

Village Head 341

Chapter 341 The Preparation

"Now that we are all gathered, all those in support of proceeding with the plan, raise your raise?" The Village Chief's voice resonated in the gathering, where key figures from the village had convened. Seated beside the Village Chieftess, he scanned the faces of those assembled. One by one, hands were raised in a show of support for the proposed plan.

Acknowledging their unified stance, the Village Chief lowered his hand, a silent cue for the others to do the same. "And now, those in favour of exploring alternative options, instead of proceeding as planned?" he asked, opening the floor for discussion.

Seeing that no one raised their hands, the Village Chief nodded in approval, a satisfied gleam in his eyes. He announced, "With everyone in agreement, now we can proceed. Each of you must make sure that your part in the plan is executed faultlessly, as we aim to resolve this issue within the next three to four days."

While Orion had stated that everything would likely be ready in two or three days, the Village Chief knew better than to ignore the possibility of unforeseen complications.

Therefore, in case Orion's plan faced disruptions, having an extra day seemed wise – it might even stretch to five days if necessary.

Nevertheless, until then, there remained the pressing matter that the Village would have to tap into its resources and purchase as much breast milk as possible from every lactating mother. Just contemplating the expenses was enough to send a throbbing headache pulsing through the Village Chief's mind.

Meanwhile, the key leaders exchanged understanding nods. Caretaker Shani pondered how to deliver the wooden pots Orion had crafted, while Caretaker Zola, who had been occupied with organizing materials, planned the quickest way to transport them to the Warrior's Garden without hindrance.

However, Stronghold Leader Drakar couldn't help but internally frown at the current situation. He had arrived early to speak with Orion in order to gauge his personality before formulating a plan.

Unfortunately, the Village Chief's abrupt call for an emergency meeting had disrupted his intentions, leaving him little choice but to expedite his meeting with Orion.

If he wanted to leave the Village as fast as he could, then he stood to gain a lot by meeting Orion as quickly as possible, so he could understand if it were possible for him to leave the village in three or four days.

"Alright, that concludes today's discussion. Let it be clear in your minds that your assigned roles are not to be forgotten, and if any news reaches you from the tree nymphs, send it immediately to every one of us," The Village Chief added, rising from his wooden platform and proceeding toward the heavy curtains shrouding their view of the outside.

The Village Chieftess followed suit, trailing after him. "This meeting is dismissed," he stated, and with that, both figures exited the room.

Rising from their wooden seats, the key figures dispersed one by one. However, just as Stronghold Leader Drakar was on the brink of leaving, a solidly built figure with a muscled physique covered with scars stepped into his path.

"What do you want?" Stronghold Leader Drakar asked, his expression marked with a frown as he regarded Stronghold Leader Zogar.

Stronghold Leader Zogar retorted with a lifted eyebrow, "What do you mean, what do I want? Is it bad that I want to speak with my elder brother after several months?" He scrutinized his elder sibling before adding, "Or don't tell me that you have been avoiding me throughout this period for a reason?"

Stronghold Leader Drakar's expression softened, his furrowed brow relaxing as he let out a weary sigh. His hand reached out to clasp his brother's outstretched hand, gently lowering it from blocking his path. "I'm sorry," he began, "I've been engrossed in managing the borders and handling various matters, and this sudden predicament has only added to the load."

He took a step away, moving as though he were on an urgent assignment. "However, we can catch up later, brother, perhaps once this issue with the newborns is resolved," he added, parting the heavy curtains with a sweep of his hand and walking away.

Meanwhile, Stronghold Leader Zogar's brow arched in curiosity as he watched his elder brother walk away. Initially, he assumed his brother's focus was on fending off the waves of Vylkr vines

attempting to breach the border. However, as the day unfolded and Stronghold Leader Drakar didn't spare him even a fleeting glance, Stronghold Leader Zogar began to suspect that he was being avoided on purpose.

Dismissing the thought with a wry smile, he let out a sigh. "Well, he'll come around eventually, once he realizes," he mused to himself.

With the agreement he had struck with Orion, Stronghold Leader Zogar knew he'd likely be among the first to benefit from Orion's creation. Understanding his brother's competitive nature, he expected Stronghold Leader Drakar would soon circle back to engage in conversation.

After all, it's not every day that two brothers get to be the leaders of the two strongholds, and for them not to be competitive was next to impossible, because if they weren't, then they wouldn't have attained such positions in the first place.

"Well, I better hope that he finds out about it on time."

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"Alright, are you ready?" Orion asked, facing the tree nymph before him. Although they couldn't immediately get a needle, as there were none, all it took was for someone who could mould wood the same way his mother could mould clay to easily make one for him, since it was quite easy. Another was also provided for Saria; she was equipped with a needle, expressing her willingness to contribute.

Saria nodded eagerly and responded, "Yes, let's get started."

As much as she would have been content with watching Orion work, the monotony of guarding this place had started to chip away at her initial enjoyment. While occasional mischief with tree nymphs provided some relief, she found herself fascinated by Orion's unusual approach with the materials before him—a small knife, a ball of thread, and a small pointed wooden stick.

So, she decided to try to understand what he was attempting to do and also to see if she could replicate it herself, just to keep herself busy and perhaps learn something new during her long lifespan.

Chapter 342 The Construction

"Alright then, let's get to work."

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Forty-eight hours later

Orion's hands worked tirelessly, precisely cutting and sewing each piece of material to the right size, all while Saria shadowed his actions, mimicking them after a few trial-and-error attempts.

The time he'd invested in teaching her the process was paying off handsomely, as he now had an extra pair of skilled hands to assist him. Her tirelessness, comparable with his own warrior's endurance, proved invaluable in speeding up the process far beyond his expectations.

Moreover, the availability of all the materials, except for the metal pots and rods, significantly facilitated their work.

Regardless of the initial struggle, they had managed to carefully cut and sew each piece together, turning disparate components into a cohesive whole.

Over the span of seventy-two hours, their hard work had paid off. The fabrics were now skillfully tied and joined with the basket. Orion had personally crafted 80 baskets, while Saria contributed to the rest, resulting in a grand total of 146 baskets — a number that surpassed their requirements for the quantity needed for the plan to take shape.

Additionally, Orion was starting to sense the toll the prolonged work was taking on him. While Saria could afford to pause briefly and rejuvenate herself through her tree nymph's nature, he couldn't quite follow suit. Unlike her, he needed actual rest, and being a warrior only help alleviate the mental strain a little.

There were moments when he found himself dozing off intermittently during his tasks, only to jolt back awake with a slightly less fatigued mind, before resuming his work.

Also, his sole driving force stemmed from the promise of substantial rewards awaiting him. Knowing that considerable reward awaited him kept him going. If the plan proved successful, he might even seize the opportunity to capitalize further on his relationship with the Village Chief.

After ninety-six hours, a concerning piece of news reached Orion's ears; Anara still hadn't awakened or responded to any of their calls. This information left him with a sense of uneasiness, especially considering it had been four days since he had begun his intense work here.

The situation took a slightly worrisome turn as the Village Chief came to inform him that the rumours they had been circulating as part of the plan had caused quite a commotion. They could no longer wait and had already decided to schedule the gathering for tomorrow, leaving him with limited time to test his construction. Now, his only option was to trust in his own abilities and hope that his creation would work as intended.

However, upon discovering that they were able to delay the plan for up to five days instead of the initially expected three, Orion couldn't help but feel a sense of appreciation toward the Village Chief for his foresight in planning for potential delays.

Nonetheless, Fifi had also come to see him and relayed the news back home that he was okay and still working. Unfortunately, he had to fabricate a rather tough lie as this was something they didn't need to know about.

Regardless, it warmed his heart to know that eager faces were waiting for him to finish his work and return home in time.

Orion couldn't help but smile as he began using the ropes to arrange the metal pots properly. These pots had four bent metal stands which he used to connect them securely to the basket on top, fastening them together to the point where he was confident that none of them would come loose.

"Lighter than I expected," Orion murmured as he hefted a piece of the construction material. He set that thought aside, focusing on the task at hand—assembling the components one by one. With Saria unable to assist, he was committed to seeing it through until morning.

When the fifth day arrived, Orion finally took a step back to admire his creation. However, he inadvertently collapsed onto his back, his breath coming in rapid, ragged gasps as he struggled to regain his composure.

Simultaneously, he battled the overwhelming urge to succumb to sleep's embrace.

"Are you alright?" Saria's concerned voice reached Orion's ears as she knelt beside him. Her gaze lingered on the young man who had been tirelessly toiling in the warrior's garden.

Having learned so much from him during these past few days and having spent time together, she was genuinely curious to understand what kind of person he was. She had even discussed talking with other tree nymphs to find out, only to discover that this was the famous Orion, the talk of the village, the one who had awakened a six-star potential for inner strength.

In a nutshell, if she had merely been curious before, now her interest was fully piqued. To the point that she had observed him diligently as he worked on fixing the metal pots and rods, not daring to blink for fear of missing out on some crucial insight into his character.

"I'm alright," Orion managed between heavy breaths, using his arm to shield his eyes from the rising morning sunlight. "I just need a bit of rest."

Saria nodded in understanding and rose to her feet, taking in the view before her. Countless 'baskets,' a term she had learned from Orion during their time together, were spread out in front of her. They ranged in size from small to large, laid out on the ground. Among them, one stood out as the largest of them all.

"So, you're saying these things can actually fly?" Saria's curiosity was piqued as she directed her gaze toward the odd-shaped fabrics they had cut and carefully adjusted.

They had fastened them to the sides of the baskets using thick ropes. Her attention shifted to the metal pots and rods also connected to the baskets. While the whole setup seemed strange and she harboured doubts about its flying potential, her fascination with the concept grew, and she couldn't help but wonder how it would manage to achieve such a feat.

"Definitely, these will not just fly, they'll soar," Orion expressed, lifting himself up from his resting position on the ground.

His gaze swept over the collection of hot air balloons, each displaying its striking shape and size. His attention, however, was irresistibly drawn to the largest balloon among them—a hot air balloon that he intended to share with his family. How could he have spent all this time away from them without bringing back something as amazing as this?

However, he knew that he would have to reveal his surprise a few days after the gathering, providing him with a plausible explanation for how he had acquired such an extraordinary creation.

"Next up, we're focusing on the woods, and those heated stones should be arriving any time soon, by the Village Chief," Orion added.

He recalled encountering these special stones while assisting Alya in preparing the Village Chieftess's bath. His only wish now was for this makeshift contraption to take to the air and prove its capability.

Chapter 343 The Preparation (2)

Orion let out a heavy exhale before allowing his body to sink back onto the soft grass. Just as he was on the brink of succumbing to sleep, a large presence cast a shadow over him.

Startled, he twisted around to confront the figure that had suddenly appeared behind him. The sight of an unfamiliar face snapped him to full attention, and he scrambled to his feet.

Although his initial wariness faded slightly upon realizing that only warriors and key figures knew about the existence of the Warrior's Garden, he still asked with a bit of caution in his voice, "Who are you?"

A smile appeared on the man's lips as he cast a glance over the collection of hot air balloons sprawled across the ground. His gaze settled momentarily on the one crafted for Orion and his family, then returned to lock onto Orion himself. "I am Stronghold Leader Drakar," he introduced himself. "The Leader of the Rightward Stronghold." His words flowed smoothly, confident and composed.

"The Village Chief mentioned that you needed some heated stones. Since he's currently absorbed in the gathering, I took it upon myself to bring them to you." He extended his right arm, revealing a large clay pot he had been carrying and placed it in front of Orion, before stepping past him to get a good look at the hot air balloons.

Orion's eyes widened in surprise at the realization that the gathering had already begun. Sensing the gentle brush of heat against his face, he focused his gaze toward the heated stones in the pot, then lifted it cautiously with his hands.

He then turned around and hastened his steps towards Stronghold Leader Drakar, who was currently crouched down and carefully examining the balloon's basket and its envelope. He asked, "Where exactly is the gathering being held?"

"It's going to be held in the village," Stronghold Leader Drakar responded. He continued, his voice thoughtful, "While we did consider the farm as a potential location, having such a large gathering here or even in the forest wouldn't be wise. Also, since not everyone is allowed on the farm and there would be more space in the village, we decided to do it there."

Once Stronghold Leader Drakar's words came to an end, Orion couldn't help but let out a sigh of relief. He had been worried that the gathering might be set at the farm, as there would be no feasible way to discreetly launch the hot air balloons into the sky without drawing attention if the event was held here. So, he was thankful at least that it wasn't.

"Alright," Orion said. He observed as Stronghold Leader Drakar rose to his feet and joined in the effort, helping him and Saria load the metal pots with heated stones and wood. Then, he directed Stronghold Leader Drakar to hold the envelope upright, allowing the hot air to gradually inflate it until it gained enough lift to gently raise the basket from the ground.

Amidst this process, there was a moment when both Stronghold Leader Drakar and Saria paused, taking in the scene before them. It was obvious that they were awestruck by the sight, as they had never witnessed anything quite like this before. After the brief pause, they resumed their work with more enthusiasm, a shift that caught Orion by surprise.

However, Orion shrugged off the thought, assuming that Stronghold Leader Drakar and Saria were likely just as excited as everyone else to witness the hot air balloons taking flight.

Filling each envelope required around 18 minutes. Nonetheless, as the process continued, the duration grew due to their sequence – they began with the smallest envelope and worked their way up to the largest. By the time they finished, two and a half hours had slipped away.

"I believe that should it; next up should be the newborns," Orion said, his gaze shifting toward the hot air balloons, tethered by ropes to a firmly planted wooden pole that Saria had driven deep into the ground. "Maybe Saria can help us send a message to...."

Before he could even finish his thought, Stronghold Leader Drakar interjected, "No need to worry, I'll fetch them." Adding more strength to his legs, he pushed down and sprang into the air, soaring upward towards Overseer Anara's section of the farm.

Meanwhile, Orion closed his mouth as he watched the Stronghold Leader disappear. He couldn't help but sigh as he had wanted to suggest that the tree nymphs should be able to help them bring the babies here since there were more than a hundred of them under Anara's care.

Still, since the Stronghold Leader had been so eager to go, then he must have a way to bring them here. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, Orion carefully arranged the wood in the hot air balloon, making sure it would generate sufficient heat for the journey to the village. "I only hope that there isn't strong wind today, or else....." Orion muttered under his breath, another sigh escaping his lips as he pondered how well the plan was working out and how dangerous things could become if it went sideways.

"Bamm!!"

The sudden sound of shattering rock and vibrations beneath his feet caught Orion's attention. He knew that Stronghold Leader Drakar had arrived, even though he oddly arrived quickly.

"I wanted to...." Orion's intention to voice his thoughts faltered at the sight that greeted him. As he turned towards Stronghold Leader Drakar, newborns floated in the air, suspended around him.

Orion's attention refocused on Stronghold Leader Drakar, and he noticed the Stronghold Leader's hands radiating a brilliant silver light. "Is that your..." The words he intended to ask were preemptively answered as Stronghold Leader Drakar took a step forward and explained, "Yes, my gift allows me to manipulate objects from a distance. While there were initial limitations, they have lessened since I became a warrior. As long as it's within my line of sight or perception, I can influence it."

'No wonder he became the Stronghold Leader,' Orion thought, impressed by the versatility of Stronghold Leader Drakar's gift. If he possessed strength comparable to the Leftward Stronghold Leader, Zogar, then facing off against him would present an entirely different challenge.

Orion imagined scenarios where Stronghold Leader Drakar's gift could render his opponents helpless, nearly impossible for them to approach or move, similar to how Stronghold Leader Zogar's strength remained unmatched.

He soon reached one of the hot air balloons and gently settled the babies into the basket. Saria had thoughtfully lined it with a soft fabric to ensure their comfort. Alongside the newborns, he placed a

stash of fruits gathered from the warriors' garden, including the Kalna and Lipry fruits, in the remaining hot air balloons.

Observing the final baby being gently settled into its basket, Orion shifted his attention to Stronghold Leader Drakar. He turned around and asked, "What's our next step?"

Orion smiled at the question. His eyes briefly swept over the hundreds of hot air balloons filled with newborns and the others carrying fruits before he fixed his gaze on Stronghold Leader Drakar. With a wide grin on his face, he said, "We fly," then began walking toward his own hot air balloon.

Chapter 344 The Supplication

Jumping into it, he turned toward Stronghold Leader Drakar, who was still staring at him in a daze. "Ahem! We better get going, Stronghold Leader Drakar. After all, we'll be needing your gift to make this plan work much better," he added.

His words were enough to jolt Stronghold Leader Drakar out of his momentary trance, causing a broad grin to light up his face as he walked closer to the large hot air balloon.

'He's genuinely thrilled about this, huh,' Orion thought, observing as Stronghold Leader Drakar joined him in the basket. Orion's attention then shifted to Saria.

"Why not join us, Saria?" he suggested, extending an invitation to the curious tree nymph. "You could very well become the first tree nymph to ever fly above the clouds, so this might be an opportunity you don't want to miss," he added with a wink.

"I think you can go without me," Saria said with a strained smile on her lips as she slowly took a few steps backwards, causing Orion to raise his eyebrow in mild surprise.

"Come on, even the babies are joining in," Orion persisted. "I promise you, it's bound to be one of the most breathtaking experiences of your life," he added, attempting to sway her decision.

After all, considering the amount of help she had provided him, when she could have merely watched and let him do it all by himself, he couldn't bear the thought of her missing out on such a remarkable spectacle.

"Um.... I'm not sure if you fully understand, Orion," Saria replied, her voice tinged with concern. She nearly stumbled over some of the materials that had been scattered about during their work on the hot air balloons. Regaining her balance, she continued, "I mean, tree nymphs weren't exactly created for flight. After all, there is a reason why we are called tree nymphs."

Considering the enormous height required for what could be considered 'flying'—especially given her awareness of how high those with shapeshifting abilities could ascend—Saria's instincts told her that such altitudes might pose a significant risk for tree nymphs like her.

Her instincts screamed danger.

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The market square

Two hours ago

Several voices and hushed murmurs filled the air, as villagers of all ages, heights, genders, and sizes congregated in the market square, which had been carefully cleared and reorganized to host their gathering.

As the crowd settled, eyes turned toward the Village Chief, the Village Chieftess, the Caretakers, and the stronghold leaders—all except one.

Finally, the Village Chief stepped forward, prompting a ripple of hushed whispers to spread through the masses. Those nearest the speaker gestured for quiet, their motions cascading like a wave from the front to the back until an expectant silence enveloped the entire square.

Seeing the crowd now silent, the Village Chief cleared his throat to command attention. He commenced, "In light of the rumours that have been circulating throughout our village, rumours that have sparked urgent concern as they invoke the name of our god, Naka, we've taken it upon ourselves to ascertain the authenticity of these claims.... Ahem!" Another discreet throat-clearing. ".....Hence, the purpose of this gathering and the very reason you all stand here today."

A ripple of murmurs swept through the villagers, each voice eager to express their curiosity about the validity of the rumours and the potential of their prayers being answered by Naka.

The Village Chief raised his hand to quieten the crowd once more, and then resumed, "Following a thorough investigation, leaving no stone unturned in our search for the truth, we have at last found the truth behind these claims..."The Village Chief paused, as though finding it difficult to express and complete his next words.

"What is the truth, Chief?"

"Did Naka really give those warriors back their children, Chief?"

"Did Naka really bless them with more wealth, Chief?"

"Chief....."

"Did....."

The questions erupted from the crowd, each one rising with more momentum, seeking confirmation or denial of the various rumours that had circulated throughout the village.

Amid the murmurs from the crowd, the Village Chieftess's hand rose, signalling the villagers to hush and listen. As the chatter died down, she reached out and gently massaged her husband's shoulders, as though she was trying to help him calm his emotions.

Feeling the support of his wife's subtle assistance in adding authenticity and emotion to the moment, the Village Chief fixed his gaze on the gathered villagers, observing their expectant expressions.

His face turned serious as he stated, "It is not a mere rumour. Naka has indeed communicated with them. Our long-held prayers have reached our god's ears, and at last, his divine presence has graced our village."

The once bustling crowd had turned into a sea of silence, with each villager's mouth agape in astonishment. While some had already entertained the idea as truth, thanks to the confirmation from certain warriors who had arrived from their strongholds, hearing the same affirmation from the lips of the Village Chief, amidst the presence of all, both the key figures and the surrounding warriors, rendered the revelation in an entirely new light.

The doubts that had lingered around the rumours were now swept away, replaced by an eruption of voices as the crowd collectively voiced their desires, their screams echoing towards the Village Chief.

"Chief, my son died as a warrior, let us pray so that he could be rev....?"

"Chief, I'm broke, my gift is useless, let us pray so th....?"

"My child..... Chief, my child is gone....."

"Cheif, my daughter is ugly, let us pray for her tranforma....?"

"Cough! Coughh!" The Village Chief let out a feigned cough, its resonance filling the air as he tried to quell the villagers' excitement. Once the voices began to subside gradually, he continued, "The primary purpose of this gathering is for us to unite in prayer and praise to Naka, to plead with a unified voice, in the hope that our requests might reach him. Perhaps through our collective voices, Naka will once again bless us with his divine presence and listen to our pleas."

The last words resonated with intense emotion, causing villagers who could no longer contain their feelings to drop to their knees. One by one, they lowered themselves onto the reddish clay sands, their hands gripping the earth earnestly.

After witnessing such a scene, not wanting to lag behind, among the key figures, Caretaker Ivor was the first to kneel. Following his lead, Caretaker Shani joined in, gently cradling her baby in her arms. Then came Caretaker Zola and Caretaker Nala. The line continued with Caretaker Naida, and even Stronghold Leader Zogar eventually softened his stern countenance, letting out intermittent sighs as he knelt.

Following suit, the Village Chieftess lowered herself to her knees, exuding a distinct feminine elegance that set her apart.

At the same time, the Village Chief controlled the Vylkr energy along with the strange power within him, channelling it into his legs to amplify their weight. As his knees made contact with the ground, a resonating "Boom" filled the air, accompanied by a series of cracks that spread out from where he had knelt.

"Let us all close our eyes and raise our voices in praise," the Village Chief said, his gaze encompassing the gathered villagers. Slowly, he closed his own eyes, his voice softening as he continued.

"...to Naka."

Chapter 345 Orion, Bless Them!

"Isn't this an incredible feeling?" Orion's voice gained an edge of excitement as he spoke to Saria, who clung tightly to the side of the basket, shivering. Seeing her nervousness, Orion let out a small sigh. "Look, the basket is stable, you're the only one shaking."

Saria took his words to heart, realizing she might be overreacting. Perhaps she should give it a chance; after all, it couldn't be as dreadful as her instinct made it seem, right?

Nevertheless, when she finally mustered the courage to stand upright and gaze at the view below from their height in the sky, a surge of dizziness overcame her.

In an instant, she crouched down, clutching her knee with a wrinkled brow, her expression revealing her discomfort. "No need to worry, I might just stay like this until we're finished," she muttered nervously.

"Hmm, well, you're missing out," Orion retorted, understanding that adapting to flying on a hot air balloon might be a bit much for her at the moment.

He decided to let her adjust naturally. Perhaps, given some time, she would gather the courage to stand and appreciate the breathtaking view on her own.

Suddenly, his ears tingled as distant voices reverberated through the air.

Tilting his head down, Orion discerned that the villagers had begun their prayer and praise session for Naka, their voices reaching even to this height.

Looking downward through the wisps of clouds, Orion's attention was drawn to Stronghold Leader Drakar's voice. "If their voices can reach all the way up here, it demonstrates their enthusiasm,

which in turn confirms the success of this plan," Stronghold Leader Drakar said. His eyes met Orion's, and he nodded approvingly.

"Although you may have used the name of Naka to deceive the village, I want you to take pride in the fact that not many could devise such a clever scheme while simultaneously constructing this contraption," Stronghold Leader Drakar continued, maintaining control over the multitude of hot air balloons through his gift. His gaze remained fixed on Orion as he added, "And believe me, there are currently none who could match your feat."

When Stronghold Leader Drakar finished speaking, his attention returned to the breathtaking scenery stretched out before him. Deep down, he was fully aware that despite their attempts to conceal it, some, if not all, of the key figures in the village harboured fears and concern concerning Orion's potential influence.

He was willing to bet a huge sum of his wealth that if Orion managed to survive long enough to create his first three containers, the path for him to become the next village chief would be nearly inevitable. Whether driven solely by his merits, given his significant contributions to the village, or bolstered by his undeniable strength, Orion's future appeared quite promising.

Nevertheless, thoughts and predictions, as fickle as they were, remained subject to change. Therefore, Stronghold Leader Drakar hoped that Orion could first survive this day, as there were many things he was prepared to do if his initial plan didn't work to ensure his route out of this village.

"Stronghold Leader Drakar, are you ready?" Orion's words effectively pushed Stronghold Leader Drakar's thoughts to the back of his mind. Orion already knew about what he was doing as he had already viewed it from another perspective; however, that doesn't change a thing for him.

After all, at the end of the day, the newborns were going to be returned to their families, and that was the only thing that mattered at the moment.

"Yes," Stronghold Leader Drakar replied with a firm nod. He could discern from the prolonged prayers and praises that the villagers had engaged in that the time was ripe to execute their plan. However, all that he was currently waiting for was Orion's signal, so that he could release the hot air balloons.

"Alright," Orion replied, his attention toggling between the volume of the sound and the scene of the gathering from his view up above. After a while, within minutes, Orion suddenly said, "Release

it now." His words reverberated in the breeze, and Stronghold Leader Drakar quickly guided the hot air balloons toward the ground using his gift.

Orion watched the process with a sigh of relief escaping his lips, releasing the pent-up stress that he had been holding for a while. He muttered with a grin under his breath, "I was kind of hoping to see their surprised faces, though."

Meanwhile, down below, the crescendo of the villagers' voices continued to rise, intertwining with their passionate prayers. The Village Chief could only keep his gaze fixed on the sky, waiting to see if Orion's plan had indeed succeeded, and whether the children and the wealth they had prepared would begin to descend from the sky at any moment soon.

However, as moments stretched into hours and the gathering crept closer to its third hour, a flicker of concern swept through his body. Unconsciously, he turned his head slightly, noticing that even Stronghold Leader Zogar had his gaze fixed upwards, perhaps wondering why his brother had not yet arrived at the market square.

'That scheming rascal. Even though I was the first to strike a deal with Orion, he managed to be the first to fly in his invention,' Stronghold Leader Zogar mused. Although he had actively participated in ensuring the success of Orion's construction, he realized that if his brother hadn't returned to the village by now, it must mean he had seized the opportunity to test it himself.

Recalling the scope of his elder brother's gift, Stronghold Leader Zogar could only nod to the probability. In his place, he admitted, he'd have done the same without a second thought. Regret pricked him slightly as he lowered his head and shook it gently.

"You've outdone me this time, brother," he murmured, just as the crowd's mood shifted, morphing from the chorus of prayers and praises to a murmur of astonishment and gasps.

Casting a curious glance around, Stronghold Leader Zogar's throat tightened as his gaze swept over the crowd, whose eyes were all directed toward the sky. Some were even pointing upward with their fingers.

Chapter 346 One-Time Deal

He observed the ripple of excitement spreading, infecting each person like an infectious enthusiasm. One by one, they succumbed to the curiosity, craning their necks and stretching their gazes upward.

Suppressing the tense knot forming in his own throat, Stronghold Leader Zogar followed suit, tilting his head to peer upward. And then, as his eyes locked onto the sight above...

...they expanded in sheer disbelief.

It was absurd.... ridiculous, almost surreal. The scene unfolding before him was one he'd never dreamed of witnessing. Even when the words first escaped Caretaker Ivor's lips, or later when Orion himself confirmed it, Stronghold Leader Zogar couldn't shake his scepticism. Despite having faith in the boy's confidence, experiencing it firsthand was an entirely different matter.

And so, as Stronghold Leader Zogar watched, every doubt in his heart was swept away.

If he hadn't known about the plan beforehand, he might have genuinely believed that Naka was extending his divine hand. A wry smile curved across Stronghold Leader Zogar's lips. Despite the questionable use of Naka's name, the imminent transformation of the village through this construction was undeniable, and the effects only made him realize that Orion's plan was much more frightening than he had imagined.

"Everyone!" the Village Chief's voice echoed through the crowd, his exclamation reverberating around the area as he observed the objects descending from the sky, which he knew were Orion's constructions.

Rising to his feet, a broad smile painted across his face, he gazed at the assembly, his expression radiating the joy of witnessing Orion's plan unfold seamlessly. However, for those still kneeling, the Village Chief's smile seemed to mirror the contentment of witnessing Naka's divine response to their prayers.

Some even raised their voices, causing the volume of the sounds and those around them to increase to another level entirely.

Finally, the Village Chief addressed them, "EVERYONE, STAND UP, THAT WE MAY RECEIVE THE GIFTS THAT NAKA HAS BLESSED US WITH. REMEMBER, NAKA FULFILLS THE DESIRES OF OUR HEARTS BEFORE ANY OTHER CONSIDERATION. OPEN YOUR HEARTS TO RECEIVE HIS GIFT. LET US PRAISE NAKA!"

From that moment onward, the echoes of voices and jubilant shouts grew louder than ever before, spreading through the air and reaching far beyond the gathering.

The villagers rose to their feet one by one, hands lifted high to receive Naka's gifts. "MAY NAKA BE PRAISED!"

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Hearing the voices from down below that seemed to have increased as the hot air balloons descended from the clouds, Orion already understood the emotions behind those voices. With a huge grin on his face, he muttered, "The newborns' problems have been solved."

Stronghold Leader Drakar, taking the responsibility to ensure the smooth descent of the hot air balloons, caught wind of Orion's mutter and nodded in agreement. "You're absolutely right, the newborns' issue has been resolved," he affirmed.

He then fixed his gaze on Orion and asked, "Now that this matter is settled, do you have any intentions of crafting more contraptions like this?" He grasped the edges of the basket they occupied. "While I can empathize with the stress you've endured in these past few days, if you're able to create a few more of these constructions for the Rightward Stronghold, I promise to personally reward you with a considerable amount of wealth, potentially surpassing what the Village Chief might offer you in return for this achievement."

Hearing Stronghold Leader Drakar's offer, Orion's eyebrows shot up in surprise. After all, with these offers coming at him from all directions, his family would probably be able to amass so much wealth that he would only need to focus solely on his warrior training, rather than his financial concerns.

Nevertheless, he couldn't help but shake his head in defeat. "I appreciate the offer, Stronghold Leader Drakar," Orion responded, "but I'm afraid I have other plans in mind. After this, I intend to return home and take a few weeks of rest. I've got my warrior training to catch up on as well. Besides, Stronghold Leader Zogar has already made a significant proposal that I've accepted, and I'd like to make sure that I follow through on that before considering any more commitments."

Furthermore, he saw this period as an opportunity to connect more deeply with his wives, who had undoubtedly been anxiously waiting for his return.

And, now that he considered it, wasn't this the ideal moment to organize an orgy?

Just imagining all their wet pussies welcoming his hard scorching shaft back home was enough to make him not regret pursuing those both younger and older than him.

Meanwhile, Stronghold Leader Drakar couldn't help but release a faint sigh. "Is that truly your answer?" he asked, already guessing that his brother had made his move and struck a deal with Orion, based on his previous discussion with Caretaker Ivor.

Nonetheless, he decided to ask, exploring the option of extending his stay in the village for a bit longer. However, as he considered the time required for Orion to craft another contraption like this, he realized that waiting for such an extended period was no longer feasible.

He acknowledged that his patience was wearing thin!

"How about this one?" Stronghold Leader Drakar asked. "If you're open to it, I'm willing to barter with you for this construction. Consider it a temporary arrangement until you're ready for a more formal deal." He weighed his options.

Regardless, Orion shook his head and responded, "I'm sorry, I created this to try it out for myself and my family, so I can't trade it. However, if you're patient, I promise it will be worth the wait. The experience I've gained from building this one and others will only make the ones for your stronghold even better." This was the best he could do, considering that the Stronghold Leader's gift had eliminated all of his worries and improved his plan significantly, indirectly improving his status in the village.

"Saria, could you please remove some of the heated stones? We need to prepare for landing," he instructed, shifting his gaze to Saria. She had finally mustered the courage to stand up from her earlier position, her eyes now wide open as she observed the scene below.

Chapter 347 Everything Falls Apart

Saria acknowledged his words with a nod, stepping towards the metal caged pot. She was cautious, ensuring her hand found the hook below the pot as Orion had instructed.

Slowly, she began to pull it out, allowing the heated stones and the remaining burning wood to drop into the bottom of the pot.

However, just as she was about to proceed, Stronghold Leader Drakar's figure suddenly appeared beside Saria, his hand gripping her wrist tightly.

With a tight-lipped expression due to the discomfort of the intense grip, Saria's features tensed. She turned her head to the side, her gaze locking onto Stronghold Leader Drakar's fierce eyes. Her voice held a wave of annoyance as she questioned, "What's the meaning of this, Stronghold Leader Drakar?" Her brows furrowed further as she added, "I hardly think we're on familiar terms for you to be clutching my wrist so forcefully."

Before he could reply, he exerted more force on her hand, pulling it away from the metal pot and guiding it downwards. "Considering you're a tree nymph, I'll exercise caution not to hurt you. However, I'd advise you to steer clear of the metal pot," Stronghold Leader Drakar responded. The sound of lightning buzzed and crackled in his ears, attracting his attention as he struggled to maintain his grip on Saria's hand, while she made every effort to break free.

He pivoted his head backwards, catching sight of Orion's hands crackling with brilliant blue sparks of lightning. "Stronghold Leader Drakar, I think it's best you stop whatever you're attempting until we've landed," Orion's words held an undertone of frustration, as he foresaw the potential chaos that might erupt if a conflict unfolded while they were still suspended in the air.

Though Stronghold Leader Drakar might endure a fall from this height, the same couldn't be guaranteed for him and Saria.

He shifted his gaze to the other side, where the newborns remained suspended in the sky above the gathering. If they were to suddenly descend—either plummeting from the sky or descending in a crippled hot air balloon—it could jeopardize the entire plan, disrupting the proceedings and potentially causing harm to the villagers below.

Yet, rather than engaging in a verbal exchange, Stronghold Leader Drakar let out a weary sigh and activated his gift, causing Orion to halt mid-sentence as if frozen in time.

As Saria finally managed to wrest her hand free from his grip, she spun around to glare at him with a fit of fierce anger in her eyes. "You will regret this," she began, her voice carrying an edge of resolve, "I will inform Anara and the other overseers of your actions, and they will—" Saria's words abruptly dissolved as her voice and motion alike were arrested, seized by Stronghold Leader Drakar's gift.

Shaking his head, as though enjoying the newfound tranquillity, Stronghold Leader Drakar finally broke the silence. "Don't worry, I'll drop you two off in the forest for now. Just remain quiet," he

instructed, replicating the same procedure that Saria had undertaken, having learned the process from Orion as they embarked on their ascent through the sky.

"If I had the patience to wait, perhaps I would have," he mused, a hint of resignation in his tone, "but I've already spent enough years in this village, and I can't afford to squander any more of them."

Gazing briefly at Orion, Stronghold Leader Drakar deftly adjusted the flow of hot air into the envelope, synchronizing his actions with the wind's direction, and propelling the balloon onward with his gift.

However, just as he was about to angle the craft, a strange sensation seized him, and his vision seemed to slow down.

An ear-splitting scream shattered the stillness, reverberating through the atmosphere like a thunderous roar. "BOOOM!" The scream soared into the sky, creating a shockwave that rippled through the clouds, resonating with the altitude at which they were suspended.

Orion's muttered curse was drowned out by the adrenaline coursing through his veins as he launched himself towards Stronghold Leader Drakar, his lightning-coated blade quivering with his resolve. He intended to drive the blade straight into Stronghold Leader Drakar, who was occupied maintaining his grip on Saria through the use of his gift, his hand covering Saria's slightly agape mouth, which had been left open during their previous conversation.

"RIPPPP!!" The lightning-forged weapon sliced through Stronghold Leader Drakar's lower back, causing him to stagger, momentarily caught off guard by Orion's brisk and unhesitating assault.

But, had it been anyone else, the lightning-forged blade would have unleashed a jolting shockwave that could render them momentarily incapacitated, their senses scrambled... For anyone else, the blade's electric fury might have seared their skin as it tore through them, leaving a trail of sizzling destruction. However, in this particular instance, it was not anyone else...

Orion found himself pitted against none other than Stronghold Leader Drakar, the Stronghold Leader of the Rightward Stronghold. The instant the searing blade of lightning pierced through the Stronghold Leader's abdomen, he harnessed his Vylkr energy, channelling it through his body.

With a swift, calculated movement, he thrust his elbows downward and backwards, the sheer force causing audible pops and contorted bends in Orion's bones.

The counterattack propelled Orion backwards, crashing into the basket's edge. Agony surged through him, and his anguished cry filled the air as he clutched his shattered shoulder.

"AHHHHH!!!!" Orion's agonized scream filled the air, his teeth chattering as he battled to control the painful vibrations coursing through his body. Meanwhile, Stronghold Leader Drakar advanced, tauntingly starting a sentence, "You shouldn't have----" but it was abruptly cut short by an onslaught of pure, piercing sound that struck him. "AAAAAIIIIIIIIII!"

"AAAAAIIIIIIIIII!" The wave of torment caused him to lurch forward, his grip desperately clutching the basket's edge for support. Before he could even begin to heal the wound Orion had inflicted on him, another soul-penetrating "AAAAAIIIIIIIIII!" shattered his concentration.

The unrelenting barrage of ear-splitting screams continued as Saria poured her voice into the assault. Her cries reverberated through the sky, as if the heavens themselves were wailing in pain and fury. Despite her throat growing hoarse, she refused to relent, determined to loosen Stronghold Leader Drakar's grip from the edge of the basket.

Chapter 348 The Runaway Stronghold Leader

"ENOUGH!!!" Stronghold Leader Drakar's voice thundered, slicing through the onslaught of screams. Activating his Vylkr warrior's form, he controlled the Vylkr energy, conjuring blackish wisps that swirled around him, intertwining with his hair and infusing his eyes with a dark hue.

In an instant, he vanished from his prior position, reappearing beside Saria with alarming speed. A fierce blow, like a piston, rocketed from his fist and slammed into her abdomen with a resounding "BAAM!" The surrounding air fractured into shockwaves, propelling Saria upwards. She tumbled to the floor of the basket, unconsciousness sweeping over her.

Stronghold Leader Drakar's heightened senses then suddenly picked up a movement from the corner of his eyes. With the speed born of his enhanced abilities, he appeared next to Orion, his knee thrusting forward with the force of a cannonball. A sickening "Bamm!" echoed as his kneecap slammed into Orion's chest, shattering the air pressure around them.

Blood sprayed from Orion's mouth onto Stronghold Leader Drakar's tulga as the pain radiated through his ribcage.

Finally regaining his composure, Stronghold Leader Drakar's voice carried a semblance of control as he spoke, "You see what you've made me do."

He drew in a deep, steadying breath, allowing the strange energy in his body to calm the raging Vylkr energy within him. "I had intended to leave you both in the forest before I took off," he continued, his voice resonating with a hint of irritation. "Now I'm unsure if you could even survive a fall from this height."

Stronghold Leader Drakar was about to continue, his frustration clear in his expression. "Now, it seems like I have no choice but to carry you along until you ha----"

"SSSSCCRRREEECCCH!!" The shrill cry of a bird pierced the air, reverberating in his ears. Before he could react, he felt the powerful rush of wind enveloping him, and he instinctively turned his head to the side.

There, with a set of wide, forward-facing emerald eyes, he beheld the transformed visage of none other than the Village Chief.

The gaze shifted from Saria to Orion, lingering on Orion's bloodied form, before finally locking onto Stronghold Leader Drakar with an intensity of anger and hatred that he had never encountered before.

A wry smile curved across Stronghold Leader Drakar's lips as he seized Orion's head, raising it to meet the creature's gaze. "If you move or attempt to stop me," he said, his tone resolute, "I swear that in the name of Naka, I will kill him." He was keenly aware of the significance Orion held in the eyes of the Village Chief and the other key figures, as revealed during their previous meeting.

In spite of any reservations they might have had about Orion's intelligence and resourcefulness, the man's value alive was irrefutable.

Controlling his gift, Stronghold Leader Drakar gradually adjusted the orientation of the hot air balloon to align with the wind's direction.

His wry smile transformed into a grin as he maintained his hold on Orion, refusing to let go until he was confident he had distanced himself sufficiently from the Village Chief. He watched the Chief remain stationary in the distance until he was reduced to a mere speck in the expansive sky.

Recognizing that the Village Chief could bridge the distance in mere minutes to ensure his safety and escape, Stronghold Leader Drakar never let go of Orion, while Saria lay unconscious on the ground, defeated and unable to reach her tree.

.....

"BAMMM!!"

Landing on the ground, the Village Chief could sense the weight of every key leader's gaze upon him. Their eyes were filled with curiosity, likely speculating about the recent upheaval that had disrupted the once calm sky.

Meanwhile, the villagers distributed the wealth they had obtained from the hot air balloon among themselves, and families did their best to identify their own children among the newborns. Unbeknownst to them, the reverberations in the sky were lost on them, interpreting it merely as a sign of Naka's effort to establish a connection.

'Naka communicates with us in mysterious ways—indeed, he does,' they thought.

"Chief, what's happened?" The Village Chieftess asked, her heart tinged with a sense of foreboding. She observed the twisted, unsightly expression etched on her husband's face—a stark contrast to what should have been a moment of satisfaction, considering they had just resolved one of their most pressing issues.

"It's Drakar," the Village Chief bit out the words, his tone laced with frustration, as he strode away, the other key figures trailing behind him.

Their faces bore tense frowns, acutely aware of the solemn atmosphere surrounding him. He signalled for the warriors nearby to keep a watchful eye on the gathering. "He's gone rogue and fled with Orion, and a tree nymph."

Whether it was the Village Chieftess, the Caretakers, or Stronghold Leader Zogar, disbelief was evident on their faces as they froze mid-step, their gazes fixed on the sky that the scream had pierced through. After a moment, their attention returned to the Village Chief, who had also halted. He turned to face them, his expression maintaining the solemnity it had held from the beginning.

Stronghold Leader Zogar stepped forward, his voice filled with a mix of dread and disbelief, "Chief, you don't mean..."

Before he could finish, the Village Chief's words cut through, "Yes," he affirmed. "From what I've witnessed, he's not only taken them hostage but has also brutally beaten them, leaving them severely injured and unconscious." The Village Chief's voice was tight with a blend of anger and helplessness.

Stronghold Leader Zogar gulped, feeling a lump in his throat as the severity of the situation further sank in within his mind.

Observing the Stronghold Leader's hesitancy—his mouth poised to speak, then closing as though he was searching for how to respond—the Village Chief's patience waned, manifesting in an impatient snort. "Get to the Leftward Stronghold and gather every shapeshifter capable of flight. We're going on an exploration," he ordered, and as his final words, "I will do the same at the Rightward Stronghold," trailed behind him, he transformed into his green-horned owl form and flew off into the distance.

Chapter 349 Another Offer

Amidst the hushed atmosphere, they mentally sorted through their concerns, observing the Village Chief's departure from the village without their company. Contemplating the potential ramifications of this unexpected situation, a voice abruptly cut through the silence. "I don't know about all of you, but I think it's time that I join Hrok and retire," Caretaker Ivor stated with a sigh, rubbing his temples as he walked toward the farm.

Like the others, he was aware that this problem surpassed even the challenges posed by the newborns.

In a gradual procession, the key figures pivoted on their heels and exited, leaving Stronghold Leader Zogar to stand alone, visibly trembling.

Eventually, he mustered a surge of strength in his legs and propelled himself upward into the sky, departing with a force that left a noticeable crack in the spot he had occupied moments before.

.....

As I slowly awoke, I wished to believe that everything that had taken place was merely a dream. However...

"Ah!"

An involuntary exclamation escaped my lips as I sensed the pain encircling my body, particularly in my chest and shoulders—areas that felt like they were throbbing mercilessly.

"You're awake," a voice I recognized so well that it almost prompted me to attempt sitting up. However, understanding my current incapacitated state, I focused on fully opening my eyes and gazing upon the individual accountable for my condition.

I fixed my gaze on him, my eyes wide with a mixture of pain and anger. Just as I was on the verge of calling out to him, an oddity caught my attention, causing me to swallow down my words.

Instead, I opted to focus on my own healing, allowing the two energies—both strange and Vylkr—to course rapidly through me. I let my eyes wander over the form that seemed to resemble a fantastical, mutated eagle or something along those lines.

Suddenly, the creature swivelled its head in my direction, its attention now fixed on me. It unfurled its feathers and then flew from Stronghold Leader Drakar's lap, landing before me. Its intent seemed clear as it thoroughly scrutinized me.

In a heartbeat, I observed with astonishment as the creature suddenly descended down into the shade cast by the hot air balloon, only to ascend once more, out of the shadows of Stronghold Leader Drakar's silhouette.

Stronghold Leader Drakar ran his fingers through the feathers of what seemed to be his pet, and at last, his voice broke the silence again, "His name is Shadow Talon. I acquired him from the Caravans, and ever since, he's been my constant companion."

I immediately sighed internally. Of course, he obtained it from the Caravans.

At this point, I've decided it's not a stretch to assume that any odd or unusual item I encounter somehow finds its origins with the Caravans.

Shifting my position to sit up, I leaned against the side of the basket, spotting a few holes that had likely been the result of our fight. "Why?" I asked, once I had managed to find a relatively comfortable spot, my right arm supporting my broken collarbone and left shoulder.

I alternated between nursing my sore chest and tending to the few fractured bones there.

Stronghold Leader Drakar arched an eyebrow at my question, his gaze fixed on me as he repeated, "Why?" His lips curved into a wry smile, seemingly understanding my curiosity, and he replied, "Because there's a vast world out there, and I've spent almost my entire life confined within those village borders, battling Vylkr vines day in and day out... How to destroy the Vylkr Vines? How to repel their invasion across our borders? Hmph," he snorted, his tone edged with bitterness, "being a stronghold leader is nothing but a burdensome mantle and a title. I was ready to cast it aside and embrace freedom."

Pushing himself up from his spot in the basket, he paced closer to me, his expression solemn. "Moreover, I extended an offer to you, which you turned down. Had you accepted back then, you wouldn't be in this predicament now." He then shook his head with a sigh, "And now, they must think I've captured you and a tree nymph, subjected you both to harsh treatment and forced you to accompany me."

'Saria!' I immediately thought, and my head swiftly turned to the other end of the basket where I spotted her. I sighed in relief as I laid eyes on her, although concern still gnawed at me as I noticed she was still somewhat unconscious, her complexion slightly pale.

"But this wasn't my initial plan. So, I am willing to make you another offer, Orion," Stronghold Leader Drakar's voice interrupted my thoughts. I turned my head toward him immediately as his words reached my ears. "Another offer," I repeated.

I clenched my jaw, attempting to maintain my composure. After all, I had a family, several unborn children, waiting for my return. I couldn't allow myself to die here.

"Yes," Stronghold Leader Drakar affirmed, nodding as he spoke. "Because my intention was never to kill or forcibly take anyone along, I will give you two choices." He extended his index fingers toward me, one after the other.

"One, you can accompany me to the outside world. Given your intelligence and six-star potential for inner strength, I believe you have a good chance of surviving out there. Or two, you can meet your end here alongside the tree nymph, as I don't have the resources or energy to care for two captives, let alone provide them with food." His gaze shifted toward the sack of fruit positioned in the centre of the basket, causing realization to dawn on me about its purpose.

Amused by that realization, a wry smile graced my lips. I had initially thought the purpose of the fruit was for us to eat in case we became hungry during the task.

"Well, what's your decision?" Stronghold Leader Drakar asked, his gaze locked onto me. His pet, Shadow Talon, perched on his head and fixed its ebony eyes on me, as well.

Instead of answering directly, I sighed and replied, "You know, if you had waited a few more weeks or even months, you could have avoided all this stress. You could have slipped away from the village unnoticed and saved yourself from this predicament."

He examined me from head to toe, his gaze piercing, before he retorted, "I won't spend another few days, weeks, or months trapped in that village. I can't and I won't. And do you honestly believe I just started plotting this journey recently?" He continued, "Sure, I might have forgotten a few things, but that won't hinder me from seizing an opportunity right in front of me. So, are you going to seize it this time, or are you dismissing it as usual?"

Chapter 350 Within The Mountain

My wry smile broadened at his words. If there was a chance to explore beyond the village, I wasn't interested. So, I replied, "I'm sorry, Stronghold Leader Drakar, but I have to decline your offer." The village had everything I needed for a comfortable life in my second chance, and the risks of an uncertain adventure didn't outweigh what I had here.

However, Stronghold Leader Drakar let out an immediate sigh and shook his head at me. "If you had joined me, I had envisioned great achievements that we could have attained together," I observed as his hands began to emit a warm silver glow.

In an instant, I found myself rising into the air, my body hovering until I was higher than the edge of the hot air balloon's basket. "Runaway Cities, individuals aspiring to become legends, and creatures capable of battling the Vylkr vines. Those were the insights I gained from the Caravans," he explained. "And if you had considered my offer, I would have shared more details with you. Nonetheless, I wish you the best of luck in your current endeavours."

Those were his final words echoing in my ears before I went beyond the safety of the basket, hurtling towards the ground below.

"HEY, WAIT! WAIT!" I screamed at the top of my lungs, the words trailing behind me as I plummeted to the earth.

"Crunch!!"

The impact wasn't as brutal as I had expected; the landing was surprisingly softer. Feeling the frigid cold around me, I raised my head, looking at the mist that surrounded me like a shroud, as though I had fallen within a cloud. However, as the cold tendrils began to creep up my fingertips, my gaze dropped downward, revealing a landscape of ice and... snow.

"Snow," I murmured to myself, taking in my surroundings and the height from which I had fallen. It wasn't difficult to deduce that I had landed on the peak of a mountain.

"A mountain," I voiced the realization aloud, an uneasy feeling settling in my gut.

I had just fallen into a dilemma, and it was dawning on me that descending from a mountain wouldn't be a walk in the park, especially if the Vylkr Vines had a way of reaching these heights.

While my gaze had been fixated upwards, I suddenly caught sight of a colourful figure hurtling down from the sky. Recognizing that it was Saria, I dashed towards her and managed to catch her, using my body as a shield for her unconscious form.

We tumbled through the snow, finally coming to a stop. Despite the lingering ache in my chest and shoulders, I cradled her body against mine, ensuring she was shielded from the cold ground. Carefully, I lifted her tall frame, cradling her over my chest before gently draping her limp body over my shoulder.

Surveying my surroundings, I found myself unsure of which direction to take. In a whimsical decision-making process, I resorted to a simple game of 'eeny, meeny, miny, moe.' I made my choice and set off in that direction.

.....

Watching Shadow Talon, who was fixated on the spot where he had thrown Orion and Saria, Stronghold Leader Drakar raised an eyebrow and asked, "What? Do you want to join them?"

Shadow Talon responded with a sharp, piercing bird cry, as if to express his disagreement with Stronghold Leader Drakar's words. Then, he descended from the edge of the basket and began to scratch his claws against the cutlass hanging from his waist.

"You do realize this is for our safety, don't you?" the Stronghold Leader said tiredly.

"Screech!" cried Shadow Talon.

Observing the scene, Stronghold Leader Drakar couldn't help but let out a heavy sigh. "Alright," he conceded, gripping his cutlass and untying it from his waist.

Gazing through the layers of clouds and mist below, he aimed and boomed, "Take this to defend yourself," before he hurled it downward with a powerful force, propelling the cutlass through the swirling clouds towards the distant mountain.

.....

As the voice echoed and the weapon struck the spot where he wanted to step next, Orion's eyes twitched, and he couldn't help but mutter, "I'm still going to kill him," as he snatched the cutlass from its snowy landing spot and pressed on. His legs sank into the snow as he moved through the icy storm, hoping to find a way out.

While his body could endure the biting cold and the sensation of ice brushing against his skin, he couldn't ignore the same concern for Saria. Her form was becoming encased in frost, and he knew he had to get her to safety.

"Don't die... Don't die... Don't you dare die on me," Orion muttered under his breath as he increased his pace, realizing that this was the first time he had found himself in a situation where he intensely desired to both take a life and save one.

"Drakar, mark my words, I will kill you," Orion said, as he reached the mountain's summit. His gaze scanned the landscape below, spotting several one-star and two-star Vylkr vines moving around aimlessly.

However, his attention sharpened when he observed a few vines slithering in his direction, stopping just below him. They seemed to behave like patient serpents, waiting to strike once their prey entered their domain. "I. Will. Kill. You."

Seven hours later

Although Orion had decided to rest a little before descending the mountain, he opted to hurry once he noticed Saria's condition worsening due to the cold. Gathering his strength, he pushed through the entangled web of Vylkr vines, unwilling to let Saria's condition deteriorate any further. Eventually, he stumbled upon a cavern and entered it.

After entering deep into the cavern, Orion began to notice that the presence of the Vylkr vines gradually lessened. And though he lost track of both the hours and his direction, he was sure that this uncertain path was a far better alternative than confronting endless waves of Vylkr vines on treacherous terrain.