



THE
SONG
OF
SEVEN
FIRES

ARIANA AUGUST

The Serpent Awakens

Copyright © 2025 by Ariana August

www.authorarianaugust.com

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

First Edition: September 2025

Welcome To Nuama!



[Click here](#) for detailed maps—*and* this map at higher resolution.

Learn more—check out the [characters](#) and [lexicon](#) of Nuama.

Chapter One — Before

The thing about Joreh was that he loved her so much he wanted her to be the best version of herself.

That's what Lireah told herself, and that's what he told her, too—always softly, with his forehead pressed to hers and his hands cupping her face like she was something fragile.

I only say these things because I love you. You know that, right? You know that. You know I'm not trying to hurt you?

It wasn't really a question.

She was twenty-five.

She'd met him at twenty-three, at a friend-of-a-friend's nameday gathering on the terrace of a drinking hall in the uppers.

It was the kind of place with dozens of oil lanterns strung between the columns, overpriced spirits, and a view of the towers that made everyone feel briefly immortal.

Joreh was thirty-nine. Dark hair pushed back, a linen shirt with the sleeves rolled to the elbows, a dapper vest lined with silver thread, a timepiece at his wrist that caught the lantern light when he gestured.

He bought her a drink without asking what she wanted—a glass of vel'asha, pressed into her hand with a smile that said *trust me*.

She'd been holding the house list, about to order a sev'arin fizz—that hall was famous for them. She never mentioned it. That was the first time she swallowed a preference to make room for his, and it went down so smoothly she didn't even feel it.

He worked in trade holdings. Everyone liked him—he was good at reading people, good at knowing exactly what to say and when to not speak, good at making you feel like the only person in the room and then, with one flick of inattention, like you were lucky to be in the room at all.

Three months in, she wore a red dress to dinner. She'd bought it on a whim from a secondhand stall at the Vael Market because the fabric felt amazing and when she looked in the wavy mirror she saw someone braver than she sometimes felt.

When she came out of the bedroom, he was on the divan, reading a ledger. He looked up. His eyes moved down her body and back up again—slowly—and then he did this thing with his mouth. Not a frown. Not quite. Just the corner of his lip pulling inward, the subtlest flicker of something she'd later learn to read the way sailors read clouds.

"You're wearing that?"

Not mean. Not angry. Almost amused.

A tiny, careful question that planted itself under her ribs like a splinter.

She looked down at herself and suddenly the dress didn't feel like her anymore. It felt like a mistake she'd made.

She changed. It wasn't worth an argument, not when they had a fun evening planned.

He kissed her forehead, lingered there, and said she looked beautiful. The relief was so warm and narcotic that she leaned into him, grateful he was there.

The red dress went to the back of the wardrobe, then to a charity bundle, then one day it was gone.

She didn't mourn it. That was the trick—he never took anything from her all at once. He just made her want to let it go, because it made sense.

He didn't tell her to stop seeing her friends. He would never. *He wasn't like that—* he said so himself.

Bafrea, her closest friend since first annum at academy, came up in conversation one night. Joreh tilted his head.

“Don't you think Bafrea's kind of a... bad influence? I mean, I love her just as much as you do, but every time you come back from seeing her you're drinking more, you're staying out later. I worry about you.” He reached across the table and took her hand. “I just don't want anyone dragging you down.”

And Lireah thought about the last time she'd gone out with Bafrea—how they'd shut down a wine bar one night, laughing so hard Lireah's stomach ached.

She'd burst through the door wanting to tell Joreh about the ridiculous thing the barkeep had said. He'd been sitting in the dark front room, awake, waiting.

His silence was one she could feel on her skin. He hadn't yelled. He'd just said, “I was worried,” in a voice so quiet and wounded that the fun curdled into guilt instantly, totally, like a chemical reaction.

So maybe Bafrea was a bad influence.

Sana, he noted, always seemed to be flirting with other men when her partner wasn't around. “What does that say about her values?”

Xia, her old academy roommate, was fun—"but honestly, my love, have you noticed she's competitive with you? The little comments about your work? I see how you get after spending time with her. You're quieter. I don't think she's good for you."

He said it with such tenderness, and Lireah felt a rush of something like gratitude—that he noticed, that he saw her, that he cared enough to protect her from harm she couldn't detect on her own.

She saw less of Bafrea. Cancelled plans with Sana.

Let Xia's letters sit unopened until the letters stopped altogether, and when they did, the silence barely registered, because Joreh filled every space so completely there was no room to feel what was missing.

It was like a dry lakebed that had flooded—you couldn't tell everything was gone because there was no emptiness. Just him. Everywhere.

He had opinions about everything. Her hair ("I like it better down, it's softer"), her work ("You know that place is kind of beneath you, right? You could do better"—or, alternately, "I just don't want you to get ahead of yourself, your employer has to say nice things"), the way she laughed in public ("It's a little much, Lireah, people were staring").

The opinions arrived as observations, as the quiet counsel of a man who simply loved her too much to watch her embarrass herself.

After all, he wanted her to have his babies someday—and the mother of his children had to be above reproach.

He told her all the time how he wanted her to give him babies, though other than that, he never said anything about making their relationship lasting.

She was glad he wanted children though. That was important to her—being a mother. She wanted two daughters and maybe a son. She'd told Joreh so during their fifth month together, and he'd immediately said that sounded wonderful to him.

But it hadn't happened yet.

In the meantime, she worked as a junior illustrator at a small paper design house. She was good at it—had always been good at it, had stayed up most nights until last bell at academy bleeding pigment theory and letterwork. She had built a folio her instructors called exceptional.

Her employer had told her twice last quarter that her work was outstanding. The first time, she came home bright-faced, practically vibrating, and Joreh smiled and said, "That's wonderful, my love," and then pivoted seamlessly into a twenty-minute story of a trade deal he'd brokered.

The second time, he tilted his head—that tilt—and said, "I mean, she kind of has to say that though, right? That's just how employers talk. I don't want you to be disappointed if it doesn't lead to anything."

He held her as he said it. She put her chin on his shoulder, feeling the glow drain out of her like water through a crack in a glass, and thought: *He's right. I always get ahead of myself. He's just keeping me grounded.*

That was his way.

Every cut came with a kiss. He was the injury and the tincture, the sickness and the only approved treatment. She ran to him for comfort from the exact pain he had caused, never seeing the circle because the circle was all she knew.

They'd been together two annums. She lived in his dwelling—his, not theirs, a distinction he deployed casually whenever leverage was needed.

“This is my home, Lireah. I need you to respect that.”

She kept her things in the spaces he'd designated—one side of the wardrobe, two drawers in the washroom, a single kitchen shelf for the dried senara leaf tea he said smelled strange but tolerated because he was generous like that.

She paid half the cost of the dwelling—more than half, some months, when his commission notes ran late. He never called it what it was. He called it *helping out*, as though her coin were a kindness he was graciously accepting rather than something he required.

When they fought—and they fought more now, or rather, she fought and he managed—it always ended with her apologizing. Always.

She could never trace how it happened. She'd begin with something real and solid—the way he'd gently mocked her in front of his friends, his hand on her lower back steering her away from a conversation she was enjoying at a gathering, plans he'd canceled or rearranged without asking.

But Joreh could rotate a conversation the way other people solved equations—calmly, patiently, turning it until the picture changed.

The original grievance would become her tone. Her tone became a pattern. Her pattern became evidence of something fundamentally unstable in *her*.

Not him, never him.

“You always do this, Lireah. You take something small and you spiral. I can't keep being your punching bag.”

He would say she'd hurt him—he was the wounded one and she was the thing that had caused the wound.

Soon she'd be apologizing—confused, disoriented, her original point dissolving like salt in water—while he sat there, calm as marble, waiting to be soothed.

"I'm not going to engage with you when you're like this," he'd say, if she pressed.

And then the silence. He wielded silence like a knife—precise, deliberate.

He could go hours without speaking to her, without looking at her, and the absence of him, even while he sat a meter away, created a hole so total that she would say anything, agree to anything, bend into any shape just to feel the air return.

She always broke first. He knew she would.

She cried in the bath sometimes. Not the kind of crying that announces itself—not sobs, not gasps—just a quiet, steady leaking, like condensation on a window, so subtle she could almost pretend it was just the water on her face.

She didn't understand it. She had a man who loved her, who took care of her, who only got upset because he loved so deeply.

She lived in a dwelling in a good quarter of the uppers. She had work, even if Joreh thought she could do better—or couldn't, depending on how he felt that day.

She had everything she was supposed to have at twenty-five, and the persistent, bone-deep sadness didn't make sense, so she did what he'd trained her to do—she decided the problem was her.

I'm too sensitive. I'm too emotional. I need to be better.

His words, living in her head now.

One night, she almost saw it.

They were having dinner with another couple—Joreh's friend Marus and his woman, Tessiha—and Tessiha was telling a story, laughing, gesturing with her wine cup, and Marus was watching her with an unguarded, uncomplicated look. Like she delighted him. Like her volume and her mess and her too-loud laugh were not things to be managed but to be enjoyed.

At one point, Tessiha's hand knocked her cup and wine spread across the cloth. Marus snorted, handed her a napkin, and said, "This is why I love you."

Tessiha swatted his arm and the whole thing was so easy, so free—

Lireah felt something crack open in her chest. A door she didn't know was there, and behind it, a question—*is that what it's supposed to feel like?*

She looked at Joreh. He was reading a trade missive. Ignoring all of them.

And then Joreh looked up, caught her staring at him, and his face broke into a smile. The smile. The one from the terrace.

The one that said *you're mine and isn't that the most wonderful thing in the world*. He reached over and squeezed her knee under the table. "You alright, my love?"

The door closed.

"I'm fine," she said.

Her mother came to visit a few times each month. Lireah kept the visits short now—Joreh didn't like her "processing their relationship with outside people," which was his phrase for any conversation that might give someone else a window into the life she was living.

Her mother only ever asked how she was doing. Lireah only ever said fine.

But last Soothday, her mother paused in the middle of their walk—a long, loaded pause, the kind only mothers know how to deploy. Then she spoke.

"You seem different, Lireah. You seem... sad."

Lireah laughed. Not too loudly, though.

"I'm just tired, Mama."

After her mother left, she sat on the edge of the bed.

Joreh was in the washroom, singing to himself—he had a beautiful voice, and she could hear it through the wall, warm and careless, and she hated that even now it made her feel safe.

She stared at her hands and thought, briefly, involuntarily, about the girl she'd been before. The girl who wore red and laughed with her whole body and sent for her friends at midnight and created things with her hands that strangers called exceptional.

That girl felt like a portrait of someone she'd loved once and lost touch with, and she couldn't quite explain how, couldn't find the single moment it all went wrong—because there wasn't one. There were a hundred. A thousand. Each one so small that by the time you added them up, the sum was unrecognizable. The math untraceable.

Joreh came out of the washroom, a towel around his waist, steam trailing behind him. He looked at her sitting there and his brow creased.

"Was your mother here?"

"She stopped by. Just for a little while."

A sigh. Just a breath, but loaded with the weight of a hundred prior conversations. "I hope you weren't complaining about me again."

"I wasn't," she said quickly. Too quickly.

She heard the eagerness in her own voice—the desperate, reflexive need to reassure him—and for half a second, she hated the sound of it. But the half-second passed.

"Good." He walked over, still damp, and kissed the top of her head. His lips lingered. "You know I only want what's best for you."

"I know," she said.

And she believed him. Spirits help her, she *still* believed him—not because she was stupid, not because she was weak, but because he had spent more than two annums patiently, meticulously dismantling her instruments of navigation and replacing them with himself.

Her compass pointed to him. Her timepiece ran on his schedule.

She was twenty-five. She had so much time.

That was the thing that made him dangerous—and somewhere, in a part of himself he'd never show her, he knew it.

He had many annums to work with. Annums of small corrections, quiet erosions, gentle theft. Annums to whittle and shave and sand down the woman who'd walked in until nothing remained but the shape he preferred—and she would thank him for it.

She would look at the husk of herself and call it love, because he had taken the word and hollowed it out and filled it with something else entirely, and she no longer knew the difference.

Outside, the uppers hummed and shimmered, full of people she no longer visited and places she no longer went and a version of herself she could no longer reach.

Lireah pulled the curtain shut.

Joreh preferred it closed.

It was a task-night when she went, which was unusual. She normally only visited on feast days or the occasional obligatory Soothday, and even then, Joreh always came with her, sitting at her mother's kitchen table with his perfect posture and his perfect manners, complimenting the food, asking about the garden, being so thoroughly charming that Lireah sometimes wondered if she'd imagined everything—if the version of him that existed in her mother's kitchen was the real one and the rest was just her being dramatic.

But Joreh was in Aureth—the outer edges of the uppers—on business until Freynight. He'd sent a note from his lodging house saying he missed her, and she'd written *miss you too* on a slip of paper and left it on her desk to post in the morning and then sat in the quiet dwelling for a long time, doing nothing, just listening to the stillness of the kitchen. The silence didn't feel oppressive the way his silences did. It felt neutral. Like a room with no opinion.

She sent word to her mother on impulse.

"I was thinking of coming over. Just for the night. If that's all right."

Her mother replied quickly with a note that said, "Of course, sweetheart. I'll make up your room."

The walk was half a turning of the glass, through the outer wards and down the long hill road. She didn't hum or talk to herself. She just walked, her shawl pulled close, the early spring air still cool enough to need the wool but soft enough to feel like a suggestion of something warmer coming.

The busy quarters thinned. Market rows gave way to lane houses, lane houses to garden rows, and then she was turning onto Maren, and there it was—the stone and timber house with the green door, overgrown aethenblossoms, and the porch lantern already lit, though the sun hadn't fully set.

Her mother always had the porch lantern lit—day or night. It was such a small thing. Lireah didn't know why it made her throat tight.

Dinner was nothing special. Stewed hen and grains and greens dressed with a bit too much oil, eaten at the same kitchen table where Lireah had done her lessons, spilled berry juice, carved her initials into the underside of the wood with a knife when she was nine.

Her mother talked about the neighbor's new hound, a book she'd just finished, and whether the vethara would come back this annum or if the late frost had gotten them.

Lireah listened.

She didn't have to perform. She didn't have to monitor her volume or her opinions or calculate which version of herself was safest to offer.

She just sat there and ate stewed hen and let her mother talk about vethara. It was the most relaxed she'd been in a long time, though she didn't frame it that way to herself. She just thought—*this is nice*.

After dinner, her mother brewed tea—the same dried sorrel root she'd been buying for twenty annums, from the same herbalist, in the same paper wrapping with the same symbols drawn onto it—and they sat in the front room and played half a round

of tiles that neither of them cared about finishing. Around the ninth bell, Lireah yawned, and her mother said, "Go to bed, dearest. Your room is ready."

Her room.

It hadn't been *her room* in any real sense for over seven annums—since she left for the academy—but her mother had never converted it.

The narrow bed was still there, pushed against the wall beneath the window. The blanket was the same one—soft blue cotton, washed so many times it felt like nothing at all, like being covered by air. But it still kept her warm.

Her shelf still held the books she'd left behind—adventure stories with cracked spines, a few art folios, a pile of sketchpads. On the bureau, a framed drawing of her at seventeen, standing in front of a canvas at the academy exhibition, grinning like she'd gotten away with something.

Lireah sat on the edge of the narrow bed and the mattress dipped in the same familiar way. She could hear her mother downstairs, splashing water as she did the dishes in the kitchen, the muffled clink of mugs being put away. The sounds were so ordinary, so deeply known, that they bypassed her mind entirely and went straight into her body, settling somewhere behind her sternum like a warm hand.

She changed into an old shift she found in the bureau—a faded thing she'd last worn at a foot race she'd run the annum before leaving for academy—and climbed under the blanket.

The pillow smelled like her mother's washing herbs. Clean and uncomplicated. She pulled the blanket up to her chin the way she had when she was small, tucking it tight around her shoulders, making a cocoon.

The window was cracked. She could hear nightsingers, or early frogs—some small living thing calling in the garden. A lantern-cart passed on the lane, its glow sliding across the ceiling in a slow arc. Then quiet.

She closed her eyes.

She didn't fall asleep right away. She lay in the in-between place, not quite conscious, not quite gone, and her mind did the thing it rarely did anymore: it wandered freely. No vigilance. No calculation. Just drift.

She thought about a dwelling. Not any specific dwelling—just a vague, soft-edged idea of one. Hers. Fully hers. Small, maybe. A single room. Big windows.

A drawing table by the window where the light came in, covered in sketches and pigment pots and the productive mess of someone making things again. A tea cup on the sill. Plants she'd chosen herself.

She thought about a Soothday. Waking late. No one else's mood to read, no temperature to take. Just morning, just quiet, just the slow luxury of deciding what she wanted to do and then doing it. Sending for Bafrea. Going somewhere for a meal.

Talking too much. Laughing at whatever volume came naturally.

The images weren't vivid. They didn't have plot or detail. They were more like the feeling of a thing than the thing itself—warm and hazy and just out of focus, the way the world looks through a window on a rainy day. She wasn't planning. She wasn't deciding.

She was just allowing her mind to show her something it had been keeping in a locked drawer, and in the safety of this room, in this bed, under this blanket that smelled like her mother's house, the drawer opened easily, without effort, as if it had been waiting.

Oh, she thought, half-asleep. Not a revelation. Not a decision. Just there.

The nightsingers called. The curtain shifted in the breeze.

Downstairs, her mother doused the kitchen lamp, and the house settled into its bones the way old houses do—a creak, a long exhale—and Lireah slept.

Chapter Two – The Arrival

She opened her eyes and was greeted by a wall of green. She was facedown on something soft...

What was she lying on? Moss?

Yes, it was moss. Tiny white flowers poked up from the bed of it, each twinkling like a star against a sky of emerald green.

Above her, a canopy of vast, tangled branches filtered light into long golden shafts that fell like slow pillars through the air, catching motes of something that wasn't quite dust. Pollen, maybe. Or spores. They drifted with an aimlessness that suggested time moved differently here—unhurried, thick, like honey dripping from a hive.

Lireah sat up.

The moss was dense and impossibly soft, a living carpet so thick and deep it shifted beneath her when she moved. It covered the ground in rolling mounds, pale jade near the roots of the trees, deepening to emerald-black where the light fell richest.

Small flowers she'd never seen grew in clusters along the moss—translucent, bell-shaped, faintly luminous, as though each petal held a drop of dew.

To her left was a waterfall.

It poured from a rock face that was covered with hanging vines, maybe forty meters up, the water catching the canopy light as it fell so that it looked less like water and more like poured glass—smooth, unbroken, almost silent.

Where it met the pool below, the surface barely rippled. The pool was clear enough to see the bottom: pale stones, dark sand, the slow waving of several aquatic plants she couldn't identify—deep green with feathery arms, soft pink branching things, some curled and violet-black.

The air smelled like rain and flowers and something sweeter beneath both—something unfamiliar that settled in her chest and loosened the tightness there.

She looked down at her hands. They were the same as they'd always been. She looked at her legs, her bare feet against the moss—yes, still hers.

Then she felt it.

A weight behind her shoulders. Not painful. Not heavy, exactly. Just—a fullness, a counterbalance, like something had been added to her body while she slept.

Lireah reached back, and her fingers met feathers.

She stopped breathing.

Slowly, carefully, she turned her head and saw it—a wing. *Her* wing. It arced from behind her left shoulder in a long, sweeping curve, the feathers layered in shades of soft white, pink, and pale gold at the edges, deepening to a warm amber near the base. She flexed something instinctive—a muscle she hadn't known she had—and the wing shifted, opened slightly, and the light passed through the outer feathers like sun through stained glass.

She screamed.

She scrambled to her feet, heart hammering, turning to see the other wing—yes, *there were two*—and she was spinning, hands shaking, mouth open.

The wings threw her off balance, and she fell into an untidy pile onto the moss.

Her breath came in short, sharp pulls. “What in the name of—”

Then she heard a sound.

A branch shifting. A soft landing on moss.

She turned.

The woman standing at the edge of the clearing had wings the color of deep bronze. She was in the process of folding them up behind her back. It was clear she had just flown down from the sky.

“Hello, Sestra.”

She was looking at Lireah like she had been waiting for her for a very long time.

~

“Sestra?”

“You are a woman, are you not?”

“Yes, I—”

“Very well. Here we call one another Sestras.”

“Ah, alright—”

Lireah wanted to ask *where* here was, exactly. And why she had wings—

“My name is Fieoni. Can you walk?”

Fieoni's voice was low and unhurried. She stood at the tree line with her bronze wings folded neatly behind her, watching Lireah with an expression that was hard to read.

Lireah nodded, though as she stood she wasn't entirely sure that was true.

Her legs felt like her legs. Her feet felt like her feet.

But the wings behind her shifted every time she moved, adjusting her center of gravity in ways she didn't understand, and she kept overcorrecting, swaying slightly, like someone standing on a boat for the first time.

"I can walk," she said. Her voice sounded strange here—as if the vastness of the foliage surrounding her was absorbing it.

"I assume you cannot fly?" Fieoni said, watching her stagger about.

"No, I—"

"Where did you come from?"

"I... from the uppers?"

"The uppers?"

"Yes, in the centralmost village in Horhad."

"Horhad..."

A chill ran through Lireah. Horhad was one of the largest centralmost villages—everyone knew of it. Except this woman, apparently.

"I—well, my world is called Da'reth—"

Fieoni gasped.

"Da'reth? That isn't possible—"

"What do you mean it isn't possible? Do you not know the name of your own world?"

But then, maybe this woman wasn't from Da'reth—

"You are not on Da'reth anymore."

Lireah's head grew light.

“Excuse me? You must be jesting!”

“I am not.”

“But—how is that possible?”

“I don’t know, though I could likely guess,” Fieoni murmured as she glanced at the wings on Lireah's back.

“I—”

“I am sorry, but I can’t give you an answer with any certainty right now. I must consult with the other Sestras of my temple to see what guesses they may have. You may come, if you’d like.”

The last thing Lireah wanted was to be alone, so she nodded her assent.

“Then we will walk. It isn't far. And evening meal is approaching. You’ll be getting hungry, I’m sure.”

Evening? But—

Then Fieoni turned and stepped into the forest. Lireah followed, because there was nothing else to do and nowhere else to go and the woman with the bronze wings was the only solid thing in a world that didn't make sense yet.

The forest was not easy to move through.

It wasn't hostile—nothing about this place felt hostile—but it was *dense*, layered and tangled in a way that suggested it had never been asked to make room for anyone. The trees were enormous, their trunks wrapped in climbing vines that spiraled upward and erupted into cascades of pale blue, magenta pink and opalescent flowers high above.

Roots broke the surface of the mossy ground in thick, knotted ridges that Lireah had to step over carefully, her new wings catching on low branches as she passed. Each time it happened, she flinched. Each time, Fieoni paused and waited, Lireah freed herself, and they continued.

The light here was green, gold, and shifting, filtered through so many layers of canopy that it felt less like daylight and more like being inside a lantern. Things grew on top of other things—ferns sprouting from the crooks of branches, mushrooms with wide, flat caps the color of burnt orange lining fallen logs, flowers she had no name for pressing out of every available surface as though the forest could not help itself, as though stillness was not an option and every inch of bark and stone and soil had to be *alive* with something.

Lireah saw a vine heavy with dark, oblong fruit that hung in clusters like upside-down chandeliers. She saw a bush covered in tiny white berries that pulsed—actually pulsed—with a faint interior light, as if each one held a heartbeat. She saw something that looked like a lily but wasn't, its petals black and velvety and wide as her hand, growing in a shallow stream they crossed on a series of flat stones that Fieoni navigated without looking down.

"What is this place?" Lireah asked, halfway across the stream, balancing with her arms out.

"Weverta," Fieoni said, from the other side. She said it simply, the way you'd name the location of your dwelling for a visitor. *This is where I live.*

"That is the name of your world?"

"No, that is what this isle is called."

"This is an island?"

"Yes. The mainland of Themias is north. There are many more islands and islets between here and there. This whole of our world is called Nuama."

"Nuama?"

"Yes—created by The Awakener over nine thousand annums ago."

"The who?"

"Come," Fieoni sighed. "All will be revealed. But let us make haste—you look peaked."

Lireah wanted to ask more—*how did I get here, why do I have wings, what is happening*—but Fieoni was already walking again.

After a while—twenty minutes, maybe, or forty, it was difficult to tell without a timepiece—the forest began to change. The wild tangle thinned.

The trees grew more evenly spaced, their trunks straighter, the vigorous undergrowth beneath them giving way to soft, open stretches of ground cover. The moss gave way to something finer—a low-growing plant with tiny silver-green leaves that felt cool and yielding underfoot, almost like walking on damp cloth. The scent it released was similar to darkmint.

The path widened. Stone appeared—not built, exactly, but *formed*. Flat slabs set into the ground at intervals, forming a walkway that curved gently between the trees.

"These are the Groveholds," Fieoni said, noting the direction of Lireah's gaze. "We tend to them with a light hand—well, our Fa'loom do."

"What is a Fa'loom?"

"You'll see," Fieoni said.

The Groveholds were a different kind of beauty than the wilds beyond—no less alive, however.

The trees bore fruit Lireah didn't recognize—clusters of something small and round and deeply violet growing in spirals along the branches, and larger, teardrop-shaped fruit with skins that shifted between green and gold depending on the angle of the light.

Flowering plants of all sorts lined the stone paths, their blossoms a soft coral color, and the air smelled sweeter here—richer—like walking through a citrus orchard thick with blooms.

Fieoni stopped beside a tree with low-hanging branches and reached up without ceremony. She pulled down one of the violet fruits and held it out.

"Dihge fruit. Eat it, if you'd like."

Lireah took it. It was warm in her palm, almost body temperature, and the skin was smooth and taut. She bit into it and her eyes closed involuntarily. It was sweet, but not the way sugar is sweet—deeper than that, more complex, almost like honey. There was something floral in it, and something almost herbal beneath that, with a finish that was bright and clean. It lingered in her mouth and she reached for more.

"It's delicious!"

"Yes. Pick as many as you'd like," Fieoni said, so Lireah did.

Further along the path, where the stone slabs gave way to a wider space flanked by trees branching into graceful arches overhead, Fieoni paused again. She reached into a low thicket and produced something larger—a smooth-skinned fruit with a faint blush of pink at its base.

"Ōlara," she said, peeling it with one hand. The flesh inside was glistening and impossibly fragrant. She handed half to Lireah.

It was softer than the dihge fruits. Tart, just a bit. Sweet like simmered sugar underneath.

Fieoni turned, and through the archway of branches ahead, Lireah saw it—a huge structure rising from the ground like something that had grown rather than built. Stone and crystal draped with living vines, its walls open to the air so that the forest moved through it freely.

Blossoms climbed sparkling shafts of jasper, umber, and aureate. The stone walls of the temple were made of translucent quartzite in shades of glinting gold and pearl white. Through them, Lireah could see the glowing interior.

Beyond the temple was the ocean. Its water was an impossible shade of teal. The waters of Da'reth were always grey.

"Welcome to Temple Es'ilāha," Fieoni grinned. "Isn't it beautiful?"

"I—oh. Oh, yes. It is."

~

The interior of the temple was not what Lireah expected, though she wasn't sure what she'd been expecting. It wasn't solemn. It wasn't hushed. It was *living*—open-walled and airy, its columns wrapped in flowering vines that continued up into a latticed canopy where broad leaves overlapped to create shifting patterns of shade and light.

Only some parts of the temple were roofed, and those were in thin panels of what seemed like thin crystal of some type, as they let in quite a bit of light.

The floor was smooth, pale stone inlaid with thin channels of running water that branched through the space like veins, catching the light and carrying it in bright, trembling lines from one end of the hall to the other. Somewhere, something was blooming that smelled like warm citrus and rain.

Lireah saw the men before she understood what they were.

They moved through the temple grounds—quiet, purposeful, beautiful in a way that seemed less accidental than cultivated. The first she noticed was carrying a stone basin of water across the courtyard, bare-armed and broad-shouldered, the muscles of his back shifting beneath well-oiled skin as he walked. He wore a linen wrap low on his hips and nothing else, and his hair was cropped short, and the line of his jaw could have been drawn with a straightedge. He set the basin down at the base of a flowering column, knelt, and began washing the stone with slow, careful strokes—attentive, unhurried, as though the task were worthy of his full attention and he was worthy of the task. Up and down, over and over.

A second was trimming back the vines along the far wall with a curved blade. He was leaner—tall, narrow-waisted, dark hair falling across his forehead as he worked. His forearms were corded with muscle, and every movement had a kind of thoughtless grace, the blade arcing and returning in a rhythm that was almost hypnotic. When he paused to push the hair from his eyes, Lireah caught the angle of his cheekbones, the fullness of his lips, and felt something stir low in her belly that she hadn't felt in a very long time. She looked away. Then she looked back.

He was quite good-looking. Even moreso than Joreh, who she'd always thought was the most handsome man she'd ever seen.

A third man knelt in a patch of sunlight near the terrace steps, grinding something fragrant in a stone mortar—herbs, spices, she couldn't tell. His hands were large and deliberate, and the muscles of his thighs tensed beneath his wrap as he worked. She could see the thick outline of his—ah, well. Perhaps she should not be looking.

They were everywhere, she realized. Tending the grounds, carrying supplies, oiling the wood of the railings, arranging cut flowers in stone vessels along the walkways. None of them spoke loudly. None of them rushed. They inhabited their bodies with a kind of ease she'd never seen in men before—no posturing, no performance, no self-conscious tension.

Just muscle and skin and focus and the quiet, confident presence of people who knew exactly what they were for and took pleasure in it.

They were friendly with one another—easy camaraderie that she'd never witnessed between men in Da'reth. Two of them embraced upon meeting, and there was nothing sexual about it. They were just glad to see one another.

“Those, my dearest, are Fa'loom.”

“The men, you mean? They are called Fa'loom? Is that a word meaning servant?”

“Of a sort. But all males here in Nuama are trained to serve and honor women. It is their rite, given to them by The Awakener herself.”

“Ah... I see.”

But Lireah didn't see. She *wanted* to, however. Being served instead of serving—relaxing instead of doing—that sounded nice. Peaceful.

Fieoni led her through the main hall and out the far side, where the temple opened onto a wide terrace built into the slope of the grove. Below, the Groveholds stretched in layered green descending toward the sand—a thin band of white and then the water, that impossible teal blue, shimmering at the edge.

The terrace itself was shaded by a canopy of trained branches heavy with small, star-shaped white flowers that released their scent in waves whenever the breeze moved through them.

At the center of the terrace stood a long, low table made of dark wood, its surface smooth and faintly gleaming, set close to the ground with cushions arranged around it in deep jewel tones threaded through with gold and silver embroidered patterns.

Two women were already seated.

A third was standing near the arched doorway, and Fieoni whispered something to her. The woman looked at Lireah, nodded, then walked away.

The women at the table looked up when she and Fieoni approached.

One of them was older than Fieoni—or seemed to be, Lireah was already learning that age was hard to read here—with wings the color of a dark plum, folded loosely behind her. Her hair was silver-white and cropped close, and she had the kind of face that looked like it enjoyed laughter.

The second woman seemed younger—close to Lireah's age, maybe. Her wings were extraordinary: a deep iridescent teal that shifted to emerald green when the light

caught them. She kept them slightly open behind her as she sat, as if she couldn't quite be bothered to fold them all the way.

She was eating something from a small bowl with her fingers and looked up at Lireah with a grin that was immediate and uncomplicated.

"I didn't know we were having company for evening meal! Who is this *gorgeous* Sestra?"

"My name is Lireah," she said, heat rising to her face.

She'd never been called gorgeous before, though she wasn't falsely humble, either. She knew she was pretty.

"I'm Veshai," the woman said, mouth half full. "You look like you're about to fall over."

"She's only just arrived," Fieoni said, settling onto a cushion with the easy grace of someone whose wings knew exactly where to go. "From Da'reth."

"From—?"

"What in the name of—"

"It's alright. She's alone. Nothing else came with her," Fieoni hastened to reassure them both.

"*Nothing* else?" Lireah asked. "What does *that* mean?"

"Dearest, as much as I would love to explain the origin story of both your world and ours, it is quite a long tale. Frankly, I think you ought to eat and rest before hearing it. For now—you are safe. We will care for you. You have nothing to worry about."

"Alright," Lireah said, reluctantly. She *really* wanted to know what was going on. But she supposed she could wait a little while.

The older woman across from her extended her hand—not to shake, but palm up, an offering. Lireah took it on instinct and felt a brief, firm squeeze.

“I am Dorivae,” she smiled. “Welcome to our table.”

“Thank you.”

“Lireah, usually others eat with us, but tonight I’ve asked for privacy so you can settle in,” Fieoni said.

“How many women live here?” Lireah asked.

“Around two hundred,” Dorivae replied. “Now sit, join us!”

Lireah sat. The cushion received her like it had been waiting. Her wings—she was still getting used to thinking those words, *her wings*—fanned awkwardly behind her before settling against the fabric, and she caught Veshai watching with an amused tilt of her head.

“I can’t imagine evincing here all and having wings all of a sudden,” she said. “We are born with them, here.”

“It *is* a little awkward,” Lireah laughed.

The food arrived shortly after, and it arrived carried by men.

They came from inside the temple in a procession—four of them, wingless, bare-armed and bare-chested, moving with an attentiveness that was thorough without being performative.

They were beautiful in the way that well-tended things are beautiful. Clear-eyed, thick hair, strong bodies.

The first set down a wide stone platter at the center of the table with both hands, dipping his chin slightly as he placed it. He had dark hair tied at the nape of his neck

and forearms corded with lean muscle, and he glanced at Lireah—briefly, warmly—before stepping back. It wasn't servile. It wasn't stiff. It was something she didn't have a framework for—men in service who seemed neither diminished by it nor performing it for reward.

And the food.

The first stone platter alone held more variety than she could process. There were small, round things that looked like pastry but weren't, with golden, flaking crust and dark, fragrant filling that oozed when Veshai tore one open.

There were sliced fruits arranged in overlapping fans—some she recognized from the walk through the Groveholds, and others she didn't—a deep orange fruit with seeds like tiny rubies, a crescent-shaped thing with pale green flesh that smelled faintly of vanilla.

There were salted meats, dark, and glossy, folded beside small dishes of something that looked like honeycomb and glowed faintly amber. There were greens she didn't recognize, dressed in something bright and acidic that made her mouth water when she leaned close.

A second man set down a wooden board holding an array of soft cheeses—one white and crumbly, one pale gold and dense, one veined with something violet—alongside a basket of bread still warm enough to steam when broken.

“Ah! Rootbread, my favorite,” Dorivae crowed with delight. Rootbread. Not real bread. Well, that was alright. It looked pillowy and soft and smelled delicious.

A third brought drinks—tall crystalline cups of something cool and faintly effervescent that tasted of crushed herbs and a sweetness that wasn't sugar.

The fourth set down a final tray of small, intricate delicacies in various colors layered with cream and topped with crystallized petals, each one different, each one almost too precise to eat.

They set everything down and withdrew to the periphery of the terrace, present but unobtrusive, watching for an empty cup or a needed plate with the quiet practice of people who had made attentiveness an art.

Dorivae began serving herself without ceremony, and Veshai was already two “pastries” deep, licking filling from her thumb.

"Eat," Fieoni said to Lireah. Not a command. An invitation.

Lireah reached for the rootbread first—something vaguely familiar—tore a piece and used it to scoop a bit of the violet-veined cheese. It was tangy, rich, and melted against the warm rootbread in a way that made her eye drop shut involuntarily.

She hadn't realized how hungry she was. When she opened her eyes, she reached for one of the “pastries”, then a handful of the *ōlara*, then a slice of the orange fruit with the ruby seeds, which burst on her tongue like tiny pockets of tart sunshine.

"She eats like she hasn't been fed," Veshai observed.

"Maybe she hasn't," Dorivae said quietly, and there was something in the way she said it—not pity, not judgment, just a knowing—that made Lireah's hand pause halfway to the smoked fish.

She looked around the table. Veshai was grinning, teal wings catching the light. Dorivae was watching her with those calm, unflinching eyes. Fieoni was pouring herself a drink, bronze feathers shifting as she moved.

Somewhere below, the Groveholds murmured with wind and birdsong. One of the men stepped forward to refill Lireah's cup, and she looked up at him and said *thank you*, and he smiled—easily, genuinely—and stepped back.

No one told her she was eating too much. No one told her she was being too loud or too quiet or too anything. She didn't have to monitor anyone's face for the wrong expression.

The food was abundant and the cups stayed full and the Sestras chatted about the grove, about the tides, about someone named Kerith who had done something outrageous with a boat.

Joreh would have said they were gossiping. But this was the most fun she'd had in... well, she didn't really remember how long.

The women folded her into the conversation without pressure, without expectation, the way a stream folds around a new stone. Naturally.

Without argument.

Lireah ate until she was full. She couldn't remember the last time she'd done that without apology.

And then, later in the evening, she realized she hadn't thought about Joreh for hours.

~

The meal had slowed to its natural end—plates half-cleared, cups nursed rather than drained, the conversation settling into the easy, unhurried rhythm of people who

had nowhere else to be. The light on the terrace had shifted from gold to amber, the sun moving behind the canopy and casting everything in warmth.

Lireah was leaning back on her cushion, her wings spread loosely behind her against the fabric, when Dorivae set down her cup and looked at her with that steady, unhurried gaze.

"You've noticed the men," she said. Not a question.

Lireah blinked. Of course she had noticed them—it would have been impossible not to. They moved through the periphery of the terrace with that same quiet attentiveness, clearing a dish here, replacing a cup there, and they were—yes, she had noticed.

The one with the dark hair tied back. Another with broad shoulders and a jaw that caught the light like it had been carved for exactly that purpose. A third, leaner, with hazel-green eyes and hands that moved with deliberate grace.

"They serve the temple," Fieoni said, tracing the rim of her cup with one finger. "But service here has a broader meaning than you might be used to."

Veshai leaned forward, teal wings shifting behind her, and her grin was conspiratorial but not unkind. "They're trained in *all* forms of care, Lireah. Companionship. Comfort. Pleasure." She said the last word the way she said everything—openly, without embarrassment, like it was just another thing that existed and deserved a name. "They live in the duug, near the beach. They're available to any woman of the temple whenever she wishes."

Lireah's lips parted slightly. She didn't speak.

“You can have two or more, if you’d like,” Veshai said casually, watching Lireah’s face. “They have all kinds of *offerings* they can give—whether you prefer oral stimulation, or perhaps a varapos in each entrance—”

“Varapos?”

“Their snake—the thing between their legs!” Veshai laughed.

“What do you mean by each entrance?” Lireah’s face was flushed with heat, but she wanted to know—

“Ah, your liaspure and your rear entrance—”

“Liaspure? Is that my...”

“The opening between your legs that gets wet when you want a man to put his varapos—or fingers or tongue—inside you,” Veshai grinned wickedly.

“Ah, I... I see.”

“And below the varapos are a man’s yezari.”

“Yezari?”

“Yes, those things that dangle—”

“Oh! In Da’reth we call those testes.”

“Testes slapping against my liaspure while a man hammers into me from behind is my favorite. What about you, Lireah?”

Lireah was not a prude—most women in Da’reth slept with several men before settling down with one to have children with—but she’d rarely discussed intimacy so openly before. And not with people she didn’t know well.

“Ah, well—”

"There's no obligation," Dorivae added, reading her expression. "And no expectation. You choose if you want company, and you choose *who*. The men here in Nuama will not come to you unbidden. They will not assume. They will not take what isn't offered." She paused, and the weight of the pause suggested she understood exactly why that distinction mattered. "Here, your desire belongs to you. It is not something to be managed or negotiated away. It simply *is*."

One of the men—the one with green eyes—crossed the terrace to clear a platter. As he drew near, he caught Lireah's gaze and held it for a moment. There was a teasing lightness to his smile. Then he moved on, and the moment passed.

"You don't have to decide anything now," Fieoni said. "You've only just arrived."

"But," Veshai said, and paused to pop a crystallized petal from one of the remaining cakes into her mouth, "you should know that if you'd prefer a *woman's* company tonight—" She met Lireah's eyes, and her expression shifted into something softer than her usual grin. Warmer. "—I'd offer mine. No expectations. Just someone beside you so you don't wake up in a strange place alone."

It was said so simply. So without agenda. Lireah felt something loosen in her chest. Her shoulders dropped into a more relaxed state.

"You are safe here," Dorivae said. She reached across the table and rested her hand near Lireah's, not touching, just *near*—an open door, not a pulled arm. "I know that word may not mean much yet. But you will learn it again. We'll make sure of that."

"You're lovely," Veshai added, quieter now, studying Lireah's face. "I don't think you know that. Or maybe you knew it once and someone made you forget. Either way

—" she shrugged, her teal wings rising and falling with the gesture. "You'll remember soon enough."

The amber light deepened. The star-shaped flowers above them released another wave of scent. Somewhere in the grove, a bird was singing a long, spiraling note that didn't resolve, just kept climbing, climbing, as though it had no interest in ending.

~

Lireah and Veshai left the terrace just as a nebula crested over the ocean.

"That is Nebula Aesplied," Veshai murmured. "That one is my favorite."

Lireah waved goodbye to Fieoni and Dorivae, who were staying at the table for a while longer—Dorivae was finishing a not-pastry, Fieoni stretched her bronze wings in the open air while she drank another mug of what was called fiera.

It was a strong, delicious drink the color of blood. Lireah had enjoyed three goblets of it herself over the course of the evening.

Veshai walked beside Lireah down a stone path that curved along the temple's outer edge, lined on both sides with coral-blossomed plants and lit at intervals by small honeywax torches set into the ground that gave off a warm, steady glow.

"You're quiet," Veshai said.

"I don't know what to say."

"That's fine. Quiet is fine. I just wanted to make sure it was the comfortable kind of quiet," Veshai said as she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

Her teal wings caught the torchlight as they walked, flickering between green and deep blue.

They walked in silence for a moment. The path widened and sloped gently downward, passing beneath an archway of intertwined branches hung with small, pale fruit that glowed faintly like tiny moons.

"Can I ask you something?" Lireah said.

"Anything."

"Do you think I will stay here?"

Veshai was quiet for a few steps.

"Well, I don't know of anyone who has come from Da'reth before. And though some of our Sestras perform Visitations there—"

"Wait, what? You *visit* Da'reth?"

"Well, *I* don't. But some do. That's part of what Fieoni will talk to you about tomorrow. Without getting too deep into anything, let me just say that I think it is likely you will stay."

"I want to. I think."

Veshai looked at her. "You don't have to rush it. That's the thing about this place. Nobody's keeping score. Nobody's waiting for you to perform."

Lireah felt something rise in her throat—not tears, not quite, but the pressure that comes before them, the warning. She swallowed it.

"Someone was," she said quietly. "Before. Someone was always keeping score."

Veshai didn't ask who. She didn't press. She just reached over and took Lireah's hand—gently, loosely, the kind of hold you could slip out of without effort—and walked

with her in silence until the path ended at a low dwelling nestled into the grove, its walls half-covered in climbing jasmine, its doorway hung with a curtain of woven fabric that moved in the breeze like slow breath.

"Your chambers," Veshai said. "There's water inside, and clean clothes, and the bed is very comfortable. Like sleeping on a cloud that someone overstuffed."

Lireah almost smiled. Almost.

"Thank you," she said, and meant it in a way that went beyond the room.

Veshai squeezed her hand once and let go.

"I'm just down the path if you need me—my chambers are the ones covered in lilacah blooms. The long trialing flowers that look like clusters of bells. Come find me if you need anything. Or even if you need nothing. Even if you just want someone to be quiet next to." She stepped back, her wings catching the honeywax torchlight.

"Goodnight, Lireah."

"Goodnight."

She watched Veshai walk back up the path until the teal of her wings disappeared into the violet light of night, and then she turned and pushed the curtain aside and stepped into the room that was hers—fully hers—and stood for a long time, breathing in the jasmine, letting the silence settle around her.

~

After the vastness of the forest, the open sweep of the terrace, and the sheer overwhelming *scale* of everything she'd seen since opening her eyes in the moss, the chamber felt cozy and calm.

The walls were smooth, pale stone—quartz, maybe, or something like it—and warm to the touch when she pressed her palm flat against them. The climbing jasmine had found its way in through a skygate and was sending thin green tendrils across the stone clustered with small white blossoms.

A second skygate was set low into the opposite wall and looked out onto the grove.

The bed was, as Veshai had promised, perfect. It sat low to the ground on a mineralshaped stone dais, wide enough to sprawl in, layered with linens so soft Lireah ran her hand across them over and over just to feel them.

The sheets were pale—not white, more the color of cream left in morning light—and there were blankets folded at the foot in sage and dusty rose, and pillows of varying sizes, some firm, some yielding.

A blanket, heavier than the rest, was draped across one side. She'd pulled it to her chest when she first sat down. It was stitched in a pattern she didn't recognize—interlocking shapes that might have been leaves or wings or both.

A low table beside the bed held a ceramic pitcher of water and a cup. A small dish of fruit, their violet skins catching the dim light. A candle—though not a candle, exactly. A smooth, round stone that gave off a warm, steady glow, bright enough to see by, soft enough to sleep beside. She could not find a wick or a flame. It simply *gave*

light, the way the moss simply grew and the water in the temple floor simply ran. Things here worked by rules she hadn't learned yet.

Clean clothes had been folded on a wooden stool near the door—a loose, sleeveless shift in pale linen, simple and soft. She'd changed into it, navigating the strange new logistics of her wings, which refused to cooperate with fabric and had to be fed through two long openings in the back that someone had clearly designed for exactly this purpose. She caught a glimpse of herself in a polished stone mirror mounted on the wall and paused.

The wings rose behind her shoulders like something painted onto her reflection by a hand that wasn't hers. She looked away.

Now she sat on the edge of the bed. The grove was quiet outside—not silent, never silent here, but quiet in the way that living things are quiet at night. Insects she couldn't name. The occasional low hoot or chirp of something in the canopy. Wind through the jasmine. The distant, barely-there sound of water, always water, this place was threaded with it.

She was tired. Bone-tired. The kind of tired that lives behind the eyes, in the hinge of the jaw, in the place where her wings joined her body. Her wingroots.

She wanted to sleep. Every part of her wanted to lie down in this impossible bed and let the linen take her and the scent of jasmine carry her under.

But she couldn't.

Because what if she woke up and this paradise was gone? What if sleep was the door back to Da'reth? What if when she closed her eyes in this room with its warm

stone walls and living jasmine, next time she opened them she was lying next to Joreh in *his* dwelling?

What if she woke up and the wings were gone and her body was just her body again—small, flightless, weak—and this place became a dream she'd carry around like a stone in her pocket, unbelievable and unshared?

She couldn't go back. The thought was so sharp and sudden it startled her. *I can't go back*. Not to Joreh and his careful, quiet violence. Not to the dwelling that was *his* and never *theirs*. Not to the silence he used like a blade, or the love he used like a lock.

But.

Her mother.

The thought arrived sideways, the way grief does—not announced, just suddenly *there*, sitting in the center of her chest like something heavy and cold.

Was her mother worried right now? Was she sitting on the edge of the same bed Lireah had slept in just—when? How long had she been here? Time didn't work the same. She didn't know if hours had passed or days or something else entirely, and the not-knowing was its own kind of cruelty.

She sat on the edge of the bed and held the blankets against her chest and felt the two things at once—the terror of going back and the ache of what she'd left—and they sat inside her side by side.

The glowing stone on the bedside table pulsed once, gently, as if breathing. Lireah lay down. She did not close her eyes. She watched the jasmine move in the window.

She listened to the grove breathe. She held the blanket like a hand she could trust, and stayed awake as long as she could, guarding the door between worlds with nothing but wakefulness and want.

Eventually, sleep took her anyway.

Chapter Three — First Flight

She woke up in the bed.

The jasmine bed, the cream linen bed, the bed in the chamber with the warm stone walls—*this* bed, *this* world—and the relief hit her so hard she pressed her face into the pillow and lay there for a full minute just breathing, her wings spread across the sheets behind her like something unfurled in the night while she wasn't watching.

She was still *here*.

The light through the window was early and soft, golden-green, and the grove outside was already murmuring with birds and the distant sound of water. She lay still and let her body arrive slowly—her limbs, her hands, the new weight of the wings, the faint soreness in muscles she was still learning she had.

She stretched, and the wings stretched with her, opening wide and then folding back in a motion that felt less foreign than it had yesterday. Like her body was learning without her permission. Like it already knew what it wanted.

She dressed in another linen shift—this one a pale, dusty gold that fell to her hips—clothing here covered much less than garments in Da'reth did—and followed the stone path back up to the terrace.

They were already there.

Dorivae sipped a cup of something steaming, her wings folded behind her like a robe. Fieoni was beside her, eating in silence, her feathers catching the morning light so sharply they looked almost metallic. Veshai was lying on her side on a cushion with her

head propped on one hand, teal wings pooled behind her on the stone, lazily tearing pieces from a round of rootbread and looking like someone who had made an art form of not being fully awake.

“You’re still here,” Veshai said, spotting her. “I’m so glad!”

“As am I,” Lireah smiled.

The other two women greeted her as she approached the table, and she returned their hellos.

Then, she sat. The cushions received her. The morning air was cool, sweet, and tasted like the star-shaped blossoms overhead, and she felt—not good, exactly, not yet, but *present*. Solid.

Like she was actually sitting where she was sitting instead of floating three inches above her own life.

She arranged her wings on the cushions behind her, copying Dorivae’s method of propping them out of the way.

Then the men arrived with food.

There were more of them this morning, or maybe she was simply more awake to their presence. They came from the temple interior carrying trays and platters and pitchers, bare-armed in the warm air, and Lireah found her gaze lingering in a way it hadn't the night before.

The one with the dark hair was back—tied at the nape again, a few loose strands framing his face—and he moved with a quiet physical confidence that she felt in the pit of her stomach. He set a platter of sliced fruit before her, and when he leaned close, she

caught his scent—something woody, clean, like the forest after rain. His forearm brushed the table near her hand. She didn't move away.

A second man poured her drink—the cool herbal thing from last night. He was broader, with deep-set dark eyes and a mouth that curved naturally toward amusement, as though something was always quietly funny to him. He poured slowly. She watched his hands. They were large and deliberate and she thought, involuntarily, about what it would feel like to be touched by hands like that—unhurried, sure of themselves, attentive. He caught her looking and met her eyes, and the warmth in his gaze was unhurried too. Available. Not presumptuous. Just *there*, if she wanted it. She felt heat climb her neck and looked down at her cup.

Veshai, who missed nothing, grinned into her rootbread.

The food spread across the table. There were bowls of something called yogurt that was drizzled with honey and emberfruit, platters of fruit both familiar and not—sliced *ōlara*, glowberry, something new that was deep red and glistening and tasted like melon and smoke—soft eggs prepared in some way she couldn't identify but that were creamy, rich, and seasoned with an herb that bloomed on her tongue.

Warm rootbread with something that tasted like butter. Small, savory cakes dense with nuts and seeds.

She ate slowly and well, and no one monitored how much.

It was Dorivae who brought it up.

"You have questions," she said, in that direct, unornamental way of hers. "Ask them."

Lireah set down her bread. "Will I go back?"

The table shifted. Not dramatically—no one flinched or looked away—but the energy changed. Fieoni stopped eating. Veshai sat up.

"We don't know, but we don't think so," Fieoni said.

"So I *could* wake up back there one day," Lireah said. The words tasted metallic.

"We don't know," Fieoni repeated. "We don't know if you still exist there at all—whether your body remains, whether time is passing."

Lireah's stomach dropped. She thought of her mother. The porch lantern. The bed she'd slept in last night—the night before that?

Dorivae read her face the way she seemed to read everything—precisely, without intrusion.

"There may be something," she said. "We have ways of sending a presence across the threshold between realms. Not a body. More like a—" She looked at Fieoni.

"It is called a Visitation," Fieoni offered. "Enough to be seen, to speak briefly."

"Someone could go to my mother?" Lireah's voice cracked on the word *mother* and she didn't try to hide it.

"Possibly. To tell her you're safe. That you're cared for. It wouldn't be a conversation—more like a moment. But yes—if we get permission from a Haporai."

"A Haporai?"

"They are the heads of temples. It is an advanced rank of Ensheduana."

"Ensheduana?"

"Oh—ah, Ensheduana keep our birth and death records, and assist with both. As well as conception rituals. A Haporai has advanced training in those things, and is also responsible for managing temples and those who live and work there."

"I see," Lireah said. It was all so overwhelming. She pressed her palms flat against the table and breathed.

"There's something else," Dorivae said. "We'd like you to see the Empress."

"Thelyrah," Veshai added, and there was a shift in her voice when she said the name—not reverence exactly, but something adjacent to it. Respect laced with genuine feeling.

"She would want to know about you," Fieoni said. "About where you came from. What happened to you there."

"Why?"

"As far as we know, no one from your world has ever evinced here before—not the way you did. Fully formed, adult, with wings. That's new. And so the Empress must be told."

The morning light moved through the star-shaped blossoms.

The man with the dark eyes refilled her cup without being asked. His fingers were warm where they brushed the ceramic near hers, and she let herself feel it—the warmth, the closeness, the simple fact of someone beautiful choosing to be near her—without guilt, without calculation, without the quiet voice that used to ask *is this allowed*.

"Alright," Lireah said. "I'll see her. I'll see Empress Thelyrah."

~

Later that day, Veshai took her to the meadow.

Not the terrace, not yet—instead, a flat, open stretch of ground at the lower edge of the Groveholds.

The grass was knee-high and silver-green the way everything here seemed to be some more beautiful version of a color Lireah already knew, and it rippled in the wind like water. The space was wide and unobstructed, no trees for fifty yards in any direction, and the ground beneath the grass was soft enough that when Veshai stomped on it with her bare foot, it gave like a down-stuffed mattress.

"Landing pad," she said, grinning. "You're going to become very familiar with it."

"That's encouraging."

"I'm not here to encourage you. I'm here to get you off the ground." She dropped into a stretch, her teal wings extending behind her in a long, gleaming sweep. "First things first. Open them all the way."

Lireah tried. She flexed that strange, deep muscle in her back—the one she'd only been half-aware of since waking up here in Nuama—and felt her wings spread behind her, partially, tentatively, like hands opening underwater.

"All the way," Veshai repeated. "You're giving me about sixty percent. I need everything."

Lireah pushed. The wings resisted—not because they couldn't, but because *she* couldn't. There was a psychological wall, a flinch at the edge of full extension. She gritted her teeth and pushed past it, and the wings opened wide.

The span of them shocked her. They were enormous. Three meters wingroot to tip, at least.

Her feathers caught the light, and the wind moved through them immediately, pressing them open further. She felt it everywhere—in her shoulders, her ribs, the deep muscles along her spine.

"Good," Veshai said. "Now fold. And open. Fold. And open. Feel the weight of them."

She did. Open, closed. Open, closed. It was tiring in a way she hadn't expected—not the wings themselves, but the muscles that controlled them, burning after only a few repetitions like she'd been asked to do push-ups after annums of never using her arms. Her breath quickened until she was gasping.

"They're muscles," Veshai said, watching her. "Same as anything else. They need to learn. Now—run."

"Run?"

"Run. Full sprint, wings open. Don't try to fly. Just run and let them feel the air."

Lireah ran. It felt absurd—barefoot in the silver grass with her wings spread wide and useless behind her—but she ran hard. The wind filled her feathers and the drag was immediate, like running with a sail strapped to her back.

Her wings bucked and shuddered in the current, trying to do something she wasn't letting them do, and she fought to keep her footing as the grass whipped past her calves.

"Again!" Veshai called from behind her. "Back to me. Faster."

She turned and sprinted back. This time the wind was at her face and her wings caught a gust and she felt her feet lighten—not leave the ground, but *lighten*, as though gravity had loosened its grip by a fraction, and her stomach flipped.

"Feel that?" Veshai was grinning. "That's lift. That's what we're after. Again. And this time, when you feel it, *flap*."

She ran again. Harder. The grass blurred beneath her and the wind filled her wings and there it was—that lightness, that loosening—and she beat down with both wings in a motion that was clumsy and instinctive and entirely wrong and her feet left the ground for about half a second before she came down hard on one knee in the soft soil, wings folding around her like a collapsed tent.

"Good!" Veshai shouted.

"Good? I fell!"

"You fell from the *air*. That's progress. Again."

She got up. She ran. She fell. She got up. She ran and fell and ran and fell and each time the half-second became a full second, then two, then three—her body learning the rhythm her mind couldn't teach it, the downstroke that catches, the angle of the wing at the top of the beat, the way her core had to tighten and her shoulders had to roll and her spine had to become the axis around which everything else moved.

On her twenty-third attempt, she didn't come back down.

It wasn't graceful. Her wings beat too fast and her legs kicked beneath her as though still searching for the ground and she climbed at an ugly, stuttering angle.

But she was *up*! She was in the air.

The grass was below her and the wind was around her and her wings were beating—actually beating, actually working, doing the thing they were built to do—and she flapped around the clearing, shaking, breathing hard, looking down at Veshai.

Veshai was standing in the grass with her hands on her hips and her teal wings flared behind her and a look on her face that was pure, uncut pride.

"Now stay up!" she called, and launched herself from the ground in a single fluid motion—wings catching the air with the ease of someone who'd done it ten thousand times—and rose to meet her.

They hovered together, face to face, four meters above the silver-green field. Lireah's wings ached. Her shoulders burned. Her breath was ragged and her hair was plastered to her forehead with sweat and she was trembling with the effort of keeping herself aloft.

She was smiling so hard her face hurt.

"Told you," Veshai said softly, hovering effortlessly beside her.

Lireah laughed—a breathless, disbelieving sound—and for a moment the two of them just hung there in the warm air above the meadows of Weverta, wings beating, the world spread green and impossible beneath them, and everything Lireah had ever been told she couldn't do felt very, very far away.

~

Five days in and her body was beginning to feel like hers again. Not entirely—the wings were still a negotiation, still a conversation between what she wanted and what they wanted, and every mornings she woke with a deep, sweet ache between her shoulder blades from the flight drills Veshai put her through—but the strangeness was thinning.

She was starting to move without thinking about moving. She was starting to feel less like a visitor in her own skin.

They hadn't left to visit the Empress yet.

"Your wings need at least another week," Fieoni had told her on the third morning, watching her attempt a sustained glide across the practice field and veer into a bush that luckily didn't have thorns. "The journey to Corestone is half a moon cycle, and you'll need to fly part of it."

"And the rest?" Lireah had asked, pulling a coral blossom from her hair.

"Ship," Dorivae had said, not looking up from the missive she was writing. "Eleven-masted. It's being arranged. The vessel won't be ready for departure for several days yet. There are provisions to organize, route consultations with the navigators, a request for seven Airtenders to sail the ship."

She said all of this the way she said everything—calmly, precisely, as though the logistics of an ocean voyage were no more complicated than deciding what to have for lunch.

So Lireah waited. She trained. She ate. She slept in the jasmine room and woke each morning in the same bed, in the same world, and the gratitude of that never dimmed.

On the seventh afternoon after she had arrived in Nuama, the women took her back to the waterfall.

Chapter Four – The Outing

It was a short flight from the temple, then down a winding path through the thickest part of the Grovehold.

Lireah was grateful Fieoni had taken the time to walk with her that first day. She'd never have been able to fly it.

Suddenly, the trees opened onto a basin of dark stone where water fell from a mossy overhang above into a wide, clear pool edged with flat rocks that had been worn smooth by centuries of current and sun.

The spray caught the light and threw tiny rainbows against the stone. Ferns grew in wild profusion around the edges, their fronds trailing into the water. The air was cooler here—heavy with mist and the green, mineral smell of wet rock.

"It's just as beautiful as the first time I saw it," Lireah joked.

"Ah, you mean all of a sevenspan ago?" Veshai teased right back.

"Feels like a lifetime," Lireah murmured.

"This," Veshai announced, already pulling her shift over her head, "is my favorite place on the isle."

They settled onto the flat rocks at the edge of the natural pool—Dorivae reclining against a sun-warmed boulder with her plum wings spread to dry in the mist, Fieoni sitting upright at the water's edge with her feet submerged and bronze feathers gleaming, Veshai half-in and half-out of the pool, her teal wings floating behind her on the surface like iridescent lily pads.

Lireah sat with her legs drawn up, her wings folded loosely, watching the waterfall and feeling the spray on her skin and thinking that she had never in her life been in a place this beautiful and simply been *allowed* to be in it. No cost to enter. No time limit. No one asking her to move along.

The men arrived shortly, carrying baskets and trays.

There were three of them today, and they were dressed for the heat—which is to say they were barely dressed at all.

Linen wraps slung low around their hips, and that was it.

The broad one with the dark eyes and amused mouth—she'd learned his name was Tauren—carried a tray of chilled fruit and cool mint water that he set on a flat rock near Dorivae with a brief dip of his chin.

His wrap sat low enough on his hips to reveal the cut of muscle beneath, and he moved through the mist like he belonged in it, water beading on his shoulders and chest as he worked.

The second was new—taller, leaner, with close-cropped hair a stillness about him that was almost meditative. He knelt at the pool's edge near Fieoni and began arranging small bowls of something creamy and fragrant—some kind of balm or oil—and his hands moved with the slow, deliberate precision of someone who understood that the way you do a thing is as important as the thing itself. The muscles in his back shifted as he reached.

Lireah could clearly see the outline of his varapos—it was fully erect. Of course it was—Veshai was naked, her breasts poking out of the water like two perfect hills. Her legs were slightly spread, her dark curls barely submerged beneath the water.

The third was the dark-haired one with hazel green eyes. Ohýme.

Lireah had asked his name on the second day and Veshai had given it with a knowing look Lireah had pretended not to see.

Ohýme crossed the rocks toward Lireah carrying a crystal pitcher and goblet, his hair loose today, damp from the mist. The linen wrap clung to him in ways that the water conspired to make worse—or better, depending on one's perspective.

His varapos was thick. And long, she thought. She watched him in a way she'd have been embarrassed about in Da'reth. But here, looking was normal—if one was a woman. Males didn't look at women unless they had permission.

Ohýme poured for her and she watched the muscles in his forearm shift as he tipped the pitcher. When he looked up, she held his gaze for a beat longer than she had before.

"Thank you," she said, and her voice came out lower than she intended.

He smiled—not the restrained smile from the first night, but something warmer, something with a flicker of light behind it.

Then Veshai called him and he moved away to attend to her. Veshai immediately put him to work rubbing balm into her back and shoulders with a shamelessness that Lireah found both appalling and deeply aspirational.

"So," Dorivae said, biting into a slice of chilled fruit, her eyes closed against the sun. "You're sleeping well?"

"Better," Lireah said. "Each night is easier."

"Your body is settling. The fiera is likely helping." She opened one eye. "And the rest of you? How is that settling?"

Lireah looked at the waterfall. At the pool. At Ohýme's hands working slow circles into Veshai's shoulders while Veshai made sounds that would be considered indecent in Da'reth.

She imagined his hands on her hips, his lips on her—

"I want to go to the duug," she said.

She hadn't planned to say it. It just came out. She felt heat rise in her cheeks immediately.

But she didn't take it back.

Veshai opened her eyes. Fieoni looked up from the water. Dorivae's expression didn't change—she simply took another bite of fruit and chewed.

"Good," she said.

"You don't think it's—" Lireah started.

"What? Too soon?" Dorivae sat up slightly. "According to whom? Whose time are you judging this on? Because it isn't yours. Yours was taken from you and replaced with someone else's, and the sooner you stop consulting it the better."

The words landed in Lireah's chest like stones dropped into still water.

"You want something," Fieoni said quietly. "That's not a flaw. That's not a weakness."

"Anyone in particular?" Veshai asked, grinning, while Ohýme continued massaging her shoulders while doing his best not to listen to the conversation happening around him.

Lireah looked at Ohýme's hands. At the dark hair falling over his forehead. At the line of his jaw and the way the mist caught on his skin. At the heft of his varapos.

"I think you know," she said softly.

Veshai laughed—big and generous, her teal wings splashing as they lifted from the water.

"If he is not available, others will be," Veshai grinned. "Would you like me to accompany you?"

"Not this first time," Lireah said slowly. "I think the first time I should go alone."

"Go tonight, if you'd like," Dorivae said. It wasn't a question or a command—it was permission, offered freely, the way everything here was offered. "Our communal duug is at the end of the lower path, past the latest bush of star jasmine. You know the way."

Lireah nodded. Heat pooled low in her belly. Her pulse was doing something fast and unfamiliar in her throat—not anxiety, not the old tightness. Something alive.

Something that was entirely hers. She held it gently, the way you hold a flame you've just managed to light after a long time in the dark.

The waterfall roared softly. The mist drifted.

Tauren refilled Dorivae's cup without being asked, and the light played across his chest as he leaned close. Dorivae's hand rested briefly on his wrist—casually, comfortably, the way you'd touch someone you'd touched a hundred times before.

This place. These women. This impossible, abundant, unhurried world.

Lireah sipped her drink, watched the waterfall, and let herself want what she wanted.

Chapter Five – The Duug

The air outside the duug smelled of orange blossoms and crushed fiera petals—sharp, heady, and intoxicating. Lireah stood beneath the entryway, heart fluttering in her chest, the laughter of other Sestras drifting past like wind chimes in the warmth of dusk.

She could barely breathe.

Though she'd enjoyed the attention of men in Da'reth, this was her first time visiting a duug. She expected it would be quite different than the often-hurried, inexperienced or uncaring touches of men she'd been with before.

And suddenly she found she couldn't wait to taste the pleasures the night would bring.

Inside the threshold, the duug shimmered with dim golden light and perfumed mist. The scent was cloying but exquisite, as if someone had steeped citrus oil in warm amber and slow-burning resin. There was music somewhere deeper in—flutes, drums, the trill of voices humming in synchrony.

“Welcome!” An Ensheduana nodded as she approached.

“Hello,” Lireah said softly, returning her smile.

“Wander as you wish, and feel free to seek refreshments. They are scattered throughout the duug in various alcoves,” she said, gesturing Lireah inside.

“Thank you,” she replied.

Lireah hadn't expected so much...so much. It seemed everyone in the temple complex was here. Though the space was uncrowded it nearly vibrated with passion just around every bend.

A curve of mineralian light lit up, dancing beneath Lireah's feet, and she could see from how it twisted away that it was meant to guide her through the courtyard.

So she followed it, stepping forward several paces—and there—*there* was a stunning example of what delights could be hers this evening.

A couple, tangled in slow, delicious copulation.

The Sestra's wings trembled as she straddled the Fa'loom beneath her, his strong body pressed into the soft moss. His hips rolled up to meet hers in perfect rhythm, his hands gripping her thighs, steadying her. Her sounds of pleasure echoed through the outdoor space as she rode him, seeking her climax.

Lireah froze. Her thighs clenched instinctively.

She was not afraid—of course not—but she *was* already wet.

As she moved deeper into the courtyard, another space opened up. This one was lined with pleasure pools, soft steaming baths mineralshaped into the floor. Naked men moved through the area—some alone, some bathing one another or a visiting Sestra, some simply standing, glistening, waiting.

Their bodies were exquisite. Not one looked the same—some tall, some broad, some slender, some soft—after all, Sestras have tastes as varied as they. A few of the Fa'loom were decorated with ink or shimmering dust, others bare but for a wrap at their waist, sheer as breath. Most were naked.

One turned at the exact moment Lireah walked past.

He was not young. Not old either. Perhaps thirty annums? His gaze met hers.

He smiled.

She smiled back then looked away, but not before taking in the fine edge of his jaw, the way his hair was braided through with feathers and fine chain, the precise cut of his abdomen.

She knew she was being a bit shy. An unfamiliar feeling, but one she planned to let go of as the night went on.

She turned a corner and nearly collided with a man standing against one of the stone arches. He stepped forward at once, catching her elbow with a feather-light touch.

He was her age, maybe a bit younger. He would be quite new to pleasure-work, then. Curly-haired, mischievous eyes, lips like he knew exactly how to kiss. His chest was bare, adorned only with a fine chain of polished opalite that shimmered blue when he moved.

“You’re new,” he stated.

“I am.”

“Are you here for your first evening?” he asked.

Lireah could only nod.

“Your very first, or your first at this duug?”

“My very first,” Lireah whispered.

He bowed, low and reverent, and when he rose, his eyes held hers with tender warmth.

“To begin, would you like a kiss?” he asked. “Only if you wish it.”

Her heart thundered.

She knew she could say no. That if she did, he would smile and bow again and vanish into the mist.

But instead, she said, “Yes.”

He stepped closer and kissed her.

It was soft and slow. His lips moved against hers as if offering a question rather than an answer. And his lips were SO sweet, like pillows of honeyed bread.

She whimpered, breath catching in her throat, and he deepened the kiss, tilting her head back, caressing her low back.

When he pulled away, she nearly stumbled forward into him—he caught her, steadied her against his broad chest.

“Welcome, Sestra,” he whispered. “May tonight be everything you desire. I will fetch you something to drink that I think you might like. You may go wherever you would like—unless a door is closed, of course. And connect with whomever you wish—there are many Fa’loom available this evening, and all are ready to serve. I hope to see you again shortly,” he smiled, then disappeared down a separate corridor, his bare back vanishing into mineralian light.

Lireah leaned against the archway for a moment. What a kiss!

She wondered idly what the young Fa’loom was fetching for her, then wandered deeper into the courtyard of the duug.

She wondered where Ohýme was—if he was here, or if another Sestra had called him to her bedchamber already.

The next corridor offshoot led into a circular chamber, dimly lit from beneath the floor with biolumen veins running through obsidian stone. There, shimmering on a tall crescent-shaped piece of mineralshaped larkivite, was a list of Pleasure Offerings.

Lireah stepped forward, breath still a little uneven from the kiss.

Each option shimmered in a different hue—lightly pulsing, gently glowing with biolumen, like desire itself lived within the script. When she held her hand just above each option, they expanded with a soft hum, revealing a description.

Choose one or more options below, combine as you like, or simply pick a Fa'loom—or two, or more—and see what happens! As always, Sestras visiting the duug together may request whichever combinations of the below they desire. You and another Sestra/s may also choose an alcove in which to pleasure yourselves and one another, and may also invite one or more Fa'loom to watch if you wish. The night is yours, enjoy!

Featherplay — *the standard, beloved for a reason. Kissing, oral if requested, sensual touch, culminating in penetrative copulation.*

Oral Artistry — *Receive the full attention of a trained mouth for a time of your choosing. Expect worship, rhythm, and slow unraveling. Request two Fa'loom—one for each entrance—for even more fun!*

Duet with Breathwork — An Ensheduana-guided experience involving synced breathing, eye contact, and stimulation from a Fa'loom of your choosing. Oral, fingers, varapos, or all of the above. Some Ensheduana are happy to join the fun, as requested.

Shared Bath with Completion — Intimate bathing and release in a scented, steaming pleasure pool. Each of our mineralshaped pools has multiple beds and lounges nearby for post-coital (or continued-coital) use.

Controlled Release — One or more Fa'loom pleasuring you in whichever ways you choose, withholding their own release until you tell them to cum. This differs from other offerings, in which the Fa'loom generally cum two or more times. Some Fa'loom specialize in controlled release, please inquire.

Multi-Pairing Rotation — A sequence of offerings from multiple Fa'loom. Each offers a different skill of your choice.

Endurance Offering — One Fa'loom. One goal. As many completions as your body can handle. Please be certain to drink plenty of non-alcoholic fluids before and during this offering, as you are certain to need replenishing!

Pleasure Mapping — A full-body exploration with soft oils and fingers trained to find every point of bliss. Even the most experienced Sestras are sometimes surprised by what is discovered during this offering!

Custom Configuration — Create your own journey. An Ensheduana will assist in finding the perfect group of Fa'loom for you.

Deep Offering — For those who crave fullness and intensity. Be filled in either of your entrances—or both—by one or more of the Duug's most generously endowed Fa'loom. Breathwork, massage, and pacing ensure a deeply pleasurable, safe experience. Light fare (fruit, broth) is recommended prior to Deep Offering. Heavy meals may result in nausea during rapid thrusting.

Mirror Dance — Pleasure through reflection. You and your chosen Fa'loom will be pleased in front of a mirrored surface by a second Fa'loom. Designed to awaken visual arousal and deepen connection through eye contact and embodied affirmation.

Pulseplay — Stimulation through sound and vibration. Utilizes tone-resonant tools, subtle energy pulses, and vibrating pleasure stones—not dependent on penetration or size. Ideal for those seeking inner awakenings and nerve-based climax. As a mineralshaper must be present for this, please request in advance.

Group Experience — You and your closest Sestras, plus however many Fa'loom you wish. One chamber, one night, endless pleasure. Groups of more than five should request this in advance when possible.

The Tilted Path — *For those who wish to dominate. You may blindfold a Fa'loom and play with him however you wish. This is a fantastic offering if you've had a particularly difficult day, as it can act as a sort of "dual release". Many Fa'loom enjoy being treated this way. That noted, if you would like to get **very** aggressive, please meet with an Ensheduana to discuss which Fa'loom would be a good fit for you.*

Hands of Pleasure — *No mouths. No sex. Just hands. Multiple Fa'loom use only their hands to explore, massage, and bring you to climax while you lie back and enjoy. No other contact allowed. A popular option for those who enjoy being adored without doing anything at all, or for those who are quite tired and simply want release.*

Lireah's hand hovered over the glowing list, breath catching with each revelation. She hadn't expected the duug to be so precise, so attuned—as though it already knew the map of her body, the questions she hadn't yet asked aloud.

"Hello," an Ensheduana that Lireah vaguely recognized said as she entered the space.

"Good evening," Lireah nodded in greeting.

"I am glad you decided to visit the duug," she smiled.

"As am I."

"You're wondering about the list?"

"I am," Lireah grinned, anticipation flowing through her limbs.

"Many Sestras begin their evening with something gentle. But I have also seen first-timers take the Endurance Offering and walk out glowing, whispering thanks to The

Awakener for blessing them with so many completions,” she laughed softly, amusement plain on her face.

The Ensheduana’s silver wings were folded neatly, a tray balanced in her hands. The goblets upon it were cool with condensation, fragrant with rosewater.

Lireah accepted one. Sipped. The sweetness calmed the tremor in her chest.

“And if I don’t know what I want yet?” she asked.

The Ensheduana smiled as though the question pleased her. “Then don’t choose yet. You’ll decide sooner or later. If you’d like to see an offering in person, there is one just down that way. The Sestra you will see in the chamber beyond choose Featherplay with two Fa’loom,” she smiled again, looking quite pleased.

“Thank you.”

“You are welcome to look inside the chamber of any door that is open.”

With a gesture, she indicated a narrower corridor, quieter, its floor lit in soft pink and lavender like a secret waiting to be discovered. Lireah’s bare feet carried her forward, her breath shallow as sound reached her—a pulse of laughter, a sigh, a low cry that shimmered with pleasure.

The corridor narrowed. Lireah slowed, her pulse loud in her ears. The air was heavy, humid with sex.

A gasp. A wet, shuddering cry. The liquid slap of skin on skin.

At the corridor’s end hung a drape of beaded biosilk. She stopped, breath shallow, and peered through.

Three bodies.

A Sestra reclined against silken bedding, wings trembling, gilded dust scattering from their tips. Her thighs were parted around a Fa'loom's hips, his body slick and gleaming as he sank into her, each stroke slow and deep. His mouth brushed hers, whispering something too low to catch.

Beside them, another Fa'loom knelt, his lips sealed to her breast, sucking, tonguing, his hands holding her ribcage as though she might lift away without him. She held his head tightly to her as the other man lifted her hips to meet him more fully. His yezari hung beneath his spread legs like ripe fruit on a vine.

The Sestra's cries rose—sharp, breaking, sovereign. She clutched at both men, legs wrapped, body quaking. Her release came fast and unrestrained, a sound so raw it made Lireah's thighs clench together.

The men did not relent. They held her through it, fed her more, gave her more, until finally the Sestra's completion overtook her totally, and she squirted all over the man inside her, thoroughly soaking the sheets beneath her.

Lireah's hand pressed flat to the wall, knuckles white. Her lips parted without thought, breath trembling. She could taste her own need at the back of her tongue.

How beautiful it was to see a Sestra using every offering of touch as fuel for her own fire. And Lireah's body ached in recognition, her core tightening as though to hold in what she craved.

She stepped back from the curtain made of beaded biosilk, breath uneven, skin alive with heat. And that was when she heard him—

“The Ensheduana said I'd find you here.”

She turned.

It was the young Fa'loom. The one who had kissed her. His curls were damp now, water glinting at his temple. In his hands he carried a vessel of pearl-root wood, polished smooth, steam curling from its lip.

"I brought something for you," he said, offering it forward. "Fiera. As I am certain you know, it eases the body yet sharpens the senses."

"Ah, of course. Yes. I adore fieras, thank you."

"You are very welcome, Sestra. By the way, my name is Vire. It rhymes with fire," he smiled.

Lireah's fingers trembled as she accepted the vessel. "I didn't ask you to bring me anything, Vire."

His mouth curved. "No. But I hoped you'd be glad I did."

She sipped. Warmth spread over her tongue, down her throat, soothing the flutter still in her chest, even as her thighs hummed with restless ache.

He stepped closer—not touching, but near enough she could feel the gravity of him. "You saw the three of them?"

Lireah nodded. "Them—and another couple in the courtyard, when I arrived," she replied.

His gaze brightened with delight. "I love watching Sestras fall more deeply in love with pleasure. Would you like help choosing *your* path?"

Her heart raced. His kiss still lingered on her lips, but more than that—he felt like a co-conspirator.

"I think I'd enjoy that," she grinned. "Do you know Ohýme?"

"I do! Would you like him to join us?"

“I would.”

“Stay here, I’ll let an Ensheduana know that we’re requesting him.”

He wasn’t gone long. When he returned, he extended his hand—open, patient.

“Come. Let’s begin. Ohýme will be along shortly.”

The corridor widened into a smaller alcove, ringed in woven gold and veiled with strands of translucent silk. The music here was a low drumbeat—low, deliberate, drifting in through the wide skygates.

Movement caught Lireah’s eye. She turned toward another chamber, its entrance framed by flowering jasmine and warm mineral stone.

There—two women.

They lay tangled across a mound of pillows, wings brushing in shimmering contrast—sapphire and lilac. Their mouths were sealed together in a fast, almost frantic kiss, tongues sliding, lips claiming, their pleasure shared and building. One Sestra’s hand was buried between the other’s legs, coaxing, while the other clutched at her wrist, urging her deeper.

Between them, kneeling low, was a Fa’loom. And he was touching both of them, fingers moving deftly between their thighs.

His arms moved in counterpoint—one hand circling a clit in patient arcs, the other stroking firmer, drawing gasps and tremors from the other woman. His hands were moving in rhythm with their kiss.

Lireah stilled, breath unsteady. It was seamless. Every flutter of his fingers, every shift of pressure, attuned precisely to what each woman craved, without words, without instruction.

The Sestras' wings quivered, their cries rising in harmony. But the kiss never broke. Their moans were swallowed into each other's mouths, one woman's climax feeding into the other like a shared breath. Their bodies opened, accepted, took—using the Fa'loom as fuel for their fire.

And he was right where he wanted to be—his face held a rapturous glow unlike any Lireah had ever seen.

Beside Lireah, Vire murmured softly—“We are taught to serve every edge of a woman's desire. Two at once is no challenge, if you know how to listen.”

Heat bloomed low in Lireah's belly. Her thighs pressed together, her mouth dry with want. She moved forward, seeking their private chamber. She was suddenly very eager to begin.

They stepped into a chamber with her name above the doorway, framed by arching vines, filled with low golden light in veins of bioluminescence that threaded through pale pink mineralstone.

Cushions spilled across the floor like a waiting embrace, and a large round bed was nestled against the wall. Other implements and tools—cleaned and waiting—were nearby.

Vire sat first, cross-legged, then lifted his hand in invitation. When Lireah gave hers, he drew her gently down beside him, warmth radiating from his skin.

She held her vessel of fier a moment longer, savoring the heat that lingered on her tongue. “I've always liked the way fier settles in the body—an ache you can lean into... or ignore, if you wish.”

His smile curved, eyes bright with approval. “So you appreciate its gifts.”

Lireah's lips tilted in a slow grin. "I do. And—I know what I want."

She extended her hand, palm open, gaze steady. "You may touch me. Not between my legs, nor my breasts. Not yet."

His laugh was soft, delighted—like a bell struck in secret. "Command me, Sestra, and I will obey."

"You may call me Lireah," she said.

"Very well. Lireah—sounds similar to lyrical. I like it."

His fingers traced reverently along her arm, circling the slope of her shoulder, brushing the elegant rise of her collarbone. Each caress drew her deeper into herself, awakening sensation without demanding it.

He chuckled, delighted at her awakening. His fingertips were brushing her shoulder blade now. "Perhaps you're suited for the Endurance Offering, Lireah," he teased lightly.

She bit her lip, heat thrumming through her.

"Do you know," he continued, "some Sestras start that offering thinking they'll last all night. And emerge shortly later to be carried to bed at their own dwelling, their skin glowing like the Sunstone Temple."

Her thighs tensed at the image.

"Massage me," Lireah requested, kissing his cheek lightly.

Then she leaned back into the cushions, drawing her legs beneath her. She let the soft silk of her gown slip from her shoulders, baring the smooth slope of her upper back and the graceful arc of her neck. Her breasts remained covered—just barely, the fabric clinging to her nipples.

Vire noticed.

Of course he noticed.

But he said nothing—only shifted behind her, hands moving with gentle purpose.

“Close your eyes if you wish,” he murmured.

She did.

And then his palms were on her—starting at the tops of her shoulders, pressing slowly, kneading into the muscles with deliberate rhythm. His thumbs worked circles into the tension behind her neck, then drifted down to the delicate knobs of her spine.

“What oil scent do you prefer?” Vire asked, voice low.

“A strong blend, please—something that smells like soil after rain,” she said. Now where had that thought come from?

No matter.

She heard the small pop of a stopper being pulled from a vial, the spiced scents of liantra and honeyroot rising as he warmed the oil between his palms.

When Vire’s hands touched her again, the heat made her shiver, her nipples tightening.

He dragged his fingers slowly down her back, over each rib, smoothing tension from her sides and into the small of her back. Exquisite.

Then he began digging in deeper, relaxing out the tight spots in her shoulders, between her wingroots.

Lireah moaned with appreciation—Vire really was good at what he was doing.

His hands worked lower, kneading into her back with patient strength. Lireah sighed, the sound half-appreciation, half-command.

“You enjoy this,” she said, teasing lightly.

“Of course,” he murmured, pressing deeper between her shoulders. “Service is a joy. And a privilege. I’d much rather be here with you than be a servant without my varapos.”

Lireah laughed softly, glancing over her shoulder. “And if I asked you to keep going all night?”

His smile curved against her skin, delighted. “Then I would thank The Awakener for the gift of being a Fa’loom, as I have every night since becoming one.”

Lireah settled into the cushions, utterly at ease, warmth unfurling in her belly.

Then, the sound of soft footsteps—measured, calm. Lireah’s eyes lifted, her breath catching as a new silhouette broke the dim mineral light at the chamber’s edge.

Ohýme stood at the edge of their alcove, silhouetted in the glow of biolumen. He wore a loose half-wrap around his hips and nothing else. His skin was well-oiled, his body strong, movements slow and deliberate.

His eyes—deep green in this light and full of unspoken things—moved from her to the Fa’loom behind her, then back again.

“May I join you?” he asked, his voice low and resonant.

Lireah did not answer at once. She liked that he waited. She liked the silence filling with his patience. Finally, she inclined her chin, a small nod.

“You may.”

Ohýme crossed into the cushions without fanfare, lowering himself with the grace of a predator at rest. Long legs folded beneath him, posture unguarded but rooted. He smelled of juniper and stone, as though he carried an entire cavern inside his skin.

Vire adjusted, his hands stroking lightly up her back, shifting to grant the Ohýme enough space without breaking his own rhythm of service.

Lireah's gaze lingered on the man before her. "How long have you been a Fa'loom?"

"Over twenty annums," he smiled with the patience of one who has seen much, and enjoyed nearly all of it. "I've been lucky enough to serve three Keepers. Each kept me for at least five annums. And I have been here at this duug for almost another five."

Ah. What a delicious thought—to be served by one with so much knowledge. Lireah spread her legs a bit, loosening her gown.

"And may I ask your favorite offering?" she asked, half-teasing, though her heart was already racing.

His answer was immediate. "Deep Offering."

Her pulse stumbled.

He let the pause stretch, his eyes holding hers—not domineering, not coy. Simply present, solid as stone.

"Do you prefer the front or back entrance?" she asked, softer now.

"Front." His tone did not waver. "Though of course I am happy to be allowed inside either place, Lireah."

The younger Fa'loom chuckled behind her, a low ripple of sound against her spine. "He is known for his Deep Offerings, Lireah. Some come to this duug especially for that, from him."

Ohýme arched one eyebrow at Vire, though his smile remained easy. "It does help—to have a large varapos—when a Sestra requests a Deep Offering."

Her throat worked, a slow exhale slipping past her lips. Heat pooled low, urgent.

Then he added—

“Most Sestras don’t last long before their first climax.”

Lireah’s thighs pressed together, her body thrumming like a struck chord. Behind her, Vire’s hands rose to her scalp, kneading with slow circles that made her melt back into him, sighing.

“You’re skilled,” she murmured to him. “But I want to know your touch, as well,” she smirked at Ohýme.

“How may I serve you, Lireah?” Ohýme asked, letting the tease draw across the space between them.

She did not answer. Instead, she straightened, letting her gown slip further from her shoulders, bare collarbones gleaming in the mineral light, dark areolas peeking from beneath the silk. Her gaze locked on Ohýme’s, and her voice sharpened into command.

“Vire, disrobe Ohýme please,” she directed, turning her head softly.

Vire stilled, breath catching at her decree. Then—“Yes, Lireah.”

He rose, circling to Ohýme. Their eyes met briefly—an acknowledgment, almost a spark of amusement—before deft fingers untied the wrap at his hips. Fabric whispered to the floor.

Lireah’s breath caught.

His body was carved maturity. Strong, heavy with presence. And his varapos—thick, pendulous, not yet fully hard but already promising more than her imagination could conjure—hung between his thighs like the thick branch of an anganga tree.

She did not avert her gaze. She let herself drink it in, because she wanted to.

“Oil him,” she commanded.

Vire bowed his head and fetched a vial from the tray, golden liquid streaming into his palm. He stepped close and wrapped his slick hand around the Ohýme’s shaft.

Slow strokes. Up, down. Gentle first, then firmer, coaxing flesh into swelling promise.

Ohýme closed his eyes briefly, a breath leaving him rougher than before, then fixed his gaze back upon Lireah—anchored, unyielding.

And she felt the ache inside her rise like a tide—for him, for his touch. His fingers upon her skin, insides her—

“I’d like to kiss you,” he said.

Lireah felt the world narrow to that single vow.

She nodded once. “You may.”

The two men moved as one— Ohýme crossed the cushions with a predator’s grace, lowering himself before her, close enough that his breath stirred her lips. Vire remained at his side, kneeling lower, his hand still gliding along Ohýme’s quickly-thickening shaft.

Lireah waited, trembling with stillness.

Ohýme leaned in. His mouth met hers.

Not teasing. Not sweet.

Deep.

His tongue entered her with primal certainty, unhurried but consuming, claiming her breath, her sound, her gasp. She moaned into him before she could stop herself, her fingers curling into the solid slope of his shoulders.

She was being devoured—when he finally pulled back, her chest rose and fell fast, nipples sharp beneath her gown, her thighs aching and open with need.

She could feel the slickness between her legs, dripping out of her already.

Her voice, when it came, was commanding.

“Touch me.”

Ohýme’s eyes didn’t waver. He lifted one hand to her face, thumb grazing the corner of her mouth as though he was tasting her again through memory. Then his lips met hers as his palm drifted lower.

Throat... the dip of her collarbone... the swell of her breast beneath the thin wrap. He didn’t strip it away, not yet—just cupped her firmly, thumb circling her nipple as she moaned into his mouth.

Vire knelt quietly at Ohýme’s flank, still stroking, oil gleaming along Ohýme’s fully heavy shaft. Yet Ohýme’s attention never fractured.

His kiss only deepened, searching, while his hand traveled down Lireah’s ribs, her waist, to rest flat on her lower belly.

Not between her thighs—not yet.

Just a promise. His palm pressed warm against her mound, steady and firm.

Lireah gasped, her hips arching instinctively into that pressure. He devoured her gasp, feeding it back to her in the crush of his kiss, until her breath came ragged and the heat in her body roared.

Then—Vire spoke.

“Shall I move behind you and please you, Lireah?”

Lireah turned her head, her gaze locking with Vire's. His eyes gleamed with heat and obedience, awaiting her word.

"Yes," she said.

The air shifted.

Vire shifted smoothly around her, settling on the cushions. His knees bent, feet folded beneath him, thighs parted to cradle her body. Lireah let herself lean back into him, sliding easily into his lap, her back flush to his chest.

His heat pressed everywhere—his breath at her neck, his hardness settling thick and hot against the curve of her rear. But he held still, waiting for her will.

At the same time, Ohýme adjusted, lowering to kneel between Lireah's spread legs. His thighs pressed outward, gently urging hers open. His palms settled at her hips, grounding her in place, and then—slow, deliberate—he eased forward—his shaft, slick with oil, sliding into the cradle of her folds. Not inside, not yet. Just nestled there, thick and throbbing against her slick heat, teasing her with what was inevitable.

Lireah was seated like an Empress between them.

One Fa'loom's lap beneath her, his chest firm against her back.

The other kneeling before her, his body filling the space between her thighs. Two Fa'loom pressing into her, their bodies enclosing her like twin flames.

Vire bent close, his lips grazing just behind Lireah's ear.

"May I explore you, Lireah?"

Her body tightened, her breath catching in a sharp, delicious ache.

"Yes," she whispered.

His hand slid across her waist, tracing the dip of her belly, while Ohýme lowered his mouth to her throat. Slow kisses spilled down her neck, tasting her skin.

Vire's fingers brushed the silk still covering her core, heat soaking through fabric to meet his touch. He exhaled against her ear.

"You're dripping."

Lireah's sound was half laugh, half moan—a delighted confession. She let her gown fall lower until it pooled around her waist, her breasts bared, nipples taut and flushed for their mouths.

Ohýme kissed down the valley of her breasts, Vire pressing his lips along the nape of her neck.

Then came the question—low, careful, weighted with respect.

"Are both your entrances available to us, Sestra?"

She shivered. They had been trained to ask. To honor her no—or her yes. To wait. And she adored knowing she held that control. That safety.

"Yes," she breathed. "They are."

There was stillness—a sacred pause. And then, movement.

Vire slid his fingers beneath silk, parting her folds. His groan was soft, awed. His other hand circled her ribs, anchoring her body as though she might float away. Ohýme lifted her hips with careful strength, positioning her, and brought his own fingers between her thighs.

They did not drive into her. Not yet.

They tasted.

One finger slipped just inside her front entrance, shallow as a breath. Another, slick with oil, circled the rim of her other, tighter entrance, coaxing, patient, reverent.

She had no idea whose fingers belonged to whom, and she did not care.

Lireah writhed between them, moaning as one thumb circled her clit while another finger eased deeper at her back entrance, stretching her gently. The tremor in her thighs betrayed how close she already was.

Ohýme sealed his mouth over her breast, lips hot, tongue flicking her nipple until she gasped. Behind her, the younger worked with infinite patience, his finger sliding in and out to the first knuckle, preparing her as he kissed along her shoulder and spine, whispering words too soft to catch but resonant as a hymn in her bones.

It was unlike anything she had ever known. Her body was hers—but in their hands, it was also an altar. And they worshipped.

Her cheek pressed against Ohýme's chest as her hands clutched at his biceps. Her hips moved of their own accord, chasing more, pleading wordlessly. But the Fa'loom didn't rush. They only deepened, stretching her, guiding her body to open in both places at once.

No thrusting.

No shafts yet.

"Breathe," Vire murmured at her ear, his tongue flicking its curve.

Ohýme's thumb pressed firm circles over her clit, then both Fa'loom slid their fingers deeper—front and back.

Lireah's moan broke raw and shuddering, her whole body shaking.

"More, please!"

Her hips rocked, back and forth, taking their fingers deeper each time.

The climax bloomed, radiating from her core like fire through her veins. Her toes curled. Her body clenched tight, and she cried out as liquid heat spilled from her, pleasure erupting in a wet, glorious spasm.

Their fingers lingered—anchoring her, holding her open as her shudders eased. Only when her breath returned did they withdraw, slow and careful, leaving her body throbbing in the emptiness they created.

Lireah trembled still, but it was not fragility that filled her now. It was fire. Power. Her body sang with heat—skin slick with oil, kissed raw in a dozen places—and through the haze of pleasure, something sharper unfurled inside her.

Hunger. Unlike anything she'd ever known.

She turned her head toward Vire, breath ragged but her voice steady.

“Don't stop,” she whispered. Then, firmer— “Give me more.”

He stilled, then smiled. A glimmer of awe in his obedience flicked through Lireah and she understood why the women of Nuama were so happy.

Ohýme, who was kneeling between her thighs, pressed a soft kiss to her inner thigh. “We will give you more. We will give you as much as you can take.”

Lireah's hand slid into his hair, deliberate. She guided his mouth upward, pulling him into another kiss—harder this time, deeper, her teeth catching his lower lip. His groan vibrated against her tongue.

Behind her, Vire returned to his work, his oiled fingers teasing her tighter entrance. Circling, pressing, coaxing. Deeper and deeper. Preparing her with patience that made her ache.

She rocked her hips, pressing back against him.

Ohýme felt the shift, felt the plea in her body, and smiled against her mouth.

“You want to be opened,” he murmured. “All the way?”

“Yes,” she gasped.

Ohýme’s thumb found her clit, firmer now—no more teasing. Demanding.

Commanding her to cum for him. And she loved it.

Vire pressed deeper inward, one finger sliding fully into her rear entrance. All the way.

Lireah moaned, caught between the stretch behind and the insistent circles of pleasure in front.

“That’s it,” Ohýme whispered, kissing her lips again. “Beautiful. Take him. Take more. Take what you want.”

Her cry broke raw in his mouth.

Vire’s second finger followed, stretching her further. A burn, yes, but the kind that blossomed into heat instead of pain. His fingers were thick, stretching her almost as much as his varapos soon would.

Ohýme’s mouth returned to her breast, lips wrapping around a nipple, tongue flicking in greedy delight. His hand stayed relentless at her clit.

Behind her, Vire deepened his touch even more—two fingers working inside her with slow circles, his other hand spread across her back to keep her steady.

Lireah groaned, not from discomfort, but from being unraveled exactly as she craved.

The pressure built again, faster this time, molten and deep. Each sensation mirrored the other—front and back, clit and rear entrance, stretch and stroke—her whole body caught in a circuit of pleasure.

Ohýme plied her mouth as his fingers worked in tandem with Vire's. His curled inside her, pressing against that sweet inner wall, while Vire's spread her open, massaging her from within her tightest space.

They were preparing her. Opening her. Making room for more.

Lireah's hips rolled helplessly between them, caught between Ohýme's chest against her front and the thick weight of Vire's shaft pressed hot at her back.

Then she came.

Her second orgasm tore through her—pressure blooming, cresting, breaking. She cried out, guttural and unrestrained, as her body spasmed around their fingers, warm, sticky liquid gushing from her.

When the last shudders ebbed, Lireah's lips curved into a smile—breathless, triumphant, greedy.

Her hunger only seemed to deepen as the night went on.

Lireah slumped back into Vire's lap, her skin slick with sweat and oil, her body still thrumming from release. But her smile was wild. Triumphant.

She wasn't finished.

Not even close.

Ohýme pressed his mouth to her cheek, her collarbone, the underside of her breast.

Behind her, Vire shifted, his arms circling her waist, palms steady on her hips. His heartbeat thudded against her spine, his varapos a hot weight—hard, waiting, obedient.

“I want more,” she said, tilting her head to catch his ear. “Deeper. Both of you. But not with your varapos—not yet.”

They understood.

Ohýme slid lower between her thighs, his hand finding her again. This time his fingers didn't toy or test; they drove deeper, curling until they pressed that hidden ridge inside her. Diving inside her agains and again, faster, harder each time.

Lireah's cry broke sharp against his mouth.

At her back, Vire returned to the work he'd begun, sliding two fingers into her with unhurried confidence, then a third—stretching her further than before. She hissed, the edge of burn sweetened by want, but tilted her hips to take him even further inside.

“Slow,” she commanded, and he obeyed, kissing her shoulder blade as he sank his fingers fully inside.

Together they built a rhythm— Ohýme working her front, stroking deep and curling; Vire filling her rear, stretching her patiently. Lireah rode their touch, her breath ragged, her body lit like a field of sparks.

Their mouths never stopped tasting her. One suckled her breasts, teeth grazing her taut nipples. The other kissed the line of her neck, her shoulder, his delicious words spilling into her ear.

Lireah moaned, her hips rolling between them—greedy, chasing sensation, pulling more from their hands than they offered.

“Deeper,” she gasped. “Now!”

Vire cupped his fingers and drove his hand fully inside her tightest place.

Ohýme mirrored him, three of his fingers driving firm along her front wall.

She gasped again, her whole body tightening at the exquisite fullness. They held steady, letting her savor it—the stretch, the weight, the delicious overwhelm.

Her eyes stung with heat, not from pain but from the sheer intensity of being so utterly opened and undone.

Her hips rocked, her voice roughened. She claimed every inch of what they gave. And when she finally stilled, breath ragged, her voice came low and certain.

“I’m ready.”

Both Fa’loom froze, the air between them crackling with the weight of her words.

Ohýme smiled, slow and sweet.

Vire’s voice was husky. “You want us to fill you, Sestra?”

Her smile widened. “Yes. Use your varapos. Both of you.”

The chamber held its breath—even as Ohýme leaned forward, his lips pressing briefly to hers.

Both Fa’loom withdrew their fingers slowly, sliding slick hands from her body as though releasing hidden treasure. Then they lifted her—one bracing her back, the other guiding her hips—until Lireah was kneeling upright on the cushions.

Vire became her seat, thighs spread beneath her, his chest pressed to her spine, his arms firm around her waist. His strength locked her in place without caging her, every muscle taut, steady, waiting.

Ohýme knelt before her, eyes dark with devotion, his oiled shaft poised at her folds. He let the broad head rest against her, heavy and hot, slick against her already-drenched entrance. She gasped at just that weight, her body flexing to welcome him.

Behind her, Vire pressed the tip of his varapos against her rear entrance, steadying her hips as he aligned with her.

No words were needed. The air itself quivered with what was about to happen.

When Ohýme finally pressed inward, he did so with a slowness that felt almost ceremonial. Lireah opened for him, her body taking him inch by inch until she moaned aloud—he was so large. He was stretching her beyond what she thought she could take. And it felt delicious.

Ohýme paused halfway, leaned up to kiss her mouth—deep, anchoring—while Vire bent close to her ear.

“Remember to breathe, Lireah,” he whispered gently.

And then he pushed forward. Her back entrance stretched around him, prepared but still tight, her hips rocking back to take what she demanded. The burn turned molten, her moan vibrating into Ohýme’s mouth.

And then—yes.

Both were inside her.

Not fully, not yet. But enough.

Enough to make her body tremble.

Enough to make her breath falter.

Enough to crown her with fire.

Ohýme kissing her again, his hand cupping her breast. Vire held her from behind, his lips grazing her shoulder, murmuring against her skin.

“You’re taking us beautifully,” he said, and Lireah gasped.

Her body clenched around them, pulsing in rhythmic waves that drew moans from both men. They rocked her slowly, shallowly, their movements alternating—one pressing deeper as the other eased back—keeping her stretched, filled, burning.

Her senses shattered. She felt everything—their shafts sliding against her walls, the heat of sweat and oil, the living vise of muscle keeping her steady. Their rhythm was tidal—slow, relentless, inevitable.

Her cry tore free as Ohýme’s thumb found her clit, circling with exacting precision as his varapos swelled inside her.

The climax built like a stormfront, vast, impossible to contain.

When it broke, Lireah arched against them both, mouth open in a voiceless cry, body convulsing in their grip as she hammered herself down onto both of them over and over and over.

Her orgasm ripped through her in rolling waves, and still she was filled, still they rocked, still they anchored her.

She sagged into them, shaking—but not emptied. Ohýme’s thumb stayed steady on her clit, coaxing. Vire whispered heat into her ear.

“Let us give you more, Lireah. We are willing.”

Her hips bucked, wild, greedy. Her body clenched so fiercely that they shouted their own pleasure, devotion spilling from their mouths into the molten air.

And then—a sudden, unstoppable flood.

Hot liquid burst from her center, soaking Ohýme's lower belly, the cushions beneath, splashing against the Vire's thighs. It wasn't dainty.

It was violent. Beautiful.

Lireah threw her head back and laughed, ragged, radiant, wild. *This* was what she wanted. *This* was the pleasure she was made for.

They carried her through wave after wave, her body spilling, quivering, trembling open again and again. It felt endless—each thrust stretching her further, each climax ripping through her with no pause between.

And then—voices, ragged, reverent.

Ohýme, groaning against her ear, whispered, "Lireah... you feel so good—"

"Then come inside me," Lireah demanded.

Her mind was smoke, her body molten when they finally broke.

Their rhythm snapped into perfect unison, hips driving forward with controlled force. They pounded into both her entrances at the same time, again and again and again, and then—

The final pulse, their heat, their flood—they spilled inside her as one, just as she released her own juices all over the two of them again.

She screamed as she came, panting, her voice echoing throughout the chamber.

Their bodies shuddered against her, their shafts pulsing deep as they softened, sweat-slick and trembling. Lireah sagged between them, her own body wrecked and fluttering around their release.

And yet—her hips twitched.

Need surged again.

It should have been the finish.

But she was still wet. Still aching. She needed *more*.

Her head lifted, lips parted, voice raw.

“Again.”

Ohýme’s brow arched. “Are you certain? You have taken so much already—”

She nodded. Then turned her head, eyes locking with Vire’s raw hunger.

“Don’t hold back.”

That was all it took.

They pulled free, their shafts glistening with her slick wetness and their own, leaving her for a breath that felt like emptiness—then filling the chamber with motion.

Vire gripped her hips rougher this time, hauling her upright with none of the earlier patience. His hands were iron, claiming her, feral.

Ohýme moved quick, reclining back into the cushions and drawing her over him. Lireah straddled him eagerly, her body dripping, stretched wide, aching for more. He didn’t tease—he held her steady as she sank down in one wet, greedy slide, taking him to the base with ease.

There was no burn now.

No resistance.

Only depth.

And before she had even begun to move, Vire pressed in from behind—he too, was hard again already. No circling, no coaxing this time. He shoved forward in one brutal, beautiful thrust, burying his varapos fully inside in her back entrance.

Lireah screamed.

Not from pain.

From power.

She was speared, full beyond imagining, held open—and both men moved at once now. No patience. No ceremony.

Only rhythm.

Only hunger.

Only her pleasure.

Ohýme drove up from beneath, his hands clamped to her thighs like anchors as he slammed into her dripping folds. Each thrust hit deep, wet slaps echoing through the chamber as she rode him.

Vire hammered her from behind, hips snapping forward again and again, his heavy yezari slapping against her ass. His voice was low, ragged, as his fingers stroked between her legs.

“Lireah—you’re so *wet*, I can’t—”

Lireah was shaking, her body consumed with pleasure—riding one varapos, pounded by another, taken to the edge and hurled over it again.

It was everything.

Their rhythm wasn’t patient anymore. It wasn’t gentle. It was chaos turned perfect—two bodies moving in feral tandem, filling her until every breath left her throat as a cry.

“Harder,” she gasped, nails clawing across Ohýme’s chest as she bounced up and down on top of him. “Don’t stop.”

Ohýme found her clit again, no longer delicate—his fingers rubbed, pinched, commanded her body to yield more, to give everything.

And finally, Lireah couldn't take any more.

Her orgasm ripped through her like lightning, her inner walls clamping in spasms that squeezed both shafts in savage pulses. She screamed—a raw, radiant sound, as silky fluid spilled from her, soaking Ohýme's chest and belly, spraying wet heat across the cushions, driving a feral growl from Vire's lips.

"Come, both of you. Now!"

Ohýme groaned beneath her, thrust upward sharply once more, and spilled deep inside her, his varapos pulsing hard as he emptied into her. Vire shuddered as he emptied himself deep inside her, filling her with his molten cum.

Lireah roared—not from pain, not even from orgasm, but from sheer triumph.

She collapsed forward onto Ohýme's chest at last, her body drenched in oil, sweat, and sex. Her lips were swollen from kissing, her hair wild, her skin marked with hands, mouths, sticky wetness.

She understood now why the Pleasure Menu recommended taking liquids before such offerings.

Behind her, Vire still panted—his own release glistening as it dripped out of her. He leaned forward, pressing a kiss to her shoulder.

"You are phenomenal, Lireah," he whispered.

Ohýme didn't speak yet. He was still inside her, softening now, his hands gentle at her hips. Slowly, he withdrew, and she wanted him back inside. He felt so good there, so perfect.

Then, without breaking her gaze, Ohýme reached between her thighs. His fingers slid through the flood still dripping from her—her release mixed with his own. He gathered their juices lazily, dragging them across her swollen liaspure.

And then, with deliberate slowness, he lifted his hand.

Brought his fingers to his mouth.

And sucked each one clean.

Lireah gasped, hips twitching helplessly at the sight.

“Sweet,” he murmured, licking his lips. “We taste like honeywine.”

Lireah shivered, undone all over again by nothing more than his words.

Vire came closer, kissing her throat, one hand tracing up her side, fingertips brushing the curve of her breast. His voice was soft when he spoke.

“Did we please you?”

Lireah laughed—hoarse, radiant, still trembling. “Do you have to ask?”

Both Fa’loom smiled, and Lireah lay between them—drenched, radiant. Fully satisfied for the first time in her life.

Ohýme shifted closer, cupping her face in both hands, his gaze steady, threaded with awe.

“You’re incredible, Lireah.”

Behind her, Vire gathered her back into his arms, spooning her gently, his chest pressed to her slick skin. His embrace was steady, anchoring, as though to remind her she was held even after she had wrung them both dry.

Their hands roamed slowly over her body—stroking her belly, brushing along her thighs, circling her nipples with lazy tenderness.

Lireah, who had entered the chamber curious and a little uncertain, now lay between them utterly transformed.

Open. Adored. Alive in a way she had not known she could be. It made sense now, why Sestras returned to the duug so frequently. She knew she would, too—soon, and often. And perhaps most often to Ohýme.

“Vire? Could you leave Ohýme and I alone, please? While I am grateful for your ministrations tonight, two bodies near me is overwhelming right now.”

“Of course, Lireah. And thank you for allowing me inside you tonight. I am honored.”

“Thank you, as well. Enjoy the rest of your evening,” Lireah smiled at Vire as he left the chamber.

A long sigh left her lips as she melted deeper into Ohýme’s arms. Only now did she notice how raw she felt—the tremble in her muscles, the ache deep in her thighs, the tender stretch pulsing at her rear.

After a few moments, Ohýme pressed his mouth to her shoulder, whispering against her damp skin.

“Let me tend to you, Lireah.”

“Very well. I would like that,” she said shyly. She’d never been “tended to” after intimacy before. She wondered what he would do.

Ohýme slipped away briefly, then returned with a soft cloth, a bowl of steaming herbal water, and a vial of pale-blue oil that shimmered faintly with biolumen. He knelt at her side, lifting her knees with such gentleness it nearly undid her.

“This oil is for after,” he said quietly. “For places newly awakened.”

Lireah nodded, throat too thick for words. He began to clean her with patient care, warm cloth stroking away oil and sweat, the traces of release between her thighs.

“You’re closing back up beautifully,” he murmured. “Relax into my touch.”

He massaged the cool oil into her skin in slow circles—never breaching her again, only soothing, calming, giving.

The ache ebbed into warmth, and Lireah felt her body settle.

Ohýme handed her a vessel, pale and green-tinted, tiny petals floating on the surface.

“To drink,” he said, cradling her head as he held it to her lips. “It will replenish what your body has released.”

She drank slowly. It tasted faintly citrusy, cool and sweet, sliding down her throat like morning rain. When she had drained it, he set the the goblet aside and lifted a smaller one—this one of fier.

“Drink as much as you’d like,” he said.

She sipped, warmth slipping down her throat like silk. Her eyes softened, her belly heavy with satisfaction.

When she was finished drinking, Ohýme lay beside her once more. The fires had dimmed, the air thick with the scent of sweat, sex, oil, and something floral drifting in from the gardens.

Distant laughter drifted from other chambers, the joy of other Sestras still in their own pleasures.

But here, in this pillowed cove, time had slowed to something golden.

Ohýme looked at her, tenderness in his gaze. “Would you like to spend the night here at the duug?”

“Yes,” Lireah whispered. “I want to sleep.”

Ohýme rose, fetching a woven throw from nearby and shaking it out. The fabric shimmered faintly, golden threads catching the glow of the biolumen tiles along the floor.

Ohýme adjusted her body carefully, lifting her hips with a touch that made her breath catch again. He arranged her wings carefully on the pillows so her feathers would not be bent in the morning. Every part of her ached—but in the most beloved way.

Once she was reclined fully, her head resting on a pillow that smelled faintly of nectar and spice, Ohýme slid in next to her, his chest a warm wall pressed lightly to her breasts and belly.

One arm circled her waist, his thigh nudged between hers.

He surrounded her.

Not as a lover. As comfort.

As a guardian of the experience they had just shared.

“You were extraordinary, Lireah,” Ohýme murmured.

She laughed softly. “So were you.”

Then she nestled in deeper, her body boneless, eyes fluttering shut.

Wrapped up in him, heat fading, limbs tangled, Lireah let go.

Of the room.

Of thought.

Of everything except the slow, thudding beat of satisfaction in her belly, and the warmth of Ohýme pressed close, breathing in sync with her.

Her first visit to the duug had completely undone her—in the best possible way.

And this was only the beginning.

Chapter Six – The Ship

The harbor at Vêhlsan was a wide, crescent-shaped bay carved into the southern coast of the isle. The water so clear that Lireah could see the bottom thirty meters down—dark sand, pale stone and long, undulating ribbons of sea grass that moved in the current like slow green flames.

The air smelled of salt and warm wood and something resinous and sweet—perhaps it was sap heated by the sun. Docks extended from the shore in elegantly curved piers built from dark timber. Moored alongside them were vessels of every size—small skiffs with triangular sails, wide-bellied fishing boats with nets drying on their decks, sleek two-masted cutters with hulls painted in deep jewel tones.

And then, at the end of the longest pier, the ship.

Lireah stopped walking when she saw it.

It was enormous. The hull was dark wood, almost black, polished to a sheen that reflected the water beneath it in rippling streaks. It sat low and wide in the bay, its lines elegant and predatory, curving upward at bow and stern into figureheads she couldn't make out from this distance.

And the masts—eleven of them, just as Dorivae had said—rose from the deck in staggered heights, the tallest at the center reaching so high that its tip seemed to graze the low clouds drifting overhead.

The sails were furled for now, lashed to their yards in neat bundles of fabric that ranged in color from deep indigo to pale silver, and the rigging that connected everything was a web of rope so intricate it looked like lace drawn against the sky.

"The Aëlar," Fieoni said, coming to stand beside her. "It means *long, deep breath*. She's one of a few dozen eleven-mast vessels in the Empress's fleet. Built for deep-sea crossings. She'll carry us around the tip of Ushunas, through the Southern Sea, then all the way to Corestone."

"Half a moon cycle," Lireah said, still staring.

"Give or take. Depends on the winds. The Airtenders are good—some of the best, actually."

The pier was busy with preparations. Sestras moved along the dock and across the gangways with purpose—carrying crates, setes, coils of rope, bundles wrapped in biosilk.

The crew, Lireah realized. Women, all of them, bare-armed and moving with the efficient grace of people who knew a ship the way they knew their own bodies. They called to each other, their voices bright and sharp over the sound of water and wind and the creak of timber.

Dorivae was already aboard. Lireah could see her standing at the rail near the bow, her silver hair catching the light, deep in conversation with a tall woman in a laiokin who gestured frequently toward the open sea.

Veshai was somewhere below—she'd gone ahead that morning to claim their quarters, which she described as "almost better than the temple—I once slept for three days straight on a crossing and no one woke me."

"Lireah."

She turned. Ohýme was coming down the pier behind her, and the sight of him made something low in her belly tighten pleasantly.

He carried a travel pack over one shoulder, and he was dressed in loose linen trousers, a sleeveless wrap that left his arms and the planes of his chest half-exposed, his dark hair curling around his ears, showing off the line of his jaw and column of his neck.

He moved through the bustle of the pier and when he reached her, he dipped his chin—that small gesture she'd come to understand was a Fa'loom's way of saying *I see you, I'm here, I'm yours if you want me*.

"They told me I'd been requested for the voyage," he said. There was warmth in his voice. A thread of something private.

"You were," she said, and held his gaze, and felt the heat of the last time she'd been near him move through her like a current. The duug. His hands. The way he'd whispered her name. She hadn't stopped thinking about it. She hadn't tried to.

In fact, she'd been back to see him three times since that first night. Once with Vire again, twice without.

Behind him, another man approached—Tauren, the broad one with the dark eyes and the mouth that always looked like it was carrying a secret joke.

He carried a larger pack and a wooden case under one arm, and when he saw Lireah, he smiled. Not Ohýme's quiet warmth—Tauren's smile was more open, more playful, the smile of someone who enjoyed the world and expected the world to enjoy him back. Dorivae had requested him. That much was obvious from the way he looked

up at her standing at the ship's rail, and from the way Dorivae looked back—brief, sure, possessive in a way that was entirely comfortable.

"Shall we?" Fieoni said, and led them up the gangway.

The *Aëlavar* was even more magnificent from the deck.

The wood beneath Lireah's feet was smooth and warm from the sun. The deck stretched wide and long in both directions, broken by hatches and coils of biosilk rope and fittings that gleamed.

The eleven masts rose around her like a forest, their rigging humming faintly in the wind, and when she looked up through the web of ropes and yards she could see the sky—enormous, cloudless, a blue so deep it looked like it had been poured from a goblet.

Winged crew members moved through the rigging overhead with terrifying ease, climbing barefoot along the yards, calling to each other as they loosed the first sails.

The indigo canvas unfurled in great billowing sheets that caught the wind and snapped taut, and Lireah felt the ship shudder beneath her—a deep vibration like a muscle flexing—and then slowly, they began to move.

The harbor fell away. The isle receded. The Groveholds beyond the Mamlakah shrank to a green smudge on the horizon and then to nothing.

There was only the sea.

Their quarters were belowdecks. Veshai had not exaggerated.

Each cabin was wide and low-ceilinged, built from the same dark wood as the hull, with a bunk set into the wall—curtained with heavy fabric—and an area furnished with a low table, cushions, a desk bolted to the floor. Storage for setes and other items.

A second door led to a private bathing room—a deep basin set into the floor, fed by some waterwhispering technique Lireah didn't understand. Honeywax torches hung on the wall, their glow steady and warm, and the porthole on the far wall let in a circle of blue light that shifted and swayed with the movement of the ship.

Ohýme helped her settle in. When they were done unpacking, she told him to undress and lie down on the bed. He was happy to obey.

~

The days found their rhythm.

Mornings were bright and wind-scoured, the sun rising over a sea that stretched in every direction without interruption. Lireah took to spending the early hours on deck, standing at the bow rail with the wind in her face and her wings half-open behind her, feeling the updrafts that rolled off the water.

Veshai joined her most mornings, and together they practiced—not full flight. The ship was moving too fast and the crosswinds were unpredictable. Instead they did short launches from the foredeck that let Lireah test her wings against the sea air.

She was getting stronger. She could feel it—in her shoulders, in her core, in the deep muscles along her spine that no longer ached after a dozen strokes but held and held and held.

"You'll be ready," Veshai told her on the fourth morning, watching her bank into a headwind and hold steady for a full ten seconds before dropping back to the deck. "By the time we make landfall, you'll be ready."

The crew largely left them alone, though Lireah caught them watching sometimes—curious, respectful, a few openly admiring her progress.

The captain was a woman named Othia, tall and young, who ran the ship with a voice that could carry from bow to stern without shouting. She dined with them on the first evening—a meal served on the open deck under the stars, the eleven masts silhouetted against a sky so dense with constellations that Lireah couldn't find a single one she recognized—and told them stories of the sea. The Sunderwater Shoals, creatures that surfed waves for no reason other than enjoyment, places where phosphorescence turned water to liquid light.

"You'll see all of it someday, if you sail enough," Othia promised. "The phosphorescence is something worth missing sleeping for."

She was right. On the third night, Lireah stood at the rail and watched the sea turn a deep blue-green that pulsed beneath the surface like a heartbeat. The wake of the ship was a trail of light, and when she looked down, she could see shapes moving in the glow—long, sinuous bodies rolling just below the surface, their outlines edged in phosphorescence, singing a low, resonant note she felt in her sternum more than heard.

Ohýme stood beside her. Not touching. Just there. His presence had become a kind of comfort she hadn't expected—not just the physical, though the physical was extraordinary. It was the *steadiness* of him.

He didn't fill silence with noise. He didn't need her to perform ease or gratitude or desire. He simply existed beside her, available, warm, and let her come to him when she wanted to. And she wanted to. Often. In the narrow bunk behind the heavy curtain, with the ship rocking beneath them and the sea murmuring through the hull, she

reached for him and found him ready every time—patient and unhurried and impossible with his hands and his mouth and the low, reverent way he said her name when she pulled him inside her, as though she were granting him access to something sacred.

Afternoons were long, slow, and golden. The women lounged on deck or in their cabin, reading, talking, sleeping.

Dorivae spent hours at the desk composing missives she couldn't send yet while Tauren fetched her water or whatever else she needed. He was attentive to her in ways that went far beyond mere service.

Fieoni sat in the rigging like she'd been born there, bronze wings folded, watching the horizon with the patient focus of a bird of prey.

Veshai sunbathed on the foredeck with Lireah beside her, both of them half-asleep in the salt air, their wings spread beneath them like blankets.

The evenings were meals on deck—food prepared by a woman named Breva who worked miracles in a galley the size of a closet. Grilled fish with charred citrus. Cold salads with herbs Lireah was learning to name. Smoked shellfish served on beds of sea greens.

Honeywine passed around in ceramic cups as the stars came out.

On the eleventh evening, the winds shifted.

The sails were reefed and reconfigured overnight—Lireah woke to the sound of feet on the deck above and the sharp crack of canvas—and by morning, the Aëlar was moving faster, cutting north through choppy water.

Shoan's Teeth appeared on the horizon that afternoon—a jagged line of black rocky islets jutting from the sea like the spine of something buried, spray erupting white against the stone.

Othia navigated the passage with calm precision, and the Airtenders worked the sails seamlessly. The ship threaded between the islets like a needle through fabric, close enough that Lireah could see barnacles on the stone and seabirds nesting in the crevices.

It was the most terrifying and exhilarating hour of the voyage, and when they emerged into open water on the other side, Veshai let out a whoop so loud that even Othia smiled.

“Well done, Othia!” Veshai shouted.

“We could have gone around Shoan's Teeth, but it would have added a day or more. Besides, the teeth aren't as dangerous as they look. Especially with such talented Airtenders,” Othia said.

“Only half a day more,” Fieoni told Lireah that evening as they stood at the stern rail, the sun set behind them in shades of copper and crushed berry. “We'll make landfall by morning. Corestone's harbor, called Lah Cove.”

Lireah stood beside her and looked south, where the sea stretched dark and vast. Her wings caught the evening wind and flared open without her thinking about it.

She was ready.

Chapter Seven — Corestone

Lireah smelled Corestone before she saw it.

The wind shifted in the last hour before dawn, and it carried something she couldn't name—green, mineral, and ancient, like wet stone, night-blooming flowers and the deep, loamy exhale of soil that has been alive for a very long time.

She was standing at the bow rail with her hands on the dark wood and her wings held closed tight in the predawn chill when the fog thinned and Corestone materialized from the dark like something she had dreamed into being.

It was not a building—not in the sense of buildings in Da'reth. It was not a palace or a fortress or a citadel or any word she had for a place where power lives.

It was a cliff face—a massive, vertical wall of stone that rose straight from the sea for what must have been three hundred meters, stretching outward in both directions until the fog swallowed it.

And it was *inhabited*. The entire face of the cliff had been designed and hollowed by mineralshapers. Sunsprawls jutted from the face at every level—wide, deep ledges of natural rock that had been smoothed and furnished, draped with trailing vines and flowering creepers that spilled down the cliff in cascading curtains of green and violet and deep, arterial red.

Archways had been shaped into the stone, leading to chambers and corridors and halls that glowed faintly from within, warm light spilling out into the quiet morning

like honey from a cracked jar. Staircases wound up the face in long, spiraling switchbacks.

And everywhere—at every level, on every ledge—there was life. Plants erupting from crevices, trees growing sideways from impossible footholds, moss blanketing the stone in dense emerald pelts, flowers she had no names for blooming in clusters so thick they looked painted on.

And the skygates.

She noticed them as the light rose—enormous openings cut into the cliff face, wider than they were tall, their edges smooth and rounded like the mouths of caves. As she watched, a figure appeared in one of the highest skygates—a winged woman silhouetted against the pale sky.

Without hesitation she stepped forward and dropped. Lireah's breath caught. But of course the woman's wings opened immediately, enormous and dark against the dawn, and she swept outward over the sea in a long, banking arc, climbing effortlessly on the updraft that rolled up the cliff face.

"Corestone," Dorivae said quietly, appearing beside Lireah at the rail. She looked up at the cliff the way one looks at something deeply loved. "The dwelling of Empresses. The oldest mineralshaped structure in Nuama."

"Truly?"

"Yes, and the cliff is measurably larger than it was thousands of annums ago. Mineralshapers add a few chambers every annum."

The ship turned.

Othia brought the Aëlavar around the eastern edge of Corestone, where the rock curved inward to form a natural harbor—sheltered, calm, the water shifting from deep blue to pale jade as the seafloor rose.

This was Lah Cove. The water here was so still it looked solid, and the cliffs on either side were lower, draped in thick vegetation that trailed into the sea, long green tendrils floating on the surface.

The crew brought the Aëlavar alongside it with the practiced ease of a hand finding a glove.

They disembarked into warm air that smelled of salt and jasmine and wet stone. The dock was busy but unhurried—women moved along it carrying goods, calling greetings, their wings in every color Lireah had yet seen and several she hadn't.

A pair of Fa'loom stood near the dock's end, fully garmented even in the heat, unloading crates from a smaller vessel.

Ohýme walked beside her, close enough that his arm brushed hers. She'd given him permission to wear his half-garment, though that wasn't really standard in Corestone. It was too hot for anything else.

For now, Ohýme was hers—she could choose him for as long as she liked. And then, choose someone else. So far, she wasn't tiring of him.

The first arch rose at the end of the dock.

It was natural stone—worn smooth by wind and sea spray—and it framed the path ahead. Flowering trees pressed in from both sides and above, their branches intertwining overhead to form a canopy dappled with light. The air beneath them was warm and close and heavy with scent. Insects hummed. Water trickled somewhere

nearby—always water, always trickling—and the stones beneath her feet were warm from the ground's own heat.

The second arch was larger, taller, and as they passed beneath it, the vegetation shifted. Ancient trees with trunks as wide as her chamber back at the temple, their bark covered in luminous moss that pulsed faintly green even in the daylight. Vines hung from the canopy in thick, ropy curtains, some bearing flowers the size of her hand that were deep purple at the edges and pale, almost white, at the center. Birds moved through the branches—bright, quick, singing in overlapping melodies that wove together into something that felt less like birdsong and more like music.

Beneath the third arch was a shallow pool fed by a spring that bubbled up from the rock below. Enormous lilies floated on the surface, their petals white and fleshy and faintly iridescent, and small darting fish moved beneath them, silver and gold.

Tauren paused here to fill a water skin from a spring that emerged from the rock wall. Dorivae waited for him, standing at the pool's edge with her plum wings catching the filtered light. When he returned to her side she took the skin and drank and handed it back and their fingers overlapped for a moment and neither of them pulled away.

Soon they reached the steps leading inside Corestone.

They wound up through the cliffs in a long, spiraling ascent—sometimes inside, sometimes out—hundreds of steps mineralshaped from the stone, wide and shallow and edged with low walls that served as both railing and seating.

Every few turns, the staircase opened onto a landing where the view expanded—the bay below, the sea beyond, the Aëlavar already small at the dock.

Plants grew from every crack and ledge—trailing succulents with fat, jewel-toned leaves, climbing vines heavy with fruit, tiny, tenacious flowers in white and violet.

Skygates opened in the cliff face as they climbed—some small, some vast—and through them Lireah glimpsed the interior of Corestone. Corridors lit with warm light, chambers furnished with low tables, cushions, and hanging fabrics, open courtyards where fountains ran and women moved in quiet conversation.

Outside of one skygate, on a sunsprawl, half a dozen women stood stretching in the sunlight, wings open, preparing to launch.

Through another Lireah saw a bathing hall—a long, low room filled with steam and the sound of water, bodies moving through the haze, the gleam of wet skin and feathers.

Ohýme climbed beside her in easy silence. At one of the landings, where the wind came up strong off the sea and pressed her shift against her body, he steadied her with a hand at the small of her back—brief, warm, attentive in a way that made her pulse quicken. She leaned into it for just a moment before the path narrowed and they climbed on.

At last, the stairs ended. Perhaps next time, she would be strong enough to fly rather than walk up all that way.

They emerged onto a broad terrace at the cliff's highest inhabited level—a wide, open expanse of smooth stone shaded by a canopy of woven fabric and living vines.

The view was staggering. The entire Southern Sea spread below them, vast and glittering, and the sky above was cloudless and enormous. The terrace was furnished with low seating arranged in a wide semicircle, and at its center, facing the sea, was a

divan shaped from the same stone as the cliff, its surface covered with a dense pile of woven pillows.

The chair was empty.

A Sestra stood nearby.

“Empress Thelyrah knows you're here, and why,” she said. “She will arrive shortly.”

~

One moment the terrace was empty, the wind moving through the vine canopy in slow, fragrant waves.

The next, a figure appeared at the far edge—stepping through a skygate set so deep into the cliff face Lireah hadn't noticed until it opened—and every molecule of air on the terrace rearranged itself around her.

Empress Thelyrah.

She was tall. She moved across the stone with a stride that was unhurried, the kind of walk that doesn't adjust for obstacles because obstacles have already been removed for her.

Her wings were the color of midnight—deep, lustrous black shot through with veins of iridescent teal and violet that caught the light and shattered it into fragments. They were enormous, wider than any Lireah had seen, and they didn't fold neatly behind her so much as *draped*, cascading down her back and trailing behind her like a living train, the tips of the longest feathers almost—but not quite—brushing the stone.

Somehow, Lireah knew Thelyrah would never allow her feathers to be damaged by something as simple as carrying her wings to low.

Her skin was flawless, lit from within by something that wasn't youth—vitality, perhaps, or the radiance of a woman who had seen much and hadn't let it dim her.

Her hair was lush and white curly, and was arranged in an elaborate series of interlocking coils and braids threaded with thin gold chains from which tiny stones hung—dark violet, almost black, catching the light like captured stars.

Her face was striking in a way that resisted description. High cheekbones, a strong jaw, full lips, and eyes that were the color of rich soil—warm, golden-brown, sharp and disconcerting.

She wore a gown of sheer layered silk in shades of deep plum and black that moved around her body like smoke, cinched beneath her breasts with a band of hammered gold. The skirt fell in long, diaphanous panels that revealed the lines of her legs as she walked.

Her shoulders were bare. Her collarbones were works of art. Gold cuffs encircled both wrists, catching the light with every movement. She wore a simple circlet in her hair with one large ruby dangling from the center, trembling between her eyebrows.

She was, without question, the most beautiful woman Lireah had ever seen.

And beside her, a man.

He must be Tuheru—her longest-serving Fa'loom. Veshai had told Lireah all about him and Thelyrah's other Fa'loom during their crossing.

Tuheru walked half a step behind and to her left, and he was—Lireah's breath faltered—he was *impossible*. Tall, broad-shouldered, with skin like burnished copper

and a face that belonged on the wall of a temple. He had a strong, straight nose, deep-set eyes the color of dark honey, full lips that were quiet and held the same expression of serene, devoted attention Lireah had seen in Ohýme and Tauren.

But... deeper. *Distilled.*

Refined over decades into something that transcended service and became art. His hair curled over his ears and it gleamed in the sunlight. He wore a wrap of dark silk, low at the hips and slit along one thigh, and a single gold band around his upper arm.

Lireah was glad to see Ohýme wasn't the only Fa'loom that was lightly garmented.

Tuheru's body was sculpted—every line deliberate. He moved beside the Empress with a physical awareness so total it was gravitational.

His tattoos—which Thelyrah had designed for him—covered most of his body. A sign of high honor for any Fa'loom. Ohýme had many, as he'd had three long-term Keepers. Perhaps Lireah would design more for him, someday.

Thelyrah reached the semicircle of seating, but did not sit. She stood and looked at each of them in turn—Dorivae, Fieoni, Veshai—and each woman inclined her head.

Then her gaze found Lireah.

"Empress," Dorivae said. "This is Lireah. As I mentioned in my missive, she arrived in the Groveholds of Weverta quite alone."

"Your Fa'loom may leave. Tuheru, show them to the communal hall nearest here. Then return."

"Yes, Empress," Tuheru said softly, then led Ohýme and Tauren away.

Thelyrah studied Lireah for a long, quiet moment. Then she extended one hand—long-fingered, gold-cuffed, steady—and Lireah took it without thinking.

The Empress's skin was warm and her grip was firm. Her touch sent a current through Lireah's arm that tingled like unexpectedly sour citrus—though, not at all unpleasant.

"I am Thelyrah," she said, then released Lireah's hand and stepped back.

"Welcome to Nuama."

"Thank you, Empress," Lireah's voice trembled. The woman before her radiated power in a way Lireah hadn't known was possible.

"You are quite pretty," Thelyrah said, tilting her head. The way Jorah used to—but it was nothing like that.

"Thank you," Lireah smiled. "You are—exquisite."

Thelyrah laughed, and the other women chuckled along with her.

"Thank you, Lireah. Your words are kind. As is your heart, I would imagine. Since you've somehow managed to leave Ihatithre and come here."

It wasn't a question. Lireah blinked. "I don't—"

"Your realm, which you call Da'reth, has been known to us for a very long time. We call it Ihatithre."

"Oh. I see..."

"The boundary between our realms has been sealed for over nine thousand annums. But now it is fracturing. And Da'reth is close—how close we do not know—to shattering our own."

The terrace went silent. Even the wind seemed to pause.

"What does that mean?" Lireah managed to ask after a moment.

"It means many things," Thelyrah sighed, though Lireah sensed it wasn't in annoyance. "Among which, it means you are not alone. In the past moon cycle, several other women have appeared from Da'reth—scattered across Nuama, arriving as you did—*with wings* and *without warning*. You will meet them soon. I've sent for them."

Lireah's knees almost buckled.

Other women. From her world. From *Da'reth*.

She wasn't a fluke. She was part of something larger, something cracking open between worlds.

And the Empress of this one was telling her the crack was widening.

"But first," Thelyrah said, and her voice gentled, "I would hear your story. All of it. From the beginning."

Tuheru returned without Ohýme and Tauren and moved to arranged cushions beneath the Empress's wings.

Thelyrah finally sat, her dark feathers pooling around her like night spilling from a goblet.

Lireah took a breath.

Then she began.

Thank you so much for reading! I hope you enjoy the stories set in Nuama & Ihatithre (Da'reth) for many annums to come. To make sure you never miss a release, please subscribe to my newsletter below.

*As an indie author, my success depends **entirely** on readers like you. If you enjoyed this story, please consider leaving a review on the platform where you bought this book, or on [Goodreads](#). It takes less than a minute and supports my life-long goal to become a full-time author ❤️*

*All my love,
Ariana August*

Check out the [characters](#), [lexicon](#) & [maps](#) of Nuama.

I release **MOTHS** novels and my in-world spicy novella series (**MOTHS After Dark/MAD**) every few weeks—[subscribe here](#) to stay in the loop!

Is your BF/husband a Tuheru or Amaz? [Find out here!](#)