

“Mare Ozara,” another person calls out, causing Ozara’s brain to swiftly pause along with her body. “The Sea Houses need you to overlook these documents about upcoming treaties that will soon pass.”

“I could have sworn I was already given a few of those,” she mumbles, strumming through the papers only for them to all spill out of her hands. She wished to say she didn’t see such action coming and that she could handle this all, but that would be a horrendous lie that would bring no peace. Bending over, she motions to the servant to stay where they are, refusing his help. Once done, she gathers the paper and nods, heading to her study and closing the door with a long sigh.

Placing the stack of scrolls on her desk, she wanders to the unsealed window, sitting on the frame and letting the cool ocean breeze hit her. Today would be a perfect day to just laze about. The same could be said about the previous day and the day before that; before one knows it, they realize that every day here is perfect for relaxing. It’s what made Tishfai unique and oh so tempting. Who would wish to be stuck behind a desk all day and attending multiple meetings when they could be out enjoying the island’s beauty?

Hopefully, her people are enjoying it for her. She has far too much on her plate to continue daydreaming. She feels she has wasted far too much time, so she sits, sighing while looking over the mounds of papers she will have to attack.

The day begins to get away from her. A sun, once high in the sky, begins to set, casting a beautiful golden glow over the island. Ozara only realizes the time when she is forced to light some candles, getting to her feet to do it when they light up on their own. For a minute, her eyes widen in a shocked manner, but she immediately calms down when she feels the fire side of her waver, warming with a soft hum.

“You’re back early,” she remarks, heading back to her seat as the person in question walks further into the room. “How did it go?”

“Fine, I assume,” Kaian voices, releasing a soft yawn as they lean on the archway, gazing around as if they didn’t commit this room to memory long ago. “You will be

disappointed with me, though.” Ozara raises a brow, part of her not wishing to hear whatever her partner was about to say.

They glance away and shrug, “I walked out in the end. I couldn’t stand another second of it.”

“Please tell me that most of the main concerns were addressed by then, at the very least.”

“Hopefully,” Kaian snorts, wandering over to Ozara and peering down at her, rubbing their thumb over her creased brow. “Worry less, Zari. I did it in the most respectful way possible.”

“Why do I doubt that,” she snorts, escaping their hold and moving back to her seat, taking it with a huff.

“You should sleep then,” she yawns, ignoring the inquisitive look that she receives. “I will join you when I finish.”

“Tell me why I doubt that.” They take a seat on the edge of her desk and grab two of the scrolls, unfurling them and reading them with little care. Requisitions, treaties, and agreements in need of renegotiation or updates due to the change in power. Kaian believed it would be far easier if Ozara wasn’t so thorough and wanted to undo most of what her mother had set in place. They helped where they could, but they were still struggling to learn the ins and outs of phoenix law and customs, let alone Pegasus.

“Have you taken a break yet?” Ozara glances up at the question, raising a brow. “Well, then let’s take one.”

“Do you see how many documents I have to go through?”

“Yes. And I’m sure tomorrow another stack will join this one due to your absurd want to not hire clerks to aid you.”

“I have no time for corruption, not when we’re this fragile,” Ozara mumbles, continuing to mumble about things that Kaian has heard time and time again.

“Zari, we both know how I get when I’m restless and stuffed into one of these routine boxes. Humor me for now, and I will not nag you to come to bed.”

“That is a lie,” she laughs, Kaian joining her as they shrug and nod.

“You’re probably right.” They round the corner and pull Ozara to her feet, bringing her close as they gaze down into cerulean-colored eyes.

“Humor me, my love,” they whisper with a need to be near. “We have hardly seen each other these last few days, let alone spent time together.” They look her straight in the eye, conveying how much they miss her without words.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Ozara snickers, leaning into their touch, “you know I can’t say no to you when you do that.”

“Exactly why I have devoted myself to perfecting such a look. Can one fault me for wishing to spend time with my wife?”

“No need to continue trying to persuade me, Kaian,” she chuckles, “what do you wish to do?”

They pout in thought, rocking their head back and forth, “I’d love to venture more of the island. There were a few plants that I saw when flying in that I don’t believe I have ever seen before.”

“You want to go on a nature hike?” she asks, brow raised.

“Why do you say it like that? I have found myself stuffed in buildings this entire week. And the joy that I got on the flight here has only cemented the wish. So yes, a nature hike sounds best.”

“Then a nature hike we will have.” She gets to her feet with a hint of worry resting in her eyes. Something inside her tells her to turn, to turn back around and finish just a bit more before heading out. But she continues on, towards the hall and away from her home.

They remain in their bi-pedal forms since a nature hike would not be a far walk. Nature was never far on the island. That was one thing that Ozara wished most to

preserve, even with the influx of people. Her people and their relation to the earth and water were vital and unique, and if everything else was doomed, then they would at least leave behind a foundation for whoever was next.

“Ugh,” she groans, “and here I am, still thinking of the future.”

“I don’t think it’s possible for you not to,” Kaian points out, leading the way. “That is why I am here. To remind you that the present needs your attention as well.” She can’t disagree with those words, and with a content smile, she continues after them. They wander farther from the palace and towards a well-known trail that leads through a meadow. The island’s flowers are in full bloom, a cluster of colors and sizes that see no end or need to compete with those nearby. They simply exist and sway with the grass as the night’s wind breezes.

“This one,” Kaian says, walking to the side and showing her a group of starkly pink flowers outlined in a green far lighter than the emerald-toned grass.

“Oh, Mermaid Tails.”

“They can’t be,” Kaian frowns, “Mermaid Tails are blue ...” they drift off. They eye the flower closely and see that besides the color and a third petal, it does closely resemble the flower.

“Mermaid Tails change color when summer arrives. During Monsuna, they are pink and green and have a third petal that falls later.”

“How have I never noticed this?”

“You typically are in the territories during Monsuna,” Ozara points out, “look at it like you have more to explore.”

“That is true,” they voice, turning their back to Ozara as they study the ground. She raises a brow but doesn’t worry herself over it, gazing around. A few others are out, strolling through the meadows and enjoying the blossoming flowers. It was indeed a beautiful night.

The touch of another startles her out of her peaceful thoughts as something parts her hair. She reaches up and touches the velvety and fragile flower that now rests in her head.

"I couldn't help myself," they laugh, "silver looks spectacular against your hair."

"You are far too sweet with your words."

"You make it far too easy to speak them." She steps closer and leans up just enough to reach their lips, savoring the simplistic taste and feel. Kaian's arms circle her waist as they separate but then meet again. Each time they move away, they realize that they have yet to be fulfilled, so lips constantly touch and crave the other.

"We can relax here, I suppose," Kaian speaks against her cheek, trailing their lips across her jawline. "Though I do wish it was far more private."

"Come," she steps outside their hold, "I have a place in mind where we can relax."

"Another secret alcove, Ozara?"

"The first one is hardly a secret. I just know the best time to visit. I have not shared the one I speak of with anyone, not even Auri and Rivenee." Her cheeks warm as she scratches the side of her head, "it is selfish, but I used magic to better conceal the place."

"No," Kaian gasps in amusement, "why would the busy ruler of an entire house do such a thing?"

"You jest, but there are many times where I chide myself on it. Who am I to keep such a sight away from the eyes of others? I do not own this place, and it is already hard to find." She fidgets, the thoughts growing in volume about her actions and the hoggish attempt behind them. There was no other word to describe it but self-centered greed for something that was not hers.

She feels a squeeze against her hand and glances to see Kaian's fingers intertwining with hers.

“Show me.” Nodding, the two of them shift and fly to the area. Once the trees grow closer, they are forced to transform back and continue on foot. She can feel the usual pull of her magic growing the closer they get and follows it to the spot. She reveals the hole by moving some of the underbrush out of the way.

“Where?”

“A moment.” She lifts the mirage, and Kaian eyes the sizable hole that rests in the ground, leading into darkness.

“I must admit, hiding this does seem unneeded. Even if I walked across this exact spot, I would probably overlook it, let alone decide to investigate.”

“I know,” Ozara murmurs.

“Come on,” Kaian tells her, “show me how to get to this separate world of yours. I find myself excited.” She enters, working her way further and further down until her feet no longer touch the sides of the hole, and she falls, landing gracefully.

“Careful,” she calls up, and no more than a second later, Kaian falls through less than ideally.

“I am not surprised.”

“You could have warned me.”

“It is a hole, my love. What did you believe it would lead into?”

“Honestly,” they say, standing and shaking off the dirt that clings to their clothing, “I believed it would be some weird tunnel that I would have to shimmy through.”

“No. The good thing is most of the way is walking alone.”

“I would like to hold your hand if that is fine with you. Easy to get lost in here due to it being dark and all.”

“A phoenix claims a place is too dark. That is new.”

“An excuse is an excuse. Especially when it means that I can be closer to you.” Ozara snorts, seeking their hand before leading them through the cave system. The moonlight shines through a few cracks and holes, but otherwise, the area is devoid of light. That is when she spots the first landmark, glowing teal moss that clings to the wall, the light intensifying as they grow closer, as if greeting her like an old friend.

“This is the same moss in your underwater caves, right?” She nods.

“It’s interesting that it doesn’t have the same properties as the bioluminescent plants back in my home. I’m still trying to find out why.”

“Any luck?”

“Yes. But I want to research more before telling you anything. Otherwise, it would just be me rambling on.”

“It is a good thing I adore your ramblings then. Come, we’re not far.” The duo continues on, and the moss grows in abundance. Once a few spots along the wall develop to extend to the entire ceiling and walls.

“It’s like an entirely different sky,” Kaian gasps, wishing to reach out for them, but just like the stars, they always seem far too out of reach. Ozara continues, no longer needing to guide them due to the natural light. She walks a few steps more, listening to the sounds of moving water. Walking across the thin rocky bridges and thick ledges that lead one deeper in.

“Am I following the water?” Kaian shouts behind her.

“Yes. Come on.” She grows excited as a once severely gaunt stream of water thickens into a river that impatiently leads into a sizable hole in the wall. And through that hole do they come to their destination. The same moss from before lights up the enormous cave while the area’s fauna aids as best they can. Their own glowing light is not as strong, but it gives the space a divine feeling. They reside on rocky outcrops and sprout from the water.

“This is like an entirely new world,” Kaian states breathlessly. They look over the edge, “how deep is the water?”

“Deep enough for exploration of its own. I haven’t reached the bottom yet, but I know cave systems exist. Otherwise, the constant water influx would have flooded this place.”

“This is beyond amazing. Is this the only cave like this on the island?”

“No,” Ozara informs, “there are others, and they are popular places. They receive more light closer to the surface than this one.” Her head droops as she walks to the side, “I know I should probably reveal this place, but it feels like one of the last strands I have to my childhood. Before, I had to truly grow up. I’ve had this place for so long, and it has been integrable to me, feeling like there is a place where I can just be Ozara.”

Kaian lays their head down in her lap, relishing the feel of her hands against their scalp.

“I think I understand. That’s how I feel about flying. When I’m up there, far from the rest of the world, it feels like I’m just another creature with no ties and responsibilities. I’m Kaian, and that’s...” Kaian’s heart grows heavy, not bothering to finish their sentence as they let silence move in. Or as silent as the cave can grow. The water is chatty, and the sounds of creatures and insects can barely be heard when the water quiets down to allow them to speak.

“What else is bothering you, Kaian?”

“What?” they question, startled at the sudden shift in the silence. Ozara continues to play in their hair, twisting the multicolored braids around her fingers before releasing them and shifting her attention to another. She smiles, happy to have helped with these braids.

“Your mind is so far away, and you’re still just as tense as when we started. There is something wrong.”

“It was a tense day.”

“Every day is a tense day. You have been the master of letting go and unwinding. Something else is bothering you.”

Kaian's mouth remains closed as they gather themselves.

"I'm not mad that I walked out of that meeting. But the impulsiveness makes me wonder if I'm cut out for any of this. I have to rule not only my people but yours as well. Just the thought of ruling over someone," they rise to their feet, pacing back and forth along the banks. "Is it not obscenely crazy to you? That we, two people, are expected to care for thousands." Finally, they collapse, letting the sensation of the water pooling around their feet take their mind off some of their thoughts.

"Fennore took care of me in the tower. And when I was out, I relied on you. I hardly know how to care for myself, let alone people I don't know."

Ozara wanders over, sighing as she takes in her surroundings. "Remember when we were stuck in that cave? You got us out. Or when the basilisks had us cornered? You were the one who came up with a clever way to escape."

Kaian wished to tell her to stop, but something inside hoped for her to go on. And she did, naming as many instances as she could before she felt as if she was strolling down memory lane.

"My point is," she sighs, "that there has been more than one occurrence where you have been responsible and put the lives of others before your own. I know I wouldn't be here if you had not."

"Yes, you would. You're the strongest person I know."

"Are we simply going to go back and forth, complimenting one another until we find ourselves out of words?"

"Never," they laugh, drawing near and breathing in the intermingling fragrance of Ozara and the surprisingly pleasant smell of the cave. "I would never run out of words."

Hearts swell as they sit in silence. Hands lazily caress different parts of the other, with an inattentive wandering that does not match their owners. Ozara finds herself focused on every aspect of Kaian. Their breathing, smell, and movement. Each huff or deep inhale is noted. The feel of soft skin. And their flame, a gentle one that she

remembers being almost shy. As it grew, it became more bold and passionate, but it has never stopped being comforting. A thick blanket that shields the wearer from the world without a second thought.

Her body shudders as Kaian's grip on her tightens, their face projecting nothing but pure devotion.

"I love you," Kaian whispers, their forehead resting against hers as they pull her closer, "I love you."

Ozara laughs a merry one that causes her heart to sigh in happiness. To frolic under a moonlit sky with no direction or purpose. It was content, and that was all it needed.

"How long have you been holding that in?"

"Every second. I'd scream it from the top of the trees if I didn't think I would wear away the words."

"I doubt such a thing is possible," she whispers, caressing their cheek as her eyes meet theirs. How is it possible to feel so much of one emotion for someone? And even more, to hardly ever really notice. Her love for them came so naturally and true that it feels like she was born to love this person. Growing up, she wished for nothing more than to share the burden with someone she got along with. She understood no love would come to her if she wanted what was best for her people, and as a little girl, she accepted that and promised herself she would be okay. But this. This was so much more. She found not only a lover but a best friend and a confidant.

So many doubts about how she grew up and if she focused on the right thing. Constantly second-guessing herself and pondering if she made the world a better place due to them. If years from now, people will remember her as the starter of a bright and prosperous future or the one who threw the last straw that caused the horse to plummet. And Kaian. Kaian's presence alone reassured her that she was on the right course. That she could revisit that little girl and tell them to keep going, it all becomes worthwhile.

Ozara snuffles, wiping at her eye as Kaian's eyes grow wide.

“And to think I would’ve missed this for work.”

“I wouldn’t allow it. I was going to get you out of that room one way or another.”

“You would have dragged me?”

“Dragged? No. Picked you up and carried you out, yes. Similar to what I did on our wedding day.”

Ozara threw her head back as she laughed, the sound echoing freely off the cave’s walls, “you almost fell when you did that.”

“Almost.”

“You tripped so many times until I forced myself down.”

“I would have eased that fall. I refuse to let you go.”

“I will hold you to that,” Ozara sighs into their neck. Relaxing and forgetting that a world of paperwork exists miles away. Younger her would be shocked to see that her care finally resides somewhere else, with someone else.