

Prologue

Keshaar opened his eyes and shuddered against the stone wall of the cave. Wind from the storm chilled on all sides as rain splattered at the entrance of their aerie. He blinked again in the dark, letting his eyes adjust as much as they could, and looked around the cave for his brother. He called out, his voice nearly swept away by the gale outside.

“Zan!” The young gryphon scanned for movement before he shuffled to his feet and flapped his awkward wings. They were large, almost too large in proportion to his body, and were covered with a blend of gryphlet down and fledgling plumage. It wouldn’t be long before he could fly, before they could both fly. If their parents didn’t come back soon, they just might have a chance at survival.

“Brother!” he called again. His eyes finally caught movement at the mouth of the cave. There, another small body lay huddled against the wind and rain that ravaged the outside. But what had driven Zanthar to sit over there? It was hardly bearable in the back of the cave, much less at the opening where the chilled, wind-lashed rain soaked the stone.

Fluffing his feathers in anticipation, Keshaar crept to the mouth of the cave. “Brother, you should come inside,” he murmured, wrapping the slightly smaller gryphon in one of his partially feathered wings. Green eyes evaded Keshaar’s own yellow ones, and he felt a flicker of fear at his brother’s avoidance. He hoped Zanthar wasn’t thinking of leaving again. Keshaar needed them to stick together. Their parents would be back soon, they would return, and when they did, everything would be fine.

He probed his mind, feeling for the bond that kept them both connected, but there was only emptiness where he used to be able to feel his brother’s presence. Zanthar had cut him out, had shut down his end of the bond.

The exposed rim was as cold as Keshaar had predicted, but he remained at his twin’s side, comforting his sibling as best he could, gently grooming the feathers on Zanthar’s neck. Finally his twin shuffled, and Keshaar moved slightly, gold eyes finally meeting his brother’s brilliant green.

“They’re not coming back.” The voice was a harsh whisper, and Keshaar felt his fear sink deep into his bones, burning through his veins like ice. No. They will come back; they have to come back. Neither he nor Zan had fully fledged yet. If their parents didn’t come back soon, they would starve, or freeze. Die in their own home, the one place where they were supposed to always be safe.

“Of course they’ll come back, Zan. They’re just out hunting. The rain probably delayed them a little, that’s all.” The words died in his throat as he felt Zanthar tremble beside him. Five years; they were both only five years old. Still too young to be left on their own.

“I’m scared, Brother.” Again it was the faintest of whispers, just barely in the range of gryphonic hearing. Keshaar was scared too. What would have kept their parents away for so long? What could have happened to them? Keshaar looked away, unable to meet his brother’s eyes, and trying not to tremble himself.

It felt as if they were on the edge of a canyon, with only a little ground to hold on to, and the whole world stretched out below. An exhilarating thing for a flighted gryphon, but terrifying for two still so young and without feathered wings.

“Come, Zan, we should try to get warmed up in the back of the cave. They’ll probably be back as soon as the rain lets up.” Keshaar moved back toward the far side of the cave, but paused when Zanthar didn’t get up to follow. “Zan! Come on.” His voice hissed slightly. He was frustrated, scared and cold. Why couldn’t his brother just listen to him?

The small black mound of feathers was shaking violently in the dim light from the moon, and Keshaar found he could not stay mad. With a sigh, he walked back, intending to drag his twin away if that was what it took.

Once again, scared green eyes met his, and he felt the fear rising up inside again. What if they don’t come back? What if they never come back?

“I think they left us.” Anguished words whispered in the dark, holding so much weight before being blown away.

“What? Why would they do that, Zan?”

His brother looked away and Keshaar sighed, feathers relaxing and smoothing down, feeling as if he had been released from a trap. “I don’t think they love us anymore. They left us. They...h-hate us,” Zanthar murmured.

Keshaar grabbed his brother, eagle like fore-claws and talons closing in Zanthar’s feathers. “Shut up!” he yelled, his tail lashing viciously from side to side. “Why would you say something like that?”

Zan blinked up at him, a helpless look on his face. Keshaar took a breath and released his grip. He shook his head and stalked away.

“But what if it’s true!” Zan yelled at his back. Keshaar paused, not trusting himself to be kind. His talons scraped loudly against the rock and he ground his beak.

“It’s not true, Zan. Our parents love us. I know they do. Just like we love each other, right?” There was no response from the mouth of the cave. “I’m scared too, Zan.”

Keshaar’s eyes closed and he clung to the cave floor as if it could save their lives. He shuddered, crouching down and gripping the cold stone with every fiber of his mind and being. The world was spinning around him, spinning around them both. “It hasn’t been that long yet. Only a week has passed. They’re coming home, you have to believe it.” His voice sounded weak and small to his own ears. He tried to sound surer of himself, but he couldn’t stop the fear. He couldn’t shut out the idea that maybe they would not be coming back after all.

“What if they just left us, Keshaar? Started another family somewhere else? Why else would they vanish for so long?”

Keshaar shook his head against the words, hoping to dash them away as if they had a physical form. “No, Zan. They wouldn’t have done that. They love us.” Silence met his proclamation and he opened his eyes, reluctantly turning to glance at his brother. Zan was looking out again, out toward the rain.

“We’re going to die, Brother.”

It was so soft Keshaar almost missed the words. He bit back a retort, heat flushing under his feathers as he realized there was no retort. Zan was right. They'd already gone a week without food. Much longer and they would die.

"Just, trust me, Zan. Trust me, Brother. We can survive this. I know we can. And they will return." He walked back to Zanthar and reached out for his twin, talons just grasping for Zanthar's shoulder. He tried to drag his brother into a hug, but was thrust backward as his brother lashed out with a wing. Keshaar tumbled, rolling to avoid hitting his head, and hissed as he climbed back to his paws.

"Zan!" he yelled, his voice harsh with emotion as anger burned the fear from his veins. His brother remained motionless. He was about to shout again when his twin turned emerald eyes in his direction. It wasn't fear that clouded his brother's vision this time, but hate. A hate so venomous that Keshaar backed away from his brother without realizing he had moved. Keshaar had never seen such a look directed at him before, and never such a look on his brother's face. What feathers he had on his hackles rose and Keshaar spread his wings out, hoping he would look large and threatening. He didn't think his brother would attack him, but he wasn't sure what Zanthar would do now in his seemingly desperate state of mind. This isn't my brother; this isn't Zanthar.

"They've left us, Brother. They've left us, and it's all your fault." Bitterness and hate dripped from every word. Keshaar hunched, feeling both fear and anger rise at his brother's words. Where was this coming from? It was as if a switch had flipped, and Zanthar just wasn't himself anymore.

"I—I don't understand. Zan, please, where is this coming from? What's wrong?" Zanthar hissed, leaping forward, stopping just in front of Keshaar's face. Keshaar danced backward, keeping space between himself and his brother.

Zanthar glared at his brother for a moment longer, before blinking, and turning away. "It doesn't matter anymore, Keshaar. There isn't anything left for us here. I'm...I'm leaving." He turned back, his eyes softer than they had been, the hate not really gone, but reduced to a simmer instead of a blaze. "Come with me, Brother?"

"Come...come with you?" Keshaar's beak dropped open in shock. Their aerie was built into the side of a cliff. The only way down was to fly, and neither of them could do that yet. "Zan, have you lost your mind? We can't leave!" He reached out for his brother again, but Zan knocked him away with a swipe of a wing and turned back toward the opening. Zanthar lifted his wings as if to fly, and Keshaar felt fear burn through his veins again. He couldn't let his brother do this.

Keshaar dashed forward in a leap, claws scraping against stone as he landed, but his brother wasn't there. He had only a moment to try and understand what had happened before a heavy weight smacked into him from the side, forcing the air from his lungs. Keshaar clawed desperately against the cold stone for purchase and rolled sideways. He kicked out with his hind legs and hit warm fur. Keshaar screeched at his brother, shutting his eyes as eagle-like fore claws headed for his face. They cut through the down of Keshaar's brow and into his flesh, but missed

his eye. Keshaar reached out blindly, grasping what felt like feathers, and rolled onto his back, dragging Zanthar with him. He dared not open his eyes, for fear of losing them to his twin's talons.

“Brother!” Zanthar's voice was thick with fear.

Keshaar kicked again, shoving the weight off of him and to the side. Zanthar did not leap on him again. Keshaar lay there panting, fighting hard to regain his breath. Finally, he opened his eyes, blinking hard against the blood that dripped into them. He looked around, expecting to see Zanthar huddled in a corner glaring at him, but the cave was empty.

Keshaar lurched to his feet, wounds forgotten, his heartbeat pounding in his ears. Where was Zanthar? Another look around told him that his brother was not in the cave. Bile rising in his throat, Keshaar rushed to the ledge, looking over, ears laid flat with the fear of what he might see. He blinked again, looking hard, but there was nothing other than the rocks, and the rain.