. For three months she'd longed to have

him do this to her and wasn't about to stop it now. She didn't have the willpower to make him stop, even if she wanted to.

The next thing she knew, she had her legs wrapped around his waist and her arms around his neck as he worked his hands further under her shirt. He tweaked her nipples, rolling them between his forefingers and his thumbs with a precision she didn't want to question. The idea of him bedding other women sickened her.

"Rayna," he murmured, kissing her neck and cupping her breasts. He nipped playfully at her shoulders and let out a manly chuckle as she rubbed against him.

Rayna wanted more. She needed to feel him inside her. There were too many articles of clothing between them. She tugged at his open shirt, running her hands over the planes of his chest. His muscles rippled under the weight of her touch and Rayna lost the ability to control her breathing. She shifted her hips, rubbing her body against his, striking his long, thick cock just right. Release was near. She arched in wild response, pushing her clit against his clothed erection. His lips greeted hers at the same moment her orgasm struck. Kabril drank her moans down, smothering them with his kisses. She wanted more.

Kabril jerked his hands out from under her shirt and she unwrapped her legs from his waist. He didn't put her down. Instead, Kabril kept her close, his breathing choppy and his movements stiff.

"Why did you stop?" she asked, feeling rejected.

"Because I refuse to take you on the ground like a savage."

"I wouldn't mind." Shocked by her own words, Rayna felt her cheeks staining with a blush.

"Kabril?" Sachin appeared from the shadows, silencing any further confessions that might have fallen from her lips. His silver eyes were narrow and he seemed focused on something behind them.

Rayna was a tad surprised Sachin didn't comment on the fact she was being held off the ground by Kabril. He seemed fixated on something else. Her brow furrowed. "Sachin, what's wrong?"

His gaze met Kabril's. "We are not alone."

Kabril tightened his hold on her to the point she could scarcely draw in air. "K-a-b-r-i-l."

He released her quickly, causing her to stumble. Sachin was there in an instant, steadying her. Kabril growled and gave her a slight tug, pulling her away from Sachin. The men stared at one another for what felt like eternity. Testosterone coated the air. Scared of a possible wild animal stalking them, Rayna batted them both in the arm. They were acting like idiots so she didn't mind stooping to scolding them. "Guys? What happened to we are not alone? Huh? I don't want to be the main course for a jaguar. Pull it together here."

No sooner did the words leave her lips than tension seemed to fill the air. Suddenly, the sounds of the jungle all but halted. Her breath hitched and she took a small step towards Kabril. As silly as it sounded, he made her feel safe regardless what she might have to face.

"How many?" He glanced towards Sachin.

Sachin's gaze never left the surrounding area. He shook his head slightly. "I do not know. Take Rayna to safety. I shall see to—"

Kabril scoffed. "We are in unfamiliar territory, old friend. I will not leave you to your own devices. Not when it is clear we are outnumbered."

Rayna stared at Kabril, noting his speech was different once again, as was Sachin's. "Guys?"

"Worry not, *ta'konima*," Kabril whispered, putting his body before hers.

She arched a brow, wondering what the hell it was he'd just called her. From the sound of the sharp intake of breath Sachin took, she had a

funny feeling it meant something significant. Her luck, he'd just insulted her in the worst way and she was oblivious.

He crouched a bit, taking her with him. Sachin followed suit. Kabril motioned with his head towards the far left of the river. "They are coming in from that way as well."

Sachin nodded, appearing to have already caught on to the fact they were being surrounded. Rayna was still lost. "Wait? Jaguars are now hunting us in a pack. I thought they weren't ones to travel in groups. I thought—"

Her words were cut short by the sudden sound of something swooshing overhead. Kabril tossed his body over hers, taking her down and pressing her to the ground. He shouted something to Sachin but the noise level reached proportions that drowned him out. As quickly as Kabril's weight had landed on her, it was ripped off. Rayna sat up fast, pushing to her feet. The sound that could only be described as hundreds of birds flapping their wings ended. The strangest part of it all was that Sachin and Kabril were missing, leaving her alone on the edge of the river.

"Kabril?" She turned in a slow circle, doing her best to pierce the darkness with nothing more than her eyes. "Sachin?"

Fear gripped her.

"Kab-ril?" she asked, her voice cracking under the weight of her nerves. "This isn't funny. You two have the strangest sense of humor. Kabril?"

Nothing.

Rayna wasn't sure how much time passed but she knew it was a significant amount. Something rustled in the brush to her left and she froze. "Kabril?"

A single feather drifted down before her face, nearly causing her to scream. Calming herself, Rayna plucked it from the air. The bird it belonged to had to be huge. The feather was over a foot long and had something dark, warm and wet on it. She brought it closer to her face and gasped when she realized it was blood.

She turned quickly and ran head first into something. Strong arms grabbed her shoulders and she gave in to the urge to scream a half a second before she brought her knee up, hard and fast.

“Rayna.” Kabril deflected her knee with his upper thigh right before she would have made contact with his groin.

Her eyes widened as she realized it was him. “What? Where? Kabril?”

A soft smile slid over his handsome face, easing some of the tension in her body. “I am here and you are safe.”

“What about Sachin?”

“Here,” Sachin said, appearing behind her, causing her to push her body against Kabril’s.

Rayna pressed her forehead to Kabril’s chest. “You two need to hum or something when you walk. You scared the hell out of me. And where did you two go?” She glanced around. “Are the jaguars still close? I think they attacked a bird.” She held the bloody feather up for Kabril to see. “Poor thing.”

His gaze hardened. “Discard that immediately, Rayna.”

Stunned by the directness in his voice, Rayna simply stared at him.

He ripped the feather from her hand and tossed it aside. “Return to camp this instant.”

She blinked, sure she’d heard him wrong. He couldn’t be issuing orders to her like he was her master. “Excuse me?”

He pointed towards the campsite. “Go!”

Sachin moved up next to her and cleared his throat. “Kabril.”

“What if the bird’s not dead, Kabril?” she asked, deciding to seize the moment. “Shouldn’t we look for it? You could help it. It’s what you do, right?”

Kabril’s nostrils flared and his entire body went rigid. “I gave you an order. Do not disobey me on this.”

Rayna took a giant step back. Anger consumed her, leaving her throat constricted as she fought to keep from crying out with rage. Something on Kabril’s face changed as a sigh tore free of him. He made a move to come to her but she put her hand up, stopping him. “Don’t. I’ll do what you *command*. I’ll go back to camp but know that I’m doing it to keep from choking you, not because you ordered me to.”

“Rayna, no.” Kabril made another move to come to her, this time finding Sachin stepping in his path. “I did not mean to—”

She folded her arms over her chest and gave him a droll look. “Didn’t mean to what? Open mouth, insert foot? I’m sorry I asked about the bird. I assumed since you’re an avian vet and all that you’d care. Guess I was wrong.” She glared at him. “About a lot of things.”

Sachin glanced over his shoulder at her. “Rayna, forgive him. The, umm, jaguars,” he nudged Kabril, “yeah, jaguars, left him worried about how safe you were. He isn’t acting like himself right now. He worries about you. We both do.”

“Yet you don’t bark orders at me like I’m a dog.” She gave Kabril a cross look. He cringed under the weight of her stare. “Don’t you think I was worried about you two? Huh? For all I knew, you two were being mauled to death twenty feet from me. You don’t see me ordering him around, do you?” Rayna didn’t wait for an answer. Instead, she turned to head back to camp, mumbling on the way, “Thinks he’s king of the jungle. Asshole.”

Kabril winced at the sound of Rayna cursing him as she headed towards camp. The camp wasn't exactly an ideal place to send her to alone but leaving her near him and the scene of the Falco's attack was far worse. Kabril was likely to lose his temper and shift—something Rayna didn't need to witness. Besides, if a Falco happened to escape them, it would come directly for Kabril since he was king. A Falco would have no interest in a human.

Ah, there was a point I too thought I would never have an interest in a human either. Now look. I am at the mercy of one.

Sachin coughed slightly and shook. It took Kabril a second to realize he was being laughed at—again. He punched out quickly, catching Sachin's right cheek. "I do not find this amusing."

His chest tightened at the thought of Rayna falling into the enemy's hands. He couldn't believe his enemy had tracked him down on Earth and attacked.

Rubbing his jaw, Sachin nodded. "I know. Still, you did not have to take your anger out on Rayna. She was unaware the feather belonged to the Falco. Her heart is big. Her concern for you is even bigger. Did you not sense the fear in her voice when she called your name?"

Kabril had sensed her fear. It had eaten at him as he flew high in the air above her, killing the enemy and disposing of them downriver. It had pained Kabril greatly, not being able to shout out, let Rayna know he was near. The last thing he wanted to do was have her find out what he truly was during a battle. She wouldn't understand.

Sachin patted Kabril's shoulder. "Go. Fly for a bit and clear your mind. I shall guard Rayna."

Still muttering curses, Rayna headed for her tent. Something shuffled to her side and she glanced in that direction. A man with long blond hair

was there, glaring at her through eyes of burnt umber. He wore a loincloth of all things. Her mind tried to rationalize why he was there and where he'd come from but she came up empty.

"So you are the human their king is so fond of," he said, his voice deep.

Confused, Rayna shook her head and took a tiny step back. A wry grin spread over the stranger's face. "Running is pointless. Come quietly and I shall make your death as painless as possible."

My death?

The man moved closer and something deep within Rayna snapped. She bent down quickly, seized hold of one of the retaining wall rocks for the fire and pitched it at him. A scream tore free of her as she did. The man sidestepped the rock with ease, looking amused by her efforts to keep him at bay. The dirt she'd accidentally cast with the rock rained down upon him. His laughter faded instantly as some of the dirt made its way into the wound on his side.

He lunged at her. Rayna tucked and rolled away from the fire pit, kicking with one leg as he approached. She scored a direct gut hit. Pain radiated up her leg. The man was solid muscle. He snaked an arm around her waist and the next thing she knew, she was being lifted off the ground.

High off the ground.

As the campsite below seemed to shrink, her stomach dropped and fear held her screams. She knew she should call out. Do something. Anything to alert Kabril and Sachin of what was happening but she could scarcely wrap her mind around it let alone warn others.



"Calm down," Sachin said, keeping a safe distance from Kabril.

“Calm down?” he echoed, wanting to kill something, anything. “The woman I wish to rule by my side for all eternity runs off into the jungle rather than spend another moment with me and you tell me to calm down?”

“We will find her, my lord.”

Kabril froze. “Why is it you are not correcting me—telling me how we will find my mate soon and that Rayna can never rule by my side?”

Sachin whistled as he averted his gaze. A sinking feeling came over Kabril as he clenched his fists. He knew Sachin well enough to know his old friend was up to his antics again. “Why is it I think you have been trifling with me from the moment we came to Earth?”

“Perhaps,” Sachin kept his gaze directed anywhere but at Kabril, “it is because I have been trifling with you.”

“What?” he bellowed.

Sachin stiffened. “I know you, Kabril. You would have resisted your pull to her had you known the truth. It is part of your stubborn nature, *my lord.*”

“The truth?” Kabril arched a brow in question, not liking the added my lord. “What truth?”

Sachin held his secrets close. Growling, Kabril stared at his long time friend. “This conversation is far from over. Now we hunt for Rayna. Once I have her safely within my sights, you will tell me all you have been keeping from me.”

“As you wish, my lord.” Sachin bent his head and yanked his shirt off, shifting into partial hawk form as he did. Large brown and white feathers rippled over his shoulders as a set of wings emerged from his upper back. Sachin, like Kabril and most other strong warriors, could shift portions of his body on command without pain and for indefinite periods of time. They could also do full shifts if need be.

Kabril did the same, shifting enough to be able to fly. As his wings sprouted forth from his shoulder blades, Kabril took a deep breath, enjoying the rare treat. While on Earth, he had to use caution not to be discovered. Shifting was a luxury. He flexed his wings, each spanning close to ten feet and took one last look around the campsite.

He shouldn't care that Rayna walked out on him but he couldn't help himself. Even if she wasn't the woman the prophecy spoke of, he'd come to care for her. The jungle was no place to wander alone. Especially not with an enemy attack having just been thwarted. As Kabril went to lift off the ground, he noticed something near the doused fire pit. One of the retaining wall rocks was missing.

He glanced around the area and found it off to the side of the site. There was something else there. A single bloodied feather. Not the one he'd forced Rayna to drop—a new one.

Suddenly, it felt as if he'd been struck in the midriff, the air swooshed from his lungs and his knees weakened. He was unable to believe they'd missed a Falco warrior, even with the proof lying right before him. Kabril clawed at the ground, shaking his head in denial as his body contorted in pain—partially shifting, then un-shifting, at an alarming rate. Vaguely, he heard someone crying out. It took a moment for him to register the fact that it was him and that he was calling for his mate—his Rayna.

Chapter Four

Kabril held tight to one of his Advisor's throats. The urge to choke the life from the man was great. "Speak out against my decision again and I will kill you with my bare hands."

Iorgos, his brother and soon-to-be the next target of his rage, touched his shoulder tentatively. "Kabril, unhand him. He speaks only the truth. To invade *Falco Peregrinus* with no preparation, to rescue, what—a human female who is not even your chosen one is beyond foolish. It is deadly."

Swinging his fist, Kabril caught his brother's jaw and sent him hurtling into the thick castle wall. "They have *my Rayna*! I am king here. When I order an attack, it is to be carried out. No questions asked."

Iorgos stared up, his blue gaze icy. "You have not been king here for many moons."

"Think you to overthrow me, little brother?" Kabril asked, his voice bristling with anger.

"Why should I not?" Iorgos was always the one to butt heads with Kabril. Second to the youngest, he was a long way from actually seeing the throne for himself but had the leadership skills Kabril needed in his absence. "You abandon your people on a quest to retrieve the one the Oracle foretold coming yet you are gone for many moons before returning with tales of another female. You then wish for our men to rush to their deaths to save a pathetic, vile human. Seems to me, big brother,

overthrowing is the least I could do for you. The female's life is not worth even one of our own, let alone hundreds upon hundreds."

Sachin stepped forward and delivered a swift kick to Iorgos' side. "Speak no ill of your future queen! Rayna is a wonderful, loving human who has done as the Oracle predicted and won the heart of our king."

A chorus of gasps followed Sachin's statement. The Advisors began whispering amongst themselves while Kabril stared at his long-time friend. Sachin's words began to sink in and Kabril felt his resolve crumble. He'd not been in his right state of mind from the moment Rayna went missing and suddenly, Sachin's hints hit Kabril with the force of a hundred men. "She is my...my...my true mate?"

Nodding, Sachin lowered his gaze but stood proud. "On the day you first laid eyes upon her, my lord, you whispered how sweet she was and that you would give all to have her be the one. I knew better than to tell you she was your mate because of how stubborn you can be. You did as I'd hoped you would do. You made her like you, won her trust and, I believe, her heart."

"But I lost her." The words fell from his lips in more of a sigh than anything else.

Sachin glanced at the table full of Advisors. "Our queen has been taken by our enemy. All of you are aware of the prophecy. Should our lands once more know the sound of children, we must act quickly. Our king wishes to strike with our combined power. Dare you deny him this?"



Rayna sat, her knees tucked under her chin and her gaze planted firmly on the back of her abductor. The man, or whatever he was, leaned over, dipping his hand into clear water and using it to rinse his wounds. Each time he brought the water to his open flesh, he hissed, leaving

Rayna little doubt how much pain he was in. He'd favored his side for awhile. She noticed right away how filthy the wound was, caked in dirt and blood.

She slid her foot back and forth on the river's edge, still unsure where she was. The area, while dense in foliage, trees and flowers, wasn't the same as where she'd been. It also wasn't as humid.

The man glanced over his shoulder. "We are in the Tocallie Mountains. In the Accipitridae realm."

She opened her mouth to comment but he cut her off. "And no, this is not Earth."

Not Earth? Accipitridae realm?

Closing her eyes, Rayna tried and failed to process all that had happened. Men who grew wings and flew in the air didn't exist. Other realms didn't exist. None of this could be real. She pinched her arm, trying to wake herself up, but realized it was a living nightmare.

"W-who are you?"

The man continued to cleanse his wounds. "An enemy of your king."

"My king?" she asked, not following.

A sardonic grin spread over his face. "I suppose you would not view Kabril as your king. Humans have no respect for anyone other than themselves. Not that I advocate showing allegiance to the likes of a *Buteos Regalis*, especially that one in particular but it is better than answering to no one. Our leader may have his faults yet we, for the most part, stand behind his decisions." He didn't sound so sure of himself.

Rayna wondered if the man truly believed in what his king did or if he merely wanted her to think he did. Either way, she had no intention of dying by his hands. "Is threatening to kill an unarmed woman considered a fault?"

His gaze lowered slightly as if he were ashamed. He stiffened, suddenly looking composed. “We have more values than the *Buteos Regalis*.”

A Buteos Regalis?

Her mind raced and what she landed on did little in the way of clearing up matters. “Royal hawks?”

The question forming on the man’s face alarmed her. One of them needed to have a clear idea of what was going on and it sure the hell wasn’t her. “Either you are a skilled liar or you truly do not know.”

“Know what?”

“Who and what we are,” he said, his voice even.

Suddenly, the idea of knowing everything terrified her more than her current state of ignorance. Blood-tinged water slid down the man’s bare torso and into the top of the loincloth he wore. Rayna glanced around, trying to see if anything would work to bind his wounds.

“If your goal is to escape, you should understand the portal back to your world is at an elevation you will plummet to your death. Should you attempt to cross it without one of us there to hold you it will not end in your favor.”

“I was looking for something to help stop your bleeding,” she said, not bothering to hide her annoyance with the man.

“Oh.” He appeared puzzled and then something in his expression seemed to soften. “I am Lazar of the *Falco Peregrinus*.”

She clutched her knees to her chest tighter. “As in a falcon?”

The corners of his mouth twitched slightly. “Yes. As in a falcon. And your name is?”

“Rayna,” she said, unsure why she gave him any details without fully understanding what was going on.

“I am sorry to be the one to tell you of all you did not know.” Lazar went to one knee and looked out from sympathetic eyes. For an abductor, he wasn’t as fearsome as he’d first seemed. Setting aside the fact he had wings that sprouted from his upper back and then disappeared within seconds, he wasn’t so bad.

She steadied her breathing and avoided making any sudden moves. “Does it hurt?”

Lazar lifted a brow and glanced at his wounds. “I have been hurt worse.”

“I meant your wings. When they come out and go back in, does it hurt?”

A slow, steady grin spread over his face. “If I go too long between shifting my skin itches and I long to feel the air against me as I soar in the skies above. But no, the shift itself is painless.”

“Why,” Rayna focused on the ground, “did you call Kabril a king? He’s a doctor and he doesn’t have wings.”

The sick feeling in the pit of her stomach returned and she was positive she didn’t want to hear Lazar’s answer. He cleared his throat and she met his gaze. “How is it you could spend so much time with him, yet know so little?”

I’m wondering the same thing.

She shrugged.

“Maybe you are not the one he seeks. I assumed when I witnessed the two of you conducting the starts of coupling, I thought you were she. The human it is said he is destined to mate with.”

Rayna ran her hand through the grass next to her, wanting desperately to be home. Her bottom lip trembled as the thought of Kabril taking another woman to his bed beat at her mind. The implication of what Lazar was saying wasn’t lost on her. “Kabril is like you? He can,”

she ripped a handful of grass from the ground and clutched it to her, “grow wings too?”

The pity in Lazar’s eyes only served to cut deeper into her heart. None of what was happening was a dream. It was as real as the grass she held and the air she breathed. It also meant Kabril had lied to her. Gained her trust and used her.

“My orders were to seize the human female, alive or dead, and return to the castle at once.” He looked to the sky. “I do not think it wise to follow these now.”

“W-why?”

“Because it is clear his omissions have hurt you enough. I wish not to see my king inflict more pain upon you for simply falling prey to our enemy. As I have said, our king is not without fault. There is a time to follow blindly. This is not one of them.”

Inflict more pain?

Rayna gasped. “They want to hurt me? Why?”

His refusal to answer left Rayna wondering how much to the story there was. Lazar was clearly hiding something. What? She wasn’t sure.

Lazar touched his wounds with reluctant fingers and she knew he was in a good deal of pain. “We should rest. Others will come in search of you.”

“Others?” Rayna moved towards him quickly, no longer caring that he had the ability to sprout wings.

Lazar chuckled. “I will allow no harm to come to you, Rayna.”

She eyed his wounds, the one on his side in particular and snorted. “No offense but I don’t think you’re—”

“The soil from Earth has something ours lacks. Something in your soil inhibits our ability to heal quickly. Under normal circumstances, my wounds would be nothing more than faint scars by now.”

She vividly recalled the dirt hitting him after she threw the rock. “I’m sorry.”

Lazar patted her hand. “You were attempting to protect yourself. You have nothing to be sorry for. I,” he sighed, “on the other hand, do. As soon as I am able, I will return you to your realm. It would be wise if you were to disappear for a while there. The Falco wish greatly to possess you. They believe King Kabril will lay down his sword and barter for your safe return.”

Envisioning Kabril wielding a sword wasn’t as hard as it should have been. All the times she’d referred to his behavior as regal and his speech as implacable haunted her. As much as she wanted to argue the point that Kabril wasn’t the king Lazar spoke of, in her heart she knew Lazar spoke the truth.

She picked a purplish-colored leaf from a plant near her and dipped it into the crystal clear water. “This isn’t poisonous, is it?”

Lazar shook his head and chuckled. “No. The flowers the plant will get late in the season are harvested and used in medicine. Was your goal to poison me?”

Rayna knew he was joking. She took the leaf and pressed it to his open wound as gently as she could. He hissed but let her continue, pulling leaves, wetting them and putting them over his open wound.

He caught her hand in his and stared at her, their faces dangerously close. “You tend to me when, by rights, you should be vexed by all I have brought upon you.”

“Without you, I’ll plummet to my death, remember?” She smiled, trying to make light of a situation she wanted nothing more than to crumble and cry in. Falling to pieces would accomplish nothing. She wanted to go home. Lazar could get her there. Something about him seemed genuine and she needed someone to trust.

His smile faded as his gaze flashed towards the sky. “Run!”

Confused by his sudden change, Rayna simply stared at him. “What?”

Dark shadows eclipsed the sun. In an instant Rayna was yanked to her feet by her hair. She cried out and tried to break free, only to find herself being thrust towards a hulk of a man. Dark brown, almost black wings spanned out at least twelve feet in each direction. The menacing stare he leveled on her shook Rayna to the core.

“Humbert,” Lazar said, his voice strained. “No.”

The brute holding her glowered in the direction Lazar’s voice had come from. “Is this the human?” His lip curled. “Disgusting creatures.”

“No. I took the wrong one. She was near their king but is...”

Humbert’s lecherous gaze slid over her, making her skin crawl before moving back towards Lazar. “You have always been weak where females are concerned.” He spat as he glared at Lazar. “The king anticipated as much from you, Lazar. He sent you to test your allegiance.”

“But I seized the wrong—”

“It matters not. She will not be permitted to leave now that she’s seen our realm. And you, Lazar, you shall be handled accordingly.” The man untied one side of his loincloth and fear coursed through her veins.

Lazar moved quickly, attacking the man nearest him. In an instant, the man was sinking in the water, his throat sliced open. Lazar’s fingers were bloodied. She looked closer and realized his fingernails were now long, dagger-like. She had little doubt they were the weapon Lazar used to kill the man, even in his weakened state. He held his wounded side and staggered. “Humbert, I will not...will not...”

He swayed and went to one knee, dashing Rayna’s hopes of being spared from Humbert. She tried to rush past Humbert but he extended

his wings, blocking her path. He stuck his chin out defiantly. “Going somewhere?”

Without thought, Rayna kicked him square between the legs. Humbert doubled over, clutching himself as a choked gasp broke free of him. Her gaze snapped to Lazar. Beads of sweat broke on Lazar’s brow and he swayed a bit, touching the ground with one hand to steady himself. Rayna rushed to his side. “Are you okay?”

He nodded a second before his eyes rolled to the back of his head and he tipped forward, splashing into the water. Rayna didn’t hesitate. She dove in after him. The icy water shocked her system but she didn’t stop. She continued onward, reaching for him through the clear, cold water.



Kabril grabbed hold of his chest and felt as if someone had hit him with a block of ice, stealing his breath. His arms cramped and he lost his focus for just a second, but long enough to jar him from flight. His wings folded in, cradling his body as he fought and failed to draw in air. Something seized him from behind, lifting him and ceasing his decent.

“Kabril!” Sachin’s voice pushed through the pain, clearing Kabril’s head.

The icy feeling vanished almost as quickly as it had arrived. The innate knowledge something was wrong with his mate settled over him. His iron will surged forth. “Rayna!”

“What vexes you, my lord?” Sachin asked.

“Rayna’s hurt. The situation is grave.”

“Is she...?” Sachin swallowed thickly. “Is she still alive?”

As much as Kabril wanted to believe she was safe and all would be well, his gut told him differently. He pushed off Sachin and flew in the direction his mate’s distress signal had come from. “I do not know.”

The Tocallie Mountains spanned a great distance and were easy to get lost in. Nothing could keep him from Rayna now that he'd connected with her on another level. Sachin tried to change course, heading in the logical direction—towards the closest portal but Kabril remained steady, following the pull of his mate. A clearing appeared and he spotted a Falco warrior near the edge of a spring. Red tinged what should have been crystal clear water. A knot formed in his throat as his heart hammered furiously.

Rayna.

A strangled cry ripped free of him as he began his rapid decent. Kabril broke through the surface of the icy water, already knowing how cold it was. The velocity at which he hit the water left him shooting past his target. Rayna's long hair danced in the water, lifting and swaying with a sickening silence as her limp body headed downwards. A Falco warrior was near her, his body lifeless as well. Kabril recognized him immediately as one of the men he'd fought with. Torn between rage and concern for Rayna, he thrust his anger down and seized hold of his mate. Her body was as cold as the water she was submerged in.

Holding her close, Kabril kicked, using his powerful body to take her quickly to the surface. He drew in a deep breath the moment he emerged but Rayna did nothing. Her body remained listless. Every fiber of his being called out to the Epopisdeus, begging them for forgiveness and to spare the life of the one he loved.

Love?

The scope of his feelings hit him, causing unshed tears to fill his eyes and his chest to tighten at the thought of losing her. Someone pried Rayna from his cold hands before someone else yanked him free of the water. Kabril knew his men were close, trying to help but he needed to be near Rayna.

“N-no!”

His teeth chattered as he reached for his mate. The moment he touched her cheek, a sob fell from his lips. “Magaious, I beg of you, take my life in place of hers.”

A circle of gasps sounded around him but Kabril ignored them. It mattered not what his men thought, only that Rayna survived. He would rather die knowing she lived on than to go a single day without her by his side.

Sachin stood silently watching his long-time friend hold firm to the woman he’d grown to love. It pained Sachin, knowing he’d withheld the truth of who Rayna was from Kabril. He directed his gaze skyward and closed his eyes as Kabril openly prayed to the Epopisdeus he’d shunned so long ago. Sachin joined in, silently calling upon the bird gods to intervene.

He glanced to the side and found Humbert being lifted away, his wings, hands and ankles bound. Curses spat forth from his foul mouth and Sachin vowed to cut the man’s tongue from his head before the night was out.

His men lifted a second Falco warrior from the depths of the frigid water, not bothering to tie him. They followed behind Humbert and the others in the direction of the castle. Sachin didn’t need to instruct his men to put the two in the dungeon. It went without saying. He did have to give a rather stern look at the remaining guards, fearing they’d take it upon themselves to kill the Falcos instead of allowing the king the pleasure.

Sachin eyed his friend and went to turn his back to give Kabril a private moment for mourning Rayna when a bright light shone down

upon them. At first, it bordered on blinding before dimming enough to allow Sachin to make out Kabril's and Rayna's outlines.

The sound of Rayna coughing was music to his ears. It was as if the heavens opened and harps played. Afraid his imagination and wishful thinking had run away with him, Sachin watched his old friend carefully. The moment Kabril tipped his head back and let out a fierce growl of triumph, Sachin drew his sword and held it high.

"Praise Magaious!"

Kabril rocked Rayna, holding her so tight Sachin wondered if his friend would hamper her already labored breathing. He moved to Kabril's side quickly. "I can carry her while you regain your strength, my lord."

Rayna's blue eyes drifted shut and her head lolled back. Kabril kept hold of her. "No."

"Kabril," he whispered, putting his hand on his friend's shoulder. "You are in no condition to fly with her in your arms. You could drop her. Is that what you truly want?"

The weight of the decision showed in Kabril's eyes a second before he handed Rayna to Sachin. The trust given to him was not misplaced. Sachin inclined his head before securing Rayna and taking flight. Kabril flew close to him, no doubt monitoring Sachin's care of his mate.

Chapter Five

Rayna's head felt heavy and her body laden with lead. She groaned as she opened one eye to peer out into the darkened room. Light filtered in through heavy drapery. The single slit and the tiny amount of light passing through left her shielding her face. She tried to roll away but her body refused to respond to her commands.

"Be still," a deep, familiar voice whispered near her ear.

"Kabril?" Rayna asked, twisting around and suffering the fate of such a choice almost instantly. Pain shot through her and she cringed.

Kabril put his hand to her cheek and cupped it gently. "*Ta'konima*, I beg of you to rest. The doctor has given you something to help you sleep."

"My arms are heavy and I'm mad at you," she blurted out.

The corners of his lips twitched. "I know. It will pass, as will the pain. I can only hope your anger with me subsides as well, Rayna. If I could take your pain from you, I would. My power does not extend to that point."

Her brow knit as his words trickled through the recesses of her mind. "Power?" She drew in a shallow breath. "Wings? They had wings, Kabril. Huge wings that came right out of their backs. They could fly." She closed her eyes as a dull throb began in her head. "They said you were a king and that you had wings, too."

She waited for Kabril to laugh. He didn't. Instead, he simply watched her through cautious golden eyes. Rayna's gaze darted around the room.

She'd been in Kabril's bedroom once before, to help him pack for the trip. This was not his room. This room was grand with vaulted ceilings and lamps suspended from chains. The oversized four-post bed they lay in was carved from dark cherry-colored wood. The Mediterranean blue, plush coverlet engulfed her and matched the silken gown she now wore. Her heated gaze flashed back to him and locked on the tawny expanse of his chest.

Suddenly, her mouth was very dry.

"W-where are we and why are we in bed *together*?"

"Excuse me, my lord," a feminine voice said, causing Rayna to sit up faster than her aching body allowed.

She swayed and Kabril was there, steadying her with his powerful arms. "Rest, Rayna."

Ignoring Kabril, Rayna focused on the female in the doorway. The woman held a tray of what looked to be fruits and a decanter of something. Her long blonde hair fell in waves to her slender waist. As much as Rayna didn't want to be jealous, she was.

The woman inclined her head and offered a non-threatening smile. "My lord," her attention went to Kabril, "Iorgos ordered food be sent up. Your brother worries because you have not eaten since..." The woman averted her gaze. "Since...erm..."

"Since the queen arrived?" Kabril supplied, a teasing note in his voice.

Rayna had thought the blonde was gut wrenching enough. Hearing there was a queen to go along with the king left her feeling as if she'd been struck with a bat. She looked up and shook her head. "Waking up and finding myself in my boring country house would be great right about now. Really, I'm full up on winged macho men. I'd like to go back

to simple, sexy bird doctors. Ones who may be odd at times but don't have stacked blondes showing up to feed them grapes."

"Set the tray down and leave us," Kabril said.

The woman did as she was instructed. Rayna rubbed the back of her neck and let out a soft laugh. "Am I crazy? Be honest."

"Rayna, your sanity is not in question." He ran his fingers down the back of her arm making a shiver ripple through her. When he reached her hand, Kabril laced his fingers through hers, the move intimate. He brought their joined hands to his lips and planted a chaste kiss on hers. "What I wish to know is if you can accept me as I am?"

"You're not an avian vet, are you?" she asked, already knowing the answer but needing to hear the truth from him.

"To your people, I know more of birds than they could ever hope to." Kabril lifted her hand and spread her fingers wide, kissing the tip of each one. "But, alas, I am not."

She wanted to yell at him for lying to her but the feel of his full lips trailing over her skin was too distracting. He made his way up her arm, slow and steady. When he reached her shoulder, Kabril nipped lightly at her skin, catching the strap of the gown she wore. He dragged it down before returning to kiss his way up her shoulder, towards her neck.

Kabril knew Rayna needed her rest but the taste of her skin was too tempting to resist. He thought she'd shriek in fear of him after he learned she knew he was not human. Once the castle doctors had informed him she would indeed recover, Kabril had set out to learn what had happened from the sources. By the time Kabril reached Humbert, Sachin had already beaten the man within inches of his life. Kabril didn't question Sachin on the matter. If his friend felt the need to take such measures, they were clearly called for.

Lazar was slow to recover and in his fevered state revealed snippets of the conversation he'd held with Rayna. Kabril had wanted to be the one to tell Rayna all his secrets, not have her learn by way of kidnapping at the hands of his enemy. The minute Lazar regained full consciousness he would be tortured for his role in the attack on Rayna. There was little point in inflicting pain on a man who was not aware of the goings on around him.

Pushing thoughts of torture from his head, Kabril concentrated on the bounty before him. His mate. His soon-to-be wife. Rayna stared at him with questioning eyes and he wanted to kiss the doubt from them. He'd sensed her unease with the serving wench and didn't need to search far inside himself for the reasons behind her mood. She was jealous. It was foolish considering he'd never given the wench a second look much less bedded her, but the comfort from knowing Rayna cared if he did left his heart swelling and his lips sealed.

He moved his hand across Rayna and managed to ease her to the bed. Sliding over her, Kabril tried and failed to control his breathing. Her hair fanned out around her as she stared up at him with wide eyes. His senses were keen and he picked up on the beating of her heart. As much as he wanted to take her, ram his cock into her depths and claim her for his own, Kabril knew she needed to fully recover. "Sleep," he whispered, going to plant a kiss on her forehead.

Rayna tilted her head and caught his lips with hers. She thrust her tongue into his mouth, causing Kabril's chivalry to crumble. His cock hardened at an alarming rate and he rubbed his body against hers. The need to join with her was great. He drew air through his flaring nostrils, behaving more like a rutting bull than the king of hawks. He pressed his distended flesh to Rayna's mound and it only took a second before he felt the proof of her arousal.

“You are wet, *ta’konima*,” he whispered between kisses.

Rayna pushed on his chest. “And you are rude. Get off me. Now.”

Her spunk only added to her allure. He nodded, making no effort to bend to her wishes. Instead, he feathered his tongue over her bottom lip and relished the shiver that moved through her.

Rayna’s foot made its way up the back of his leg before she wrapped her legs around his waist. The feel of her countering his movements was too much. Kabril gave in to the desire to go further. He’d already had a small sampling near the river and could scarcely await more.

He settled between her legs, a reminder that she wore nothing under the sleeping gown he’d had her put in. His own sleeping pants pulled taut as his cock fought for freedom, the promise of paradise close.

Rayna raked her fingernails down his back hard enough to cause his skin to welt but not hard enough to draw blood. The shifter in him could smell even small traces of blood.

She returned his kisses, searching his mouth with her tongue and no doubt finding it welcoming. Rayna arched against him, leaving his cock rubbing against her wet slit. Moisture soaked through his pants and the scent of her arousal pushed him over the edge of restraint.

Growling, Kabril ran a hand into the back of Rayna’s hair and tugged, forcing her head back so he could devour her neck—smothering it with heated kisses. He moved downwards and planted kisses on the swell of her breast. Kabril pulled the other strap of her gown, freeing her glorious globes in the process. He took a pink-tipped nipple into his mouth and sucked evenly. Rayna’s moans spurred him onward. He crushed her breasts, cupping them with his hands while he coated them in kisses.

“So sweet. Like ripe berries.” He licked a line around her erect nipple, staring up at the rapture on her face.

Her mouth fell open and a cry broke free. “Kabril. Please.”

Working his hands down her body, Kabril continued to vary kisses and licks on her nipples. He kneaded her thighs, all the while fighting an internal battle to keep from coming as he inched the gown upwards. He dipped his head, laying kisses low on her stomach. As he neared the thin thatch of well-maintained hair on her mound, Rayna lightly ground her body against him. “Patience, *ta’konima*.”

He spread her drenched folds and eyed the prize. Her rosy clit was swollen with lust. Kabril drew it into his mouth mindful to be gentle and flicked his tongue back and forth. Rayna’s entire body tightened and he had to seize hold of her hips to keep her from moving up and off the bed.

She cried out, laced her fingers in his hair and held firm, riding his mouth. He lapped cream from her slit while taking one hand and stimulating her clit. He found a steady rhythm and chuckled into her pussy as she began murmuring a mix of curses, pleas and threats.

“Dammit, Kabril. Uh, more. There.” She thrust her hips upwards. “There. Oh, yes!”

Rayna came with a start and Kabril continued to work her clit, swirling his tongue and lapping her juices. Her cream was every bit as sweet as she was. Unable to resist her any longer, Kabril moved up and over her. He supported his weight with one arm as he freed his cock from its confines with his other hand.

He nudged her entrance with his cock head and locked gazes with her. “Rayna Vogel, do you accept me—all of me from now until the end of time?”

The look Rayna leveled on him was scorching. Purring, she cupped his face and Kabril anxiously awaited her answer. In order for his claim to be official and for Rayna to be the queen in the eyes of his people, she had to accept all of him—his magik included.

A lone tear made its way down her smooth cheek and Kabril felt as if his heart had shattered. Assuming she was rejecting him as her mate, he went to move away. Rayna held steady to his face.

“Kabril?”

“Y-es.” He cleared the emotions lodged in this throat. “Yes?”

“Does your skin itch too, when you’re not able to shift forms for a long period of time?”

The question caught him off guard. Stunned, he nodded.

She traced a path down his neck and to his shoulders. More tears escaped their watery prison and Kabril had to look away to avoid weeping himself.

“I never meant to cause you pain.”

“Rayna?” He wiped her cheek. “What do you mean?”

Her voice shook. “You didn’t...change...because of me. Did you?”

Kabril moved slightly, causing the head of his cock to press into her hot core. Fire shot through his lower body and the fierce need to lay claim to what was his was almost debilitating. “Rayna, please. I beg of you. Do you accept me—all of me from now until the end of time?”

She stared up through lust-filled eyes. “Show me, Kabril.”

His body felt as if it were going to burst. “Speak not in riddles, *ta’konima*. Though I may be a king, I am still but a man.”

The slow, sexy smile that slid over her face eased his tension a bit. “I want to see your wings, Kabril.”

My wings?

At any other time he would have attempted to reason with her, make sure she was ready to see him shift forms, but his resolve was weak. He let go, allowing feathers to emerge on his upper shoulders first and then his shoulder blades. One barely there pinch later and his wings unfurled.

A blanket of brown, white and gold enveloped them as Kabril extended his wings out and around them.

Rayna squealed and touched one of his wings tentatively, as if she was afraid she would cause him pain. Her touch had the exact opposite effect. Pleasure shot straight through his body, settling in his cock each time she touched his wings. He bit his cheek, trying to focus on anything other than the fact he was close to paradise. “R-Rayna,” he ground out. “Do you accept me—all of me from now until the end of time?”

“Yes, Kabril. Yes.”

With that, he surged forward, sinking his cock into her silken depths and relishing the feel of his mate’s body encasing his own. Her pussy held him to her. She was tight. Made just for him.

The base of his spine tingled and Kabril knew additional feathers were forming on his back. He also knew his magik was rising, preparing to share itself with her, granting her the ability to live as long as him.

“Uh, Kabril,” Rayna panted as he began to slide in and out of her. She clung to him, countering his thrusts and rubbing her body against his. Her pussy clenched around his cock as Rayna tipped her head back. “I’m coming. Kabril, yes!”

Liquid warmth made their already glorious merging even better. His magik picked then to rise, circling them with static-charged energy. Rayna continued to come, paying no mind to the power around her. For Kabril the moment was momentous. Never before had he shared his magik with another. Doing so during the act of coupling forever bound Rayna to his heart and his soul. She was now, in the eyes of his people, his wife, his mate, his queen.

He exploded, rooting himself deep within her core as his cock twitched, jetting forth seed. Kabril’s entire body shook from the force of it

all. The intensity was unlike anything he'd ever experienced. His cock remained hard, even after his seed was spent.

Wrapping his arms around Rayna, Kabril captured her mouth with his as he used his extended wings to lift them from their current position. Rayna yelped and held tight to him.

Chuckling, Kabril slid his hands down and cupped her ass. "Ride me, *ta'konima*."

She glanced down, looking uneasy.

"Worry not. My power helps in keeping us afloat. We will not fall."

Rayna nodded, biting her lower lip and driving him mad with desire. She began to move her hips slowly at first, before working into a faster rhythm. When she varied her movements, moving up and down on him, Kabril seized hold of her and started impaling her on his cock.

Cries, moans and animalistic grunts broke free of them both. The smell of sex filled the air and Kabril's magik still buzzed around them. The moment was perfect and worth waiting four hundred cycles for.

Rayna's pussy milked his cock as her legs tightened around him. He knew she was coming and wanted to join her. He pumped feverously into her, savoring the feel of his mate. His sac drew up a second before he expelled his seed, filling her with all he had to offer.

"*Ta'konima*," he whispered, nuzzling his face into the crook of her neck and planting kisses there.

A sultry laugh bubbled up from her. "Mmm, tell me what *ta'konima* means."

"It means my love in my language. *Ta'konima* from a man to a woman and *to'konimo* from a woman to a man." He kissed her again and she stiffened. "Rayna?"

"You love me?" The question, while so innocent, nearly broke him.

How could she not know what he felt for her? How could she not see what he'd done?

Because you have not told her and she knows not your ways.

“Yes, Rayna. I love you. I have loved you since you took me to see your Henry. Each day I fought the urge to lay claim to you.” He expelled a long, tired breath. “I could wait no longer.”

“Lay claim to me?”

He eased them back onto the bed and withdrew from Rayna. “What happened between us means, in the eyes of my people, you are my mate. Umm, my wife. I know it is not the same for humans. Sachin explained their customs to me, but what transpired, the sharing of my magik and our bodies, makes you queen to my people, Rayna.”

Kabril waited for her to explode in anger. When tears arrived, he wasn't sure what to do. “Rayna, are you in pain?” Guilt consumed him. “I was selfish, taking you when you were not yet fully recovered.”

“Shhh.” She pressed her hand to his mouth. “I love you too, Kabril.”

For a moment Kabril felt as if he had been struck senseless. The sound of his heart pounding filled his ears and his breathing increased. “You love me as well? You are not vexed by my...”

“Shut up with the vexing and kiss me, king.” She pulled him to her.

Kabril laughed as he drew his wings back into his body, leaving no trace of them behind. He rolled, putting Rayna on top of him so he could stare up at her beauty. “I will cease my blathering if you commence with the games.” He wagged his brows and Rayna blushed.

“The games, huh?” She raked her nails down his chest lightly. “Mmm, I think I can come up with a few things, *to'konimo*.”

Chapter Six

Rayna moved down the seemingly endless stone corridor in search of Kabril. She'd woken to an empty bed and needed to see him. Recessed portions of the wall held sconces. A candle burned bright in each one. A navy-blue runner ran the length of the hall, keeping her bare feet from padding against stone.

The moment Rayna spotted a curved staircase she quickened her pace, bounding down them at a speed she shouldn't have. She tried and failed to come to a stop at the bottom. Instead she slid on a slick, cold floor and crashed shoulder first into the wall.

The sound of Sachin's voice caught her attention, making her ignore the pain shooting through her arm. His voice was faint but unmistakable.

"My lord, mayhap he speaks the truth."

"He lies!" Kabril shouted, his voice so deep and dangerous that it vibrated around her. "The knave spouts venom from his lips with his deceit. My queen would never rush to the aid of my enemy."

Aid of the enemy? His queen?

The sound of something cracking grabbed her attention. She followed the noise and tripped over the edge of a heavy wooden bench. Rayna put her arms out, in hopes of catching herself and ended up grabbing hold of a wall sconce. It turned, lever-like, and the stone wall nearest her opened, revealing a dark staircase.

Sachin's voice became clearer. "My lord, ask the queen."

This time it sounded as if something snapped. The noise was followed by a painful cry and Rayna recognized the voice immediately—Lazar. She ran down the steep steps and when she came to the end she covered her mouth, unable to believe the sight before her.

Kabril cracked a whip and it bit at Lazar's exposed chest. Lazar's wrists were bound above his head as he hung, suspended from iron chains. Blood trickled down him as his chest heaved. Rayna's gaze traveled the length of the large room. A cornucopia of torture devices lined it. With her mouth agape, she stared at Kabril.

His black hair clung to his sweat-soaked face. The feral look in his eyes made her take a step back as he grit his teeth, his attention still solely on Lazar. "You dared to harm my mate. To take her from me and leave her for dead. For this, you shall suffer my wrath." He drew the whip back again and Rayna dashed forward, putting her body between Kabril's and Lazar's.

Sachin was suddenly before her, shielding her with his massive body. "My lady!"

"S-Sachin?" she asked, her voice barely there. "Don't let him hurt Lazar."

"Go," Lazar whispered.

Sachin stepped to the side and Rayna faced Kabril head on. His golden gaze was still burning with rage. The veins in his neck stood out noticeably.

Rayna put a hand on her hip and glared right back at him. "If you're going to shout orders at me or try to hit me with that whip I'll have you know that I'll..."

Suddenly, Kabril dropped the whip and backed away, the fire draining from his eyes. “Hit you? Rayna, I would never raise my hand to you. Never.”

“But you’d beat a helpless man? One who tried to keep me safe from his own people?”

Kabril grimaced and tipped his head. Sachin took hold of her shoulder. “Explain.”

“Lazar took me from the campsite but when he found out Kabril had done nothing but lie to me for months, he decided I’d been through enough. Plus, I don’t think he agreed with what they had in store for me. He was going to take me home when the other Falco Per-e-something or others arrived.”

Sachin bit his lower lip. “*Falco Peregrinus?*”

“Right.” She nodded, adding, “He killed one of his own men to keep me from being hurt and I think he would have done the same to Humbert if I wouldn’t have infected his wound with soil from Earth. He’d been suffering from the effects already and it was too much for him. He fell into the water and I went in after him.” Rayna blushed. “After I kicked Humbert where it counts.”

“Where it counts?” Sachin asked.

She centered her gaze on his groin and he winced. “Yeah, it worked so don’t knock it.”

Kabril stood, listening to his mate talk of how Lazar came to her aid. Guilt for having allowed her to be taken to begin with settled over him. Seeing the shame in Rayna’s blue eyes as she shielded the Falco with her body didn’t help matters any. He was king, it shouldn’t make a difference what anyone thought of him but it did. He cared what light Rayna viewed him in.

Sachin tipped his head. “My lord, permission to remove the prisoner’s restraints?”

He nodded.

Rayna crossed her arms under her breasts, causing them to thrust forward. “Prisoner? How about a guest? I like the sound of that better.”

“Rayna, you cannot possibly think to—” The stern look upon her beautiful face silenced him.

She tapped a finger against her arm. “I’m still mad at you for lying to me, Kabril. Don’t think you’re going to get on my good side beating Lazar to a bloody pulp. Let him down, clean him up and see to his wounds. He needs a doctor and something to eat, not to be interrogated by you.”

Sachin opened his mouth to say something and Rayna shot him a nasty look. “One word from you and I’ll make you eat my famous chicken divan.”

Gulping, Sachin put his hands up, signaling defeat. Kabril’s stomach churned at the thought of eating chicken anything. His long-time friend thrust him towards his mate. “For the love of the gods, see to your woman before she truly does clip our wings.”

“Your woman?” Rayna quirked a brow as she stared at Kabril.

He gave into the smile wanting to come and went to one knee as Sachin had told him human males did in situations such as this. He took Rayna’s hand in his and stared up into her blue eyes. “Rayna, you will marry me the way humans do.”

Sachin cleared his throat and Lazar laughed under his breath. Kabril thought hard about Sachin’s instructions and realized he’d commanded Rayna instead of asking her. He decided to try again. “Uh, umm, Rayna, would you do me the honor of being my ball and chain?”

It was Rayna's turn to laugh, and laugh she did, tipping her head back and covering her mouth with both hands. "Ball and chain? Heaven help me. My man thinks that's a compliment."

"Be my chick?" he asked, hopeful he got it right.

Rayna laughed harder.

"My sexy significant other?"

She closed the distance between them, snorting softly and shaking her head. He went to try another only to find her pressing her fingers to his lips. "Shhh, Kabril. Yes, I'll be your wife the way humans do it, too."

His heart soared. He swept her off her feet and rushed towards the staircase. The need to get her back to their chambers and make sweet love to her was too powerful to resist. The Oracle had chosen well for him. Rayna truly was his perfect match.

Epilogue

Earth, three and a half months later...

Kabril slid his arms around his wife and held her close, running his hands over her low, swollen abdomen. The life they'd created grew within her. Every moment since its conception seemed like a miracle to him, to Rayna and to the people of Accipitridae. Already the somber moods had lifted and the people rejoiced once more. A festival was in the works, the first in many years. It was to honor their union and the coming of their child. At least that is what the people claimed. Kabril suspected they were looking for a reason to celebrate after so many cycles of dwelling on the negative.

The threat of war was still imminent. Relations with the *Falco Peregrinus* were still nonexistent. Lazar's presence in the castle sparked controversy at first but he was beginning to grow on everyone, including Kabril. Sachin insisted the Falco could be useful for establishing relations with the *Falco Peregrinus* in the future. Lazar seemed to think he would never be welcomed back by his own kind. Kabril tended to side with him on the matter. Lazar was always welcome in Kabril's kingdom.

The wind picked up, causing orange and yellow leaves to scatter about. Rayna sighed and leaned back into his embrace. "It's so beautiful, Kabril. I'm going to miss it."

He kissed her temple. "*Ta'konima*—my love, I have told you time and time again that you do not have to sell your grandmother's home."

She nodded. "I know, but we don't need it. You're keeping the one down the lane on the off chance one of your men wants to visit and we live in Accipitridae." She glanced over her shoulder at him. "Your castle sleeps about a hundred people or better so I don't think we need this as a guest house."

"It holds sentimental value to you, Rayna." He rocked her gently, drawing in her sweet scent.

"I'll make new memories with you, Kabril. You're my family now."

He cringed, not wanting to broach the subject he needed to. "Speaking of family. You met my brother Iorgos."

Rayna arched a dark brow. "Yes and I still think you're too hard on him. But I don't think that's what you're getting at. What's up?"

"Word came of my other brothers arriving soon to welcome you to the family."

She licked her lips and grinned. "Are you going to tell me how many brothers you have finally?"

Kabril stiffened. "I have eight brothers. Two were born minutes behind me. There are two sets of twins, one includes Iorgos. Then, there is Thrandr, he was a single birth."

One. Two. Three. He mentally counted down until Rayna's temper flared.

"You have how many sets of what?" Rayna spun around in his arms, her eyes wide in disbelief.

"There is more," he said, against his better judgment. "For our kind, multiple births have nothing to do with the female. Apparently, male shifters, of our kind, release a chemical in our sperm which encourages a high fertility rate. The chemical has been absent for some time as it is tied to our magik."

Rayna clutched his arms, her fingernails digging into his skin. “Are you trying to tell me there is a good chance I have more than one baby growing inside me?”

A sheepish smile swept over him. “Yes.”

“And this is coming up this late in the game why?” she asked, tapping her foot.

“I love you.”

Rayna batted her lashes and let out a soft sigh. “I love you too but if you don’t start telling me important things up front, you’re going to be sleeping in the birdhouse.”

He cringed and she laughed. “Ah, my queen, you have my word, you know now all of my secrets.”

About the Author

Mandy M. Roth grew up fascinated by creatures that go bump in the night. From the very beginning, she showed signs of creativity. At age five, she had her first piece of artwork published. Writing came into play early in her life as well. Over the years, the two mediums merged and led her to work in marketing. Combining her creativity with her passion for horror has left her banging on the keyboard into the wee hours of the night. Mandy lives with her husband and three children on the shores of Lake Erie, where she is currently starting work on her Master's Degree.

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TALONS

A collection of five stories taking you to the height of passion

Talons: Kiss Me Deadly

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Death is a collective—an unkindness of supernatural ravens with the power to take the form of men and to decide which humans live and which humans die with a mere touch.

When Khail lays his fatal touch on his next victim and she doesn't die, he's faced with a human immune to his deadly power who has seen him shift form—and he's able to have physical contact with a woman for the first time in centuries.

Falling for a shapeshifting messenger of Death wasn't on Bridget Sawyer's agenda, but things are about to get even more complicated. The Unkind is determined to claim her.

Talons: King of Prey

© 2006 Mandy M. Roth

In a place where realms combine and portals open passages to the unknown, a prophecy speaks of fertility being restored to his people through the taking of King Kabril's mate.

The prophecy neglects to mention she lacks something vital to his kind—wings. Kabril, King of the Buteos Regalis has no interest in taking a human mate. His kind believes humans are dirty, vile creatures who rely on machines to lift them into the air. The last place he wants to go in search of his mate is Earth, but he's left no choice.

Never did he expect to find love on a planet with one moon, people who lack wings and a stubborn vixen who makes his heart soar. When he does, he fears the truth about who and what he truly is will steal it away. Little does he know his enemies fully intend on doing the taking.

Talons: Firebird

© 2006 Jaycee Clark

Legend has it firebirds bring both good fortune and destruction, Reen has become an expert at both...

Reen is an expert at destruction and annihilation. She's a Hunter, an elite, one of their best assassins, she's also a legendary firebird—a creature of lore. Staker, a member of the Falcon order, is her soul mate from a bloody past she desperately tries to forget, but one that haunts her every moment. The two are thrown together in a desperate search for missing women.

The Collector is a man who loves the hunt, preying on the unusual, on the special—all to keep these women for his own use. The Collector favors shifters, the rarer the better. He traps them, keeps them, and turns them into his own private collectables.

Staker doesn't want Reen to be a part of this dangerous mission, but she has other plans. Unfortunately, so does the Collector...

Talons: Caged Desire

© 2006 Sydney Somers

He's trapped...she's suspicious—to earn his freedom all he has to do is win her trust.

Locked in a cage for almost fifty years ago, Logan has had nothing but time to plot his revenge on those who wrongfully condemned him to spend eternity in the deepest regions of a South American rainforest. But with one look at the alluring vampire who holds his freedom in her hands, revenge becomes the farthest thing from his mind.

Eve Blake is puzzled by the wooden crate delivered to her door. Even stranger is the large golden eagle inside. It doesn't take her long to realize the majestic creature is far more than he appears. Finding a man in the cage previously containing the feathered animal gives Eve every reason to suspect the shifter was locked away for a reason.

Can she trust him when he promises not to harm her if she releases him? Or will her decision cost both of them more than they bargained for?

Talons: Seize the Hunter

© 2006 Michelle M Pillow

Fate is giving her the one man she'd never want for her very own.

Princess Ari of the planet Falconia knows it's her time to marry and has picked out several suitable men in her mind—none of which are Falcoan Army Commander, Rurik of the Fifth. The man tormented her as a child, causing her untold humiliations. But there is really no need to worry about such a match. Shifters cannot rule and Rurik is a natural born falcon shifter.

Trusting destiny, Ari sips from the Marriage Chalice, sealing her future. But things don't go as planned. It would seem fate is giving her to the man she despises. How can she find happiness with the one man she could never want for her very own?

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