

OPPORTUNITY

“Shalassa’s tits, are you *sure* you know how to fly this thing?”

Serrane Starwind, the Ranger-General of Highwind, couldn’t help but grin as she and her companion whipped across the Shattered Peaks on the back of their stolen wyvern. The freezing night wind chilled her bare skin and tousled at her long hair, and she could barely see anything with the moon concealed behind the overcast sky. By any objective measure, she should have been terrified.

Instead, she was *exhilarated*.

“Hang on,” Serrane warned. “We need more speed.”

“*More* speed?” Valuri protested. “Are you bloody—?”

Serrane gripped the reins and spurred the wyvern into a dive. Her stomach sank as they plummeted down the mountain’s edge, and she lifted her arm to shield her eyes as bits of snow and dirt sprayed across her face. Valuri clutched the ranger’s waist so tightly it actually hurt, and the Huntress audibly gulped when the wyvern unexpectedly pulled up and banked hard around yet another snow-covered peak.

“Oh, gods,” Valuri mumbled. “I’m going to be sick...”

Serrane snickered as she eased the wyvern into a slower, less frantic descent down the face of the mountains. So far, the beast had responded to her commands even better than she had hoped. She continued to gently soothe its mind through the Aether, assuaging its fears and insisting she had its best interests at heart. Their connection was already stronger than she thought possible.

Yet somehow, she knew it was only the beginning.

“I think we lost them,” Serrane said, squinting and glancing back over her shoulder. The billowing black clouds from the destroyed hatchery had faded into the darkness, as had all signs of their pursuers. The enemy wyvern riders had far bigger problems to deal with now, like explaining how two women had completely sabotaged their plans to douse Highwind in flaming oil.

Grinning in satisfaction, Serrane leveled out their trajectory and continued skimming across the mountaintops. If they maintained their course, they probably could have reached Highwind by daybreak, but she had other plans. After gliding ahead for another hour, she started searching the hills and peaks below for a suitable place to land. She knew these mountains better than anyone, and it didn’t take her long to find a recognizable landmark.

The wyvern set down in a grassy clearing nestled between two particularly large, rocky overhangs, and the instant the beast came to a halt Valuri slumped out of the saddle clumsily and rolled down onto the ground.

“Son of a bitch,” she rasped, keeling over as if she were about to wretch. “If we ever do something that stupid again, please just leave me behind...”

Serrane chuckled as she dismounted. The sudden pause in a movement was a little disorienting, but she braced her hand against the wyvern’s scaly neck and gave him a reassuring pat.

“Good boy,” she soothed. “Everything is all right. You never have to go back, I promise.”

The wyvern growled softly, and it—or rather, *he*—reared back just enough that he could look upon her. His giant yellow-orange eyes should have been terrifying, but Serrane didn't sense the slightest amount of hostility. If anything, the beast was pleasantly surprised that she hadn't forced him to keep flying much longer.

"You can take a break," Serrane told him. "I'll see what I can do about your wounds."

Valuri groaned. "Making cute little voices at dogs is one thing, but that thing can't possibly understand you."

"Of course he can. Wyverns are highly intelligent."

"Compared to what? Jorem?"

Serrane smiled as she gently traced her fingers along the beast's scales. "They are all that's left of the dragons—real dragons, I mean, not the Wyrms Lord pretenders. Though we haven't seen one of those in this part of the world for centuries, either."

"That will change soon if wolf girl gets her way."

Serrane turned and frowned. "What?"

"Forget it," Valuri said, waving her hand dismissively. "Are you sure you don't want to keep going? That thing is so bloody fast we could get back to Highwind in no time."

"We could, but he's injured and needs some rest—and so do you."

Valuri snorted. "Don't worry about me. I've been in worse shape than this."

"Regardless, you could use some time to regenerate." Serrane paused and glanced back towards the mountains. "Besides, we will be better off returning to the city in daylight. I'd rather not have to dodge my own rangers trying to shoot us down."

She kept her hand on the wyvern's neck for another minute before she finally shuffled beneath his mighty wing in search of injuries. Most of the enemy arrows had missed or bounced harmlessly off his tough hide, but a few had lodged into the narrow gaps between his scales.

"This is going to hurt," she warned. "But you trust me, right?"

"If he doesn't, I hope you know some kind of spell to counteract poison," Valuri said, eyeing the creature's venomous tail.

"He won't harm me," Serrane said. "Probably."

Clenching her teeth in anticipation, she wrenched the arrow from the wyvern's flesh. He screeched just like she had expected, but at least he didn't whirl around and try to eat her. She paused a minute to soothe his mind again before she reached down to her belt and retrieved one of her healing salves.

"I'm not sure how well this will work given the size difference, but it's better than nothing," she said as she rubbed the foul-smelling liquid into the wound. The wyvern clearly wasn't thrilled about the sensation, but thankfully he kept his protests to a minimum.

"If only he could talk," Valuri said after a few minutes. "Maybe he could tell you where the Inquisitrix found all his brothers and sisters."

Serrane pursed her lips in thought. "That might actually be possible."

The Huntress blinked. "Seriously?"

"Maybe. I can sometimes explore the recent memories animals. They don't tend to recall much, of course—their minds are purely instinctual. But like I said, wyverns are highly intelligent."

Serrane closed her eyes and reached out through the Aether once more. She could feel the wyvern's fear and confusion but also his gratitude—he knew that she had saved him, and he was thankful. She smiled at the thought as she tried to push past his surface emotions and into his memories...

“*Jukatta!*” she winced, stumbling away and clutching her wrist as a spike of pain shot down the length of her arm.

“What’s wrong?” Valuri asked, sitting up.

“I’m fine,” Serrane insisted. “It’s the Flensing—Aetheric backlash from overchanneling during the battle.”

The Huntress nodded knowingly. “I’ve seen Jorem hurt himself that way plenty of times over the years.”

“Humans are typically more susceptible to the backlash.”

“Oh, I wasn’t talking about overchanneling. He’s just clumsy. And fragile. And kind of an idiot.”

Serrane chortled and glanced back over her shoulder. Valuri had an impish grin on her lips and a puckish twinkle in her eye. “You really enjoy mocking him, don’t you?”

“I enjoy mocking everyone. It’s how I compensate for my own crippling emotional problems.”

Serrane laughed again. “From what I can tell, that’s how you show affection. You must love him very much.”

“He’s all right,” Valuri shrugged. “Red is the one I really miss, though. Great body, great tits, doesn’t complain all the time...you two would get along nicely.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way,” Serrane said, “but you’re one of the strangest people I have ever met.”

“That’s probably why we work so well together. I need a regular, straight-laced girl to keep me honest.”

“Mm,” Serrane murmured as she backed away from the wyvern. “You really were impressive back there.”

Valuri scoffed. “Unless I’m mistaken, you’re the one who blew up the camp, stole a wyvern, and detonated a vault full of oil.”

“I couldn’t have done any of that if you hadn’t locked down Lasille. I’m completely helpless against the Senosi.”

“Not *completely* helpless,” Valuri said, a devilish glint returning to her eyes. “We’re all gluttons, and a beautiful elf sorceress like you is an irresistible meal.”

Serrane frowned “How does that help me, exactly?”

“Well, how did you escape from Lasille the first time? We get so focused on dinner that we make mistakes.”

“Ah,” the ranger murmured, crouching down and closing her eyes as the last of her lingering battle tension drained away. “Speaking of mistakes...I hope you don’t regret what happened last night?”

Both of the Huntress’s black eyebrows shot upwards. “Are you kidding?”

“No. I don’t want to interfere with your relationship with Jorem and Kaseya.”

Valuri snorted. “Honey, our relationship isn’t that complicated. Red is the one with the collar and the over-inflated sense of obligation. I do what I want, and Jorem does what he wants. There’s nothing else to it.”

Serrane smiled back. “I’m glad to hear it. Most humans in this region aren’t quite so...*enlightened*.”

“What about that knight of yours?”

“You wouldn’t ask that question if you knew how we met.”

Valuri leaned forward. “Go on...”

“Another time, perhaps,” Serrane said with a wink. A gust of bitter night wind blew across the clearing, and she crossed her arms and tugged her cloak for warmth.

“At least you can protect yourself with magic,” Valuri said, shivering.

“I don’t want to risk channeling for a while yet. If the Flensing knocks me unconscious, you won’t have anyone to keep you company.”

“Good point,” Valuri murmured. “Unfortunately, starting a fire also seems like a bad idea. For all we know there are a dozen riders out there still searching for us.”

“Agreed. We’ll have to come up with some other way to keep warm.”

The Huntress smiled slyly. “Any ideas?”

“One or two,” Serrane said, reaching into her pack and retrieving her blanket. She unfurled the roll with a single flick of her wrist and stretched it out across the flattest stretch of grass. “The enchantment is strong enough to block out a blizzard. Though the more body heat you generate, the better.”

“Then we should probably get started,” Valuri said, leaning forward and kissing the ranger on the lips. The Huntress’s strong arms instantly wrapped around Serrane’s waist and pulled their bodies together.

Aluriel always says there’s nothing sweeter than victory sex. And she’s usually right...

The bitter wind quickly became a distant memory as their tongues and limbs swirled together. Valuri gently laid the elf down on her back and pulled the blanket over them, and neither woman bothered fiddling with the straps of their armor. Serrane was a little surprised; the ravenous Huntress who had thoroughly dominated her last night had seemingly been replaced by a sweet, caring lover...

Valuri eventually pulled away, and her green eyes fluttered contentedly as she stared down at the woman beneath her. “Gods, you are so beautiful...”

Serrane smiled and locked her lithe elven legs around the Huntress’s waist. “What are you going to do to me?”