



# The Wish

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**Category:** Romance, Paranormal

**Description:** Starlight, starbright, first star I see tonight. I wish I may, I wish I might. Have this wish, I wish tonight.

Ten years since the arrival of the Ragoru, a new alien species arrives. The Atlavans left behind their world of deserts and fading oases with their clans and few remaining females for a new chance at life on a new world. With their female birth-rate low, and losing over half of them to sickness on the voyage through the stars, the Atlavans are on the verge of extinction. Their only hope is to send out their unmated males into the world to seek out new nesting grounds on which to build their clan rookeries. Among them, Agrel and Gehj are committed to doing their duty, knowing that the joy of mates and family belong to other, more fortunate males, but when they encounter an abandoned village within the woods they are prepared for anything except the seductive call to mate with the female they discover there.

Nothing is as simple as it seems for this female with her daughter. A little female who made a very specific wish... for them. And just maybe they wished for them, too. But can everyone's wishes come true?

This book is a 49k novella in the Ragoru universe (taking place coinciding with the Dawn of the Ragoru segment), and is the first of the Atlavan stories.

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## Chapter

### One

Wishing on stars was for babies and at ten, Lily had long since stopped believing it would work. When she was little, she had wished upon a star when her daddy went out into the woods and never returned. After that, her momma had grown sad, and the woods had become scarier as people began to leave the village—either by themselves or by just disappearing into the woods. They all left, leaving Lily and her momma behind. So now she was staring critically up at the stars.

“Okay, stars. I’m going to make one more wish,” she muttered. “Please send a good daddy to make mommy happy and help us feel safe again.”

Agrel grunted as he dropped to his haunches at his ahaku’s side as they surveyed the human village. Strangely, it seemed empty, and that sent a small shiver through him. He had come across more than one vacant nest on the old world where the previous inhabitants had died and he hoped that this was not the case. It was unsettling to be in a place inhabited by nothing but the dead. Not that an abandoned village was any more welcoming. What would make an entire population just disappear?

He drew in a wary breath, scenting the air, his sharp eyes scanning the buildings. He grunted again, this time with relief when there was no hint of the rotten stench of death. Oh, there was plenty of rot, but it was more like the scent of old plant matter slowly decaying and old furs left unused for many seasons. But beneath it all, there was an intriguing sweetness within the air that enlivened him. It seemed unlikely to find something so precious in this part of the woods. They had encountered far too

many dangers through this part of the forest the closer they came to the village.

Kicking the dead plant out of his path that had attempted to devour them just moments earlier, his ahaku, Gehj, glanced over at him curiously. “Do we approach?”

Agrel nodded, the layered crests on his head rising slightly. He turned to meet the male’s eyes, noting the depths of caution that he read there. At one time, that caution irritated him as a male who preferred action, but they had gone through their growing pangs as a bonded pair during their youth and as a result he respected the caution of his ahaku. Gehj was now the only male that he would ever feel safe claiming a mate with. But he also recognized that this was likely the purpose of the instinct: for males of their species to bond together as juveniles. It prepared them for the day that they might have a mate.

If they were fortunate to find one. Many of the females who were among those fleeing their planet with the help of the alien star-voyaging vessel had failed to survive the trip. There had been an outbreak that had mystified their rescuers before it was eventually contained, but not before decimating their population and snuffing out the lives of over half the females. The surviving females were not even accessible to males like them. They were protected with a circle of ranking males, while scouts like Agrel and Gehj were sent to look for opportune nesting grounds to rebuild their rookeries. It had been only five hands of days since the Feriknikal, aliens who brought them to this world, had departed with no other instructions than to avoid the lands that lay in the north where a ferocious predatory species called Ragoru claimed the cold expanse of forest and icy plains for their territory.

They could have it.

Atlavans were, by nature, a species that enjoyed the dry heat and warm breezes found in the mountains of their home world. Mountains that had once overlooked great stretches of sand dotted with large, fertile oases, and cut through by magnificent life-

giving rivers before the water began to dry up and the great suffering had begun. Given a new chance at life on a new world, they were happy to strike south in search of a new home. This village would be a convenient place to rest for a few days, but it would not work for a permanent settlement for their people, regardless of all the empty dwellings waiting to be filled again with life.

“It appears to be empty. We can easily claim a new dwelling for a handful of days while we hunt to replenish our provisions, feed, and rest. If nothing else, this miserable forest is rich in game.”

Gehj trilled softly in agreement, his head lifting briefly to peer up into the darkening sky visible between the trees. The movement showed off the bright blue collar of feathers that stood out brightly among the gold and red plumage.

“We should not delay. This part of the forest is treacherous. I would not enjoy being unnecessarily caught out in it after nightfall.”

He stood, his tail feathers fanned slightly as his tail tipped to counter his shift in weight, the long crimson feathers bright against the dark greenery. Trilling quietly, Agrel rose as well, his tail bobbing impatiently. Without another word, they emerged from the forest and entered the village. The silence deepened as the sounds of the forest faded, and it struck him how much the abandoned dwellings were like ghostly sentinels against the encroaching dangers of the forest outside the village walls. The further he walked into the village, the more certain he became that it was unsuitable for any person among the living, much less an entire Atlavan community. Sooner or later, the village would succumb to the forest.

“How long did you say that we will be staying here?” Gehj whispered.

“Five days. Not a day more,” Agrel replied with a shiver. Atlavans disdained such damp, sunless places as much as the sun-mother, Deji, did.

Five days to hunt and smoke the meat into travel rations and then they would be gone. He would not be sad to leave it behind.

## Chapter

### Two

Delilah warily looked around as she stepped out her front door. The few remaining hens raced for the door, reassuring her that there was no threat at her doorstep as they eagerly demanded their breakfast. Such as it was. She didn't have much feed left, though she had tried to stretch it as far as possible by picking what she could find growing in the abandoned fields. She had tried to pick up the slack and maintain them as people left the village, but it grew more difficult as every month passed, and the remaining residents trickled away or were swallowed by the forest. Even going into the fields was becoming risky as the forest quickly began to overtake them. It wouldn't be too much longer before she wouldn't be able to get any of the grain from them, and her small vegetable garden beside her cottage only provided so much.

As it was, she only had enough feed to last a few more days, and their cellar was getting low on stores. They had been making due mostly with eggs, but those were dwindling. With the quality of their feed going down and their advancing age with no younger hens to take their place since a predator had brought the rooster down the year before, Delilah was running out of options.

"Sorry ladies, looks like this might be the end of the road," she sighed as she scattered more feed for the birds.

Emptying the small basket on the ground, she turned and smiled at the sight of her daughter sitting on the porch step with a kitten cradled in her lap. The kitten had wandered into the field several days ago, half-starved. The painted geschi cat had a tawny coat speckled with vivid pink spots overlaying black pigmentation. It was

foolish to take the kitten in, especially knowing that the arboreal geshi got quite large in the wild, but she hadn't been able to abandon it. Of course, Lily had taken to the little furball quickly and had been the one to name her Nimh. Given how sad Lily had been, seeing her daughter's happiness was worth it—if only she could feed it enough to keep the kitten and themselves alive.

“Hey kiddo,” she murmured, ruffling her daughter's hair. “How's Nimh?”

Lily's little shoulders lifted and fell with her sigh. “Hungry,” she said as the kitten mewed plaintively. Her bright green eyes turned to her hopefully. “Maybe it's time for lunch now?”

Delilah bit the inside of her cheek to distract herself from the choking despair that welled up so suddenly. They wouldn't go hungry. She wouldn't allow it.

“Sure, honey. The rice has been cooking on the stove all day. It is a nice porridge by now. We can cut up some of the vegetables from the yard and then—” she broke off seeing the way her daughter's face fell, her little nose wrinkling in distaste. Crouching in front of her daughter, Delilah patted her cheek sympathetically. “I know that it is not what you want. But what if we can have meat for dinner? Would that make it better?”

An uncertain look crossed Lily's face, and she craned her neck to peer around her at the chickens pecking at the ground. “You are going to kill one of the hens?” she asked quietly.

Delilah nodded. “Yes, baby. They aren't laying eggs any longer and we need something to eat to help us hold out a little longer. Our neighbor, Vernon, did say that he would send his kin back to escort us safely through the forest once he arrives home. We just need to hang on until they arrive.” Brushing a lock of Lily's hair behind her shoulder, she rubbed her back lovingly. “Besides, Nimh needs the meat as

much as you do. You both need the energy for growing.”

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Lily nodded but glanced one last time at the hens and headed inside, cradling Nimh in her arms. “You’re right, momma.”

Delilah’s shoulders slumped with a mixture of relief and resignation. Relief because Lily accepted what needed to be done. Resignation because no matter how much she wanted to, she couldn’t change things.

If only things had been different. If only Zack hadn’t disappeared into the woods and died years ago, abandoning them in the village without family to lean on when they desperately needed the safety that numbers would bring. If only some of the other village folk had set aside their resentment to extend a helping hand and welcome them among their families so that they could safely escape. But as frightened as everyone was, no one had wanted to take them in. They blamed him—and, by association, her—for the ruination of their village. When she had arrived with her husband many years ago, it was because he had been the huntsman assigned to patrol and protect this part of the woods. He had safeguarded the people of the village for many years until he ultimately failed. And then, he had walked into the woods one day and died there, never to return... not even as a body so that they could properly bury him. He died five long years ago, abandoning her, abandoning Lily, and abandoning the village to the dangers of the encroaching forest.

The villagers had blamed her husband, their anger growing as the threat from the forest grew. But, as there wasn’t much that they could do to him, they shifted that blame to her. Like many, they believed that an active huntsman shouldn’t be married with home obligations. Such things were best left until after he was ready to retire from being on active assignment. By marrying him and having a child with him, they believed that she and Lily had been a distraction and ultimately harmful to the



community. The fact that they had been one community together and had celebrated Lily's long-awaited birth with her meant nothing. Zack had abandoned them, and Delilah and Lily were to pay for his failure.

It hadn't taken the village long to start shunning her either, so Delilah wasn't entirely surprised when the villagers began to leave, leaving their homes in small groups without them. Vernon had lingered longer than most, unwilling to abandon them. He had hunted game for them to see that they were reasonably fed. He went out every day, braving the woods until he began to run out of ammo. Then he too had ventured into the woods with a promise to send help to escort them out, convinced that they would be much safer that way.

Or perhaps he had tired of the responsibility when she repeatedly declined his advances. Maybe he never had any intention of sending anyone but hadn't wanted them to get it into their minds to try to follow him. It was a terrible thought, but one that she couldn't quite shake free of as she filled the bowls with porridge. After all, a woman unfamiliar with the woods beyond the immediate area right outside their gates and a young child would attract every opportunistic predator in the area.

If he had lied... well, that left her with a very uncomfortable probability that she hadn't wanted to consider. That eventually she would be forced to venture into the forest herself and pray that she would be able to find her way.

Delilah lifted a spoonful of porridge to her lips but nearly choked when she attempted to swallow the small mouthful of food, her appetite vanishing at the thought. Seeing that Lily was ravenously cleaning her bowl and down to the last few bites, she pushed the bowl toward Lily. Rising to her feet, she bent, dropping a kiss to the top of her daughter's head.

"Go ahead and have mine, too. I'm going to walk toward the village center and see if those berry bushes that Mrs. Murgun grew have any fruit on them. It would be nice to

have something a little sweet. Just stay inside with Nimh.”

Lily nodded without looking up as she rotated the bowls and shoveled a large spoonful of porridge into her mouth. Her feet swung happily despite the meager meal while Nimh purred as she devoured her own food beside Lily’s chair.

Gathering her basket from the shelf beside the door, Delilah gave her daughter one last fond look before heading out the door and quickly striking down the path that ran through the center of the village from the northern gate to the southern wall. Although Mrs. Murgun’s abandoned berry bushes were her ultimate destination, Delilah stopped at several gardens on the way, checking on fruiting plants and vegetables as she went. She came away with little, but every bit would help feed them for another day. She was almost feeling optimistic, in fact, upon catching sight of the familiar berry bushes when something stepped out of the abandoned house, directly in her path.

Delilah froze in place in the middle of the street in shock. She’d heard on the comm-radio about the arrival of an alien species. She had laughed about it with her husband at the time—some five years ago? But those aliens had been described differently. Large lupine creatures with thick furry pelts, multiple arms and savage fangs... the Ragoru had been described to be stuff of nightmares.

But this... this was not a Ragoru.

Tall and lean but powerfully built, the alien’s body seemed to shimmer a golden red hue and possessed down that thickened in certain spots along the legs, shoulders and collar where it gave way to larger gold-tipped red feathers. On either side of the alien’s neck there were two long teardrop shaped marks of a vivid blue on either side of its neck and a thick collar of similarly colored feathers just above its chest, and threaded within the thick feathery crests that covered its head, the feathers of which were long enough to trail over halfway down its back with streaks of red and bright

blue amid the scarlet feathers. It was the alien's face, however, that gave her a pause. It was almost humanoid in appearance except that its eyes were larger and rounder than human eyes, giving it an uncanny appearance that was only matched by the bony plating that ran down over the bridge of its nose, forming something of a hooked shape to it that was only matched by a similar plating on its chin.

Its head suddenly turned toward her, and her heart nearly failed when its vivid blue eyes locked onto her. It trilled softly, and suddenly another came from the same cottage almost identical in size and plumage except it was vivid green in places where the other was blue. Their heads turned toward her in unison as green and blue eyes fastened upon her.

Anxiety pumped through her, making her heart race and, in that moment, Delilah discovered her limit for the unusual as a scream ripped from her throat and she whirled away, determined to find her daughter and take their chances in the woods far from the cursed village and its mystery aliens. Even she had her limits.

## Chapter

### Three

Gehj startled at the sound of the female's scream, his wings and tail feather fanning as his crests lifted, puffing out with instinctive alarm. But despite the terrible sound, his eyes followed her with fascination. Wingless, like an Atlavan female, she could almost have been mistaken for one if not for the absence of feathers, the softer structure of her face, and the long strands of fur wound and pinned to the top of her head. Her face deathly pale and her eyes wide with fear, she whirled around to flee, only to collide directly into Agrel seconds after he dropped to the ground behind her. Another shrill scream tore from her as she flung her basket into his ahaku's startled face and raced past him, disappearing between two buildings.

“That must be a human,” Agrel observed with an amused note in his voice as he plucked a leaf of vegetation from his chest and tossed it to the ground.

“I believe so,” Gehj confirmed as he joined his ahaku’s side to stare in the direction she had fled.

“Do you think we should follow her?”

Gehj peered at the other male with amusement. “Do you wish for her to throw other things at you?”

A contrite expression passed over the male’s face, but he shook his head. Agrel’s gaze drifted down to the fallen basket and his crests raised slightly in curiosity. “Do you imagine this was her food?”

Gehj followed his gaze to the scattered bits of vegetation and berries. He grimaced. “Most probably. She must have been truly frightened to abandon it,” he observed as he crouched down and began gathering the pitifully small vegetables and put them back into the basket.

“This is not much food,” Agrel observed. “If this is what she is subsisting on, I doubt it can sustain her for long.”

Gehj nodded in agreement. Clearly, the surrounding forest was beginning to choke out the sunlight except for when the sun was directly overhead. The forest was not only rapidly encroaching on the abandoned village, but the gardens and fields were being rapidly choked up by a wild tangle of plants and young bushes that had seeded everywhere.

“We should take it to her,” his ahaku announced as Gehj picked up the refilled basket and he nearly dropped it in surprise.

He stared at the other male for a long minute, uncertain whether or not Agrel was joking. Surely, he did not intend to just arrive on the doorstep of a female who was obviously terrified of them. He waited expectantly for Agrel's laughter, only for the male to tug the basket from his hands and start off down the road with it. Gehj's eyes followed him in horror. Giving his head a firm shake to affirm that he was, in fact, not hallucinating, Gehj hurried after him with a shouted protest.

Grabbing the edge of the basket, he pulled his ahaku short. "Are you insane?" he hissed. "Do you imagine that you will just walk up to her door and give it to her?"

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“Do not be silly,” Agrel chuckled, his wings spreading wide, forcing Gehj to duck out of the way. “I am going to fly. I will be able to locate her dwelling quicker if I have an aerial view.”

That was worse! Gehj made a strangled sound of disbelief and launched himself at the other male just in time to grab him with enough force to tackle him to the ground just as he lifted into the air. They dropped like a pair of stones and he grunted as the hard, packed ground rose up to meet them.

Wings flapping wildly, Agrel twisted out of his hold so that they faced each other as they gradually straightened.

“What is wrong with you?” Agrel demanded.

“What’s wrong with me?” Gehj echoed in disbelief. “What is wrong with you? The human is already frightened, but you think flying overhead and dropping down on her is the best solution? Just picture it for a moment.”

Agrel frowned. “It may seem a little hostile,” he admitted.

“You think?” Gehj replied. “Now just imagine all the terror that you saw on her face when she ran, and how that might be amplified.”

The male’s mouth twisted in a grimace, his crest flattening in a faint sign of distress. The tension eased from Gehj’s body in response. Agrel was occasionally short-sighted with his intentions, but the male had a good heart and meant well. He would never intentionally do something that might terrorize the female.

“What about her food?” he asked, nodding to the fallen basket.

Gehj hesitated as he peered at it. “What if we track her to her dwelling on foot and then leave the basket with the food a short distance from her dwelling where she can see it? She may come out and retrieve once she sees that we are gone.”

“What if she does not see us? She will not know that we are showing her such consideration and will still be afraid of us.”

“Who else would it be? As far as I have seen, she is the only human here,” Gehj replied. “There is certainly no one caring for her here.”

Despite the truth of his words, they offered little in the way of encouragement or hope. The fact that she had no one to help her did not mean she would accept help from them. He knew that, and Agrel knew that. And it was clear that such a strong possibility disappointed his ahaku. The male picked up the basket and stared down at it in dismay before he set about slowly gathering up the food once more. Gehj silently bent to help him gather the fallen food when Agrel brightened unexpectedly.

Reaching for his crest, the male withdrew one of his long red feathers and laid it across the bottom of the basket. He smiled down at it, pleased with himself. “There, perhaps she will understand that.”

Gehj craned his head to peer at the feather. He had to admit that it was a nice touch. Atlavan rarely sacrificed feathers for another that they were not mated to, so he was impressed that Agrel was so quick to do so. If the female was Atlavan, she would read much meaning into the gesture. Or was the male offering far more than an assurance of safety?

“Your feather, ahaku?” he murmured.

The male nodded and adjusted its position in the basket. “Why not? We are unmated and alone... she is alone as well. It makes sense. She may not fully understand the meaning of the feather, but it is soft and attractive and a clear offering of ourselves.” He paused and looked over at Gehj critically. “You should offer a feather as well. She will be able to see that this one is unmistakably mine with its hint of green on its edge.”

Gehj returned his regard skeptically but, after several heartbeats of hesitation, pulled loose one of his blue feathers from his crest and laid it in the basket beside his ahaku’s feather. Agrel cooed at the basket with obvious pleasure and cradled it to his chest.

He looked over at Gehj, his crest feathers fluffing into brilliant crown. “Shall we take them to her, then?”

Gehj nodded wordlessly and spun away, suddenly very overwhelmed with the enormity of what they were doing. He could not believe he was actually engaging in the first steps of courtship with a female he did not even know. But he could not fault Agrel for his decision. Knowing how few opportunities they may have in the future, he was also eager not to waste the possibility of finding a mate. Right now, like at the beginning of any courtship, mating was nothing more than a mere possibility, one that he was interested in exploring further.

Leaving Agrel to carry the basket, he struck off down the street, his keen vision locking onto the fresh imprints of her feet on the dirt path that served as the village’s road. Atlavans preferred stone roads to serve the purpose of greater privacy among a species who tracked others effortlessly by sight, but he could not complain about the usefulness of the road in this instance. It led them on a direct path among a handful of buildings until they were standing a short distance from the female’s small dwelling. It was not even half the size of several of the other dwellings, but light poured out visibly from one window, giving it a welcoming appearance that was far more



inviting than the larger dwelling that they had claimed.

He gestured to the road immediately in front of them. "Leave it here, Agrel. She should see it fine from this distance."

"I do not think her vision is as good as ours," the male replied doubtfully. "I will take it a little closer."

Gehj frowned. That was true. Still, he kept an eye on the house, watching for any sign of alarm as his ahaku crept closer and set the basket on the ground. His frown deepened in response to a flutter of movement by the window. Was that her? Had they frightened her again? But the small, pale face that peered out at him was not their female but one far smaller... younger. A nestling?

"Gehj, do you see what I am seeing?" Agrel whispered, and the male took an unconscious step forward. "A nestling! I have not seen a nestling in... a long time."

Warbling and agreement in his throat, Gehj's eyes drifted over the dwelling warily. A mother with young would be more vulnerable than she would be without, and more liable to attack first to safeguard the safety of her nestling. Thankfully, it seemed that she did not notice their presence immediately or that her daughter was watching them with the open curiosity possessed by the young. But where there was a nestling, a male would be nearby. That was surprisingly more disappointing than he would have believed in such a short amount of time.

"Agrel, back away now," he hissed. "We should leave before the male comes."

"I do not believe there is a male," his ahaku replied, and Gehj bit back a snarl of frustration.

"You also did not know there is a nestling. Better to be cautious."

Despite his words, shock rocked him. The thought of her being alone there with a nestling horrified him. Who could leave even an unrelated female alone with an offspring? On the heels of the shock, however, his admiration grew by leaps and bounds, building upon the desire and rightness that he felt upon first catching sight of her. She was a strong, brave female, and the sudden desire to claim her shook him violently.

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Now he sounded as crazy as Agrel.

And Agrel was currently looking unconvinced about the entire matter. He nodded, however, and took several steps back but paused and seemed to reconsider because he hurried to the basket once more when a loud cackling noise broke the air. Agrel's crests rose threateningly as several feathered creatures flapped their wings aggressively as they emerged from wherever they were hiding and proceeded to launch themselves at the basket.

His hiss was the only warning they got before he dispatched them as well with a slash of talons and a violent beat of his wings and leaving them strewn where they dropped around the basket. He nodded approvingly, his feather puffed out with pride.

"Nothing will take food from her or her nestling," he declared as he turned away with a slight fanning of his tail feathers. "Now I am ready. Let us return to the dismal hovel. I hunted well today and there is plenty of meat waiting for our meal."

"Yes," Gehj murmured.

With one last glance at the little nestling staring at him wide-eyed from the window, he lifted a hand in farewell and departed from the street with his ahaku.

Chapter

Four

Delilah gaped at the pile of dead birds left beside her basket. She hadn't seen what

happened as she had come from the cellar just as the males were leaving, but Lily had filled her in with excitement that only a child her age could achieve. They had murdered every single ornery old hen because they went for the food in the basket.

She should be furious, but it was hard to be angry when the aliens clearly didn't recognize domesticated fowl when they saw them and probably only saw scavengers attacking her hard won food. And if she was honest, they saved her the effort of having to personally dispatch the poor old things herself. She could put them in the stewpot with the bits of potato, carrot, and onion that she had scavenged for their lunch, and they would easily get several meals from it as it would last for a few days in refrigeration.

Without a second thought, she gathered the hens by their feet before bending down to fetch her basket and carrying the whole load inside. She promptly deposited the birds on the table without so much as a glance toward the basket. The birds would take some time plucking so she would have to get on it quickly.

"Oh pretty! Momma, look at these!" Lily exclaimed, drawing her attention from the task of meal preparation as she withdrew two feathers from the basket.

Her eyebrows climbed at the sight of two large, brightly colored feathers in her daughter's hands. What were the chances of two such prominent feathers falling into the basket? One bore a hint of green and the other was almost entirely blue—one from each alien, she surmised.

"They are presents for us; I know it!"

Presents? Why would aliens give them presents... and such odd ones at that? They were pretty, but they literally came off their bodies. That didn't sound like a normal sort of present. Lovers who intended to marry often exchanged locks of hair and wore them in small pieces of jewelry. Like the locks of hair, the feathers seemed too

personal.

“I don’t know if we should accept them, Lily,” she quietly admonished. “Birds often carry parasites on their feathers. We don’t know what an alien’s feathers might carry.”

Her daughter’s face fell in response and guilt assailed her as Lily’s big hazel eyes turned to her pleadingly.

“Please, mamma. They don’t have anything on them... I’m sure of it. They wouldn’t give us anything that would make us sick. Please let me keep them.”

Delilah wasn’t so sure of that. What if making them sick under the guise of charity was exactly their goal? She sighed. Or maybe she was being overly suspicious. Although they had startled her, she had the impression that they had been just as surprised to see her. And they hadn’t tried to attack her. Nor had they attempted to attack her home when they discovered where she lived. Given that she wouldn’t have a real chance of fighting them off if that was what they decided to do, she decided that she could afford to give them the benefit of the doubt. What else was she going to do... cower in terror? Then there was the careful respectfulness that they were showing by maintaining their distance.

“Oh, very well. Just put them on the mantle so you aren’t handling them—just in case,” she agreed with a sigh of exasperation.

Although she wasn’t convinced that accepting the feathers was a good idea for reasons that Lily wasn’t old enough to understand, it was worth it, however, seeing her little face light up with obvious pleasure as she carefully displayed the shimmering pair of feathers.

“They look magical,” Lily observed in awe and Delilah joined her by her side to peer

at the feathers speculatively.

There was a certain quality to them that made them appear almost like fire when the light hit them just right. “They are certainly very pretty, Lily. You chose a good spot for them,” she replied as she dropped a kiss on the top of her head.

Returning to the kitchen, she wasn’t entirely surprised to hear Lily’s footsteps following behind her. She often had a captivated audience while she cooked and was frequently peppered with dozens of questions that needed answering. She smiled privately to herself as she prepared the water to dip the birds, but the questions that came from her daughter were not ones that she was expecting.

“Do you think they are here for us?”

Delilah glanced up from the water filling the small tub she put in the sink, her brows knitting with confusion. “What would ever make you ask that?”

Lily shrugged. “No one ever comes to the village. Even traders stopped coming a long time ago after daddy died and couldn’t keep the woods safe. Why would they come all the way here if not for us?”

“Baby, we are in the middle of nowhere,” Delilah gently explained as she carried one of the birds over to the tub. “How would they even know that we are here?”

“Well... because I wished for them.”

“Wished for them?” Delilah echoed, her head lifting to peer at her daughter. “What do you mean?”

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“I wished on the first star on the midsummer’s night just like daddy always said,” Lily replied. “The best and most sincere wishes are sure to be granted that night.”

“And you wished for two aliens?”

“No,” Lily admitted. “But I did wish that we would not be alone... and now here they are.”

Delilah’s brow furrowed. There seemed to be to it that Lily wasn’t saying but the innocent smile that her daughter directed at her, but she wasn’t overly concerned. If wishes did anything, then her husband would never have died in the woods, abandoning them. Without even a burial to grieve over, there had been nothing but pain and loss, and a big, ugly wound that never healed right since he disappeared. And then the gossip of more terrible possibilities that he hadn’t died but had chosen to abandon everyone, including his wife and daughter, to escape the burden of his life there. And unfortunately, that rang truer than the story she comforted herself with.

That gossip still haunted her—imagining the possibility that he was still out there, living well while she struggled alone with their daughter. She made sure that Lily never heard the ugly rumors, but her own heart ached from the possibility. There were times that she wished that his body had turned up mangled and half-rotten so that she could put it in the ground and be done with it.

But just as she wasn’t about to destroy her daughter’s faith and love in her father, she wasn’t going to ruin her belief in wishing stars.

“Well then, if time shows that your star sent them to us, then we will have to thank

the stars, won't we?" she replied, and Lily nodded earnestly.

She smiled outwardly as she turned her mind toward preparing the meal and pretended like her heart wasn't aching all the more now. It became an easier charade to pull off as her daughter's questions and observations filled the space between them. Delilah kept the smile on her face as she replied, but deep inside, she wondered about the aliens and about the fate of her missing husband.

## Chapter

### Five

Agrel watched for the female as he went about his day. He sometimes caught glimpses of her as the days passed since their first meeting, but he made no further attempts to approach her. But he certainly watched her. He longed for the moments he caught a glimpse of her. He recognized that his guarding instinct was already engaged. That was what made him want to hover attentively nearby whenever she was walking through the town or in the overgrown fields. He was as careful as possible to reduce his chances of being seen, but there were many times when she suddenly straightened, and her head turned his way, that he was almost certain that she knew he was there.

He did not care what Gehj said, he was certain that there was no male. He had seen no signs of a male in the village or around her, not even from a distance. There was certainly no one to stop him from perching on the roof and admiring the way the sunlight poured through her clothes, revealing the beautiful shadow of her female body beneath.

The roof briefly vibrated as Gehj dropped down and lowered himself into a crouch. Agrel watched him from the corner of his eye and smirked as he observed the way his ahaku's eyes narrowed with interest on the female. The male's wings trembled for but



a moment before he wrenched his gaze away to pierce Agrel with an annoyed look.

“When you said that you were going hunting, this is not what I had in mind,” Gehj observed drily.

Agrel shrugged, unconcerned. “I did that, too. The meat is currently smoking. But I must admit that this hunt is far more interesting.”

Gehj sighed and sank down onto the roof beside him. “This is foolish. If she has a mate?—”

A derisive snort escaped Agrel. As much as he respected his ahaku, this was getting tiring. “What male? Have you seen any male since we arrived?”

“He could be in the woods,” Gehj protested, but he said it weakly, clearly not even believing it himself.

Agrel shook his head. “If he was in the woods hunting, he would have returned by now. He would not be absent so long that there is no trace of his presence. No male would be gone for so long unless he was?—”

“Dead. Or willingly abandoned them,” Gehj finished with a sigh.

Agrel gave a curt nod, his gaze sliding back to the female. She was all alone with her nestling, and that was aggressively triggering his instincts. He recognized that fact and made no effort to fight against it.

“Do you think a human male would truly abandon his mate and nestling?” he asked as he returned to studying her. “Would it not be more logical to assume that he is dead, and that is why he has not returned?”

He would prefer to believe that. The idea of an unknown male abandoning the female that captivated him oddly rankled, even though it still provided an opening for their claim. It pained him to think of them being hurt in such a way.

“They are not Atlavan,” Gehj unnecessarily reminded him. “We do not know how their males treat their mates. Even among our own species, it is not unheard of for a deviant male to abandon his nest. We cannot discount the possibility.”

Agrel’s heart sank, but he inclined his head in agreement. It was a possibility that they could not ignore. Not that it would change the outcome. If the male attempted to interfere, he would be dealt with in the harshest terms possible. And he was nothing if not an inventive male.

“It does not matter. We are here now,” he replied, pointedly ignoring his ahaku’s sigh.

“And if she does not want us?”

They would broach that problem when they arrived at it. He was not going to think so pessimistically. They still had time. His gaze drifted over the female and the field lazily, imagining what it might be like to gather food at her side. Of course, the mountains would be far safer than the wretched village. There would be no forest hiding murderous wildlife and plenty of space for a male to stretch out his wings. His sharp gaze shifted as the tall, overgrown grass just behind her seemed to shift unnaturally. The movement was slight, but not insignificant. Something other than himself was hunting her. Without a word, he stretched out his wings and launched himself from the roof, ignoring Gehj’s questioning coo.

The grass shifted again, and a hint of fur very briefly became visible before it was concealed once more. Blood going cold, Agrel beat his wings faster, his entire body growing taut as he aligned his position with it. He did not recognize the predator as

one they had encountered, but it was a predator, nonetheless. Folding his wings, he dropped silently from the sky, his claws lengthening into talons in preparation for the kill. The stalks of grain whipped as he crashed down into them, his talons going for the creature stalking his female.

A shout rose from behind him, and he rose his wings defensively, reeling, as a woven basket came down on his head and back repeatedly.

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:43 pm*

“Get away from her!” the female shrieked.

Her? Flicking his wings to shake off his stupor, Agrel lifted his hands in front of him to demonstrate that he was unarmed.

“Do not be afraid. We mean you no harm,” he assured her. She immediately flinched and shrank away, her eyes going round with fear as they focused on his talons. What? Oh! He immediately dropped his hands and discreetly broke off the excess length. “There was a beast preparing to attack and I?—”

His words faded as the female picked up a small furry creature and cradled it in her arms.

“Y... you mean this?” She peered at him quizzically. “You thought you were saving me from a... kitten?”

He peered down at it as it stared at him with large, yellow eyes. Its mouth full of razor-sharp teeth opened and he tensed, ready to slap it aside if it attempted to tear flesh from the female holding it. Instead, it let out a soft mew, and he blinked down at it in surprise. It was... cute?

A very soft chuckle rolled over him, making his feathers fluff with pleasure. His gaze lifted from the kitten curiously. The female stared down at him, her hand pressed against her mouth, muffling her laughter. Her eyes sparkled down at him from above her hand with open amusement, and his lips curled kindly in response.

“I take it that you do not require saving,” he observed with a trill of amusement of his

own.

She shook her head, and she lowered her hand from her mouth, though an uncertain smile remained in place. “No, Nimh might be mischievous, but she is our pet. She wouldn’t actually hurt us.”

“Nimh,” he said slowly and cautiously extended one hand only to draw it back quickly when tiny needle-like claws extended from the kitten’s paw to swipe at his fingers. “Mischievous indeed,” he muttered, and to his delight, the female gave another quiet chuckle in response.

“Flexing her predatory instincts is part of her play, but she doesn’t mean any harm either,” she said as she bent and set the wiggling kitten back on the ground. Her fingers clenched together, betraying anxiety.

He nodded, his eyes dropping to the discarded basket and all the foodstuff that once again scattered everywhere because of him. He grimaced as he heard the loud sound of Gehj’s beating wings as the male landed just behind him. The female’s smile slipped, a look of wariness coming over her expression as her eyes bounced between them.

“Making a mess again, Agrel?”

He did not even bother to look back at his ahaku but smiled apologetically at the female in front of him instead. “It seems that you have lost all of your foodstuff again,” he observed as he slowly knelt and began to gather it up. “I apologize that I frightened you so much that you were willing to sacrifice it to beat me away.”

“I... I didn’t really think about it,” she admitted. “I was a bit surprised. And afraid you were going to eat her.”

“Eat her?” he echoed, his gaze trailing back toward the kitten that was busy chasing an insect through the grass. She was no larger than some animals that he had hunted and brought back to the village. “I can see how you might have misunderstood the situation.”

She shook her head, a look of exasperation on her face as her eyes followed the kitten for a moment. “I hadn’t planned for her to follow me out here, but I suppose she was getting tired of being cooped in the house, too.”

Too? His mind immediately went to the nestling, and he wondered if she was also being kept within the dwelling because of their presence there. Guilt ate him, but he kept it to himself. He did not want to make her wary of him again by expressing too much interest in her offspring too early. Instead, he focused on picking up the spilled roots that she’d been busily pulling from the ground a short distance away. His nose wrinkled as he held up one pitiful looking root and dangled it in the air by its stem.

“Surely this is not all you are going to eat?” Agrel asked as he peered at it with a measure of distaste. “Do you not eat meat?”

The little female’s shoulders slumped with defeat, frustration gathering in the small line between her brows. At this side, Gehj puffed up with annoyance, swiftly reacting to her obvious discomfort.

“Agrel,” he hissed. “It is rude to assume. She may not even eat meat.”

“Actually... I do,” she interrupted, her eyes flicking between them nervously. “I just don’t have any. At least not after the chickens you killed. I should thank you for that. We were able to eat well off the stew while it lasted. But there is nothing left now. The forest is... not safe. I wouldn’t dare to enter it to hunt, even if I knew how to set a basic snare.”

Gehj made a sympathetic sound and edged a little closer. He nudged Agrel out of the way, much to his amusement, as he picked up her basket and offered it to her.

“It is not,” he agreed. He hesitated and glanced around, as if uncertain how to broach the topic. “Do you not have mates to care for you? Or perhaps your brothers?”

Smart. He inferred nothing but inquired over those things that would concern an Atlavan almost immediately. No Atlavan male would leave his sisters unprotected any more than he would his mate. Even if it happened that both of her mates had to attend to something, she would always have a brother, or another male relative, to see to her welfare. Leaving a flightless female alone and abandoned was punishable by their laws. Not that there wasn’t the occasional rogue who did so, as Gehj had reminded him, but they were very few and far between.

She gave a small, nervous shake of her head, betraying her discomfort with the intimacy of the question, her earlier ease obviously forgotten at the reminder of being alone with two unknown males and with no male protection. “N... no. No brothers. And my...mate died a long time ago.”

Agrel trilled softly in sympathy. She jumped at the sound, her head whirling toward him, and he smiled apologetically in response. His ahaku had the sense at least to smile apologetically in response.

“W... why are you still here?” she stammered. Despite her fear, her words were starting to come quicker and firmer again, much to his relief. “What do you want?”

“To hunt,” Agrel replied bluntly, and Gehj gave him a sharp look when she immediately winced.

“Wh... what do you eat?” she whispered, dread thick in her voice.

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Confusion drew his brows together, but his expression cleared quickly with understanding.

“No, not as you think,” he replied, and immediately lifted the furry mammals strapped to his belt. It just so happened that he had caught it just as he had set out to find her. “Just what animals we may catch. The gods would send a terrible blight if we even considered eating another person.”

Gehj angled his head to meet her eyes and nodded, affirming his words. Her gaze flitted toward the small furbearer and the tension bled from her as she gave a nervous laugh.

“Oh... you bagged a hare.”

“Six actually,” Agrel preened. “I have already taken the others inside.”

Her lips parted, and she craned her head to look around Gehj to the small dwelling just behind him that Agrel gestured to. “You are staying in Mrs. Murguns place? She hasn’t lived there for over a year. I doubt she left many of her belongings behind for you to cook with.”

“She certainly left a hard floor,” Agrel agreed with a faint wince.

“It is better than sleeping outdoors,” Gehj countered, but he followed the direction of her gaze back to the dwelling and shrugged his wings. “We spit and roast what we will eat and smoke the rest. We can make do for the few days that we are here.”



“Mrs. Murgun’s garden should have some herbs growing wild there that you can use,” she said. “They don’t come close enough to the village for me to trap anymore, but that is what I would do.”

Agrel brightened at the opportunity suddenly presented to him. “Then you should definitely have one. As it happens, I have one I just recently caught with me.” Pulling it from his belt, he offered it to her.

She stared at it for a long moment, uncertainly.

“I see. Well, if you are certain then I would be happy to take it, with my thanks, of course,” she acknowledged, her arms coming up to take the hare as he handed it to her. She smiled at it. “It’s very generous. Thank you.”

He returned her smile, his heart softening further. They should be spending their time hunting and smoking provisions while scouring the village for anything useful they could find for their journey. This was not a place to linger when they needed to move on as quickly as possible to find new rookery grounds for their people, but at that moment, he could not think of a single place he would rather be. He knew Gehj thought him ridiculous for following after and tending to a stray, unrelated female, yet he caught his ahaku gathering fruits, berries, and nuts for her as well. He clearly felt the same undeniable urge.

“You are welcome...” he hesitated, waiting for her to decide whether or not to grant them her name.

“Delilah,” she quietly replied, hugging the hare to her.

He inclined his head in acknowledgement. “I am Agrel, and this is my ahaku Gehj. If it assists you, we will be happy to continue with this arrangement for the time that we are here,” he murmured, drawing a startled look from Gehj, though the male

recovered quickly enough to nod in agreement. “Would you like me to bring another to you?”

A guarded look crossed her face, and Agrel wondered if she would refuse.

“I wouldn’t mind a second hare, but I can wait here,” she said.

Agrel took it gracefully and inclined his head in agreement. “Of course. I will return,” he replied.

Turning away, the male opened his wings and flew back to the dwelling where they were butchering and preserving their cache of meat. He circled once, noting that Gehj waited by her side. His ahaku’s gaze drifted occasionally in the female’s direction while taking care not to look at her directly for too long so as to not make her uncomfortable.

Slowly, then. He smiled to himself as he winged his way toward the dwelling. She was not taking the opportunity to flee, and her fear responses were visibly lessening. Just perhaps they had a chance.

## Chapter

### Six

Delilah didn’t know what to think of the aliens. She’d felt them watching her daily since their arrival and yet, while they had left her plenty of fruits and vegetables, they hadn’t made any further attempts to come nearer to her until the day the male called Agrel had sought to rescue her from the fierce Nimh. Even so, they kept their distance, though they lingered more, their eyes following her. They had watched her before, she’d always been aware of it, but it had been from a distance. She was more acutely aware of it now that she was sharing the village with her without any of them

feeling the need to avoid each other now.

She was certain that they were very much aware of where she was in the village at any time of the day. No matter where she went, she caught sight of one or the other, or sometimes both of them, whether in passing or while the males happened to be lounging as they rested and enjoyed the sun. Even from her window, she would often look to see one of the males passing overhead, their color disguised by the brightness of the sun behind them, making it difficult to distinguish one from the other. They were a constant presence and rather than alarming her, she found that she was comforted by it. Nothing dangerous was liable to get into the village while the males were on guard.

Not only that, but the males were considerate of their welfare. On numerous occasions, she had seen the male called Gehj leaving baskets of wild fruits, nuts and other bits of food that had obviously procured from deep within the woods. A plentitude of food that the meager gardens within the village and the dying fields just outside the walls couldn't even match. And it wasn't just that. Since learning that they ate meat, the other male, Agrel, had also begun to leave meat out for her as well. She was reluctant to accept it at first, since they were still very much unknown to her, but she had Lily to think of. Lily, who watched them from the windows with far too much interest. And it was getting harder for her to justify keeping her daughter confined within the home—even to herself—when everything they did demonstrated that they could possibly be trusted.

She was just frightened to trust to that extent, not when everyone else in her life had already abandoned her. And she was equally afraid of how much she'd recently come to rely upon them. The thought of losing that—of Lily slowly starving to death—terrified her.

"I still don't know why I cannot go out and play," Lily complained. "It's so boring in here."

“I explained it before. We aren’t alone out here, so you can’t have free rein of the village like before. I would just feel better knowing that you are here where it’s safe... with Nimh. You are both very small and can be easily hurt. It’s better to be safe now rather than sorry later over a lapse in judgement,” Delilah replied, her attention focused on wiping down the kitchen, and really any surface of the house.

Perhaps she was also beginning to feel the pressure of always being indoors as well. She was feeling as restless as her daughter looked.

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“But they came from the wishing stars,” Lily reminded her with a heavy sigh.

“Of course they did. They are aliens.”

Lily shook her head, a secretive smile on her face. “No momma, I told you, they came from the stars for us. They are our new family.”

New family. That was something Lily certainly had not said before. Saying she wished on the stars that they wouldn’t be alone was one thing, but insisting that the aliens were family to them gave Delilah a pause. They never had any other family except each other after Zack disappeared. She’d thought that was enough. That Lily was happy despite the hardship. She didn’t realize that Lily had so keenly felt the lack of having the large families that the other children had. She never had uncles or cousins... was that what she was hoping for? If so, her daughter’s heart was going to be broken.

It was painful knowing that she would have to stand helplessly by as her daughter cried her heart out, all because of a harmless fantasy dreamt up by her lonely child. It wasn’t fair. Why did they have to come to their village? Why should Lily be forced to experience abandonment and pain a second time when the aliens eventually leave? She knew that it wasn’t their fault. They were doing nothing to encourage any such fantasy over the hours her daughter spent watching them. Of course, they watched Delilah and Lily in turn—what little they could see of the little girl through the window—but it had struck her more like the sort of fascination one might feel encountering something new. Wasn’t that why she also often looked for them as she walked through the village? It had long ceased being about fear, but rather, it had become an unconscious pull to observe something so very different from her.

“Lily, honey, I don’t think they would see us the same way you see them,” she cautioned. “I know that they are fascinating with their long feathers and red wings and even look a tiny bit like us in the way they are shaped, but they aren’t human. They may not even consider us as people in the same way we do, much less as a potential member of their family. It would be best to get that out of your head.”

Heaving an exasperated sigh, Lily dropped down from her knees as she turned on the couch, giving her back momentarily to the window behind her. “Momma, don’t be silly. Of course they do. Don’t you see the way they are always bringing us food?” she pointed out in her most reasonable voice. “Who else would do that but family? That’s what families do... they feed each other. Kids are given good foods by their families to show them how much they love them.”

Perhaps she should have expected that response. In Lily’s eyes, they were practically heroes. It didn’t hurt that from day one she’d been wildly enthusiastic about them. She practically bounced when one of the males came within view of the windows, her slender arms waving over her head jubilantly.

“Okay,” Delilah replied, drawing out the word slowly. “But people also feed small animals that need food without making them part of their families. We took Nimh in, but that is not always the case. Their kindness might be the same that we would show a starving dog.”

Lily giggled. “We would bring the dog home, too,” she pointed out.

There was no arguing with that. “Fair point,” she chuckled. “But Lily, just remember that they are not us. We can’t expect them to just adopt us.”

A sweet, knowing smile spread across her daughter’s face. “You’ll see, momma.”

While she was certain that it was just the fantasy of a lonely child, she couldn’t

ignore that her daughter's words sparked something within her. What it was exactly, she wasn't sure. But with the dangers of the woods growing by day, and the males attentively providing so happily for their meals in ways they hadn't enjoyed since her husband disappeared, she could understand the appeal for Lily. It was hard to not want someone who was there specifically for them.

And although it was a fantasy, it was one that followed her into slumber that night and haunted her all next morning when she woke. She went about doing her morning routine listlessly, her mind occupied with conflicting thoughts of the alien males. Was Lily right? Not specifically the family part—that was just the hopeful imagining of a child. But might they have been lured to the village and were lingering because they were... interested?

They claimed to just be hunting and renewing their supplies and yet their interest in her was difficult to refute. Not that they came to the village for them, but even if it was by some wish that made their paths cross, did they see something more in her than just a lone female they were forced to share space with? It sparked a crazy idea—one that the old Delilah would have pushed away with revulsion and not dared do consider. But why shouldn't she? Zack would hate the very idea of his daughter being permitted around a pair of "monsters." It would have all been a matter of principle, of course.

That was the way it always was with Zack. Everything he did for Lily was about his image or the core principles of his beliefs. He certainly hadn't invested any of himself or his time into her, which accounted for the fact that Lily barely had any memory of him. His duties often took him away, and for increasingly longer periods when the newness of being a father wore off. And when he was there, he was often impatient with the little girl who interfered too often with his pursuit of his baser desires.

That is why, an insidious voice within her whispered, you question whether or not he truly died. How many times did you have to listen to him complain about him not

being able to have you to himself?

She had believed that he was just tired, overworked, and wanting some comfort from his wife. Lily hadn't understood that, but Delilah had been certain it was just something that would fix itself and that her husband would grow close to his daughter. Was he ever close? Had he ever held her? Had he ever voiced wanting a baby or being disappointed when Delilah struggled to conceive? A chill worked deeper within her and suddenly the house that she had shared with Zack for so many years felt claustrophobically small.

She swallowed thickly and pushed the feeling away. What did it matter anymore? He was gone. He certainly wasn't around to offer his objections about any decisions she made. And right now, she needed to protect her daughter. Her broken heart aside, there was a chance that Lily wouldn't make it through another winter if Vernon didn't pull through for them—and as the days passed, that was looking increasingly hopeless.

She had no choice. She had to persuade the aliens to help them, and she was under no illusions that doing so would cost her. In her brief conversation with Agrel and Gehj, they had been clear as to what their plan was, and it wasn't the sort of plan that allowed the required flexibility necessary for traveling with two humans, especially a child, if they had to travel hard for long distances. They certainly would not be eager to charitably pick up the responsibility of feeding and protecting them while they were forced to travel considerably slower to accommodate them—not without some kind of compensation.

If she was not wrong and they were... interested, then perhaps a bargain could be made. Heat rose to her face, unbidden, at the thought. She'd never been intimate with anyone but Zack, but the aliens weren't exactly unattractive. She believed that she could carry out such an arrangement until they arrived at either another settlement or within distance of a citadel. And just maybe doing so would ensure that Lily was



surrounded by other people whose presence would help distract her from the disappointment and pain when Agrel and Gehj left them. Though Delilah had never been south, she would take her chances there over being left to die alone in the village. And she would trade the only thing she had to get it—her body.

She needed to speak to them. Pulling the towel from around her waist, she craned her head toward the living room.

“Lily,” she called out and smiled when her daughter’s sweet face popped around the corner. She dried her hands off on the towel and tossed it on the counter. “Lily, baby, I’m going to head out for a bit to see if they left anything for us.”

She didn’t need to mention who they were for her daughter’s face to light up with delight.

“Can I come with you?” she asked, bounding into the kitchen.

Delilah shook her head. “Not this time. There’s something I need to do. Maybe next time, okay?”

Lily peered for a long moment, studying her, but she must have seen what she wanted to see because she suddenly broke into a smile. “So, you won’t keep me in here forever.”

“If I thought it would give me some peace, and any kind of guarantees, I would try to,” Delilah muttered. “Just stay in the house and keep the door locked. Don’t open it for anyone.”

Her daughter huffed and rolled her eyes. “I know, mamma. I won’t.”

She cupped her cheek and smiled. “Good girl. I won’t be gone long. Take care of

Nimh.”

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Lily nodded and bent to scoop up the kitten that came racing toward her. Clutching Nimh to her chest, she followed her to the door and waited patiently as Delilah stepped outside and firmly closed the door behind her. She waited, listening, until she heard the familiar sounds of the locks sliding into place.

Good girl.

Turning toward the central road, she tipped her head as she walked toward the center of the village, examining the skies and the nearby rooftops for the males. Usually, they were easy to spot at any random time that she chose to look for them and yet now that she actually wanted to find them, they were gone. Had they finished and left already? Her heart constricted painfully, and she picked up her pace, hurrying through the village. She peered into the cottages as she passed them with the hope that they might be scouring the other residents for more supplies, but she came up empty. She tried to tell herself it was fine. That she would come across them at any moment and then would feel silly for the pressure twisting her insides. She didn't truly panic, however, until she reached Mrs. Murgun's cottage, only to find it eerily silent as well.

Delilah spun away, her heart hammering as a sick feeling crept through her, pushing bile up her throat. They left. They didn't even say goodbye. Perhaps it was a ridiculous expectation, but she couldn't help but feel stung by it. She'd been so certain that they wouldn't just disappear on them... not without saying something.

It seemed that she was wrong.

Her heart weighed down with disappointment, she left the empty cottage. How was

she going to explain this to Lily?

It was the loud sound of splashing, however, that penetrated her thoughts and made her freeze in place. The last time she heard splashing like that, a large animal had managed to make its way into the village and decided to avail itself of the large pond there. It had taken the strongest men and all the village's bravest women to bring it down before it could harm anyone. If there was another out there, she didn't know what she would do.

Her heart beating trepidatiously, she headed toward the sound, needing to know for certain exactly what she was dealing with. The pond had been the jewel of the village. Nearly the size of a small lake and blooming with lilies, it had been a welcoming place of beauty and refuge. It was the one thing she found pleasure in, and yet now she wished that there was no pond there.

Stepping through the bushes that created a natural privacy screen between the pond and the nearest cottages, Delilah froze in shock. There, standing waist-deep within the pond, was Gehj, his blue feathers distinctly setting him apart. His wings and tails feathers shimmered in the sun as they drifted across the surface of the water. The gold strands within the red feathers picked up the sunlight, making them almost glow. And, though his back was turned toward her, she could see that he was very naked.

A blush climbed high into her cheeks. She was relieved that he hadn't left, but she also couldn't believe that she was spying on him while he bathed. His lean hips were kissed with the water lapping over them, the strange split covering that he wore absent. Gehj's wings stretched, fanning wide as they sprayed out water droplets before flapping and withdrawing out of the way as Agrel surfaced gloriously from beneath the surface, all burnished red and gold blazed with green. His wings rose over his head, the sun catching the feathers and making them glow with incredible radiance. And he is facing her. Just beneath the surface of the water, between his thighs, there is a bulge of flesh, like a pouch with a front seam that was far more

generous in size than anything she could have imagined. Something thick and red pushed out slightly with a girth that split it in a way that had her draw in a ragged, panted breath before it slipped back inside.

Oh gods.

She stared in awe, unable to look away until Gehj suddenly moved, turning in place as he too faced her. Their powerful bodies were slick with water, smooth skin in matching hue with the patches of downy feathers. When they were dry, it was easy to imagine that their entire bodies were covered with red feathers, especially since she tried to be polite and not look too closely. But now there was no looking away. She was caught. She knew it... and they knew it.

“Delilah,” Agrel murmured, his voice piercing her with a heat that she could feel straight down to her toes. “Are you looking for us?”

This was it... the opening she didn’t realize until then that she needed. She had initially planned to discuss matters, but this was more efficient. It would be easier to bargain once they had an idea of what she offered them. She knew she wasn’t the best of lovers—Zack had begun to complain frequently about it shortly after they were stationed in the village—but perhaps the aliens wouldn’t notice her shortcomings. Regardless, she couldn’t back down now if she wanted to get Lily out of the village.

She regained her composure and smiled at him in a way that she hoped was seductive. “Actually, yes.”

A smile stretched across his face told another story, and he began to wade from the pond. “Good.”

Chapter

## Seven

Water ran off Agrel as he waded to the shore where Delilah waited. Gehj watched and waited for all but a heartbeat before he, too, began to make his way toward her. He could feel every feather on his body, down to the very quill, vibrating with need. While they were bathing, they had discussed how to best approach her, given that their time was nearly at an end in the village, and instead, she had come to them. She had approached them for the consummation. Her entire body was soft and welcoming, the pupils of her eyes blown out with desire even as a musk of need rose from her flesh. It was truly happening. Never had he dared to imagine a female approaching them, much less Delilah.

Agrel had been right. By keeping close to her and slowly accustoming her to their presence, she had begun to unconsciously bond with them, relating the sense of safety and affection with their devoted attentiveness. She responded like an Atlavan female, except far bolder. A female of their species would still wait until the ahaku pair made an official declaration to her.

Keenly aware of the momentous occasion upon them, Gehj arrived at Delilah's side just moments after Agrel and extended his hand in welcome to their female. He expanded his feathers, his crest rising and tailing fanning wide gloriously to convey his interest, but barely dared to breathe until her hand slid into his ahaku's hand. Nearly trembling with the enormity of the moment, Agrel took her other hand so that they were able to draw her with them into the soft grass beside the pond, fragrant with small yellow flowers. It was not a nest worthy of a mate, but their circumstances were not typical of an Atlavan mating.

They would owe her all formal rituals and oaths at their nest once they were settled among their people, where they would be protected and provided for while they went into seclusion. Such a thing was not possible now. Even the courting flight would be too risky. It was not how he imagined his mating would go, but he did not think of it.

Instead, working cooperatively with Agrel, he focused on the task of wooing her with the tender brush of his wings over her body, stroking leisurely over every bit of exposed skin with gentle sweeps. He admired the hue of their feathers against her and her incredible responsiveness.

Many females barely tolerated wing-grazing only for the levels of arousal that it brought them, but not Delilah. She shivered at their touch, her breath catching in small, telling gasps, her skin pinkening with her heightening desire. She took great pleasure in their wing-grazing, her body softening and leaning into them as the signs of her arousal deepened further. It was only then when her body was rubbing against theirs and her body arching into the touch of their wings that they knew that she was ready. Only then did they slowly begin undressing her.

Exchanging a look with his ahaku, Gehj gripped a long feather and singed it free from his crest with a curl of flame that rose from it. He held the long red feather between them for Delilah to see, the radiant blue of its tip catching the firelight so that it shimmered. He brushed it against along her jaw before lovingly setting it on the bed of grass where Agrel's green-tipped feather quickly joined it. The two feathers weren't enough for one's mating and the wrongness of it shook him. He was tempted to singe several more feathers free, but Agrel cooed softly, bringing his gaze to him. Gehj swallowed and nodded his thanks for the reminder. They had discussed this and had agreed that waiting was the best course of action.

"Just two feathers for now," he rasped, and Delilah glanced at him curiously. He knew that she did not understand the enormity of the feathers, or how much it cost him to wait to feather their bed properly. He would explain it to her later.

"This is honestly beautiful just as it is," she whispered, and a small quiver ran through her that he knew was just as much from nerves as it was from her own rising desire. "It's really been a while since I've done this. I'm not sure?—"

“Then let us lead,” Agrel cooed, its resonating purr growing in strength as the sound thickened on his tongue. “We have never done this before, but when we were young, we were taught by an elder about the ways of mating and pleasure. I would be happy to show you.”

“As would I,” Gehj echoed in agreement, his eyes opening as he trailed a claw along the hem of the fabric laying against her collarbone. “I am an eager student and would be delighted to show you what I have learned.”

She shivered in response, her teeth sinking into her lip to stifle her moan as she jerkily nodded in agreement. He smiled as he trailed his hand lower to stroke over the fullness of her breast. Exchanging a look with his ahaku, they lifted her together and set her on the bed between them. Gehj carefully undid a button with his claws. Atlavan did not often use such things on their clothing, preferring ties for even their cloaks worn in the winter, but they used them occasionally enough that he understood how to release its hold on the material. He opened one button after another, revealing more and more soft flesh.

They took their time removing every article of clothing. Atlavan females wore the split wrap tied at their hips like males did, and nothing else except layers of beads and chains over their breasts. Much of Delilah’s clothing was a puzzle to him, but one that he enjoyed while uncovering each new discovery as he slid his fingers and his tongue over every bit of exposed skin as Agrel did likewise at her other side as they held her between them. The heat of their magic snapping along their tongues to dance over her flesh and make her gasp with pleasure.



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Delilah arched between them, her hands sliding to their chests, finding her anchorage in the storm of desire that rose between the three of them, the heat and weight of her hand sending a current through him. Her touch seared deeply into his flesh, as if imprinting herself upon him, and from Agrel's sharp intake of breath, he knew that his ahaku was sharing the same experience and feeling. He shivered as her fingers fluttered against him, caressing the very small and very fine down covering his chest—their chests, for Agrel's low hiss betrayed his own pleasure—her fingertips teasing the longer feathers along his collar.

Gehj growled softly with the pleasure of it and his achingly erect cock suddenly did something it never did. It twisted in the air as if trying to grasp something and he gasped as a strong tugging sensation in its root tripped a string pleasure through him with its movement. He was ready to breed already.

Burying his face in her neck, he inhaled her ripe scent as his right hand, which had been resting against her belly while he helped support her weight with his left, slid down. Mindful of his claws, he followed the blessed path of unbelievably soft skin until he reached a small pelt of fur soaked heavily her in sweetness. He could taste it sharply within his mouth the moment his fingers stirred the curls. Agrel stroked her thigh as he watched, and a shiver noticeably rocked his ahaku.

“You are so very soft, swiya,” the male hissed.

The word used for one's beloved mate fell sweetly from his tongue and it sparked something with Gehj, his hunger climbing for the claim. Swiya—heart's fire—he understood now why that was the love name given to females. He felt as if he was about to be set ablaze, burning within the rising mating flames that bathed him low in

his belly.

Gehj's fingers combed through her curls only briefly before sinking deeper to where her warmth beckoned him. Wet heat bathed his fingers, and his need twisted frantically within him as he felt the first sparks of his mating fire climb higher through him.

Not too soon, he reminded himself. She needed to be well prepared, and her body filled with his seed before he could give into his fires or else he risked injuring her. Even at Atlavan could be injured by the fire of another, he did not wish to think of what it could do to a soft human.

So he petted her sex, enjoying the way her belly quivered, and her hips began to rock in response, or the way her breath caught in a little hiss and her hips jerked when he discovered the sensitive pleasure center at the top of her sex. The little bud of flesh was a delight to play with. He rubbed his first and middle finger on either side of it, enjoying the way she panted and the choked little sounds she made when he squeezed and tugged on it. Atlavan females did not have such a thing on the outside of their bodies, which made their pleasure harder to rouse. But his little human seemed made for pleasure from her mates. Her sex gushed its sweet rewards as his fingers plucked the bud like a string or when he flicked it with the side of his claw.

Agrel groaned and his lowered from her other side, his long tongue snaking out from between his lips to dive into her sex as Gehj rolled her bud between his fingers. Delilah's hips shot up with a sharp cry that she immediately smothered with her fist as she quickly brought it to her mouth. He purred, delighted by her responsiveness.

Since Agrel was greedily plunging his tongue into her sex, Gehj turned his head toward her breasts. They had a weight to them of a female who had nursed a fledgling, her brown nipples stood up from their softness in taut peaks. Trilling softly, he lowered his head to her breast, his tongue snaking out to curl around the bud. He

tugged on it with his tongue as Agrel moved forward with a growl, pressing his tongue deeper so that Delilah moaned in a sharp, broken gasp. Gehj lowered his head, closing his mouth around her nipple. He sucked on her breast, his tongue working the nipple with his mouth as his fingers continued to tease the bud between her thighs so that she writhed, her body dancing on the bed where she lay between them, her nectar releasing with her little cries of pleasure.

Pleasure tightened from the root of his cock, sending pulses of pleasure rocking through him, but he startled when a tight glove of heat enclosed around it, squeezing as it slowly slid up his length. Her hand. He shivered, his breath escaping him in a sharp growl, the pleasure encompassing him. Gehj's hips moved at counterpoint, thrusting as her hand began its descent again. His desire consumed him so that he sucked eagerly upon her, his fingers dancing and strumming sex until she shrieked and gushed her pleasure onto his tongue, bathing his mouth and face with her scent. His ahaku's excited growl stirred his own eagerness, his cock pulsing and twisting instinctively within her grip, seeking its hold.

"Kiss me, please," she whispered, and his eyes snapped to her face in confusion.

He lifted his mouth from her breast and frowned in confusion. "I do not understand."

She giggled sweetly, her eyes dancing at him from her face flushed with her pleasure. "Press your lips to mine and I will show you," she teased.

Curious, he lifted his mouth and placed it against hers. Her lips moved beneath his and his eyes widened at the curious little sparks of warmth that sprung between them. He gasped in response, only to feel the tap of her tongue on his bottom lip seconds before it darted ever so briefly into his mouth, igniting him dangerously as his passion broke free to roar through him. His hand left her sex to cup the back of her head so that she could not escape him as he followed her retreating tongue back between her lips. Her tongue was small and soft, perhaps a third of the length of an

Atlavan tongue, and less tapered. She would not be able to move her tongue like he could move his, but that was part of the fun.

His tongue plunged between her lips so that he swallowed her gasp as his lips fed hungrily from hers. His hand left her head and dropped between her thighs once more until Agrel growled his impatience as he rose from his place, his tongue withdrawing from her cunt.

“I wish to have this kiss,” his ahaku purred as the male climbed his way back up her body.

Gehj stared into the male’s green eyes as he devoured her mouth, sharing his excitement with the other male until he finally pulled his mouth away so that Agrel could turn her head toward him and claim her lips, feasting upon her until Gehj’s patience came to an end. Back and forth, they traded turns, kissing her as their wings fanned over her, their feathers caressing her body. Her hands were closed around their cocks, squeezing them as she stroked them, and they rocked into her fists so that their bodies writhed together on the nest.

Unable to wait a moment longer, Gehj left her cunt and curled a hand on her hip. Gripping her firmly, he turned her body to face him and shivered from the brush of her breasts against his chest and the softness of her belly against his abs. He had to bend down more to continue to kiss her as he adjusted their position, but it was well worth it, even if their new angle forced her to surrender her grip on their cocks. Her hands went to his chest and her fingers splayed against the muscle she leaned into him, her little moans muffled by their kisses.

His cock twisted between them, seeking her entrance, and Gehj drew her leg over his hip so that the tip of his slid against her sopping slit. Pleasure slammed through him as his cock immediately twisted upward, driving into the hot grasp of her cunt so quickly that his entire body shuddered as her hips rocked and the tight clench of her

channel squeezed rapturously with her loud moan. He withdrew slightly and plunged again experimentally, and each time he felt a jolt of pleasure strike the point behind his seed sack. He angled his hips in response so that he could press deeper as he began to shuttle in and out of her cunt's clenching grip.

He was aware of Agrel's weight shifting behind her as he got into position, and excitement curled brighter and hotter within Gehj's belly. This was it. They were to step off the precipice to discover together the genuine pleasures of breeding that had only been shared in hushed conversation but of which they had been incapable of experiencing until now.

The slide of his ahaku's cock against the root of his made Gehj tremble. The thick tapered head tapped his shaft before pressing in an upward glide as it, too, pushed its way into their mate's soft little body. She cried out, her body tightening with shock as if she had not expected them to both fill her. Her cunt clenched and spasmed in a way that made his eyes roll with pleasure even as his seed threatened its release. He pushed back the sensation, needing to extend it a little longer to achieve the true unity. Her little body was alternately trying to force them out and draw them deeper within as she whimpered between them. As if held with a silent, mutual agreement, neither he nor Agrel moved. They waited until the tension slowly melted from her and her body softened, welcoming a deeper, more thorough invasion.

"Do you want more?" Agrel rasped, and she nodded as two strangled words escaped from between her lips.

"Gods yes."

Agrel grunted deeply and drew back minutely before thrusting deep. Shuddering with the flames climbing at a dangerous speed through him, Gehj began to thrust in tandem, his breath panting from his as their female moaned and cried out, her sex gushing her pleasure as she was skewered repeatedly on their plunging, writhing

cocks.

And then it finally happened. Their cocks twisted within her channel and twined around each other, rubbing with such exquisite sensation as they latched together that Gehj snarled as little sparks of flame snapped up from the feather tips of his free wing. He fanned his wing instinctively as their cocks gripped and rubbed against each other. Sap spilled from their tips for the first time, and they moaned, their mouths pressing kisses to their mate as she panted and whimpered between them. The sap was hitting her system, sparking their flame within her even as their own exchanged essence worked on the both of them. It was the highest bliss for a female and her ahaku males, and he felt her cunt convulse around them as the full strength of it hit them. It hit him like the force of a tide or a sharp gust of wind coming down a sheer cliff-side.

Gehj's wings shot out wide as he shrieked in unison with Agrel. They were in a shared freefall of bliss as compounding sensations culminated together, drawing them higher and higher into ecstasy as their bodies continue to pump thick sap into her with every rapturous pulse of her cunt sucking desperately around him with its every squeeze. Delilah screamed then, her cry of pleasure finally declaring her readiness for their seed.

With their free wings beating the air around her, the feather tips skimming her skin, they began to thrust together. Their cocks rubbed together in their embrace with every thrust, releasing more and more of their sap until all three of them were delirious, their bodies writhing together, the wet sound of slapping from their rut filling the musk-laced air. Gehj grunted as he felt the pleasure building behind the root of his cock, the pressure that sent a tingle of pleasurable warning to his back. That pleasure expanded in a flaming crescendo, and he shrieked again, his voice layering with Agrel's own scream as their hot release ejected from them in stream after stream. Their cocks writhed together with the release, jerking and spasming, triggering their mate's sweet release, their cries rising together as their flames ignited around them

and her cunt greedily drank their offering in.

Mated. In the embrace of the inferno, they were mated and one, their fires bleeding together, feeding each other, becoming one fire.

They were one.

### Chapter

### Eight

Delilah came down slowly from the pleasure pumping through her. She blinked rapturously, her head still swimming. She couldn't believe it. She hadn't sought them out for this and certainly not like... that. Her cheeks flamed with the memory of their cocks taking her in unison. As the population of men slowly dwindled, she felt positively hedonistic after enjoying the wild rutting of two males in their prime. Or she assumed that they were. She didn't know their ages, but it was clear that they were enthusiastic, and everything was in working order. And despite the shock of having her cunt filled simultaneously by their writhing cocks, they had left her with a blissfully languid feeling of satisfaction afterward.

Was it her imagination or had they literally caught on fire? That was mildly concerning, but as her skin didn't look in any worse condition, she let it go. It had to have been an illusion conjured by her mind with the intense heat of the moment. She hoped that now that she demonstrated what she could offer them that she wouldn't have to worry about them disappearing into the night now.

Not that it stopped Zack.

That dimmed her pleasure, and she frowned. She didn't even know that for any certainty. She reminded herself of that like a mantra to protect herself from the ugliness of what was likely the truth.

"Swiya," Agrel rasped, pressing his lips to her brow. "What is on your mind? You are



thinking quite intently. I can see it.”

Delilah blushed in embarrassment. “It’s not that. It’s just... when will you be done with gathering your provisions?” she finished lamely.

Agrel’s brow rose in surprise, but he smiled down at her flirtatiously. “Eager are you? We are as well. I suspect that we will be ready to depart in two days.”

Two days... that was a lot faster than she had expected. She would need to work quickly to convince them to take her and Lily from the village. She’d hoped to invite them to share pleasure with her a few more times before she broached the subject. It seemed that it wouldn’t wait.

“Of course, we will assist you in packing whatever belongings you wish to take,” Gehj continued. “It may be difficult to take everything, but you can direct us as to what small things are most important, and we will see to it. Truly, we are most honored that you have chosen us.”

She blinked; this time it was her turn once again to be caught by surprise. Chosen? Had they known all along what her plan was? And they went along with it? “Really? You would do that? You won’t leave me... us... here when you leave?”

“What an odd question, swiya,” Agrel teased. “Certainly, you did not imagine that we would leave our mate to fend for herself?”

Mate? Her mind stuttered in a silent note of utter shock. That was not the plan. It brought back memories and should have rightly inspired the same feeling of dread and horror that she felt upon learning that the Ragoru had come to take humans, something Zack had been quite vocal about. His anger at the High Council for agreeing with the bride program had been palpable for weeks after they got word of it on their communication device. She could still hear the echo of his words.

“Mark my words, Lila, the aliens have a plan to breed out and replace humans on this planet,” he growled.

She had no illusion about what he would think about a winged alien mating with a human, even if their features looked slightly more human. She’d been afraid back then, when the announcement about the Feriknikal agreement between humanity and the Ragoru came out, but for some reason the word “mate” wasn’t dredging up the same ominous feeling she had felt back then. She didn’t understand it.

“W... what?” she whispered. “When? How?—”

Gehj’s smile faded, and she immediately felt even more guilty as he peered at her warily. “You did approach us while we were bathing and accepted us into your body because you wished for us to mate, correct?”

Her mouth opened and closed ridiculously like a fish gasping for air. She suddenly couldn’t breathe, struck as she was with the enormity of what she had done without realizing it, as well as how vile the truth would sound. She was an adult and knew that there were always consequences for every action, but this was beyond what she would have ever imagined. But she wouldn’t have imagined, not even in her wildest dreams, that she would somehow suddenly become their mate—both of them at that. It was supposed to be a bargain of mutual benefit—nothing more! And now she had two males looking at her like she’d just presented them with a great gift, like it had all been carefully decided and acted upon in some great romantic gesture, and she had merely meant to convince them to accept the temporary trade of her body for safe passage.

Agrel’s expression shifted to one of concern. “Delilah?”

“I... I just need a minute,” she said between gasps for air. Not only was she struggling with being blindsided by something she hadn’t even entertained the

thought of, but she suddenly felt incredibly guilty that they thought she had made some grand gesture that she'd never made.

The male's expression sobered. "You had not intended to mate with us," he said quietly and pained lanced through her heart at the hurt and disappointment in his voice.

"It's not quite that exactly," she said quickly, stumbling over her words. "I just hadn't presumed that... that...."

Understanding dawned, and Gehj's expression softened. "You did not think that joining would result in a permanent bond," he murmured.

A look of shock descended over Agrel's features, but the other male gently nudged him. "Do not make her feel worse," Gehj scolded quietly.

Agrel blinked rapidly, but nodded, his head bobbing. To Delilah's surprise, he took her hands in his, clasping them warmly as he raised them to his brow and pressed them against the soft feathers there.

"Forgive us. We misread the situation. We would never have mated you against your will. Such a crime is met with great punishment among our people."

Delilah gaped at him. As much as she was struggling to overcome her shock—not to mention wrestling with her guilt for having less than honorable intentions than they clearly had toward her—she certainly didn't want them remorseful about what happened between them or the fact that they had been happy and excited to bring her into their family unit. She hadn't believed that they would desire that and wasn't even sure that was what she wanted, but she couldn't deny that it was terribly sweet that they had such pure intentions before laying with her. Now Agrel looked genuinely distressed, as if he had committed some huge sin. She understood how it

looked—especially how it would look to outsiders. She knew that most humans would say that she'd been tricked into it. She shook her head in frustration and Gehj's red wing brushed her shoulder and arm sympathetically. She met his eyes and saw understanding and compassion there.

“We all got carried away with the moment. Do not blame yourself for the misunderstanding. You are not Atlavan, so if you chose not to remain with us, it will not adversely affect you.”

“But it will affect you,” she gathered, and he shrugged his wings, unconcerned.

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“An Atlavan ahaku typically only mates once in their lives. We will not suffer terribly other than a loneliness of spirit, but we would have likely not mated anyway. We do not expect you to adhere to a promise that you did not realize that you were making.”

Agrel nodded in agreement, though his expression was far more miserable as he made the gesture. That didn't make her feel any better. Although it relieved a lot of immediate pressure, it also left a void in the pit of her stomach. They were giving her exactly what she was going to originally ask them for—at the time unable to imagine that they would want forever with her—but suddenly she wasn't so sure that she wanted it. She also wasn't sure if she was ready to commit forever to someone she barely knew when Zack had committed years to her and still disappeared into the woods, whether by accident or design.

“I... I'm not saying that I wouldn't consider being... ah... mates,” she replied, heat rising once more into her face as she recalled what all that entailed in very vivid, knee-knocking detail. “You are right, though. It isn't the reason I came out here... I wanted to offer an exchange for help. But I may be open to it. If given time,” she quickly added.

Gehj regarded her shrewdly but inclined his head with a sympathetic smile. “I see. You were going to trade pleasure for passage, correct?” At her nod, he sighed, his tail feathers fanning slightly to betray a hint of emotion despite his even demeanor. “I understand your reasoning. You have your nestling to care for. Of course, your primary concern will be for her welfare. As for time—time is what we have plenty of while we are traveling, especially since traveling with two humans will not be as quick. If you are open to considering us, we will consider that a fair chance. Rest

assured, you are welcome to travel with us as far as you like regardless, even if you prefer to settle among other humans rather than accompany us in our search for our new home. Is that not right, Agrel?" he asked as he looked over at the other male intently.

Agrel inclined his head, though he wasn't as successful in covering his disappointment. His crest lifted slightly as his tail feathers fanned, only for both to flatten miserably. Despite that, there was no reproach in his gaze as he met her eyes. Only sympathy.

"We would not have left you, or your nestling, behind willingly in this place, even if you had not joined with us. You would have been required to chase us away, insisting that you did not wish for our assistance before we would comply," Agrel quietly affirmed and Delilah felt her heart rise in her throat, choking her with emotion. An uncertain look crossed his face. "Would you at least consent to allowing us to care for you as we would our mate as we travel? I do not necessarily mean sex," he quickly added, "though neither of us would object if you desired to share pleasure with us again. But our instinctual needs are more... performative," he said with a wince.

"He means that it is ingrained with us to tend to our mates and offspring," Gehj explained. "Because it is instinctual, it is difficult to ignore our drive to caretake and protect our families. If you do not find it objectionable, it would be very welcome."

Delilah nodded, overwhelmed all over again. She could hardly believe that they truly desired a family that included a middle-aged woman who had already birthed a child for another man. It was a little shocking. With the exception of Vernon, who was old enough to be her father or an uncle, no one had looked twice at her since Zack's disappearance.

Though a few men chose to be hunters, the fact that the number of men born every year was declining within the population had many even more fussy with their

insistence that the females they accepted and married not have the inconvenience of children that they had no desire to spend their energy on. In recent generations, the man being able to be increasingly selective for his bride meant that it was increasingly evident that “used up” women were expected to not attend any social events where they might be mistaken for one that they considered eligible for marriage. Though she may be present for casual pleasure.

There were even some strange ideas that if a woman had given birth for one man that her womb would not be hospitable for making sons for another. So that somehow it was being turned on women despite all scientific knowledge. And it was even worse in the villages, far from the citadels.

She would have to be insane to refuse something so simple and yet meaningful as their instinctual desire to nurture and shower with attentiveness. Lily would soak that up.... And even Delilah could not recall when time, affection, and consideration were freely offered by Zack during the course of their marriage without Delilah begging for it. And there wasn't a time that Lily had been given it by anyone in her life who wasn't her mother. This mate thing was at very least worth considering.

“Okay,” she said at length. “I can agree with that. In fact, I think it would be very beneficial to Lily to be exposed to that for however long it lasts. Of course, that means that we will need to tell her our plan to travel together. Just don't make promises about the future that we are not certain if we can keep.” She hesitated, his eyes flicking toward Gehj and then Agrel uncertainly, and both males nodded in agreement. “Perhaps... would you care to eat with us?”

That was one way to get things moving. Her momma had always said that being around a table brings people together. Though, knowing Lily, she would be angling to have everything. If only she didn't get hurt—that was all that mattered. Otherwise, she was going to do everything in her power to give her daughter exactly what she deserved and needed.

## Chapter

### Nine

Excitement vibrated through Agrel, making his wings twitch. After days of watching the activity of the humans from a distance, and longing to share in their warmth and closeness, he was finally a part of the family. He would no longer be obliged to stop a safe and non-threatening distance away like an unwanted stranger, but would be one of them. To be an ahaku male with a mate and nestling was everything he wanted. A mate to cherish and a nestling to love and watch grow—and he did not even have to wait for the latter to come. The gods were giving him blessings in multitudes. He could barely contain himself. It was scarcely believable that he could be so fortunate to be granted so much so quickly.

Despite the mess they made of their mating, he was once again optimistic. Although Atlavans didn't experience the drive to join outside of mating, he understood that they were different species with unique expectations and social rules. Mistakes were to be expected; he just had not anticipated it happening already and especially not regarding something his species took very seriously. But he was confident that he could fix it and the sort of mate and father that the females needed him to be. And he would start by providing in the most basic way he knew how—by giving his time and providing food to fill their bellies. He nearly trilled with pleasure as he patted the sack hanging from his belt. He had made a point to stop and collect a few of his recent kills for their supper.

“I must warn you, Lily has a very active imagination,” Delilah said as they entered the small, gated yard around the dwelling. “If she says anything strange, do not take it too seriously.”

He looked over at her curiously, but nodded. It seemed that nestlings were not too different between species then.



“She is named after you?” he inquired as glanced around anxiously, eager for his first full glimpse of the little female.

A look of surprise crossed his mate’s face, and she smiled. “In a fashion,” she agreed. “Or at least it sounds like it, doesn’t it? I was often called Lila by... it doesn’t matter.” She shook her head, her smile dimming briefly. “I always liked the name Lily. It’s a flower that my mother grew in her garden.”

“Do you grow these lilies, too?” Gehj queried curiously.

“No. They are expensive to acquire and difficult to grow on this world. She is the only Lily I have, but she’s really the best one.”

Agrel nodded solemnly. He did not know anything about growing flowers—he was a hunter and that was where the majority of his skills lay—but he understood about valuing that which was most precious. Something of beautiful memories from the home world would doubtlessly be seen as valuable among his own people as well, but family was the real treasure. And a nestling—an ahaku pair and their mate could wait for a great many revolutions to be blessed with one. Nestlings were the true treasures guarded within the families.

“Then Lily is my favorite as well. Lilies and Delilahs,” he announced, startling a soft laugh from her.

“I think I can handle that,” she replied, her eyes bright with amusement.

Gehj took her hand in his earnestly. “I do not think you understand. To us, you—a mate—and Lily, a much-desired offspring, are the greatest gifts that the gods could bestow upon us. Many males would wait long—some perhaps all of their lives—for such gifts and consider themselves lucky if they obtain even one.”

“That... that is good to know,” she replied in a voice thick with emotion despite the obvious conflict on her face.

Agrel’s heart hurt for her. He understood that she had intended nothing permanent—even she hadn’t known that Atlavans were not designed that way—but was it so hard to accept such words for him? Surely, she had heard such things from her previous mate? But no, she looked so overcome with emotion that it struck him that perhaps the human male had not appreciated her or was negligent in demonstrating such feelings. Fortunately, Atlavan males doted on their females and nestlings. She would never suffer such lack again.

He was about to ask if she wished for them to wait outside so that she could bring Lily out to meet them on more neutral—and less intimidating—ground when a tiny female launched from the dwelling with a small furry creature grasped in her arms. She drew to a stop right in front of them, her mouth gaping open for a long moment before a sudden, sharp squeal of excitement left her that made his feathers fan in surprise.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:44 pm*

“The stars sent me not one but two daddies!”

“Lily,” Delilah groaned and cupped her face in her hands, but he was absolutely delighted.

She believed that the stars had sent them? It was so utterly charming that his heart melted completely. It was far more appealing to think that the Feriknikal had whisked them away to serve such honorable purpose to father nestlings and be goodmates to those who needed them. He liked this better than the grim purpose that was set before them to locate a proper territory to establish their rookeries. Serving one’s people was all fine and good, but this made him feel like he had an actual purpose.

He crouched in front of her; his wings unfolding with an urge to sweep around her and keep her close for all time. He swore that even when she came into maturity, he would remember this moment. Any male who dared to harm her would know the bite of his fury.

“I am honored, Lily,” he cooed.

“As am I,” Gehj replied, his heart in his eyes.

She was so small and delicate, more so than he had understood from his brief glimpses of her watching through her window. She was perfect, and she was his offspring... his nestling. There was no waiting for Delilah to make her decision. Even if he did not have the honor and great pleasure of raising her, she was his and would always protect and care for her. Even if that meant abandoning the rookeries once their task was completed to dwell on the outskirts of the human settlement, to watch

over the both of them should they need him. He understood just from looking at his ahaku's face that he felt the same.

It was decided. Delilah did not have to accept them as her mate, and she could choose to continue her life without them, but they would never abandon their mate and nestling. They would complete their mission that they were sworn to, but this was their family. They could do no other than watch over them and protect them, even if from a distance.

Atlavans were quick to choose but loyal to the core once that decision was made. The gods granted them this, and so he was greedily taking it. No matter the outcome, he would be everthankful to have been granted the chance to experience such feelings.

## Chapter

### Ten

Delilah caught her daughter by the arm in case she decided to throw herself at the two males staring back at her with such obvious pleasure. If nothing else, that alone showed her the depth of love and kindness that they were capable of. They weren't merely just tolerant of Lily but looked at her the way fathers watched their children when they were at play. The way she'd often wished that Zack would have looked at her rather than with impatience. Love. It was the same warmth that brightened their eyes when they looked at her, even if she hadn't recognized it at that particular time.

They even received Lily's declaration with a look of delight despite the fact that, at that moment, she wanted nothing more than for the ground to open up and swallow her whole. First it was that the stars were sent for them, and then it was that they were to be a family... and now she was just outright calling them her daddies? Mortification filled her, but she was also surprised. Lily had cried for her father when he never returned home, but she had never mentioned wanting another father. Even

Lily mentioning that she wished for a family so that they wouldn't be alone hadn't struck Delilah the same as wishing for a father. She was far more invested than she had previously understood. This was either wonderful if things worked out, or really, really bad if they didn't.

"Lily—" she began, but was surprised when the males cooed at her, their wings extended out around them as if almost cupping her lovingly between them.

Now that she thought about it, they had done that with her as well.

"Greetings little one," Gehj said. "I am Gehj, and this is my ahaku, Agrel."

"Ahaku, that's a funny word," Lily replied and giggled. "I'm Lily, and that's my momma. I knew the stars would hear me and send me someone, but I didn't think that they would send me two daddies."

"Lily," Delilha gently chided, "it's rude to make assumptions."

Although both males seemed entirely on board with being her mate and would likely step up to help care for Lily as they had been, there was a lot more expected of "daddies" that she didn't think was fair to automatically sign them up for. To her surprise, Agrel gave a clicking laugh that was a bit startling and more adorable than she wanted to admit.

"We do not mind, swiya," he assured her, his expression soft as he looked down upon her daughter. "We would be pleased to be thought of as such."

"It is a great honor to be called father," Gehj confirmed, his eyes bright with emotion.

"You are? It is?" Delilah's gaze shifted between the males. This was more than she had imagined from their earlier conversation.

Gehj nodded. “Naturally. We explained how much our people treasure children,” he said, tapping Lily on the tip of her nose with one claw so that she giggled. “It is not just their existence that is special, but who you are shaped to become for them. Any male can provide food and protection, but a father is... more than that. And mothers are revered among the Atlavan, so much so that it is forbidden among our people for a male to leave a female caring for a fledgling without adequate protection and care.” His expression shifted, quickly becoming disturbed. “It is beyond belief that anyone would leave a mother alone in this place.”

“A lone mother is supported by the entire clan of the rookeries because of how essential she is to the welfare of our nestlings,” Agrel agreed. “She would live peacefully with everything she desired, but she would have no shortage of males eager to care for her and her young should she choose an ahaku pair. It is considered a great honor to gain the trust and love of a mother, who would be, by necessity, far more selective.”

“Ahaku pair? You’ve mentioned that before, but I don’t quite understand what it is, other than the fact that you appear to form together,” Delilah observed, keeping her wording skewed away from the subject of mating as much as possible since her daughter was listening with rapt fascination.

Gehj tipped his head to smile up at her before straightening to his full, towering height. “That we do, but it is a result of being an ahaku pair, rather than being a pair because we chose to take the same female as a mate. Ahaku pairs are two males who bond as juveniles. It is a matter of our nature, but those who brought us here spoke of a chemical connection, but these are not things we know of.” He shrugged his wings. “The whys do not matter so much as the fact that males are drawn together and select each other for ahaku. Like all mating, it is irreversible and permanent unless one of the males dies. They remain together as juveniles, stabilizing their relationship with each other, and then they choose a mate together as adults.”

His bright blue gaze drifted over her in such a way that Delilah felt the heat of it sink deep into her and stir the banked fire within her until it rapidly rose through her to burn her cheeks. His lips parted for a moment, and he drew in a small, sharp breath before they closed once more. Whatever he tasted in the air sent a shiver through him, and his eyes grew brighter as his mouth curled with a look of definite satisfaction. She glanced over at Agrel to find him watching her in the same rapt fashion, though he remained crouched by Lily.

That at least made sense as to why things proceeded as they had. Didn't Ragoru mate in threes with a single female? Zack had made it sound like something disgustingly bestial in which they relished sharing the same female between them. She had assumed that this was the case with the two males in front of her—that sharing was a matter of pleasure. The way that Gehj explained Atlavan mating practices, however, made them seem natural and beautiful. Perhaps those of the Ragoru were as well despite being painted as ravenous monsters. She doubted that the huntsmen would show Atlavans much more grace.

“Perhaps this conversation should be tabled for later when there aren't little ears present,” she said, directing a meaningful look toward her daughter. “Lily doesn't yet need to know the ins and outs of... mating.”

“Momma,” Lily protested, but the males chuckled.

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“Of course,” Gehj agreed, his smile warm as he looked over at her. “Besides, we should address the meal that brought us here before the hour grows any later. Why not go inside and prepare what you need while Agrel and I prepared the hares?”

Delilah nodded, relieved to have everything shift back to some sense of normality. Preparing dinner in her kitchen was definitely more within her comfort zone.

“Come on, Lily, give me a hand.”

The sigh her daughter sighed was telling. It was clear that she would much rather be out there with the Atlavans.

“We do not mind if she assists us,” Agrel offered. “If you do not mind leaving her here in our care.”

Leave her alone with them? An uneasiness descended over Delilah and momentarily stole her breath and her ability to think. The males halted all activity and watched her, their body language and calm and relaxed while waiting on her decision. She could say no and demand that her daughter go inside with her, and she knew without a shadow of a doubt that they would accept it without further comment. But she also knew that her instinctive reaction was born out of years living with little protection in the village and unable to trust anyone. It wasn't fair to the males who were inviting them into their family.

“Please, mamma,” Lily whimpered.

“We will watch over her and keep her safe. We could do no other,” Gehj quietly



added.

“You are certain she won’t get in the way?” She glanced at them uncertainly. “Lily can be a bit much when she would rather play frivolously instead of pay attention.”

Agrel chuckled and shrugged his wings in response. “Such is the way with fledglings. There were once many in our clan and we were often called upon to teach them. That was before the sickness. One little wingless female will not be too difficult. A young male trying out his wings and unable to sit still is far more burdensome,” he added.

Her lips twitched with amusement in spite of herself and she let her breath out in one slow, steady sigh. She could just imagine how troublesome Agrel was as a nestling. His poor mother. “Alright. Just call if you need me.”

“I will keep that in mind,” Agrel replied, his voice lowering to a husky pitch that sent a shiver of awareness through her and her blush rising once more into her cheeks.

She was still blushing several minutes later as she stood in her kitchen, fanning her cheeks with one hand as she began to pull down the pans and spices that she was going to need. She thankfully managed to get control of herself by the time Gehj returned and set the hares where she directed on the freshly wiped chopping board. She had a feeling that he would have lurked there at her kitchen table if she let him, but she shooed him back outside so that she could cook and think without his eyes caressing her, bringing heated memories back to her of their time at the pond.

It wasn’t that his eyes touched her in an unpleasant or lascivious way, but rather that they moved over her with true appreciation and admiration that made her blush anew. And she absolutely was not going to sit there and spend her entire time cooking, blushing like a schoolgirl. Still, that didn’t stop her from glancing frequently out the kitchen window as she worked, her eyes following the males as they fanned their wings and tail feathers in their play as they allowed her to chase them around with a

large plush beast that had seen better years. To their credit, the males seemed to find it a great game and allowed her to torment them with a plushy as she ran with little Nimh at her heels in hot pursuit.

Shaking her head in amusement, she headed back to the stove. Dinner would at least be eventful. And having the two alien males for company oddly made it the most enjoyable meal she'd had in some time.

## Chapter

### Eleven

Agrel wanted to moan with the pleasure of being sufficiently filled with a satiating meal. He had eaten better than he had at any time in his most recent memories. The truth was, he couldn't recall even a single time he had enjoyed his meals so much, except maybe when he was still in his mother's nest. His tail-feathers fanned where they rested on the other side of the bench he was seated on, his tail shifting as the little sharp-clawed furbearer—Nimh—swatted and pounced on the long, trailing ends. She was easy enough to ignore and was entertaining, though troublesome. In any case, his attention was fixated elsewhere because now that one hunger was satiated, the other had flared back to life.

He wanted to investigate once more the bountiful flesh that lay beneath the layered clothing she wore. It concealed so much compared to what female Atlavans wore. His admiration of the female for how quickly she had conquered her fear of them, and her strength as a mother alone in the world, had swiftly returned to lust over the course of the meal. He did not know if it was the meal itself inflaming the passion of his internal fires or sitting across or whether it was watching the subtle movements of her little, delightful body as she ate that had him so enflamed. But he was.

He was constantly drawing in sharp breaths over his receptor plates on the roof of his

mouth that allowed him to smell and taste her in the air all at once. He was also glad that he was sitting because his cock had fully extruded and was already thick with his need to mount and claim. Just the thought of it made him bite his lip as he strangled on another moan for an entirely different reason. He might have even let one inappropriately slip if little Lily had not chosen that moment to give a sharp, experimental tug on one of his feathers.

He winced in pain, his eyes lowering to the little female who clung to one of his long crown feathers.

“It’s so pretty,” she cooed. Her eyes lifted to meet his gaze, and she smiled widely. “May I have it?”

He blinked slowly. “You want a feather from my lower crest?”

She nodded eagerly. “I don’t have any feathers on me, so I would have momma tie it into my hair so we can look like a family. I still have the two feathers you left before, but this one would be special.”

That was... adorable. He beamed down at the tiny female, utterly taken in. He had not believed it was possible to adore her more, but it seemed that he was mistaken. It was a fabulous idea. An Atlavan’s feathers were treasured, and each clan bore distinct genetic markers on the patterns of their feathers carried down from their mother’s line. His feather would identify Lily as his to any of his people who saw her.

“Lily, no. That’s part of him. You can’t just ask for part of his body,” his female chided, but he shook his head.

“No, it is fine,” he assured her. “We do not give our feathers to just anyone, but Lily is special, is she not?”

“Won’t it hurt?” His female grimaced sympathetically, and Gehj chuckled.

“It does, when they are pulled,” Agrel teased as he gently removed Lily’s fingers from around the long feather. “But if you recall, we have other ways... easier ways that will also help it grow back quicker than it would if being plucked. It is convenient too because we use this method to decorate the nest upon first mating,” he replied, his lifting intentionally to meet the gaze of his mate, calling to memory the feathers that they had laid out on the grass before mounting her. “And we layer them in the nests of any young she births. Those feathers serve as keepsakes for the nestlings and used to decorate their nests until they mate. As we accept Lily as ours as if we had sired her from our own loins, it is her right to have them”

Turning his attention back to Lily, he leaned forward with a conspiring smile, eager to see her reaction. “Watch closely.”

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Gripping low on the feather with his forefinger and thumb, he sent a rush of flames over his feathers. That single feather, with the flame caught, flared brightly and came off with a sparking pop that made both humans jump. Lily clasped her hands over her mouth in awe for a long moment, but when she lowered her hand again, it was only to begin wild clapping.

“Wow! That’s so amazing!” she cheered as he tipped the feather toward. She peered at it curiously and glanced back up at him. “Is it still hot?”

He shook his head. “Atlavan feathers cool quickly from our flames,” he explained as he handed it to her.

She brushed the feather along her jaw and her eyes closed blissfully. “It’s so soft.”

“Take good care of it,” his female advised. “And be sure to thank Agrel.”

A shiver ran through him with the sound of his name falling from her lips, her unusual accent making it all the sweeter to his ears. His head turned toward her, a sense of completion filling him. Her eyes shifted to him and a pink color brightened her cheeks.

“No thanks are needed for something that is a great honor,” he murmured. “I would give you a feather, as well, female. In truth, I would beg you to take another.”

The color in her face grew deeper, like the bloom of a flower, and it likewise charmed him.

“Lily, if you’re done, why don’t you wash up and head to bed? I will be in after a while to tuck you in,” she said quietly.

Tucking his feather behind her ear, his fledgling smiled before hopping from her chair and scooping up the little beast that mewed at her plaintively for being pulled away from his tail feathers that had been a source of fascination for the little creature.

“I’m going to take Nimh,” Lily announced, and Delilah nodded in agreement, her eyes following the little female as she left the room. It was not until Lily was gone that his female relaxed and regarded them steadily.

“Tell me more about Atlavan mating,” she said at length. “If it is something that I am going to consider, then I need to understand more about it. And I’m realizing that I’m making a lot of assumptions based on human relationships and how deviations from that seem. I want to understand what it is to you. And what they will mean for Lily and me, beyond what you’ve already told me. It just seems to me that I should be worried that all of this is happening very fast. Lily has her heart set on this family, I will admit, because she is ten and doesn’t understand how adult relationships work, but I can’t help but feel as if I should be worried about how this all might end. I understand that right now I’m convenient, but what if I accept this mating thing and you find another you want more?”

Gehj folded his hands on the table in front of him, the feathers of his crest rising attentively. His head cocked thoughtfully as he regarded her. “That is fair, but I can assure you that it would never happen. First, because we had already intended to approach you before you arrived at the pond, despite our situation being one that does not make for good timing. This could never be imagined by us as a matter of convenience, as any Atlavan would struggle to bond with someone if it was only because they are immediately available. But I suppose that Atlavans and humans differ in more ways than just our appearance,” he observed. “This mating was unlooked for on our part, and unintended on your part, but we have no regrets about

it. When we say that you and Lily are a gift from the gods, we mean exactly that. One unanticipated and unlooked for, but cherished. We choose quickly but we never choose lightly”

Agrel trilled softly in agreement. “It really is terrible timing considering all the travel that we must do. But it does not matter. Nor does your original intention matter to us. All we want is to spend the rest of our lives showering every bit of our love and devotion upon you.”

“I see. What about falling in love? Do you not do that?” she whispered. “It seems terribly sad to have everything ruled by instinct instead of the heart.”

A look of understanding drifted across Gehj’s face, and he nodded. “Of course. It may be fast compared to what you are accustomed to as a human, but much goes into the choosing for an Atlavan. A lot of it is based on instinct, but also biology. For us, these things cannot be so easily divided from the heart. When we choose a mate, though it may be quick and decisive, there is already love present. It is the seed of love that develops and grows over a lifetime together. It cultivates naturally between the ahaku and their mate from the bond that is established between them. Outside of our nestlings, it is what is most treasured within Atlavan families and is the happy pursuit of all who are mated.”

Delilah shifted in her seat, her eyes dropping to her hands resting on the table in front of her. “That makes sense, but it also sounds strange... backward. Most humans on this planet either marry because they find someone that they love, or for social connections and status. It feels like that it is something that, if it comes, will come first before all other things.”

Agrel cocked his head. “Is that real love, or an illusion that is embraced because they are waiting for this love? Or is it the real that love that comes afterwards over time?”

Delilah's eyes lifted to him uncertainly. "I... I don't know," she admitted.

"Then perhaps you can consider this too when weighing your options. Consider it as taking a chance on us that even though it is different, for us it is still love," Gehj quietly replied.

"And you truly wish to by Lily's fathers... in every way?" she whispered as if unable to bring herself to believe it entirely.

"She will be our eldest daughter, first and beloved among our fledglings," Agrel swore as he reached out grabbed her hands within both of his.

"The first?" she whispered, and he nodded but immediately sobered at the distressed looking that briefly flashed across her face. Did she not believe him, or did she worry that he was mistaken?

"Our saviors explained that it is your choice," he explained, "but that all the species that they are re-homing on this planet are genetically compatible with humanity to give us all a chance to save each other. There would be many nestlings should you desire it."

Delilah slowly withdrew her hands with a nervous laugh. "This is... definitely a lot to consider."

"There is no rush," Gehj assured her. "It will be another two days before we are ready to leave, and then the journey south will take a considerable amount of time." He gave her reassuring smile. "While there will be many opportunities for you to part ways with us if you decide against traveling further with us, you will be under no pressure to make a decision right away. You could even dwell among our people for years without making a decision should you wish, and no one would think less of you."



Their kin might shun them once the truth came out if she did not accept them before then, but that was another matter and entirely their own faults. It was not a consequence that Delilah needed to know about or be worried over.

Delilah gave them an unreadable look as she sucked in her bottom lip uncertainly, but there was something new in her eyes that fanned his hope higher. Finally, she nodded and stood, carefully pulling her hands free from his hold. “You can sleep here... with me. There is no reason to send you back to the cottage to suffer with whatever moldy furs you’ve managed to find. It’s not like we aren’t already mated, and besides, Lily and I stripped the cottages months ago of anything decent.”

Agrel released the breath that he had not realized he had been holding and smiled. “Of course, swiya. We would be happy to stay here with you.”

A tiny smile made an appearance, and she shyly nodded again. “Just give me a minute to get some more pillows and furs,” she whispered nervously before leaving them alone there in the kitchen.

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Given that they had feasted on her body and had enjoyed every delectable inch of her, it amused him to discover that she was so shy when it came to enjoying intimacy together.

“What do you think?” he whispered to his ahaku.

The other male snorted in amusement as he stood. “I think that we need to prove ourselves, and we shall start with the kitchen. She labored enough for us, so now we can demonstrate to her the good ways that we will add to her life. Now, get up and haul in some water. We have work to do.”

### Chapter

#### Twelve

Delilah lay awake in bed, her every sense acutely aware of the two aliens settling into the bed on either side of her. Zack’s preference for excessively large builds that filled an entire side of the bedroom with two oversized stuffed mattresses, while overkill at the time, was serving her in good stead now. Even with the extra space, it was a tight fit to accommodate their wings. Gehj shifted his weight and one of his wings trailed absently across her body as he adjusted his position.

Was she still experiencing some nervousness due to the newness of being with them this way... or was it because her thoughts kept returning to their conversation about mating and their obvious enthusiasm over having more children? Should she tell them about how much she struggled with conceiving Lily? How she was nearing the end of her reproductive years. Would it even matter at that point? They had made it clear

that it was irrevocable for them, but all the talk about fledglings made her feel even more guilty than before, like she'd stolen something from them that they might have been given from another woman.

Worse, these were all things that would have come up and they could have talked about beforehand if she hadn't been so bent on seducing them. Did she regret her decision—no. Lily's welfare was her priority, but two things could be true at the same time. She could have no regrets about her decision while also feeling very guilty about the ramifications for the Atlavans.

"You are thinking too much again," Agrel teased as he brushed a wing down her belly.

She watched it, her breath catching, as the little sparks of fire that sprung from it sizzled and faded out against her skin without causing any damage. That also seemed to be an unexpected benefit of mating with them. She was suddenly fireproof. That was surreal. She didn't think that was scientifically possible. Unless sex had changed something basic in her biology.

She blushed and shook her head.

Gehj skated his clawed fingertips very gently along her shoulder. "We will not pry, but you never have to fear speaking your mind honestly with us. If there is any problem, we can get through it together."

Wiggling into a more comfortable position on the bed, she sighed. She might as well just get it over with.

"Just how important is it for you to have more...nestlings?"

Gehj studied her for a long moment and then chuckled. "Nestlings, is that what this is

about? You are worried that you will become gravid while we are traveling? There is no reason to worry. Atlavans are slow to breed, so it will likely be some time before you have to worry about preparing a nest for them.”

That was unsurprisingly not helpful. Goddess, they were slow to breed, and she struggled to carry pregnancies to term—that wasn’t a good combination if they were set on a house full of nestlings.

“Is that what is occupying your thoughts, swiya?” Agrel cooed as he wrapped a wing around her, its softness and warmth penetrating through the miserably thin blanket.

“No exactly,” she mumbled. “It’s more than I don’t if I... can. That is to say, I really struggled just to have Lily,” she hastily explained at their look of surprise. “And I’m no longer younger,” she added, her lips twisting in a grimace. “It seems that I’ve cheated you out of having a young fertile mate.”

“Cheated us?” Gehj echoed as he peered at her in confusion. “I do not understand. Why would we feel cheated? If you accept us, then we gain a mate and nestling. We already have more than most.”

“Yes, but you won’t have one of your own,” she explained.

Gehj cocked his head at her, his crests rising slightly. “But Lily will be ours.”

“Not your blood,” she clarified, suddenly confused as to why she was arguing the point.

“Of our blood,” he replied slowly, as if it was a foreign concept to him.

Delilah’s brow furrowed. Did the Atlavans lack a concept of paternity? She understood that they didn’t feel sexual desire until they were at the point of choosing

their mate, but certainly there had to be some acknowledgement of biological connection. To not be aware of it seemed strange from her standpoint, considering the social importance given to it.

Agrel shrugged his wings with a clear lack of concern and smiled. “It does not matter; we do not make this distinction. Whether one or a dozen, any nestling is treasured. There are times where a male might wish to mate a female whose mate has died. He may not sire any additional offspring on her, but her nestlings are his own from the day they join.”

“Wait.” Delilah’s brow furrowed. “I thought you only mate once?”

Surprise briefly touched Agrel’s expression, but then he chuckled, the soft little clicks softening her wariness. “Typically, we do. No one expects that their mate would die, nor plans for the eventuality of it as it is seen as bringing misfortune. But if a female loses her mates, many ahaku pairs will seek her out if she becomes receptive to mating again. It can be quite competitive. No one would expect a female to rear her offspring alone unless she was determined to do so. Many would welcome the opportunity to provide her comfort and to father her young.”

That was so different that she struggled to believe it. Males didn’t just ignore the lone females but actually competed for her attention?

“So, the... bonds... between mates, they are absent after her mates die?”

He nodded and tucked himself closer against her side, his large frame relaxing as he peered down at her, his eyes oddly luminous in the room’s rapidly waning light. “But it seldom happens. Even if there is an accident, usually she still has one mate available to care for her and their nestlings. But this is not something you will have to worry about. We would never allow it to happen,” he assured her as his claw trailed along her collarbone. “We will not fail to be present to love and protect you and our

nestling.”

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“For that reason, we would do all that we could to ensure that you have us for all the years ahead should you choose to be ours,” Gehj rasped in agreement from her other side as he tucked in close against her back, his warmth flooding over her. “Above all, we want nothing more than to just love you and show that love to you every day. To protect you, care for you... and bring you pleasure,” he added, his voice deepening ever so slightly as it grew huskier with the arrival of his arousal.

“Can we show you how we would do this?” Agrel murmured, and she nodded jerkily in agreement.

Why stop it when she wanted their touch with such desperation? In any case, she reasoned that it was bound to happen given the position in which they were laying so that the progression of their touches felt like a natural thing, unhampered by their most recent topic of discussion. If it weighed on their mind at all, they didn’t think about it. Instead, they began to explore her with small, slow touches that heated her blood. It began as a slow, warm tingle beneath the skin that followed the path of their fingers until it gathered within her belly and began to rapidly grow deeper and stronger so that her skin trembled with every touch.

Gehj’s wing curled over her, his feathers skimming over her belly and the part of the leg bared by her nightgown that had somehow become rucked over her hips on one side. She didn’t know how it was that she felt it so acutely through her tunic, but she did, and she trembled with the pleasure that rose in answer to it. She basked in the warmth that rose between the two males sandwiching her, as Agrel curled his wing above Gehj’s wing. Hands petted her in soft, light, circular touches, their eyes growing brighter as night settled in. They neatly skirted her aching breasts and avoided her mons as they caressed her with lingering touches everywhere else. It was

a maddening pleasure that had her panting and leaning into them with every stroke.

“Do you mind this?” Gehj whispered, his breath fanning her shoulders and the back of her neck.

She shook her head mutely, her body tensing and uncoiling in response to every touch they delivered. Agrel held her gaze as he ran a claw down from the base of her throat to the top of her cleavage, the corners of his mouth curling in a smile when her breath caught on a strangled moan and she shivered in reaction.

“So responsive,” he rasped, his claw lightly scoring her flesh. “You like it, do you not?”

Her lips trembled as a moan struggled to overtake her. “Yes... It’s so good.”

Gehj made a low sound of approval in his throat and their hands went to the hem of her nightgown. Grabbing ahold of the lacy hem, they dragged the fabric up the length of her body before pulling it completely over her head and tossing it to the side. Their identical hisses of pleasure at the sight of her bare skin were exhilarating. It made her feel desired, like nothing ever had before. Gehj kissed the nape of her neck from which his tongue followed an invisible trail along her spine, his wings fanning her with subtle little movements. Every movement of his wings ran the feathers tips up her body in such a way that it felt as if he was stoking some inner furnace within her as her belly grew molten hot from the desire that was building ceaselessly within her. In a brief moment of sanity, she wondered if that was because his natural inclination was to breed in mid-air.

“I... I hope my lack of wings aren’t hampering you in any way,” she choked out as his tongue swept along the long muscle of her shoulder blade.

Both males chuckled in unison, the sound vibrating against her skin with puffs of



warm breath.

Gehj's tongue disappeared, and he kissed the smooth skin he had been previously lathing. "Female Atlavans lack wings as well—though we do not know why they aren't winged, but there are stories. But if you say that because you think we breed in the air, you would be mistaken," he teased in a warm voice. "Our wings are not structured well for long periods of gliding that would be safest for such an activity. Even a feathered animal has the sense to breed safely in a tree or on the ground."

"Now cease trying to distract us," Agrel murmured with amusement against her breasts. The ridge of bone along his nose rubbed against the soft flesh, continuing his torment as he massaged her breasts and teased her nipples. Suddenly, his teeth delivered a small, stinging nip in feigned punishment that had her drawing in her breath sharply from the pleasure that burst deep within her.

A soft cry escaped her, her body arching against him as the males held her firmly in place between them.

"Patience," he cooed, and she swallowed back her protest as his tongue immediately slipped from between his lips to curl over her nipple.

Long, silky feathers teased her legs as their tails fanned as the primary feathers of their wings teased with flitting brushes. Even though they didn't use their wings for flying during sex, it was clear that they were definitely used. They dragged over her, flicked her, and sometimes swatted her with little explosions that made her skin jump and pleasure burst behind her eyes even as it plummeted deep into her belly.

Gehj dragged her leg back over his hip, holding her open so his fingers could slip downward and cup her drenched sex. The sides of his claws spread her open, exposing the entrance of her channel, and Agrel slid down the length of her body. From behind her, she felt Gehj shift against her as the calm, sweet male she was

coming to know disappeared beneath the subtle aggression of his sudden domination over her. His cock slipped from his sheath, and it brushed against her most sensitive flesh as it slipped forward from behind and pierced her cunt with a hooking motion. It buried itself within her, rooting around as it slid deeper and deeper. Gehj hissed and his hips began to move, so that his writhing cock was shuttled back and forth within her channel. Delilah gasped, her fingers clenching fistfuls of bedding as his cock drove in her with leisurely deep thrusts that seemed to shatter every nerve ending as her need coiled hotter and darker within her.

Gehj's wing folded over her shoulder, pinning her to his chest, his feathers brushing over her in time to his thrust, but that wasn't what shattered her. It was the curl of Agrel's tongue against her clit. It dragged against the hyper-sensitive flesh, teasing the little bead exposed by Gehj's spread fingers.

"That is it, Agrel, taste her and tune her pleasure to yours," the male behind panted, his hips pumping with hard little snaps that made her see stars.

Agrel grunted in agreement and his mouth closed over it, sucking on it so that her channel clenched and spasmed around the cock thrusting into her. Gehj's growl filled her ears, his breath ragged. Agrel released her clit, his mouth drifting downward as the hard bony ridge of his nose pressed against her clit, rubbing it as his tongue slid along her folds before piercing her, his tongue driving into her, wiggling into her, squeezing into the space left by Gehj's writhing cock. The male moaned in a low, loud sound from his chest, his hips kicking forward, driving deep into Delilah and against Agrel's flattened tongue. Gehj hissed and did it again, his hips bouncing with a frantic, lust-driven motion as he drove into over and over while Agrel's tongue flattened and caressed from the inside, only to retreat and strike and twist around her clit before driving in again.

Delilah's thighs shook as pleasure and need coiled and tightened deeper within her belly. She shivered at the sensation of Agrel's claws skimming over her mons, belly,

and thighs, and the brush of Gehj's thumb against her clit, rubbing it in circular patterns whenever his ahaku abandoned the nub and gave him the opening. He tapped it and tweaked it with one hand while his other hand gripped her hip, his wing's feathers vibrating against her breasts, teasing her nipples with the urgency of his thrusts.

Agrel's wings and tail feathers fanned wide, his crests rising as he climbed back up her body. His cock hooked and writhed between them, its dark purple length twisting in ways that revealed the peculiar thread like texture that lifted whenever it bent at an angle. The thick tapered head was beaded with milky pearls of his desire. She watched them expand as he adjusted the angle of his hips and his cock disappeared between her thighs seconds before she felt the pressure of it pressing against her cunt, demanding entrance. It pressed and twisted along the length of Gehj's cock, burrowing into her slowly as the other male's thrusts became fever-pitched, his hips slapping against her bottom with the force of his rut.

And still Agrel's cock pressed forward until it was completely burrowed within her. It twisted then, and an orgasm tore through her in reaction, the world shattering in white brilliance of pleasure as his cock latched around Gehj's cock, bringing the male to a jerking halt, driving both cocks so deep that they rubbed and bumped at the mouth of her womb, striking every sensitive pleasure point there as they twitched and writhed together, pumping hot sprays of seed within her.

And then they moved together.

Delilah's eyes rolled back as their hips rolled, their bodies rocking in tandem, their cocks dragging in and out of her, stretching her with every thrust and retreat. Agrel's wingtip teased the back of her thigh with every thrust just below the firm press Gehj's claws holding her leg open. She shook as they plunged into her, that tightening, winding sensation condensing in a hot, white ball within her that grew with every plunge of their joined cock, their bodies moving against hers, their hips pressing up in

hard bursts that shook all three of them so that their joined cocks filled her faster and harder.

A whimper formed in her throat, and it grew louder and sharper as her pleasure began to unravel in bright lashes that struck through her. A golden light brightened around them and heat flared over her, consuming her thousands of tendrils spread wide through her core and her orgasm shattered, exploding through her with a fury that made a shriek break from her lips for just a heartbeat before it was smothered by Agrel's mouth. He kissed her deep and moaned into her mouth, his body shaking as his seed rose in thick bursts, giving her stream upon stream of his release. Behind her Gehj hissed, his released triggered by theirs. He ground against her, his cock pressing deep against the mouth of her womb, straining against the hold of Agrel's cock in a desperate need to wring out every bit of the pleasure that quaked violently through him.

They writhed together on the bed, the tangled bedding half-falling to the floor until eventually they grew still and merely held each other as their bodies remained conjoined together. Their seed still pumped into Delilah, sending tiny quakes of pleasure through her, but the urgency was dimming and fading until they just lay peacefully on the bed entwined within each other's arms, their cocks eventually unwinding and sliding from her body.

Curled between them, she felt warm and safe. She burrowed deeper, turning toward Gehj to bury her nose in the thick feathers of his collars as exhaustion set in and mingled with a sense of satisfaction. She was worn out completely... but it was good. Beneath her cheek, Gehj's heart beat steady and true, and a smile curled her lips as she felt Agrel fit his big body around her back, his frame curling around hers and his wings cupped over them all. Beneath his wing, Gehj's wing curled forward and rested over her shoulder and side in a tender clasp that held her firmly against his heart, their breaths mingling in slumber.

It occurred to her, as sleep slowly claimed her consciousness, how strange it was that they fit so perfectly together.

Chapter

### Thirteen

Gehj dropped from the sky, landing in front of the large storage building some distance outside the village walls. Although the building itself was nearly a ruin, the true purpose of his presence rested just before him, barely visible between the doors hanging at odd angles from their hinges. He pushed between them, a trill of excitement vibrating within him. This was exactly what they needed! A massive box frame with four wheels... it was perfect! He circled around it, examining it for any damage. Luckily, it seemed to have escaped the sort of damage from the woods that was overcoming the storage building itself. It was clearly made to be pulled by some manner of beast, but that was unimportant. He could pull it easily with Agrel's help.

His ears pricked, and his crests rose slightly at the sound of impact just outside the door. Footsteps followed and Gehj's mouth parted instinctively to draw in the scent of the person outside the door. Naturally, he knew who it was as there was only his ahaku and himself scouting outside the village. And who else would just casually drop from the sky?

"Gehj, are you in here?" his ahaku called, as if summoned by his thoughts. "I could have sworn that I saw you land near here."

"Yes, I am here," Gehj replied as he circled back around the box to greet him. "I thought I saw something of interest when we initially passed this way and so came back to investigate." He gestured toward the wheeled box. "It seems that it was fruitful."

Agrel stepped closer, his head cocking one way and then the other as he studied it

curiously. “It does not look like anything an Atlavan would have... but then it is not well suited for moving within the mountains.”

“It just needs to get our females and all of their belongings over land,” Gehj reminded him. “For that, at least, it is well suited. We could even fit one of the mattresses across the back to provide a place to sleep for us.”

His ahaku nodded. “There will not be any shade from the sun, though. With the way Delilah and Lily are covered, I believe they must burn far easier in the sun.”

That was true. Gehj studied it thoughtfully. “We can cut and bend some branches and lash them to the sides, and tie down a couple large hides to it. It may get a little hot, though,” He scratched his neck. “I do not believe we should have any problem pulling it. What do you think?”

“Let us find out!” Agrel grinned with excitement, his wings flicking and tail bobbing and fanning almost playfully as he approached the box.

Tucking one of the long poles beneath his arm, he waited patiently, his crests and tailfeathers dancing ridiculously until Gehj had the other one.

Adjusting his grip on his own pole, Gehj studied his ahaku and shook his head. “You just cannot help yourself. We are no longer juveniles.”

“We are not elders either,” Agrel replied. “There is no reason not to make things fun. Lily at least appreciates that.”

“Lily has only seen ten summers,” Gehj reminded him flatly as he made an effort to control his urge to smile at his ahaku’s silliness.

“But she still possesses great discernment. Besides, Delilah likes it, too.”

“Of course, she is accustomed to bestowing affection on fledglings,” he teased, but Agrel did not puff up with insult as he so often did in the past. Instead, he smirked, completely unruffled by the comment.

“She was not giving me the affection she would give a fledgling when I was making her scream last night!” A taunting smile crossed Agrel’s face, but Gehj just shook his head, the corners of his mouth curling with amusement.

“Of course not. We were both there, and I was leading.”

An amused snort of disgust escaped the other male, his eyes glittering with laughter as he rocked back on his heels to regard him. “Are you saying that I am lacking when it comes to pleasing our mate?”

“Not at all,” Gehj replied. “I am just saying that you need me.”

Agrel grinned back, not the least bit ruffled. “Fair. But then you need me as well. We balance each other well. We both know this. I keep you from just retreating into the shadows of a life fixated on duty, whereas, for me, knowing that you are sensible enough for both of us allows me to enjoy amusing myself.”

Gehj snorted and rolled his eyes with silent laughter. That was a fair assessment. He likely would easily become an obscure and half-forgotten member of their clan, with nothing in his life except the next duty handed to him if it weren’t for Agrel. In retrospect, he could not imagine any other as his ahaku. The male managed to repeatedly drag him out into the world since they became ahaku, and he could not thank him enough for it. Certainly not now, and the male would not likely let him forget it. He might have never even met Delilah if he had insisted that they stay on route when Agrel got the foolish notion of exploring the woods a bit for supplies. That “inadvisable” impulse was their greatest blessing.



“Come on. Help me pull this into the village,” he replied around his quiet laughter. “Delilah should be pleased to see it if it does not come apart in the process.”

Agrel grinned good-naturedly as they adjusted their respective grips on the poles and pulled. At first the wagon resisted, perhaps due to it sitting for so long, but eventually the wheels began to turn, and the box rolled with them. It moved in a jarring fashion, but it was at least something. Gehj just had to ignore the terrible smell rising from the wood as well. Such things were expected, even if it was unpleasant.

Working together, they pulled the box through the village’s gates and down the road. It was not difficult beyond the tedium of striking a synchronized pace with Agrel. As they had often flown together in tight formation in their youth, it came back to them quickly enough and Gehj felt his spirits lift the closer they came to their destination. He could not wait to see the expression on her face—the happiness that would come with knowing that she would be able to travel with some comforts. The moment Delilah’s dwelling came into view; however, he suffered a momentary pang of doubt. The box was rickety. Even with the two of them pulling together, it did not roll smoothly. The wood was rough and unpleasant... and then there was the smell. He drew in a breath of the air and immediately gagged. The smell wafting up from the wagon was intolerable and seemed to be getting worse, drawing his attention more acutely to it. He gagged and wretched, drawing his ahaku’s curious gaze.

“What are you doing?” Agrel whispered.

Gehj shook his head, his crests flaring and flattening in distress as he tried not to hurl. She was going to be disgusted with it, and with them for even thinking about showing up with it at her door, much less expecting her to travel in something that smelled so foul.

“Do you not smell that?” he hissed at the other male and immediately gagged again.

Agrel sniffed the air and shook his head, his crests lifting very slightly as his expression grew more curious. “It smells the same as it did before. Why is it bothering you now?”

“Impossible,” Gehj countered with shock. He came to a complete stop and dropped his pole, forcing his ahaku to lower his as well. “We have to turn back and rethink this.”

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Chuckling quietly to himself, Agrel stretched his wings for a moment before turning toward him with a patient smile, his arms crossing his chest. “And why is that?”

Why?

Gehj gaped at him. “It is revolting. We cannot present this thing to our mate. It will reflect badly on us and our ability to take care of her. I?—”

“—need to calm down,” Agrel interrupted. “Or else you are going to have another repeat of when you were asked to present your report to Chieftain Dengal. Do you not recall what happened?”

“It is not the same.” Gehj’s wings twitched with embarrassment.

He had wanted it perfect. He had gone over his report a dozen times and then went personally to see the producers and visit the storehouse managers to recalculate their numbers with them. It had been a lot of work that had not left him much time for sleeping and eating and he?—

“You dropped to the ground in exhaustion right in front of the chieftain,” Agrel reminded him drolly. “I had to carry you back to our nest and was forced to take care of you for three days because you were as weak as little Nimh.” He hissed with quietlaughter. “Not the same, you say, but it is exactly that. You are panicking now, just as you did then.”

Gehj grimaced, perhaps his ahaku was right, but it still didn’t hurt to—his train of thought was interrupted as Lily came sailing out of the house as if she had sprouted

wings. She ran to them, her face lit up with excitement.

“A wagon! I can’t believe you found a wagon!” she shrieked as she stopped in front of them and bounced in place on her small feet. Spinning around, she shouted back to the house. “Momma, they brought a wagon!”

He groaned inwardly. So much for his attempt to abandon the smelly box...wagon... somewhere.

“A wagon?” Delilah’s head popped out the door curiously and she smiled as a look of relief swept over her face. “Oh, thank the Blessed Mother.” Her smile widened as she headed for them. “I thought for sure we would have to carry everything. That would have required us to abandon almost everything.”

He was so fixated on his mate as he tried to think of a way out of their current situation that he failed to see Lily scooting close to his side until she let out a loud giggle.

“It stinks,” she declared loudly and giggled again, her nose wrinkling.

Shamed filled him. He should have thought of that when he found it. He could not believe he brought something with such a foul smell for his mate.

“Don’t be silly, Lily,” Delilah countered in a light voice, startling him as she moved to the side of the wagon. Her eyes gleamed happily as she looked it over. “As the wood isn’t rotting and seems to be in good condition, it has probably sat in a barn somewhere. That’s just the normal smell, since animals tend to hole up in there to get out of the weather. We will sweep it out good and mop it down with vinegar. Once it’s dry, we can tie down some herbal sachets in the corners. It won’t be perfect, but it will do just fine.” Turning to Gehj, she stood on her toes and pressed a kiss to his cheek, shocking him into silence, before doing the same to Agrel. “Thank you, this

must have taken you some effort to find.”

“It was Gehj. I helped pull it, but he is the one who found it and suggested that we bring it to you,” Agrel replied as he turned a smug smile on Gehj.

“I... it is nothing,” he stammered, caught off-guard.

“It is perfect,” his mate assured him as she drew his head down and placed her lips directly over his.

He froze, his crests rising and tail feathers fanning in response to the desire that shot through him with the meeting of their mouths. His eyes slid shut, and he kissed her back. The contact was brief, and her cheeks were red when she quickly pulled away from him again, but his heart still thudded in his chest, its pulse filling his ears. Lily giggled from where she stood, her small hands pressed against her mouth, until her mother drew away with a quiet admonishment.

“Don’t gawk at adults, Lily. Staring is rude. Come on, let’s go get the vinegar. We may need all of it, but that’s okay, we won’t be taking it with us, anyway. Do you know where I have the lavender stored?”

“Yes, mamma,” the nestling replied as she began to bounce in a skipping step at her mother’s side.

He watched the pair as they walked back to the dwelling, certain that the emotions filling his heart had to be visible on his face. His ahaku clasped him roughly on the shoulder, his wing wrapping enthusiastically around him in a way that he knew was annoying, so that the bend of the wing thumped Gehj heavily on the chest.

“We should fetch the brooms and get the wagon ready, yes?” Agrel said.

Gehj nodded numbly, still stunned. Yes... they should do that so that the wagon would be ready by the time Delilah returned with the supplies. Gods knew that he would happily do that and more.

He would do anything for her.

## Chapter

### Fourteen

Delilah shook her head in wonder. How was it that in the flurry of preparing to leave that the cottage looked so good? While she did spot cleaning and did all the regular cooking, she really couldn't recall when her home was in such good condition. It wasn't so much the regular cleaning, as she kept up on that as much as she always did. It was how the hard-to-reach places that she always had to chastise Zack about and had been neglected for years since his disappearance were suddenly clean, and the dishes were washed after every meal before she had an opportunity to get to them. And it was thanks to the Atlavan males sharing her home and her bed with her.

She truly had not expected such thoughtfulness. She had figured that they would try to romance her with little meaningless but sweet gestures and had prepared herself for not being swayed by flowers and little tokens... to make her decision rationally. But this she was not prepared for. Males who cleaned and worked to make her life easier, who she didn't have to follow around with a broom and waste bin on the chance that they may thoughtlessly discard something or leave a mess somewhere. Truthfully, they were cleanly to the point of nearly being fastidious with it. She had even caught them carefully grooming each other's feathers to remove loose or damaged ones and singed them to ash between their fingers. Ash that they, in turn, swept up on their own without having to be asked.

Blessed Mother... was there anything as attractive as a male who kept his home and

himself so clean and orderly? Not only that, but when they weren't cleaning or hunting, they were happy to spend portions of the day playing with Lily or simply spend the evening sprawling with them in front of the fire. They'd fallen into a comfortable rhythm over the span of just a few days while Delilah went through their meager belongings and set aside the most important things to go with them.

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Perhaps that was why she was staring anxiously out the window, watching for any sign of their return from the hunt. It was very nearly time to leave. Sacks were prepared with packages of carefully smoked meat, and gourds had been painfully hollowed, cleaned, and filled with water, each bottle corked in preparation for departure. Seeing the supplies reassured her that they wouldn't simply just disappear into the woods one day like her husband had and never return. Logically, she knew it was silly to worry about such things when they swore that they would never leave her, but when her husband disappeared, she would have sworn that he would have been back that evening. It was difficult to trust that they would return to her, even though she reminded herself that they wouldn't leave their supplies.

"All done," Lily announced, startling her from her reverie.

"Hmmm?" She looked over at her daughter curiously, her brows rising at the overstuffed bag at Lily's feet. "What is that?"

Lily gave her a quizzical look as she played absently with the feather tied into her hair. "My stuff, of course. We're going to be going soon, right? That means everything needs to be packed. My daddies were packing things during the night and loading the cart so that we can leave today, but I wanted to pack my own things." She gave the room a curious glance. "Haven't you been packing, momma?"

"Yes, of course," Delilah murmured.

She had thought that she'd been making good progress getting the kitchen and living room squared away, but now she was ashamed that she hadn't noticed how much the Atlavans were doing while she slept.



She smiled reassuring at Lily. “There’s just a little left to pack up here and then I will go see what I want to pack in my room.” She hesitated. Her bedroom and all the memories of everything contained within it had been a task she had been putting off for far too long. “Perhaps you should go into my room and see if you can find a keepsake from your father that you want. We won’t be able to take all of daddy’s things with us. But it is good to have something to remember daddy by so we can hold him close.”

She could pretend for her daughter’s sake.

Lily shrugged. “That is what daddy Agrel said. He said that it’s important to remember daddy because daddy Agrel and daddy Gehj can never take his place, even though they love me a lot. And daddy Gehj says the more love someone surrounds themselves with then the happier they will be.” A look of uncertainty crossed her face. “Is it bad that I don’t think about daddy anymore?”

Delilah’s heart ached for her daughter. “Of course not, baby. It has been a long time, and you were small when he disappeared.” She left it unsaid that he was seldom around, anyway. She didn’t know if Lily remembered how often he was gone, and she didn’t want her daughter to feel sad and unwanted from what happened in the past when she was clearly healing. Unlike Zack, the Atlavans always had time for her, which put another chink in the armor over her heart. “What about your daddy’s pocket watch? He once said it belonged to his daddy, so it can be something extra special.”

Lily shrugged again and smiled gamely. “Okay, I guess.”

Delilah nodded. “Okay. It is on the big dressing table in my room. But first I wanted to talk to you about something,” she said, turning away from the window.

Lily’s brow wrinkled. “About what?”

“Well, about Agrel and Gehj,” she replied. “I know that you think that the stars gave them to you to be your daddies but?—”

“Not just for me,” Lily interrupted with a cherubic smile. “I asked the stars for a special daddy who makes you happy again. And they did! You smile so much now and even singing when you are working in the house.”

Startled, Delilah stared down at her daughter with wonder. “I... I am?”

Lily nodded as she bent down to scoop up Nimh who had charged into her feet. “Our family is getting bigger and better, just like it should.”

“Lily, I know I should have talked to you about this sooner, but you do realize that they are not human—not like daddy and momma, right? Which means that if we end up deciding to go all the way with them instead of heading toward the nearest human town, that it will mean leaving everything we know behind.”

Her daughter’s brow wrinkled. “Like what? Daddy Agrel says that there are a lot of fledglings around my age that survived the epibema?—”

“Epidemic,” Delilah gently corrected, smothering a smile.

“That’s what I said,” Lily muttered crossly, but her expression cleared quickly as she refocused on the matter at hand. “And Daddy Gehj said that even though they don’t have a home yet, that when they find a home, they will build a real school. Until then, there are lots of people who will teach me anything I want to know. And I could have real paint for making my pictures, momma,” she said in a hushed voice.

“Really?” Delilah’s brows rose, impressed. They certainly sold her on life with the Atlavans. “And you wouldn’t miss living around other humans?”

“Other humans left us,” Lily replied quietly, her head bowing slightly as she suddenly became interested in studying Nimh. “There is no one to miss.”

Delilah swallowed thickly past the lump in her throat. She certainly stuck her foot in her mouth. The last thing a ten-year-old ever needed to know was how quickly and easily people abandoned each other. She had already had multiple lessons in that. Delilah cleared her throat, abandoning that line of conversation. There needed nothing more to be said about that.

“You do realize, whether we stay with them or not, that you will have to listen to what they say, right? Especially when we are traveling through the woods—it will be very important. They wouldn’t be guests anymore but would have a real say in your life.”

Lily’s head lifted, and she smiled. “I will listen to them like I listen to you.”

“Blessed Mother helps us,” Delilah teased as she snatched her daughter up into her arms and proceeded to tickle her, drawing peals of laughter even when they lost their balance and dropped to the ground. When they finally calmed again, she brushed the hair from Lily’s eyes from where they sat on the floor and looked down into her daughter’s sweet face. “Everything will change, regardless of where we end up.”

“Everything’s always changing, momma. We should stay with them... it will be a good one.”

“I hope so, baby,” she murmured.

Chapter

### Fifteen

Agrel tilted his head back, basking in the sunlight as he drew in a deep breath of air. The sun beat down on them through the trees, drawing long shadows over the ground as they drew the wagon through the woods. This part of the woods wasn't quite so thick as others so that it made the day quite pleasant. Everything was greener and brighter... or perhaps it was his mood which had improved substantially since taking Delilah as his mate.

He glanced over at her, his heart warming with affection as she walked trustingly by his side, the sun glancing off her hair. He was a bit confused by her insistence on walking, though. They had expected both females to ride in the wagon when they were stopping to rest and yet, other than Lily sleeping for a time in the wagon when the first started out in the early morning, neither female had spent any considerable length of time in it at all. It just did not seem right to him. She was not as strong as either him or his ahaku. Should she not be depending on them?

A female relying on the care of her males was the norm in their society where Atlavan males were built to be large and powerful in contrast to the females. It was expected for males to do the bulk of the physical labor required for patrols, hunting, as well as seeing to domestic tasks that came with minding the household. All of which were possible with the short rotations and the ahaku bond that allowed them to not only split up their workload but also directly care for their families for the majority of the day. Atlavan females prepared meals, wove fabric, minded offspring, and the few light domestic duties as they felt were needed. He had assumed the same care was expected among human females. An Atlavan female would have expected to ride in the wagon the entire way, where she could lounge and rest until they stopped. Such

good treatment and demonstration of love would guarantee that she would be in good spirits and pleased while hovering over her mates lovingly.

Delilah's actions confused him. Not only did she do the majority of her cleaning before he or Gehj had an opportunity to tackle it, but she almost seemed resistant at times toward their efforts. And now she was walking with little Lily, who was scampering among the bushes and tall grass close to her side instead of comfortably riding.

He cleared his throat, drawing her attention to him, and nodded toward the wagon. "Do you not wish to ride?"

Delilah's brows drew together, and she glanced over at the wagon in confusion. "I assumed that we would ride when we became too tired to walk."

That was strange logic. "If you ride, then you will not become tired."

"But then you would have extra weight in the wagon, making you tired," she countered lightly, her face lifting to the sun. "Besides, why would we want to miss out on getting a bit of exercise and fresh air? Walking will do us some good, especially Lily, who has spent so much time confined to the cottage over the last few months. We will be in the wagon enough as it is, and it's not exactly a smooth ride in there."

Agrel gave her a perplexed frown. It was not?

"Gehj, stop for a moment," he said.

His ahaku glanced at him curiously but slowed his pace so that they came to a stop. "Is there a problem?"

“Not at all, I just want to see something,” Agrel replied, putting down his pole.

Without another word, he circled to the back of the wagon. He could feel Gehj’s gaze following him, but he understood that it all probably looked very odd to the male. But he just wanted to test something.

Folding his wings tightly against his back, he vaulted into the wagon and made his way to the mattress protected at the back. He lowered himself onto the mattress and gave it a little test bounce. It seemed comfortable enough. Granted, there wasn’t much room to stretch out his wings, but that wasn’t something his mate and nestling had to worry about. Even with the limited space that forced him to keep his wings folded, it was spacious enough since they had organized the space to be large enough for all four of them to sleep in there.

Settling on the mattress more fully, he rapped on the back wall of the wagon and called out to his ahaku. “Give it a pull at regular speed, Gehj.”

Gehj let out of a low, sharp hoot of agreement and the entire wagon jolted so hard that he fell forward. He caught himself in time to keep from landing on the hard floor of the wagon, but it did not get any better. The wagon bounced abominably, knocking him from one side of the mattress to the other whenever he least expected it. He attempted to stabilize himself by sinking his claws into the mattress and holding on, but all that was bouncing him jarringly in place in rapid little staccato bursts that matched an Atlavan’s walking speed. Every step Gehj took made him bounce and hit the mattress on the return with enough force to jolt his entire body. He scrabbled in place, trying to find a better hold but Gehj suddenly hit a rock with the wheel floor and the wagon bounced so hard that it sent him up off the mattress completely and crashing down again so that he was bouncing on his side and rolling, his feathers being crushed indignantly as he worked to right himself.

“Gehj,” he shouted and then grunted when the wagon bounced violently again, nearly

sending him flying again if not for his claws piercing the mattress. His chest hit the bed hard, however, expelling his breath from his lungs as he shouted the male's name again. "Gehj,stop!"

The wagon jolted to a stop and, taken off guard, Agrel's body weight worked against him, the momentum throwing him bodily into the back wall of the wagon. He lay for a moment, groaning before dragging himself out of the wagon. Deliliah had come around the side of the wagon and watched with wide eyes, her hands coming up over her more to discreetly cover the smile that she could not hide. He did not blame her for finding the situation amusing. She did allude to the fact that it was not comfortable.

But he did not understand. No Atlavan female that he had ever known had complained about being carried over distances in litters or anything other transports devised for them by their mates. He rubbed his backside just over his tail as he climbed down from the wagon and groaned just as Gehj came around the wagon's side as well.

His ahaku stared at him in shock. "Agrel... what happened? Did something come unlashd and fall upon you?"

Agrel grimaced. Thank the gods that had not happened. "No, fortunately. I would likely be in even more of a mess," he grumbled. He squinted at the other male. "Were you running by chance? I told you to keep it at the same speed."

A look of annoyance briefly touched Gehj's face, but he shook his head. "Of course I was not running. You asked me to continue at the same pace, so that is what I did. I took a bit more effort to pull by alone and I may have actually been going a little slower because of that, but I did attempt to perform the same."

Agrel grimaced and rubbed just above his tail again. "Next time we meet our kin, I

will sincerely apologize to any of our cousins we helped carry. That is murderous.”

A look of surprise flitted across Gehj’s face. “Truly? That is remarkable. No one has ever said so.”

“Would you like to try it for yourself?” Agrel offered succinctly, but his ahaku laughed and shook his head, his hands lifted in front of him.

“No, I do not wish to come out of there with half my feathers bent.”

Agrel froze. “What? What is wrong with my feathers?”

Lily covered her mouth with her hand and giggled. “You look like an angry chicken that ran into our door.”

Chicken... one of those silly birds that he had killed for them? The feathers on some of them did look quite beat up. Gods, was that how his feathers looked? He mournfully ran his fingers over his crest as Delilah glanced down sharply at their nestling.



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“Lily! That isn’t nice,” she admonished her. Her gaze shifted back to Agrel, and she winced apologetically, though she made some attempt at offering a reassuring smile. “It is not that bad. Honestly, I didn’t even notice it at first until Gehj mentioned it. It’s just a few feathers that are slightly bent at odd angles. It’s hardly noticeable.”

“Just play it off like you do any other miscalculation when you are looking to preserve your pride behind some amusing excuse,” Gehj soothingly advised. “Just say that it is...” he rolled a hand in the air as he sought the right words.

“A new look,” Delilah quickly suggested. “If anyone asks, just say that you were trying a new look playing with manipulating the angles of your feathers.”

His expression softened at their mate’s suggestion. It was clever. Fashion was something that Atlavans embraced with abandon as they tended to take great pride in their appearances. It could work as most of his clan could understand and appreciate such things, even if they found some amusement in failing to pull it off. It was a lot better than having it widely known that he got his feathers all bent up and askew from being tossed around in a travel convenience.

It was undignified and he felt immediately sympathy for the females who were forced to endure it when traveling in private sedans. Who knew how many damaged feathers they sacrificed and singed away to keep themselves looking relaxed and unruffled when they emerged? It did not seem quite fair to participate in hiding the reality of the situation from the other males of the clan.

“Thank you, Delilah, but perhaps it is better if I speak truthfully about them. That I sacrificed a small amount of my pride to make certain the transport was comfortable

enough. It is something males do not think of, but clearly, they should.”

Gehj’s gave him a thoughtful look. “I am impressed. That is quite thoughtful, Agrel.”

Agrel’s head bowed in acknowledgment of his ahaku’s praise as they headed back toward the front of the wagon. “It just does not seem right to not own up to an experience that our females so frequently suffer without complaint.”

The other male nodded, and they silently bent, taking their poles back up once again. They resumed pulling, the wagon creaking behind them, but this time he was more conscious of the wheels bouncing over stones and dips in the forest floor and his mind worked as to how he might fix the problem. There was nothing that they could do for the wheels. The ground was not perfectly level, which was what made the wagon sway and bounce every handful of steps. His gaze trailed over to Lily, and he smiled as he watched the nestling as she engaged in her own little world of fantasy as she played, whirling a long, colorful piece of material around her.

Delilah followed his gaze and smile as she increased her speed slightly so that she walked at his side. “Don’t worry too much about her. Children have far more energy and resiliency than you expect, and she knows what dangers to look for. More importantly, she knows not to wander from our side. That ribbon will keep her amused for hours with her make-believe.”

Agrel did not quite believe it and yet, as the hours passed, he had to admit that he marveled at how tireless she appeared the entire time. It was only when she began to noticeably slow and her ribbon drooped and dragged at the ground that Gehj chuckled quietly and suggested that they stop for a meal.

While Gehj helped Delilah bring out what they needed to make their meal, Agrel ducked into the woods to hunt. They had plenty of provisions with them, but he would hunt while he was able to do so. Fresh meat was always far more nutritious for

females and growing nestlings. Fortunately, the forest was heavily populated with the creatures Delilah called rabbits, and he was able to bring a couple of them down swiftly and efficiently. Seeing the pleasure in their mate's eyes when he returned with them was reward enough. Even more so was seeing the pure happiness on Lily's face a short time later as she devoured the meat and licked the juices from her hands. Despite how tired she was, she was happy and bubbly throughout the entire meal but afterwards, after everything had been put away, Delilah climbed into the back of the wagon with their nestling to rest.

Gehj watched them and glanced over at him as they made their way back to the front of the wagon. "We will go slower and temper our pace until we are ready to stop for the night. However quickly we need to accomplish our mission, I will not be the one responsible for them suffering any more than what is necessary."

"My thoughts exactly," Agrel murmured, and he picked up his pole.

The wagon groaned and shuddered forward as usual, but it didn't seem to rock and jerk quite so much with their slower pace. He hoped that it was comfortable enough to rock them to sleep. It was for that reason, when they finally stopped for the night and climbed into the back of the wagon, he was relieved to see both females curled up together in the center of the bed and sleeping soundly.

Good. It had not been too difficult for them.

Yawning, he crawled up the mattress on one side of them while Gehj took the place on the other. Curling up on either side of them, they fanned their wings over their family to keep them safe and warm as they, too, drifted off to sleep. Around the wagon, a perimeter of controlled Atlavan fire would keep predators at bay while they slept without worry throughout the night.

Chapter

## Sixteen

Delilah groaned and stretched, careful of her daughter's head pillowed on her lap. Three days of traveling and she was already stiff as hell when she woke, even with walking most of the day. Although Gehj and Agrel were doing their utmost to keep the bouncing in the wagon to a minimum, it was still a bit hard on her back to be seated on the mattress for any kind of extended amount of time as she discovered over the last few days of traveling. She fell asleep in the wagon as the males didn't stop moving until long after she was asleep and began again early in the morning.

Blessed Mother, didn't they need rest?

She shook her head in exasperation. They were truly nothing close to being human. She didn't know anyone who could go on so relentlessly day after day without seeming to tire. She understood that they were trying to make up lost time. They had made it clear from the beginning that they had urgent matters to attend to—a new homeland to locate for their people—and Goddess knew that having humans slowing them down wasn't helping matters any, but she didn't understand this. Nor did she didn't understand why morning after morning they refused to wake her when they rose. Instead, every morning they started out early without a word to her. She didn't believe that they were already getting tired of her company.

Perhaps it was out of courtesy to her. It just seemed strange that they would make a point to let her sleep late unless her chatter and presence were too distracting when they were already delayed for her sake. She didn't know, and it put her on uncertain footing that made her second guess herself. She didn't want to just ride in the wagon for an extended period, but perhaps Agrel's commentary on the first day had in fact shown her exactly what they wanted: both her and Lily tucked safely out of the way. And she supposed that she couldn't complain too much about that when they were moderating their pace for their comfort. That alone was incredibly kind and considerate of them.

Of course, Agrel had received firsthand experience of what riding in the wagon at a quick pace was like. Her lips twitched at the memory of three long feathers of his crest that had become twisted so that they stood up above his other feather like a headdress that would be favored by one of the citadel matriarchs. She bit her bottom lip to restrain her laughter. She really did appreciate his efforts after all of that, but she really preferred to walk. If that was going to cause a problem—well, then it was better to just have that conversation out so that she knew exactly what was going on because waking up to the wagon moving relentlessly before she even had a moment to collect herself was starting to get to her.

Not the least of which was the fact that she woke rocking and swaying with a full bladder and a desperate need to pee. As if to remind her of the fact, the wagon lurched unexpectedly, and she winced, her legs tightening even as she clutched her Lily to her to steady her. She debated thumping on the back wall like Agrel had done previously but she didn't know if she could strike it hard enough to be heard, not to mention that the idea of them standing and waiting around from her to finish peeing was disconcerting... and as usual there was no waiting.

Whispering a soft curse to herself, Delilah carefully shifted her daughter so that she lay fully on the mattress again, allowing Delilah the space to slide off without waking her. Of course, then she had to evade all of their belongings that were stacked neatly around the thick mattress, which, though they were lashed securely into place, proved far too easy to bump into or fall against while walking in a moving wagon. At least the speed was kept at a slow, steady pace so that she could jump easily from the back and land without incident on her feet.

She turned with a smile and jogged out a few steps. The wagon continued to roll slowly but steadily ahead, but she only gave it the briefest of glances. She never had any problem catching up, and neither male was ever the wiser as to her absence when she suddenly popped up beside. Hurrying into the bushes, she made a quick check for anything immediately dangerous in the immediate area where she planned to squat

and quickly did her business. As she cleaned herself up, it occurred to her that her menses would come soon within the next week and half. She hoped that she was no longer traveling when that happened. For now, her brief trips to the bushes were a quick and uncomplicated matter, but she wasn't looking forward to dealing with body aches and bloody rags while traveling. Unfortunately, the duration of the trip wasn't something she had any control over.

Smoothing her clothing to the best of her ability, Delilah jogged from the bushes, eager to catch up with the males and chat with them as they walked. The wagon wasn't far and so she picked up her pace, closing the distance until a low growl rumbled from some place behind her, sending a chill up her spine. What was that? Delilah's pace fell to a nervous, wary walk still some distance behind the wagon.

She glanced uneasily behind her, her skin prickling. She heard it again, a low rumbling growl as four glowing, golden eyes cut through the darkness, staring directly at her. Delilah's breath caught in her chest as the muscles clenched tightly in fear. She felt as if she were strangling on her horror as those eyes began to move closer and closer to her. Stalking her.

Four eyes... four eyes, where did she know that from? What had four eyes?

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“Gehj? Agrel?” She called out to her mates, praying that they heard her plea despite being nothing more than a thread of sound squeezed from her throat. When there was no immediate response, she directed her plea to the creature stalking patiently toward her as she continued to back away from it. “Please,” she whispered. “Please, don’t.”

It studied her, its heading cock for a moment as it briefly fell silent. She stumbled and fell to the ground. As if seeing a moment of weakness to attack, it emerged from the brush, the morning light making its fur look even darker, like a stain of a shadow against the world with four bright, piercing eyes burning at her. But instead of attacking, it stood, its body a dark shadow and yet distinct in the early morning light as it rose to stand like a man. Fear constricted her throat, and her eyes grew wide as clarity slammed through her. She knew exactly what it was—the one thing she had feared.

Ragoru.

A scream ripped painfully from her throat, and she whirled away, sprinting toward the wagon, which swayed as it moved farther and farther away from her. All at once, it stopped, and a bright light rose over its top as the Atlavans ascended over the top of the wagon, fire burning from their wings. Their wings beat the air, propelling them forward. Her eyes followed them as she ran frantically forward. They cut through the air at a shocking speed but then did not drop to her side, instead they soared over her head, their bodies angling at the last minute to dive toward the Ragoru that was rapidly gaining on her. Delilah spun around, her steps wobbling as she broke from her sprint, and watched wide-eyed as the outright attacked the massive male nearly twice their size. She waited for him to swipe and to attempt to knock one of them out of the air. Her throat constricted with worry but, to her surprise, the Ragoru dropped low,

scrambling out of the way of their assault as he withdrew to a safe distance.

“Wait... wait!” the male roared, his clear, precise words ringing out with such surprise that she frowned with confusion.

“What?” The word fell from her lips in shock and was echoed by her mates as they dropped to the ground a short distance in front of her, forming a very confused barrier of flames, wings, and merciless claws.

That... that didn't sound like a murderous beast attempting to kidnap her or tear her apart. Her brows drew together as she studied the panting male and slowly walked forward to join her mates. Their heads turned toward her and she wondered if they would resist her stepping between them as she approached the flaming wall of their wings. To her surprise, they drew back their wings, opening the way for her as their gazes returned to the Ragoru warily watching them. Something about the whole thing was off. Even the panicked shout sounded off—like from a frightened child.

“What do you mean ‘wait?’” she called out to him. “It didn't look like you were waiting to attack me.”

“Attack you? I didn't attack you.” The male's ears flattened, and he shook his head, shrinking into himself. “There was a large spotted predator creeping toward you. I... I meant to save you,” he added weakly, his eyes turning to the bushes helplessly. “It... it is gone, but I did not know you had males with you.” He shifted in place, suddenly looking every inch as young and uncertain as he sounded despite his size.

She squinted at him but set a hand on Agrel's arm, feeling the tension that was wound tightly through his body, easing slightly beneath her palm. She glanced over at Gehj and the male nodded, his flames dying as his wings snapped behind him. Walking out the direction that the Ragoru indicated, he peered down at the ground for a long moment, his crests rising. Nodding to himself, he returned to her side and peered



down at her.

“He is speaking the truth. There was something there that appears as if it were following you.” His mouth downturned, his brows dipping. “What were you doing out here alone, anyway?”

“Can we not get distracted here,” she muttered at him from between her teeth. “If you must know, I had to pee.” Her gaze shifted back to the Ragoru eyeing them nervously. “What is your name?”

“Zemb,” the male replied, his voice shaking.

She smiled reassuring. “How old are you, Zemb?”

“Fi... fifteen summers,” he replied.

Blessed Mother, he was practically a baby. He glanced around helplessly, and she wondered if he was looking for an escape route. Poor kid. This... this was the monster that Zack had been so insistent needed to be destroyed. He was very much like any teen boy she’d known, just with a bit extra added to his appearance.

Gehj sighed, his wings relaxing, and he exchanged a look with Agrel, whose flames went out as he curled one wing possessively around her.

“Sure, why not?” Agrel huffed, but there was no malice in it, and Gehj smiled as his head turned back to the Ragoru.

“We are very thankful that you saved our mate,” he said, his voice pitched in a low, kindly note. “If you had declined to help, there is little doubt a clever predator would have brought her down before we noticed that she was in need of help. You did very well and have our thanks.”

The male's ears tipped toward him, his expression brightening. "I do?"

Agrel trilled in amusement at her side and waved a wing toward him as he gently turned her back toward the wagon. "Come. We were just about to stop for morning meal, are you hungry?"

Zemb nodded eagerly, forgetting his reluctance as he bounded toward them with juvenile enthusiasm. It was only once he was up close that Delilah saw how thin and lanky he was, despite the fur. He was definitely at that awkward developmental stage—it seemed that even aliens experienced it. His bright eyes turned to her as if sensing her regard and his ears twisted to the side in obvious embarrassment, his eyes dropping.

"I apologize that I frightened you, female."

"Delilah," she replied, and promptly nodded to her males. "These are my mates, Agrel and Gehj."

"Just two?" he asked with open curiosity, and Agrel frowned at him.

"An ahaku pair is all an Atlavan's mate needs," he replied.

"Oh, of course," Zemb replied cheerfully, not even noticing the chilling in Agrel's demeanor. "Ragoru females normally mate with a triad of males, but I have heard that it is done, though my family does not agree with it. They said two mates is an insult to the female."

"And where is your family?" Gehj gently inquired before Agrel could implode into a blazing ball of fury, and Zemb's expression fell.

"They are with the dark father now. A hunter killed them. He has been pursuing me

for many nights, but I keep getting away.” He sniffed the air curiously. “What are we going to eat?”

“All stomach—he is definitely a juvenile,” Agrel commented wryly, and Gehj chuckled.

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Delilah's lips twisted in a faint smile, but news of the hunter just days south of their village sent an uncomfortable feeling creeping over her. It had to be a coincidence, but the quicker they were out of the area, the more comfortable she would feel. Despite all her questions, the last thing she wanted to do was run into the male who abandoned her and would likely try to kill the only people who gave a damn about her. And she wasn't about to let that happen.

### Chapter

#### Seventeen

Their mate was a bundle of nerves. Something had put her on edge, and it was not the Ragoru, of that much Gehj was certain. Nor was she concerned over a frightened nestling since Lily was currently climbing all over Zemb with rampant curiosity. Not only did she greet him with the excitement of a curious nestling, but the young male had an eager-to-please personality and overall genial bearing that seemed to both welcome and encourage her immediate fascination.

At least that had worked in their favor. He was certain that if Lily had been awakened by the fight and had been frightened, Agrel would have insisted on removing the Ragoru from their midst. It was not that his ahaku was unsympathetic, but he tended to be led by strong emotions. What made him a loving and genial ahaku and mate was risky toward anything or anyone that potentially threatened those he considered his family. And Agrel was still twitchy as he was coming down from his state of heightened aggression that had been triggered in protecting their mate. A frightened nestling would have likely pushed him too far despite Zemb's innocence and pitiable situation. Hedoubted even Delilah would have been able to talk reason into him

before he chased the male off.

“Lily, Zemb is not a tree. I’m sure he doesn’t enjoy being climbed on,” Delilah gently chided.

Lily’s little face peeked from around the male’s ruff to pout at her mother. “But he’s so fluffy. Even more than Nimh!”

Gehj chuckled quietly under his breath and discreetly refocused on his cooking. The Ragoru was definitely that.

“I do not see what is so great about fur,” Agrel commented as he dropped an armful of firewood beside him. “My crests are far more impressive.”

Gehj smirked up at his ahaku but offered no comment. It was such a silly thing to be jealous over. “You know Lily loves your feathers... and more importantly, our mate appears to prefer them,” he casually replied as he turned the spits over the fire.

“You do not have to always be so reasonable,” Agrel replied, but it was said without heat and an easy smile slipped across the male’s face. “Very well, you are correct. And he is useful. He does not shirk from anything asked of him and is even happy to keep Lily entertained. Few males his age are so affable.”

Nodding in agreement, Gehj glanced toward their mate. Her gaze was attentively trained on the Ragoru, her expression thoughtful. He doubted that it was because of the male’s geniality.

“What are your plans now, Zemb?” Delilah asked.

Zemb glanced up with a mild expression of surprise and shrugged as he gave her a lopsided smile, his left ear lowering ever so slightly with his good humor. “I was

thinking about heading to Ragoru territory in the northlands. My parents chose not to settle there as they did not wish to set aside the life they were accustomed to in order to live closely among others, but it does not sound so bad to me. I did not have any siblings and with my mother and fathers gone, it would be nice to have some kind of family.”

Delilah’s brows knitted in confusion, and even Gehj paused to glance over at the male. They had traveled south for a great many days before even encountering their mate’s village and since then have traveled many days more. And this was without ever setting eyes on the northlands of the Ragoru territory. It was much further north, further beyond where they had started before heading south.

“Zemb... do you know how far that is?” she gently queried.

He shrugged again but looked away, distracted, as Lily tumbled over his shoulder, dropping into his lap. Agrel started forward, but Gehj thumped him on the leg with his tail feathers. His ahaku gave him a questioning look, but Gehj shook his head in silent warning to cease hovering over their nestling. Agrel frowned back at him, ruffling his wings briefly before joining Delilah and dropping to the ground to sit at her side. His wing curled around reflexively, his eyes never straying far from Lily as if afraid to let her out of his sight in case she might bruise. Gehj snorted quietly to himself. Gods forbid that happen, the male would probably lose his mind. He would be a nightmare to live with if they ever had any more.

Now why did that make his heart squeeze with longing?

Glancing over at Zemb, he smiled as the male released a rough chuff of laughter and carefully set her back on her feet again.

“The northlands are many weeks’ journey through thick forests and mountain passes,” Delilah continued. “The huntsman won’t let you get that far.”

“I have outrun him this long,” Zemb cheerfully reminded her, but Gehj saw the shadow of doubt in his eyes.

Evading anything that hunted one was often more a matter of luck than anything else, and with a cunning predator, that luck would never last long before one was forced into a confrontation. It was better to take control of the situation and turn the hunt back around on the hunter, but Zemb was young and inexperienced. And given how thin he appeared, he was likely not a successful hunter himself to even make it that far, much less fend off an attack. He did not wish to hurt the male’s pride, though.

“Can you hunt?” he inquired casually

Zemb hesitated. “Some,” he reluctantly admitted, his eyes drifting longingly toward their meal. He swallowed thickly, betraying his hunger. “I had only recently become old enough to begin hunting with my fathers when the huntsman came. But I have managed to catch some game, small animals mostly.”

Delilah expelled a sharp breath and shook her head. “I imagine that they haven’t taught you how to protect yourself, either.”

“They taught me some,” Zemb replied with equal reluctance. “I just need to get to the northlands and then?—”

Agrel snapped his wings impatiently, startling the young male enough that he drew his attention to him completely. Agrel met his gaze firmly. “You cannot defend yourself, not from predators or these huntsmen... whatever they are. You are not only very vulnerable, but you cannot even feed yourself. How do you imagine that you will evade the huntsman long enough to even try? And if you, by chance, get lucky, do you imagine that you will get far before you starve to death?”

The Ragoru wilted and Gehj’s heart ached for him. Such truths were not

uncomfortable to face, but it was better for him to confront it than be taken by surprise by the reality of the situation.

“That was harsh, Agrel,” Delilah chided with a sharp shove at his wing to emphasize her point.

His ahaku grunted in assent, but he offered no apology. He stood by his words, and the direct look he gave the young male conveyed as much. Their mate sighed and shook her head at his stubborn silence before addressing the Ragoru again.



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“While Agrel just possessed the tact of a rolling boulder, he is not wrong. Huntsmen are tenacious and are trained to follow their prey over vast tracts of land. You will have to evade him, escape the dangers that the woods offer, and then must be concerned with feeding yourself on top of that. Even if you escape the attention of the huntsman, winter will come before you even arrive in the northlands, and the game doesn’t get any easier to hunt and the things that can kill you become substantially bigger and far more numerous. In fact, the further north you go, your situation will become even deadlier if you weren’t taught how to defend yourself.”

Peering over at their mate, Gehj cupped his wings around the fire to protect it from the shifting breezes as he considered his question. “What exactly is a huntsman?”

“Death,” Zemb said sorrowfully.

Delilah nodded. Drawing in a deep breath, she rocked back slightly until she was enclosed in more of Agrel’s wing. “Death is about the sum of it,” she quietly agreed. She glanced worriedly toward their nestling, but Lily had curled up against Zemb’s chest, her eyes closed in slumber. A look of relief passed over her face before she looked once more toward Gehj.

Dropping her voice to a quiet volume, she confided in them. “Lily’s father was a huntsman, a member of an order of trained hunters. He was trained to be a merciless killer of anything at all that the council determined was a threat to human safety. I know that he was in more frequent contact with the leaders of the Order after word spread regarding the arrival of the Ragoru to our world. He was secretive, and suspicious of everything. Almost paranoid. And then one day he simply went into the woods and never returned. We all believed that he was killed by something in the

woods, it was easier to believe that, but the truth is that no one ever truly knew what happened. What we do know is that communication with the Order ceased and they abandoned the village to die within the woods... but as for her father, I... I don't believe he is dead. A huntsman is notoriously difficult to kill, and they live for the chase. And if the Order sanctioned the killing of Ragoru—even if illegally, without the permission of the High Council—there would be no greater prize.”

A chill worked up Gehj's spine, and he ruffled his wings uneasily as he exchanged a look with ahaku.

“That is going to give me nightmares,” Agrel replied drily. “Thank you, Gehj. I could have lived many years in bliss without knowing that there is an entire clan of humans actively killing anyone they arbitrarily decide needs to be destroyed.”

“My fathers once told me that some males can turn rogue,” Zemb admitted. “And they are dangerous, so I was to stay away from them. But, although we are territorial, Ragoru would not actively seek to harm anyone. We would just wish to live peacefully within our own territories. My mother and fathers were never a threat to anyone.” He glanced toward Delilah, his expression pleading.

Delilah sighed and nodded gravely. “The Order has done a good job frightening the populace against the Ragoru. I am sure they will do the same to the Atlavan, if given enough time. It is possible that word is already spreading and will make our journey south difficult if we get near any populated areas. But this is not what worries me the most.”

Gehj felt a prickling among his feathers, and he eyed his mate warily. “What worries you, swiya?” Was a murderous clan of humans not enough?

She grimaced. “What worries me most is that if Zemb has been heading north this entire time, then that means that there are huntsmen further south than I ever

believed. It is unlikely that this is just coincidentally a lone huntsman. They are far too organized to spread themselves out far for long-term hunts without a reliable regional network of outposts. This means that this huntsman may pose a danger to all of us.”

Agrel hissed quietly, his eyes shifting to Zemb. “And if he catches the Ragoru alone—which he will—he will certainly learn of our presence and come for us quickly.”

Zemb balked, his eyes widening fearfully. “I would not betray your presence in the southlands. You have been kind to me, I would never?—”

“Calm yourself,” Agrel cooed, his expression gentling. “I know you would not do so intentionally. And setting aside the matter of our safety, I would not rest well knowing a helpless juvenile was starving in the woods. It is a cruel death compared to our fires.”

“Agrel, what you are saying?” Delilah whispered, a look of alarm crossing her face as the Ragoru stiffened fearfully.

Gehj laughed softly as he peered humorously at their mate for a moment before allowing his gaze to drift over to his ahaku. “Do not be afraid. He is suggesting that we take him with us. We would never leave a juvenile alone to starve, but nor would we offer a merciful death unless we had no other choice. Zemb is young and deserves every chance of survival.”

Tension drained from the stiff set of Delilah’s shoulders, and she half turned to sharply thump the male beside her. “Learn how to phrase things better so that you are not taking years off my life,” she huffed.

Zemb laughed with relief as Agrel wrapped his wings around their mate in an attempt

to ingratiate himself to the annoyed female beside him. All the while Lily dosed and Gehj chuckled quietly to himself as he returned his attention back to their meal. Soon enough, it would be time to wake Lily to eat. She would have a full belly before they began traveling once again. If the huntsman was working his way north, then it was more imperative than ever that they strike for the south quickly, before he noticed that his prey had begun to move in a different direction. Once they got to the mountains, all would be well. Once they were in the mountains, nothing would be able to get near their family without their notice.

## Chapter

### Eighteen

Delilah kept Lily in the wagon while they traveled now. There was no more walking outside, not when she was terrified that their presence might slow down or distract Gehj and Agrel. Even with Zemb guarding the rear of the wagon, she couldn't help but feel a dark certainty weighing on her that they ultimately would be unable to evade the huntsman's notice. As worried as she was for her mates, she was also very worried about her own fate. What she hadn't explained was that rumor had it that the human women caught consorting with Ragoru were dealt with harshly, often never seen again. For her, it would be worse. As the widow of a huntsman, she would be considered the worst kind of traitor. The Order kept such detailed files on their huntsmen that she had no doubt that her face was known to the order. All it would take would be the misfortune of being recognized and could just as easily disappear as all those rumored women.

The thought made her blood cold.

She closed her eyes, praying silently to the Mother that they would remain ahead of the hunter and soon arrive at a place of safety. The wagon jolted, startling from her prayer, and her breath caught when she noticed that it was slowing down and rolling

to a stop. Sliding off the bed, she stood and started to make her way toward the open side of the wagon, but stopped with surprise when Agrel vaulted inside. Her eyes flicked to a spot over his shoulder, straining to see outside. It was still early afternoon. It was too early to stop.

“Is something wrong?” she asked in a strained voice.

“No,” he soothed. “We are stopping for a rest.”

“Oh,” she fidgeted, suddenly feeling a bit awkward in his presence in such tight confines. She felt ridiculous feeling that way, but she embarrassingly hyperaware of him within the small space. “It’s still early. And the huntsman?—”

“—is not someone we should run scared of, or else we will exhaust ourselves and make mistakes. We need to rest sometime and enjoy life a little. This is a good place to stop,” he cajoled. “Come, swiya. Come, rest with us.”

“Oh, but Lily—” she glanced toward her sleeping daughter. Nimh was snuggled up next to her and they both looked so incredibly sweet. She hated to wake her just to do something that she was already doing.

Agrel chuckled softly. “Zemb has agreed to guard over her. In fact, he is excited to do so. Apparently, this, too, is an experience he had yet to enjoy since he had no younger siblings to guard and protect. And with his keen senses, he will alert us if there is any danger. Does this reassure you? Will you come rest now?”

“Oh.” Heat rose and bloomed in cheeks as she stared at the hand he suddenly held out for her.

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He was inviting her to rest with them... alone. And here she was saying “oh” over and over as if she didn’t have a thought in her head. She didn’t even know why she was feeling all flustered. Wasn’t she the one who seduced them? Why did it now feel as if the tables were turned unexpectedly?

Because they wanted her. They didn’t make that a secret. She was the one faltering and uncertain ever since she was confronted with the possibility of forever. At first, the idea of being permanently tied to the aliens had frightened her as much as it had intrigued her. The intrigue she wrote off as a natural response to the allure of being cared for rather than struggle alone, but it hadn’t been worth giving up her freedom and the chance of a new life among humans to live among another species. Lily had the natural trust of a child eager for a better life. Delilah hadn’t had it in her to take that chance. But lately... she wasn’t so sure.

Would it be so bad?

She looked at the red hand that was held out to her. Although his fingertips bore sharp, black claws, and the flesh was a brilliant shade of ruby that should have seemed unnatural and repellent to her, his hand was large and inviting. Even the soft dusting of downy feathers that began just above his wrist and trailed up the side of his forearm reinforced the allusion of warmth and softness. Although they hadn’t been permitted many opportunities for intimacy since they left the village, she acutely remembered the heat of his touch from the nights in her bed. Heat curled within her belly, and she slid her hand in his.

A warm smile touching his lips, Agrel led her to the edge of the wagon. He released her hand long enough to drop from the edge with a faint flutter of his wings, but then

he turned and scooped her up into his arms. Held tightly to his chest, Delilah rested her cheek on the warm feathers that extended from his collar and breathed in his scent as his heart beat a powerful and steady rhythm beneath her ear. The warmth of his wings closed around her, making her feel so cherished that tears unexpectedly sprung to her eyes. Thankfully, he didn't see them, and she was able to privately dash them away as his entire body swayed with the rhythm of his steps as he carried her away from the wagon.

Delilah's hand flattened against his chest, fingers playing absently with the tips of his feathers. A soft, sweet sound surrounded her, and she smiled. She'd noticed that both Gehj and Agrel cooed when they were exceptionally pleased, but this coo was so much smaller and more intimate and called to her in a long strain of sound that felt like he was singing to some corner of her soul.

He didn't walk very long. As he had assured her, they only went a short distance from the wagon, weaving among the trees, before he stopped and opened his wings. She blinked against the sunlight suddenly hitting her face and her lips parted in surprise. It was... beautiful!

"Oh, Agrel," she murmured in awe as he gently set her on her feet.

The forest opened up around a large, beautiful lake around which flowering trees grew and stretched out their branches, dropping pink and lavender flowers into water that shimmered like a sea of jewels beneath the sun. Gehj stood at the water's edge, a light breeze teasing the long feathers of his crest so that the red and blue feathers danced lightly around his shoulders. His face lit up in a way she'd never experienced before. They were the only ones who looked at her as if she brought the sun, moon, and all the stars with her.

Her eyes lifted slowly to the tree line, and her heart quickened with surprise. "Are those mountains?" she whispered.

They were still some distance away from what she could tell, but seeing them... it was wonderous. She'd never seen mountains before. She'd grown up in a small citadel near the great waterways in the east and only had books to feed her imagination about the majestic mountains of their world. When the males told her that they were searching a new territory for their people within the mountains, it had seemed more like a far-off fantasy than anything she would catch a glimpse of. She had thought it would be longer and that they would come upon numerous citadels and villages first, and while it had taken them a great many days of traveling through the forest to get there, suddenly it seemed as if it was happening far too soon.

Gehj glanced over his shoulder at them and nodded. "It is," he agreed with a content sigh. His head turned, and he looked at her, his expression softening. "Do not worry, swiya, we have not forgotten. Once we arrive at the mountains, we will need to notify the elders, but afterwards, if you do not wish to remain with us, we will locate a human citadel for you."

She nodded mutely, uncertain of what to say. Her mind was panicking with the realization that her time was running out far quicker than she'd anticipated.

Agrel's knuckles skimmed her arm. "Relax, swiya. Remember, you do not have to make any decisions until you are ready. We will not chase you from the mountains. There is no rush."

She exhaled slowly and nodded again, this time managing a smile. That didn't seem fair to either the males or Lily. Delilah knew her daughter and knew that she would certainly not only become more attached to the two males, but also to the mountains and the Atlavan community. She needed to make the best choice for everyone. She couldn't deny, however, that the gentle reminder eased some of her panic.

Her eyes drifted back to the lake and her smile grew, becoming more relaxed and genuine. "I can't believe you found this place."



Gehj nodded, the small amount of tension that he seemed to carry just moments early fleeing him as a wistful expression came to his face. “Agrel and I have been trading off with Zemb in pulling the wagon so that one of us can periodically scout ahead. I happened to see this spot from above the trees, and it reminded me of our time in the village.”

Delilah’s cheeks grew hot. She knew exactly what day he was referring to. It hadn’t been a lake though. The village pond had been beautiful but incomparable to the beauty of the lake that sprawled in front of her. The blooming wilderness lent a magical air to everything, whereas the water of the pond had been murkier and the flowering bushes planted around it had been overgrown and slowly dying.

Gehj’s wing brushed her opposite arm from the one Agrel stroked, and she shivered in reaction. She hadn’t even realized that he had come so close. She looked up and met his eyes.

“Whatever your decision, we will always love you,” he rasped. “We just want to enjoy this moment in time with you as something beautiful to have and remember. But only if you wish it, too. We can take you back to the wagon if that is your desire. Just tell us what you want.”

That was the problem... she was still terrified that she might not be sure what she wanted. She was afraid of making a mistake. But this... a beautiful moment with them was impossible to pass up.

“I want to stay,” she said quietly, and a smile hitched the corner of his mouth as both he and Agrel drew closer to her.

Between the two of them, they removed every single item of clothing from her and hung them in a nearby tree where they would be safe from becoming wet or dirty. They added their own clothing to it as boots were kicked off and set aside. With her

males on either side of her, they stepped into the lake, the cool water lapping at their limbs. Both males turned and spread their wings and tail feathers and dropped back into the water. Floating side by side on the surface of the water, they drew her between them so that she drifted with them, held in place by an arm from each male curled around her. There they drifted together, side by side, the sun warming them with golden light playing over the water and their feathers, sending everything aglow.

It was beautiful, and their arms curled around her with warmth and adoration. They didn't just move in to grope her now that they had her naked between them as experience had long taught her that men typically did. They held her, petting her skin and hair lovingly as they drifted together. On one side of the lake, a tangle of vines drifted. The fisherman's lure was an aquatic plant that was a death trap to anything that happened to get tangled in its vines and yet she didn't feel even a hint of apprehension. Instead, she marveled at their beauty as broad flowers with numerous petals opened beneath the sun in a dazzling display in a multitude of colors. The Great Forest was a place of danger, where one courted death, and yet with them, she felt safe and happy.

Maybe a chance at forever with them wasn't so bad after all.

## Chapter

### Nineteen

Gehj smiled, his heart overflowing with love as he looked at the female floating between them. Such was a pastime that his species had often enjoyed, a symbol of true affection, devotion, and trust between ahakus and their mates before the water of the oases and mountain lakes began to dry up. To have this moment with Delilah was a memory that would always live within his heart.

His hand trailed from the small of her back to her hip before gently following along

the shape of her bottom that, from her lack of a feathered tail, was so distinctly different from that of an Atlavan. He found the difference between them fascinating and alluring. Especially with how sensitive she appeared to be there. She shivered in reaction and embers of his lust sparked and grew in response to it. Softly cooing the depth of his love, he shifted his hold on her and drew her through the water until she was fully on top of him rather than floating, partially suspending on their wings. A little sigh of pleasure escaped her, and she shivered with arousal as their wet bodies slid against each other, and Agrel's eyes heated with interest as he silently watched.

Pulling Delilah up onto his chest, he dipped his head and brushed his lips against hers. She tasted sweet. His tongue stroked her bottom lip playfully. Her lips parted and his tongue slipped inside, tucking into that delicious little oasis. Like a male parched from hours flying over the desert, explored and savored her flavor, teasing her tongue to glide along his sensually as the seam of his sheath split around his aching cock. It pushed from his body aggressively, seeking the tight embrace of her cunt. His hips jerked reflexively, need hammering through him and blazing within his blood. Its head slipped against her bottom, and he hissed with frustration as a small explosion of pleasure lit through him at that briefest contact. Pleasure that skittered away like a spark dancing over a distance but failing to light.

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Lust twisted within him, rising in sharp, ravenous demand as it chased pleasure, needing more of it. The water rippled around him with his fervor and his hands moved over her, smoothing over her soft human flesh, gently squeezing and gripping her, savoring her lushness as his cock jerked repeatedly in its eagerness to be buried inside of it. He wanted his mate... needed her. She did not realize how much happiness she brought them, nor how it made them hunger even more for her. Every gentle smile and affectionate laugh made him want to be buried up to his sheath in her, breeding her day and night. Every flash of her wit, brightness of her intelligence, and spark of her temper made him yearn even more for the tight clutch of her around his cock even as he longed to hold her in his arms and enjoy the closeness with her in body and heart. A desire to be one within the fires once more.

He devoured her, his tongue thrusting in her mouth in a rapturous mating, enjoying the muffled sound of her needy gasps and moans. Agrel ceased floating on his back and glided over, nearly trembling with his eagerness. Gripping her under her legs, Agrel lifted her, breaking their kiss as he lined her up with Gehj's engorged phallus. Cock straining, Gehj hissed and pumped his hips upward in an attempt to pierce her. He needed her, the flash fire roaring through him would accept nothing else but her. No one else. The fire between mates burned hot and fierce. He had been told that all his youth but had never been able to imagine it. Now he understood. The bone between them crackled with life between them, fueling and fanning the flames like a rousing wind. It was energetic, a combustion within the air around him, and he felt it burst from the tip of his cock with the first initial release of his seed as Agrel lowered her sex onto him so that the soft, wet flesh parted in welcome around his length in one long stroke.

With his wings braced wider to keep him afloat at his current angle, Agrel worked her

up and down on Gehj's cock, lifting her up and pressing her down to meet him as his hips shot up, driving the tip of his cock up into the heat that gripped and drew upon his length with every stroke. Delilah flung her head back, shouting her pleasure, giving herself up to their lead.

Gehj's wings spread slightly in the water beneath him as he arched his back, lifting himself up from their secure surface, his tail fanning wide to add additional support as he rocked with her, her cunt rippling around him as she panted and fisted his feathers ecstatically. He trilled as he shook with a burst of pleasure, a hot stream of his seed ejaculating into her, sending his mate writhing upon him from the dose of heat and concentrated pheromones. Throughout, he maintained an eye lock with Agrel, sharing his pleasure openly. Although his cock alone filled her at this angle, he could see that his ahaku enjoyed teasing himself with watching.

With his tail and wings spread further for greater and more stable buoyancy, Gehj gripped her ass, rocking her with him, allowing Agrel's hands to slip away. His ahaku stroked her bouncing bottom for a moment, watching as Gehj's cock filled her cunt, his eyes gleaming. Agrel's hand slid down and wrapped around his own cock and Gehj did not miss the fact that the male fisted himself tightly, dragging his hand up and down his length in time every thrust of his cock. Excitement roared hotter through Gehj, his lips parting as he panted, dragging in ragged gasps of air as Delilah's sex squeezed tightly, sucking hard in a pulsing rhythm that made his hips jerk and slap upward helplessly, driving his cock hard and fast as he rode her climax.

At his side, Agrel's hips jerked in small, sharp, barely constrained spasms, and the male's jaw tensed as if straining for control. His green eyes lifted then, and they were searing with heat as flames danced and brightened within their depths.

"Gehj," he hissed in warning. He was unable to wait any longer.

Trilling that he understood, Gehj angled his body, shifting the angle of his wings and

tail simultaneously so that he was able to lower his hips and Delilah, keeping them joined while also keeping them afloat. Her cunt squeezed his cock as the cool water washed over her hips, shocking her body with the rapid cooling that it triggered another climax, sending fire rushing from his cock up to the tip of his crests. He was certain that flames licked off the tips of his feathers. Agrel grinned in response, his eyes trailing away, brightened with the reflection of the flames as he watched them dance across the water. The male chuckled as he circled around to take position behind her, his love and lust burning brightly in his green eyes. They braced themselves on their wings, floating in place, their wings sliding around her sides and overlapping together so that they floated, interlocked, stabilized as Agrel lined himself up and pressed his cock into her sex, the shaft and broad head of his cock rubbing against Gehj's as he slowly sank deep.

Gehj's eyes rolled back, and his breath shuddered from him as he began to pump his hips, once more driving his cock in and out of their mate's silken heat, riding against the plunge of his ahaku's cock in counterpoint. All three of them moaned and cried out together, their bodies rocking together, sending sprays of water as feathers flicked out of the water that rose with the rhythm of their rut and slapped against them.

His hands tightened on her, anchoring her to him, and in counterpoint to Agrel's firm hold, as the fire within his blood crested high within him. They rutted her together, their cocks shuttling in and out of her in a wild but broken rhythm that had them all crying out and clinging to each other. Claws gently raked against her soft skin, and her soft human claws returned the favor with considerably more strength, but not enough to harm him. Indeed, it did the opposite. It sent a new frenzy boiling within him to the point that his wings were nearly rising up and slapping the water with his every thrust, putting every bit of his momentum behind his thrusts while Delilah screamed her encouragement, her cunt strangling his cock against Agrel's sex within her clutch. Agrel, in truth, was the one keeping them stable and afloat, though he recognized the fact through the haze of maddening desire climbing through him. The male's face was twisted with pleasure, his constraint fracturing.

They would not be able to continue in the water, not without risking drowning. The embankment was too far away to reach in quick order, which only left the sky above. Atlavans never mated in the air, it was considered reckless. However, it was better than sinking.

His decision made, he jerked upward, hips slamming deep, burying his shaft completely as his wings wildly flapped, lifting them from the water and into the air. Agrel trilled in surprise as his cock was suddenly pulled free from her body, but the splash of his wings lifting up from the water thundered loudly as he rose in pursuit. Gehj's grip tightened on his mate, his hip pumping wildly, eager to breed and fill her with his seed as his eyes followed his ahaku's progress. The male's wings fanned the air as he glided upward, rising as he circled them until he was just behind Delilah. Stretching his wings wide to catch the air, Agril wrapped his arms around her, tucking his bottom in as he curled himself against her, his hips pressing forward, lunging for her wet heat.

An electric burst rose from Gehj's testicles up his back as Agrel's cock buried itself within her, grinding along the length of Gehj's shaft. He shook with it and his cock grew rigid as it gave up the first true streams of his seed pumping into her. Hooking their legs together, they thrust in tandem with every wet flap of their wings until she was screaming, her cunt drenching them with every rapturous pulse of her cunt squeezing and releasing around them. And still they rose higher and higher as they rutted her, the steam burning off their feathers before exploding into a dance of flames. They were burning in the air, consumed by the flames. Gehj shouted hoarsely as his seed finally erupted from him, flooding into her in tandem with Agrel's release. Delilah's cunt gripped viciously around them as she shrieked again, milking them, drawing the seed that they offered her.

They gave it all to her as they climbed high into the air, the breeze fanning their flames and their heated flesh. And at the pinnacle, their wings spread wide, flames bursting harmlessly in the air in all directions around them. Joined together, the

bodies trembling with the force of their release pounding through them, their wings folded, and they slowly glided downward, their wings flapping as they splashed down into the water. There, once more in the water, they drifted together, tethered as their cocks continued to rock in and out of her, pumping stream upon stream of their release into her. Their wings locked together once more, they floated in lazy circles drifting upon the water, the flames of their fire dancing over the water's surface.

Gehj shivered rapturously as he clung to his mate, his hips flexing instinctively as he continued to release his seed within her. Truly mating in the skies was beyond description. It was the ultimate pleasure and dizzying, and even though it filled him with the most sensational pleasure, he understood another reason his species did not indulge in mating in flight. Aside from the risk of injury, the pleasure was so much that anyone who knew what to look for could mark their location—and Atlavans were notoriously private and known for keeping their nests among the rookeries hidden, even from each other.

But it was worth it. Such pleasure was worth experiencing at least once in one's lifetime to his reasoning. He just hoped that their fire show would go unwitnessed and remarked.

## Chapter

### Twenty

Delilah brushed the wet strands of hair off her face. The further south their journey had taken them, the hotter it had become. Although the Atlavans seemed unbothered by it, she was unaccustomed to it and felt like she was suffocating in her clothing that was currently damp with sweat and sticking to her body. At least the mountains were getting closer and, according to Gehj, they would soon be in the foothills where he promised her that she would find some relief from the heat as they made their way higher. Blessed Mother, she hoped so.



It was so hot that she wasn't even attempting to ride in the wagon during the day. The wagon ran several degrees hotter than it was outside and she just wasn't built for the misery. Nor could she subject Lily to it with a good conscience. Which meant that she was going to have to put all her faith in the protection of her mates... and that didn't bother her. She trusted them. She didn't think it would be possible to trust a man again, but the two Atlavan males had worn down her defenses with their kindness, loyalty, and unshakable love that she couldn't help but to trust them with everything.

Hell, she didn't even freak out when they burst out into a column of flames while taking her together in mid-air. It was in the aftermath of their love-making that she'd come to realize just how much she trusted them. And loved them.

She loved them. Her eyes trailed over to where Gehj was patiently carrying Lily while Zemb took his place at the wagon. She was actually in love with aliens. A private smile curled on her lips as she watched them. Her daughter's head lolled against his chest, clearly exhausted from walking in the heat, but her face was still animated as she chattered up at him. Lily had been right. They had found a new family in the males who not only loved her but loved both of them. If they had just been chasing after Delilah, she would have known how to handle them, but their tenderness and ceaseless patience and care of Lily had chinked away at her defenses. They had understood that they came as a package and not only accepted it but were truly delighted in it. It hadn't all been an act. And now... now she had it all. If only there wasn't this ominous shadow that seemed to follow them, as if something was just lying in wait to upset their found happiness.

Her smile faded. So why couldn't she just have this? Why couldn't whatever it was out there—whoever it was out there—just let her have her happiness?

But she knew. The Order would never let her be happy if they discovered her wandering with aliens in the Great Forest, and as the days passed and the ominous

feeling increased, the more certain she was that they were being stalked by at least one huntsman. And yet, still, he had not made an appearance. The uncertainty of when he might strike frayed her nerves that were already strained from heat exhaustion.

Why wouldn't the bastard just do something? Either quit messing around and attack already or leave them alone. She sighed heavily, drawing Agrel's gaze to her.

He gave her a compassionate smile. "Not much longer, swiya. Another hour and we will be in the foothills, and it will be cooling off by the time we make camp tonight."

That soon? Maybe the Mother was listening after all. Surely the huntsman would not pursue too far into the mountains. That was terrain with which they were not generally trained to deal with, from what she recalled. They would be safe once they began climbing into the mountains. At least, as far as she figured, anyway.

"Good. When all is said and done, I don't think I'm going to want to travel anywhere ever again," she groaned. "The blisters on my feet have blisters."

He glanced at her boots with concern. "Your feet hurt? Why did you not say so?"

Agrel shifted the weight of the wagon's pole, preparing to drop it, but she held her hand up and laughed. "Hold on, Zemb needs your help. And that, right there, is why I didn't tell you. Because you will want to rescue me and abandon either Zemb or Gehj to handle the wagon alone."

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“Oh... right!” A look of embarrassment came to his face, and he readjusted to his grip to a firmer hold as he grinned sheepishly at her. “You cannot blame a male for wishing to care for his mate.”

And that was another reason why she loved him. He would have shamelessly ditched the wagon altogether to carry her if he thought she was in pain. And though Gehj was glancing back at him with exasperation, she knew that he would also do the same.

“I can make it for a little while yet,” she assured him. Long enough to give the wagon some time to cool off, anyway.

“Are we almost there?” Lily asked plaintively. “I’m hot and I’m bored. I want to swim in the big lake again.”

“You and me both,” she mumbled, a blush rising in her cheeks as she recalled the activity that she had done at the lake just hours before taking Lily down there to cool off and bathe in the water.

Agrel—damn his sharp ears—grinned at her slyly. It didn’t help that he also seemed to see everything and was no doubt taking note of her flustered state.

“I do as well,” he said aloud, making her cheeks burn even hotter, though it took some effort not to grin like a crazy person over just how pleased he sound.

Tonight. I will tell them my decision tonight.

Anticipation filled her as some of her worry receded. True to his word, they arrived in

the foothills a short time later. The sun beat down on them mercilessly as the forest began to thin out as they moved up into the higher elevations, but she was grateful to catch the first cool breeze she'd felt in days. Sighing happily, she loosened her hair from the braid she had it in, allowing the breeze to cool her scalp. She shook her hair out and from the corner of her eye, she caught Gehj watching her. He had slid into Agrel's place, giving the male a break, though her mate had promptly used it to chase Lily around until she got good and tired, only for him to carry her back to the wagon and hop effortlessly into it with her daughter in his arms.

Knowing him, he probably wouldn't leave her side until Lily was asleep. He was a good father... they both were good fathers and mates in their own unique ways, fulfilling different things that she and Lily needed.

Picking up her pace, she fell into step beside Gehj and craned her neck to look over at the Ragoru on the other side of him. "How are you doing with the incline, Zemb? Not too much, is it?"

The young male shook his head and grinned. "Not at all, though I do not think your wagon will make it very far up into the mountain."

Gehj tipped his head back to peer up the mountain and nodded. "It will not, but the higher we get the wagon up, the better. It will be easier to guarantee that nothing will disturb you while we scout for our nesting ground, nor the wagon we are forced to leave your belongings behind to carry you up to the high ground."

"I will not need to be carried," Zemb scoffed, but Gehj merely smiled in reply.

"If you are certain," he said cryptically.

Delilah glanced at him quizzically, but she didn't get the opportunity to ask what he meant since Agrel chose that moment to jump from the back of the wagon and swoop

over ahead before dropping beside her with a flurry of wings.

“Show off,” she teased.

Agrel grinned back at her, his crests lifting flirtatiously. “It is so good to be out of the forest and able to really stretch out my wings again. What male wants to walk everywhere?”

“Perhaps those born without wings,” she countered drily, and he laughed, directing an apologetic look toward the Ragoru.

“I would not wish to fly anyway,” Zemb pointed out. “I prefer my paws solidly on the ground where they belong.”

“You are going to live among Atlavans and you do not wish to fly?” Agrel sighed heavily when the younger male nodded in agreement. “What will you do when peers your age are flying over the tops of the mountains?”

“Walk,” Zemb rejoined, and Delilah muffled her laughter behind her hand, winning an amused smile from the young Ragoru.

“Walking is perfectly nice... and safe,” she added.

“Ah, but unlike the Ragoru, you won’t have much choice but to be carried. Your only option will be the one you fly with.”

“Right,” she scoffed, but his sly smile made the back of her neck prickle, and she discovered the reason for her mates’ commentary toward her and Zemb just as the sun was going todown and the wagon rolled to a stop at the side of a steep wall of stone.

Delilah's eyes drifted upward over the sheer cliff side with shock. That wasn't at all what she expected. Even Zemb looked aghast as he stepped closer to the rock and smoothed his hand over it.

"Here we are at last," Agrel said cheerfully. "We will make camp here and then tomorrow we will ascend—after Gehj and I have a good look around."

Her other mate narrowed his eyes as he peered up at the cliffs above them. "From this vantage point alone, I have a good idea of some spots to scout early in the morning. We can leave just before dawn so that we can make the most out of the morning light."

Delilah followed their gaze to the cliffs and mountain peaks above. Try as she might, she couldn't imagine an entire civilization of people living in those heights, even if they were winged Atlavans.

As Agrel walked away to tie down the wagon with several stakes, she sidled over to Gehj's side to peer up at the mountaintops with him. "Are you certain it is safe living so high in the mountains?"

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Her mate gave her a startled look, but then chuckled softly. “Yes. I know it looks alarming here, but we do not roost off the side of the mountain. There are plenty of little valleys and flatter areas that our people make our home.” He nudged her gently with his wing before folding her under it. “That we can worry about tomorrow. For now, we will enjoy our dinner. Prey will not be particularly plentiful here, but I am certain we can improvise something with what we brought with us.”

Nodding, Delilah fell into step with him and headed back to the wagon to pull out supplies. Thankfully, because her mates were able to hunt fresh food nearly every day, they still had plenty of food. For that reason alone, they were all able to go to bed with comfortably full stomachs. But that didn’t help to quiet her mind as uneasiness crept through her. They were literally trapped against the side of the mountain. Although there was no good reason for the huntsman to pursue a Ragoru so far up, their current position, while defensible for Atlavans, made her feel like a sitting duck waiting to be taken out.

She drew a deep breath and slowly expelled it. That was just her paranoia talking. Everything would be fine. Her mates had just assured her not even an hour ago that she had no reason to be concerned, as they hadn’t caught sight of anyone following them. She just wished she could feel reassured.

Snuggled between her mates and daughter in the wagon, she listened as Zemb moved around a bit until he found a comfortable place to lie down. She always felt guilty that he had to sleep outside, even though he told repeatedly not to be concerned about it because his pelt kept him comfortable and dry. Still, she strained to listen, her anxiety keeping her awake, certain that she heard something—or someone—prowling out there. And yet no one had reacted, and no alarm went up. By degrees she relaxed

until she finally drifted off, not even rousing entirely when her mates slipped from the bed with loving whispers that they would return quickly. She smiled in her sleep and when she woke to birdsong in the morning, she felt exceptionally foolish about all the concerns and paranoia that had occupied her the night before.

Shaking her head in amusement at her overactive imagination, she pulled back the cloth that enclosed the back of the wagon and hopped down, only to immediately trip over something large in her path. She teetered and stumbled, but her eyes fixed on it with a look of horror. She'd tripped on a large mass of fur. Her anxiety threatening to overwhelm her, she bent and reached out with trembling fingers to check and make sure Zemb was still alive. She pressed them cautiously against his throat and exhaled with relief when she felt a thready pulse beneath her fingers. He was unconscious, but alive. But she had a bigger problem: the huntsman. A throat cleared a short distance away. She froze, her gaze skittering over to the shadows as a tall, familiar shadow unfolded itself from where it was reclined and stalked toward her.

“Hello, Delilah.”

“Zack,” she whispered.

He smiled coldly at her as he approached. She backed away, but she was neither quick enough nor had enough room to make an escape. Striking fast, he twisted her arm behind her back and forced her belly-down to the ground. He held her there, his stench rolling off him as he held her pinned in place. “I do believe that you and I need to have a talk.”

Chapter

Twenty-One

Agrel's wings stretched out, carrying him quickly through the air, the peaks of the



mountains flowing beneath him. His body tilted, shifting as he glided from one current to the next, his wings beating a steady rhythm before stretching wide to glide once more. To his right, Gehj drifted through the air flying under him and to the left until they were flying at a diagonal parallel, the sun glinting off the gold in his wings and tail. The male's head tipped toward him and he smiled in shared happiness.

They had found it. Nestled low between two mountains but with high cliffs difficult to scale, they had found a fertile and ripe valley lush with plant life along the rocky slopes while lacking the dangers that hunted within the Great Forest. And yet to the south there was a view that captured his breath and stole it entirely, the desert so much like that of their home world stretched on and on beneath the sun. It was a good place for their people, but also it was a good place for their family. He was certain once the stones were laid for the rookeries, and Delilah saw the beauty that it would become with her own eyes that she would love their new home. She and Lily would be safe, far from the threat of the huntsmen, comfortable, and would lead a happy life among the Atlavans.

Now they had to collect what was theirs and bring their family and belongings up into the valley. Only once they were secure would he feel comfortable enough to leave Gehj and Zemb alone with them while he searched for the chieftain's household and guards to lead them back to the valley.

But first—Delilah and Lily. They were too far down the mountains for his comfort. Far too close to the forest that climbed up the side of the mountains to the best of its efforts. More than that, the forests belonged to the huntsmen, and he wanted them nowhere near his family.

Flapping his wings to pick up speed, he careened over the peaks with Gehj, their crests and tail feathers fluttering in long, colorful streams. Peaks and valleys fell away; great cliffs dropped from view as he angled his trajectory for the single slope where he knew their family waited. He could see it in the distance and his heart

fluttered, eager to be with his mate once more. The cliffs stood stark, almost white against the dark shadows of the mountainside. There, his mate and nestling were just below that rise?—

Below him, Gehj whistled a long note of warning, drawing him out of his ruminations. He frowned down at his ahaku and the male pointed. What was he seeing?—No, he saw it, too. A dark blue cloak stirring in the air... whipping... concealing. A cloak that did not belong to their mate and did not belong there. A hiss boiled out from him, falling from his lips in a piercing shriek. Folding his wings, he dropped at the same moment Gehj did, flames rising from them as they plummeted down the sheer cliff side. His wings fanned wide at the last minute, bringing his upper body aligned upward so that his feet swung down, slamming into the hooded figure.

The cloak spun away, bringing the human male into full view as he twisted and rolled across the ground only to come up in a defensive position, his blade drawn and held in guard a position in front of him. Agrel sneered at the weapon. He had no fear of blades. Although many among his kin enjoyed forged weapons, he preferred his claws, which were far more wicked, as was the heat of his flame. He held the male's eyes as he allowed his claws to extend. The tip became sharper as they grew and began to hook like massive talons that were nearly the full length of the fingers they grew from. The human stared at him, his eyes widening in surprise. Agrel merely smiled, fingers spreading as he allowed his talons to slash through the air on either side of him with the rhythmic dance of his fingers.

“Afraid human?” he hissed, his eyes studying the male, taking in the strange symbols decorating his clothes and distinctive blue hues. Not any ordinary human.

His gaze drifted from the male toward his mate and his jaw clenched as he saw her drop to the side of the young Ragoru she had been protecting. The male was unconscious, clearly taken by surprise and injured. There was only one sort of human

who could be so formidable to have taken a healthy young male and have a chance of escaping without suffering any injury. It seemed that his mate had not been exaggerating.

“Huntsman,” Gehj spat, arriving at the same conclusion.

A hard smile stretched across the huntsman’s face. “That I am. But you have me at a disadvantage as I don’t have a clue what you are. Though it is surprising to find my ‘wife’ tangled up with not one but two alien monstrosities. You’ve certainly changed, Deliliah, if you’re whoring yourself out for monsters now. You should have had the good grace to die,” he spat.

Agrel stiffened and exchanged a silent glance with his ahaku. This was not just any huntsman, this was the male who had disappeared and let his family believe he was dead. This male left two vulnerable females to die. Hatred boiled up within Agrel, stoking his inner fires so that flames crackled and snapped along the feathers of his wings.

“Zack, just leave... please. If you have even the smallest bit of compassion for me for the years that we were together?—”

A scornful look passed over the male’s face and he barked out a hard, cruel laugh—a sound that made Agrel’s crest snap up defensively—and shook his head. “You think I owe you something for the years we were together? Years of torture, you mean. It was fine while you were a companion that was eager to follow me and eager to please no matter what I asked. But then you had that little brat and stylized yourself as my wife, as if I would ever lower myself to marry a woman like you.”

Agrel hissed, Gehj’s voice rising to echo with his as their crests raised in threat at the insult. He would have happily killed the male on the spot—and was certain that Gehj would have been more than happy to assist—if their mate hadn’t held up a hand to

them in a silent plea. Wings snapping in irritation, he withdrew, nudging against Gehj to drive the other male back with him. Surprisingly, his ahaku was less eager to listen, his blue eyes blazing with fire. Agrel slapped him harder with his wings, drawing Gehj's startled gaze to him. Agrel gestured for him to calm himself and wait. They needed to let this play out for their mate's sake. He understood that she had questions that she never got the chance to ask. She deserved to hear those answers and to finally allow herself to vent all the pain and anger that she had been holding within herself.

There was plenty of time to kill the male.

Delilah shook her head; her brows knitting together with confusion. "We married before we left the citadel."

"That ceremony officiated by the Order? You are still naïve, Delilah, if you believe that a woman of common background would have been legally married to a huntsman. Especially when the Order prefers to pair huntsmen with women with notably strong bloodlines that have numerous sons. What does your genetics have to offer? Nothing. Which is why they provided me with the means of medicating you to prevent pregnancy. I still do not understand how you managed to conceive." He shook his head with a look of disgust. "And look at what you gave me, anyway, a weak daughter."

Delilah's expression hardened, and she slowly straightened from where she was crouched at Zemb's side. "You... you asshole!"

The male nodded. "That I am. I make no apologies for that. I really thought you would have been cast out of the village and died by now, but I suppose I should thank you."

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“Thank me?” Her voice trembled with wariness, but Agrel could hear the edge of anger rising within that became stronger with every word she spat. “You left us believing that they would kill us! Why would you be thankful to me now?”

The huntsman shrugged. “I realized afterward that I may have been a little shortsighted about Lily, though I wasn’t in position to care for a small child. I was reprimanded severely for leaving potentially worthy breeding stock behind. Thanks to you keeping her alive all these years, it gives me the opportunity to correct that minor oversight without any of the inconveniences. So, now you will die like you were supposed to, and I will be taking Lily back. She is of my stock after all, and the Order may find her useful for pairing with a huntsman when she comes of age.”

“You’re a monster!” Delilah snarled as she backed defensively against the wagon, bodily protecting their nestling.

“I’m a monster?” The male chuckled. “Have been confused by their dicks between your legs. They are the monsters. I merely dispose of them.”

“I have had enough,” Gehj spat, and before Agrel could react, the male, who was usually the calmer between them, snapped his wings, and rose quickly into the air.

With a curse hissed between his teeth, Agrel beat his wings in furious snaps as he, too, joined the attack. Flames burst from their feathers, and he saw the moment the huntsman noted them because the male wheeled back, his eyes widening with surprise as he lifted his blade higher to meet their attack. Agrel laughed grimly as he wheeled through the air, flames unfurling from every beat of his wings. Fire fell, fizzling in the air before it hit the ground, but it was enough to make the huntsman

wary as he crouched defensively. And there it was... a hint of fear in his eyes!

Arcing through the air, Gehj dropped and folded his wings, dropping like a flaming bolt toward the huntsman. The human dived out of range of the attack, his body hitting the ground hard, though the momentum carried him around in a roll. Snarling, the huntsman sheathed his blade to remove a small, broad, handheld weapon from his belt as Agrel spun, lining himself up as Gehj rose back into the air again. His wings spread wide, he scrutinized the weapon. Part of it looked like a bow that many juveniles used while hunting from the air, but it was usually small—smaller than even nestlings played with—and set at a weird angle where it was attached to another piece. Agrel's wings slowly curled inward so that he began his descent just as the male snatched a small bolt from a slot on his belt and notched it into place.

Agrel stretched his talons out in front of him and his wings folded tighter against him, his flaming roaring higher around him as his descent sped up in attack. The huntsman brought the weapon up and the bow's string snapped with a press of his finger, launching the bolt directly at him. Flames engulfing him, Agrel swiped at the bolt and smiled grimly as the wood charred and broke into ash as he struck it with his claws.

The huntsman staggered back, fishing for another bolt from his belt but upon not finding one, withdrew his blade and brought it up swinging. The blade cut through the air, countering Agrel's attack with a blow that, though he managed to block it with his talons, sent him reeling to the ground, his flames smothered by the dirt and sand. Agrel pushed himself up from the ground, stunned and off-balance from his unanticipated collision with the ground so that he stumbled shakily. The huntsman's eyes narrowed on him and a smirk rose to his lips as he turned away, dismissing Agrel as an immediate threat. His head spun, but he hissed as his tail feathers spread out in a demonstrative threat. A small sound startled him, however, and his eyes snapped toward the wagon just as the covering over the back shifted and was pushed out of the way by a small, delicate hand.

“Daddy?” Lily queried groggily. Her eyes sought out Agrel and Gehj as she peered out from the back of the wagon.

“Lily, go back inside!” Gehj shouted from where he wheeled in the air above.

Delilah turned her head toward their nestling and nodded at the wagon. “Lily, quick now.”

Their nestling nodded, her hands fumbling with the covering, but she froze, her face going pale as she spotted Zemb’s collapsed body in front of the wagon. Finally, her eyes finally landed on the huntsman.

The male swiped dirt from his face and grinned as he took several steps forward only to jump back when a powerful clap of Gehj’s wings sent a firebolt the ground, blistering the earth and scorching it. The human’s head tipped back to glare at him as he circled above. They preferred not to fight directly with fire close to the ground because of the damage it could do, but in such a case, Agrel approved. They would do whatever it took to keep that male from their family. Agrel’s talons flexed, his wings spreading wide around him, his tail feathers fanning wider as he stalked forward. It would be so easy to send a fire blast from his wings directly to the male’s unprotected back, but he dared not risk missing and setting anything else on fire.

“Lily, there you are,” the huntsman called to her, his voice shifting. “Look at how you’ve grown. Come, say hello to Daddy.”

Lily shook her head and shrank back, defensively drawing the fabric lower. “You aren’t my daddy,” she shouted. “Agrel and Gehj are my daddies.” Her eyes dropped once more to Zemb’s crumpled body, and her lower lip trembled. “You hurt Zemb. You... you’re a bad man.”

The huntsman’s face darkened furiously. “Ungrateful brat. You’re coming with me

whether you like it or not—and you’ll be thankful, too,” he spat as he started forward at an angry clip.

Agrel leaped forward, his wings flapping so that he skimmed at high speed over the ground as Gehj fell from the sky above. Their fires burned brighter around them as one thought and one purpose solidified within Agrel: guard and protect their family!

## CHAPTER 22

Delilah climbed quickly into the wagon and gathered Lily into her arms as she spun away and crouched down protectively, putting her back between the man she once loved and her child in a desperate attempt to shield her. She looked over her shoulder as the sky brightened and air almost seemed to turn gold from the flames of the Atlavans in their attack. Never had she felt more helpless than she did at that moment. She had no fighting skills or even the crudest makeshift weapon at her disposal. She had nothing with which to help her mates as she watched Zack just barely evade their strikes to counterstrike viciously, but not without receiving injury as their talons tore through him and flames singed his hair and skin.

They glided around each other, lunging with every strike like a flaming, choreographed dance. The Atlavans countered every blow with blocks from their fiery wings, sending fire racing through the weapon. Delilah could see where the metal of Zack’s sword was blackening from the repeated blows but still, he swung, slicing the air with it only to have it knocked away again as the frighteningly long talons lashed out, tearing flesh when Zack attempted to evade the fiery wings striking at him.

With a wild, desperate swing of his sword that sent Agrel and Gehj parting out of its way, Zack threw his weight forward, rushing the wagon like a battering ram. Gehj sprung back into the air with a shriek, his leap clearly calculated as it brought him down onto Zack’s exposed shoulders and back, dropping him heavily to the ground.



The sound of impact was brutal, but she knew that it wouldn't keep him down. Delilah slowly straightened as she watched Zack rise to knees with a roar, cutting the air with both sword and dagger, fighting desperately just to maintain that position without managing to climb to his feet as her mates circled around him, their wings and tails fanned wide with hostility and trading strikes over and over.

They were toying with him. She recognized it. They were slowly bleeding him out with every cut they delivered and smiled with every shout of Zack's pain, only to move lithely out of the way with a flap of their wings when he doubled down on his attack. He fought viciously, his teeth bared in a snarl and hatred burning in his eyes that turned slowly to madness as his every attempt to destroy the Atlavans was frustrated, and he was delivered with even more blows from their talons and wings. Wings that could have set him on fire instead of just painfullysing him. They were intentionally making him suffer, killing him slowly.

"Mommy?" Lily whispered in a frightened voice. "Are they going to get rid of the bad man?"

"Yes, now don't look, baby," Delilah whispered as she drew her tighter against her chest and wrapped an arm around her daughter's head in an attempt to smother out any sound as a shout of agony rose from him.

It wasn't easy to listen to, and the last thing she wanted was for Lily to be subjected to hearing him die, but it was a relief to know that her mates were delivering justice on her behalf. Not only for every terrible thing that he had done that she hadn't known about, but also for the fact that if they'd arrived even a handful of minutes later, they would have arrived to find her dead and Lily gone. And Zack clearly would have had no remorse over killing her in front of her daughter. It was for that reason alone that she continued to watch every spray of blood and the way the fire ate his flesh, blackening his skin and burning away his hair bit by bit until finally they ended his wretched life. Their talons drove into his abdomen simultaneously, ripping

through his internal organs before dragging them from his body in a sloshing mess. She swallowed thickly as she stared at the mess, willing herself not to be sick while at the same time feeling an enormous sense of relief that Zack couldn't harm her or their daughter.

She watched as Gehj straightened and headed toward her. She glanced at him, but her gaze followed Agrel as he bent and grabbed a handful of the huntsman cloak that Zack had always been so proud of. His face set in fierce scowl, he dragged Zack's body to the edge of the mountain's side and threw him over. She exhaled shakily and turned toward Gehj as she slowly loosened her death hold on Lily. It was finally over.

Gehj looked down at Lily anxiously for a moment before his eyes lifted to meet her gaze apprehensively. "Are you both well?"

Delilah nodded. "Yes," she whispered and collapsed toward him, dragging Lily with her as she wrapped her free arm around her mate, holding onto him desperately. "Thank you."

"No need to thank us. We will always protect you," he rasped, as he enfolded the both of them in his arms and wings.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:44 pm*

She felt Gehj's cheek press against hers, his face burrowing into her hair as he breathed her in. It was only then that she noticed the faint trembling of his body that betrayed just how frightened he had been.

"I was so terrified of losing you," he admitted and smiled, her fingers burying into his soft feathers that moments earlier had been burning unholily.

Gradually, she was able to release him and draw back enough to give him an embarrassed smile. "Did you find it? The place to make your new home?"

Gehj smiled and nodded his head eagerly. "We did. It is some distance into the mountains, but I cannot wait for you to see it."

She had to admit that she was excited, too. Now that she had made her decision, she wanted to see the place that would be her new home, and help raise it from the stony mountainsides.

"Found more than that," Agrel interrupted, and Delilah looked over to see her mate pushing a scrawny teenage boy wearing a wide-brimmed hat and an oversized coat out ahead of him.

The boy wilted and stared at them fearfully as his eyes fastened on Delilah. "Please, miss, I have nothing to do with all of this. I want nothing to do with it. The huntsman hired me from the citadel. I thought he would be doing noble things like clearing out some of the tangleweed or the red Andoro Venom-flower that grows in these southern parts. Not killing."

His eyes fell to the Ragoru. “Is he going to be okay?”

Delilah nodded, her gaze dropping to Zemb. “I think so. It looks like he just hit him with a dart to incapacitate him. I don’t know why he would still want him alive. But I’m thinking that I don’t want to know.”

The teenager nodded and swallowed nervously. “Can... can I go home... please,” he whispered, tears brightening his eyes.

Delilah sighed and nodded. Although part of her believed it was foolish to just let him go when he could tell the Order exactly where they were, he was just a kid. Thankfully, neither of her mates objected. Instead, Agrel inhaled deeply, his wings expanding slightly from his side as he peered at the male.

“The citadel... you know where it is from here?” he asked as he began to break his talons of one by one. Gehj followed suit, and she was surprised to see that they broke away evenly, leaving a tapered claw tip in their place.

The teenager nodded. “Just a few days’ journey to the west. Why? Do you wish to go there?”

Agrel looked over at her. “Delilah...”

She shook her head in answer. “No. I’m not going to the citadel or anywhere else. I’m staying with you.”

Her mate hesitated and glanced over at Gehj. “We have talked about it. It is natural that may wish to be near your own people. You can go and then we could leave here once we get the rookeries established to join you. We know that the humans will not welcome us there, but we could remain hidden and watch over you?—”

“No,” she interrupted again, and she smiled. It was sweet that they were willing to keep hidden just so that they could be with her and give her everything she wanted. But she couldn’t be that selfish and she wanted to be somewhere where she could live and love freely. They would never have that around other humans. “I want to stay here... with you. We want to make our home here with you in these mountains.”

Gehj’s eyes widened. “You... do?”

She laughed, dashing sentimental tears from her eyes that seemed to well up from nowhere. “We are mates, aren’t we? I love you—we love you—so this is exactly where we belong. Right here in these mountains.”

Agrel hooted loudly and threw his hands in the air so violently that the boy skittered away from him, but he gave an uncertain smile as her mate’s wings pumped the air. Delilah laughed at his excessiveness and was still laughing when he suddenly lunged toward her and pulled her into his arms. She spilled out of the wagon with a shriek that quickly turned to laughter once again as he swung her around in the air jubilantly.

Delilah clung to him breathlessly, joy overflowing through her. There the world spun around her with Agrel’s face and the love bright in his eyes at its epicenter. In that whirling madness, she grinned down at her daughter as Lily danced around them, her arms raised in the air.

“Me next, daddy!” she crowed.

“You are next, nestling!” he agreed, and, with another whirl, he passed Delilah over to Gehj so that she landed in the warmth of his arms and wings that were waiting for her.

Wrapped in her other mate’s embrace, Delilah watched them, her heart filled with

love and joy as Gehj's wings closed around her lovingly. They were together—a family. Even Zemb was showing some signs of life, as if roused by their celebration. He twitched and rolled to a sitting position. Throwing himself back against the wagon for support, he shook his head to clear the fog from it.

Lily quickly patted Agrel's arms in a silent demand to be put down and sprinted over to the Ragoru, practically dancing with her excitement. "Zemb! Zemb, we are going to be a family! We will be staying here, too," she shouted as she threw herself at the lanky male, toppling him over.

Delilah winced in sympathy. "Oh, Lily, gentle."

Agrel came up behind her, his arms wrapping around her waist as his wings folded over Gehj's wings in a loving lock. "He is fine, swiya."

She nodded, not entirely convinced. She was about to suggest to Lily to sit nicely next to him, but she became distracted by a movement in the corner of her vision. She glanced over at the teenager as he adjusted his hold on Zack's horse and gathered the reins more firmly. Meeting her eyes, the teenager tipped his hat to her with a small, grateful smile, his lips moving in silent thanks before turning around and leading the horse back in the direction from which he came. She stared after him for a long moment until Agrel cheerfully snatched her up into his arms and Gehj bent to pick up Lily, who stood waiting impatiently with Nimh clutched to her chest.

"Now we go home," he cooed. Glancing over at the Ragoru, he grinned. "Do not go anywhere. I will be right back for you."

Zemb waved him off with a snort. "Go away and give me the time to hurl in peace as I prepare to be unnaturally hauled through the air."

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:44 pm*

Agrel's laughter filled the air as he launched them upward with Gehj following close behind, their wings carrying them higher and higher until all the mountains unfolded before them. Delilah's heart found its wings in that moment, her wonder and love carrying her as they flew over the expanse of rising peaks to a verdant, flowering valley that she would live in happily with her mate and evermore call her home.

### Epilogue

#### SIX YEARS LATER

It took a month for them to build their nest in the first of the structures that would eventually become the rookery overlooking the valley. It was only when the nest was complete and Lily and Delilah were safe and comfortable that Agrel finally prepared to depart to find the other members of his clan, and then another month that he was gone searching for them. Delilah had waited anxiously for his return, only to awaken one morning to be greeted by the sight of hundreds of flaming wings rising above the horizon. Many of them held enormous litters suspended between them carrying supplies, while others carried wingless golden females in their powerful arms. It was a sight that she still remembered clearly years later, as if it had just happened the previous day.

Afterwards, construction went quickly as the rookery rose up like a brilliant sentinel of white stone on the slope and life settled in a pattern of normality in which, while her males had brief periods of responsibility outside of the home, the entire Atlavan lifestyle was geared toward families. The vast bridges that connected the massively built districts of nests and clan commerce also became places where the Atlavans gathered during many evenings, eating, singing, and playing together as the bright

moon rose above them. No one ever turned her or Lily away for being human. Rather, they embraced them, drawing them into their beautiful culture as if they were Atlavan females themselves.

They embraced Zemb, as well, until the male reached an age where he decided to go and explore, and to seek out his own territory and triad. And while that day had brought much sadness to their family, it had also been an occasion of great celebration among the Atlavan. They celebrated the male that he had become and would become. And life continued. They developed friendships, and as Lily began to grow into a beautiful young woman, the beginnings of romance were already beginning to bloom, much to the consternations of her fathers who bemoaned not having enough time with their nestling.

That, of course, just gave them excuses to secret their family away from the rest of the clan and the young ahaku males that flirted with their daughter. It was on these occasions that her mates flew them to the far edges of the mountains to the rolling sands of the desert, where oases offered private retreats for pleasure. And every summer, the entire clan met with other clans at the greatest oasis in the desert to pay homage to the sun and all its blessings. It was during the first gathering that she learned that the Atlavans considered the sun of their own homeworld their divine ancestor, and because gods were greater than mere mortals, they recognized the suns as carrying the same divine being, a goddess, Deji, shedding her light and graciousness upon the world in the arms of mates Goruny, the sky, and Fulor, the earth into whose arms she sank at night.

Delilah had no trouble honoring these gods in addition to the worship of the Mother that had risen among her own people. The spiritual world was vast as the cosmos that had brought so many species together so that she wasn't even sure who exactly to thank, but was thankful nonetheless when she bore another daughter, Xava, that spring.



Petting the sleeping cat beside her, she smiled down at her nestling, the numerous necklaces covering her breasts rattling, and ran a finger of the soft tufts of downy feathers that would eventually become her crests. Like all Atlavan females, she was wingless but was powdered with feathery down in all the right places and even had a thicker concentration of it over her tail where her plumage would eventually grow. A pearl pink in color rather than the reds and golds that dominated the Atlavan complexion, she was a beautiful baby with the same bright blue eyes that Gehj possessed.

“She is truly such a well-behaved baby,” her friend Exilei murmured as she wiggled a claw at baby Xava. “It won’t be too many revolutions before Lily will find her ahaku and have her own courting flight. Then nestlings will certainly be overflowing your home,” she teased.

“Mating flight?” Delilah echoed in confusion.

Exilei looked up at her and grimaced. “Apologies, Delilah. I forgot that your mating was a bit untraditional. I did not mean to make a callous remark. It did not occur to me that you would not have had one or know what it is.”

Delilah shook her head. “No, it’s fine, but what is a courting flight?”

Her friend grinned slyly. “Ask your mates. It is never too late to enjoy a courting flight, and many females enjoy replaying their courting flight on the anniversary of their mating day. Many find their bellies filled with nestlings by the time the next season comes around because of it.” With that, she winked and stood. “Speaking of which, I must return to my own nest. I will take Xava, yes? Give you some time to greet your ahaku and have that little discussion. Xava is nearly a revolution old, so you may be fortunate to fill your nest once more.”

“Fine, go on. I will have Gehj come for her in a while,” Delilah laughed and waved

away her friend as the female bent to pick up the nestling.

“I will not expect him until the morning. Have fun,” she called over her shoulder as she carried Xava out of the nest.

Delilah shook her head in amusement but gave Nimh one last gentle pat before busying herself around the nest. She sang quietly to herself as she straightened things up and did the bit of cleaning that was more difficult to attend to when Xava was awake. Though her mates insisted that she leave the cleaning to them, she enjoyed keeping busy but was happy to leave the less pleasant tasks for them. All the while, she listened for their return as she cleaned, and when she heard the jingle of the numerous little bells that were tied over the doorway, she slipped out of the storage area that she’d been organizing to greet them.

Wings and arms folded around her in the same loving greeting that had never dimmed over the years. Agrel amorously brushed the hooked boney tip of his nose against her cheek, his hips pressing suggestively against her before glancing around as if only then aware of the fact that they were alone.

“Where are our nestlings?” he queried curiously.

“Lily is gathering fruit with Soruk and Teyg,” she replied, and his expression darkened.

“Those two again?” he muttered as he glared accusatively at Gehj. “I told you that we should have frightened them away the last time they came.”

Gehj trilled with amusement and shook his head. “Do not be ridiculous. They are a good ahaku, evenly balanced, and treat her well. We could not ask for better companions for her.”

“And she’s only sixteen,” Delilah reminded them. “We do not know which males she will end up with, if any of them. It isn’t going to happen anytime soon.”

Agrel grunted, but his expression lit up as his gaze searched for their youngest nestling. “And Xava? Is she resting?”

“No, she is with Exilei for the night.”

A look of concern came over her mate’s face. “Exilei? Is there something wrong?”

Delilah shook her head. The fact that her friend was a healer clearly sent her mate immediately down the wrong mental path.

“No, she offered to watch her so that I could talk to the both of you,” she explained.

“Oh?” Gehj peered at her curiously as he set down the bundle that he’d been carrying on a small table. “About what?”

“Courting flight,” she replied casually, and both of her mates froze, their eyes fastened unblinkingly on her.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:44 pm*

She silently admitted to herself that it was still a little unnerving when they looked at her like that. She raised their eyebrows at them and to her surprise, Agrel grinned. Though perhaps she should have been concerned given the faint look of concern on Gehj's face.

"A courting flight," Agrel said slowly, as if savoring it.

"We did not think you would want one,swiya," Gehj interjected. "They are?—"

"A display of love, trust, desire, and devotion," Agrel interrupted. "And if our lovely mate wishes to experience a true mating ritual, then we have no right to deny her. And when we return, I shall feather our bed."

"You nearly made yourself bald last time," the other male commented drily, and Delilah smothered a laugh. He sighed and shook his head before looking over at her, his eyes bright and warm with love. "We will not deny you,swiya, but the ritual may not be as enjoyed by humans as it is by Atlavan females."

Delilah shrugged. "They are just as wingless as I am."

"Yes," he agreed. "But their nature also finds it an aphrodisiac. I am not so sure you would agree."

"Quit trying to talk her out of it," Agrel hissed, and that time Delilah did laugh.

"No one is talking me out of anything. I want to do this. I want to experience and have everything with you. And if this is an important mating ritual for your people,

then I want to give this to us, too.”

Agrel smiled at Gehj and slowly the tension eased from her other mate, and he nodded in agreement. Agrel hooted, sweeping her up into his arms.

“Great! I am first,” he shouted, and he ran, carrying Delilah right out of their nest onto the bridge, but he didn’t stop running.

He leaped over the side, the wind catching his partially expanded wings. They fell together through the sky and Delilah felt herself slipping slowly from his arms as he gradually relaxed his grip. Fear rose sharply from within her, but the way he smiled at her with his heart in his eyes melted it away. Even when she slipped entirely from his arms, she was unafraid. His hands tangled with hers and his wings opened wide in a dizzying performance that whipped them around like dancers.

She was dancing through the air, spinning with her mate as the air rushed around them. He released her hands at intervals, tossing her up and spinning her, only to catch her again, much like two birds of prey wrestling in their mating dance. And then, with a toss that spun her completely around, she shouted with laughter as Gehj’s wings beat the air, his fingers entwining with hers as they spun and spun, tumbling through the air. Twisting together, entwining, in an aerial acrobatic display that stole her breath, sent excitement pounding through her blood, and ignited a familiar fire deep inside of her as their wings began to crest with flames as they danced with her in their flight.

They danced their devotion, their passion, and all of their love, and they burned together throughout the night.