



Flower of Seshana (Tales from the Darvel Exploratory Systems #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Alexandra Harrow signed on with Darvel Exploratory Corporation for one reason, and one reason only—for the opportunity to study native plants on alien worlds. She had not expected to spend her days stuck within the colony labs on M285 with no opportunities to catalog or study the diverse flora of the planet outside of specimens directly brought to her to determine their potential value to the corporation. If she wanted to study anything it meant slipping off on her own with basic, borrowed equipment. It had seemed like such a simple little adventure until the alien who fell on her whisked her away to a shrouded mountain with promises to show her plants like she had never seen. But life among the Vahel is more than flowers and moonlight. It promises a love like no other with two males who wish to lay claim to her heart and hold it forever.

This is a 31k novella in the same world as *Serpents of the Abyss* and *Serpents of the Night* (but preceeding them)

Total Pages (Source): 14

Chapter

One

THIRTEEN YEARS BEFORE THE LIBERATION OF SESHANA

Alexandra Harrow cursed beneath her breath as she grappled with the rope looped through the descender at her waist, bringing her descent in the cave to a halt, sweat making her clothing beneath her thermos regulatory suit stick to her skin uncomfortably. She could not believe that she was relying on archaic rappelling techniques, all because she was unable to acquire the single signature necessary to check out the hover descender from the equipment supply.

Perhaps this had been a bad idea as so many said it was—going alone to an uncharted cave system on M285. However, she had not been left much choice since Nathaniel Hudson, the head director of Colony Merwa, had refused to respond to any of the dozens of requests she made for an appointment to discuss further exploration of Seshana's natural flora. She knew why, too. Despite her onboarding by Darvel, it had been no secret that the company was not interested in much beyond the minerals. Her presence was more of a precaution, in case they encountered any dangerous fungi within the caverns that could be life-threatening to the mining crew. She hadn't been out in the field since she arrived.

"Ridiculous," she panted into her helmet as she reached up with one hand to adjust the light on it. "Should just rebrand themselves Darvel Strip Mining Corporation and drop the exploratory part."

And Corp held onto their assets with an iron fist. Although Mewa was second only to the nearby Colony Alpha and had its own team of supervisors and technicians, she knew the head director reported directly to a Darvel representative on a daily basis. Hudson may have had the necessary rank to run the colony, but functionally he was nothing more than Darvel's little pet. Corp called the shots on every aspect of colony life and sent daily instructions regarding the colony's output and resources. She would love to tell Hudson exactly what he could do with this job, but confrontation was not her strong suit. She was a botanist, which seemed to complement her naturally independent and introverted nature—but her tendency to shyness did not help her career goals any.

"I knew I should have accepted the position at Raza," she muttered, then sighed.

Like most of M285's mining colonies, she was under no illusions that Raza was a shithole, but she suspected it was a slightly better shithole than Mewa. The colony was in a terrible position close to a mountain that, while it seemed to benefit from valuable mineral deposits, was also in prime hunting grounds for the predators that abundantly populated the desert. There had been rumors circulating among the miners about seeing aliens, but the truth was they still did not know what gases potentially filled the caverns or what sort of fauna could during sporous or blooming cycles be hallucinogenic. Although Darvel had encountered many alien races over the last several decades since leaving United Earth's solar system with its first expedition crew, to find a species on M285, a planet so brutally inhospitable, could not only be a revelation but potentially save the colonists when considering the bigger picture.

"Hell, I would blow an alien for decent equipment right about now." She blushed at her own words as she instinctively went to wipe away the sweat beading her brow, and immediately cursed when the side of her hand hit the helmet with a loud thud. "Oww! Son of a biscuit!"

Sucking in her bottom lip, she shook her hand vigorously as she adjusted her position

to rappel even lower into the trench. Most of the known cave systems branched out into upper caverns at a fairly low depth, which had the highest potential of hosting herbaceous lifeforms. Or that was her theory based on reports she had obtained from the miners. Unfortunately, she never had a chance to test this hypothesis as any signs of plant life were often cleared out during the initial excavation. Were they perhaps destroying evidence of alien agriculture? The potential was thrilling, especially since the attempts at agriculture were mixed at best—and seldom favorable. More than that, however, she was curious about wild plants that could benefit the colonies medicinally. The transport ships between Earth and M285 were notoriously slow and had only become even slower with delays in meeting the Corp's ever-increasing fulfillment quotas.

Although the colony officials worked hard to keep the facts from the miners, the truth was that they were going to soon hit a critical point within mere years.

People would starve.

She shook her head grimly, and with meticulous precision she dropped another twenty feet and stopped to plunge an anchor point into the rock. Her comm went off, warning of the approaching sandstorm, but she ignored it. She wasn't resurfacing any time soon. Once she was certain that she was secure, she shifted her weight, moving to the right. There had to be a tunnel entrance into an upper chamber somewhere. She stretched further, grappling along the rocks as she squinted at what appeared to be a darker section within the area illuminated by her helmet's lamp. That had to be an entrance.

Her fingers slid along the wall as she inched over, her lips tightening with strain as her muscles trembled beneath her TRS. She nearly lost her grip altogether when a loud snap echoed from above, followed by a blasting shriek that made her duck her head against the stone wall and cringe. It was only by some miracle that she remembered to hang on rather than slap her hands defensively over the approximate

position of her ears beneath her helmet.

Squeezing her eyes shut, she whimpered as the frantic snaps of something striking against the air grew louder as it drew closer. Her entire body vibrated uncomfortably with the piercing sound filling the shaft, and she choked on a fearful sob as it plummeted directly for her and knocked her off the side of the shaft's wall when the frightful bulk of a very large lifeform collided with her, taking her down with it.

Alexandra's mouth opened in a scream as the stone wall in front of her fell away, and her entire world focused on the yawning pit that stretched out beneath her. Every now and then, the tumbling light from her helmet bounced off the stone walls and jagged obstacles pushing out into the shaft that she somehow only just avoided. A scream rose in her throat at the glimpses of the massive coils rapidly winding around her.

She had never heard of serpents on this planet, but with its size, she had no doubt that once it got ahold of her that it wouldn't take long for the creature to snuff out her life. For now, its massive bulk thrashed against her, its tail winding along her body, the tip brushing far too intimately in certain places as it worked to secure its hold on her. She slammed her elbows and fists against the tail to no avail. It tightened into a suffocating embrace until she felt lightheaded. Head swimming, her head fell back just as two enormous wings suddenly snapped open, wrenching her violently upward and into darkness as unconsciousness descended.

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Chapter

Two

A lexandra groaned as a steady beat throbbed through her head. Her hand went instinctively to her head and then froze when her gloved fingers immediately sank into the thick thatch of her short blonde hair. Her fingers worked their way over to her glasses. It was dark enough that she couldn't see anything clearly, outside of a faint light not too far away, but she was relieved to feel that they were still in place despite somehow losing her helmet. She turned her head toward the light, and she sighed with relief as she scrambled over to where her helmet lay on its side. She turned it hastily in her hands, looking for any sign of damage that might suggest how it came off. Surprisingly, it wasn't broken. Aside from the lamp being left on, it didn't look any different than it did any other time she had taken it off during training or the few times she had ventured very briefly outside of the colony.

"Strange," she murmured.

"Ssss...tahhhhng," a deep voice hissed from the inky darkness.

Her head snapped up in the direction of the voice and she froze. "Hello? Is someone there?"

Something rasped against stone, and then she heard it again—the drifting vocalizations of hissed words drifting to her, this time in a distinctly alien language that her translation implant latched onto.

“Female... strange,” came the broken translation. “Soft, tender... not meat. What... place? Why... here?”

She got a sense of the alien moving in place as the rasping sound scraping against the stone continued but got no closer or farther away. She rubbed her brow as she recalled a long serpentine tail. She had assumed it was a cave-dwelling predator. Although she hadn’t heard of any sort of sentient beings inhabiting the planet, it was comforting to imagine that their collision had possibly been a mistake rather than the thing hunting her. The fact that it clearly recognized that she was not meat was a huge relief. Had it also mistakenly plunged into the depths of the cavern? She recalled that there had been a storm on the surface.

She swallowed nervously as it continued to hiss to itself in a low voice, and she mentally prepared for the strange sensation that would come from the other half of her translation device implanted in her throat. She had never gotten used to the way it felt whenever it manipulated her vocal cords to make the correct sounds to respond to other species.

“Who are you?” she shouted and then recoiled hard enough to fall back onto her butt by the shrill sounds that ripped from her throat. She immediately snapped a hand over her neck and grimaced in pain as the alien shrank away—or so she assumed based on the loud rasp of something heavy scraping against stone. “Don’t go,” she tried again. “Please.”

Without a doubt she would have been berated by any of her superiors if they had been within hearing distance, but they weren’t, and she was suddenly terrified of being lost alone in the cavern. She ran her hands along her waist and sides, and her stomach dropped. She was missing almost all her rappelling equipment. To her relief, the sounds of withdrawal halted, and she could almost feel its curious regard seconds before a pair of brilliantly glowing yellow eyes appeared to stare unblinkingly at her.

“Please? Strange,” it murmured in a volume that suggested it was speaking to itself despite the echo of the cavern.

It was no wonder it had reacted so negatively. She couldn’t even imagine how horrifying that shriek would have sounded echoing through the chamber, especially if the alien hadn’t been prepared for it. That it almost sounded puzzled by her request threw her, however. It clearly had such words in its language but did not expect it from her.

“Yes. Please,” she repeated. “I am frightened. Please don’t leave me alone.”

It hesitated, its indecision evident as those yellow eyes suddenly blinked at her. “You are alone?” it finally queried.

Alexandra bit her lip and prayed that she wasn’t sealing her fate in this moment. Telling an unknown being that one was alone sounded like the height of stupidity that she would have scorned just yesterday, but she didn’t have much choice but to show a little faith.

“I am alone,” she agreed.

“A lone female. How strange,” it repeated, but this time in a tone that registered to her as surprise.

“I came down here to study the plants in the cave system,” she explained in a low voice. “But... you fell on me.”

“Yes,” it agreed after a long moment and let out a long hiss of sound that was likely the equivalent of a sigh. She made a mental note to write a glowing review from the implant used by Corp. “I dropped into the cave to escape the storm but became disoriented. Those of the Vahel do not come into Seshanamitesh territory,” it added.

“A female of the shinara would seek to kill any Vahel male who invades her territory.”

“That... sounds unpleasant,” she croaked as she cast an uneasy look around. “There is another species that inhabits the caverns?”

“Yes,” it hissed. No, not it—the alien identified himself as a male. “Divided by generations, the Seshanamitesh dwell beneath ground. The Vahel dwell above.”

“Okay,” she murmured and tried not to shiver as she peered into the surrounding darkness. “I can see a species living in the caves being missed, but our people have never come across anything like you. If you live above the ground, why aren’t we aware of your presence?”

Another exaggerated rasping sound followed as he shifted in the darkness once more.

“I won’t tell,” she quickly assured him. “Aliens aren’t my department so I’m not under any obligation to report back to base anything that you don’t want me to. Well, I do have to tell them that I encountered an alien species, as that would be a matter dealing with our colony’s safety, but I won’t tell them where you live. Really, I’m only interested in plants. But... I am curious.”

A leathery rustling sound echoed through the cavern, and then the susurrus of what she now knew was scales sliding against stone filled the air as he moved toward her, his yellow eyes growing brighter. A beautiful bioluminescence speckled his sides, and a fanned fringe webbing shaped like scalloped plates ran down his back and tail. The full details of his build and appearance came into focus moments later when he intentionally moved into the beam of her lamp. Alexandra gaped as her eyes fell on his inhuman face and the scaled length of his body that terminated from the pelvis down in a long, thick serpent’s tail.

He was more different than she had imagined.

Although he was built powerfully, with a broad chest and well-developed shoulders that were at least humanlike in shape, his features when put together were startling. His tail was a long rope of muscle, his webbed wings even more massive than she remembered. His face had somewhat recognizable features, given that the nose, mouth, and eyes were in the same places as those of a human, but his eyes were larger, his nose flattened and slitted, and his facial dimensions were far more angular, lacking the soft roundness of human faces. The combination was something like a gargoyle mixed with a serpent. Even his ears, where the leathery skin had numerous flexible segments that resembled feathers, seemed both strange and fitting for him. And that was not even touching on the fact that he had a tail where, even amongst most aliens known to humans, it was more common to see legs.

His mouth parted on an exhale, and she shivered as she caught sight of his sharp teeth. He was not hunting her, but he was definitely a predator. As strange and deadly as he appeared, however, he was not without his attractive features. Although his scales were ivory and cream, his luminescent scalloped webbing glowed a pretty hue of creamsicle orange that immediately made her nostalgic for home.

Alexandra swallowed tentatively as she peered at him. “I’m Alexandra. Do you have a name?”

Yellow eyes blinked at her, and the slitted pupils shrank even smaller in the light of her lamp.

“Kethan,” he replied. His head cocked as his eyes skimmed her speculatively. “You came here to seek plants. I can show you plants. In doing this I can show you where I come from far more easily than I can explain it.”

“Oh!” She sucked in her bottom lip, suddenly uncertain. “I don’t know if that would

be a good idea. I should get back to the colony.”

Twin orange crests of the same webbing rose as two bony spines on his brow rose. Lowered as they had been, she had mistaken the markings for something like hair, but now that they’d been lifted, she could see her error clearly. She had no doubt that the webbing conveyed subtle communication cues, as the slightly raised crests seemed to be an expression of inquiry. It certainly didn’t seem to be an aggressive display.

“Did you not leave your nest to see Seshana’s plants? Will you return before you see even one?”

She squinted at him, uncertain if he was mocking her. His question seemed genuine enough.

“You have a point,” she relented. “And this is likely to be my only chance. When I return, I have little doubt that Director Hudson will revoke my access codes for the foreseeable future.” She gave him a suspicious look. “Are you certain you can show me plants? All my research indicates that they’d be found in the caverns.”

His grin stretched his mouth far too wide, illuminating the serpentine structure of his jaw and mouth as he revealed an even better view of his unnervingly sharp teeth. “For much of the planet, you would be right... except for when it comes to the Zir Mountains.”

“You have plants in your Zir Mountains?”

It hardly seemed likely. The dark mountains that rose above the desert were usually heavily shrouded with fog. Only their lowlands and summits rising above the fog were visible at most times.

He hissed gently. “More than you can ever imagine. More than the Seshanamitesh

could even imagine in their squalid caverns deep within the earth of Seshana.”

Her eyebrows rose with interest.

“I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to see,” she murmured and then nearly jumped when his crests flicked and snapped merrily.

A nervous laugh escaped her as he drew closer. She was stupid. She knew he would have to carry her to help her escape the caverns, but she still couldn’t help the tremor of something she couldn’t define as he glided toward her with the graceful winding of his tail. And when the inhuman heat of his arms surrounded her, she leaned into him and closed her eyes as a shiver rushed through her.

Yesterday’s Alexandra would never have believed this. It seemed that she was getting a real adventure in the field after all.

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Chapter

Three

Kethan held the small female against his chest within the safe circle of his arms as he winged across the dark sky. Although he had fallen deeper into the cave system's shaft than he had initially speculated, he had managed to fly out from its depths quickly enough while letting out only the occasional sonic blast to clarify his position beyond what had been visible to his eyes. All the while, his female had been a warm and welcome weight within his arms, and her soft exclamation when they broke from the cave sent a thrill trembling through him.

He wondered what other sounds she might make.

An excited beat of his hearts made his pulse race in a manner that was uncommon and a little uncomfortable for him. He was certain that it was a sign. Although the female possessed an unusual appearance, the males of the Vahel were not known to be as picky as the females among the Seshanamitesh. Granted, Alexandra possessed a strange appearance even compared to an Uraliel who were generally considered the most unusual descendants of the original ancestors. Not only was she much smaller and possessing rounder features as well as a soft, thick tuft of yellowish silk upon her head, but her attire was also strange—especially the oddly twisted metal framing the translucent glass that rivaled anything that the glassworkers produced.

There had been rumors floating around amongst the hunters of a strange new people occupying the desert and constructing their massive naras out of precious ore and glass. Reports were vague, however, as they were all faraway glimpses, much of

which had been inaccurate. It seemed that they did not possess round, bulbous heads like the giant burrowing zarkulth—for which he was incredibly grateful. It was equally apparent that they did not possess a chitinous exoskeleton either, but rather it was another sort of covering that clung tightly to his female's body. He admittedly was very curious to explore what lay beneath it. Of course, if he dared, he would be left with another dilemma. He would have to consider carefully whether or not he would share such information with his brethren.

Because one thing was abundantly apparent: they were not of Seshana. There was nothing from their world or legends that looked like them, nor did Alexandra seem to know anything about how to survive. There were also the eyewitnesses who recounted seeing the great stars dropping through the heavens, after which the strange naras appeared upon the desert. It only stood to reason that they were from the skies from which even more great stars descended from and returned to their heavenly abodes. As none of the strange two-legged beings had approached the mountains, the Vahel left them alone. But if Kethan shared anything at all about his female, he was certain that it would quickly change as opportunistic males would seek to hunt mates on the sands. And there was a chance that their people would react even more poorly to the mate claiming practices of the Vahel than even the Seshanamitesh did.

In truth, it would likely terrify them if they were all as tiny and fragile as his Alexandra. And that was disconcerting.

His gavo flicked thoughtfully as he considered Alexandra's frightening vulnerability. Even the Seshanamitesh, who seldom ascended far from their deep caverns, knew that the mountains of the Vahel were abundant in plant life. As far as he could see, Alexandra knew less than a nestling. That made her vulnerable, and that realization not only terrified him but roused a surprisingly strong protective instinct within him. It was the natural call of instinct and his fascination with the female that made his decision for him before he had a chance to think thoroughly on the matter. Instinctively his mouth parted, and he drew in her pheromones across the roof of his

mouth with his tongue, and then nearly collapsed into a pile of coils as desire overwhelmed him. He trembled in place, his tail twitching with the hot need coursing through his blood. It should not be possible to be so affected. He had never felt such a strong instinct to breed before, and yet his primary sant thickened abruptly within its sheath at the first breath of her pheromones.

He wanted to fill her with both sants and keep her knotted within his coils as he repeatedly claimed her. He peered down at the meeting point of her thighs where so many legged creatures kept their vents. Although it was covered, heat bloomed beneath his scales at the sight of it so snugly encased, allowing him to freely imagine parting her legs and plugging her thoroughly while he deposited his seed. It was a base and primal instinct and felt entirely right.

He was decided. He would have the small female for his mate. And because mate-stealing was an ancestral tradition among the Vaheliska, he felt no guilt over it. That she was agreeable to coming with him just made it easier. He did feel a small amount of shame over the deceit but pushed it away. He would fly her into the Vahel and keep her satiated, fed, and bred, and she would be content to remain with him and the small matter of his deception would be quickly forgotten. Or, at least, that was usually the case. There were times that females left, but he was curious how she would accomplish it without wings to carry her down from the heights of the Vahel.

But there was one small obstacle.

Quillen.

Unlike many males who preferred more solitary habits upon reaching adulthood outside of those rotating duties that they took on for the safety and wellbeing of their nests, Quillen had been his companion since he was a hatchling. There was no other male in all the Vahel that he trusted more, and yet when it came to Alexandra, he felt a peculiar unease. What if Quillen desired her too? What if he attempted to take her?

Kethan's gavo trembled with unease and he clutched his female to him, ignoring her mumble of protest as he soared over the desert and the dark rise of the nearby mountains, his precious burden tucked safely against him. Angling his body, he extended his tail at a sharply dropped angle to help propel him upward as his wings suddenly beat in a rapid ascent along the shrouded cliffs that rose abruptly from the desert. Alexandra's legs and arms squeezed intimately around him in reaction, sending a pleasurable thrill through him. He nearly closed his eyes at the intensity of the sensation but just barely managed to keep them open so to skillfully climb the sheer cliffs without incident.

The muscles in his arms and shoulders tensed at the sound of wings beating the air in approach as he banked to the left to swoop around a spiring rock formation jutting from the face of the cliff. He did not need to guess who it was. It was the wrong season for hunting the migratory beasts that descended into the desert, so there would be no hunters returning to the nara along his route. That meant that it had to be someone looking specifically for him and there was only one among the Vahel who would make such an effort on behalf of his mother. He groaned quietly to himself, his body tensing completely the moment he cleared the spire and spotted the pale green silhouette of the male he had considered his brother for as long as he could remember.

Now, however, he bristled anxiously, his gavo extending fully in silent warning as he regarded Quillen's bright green wings. How did he not recall that they were such a vivid hue? Did humans find bright green colorations as attractive as his species did? He knew that his own coloring was well lauded and desirable, but how would it stand in comparison to Quillen?

The question rising from the inner workings of his mind gave him pause. Where had that thought come from? While there was always a playful rivalry between them, he had never doubted his own value in comparison to Quillen. But he also never had so much he could lose before.

He gently squeezed Alexandra to him, taking reassurance from the warmth and weight of her body against his. He consoled himself that it would all be fine. He just would not give the male any opportunities to steal her. At this moment, his claim on his little female was tenuous at best. All it would take was Quillen whisking her into one of the many caves along the mountains until their pheromones were firmly enmeshed and he would lose her.

“It shall not happen,” he hissed to himself.

Alexandra wiggled against him in response, her face popping up to frown at him as she planted her chin against his chest. “What won’t happen?”

He jerked his chin toward his friend. “Quillen. I will not allow him to get too close.”

Her head craned curiously as she peered over her shoulder in the male’s direction. “Oh? Is there something wrong with him? Is he dangerous?” she asked, her voice dropping to a worried whisper.

For one long moment, Kethan seriously considered lying to her so that she might be afraid of the other male and work to avoid him herself. But it seemed that even contemplating such a betrayal made his stomach churn viciously.

“No,” he grumbled. “He is a friend.”

“Then why?—”

“He is too friendly,” he interrupted sourly, drawing a melodic sound of surprised laughter from her.

The sound caught him so off guard that his wings partially closed for only a moment in the air. It was enough, however, to make the female in his arms gasp and cling to

him harder as they dropped rapidly before he managed to stabilize his flight once more. Unfortunately, it all served to distract him enough that he failed to notice Quillen's presence until the male swooped far too close overhead.

Drawing his head back, his gavo flaring with annoyance, Kethan hissed at the other male circling far too close for his comfort. Quillen's purple eyes fell on Alexandra in passing and widened with fascination as his wings folded to make another loop around them. Unable to discourage the curious male, Kethan snapped his wings, propelling him through the air at a faster speed as he began to climb the cliffside once again.

His wings tipped, his coils fluidly whipping through the air as he flew close to the cliffs and emerging tree line so not to draw the attention of a passing zaron hunting the skies. Although the large winged predators had massive territories and encounters with them were infrequent, the Vahel learned from the time they were nestlings not to leave the nests at night when they might become lost in the fog, giving a zaron the opportunity to draw close unseen, nor to fly too high where a passing predator might spot them. The only exception was the rare mating flight when a female agreed to seal her life with a male. The risk then, and the male's willingness to protect her, held more weight than the most priceless of treasures.

As a young male he had been bewildered at the willingness of males to take on the flight. But now, with Alexandra in his arms, he could not wait until the mating flight was his privilege to claim.

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Chapter

Four

The sharp rise in their flight along the slopes and cliffs of the Zir Mountains—and the focused stare of the other male who had ceased circling to fly at a fast clip at their side—was enough to make Alexandra cling to Kethan anxiously. The dark rock was as stark as the red desert sands that covered much of the planet and heavily shrouded in mist. It was disorienting and frightening as the peaks and stone spires broke the fog at unexpected moments, all of which the male holding her deftly avoided with a whip of his tail and the dexterous movement of his massive wings.

Worse, they were cutting through the mountains at a dizzying speed, neither male relenting in their pace, creating a hair-raising flight that made her stomach pitch and knuckles grow white with her grip on Kethan. She wanted desperately to squeeze her eyes shut but was at the same time terrified to do so—that somehow not seeing her path to potential demise was worse than watching the mountains unfold around her in a nightmarish display.

Kethan shrieked as the green male cut too close in a dive, his long body angling sideways to disappear in a sleek glide through a crevice cut into the stone looming in the heavy fog in front of them. Alexandra's eyes widened. They had to be joking. But no, Kethan was heading straight for it. Her eyes slammed shut, her muscles tightening as his wings gave several furious flaps to shoot them through the air before snapping wide. The air whipped against her face painfully, but then her world was tilting as he twisted in the air and the brush of the wind was cut off completely as they passed through the cavern.

Every muscle in her body tightened with terror. Even her eyelids smarted with how tightly she clenched them as she buried her face against his chest. It was quite possible that they would never open again, even when she suddenly felt Ketha's flight level out and the warmth of sun replaced the cool dampness of the fog. And still she was unable to open her eyes.

The male holding her let out a hissing, chuffing sound of amusement, and she felt the warmth of his jaw brush the top of her head.

"Look, Alexandra. This is what you came to see," he rumbled.

She frowned against his chest in confusion and very slowly opened one eye to take a cautious glance around her. A gasp of awe escaped her, and both eyes snapped open wide in wonder. The hard world of stone and sand had melted away into a lush jungle hidden within the mountains. Wisps of fog still clung to some places, but the dense trees and plant life clinging to every scrap of soil among the stones grew in a diverse range of shades and hues. It was lush life that she never would have imagined grew on M285.

"What is this? Is this even possible?" she whispered.

Kethan chuffed, the sound rumbling deeply in his chest. "This is what we call the glory of Seshana. When our world began to die, life could only be found within the shelter of the caverns and in the highest mountains."

"And so you separated," she murmured.

He hummed in agreement, but the sound shattered in a vicious hiss as the green male suddenly dropped from above them where he had apparently been waiting unseen within the trees. A bark of amusement escaped him as Kethan neatly evaded him, his wings folding as he dropped low through the trees. Greenery rushed by them, faster

than Alexandra could follow with her eyes. She pushed her glasses back up her nose and held them in place with two fingers as she stared in mute shock at the blur of plant life speeding by her, dotted by bright splashes of floral color. She felt like she was on a highspeed bolt train crossing continents on United Earth, until Kethan's wings snapped open, jerking them abruptly into the air with such a sharp jolt that Alexandra was forced to cling to her glasses for dear life. The last thing she needed was to lose something so difficult to replace on a far-flung planet in the middle of a system outside the normal trade routes.

She smashed them to her face and screamed as Kethan rolled effortlessly in the air, pitching them into one of the dark pits that dotted the side of a bare cliff face looming ahead of them. She swallowed her cry as darkness engulfed them, the steady, fascinating beat of Kethan's hearts against her ear pressed against his chest offering a strange sense of relief. She was aware of the downward pull as his coils dropped and the rapid snap of his wings drawing his forward propulsion up short. His tail lashed against the stone floor of the cavern, and he rolled forward on it as it gathered and whipped through the dark just ahead in a winding pattern visible in the light of her lamp as he slowly brought himself to a halt.

Alexandra clung to him as he remained completely still, as if he somehow sensed her sudden fragility and was giving her a moment to freak out before she collected herself. He was steady reassurance against her, his pulse the only sound in the cave for a long moment until she became aware of the snapping sound of the other male's wings as he barreled toward them. Alexandra clung to Kethan, barely daring to breathe as the green male rolled on his long, winding tail before skidding to a halt with a toothy grin that was no less unsettling than Kethan's smiles. Purple eyes glittered with interest as the other male observed her. His mouth parted and he drew a slow breath, his tongue rising against his upper palate, but he immediately snapped his mouth closed with a look of amused chagrin when Kethan growled at him.

"On edge, brother?" the other male queried, a lilting sound of amusement clear in his

voice, indicative of casual teasing between them.

“Quillen.” Kethan greeted him with an unamused grunt.

“Brother? You two are brothers?” she interrupted as she traded glances between them. “You look nothing alike.”

Her hand closed over her mouth in embarrassment the moment the words left her lips. For all she knew there were patterns of breeding and inheritance with which she was not familiar. She knew hereditary traits were a complicated subject. Even in plants—which truthfully occupied her entire existence.

Kethan snorted in amusement but tossed the other male a sour glower. “Brother by chance and fate. My mother took him into her nest when we were young. His mother refused to tolerate living among the Vahel for a moment longer and left us, leaving Quillen behind. We were thus raised as brothers.”

“And have nested peacefully ever since—until now,” he amended with a trill of interest as his amethyst eyes narrowed on her speculatively. “Kethan never showed anyone such interest before.”

“Oh,” she murmured and gave a nervous shrug, the motion followed by both males watching her intensely. She could feel an embarrassed flush working its way into her face under their scrutiny. “It’s not so strange. He accidentally fell on me in the desert cavern. Unusual circumstances have thrown us together. That’s all.”

“That is all,” Quillen echoed in surprise as he rolled each word over his tongue in his uniquely alien way with their hissing language.

“That is all,” Kethan agreed with a fierce clicking growl directed at his “brother.”
“Cease being a menace and leave the nest.”

Quillen's crests rose slightly as he gave Kethan a sidelong glance that she found oddly humorous by his obvious obstinance. "This is my nest too. Where do you expect me to go?"

Alexandra drew up short and blinked in surprise as she turned and peered into the darkness extended behind her. They live here?

"Mother would never turn either of us away from her nest," Kethan pointed out a little too scathingly, earning a belligerent look of disgust from the other male.

"I am not being chased out of my own nest," Quillen replied with a not too friendly hiss of his own. "If you dislike my presence, then you can leave."

Kethan immediately puffed up with what she gathered was likely insult or some form of dominance—she wasn't sure which.

"Alexandra requires shelter," he snapped, his sharp teeth clicking noticeably with his vehemence.

Quillen growled in reaction. "Then—" he began, but Alexandra interrupted him with a shy laugh even as she wondered if she was crazy for getting involved at all in their argument.

"Actually, there is no reason for anyone to leave. I have plenty of practice being a non-intrusive guest. Ideally you will barely notice that I'm here."

Quillen stared at her for a moment and glanced in askance at Kethan with an uncertain flutter of his crests. "Does she truly believe that we will not notice?"

Kethan didn't answer in any kind of immediately obvious fashion, but she saw his ears move subtly to which Quillen responded with a soft hum as his gaze turned back

to her once more.

“Seriously,” she assured them with her sweetest smile. “When studying at the Interplanetary University of Biodiversity and Cultured Lifeforms, I was crammed into a two-room dorm with five other females. We learned to tolerate being very close with each other.”

Quillen trilled again, his eyes brightening. She didn’t know what was up with him, but his focused gaze made blushes rush over her in response.

“The more the merrier,” she added as she forced a shaky smile to her lips. “I won’t take no for an answer. I refuse to be an inconvenience. If it is truly a problem, maybe I can go stay with your moth?—”

“No!” both males objected in tandem, drawing her up short in surprise.

“It is as you say,” Kethan murmured with a sweet trill of his own as he drew in close and gently nudged her with the lean bulk of his body, “the more the merrier. There is no reason to make things complicated when there is ample room.”

“Precisely,” Quillen rumbled softly. “Shall we show you to your room then? As it happens, we hollowed out a spare room for some reason, but you may find it comfortable. At the very least rest for a bit as you become accustomed to our nest.”

The tension eased from her as she met the green male’s hopeful gaze and smiled. He really was sweet in his own alien way with his eagerness to see to her needs. “A short rest would be welcome,” she agreed. “Thank you.”

Kethan shot the male a sour look but quickly snapped his crests in what appeared to be a silent agreement when his eyes fell upon her in the next moment.

“Come. Let us get you settled.”

The two large males glided ahead of her in creamsicle and peridot, making something within her tighten with an unexpected intrigue. They really were a captivating pair, so much so that she paid little attention to her surroundings as she followed them down to her room until they left her to her rest and so giving her plenty of opportunity to finally note the sparse accommodations, the most outstanding feature of which was a sort of pit-like bed in the center of the floor filled with furs.

She licked her bottom lip uncertainly as she looked at it and adjusted her glasses.
“Well, I did insist.”

Chapter

Five

A lexandra was very aware of the fact that every movement she made was being closely followed by the two Vahel males sharing the “nest” with her. She still found the description for their home a little odd but didn’t dwell too much on it as it was perfectly likable. Despite being fashioned from a carefully carved out cave, it had all the charm that she would expect from a proper home even if its design and proportions were a bit unusual to her. She stared up at the walls covered with bioluminescent flowers in wonder. Kethan’s head tipped as he followed her gaze, his mouth curving in a small smile.

“Galthie flowers,” he murmured. “They grow in most caverns on Seshana. You would have eventually come across them in the cave systems I found you in, but not so numerous as you will find in a nest where we specially cultivate them.”

“They are beautiful,” she replied. “They kind of remind me of your crests,” she added, gesturing to the fanned plate-like webbing running down the length of his back and tail.

He glanced back at it and nodded. “My gavo and krishili markings. Many creatures have such luminous coloration somewhere on them. It is not the same for your home?”

She shook her head. “There are some things that are bioluminescent, but not many. And we have had so little opportunity to study the lifeforms here due to the priorities

of those in charge that I don't think anyone knows that such beauty exists. All we see is red sand," she admitted with a chuckle.

Quillen chuffed in amusement as he settled on his coiled tail a short distance away. "The beauty of Seshana only makes itself apparent for those who know how to see."

How to see? An odd comment, but she didn't have the energy to try to puzzle it out. Instead, she settled on taking in her unique surroundings.

"Do you like the nest?" Kethan inquired with a disconcerted glance around, his crest and wings moving with subtle little snaps conveying his uncertainty.

A smile tugged at her lips despite herself. Despite his inhuman features, he was kind of adorable as flustered as he clearly was.

"It is really nice," she immediately agreed to set him at ease as she ran her hand along an intricately carved shelf.

And truthfully it was. She would have expected something far more primitive giving that the aliens were living in caves, but it was comfortably homey with numerous woven mats laid out over the hard stone floor, more of the same shelves carved directly from the stone wall, and a number of beautifully fashioned tables and benches readily available for the needs of the inhabitants. There were even lush, exotic furs of the likes she would never have expected from the planet she was stationed on.

"Actually, it's amazing," she amended as her eyes fell upon several low shelves carrying large woven baskets, each with a carefully secured lid on top. "Does everything here come from the mountains?"

Kethan's ears flicked and he smiled proudly as his gaze drifted around the room.

“Yes. Everything was painstakingly gathered from the mountain and its woods, and subsequently crafted with considerable care. It took quite some time to fashion, but I am very pleased with it.”

“You speak as if you did this all yourself,” Quillen interrupted, his crest flattening with a soft, clicking growl. “It was I who spent numerous turns of the sun gathering the straw from the wild grasses and reeds to craft the baskets and split and hauled in the wood from the forest. All of that work was done by my hand alone too, while you fussed with the walls and floor endlessly.” His tone toward Kethan was biting, but his expression lightened immediately as he glanced over at her, his crest lifting in an abrupt shift that she felt was meant just for her. “What do you think of my work?” he crooned.

Alexandra glanced back down at the nearest basket, noting the intricate patterns woven into it with the different colored material. She wasn’t certain if that was by nature’s design or if they had been intentionally dyed that way, but either way the results were spectacular.

“You did all of this?” she replied in surprise and ran a finger along the sweeping wooden arm of the bench. Now that she was looking closer, she noticed that several of the branches had a similar woven look in some places that almost reminded her of old Earth wicker. Yet it looked stronger. The lives of miners and scientists alike could be made a hundred times more comfortable with such lightweight but sturdy furnishings. “It is fabulous. I really must have you show me where you acquired the materials. I have never seen anything quite like these plant fibers. I would love to get them under a microscope.”

Quillen’s smile unexpectedly slipped at her words, and he hummed softly to himself. “Perhaps.”

She wondered if it was due to an error with her translator. It sometimes happened

when encountering a new language, although it was less frequent than when the model first came out. She was about to rephrase to offer an explanation of what she meant but Kethan chuffed in amusement and curled a wing around her, cutting off her view of the other male completely.

“Quillen is what the Vahel calls a wood-singer. He can release special sonic vibrations pitched in a manner that helps him locate the bushes he harvests from when the sound bounces off and returns to him. It is a very precise sound that most Vahel cannot distinguish except those born with the perfect pitch and receptors like Quillen. These vibrations can also help him in carving and shaping wood by understanding the formation as well as the strong and weak points of the material.”

Alexandra raised her eyebrows. “Really?”

Quillen murmured in affirmation, but his expression relaxed once more in light of her enthusiasm. “It is not much compared to what the females can do. Whereas the males tend to possess the necessary aggression and reflexes to be superior hunters, the females are our true crafters and stone sculptors and put anything Kethan and I do to shame. They can fashion and bend even the living trees with the help of their songs when they are so inclined.”

Kethan chuffed and flicked the other male with the tip of his tail. “Do not belittle your abilities. They cannot find wood, and they are nearly hopeless at finding hollows within the stone. They may have a powerful range, but their senses are not as finely attuned for the most part.” He turned and gave her a mischievous grin. “He will not tell them where his harvesting spots are either. Do not take any rejection on this matter personally.”

“I did not say I would not,” Quillen countered, his crest rising in what appeared to be a challenge.

“You did not say that you would either,” Kethan countered. “Are you planning on showing Alexandra one of your harvest grounds?”

Quillen’s crests rose the rest of the way like an angry parrot as he glared over at Kethan, the crest and frill descending down his back quivering with tension. Even his wings shook slightly.

“It’s okay if he doesn’t show me right now,” Alexandra interrupted, hoping to defuse the situation. “By my estimation the sun will be down shortly and there will likely be much to occupy us when morning comes.”

Quillen suddenly trilled, startling her. “That is for certain. Therxian will need to be made aware of your presence before rumors begin to spread if Kethan wishes to keep his wings intact.”

“The rumors are exaggerated,” Kethan objected at Alexandra’s startled gasp. “Therxian is a stern and unyielding male, but he is not unreasonable and would not inflict violence upon another of the Vahel for no reason.”

“Not even for bringing a female of uncertain origins into the nara without informing him?” the other male queried with a distinct note of amusement.

A look of concern flitted across Kethan’s face, though he tried to hide it. “It is not such a grave matter, but you are right that it is reasonable to broach the matter with Therxian first.”

Alexandra glanced uncertainly toward the nest’s entrance, half-expecting some terrifying behemoth of an alien warrior to enter at any moment. “Do you think we should go see him now?”

Quillen lowered his chin in a quick, sharp dipping movement in reply. “The sun

descends quickly on the Zir. The hour was already growing late when Kethan returned with you—when I met him it was because I was venturing out to search for him. Therxian will not appreciate our company when he is settling in comfortably into his nest for the night.”

She frowned in confusion. “You seem to possess superior sight. I can’t imagine that the dark would be an obstacle for any of the Vahel.”

“It is not the dark,” Kethan explained. “The fog grows heavier when the sun goes down, and while we can avoid flying into anything by releasing sonic barks, and thus avoiding injury, we are not in the cave systems of the shinaras where one can determine what direction they need to go by this method due to the confined space there. Conversely, we have lost Vahel who have become disoriented in the fog. It is for everyone’s safety that we remain within the nests and mountain caves at night.”

“Not to mention that flying wildly in the fog at night is just pleading with a zaron to pick you off,” Quillen added as he glided past her toward what looked like a sideboard from which he withdrew several wrapped aromatic packages that made her stomach gurgle with interest when she caught their scent.

“A zaron?” she asked, glancing between the males with confusion. As hungry as she was, answers were what she really felt like she needed right now.

“A massive winged predator twice the size of an adult Vahel. They possess a broad, pointed head filled with numerous teeth and a heightened sense of smell and powerful claws to snatch their prey out of the air,” Kethan replied as he turned to take the food packets from Quillen so that the other male could go back to the sideboard to fetch more.

She gaped in disbelief. Impossible—twice the size of an adult Vahel? How could there be a predator of such size that it could be a threat to the Vahel and yet had

escaped the attention of the colonies? What if it left the mountains for easier pickings among the human transports outside of the colony domes? She took the leathery bag handed to her numbly, her gaze dropping blankly down to it.

“You are understandably feeling overwhelmed,” Kethan murmured as he unwrapped his own pack and bit into it with a snap of his sharp teeth. He chewed quickly and swallowed, his concerned gaze never leaving her, not even when Quillen drew close at her other side with a soft, musical trill. “Do not worry, Alexandra. No harm will come to you. I will not allow it.”

“We will not allow it,” Quillen corrected, and Alexandra nodded her agreement before the two could start arguing again.

She would go crazy if they started sniping at each other now, not when the idea of being exposed to dangerous predators of the mountains that she’d never heard of or prepped to deal with it made her tremble with terror. She nibbled the edge of her food, the aroma of meat and some sort of grain filling her nose in an oddly appetizing way... and yet her appetite was gone now that she was forced to recognize some very real dangers of M285. She was so small and vulnerable that she wasn’t even equal to the weakest of the juveniles. Kethan pretty much told her exactly that. Wouldn’t it be ridiculously easy for a predator to pluck her from the safety of his guard? Although the males devoured their meals, they peered at her with concern until she finally lowered the food to address them.

“Do you think.... do you think I could sleep between you two tonight?” she stuttered as an embarrassed blush climbed into her cheeks. “I... I really don’t want to sleep alone, and it occurs to me that the safest place is between the both of you where nothing has the opportunity to grab me.”

A look of surprise registered on both males’ faces, but it was quickly replaced by a reluctant look of understanding and their own worry rising beneath the surface. She

saw it even though they tried to keep it tamped down with the hope that it might not be visible to her. They exchanged a look without speaking a word, but a range of emotions appeared to flit across their faces that made her wonder what else roamed the mountains that she might have to be worried about. Unfortunately—or perhaps fortunately given her current state of mind—they didn’t share it with her, but Alexandra jumped when their crests suddenly snapped as if coming to a decision and their heads turned back to her once more.

“We agree that this may be the best,” Kethan rumbled.

She was immediately relieved and yet her stomach sank with the realization that there had to be other concerns if they were so easily agreeing to her preferred sleeping arrangement.

Not wanting to overthink it, Alexandra devoured the food in her hand and immediately accepted a second that was handed to her. It possessed an entirely different flavor profile, the notes of fruity sweetness hitting her tongue as if it was a luxurious dessert.

Few words were exchanged as they ate, and fewer still when she finally followed them back to a rear chamber possessing an enormous sunken nest in the middle of the room filled with woven blankets and furs. Her mouth went dry at the thought of sleeping between them, but she ignored it so that her courage didn’t completely desert her. Kicking her shoes off, she slipped off her TRS and set it on a bench resting against one wall. She could feel the weight of their eyes on her as she padded over to the bed in nothing but the shorts and sleeveless tunic that she had taken to wearing under her TRS to better handle the heat—even if it was technically against regulations. What could command do about it now anyway? She was more concerned about the abundance of bare skin now exposed and the way the fascinated stare of the two males made her feel. A tremor of awareness swept through her.

Feigning more confidence than she felt, she crouched down at the bed's edge and slipped into the carved-out basin, the plush bedding cushioning her as she dropped down into it. Her fingers slid over the furs and densely woven blankets before finding the edge of one and drawing it quickly around herself. She sank down into the center of the bed, her head pillowed on a long tubular pillow shaped something like an enormous horseshoe, cradling her comfortably.

Despite the comfort of the bed, she snuggled down into her blanket, her heart galloping anxiously as she began to rethink her decision. Perhaps this wasn't the wisest idea. She shifted, preparing to spring back up to her feet when Kethan and Quillen dropped into the bed on either side of her. She immediately stiffened and the males paused, taking their movements slow as they studied her reaction. She stared back at them warily. The warmth of the Vahel males was shocking, that much was undeniable. She certainly couldn't dismiss the fact that, despite asking for this, every muscle in her body had tensed to the point of panic, making her freeze upon receiving intimate contact with their intense heat.

It was so strange that they were so warm when serpents were typically very cool.

Quillen brushed the tip of his silkily scaled tail against her arm and curled it. It felt much less scary. In fact, the longer it rested against her, the more the tension bled from her as a foreign sense of pleasure rushed out from the point of contact.

"Relax," he rasped. "You are safe."

"We have you," Kethan agreed.

A melodic croon vibrated from his chest as he drew her snugly against him, giving Quillen room to fit himself in on her other side. The heat of his breath fanned the back of her head as he joined in with Kethan's song, weaving a sense of complete comfort, intrigue, and safety through her being.

Chapter

Six

Despite the sweet thrum of their melody drifting over her, Alexandra stared up at the soft illumination of the strategically planted galthie on the walls. It was truly curious how much the blooms varied, shedding light in a multitude of hues. Equally odd was her sudden inability to sleep when she'd become well known among the colonists for being able to drift off practically anywhere. More than one worker had come into her lab to find her sprawled in unlikely positions as she slept soundly. Unlike many who struggled becoming accustomed to the silence of the desert, she hadn't suffered even a moment of insomnia since arriving at Colony Mewa.

Was it because her situation was too exciting? It was possible. It wasn't every day that one's career was practically made by having knowledge handed to her that could benefit the colony as a whole. Wouldn't that cause anyone a sleepless night in anticipation for the coming day? She certainly didn't consider herself beyond any other average mortal.

If the simple use of the galthie flowers were anything to go by, there were surely many useful plants she could return to Mewa with. She peered up at the glowing blooms for a time as she listened to the Vahels' song rising and falling around her with their every breath. There was something beautiful and almost hypnotic about their song that sent warmth rushing through her. Oddly, the crooning song from the males never ceased, but it seemed to draw into long, steady notes whispering over her with every exhale, suggesting that they were possibly even singing in their sleep. She turned her head on the pillow, her cheek cushioned supportively on its curve, she

peered over at Kethan, noting the sweeping angles of his face that somehow took on an ethereal quality as the muscles of his face relaxed completely with his deep slumber.

And he was most definitely asleep. Reaching forward, she held her breath as she brushed a fingertip very lightly against the bridge of his nose. When he didn't stir, she smiled and rolled over to repeat the experiment on Quillen. Fascinating. They really were singing in their sleep as if they were so in tune with her presence that even when no longer conscious, they continued to sing to comfort her.

It was... incredible. She couldn't even get her last boyfriend to hold the door open for her as he considered it beneath him to do anything "undeserved" or "unwarranted." Hell, he didn't even care enough to make sure she finished first before he got his when they were in bed together. And yet here she had two alien males nestled on either side of her instinctively attending to her needs.

More than that, however, they were shifting in their sleep, torsos and tails rolling subtly against her, their soft scales rasping gently against her skin in the places it was exposed. The sensation was curiously pleasant, as if they were petting her, seeking to connect with her even in their slumber. Their tails dragged against her, the tips grazing over her navel and along her thighs. A heat slowly stirred to life in their wake, sending a shiver through her as her eyes widened in surprise.

Alexandra swallowed thickly, her heart thudding harder in her chest as she felt a tendril of heat unfurl deep within her belly. Her skin prickled with awareness, and she shivered at the glide of their scales against her as their tails curled and dragged over her and the heat of their bellies undulated faintly against her, the muscles brushing against her under the blanket. Thank goodness she had clothing covering her most intimate places, but her tunic had quickly worked its way up in response to their movement, leaving her midriff bare. And despite their heavy slumber, they were highly attracted to the heat of her bare skin.

She bit her bottom lip, swallowing a moan as a tail flicked against the sensitive skin of her inner thigh just under the hem of her shorts. It didn't attempt to work its way any higher, for which she wasn't certain if she was grateful or frustrated, but the lazy flick back and forth of its tip was slowly driving her mad. Her skin quivered in reaction, her breath coming in pants as the need within her belly grew and grew, expanding through her, leaving her empty and aching.

Alexandra shook her head in silent denial. What she was feeling was forbidden—worse than that, it was against the law! Although many alien species within the Intergalactic Coalition were considered aesthetically beautiful, it was widely taught that relations with them were something that was immoral, potentially physically harmful to the bodies of human women, and thereby made illegal for their own protection. Men, on the other hand, were merely strongly discouraged from it to avoid risking transmission of unknown diseases, but it did not share the same stigma. There were plenty of tales of men settling on far-flung worlds with alien brides. For women, however, only the most depraved were said to enjoy taking the cock of an alien male inside of them. Such a woman was considered dirty and widely disdained by men, though admittedly other women spoke in hushed voices of such encounters as a matter of intrigue and fascination.

Was she such a woman? She hadn't thought so before. Unlike several other women of her acquaintance over the years, she didn't download black market vids or collect 4D holopics of popular alien vid stars. Being with an alien male hadn't even registered in her private fantasies. And yet just being around Quillen and Kethan was doing strange things to her—and being between them in the bed was having an unexpected effect on her libido in ways that no one had ever managed in all of her failed attempts at dating.

She drew in a deep breath, their scents filling her nose. How was it that they smelled so good? They didn't have the wet musk of reptiles but smelled more of aromatic wood and a faint hint of some sort of astringent herb similar to rosemary. It was

incredibly pleasant, but beyond that, every breath of it sparked her arousal. It was like pouring accelerant on a fire until her nipples became hard points, and her sex dripped with her need. It was arousal like she had never felt before, clawing at her in its demand for satisfaction. Her fingers twisted around the blanket as she trembled with desire, her inner thighs slickening with the heat flowing into her panties.

She was certain that she was about to go mad if they didn't fuck her. Not just one of them but both of them. Quillen's tail suddenly wrapped around her left leg completely before finally stilling as if content in its secure hold. She blinked in surprise, but her attention immediately focused on Kethan's wandering tail. It slid along her, experimentally hooking around her ankle for a moment before letting her go to travel back up her leg. Her breath stuttered as it slipped suddenly sideways over her pelvis, its underside grazing the top of her mons before looping upward over her hip and curling back behind it. His tail wiggled for a moment and his song trembled as he grunted as it burrowed beneath her before coming to a rest against the small of her back. The tip flicked briefly and then sedately curled before also stilling altogether.

Her breath stuttered out of her in a long exhale, and the tension in her muscles slowly eased as the intense arousal heating her skin dampened and gradually withdrew. Unfortunately, as it receded, it left a gnawing hunger within her that only seemed to intensify as the scent of the males surrounding her began to cling heavily to the bedding and onto her skin. The truth was that she wanted both of them even after her incredible arousal abated, and the implications of that alone were terrifying.

She couldn't possibly get attached to them. It would never work. And if her superiors at Mewa ever found out, the consequences would be even worse than what she would suffer for her little field trip. It would be the end of her career and would likely land her straight within the mines as Darvel would still hold her contract. She shivered as fear rapidly replaced the vacating arousal.

It was too dangerous to indulge in whatever had sparked between them. She was only there for a short time and would be alone to deal with whatever fallout would possibly come from it. She needed to remember that.

Sighing, she nestled deeper into the covers, the heat from the Vahels slowly seeping into her as their scent and song continued to work their magic on her. She softened between them, a content mumble of sound rising to her lips as her eyelids fluttered and descended as a pleasant languid feeling moved over her with all the effects of a soothing, warm bath.

Her jaw cracked as she yawned. She was certain after a good night's sleep that she would be able to handle everything that the morning threw at her.

Chapter

Seven

Quillen shifted forward with interest to peer down from the ledge where he rested at the small female wandering below him under his brother's keen eye. Kethan was busily pointing out various plants and spoke of them in a low voice that Quillen didn't even bother straining to hear. If it was about the local plants, it was nothing that he had not heard many times from their mother who served as healer for their nara. Besides, he was far more interested in watching the way her bottom upended as she bent down to study the plants up close. It reminded him of how sweet she felt nestled within his coils throughout the night.

Despite his admiration for her strange form, he could not deny that she was a clever little thing. Her mind was sharp and hungry for knowledge about the plants that grew on the Zir and deep within the desert caves. The latter most Vahel had little knowledge of, but he suspected that there were many common plants between those that grew within the caverns and the deep crevices and forests of the Zir and those that grew in the massive desert cave systems that led down to the shinaras, each changed in small ways by the necessity for adaptation.

The tip of his tail curled lazily, his gaze following them as they strayed toward the edge of the nara's clearing. Quillen was not concerned. They would not go far. Kethan would not dare. Life was typically peaceful in their nara, but word had spread quickly that he had returned with an outsider and now all of the nara was in an uproar. Everywhere Quillen looked, Vahel craned their heads and fanned their wings excitedly as they tried to get a peek at Alexandra around the protective barrier of

Kethan's splayed wings as they waited for Therxian's arrival.

The head of the hunters could be a problem. The male was naturally suspicious by nature and his opinion held considerable weight within the nara, not only among its people but with the council. If he refused Alexandra?—

A shift in the crowd tore his attention from his brother and the delectable female beside him as Vahel slid out of the way for Therxian's large frame. Although all Vahel males were considered large compared to those of the shinara, Therxian had an extra quality to him beyond his size that made him stand out. There was confidence and arrogance in his bearing, and an implacable expression often carved into his stony face. Although the male had arrived among the Vahel many revolutions ago, only just barely out of his juvenile stage, Quillen could not recall a single instance when the male cracked a smile.

Therxian glided forward in that moment, his piercing red gaze briefly falling upon the Vahel who hurried out of his way, his large, dark blue wings flexing in a subtle stretch. Quillen stilled and found himself barely daring to breathe as the male's gaze raked the crowd impatiently before finally falling on Kethan.

"Where is it?" the male hissed, making Kethan's wings tense and curve protectively inward around Alexandra as he glanced back over the top of them at the lead hunter.

Kethan's gavo snapped up, and even Quillen could feel his own rising slowly in reaction to the male's open aggression. He understood the reasoning—an unknown could be a potential danger to the nara—but that did nothing to quiet his own response.

"Her name would be Alexandra," Quillen called down before his brother could do something that would get him killed.

Both Kethan's and Therxian's eyes turned immediately in his direction, and Quillen had to admit he enjoyed the look of surprise in his brother's eyes. Why was he so shocked?

"I was not speaking to you, Quillen," Therxian rumbled. "Unless you are eager to share in your brother's punishment?"

"Impossible," Quillen scoffed, but he narrowed his eyes humorously down at the intimidating male. "But I have to speak for Alexandra regardless. And there is no reason to behave as if she is a zaron making a nest within our territory."

"Is she not?" Therxian challenged with a superior smile sketched faintly upon his tightened lips. "We know nothing about the newcomers invading the deserts except to know that it is for our own safety to keep them far from the Zir. She may very well have latched onto you for exactly that purpose."

"It is not like that," Kethan protested, and his jaw hardened with his growing anger as his gavo first flattened and then slowly extended in hostility. "I am the one who fell on her when I dove into the cavern to escape the sandstorm. I am the one who invited her to return with me. She did not even know of our kind."

"So she said—and you believed her," the other male scoffed. "She could have arranged everything with her strange alien ways. We do not know what the offworlders are capable of other than violating Seshana. You likely fell into a well-orchestrated trap!"

Alexandra gaped at the accusation, and she furiously pushed forward to confront Therxian. Quillen's gavo snapped up in alarm, and Kethan tried to grab her wrist in an attempt to stop her but she was quicker than expected. She slipped around him to glower up at the lead hunter despite the fact that she was trembling visibly in front of the big male.

“I did no such thing.”

“Why should I believe you?” Therxian countered, his gaze slitting with deadly intensity upon her. “You are an outsider and cannot be trusted!”

“So were you,” Quillen shot back as he rose from the ledge.

Surprise registered on many faces among the Vahel but the murmur of agreement was unmistakable. He knew Therxian heard it too, because the male’s gavo flattened unhappily and moved in snapped and trembled as he glanced around those gathered.

“Quillen is right,” another interrupted, and Quillen turned his head as Gamay, Kethan’s mother and his own foster mother, pushed through the crowd, a vision of elegance as she emerged from among them on her fog gray coils. She peered around her, meeting the gaze of the Vahel gathered there before turning on Therxian with disapproval. “You were not only an outsider, but a male bred and reared in the shinara,” she ruthlessly continued. “A male bred of royal stock no less. There were many who wished to drive you from the Zir for the same reasons that you have presented. And yet we took pity on you and welcomed you among us and cared for you as if you were one of our own sons. Why do you believe that you deserved more than you are willing to give a female less than half your size?”

His mouth worked silently as his gavo flicked uncertainly as he glanced around the Vahel in search of support. A few lone males from among his hunters came forward to his aid but most withdrew from him with looks of misgivings cast in his direction.

“Time will tell as to her true intent. I only hope that it will not be too late,” he hissed before winding back on his tail, then abruptly springing up into the sky with a snap of his wings.

Gamay smiled kindly and undulated away as she made her way toward Alexandra. To

the alien's credit, she did not flee or meet the female's presence with terror. Quillen knew his foster mother well enough to know that alone would raise Gamay's opinion of her. Indeed, the elderly Vahel smiled and dipped her head in welcome as her arms and wings stretched wide. Alexandra looked at them uncertainly and his heart melted just a little. Such a shy little female. He found it an odd characteristic to see in an adult, but for some reason he found that small difference quite endearing. He dipped his head in encouragement as Kethan leaned forward to whisper something in her ear.

Good. Kethan possessed a gentler, if not highly inquisitive, nature. If anyone could assist her in adapting comfortably into life among the Vahel, it was him. Quillen would help, naturally, but he tended to be brasher and did not enjoy the easy interactions within the nara that his brother experienced—mostly thanks to his own mother's infamy. She had not only deserted her son to fly headlong into the nighttime fog in a state of frenzy, but had been found days later, half-eaten and hanging in a tree where a zaron had left her. Even worse was that Quillen had been the one to find her while playing with Kethan and several other nestlings as they practiced flying high within the trees. The image was burned into his mind—the condition of her torn body and the way her one remaining eye stared sightlessly into the abyss. It had been such a brutal, horrifying sight that afterward he spent many nights shuddering with nightmares within Gamay's coils

The memory still haunted him.

It would be best for Alexandra to get settled quickly and comfortably among the Vahel because one thing was certain: he would never allow her into the fog of the Zir... but nor would he surrender her to her glass nara. No place on Seshana was safe from the hungry predators that hunted it, and he was determined that if nothing else, this tiny female would survive it. He would wrap her in his coils every night and sleep deeply knowing that she was safe there between him and Kethan.

And that had been a revelation. He had found comfort resting there with them

throughout the night without even a hint of the fierce jealousy he had expected. It felt right. He only hoped that Kethan and Alexandra would come to discover the same.

Chapter

Eight

Kethan smiled eagerly, his gavo flaring with his pleasure as he watched Alexandra trail her fingers over the delicate blooms of the mother balm. She did not even seem to notice that she did so as she listened intently to his mother's description of the plant's usage. She certainly had a deep interest in the plants growing on the Zir, and more specifically their application within the nara. He would have thought her a healer but when he had suggested it, she had laughed and corrected him that she only studied the plants—she did not do practical application.

Regardless, even if she was not a healer, his mother certainly was delighted at having a captivated audience. She had hoped to train him despite his inability to form all the proper vocalizations, but like most males of the nara, he was needed as a hunter. And his mother had long given up on him finding a mate with a proclivity for working with the plants or the talents of a healer to whom she could pass on her knowledge and skills aside from the bits he had learned in his youth.

Seeing them together—his mother with her obvious delight and Alexandra's clear fascination about the healing techniques and plants used among the Vahel—did something to his heart. If he had not already desired to claim Alexandra before, due to the call of her pheromones, seeing her open acceptance and willingness to embrace the ways of the Vahel was making him absolutely obsessed with her. And he would have to be blind to not notice that he was not the only one being affected.

It had been two full days and Quillen had not yet slipped off to escape into Zir's

forests. Not only did he attentively recline a short distance away from where she happened to be occupied but he had also led them to some of the harder to find plants, which he never did for anyone. He always returned to the nara with his harvests, but Kethan could not recall a single time that the male brought anyone into the woods with him. More than that, he was attentive, and when he wasn't lying nearby in order to readily be at hand, he was bringing her water and even bits of fruit the moment he noticed that her needs were different and more frequent than their own.

Kethan should have noticed that. He seemed hyperaware of everything she did, and yet other than observing the fact that she tended to eat and drink more, he had failed to make the connection that she required it more frequently than the Vahel did. Instead of being truly observant, he had watched her like a lovesick juvenile pining after the first attractive female he laid eyes on. He would need to do better if he wanted to convince Alexandra to remain. She needed to have confidence that he could take care of her. He just was not entirely sure how to accomplish that. He was younger among those unmated males dwelling within their nara and so lacked experience in such things. He could possibly ask one of the mated males, but then there was a good chance that word would spread among the females back to his mother, making the situation even more difficult for him.

His wings twitched disconcertedly and Quillen glanced over at him with a knowing grin as he dropped from the tree and glided over to settle at his side.

“Beautiful, is it not?” the male trilled.

“You have chosen a suitable location. Alexandra seems to enjoy it,” Kethan replied begrudgingly as he glanced around with approval.

It was the perfect spot to bring Alexandra. The dense greenery of the forest was broken up a sheer rockface and a small clearing was created by a waterfall partially shrouded in its own spray and the fog that clung to the mountain. Not only was the

waterfall a vivid hue of blue, but the clearing was filled with lush, low-lying bushes and vines flowering with large blooms possessing the most captivating mesh of fragrances. The entire area was a feast for the senses. Every beautiful flower accentuated the scenery, and the sunlight caught the droplets of water spraying up from the waterfall, making them shimmer around Alexandra as she stood a short distance from it.

His head jerked around toward his nest brother when the male made a distinct sound of disgust in his throat.

“You are hopeless,” the male pointed out with a huff. “How can you be of any assistance to me in courting her when you have no idea which way your tail curls?”

Kethan’s gavo twitched in annoyance as he peered at the other male. “What are you implying? Are you suggesting that I am lacking?” Quillen only smirked in reply, but Kethan’s gavo flared fully as the rest of the male’s question sank in. “And what do you mean by helping you? You stay out of this,” he hissed. “I saw her first. I brought her to the Zir. I did not bring her here for you to attempt to steal her from beneath my wing!”

Quillen chuffed in amusement. “Listen to you. You sound like a nestling. I did not say I was going to steal her from you. In case it has escaped your notice, she responds to both of us.”

Kethan’s eyes narrowed on the male suspiciously. “What do you mean?”

“Have you not smelled her alluring fragrance in the morning?” Quillen asked, his gavo rising slightly with his question as he peered at Kethan expectantly. At the fanning of his ears, Quillen drew back with a satisfied smile. “That is what I mean. You are young so you probably did not understand what you were scenting?—”

“You are exactly two lunar cycles older than me,” Kethan interrupted as he folded his arms over his chest.

Although he disliked admitting that he did not realize the significance of her delicious scent, he did know how it made him feel. He rose with his sant filled with his engorged primary cock and an overpowering adoration for her. If anyone had dared to try and separate them at that moment, he was uncertain of whether he would go mad or just curl up and die in despair. The extremes of his emotions were frightening but also elating because he knew the expected signs of bonding with one’s potential mate.

Quillen huffed with acknowledgment. “Do you want to know what it means or not?”

“Continue,” Kethan hissed in response.

The other male grinned and leaned in closer. “Desire. More than that, both of our scents have begun to merge with hers, which is the first sign for bonding and acceptance. She is not interested in just mating with only one of us.” Kethan’s eyes widened in shock, but Quillen withdrew with reluctant sigh. “Unfortunately, it does not mean anything in terms of successfully mating. Many males have gotten to this point only to fail when a female decides to reject them.”

His nest brother’s words were a revelation but also equally worrisome. “If that is the case, it is hopeless. Females have always selected a single male and made their acceptance clear to him upon successful completion of a courtship. How would we even proceed if she does not know which of us she favors?”

Quillen’s wings shrugged before extending fully for a powerful snap that lifted him back up into a nearby tree. “Why does it matter?” he countered. “We are not like most males of the nara, nor even on the Zir. We nest together by choice rather than carving out our own territories within the nara. Why should a mate change anything when we have always shared everything between us? We should see this as a

fortuitous opportunity—or destiny.”

Kethan gaped at him. “You mean share a mate? No male shares his mate with another! It is unheard of. We would be lucky to merely be scorned. We could be cast out for joining in an unnatural nest.”

Quillen peered at him, surprisingly unruffled by the possibility—but then little ever seemed to bother the male when it came to the opinion of the nara. He often disappeared for days or weeks at a time before Alexandra arrived. Although Kethan was not an especially valued hunter as he did not possess the strength or talent for it that many other males of the Vahel enjoyed, he was not as set apart as Quillen was. Discovering his mother hanging lifelessly from the tree had marked him more than the scars he bore internally. Many speculated that the gorshiga of his mother was attached to him because of that. He likely would have died as a nestling if Kethan’s mother had not taken him in. It was only because she was a healer that no lasting stigma had attached to her. It didn’t seem to extend to Kethan either, although there were times when he wondered whether he would have been viewed as a more desirable male if not for the closeness between him and Quillen. Many of the elder females often teased them about already being mated to each other and having no room for females.

Could he even share a mate? He tipped his head as he considered it. Quillen did have a point that they were close and shared everything else to a degree that was seen as unusual among the Vahel. Other than not wanting to lose her, he acknowledged that it did not truly bother him having Quillen in the nest after returning with Alexandra, or even at night when all three of them were coiled together. And then there was the fact that Alexandra was not only beginning to bond with both of them and responding to their pheromones, but she was also far smaller and more vulnerable than females of the Vahel. She felt safer and more comfortable when they were both nearby, that much was evident. Perhaps the Vahel would be more accepting of their unique situation than he believed.

“What would you suggest?” he asked, peering up at the male.

A pleased smile stretched across Quillen’s face. “Just do what you do naturally—entice her to forget whatever is holding her back, but do so cooperatively with me so that you are not distracted by attempting to guard against me. If she sees that she does not have to choose and sees what life will be like in a harmonious nest with both of us devoted to her, it may diminish her natural reluctance to be parted from the protection of her own species.”

That made an odd sort of sense. He had to admit that he often overlooked little things because he was often too focused on what Quillen was doing. It was time to take matters into his own hands.

Turning, he clipped a large bloom of the most vivid hue of red from its bush. He smiled down at it, delighting in the perfect fan shape of each petal. It was as lovely as their female.

Theirs... That sounded right.

He turned to hurry to Alexandra’s side but paused to glance back over his shoulder at his nest brother. “How do you know so much about courting anyway?”

The male grinned down at him mischievously. “There is often much to see that one should not see when exploring the forests of Zir.”

Kethan shuddered in distaste, his tongue lolling out as he gagged. The thought of accidentally coming across a courting couple—or worse, a couple in the process of mating—turned his stomach. Perhaps he was as shy and laughably easily embarrassed as Quillen liked to tease him. Even so, he was eager to bring his female pleasure and demonstrate his depth of feeling and devotion to her in every way that he could.

It was the way of the Vahel. The pheromones created the bond for males even quicker than it did with the females so that they devoted every bit of their being to their pursuit—even as much as their hearts. At that point it was impossible for a male to turn back unless the female rejected him, and distance allowed the beginnings of the bond to fade if he managed to survive it. Kethan was already at that point. Every bit of him belonged to Alexandra.

And now it was time to show her that she was the only ashlava he would ever want for his nest.

Cupping the flower in his hand, he headed over to his female's side, returning his mother's smile as her gaze lit on the flower. She clearly understood his intention because she touched Alexandra's arm lightly before departing with an excuse that she needed to return to her nest, leaving Kethan alone with his female. His gavo snapped anxiously when his ashlava turned toward him, and he felt his hearts stutter when a smile bloomed on her face.

“Kethan, how lovely! Is that for me?”

He nodded, his tongues suddenly no longer working properly as they adhered themselves to the roof of his mouth.

“It... it is... not... medicinal,” he managed and immediately cursed inwardly at how stupid that sounded.

That was nothing like what he intended to say. He wanted to say something of his admiration of her intelligence and beauty, simple words of deep affection. And yet that was what came out.

Her brow furrowed slightly for only a moment, but then her smile widened and relief swept him at the soft sound of her laughter.

“Well, I like pretty flowers too,” she assured him as a deep pink hue stained her cheeks.

He liked that. She nearly reminded him of the flower, and he said as such when he handed her the bloom, making her eyes sparkle and dance with pleasure even as her color deepened to perfectly match the petals.

She was more than his ashlava. She was the most perfect bloom on the Zir.

Chapter

Nine

MANY DAYS LATER

As much as Alexandra battled against her attraction to Kethan and Quillen, not to mention the strange inseparable pull she experienced when around them, there was much about life among the Vahel in the Zir mountains that appealed to her. Heavily shrouded from the worst of the desert heat, there was a slow, peaceful rhythm to the nara that she not only appreciated but immediately felt comfortable within. There was no bustle of continuous activity as people scurried from one task to another as there was in the colony. Everyone had a job that contributed to the nara, but it never seemed to be without plenty of time for socialization and rest. Not only was there less commotion, as disputes and aggression seemed less common, but the Vahel themselves seemed predisposed toward a generally accepting existence... not only among each other but when it came to the realities of their world, including the potential dangers that surrounded them. Her only point of frustration was their treatment of Quillen.

It was not a matter that the male liked to discuss, but Kethan had explained it to her one evening and it did not settle her mind any. She did not understand how they could believe that Quillen was essentially a source of uncleanness. They didn't exactly treat him badly. Like all things the Vahel experienced, they merely accepted it and just politely distanced themselves from him. It was painful for her to watch and yet she noticed that Quillen didn't even seem to care about his exclusion. He gave the rest of the nara as little consideration as they gave him. She was frankly shocked that

they called upon him to hunt at all, but when she asked him about it, he had merely scoffed.

“Eating is another matter. Misfortune never seems to follow food when there are not enough hunters to provide it,” he had jested.

“That doesn’t make it right,” had been her surly reply. “No one even comes near you.”

“I do not mind. It means that there is more space for you. I would rather have your company anyway. It would be tiresome if I had to fight off females looking for a strong male to mate. That they would never even consider me is a weight off my mind.”

She hadn’t been certain if he was joking but she had peered at him sullenly, a frown knitting her brows. “What happened doesn’t mean that you aren’t worthy of love, Quillen.”

“Would you consider a cursed male?” he had asked playfully, but his laughter had died at the decisive nod of her head.

“I wouldn’t hesitate to take anyone I loved and who truly loved me in return. No curse or circumstance would keep me from him.”

She still remembered the look on his face as he stared at her thoughtfully, his eyes brightening with obvious delight. She didn’t understand why he was looking at her that way, but his soft trill sent a zing of warmth through her. She shamelessly basked in it despite the niggle of guilt she felt over enjoying the fruit of such sad circumstances.

“Of course you would,” he murmured in a note of wonder, but then he had

affectionately ruffled her hair before redirecting her attention to something else.

She would have marveled at what seemed like a curiously humanlike gesture except that she had been living with him long enough to notice just how infatuated he was with her hair. He was always touching it—at first when she was unlikely to notice but quickly growing bolder as the days passed. Now he would run his claws through her tresses whenever she was close enough to give him opportunity. She had fallen asleep many nights with the big male stroking her hair as he crooned sweetly to her.

The two were so different and yet so complementary to each other that they fulfilled her needs as much as they seemed to satisfy certain needs for each other. Gone was the silent rivalry as they struck some kind of accord, and Alexandra didn't miss it in the least. Instead, she found herself really seeing both males rather than a trumped-up image of themselves they tried to present out of some sense of competition. And she liked that.

Kethan, with his sweet shyness as he offered her small gifts of anything he perceived as something that she liked, was the romantic of the two. He went the extra mile to put the little touches in every moment, even their mealtime, to the point of often making Quillen chuff with laughter. It never bothered Kethan, however, and she admired that. There was genuineness to him that touched her heart because she knew that everything he said and did was entirely true to himself. A quiet, introspective, and intelligent male, he matched her own bookish nature and tendency to work long hours in silence. Her work habit did not even annoy him as it had so many of her boyfriends. Not only did he pick up quickly on whatever she was trying to do but he was also content to simply work quietly alongside her if not accompanying her around the nara at any given hour without her needing to ask. He was also physically demonstrative with his obvious affection. The moment he discovered that she was open to physical displays of affection, he frequently petted her whenever the opportunity presented itself, even if it was nothing more than the tip of his tail hooking around and stroking her ankle as it currently was. It was all very endearing,

and the more she was in his company, the more she wanted to remain there and soak it all in.

Quillen, on the other hand, was the more practical and cunning of the two. He paid attention to details and fulfilled simple needs, working in little things that could easily be overlooked but made her days brighter. Even if it was nothing but a sly remark that brought her a moment of laughter. He did not pet her as often as Kethan, but he always remembered to slip her glasses from her face at night and store them safely within the low table that stood next to their bed every night before lulling her to sleep with his hand stroking through her hair. But what he lacked in social mobility he more than made up for with the breadth of his knowledge as he was able to isolate the best plants among those that they gathered for her specimen boxes with nothing more than his trill and the fanning of his ears in response to receiving the returning vibrations.

She couldn't forget that he defended her either. Quillen, in many ways, seemed to be the unspoken protector of the nest and those who dwelled within it—which somehow also seemed to apply to her since that first night she slept so peacefully between them. She blushed at the memory of the way their tails slid against her legs, belly, and back in rolling strokes as they shifted in their sleep. Even that first night, they had subconsciously gravitated to her, as if desperately needing a connection of flesh between them. Naturally, come morning it went uncommented upon, as did the way they brushed their blunt noses against her, half-awake as they sniffed at her groggily with interest.

It was as if they smelled her arousal. Something that seemed to repeat night after night. Every night, arousal rippled through her as their warmth and musk completely engulfed her and their scaled bodies and tail slid erotically against her. And every morning they were drawn instinctively to breathing in the scent of her skin. She had no idea how much longer it would continue before they realized what was going on, and almost dreaded it.

Would they expel her from the nest? She didn't think they would abandon her on the mountain, but she also knew that they never ventured far out into the desert due to the fazthal beneath the sands.

She shivered, recalling Quillen's description of the beasts. It had been late in the day while they were preparing their meal, and he had taken it upon himself to "entertain" her with tales of the numerous predators that occupied Seshana that she had never heard of—and she was certain would live in her nightmares once she was no longer nestled between Kethan and Quillen.

When it came right down to it, as much as he was a source of amusement in contrast to the more serious Kethan, Quillen was also her rock and stability and the gruff hiss that made the frightening things of Seshana melt away. And damnably, she couldn't imagine leaving him any more than she could leave Kethan.

She glanced at the males from beneath her eyelashes and bit back a sigh.

Oh, Alexandra, what have you gotten yourself into?

Truthfully, deep down in her heart of hearts, she didn't want to leave but sadly didn't know how to stay either. How could she make that commitment when Darvel still held her contract? Not to mention that she didn't even know if they wanted to actually keep her or if they were simply just enjoying her company while she was there with them. She didn't know how much was real, or how much she was just perceiving through the lens of her human perceptions and expectations. She didn't let herself dwell on it, however. Live in the moment had become her new motto, and she lived by it as much as a painfully shy woman with interests that had a history of making others avoid her could.

There was only one thing that marred her peaceful life in the Zir and that was a certain group of males who formed the core group of hunters for the nara—Therxian

and his few supporters among them. They eyed her suspiciously whenever she was out and about within the nara and made her feel every ounce of their disapproval. At least she didn't have to spend much time in their company since the males took to the skies early in the day only to return long before the fog thickened at nightfall. That was her lone consolation. That and having Gamay there to spend time with whenever Quillen and Kethan were called to join the efforts of the hunt. Enjoying the company of the healer was easy, not only because she was Kethan's mother and knew more amusing anecdotes about the male than he likely suspected that she was privy to but also because, as both healer and midmother for the nara, she was an amazing source of generosity and knowledge.

Granted, some of said knowledge was incomprehensible to her because it dealt with the application of sound frequencies for treatment, but when discussions shifted to uses of different types of soil and plant life, she was all ears. She took samples of everything Gamay introduced to her and copious notes on its uses. She even took samples of the various types of dirt and mud, within which she was certain she would find distinct microorganisms related to their application. In fact, she was taking so many samples that she was quickly running out of collection containers.

She activated the closure on another collection, sealing the specimen inside. The yellow flower was visible for just a moment before the container immediately crystallized with the cryogenic mist activated within it. In the past the cryogenic system with the collection box had seemed like overkill—there was a battery life of one thousand years on each box, allowing the potential for scientists to preserve and store samples for long periods of time—but now she was grateful for it. She didn't know how long she was going to be among the Vahel, after all, and though she certainly didn't need a thousand years, it was a relief to not have to worry about the samples losing genetic integrity while awaiting transport back to her lab.

Of course, she couldn't complain about her current accommodations... or her assistant. She smiled privately to herself as she glanced over at Kethan as he

studiously sketched a diagram of the sample in front of him in her book. Although she had taken numerous photos of the samples upon returning to the nest with them, she had appreciation for the old methods, which included labeling various parts of the plants and their uses. And it turned out that Kethan had an even greater eye for detail. Thanks to him, she also had all the information recorded in the Vahel script as well as her notes in English.

And that was not even considering the fact that, despite Therxian's best attempt to expel her from the mountain, the other Vahel were openly friendly with her—no little in part due to Kethan or his mother accompanying her at all times. Quillen was also never far away, but it seemed that the Vahel kept a respectful distance from him, withdrawing entirely from the area whenever he was around.

“You are deep in thought,” Quillen observed in a soft trill, drawing her back to herself.

Setting the specimen box aside, she smiled over at him, noting that he had already finished separating the samples while she had been lost in her reverie. “It’s nothing. Just noting that I’m nearly out of specimen boxes. I imagine that after another few days my task will be as complete as I can manage for the time being. I can’t imagine how I will transport them all,” she added with a quiet chuckle. “In their collapsed and folded form, they’re a lot easier to carry.”

Quillen trilled with amusement, his gavo snapping in agreement despite the speculative look narrowing his eyes. Kethan, however, was more direct with his thoughts. He frowned over at her as he slowly closed her notebook that he had been sketching in.

“So soon?”

She grimaced a little as it seemed that time had passed quicker than she had

imagined, and she shrugged. There was no sense in bringing down the mood.

“Soon enough, but not yet,” she assured him with a smile. “After all, there is plenty of work still to get done.”

The males exchanged a look, but she turned away to busy herself with another task to hide her tumultuous feelings. She didn’t want to make the moment even more uncomfortable than it was. Dashing her hand against her cheek, she reached for another basket of plant material Quillen sorted for her.

“Let’s continue, shall we?”

Chapter

Ten

Quillen followed his female overhead from the trees, his wings helping him glide from one to the next with ease. She had been quiet lately, and he did not like it. Nor did he like that she had snuck away from their nest and the nara at such an early hour to venture so close to the edge of the mountain. It was both out of worry for her safety and how Therxian and his hunters might perceive her activities that sent him after her the moment she was gone. Therxian was just waiting for some small sign of duplicity, and if he thought she was trying to communicate with her alien nara from the mountain in order to betray their position, he would not hesitate to retaliate.

Although he was not certain to what lengths the lead hunter would go to when it came to Alexandra, he was certain that he did not wish to find out. So he maintained a steady pace above her, watching with reluctant amusement as she fought against the brush and trees below.

“What is she doing?” a voice hissed from a branch just above them, startling Quillen enough that he nearly fell out of the tree.

His wings stretching wide, he managed to stabilize himself before delivering a sharp look to his contrite nest brother grimacing apologetically above him.

“I do not know,” he replied, “but she appears to be heading toward Terishal’s Lament.”

He left unspoken any reminder that the cliffside was not only named for ill-fated mates but was the same place where he had discovered his mother. He did not wish to speak of it and summon the sense of dread from the pit of his stomach, but he knew that Kethan recalled judging by the way the male's gavo flattened uncomfortably.

"Why did you let her get this far?" Kethan quietly called down to him, and Quillen's gavo snapped irritably.

"As if I have control over her," he hissed in return. "I am more concerned about Therxian discovering her out here, but I do not wish to frighten her."

Kethan peered at him in disbelief. "And you think that hovering above her like a gorshiga is not going to do it?"

Quillen quietly groaned. He had not considered that part. Thankfully she had not caught sight of him or else she would have alerted every predator and Vahel nearby with her scream. Although humans did not have vocalizations as powerful as the Vahel, he was certain that it would still attract plenty of attention.

"Our ashlava is a strong female," he replied confidently instead.

Kethan snorted. "Strong or not, it is better to approach her from the ground where she can hear us coming. Either way, this is not a good place, and I do not think she realizes that it is directly within sight of the path most of the hunters take when they leave the nara."

That was a good point and one he had not thought out thoroughly. Snapping his gavo in agreement, Quillen dropped from the tree, spreading his wings only to slow his descent just enough that he did not land hard. He could not keep his drop entirely quiet, however, and when his coils hit land, he sank low on them with his hands pressed to the ground on either side of him and he waited with bated breath for any

sound of alarm. When it did not come, he relaxed and straightened only to snap his wings open with surprise when Kethan appeared suddenly at his side.

“Where did you come from?” he quietly demanded.

Kethan gestured to an open grassy spot a short distance behind them, and Quillen gritted his teeth. Of course.

“You could have said something,” Quillen grumbled.

“You appeared determined to drop exactly where you were,” Kethan pointed out. “I figured that you had the matter handled. I am not the most silent hunter and so I selected a spot to compensate for my shortcoming.”

Quillen sighed, but he did not attempt to fight back his smile at the other male’s logic. As if anyone would ever believe that Kethan would have any kind of shortcoming aside from his unfortunate bond with a cursed male such as Quillen.

“Come on,” he grumbled. “We need to fetch Alexandra before she is spotted, or worse, kills herself on those rocks.”

Kethan murmured his agreement and together they darted forward, their wings fanning the air to increase their speed as they glided over the mountainous forest floor. Small rocks bit into his flesh and some of the tiniest pebbles became lodged between his scales but Quillen did not reduce his speed, nor did he pause to rest. He raced forward, spurred by a heightening urgency. Something was itching beneath his scales, warning him to go faster. He had to go faster to save her. He had been unable to save his mother, but by the gods, he would save his mate!

His breath rushed in and out of him as he pushed his body to its limit. He did not know what he expected to find but he felt a sense of relief the moment he spotted

Alexandra at the edge of the cliff, the short yellow fur on her head billowing with the wind. She was there. She was safe. There was no grisly corpse rattling as it hung from the limbs of the tree overhanging the cliff. Those limbs did not even reach the top of her head as she busily worked with her head down, oblivious to her surroundings.

He intended to call out and alert her to their presence, but his words became lodged in his throat when he saw her lift her hands, holding a strange metal object. A whirling part at its top began to move and it started to rise up from her grasp and into the air, carrying with it a number of Alexandra's priced specimen boxes. Clarity rushed to him in that moment. She was sending the samples down the mountain! Right under the nose of Therxian. His gavo standing high with his alarm, Quillen wound on his tail, giving him a clear view of the cursed thing. Therxian would certainly condemn her for this. He hissed vehemently, scooping up a rock in his hand as he did so, and tossed the projectile at the strange metal carrier with all of his strength.

The crack of impact rocketed through the air, and Alexandra cried out in dismay as the carrier tipped wildly to the side and plummeted. She was still staring down at it aghast when he arrived, and he could not help but join her in peering down at the bits of metal scattered over rocks where it crashed. Alexandra's mouth moved silently in shock, but he was relieved that the look she directed was simply one of confusion.

"Why did you do that? My samples?—"

"I will return to collect them later," he quickly assured her. "But you cannot be caught with this. Not here. You are directly within the flight path of the hunt!"

Alexandra's mouth parted with horror as comprehension surfaced within her bright alien eyes. "Oh no. Oh my gods," she whispered as she quickly unattached several little metal things and dropped them over the cliff. "I didn't mean to cause trouble. I just wanted to help the colony, I swear it. I had programmed the flyer to just take the

samples there. But I didn't program its return path. I have enough mini flyers to make several more deliveries—well, had," she amended as she glanced down the cliffside.

"I will fetch them too," he quickly promised. "Therxian?—"

"Quillen! They are coming!" Kethan hissed as he elected to fly the remaining distance and dropped to the ground at their side with a whip of his pale tail.

The alarm in his tone made Quillen's gavo stand starkly upright in panic. Their wings rattled as they snapped them open to shield their ashlava as a shriek filled the air from above.

They observed a formation of three hunters flying overhead. Therxian broke away from his position at the lead and dropped to the ground, his tail looping protectively as it slid against the ground. Quillen froze as the male peered at them. Had he seen something to condemn Alexandra? If he had, would Quillen and Kethan be able to carry their mate to safety in time? His tail coiled, the muscles tightening as he mentally prepared to take flight, and he gamely met the male's gaze with a bored tip of his head.

"Therxian? To what do we owe the pleasure of your presence?"

The lead hunter's gaze scanned the cliffside but when he returned Quillen's regard there was no accusation within the depths of the male's red gaze, just mild curiosity.

"I was heading out to hunt and noted your presence at this cliff of all places with your Alexandra," he rumbled. "Is something amiss?"

Quillen blinked in surprise. Therxian was... concerned. Did he believe that Quillen was planning to throw his ashlava over the cliffside to appease his mother's gorshiga? It was absurd. He knew what the entire nara believed, but he never imagined that

Therxian would also believe that he was tainted and haunted by a female he tried to not even think about. But then the male cast a worried look in Alexandra's direction and everything clicked into place. Quillen chuffed softly to himself, drawing the male's attention back to him.

"There is nothing to worry about," he assured the hunter. "I felt it was time to speak to Alexandra of certain events. And introduce her to Mother," he added, tipping his head toward the tree into which his mother's remains had been buried in a hollowed-out portion that had long since been resealed.

The outright lie sounded ludicrous to his own ears as Gamay was the only mother he recognized after being abandoned. That the act had resulted in his mother's death had been unfortunate—even more so that he had been the one to discover her remains—but she chose to leave him and it was Gamay who had raised him with her own son as if there was no difference between them. And she had both met and quickly come to love Alexandra. So all that was necessary had already been accomplished as far as he was concerned. However, Therxian appeared to accept the excuse, and the male inclined his head in acknowledgment.

"That is right for you to do as a son," the male said gruffly. "And a good step that you take with the female so that all things may proceed in the correct direction. No doubt it was difficult, but I congratulate you," he added stiffly before withdrawing with a backward roll of his coils.

Quillen wanted to laugh but he tightened his lips, grateful that expressions of sorrow and restrained mirth could look so similar, and bowed his head. From the corner of his eye, he could see Kethan looking studiously away as if to take in the grim scenery of Terishal's Lament. No doubt to keep his own emotions under control as he wrapped one wing around their ashlava's shoulders.

"Now get your nest in order with your ashlava," Therxian grumbled in parting, but he

suddenly hesitated to peer speculatively at them. “Is it both of you?”

From the corner of his eye, he saw Kethan stiffen. He knew that this question was one that his nest brother feared. “And if it is?” he queried.

To his surprise, Therxian merely snapped his gavo as if that were exactly what he expected. “Given your nesting habit, there has been much speculation around the nara whether she would choose one of you or bond with you both. All signs have pointed to the latter, but I was not certain which path you would choose.”

“We are both bonding,” he agreed, “and we both accept it.”

The male inclined his head in a short, respectful salute before giving him a tired look. “Good. Now finish this so that the nara can be at ease.” He gave one final glance toward the cliffs, his mouth tightening. “Do not linger here too long. This is a place of misfortune. It is not a good place for blessings.”

“Thank you, Therxian. That means more to me than I can say,” Quillen replied solemnly. “We will be leaving momentarily.”

The hunter inclined his head again. “Do not forget to notify the nara where you wish for the blessings to be held. I will be waiting for your word.”

He saw only the shadow of the male shift as he dipped his head once more. Therxian, fortunately, was not a male to waste words. Without farewell, the male sprung into the air with a powerful beat of his wings, another shriek vibrating through the air to communicate with the other hunters as he took to the skies, leaving them far behind.

“You are insane,” Kethan said, drawing up to his side. “What would you have done if he refused to believe your ridiculous story?”

“I was improvising,” Quillen hissed in turn, but the other male merely shrugged his wings, unconvinced.

“I think he did well,” Alexandra said, her eyes sparkling behind her glass lenses. “Especially considering that he had to think quickly to cover my mistake. I’m really sorry for causing so much trouble. I didn’t intend for any of this to happen. I suppose that I thought that I could just consider what I was doing as merely some sort of adventure if I had failed. I didn’t think enough about the risks.”

“You ought to have notified us of your intent and we would have explained to you why you could not,” Kethan replied in a low voice. He fell silent for a long moment, and Quillen’s softhearted nest brother sighed at the unhappy look on her face. “We know that you wish to help your people. It is admirable. But we have to consider the safety of the Vahel dwelling on the Zir. Although we would protect you from Therxian to the best of our abilities, his actions are not without reason.”

Quillen snapped his gavo in agreement as he gave Alexandra a solemn look. “Think of it beyond your desire to help the people of your colony, ashlava, and see it from the perspective of the Vahel. If your people realized that there were these resources here, but they also learned that the Vahel dwelled here as well, would they treat us as respectfully as you and seek to live in harmony with us and learn from us?”

He watched her eyes go round as she suddenly grew frightfully pale. Worried, he considered reaching over to offer her comfort, but she bit her bottom lip and shook her head as she made a sound of frustration. “Fuck! No. Corp would see you as an obstacle to needed resources and order your removal. I... I thought it was enough that the return path wasn’t recorded into the flyers. But you’re right. There hasn’t been any interest in exploring the mountains due to the dangerous conditions caused by the fog. Darvel considers unnecessary exploration of the planet a waste of resources. But if they knew what was in the Zir, they would eventually send teams into the mountains, and if you presented any kind of danger or obstacle to what they wish to

acquire... it wouldn't be good."

"With the way they are invading the caverns, I am surprised that they have not yet encountered the Seshanamitesh," Quillen observed with a dark chuckle.

That would be quite a meeting that would not pose well for this Corp. He promptly quieted his laughter, however, when Kethan glared over at him. Right. This was still their mate's people.

"I assure you that this is something that Therxian has likely considered, and likely others on the council. And regardless of any sentimentality, he would have sought to prevent it. It is fortunate that Quillen discovered your absence and followed you," Kethan replied in a low voice. "If we had not come in time... I do not wish to even think of what could have happened."

A small frown marred her brow as she peered at them. "I didn't realize that you felt so strongly. You speak as if you would have been devastated."

"We would have been destroyed," Kethan admitted, and Quillen nodded solemnly, his heart constricting painfully in his chest.

"Oh," she whispered, and her hand rested in a fist against her heart. "I... I didn't realize. I don't know... I...."

Quillen smiled at the color rising to her cheeks. Ah, he understood. Straightening, he languidly stretched his wings. They had not been clear enough as to where their immediate intentions lay, and she was nervous about taking what she wanted. He had an idea of how to deal with it. "As you are adventurous enough to chance your life at Terishal's Lament, how do you feel about another adventure?" He paused and thought his words over. "No, more of an experiment."

Intrigue lit her eyes, and she smiled as she peered back at him. “What did you have in mind?”

“Pure carnality,” he rasped and then trilled when the sweet scent of her arousal washed over him.

Chapter

Eleven

“Carnality?” Kethan quietly hissed upon returning to their nest. He stared at his nest brother incredulously. He had been correct the first time; the male was crazy. “What exactly are you planning now?”

“Just some encouragement,” Quillen replied without bothering to lower his voice in the least. Alexandra glanced back at them, pushing her glasses up her nose with one finger as she gave them a curious look to which Quillen replied with a flirtatious grin, his gavo fluttering. “Since our Alexandra is feeling a little bold at the moment, it is good to seize the opportunity. Is that not right, Alexandra?”

A bright pink hue rushed into their flower’s cheeks, but her lips curled in shy agreement. “I admit that I’m a little curious to see what you intend. From my perspective this is all a little unexpected.” Her lips pinched together slightly in the fascinating way that only her malleable mouth could do. He wondered how that mouth would feel against his scales and felt his primary cock thicken within his sant. “I’m curious about something, though. As this comes on the heels of your conversation with Therxian, what did he mean by getting your nest in order... and what is an ashlava?”

Kethan felt an uncomfortable dip in his stomach as Quillen gave him an annoyed look.

“You did not even attempt to prepare her in regard to your intentions when you

brought her here—not even a little?” the male demanded. “Even a Seshanamitesh would understand the implications of being carried off by a male of the Vahel but you knew she was unaware of our species. All of our efforts—and she had no idea!”

“I had intended on speaking of it at a later time,” Kethan admitted, his gavo flattening with embarrassment. “The timing just never seemed to present itself. But you are right. As I brought her here, it was my responsibility.” Drawing in deep breath, he turned to Alexandra and held out his hand for hers. He was absurdly pleased when she trustingly placed her hand in his and closed his fingers around her tiny digits. “Ashlava means queen of the nest,” he murmured. “Although I offered to show you the Zir because your interest pleased me, it was not without ulterior motives. We do not keep the unwilling, but from the first breath of your pheromones, I knew that I wanted you for my mate and intended to make every opportunity of our time together to court you.”

To his relief Alexandra did not withdraw her hand, but he did not relish the shock on her face.

“You wanted me to be your mate?” she squeaked, and her eyes shot over to Quillen. “And you?”

“It was my intent from the moment I saw you in Kethan’s arms,” he affirmed with a smile. “And I have only become more certain with every passing day as the bond grows strong between us.”

“Bond?” she echoed in a whisper.

“Our pheromones reacting against each other, drawing us closer,” Kethan affirmed. “We have scented you?—”

“Oh, gods,” she whimpered. “You smelled... that?”

Quillen's wing extended to brush her back as he gave her a sympathetic smile. "It is difficult to hide things in such close confines, and it is part of our nature to scent and respond. Is it not for your species?"

"Not really," she muttered. She twisted her fingers nervously in front of her. "I... I am not sure what I am ready for. What you suggest is... well... illegal on Earth and all twenty of its colonies."

"Illegal?" Kethan blinked in disbelief. "Your people have laws regarding... mating?"

He glanced over at Quillen but even Quillen looked taken aback by such a concept.

"How disgustingly primitive," the male commented as he bared his teeth in distinct distaste. "The Vahel have not had mating laws since the cataclysm. There are laws to protect those among the Vahel, but mating is the business of each nest alone. As is how they mate. Other than the blessing before the mating flight, no one interferes."

Kethan's gavo flicked in agreement but, now that the subject of the mating flight came up, he was suddenly distracted by thoughts of all the possibilities in which they might join with her.

"Focus, Kethan," Quillen hissed, and he came back to himself with a startled snap of his gavo and an embarrassed smile. The male huffed before turning back to Alexandra. "You are not ready for the mating flight, but there are ways to enjoy until then."

That caught her attention. She blinked rapidly as her eyes darted back and forth between them.

"Enjoy?" she repeated in another adorable squeak, her cheeks darkening from pink to a deep red of his favorite flower. No, that was not correct—his Alexandra was his

favorite flower. “Now I really want to know what you have in mind.”

So did Kethan, though he was beginning to get ideas.

Quillen hissed with the chuff of his laughter. “Do not look so scared. You will only enjoy it, and it can help you decide whether you wish to play by your people’s rules... or ours.”

“I’m not scared,” she denied. “This is just very embarrassing to talk about. I don’t exactly possess a wealth of experience here.”

Kethan tipped his head. “Vahel only gain experience with those they intend to mate. You will be our first experiences.”

“Oh... Really?” she replied in a small voice. “I wish I could say the same.” The last was said so low that he almost did not catch it, but he fought back a frown when he heard the note of regret in her voice.

He did not wish for her to feel remorseful about anything when it came to their joining.

“Our people are different,” he reminded her kindly. “The instinct to mate is strong in a Vahel when they meet a potential mate they are interested in. We decide very quickly. As I see it is different for humans, I understand that you would be slower to choose your mates and consider many factors before accepting or rejecting them.” He cocked his head in consideration. “I can see the advantage in this. A rejected male who has already begun to bond... it is dangerous.”

She paled noticeably. “Dangerous? How dangerous?”

Quillen shrugged his wings. “In the worst cases males have died, and sometimes

those who survive live such an empty life that they go through a period wishing that they had died. Rejection is not all that frequent,” he rushed to assure when she began to look ill.

“But not before going mad from separation, if it happens at all,” Quillen added. He smiled at Alexandra’s growing look of horror. “Not that it is going to happen.”

“It will not happen,” Kethan agreed as he shot Quillen a warning look, to which the male flattened his gavo apologetically.

“Okay.” Alexandra drew in a steadying breath and slowly let it out. “Perhaps let’s just get back to carnality part.”

Quillen’s gavo snapped and he glided forward until he was right in front of Alexandra, his much larger frame towering over her despite resting lower on his tail. “Do you trust me, ashlava?” he murmured.

Alexandra’s head bobbed and her hands went to her upper covering. “L-let me do it, okay?”

Kethan slid forward so that he was at her side, lowering his head as he watched her small fingers fumble briefly with the material before drawing it completely over her head. His breath caught at the sight of her breasts. Although they were partially obscured by the scrap of fabric that cupped them, they appeared enticingly soft. Females among the Vahel had breasts as well, of course. Unlike many creatures on Seshana, the Vahel nursed their young from birth, and females preferred to cover their breasts with intricately adorned woven cloth and thick ropes of beaded necklaces compared to what Alexandra wore. And yet there was something about Alexandra’s breasts that he found especially appealing.

Without a thought, he reached out and brushed a finger along the bare swell of her

breast. Soft and warm beneath his fingertips, there was a surprising plushness to it without the protective scaling that was common to all Vahel. He hissed in awe as he continued to pet her, running his fingers back and forth across the top of the breast as Quillen mimicked the flow of his caress along her other breast. Kethan could see the nipple straining just below his fingers within the cloth, begging for attention. He was not one to deny his mate. His eyes slitted with pleasure, he ran the tip of a claw very gently over it, his breath catching when it hardened further.

Making an impatient sound in her throat, Alexandra stepped back. “Wait,” she panted. “Let me just—” Her words stopped as she reached behind herself and released the covering.

The material went slack around her chest, and she shrugged it off with a small sigh of relief. And what a delectable sight she was. Her brown nipples stood out in taut points, the perfect little morsels to tease with his tongues. Quillen trilled and he echoed the sound as their tails wound rapidly across the floor, bringing them to her side and catching her between them. Their hands stroked over her bare breasts, dragging over her nipples in circling touches. Kethan experimentally gave her breast a gentle squeeze and plucked at the nipple carefully between his claws until she hissed with pleasure.

The sound made his cock jump with pleasure within his sant, and Quillen trilled again before dropping his head to catch her nipple between his tongues. Alexandra’s lush little body arched in reaction. It was so exquisite that he could not stop his primary cock spilling from his sant.

His beautiful flower.

“Oh fuck.” The sound of her gasp danced over his scales, and he looked up to note the direction of her gaze. Her eyes were glazed with desire that deepened despite the hint of unease at their depths. “Oh fuck,” she repeated, her tongue passing over her

lips. "Okay, no problem. I can work with this."

"You do not need to work with anything. Not right now," Quillen rasped, lifting his head from her breast. "You are to just enjoy."

Kethan hummed his agreement around her other nipple, and her strangled moan as her body arched gloriously sent a tremor of desire through him. Her need was so pretty. His tail undulated against her restlessly, coming into contact with her hands. They twitched nervously against his tail before flattening to smooth over his scales in a tentative caress that went straight to his primary cock. He hissed his appreciation, and gradually her touches became bolder as she explored the texture. Her hand froze, however, when Quillen made a sound of frustration as he ran a claw along the upper part of her lower coverings.

"How do we remove these without damaging them?"

Alexandra's hand slipped from Kethan's tail, but as much as he mourned the loss, he released her nipple and drew his tongues back into his mouth as he watched with fascination when her hands went to the coverings. They trembled nervously as she fumbled but whatever she did worked because the band loosened, and she pushed them off her hips before relinquishing control to Quillen. The male tugged them the rest of the way down her legs and tossed them aside only to go utterly still with an exhalation of intrigue.

Kethan understood the feeling. Without her covering, her delicious scent was richer, and the headiest perfume was coming from the apex of her legs covered in a small patch of fur. Trilling with interest, he slid a hand down her belly, but her hand covered his, stopping its movement.

"This may be a little less awkward if I'm lying down," she whispered with a breathy laugh.

He considered and snapped his gavo in agreement. It would be difficult to explore thoroughly with the way she was standing. He wanted to see her sex opened for him. Quillen clearly had the same thought because the male also trilled, but then the sound faded into a hum as the male scooped their mate up into his arms and carried her into their sleeping chamber.

Kethan hurried after his nest brother, excitement burning through him. Grabbing her favorite pillow, he positioned it as Quillen laid her within their bed. He could not believe how beautiful she looked laying there. Her legs had fallen apart slightly revealing a hint of the pink flesh normally concealed from sight. Should he lay beside her? Or should he investigate his favorite part now that he could see it?

“Oh, okay.” She giggled as she rested her hands over her eyes in embarrassment. “You’re like a couple of predators looking for the tenderest piece.” Lowering her hands, she grinned up at them. “Get down here.”

Chuffing his amusement, Kethan lowered himself beside her as Quillen did so on her other side. She was stretched out between them just as she usually was every night, but this was different. Quillen had called it carnality, and at that moment he could not think of any better word as an aching heat burrowed into him and spread through him in a thick wash of need. She tempted not only his desire but his sanity. He was not entirely even sure that he was not imagining the moment or the way she looked with her bare flesh illuminated by the glow of the galthie.

She was... everything.

He sank down with a rattling groan, his mouth grazing her belly. He did not have soft human lips to caress it the way he would have liked, but he brushed his mouth over it and his tongues darted out, the tips of them grazing over her as he breathed in her luscious scent. Her exquisite flavor flooded his senses, and he moved his mouth lower as he laved her flesh, chasing her tiny quivers of pleasure with his tongues.

Alexandra writhed against him, her little sounds stirring his desire to a ravenous hunger. Every moan, every breathy cry tantalized him. And when his tongues reached the perfect flower of her sex—it was nothing short of bliss as she cried out with the stroke of his tongues, flooding them in her nectar. Hunger slammed into his gut as he drank deeply of her pheromone-rich sweetness. His control snapped in that moment so that he devoured her, his tongues plunging into her and dragging over her petals ravenously. He growled against her sex and drew back slightly to make room, and Quillen dragged her leg to the side so that she was more exposed and slicked his tongues against her sex as well.

It was good that the gods blessed their children with long tongues. It made it possible for them both to enjoy her pleasure as they shared her, devouring her with every hungry dive and drag of their tongues against and inside her. A new tension was mounting through her, quivering and dancing beneath her skin. He wanted more of it. He wanted to see what it looked like as it broke loose and shattered her.

The tip of his tail slicked up her body, the pheromones in her sweat coating it intoxicatingly as it slid up to cup her breast as the very tip flicked against it. Her muscles clenched and she jerked within their hold as her cry of pleasure filled the chamber. His tailtip immediately curled around her nipple, and he began to caress and tug on it with every stroke of his tongues. His saliva mixed with Quillen's, drenching her cunt in their pheromones, drawing the scent of her arousal deeper and making her overflow with a richer essence until she finally shattered with a shriek, her muscle straining as she arched powerfully, her sweetness exploding from her and drenching their tongues.

Their hisses of pleasure rose up as they drank it down and allowed it to seep into their scales, carrying the powerful pheromones deeper within them so that they shuddered and their primary cocks erupted, spilling their seed in copious streams onto their mate's body and the bedding.

Gradually he drew his mouth away, his tongues dragging around his mouth as he lapped up the last traces of her flavor, and sank back into the bedding beside her. He admired her drowsily and rubbed their seed into her skin in firm strokes as he watched Quillen remove the bedding that required cleaning. He startled with surprise, however, when Alexandra suddenly rolled on top of him, her plump legs straddling him as her cunt rested against his sant. His cock immediately stirred in reaction, hardening so that the tip pressed from his sant directly into her heat. She tossed her head back and moaned as the head pressed slowly into her snug channel, and a shiver rushed through him with renewed arousal. Quillen sat up and trilled with interest, his eyes going to the very place he was connected with Alexandra, filling her instinctively as his cock slowly slipped from his sant directly into her. He was not sure he could have stopped it even if he had tried. There was nothing in that moment but her tight heat.

“Like I said,” she gasped as his cock surged up and plugged her completely, “I can work with it.”

She rocked her hips, her belly flexing as her cunt tugged at his primary cock with each movement. Kethan hissed and his coils curled around her reflexively and dragged against her pelvis in frustration. His instinct to mate was not entirely compatible with her form. She did not have a long tail to twine with, nor did she have a secondary slit like a Vahel female would to receive his other cock that was now fully engorged and ready for her clutch. He growled as he thrust up into her, his upper tail bucking as he drove his primary cock repeatedly into her clutching heat, his lower tail twisting and dragging against her slickened flesh. The end of his tail dipped lower and his cock dragged inexplicably against another hot center. The tip of his tail extending beyond his cock suddenly wound around her, tightening to keep her firmly in place as his tail whipped, plunging his heavily lubricated secondary cock into her even as his primary cock drove deep.

Alexandra gasped and cried out, her channel convulsing around him as she rocked

back against him, pressing him even deeper. He hummed as his coils flexed around her, thrusting his cocks in and out, plugging her entirely as he rutted her, forcing his cocks deeper and deeper as they became increasingly engorged. She trembled, her musk thickening, as she moved over him, her body lifting and lowering in a primal dance within the confines of his coils that expanded and constricted around her in turn as he bred her. They twisted together in this dance and Kethan could feel the heat sparking hot deep within his gut. It sparked again, brighter and hotter. And then suddenly it was rising and rushing through him as his cocks jerked and spasmed within her clenching, pulsing heat. Their cries mingled together as she convulsed, her body drawing his seed deep even as cocks released in heavy streams within her that seemed to go on and on as their shared pheromones triggered their release again and again.

His body shook with the pleasure-pain of the last spurt of seed within her. Alexandra moaned and then gasped as his cocks withdrew. Kethan lay there, his eyes sliding shut, uncertain whether or not he would survive mating when Quillen trilled and tugged Alexandra off him. He did not bother opening his eyes—he did not have the energy—but the musk of their arousal quickly filled the chamber as did the wet sounds of their mating. Quillen’s moans as his cocks found their anchorage was nearly music but not so much as Alexandra’s wails of pleasure as the male aggressively rutted her, the wet slaps of their entangled bodies becoming more and more furious until they broke with their own cries as Alexandra accepted her other mate’s seed.

It was good. Kethan smiled sleepily, exhaustion stealing over him. He was half-asleep when he felt Alexandra drop beside him, her sweaty body brushing against his scales. Rather than arouse him, as spent as he was, her pheromones had a curiously different reaction, flooding him with a sense of peace. Yawning wide, he turned and gathered his mate in his arms.

“I’m your mate now, right?” she mumbled sleepily, and his heart stuttered.

“Would you like to be... to both of us?” Quillen asked.

“Of course.” She yawned widely. “Both of you. You and me forever. I never want to leave you,” she whispered, the words ending on a little sigh as she drifted off to sleep.

He knew without a doubt that there would be no survival for him now without Alexandra. As long as he got to hold her for the rest of his life, he would be fine.

“I will not be able to survive without her,” Quillen murmured in a rare show of vulnerability some time later.

“I know. Neither of us would.”

Chapter

Twelve

“Have the specimens all been properly stored?” Alexandra asked distractedly as she worked on the arduous task of organizing her books.

Thankfully there was a male within the nara who was practically ancient and who had taught all of his nestlings as well as the young generations of his line the art of book binding. Despite having a wizened appearance with scales faded nearly to white, he had a remarkable amount of stamina. He had also been happy to assist with providing her with a number of bound books that she was able to transfer her notes into. They now counted amongst her most treasured possessions—and for good reason. Her work needed to last, after all. Among those books were a number that Gamay had given her as well, with written information regarding the Zir and the plants of healing that Kethan had been patiently helping her translate into her own bound books. At some point she would need more space made for her books, but the freshly carved-out shelves in the main chamber served her needs perfectly for now.

Quillen hummed in agreement from behind her, his tail slithering along the back of her thigh flirtatiously. She couldn't see him, but she smiled as she slid another book onto the shelf. She knew he did that for her benefit since she couldn't see his gavo snapping in reply, even though she could often hear it if he did so vigorously enough. She wasn't surprised that he had already finished with the task.

Of course it was taken care of. Not only had they been showering her with pleasure every night, but they had also been working hard around the nest. Ever since

Alexandra had agreed to become their mate, they had been busy over the last week as they methodically prepared their nest with a startling intensity. All in order to officially welcome her into their family. She had told them many times that she didn't need that—that their nest was perfect as is—but they had insisted. The nest was hers and they wanted everything properly prepared. And the gesture had been so sweet that she hadn't had the heart to protest. She was also privately more than a little pleased that they wanted to.

She had been a little surprised, just how much they had decided to tackle... and with considerable enthusiasm. And among the many things that had demanded their time and attention, expanding their nest to include a workroom for her had taken priority as they had deemed to be among the most important. She couldn't disagree either. Although she would never have demanded that they build her a workroom, especially when they had managed just fine in the main chamber of the nest, she was already in love with the room even without seeing the final touches that Kethan had shut himself in to work on over the last couple of days.

She didn't need to see its finished look to know that it would be exactly what she needed and wanted. The fact that they had asked an elder female named Dyeri to make a special storage area within the room she had taken considerable pleasure in carving out with her powerful sonic blasts touched her heart. That gaping hole for the large closet space had struck Alexandra with awe when she got her first glimpse of it. It was more than enough space to safely store all of her specimen boxes that she'd painstakingly collected until the day came that she would be able to give all to her people—if it ever came. Quillen had never brought up the possibility that it wouldn't, nor had Kethan, but she knew there was a strong possibility. And she couldn't quite hide that acknowledgment sometimes when she looked upon her collection.

Having it stored safely out of sight would provide her with some necessary mental relief. "That's great. Thank you for taking care of that."

“Kethan also said to tell you that he is ready,” Quillen murmured.

She glanced up in surprise as she shelved the last book. “It’s time already?”

Quillen’s smile was her only answer, so she smoothed down the dress that Gamay helped her with and followed him back through the nest to her new workroom where her other mate was waiting. Her fingers nervously toyed with one of the flower-shaped embellishments sewn into the fabric. Technically the dress was the product of an entire team of Vahel who had worked on weaving and dying the cloth. They weren’t accustomed to making so much fabric as the females wore just enough to safely cover their breasts. Yet they had volunteered their help cheerfully, the chatter of the Vahel filling Alexandra’s evenings as they all worked together.

And each of them was likely waiting at their chosen site for the blessing ceremony, eager to bear witness to the departure of their first flight as mates. That part made her a little nervous.

“Is the flight part really necessary for the blessing ceremony?” she asked Quillen.

The male glanced back at her in surprise. “Of course. One is not officially mated among the Vahel until the female has entrusted herself to her mates in a mating flight.” He chuffed softly. “We have wings, hithana. We were made to fly.”

“Okay, but I do not,” she pointed out. “I’m not going to be able to perform this like your fingers since I can’t fly.”

Her mate gave her a sidelong look. “What makes you think the females fly? That would be too many wings getting in the way,” he observed cheerfully. “The male catches and holds his female, and he is the one flying as he penetrates her.”

“Catching?”

He waved that off. “It symbolically represents a time when males captured females and bred them in the skies as they returned to the Zir so that they were arriving to the nara with their females safely mated. There was no risk of a female being stolen by another male if she was already mated,” he added with a grin.

“I see.” That made a certain kind of sense. “So this reenactment is basically an official ‘carrying your mate home’ sort of thing.”

“Precisely,” Quillen answered. “You will just be saving us a lot of work since we do not have to chase you.”

She hummed quietly to herself. She assumed that meant that other males had to work for their females and her mates were just expecting her to pliantly wait until they carried her off. That didn’t seem entirely fair... and she admitted that ruffled her pride just a little.

“We are here,” Quillen announced. Alexandra wasn’t sure if that was for her benefit or Kethan’s but her mate turned toward her, lifting his tail so that the tip could flick gently along her cheek. “Close your eyes, hithana,” he gleefully instructed.

She lifted an eyebrow, amused by his antics, but closed her eyes, her hands held out so that he could safely guide her into the room. He didn’t take them but scooped her up instead, and her breath whooshed out in a yelp of alarm that terminated with a giggle as he hurried her inside and deposited in what she expected to be the center of the room.

There was a trace of stone dust and wood on the air, but it was a clean scent that spoke of newness, and she smiled as excitement welled inside of her. Although she had seen it after it had been freshly carved out from the stone and all rough angles, just being in the room—the room that was her official mating gift before the ceremony could begin—made it all very real to her.

“Open your eyes, hithana,” Kethan hissed.

Her eyes flew open the moment the words left his mouth, and she gasped in pleasure. Everywhere she looked she could see the same care to attention and detail that she had noticed throughout the rest of the nest. The walls were not merely smooth walls, but each one was lined painstakingly with shelves sculpted into them, and each shelf had delicate scrollwork carved into its edge so that the pattern seemed to run in lines of flowers around the room, interrupted only by the door and the storage area constructed in the far corner of the room for her specimen boxes. She made her way back to it, her hand grazing along tables and high-backed benches as she made her way between them.

It was... perfect. She couldn't believe that they had worked so hard to make this special room for her. Not a bit of the work was hastily done—it all stood as a testament of their love to her. Even her specimen boxes were neatly stored away waiting for whatever may come in the future. And with plenty of space to spare. Emotion thickened in her throat. Although they had insisted that it was the males who provided the mating gift, she still felt bad that she had nothing to give them.

“I know what you are thinking,” Quillen hissed so vehemently that she glanced over her shoulder back at them. “Cease. You have already given us more than you understand.”

Kethan's gavo snapped in agreement but his smile that he offered her was shy with uncertainty. “Quillen is right. This is our right to do this for you. There is only one thing we want—but only if you are willing,” he said. “Although the mating flight is tradition, I know that it frightens you. Because of that, I am content to just have the blessing ceremony.”

“But you want the mating flight,” she murmured, her heart clenching at the quivering snap of his gavo as if ashamed to admit it. Sweet, sweet male. Even after doing all of

this, he was willing to sacrifice what he wanted most for her.

“He is content, so I will ask for myself.” Quillen sighed. “Hithana, will you fly with us?”

Alexandra turned toward her mates, her dress whirling around her legs with the quickness of her movement. She could not deny them something that was so clearly important to them. “The idea of being suspended between you guys in the air is completely terrifying, but... let’s do it.”

Kethan blinked blankly as if uncertain he heard correctly. “Does that mean yes?”

“It means yes,” Quillen affirmed as he hugged the other male with a happy trill.

Alexandra laughed as her males rushed to her and caught her up in their arms between them, lifting her up off her feet. She could do this. For them, she could do anything. And seeing their happiness was entirely worth the commitment.

She kept that thought nestled tightly within her heart as they darted out of the nest and into the air, Kethan’s wings folding at random intervals to send them tumbling joyously until she laughingly begged him to stop before she lost her last meal. Her mates had chuffed at that but had traded maneuvers for speed as they streaked across the sky. It took them little time to wing their way to their selected site. As expected, the Vahel had already gathered there, most of them reclining on rocky ledges or high in the trees. Quillen made a sound of distaste as they began their descent, still annoyed at surrendering one of his favorite collection spots to the nara, but he quieted at Kethan’s pointed look. They had unanimously agreed to this location because it had been the place where Kethan and Quillen had first made their intentions known—even if it had been unclear at the time—with nothing more than one of the simple red flowers that grew everywhere in that part of the woods.

Alexandra caught Quillen's eye and smiled at him. "I love you," she mouthed, and a pleased smile inched up at the corner of his mouth.

His eye closed in a wink and he broke eye contact as his chest expanded suddenly, and he shrieked as they dropped in a rapid glide through the air. Kethan's voice joined his, the sounds rolling together, and they were greeted with a rising hum vibrating through the air from the nara below. She could almost imagine how it must have once been, a male returning with his captured mate and his triumphant shrieks as the nara greeted him and his female with the rise of their song. It rippled through the air, the sound so powerful and melodic that it was as if a primal song of life from Seshana itself had awakened.

Kethan's wing folded and he abruptly shot down, giving her a close-up experience of falling as the ground rushed toward her at a dizzying speed. Her fingers dug into his arms, but she didn't scream. She trusted him not to kill them. The flowers were in full bloom with twice as many blossoms welcoming them as they prepared to land.

But they didn't. Kethan's wings snapped open at the last minute to skim over the gathered Vahel before taking to the air again. She caught a brief glimpse of Gamay's happy expression beaming up at them before the world dropped away once again. Alexandra gaped at the ground shrinking below her again and twisted back to stare at the male holding her.

"Are we not going to land?" she shouted over the air rushing by her ears.

Kethan chuffed. "No!"

"This is the blessing ceremony," Quillen elaborated as he dropped beside them, his wings stretching wide as they beat the air.

Over and over they circled and dived toward the Vahel, the hum of song gradually

growing louder and woven with joyous trills. She felt Kethan nuzzle her neck, and her belly grew heavy with desire as his breath fanned her ear.

“Are you ready?”

“We aren’t going to... in front of everyone, are we?” she whispered in mortification.

“No,” her mate replied. “We fly higher and farther than that. I just wanted to prepare you before I begin to rise.”

“Would have been nice if you had warned me before plummeting too,” she said with a smile. “All right, let’s do it!”

Kethan’s body began to tip skyward, his tail twining like a ribbon below them as he began to climb the heavens. The song from below grew louder, the trills breaking more frequently as the Vahel expressed their excitement. She could feel his cock pressing behind her back. Even though she couldn’t see it at their current angle, she knew that the dripping dark phallus had pushed out from the dip of flesh below his navel, the shaft tapering from the broad bulge at its base toward the tip where it flared out again with a small cluster of heads, each one twitching and dripping with precum.

She drew a shaky breath and parted her legs, grateful that she had chosen to wear a dress and had foregone underwear for this flight. Everything was easy access as her body prepared to receive him. He trilled softly in his excitement, the tip of his tail curling upward to drag the hem of her dress upward.

And then he stopped and chuffed softly as Quillen folded his wings and darted down, snatching her easily from Kethan’s arms as her other mate relinquished her. This time she couldn’t hold back her shriek, and the answering shrieks from the Vahel filled the air, only to be followed by her scream of pleasure as Quillen tipped his hips up and drove his cock into her in one hard thrust.

She was pinned there to him, speared on his shaft as his wings beat the air, every snap of them rocking his cock in and out of her until her sex wept and dripped around him. Up and up he flew, fucking her hard with every pump of his wings, sending tides of ecstasy over her as her cunt clenched, sending deeper shocks of pleasure through her until finally she broke and her pleasure burst so viciously that she could only wail as she was caught in its seemingly endless flow. Quillen moaned in her ear as her pussy clenched repeatedly around him throughout the rushing tide of her orgasm, the rhythmic pulse of its walls milking him hard.

She felt him tremble violently and expected his release to follow, but his wings suddenly folded to curl around her as he unexpectedly rolled. The world spun all around her, but enclosed as she was in his embrace, Alexandra wasn't afraid. The thrill of it shot through her as they dropped, but it seemed that it was not without purpose because Quillen's tail whipped around her and his other cock pressed against the opening of her sex, wedging its way in. It stretched her tightly so that each flex of his tail writhing around her caused both cocks to rub in the most intriguing way inside of her.

Quillen thrust and writhed, his cocks working in and out of her as they dropped. She could barely breathe as the wind rushed past but somehow that stirred her excitement even higher so that her sex clenched around him with renewed interest as she began to climb to another climax. This climb, however, was a rush of sensation as he held her to him and rutted her in freefall until she was screaming and he was shrieking as his cocks pulsed and spilled, ejaculating far harder than they ever had before as they filled her with streams of his hot cum, each blasting sending her spiraling through pleasure all over again.

She was still shaking with her climax when Kethan swooped up from below them and reclaimed her. For a moment she could breathe fully as she lay within his embrace, moaning as his primary cocked burrowed into her cunt with one long, slow thrust. Kethan hissed his pleasure as he finally filled her completely, and she smiled at the

loving way he proceeded to rub his cheek and the ridges of his jaw all along her neck and head. She knew that it was an instinctual pheromone thing that was tied closely to the Vahels' show of affection, but she also knew it was in his hearts and accepted his loving hold at face value. Tracing her hand over his chest, her love overfilled her heart, making her chest ache with its intensity and her eyes sting with tears of happiness as his wings stretched wide and began to snap as he lifted them once more into the sky.

Higher he lifted them, his cock rocking in and out of her. His pace was more measured than Quillen's, lacking the other male's frenzy. Instead, it built in a steady pulse that hammered through her, drawing her pleasure tighter and tighter, their moans mingling until her pinnacle was once again breached, and her body jerked and shook with the spasm that overcame her. Her entire body felt as if it were hot and fluttering, desperately gripping Kethan's pumping cock as the wave of ecstasy swallowed her entirely.

"I love you, Kethan," she whispered as they rolled in the sky, his coils wrapping around her to press his other cock in as they began to fall together into bliss.

Chapter

Thirteen

And they flew into the sunset to live happily ever after. Of course, happily ever after had to look different for everyone, and to Alexandra it looked like a nara filled with joy as the Vahel greeted her. She now understood fully what Therxian had meant about finally being a part of the nara. Although not everyone had what humans would visually consider the most pleasant of countenances, the Vahel treated her with familiarity—not as a stranger briefly entering their lives but a member who belonged there among them.

And it was easy to see because not one among them interrupted what they were doing when she stepped into the clearing. Elderly males and females were submerged in the hot spring near the center of the clearing, their tails extending and twisting through the water, enjoying the heat as the day began to cool rapidly with the onset of evening. One of the females rose halfway from the pool and waved to her in greeting. Alexandra blushed a little at the blatant nudity as she was treated to a view of the female's scaled breasts. She tried not to stare but it was difficult not to do so when humans that she knew tended to be more conservative. However, she didn't hesitate to shyly return the gesture, earning her a warm smile from the other female before she slipped once more beneath the surface of the water.

“Is nudity that common?” she whispered to Kethan, unable to control her blush. She hadn't really noticed before. “They usually don't rise up from the spring in front of me. I didn't realize?—”

Kethan chuffed mercifully and hugged her to him with one wing. “I did not think to warn you, hithana. The Vahel may wear coverings, but it is more for convenience or protection—or simply for decoration—rather than human shyness.”

“It’s called modesty.”

“Sounds terrible,” her mate quipped, and she bit back her laughter.

“I meant to ask you—hithana, what is that?” she whispered instead, changing the topic.

“Sweetest one,” Quillen replied from her other side as he bent in to quickly trail his tongue along the shell of her ear. “Or most loved.”

“Mmm, I like that,” she sighed in approval. “I would much rather be most loved than a queen.”

“Noted,” Kethan rasped as he swooped in to drag his cheek against hers. “Perhaps we should practice it back in our nest and return to the day of blessings later?”

“Not a chance,” she chuckled, pushing his head away. “You already got me down here with the basket. I’m not going to be able to work up the nerve to do this again so let’s just get to it.”

Kethan grumbled playfully but relented as he straightened only to curse with a hiss, his wings spreading as they snapped wide around Alexandra, shielding her entirely. She could clearly hear Quillen’s hiss of displeasure, but she was a little distracted by the large hunter, clearly freshly returned from the hunt, suddenly appeared in front of them with a triumphant grin and a grisly gift dropped at their feet.

“Blessings to your nest,” the male grunted and gestured to his kill. “May this feast

celebrate the blessing of your unified nest to the nara.”

Alexandra blinked down at it as everything clicked into place. Oh. This was a gift. A blessing day gift.

Adjusting the large basket on her hip, she brushed Kethan’s wings aside to smile over at the male in thanks, to which he responded with an even broader grin showcasing his numerous sharp teeth.

“Thank you, hunter...” she faltered, realizing that she didn’t even know his name.

The male chuffed in amusement and inclined his head. “Archay,” the male rumbled.

It sounded so suspiciously like Arche that she nearly asked him to repeat it but caught herself in time. She inclined her head appreciatively.

“Thank you, Hunter Archay, for your blessing.”

The male’s wings puffed up behind him with pleasure, and he quickly inclined his head again with an even more pleased expression before moving away and leaving Quillen to gather up the dead beast.

“He is not joining our nest,” he muttered. “I am warning you now, hithana, I will not tolerate any male who tries to flirt or gift his way into our nest.”

“I gathered that when you threatened Therxian the first time,” she replied. The idea was so preposterous that she couldn’t hold back a giggle of amusement. “But you don’t need to worry. Two mates are more than enough for me.”

Quillen grunted in acknowledgment, but the corner of his mouth twitched as Kethan chuffed out loud. A happy, light feeling settled within her chest as she continued to

wander through the nara's gathering area.

She had to admit, even if only privately, that she felt a little self-conscious but this too, they had informed her, was a tradition among the Vahel following a successful mating. While the blessing ceremony saw off the mating flight that officially brought a mate into the nara, the day of blessings that followed was one of feasts and gifts offered to a successfully mated couple—or in their case, throuple.

Kethan's yellow eyes brightened like a pair of suns as greetings and well wishes were called out to them as Vahel came forward to offer tiny gifts that were immediately deposited in the basket. His gavo was slightly flared with his good mood, and he trilled with pleasure over every little thing, melting her heart. Just seeing him so happy and content was enough that Alexandra immediately felt her tension ease as she relaxed in response, her smile becoming broader and more genuine. Quillen peered over at her and smiled indulgently as he nudged her lightly with his wing.

"You appear happy," he observed quietly.

"How can I not be?" she replied as she leaned, wrapping an arm around his waist. "I am a little socially awkward, but I'm with you, and you two are part of my happiness."

A look of pleasure brightened the male's face, his purple gaze softening to velvet. "Then we shall never part," he rasped as he cupped her cheek with one hand before lowering to skim her throat with his fingers.

Lowering his head, he lovingly brushed his brow against hers before reluctantly releasing her when several males called out to him. With a look that promised far more once they were alone again, Quillen turned toward the males with a curious stare and came close to bolting when one of the hunters suddenly embraced him. Alexandra smothered her laughter behind her hand as she watched him awkwardly

return the male's embrace even as his gaze flicked over to her in semi-panic. It seemed that successfully mating had some unexpected benefits. Though it seemed that it would take some getting used to for her reclusive mate.

"He will be fine," Gamay assured her, the female's voice drifting up from a point behind her. Alexandra turned just as her new mother arrived at her side with a pleased, maternal smile on her face. "The whole nara has been talking of it. No one was certain whether or not you would go through mating with him given how his mother's terrible choice stained his life among the Vahel."

"I am a scientist. The dead don't inform my personal choice," Alexandra replied.

Gamay inclined her head. "As a healer, they do not inform my choices either. I have seen too much to believe that a sad circumstance of death does anything but perhaps leave their loved ones feeling sadness, regret... and anger in some cases." She exhaled heavily as if a great weight had been taken from her shoulders. "I have raised Quillen since he was a nestling. I am more his mother than the female who birthed him. It has hurt me to see the way the nara has avoided him. But his successful mating has changed everything—bringing in new life and hope through the establishment of your common nest together, banishing the stain of death. It will take him some time to become accustomed to it, but he has a new life now in the nara, thanks to you."

Alexandra blushed. "I didn't do anything. I just love him. I love both of them."

"And that is the most important gift," Gamay replied. Turning, she reached into the woven bag looped across her chest and pulled out an intricately carved figure of a Vahel female that she gently placed into the basket. "My gift for you," she murmured. "You were not born from us, but you are now of the Vahel. You are a daughter of Shangla. Shangla," she said, touching the small head of the statue, "will protect you."

“Thank you,” Alexandra whispered. She did not know if she believed in this Shangla or not, but the sentiment of belonging was not lost upon her and affected her deeply. Every bit of her gratitude was genuine.

Gamay smiled and touched her shoulder briefly, a small connection, before she drifted off to greet several of the nestling rushing to her. Alexandra watched her go with a smile, her eyes falling warmly on the nestlings. She admittedly had a soft spot for them and was pleased when they suddenly turned and rushed toward her, moving swiftly on their slender tails. She laughed, murmuring her thanks as they loaded her basket with flowers, river polished stones and other little things that they had likely just found that morning and saved as gifts for her. But the best gifts were their hugs and the gentle pats from their little hands where before they had watched her shyly. Setting her basket on the ground, she kneeled among them, talking with them until she felt the weight of eyes on her sending a hot spark of awareness through her body.

She turned and her eyes fell once more on Kethan as the male smiled and separated himself from the males and females surrounding him to return to her. She straightened as he approached, her heart beating quickening with the fresh wave of love she felt.

If Quillen was her rock with his cool amethyst gaze and playfully loving partner, Kethan was nothing short of her joy made into flesh and perfectly huggable. With a hopping step, she followed her impulse and leaped into his arms. Twining her arms around his neck to hug him tightly to her, her legs came up to circle his hips as his arms came around her to hold her close. A small, startled hiss of pleasure escaped him, and she grinned as she felt his tail and wings curl around to embrace her close in turn, surrounding her in his warmth. They held each other, their hearts beating together.

“Do not forget me,” Quillen rumbled as he pushed himself into their hold, his wings and arms wrapping around them.

“We could never forget you,” she assured him, brushing a kiss against his cheek.

“It would be impossible to,” Kethan agreed dryly and then chuffed with laughter when she thumped his chest. “We are family. The three of us together,” he murmured as he snared Quillen and dragged him closer into the hug. “There would be no us and no nest without you.”

“Sweet talker,” Quillen grouched, but his trill of happiness was hard to miss.

Alexandra smiled as she hugged her mates. Kethan was right. Whatever challenges the future might bring, this was what was important right here. Her family. And there was no better place on Seshana than the Vahel nara on the slopes of the Zir.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:36 am

FOUR YEARS LATER

“ A lexandra! A human! There is a human in the nara!” Neima shouted as she darted inside, her little wings folding upon touching down only for the small female to dart across the room to Alexandra’s side with a whip of her tail.

Kethan looked up from where he was lazily reclined on one of the benches in their primary chamber and smiled indulgently as the little female hurried across the room straight into her favorite human’s arms. Neima was one of the many nestlings who had recently become students under Alexandra’s tutelage to learn all about propagation, conservation, and how to advantageously cultivate the plants that the Vahel depended on along the slopes closest to the nara. It was turning out to be so beneficial that Kethan often wondered while looking out over the hanging gardens why they had never bothered to do so before. Was it because they had grown too dependent on the hunters and took for granted the gifts of the Zir?

Perhaps.

Though fully accepting Alexandra among them, not everyone had been entirely supportive of her efforts when she began to build the first gardens closest to their nest. She had explained that it was to study the commonly used plants among the Vahel and work on what she called selective breeding, the results of which she mentioned would not be readily seen for many revolutions, but from the outset it had looked bizarre at best. Most within the nara had initially considered it a waste of time. All except Therxian, much to Kethan’s private surprise until the male had mentioned that the Seshanamitesh depended on growing crops, making the male Alexandra’s enthusiastic champion.

That part had been a source of vexation for him, and for Quillen, who had to remind him more than once that he would need to go find his own human as they had no intention of sharing. Fortunately, the male did not take their threats too much to heart and continued to support their mate until the first true harvest came in and the Vahel had seen for themselves the potential advantage to Alexandra's gardens. Only then did they begrudgingly send nestlings who had shown interest in her work to study with her. Of which Neima had been among the first and was therefore understandably the first to inform Alexandra—and thereby their entire nest—of anything of importance happening within the nara.

It was actually quite convenient. Especially as their mate was swelling ever larger with their nestling and struggled to navigate the slopes surrounding the nara. Neima not only reported to Alexandra but also began directing the other juveniles in taking over the weeding and watering to spare their mate the climb.

“A human?” Quillen murmured as he shifted lazily on his tail and yawned, awakening from his midday nap. “Do you suppose Therxian finally got one?”

“Very funny,” Alexandra chided from across the room as she gave Neima one more hug despite how awkward it was for her to do around her enormous belly. “Just keep wishing a human on him and you’re going to regret it when he turns up with someone who is going to penetrate that rock hard exterior and turn him into mush.”

“Does not sound too bad,” Kethan muttered to Quillen. “Perhaps then he would get off our tails about his own ‘ideas’ for improvements that can be made to the nara.”

His nest brother grunted in agreement. “Old ways work best. I do not know why he is determined to turn it into a shinara when he worked so hard to escape the one in which he was reared.”

“Oh really?” Alexandra challenged, her eyebrows raising in a look that made his gavo flare in warning. “I don’t recall you saying that to me when I was building the

gardens.”

“That is different,” Quillen replied with a broad grin. “Our mate possesses great charm and intelligence—Therxian just hates seeing anyone enjoying a moment of peace.”

Their ashlava laughed, the sound sending a shiver along Kethan’s scales. He could not wait to get her alone. He found her more irresistible than ever, and her pheromones were driving him wild, to the point that everything she did made him want to rut. He knew it was instinctive reaction designed to keep him close to her to care for her needs but he did not care. Alexandra had his hearts. And he would never cease wanting her even when her pheromones leveled out once more. The only difference was that they would settle back into more leisurely mating instead of the desperation that seemed to seize them around her fertile periods and only get worse the moment she became impregnated.

He was actually starting to look forward to having time to properly love his mate without that maddening urgency. Until then, however, he was going to enjoy every bit of the madness.

“It is not Therxian,” the little female announced, distracting him. “Hunter Zurgol appeared with her just a short time ago. She was screaming and awfully mad at him, but he did look happy,” she trilled with merriment. “Gamay went to calm her.”

“Zurgol,” Quillen repeated, echoing Kethan’s thoughts. The male glanced over at him inquiringly. “Is he not the male who tangled with the zaron revolutions ago? Ugly male who could scare the quills off a zarkluth?”

“No wonder she screamed,” Kethan added but then grinned. “It would be interesting to see how he will court her. I do not believe she will make it easy on him. He is not the most tractable male.”

“What do you expect?” Quillen chuffed. “He is Therxian’s favorite hunter. He has a massive stick up his vent just like him.”

“Don’t pay them any attention,” Alexandra told Neima and shot them a glare that spoke volumes as she gave the nestling a candied flower. Neima eagerly stuffed it into her mouth with a hum of pleasure that made Kethan chuff in amusement. The treat their mate introduced had become widely popular among many of the Vahel but especially among the nestlings. “I’m certain that she’s lovely. Let Gamay know that I will go and meet her shortly and see if I can help.” Alexandra sighed as she gave Neima a hug before sending the nestling on the way. “As for you two—” she scolded.

“We deserve punishment,” Kethan replied as he uncoiled from the bench. “Perhaps our mate requires satisfying?”

“Yes,” Quillen agreed as he too slipped to the floor to slither over to their laughing mate. “She should use us for her pleasure. It shall be torturous.”

“You two are ridiculous,” she gasped around a laugh, her face pinkening with merriment.

“That may be, little flower,” Kethan hissed as he wound over to her other side, “but every flower needs a good tender.”

“And it is our pleasure to make you bloom,” Quillen finished as his tail looped around her waist to draw her tightly against him.

Kethan grinned as he wound his tail up her thigh until the tip of his tail rested over her rapidly beating pulse. So sweet. So perfect. Bending his head, he placed his mouth upon her neck and breathed in her fragrance with his kiss. And at the brush of his tongues against her skin, his flower bloomed for them with her sweet perfume yet again.