



# Dweller of the Mists (Tales from the Darvel Exploratory Systems #2)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** This was supposed to be Noelles last trip as part of one of Darvel Corporations exploratory teams. After several years of service, she was finally done and ready to retire on Earth with her citizen benefits. It is just her dumb luck that she has been sent to a dangerous world covered continuously in a heavy blanket of fog that one team had already been lost to. It is worse, however, when it quickly becomes apparent that she was assigned to a doomed trip. An explosion on ship that forced an evacuation not only separates her from her team but drops her deep in the swamps, far from their intended base camp.

Frightened and alone, Noelle is forced to survive in a hostile and alien world where her only company is a strange alien lurking in the swamp. The male sings every night for her, his bioluminescence lighting the swamps, but the amphibious alien is an unknown factor. Alien or not, she needs to get to base camp and rejoin her team, but can she trust a potentially dangerous stranger with her safety, or with her heart?

**\*\***This is a companion novella to Mist World: Asylum of Graelf coming spring 2025. Although it can be read as a standalone it is a better reading experience when one is familiar with the Darvel Exploratory Systems series and has already read The Frog Prince.

**Total Pages (Source):** 17

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 4:04 pm*

Noelle Xander glanced up from the briefing documents projected on her comm to meet the hard gaze of the project commander. His brow lowered at her scrutiny, the grooves in his face deepening with disapproval.

“Do you have a problem with your orders, Mission Specialist Xander?” he growled.

Noelle exchanged a worried look with William Kim to her left and swallowed. Although they had carried out many survey missions for Darvel Corporation and had nearly won their citizenship due to those efforts, no mission had seemed as frighteningly ominous as their current assignment.

“Not exactly a problem, sir. More of a concern. Wasn’t planet Xal2614 pulled by United Earth? This ‘Mist World’ was flagged as uninhabitable. There are rumors that a team was sent in and just... disappeared, completely abandoning their camp.”

Project Commander Brock Garris narrowed his eyes on her for a moment before grunting in acknowledgment. “We’ve taken new surveys, and Darvel believes that it can still be useful if we focus on very specific terrain so as to avoid predatory lifeforms in the deep swamps and adaptability issues. Originally, we did not wish to set down exploratory vessels along the mountain regions to avoid landing incidents, but new surveys reveal several plateaus that can serve our purposes while taking advantage of the resources in the neighboring valleys around them. Which brings us back to your job.”

“We are to catalog resources,” Kim replied to the silent prompt as he moved his finger over his comm, sliding through the pages of the document. “Scan plant life, mineral composites, basically everything. Report anything unusual.”

“And air scans,” Garris added. “Although we received basic scans from the drone fired down into the atmosphere that confirm you will be able to survive without issue after receiving several inoculations to protect you from the alien environment more efficiently than a thermos regulatory suit, we want more thorough recordings kept over the course of the yearlong mission logged with the daily temperatures on the surface. Isolated from the predators in the swamps, this mission should be a walk.”

“I see,” Noelle murmured, not the least bit reassured. Anytime someone told her how easy something was going to be, it made her itch.

“One last thing. It won’t just be the two of you this time.” Garris fought for a benevolent look and failed miserably in her opinion. “I will be adding two more people to your team. Amanda Kastle will be joining you for her fifth survey, and you will also have a new recruit, Samara Daniels.”

“The more, the merrier,” Kim replied with a polite smile.

He was totally kissing ass. They both knew it. It was his ass-kissing voice. He met her gaze with a faint roll of his eyes when Garris wasn’t watching, and she bit back a smile. Despite his antics, she could tell that he was worried and there was more to his words than he would ever admit to. Beneath it all there was a vein of truth in his statement that she could see that he felt from the disquiet in his eyes. And she couldn’t help agreeing. In a place like Mist World, the more people she had at her back, the happier she was.

So she held her silence throughout the meeting, even though the apprehension grew and twisted more and more within her gut. She didn’t want to go but didn’t have a choice, not so long as Darvel Corporation held her contract. Non-gratas did not have the luxury of declining like citizen volunteers to the program did. Sweat gathered at the small of her back and lining her upper lip. Worse than that, she felt like she was going to throw up at any moment. The idea of another team was not reassuring

enough to combat her growing misgivings that were becoming harder to ignore as Garris continued to outline the mission and the conditions that they were likely to encounter on the planet's surface. It sounded like a place spun of nightmares. Who had ever heard of a planet where fog covered the majority of its surface at all times?

“Naturally, although we will be monitoring you from the nearest corporation station, you will be on your own,” Garris continued gruffly. “This will be nothing new for any of you, but I expect you will show Ms. Daniels the ropes. Once on the surface, you will have no one to depend on but each other. Good luck!”

## Page 2

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### Chapter

#### One

Noelle jolted awake with a gasp, looking around the escape pod in a confused panic. Squeezing her eyes shut, she dragged in one deep breath and then another as she allowed her thoughts to settle. The exploratory vessel was gone. She had watched the lights die from it seconds after her pod was launched safely into space along with the other three containing the other members of her team. Her memory was fragmentary after that, but what she was sure of was that the entire team was now stranded on the planet surface... wherever the rest of them were.

Samara Daniels. William Kim. Amanda Kastle. She had no idea where their escape pods had landed, or even those pods where their supplies landed that they had thankfully already sent down planetside the day before. At least she had a tracker for the supply pods and could only hope that she would meet up with the others as they also made their way to their provisions.

Her hand shook as she tapped her comm, bringing up Kim's link. "Kim, you there? William?"

Her bottom lip trembled, his name falling from her lips with a stressed sound of despair when there was no response. Every mission they survived, she always had Kim watching her back. Without her partner, she didn't even want to lift the latch on her pod. Mist World lurked just beyond it, more threatening than ever. Somehow she had gone from having even more people to count on to being completely alone in an environment so potentially dangerous that United Earth had scrapped the project.

It should have stayed scrapped. It was clearly cursed from the start.

She shivered as an icy dread filled her. Somewhere there was an entire camp just waiting for its ghosts to return to it. She definitely didn't sign up for this. She was a successful member of her exploratory team because of her willingness to explore alien environments, as it seemed to be a good way to use her lifelong experience living in potentially hostile landscapes that she had gained growing up in the swamps. But this—this was something different.

Some things should just be left alone.

Noelle gave her head a firm shake, her hand going to the charm her mother gave her to ward off evil. All the stories her grandmother told of angry ghosts came rushing to the surface of her mind. A world filled with heavy fog would be the home of ghosts. She was certain of it.

She bit her lip uncertainly and hunkered down in her seat. She definitely didn't want to go out there alone, not with her grandmother's old ghost stories brewing in her head. Maybe she would just wait for a bit. If Kim were also temporarily rendered unconscious, it could explain his lack of response. Her fingers continued to tremble as she ate some of the stored rations, the water pods slaking her thirst. Thankfully, the life pod was equipped with a small toilet that pulled out of the wall for use when an inhabitable planet was within immediate delivery range, so she was able to take care of her needs. If there was anything to be grateful for, it was that and the fact that the planet hadn't been so far away to necessitate cryogenic sleep after entering the life pod. A good thing, too, since emerging from cryogenic sleep while traveling only to be submerged right back into it by the life pod could have ill effects on the human body. In her current situation, however, that was the least of her worries. Every hour she tried again to comm Kim, only to be met with silence. Eventually, her eyes grew heavy and she dozed in her seat.

“Registered occupant Noelle Xander.” She jumped awake as the fragmented voice filled the pod. “Darvel Corporation protocol prohibits any loitering in pods or vessels upon planetary arrival. It has been recorded that you have been within the pod for one full day and night cycle. Please exit and proceed with your mission.”

She rubbed her eyes at once both groggy from sleep and utterly bewildered. Corp actually programmed time limitation into the AI for their life pods?

The sound of moving hydraulics filled the cabin, and she jumped again as the hatch above her burst off its hinges with a loud pop. The sound of unfamiliar insects immediately surrounded her as the early morning air filled the cabin. Her pulse raced, her breath rushing in and out of her in frightened pants. Overhead, she could make out trees with dripping bioluminescent growth. This didn’t look like any mountain plateau. It reminded her of the swampy region she grew up in which might have been reassuring if there wasn’t one glaring problem with that—she wasn’t supposed to be in the swamp.

A very dangerous swamp that had already claimed two human lives—a rumor Garris had not bothered to discredit.

“Oh, gods. Oh fuck,” she whispered.

“Please exit, Noelle Xander,” the AI reminded her.

“I am,” she hissed back at it, even though it was ridiculous to argue with a life pod’s AI. They didn’t even have the kind of advanced AI that the ships possessed. It wouldn’t register a conversation, so it couldn’t be reasoned with. It would merely record and report. And there went six years of work down the drain for “noncompliance” with regulations once the recording got back to Corp. “Fuck,” she whispered again. “I’m going now.”

Grabbing the small survival bag equipped within the life pod, Noelle immediately filled it with what remained of the food and water rations, adding to the enclosed supplies before closing it. Hitching the bag over her shoulder, she gave one last forlorn look around at the relative safety of the life pod before reaching up and pulling herself out of it and out into the swamp.



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### Chapter

### Two

The swamp was hauntingly beautiful. That was Noelle's first impression of it as she stood upon the life pod, her eyes wide as she got her first real look at her surroundings. Trees that rivaled sequoias in size rose from the swamp waters, their massive roots emerging above the water in thick, twisted systems teeming with life. The trunks of the trees were silvery in color with a faint sheen that she could sometimes see through the fog from those trees closest to her, but they were also in bloom with long strands of glowing flowers in hues of pink and purple. Their soft blossoms drifted in long, luminous wisps through the heavy fog with the breeze.

Noelle dragged her tongue along her bottom lip nervously as she tore her gaze away from one swaying flower-filled vine and focused on the dark water. The fog crawled over its surface in a scattered, broken manner but the water itself was just as impenetrable as the surrounding gloom. As beautiful as it all was, it made her acutely aware of just how isolated she was in a world that she knew nothing about and couldn't even see well.

"Hello!" she called out. Noelle turned her head slowly as the entire surrounding swamp abruptly fell silent. "Kim? Kastle? Daniels? Is anyone there?"

Silence thickened for several long moments before being broken once more as the sounds of the swamp stirred to life. She was truly alone. Trying not to panic, Noelle's gaze dropped to a massive root system of the tree her pod was precariously perched upon above swamp water. This definitely wasn't a safe place to stay long-term when

any number of things could make the pod slip straight into the water. She would have mentally thanked the AI for pushing her out the door if she weren't still salty over the reason for it.

Taking a deep breath to steady her nerves, she lowered herself down the side of the pod onto a massive twisted root. Her foot immediately slipped, but she was prepared for that and gripped the side of the pod harder as she regained her balance and braced her legs wide to evenly distribute her weight. Her footing gradually became more certain as she inched away the water's edge where the pod rested and climbed higher along the root system to the massive trunk. Tipping her head back, she squinted up at the canopy higher overhead.

It was almost how she envisioned Earth must have been like millions of years ago. Before the glacial ice sheets had crawled over a large portion of the planet. The heat and humidity were about right to provide the feeling of a primeval swamp. She half-expected to see some creature of monstrous proportions suddenly rise from the water to take a bite out of something.

Noelle froze at the thought, her eyes shooting down to the water nervously and then back up to peer among the trees. Wasn't the threat of predators one of the reasons that Darvel chose not to send them down into the swamp?

Her pulse quickened as her heart picked up a rapid pounding rhythm in her chest as her gaze searched the fog uselessly.

She shook her head. "Get ahold of yourself, Noelle. It's not like you didn't spend most of your life in the bayou. Everything is just... bigger. But the same rules apply. Presumably," she muttered as an afterthought.

Bracing her weight with one hand against the enormous trunk of the tree, she made her way along the roots, pausing only for a moment to work a dry segment free that

was straight and sturdy enough to make a half-decent walking stick. It was only so armed that she felt confident enough to inch across the root systems from one tree to the next, using her walking stick as anchor and leverage for sustaining her balance. Her feet slipped more times than she could count, but the more she walked, the more she became accustomed to the awkward gait that was forced upon her as she crept forward.

She paused after a short distance and glanced back. The mist had swallowed her pod so thoroughly that not even her goggles were able to penetrate the gloom enough to even make out where it rested. There was nothing but a white wall rising from the water into the trees, speckled with soft lights and the movement of long hanging branches with the faint stir of the humid air.

Somewhere in the distance, a song rose with a note that she might have categorized as curious. The hair on the back of her neck prickled. The heavy shroud of fog made her feel isolated and yet she felt as if she were being studied by something. That she wasn't truly alone. Noelle dismissed it with a shake of her head. She couldn't go crazy yet. It was certainly the environment for it, however.

"Got to find a safe place to sleep before night falls," she muttered out loud. She needed to hear the sound of a voice, even if it was only her own. "Keep moving."

Using her walking stick for leverage, she hopped the short distance to another root system and continued to walk in the direction indicated by her beacon. She would have to go quite a bit of distance to get to the supply drop. It would be impossible to reach before nightfall. If she didn't miss her guess, it was several days north of her current position. She wasn't shocked. They were never meant to arrive in the swamp. Although the supplies hadn't landed precisely at their designated camp coordinates—and they had all collectively groaned about the days of traveling it would take for them to retrieve everything and bring it to camp—it was still considerably upland from the swamplands where she landed. She would just have to

find places to shelter in the interim and pray that she met up with one of her team before then.

With a grim set of her mouth, she plunged ahead.

It was slow going—painfully so—but Noelle picked her way along the roots steadily as she fell back into the accustomed habits that came with traveling through the swamp. While nothing was so oversized back home, there was still a certain familiarity that settled gradually into her bones. She dragged the back of her forearm across her brow to mop her sweat and promptly startled when another signal suddenly sprang to life with a loud chime that made her stumble in surprise. Lowering her arm, she squinted at the signal.

“What in the world?” she whispered.

The signal was corroded, flickering in and out, but it was clearly being broadcasted at that frequency by something Darvel-made. Was it the abandoned camp? A shiver of apprehension ran up her back as all of her grandmother’s old ghost stories once more came rushing back to her. If her grandmother were there, she would be shaking her head and warning her not to fool with things better left alone.

“Whatever the swamp takes, just leave it, child,” her grandmother’s voice whispered from her memories. Back then, she had found an old doll half-buried in the mud at the water’s edge but hadn’t had the opportunity to rescue it before her grandmother drew her away with a shake of her whitened head. “The swamp has its own spirit and life, and it doesn’t take kindly to people fooling with what it has claimed from those who have been here before. It is the price that was paid. You don’t go stealing anyone’s coin from them. Least of all from the spirits who are dwelling here.”

Noelle had nodded in agreement, her tiny hand tightening around her grandmother’s thin fingers as they continued to forage. Those had been happier times, before the

local government had gotten word of their community of unregistered non-gratas living and breeding illegally off-grid and carried out a full-scale raid, wiping out their little community. She had clung to her grandmother as they were ripped from their home and forced into a camp for children, the elderly, and the infirm, but she had never seen her older siblings or parents again.

She swiped away another drop of sweat and grimaced. The sweat was cold on her skin with the cooling temperature. Night would arrive soon and, as of yet, she hadn't been presented with any options to keep clear of convenient predation. There wasn't even a decent tree with low enough branches for her to grab onto so that she might scurry up into them. She grimaced at the signal. It was just a short distance to the northwest of her position. It wouldn't take her far out of her way if she sought shelter there within the old camp.

"Sorry, Grandma," she whispered as she realigned herself with the new signal. "I need a place safe to get decent sleep."

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### Chapter

### Three

G wum Narvook Shoowilp Bia faltered and nearly fell from the low branches of the tree at the sight of a petite little creature crawling up from the ruined metal he had been studying from above. That... was unexpected. Though the metal piece was far larger than anything else he had seen fall from the sky, he had not imagined that it would have anyone within it! Was he mistaken? He had seen something large blaze through the sky from where he had been traveling nearby and had followed with excitement, but perhaps he was mistaken as to where it had landed. Surely this had to be merely some creature's den.

It was tempting to cling to that logic, except the markings on it were the same as those he found upon those other heavenly artifacts. Likewise, the stranger's clothing bore these same markings. Was it also from the heavens? He crept closer, descending from the branches as he studied it. Bipedal with a tailless stature not unlike the Bia, but different. Certainly not Bia. Her features were sharper, finer, and pointier than any female of the Bia clans.

Its build was too slight and it did not have fleshy head tendrils but something softer like the hair of the Gwyr, groomed to a surprisingly short length that no member of that vain species would wear. But otherwise it was fascinatingly similar right down to the slender, delicate build that was common among the Gwyr who did not belong to the warring class—or so rumor had it. Was it Gwyr then? They had a love for shaping metal and their unusual sciences that delved further into the nature of their world than any respectable Bia dared.

Some things were not to be tampered with, and the Gwyr had yet to learn that lesson as they pushed further and further. He might have believed what he was looking at was an experiment from the mountains except that the matching markings could not be dismissed, nor would he contemplate that everything he had collected had come from the Gwyr. They had not come from the mountains. He had seen it with his own eyes. He had seen something fall from the sky, just as he had all the previous times he had gone out to collect his little treasures.

The creature swiped its forearm across its brow and turned toward him. His eyes widened with fascination. He could not help climbing down a little farther and drawing a little closer for a better look. How remarkable it was! Although its hair was short, it had a charming appearance from the front with the way the slightly longer length at the front brushed its brow. Its face, the only bare flesh he could see, was of a shockingly pale color like polished stone brought up from the dark water, or the moonlight drifting down through the trees to play upon the water. But its eyes held him captivated for a long moment. They were the bright blue of the skies above the concealing mists.

It was definitely not Gwyr. And judging by the small, high breasts on it, it seemed that it was female.

Gwum settled comfortably on the branch as he peered down at her. The similarity to the Gwyr, however, was uncanny. If not for the wreckage and the unusual markings, he might have believed she belonged to the same species. She could almost pass for one of the wingless variations, if not oddly mutated. Mutations were not unheard of among both the Bia and the Gwyr, after all, and the resemblance to the Gwyr was difficult to deny. As it was, the Gwyr were already known to have winged and unwinged members among their race, so a mutation could have accounted for other oddities.

He moved silently from branch to branch, high within the trees, easily keeping up

with her pace while permitting him lengthy periods of observation between each leap. However, the more he watched her pick her way through the trees, the less convinced he was that she could pass for any kind of Gwyr, even a mutated one. Her movements seemed too comfortable within the swamp to be a female from the mountains. Her facial features were far too round and smooth, more so than he believed even Gwyr children possessed. And outside of her lack of wings and coloration, he could not imagine a mutation so extreme that it would deprive her of her horns, a prehensile tail common to all Gwyr males and females, and the sharp talons on her hands and feet.

Those little feet were not doing her any favors either. Gwum scratched lightly behind one pointed ear and smiled at the way she hopped along the roots with less strength and grace than a juvenile Bia.

How adorable. And strange. Nothing about the little female made any logical sense. Even a Gwyr would have leaped far more powerfully than that despite lacking the confidence that she had within the depths of the swamplands. The whole matter was a big, perplexing puzzle. Was she a product of a Gwyr and Bia mating? Such a thing had not happened in generations as far as he knew, and it was too odd to even truly contemplate.

He continued to follow lazily above her, his urgency to return home forgotten as he became lost in admiring the graceful movements of her lithe body. When she was not jumping, she was very graceful indeed with the way her limbs moved, which just further indicated that she had not evolved from the primal essences of their world, Kren. She was very small, almost childlike, except for the fact that the ripe curves of her form and the fact that she was out in the swamp alone suggested that she was clearly an adult of her species. The strange clothing she wore certainly did not hide her shape any. It clung to her little frame exceptionally well. Her shape was quite pretty, though unusual as Bia females were typically taller and of a sturdier and more powerful build.



Perhaps she had come from offworld? It seemed laughable, and his kin would call him crazy if he said such a thing aloud. They did not have much patience for his imagination beyond thinking of clever ways to heal their people. But she clearly was connected to the heavenly artifacts, and even her wreckage was of such origin. There was no other explanation. And while she was not built for the swamps of Kren, it was clear that the environment was not too much unlike one with which she was familiar. It made him even more fascinated, wondering what far-off place she had come from and what her world must be like.

“What tales would you tell?” he whispered down at her, the quiet pitch of his voice lost within the swamp.

He continued to follow her throughout the day with taciturn determination, leaping among the branches not quite directly overhead but within range of visibility. He was alert not only to her movements but also the activity of the wildlife responding to her passage. He did not hesitate to act, warning off the smaller common predators of the daylight hours with violent hisses as he dropped in startling proximity to them, chasing them away. They slid back into the water with rumbling groans and snapping teeth. Several of them hissed back at him angrily before disappearing into the water or trees. There were few at first, but as the hours wore on and the day grew later, he began to be concerned. They were growing bolder as night approached, desperate to hunt before night fell. Because then... the larger predators would emerge.

His eyes caught on a crawling zengli dropping rapidly through the tree she was currently navigating, its many pincers widening in readiness for its attack even as the multitudes of its slender legs carried it quickly in its hunt. The long flesh-devouring insect was nearly as big as the female. Silently he dropped upon it, targeting its eyes first with his claws. Blinded, the zengli released a hissing shriek, its body rolling into a ball as it dropped from the branches, taking him with it. Gwum dug his claws on one hand into the bark of the tree, slowing their fall until they landed safely within the massive roots of the tree. Claws digging into the joints of its body, he ripped away

its pincers and tore into the vulnerable segments of its flesh.

Gwum had just ruthlessly dispatched the zengli and was considering the best way to butcher one so large when she suddenly changed directions, heading west, deeper into Warderoon territory. He stared in shock for a moment and abruptly abandoned his prey. The sacrifice was small. Zengli were not very good for eating anyway; it was merely his preference to not waste what he killed. Her change in direction worried him. Why was she going that way? Did she not see the territory markers carved into the trees of the inner barrier? Although the boundary trees of the outer barrier were likewise marked, the warnings were milder, expecting the possibility of those who may pass through the territory and tolerating it as long as intruders did not make trouble. But beyond the inner barrier was another matter.

No one who was not of the clan was allowed beyond that point. Although not every tree bore the mark, a good number of them did in a way that the warnings ran up and down the length of the tree, making it hard to miss, regardless of whether one's vantage point was from the water or high in the trees. She walked past them, however, as if they were invisible. The Warderoon clan was not going to be pleased.

Gwum moved uneasily along the edge of the barrier, his gaze dropping to her repeatedly before rising back to the marked warning. She was getting farther away with every minute he lingered there. He was curious and felt a strong compulsion to follow. Common sense told him that it was foolish to follow her when he should have been hastily making his way far from the clan's lands before he overstayed his welcome. While the clans were on peaceful terms, territories were strictly guarded, and his passage through the outer barrier was surely noted by sentries and his presence was going to be allowed for only a limited amount of time. It was a constant reminder that while Warderoon sentries were not attacking, they barely tolerated him passing through.

That was nothing new, however, as there wasn't a single Bia clan who did not prefer

that strangers not pass through their territories as much as possible. Unfortunately, the swamp never considered such borders when it came to what it provided. It did not care who dwelled there in a given territory, or what they might need that it failed to produce for them, which is why he found himself in the Warderoon outer territory to begin with. As a healer, he did not have the luxury to dance around clan politics, but the idea of invading deeper into another clan's territory gave him pause.

Gwum pressed a hand against the satchel hanging from a strap draped across his chest. Several young nangash plants were nestled inside there with their roots carefully wrapped for the journey back to Shoowilp lands. While he did not mind passing a day following an interesting and strange little female, especially since they had, by chance, been traveling in the same direction, he should not be letting her distract him from what was important. His priority was returning home as quickly as possible with the saplings and leaves he harvested from mature plants. While the swamp's humidity would help preserve them for several days, he needed to return quickly and plant them in his gardens and work on making medicines from the collected leaves. And he needed to do so without delay to reduce the risk of losing any of the tender young plants before they had a chance to establish their roots in his carefully tended soil.

He turned north once more, turning away from the sight of her small, slight form, with every intention of continuing speedily toward the Shoowilp border but he hesitated. What would happen to her if he abandoned her there? If he were no longer watching over her, how long would it take before something became bold enough to attack?

The thought did not sit well with him.

He groaned unhappily to himself. Why did she insist on heading northwest? Technically, she was still moving in generally the same direction, but she had been going due north for hours. What was the reason for the sudden change?

He shifted his weight thoughtfully as he silently climbed back up the tree and navigated the branches until he crouched above her. It was nearly night. He would not be able to travel much farther. He doubted that she would be able to go any farther either once night fell. Already his bioluminescence was responding to the gathering darkness so that he could at least see the small glowing bumps running down his arms. In the dark it would allow him to see anything that was directly in front of him, but the small female below did not have even that advantage. She would not be able to see at all.

Was she already struggling to see her surroundings? She wore strange bits of round metal around her eyes that now glowed faintly, but he did not know how well they served her, especially since her steps were gradually becoming slower and more careful as night descended. Perhaps she was not truly changing course but merely in search of a place to rest.

He did not know why she would believe that she would find better opportunities for shelter going a little more to the west, but he did have to admit that the giant magnunk trees, while creating convenient root systems for travel, did not lend much in the way of opportunities for weaker species to scale them. It was thanks to possessing powerful limbs and long, strong claws that adult Bia were capable of scaling them successfully without too many issues. Once again, it seemed that she was as vulnerable as a juvenile.

He really ought to accompany at least far enough to reassure himself that she would be able to sleep safely. Then he could leave and fulfill his responsibilities.

Yes, that was the most sensible course of action.

Without further hesitation, Gwum sprung for the next tree, eager to catch up with the little female creeping farther ahead of him. Keeping alert for the presence of any predators or Warderoon males who may be passing through the territory, he followed

her through the dense growth as the forest grew thicker and the water levels rose. Everything was lush, and the insects hummed in vast clouds moving through the swamp. He hummed to himself in admiration as he looked around. He always believed Shoowilp lands to be the most beautiful, but he had to admit that there was an unexpected allure to the deeper sunken swamps of the Warderoon territory. No wonder nangash plants grew so well there. He would have to keep that in mind when he established them in their new home.

His curiosity piqued, Gwum took advantage of the opportunity to study the deeper Warderoon swamps, but he never lost sight of his odd little offworlder. He followed her even as the sun dropped low and the luminescence of the forest brightened as the creatures of the night came to life until at last they arrived at a little partially enclosed “pond.” At one end, at the highest bit of ground, he could barely make out a large metal structure peeking out from the greenery absorbing it into the swamps. It was there she headed, and it was there he followed. At first he followed slowly, leisurely keeping his distance, but then at a quicker pace when he caught a foul scent from the spores of a familiar predator filling his nose.

A cazka had claimed the pond. That was not good. They weren’t the brightest predators, but they were big and mean. And if it discovered that she was there?—

He prayed to the gods that she did not intend to stay long

### Chapter

### Four

Noelle squinted at the campsite. Or what remained of it. Bits of metal were broken and submerged in the swamp that may have once been various tools and some kind of boat supplied by the Corp. Farther back, balanced on a higher rise made of layers of dry mud overlaying a massive root system, she could just barely make out the trailer peeking out from the growth of long vines and strands of lichen covering it from above and the large climbing brush rising up along its sides. Visually, the trailer was more of an impression with hints of metal through the overgrowth. Given a year or two more, she had little doubt that the swamp would have consumed it entirely. As it was now, she was uncertain if she could have found it without her comm.

“Well, this is it, Noelle,” she murmured to herself. “Just pray that nothing has decided to make a cozy nest out of it inside.”

Gods, please let it not be so.

Picking her way up toward the side of the trailer, she yanked the vines free and brushed away the mossy strands. Gradually, she cleared one window and then the other before finally working her way down and finding the door. By then her hands were aching, her gloves not entirely saving her fingers from the bite of the thick vines as she struggled to pull them free. More than that, however, she was exhausted. She eyed the cleared door unenthusiastically.

“Almost there. Just have to get the door open and then I can find a spot to crash for

several hours.” Her stomach growled in reminder that she hadn’t yet eaten since being awakened from cryosleep and pushed into a life pod. She pressed her hand to her belly and grimaced. “And maybe something to eat.”

Squaring up with the door, she eyed it critically for a long moment and ran her hands along it to find the best hold. Thank the gods it was slightly ajar. She would have likely been screwed otherwise. Securing her grip, she threw all of her strength into prying the metal door in front of her the rest of the way open. Thankfully, it was open just enough that it gave her a good hand hold as she wrenched back on it. It screeched loudly but gave inch by inch until she finally had a big enough gap to squeeze through.

Brushing her hands off on the form-fitting jumpsuit covering her TRS, she looked around curiously as she walked toward the center of the main room. Dust clung heavily everywhere within the camp trailer, and she could see spots where mold and bits of the swamp were beginning to invade what had once been a sparse but immaculate interior. Even plants had begun to take root and grow within the patches of dirt that had either blown in or, more likely, flooded in when the water rose. It probably did so seasonally. It wouldn’t surprise her in the least if there were a kind of monsoon season. One thing was for certain: the fog had absolutely no qualms against seeping into the camp trailer. It curled around her feet and calves as she walked through the central room and coiled against the walls like smoke rings from a sleeping dragon.

“Creepy,” she muttered as she brushed aside what looked like trailing strands of lichen or moss except that they bore pronounced feathery pink leafy segments.

She wondered, if the exploratory team stationed there had remained stationed within the camp, how long they would have been able to keep out the encroaching swamp. The amount of growth was impressive and lent an alien eeriness to what was left of the camp.

And it was certainly creepy. It was as if it were slowly wiping away and devouring any and every trace of human presence that had once been there. That was the nature of a swamp. It overtook and consumed everything eventually, but on Xal, it just seemed all the more foreboding.

She shivered and sidestepped a thicker mass of the fronds but froze in place as a melodic—but entirely alien—song drifted inside the unit. It was beautiful and yet the sound was so completely inhuman that it made her skin prickle disconcertedly. She swallowed nervously but shook the feeling away and doubled back to close and lock the door firmly behind her. Although she was worried about being trapped inside without fresh air and in the company of various unknown mold spores floating around, she was more concerned with being eaten by some manner of alien creature. If nothing else, the song of alien lifeforms becoming alert as the sun sank just reminded her of the fact that she was not alone there and that many predators took advantage of hunting at night.

Don't think of that, she scolded herself.

Giving her head a little shake to refocus, she continued forward and walked between a refrigeration unit and a small table with two chairs, one of which was tipped over. Several shelves stood nearby against the wall, laden with sealed clear containers. Each was filled with the familiar sight of the silvery field ration packets. She shook her head in wonder as she passed the shelves. Whoever had been stationed there had not been there long enough to even make a significant dent in the supplies. That meant that they hadn't gone out into the swamp to forage for dwindling supplies. It made their disappearance even more disturbing. Surely there had to be some clue as to what they were working on and what happened to them in the laboratory.

She didn't even glance in the direction of the sink as she made her way into the laboratory space. It was just as empty as the rest of the housing unit. But more than that, it was to the point of appearing frozen in time, making it all the more eerie.



Noelle ran her fingers absently along shelves storing all manner of testing equipment. Tubes coated thickly with dust and some with a moldy residue forming within them from the environment were at eye level. There were a few sealed vials containing samples, but she couldn't make out what they were just by casually looking at them. Just beyond them, the light frame of the data processor sat on a long metal table. She hurried over to it and ran her fingers inquisitively over it, hopeful that there might be some small reservoir of energy left. Her face fell in disappointment when the machine did not even so much as hum from the system when she hit the power button.

Well, fuck.

She glanced around the room morosely, her eyes falling on a cushioned sitting bench wedged into one corner with a stack of blankets resting on it. Had someone been sleeping there? The blankets were perfectly folded as if someone had risen from sleeping mere hours ago rather than years. If one could overlook the moss and dust covering the fabric among a scattering of dead leaves and flowers from old vines. Regardless, it didn't look all that comfortable to her.

Licking her lips, she scooted past it and headed farther into the trailer until she reached the sleeping quarters. There was no door, but a privacy curtain effectively separated the room from the lab. Noelle pushed it aside and stepped past it. Motes of dust flew into the air from the disturbed fabric. She coughed in reaction, her eyes momentarily dazzled by the tiny motes catching the light with a colorful shimmer that seemed particular to their composition on Xal. They filled the small space of the bedroom with a rainbow of color floating over a bed.

An actual bed! Not a cot or an uncomfortable bench, but a solid bed with a decent mattress—decent for what the Corp supplied at least. She nearly groaned with gratitude as she hurried toward it. The bed was set up by the window, the bedding neatly smoothed into place. It was also left perfectly orderly as if the occupants had simply gotten up to start their day and disappeared. In this case, however, it looked

inviting. Bending over, she lifted the outer blanket and gave it a brisk shake before smoothing it back into place. With a tiny sound of excitement, she unzipped her jumper and set to work peeling off her TRS. The environmental controls weren't working but the blankets looked thick and warm. She couldn't wait to sink into it. She could deal with the musky, damp smell of the trailer—it just reminded her of her grandma's house anyway. Anything was worth having a comfortable place to lie down.

But first—she was thirsty after traveling all day. Making her way back to the kitchen, she glanced around for any hydro pods, but to her disappointment she came up empty. There was an as of yet unused water filtration system sitting at one corner as if it were just recently unpacked before the camp had been abandoned. It was even still sealed with security tape. Noelle recognized as they were usually included in camp supplies for emergencies, but she had never had to use one since they always had enough hydro pods to weigh down a small freighter. The idea of drinking the swamp water, even filtered, turned her stomach, but there was no helping it. Breaking the seals, she pressed the power button and sighed with relief when it started up. She didn't have a clue if anything else in the trailer worked, but at least the filtration system ran on a self-containing generator in case of power failure. So did the pump system that delivered water into the trailer. She just prayed that it also worked so she wouldn't have to go out and haul in water by hand.

With considerable reluctance, she moved over to the sink and touched the tab on the spigot. Murky water gushed from it. It smelled funny and had a strange color to it, but at least it was water. She rinsed the small basin sitting inside the sink and then let it fill before transferring it over to the filter system. She was a little nervous as to the result when she put the cup beneath the system's spout, and that uncertainty didn't improve any when clear water with the faintest pink luminous tinge filled the cup. She lifted it skeptically and took one of the test strips from the closed cup on the counter beside the filtration system and dipped it into the water. Her eyebrows rose as she read the results. The water was clean and safe. It just looked strange.

“Okay,” she mumbled to herself. “It’s not like I have any way to issue a complaint to Corp at the moment. What am I going to do—die of dehydration? Considering I like living a little much, I guess it’s bottoms up.”

She wrinkled her nose as she tossed the contents back. Surprisingly, the water had a slightly fruity aftertaste that gave her pause. Questionable appearance and source aside, it wasn’t too bad. She immediately poured another tall cup and proceeded to sip it as she made her way back to the sleeping quarters. Sinking on to the bed, she studied the room once more while she drained the cup and set it on the small table beside her.

“I think I could sleep a year. At least the mattress isn’t too bad.”

Lifting the edge of the blanket to cover herself, she froze and cocked her head to listen as the rhythmic, pulsing song rose once more, hauntingly but closer and louder than before. Below it, however, there was a deep rattling, hissing sound that rumbled far closer, threateningly from the other side of the trailer. She jumped up from the bed and stared at the far wall, her breath quickening. The threatening sound gradually faded, leaving only the eerie song. She turned toward it and swallowed. There was something out there—more than one something—and whatever they were, they sounded a lot bigger than a harmless little frog, and one sounded as if it crawled from the darkest depths of the underworld. At least the other one, despite the eeriness of its song, didn’t make her skin crawl.

Inching toward the window, Noelle pulled back the curtain and peered out into the night. The fog had rolled in thicker since sundown, and the swamp beyond the trailer was mostly concealed by an impenetrable blanket. Only the faint glow of motes dancing in fluttering sways with the breeze were visible. And something else.

She squinted at it. They were a large cluster of glowing pinpricks like a small field of stars moving. It was far too uniform to be a swarm of insects, each one maintaining

the same distance as they moved. Which meant it was part of something larger.

Her eyes widened and her mouth went dry as her eyes continued to follow the movement of that luminous galaxy of lights as it moved closer and closer. What was worse was that it seemed to be intentionally creeping up on the trailer as if aware of her presence within. It was moving so intentionally that it often stopped and dropped low, its lights nearly disappearing before beginning to crawl toward her once more—slipping closer with every beat of her heart. She backed away from the window and dropped the curtain, suddenly feeling hunted. Had she attracted the attention of predators after all? She thought she had done so well all day but now she wasn't so sure.

She swallowed thickly as her pulse quickened.

“No problem,” she whispered aloud in an attempt to reassure herself as she turned away from the window and peered at the surrounding sleeping space once more. “I will just wait here a day or two and catch up on some rest. Whatever it is, it will eventually get bored and move on. It's not like I'm short on food or anything. Being delayed by a few days to recover won't hurt me. I'm sure everyone else is doing the same thing.”

That was a reasonable course of action as far as she was concerned. The problem was that it didn't go away. Days passed in which Noelle paced the trailer, at times eating directly out of the packet. There was no power in the trailer so she could not turn any of the monitors on. There were likely voice logs within them documenting whatever had happened that led to the base camp being abandoned, but it was completely inaccessible to her. So she spent hours staring out at the swamp beyond the window instead. She never actually saw the creature during the day, but she heard it singing intermittently during the day from wherever it concealed itself among the trees within the lighter fog, letting her know that it was there, but every night it returned to the water surrounding the camp.

“Jymlina, jymlina,” it sang.

And the more it sang, the more her translator picked up. What was even stranger was that her translator was suddenly updating itself with the new language in large patches as if collecting and supplementing from another translator within range. She doubted that it was from anyone among her team. This was an uncharted world. None of them would have the language within the database of their translators yet.

That left only one possibility. One that sent a cold chill through her to even think about.

Had someone from the original exploratory team survived? That was the only thing that made sense since the translator was powered by the neural activity of its host. A translator attached to a corpse wouldn't be able to uplink like that. But if someone survived, that implied things that only frightened her further as it didn't mean that they were functionally whole. The fact that they abandoned the camp testified further to that. But if they were truly still alive... then where were they?

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*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 4:04 pm*

### Chapter

### Five

G wum crept toward the dwelling, his slightly webbed ears pricking as he listened to the activity coming from inside. This female—for all her fearlessness, she was a shy one. She concealed herself in her dwelling while she watched him.

At first he worried that she wished to trap him there like so many females of his species, to catch him within her territory so he could never leave her nesting grounds again. Because of that, he made his approach cautiously. It was only after she watched him for several minutes and then disappeared without attempting to lure him inside that he decided to relax his guard. This was not her territory. She was not trying to trap him. And so, he watched, waiting to see what she intended to do.

Whatever she was doing, she seemed to be growing increasingly restless. He spent days watching her and had discovered that she never slowed down. Even though she never emerged from the dwelling—not even to enjoy the semi-seclusion of her pond, which could not possibly be good for her—she moved continuously with quick, jerky motions from one end of the dwelling to the other. And it was only getting worse as the days passed.

Her pacing was growing quicker with a nervous, twitchy energy as she hurried from one end to the other before whirling around and starting over again. She was at the window more frequently too, the shadows on her face growing darker, betraying her lack of sleep even as her pauses, while more numerous, became nothing more than hasty glances before she was nervously moving away again.

It was becoming uncomfortable to watch. It was natural that he felt that way. He was a healer, so of course it would bother him to see the female anxious and suffering. She was fluttering around inside like a brightly feathered wylmyn caught in a cage. Her restless pacing and frequent stops to peer outside were too much like the frantic beat of the wylmyn's wings against its confines. His chest constricted tightly as he watched her, and that tightness spread quickly up his neck. The skin of his throat sack grew taut and flushed with heat, the skin tightening painfully as it then swelled instinctively.

Not again! He would not permit it. He had self-control. He would contain it. He would?—

“Jymlina,” he sang, his song bursting unbidden from him as his throat sack ballooned larger than ever, the sound deeper and more resonant than ever before.

Eyes widening in horror, he slapped a hand over his throat, flattening the muscle and the vividly pink flexible tissue there. It was one thing to casually sing in order to offer comfort, but those sweet little songs meant nothing. This, however, was a primal quaking designed to lure in a mate. It frightened him even as it vibrated from him.

“No, no, no. Not that,” he hissed to himself.

He was a fool. What had he done to himself? How was it even possible? It had meant nothing, no more than the other times that he had soothed and distracted an overexcited female to escape her notice. What was more, he had no intention of taking a mate! Among the Bia, females settled comfortably into their territories, keeping their brood and mates close to them. Even before mating, they seldom ventured far from the safety of their maternal homes until they came of age to claim their own breeding “pond,” defined only by the greenery and natural structures that would enclose it partially from the rest of the swamp. It was only once they were comfortably settled and ready to mate that they drew males in with their pheromones

and the pulse of their vibrations. And that was it for any male good and caught. The chosen male would never leave again except when accompanying his mate somewhere, though if there were young offspring, he usually remained within the nest caring for the young—his carefree days of exploration over.

It had never been a life that appealed to him. Although he had no objection to comfortably resting within a nest, his desire to explore the swamps of their world had him avoiding any scenario where he might possibly be snared. He should leave. He had just recently begun to consider that he might be cursed by the gods with a highly developed conscience that kept him from abandoning her to her own devices, but enough was enough.

Decision made, Gwum grunted quietly and turned away, intending to leap for a tree outside of the pond. He lined himself up for the jump and attempted to leap but his limbs refused to obey him. His breath stuttered out of him in a shocked gasp as he stared down at his traitorous body.

Why was he reacting like a captivated male, drunk on pheromones and stunned by the tiny pulses of bioelectricity? That was not happening. It was not possible. There were no pulses in the air, and the female's pheromones were fainter and sweeter like the rarest flowers that bloomed after a monsoon than the robust notes of Bia females. She should have had no way to bind her to him.

Was it because he had privately admired her and, in moments of weakness, considered it a pity that he had never encountered such a female among his own species. Was this a joke from the gods for entertaining such forbidden thoughts? No Bia would have dared to even think such of a Gwyr. To think it of a female from the heavens was surely how he brought punishment upon himself.

And yet, within the privacy of his own mind, he could not deny that he was captivated by qualities in her that the Bia females he had met and known did not



possess. Perhaps if they had, then he would have felt a desire to mate and put himself out of his misery. At least then he would no longer be plagued by his mother's complaints about him being alone and that she had no grandchildren to dote on. For a moment he allowed his imagination free rein, and he gasped at the image of the female that rose unbidden within his mind, her body ripe and swollen with life even as she traversed fearlessly through the swamp at his side, a smile on her soft lips.

Such an adventurous female who fearlessly loved the swamps and wished to explore them as he did would be a female he could feel right with. With his quiet hiss of desperation, he thrust the image away even as he grasped at the underlying logic. It had to be the reason that he was singing for the female. Perhaps it was all in his head, even his captivation, all because some instinctive part of him was reacting to the fact that he was at ease around her.

He laughed uneasily. It was logical and yet it did not feel right. There were those among the Bia who would call it fate, but he had laughed at those who claimed that mating came down to such a thing. Pheromones and bioelectric vibrational pulses played a large part in ensnaring a male, but that was hardly fate. Still... it felt that way. He could see why those who had experienced it likened it to such phenomena. It was certainly tempting to entertain when it had such a strong influence on a male's function. If not for the fact that he was a healer and highly aware that she did not send out electric vibrations to tease the receptive tissues in his ears, nor possess anything quite like the pheromones of Bia females, he might have also been susceptible to thinking this way.

Either way, it had suddenly complicated matters. He only intended to guard her on her northern journey because he could not abide the idea of her becoming injured or dying in his absence. Although it was not an inclination he had ever felt before as he customarily fled from females, it seemed natural enough response for a healer.

She needed to leave the dwelling now. He needed to continue making his way home

before the saplings died. He could not afford to arrive empty-handed with nothing but a small harvest to show for his efforts. He was also ready for this torture to come to an end. She made him... react to her in uncomfortable ways. Even now he could feel the tightening as his cock grew more rigid. It was a state that plagued him nightly now for which he could not find any truly satisfactory relief. All this waiting was simply prolonging things.

He was getting tired of waiting.

Gwum hissed quietly to himself as he watched her shadow move past the window. She did not stop and pull back the material covering it to look out at him this time. Instead, she paced with an increasing restlessness that he could feel tightening within him. No, this was not the frantic fluttering of a wylmyn, trapped and cut off from the only home she had ever known. He suddenly comprehended with sharp clarity what this was. He understood this restless feeling. He felt it every day when he returned to his mother's den, as was expected of any and all unmated males. It was being trapped in a place of safety and familiarity and feeling suffocated by it. Knowing it was right to remain but unable to tolerate the confines. The pacing was an expression of helplessness while the constraints grew harder and harder to ignore.

And fear. She was in a strange world that no doubt forged chains binding her in there just as firmly as his respect and obligations to his people.

Perhaps this strange female was a kindred spirit. It was a novelty to be sure. He had never met anyone who shared this quality with him, least of all a female given that they were usually the most content with Bia traditions. And yet, he understood and empathized with this alien female and that did a strange thing to his hearts, making them clench unexpectedly.

The sensation was so alarming that he hissed again, louder, in frustration with himself. He was clearly being driven into a state of madness, and his body was

reacting unnaturally to his confused mental state. He grabbed his crest as he struggled to regain control and gripped the leathery tendril in his hand in frustration but froze when he heard a clattering, then a vicious hiss echo from nearby. The sound sent a prickle of alarm through him.

The cazka was growing bolder and drawing closer to the dwelling and the female hiding there.

There was no other choice. He would approach her to hasten them on their way and put an end to this. He would make his approach tomorrow.

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### Chapter

### Six

Noelle jerked away at the sudden sound of something pounding with an irregular rhythm at her door. It wasn't the brisk tapping of a human, but it was clearly intentional. Gripping her blanket to her, she scooted warily back on the bed, her eyes going round as she stared at the entrance to the bedroom. She half-expected something to explode through the front door of the trailer and come tearing back to the room for her, but after several minutes the commotion subsided, and gradually she was able to relax.

That was until something landed heavily on the roof above her head.

Choking back a scream, she scrambled from the bed, her heart leaping into her throat. A series of small scratching sounds rose from overhead, but they were rapidly getting louder and faster as if something was trying to tear its way through the roof.

“Go away!” she screamed, and the sounds above immediately fell silent.

It was an eerie silence—a complete lack of sound as if everything were holding its breath as a predator passed. But it was somehow worse than that because whatever it was had reacted to her scream in a way that few animals would have. Most animals would have bolted at the unexpected sound, but there were some that would have grown more excited at the sound of frightened prey. Whatever was on the roof knew she was in there and was listening.

She bit back a cry but jumped with a whimper when a familiar sound sang above her. “Jymlina.” But then it somehow got worse when it sang again and this time her translator kicked in as words entwined with the song in her mind. “Come out and come to me, jymlina.”

She was right. It was worse. It was not just a cunning predator; it was an alien stalking through the swamp around the camp, hunting her. The same one she heard night after night, calling to her, insisting that she leave the trailer with words that became more and more frustrated. Did it see her as prey or an intruder? Some aliens were highly territorial and didn’t react well to strangers invading their homes. Whatever its reason, it was one that she didn’t even want to imagine.

“Please,” she choked, this time unable to hold back her sob when the word fell from her mouth in an alien dialect. “Please do not hurt me.”

“Hurt you?” it echoed in a quizzical tone. “I would never hurt you.”

She shook her head, terrified at how clearly the alien’s words flowed to her. Even its tonal inflection. It made her want to trust it, and blindly trusting and unknown alien was perhaps the stupidest thing she could do, especially considering the missing exploratory team. And what of her own team? Were the aliens luring them out one by one as they had with the previous team?

It was a situation she had never dealt with before. All the planets she was sent to had been unoccupied by sentient beings. She had never met an unknown alien. Truth be told, as a non-gratas who was not permitted to mix in open social atmospheres designated for citizens, she had never even met an alien before outside of seeing a few at a distance. Hearing alien words coming out in her own voice terrified her with its uncanniness from the knowledge that it was unnatural sounds forced through her.

“Come out, jymlina,” it crooned, and she gave an aggressive shake of her head.

“No!” she shouted as she scurried over toward the door of the sleeping quarters to put more distance between herself and the alien. “There’s no chance that I’m going to just walk out there for no other reason than because you say to.”

It fell silent again as if considering her words.

“You do not wish to remain here, jymlina,” it said thoughtfully after a long moment. “It may feel safe for you to be surrounded by familiar walls and items, but it is not good for you to remain trapped in here. Especially not since a cazka has claimed this abandoned place. This place no longer belongs to your people. It is his now, and you are neither quick enough nor do you possess enough natural defenses to protect yourself from such a predator.”

“I... I haven’t seen anything,” she replied uncertainly.

“Naturally,” it hummed in agreement. “I have been luring it away from here at night in the same manner I distracted other predators who caught your scent when you were traveling, but you will not be able to evade it forever. It is already returning more quickly now and drawing closer to this place. It will eventually find where you are hiding. Once I continue north, your protection leaves with me. It is better that you leave too.”

It had been... watching her? Her throat constricted, cutting off much of her air supply as panic rushed through her, making her lightheaded. Or maybe that was because she simply wasn’t getting enough oxygen? It didn’t matter—it was natural to panic upon discovering that her easy trip through the swamp hadn’t been so easy and that she had been hunted and nearly ended up something’s dinner many times before the alien on her roof intercepted them. Not only had she not seen any of the predators it spoke of, but she also had not seen the alien either outside of the galaxy of markings on it as it lurked outside the trailer. How had she not realized it was following her? Where had it even been hiding all this time that she hadn’t seen it?

“You... want me to trust you?”

“It would be to your advantage,” the alien agreed.

That was fair. But it wasn't that simple.

“You can't really expect me to trust a stranger.” She meant to say alien, but the word stranger came from her mouth instead. She supposed it was close enough. It was clear that the alien had no concept of species from other planets.

“I am a very trustworthy male. I am a healer,” the alien replied indignantly. “There is no one you should hope more to find you in the swamps than a healer.”

A male alien. That didn't exactly make her excited to go out and make friends either. While she didn't consider herself one of those humans who stupidly believed any and every alien wanted to get into the pants of human women, males were often unnervingly larger than even human men, much less women. And at five feet tall and boasting a very petite build, she was a lot smaller than many women who voluntarily signed onto the exploratory teams.

Family and old friends, worried that she might get easily hurt, didn't understand why she had even signed onto the program. United Earth laws prevented Darvel from assigning non-gratas to the exploratory division just because of how potentially dangerous it was—it had to be comprised wholly of volunteers. It was the only real exception made when it came to what the Corp could do with them, but it was an important one and the reason why there was such a big payoff for volunteering service. The opportunity to earn citizenship was a huge dangling carrot and Noelle had snapped it up despite knowing that she was surrendering her life and her last remaining legal protections to them. She'd never had a moment where she'd regretted her decision... until now.

Maybe she should have listened to her family and friends, or even the personnel who had done the necessary paperwork and psych evaluation who had suggested that, given her size, she was a potential liability to the program and didn't belong there. She had insisted and even demonstrated her capabilities in several simulations. That didn't stop people from talking, however, and it had been her good fortune to be partnered with William Kim. He never dismissed her capabilities. She wished more than ever that he were there with her. He would have watched her back no matter what decisions she made at such a moment.

But he wasn't. She was all alone, and so she needed to watch out for herself. She couldn't take any chances with the alien. She didn't want to die on this planet. She wanted to go home where she didn't have to worry about some unknown alien monster killing her.

She swallowed and shook her head, even though she knew he couldn't see it. "No. I'm sorry, it's nothing personal, but I just can't blindly trust someone I don't know. You may mean well, but for all I know it could be a trap—one that I would be a fool to walk right into."

A heavy sigh came from above and then silence. "You are correct," he grumbled unhappily after an excruciatingly long moment. "It would be unwise to simply trust so easily, but I cannot linger too much longer. The little bit of water I've been feeding to the nangash will not sustain them long. I must return home. But three days," he murmured, his voice pitching in a way suggested he was now speaking to himself. "I can spare three days, I think, to convince her."

Noelle cleared her throat uncomfortably. "Perhaps you can show yourself. This whole thing is a bit disconcerting. First being watched by a practically invisible presence and now talking to one."

"Ah." A sonorous chuckle echoed from above, sending a feeling of tiny butterfly



wings skittering over her skin. “I did not consider... Very well, I shall drop in front of the looking portal by your entrance. Come see me. Once you see me well, I will go out into the water so you may feel safe opening your door and talking to me.”

She bit her lip as she considered his proposal. It sounded fair.

“Okay, I’m going there now,” she called up toward the ceiling.

She jumped at the sound the metal roof made as he ran across the roof and leaped from it. The splash that followed was like that of an Olympic diver and it brought a faint smile to her face. He was clearly trying to make himself heard for her benefit. That was a point in his favor.

Gathering up her courage, she headed toward the main room. It was a small thing. She was safely inside with a door, four walls and roof, and a floor between them. She stopped in front of the window so close that her breath slightly fogged the glass. There! She saw the water ripple close by, the movement subtle in the morning light but obvious enough that she didn’t jump out of her skin when a lean, powerful male slowly drew himself out of the water. She spotted one hand and then the other; each possessed long fingers webbed at the first knuckle and tipped with brutally large claws slip from the water. They were followed by his wrists and powerful forearms and then the lean, muscular biceps of an athletic swimmer. He gripped the roots, the claws finding purchase, and pulled himself from the swamp.

Long dark purple ropes that vaguely resembled hair came into view and they streamed with water as the alien’s head and chest emerged and rose over the edge of the root system. He kept his every movement slow, his vivid green, luminous eyes pinned on her. There were a few species who had bioluminescent structures in the iris of their eyes, but it made sense for a species inhabiting Xal given its gloom. His species clearly needed every advantage evolution gave them to survive there. His dark violet skin was also covered with bioluminescent freckling wherever it wasn’t

covered by his strange black netted clothing. He also had a sort of leather bag strapped protectively across his chest. He had mentioned transporting something... maybe it was in there.

He lifted himself onto the massive root system on which the camp sat and slowly approached the window, his gait a graceful slink despite the slight amphibious look to his textured skin. He stopped in front of the window and his full lips turned up in a small smile as he lifted a hand and placed it on the reinforced glass. Three fingers and a thumb. She stared at his hand uncertainly. Did he expect her to lay her hand on the window too? Her brow beetled as she debated if that would potentially cause a misunderstanding by construing an intention that she wouldn't be aware of. Before she could make up her mind, however, he smiled, revealing numerous sharp teeth, and dropped his hand. He remained in place, standing there for several minutes, allowing her to look her fill as he studied her as well before turning away and dropping back into the water.

He didn't disappear from sight within the dark water, however. Keeping at the surface, he swam slowly from the edge of the root system until he was in a shadier area some distance away. His bioluminescence brightened, revealing the constellation of lights that she'd become so familiar with night after night. He remained in place, his eyes glowing, waiting.

"I suppose it's my turn," she murmured nervously.

Leaving the window, Noelle went to the door and opened it very slowly, just in case he charged from the swamp and tried to rush her. But he didn't move. He remained still, patiently waiting for her to gather her courage and open the door the rest of the way. She stood there with the door open, unable to move from her spot for several minutes. Eventually, she stepped outside and made her way to a slightly higher root that looked perfect for sitting on. Dropping onto it, she peered at him for a bit as she allowed herself to get accustomed to his presence out in the open.

“What’s your name?” she called to him.

There was a brief pause, and a strange shiver overtook the male but quickly disappeared. “Gwum Narvook Shoowilp Bia,” he replied.

Her lips tipped ruefully. “That’s quite a mouthful.”

His smile flashed, and this time his sharp teeth were a bit less unnerving now that she expected it.

“Bia is in honor and recognition of my species, for we are all one. Shoowilp is my clan. Narvook is my family designation. You may call me Gwum as this is my personal name.”

“Gwum,” she repeated. “I am Noelle. My family... ah, designation is Xander. I don’t have a clan. My species is human, but we don’t use that as part of our names.”

“Like the Gwyr,” he replied as he swam leisurely in place, he leaned back and floated there, the ropes of his “hair” floating around him. “You are very similar to the Gwyr, but also very different. But in this you are the same. They do not even name themselves with their clan.” He shook his head almost mournfully. “This estrangement is odd to the Bia.”

“Gwyr,” she repeated. “Is that what was making those frightening noises?”

A second sentient species to worry about was terrifying enough to consider, but if it was making those kinds of noises, then that just made it worse. It didn’t sound friendly at all. At least Gwum just sang to her. The other thing sounded like it would tear her apart.

He shook his head again and chuckled. “The Gwyr live in the mountains. They

seldom come down into the swamps unless they wish to procure something. There are a few clans who have trade alliances with them in exchange for their ore and fibers that we do not have access to in the swamps. Not the Shoowilp or the Warderoon, however, so you have nothing to fear of a Gwyr here. It would be too much effort for them to invade either territory when they can approach a clan that they have an alliance with.” His smile fell. “What you heard—that would be the cazka.”

“And that is?” she queried.

“A very large and very dangerous predator,” he replied solemnly. “They are rare as they are slow to breed, but where a cazka has claimed hunting land, all Bia remain alert and aware, and do not approach. And you... you are right in the middle of its home.”

Fuck.

### Chapter

### Seven

G wum streaked through the water as he swam across the pond, eager to visit with the human female. Noelle. Her name flowed strangely off his tongue and yet it had a beautiful cadence to it that he found to be delightful. Just as she was. Although they never came closer than him in the water and her safely seated in front of her dwelling, she had a lively spirit that slowly revealed itself as they conversed.

What had begun as a stilted conversation that first day had grown over the last few solar rotations. It had also revealed to him the frightening circumstances of her situation that had her traveling through the swamps. It was why he had not tried to close the distance between them. Seeing her gradually become calmer and more relaxed was worth the delay. It had helped that the cazka was in a different part of its territory rather than venturing near the dwelling. It would not last much longer, but it was a good reprieve for her that she needed. He just wished that the nangash could wait. It was already beginning to wilt very slightly despite his best attempts in the hollow of the tree where he was currently keeping them.

Today, he would have to say goodbye if she decided not to leave with him. He could escort her to her supplies where she hoped to find the others who had come to Kren with her as it was in the same direction he was traveling, but he had to leave in the morning, regardless of whether she came or not.

Any unfamiliar pang tightened his chest, and he stopped swimming to rub it with one hand. That was strange. He had never had issues with his health before. Perhaps he

needed to rest for a time upon returning to his maternal pond.

He did not want to think about that now. He just wanted to enjoy what was left of his time with the fascinating human. He did not like the fact that she would soon be alone. She would be frightened and sad there alone. He hoped that she decided to come with him. Perhaps he should bring her a gift. He brightened at the thought but then promptly grimaced. What did females enjoy receiving as gifts?

He knew of the traditional courting gifts that a male would bring to a female, hoping that she would choose him once she decided to mate. Competition was fierce, and males were not above wooing the female they desired. Such gifts were usually food items designed to show ability to care for her, but he did not think Noelle would enjoy them. He was uncertain if she would even find the delicacies enjoyed by Shoowilp females to be pleasing. They were completely different species, with likely very different ways of experiencing food. For that reason, the odds weighed heavily in favor of her not liking them.

What would he enjoy if he were female?

Gwum huffed mirthfully. If someone deigned to present him with a gift, the answer was easy. He would not mind being brought plants to cut down on his own necessary foraging. Noelle had delicate skin... Perhaps the gyl. The gel acquired from pulsing the thick flower petals would be good for her to use to create a protective barrier over her skin. It was a gift he believed was considerate, so she would naturally enjoy it.

Tipping his head back, he scanned the branches above him, searching for the familiar bloom of the parasitic gyl flower. They typically grew plentifully in the oyal trees which were identifiable by their notched limbs and the whorl pattern on the bark of the tree. Ah, there! The pale purple flowers were not luminescent so far more difficult to spot, the petals just visible against the deeper lavender gray leaves of the host tree. With a grin he leaped for the lowest branch and made his way up the tree, until he

reached the branches where the mist was thinnest and gyl bloomed in a ray of sunlight. Unlike a Gwyr, he found the intense sunlight uncomfortable, but he did not let it interfere with his careful collection of the flowers.

With the utmost care, he snapped the stem and gathered the bloom up into his hand. It was so large that the flower nearly filled the space between his claw tips and the bottom of his palm, and its rich perfume seemed to grow even more potent by the moment. Taking care not to bruise the flower, he tucked it into his satchel, resting it gingerly on the bed of nangash leaves that still filled the bottom. With the gyl flower stored, he turned his attention to gathering a second and a third flower. Three hardly seemed like enough, but as Gwum had no room left in his satchel—not without dumping out the nangash leaves that his people needed—he reluctantly left the remaining flowers behind and resumed making his way back to the dwelling.

The moment it came within sight, a renewed excitement filled his chest. He hated finding a safe place to sleep at night. It forced him to leave the pond and take refuge in the nearby trees, and the necessity of finding food in the morning inevitably drew him even farther from Noelle. But now that he was returning to her, all of that fell away. It was unimportant. All he cared about at that moment was seeing her lovely, unusual human face.

To his surprise, Noelle was already outside. She sat on her favorite root perch, her face tilted up to the morning sun as she breathed in the sweet air. She appeared to be unaware of the nightglow insects that clung to her hair like a luminous crown, their light a glorious radiance despite dimming with the rising of the sun. As if suddenly aware of his presence, she opened her eyes, and a tiny smile curled her lips that made his hearts stutter. Her hands brushed over her clothes, self-conscious of the dirt that clung to her. He did not care about such things. She could be wearing the healing mud from the bottom of the swamp and still be the most beautiful creature to him. That realization was shocking but there was a rightness to it that thudded like a pulse through his veins.

His hearts in his throat, he crept closer, his hand going to the satchel where the gyl flowers waited.

“Good morning, Gwum.”

A small shiver of pleasure ran through him, and he smiled as he dropped into the lower branches of a nearby tree. “Good morning, Noelle. How was your rest?”

An expression he did not recognize flitted far too quickly across her face, but he gave it little thought, focusing instead on the way her smile grew in response.

“It wasn’t bad. Very quiet. I’m not accustomed to the sounds... or the lack of sound... that this swamp makes.”

He cocked his head, baffled as he took in the surrounding sounds of the pond. “The swamp is alive with continuous song and sound. It sings even now. Do you truly not hear it?”

She shook her head and her smile grew rueful. “I’m guessing that I’m missing out on a lot, huh?”

He did not understand the sound at the end of her question but chose to ignore it, inferring that it must be something that stressed the question. He nodded grimly, suddenly more worried about his little human than ever. If she did not leave with him, she would be even more vulnerable than he had originally believed. He had never heard of anything having such dull senses on all of Kren. That meant that she had not been merely distracted when he had followed her, but she had truly heard nothing at all.

Another shiver ran over him, but this time out of fear.



Her smile dimmed at his wordless reply and a flicker of emotion darkened her eyes with concern. “That worries you, doesn’t it?”

Again, he nodded. “The swamp is beautiful,” he began, “but it is very dangerous. If you cannot hear its song even now, then you are unlikely to hear the creatures that hunt within it. You did not hear them,” he amended, clarifying. “I thought that perhaps you just did not recognize the sounds, or were too distracted that you ignored them as something not notable enough for concern. But you did not hear them at all. If I had not come across you?—”

“I would have died before I even reached camp,” she concluded and looked around warily and choked on a gurgling sound in her throat. “I could have had that creature you spoke of sneaking up on me while I sat here waiting for you and would have died before I realized anything was wrong. Shit, it wouldn’t even had to sneak up on me,” she muttered.

Gwum gave her a sympathetic look and leaped to a branch that was closer to her, wanting more than anything to soothe her worry. “I would not have let it hurt you,” he assured her. “I would have heard it moving through this part of the swamp long before it reached the human dwelling.”

She swallowed thickly. “But you cannot stay.”

He nodded regretfully. “I cannot. But... you may accompany me.”

A look of fear rose within her eyes and his heart plummeted. She was still afraid of him. She still did not trust him. He hoped for too much in such a meager amount of time.

“I can’t,” she whispered with another frantic glance around. “This place is the only safety I have. Out there I will be exposed, and... I... I just can’t.”

Hope rose so quickly within him that he felt momentarily unbalanced by the emotion. He blinked at her in surprise. She wasn't afraid of him. She was terrified of the swamp. He gave the dwelling a critical look and shook his head. Without a word, he leaped into a higher branch and then over her head as he made his way to the trailer. From the corner of his eye, he watched as she jumped to her feet, a look of alarm on her face.

"What are you doing?" she shouted just as he dropped to the roof of the dwelling with a metallic thud.

He met her eyes grimly. "This dwelling cannot protect you from a cazka. A single cazka is a dangerous foe even for a Bia, and this place would not have proved to be an obstacle to me if I wished to get in." He wrestled with himself, uncertain of how much he wished to say—he did not want her to be afraid of him, but she had to understand, and there was only one way to do that. "When I spoke to you from the position before, I planned on removing you forcibly, if necessary," he admitted. "Anything to end the stalemate between us."

Without another word, he bent and stabbed his claws into the metal. It squealed in an unholy fashion as he demonstrated exactly how he would have extracted her, his claws cutting through the metal effortlessly. He grunted slightly as he peeled the section back, barely daring to meet her eyes. The horror that he found there gutted him but what shocked him the most was the way he trembled as if he were a rejected male to be pitied.

"Noelle—" he began hoarsely but she shook her head and lifted a hand in a request for his silence, the hushing motion one that Bia also practiced with their young.

"I just... I need a moment," she mumbled, and she sank heavily back to the root.

Her eyes remained fixed on the bit of metal he held and he guiltily pressed it back into

place, all the while trying not to cringe at the way the metal continued to squeal as he manipulated it.

“I did not wish to frighten you,” he said quietly as he sank into a crouch, his gaze never shifting away from her face which had suddenly gone very pale. “It was the best way I could think of to demonstrate what little safety this dwelling truly offers.”

She nodded, and he recognized the numbness to her movements. “No, I get it,” she assured him in a wobbly voice. “I’m just having a hard time wrapping my mind around how precarious my situation has been every day I stayed here... and all the while, the only reason this place offered me safety at all is because of you.”

“Is it so bad to have an ally?” he queried gently.

She shook her head, and her expression softened as she looked up at him. “Not at all. But I do have an unexpected empathy for all the unsuspecting crawfish I dug up and had for dinner... I’m kind of getting how that feels,” she added with a quiet chuckle that sent a little thrill down his spine.

He was suddenly hungry to hear her laugh again. “These crawfish can tempt a male to abandon every bit of his sanity?”

A giggle bubbled up from her, making him tingle delightfully. “Oh, I’m sure that someone somewhere has been pretty tempted to do some crazy stuff by a good crawfish boil,” she returned amid her laughter.

Gwum grinned in turn. He really had no idea what she was talking about, but the context from her clues led him to believe that it was some sort of small creature that was retrieved from the swamp, boiled, and consumed with some relish.

“I was not aware that humans had Bia dwelling on their planet,” he teased. “Surely

only a young Bia male would lose their sanity trying to eat whatever he finds at the bottom of the swamp. Before reaching maturity, a male is nothing more than a stomach with two legs attached to move it around to wherever the food is.”

A peal of laughter escaped her, warming his hearts and delighting his senses despite the fact that she slapped a hand over her mouth in an embarrassed attempt to muffle it.

“Do not hide your laughter,” he chided. “Laughter is celebrated as a great gift from the gods. Enjoy it fully like all Bia do.”

She gave him an uncertain look, but her hand slowly dropped from her mouth. “I’m more afraid of drawing something here that might hear me and decide to eat me.”

“Right now I am the only thing here that would wish to eat you, so you do not need to worry about anything else,” he assured her.

He did not understand why her face suddenly turned pink or why she was suddenly so interested in looking at anything else but him. He rubbed the back of his neck as he regarded her, completely perplexed by her reaction. Perhaps now was simply a good time to present his gift. With a quiet hum, he opened his satchel and dug into it. Her eyes were on him now. He could feel her watching him and he intentionally slowed his movements to prolong the moment. He wished to savor it.

Gathering the flowers carefully, he lifted them from the satchel and cautiously approached the edge of the trailer before dropping down onto the root system just a short span from where she stood. Her eyes widened as they took in his offering and her face grew even pinker.

“Oh... Gwum, they are lovely but I’m not sure... I... uh... on Earth it would be forbidden for you and I to, uh...” She gestured helplessly between them, and his eyes

widened with comprehension.

She thought he was interested in mating.

His loins tightened with unexpected interest, but he pushed that foolishness away as he quickly shook his head in denial of the direction of her thoughts. “No, Noelle, you misunderstand. It was just a gift to brighten your day, especially as I leave tomorrow.”

“Oh!” An embarrassed laugh escaped her as her face turned an alarming shade of red. “Of course that would be it. Not... oh, gods,” she mumbled, burying her face in her hands.

“It is not meant as a slight against you,” he continued awkwardly. “You are truly a fine and lovely female. It is just that I do not wish to sacrifice myself upon the altar of mating.”

She lifted her head and squinted at him. “Are you saying that you’ve never...”

He choked as comprehension gripped him. She was questioning his capabilities! Normally that would be something he easily ignored, content to let others think whatever they liked of him, but he was feeling unreasonably defensive about it.

“I have,” he loudly interrupted, startling her enough that she jumped and then giggled at her own reaction.

“Sorry, sorry,” she rushed soothingly, and he stared in surprise when she crossed the short distance separating them and gathered the flowers into her arms with an expression of delight. “They are so beautiful. Thank you, Gwum.”

His throat bobbed with the effort to swallow, and he inclined his head in

acknowledgment. The urge to point out that the flowers did not compare to her beauty was on his lips, but he kept the words captured tightly within him.

What insanity had now descended upon him? Perhaps she was this crawfish she spoke of indeed because now he wanted to explore every texture of her soft body with his tongue and nibble upon her with his lips until he was well sated with her flavor. Perhaps he was truly experiencing a moment of madness.

“All right,” she agreed with a little chuckle. “So we leave in the morning then?”

He nodded in agreement and then looked from the flowers and back to her again as she continued to stare down at them admiringly. “Are you not going to eat them? They are quite nourishing for the skin.”

For some reason she erupted into another peal of laughter, and he found himself chuckling despite himself. He did not understand what they were laughing about but this female never ceased to entertain him.

“Show me how to eat them then,” she challenged, and something within him heated at the tone of her voice as she placed the edge of a blossom against her pink lips.

He shivered again, a pulsing tempo filling him as he nodded and stepped closer. How could he resist?

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*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 4:04 pm*

### Chapter

### Eight

Embarrassing blunder aside, Noelle didn't hesitate to take Gwum up on his offer. He made the small proviso that they would need to stop by his home first to fulfill his responsibilities but then he would be free to accompany her every step of the way until she reached the supply cargo. Considering what she now knew of the swamp, that made her feel better about striking out once more.

She did notice that he had been acting a bit differently since then. More... intense. His gaze seemed to linger on her longer, though often with a faint look of confusion. Some of those looks, however, lit a hot throb deep within her that she was determined to ignore. She certainly didn't need to embarrass herself further. And she had spoken truthfully in the heat of the moment, though she had completely misinterpreted his gesture.

United Earth had its laws, and the one regarding interspecies fraternization was in place to protect everyone. Orientation into the exploratory program had stressed the importance of this. Alien genitals could potentially harm their human partners, and that wasn't even taking into account the social aspects that could potentially endanger a human who attempted to leave their alien lover. Although her protests had been a knee jerk reaction, it had been both humbling and humiliating to realize that he was not even interested.

That had unexpectedly stung.

“Nice going, Noelle,” she muttered to herself as she shoved the collapsed filtration unit next to the few supplies from the trailer in a rucksack. “What did you think this was, an Aturian drama involving illicit cross-species romances?”

A sound from the doorway drew her attention and she glanced up as Gwum slowly entered, his head swiveling as he looked around curiously.

“This place... it was left here by others like you?” he asked.

She bit her lip and glanced around the abandoned trailer. “Yeah. I wish I knew what happened to them. They’ve been presumed dead since they disappeared and yet my translator—the thing that helps me understand and speak your language—produced your language too quickly. It had to be updating from one of them, which would have only been possible if they were alive... somewhere.”

He turned his head toward her as she spoke, his brows rising with interest. He hummed thoughtfully once she fell silent and her breath caught. Could it be possible that he knew what had happened to them?

“It is possible they are with the Warderoon clan whose territory encompasses your little pond here,” he said slowly. “It is not unheard of for Bia clans to adopt those who are lost or injured, but it is more typical if it is a child or a female of breeding age who can establish a new lineage branch for their clan. Adult males are not usually accepted unless they are among those chosen by their own clans to cross into neighboring ally clans’ territories to woo females who are accepting mates. It keeps the lines strong,” he added with a small smile.

She nodded. Genetic diversification was a matter of survival.

“Do you think that’s what happened? We aren’t of the same species.”



He lifted his hands in an approximation of a shrug. “Males among my species are very adaptive and highly fertile. In past generations there were occasions of female Gwyr becoming injured and abandoned within the swamps and breeding successfully with a Bia mate. Naturally, such would be considered an abomination by the Gwyr and the mother and offspring would have been destroyed, so they were always hidden deep within the clan territories where they would never be found.”

Noelle bit her lip. “There might have been a woman in the last exploratory team.” She brightened and looked to Gwum hopefully. “Do you think we could go ask? If I could find?—”

She fell silent when he grimly shook his head. “I am Shoowilp, not Warderoon. To even attempt to do so would be a death sentence for me. It is only by good fortune that none of the clan guardians have noticed my presence this deep in their territory, but that may be a blessing of the cazka deterring them from venturing in this direction while it makes its home here. If I were discovered here outside of the selecting season, I could be immediately executed on sight as a trespasser.”

Noelle felt lightheaded as the blood drained from her face. She had not realized just what he was risking following her to camp and lingering so long for her sake. Hell, for all she knew the Warderoon forcibly “took in” the other team to establish them as breeders. She definitely wasn’t signing on for the fate of a captive breeder dressed up to resemble some kind of clan adoption. Any lingering reluctance she had released as a new urgency to get far as possible from the Warderoon territory took its place. She forced a nervous smile to her face and tried to appear casual, and she took one last glance around to make sure she wasn’t forgetting anything.

“Well, that’s that then. I think I have everything I will need,” she murmured. “Let’s get out of here.”

Gwum hummed in agreement and with one fluid motion turned and preceded her out

the door. Despite his fascination with the trailer, it was clear that his interest didn't extend beyond the surface. He was eager to be on his way, and she couldn't fault him for that even if part of her wished that he were as curious about her and her species as she was about him. She bit back a sigh at her own foolishness and followed out the door behind him.

He walked over the root system with a casual grace she envied, his head tilting back as he scanned the trees above. She tipped her head back as well, curious as to what he was looking at, but after several heartbeats she slowly became aware that he was watching her. Her head turned toward him, and she arched an eyebrow at him, to which he offered her a wry smile.

"Your species is not arboreal," he observed.

"Not in the least," she agreed. "Some of us go through tree climbing stages as kids but breaking my arm falling from one when I was young quickly cured me of that. Why?"

The corner of his mouth hitched a little higher and he chuckled. "I did not think of it. All that time following you through the swamp, it only occurred to me now that you would not be able to move through the trees like a Bia." He reached for her hand, his claws lightly skimming over her fingertips, sending tiny electric tingles up her arm. "It is no wonder that you fell when you do not have strong claws to cling to the trees."

"I wouldn't have made that association. Although you seem to jump through the trees easily enough, I thought the Bia were aquatic," she replied, and he nodded in agreement.

"The Bia are aquatic. When we are within our home territory, we spend much of our time on the ground and within the water. Our homes are a far safer place to retreat

than the dwellings your people make but we may also escape into the trees. For traveling purposes, it is far safer to remain above.”

“I see,” she mumbled and glanced uncertainly up into the trees.

Her throat worked as she swallowed nervously. They were really high up there. Fuck, that made for a long drop. Her arm throbbed sympathetically in remembered pain. She didn’t know if she could do this.

“It will not work,” he mused, his voice intruding on her mini panic attack. “We will have to walk along the root systems as you were.” His head turned toward her, his smile replaced with a grim look as he regarded her seriously. “ But if there is danger, you must trust me to carry you up into the trees. There is no alternative when we are out in the open swamplands, and this cannot be any point of argument between us. Safety is the first priority.”

Noelle nodded eagerly. She would happily agree to anything if it meant that she didn’t have to climb the fucking tree. She was not proud of the relief that she immediately felt. Call her a coward, but it was worth not having to maneuver dozens of feet off the ground. “I have absolutely no problem. If there is any chance that we might be in danger, by all means whisk me away. I will try not to scream too loudly... and keep the whimpering as minimal as possible,” she added with a tiny wince.

His mouth twitched in a gentle smile, and she was startled when he tangled his fingers with hers, his large claws overlapping her hand in a fashion that she found surprisingly soothing. Her hand warmed and the rest of her seemed to warm and grow heavy as contentment spread through her. Whoa, this was something dangerous!

“Come then,” he said quietly, his voice pitched so sweetly that her heart seemed to gallop all in its own accord in reaction. “I will protect you, jymlina.”

“Okay,” she whispered and willingly followed him out into the vast swamplands stretched out ahead of them.

### Chapter

### Nine

Traveling along the root systems was an entirely new experience for Gwum—and a novelty that he found surprisingly enjoyable. Of course, part of that pleasure was likely due to the company. For so many revolutions he had traveled alone that having someone by his side, her hand trustingly entangled with his, sent an unexpected warmth through his hearts... and other regions he tried not to think about. It was easy enough to dismiss. He was a male holding the hand of a female. That his body was experiencing a reaction to it was nothing for him to be overly concerned about. He was a healer, after all. He understood these sorts of things better than most and did not possess the same romantic fantasies that many males clung to.

It certainly was not fate or any predetermination blessed by the gods.

He glanced back at her, and he could not help the smile that curled his lips. His little human was certainly a potent lure. The nightglow insects were gathering with the waning sunlight and appeared to be following after her in a long glittering train. A small cloud took advantage of their brief rest to land in her hair and continued to cling to her like a luminous crown. It was quite enchanting even if he did not understand it.

He had never seen nightglow insects act in such a way. It was odd. He stared at her profile as he tried to work out what might be drawing them, but Noelle raised her brows at him, the odd strips of fur arching quizzically. Caught staring, he gestured to the insects.

“The nightglow insects... they are oddly attracted to you.”

She glanced at the cloud of lights and smiled, her hand slipping free from his so that she could glide her fingers through the air among their dancing illumination. “They started doing that the first day I left the trailer. Strange, isn’t it? But kind of magical too.”

“Magical,” he echoed, his skin prickling. It was too unnatural for him to feel completely at ease about it. “I have only seen such concentrated clouds when the water saroong bloom, their flowers covering the vast waterways of the swamplands.”

Her eyes dropped to the surface of the water. “Saroong, huh? Sounds a bit like our water lilies back home. I can’t say that I have ever seen them draw anything quite like that, though.”

He lifted his hands helplessly. He did not understand the comparison, but he understood that he was not meant to. Her observations were clearly for her own benefit. She was trying to make sense of a world that was strange to her. She did not look his way but continued to study the water as if it held some unknown answer. Sighing, Gwum’s gaze swept the surrounding swamp. The light was growing fainter; he would need to stash Noelle soon if he wished to successfully acquire food for them.

“Noelle, it is time,” he murmured, and her eyes snapped up to him in wary surprise.

“Time? Time for what?”

He nodded toward the trees. “It will be dark soon. The best place to rest is there. We should ascend now so that I can make certain that you are comfortable before acquiring food for us.”

“Oh... right,” she replied quietly and glanced up. “Are you sure that it’s safe for us to sleep up there?”

“Very safe,” he assured her. “It may not appear so from here, but the branches are very broad. Nearly every tree has a comfortable little nook where a traveler might sleep. And you will have me beside you,” he added with a playful smile. “I will most definitely not fall, so you will be safe squeezed in between me and the tree.”

She gave him an uncertain smile but did not argue. Instead, she swung her bag off her shoulder and proceeded to open it. He watched in surprise as she withdrew a large metal disc. She slid her hand over its top, and he startled when a small piece popped up and the disc expanded rapidly into a small cylinder.

“Noelle?”

Her eyes lifted to him and danced with amusement. “This handy little device is a water purification unit,” she explained. “It will take this mucky swamp water and filter it into something drinkable. And I don’t know about you, but I prefer to get whatever water I might need for the night before we go up there.”

“You are drinking the water from the swamp?” His voice sounded hollow to his own ears, but he was shocked. While the water wasn’t harmful, most Bia preferred cleaner water sources that took less effort to purify.

“What else is there?” She laughed and shook her head as she began to unfold and assemble her equipment. “Granted, it has a strange pink luminosity to it, but it’s actually not bad. It has a pleasant fruity aftertaste which would actually be quite popular back on Earth if marketed and packaged well.”

Luminous. Pink. That suggested only one thing. Gwum studied her and just barely managed to hold in his laughter.

“Of course. The mystery reveals itself,” he observed quietly to himself.

What an entirely unexpected reaction. Bia biology depended on a diet rich of certain minerals in order to maintain a healthy bioluminescence, much of which was absorbed through their skin while they were in the water, but it seemed that humans, with their thinner skin, had the capacity to surpass them all in this regard. Now that he was looking closely at her, he realized that she looked healthier than she had before. She almost seemed to possess a pink luminosity to her skin and her flesh was smoother and more radiant. She was, in fact, glowing. It was barely noticeable with the sky darkening but he was certain that after prolonged exposure that her bioluminescence would become more pronounced.

The question remained as to whether that would attract predators to a greater degree or discourage them. He sincerely hoped that it would be the latter case as condensed saroong was often used to repel larger predators from the Shoowilp clan territory. Having so much luminous flesh could potentially pose a problem unless it also served to frighten them away by its alienness. Did that factor into the cazka detouring away from the human encampment? He doubted that it would keep it at bay for long, especially since the potency was minimal and likely just enough to confuse it for the time being. Once she left the swamps, it was quite likely that the effects would fade over time, but he could not help but think that her overall health would decline without the benefit of its nutrients.

His observation did not go missed by the human, however. Her head snapped toward him, and she frowned.

“What do you mean?”

“It is the water,” he cautiously explained. He did not wish to alarm her. “I did not even notice it at first until you mentioned it but it all fits. Do you recall the water saroong we just spoke of?”



Noelle nodded.

“It reproduces by spores. The swamps are full of them. It is an important nutritional source for Bia and many creatures that share the swamp, but it seems that humans ingesting the spores has a different effect.”

Her face paled, her luminosity noticeably fading. “I’ve ingested spores... like from a fungus? But that doesn’t make any sense. The filtration unit marked it as safe.”

Gwum nodded. “It is safe. Bia absorb it largely through our skin from swimming in the swamps and invariably ingesting small amounts of it. It clearly supplies important mineral benefits to your human physiology as well. It just has some unusual side effects that I failed to notice. Your skin has a faint glow to it, and,” he leaned forward and sniffed her, a hum of surprise escaping him, “you also smell strongly of saroong.”

Noelle’s mouth fell open for only a moment before it snapped shut with a low groan. “And that is why the nightglow insects are attracted to me. I smell like a giant saroong flower to them?”

He nodded, his lips twitching with his barely contained mirth.

A heavy sigh escaped her as she stared at the water in frustration. “Well, now what?”

“Gather your water since you have an easy way to purify it. This may actually work in our favor as the predators may be less likely to clearly scent you.”

She gave him a hopeful look. “Does that mean we can stay down here?”

Gwum chuckled and shook his head. “A worthy attempt to secure your comfort, but no. We will be vulnerable while we sleep. It is altogether a better idea to be above

where the majority of predators hunt.”

She sighed again, somehow heavier, and nodded. “I figured you would say that. Very well—beam me up, Scotty.”

He paused, uncertain of what she expected. Some of her words were clearly in her native language, leaving him helpless to proceed. Her brow furrowed slightly when he failed to respond, but then a look of comprehension lit her eyes and she giggled.

“Oh! Sorry, Gwum. Don’t worry, most humans wouldn’t get the retro science fiction references either. It’s not considered a fashionable interest, though better received than those who closely follow classic horror. My crewmate, Samara, loves old horror movies, and there’s enough intersection between our preferred genres to give us a lot to talk about. Or at least she did—if she’s still alive. Anyway, I just meant that I’m ready to go up.”

Despite his hearts aching for Noelle’s uncertainty when it came to her companion, tension drained from Gwum, and he chuckled at the absurdity of the whole situation. Ah, stories. He understood this concept even if he did not understand the specific nuances of which she spoke. She appeared to understand that and made no further attempt to converse further on it once making her point. Instead, she waited patiently for him to pick her up, her arms out at her sides in invitation. Grinning, he nodded toward the water.

“Gather your water first,” he directed as he leaned casually against the massive base of the tree.

A reluctant look flitted across Noelle’s face but she nodded and slowly bent down to fill her filtration unit. Once it was full, a green light appeared on its side, and she stashed it back inside her bag before swinging it back onto her shoulders.

“Okay, I’m ready.”

Gwum did not reply but stepped toward her, his arms coming around his lush, fragrant little human. Her body fit against his, her softness yielding to him. Something deep within him responded and he nearly groaned with pleasure. Instead, he sank his teeth into his bottom lip and fought back the surge of desire hardening his cock for the first time in his life. Male Bia did not typically experience their first rush of need until they approached a potential mate and attempted to woo her. As he had never made any such attempts, his body had always remained blissfully silent... until now. Potent desire rushed through him with such strength that he nearly shook from it as her perfume filled his nose.

He crushed her against him as he fought against his base instinct. He wanted to turn her to the tree and mount her. He nearly trembled with the desire to do so. His teeth sank deeper into his lip as he held himself still, denying the demand of his body until the roar of need rushing through his blood gradually cooled and he was able to think again. He hissed quietly to himself but refocused as he tipped his head back to target the desired tree limb. Without warning, he leaped and then was nearly deafened by the shriek that came from the human in his arms. The sound was so unexpected that he nearly missed the branch. It was only by some divine grace that he was able to instinctively grab it on time to prevent disaster.

Digging his claws into the wood, he swung up onto the branch and anchored them in place while Noelle’s fear slowly subsided. At length she stirred, and her head began to swivel as she peered at the light purple foliage and numerous brilliant green little flowers that bloomed in the moss that hung from the branches above them. When he was certain that she was not going to panic at his smallest move, he gradually straightened, drawing her up with him until they were both standing together.

“Wow,” she whispered. “The fog is so much thinner up here. Forget what I said before about magic. This is magic.”

Gwum made a sound of agreement as he led her to a natural alcove among the branches. Storing his satchel there, he gestured for her to enter the alcove. “It is a part of Kren that I would never give up,” he quietly acknowledged. “How any male can give all of this up to be beholden forever inside his mate’s den is beyond my ability to imagine.”

Her head turned toward him as she settled inside, and he felt the weight of her gaze, but he refused to make excuses or apologies. It was how he genuinely felt, and she could not possibly be surprised. Not when she knew that he had no desire to mate. So why did he feel guilty for uttering it? It felt as if he was betraying her somehow.

Turning away from the alcove, unable to meet her eyes, he gestured vaguely to the swamp below them. “I am going to acquire food. I will not be gone long.”

“Okay,” she replied just as quietly.

He swallowed past the stubborn lump of emotion in his throat and nodded as he moved toward the edge of the branch.

“Hey, Gwum... is Kren the name of this world?”

A laugh of surprise bubbled up within him, but it came with no little amount of bewildered disappointment. With everything going on between them at this moment and she was interested in the name of their world?

“It is,” he agreed and dropped from the branch without another word.

He hit the water with hardly any sound and drew his legs up against his chest to slow his descent into the depths so he did not stir the sediment at the bottom. He floated in place for a moment but then kicked downward, descending at a controlled pace toward the bottom. Working quickly, he gathered several small stones to add to the

collection of what he already had. A disturbance in the water just ahead of him was even more fortuitous as a mane-finned willip fish broke in its course toward him and expanded its enormous fins wide in mock threat.

Gwum grinned at the fish. Now that would make a fine meal for his Noelle. Kicking forward, he slashed with his claws and dispatched the large fish with the ease of a male who had fished the great majority of his lifetime. Getting it back to the tree took far more work than the actual hunting, but it was all worth it to see the rapt fascination on her face as he laid out the stones and created a bed for the fire to cook their meal. Watching her smile did funny things to his hearts, but watching her enthusiastically devour every bite of fish that he handed her fed a sense of rightness that settled deep within his gut.

In spite of that knowledge, he could not face the fact that some part of him was growing more and more insistent that this was something he could happily do for the rest of his life.

### Chapter

### Ten

Noelle stretched as she roused from sleep, her body instinctively seeking the warmth of Gwum's body wrapped around her. After so many nights sleeping wrapped safely in his arms, she was becoming far too accustomed to this, and she couldn't even find it within her to regret it. It was going to hurt her in the end—she wasn't stupid to think that this had any hope of lasting—but she couldn't imagine waking up on Xal... no, Kren... without Gwum tucked snugly against her back.

Careful not to jostle him too much, she turned in his arms so that she could admire his sleeping face. He was beautiful. It took her a while to realize it, but there in his arms, with only inches separating his face from hers, she couldn't deny it. His violet skin, while much thicker than hers, possessed a polished smoothness of uniform color except for the sprinkling of bioluminescent markings sprinkled over his nose, forehead, and cheekbones like freckles on a human. His powerful arms were covered in the same markings, but they were larger on that part of him, as well as his broad chest. They were only small on his face, hands, and feet, though she struggled to imagine what sort of evolutionary advantage that posed. Did they aid in some sort of camouflage in the swamps at night?

Gwum stirred and his eyes slowly opened, revealing the oblong slit pupil and glowing green brilliance of his irises before she had the chance to close her eyes and feign sleep as she usually did when they woke.

"Noelle," he breathed, sending a tiny little shiver through her. "You are awake early."

She struggled not to blush. She didn't want to admit to even herself that every morning she'd set her comm to silently wake her early. She told herself it was so that she could get to the supply drop sooner, but that didn't account for how she spent the time watching him until he began to show signs of awakening. And she always allowed her eyes to flutter closed so that he could wake her with his hand stroking in gentle circles on her back.

Damn it!

She blinked and turned away with a yawn. "I just woke up myself," she mumbled as she pushed herself to seated position and brushed her hair out of her face to peer at the lightening sky peeking through the trees. "You're right. It is early."

Gwum nodded and sat up beside her. He remained there for several heartbeats, but she refrained from looking at him until she heard him stand. Only then did she dare to glance at him as he studied the tree line.

"We will be crossing into Shoowilp territory soon. I expect that we will arrive at my home shortly after midday."

Noelle nodded and pushed herself to her feet, her blush returning in full force when Gwum leaned forward to grip her arm and steady her. His touch ignited a warm flutter deep within her belly and her breath hitched slightly in reaction, and it only got worse when he bent and swept her up into his arms. If he noticed her reaction or had any inkling as to what they meant, he thankfully did not acknowledge it. It made her mortification and deep inner turmoil a lot easier to deal with.

Her mother would have been horrified, but then Mom had drunk the whole human purity synthade along with most of United Earth's planetary nationalist bullshit ages ago. She doubted the woman even had a second thought about her family as she proudly marched off to her colonial assignment, abandoning her family at home. No

loss there. Grandma had spirited her away to the swamp to live a life of freedom that few non-gratas would ever know. Grandma wouldn't have been horrified by Noelle's reaction to the alien. She would have cackled gleefully.

Noelle buried her face against Gwum's chest, her lips twitching at just picturing the old woman's delight as he hauled her effortlessly back down the tree. Grandma had often expressed regret that she had been put into a non-gratas breeding program when young. She'd fancied the idea of illegally being carried off by a powerful alien and had quite a few contraband romances on her datapad. Ninety-five and still going strong, the old woman would love that Noelle was currently living her greatest fantasy.

"You seem happy," Gwum observed, a smile in his voice as he dropped onto the mass of roots below them, his powerful legs effortlessly absorbing the shock.

"I was just thinking of my grandmother—my mother's mother," she clarified as he lowered her to her feet and glanced down curiously at her. "She would have loved all of this."

The corners of his mouth hitched. "I imagine that she is very much like you then, possessing a great, adventurous spirit."

Noelle blinked at him, startled by his observation. "Is that how you really see me? Even when I've been literally hiding from everything?"

Gwum lifted his hands in a shrug. "Every Bia knows that there are plenty of occasions where hiding is the more intelligent choice... as is necessary caution. But you came here, and you are persevering despite the challenges and dangers in this world. So I see a female with a great spirit."

She blushed with pleasure, but a laugh startled from her when he suddenly grabbed



her hand and tugged her along with him as large butterfly-like insects with multiple petal-like wings exploded from a nearby bush, their poison-green wings shimmering as they caught the sunlight. He chuckled happily as he led her along the root systems surefootedly as if following a well-worn and familiar path.

The Shoowilp territory was beautiful. While the swamp around the camp had possessed an aethereal presence amid its deep fog and all manner of bioluminescent plants and lifeforms, the swamp here was brighter as the daytime fog lightened up enough to turn golden with its rays and the long vines of glowing flowers were replaced with magnificently large jewel-like flowers that caught the sunlight and shimmered regally with it. There were also more rocky rises protruding from the water, providing natural bridges among the root systems of the trees and bushes that sprouted from the debris collected in the larger gaps in the roots.

Gwum pulled melons from low hanging vines in passing and cracked them open so that they would have something refreshing to eat as they walked. At other times they paused to collect berries or nuts that he effortlessly opened with his claws, plucking the meat out for her. Their pace seemed less urgent since crossing territories and yet, for all its distinct beauty, it seemed that the water qualities didn't differ any because she began noticing that she was fully starting to glow now. Even in the daylight she could see the faintest brightness issuing from her skin. It felt almost freakish, but Gwum assured her it was perfectly natural and in fact was part of what fed Bia luminescence, except they were not as thin-skinned as humans, their thin patches in their markings. That he didn't see anything amiss about her glow and instead seemed to find it particularly charming made her feel more at ease with it, and she had gradually come to admire it herself over the passing days. How many human cosmetics were designed to give the illusion of glow to the skin? And here she was just doing it naturally thanks to the biochemicals found within the environment.

She giggled privately at that but fell silent in wonder as she spied a large ridge protruding up from a huge network of roots. Masses of flowers and silvery pink

mosses clung to it, making it appear almost like a fairy mound.

Gwum, catching the direction of her attention, grinned. “That is my mother’s dwelling. We have reached my maternal pond. It is just a short distance to my home. It is not as pretty, but I am proud of it.”

She saw why less than an hour later. While the ridge marking the entrance was smaller, the entire root system around it was covered with numerous plants that seemed to climb up the tree as well. Many of them flowered but others had distinctive leaves of various shapes and hues that caught the eye. Rather than a lush little decorative garden, she was certain that it was filled with all manner of medicinal plants. It looked like somewhere a healer lived. Noelle smiled up at him as he squeezed her hand and led her excitedly toward it.

“Does everything covering your home have a purpose?” she asked as she entered along a little path carved into the root system and descended into his home with him.

He nodded in reply. “There is much that I need on hand at any given time to help my clan. I have massive storage rooms carved out and reinforced, but the garden is necessary to maintain my supply. Wait here while I find some light,” he murmured, releasing her hand.

The glow of his markings made it easy for her to track his progress. Her own skin was growing brighter in the absence of light but it was still dim. At last, he seemed to find what he was looking for and a flare of light brightened the room as the fire he lit within the hearth grew.

Noelle took the opportunity to look around. The house was constructed in a sort of dugout style, thick roots and packed mud forming the walls reinforced by slabs of rock except for strategic openings. She even swore she saw a shuttered window or two up high near the ceiling. Everything within the house was made of wood and

stone and had the appearance of being comfortably worn with several woven blankets and even a few furs stacked in various baskets and bins neatly lining the walls where numerous shelves occupied the remaining space, each filled with jars of unknown substances. It looked cozy, like a mixture of an ancient lodge and a mad alchemist's house. And it absolutely fit everything she knew about Gwum.

She loved it and felt right at home there with him—damn if she wasn't in a pitiable situation. She had actually gone and fallen in love with an alien. Her grandmother would have been thrilled if it weren't such a doomed romance with a male who, however sweet and caring he was toward her, didn't want her.

“We will sleep overnight here. You should be comfortable enough once the fire eases some of the chill,” he said cheerfully. “Now, would you like to accompany me to my garden while I get these planted?” He tapped the side of his satchel meaningfully, and Noelle quickly nodded.

She wanted to get the most out of every minute because she knew without a doubt that it would all very soon be coming to an end. And that was beginning to scare her as time slowly ran out.

### Chapter

### Eleven

G wum settled on a branch and smiled as the little female sat among his plants. He did not think anyone had ever admired them as she did. Most Bia did not consider anything but the most glorious flowers worthy to plant around their homes. His was a practical exception and never truly garnered much outside of respect offered for his perceived “sacrifice.” No one considered the fact that genuinely preferred the plants which offered so much usefulness to his community rather than the most ornamental of flowers. Besides which, there were plenty of true beauties that created small waves and crests of blooms among the dense foliage.

And among them, Noelle was the most beautiful. He rubbed his chest absently as he watched her, unable to quite believe that it had not ceased beating as captivated as he was by the image of her illuminated by her own pink glow and the gold of sunlight-kissed fog drifting around her. Sitting among the flowers and colorful leaves, she appeared as something precious sent from the gods for a fleeting time among them.

She ran a finger lightly over the newly planted tender nangash sapling closest to her, a smile lifting the corner of her lips in a delicate curve. The pale violet leaves were trimmed in pink that seemed to almost glow where she touched them. It was all an optical illusion, of course. Nangash did not possess any bioluminescent characteristics but her own illumination grew by the day, so much so that it shimmered over the leaves beneath her fingertips. The pale pink of the leaf edges just made it more visible.

It was hard to believe that there were other of her species out there and at least one that had been taken into the Warderoon clan without a word from them. Why would they not have shared such news?

Her breathy sigh of pleasure skated over his skin like a caress, so much so that he was barely able to remain still when his instinct demanded that he go to her. It thrummed in his blood and sang so sweetly that he fairly trembled with it. As if she heard his innermost thoughts and desires, she looked up at him, a smile on her dark pink lips.

“This is so incredibly beautiful, Gwum. Do you really leave this place for days and weeks at a time? It hardly seems possible that it doesn’t demand all your attention to care for it.”

Her words, though simply spoken, rained upon him like the most exotic elixir, their cadence caressing his senses with the hot bloom of pleasure. He shivered in response. How had he not noticed before that her voice could tease the sensitive receptors in his ears as acutely as any mating vibration? As he luxuriated in the peace and beauty of the moment with her, he experienced a breath of clarity. He recognized it and trembled with the shock of it.

Jymlina. His jymlina. He had assumed that it was misdirected and confused instinct, but the call of her vibration issued from her voice was just as effective as that which issued through the skin of a Bia female. He was just aware of it now, and after so many days with her, his reaction was growing nearly uncontrollable. It all made sense now—his strong responses to her and the undeniable pull he experienced, even if it terrified him when it came to what it meant for their future—but he still did not understand how it could have possibly happened.

Aware of her focused attention on him and the quizzical rise of her brow, he shook his head in an attempt to focus.

He cleared his throat and gave her a knowing smile. “The plants mostly take care of themselves. I selected the placement of my dwelling to take advantage of several environmental factors that would naturally support plants with varying needs and applied to where I positioned them too. Everything here has been created quite intentionally.”

She pursed her lips, and he was startled when a musical sound escaped her. “That’s really something,” she observed and smiled broadly as she continued to take in the careful tiers of his garden.

Gwum settled back and indulged his desire to watch her, enjoying her rapt fascination and curiosity. He delighted in every single discovered pleasure and was eager to watch her explore further when their peace was shattered by a sharp song that broke through the trees. Noelle reacted as expected, and the female froze warily before ducking into the flowers as much as she could manage while Gwum’s eyes rose to a lone male making his way through the branches above them.

The lanky form of his elder brother was as unmistakable as it was unanticipated. An unhappy sigh escaped him. He could have sworn that he made it back to his dwelling without anyone in his family taking note. What was the male doing here anyway? Jyel had been long mated for several revolutions and seldom returned to their maternal home. It almost seemed like a plan set up to intentionally vex him. He frowned and straightened, planting his hands on his waist in annoyance as he waited for the male to descend.

“Gwum, there you are!” Jyel called, his deep voice cheerful despite Gwum’s dark glower. “Mother caught sight of your return as she tended her garden. She did not think you saw her signaling to you, so she sent me to fetch you, especially as she spied that you had a small female with you. As you know, it has been Mother’s fondest wish for you to mate. Even if it is fruitless without offspring, she is delighted that you will no longer be alone and is already planning the mating feast.”

Jyel craned his head to catch a glimpse of Noelle through the flowers and leaves, but Gwum puffed up with ill temper and pushed the male aside. Privately, however, he wanted to groan. How had his mother deduced so easily who Noelle was to him when he only just discovered it himself?

Catching the male by the arm, he dragged him aside with a hiss. “Are you insane? You do not just say such things. We are not mates, and for you to claim it as such so simply?—”

“She has not chosen yet?” A look of shock made Jyel’s natural swarthy deep purple coloring fade noticeably as the male grew pale. “But just seeing you there... you look like a mated couple. And Mother was certain.”

“Well, Noelle is not,” Gwum snapped in a low voice. “She is not Bia or Gwyr. She is?—”

“An offworlder,” Jyel finished with a knowing nod. “We had just recently received word of what happened in the Warderoon territory. It is a fascinating story. From what I understand those found by the Warderoon look very much like Bia, but it was from some sort of modification to their physical form.” He peered up at Noelle’s barely visible glowing face. “This is their natural form?”

“Accentuated by the spores of the water saroong. Their skin is thinner all over and so they glow thus when intaking it.”

Jyel made a small sound of awe but ruined it by turning to Gwum with a smirk. “It is a good thing that Mother believes you are claimed and that your little female at least appears to be deeply bonded with you, or else you might have our younger relatives competing with you.” Jyel’s heavy hand slapped him on the back. “Just find a way to hurry and finish this mating so Mother will cease worrying.”

Gwum frowned and cast an unconvinced glance in Noelle's direction. Is that what his brother saw? What his family saw?

"Are you certain? How can you tell?"

Jyel scoffed but not unkindly. "It is the way her eyes never leave us just now, but especially not you. She is looking to you to protect her as a mate would. She was also angled within your direct line of sight and lingering close to you as you sat out in the garden rather than exploring on her own. These are all signs of an attached female. Otherwise, she would have easily abandoned you for her own interests."

Gwum shook his head. "She keeps me within sight because she is vulnerable to the dangers of Kren. Noelle," he raised his voice to call over to her, "come down and join us."

Her nose scrunched skeptically but she nodded and straightened just enough to descend safely from the higher tiers where she'd been sitting and made her way down to them. Gwum gave her an encouraging smile as he elbowed his brother to give them a little more space as she arrived at his side. Her warm body pressed against his side as she leaned into him and glanced curiously over at Jyel.

"This is my elder brother, Jyel. My mother invited us?—"

"More of an order. An invitation can be refused, but no one refuses Mother," Jyel corrected with a friendly smile.

The corner of Noelle's mouth curved in response, and some of the tension that Gwum felt at the prospect of how his little female might react when encountering more of his kind faded.

"Well, I certainly can't refuse then. My grandmother raised me with better manners



than that.”

Jyel’s grin widened. “Excellent. It seems that my timing was quite fortuitous that I am getting the pleasure to be the first to meet you. My siblings will be yellow with jealousy.”

Noelle laughed at his exaggeration, and Gwum frowned.

If it were not for the fact that the male was already safely and happily mated, Gwum would have been concerned about his brother becoming infatuated with his jymlina. All the same, he narrowed his eyes unhappily at him.

“What are you doing here anyway? Should you not be at Viaya’s side?” he demanded.

Jyel sighed and lifted his hands helplessly. “What am I to do? She has all of her female relatives crammed within our home and threw me out. She is spawning again, our fifth child—a daughter this time, I suspect—and as far as she is concerned, I am in the way and annoying her with my tender affections. So I am here to annoy our mother instead,” he concluded jovially.

Gwum shook his head, but he was not entirely surprised. Even healers were squeezed out except in the direst of emergencies. Spawning was ruled over by the nesting female’s female kin, and it was rare that they permitted any others present... even the mate of the female in question and father of her offspring.

“That must be comforting for her,” Noelle observed with a fond smile. “Family is important. And no one really understands what you’re going through better than other female relatives. It is a network of love and security, as well as understanding and sympathy that you don’t really get the same way from anyone else.”

“I never considered it that way before,” he slowly replied. “In my experiences with this tradition, I always saw it as a selfish and foolish whim that erroneously put priority in the wrong place, but when put that way it is easier to understand the reasoning behind it.”

“That is because you are a healer. It makes you prickly because they do not permit your involvement unless there is an emergency,” Jyel teased.

Gwum puffed up at his brother but deflated at the mirthful smile on his female’s face as she patted his hand. “Don’t feel bad. We all get a little prideful when it comes to things we feel are our responsibility. The fact that they trust you when it matters is what counts the most. In a normal birthing situation, I imagine that they have it handled and would have nothing for you to do. My grandmother delivered many babies in the swamps back home before—” She shook her head and gave Jyel a sympathetic smile. “It is a pity that you don’t get to be there to comfort your mate, however.”

The big male grinned in turn. “Do not feel too badly for me. My Viaya has the right of it. I am great with our offspring and a loving mate and father, but I am a nuisance in stressful situations. I would have been allowed to stay if I did not inspire a desire within her to strangle me or remove important parts of my anatomy in the process for saying the wrong thing at the wrong moment.”

Noelle’s laughter rang over the pond just as their mother emerged from her home, her pink eyes fastening immediately on the human with an expression of utter adoration that made Gwum want to disappear into the swamp again. His mother meant well, and she adored all of her sons’ mates as she was never lucky enough to have born a single daughter. A pale hue of purple and pink with dark pink eyes and the long coils of her crest bound at the top of her head with a red vine, his mother was over a head taller and twice as broad as Noelle, and the little human disappeared entirely when she swept her affectionately into her arms. Gwum tensed, prepared to defend his mate

and insult his mother by ripping her out of her arms, if necessary, but relaxed at the soft sound of Noelle's laughter.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Noelle gasped as his mother released her with a gratified smile.

"Such a delight! And look how unusual and pretty you are!" his mother gushed. "The Shoowilp clan is very fortunate to have you."

Gwum winced and attempted to signal to his mother but gave it up when Noelle showed no reaction to the female's statement. She clearly did not understand what his family assumed, but he was not in a hurry to enlighten her as his family continued to enthusiastically extend their greetings while his mother ushered her inside. Perhaps it was not such a bad thing. It made his mother happy. He could come up with a convincing story of some minor tragedy to explain why she did not return with him. They would be sad, but at least they would have this... and he would have this memory as well. For this moment in time, he could pretend that he had a mate and had the pleasure of expanding his family. At least his mother would no longer pressure him into mating. Bia only mated once, and his mourning would be respected.

Somehow that did not make him feel any better. He would endure every lecture and obvious hint from his mother for the rest of his life if he could just have the one female that he wanted but who could never be his.

### Chapter

### Twelve

Noelle was completely charmed by Gwum's family. They were loud and friendly, and brought back memories of the community that she had when she was younger and the home that hadn't existed for many years now. Jyel was jovial and had a jest for everyone, and the tall male clearly formed the backbone of the family with his big heart. He seemed to be everywhere at once, helping wherever he could while the two younger brothers were continuous sources of merriment and delight with their welcome. There were apparently other brothers as well, but they were all mated and living in their own ponds, some in other clan territories. Even with the smaller number of family members present—and one softspoken and kindly father of a faded plum complexion who greeted her warmly when the others weren't clustered around her, eager to fill her cup, fetch her food, or fire questions at her—Noelle was exhausted but in high spirits when night finally came and she departed with Gwum back to his home at the other end of the pond.

She hadn't noticed before, but it was the only other dwelling she saw within the pond.

“Are you the only one who has your own home here?”

He glanced over at her in surprise as he carefully guided her over a particularly knotted root system and nodded.

“This dwelling is traditionally the home for the daughter in residence—the eldest daughter who would dwell within her mother's pond with her mate and offspring to

care for her aging mother and eventually inherit it. My mother did not have any daughters, and since I was not inclined to mate and by Bia laws and traditions incapable of claiming my own pond because I am a male, my mother suggested that I dwell here.”

Noelle nodded. That made sense. It also made sense as to why the elder female had shown so much delight with her presence and all the mate talk that Gwum pointedly ignored. It was none of her business, of course, but it just drove the knife a little deeper into her already bruised heart. She felt bad for his mother too. No doubt he would come up with some kind of lie when he returned, but she had been so happy to have a daughter in her pond that it just made Noelle feel worse.

Gwum suddenly chuckled, startling her as he leaned forward and brushed the claw of his index finger against her cheek. She stared at him in surprise for a long moment, trying to work out what that touch meant when his finger drew away and a nightglow bug drifted up from her cheek. She blinked at it and gave it a wry smile despite the fact that she now wanted to cry. He had touched her just to brush away an insect, that was all.

“It seems that they have followed you after all,” he murmured and gestured to the air above her head.

She looked up and gave a watery laugh at the luminous cloud surrounding her. Despite everything, her spirits lifted a bit at the sight of them.

“They can’t help that they’re all in love with me,” she joked halfheartedly. “I smell good to them, after all.”

Gwum’s expression sobered, and his hand lifted to her cheek to caress it tenderly. “That is not the only thing about you to love. If I were to take a mate, you are everything that I would have ever dreamed of.”

If. A damnable word. She was everything he dreamed of but not enough. She managed a small smile as she leaned her cheek into his hand, savoring the connection. If this were all they had then she would take it and have no regrets. At least the memory of it would be something she could cherish through the months or years Darvel had them stationed there.

His knuckles brushed her jaw as he studied her face, his eyes growing heavy as they glowed with his rising desire and the reflection of the nightglow insects off his irises. His claw brushed her bottom lip thoughtfully and he paused as it very slightly hooked into her mouth. He parted his lips and inhaled deeply as if drawing in her scent. His head lowering fractionally bit by bit as he continued to breathe her in with a soft, rumbling static hum. It was so unlike his usual song that it made the small hairs on her body stand on end. She shivered as hot arousal streaked through her, settling deep within her belly only to blossom and burn wildly at the touch of his lips against hers.

She clung to him as they kissed. Not many species kissed but she was thankful that the Bia did. Their mouths melded together, breath exchanging between them with every kiss. There were no declarations, no promises for tomorrow, just this.

“Noelle,” he rasped regretfully, and she clung to him tighter, not wanting to hear his apologies.

“I know. But we have tonight. Can we have tonight?” she pleaded between their kisses.

Gwum groaned in affirmation, his arms curling around her to lift her off her feet. A hard, inflexible bulge ground against her pubic bone as he held her. It didn’t feel like his cock; it was too rigid—more like a bit of armor than men frequently wore to protect their genitals—but it definitely did something for her as it rubbed with a gentle pressure against her. The sensation seemed to also get him excited too, and he hissed quietly in his eagerness even as her arousal slickened her thighs.

Without a word, he carried her deep into his home and laid her on a thick, luxurious bed. There were strange wooden posts that rose from the corners of the bed and were anchored to the ceiling. They struck her as unusual at first, but she understood their purpose right away when his hands covered hers and he slowly drew them from around his neck as he began to turn her toward the posts. She protested, pulling her hands free from his hold to slide them up over his chest, dragging her nails against his flesh with enough pressure to make his eyes grow heavy with desire. She was determined to keep him exactly where she wanted him.

“No. Just like this,” she whispered, holding his gaze. “This is how I want you.”

He pulled back and gave her a quizzical look. “This is not how Bia...” He shook his head, clearly rethinking his words. “Are you certain this will not harm you?”

That threw her at first, but she enthusiastically nodded and tugged him closer so that he covered her intimately, his large body pressing hers into the bed. “Yes, this is perfect. I want to see you and kiss you while we do this.”

He gave her a contemplative look but nodded, the corner of his mouth hitching indulgently. “It sounds a little obscene to look upon each other while rutting,” he teased.

“Humans are obscene, naughty creatures,” she agreed as she tugged impatiently at his clothes.

Gwum chuckled and gently pulled her hands away so that he could strip off his netted pants from his legs and toss them aside. He made a glorious sight, his violet flesh luminous with orchid pink markings speckling him entirely over his powerfully muscled body on display. Her gaze ran down his length and lingered on a strange bony pouch at the apex of his thighs.

Despite their differences, he was breathtakingly beautiful. He was also quick. It took so little time for him to relieve himself of clothing that it seemed as if she had just taken a breath when his hot hands were on her, stripping away her jumpsuit and TRS with a surprising amount of patience—far more than she possessed. She stretched her arms above her head, drawing her hands out of the way, and she watched him methodically work with a grin. Better just to leave him to it. She probably would have damaged one or both of them in her haste and then complained afterward when she had to wear them again. As it was, she enjoyed each reverent caress as he continued to hum statically, a low song pulsing behind it.

Noelle sighed with pleasure. The way he looked at her with his bright glowing green eyes made her feel craved, as if she were nothing less than the air he needed to breathe. His claws looked so lethal, but they danced over her flesh in teasing patterns, drawing her excitement higher.

“Perfection,” he murmured, and her heart jumped at the note of longing in his voice. It was more than mere desire and it pierced her heart.

Her fingers flew to his lips and brushed over them in a gentle caress, not wanting to spoil the moment with their regrets for the future. “Shh. Just show me.”

He growled softly and kissed her long and deep until he broke away with a hiss as his hips pressed forward. Noelle glanced down and her eyes widened as something long and thick extruded like a shapeless rod of flesh from his genital pouch, parting the softer folds along the seam of his sheath. It was hot and wet and whipped against her belly with its own rapid little movements as he slowly drew back, dragging it across the top of her vulva. She stared at it a little uncertainly, all the warnings fed to her over the years playing through her head. It was ridiculous, though. It was just his cock and, while an impressive size, was not one impossible for her to manage. Unnerving as it appeared with its unfamiliarity, she wanted this. She wanted to share this with him because it was him. And, gods, he smelled good.



Spreading her legs wider for him, she gasped a moan when his cock slicked against the sensitive flesh of her sex. Gwum hissed as a tremor ran through him, but his cock quickly worked its way down and found her entrance. It dipped tentatively into her as it lashed against her most intimate core between her thighs, but in the next breath it was pressing into her, wiggling slightly as it worked its way into her only to stiffen and pressed into her in one smooth and excruciatingly slow glide.

They panted together as he worked his cock into her and cried out as one when it finally reached the mouth of her womb. The groan he gave almost sounded pained as his hips rocked back and drove forward, and he repeated the motion, withdrawing and driving into her again so that their bodies arched together with every thrust. It was a dance of primal choreography as they rocked together. His claws skimmed over her skin at one moment, the webbing between his fingers gliding erotically as his claws pricked her deliciously and shredded the bedding beneath them in the next breath as he speared her with powerful thrusts as his cock sank into her over and over.

He caressed her, breathing a quiet litany of words too low for her make out as his pace quickened, his body growing tauter as his strokes became harder and more desperate. Her cunt squeezed him enthusiastically as her orgasms rippled through her in tingling bursts that preceded the dizzying surges of pleasure. He thrust through them, growling softly in her ear. His eyes rolled and he lowered his head to pant against her skin. His breath teased her skin as it fanned over her, but she startled at the sight of his tongue as it slipped from his mouth and continued to extend longer than humanly possible as he lowered his head. It trailed along her breasts and kept extending as it dragged down the length of her body, finally finding its place between her thighs. Noelle grunted and then immediately moaned loudly in shock and exquisite pleasure as it lapped at her clit in time with his thrusts. The sounds of his pleasure increased in frequency and volume, and his thrusts grew more eager as his cock thickened inside of her.

Noelle clung to him, riding the wave of pleasure with him as it rose higher and

higher. She could feel the sweet tension rising through her back and thighs and belly as a frisson of pleasure swept over her entire body in prelude to the main event. Throwing her head back, she gasped and cried out with the first convulsion within her sex squeezing the rigid length of his cock rutting into her.

And rutting was the only way to describe it. His urgency was peaking, his hiss of pleasure dropping lower into a crackling growl as his pace picked up until he was thrusting into her with abandon, his cock plunging in as he gasped and growled against her ear. It shouldn't have excited her as much as it did, but the tension wound tighter and tighter within her belly, releasing fresh floods of her arousal until it expanded, flared, and burst on a scream of hot pleasure that tore from her throat as the entire world broke around her, shattering with the force of her release.

Gwum bellowed and quickly followed her over the edge, his cock throbbing and jerking. He gave one last hard thrust, pressing the tip of it firmly against the mouth of her womb as it sprayed load after load of his hot cum following every powerful convulsion of her sex gripping his shaft. They spiraled together and clung to one another until they lay spent on the bed. His tongue continued to lap at her until his cock withdrew from her channel. Only then did it retreat back up the length of her body before disappearing between his lips as he rolled onto his back to lie gasping at her side.

"That was... everything I could have imagined and more," he rasped, breaking the silence of the room.

Turning her head, she regarded him tiredly with wonder. "Yeah, you're right. You also have an incredibly long tongue. Emphasis on incredible."

"An evolutionary trait among Bia for collecting nectar. I never believed it could be so useful," he agreed, a wide smile breaking across his face as she giggled helplessly at his side.

Noelle was still smiling as she snuggled into his side. For tonight and all the nights he offered her, she would pretend that her heart would not soon be breaking. That time felt far off at the moment, but she knew that it was coming up on her all too soon.

She would greedily enjoy it while she could. That was all she could realistically do. This life and this male were not hers to keep, no matter how much she suddenly wanted to.

Grandma, what am I going to do?

### Chapter

### Thirteen

Noelle didn't mention their night together when they started out in the morning. Neither of them spoke at all, though they exchanged quiet smiles and frequently touched each other with little butterfly brushes as they got ready and departed the maternal pond. For this purpose alone, their silence was necessary, as was the reason that they were quietly leaving just as dawn broke over the swamp. They were avoiding uncomfortable questions and truths with his family. She was avoiding the painful goodbyes even as she felt it echo through her with every step as she walked through Gwum's home and emerged from its entrance into the early morning air.

The early hour was beautiful as nightglow insects still drifted over the surface of the water in a leisurely dance of light. Normally she would have paused to appreciate it, but looking upon it just made her sad even though she exchanged an appreciative smile with the male by her side. She would fake it until she made it and hoped that pretending she was okay would eventually come true and the pain of leaving would fade.

She had never actually believed that a broken heart could cause physical pain, but it quickly became obvious that she was wrong. Her heart was heavy with a deep, gnawing ache as she followed him across the large root system that protected and formed the walls and foundation of his home, and it grew heavier with every step that carried them farther away. And she nearly wept with unhappiness when the wild beauty of the swamp resumed as the cultivated beauty of the pond gave way. It was foolish because she had known from the beginning, and there had never been any

plan for forever with Gwum, but all the same Noelle was unable to resist looking back, hoping to catch one last glimpse of it to keep with her as the swamp brightened, casting its golden glow over the fog.

Her lips parted in dismay, her heart clenching miserably. She couldn't see it. All she could see was the wild tangle of the Shoowilp swamplands and not even a hint of where Gwum's maternal swamp rested with its vibrant flowers cultivated over generations of his family dwelling there. Her eyes scanned the trees desperately, looking for the deep purple leaves of Gwum's tree brightened with a tapestry of flowers and colorful plants rising up along its side in a colorful garden planted among the tree's natural dips and hollows. And yet she couldn't even pick which tree was his among the many rising from the swamp. It was like everything was being snatched away the moment she wasn't looking—before she was ready.

Frustrated tears filled her eyes, but she wiped them away before Gwum noticed them. The last thing she wanted was for him to feel bad about their parting. He was quiet as he moved ahead of her, and though he frequently glanced back at her, his expression was unreadable. Did he already have regrets?

She bit her lip uncertainly as she watched him walk ahead of her. "You are going to be okay, right? With everything that happened between us, I mean."

He halted and glanced back at her, his brows rising in surprise. Turning, he walked back to her and took her hand in his, a warm smile on his lips. "What happened between us is something that I will always treasure. I will keep it here and here," he said quietly as he brushed his claw against his brow and then over his chest. He paused as he considered her and cocked his head. "Do you have regrets, jymlina?"

She sniffled but gave him a teary smile as she shook her head. "Never. Tell me, what does jymlina mean? My translator isn't helping me."

Sadness crept into his eyes, but his smile widened as he stroked his thumb over the back of her hand. “It is a common term of affection among the Bia. It refers to a flower that is highly favored for its beauty, but now that I think of it, it would be better to call you saroongna. The flower may be common in its swamp, but it gives life and beauty to everything. Just like you do.”

She dabbed at her eyes and grinned. “Saroongna, huh? I kind of like that.”

“Then that is who you will be, forever my saroongna. I will never be able to survive the blooming season because my thoughts will be only for you.”

“Wow,” she whispered in a choked voice, and he squeezed her hand, his gaze softening. Sighing, she glanced around them with the pretense that her longing and grief were for the swamplands they would soon be departing. “I don’t know what I will do without this.”

Gwum’s eyes swept over his swamp, and he nodded as he breathed deeply. “There is no place on Kren that is like Shoowilp territory, but all of the vast swamps of Kren hold a special beauty and bounty that the mountains cannot rival.” He glanced at her, worry darkening his eyes. “I will worry about you being on the mountains, far from this comfort.”

She nodded miserably. She worried about that too.

“You do not have to leave,” he whispered. “You could stay. We would help you survive here.”

His clan would help her survive but she would be just as alone. A promise of love that was not. Whether in the swamp or the mountain, she would be alone. Could she bear being so close to him and never having his love? She shook her head and mustered a sad smile. “My team is out there waiting for me.”

His eyes darkened but he glanced away before she could discern the emotion within them. Did he want her to stay with him? All he had to do was ask her. Please ask!

A quiet laugh erupted from him, and he nodded as he released her hand. “You are right. You belong among your people. You are not meant for the Bia.”

Her heart broke into a thousand painful little shards. “Right,” she whispered as she fell into step behind him and they continued to walk in silence.

### Chapter

### Fourteen

Day after day they walked as they left the Shoowilp territory and crossed into the Fwen and the Gillup territories until eventually they left the swamp and began their ascent. In all of Gwum's exploration and numerous trips to acquire supplies, he had never before been outside of the swamplands. Gwyr were notorious for violently defending their territory, so he never felt any reason to be good enough. Only his saroongna was worth the danger. He wasn't prepared, however, for how it would affect him.

Despite the fog, the air felt dryer, making his skin burn and ache as thirst constantly ravaged him, and his eyes burned so that he was forced to continuously blink them. Even the mountains themselves were miserable as the hard stone cut into his feet with only large patches of moss offering relief. The trees seemed to share his misery as they refused to grow to an appropriate size. Instead, they remained small and thin compared to those that grew within the swamp and far less plentiful, providing for less comfort for their rest. It also made him feel more exposed than ever before, which was bad enough but made worse by the fact that something was hunting them.

"It shouldn't be much farther now," Noelle wheezed breathlessly as she stumbled to his side. "It's just over that rise according to my comm's tracker," she said as she nodded toward a cliff rising in the near distance.

His hearts hurt for her. She was noticeably exhausted, and he wanted nothing more than to snatch her up and haul her back to the safety of the Shoowilp territory whether



she wanted it or not. He could make her happy. He loved her with all of his hearts. He would gladly devote his existence to her, and his family adored her. They would give her all the family she wanted. And he would breed her eagerly every night, preferably multiple times a day, and if they were lucky, they might have offspring of their own. He could give her everything... except the humans she was searching for.

To take her would be selfish and he hated that he loved her too much to hurt her that way. For once he wanted to be selfish and take something for himself, but he could not do it to the detriment of his mate. And she was his mate—there was no denying it or trying to ignore it. He recognized it within his hearts and bred her all throughout the night, mingling their pheromones together inescapably even if she was incapable of scenting it. He was proud to wear her scent but hated that even if it did not disappear that it would eventually fade with the passage of time without her there to renew it.

He squinted at the rocky rise and frowned. There were no trees at all up there. Noelle would have no shelter or defenses, and he was expected to leave her up there?

“There? Are you certain?” he murmured.

She nodded wearily. “Yeah. Not very homey looking, is it? That’s just the drop site. It was a bit off course but at least the plateau isn’t too far away. Hopefully it won’t look so... so...”

“Dead,” he supplied. Sighing, he turned toward her reluctantly, not wishing to hear her refuse him again but unable to go further in good conscience. “Noelle, I do not like this. I...” He froze, his senses sharpening as a crackling thrum rose.

Cazka? What was a cazka doing out of the swamp? Unless it had followed them from the human camp. It was not unprecedented for cazka to follow the scent of prey once they have locked onto it for long distances. He had assumed that the predator had

been not able to locate her due to the change in her scent making it nose blind, but they were highly intelligent creatures... If he was right, then it would seem that his initial assumption was incorrect.

It did not matter. The important question was how were they going to escape it without suitable trees to flee into? The cazka was not incapable of scaling trees but did not climb fast and gave up quickly. That was not going to pose the same sort of obstacle with the trees that grew along the mountainside. It was trying to locate them now, the snuffling sound growing louder, all it would take was one loud noise to give away their position and?—

“Gwum, what?—”

“Shh,” he hissed and grimaced apologetically at the look of surprise she gave him. “Cazka,” he whispered as he opened his arms for her and bade her to step into them.

Her eyes swept the forest nervously, but she nodded and closed the small distance separating them, practically climbing up his body the moment she stepped into his embrace. He hugged her to him and swept her up into her arms. They would travel faster this way. They had only one chance and he would need to move fast in order to get them up the cliff to the sole source of potential safety. He just hoped that a human structure designed to be intentionally dropped from the heavens would be enough to keep out a cazka.

He glanced toward her comm and oriented himself, his hearts pounding in his chest as he clutched Noelle tightly to him and leaped forward into a sprint. Sacrificing silence for speed, he raced from the woods and bounded up the cliffside. Tiny pebbles rolled down the cliff at the cazka’s roar and the sound of trees cracking and young saplings crashing to the ground rose abruptly from behind them, and Gwum glanced back frantically to judge the distance separating them as the predator broke from the tree line with a ferocious whip of its head. It barreled toward them, its leathery skin

and the armored scutes that covered its back between vicious spines catching the sunlight in an oily gleam. Its mouth snapped the air, its sharp teeth in a continuously exposed grin as its maw opened with a rattling howl, ropes of salvia falling from its jowls.

“Holy fucking shit, it’s the gator from hell!” Noelle shouted, and she clung tighter to him. “Move it, Gwum! We’re almost there!”

He did not need any further encouragement; sadly he was also going as fast as he could go and already his body was laboring to maintain the speed. The Bia, while capable of moving quickly, were not designed to do so continuously over long distances. He could feel fatigue catching up to him but he stubbornly pushed himself beyond his limits. Just a little farther. He had to get Noelle to safety. He had no chance alone against the cazka, but as long as he got Noelle safely tucked inside with her supplies, he would face what was to come.

He hugged her to him as he ran, his already broken hearts shattering. “Noelle, you will live, I promise. Do not forget that you are my saroongna, this means you are not only life, but you are specifically my life,” he rasped in a labored breath. It hurt to breathe, much less speak, but he had to tell her while he had the chance. He saw the metal structure rising above the rocks just ahead of them, they were almost there. “You are everything that I love and treasure and I would have?—”

He cried out as he stumbled and fell to his knees as he crested the cliff. His body curled around hers as they rolled down the opposite side together until they stopped just shy of the massive metal box. He stared in a daze at it. They were there. He tried to rise but his limbs shook uselessly, his body spent. He wept as he released her, a ragged sob tearing from his chest.

“Go. Run!”

Her feet scrambled for purchase on the rocks but she did not leave him. Instead, she bent down and looped his arm around her neck, shouldering the bulk of his weight as she relentlessly tugged him to his feet. His eyes lifted to the top of the cliff at the sound of small rocks breaking loose and rolling down toward him. The cazka rose over the edge, its rattling hiss turning into a hunting hum as it focused on them. Its jaws opened wide, its spiked spine rising in preparation for the attack.

“Go!” he hissed vehemently, and he tried to push her away so that she was forced to drop him, but she shook her head stubbornly and clung to him.

“No! I’m not leaving you!” she shouted.

The cazka’s muscles bunched and it raced from the cliff, its claws scouring deep grooves as it ran. The air shrieked suddenly in a way that sent a cold trail down Gwum’s spine and he braced himself, curling his body around his mate as much as possible to protect her with his dying breath as it sprung, its claws stretching like the hand of death for him.

The air shrieked suddenly, and an unholy scream filled the air with a sharp thunk . It was followed by a loud crash that could only be made by the impact of something heavy falling as a cloud of dust rose, mingling with the fog. Gwum blinked in surprise, the tension slowly draining from him when he didn’t feel the touch of the cazka’s deadly claws. Coughing a little, he looked over his shoulder toward the beast and his eyes widened. Its body was stretched across the ground, blood pouring from a wound made by a large Gwyr-made metal bolt lodged deeply into its neck.

His eyes snapped up to the surrounding slopes nervously, waiting for the Gwyr to show themselves.

“It’s dead,” Noelle whispered in a voice dull and distant with shock. “How?—”

“A Gwyr bolt,” he hissed. “They are somewhere.”

“Then let’s get to the cargo container and hide before they see us,” she quietly replied.

He nodded. It would not matter. The Gwyr possessed sharp eyesight, and if they had seen the Cazka well enough to fire from such a distance, there was no doubt at all that they had seen them as well. Still, he allowed his mate to haul him to the container where she released him only to inspect it.

“The opening mechanism should be around here somewhere and I—” A startled gasp left her. “Kastle was here!” she exclaimed, and she laughed in disbelief as she swiped a hand over her face. Her fingers trailed over what appeared to be crude shapes carved into the metal. “She left us all a note.” Her brow furrowed quizzically. “She left supplies for me and said to use the transporter inside to bring them up to base camp, but she was going up the mountain. Something about catching a lift with a friend on a rescue mission. What in the world?”

“That would be me,” a deep voice interrupted, and Gwum whirled around with a vicious hiss. The Gwyr male lifted an eyebrow at him but made no move to attack. “Fine reception considering that I saved your worthless hide. But what can one expect from a Bia? You are just fortunate that I happened to be passing by. Regardless, it was not you I am interested in.” His gaze shifted to Noelle and he smiled, revealing his sharp fangs. “You, on the other hand, I am delighted to see. Amanda will be relieved.”

“You know where Kastle is?” Noelle asked doubtfully.

He inclined his head. “This cliffside is on the edge of my property and I happened upon her while hunting much in the same way I came across you—minus the cazka, though that makes a fortunate feast,” he added, licking his lips. He sighed and shook

his head before gazing upon Noelle with a look of admiration. “It seems that she was right about you after all. She said if anyone could come out of the swamps alive, it would be Noelle Xander. I can take you to her, or you can carry on with her instructions if you like. No one will bother you here as it is within the bounds of my territory. So long as I keep up appearances, no other Gwyr will venture to cross into it.”

Gwum frowned. Although the offer of protection would give Noelle the safety that she needed against the Gwyr, he distinctly dislike giving her over to the smug male. He glanced over at her curiously. Would she go with him to be reunited with her companion? He disliked that option even more, but he also knew that he had no power over her decision. That was, after all, her stated purpose.

Her expression shifted to one of uncertainty as she glanced over at him. “What if...” She faltered but drew in a sharp breath, then made a valiant attempt to smile. “What if I didn’t go to the plateau?”

He froze, uncertain whether or not he misheard. “Not go?” he echoed, refusing to allow a false hope to take root.

Noelle’s smile disappeared and she ducked her head, her gaze fixing on the metal shell in front of her. “Yeah, you’re right. It’s probably a stupid idea. I’m basically a dead woman walking in the swamp and?—”

“And I will love every minute of having you under my protection. For the rest of our lives,” he added in a rush as he gently cupped her face and tipped it so that her eyes met his. “I never wish to let you go. You dwell within my hearts, Noelle. You are my mate—the only mate I have ever wanted and will ever want. Please stay with me.”

“Forever?”

“Forever,” he confirmed as he drew her into his arms, hugging her tightly against his heart. He had never wanted a mate. But he did not just have a mate. He had everything.

The Gwyr chuckled with delight. “What a perfect ending... or rather, a new beginning. I cannot wait to tell Amanda.”

The male’s wings flapped as he took to the sky, but Gwum ignored him. Brushing his knuckle beneath her chin, he tipped her head back and claimed her lips with the first of many kisses that they would have for the rest of their lives.

### Chapter

### Fifteen

The return to their pond seemed to take far longer than Gwum remembered it taking to leave for the supply cargo. Although he had already technically mated with Noelle, he wanted to make it official with his mate as a fully aware participant. But to do it properly, it meant waiting until they were home where he could comfortably take her up in their tree in the safety of their territory where they would be undisturbed. It was for this reason that excitement filled him as he spotted the first sign of the pond.

He felt a little guilty for how quickly he abandoned the Gwyr who had rescued him but at least he had the forethought to extend an invitation for the male and his mate to visit before departing. He would just have to inform his mother and the entire clan so that panic would not be raised when they visited.

But first, he wished to mate with Noelle correctly—the way she deserved.

Drawing her to their tree, he climbed with her through the garden and helped her into the lower limb. Higher and higher they climbed, her hand trustingly in his as she allowed him to guide her up until the pond seemed to open up below them. At his side, Noelle turned so that she faced away from the tree and her breath caught as she stared out at the view.

“This is amazing,” she whispered in awe.

He hugged her against his side and dropped a kiss onto the top of her head. “I wanted



to give you this—I needed to,” he corrected himself wryly.

She turned her head, angling it back as she glanced up at him curiously. “What do you mean?” A smile tipped her lips, and she turned into him, her arms wrapping around his torso. “I have everything that I need, right here.”

His heart melted and he gathered her close to his chest, holding her tightly against him. “I hope that always remains true.”

“Life may not always be perfect, but I’m able to freely be with the one that I love. I couldn’t ask for anything more,” she murmured, and he pressed a kiss into her hair as she rested her cheek over his heart.

“I would ask something, however,” he whispered into her hair.

“Hmm?”

Lifting his head, he curled his finger beneath her chin and tipped her head so that she met his eyes. He stared into her eyes, wanting to imprint this moment upon his memory. With the gold-lit mist rolling around them and the flowers in full bloom as they clung to the trees. The moment was perfect.

“Though it has already been done, I wish to properly make you my mate,” he quietly explained.

A confused look crossed her face. “What? I know that you said I’m your mate, but I didn’t realize that it was already done. When did that happen?”

Not wanting to release her from his arms, he shrugged in the more human manner that his mate favored and smiled down at her. “When you first accepted me into your body, I became pheromone bound to you, my scent changing to align with yours.”

Her brow crinkled at him. “But... you still let me leave? Even though we had mated, and you would feel the repercussions of it?”

“You are not Bia,” he gently reminded her. “It is not fair to bind you to the customs of my people when you are not similarly afflicted. Nor did you know beforehand.”

She searched his gaze with concern. “You would never have told me if I hadn’t chosen to come with you.”

It was not a question, but he nodded all the same. “I had already bonded with you. There was no going back for me. I just wanted to have one thing to keep with me... just as you also desired.”

She exhaled slowly with a shaky laugh and shook her head. “I cannot believe how close I came to losing my own mate. And I never would have known it.” Her mouth tightened slightly. “Don’t keep things from me again. If we are mates now, then I must be aware of everything that is going on.”

He inclined his head, his chest tightening with emotion. He truly had a mate who would walk with him. “This I can agree with.”

“Good.” She regarded him seriously for a long moment but then her lips twitched, and she peered at him speculatively. “So, how do we properly mate, then?”

He nodded to the side of the tree. “In the Bia fashion. I turn you to the tree and you accept me in mounting you.”

Her brows rose. “The first time when you kept trying to turn me toward the bed posts?—”

“It is instinct to mate in such a way. Our claws can make breeding hazardous,” he

pointed out with a chuckle.

Her eyes fell to his claws, and she winced in sympathy though she laughed as well. “That’s fair. I don’t have any such claws, but I can see how evolutionary that just feels like the right position... but... outside?”

She looked uneasily around them, but he smoothed a hand along her shoulder, seeking to both comfort her and draw her attention back to him. It worked enough so that he could feel some of her tension flee just before she looked over at him inquisitively.

“Just this one time,” he murmured. “Few Bia females enjoy mating in the trees, so it is not expected except at the time of mating when she chooses the male from all of her gathered suitors.”

“Thankfully I was able to skip over the step,” she muttered, and his lips twitched with amusement.

“I am thankful, too,” he agreed. “I would not have enjoyed chasing away rivals and working so hard to capture your attention. It is selfish but it pleases me that it was only I who discovered your presence in the swamps.”

“You and me both. I don’t think I would have enjoyed being the center of attention among multiple males.” Her gaze skittered over the trees. “How is this even going to happen without someone seeing.”

The corner of his mouth hitched in amusement. Her sense of smell was truly terrible. She hadn’t noticed the subtle change to scent from the chemical mixture now flowing through him.

“No one will approach,” he assured her, and he took her hand in his reassuringly. “I

have entered into an aroused state since returning to the tree and my pheromone signature is letting anyone within the vicinity to stay away.”

A pink color crept into her face, and she chuckled wryly. “Are you telling me that your entire family knows when you are aroused.”

He inclined his head. “And when you are, as well. Your scent changes quite distinctly.”

“That... is mortifying,” she admitted, burying her face in her hands.

Gwum laughed quietly and he gently pulled her hands away. “It is natural. No one would have the bad manners to comment on it or to intrude upon our privacy.”

She took a depth breath and glanced at the thick trunk of their tree. “So... right here, huh?”

He cocked his head. “If you are too uncomfortable with this, we do not have to?—”

“No,” she interrupted. “This is important. If this is how you mate, then I want it. I don’t want to miss out on anything that is important to you or within your culture. It may be strange to me as a human, but I am here with you, living among the Bia on Kren, not United Earth. I want to share this with you, too.”

Desire sang within him as she turned away from him to face the tree’s massive trunk and flattened her hands against it. Gwum did not think twice. Excitement humming within his veins, he quickly shed his clothing as he slowly approached her until he was standing right behind her. Reaching out, his claws skimmed down over the thick material of her clothing.

“If you are going to dwell among the Bia, then you do not need this anymore,” he

observed as he continued to trace a pattern back and forth along it. “Is this correct?”

She nodded in a jerky motion, and he could not miss the way she trembled in anticipation. “The temperatures and environmental conditions are something I can handle. I don’t need the TRS. Darvel would have just required me to wear it so that it monitored my health as additional precautions. Get rid of it.”

He hummed with pleasure. He would be pleased to see her in Bia clothing. It would not only be more comfortable for her in the humidity of the swamp, but he would take great pleasure in how easy it would be to remove from her.

Without delaying any further, he caught the fabric on his claws and ripped through the outer material and then through the much thicker material that clung close to her body beneath it. Little by little, he exposed her soft flesh, the faint pink luminous glow of it rousing his desire further as the mist brushed over it. It was only when she was bare and his throat sack working as he eagerly sang for her that he was able to take a moment to truly appreciate the beauty of her shape and form. She was glorious! With the golden mist clinging to her and the backdrop of violet leaves among vivid blooms, she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. He caressed her gently with the tips of his fingers and claws as he explored the long line of her back and the plump curve of her ass.

“Oh! That’s nice,” she moaned at his touch and shifted just enough that he caught sight of the side of her plump breast.

Gwum groaned in agreement. It was more than nice. Just lightly touching her sent white hot pleasure burning ceaselessly within his blood as his need to rut and breed grew more and more pronounced. It was beyond nice—it was pure ecstasy. And the round bit of flesh made his mouth water as if it were the most flavorful fruit.

The skin appeared so soft and even more luminous in that spot that he followed the

demands of his instinct and cupped it in his hand, gently fondling it and teasing it soft rake of his claws teasing its tip. Pressing against her back so that his hard sheath nudged her ass, he rested his head over her shoulder so that his tongue could slide down to rub and flick against the little, hard peak. Her breath hitched and picked up, and she whimpered with her pleasure until his ears were full of her sweet sounds of pleasure even as he breathed in the thickening scent of her desire. Her legs shifted in reaction to his touch and Gwum was instantly hit with the scent of her heavy musk as he caught sight of the slick sheen on her thighs.

His cock whipped violently within his sheath in response, and he groaned, a sense of euphoria flooding him as his cock pushed free, parting the soft slit of his genital guard with its powerful thrust. His hips jerked in reaction, and he hissed in time with her loud moan as his cock darted forward and glided in between the globes of her buttocks to wiggle up into the wet heat of her cunt. His bottom flexed and his hips snapped instinctively as he drove his probing shaft deep within her clutch, Noelle's loud gasp of pleasure fueling his desire. His cock immediately stiffened, and he dug his claws deep in the bark of the tree on either side of her as he thrust deep, his cock writhing as it drove into her until finally bottomed out. There it pressed against the entrance to her womb, the tip kissing upon it as it pressed snuggling and flicking against it and the surrounding internal flesh.

Gwum shivered with ecstasy as his fervor climbed rapidly with his desire. He could not have stopped himself from drawing back to thrust again even if he wanted to. With a growl, his hips rocked back, and he thrust forward. Bark splintered beneath his claws as he snapped his hips, driving into her clenching heat. Her channel squeezed around him, rippling as she panted, her moans rising in a sweet melody rivaling any other in the swamp. How he loved this song. His throat sack expanded, and he sang with her, their voices rising and entwining together in a fierce and wild tempo as he rutted into her, his thrusts becoming increasingly primal as he followed the melody quaking from her with her cries of pleasure.

Her channel spasmed around him in response, its reflexive movement dragging on his cock and sucking it on it with deep pulls as she sang with her climax. He rutted harder, his hips snapping sharply to drive him deeper and faster. Flowers had fallen on them at some point and had become crushed between them, adding further fragrance to mingle with their own blending scents even as they left vivid trails of bright red and pink hues stained across Noelle's flesh. Gwum hissed desirously and pounded into his mate, his cock rubbing eagerly against the mouth of her womb with every thrust as her channel tightened in response, driving him to delirious heights of pleasure.

He could feel the electric pulse gathering at the base of his back and within his testicles. It lit up with a burning heat within him even as it tightened further. Her cunt began to ripple harder, squeezing tightly around his length as her soft cries grew louder with her own brimming pleasure. He shivered against her back, trembling with the force of pleasure rapidly climbing even as his cock throbbed and began to jerk and whip with his impending climax. She exploded into a symphony of sound and sensation, her ass rocking back against him and her cunt clenching hard to milk him as her fingernails scrambled along the tree trunk with her cries. Growling wildly, Gwum toppled into bliss as his seed sprayed, his claws digging into the tree with the force of his release.

He shook with it, her cries and rapid pulse of cunt drawing it on and on until he finally collapsed with her in his arms so that they were stretched together along the thick branch. It took considerable effort to find every breath but each of those breaths were breathed with her, every beat of his hearts thudding in time with her singular human heart. Tiny pink flowers rained on them from above, tangling in her crest and he smiled lovingly as he pulled one free to brush it along her cheek.

Her blue eyes had deepened with their rutting but there was a contentment within them that made a deep-seated happiness rise from within his chest.

“Now we are mated,” she mumbled tiredly, a smile teasing the corners of her lips. “Can’t be any doubt now.”

“No doubt,” he agreed with a chuckle. “I am certain the entire swamp heard your mating declarations.”

Noelle groaned but laughed as she cuddled closer to his chest. “Just so long as everyone knows that you are mine.”

“Always,” he rasped. “For the rest of our lives.”

And he would make sure that it was for a very long time as he never wished to be parted the one being who was his own hearts made into flesh.



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Noelle smiled as she carefully maneuvered a little plant on their tree. It was home and had been home for a decade now. Hashi sometimes visited with Amanda, who demanded that she stop calling her Kastle within minutes of the first visit, and even William and Samara stopped to see her from time to time, though the respective duties of their mates frequently kept them busy. As for the camp and Darvel's mission, they happily abandoned it altogether. The promise of citizenship that would give them control over their lives seemed pointless now when they literally had everything they wanted.

With the assistance of Gwyr science, they even had the option to have babies. Samara had no less than three little ones following her around whenever she visited and Noelle didn't know how she had the energy to keep up with kids with wings—in multiples of all things. She was content with her one little daughter who, at four years old, was excitedly exploring her grandmother's swamp with the same abandon Noelle had felt when she was young.

Sitting back, she smiled at the sight of her daughter slipping through the safe water of the pond, her little head bobbing cheerfully as Pyria, Gwum's mother, laughed from where she sat on the rocking chair Noelle made for her.

"Just look at her go!" Pyria exclaimed as she glanced back excitedly over at her. "She is swimming better than anyone I have seen in her age group."

Noelle chuckled in agreement. "She certainly didn't inherit that from me. I can swim but you've seen it. I mastered the dogpaddle at best."

"You swim fine, saroongna," Gwum assured as he leaned over a shahessa flower he

acquired recently from the Gwyr that could boost their nutritional needs and kissed her. “Besides, you have me to help you in the water if you need to move faster.”

“You’re always looking out for me. You’re even trying to grow this temperamental plant for me,” she teased as she nodded toward the delicate, tiny flowers.

Gwum glowered at it as he frequently did whenever it wilted or behaved in any other way that didn’t suggest abundant thriving in the manner of other plants on his tree. She tried to reassure him that it was okay if it didn’t produce as well as it did in the mountains. She didn’t need it as regularly as the other humans since the saroong spores within the swamp kept her healthy, but it was a useful supplement that kept her energy at peak levels in the winter. But he still took issue with it as if its refusal to thrive was a personal affront to his abilities as a healer.

“I would grow a dozen more if I had to,” he assured her, but as heartfelt as his oath was, he couldn’t quite hold back his grimace of distaste. “Please do not ask me to.”

Noelle chortled mirthfully and pressed another kiss to his lips. “As long as I have you, our little Bianca, our pond, and the saroong, I have everything I need. Except for maybe one little thing.”

“Name it, saroongna, and it is yours,” he hissed devotedly as he pressed a warm kiss to her hand.

“Another baby?” she suggested with a meaningful wiggle of her brows that had her mate crush her to him with an excited growl.

“Ooo, are Mommy and Daddy making another baby right now? Cousin Deahry said that mommies and daddies hug and wrestle when they make babies!” Bianca piped up curiously.

Pyria laughed merrily and shushed her. “Nonsense. Do not listen to Cousin Deahry.

We all hug, and some hugs are long and deep because, like the lush beauty of our pond, love just grows and grows.”

“Okay, but if it gives me a baby brother or sister that would be good too,” Biana replied so wistfully that Noelle’s lips curled against her mate’s smiling mouth. “Then that means more love to grow!”

There was no faulting their daughter’s reasoning.

Love definitely did grow and grow. It sang through their swamp and their family. It bloomed richly with an unending beauty that was always changing but became a deeper part of her with every passing of the seasons. A life of freedom, love, home, and family was all that she had ever wanted and what had brought her across the star systems, and now that she had it she wanted nothing more than just to watch it grow.

Grandma, I wish you could see me now. I reached the stars and found everything we ever wanted.