

Chapter 1 – The Cracked Horn

A jolt of energy coursed through Majherri's body, nearly sending the unicorn down onto the sand. Staggering, he felt the ocean water cresting over his hooves. The human girl who had touched him collapsed in a heap in the water and was shaking her head. She was likely trying to understand what just happened, and she wasn't alone.

It was the Bondspark, something Majherri thought he'd never experience, again! No unicorn before him had ever survived losing their rider. Somehow, Majherri had and now his life had meaning again. Part of him rejoiced at making a connection with another human. At the same time, he felt an ominous sense of fear building deep in his soul.

The clatter of his hooves, the sound of wheels turning, and the ever-present chatter of humans: Majherri preferred the noise. Silence invariably allowed the echoes of Danella's final screams to invade his mind. She'd commanded him to run to safety and warn everyone. The words were still there, but the images were lost.

Ahead lay yet another small town, filled with hands wanting to caress him. Those hands were attached to young girls praying for a connection to him and the chance to become a battle maiden. If he could make those noises humans use to speak, he'd tell them to be careful what they wished for.

Not that they'd listen. The younglings, the other riderless unicorns, were just as foolish. They stared at the missing tip of his horn, the crack running down it, and the mysterious scars on his left side. Then, they would ignore anything he said. Deep down, he knew they thought his fate couldn't happen to them. Majherri's greatest problem was that he couldn't even tell them what occurred.

Within days, he stopped conversing with the younglings.

Along the road, some of the locals, children with a few adult minders, followed the caravan's progress. They pointed at him and his brethren, and threw flowers to the selectees from the previous towns.

"They're so beautiful! Mother, can I try and pet them now?" One of the girls shrieked and tugged at her mother's arm.

The mother chided her daughter. "Laura, you have to wait until the battle maidens bring the procession into town. The candidates go first and then you'll have to wait your turn in line with the other children."

"But I don't want to wait in line!"

"Perhaps you should have thought of that before you insisted that we come out here."

Majherri listened to the young girl whine about the unfairness of it all. In days past, he would have run over and let her stroke him briefly, basking in the attention. T'rsa, his sister, teased him about being such a prideful and rebellious member of the herd.

She hadn't done that in almost a year.

His apathy bothered her, but Majherri couldn't work up the interest to care. Most in this expedition and the others back at the Sacred Isle avoided close contact with him. He was a pariah, an oddity, and an example of something to be avoided at all costs. His was a fate worse than death!

Summoning a bit of his old courage, Majherri made his way to the surprised humans and presented himself. The one called Laura immediately reached out and touched his face. Majherri felt no magical connection and did his best to tolerate the rough caress. Even the mother reached over and rested her hand on his side.

"Look at the scars, Mother!"

"Laura, you shouldn't say that!"

Majherri snorted and backed away from the pair. Flipping his mane and tail in anger, he trotted to catch up to the rest of the caravan.

Typical! I try and grant a child her wish and that is my reward.

The group came to a halt in the center of the town amid cheers. Even in his state, the festive atmosphere nearly got to him. For a moment, he felt like prancing, but the moment, like so many others, passed without action on his part.

T'rsa's rider, Meghan Lynch, gracefully slid from the saddle. Tall and lithe, she was one of the school's instructors and recruiters. Fine, lightweight armor protected the brown-haired woman. She removed her open-faced helm and carried it in the crook of her arm.

Majherri watched the town elders greet and fawn over Captain Lynch. Not only was she T'rsa's rider, but also Danella's twin sister. Other than the darker hair coloring, they were identical! Every time he looked at her, he felt ashamed that he'd outlived his rider. There was little doubt in her words and her actions that she blamed Majherri for Danella's death.

The bitter resentment ran deep on both sides. He no longer cared for Captain Meghan Lynch. His sister could have chosen better! If Danella had accepted the commission and become a teacher, Meghan and T'rsa would still be scouts and Danella would likely be alive.

Lynch addressed the crowd of humans as the wagon drivers and guards set up the bales of hay and practice targets for the demonstration. His eyes lingered on a breastplate scarred by flame. It was a bittersweet reminder of his past. The Captain spoke of the benefits of becoming a battle maiden and joining the High-King's elite unicorn cavalry; the strongest force in the land. The humans lapped it up as a feline would milk from a cow. She explained how any girl selected would learn to tap into the magical energy stored inside the bonded unicorn and be able to perform magic from one of the four elements.

Naturally, the sounds from the crowd grew in intensity when the shiny coins were mentioned. The family of any girl chosen would receive a substantial amount of these. Majherri often wondered about the fascination with these small circles of gold and silver that most humans seemed obsessed with. Danella had tried to explain it to him once, but he kept blowing his breath onto her neck to tickle her until she gave up, laughing at his silliness. A poignant stab of pain accompanied that otherwise happy memory.

Feigning interest in the demonstration that followed, he was sorely tempted to trot over to the line of young girls, separated from the crowd and with the floral wreaths around their heads, and let them touch him. It was the same one performed in place after place. Instead, the unicorn gazed at the clouds above and looked for any positive signs in the blue sky.

Time passed and a voice interrupted his searching. "Majherri, go and take your place. Don't upset Meghan any more than she already is." The voice belonged to an earth maiden, an officer named Lindsey Sheppard. She rode Pasha, a whimsical female that seemed to be paying an unusual amount of attention to him, as of late. A few strides away, Captain Lynch scowled at him as the riderless younglings were already in a line.

The performance is over. Time, once more, to shatter the dreams of female humans.

Hanging his head in shame, Majherri walked toward the three younger unicorns and stood at the end of the line. T'rsa snorted and kicked some dirt on him with one of her hind legs, expressing her displeasure.

The first candidate approached. She was a hesitant blonde. She caressed Lycenae's mane for three or four strokes before the young male unicorn stepped back and away from her. She stepped to Sage, but the female too rejected the young human. Majherri scolded himself for not stepping into the first spot in line; this one was going to be a crier. He could tell by the way the girl's lips trembled. Drucene rejected her too and he spotted the first signs of tears starting.

As the girl reached out for him, Majherri closed his eyes and searched his feelings for any reaction

from his dormant magic. There was nothing, not even the faintest stirring. He opened his eyes and looked at the hopeful girl still petting him and shook his head, pushing her away.

It was painful to watch the barely teenaged girl sobbing into the arms of her father, who offered meaningless words of comfort. Danella had told him that they always focused on the ones who are selected and rarely was any consideration given to those found wanting. Majherri considered how crushing it must be to a young female's pride. The three excited younglings next to him had no idea the damage they were inflicting on these emotionally volatile young women.

His new-found sympathy was a direct result of losing his own rider.

More hands tried to touch him and were led away. Two bore the rejection stoically, but the third was another crier. Drucene made a connection with a fair haired girl and pranced around her happily as the humans roared in applause. There was always a sense of pride in the towns and villages when one of their own was selected.

Six more females tried to join their comrade before Lycenae chose his rider, who turned to her parents and smiled. "I knew it! Didn't I tell you that I'd be chosen?"

Oblivious to the ceremony, the parents rushed forward and fawned over their offspring, a girl named Rebekah. Again, Majherri wished he had been at the front of the line, just to reject her out of principle. As he well knew, too much pride and arrogance was a bad thing. Majherri didn't particularly care for Lycenae, so he decided the pair deserved each other.

There were five more candidates, but none managed to garner any reaction from Sage or Majherri. Still, the town was overjoyed to have two selections. Trsa continued to ignore him and Rheyssurah shot him a look of pity and mistrust, moving closer to his sister to comfort her. Rheyssurah never sought his approval, not that Majherri would have given it. It was one of the few things that could still penetrate the numbness in his soul.

Majherri considered expressing his disapproval, right then and there, but opted to leave. He once had status, but now had none. The maidens invited females of all ages to come get a brief touch of the unicorns.

I already tried that once today, and was not satisfied with the results. I've had my fill of this!

In defiance, he walked off. Lynch barked at him, but he swished his tail at her dismissively. Lieutenant Sheppard interceded and sent Pasha after him. He could easily lose her. Pasha served in a combat brigade and wasn't a scout, but he tolerated her presence and headed toward the ocean. The heady smell of the sea enticed him. Before being promoted to Lead Senior Scout and transferred to the Western Battalion, much of his and Danella's time had been spent along the southern coast. His rider had loved watching the relaxed might of nature as the waves pounding the shoreline.

Slowly, he wandered through the empty streets, looking for anything that interested him in the windows of the human shops, and for an access to the ocean. After about ten minutes of searching, he spotted the path to the beach and made his way down it. All the while, he felt close to Danella and wondered if she was smiling down on him from the great pastures in the sky.

Part of him wished he had never staggered out of that western desert, bearing wounds both physical and emotional. He'd warned the Greater Herd, and scouts scoured the area, looking for signs, but the steppes were massive, and the shifting sands left no traces. If only he could remember what happened. With no bond, Danella was declared dead and they waited for Majherri to die from the wasting.

When he did not, they had the human oracle examine him. She said to send him out to search for a new rider.

Pushing his hooves into the sand, he tried to enjoy the feeling and stave off the bitterness. Danella wouldn't want to see him like this! Majherri noticed a sound that was almost hidden beneath the noise of the waves. It was the sound of a human female crying.

For once, couldn't I go somewhere without these crying humans plaguing me?

Danella was made of sterner stuff. Rather than wait for a water maiden to come along with healing tears, she simply ripped an arrow out of her flesh, applied her flame to cauterize the wound, and rejoined the battle. Unlike her sister, Danella didn't mind the scars and boasted that they proved she was alive.

Majherri now bore several scars of his own. He felt anything but alive. The unicorn debated the options available to him, but the human was already staring in his direction. He could just trot away. The girl was older than the candidates, with blondish hair that looked like the harsh sunlight made it lighter than it should be. The garments she wore were nice by human standards. She seemed to be conscious of her grooming. It was a good trait, at least the unicorn supposed.

The girl isn't one of my would-be suitors. At least I'm not the cause of her tears.

He somehow felt better with that knowledge as she wiped her eyes and addressed him.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" she said. "I come here and just watch the waves when I'm sad."

Majherri nodded and turned to gaze into the horizon and watch the gulls circling in the distance.

"I'll leave if you want to be alone," the human put forward. The snuffle in her voice said otherwise, but since she was trying to be courteous, he looked back and moved his head sideways in a noncommittal gesture. If she kept talking, he might take her up on that offer.

A blissful minute of silence followed, before the human spoke once more, "I watched the demonstration, but couldn't bear to watch the selection. I heard the crowd cheer twice. I suppose it's too much to ask that Rebekah Morganstern wasn't chosen. She's such a spiteful brat."

The human is a fair judge of character. He regarded her and tried to figure out how best to break the news. Unicorns understood the human language, but it didn't work the other way.

"She was, wasn't she?"

He nodded.

The young woman's face flushed. Majherri guessed in anger. "She had the nerve to say that I shouldn't be allowed to attend the festival and called me impure, of all things! Oh, I'm sorry! You didn't come here to listen to my problems."

He nodded again. His hopes that she'd still her tongue were dashed as she took this as a sign that she should talk about him.

"You've been in a serious scrap haven't you? I knew unicorns were tough! I bet your rider must be proud. What? What did I say? I'm sorry! Don't go!"

She'd been standing on his right side and hadn't noticed the scars, as he circled behind her, she saw his left side and gasped, "Oh, no! You didn't win that fight."

Majherri couldn't summon the strength to lie and avoided her gaze. Pathetically, he glanced out at the ocean and partly wished for a giant wave to come and drag him out to sea, finishing him. At that moment, he'd have welcomed the release. The noise he made was unnatural for a unicorn. It was a primal cry of pain. The human responded to it and threw her arms around his neck.

That's when the magic inside him stirred. His bond to Danella had been a rising surge of magic. This was a violent release of pent up heat and energy; something restrained that finally snapped and broke free. To say he was both shocked and worried was an understatement.