

JOURNEY TO THE KOVU TERRITORY



ANNA KOSTEN

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Journey to the Kovu Territory (free
sample)

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ONE

Jane Han held her balance on a tree branch. She peered around the deep-green pine trees, searching for her enemy—the griffon. She swept a wisp of auburn hair out of her face and away from her ear, listening intently.

All was silent.

She took a slow breath.

She had to remember her training. She was a protector, after all. And Protectors trained to be strong through horrific events. Unfortunately, Jane had known many protectors who allowed their emotions to take over, making impulsive decisions. Decisions that sometimes got them killed.

The sharp screech of a griffon echoed, seeming to come from all around her. She unlatched her bow from the strap on her back and strung an arrow. Holding her breath, she listened for another sound.

Silence.

And then, with a jerk, she was suddenly lifted high into the air. A piercing bolt of pain shot through her shoulders. She kicked and swayed, trying to get the griffon to lose its grip on her. She smacked and clawed at the tough, scaly skin above its talons.

The griffon threaded its way around the thick pines and through the gaps between tree branches. Then it soared up to skim the treetops.

Jane's legs whacked against the tree tops, the branches leaving marks

on her boots.

The griffon dove down into a dense group of pines, flattened its wings against its back, and squeezed between two trees. Everything blurred past as they whizzed through the forest. The griffon soared back up through an opening, gliding above the trees once again. Its talons suddenly released her shoulders.

Her stomach flip-flopped, and her lungs ached as she screamed. A sharp pain bolted through her chest as she plummeted through the air, desperately grasping for anything to stop her fall. She latched onto a tree branch, jerking and bouncing to a stop, her lungs burning as she gasped for breath. She peered upward, searching for the predator. It would return.

The griffon spiraled upward and then dove for her. It took all of Jane's focus to swing down to the lower branch. The griffon's talons reached for her but missed, grasping branches and leaves as Jane shifted her position. Realizing it had missed its target, the griffon began circling like a bird of prey, its eagle eyes scanning for her.

Jane knew the griffon would spot her soon, and she was without a weapon. She searched for something—anything, and a small burrow-like opening under thick tree roots caught her attention. Grabbing the coil of rope from her belt, Jane knotted one end onto a sturdy branch, then the other around her waist. With her trembling fingers wrapped tightly around the rope, she carefully began to climb down. She was still at least fifteen feet from the ground when she heard it.

Whoosh.

The griffon dove for her again.

Jane knew she wouldn't make it back to the safety of the tree's branches before the griffon reached her.

She did all she could.

She clenched the rope and squeezed her eyes shut, bracing for impact.

The griffon's talons dug into the back of her leg, sending lightning

bolts of pain through her thigh. The griffon's wings beat the air as it tried to yank her from the rope.

She screamed.

No. She wouldn't let go. No!

Her sweaty fingers began to slowly peel away from the rope. Tears escaped the corners of her eyes.

Suddenly, the griffon released her leg and vanished into the thick forest.

Strange. It wasn't like a griffon to give up easily.

She unknotted the rope from around her waist, her heart pounding. Her blood-stained fingers fumbled with the knotted rope. "C'mon. *Come on.*" Finally, the rope loosened, and she pulled it through, untying the knot. Her aching hands released the rope, and she dropped to the ground. She landed on her feet and stumbled onto her back. Every muscle ached from exhaustion.

But she had to keep moving. Staggering to her feet, she swiftly hobbled over to the opening under the tree and crawled into it. She lay there against the cool dirt, breathing hard.

Thud!

Jane's eyes bolted open.

The griffon dug its claws in the mud around the hole, trying to burrow its way in. It clawed aggressively at the dirt, widening the gap.

Jane tensed, clutching the roots behind her.

She was trapped.

The griffon poked its head into the hole, snapping its golden beak at her viciously.

Jane gasped, tucking her legs into her body. She clenched her eyes shut and pressed her body against the thick roots.

The griffon stretched its neck and snapped inches from her foot. Then it pulled its head out from the hole. The hole appeared too narrow for him to squeeze through.

The griffon's deep, strong voice echoed from outside of the tree. "Jane, the mightiest griffon of all time, has given up. But only because of your injuries." He paused. "...and because I'm bored of this training."

Jane heaved a sigh and crawled out of the ditch. "I'm not that badly—" A sharp pain bolted through her shoulder, and she leaned against Flame, her horse-sized griffon. As she gripped her shoulder, she glanced down at the bloody gash on her leg, watching as blood oozed down into her boot.

"Training sucks when you have to hurt your best friend." Flame's gentle gaze caused Jane to smile. "Now let the most amazing flier take you home."

She shuffled onto his back, and they took off into the sky. She would have shivered from the cool spring breeze if her blood hadn't been pumping fiercely. "I told you not to go easy on me, Flame."

"Are you kidding? I was brutal!"

Jane shook her head. "You purposefully let me escape that tree. I specifically told you not to do that."

Flame stared up at the treetops, searching for an excuse. "Well—"

"Just don't go easy on me next time. That's all I'm asking."

The Protectors of Hidatsu Training Center came into sight, and they circled it. It was built into a mountain with pillars holding the roof in place. A few windows were carved into the mountain to let light into the dim rooms. They glided to a landing, and Jane slipped off Flame. She leaned against his back.

Flame licked his beak. "I'm going to go back to the griffon cave. I, uh, I got some business to attend to."

"Like dinner?" Jane crossed her arms at Flame's smirk. Her stomach ached. She hadn't eaten all day. *I've got to stop torturing myself and start eating more than one meal a day.*

"The most amazing griffon deserves a good meal after his difficult training."

Jane smiled.

Flame trotted away toward the griffon cave. He called over his shoulder, "See you tonight!"

Jane hobbled up the cobblestone steps toward the Training Center's doors. She ran her hand along a stone griffon statue. Two griffon statues sat on a stone table just outside of the steps. Both were carvings of the most heroic Hidatsu Protectors in Hidatsu's long history. Everyone knew their stories. One of the griffons had saved the entire royal family from an assassination attempt. And the other griffon saved Hidatsu from a powerful wizard who'd tried to obliterate them with fire.

Jane rapped her aching fist on the wooden door. A few seconds later, it creaked open.

Fire Feather, one of the griffon cooks, stood before her. She scanned Jane up and down. "You poor girl! What has happened to your clothes? Oh my. Let's bandage up these scrapes." Fire Feather led her to a large room with an enormous red and silver rug and roaring fireplace. The fire cast a warm glow on the smooth, stone ground and reflected off the silver thread on the rug.

Jane sat in front of the crackling fire, the warmth radiating against her skin. Goosebumps ran up her back from the soothing, cozy heat.

The Training Center was like home because it *had* been her home since she was five. Her birth home was Hidatsu's castle, where she once lived with her sister, Princess Olivia, her father, King Xavier Han, and her deceased mother, Queen Shasta Han.

Jane stared into the fire, watching the colors dance and swirl. A bright yellow flame lifted into the air and mixed with a deep red flame.

Yellow.

She swallowed.

That had been her mother's favorite color. She would look to the sun every morning with a smile, turn to young Jane and say, "*Yellow is my favorite color.*"

"I know that," Jane would reply. *"You tell me every day."*

Jane shook back to reality, the warmth in her chest fading.

Her mother had been killed by a Kovu Warrior when she was just five. Jane remembered little of her mother, but she could vividly picture her warm smile and gentle, olive green eyes. Taking a deep breath, she blinked back hot tears. After her mother was declared dead, Jane was sent away to the Training Center. She coiled her tense knuckles into fists.

The Kovu Warriors, dressed in all black, were cruel. They would kill anyone without hesitation. Jane's job was to fight back against the Kovu Warriors—to keep the pain she'd grown up with from reaching anyone else.

For over a century, the Kovu Warriors were a constant threat to the people of Harrenal. They wanted to take over the Kingdom of Harrenal and expand their Kovu tribe.

Fire Feather entered the room with a first aid kit. Jane snatched a bottle of azylleblossom powder out of the kit, applied it to her wounds, and wrapped a bandage around her leg, using tree sap to secure it. Afterward, she did the same to her shoulders. The process only took a few moments since attending to her injuries had become a part of Jane's training day routine.

Jane thought back to her botany lessons, recalling her griffon professor's hoarse voice: *"Azylleblossom powder is made from a star-shaped purple azylleblossom flower. It can heal most wounds in less than seventy-two hours."*

Jane scooted closer to the fire. Fire Feather sat beside her, keeping her eyes fixated on the flames.

As Jane took a breath, a dull pain stabbed her in the chest. She moaned and attempted to breathe without moving her chest, but the intense pain didn't ease.

The dinner bell rang. Jane made her way to the griffon meeting room.

Baskets of raw jackalope meat and fish were spread across the floor. Griffons began crowding the space, stretching their bodies across the floor to eat.

Fire Feather cooked Jane a special meal since she couldn't eat what the griffons ate. Tonight, Fire Feather had prepared cooked bacon and jackalope meat for her. Jane took a plate of food and a cup of water to the meeting room.

As Jane walked to her seat on the floor, she glanced over at Graystone, the griffon leader, who lay sprawled out on a wood platform in the back of the room. He stripped apart a chunk of meat with his talons and devoured it. Graystone was the largest of all griffons, nearly seven feet tall with a stunning mottled-gray coat.

Jane's chest knotted with the feeling of loneliness.

The eight other human trainees who'd trained with her had left only a month ago to receive training in Halamanu. Graystone had told Jane she was needed for another purpose but hadn't spoken to her of it since. Perhaps he had only wanted to keep her from being upset about not going to Halamanu? Maybe he didn't think she was ready to train in Halamanu? No. She knew Graystone. He wouldn't lie to her.

Flame pranced into the room, his eyes landing on a basket of fresh fish.

Jane took her seat, sighing as Flame sat next to her. "You're hungry *again!*?"

He kept his eyes glued to the basket of fish. "No..." he trailed off.

Jane chuckled as she bit down on a slice of bacon. It was deliciously salty and crispy. After she downed a few bites, her stomach rumbled for more, but meals were strictly regulated at the Training Center.

No seconds.

No requests for extra helpings.

The bacon gone, she sighed. She took a bite of the jackalope meat and nearly choked from the salt and bitterness. She forced herself to

swallow what was in her mouth and pushed the plate in front of Flame. “You can—”

Graystone sent her a sharp glare. “Jane, you need to eat.”

The blood rushed to Jane’s face. She didn’t look up from her plate, but she could feel everyone’s stares.

She took as tiny of a bite as possible and instantly chugged fresh water to wash it down.

When no one was looking, she slid the meat off her plate, and Flame snatched it up with his long tongue before it could hit the floor.

Blackout stomped his talon twice on the platform.

Everyone lifted their heads.

His glittering eyes scanned the room. “Who would like to hear the tale of the griffon, Hawk?”

Taking the attentive silence as a consensus of approval, Blackout continued. “Very well then. Hawk was named for his speed and cleverness. Cunning he was...”

A griffon that was the color of sand raised his wing. His right eyelids had been stitched together.

Blackout rolled his eyes. “If this is important, Silverblade, please speak.”

Jane sighed. Silverblade was known for long rants about theories and related tales.

Silverblade opened his mouth. “Isn’t it strange that emeralds are green? Why not—”

Blackout quickly cut him off. “One day, Hawk stole a magic emerald from Halamanu, which was able to create armies and give the wielder magical abilities. However, the abilities required so much power that if the emerald was removed from its protective crest...” His voice tensed. “If it were removed, the wielder would die.”

The room went quiet.

Uncomfortably quiet.

Blackout finally broke the silence. "One interesting fact about the jewel is that humans can't have the power." He pointed to his chest. "Whenever the wielder holds the emerald, a silver, swirled crest magically appears in their chest. The emerald is then placed in the crest, and they gain the magical abilities."

Silverblade dropped his mouth open, his tongue sticking out. "Why is it an emerald? Why not a piece of..."

Another griffon chimed in, "Ooh, a fish."

Silverblade nodded, his tongue still hanging out.

Blackout glared at them sternly. "The emerald was kept in a secret underground tunnel guarded by hundreds of griffons. The emerald was even confined inside a cage, with bars that would electrocute you if you touched them. Still, Hawk managed to steal it." His voice became stiff. "And, other than Hawk, not one griffon in that tunnel survived." He paused, and a strange silence filled the room.

At last, Graystone spoke. "I need to speak with Jane Han and Flame. Everyone else is dismissed."

Jane fidgeted with her braid as she watched everyone exit the room.

Flame whispered to her the very question she was contemplating: "Why do you think he wants to see us?" He sat straighter. "Perhaps he wants to reward me for being the most famous griffon in all of history."

Jane bit her lip. "Don't get your hopes up." *Surely I'm not in trouble.* She mentally reviewed a list of things she had done that day but didn't recall breaking any rules.

After everyone else had left, Graystone and Blackout approached.

Jane took a deep breath, trying to calm her nerves. "You wanted to see us, Graystone?"

He wrinkled his gray, feathered forehead. "How did training go?"

Blackout turned to Graystone. "Flame went easy on her and eventually called it a day due to her injuries." His eyes met Jane's. "If this had been an exam, she would have failed."

Jane crossed her arms. She could see pleasure in Blackout's eyes. He was enjoying seeing her fail. Taking a breath, she focused on keeping any sign of distress from showing on her face. There was no way she could give Blackout that satisfaction. "I'm sorry, Graystone."

Graystone held up his wing. "It'll have to be enough."

Jane stared at him, blinking. What was he talking about?

Blackout glared at Graystone. "*What?* Jane isn't ready! Even *she* knows that!"

Graystone straightened his posture. "Blackout," he warned.

Blackout stomped his talon on the floor, the thud echoing.

Graystone turned to Jane, his gaze solemn. "You will take your sister, Princess Olivia, to the Kovu Territory and meet with their leader to discuss and sign a peace agreement." His eyes lowered. "It's risky. Your trip will be kept in the strictest confidence."

Jane's head spun. She had to process what he'd said before she could understand it. She drew in a breath, gaining the strength to speak.

The Kovu Territory?

Had he seriously just given her such a task? "But, Graystone, am I truly ready for this? I can't even protect myself. How am I supposed to protect Olivia?" She immediately regretted downplaying her skills when they were offering her such an opportunity. *Why me? How do they know I'm ready for this? There would be so much responsibility.*

Graystone answered, "There's always been something special about you, Jane. We've been preparing you for this since the moment you arrived at the Training Center. We've always assigned more difficult training to you. You didn't pass today, not because you were unprepared, but because it was practically impossible for any human to do so. That'd be like a single griffon fighting a dragon."

Jane stared down at her hands, still trying to process everything.

Graystone turned to Flame. "Flame, you will be transporting and protecting the sisters on the journey." His eyes moved to Jane. "A

protector from Halamanu will be here tomorrow to teach you specific skills for the journey. Be outside by your usual training time.”

Blackout’s face tensed, and his tone became harsh. “Yes, and now you two must leave and rest.”

Jane looked from Graystone to Blackout and then finally followed Flame out of the room.

Behind them, the booming voices of Blackout and Graystone echoed. Jane couldn’t determine what they were saying, but the conversation sounded heated.

Finally, they reached the hallway to her room. Jane turned to face Flame. “Good night.”

Flame wrapped a wing around her. “Don’t worry about the journey. You deserve to be the one who gets to escort Olivia to the Kovu Territory.”

She stared at him, contemplating what to say, how to act, and how to feel.

“And I deserve it.” He stood taller. “I, the mightiest griffon in all of the world, deserve this—”

Jane started down the hall. “Good night, Flame.” She could feel Flame’s eyes following her as she walked to her bedroom door. She swiftly pulled the door open and closed it behind her.

Her bedroom was small, with just enough space for her bed and a wooden dresser. She walked around a wooden crate with books, arrowheads, and a few empty jars. Jane dropped onto her bed, trying to force back stinging tears.

Protectors didn’t cry.

But how was she supposed to feel?

This was like a suicide mission. There was a great chance that she would never return to Hidatsu. Would she be able to protect those accompanying her?

She wasn’t ready for this. She was going from training to a major

mission.

Jane stared at the cobblestone ceiling above her and suddenly sat up. Mustering up all the courage inside of her, her hands coiled to fists. “I am Jane Bree Han, daughter of King Xavier Han. I am a trainee no more. I am a protector. I will stay strong, for I *will* take Princess Olivia to the Kovu Territory and bring her back unharmed. This mission *will* succeed.” Breathing hard, strength coursed through her veins.

She could do this.

She was a protector now.

And this was exactly what a protector would do.

She lay down and closed her eyes. Every thought slipped away into the darkness that engulfed her.