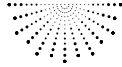


CHAPTER ONE



I HAVE A WAY WITH MONSTERS. Unfortunately, this chickcharney seems immune to it.

When I was three, my dad captured a chickcharney and brought it home for me. I tried to hug it. You can't blame me. Chickcharnies look like owls on stilts with amazing monkey tails. Adorable.

Anyway, the chickcharney, shockingly, did not want to be hugged, even by a princess. For a flightless bird, it tried very hard to take flight. Finally, Dad whisked it away and promised me a more huggable version. I still have the toy, which has had both eyes and a leg replaced due to overcuddling.

Now, nine years later, I'm trying to capture a live chickcharney, and I swear it knows how much abuse its stuffed twin endured. It is not falling for any of my tricks, despite the fact that I am offering mealworm-and-hazelnut suet, which chickcharnies love the way I love honey cakes.

I'm crouched behind a rock, watching the

chickcharney bob around, totally ignoring the suet. Finally it stops, as if catching the scent.

When the chickcharney turns toward me, my inner toddler squeals. It is truly the most adorable of the bird monsters, all huge eyes and fluffy feathers and those ridiculous legs. Its fuzzy body bobs as it walks to the first nugget of suet. To reach it, the chickcharney has to bend almost in half, like a human touching their toes. It swings down, grabs the nugget and levers up. As it chomps the treat, it squeaks in delight. Then it spots the next piece.

When the beast heads my way, I suppress a shiver of glee. I've chosen my spot perfectly. I am the royal monster hunter, after all. Well, royal monster hunter *in training*, but I do carry the ebony sword.

As Clan Dacre, I'd been raised to be a monster hunter. Yet my training doubled when I took the sword, and today I can see how it's paid off. Chickcharnies are nervous beasts, but this one is heading straight for me, not suspecting a thing. I'm downwind and hidden behind long grass, wearing a tunic and leggings that blend with the green fronds.

The chickcharney keeps bobbing toward me. When it hears a sound, its head swivels all the way around to look behind it. I tense, certain it's about to bolt. But it only peeps twice and then continues toward my hiding place as it scoops up the suet-chunk trail.

It's five feet away. Four. Three . . .

Dry twigs crackle and paws thump the hard earth as something plows through the grass. A flash of brown fur. Then jagged teeth flash as the intruder squeals in rage . . . and charges the chickcharney.

“Jacko, no!”

The young jackalope pretends not to hear me. He’s running at the chickcharney, I’m running at him, and the chickcharney is running as fast as its wobbly stilt-legs will carry it. It’s not fast enough, though, and Jacko leaps with a squeal of victory that turns to a grunt of surprise as I dive and grab him.

I land flat on my face, outstretched hands clutching Jacko’s furry body. Once caught, he only gives a chirp of confusion. Then he sees me facedown in the dirt, and his chirp turns to an alert cry as he wriggles free and nudges me with his antlers.

I groan and lift my head. The chickcharney is long gone. There’s just my half-grown jackalope companion, chattering at me. With long, powerful hind legs and a slender body, Jacko looks like a hare . . . if a hare had striped fur, pointed teeth and tiny antlers.

Jackalopes are predators and a full-grown one could take down a chickcharney. At half size, though, Jacko is just dangerous enough to spook the poor beast.

“I was not being attacked by a chickcharney, Jacko,” I say.

His chirrup says he’s not so certain. In fact, he’s quite sure he’s just rescued me from a terrible death at the talons of a deformed owl, and he nudges my hand, looking for the petting he so richly deserves.

I give him a pat. He did think he was protecting me, and despite our training, he’s still too young to grasp the difference between threats and targets. Which is why *someone* was supposed to be watching him.

When a giant black wolf charges from the brush, I

don't pull my sword. I don't even scramble to my feet. I just skewer the warg with a glare.

"Hello, Malric. Great job taking care of Jacko."

People say that Clan Dacre can understand the speech of monsters. Not exactly. We just learn to interpret their body language. Yet the more time I spend with beasts, the more I suspect they understand a greater portion of *our* speech than we realize.

Malric's snort insists that caring for a jackalope is beneath his dignity, but I don't miss the sheepish look in his eyes. He stalks over and grabs Jacko by the scruff of his neck. Jacko hangs there, limp, even when Malric gives him a shake and a growl.

A shadow passes over us. I squint up as a white cloud floats down to land on four roan-red hooves. The pegasus filly looks at Malric and Jacko and then tosses her red mane with a whinny of annoyance.

"No, you didn't miss the party invitation, Sunniva," I say. "Thank *you* for staying away while I hunted. Unfortunately, your fellow beasts weren't as patient. So much for catching a chickcharney."

Leaving my beasts at the castle hadn't been an option. Jacko needs a steel cage to keep him from coming after me, and even then, he's been known to squeeze through the bars. I refuse to corral or bridle Sunniva—staying with me must always be her choice. As for Malric, well, this isn't exactly an authorized hunt. Mom thinks my brother and I are off enjoying a picnic, which means we need my personal bodyguard, and that's the warg.

I push to my feet and look around. "I'm sure Rhydd won't catch one either, so—"

Malric woofs. It's a deep chuff, and I follow his gaze to see the chickcharney perched on a rock fifty feet away, watching us.

Maybe I haven't lost my chance after all.

"Malric—" I begin.

Before I can finish asking, he pins Jacko under one massive paw. The jackalope grumbles but lies still. I thank Malric with a nod. Then I pull an apple from my pocket and give it to Sunniva, while politely asking her to stay here. Her whinny agrees.

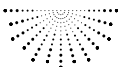
Beasts under control, I leave the chickcharney watching them with interest while I creep through the long grass. On all fours, I make my way toward the monster, ease behind it and toss a suet pellet over its head. It peeps and gives a start. Then it smells the treat. As it gobbles up that one, I toss another into the space between us. The chickcharney trots over and—

Hooves pound the earth, the very ground vibrating beneath them.

A massive black horse leaps out from the forest. A steed with an iridescent horn. The unicorn charges, a rider clinging to his back. Rhydd grins and lifts his net as his unicorn, Courtois, bears down on the chickcharney.

My chickcharney.

CHAPTER TWO



I STAND my ground as my brother gallops straight at me. For twins, we don't look much alike. We share the same honey-brown curly hair, though he now keeps his short. His skin is the color of his hair; mine is a little darker. I have our mom's heart-shaped face and our dad's green eyes; Rhydd has Dad's square face and Mom's brown eyes. Those eyes dance as he whips past me.

"Hey! That's my chickcharney," I shout as the bird monster runs for its life.

"Nope!" Rhydd yells back. "You set the rules, Rowan. Remember?"

The last time we hunted, Rhydd had found the target—a hoop snake—first, but then he'd lost it and when I captured it, he cried foul. So this time, I'd made a rule that being the first to find a monster did not mean it was yours. I'd meant that you couldn't claim a target after you'd lost it. Apparently, I hadn't been specific enough.

"You can still catch this one," Rhydd calls. "Just beat me to it. You've got a pegasus."

I grumble under my breath. He knows I can't ride Sunniva yet.

"I'm sure Malric will give you a lift," Rhydd shouts as they disappear in a cloud of dust.

The warg fixes me with a look that dares me to try it.

"Thanks," I mutter.

Malric lifts his paw from Jacko, who leaps up and stands, poised on all fours, back straight, looking at me and chirping, as if offering his services as a mount. I chuckle and scoop him up.

Rhydd's right—I made the rules—and this is just a game. He'll crow over his victory, but the next time we hunt, he'll be the one who adjusts the rules to be more fair.

I really shouldn't have wagered that the loser had to attend the boring state luncheon tomorrow. I *wouldn't* have agreed if my fellow monster hunter in training, Dain, hadn't sworn he had a foolproof method for capturing chickcharnies. Now Rhydd and Alianor will catch a chickcharney first, and I'll be stuck at that luncheon. I could get my revenge by insisting Dain join me, but the only thing worse than sitting through those speeches would be sitting through them with Dain grumbling beside me.

A horse tears past to my left, on course to help Rhydd. The rider is a girl with light-brown skin and braided light-brown hair, her blue eyes glinting. It's Alianor, my friend and Rhydd's partner on this hunt.

Alianor waves as she passes.

I sink to the ground. "At least someone's partner stuck around."

Jacko hops onto my lap, looks into my face and chirps. I scratch behind his antlers. “Yes, you stuck around. Dain, however, did not.”

When Jacko hisses, I twist and notice Malric staring behind me, his narrowed gaze fixed on something that requires his attention, but not his concern.

A boy creeps through the long grass. He’s my brother’s height but thinner. His ebony hair is tied at the nape of his neck and his skin, a shade darker than mine, almost blends with the shadows cast by the long grass.

“Trying to sneak up on me?” I say to Dain.

“No point with those two glaring at me.”

“Malric’s just watching you. It’s Jacko who’s glaring. They’re my bodyguards for when my human partner doesn’t stick around. I’m teaming up with Alianor next time.”

“Oh, so I guess that means you don’t want this?” He lifts a burlap bag. Inside it, something peeps in alarm.

I scramble to my feet. “You caught a chickcharney?”

He carefully lowers the bag around the bird, holding it in place. I see a familiar black spot on its beak.

“You caught *my* chickcharney,” I say. “The one I was hunting.”

“The one we were both hunting. You were luring it in while I was setting a trap in case it got spooked. Or in case your blasted bunny tried to *attack* it.”

Jacko chitters at him, teeth flashing.

“First your jackalope, and then your brother,” Dain says. “It was pretty much a guarantee that something would spook your chickcharney, princess.”

I squint out over the long grass. “So if you caught my target, what are Rhydd and Alianor chasing?”

“I have no idea.”

I laugh and crawl over to examine the chickcharney. Dain crouches over it as we study the specimen. Dain might not seem excited by the creature, but his dark eyes gleam with interest, and he lets strands of hair fall into his face without impatiently shoving them back. We study the beast and discuss it, and I sketch it for my journal as Dain holds it without complaint.

Then we prepare to release it. Alianor will grouse about us not proving we caught it—being from a bandit clan, she always expects a trick. Yet Rhydd knows I wouldn't lie, and a training exercise is no excuse for traumatizing a beast.

I carry the chickcharney a reassuring distance from *my* beasts. I may also give it a cuddle. A very small one, and only because it's already snuggled into my arms. I bend and set it down with murmurs and feather-strokes. It peeps, running its tail along my arm as if petting me back. I give it one last suet pellet for the road. Then I rise and step away.

The chickcharney tilts its owl head, looking at me. Then it peeps, hops closer and wraps its tail around my leg.

“No, princess,” Dain calls.

I glance at him, my brows rising.

“No, you do not need a pet chickcharney,” he says.

I roll my eyes and give the beast another pat before I try to back up again. That delicate but strong tail tightens around my boot.

“Absolutely not,” Dain calls. “You’re a monster hunter, not a monster collector. Stop taking them home.”

I glower his way. “I have never taken a beast home. They follow me willingly. Well, except that one.” I hook my thumb at Malric, who watches us with baleful yellow eyes.

“And the gryphon?”

I straighten indignantly. “That is not the same, and you know it.”

Before I could become the royal monster hunter-elect, the council insisted that I hunt down the gryphon that killed my aunt and wounded my brother. While I was training for that, the gryphon found us. I hadn’t trusted the council to believe I killed it, so we brought it back to the castle alive, where we’d discovered it was pregnant and decided to let it live so we could study both mother and baby.

So, yes, technically, I brought the gryphon home. Still

...

“It’s not the same thing,” I say again.

Dain shrugs. “If you insist, princess.” His face stays serious, but I don’t miss the amusement twinkling in his eyes. I huff and turn to the chickcharney.

“I’m not taking it home,” I say. “Now, if it were an orphaned baby that wanted to follow me, then it would be an excellent opportunity to study—”

“No.”

I glare at him. “I said *baby*, which this is not.” I crouch and unwrap the chickcharney’s tail from my leg. “You’re fine. If you ever see me again, feel free to say hello, but you belong out here.”

I scratch behind its owl-like ear flaps, and it rubs against my hands.

“Princess . . .” Dain growls.

I straighten. “I was saying goodbye. Now begone, tiny monster. I have no more suet—or petting—for you.”

The beast peeps up at me. Then the grass swishes, and the chickcharney startles in alarm. Dain steps toward us, his face fixed in a look that has the chickcharney toddling off, flapping its useless wings.

I chuckle. I don’t interfere, though. Part of being the royal monster hunter is doing what’s best for the beasts, which is to leave them alone unless they are injured or orphaned or otherwise unable to care for themselves. As I watch it go, something tickles my attention.

I glance around, frowning. I’m not sure what I picked up—a sound, a smell, a flicker of movement? Dain’s chasing the chickcharney away. Jacko’s napping in the grass. Malric is watching us with his annoyed-babysitter stare and Sunniva . . .

Sunniva had been eating when I glanced over. Now she’s stopped, her head up. With a whinny, she races to my side and presses tight against me, a solid wall of white horsehair.

When I found Sunniva, she was alone. She shouldn’t have been. Even full-grown mares live with a herd. While Sunniva *seemed* fine, she still wanted her herd, and now she has it with us, so when she’s frightened, she runs to me.

As I scan the sky, I get that feeling again—a ripple in the air, stirring the hairs on my neck.

“Princess?”

Dain follows my gaze and shades his eyes. Then he

backs my way, reaching for his bow as I withdraw my sword. It's heavy in my hand, polished steel and ebony wood with an obsidian blade.

"Your bow," he says, without turning, hearing only the *thwick* of my blade leaving the scabbard. I'm more comfortable with my sword, but he's right.

As I switch to my bow, I call, "Jacko!"

The jackalope races over, and I point down, a command that tells him to take cover at my feet. Well, no, I think he believes it means "protect Rowan's feet," but the end result is the same.

I nock an arrow just as Sunniva bumps me. Jacko chitters at her, and she two-steps, her dainty roan-red hooves coming too close to the jackalope for my liking. I give her a hard look, and she tosses her mane, hot breath trumpeting from her nostrils.

I try drawing my bowstring, but she's still too close. Malric lumbers over and nudges Sunniva aside to let her huddle against him.

"Thank you, Malric," I say.

His grunt says we're all overreacting. He doesn't see or smell a threat.

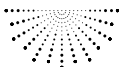
He might be right. Still, I keep scanning the empty sky.

A distant shout makes me jump, but it's only Alianor, her triumphant cry suggesting they've caught their quarry. As for ours, the chickcharney watches us, unconcerned. Then it realizes Dain is distracted and makes a tentative hop back in my direction. Dain stamps his foot at the beast, and I open my mouth to say something just as a thin gray shape shoots from the nearby forest.

THE GRYPHON'S LAIR

I catch a glimpse of a fox-like head with tufted ears and a long muzzle opening to reveal rows of razor-sharp teeth. Bat-like wings flap twice, and the beast dives straight at Dain.

CHAPTER THREE



“WYVERN!” I shout.

I spot an outcropping of rock we can use for cover, but it’s too late for that. I run at Dain. He’s a dozen feet away, and that seems to be where the wyvern is aiming, but just before I reach him, I see it’s actually going for the chickcharney, who’s bobbing in confusion at my shout. I swerve and leap onto the chickcharney instead. The beast gives one bleating cry of alarm before huddling under me, cheeping in delight, as if I’d tackled it in a hug.

“Rowan!” Dain shouts, just as the wyvern’s claws scrape my back. My hardened leather tunic protects me, but I still feel the impact. I let out a grunt and roll, throwing the startled chickcharney aside. It keeps rolling, long legs pumping uselessly, as I leap to my feet and pull my sword.

The wyvern dives at me again. An arrow hits its wing and it aborts course, veering up, screaming. As it wheels on us, a second wyvern appears above it.

“Cover!” I shout. “Take cover!”

I grab Jacko, run for the outcropping of rock and dive into it. Dain follows, slamming into me, and at a peep of alarm, I turn to see him holding the chickcharney. He looks down at the monster bird as if to say, "How'd that get there?" before shoving it aside.

We crawl into a spot where an overhang of rock protects us from aerial attack. Malric barricades us, snarling and snapping as the wyverns scream. I catch sight of one. It's purplish-blue, which means it's female. The other is brownish-orange—male. A mated pair.

The female is as large as Sunniva, with a long, whipping arrowhead tail and clawed back feet. Her shadow passes over us, reminding me of the gryphon, and my blood chills at the memory.

While the wyverns aren't eager to tangle with Malric, they will. I know that. They're sizing up the situation, and they'll soon realize that the two of them can take him on.

"We need to . . ." I trail off as I look up at the rocky overhang.

"Yeah," Dain mutters. "They can't attack us, but we can't attack them either."

I wriggle to the left, past the overhang.

"Princess," Dain warns.

I keep wriggling. I'm still protected enough, and the wyverns are busy with Malric. Another two inches gives me an arrow-sized gap. Every few heartbeats, one of the massive beasts flies overhead.

I hesitate, hand on my bow. Then I say to Dain, "There's a spot here. You're better. You should take it."

As I edge away, he eases into the spot. He peers out and then grunts. With Dain, grunts and scowls are a

language all of their own. This particular noise is satisfaction, acknowledging I've found a spot he can indeed use.

When he grunts again, I translate that one to surprise. Concerned surprise. Something's not right.

That's when I realize I don't hear the flapping of the wyverns' leathery wings.

I cock my head to listen. The chickcharney peeps, and Jacko growls like an older child warning a younger one to be silent.

I can detect the sound of the wyvern wings, but they're moving away. I exhale, rocking back against Dain, opening my mouth to say—

Sunniva screams, and I bolt out from the rocks so fast I bash my head. I reel, and Dain catches my arm to pull me back, but I wrench free and run.

Sunniva is twenty feet away, rearing onto her hind legs as the female wyvern snaps at her. Shouting, I bear down and pull my sword, Malric at my heels. An arrow hits the wyvern in the flank, but the beast barely seems to notice. The wyvern snaps again at the filly, catching her behind the neck.

"Sunniva!" I scream. "Run!"

The pegasus breaks away, blood flecking from her wound. She doesn't run, though. She wheels and batters the wyvern with her hooves. Another arrow passes, this one missing its target. A dark shape blocks the sun. The male wyvern. He shoots straight up into the air. Then he hovers there, and I know what's coming. I know exactly what's coming.

"Sunniva!"

I run so hard I can't breathe. Can't see either, the

world tinged with red. In that red, I make out Sunniva, rearing, her hooves slashing as she fights the female wyvern, unaware of the male plummeting toward her. I reach her and . . .

I don't think about what I'm doing. I react as I have been trained, my aunt Jannah's voice sounding in my head.

Protect your mount, Rowan. Always remember that it's a prey animal. If your mare is attacked, don't fight alongside her—you risk being trampled. Get onto her back. Fight together.

I shove my sword into its scabbard, and when Sunniva comes down, front legs on the ground, I grab her and swing onto her back. That's when I realize my mistake. This isn't my mare. It's an unbroken pegasus filly.

Sunniva screams as if this is a fresh attack. She rears, and I wrap my hands in her mane, clinging for dear life.

"Sunniva!" I shout. "Hold on! I'll get off!"

She doesn't seem to hear me. I clutch her neck and keep talking, babbling, my mouth by her ear as she writhes and bucks.

Get off. Just get off her.

I can't. I see the ground below and those flashing hooves, and I know I cannot jump off. Before I found her, she'd struck my trainer, Wilmot, with one of those hooves, and it addled his mind. He's slowly recovering, but he's said many times that he's lucky to be alive.

If I drop from Sunniva's back, she'll trample me.

"Run!" I shout, knocking my heels into her sides. "Just run!"

Please run. We can do this. Run, and I'll keep you safe.

Instead, something bumps my leg, and I twist to see her wings extending.

“No!” I shout.

She can't take off with me on her back. Her wings won't support the two of us.

Teeth flash beside me. It's the male wyvern, with his huge jaws and triple rows of teeth. Leaping onto Sunniva caused enough commotion to thwart his dive, but now he's trying to grab me as Sunniva writhes.

Sunniva flaps those beautiful white-feathered wings. One smacks the wyvern, and he drops. Then the filly lifts off. She manages to get a few feet from the ground only to falter, wings beating madly.

I need to get off her back, let her fly. I have no idea how high we are, but I roll to the side and drop. I hit the ground hard, pain rocking through me.

Something catches my leg. I look to see the female wyvern's jaws clamped around my boot. She swings me into the air. As I dangle aloft by one leg, the ground thunders and a voice screams, “Rowan!”

I catch a glimpse of Courtois charging across the grassland. Then my sword starts to slip from its scabbard. I yank it out as I hang there, the wyvern hovering with me in her jaws. She whips her head, and I sail upward, but I keep my hand on my sword and I slash. The tip catches her in the throat.

The wyvern drops me. As I hit the ground, I clamp tight on my weapon. It stays in my hand, *and* I manage not to land on the blade. I leap to my feet and slash at the wyvern as she dives. She sees the blade, lets out a terrible shriek and tries to divert course. I follow, twisting around as my blade whirls. It strikes her neck again. She screams. Then she hits the ground with an earth-quaking thud.

My gaze shoots to the sky. Sunniva is in flight, hovering as she watches us. To my left, Courtois swings toward me with surprising grace for a creature the size of a draft horse.

The unicorn charges at the fallen wyvern. On his back, Rhydd has his sword out, ready to strike the killing blow. Instead, at the last second, Courtois ducks, nearly sending Rhydd flying over his head. The unicorn's horn impales the wyvern. Still galloping, Courtois lifts the beast aloft and throws it aside. Then he wheels and slows, snorting, his front hooves pounding the ground, ready to trample the wyvern if it stirs.

It does not stir.

"Prince Rhydd!" Dain shouts.

Rhydd and I look up just as a shadow passes over. The male wyvern hovers above my brother. Then it dives.

Rhydd doesn't need to command the unicorn. This was my aunt's steed. Courtois hears Dain's shout, and he moves even before he can see the reason for it. He plows forward . . . and almost mows me down.

As I scramble away, Malric charges, snarling at Courtois. Malric turns that snarl on the wyvern as it veers my way. Seeing the massive warg, the wyvern feints to the side.

I swing at the wyvern. My sword slices into its leg. It screams. An arrow hits its wing, then another in the same spot, tearing the leathery skin. The beast lands and rears up. It only has two legs—back ones. I've injured one of those, and it teeters before finding its balance.

The wyvern's tail whips, its arrowhead slicing through the air. Malric stands beside me, growling. We face off

against the male wyvern. We're close enough for me to see its fox-like head covered in fine red hair. Its eyes are reptilian, slitted pupils fixed on me. When its jaws open, I get far too close a look at those triple rows of razor teeth.

A thump sounds behind me, with a quick, "It's me," from Rhydd, so I'm not startled.

My brother moves up beside me. Malric growls, telling Rhydd that we have this under control and he is interfering. I shoot Rhydd a glare, but only because he should stay mounted and protect his leg, still healing from the gryphon attack.

"Courtois stole my quarry," Rhydd murmurs with a smile. "I can't let you take down *two* wyverns."

The wyvern snaps at us but stays back, facing us as its head bobs, surveying the situation.

From behind us comes a whinny and the *thomp-thomp* of hooves over hard ground.

"Took you long enough," Rhydd yells without turning. "You missed all the fun."

"Looks like you're still having it," Alianor says. "If your idea of fun is facing off against a wyvern the size of a small house."

The wyvern rears and unfurls his wings.

"He *is* kinda big," Rhydd says, as the shadow of those wings plunges us into darkness.

"Not quite the size of a small house, though," I say.

"Still, really big." His voice quavers so slightly that no one else would notice.

"I'd like to drive it off if we can," I say, raising my voice as the wyvern shrieks. "They were only looking for dinner."

“Agreed.”

“On the count of three, we’ll charge. Make a lot of noise. Brandish your sword and—”

The wyvern strikes with the speed of a cobra, that snake-like neck springing. I’m mid-word when there’s suddenly an open pair of massive jaws coming straight for my head.

I fall back, sword slashing up. The broadside strikes the beast just as a tooth rips into my cheek. Pain, sharp and fierce. Jaws clamp on my shoulder but are stopped by the hardened tunic, and I slam my sword into the beast’s head.

The wyvern screams and falls back. Blood streams from its side and flecks spatter from Rhydd’s sword. Malric has hold of the beast’s leg. The wyvern wheels on the warg, and I raise my sword to strike. A stone *thwacks* against the side of its head. The wyvern lets out a terrible cry as it spins on Dain, now holding his slingshot. It’s then that I see Jacko . . . *on* the wyvern’s back, his teeth clamped onto its neck. The wyvern’s wings extend, ready for takeoff.

“Jacko!”

I run, but Alianor is there first, plucking Jacko off as the wyvern crouches for flight. The huge beast doesn’t notice—it has just spotted its mate, lying dead on the ground. As the wyvern flaps over to land beside her, we stand guard, everyone brandishing their weapons. Jacko is in his shelter spot at my feet, and Malric stands beside me. Sunniva has taken cover in the forest. The wyvern hisses our way a few times but stays with its mate, nudging and licking at her.

My heart twists as I whisper, “I’m sorry.” I *am* sorry that we had to kill this beast’s mate, and yet *had to* are the key words there. Even if we’d given up the chickcharney—which I’m not sure I could ever do—the beasts wouldn’t have been content with that small meal. We had no choice but to fight.

“Let’s back up,” I murmur. “If it will let us leave, we should do that.”

“Are you okay?” Rhydd asks, glancing over.

Hot blood trickles down my cheek, and my shoulder aches, but I’m fine and say so.

We start our retreat, gazes fixed on the wyverns. Malric stays in place to give us cover. Once we’re about twenty feet away, he allows himself to retreat. Two more steps and I hear a peeping, and look over to see the chickcharney running after us as fast as its stilt-legs will allow, tail whipping as it chirps, as if to say, “You forgot me!”

Dain sighs. Then he pockets his slingshot, jogs over and scoops up the chickcharney, which peeps in alarm. Dain runs back with it under his arm like a ball.

“Looks like you have a chickcharney after all, princess.”