A New Beginning

by Katniss239

Summary

Rhea Craine has had about as typical a sob story of a childhood as you can get; spent her childhood years on the streets, had to fight tooth and nail to get where she is now. No one has ever given any love to her, and frankly, that's just fine by her standards. She's never needed it. However, when she's offered a position on Grace Augustine's team on Pandora, she may just find that things aren't always what they seem.
It hadn't felt like six years.

It had felt like i'd only just closed my eyes when we arrived.

Over and over i'd been asking myself the same thing; why would a street rat like me be offered a position like this?

You see, unlike the rich kids or former soldiers nowadays, I've had to fight for everything. Right down to the barest minimum essentials, such as clothes and a place to sleep at night. You don't know the meaning of the word 'hard' until you've experienced something like that.

I'm not telling you this to make you feel sorry for me.

I'm telling you this to bring everything into perspective.

You see, bringing me into the world is what took my mom out. Because of that, my daddy blamed me for her death. He didn't want anything to do with me. He locked me out of the house and left me on the streets to fend for myself. I've had to resort to lying, cheating, and flat out theft to make my way, narrowly avoiding law enforcement for years. No one has ever given me a second glance, no one ever stopped to help the little girl on the streets. And frankly, that's fine by me. I've done just fine on my own. I don't need anyone else.

So now you understand why this is so confusing for me.

There are so many other possible candidates for this; professional scientists, former soldiers, people who were actually trained for this sort of shit. Me? A common street rat? What could I possibly have to give these high-flying science folks?

Why am I here?
Chapter 2

As the ship landed, I watched the rest of the scientists and other workers filing out, before I finally rose to my feet and started heading for the base myself. As I rounded the divider and headed for the ramp, the commander gave me a dirty look. "Let's move it, special case! I don't have time to wait on you!"

"Well, guess what?" I snap back. "You just fucking did!" Shoving him out of the way, I march down the ramp and on into the compound. I take a moment to look about the base, observing all of the soldiers and workers milling about in the yard. After few few minutes of observing, I proceeded on toward the entrance all the employees have gone through. On the way there, I could hear several of the soldiers hooting and whistling and cat-calling at me. I can't exactly lie, I was rather pretty.

As one man in particular sauntered up to me, I smacked him square in the chest and snarled. "Piss off."

It took several hours of wandering the vast hallways-I'm not kidding, that place was as confusing as fuck to navigate-before I finally arrived at the briefing room that I was told I had to go to first thing. It was as I took a seat at the back of the room that a man in a wheelchair came rolling into the room-pardon the pun. As he came to a stop next to me, he glanced at me and said simply. "Jake. Jake Sully." He held out a hand to me.

I looked at him for a moment before I took his hand, shook it, and replied. "Rhea. Rhea Crain."

"You're here for this whole...Avatar program too, aren't you?" He asked.

"Yeah." I responded. "Though I don't have the slightest fucking clue why." Jake chuckled at that. Everyone went quiet though as a man came walking in the room. As soon as he stepped in, all the soldiers standing at the front of the room stood at attention. He was an older man, his close-cropped hair turning gray with age. But I could tell right away that age made no matter to this soldier. Three long scars ran almost from his right eye to the top of his head. He glanced at each and every person in the room as he walked slowly to the front.

"You are not in Kansas anymore." He said, and I had to stifle a chuckle at that old phrase. "You're on Pandora, ladies and gentlemen. Respect that fact, every second of every day. If there is a hell, you might wanna go there for some R&R, after a tour on Pandora." He pointed out to the edge of the compound before turning around and continuing. "Out there, beyond that fence, every living thing that crawls, flies, or squats in the mud wants to kill you, and eat your eyes for jujubes. We have an indigenous population of humanoids called the Na'vi. They're fond of arrows dipped in a neurotoxin that will stop your heart in one minute, and they have bones reinforced with a naturally occurring carbon fiber. they are very hard to kill. As head of security, it is my job to keep you alive...I will not succeed...not with all of you. If you wish to survive, you've got to cultivate a strong mental attitude. You've got to obey the rules. Pandora rules."

I let myself zone out as he started listing off the rules. What a load of shit.

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After what seemed like listening to people talk for-fucking-ever, we were finally released from the safety brief. Since I had no clue where I was supposed to go, I let Jake lead the way. Our walk was relatively dull, talking about this and that, before another stranger that I couldn't be bothered to care for came running up to us. "Excuse me! Excuse me!" He called out as he ran up to us. His attention immediately went to Jake. "Jake. You're Jake right?" He said. "Tom's brother...wow. You look just like him. Sorry, I'm Norm...Spellman." The two men shook hands. "Went through Avatar training with him." He turned his gaze back up to me and said nervously. "And uh...and you must be Rhea."

"In the flesh." I replied with a shrug.

After an awkward moment of silence, Norm cleared his throat and said. "Well, come on. I'll show you guys the way." And so, Jake and I followed behind Norm as he led us very precisely through the hallways into one room in particular. As we walked passed rows of computers, I vaguely heard Norm saying. "The Biolab. We're gonna spend a lot of time up here." He greeted someone else briefly before continuing on. "Here's the Link Room, right here. This is where we're connecting to the avatars..." His voice faded from my ears as we reached a row of tubes, each filled with some sort of fluid I couldn't put a name to. For a little while, I simply stood there, staring with my mouth hanging open at the bodies floating inside the glass tubes. "Damn! They got big!" Jake commented.

"Yeah, they fully mature on the flight out." Norm added. "So the proprioceptive sims seem to work really well."

I let their words fade from my hearing as I stare at the third body in the row. I faintly recall hearing someone mention something about the bodies-Avatars-being made from human DNA mixed with that of the natives here. I can't take my eyes off of the face, which looks so much like mine it's almost frightening. "And here I was thinking you were just pulling my leg." I thought aloud.

"No." Norm told me. "In the science world, we leave nothing to chance. This is your avatar now, Rhea."
Chapter 3

After we were introduced to our Avatars—I still wondered how nobody else could find those things just the slightest bit creepy—we were introduced to video-logging. Just point the camera at yourself, and talk about your day. About as straightforward as it gets. After we did that, Norm told us that next, we would be going into something called the Link Room, where apparently through some neuron mind-meld science fuckery voodoo, we would connect to the Avatars. As a guy named Max lead us into the Link Room, an announcement came over the intercom system.

As we watched, several bed-shaped pods came sliding out from their places in the wall. As one of them opened, a woman sat up and called out. "Who's got my goddamn cigarette? Guys! What's wrong with this picture?" Just in time, another woman came running up cigarette in hand.

"Grace Augustine is a legend!" Norm told us. "She wrote the book, I mean literally wrote the book on Pandoran botany."

"Yeah, that's cause she knows plants better than people." Said Max—under his breath, I might add.

As we came up to her, the woman—Grace—gave us a skeptical look. I returned it right away. She wanted to play rough. I could play rough. "Here she is!" Exclaimed Max. "Cinderella back from the ball, Grace! I'd like you to meet Norm Spellman, Jake Sully, and Rhea Craine." Grace handed off her cigarette, observing each of us closely. "Norm." She commented. "I hear good things about you. Hows your Na'vi?"

Before I could blink, the two of them engaged in a brief conversation in what I assumed was the Na'vi language. Don't ask me to translate. It just sounded like fucking gibberish to me. "Uh, Grace." Said Max. "This is Jake Sully."

"Ma'am." Said Jake, holding out a hand to her.

Grace sneered at him and said. "Yeah, yeah. I know who you are, and I don't need you. I need your brother. You know, the P.H.D who trained for three years for this mission?"

"He's dead." Jake told her. "I know it's a big inconvenience for everyone."

Grace frowned and asked. "How much lab training have you had?"

"I dissected a frog once." Jake replied.

And then, joy of joys, Madam Cheerful turned to me. "And what about you? Rhea is it? How much—"

"Let me save you some time." I cut her off. "No, I don't know the native tongue. No, I have had no 'lab training'. No, I'm not some pompous science bitch like you. I was given an option; either join on to this freak show, or spend the rest of my life in a prison cell. So, you're stuck with me. Lucky you."

Grace scoffed. "You see? You see?" She told Max. "I mean, they're just pissing on us without even the courtesy of calling it rain." She stomped off, grumbling. "I'm going to Selfridge."

"No Grace." Exclaimed Max. "I don't think that's—"

"No, man! This is such bullshit!" Grace shouted. As she stomped down the hall we heard her snarl.
"I'm going to kick his corporate butt! He has no business sticking his nose in my department..."

Well, she was exactly as I had expected; a stuck-up snob. Max sighed, then leaned in close to Jake and I as he said. "Here tomorrow, 0800. Try and use big words."

That night was largely uneventful; A meal in the mess hall with everyone else in this tub, more video-logging, and then back to my bunk which, surprise, surprise, was with the rest of the science sorties. Typical. As I lay there awake in bed, I pulled out the pendant of the necklace I wore from underneath my shirt. It was a simple thing; a tarnished, silver-colored pendant carved in the shape of an eagle. It was the only item I had of my moms. I had worn it every day of my life.

I stared at it for a while, tracing my fingers over the patterns carved into the metal. *What am I thinking?* I scolded myself. *I don't belong here.*

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The next day, I saw that they had removed the three Avatars from their tubes, had dressed them in paper hospital gowns, and laid them on gurneys in another room. Grace led us into the Link Room, pointing each of us to an open pod, from Norm, to Jake, to me. "How much link time have you logged?" She asked Norm.

"Uh, about five hundred and twenty hours." Norm replied.

"That's good." Grace commented. "You're there, you're here, you're in there." She told each us. "How much have you logged?"

"Zero." I told her.

"Zip." Added Jake. "But I read a manual."

She looked at the two of us as though we were suggesting jumping out of a plane. "Tell me you're joking." She exclaimed.

"Well, I'm not." I barked. Proceeding to lay down inside the pod, I pulled the metal grid down over me and said. "Can we just get on with this?" Grace simply shrugged. She pressed a few buttons on the panel by Jake's pod, and did the same for mine. "Now just relax, and let your mind go blank." She told me. "Shouldn't be hard for you." I would have smacked her if I wasn't under that metal grid. She closed the lid of the pod over me, and then it was only darkness. For a while, I simply laid there, listening to the steady whirring of the machine I was in. I half expected to be injected with something, or melted down, or roasted alive. But no.

After a while, I closed my eyes, emptying my head of all thoughts, letting my body go limp. There was blackness for a brief moment. Then a flash of white light, colors swirling all around me. I felt a strange, numbing sensation, like being drunk. Then it was blackness again. And then I heard a voice. "Rhea? Can you hear me? Can you hear me, Rhea?" As I came to, I could make out a couple of scientists crouched over me, both wearing breather masks and hospital gowns. One of them shined a flashlight in both of my eyes, and the man commented. "Pupilarity reflex is good." I heard
someone snap their fingers in my ear, and one of the scientists made a comment i think about my hearing. "How you doing Rhea?" One of them asked.

"Okay...I think." I responded. My voice sounded hoarse, as if I hadn't used it in a while. I held up my hands, and was surprised to see that they were blue all of the sudden. I faintly heard someone talking about taking it easy, but I didn't listen as I sat up. It was so strange, my arms and legs suddenly felt weird, like some foreign things that had suddenly attached themselves to me.

In fact, everything felt a bit off.

As I slowly rose to my feet, testing myself to see if there was anything wrong, I looked up, and saw my reflection in the window. I saw the Avatar's face staring back at me-no, my face. Somehow, through some complicated science bullshit I didn't understand, I was inside the Avatar. Don't ask me why the flying fuck this unbalanced me. I have no idea. I had faced down some of the most violent street gangs on earth, I had survived years on my own, and yet, for whatever fucking reason, this threw me off. Seeing my face like this really, really fucking threw me off.

I suddenly felt as if I was going to feint. I sat back down, and the nurse coaxed me to lay back down, saying that they'd send me back out, or whatever. I listened, and layed back down on the gurney. Remembering Grace's instructions, I let myself relax, and let my mind go blank.
Chapter 4

I lay awake in bed that night.

No matter what I tried, I just couldn't get to sleep. Finally I got up out of bed and went to the video log camera. I sat down in the chair, turned the camera on, and pointed it at me. "Okay...It's...day two I think, not sure what the hour is...and I'm just really screwed in the head right now...I'm still trying to figure out why the flying fuck I'm here. Like, what can I do that will help these people?...What is wrong with me? Ever since I got here, I can't think straight! I've never been this screwed up before!" I hadn't realized I was gradually getting louder in my own conversation, but I managed to stop myself in time to avoid waking the others. When I saw that I hadn't successfully woken up anyone, I continued. "Maybe...I'll figure out what I'm supposed to be doing here tomorrow. I don't know. All I do know is...my options are pretty slim right now. If I can't figure this out, then...then I'm as good as dead."

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The next day, I was told to join the science team on a reconnaissance mission out into the jungle—I hope I got that right. Some chick named Trudy took us for a ride in her gunship, and I'm not gonna lie, it was pretty fucking awesome. Soaring over trees, flying down waterfalls, watching flocks of alien-bird-whatevers taking to the air. That made my day easily. Eventually, Trudy put us down in the clearing, and the four of us—now controlling our avatars—jumped out of the gunship. I was very thankful that they allowed me some time to practice controlling my avatar before we left the base.

I was given A gun to use, but I had my knives first and foremost. That was my weapon of choice. I had those knives in my hands, ready to fight if necessary. Grace made a few hand gestures, and then pressed a button on the communication thing on her neck to yell. "Shut it down! We're gonna stay a while!" Trudy did something I couldn't see inside the gunship, and the extremely loud propellers gradually stopped spinning. Grace briefly told the one human gunman to stay with the ship, before we set off into the forest. Jake, Norm, Grace and I kept in a tight huddle the whole way. All the while, I couldn't help staring around at the forest. Okay, call me wimpy, call me weak, call me whatever the fuck you like, but it was very nice to look at.

It was like something I would only see in a projection. There were so many different colors, and shapes, and sizes. It was just beautiful. I was snapped out of my daydreaming by a call from Grace to keep up. We all jumped as suddenly, several large, six-armed animals came swinging through the trees, chattering to each other as they went. One of them stopped to pick a fruit and was startled at the sight of Jake pointing a gun at it.

"Pro Lemuros." Said Grace. "They're not aggressive." Jake lowered his gun as the creatures continued on to wherever they were going. "Relax, marine." Grace grumbled, pushing Jake's gun down. "You're making me nervous." With that, she continued to lead the way further into the forest.
"So...how will they know we're here?" Asked Norm.

"I'm sure they're watching us right now." Replied Grace. This made me look up into the trees, looking for any possible sign of the natives. I couldn't see anything that revealed any of the natives were watching us. Of course you can't, stupid. I scolded myself. They live in a fucking forest. They're probably the best tree climbers ever. Jake and I followed after Grace and Norm as they moved further into the woods, doing whatever the fuck it is science-sorties do.

While the two of them blabbered at each other about scanning signals in trees or whatever, I lounged against the trunk of a tree, observing everything around me. To tell you the truth, I was actually kind of taken by it. All the different sorts of plants, all the strange sounds coming from within it's depths. It was...kind of beautiful. I had gotten so lost in my own thoughts, that I didn't notice that Jake had disappeared.

"Jake?" I called out. "Jake?" There was no answer.

Suddenly, a loud roar sounded from a short distance away, startling all three of us. We rushed out into a clearing to find Jake standing with his gun pointed at a giant, rhino-like-creature with a colorful fan on its head. The creature bellowed indignantly.

"Don't shoot!" Exclaimed Grace. "Don't shoot! You'll piss him off!"

The beast gave another bellow and slammed its hammer-head against a couple of trees.

"It's already pissed off!" Jake cried.

"Jake, that armor is too thick, trust me!" Grace persisted, and Jake lowered his gun. The thing continued swinging its head around before pawing at the ground, and Grace explained. "It's a territorial threat display. Do not run, or he'll charge."

"So what do I do? Dance with it?" Jake barked.

"Just...hold your ground." Grace cautioned.

The beast roared again and proceeded to charge Jake. Jake screamed and charged in return, and in one of the most bizarre things ever, the beast stopped, and began to shrink away from him. As Jake proceeded to taunt the creature, Grace, Norm and I noticed something else rise out of the brush behind him. "Uh...Jake..." I said hesitantly.

"Yeah, you get your punk-ass back to mommy!" Jake taunted as the rhino-thing ran back towards the rest of the herd. "Yeah! Yeah, you got nothing! You keep running! Why don't-"

"Jake!" I shouted, and it was then that he noticed the big, black fanged creature behind him. With a roar, the beast leaped clear over us and at the rhino-things, with the rhino-things forming a tight ring together and flashing the fans on their heads, which I can only assume was a means of distracting their new monster, before it turned toward Jake. "What about this one?" Jake asked. "Run? Don't run? What?"

"Run!" Cried Grace. "Definitely run!"

As Jake began to run, the monster gave chase. Without really thinking about it, I ran out, ignoring Grace and Norm's protests, and proceeded to impale the monster in the eye with one of my knives. As the beast screamed and writhed, I rushed forward and grabbed Jake by the arm. "Follow me!" I shouted. We both ran as fast as we could go with the beast close behind. We dived beneath the roots of a tree, narrowly avoiding its claws and teeth as it furiously clawed and bit at the tree roots
trying to get to us. Jake proceeded to fire at it with his gun, while I slid around underneath and stabbed it in the shoulder and stomach with another pair of knives. In one swift move, it threw me off and tore the gun from Jake's hands, tossing it into the trees.

Jake managed to pull me away in time to avoid the monster's teeth snapping shut on my head, and we both continued to run. Loosing both our packs as we ran, we both got to the edge of a waterfall and, without a second thought, leaped over the edge.
Chapter 5

Now I know what you're thinking; I just fucked up royal, right? That's exactly what I was thinking as I was being carried away down the river. All I could see was the rushing water and the rocks underneath me. Finally I managed to paddle my way to the surface and grab hold of a rock sticking out over the water. I stayed there for a minute, trying to breathe, and it was only after I caught my breath that I realized Jake was nowhere in sight. I looked around, trying to spot him, but I couldn't see him anywhere. "Well, this is just fucking wonderful."

It was after several hours of trying to find my missing partner that I decided fuck it and tried to find my way back to the base. There was just one little problem: I didn't have the slightest fucking clue where I was going. It wasn't until the sun went down and I took shelter in a cave that I saw what the forest looked like at night. I won't lie, it was pretty fucking cool. Everything was lit up. The plants, the trees, even the fucking ground was glowing!

*Focus, you dipshit!* I scolded myself. Once I was settled down inside my cave, I took stock of my weapons. I still had most of my knives, but my gun had been lost in the river. Since I preferred knives anyway, I took one in each hand, each as long as my forearm. I carefully positioned myself at the mouth of the cave so that I could see for a good few yards in front of me, and yet remained hidden by the rocks. For a long while, I stayed hidden, observing the close area.

I let my sharpened sense of hearing soak up all the sounds of the forest. For a while, all I heard was animal sounds. Nothing that seemed out of the ordinary for this place. Then I heard it. I had heard something similar from a projection, one talking about horses. This sounded very similar.

Several huge, six-legged beasts came running into the clearing. I made sure to stay out of sight from them and their riders. They were Na'Vi. I could tell, judging from the appearance of the Avatars.

The man leading the group, who looked as though he walked around with a pole shoved up his ass all hours of the day, turned his mount about and started talking to the others. I had no clue what the fuck he was saying, but he seemed pissed about something, gesturing several times up into the trees with his bow.

Another boy in the party said something in response, to which Pole-Up-His-Ass nodded and mumbled something. He then shouted a command, and the group took off on their horse-things. It wasn't until I was sure they were a good distance away that I crept slowly out of the cave, my mind racing a million miles an hour.

Who were those guys? Why were they out here? What if they had found Jake? I couldn't let that asshole get himself killed. Sighing in frustration, I got up and decided to follow them, and see if they could lead me to Jake. I started following the tracks left by the horse-things through the brush. Thank God I still had my knives, otherwise I'd be fucking screwed.

Never had I thought that would be more prevalent than right now. Out of nowhere, I felt a heavy weight land on me, pulling me on to my back. With lightning fast reflexes, I swung up onto my feet to face my opponent. He looked young, a teenager I guessed. He was putting on a brave face, but I could tell by his stance and the way he held his knife that he was not skilled in combat. Probably still a green horn. I decided to not go full out on him in that moment. I made a show with my knives, twirling them in my hands. He shouted something at me, Na'Vi I guessed, and charged me. I side-stepped him easily. With a yell, he charged again. I grabbed him by the arm, forcing him to his knees and twisting his arm behind him just enough to make him cry out. "I could break your
arm!" I shouted.

Before he could respond, there was the sound of fast approaching hooves. I had just enough time to look around before I was knocked to the ground by a wooden bow smacking me in the face. Big surprise, Pole-Up-His-Ass was back. He leaped on top of me with a loud cry, wrapping his long fingers around my throat. He was a lot stronger than he looked, I'll give him that. I kicked and struggled under him, trying to breathe. I finally managed to land a kick to his crotch, making him cry out and loosen his grip. Hit him in the nut sack, works every time. I managed to throw him off, punch him in the face a few times, and give him a good slash on the arm one of my knives for good measure. He slashed with his knife, which I managed to block.

Suddenly, one of the other men screamed, and both Pole-Up-His-Ass and myself managed to scramble out of the way in time to avoid a massive black monster landing in the middle of the clearing. It was the exact same sort of monster who had attacked me and Jake earlier. No, it was the exact same one. Sure as shit, I could see the hilt of my knife sticking out of its eye socket. The beast moved to stand between me and Pole-Up-His-Ass, hissing at the man threateningly. I looked toward the men, but they all looked just as surprised as I was.

In a moment of silence, the thing lowered its head to nudge me. "Well...I suppose a 'thank you' is in order." I murmured. As if it understood me, the beast rumbled in response. After a moment, I decided to return the favor. I took hold of the knife, and with a swift tug, yanked it out. The beast roared in pain at first, but then relaxed, pushing it's muzzle into my hand as if to say 'thanks'.

"You're welcome." I told it. It proceeded to bear its fangs at Pole-Up-His-Ass one more time, as if giving a final warning, before it took off into the dark. Now, do not try to asking me what the hell just happened, cause I haven't the slightest fucking idea. All I know is that thing helped me, so I helped it. For a long while, Pole-Up-His-Ass and I simply stared at each other, sizing each other up. I had seen his sort before. Either he was waiting for the ultimate chance to prove himself, or he had already proven himself and expected everyone to follow without question because of that.

After a few minutes, his attention was diverted by the sound of two pairs of feet running along the branches above us. Without a moments hesitation, he took out a pair of leather bands, each having a heavy ball attached to each end. He twirled them in his hands before throwing them up into the trees. Sure enough, there was a loud exclamation of "Shit!" and Jake came crashing to the ground. Without really thinking, I rushed over and helped him untie himself. There also seemed to be some sort of unspoken order, as the Na'Vi once again raised their bows and knives at us, ready to kill us at any moment. "There you are, meathead." I muttered to Jake. "bout time. I've been looking for you all damn day."

"Well, I've been a bit...tied up." Was Jake's response.

Seemingly from nowhere, a woman jumped down into the ring and shouted something at her kin before turning to Pole-Up-His-Ass. While the two of them were snapping at each other, I murmured to Jake. "Who's the chick?"

"I don't know." He replied. "But she helped me out of a fix, so...I don't know what she wants to do."

"Well, it looks like these two don't really get along very well." I commented. Finally, the conversation ended with Pole-Up-His-Ass climbing back on his mount and barking an order to his comrades. Before I could react, one of the other Na'Vi grabbed a hold of my ponytail, while the other pressed a knife to the back of my neck. A couple others did the same with Jake. Jake tried to ask what was happening, but his 'friend' didn't answer him. As the Na'Vi riding the horse-things rode off, those that didn't have a ride proceeded to run after them, forcing Jake and I along with
We moved fast through the forest, not really giving any time for the two of us to see where we were being taken. We crossed a wooden log that spanned across a river, and that's when we came to the biggest tree I had ever seen in my life. No shit, this thing was like a fucking skyscraper! Jake and I were taken into the hollowed out base of the tree, where thousands of Na'Vi were gathered round to watch us. The villagers eyed us warily, chattering among themselves. One even reach out to touch Jake, and then recoiled, as if her expected Jake to strike him.

Were were led up to the base of a massive spiral that went up and up and up into the extent of the tree. There, Pole-Up-His-Ass was already talking with another man, one who had a whole lot more finery on than the rest. It didn't take much for me to guess that he was the leader. As Jake's girlfriend approached, she and the new guy began talking to each other, with her gesturing repeatedly to them. Every now and again, Pole-Up-His-Ass interjected with something of his own, pointing specifically at me. Even though I couldn't understand what he was saying, I could guess he was talking about the incident with the monster in the woods.

The man said something that made all the others laugh, and Jake asked "What's he saying?"

"My father is deciding whether to kill you." His girlfriend told us.

"Your father..." Jake murmured. He made to move forward, but I placed a hand on his chest, shaking my head at him. Suddenly, there was another loud shout and a woman, also dressed in much finer attire than the rest, came walking down the spiral. She pointed at Jake and I and said something else, and her kin backed away. "That is mother." Jake's girlfriend said ominously. "She is Tsahik, the one who interprets the will of Eywa."

"Who's Eywa?" Jake asked. He didn't get an answer as the Tsahik-I hope I pronounced that right-looked us over. Holding out locks of our hair, briefly grabbing both of our tails, and other mildly creepy shit like that. After a moment, she turned to Jake and asked. "What are you called?"

"Jake Sully." He answered. Faster than either one of us could react, she took out a small knife from the headdress she was wearing and swiped him with it. Then, in a supremely creepy moment, she proceeded to lick his blood from it, before asking. "Why have you come?"

"I came to learn."

"We have tried to teach other Sky People. It is hard to fill a cup which is already full."

"Well, my cup is empty, trust me. Just ask Doctor Augustine. I'm not scientist."

"What are you?"

Jake hesitated a moment, looking at everyone around him, before he said. "I was a Marine, A um...a warrior...of the...Jarhead Clan."

I looked at him as if he just said he was a dragon, but before I could say anything, the woman turned to me. "And what of you?"

"What of me?"

"What are you?"

I was silent for a moment as I looked her in the eye. This woman seemed as if she could strip me down with her eyes, looking right through me. After a moment, I said quietly. "I am nothing. I was
There was another long period of silence, as if she was reading everything about me without me saying a single word. Finally she said, "I see a darkness inside you, one that you have come to seek out. Perhaps there may be a way to guide you out."

"And what if I don't want to be led out?" I challenged. She was quiet before she simply said, "We shall see."

Chief gave a brief speech before the woman turned to Jake's girlfriend. Girlfriend was told something, something she apparently disagreed with, for when her mom held a hand up to say that the conversation was over, she gave a loud, frustrated groan. She then turned to Pole-Up-His-Ass and said what sounded like nearly the same thing, to which Pole-Up-His-Ass shouted, and the woman silenced him with a snap. Pole-Up-His-Ass went silent, but glared at me with barely concealed disgust. The woman then turned back to us and revealed that we'd be learning their ways. Jake was to be taught by his girlfriend, and Pole-Up-His-Ass was going to teach me. Happy happy. "Learn well, both of you, and we shall see if your insanity can be cured."
That night, Jake and I were set to join a public meal with several of the clan. Before we made our appearance, Jake and I were led to separate platforms that branched off the central spiral. Once I was led onto that platform, I was surrounded by several Na'vi women who proceeded to help me out of my green tang-top and khaki shorts. "It is a pleasure to meet you, miss Rheacran." Said a girl who I learned was named Payhoä. I tried not to look mad at her severely mispronouncing my name and simply said. "Just Rhea, please."

I learned quickly that Payhoä loved to talk-and by loved to talk, I mean this girl never fucking shut up. It's like having an annoying insect constantly buzzing in your ear. I let her and the other women flutter around me, chatting about how interesting it was to finally meet a 'Dream Walker', which was apparently their word for 'Avatars'.

When they had finished, I had on some sort of leather bindings holding up my boobs, and it was decorated with feathers, bits of bone, and other nature stuff. I also had on some sort of leggings and a really long loincloth to cover my privates. I could feel that it was held up by a thick cord that was wrapped around my waist, with part of it wrapped around the base of my tail.

They had also done my hair in a style that we referred to on Earth as 'box braids'. Once I was all done up, I was led back out onto the spiral, where I was joined by Jake and his girlfriend. I saw that Jake also had on a loincloth and leggings, and just had two simple braids in his hair, one at each temple.

His girlfriend led us further up to another platform, where a whole group of villagers, including Chief, Mother, and Pole-Up-His-Ass were gathered around a small pitfire. As soon as we approached, whoever was singing stopped and everyone proceeded to stare at us.

"G-good evening." Jake stuttered awkwardly, making me do a mental facepalm. "Please don't get up."

"Shut up, dumbass." I hissed at him, and we both carefully made our way around the circle to take open seats. The night was mostly uneventful; just some sort of cultural whatever while we ate a small meal. Once it was over, Jake's girlfriend led us up into the higher parts of the tree, to what looked like some kind of hammock type things which we would be sleeping in. It took a while, but eventually I was able to close my eyes and get to sleep.

As this happened, there was suddenly a brilliant flash of light, and as my vision swirled back into focus, I was able to make out Grace crouched over me, shining a light in my eyes and calling my name. "Rhea. Rhea! Come on back, girl. Come on." She lightly patted me on the face and moved my head back and forth until I finally regained control of my senses. I groaned as Max and Norm helped me sit up. I felt like I had just gone through an all-night bender, and the hangover was still not entirely gone. "Damn, you two were dug in like a pair of ticks!" Exclaimed Grace.

I looked over to see Jake was having about as much fun as I was; pale, sweaty and dizzy. "Are the Avatars safe?" Grace asked. I didn't have the energy to answer, so I let Jake do it.

"Yeah doc... and you're not gonna believe where we are..."
I was still nursing that hangover feeling later, when we were all eating in the pub. I was only vaguely listening in as Grace talked about our escape in the jungle-apparently that monster was called a thanator, and the folks we were with were called the Omaticaya. All I could manage to do was just sit there, poking at my meager breakfast while trying to get my head to stop pounding like a fucking drum. Eventually, I just decided to get up and leave, thinking a bit of walking around might do me some good. I just roamed about with no real destination in mind.

It wasn't until I came up a flight of stairs that I stopped and peered around the corner. Jake was sitting there in front of a projection of the Omaticaya's tree, talking to that guy Selfridge, as well as General Scar Face who I met when I first arrived. I couldn't hear what they were saying over the noise of the machinery in the room—that and that fucking headache was still pounding in my skull—, but I could see Jake repeatedly gesturing to specific areas of the tree while talking to Selfridge and Scar Face. *What the fuck...* I made to move forward more, but froze when one of the guards started to turn towards me. Not thinking very clearly in my current state, I turned around and left, the puzzlement over what I have just watched quickly fading to the corner of my mind as I sought out my bed to sleep off this fucking headache.

The next day, Jake and I were schooled on the most important people within the clan. Apparently Chief was called Eytukan, Mom was called Moat, Girlfriend was called Neytiri, and Pole-Up-His-Ass was called Tsu'tey. I still kept the name Pole-Up-His-Ass tucked in my sleeve in case I needed something to intentionally piss him off with. After it was revealed that Neytiri and Tsu'tey would become 'mated' and be the new heads of the clan in the future, Jake then proceeded to ask. "So who's this Eywa?"

"Who's Eywa?" Exclaimed Norm, as though it was the dumbest question he'd ever heard. "Only their deity, their goddess, made up of all living things! Everything they know! You'd know this if you had any training whatsoever."

"Who's got a date with the chief's daughter?" Jake asked with an irritatingly smug smirk. This caused him an Norm to have a short argument, which was abruptly ended with me smacking Jake on the back of the head and Grace declaring. "Alright, knock it off you two. Let's go. Village life starts early." Jake and I both climb into our pods and go through the connection process.

When I opened my eyes again, I was back inside my avatar body in the village. As I reached the ground and come outside of the tree I was told to head to the stream in the north end of the clearing, and that I would be receiving training from Tsu'tey today. As I approached said stream, I passed through a whole herd of those giant, six-legged horse things—which the scientists apparently referred to as direhorses. I reached the location just in time to watch Jake go tumbling from the back of a direhorse, causing both me and Neytiri to burst into a fit of giggles. "You alright there cowboy?" I called in between laughs.

"Ha ha ha. Very funny." Jake grumbled, getting to his feet as Neytiri went to fetch the horse. Suddenly, without any warning, my feet were swept out from under me and I fell onto my back. I looked up to find Tsu'tey standing over me, clubbed staff in hand and an incredibly irritating smirk on his face. "What the hell was that!?" I shouted at him.

"Element of surprise." He said in surprisingly fluent English. "You must be ready for anything. Your enemy will not make it a fair fight."
Seeing my opportunity, in one swift motion, I snatched his staff, hit him square in the chest with the clubbed end, and sent him sprawling onto his back. "And here's a good lesson for you; monologing is also a good way to get killed." I couldn't help smirking back at his furious scowl as he leaped back up to his feet.

"You both should go away!" He snapped.

"Nah, you'd miss us." Jake countered with a downright evil grin. "I knew you could speak English."

Tsu'tey scowled before turning to Neytiri and rapidly conversing to her in their native tongue. I may not have understood a single word of their language at that point, but I could tell that what he was saying was no compliment. Neytiri gave him a nod and a simple phrase before leading Jake a short distance off. Once they were gone, I turned back to Tsu'tey as he got another staff off of a direhorse who was getting a drink and barked. "Prepare yourself."

I stood ready as he approached and took a similar stance. I was immediately reminded of a situation I had faced before, where I had gotten into a fight with a gang leader back on Earth. We fought with knives and not staffs, but I still saw the resemblance. I quickly began racing through my mind of all the moves I could remember from that fight and watched him, waiting for his first move. When he yelled and leaped forward, I brought my staff up to block his downward swing. I then proceeded to bring my staff around and strike him in the ribs with the clubbed end. What I failed to notice however was that he swung the tipped end down to slice across my lower leg. I yelled at the open cut, and attempted to hit him in the chest with the club, but faster than I could react, he side-stepped and nailed me square in the back, sending me sprawling forward into the dust. "Dead." He hissed.

Oh, he was not going to win that easy. Leaping back to my feet, I made a series of rapid swings, one of which managed to catch him on the side of the head. While he was still reeling, I landed a punch to his chest and swept his feet out from under him. Admirably fast, he flung himself back up onto his feet. What followed was a series of parrying blows, neither one of us giving ground. There was a brief pause, both of us panting and sweating.

This was gonna be a long day.
Chapter 7

The next day, it was as if I could still feel how bruised I was even after I got out of the link bed. How the flying fuck does that even happen!? The method that Tsu'tey used for close combat wasn't like anything I had experienced before. He was incredibly fast and struck like a fucking hammer. I was told to head to the science office and talk to Grace. Apparently she had some sort of plan for the Avatars. Not in any rush, I took my time getting there.

When I arrived, I found Jake, Norm and Grace surrounded by boxes. "What's going on here?" I asked.

"Gettin' out of dodge." Grace talked as she continued packing. "I'm not about to let Selfridge and Quaritch micromanage this thing. There's a mobile link up at Site 26 we can work out of, way up in the mountains."

"The...Hallelujah Mountains?" Norm asked.

"That's right." Grace confirmed.

"Are you serious?"

"Yeah."

"Yes!" Norm pumped his fist in the air. When Jake and I looked at him, he said. "The legendary floating mountains of Pandora? Heard of them?"

***

With Trudy's help, all four of the Avatars were loaded into the gunship and made ready for transport. Within a couple hours, we were up and flying. As we flew, Norm was excitedly questioning both Jake and I about our experiences with the Na'vi. While I was in no mood to talk, Jake was more than happy to rattle on about his experiences with Neytiri. I simply stared out the window, watching the landscape fly by underneath us.

As we approached a massive fog bank, Grace commented that we were getting close.

"Yeah, look at my instruments." Trudy laughed. I leaned forward in my seat to see that all of the sensory things going crazy on the dashboard of the ship.

"Yup, we're in the Flux Vortex." Grace said.

"We're V.F.R from here on." Trudy added.

"What's V.F.R?" Norm asked.

"Means you gotta see where you're going."

"You can't see anything."

"Exactly! Ain't that a bitch."
As we finally emerged from the fog, I swear my jaw hit the floor at what we saw. Sure as shit, there were giant floating mountains, all covered in trees and plants, all around us. Some were connected together by vines, while others had waterfalls that tumbled down into endless air. Jake and Norm joined me in gawking, which made Trudy laugh. "You should see your faces!" She cried.

Bringing the gunship around to an isolated side of a particularly large mountain, island, whatever you want to call it, Trudy landed the ship on a small plateau that had the link chambers tucked up against the rock wall, declaring dramatically "Thank you for flying Air Pandora!"

We made our way through the airlock door and into the main sitting area. Basically it was two long rectangle rooms connected together, with the beds and sitting area in one rectangle, and the link beds in the other. As the others were sorting out who would sleep where, I spaced out as I looked over some of the pictures on the refrigerator. All of them were at Grace's old school. In each picture, Grace was surrounded by Na'Vi children, all of whom apparently were greatly enjoying themselves, if the smiles on their faces were any sort of judge.

Okay, don't tell anyone this, but...because of my lack of a proper upbringing, I had never had a standard education. Since my piss-poor asshole of a dad had pushed me out of his life, I had never been sent to a real school. I had only gained a small knowledge of how to read from watching commercials on hologram screens. Beyond that, nothing. So I couldn't help wondering just a little about what that must have been like. I had heard briefly about Grace's school when I first arrived on Pandora. I knew it was closed down, but I didn't know why. Maybe General Jackass cut their funding. I don't know. I was pulled from my thoughts by Grace calling Jake and I into the next room, where all the link beds were lined up in a row.

"Jake, you'll be in the link at the end." Grace said as she went down the line, activating the link beds one by one. Unit 1. Beulah. She's the least glitchy." As Jake began to haul himself into the link bed, Grace directed me to the bed right behind him. "As for you Rhea, you'll be taking Unit 2." I didn't respond, only proceeded to climb into the link bed. I had too much on my mind for conversation right then.

As soon as Jake and I returned to the village, we were told to go meet up with Neytiri. Apparently Tsu'tey was away hunting, and wouldn't return for several hours yet. Why did I feel a twinge of disappointment at that? We met up with Neytiri at the base of the core spiral. We followed her up it, having to run to keep up with her, until we reached the upper canopy of the tree. At their thickest, the branches were wide enough to drive a truck across.

Jake and I looked over the edge, at the ground miles and miles below us. I had to look back up cause the height was making me dizzy. We followed Neytiri out to the edges, where the branch split off into a ton of smaller ones. We could see colorful wings and tails sticking out of the leaves, and we could hear a squawking sound coming from them. Neytiri made a similar noise, and some sort of green, lizard-looking thing exploded out of the trees, landing on a pair of huge claws like a bat and giving a loud shriek. Jake threw himself over backwards with an exclamation of "Holy shit!", while I simply stared.

"Do not look in her eye." Neytiri instructed. After the two of us broke eye contact with it, Neytiri held up what I assumed was some sort of fruit, and as the beast ate, we got to hear it's name; Seze. As Neytiri made the connection with Seze, she explained. "Ikran is not horse. Once tsahaylu is made, Ikran will fly with only one hunter in the whole life." She checked the fastenings of what I guessed was supposed to be some manner of saddle, before jumping on. "To become taronyu, hunter, you each must choose your own Ikran, and he must choose you."
"When?" Jake asked.

"When you are ready." Was simply all she said. With one finally yell, Seze leaped off the branch with Neytiri on her back. Okay, it was pretty cool to watch. Both Jake and I stared over the edge of the branch as Neytiri and Seze sailed through the air with seemingly minimal effort. They executed complex maneuvers mid-flight, creating a fantastic show, leaving both of us to wonder what it would be like when we finally got to do that.

***

The next several weeks passed with Jake and I being initiated into the ways of the Na'vi. Learning the language, culture and traditions, being taught how to hunt like them, and a whole host of other stuff like that. The language was an absolute fucking pain to begin with, but in time, I managed to learn enough to piece together small sentences in Na'vi, and continued to build on it. In between the lessons on language and culture, Tsu'tey and I continued our sparring sessions. To be honest, I actually came to enjoy sparring with him.

He provided a good challenge for me, in that he was always prepared with new tactics for a match, making me think on my feet every time. It seemed the feeling was mutual, 'cause we'd have a good laugh about the match later. Hell, it even got to the point where he would congratulate me if I managed to beat him. How 'bout that! As the weeks steadily turned into months though, I began to encounter a...problem. I started to feel...conflicted. I felt a sense of belonging with the Omaticaya that I hadn't felt since...well, ever.

Take Payhoä for instance. Yeah, I know I bitched about the girl never shutting up, but to tell you the truth, I grew to like her. Annoying little chatter-box that she was, I found that she provided a sense of grounding for me. Like with her, I felt like there was someone who I could rely on. A friend, a comrade, maybe even like a sister. I liked the chick. There's no denying that.

And then there was Tsu'tey. I didn't know what the wild blue fuck was up with him, but the way I acted around him was not normal for me at all. Normally, I was very much a hit first, ask questions later kinda person. But with him, I faltered, I second-guessed, I hesitated. What the absolute fuck? I started to draw up a complete mental blank when I was near him. I couldn't think straight.

It was a combination of all this and more that put me into a mental fuck. You see, when you grow up on the streets, as I did, you grow to accept that there's no hero coming to save you. You begin to understand that the only person you can truly rely on is you. I accepted that fact a long time ago, and it's kept me alive ever since. I've only ever needed myself, no one else. So you can get the idea of how this all felt pretty fucking weird to me. I've never had any sort of community, or anything even remotely close to a family. These were all new feelings for me, and it made me half wonder if perhaps I was going completely fucking insane.

Maybe I was.
Chapter 8

One day, I was up among the higher branches, trying to sort out some thoughts in my head. Up this high, the only company I had were a few little bird-lizard-things. The semi-quiet allowed me time to sort out all my scattered thoughts, coming to terms with everything that had been happening in the past few months. This was absolutely pathetic. I'd never been this messed up about anything before!

This was just all so fucked.

"Come on out, Payhoä." I called out. "I know you're there."

After a moment, the teen girl made her way out of the main trunk of Hometree and came out to where I was sitting. When I saw the surprised look on her face, I laughed. "Don't look so shocked. There's only a handful of people who can sneak up on me." She came to sit next to me and stared at me for a long while.

"Something troubles you Rhea. What is it?" She asked.

I sighed and said. "I don't know. I just...I feel... confused. Conflicted."

"About what?"

I couldn't help laughing. "Where do I start?"

"Was it something that happened a long time ago? Was it something with your parents? Our people have experience great hardships in the past. My mother told me stories of the old conflicts. I remember one tale..."

I couldn't help smiling as she launched into another of her long-winded ramblings. I didn't feel ready to answer her questions, so I just let her keep talking on and on and on.

Suddenly, Payhoä stopped talking when she noticed where I was looking- directly at Tsu'tey. "You'd best avert your eyes, Rhea." She advised. "You know he and Neytiri will be mated. He can't be with anyone else-"

"Yes, yes, I know!" I cut her off. "So typical that the one guy I actually like is the one I can't have." I turned to look her in the eye, gripping her shoulders. "Payhoä, I need you to promise me that you'll keep this a secret. Promise me!"

"Alright! I promise!" She cried. I let go of her.

"Thanks Payhoä. You're a real friend."
Chapter 9

The next day started the same as usual. Tsu'tey and I were engaged in a morning sparring session. This time, we were focusing on hand-to-hand combat as opposed to armed combat. When Tsu'tey attempted to hook his arm under mine, I twisted about to grab him by the wrist and twisted his arm behind his back, forcing him to his knees. "That's another for me." I told him, grinning maliciously. We shared a laugh, and I let him up.

There was something in his eyes. I couldn't tell exactly what it was, but it was something. After a moment, he said. "Come. Join us on a hunt." He motioned with his head, and I followed him to where a group of men and women were waiting with direhorses ready. After retrieving my bow and arrows and my knives, I swung myself up on my horse and we all headed off into the woods. Overhead, we could hear the sounds of a few of the ikran taking off and following from the air.

After a good distance of riding, we approached a river that was a hotspot for many of the prey the clansmen liked to hunt.

Tsu'tey held up his hand and we all brought our mounts to a halt. He motioned to me, and we both dismounted. Crouching down low, I followed the tracks up over the ridge with Tsu'tey close behind. Sure enough, an entire herd of Taloiang-called Sturmbeasts by the folks at RDA- were by the river drinking their fill. Once we made a headcount of there being about a dozen individuals, we returned to the hunting party. Several of the flyers had landed as well so that they could hear the plan. Those of us on horseback would charge the herd in order to get them to panic and scatter. Up above, those on ikran would try to pick off individuals, while those of us on the ground would do the same. It was agreed among all of us that we wouldn't take down more than four animals.

Once everything was set, we all returned to our mounts. After the ikran took to the sky, those of us on horses charged, with the others whooping and hollering. As soon as the Taloiang caught sight of us, the herd took off running. I rode close by Tsu'tey as the two of us made a charge directly for the center. Just in time, I got my horse to swerve to avoid getting hit by a charging bull. A boy by the name of Takael wasn't so lucky, and ended up face-planting in the mud when his horse went down. From up above, a couple of the air-born hunters fired arrows, taking down a couple of the beasts.

I quickly surveyed my surroundings until I spotted a large bull with an open wound in his shoulder towards the front of the stampede. Grabbing hold of my bow, I leaned forward to say to my mount. "C'mon, boy! Let's go get 'em!" My horse answered with a snort and added more power to his stride. We got closer, and I knocked an arrow to my bow. Keeping my line of sight down the shaft of the arrow, I aimed and fired. Sure enough, the arrow buried itself in the bull's shoulder, causing the bull to bellow and topple over into the mud. Ha! You're my bitch! As Tsu'tey caught up with me, I couldn't help flashing a huge grin at him. And amazingly enough, he smiled back! How about that! Tsu'tey raised his bow up in the air and whooped.

Caught up in the moment, I cheered and hollered too. By the time the hunt was over, two more bulls had been felled, reaching the desired total. We set about carving up the meat and putting it into bags. After a while, we made our way back to Hometree, and the meat was taken away to be stored for the meal later that night. After we stored the last of the meat, I made to go find Jake, but stopped when I noticed Tsu'tey staring at me. "Is there something I can help you with Tsu'tey?" I asked.

"You are... an oddity, Rhea." He responded.

"And you're only just now figuring this out?" We both had a laugh before he continued. "I would like to know more about you Rhea Crane, if you will allow it."
My smile disappeared in a micro-second. "Um...now's not really the best time. Maybe some other time?"

His expression said his curiosity was not sated, but he simply nodded and said. "Very well. We're finished for the day. I'll make the arrangements, and in a few days, we'll make the journey."

"The journey where?"

"Into the mountains."

It took a moment for my head to process this. "Wait...really?"

"Yes. You have proven to me that you are ready."

***

Sure enough, just a few days after Jake had passed his test, it was now my turn. It was me and three other apprentices. Two adult hunters by the name of Îpä and Keyruit flew on their ikran overhead, calling out occasionally so the entire group would keep track of each other. Tsu'tey was on the ground with us, leading us up towering nets of boulders, over waterfalls, and across massive vines that acted as bridges from one mountain-island to the next.

Finally, we came through a tunnel and emerged close to a mountain peak. Outside, huge swarms of ikran were flying about, shrieking and squawking to each other. As we watched, Îpä and Keyruit flew in, landing their ikran on the ledge and dismounting. Tsu'tey discussed the plan of action with them in Na'vi, before he turned to me and said. "Alright. Rhea, you're first."

I stared at him for a moment before nodding and releasing a rush of breath. There was a narrow ledge that led from our alcove hideout to a broad plateau. There, several dozen ikran were all nested together. I slipped carefully along the ledge, trying to avoid looking at the dizzying drop that was right next to me. Sometimes, I swear God just loves to fuck with me. Remembering everything that Tsu'tey had told me, I reached for the coil at my waist that held a heavy weight at one end. As I came out onto the plateau, the ikran began to take notice of me.

As they screeched and roared, I tested the waters by mock-charging a few. As expected, each one I tried this with took off and flew away. I was scanning about the crowds when I finally caught sight of a yellow and blue ikran. It seemed to have noticed me too, for it turned to face me with an ear-piercing shriek. To be certain, I mock-charged this one as well. But unlike the others, this one actually lunged back at me. That was all the needed evidence. I let the coil unfurl in my hands.

"Alright big boy." I whispered. "Show me what you got."

When he lunged again, I jumped out of the way of his jaws and landed on his back. I clung to his neck as he wriggled and rolled, all the while with the others cheering me on.

I attempted to crawl my way up to his head, but was stopped when he started flapping about. He struggled so much that he fell over backwards, crushing me under him. He got back up, and I
narrowly dodged his snapping jaws, retaliating by swinging my rope so that the weighted end struck him in the head.

As I swung the rope again so that it tied his jaws shut, I could hear Tsu'tey shouting. "Make the bond, Rhea! Make the bond!" I attempted to pull the ikran's head to the ground, only for him to lunge up and send me flying. Just in time, I managed to grab hold of one of his antennas and pull myself back onto him. Gripping onto his head with my legs, I grabbed my ponytail with my free hand and brought the two together, watching as the pink nerve endings intertwined.

The ikran gave one massive shudder, then fell to the ground limp. For a while, both of us just lay still. I waited until my heart stopped pounding and my arms and legs stopped shaking. I stared into the ikran's eye, and he stared back, seeming to say 'I submit'.

After a good while, I untied the rope from around his jaws and allowed him to stand. "That's right." I whispered. "You and me...we're partners now, yeah?" I barely noticed Tsu'tey until he was standing right next to the ikran and nudging it towards the cliff edge. "The first flight will seal the bond between you two. Just remember, focus, and think."

"Focus and think." I repeated.

"When you're ready, think 'fly'." He told me.

For a moment, I simply sat there at the edge of the cliff, staring at the green blanket of forest hundreds of thousands of miles below me. Breathe, Rhea. I thought. Focus on direction. Breathe. I took one final deep breath, and thought one simple word. Fly.

Without another word, the ikran jumped from the cliff and plunged into a vertical drop. Everything was zipping by so fast, the only thing I could focus on was the ikran's head. Focus, focus, focus! I told myself. Level out!

The ikran turned on a dime, leveling out and flying straight. For a second, everything seemed to slow down, and I couldn't hear a thing over the blood rushing in my ears. After what seemed like forever, my brain snapped back into focus, and I swung my legs forward, balancing my feet near the base of the ikran's neck and holding on to his antennas with my hands. Focusing directly ahead of me, I thought clearly. Bank right.

I managed to stay balanced as my ikran tipped his body to turn to the right. To experiment, I let more directions pass through my head to him, and sure enough, he followed every one. An echoing shout made me look around, and I saw Tsu'tey come flying by on his ikran as well, catching up and keeping pace with me. He was wearing a massive smile on his face, and I lifted a hand and cheered.

He responded with cheers of his own, and we proceeded to race each other through the floating mountains. The rush of adrenaline was amazing! I was having the time of my fucking life. I never would've thought flying would be so much fun.

***
Later on, outside of my avatar body, my head was swarming with thoughts. They were wriggling about in my head like hundreds of bugs. I was far too jittery to film any video logs, so I decided to get up and walk through the military. I wandered meaninglessly from one room to the next, trying to find something to occupy my brain. A few of the soldiers attempted to flirt with me until I told them to fuck off.

It was as I was passing by the cafeteria that I stopped. Jake was sitting alone in his wheelchair, clearly lost in his own thoughts, when Quaritch came in. I tucked around and hid behind a corner to avoid being seen.

"Haven't gotten lost in the woods, have you?" Quaritch asked. "Your last report was more than two weeks ago. I'm starting to doubt your resolve. The way I see it, it's time to terminate the mission."


"No I can do this." Jake insisted.

"You already have. You give me good, usable Intel on this 'tree of souls' place." He laughed. "Yeah, I got them by the balls with that, when this turns into a shit-fight, which it will." This made me tense. Tsu'tey and I had passed over the Tree of Souls on one of the flights we had taken together, and afterwards, he had told me about the significance of that particular tree. He told about how it was the most sacred site to the Na'vi, and that outsiders were strictly forbidden to set foot there. At the time, I didn't know just how important that tree was, but I understood that holding such a place at gunpoint would be a serious blow to the Na'vi.

"I gotta finish this." Jake said. "There's one more thing. A ceremony. It's the final stage in becoming a man. If I do it, I'm one of them. They'll trust me...and I can negotiate the terms of their relocation."

There was a moment of silence before Quaritch declared. "Well you'd better get it done, corporal."

I didn't need to hear any more. I got up and started walking away. I knew I would need to handle this carefully. One wrong step could spell disaster.
Chapter 10

According to what Tsu'tey said, there was only one more step left before I would be recognized as a full member of the clan; the Uniltaron.

The Dream Hunt.

In preparation, Tsu'tey smeared some manner of body paint on me. When he finished, my entire upper body was covered in swirling patterns of body paint. Once that was done, he led me up the spiral in the core of the tree until we reached an enclosed, cavernous space formed inside the core. Several of the clan members, including Moat and Eytukan, were gathered in a circle. One man at the edge of the circle was steadily beating on a drum, while a woman was playing a flute.

Tsu'tey led me into the center of the gathered crowd, and I dropped down onto my knees. Moat held a bowl in her hand that was emanating a pale smoke, which she waved about with a fern fan. When she approached me with the bowl, I held out my hands as if to scoop up the smoke, and brought my hands up in a sweeping arch over my head. Tsu'tey had explained that this was believed to bring about a cleansing of the spirit in preparation for the ritual.

In Na'vi, Moat said. "Oh wise worm, eater of the Sacred Tree, bless this worthy hunter with a true vision." Moat had set down her bowl, and a girl handed her a piece of bark, from which she pulled a small, pale blue worm that glowed in the low light.

Just close your eyes, Rhea. I thought. Just swallow it in one go.

Closing my eyes, I opened my mouth, allowing Moat to drop the worm in. Not wanting to linger in the fucking disgusting taste, I swallowed it whole. As I did so, everyone else began chanting the same phrase in Na'vi over and over and over. "Grant her a true vision." As they said this, Eytukan reached into a jar, pulling out some manner of scorpion-looking insect. Oh fuck, here we go. I thought.

The bug made rattling and hissing sounds as it skittered across Eytukan's hand. He stepped around behind me, before holding the bug closer to my shoulder. I couldn't keep from crying out as the bug stung me in the shoulder. Fuck, that hurt! As the others continued chanting the same phrase again and again, my vision started to sway. The individual voices of the chanters started melding together. I looked over at Tsu'tey. His gaze was fixated on me, a mixture of interest, concern, and another emotion that I couldn't identify. I started feeling very light-headed as my vision continued to become more and more skewed.

Finally, my vision went completely black as I fainted.

I was standing in a gray forest. The trees were blackened and dead, and flakes of ash floated in the air. The air was so filled with ash and smoke that I couldn't see more than a few feet in front of me. Where was I?

Suddenly, the burnt forest disappeared around me, and I was flying through the air. Flying on what precisely, I had no idea. As the trees whizzed by underneath me, suddenly the sounds of people screaming filled my ears. It was so damn loud, I clapped my hands over my ears to try and block it out, squeezing my eyes tight shut. When I opened my eyes again, I was standing on the
edge of a cliff, looking down at a bank of clouds. A rumbling snarl filled my ears. I turned about to see an enormous Thanator-known to the Na'vi as the Palulukan-standing in front of me.

The great beast moved with all the grace of a cat. I stood prepared, ready to slash the fucking thing open if need be. It stalked slowly toward me, its teeth bared in a snarl. For what seemed like an eternity, neither one of us moved. Then, the beast let out a bellow, and then lowered to the ground. I don't know what the fuck possessed me to get on that thing, but I did.

With a jolt, my eyes flew open. My heart was hammering painfully against my ribs. I was coated in sweat, and I was breathing hard as though I'd just ran a marathon. Everyone was looking at me with expectant expressions. Tsu'tey knelt down and held out a hand, helping me to my feet. He allowed me to leaned on him slightly until I felt I could support myself. After a moment, Eytukan approached me, smiling as he placed a hand on my shoulder. He simply said "Come." and he and Moat led the way out of the cavern. Everyone else followed them out until Tsu'tey and I were the only ones left.

Tsu'tey looked to me, and I nodded to signal that I was ready. Tsu'tey nodded in return and proceeded out of the cave. I followed close behind.

Out on the ground level within the tree, the entire clan had gathered to see the result of the ritual. A steady murmuring spread through the crowd as I emerged out into the open. I walked into the center of the crowd, the villagers parting in front of me like water around a rock. I came to stand in front of Eytukan and Moat. Eytukan raised his hand above his head, and proclaimed in Na'vi. "You are now a daughter of the Omaticaya. You are now one of The People."

He, Moat, Tsu'tey, and Neytiri each placed their hands on my shoulders. I looked over to Tsu'tey, who gave me a warm smile in return. A touch of pride sparkled in his eyes, as well as something else that I couldn't identify at the time.

One by one, the rest of the village came forward, forming rings, each putting their hands on the shoulders of the person in front of them, until the entire clan form one enormous circle. A feeling of warmth shot through me right then, and I couldn't resist smiling as well. It was as if the spiderweb of interconnecting limbs spread all of their loyalty and support right to me.

*This must be what having a family feels like.* I thought.

For the first time that I could remember, I felt like I was in a place I belonged.

I felt like I was home.

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That night, after the ceremony was over, Tsu'tey took me out from Hometree, past the river that marked the village edge. We entered into a small grove of trees that was a good distance away from the village, ones that I hadn't seen before. All of the trees had a fuck ton of vines hanging from their branches, bathing the entire grove in a pale, purple glow, offsetting the green luminescence from the ground and the surrounding forest.
I brought my hand up to brush against the vines, making them glow brighter when I touch them.

"Welcome, Rhea, to Utral Aymokriyä." Tsu'tey tells me.

"The Tree of Voices." I translated the name.

I watch as Tsu'tey grips a handful of vines and brings the end of his ponytail up. The nerve endings within the hair rapped themselves around in the vines, and Tsu'tey closed his eyes, looking as though he was listening to something. "Here is a place that we may listen to the voices of our ancestors." He told me.

I copied what he did, gripping a handful of vines and allowing the nerve endings in my ponytail to wrap around them. It's kinda hard to describe the feeling of being connected to that tree. It's sort of like my mind was behind closed doors, and connecting to the tree opened those doors. I could hear the sound of crowds of people singing. I could hear a man reciting ritualistic chants. The voices washed over me like a flood.

It was absolutely fucking amazing.

I felt a hand touch my shoulder, and I turned to see Tsu'tey looking at me with a warm smile.

"You are Omaticaya now. You're one of us." He told me. "You can now craft your own bow from the wood of Hometree."

As his words sunk into my head, I heaved a sigh. Though this torrent of feelings were slightly less confusing to me now, there was still a note of uncertainty.

Tsu'tey seemed to sense my feelings, for he asked. "Rhea? Is everything alright?"

"Yeah...yeah, absolutely." I replied.

His frown clearly displayed the response of 'bullshit'. "What is it? What's wrong?"

I turned my gaze to the ground before I said. "It's just...this is all so...new to me. I...I never had anything like this."

"Anything like what?" Tsu'tey pressed.

I couldn't believe I was about to tell him this. I had no fucking idea what compelled me to tell him something that I had never told absolutely anyone ever. If you asked me today why I told him of my past, I would tell you that I have no clue.

But, there I went anyway.

"I...I've never had a community, or...anything even remotely close to a family." I told him.

"You didn't? What of your parents?"

Another long pause passed before I simply shook my head.

He looked as though he wanted to ask more, but thankfully he didn't.

"You...have never known love then?" He asked.

"Honestly...I'm not even sure I know what love feels like."
The next silence was so long it was almost painful, until I felt his hand beneath my chin, bringing my face up so that I had no choice but to look him in the eye. He spoke so quietly it was almost a whisper. "I could help you that, if you'll let me." Even though I was a complete newbie in regards to sex—yes, I had never had a man in my bed. Shut up—I wasn't so stupid as to completely miss what he was insinuating. "But...aren't you already promised-" I started.

"Leave that to me." He cut in. "Just give me a few days to work things out, alright?"

I thought about it for a moment, and said. "Alright. I trust you."

Now, before you say anything, no this didn't lead to any nighttime fucking beneath a tree. We agreed to postpone officially becoming a thing until Tsu'tey could get all the messy details taken care of. Though, if I had known what was about to happen, I may have gone for it anyway.
The next couple of days I spent trying to think up a way to get Jake to spill about his mission with Quaritch. I ran over dozens of scenarios in my head, and all of them seemed completely and utterly fucking idiotic when I spoke them out loud. Finally, I just decided to play it by ear. The following day, we were hanging about in the rig in the mountains in the late afternoon.

I strolled up to Jake just as he finished his video log. "Hey, cowboy." I said. He responded with a half-aware "Hey."

"Your Dream Hunt's just around the corner isn't it?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"What d'you suppose will happen after?"

"Dunno." His one-word responses made me frown.

"I don't." I started.

"Hey! Crane!" Grace's yell from across the hall cut me off. "I need you over here!"

Fuck you, Grace. I thought.

"Seems you and Princess have been getting pretty close." I observed.

"Yeah." Jake responded half-heartedly.

I opened my mouth to continue, only for Grace to tell. "Crane! Get your ass over here!" Growling in frustration, I left to see just what the fuck Grace wanted. I'm not done with you, cowboy. I thought. Not by a long shot.

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It was the morning after Jake's Dream Hunt. I had tried several times to get more information out of Jake, but they all failed, either because he was occupied with Neytiri, or because I was called away for something else. It was after another failed attempt that I was approached by Tsu'tey and offered to join another hunt.

We spent most of the morning riding through the jungle, which culminated in the felling of four Talioang. It was as we were packing up the meet to return to the village that we all heard a distant rumble combined with the sound of snapping trees. "Do you hear that?" Tsu'tey asked me.

"Yeah." I replied. "It sounds like the equipment from the base. It sounds like it's coming from..." The realization fell like a bomb. All at once, Tsu'tey barked an order, and we all leaped back onto our horses and rode at a full gallop through the brush. The noise of the plows was getting louder.
and louder until we finally rode into a clearing. As feared, the noise had been coming from where the Tree of Voices once stood.

All that stood there now was torn up earth and felled trees. Several massive plows moved about, scraping up the tree trunks.

The entire hunting party was completely silent as they gazed at the destroyed grove. I looked at Tsu'tey. As he stared, his face twisted with rage. "Tsu'tey..." I whispered. Whatever I planned to say, the words died in my throat.

"Back." He snarled. "Back to Hometree. Now." Nobody said anything else as we turned the horses and rode back toward the village.

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It didn't take long at all for news of what happened to spread throughout the entire tree. By midday, the entire clan was howling for vengeance. Gathered in the center of the tree, Moat motioned for silence.

The ride back had given me time to think up an idea. As soon as I had it fully planned, I had brought it to Eytukan's attention. We had debated and argued for a while, until we finally reached a compromise. It wasn't one that I was particularly happy with it, but he refused to hear more on the matter.

Once the rest of the clan was silent, Eytukan explained the plan; a war party of clan warriors would lead an assault on the base. Meanwhile, I would slip in and attempt to assassinate Quaritch. The part that I wasn't particularly happy with was that Tsu'tey was announced to be leading the war party. To be clear: I had no doubt that Tsu'tey would be able to handle himself. I just wasn't sure how well he would be able to match up to gunships and mech suits.

As if he read my mind, Tsu'tey put a hand to my shoulder and said quietly. "You don't need to fear for me, Rhea. I shall take down many of them before they take down a few of us."

I gave him a grim smile and replied. "Then I'll have to find General Jackass fast, before too many die."

"Tsu'tey!"

The crowd parted as Jake and Neytiri returned.

And they were holding hands.

I could figure out pretty quickly what was happening. And I wasn't the only one. Tsu'tey marched up until he was nearly nose-to-nose with Jake, and said. "You...You mated with this woman?" I could hear Grace deliver an "oh shit" from somewhere in the crowd.

Neytiri stood tall as she said. "We are mated before Eywa. It is done."

You fucking idiot. I thought. This was precisely the reason why Tsu'tey and I held off officially
becoming a thing. Rushing headlong into it would've only caused problems. Tsu'tey stood with his eyes closed, as if considering what to say.

"Brother, please!" Jake pleaded. "Do not attack the Sky People. Many Omaticaya will die if you do-"

"No!" Tsu'tey's shout was so loud, it echoed through the tree. "You are not my brother! You never will be!"

"I am not your enemy!" Jake snapped, pointing up towards the sky. "The enemy is out there, and they are very powerful! I can talk to them-"

"No more talk!" Tsu'tey cut him off.

I stepped up to speak. "Jake, we already have a plan in place." I explained what was going to happen, but Jake was still shaking his head. "No, no, you'll never make it. Even if you somehow make it past the guards, you'll never take down Quaritch. You haven't seen what he can do."

"He hasn't seen what I can do!"

"It's no use, Rhea. It will fail." He looked toward the ground and grimaced, as if he was about to say something painful. Finally, he looked up and swept his gaze over the crowd. He said in Na'vi. "I have something to say. To all of you." His eyes settled on Neytiri in particular as he said in English. "The words are like stones in my heart." But before he could say anything more, Grace suddenly collapsed to the ground. Jake and I shared a glance as we realized what was going on. "Okay...look..." He started. "I was sent here to-"

He didn't get to finish as he too collapsed. I turned to Tsu'tey. "Tsu'tey, listen to me." I urged. "They're going to-"

It felt as though I had been grabbed by the neck and was being yanked backwards. My vision went out like a light, and I had the feeling of passing back into my human body. I was barely awake and out of the pod before someone was seizing my arm and hauling me to my feet. I immediately aimed a punch at the guy's face, which he managed to block. I just recalled the sounds of Grace and Norm shouting before something hard struck me in the head and I blacked out again.

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