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MICHELLE HOWARD



WINGED HUNTERS

DANGEROUS
LOVE

Dangerous Love

Winged Hunters

By Michelle Howard

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Chapter 1

“You have to leave. Hurry!”

Being awakened out of a dead sleep would have made the average individual sluggish. Not Zanica. These last weeks had been a respite, but she hadn't lost her edge or fear. She'd known she'd need to run again soon.

“What is it? What's going on, Helta?” Glancing at the woman rushing around the room, Zanica hastily jammed her legs into her pants and yanked a shirt over her head. Her hands shook and her heart thudded against her chest hard enough to bruise as possible scenarios ran flashed through her mind.

Helta, the human female who had provided her a safe haven, stuffed Zanica's belongings into a rough sack as she kept looking fearfully to the window. Even the darkened night beyond felt threatening.

Before Zanica could question the danger further, Helta shoved the bag in her direction. “Take this.”

Zanica automatically clasped the strap and slung it over her shoulder.

“He comes. A flock was spotted cresting over the hills.” As she gazed around the room, Helta's pale features held a glimpse of terror Zanica had never witnessed in the other woman before.

Finding what she searched for, Helta reached over then pushed a pair of shoes into Zanica's hands. Accepting them, she bent over and slid her feet into the worn, comfortable boots. As she did, a knot formed in her throat. A flock was the term used for a group of the winged. She didn't have to ask who *he* was.

There was only one he that would be coming after her—Gaen Hwil, the leader of her volt. Well, former volt because she was *never* going back.

Just thinking his name sent an uneasy shiver down her spine and her wings fluttering behind her. Shoes firmly on, she

rushed across the room to where Helta waited by the door.

“You can’t be found here. He’ll make everyone pay if he suspects we’ve been hiding you.” Helta sent another nervous glance toward the window. Pitch dark filled the sky with occasional flickers of light from one of the two glowing moons over their world.

Another nervous shiver racked Zanica’s frame.

Swallowing the lump forming in her throat, she followed Helta from the room. The older woman and her husband had been beyond kind to her. They’d taken her in when she arrived in the middle of the night with nothing but the clothes on her back and tears in her eyes.

Initially, they’d flinched at the sight of her bedraggled wings, signaling she was of the winged, but her plea for help had touched a spot in the heart of Helta’s husband, Coran. They’d ushered her inside, fed her and let her stay in their home using their daughter’s old bedroom.

It had been the best thirty-two days of Zanica’s recent life. For the first time in a long time, she’d been free of the constraints of her volt and Gaen’s increasingly erratic behavior. There was no way she could go back now. Not with his new edict regarding all unattached females.

Any male could now demand a claim on a female and she’d have little choice but to agree and submit. For the good of the volt, of course. She snorted. It was supposedly a proclamation for everyone but she knew the truth. Gaen wanted a means of forcing *her* compliance.

“Zanica?”

Helta’s voice brought her attention back to the moment. Zanica folded her wings close and focused on the here and now. She couldn’t afford to get lost in the past.

In the outer room where they’d spent many days relaxing on the cozy furniture, Coran whipped a blue patterned rug back from the floor and revealed a circular, metallic latch. He crouched, braced his weight with one hand and pulled on the handle with the other.

A section of the floor flew up with the motion. Coran glanced at her and waved his hand in a hurry gesture. Brackets framed his thin lips, the look in his gray eyes urgent. “This way. The stairs lead down to a tunnel like we discussed in case of an emergency. It’s a narrow fit. Follow the path and it will lead you far enough out into the wooded fields. Hide and make your way from there in the morning.”

Zanica drew a deep breath and stared into the inky abyss. Her heart thumped as remembered fear washed over her in a wave. Though they’d made this plan at the beginning of her arrival, she hadn’t allowed herself to think about actually using this tunnel. The thought of going down there alone terrified her.

Helta reached out and clasped her hand. Strands of blonde hair slid from her usually neat updo. “You *have* to go, Zanica. We’ll miss you but your volt can’t find you here.”

Zanica knew that. Yet, still she lingered. It wouldn’t bode well for the human couple if it was discovered they’d helped her. The volt she’d grown up in wasn’t the same anymore. It had devolved into an aggressive place full of angry males and females too frightened to oppose them.

“Will the both of you be alright?”

Helta squeezed her hand in reassurance. “Don’t worry about us. We believe in you. Have faith in yourself.”

That was the problem. She didn’t have much faith left. Gaen had taken over her volt from the prior leader, Muel. Muel had been a good princep, strong and considerate to their members. Especially toward the females and fledglings. He’d been in charge for as long as she could remember and had been kind to her parents and grandparents during his reign.

All that had changed in an instant. She looked at the hole, then back to Helta. A single traumatizing moment from her past left her with a deep-seated fear of dark spaces. She drew in a deep breath, knowing she couldn’t let that derail her plan. “Thank you both. I can’t begin to repay you for your compassion.”

At her shaky whisper, Coran gripped her shoulder and leaned forward, his gray eyes piercing. “Don’t give in and don’t give up. Use your fear and hatred for Gaen to your advantage.”

Zanica inhaled a deep breath, letting his words sink in. Their daughter was lucky to have them as parents. They were a perfect example of kindness and grace. It made her miss having a family more.

Nodding, she tried for a reassuring smile, but her lips couldn’t manage the gesture. Coran and Helta were innocent. They weren’t of the winged people and didn’t deserve to be dragged into her troubles. She was aware of how Gaen treated those caught harboring someone when his volt came calling. Gaen would definitely use them against her. “I don’t want him to hurt you.”

Helta’s expression softened. “We’ll say we never saw you. There’s no reason to believe we’re lying. Our daughter visits sporadically and we’ll say she just left.”

An eerie squawk pierced the night air, alerting to the closeness of her volt. Zanica firmed her shoulders. It was time to go. Gathering her nerve, she looked down into the stairway that led to complete darkness.

Time was of the essence. Tension crackled on the air. Zanica’s fingers cramped from clenching so tight. Slowly, she uncurled them. She couldn’t risk Coran and Helta any longer by delaying.

Shifting around, she placed her feet at the top of the hole. “Goodbye.”

She gripped the rungs and slowly took the first step down. Coran reached for the latch, met her gaze and muttered, “You have to find someone to stand for you. It’s your only chance against Gaen.”

Instead of answering, she began a rapid descent into her worst nightmare. She dropped to the ground, her wings fluttering to ease her landing.

“Good luck to you, Zanica,” Helta called down softly.

Above, the flooring dropped into place with a clang as she straightened and turned toward the darkness. After another deep breath, she set forward.

She didn't think about the fear curdling her stomach or the stench of stale dirt and the squish of mud beneath her boots.

Each step sent shivers up her spine, but Zanica kept moving forward. She had to. The alternative was to let Gaen catch her, force mate her to someone and spend the rest of her life in misery.

And it would be misery. Gaen only knew cruelty, led with it, and none of the Vultures in their volt were strong enough or willing to take him on.

If only her grandparents hadn't died, leaving her to a madman's whims. If only the warriors in their volt hadn't believed Gaen's lies about leading them in a better direction.

The last warrior who'd stood up to Gaen was dead. Mikael had challenged Gaen and the other Vulture slit his throat with a swipe of his claws moments after the match began. In an instant, Mikael was dead. Challenges weren't often to the death, but Gaen's actions that fateful day were the first among many changes.

There were no more challenges after that. Every day under Gaen's leadership there was a new edict. Knowing Gaen would target her for her rare abilities had sent Zanica fleeing from her home and into the small town of the non-winged beyond the valley. It was there she'd stumbled upon Helta and Coran.

Zanica thought she'd die on her desperate flight and at a certain point she'd had to continue on foot. Step by step, blisters forming on her feet, she'd kept going and met the ones who had saved her.

Ahead, the narrow passageway twisted to the right. Pulling her wings in close to her back, she slowed down to better navigate. Her breath sounded unnaturally loud. Excellent night vision or not, nothing could make being in this underground

death trap better. It reminded her too much of the time she'd spent in another dark hole.

Cold, wet, dark. The smell of blood and death heavy on the air.

Locking her jaw, she broke free of the painful memories.

Dirt and gravel crunched and crackled beneath her feet. She strained to hear if Gaen had discovered the tunnel, but silence surrounded her like a tomb.

Spikes of panic alternated with genuine despair at what Gaen would do if he got a hold of her. It was almost as bad as the terror eating at her from being in the dark.

Pushing forward, she clung to a sliver of hope. If she got into the wooded area, she could rest for the night then figure out where to go in the morning.

There was another humanoid settlement a day's travel from here and several volts that hopefully would consider letting her join.

She wasn't sure how far she'd traveled in the tunnel. Sweat left her shirt soaked, the thin material clinging uncomfortably to her skin. She flicked away insect webbing from her face each time she had to squeeze past a tighter section.

Finally, she reached a dead end and the ladder mounted against the wall before her. An upward glance revealed a tiny crack where a glimmer of silver light from the moons flickered.

Drawing a deep breath, she reached for the sides and heaved upward. She paused at the top, running her fingers along the edges until she found the latch. Adrenaline poured into her system as she carefully lifted the section.

Around her, trees and brush crowded her vision. Sensing no danger, she eased the lid wider and crawled out. Her gaze constantly scanned the blue-black sky for any signs of wings.

None. Quietly, she lowered the top back in place. The grass on top blended perfectly with the forest flooring. A slight

breeze ruffled her feathers and she fought the need to stretch them in case they were spotted overhead.

Behind her was the humanoid town she'd left, directly ahead of her was the unknown and possibly other volts. Surely, one of them had to be better than where she came from.

Except she'd heard the rumors as many fledglings did. A cautionary tale not to stray far from their aeries.

Rumors of deadly flocks that killed on sight filled her head. But what choice did she have? Gaen would mate her and break her in the process when she resisted.

And she would resist because she had no intention of being his.

Chapter 2

Pazir was up with the rising of the sun. Their hunting party had one last trip planned and they'd have enough food stores to survive through the oncoming rainy season.

“How many do you want to take with you?” his cousin, Dieba, asked as he drew beside him.

A good question. Standing on the outside ledge with the sun beaming on his dark head, Pazir scanned the males who'd awakened far earlier than they were used to in order to volunteer to participate in the hunt. His volt was small in numbers but made up for it in brute strength.

They were known among other flocks as a death volt, a ruthless segment of Vulture population with no room for mercy to those who opposed them. Pazir and the ones under him were considered the worst of their kind, owning all the negative stereotypes applied to their race.

It wasn't an exaggeration. Pazir had to rest control of their volt from the prior princep and leader, Asmir, before he could doom them all.

Asmir had been vengeful and bitter, getting them into needless skirmishes that resulted in loss of life for several of their females and fledglings who'd been too weak to fly away in the aftermath of such fights.

Truthfully, he should never have been princep, but others thought he'd rule in the same manner of his younger brother, Trez, who'd died in a stupid accident earlier.

Not that Trez had been a much better princep. He'd been reckless and lenient which in turn led to a systematic failure in the basic chain of command structure within the volt.

With all of that, at least Trez had known to make sure there was enough food to feed the fledglings during the rainy season and that their females had what they needed to keep home fires burning.

When Asmir came into power, he was a darker, more violent version of his brother and didn't care if they fell into disarray. Between the rule of the two males and the already deteriorating volt, it was no great loss when Pazir finally challenged Asmir for leadership.

During the match, instead of crying yield, Asmir had forced Pazir to kill him. Then again, he would have killed the other male anyway for being such a fuck up and starving their females. If there was one thing guaranteed to raise Pazir's ire, it was the thought of a female going hungry. It brought back savage memories from his time as a fledgling and his mother.

Murmurs questioning his ability to lead had grown in volume since he'd taken over as princep. Pazir knew it was because some feared he was *too* strong, *too* cruel. They eyed him with one part gratitude and two parts mistrust.

It didn't matter that he'd found them a place in the Chulua mountains with beautiful, jagged rock outcroppings that made for excellent take offs and landings. Forget the fact that Trez and Asmir had had them living in unsafe conditions.

Before Pazir had moved their volt, the danger to their members had been high. None of that was an issue anymore. He had worked hard to turn the spacious caverns into a defensible home where everyone could be comfortable. More importantly—safe. And for the first time in years, their stores would soon be filled to abundance.

No female would ever go hungry under his watch. He was trying to build something. No, he *was* building something.

The home he'd never had. He knew all too well what the alternative looked like. He and his mother had wandered from volt to volt after her birth family kicked them out for the transgressions of Pazir's father. His father had found another volt quickly because of his fighting skills but he'd wanted nothing to do with his son and a female he hadn't mated.

Pazir learned at an early age to fight for everything he wanted and prepare for any eventuality. It was a lesson he vowed to never forget.

And if that meant ousting those who weren't onboard with how he now ran things, then he would accept the label of being a cruel leader. He wouldn't let anyone threaten what he'd built. He didn't have the luxury of tolerance. Asmir had seen to that.

“Pazir?”

He blinked away his thoughts and dipped his gaze toward Dieba, eyeing him in concern. Pazir cleared his throat. “Three. There's no need in risking more for this final hunt.”

They were carnivorous beings and while they'd made do with vegetation during particularly lean times, it wasn't what they needed to sustain their larger musculature.

“Rudon, Calis, and Unger,” Dieba called out to the three warriors and signaled them over.

Relief flashed over the faces of the other males not selected. Pazir withheld his smirk. He admitted to being controlling during hunts, but he had to be. The males weren't used to discipline but were gradually falling into line.

It would take time but he'd soon have a well structured volt everyone could be proud to be a part of. Something else he'd always longed for as a fledgling.

He directed his gaze toward the three males chosen to accompany him. “We'll fly farther out today. Close to the border by the woods of the non-winged.”

Calis cringed but the others hid their expressions better. There was no fondness in them for the humanoids. Because of them, the winged people had been pushed farther and farther away from the rich hunting grounds.

Another thing Pazir blamed Trez and Asmir for. They should never have given ground to the humans. Deals from humans were broken as easily as they were made and now the volts fought amongst each other for the remaining territory.

Pointing at Dieba, Pazir said, “Make sure everything is in place for tonight. We shouldn't be gone long and a celebration is in order.”

His statement caused a slight lifting of lips to those who heard his decree. One thing Vultures liked was a celebration. Drink flowed freely and they could eat until stuffed.

Pride rolled over him. Eating was a point of admiration. Eating to excess signaled prosperity.

Pazir tightened the strap of the quiver laced around his lower leg and secured the bow over his shoulder so it wouldn't impede his wings. Those going with him checked their knives and bows then met his gaze. He nodded his readiness and they headed to the edge of the ledge.

A rush of satisfaction filled Pazir as he stared down at the dizzying gorge below. This was their home, their new aerie. He'd chosen well and if he had anything to do about it, their volt wouldn't just survive, they'd thrive.

Zanica glided on the thermals, working hard to ignore her exhaustion. She'd struck out this morning as soon as the sun rose. Her sleep through the night had been fitful, every branch cracking or breeze whistling overhead set off a burst of anxiety.

By luck or chance, so far, she'd managed to avoid any search patrol sent by Gaen. Staying close to the humanoid territory lines had been a good bet to escape his notice. Vultures and humans reluctantly associated with one another when needed.

Her mind raced with possibilities. She needed to find somewhere safe, a place to hide until she could get to another volt. Hours in the air had started to have an impact on her remaining reserves of energy.

Her wings ached and the breeze she'd used to glide and conserve her strength had long since fallen off. The patch of green below enticed and she flew toward the ground. A short rest. That's all she'd allow herself.

As she careened in a wide circle to land, a spasm rolled through one wing. She flapped furiously to adjust for the loss

of mobility and let out a small cry as she struggled to stay airborne.

Pulling on instinct and the skills her father had taught her, she swerved to catch an air current, concentrating on where she wanted to land. Her feathers ruffled as the wind whipped through them but she never took her eyes off the spot. Close. Almost there.

Sweat trickled in her eye, causing her to blink to clear her vision. A little closer. She strained, muscles in her abdomen drawn tight as she compensated for her wing by shifting her weight.

Her feet hit with a thump. Momentum and loss of balance sent her floundering forward, contact between the forest floor and her face imminent.

Or would have been, if strong hands hadn't caught her about the elbows. Off balance even more, her face smashed into something solid. The smell of oak and peat filled her nostrils. A raspy hiss sounded from above. She jerked her head up and stared at the curve of a firm jaw.

"Who are you?" A dark and deadly voice rasped.

Before she could answer, she was thrust upright and the hands fell away. Her gaze dropped to the muscled throat bisected by a brutal scar that slashed halfway around a tanned neck. Someone had made a serious attempt to kill him.

Bracing her weight, she gazed around and froze. Four looming males stood in a semi-circle in front of her. Dark hair, dark eyes and wings so black, she detected a sheen over them.

Knowledge of who they were flashed in an instant. Death volt members. Vultures who were said to kill indiscriminately.

She took a nervous step backward then another. The males closed in tighter, sneers twisting their full lips.

"What have we here?" one of them asked with a cocky slant of his hips.

Her first thought was to run which she quickly ruled out. Until the cramp in her wing loosened, she couldn't take off. In

addition, they'd give chase and there would be no mercy found with them.

Death volts were settled to the west, taking over more and more land not used by the older groupings or smaller flocks. They were moving into the cliffside homes that had been abandoned for greener pastures long ago.

Shirtless, these males each had muscled, powerful frames that spoke to their time in the sky. Tan rawhide leggings covered taut thighs down to calves with leather quivers strapped in place.

A hunting party. She'd been discovered by a hunting party. Her mind shrieked in warning but her gaze never dropped. The gods were clearly out to get her.

Two of the males moved toward her and the threatening look in their eyes didn't bode well. Her hand dropped to her waist and came up empty of the tiny knife she'd grown accustomed to carrying around within her volt to hold off Gaen. It was probably still on the table in the bedroom she'd used in Helta's home.

Curses slipped free at her careless mistake. She wasn't a strong fighter by any means but to be weaponless made her easy prey. It was never a good idea to be prey.

"Looks like a trespasser, Calis," another spoke.

"We kill trespassers, Rudon," the third male said, joining the others as they spread a few feet apart. It was enough to block a path of escape if she tried to fly away.

Her wings ruffled in warning but didn't flair them out to full length. She wasn't completely stupid. Exposing her wings would make her vulnerable to injury from them and a bad injury would impact her ability to fly if given the chance.

Just when the first male, who'd spoken, stretched a hand to reach for her, a long arm blocked him. "Wait, Calis."

Her gaze snagged on the fourth and largest male. The one who'd caught her. His dark hair fell in haphazard waves about a cold face carved in fierce angles. If she'd had any doubts about where they'd come from, his looks would have

solidified it. Those who lived this far out wore the appearances of their Vulture ancestors closer to the surface.

Stubby lashes hovered over midnight eyes that watched her with an intensity that pebbled the flesh on her arms in response. His nose was long and slightly hooked above thin lips pressed tight together. When he'd spoken, his voice carried the flavored accent of the higher plains. Deep, raspy with a husk she wanted to drown in.

His size dwarfed her. Not just in height but in the muscled mass packed on a body built to carry it. His pitch-black wings arched high over his shoulders, the feathers rustling occasionally while he stared at her with a narrowed gaze.

In her old volt, she'd been surrounded by males bigger than her but none as firm or solid as the one standing in front of her. Under Gaen's leadership, the males were growing lazy from lack of training and vicious from no discipline. None of these males looked as if they sat around arguing or sleeping all day.

"She's in our territory, Pazir," the one called Rudon complained without taking his gaze from her. "Let us remind the other volts why they should stay away from our lands."

By killing her. That's what he really meant. A shaft of ice trailed down her spine between her wings. She'd heard of the other male. Pazir Catharte. His name struck horror in her right down to her toes. Everyone had heard of the new leader of the growing volt to the west. He'd killed the prior princep in a challenge and allegedly the brother too.

Anyone who came forward to oppose him was easily defeated. Challenge after challenge but none could overthrow him.

And it was said many had tried.

If the rumors were to be believed, Pazir ruled with complete authority over his people, refusing to accept weakness and banishing those who didn't measure up to his high standards.

Seeing the male up close and in person, she was willing to believe the stories. Power pulsed in hidden waves around him, his presence a threat in itself. She had the feeling if she moved a step out of line, he'd have no problem standing silently by while his hunters went about their threat and killed her.

"This is neutral land," she blurted. Her sense of direction was decent enough and she remembered the slim boundary of space between the non-winged land and the nearest volt in the west.

Pazir eyed her from head to toe then glanced around with a dismissive snort. "Four steps to your right will put you in our territory."

His voice rumbled forth, that rich accent sexy and threatening at the same time. She licked her lips and shifted a half-step to the left. To her surprise, the other three males didn't move to pursue.

"I'm not hunting. I won't take meat from your people. I just need to get over to the next mountain." Where she could hopefully beg for help, maybe join another volt who wouldn't be afraid if Gaen came looking for her.

"Females don't travel alone. Where is your volt? The flock traveling with you?" Pazir demanded.

Nerves bit at her. He obviously believed females shouldn't be out unattended. Like Gaen. She contemplated lying but the shadows shifting in his gaze warned he was waiting for exactly that. "No flock. I'm alone."

When she'd run, she'd run by herself. Her only family left, a cousin, vowed to never reveal her knowledge of Zanica's plan to escape. It was in Leia's best interest to not even speak of it.

"If you are alone, you are an enemy attempting to spy."

He made the firm declaration without hesitation. Her eyes widened. How did he make that leap? "I'm not a spy!"

He tipped his head at one of the males with him. Calis? Rudon? She couldn't recall but the male slid his bow from his shoulder and pulled an arrow from his ankle quiver.

She held her hands up in supplication, her throat going dry.
“Wait. Wait. Please.”

“Who are you?” Pazir asked. “What volt do you belong to?”

“Yes, Zanica. Tell him who you belong to.”

The new voice coming from behind her was smug and familiar. As familiar as the dread filling her soul.

How had she missed Gaen’s arrival?

Chapter 3

The presence of the lone female this close to his territory surprised Pazir. That didn't happen often. Humans and Vultures alike knew to stay away from his borders.

He prided himself on being prepared for any eventuality but nothing prepared him for *her*. She was striking. From the haughty way she held herself, to the rare blue eyes glaring at him.

She was slender, her skin taut against her collarbone, her waist narrow with the slightest curve to her hips. When Rudon and the others threatened to grab her, he'd wanted to let them except honor dictated he give her a fair chance. She wasn't *in* his territory and subject to the consequences they doled out to trespassers.

Four steps. His cock stirred for the first time in months. Four small steps in his direction and he'd be within his right to snatch her, do whatever he wanted. He was contemplating exactly what that entailed when he caught the slight disturbance in the air signaling the arrival of others.

Pazir flicked his fingers in a subtle move against his thigh. His hunters tipped their heads in the barest of acknowledgment. The shift in their stance went from relaxed to alert in a beat. He'd trained every male in his volt to hand signals and practiced with them continually for circumstances like this.

Some didn't like it and considered it a foolish endeavor along with several other things he'd put into place. Pazir didn't care. The only thing that mattered to him was making their volt stronger so they could protect their home.

“Yes, Zanica. Tell him who you belong to.”

Three newcomers landed behind the territory line. All male. Brown wings, leaner frames and a lack of muscle tone. Disgust flared at the all too familiar sign of a poorly fed flock but he masked the emotion and kept his eyes on the female.

Instead of the relief he expected to see, her reaction to the presence of the arrivals intrigued him. Her shoulders stiffened, eyes going wide, showing more white than blue and her body tensed as if to flee.

Which would be a huge mistake because it was clear these males would give chase and it wouldn't be pretty.

Though why he cared he couldn't explain.

What really caught Pazir's interest, was the way the female's wings quivered before tightening into rigid folds at her back. He studied the way her skin paled and her shift in positioning, something one did in preparation for attack. Her fear of the trio was obvious.

Then again, it wasn't his problem. *She* wasn't his problem, no matter how much his interest was ignited. Whatever momentary insanity had taken hold of him would soon fade.

Rage encompassed the female's face before she turned from him to face the tallest of the trio. "I don't belong to you, Gaen."

Gaen.

The name made him tense. Pazir knew exactly who he was. He'd waited years to come face to face with the leader of one of the flat land volts. He could take the male down now, ending his life quickly.

No. Gaen didn't deserve a quick or easy death. He would suffer at Pazir's hands. All of his previous fantasies of Gaen bleeding at the end of his blade faded as a new plan began to form. A surge of triumph filled him. Interest renewed, he focused for more reasons than an attractive female.

Zanica spun and faced Gaen. He had his two close friends, Waine and Duvull, with him. The grin on Gaen's face glowed with evil and a hint of malice at finding her.

Stopping here was an error in judgment. She had a death volt leader on one side and her former leader on the other.

Both options were bad. Her brain raced, trying to figure out an escape plan.

Ignoring her denial, Gaen looked beyond her and spoke in an authoritative tone to Pazir. "I'm sorry to have bothered you. Zanica has a rebellious spirit. We'll take her back and make sure she doesn't disturb your territory again."

Zanica shifted to the side, keeping both males in her sight. Pazir's expression remained neutral while Gaen's grin widened. Her chest tightened. If she went back with him there was only one fate for her.

"Make sure she doesn't stray close again," Pazir snarled, turning on his heels to leave.

Desperation tugged at her. Gaen would never let her out of his sight again after this. There would be guards following her every move. A mate she didn't want would be forced on her. Any opportunity to escape would be lost forever.

Coran was right in his muttered advice. She had to find a male to go against Gaen. Fight fire with fire. Who better than a death volt leader if she could sway him to her side?

But how?

Pazir's wings flexed as he prepared to fly off. It was now or never. A last ditched effort to save herself. She'd take the unknown over what was waiting for her back at her old volt any day.

As Gaen gleefully reached for her, she dodged to the side. His fingers swiped along her arm, the tips of his claws scraping her skin. Too close. Too damn close.

Waine and Duvull moved as if to close in on her.

"Stop, Zanica!" Gaen hissed. "You're making this worse for yourself."

Nothing could possibly be worse than what he planned. Gaen's sadistic tendencies were well known and his friends were no better.

The commotion delayed Pazir's departure. He partially turned. Without hesitation, she took a running leap toward

him.

Snarling, Duvull reached for her, but she added a push to her momentum from her wings and hit Pazir's chest full center.

Her arms locked around his neck and she shoved her face into the hollow at the base of his throat beneath that jagged scar. "Accept me. Please."

Before he could react, she rose on her tiptoes, bit down hard on the juncture at his shoulder and broke the skin. Heart pounding, she closed her eyes and prayed to the gods as she released her mating hum.

Pazir stiffened in her hold, but Zanica didn't dare move away. *Accept, accept*, she silently begged. He had to accept.

Her hum rose in volume, a high-pitched sound that wobbled on the end as the last note died out. Along with her hope of rescue.

The ensuing silence was loud.

No reaction from Pazir and her mating hum.

Gods, Gaen was going to make her go back with him. Tears burned her eyes.

"Nice try, Zanica," Gaen taunted. "Now get over here."

Tremors racked her frame and she lowered her feet flat to the ground, loosening her hold around the solid body against hers. She would pay for her actions today in ways she could only imagine.

Regret a hard knot in her belly, her fingers trailed through the soft hair at Pazir's nape then slid free. His rough hand latched onto her hip, stopping her withdrawal. The throaty vocalization vibrating from his chest startled her. He cupped the back of her head with his other hand, pressing her face tighter against him.

As he lowered his head to the base of her throat and collarbone, her breath lodged in her chest. Anticipation caused a fluttery sensation to bubble in her stomach.

A light nuzzle from his nose and then the press of his teeth. She tensed, crying out when he bit down. Warmth instantly spread through her limbs, knocking out the chill she'd lived with for the last thirty-two days.

Relief left her wings rustling and she almost collapsed onto the chest beneath her, his heart a vibrant beat against her skin.

Slowly, Pazir released her, the mark he left on her neck wet and throbbing as he muttered in her ear, "Release me. Mate."

Mate.

It took a moment for the demand to get through to her brain. She eased her mouth from the bite she'd made, a ridiculous thrill of pride filling her at the dark blotch on his skin. Her claiming mark stood out in stark contrast beneath the scar.

Suddenly, she was twisted to the side. Pazir curved an arm like a bar around her waist, keeping her tight against him. Gaen's bronze skin paled. He looked from Zanica to Pazir then back to Zanica, shock evident on his face. "You can't mate him."

Any moment now Zanica expected him to charge forward and snatch her back. Gaen's hand hovered over the deadly knife belted at his waist as if to do exactly that.

"Is she already claimed?" Pazir asked with a tilt of his head.

She could tell the lie was on the tip of Gaen's tongue as his eyes darted around the clearing. Sweat trickled from under her arms. Clenching her teeth, she waited. How far gone was he? Was she worth risking a challenge here and now with someone he knew was a better opponent?

"She is not claimed," Gaen gritted out.

The knot in her chest loosened.

"The female chose me as her mate," Pazir continued. "The right to choose is always the females."

"So noted." Gaen looked distraught but beneath the reluctant agreement was a light tone of retribution. The

glimmer in his gold eyes warned Zanica this wasn't over.

“You can't let her go! She belongs to us.” Rage blurred Duvull's features and he took one determined step in her direction.

She jerked in fear but the arm at her waist held firm and didn't let her move. At the same time, three arrows thudded into the ground, creating a clear line of demarcation. One pierced the toe of Duvull's boot. He shrieked in pain then yanked the shaft out from his foot.

“Enter our territory and die,” Pazir rasped. “No tolerance.”

No one doubted he meant the harshly uttered threat. She risked a glance to the side and the three males with Pazir held their bows with more arrows nocked at the ready and aimed at the center of Gaen's chest.

“No! Zanica's going back with us,” Waine declared and charged forward with a knife clutched in his fist.

Right into Catharte territory.

Zanica was shoved into the arms of Rudon before she could blink. Pazir stepped forward and caught the arm Waine held aloft. With a vicious jerk, he broke Waine's arm and punched him in the face.

Dropping the knife, Waine staggered back then tried to swing in return with his uninjured arm. Pazir turned with the move, twisted the limb and pinned it behind his back. A sharp kick to Waine's leg sent him sprawling to his knees.

“I'll kill you!” Waine howled as he struggled.

A quick jerk and the snap of his left wing followed by the right was heard clearly. Waine's scream shattered the air. Not wasting a moment, Pazir hooked one arm around his neck.

He leaned forward and swiped the fallen knife from the ground. Zanica tensed but the arm banded around her waist held her in place. She stared at Waine on his knees, facing Gaen.

“No tolerance,” Pazir repeated, staring directly at Gaen too. Then with a slash of the knife, he slit Waine's throat.

Everything happened so fast, she barely had time to process. Pazir shoved Waine's body to the side and straightened.

"Understand?" Pazir asked Gaen. His expression remained even, as if he hadn't just killed a male in less than five minutes.

Malice darkened Gaen's face and rage beat at her from the evil glare he threw in her direction. To Pazir, he gritted through his teeth. "Understood."

Tossing the knife to the ground, Pazir backed up and Zanica was passed over. Once more Pazir latched his arm around her waist. They waited in silence.

"You can have her," Gaen finally spat. "Be wary she doesn't betray you when you least expect it as she has others."

After that dire statement, Gaen pointed at Duvall. The other male hefted Waine's dead body over his shoulder. Together, he and Gaen spread their russet colored wings and launched into the sky.

Pazir flicked his fingers at Calis and Rudon. The two males took flight immediately. They'd follow at a distance on their side of the border to make sure the volt leader did indeed leave. Gaen had a reputation for being a liar and cheat. Unger stayed close to guard Pazir. Unnecessarily.

"You killed him."

The hesitant voice brought his attention back to the female he held. His mate. He wasn't sure who was more surprised at the turn of events—him or Gaen.

She'd run to him. He couldn't recollect anyone ever running *to* him for help. His reputation alone prevented that, making her action all the more conflicting.

Earlier, she'd teetered so close to the boundary lines, he'd wanted her to come closer. Had even been tempted to taunt her into crossing. Thus, her unexpected jump the short distance

into his territory had sent a surge of adrenaline roaring through him.

What she'd done next, however, had completely caught him off guard and he'd hesitated. Then he'd spied Gaen reaching for his weapon, the look of hatred on his face extreme for the circumstances.

A rare moment of protective fury for a stranger rolled through Pazir. His initial instinct had been to deny the invitation. He didn't want or need a mate, not when there was still much to do to settle his volt but her body had felt soft and warm cradled against his, her tiny teeth a dagger sweet pain as she bit him.

Once she released the mating hum, he was lost. He'd pulled the defiant female close as he answered her call.

There were plenty of females who sought his nest. Sex was easy among the Vultures but to mate was a lifelong commitment he'd never felt the need to experience.

Until now. Not only had the dark-haired female with the wary blue eyes called to his senses, she'd given him a potential edge against Gaen in his vendetta. All he had to do next was figure out the best way to use her.

"Congratulations, Pazir," Unger said, smirking as he came closer.

Pazir's upper lip curled and he hissed as he moved the female—no, his *mate* back with him. Unger's brows arched and he chuckled. "Feeling possessive already? They say it's like that, you lucky bastard."

Lucky? That wasn't the word Pazir would use. Letting the female go, he ignored the instinct to keep her body pressed to his. "We'll head back. I need to figure out what this was about."

"And the meat?"

They'd stashed the carcasses of the three dhuru beasts they'd killed to follow the path of the wings they'd seen soaring across the sky dangerously close to his territory.

“I’ll send Rudon and Calis to collect it when they return.”

The female twisted her hands together as she watched them in trepidation. What had Gaen called her? Zanica. His mate’s name was Zanica.

Chapter 4

“The journey to our home is long. Are you up to the flight?”

At the question, Zanica faced the male she'd claimed as her mate, a sense of disbelief still churning at her insides. He'd killed Waine, stood firm against Gaen and had moved on as if nothing had happened.

Her chin tipped upward. The spasm had eased and though still tender, she was confident in her ability. “I'll manage.”

What she lacked in strength she made up for in speed. Vulture males could travel for hours compared to their female counterparts, but she could outpace and outdistance them easily for a short period of time.

She inwardly winced. *When not exhausted that is.*

Pazir offered her a clipped nod. “We head back to the cliffs. You'll fly between Unger and me.”

She turned toward the other male watching the two of them closely from a short distance away. That must be Unger. She bit her bottom lip, her gaze unerringly going to the cloudless sky. The rainy season would soon be here.

In a matter of weeks, days even, winds and storms would wash gullies out. Travel would be limited. While relieved her unexpected mating had held Gaen off, she wasn't sure if staying with Pazir was any better. In the moment, he had definitely been the lesser of two evils.

For now, she'd take the opportunity to recover and plan accordingly. When the time came, she'd leave and continue on her way to a volt with a better reputation.

As if reading her mind, Pazir gripped her shoulder firmly, leaned toward her and ran the edge of his nose across her temple until he reached her ear. Breath whistled softly by as he whispered, “If you try and run, mate, I *will* chase you. You chose me and now you'll deal with that.”

His words should have scared her. Instead his overt aggression caused her nipples to harden and her outer feathers ruffled in response. Pazir eased back and his gaze trailed over her shoulders to her wings. Something she couldn't identify passed fleetingly in those dark orbs. Lust, greed or satisfaction. She couldn't decipher which or maybe it was a combination of all three.

“I'll deal.” *For now.*

He held her stare a moment longer then straightened and stepped back, his black eyes daring her to deny his words. The hair at her nape curled in reaction. Arousal and fear warred with one another.

In her old volt, she'd done her best to dissuade male attention only to end up in the clutches of one of the most dangerous of their kind. A death volt leader.

Yet, there had been something in his demanding tone that awakened a part of her feminine core that had long lain dormant.

No. She had to remain firm in her plans and push deep down whatever feelings the mating hum had awakened. This was *not* a true mating. It was an act of survival.

“We'll wait for you to be airborne then join you.”

Swallowing, she knew she had no choice but to see her rash actions through. With a running leap and forceful flap of her wings, she took to the sky. Wind rushed past her face, air currents flickering through her feathers as she caught a thermal and flew.

A disturbance to her right showed Pazir and those nightly black wings expanded to full length behind him. His hair whipped about the fierce countenance of his face. From this angle, it was easy to see why others feared him. There was a cruelty inherent to his profile, an edge of menace that emanated from him.

No wonder Gaen hadn't challenged him about the mating. A whoosh of air drew her attention to her left. The other male, Unger. They'd positioned themselves in a protective

formation. Gaen's volt didn't do that. Not for fledglings or females.

Did they expect an attack? The possibility added a burst of speed to her flight. The sooner they reached Pazir's home, the better.

Almost an hour later, the early morning sun began to warm the air. She wanted to luxuriate in the sensation of the heat bathing down on her feathers but this wasn't a leisure trip. Her gaze shifted to Pazir again. His puzzled expression worried her.

As his mate, she was subject to his whims and had given him a powerful advantage over her. Then again, he'd done the same by accepting. While neither of them knew each other, only death could separate a mated pair. Or public repudiation if the cause was great enough.

She spent the trip silent, occasionally glancing at Pazir. Each time she looked in his direction, she found his intense stare on her. A heated flush rose under her skin. Recently, there had been little reason to interact with the males in her volt. Deliberate on her part. The few she might have been interested in treated her with disdain or greed, following Gaen's lead toward females in general.

There had been one lover, a male she'd considered mating, only to find out he'd been using her to help his mother. The funniest part was she would have helped anyway if he'd been honest and upfront.

Her wings dragged and she dropped a few feet before recovering and surged back up into her original position. Her body needed rest. Pazir looked at her askance but didn't question her stamina as he stretched his arm and pointed straight ahead. "It won't be much longer. Just over the rise."

Zanica could make out the sprawling red-gold mountains in the distance. Numerous outcroppings jutted from the sides of the craggy landscape.

The height alone was imposing but the crevice between the two natural formations caused her heart to dip. One

miscalculation, one error in flight, would send an individual plunging to their death. This was where he made his home?

“Land there,” Pazir ordered. He didn’t wait to see if she followed as he shifted to the right and dove toward a ledge where several people gathered.

On her left, Unger adjusted to hover beside her. “I’ll keep watch over you. It’s a steep drop. The draft from the valley can throw off your flight pattern. Be careful going in.”

It was unexpected advice from a male who’d not long ago calmly discussed her death. “Thanks.”

Narrowing her gaze on where Pazir now stood with another male on the ledge, she gauged her speed and slowed her descent. She cautiously circled a spot slightly away from the crowd and landed with bent knees.

When she straightened, she met the sharp glare from a face dark with anger. The male watched her with hands knotted into fists at his sides. Tensing, she braced for a fight and once more reached for the knife she no longer carried.

“Samian,” Pazir snapped, “See about the supplies and winter blankets for everyone.”

The other male shot one last glance in her direction before marching inside. More gazes turned in her direction, lowered to the mark on her neck, then narrowed in confusion.

Mate, mate, mate. The muttered word filled with doubt soon spread through the crowd.

She had to admit, she could understand their shock. It wasn’t as if she’d left her old home expecting to be anyone’s mate, let alone a male from the death volt.

Knowing it was important to make a strong first impression, she pushed her shoulders back and walked to stand next to Pazir. She might not want to stay here among strangers and potential enemies but she wouldn’t be cowed.

Pazir stopped his conversation to stare, his gaze eyeing the length of her. She couldn’t read anything on his face. His

expression still held the blank look he'd used when he decimated Waine and faced Gaen.

Unsure what he searched for, her wings automatically tensed. She prepared for him to issue a threat or demand but instead when she drew near, he snarled, "Don't do that. Your muscles will lock."

Zanica froze but he turned to the male beside him and said, "Dieba, this is my mate. Zanica, this is my cousin, Dieba."

She nodded.

"You are now a part of the Catharte volt. Unger will show you around the aerie," Pazir continued.

"Me?" Unger turned stunned eyes to him.

Pazir dropped his voice and shifted his weight to turn slightly in Unger's direction. "Is that a problem?"

Unger lowered his head and his gaze darted to the side. The slight flicker of his wings revealed his nerves. "I am honored you chose me."

Even she caught the sarcasm in the remark, but Pazir only nodded and announced in a louder tone. "Rudon and Calis will return with the meat from our hunt. We will go into the season fully stocked as planned."

A cheer rose from the crowd. Some stamped their feet and hooted while others clapped and flared their wings.

She couldn't help focusing on those last words. They had enough food to be stocked for an entire season? There was never enough food with Gaen. Hunger was an expected state over the last few years.

"Let's go, princep." Unger stepped aside and gestured.

Princep. She was the princep due to her mated status to Pazir. Nerves stirred in her gut but it was the warbled noise from her belly that sent a flush of embarrassment to her cheeks.

"Perhaps, I should feed her too," Unger stated with a downward turn of his lips.

Pazir eyed her again, the searing heat in his gaze unreadable. “Whatever she wants and needs.”

Pazir watched Unger walk away with his mate. *His mate*. He still had trouble believing he’d accepted the claim. Unger adapted his stride and closed the distance between him and Zanica as they disappeared into the entrance. The main cavern was a part of the network of caves their volt had turned into a massive aerie to house everyone.

Jealousy tore at him, but he ruthlessly shut down the emotion. Despite his reluctance to escort her, Unger would never betray Pazir in that manner. He might be uncertain about this mating but the other male would protect the female.

“What the fuck?” Dieba asked, turning to Pazir the moment the two vanished inside.

Pazir shook his head. “She was close to our territory. Gaen came upon us with two of his males and tried to force her to go with them. She jumped in my arms and issued the mating hum.”

Disbelief creased Dieba’s features and his mouth gaped for a moment before he recovered. “You accepted?”

Huffing a laugh, Pazir said, “I did but this could be the opportunity we’ve been waiting for.”

Dieba’s gaze clouded. “She is an innocent.”

It went against one of their guiding tenets. No harm to females. But this was different. “She won’t come to any physical harm. I only need her to draw Gaen out.”

Shaking his head, his cousin sighed. “Don’t lose yourself completely in this vendetta, Paz.”

Clenching his jaw, Pazir held back the need to snarl at another male opposing him despite the fact it was a relative he loved. He’d waited years for the chance to strike against Gaen. If using the female gave him the opportunity to do so, he wouldn’t ignore it.

At the most, her heart would take a beating. Emotions were frivolous and ever changing. His new mate would recover from whatever upset she suffered in his efforts to avenge his mother.

Either way, Pazir would do what was necessary to get what he wanted.

“Seducing her will be easy with the mating between us. Any information she reveals about how Gaen runs his volt will be useful. Hunting habits, close allies and security defenses.” A thread of guilt niggled at his gut as he voiced his plan. A mating should not begin on secrets but he had no choice in this particular instance.

“I’ll get more information on her while I’m at it. Look into her history and connections. He may have planted her here to spy on us,” his cousin stated with a pointed look before spreading his wings wide.

Pazir gave him a responding nod. Although he didn’t want to think that the beautiful female he’d claimed as his mate was sent to infiltrate his volt, he needed to remember that it was a strong possibility.

And if she was, he’d take care of her as easily as he’d taken care of Gaen’s male, no matter his feelings on harming females.

When Dieba flew off, Pazir ran a hand through his hair and shook his head again. He was off-kilter and that rarely happened. Being organized and deliberate about his actions was how he maintained control. Nothing about what he’d done today made sense. Mating the female from Gaen’s volt was a spur of the moment decision he hoped he didn’t come to regret.

“I thought you weren’t interested in a mate.”

The perturbed female voice coming from behind Pazir didn’t startle him. He’d heard the scrape of her shoe against the stone. He didn’t bother to turn around. Aneesha had made no secret of her desire to attain a permanent place in his nest as his lover, if not mate.

She placed a hand on his forearm and he shot her a glance. “Don’t.”

At his sharp tone, she immediately snatched her hand away. Her lips pursed and she tossed back her head of dark waves. “If you had to choose a mate, couldn’t you have at least selected someone less...pretty.”

In this instance, pretty was used as an insult. Pazir hid his amusement. He wasn’t blind. Zanica’s appearance would clearly draw attention. Her looks were proof that the volts in the east and flatter plains had mingled with the non-winged at some point in their ancestry.

She didn’t have the hawkish nose, thin lips or broad features like the females in the west and in his volt. Her body was also slender, lacking the voluptuous curves he was accustomed to. Beauty like Zanica’s was viewed as a sign of weakness in the mountains.

It didn’t mean he didn’t find her appealing, though. His body’s response when he’d had her pressed tight against him spoke to her desirability. Even now, his cock ached to take her.

“She’s fine,” he finally said to Aneesha.

She glared and he’d had enough of the conversation already. He could tell she wanted to discredit his new mate. The instinctive urge to crush the threat rose and his feathers twitched against his back.

Part of him wanted to issue a warning while the calmer, rational side of him held back the words. They were predators at heart. It was in their nature to feast on the weak. If he showed too much care for Zanica, she would be perceived to be easy pickings.

“Princep.”

He looked up to see one of his top guards glide down and land next to him. A single white feather stood out at odds amongst Fynn’s sleek black wings.

“I have news from patrols in the west.”

Knowing she'd lost his attention, Aneesha hissed and moved to go inside. Putting her out of his thoughts, Pazir focused on Fynn. "What is it?"

Brows lowered, Fynn shoved a hand through his disheveled shoulder length hair. Hair his mother continually nagged him to cut. "There were signs of scouts on the edges of our territory. When I dove closer, they took off and flew away. I didn't give chase since I was alone."

Territory boundaries were indisputable and established. Everyone knew where Catharte land began and ended. He'd driven the point home and left the bodies to show it.

If someone wandered too close, it was never by accident. A scout group implied a planned visit.

"Gaen?" Pazir asked, wondering if the leader of Zanica's volt could have organized a party this quickly.

Fynn shook his head, frustration flashing over his face. "It's unclear which volt they belonged to. I wasn't close enough, princep."

Pazir's gaze drifted toward the cavern entrance. He'd thought to seek his mate out and begin the effort to draw her closer toward him. Physical proximity would enable him to set his plan in motion. Except, he also needed to look into this situation. "Show me."

Fynn led him toward a clearing on the far edges of the border where his lands butted against the humanoids and another volt farther along in Echo Valley.

Though Pazir didn't expect to find anyone around, he was aggravated that someone was bold enough to test him by encroaching this close to his territory. "I'll arrange a team to check it out tomorrow. You'll go along to identify this specific area. Remember, what happens if you find an enemy."

Fynn nodded. "No tolerance."

With a snap of his wings, Fynn rose in the air to finish his patrol.

Trespassers. One more thing to worry over. First, his surprise mate and now the possibility of an enemy seeking to encroach on his territory.

Perhaps it was coincidental. Except Pazir didn't believe in coincidences.

Chapter 5

Zanica couldn't say Unger wasn't efficient as he gave her a tour of the aerie. He moved her quickly from one space to the next with detailed but clipped descriptions.

Glass globes filled with phosphor crystals hung from the ceiling by hooks, providing bright light and reminding her of those found in humanoid homes.

She didn't glimpse anyone around. From the size of the extensive network of caves, she'd expected a larger volt. More members. Unless they were out or spread very far apart in living space, there weren't many here and those she saw were older in age.

Her stomach gave another loud rumble. Unger smirked. "Right on time."

She looked around the room they entered, noting the huge stove with multiple pots boiling on top of grates with fires flickering beneath them. There was a large opening in the ceiling to vent the smoke.

A lone figure bustled about the kitchen area along with two others. The aroma of savory spices filled the air and her stomach cramped in hunger.

The curvy, dark-haired female rushed by only to stop when Unger caught her attention. "Mira, we have a guest. Is there anything prepared she can eat? I fear her stomach will claw its' way out at the rate it's making noise."

Zanica's head snapped up at his comment but he faced Mira. She couldn't be sure if that was humor she heard in his voice or an insult.

"There's a hearty beef soup from a dhuru beast she can have."

Putting action to words, Mira used a wooden ladle and scooped a large serving of the soup from a pot. She turned and set the steaming bowl on the island counter in the middle of a room that could easily sit twenty or more.

Unger nudged Zanica's shoulder lightly. "Sit and eat. I'll return for you shortly."

He was gone before she could protest. Feeling stares burn her back, she took a seat on a tall stool, wincing as it squeaked beneath her weight.

Mira stood on the opposite side of the counter, her dark gaze watching Zanica closely. The tantalizing scent of the soup was hard to resist. Chunks of meat and vegetables floated in a golden brown broth. Her stomach clenched so tight, she gasped.

Unable to wait longer, Zanica ignored the gazes on her and gripped the spoon to take her first taste. Rich herbs exploded on her tongue mixed with ingredients she couldn't identify.

With a satisfied sigh, she closed her eyes and chewed carefully. It was as good as anything she'd eaten prepared by her old volt. No, this was better because it had dhuru chunks and many of the meals there lacked beef or some other form of meat thanks to Gaen's poor leadership.

She finished the meal in silence and pushed the empty bowl away with a full stomach. The shuffle of feet against stone pulled her attention to Mira holding a white cloth in hand while watching her with a pleased quirk to her brows.

The other woman possessed the stern visage, pointed nose and rounded figure found in this part of the land. Thin strands of silver shown through the black hair pulled into a sensible bun at the back of a wide neck. White feathers lined the edges of her black wings. She wore a simple short sleeved shirt in a light shade of blue

"Who are you?" came the gruff question.

"My name is Zanica." She wasn't sure how much she should reveal. Neither Unger nor Pazir had given her direction on how to handle her introduction.

"You're not from a volt around here." It was a flat statement.

Zanica rubbed her hands over her thighs beneath the table. Her softer physical features would have made that clear.

“Correct.”

Others came into the designated kitchen area, paused at the sight of Zanica and lingered. Two males and three females. She recognized one of the males from her arrival. Pazir had called him Samian.

She contemplated rising to her feet to prepare for an attack. Her experience with Gaen taught her to be on guard at all times when faced with an aggressive male.

Not willing to provoke a fight, she remained seated and kept her gaze resolutely on Mira but her ears strained for the slightest movement from Samian who'd shifted to stand behind her.

“The princep flew in with her from the hunt,” one of the females offered.

“Is she a prisoner?” the other male asked.

Zanica tensed and braced her hands on the edge of the table. The prickle of the wooded rim scraped her palms but the solid texture grounded her. There was no need to run but she automatically scanned the room for potential weapons. Nearby the spoon she'd used to eat rested to the right of her fingertips.

Her gaze paused on a sharp knife next to an uncut potato at the other end of the table. It would require speed to reach it before anyone in the room could react fast enough.

There was also a strong possibility Samian and the other male were armed and would attack, stopping her from defending herself.

She exhaled softly and forced her shoulders to lower in a relaxed position. Her wings rustled and settled along her back. The element of surprise was all she had and she'd only get one chance to defend herself.

Mira wiped her hands nervously on the cloth before dropping it. “Unger dropped her off and told me to feed her. He called her a visitor.”

Several snorts followed the revelation along with unwarranted glares. Zanica slid from the high stool regardless

of how it would look and eased to her feet. She refused to be caught unaware.

No one moved. If anything, they crowded closer. Her wings itched with the need to spread and create distance for her. She flexed her fingers as she considered lunging for the knife anyway.

“Where do you think she’s from and why is she here?”

Another question, this time in a darker tone from one of the others. They didn’t seem to care that they talked around her.

“Maybe we should take the answers from her,” Samian drawled in a tone edged with bitterness.

Instantly, long arms wrapped around Zanica’s waist from behind. The action pinned her wings to her back and locked her in place. The hard thrust of a cock pressed against her back as wet lips licked down the left side of her throat. “Who are you really?”

She struggled and parted her lips to scream but his rough hand smashed over her mouth, muffling the sound. Her feet scuffed along the floor as she tried to kick out. The grip around her waist tightened, cutting off her air supply.

Her eyes widened as she desperately searched for help—one sympathetic gaze—but the group in front of her watched with nervous and uncertain glances.

With a last ditched effort, she bit down on the palm hard enough the tang of blood filled her mouth. His hand drew back sharply.

“Fucking b—”

She slammed her head back, stopping whatever he was going to say and another curse followed. His arm loosened and she lunged forward. Her fingers scraped at the table as she fought to reach the knife. A hand latched onto her hair and yanked her head back.

Pain seared her scalp followed by a snarl. “Who are you?!”

“She’s my mate and I suggest you let her go, Samian.”

Pazir wasn't sure what he'd expected when he went in search of the female. He knew his volt was a rough mix, a volatile group still in the process of relearning discipline and restraint.

He did *not* expect to walk in on Samian knotting Zanica's long waves in his fingers, tipping her head back at an awkward angle while his other arm banded around her torso to keep her wings immobilized.

A glimpse of her face revealed a mix of fear, panic and anger all rolled in one as her gaze met his in a silent plea for help. Rage flowed through him and red filled his vision. He had to work to maintain his neutral expression.

Attack. Kill. Protect.

The urges crowding at him blinded him to everything else. He had the sudden desire to shove his fist down Samian's throat for touching his mate.

"Your mate?" Samian asked in feigned surprise. He jerked Zanica's head back once more then flung her away as he stepped back. "Sorry."

Zanica fell forward with a sharp cry and her hip crashed against the counter. When she regained her balance, she rubbed at the injury and Samian laughed outright.

The sound of his mate's pain and the look of glee on Samian's face acted like a catalyst. Pazir moved across the room between one heartbeat and the next. He had Samian's throat in the palm of his hand and used it to lift the other male to the tip of his toes. Then he slammed him against the wall. "Don't *ever* touch her like that again."

Samian's eyes widened. He met Pazir's gaze, showing the first signs of fear. Anger boiled within Pazir. He snapped his teeth in the air between them. The other male flinched, his wings drooping as he ducked his head to the side in submission.

"You already stand on thin ground with me," Pazir muttered in Samian's ear, tightening his hand around his throat.

“I didn’t know she belonged to you, princep. You tell us to be leery of strangers.”

The words came out in a strangled croak. Pazir grunted at hearing his orders twisted for justification at Samian’s actions. The mandate didn’t leave him room to banish the male though he didn’t believe him for a single moment. Samian had been pushing for a while. Sometimes blatant and sometimes subtle.

“I also said no female will be harmed in my aerie.” Pazir held him aloft long enough to make sure his meaning was clear before dropping him.

The silence in the kitchen was loud. He turned to face everyone, skimming over his mate’s glare. She held a knife clutched in one fist. Surprised, he paused. She flushed and shoved her hand behind her back.

He’d have to remember to relieve her of the weapon later. Facing the others, he stated, “I mated the female, Zanica. She is now your princep as well. Spread the word. Anyone who has a problem with this, should speak directly to me about it.”

No one would be able to make an excuse about not knowing again. He stared at everyone in the room, asserting his dominance with a low hiss. Eyes lowered and wings tucked close.

Except for Zanica. His mate watched him with wide-eyed confusion and a glimmer of appreciation. Endearing her to him would go quicker than he thought.

It was enough. He had long term plans for her and it didn’t involve her being hurt before he had a chance to put it into action.

Chapter 6

“Zanica, let’s go,” Pazir ordered.

Keeping a watchful eye on Samian, Zanica slowly made her way to the open doorway. She tucked the knife she’d grabbed into the waist of her pants.

Pazir stayed close until they exited. As soon as they were in the outer hallway, she exhaled softly.

“Do a better job staying alert,” he gruffly commanded. “Not everyone will welcome you here. Strangers are regarded as a threat.”

Her heart thumped madly, but she kept the quiver from her voice. Barely. “Feels like home.”

That pulled a questioning look from him, but thankfully he didn’t probe. Honestly, she wasn’t sure she would have answered if he’d attempted to delve deeper into her snarky words. Living with Gaen and the changes in their volt wasn’t something that could be easily explained during a rushed walk in a hall.

As Pazir whisked her through the cavern, gazes followed them, male and female. He didn’t slow for anyone and since he didn’t speak further, it gave her a chance to review the incident in the kitchen. She hadn’t expected his defense but there had been a ground swelling wave of relief when she’d heard his voice.

For one brief moment, she’d thought she was going to be killed by Samian and no one would stop him. The few faces she’d seen in the kitchen held worry and concern. Mira’s expression, in particular, had at least appeared on the verge of running for help.

So far, Zanica’s experience with Pazir’s volt didn’t differ much from Gaen’s and she wondered if she’d traded one monster for another.

I just have to stay long enough to figure out my next step.

Pazir stopped at a sloping curve and ducked his head to go through the entryway. He watched her with a guarded expression as she entered behind him. “This is my room. *Our* room.”

An amused smirk twisted his lips when he added the emphasis. Full, kissable lips.

Ignoring the burst of heat in her middle, she gazed around the space. There wasn't much to see. A wicker bin with neatly folded clothing piled inside, two pair of boots pushed along one wall and a misshapen sculpture made of branches propped in a corner.

It was huge for one person with another room that branched off of this one. Forcing her steps forward, she moved in that direction until the toe of her shoe kicked something. She glanced down at a disorganized pile of blankets shoved into the corner where two of the walls met. Her heart skipped a beat. His nest.

The thought of sleeping together sent heat spilling over her skin and she ran her hands up and down her arms. Mates slept together. Would he expect that of her?

When she glanced over her shoulder, he didn't say anything. He leaned against the entrance, waiting for her to finish her inspection. Her lips pursed as she looked back at the two miserly blankets. It wasn't a good nest. Her fingers twitched with the feminine urge to straighten the covers, to find more and shape them into a better place to sleep.

Blowing out a breath, she turned away and her gaze snagged on the opening to the connecting room. She headed toward it and paused at the impressive view. A large pool of water dominated the humid alcove, steam rising in misty streams toward the ceiling where a narrow slit vented the excess moisture. Her heart leaped. “You have a hot spring.”

From behind, he grunted but his steps signaled him moving toward her. The heat from the room couldn't compete with the heat from his body as he stood beside her. “One of the few personal rooms to have them though several springs can be found throughout the mountain for bathing.”

His rumbling words stroked over her skin like a caress. He gripped her shoulders, hands brushing across her wings and leaned closer. His face almost touched the side of hers as he added, “You can change anything you want in here, mate. Including where we’ll sleep.”

Pazir didn’t miss the appalled look on Zanica’s face when she observed the blankets he’d tossed to the floor to sleep. Having a decent nest wasn’t a concern for him. His focus had been elsewhere. Food for the volt was a priority, training the guards to protect them, and rousting out the traitors.

Now, he had a female who could be the answer to turning the tide in his quest to make Gaen pay for his cold-hearted action in the past.

Pazir stroked his hands over the soft curves of her shoulders as he spoke, noting the shivers she couldn’t suppress. Then he leaned his weight into her wings, his arousal pressed against the curve of her butt unmistakable.

“Um...that won’t be necessary,” she mumbled and moved forward from under his light caress.

He allowed her the small escape but continued to watch as she eyed his bathing pool. It was an indulgence and he didn’t care. The moment he saw this space, he’d wanted it. There wasn’t much he claimed for himself, but he’d staked this room as his own.

Leaning against the stone wall at his back, he crossed his ankles and waited. Zanica squatted at the edge of the lip to the spring. Her wings spread in a graceful fall along the ground. The light shade of brown fit her, each feather a delicate detail forming layers that could withstand the cold or cut sharply when wielded correctly.

The pose also lent her an air of vulnerability. As if she needed more ways to draw his attention. His hands itched with the need to touch her and the drag of desire had his cock in a vise. Images of the two of them tangled together danced across his vision.

He wanted to rut on her until she couldn't easily draw her next breath. Corraling his wayward thoughts, he forcibly pushed his arousal away.

Zanica was a tool to be used to lure her former princep to him and he needed to remember that.

Maybe his father had the right of it in the one rule he'd tried to impart to Pazir. Kill anything that softens you or else you'll find yourself at someone else's mercy. A heartless lesson to teach a fledgling who had no idea what he'd meant at the time.

Pazir's gaze went to the small blemish at the base of Zanica's throat. He inhaled sharply. As his mate, she posed a unique problem for him. His physical attraction to her aside, she was a potential threat to his control and a possible weakness for his enemies to exploit

She trailed the tips of her fingers through the surface of the water, causing ripples and asked, "Why did you accept?"

Pazir didn't pretend to misunderstand. They were speaking of their impromptu mating. Since he couldn't reveal the full scope of his reasons, he countered with, "Why did you initiate it?"

It wasn't a random question. He truly wanted to know what had made her take the risk. She peered over her shoulder and glared. The sight was jarring on her delicate features. "It was clear I was in a desperate situation. You, on the other hand, could easily have flown away with your hunters and left me to Gaen."

He arched a brow at her accurate summation. "Is that what you wanted me to do?"

Instead of answering, she sighed and wrapped her arms about her bent knees. The wings he'd admired drooped and fanned behind her. Combined with the downward twist to her mouth, he fought the urge to go to her.

Something he couldn't define continued to pull at his cold heart. She was supposed to be a means to an end. He couldn't

let her get to him. To get justice for his mother, he *would* do whatever he had to. Including, using this female he'd mated.

Zanica's gaze roved over his body in a deliberate manner, interest and the stirrings of arousal evident. If her goal was to get him to shift in place or feel awkward, it didn't work.

Sex he knew. Sex he was familiar with. It was the other ways she made him feel he didn't understand.

He held his position under her intense scrutiny. He'd been confronted by stronger opponents than this female with her soft blue eyes, full lips and long legs.

"You have a reputation," she continued. Her gaze locked on his, then narrowed. "Pazir Catharte, the newest princep of the merciless death volt in the west.

"Brutal, ruthless, and conniving are just a few words used to describe you. Unlike many females, you can do whatever you want. So, I ask again, why did you accept?"

He admired her ability to call him cruel to his face. Not many would. Dropping his arms, he straightened and strode toward her. To her credit, she didn't bolt.

When he neared, he extended his hand and waited. She hesitated before clasping his fingers and allowed him to tug her to her feet.

Standing next to her in such close proximity, he was reminded again of the difference in her form and size compared to the females in his volt, right down to her lighter colored wings and hair. The heat from the springs had left moisture dotting her brow and sweat dampened curls clung to the sides of her face.

He reached up and ran his fingers through the brown waves hanging down her shoulders from root to end. The slight catch of her breath brought a half smile to his lips. She wasn't as immune to him as she wanted to be. Perfect.

He lowered his hand and teased a finger over the curve of a sharp cheek, down to the plump mouth that begged to be kissed. "I don't know why."

Her lashes fluttered and her lips parted. Hints of a rosy flush spread over her cheeks and down her throat. “W-what?”

He ran his thumb back and forth over her bottom lip, entranced by the sight of her dazed and confused. “You asked why I accepted and I don’t know. But you’re mine now.”

Cupping her jaw, he held her still, his fingers pressing deep. Another indrawn breath. He smothered a grin and bent his head. The light scent of jazs flowers filled his nostrils.

He gave her ample time to move. When she closed her eyes, he took it as permission and kissed her. Kissed her with the raging hunger of a male who’d gone too long without.

Her arms came up around his neck and she pressed her body against his. The sharp stab of her nipples through her shirt made him groan. He dropped his hands to her waist and jerked her in closer as he deepened the kiss. His tongue delved deep, her taste a rich burst of flavor in his mouth.

She tasted of Mira’s dhuru soup and her own unique essence. Another groan ripped from his throat as he angled his head and tried to consume her. He grabbed her round ass, fingers clenching in the softness and shoved her against his aching cock. Her corresponding moan was like fire to his senses, burning fast and bright.

Hefting her in his arms until she wrapped her legs around his waist, he turned and staggered his way to the blankets in the corner. He lowered her carefully to the floor, his body hovering above hers.

Having her beneath him awakened primal urges. She stroked his hair and he fought the need to press into the gentle touch. “I want to finalize the mating and fuck you.”

It was a harsh declaration but Pazir was too far gone to attempt flowery phrases and he didn’t have them in him to begin with. He needed to tie her to him quickly and intimacy was the best way to get through to a female’s core.

Some would view it as wrong or deceitful, but this was who he was. She’d called it when she named him brutal and ruthless. Enemies fled his presence and others wanted him as

an ally. Those in his volt respected him even when they cursed his methods.

He'd make no apology for that.

Chapter 7

Pazir's words sent a rush of desire racing through Zanica. Though a sliver of space kept their bodies from touching, she could feel the pressure of his dominant presence pouring from him. The sensation sent her arousal soaring.

She was wet and her body longed to give in to his demand. She tried to slow her urges to think clearly. If they had sex, it was a step that couldn't be reversed. There was no doubt she wanted him, but what did she really know about him?

Tentatively, she touched the outer curve of his wing, her fingers caressing the soft black feathers. He shuddered but didn't lower his weight onto her.

With his hands braced at the sides of her head, his long legs stretched out, she could arch up and he'd take it as explicit acceptance. At the thought, her skin grew tight and the muscles in her upper half tensed to move.

“Zanica?”

Her name was a husky rasp that added its own sensuous texture to the sound. She licked her lips and called herself several kinds of fool as she relaxed back against the floor. Her wings twinged, but she ignored them for the moment. “No. It's...it's too soon. Physically, I want you, but I'm not sure that's enough to sustain a mating.”

He tipped his head to the side in consideration. His dark eyes glittered with the stirrings of anger. “The mating is until death. You know that.”

She nodded. In theory. There were a select few who violated the oath bringing dishonor to the union and if she decided to leave, Zanica would be one of them. Stalling, she muttered, “Doesn't mean we can't wait until we at least know each other a little better.”

Pazir's lips twitched. “If I fuck you right now, I guarantee you'd know me a whole lot better.”

The unexpected quip caused a rough laugh to slip free and her heart lightened. His humor was a surprise considering his reputation. Amusement lit his eyes and he sprung up to his feet with a quick flutter of his wings and the flexing of his arms. He leaned over and clasped her forearm, yanking her to her feet abruptly.

“I will respect your wishes.”

Her hands grasped at his bare chest and slid against his hard frame. Nobody should have a body that felt sculpted from rock.

“For now.”

Her gaze jerked to his at the added caveat. His smoldering stare held her in place.

“You’re going to ask me to fuck you soon, Zanica. And when you do, I’m going to make sure you’re too sore to move or think of refusing me again.”

She whimpered. The pained sound squeaked between her lips without thought.

“You’re free to move around and familiarize yourself with the rest of the aerie,” he continued as if he hadn’t stunned her into silence. Gone was the sensual lover and in his place was the cold leader. “If you want anything, tell Dieba. His job is to make sure everyone has what they need.”

“Where will you be?” she asked, a part of her admittedly curious.

“There’s a celebration planned for tonight. I need to make sure the two males from this morning’s hunt retrieve the dhuru beasts we killed and left behind.”

Staying close on his heels as they left his room, Zanica thought about what she wanted to ask, but living in the volt under Gaen had made her leery of pushing males who could turn violent in an instant. Especially the leader of a death volt. She wasn’t foolish enough to believe being his mate afforded her any protective status no matter what he’d said in the kitchen.

Pazir glanced down and caught her staring. “What is it?”

“You’re committed to making this mating work?”

Shadows crept into his black eyes and a malevolent force replaced his prior look. If she’d thought him cold before, he was downright deadly now. “Yes.”

Shivering, she cupped her elbows to ward off her sudden fear of being faced with a predator. “You don’t know anything about me.”

“I know my cock is hard and wants to be buried deep in you. I know if you betray me, I’ll kill you without hesitation.” He drew to a halt beside her and pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Don’t put me in that position.”

He pulled away, turned down a fork in the tunnel and disappeared from her view. She stood where he’d left her and wondered how he’d transitioned smoothly from wanting to fuck her to threatening her with death. She ran her hands up and down her arms to distill the chill left behind from his words.

If she succeeded in leaving, he would no doubt see the act as a betrayal. Her pulse leaped. Betraying a male such as Pazir would place her directly in the line of fire when he sought retribution. Which meant she had to be careful about what she intended.

“Are you lost?”

Zanica spun around. The tall dark-haired male coming up behind her had the same large body as the other members of Pazir’s volt she’d seen so far. “No. I’m fine.”

“Zanica, right? Or do you prefer princep?”

A reluctant grin tugged at her lips. Hearing the title used to refer to her would take a while. Wouldn’t Leia get a kick out of this. “Zanica, please.”

“I’m Liken.” He aimed his thumb down one of the corridors she hadn’t visited yet. “Have you had a full tour of the aerie?”

“Pazir asked Unger to show me around, but I’m not sure how to find him. We got separated after he dropped me off in the kitchen.”

Liken released a high whistle that dropped on the end then added two short bursts. A long steady whistle echoed in return through the cavern. He faced her and must have caught her confused glance. “Just letting Pazir know you’re with me.”

“High, low, two shorts,” she surmised. Other volts used specialized vocalizations and calls to communicate but Gaen found it frivolous, so they no longer used them.

Liken’s gaze widened and he flashed her a grin. “Not exactly. High to low is to call Pazir. Only he answers to that one. Two shorts are alerting to guard status. Let’s go.”

She followed behind him, but her curiosity was roused. “Guard status?”

Liken grinned. “I basically signaled I was guarding the princep and since I’m not with him, he knows I’m with you.”

Genuinely intrigued, she asked, “What’s the long steady he used mean?”

“It’s an agreement or confirmation. We have several variations but the main one to remember is the one to call the princep. Three shorts mean an emergency.”

They traveled through the halls with Liken explaining things in the same succinct manner as Unger. She sensed neither male meant it negatively though she found Liken much more personable.

Despite being in a new environment, she wasn’t too distracted to miss the effort made to make this space a home. The entire aerie built within the caves and tunnels of a mountain was better than anywhere she’d ever lived.

Comfort and care was taken in the décor and the lights strategically placed to avoid darkness. The smell of food permeated the air and the feeling of warmth provided by a heat source she hadn’t discovered yet.

One thing stood out and she couldn't get it off her mind. It seemed unusually empty for an aerie of this size. "How many live here?"

"Just over twenty. We originally had fifty in our volt but after the challenges, we were down to thirty. Pazir recommended another twenty leave."

After doing the calculations, her brows drew together. "That would leave ten."

Smirking, Liken said, "I know. Along the way, we gathered ten more."

That was a lot of change and still small for a volt. Gaen had close to eighty members. "What happened to everyone else?"

Liken's expression blanked. "They died. Lack of food, infighting and betrayal."

She jolted from the stark admission but a fledgling came running around the corner and slammed into Liken's legs forestalling further conversation. Small black wings fluttered and settled against his back. Liken bent over to catch the little one by the shoulders. "Whoa! Not so fast."

A female burst into the corridor, an annoyed expression on her face. "Niyall!"

The boy giggled and dodged behind Liken's legs. When the female tried to reach around him, Liken shifted his stance, blocking her way and flared his wings wide. She pulled back, shot him a frustrated look and propped her hands on her hips. "You can't protect him this time."

A wide smile stretched across Liken's face. "What could he possibly have done, Saraya?"

Saraya pursed her lips and spoke through clenched teeth. "He ate an entire berry pie while I was putting away laundry."

Niyall giggled louder. Zanica peered down and there were indeed stains in a reddish color smeared around his mouth and one side of his face. Laughter bubbled up and she bit her inner cheek to hold it in.

Liken leaned back and gazed down at the fledgling. “Is this true, Niyall?”

Niyall poked his bottom lip out and his wings drooped. He scuffed the floor with his bare toes and muttered, “Yes.”

Liken groaned and turned around to squat next to the pie thief. He cupped the small shoulders and spoke earnestly. “We talked about this. Too many berries do what?”

“Make us silly.”

“And when we’re too silly, what happens?”

A pause and then: “We fly loopy and can fall.”

“That’s right. If you’re loopy and fall from the sky, you could be seriously injured and your mother would be sad.”

At Liken’s explanation, Niyall looked to his mother. Saraya stood with her arms folded across her chest, tapping her foot.

“Sorry.” His tiny voice was full of remorse and even Zanica’s heart hurt.

Saraya dropped her arms and blew out a breath. “Trouble maker.”

Niyall shot past Liken and ran into his mother’s arms. She swooped him up and glared at Liken as he slowly stood.

“You’re too soft on him,” she snapped and stormed back the way she’d come.

An awkward silence ensued and then Liken said, “I think she’s growing on me.”

Zanica snorted. “I didn’t get that impression.”

In fact, the opposite. Saraya had looked as if she wanted to kick Liken in the chest. The fledgling, on the other hand, had looked at him as if he was his whole world. Maybe they’d had a fight. “Your mate and son?”

Anger flashed over Liken’s face. “No. My half-brother’s.”

She didn’t know how to respond to that. If they were family, why did Saraya seem as if she didn’t like him? “Do

you and your brother not get along?”

“My brother’s dead,” he snarled as he moved toward another hall. “Good riddance.”

Pazir spent the day putting out one fire after another and settling disputes. When two males refused to back down from a pointless argument, he lost his composure and punched both of them. Shaking his fist and flexing his fingers, he said, “Double patrols tonight. Both of you or there’s more where that came from.”

“Yes, princep.”

“Yes, princep.”

They scurried to their feet and raced down the tunnel. Rudon and Calis returned to confirm they’d watched Gaen and his males leave. No one had doubled back to venture into Pazir’s territory.

“Did you really mean to mate her?” Calis asked with a puzzled frown after they’d given their report.

“I did,” Pazir stated, leaving no room for doubt. Only his cousin needed to know the truth behind his reasoning.

Rudon grinned and clapped Pazir on the shoulder. “She is an unusually pretty female.”

Pazir only grunted then changed the topic. He didn’t want to discuss Zanica with them. “I have to send both of you back out to retrieve the meat from the hunt and have it stored properly. We can’t afford to waste food.”

Their joking expressions grew serious and they nodded, flying off immediately. Pazir sighed. They were good males, if a bit reckless. He’d have to think of a way to give them a longer break between patrols at some point. The volt needed to grow their numbers in order for him to do that. Another discussion he had to have with Dieba.

Pivoting, he made his way around the caverns and confirmed everyone had what they needed. He received a few

requests regarding trivial matters and took mental note to pass all that meaningless shit to Dieba to follow up.

With so much to do, it took several hours to wrap up everything, including a flight out to fill in on a patrol for Tomas due to the male's minor wing injury. Dieba caught up with Pazir that evening when he entered the center cavern designated for the celebration.

Fatigued dragged at Pazir, but it didn't stop him from getting straight to the point. "What did you find out?"

"More of what we already knew. Gaen Hwil took over the volt several years ago and has been running it into the ground. It's said he has a temper and lashes out uncontrollably. Members would leave his volt if they had an alternative."

When his mother had fallen ill, Pazir had requested aid from them. Muel was princep but Gaen had been his right hand and handling all communication. Pazir hadn't known Muel well but his reputation had been solid. Thus, the denial of Pazir's urgent request had been a shock. "What about Zanica?"

A grimace flashed over Dieba's face. "Sorry, cousin. I couldn't find out any specifics and didn't want to approach someone from her volt in case it got back to Gaen. The information I attained was from a few other princeps who've had dealings with him."

Pazir glanced around, suspicion darkening his gaze. Had he let a ligren in his home, the vicious cat known to attack its own pack mates? "Where is she anyway?"

Dieba knew everything going on as well as he did.

"Still with Liken."

She'd been at the forefront of his mind throughout the day as he dispatched his duties. It didn't help that the kiss they'd shared had been explosive and the thought of being with her tonight in his nest kept his cock hard.

"Are you still planning to use her?" Dieba asked.

The very question Pazir had asked himself. He couldn't back down. Nothing else had given him a better chance. "Gaen Hwil has to pay for what he did."

Dieba didn't bother hiding the concern on his face. His cousin knew everything about his past. The pain and suffering he and his mother had gone through looking for a volt to take them in after they'd been forced out of their home.

No one wanted to take in a female with no value and her son. Until Xavin. Dieba's father and Pazir's mother were related and Xavin had convinced the princep of his volt to let them stay. There were a few good years but then Trez took over as princep and chased away several members who questioned his leadership.

It was like Pazir's childhood all over again except Trez had enough charisma to convince the volt he could keep it running. Then processes put in place to keep a volt running systemically began to fail. They lost their aerie to a stronger volt and were forced to move.

Months later, Trez was gored by a rencero's horn from a careless mistake during a hunt and died. Their resident healer burned herself out trying to save him and died as well. Asmir took over and had them take refuge in trees to live.

No one was assigned to maintain schedules, supplies or patrols. Hunters grew lazy and ceased going out. Soon, food became scarce. Those still remaining in the volt hadn't fared well.

Prior years of struggle combined with the downward turn had taken a toll on Pazir's mother and she'd fallen ill. He'd reached out to every volt near and far. Muel was the closest and Gaen had often been heard boasting of having two healers in their volt. The other male firmly refused Pazir's request to send aid.

His mother had gone to Muel's volt directly, hoping to sway him. Gaen had met her at the territory lines and despite his mother's illness, despite knowing she was a female with no fighting skill to challenge him, Gaen had killed her. Coldly sliced her throat and declared it fair for her trespass.

Pazir would never forgive Gaen for his callous action and had every intention of tearing him apart piece by piece.

“I don’t like this. We know nothing about her,” Dieba said into the charged silence. “Let her go and search for another way to take down Gaen. This isn’t like you and you know it.”

It was common knowledge Pazir couldn’t, *wouldn’t* torture a female. His flaw and his weakness. He could almost see his father sneering at him from beyond the grave.

Dieba, on the other hand, had no such reservations though the females in their volt were excluded from the violence he often unleashed on enemies.

Did he need to step back from this and let Zanica go?

The very idea caused an immediate reaction. He was *never* letting his mate go. The animal in him desired her, wanted to fuck her again and again until more than his mark and scent were imprinted on her.

“Cousin?” Dieba pressed.

Shoving back the aggressive side of his nature, Pazir firmed his lips and pondered what he intended. Attraction meant nothing if she was sent to disarm him with her guileless smiles and pretty face.

As he’d warned her earlier, if she made one mistake, he’d end her. Kindly, of course. Flaw or not, he’d come too far to lose everything. “No, I’ll stick to my plan. This is the best way to take care of this.”

And if she was a spy sent to destroy his volt from within, sleeping with one eye on his mate wouldn’t be a hardship.

Chapter 8

The celebration seemed to be in full swing when Zanica arrived with Liken. After walking in, he waved at her and went straight for a table teeming with food. The smell alone tempted her as well. All she'd eaten today was the soup.

Food scents filled the air and the table pushed along one wall almost bowed beneath the weight of the food piled high. Meats, breads, various fruits and berries and a small selection of vegetables were out in abundance. It was more food than Zanica had ever seen at one time and everyone took part in eating.

Laughter and conversation bounced off the cavern walls. It seemed like the entire volt was here. She searched the crowd for one face in particular. There had been no signs of Pazir since he'd left her stranded in one of the tunnels.

"I'm sorry I didn't introduce myself earlier."

Zanica looked up into dark brown eyes and smiled at Saraya. "You had your hands full."

Saraya grinned. "My son, Niyall, keeps everyone busy."

Zanica nodded. Fledglings were like that all over. They needed structure and activities to keep them engaged or they found trouble. Zanica extended her hand in a gesture that showed she held no weapons. "I'm Zanica."

The other female clasped her palm warmly. "Saraya. You're Pazir's mate. I heard about it later after running into you and Liken."

Her nose scrunched when she said the other male's name. Zanica bit her bottom lip, not sure if she should mention anything. There was a lot of pain surrounding the other female's aura.

She decided to go with her gut. "I'm sorry about your mate. Liken mentioned he died."

Mouth twisted in a sneer, she hissed, “Heron was not a good male and I was a fool to believe his lies. He died and my son didn’t miss his father which should tell you all you need to know about our relationship.”

So much venom in those words. Zanica winced.

As if needing to get all the poison out, Saraya continued. “He broke mating vows. He slept with another female from a different volt. He revealed prime hunting grounds in Catharte territory and let other males hunt on our land without Pazir’s permission.”

Shock held Zanica silent. Alone, each of those would warrant a punishment from any princep, together it would result in banishment and that was on the light end. Some would kill for such atrocities. Finally, she managed, “What happened to him?”

Saraya’s angry features smoothed out. “He thought he was so clever. Abandoned Niyall and me with the intent to live with his new volt, but the other female belonged to the princep of that volt. Using Heron had been an elaborate scheme set up by them. They killed him as soon as he arrived.”

Though her expression remained bland during the recital, wave after wave of anguish poured from her. Unable to stand the pain another minute, Zanica reached out and touched her forearm. Just two fingers to make her intentions clear. Saraya looked down at the contact, her brows drawn together.

Zanica wrapped her hand around the plump arm and her healing gift fired up as she murmured, “I’m sorry you were hurt like that. It’s alright to let the pain go. If not for yourself, then for Niyall.”

A sniffle came first, tears gleaming in her brown gaze when Saraya met Zanica’s eyes then a broken cry escaped. “He betrayed me!”

She stumbled forward and Zanica was there, curving her arms around her and letting her healing nature leech Saraya’s pain free. “Let it go, let it all go.”

She patted Saraya's back and wings through the crying storm. When she felt it easing off, Zanica leaned back and swiped at the remaining tears on Saraya's face. Cupping her cheeks, she stared into her eyes. "All better."

Using her healing gift in such a public way was incredibly stupid but she hadn't been able to resist. Healers healed. Now, her chest tightened, waiting for Saraya to realize what had happened and reveal the secret Zanica wanted to withhold from Pazir.

Saraya huffed and shook her head. "I don't know why I unloaded my problems on you. I haven't told anyone the details of what happened. Only Pazir knows everything."

Zanica offered a warm smile. There was no need in telling her that she hadn't had a choice in the matter. Once her gift took over, it worked to heal all wounds, including emotional ones.

"How did Pazir handle it?" Zanica asked once Saraya seemed calm.

Though abashed, Saraya's gaze held steady. "He let me stay. Didn't banish Niyall or me as he was within his right to do. We wouldn't have had anywhere else to go. I don't know if you've noticed but look around."

Zanica did exactly that, trying to be as unobtrusive as possible. No one appeared to be paying any attention to either of them, too caught up in the excitement of the celebration. Her secret was still safe. If Pazir was anything like Gaen, he'd abuse her abilities and she'd never get the chance to escape.

There were males eating and drinking, a guarded look to a few but not as tense as things would be if this was happening in Gaen's volt. There weren't as many females but some were scattered around.

"What am I looking for?" she asked Saraya.

"In most volts you'll find a good mix of the old and young, males and females. Fledglings running about."

Zanica's brows drew together as glanced around again, seeing what she'd missed the first time. Pazir's volt skewed

older. Niyall was the only fledgling here. If this was an event for all to attend, where were the other little ones?

It didn't make sense that there would be only one in an entire volt. Vultures were prolific breeders. "What happened?"

Saraya's upper lip curled in disgust. "Betrayal. So much. Pazir had to work hard to clear it out. Not to mention our princep expects immediate compliance to his rules. Those who remain are loyal to him but our trust amongst ourselves has been eroded because of the past."

Grimacing, Zanica couldn't imagine how she would survive in a volt like this one. If a tiny part of her had considered staying, she forced herself to rethink it. Too much of what Saraya disclosed was similar to the way Gaen ruled. Going back to that didn't sound like a good idea.

"Anyway." Saraya shook away what were obviously dark thoughts. "Things *are* slightly better now. Some here still want to push for the old ways under Trez and Asmir. There's a standing rule that females aren't to be harmed. We could have a good volt if those individuals don't mess it up."

Mess it up? Like Samian when he'd grabbed her? Not harm females? Yet everyone in the kitchen area had watched and not moved to help her. "Interesting."

Realizing she may have said too much, Saraya smoothed down the purple shirt she wore with black pants. "I don't want to hold you. I have to stop Niyall from eating too much."

She chuckled nervously, but it seemed lighter. In fact, Saraya seemed as if a great weight had been lifted from her shoulder. She turned on her heel and headed off to scold her son.

Niyall ate sitting next to an older male. Silver streaked the dark hair falling around a creased face and his black wings lay tightly folded against his back. The fledgling squealed when he caught sight of his mother bearing down on him and darted off. His tiny wings worked hard and he lifted two feet in the air to make his escape.

Those watching laughed in lighthearted amusement. Zanica looked around and noted the few familiar faces she recognized. Liken was here, laughing with Dieba in a corner. Calis and Rudon, from the hunt, were eating at a table with two females.

There were no dark looks, no warnings to conserve portions. Her stomach growled and she considered fixing a plate. Of course, that meant drawing attention to herself the moment she moved.

“So, you’re Pazir’s mate.”

The mocking voice drew her attention to the side. She looked up and a female stood in front of her with a hip cocked to the side, hands firmly planted at her waist and a sneer on her full lips. Dark hair was braided in a single rope and hung over her shoulder. Her face had the blunt features Zanica recognized in this part of the land.

“My name’s Zanica,” she said, hoping to avoid a confrontation.

The other female’s upper lip curled as she spat, “I know you’re name.”

“Aneesha, what are you about?” Liken snapped, immediately coming over.

He must have been watching to respond so fast. Dieba remained in his seat, observing intently, his food forgotten.

“Meeting the new addition to our volt,” Aneesha replied sweetly.

Liken looked to Zanica then back to Aneesha as if seeking the truth of her words. Finally, he said, “Pazir has been very clear about his edict concerning his mate.”

“Hmm. Right. No one can touch his precious *Zanica*.”

If she wasn’t so obvious in her attempt to get a rise out of her, Zanica would have laughed in her face. Liken arched a brow in her direction and Zanica did her best to convey she didn’t need his help. She needed to show the members she wasn’t going to be prey and the lesson started here and now

with a female who was obviously Pazir's former lover. Why else would she have a problem with Zanica?

"Enjoy yourself, Liken. You've spent enough time looking after me."

His lips twitched and his low bow was exaggerated. "As you say, princep."

The moment he walked away, Aneesha snapped, "I don't see what he wants in you."

It was clear the who Aneesha referenced. She'd dealt with jealousy before. There was nothing Aneesha could say or do that Zanica hadn't witnessed in her past. Insecure females always sought to create seeds of doubt. Zanica forced a smile to her lips. "It doesn't really matter, does it? He's my mate."

Aneesha hissed, rage rolling from her like invisible steam. Zanica kept her smile in place. If the other female attacked, she would find Zanica unafraid to fight back. She hadn't escaped Gaen's volt to be easily cowed by someone else. It had been a long day. Her nerves were frazzled and she was exhausted. On top of that, she was tired of feeling threatened.

A glimmer of doubt darkened Aneesha's eyes. Zanica noticed the sudden quiet around them.

"Aneesha!" someone called out. "Leave her be and enjoy the festivities."

Zanica's smile widened, baring her teeth in a clear way that stated she wasn't backing down. The tips of her claws pricked her palms. She'd gouge the female's eyes out before sharing her mate. Being possessive of her things had been a fledgling flaw that followed her into adulthood.

Aneesha snarled, turned abruptly and stormed off with a last bitter glance. Zanica watched her leave until a prickle of awareness itched her neck. She scanned the growing crowd and locked on a midnight stare.

Dark. Piercing. Dangerous.

Her breath lodged in her chest. It was as if her thoughts conjured him forth. Pazir pushed away from the wall he'd

been leaning against. Her mind raced as he sauntered toward her.

Would he be upset by the confrontation with one of his former lovers? What if he chose to make his point to put her in her place by embarrassing her in front of the entire volt?

Refusing to run as her lizard brain encouraged, she thrust her chin up and popped her shoulders back. Her stance screamed defensive and she didn't care.

Every step he made toward her sent her breath rasping from her chest. She was being stalked by a predator she had no measure of predicting his behavior.

When he reached her, he cupped her jaw and tipped her face up. Her lashes fluttered and her fingers curled into fists at her sides. He leaned forward and kissed the top of her head.

The unexpected gesture sent the breath wooshing from her lungs. Such an innocuous touch. The contact seared her skin and shifted anticipatory fear into a slow build of lust.

Her gaze dropped to the mating mark she'd made and the wicked scar slashing across his neck. The urge to lick both crossed her mind, sink her teeth deeper and make sure the mark was visible to any who thought he was free.

When he straightened to his full height, she cleared her throat and said, "I could get used to that."

Heat rushed over her face and she almost groaned aloud at how silly she sounded.

Humor flickered in his dark eyes and one corner of his mouth curved up. Some might consider it a smile but there was a bitter slant to the gesture that kept her on her guard. "Good. It's how I intend to greet my mate."

Mate. He said the title with a layer of possession that reached deep and created tiny fissures of pleasure running up her spine. She forced her tone to stay calm. "I see. I'll have to think of what to do in return."

Her stomach growled ruining the playful effect she was going for. Her skin heated and she groaned under her breath.

“Ignore that.”

“Have you eaten?” he countered.

“Earlier, but I’m fine.” There was no explanation for why she didn’t want him to know she was starved. It was no reflection on her, yet a sense of shame followed the thought.

He arched a brow. “I didn’t expect you to lie about something so easily proven. Come, mate. Your hunger is noted by everyone here and they’ll view me as a poor caretaker.”

Curving an arm around her shoulder, he steered her toward the overflowing table and there was no way to resist unless she wanted to draw more attention to them.

There was something rewarding about seeing to his mate’s needs. It didn’t matter that his every action was geared toward leading her into trusting him. Pazir felt compelled to care for her. He loaded Zanica’s plate, making sure to include a surplus of meat.

Guiding her to a chair, he nudged her into the seat and handed her the food. Silence hummed between them while he watched the members of his volt enjoy themselves.

This was a rarity. There wasn’t often cause to celebrate. He had been harsh, firm, and intolerable at times. Disobedience couldn’t be tolerated in those early days. It had made for a tense atmosphere.

Things were getting better now but he never fully relaxed his vigil or took his responsibility to the volt lightly.

From the corner of his eyes, he saw Zanica’s lips firm before she gave in and started to eat. Satisfaction filled him in a rush. Her refusal to acknowledge her hunger made no sense. Perhaps, the answer lay in her past. When her plate was half-cleared, he demanded, “Tell me about yourself.”

The utensil paused near her mouth and he had a tiny flair of regret for interrupting her pleasure in eating. And it was pleasure. Her eyes were half-lowered, her cheeks glowed and

her wings weren't held tightly to her back. They draped casually over the chair designed to accommodate their bodies.

“What do you want to know?” she countered, eyeing him carefully.

Everything. Unable to explain his curiosity about this female, he kept that answer to himself. “Family? Lovers?”

She glared on the last and his mouth curled with amusement. He really did enjoy seeing the little signs that hinted at her personality. She wasn't as weak as he'd initially perceived her.

He moved a little closer, letting the side of his left leg brushed against her right leg. Another dark look caused him to hold in his humor at how easy she was to rile.

“I don't have much family left. A cousin.”

Good. Something he could potentially use to bend her in his favor. Throttling his excitement, he softened his voice. “In Gaen's volt?”

She nodded and pain flashed across her face. “Leia and I are the only two left.”

They were similar in that regard. Dieba was his only family as well. Sympathy rose and he immediately crushed the feeling. She hadn't answered the lovers question but he left that for later. There were more important things he needed to address.

Edging closer, he extended one wing and lightly brushed it against hers. She twitched in place but didn't move though her lips trembled. Reminding her of how she got here would increase her sense of vulnerability.

Females sought safety and security. It was an ingrained instinct. Being in a new volt among strangers would make Zanica more inclined to seek someone who symbolized protection and strength.

A mate represented that, putting him in a prime position. All he had to do was show her moments of kindness, gentle

touches and offer her the right amount of care. She'd be ripe for the picking and willing to tell him anything.

He lowered his voice further and asked, "Why did you want to leave your volt?"

There were many reasons to leave an established flock. Some fragmented like this one had and members abandoned it out of fear. Others weren't seen as a good bet. Then there was banishment.

Considering his brief confrontation with Gaen, he didn't think the latter was the issue. It was clear the other male very much wanted Zanica back.

"I left because of Gaen. He wants me for himself."

He gritted his teeth, a part of him terrified at the vehemence of his response to that revelation.

Curling his fingers into his palms to hide the flex of his claws, he continued to stroke his wings over hers in a reassuring caress. Revenge plans or not, he'd never let Gaen get his hands on her.

Chapter 9

There was no reason for Zanica to lie. Gaen wanted her for her healing abilities. There had been another healer in their volt at the time but when Zanica revealed her gifts, he'd bragged far and wide about having two healers when many had none.

To make matters worse, he'd bartered her skills as well as the other healer's as if they were a commodity he owned.

With Pazir, she hoped to keep her ability a secret. It was draining to use and seemed to make others think she could do the impossible. She couldn't. A lesson she'd learned the hard way.

At her revelation about Gaen wanting her, Pazir's expression darkened. The air of danger around him increased and she knew she was dealing with the predator aspect of him. Her skin pebbled and shoulders tensed but she didn't run away as her instinct encouraged her to do.

"Gaen will not get you back. You belong to me."

Her feathers ruffled in defense. "I don't belong to anyone."

When he leaned in her direction, she wished she was standing. Being afraid and being deliberately intimidated were two different things. She refused to let him know he terrified her.

His voice deepened to a whisper dark rasp. "I should take this moment to clear things up. You will not look to another male for your needs. I will mark you with my scent and seed so no other even thinks of taking you. If another male tries to touch you, I will shred his wings from his back, rip his guts out and feast on his entrails."

Her mouth dried and her heart sped up. She had no reason to doubt he meant every word. She'd witnessed him kill a male with his bare hands. "As long as you understand the same goes for you, if you think to go to another female."

His brows rose but he didn't comment. After another minute of silence, her stomach growled. At this point, it was

embarrassing. She eyed the table, contemplating seconds.

“There’s no need to deny yourself. Eat until you’re full, mate,” Pazir murmured.

She glanced over at him. That was it? No mention of the intensity of the subject they’d just touched on?

He’d shifted his stance beside her and leaned against the wall with his legs crossed at the ankle. The casual pose drew her gaze to his large frame dressed in dyed raw hide pants. The black material hugged his thighs and the tight white shirt molded to his broad chest. He’d changed but the clothing was as simple as the hunting gear he’d worn earlier.

Distracted, her gaze roved over the upper curves of his powerful wings visible behind his shoulders. Black feathers gleamed in the dim light of the cave’s interior but she could imagine how fast he’d be in the air as he tore through the skies.

The idea brought on a wave of arousal and her nipples tightened beneath her shirt. His snort caused her eyes to flick back to his face. Amusement gleamed from his gaze.

Her breath caught in her chest and her heart skipped a beat at the change it brought to his features. He wasn’t smiling but the intimidation factor wasn’t as intense. She hadn’t expected to find the leader of the Catharte death volt attractive.

And he knew it.

Determined not to let his awareness of the knowledge bother her, she returned to the tables and stacked her plate full of food. When she returned, he was still there, his eyes scanning the crowd and a readiness about his posture though he feigned relaxation.

She sat and methodically went through her food with the same level of enjoyment as the first time. Watching the hesitant yet relieved smiles on the faces of others as they ate, highlighted the small differences from her old volt.

An air of satisfaction and happiness existed. No one seemed on the verge of an argument or fight.

This wasn't what she'd expected to see. In any way. Pazir had a reputation as a ruthless killer. Members spoke of being chased out and not welcomed to return. But seeing this, gave her an entirely different perspective.

Saraya had mentioned betrayal. It was possible that those kicked out had violated the guidelines Pazir set out and weren't thrown out arbitrarily as implied.

Resting back in the chair, she let the feeling of contentment flow over her. At some point, three males brought out instruments and began to play music. Lively, catchy tunes that had her feet tapping as she bopped her head along.

Soon, a group formed and danced around the room. Zanica searched expressions for scorn or contempt but found only warm smiles and enjoyment from those watching while they clapped to the beat.

Liken came over to stand in front of her and extended his hand. He cut a glance to the side of her then asked, "Can I have the honor of the next dance?"

Zanica followed his gaze to Pazir. He hadn't moved and his eyes were closed. Had he fallen asleep? Although he didn't seem to notice anything going on around him, she was willing to bet he knew exactly when the other male had approached.

Since he didn't voice a complaint, she turned back to Liken and smiled. "Yes."

Familiar with the next dance, she matched the steps and found herself laughing with the others as they spun and stomped. Male after male asked her to dance until she grew tired and her feet hurt. She waved off the next male and went back to her seat to gratefully rest.

While her heart tried to settle, she wiped her forearm across her eyes, clearing the trickle of sweat.

"Can I...umm...honor the next dance?"

The jumbled question brought a smile to Zanica's face before she lowered her arm. Niyall stood in front of her with his hand extended. She straightened her shoulders and formally said, "Yes, you may."

His childish face broke into a wide smile and his wings rose behind him in glee.

“Wings down inside,” someone called out gently.

Niyall immediately folded them but his attention didn't stray from Zanica. She took his tiny hand in hers and let him lead her to the center where the crowd of dancers had grown.

To her surprise, he knew the steps and enthusiastically followed them. Her toes were stomped on with each turn and spin but she didn't care. His excitement and joy glowed too bright to crush in anyway. When the musicians stopped, she leaned over and hugged him. A thin film of sweat coated his body. “Thank you.”

“You're welcome, princep.” Afterward, he skipped off in search of another dance partner.

As she approached the chair, Pazir's still form drew her attention. Eyes closed and arms crossed over his chest, he remained in the same position.

Shrugging, she spent the next hour observing and learning more than she expected about Pazir's volt. Niyall bumped into someone while dancing with his mother and was given a cherished smile and rough pat on the head. Everyone was clearly enjoying themselves.

“Can I have the honor of the next dance?”

Shaking off her wandering thoughts, Zanica faced the male who'd approached. Samian.

“No,” a deep, growly voice stated from her right before she could answer.

At the abrupt refusal, Samian's hand dropped to his side and he took a half step back. Both of them looked at Pazir. His eyes were still closed.

Samian's lips pressed tight. “My apologies to the princep for my earlier actions toward his mate. I would like to dance as a—”

“No,” Pazir repeated in the same low tone.

Uncertain what to do, not that she wanted to dance with Samian, Zanica perched on the edge of her seat in case she needed to react immediately. Samian's hands flexed at his sides. The disgruntled look warned he wouldn't give in so easily.

"Perhaps it would be best to see what your mate wants," Samian stated with feigned concern.

Zanica jerked as Samian's attention swung in her direction. His dark glare sent a shaft of fear straight down her spine. In it she saw frustration, retribution and a boiling hatred that had no justification. There was no way she would consider being in his arms.

For the first time since he'd attached himself to her side at the celebration, Pazir moved. His arms fell from across his chest, he opened his eyes and focused his deadly stare on Samian. "My mate wants what I want."

A tiny shiver rolled over her wings at the possessive words. Samian clenched his jaw and she thought he'd actually push the issue, but he finally inclined his head and spoke to her directly. "Enjoy the rest of your night."

He turned and walked away, his wings held taut against his back. Breath eased from her in a silent wave of relief.

"If he fucks with you again, tell me. If I'm not near, use the knife you swiped and gut him. Don't hesitate, don't think," Pazir warned.

When she faced him, he watched her intently. What he suggested seemed extreme. "Will the others be upset if a newcomer kills a member of your volt?"

"*You* are now princep of this volt." He tore his eyes from hers to scan the room. Satisfied no one was near, he added, "Samian likes to play games. I don't want you caught up in the one he thinks to play with me. So when I say gut him, I mean *gut* him. Understood?"

She swallowed and tried to wrap her head around the idea of what he proposed. Yes, she was used to carrying a knife to protect herself but at the most she only had to flash it around

or use it as a threat to ward off unwanted attention. She'd never killed anyone.

“Say you understand me, mate,” he growled at her lack of response.

“Yes.” For emphasis, she pulled out the puny kitchen knife she'd tucked in her waistband.

His upper lip curled in distaste. “I'll get you a better knife but for now, keep it with you.”

Courage or recklessness caused her to ask, “What happened to females aren't to be harmed in your volt?”

His brows lowered and his jaw tightened. “When I finish cleansing this aerie of all the detractors, I promise there will not be a female among my volt worried about her safety here. I vow it.”

A vow was a sacred commitment. She didn't doubt for one minute he wouldn't see it through.

Chapter 10

“Come. I want to show you something.” Pazir extended his hand to Zanica. There was a hesitant look on her face but to his relief, she settled her hand in his and let him pull her to her feet.

“Where are we going?” she asked, her steps light as she followed him.

He tightened his fingers on hers, feeling the strength in her grip and led her from the boisterous room. Soon, the tone of the crowd would shift and those looking to partner for sex would start making out and removing clothes while they danced. Saraya would have Niyall out before any of that started.

Though he’d love to see his mate’s reaction to the blatant sexuality, he had a bigger goal.

Outside, he flexed and stretched his wings, reluctantly releasing her hand. Zanica tipped her face up to the orange red glow of the changing sky. He studied her profile and wondered what thoughts flowed through her head.

She hadn’t looked thrilled at the idea of gutting another. He’d meant what he said though. With someone like Samian, you had to strike fast because he wouldn’t give you a second chance.

“Ready?” he asked.

She nodded and he took to the sky. A moment later, the swoosh of her wings followed. She performed a dazzling loop before coming toward him. Impressed, he arched a brow and she flushed.

Once she drew near, they flew side by side then headed for the spot on a ridge to the south. It fell well within his territory lines and offered an incredible view of the gorge below and a waterfall that cascaded into a lake.

It was a short trip but he kept his eyes on her, amazed with her skill. She handled herself well flying, from her posture to

the ease with which she maintained positioning. Not everyone was as adept in the air.

Rays of sunlight caught the shades of brown in her wings as they spread behind her. Her lean frame enticed in the strapless black shirt, drawing his gaze to the plump mounds of her breasts on display. The matching skirt that stopped at her knees elongated her slender legs and he imagined them wrapped around his waist as he pounded into her.

Someone must have lent her an outfit and showed her the springs for bathing. He grew hot under the collar and not because of the temperature. She set him on fire with just her presence. A shapely distraction. That's what she was.

He was grateful when they arrived at their destination. Leading her to a good place to land on the ridge, he went first and tipped his head back to watch as she came in slow on a glide to lightly hit the ground beside him with a tentative grin.

Cheeks flushed and hair slipping free of her ponytail, her expression reflected the joy she took in flying. Her blue eyes studied him alertly, lips slightly parted. His heart thumped in appreciation and he couldn't resist the need to touch her.

When she drew near, he reached out and smoothed a hand over the loose strands about her face. "Who taught you wing control?"

Her eyes sparked with awareness, a noticeable ripple rolling over her upper feathers. The attraction between them flared to life. Her nipples budded against the thin material of her shirt and she leaned toward him with a breathless gasp.

Continue to stroke and touch her, he worked his way down the side of her neck, his gaze immediately drawn to the dark mark from his bite. Desire hardened his cock to the point of pain and had him stepping closer. Chest to chest, he gazed down at her fluttering lashes. "Zanica?"

"Nica. Call me Nica," she whispered.

Leaning in close, he murmured, "Tell me who taught you such good wing control. Nica."

A slight whimper escaped her parted lips. He nipped the bottom one then licked over the damp flesh before easing back. She couldn't hide the effect he had on her. Her pupils were wide and her nostrils flared as she took in his scent.

Wanting to keep her off balance, he slid one leg between hers and pressed up. She jolted, her hands grabbing his shoulders to retain her footing. He cupped her hip with one hand and nuzzled the swirl of hair at her temple then breathed out, "Don't you want to tell me, Nica?"

Flustered, she stammered her answer. "M-m-my dad. My dad taught me."

"Mmm." His thumb slid over the delicate bone of her collar, her thumping pulse, seamlessly fanning the flames of arousal. He moved his hand to the front and framed her throat in his grasp. Her breath caught and the beat skittered under the pressure he applied. "He did a good job."

She swallowed and the motion rolled under his palm. Her body shook but she didn't back away or a call a halt to his dominance. This close he noted the heat from her body, the tremble she couldn't hide.

"My mother insisted. She lost her sister during a simple flight as a fledgling. The fear stayed with her well into adulthood."

"Mmm." Sharing her past was good, a solid step in the right direction. All he had to do was build a connection with her, provide a caring ear and it would ease his way into her heart. "You mentioned only having a cousin left. What happened to your parents?"

She gasped and jerked back. Darkness and shadows doused the fire in her eyes. Licking her lips, she said, "They died. That's all you need to know."

He'd lost her. Throttling back a curse, he kept his tone light. "I'm sorry. My mother is gone as well."

An abrupt nod. The connection was cut for the moment but now that he knew the way, he could reestablish it with a few

simple touches and gentle caresses. She was as susceptible as any female.

Her gaze shifted toward their surroundings as if suddenly realizing where they were. “Why did you bring me here?”

Moving so they stood side by side, he twitched his muscles the slightest and their wings slid along one another. She cut him a sharp look, the suspicion clear to see. He adjusted his position to stand behind her and cupped her shoulders. “Keep looking.”

Orange, red and yellow bands spread across the sky. The moment the sun lowered beyond the horizon, it happened. Zanica stilled, then, “Oooh. Beautiful.”

When the sun went down, it hit the water just right and reflected off the red stone running throughout the mountain. The dazzling light display created by the minerals was breathtaking.

He ran his hands down her arms to her waist and pulled her snug against him. Touching her was rapidly becoming an addiction. Burying his face at the side of her throat, he murmured, “So beautiful.”

Zanica didn't like talking about her parents. It brought up memories she preferred not to revisit, reminding her why her grandparents fell into a sad state and never truly recovered. She didn't blame them. They'd loved their only fledgling, her mother, with every beat of their heart. Her father was easily welcomed into that bond.

Losing them had been devastating. As she watched the dazzling display with the setting sun and the mountains, she thought of the mate who brought her here. How had he known she'd appreciate the sight?

She held her breath as Pazir rested his face along the side of her neck. His lips rough yet gentle as he placed a trail of kisses along her neck, collarbone and ending at the curve of her shoulder. Teeth nipped and she jumped.

His husky laugh filled her ears while his hands stroked her hips, squeezing, kneading her flesh. Her head tilted to the side on a soft moan. How easy it would be to lose herself in his arms.

But she'd called a halt to their sex earlier for good reasons. It was too soon to fall beneath the spell he wove around them with his presence alone.

He smoothed his hands up the front of her torso. Slow and steady, his target obvious. Wings quivering, she waited. The moment he held her breasts in his firm grip, she arched back on a sharp inhale, her head rolling along his shoulder.

"Pazir," his name came out a soft gasp.

"Nica," he said, mockery in his tone as he grazed his teeth up the column of her throat to pause over her pulse.

Trembling, she held still, poised on a threshold of suspense. He slowly fondled her breasts, thumbs flicking over her nipples as he pumped his hips against her from behind. She widened her stance and his thick length nestled right into her cheeks with each aggressive thrust.

"I want to taste you," he breathed in her ear.

Heart pounding, she licked her lips and tried to shake off the passion induced haze. "We can't. We need to wait to get to know each other better."

He snorted and nibbled the tip of her ear lobe. Her thighs quaked and her internal channel clenched tight. "I'm trying to get to know you but you won't let me."

She smiled against her will. He was a charmer. A little couldn't hurt. "Only a taste?"

He stilled and a deep groan rumbled forth. She caught a glimpse of his profile. His face glowed with savagery and every feather fluttered at the sight. She'd done that. She'd brought out this side in him. No one else.

"Don't tease me, Nica. Say yes." His tongue flicked along her rapidly thumping pulse but he didn't continue.

“Please,” she moaned in anticipation as his mouth hovered in place.

He clamped down, the bite shocking yet painless. She cried out, her hands flying up behind her to clasp his head and hold him to her. Gentle suction ensued and her body rocked in place, moisture flooding her underwear.

More, more. She needed more.

“Pazir, Pazir,” she chanted his name.

He hummed and it vibrated along her skin. When he loosened his bite, his tongue slid over the tender area. Each lick was like a scrape along her raw nerves and her body began a rhythmic clenching.

On the verge of orgasm, she gritted her teeth the moment he released her breasts and glided a hand to palm her groin. Two thick fingers shoved against her skirt at her entrance, only the material keeping him from penetration.

Another jagged cry came from her and her head fell forward. He locked one arm around her waist to keep her in place as he continued to thump those torturous fingers between her swollen folds.

“Do you want to come?” he whispered. “Do you want me to release the tension building in you, Nica? Tell me. Whatever you want, I’ll give it to you.”

“Yes. Please. Make me come, Pazir.”

She was babbling and didn’t care. He groaned. “Lean back. Trust me to hold you up.”

She relaxed, her wings tucked tight. He slid his hand free from between her thighs and shoved at the hem of her skirt. The kitchen knife clattered to the ground but neither of them paid it any attention. She clasped both hands around his forearm at her waist, feeling the cool air hit her thighs when he got her skirt up and tucked it in her waistband.

Between one breath and the next, his fingers were back. “No underwear?”

She inhaled sharply. There was no chance to respond. He glided through the gathering moisture, swiped along her clit and delved between her lower folds. She bit her bottom lip and pumped into his touch.

“Fuck, you feel good. So wet. Wet for me, Nica. Only me, your mate,” he rasped harshly in her ear, his panting breath wisping over her skin.

His fingers prodded at her opening, one, two, three. Without prolonging it, he plunged all three inside and she screamed. In and out, he thrust his fingers, flicking and stroking the nerves on the outside on each deep drag.

He drove her up fast, pleasure and ecstasy building in an uncontrollable wave. Broken cries mixed with moans filled the air around them. Tears dampened her eyes and her body climbed on its own, seeking then finding release.

His hold tightened around her as she exploded, wildly arching in his arms, lost to the rapture spilling over her.

Closing her eyes, she slumped against him afterward and choked for each breath. He gently withdrew his fingers, crooning in her ear while she quaked in his hold.

“Soon, you won’t deny me the rest of your body.”

Chapter 11

After another restless night craving his mate, Pazir walked Zanica to the entryway of the kitchen, slid a section of her hair to the side of her neck and leaned down to kiss her. Her lips quirked up as he pulled back and she caressed the side of his face. “Are you leaving? No morning meal?”

He shook his head. “Routine patrols. I’ll be late getting back to the aerie tonight too.”

Disappointment dimmed the light in her gaze and he held back a groan. He was not the only one ensnared by their time together. Over the last week, he’d worked to get her accustomed to his presence in their nest, bringing her to orgasm with his fingers and mouth every night. She’d yet to invite him to consummate their mating fully.

Nipping her ear, he whispered, “If you’re good, maybe I’ll bury my tongue between your thighs when I return and show you how much I thought about you while I was gone.”

She drew in a sharp breath and pulled away. He hid a grin. One thing he’d learned was her weakness for sex talk. She didn’t just like it, she burned for it. The more naughty his words the more she flushed in arousal.

Her chin went up in a defiant tilt. “Don’t bother, I’ll be asleep.”

He laughed outright and moved away, greeting Mira, the only other one present. His mate liked to pretend she didn’t care but she clutched his head tight, her soft legs wrapped around his neck whenever he slid beneath the covers at the end of a long evening.

Tonight, would be the same, he decided, as he waved and left to start his day. The only difference was he didn’t plan to stop with his hands and mouth on her body. He’d be cock deep in his mate’s warm embrace as she milked his seed from him.

Zanica controlled her shivers from Pazir's statement and stared at his backside as he strode from the kitchen. It was a shame she couldn't find a flaw with the front or rear view. Everything about him appealed on a physical level and slowly she found herself drawn on an emotional level too.

Which was why she felt guilty. She wasn't supposed to have feelings for Pazir. Her mating had been a rash act, a delaying tactic until she could find another volt that would take her in. Instead, she was falling in love. Falling in love with a male who acted in defense of the family he was creating in this aerie.

And that's what it was. A family. He didn't have to say it but she saw it in his every decision, his every action. He was building something good and strong. She wanted to be a part of that more and more.

Maybe, it wouldn't be bad if she stayed. Or worse, gave him her heart. Because, she longed for the very thing he seemed to be working so hard to create.

Every night she lay beside him, she felt herself softening toward him. It didn't help that the sex, what they'd done so far, blew past any expectations she had and didn't have. More importantly, she'd grown accustomed to spending her nights wrapped in his arms.

Mira bustled around the kitchen and caught Zanica's eye when she turned to place a large kettle on the center of a table.

"Can I help with anything?" Zanica asked.

Mira added a tray with steaming loaves of heavily buttered bread and shook her head. "Thanks for offering but everything is done for the most part."

More colorful bowls filled to the brim joined the growing collection of food and Zanica's stomach chose that moment to growl loudly. Mira glanced up with a smile warmer than the one she'd had for her the other day.

"Come sit. Eat your fill."

Hesitantly, Zanica approached the table and sat at one of the tall stools. Though no one else was around she still longed

for the comforting feel of her knife.

Hunger and Mira's stare got the best of her. Zanica reached for an earthenware plate and added grain, berries, various other fruit and then a large helping of what appeared to be smoked dhuru meat.

Halfway through the mound on her plate, she noticed Mira watching with a smile on her face. Another flush filled Zanica's cheeks. "Sorry."

"Until Pazir took over as princep, food was always in short supply. I still shock myself when I go into the cold storage and bring out what's needed for meal prep," Mira said. Her gaze darted to the side then came back to Zanica. "I also wanted to apologize for my inaction. I'm sorry for my behavior when you first arrived."

Zanica swallowed and pushed away her now empty plate. "Don't worry about it."

Mira placed a firm hand on the table between them and glared. "No. It was wrong not to defend you from Samian. It's hard to accept things can be different here." She glanced down at the wood surface. Then snapped her head back up with a narrowed gaze, her midnight wings twitching. "But *only* if everyone works at it. That won't happen again. You'll always be safe in my kitchen if I can help it."

Zanica appreciated the sentiment more than she could express. Taking a chance, she reached out and squeezed Mira's braced hand. "Thank you."

Mira blew out a breath and the tentative smile returned to her face. "Now, tell me what you plan today."

Zanica sat back and exhaled. She didn't know. She'd never had the freedom to plan. Every day at Gaen's had been one anxiety ridden moment after the other. Lack of food and basic necessities had kept everyone on edge and the new mating rule was one more axe to the tree that was in the midst of falling. Her old volt just didn't know it yet.

"Princep."

Zanica turned toward the hesitant voice behind her. A male she didn't recognize stood before her. His dark hair was cut short and he was younger than the other guards she'd seen in the volt. She was close to knowing most of them from her few forays through the aerie.

"Call me Zanica," she said, still unsure about being referenced by the leader title for the volt.

He bowed slightly. "I have a message from when I was on patrol this morning."

She frowned. "A message?"

He handed over a crinkled piece of paper he'd been clutching. She accepted it and he flicked his fingers in dismissal and left as quickly as he'd entered the kitchen. Unfolding the paper carefully, she realized it was a written note.

Nica,

I'm worried. Gaen has told everyone that you were taken by Pazir Catharte. Things are crazy here. He's even more out of control. I need to know you're alright. Please. If you can get away, meet me at our special spot.

Leia

"Is everything okay?" Mira asked.

Zanica jerked, lowered her hand to her side and crumpled the note. "Oh. Ah, yes. Everything's fine. I'm just going to go out. Take a little flyover."

She scrambled to her feet. Leia. Her cousin, Leia wanted to meet. After a quick wave, she rushed out of the kitchen and through the tunnels.

A few older females smiled as she strode by. More and more of Pazir's volt were warming up to her. It felt good. Another reason to consider staying here.

As she neared the main exit of the aerie, she slowed and glanced casually around. At this time of day, the area tended to be empty. With worry for Leia on her mind, she paused on the outside ledge then leaped into the air.

No one called out or stopped her. She flew low and headed toward Gaen's territory. Her heart pounded the entire way at the thought of anything happening to Leia. She slowed near the humanoid territory lines where Coran and Helta lived but made sure to stay within the boundaries of Catharte territory.

As soon as she landed, Leia burst from the trees, ran toward her and wrapped her arms around Zanica's waist. "Nica!"

They collided and hugged, both laughing and crying involved. Zanica got herself together and leaned back but kept hold of her cousin's forearms. Leia looked thinner, her hair up in a sloppy ponytail and dark circles under her eyes. Even her wings appeared dull, the feathers lank and a few wilted on the lower edge.

"Are you okay, Leia?"

Nodding and sniffing as she wiped away the remnants of her tears, Leia said, "I'm good. It feels like forever since I've seen you. I miss you, Nica."

It felt so good to be with Leia, to see her and hug her. "Same."

Leia snickered. "You cried first."

"No, *you* did," Zanica returned with a shaky breath.

Zanica squeezed Leia's arms one more time then dropped her hands to glance around the area. She didn't see anyone but kept alert. "How did you manage to sneak out? Were you followed?"

Leia shifted nervously about, a frown darkening her face. "I told Gaen I had to go out and gather fruit. Food in the aerie is scarce and with the rainy season upon us, things are tighter than normal."

Zanica thought of the stocked pantries in Pazir's vault, the food available for everyone to eat without fear or worry. She couldn't stand to think of those she'd lived with suffering. Especially not Leia. "I'm so sorry."

Leia patted her shoulders and said, "I'm just glad you came, Nica."

"Of course I came!" How could her cousin think otherwise? "Your message scared me."

A grimace creased Leia's features before she drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "When Gaen came back with news of the mating, I was terrified. I couldn't imagine you with someone like Pazir Catharte."

There was a questioning tone in her cousin's voice and Zanica found herself smiling as she thought of Pazir. She could imagine how shocking that news was to their old volt members. Leia, in particular, knew of her hesitation to form a connection with a male.

"Long story short, I was trying to escape Gaen and ran into Pazir. Gaen and Duvall were trying to force me back until I gave the leader of the death volt the mating hum."

Gasping, Leia's eyes widened. "He could have killed you!"

That had been a distinct possibility. Zanica shook her head and caressed Leia's outer wing feathers. "But he didn't. Oh, Leia. I'm sorry you found out like that. If I could have gotten a message to you, I would have. Everything happened so fast."

Nodding, her cousin turned and walked away a few steps. "I realized that afterward."

"Speaking of, how did you get a message to me? You would have had to get close enough to Pazir's territory for one of his guards to see you." The very thought sent a shaft of terror roaring down Nica's spine.

Spinning around to face her, a look of guilt rolled over Leia's expression. Zanica gasped. "Leia! You didn't!"

"I had to, Nica!" Leia paced as was her tendency when agitated. "I needed to know you were alright and nobody knew anything. I couldn't ask Gaen and Duvall went on and on about Catharte killing Waine for no reason as proof he was a sadistic bastard."

Zanica flinched at the memory. “It wasn’t like that. Waine tried to attack and crossed into Pazir’s territory.”

Leia’s eyes widened. “He killed him, Nica. That’s a pretty big deal. What was I to think with you mating to someone like that?”

Seeing the worry and fear in her cousin’s eyes caused Zanica a wave of remorse. “I understand but you risked a lot. I can’t stress enough how serious the volt is about those who trespass. I’m surprised you weren’t killed.”

“Well.” A frown pulled at the side of Leia’s mouth. “I may have waved my hands to get the male’s attention when he did the fly over. I stayed on the humanoid side and tossed the letter to him. He was going to leave it but I stressed it was for you and that I was sure you wouldn’t appreciate a message from your family being ignored.”

Zanica rolled her eyes. “You’re lucky. Very lucky, Leia.”

Leia strode toward her and gripped Zanica’s forearms. “Swear you’re fine. Tell me he isn’t cruel to you.”

Not bothering to hold back her smile, Zanica assured, “He’s not like that. I mean, he is, but not really. I can’t explain it other than to say we’re working on our relationship and I think the stories about him are exaggerated.”

Slightly. Or only a little. Though she trusted her cousin, she didn’t want to say too much about Pazir or risk anything getting back to Gaen accidentally.

“Good. That’s good to know.” Leia’s head tipped to the side as she asked, “Do you think we could meet again?”

Before Zanica could think of all the reasons that wouldn’t be a good idea, Leia added, “I miss you and truthfully, I worry.”

Leia worried a lot. It was her default emotion. “Maybe I could ask Pazir to let you join?”

Leia’s eyes widened at the offer. “I don’t think I’m ready for that.”

Zanica was afraid she'd say that and offered another solution to allow her to keep an eye on her cousin. "We'll meet here at the same time every other day."

The more she thought on it, the more she decided it was the right thing to do. Hopefully, it wouldn't be for long and she could ask Pazir to let her cousin join their volt. She just needed a little more time for him to be agreeable and convince Leia to change her mind.

Leia brightened. "Perfect, Nica. See you in two days."

Chapter 12

Zanica's meeting with her cousin stayed on her mind. She was more than worried for Leia and what Gaen would do. Going about her day, she spent time observing the members of the volt. She laughed with Niyall and had a quick snack in the kitchen though Mira wasn't there to chat with.

It was evening time when she and Pazir crossed paths with one another again. Her heart sped up and she broke off her conversation with Saraya midsentence. There were a few others in the hallway congregating.

Striding toward her, Pazir glanced at Saraya and she must have read some message in his gaze because the other female snickered and muttered bye to Zanica as she rushed off.

"How was your day?" he asked

Zanica had to swallow twice to clear the dryness from her throat to answer. "F-fine."

The corners of his lips twitched as he leaned over and nuzzled the top of her head. His voice was whisper soft as he said, "Good."

A shudder rolled over her and she stumbled back a step, her back thumping into the wall behind her. Her body tingled in anticipation and he'd yet to truly touch her. She knew why. He wasn't as sneaky as he thought he was.

Spending each night in their nest together had lowered her resistance toward him. While he thought he was leading her into accepting the physical side of their mating, he had no idea how much she already wanted him.

Night after night, he stroked her to climax, asking little of her in return though touching him brought her as much pleasure as receiving. The taste of him in her mouth, the softness of his feathers beneath her fingers, she loved all of it.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked.

She shivered from the rasp of his voice and met his gaze boldly. “You.”

His eyes darkened and his nostrils flared. Not waiting for him to act first, she stretched up and looped her arms around his neck. He groaned deep in his throat, causing her nipples to curl into tight buds. She slid her hands into his hair and held him still as she pressed her lips to his.

The first touch was subtle. Her lips brushed along his in a gentle caress, once, twice. On the second pass, she slid her tongue against the seam and his lips parted on a gasp.

Pazir gripped her hips and moved them. Her wings hit the wall but she didn’t care. Her tongue stroked against his as she explored his mouth. Tart, rich, with a hint of berry.

Moaning, she tipped her head to the side and dragged her hands over his scalp, raking him with her claws. Low growls reached her ears and his hold around her waist tightened. He took over the kiss in a possessive move. His mouth devoured hers with rough licks from his tongue and sharp nips from his teeth.

Tightening her hold on him, Zanica curved a leg around his hips and lifted up to rock against him. Soft cries and whimpers slipped free as he drove her arousal higher. When he pulled away, she almost snarled in denial.

“Stop or continue?” Pazir asked in a panting breath.

The rough question held a note Zanica couldn’t place. When she glanced up, his brows were drawn low together, cheeks in sharp relief. But it was his eyes that sucked her into a swirling vortex. The black orbs blazed with unchecked passion, lighting a fire in her loins.

She knew if she agreed to continue, there was only one way this would end. With his cock deep inside of her. Desire stirred like an undercurrent, pulsing within her core along with a sharp burst of longing.

She wanted to be held, touched and stroked by him.

“Nica?”

Her nipples hardened and her throat grew dry. She didn't trust easily and yet every part of her demanded she accept what he offered. Pazir was strong, fierce. A male who could protect her if challenged. The animal part of her preened at the idea of having such a powerful mate. Her answer was easy. "Continue."

She tapped at his shoulders and he pushed away from the wall. His hand landed on her lower back between where the roots of her wings emerged from her skin. The warm contact settled in her belly and started a slow burn that built as they wove through the crowd and into one of the many twisting halls.

When they reached his room, a thick floor length blanket had been strung across the entrance. Pazir swiped it aside and jerked it back into place once they were inside. He must have had it added to ensure a modicum of privacy. She couldn't remember anyone blocking off their private space in her old volt.

The sounds of sex could be heard at any time and it was nothing to see two winged fucking in halls. She and her cousin had often hurried past those rushed scenes. Unwilling to be caught unaware and dragged into similar acts with the brutes under Gaen's leadership, they'd had to be so careful.

Pazir gripped her hips and spun her around to face him. Features flushed, he rasped, "You're mine."

"Yes." The moment the word left her lips, his mouth was on hers. The rough stroke of his tongue slid into her mouth. Pressed against his body, every inch of his hardness aligned with hers.

She reached for his shoulders to keep from falling and tipped her head back to kiss him just as fiercely. He rubbed her hips, tugging her closer. His cock pressed into her belly, the thick shaft a firm throb against her middle. Moaning, she raked her hands across his shirt. "Mine."

He pulled back to grin at her, his lips twisted into a cruel slant. She waited for him to deny her claim but he brushed his nose along side hers and murmured, "Agreed."

His mate was a soft armful beneath his hands. Pazir lowered her to the blankets on the floor feeling a flash of remorse that he didn't have an appropriate nest for her. He stroked back the hair falling over her face to stare into her delicate features as he knelt across from her. She truly was beautiful.

And his.

He cupped her breasts in both hands and tugged at the material of her halter shirt. "Off."

Zanica's smile blazed across her face and she sat up to yank the straps from her neck and toss the material to the side. His gaze dropped instantly. Plump, firm breasts tipped by dark pouty nipples held his attention.

"Your turn," she murmured, arching a brow as she ran a caressing hand down his shirt covered front.

He eased back on his haunches and tore at the offending garment. Chest bare, he reached down and he gripped his aching cock. "I can't wait to feel you beneath me, Zanica."

The overwhelming lust roaring through him was a new feeling for Pazir. He wasn't accustomed to wanting a female the way he wanted the female sprawled on his blankets, and watching him with desire flushed cheeks.

Passion lit her gaze and her thighs splayed, drawing his eyes. A warm flushed worked its way down her torso the longer he stared. His cock pulsed in his tight grip. He firmed his hold, unwilling to give in yet to the urge to release.

With a lustful glint in her eyes, she whispered, "Do your worst, Pazir."

Hearing his name on her lips sent fire licking up his spine. He dropped down, careful not to crush her under his weight. Beneath him, Zanica rocked and moaned his name.

Kneading her right breast, he lipped the nipple of the left one and kept his gaze on her face to gauge her response. Zanica arched on a gasp, her hands flying to his hair, fingers

digging deep to scrape against his scalp. It was rough and urgent, more demanding than a caress.

He closed his eyes on a groan and pushed the hard length of his cock against her warm folds. Shifting to her other breast, he sucked the hard tip and tongued the surrounding flesh.

“Pazir!” she moaned breathlessly.

The scent of her arousal filled his nose. There was no way to describe his reaction. This wasn't feigned interest. This wasn't someone looking to use him. Fear was no where to be found in the light-colored eyes watching him. She cupped his jaw, the stroke of her hand gentle and licked her bottom lip.

Fuck!

Any chance of making this slow went out the window. The rampant desire running through him wouldn't allow it. He sat up abruptly on a guttural growl and took off his boots. Her steady gaze remained on him as he kicked off his pants, baring his aching shaft. He cupped the head and squeezed until he felt in control again.

One breath. Two. He exhaled deeply, trying to control the emotions raging through him. Another moment, then he leaned forward and hooked his thumbs in the waist of Zanica's pants. Together they eased them down her legs. He held her foot aloft and slid one shoe off then the other and tossed them aside.

“Beautiful. Mine,” he murmured, eyeing her naked body stretched on his nest. He wanted to brand her, sear her with a sign of his possession. Suddenly, the mating mark on her neck wasn't enough. He tore his gaze from her lithe form and met her stare. “I'm territorial, Zanica. Not just about my lands. You should know that about me.”

The admission came without thought, the truth flowing from him in a sudden need for her to know and understand him. He defended his volt, protected each and every member and all he asked for in return was their loyalty.

A mate was different. If Zanica gave him her trust, he suddenly realized he would give her more than she ever asked or wanted in return.

“What are we doing?” she asked nervously.

He shook his head. “I have no idea but we’ll find out together.”

Pazir lowered his head and the sweep of his lips brushed the top of Zanica’s ear. Pebbles rippled across her flesh and she forcibly swallowed. Blood thundered in her ears and her pulse leaped uncontrollably, the rhythm discordant and loud to her.

“Together,” she agreed.

He parted her legs forcibly and angled himself between her thighs. Nestled against her moist center, his cock pressed insistently. A ragged gasp escaped and she arched her neck back, meeting his thrust with a pump from her hips.

The smile he aimed at her was a wicked curve of his lips. Moisture leaked between her thighs as she moaned in pleasure. She raised her legs, locking her calves about his hips as he thrust forward.

The pressure, the stretch—her internal muscles clenched in counterpoint. Pleasure exploded as he rocked back and forth.

“Fucking good,” Pazir groaned, his face buried at her throat where he nipped at the mating mark. “You feel so fucking good.”

Zanica wrapped her arms around his shoulders and held on. Her thighs quivered and she winced when their combined weight bore down on her wings. He must have noticed. Within seconds, he cupped her arms and rolled them until he was on the bottom.

She almost protested, but any position would do if it gave her the privilege of tasting his golden skin all over. She sat astride his lap and his cock sank deeper if possible. Her internal muscles burned, the edge of pain dulling some of her desire. Pazir cupped her breasts and squeezed, his thumbs like firm pressure points on her nipples.

She gasped and rolled to her knees then dropped down. Good. This was better than anything she’d imagined. No

wonder her cousin loved the act. Up and down, she moved, taking his thick shaft deep. A slow drag up then a fast pump down as she moved over his hips in an uncontrollable motion.

Her wings flared behind her before she rolled them back and planted her hands on his broad chest. She needed a minute, a few moments to get herself back under control.

“Keep moving,” Pazir snarled.

“Wait,” she panted. “Give me a second.”

Unexpectedly, he spanked her. Light, easy smacks that tingled as he set up a rhythm. After a few whacks, she was shamefully rocking into his palm, the crack and pop of their skin meeting sending her heart racing.

Zanica had once told Leia sex was okay but not monumental and her cousin had gazed at her in disappointment. “Nica, one day I hope you find someone who shows you how special the coming together of two lovers sharing passion can be.”

Now Zanica knew what she meant. Pazir caressed the curve of her butt cheeks, his fingers teasing the crease and flutters rippled through her feathers.

She was on the cusp of coming, the impending orgasm a prize to be won. Leaning forward, she kissed his chest and made her way up to his shoulder then the column of his throat and the vicious scar there.

Her tongue flicked over the old wound and the calloused skin, ignoring the way he stiffened. She stroked her hands over every part of him she could reach, wishing he was above her so she'd have access to more of him.

Beneath her, Pazir thrust up and gripped her hips in an iron clad hold, pinning her to his body. Then flipped them over. Once more, he pounded into her from the top and the shift added to the intensity of the feelings overriding her.

He moved her as he saw fit, his teeth locked in a snarl as they both rode the wave. The orgasm slammed into her and she arched back on a choked scream.

His release followed and the hot jet of his seed flooded her insides.

When Pazir collapsed over her body, Zanica worked to catch her breath. He trembled in fits and spurts as his weight crushed her. She gathered her strength and stroked the arch of his wings. He moaned deep in his throat, his breath stirring along her collarbone where he'd nestled his face.

After another shaky breath, he heaved himself off of her and rolled to his side. With his weight propped on his hip and elbow, he gazed at her in silence. Suddenly shy, she resisted the urge to cover her quivering breasts and her still hard nipples.

She really needed to control her impulsive nature. Mating a stranger in the heat of the moment had the potential to be her worst mistake. Or her best idea.

“Are you having second thoughts?” Pazir asked.

She met his gaze and swallowed. Was she? His expression was blank and she had no idea what he was thinking aside from knowing he'd come and seemed to have enjoyed himself. “There's no need for regret. I wanted you. We wanted each other.”

“And we're mates,” he added with a pointed look at the mark on her neck.

Her hand flew up to touch the sensitive bruising. She bit her bottom lip then said, “And we're mates.”

He hooked an arm around her waist and tugged her in close. His thigh forced its way between hers as he dropped his elbow to rest his head on his forearm. Snuggling? The princep of the death volt wanted to snuggle?

Catching the confused expression on her face, he grimaced and tightened his arm. “Sleep. Tomorrow, I have to rise early and fill in for a patrol along the borders of our territory. Dieba and Liken will be here if you need anything.”

He was passing her off again but she didn't care in light of what else he'd said. *Our* territory. From the beginning, he'd

referenced the bedroom as theirs as well. At no point did he make her feel like an unwanted intruder.

“I’ve made it clear to them that you can do or have anything you ask within reason,” he continued.

She arched a brow. “What’s out of reason?”

He snorted, a wisp of air teasing her temple. “Betrayal.”

The single word was said with enough vehemence she had no doubt he meant it.

His mate slipped off to sleep between one heartbeat and the next. Pazir lay next to her, listening to the soft chuff of her breathing. She could use the rest. He’d give her a little while.

Another snort escaped from him. He wasn’t letting her sleep because of the fatigue caused by their exertions from sex. The reason was simple—he didn’t want to let her go yet. Arms around her soft form, the jasz scent of her in his nose, the feelings engendered from her warm weight pressed against him settled deep in his gut.

He needed this moment as much as she needed rest. Holding her gave him something he’d never had. Quiet.

The worry, the stress, the pressure he constantly faced didn’t allow for inner calm. But with his mate, with Zanica, he was calm. At peace. His lips curled, for this brief time anyway.

He studied her upturned face. Thick lashes formed a fine layer on her lids, the ends curled so tight they looked heavy. Had he ever noticed a female’s eyelashes before?

The very thought made him feel like a fool but he didn’t shift his gaze away from the smooth lines of her face, the pert pout on her lips, the angle of her nose and the rich waves of hair sliding around them.

The length was long enough for the ends to touch his fingers where they rested on her waist, keeping her nestled close to him. Her head rested on the bend of his left arm and despite the numbness spreading, he had no desire to move it.

Zanica. A graceful name for a female whose presence should have caused him turmoil but instead did the opposite. He caressed the curve of the bare thigh propped along his legs. Lush breasts rested on his chest, one wing spread over his entire right side.

She had him pinned in place with no more than the slight weight of her body. Of course, moving her wouldn't have strained the muscle in his smallest finger. He smirked and nuzzled her temple, relishing the female he decided he would fight to keep. She hummed deep in her throat, the sound awakening his cock again as she twitched in place.

Years of loneliness and fighting for everything he'd ever had culminated in a gift that jumped into his arms freely. An odd sensation moved in his chest.

His arm tightened around her waist. Zanica was his and he was keeping her.

Chapter 13

When Zanica woke, Pazir was indeed gone. She pushed up from the measly covers he considered a nest and grimaced. Now that she no longer planned to leave that would be the first thing she changed. After washing in the adjacent hot spring, she rubbed a towel over her body and spread her wings to dry.

She stared at her crumpled clothing on the floor. Pazir had given her a few outfits he'd collected from the generous females here. She contemplated what to wear when she noticed several stacks of clothing folded on the floor. Squatting next to the first pile, she revealed simply cut shirts. Next were pants, all new. Pleasure suffused her at the realization.

Somehow, her mate had managed to convey to someone, Dieba most likely, his wishes and she'd been provided an entire wardrobe.

She couldn't think of where or how Dieba had attained them unless he made a trip to the town of the humanoids. They offered more variety and styles. Dresses, shirts, pants and underclothes were durable yet attractive and they accounted for adjustments due to wings. She'd have to make time to thank Dieba when she saw him later.

Placed on top was a gleaming knife she could carry and an ankle sheathe for it to go in. Her heart skipped a beat as she clutched it close. He'd remembered their conversation. She glanced around but didn't see a note.

Shrugging, she slipped on a shirt from the pile, adjusting the straps for her wings, then hopped into a pair of pants. They fit snugly and were only a little short, ending a smidge above her ankles.

Her boots were fine and once dressed, knife in place, she shoved back the swath of material shielding the doorway from curious eyes. Sounds of an awakening aerie reached her.

She strolled through the halls of the cavern, responding to the pleasant greetings she received from a few she passed.

Eventually, her steps led her to the exit and she found herself on the very ledge where she'd arrived over a week ago.

Her thoughts focused. Time was passing by quickly. Feelings for Pazir and those in his aerie were growing.

Gaze tipped upward, she inhaled sharply, drawing in the scents from a new day. The sun was up and doing its best to wipe out the slight chill in the air. Anticipation and a burgeoning sense of freedom had her wings lifting almost on their own volition.

She let out a rough breath and surged upward. It was a risky take off if not done well but her father had taught her to fly and there had been no one better in the air during his time. She veered sharply to the left, flapping her wings for a boost of speed as she allowed herself the first stirrings of joy.

Flying had always been that way for her. Being in the air, soaring above the grounds, was an integral part of a Vulture's nature. The non-winged would never understand what they were missing.

A piercing whistle dragged her attention from the pleasure flight. When a woosh of air ruffled her feathers on her left, she turned and Liken winked at her. Her lips twitched in a reluctant grin. There was something irreverent yet irresistible about the other male.

"Are you my guard?" she asked, not as opposed to the idea as she'd expected.

"No. The princep absolutely didn't ask everyone on patrol to keep an eye out for his mate today and make sure she understood where his territory lines were. He also didn't terrorize one of the new recruits with a threat for mentioning he saw you at the celebration and commenting how nice you seemed," Liken said with a huge smirk.

The laugh burst from Zanica unexpectedly. He recounted the incident with such blithe charm, she couldn't help being amused.

"Pazir did no such thing," she finally managed between lingering chuckles.

Liken shrugged and pointed to a copse of trees topped with jagged shaped green leaves. “That is where Catharte territory ends in that direction. As long as you stay on this side and don’t go beyond those trees, you aren’t in danger of encroaching on any volt nearby.”

There weren’t many volts this far out. The humanoids owned the small space of land separating this area from Gaen’s territory.

“Follow me,” Liken said and banked to the right.

She changed her flight pattern to stay in line with him without impeding his wings.

“You can go farther in this direction. Pazir has taken control for as far as you can see and beyond the mountains in the distance.”

That was more territory than a single volt could control. “How does he manage it? Wouldn’t it be easy for another to steal it?”

Liken shot her a questionable glance, his lips twisted. “Do you know the male you mated? No one takes anything from our princep once he claims it.”

She shuddered at the implication. “Does he find himself in fights often to hold his claim?”

“Patrols run continuously. If there are any infractions, our orders are to attack without question. The less you tolerate, the less you find yourself challenged.”

While Liken spoke without inflection in his tone, she picked up on the dark currents beneath his words. If Pazir commanded with such ruthless instructions, it explained his reputation for cruelty and how he held the title for running a death volt.

“Does that happen often?” she asked.

His expression grew grim and he offered a clipped nod. She noted the lines of strain around his eyes and recalled something else. “How do you manage to run patrols at that rate if the numbers in the volt are so small?”

It was near impossible to maintain unless they exhausted each member.

“We work in rotations and varied shifts,” Liken answered, pulling up to hover in the air. “It *is* taking a toll.”

Slowing her wings to a flutter, she easily held her position beside him. Admiration glimmered in his gaze and he clicked his tongue in rapid succession as praise. Heat filled her cheeks as a blush rose up from her neck to encompass her face.

Liken folded his arms across his chest and eyed her form. “You’re an exceptional flyer.”

“Thanks, I—”

Three sharp whistles cut through the air followed by three more. Zanica frowned and started to ask what it meant but the color drained from Liken’s face. Without another word to her, he twisted about, and shot past her, flying toward the east. A gust of wind from his backdraft blew her hair over her eyes.

Uncertain what had happened, she followed behind, keeping up with him. Liken angled down toward dark splotches on the ground barely visible to her enhanced vision.

Two others flew rapidly by her. Zanica raced after them, landing at the same time as the others. The heavy scent of blood coated the air, each breath she drew filled with the metallic smell.

“Stay back,” Liken cautioned.

A snarling ligren paced back and forth, its brown fur ruffed up in hackles. The carnivorous animals tended to travel and hunt in packs. They cornered prey and shredded them before consuming the meat while their meal still lived. This one obviously had something or someone cornered.

Low whimpers reached Zanica’s ears and she clenched her fists helplessly at her sides. Liken had no such reservations and raced forward on foot. He nocked two arrows at the same time and fired. They struck the creature one after the other.

Layers of fur and a tough hide bulked up the ligren’s size and it didn’t react to the arrows protruding from his thick

neck. Instead, it growled and pawed at the ground with razor sharp claws. Muscles rippled in its' haunches in preparation to attack again.

A muffled cry pulled Zanica's attention back to the side. Recognition clicked when she caught sight of the face. Saraya. She was bent protectively over something in her lap.

Terror ripped through Zanica. This was bad. Saraya lifted a tear streaked face toward her and Zanica's chest tightened. *No, no, no*. She didn't want to look but her gaze lowered.

Niyall. Zanica's heart dropped. It was Niyall and he wasn't moving. Tiny wings lay crumpled beneath him, one twisted at an awkward angle. He was so still. And blood. It saturated the front of his yellow shirt as he lay limp in his mother's arms.

Heal. The healing compulsion suddenly surged within Zanica and she tensed to go to his side.

"Zanica!" Liken snapped. "Don't move."

Zanica's heart pounded faster. Her fingers clenched and unclenched as she bit her inner cheek. Why wasn't Niyall moving? What if they were too late?

"Wait, Zanica," Liken warned and it was the steadiness in his voice that held her in place.

Dieba, one of the two who had arrived with them, charged forward. The ligren leaped for him. Claws out, Dieba sliced rapidly, his wings taking him out of range as the creature lunged and snapped its massive jaws.

Unger eased closer and the two males managed to push the ligren back. While they focused on fighting, Zanica took a chance and went to Saraya. She dropped to her knees and met Saraya's gaze. "Is he...?"

Saraya stroked Niyall's hair back from his pale face. Her other hand was planted over his middle. Rivulets of red poured over Saraya's fingers.

"Th-th...the ligren...Niyall wasn't watching and it..." She sniffed and cradled her son closer to her chest. "It attacked my baby, Zanica. My b-baby."

She rocked back and forth as she wailed on the last. Zanica leaned closer and gripped her shoulder. “Is. He. Alive?”

Saraya shook her head, her ragged cries breaking Zanica’s heart. She slumped back on her heels and the ache spread across her chest. Too late. “I’m sorry, Saraya.”

Niyall twitched and whimpered. Zanica’s eyes widened. She stared at the little boy who’d made her laugh and danced with her. Shoving at Saraya’s clutching grip, Zanica revealed the wound from the ligren.

The gaping, torn flesh made her light headed but she blocked the feeling and focused on what mattered—getting his mother to release him so she could heal him. “Let me help Niyall, Saraya. Place him on the ground.”

“Noooo,” Saraya moaned, trying to pull him back to her chest but Zanica blocked the action. “I don’t want to let my baby go.”

“Trust me,” Zanica begged, leaning in. She had to get through to Saraya. Every second counted. “I can help him.”

Tears running down her cheeks, Saraya stared at her in confusion. “W-what?”

The compulsion pounded like an incessant beat in Zanica’s head. How long did she have? Would she be able to save Niyall? She licked her dry lips and said, “Trust me.”

Slowly, so slowly Zanica wanted to scream, Saraya gently lowered Niyall to the ground. Not wasting another moment, Zanica crouched over his small form and placed one hand on his soaked midsection and the other on his pale forehead. Her hands trembled but it didn’t matter. Only using the gift she was born with mattered.

The familiar burn started at her fingertips and spread up her wrists then her arms. The world around her faded as she poured her healing energy into the tiny body quivering under her touch.

The injuries were extensive. She saw them in her mind’s eye. The ligren had torn into him with claws and teeth. The broken ribs knitted together the quickest, the gash on his

temple shrinking in on itself but the chunk of missing flesh around his stomach proved the most critical.

A single tear rolled down Zanica's cheeks as heat boiled under her skin, the warning sign she needed to stop.

"Never," she muttered harshly, bowing her head and funneling even more of her energy into Niyall. She would *not* lose him.

Sweat dripped down her temple, and she blinked rapidly to clear her vision. Her wings were a heavy weight on her back but she continued to send every bit of healing she could. He'd lost so much blood, repairing the muscle and tissue damage alone strained her.

His tiny lungs stuttered and another tear leaked from her eyes. She needed more, *had* to dig deeper for a little more.

Gritting her teeth, Zanica envisioned herself closing the wound on his stomach but the response from his body was sluggish. When Niyall's heart skipped a beat, she knew she was losing him.

"I'm right here, mate. Use me." An oak and peak scent filled her nostrils. Two arms slid around her waist, accompanying the huskily murmured words.

Pazir.

Zanica shuddered in relief and a weak cry slipped past her lips as she closed her eyes and choked back the sobs trying to escape.

Chapter 14

Pazir flew fast, straining the muscles in his wing frame and arrived to chaos. He'd heard the call. Three short blasts signaled an emergency.

His first thought was for Zanica except his mate wasn't in the aerie. He knew she'd been out with Liken but the call hadn't come from either of them. He landed with a thud.

Desperation and grief lingered in the air. His gaze searched for the cause while his heart pounded a furious beat.

Off to the side, Liken's chest heaved as he tried to catch his breath. Specks of blood marked his right cheek and a dead ligren lay at his feet. Unger and Dieba stood nearby in a guarded stance, their intense stare focused on something else. Someone else.

Which drew Pazir's gaze to Saraya on her knees. Blood stained the front of her shirt but her worried gaze remained fixed on the female at her side.

Shoulders hunched forward, Zanica's wings quivered and her hair hung about her face, obstructing his view. Pazir's breath stuttered as he drew haltingly close. Liken shot him a concerned, sharp glance but he didn't stop. Zanica crouched over a still form.

When he recognized Niyall, Pazir held back a growl of anguish. Zanica had her hands clamped over the fledgling's lax body.

A blue glow suffused Niyall from head to toe but in an instant he recognized what she was. A healer. Never did he imagine he'd mated a coveted healer. And a powerful one if the look on the others' faces was anything to go by.

He risked a glance at Niyall and weakness threatened to send Pazir to his knees. The ligren had gone for his vulnerable middle in an attempt to tear the little one apart.

The lacerations from the ligren's claws had shred him from sternum to groin. Slashes and rips marred his shoulders and

arms. Blood was everywhere.

Saraya noticed his approach and tipped her head back to meet his gaze. The devastation and entreaty in her eyes were hard to witness. At this point, Pazir wasn't sure the strongest healer could save Niyall but he wouldn't voice those doubtful thoughts. Niyall was the only fledgling in their volt and beloved by all who lived in their aerie. His death would shatter them.

Pazir went to one knee beside Zanica. There was no sign she was aware of his presence. He didn't need to see her face to sense the battle she waged.

Not knowing what to do or how he could help, he slid behind her with his knees bracketing her hips and wrapped his arms around her waist.

Leaning forward, he murmured in her ear, "I'm here, mate. Use me."

At first, she froze, then her weight relaxed against him with a sharp cry that pierced his heart. Her wings arched before they settled against her back.

He squeezed her tight and pressed his face into the hollow created by the side of her neck. The scent of the jazs flower, a smell he already associated with her, filled his nose on each inhale. He closed his eyes and centered his thoughts on Niyall and Niyall only.

Pazir wasn't sure how long he held Zanica but no one around them made a sound. Time had no meaning. Quiet reigned in the small corner they occupied.

Being exposed like this was dangerous but he trusted Liken and the others to see to their safety. He had to because there was no way he was letting his mate go. He'd made that vow as she slept in his arms.

If there was a remote chance she could save Niyall, he wasn't leaving her side. "I'm here. You can do this, Zanica."

The first pull on the fragile mating bond surprised him. He'd heard how a healer could draw on another for strength in extreme circumstances though he'd never witnessed it. Feeling

the sensation was unnerving but she was welcome to take as much as she needed, whatever she needed.

He drew in a deep breath and exhaled slowly as he tried to keep himself open to the light probing touch within his core. He nuzzled the feathers on the curve of her right wing and ran his hands up and down her arms.

Moments passed. Niyall didn't move, the pool of blood on the ground beneath him more than anyone could survive. Pazir parted his lips to tell Zanica it was over when she suddenly stiffened.

"I want my mommy," Niyall said in a weakened voice.

Saraya shrieked behind them and burst from her position on the ground to hover over Niyall. Zanica offered her a trembling smile and carefully moved to the side. Unwilling to let her go, Pazir eased Zanica sideways onto his lap.

As soon as the way was clear, Saraya scooped Niyall into her arms and cried. Her wings folded around him, hiding them from view as she rocked back and forth.

Pazir cupped Zanica's face with one hand. She was pale, her body trembling in his hold. "*You* are full of surprises."

She huffed a laugh and the sound tugged the corners of his mouth up. Then her eyes rolled back in her head. Fear clutched him in its grip and he locked his arms around her. "Zanica!"

Her head lulled to the side and her wings wilted. Pazir rose with her in his arms, snapping commands as worry threatened to derail his ability to think clearly. "Liken, Unger, accompany Saraya and Niyall back to the aerie. Dieba, with me."

Pazir pushed off his heels and launched into the air, his hold on Zanica secure as he flew as fast as he could. He refused to acknowledge the terror ripping into him at the thought of something happening to his mate.

Zanica slowly opened her eyes. A wall of white filled her vision and the sight of a bent male leg within touching distance. Groaning from the ache in her head, she shifted onto

her side. Her stiff muscles protested the move. Her throat was dry too.

Blinking, she tried to collect her thoughts and pushed up on an elbow. The world swirled around her before settling.

“How are you feeling?” a deep voice asked.

Jerking in surprise, she lurched upright and came face to face with Pazir. Her thoughts floundered and she strained to remember what had happened. Everything was murky. She pressed a hand to her head. The way she felt usually came after a hard healing.

Healing! Her heart beat a frantic rhythm as the memories came to her. She looked around but they were back in Pazir’s bedroom. “Where’s Niyall? Is he alright?”

“Niyall is fine,” Pazir said, drawing closer on his knees. “Thanks to you.”

Her biggest secret was out. Flushing, she smoothed a hand down and touched blankets. She frowned. Layers and layers of blankets cushioned her body like a soft cloud. Pazir had added more to his nest. Made it comfortable and welcoming.

Unwilling to probe too close at what it meant, she stuck with Niyall. “Did I finish the healing in time?”

It had been close. There was so much damage and she’d taken care to fix as much as she could to ensure he recovered with no physical remnants of the attack. Toward the end, she’d been running on fumes and pushing herself. She remembered Niyall asking for his mother and the rest was a blank.

“Aside from a voracious appetite, which he already had, he appears to be fully recovered.” His brows drew together. “Again, because of you.”

Acknowledging her healing gift around strangers was hard. Healers in a volt were to be revered but far too often they were abused by the members if a strong princep didn’t set boundaries.

That was the case with Gaen. He refused to limit how often his members came to Zanica even for small things that

didn't need her intervention. She and Leia knew it was only a matter of time before Gaen allowed his volt to drain Zanica dry without an ounce of care or worry.

Healing took a lot out of healers depending on the extent of the illness. Too much exertion and they could burn themselves out and die. As she'd almost done in her effort to save Niyall.

"Why didn't you say anything?" Pazir asked at her silence.

She arched a brow and his mouth firmed. Healers only hid what they could do if they feared their ability being abused.

"I see. Is being a healer the reason you wanted to leave your old volt?"

Among many but she only nodded. She should check on Niyall and talk to Saraya. She couldn't imagine how the other female felt seeing her son struck down.

Pazir caught a lock of her hair between his fingers and stared as he rubbed at the curled end. His face was set in stern lines, his dark eyes narrowed. "You scared me."

The admission took her by surprise. "Why?"

His head tipped to the side and his brows drew together in confusion. "Because you risked your life to save Niyall."

She swallowed, wondering if he'd forbid her to use her abilities. "He's a fledgling. All fledglings are precious gifts."

"They are." He tucked her hair behind her ear and smoothed his thumb over the arch of the lobe. His gaze when their eyes met drew her in. "But you almost died. In that moment, there was nothing I could do."

He'd increased the layer of dominance in his voice and her body responded. Desire awakened and her heart thundered in her chest, but she felt the need to explain her actions.

Crouching on her knees, she clasped her hands together to still the nervous reflex to fidget. "That doesn't always happen. I—"

“Pushed yourself,” he hissed with a glare as his thumb continued its enticing stroke to glide down the curve of her cheek, the edge of her jaw. Tingles followed in the wake of his caress. “You did more than you should have to save Niyall.”

“B—”

His thumb pressed on her lips, stopping the words she wanted to speak. “The thought of something happening to you... wasn’t pleasant. I’m finding myself growing attached to having a mate.”

Heat suffused her face and not just because his thumb slid back and forth over her lips, creating a sensual stroke that warmed her middle. The look in his eyes hinted at the desire made evident by the thrust of his cock against the material of his pants.

She reached up and gripped his wrist, gently tugging it away from her mouth. “The ligren went for maximum damage. If I hadn’t—”

“Niyall would be dead,” Pazir finished for her.

Sighing, Zanica dropped back on her heels. What she’d done sounded extreme, but if given the chance, she would make the same decision again. The life of a fledgling was worth more than any harm that could come to her.

As if reading her mind, Pazir snorted. “And you’d do it again.”

Unsure how he’d react to her answer, she didn’t respond.

Exhaling with a shake of his head, he smoothed his hand over the curve of one wing before gripping her shoulder in a firm grasp. “Listen and hear me well, mate. Do *not* endanger yourself like that again.”

No one had expressed concern about her using her gift before. Healers healed. Other than being careful to not let a healer overextend, she’d never had anyone worry to this extent.

“Zanica?”

Her stomach jumped in and growled. Loudly. Pazir chuckled and reached over to tug her into his waiting grasp. Her mouth fell open, but he stood and lifted her to her feet at the same time. He brushed his nose against hers and kissed her lips in a quick, firm motion. When he drew back, he said, “Niyall isn’t the only one hungry.”

And that was how Zanica ended up in the kitchen with Pazir, Liken, Saraya and a pale but grinning Niyall. As soon as he saw Zanica, Niyall jumped from his stool and ran toward her. His arms wrapped around her legs and she would have fallen backward if not for Pazir bracing her weight from behind with his hands at her hips.

“Thank you for saving me, Zanica,” Niyall declared after he stepped back.

“Call me Nica.” Ruffling his hair, she smiled into his bright brown eyes. “You’re welcome.”

“I don’t know how to repay you,” Saraya said, walking toward her to wrap Zanica’s hand in both of hers.

A healer’s job was to heal. Everyone knew that. Sometimes to the detriment of their own health. “No payment needed. I’m glad to see Niyall well.”

The fledgling was back in his seat, devouring a platter of fruit. Her stomach gave another embarrassing rumble. Pazir guided her forward to a seat with a hand between the sensitive separation of her wings until she sat. She watched as he smoothly moved around the kitchen and returned with a plate overflowing with food.

“Do you think I can eat this much?” she joked, reaching for a utensil.

With one arm extended, Pazir braced a hand on the table to the left of her. He smoothed his other hand down the outside of her closest wing, causing it to ripple from the intimate caress usually reserved in private between lovers. “I don’t like seeing the worry in your eyes when you’re hungry.”

He’d noticed. She grimaced and started to eat instead of explaining the food shortages from her past. After an

unexpected kiss to her temple, Pazir turned to Saraya. “What were you and Niyall doing to attract the attention of a ligren and so far within the territory boundary?”

Liken rested his hips on the counter behind him and had his arms folded across his chest. His expression wavered between relief and annoyance. “She wanted to take him exploring.”

The snarling response drew an angry hiss from Saraya. “We were within Catharte land. The ligren attacked without warning. I tried to hold it off, but Niyall was scared and ran though I told him to hold still.”

Niyall nodded eagerly. “I heard it growling and turned around when it jumped or it would have shredded my wings. Liken says to always protect our wings. I did good, right?”

Niyall turned his innocent gaze toward Liken, unaware of the tension emanating throughout the kitchen. Zanica could practically see the frustration in the other male’s eyes but to his credit, he kept his tone light. “You did very good, little one.”

Nodding happily, Niyall returned to the last few cuts of fruit on his plate. As soon as he was done, Saraya wiped his hands and helped him to his feet. “I’m going to take Niyall to settle for a nap. It’s been a long day already and the morning just started.”

No one spoke as the two left. Pazir tipped his head toward Liken. “Keep your eyes on both of them. Until we know if the ligren was part of a stray pack or a lone animal on the prowl, I don’t want either of them out alone.”

Liken took off like a shot. Pazir cleared his throat and eyed Zanica. She finished her food and pursed her lips. “You want to talk?”

It was the logical thing to expect. Would he demand she heal others now that he knew? Force her to do his bidding as Gaen surely would have?

He approached with slow, stalking steps and cupped her cheek. “I want you to promise not to risk yourself like that

again.”

Shocked, it took a moment to respond. “You don’t expect me to heal everyone in your volt?”

“You. Passed. Out. In my arms,” he reiterated forcibly. “I’d prefer to have your promise in order not to experience that level of worry again.”

He was supposed to be the ruthless leader of a death volt, yet he continued to show hints of something different toward her. Softer.

Giving in to temptation, she reached up and ran her hand over his shirt covered chest. The muscles twitched beneath her touch. “As a healer, I’m compelled to help. I can’t make that promise.”

He sighed and leaned forward to nuzzle her temple. “Can you at least try not to die before we’ve been mated longer than a month?”

She snickered and nipped the side of his jaw. “That I can do.”

Chapter 15

The trees and ground of Pazir's vast territory passed by in a blur as he flapped his wings and increased his speed. Leaving Zanica this morning had been more difficult than he'd expected. It had been several days since the incident that would have killed a lesser healer and he still found it difficult to let her out of his sight.

He'd claimed her and she was his. The fact he'd almost lost her still had the power to shake him. When she had passed out in his arms, terror had ripped through him. He'd driven himself crazy watching over her until she woke, the constant thought that she might not a dark possibility. Then she devoured a meal as if eating was a luxury she wasn't used to.

The thought of his mate experiencing lean times reminded him too much of his fledgling years with his mother. Those days when she scrounged for enough vegetation and fruit to feed him weren't often far from his mind despite his desire to banish the memories and the feelings they brought out in him.

But then, his mate was doing the same—bringing out long buried emotions. His heart raced in her presence and his cock stayed at the ready. Sex between them was explosive and he had to drag himself from their nest each time.

Unfortunately, his schedule didn't allow for him to linger in her arms as he wanted. Covering patrols to assist his overburdened guards was a constant. He returned to the aerie late into the night and couldn't find it in him to interrupt her deep sleep to satisfy his urges.

To reassure himself of her safety, he gazed at her restful visage and tried not to focus on how easily she could have been taken from him.

“Which way are you leaning?” Dieba asked as he flew at Pazir's side.

His cousin had been opposed to Pazir attending this meet and insisted on coming along. Pazir knew he had no choice. They couldn't keep up the intense schedule and the males in

his volt were showing signs of wear from the strain. The upcoming meeting could possibly be the answer and solve their problem.

“If they are honest and sincere, I will say yes.” Pazir planned to meet with a wandering flock that had reached out to him. The smaller volt had recently lost their aging princep and their land.

None of the remaining members were interesting in leading and hoped to merge with another volt that would welcome them and offer safety.

Not many would. It was in their nature to be clannish unless a familial connection existed and even then, there wasn't always a guarantee of acceptance unless they were perceived to have value.

This group had to be desperate to consider a death volt. Pazir knew what it was like to be without an aerie and fearful of finding a new home. He'd never condemn anyone to that if he could prevent it. His years as princep hadn't stripped him completely of his empathy.

“I'm worried about you. Not everyone is trustworthy,” Dieba said with a pointed look.

A muscle ticked in Pazir's jaw. New rumors leaked that Gaen was boasting about expanding and taking over more territory. Dieba suspected that Zanica could be working with her former volt leader.

“Reports have come in,” Dieba said. “Liken followed her as close as possible but couldn't see who she met with.”

A chill rolled down Pazir's spine. He knew of her first meeting with her cousin because his guard had told him about receiving the note. “She met with someone again?”

Dieba nodded. “She was near the territory lines. It's a strong possibility it was Gaen.”

Pazir shut the thought down instantly. “No.”

She wouldn't meet Gaen. Not after her reaction to him. Another male from another volt...maybe. Possession lashed at

his senses. She was his mate. No other male should be meeting with her.

Unless she sought to trick him. Could she be colluding with his enemies?

“I thought you were on her side,” Pazir said while he fought his own growing doubts.

“I was.” Sighing roughly, Dieba drew to a halt in the air and hovered as he faced him. “I know you seem to have... developed a deeper attachment to her. Saving Niyall has also made you willfully blind to the potential risks she poses.”

Tendrils of anger stirred in Pazir. Zanica wasn't some female, she was his mate which was a fact Dieba seemed to have forgotten. Rarely did he and cousin disagree though. He folded his arms over his chest and asked, “Weren't you the one warning me of her innocence and to be careful of her being hurt by my actions?”

“That was before,” Dieba exploded with a wave of his hands in the air. “We have no way of getting more information on anything about her without exposing our suspicions regarding her and Gaen. How convenient you discovered her near our territory. What a surprise Gaen also happened upon you and she force mated you.”

“I wasn't force mated,” Pazir hissed, refusing to allow that lie to stand. “She released the hum and it was up to me to accept or deny. I accepted. There was no coercion.”

Dieba snorted and rolled his eyes. In their youth, such a look would have started a fight between them. “Look how quickly you defend her! And the mating is still in the early stages. Instinct will continue to push you to tighten the bond. Can't you see how this would be the perfect trap?”

Pazir didn't want to argue with his cousin. Especially about Zanica who he found himself falling for every day and every moment he spent around her. But reacting on emotions wouldn't serve him well. He trusted Dieba as he trusted no other.

Drawing a deep breath, he let it out slowly. To Dieba's point, their information on Zanica *was* slim but her actions from the moment their paths crossed seemed natural without hint of subterfuge. There was no justification for her to betray him, no reason or rationale when neither of them knew one another prior to that day.

He didn't want to believe she meant him harm or was working with her former volt to betray him. But the truth was the possibility existed since Liken did witness her sneaking out repeatedly. "What do you suggest, cousin?"

Relief flashed over Dieba's features and the lines of strain around his eyes and mouth eased. His cousin was under a lot of pressure and a knot of guilt unfurled in Pazir's chest. He placed a ton of responsibility on Dieba and not once had he shirked in his duties to their volt.

"I knew you'd see reason." Pleasure sprouted in the form of a grin. "We let Liken continue to keep an eye on her, and report back. She seems to have developed an affinity for him. The moment we discover her ultimate plan, I'll take care of it."

Ultimate plan. Pazir lowered his arms to his sides. "You speak as if it's already confirmed that she's not being honest with me."

Even thinking such caused a bitter taste to fill his mouth. He was hardly a fool. Perhaps his weakness lay in the fact he *wanted* Zanica to be what she seemed.

It wasn't just physical attraction either. Zanica represented something he hadn't realized he desperately needed. Companionship. Intimacy. That was the true reason he didn't want to think Zanica would betray him. He hadn't known her for long but he *wanted* her, wanted her in his life and by his side.

If he found out she was working with an old member from her volt...he didn't want to think what he'd do. It was his hard line and he'd told her that, been very clear he'd accept anything except betrayal.

Dieba closed the gap between them and squeezed Pazir's shoulder while smiling. "Cousin, I want what's best for you. Together, you and I."

Together, you and I.

Words Dieba had whispered to Pazir the first night he found him sleeping outside his mother's room worried harm would come to her if he didn't continue to watch over her. He'd still been a fledgling at the time and Dieba, a few years older, sat beside him, shoulder to shoulder to keep vigil. A bond had formed between them that night.

"Together, you and I," Pazir replied with a grim twist to his lips.

Zanica found herself spending more and more time with Saraya. She liked the other female a lot. Mira, too, had become somewhat of a friend. Mostly due to the fact Mira appreciated Zanica's hearty appetite.

Today, Zanica and Saraya were going to one of the springs within the aerie to relax and chat. Liken agreed to look after Niyall for a few hours which meant they had some time to themselves.

"You're growing comfortable," Saraya suddenly said, glancing at Zanica.

Snorting a chuckle at the unexpected statement, Zanica asked, "How can you tell?"

"You haven't slowed or hesitated on the turns. Usually, you let me take the lead, but I've been watching and you already know your way around. It took me months of living here before I stopped getting lost."

Zanica chuckled. She'd surprised herself by how quickly she'd learned her way around. "My sense of direction is awful but Liken mentioned the tunnels are just turns that get wider and wider ending in the same central spot. In reverse, they lead to one of the only two exits that exist in the cavern."

As she and Saraya neared the arched entrance to the spring, steam flowed out and onto her face. The other female's nose scrunched at the mention of Liken. "Hmph."

Biting the inside of her cheek, Zanica withheld a smile. She wasn't sure what was going on between the two but there was definitely something. Maybe not attraction or if so, reluctant on Saraya's part. Liken didn't seem as put off by the idea.

"Hopefully he won't get my son into too much trouble I'll need to apologize for." A rueful grin twisted Saraya's lips, causing Zanica to laugh outright.

Liken definitely encouraged Niyall's mischievous moments but he was also very careful with the boy. It was the perfect balance for a fledgling, who had no father for guidance in his life.

Removing their clothes, they folded them and placed them on a table at the edge for that purpose. Zanica eased into the water first and cringed at her wings getting wet. Water logged feathers were never fun but if time permitted, she would go outside and let the sun dry them.

The neck high water soothed tight muscles and soon Zanica found herself dozing lightly. She wasn't sure how long they rested but thudding steps and raised conversation broke into her relaxed state.

Samian and Unger strode passed the entrance of the bathing cave, both males grinning as they talked. As soon as Samian saw Zanica, his steps slowed and a frown torqued his lips. "If it isn't the princep's new mate."

Not seeing him for a few days or worrying about his taunts had been a relief. Apparently, he'd returned from whatever he was doing. Zanica kept her chin up, refusing to let his presence intimidate her. "That's right."

After a contrite glance in Zanica's direction, Unger nudged Samian with his shoulder. "Leave her alone, Samian. She is our princep as well."

Samian's upper lip peeled back, flashing his teeth and he tapped the claws of his right hand against his thigh. "You're right. She's not worth my time."

Storming off, Samian left them with a glare. Unger offered an apologetic shrug and hurried after the other male. Zanica shook her head. "I've no idea why he seems to hate me."

"Samian?" A sneer accompanied Saraya's raised tone. "He pretends to agree with the princep's rules about order, but he was one of Asmir's strongest supporters. No good will come of him staying within our volt."

Saraya's prediction sent a chill across Zanica's wings. Perhaps because Samian's behavior was so reminiscent of Gaen. Males like that weren't often deterred.

Heaving herself from the water, Zanica headed for her clothes. Saraya gripped her arm before she could move forward. "Samian would love the chance to push our princep into a corner or raise his anger. Don't let him use you as an instrument for Pazir's destruction."

Destruction. Such a dark word, yet she understood the context. Zanica knew Samian's type and wouldn't lower her guard around him. "I won't."

Chapter 16

The members of the flock in front of Pazir were no longer the strong volt they'd once been. Four females, three fledglings and ten males stood in a small circle before him. The males were the true reason he was considering merging them with his volt.

“You come with only one guard?” The dark-haired male greeted with a wary look around.

Pazir spread his legs in a wide stance asked, “Did I need more?”

The question was rhetorical. Everyone who knew his name, knew he and Dieba had left a trail of bodies in their wake when they first wrestled control of the volt he now ran. They relied on one another to survive and no one who crossed their paths ever tested them twice.

“No, of course not. Thank you for meeting with us, princep. I'm Auson.”

Pazir nodded. Like the others in the group, Auson was unnaturally thin, a sure sign they struggled to find sufficient food. “What happened to the rest of your volt?”

From what he'd last heard, Maasene, their deceased princep, had once boasted over fifty members. Just under two dozens stood before Pazir now. He'd expected more.

“They chose to go with extended family members into other volts.” Auson waved at those with him. “We're all that's left. For various reasons, we have no home.”

Dieba grunted beside Pazir. His cousin understood as well as Pazir that none of them would make it through the rainy season without assistance.

Clearing his throat, Pazir braced his hands on his hips. “You know what I want, now tell me what you want.”

Auson's lips pressed tight together and the males with him shuffled their feet. Murmurs of anger hissed amongst them,

but Pazir kept his attention on the one he knew was the decision maker.

If Auson and he reached an agreement, the others would fall in line and follow. Pazir needed more men to strengthen his guards and ease the pressure on the patrols they maintained.

“Safety. For all of us. We refuse to be parted. So, you accept *each* of us into the Catharte volt or we *all* walk.”

Behind the bold statement, Pazir sensed the male’s worry. Rightfully so. There was a strained look on the females’ faces. The fledglings wouldn’t survive the coming season. He gave the females a few months after.

Once their numbers dwindled further, the males would be picked off one by one by predators in the wild or another winged group defending their territory.

The little ones huddled under the females’ drooping wings, fear and worry in their eyes. The males attempted to look harsh, but desperation had a look and scent. Auson and this group reeked of it.

“I don’t have a lot of rules but the ones I have are strict and expected to be followed,” Pazir said, eyeing them individually.

“We’re prepared to follow any rules,” Auson started. He raised his chin in defiance. “But we will follow none that endanger our females and young.”

Pazir folded his arms across his chest. “Every male is expected to be a guard, no exceptions. No harm is to be done to any female. They are to be respected and protected and lastly, the safety of our fledglings come first.”

That caught the attention of the females and relief flashed in their eyes before they masked the look. Auson exhaled gruffly. “Is that it?”

“And if you betray me, your life is forfeit.” Pazir made sure to meet every adults’ gaze one by one. “That goes for everyone. I don’t tolerate traitors.”

The male standing with his hand clasped in one of the females hissed. “You run a death volt. How do we know you won’t make up a reason to kill us?”

Pazir’s upper lip curled and he hissed back. He’d heard that question a lot. “You don’t.”

It was best all of them understood where they stood. In his life, he’d killed for less.

“Your rules are fair enough and we agree,” Auson said without consulting the others.

Which told Pazir everything he needed to know. They’d planned to agree regardless of what he asked. There wasn’t another volt anywhere close to his territory willing to support and feed new members. This group was one misstep away from being wiped out.

“Gather your belongings,” Dieba called out, speaking at last. “We’ll fly wing to wing with you to your new home.”

It started with one of the females. A muffled sob first, followed by another and soon all of them cried. Fear and being on edge were an ugly mix and they had reached their limit.

To his surprise, Auson went to the closest female and wrapped his wing around her. She leaned into the embrace as his head tilted to nuzzle the side of her temple with his nose, murmuring reassuring words to her.

Mated?

Pazir hadn’t gotten the sense any of them were intimately connected. Then again, it didn’t matter if they were. He needed to build his volt and grow his numbers, preferably with a large contingent of males to protect his territory and the members.

Stepping away from the female, Auson straightened. A flush spread from his cheeks and down his throat. He ducked his gaze away, a muscle ticking in his jaw before he turned and met Pazir’s gaze evenly. “We have everything with us.”

A quick look revealed a few backpacks which the females were sliding over their arms. The males gathered the little ones

and held them close to their chests. Pazir clenched his teeth then forced himself to let out a breath. He'd known he was their last resort but to see their situation highlighted with meager bags and fledglings who probably couldn't fly great distances angered him.

"Let's go," Pazir snapped, turning to launch upward.

The flow of air around him confirmed the others were with him. When he sensed everyone in the sky, he sped up. They couldn't afford to go slow. A flock their size would be noted and while Pazir didn't expect any trouble, he didn't take chances outside the boundaries of his land.

Dieba flew up beside him, his lips curled wryly. "You don't do anything easy, cousin. New mate and new members all in a brief span of time."

Pazir found himself snort laughing in response. "The males are a necessity."

Nodding, Dieba added, "We need to grow our numbers fast but safely."

Agreed. They didn't need untrustworthy members. Pazir had done his best to clean out the rot and only a handful remained. Like Samian. The male wasn't supportive of the changes being made but he'd been warned. The incident with Zanica already had Pazir wanting to challenge him.

It wouldn't be long and he couldn't wait.

With her chin resting on her folded knees, Zanica sat on the ledge on the outside of the aerie. Above her, patrols flew in specific patterns across the sky. She'd noted guards in the interior of Pazir's mountain home as well. Clearly, he took the protection of those under his leadership seriously.

Giving out baskets with Saraya had also enabled Zanica another opportunity to observe the members of his volt. Her brows crinkled. *Theirs*. It was hard to remember she was princep too now which meant Pazir's volt was her volt.

She heard a long whistle from the left and turned to follow the sound. Wings filled the air, forming a dark shadow across the sky. She shielded her eyes as a contingent of vultures flew toward the ledge where she stood. Footsteps crunched behind her.

Tensing, she glanced over her shoulder to see Liken and Samian join her. She spoke directly to Liken and ignored Samian's narrowed gaze. "Are we expecting visitors?"

The patrols would have stopped the group if they didn't belong. She doubted Pazir allowed for a mistake that would let a flock this size invade his territory.

"No, it's the princep." Liken pointed toward the center figure with a wide wingspan.

She focused her vision on the large form and recognized the power and grace of Pazir's body. He flew with brute purpose, the sheer power and force easy to see.

Around him, she counted almost two dozen others. "Who's with him?"

A whistle pierced the air, short, long then short long again. There was no time to answer as the group swooped in a circle then came in one after another. Males, females, and one—no, three fledglings.

Her gaze shifted to Pazir, the last to land. He signaled her over with an abrupt jerk of his chin. She immediately rose, dusting her hands together.

As she approached, the hard mask he wore fractured. His eyes brightened in appreciation and she silently thanked Saraya for giving her this particular dress.

The yellow fabric swayed with each step she took and the halter neck drew attention to her decent sized breasts. The flat ankle high boots she wore added an unnecessary swing to her hips and his eyes took note.

When she reached his side, he spoke. "I'm welcoming a new flock today. A volt to the west recently lost their aging princep. None of the remaining members were interested in

being in charge and they needed to merge with another in order to survive.”

Unsure how she was to take that information, she asked, “What do you need me to do?”

One side of his mouth ticked up. “I’d like you with me when I make the announcement.”

Shocked, she could only stutter. “But, I—I...why?”

The half-smile forming on his harsh features was a beautiful thing to witness. “Because you’re my mate. The princep.”

He definitely took pleasure in telling her that. She narrowed her eyes and glared. “I have no experience with that.”

Pazir’s left wing extended and brushed against hers. Feathers stroked against feathers and she controlled her shiver. Wing to wing contact was an intimacy not shared by just anyone. And he did it in full view of everyone here. A breath shuddered from her. He was really proving to be an enigma.

His expression grew serious. “As I grow the volt, you will need to get used to it. Come, mate. There’s nothing for you to actually do. Yet.”

He curved an arm around her shoulder, not allowing her room to protest and turned them to face the newcomers. The females looked terrified and she instantly related to them. Strange new place, unsure of your welcome. The males were harder to read, their expressions grim, lips tight.

“Everyone, this is the new flock I’ve accepted into our volt. They will make their home within our aerie and are expected to follow the same rules.” Pazir projected his voice to be heard to those in the back. “Dieba will get them settled.”

Seeing the fledglings tugged at Zanica’s heart. There were three of them—two females and a male. The fear in their eyes and the anxious way their wings fluttered had her shifting away from Pazir and going to one knee before them.

“Welcome, little ones.”

The tiniest of the three with a messy tail of dark hair at the top of her head moved forward, slipping the hold her mother had on her shoulder. “Ari!”

Ari stopped directly in front of Zanica. She couldn’t be more than five or six. Face earnest, her sweet voice held a hesitant note. “Is this really going to be our new home?”

“Yes,” Zanica said firmly, not breaking eye contact.

Ari’s black eyes glittered and she shot a quick look at her mother then turned back to Zanica. “Can we *all* stay? Do you have enough space for us to live here?”

The question was asked in a hopeful tone. It broke her heart. Zanica had always had a volt to call family and an aerie to call home. Though it was currently a nightmare, worrying about having a place hadn’t been an issue for her. She smiled and held her arms far apart. “We have lots and lots of space. Every family can have their own cavern.”

The fledgling bounced on her toes and ran back to the female. “Mommy, we can have our own room.”

While the adult Vultures continued to watch Zanica and Pazir with a wary eye and suspicion, she noted that the fledglings had no such problem accepting her words. They each wore bright smiles. That was the most important thing. She rose to her feet and tucked her wings in close. Pazir reached over and wrapped his arm around her waist again.

She froze, remembering his presence. A heated flush spread across her cheeks at the presumption she’d taken. Pazir leaned over and brushed his lips over her ear. “Well done, princep.”

Chapter 17

Days passed without issue. Pazir knew it was only a matter of time before something happened to interrupt the calm. It was late when he flew out with his cousin in the dark of night to speak away from listening ears before tonight's scheduled rendezvous.

"Samian's up to something," Dieba spat quietly to Pazir.

"Agreed. We don't have proof though."

His behavior of late had both of them watching him closely. There was nothing specific they could point to but the other male spent more and more time away from the aerie. There was no rule governing how his members spent their free time. As long as the males did their patrols and followed the rules of the aerie, Pazir didn't restrict their personal time.

Maasene's former flock joining them helped ease the strain on those he assigned as guards. The males had quickly picked up on the protocol Pazir instituted and so far he'd had no problems with any of them in the last weeks.

As predicted the fledglings were lavished with attention. Niyall was thrilled to have playmates and the squeals of laughter from the little ones rang throughout the caverns, drawing smiles from everyone. The females seemed to have integrated well also.

He owed that to his mate. A grim smile twisted Pazir's lips. Zanica was proving to be a surprise in that regard. He had already reevaluated his intentions toward her. Using her to bring Gaen down was no longer an option. There would be another chance to get the other male.

One thing continued to be an issue though. Liken kept Pazir informed of her actions and she was still meeting her cousin and others from her old volt but had yet to mention it to Pazir. He wasn't worried about her remaining female family member but the males Like spotted nearby were a concern.

“Have Rudon and Calis discovered anything?” Pazir asked.

Both had been assigned to keep watch over Samian and report any suspicious behavior.

Dieba blew out a frustrated breath and paced away then came back, his shoulders held in a rigid line. “Nothing we can use yet. Samian met twice with someone but they couldn’t get close enough to identify them without revealing their presence.”

Irritation coalesced into a knot at the pit of his stomach. Who could Samian be meeting and why? That was what puzzled Pazir the most. Samian had joined the volt a few years back. He’d claimed to have no family or affiliation with anyone else and wanted to be a part of a flock again. Trez had readily accepted the explanation and not questioned the male further.

It was a bad practice and one Pazir didn’t follow. He looked extensively into anyone wanting to join the Catharte volt no matter how bad they needed the numbers. He’d worked too hard to get things the way they were. Those caught defying the rules he set were eliminated or banished.

The policy served as a warning to any who thought to lie or cheat their way into a place he wanted to be a safe home for the members. If Samian was looking to betray Pazir, this would not end well for him. Pazir would make an example of the male that would send a resounding message to volts far and wide.

Clicking his tongue, Dieba broke into his thoughts. “Has he bothered Zanica again?”

Pazir tensed, his gaze flying to his cousin’s to see why he’d brought her up. Dieba faced him calmly.

In Dieba’s mind, everyone posed a risk to the aerie. This included Zanica in light of the reports concerning her secret trips. Pazir knew he wasn’t able to be bias about Zanica. The plan to use her had backfired because he wanted her more than he wanted Gaen. His emotions were fucked.

He clenched his fingers at his sides. “She hasn’t said but I also haven’t been around her much these past weeks.”

Prepping for the rainy season and working to take over a small slice of land that would extend his territory right to the edge of another princep’s boundary, kept him busy. He smirked contemplating how Bastien would react to such a blatant step.

Between Pazir’s responsibilities, not to mention the new members, there had been no time to attend to Zanica. He’d rectify that though. Tonight, he planned to be back early enough to take her to their nest and love on her. He missed their intimacy and sex was a part of that.

Dieba grunted. “If this is an elaborate scheme on her part, I’m fooled.”

Silently, Pazir agreed. Everything about her seemed genuine. He’d thought to seduce her but he was the one seduced. There was no way he could have followed through on his plan to use her. Not after she’d risked her life to save Niyall and not after she’d burrowed tracks in his heart.

Suddenly, the need to see her hit like a storm pounding through the valley. He resisted the urge to return to the aerie. They had to follow up on Fynn’s latest discovery

“You’re different with her,” Dieba stated, continuing his line of thought.

He was. Pazir couldn’t deny it.

“Just be careful,” his cousin warned. “We have no idea what Gaen meant in those last words he threw at you either.”

A pointless threat and rash statement by a desperate male. Pazir’s nose curled in disgust. “I don’t know what to make of that or if he wanted to cast doubt on Zanica with any volt she found or had a chance to explain her side.”

“And has she? Explained her secret trips outside the volt?”

For once the suspicion was absent from Dieba’s voice, leaving genuine curiosity behind. Pazir hiked a shoulder in dismissal. “She’s told me a little of her background.”

Enough that he trusted her and increased the need to take Gaen out. Turning toward the sky, he flared his wings and snapped, "Let's go."

The sun had lowered and the moon cast its eerie glow, giving them sufficient light on the flight to the meeting spot. Fynn was already there. Pazir greeted him with a nod and Fynn moved forward, pointing. "This is where I found the first hole."

Pazir approached and studied the disturbed ground. He pressed the toe of his boot at the mound. "What do you think?"

Fynn's lips flattened and his brows drew close. "There are several similar spots in this area. Someone's been digging, searching."

But for what was the question. Frowning, Pazir tried to recall if there was any detail about this part of the land he'd claimed that he'd missed. His gaze scanned the clearing. "There was a mine a while back but it supposedly ran dry. Nothing left to bring out."

Fynn cast a quick look around. "This is the area where I kept seeing the strangers, I reported on when we spoke. Except on the edges of your territory. They never crossed over to this side before."

Or they'd be dead. Fynn as well as his other guards and hunters understood Pazir's standing order to strike first.

"Well, they're crossing now." Dieba pointed at the very obvious tracks and torn up ground.

Fynn snorted. "During my patrol, I flew over and trailed behind the same males last night. I arrived as they were leaving. I still didn't recognize either but they were heading toward Echo Valley."

Echo Valley was where a small volt run by Bastien Kerr lived in the midst of a group of non-winged. "If Bastien is behind this, it's deliberate. He's picked up the humanoid habit of lying, cheating and betraying weaker Vultures. Especially the smaller flocks that don't have a strong volt to rely on."

"Could Samian be working with him?" Fynn asked.

Fynn was aware Pazir had his eyes on Samian. “It would be like him to partner with a known enemy. I’ll speak with Rudon and Calis when we return. They’re shadowing Samian. In the meantime, I want to see if we can track whoever thinks they can trespass onto Catharte territory and not get caught.”

They launched into the air and Fynn took lead since he was most familiar with the area where he’d spotted the others. Voices carried on the air. Muffled conversation that had Pazir using hand signals to have them slow down and land in a nearby grove of trees.

Using the dark skies to blend, they were quiet as they took position between the branches of a tree far above the three Vultures talking below. Pazir vaguely recognized one of the males from his visits to other volts. The tall Vulture had been frustrated at Pazir’s unwillingness to agree to something trivial or another.

He hand signaled to Fynn to confirm if these were the males he’d seen and received a confirmation sign in return.

“Jona, do we have any word on when Catharte will be out for an extended time?”

The one speaking had his hair shorn on one side and his black wings were intermixed with lighter brown feathers around the edges.

“No,” the one Pazir recognized spat with a glare. “He keeps his plans to a limited few when he leaves his aerie and always accompanied with a guard.”

“What about his mate? Can we lure her away?”

Pazir tensed, ignoring the warning glance from his cousin. He refused to take any threat to Zanica lightly. Jona took a moment to answer. “Maybe. We don’t have a lot of information on her. There’s talk she ran from Gaen Hwil’s volt and was the healer there.”

The third male grunted and folded his arms across his broad chest. Thicker than the other two and with harsh craggy features, Pazir knew this was the one to watch.

“Their healer? I bet Bastien will be interested in talking to her. See if she can be swayed to help us.”

So, they *were* from Bastien’s volt. It made sense he’d be involved in whatever this was. Bastien would love the means to strike out against Pazir but his volt wasn’t strong enough nor was he stupid enough to challenge Pazir directly.

The three continued to make plans on how to get Zanica to speak with their princep. As they wrapped up, Dieba started to rise from his crouch and fly down but Pazir stopped him with a brisk shake of his head. He waited until the three were gone then faced his cousin.

“Why didn’t you let us question them?” Dieba asked between gritted teeth.

“Because we have no proof they were the ones searching and digging the holes.”

Fynn spoke up. “I recognized the larger male. I’ve seen him before and he’s definitely from Bastien’s volt.”

“It’s not enough and we’re on their land, their territory,” Pazir stated.

Dieba studied him closely. “That’s never stopped you before. What are you thinking?”

“We wait. Fynn will continue to watch this area and if he catches them in the act while on our land, even better. Otherwise, I want to see what they intend. If Samian or Gaen are involved, it’s the perfect opportunity to catch all of them.”

“And your mate?” Dieba probed.

“Zanica is my responsibility.” He’d keep an eye out to see if anyone tried to approach her. It was clear Bastien was targeting her because of her connection to Pazir.

The other male wouldn’t get the chance to harm a single feather on her.

Chapter 18

Pazir thanked Fynn and left the other male to finish his patrol. Dieba was silent on the flight home. All was quiet when they arrived. Pazir waved Dieba off and went in search of Rudon and Calis. He found Rudon in the main springs at the center of the aerie.

“Princep, I wasn’t expecting you.” Rudon rose from the water and stepped out. He quickly wrapped a towel loosely about his waist and frantically swiped at his wet hair.

The female beside him gasped and lowered herself deeper into the water until only her face showed. She was one of the new members from Auson’s group.

Pazir held up his hand. “Don’t worry. I was hoping to speak with you or Calis.”

After a chin lift toward his companion, Rudon walked toward a corner where they wouldn’t be heard. “Calis is already asleep. He covered several shifts on patrol over the last three days and hasn’t rested.”

Hopefully that wouldn’t be necessary any more with the addition of Auson and those from Maasene’s volt. “What do you have on Samian?”

Rudon’s eyes narrowed and a grimace crossed his face. “He’s foul. In manner and speech. The first to finish his patrols and the last to volunteer to help. Tonight, Calis and I managed to trail him as far as we could to the border without being noticed. He was gone for several hours before returning.”

“Which way did he go? Echo Valley or the flat lands?” Pazir asked, curious who Samian was working with against him.

“The flat lands. You’re right to be concerned with Gaen. Calis spoke to someone in Gaen’s volt. He’s grown more secretive and extremely erratic. Claims he’s planning something big to prove his volt is about to rise above others.”

Pazir could crush Gaen easily and wasn't worried. What Pazir didn't like, was having a traitor in his home. It was only a matter of time but Samian's day was coming.

"Thanks, Rudon."

Rudon hurried back to his companion, ripped off the towel and dove into the water. Shaking his head, Pazir left the lovers alone with his own plans to satisfy his needs at the top of his thoughts.

He headed straight for his rooms where he hoped to find Zanica waiting. He wouldn't let the conversation with Dieba deter him from being with her.

At the final turn leading to the tunnel for the cavern he'd claimed as his own, he heard light steps striding toward him. Since the other living spaces in this section were empty, a deliberate decision by him, it could only be one person. His pulse picked up and his breathing increased.

Pausing, he only had to wait a split second before she appeared. Her head was aimed down as she mumbled words he couldn't make out under her breath and hurried forward.

He could have prevented the collision but the moment her breasts crashed into his chest and her slender weight pressed into him, he knew why he hadn't.

He wrapped his arms around her, controlling the momentum and inhaled sharply. The jazs smell in her hair filled the breath he took. "Nica."

She jerked, her head coming up sharply with a gasp. He leaned his face away in time to avoid contact.

"Nica."

Her name was a soft groan muttered above her head but the sound spiraled through her. Pazir held her for a moment before settling her back on her feet. Zanica met his gaze and flushed at the vivid arousal he made no effort to hide. "I didn't realize you were back."

His hands were still at her waist, his dark eyes unrelenting. “Just arrived.”

His thumbs caressed her hips in a subtle glide. Need exploded and her loins ached. How easily her mate brought out this side of her.

“Is everything alright?” she asked, struggling for something to say.

Pazir cupped the back of her neck and brought her in close again. His head lowered slowly. Closing her eyes, her breath hitched as she waited for contact. Ecstasy. His lips touched hers and it was nothing short of ecstasy.

Pazir devoured her mouth until she began a slow rock against him. Her head fell back in pleasure as she gripped his shoulders for balance. His mouth angled to the side of hers before he dragged in a ragged breath then slid his lips across her jaw.

When his teeth grazed down the column of her throat and ended directly over the mark left from his mating bite, she whimpered.

His cock throbbed along her middle and she arched up on a gasp, wanting more, needing more. She opened her eyes and took in his savage stare, watching her with unmistakable hunger.

“I need you,” he whispered hoarsely.

She barely managed to nod before he swooped her up in his arms. Her wings folded and she held on as he strode down the tunnel with determined steps and turned sharply into their room.

He didn't stop until he reached their nest. She'd rearranged the surplus of blankets and piled the pillows at one end. Pazir placed her at the center and ripped his shirt off followed by his pants and boots.

Once finished, he straightened and just stared. Zanica was held in place by the heat in his gaze. Tension thrummed in the air between them. He tipped his chin up and growled, “Take off your clothes unless you don't care if they get ruined.”

Because he'd tear them. The implication was in his eyes. She sat up and rushed to remove her shirt and pants. She couldn't afford for Pazir to destroy them because the mood hit him.

As soon as she was bare to skin and feathers, he was on her. His hands rough, yet insistent, roved all over her. Every stroke and touch left fire in its wake. She buried her hands in his thick hair, moaning deep in her throat. The familiar oak and peat scent of him was in each breath she took.

He settled between her thighs and she entwined her legs around his hips. The tip of his cock brushed at her wet entrance, causing both of them to groan. She was damp and ready for him already. "Please, Pazir. Take me."

"Look at me," he demanded.

As soon as she did, he thrust forward. The ripple effect from the fierce penetration rolled up her spine. She groaned, her eyes closing as she let her head drop back.

"Keep your eyes on mine." Pazir gripped her throat, his fingers pressing tight into her jaw as he angled her head back toward him.

Swallowing, she met his gaze and stared. His eyes were dark pits filled with hunger. No, not hunger, greed. And he wanted to devour her. His hips snapped against her, his shaft piercing her long and deep. Each time he pulled back, she moaned from the aching sensation and when he slammed back, she screamed.

On and on it went, sweat gleaming on Pazir's chest, his wings spread behind him and his face hovering over hers as he grunted atop her. The orgasm raced up her spine, settled in the pit of her stomach and had her locking her arms around his neck as she came.

Lights exploded behind her eyelids, her chest heaved and her thighs trembled as she lost her hold on him.

"Coming. Coming," Pazir choked out.

His back went ramrod straight, his thighs tense against hers as he came with a roar then collapsed on top of her. She

was too tired to complain but he moved to the side of her with a sharp huff.

As he settled on his front, his arms crossed under his chin, he stared. The cocky lift of his brow caused a huff of laughter to escape from her. He deserved to be smug so she didn't say anything.

Working to catch her breath, her gaze landed on the scar lashing across his throat. Her hand was already in motion as she traced the jagged lines before she thought better of it. He caught her wrist and carefully lowered her hand.

“What happened here?” she asked.

His wings fluttered then folded against his back. “I trusted a female who claimed to have feelings for me.”

Zanica wasn't one for petty jealousy but her ire rose at this unknown female having access to him. Though the response wasn't what she expected, she refused to look away. “Did she do that to you?”

She couldn't imagine him letting a female get the better of him in a fight.

“Mmm. No.” He closed his eyes, the feathers on his wings going still. She wasn't the only one worn out by their enthusiastic joining. “That was a male by the name of Danin.”

It was less plausible he'd let a male get that close to him. The scar wrapped halfway around his neck. “He cut your throat in defense of this female?”

One eye cracked open to see her, a small smile lifting the corner of his mouth before the lid closed. “Nothing so innocent as that, my sweet Nica.”

“Tell me.” She didn't care that it came out a demand.

“Farah told me she wanted to escape her family. I was to meet her at a certain place and she'd have her things packed and ready to leave with me.

“I wasn't aware she'd decided it would be a good idea for her mate to take over my volt and lead them.”

“Her mate?!” Zanica gaped.

“I was also not aware she was bound to another. Danin,” he continued.

“Traitorous bitch,” she spat. “Did you kill her?”

His lips twitched. “I did. After. When I met Farah at the appointed spot, she threw herself into my arms and we had sex. While I was between her thighs, Danin came up behind me, hooked his arm around my throat and slashed his knife across.”

This was too much. She pushed to her forearms and sat up, her emotions running high. Anger on his behalf filled her. “He attacked you from behind?!”

Pazir rolled to his side and stroked a hand over her bare thigh. His gaze dropped to eye her breasts and the apex of her thighs. Zanica groaned and snapped, “Focus.”

Smirking, he lifted his gaze and said, “Farah’s eyes shifted to over my shoulder moments before the attack. It was enough warning to move and saved my head from being taken off. I lunged up, drew my knife and killed him.”

“And her?” Zanica couldn’t help the bloodthirsty part of her wanting to be sure of that.

“And her.” His eyes held a dark glow as if caught in the past. “It went against my nature to harm a female but I stabbed her through her lying heart.”

Chapter 19

One day went by. Then another. And another. Pazir used every surface in their rooms as an excuse to test if it could withstand sex but she didn't complain since he left her exhausted in a good way. The last few days had been spent with him taking care of the volt and then spending each night fucking her as if he couldn't get enough.

A week later, the rainy season hit with ferocity in the early hours of the morning. Wind whipped about, creating a howling crescendo through the caverns. The noise echoed around the tunnels and the ceiling shuddered.

Huddled under the blankets, Zanica cringed then forced herself to relax.

“Are you scared?”

Pazir's voice was a deep, rumbly rasp behind her. She shook off the worry and glanced over her shoulder at her mate. His lids were drowsy and half-lowered, tiny creases from the blankets marring one cheek.

“I'm fine,” she lied.

His brows bunched together and concern gleamed from his gaze. “Truly?”

Ignoring the evident doubt there, she nodded. “Yes.”

Dark waves of hair fell over his face but instead of softening his looks it only served to enhance his harsh features. Her gaze dropped to the scar carved out along his throat. Now that she knew the story behind it, she was more enthralled with him. He'd fought against betrayal and survived.

Knowing the details and what he was capable of should have frightened her but she found herself oddly reassured. Gaen and his friends would find it hard to get to her. Pazir would shred them and not look back.

“Settle and try to rest. There’s still time before we have to get up,” he whispered in her ear.

He was supposed to have left already this morning to do a flyover with a patrol but the weather clearly changed those plans. No one was going out in this.

Another boom sounded and the very mountain seemed to tremble. She squeaked before she could hold back the sound. Pazir hissed and scooted closer. His arm, a heavy weight across her torso, tightened to draw her back against his chest where she’d been before the storm had startled her.

She didn’t have a hope of going back to sleep but nodded to keep him from asking more questions. His breathing remained steady and she hoped he’d gone back to sleep.

Thunder followed by lightning continued in a sonorous display with her flinching each time.

“Have you always been afraid of storms?” he asked into a break of silence.

Drawing in a deep breath, she went with the truth. “Only in recent years. I was caught out in one.”

The most horrific day in her memory.

“What happened?” he asked, smoothing his hands up her stomach and down again. He wasn’t attempting to be seductive though her skin heated and her breath caught. It was a touch of comfort.

“There was an accident,” she whispered.

A terrible, terrible accident. She’d been with two friends, enjoying an afternoon without chores or fear. Jada and Noreen were excited as well. The rainy season was weeks away so they weren’t concerned when it got late and they’d had to make their way back to the aerie in the dark.

Their biggest fear had been escaping Gaen’s notice before he discovered they’d been out late. The unexpected storm had dropped rain on them so fast and sudden their wings were sodden in an instant.

“We need to find somewhere to wait it out,” Jada said with a fearful glance at the sky.

One of the first things the winged taught fledglings was not to fly in the rain. Conditions weren't ideal to maintain control and their feathers didn't handle air pressure well when wet.

Eyes wide, Noreen shook her head and swiped at her soaked hair. “Gaen will go crazy if he finds out we left.”

As the new princep of their volt, Gaen had already built a reputation on cruelty. None of them wanted to get caught or draw his attention to them.

“Noreen's right,” Zanica added. “We have to try to get back.”

The fear and insistence on returning in a storm that could rival the worst during the rainy season proved a fatal mistake. Jada was a weak flyer due to her smaller stature. When she'd struggled in the air during a violent gust of wind, Noreen had attempted to steady her, only to have her wings tangle and fold under their combined weight.

Moments. It took moments for her friends to tumble from the sky, head over feet into the treetops, breaking branches along the way until they crashed onto the ground below. Heart in her throat, Zanica had chased them all the way down, screaming their names as the wind and rain lashed at her face.

Their bodies had landed in an old hunter's trap, the hole deep and filled with the sour smell of stagnant rainwater. Heedless of the danger, Zanica had flown down and dropped to her knees. She had to heal them. She could save them.

Except Noreen's neck bent at an awkward angle and her face was turned toward her back. Jada—Zanica exhaled harshly in the retelling—Jada's wings had been torn from her back and her face had taken the blunt impact upon landing, leaving her features unrecognizable.

Still, Zanica had crawled to her friends and put her hands on them. Her healing gift responded as she tried to do the impossible. She wasn't sure how long she'd been at it. Just the

steady drip of water in the dark with her knees sunk into mud stood out in her mind.

Her next memory was waking to Leia crying and begging her not to die. Someone had sent out scouts and found them the next morning. She'd spent an entire night with the bodies of her dead friends and was brought back to the aerie, barely alive.

"I'm sorry you lost your friends in such a painful way," Pazir said when she finished her story.

Blinking away the tears gathered in her eyes, Zanica choked out, "It was my fault. I'd wanted to go out. If we'd stayed close, the storm wouldn't have caught us."

Gentle tugs on her hips had her turning over to face him. His left wing rose and covered her beneath a feathered layer of warmth. "It was an accident. None of you could have known."

She started to protest then huffed out a breath. He was right. She knew that but there would always be a twinge of guilt she didn't think she'd ever lose.

"What happened to you after?" he asked when she'd been quiet too long.

In this position, his face was close. She could see the puckered edges of his scar in vivid detail. Reaching up, she softly outlined the thickened skin. His flinch was subtle but she caught it.

Lowering her hand, she said, "I recovered. Gaen became more adamant about females not going out unescorted afterward. He used the incident as proof that we needed males to watch over us. Things in the aerie became... uncomfortable."

The deaths had been the catalyst for Gaen to push the boundaries even more. The control he wielded was frightening and only getting worse.

"Thus, your reason for wanting to get away?"

He made it a statement and Zanica flopped her head back down. She didn't want to tell him everything. After her time

with Gaen, her sense of trust in others was at an all time low. Not to mention Pazir's reputation didn't inspire confidence.

Her brows drew together. Except a part of her did trust him. She knew without a doubt he'd protect her and if Gaen made an attempt to strike against her, Pazir would make sure he regretted it.

Pazir stroked the hair back from her face, ran his hands over the outer feathers of her wings and she shifted until she was on her side looking at him. "A lot went into me wanting to leave. My healing gift, his backward rulings and him wanting to mate me. He's not a good princep."

"Mmm." He continued the gentle touch, up and down, up and down, until her eyes grew heavy and against her intent, she fell asleep.

When he heard the soft whistle outside his doorway, Pazir didn't want to leave Zanica and had to drag himself from their nest. He placed a gentle kiss on the curve of his sleeping mate's shoulder and eased from behind her body where he'd lain, trying to understand his obsession with her.

Standing, he pulled on a pair of pants and crossed the room to ease the curtain back. Dieba stood on the other side with a worried look on his face. "You missed breakfast and didn't show to cancel patrols this morning."

As princep, Pazir didn't have to do patrols but he believed it a strong sign of leadership and it helped keep his finger on the pulse of the members in his volt. During bad weather he made the call to stay in. He didn't risk his members. This was the first morning he'd ever missed showing for that call.

Flushing, he ran a hand down his face and muttered, "Sorry. Time got away from me."

Dieba peered over his shoulder, spotting Zanica asleep beneath their covers. "That's unlike you. You always show or tell me when you change plans."

He'd been cock deep in his mate and had forgotten everything. "I'm fine. Thanks for checking on me."

Another glance into the room from his cousin then an abrupt nod. “I won’t bother you further. Just needed to know nothing was wrong.”

Pazir gave Dieba a few instructions before ending the conversation with, “If anyone needs me, I’m not to be disturbed. I’m spending time with my mate.”

He’d shocked his cousin again but it was an ordinary thing to do for a newly mated couple. For once, he was going to let himself have this.

“I told her about Farah,” he added.

Sharing the deeply personal story behind the attempt on his life drew him closer to his mate. Her reaction had been one of empathy and support. Hearing of the deaths of her friends during a storm had also affected him.

His heart clenched. There was no way he could leave her alone on these early days of the rainy season knowing what he now knew about her past.

“You really like her.” There was more than shock and surprise on Dieba’s face. He was beyond stunned. “I’ve never seen you this way.”

A soft moan came from behind him. Pazir glanced over his shoulder. A frown appeared between his mate’s brows and her hand drifted restlessly over the spot where he’d lain next to her.

There was an awareness rising within him, an assurity that she was always meant to be his.

“I can’t do it,” he murmured.

Dieba knew instantly what Pazir meant. “You don’t want to use her for revenge anymore?”

Pazir nodded. “She’s innocent in this.” Though they spoke in whispers, he lowered his voice further when he faced Dieba again and said, “She’s carved a space in my heart I didn’t expect. This mating wasn’t planned but I want her by my side.”

Dieba gripped him by his shoulders and held tight. Pazir couldn't read the mix of emotions in his eyes but his cousin's voice was raspy as he said, "I'm happy for you."

Not threats, no warnings and no dire predictions about Zanica being wrong for him or not knowing her entire background.

Relief flashed through him. Pazir didn't realize how much he needed Dieba's support for his relationship with Zanica. "Thank you."

Chapter 20

Pazir spent three days in total with Zanica holed up in their rooms. Sex was a constant but more than that she found herself sharing bits and pieces about herself and while he didn't talk as much about his past, she discovered little things about him

Like his husky groans if she caressed his wings. The way his eyes glittered when she joined him in the springs attached to their main room. More than that, she'd managed to make him laugh. A small, quick huff of sound but a laugh all the same and it was by accident.

It happened when she'd sought to sneak from their nest while he was asleep to take a quick bath. She'd risen from the covers completely naked and bent over to grab a towel. Unfortunately, she'd overbalanced and almost fallen forward but used her wings to push back, only to end up on her ass, legs akimbo anyway.

Then she'd heard it. That distinctive sound. When she'd looked toward their nest, he'd been on his side, watching her with a smile twisting his lips, signs of laughter still gleaming in his midnight eyes.

They'd grown close. At least she liked to think it wasn't one sided. Pazir loved to touch her. A hand down her side, a nuzzle against her temple. More times than she could count, he'd wrap his arms around her and bury his face at the side of her throat and rest his jaw along her shoulder.

Neither of them spoke of emotions or feelings but it seemed like something powerful was growing between them. Something Zanica wanted more than anything.

"What are you thinking?" Two arms banded around her waist from behind and locked her in place.

She tipped her head to the side and smiled up into Pazir's face. "I'm happy. I haven't been happy in a long time but I am now."

His gaze widened then he groaned and nuzzled the space at the side of her throat. “Temptress. I want to probe the reasons for your happiness and add to those feelings.”

She smirked, looping an arm behind her to hook around his neck. “Are you sure you can’t stay?”

Another rough growl as he playfully nipped her. Slowly, reluctance in every step, he eased away from her. “I have to see to the volt today. I’m sure Dieba has done admirable but there are things I must address personally. Not to mention, I want to assure myself Auson and the others don’t need to speak with me.”

To her knowledge, the new members were integrating well. It was good having more fledglings present as well. Niyall had playmates and Saraya had young mothers to share and speak with.

She arched a brow and pressed her weight into him, secure in the knowledge he’d never let her fall. “Maybe later?”

“Guaranteed,” he growled and kissed her.

Her lips parted and she welcomed his tongue on a moan as she arched and rocked against the growing erection poking her. Pazir took his time and when he finally eased back, she wished they didn’t have to leave this room. Ever.

Clearing her throat, she said, “I know this mating came about for the wrong reasons but...I—”

She stopped unable to continue. Pazir used his thumb and pointer to grip her chin and held her face up so she had to meet his gaze. “What?”

“Never mind.” She shook her head, too afraid to speak her innermost thoughts.

“You can trust me, Nica,” he promised in the raspy tone she couldn’t resist.

“I want...love. I know it’s too soon,” she rushed before he could interrupt. “I had planned to find another aerie, a place I’d feel safe but then I ended up here.”

A growl rumbled from his chest and his eyes narrowed.
“You don’t feel safe here?”

“I do.” To her surprise, she wasn’t as worried as she’d been when he’d brought her home the first day. Samian concerned her but she had no doubt Pazir would make sure the other male didn’t harm her. “That was my original plan except now, I want to stay here.”

“With me?” He leaned closer and peered into her eyes.

Shivering, she nodded. “With you.”

“Good,” he breathed and his accent thickened.

There was so much more she wanted to say but they didn’t really have the time and while she teased, she didn’t really want to distract him from his duties.

“I’ll see you later?” Pazir asked with an arch of his brow.

Zanica nodded. She’d cross paths with him at some point today. He turned to gather something from a stack on the floor and she eyed his broad form. He was naked to the waist, his large black wings held loosely to his back. Tan pants fitted close to his tight ass and the soft soled shoes he wore.

On his lower left leg, he had a quiver laced around the calf and she knew part of checking on the volt meant he’d go out at some point and patrol with a hunter or two. Not far. The weather wouldn’t allow for that since it could change on a whim.

Admiration showed in a low hum she couldn’t hold back. Her mate angled his head to the side, a small curve of his lips visible.

They *had* grown close. She hadn’t imagined it. Zanica and the princep of the most dangerous volt around. No one would believe her. *She* didn’t believe it.

Pazir straightened and headed for the doorway, the crossbow slung casually over his shoulder. He saluted her with two fingers to his temple and left.

She let out a blissful sigh and her heart gave a determined thump. Sexy, considerate and a generous lover.

Shaking her head, she went to get dressed. Afterward, she made her way to the ledge outside the main entrance of the aerie and looked up at the sky. The early morning sun was hidden by the overcast, the mist in the air hinting at more rain to come.

Gazing around, she caught glimpses of wings overhead. Everyone was taking the opportunity to be in the sky before the torrential rain returned.

One dark set of wings in particular held her attention. Even from this distance, she recognized him instantly. Pazir was bigger, his feathers darker and his presence a magnetic draw compared to the others. When he parted his lips and sent out a loud caw, a resounding response echoed from everyone flying around him.

The piercing sound reached down deep and yanked at the core of her spirit, her animal nature rising to the fore. The need to release her own demand shoved forward and she had to clamp her teeth shut to hold it in.

Above her, Pazir seemed to sense her presence and slowed to a hover, his gaze unerringly spotting her as if she was the only one standing on the edge. She imagined a smirk creasing his face and pursed her lips. He knew what effect that resonant call had on Vultures.

Two males separated from a flock coming toward the aerie and joined Pazir, causing him to immediately divert his attention. After a small conversation, they headed south.

Her shoulders drooped a little. He really was daunting. *But* he was hers. A smile suddenly brightened her face at the thought.

The call Pazir released was one of dominance, demanding his right to rule over his volt be acknowledged. Everyone in the air around him answered, sending a surge of triumph through him.

He gazed down onto the mountain he'd turned into a home. Zanica stood on the ledge, her head tipped back, gazing

at the sky. At him.

Her wings rose then settled. He smirked at the visible sign his call had affected her. The thought of going down there and repeating the sound in her ear to watch her reaction up close hardened his cock.

It didn't matter that he'd had her every way possible over the last three days or that he'd kept them in their nest while he fucked her until they were sex drunk. He'd never have enough of her.

A disturbance in the air had him reluctantly turning away from her. Fynn and Unger flew up beside him but it was Fynn who took the lead with an urgent look on his face. "Gaen was seen visiting Bastien. He flew into Echo Valley and was there for several hours before flying out alone."

Satisfaction unfurled within Pazir. At last. Proof the two leaders were working together. Now, he only had to figure out how to catch Bastien's members in the act of trespassing on his land and he could deal with both princeps at the same time.

"Tonight, take Unger with you to the site where the digging is occurring. Stay hidden in the trees and if you see anyone illegally crossing, kill them," Pazir snarled.

Fynn smiled broadly. "Gladly, princep."

Unger's grin was more vicious as he offered a clipped nod. "You can count on us."

With a powerful thrust of wings, they flew off. Pazir continued on, noting Liken out with Niyall. The fledgling had fully recovered and was back to his mischievous ways. Perhaps more so since he had others close in age to play with around the aerie.

Seeing him, Niyall shouted, "Princep, I was out but not in the rain. Liken said it wasn't safe."

Today was a clear day but they had to maintain their vigilance because the weather could shift with little notice. "Liken's right. Safety first."

Excitement added a flush to Niyall's cheeks. "I'm going to play with Ari, Caden and Marissa. They don't fly as strong as me yet, so we have to stay close."

Holding back a chuckle, Pazir said, "That's a solid plan. I'm glad you're looking after our new members."

Another wide smile, then Niyall turned and flew with a slight wobble toward the ledge. He landed safely, hugged Zanica and darted inside the caverns. Pazir faced Liken who watched until Niyall disappeared, his expression one of yearning and pain.

Pazir knew why. Heron's cruelty went beyond abandoning his mate and fledgling. He'd stolen the female he knew his brother cared for by setting up a devious plan to seduce Saraya. She'd fallen in love with the wrong brother and had the broken heart to prove it. Now Liken waited for her to heal and recognize he'd always been there. Caring for her, loving her.

"It would help if you actually told her how you feel," Pazir offered when the other male turned to look at him.

Liken's snort held derision, remorse in his gaze. "You have no idea of the ways my brother abused her. She is like a fragile kit, spitting and clawing at any who try to offer comfort."

Fury soared at the idea a female beneath his care in his aerie had been abused. "He hurt her physically? No one thought to tell me?"

A fierce frown darkened Liken's face and his entire frame tensed. "He knew not to lay a hand on her. In some ways, what he did was worse. He played games with her mind and heart. Bringing it to your attention would have distracted you when you were defending against continuous challenges and trying to save our volt."

"I still would have intervened if necessary."

The look that flashed across Liken's face was part remorse and part bitterness. "There has always been an unofficial rule that you are either prey or the predator. I didn't want to put Saraya in that position."

Pazir didn't agree with it but let the matter go. Liken would figure things out on his on.

Chapter 21

Nica,

I need you. It's urgent. Meet me today in our special spot.

Leia.

The note was given to Zanica by the same guard as before. It wasn't time for the regular meeting she and Leia had in place. Why was her cousin changing things now?

Unless Gaen had done something. What else could have happened for Leia to risk endangering herself to get this to one of Pazir's males?

Worry gnawed at her as thoughts whirled through her mind. She needed to go. If only to make sure Leia was alright. Not helping her cousin wasn't an option.

As she hurried through the cavern, she kept her attention on anyone following her. She didn't know for sure but had the feeling Liken had been assigned as a permanent guard to watch over her. More of Pazir's subtle attempt to ensure her safety.

Her steps stuttered and a sharp ache glanced her chest before she moved forward again. The idea of Pazir protecting her, wanting to care for her in this way spoke to the core of who he was.

It took some wrangling but finally she managed to slip away around midday when Liken was distracted by Niyall.

With his attention on the fledgling, she left before he had a chance to catch up with her.

The flight to meet Leia seemed longer than she remembered but the moment she saw her cousin's brown wings on the ground, Zanica landed and ran toward her. "Leia!"

Leia slammed into her and her hug was tighter than normal.

"What happened?" Zanica asked in concern.

“So much. There isn’t enough food and Gaen sent Lewin and Carr to try and bring down a few dhurus. Winds shifted when they tried to fly back during a storm and they suffered minor wing fractures.

“There’s no one to treat their injuries or anyone’s for that matter. It’s making everyone angry and scared. Some are even blaming you. Things are bad, Zanica.”

Zanica was shocked. “They’re blaming me?!”

Leia nodded. “Gaen told everyone you refuse to come back and help and that you’ve turned Pazir against us with lies so Pazir has targeted our volt.”

Clenching her jaw, Zanica snapped, “That’s not true.”

Her cousin looked defeated and the bones in her wrists stood out as she held her hands up in a placating gesture. “I know. I know.”

Appalled at the sight of Leia’s visible hunger, Zanica pleaded, “You should leave. Gaen is out of control and the volt is going to implode. It’s only a matter of time.”

“I know. I...I think you’re right and I need to leave. Do you think your mate would let me move with you? Join your volt.”

Zanica’s immediate response was to say yes but she wasn’t actually sure. She and Pazir had definitely grown close and their relationship was solidified. Yet, she also knew how he felt about strangers. He was fairly intense and protective about anyone who came into his aerie.

“I’ll ask.” Somehow she’d convince him to accept her cousin.

Leia’s brows crinkled and a hesitant smile crossed her face. “Do you like it there?”

Easy. “Yes. There are a few...difficult members but for the most part, I do like living there. It’s nothing like what I expected and far better than Gaen’s.”

Her cousin reached out and tentatively grasped her hand. Zanica tightened her fingers around hers. “And does he know

about...?”

“My gift? Yes, Pazir knows I’m a healer but he doesn’t use me. He doesn’t force me to heal routine ailments.” Zanica’s lips twisted. “I’m not sure if those in his volt think of coming to me because they’re so used to taking care of themselves with basic remedies.”

Leia tipped her head to the side and studied Zanica as if searching for the truth. “Sooo, do you like *him*? What’s it like being mated to the princep of the most dangerous death volt in the land?”

A laugh bubbled up. She couldn’t begin to describe her new life with Pazir. Instead, Zanica kept it simple. “Not what I expected at all.”

Leia snickered then her expression grew solemn. “I love you, Nica. You know that, right?”

“Of course.” Then because she was getting worried about what her cousin was going back to, added, “You should come with me today. Don’t return to Gaen’s. I’m sure I can convince Pazir to let you stay.”

Leia shook her head in denial. “No, it’s too soon. I have a few things from my parents I don’t want to leave behind. I’ll need to be careful and make sure he doesn’t suspect anything or he’ll try to stop me.”

Zanica had a feeling there was more. “Are you still with Bevin?”

A flush of color rushed over Leia’s face. “Yes. We...we have discussed mating to make it permanent.”

That surprised Zanica. Bevin seemed harmless enough and she knew Leia liked him a lot. Maybe even loved him. “Is he what you want?”

“Of course I am. Leia and I are in love,” a new voice said.

Zanica froze as a tall dark-haired man stepped from the trees and strode toward them. Her hand fell to the knife Pazir had given her sheathed at her thigh.

Fear flashed in Leia's brown eyes then faded. She swallowed and offered a shaky frown. "Bevin, I thought we agreed you'd wait."

Bevin stopped next to her cousin and slid an arm around her shoulder, all the while, his dark gaze remained locked on Zanica with an expression she couldn't read. "I wanted to meet your cousin. You talk about her all the time, Lei-Lei."

Heart pounding, Zanica shot a look at her cousin. These were supposed to be secret meetings. Why had she invited Bevin? "You told him?"

Leia bit her bottom lip, her eyes growing glassy with tears Zanica didn't understand. "Zanica, you remember Bevin, right?"

"I remember Bevin." Concern plucked at her senses and Zanica didn't know how to take this meeting but something warned she needed to leave. Now. "I should get back to the aerie."

Smiling, though his gaze narrowed, Bevin asked, "Does Catharte watch your every move? Aren't you allowed to visit family?"

She didn't like the way he eyed her and a rustle from the trees caused her muscles to tense. "I have to go. Leia, can I speak with you a moment?"

Cheeks flushed, Leia moved from Bevin and followed her a few feet away. Trying to mask her anger, Zanica spoke in a harsh whisper. "What is this, Leia? You sent me an urgent notice then bring someone from Gaen's volt with you? This was supposed to be our secret. You promised! Now you've put both of us at risk by bringing Bevin."

"I-I...I'm sorry," Leia cried and turned to flee.

"Leia, wait!"

But her cousin reached for a basket Zanica hadn't noticed and her wings flared wide. "I have to go."

Keeping an eye on the newcomers, Zanica asked, "What about—?"

“Later,” Leia cut her off, going to Bevin, who smirked, and gripped Leia’s hand in his.

“Maybe we shouldn’t rush off, Leia,” he said.

“No, we have to go.” Her cousin looked frantic. “Bye, Nica.”

After another moment, Bevin’s smug face shifted. He released Leia’s hand and came toward Zanica. Tensing, she didn’t run. He sneered as he spoke in a rasp. “I’m sure we’ll meet again. You wouldn’t want anything to happen to Leia.”

Then he was gone. After a remorse filled look, Leia bent her knees and leaped into the air. With a flap of her wings she was gone, soaring away. The two males glowered at Zanica before following.

She cursed under her breath, her flight back filled with thoughts on what was truly going on. One thing was certain, she couldn’t tell Pazir yet. He would leap to the wrong conclusion and she didn’t believe for a moment Leia would plot against her.

“Are you certain?” Pazir asked from his seat in the room reserved for private meetings with his guards and hunters.

Standing in front of him, Calis and Rudon shifted their stance and eyed one another. Neither appeared as if they wanted to continue. It was Calis who bravely started. “She went out of her way to avoid Liken. He allowed her to think she escaped unnoticed and signaled us to follow her.”

Liken had followed her to the border where her old territory met Catharte land each time she visited her cousin but had deliberately stayed back to avoid detection. Pazir drummed his fingers on the top of the polished tree stump acting as a small table to the right of him.

In the beginning, he knew to be leery of his new mate but he admitted he hadn’t wanted to believe she was working with Gaen against him.

Seduction had been the plan. Get her to fall for him and lure her into revealing any secrets he could pull forth. Instead, he'd managed to be caught in his own net. His claws dug into the wood beneath his fingertips as he bit back foul curses at his stupidity. He'd defended her to Dieba and she'd betrayed him.

“What else do you have?” he asked once he regained control.

This time Rudon answered. “We believe Zanica is using her cousin as the go between to exchange messages with Gaen. The two of them are known in their volt to have a close relationship. No one would think to question when the cousin leaves.”

Fury simmered beneath the surface and his heart hardened with each damning word Rudon spoke. Zanica had betrayed him. His mate.

Her talk of feelings, of *love* was just that. Talk.

“In the past, males hovered in the woods while the two met. Today, one came forward and joined them. We believe the males to be a part of Gaen's close friends known for doing his dirty work. Zanica is definitely working with them,” Calis added. “How do you want us to handle this?”

“I'll take care of my mate,” Pazir snarled, surging to his feet. He'd give her the opportunity to confess. If lies dripped from her lips...his fingers curled into fist and he broke off the thought. “Keep this to yourselves for now.”

Ignoring those who called out his name as he strode through the cavern, Pazir had one goal on his mind. Find Zanica.

He felt raw, exposed and had to grit his teeth to hold back a hiss of hurt. He didn't doubt what Calis and Rudon reported but there had to be an explanation. He refused to believe Zanica would betray him in anyway. She'd mentioned her cousin before so maybe something had happened to the female.

He didn't have a problem with Zanica maintaining a relationship with her only remaining family member. In fact, if she asked, he'd gladly welcome her cousin to his volt. Except there was Bevin. The male was no good and Pazir knew his reputation well. Bevin was often sent out to do Gaen's dirty work and enjoyed it.

Easing the blanket aside to enter their rooms, he spotted his mate coming from the hot spring in the attached cavern. Her body was bare and wet, her long hair loose about her shoulders.

His gaze dropped to her tear shaped breasts topped by pert dark nipples. The triangle of hair at the apex of her thighs glistened with water droplets that ran in rivulets down her legs.

As always when near his mate, desire took root. He wanted to crush her plump lips beneath his, pound his cock into her waiting heat and make her scream in pleasure over and over again.

Ruthlessly, he crushed the feeling. He couldn't let emotions distract him from his purpose.

"Pazir?" A questioning look crossed her face as she ran a drying cloth over her hair. Her wings quivered as she lifted them to dry.

His gaze drifted over the brown feathers. He'd stroked them a million times, in bed and out. The anger that sent him storming to their room shifted to a remorse filled ache that settled in his lower belly. He needed her to be who he thought she was.

"Pazir, you're staring?" She flashed a curious half-smile in his direction and it was hard to remember what Calis and Rudon had told him.

Everything about her standing before him appeared innocent. She was the same female who'd caught his attention at the territory lines during a hunt. The same one who kissed him with abandonment the moment he touched her.

"Where were you today?" he asked in a calm tone. "I wanted to spend some time with you but couldn't find you

anywhere in the aerie.”

She froze. Guilt stained her cheeks fiery red and the ache turned to knots. It wasn't that he doubted Calis and Rudon but he wanted Zanica to be loyal to him.

Folding the drying cloth and placing it in a basket she'd designated for used linen, she moved toward their nest and lowered herself to a kneeling position. There was no effort to cover her body. Did she hope he'd be overwhelmed with arousal and forget his question?

“I...went out for a little bit.”

He tipped his head to the side, fury boiling within him at the superficial response. “Did you stay close? You know how dangerous the rainy season can be.”

Her throat moved as she swallowed. When her lips parted, he thought she was about to tell him she'd met with her cousin and Bevin. Maybe she'd also tell him *why* and he could dismiss the unsettled feeling filling him the longer he stood here.

Tell me, he silently begged. Tell me the truth and let me help prove you haven't betrayed me, Nica.

Her lashes lowered over her blue eyes briefly. When they opened again, she smiled brightly. “I stayed close. It was good to get out after being inside for so long. Plus, I wanted some fresh air since the storms could start up at anytime, forcing us to be confined again.”

Heat rose beneath his skin and he curled his fingers inward toward his palms. His mate had just looked him in the eyes and lied.

Chapter 22

“Oh? Was Liken with you? I know he enjoys your company.”

Zanica didn't like the way Pazir watched her. There was something she couldn't quite place in his tone. Did he know she'd met with Leia?

At the thought, her heart pounded against her chest but she forced herself to remain calm. She'd taken precautions for each visit and no one had followed her.

“No, I couldn't find Liken.” She rose from the blankets and began dressing with a nervous flutter. Sitting still and naked only made lying to him worse. “Saraya and I picked berries then returned here.”

At least she remembered what Saraya had planned for the day. It would be easy for Pazir to assume she'd accompanied her. Lying on her friend compounded the guilt filling her.

“Mmm. Well, have a care. I don't want to worry about anything happening to you.”

Zanica fastened her pants and tucked her shirt in at the waist. When she turned around, Pazir stood directly behind her and she bumped into his chest. He caught her easily and smoothed his hands up her arms. “Careful, mate.”

His tone. Why couldn't she figure out his tone? Breath short, she murmured, “Thanks.”

She tried to ease around him but Pazir's grip tightened. “I know you and I didn't enter this mating for typical reasons but I want you to know that my feelings for you have grown. You can tell me anything and I will support you. Protect you.”

The vise like sensation locked on her chest and stalled the breath she tried to inhale. Her eyes watered and she blinked the betraying evidence away. It took effort but she broke from his restraining hold when she wanted to lean into his chest and have his arms wrap around her while she told him everything.

But that wasn't possible. Pazir had made it very clear in the beginning that there was only one thing she could do that would turn his ire in her direction and risk her place by his side.

Facing him and knowing she'd lied and jeopardized their mating left her bereft. She needed to be alone, away from his penetrating stare. "I'm going to—"

The rattle of the curtain concealing the entrance to their room stopped what she'd been about to say. Dieba stood in the doorway. He cut his gaze from her to Pazir. "Samian's made his move. We need to go."

Pazir turned toward his cousin. "Gaen or Bastien?"

Zanica tensed, unsure what was going on.

"Both. Fynn is already trailing them but reports that they've entered Catharte land."

A ruthless grin curled the edges of Pazir's mouth. "By all means, let's welcome them."

"No tolerance," Dieba added with a sinister cast to his face.

What had Gaen done now? Worry for her cousin burst into Zanica's thoughts. She stepped forward, drawing the eyes of both males. "Wait, what's going on?"

Dieba's masked his expression in an instant. Pazir, however, eyed her in contemplation. "Do you really not know or do you think to continue playing me for a fool?"

The words bit with the sharpness of a blade. Her gaze flew to his in shock. "Pazir?"

"Tell me the truth this time, Nica," he stated bluntly.

Her stomach dropped. He knew. He knew she'd lied. But what did that have to do with the rest of what he said. "Pazir, I'm not playing you. I have no idea what you're talking about."

His brows lowered and the look he aimed at her was one of disgust. "I gave you the chance to tell me the truth and you

didn't."

Her skin grew heated and her pulse leaped. She didn't know what was happening right now and why he seared her with a gaze that almost bordered on...hatred. "I don't understand."

"Pazir, we don't have time. We have to go now," Dieba interrupted, ignoring her completely.

"No. He has to explain." She caught Pazir before he could walk away, her fingers barely able to wrap around his thick wrist.

Sneering down at her, he snarled and she dropped his arm in reflex. "I'll deal with you when I return. If anyone in my volt suffers as a result of your perfidy, you will pay, Nica."

Her lungs seized and she flared her wings in fear. He stared at her with a level of bitterness she couldn't comprehend. "P-pazir, whatever you're thinking, you're wrong."

He paused on his way out the door and glanced back over his shoulder. His eyes narrowed. "Perhaps, you're right. Come, mate. I think you should accompany us."

How could she look at him as if she was innocent when she had to be aware he knew? She'd been caught meeting with Bevin. Gaen was making his move with Bastien and at the center of it all was whatever part Zanica had played in it.

It didn't make sense and he didn't understand but he'd find out.

Calis and Rudon waited outside on the ledge when Pazir and Dieba came out with his traitorous mate in tow. Calis' mouth turned down when he saw her and Rudon turned away sharply.

Beside him, Zanica flinched and Pazir fought with his instinct to hold her, to console her. Dieba, Rudon and Calis knew what she'd done. Liken knew what she'd done.

Liken more than the others was devastated. He thought Nica was the perfect mate and princep to rule at Pazir's side but even he couldn't deny her connections to her old volt since he'd been assigned to follow her.

Against his will, he turned to look at her. Tears gleamed in the eyes he adored, the rare shade standing out against her pale features. "Pazir, please let me explain about—"

Slashing his hand through the air between them, he leaned toward her and spoke through gritted teeth. "About you working with Gaen? What was your end goal, Nica? Did you think I'd let him sneak into my land and steal from me?"

"Sneak? Steal?"

The confusion on her face angered him. Shoving her away, he sneered. Hurt flashed in her eyes and her lips trembled but he steeled his heart. "I believed you when you spoke of wanting to have something. I trusted you when I allowed you into my home, my *volt*! And you conspired behind my back with a male who doesn't care about anyone but himself."

"None of that's true! You refuse to let me explain."

An explanation wouldn't change the facts. Her protest fell like empty lies. He gestured sharply at the others and they flew straight upward.

"You can fly with us on your own or I can carry you. Which will it be?"

Her lips pressed tight together, the bottom wobbling before she straightened her shoulders and launched into the sky. Her wings flared wide and she turned on a sharp angle to zoom by Dieba and Calis, narrowly missing Rudon.

Fuck, she could fly. And for some reason that angered him all the more.

Pazir took to the air and his cousin flew close to speak with him. "How are you handling this?"

He glared. "I don't want to talk about it. Let's focus on Gaen and Bastien for now."

Dieba, thankfully, nodded and dropped the subject.

Chapter 23

It took everything she had but Zanica managed not to let a single tear fall. She followed slightly behind Pazir. She wasn't sure where they were going but the others seemed to have an idea. When they landed, she kept her distance and watched as Pazir used hand signals to communicate.

Another male waited on the ground. Fynn. She recognized him instantly, considering the single white feather in his wings was so distinct.

“What do you have, Fynn?” Pazir asked in a low voice.

“Samian, Gaen and Bastien. I've been watching them and they aren't digging to look for something from the old mines as we thought. They were retrieving what they must have buried before you took over this territory.”

A frown creased Pazir's face and Zanica could almost see the thoughts whirling through his head. She wasn't sure who Bastien was but based on her limited experience with Samian, he'd have to be the type drawn to Gaen. Malicious.

She couldn't imagine what the two males planned but it wouldn't be anything good. Envy ruled Gaen and he loved to destroy anything he thought others enjoyed.

With a rough shake of his wings, Pazir firmed his shoulders and spoke in a low rasp. “Let's give them an unforgettable welcome then.”

“Should she stay behind?” Dieba asked, nodding toward her.

Pazir's response was instant. “No.”

Though it wasn't a good time to try and speak with him, Zanica sidled closer to Pazir as they strode through a winding path and beyond a heavy growth of foliage. Samian and Gaen stood together. Both males spun at their approach.

“No tolerance,” Pazir growled loudly.

All at once, Calis, Rudon and Dieba pulled their crossbows from their shoulders and nocked arrows. Samian paled and stepped backward, his gaze locked on Pazir. Gaen watched them with a smirk on his face then smiled broadly at Zanica.

Her pulse pounded and her chest grew tight. They surrounded Gaen but his expression remained smug. Fear clogged her throat and sweat dotted her upper lip. He'd only look like that if he believed he held the upper hand in some way.

Gaen met her gaze and inclined his head. "Well done, Zanica. Exactly as we planned."

Plan? What did he mean? They didn't have a plan. The protest froze on her tongue as a dozen hunters suddenly emerged from the trees. They outnumbered Pazir, Calis, Rudon and Dieba easily.

Panicked, she reached for the knife at her waist and slid it from the sheath. Her action caught Pazir's attention. His gaze darkened with accusation and his upper lip curled. Her stomach clenched and she bit back the denials on the tip of her tongue.

He believed Gaen. It was there in the hatred blazing in the depths of his black orbs. The bitter burn of tears stung her eyes and she reached for him with her free hand, fingers trembling.

With a flick of his eyes, he ignored her and turned back to Gaen. "It would take more than the males you have here to stop me from ending you."

Zanica's heart raced, not trusting the gloating look Samian suddenly wore.

Another dozen Vultures came from the trees on the left, males she recognized from her old volt, including Leia's lover, Bevin. Gaen began to laugh. Zanica eased back another step toward Pazir, but he moved away the moment her arm brushed his. His expression was grim, lips pressed tight in a firm line and acid churned in her stomach.

She was sick at heart, her chest a yawning cavern that felt as if she was being ripped in two.

“Good work. You were right about her helping to lead them to us, Gaen,” a new voice said.

Zanica turned to face a tall male she'd never met before. His shoulder length black hair blended with the pitch black feathers of his wings. His brown eyes glowed with amusement as he arched a brow in her direction. He raised his hands and slow clapped. “I didn't think Gaen could convince you to help us but once more he's proved invaluable as an ally.”

“You're a liar!” she burst out, unable to remain quiet while her world crumbled around her. She frantically looked to Pazir and the others, the disillusion on their faces clear to see. In their eyes, she'd committed the greatest sin. Betrayal. “You can't believe him, Pazir!”

“Good of you to join us, Bastien.” Pazir spoke calmly and didn't bat an eye in her direction.

The lack of trust hit the pit of her stomach so hard she almost lost the contents on the spot.

“Before my males wipe you from this world, I am curious,” Gaen said.

Pazir folded his arms across his chest, hip cocked and legs braced wide apart. There was no sign of concern on his face. His eyes were cold pools of blackness. “What?”

“Why have you made it your mission to target me? It's not Zanica because your actions started before then. I heard the talk, the warnings to others to avoid any association with me or you'd ruin them in your hunt to get to me.”

At first, she didn't think Pazir would answer. She wasn't aware he'd had any dealings with Gaen prior to her run in with him.

“You denied me the aid of one of your healers years ago when my mother sickened. Your volt had two and could easily have lent one to help her. You made the decision not to.”

Zanica's stomach dropped and her gaze jerked toward Gaen in appalled silence. He shrugged. “You should put the blame where it belongs. Zanica refused to go when I asked. As the stronger healer, she was the best chance for anyone to

survive an illness or injury. It's why we always catered to her selfish demands.”

“No!” The lies were too much. Zanica flung her knife at Gaen's smirking, lying face.

It flew with surprising accuracy right past his head, the tip skimming his left cheek, leaving a thin trail of red behind. Gaen shouted and his hand went to the wound.

A fiery burn exploded on her shoulder. *Pain*. She staggered back a step and glanced down in confusion at the shaft of an arrow protruding from the upper curve of her right shoulder.

“Now!” Pazir roared and charged forward.

Wings. Wings as far as she could see descended from the trees above. Liken, Auson, Fynn more faces she knew but couldn't name from Pazir's volt.

“Kill him! Kill Catharte,” Gaen yelled, slashing and punching with his clawed hands at those coming toward him.

The fight rocked into motion. Snarled hisses, roars of anger and the slam of fists on skin battered at her senses.

“Zanica!”

That was Pazir. She stumbled back, gaze frantically searching the area but she couldn't find him. Everyone fought, bodies ramming into others. Blood sprayed. There was nowhere to run or hide. She was trapped in the middle of the melee and without a weapon among Vulture males in full blood lust.

The betrayal cut deep. Pazir wanted to roar out his fury, grab and shake her. His chest heaved with the need to react. His mate, the female he'd trusted, the one he'd given his heart to had gone behind his back to help his enemy.

Every word from Gaen grated and drove out the small doubt Pazir had about her treachery. Bastien's arrival only served to confirm she'd worked with both to entrap him.

Then to make matters worse, Gaen's next revelation sealed her fate.

"You should put the blame where it belongs. Zanica refused to go when I asked. As the stronger healer, she was the best chance for anyone to survive an illness or injury. It's why we always catered to her selfish demands."

His mate was responsible for his mother's eventual death? If she had come and healed his mother she wouldn't have gone begging to Gaen and been killed. He raised his hands to give the signal to the males he had hiding. Today would be the day he took his revenge.

"Lies!" Zanica screamed and flung the knife he'd given her in Gaen's direction.

The blade flew with surprising accuracy toward the other male. The tip skimmed his left cheek, slashing across the skin. Gaen shouted and his hand went to his bleeding cheek. Pazir smirked. At least, she'd done one good thing whether it was on his behalf or her own.

The whistle of an arrow sliced through the air, catching his attention. His gaze jerked up to follow its trajectory. Zanica paled and cried out. It took a moment for him to comprehend what had happened.

Someone had shot his mate. His vision went red as he signaled his hunters who were hidden in the trees. He'd known Gaen and Bastien would try something. "Now!"

Screams, growls and howls of pain surrounded him. Zanica disappeared behind a sea of bodies and he lost sight of her. A male he didn't know stepped in front of him, blocking his path to get to his mate.

The leering grin revealed crooked front teeth and a wide gap. Pazir drove his fist through the male's torso and the bones gave. He struck again, this time a powerful blow to the face, smashing his jaw. The male dropped to one knee, a hand cradling his face as he wheezed, trying to drag air in with his shattered jaw.

Turning away from him, Pazir's gaze desperately searched for familiar brown wings. "Zanica!"

Knowing she'd aided his enemy didn't stop the fear spreading through his heart and mind.

"Lose something?" Bastien asked from behind him.

Pazir turned and came face to face with the prince of the Echo Valley. Bastien held up a bow and shook it tauntingly. Pazir lost his infamous control and charged forward. Bastien slung aside the bow. They came together like two animals, slamming into one another.

Pazir whirled the other male around with a twist of his wrist. Bastien fell backward and hit the ground hard. Instantly, Pazir was on him and pounded his fist into the gloating face only pausing when Bastien started to laugh.

"What do you find fucking funny?"

"She really did it. Betrayed you," Bastien gasped, licking a drop of blood from the corner of his split lip. "In more ways than one."

Pazir froze, his arm cocked back to deliver another punishing blow. "What do you mean?"

Bastien's bruised mouth spread in a wide grin. "Only that I can see why you succumbed to her. Makes sense she was able to fool one of the strongest princes in the valley. She's a tasty morsel and knows how to give a male unbelievable pleasure."

The idea of Zanica violating their mating by having sex with Bastien sent Pazir into a frenzy. He drilled his fist into Bastien's smug face again and again. The satisfying crack of bone not nearly enough recompense for the insult.

When Bastien slumped under him, head tilted and breath coming in pants, Pazir pushed himself away and rose shakily to his feet. His chest heaved as anger continued to course through his veins.

"My aim was off or I would have killed her," Bastien managed on a wheezing breath as he rolled to the side.

The idea of Bastien and Gaen using Zanica to execute their plan then intending to kill her infuriated Pazir.

“You won’t get another chance.” Withdrawing the knife at his hip, he leaned over and stabbed the bastard in his chest. He twisted the blade for good measure. Bastien screamed, his torso arching upward. “You will never threaten or harm my mate again.”

Pazir ripped the blade out and drove back into the heaving chest for good measure. Bastien’s body stilled.

“Pazir?”

His cousin’s voice pulled him back from the dark void yawning in front of him. Pazir turned slowly. Around him, the fight waned. Most of the males who’d come on Gaen’s behalf lay slain on the ground or fled without a backward look.

“Should we go after them?” Dieba asked, an eager light in his dark eyes.

The killing frenzy could easily take over his cousin. He thrived on the violence. Pazir looked around him. No sign of Zanica. His heart thundered with renewed fear. “Where is my mate?”

Then he heard her.

“Pazir.”

He turned and Zanica moved toward him, her blue eyes filled with remorse. Relieved to see her upright and unharmed, he side stepped his cousin and moved toward her. Then he remembered everything he’d learned today and slammed up a hand to stop her. “I don’t want to hear it.”

Tears formed in her eyes and he hardened his heart against it. Even now, he wanted to reach out and soothe her hurt. Unger and Fynn ran up to him. “Gaen got away.”

Snarling, Pazir spun away from Zanica and glared at Fynn. “What about Samian?”

“Dead,” Unger said with malicious glee.

While pleased, Pazir was also disappointed. He'd wanted to end the other male himself.

"Pazir, please," Zanica called again in a low voice

He didn't turn. Now was not the time to face her. His heart was splintering from her actions.

The sky darkened and lightning cracked in a vivid display of white streaks across the sky followed by a boom of thunder. Another crack and the storm hit, rain pouring down on them.

"We have to get back to the aerie. This isn't the time to be caught in weather like this," Dieba said, swiping at his wet face.

Nodding, Pazir drew in a deep breath and took charge. He gave orders, signaling for everyone to retreat. A small storm could shift into one of major magnitude with little warning.

He glanced around. Only a few of Gaen and Bastien's forces remained. He wouldn't risk his males in the open during the rainy season. Plus, they'd left the females and fledglings unattended at the aerie.

"Everyone, let's go," he ordered and released a loud whistle. Wind and rain lashed at his face. Pazir swiped a hand over his eyes to clear them. "Home!" he yelled.

Heads jerked up and the members of his volt responded immediately. One by one they flew upward, Pazir in the rear. Thunder ripped through the sky and he spun in the air searching for Zanica.

She was afraid of storms. How could he have forgotten?! He hovered in the air as Unger, Fynn, and Dieba flew by. Auson came near and Pazir caught his arm. "Where is Zanica?"

Auson slowed, a dawning awareness filling his gaze. "She turned around to heal one of the others. A male named Liken."

Liken? Pazir recognized Liken's wings slowly rising to join Unger and the others. Pazir's gaze jerked beyond him. No Zanica. He released Auson and nodded for him to continue then headed toward Liken.

They reached each other a moment later, Liken's face haggard. A large red stain bloomed on his shirt. Pazir gripped his shoulders. "What happened? Are you alright?"

Rubbing at his chest, Liken's dazed eyes met his. "Knife wound. Zanica."

Pazir's heart dropped. "Zanica stabbed you?"

Brows shooting up, Liken shook his head. "No. Sh-she healed me. One of the attackers stabbed me from behind. I almost bled out but Zanica must have found me and used her gift."

To Pazir, he still didn't look fully recovered. "Get back to the aerie."

Liken hesitated. "What about Zanica? She told me to go but..."

"I'll look for her."

Nodding, Liken flew off toward their home. Dieba came up on Pazir's side. Rain soaked hair clung to the sides of his face, water droplets clinging to his eyelids as he blinked rapidly. "We have to get back before the storm worsens."

Pazir continued to scan the skies and the area Liken had flown from. There. Brown feathers in a distinct shade he could never mistake. His mate struggled as the storm battered at her wings. One listed to the side and his heart jumped. He shifted to fly toward her but a hand clamped on his forearm.

"You can't," Dieba hissed.

A wild wind tore a path through, bending trees in half and tearing up the ground below. Pazir turned back to Nica struggling, her wings trying to glide on a current and regain her balance. "She—"

His cousin cut off the protest. "It's suicide to go back. She's caught in a vortex. You'll be pulled into the same spiral and neither of you will come out."

"Fuck!" Dieba was right but the ice he'd been trying hard to seal around his heart cracked. The lies didn't matter. The betrayal didn't matter.

None of it mattered if it meant he had to stand by and watch his mate die. No matter what she'd done to him this night, he still cared for her. He shrugged off Dieba's grip and flew back.

Chapter 24

Rain soaked Zanica's feathers and brought with it the dark memories of her worst nightmare. Shaking her head to dispel the past, she helped Liken stand. "Hurry, you need to get back to the volt safely before the storm worsens."

Liken pressed a hand over the newly healed skin on his chest. One of Bastien's hunters had struck swiftly while Liken fought another. He'd taken the blow from the back and the tip of the blade had pierced all the way through his chest in the front.

"I can't leave you," Liken said, feathers twitching as he spread his wings wide.

Lightning blazed across the sky in a zig zag white pattern. She flinched and shook her head. "I'll go after you. The wound was close to the root of your wing stems. I think I healed you well enough for the flight back."

Hopefully. She'd poured more healing energy than she could afford to waste after tearing the arrow from her shoulder and healing her own injury.

"Alright." Liken wobbled and she held his shoulder until she was sure he had his balance. He leaped into the air, lacking his usual grace but seemed to be well enough.

She took a deep breath and glanced around one last time to make sure none of Pazir's volt remained. The only bodies on the ground belonged to Gaen's males. And Bastien. She'd caught sight of his still form and felt no remorse for his death. He'd gotten what he deserved.

Spreading her wings, she bent her knees and leaped. The pull of the wind tugged her slightly. She drifted to the right and course corrected. As she climbed, what had started as a light breeze became a stronger gust.

Memories batted at her senses. Her friends' deaths. Their faces flashed before her eyes and she held back a sob. Above, the members of Pazir's volt raced away. She couldn't identify

anyone individually, but their massive black wings filled the air as rain slashed at her face.

Throat tight, she tried to find an air current to give her better maneuverability. Behind her, she felt the pull of a fierce whirlwind, trying to pull her backward. She glanced over her shoulder at the vortex forming. The drag at the center of the funnel tugged and whipped at her wings.

True fear rolled through her mind at the thought she might die in a storm like her friends. She turned forward again and caught Pazir watching her from afar. He and his cousin could see her struggling. When Dieba grabbed Pazir's arm and mouthed something furiously, she knew he wanted Pazir to leave her.

Don't. Please don't leave me.

There was no way to say what she wanted over the thunderous booms threatening to tear the sky apart. Regret cleaved her heart in half and she floundered, her left wing dipping sharply.

She was almost caught in the widening mouth of the funnel. Straining her muscles and pushing herself as hard as possible, she swayed sideways and choked back a terrified scream.

"I've got you."

Two strong arms wrapped around her waist and she was yanked free, to thud against a solid chest. The scent of oak and peat familiar enough to draw tears to her eyes. She raised her gaze to meet the dark stare.

"Can you fly?" Pazir asked.

Nodding, she replied, "Yes."

"Hold on." He flapped his huge wings while flying backward. The storm battled to pull her down but Pazir's grip never faltered. Finally, her feet were free of the spiral.

"I'm going to release you in three, two, one." When he lunged to the left, she sensed the shift in the currents immediately and pushed off his chest to flare her wings.

Using every skill her father taught her, she fought to keep from being sucked back into the whirlwind force. Pazir strained to stay aloft, the tendons standing out on his throat, his arms bunched as he fought the wind whipping violently around them.

Her smaller size worked to her advantage and she maneuvered to the side of him. “Relax your wings and fly with it not against.”

She had to yell over the roar of the thunder and the bright flashes of lightning. He nodded his understanding and at last they soared high and were on their way.

Tension filled the trip back to the aerie. Everyone landed, wings soaked and hurried inside to get out of the downpour. Water trailed from Zanica’s clothes and down her legs to puddle on the ground with each step. She kept her head lowered and headed straight for the bedroom.

Behind her, Pazir’s boots thudded closely. Shivering, she clasped her elbows and entered their rooms. She spun on her heels and faced him. Not bothering to defend herself, she clenched her teeth and waited for him to speak.

She was grateful he hadn’t left her behind but she refused to let him lash her with more accusations.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

Was he going to pretend concern for her now? She held back the words she wanted to spew and simply nodded abruptly.

Bracing his hands on his hips, Pazir sighed and lowered his head to the floor. Neither of them spoke and the hot springs in the connecting room hissed and bubbled.

Suddenly, he lunged for her and wrapped his arms around her waist. He buried his face at the side of her neck and his chest heaved. “Thank the gods!”

Shocked, her arms fell to her sides and she remained still in his unexpected embrace. She’d prepared for anger, rage, not...this. Her heart softened and she raised her arms, unsure

what was going on. Finally, she settled them on his back and squeezed. “Pazir?”

He pulled away in an instant and shoved a hand through his soaked hair as he paced away from her. “You...I-I need to know why, Nica. If you tell me why you betrayed me with Gaen maybe...maybe I can forgive you.”

His mood swung from one extreme to the other. How many times did she have to explain? She’d try one last time to tell him the truth and if he didn’t accept her answer, she’d leave. It would break her but she’d do it. “I didn’t betray you, Pazir”

He spun around to face her and she ignored the way her heart leaped at his fierce countenance. “You were sneaking from the aerie, you met with members from your old volt and when I asked—gave you every opportunity to confess,” he paused and dragged in a deep breath, the pain on his face too real to be feigned, “you lied. You lied, Nica and I don’t know what I did that made you think you couldn’t talk to me and you chose to work with Gaen instead.”

The fault was partly hers. She should never have kept her meetings with Leia secret. Why had she believed a male as diligent as her mate wouldn’t discover her actions? “I was scared. You made your position on traitors clear and I knew that. When I received the first note from my cousin, I panicked.”

“Did you think I wouldn’t help you? Or your cousin for that matter?”

Pazir fought to control the residual terror working through his system at almost losing Zanica. His emotions tangled in a knot he tried to unravel. Yes, he was angry. But he was also disappointed.

That she hadn’t felt comfortable enough to discuss what was going on left him wondering what he’d done wrong. He’d thought she understood his feelings for her.

He *never* would have punished her for wanting to see to her cousin's safety. Then there was the matter of his mother. Hearing that Zanica refused aid to another didn't match what he knew of her.

"I was wrong to keep it a secret. Meeting Leia was never about you. Well, in a way, but I was trying to convince her to leave Gaen. And for the last time, I didn't help him to trap you. I would never!"

Truth resonated in her tone. He wanted to believe her. Her blue eyes pleaded for understanding and he couldn't hold out. He didn't care if it made him weak. "Walk me through what happened, Nica. Start with the letters and meetings with your cousin. Don't leave anything out."

Her voice started shaky but as she talked, she grew more confident, the sincerity hard to miss and through it all, his questions and interruptions, she didn't waver.

The main point still bothered him. "Why didn't you ask me or invite your cousin here? You had to know I'd at least hear you out."

She bowed her head and sighed, "She refused to consider it until she had a chance to talk to the male she's planning to mate."

"Bevin?" He couldn't help the snarl in his voice.

She lifted her head and stared, brows drawn together in confusion. "Yes. How do you know him?"

"Bevin is one of Gaen's closest conspirators. He thrives on violence and the torture Gaen sends him out to do."

Her face drained of color. "Wh—?"

"Did she ever say if he asked about me? Or the volt," he cut in, striding back toward her and gripping her forearms. The answer was important.

She shook her head and he believed her. His reaction to the reports confirming her betrayal had been driven by the worry he'd let his emotions lead him into a trap.

He didn't want to deal with his own vulnerability. And there in lay the biggest obstacle in their path. His inability to accept what she represented to him—a weakness. One an enemy could exploit. He inhaled sharply and let the breath out slowly. The fault rested with him. “I'm sorry I didn't trust you.”

Her shoulders squared. “No, Pazir. You didn't trust in my love. If you don't trust what I feel for you, why are we together?”

The question stabbed him in the chest. Did she think to leave him? Even as the thought sent a bolt of terror through him, he had to take his time answering. He released her arms and clenched his hands at his sides. “It wasn't...*isn't* about you. It's me. I've had to be strong for so long. My every action has consequences and I can't afford a mistake. The entire volt depends on me. They need me.”

It sounded like an excuse to his own ears. His gut hollowed out. If Zanica left him, he'd fully deserve it but he would rage in a way no one wanted to see.

“Where do we go from here? If you put the volt before your mate, there's nothing left to say. I want your love, Pazir. All that it encompasses. Trust, forgiveness, hope. I *deserve* that.”

Another shot of fear jolted him into speaking. “Nica, you are my mate. You *are* first. Always. I'm sorry. I'm sorry I let my doubt control my actions. In my heart, I knew you wouldn't betray me but it was easier to accept the evidence presented from Dieba and the others because I could protect myself.”

“From what?” she demanded, shoving at his chest. Tears glistened in her gaze as she pushed him a second time though he didn't move. He was rooted to the spot, aching to hold her. “What did you need to protect yourself from?”

“From being hurt,” he whispered past the lump building in his throat. “Loving you gives you power over me. No one in this volt could measure up to what I feel for you. I'd kill for you, Nica. Anything you ask, I'd do.”

The raw admission slipped free and he didn't care. He was a weapon at her disposal.

"I don't want you to kill for me. I want you to love me."

"I do." She had to know that.

"Aren't you going to ask me about your mother?" Her voice was hesitant.

This moment would define the future of their relationship. "No."

She jerked and he rushed to add, "I don't believe you'd ever refuse to heal someone, Nica. It's not in your nature. That much I know."

"Gaen never told me about her. I would have—"

"I believe you." And he meant it.

There was no one else for him. Only Zanica. He reached for her, his palm spanning the back of her neck to hold her in place.

Pazir cupped the back of Zanica's neck, lighting her nerve endings up. The dominant touch was reminiscent of the reasons she'd stayed and wanted to be his mate instead of leaving as she'd intended in the beginning. He exuded confidence and gave off a protective aura that comforted and reassured her at the same time.

She wanted to give in but she needed to know they wouldn't be in this exact position again if something happened in the future.

"Going forward, I'm going to be honest with you. No more secrets. I have to trust you as much as I'm asking you to trust me," she said.

He nodded, relief crashing over his features. "Agreed. Do you forgive me?"

His thumb began to stroke gently over her wildly jumping pulse. Her skin itched, her body ached and her heart...her heart was on the verge of crumbling. "Yes."

Muttering a soft curse, he dipped his head and kissed her. She groaned and gave in to his touch. The arousal she felt in his presence hadn't dimmed despite her frustration and disappointment in his lack of trust.

Communication had failed them. Physically they were aligned but she had to wonder if they could move beyond this.

Pazir eased back slightly, his lids half lowered. There was a scowl crinkling the area between his brows. His hand shifted to caress her cheek. "What are you thinking? No prevarication. Truth only."

"Truth only. I want this to work." She wanted it more than anything she could remember wanting in her life.

"It will work because we won't let it fail." He leaned close, resting his forehead on hers. "Give me a chance to make this right. Trust me when you have no reason to after how I spoke to you."

Suddenly, he dropped to his knees and looked up at her. She pressed her hands to her mouth to muffle a sob.

"I'm begging you to let me love you the way you deserve. I won't fail this time. I love you, Zanica. I want to be your mate and rule our volt together."

She placed her hands on his shoulders, his wings, then back to his face. "Alright. I'm trusting you."

He stood and lifted her into his arms, his steps sure as he went straight toward their nest and lowered her on the blankets.

"I'm wet!" she shrieked.

He came down on top of her, his damp chest against hers. "You are about to be wetter."

Her laughter was muffled by the kiss he pressed onto her mouth and she knew everything would be alright. *They* would be alright.

Epilogue

The rainy season had given Pazir weeks to renew his vow to Zanica and strengthen the bond between them. He put Dieba in charge of the volt and devoted his time and attention to her. It wasn't all sex though he would have been fine with that.

But his mate gave him something better than physical satisfaction and pleasure. She gave him love. Love in a way he hadn't experienced since his time as a fledgling. His mother had been the only one he'd loved unconditionally and been remotely close to for years but even she hadn't been as overtly affectionate as Zanica.

Zanica touched him. Often. Little intimate glides from her hands. On his shoulder, his wings. Sometimes a gentle stroke down his arm and each time, he lowered his guard around her more and more. She fulfilled a need without trying and his heart was so firmly entrenched he didn't think he'd ever be free. Nor did he want to be.

"Pazir, are you listening?"

He broke away from his thoughts to face Dieba, standing next to him on the ledge outside the aerie. His cousin wore a knowing smirk and Pazir shoved him on the shoulder, though his lips twitched with a smile. Because of his mate. She made him want to smile. There was a lightness to his spirit that hadn't existed until Zanica.

"I was thinking of my mate. You dragged me from my nest to talk about something important yet all I've heard from you is schedule and patrol changes."

Dieba rolled his eyes. "I was giving my princep an update but clearly you don't want it."

Pazir chuckled. "I'm all ears."

"For how long though?" Dieba taunted with a pointed glance upward.

Following his gaze, Pazir tipped his head back and spied his mate immediately. She flew circles around the group of

fledglings, occasionally doing a flip mid-air much to their delight. Their squeals drew smiles from those taking advantage of the sunny day to be out.

Being confined in the caverns hadn't been completely blissful for Zanica. Storms bothered his mate more than she'd let on the one time they'd spoken about the incident with her friends.

He was glad the weather had cleared enough she could get out. Her laughter and bright smile caused his chest to tighten.

“Still all ears?” Dieba asked.

More chuckles flowed from Pazir but he diligently returned his attention to his cousin. “Make it fast.”

He had every intention of joining his mate in the air and maybe getting her alone for an intimate flight together. They'd yet to experience passion in the skies the way Vultures loved. He'd rectify that today.

“It's Gaen.”

The name killed his amusement and desire in an instant. They'd been searching for the male on and off when weather permitted but had found no signs of him. “What do you have?”

“We know he abandoned his volt and has been in hiding since the attack and his attempt to kill you. With Bastien dead, his volt has also been without a princep.”

Frowning, Pazir made a hurry up gesture with his hand. If they had a location for the bastard, he needed it now. Gaen would pay for what he'd done and how he'd tried to create a wedge between Zanica and him.

“After chasing down rumors, Fynn sighted Gaen in another winged community some hours flight away,” Dieba revealed.

Satisfaction filled Pazir. “I want to know everything. Who he's staying with, the leader and any information about them.”

Dieba inclined his head. “Already working on it.”

Gaen's day was coming. He'd better look over his shoulders because Pazir planned to be there waiting to strike

the final blow.

Catching sight of Zanica again, he shoved thoughts of the other male to the back of his mind for now. He had something more important to focus on. He parted his lips and released his call.

The members of his volt responded with a return whistle, loud and echoing. His mate's wings paused and she shifted to face him. He recognized the aroused shudder she didn't manage to hide.

Today was indeed the day he loved her in sky in the manner of their Vulture ancestors. With a grin, he surged into the air to join the female who owned him.

Author's Note

I really enjoyed writing in this new world of winged characters I created and definitely want to return to it. I've tentatively decided that the series or trilogy I should say will be three books total, including this one, *Dangerous Love*.

We will be following up on Liken, Gaen and others as we follow the trail of betrayal and secrets.

My next official project is to return to the Vassi and work on Sevanti's story and another character who has made their presence felt in that universe. After that, I want to work on getting a few more of my translations done for my international readers who have been so patient with me.

If you want to stay up to date, make sure to sign up for my newsletter or visit my website at www.michellehowardwrites.com for all the deets.

Also, reviews sharing if you enjoyed the book are greatly appreciated! LOL.

Until the next book,

Michelle

About The Author

USA Best Selling Author, Michelle Howard lives in a happy fantasy world where she writes sci-fi and paranormal based romances. Love stories have been a staple in her life since she discovered some of her favorite romance novels by classic authors like Judith McNaught, Julie Garwood and Johanna Lindsey.

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