

ABOVE WORLD  
BOOK THREE

# HORIZON



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HORIZON

# CHAPTER 1



**A**LUNA UNHOOKED THE STRAP securing her tail to Vachir's saddle, shifted her weight, and slid to the ground. Over the last few months in the desert, her legs had fused together and sprouted a thick covering of greenish-gold scales. Delicate fins had formed along her thighs but stayed flat and lifeless under her skirt. Instead of feet, a large tail fin folded up and wrapped itself around her ankles and calves like a thin, glistening veil.

Her fins were sleeping, waiting to awaken with their first touch of water. Aluna longed to feel them unfurl in the ocean and show her what they were truly meant to do. *Swim swift as a seal, fast as a dolphin.*

But here, at the desert's edge, there were no waves to welcome her. Only dried earth, stubborn trees, and the crumbly beginnings of the distant mountains. When she stood, her whole body's weight rested painfully on what used to be the heel of her foot. Even with the sturdy leather tail sheath Hoku had designed for her, she could only hop a few meters. Or walk on her hands. She needed crutches to cross any significant distance. Kampii were not meant to live in the Above World.

She gripped Vachir's mane, grateful for her friend's four solid horse legs. *Vachir*. It had taken Aluna weeks to get used to calling her that instead of Tal, the horrible name the Equians had given her. *Tal* meant *half*, and Vachir was called that because she was born looking like a horse instead of a Human-horse mix like "real" Equians. After they'd defeated Scorch at the Thunder Trials, Khan Tayan had changed Tal's name to Vachir—*Thunderbolt*—a perfect match for her bravery and speed, and for her gray star-speckled coat. Now no other name seemed right.

Vachir nickered and stomped a hoof. The others had dismounted their horses and disappeared into a tight cluster of shrubs and trees, leaving Aluna to follow behind at her own pace. She preferred it that way. The first few times Dash, Calli, and Hoku had

waited for her and watched her struggle. She'd found their patient stares unbearable. The new arrangement worked best for everyone.

Aluna unlatched her crutches from Vachir's saddlebag and slid her arms into the braces. Her fingers wrapped around the handgrips. She'd have preferred her talon weapons or a spear, but these were the tools she needed to master now.

The shrubs rustled and Hoku emerged. Aluna's special Kampii hearing devices carried his whispered words directly to her ears. "We found a group," he said. "It's the perfect size. Hurry, before they're out of sight!"

He disappeared again but she answered anyway, knowing his Kampii ears would pick up her voice. "I'll be there in two flashes of a tail." She turned to Vachir. "Keep an eye on the horses."

Vachir snorted and rolled her huge black eyes.

Distances seemed longer now that Aluna couldn't walk, and the terrain always seemed devious, as if it were trying to surprise her by being too soft or too hard or covered in twisty sticks and tumbling rocks. When she got to the shrubs, she hooked her crutches to her belt, dropped to the ground, and dragged herself forward on her hands. Her palms, calloused from years of weapon training and her recent crutch use, were now tough as sharkskin.

She found Hoku and Calli crouched at the lip of a ridge, Calli's huge tawny wings pressed firmly against her back. Dash had scrambled up one of the studier trees. Aluna could just make out his long dark hair and pale desert clothes near one of the higher branches.

Aluna quietly pulled herself to Calli's side and peered over the edge of the ridge. A dozen meters below, a group of Humans slowly made their way along the path, a massive striped rhinebra lumbering behind them. The beast's shuffling feet kicked up so much dust that Aluna could barely make out the figures through the cloud of particles. "What do you see, Calli?" Aluna asked. The Aviars had far better eyesight for distances.

"There are five in the group there, although more may be scouting ahead," Calli said.

"I thought I saw something glint. Metal, maybe?" Hoku asked.

"Oh, they're definitely Upgraders," Calli said. "There's one with two metal prongs instead of feet, and another with what look like horns jutting out of his head. I haven't seen any swords or flame shooters, but they could be hidden."

Aluna squinted, but the figures remained vague. "At least they don't have a dragonflyer. That improves our chances of speaking to them without being killed from a distance first."

Dash shimmied quietly down the tree and dropped to his stomach next to Aluna. Dirt smudged his tunic, and a gnarled twig stuck out of the cloth tie binding his hair. He smelled like horse, and he probably always would.

“We could simply follow them,” Dash said. Aluna used to think his accent was strange, but now, after months of living with the Equians in the desert, she couldn’t imagine him speaking any other way. “They travel the same direction as all the other groups we’ve seen. Perhaps they will go straight to Karl Strand.”

“More likely, they’ll just join his growing army,” Aluna said. When she’d suggested they take the fight to Karl Strand, she’d had no idea it would be this hard to locate him. Then again, Strand had been around when all the LegendaryTek splinters were created; he knew the value of hiding. “We have to convince the Upgraders to take us to Strand himself. It’s our only chance of finding him.”

“I still don’t understand why Dash and I can’t go by ourselves, since we can pass as Upgraders,” Hoku said.

Calli shoved Hoku in the shoulder. “We’re just supposed to stay safe and let you two have all the fun?”

Hoku snorted. “Infiltrating a group of Upgraders sounds like fun to you? You’ve obviously been friends with Aluna for too long.”



“They won’t take you to Strand without a reason, and there’s no better reason than valuable prisoners,” Aluna said. “Besides, we need to stick together.” She looked at each of them in turn. Hoku, Calli, Dash. Kampii, Aviar, Equian.

They’d never have freed HydroTek from Fathom if Hoku and Dash hadn’t found a way to win the Dome Meks to their side, or if Calli hadn’t distracted Fathom at just the right moment, or if Aluna’s sister, Daphine, hadn’t helped her pin the monster to the ground until High Senator Electra arrived.

And at the Thunder Trials, Aluna had lost her fight against Strand’s clone Scorch. Scorch should have killed her, and the desert Equians should, even now, be marching to join Strand’s army. Except that Hoku had put himself in harm’s way. He’d stepped between Aluna and a vicious killer, and he convinced the High Khan that honor was worth fighting for. When Calli and Dash and the Equian herds had joined him, the whole battle had turned. That one act of courage—not on Aluna’s part, but on Hoku’s—had changed everything.

Asking for help was sometimes the bravest thing a person could do. The lesson had taken Aluna a long time to learn, but now she clung to it as if it were the last bubble of air in the ocean.



“We’re about to walk into the middle of our enemy’s army,” Aluna said. “I don’t know what dangers we’re going to face, but we’ll have the best chance of succeeding if we stay together.”

“If we stop Karl Strand, then we stop his army,” Calli said.

Aluna had been thinking the same thing, yet the words sounded so strange coming from Calli. In her mind, Aluna still saw Calli as the innocent bird-girl cowering in her mother’s throne room. But Calli had grown braver and stronger during their travels. She’d been poisoned and almost killed. Innocence couldn’t survive in a world gripped by Karl Strand.

“Calli’s right,” Aluna said. “The Equians are preparing for an all-out war. If we can get to Strand first, then maybe we can end this before thousands of people lose their lives. It’s worth the risk.”

Dash sat up and Aluna’s gut twinged. He moved so effortlessly, with so much hidden strength. She used to be like that, too, although she was never so graceful. Now she felt clumsy all the time. Her body seemed to delight in defying her.

“I will follow the Dawn-bringer, even into the heart of the enemy,” Dash said. He wiped his palms on his shirt, stood, and offered Aluna a hand.

Aluna’s stomach fluttered again, but in a warm,

happy way. Dash pulled her up and steadied her elbow while she got her crutches in place.

Calli stared at the Upgraders disappearing down the path. “They’ll camp soon. We can take our time and approach them in the morning.”

“No,” Aluna said. “We go tonight. I don’t want to risk losing them. And Hoku and I can see in the dark.”

“I’m sure several of them have night vision, too,” Hoku said. “It’s a very common Upgrader modification. Rollin told me they don’t even need medteks to add the lenses to their eyes.”

“Okay, so we won’t have an advantage, then,” Aluna said gruffly. Hoku knew more than she did about Upgraders—he’d studied with Rollin for months in the desert. “But I still want to go soon. Now, even. Before . . .”

“Before I lose my courage,” Calli said quietly. Aluna saw Hoku squeeze her hand.

Dash pushed his way through the shrubs back toward the horses. Hoku and Calli followed, and Aluna tried not to hear the sweet words Hoku whispered to Calli as they walked.

Aluna went last, trying not to catch a branch in the eye. When Khan Tayan of their new Flame Heart herd had renamed Vachir, she’d also given Aluna a new name: *Dawn-bringer*. But was she leading them to a

new day—to a new world without Strand—or to their early deaths?

Vachir met her at edge of the scrub. Aluna leaned on her friend and watched Hoku and Dash pull their disguises from their horses' saddlebags.

Hoku donned a mask that covered half his face and one eye in shiny silver and circuits. It wrapped around his neck for protection and hid his Kampii breathing necklace. The neck cover had been Rollin's idea, if Aluna remembered correctly. Weeks of planning meetings back in the desert now blurred together in her mind. But Aluna had been the one to insist that Hoku wear the force shield he'd made for her for the Thunder Trials. It had already saved her life; maybe it would save his, too.

Calli touched Hoku's metal cheekbone and shuddered. "I don't like it," she said. "I miss your freckles."

Aluna agreed, but said nothing. She'd known Hoku her whole life, and yet the mask had transformed him into someone she barely recognized. She turned away, reminded of the hideous scope that Karl Strand's clone Fathom had attached to her sister's eye.

Dash slipped a crude metal skeleton over his left forearm. He'd lost that wrist and hand in the battle at the HydroTek dome. The medteks had replaced it

with a mechanical limb, but the tech wasn't obvious enough. The new external piece glinted dangerously in the amber dusk. Aluna hopped over and helped Dash strap his retractable sword to his other forearm in the hopes that it would look built into his flesh when he extended it.

It had taken so long to convince Tayan and the other Equians that this was the best plan. If they'd stayed in the desert and joined the Equian army, they'd be just five more swords among thousands. By going after Strand himself, they had a chance to make a difference.

Tayan had hated Aluna's plan. "Bravery is honorable," she'd said, "but this? It is merely foolish."

High Khan Onggur had disagreed with Tayan, and so had Khan Arasen of Shining Moon. Aluna hadn't needed the Equians' approval, but it certainly helped to have their supplies and Rollin's tech, and a place to stay while they prepared. Eventually, Tayan had come around, and she had even granted them the sun's blessing when they'd left. Nothing would ever be easy between Aluna and Tayan—not even when they were fighting on the same side.

After Hoku and Dash finished adjusting their new upgrades, they slipped behind the horses and traded their desert clothes for patchwork leathers and a few

mismatched pieces of armor. When they emerged again, Aluna gasped. Her friends had become Upgraders.

“We’re ready,” Hoku said. “Only one thing left to do.”

Calli looked at Aluna, her face pale but resolute. Aluna nodded. They were already dirty enough, and Aluna had a large scratch over one eye that she’d allowed to crust over with dried blood. Now she attached her crutches to Vachir’s saddle, hopped up, and secured her tail.

“Hands,” Hoku said.

Aluna held them out and watched Hoku wrap his custom-made cuffs around her wrists. “Remember, you can struggle all you want in these. If you need to break out of them, twist out with both arms at the same time and they’ll pop open.”

She gulped and stared down at the shackles while Hoku bound Calli’s hands. “Don’t leave me,” she whispered to Vachir. “You’re my secret weapon.”

Vachir threw her head back and whinnied, clearly pleased to be a weapon of any sort.

Dash looped a rope over Vachir’s neck and another over Calli’s horse. He kept the ends loose in his hand and mounted his mare, Sandwolf.

The world seemed to fall silent around them, the only noises the distant caw of birds, the swish of the

horses' tails and the shuffle of their hooves as they shifted their weight.

"The word is *Zorro*," Aluna said. "Anyone says it and the mission is over. We get away as fast as we can. If we get separated, we meet up again at the HydroTek dome."

Aluna lowered her chin to her chest and let months of travel sweep over her body. She and Calli needed to look like prisoners: hungry, exhausted, and defeated.

They were ready to meet the Upgraders.

## CHAPTER 2



HOKU TOUCHED HIS CHEEK and felt cool metal instead of flesh. He didn't mind it nearly as much as he probably should have. The faceplate felt slick and dangerous under his fingertips. No one could see it and think he was still an ignorant youngling who only understood books and tech.

"I wish Rollin had changed her mind," Dash said quietly. He rode next to Hoku and pulled Aluna's and Calli's horses behind him. "I would feel safer if we had an actual Upgrader with us. Someone who knows their customs."

"She said she'd be more trouble than help," Hoku said. "I know she was afraid of being recognized; I just don't know why."



Dash huffed. He sounded just like a horse. “Well, it would be unfair of me to condemn someone for keeping secrets. Perhaps she was exiled, just as I was.”

Hoku said nothing. He knew Rollin better than anyone, and he knew it wasn’t just the Upgraders that Rollin was avoiding, but Karl Strand himself. She’d gotten twitchy when Strand’s name came up during their planning meetings, and she had been far more likely to punch someone soon after. But they all had their scars, and Rollin’s were none of his business. Maybe someday she’d trust him enough to share.

Up ahead, the Upgraders had started a campfire, and Hoku could see hazy forms clustered around it like fish at feeding time. Their rhinebra had settled itself into a slumbering mountain nearby. “We’re close enough. Are you ready?” He wasn’t sure whom he was asking, Dash or himself.

“Yes,” Dash said. “Walk us between worlds, friend.”

Hoku smiled. After the Thunder Trials, Khan Tayan had given him the name *Sun-strider, he who walks between worlds*. Time to see if she was right.

He glanced back at Aluna and Calli. Their faces were grim but determined. He sucked in a big breath and tried to remember how Rollin talked. Mostly he remembered her throwing things.

“Yo,” he called out. His voice came out softer than he wanted, so he tried again. “Yo! Got room at your

fire for a couple of Gizmos with a . . .” What should he call Aluna and Calli? *Prisoners?* *Prizes?* “With some cargo?” He winced.

“Good,” Dash whispered. “This is a game. We must play our parts.”

“Don’t say ‘parts’ when we’re around Upgraders,” Hoku said.

The Upgraders around the fire stood and one took a few steps toward them.

“You on horses, then?” a man called. “Just two of you?”

“Two of us and two prisoners,” Dash said.

“We don’t want blood,” the Upgrader said. “But we’ll spill it everywhere if we have to.”

“Not necessary,” Hoku said, probably too quickly. He forced himself to stay calm. “We just want a seat at the fire.”

“He is posturing,” Dash whispered. “They are a small group, too. He tries to assert his dominance to make us think they are stronger than they are.”

“It’s working,” Hoku mumbled. He pulled his horse Sunbeam to a stop while they waited. The silence stretched and stretched while the Upgrader conferred with his group.

“Can you hear what they’re saying?” he asked Dash.

Dash shook his head. Hoku saw him twitching his

right arm, the one with the expandable sword sheathed under his sleeve.

“Steady,” came Aluna’s quiet voice from behind them, and Dash settled.

The Upgrader called, “Come closer. We want eyes on you.”

“Yeah, sure,” Hoku answered. He nudged Sunbeam. His heart seemed to beat louder with each clomp of his horse’s hooves. He squinted, trying to count the shapes taking form amid the smoky campsite. Calli had said there were five, but he only counted four.

Two Upgraders stepped forward, close enough to see. The one they’d been talking to was a burly man with goggles over both eyes and a long shock of red hair spiking out from the center of his otherwise bald head. The hair fell in a scraggly braid over one of his muscled shoulders. The other Upgrader was slight and possibly female, although her body was hidden beneath a thick leather coat that went all the way down to her feet. Her dark hair bobbed around her head like a shadowy nimbus, somehow defying gravity.

“Close enough,” the man said. “I’m called Odd. This here is Mags. We speak for the kludge.”

“I’m Hawk and this is Dash,” Hoku said.

Rollin had told them that most Upgraders named themselves, picking words that matched their upgrades and the identities they had built—or were trying to

build—for themselves. Hoku was pretending to be a trader, so they chose “Hawk” for him, since he was always hawking goods. Dash could be their hunter, their warrior, so his name worked fine as it was.

When Hoku had asked Rollin what her name meant, she’d only snorted and told him to keep his wiggly fingers out of other people’s heads.

“And what you towing behind you, Hawk and Dash? Most cargo don’t have tails and wings and ride horses,” the woman Mags said. Her voice seemed sharp as a gull’s cry over the ocean.

*Calm as Big Blue*, Hoku thought. *They either believe our story, or we run.*

“We got prizes for Karl Strand,” Hoku said. “Some trinkets he wants. He wants them bad enough to take to war in order to find them. Think we can make out good in a trade.”

Mags walked toward them, the hem of her long coat drifting just above the ground, making it look as if she were floating. She didn’t focus her gaze on him, but on Aluna and Calli. He forced himself to keep staring at the man Odd, to not let his eyes trail her and show how worried he was.

Behind him, Mags said, “What are these, scales? Can think of a dozen who would pay for some of these shinies. And the feathers, too.”

*Thwack.*

Mags laughed. "The one with a tail isn't broken, I see. Still got spirit and a good strong arm. We can help with that." She rejoined Odd and whispered something in his ear. Hoku relaxed slightly. She hadn't hurt Aluna, and Aluna hadn't pulverized Mags. A good start.

"Is there room at your fire or not?" Dash asked.

"We can just as easy make our own," Hoku added. "In fact, maybe we should. Come on, Dash. Let's take our . . . cargo . . . and find another spot."

He started to turn Sunbeam when Odd called out, "Wait. Yeah, we got room. Room for you and extra feed for your animals. Our beast won't mind sharing. Only one catch."

Hoku kept his face still. A catch. Of course there'd be a catch. "Name it," he said.

"While you share what's ours, you fight for our kludge," Odd said.

So that's why Odd and Mags had been sizing them up. They wanted to know if Hoku and Dash could fight.

"Only in defense," Hoku said. "You start a fight, and you're on your own."

Dash nodded. "I agree to this."

"Then get over here," Odd said. "We got ourselves a tasty little pact."

Hoku had almost been hoping the Upgraders would say no and the plan would fail. Then they

could all go back to Mirage or HydroTek and think of another plan. Something less dangerous.

Odd and Mags led them into camp. Hoku kept his eyes forward even though he wanted to stare at the other Upgraders. *Look like you don't care*, Rollin had said. *Pretend you've seen their gizmos and buzzy-bits a thousand times before.*

"You can tie up your horses and cargo here," Odd said, pointing to a metal spike that had been driven into a huge rock. A single rope looped around it trailed off toward the sleeping rhinebra.

While Dash fed and watered their horses, Hoku dismounted and stood next to Odd, who seemed even larger up close. Or maybe Hoku just felt smaller. He squared his shoulders and tried to imagine he was one of Aluna's warrior brothers or a fierce winged Aviar, instead of merely himself.

Dash helped Aluna down from Vachir and carried her to a position facing the campfire. Aluna hated being carried, but that was part of their plan, too. If the Upgraders didn't think she could walk, then they'd never see her as a threat. If she needed to fight, she'd have the advantage of surprise.

After everything was settled, Hoku and Dash followed Odd to the campfire and accepted strips of stringy meat. They met two more Upgraders named Pocket and Zeelo. Pocket was Hoku's age and had a

pair of twisty animal horns sprouting out of his head. Zeelo seemed old and crusty, and when she smiled, Hoku saw row after row of sharp metal teeth.

At least none of the Upgraders had named themselves “Instant Death” or “Annihilation.”

“What about the one watching us from the cliff?” Dash said calmly. “What is that one called?”

Odd glared up at the cliff, but Mags chuckled. “That scamper is Squirrel, and she’ll be down when she’s ready. Might want to keep your packs secure while you’re here, though. Sparkly bits have a way of disappearing lately.”

Once Dash pointed her out, Hoku could see Squirrel clearly. She was small, hunched, and had metal extenders attached to her feet. Wait, no. Those metal devices *were* her feet.

“Who chops off their own legs?” Hoku muttered.

“I’ve known a few who’ve done it,” Mags said, “but not our Squirrel. No, someone else did that for her.”

The world seemed to spin. Hoku swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry as desert sand.

“Young as your years, are you?” Mags said, shaking her head. Her hair bounced around her face. “Seen worse than that my first year of medtek apprenticing.”

Odd grunted and settled down by the fire. Hoku, Dash, and the Upgraders followed his lead. “We’ll see much worse soon,” Odd said. “War makes a mess of things.”



“Are you really taking those people to Karl Strand?” the boy called Pocket asked. He had skin darker than Aluna’s and eyes like deep ocean. Hoku loved the way his horns slid out of his temples, curved back toward his face like a nautilus shell, then poked out to the sides. Had it hurt to attach them? Even if it did, the effect was worth it.

“We are,” Dash said, gnawing on a stick of meat Zeelo had offered him.

“Strand will give us whatever we want for them,” Hoku added. “That winged one is an Aviar. Her people killed Strand’s Sky Master. The one with a tail is a Kampii. Hers killed Strand’s Sea Master.” They didn’t really kill Fathom, they just disassembled him, but the Upgraders didn’t need to know that.

“Haven’t met Strand myself. Haven’t even seen him,” Odd said. “But I hear he’s a dangerous man to play. You could sell those pretties to us and go on your way, richer and alive.”

Hoku pretended to consider the offer. “It’d take more than you have to buy our cargo.”

Odd stared at the fire, then laughed. “Yeah, true.”

“Shut it,” Mags said. “We do fine.” She pulled a clump of her springy hair and rolled it between her fingertips. “Could always do better, though. You maybe up for a deal?”

“We’re listening,” Hoku said.

Mags looked at Odd, but he was still staring at the fire. “We take you to Strand, we split the reward,” she said. “You only got two. There’s no way you make it that far without a fight and someone bigger and badder taking your prizes. Together, we got seven. Enough to make other kludges wary.”

There it was, the offer they’d been hoping for. No one could refuse the potential reward that turning Calli and Aluna over to Strand might bring.

“How many warriors do you have?” Dash asked.

“Warriors?” Odd grunted. “Don’t hear that word much. At present, we have no slayers. But don’t think that makes us weak. No, we got hidden skills. Right, Pocket? Hidden skills.”

Pocket smiled. The boy wore a cloth shirt with blue sleeves and leather vest. Hoku couldn’t see any other tech mods besides his horns. But his name was Pocket. Maybe he had weapons hidden in his skin.

“No slayers at all?” Hoku said.

“Well, we have Odd here,” Mags said. “He can bash skulls as good as any other sword-brain. Looks the part more than you two.”

“What are you good at, then?” Hoku asked. “What are we getting besides one Gizmo who looks dangerous?”

“Best medtek in the zone,” Mags said, raising her

chin. “No infections since I joined the kludge, and I aim to keep it that way.”

*Of course*, Hoku thought. Upgraders probably needed healers more than any of the splinter tribes. And their healers had to know tech, flesh, and how they worked together, too.

“And Odd here is lucky,” Pocket said. “Finds us good caches. Knows when we need to hide. Never lets us go hungry.”

So they were tech hunters, this kludge. Rollin said a lot of Upgraders survived by scavenging old tech—using metal detectors and old bits of map to find ancient cities, then digging up what they could. She said that sometimes kludges would meet and form temporary towns. They traded food for tech or upgrading services, shared news, fell in love, or even swapped members. The towns lasted days or weeks or even a month or two, then they broke down and each kludge went off on its own again. Unlike the LegendaryTek splinters, Upgraders had no permanent homes. They were nomads.

Then there were the kind of tech hunters who did horrible things.

“Do you take your tech from living things?” Hoku asked, afraid of the answer. He’d seen the damage other Upgraders had done on the Humans and the Deepfell near the City of Shifting Tides.

“No,” Pocket said easily. “We got tools for finding and digging. Safe tools. Squirrel keeps them whirring, good as new.”

“We traded our last stash of shiny in the horse city. Kept some of the choicer bits for bribes and trading along the way,” Odd said. “Make better time to the army without dragging sacks of metal behind us.”

“Not all of us wanted to join the army, mind you,” Mags said, glaring at Odd. “Some of us just yell louder than the rest. But even I can’t spit on a turn of luck as good as this one.” She nodded toward Calli and Aluna.

“Seven is lucky,” Odd said. “A good sign. Maybe with seven, Karl Strand will give us what we want and let us live. Better chance of that than if you go with just two.”

Hoku grabbed another stick of meat from the tiny pile by the fire. “Seven it is. But we go straight to Strand, fast as we can. No scavenging along the way.”

Odd scratched his head, making his red hair bob back and forth. “Not like I know where the man is. Not exactly,” he said. “Ask as we go. Best we can do.”

Hoku shared a look with Dash. So much for their brilliant plan. Not even the Upgraders knew how to find their leader. Still, traveling with Odd’s kludge gave them a better chance than they had by traveling alone.

“Eat up,” Odd said. “Tomorrow we head north.”

## CHAPTER 3



ALUNA SAT NEXT TO CALLI, her back against a rock, and watched Hoku and Dash pretending to be Upgraders. Odd and the others had welcomed them quickly. Maybe too quickly. Were they just excited about the possibility of a big reward from Karl Strand, or was there something else going on?

“We need to take turns keeping watch,” she whispered to Calli.

Calli pressed her lips together. “I was thinking the same thing. I don’t want to wake up and find my throat slit. Not that I’d wake up if it was, but you know what I mean.”

“You sleep first,” Aluna said. “I’m not sure I can anyway.” Her mind felt like a whirlpool, all other

thoughts sucked into the swirl of their mission. “I hope I haven’t led us all to our deaths.”

Calli leaned over, shuffled her wings out of the way, and rested her shoulder against Aluna’s. “We followed you willingly. Whatever happens, the decision belongs to all of us now.”

Aluna stared down at her hands and toyed with the fake bindings. “How does your mother handle this? She’s led warriors into battle. She’s watched them die because of her orders. How does she live with herself?”

Calli was quiet so long that Aluna wondered if she’d fallen asleep. Finally, Calli said, “I don’t know. I just hope I figure it out before it’s my turn.” A moment later, her breathing slowed and her head drifted to the side.

Aluna settled against the rock and studied the Upgraders. They sat around their fire about a dozen meters from the stone where she and Calli were anchored. Far enough away that she couldn’t hear what they were saying unless they raised their voices, but close enough for them to keep an eye on their prisoners.

The Upgraders ate and laughed and passed a canteen around their circle. When it got to Hoku, he stood and offered a toast.

“To Karl Strand and the world he’s building!” His

words sounded directly in her Kampii ears and sent shivers skittering across her skin in the cool night air.

Odd raised his cup and bellowed, “To the new king, bringing peace and shiny bits to us all!”

Some of the Upgraders cheered, but not all of them. Aluna could hear an argument rising in their voices and strained to make out their words. Mags stood suddenly and stomped away from the fire, the hem of her coat dragging in the dirt behind her. As she stalked passed Aluna, she mumbled, “Empty-headed idiots.”

Odd watched her go, then took another swig of his drink. “Don’t mind her,” he said, loud enough for Mags to hear him. “She hasn’t seen the blood and tumble, not outside her med training. Hasn’t got used to doing whatever it takes to keep the kludge safe.”

Aluna whispered quietly, so only Hoku could hear. “So they’re not all loyal to Karl Strand. We could use that.”

Hoku couldn’t respond, not with Odd passing him drinks and asking him questions, but she saw him nod once and reach for more food.

She stayed awake far into the night, wishing she were back among the Flame Heart or Shining Moon herds, where she could listen to the Equians weave their stories around a bonfire until morning. She even



missed her spongy bed back in the City of Shifting Tides. The darkness here was empty, despite a sky full of stars. Critters and creepy-crawlies darted around the rocks and through the bushes, but the world still seemed too quiet. Too lonely.

Aluna awoke to find a hand tugging at the breathing shell embedded in her throat. She opened her eyes and saw stringy brown hair, a face smudged with dirt and sweat, and dark kelp-green eyes.

The Upgrader girl Squirrel.

Aluna grabbed for her but Squirrel jumped out of the way like a desert jackrabbit. The girl didn't run, but stayed crouched three meters away, just beyond the length of the rope tying Aluna to the rock. Squirrel had a good eye. And good instincts.

"You can't steal my necklace," Aluna said to her. "No more than I could steal one of your feet."

Squirrel—she looked about ten years old—stared down at the curved metal prongs attached under her knees. Her long hair fell around her face and clung to her cheek.

"You're Squirrel," Aluna said.

Squirrel looked up sharply and narrowed her eyes.

"I don't bite," Aluna continued calmly. "Not when you're smart enough to stay out of my range." The girl wore a bulging satchel over one shoulder and a thin blade strapped to her leg. "Do you talk?" Aluna asked.

“No,” the girl answered.

Aluna stifled a smile. By her side, Calli started to stir. “You keep watch over everyone,” Aluna said to Squirrel. “You’re the eyes of the whole group.”

Squirrel didn’t answer. She seemed fascinated by Calli’s yawning and the way her feathers were twitching in the wind.

“I bet you see a lot,” Aluna said. “Have you ever been to Karl Strand’s base of operations? His lair?”

The girl narrowed her eyes again, then shook her head once.

“Too bad,” Aluna said. “You could have told us what to expect.”

“You’re better off in ignorance.” Mags walked toward them carrying two bowls. She handed the pasty white grub to Aluna and Calli and squatted down a few meters away from Squirrel. Not even Squirrel’s kludge got close to the girl.

“I’ve seen what Strand and his maggots can do, and it’s nothing I want a piece of,” Mags said. “I spend my whole life fixing things. Making things better. He claims to do the same thing, but all I see are broken bodies in his wake. Things I can’t even make sense of, let alone put back together.”

“But you’ve agreed to take us to Strand,” Calli said, wiping the sleep from her eyes with the back of her hand. “Why?”

Mags looked back at the camp, at the dusty lump that was Odd's sleeping body still snoring by the fire. "Everyone's got to survive. Right, Squirrel? We do what it takes. Whatever it takes."

Squirrel's small hand went to the hilt of her knife. Her mouth and brow pressed into grim lines. Her nose flared.

Mags smiled. "That's right, girl. Never trust anyone. Not even me."

"That's no way to live," Aluna said. "You have to trust your friends."

"Is that what landed you here, all wrapped up like a present? Did you trust someone you shouldn't have? How did that work out for you?" Mags asked. "No. I'll take my way and saw off the arms of any Gizmo who tries to make me do something I don't want to do."

Squirrel seemed to quiver in agreement, her eyes shining bright through that veil of thin, dirty hair.

"Don't count us out yet," Aluna said.

Calli lifted her chin. "We've faced worse and come out on top."

"Well, seeing as how it's partly my job and Squirrel's to make sure you stay tied up until we deliver you to Strand and his grunts, I'd say it's over for both of you. Right, Squirrel?" Mags said. "We take our jobs seriously, and we need what Strand has to offer."

“What does Strand have to offer?” Aluna asked.  
“Power?”

Mags snorted. “Not power. Safety. Security. Knowing that you can go a whole span of days without someone or something trying to kill you or yours. Shinies and power can be fun, no doubt, but they can mean safety, and that’s the true end. A space to breathe in a deadly, suffocating world.”

Mags tilted her head and her mass of black hair bobbed. She glanced back at Odd and Pocket, still asleep, and lowered her voice. “Might be that we can work out a deal, though. You see, we could make a lot of good trades—powerful trades—with those scales and feathers you two got in abundance. Maybe not make as much as Karl Strand will offer, but enough to keep us safe, buy us some more muscle, get us someplace better.”

Squirrel frowned and shifted on her sproingy metal feet.

“You promise me some of your scales and feathers—and those glinty-glowy necklaces you’re both wearing—and I’ll give you poison.” She patted the pocket of her long coat. “I got tricks that can take you out quick. Painless. Be a mercy to end it like that, compared to what Strand will do to you.” Mags leaned in. “You believe anything in this whole wide world, you

believe this: Any death is better than living under Karl Strand's control. That's no life at all."

Mags stood abruptly. "What I'm offering is a kindness," she said quietly. "You think on it. You think on it long and hard, and you let me know how you want this to go."

Squirrel's head turned suddenly, but not toward the fire. She was looking down the path behind them.

The corners of Mags's mouth twitched. "You see something, girl?"

Squirrel shook her head, then sniffed.

"You smell something, then. I'll go wake the others." Mags turned and walked to the fire. She started kicking the sleeping boys and men and cursing at them until they stirred.

Squirrel kept her eyes on the horizon behind them. "Be here soon," she said in a soft voice. "Got to be ready."

"Ready for what?" Calli asked.

"Who? How many?" Aluna said at the same time.

"Been following us a few days," Squirrel said. "Not talking, just following. Odd thinks they're looking for the right time to pounce."

Aluna breathed deep. So that's why Odd and Mags were so quick to take in their group. It wasn't just the promise of reward from Karl Strand, but the addition of Hoku and Dash to help strengthen the

kludge. Maybe Odd had been hoping that whoever was following them would lose interest. But they hadn't. That meant they were either much stronger or much too desperate to give up.

Squirrel stood up and bounced on her springy feet. "You have a funny horse." And then she was off, bounding meters with each long stride.

"A funny horse? What did she mean by that?" Aluna asked.

Calli pointed. "Look."

Aluna followed her finger and saw Vachir munching scrubby grass in the shade of a large rock a dozen meters away, the frayed end of a rope dangling from her neck. Apparently Vachir hadn't felt like playing a captive this morning.

"Hey!" Aluna called. Vachir's ear twitched, but she didn't look up from her breakfast. Aluna picked up a small stone and threw it at her flank. Her aim was true. Vachir raised her head and huffed air out her nose.

Aluna pointed to the rock where Vachir's rope was supposed to be tied. Vachir sauntered back slowly, still chewing grass, clearly unrepentant.

"Who would be following the kludge?" Calli said. She scooped out the last of her goopy white breakfast and set her bowl on the ground.

Aluna pushed herself up and started to stretch. She had a small knife hidden under her Serpenti

skirt and her talon weapons tucked into her sleeves. But she wanted a spear. And a sword. And maybe a harpoon, too.

“Another kludge, I’m guessing,” Aluna said. “Probably a bigger one.”

“Do they all live like this?” Calli asked. “Like they don’t know if they’ll live through the next day? It’s exhausting!”

“When I was growing up, I was almost never afraid,” Aluna said. “We had hunters and defenses and healers and *rules*. I worried about being bored, not about being killed.”

“And I worried about disappointing my mother,” Calli said with a sigh. “Guess we had it easier than we thought.”

Aluna thought about Squirrel’s muck-streaked face and wild eyes. “If I’d been born out here, maybe I’d want someone to bring order, too. Maybe I’d be fighting *for* Karl Strand, instead of against him.”



# Horizon

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