



A
HEART
OF
SIN
AND
EVIL

CELESTE KING

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[PROTHEKA PUBLISHING](#)

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to Kaylee, Emily, Taylor, Jordon, Melanie, Jamie, Jennifer, Hannah, Donna and the whole “Project Protheka” family. Thanks for believing in the world.

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SELLISS

“I had no other choice,” I murmur as I reach for my sword, the one thing I was allowed to keep after I was caught crossing the border into Yadat and taken to King Kriseri.

Now that I’m no longer a threat in their eyes, I can keep it. That doesn’t mean they won’t kill me the minute they suspect I’m a spy, and Yadat is a suspicious land.

I have been in Yadat for a month now, and I am still growing used to the new landscape, if you can even call it that. Coming from a place, a kingdom, like Lodra, to a place like this shocked me violently.

I crossed into Yadat from Kario, which I entered from one of Lodra’s most desolate regions. Kario was almost as beautiful as Lodra, and I suppose I expected Yadat to be the same.

That is what we – the naga – are famous for after all. The beauty of our kingdoms.

Yadat, however, is anything but beautiful. It is a harsh, rocky land, surrounded by a strip of desert that runs all the way around the kingdom.

I suppose that’s why Kriseri wants to start a war, I think to myself as I pull on my new military uniform.

I am not used to it yet – to the new colors and patterns that signify that I now belong to Kriseri’s army. I examine myself in the long, thin mirror in my new, tiny bedroom in the

barracks, and a pang of something – sadness or anger, I do not know – flashes through me.

I did not want to give up my position in Lodra. I loved my kingdom. But I couldn't do anything else.

I had no other choice.

When I am dressed, I walk out of my room and into the main area of the barracks to get my tasks for the day.

As soon as I walk into the main room, I am hit by a sharp, bright ray of sunlight that comes down into the barracks through the clear glass ceiling that stretches overhead, across meeting rooms, the massive kitchen, and the strategy rooms.

Dransa, the captain of Kriseri's Royal Guard, walks up to me with the patrol schedule for the day.

"We want you on the border today," he tells me as he glances down at the sheet in front of him. "But Kriseri wants to see you first."

"Why?" I ask. I cannot stop my hood from lifting in slight alarm.

Dransa looks at me coolly. He must sense my unease.

"He just wants more intel on Lodra. I'll be there, too. Not everyone here might trust you yet, but it seems that Kriseri has taken to you quite quickly."

Dransa's tone is dry. The implication is clear. He is among those who do not trust me yet.

He turns then, and I follow him through a tunnel in the barracks that leads to the throne room in the palace.

At least one of Kriseri's most loyal soldiers admitted that Kriseri trusts you. That is why we came here in the first place.

In the month after I was ordered to leave the center of Lodra and go to 'secure the territory' close to the border with Kario, I made up my mind to abdicate my responsibilities as a soldier in the Lodrian Royal Guard.

I spent the month creating a plan that would allow me to do two things. The first was to start a new life. The second was

to get revenge on Prince Zalith, Slyth, and especially Lasta, who had sent me to the back of beyond for no reason. Could anyone really blame me for objecting to him mating with a human? Any true naga would have found fault in his behavior.

Lodra was, and still is, in a tricky position, because apparently the naga of Lodra are becoming more and more accepting of human-naga mating.

Not every other kingdom in Nagaland is happy about that.

Idiots. *Willing to start a war over filthy human pussy*, I think angrily, and my hands curl into fists as I think about the worst betrayal I have ever experienced.

I considered going to Kario first. After months of working with Lasta, it was clear that Kario was unsatisfied with Zalith's decision to take a human mate.

But Yadat, while harsh and unforgiving, is the best option.

Because Yadat has Kriseri.

And Kriseri hates humans almost as much as I do.

Dransa and I arrive in the throne room, and Kriseri, tall and fat with his hood flared menacingly around his large face, lounges on the throne.

Several gorgeous naga women stand around him, half-naked, while some servants hand him glass after glass of wine and plate after plate of food.

Despite the opulence and the attitude of laziness that hangs heavily in the throne room, Kriseri's eyes are sharp and alert. Dark intelligence shines bright in them.

He straightens when I bow before him.

"Ah, the traitor to Lodra. You know, you are currently my favorite person. Leave us!" He barks the last two words, and within seconds, the throne room is empty aside from myself and King Kriseri.

A languid smile appears on his face.

"Now..." he says.

Dransa, while loyal to Kriseri, does not seem to hate humans the way his ruler does. And while Yadat's treatment of humans is the worst, it seems that more and more naga in Yadat are beginning to accept them.

It seems that only the older naga, the King, and myself still hold the traditional, righteous views about the place of humans in our society.

In my conversation with King Kriseri, I tell him every single piece of information that I have about Lodra. We sit down and discuss Lodra's weaknesses and the very little strengths they have.

We speak about allying with Kario and Marzula, both kingdoms itching to overthrow Lodra.

"But," I tell Kriseri after he asks for my real opinion on allying with the other Nagaland kingdoms. "I think that Yadat has the power to overthrow Lodra all on its own. We don't need those other kingdoms. They'll just get in the way."

"So." Kriseri lifts his heavy body up now, his hood still flared, his eyes still bright and burning. "You think war is really coming? And you think we should... get ahead of the situation?"

The real meaning behind his words is clear.

I shrug carelessly, even though the thought of betraying the naga of Lodra makes my stomach twist and bile rise in my throat.

But then I think of Lasta. And Zalith. And Slyth.

I think of their mates. *Human* mates. Of Zalith and Lasta's half-bred children.

The bile in my throat vanishes.

"I can make no decision, my King. You have the wisdom to make the correct decision."

"Fine." Kriseri seems dissatisfied by my ambivalent answer. "You are dismissed."

It would not be prudent of me to suggest that the King invades Lodra. No, it has to be his decision ultimately.

Because if Yadat does invade Lodra, and we lose, my head will go on the wall before everybody else's.

No, I think to myself. Kriseri needs to decide this.

But that doesn't mean I cannot help him along.

Later, I patrol through the town that lies at the foot of a large hill upon which Kriseri's palace and the barracks are built.

I am with another soldier, Kryon, who is showing me the ropes.

"Well," I tell him after he has explained how patrolling works. "It seems like the rules in Yadat are stricter than they were in Lodra, anyway. I think I'll like it here."

Kryon nods sagely in agreement. I have spent most of the morning telling him about Lodra.

Unlike in Lodra, Kriseri expects his royal patrol to keep humans in line. And that means we can do what we like to them.

In Lodra, that would be unacceptable.

A few other soldiers gather around me, and I start to talk about Lodra and the war that is almost certainly going to happen – if I get my way.

"It is inevitable," I tell them, and I cannot help but smile.

This war is the only way I'll get my revenge. It cannot *not* happen.

"Lodra will fall to the other powers of Nagaland. Right now, Lodra's Royal Guard is being run by a traitorous naga who gave himself to a human woman. They have half-bred children and are tainting the royal family's image."

"Didn't Prince Zalith do that already?" one of the naga asks me, and we all burst into raucous laughter at the mention of Prince Zalith.

I spend the rest of the day, and then the week, speaking about the war. Speaking about overthrowing Lodra.

Planting seeds of what's to come. Creating murmurs that might reach the King.

And by the end of the week, Dransa is taking me back to the throne room.

“It seems your little motivational speeches have made quite an impression on His Majesty,” Dransa says.

I shrug and do not answer. Dransa presses his lips into a thin line, his face grim with disapproval.

“There he is,” King Kriseri calls, almost cheerfully. He orders everyone else in the room. “Leave us!”

Within seconds, we're alone. The only thing audible enough to reach my ears is my own breath.

“Now,” Kriseri says. “I've been thinking about our last conversation. And I think it is time we start planning a revolution. I think we owe it to the naga of Lodra.”

And just like that, Kriseri and I plan a mutiny.

MAYA

“Well,” I tell Ella, my voice as cheerful as I can make it. “At least it wasn’t worse.”

She lets out a laugh that sounds more like a sob as I examine her leg. Ella and I are out in Yadat’s fields, which are a few miles away from Yadat’s main town.

Ella and I, along with the rest of the slaves, have been out here since just after dawn. It is harvest time in Yadat, and the fields need to be culled.

Everything was going fairly well. At least, as well as it can go for a bunch of slaves forced into back breaking labor. That is, until noon when Ella fell and scraped her leg.

Actually, ‘scraped’ isn’t the right word.

The wound in her leg is an ugly gash, and the pain of it must be intense because her usually beautiful almost copper skin has gone gray with pain.

“It’s okay,” I murmur to her as I pull a few supplies from my pockets. “I’ve got just the thing here.”

When I look up, just before I pour my cleansing liquid over the wound, I see that Ella’s eyes are tightly shut and she is biting down on her lower lip.

I know that the pain must be excruciating for Ella, and despite my cheerful, optimistic exterior, I am quite worried about her.

We are slaves to the naga, and our usefulness is dependent on our ability to work.

I've seen what happens to the injured and the elderly. The naga won't be merciful if Ella is badly injured.

I know the same thoughts must be going through her head, even faster than in mine, and I try to inhale slowly so that I do not let out the gasping breaths of pain that I want to.

I need to remain optimistic. I need to remain cheerful. I cannot let her see me worry for her.

Because the more I worry, the more she will.

Ella winces as I wipe down the wound, after I clean it with the cleansing liquid. I carry a small healing kit with me at all times because I have learned the hard way how useful it can be.

"See?" My voice is calm despite my worry, despite the unsteady beat of my heart. "It isn't that deep. But I will need to stitch it up."

I look around then for the naga who dropped us here this morning. The sun is lower in the sky, so that means he will return soon to check our progress.

I cannot let him find us like this. Ella needs to be on her feet by the time he gets here, at the very least.

I can't let them take her, I think to myself as I run a hand through my tangled red hair.

"Eat this." I flash a smile at her as I hand her the pain reliever. It is a handful of dried meqixste. I always ensure that I have some on hand.

And then I start to sew.

Ella makes it about halfway through before she starts to cry.

"You only needed eight stitches!" I exclaim, trying to keep my voice upbeat. It isn't difficult, because she has stopped bleeding.

"It hurts," she whimpers.

“Just stay still until they come fetch us. I’ll do your share of the work,” I whisper. She looks at me gratefully, but she doesn’t stop crying for a long while.

The naga arrive at sundown, but we all know immediately that something is different.

Instead of loading us onto the back of the wagon that we came to the field in, they separate the men from the women and make us stand in lines.

Ella looks much better – I bandaged her leg and gave her all the meqixste – and she manages to hobble to my side.

The naga who stand in front of us are very clearly soldiers. They look at us with cold eyes, paying no attention to the men and boys who have been working with us.

They simply look at the women.

I am cold with fear, and my palms are clammy.

“This isn’t good,” Ella whispers to me.

“No,” I whisper back. “It really isn’t.”

One of the soldiers comes to stand in front of Ella and I, and he seems to be sizing us up.

He looks me up and down, and I force myself to keep my arms at my side, though I want to cross them over my chest, to hide myself.

I hate being looked at, whether it is by human men or by the naga soldiers. I keep my face to the ground until the naga reaches a hand out to my shoulder and yanks me forwards.

I may not look it, because I am short and lean, but my body is quite strong from having worked in the fields for most of my life.

But I am not stronger than the naga.

“You’re coming with me.” He shuffles me over to a small huddle of women, who have been picked out from the entire group for reasons yet unknown.

“They’re the ones we want,” he calls to one of the other soldiers, who seems to be in charge. “They’ll do nicely.”

“Yes,” the soldier in charge answers, a lascivious smile stretching across his ugly face. “They will do well to relieve the stresses of our soldiers. And I am sure that they will be well rewarded.”

Relieve the stresses of our soldiers? What the fuck does that mean?

I look around frantically at the other women in the group I am in. The one next to me, a woman I know as Lily, has gone completely white. Her hands ball into fists.

“What do they mean?” I ask.

We are hustled to a different wagon before she can answer. Shackles are placed around our wrists and when I turn, I see that Ella is looking at me, her face wan with worry, before she turns to get into the wagon that brought us here this morning.

Lily only answers when we’re all of us alone in this new wagon.

“The naga want their fun, I suppose,” she says almost wearily. An older woman with a slightly weather-beaten face nods sagely and hitches up her trousers.

“We should have seen this coming. They’re too busy to be with their own women, so they’re using us.”

“That’s what Dransa said,” the older woman speaks. I look at her carefully as I begin to understand. Hot, pulsing horror washes over me, and bile rises in my throat. “He said that the soldiers don’t have time to find mates. So they’re going to use us.”

“Why do you sound so happy about this?” Lily snaps, and the older woman smiles.

“Because I’ve never been with a naga, and I’m quite sure that it will be fun. I’m not getting any younger, ladies, and while this may seem pretty sick, it is better than the alternative.”

Her words seem to cheer some of the women up, but Lily's face remains white. The horror, warm, wet, and slimy, inside me, has become cold and knotted up.

"It'll be okay." Lily takes my hand in hers when she notices that I've started shaking. The wagon has started up and is making its way up the winding road towards King Kriseri's palace.

"What if it isn't?" I ask her. I notice the tears that splash down onto both our hands then.

We're both crying, I think distractedly.

"Don't think about that," she says sternly. "Just pray that whoever you get doesn't hurt you too badly. Just pray that you don't get sick, or worse, pregnant."

I shudder at this. My stomach turns with nausea. I swallow several times, but the urge to vomit remains.

When we reach the palace, we are shuffled out of the wagon and taken into a separate building a mile from the palace.

Upon entering, we are taken to the basement immediately.

The naga keep us all together, and I cling to Lily as our surroundings become darker and damper.

The horror inside me has turned to dread. Tears leak freely from my eyes, my grief and fear uncontrollable as the tears demand to fall.

We are split into pairs then, and each pair is placed in a cell. Luckily, I am able to stick with Lily.

I do not think I could stand to spend the night with the older woman, who I have learned is named Beth. She seems to be excited at the prospect of bedding a naga.

Lily takes one of the cots while I take the other, and together we sit in silence.

A little while later, food is brought to us, but neither Lily nor I move.

I don't think either of us are going to have an appetite for a long time.

SELLISS

I *cannot believe that they're actually doing this*, I think as I listen to the conversation going around in the main room of the barracks.

“...just wait til you see—”

“Humans weren't my first pick, but I saw them. They'll do.”

“They'll do? It'll be fun to break them.”

I decide to tune it out. This morning, I am not on patrol. Instead, I will be patrolling the border between Yadat and Marzula tonight.

I am not looking forward to it.

I will, however, be leading and organizing the patrol, as ordered by King Kriseri. I know that this is a good step forward in my career here.

It means that he actually trusts you with something, I assure myself as I try not to express my disgust at the raucous laughter that rings through the barracks.

Last night after I came back from my patrol, I heard the news.

Dransa and several other soldiers have brought a group of human women onto the palace grounds.

And they're meant for us.

Most of the soldiers in Kriseri's guard do not have time to find naga mates, or even a naga woman to relieve stress with. I know a lot of my fellow soldiers have been complaining about this. Naga women have high standards, and require a lot of time and attention to get them into bed.

To properly focus on the coming war, we can't afford to be distracted. Not even, or maybe especially, by something as frivolous as our biological urges.

That is how Dransa came up with this brilliant idea.

I cannot help but wrinkle my nose as Dransa describes exactly what he is going to do to one of the human women when he is finally alone with her.

As disgusted as I am by the idea of sleeping with a human woman just to relieve stress, I know I cannot be overtly opposed to the idea. I need to maintain a good relationship with the rest of the soldiers in King Kriseri's guard. If I do not, there is no telling how quickly they'll turn against me.

And even though I am quite sure that I have Kriseri's support, I cannot overthrow Lodra with just a fat old King.

I'll need the support of the entire Yadatian military behind me.

Terrian, another naga soldier who is close friends with Dransa, walks up to me and nudges me conspiratorially as he tells me about the human women.

"We got a whole variety of them. There's someone for every one of us. Kryon has placed dibs on the biggest one. He says he likes them soft."

"Have you been with a human woman before?" My voice is curious, though tinged with disgust, and I look at Terrian with fascination.

He shrugs and winks at me.

"A gentleman doesn't kiss and tell. But what I will say is, those human women know how to perform when they're desperate."

Dransa and Kryon overhear this, and both of them burst into laughter before they slap Terrian on the back for what was apparently a very good joke.

This is where you pretend to be excited, a voice in my head reminds me, and I let out a small laugh in response to the others as if I agree with everything they're saying.

"It's time for you to go to the cells," Dransa tells me as I straighten my uniform. I walk away from the group's raucous discussion about how they're going to fuck the human women.

"You need to pick out the one you want. I don't want any overlap. I don't want anyone starting fights over who gets a particular girl first."

Dransa's voice is serious so I sigh and nod reluctantly as he leads me out of the barracks.

The air is warm and dry, as it always is in Yadat.

How in the name of Vatia does anything grow here?

I shift my uniform, which is sticking to me uncomfortably as sweat immediately starts flowing down my back.

The cells are about a mile away from the back of the palace, and cool air envelops us as soon as we enter.

Dransa leads me down to the lower level of the cells, and I hear them. Women whispering among themselves, singing. Laughing, even.

They must hear us because they fall silent.

"Have a look." Dransa gestures at the cells. "You have one of the first picks since you've become Kriseri's favorite."

I nod stiffly at him, and keeping my hand on the hilt of my sword, I look around the cells.

There are two women per cell, and they range in age, size, skin tone, and beauty.

I don't think I find any of them more or less beautiful than a naga woman, but they're fucking human.

Aesthetically, they might be fine, but good looks won't make fucking them any better.

I stop at the last cell. Two women inside sit with their backs to me.

“Turn around.” I bark the order at them, and they both do.

One of them is tall and pale with short black hair and gray eyes.

The other one...

I tilt my head to the side as I examine her contemplatively.

I am still repelled by the mere presence of these women, but the other one in the cell is actually fuckable.

She doesn't look like she'd talk back, either, not like Aurora or Lorelai.

The human woman who has grabbed my attention is short and slim, although I can see that she is strong despite her small frame.

She has curly red hair and an almost sweet face. Her eyes are large and round, rimmed by the softest, longest, eyelashes I have ever seen. She has high cheekbones and full round cheeks. Her cheeks are dimpled sweetly, and I find myself swallowing.

“What is your name?” I practically growl the words at her.

She shudders before answering.

As if she finds *me* disgusting.

Anger surges through me at the possibility that she might find me disgusting. Me!

I am the superior species here. You should feel privileged to have the chance with me, I think, annoyance rising in me.

“My name...” Her voice is breathless, throaty, and low. I can almost hear her moaning my name. “My name is Maya.”

I nod, turn quickly, and walk back to Dransa, who looks at me expectantly.

“You need to put your contingent through their paces before you go on patrol. I’m sure you know this, but we need to keep them in the best shape they can be in,” Dransa tells me.

I nod in distracted agreement. I am still thinking about Maya and the shape of her lips.

But I push the thought of her out of my mind and head for one of the training rooms inside the barracks, where some of the naga who will be patrolling with me tonight are waiting.

“Okay,” I growl at them. They fall silent. They can clearly sense my mood. “You know what to do. I want to see you giving your best.”

A sense of satisfaction washes over me, pushing away the sudden anger that flooded me because of my preoccupation with Maya. I watch them train, my arms crossed over my chest.

I fall into training after a few hours, too, and I spar with several of the soldiers. We train until just before our patrol shift starts, and when we finish up, we head to the baths.

The conversation turns back to the women because Dransa, Kryon, and Terrian are already finishing up in the baths.

“I can’t wait to be with her,” Kryon practically moans, and the rest of the soldiers whistle and cheer.

“She’s everything I ever wanted in a woman. You just can’t get a naga like her. She’s got all these curves, and she has a great smile.”

“She’s old, though,” Dransa comments.

“That just means that she knows exactly what she’s doing,” Kryon shoots back. “The rest of you will have to train your women. Me, I won’t have to do any of the work. These older women are a gem, my friend.”

The conversation continues with Kryon describing exactly how and why he will be fucking the woman he had chosen.

And my thoughts turn to Maya again while I listen to their graphic fantasies.

You could actually do those things with her, I admit to myself. I can imagine doing a lot of things to Maya without feeling sick to my stomach.

Dransa remains quiet throughout the conversation, only commenting once or twice, and I find myself liking him more and more. He might not hate humans as much as I would like in a naga, but he doesn't seem to be jumping for joy at the thought that he is about to get his cock wet.

"I'm going to fuck her sideways, I swear." Everyone in the room bursts into cheers again as Kryon explains how he is going to contort his woman's body to get that done.

And all the while, all I am thinking about is Maya.

It wouldn't be that bad, I think to myself as I remember her vibrant, red hair, and those long eyelashes.

It wouldn't be that bad.

MAYA

“I ’m going to become a plaything soon,” I whisper to myself, clenching a fist over my chest.

I huddle in a corner, gaining any last bit of comfort before *that* happens. I take in the feeling of my body being mine alone for just this last moment.

I hear the heavy footsteps marching from the end of the hallway. Even just by walking, they sound so aggressive and violent.

The trembling begins from the tips of my fingers, up my arms, and throughout my whole body. I dig my nails in my palms so they won’t notice it.

They stop at my cell. One of the soldiers opens the cell door, throwing it wide open. The smugness on their faces is a change from their usual disgust and scorn.

“Get up. It’s your time to be useful, slave,” he barks at me.

I swallow hard and quickly, getting to my feet. Then he shoves me out of the cell and I almost stumble into one of the other soldiers.

“Hurry the fuck up. Don’t make the male wait for a wretched thing like you,” another soldier snaps while pulling my arm.

I accidentally yelp. The first soldier pulls me away from the other one. At this point, I feel like a dirty rag being passed around.

“Don’t leave bruises on her, you idiot. They can’t have any impurities on their bodies.”

“A bruise isn’t the same as a scar. Besides, it’s not like it’ll appear right when we leave her with Selliss.”

Selliss... So that’s the name of my ‘first.’

They shove me to the front so I can follow the one leading the group towards the barracks. I try to avoid looking at any of them. I don’t dare to look up or to the sides. My eyes strictly follow the steps of the soldier in front of me. I’m careful not to knock against his back or step on his tail.

I’ll have to do everything in my power to be as obedient as I can. Even if it means humiliating myself over and over again.

It’s for your own survival.

They pull my dress, nearly ripping it.

“Stop walking. We’re here.”

All the doors look the same from the outside. The difference will be who’s inside and what they’ll do.

A soldier knocks on the wooden door. “Selliss, your prey’s here,” he says, flashing me a grin.

“Open the door and leave her here,” a deep and sharp voice answers from the other side.

I’m shoved inside like a box of merchandise. The door slams behind me, and I’m left face-to-face with the one called Selliss. He sits on the edge of his large bed, staring at me with a scowl.

I don’t greet him and keep my stare down at the floor. No words are exchanged as he analyzes me from head to toe. Then I hear him get up from the bed. He slowly saunters towards me and circles.

There’s a low growl in his chest. His tongue slithers out when he comes in front of me.

After what feels like forever, he stops in front of me.

“Look up,” he orders.

Slowly, I do as he says. My eyes trail all the way up, up, up, over toned ropes of muscle and imposing, glimmering scales. By the time I reach his face, I'm nearly breathless.

He's beautiful. The thought blares through my head before I can stifle it. It's not untrue, I suppose, but beautiful doesn't seem to do this naga justice. He's alluring in the way I'd imagine a knife is alluring to a torture victim. The promise of end, of release, of sweet reprieve. I notice the diamond shapes decorating his tanned scales. He looks like he's made from the scorching sand.

His eyes narrow. "What is your regular work?"

I clear my throat. "I-I work in the fields –"

"You *worked* in the fields. Now you'll dedicate your wasteful existence to something much more vulgar. I'm sure this is nothing new to you since you've been picked."

I shake my head. "No, I never..."

He grunts and pulls my jaw towards him. "Never what? Never been nothing but a debauched piece of meat?"

"No, master," I say.

He shoves me away, nearly spitting for simply touching me. He sits back down on the edge of the bed.

"Take your clothes off."

"Wha–"

"I said take your clothes off. Slowly," he snaps.

I nod, understanding what it is that he's asking for. Trying to control my trembling hands, I bend over to reach my undergarments. I slip them from underneath me, trying to accentuate my legs.

I drop them on the floor next to me. Then, I pull the dress down to my shoulders, ready to take it off. For a moment, I hesitate as it slides down to my breasts. One warning growl from him and my breasts are exposed.

He smirks. "I thought you wouldn't be so developed."

I don't reply to his backhanded compliment and keep taking my dress off. Once the piece of clothing pools around my feet, I stand up straight, waiting for more instructions. Selliss looks pleased with my body, with the way he grins and nods slowly.

"Turn around slowly so I can see everything. Move your hands."

I lift my hands from my belly and do a full circle. The room feels quite cold, and it makes my nipples perk up. This doesn't go unnoticed by him. There's almost a spark in the slits of his eyes.

"You follow instructions well, slave. Not bad for a human."

His grin widens, and he reaches for a coarse rope hanging from his bed. He throws it at my feet.

"Put this on your neck," he says. "Make sure to adjust it well."

He takes out a longer rope that seems to appear out of nowhere and throws it as well.

"When you're done, tie the end of this rope to the one around your neck. Then give me the other end."

As confused as I am, I follow his orders diligently. Once I give him the other end, he pulls it so hard that I fall onto my knees. The rope on my neck tightens, sinking into my skin.

He laughs. "You're at a perfect height for it," he comments.

At first, I don't know what he means. Then I notice I'm right in front of his pelvis. My cheeks flush, and I avert my eyes.

Please, anything but that. Not today, at least, I pray to all the gods I can think of.

He tugs the rope. "Answer me."

"Forgive me, master. This slave waits for your orders."

“Good, good. Here, a crumb of bread as a reward,” he says as he throws me a small piece of bread from the plate on the bedside table.

Assuming he wants me to eat it, I pick it up from the floor and put it in my mouth. A knot forms in my throat as I swallow it.

He lets go of the rope. “Dance for me. Do some twirls or jumps.”

“Dance?”

He frowns. “Don’t make me repeat myself.”

I get up from my knees, looking around for any ideas. I don’t think I’ve ever danced in my life. I have an idea of what it’s like, but I’m not confident in this task.

Another tug to my neck. “Dance!”

Without a moment to lose, I just let my body take over and do whatever movements feel best. The jumps, the twirls, the swaying. I think what he’s most interested in is to see how well my body works to his use.

I lift my arms up and twirl around the room, ending the ‘dance’ with a jump right in front of him. He sneers.

“Very nice. Have a bit more bread,” he says, throwing me a small chunk of his loaf.

“What else should I do, master?”

He eyes me for a moment. “Get on your knees and beg for pleasure.”

Good gods.

I get on my knees and press my hands together while biting the inside of my cheek.

“P-Please, master... I... I need it.”

“Need what?”

“I need to... feel pleasure. I’ll die without it.”

“What a disgraceful sight. But for your hard work, I’ll give you the meal you see on the table. It’s better than the feed

that's been given to you.”

He gestures at slices of cut-up fruit. I'm not sure what it will taste like, but my stomach growls anyway. It's more than the garbage we usually get.

He pulls me by the rope and stuffs the remaining bread in my mouth, forcing me to chew. It tastes revolting, but with just one bite, I feel my stomach full for the first time in as long as I can remember.

“Get on the bed and spread your knees apart,” he says, pushing me on the mattress.

With my legs shaking, I pull my legs apart, giving him a full view of my pussy. I can't read his expression as he stares a hole into it. But out of nowhere, he lifts my thighs and presses them up against my sides.

“Like this. You should be open like this,” he says, splitting my hips open.

“M-Master, it hurts...”

He scoffs and lets me go. He shoves the other piece of fruit into my mouth, repeating the process as before.

“Do you see what you can receive if you follow orders? If you behave, I can give you much more than this. Understand?”

I nod.

“Good. Because there's absolutely nothing you can do in this place. With just one word from me, you'll regret ever being born. So play nice with me from now on.”

SELLISS

“Craso, Eracus, when you’re finished with you sparring, meet me at the armory,” I tell the two soldiers.

“Yes, sir,” they answer in unison.

Being a captain comes naturally to me. It makes me regret not going against Lasta sooner. Before he and that wretched Prince decided to discard me for a mere human.

It doesn’t matter anymore. Now I have big plans stirring up for them. They’ll soon regret not taking my side.

I’ve been training the soldiers here diligently, making sure nothing is amiss. I want to be confident they could be prepared for any order the King ultimately decides to give. Before any of that happens, I need to pick out the best set of soldiers Yadat offers.

Craso and Eracus are my first pick to pull a small coup. Nothing too big, but enough to catch Lodra’s royalty’s attention. They both have good heads on their shoulders and have immaculate strength. Not to mention, they can last hours in a sparring match.

I plan on recruiting three more, but I need to get them in the loop before anything else.

“What’s going on, Captain?” Craso asks as they approach me.

“I’ll get straight to it so we don’t waste time. I know you’re both aware of what’s going on in Lodra.”

They both nod. “Don’t tell me you’re planning to go back to kill someone?” Eracus jokes.

“Not yet, but that’s long-term. What I want to do now is create uncertainty down there. The start of a chain reaction,” I explain.

They tilt their heads, intrigued with what I have in mind. I’m sure they won’t deny working with me. We all have the same interest in mind here.

I continue explaining. “I have a plan in mind to pass us off as peasants. We travel down to Lodra’s smaller towns, where everyone knows everyone. It’s the easiest way to spread rumors and create panic.”

“But what exactly are we going to instigate? That humans are worthless creatures?” Craso asks.

“I’ll have a better plan when I gather the other naga that I want. But to give you an idea, the whole point is to make the naga there start distrusting the human slaves.”

“It won’t be easy though, Captain. Some naga already disgraced themselves with human mates,” Eracus chimes in.

“You’ll have to trust me on this. Rumors have more influence than you might think. I’ll give you the full details when I round everyone up. But I brought you here now to ask if you’re willing to join me.”

They both shrug. “I’m up for anything,” Craso says.

“So am I. Sounds like it’ll be fun and has a point,” Eracus remarks.

“Alright then. Don’t mention this to anyone. I’ll let you know when we’ll be grouping.”

They both nod and return to their training. I leave the armory soon after, ready to scout out other soldiers for this mission. It proves to be a little harder to find naga that are on Craso’s and Eracus’ level.

Ultimately, I choose two others, a close second-best to soldiers like Craso and Eracus. Anything to bring down the

human population. To make them know what their place in this world is.

I head towards my room when I see Dransa pass by, on his way towards the barracks. I wave him over, and he waits for me to catch up.

“Captain Selliss, is there something I can help you with?”

“Are you busy at the moment?”

“Not really. I was just going to get some things to prepare for my routine rounds. You need something right now?”

“Just wanted to talk to you for a moment if you don’t mind. This might take a while, so if you’re busy...”

He raises his brow bone. “Why the urgency? Has something come up?”

“Not in particular, but it’s important I talk to you about this. In private.”

He looks at me incredulously. “Alright then. What did you want to talk about?”

I gesture for him to walk with me, leading him away from the other naga. I don’t want to rile up the soldiers and create a rebellion too soon. It might not go well for me if King Kriseri finds out that I’m causing an uproar in his palace.

I lead him away from the barracks, close to the slave cells just out of the palace grounds. I look around to make sure we weren’t followed. Dransa still looks at me with doubt and keeps his distance from me.

“I’m planning to go down to Lodra soon. I’m taking four other soldiers with me,” I start.

He jerks his head back, perplexed. “What for? Does the King know about this?”

“He knows *some* of my plans. I didn’t tell him everything since I wanted this to be as discreet as possible. Besides, you and I both know he would want to ignite a war on his own.”

“That’s true. But I have to tell you that I feel uncomfortable moving without his orders,” he points out.

“I know, but trust that this mission will be an absolute secret. I don’t plan on starting a fight over there. We’re going to be undercover as peasants so no one will know it’s us creating panic.”

“Hm, so you’re going to make drama for the naga there? What exactly is your goal here, though?”

“I have some ideas, but primarily we need to spread rumors about incoming war, humans from Yadat suddenly spreading disease, or that humans have begun to rebel against us. Anything to create uncertainty with those vile creatures,” I explain.

He smirks. “I’ve never seen a male so passionate about getting rid of humans. You’re not even interested in using them?”

The slave sent to me yesterday pops into my mind. Her large brown eyes and the cascade of red curls that fell over her shoulders...

I frown. “I’m not. It makes me wonder why *you* haven’t thought of this in the first place.”

“I have, trust me. King Kriseri wants all the humans in Nagaland to be more worthless than dirt. But Lodra is still a powerful territory. That’s why I’m reluctant to go with your plan.”

“To put your mind at ease, I plan on going to the smaller towns. It won’t cause much of an uproar, and rumors spread like wildfire there. It’ll reach the whole region in days.”

Dransa takes a moment to think about it. He sighs and folds his arms, his expression still looking unconvinced. He’s the most important asset to this plan. If I can’t get him to agree, I’ll have to rethink everything.

King Kriseri knows how fiercely loyal Dransa is. Having him in this plan will make it easier to convince the King to wage war on Lodra. If every soldier in Yadat pushes for a battle, the King will have no choice.

“It feels as if there’s more to this than your hatred for humans, Captain,” Dransa suddenly says.

I grunt. “It’s a coincidence that revenge is also part of this plan. But don’t worry about that. My time will come.”

He smirks. “Fine. When do we leave?”

“I’ll let you know later. Some soldiers are coming here,” I say, noticing some naga exiting the barracks to leer at the slaves.

“I guess today’s training was pretty tough on them. Had anything to do with it?” he asks, looking over at me.

“I guess you would know if you were there,” I say with a shove.

“I was put on guard duty today. You should read the charts, you know.”

He looks over at the stone building housing the human’s cells. “I’d probably do better work if I got to take a run at one of those bitches in the cell before I go,” Dransa says as he nudges me. “The one you got looks good enough for a night.”

Suddenly, there’s a tightening in my chest at the mention of her. I find myself clenching my fists and jaw at the thought of her being with someone else.

Why the fuck does that bother me?

“You can take one of the other females,” I say.

He raises his brows. “Oh, is she your special girl? I wasn’t aware you had come around so fast. You seemed skeptical the other day.”

I scoff. “Special?”

“Well, you are the King’s favorite lately. If you want to take a concubine, you can. One of these sluts will be reserved just for you. You can keep her all to yourself, you know.”

It never occurred to me that I could do just that. I’m the one in charge here now and can do as I please with whoever the fuck I want. I was planning to fuck her since she was in my room.

But this sounds much better. I’ll have complete ownership.

She's going to be my *special* little slut to serve my every need. If I want to defile her at any moment's time, I can and will. She'll be at my beck and call like the proper slave she is.

The idea is appealing... enough so to drown out the distant alarm bells that ring in my mind when I think of her for too long.

MAYA

I hear shuffling outside of my cell and instantly start trembling. I send up a silent prayer to the gods that no one is coming to get me. The last time was bad enough.

Sure, the naga wasn't *horrible* to me, but who knows how bad he'll get? Maybe he's saving the worst of himself for when he decides to fuck me. Which I know is exactly where this is going. Just because he didn't fuck me last time, that doesn't mean he isn't going to.

Or worse, they'll give me to another naga who doesn't care about first impressions. I've seen the way some of these human women return to their cells. It's far from pretty.

A couple of the girls in neighboring cells start whimpering as boots begin walking past the cells. Four sets of them, it sounds like. I squeeze myself as far into the corner of my cell as possible, shaking even harder than before.

To my absolute horror, they stop in front of my cell, and I know they're here for me because my cellmate has been gone since last night.

Four naga, each one looking angrier than the last. None of them are the ones who came to get me last time. The one who unlocks my cell door scoffs at the sight of me.

"Get the fuck up, slave. It's time to report to your duties."

"Please," I whimper.

"Don't make me come in there and grab you. I can't hurt you, but we can make this a lot more unpleasant for you if you

resist.”

I do as he says, knowing that he isn't lying. The naga around here couldn't care less about humans. They treat us like animals, they *see* us as animals. I'm nothing to them.

I walk forward, and as soon as I near the door, two of the naga grab either of my arms and start walking before I can catch my footing. I slip and begin a nosedive to the floor, but they catch me before I get close.

“Walk faster,” one of them grunts.

“We can't hurt her,” another one says. “If the captain of the guard wants her, that makes her the most valuable slut in here.”

I feel the slightest relief at the fact that I won't be going to a different naga, but I'm still nervous that he will be in a worse mood than last time. Technically, he can do whatever he wants to me, and that's what scares me the most.

What would stop him from killing me when he's done with me? No one would stop him, no one would even blink. No one would miss me.

“Shouldn't we blindfold her? She's going to know exactly how to escape.”

“And how do you suppose she would do that? Look at her. She's not overpowering any of our guards.”

The first naga grunts in response.

He's right. I can barely keep up with them, after being stuffed in that cell for days straight, surviving on the measly prison food they throw in my cell once a day. I'm weaker than I've ever been. Besides, I know better than to try to escape. That would be a death sentence.

Finally, we reach the captain's quarters, and one of the naga bangs on the door.

“Enter,” the captain says from inside.

One of the naga opens the door for me and they let me go, allowing me to walk in by myself. Once the doors are shut

behind me, I realize that I'm a lot more scared than I thought. That is, before I spot what's in front of me.

Captain Selliss is sitting at a small dining table with two place settings. He nods for me to take the seat across from him. Is this really what's happening? He brought me here to eat dinner? Like... like an equal?

"Y-you want me to sit with you?" I ask, just in case I got the wrong message.

"Sit, yes."

I do as I'm told while trying to avoid eye contact.

"Why won't you look at me?"

"I-I didn't want to be rude, sir."

"It's master to you."

"Yes, master."

"You will look at me when we are speaking to each other."

"Yes, master."

"Are you hungry?"

Is he kidding? Does he actually think I get fed proper meals in the dungeons? The last time I ate was yesterday when they threw me a moldy piece of bread and a small chunk of old cheese. Plus a few bites of fruit he shoved in my mouth. I'm fucking starving.

"Yes, master, I am."

"Well, eat then. I had them bring a few different options. There's some dripir stew, some fried burgona, and some yellow cheese. You can help yourself."

"Thank you."

As I fill my plate, I try not to think about how weird this is. Why would he care about feeding me? Is it an appearance thing, like he thinks I'm too frail for his liking so he's trying to fatten me up?

Maybe he thinks I'll perform better if my belly isn't rumbling from starvation.

“Do you not like the food?” he asks.

“No, the food is great. I, um... I haven't been eating that well since I've been here. Not that I ate that well before I came here. I mean, I'm not complaining...”

Fuck, I have no idea what I'm supposed to say to this guy.

“You're nervous.”

He says it like a statement, but I feel the need to nod anyway.

“Don't be. No one is going to hurt you here.”

No, you're just going to fuck me for sport. And I just have to take it unless I want to die. But you're right, no one is going to hurt me.

I shovel some more food into my mouth, enjoying the only real meal I've had in a long time. To think that the rich naga out there are eating like royalty while my people starve.

When I look up, Selliss is staring at me. Not in a bad way, but not necessarily in a good way, either. I set my fork down and put my hands on my lap. Is this his way of signaling that break time is over?

He takes a sip of his mead, finally breaking eye contact. I breathe a sigh of relief now that those intense gold eyes have looked away. Gods, why am I letting this naga get to me?

“Would you like a glass of paquir? I believe I have some around here.”

“Oh, it's really not necessary. I'm enjoying the food just fine. The stew is very good, there's a taste to it that I've never had before.”

“Probably the tiny bit of frisse I had them put in it.”

“Ah.”

“So the paquir, do you want some?”

“If you have it, I'll take a glass,” I say, only because I feel like I have to.

He gets up, leaving the room and returning only a moment later with a small bottle and a glass. He pours me some of the paquir and hands me the glass.

“Thank you,” I say, offering him a small smile.

As I take my first sip, we make eye contact, and I have to quickly look away again at the intensity of his gaze.

It’s not that he makes me uncomfortable, it’s just that, well, it’s not like he’s unattractive. In another life, I might even look his way.

As I sip the wine, I feel myself becoming more comfortable. Whether that’s from the paquir or the oddly civil dinner we’re having, I don’t know. Probably the former.

I have to say, if I were going to have to do this with anyone, I’m glad it’s him. He doesn’t seem like the worst, although I guess I can’t possibly know that yet. Who knows what kind of freaky things this guy is into? I’ve heard rumors about the kind of things naga like.

“Okay, enough pleasantries. You know the deal. Put your collar and leash back on,” he says.

Selliss stands up, crosses the room, and grabs the two pieces of rope from before, tossing them at my feet. He crosses his arms, looking at me expectantly.

I swallow hard and force myself to stand up. My hand is shaking a little as I bend down and grab the ropes. I put them on as slowly as possible, trying to prolong the inevitable.

It’s not that I’m disgusted by him or anything – he’s obviously very sexy, and this could be a *lot* worse. That doesn’t make this any easier.

Once the leash and collar are on, he approaches, circling slowly around me.

“Take off your clothes.”

I do as he says, going slowly again, but this time not because I’m nervous. I do it because I know he expects something out of me, and if I do terribly, he might choose to

have them bring a different girl. Then who knows who they'll stick me with after that?

Or worse, if I'm not good enough for the captain, maybe they'll figure no one else will want me and just kill me instead. So I take my time, making a show out of it.

"You have experience?" he asks once my clothes are off.

"Not much, master." I blink up at him through my eyelashes.

He smirks as he takes in my naked body for the second time this week. Taking his time on my breasts, he glances from one to the other, before trailing his eyes down the rest of me.

Reaching out with one hand, he touches one of my nipples with his thumb, scraping me a bit with his claw. I shiver at the touch, and this seems to knock him out of some kind of trance.

"Go to the bed and wait," he says abruptly, stepping back.

I do as he says.

SELLISS

Maya is nervous. And hungry. Perhaps they don't feed the slaves as much as they should. I shrug this thought off. That matters very little to me if they're eating enough.

What matters to me is sinking my cocks inside her holes. I'm eagerly anticipating this rut session. By the time she takes her last bite, my cocks are hard.

I push the table out of the way. She is here to serve my every need, and serve me she shall.

"Take your clothes off," I demand.

I can see it now – the fear. Despite this, she stands and does what she is told.

"Get on all fours, slave."

She gets slowly to her knees and gingerly gets on all fours. She's shaking slightly. Not with cold, I'm pretty sure. She's shaking due to a mix of excitement and fear. But I'm not certain.

I'm not giving her any more thought. Time to put her to use. I wrap the end of the rope around my fist and pull tightly so that her end goes taut against her neck.

"You're not going to be able to enjoy your time if I have to keep telling you what to do, and how to do it, are you?"

Maya's eyes are forlorn. She nods a soft 'no.' I'm not certain she knows how to form the word with her lips.

It's quite alright. I can tell a 'no' when I see one. I'll fix that soon. I'll take care of her little problem.

First things first.

"Now lick my cocks, slave."

She starts licking. I shift my legs open and push her head between them.

She eagerly starts licking my balls and running her tongue up and down my long cocks. She goes slow at first, but, after laying a hand on the back of her head, I push her to go faster.

I want my cocks beaten red. I want my cocks to feel amazing. That's what they need. They've been neglected for far too long. She needs to make me feel amazing. It's the least she could do.

And she does. I can feel the blood throbbing through my veins and both my throbbing cocks. Her hot mouth feels so good. I groan as I push one of my cocks deeper into her mouth. I grab her hair and hold it tight. She doesn't fight back.

"Good girl. You'll learn, soon enough, to enjoy this. I want to enjoy my cock being pushed down your throat. I want to enjoy hearing you gag on it. I'll make you. It's what your mouth was made for. It's what your mouth needs. It's what your mouth wants."

That's what she needs to do. She needs to make my cocks feel amazing. She will. She's mine. She'll serve me.

I thrust my hips in and out. I push her face forward and feel my cock beating against the back of her throat. I hold her there. I want to feel her gag.

And gag she does – but she also moans pleurably.

Surprised, I glance down and see her own hand moving rapidly between her legs. Confused but insurmountably turned on by the picture before me, I watch her masturbate.

I momentarily consider putting a stop to it. After all, she is supposed to be an object for *my* pleasure. I could even punish her for this transgression.

But the honest truth is that I like seeing her pleasure herself. I'll let her come and then I'll fuck her.

She continues touching herself, and the moment her orgasm hits her, I forget that her mouth is wrapped around my cock.

I like watching this. I like it... a lot.

The more I watch, the more turned on I become.

She shakes, moaning against my cock. I explode in her mouth.

"Drink it all," I command.

The second the last drop of cum is licked away, I toss her on the bed and spread her legs wide. She looks terrified of my members even in her daze, but she keeps her mouth shut.

I slide my cocks inside her pussy and ass. Her back hole is tight, almost too tight. I probe and ease myself in. She gasps involuntarily.

I can feel her juices dribble down her legs. I know she is close to coming again, so I hold off. I want her to come on my cock. I want to feel her juices drip over my balls. I want to feel her warm, wet pussy tighten around me.

I don't know why but that's what I want, and that's what I'm going to get. I slide my cocks in and out of her pussy and ass, fucking them slowly.

She groans and squirms beneath me. I can feel her pussy juices dripping down my balls. I want it to drip all over. I want to feel her pussy tightening around my cock. I want to see her come. I want to watch her orgasm again like she just did.

And just like that, she does. I feel her pussy tighten around me, and it takes everything in me not to spill inside of her as she cries out and trembles around me.

I groan.

"Good little slave. You did it. I'm going to fuck you harder now. I'm going to fuck you until I fill you up."

Still, she says nothing. Not that it would matter if she did. I like seeing her squirm underneath me. I'm enjoying fucking her more than I thought I would.

I like seeing her like this. I like making her like this. I like her fear of me. It's necessary. I'm going to give her what she needs. A good hard fucking.

Apparently, it's also what I need.

I'm looking forward to it. I'm looking forward to her squirming underneath me as she comes and when the final wave of her orgasm hits her, I'm going to pleasure myself inside her without another thought.

I'm going to fuck her until I'm numb, until I'm satisfied. I'm going to fuck her until she's satisfied. But why I care about that is a mystery.

What is it about this little vixen that has me so concerned for her pleasure?

I'm going to leave her a quivering mess. A needful mess. I'm going to leave her with a hole that aches for me.

She'll never think of another man again. She'll never want another man again.

There will be only me.

She's going to be my slave, and she's going to return every orgasm I give her.

I have her pinned. I'm holding her hands over her head. I'm not letting her move. She's not going anywhere. She's mine. It's what she wants. It's what she needs. I know what I'm doing.

I can feel her squirming underneath me. I can feel her trying to free herself from my grasp. I want her to struggle. I like it when she struggles. It makes fucking her that much more pleasurable. I don't want to let her go. She can struggle all she wants, but not if she wants another orgasm.

I grab a handful of her hair and pull her head back. "Do you like my cocks inside you, slave?"

I shove my cocks deeper into her pussy and ass.

“Do you?” I repeat. “Speak!”

“Yes,” she whimpers.

I pull on the rope around her neck. “My name,” I command. “Is Selliss. Say it.”

“Y-yes, Selliss,” she stutters.

I release my hold on her makeshift collar. “Good girl. I’m going to come in you.” I shove my cocks deeper into her pussy and ass. I grab her hair and pull it tightly. “I’m going to fill you up.”

“Yes, Selliss.”

“Come for me again, slave,” I order. “I want to see your juices drip over my balls. I want to see it.”

“Yes, Selliss.”

“That’s a good girl,” I hiss through clenched teeth.

I fuck her harder.

“That’s my good little slave. I’m going to fuck you now. I’m going to fuck your pussy. I’m going to fill it up. Then I’m going to fuck your ass. I’m going to feel it squeeze my cock. I’m going to fill it up, too. I’m going to fuck your holes until I can’t take it anymore.”

Whenever she thinks of me I want her to moisten. Yes, I like that idea.

Because despite the fact that she’s human and I hate humans, I like watching her come. And I’m going to make her come a lot.

She’s not going to be thinking of anyone or anything else. She’s going to be thinking of my cock. She’s going to be thinking of pleasing me.

I’m going to make her crave my cock. I’m going to make her want my cock.

Because now she’s my slave, and my slave alone.

MAYA

As soon as I open my eyes, I'm in a panic. I lift my head up, looking around the room. Selliss is deep asleep next to me. What the fuck happened last night?

I don't even remember us going to sleep. I wasn't drugged or anything, it's just that so much happened so fast. We must have fallen asleep right after fucking.

But more importantly, I have no idea what the fuck I'm supposed to do now. I sneak another peek at Selliss, but it's obvious that he isn't waking up anytime soon.

A very big part of me is screaming that I shouldn't be in here. This man is the captain of the guard. I shouldn't have slept in his bed. I should have gone back to my cell. But at the same time, he didn't tell me to do that, and I'm only supposed to do as he says. So it's not like I'm doing anything wrong by being in here.

Even still, this feels wrong.

I carefully slide out of bed, trying not to wake him. For a second, I pace around the room, contemplating what to do before I realize that if I don't want to wake him, I sure am making a lot of noise with all this pacing.

I grab my clothes from yesterday off the floor, and with one last look at him, I slip into the bathroom. As soon as I'm alone, I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding.

This is the first time I've been truly alone in gods know how long. It's not like my prison cell has much privacy.

I put my clothes on before sitting on the bathroom floor with my back against the door. I have to come up with something quick.

“What the fuck am I supposed to do?” I whisper out loud.

It’s not like I can just leave his quarters and walk back to my cell. What if he accuses me of escaping? I’m technically his slave, and I haven’t been given an order from my master. And I can’t exactly hide in this bathroom forever.

I stand up, resuming my pacing.

“Come on, you’ve got this,” I tell myself.

Running my finger along the edge of his tub, I let my mind wander a bit. What must it be like to be a man like Selliss?

He has his own personal bathroom, equipped with this humongous tub.

“What I wouldn’t give to take one bath in this thing,” I marvel. It truly is beautiful.

I can’t help but be jealous of everything he has, everything I’ll never have.

Finally, I convince myself to leave the bathroom before I actually do get undressed and get in that bath.

As quietly as I can, I sneak back into his room. Of course, he’s still sleeping, and I don’t know if this is better or worse. Part of me just wants him to wake up already so we can get this over with, and another part of me wants to put it off for as long as possible.

I survey the room, catching sight of the window seat. Perfect. It gives me some distance from him, while still allowing me to keep him in my sight.

Once I sit down, my heart rate begins to return to normal for the first time since waking up. I watch Selliss breathe in and out, in and out, before allowing my eyes to wander to other parts of the room.

The room itself isn’t very big, but compared to my cell, it’s fucking huge. Especially his bed. I recall how soft the fabric

felt on my skin before I realized where I was and freaked out.

Despite the circumstances, last night was actually the best sleep I've had in a really long time. Maybe ever.

I realize that this window seat is actually pretty comfortable and that I could probably get a little more sleep if I wanted to. I prop my head up against the window and close my eyes.

As I drift, I allow myself to think about last night. The way it felt when he first slid inside of me. The way it felt when I came. It was unlike anything I've ever experienced before.

I try to convince myself that I didn't enjoy it because liking it would be wrong. This isn't for my enjoyment, this is for his. I'm not supposed to like it. I'm just a vessel for him to use. Nothing more.

And yet, I still replay last night in my head. Selliss pounding into me while I clung to the bed for dear life. How rough he was. No human man was ever that rough with me. No human man ever made me –

“What are you doing?”

I jump out of my skin, almost falling out of the window seat.

“H-huh?”

“I mean, why aren't you in bed?” He furrows his brows, looking almost angry that I'm over here and not there.

“I'm sorry, master. I wasn't sure what was allowed,” I answer, sitting up.

“You can't possibly get good sleep in a window. You shouldn't do that next time.”

“Yes, master.”

“Did you sleep well?”

“Yes, your bed is very nice.”

“Is that why you left it?” he jokes, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes.

“I was just nervous. We didn’t exactly talk about what would happen in the morning.”

I give him a shy smile, already feeling more comfortable around him than I did yesterday.

“Well from now on you can stay in bed as long as you want. You need your rest.”

You mean you need me well-rested so you can fuck my brains out again?

“Thank you, master.”

“How are you feeling after last night?”

“I’m okay. How about you?”

This makes him chuckle. “I’m more than okay. Was last night not good for you?”

“No, it was! It definitely was. I, um, I enjoyed myself.”

“Good. Do you need anything?”

“No, thank you.”

“Come on, everything we did last night, and you don’t need anything?” He raises an eyebrow at me.

“Okay, well... I could probably eat breakfast. Maybe a bath, too,” I say, remembering his giant tub.

He smirks. “Of course,” he says, finally getting out of bed.

I immediately look away when I notice that he’s completely naked. My cheeks warm up at the reminder of what we did the last time I saw him naked.

Selliss disappears into the bathroom, and when he returns, his mood appears to have changed. He throws on some clothes and begins heading to the door that leads out of his quarters before seeming to remember I’m there. He turns around, clearing his throat.

“I’m leaving, and I won’t be back until later tonight. You are to stay here while I’m gone. I will have some food sent up for you, along with everything you need for a bath.”

Before I can answer him, he's gone, leaving me to ponder his random change in mood. I shake my head, clearing the thought away. I don't need to concern myself with his moods, that isn't my job.

It takes me a minute to realize that he actually left me in his room for the day. Which means I don't have to go to my cell for the time being. A huge smile spreads across my face, and I can't help but jump up from my spot in the window.

I run over to the bed, jumping into it and savoring the feeling of the soft fabric. I grab a pillow and hug it close to my body, before sliding out of the bed and dancing around the room with it.

Suddenly, I realize that I'm actually going to get to use that huge bath like I wanted to. This might be my luckiest day.

After a little while, there's a knock on the door, and a servant brings in a tray of food, setting it down on the table and leaving without looking at me.

I can sense the naga woman's distaste for me, even though she was only in here for a moment. But somehow, it doesn't even bother me. Nothing can ruin this high I'm on right now.

I sit at the table, surveying my breakfast. It appears to be kaijeer, which I've only had once before. It's still steaming hot, but I can't help but take a bite immediately, which I regret immensely because it burns my mouth.

I shovel down my breakfast, eating it like it's my last meal. Maybe being a slave won't be that bad if I get to stay with Selliss. He feeds me, and he really isn't so bad. I appreciate the effort he's putting in, even if it is only for his own benefit.

It could always be worse.

Just as I'm taking my last bite, two naga women knock and then enter the suite. One of them takes one look at me and scoffs. The other shoots her a dirty look, although she doesn't look that pleased to be in here with me either.

In their arms, they carry what I can only guess are a few different soaps, a brush, and a towel. All for me. I know I shouldn't feel lucky, but I can't help it.

Still, a part of me wonders how long this can last. I know I shouldn't get too attached. This thought is what finally brings me down from my high as I get ready for my bath.

Good things don't happen to *me*.

SELLISS

“Captain, I am awaiting further orders.”

Fuck, how many hours has it been since I last had food sent up for Maya? How often do humans eat? Maybe I should have some stew sent up for her –

“Captain?”

“Huh?”

“I was saying, I’m awaiting further orders. Is there anything I can be doing right now?”

Shit, I really am distracted today.

“Yes, soldier. You are to assemble a group of men that will be heading into Lodra soon. Same task as last time. Get them ready.”

“Yes, Captain. Anything else?”

“I already gave you your fucking orders, what else do you want?”

“Consider it done,” he says before scurrying away.

I really need to get it together. I can’t be seen slacking off, just in case the King has spies around, which I’m sure he does. But I can’t seem to shut Maya completely out of my mind.

It’s not that I care for her or anything like that, it’s just that I feel responsible for her. I feel that I at least owe her for last night.

I need to train some soldiers for the upcoming war, but before I start, I flag down a servant.

“Jezel, can you please have some taura stew sent up to my room?”

Maya seemed to really enjoy it when we had it for dinner last night.

“Yes, sir. Would you like it the way you usually request it?”

“Yes, and some bread as well, please.”

“Of course. Should I wait to have it sent up until I see that you’re heading up?”

“No, it is not for me. Have it sent as soon as possible.”

“Oh... Okay, yes, sir.”

“Is there a problem?”

“No, sir, of course not. I will have the cooks prepare it now.”

I walk away without another word. Stupid nosy fucking naga.

“Dransa,” I call to a male naga close by.

“Yes, Captain?”

“We are going to resume training. Please have Terrian, Kryon, and Cazrin meet us in the sparring ring with the rest of the soldiers. Make sure everyone has a weapon to practice with.”

“Yes, Captain,” he says, leaving immediately.

“Finally, someone who knows how to take a fucking order,” I grumble.

I head to the ring, beginning my warm-ups as soldiers begin to fill in.

“Ten minutes warm up and then everyone will break into groups of five. Your leaders will be me, Terrian, Kryon, Dransa, and Cazrin. They know what maneuvers to show you. No chit-chat, we don’t have much time to prepare ourselves.

War could be coming any moment now, and we have to be ready whenever that may be.”

“Yes, Captain.”

Once I finish warming up, I grab my sword and begin showing my group some new things.

As we’re training, my mind once again drifts to Maya. I find myself wondering if she liked the soaps I had the servants bring her this morning for her bath. I imagine how intoxicating she would smell after using them. How delicious her skin would taste.

I grin at the thought of her tiny body in my huge bathtub and even come up with a few fun ideas to get the most usage out of that tub.

But mostly I just think about how she would look washing herself. How her breasts would just barely poke out of the water, bobbing up and down as she rubbed soap all over herself.

Maybe I can make it mandatory that I watch her during bath time. It’s not like she can exactly tell me no. I could make her stand up when she gets to certain places and tell her to wash slowly.

Although I’m not sure I have the patience to sit there and watch the whole time without touching her. I’d probably end up bending her over the bathtub and pounding into her, just the way I did last night.

Fuck, last night. I recall the way she screamed when I fully sheathed myself inside of her. She almost seemed like she was enjoying it, which I mean, how could she not? I’m almost positive she’s never taken anyone as big as me.

I can’t lie, Maya was a much better lay than I thought she would be. For my first human fuck, she sure left an impression. I honestly wasn’t sure how fucking a human would work, and I kind of imagined it to be pretty boring.

Maya definitely proved me wrong.

“Distracted, Captain?” the soldier I’m sparring with jokes.

“No, soldier. Just getting a little bored of you pulling the same move on me every time. Why aren’t you using the new moves we just taught you guys?”

“Sorry, Captain, old habits.”

“Those habits might get you killed on the battlefield.”

“Yes sir. Won’t happen again.”

As I continue sparring, I remember how Maya moaned my name. It was so quiet that I almost didn’t hear it. For a moment I wasn’t sure I had even heard it, but then it happened again. And again.

“Switch!” I shout, pointing to another soldier to take the place of the one I’m currently sparring with.

By the end of the training session, I’ve made up my mind. Maya will be staying in my room permanently. I don’t want her going back to her cell. I need her to be accessible to me at all times.

I convince myself that this could actually be really fun. And when was the last time I did anything for the sake of fun?

Having a plaything waiting for me in my room all day will certainly give me a mood boost. Knowing that she’s just waiting for me to come home and fuck her... yeah, she’s definitely not going back to her cell.

I don’t care what anyone has to say about it. The naga servants can sneer all they want, as long as they do what the fuck I say and leave Maya alone.

And as for the King, I’m sure he would understand my need to have her available to please me whenever I need her to. Sending men to retrieve her from her cell takes up a lot of unnecessary time that I don’t have.

My chest tightens at the thought of other men touching *my* plaything. No one will touch her but me. Right now, she is my property, and I will do with her what I please.

Hours later, I’ve finished my tasks for the day, and all that is left is for me to grab some dinner and head to my room, so I stop by the kitchen.

“Can I get some grilled thison as well as mashed burgona with butter on the side?” I ask the cook.

“Yes, Captain. I’ll put that on right away.”

“Oh, and make that for two.”

“As you wish. I can have some servants send it up for you as soon as it’s done.”

“No need, I will bring it up myself.”

I don’t need anyone disturbing me tonight.

A little while later, the food is done, and I carry the tray up to my room. Since my hands are full, I don’t knock, I just quickly unlock the door and walk in.

I set the tray down on the table and turn towards my bed. Both of my cocks harden almost immediately. Maya is sitting in the window seat once again, except this time, she is completely naked.

She seems to be softly humming to herself as she brushes her long red hair. She also doesn’t appear to have noticed me come in.

I clear my throat, alerting her to my presence. She jumps up from the window, accidentally dropping the brush.

“Oh! I’m sorry, I didn’t hear you come in,” she chokes out. She seems to remember that she’s naked and quickly tries to cover her breasts.

“Put your hands down,” I order her.

She obeys but allows her eyes to drop to the floor as if she’s embarrassed.

“Look at me.”

“How was your day, master?” she asks, looking me straight in the eyes like I asked.

“Why are you not clothed?” I ask her, ignoring her question.

“Well, while I was bathing, the servants took my clothes for washing. They didn’t leave me anything else to put on.”

I burst out laughing, unable to help myself.

“I’m glad you find that amusing.” She furrows her brows.

Not only do I find it amusing, but it actually gives me an idea. I quite like the thought of her not wearing any clothes. Easier access.

“You will stay like this from now on.”

“Y-you mean you want me to be naked all the time?”

“Yes.”

She visibly swallows but nods.

“If I see you with clothes on, there will be a punishment.”

“Yes, master. I understand.”

I send a silent thank you up to the gods that Maya isn’t fussy. She barely even needs to be trained. She does everything I ask of her. I could have some fun with that if I wanted to.

And, boy, do I want to.

MAYA

Despite my discomfort, I can't help the way my mouth waters at the smell of the meal Seliss brought with him. It looks divine. I'm not even that hungry, considering he fed me last night and again this morning, but I'm still dying to see if dinner tastes as good as it looks.

But then, almost immediately, the tone of the room shifts. I begin to suspect that my meal is going to be getting cold, as he probably has other plans before we sit down to eat. His eyes darken and I can see his arousal as clear as day.

I don't want to do this again.

Although, last time, he didn't hurt me. And he gave me more orgasms than I knew what to do with.

He walks over to me and places a hand on my shoulder, shoving me back. My treacherous body responds instantly, despite what my head is saying.

"I can smell your arousal," Selliss growls. "Spread your legs. I want to taste you."

I can't do this, I think to myself. But I obey. What choice to do I have? He kneels and my knees find themselves over his shoulders.

He licks and sucks, and I can't help but moan in pleasure. Every touch sends shockwaves of pleasure through my body.

My body betrays me even as I wonder why I want this so badly. I can only grit my teeth and bear it. There's no way he's

unaware of the emotional turmoil this puts me through, and he enjoys it.

I bite the inside of my cheek, trying to keep from screaming as he pleasures me. He licks and sucks, gently biting down on my sensitive flesh, sending sparks of pleasure coursing through my veins.

He pushes a finger inside me, crooking it in just the right way that I can't help but moan. The sound only encourages him and soon he is pushing two fingers inside me, stretching me out and preparing me for when he slides in.

My body trembles as his tongue plays with me. His other hand grips my hips, guiding me, pushing me further and further into complete submission.

I can feel the pleasure building inside me and then its explosion as I come hard against his mouth.

He pulls away and stands up, licking his lips in satisfaction.

“Good slave,” he says, and I can feel the heat rising to my cheeks.

My legs are shaking so badly from the intensity of that orgasm I don't think they'll support me.

“I'm going to fuck you now,” he tells me.

Why he feels the need to announce it is beyond me. It's not like I can tell him no, that I would rather be anywhere else than in his bed. Although I'm not sure I could say that with a straight face at the moment, anyway. My core is on fire with the pleasure of it all, even if I feel ashamed to admit that any part of me wants him to keep going.

He climbs on top of me, pushing his hard length inside me and thrusting. I cry out in pleasure and pain as he moves inside me, pushing me further and further into submission.

Heat builds up inside me, and I can't help but moan louder. I'm overwhelmed with pleasure, and I know I'm never going to be the same.

He moves faster, pushing deeper until I'm screaming out in pleasure, my body trembling from the intensity of it all.

His massive hands lock mine above my head, keeping me still, not that I could move him off me even if I wanted to.

"You are mine, slave."

Despite his thrusts, which are hard and endless, my eyes snap to his.

"It's Maya."

I immediately clamp my mouth shut. What's wrong with me? Where did that come from? Do I have a death wish?

His movements stop.

"Maya..." he says, rolling my name around on his tongue as if it has a bad taste. "But you are my slave." There is confusion in his eyes as he stares down at me.

Anger boils up within me, but I squelch it. His cock is still buried deep inside me and at the slightest movement, pleasure ripples through me.

I gasp.

He smiles.

I try to pull my wrists free from his grasp, but he tightens his hold and continues fucking me. I try to remind myself that I should hate him for this. But the sex... it's amazing.

I moan.

He smiles again, pleased with my response.

"Say it," he growls, pushing further into me.

I'm too lost in pleasure to say anything.

He picks up the pace, thrusting harder and faster. I'm panting and gasping as the orgasm builds up inside me, begging to be released.

"Tell me you belong to me," he demands.

I really have to swallow my pride, but I do so.

"I'm yours," I murmur.

He grins with satisfaction, his thrusts becoming even more intense. I cry out as my orgasm crashes over me, my body shaking with its intensity.

“I want you to come again,” he orders. “I want you to clench around my cock. I like that.”

Of course, he does. It must be a power trip for him. Unfortunately, I like it, too.

“Come for me,” he repeats.

Another orgasm builds up inside me, begging to be released. I’m so aroused, I could probably come without his help, but he won’t stop until I’m satisfied. It’s a strange thought, for him to care about my satisfaction.

“Come hard.”

But I can’t speak. I can only obey.

His face inches closer, and his hands cup my face. He looks deep into my eyes as if searching for something. I don’t know what he finds, but it seems to satisfy him because he leans down and kisses me.

His kiss is gentle but passionate. He wants me to want this. He wants me to enjoy it.

I want to remind him that it’s not his duty to worry about that. That he can do whatever he wants, whether I like it or not. Another part of me feels a little guilty, because the truth is that I *do* like it, even if I don’t want him to know that. And a third part of me, maybe the most revolting part, can’t help but think his concern for my enjoyment is a little... *sweet*.

You can’t possibly think this is chivalrous, you idiot, I scold myself.

He pulls away, and I open my eyes. He is still looking at me with that same intensity.

“This is what you want. You want to come. You want to belong to me,” he says softly, and I can feel the tears start to form in my eyes.

Yes, this is what I want. Even though my head is screaming no, my body's saying yes.

I do the only thing I can think to do. I nod.

He smiles, and I can feel the pleasure radiating from him. He leans in and kisses me again, his tongue pushing past my lips in a claiming kiss.

And then it happens. My body starts to shake, and I let out a long moan as the orgasm rips through me. I'm clinging to him as he thrusts harder, faster.

"That's it," he murmurs, his own breathing becoming labored.

As the waves of pleasure start to subside, I'm left feeling shaky but satisfied.

"You belong to me," he says, and there is no doubt in my mind that this is true.

His second cock probes my ass, and I tense. This part always hurts a little at first, no matter how gentle he is.

"Relax," he soothes.

And then he's inside me, stretching me out and filling me up. I know it's only a matter of time before the pleasure takes over again, and I find myself lost in it all.

I start to relax and my tense muscles loosen, allowing him to slide in even further.

"You're so tight," he murmurs.

I can't help but moan in pleasure.

"I can feel your muscles gripping me. So tight. You want this."

He's right, and I hate him and myself for it.

He moans, slowly pulling out of me and pushing back in. I can feel another orgasm building up within me, and I can tell he feels it, too. His thrusts are quickening and becoming more and more erratic.

Just as I'm about to lose control, he pulls out of me, the sudden emptiness leaving me feeling full and unsatisfied. He stands with a grunt and pulls me to my feet.

"Kneel," he orders.

I do as I'm told, still unsteady on my feet.

He pushes my head down to the bed.

I can see his rock-hard cocks standing straight and tall, the tips glistening with my desire. He steps closer and pushes the top one against my lips.

"Suck," he demands.

I open my mouth and start to suck him.

"As much as you can," he says through gritted teeth.

I open my mouth wider until my lips are wrapped tightly around his base. He moans, and I know he's enjoying it. And it's getting me off, so I keep going. I slide my head up and down his cock, earning myself a tight grip on my hair. He pushes me faster and faster along his length.

He moans in pleasure as I work him with my mouth.

"I'm going to come," he groans quietly.

I moan as some pre-cum slides over my tongue. He moans louder as he shoots his seed into my mouth. The taste is salty and bitter, but I don't care. I swallow every last drop and continue sucking.

He pulls my head away and pushes me down on the bed. I can tell he's going to fuck me again.

"Enough, I want to taste you again," he growls.

He drops to his knees, his mouth moving down my body until he has his face buried in my pussy.

I can't help but moan, and as soon as I do, his tongue moves inside me.

I'm so close, but he pauses.

"You want to come, don't you?" he asks.

I nod.

“Say it.”

“I want to come,” I admit, my voice almost a cry.

“Beg me.” He moves back up my body, his erection nudging my entrance.

“Beg me,” he growls, kissing me hard on the lips.

He’s pushing inside me before I get the chance. I gasp at the pleasure that rips through me.

His hands are still in my hair as he kisses me, and he’s thrusting in and out of me as if his life depends on it instead of my own.

And I’m loving every second.

SELLISS

Fourteen days.

“What do you want for dinner tonight?” I ask Maya, who is curled up and completely naked on my bed.

I swallow, my throat going dry when I look at her.

She’s stunning.

Maya looks up at me and blinks her round, brown eyes. I am, for a second, mesmerized by the movement of her long lashes.

She sits up then, lifts her arms over her head, and stretches, arching her back.

Her red hair, wild and tangled, falls down her back, and the sunlight that comes in through the window bounces off it, making her tresses gleam.

Maya and I have, somehow, grown into a routine together.

Maybe because you haven’t let her leave your room for two weeks, I think ruefully to myself.

Maya answers then in her soft voice, a voice that is the most alluring thing in the world to me, even though I am sure she doesn’t know it.

“I am going to eat whatever you want me to, aren’t I?” I nod in answer, and she gets up from the bed and walks over to the window.

The other soldiers are training outside, just below the window, and a spark of jealousy burns through me – jealousy that they might see her.

“Get away from the window,” I tell her sternly.

She obeys me immediately, her head bowed, her arms crossed over her chest.

I cannot help but think back to the first day that she arrived in my room.

She was filthy. Anyone would have been, after having been kept in the cells for days.

But even covered in grime, sweat, and dirt from the fields, she was beautiful.

The servants took her clothes to wash, but maybe they threw them out instead because they never did get returned. So a day or two later, I went into the little town below the palace.

I do not know what prompted me to have clothes made for her. But five days after that, I arrived back to my room with a bag of clothes and underwear, just for Maya.

The only thing is... I haven't given them to her yet.

Part of me, a large part of me, does not want her to leave the room at all. I want her to myself all the time.

And giving her clothes would allow her a freedom that I cannot bear to give her.



TEN.

You're no worse than Lasta. You're no worse than Slyth, or Prince Zalith.

I am in the middle of training my men. I have become completely assimilated into Yadat, and I believe that I have been fully accepted by Kriseri and his men.

I never knew how relieved I would be the day that they stopped secretly thinking that I could be a spy.

But while that burden may be gone, another one has been placed on my shoulders.

“You put it there yourself,” I mutter to myself, and Kryon, who must have heard me, throws me an odd look.

It has been ten days since I realized that I am completely and irrecoverably obsessed with Maya.

The realization dawned on me painfully slowly, and even now I don't understand how this happened.

As long as you remember that she's not your mate. She's just a human. A filthy human.

Thinking those words feels like a betrayal. A betrayal to Maya.

You're no worse than Lasta, I think again, and a surge of violent anger rushes over me so quickly, so brutally, that I find myself striding angrily out of the training room.

I keep walking until I have left the barracks completely, and I am in the open air.

I start to pace then, as I think about the last few days with Maya.

We started having real, proper conversations about twelve days ago.

I still haven't given her the clothes that I had made for her, so she has been stuck in my room for days on end. Instead, I hid the clothes at the bottom of the tall, thin storage closet in my room and then locked it.

She's so bored that she's looking forward to seeing you. Even though she probably wants nothing to do with you.

My thoughts are bitter as memories of our conversations spring forward in my mind.

“Did you have brothers or sisters?” Maya asked me one evening. Her question was innocent enough, but it made me pause.

“Yes,” I said slowly, eventually. “Why do you ask?”

“I want to know you.” Her voice was frank, her brown eyes bright as cut glass.

I pulled away from her, the movement simply a reflex. But I didn't miss the hurt that flashed across her face.

Two days later, I decided that it would be cruel for me to not have a conversation with her.

“I have a brother and a sister,” I told her as we ate. “But I haven't seen them since I joined the Royal Guard in Lodra. And I probably won't see them again for a long time. Do you have a family?”

We had our next real conversation three days after that.

“What did you do before you worked in the fields?” I found myself asking as I took her hand in mine. Her hands are hard and calloused. And I could not help but think of the contrast between Maya and the naga women in the King's throne room.

They are all soft, sweet, and pampered. While Maya has never been pampered a day in her life. She looks soft, but deep down, she is hard and sharp.

I looked at her reflectively.

I had just brought her to an intense orgasm. Her body was covered in a sheen of sweat, and her breathing was shaky.

She laughed lightly at the question before she turned to look at me, her eyes heavy and hooded with the pleasure I dragged from her.

“I lived in one of the human farms for a while. Then I was brought to help take care of some naga children. And then the King needed more people in the fields, and I didn't have much of a choice.”

She's just supposed to be a plaything, I thought to myself as I continued to question her about her life.

I threaded my hands through her hair and her eyes fell closed.

She's just supposed to be a plaything.



FIVE.

“You look properly worn out, Kryon,” Dransa says, dry amusement in his voice.

We’re having breakfast together before we all go on patrol. I’ve been on the day patrol shift since Maya came to me, and spending every night with her has really driven this whole routine home.

Kryon and Dransa laugh as they talk about everything they’ve done with their human women.

It has been five days since I realized that what I have with Maya is not what the rest of the soldiers have with the women they picked out.

What you have with Maya is the furthest thing from Kryon’s ‘relationship’ with Beth, I think to myself as I listen to the way the other soldiers talk about the way they’re fucking the women they chose.

“So, Selliss,” Dransa looks up at me, a cocky smile on his face. I try to smile back, try to look engaged in the conversation. “Is Maya as good as she looks? You know, Terrian here almost chose her.”

I swallow the growl that threatens to escape me. The very thought of anyone else with Maya inflames anger that I didn’t know existed inside me.

Then I look up and smile a wan smile at Dransa.

Telling the other men the graphic details of sex with Maya feels wrong somehow. As if I am giving away a secret, as if I am betraying Maya.

You can’t betray her, a rational voice in my head says. *She’s just a plaything. You cannot betray someone who doesn’t mean anything to you.*

“Yeah, she’s as good as she looks,” I speak quickly, to fill the silence that was steadily growing. I lean back in my chair. “And her pussy is amazing. I don’t like her, but she knows exactly how to milk me.”

Every one of the soldiers bursts into cheers and laughter as if I have just achieved something huge. Terrian comes over to clap me on the back, and several of them shake my hand.

It seems like I'm really part of the group now, I think to myself, even though a sour taste coats my tongue and bile has risen in my throat.

What would Maya think if she heard you talking about her this way? I ask myself as I get up from the table and walk slowly back to my room.

But I know that it doesn't matter. It's not supposed to matter.

Maya is just a toy. A way to release stress.

What she thinks of me is immaterial.

So why has her opinion of me suddenly become so important?

MAYA

When I open my eyes, I immediately look to Selliss' spot next to mine, noting that he's not in it. I already know that I've slept in quite late because I seem to do that every day now.

It's not like I have much else to do but sleep when Selliss isn't here.

I close my eyes, breathing in the scent that he left behind. It's grown to be a comforting scent to me. It could be because being here in his room is the safest I've ever felt in my entire life.

Not that this is the best situation I've been in, but it certainly is the safest. In here, no one can touch me without Selliss' permission. And I get the feeling that he would never give that to anyone. He has grown very possessive over the past two weeks or so.

At least, I think it's been two weeks.

Finally, I force myself to roll out of bed. I'll take a nice long bath, and hopefully, by then it will be close to lunchtime. I obviously missed breakfast. The servants have taken to not leaving it if I'm still asleep when they arrive.

I would never tell this to Selliss, though. He might think the servants are purposely not feeding me breakfast and that I'm lying to protect them.

Which I would never do. Fuck those naga women and their hoity-toity attitudes around me.

I draw myself a bath, adding a little of my favorite soap to the water.

“Smells just like home,” I murmur as I watch the water fill the tub like I’m in a trance.

Once it’s filled to my satisfaction, I turn off the faucet and lower my naked body into the tub. I’ve surprisingly gotten used to being naked all the time. I almost don’t even notice it.

Sure, the servants made quite the show of giving me weird looks for the first week, but I ignored them and eventually, they stopped.

I’ve honestly forgotten what it feels like to be covered up. Other than the fact that it’s definitely a lot warmer.

Once I’ve washed up, I hum to myself as I dry off and head back out to the room. I curl up in what has become my favorite spot, the window seat. It’s high enough that no one can see me, while I can see everything.

“Hello, Protheke. How are you today?” I ask as I brush out my damp hair. “What’s going on in the world out there, other than the rain?”

I begin to sing to myself, a simple song that I’ve made up over the past week as my boredom gets the best of me.

“Sitting alone, this empty room surrounding me. No friendly voice, no joyous sound, just silence I have found in thee. Peering outside at the gloomy rain, raindrops fall fast and sound. I long for someone to ease my pain, someone to erase my frown.”

“Your voice is very beautiful.”

I turn to see a naga woman standing by the bed with a new set of sheets. She gives me a soft smile, and it’s obvious she doesn’t hate humans as much as the rest of the naga I’ve met here. She seems very young, maybe a little naïve.

“Thank you,” I say, turning back to the window.

“Don’t talk to it,” another naga says.

It's Verna, the usual naga that cleans the room. She's a hateful bitch, and I spend every second that she's in this room waiting for her to leave. She's the worst one I've come across.

"Yes, ma'am," the younger girl says.

As they clean, I allow my thoughts to drift again. I watch soldiers come and go. I watch deliveries arrive.

There's one thing I've noticed during my daily window-watching – there are no children here. I've never once spotted a child. In fact, I never even see women out there. Only the naga men, and a few human ones who work for them.

"Fucking animal. The Captain is a disgusting man. No wonder he is the King's favorite," Verna complains from the entryway as she begins dusting.

This is the first time I've heard her say anything like this, although she is usually alone when she's here.

"What do you mean?" the other naga asks.

"You haven't heard what they say about him? Stupid girl. You should pay more attention."

"He seems to take good care of the human girl. How bad could he be?"

"It is precisely because of her that he is disgusting. What kind of a naga man would want that thing inhabiting the same place as him."

"I thought all the naga men around here were doing this."

"Yes, they're all fucking the humans, but he's the only one hoarding one in his room all the time."

I continue to eavesdrop, soaking it all in. I'm so fucking bored that I would listen to them talking about bread all day if I could. But this is much more interesting. I didn't know that the captain was the only naga keeping a slave in his room.

"Well, I'm sure the Captain has needs. He seems like a very busy man," the young girl says.

"I don't care about his fucking needs. He is not a good man."

Suddenly, something in my chest heats up. I've heard enough of this.

"Don't talk about him like that. He can get you killed, you know," I say, standing up from the window and crossing my arms.

"Ha! Is that what you think? That he can just walk around here and do whatever he wants? Well, he seems to think so, too. But you're both wrong."

"You have no idea what you're talking about."

"Don't speak to me, slave. You're a disgrace. They never should have let you things in here in the first place. Your kind has been nothing but trouble for us since you've arrived."

"It was your race who decided we could be of use around here. You act like we wanted to be here."

"Some of you certainly do want to be here, and you're taking full advantage of it."

"Verna, maybe we should leave. This conversation isn't appropriate," the girl says.

"You're right, it *isn't* appropriate to speak to a human. Grab the rest of our things. Let's go," Verna says, turning around and leaving the room.

"I'm sorry," the girl says to me as she walks around the room, grabbing her supplies.

"Wait, don't go yet," I say as she heads for the door.

She turns around and raises an eyebrow at me.

"I um... I've been in here so long, and I've been wondering... what's going on out there, in Nagaland?" I ask.

She swallows, looking behind her at the door. The girl turns back to me and shakes her head.

"I shouldn't say. She's probably out there listening."

I nod, not wanting to get the poor girl in trouble. "I understand. Can you at least tell me your name?"

"Nizara, what's yours?" She offers me a smile.

“Maya.”

“That’s very –”

“Let’s go, we have work to do!” Verna calls from the hallway.

Nizara presses her lips together and turns around, leaving without another word. Poor thing.

Once they’re gone, I am again left with nothing but my own thoughts. I return to staring out the window, wondering about the world.

My thoughts drift to my old friend, Ella. I wonder if she ever recovered properly and where she ended up.

“Are you out there, Ella?”

I can almost hear her voice answering me, soft and sweet. A stray tear falls down my face.

Lately, I feel almost as if I’m going insane. Like I’m losing my sense of self. Part of me almost believes people like Verna. Maybe I really am worthless. Maybe humans really are nothing. Perhaps I’ve just been denying it all along.

After all, I’m nothing more than a sex slave.

I stand up on the window seat, looking down at the ground below. Maybe I should just do myself and the world a favor and jump. It’s not like anyone would miss me.

The ground is far down enough that I would die on impact. It probably wouldn’t even hurt.

My stomach twists at the thought, and I scramble down, hugging my arms around myself. Not today. I’ll give it some more time.

If things don’t get better, then at least I have a way out.



LATER THAT NIGHT, Selliss finally comes home. He lets me know that dinner is on the way and that we’ll eat as soon as he’s done bathing.

I can't help but notice that his hair is slicked back from the rain. I also can't help but notice how good it looks like that.

"Dinner is here. Aren't you hungry?" Selliss asks from the table.

I must have dozed off when it arrived. I slide out of bed and join him.

"How was your day?" he asks once I've been seated.

"It was good," I answer.

I don't have it in me to ask him how his own day was. I just want to eat dinner and fall asleep. Once I've properly serviced him, of course.

I glance up at him, and he's staring at me with a strange look on his face. I know better than to take it as concern. Selliss couldn't care less about how I actually feel. And why should he?

I wouldn't want to bother him with my thoughts and feelings, anyway, not when he could just dispose of me for another girl who wouldn't complain so much. I know how to stay quiet.

"How was your day?" I ask him, hoping to sound as normal as possible.

Even though I'm anything but.

SELLISS

“It’s really no wonder why we, as well as every other region, are willing to go to war with Lodra.”

“Well, that’s the plan,” I say to the group of soldiers. “They have no one to blame but themselves. It started with Prince Zalith, then his royal advisor Slyth, and then it got to the Captain of Lodra’s Royal Guard, Lasta.”

“Fools, the lot of them. Probably can’t handle a real naga woman from the sounds of it.”

I have the soldiers bustling with frustration. I cross my arms and enjoy their heated discussion as they mull about taking over Lodra.

“The Prince himself is to be blamed for starting this damn trend of snatching up humans for mates. Tradition works for a reason, so why fix what isn’t broken?”

“Beats me. Royal bloodlines have always been pure for all the regions of Nagaland, but it looks like that won’t be the case going forward. I hear Princess Aurora has already given birth to eight children.”

“Disgusting! Coddling with humans and mixing their DNA with ours is an unforgivable sin. We need the brutality of naga species in our future leaders, not the softness of humans!”

At the mention of humans and their softness, I think of Maya. No doubt she is waiting for my return to the private quarters.

Oddly enough, I look forward to spending time with her this evening. I decide then and there that I've indulged appropriately in the conversation and excuse myself from it.

It's the end of a long day at work, and right now I need the company of Maya to unwind, not the brooding violence of my fellow naga.

Soon, I am unlocking the door to my quarters and stepping inside to see Maya resting by the window. It is open, a sight that induces concern in me, considering the steep drop to the ground below.

Maya closes it before I can say anything and then turns to greet me. She has a strained look on her face. She wears a smile on her lips, but her eyes are frowning.

Does she have something to hide from me?

"Let me get washed up, and I will join you for dinner," I say.

Sometime later, Maya and I are seated at the table. The servants have just finished serving us a portion of dripir and pour us a cup of rirzed tea before leaving.

A bottle of paquir and an unlit candle are in the middle of the table. Ever since I arrived this evening, Maya doesn't appear to have eased up.

"Are you feeling alright?" I ask her.

Her hands lay on opposite arms, rubbing them in circles. Thinking she must be cold, I light the candle.

"Would you like something to drink?"

"No, thank you."

I'm unsure of what to think, but I decide to keep trying as the night progresses. We indulge in a small meal before I strike up a conversation once more.

"You seem to like spending time by the window. Is there something out there that catches your attention?"

"Not particularly. I'm just bored up here."

She seems to look everywhere, at her tea, her meal, down between her legs, everywhere but at me.

She's even quieter than she was when I first brought her up here.

I can't help but find her behavior quite rude. I exhale a long breath to calm myself down.

"You seem off tonight, Maya."

I await her response. She stands from her chair, and I raise an eyebrow as she sits herself down on my lap.

"Enough talk between us, Selliss. How about some dessert?"

I glance down at her nude body and am reminded why I've been refusing to give her clothes.

"Did you have something in mind?" I ask her with a devious smile.

She brings her lips to my neck, planting gentle kisses until she reaches my ear. "I think you know what I want."

I feel myself hardening for a moment. Reluctantly, I gently push her off of me.

"What's the matter?" she asks me. "You don't seem like the type to reject a woman's advances."

"Something is up with you, Maya, and I want to know what it is. You've barely said a word to me this evening, and now all of a sudden you want to fuck?"

"Isn't that what I'm here for?"

I can't deny that that's her purpose, but I can't bring myself to do anything, sensing the state she's in.

"You're being awfully cold with me. There is something wrong, I can tell, so why not just tell me?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. There's nothing wrong." She laughs, but it's forced and grates on my ear.

"Why are you acting dumb with me, Maya?"

"You're the one being weird here."

I slam a hand down on the table, startling her as she jumps back.

“That’s it!” I yell. “Stop playing fucking mind games with me and be honest! I brought you up here into the warmth and comfort of my own private quarters for the better part of two weeks, yet this is how you treat me? You can’t even answer a question?”

She grunts and looks away, crossing her arms.

“Is it not enough that I plucked you away from the rest of the humans? Do you –”

I stop when I see a tear fall down her cheek. A shred of guilt tells me it would be wise not to keep yelling at her.

More than anything, I am hurt as to why she’s pulling away. I wonder if she no longer trusts me, or if she ever did to begin with. But I say nothing, not wanting to appear weak in front of her.

“Please don’t yell at me,” she whispers, her voice breaking as she seemingly fights back more tears.

What is it I’m getting wrong here? I think to myself. *Do Zalith and Lasta have something that I don’t?* The fact that they could keep their mates quite content, while I thought I had offered this human every privilege I could think of and she still isn’t happy, irks my pride.

It’s only made worse when I recall that she isn’t my mate and I shouldn’t give a damn about any of this in the first place.

Still, I try thinking of something to cheer her up, walking over to join her as she sits on the edge of the bed.

“I can see that you’re not happy here,” I say in a gentle tone. “I don’t suppose I can blame you. You know that there are humans living in Lodra, too?”

“I bet they get treated the same here,” she whispers.

“Not quite. In fact, some of them even seem happy.”

She turns to me with an inquisitive look.

“Happy? I find that hard to believe.”

“Generally speaking, humans have better treatment over there than they do here. Call it love, but things seemingly improved for them when some nagas took them as mates.”

As I continue speaking, Maya’s face lights up. For the first time this evening, she’s paying me proper attention.

“So what you are saying is that humans are free in Lodra?” she asks, a hint of excitement in her tone. Before I can answer, she’s up on her feet, looking hopefully out the window. “A place like that is where I need to be...”

I watch her as she smiles, and that’s when it hits me. Yadat and Lodra are stark in their treatment of humans, that much I already knew, but I have been fighting to destroy a place where Maya would be liberated and no doubt happier than she is here.

I keep my shame to myself as I return to the table to pour myself another drink. I stare into the glass, twirling the paquir around as I mull in my thoughts.

Damn it... How did it ever come to this? I came here to overthrow Prince Zalith and take revenge on Lasta for ousting me, and yet here I sit, investing myself into the very thing that I took issue with in the first place.

I look up at Maya, her hand placed longingly on the window. A small part of me deep within knows that she deserves better than this. I want to give her what she wants. She has earned her happiness, but it’s easier said than done.

The soldier in me reminds myself of the mission at hand. My job is to bring Lodra down and stage a takeover.

There’s no way I’m going to be able to do this and give Maya what she wants, possibly needs, at the same time.

“Damn it.”

“What’s that?” Maya remarks, glancing at me with that beautiful smile of hers.

“Oh, nothing. Just thinking about what I have to do tomorrow.”

Her smile lingers on me before she turns away. The guilt within me grows aching. All I wanted was a quick release, and now I realize just how deep I am in this mess of a situation.

If I annihilate the very place she longs to be, then what kind of monster will I become? Do I still have the strength in me to do what I came here to do?

MAYA

The aching feeling for something more than this still lingers. Last night, though, I was given the first glimpse of hope for the future when Selliss told me about Lodra, the land where humans get to roam free

It seems like a fantasy, but what reason does Selliss have to lie to me? He's been pretty honest about everything, and I trust all that he says by now.

I fell asleep dreaming about Lodra, envisioning going for an evening stroll with no one to answer to. I know there's a deeper purpose to my life other than being someone's property, to be able to live free in a safe haven for humans.

That alone should be enough motivation to risk it all, to make a break for this fabled land. So why don't I?

I turn around to look at my answer, admiring Selliss as he gets prepared for the day. I cannot deny just how good he has been to me. I may be stuck up here, but it certainly beats rotting in a cell.

If only things were different. If only he and I could live elsewhere, away from all of this madness. He is just about ready for the work day ahead.

"I guess I will see you later then?" I ask.

"No need to wait until this evening," he replies. He reaches into his closet and pulls out a bag, handing it to me. "Put this on."

I can't believe it. I'm holding the first set of clothes I've seen in two weeks. Without hesitation, I slip them on, donning a long green skirt, a deep brown corset, and a silk, sleeveless top.

"I might just never take this off again," I joke. "So, what did I do to earn this?"

Selliss offers his hand. "Come with me and I will show you," he says with a smile.

I must be dreaming, I think to myself as we leave the room. I have almost forgotten what the palace looks like outside his quarters.

Selliss leads the way through the twists and turns of the hallways, eventually bringing us to a large set of doors on the ground floor.

He pushes the iron doors open, and we're hit by an intensely bright ray of sunshine. I blink, and when my eyes open, I'm shocked to find us at the entrance to the gardens.

"By the gods," I exclaim, letting go of Selliss' hand.

I walk forward, casting a glance ahead at the maze-like garden trails before me. Gardeners tend to the various flower beds of boisterous colors and trim the neatly kept hedges. I can see fountains in the distance.

Part of me cannot believe this is real, that this is my first time stepping onto soil and grass in what seems like forever. This is so free from the confines of his quarters that it feels like the rest of me is still trying to catch up.

"This is so lovely," I remark aloud.

"I thought you might like it," Selliss remarks. "It's about time you set foot outside my room, don't you think?"

"It couldn't have come any sooner. Can we take a walk?"

"Of course. Stay by my side. I'll show you the way to an area where we can sit down for something to eat."

I cannot stop gasping and laughing in delight as I stroll through the gardens. Soon, Selliss takes us to a small table set

up in the center, where some servants have prepared us some tea and a small selection of baked goods.

“Why didn’t you take me out here sooner?” I ask, only half-joking, as we settle down.

“Well, I couldn’t have spoiled all the fun in one day now, could I?” he says. “So, I take it you like the place?”

“Like it? I love it.”

I take the cup of tea in my hands. As it warms me, I am overwhelmed by joyous gratitude, and for a little while, I forget about the troubling thoughts that had been plaguing me the previous night.

“If my knowledge serves me correctly, then you are the first human to set foot in the gardens.”

“I guess that makes me pretty special then, doesn’t it?”

“I suppose it does,” Selliss replies. He takes his mug and raises it. “Cheers.”

“Cheers!”

I sip the tea, noticing how it seems to taste better outdoors. Closing my eyes, I breathe in the fresh morning air, filling my lungs as much as I can.

“Tell me something, Maya.”

“Yes?”

“If you weren’t here in Yadat, where would you go and what would you do?”

He looks at me full of wonder, and from that alone, I can tell that his question is serious. I decide to entertain him.

“Well, I think you know where I would go.”

“Lodra?”

“Obviously. As far as what I would do, I’d have a proper life.”

“A proper life? What do you mean?” he asks, tilting his head.

“Pretty much everything I don’t have here. You know, like a hobby, a job, things to do, that sort of thing. In other words, I would live.”

He slowly nods his head. We say nothing for a short while. I appreciate the silence. Being out here is healing for me and a reminder that there still could be a glimmer of hope in my future. I had lost sight of it for so long I hardly knew what to do.

I only wonder how I can get to Lodra. Maybe one day.

After a short while, Selliss rises to his feet, signaling the servants over to clean up after us.

“Unfortunately, duty calls,” he says to me. “I know our time out here was short.”

“Don’t worry about it. You are Captain of the Royal Guard, after all. Thank you for bringing me out here, anyway.”

He smiles as I stand and wrap my hand around his elbow.

“I’ll escort you back to the quarters then.”

As we leave, I take notice of nearby guards eyeballing me strangely as we pass them by. Oddly, they seem to direct their gaze at Selliss, too.

I don’t think about it for long, for soon, we are back in his room. As I step inside, my eye catches sight of a gift basket.

Inside it are candles, a blanket, and some sweet treats.

“You’re spoiling me today.”

“Please, don’t mention it. I’ll see you later.”

“Wait!” I exclaim.

I run up to him as he stands in the open doorway, planting a kiss on his cheek.

“Don’t be gone for long,” I whisper. For the first time, I feel like a real lover and not just some playtoy kept for his amusement. The idea might be childish, but it warms me.

As I pull back, he touches his cheek, his studious gaze lingering on me. He smiles and bids me farewell.

I marvel over the gift basket for a while, but it's not long until the now familiar feelings of sadness return to me.

Despite the kindness of his gestures with the presents and the excursion to the gardens, I remember that they're only special treats.

There is no amount of bribes – because let's be honest, that's what they are – that can make this kind of life worth it. Only one thing exists that could change it all for me, but I know it's nearly impossible. I glance out the window towards the south where Lodra lies.

I spend the daylight hours indulging in the gift basket, enjoying some treats, and lighting a candle by the bedside. The aroma of rirzed induces me into a nap that passes the day until Selliss eventually returns for our evening meal.

I wake to the clanging of cutlery, peering as he sets the table. He smiles as warmly as the flame on the candle.

“Did you have a good rest?” he asks.

“Yeah,” I answer, sitting up as I rub my eyes.

I change out of my clothes into a set of satin pajamas he has brought for me before joining him. The rejuvenating day has restored my appetite, and so I indulge heavily in our meal of roasted taura and burgona.

“How was work?” I ask him.

“Fine, how about you? You must have been glad to have gotten a break from here.”

“I actually had the best day I've had since arriving here in Yadat. Thank you for that, Selliss. It really meant a lot to me.”

He smiles for a brief moment, but it changes to a frown as he peers down at his meal.

“Is something wrong?”

“Hmm?” he mutters. “Oh, no, it's just that... Well, it's just that you shouldn't expect to get used to it. We'll be heading off to Lodra soon.”

He casts a weird look my way as if he has just dropped bad news, but I grow excited at the prospect of traveling to Lodra with him.

“I look forward to that then,” I admit. “It sounds like a lovely place, and I’d be honored to accompany you there.”

A part of me wants to hope that he’s taking me there so that we can be together, properly, the way we never could be here. But I mentally push the thought aside. *You can’t read too much into it. Don’t be stupid. You’re just a plaything to him, and you’d better not forget it.*

SELLISS

My day starts off with some basic combat training. At this point in my career, I've perfected my technique, allowing me to move fluidly through the motions with ease.

My quick motions and display of skill with a weapon garners a lot of attention from fellow soldiers. While I cannot deny that it feels rewarding to have so many admirers, gone is the usual ferocity that I initially showed off when I first arrived in Yadat.

No one else seems to notice, but I just can't seem to muster the strength I once had. I now realize I am unworthy of all this praise coming my way.

"I can't wait to see this guy slaughtering those traitors in Lodra!" I hear someone say.

I know the reason for my dismay, despite my remarkable performance. With each swing of my sword, I recall just what it is that I am fighting to destroy. A happy future in Lodra for Maya.

My vision of her finally achieving happiness is slowly beginning to blur, and the voice of guilt becomes louder with each cheer thrown my way.

As I wrap up my training, a messenger informs me of King Kriseri's wishes to meet.

Must be about the plans for Lodra.

I freshen up for my meeting, thinking of the men I have stationed at Lodra's outskirts. With each passing day, their hunger for spilling blood grows more and more. The only thing that would satisfy them is Prince Zalith's head on a spike.

I have received word of how tense the situation is at the border, with both the guards and the citizens stirring up a discourse about looming war.

If things end up going according to plan, Zalith won't know what's hit him until it's too late.

I march my way to a private conference room to meet the King. Even without his throne, he is intimidating and commands respect.

Being as bloodthirsty as he is, it does not surprise me that he wishes to be directly involved with fear-mongering and the conflict itself.

"I'm glad you could join me, Captain," he says with a sinister smile. "You'll see here maps we have of Lodra and the outposts along the border."

"Very good, my King."

We delve deep into a discussion of logistics and battle strategies.

"I have men stationed here, here, and here," I say, pointing at various highlighted areas. "This spot along the border is where it's weakest, so it'll make a good entrance point for our troops during the initial offense. Also, it's located near some human settlements, so we can snatch them up for our own use."

My words impress King Kriseri but seeing him so remarkably satisfied with my intelligence and insider knowledge isn't as rewarding as it once was.

We go back and forth, exchanging thoughts and analysis on routes of attack. Gone is my once heavily present enthusiasm for bloodlust.

I think back to a meeting I had a long time ago with Captain Lasta of Lodra's Royal Guard. I recall how I had sensed unease within him when we had conversed about human mates being the cause of the looming war.

This feeling going through me... I wonder if it's what Lasta had felt in my presence.

Like Lasta, I now have a human under my watch to be concerned about. Snapping back to reality, I quickly divert my focus back to the matter at hand.

The last thing I need is for the King to suspect I have hesitations about this whole affair. I have heard of what he does to humans, and I do not wish to get on his bad side.

After all is said and done regarding our plans for the attack, I bow to him and excuse myself.

"Do not be so hasty to leave, Captain," his booming voice says. "There is another matter which you and I need to discuss."

"Of course, my lord. What may that be?" I ask, feeling my heart drop to my stomach.

"Yesterday evening, I received a lot of troublesome complaints regarding you and the human that you took from captivity. It appears as though you and her have been spending an extensive amount of time together."

I draw myself up, trying to exude every ounce of confidence. By no means am I scared of King Kriseri, but I fear what he will do to Maya should he find out my true feelings for her.

"What of it, if I may ask? I am enjoying having my way with her," I reply, saying the first thing that comes to my mind.

Kriseri laughs, but I cannot tell if it's because I humor him or if he's seeing right through my lies.

"That may be the case, Captain, but a fair point has been brought to my attention. This human of yours is said to be receiving standard naga meals instead of rations, fine clothing, and was out on the palace grounds yesterday. I'm sure you can

understand that it's turning a lot of heads within the royal court."

"Including yours, sir?" I ask.

"I am by no means an advocate of what you're doing, Selliss. You should know that much given my opinion about humans. However, because it is you, I am willing to make an exception due to your outstanding performance in your role."

Does this mean that Maya is safe?

"So there's no demand attached to your observation?"

"Not for now. Maybe you get a kick out of pampering your human property, so consider it a reward. Just keep in mind that you only have so much liberty when it comes to how you treat your human. After all, you are very aware of how we normally handle them here."

By chance, I hear a human woman's scream echo through the castle.

"Perhaps though, it would be in your best interest to back away from this girl and have your way with others. Show the naga that they have nothing to worry about. What do you think?"

"Maybe I will, if there are any on offer."

I don't mean what I say, but I need to keep the King happy.

"I think it is a good thing that you're heading away to Lodra very soon in any case. Some distance from your human will keep you on your toes and your mind sharp. I expect nothing but success if your skills on the battlefield match the capabilities of your mind."

"Oh, well, I was thinking about bringing the human with me. It'd be too much of a waste of time to teach another how to please me."

"No," he says instantly. "I will not let any human leave this property. Besides, my men do not need a woman to distract them once the mission is underway. I'm sure you understand."

Shit... Maya won't be happy to hear she has to stay behind.

“Of course, sir.”

“And as far as your girl goes, perhaps I will have her sent back to the holding cells, or better yet, I’ll get rid of her for good. Not many naga take interest in a used woman when there are always more.”

Somehow, I hold my composure as he reveals his thoughts.

“I’m sure there will be no need to do such a thing.”

“I am sure, too, but I cannot blame you for getting a little carried away with your human. You need to understand that I need you to keep your head straight for the war. That’s what this is all about.”

“Let me reassure you that you have nothing to worry about. I will be away in Lodra for a few months, so I’m inevitably going to forget about the girl. Why waste dulling a weapon on the killing of a human, anyway? We need as many prime swords and axes as we can get for this conflict, so as Captain of the Royal Guard, I would not recommend taking the trouble.”

If anyone else was this resistant to the King, they’d be lucky to come out with only a broken limb or two. Given that it’s me though, Kriseri takes my words into serious consideration.

“I didn’t think of it like that.”

“Precisely. Besides, ignore this nonsense about a used woman. Keep the girl around and save her for the lower-ranking men. After all, they get second priority, do they not?”

“Indeed,” Kriseri says with a smile. “This meeting is adjourned then. Begone.”

I leave him be, but my troubles are only beginning.

On one hand, I am glad that Maya is safe for the moment. Luckily for us, King Kriseri doesn’t believe in the concept of love, so he seems to have taken my words well.

On the other hand, Maya isn’t going to be able to come with me to Lodra. Despite the uncertainty looming over our

future with each other, I know that no matter what, I cannot let any harm come her way.

MAYA

He steps toward me, and I can really appreciate him. Physically, he's a specimen. He's so tall and strong. Lately, he's... changed. He's been trying.

He wants me to please me. I'm not dreading the intimacy that I know is coming. In fact, I'm looking forward to it.

I want the orgasms I know he is going to give me. The endless mind-blowing orgasms. I shiver at the thought.

Selliss unlaces the back of my dress and watches as it pools around my feet.

"You're beautiful," he murmurs in my ear.

His voice, deep and gruff, makes me moisten. Those compliments make me feel something...

"Lay down," he orders. "Spread your legs."

I know what to do. I spread my legs for him and soon, his tongue is on me and he's tasting me, consuming my juices.

He moves his tongue faster, and I feel my back arching. I dig my fingers into the sheets and it's almost painful. Impossibly painful and yet so satisfying.

Biting my lip, I move my hips along with his tongue.

He's gentle one second, rough the next. His teeth nip at my clit and I jump, but he holds me steady as he ravishes me.

I moan. I arch. I nearly scream as his teeth graze my clit again.

“Mmm,” he moans. “You taste so good.”

He grabs my hips and pulls me toward him. My body convulses as he laps at my pussy.

“Selliss,” I moan his name.

He sucks at my clit and thrusts two fingers into my wet, waiting pussy. My body shudders as he fucks me with his fingers.

“You like that?” he whispers.

He begins sucking at my clit while he thrusts into me. It’s too much. I feel something building inside me. It’s like a volcano ready to erupt. My toes curl, my fingers grip the sheets, and I can feel the impending orgasm.

I gasp as he pushes his fingers into my pussy faster and faster, fucking me with his fingers. He sucks at my clit, nibbling and nipping.

“Selliss,” I moan and whisper his name more as my pleasure mounts.

“Come for me, Maya,” he whispers.

I explode, coming hard. My body rocks and my muscles tighten as wave after wave of pleasure ripples through me, making every inch of my body feel alive.

My pussy clenches around his fingers, and my juices drip down his wrist. I breathe hard, taking in deep, gulp-like breaths.

“That’s it,” he murmurs.

He keeps his fingers inside me but bends down to kiss my lips softly.

Gently, he runs the fingers that were inside my pussy over my lips, and I can taste my sweet juices. I suck at his fingers, swirling my tongue around them and tasting my own tangy flavor.

“I love it when you taste yourself on me,” Selliss whispers. “It’s so fucking hot.”

He pulls his fingers out of my mouth and sits back on his knees. I spread my legs and watch him as he undoes his pants. His big hard cocks spring free.

I lick my lips, thinking about how I am going to taste him. That's one of my favorite things to do lately.

Before he can get to me, I'm on my knees and stuffing one of his cocks into my mouth. I let him fuck my mouth for just a few minutes before I deep-throat him. I love the way he moans.

I bob my head faster and faster, letting his cock hit the back of my throat before I pull back up. I suck at the tip, swirling my tongue around the tip. I'm tightening my lips around his cock when he pulls out of my mouth.

A soft moan escapes my lips. I want his cock.

"Suck it hard," he orders.

I do as he says. I suck his cock hard and slow like I'm savoring his flavor. His cock is thick in my hand. I squeeze it. It twitches in my hand. He tastes so good. I swish my tongue all around the head, making him groan.

He grabs my hair and guides me to take him fully into my mouth. I relax my throat and let him slide down into my mouth. I sink down until my chin touches my chest. He holds me there, deep in my throat. I gag, but I don't move. I swallow around his shaft.

"Fuck," he moans, pulling at my hair as I swallow him.

Selliss pulls his cock out of my mouth and stands. I watch him as he climbs off of the bed and finishes removing his pants and shoes. Walking back over to me, he grabs my legs and pulls me toward him, spreading my legs.

"Suck me," he orders.

He grips his thick cock in his hand, the other cock this time, and guides the tip to my lips. I open my mouth and he slides his shaft into my waiting mouth.

He moans and grips my hair to guide me as I bob my head up and down on his thick cock. He tastes so good.

He reaches down and squeezes my breasts, pinching my nipples until I cry out from the pain of it.

Pain that I've learned to enjoy.

My tits bounce free, and he cups them in his hands, teasing my nipples with his thumbs.

He pulls his cock out of my mouth, and I cry out.

"Please!"

"Please what, Maya?" he asks.

"Please fuck me. Please, Selliss."

"You want my thick cock inside that tight little pussy of yours? Do you want my big cock, Maya? Hm?"

"Yes," I breathe. "Yes, Selliss."

He looks me in the eyes, and I feel a heat growing in my pussy. I know what he is going to do. I am going to come hard for him, just like I do every time he fucks me.

I spread my legs, and he kneels between them. His cocks are rock-hard. I reach down and grip one of his shafts in my hand.

He lets me stroke his cock for a few moments before he lowers himself on top of me. He thrusts into me, and I cry out. I wrap my legs around his waist and dig my heels into his lower back. He pounds his cock into me, over and over.

His cock is thick. Too thick. I love it. I feel it rubbing against my sweet spot. I'm so, so close.

"Selliss!" I cry out as he pounds into me. "Fuck me, Selliss!"

"Come for me, Maya."

I do as he asks. I come hard as he thrusts into me over and over.

Huge, growling moans tear out of my throat. My whole body is shaking, quivering as the orgasm tears through me.

"Fuck, Maya. Your pussy feels so good."

His words are lost in the intense pleasure of my orgasm. I'm moving my hips with his thrusts, and I can feel my pussy tightening around his shaft.

I cry out as my body shudders with each thrust. His body rocks against mine, and I feel his cock twitching and pulsing inside me.

He grabs my ass and pounds into me so hard I can hear his balls slapping against my swollen pussy.

"Fuck!" he groans. "I'm going to come, Maya. I'm going to fill you up with my thick load."

He pounds into me once more and holds himself deep inside me. He empties his hot cum inside me.

"Fuck," he moans. "Fuck, Maya. Your pussy is so tight."

I raise my hips to meet his already slow thrusts. My pussy throbs from how hard he fucked me. I keep my legs wrapped around his waist, wanting to feel the last of his load filling my pussy.

He slides out of me, and I feel a warm, wet fluid dripping down my thighs.

"Fuck," he groans as he grips his cock.

Watching me rub my sticky pussy makes his still-hard cock twitch, the one that didn't come yet. I can't wait to feel that big cock inside me for the next round. He climbs off the bed and I get on my knees and watch him as he strokes his big, thick cock.

He strokes it a few more times before he grips his shaft at the base. He rubs the head against my lips. I open my mouth, and he slides his cock inside. I suck at his head, rubbing it against the roof of my mouth.

He pulls his cock out of my mouth and grabs my hair.

"You want this, Maya?" he asks.

"Yes," I reply. "I want your big, thick cock."

"You want to come like this?" he asks.

“Yes,” I pant. “I want you to fuck my mouth.”

“You want me to come in your mouth?” he asks.

“Please,” I beg. “Please, Selliss.”

He moves his cock so that the head is right against my lips. I part my lips for him, and he slides the head inside my mouth.

He slides in just a little, then pulls back out.

“Fuck,” he says.

I open my lips wider, and he slides his cock in a little further. This time he pushes in a little deeper. He pulls his cock out of my mouth and does it again, pushing his shaft into my mouth a little deeper.

“Open your mouth wide,” he orders. “Wider.”

He pushes his shaft into my mouth, and I open as wide as I can. He pushes it in deeper and deeper until the head of his cock hits the back of my throat.

I suck at his shaft and feel his snake tail slide between my legs to massage my incredibly swollen clit.

I’m not sure how much more my pussy can take. I’m not sure if I can handle another orgasm.

I tell him this, and he laughs.

“You will come again if I want you to.”

The pressure on my clit increases until I explode. I can hear him chuckling as he fucks my mouth.

He pushes a little further into my mouth each time, rocking his hips with each thrust. My mouth is stretched to its limits to accommodate his thickness.

I take my hands and grip the base of his cock. I suck at his head, sliding my tongue around it and into his slit.

He moans and pushes his cock deeper into my mouth, sliding into my throat. I feel his balls against my chin.

He pulls his cock out and slides in again. This time he doesn’t stop. He slides his shaft into my throat again and again.

He is moaning and grunting, and I can feel his balls tightening against my chin. I use my tongue and lips to please him and feel his shaft twitching in my throat.

He pulls his cock out of my mouth, and I look up at him. His eyes are wild, and he looks like he's about to burst.

“Fuck, Maya!” he cries out. “I’m going to come again. I’m going to fill your hot little mouth with my cum.”

“That’s it,” I pant. “Fill my mouth. Come for me.”

He thrusts into my mouth once more, and his cock starts to twitch. I feel his head swell and a hot, thick liquid coats my tongue.

I swallow every single drop, and I’m happy to do so.

SELLISS

“**Y**ou smell amazing,” I whisper into Maya’s neck, flicking my split tongue over her skin.

She giggles. “Thank you, master.”

“Don’t call me that unless you want to start something again,” I warn as I grope her ass.

She jumps and playfully hits my chest. “But you like being called that. You feel like Selliss is too casual for us.”

“It is. Everyone calls me by name or Captain or sir. You’re the only one that calls me ‘master.’”

“Well, because it’s true, isn’t it? You are my master, and I’m your slave.”

I frown. “I know you’re making a joke to get a rise out of me. But like I said, don’t start something you’ll regret.”

Her mischievous giggles tell me that she indeed tried to purposely make me angry. I roll my eyes as she huddles closer to me. Her bare skin pressed against my scales is a type of pleasure I didn’t know existed.

Nor the scent of her body after ravaging her like a beast. To think a human could taste so sweet. Of course, only Maya could taste like this. There’s no other reason why I’d be so addicted.

She looks up at me, caressing my face with her small hand.

“I’m sorry, master. I didn’t mean to make you angry. You just look so handsome when you are,” she coos while

fluttering her eyes.

“Maya...” I frown, not sure if I’ll be able to have self-control. “Where did this sudden boldness come from?”

“I guess I learned it from you?”

“Keep at it, and you’ll find out more about me,” I snap at her.

Another melody of giggles as she wraps her arms around me, or at least tries to. I rest one hand on her thigh and the other over her waist. I’m trying to get as much warmth from her as possible before I have to live without it for months.

It can be longer if King Kiseri wishes to...

I hate to even think about it. Wasn’t Dransa the one who said I could take a concubine? Then they try to throw it in my face, saying I’m spending too much time with her. What if I’m just horny all the time? Isn’t that good enough?

I look down at Maya, who peacefully has her eyes closed. She rests her head over my chest, being comforted by my heartbeat and the rising of my body. I tighten my hold on her, not wanting to accept the King separating us.

“Maya,” I murmur.

She lifts her head, looking at me with a loving gaze. I’m caught in it for a moment, unable to believe that such a sight exists only for me. I can’t help myself touching her face, and she leans against my touch, wanting more of it.

“Do you know who you belong to?” I ask, my voice lowered to a threatening tone.

It doesn’t faze her, a soft smile tilting her full lips. “I belong to you,” she responds with a sigh.

She reaches up to give me a chaste kiss. But I’m not satisfied, and I pull her to devour her lips once more. I stop myself before going further than this, knowing that it’ll make it harder for me to leave. It’s the most self-control I’ve had to practice since the day I was born.

After breaking the kiss, her face is flushed and her large eyes are in a daze. Even her erotic expression makes it hard for me to stop. I just want more and more of her. It will never be enough.

I want to claim her. Make her completely and inevitably mine.

To do something so obvious that no one could ever question it again. And the answer is clear as day when I look down at her enticing body.

I'll fill her up with my eggs. I growl possessively, gripping her waist.

That's exactly what'll make her all mine. I'll ruin her so no one will ever dare touch her, even when I'm gone. Just how Zalith did to Aurora and Lasta to Krista.

I can already imagine how she'll look pregnant by *me*. She'll look wonderful with a swollen belly, growing *our* children inside of her. That way it'll be obvious to everyone that she's mine and mine alone. That I'm the one who ruined her body and will be the *only* one to do it for eternity.

The primal urge to fill her this very second gnaws at my insides. I want to destroy her to the point of her begging me to stop. But that's only the greatest part, when I fill her completely and bind her to me. There won't be an escape for her.

Anywhere she goes, everyone will know she's mine. And there'll be no place in this world where she can hide.

"Selliss?" Maya snaps me out of my thoughts. She stares at me full of worry. "Are you okay?"

"There's just many things going through my head."

"Like what?"

"That I want to fill you up with my eggs," I say bluntly.

She flinches from surprise. "Fill me with your eggs?"

"Yes. You know that's how naga claim their mates," I explain. I hold her chin up. "That's what I want to do with

you, at least someday. I'm not asking you to do that right now. I'm just daydreaming."

Relief washes over her, with a hint of disappointment. Mine is even greater compared to hers, though. But even I know that's a terrible idea because it will ruin everything.

"Can I ask, why not now?"

"Don't tell me you're eager for something like that?" I muse.

She blushes and shakes her head. "It's not that but, I don't know. I find it quite romantic, I guess," she says, laughing uncomfortably.

I grab her jaw. "You do? You'd like that?"

"Well, I suppose so. Don't you think so as well?"

"Of course, I do. I'll be obsessively thinking about it until it comes true. But now's not the time for it. As much as I want everyone to know you're mine, it can put you in danger."

I can't just advertise to everyone she's mine. I have to *hide* it. If the King were to find out, there'd be an issue. It wouldn't take a genius to know whose eggs she carries. To be able to hide a pregnancy, I'd have to make sure she *never* leaves my room. I'd have to be the only one that comes in and out of here.

"Do you really think they'll punish me even if I'm carrying your eggs?"

"I honestly don't know. They could force you to lose my eggs to punish the both of us. They could kill you to punish me. I know my position will be stripped or I'll be sent somewhere else."

This will surely be what sends the King over the edge. I don't want to risk having her killed because of my selfish wishes. There's already too much to risk right now.

Fuck, I hate to even think this is how Lasta felt with his wench.

I refuse to even be sympathetic to what he went through. He still betrayed me in the end for a measly slave that's not even worth a speck of dirt. I'll commend him for being able to hide it even after I confronted him.

Which means this arrangement is fine. I just have to lay low and not attract attention. What I do in my bedroom is no one else's business but my own. But I'll be more discreet when bringing Maya in here. I'll have to do it in the dead of night when most of the palace is sleeping.

I don't want anyone to think that they're free to do what I'm doing. There shouldn't be more mixing between humans and naga. Maya is the only exception to this since she's not like the other humans in the slightest. Any kin from us will be exceptional, even compared to Zalith's children.

I just have to be patient, that's all. I'll resolve the issue I created and then I can be with Maya without problem. Even if it can take years before that can happen.

I have to take care of the mission.

I sit up, sighing, preparing myself to tell her the bad news. I fix Maya on my lap so she's straddling me.

"Listen, I can't take you with me to Lodra. The King's giving me grief over this whole thing, and I have to abide by his orders for the meantime," I explain while grazing her cheek.

Suddenly, she moves away from my touch. Her eyebrow wrinkles as she glares at me.

"Maya?"

"What do you mean you can't take me with you?" she shouts. "You promised me I'd go with you!"

What the fuck?

Where's this sudden attitude coming from? She even makes fists while still scowling at me. I'm not even pissed. I'd say I'm overwhelmingly confused as to why she suddenly switched to show such an assertive side.

"I know I said that. But the King –"

“I don’t care what the King said, *you* promised!”

Now I’m the one growling at her. Where’s the submissiveness she usually shows me? She should’ve just accepted it and continued to pleasure me.

“Who do you think you’re speaking to?”

MAYA

Is it possible I've had too much wine? Could it be that I've been holed up in here for far too long? Or maybe it's just that I've been pulled on a string like a puppet for far too long.

Whatever the cause, I cannot believe that I've just let loose at Selliss. I blink and quickly rub my eyes just to make sure I'm not dreaming. Sure enough, he's still standing there in front of me, looking as surprised as I am.

This can be added to the list of things done by a human for the first time in Yadat.

"I have been kept locked up in this stupid room for... gods know how long, I can't even remember off the top of my head, and I bet you don't either! To you, I'm nothing but another book on your shelf, making empty promises to finally do something with me while all I do is collect dust until I'm forgotten about."

"Hold on a moment," Selliss remarks, raising a palm. "Not only is that an unfair accusation but a false one, too. We both know I've taken you outside of this room."

"Oh, yes, how could I forget that one occasion where you actually remembered there was a world out there for me to see? How silly of the stupid human woman, right?"

Selliss reels back. He clearly never expected me to blow up and neither did I, but I can't stop myself from spilling out all of my frustrations.

At this moment, I don't care what awaits me if there's a punishment coming for me. All that matters is that Selliss knows what he's done. I am not giving up without a fight.

"I'm confined to this fucking cage of a room," I blurt, gesturing to the space surrounding us. "I guess I really am nothing more than your prisoner."

"You... you've never spoken to me in such a manner before, Maya," the traitor says. He almost sounds hurt, which only makes me angrier.

"Yeah, I haven't, and do you know why? Because all you've ever heard me say is 'yes' and have me roll over and spread my legs, all so you could get off. I cannot believe just how long I've let myself be subjected to this kind of treatment for you, do I really deserve anything close to a dignified life?"

"What the fuck do you want from me?"

I shove a vase off the nearest table, watching it shatter just like my hope for a better future, each shard a piece of my broken heart.

"I want you to listen to me!" I yell. "And to stop thinking of yourself, just for once!"

"You're kidding," he says. "I have done nothing but think of your welfare. You really have no clue, do you?"

"Oh, yeah, because betraying me and leaving me fearing for my life is just such a heroic display of your concern for me. When Kriseri ordered you to leave me behind, I bet you didn't even consider what would happen to me."

"Actually, I did, so don't go spitting out accusations left and right when you weren't even there!" Selliss retorts.

"Is that so? Well then, did you voice anything on my behalf?"

Selliss reels back, waving his hands dismissively at me.

"I knew it," I hiss through clenched teeth. "Who knows if I'll even live past the day you depart? I don't know what to say to you anymore... Do you know what the worst part is?"

He peers up at me, his face ridden with guilt as it should be.

“Your... your company is the only thing that has kept me going these past few weeks. There were times I considered jumping out the damn window to end it all, but in those moments of darkness, you were the sunshine that made things clear for me.”

“Maya...”

“All this time, I’ve been so damn good to you, obeying your every whim, yet after all of my efforts, this is what I get in return. Tell me something, Selliss, is this really all you think I’m good for? Just to sit and await my next command, all day, every day?”

“I...”

“Do you know how excited I was to finally get out of this shithole? I thought I could find a better life out there with you, but at the last minute, you decide I’m not worthy enough. Maybe I don’t get you off anymore, maybe that’s really why I’m being tossed aside.”

Selliss picks up a rag and wipes himself off, avoiding any eye contact with me as I stare him down. He looks away so I can no longer tell how he feels.

For all I know, the guilt has become replaced with carelessness. Perhaps he didn’t hear anything of what I just said, but what more does it matter now? He turns for the door.

“Where are you going?” I ask.

“I... I have to leave. Duty calls.”

“Yeah, run away like the coward you truly are, you piece of shit!”

I grab a bowl and hurl it at the wall. It smashes to the ground, but still, Selliss does nothing, only closing the door gently behind him. The twist of the lock is the final nail in the coffin.

Somehow, even after my rage-filled tirade, I am still alive, and in one piece. I am not yet done.

I grab the tablecloth and whisk it away, sending all that remains to the ground. The carpeted floor becomes stained with all sorts of colors, from the bright red blood of raw meat to the deep, rich blue of paquir.

Right now, though, I can't find a single damn to give about Selliss' furnishings. It continues with the bed as I rip the sheets away, tossing them to the opposite side of the room.

I empty each and every one of the drawers and cabinets. I hurl all of his gifts to the ground.

When all is said and done, the room is an unrecognizable mess. I retreat to the seat by the window, exhaustion replacing my anger. It anchors me down in place as I look south towards Lodra, at a future that was robbed from me all because someone decided I wasn't good enough to live happily.

As I sit there, a tear falls down my cheek. I dash it away, holding back any further crying for the time being. In my self-convincing to maintain my composure, all of Selliss' words about Lodra echo in my head.

I think of all those humans getting to live freely and roam in the southern region. While I'm happy there exists a place where humans aren't treated like garbage, I can't, for the life of me, figure out why I don't deserve that kind of liberty.

The gods know I've been through more than enough harsh treatment at the hands of Kriseri's men.

"So much for a change," I remark, gazing longingly at the sky. "We could have been happy together, Selliss... But you just had to go and change that, all for your beloved King, didn't you?"

I rest my head back against the wall, closing my eyes as I wallow in defeat. I can't help but laugh at my despair, finding it utterly ironic how the one man who had been a beacon of hope ultimately ends up standing in my way.

I am his slave after all. What kind of owner strives to make life better for his property? Just when I thought I found someone different, it turns out he's no better than the rest of them.

“Maybe I’m the fool for thinking I had a shot.”

Over the next few hours, I go from silence to crying, to talking aloud to myself and repeating the cycle over. Eventually, it comes time for my evening meal.

At any moment, Selliss is going to come through that door. He’ll likely beat me for the mess I’ve made, but I’m done caring.

I rise to my feet when I hear the lock opening. I’m surprised to see it’s just a servant carrying a tray of food. He stops and casts a glance at the floor.

“I suppose I’ll just leave this here,” he says, placing the tray down on the vanity.

“Where is Selliss?” I ask.

“Captain Selliss asked me to inform you that he is still busy with his duties. He will return to you later in the evening.”

I roll my eyes and turn away as the servant takes his leave.

I guess Selliss is already scouting for a replacement, fucking any and every girl in sight. Coward.

“I’ve just about had it. I’m done being stuck here.”

Deciding on my next move, I find the nearest sack and begin stuffing it with my belongings. I pack some fruit, water, a blanket and a change of clothes.

It’s clear to me that if I’m ever going to get out of here, it won’t be with the assistance of Selliss. Sometimes, a woman just has to look out for herself and not wait for empty promises.

Once everything is ready to go, I gorge on my dinner. I do not know when my next hot meal will be so I cannot afford to take any chances.

There is still some light in the sky. I only hope that whatever Selliss is busy with, it keeps him occupied long enough for me to make my escape.

“I’ll take my leave when it’s dark,” I mutter. “If I wait around for Selliss to return, he’ll just haul me back to prison himself.”

I’m scared for what happens next, but I’m not going to die in a cage. It’ll be on my own terms.

SELLISS

I'm by my lonesome in the training room. There is a great force of guilt overwhelming me, something that I need to rid myself of. I can't exactly take it out on Maya, so I figure the next best thing is to put myself through a grueling workout.

Just as I'm about to begin, I am interrupted by the sudden entrance of a servant. I spin around in anger, hissing through my teeth.

"How dare you?"

"I deeply apologize, sir! It's just that the time for your evening meal has come."

"Do I look like I'm ready to eat?" I ask sarcastically.

"Well, what about the human woman in your quarters? She likely expects you back at any moment."

"Hmm," I mutter. "This is true... Deliver her dinner. She can start without me, inform her that I am too busy with my duties. Do not disturb me again or there will be consequences."

"Understood, Captain Selliss."

The servant makes a swift exit. I exercise with the ferocity of a madman, smashing personal records and moving through the motions more fluidly than I ever have before.

I am the angriest I have been since Lasta and Zalith ousted me from Lodra, perhaps even more so. As deep as I am in

rage, I am still a reasonable man, and I know that no blame can be placed on Maya.

Rather, I'm disgusted with how this entire situation has worked out. Worse yet, I know she has every right to be as irate as she is. I would be too if I had been filled with hope, only to have it ripped away.

She needs her space to calm down, and so do I. If I do not expend this dangerous energy on the weights, then someone's head would have to do, and I don't exactly feel like being arrested for murdering one of my own on this dreadful evening.

As I exercise, I am fueled by all the hate-filled words that came out of Maya's mouth. There was no word of a lie when she accused me of leading her on.

Despite how right she may have been, however, she is still wrong about my concern for her. That's why I hurt as much as I do in this moment.

What drove me out of that room was the guilt of knowing I may have just screwed her for the worse.

As much as I hate to admit it, I have come to care for Maya. Becoming sentimental for a human wasn't what I came to Yadat for. It was to take revenge on someone who had done the very same thing.

Yet, my murderous motives are long gone now. Things have only grown worse, and I am deep in the thick of it.

I cannot afford to throw away the life I have built for myself here. No one has ascended the ranks like me and blown away the King with all he has to offer.

Going back to Lodra and being recognized will spell certain doom for me. It's not like they would host a homecoming party with open arms. If anything, they will kill me on sight for defecting to a hostile region.

I finish my exercises but do not yet feel it is the right time to return to Maya. As I contemplate what to do next, a bunch of soldiers enter the training room, rejoicing at the sight of me.

“There he is! We were looking everywhere for you, Captain! We’re going to celebrate tonight with a couple of ales, what do you say?”

“Celebrate? What’s the occasion?” I ask.

“Our soon-to-be victory over Lodra, of course!”

These guys are getting way too ahead of themselves... But I could do with some numbing to this mess.

“Fuck it, let’s do it.”

We all head to the canteen where the drinking is already underway. I drown myself in ale, joking with others about Prince Zalith and mocking how soft Lodra has become.

Some of the soldiers have their human slaves strip and dance on the tables, with one even offering a personal lap dance to me. Her owner has no problem with it, seeing as I’m their captain.

I reject it, passing her to the next in command and downing another few pints of ale. Each of us try our hand at a throwing knife competition, which I narrowly win.

The contest comes to an abrupt end when a soldier drops the knife and ends up with a blade stabbing their foot in place. We all laugh it off.

One by one, the men pass out, their human property draped over their laps. There’s no more ale left, and so I take my leave, somehow still sober enough to head back to my quarters on my own two feet.

I lay my hand gently on the door, knowing who is waiting for me on the other side. I only hope that Maya has calmed down by now, at least enough to give me a listening ear.

Drawing a deep breath, I step inside.

“What the fuck?” I blurt.

It’s like a storm has come and hit the room. Everything is turned upside down, and worse yet, I cannot see Maya.

“Maya!” I yell while carefully stepping over fallen items. “Maya, where are you?”

I curse when I step on a broken vase. I look to the bed where empty plates and bowls lay.

I check underneath the bed and in the bathroom, but she is nowhere to be seen.

“There’s no way she could have left,” I mutter.

I’m proven wrong when I can’t find any of her stuff. My anger returns, causing me to flip over the dining table. It blends in with the rest of the mess.

Retreating to the edge of the bed, I bury my head in my hands. Fear slowly grows within me, knowing what potential dangers she could run into outside this room.

Maya may have felt trapped in here, but at the very least, she was protected.

“Surely there is something that can be done.”

I contemplate each and every possibility that crosses my mind. I could always issue a search party. She couldn’t have gotten far.

No, I better not do that. I want her back on my own accord, not in the hands of others. If the men get their hands on her, they’ll throw her right back in the holding cells if she’s lucky. I can’t bring her back here without raising eyebrows.

I look out the window in the direction of Lodra, where I am hit with a terrifying realization.

“What if... what if this is for the best? No doubt, King Kriseri has his eyes on me, and I can’t treat her as she deserves without causing further discourse.”

I look then to the spot by the window where she would always sit, wishing she was there right now.

Her absence makes its mark, leaving a hole in my heart in the shape of her. A tear falls down my cheek to the floor, knowing I am too late to do anything.

I should have made things different for both of us.

I know now that what I really wanted all along was for us two to be far away from all of this nonsense, but this world is

far from ideal.

Like the naga who stabbed himself in the foot, I am anchored down, the thought of my woman running away plaguing my mind. I lay down on the unmade bed.

“Maya, you shouldn’t have run away without giving me another chance... But I only hope that you’re okay out there. You deserve happiness more than I do.”

Slowly, I pass out and drift off into a troubled, restless sleep.



“MAYA... COME CLOSER... MAYA!”

I shoot up in bed, frantically looking around for signs of her. A headache hits me hard, but I’m clear-minded, cursing myself for almost giving up so easily.

“Gods... how much did I have to drink last night?”

I look down at my hands. I have grown used to waking up holding Maya. The peace that came with it is gone tonight. I rise shakily to my feet, rubbing my head.

“I can’t believe what I was thinking last night,” I groan, stumbling toward the window. “I’m not letting you go that easily, Maya. I’m coming to find you, no matter what.”

Those good times we shared together suddenly matter way more to me than any military achievement could.

“How am I going to do this? I can’t let anyone else in on this. There’s no one I can trust. I have to find her alone. Lodra! She has to have gone there!”

I clean myself up as swiftly as I can and make my way to King Kriseri’s court. There, I request a private meeting with him under the guise of strategy planning. He is more than eager to see me.

“Ah, if it isn’t my fine Captain,” he greets. “What brings you to me this morning? My court staff tell me you have plans you wish to share.”

“Yes, my lord. As you know, I have men stationed in the outskirts villages of Lodra. With your permission, I wish to venture out there to see firsthand just how successful our rabble-rousing is going. I shall then return to you so that we can then decide when to commence the attack.”

Kriseri rears back, stroking his chin with an impressed look on his face.

“I respect a captain who is willing to put himself in enemy territory for the cause. You may go, Captain Selliss, but be swift about it. Return to me as soon as possible. Lodra has known peace for long enough.”

“Of course, my lord.”

I have the perfect excuse under my belt. There’s no way I’m going to let this opportunity slide. One way or another, I’m getting Maya back.

MAYA

The time has come. Darkness has fallen down on Yadat from the black clouds above, and Selliss hasn't bothered to return.

“What a fool.”

Even if he does have the slightest bit of regret, I will not be around to hear his pleas for forgiveness. He must learn that he can't pull people along and trick them so ruthlessly.

As I waited for nightfall, I discovered that the servant left the door unlocked, perhaps forgetting to do so in his shock at seeing the state of the room. That would be his mistake and my fortune.

My heart is pounding as I throw my sack over my shoulder. Quietly, I open the door and step out into the hallway. My beating heart is so loud that I hope no one else can hear it.

I breathe deeply yet silently as I begin my escape. I remember the route down to the ground floor from when Selliss brought me to the gardens.

After tasting a hint of freedom that day, I was famished for the complete experience. There's no going back now. The days of being an all-obeying slave are behind me for good.

No guards are on patrol on this floor, seeing as everyone is usually asleep at this time. I'm able to descend to the ground level without issue, but it's where things grow more complicated.

“Any day now, we’ll all be off. I reckon it’ll all be over as soon as it starts. The Prince won’t be prepared,” a soldier says as he talks to another, walking past my hiding spot.

What are they talking about?

I brush off the thought. These fuckers could do whatever they want, I’m not going to be a part of it. Soon, I’ll be enjoying my newfound freedom in Lodra.

I spot an exit leading out to the castle gates but it is guarded by two soldiers, each heavily armed. There’s no way I can sneak past without a distraction.

From my sack, I remove a tizret and hurl it down the hallway.

“What was that? Let’s go check it out!”

Bingo.

I slip out of the exit. After a few painstaking minutes, I’m outside the palace, faced now with the hill descending to the main village of Yadat.

I pull the blanket over my head, tying its ends to form it into a makeshift hood. In the dark of night, I’ll blend into the air like a ghost.

Before proceeding any further, I look back over my shoulder at the palace, thinking of Selliss. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry,” I mutter.

I return my attention to the journey ahead. I’m now faced with the hardest part, a long and treacherous road to Lodra that’ll take days, and that’s if I even get there.

There’s a possibility I will not make it through to see the light of tomorrow, but at least I will have died on my own terms.

“I better get going.”

I stick to the shadows and alleys as I move down the hill and through the city of Yadat. At this time of the night, any naga out on the street are too inebriated to try anything stupid with me.

The wind picks up as I traverse the backroads. I pull my blanket closer, but it doesn't do much to fend off the cold. I think of Selliss and his muscular arms, the way he used to pull me close when I woke up from being cold.

I am on the outskirts of the city when I hear someone call out to me. Slowly, I turn around.

"You there!" a drunken naga calls out. "How much for the night?"

He must think I'm a whore.

"I'm not what you think I am. Now leave me alone."

"Hey! No one dares to... To..."

The naga falls to the ground, his bottle of ale smashing beside him. At least it's one less problem for me to deal with.

The cold becomes almost unbearable as I journey through the desert plains just outside the residences. There's no cover from the cold, and I fear losing my hands after they go numb.

The longest hours of my life pass me by. A day, and then two, but I have done the impossible. I stumble upon the outskirts of Lodra with aching legs, an empty water canister, and no food in my belly. With everything depleted, I need to find a warm bed and some sustenance fast.

The sun slowly begins to peak its head over the horizon for the third time, illuminating the land with almost blinding light, yet its emergence brings with it a new flash of hope.

In the distance, I spot a small village.

"There has to be an inn of some sort."

The time has come for me to see just how I'll be treated. Even after all the talk Selliss gave me about the liberties of humans in Lodra, it is still, after all, a region of Nagaland.

My legs are just about to give out before I spot a local inn. Stumbling my way inside, I almost fall flat on my face, catching myself on a wooden beam at the last second.

I peer up with heavy eyes stinging with exhaustion. Some naga and humans sit at tables, already a few beers deep this

early in the morning.

Decorative furs and glowing lamps light up the place, easy on the eyes unlike the morning sun. At the head of the tavern is a long counter, where a free seat calls me by my name.

“Please,” I groan with a dry throat. “I need water.”

The nearest patron, a human man, lays my arm around his shoulder as I limp over to the counter.

“Here,” the bartender says, placing a pint of water down in front of me. “I’ll see what we have in the kitchen.”

I’ve never drunk something so quickly in my life. As my wits slowly return to me, I spot some concerned patrons nearing closer.

The bartender returns with a large plate full of food. I waste no time digging in, not bothering to use the utensils. Only then do I notice just how dirty I look, my bare feet and arms stained with dried mud.

“You look like you’ve been through war,” the man remarks, the one who helped me over.

“Yeah, where did you come from?” the bartender asks, refilling my pint. “You look like shit.”

Well, the people in Lodra certainly have no issues with honesty. At least none of them are trying to kill me. Not yet, anyway.

“Wait. I just want to make sure that I’m in Lodra,” I say.

“Well, of course you are.”

I really made it...

“So go on then. Where have you come from, wary traveler?”

“Traveler? Me? No way. I am a prisoner, I escaped from captivity in Yadat.”

Both the eyes of humans and naga grow wide when I mention the cursed region.

“Yadat? You escaped from King Kriseri’s clutches?”

“Only by sheer determination.”

“Tell us how you did it! No one’s ever escaped and lived to tell the tale!”

“Is it really as bad as they say it is?”

I look up from my meal. Only then do I notice that almost every patron in the tavern has gathered close, for I’ve been too busy trying to eat. At the entrance, someone is beckoning for others to come in and hear what I have to say.

That’s when I realize that I have these people in the palm of my hands.

I should play it up, one voice in my head says.

No, don’t! It’s never a good idea to lie! another says.

It’s not lying! Besides, I have every right to do what I want as a free woman.

“Life was incredibly tough under King Kriseri,” I say, drawing myself up as if rehearsing a speech. “I was beaten and assaulted against my will each and every day. It was a nightmare, and to be honest, I don’t know how I made it out alive.”

“Did you really survive it all?”

I take a swig of water. “Well, I’m here, am I not?”

The more tales I tell, the more gatherers I have listening in. It feels like a reward to have my story heard, and I am certainly starting to relish in the respect that humans have here.

I have made it this far. It’s time to start living life on my terms. An hour passes where I answer questions and share more of my ordeal in Kriseri’s palace.

But during the hubbub of it all, I notice a patron sitting by his lonesome at a table on the opposite side of the inn.

Like everyone else, he is watching me. However, on his face is not the excited look of someone who wants to hear my stories, but rather an expression as if to tell me he has his eye on me.

A chill travels down my spine, signaling the end of my rambling.

“Okay, folks, the show’s over,” I blurt, rising to my feet.

“We have a room for you to stay overnight if you’d like?” the bartender offers.

“No, thank you. I better get going!”

I make a swift exit before anything else is said. As soon as I am outside, I’m hit with a wave of regret.

Why did I blabber so much? Anyone could have been listening in!

I’m unsure of where to go from here, but a split second later, that becomes the least of my worries.

My mouth is cupped, and my arms are restrained as a group of naga grab me from behind.

One presses a knife to my throat, its cold, hard, serrated steel almost piercing my skin.

“Another peep out of you and you’re dead!”

They haul me away.

Just like that, my new life is gone.

SELLISS

Now that I have the King's blessing, I waste no time heading to the stables. There, I select the fastest equine the castle has in its arsenal, a valiant steed by the name of Scout.

As the stable workers prepare him, I equip myself with a sword and light armor. Once set, I take Scout's reins and spur him into a trot, guiding him out of the palace grounds.

We exit the palace gates and pick up speed, transitioning into a gallop before we reach the main city.

"If she snuck out in the dead of night, she'll no doubt have gotten past the main city."

I continue on, coming to the outskirts where the terrain gradually lightens to nothing but sand for miles. At this point, I'm hightailing it to Lodra.

"I wonder if she even made it," I say to myself. "These deserts are scorching hot in the daylight and drop almost to freezing at nightfall."

As I ride, I pray to the gods that I do not stumble upon her corpse waist-deep in the dunes.

I long to hear Maya call out my name again, to hear the word 'master' emanate from those beautiful lips of hers.

The further I travel, the more anxious I grow, yet at the same time, it impresses me that she's been able to get so far. For someone who has no knowledge of the land, she did well pulling off an escape.

Then again, I suppose that's the kind of fuel that comes from being kept holed up in one room for weeks on end.

I ride for a few hours. It is still bright by the time I reach the outskirts of Lodra. As Scout trots into the city, I cannot help but feel a strange tingling run up my spine, like the scurrying of a hundred unwelcome insects inching their way beneath my skin.

I hitch Scout outside an inn and make my way inside, parched for a refreshment. I march up to the bar and signal for the bartender.

"A pint of water please."

"Where are you coming from today, traveler?" he asks.

"Nowhere interesting, friend."

"Have it your way," he says, handing me the drink. "Lots of compelling folk coming round this way over the last while."

"I bet. These are turbulent times, after all."

"Indeed they are. You should have been here yesterday morning. There was a poor human woman who looked like she hadn't seen sleep in a week."

Human woman?

"Tell me more," I ask, leaning my elbows on the counter.

"Where do I start? She came stumbling in like she was about to collapse. We gave her some water and a bite to eat, and after some prodding, she revealed she had come all the way from Yadat."

"Yadat, you say?"

I keep my tone calm, but I know it just has to be Maya.

"Yeah, rambling about how she escaped from the mad King Kriseri up north. Attracted quite a bit of attention, but she disappeared after an hour or so."

"Did she say where she was going?"

"No," the bartender says, raising his eyebrow. "But why do you ask? Do you know her?"

He must think I'm a guard from Yadat. I better de-escalate this and get his suspicions off of me.

“No, not at all, it's just that there are rumors of Kriseri sending down spies from Yadat. Word is that he's been using humans for his bidding.”

“Is that so?” he asks, becoming wide-eyed. “That isn't good if I served one. Gods, she didn't even pay for anything.”

I slap some money down on the counter. “I better be on my way, keep the change.”

I rejoin Scout outside, offering him what's left of the water before mounting the beast. Now that I have eyewitness accounts of Maya's arrival in the city, I have to keep moving.

I spur Scout and move to the nearest secret campsite, hidden in an abandoned residential space tucked away in a forgotten part of the city.

Some men catch my eye as I approach. I do not know their names but recognize them as men from the palace. They are dressed in regular civilian clothing.

They, too, recognize me, immediately sheathing their swords as I rear my head up at them.

“It's Captain Selliss! What are you doing here?”

I tend to my job of checking on their progress. Finding it hard to concentrate, my mind keeps wandering to the thoughts of Maya. I ask the men about any suspicious activity in the city, and apart from an increase in Lodra's guards, there's nothing to report.

“Very well then. Send word to Yadat if there are any changes. It's expected that our assault shall commence any day now, so be ready for anything.”

“Yes, sir!”

The truth is that I'm giving less and less of a damn about Yadat versus Lodra as each hour crawls by. I have no choice but to maintain interest in front of the men, but the reality is that I'd rather just focus on finding Maya.

In the strangest of ways, I hope that she has gotten herself caught by Yadat's undercover soldiers. If she's being held anywhere, it'd be in any one of the four campsites stationed around the city.

My time spent at the next two outposts takes me more than a few hours. I painstakingly listen to the reports of men who have uncovered quite a bit of intel regarding the city's guards and military capabilities.

The captain in me from before I fell for Maya would have been impressed. The men are undoubtedly doing their part for Yadat and are more than committed to the cause, so I congratulate their efforts and give them the same warning in preparation for the upcoming offensive.

By the time I've wrapped up my visit at the third campsite, night has fallen over the land. Hints of fatigue begin to clamp down on my energy, yet I refuse to give up.

I can feel that she's close. Scout and I make our way to the fourth and final campsite in the region.

It's easy to spot, thanks to the obvious smoke rising from the tree line. The captain in me grows frustrated by how easily they are giving their position away.

"Who goes there?" a familiar voice calls.

"It's me, Dransa. Show yourself!"

"Captain Selliss, we were not expecting your presence tonight. What brings you here?"

He and several men emerge from the trees, sheathing their swords.

"I'm the one who'll be asking the questions. Why on Protheka is there a lit fire so close to the populated areas of the city? Put it out immediately! You were supplied with lamps and plenty of oil for a reason."

Dransa gestures for one of the soldiers to put out the fire.

"Sorry, Captain," he says.

“I expect better from all of you. You’re lucky I will not report such a thing to King Kriseri.”

Before I can say anything else, a woman’s voice cries out in the distance, muffled by the sound of a passing breeze.

“Who’s that?” I ask.

“Oh, you won’t believe this Captain,” Dransa says. “Some of the men captured a woman who claimed to have escaped Yadat. I went to see her and recognized her as one of the prisoners we had in the palace.”

That has to be her!

“Take me to the prisoner at once.”

The woman’s voice keeps yelling out as she is brought closer. From a tent, two guards emerge, holding her by the arms. She is blindfolded, but I immediately know it’s who I’m looking for.

“She’s a strong fighter, this one.”

As soon as Maya is placed in front of me, a soldier removes her blindfold. He is met with an instant headbutt.

“Bitch!” he groans, raising his fist.

“Leave her be!” I order.

Maya’s gaze looks up to meet me. Her face of fury widens with surprise at the sight of me. Her mouth drops open.

“What’s the matter?” I ask. “Surprised that you’ve been caught? That’s what happens when you go telling strangers you’re an escapee.”

“Yeah, you tell her, Captain!”

I feel like an asshole speaking to her in such a manner, but at the same time, it’s her fault that she’s gotten herself caught. Yet I’m ridden with guilt at the sadness in her eyes and the tears streaming down her face.

“The men have been clashing over what they want to do with her,” Dransa says. “Some wish to kill her right here, right now.”

Another soldier pipes up. “I think we should have a bit of fun with her first. This is the first taste of action we’ve all gotten in months, and it’d be a shame to let her go to waste with a quick kill.”

“I think we should send her back to King Kriseri,” Dransa replies. “After all, she is still his property, whether she likes it or not.”

Each choice makes me sick to my stomach. I did not come all the way out here and spend the entire day searching for Maya only to decide how she dies.

There has to be something I can do. As Captain of the Royal Guard, I have authority. These men must obey my every command.

Letting her die right here is the easiest way out, a voice in my head says. What exactly are you going to do with her? Let her go free? The men will just find her again!

She does not deserve to die, another voice says. Fight for her, otherwise, who else will?

“I will handle her myself!”

With my hand on my sword, I make up my mind and seal Maya’s ultimate fate.

MAYA

“**W** here are you taking me?”

“Shut the fuck up and walk faster,” he says, grabbing a fistful of my hair and yanking me along.

“Selliss, how did you even find me?”

“I’m not an idiot. I had a feeling you came here. You’re just lucky I found you when I did. Do you have any idea what those men were going to do to you back there? You could have ended up in a much worse situation than the one you were in back in my room.”

This *is* a worse situation. I know he’s right about the soldiers, but I have a feeling what he’s going to do to me now will be even worse. The grip he has on my hair is my first clue. The way his voice is shaking with anger as he talks is my second.

“You are such a fucking dumb human. Of course, you would run away from a situation where you were fed, bathed, and basically treated like a princess.”

“You call that being treated like a princess? You kept me locked up in your room with no one to talk to but you! All you did was use me like some fuck toy! Why are you acting like you care about me all of a sudden?”

“I don’t fucking care about you. But how you act reflects directly on me.”

Taura shit.

“Can you fucking let go of my hair? You’re hurting me!”

“Good. You deserve to be hurt,” he says, yanking harder.

I shriek and fall to the ground. He towers over me, looking at me with an expression of pure wrath.

“You should have never run away. You’ve ruined everything. What the fuck am I supposed to do with you now?”

“Are you going to kill me?” I’m not sure I want the answer.

There’s a moment of silence where he continues to drill holes through my head with his eyes. The longer he takes, the more I tremble. Is he actually going to kill me? I always knew it was a possibility, but I never thought he would actually do it.

“No. I’m not going to kill you. But you’ll be lucky if you don’t end up dead at someone else’s hands because of your foolish actions.”

“I’m sorry... I-I didn’t know this would happen.”

“Of course, you didn’t. Though I’m curious, what *did* you think was going to happen? Did you think you’d run into some human male who would take you in and you’d live happily ever after with him? Huh?”

“N-no.”

“Then what?”

“I don’t know, okay?” I begin sobbing. “I just couldn’t take one more second of that room. Couldn’t you tell that I was going insane in there? Or do you really pay that little attention to me?”

His expression softens. “Get up. We can’t stay here,” he says, ignoring my question and resuming the path he was heading in.

“Where are we going?” I ask.

He spins around, the angry look back on his face. “I don’t fucking know. Can I trust that you’ll simply follow me?”

Before I can answer, he slips his belt off and yanks me towards him.

“I don’t fucking trust you anymore. You’ll wear this around your neck until I say otherwise.”

He wraps the belt around my neck and locks it into place.

“I don’t know where we’re going to go. I can’t exactly show up in front of those men with you still alive, and I’m not going to kill you.”

He grabs the long end of the belt and yanks me forward. I stumble but quickly catch my footing, not wanting to fall again.

“You know, I didn’t ask you to save me from those men. I can handle myself.”

He stops again, turning slowly to look at me. If rage had a face, it would be his.

“What did you just say?”

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

“I said I can handle myself.”

“If you can handle yourself, then tell me how you ended up in their grasp in the place, huh? How did they capture you, Maya? If you’re so fucking tough, then how did you get *caught*?”

“Maybe I wanted to be caught.”

“I don’t believe that for a second. You wanted to leave your comfortable life back in my room, for a shittier one awaiting your death? I don’t think so. Stop lying to me.”

“I’m sorry...”

“You should be fucking sorry,” he says, stepping closer. “But the only person more sorry than you is me. I never should have gotten involved with you in the first place. You’ve been nothing but trouble ever since.”

“Then why did you?” I ask.

He steps forward again, but this time I take a step back, trying to keep some distance between us even though he still holds the other end of my leash. But Selliss follows me, taking another step towards me.

This time, when I back up, I feel a tree against my back. Selliss gets in my face until we're practically nose to nose. And because I don't know when to shut up, I open my mouth again.

"If I've been nothing but trouble for you, then why did you keep me around? Why did you fuck me every night for hours on end? Why didn't you just discard me after the first time, in search of someone better?"

His golden eyes darken to an almost brown shade, and his breathing becomes heavier, as does my own. With him this close to me, I'm reminded of all those nights sharing a bed with him.

I'm reminded of the way his breathing was an almost calming sound that helped me fall asleep at night. Even when he was one of the reasons I couldn't fall asleep.

"Maybe I just like fucking you," he snarls.

"Did you ever ask me what I liked?"

"Oh, don't play that game with me. I think you liked it just fine. No one has ever screamed my name as loud as you did every time you came."

"Who said that was real?"

"Your pussy."

I stare at him, baffled at the audacity of this man. His hot breath tickles my face, and I find myself lowering my eyes in submission. Right down to his lips.

Oh gods, those lips. I can't deny the way they've made me feel in the past. Even if I would never admit that to him.

Selliss yanks on the leash, and I return my gaze to his.

"Admit that you liked it when I fucked you."

"No —"

Before I've even finished the word, his lips are crashing into mine. I submit immediately, unable to resist the temptation. Because he's right.

He lifts me up, and I wrap my legs around his waist as he pushes me back against the tree. His hands roam around my body, moving from my ass to my breasts, where he pinches my nipples.

I let out a soft moan and he growls into my lips in return. His lips... they're so fucking soft against mine, and it's impossible not to get lost in them. I forget what we were even arguing about as we cling to one another.

I let my hands wander up to his face, feeling his cheekbones. Memorizing them. I wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him closer and breathing in his scent. I memorize that, too.

Suddenly, he pulls away and drops me back to the ground. I straighten out my clothes, avoiding eye contact.

"We should keep walking. In case anyone comes after us."

"Okay."

I follow him, and neither of us talks for a while. What's left to say?

As we walk, I feel more confused than ever. I think back to the last time we had sex, and how for the first time, it felt like sex with a lover. Not that the times before that didn't sexually please me, because they did.

It's just that the last time felt the most real. It didn't just feel like him fucking me, it felt like we were fucking each other. And I liked it. A lot.

I remember how quickly it all went so wrong after that. How betrayed I felt by him, even though he never owed me anything. I was his slave, and nothing more. Even if I sometimes wanted it to be more.

An hour goes by before either of us talks again.

"When was the last time you ate?" he asks.

“I don’t remember.”

“That long?”

“I guess so. A lot has happened. Maybe at the bar?”

“We’ll find something before nightfall.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet. I still have no idea if either of us is going to make it out of this alive. This is much more complicated than you know.”

“I’m sorry,” I manage to say before the tears start.

I realize that I may have actually sentenced us both to death. And there’s nothing I can do about it.

We continue walking until it’s dark, and Selliss doesn’t say another word for hours.

The silence is deafening.

SELLISS

It takes hours before I feel comfortable stopping. I'm furious – at myself, at her.

I have no idea how we're both going to survive this.

They'll pass her around until she dies from it, and they'll behead me like the traitor I am. The latter I can live with.

I look down at the mane of red curls and feel a surge of guilt. We're in this predicament because of me. If I had stuck to the plan...

If I had stuck to the plan, she'd be a goner anyway. A whore to be used and discarded by some other naga far less... appreciative than me.

I find some berries, and we feast on those. I can't risk building a fire to feed her meat, so she'll have to make do with the fruit.

She doesn't complain, probably because she knows I'm furious at her.

Every now and then I see her glance in my direction, but I avoid her gaze. If she had just stayed where I left her, we might have had a chance. Now what am I going to do?

When the last berry is consumed, I decide fucking her is the only thing to do. I'll take my anger and frustration out on her body.

She is mine, after all.

I grab her hair and yank her to her feet. My lips crash down on hers. She yelps and claws at my hand, trying to loosen the hold. It only makes me tighten my grip.

“Please, you’re hurting me.”

I ignore her and pull her closer. Eventually, she gives up and molds her mouth against mine.

I reach for the knot holding her dress in place and untie it. It falls from her body in a heap.

My hands roam across her chest, squeezing her breasts. I pinch her nipples, and she gasps. I pull her nipples between my finger and thumb, twisting them until she cries out.

“That hurt?” I whisper.

“No,” she whimpers stubbornly, but I know she’s lying.

I take my belt from her neck and use it to bind her wrists, the other end I secure to a thick branch. She is now completely at my mercy.

I smack her ass, hard.

“Ow.”

I smack it again.

“Ow. Ow.”

I spank her again and again, until my hand stings from the effort.

“Do you want me to stop?” I ask, knowing damn well what her answer is going to be.

“No, please keep going.”

I spank her again, and again. Her ass is red, angry from my hands.

I reach around and find her wetness. I slide a finger inside her, and she moans. I pump her quickly, pushing in deeper. Her moans become frenzied, and she squeezes her legs together, trying to get my finger deeper.

I withdraw my fingers from her pussy and spit on them. She moans.

“Beg for it,” I order.

“Please,” she begs. “I’ll do anything.”

I spit once more and slap my hand against her ass. She pants, her breasts heaving as I run my fingers over her pussy.

“Please, Selliss” she begs again. “I need it.”

I decide to ignore her pleas.

I push two fingers inside of her, and she jerks against the restraints. I pump them in and out, twisting and turning them as I do. Her moans become louder.

She twists against the restraints.

“Please, Selliss, I need your cock.”

“I think you’re lying, Maya. If you needed it that badly, you wouldn’t have run away. You want to be punished.”

I slap her ass again, and she gasps. I pause for a second, and she squeals.

“Please, Selliss. I’m sorry. I’ll never run away again.”

I grab her ass and squeeze it hard, rubbing my fingers over the sensitive parts I know she likes.

“Please, Selliss. Put your cocks inside me. I want to feel it.”

I smack her ass and shove my fingers inside her, pushing in deeper, and withdraw them only to spank her again.

She cries out from pain and pleasure. I smack her hard and then shove my fingers back inside her.

I pull my fingers from her and slap her ass, this time as hard as I can.

She screams. “Please! I’m sorry.”

I slap her ass again. Her body tenses.

“Please! Anything! Selliss! Anything!”

I lean down and push my fingers into her mouth. She sucks on them. I pull them free and push them back into her pussy. She moans and bucks against the restraints.

Her pussy clenches around my fingers, and she grunts loudly. She is coming.

“Please! Selliss! Yes!” she screams.

I remove my fingers from her pussy and slap her ass again.

She tenses again and moans in frustration. I won't let her get off that easy.

I grab a handful of her hair and pull her head back. She cries out. “Selliss!”

“Yes?” I ask.

I lightly tickle her clit, arousing her as much as possible without actually allowing her to orgasm.

I slap her ass, hard. The sound echoes through the trees. She groans.

“Did you want something?” I whisper, my tongue flicking across the shell of her ear.

“Yes! Please let me come. I'll do anything! Selliss! Please, anything!”

I slap her ass again.

“Anything?”

“Yes! Anything!”

I think about it for a moment, but denying her the orgasm she so desperately craves seems like the best form of punishment for my feisty little redhead.

“No,” I growl. “You'll come when I'm ready. Until then, I want you to suffer.”

I reach down and slide a hand between her thighs. I pull her pussy lips apart and stare at her pussy. I run my fingers over it, flicking her clit every now and then. She squirms against the restraints.

I bend over her. She tries to turn her head to face me, but I hold her in place.

I lick her pussy, from top to bottom, and her body goes wild in response. She gasps and moans.

I spit on my fingers and smack her pussy again. Then I slide my fingers inside her pussy. She groans as I plunge them in deep. I pull my fingers free and slap her once more.

She whimpers, and I feel her body tense as I push my fingers back inside.

I let go of her and take out my cocks. I push the tip of one against her entrance and thrust inside her, hard. Our bodies slap together, and she moans loudly. I pump her deep and hard.

I wrap my arms around her and pull her close, my cock thrusting in her faster. She squeezes my arms, and I reach down and pinch her nipples hard.

I wrap a hand around her throat and squeeze.

I push deeper, harder. She moans louder.

I squeeze hard and thrust deep, my cock filling her. She comes violently, her pussy tightening around me. I have to wrap my arms around her to keep her still as she continues to shake and tremble from the intensity of her orgasm.

I continue to thrust, more trying to get off than to get her off. But each thrust prolongs her orgasm, drawing it out, making her writhe and shake.

I'm not there yet.

When her orgasm subsides, I switch cocks, opting to thrust my neglected second dick inside her pussy.

She's still wet, so she takes me easily. She moans as I thrust inside her hard.

I reach around and find her clit. I slide my finger across it, and she moans as I pump into her from behind.

"Oh, fuck," she moans.

I reach around and grab her by the throat. Her body tenses, and I release her. I want her to come again, but I don't want her to suffocate.

I continue pumping her as she moans and bucks against me. She's getting close. I reach around and pinch her nipples.

She screams, and her pussy tightens around me.

I slide a hand in between her thighs and find her clit. I rub it hard, and she moans loudly.

She bucks against me, desperately trying to get off.

I wrap an arm around her and hold her in place. Her entire body tenses as she screams from her orgasm.

I thrust deep, a few more times, and then I reach my climax as well. I thrust deep and groan, filling her with my seed.

I pull out in exhaustion. Then I remember she's still tied to the tree, her arms secured above her head.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"I'm fine," she says.

"Are you really?"

"I'm sorry, Selliss. I'm so sorry."

"No more running away."

She nods. "But Selliss, you can't save me. You might stand a chance if you leave me here."

"No." That's all I can bring myself to say right now.

She looks at me and then buries her face in my chest. I stroke her hair. It's getting late, and we don't have much time left.

"We need to get some sleep," I whisper, brushing her hair back.

"Will you untie me?" she asks.

I probably should, considering she's been in this position for awhile. Her skin is red from my abuse. I reach over her head and release her from her bonds.

But when she holds me tight and lays her head on my chest, I know I need to figure out a way to fix this so we can be together.

MAYA

When I wake up, there's a split second where I forget that we aren't back in Selliss' room in his big, comfy bed. In that moment before the realization hits, I feel safe again. Warm.

At home.

But then reality hits, as it often does, and I'm reminded of how I screwed everything up. I find myself wishing that I had just stayed in that room. Maybe then me and Selliss wouldn't be sleeping on the ground in the woods with nowhere to go.

Neither of us would be scared for our lives, wondering what's going to happen next.

I begin crying before I even open my eyes. How could I endanger Selliss like this? He took such good care of me. He got me out of the dungeons. Things could have been much worse, and I took it all for granted. And to what end?

Selliss rolls over, and I know that he'll be up soon. He always moves around a lot right before he wakes up. It's actually kind of cute.

I'm not sure when I started using words like 'cute' in reference to Selliss. Maybe somewhere around the time I noticed that he memorized the food I like and stopped serving the ones I don't. Or when he stopped having them bring the soaps I didn't like and only stocked the ones he knew I did.

Maybe it was when I woke up one morning as he was leaving and he tucked the blanket around me, unaware that I

was awake.

As I lay there letting the tears roll out of my eyes, I ponder what all of this means, and why it took me so long to put two and two together. Why am I only now seeing the good in this man? Why was I so blind to it before?

The more I think about it, the more I realize that Selliss has actually sacrificed a lot for me. He came all the way out here looking for me after I ran away. I never would have thought he would think twice about my disappearance, let alone come after me.

I turn over so that I can look at him. His tan scales are glowing slightly in the morning light. He looks beautiful like this, and part of me wants to reach out and touch him.

Fuck it. I let my hand drift up to his neck, feeling the scales. They're softer than one would think.

Selliss opens his gold eyes, and I pause for a moment, unsure of what his reaction will be. When he doesn't say anything, I continue touching him, from his neck up to his cheek.

The moment feels more intimate than any we've ever had together. Is it possible that the two of us both feel the same way about each other?

"You've been crying," he finally speaks.

I stay silent, but I retract my hand. He catches it midair and brings it back to his face.

"Don't stop," he whispers.

As we stare at each other, another realization hits. The way I'm feeling right now, this ache in my chest. It's pain, regret, and a mixture of something else that I haven't been able to put my finger on.

But now I know.

"Selliss?"

"Yeah?"

"I love you."

Before he can respond, I keep talking.

“I love you, and I understand if you have to kill me. I deserve it. When the time comes, I’m ready.”

He blinks at me, shock evident on his face. But before I can say anything more, he sits up, shoving my hand aside.

“Shut up,” he growls, standing up and stretching.

My body is so stiff from last night’s endeavors, as well as sleeping on the ground, that it takes me three tries in order to fully sit up. Selliss is gathering his things, making like he’s about to leave.

“Get up,” he orders.

I do as he says, staring at him all the while. Is he really not going to acknowledge what I said? I begin to feel like maybe being honest was a mistake. Maybe I should have just kept my mouth shut.

I understand that in his position, being in love with a human would be catastrophic. Forbidden. I know that he is part of a naga military that is essentially against humans, particularly humans and naga mating. I’ve gathered that much over the weeks.

So maybe he *can’t* say anything back. Or maybe he just doesn’t want to because he doesn’t feel the same about me.

“Come on, we need to start walking,” he says, finally looking at me.

My chest hurts as I look at him, but I nod and start following him.

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll see when we get there.”

“Are we going to eat breakfast?”

He turns to look at me, concern written on his face.

“Are you hungry?”

“A little. I can wait until we get to our destination though.”

“Nonsense. We still have a good way to go still, and you need energy if you’re going to be walking all day. We’ll find something.”

“Okay.”

The two of us set off to find any edible plants or berries. After about thirty minutes of searching, we stop under a tree and sit down to look at our finds.

“Did you get anything good?” Selliss asks.

“Some tizrets, you?”

“I got a handful of tiphe tree nuts.”

“Wow, that’s all?”

“It’ll have to do. Better than nothing,” he says.

“You’re right. I should be grateful.”

“No, I mean, don’t get me wrong. I’d much rather be having thison stew right now. Be as ungrateful as you want, but we still have to eat this shit,” he jokes.

I laugh, taking some of the nuts from him and handing him a tizret.

“I’ve never been a fan of tizrets. It’s hard to know when they’re ripe, and if you eat one that’s not ripe enough yet, they’re super tart. Plus the skin is so annoying to peel off.”

“Here, give me yours. I’ll get the skin off for you,” he says, taking my fruit.

“Thanks.” I smile at him.

At least things aren’t awkward right now. I couldn’t handle another minute of that awkward silence after I told him I loved him.

I don’t regret saying it though. I refuse to die with any secrets.

“Here.” He hands it back to me.

I bite into it, testing its ripeness.

“Perfect.” I nod.

“I can’t say the same for my own,” he says, scrunching up his nose.

I laugh because it might be the most human expression I’ve ever seen him make. It’s adorable.

“What the fuck are you laughing at?”

“Nothing! Nothing, I’m sorry,” I reply, hiding a giggle.

He shakes his head at me, but I can see one corner of his mouth fighting to turn up into a smile.

A few moments later, we’ve eaten our food and continue our journey.

“Still not going to tell me where we’re going?”

“Nope. It’s not necessary.”

“Ahh, you’re just going to wait until right before I can see the den of ursain before you throw me at their feet.”

He snorts, shaking his head again. “I would never. If I was going to have you killed, I would do it myself.”

“So why don’t you?”

“We’re not talking about this. Let’s just walk. I don’t want to attract any attention to us.”

A few hours later, we reach what appears to be an actual path. My nerves have completely taken over me at this point. I have no idea what’s about to happen next. Is he taking me to Kriseri? I guess I wouldn’t be too surprised.

After walking on the path for a while, I can see the form of a building up ahead.

What appears to be a castle takes form, and I’m sure that this must be where the leader of the Lodra territory lives. My heart speeds up. This is good.

Maybe I can actually live a happy life here. Maybe I can have human friends again. I wonder if Selliss will stay here with me. A knot forms in my throat at the thought of him leaving me here and taking off.

We finally reach the gates of the castle. Selliss stops, taking a deep breath. He looks troubled, as if he's remembering something.

I open my mouth to ask one of the questions I've been dying to know the answers to, when a group of naga men rush towards us out of nowhere.

Selliss tries to fight them off but fails. They overpower him and begin dragging him past the gates.

"Selliss! Wait! Where are you guys taking him? You can't just take him! Selliss!"

He struggles in their arms until he can twist his neck around to see me. He mouths something, but I can't make out what it is.

I chase after them, sobbing. I refuse to be separated again.

SELLISS

This is my worst nightmare. I knew that arriving on the royal grounds, I wouldn't be walking into open arms. But I definitely didn't expect to be instantly captured.

And the worst part of all is that Maya has to witness this. She still chases after us as I'm being dragged away by Prince Zalith's men.

In this moment, I regret not telling her anything about where we were going. I should have prepared her for what might happen. I should have at least told her what to expect. And now it's too late.

"Please stop! Where are you taking him?" Maya sobs.

"Will someone please shut that bitch up?" one of the naga grunts.

"Don't fucking touch her!" I shout. "I swear to the gods, if any of you fucking touch her!"

"What are you going to do, huh?" one of the naga whispers in my ear. "You would deserve it. You're a fucking traitor."

"You don't know what you're talking about. I request a council with the Prince."

"Oh, you'll get to talk to the Prince. I'm afraid he won't be on your side, though."

"Please, take me with him!" Maya shouts. "Please, I'm begging you."

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, someone grab her and take her with us to the dungeons. They can fucking share a cell together for all I care.”

“Are you sure that’s smart?”

“Did you not hear me? I don’t give a fuck. It’s not like he’ll be alive much longer anyways.”

“What did you do, Selliss? Fall in love with this human? Poor girl. Didn’t you tell her you were at the top of the human-hating chain?”

“Shut the fuck up,” I growl.

“No, because you’ve caused a lot of trouble for us around here. All over Nagaland for that matter. So I can say whatever the fuck I want to you. You deserve much worse.”

“Whatever, as long as I get to talk to Zalith.”

“I don’t know what makes you think you’ll get pity from him. His children are half-human. His mate is a human. He fucking hates you.”

This is when I shut my mouth. This man obviously can’t hear what I’m trying to tell him, and why do I care anyway? My fate isn’t in his hands. At least they’re letting Maya come with us. At least if we die, we’ll die together.

People stop and stare the whole way to the dungeons, and I avoid looking at all of them. I feel sick to my stomach knowing that not that long ago, I was against these people. I hated these people. And now I could die because of it.

Finally, we arrive. They throw the two of us in our own cell together, locking us in and then walking away.

I immediately pull Maya into my arms, holding her as tight as possible.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry... I’m so fucking sorry,” I repeat, rocking her back and forth.

“Selliss... What’s going to happen now? What were those naga talking about?”

I sigh, letting her go from my arms and instead taking her hands in mine. I suppose the time for secrets is over.

“Maya, there’s a lot that you don’t know. I used to be a soldier here. For years, this was my home. But a couple of months ago, I stirred up some trouble. The Captain of the Royal Guard, Lasta... he was my superior, and I couldn’t let go of my hatred for him.”

“What do you mean?”

“He was in a relationship with a human, and I despised him for it. I threatened him, and I said a lot of terrible things. I believed a lot of terrible stuff at the time. I was delusional, and I didn’t have all the facts. But Lasta had enough of it, and he had me sent away on a fake mission. Well, it wasn’t exactly fake. But then I came into contact with King Kriseri, and he wanted me to join him in ending naga and human mating. He hates humans, and at the time I did, too. I agreed to help him. I was determined to get revenge on Lasta, and Prince Zalith, who also has a human mate.”

She puts her hand over her mouth and steps back, staring at me in horror.

“But you have to understand. I was naïve. When I met you, when I got to know you, everything changed. I don’t believe in ending human and naga relationships anymore, and I regret everything I did. You have to understand that a lot of misinformation gets spread around. The King is ruthless, and he does whatever he can think of to poison people’s minds against humans.”

“Stop, Selliss... I believe you. I believe that you regret it all. I know that you’re a good man.”

Her words mean more than she knows. But it might still be too late for us.

“Maya, I’m sorry for whatever is going to happen next. I will ask them to spare you. But there’s something I want you to know.”

I clear my throat, swallowing once, twice. I don’t know why I’m so fucking nervous to say this. Maybe because I’ve

never said it before, to anyone.

“Maya... I love you. Earlier, when you said it... I think you literally made my heart stop. But I couldn't say it back. I didn't know what was going to happen when we arrived here.”

“And now that you think we're about to die, you feel like you can say it? How am I supposed to believe that you really feel this way for me?”

“I will show you. If we make it out of this, I promise I will show you. I'll spend the rest of my fucking life showing you.”

“Heartwarming.”

I turn towards the cell entrance to see Prince Zalith standing there with his arms crossed, smirking.

“Isn't it funny how the tables have turned? I think the word is karma?” he quips.

Ignoring him, I look back at Maya and cup her cheek in my hand.

“I promise,” I whisper. “I'll show you.”

Leaving a kiss on Maya's forehead, I turn to the cell door. Zalith is still smirking.

“So tell me, Selliss, what is the traitor doing back here?” he says.

“Things are different now, Prince. I have come to admit my wrongs. I've come to join your side of things.”

“Aren't you scared that it might be a little late for that?”

“Who would I be if I didn't try?”

He snorts.

“Please, hear me out. I'll tell you everything I know,” I beg.

“Why should I believe anything you say?”

“Believe me or don't. I'm still going to tell you everything. But I think you'll choose the former.”

“Okay, enough. Tell me.”

“I’ve been working with the King over the past couple of months. He wants to lead an army against humans. Back in Yadat, we were training soldiers. He brought a bunch of human slaves for us to... use while we trained.”

“Use how?”

“As prostitutes, Prince.”

“That sounds like him. And this is how you met the human girl behind you?”

“Yes. As I’m sure you just heard, I’ve fallen in love with her. My perspective on things has changed completely.”

“Convenient, isn’t it? I’m sure Lasta would have a good laugh if he heard this. Why should I grant you mercy, when just a couple of months ago you were causing all sorts of trouble around here, stirring up human hate?”

“I made a mistake. I made many mistakes. But I’m here to repent them. I will do anything I can to help this side of the war. I want to work with you.”

“How much insider information do you have? Can you tell me how many men the King has already assembled? Do you have time frames? Battle plans? Anything?”

“Yes. I have all of that, although I can’t be responsible for anything that he changes once he realizes I’ve betrayed him.”

Zalith taps a finger against his lips, appearing to be deep in thought.

“Please. You’re all in danger here. Your kingdom is not safe. We have to do something quickly.”

“You need to stop using words such as ‘we.’”

I take a deep breath, realizing that the Prince is not going to spare my life. He wants me dead, and nothing is going to change his mind.

“Fine. Kill me. I understand. But promise me one thing. Maya will go untouched. Please, you have to save her. You have to protect her from whatever is coming. Do not punish

her for being involved with me. She didn't know about any of this until today. She is innocent."

He raises an eyebrow at me, and I continue talking before he can deny me.

"Think about your mate. If this was Aurora, what would you do? Please, that's all I ask of you. Kill me, I don't care. As long as she gets to live."

Zalith looks behind me at Maya. I feel rage in my heart at another male's attention being trained on her. She's mine.

"Prince –" I start.

"Enough," he interrupts, stepping forward.

This is it. This is the moment that will reveal my fate.

MAYA

I'm shaking out of fear and trying as hard as I can not to run forward and wrap my arms around Selliss. The Prince is pacing back and forth in front of our cell, and he hasn't yet said what he is going to do with either of us.

Selliss hasn't looked at me since the Prince arrived. I'm terrified that he might be about to die for me, and I'm also incredibly shocked and confused about this whole situation.

Before today, I had been under the impression that Lodra was different. I thought they didn't hurt humans here. I thought we would be safe here. But it appears that I was wrong about everything.

If we went back to Kriseri, I would for sure die... and Selliss probably would too once the King got word of where we had been. And if we stay here, well, we still might both die. No matter what, we can't win.

Maybe it's time I speak up.

"Prince Zalith... if I may?"

Selliss whips his head around to me, his slitted eyes as wide as they can be. He starts shaking his head at me, but I ignore him. The Prince stops his pacing and raises a brow at me.

"What's your name again?" he asks.

"Maya."

"And what is it you have to say, Maya?"

“Prince... I know that this is an impossible situation, but please hear me out. I know Selliss to be a good man. I have never seen him hurt a human, and he has never hurt me. He has taken care of me over the past month and made sure that no harm came to me. I understand that he was not always like this, but he has admitted to being wrong. He has changed. Doesn't that count for something?”

He watches me for a second before turning to Selliss.

“I am not going to kill either of you. I am trying to raise awareness for human and naga relationships, not tarnish their reputation. If I killed either of you, I would be going against my own beliefs. As much as you would deserve that, Selliss. But I am not a hypocrite, and I am not filled with so much hatred that I need to have my revenge. So you two will go free. On one condition.”

“Anything,” Selliss says immediately.

Zalith rolls his eyes.

“Selliss, you will give me every piece of information you have about Kriseri. You will give me any information you have on Yadat, on the army, on the location of every single soldier. You will tell me everything you know, no matter how small it is. Nothing should be left out. This is crucial to the war that is coming. You could help us win this.”

“Yes, absolutely.”

“And Selliss?”

“Yeah?”

“This doesn't mean you're completely off the hook. I'm watching you, and I will always be watching you. I still haven't completely ruled out the possibility that this is all a part of Kriseri's plan.”

“I can assure you that it is not.”

“Only time will tell. But for now, you're on probation.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Okay, guards. Unlock the cell. You two will follow me to the castle. You are officially free. I will make sure that no one bothers either of you, but especially Maya.”

Selliss grabs my hand and holds it as we walk out. We stay like this the entire way to the castle. Once we arrive, the Prince stops and turns to us.

“Selliss, you and I are going to have a meeting with Lasta to discuss everything you know. I know that your journey here couldn’t have been easy, so Maya, you are going to wait here for my mate. She is going to come and help you settle in. You will be in good care, so both of you needn’t worry.”

I nod, turning to Selliss. He takes me into his arms, kissing the top of my head and squeezing me tight before letting me go.

“I will see you later,” he says, turning to follow Zalith.

“Wait,” I say.

I put a hand on his face, pulling it towards mine. Only when our lips touch do I finally feel safe again. I finally believe that we are going to be okay. And when we pull away, all I want is to be alone with him.

But Selliss squeezes my hand and follows Zalith without another word. Later. We will be alone later. Right now there are more important things on hand.

I wait with the two naga guards that they left with me, who are thankfully not the ones who dragged Selliss to the dungeons earlier. Moments later, the Princess arrives.

“Hi, you must be Maya,” she says, taking my hand in hers.

“Yes, and you’re Princess Aurora?”

“I am.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“You as well. Why don’t we go back to my quarters and get you something to eat? I can answer any questions you have there. Or if you’d rather not talk, that’s okay too.”

I nod and follow her through the castle until we reach two huge double doors. The guards stationed outside open them for us, and we enter alone.

“My children are with their nanny, so it will just be us. You don’t have to worry about meeting anyone else just yet.”

“How many kids do you have?”

“Eight.” She smiles fondly.

Wow, eight. I picture myself having eight kids with Selliss, and it is a surprisingly comforting thought.

“So, you are mated to Selliss?” she asks.

“Well, we aren’t exactly mates. But we are in love. We both confessed it to each other earlier today.”

“Ahh, I remember the first time Zalith and I admitted that we loved each other.”

“Was it complicated, being in a relationship with a naga Prince?” I ask before I can stop myself.

“Oh, yes, at first it was extremely difficult. His family did not approve of me. A lot of horrible things happened. But it all worked out for us in the end, and we’ve been working to normalize our kind of relationship ever since. It baffles me how some people can be so close-minded.”

I nod, imagining how hard that must have been for her.

“How is it now between you two? Being mated to a naga, I mean.”

“Oh, it’s wonderful. I wouldn’t trade it for the world. But you know how it is.”

“Well... not exactly. Selliss and I haven’t really gotten to experience ‘wonderful’ yet.”

“Oh don’t worry, you will. Every relationship has its hurdles in the beginning, but you will come out the other side stronger than ever. Trust me. It will all be worth it.”

Servants arrive with two big trays of food, and the Princess leads me to a table where we sit down and begin eating. I try

my best not to scarf down the food in front of me, but I am *starving*.

“How long did it take for things to become normal after you were mated to the Prince?”

“Oh, I would say things became normal even before the actual ceremony. But we settled into the honeymoon phase pretty quickly.”

Nodding, I take another mouthful of stew.

“I can tell that you’re worried. But if you and Selliss both love each other as much as it sounds like you do, then I promise you it will all work out. You guys are safe here, and once you decompress, you can really start living your lives together. It will be like everything else never happened.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it.”

“Do you have any questions about anything?”

“Do you like living here in the castle?”

“Oh, yes, this place has become my home. Of course, once this war business is over, it will be a much happier place to be. I have many friends here.”

“Human friends?” I light up.

“Yes, my best friend Lorelai will be very happy to meet you. Krista as well. They will love you.”

“But isn’t Selliss an enemy to their mates?”

“It’s complicated. But yes, he was. They will accept him though. In time, everything will be okay.”

“How can you be so sure?” I ask.

“Because I’ve witnessed it happen, and it happened to me. Forgive me if I’m a bit too optimistic, but I can’t help it.”

Funnily enough, despite my worries, I start to believe her. Of course, I’m still hesitant, but she makes life here seem so nice that I can’t help but believe it.

“Thank you for being so nice to me. In Yadat, things were... different.”

“I can only imagine. I’ve heard terrible things. But that will change. We will get the rest of the humans out of Yadat.”

I tear up, thinking of my old friend Ella. I can only hope that she is still alive and that she holds on until we can save her. Please gods, let her still be alive.

“I’m sorry that you had to go through all of that,” the Princess says, smiling at me sympathetically.

“Thank you, Aurora.”

“Please, call me Rory.”

I smile at her, and I truly am thankful for her kindness. It’s the only thing getting me through the rest of this day when all I can think about is being in Selliss’ arms.

SELLISS

“Selliss?” Maya asks tiredly from the bed we share. “Where are you going this early? Is the Prince looking for you?”

I go and kiss her forehead. “No, nothing like that. I just thought maybe I could train for a little while.”

“This early, though? I thought you weren’t given that much free range here.”

“Well, they probably know that I know that if I try something, I’ll have my head chopped off,” I say, laughing dryly. But she doesn’t find it funny and frowns. “I’m kidding. They know I wouldn’t risk leaving you alone. I’m also pretty sure the guards are still around to keep a watchful eye on me.”

She sighs and stands up from the bed to hug me. I squeeze her tight, just for my own reassurance. Times are still delicate and nothing’s for certain. I want to remember the feeling of touching her like this, basking in her scent.

She kisses my cheek. I return the gesture on her sweet lips, lingering my gaze on her lovely eyes. I break away, knowing that it’d want to do more than that. I head towards the training grounds at the crack of dawn.

I have about an hour or so before Lodra’s army starts their own training. Before Lasta comes up to me and we get into another altercation. He’s been keeping his distance from me this whole week we’ve been here.

I know Krista was pregnant, but I'm not sure if they've had their litter already. I don't know how many, but I'm sure any amount would keep anyone highly busy. Not to mention that Lasta's on top of security around Lodra, stationing soldiers around to quell any signs of unrest.

I take a dummy weapon to avoid taking another's by accident. Now that I'm here, I'm wondering if I should be doing this. What will the other soldiers I used to work with say to me?

"I should've just stayed in bed with Maya," I mutter.

I look over at the sidelines, noticing the guards Lasta placed for me. They don't break eye contact and stare right through me, watching my every move.

Jerks.

My little training session goes by fast. In the blink of an eye, I hear the clanking of armor and swords in the distance.

I wave at the guards to let them know I'm done. They start following behind me, when I start noticing the rest of the palace waking up. The blacksmiths, the maids, the advisors, the groundskeepers, everyone is moving around the palace. Even the palace chefs carry boxes of food.

Among them, Krista walks alongside another female. By the looks of it, it's her maid, and they happily chat away as they head towards the healer's quarters.

She hasn't given birth?

She holds her swollen belly with both hands, waddling too fast. I wait for Lasta to snap at her to slow down, but he's nowhere around.

I can't believe he's letting her wander around by herself like that. If Maya was...

I myself stop walking, going back to my fantasies about impregnating her. I glance back at Krista, wondering if my beloved will also look just as happy carrying my eggs. Will she have a hard time walking, too? Will we have as many children as Prince Zalith and Lasta?

I can imagine how much different a human pregnancy will be compared to a normal naga female carrying eggs. Even naga females can die in childbirth from it. Despite knowing this, those two still went ahead and chose human mates.

I suppose everything is different when having a human mate.

I turn my sight back towards Krista, who already disappeared. I follow the path she took towards the healers, curious about her pregnancy.

I'd like to know more about it, in case I'm ever blessed by Vatia. As I'm walking towards the healer's hut, I see Lasta approaching the women. His expression sours as he marches towards Krista. He nods at the maid, gesturing for her to leave them.

Lasta folds his arms as he talks down to Krista, who looks a little nervous about something. I walk closer to get a good listen in their conversation, without Lasta noticing of course.

"I told you to wait until I returned. What if something happens to you on the way here?" he scolds her as he rubs her belly.

"I'm fine, my love. I felt a little sick this morning and wanted a bit of medicine," Krista explains.

Lasta frowns. "Sick? How long? Why didn't you say anything?" he says, holding her arms.

She laughs. "It's just a little nausea. I can't cook if everything I make smells awful to me."

"You're carrying eight eggs, Krista. You don't have to cook for me. That's why you have the maid."

"But I wanted us to have a romantic dinner tonight. We won't have a lot of time alone after the babies are here."

Lasta sighs, relenting to her wishes. "The second you feel sick, you will stop. Understand?"

She giggles as she reaches for his face to kiss him. I quickly decide to leave. Their relationship is more affectionate than I thought Lasta would be. He shows a softer side.

Is that what I look like from the outside when I'm with Maya?

I walk around the palace grounds, finding any work to do or if I could offer a helping hand. But I can't help but remember Krista's mention of their romantic dinner. It sounds like there's still courtship after the mating ceremony.

Would Maya like one of those dinners? I don't think she has a favorite food.

I nearly bump into the other two naga-human couples. Prince Zalith and Princess Aurora are in the gardens with Lorelai and Slyth. The Prince tries to wrangle his children while the Princess chats with Slyth and Lorelai.

They all look... normal... and loving. The Princess beams at the Prince getting tumbled by four of his children. Slyth carries one of his young while having an arm wrapped around Lorelai's shoulders.

Slyth's children try to catch up with the royal children in tackling Prince Zalith. They're still crawling but make high-pitched noises. The Princess picks up two of her children from the Prince's head. He stands up laughing, picking up three kids.

The whole picture looks overwhelmingly endearing. Not a second goes by without showing any sort of affection. I thought such a thing only existed between Maya and me, but it goes to show that I'm not as affectionate with her as I should be.

A different guard approaches Prince Zalith, and the naga part ways with their mates and children. They don't leave without a few kisses to them or their children.

I take it as my cue to leave, with many ideas running through my head.



“WHY ARE YOU COVERING MY EYES?” Maya asks impatiently as I lead her to the secret garden I once saw Lasta and Krista in.

“Be patient. We’re almost there.”

I found Krista’s maid to ask her about the romantic dinner she was preparing for Lasta. She wanted to give me some of their food, but I vehemently denied it. Instead, I had to beg around the palace ground for bits of capra or taura cheese. Then I swallowed my pride and went to the barracks to ask for some bahru so our dinner wouldn’t look so pathetic.

I took a blanket from our room to place on the ground, right near the small lake. When I saw Lasta and Krista out here, I couldn’t help but notice this was a great view. The full moon proves I made a good choice. I hope Maya enjoys it as well.

I take my hands from her eyes, and she audibly gasps.

“What’s all this?”

“I thought we could have a break from everything that’s happening,” I mutter, smiling at her amazed look towards me.

“That’s so sweet, thank you,” she says before tiptoeing to kiss me.

Remembering what I saw earlier today, I kiss her back while wrapping my arms around her.

“You’re welcome. Sit down and taste some of the cheese. Lodra has the best quality of food in Nagaland.”

She huddles up against me, staring at the moon. Her eyes shine, and a smile spreads across her lovely face. I wrap my arm around her waist, following Prince Zalith’s example. As a result, Mayas leans her head on my shoulder.

“Is this romantic enough for you?”

She giggles. “It is. I don’t think I’ve ever seen such a big moon.”

I smirk. “Well, like I told you from the beginning, I’ll give you everything you want if you play nice with me.”

“I think I did more than ‘play nice’ with you.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

She smacks my chest playfully. “This is beautiful. What made you do all this?”

I shrug. “Like I said, a break from the chaos.”

Time is tense, and everyone’s really waiting for King Kriseri to make a move. But in the meantime, I want to spend the time before that trying to grow closer with Maya.

“I’d give you the moon and all of Protheka if that’s what you want,” I say.

“But I just want you, master,” she coos.

I chuckle as I tip her chin to give her a passionate kiss.

MAYA

“**T**his really is so amazing, thank you again, Selliss.” I smile at him.

“Of course.” He smiles back.

We sit back and eat some of the cheeses he got for us, admiring the view.

“Do you think you’ll want to stay here once the war is over? In the castle I mean?” I ask.

“Honestly I haven’t really thought about it. Would you?”

“I think I would like to live here for a while, yes. But maybe in the future, I’d like to have my own little cottage, far away from anyone.”

“Am I allowed at this cottage?” he jokes.

“Of course you are silly.” I playfully shove him. “Who else is going to build it?”

“Build it? You think I know how to build shit? Let alone a whole cottage?”

“Um... yes? Is that not in your wheelhouse?”

“Oh, actually you’re right. All naga men take a class on building homes when they reach age seventeen.”

“Wait, really?”

“No! Absolutely not. But I could easily have one built for us if all goes well in Nagaland.”

“Do you think it will?”

“I don’t know... I’d like to hope so, but I’m afraid the hatred some people have runs very deep. Some of them will go to any lengths to get what they want.”

“Like King Kriseri?”

“Yes, exactly like him.”

“How bad is he?”

He bites his lip, turning to look at me.

“He’s awful. More specifically, he’s a disgusting beast. And ruthless. Unfortunately, he has many supporters, and they would do just about anything for him.”

“How do you think he ended up this way?”

“It’s hard to say, but naga hatred towards humans is a long-standing tradition. It has been this way for a very long time, Maya. Even here in the castle, it used to be much worse. Things only really started taking a turn for the better when the Prince mated with Aurora. Of course, at the time, I was very much against it. I’m ashamed of the way I acted, the things I said. The hatred I spread.”

I wrap my arms around him and pull him close.

“You can’t keep beating yourself up for that. Any of it. You’ve changed, and you did the right thing. That’s what matters. You deserve forgiveness, Selliss. Please believe that.”

He continues staring at the ground.

“Look at me,” I say, waiting until he does to continue. “I love you, Selliss. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Doesn’t that tell you that you’re a good man?”

He stares at me, thinking for a moment before nodding.

“You’re right. I shouldn’t waste our time moping together.”

I pull him in for a kiss, savoring his taste.

“I love you so much, master,” I murmur against his lips.

“I love you too, my beautiful girl. But you know, you don’t have to call me master anymore,” he says, looking at me with

the utmost seriousness.

I smile, my cheeks heating up.

“I know... but can I?”

“You want to?”

“I do, very much so. It makes me feel special.” I smile shyly at him.

“Well then I would be honored if you kept calling me that,” he says before planting another kiss on my lips.

He pulls me into his lap, caressing my hair, and I can't help but feel blissfully happy at this moment. This is all I ever wanted.

As Selliss brushes his hands through my hair, I close my eyes. He begins leaving small kisses on the top of my head.

I've noticed him being much more affectionate tonight, and I can't say I don't love it. I always knew he had a romantic side.

All of a sudden, a naga man runs towards us, and Selliss immediately stands up, shoving me behind him.

“Lasta! What are you doing here?”

“We need you. Zalith, Slyth, and I are assembling all the men. There's a riot a few towns over. It's bad. We think some of Kriseri's staged actors riled everyone up. We have to go *now*. We need to stop this before it spreads.”

Lasta doesn't wait for him to answer. He just turns around and starts running.

Selliss nods and turns to me. I'm already shaking, and I grab ahold of him.

“Don't die.” I begin crying. “You can't die, okay? I need you to come back home to me.”

“I promise you I will return. Go back to the castle and find Aurora and Lorelai. They will take care of you. Do not leave their sides. That is an order, okay?”

I nod, letting go of him. He leaves with Lasta and all I can do is stand there and watch. I have a terrible feeling about this. Something inside of me just feels wrong.

“Maya! Are you out here?” Aurora shouts.

“I’m here!” I manage to say.

“Oh, there you are. Listen, I know it’s scary, but it’s going to be okay. Just come inside with me.”

I follow her, choking back my sobs. She wraps an arm around me as we walk, rubbing circles on my shoulder.

When we get to her room, it’s chaos. Kids are crawling around everywhere, screaming and laughing. Lorelai and Krista sit on a couch, deep in conversation.

“Oh, good, you found her,” Lorelai says.

“She was exactly where Lasta said she would be. Maya, why don’t you go sit on the couch with them while I fix us up with some tea?”

I do as she says, taking a spot next to Krista. She looks just as nervous as I am.

“Do you think they will be okay?” I ask.

Lorelai takes my hands in hers and squeezes them.

“They know what they’re doing. I think they are going to be just fine.”

“It’s okay to be nervous though. But they’re trained and very skilled. This is what they do,” Krista says, shooting me a soft smile.

I’ve only met Krista once before, but she reminds me of Ella. Soft-spoken, kind, and a little shy.

Aurora returns with a tray of mugs, and we each take one.

“This is delicious, Rory,” I say. “What’s in it? I’ve never had anything like it.”

“I added a pinch of nabella to them, and Krista, yours has gankoya to help with your nausea.”

“Oh thank you, you’re a lifesaver. My morning sickness has been so terrible lately,” she says as she rubs her belly.

“Congratulations on your pregnancy, by the way,” I tell her.

“Thank you. With any luck, maybe you’ll be pregnant soon too.”

I smile at the thought, imagining how protective Selliss would be over me, even more than he already is. I picture him holding our kids, playing with them, putting them to sleep. It’s a wonderful image.

“I would love that,” I say.

“Motherhood has been so kind to me,” Lorelai says. “And it brought me and Slyth even closer together, which I didn’t think was possible after we mated. He truly is an amazing father.”

“Zalith, too,” Rory says. “I’ve never seen him happier than when he’s spending the day with the kids.”

“Are you worried about him?” I ask, still unable to take my mind off of where our men are.

“I am.” She looks at the ground. “But I know that he would never put his life in jeopardy. He knows me and the kids need him. He won’t let himself get hurt. And he will make sure his men arrive home safely, too. He is a good Prince.”

“And Lasta is the Captain of the Royal Guard, so if anyone knows what they’re doing, it’s definitely him.”

“But they all hate Selliss... What if they don’t look out for him?”

“Oh, honey, they would never do that. They aren’t bitter. Please don’t ever think that. They are good men, I promise you,” Lorelai says, pain in her eyes.

“It’s just that, your mates are all best friends... and Selliss was their enemy up until last week.”

“*Was* their enemy. The past is the past. Selliss is proving himself by helping them keep that town safe, and they won’t overlook that. Trust me,” Rory says.

“Okay...” I nod.

“Look, why don’t we take our minds off of this? Let’s play a game with all the kids. Hide ‘n seek?” Krista says.

“I think that’s a great idea. Krista, why don’t you be the one to hide since you can’t exactly run around seeking right now? We can help the kids find you.”

Krista rolls her eyes but stands up, hobbling her way down the hall to hide.

“We’ll give her a minute before we tell the kids, she’s a bit slow,” Lorelai jokes.

I giggle, watching Krista waddling away.

Despite the shitty situation, I wouldn’t want to spend this nerve-racking time with anyone other than these women. All I can think about is how thankful I am to finally have human friends again.

And the best part is that they all have naga mates, so they can give me all the advice I could possibly need. Not one of them is ever going to judge me.

What more could a girl ask for?

SELLISS

I *cannot believe they actually went through with it.*

Someone is talking to me, but I cannot really hear them, because all I can see is the horror of the mutiny around us.

Bile rises into my throat at the sight of several naga who have been beheaded and dismembered, their now formless, misshapen bodies piled up in the center of the town we just arrived in.

“There’s more of them up ahead,” Lasta says, drawing his sword.

He points at the mob that is trampling down everything in its path a few miles away from us.

“They’re moving from the center of the town towards the forest, to the next town over. We cannot let them get there,” Lasta murmurs and looks back at his men.

He doesn’t need to give them any orders. He simply nods and they nod back and spread out, disappearing between the houses, and into the forest surrounding the town.

“You should go back to the palace.” I turn when I hear Lasta speaking. And there, coming up behind us, covered in swords and knives, is Zalith.

“I want to talk to them,” Zalith says, his face grim.

“Talking won’t help.” I find myself speaking for the first time, and my voice is low and hoarse.

Shrill screams fill the air then, and we turn to look at the movement of the mob up ahead.

Thick, black smoke is rising into the air, colored with orange flames that spit and crackle dangerously.

“They’re going to burn the fucking place down,” Lasta mutters, but when I turn back to them, Zalith still has his eyes on me.

His eyes are hard, and I know he is finding it difficult not to hold me entirely responsible for everything that is happening right now.

Deal with your guilt later. Do what you can now.

“Why won’t talking help?” Zalith snaps the question, his hand going to the hilt of his sword.

“Because they’re Kriseri’s men. The rules of Lodra do not apply to them. Anyway, those aren’t the men I worked with in Yadat. They’re a few rogue men who aren’t following any leader.”

“Well, talking might not help them, but I’m going to make them listen somehow,” Zalith says, his lips pressed into a thin line.

He simply gestures at Lasta, and we all walk towards the mob.

The mob is being contained by some of the Lodrian Royal Guard, but they aren’t doing any good.

The naga who are at the center of the mutiny are violent, powerful, and hungry for blood.

And they know that they have King Kriseri on their side.

“He wanted this,” I say aloud. Lasta doesn’t need any explanation. He has been preparing for this moment for months now.

In fact, we were both preparing for this. For a war.

I just happened to help speed it up.

My heart drops into my stomach then as I remember the bodies of the Lodrian naga that are spread out in the town center.

I helped kill them.

I try to shake the thought away. I try to rationalize and barter with myself.

You tried to stop it. You did your best to stop it. This mob isn't even your men.

But I know I will always feel guilt for those dead naga. I am still responsible, even if only a little bit.

Because I decided to cross that border all those months ago.

I decided that my desire for revenge was more important than the potential lives of the naga of Lodra. The naga of the kingdom that I had loved all my life.

You became responsible for their deaths the minute you crossed that border. The minute you sold your soul to Kriseri. The minute your ego became more valuable than your values.

And look where you are now. In love with a human woman. In love with the very thing that drove you into Kriseri's arms in the first place.

We have broken into a run and are merging with the mob before I know it, and I draw my sword, my anger sharp and brittle.

Being right in the middle of the mob is overwhelming. It is loud and bright and painful.

The air is filled with smoke and the roaring sound of the fire almost drowns out the sounds of the screams and shrieks of the naga who are trying to burn Lodra to the ground.

I notice then that some of the naga who are caught up in a mob are actually from Lodra.

They came out to try and defend their homes, I realize.

The mob has grown larger. There has to be about seventy or eighty naga mixed in with one another.

The mob is tightly pressed together, body against body, our breath mingling together, and when I look ahead, I see that we're surrounded by a ring of fire.

“Stop!”

Prince Zalith's voice is loud, deep, and piercing. And it is commanding.

It is the voice of someone who will one day be King.

I look over at Lasta and Slyth, who are looking at Zalith with what I can only describe as pride on their faces.

The mob slows down and spreads out, and soon, the Lodrian Royal Guard is surrounding the naga from Yadat.

The group becomes smaller and smaller as the Lodrian naga move back to their homes, taking the dead and the injured with them.

“You will all be arrested! You are committing treason!” Zalith bellows, and some of the Yadat naga look around and whisper among themselves.

Somewhere in the distance, a few people are trying to put out the fire. And then the scream, a high keen, ripples through the air.

We all turn.

It is an older naga woman. She has fallen to her knees in the center of the town near the fountain. She is cradling a dead, dismembered naga in her arms.

And she doesn't stop screaming.

When I look at Zalith, his face is pale with fury.

I jostle my way out of the crowd as the naga from Yadat remain surrounded by Lodrian soldiers.

“Threats of treason won't work,” I tell Zalith.

“And why exactly not?” he barks.

“Because they're not from Lodra. Like I said before, the rules of Lodra do not apply to them.”

I speak more loudly, and some of the naga in the mob, some of them from Lodra, begin to look uncomfortable.

“They’re loyal to Kriseri. They don’t care about your laws. They’re just trying to stir up trouble.”

“Trouble?” Zalith spits and then turns to point at the bodies of the dead. “They killed people.”

And you helped them.

He doesn’t say the words out loud, but I know he is thinking them.

The mob starts to disperse as more and more of the Lodrian naga leave to join those who are tending to the injured.

But not all of them are leaving, I realize then. Some of the Lodrian naga have been swayed by the dissenters from Yadat.

And they want a fight.

A yell breaks the momentary silence, and then, in something akin to a flood, the remainder of the mob moves towards us.

I jump into the fight without thinking.

You helped them. The words, and I do not know if they’re mine or if they’re words I imagine Zalith speaking, ring over and over in my head. *You helped them.*

All I see, as I dance forwards, lunging at a naga who fights with two long knives, are the bodies of the dead.

I knock one of the knives out of his hand, and the look of crazed excitement flickers out of his eyes.

I leap forward with a howl and drive the sword through his chest. I pull it back with a ferocity that I haven’t felt in years.

I bump into Lasta then, and push him out of the way as a dagger flies through the air towards him. I deflect the dagger with my sword and kick the naga who threw the dagger right in the face.

“You okay?” I ask him, and he nods breathlessly.

“We need to stop this,” Lasta says, and the worry in his bright eyes is obvious.

“Yes. And we need to do it before more get hurt,” I reply and lift my hand to wipe sweat off my face.

“I think it is time you and I work together. Like we used to in the past. We’re trained to do this. Zalith and Slyth cannot do this without us. And I cannot do this without you.”

Lasta’s words are frank, and they give me pause.

He’s giving me a chance to put the past away and walk into the future together.

And so, in the middle of the chaos, I take his hand and shake it, before we both turn to face the violence.

MAYA

“It’s been too long,” I say, pacing back and forth in Aurora’s room.

We all slept in her bed together, and it is now morning. The men still have not returned. No one in the castle appears to know what happened. No one has any news about them, and it’s beginning to drive us all a little crazy.

“It certainly does feel that way. But imagine how bad the situation must have been. It was never going to be a quick and easy task. If the King really had his men there, then they probably destroyed that town.”

“Yeah, but were our mates in that town when they destroyed it?” Krista sobs.

Lorelai and Rory have kept it the most together, and Krista was doing well until this morning. Now she’s on my level. Rory is trying her best to keep it together for the rest of us, and Lor has just been sitting in the window seat staring out of it for the past hour.

The sight of her in that seat takes me back to Selliss’ room. At this moment, part of me wants to go back to that room. I was lonely, but Selliss and I were safe. And if he died in that town last night, then I will never forgive myself for ultimately being the reason he was there.

It will be my fault if he dies. This is what I’ve been telling myself all night, reciting it over and over in my head instead of sleeping.

“We can’t keep thinking like this,” Aurora says.

“Getting a little hard to do that,” Lorelai says, still staring out the window.

I’m not sure if she’s watching out for our men or if she’s just staring blankly, but either way, I think she’s starting to lose it.

“I know, trust me I’m having a hard time, too. But we have to hold it together. If they come back, they are going to need us.”

“If?” Krista asks, lips trembling.

“*When*. Fuck, I didn’t mean that. They *will* come home, girls. They’re probably just helping clean up after the battle. They can’t just leave the town in ruin.”

“You think it was that bad?” I ask. “That the town would be in ruin?”

“I don’t put it past the King’s men. I hope not, but they are cruel enough to do that kind of damage.”

Finally putting an end to my pacing, I sit on the bed, staring a hole into the ground. If Selliss does not return, then I have to come up with a plan. A plan to slip out of the castle and do what I should have done all those weeks ago in Selliss’ room.

I cannot live without him. He is all I have.

Krista begins sobbing uncontrollably next to me, holding her stomach.

“Krista, you have to stay calm. You could hurt your babies.”

“My babies could grow up without their father!” she wails.

“No, no, they will. Lasta is probably on his way here right now. Breathe, Krista. Breathe.”

Aurora crawls into the bed and hugs Krista into her chest, rocking her back and forth. I can’t imagine if I were pregnant during this. If I were Krista, I would’ve been a mess from the moment they left.

Suddenly, Aurora sits straight up, shock in her eyes. I follow her stare to the entrance of her room, where Zalith stands. He looks grim, and there's blood and dirt all over his body.

Aurora chokes back a sob, jumping up and running towards him. He picks her up and holds her close.

Slyth walks in right behind him, immediately heading towards Lorelai who's still sitting in the window seat, looking dead in the eyes... until she sees him. Then the tears come. Slyth picks her up and they kiss, so intensely that I have to look away.

When no one else comes through the door, me and Krista look at each other. Her face crumples, and tears begin effortlessly streaming down my own face. We hug each other, staring towards the door.

“Where are they?” Krista shrieks.

Zalith looks over at us, confusion on his face. He looks back at the door and opens his mouth, but before he can say anything, two naga men walk in.

It's Lasta and Selliss. They look at each other and nod, Lasta patting him on the back. When Lasta notices me and Krista, he runs over, immediately pulling Krista towards him.

“Is everything okay? Are the babies okay?” he questions.

She sobs into his neck, nodding.

I slowly look back to Selliss, who's leaning against the door jamb. He smirks at me like the prick he is, and I climb out of bed, walking over to him.

“Miss me?” he asks, raising an eyebrow.

I punch him as hard as I can in his arm, which admittedly is not very hard.

“Shut up. You're an asshole. I was worried about you all night. You have no idea what it's been like waiting for you to come back.”

At this point, I break down in tears. All the emotions I've felt for the past twelve hours rush into me at once.

"I thought you died... I thought you died, and I was going to be all alone. I thought I killed you!" I sob.

He pulls me into his chest, laying his head on top of mine.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have joked. I was just trying to lighten the mood. But I'm fine, and I barely have any injuries."

"You're injured? Where? Are they bad?"

"No, no. Nothing serious at all. Just need a few bandages and a good night's rest, that's all. None of us were badly hurt, thankfully. We were really lucky."

"So what happened?" I hear Aurora ask Zalith.

I turn around to hear his answer, and it seems like I'm not the only one who's curious. Lorelai and Krista look at him, too, awaiting his response.

"It was bad. Really bad. When we first got there, it was impossible to get everyone to settle down. Kriseri's men were setting fire to everything, and some Lodrian men started joining them. They definitely took a few supporters with them. But we finally drove them out of there and killed quite a few of them along the way."

"How many casualties?" Rory asks.

Zalith looks at the ground, shaking his head.

"Way too many. They started killing the naga men who didn't agree with them. A lot of women lost their mates. It's terrible. We have a lot of work to do in rebuilding that town."

"What are we going to do? To stop this from happening again? I mean, what if it's us losing our mates next time?" Lorelai asks.

"That will never happen," Slyth says, pulling her close. "But don't worry, we have plans to stop this from happening again. We're going to start working tomorrow. Tonight, we need to rest."

“Let’s go to our room,” Selliss whispers to me.

“Good idea, I can fix you up,” I say. “Guys, we’re going to retreat to our quarters if that’s okay. Selliss has got some injuries that need fixing up.”

Almost on cue, all three women start looking their men up and down, searching for injuries on them. Lasta waves Krista off before crossing the room towards us.

He sticks his hand out to Selliss, and the two of them shake hands.

“All is forgiven,” Lasta says.

Selliss bows his head slightly, and I can tell this means a lot to him. He looks up at Zalith and Slyth, who both nod at him.

Finally, Selliss and I head to our room, something I wasn’t sure was ever going to happen again.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” I say as we walk in.

I immediately find the bandage kit in the bathroom, and Selliss strips off his shirt so I can help him. We spend the next ten minutes smearing a medicinal salve onto his cuts and sealing them with a bandage until I’m satisfied.

“Selliss?”

“Yeah?”

“I was thinking, while you were gone... and I wanted to tell you that I would be honored to have your babies,” I say, biting my lower lip.

“You... you would want that?” His jaw drops.

“Yes... and I want us to have a mating ceremony. If last night taught me anything, it’s that I need to hold onto you while I can. I don’t want to lose you. I love you so much, Selliss...”

He continues staring at me incredulously. I begin to feel worried that maybe he doesn’t want the same thing.

“I know it’s soon, but if you don’t want the same then –”

He puts a finger on my lips to stop me from talking.

“I want all of that... I just never thought anyone would ever feel this way about me. I never saw myself falling in love and having a partner. But I especially didn't think anyone would ever want to be my mate or carry my eggs. But I want that so much with you, Maya. I want us to have a ceremony immediately.”

I breathe a sigh of relief.

“Oh thank gods... you scared me for a second there.”

He pulls me into his arms, and we stay wrapped around each other for what feels like hours.

I never want to let go.

SELLISS

It's taken longer than I'd hoped to fully heal, but with Maya's tender caresses, I am back to full strength. Nothing turned out as expected. Everything is so much better.

My redheaded beauty is at my side, and I am happy to have her. I stroke her back. The healer has released my eggs, and I'm eager to pump them into her womb. I want her to grow round with my children.

Nothing would give me greater joy.

Maya stands on her tiptoes to kiss me, before lowering herself down the length of my body to release my cocks from their confinement.

I shift my hips as she kisses her way down my torso. My hands in her hair, I encourage her to take me deep into her throat. She sucks me with practiced ease.

My cock hits the back of her throat as she flicks her tongue over the tip.

I want to fuck her mouth. I want to come down her throat. I breathe heavily as I fight against the urge to thrust my hips upward. The sight of her taking me so far down her throat is erotic beyond words.

"That's it, baby, suck me," I groan.

I feel the build-up of pressure in my balls as she hollows her cheeks and sucks me even harder.

"Enough. Get up here," I growl.

Maya rises from my cock and straddles me. The feel of her hot, wet pussy is euphoric. She arches her back slightly, and I watch in awe as she slowly slides my cock into her tight hole.

“Fuck...” I hiss as she impales herself on me.

I grip her hips and begin to thrust upward. Her body is amazing. Almost every inch of her is perfect. I love sliding my cock in and out of her body.

“Fuck me, Selliss, fuck me hard.”

I grab her face and kiss her deeply. “You are so beautiful,” I whisper.

“Oh fuck, Selliss... so deep.”

I hold her still and thrust upward. She is so tight. The muscles in my thighs shake as I try to hold back. I want to fill her with my seed. I want to make her pregnant.

“Take my seed, take it deep...”

My words are deep and guttural as I feel my seed start to boil.

“I’m going to come,” she whispers.

“Come with me, Maya.”

She moans as my seed spills into her womb. Her hips jerk and grind against mine as she comes hard. Her body clamps down on my cock, and the glowing energy of her orgasm fills my cock.

“Oh fuck... oh fuck...” I hiss.

Her body feels like warm syrup as I slide my cock out of her. I lay her back on the bed. I want to taste her pussy. I want her juices to gush down my throat. My mouth waters at the thought.

I spread her legs wide and position myself between them.

“I need to taste you,” I murmur.

I lap her sensitive nub and suck her labia into my mouth. I bite down lightly, and the taste of her fills my mouth. I lap my tongue over her and savor her flavor. She is delicious.

“Selliss, oh my gods...” she murmurs. I suck her clit into my mouth and flick my tongue over it. “Oh gods!”

She squirms beneath me, and I hold her still. I want to give her pleasure. I want to taste her orgasm.

I slip a finger into her tight pussy and begin to pump it in and out.

“Oh fuck, Selliss, fuck me...”

I slip another finger into her sodden pussy and pump my fingers in and out. Her juices trickle down my hand. The smell of her arousal fills my nostrils.

I gently bite her swollen clit, and she cries out.

“I’m going to lick your pussy until you come...”

I lick her clit slowly. Her body is so sensitive, and I want it to feel so good. I lick and suck on her clit until she moans and pushes against my face.

I slip a finger into her tight hole. She is so slick and juicy. I love the way she tastes, and I love the way she responds to my touch.

“Oh, Selliss... lick my clit...”

Her hips move faster as I lick and suck her clit. I slide another finger into her, and then a third. I fuck her harder and faster with my fingers. Her pussy is throbbing around my fingers, and I know she is close to coming.

I lick her clit as fast as I can. She moans as her pussy clamps down on my fingers. I taste when her juices gush into my mouth as she comes hard.

I climb up her body and kiss her deeply. Her hands are on my ass as she pulls me against her body.

She gasps and moans as I slide my other cock into her. Her pussy feels like a hot, wet glove around my cock. I thrust my hips hard, pushing deep into her body.

“Oh, baby, you feel so good...”

I feel her pussy tighten around my cock. Her body shakes and trembles as I fuck her. Her moans fill my ears, and I groan. I thrust into her again and again, and she moans as her body clamps down on my cock.

Her body shakes and trembles as I continue to pump her pussy. I kiss her hard as I thrust inside her. My second cock, hard once again, probes her ass and she smiles excitedly.

I remember a time it used to scare her...

I enter her ass slowly.

Her eyelids flutter as she adjusts to my size. I pet her hair and kiss her cheek.

“Take my cock, Maya, take it all.”

“Oh gods, Selliss, this feels so good.”

I grip her hips and thrust upward. My cock is throbbing, and my balls ache. I need her again. I need to fill her with my seed.

“That’s it, Maya, take my cock.”

I thrust into her again. Her ass is so tight and hot. I thrust into her harder and faster. Her pussy is quivering, and her pussy juices are flowing down my thighs. She moans loudly and buckles beneath me.

“Oh, fuck, Selliss, fuck me!”

Her pussy is quivering and throbbing around my cock. Her ass feels so fucking good. I thrust and feel her muscles grip my cock tightly. Her breathing is heavy. The room smells of our sex.

“Fuck me in the ass, Selliss... fuck me hard.”

I thrust into her again and again, as hard as I can. I want her to feel pleasure. I want her to feel so good.

My balls slap against her pussy as I thrust into her ass. The sound of our skin slapping together fills the room. She moans loudly as I fill her ass with my cock. Her moans turn to cries and I thrust harder and harder.

Her pussy is tight, and I know she's close. I feel her body start to tremble. I can feel my seed ready to spill.

I thrust into her ass as hard as I can. I can't get enough. My other cock is still working her pussy, and it's magical to have her working both cocks at the same time. I'm practically delirious with pleasure, and I have to remind myself that I need to focus on my original goal – impregnating her.

“Come with me, Maya!”

I thrust into her a few more times, and then her pussy clamps down on my cock. She moans loudly as she comes hard. The throbbing of her pussy is delicious, and I groan as I fill her with my seed. I feel my balls tighten, and I moan as my eggs spill into her.

“Oh fuck, Maya, oh fuck...”

I collapse onto her body as my cock pulses inside her.

Our bodies are slick with sweat, and I hold her close. I can't get enough of her. She is everything I could ever want.

“I love you, Maya.”

“I love you, too, Selliss.”

MAYA

“Are you nervous?” Krista asks me as she puts on the veil over my head.

“A little, but I don’t know if it’s the pregnancy hormones.”

Lorelai and Princess Rory giggle. I’m sure they were as nervous as I am during their mating ceremony. I can’t believe we got to this day finally. It’s really all I can think about.

“How have you been feeling recently?” Princess Rory asks.

“Not as bad as in the beginning, but this is the first month of my pregnancy so I hope it gets better from here on out,” I say, caressing my already protruding belly.

“Do you have a feeling on how many eggs you’re carrying?” Lorelai asks.

“I think about six. Selliss wants more but honestly, I don’t think I have the strength for it. I have no idea how Princess Rory and Krista managed eight.”

Krista sighs. “Lasta wants more. I think he’s in a subtle competition with Prince Zalith and Lord Slyth.”

“Don’t even get me started. Slyth keeps talking about fertility, like we really need to have a dozen babies,” Lorelai laments as she rolls her eyes. “But Prince Zalith mentioned something about not having any more, right? I think your birth really scared him, Rory.”

“Well, he got over it pretty quickly. I’m definitely convinced that there’s a competition going on. He’s been pouncing on me every chance he gets.”

I tilt my head. “Well, isn’t that normal of them?”

There’s a pregnant pause before we all laugh, sharing the pain of carrying a litter and dealing with obsessive mates. But as nervous as I feel, my happiness overshadows it. All the uncertainty brought about by King Kiseri made me think this day was impossible. But once I put on my dress, it all washes away.

I chose neutral colors to match Selliss’ scales. With the color of my hair, they match his eyes, although the color’s much bolder. The dress hangs off my shoulders, accentuating my breasts and collarbone. The trail behind him is decorated with white petals.

“You look amazing!” Krista beams as she fixes my unruly hair. She plaited my tresses to place white wildflowers, even though the veil’s also decorated with petals. “I don’t even think Princess Rory took this long for her ceremony.”

“Well, because we were on a battlefield,” the latter remarks. Then she sighs. “We just wanted to be together as soon as possible. I really wouldn’t change it for anything.”

I guess I’m quite lucky to have the ceremony in Lodra’s territory. I don’t think this could happen even in secret if we were still in Yadat. The King’s been quiet so far, but I don’t even want to think about that. At least for today.

Focus on the new life you’re building with the love of your life, I think to myself.

“Oh!” I jump a little when I feel some of the eggs move. The others stare at me in surprise. “That’s the first time they did that!”

“I think you’re having more than six, Maya,” Krista says hesitantly. “Lorelai didn’t feel movement her first month when she carried her five eggs.”

The blood drains from my face. “Oh, no. Please don’t say that.”

Princess Rory chimes in. “Well, thank Vatia! Now you both will be busy with your future litter. Just enjoy yourself today and let’s not keep your mate waiting.”

I forcibly laugh, nervous about a different thing now. They guide me towards the path that leads to the altar. Our ceremony will also be traditional.

Selliss meets me there, looking handsome as always. Captain Lasta stands beside him as he shakes his shoulder in encouragement. I’ve never seen such a wide smile on my beloved’s face. It brings tears to my eyes.

“You look absolutely breathtaking,” he says.

“I think the same way about you.”

His eyes travel down to my belly. Unable to hold himself back, he gently rubs his hand over it.

“Did they allow you to fit in your dress?”

“They did until they started moving.”

His face falls. “They moved? But this is your first month...”

He turns back at Captain Lasta, who gives him a knowing smirk. I guess I’ll have to prepare myself mentally and physically now. Something tells me eight is the magic number around here.

When Selliss turns to me, I notice he’s misty-eyed. But he’s stopping the tears from falling.

I giggle. “What do you think?”

He clasps my hands. “I think that I’ve never been this happy in my life. Thank you for carrying my eggs, my beloved Maya.”

He leans down to kiss me, when a large hand sticks between our faces.

“Did you both forget where you are?” Captain Lasta scolds us.

Krista comes up and locks her arm with his. “We were like that in our ceremony, Lasta,” she muses.

The latter grunts. “Well, we were about to kiss anyway. You two, you’re keeping the guests waiting.”

We look to our side, noticing naga holding the flowers they have to place on the altar in honor of the gods. Selliss gestures for them to follow through with the tradition. In silence, they all place their flowers on the altar.

Finally, after the last one, Selliss and I walk towards the shaman. He squeezes my hand the closer we get. Time goes slowly and everything around us seems like just a blur. All my focus is entirely on Selliss, and his on me.

No words are needed for us to express our undying love for each other. I can feel his affection shielding around me and our babies. There’s no doubt in my mind or heart that I can trust him with my life.

The words I waited to hear are finally spoken into reality.

“In the name of the Light, you may now kiss your mate,” the shaman orders.

Without a moment’s hesitation, Selliss grabs my face and kisses me with such neediness and passion. I hold onto his arms, melting in his embrace. The guests laugh and leer as Selliss dips me to deepen the kiss.

I have to tap his arm to stop him from continuing for the sake of everyone else. He grunts and breaks away from me.

“In the name of the Light, I bless this beautiful couple!” the shaman shouts.

The cheers get louder and the applause longer. Selliss picks me up and twirls me around.

“I’ll love you for eternity, my beautiful mate,” he promises as he sees me down.

“I’ll love you even more,” I say.

He looks at me incredulously. “I don’t think so. I was willing to have my head cut off for you,” he snarks playfully.

I raise an eyebrow. “And who’s the one carrying your eggs?”

“You’re even bold at this time, aren’t you?” He leans down to my ear to whisper. “I’ll have to do something about that new attitude of yours.”

I whisper back to him. “You can do that on your honeymoon, *master*.”

He stares at me for a second, when I feel him gripping my waist.

“You’re playing with fire here, *beloved*.”

“Well, I guess I’ll have to wait and see if I get burned,” I retort flirtatiously.

After chuckling he lifts me off my feet to carry me where the rest of the celebration takes place. A large bonfire sits in the middle with tables lined around it.

The music starts to play and it’s just us two in the middle. Selliss sets me down and pulls me towards him. We lock eyes as our bodies flow with the rhythm of the music.

“This is nothing like the dance you showed me when we first met,” he says.

“Well, these little ones are to blame for it,” I say, noticing how we’re not really pressed together. My belly creates a space between us. “I think they’re going to take my attention away from you.”

He scoffs. “They’ll have to challenge me first. You’re my mate before I’m a father.”

“You say that now, but I’ve seen the others have a soft spot for their litter. Especially the girls.”

“Because girls are weaker. They need more care.”

I laugh almost in a snort. “You see? You’re already coddling them.”

“Whatever,” he mutters. His grouchiness doesn’t last. He leans down to kiss my forehead. “Still, it makes me incredibly happy that you’re carrying our children.”

“I know. I feel the same way,” I say. “But I have to say, I never imagined all of this happening.”

I look over at the people of Lodra and our surroundings. I once thought my only sight would be barren walls – isolated and lonely. Despite the initial circumstances, I’m glad they happened, otherwise, I wouldn’t have known this kind of love.

“My love?” Selliss turns my head up to him. “Are you remembering how things were... before?”

“I am, but if what happened then needed to happen for us to come to this... I would do it all over again.”

He smiles in relief. “I hope you don’t regret being with me?”

“Not for a single moment.”

“I love you eternally, Maya. Never leave my side,” he utters, leaning down to my lips.

“I wouldn’t even think about it. I will love you even in my next life,” I say as I close the kiss, sealing our everlasting love.

DRANSA

“We never should have trusted a traitor. This was bound to happen.”

Kryon mutters this as we stand on the border between Yadat and Lodra and watch the stragglers try to make it across the border, back into their homeland.

There are only three of them, and they're badly injured. Some of my men rush forward to drag them into Yadat and take them to get medical assistance.

“Yes,” I growl through gritted teeth. My hands are balled into fists, and my hood is flared as rage surges through me. “We should never have trusted him.”

Part of me still cannot believe this. That Selliss betrayed us the way he did.

And all for a human woman.

But then again, Kryon is right. Selliss showed us his true colors simply by showing up and abdicating his responsibilities in Lodra.

“And all for a human woman,” Terrian echoes my thoughts, spitting the words, his face twisted with shock and disgust.

“Kriseri is going to want blood for this,” I respond and rub my hand forcefully over my tired face.

It is close to dawn and we're all exhausted, but there is no one else to do the night patrol, as we've just lost about twenty

soldiers to Lodra's forces.

"Kriseri is going to want our heads," Terrian says heatedly. "We should have killed Selliss the minute he set a claw across the border. We let him in, ergo we're responsible for this mess."

We stay on our patrol shift for a few extra hours, until reserve soldiers are called up to relieve us.

"We'll start a recruitment trial tomorrow," Terrian says tiredly as we walk into the barracks.

I nod and leave the barracks to head for my room.

I actually thought Selliss was a good addition to Kriseri's Royal Guard. He was a good leader.

But he was led astray so easily. How could this have happened? What is in the water in Lodra?

My disbelief about Selliss' actions is strong, but some small part of me can almost understand why he did it.

I've been with human women before. I don't hate them, and I have found some of them attractive.

But to throw an entire prosperous career away from a human woman?

I wouldn't even do that for a naga woman!

There is no woman in Nagaland, in all of Protheka, who could make me give up something this good. I think angrily to myself as I remember how I led Selliss to Maya.

I know I am not responsible for his actions. But maybe, just maybe, if Kryon and I hadn't come up with this clearly fucked up idea of having human women for stress release, then maybe none of this would have happened.

"You couldn't have known." I have to speak out loud to myself, to convince myself of this truth.

I could not have known that Selliss would fall 'in love' with Maya.

"But I still feel like I led him directly to her."

My words resound around an empty room as I flop down on the bed.

I am asleep within seconds.



I WAKE up just in time for my shift, and when I arrive in the main room of the barracks, Kryon and Terrian are already waiting for me.

Tomorrow we'll start selecting new trainees from the recruits who have signed up to join the Royal Guard.

And the next few weeks will be grueling, as we try to get them ready for whatever is coming next.

Because while Lodra may have won the battle, the war is still coming.

Kryon, Terrian, and I discuss Selliss and Lodra as we walk through town towards the border.

"I still cannot believe he would betray his own people for a human woman," Kryon says. His eyes are narrowed, and he is breathing heavily – signs that he is very angry. "He basically gave up his entire life in Lodra because of a human woman. And then gave up everything he worked hard for here."

"Because of a human woman," Terrian and I say in unison.

"I get that they make good playmates. And they're certainly excellent in bed. But if you wanted a companion that bad – Well, there are plenty of naga women who would do the job just as well."

"Yes!" Kryon replies to Terrian's words. "Keep them as pets, but nothing more."

We all nod in agreement, and then spread out, each of us taking up a post along the border.

I lean against the wooden post and think about Selliss and Maya.

I have never been in love. And the thought of giving myself so completely to someone, so entirely that I'd be willing to give up my life's convictions, is unthinkable to me.

I wouldn't do it for a human woman, and I wouldn't even do it for a naga woman, I think to myself.

And Terrian was right. Human women are great as pets. They're nice to keep around. And they are certainly much easier to deal with than naga women, who expect the entire world.

I have seen naga men break themselves to please a naga woman, and that is incentive enough to stick to fucking human women.

But what Selliss did, how he felt about Maya, his motivations – I cannot understand them.

“And you never will,” I tell myself as I look up at the steadily darkening sky.

If it came to it, I'd rather use my hand to get off than give myself like that to any woman.

Luckily, I have never had to rely on myself. I know that I am attractive, and so do the women around me.

“But if it came to it...” I look over at Terrian and Kryon, who are also leaning against their posts.

Yadat is cold at night, especially here where we are, on the border between Yadat and Marzula.

We are miles away from civilization, and we are surrounded by a strip of dead and dry land. The lush beauty of Marzula glares at us from a long distance.

But here, at these wooden posts, it is just us, the desert, and the sky.

And each of those things is brutal and unforgiving.

Including us.

And I know that if I ever come across Selliss again, I'll have his head for what he did to me, my King, and the men underneath my command.

“Lodra will be easy to take,” Terrian tells me later on when we are being relieved from our shift.

“Of course it will be,” I scoff, my hood flaring angrily as I think about that kingdom that has shamed the entirety of Nagaland.

“Lodra is weak, even if they do not look like it. Any kingdom that would prioritize humans over naga is weak.”

We do not go to bed, but walk straight to the center of Yadat, to the town that lies beneath the palace.

There, in the town square, we see dozens of young naga men, ready to be trained.

“This will be brutal,” I tell Kryon, who nods in agreement.

It will be brutal, not just for the new recruits, but for us too.

We will need to train as hard and as fast as we can. We will need to be faster and stronger than ever.

King Kriseri will not tolerate any failure going forward.

He will expect us to take Lodra and win.

And it probably will be easy. Because clearly, the Lodrian naga males cannot think straight when a semi-attractive human woman walks into the room.

But I am not willing to take any chances.

When war comes – because it will – I want to take Lodra and I do not want to lose any men.

Kryon and Terrian take the new recruits through their first round of training, while I speak to Melinu, Kriseri’s chief war strategist.

“We need to send in a few spies,” Melinu mutters. He is old and short and very thin, and the skin of his upper body is so pale that I can practically see the rush of blood through it.

He has white, wiry, unkempt hair and he wears round, wire-rimmed glasses.

He looks insane, but he really is a genius.

Can you have one without the other?

“I’ve gotten word from Kario,” he tells me. “They caught a Lodrian spy in the royal palace a few months ago. But he escaped before they could question him.”

“And you think we should do the same? What if they capture one of our men, and we lose a good soldier? We have already lost too many men.”

“That is why we send a spy and not a soldier,” Melinu says, his voice sharp. “This is war boy. You need to start asking yourself what you’re willing to do. And who you’re willing to lose.”

THE END.

To read more about Maya and Selliss my newsletter here:

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PREVIEW OF MONTER'S MATE

The Worlds of Protheka is a vast and growing world. Check out one of the books, *Monster's Mate*

Monster's Mate

By Anne Hale & Celeste King

Available on Amazon [here!](#)

TANEM

The night is almost as dark as I am.
Almost.

Maybe nothing is darker than I am. I don't know. I have lived a very long time.

Somewhere in my memory, maybe I can find something as dark as I am.

But I have no interest in searching through my memories for something that doesn't matter.

What matters is that I am darker than night, and I shift and ripple with the shadows of Eelry.

I am not trying to hide. Not really. I am hunting, and maybe I should hide. Be stealthy.

Maybe.

But I have no patience for playing hide and seek with my prey. They will see me coming. They will see their deaths.

They will certainly feel their deaths.

Next time, I will try to be stealthy. The taste of surprise in the blood and flesh of whatever I am eating is quite exquisite.

That, I have to admit to myself.

My favorite meals are dark elves. They taste like nothing else I have ever consumed.

And in my centuries of living...

Centuries Tanem? Have you truly lived that long?

In my centuries of living, I have never tasted anything like a dark elf. Their flesh is soft, supple, tender.

Their dark sorcery flows through their veins, providing me with strength and keeping me sated days after the meal.

My fangs are extending from my gums, just think about them.

The muscles in the tentacles that are sealed into my back flex and twist. They are hungry.

“Shh. Be still.” The words slip from between my fangs. My low, guttural voice a growl more than anything else.

I catch the scent of humans when I lift my head to the air. My nose wrinkles involuntarily.

I am not the biggest fan of eating humans. But perhaps tonight I will find something sweet to calm my tentacles.

Maybe tonight, I should do the easy thing and give up on hunting the dark elves who have probably sensed my presence in the city.

The humans are in a hurry, that much I gather from the way their energy sparks and whips in the air.

Their voices are low, their footsteps hurried. I follow them, my footsteps soft and swift against the cobblestoned ground.

My body has remained muscular, strong, and lean, despite my years of living.

I find it fascinating that humans age to become decrepit creatures, unable to help themselves.

The group of humans turn a dark corner, and my tentacles lift from where they were hanging down my back. I loom over them, and the fools still do not see me.

You are so hungry. My voice speaks silently in my head, coaxing me on.

I am about to attack, to grab one or two, when the scent reaches me. The fragrance is like nothing I have ever smelled before.

It is fresh and bright and so sweet. It smells even better than the magical blood of the dark elves.

Whatever it is, it is coming from the humans. I retract my tentacles, against their protests.

I can't eat yet. Not until I have found the source of the scent.

I am aware that my heart is racing and my stomach is twisting. My skin prickles as I follow the humans around corner after corner.

Soon, we come up to a one-story building with a low roof. I can't go in just as I am, so I wait for the humans to enter.

What is this place? I can hear dozens of footsteps crossing the dirt floor inside. A thousand different scents mingle and exude from the building.

I allow the darkness to cover me, slipping inside before the elf guarding the door can see me.

All he notices is a whisper of wind caressing his cheek as I pass.

I remain close to the walls of the building, until a guard catches my scent. The giant creature looks up at me, signaling the guards behind me.

I duck into an alcove to my left, and they follow.

The tentacles stretch from my back and break their necks in seconds. I do not even have to move.

I heft their bodies into the alcove, piling them on top of one another. There are bales of hay close by.

I remain pressed into the darkness as I pile the hale on top of them.

Finding my prey will be impossible now. I can't hunt or else I will be hunted. Hunted to my end.

When I turn, I realize exactly what is happening inside the building. It is an auction. Whoever is running it is auctioning off precious jewels, animals and the like.

And humans, I quickly discover.

I can still smell the scent that has drawn me here. I can almost smell the fragrance in the air, shimmering like a bright light reflecting off glass.

I inch away from the wall, straining to see the front of the room. Several humans are auctioned off. They are beautiful; young, sweet things.

But right now? They are not enough to sate my hunger.

Not while the owner of the fragrance lingers close by.

The sixth auction item is a necklace containing several jewels of precious origin. I could not care less.

The seventh auction item is slightly more interesting.

“Get your hands off me, filth!” She screeches. Several of the humans and elves gasp at her words.

She is being brought, kicking and screaming onto the stage.

Strange. Usually humans like being auctioned off. They'll be taken care of instead of remaining in their slums.

An elf close by chuckles with amusement.

The human girl is still struggling on the stage. “Don't buy me!” She shrieks the words.

“I'll stay on the streets! I'll just run away from you!”

The scent is back and stronger than ever. I need to leave and find it. I need it. Desperately.

As I leave, it wafts towards me, and I turn unconsciously.

It is her.

The human girl throwing a tantrum on the auction stage.

Who is she? And why does her scent set me on fire?

I cannot answer the questions that flit through my head.

MOIRA

I have bitten three elves in the arm, and have chewed off an ear.

Dear gods, they taste awful.

The pain does not seem to register with them. They do not seem to even feel pain.

That doesn't matter to me.

I won't stop kicking and screaming until I get away from this place. From the auction house where I am as good as a side of taura.

I am sure I will be prodded and poked like a side of taura too. When I look down from the stage at the room, I see several elves and dark elves nodding at my appearance.

My heart almost freezes with fear, but I swallow through it, because if I do not, I will collapse.

I have been close to collapsing for several days now. I am not sure why. Maybe I am exhausted from worry. Maybe I am exhausted from grief.

I don't think it matters why any longer. I don't think it matters that I am exhausted any longer.

All I can do is keep kicking till they let go of me for one second. Then I can escape.

Both elf servants that hold onto each of my arms twist and I howl with pain. Tears sting my eyes, but I refuse to cry.

Not until I have given up all hope.

Betrayal lingers, burning in the back of my mind as I fight for my life.

I was working well before my master, such as he was, decided to sell me off. I was a good worker, attentive, and kind.

I took care of him, his house, and his family well.

I almost cared for the dark elf. But I think that maybe this was all part of his plan.

To use me up and toss me out. Until the only thing left for me was to lay back with my legs spread for whoever bought me.

The elf servant twists my arms again.

This time, tears fall. I am sobbing now, openly and loudly.

Maybe, just maybe, this will deter whoever thought I looked good enough to buy.

I thought at first that my elf master was joking when he said I was to be sold off.

But quickly enough I realized it was the worst joke that I would ever hear. And the other human servants did not help.

I had always known they didn't like me, though I am not sure why.

But they had blamed everything that went wrong on me. So I was forced out.

"This feisty one will be sold to the highest bidder!" A dark elf on the stage grins at me, his sharp teeth glittering in the dim fires that sparkle from torches on the walls.

“NO!” I scream the word until I can feel my vocal chords start to crack.

“Buy me and I will curse you all to your deaths. Don’t fucking buy me or you’ll regret it.”

Tears, real tears, are falling down my face. Tears of shock and exhaustion and grief.

And there is nothing I can do to stop crying.

My curses deter no one, and neither does my crying, I realize angrily. More hands with paddles on them have shot up.

The dark elf laughs loudly.

I recognize the elf closest to the stage who has now bid the most on me. He is known for his cruelty, and his ugly smile terrifies me.

I blink my eyes that sting with tears, and the room glitters around me. It smells rank, like sweat and drying shit.

Bile rises to my throat, but I know I cannot give up. Maybe I can escape.

This time, my struggles are more violent, and the elves must have lost their patience. They restrain me more forcefully.

And their claws draw blood. I fall to my knees as blood wells up from deep scrapes on both my arms.

My tears, this time, are silent.

The auction room goes quiet.

Are they shocked? Did these superior creatures think that humans didn’t bleed?

The dark elf has ordered the servants to take me to the back. I will probably be punished there.

But just then, a loud, growling snarl comes from the back of the room.

Monster.

Because that is what it is.

It has thrown itself at the stage, a big, dark, hulking figure. It has clawed hands, and red eyes glitter from its face.

The elf servants jump into action, trying to restrain it.

Why is the monster coming for the stage?

The thought comes to me distractedly. Because I have seen my chance.

GO! NOW!

I slip away from the elves, who are too focused on subduing the beast. I don't care any longer that I am barefoot and bleeding.

But I am not fast enough. Because a dark elf shifts out of the darkness as I run past. He grabs me. He must have been waiting for me.

"You're all mine," he grins down at me. "And I don't even have to pay for you. You will be a nice treat that I keep chained to my bed."

My blood is cold, and I am shivering in his grip.

It is over. I know it is. Dark elves have magic. He will probably disappear with me now.

But someone disagrees.

The growl is low and rumbling and darker than the nighttime.

It is unnatural and the elf hisses.

"Beast." The word slips from his lips in a whistle and he shoves me behind him.

The monster faces us, and slowly, four long, thick tendrils stretch from his back.

The elf doesn't wait but summons a staff and throws magic at it. The beast avoids the magic effortlessly.

He growls again, leaping forward. The elf creates a dark forcefield around us. The beast bounces off it, but doesn't fall.

Our eyes meet. Both his red eyes close and open slowly. As though he is trying to communicate with me.

The elf throws spell after spell at him, swiftly, brutally. The beast is hurt several times but continues forward.

He is relentless, using his arms, legs, claws, and tentacles to fight.

I realize, when he avoids clawing at me when the elf shoves me in front of him, that the beast is trying to help me.

But why?

To be continued. To read more click [here!](#)