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**FORBIDDEN  
LOVERS**

RED PLANET DRAGONS OF TAJSS

# FORBIDDEN LOVERS

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RED PLANET DRAGONS OF TAJSS (SEASON  
THREE) BOOK TWENTY-EIGHT

MIRANDA MARTIN

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## ANNALISE

*I*t's cold. I roll onto my side and pull the blanket up to my chin. I'm half-awake but really don't want to be. Exhaustion lies heavy and fills my head with sleep fog.

"Tams... the fire..." I groan.

Silence mocks me. I crack one eye open, forcing myself to be more awake, and now I remember. Tamara's not here. Abs isn't either. I'm alone. I sigh heavily and then roll out of the cubby that serves as a bed.

The stone floor is freezing on my bare feet. I should get some slippers. Get, right. What I really mean is I should figure out how to make some slippers. I mentally add that to the list of things I might learn to do some day since there is no place to go and shop.

I miss shopping. Who knew how much we took for granted such a simple convenience. Want something? Go to one of the hundreds of shops and pick it up. Simple. Easy. And gone. Forever. Will there ever be shops again? Is that a thing that our great, great, great grandkids will bring back?

I kneel next to the firepit, staring at the coals and willing them to light up. They don't, of course, but sleep clouds my mind and it's hard to think. Coffee. Oh my god, I would kill someone for a cup of coffee.

No, not literally. Bad thought. Don't be having those thoughts. Killing is a real thing, not a figurative one. Another change in my life. There has been too much change.

The pile of dried whatever the hell it is that they use for fueling the fires catches my eye in its basket. Right. That stuff. I grab one of the flat patties and place it on top of the glowing coals. Then I lie on my side and blow on the coals until smoke is curling around the patty. Once that happens, I know from experience that it will do its thing on its own. I sit up, pulling my knees to my chest, and rest my chin on them while I watch and wait for the coming warmth.

The flames slowly lick their way around the edges of the brown patty thing and it's a race as to whether the fire or the smoke will happen first. I scoot back along the floor until my back is against the wall below my bunk. I reach up, grab my blanket, and wrap it around myself then resume waiting.

It's quiet. Too quiet. I can't recall the last time there wasn't the sounds of Abs and Tams breathing. Or moving around getting ready. Or something, making some kind of noise. No, that's not right, of course I can recall it. It was yesterday.

Right. Well, one way or another this sucks. I'm alone and I do not like it. I vote against it. Now all I have to do is become a completely self-centered bitch and demand that they break up with their mates. Or... maybe I could move in with them?

Ew, no. They're my besties, my sisters of choice if not blood, but I know what they sound like when they're doing it and... no. No, silence is better. It's an adjustment. I'll get used to it. Eventually, right? The smoke fills the room and makes me cough. I force myself onto my feet and go prop the heavy piece of leather that serves as a door partially open to let in fresh air.

My feet are still cold, but the room is getting warmer. I shuffle over to the shelf. A small pottery bowl holds some cold water. I lean my face way into it and carefully splash water onto it then press my wet hands to my eyes. The cool helps ease the puffiness and helps me feel more awake.

I yawn, stretch, and wish, not for the first time, that the nights were longer. My nocturnal activities are the one reason I'm glad that I've got a room to myself now. Tams and Abs would never miss that I've been slipping out if they were in the room

with me and I'm not ready to tell them about that. Not yet anyway.

I will. Soon. I can't keep a secret from them. Honestly, I'm surprised I've managed to this long. I yawn again but it's cut short when I inhale too much of the smoke and it turns into a coughing fit. Damn it.

I glare at the broken chimney. They'll fix it soon. I hope. Another thing I have no idea how to do. Fix stone constructions that make up our refugee human homes. That skill is not going on my list. I'm not interested in masonry, but I do want it fixed. I'll leave that to those who know more than I do.

I need to get to breakfast and then get my work duty assignment for the day. Best to be there early or I'll get stuck with some crap job. Which might literally be crap, or crap handling. Abs got stuck on that detail once. The story she told was enough for me. No thank you, I'll pass.

I change my clothes out for fresher ones. Fresh being relative. This is, after all, Tajss. Even though we've moved into these underground caverns with our new hosts, the Cavern Zmaj, water is still in short supply. Better, but definitely not abundant.

Another thing I miss. On the generation ship I never once thought about water. I wanted water, I went to the sink, and I got a glass. Or I filled my tub. No idea how it worked. Never cared because it was just always there. On demand.

That item has long been on my 'thankful' list, but I take the moment to appreciate it again. It is much better to find things to be grateful for than to be upset about. A silly little motto, maybe, but it gets me through the day.

All dressed and as ready for the day as I'm going to be I step outside. My room is higher up than either Abs or Tams, but if I hurry, I should catch them on my way down. The walkway outside my door looks down on the pit, or the arena depending on if you're talking to a human or a Zmaj.

The pit, as humans call it, is five stories below my room and there is no railing on the edge. I don't get too close. No point in risking it and besides, I know what is down there. The hard-packed floors surrounded by bleachers on either side and the front part that I think of as the stage or the emperor's box. The Al'fa, leader of the Cavern Zmaj, is not an Emperor, per se, but he's close enough.

My foot hits something and it skitters across the stone walkway, pulling my attention out of my own head. Whatever it is it stops close to the edge. I stare at it in the dim light until I figure out that it's a package. Someone must have left it at my door.

*What? Who?*

I look around but no one seems to be paying any attention to me or the package. There are only a few people moving on this level of the apartments though and it's dark out here. There are torches placed every forty feet or so that cast only enough illumination to keep it from being pitch black. Cavern Zmaj have excellent low-light vision, but they've been letting us put up more lights because humans don't.

Curious I walk over and kneel. The package is lightweight. It's about as long as my forearm and looks like a thin piece of leather. That's not unusual. Like water, wood is in short supply on Tajss. For anything on the ship we would have used paper for, they use some variation of leather. I pick the thing up and find the binding string. Carefully I untie it and unwrap it.

As the thin leather comes apart a soft glow emerges. Flowers. I look quickly around. It can't be. No way.

The flowers are bioluminescent and gorgeous. They give off a soft blue light of their own, fading, but still. The stalks are a rich red color, and the blooms are a soft white beneath the glow they emit. It's a full bouquet.

*You didn't. How?*

My heart is racing and not only with the excitement of having received flowers, but with knowing how dangerous and

impossible this is. He couldn't have. When did he have time? And how did he...

"What you got there?" I jump at the sudden intrusion and fall back onto my butt. "Sorry, didn't mean to startle you. Are you okay?"

The man offers his hand to help me up. I stare at the offered hand too long in bewilderment.

"Nothing, uh, no, I'm fine, uh, thank you."

I mumble a lot of words as I accept the offered hand and let him help me to my feet. I cuddle the flowers closer to my chest, but the leather wrap is open exposing them to his view.

"Oh, secret admirer, nice," he says with a smile. "Whomever the lucky guy is, keep him. Can't imagine what he had to trade to get flowers from that Zmaj who guards them."

"Yeah, uh, thanks," I mumble, shaking my head.

He has no idea what the one who delivered them risked doing this. I can't say either. The man is middle-aged with heavy worry lines, but he smiles and nods then moves on his way after giving me his best wishes for the day and I give him the same.

I dart a quick look around then rush into my room, stopping and trying to decide what to do with the flowers. Should I hide them? Display them? Display them in what? Our room, no not ours any longer, mine, is spartan in décor. The life of refugees, as Abs used to joke, this is why we can't have nice things.

"I don't have to hide them," I say out loud if for no other reason than it feels good to talk this through. "No one will know and there is nothing wrong with my having an admirer. Perfectly normal."

*Unless Tams or Abs sees. They'll never stop asking questions.*

Right. Hmm. I stare down at the flowers and my heart swells in my chest. He loves me. I knew that he did, and I know how I feel about him, but this... wow. Stupid, though. When I see him again, I have to make damn sure he doesn't do this again.

How could he do something this dangerous? What if he got caught?

But he loves me. Already, enough of the sidetracks. What do I do with the flowers? If I continue to stand here stuck in my own internal debate I'll miss the girls at breakfast and end up on crap detail as well.

*Hide them. They're for you, no one else.*

Right. Good idea. Self-high-five. I hide them under my pillow knowing full well they will be crushed but I can't get rid of them, and I don't have a lot of options to hide them in. Besides, pressing flowers is a thing, isn't it? I seem to remember some old Earth vid or book where a girl was doing that. My hand lingers on the pillow as my heart races. Talk about grand gestures. Sheesh.

Okay, breakfast. I head out the door and join the flow of people heading in the same direction I want to go. It's early and there aren't very many up and walking yet. I run my fingers through my hair, working out knots as my thoughts wander and my feet carry me along.

It's been years since the generation ship was attacked and we crashed here. In that time, we've been rescued by the native alien dragon-men, the Zmaj, then had a civil war among our own kind. Followed that up by being invaded by another alien species and went to war against them. Then the powers that be blew them up but also made the already barely habitable planet worse in the process. To say it's been an eventful few years would be an understatement.

And of course, some human women have fallen in love with Zmaj and had babies, because that's what people in love do, and yet despite this I still am not comfortable sharing my secret. I want to. I want to tell my friends I've found someone who looks at me the way their mates do. Someone who makes my heart speed up every time I even think about him. Someone who makes me feel like I can do anything.

Anything except tell them, of course. Every time I get close to saying it my throat clenches shut and my mouth feels like it's full of red sand from the planet's surface. Because my love is

forbidden. Stupid, terrible, totally wrong side of the ship kind of love. What was that old vid... don't tell me I'll remember it.... *West Side Story*. That's it. Wouldn't life be great if we all just sang away our problems?

Entering the dining hall, or eating area, or whatever whoever wants to call it I look over the sea of heads for my friends. They should be here somewhere, especially since I took time to hide the flowers.

"Anna," Tamara yells from the far side of the room waving a hand in the air.

I smile and work my way across the room to her. She's in line for the food. This place is so weird. Almost everything is made of stone. Like, everything. Most of the food is stored in these bins that are literally carved holes in the wall, everything except the hot stuff. Tamara looks bleary-eyed and pale as she hands me a plate.

"You okay?"

"No. I hate mornings. I hate... everything."

I rub my hand on the small of her back. She bows her head and sighs.

"Still dealing with the sickness?" I ask.

"I think it's getting worse."

"It's only the first trimester, right? You've only got another, what, six? Seven weeks?" She gives me a death glare, but I keep smiling trying to support her. She grumbles something about what she'd like to do with those weeks that is not nice but that's okay. I still love her. "Have you seen Abs?"

"No and she can piss off too," Tamara says.

"She's still not getting sick?"

"No!" Tamara exclaims. She's putting some slices of sizzling meat onto her plate as we work our way through the line. "I'm pretty sure she cursed me. Somehow."

"What do you mean?"



“I’m taking on her morning sickness for her,” Tamara grouses.  
“Not fair. Not cool at all.”

“That’s what friends are for, right?” I say, knowing that I’m prodding her, but she closes her eyes and shakes her head.

“Yeah,” she sighs.

We finish going through the line and find a free table. We make small talk but mostly focus on eating our food. I keep looking around for Abigail to show up and when she finally does, I stand up and wave my arm so that she’ll see we’re already here. She joins us as soon as she fills her plate.

“You’re late,” I say.

Abigail has bags under her eyes and also looks pale.

“Yeah,” she says. “All the missed days of sickness caught up with me.”

“Good,” Tamara says, then we look at each other and all of us laugh.

“I can’t wait,” I say. “I’m so excited. I will be the bestest Auntie of all time.”

“She’s going to hype them up and send them home,” Tamara says.

“You’d best be changing your plans,” Abigail says.

More laughter. I eat with vigor while they both push their food around on their plates.

“How are you adjusting?” Tamara asks at last. “You doing okay?”

“It’s an adjustment, but I’ll manage,” I say.

“You’re not too lonely, are you?” Abigail asks.

*Say it. Tell them. This is your opening.*

I smile. Both of my best friends are watching. Their concern is more than obvious. Fear makes my mouth dry. What if they think I’m stupid? Wrong? No, they’ll get it. I can tell them.

“You guys remember when we were captured?” I ask.

“How could we forget?” Abigail says.

“Well, one of those—”

“Annalise Barker?” a stranger interrupts before I can say more.

The three of us turn to the newcomer. It’s a young woman that I at least do not know. She has short cut hair, soft brown eyes, and is wearing a grey jumpsuit that tells more about her than anything else. Those jumpsuits are reserved for those who work directly with the leadership. Our de facto government.

“Yeah?” I answer.

She nods sharply. “You need to come with me.”

“Me? Why?”

Now I’m afraid for an entirely different reason. My stomach roils and a cold sweat forms. I haven’t done anything wrong. Except, I have. Did someone catch me? This is bad.

“What’s this about?” Tamara asks, rising to her feet and standing so that she’s looming over the poor girl.

“I am not at liberty to discuss the matter,” the girl says matter of fact.

“You’re not taking her alone, it’s all of us or nothing,” Abigail says.

The girl looks at each of them in turn, undeterred. Her soft brown eyes harden as she frowns.

“This is not a request,” she says. “It’s an order.”

“An order from who?” Abigail demands.

“Lady General Rosalind,” the girl says.

The wind leaves all our sails at once. The three of us exchange fearful looks. Shit. If Rosalind knows... I can’t take the girls with me. Not that they won’t support me, but I don’t want them implicated in this. If I’m going to be in trouble, then I have to protect them.

“I don’t care if—” Tamara is saying, her voice rising.

“It’s fine, I’ll go,” I say, cutting her off mid-sentence.

“Anna, you don’t have to do this,” Abigail says. “I’ll talk to Zat’an.”

“And I’ll get Kri’sin. This is unacceptable,” Tamara says.

“No,” I say, shaking my head. “No, listen, it’s fine. Let me check it out first. I’m sure it’s nothing.”

Neither of them looks convinced but they don’t argue. Abigail nods first but Tamara, bless her heart, she has that steely look in her eyes that I know means she’s not going to let this go. I grab her hand and squeeze, giving her a nod, begging with my eyes that she let this be.

“Fine,” she says at last. “But you check in soon. If you don’t...”

She trails off not needing to finish the threat. If I know Tamara, she’ll tear the entire mountain down to save me if that’s what it takes.

“I will,” I promise then turn to the girl. “Lead the way.”



## ANNALISE

*I* follow the girl, name unknown, around the arena where the warriors are training. They're always training so that's no surprise. The loud clack of wooden clubs and the huff sound they make with each blow echoes from the stone walls of even this huge space. I feel their eyes on me as I walk past. Watching with curiosity and judging.

*Do they know? Is my secret out? Are they going to hurt me?*

"What, uh," I clear my throat and try again. "What is this about?"

"I do not know," the girl says without breaking her stride. She doesn't even glance in my direction. Her eyes stay focused straight ahead. If anything, she walks a little faster.

"You don't know? Or you won't tell me?"

Now she glances at me for the first time since we left the dining hall. There is at least a hint of kindness in her eyes. She shakes her head, ever so slightly.

"Look," she says, speaking softly. "I work for Rosalind. You don't mess around with that. I don't know, but even if I did, I wouldn't say anything unless she ordered me to."

"She's that scary?" I ask, my stomach churning.

I'm wondering what might happen to me. What do they do to criminals? After the Black Market was broken up in the Bunker there were a lot of stories told about what happened to them, but no one really knows the truth.

“Not scary, I mean she is, but,” she shrugs, “I don’t want to lose this job. And Rosalind, she’s, well, she’s the Lady General. If you don’t know her, you won’t get it.”

“I’ve met her,” I say, thinking back to when she summoned Tamara.

Abigail and I refused to let her go alone then too. Rosalind was imposing for sure. But she seemed, I don’t know, sane? Like a really rational person. She has this gravitas to her. It’s clear she was born to be a leader.

“Then you get it,” the girl says. “Now come on, we’re late. It took me forever to find you.”

I don’t ply her with further questions. She is doing a job and I respect that, and I don’t want her to get in trouble. She seems nice enough. Maybe that will earn me brownie points. I’m going to need them.

She leads us through the wide door that sits under the Al’fa box. I’ve been through here before too but when I expect her to take the stairs to the right she keeps on walking. We’re not going to the room I was in before then. Further down we stop at a door and the girl knocks on the stone beside the leather curtain.

“Come in,” Rosalind says.

The girl pulls the leather aside and motions for me to go in first. My nerves are screaming to run but even if I did, where would I go? The caverns are big, but not so big they wouldn’t find me. And I don’t have a rendezvous for another two days, so going out past the barriers alone is about the stupidest thing I could possibly do.

I take a deep breath, hold it, and step through the door into a cramped office space. There is a stone desk that looks like it was shaped and carved out of the stone that once filled the space. It probably was.

Behind the desk is Rosalind. In her meticulously clean and gleaming white space leathers replete with cloak. She has gray at her temples, but her eyes are as hard and sharp as ever. There are crows’ feet at the corners of her eyes and worry

lines on her forehead, but she smiles which calls attention to the fading scar on her cheek. Never forget this woman is badass.

“Annabelle Barker, come in,” she says.

“Uhm, Ros—, uh, Lady, uhm, General,” I stumble my way not sure how to greet her.

“Rosalind is fine,” she says.

One hand is out of sight but the other rests on the desk. Her fingers drum while she studies me. Her smoke-grey eyes openly appraise everything, and it feels like she’s looking into my very soul. When at last she nods my knees become weak and I exhale sharply. She motions towards a chair, and I take it, grateful because I’m not sure I won’t fall if I don’t sit down.

“That is all Lynn,” Rosalind says to the girl who has remained standing in the door.

“Yes sir,” she says, and I hear the sound of the heavy leather dropping back into place.

“Am I in trouble?” I ask.

Rosalind smiles and then pulls a piece of paper over in front of herself. She stares at it for a long time then begins speaking without looking up.

“Annabel Barker,” she says. “No special training. Parents and family deceased. Your two friends have matched with two of the Cavern Zmaj, the first to do so. This has left you alone in your quarters.”

“Am I getting a new roommate?” I ask, grasping at straws for why I am here.

Rosalind pauses and arches an eyebrow. The only acknowledgment that I spoke at all.

“You do your work. Do not cause trouble and are highly spoken of by all your supervisors. You do not make waves, but you also do not stand out.”

“Is there something wrong with that?” I ask.

*What is she doing? If I'm caught say so. Why is she reading off my life history.*

“Both parents unaccounted for, presumed lost in the crash. No mate. No long-term relationships noted.”

“How much do you know about me? Have you been spying on me?”

A half-smile curls the corners of her lips, but still, she doesn't look up. She keeps reading the piece of paper. All this is on record about me? How? Who knows all this? How did they get it?

The door behind me opens. Looking over my shoulder a Zmaj walks in. This is the one that was with her before. He's wearing a red cloak with a hood that he lowers after stepping through the door. He nods at me as he walks around the desk to stand on Rosalind's right side. He places one hand on her shoulder but his piercing, emerald-green eyes are fixed on me.

“This is her?” he asks.

I swallow hard. I'm caught. There is no doubt about it now.

“Look, I can explain—”

“Can you?” Rosalind cuts me off, looking up with open curiosity on her face. “And what is it you can explain?”

“I... it's... I...”

I can't form a coherent thought. My throat clenches, sweat drenches me, and all I want to do is crawl under a rock or anywhere that will get me out from under her gaze. I move my mouth, but words won't come.

“Child,” the Zmaj says. “You are afraid. Do not be. Tajss' will provide.”

I shift my gaze away from her to him though the weight of her eyes impossibly remains. I should tell them everything. It's love, that's not a bad thing, right? The heart wants what it wants. I'm not ashamed of that, but I am afraid. Afraid of what these people might do when they find out.

“I'm... I'm sorry...”



“You have nothing to be sorry for,” the Zmaj says. “Rosalind do not toy with her. Make your offer.”

“Offer?” I ask.

*What offer? Is she offering to let me go? To not punish me? Or offering me... what? What offer?*

I lift my unsteady gaze from him to her. She is watching me and those eyes... they know everything. I don't have to say it because she already knows everything anyway.

“I want to offer you a job,” she says.

My lips are numb. Did she... she did. She really did.

“A... job?”

I'm struggling to keep up with the leap of logic. Going from being sure I was about to be severely punished to being offered a job is switching gears too fast for my fear frozen brain.

“Yes,” Rosalind says. “A job. Working for me, personally. One of my pages.”

“Page?” I look from him to her trying to figure out if this is a trap. It has to be. She's trying to catch me out.

“A term for an assistant,” she says. “I've been reviewing your work records. I like what I see.”

“But, uh, me? Why?”

Rosalind smiles. She places one of her hands on top of the Zmaj's where it rests on her shoulder. There are age spots on hers.

“You came to my attention after the matter with the Cavern Zmaj Kri'sin. You stuck up for your friend, even though I am sure the situation was terrifying. You did not let it back you down or hold you back. You did what you felt was right. That is admirable.”

“She's my best friend,” I say.

“I can see that,” Rosalind says. “It was a display of integrity and loyalty. After that, I had some questions asked about you.”

I need people with me that I can trust implicitly. Your demonstration was the best kind of job interview I could ever devise.”

“What would I do?”

“Whatever Rosalind needs,” the Zmaj says.

“Yes,” Rosalind says. “I’d like you to be my personal assistant. In exchange, you will be trained in administration while serving your people.”

*My people. But this will put more eyes on you. People will know you. Be more likely to notice when you disappear into the tunnels.*

“Can I, uhm, can I think about it?”

“Are you turning me down?”

“No, I, no!”

“You have some better job offer?”

“No,” I shake my head.

This is going bad. She already found all this out about me without even trying, what can she uncover if she puts her mind to it?

“Good, then you accept?”

My head is spinning. I don’t know how to say no, and I don’t want to. The job is a dream come true. Or the best dream I can imagine right now. Since the crash, there hasn’t been any time for dreaming of jobs or the future. It’s always about surviving one day to the next, but this... I could make a difference by doing this.

“I, uh, yes, I do,” I say, making my decision.

“Good,” Rosalind says, rising to her feet.

She’s so incredibly tall. And beautiful, in an almost harsh, Goddess come to earth, and she might smite you kind of way. While there is a harshness to her features, there is also a warmth and kindness there too. I’m starting to see why the girl who brought me here acted like she did.

Rosalind comes around the desk and extends her hand. I stare at it for what I am sure is entirely too long, but she waits with the patience of a saint. I take it but she adjusts, pushing forward and grasping my wrist so I grasp hers.

“Your first lesson,” she says, her grip like a vise on my arm. “Always shake by the wrist. Do you know why?”

“No,” I say.

“Common wisdom is to show that neither you nor your opponent is wielding a weapon,” she says. “And this is true enough, but a regular handshake fulfills that obligation. Grip by the wrist and you have control of your opponent. You can use it as leverage against him. Always, always keep the advantage. Your first lesson.”

“Oh, I see, okay,” I say, definitely not seeing but not feeling like I’m in any position to argue with her.

“And never let them know everything you know,” she says.

And my blood runs cold because she’s looking into my soul when she says it. Does she know? Is this a really elaborate setup? For what?

“Okay,” I say, my mouth dry and tongue thick with the unspoken truths I’m not sharing.

“Good,” Rosalind says, letting me go and returning to her seat. “We have a lot to do. You start tomorrow morning. Be here early, I like to start the day fast.”

I nod, give a half-bow then think better of that and instead turn and walk out the door. All the time I feel her gaze on my back and the lies I’m telling burn hot in my head.



## ANNALISE

“*Y*ou have got to be kidding. A job? Seriously?” Tamara’s voice is loud, as she rises from her seat leaning over the table.

“Quiet down, sheesh,” I admonish, looking around the dining hall. A few people glance in our direction but no one seems to be giving us any special attention. She keeps this up though and I have no doubts everyone will be looking at the commotion.

“Sorry,” she says, dropping back into her seat and looking around.

“This is a good thing, it is not?” Kri’sin asks. “She is the leader of your people. Working for her is a promotion.”

“I, reluctantly, agree,” Zat’an says, his deep voice rumbling.

“Why, though?” Abigail asks the obvious question.

“Apparently she liked my hutzpah,” I say.

“Your hutzpah?” Tamara snorts. “That gets you not only noticed by but also hired by the Lady General herself?”

“What? I have hutzpah,” I say.

“Of course you do,” Tamara says. “I’m not arguing that, only that I don’t see how that equates to a job with the de facto leader of the remnants of the human race. Pretty big leap of logic. That’s all I’m saying.”

“Tams, be nice,” Abigail says.

I hold up my hand as I shrug.

“I had the same thought,” I say. “But hey, I’ll take it, right? This is a good thing. I think.”

“It is a very good thing,” Zat’an says. “It will put you in a position of power. You can make a difference for the future of all our peoples. Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” I nod, and before I can think through what I’m saying I spit out the first thought in my head. “Maybe I can help ease tensions with the Urr’ki.”

“Never,” Zat’an snaps.

He leans forward aggressively, but I don’t miss the fact that Kri’sin keeps his mouth shut. In fact, he leans back and frowns with a thoughtful look on his face. Interesting.

“Zat’an, it’s okay,” Abigail says, placing a hand over his clenched fist that rests on the table. “We’ve talked about this.”

“We have, but I do not agree,” he says. “They Urr’ki are the enemy. The fact that one of them has learned our language is a ploy. Another of their tricks. An attempt to infiltrate and cause us to lower our guard.”

“You do not know that,” Abigail says.

Tamara exchanges a look with Kri’sin that I can’t read. Something is going on between the two of them and now I’m curious. Curious but I also know her well enough to know I won’t find out now. Not here. This is entirely too public of a place. While I’m busy studying the two of them Abigail and Zat’an continue to argue in soft voices but it’s also clear that nothing is going to change on that front either. At least not right now.

“Did I tell you guys about the flowers?” I ask, looking for a way to change the subject before dinner devolves into little more than a massive fight.

“Flowers? What flowers?” Tamara asks, leaping onto the subject change immediately, her eyes alight with burning curiosity.

“They are deceptive. We must not let our guard down, this is all I am saying,” Zat’an says continuing his argument.

“Ugh, we *will* discuss this later,” Abigail says, rolling her eyes. “Now, flowers, who brought you flowers?”

She shifts her attention though it’s clear that Zat’an and her are not done with their argument. He grabs a piece of meat off his plate, throws it into his mouth, and chews on it aggressively.

*Why did I say this? I know who brought them, who else could it be? I can’t tell them the truth. Not with Zat’an here. Kri’sin, maybe...*

“I don’t know,” I say, only partially lying. I don’t really know, do I? “They were outside my door this morning.”

“I know who did it,” Tamara says.

My stomach clenches and I stare wide-eyed at her. She knows? How? Did I slip? When Tamara knows something for certain she has this look, and she definitely has that now. It’s a half-smile and the way she looks at you with her eyes half-lidded while slightly arching her left eyebrow. It’s a thing she does and Abs and I both know that look.

“You do?” Abigail and I manage to speak in unison.

Our eyes dart to each other and both of us chuckle. We do this all the time. A sure sign that we know each other too well.

“Yup,” Tamara says, basking in the glory of knowing something that she thinks we don’t.

She is toying with us about her knowing, lording it over the two of us. We play along. I lean into her, and Abigail does too.

“And?” I ask.

“Isn’t it obvious? I mean seriously Annalise, you never see the obvious,” she says smugly. “I swear if it wasn’t for Abs and me you’d never get laid.”

“I am not oblivious,” I protest. “I see things.”

“Uh-huh, then how come you don’t know who left the flowers?” Tamara teases.

“How do you know? Unless you did it?” I counter.

I don't even see him approaching until he's standing next to the table. People are always moving around the dining hall so a Zmaj passing by doesn't draw my attention until his massive form is right at my shoulder. It startles me and I jump to the side as I look up to see who is invading my space.

“Gerlar?” I ask, not even sure I have his name right.

He was on the patrol that saved Kri'sin, but I don't know him well. Or at all, really. He smiles brightly and his wings rustle which I think might be a sign of pleasure? He nods.

“Hello Annalise,” he says. “Good morning to all of you.”

He addresses the table nodding specifically to Zat'an and then Kri'sin. They both return his nod, but no one says anything. I stare at him waiting, not sure why he's standing here. Having finished acknowledging the other two Zmaj he stares at the table. He has his hands clasped in front of himself but then he shifts and holds them behind his back, then a moment later he puts them at his side.

“Good morning Gerlar,” Tamara says, shooting me a look that I don't understand. “How are you today?”

I look back at her with my own confusion and a slight shake of my head to make it clear I don't know what is happening. She rolls her eyes. Great, helpful Tams.

“I am well, thank you,” he says, still not raising his eyes from the table. He is waiting for something, but what?

I look to Abigail for help, but she shrugs and shakes her head.

“What are you up to today?” I ask.

It's a thing, right? What am I supposed to say?

“I will be training,” Gerlar says. “I have drawn a patrol as well.”

“Patrol sounds fun,” I say.

“Yes,” he agrees. His hands spasm and he clenches them into fists then releases and once more shifts them behind himself.



I give my friends one last look for help in understanding what is happening. Tamara blinks and motions with her head as if that is telling me anything useful at all. Hint, it doesn't Tams, thanks.

"So, uh, did you need something?" I ask.

He glances up, and for a very brief moment, our eyes meet. I can't read anything about him except confusion and nervousness. I smile, trying to be encouraging, but he drops his eyes to the table almost immediately and shakes his head.

"No," he says. "I wish you all a very good day."

He turns and walks off. I watch him go for a moment.

"What was that?" I ask, turning my head back to those at the table.

"Are you blind?" Tamara asks, her voice rising.

"Blind? Huh?"

"Abs, help me out here," Tamara says.

"What? Did I do something wrong?" I ask.

"I think," Abs says. "That I know who brought you the flowers now too."

"The flowers? What?"

My head is spinning. How does Abs know about him? What did I do that gave it away?

"She doesn't see it," Tamara says. "Proving my point. She would never have a boyfriend if we weren't looking out for her."

Abigail laughs. The two Zmaj males focus on their plates though I don't miss them exchanging an uncomfortable look.

I calm the storm in my thoughts by quashing the fear of being caught. If they knew the truth then they'd be calling me out directly, not being coy like this. Right? Yes, that's right. Then what is it? Something... flowers. Gerlar... oh. No. Seriously?

I jerk my head back around to find Gerlar but if he's in the dining hall I don't see him. My stomach churns and my cheeks

flush hot.

“You think... no... Gerlar? But... why?”

“Why?” Tamara snorts, spitting the drink she was sipping.

Abigail wipes droplets from her face but is laughing too.

“I mean, I know why, I guess, but no, wait. Why? Why me? He can't be... I'm not... don't they have like...” I look at Kri'sin. “What about the dragon thing? Isn't that supposed to, I don't know, rumble or something?”

Kri'sin has been studiously focusing on his meal, but he looks up when I address him directly. He looks at Tamara before responding.

“I am not going to get involved,” he says.

“Coward,” I accuse as he drops his focus back to his food and shoves his mouth full. I look at Zat'an. “You too?”

Zat'an frowns, opens his mouth, then I see Abigail shift under the table, and he shrugs before shaking his head.

“He likes you. It's obvious,” Tamara says.

“But... I didn't...”

Now I feel bad. What did I do? Did I lead him on in some way? I didn't mean to. I know I don't feel anything like that for him. I have my love. Even now, thinking of the one I do love makes my pulse race and body tingle. But isn't the dragon all about fate? No, this is a mistake. It has to be.

“Sometimes these things take time,” Abigail says.

“Or you could just bang him,” Tamara says.

“No!” I exclaim, too fast and too forcefully.

I am on treacherous terrain. I need to backpedal. Why did I bring up the stupid flowers in the first place? Time for a fast subject change. Something... anything.

“I'm still not sure about this job with Rosalind,” I say.

“Nice try,” Tamara says.

“You should take it,” Abigail says. “It’s the kind of opportunity that doesn’t come twice.”

“You think?” I ask, ignoring Tamara who rolls her eyes and then capitulates to the change of subject.

“She’s right,” Tamara says. “It’s a golden chance. Take it. She’s the Lady General. Besides if you refuse, she might make you disappear or something.”

“Rosalind wouldn’t!” I exclaim. “You think?”

“No,” Tamara laughs. “Take the job. Worst case scenario you can always quit.”

“I guess you’re right,” I say. I gather up my dishes. “I’m going to grab some of those sweet buns for later.”

“You better watch those calories,” Tamara teases. “Or you could meet up with Gerlar and work them off.”

“Tams,” I say.

“Be nice,” Abigail says.

“What? I’m just saying,” Tamara says. “It’s been more than a bit. She could use some horizontal tango.”

“I’m fine, thank you very much,” I huff. “I’ll see you all later.”

We say our goodbyes and I take my dishes up to the return station. Then I grab four of the sweet buns. Before I go to Rosalind, I am going to stash these in my room. He will love these. I don’t know if he ever gets sweets like this, but they are my personal favorite. I can’t wait to share them with him at our rendezvous tonight.



## ANNALISE

“Need anything before I call it a day?” I ask.

Rosalind looks up from the papers she is studying. She’s been working since before I arrived. I don’t know her well but the exhaustion and weight on her shoulders is more than obvious. Her face is a little pale, the lines at the corners of her mouth deeper, the crow’s feet around her eyes are more pronounced. Despite all that she remains an imposing presence. Her eyes are steel, sharp, and intelligent. Constantly evaluating everything she sees.

She opens her mouth to say something then her eyes widen, and her face turns ashen. She spins to the side grabbing the trash container from beside her desk and is violently ill. It happens so fast it takes me a moment to react. Shaking my way out of the shock, I run to her side as I yell her name.

She vomits again, raising one hand and holding up a finger, stopping me in place. She holds in that position, bent over and head in can for a moment then straightens and sets the container down. She pulls a cloth out of a drawer and wipes her mouth. Then, as if nothing happened, she turns back to her desk. She sits tall as ever with her shoulders sharply squared.

“I think that will be all,” she says. “Thank you.”

“Rosalind, are you okay?” I ask, unwilling to leave after witnessing that.

“I will be fine,” she says, picking up a book and opening it.

I'm clearly being told to leave but still I hesitate. Is she sick? Should I get the healer? I can't just leave her like this, can I? I hesitate, but she is the Lady General.

"Uh, okay, I will... see you tomorrow," I say.

Uncertainty feels like a damp blanket as I turn and walk to the door. I know I should go because she dismissed me. I don't know her well, I'm just an assistant and my job is to do what she wants. She wants me to leave, she just said so.

I grab the leather of the door, pull it to one side, but I can't step through. This is not who I am. I might be fired for it, but if that happens then so be it. I'm not going to be someone different because of any job.

I turn around and walk to the desk, stopping in front of it. Rosalind watches my approach with hooded eyes, frowning and silent. The frown on her face is enough to make my knees quake but I've already resolved that I'm not going to not be me. I can't leave a person who is clearly sick without making sure I've done everything I possibly can to help.

"Was there something else?" Rosalind asks.

"Uhm," I swallow trying to force moisture into my mouth. A fluttering sensation fills my chest and every smart idea I have is to turn and run, but do I? Nope. Here I am, standing up to the freaking Lady General herself. "Yeah..." she continues staring, waiting. I blurt it out. "That's not okay. How can I help?"

At first, her only reaction is a very slight widening of her eyes then her brow furrows and she drums the fingers of her right hand rapidly on the desk. It's an idiosyncrasy that I'm very familiar with after only one day of working in her office.

"Do you keep secrets?" she asks.

"Huh?" I ask, taking a step back and immediately thinking of my one big secret.

*This is it. It's all been one big trap, a lie leading to this moment.*

Rosalind's stare is steady, unflinching even. The fluttering in my chest becomes wings of ice, buffeting chill through my limbs with every flap.

"Secrets," Rosalind says, not elaborating. My heart is hammering making the blood rush loudly in my ears. I wait, as much unable to speak as I am unwilling. "This job, I told you at the start of the day you would see things. That you would be expected to keep under wraps."

"Y-yes," I stumble. "Yes," I say with more confidence that I don't feel but I'm faking the best I can. "You said that, and I agreed. I won't tell anyone."

I don't know where she is going with this. If she knows my secret, then why is she asking me if I can keep one? Is it because I did such a bad job of keeping mine that she knows I can't be trusted? Am I going to jail? Am I going to be banished? She banished Gershom and all his followers. Gods above I don't want to be banished!

She's got that look. The look like she's weighing your soul. Examining every sin, you've ever committed in your entire life and deciding your fate. I don't know how she does it but it's awful. I want to fall on my knees and beg forgiveness, but I don't. I stand, knees weak, stomach turning, and I wait.

"What I am about to say is not to leave this room," she says. "If it gets out, I will know it was you. The only other two who know the situation are beyond question. Do you understand this?"

*She doesn't know!*

Elation fills my chest, and the wings lose their icy chill, lifting me up, at least mentally. I nod then realize she's waiting for me to say it out loud.

"I understand. I want to help."

She nods slowly then she stops drumming her fingers and rubs her forehead.

"I am pregnant."

“What? That’s great. Congratulations. Wait, why don’t you want anyone to know?”

She sighs and rises from her seat. She turns and paces away, coming to a stop in front of the small firepit that both lights and warms the room. I turn and watch the orange glow dancing across her face. She is beautiful, in an ancient goddess I might smite you for looking at me kind of way.

“With my age and.... Health, I prefer to wait until we are sure,” she says. “I do not want this to be a distraction. There is too much happening. What we are doing is too important.”

I don’t comprehend what it is we’re doing that is so important but it’s my first day on the job so that’s no surprise. Why would I? I mean, sure we’re administering tasks and commodities for all that remains of humanity. I mean, who knew that even after all that’s happened there would be so much freaking paperwork. I guess it’s true, you can’t kill administration. Even with a literal nuke.

All the duties and assignments come through Rosalind. Every plan for expansion, for distribution of food, for making sure that the supplies needed are gathered, made, or bartered for all comes through her office. A thousand tiny details and that is just what I’ve seen today.

“Okay,” I agree without understanding. It’s not my place to pry, that I am sure of. “How can I help?”

“I only tell you because you will be working closely with me,” she says. “Hiding it from you will not be an option. This does not mean I need help. I will handle it.”

“Okay,” I say, biting my lip. “May I... may I speak?” She doesn’t say no but does turn her head towards me which I take to mean assent. “My two besties are pregnant too and we’re really excited. This is a good thing, right?”

“There are over one hundred pregnancies right now,” Rosalind says. “It is good. It strengthens my plan. But a distraction, if something goes wrong...”

“What could go wrong?”



Her eyes narrow and she frowns deeply. She turns back to the fire, and I think she's not going to answer when she speaks at last.

"Before the crash, I was very ill. Epis has somehow fixed that," she says. "It changes us, but I do not know if my body is still capable of this."

"You look amazing."

"Thank you for the compliment, but I have made my entire career knowing exactly what my limits are and then figuring out how to go beyond them. This..." she trails off and silence hangs heavy. She crouches and pokes at the fire with a stick before throwing it into the roaring flames. "I do not know."

And just like that, I get it. Rosalind is not a woman who knows fear. She's powerful and most of all in control of any situation. And then there is this. She's not sure she's in control of it and that, of all things, scares her.

There is no way I'm going to say this though. That would be stupid. Instead, I nod understanding.

"Okay. Anything you need, let me know."

"Thank you," she says. "You should go. It is late and you will miss the last meal call if you don't."

"Yes sir," I say.

I leave her to contemplate alone. Only when I'm outside do I realize how late it is. She's right, I need to eat quick. The last meal is already wrapping up and I was hoping to get a nap before my rendezvous tonight.

I'm going to be tired tomorrow but there is no way I'm not going to meet him tonight. It sucks enough that I get to see him so rarely I can't imagine missing one. Besides if I don't show up, he'll worry. And if he's worried, who knows what he might do?

Squaring my shoulders, I rush to dinner.



## ANNALISE

I hate this part. Tingling sensations rush across my arms, leaving goose-pimples in their wake. My stomach is a roiling mess. My feet feel like they weigh a thousand pounds each, and it's all I can do to take a step. The only thing that keeps me moving is knowing that I'll be with him soon.

This is necessary.

I don't have any choice.

There is no other way to see each other, and being apart is not an option.

"Annalise, why are you here again?" Chanka asks, pushing off from the wall he was leaning against.

"I brought you a sweet bun," I say, keeping a smile fixed on my face. A bead of sweat trickles down my spine. Is this it? Will this be the time I can't get out? Am I caught?

Chanka's face brightens, then an answering smile spreads across his face. "The ones with the drizzle?"

"Of course," I say, pulling the bun out of my basket.

His eyes follow my hand and widen when I pull the bun out.

"I know this is your favorite."

"Yessss," he says, drawing out the last syllable.

I've got this.

“Oh,” he says, his face falling, his smile turning down into a frown as his shoulders slump. “I am sorry.”

“Sorry? Why?”

“Annalise,” he says, tearing his eyes away from the sweet bun to look at me directly. “I cannot let you go. It is too dangerous. Too much risk, you have been lucky, but I cannot continue to allow this. What if something were to happen to you?”

“Oh, Chanka,” I say, feigning nonchalance, but my stomach is a hard knot, acidic bile burns up my throat. “I do this all the time. You know I’m careful.”

He shakes his head doubtfully, but his eyes dart to the bun in my extended hand. “I should not...”

“I know,” I agree, nodding sympathetically.

This is the biggest risk. The compound is on high alert since the incursions and the quake only made it worse. It’s gotten harder and harder for me to slip away. Chanka is the only one I know how to get by now. If I lose him, I’ll lose my only way to my rendezvous.

I’ll never see my love again. No! I have to figure this out.

Chanka is staring at the bun and licking his lips as his stomach grumbles, loud enough for both of us to hear it. So loud, I’m surprised when it doesn’t echo through the corridor. This is my chance. I leap onto my one hope.

“You’re probably right,” I say with pure disappointment in my voice as I turn to head back. “I’ll just go back to my room.”

“Wait—” he cries out. “Annalise, why do you do this? There is plenty of space in the compound.”

“Is there?” I ask as I turn back around. I shift the basket so it’s between us, letting it swing on my forearm, so the scent of the sweet buns fills the air. “I like it out there. It’s beautiful and I don’t go far. Also, I’m very careful. You know I am.”

“But... if something happens...”

“I’ll be fine, but if you think it’s a bad idea, I guess I’ll...” I trail off and partially turn back again.

“It is a bad idea,” he says, but then he inhales deeply and smacks his lips again. “But this one more time. You must be back in a wingspan though if anyone finds out I let you go...”

“I don’t want you to get in trouble.”

“I will be,” he says. “Kri’sin would have my head if I were to let something happen to you. You are his mate’s best friend.”

“Tell you what, this can be our little secret,” I say.

“A secret?”

Gods bless you Chanka. Of all the Zmaj I’ve met in my life, he’s the slowest. He’s a simple man without guile. His heart is pure and huge, but he is not the brightest. I feel bad manipulating him like this, and I truly don’t want him to get in trouble, but I must get out. I have to meet my love.

“Yes, just ours, you know like friends keep.”

“Friends?” he asks, and the lilt in his voice makes it clear this both surprises him and makes him happy.

“Yes, we are friends, aren’t we?”

He nods enthusiastically. “Yes, friends. Annalise is Chanka’s friend.”

“Of course you are,” I say, pulling the bun back out of the basket. I hand it to him, because whether he lets me out or not, I do like him and won’t deny him this pleasure any longer. I’ve used it the best I can.

He takes the bun in his hand and nods his head. “Okay,” he says, staring at the bun. Then he looks up and his eyes are bright and shiny. “I will come with you. Protect you. Then you will be safe!”

Nausea clenches my stomach. That would ruin everything. Oh Chanka, now isn’t the time for you to have ideas. Think. Think fast. How do I stop this? If Chanka comes then everything will fall apart. This house of cards I’m struggling to keep aloft will be destroyed.

“Who will hold your post here?” I ask, tapping one finger to my lips to appear thoughtful.

“Oh,” he says, nodding and frowning deeply. “Annalise, I do not want my friend to be hurt.”

I place my hand on his arm. If only he knew what I was doing. I’m certain I won’t be hurt because the one I am meeting will protect me, but I can’t tell the Zmaj that. I can’t tell anyone. The lie is a heavy stone in my chest.

“I promise you, I will be fine,” I say. “You enjoy your bun and I’ll be back in less than a wingspan.”

I have no idea how much time a wingspan is really, but I will be back in a couple of hours. Neither of us can be gone long. We can’t risk suspicion. This was so much easier before the quake when the security was laxer.

He nods thoughtfully. “You are right,” he says. “Chanka accepts your promise.”

I take one last look around to make sure no one’s observing us, then smile and walk past the guard before he can change his mind or something else goes wrong. I hear him savoring his bun clear up until I turn the corner.

As I move deeper into the tunnels, the walls and floor go from smooth to natural, rough cavern. That’s how I know I’m outside the compound’s territory. It’s okay because I will not be going much farther. He comes as close to the compound as he can.

As I walk, every sense is on edge. I swear I can taste the air itself. I’m so hyper-aware that my nerves tingle. Every shadowy shape outside the light of the small torch I carry is a threat.

Stepping into an open chamber, I spot a pile of rocks next to a dark tunnel. This is it. I stop and turn in a circle. My torch is the only light, but it barely pushes back the darkness. There’s the opening by the stones which looks natural but there’s also a crack that was probably created by the quake.

He’s not here. Why? Did he get caught? Is he okay? Was he able to get out? He must have run into a problem, but he’s okay. Isn’t he? He must be.

A thousand whys crash around inside my head as my nerves grow more and more ragged. Water drips somewhere that I can't see. The steady rhythm gets on my nerves.

Something scrapes behind me and I spin, swinging the torch, but I don't see anything.

Tentatively I step forward, thrusting the light into the darkness like a spear with which I try to kill the pitch-black emptiness. I move it around but there's nothing but rubble and a big stalagmite rising from the ground.

I move to the side of the natural formation and make sure nothing is hiding behind it.

"Eeep," I yelp, jumping back as something small and white darts away from the circle of light cast by my torch. I bump up against something hard, then a hand is on my mouth, and I can't even scream.





## ANNALISE

I drop my basket and grab the hand and arm on my mouth. I kick back with all my might. My foot connects and my assailant grunts, letting me go. I stumble forward at the sudden release and keep moving, using the momentum to get away. I go a few steps and spin to face my attacker.

The shadows seem to coalesce with a flourishing swirl. He steps into the light circle of my torch and my heart leaps into my throat where it pounds like the roaring engines of a space fighter. Dropping the torch I run to him.

He wraps his strong arms around me, pulling me tight as our lips come together. His wide, full lips move against mine and the passion rises. His hands move over my backside, and I run mine over his shoulders, neck, and up to his hair.

We kiss and we kiss. I don't want to ever stop. This is my happy place. Kissing him. Hugging him. Being in his arms. All the fears, the worries, the doubts belong to another person. Here there is only us and together we are complete.

"I have missed you," he says, speaking Zmaj.

"You're a jerk," I say.

"I did not mean to scare you," he explains. "I did not want you to scream and alert the lizard guard."

I frown. "You know I hate it when you call them that."

He drops his eyes and shakes his head.

“I am sorry, you do not know how hard this is,” he says, shrugging and moving his eyes up begging me for forgiveness.

I can't stay mad at him and capitulate almost immediately. It only serves to highlight the real problem though and bring it to the front.

“How are we going to do this?” I ask.

“I am happy,” he says. “Are you not?”

“Yes...” I say trailing off thoughtfully. “No. I don't like sneaking around. I want to be with you, always. I want to spend the night with you. I want to wake up in your arms!”

He frowns.

“And you think I do not want the same?” he asks. “How are we to do this? Our people hate each other.”

“Not my people,” I say. “Well not all my people. Some probably will or do. Humans can be total assholes, unfortunately.”

“Assholes?” he asks and I realize that I'd inserted a Common word because there isn't a Zmaj word that translates to that, or at least not one I know.

“Uhm, jerks. Best translation.”

“Yes, I imagine it is so, even with you Star People.”

I shake my head laughing. “I keep telling you we're not 'Star' People. We're a different species, sure, and we came on a ship but still.”

“And how does this not make you Star People? You came from the stars.” A wicked grin spreads across his mouth which looks intimidating because of his tusks, but I know better. He is not fierce, never with me at least. “Besides, you are my star.”

“Be serious,” I say, rolling my eyes.

“I am,” he says, grabbing my waist and pulling me back into his arms. Our faces are less than an inch apart. His eyes burn intensely. “You are my guiding light. You are the fuel that gives me strength.”

“You are ridiculous,” I say, but there is no denying the way my heart races or the heat flushing my skin.

He doesn't argue further, resorting instead to kisses. He kisses my lips, my face, and down my neck. I love the way his tusks feel dragging across my skin. The strength of his arms, the smoothness of his skin. The coarseness of his hair in my fingers.

I'm putty in his arms. I'm his and I know it. It's okay, though, because it's reciprocal. He's mine too. We've been stealing these moments every chance we get. Ever since my friends and I were captured when he and I made a connection. The moment we saw each other we knew.

Except he's the “enemy”. Or so the Zmaj say. He's not my enemy. None of his kind are but there is a race war between the two species. How do we overcome lifetimes of hatred? Of bigotry on both sides?

I can't force myself to think about it. Not now, not when his lips are teasing my skin as he nibbles his way across my shoulder. Our times together are too few and too short. There is plenty of time to worry about all that when we're not together. Right?

His hands lift my shirt, roughly calloused fingers caress my belly, brushing the underside of my breasts. He lowers himself and nibbles at my exposed stomach. His fingers hook into the hem of my pants and gently he pulls them down and a moment later his face is buried in me. I twine my hands in his hair to steady myself as his mouth and tongue create unimaginable pleasure.

He works hard and fast, with a skill that belies that we're aliens to each other. He knows my body, knows how to push me right to the edge and he does so with the unerring skill of a marksman.

In moments I'm panting and in no time my orgasm rips through. I buck against his face, pulling on his hair and forcing his tongue deeper. When it passes, he looks up with a wide smile.

“It is good?” he asks.

“You know it is,” I smile and he nods.

“Good,” he says, then looks around then rises. “You were very loud, I should go.”

“No,” I say, grabbing his hand and pulling him back.

“Annalise,” he says, not moving closer. “You know this is impossible.”

“I know, but...” I don’t let go of his hand and he doesn’t break the connection. We stare at each other, neither of us wanting to leave, no matter that we don’t have a choice. “I miss you.”

The look on his face says everything I need to know. The breaking of his heart is writ large on his wide, green features. He drops his gaze, unable to keep in contact with mine.

“If I come with you, they will kill me.”

Tears press against my eyes, not of sadness but anger and frustration because I know he’s right.

“Then I will come with you,” I say, choking on my suppressed emotions.

“We have discussed this... my people... they are...” he shakes his head then stares down the tunnel he will soon disappear into. “I am trying, but there are problems. Too many believe in the Shaman. The old hatreds are too ingrained.”

“What are we going to do?” I sob.

I hate it, but I do. All I want is to be with him. Openly. I want to share him with my friends. I want him in my life all the time.

He inhales deeply, holds it, and then slowly exhales. He’s struggling with his own emotions too. He swallows.

“I do not know,” he says, and it feels like the words are a hammer shattering my heart. “But,” my heart leaps onto the single word because I’m drowning and it’s a lifeline. “We will figure this out. It will take time.”

He's right. I know it, but I don't want to. I want to tell him he's wrong. To scream at him and yell until the universe changes around us and our people become different. Better. That's irrationally stupid but who ever said love is rational?

"It's getting..." I choke and have to swallow hard before I can finish speaking. "uh-hum, harder to get out. They're on high alert. The quake and the incursions. I don't know when I'll be able to return."

His hand convulses on mine tightening and his jaw tenses, but he nods.

"I understand," he says. "If you cannot make it, I will understand."

I bite my lip and nod.

"I hate this," I whisper, my voice hoarse.

"As do I, my dragoste," he says.

A tingle races up my spine when he says that. It's a word in his language that doesn't seem to translate to either of the two languages I know but I get the concept of it and it fills me with joy. I step closer and place my hand on his cheek. He turns into it and kisses my palm.

"I will see you soon," I say, rising onto my toes for a kiss.

His arm wraps around my waist and we linger in the kiss for longer than we should but neither of us wants to part. Duty and fear of consequences pull us apart at last and we step apart.

"Soon," he says, holding my hand even as he walks backwards.

Our fingers are all that's left touching. It's an effort of will for both of us to take that last step that will break this last touch. His chest fills and he grunts as he steps back. He walks backwards until he disappears into the shadows.

I watch, imagining I see the shape of him for much longer than I know he is actually there. Finally, I straighten my clothes, turn, and head for home. Chanka is leaning against the wall staring down the tunnel when I come around the corner. He smiles brightly.

“You had a good walk?” he asks.

“Yes, very good,” I say, a mixing emotion of happiness and unending sadness swirling in my head.

“This is good,” he says. “I am glad you are safe.”

I pause at his side and look at the Zmaj. He’s earnest and friendly with a huge heart. Yet if I told him what I was doing he would be shocked, angry, and vile. How can that dichotomy exist in someone who is otherwise so kind?

“Thanks,” I say. “You’re a good male, Chanka. Always keep that.”

He beams, standing straighter.

“Thank you, Annalise. You are a very good female too.”

“Yeah, not so much,” I snort, turning and heading for home.

Chanka says something as I walk away but I’m too lost in my own head to hear it. It doesn’t matter anyway. Every time I leave him I feel like this. Kind of empty and the world around me seems distant, cruel, and dark.

I need to sleep. I’m more than exhausted and all I want right now is to lie down, maybe have a good cry, and grab as much rest as I can before the morning arrives. As I walk toward my bed I’m acutely aware of how quiet the compound is. There is no night and day division here that any of us humans are aware of, at least that I know, but the Zmaj have a sense of it. It is late and only the guards are awake or should be. I reach my door without seeing another soul. I grab the leather door and there is the promise of rest which lifts my spirits at least a little bit.

“It is late. Where have you been?”

My heart stops.



## ANNALISE

*M*y hand trembles and my breath catches. It feels like my blood has turned into icy slush and my heart is working double time to force the cold mix through my limbs.

*Lie. Say something. What?*

My head feels like it weighs a thousand pounds as I force my neck to turn and look over my shoulder at the male voice. The moment I see him I recognize him. Gerlar. Friend of Kri'sin. He's been showing up a lot and I don't know why. A deep frown accents the judgment on his face. Seeing that ignites a spark in my guts and that spark lights the fire. Anger pulses, burning out the icy fear. Instead of lying or retreating, I attack.

"And what business is it of yours?" I snap, whirling away from my door.

It works, some at least. His eyes widen, the tension in his jaw eases and he drops his crossed arms to his sides. He shakes his head and his tail slaps to the ground.

"It is not safe," he says.

"It's not? What are you saying? That the guards aren't good enough? Do they not watch the paths into the compound? Are they lax?"

I press my attack and step closer to him. He takes a step back shaking his head and raising his hands between us.

"No, I am not saying such—"



“Then what are you saying Gerlar? Explain to me why it is not safe for me to walk at night?”

“The quake, the Urr’ki, it is not—”

“Safe? You said as much already. Come on. Tell me why you think the guards aren’t good enough. And if that is the case, why aren’t you on duty? What are you doing here? At my door when you clearly should be standing guard?”

He grimaces and his eyes drop. I’ve hurt him and immediately I feel bad. He doesn’t deserve this. I’m being a bitch because he caught me, and I can’t explain myself. This isn’t right. I drop the attack. I can’t do this. It’s not who I am. I take a step back and give him space to recover his composure.

“I do not mean...” he trails off, shakes his head, then looks up. “I am sorry. This was my mistake.”

He turns to walk away.

“No, Gerlar, I’m sorry,” I say. He stops but doesn’t turn back. The slump in his shoulder, the way his tail drags behind him, I’ve hurt him. There is no doubt about that and why? Because I’m a bitch, that’s why. “Were you looking for me?”

That’s a loaded question and I only realize it after I say it. If he was looking for me, then does he suspect what I’ve really been doing? Is this it? Am I caught? Should I have continued to press my attack? Paranoia makes my skin tingle like a thousand tiny spiders running over my limbs. Gross.

“I wa—no,” he changes what he was going to say mid-sentence. “I am on patrol. I saw you moving.”

He lied. About what? What was he going to say? What is the truth I’m missing here?

*He knows. I’m caught. Get ready for the trouble. What did I expect?*

“I couldn’t sleep,” I lie in return.

My nerves are jangling and on edge. Does he believe that lie? He frowns, his eyes blink in slow motion then he makes a grunt sound.

“Oh,” he says. “Do you...” he trails off, drops his eyes to the ground, raises his hands, and drops them, letting the unfinished thought hang for what feels like forever. “Is there anything I might do to help?”

He doesn't look up when he asks. He's staring at my feet, which is strange. What is going on with him? The Zmaj are normally intense and direct. I don't know that I've ever seen one acting like this and I don't understand.

“No, I'm better now, thank you.”

“Good,” he nods, still not taking his eyes off my feet. Does he have a foot fetish? Weird. “Well. Good night.”

He turns and walks away. I watch as he takes several steps, but I feel terrible.

“Gerlar, wait,” I say. He jerks his head around and looks directly at me. I can't read his face though. His eyes are alight and there is an odd eagerness to it that I don't understand. “I'm sorry, I didn't intend to be so mean. You startled me.”

He doesn't answer immediately, staring as if there is something more he wants me to say. I don't know what he's looking for, but the silence goes long enough that I grow uncomfortable and begin to regret my decision to apologize.

“It is not a problem,” he says at last, pursing his lips and frowning deeply.

“Are you sure?” I ask. “I didn't intend to be mean.”

He rubs his right horn in what looks like an absent-minded manner. I'm struck by the rich color of his piercingly amber eyes.

“I did not intend to startle you,” he says. “I was... concerned.”

“Well, thank you. That's sweet.”

“Sweet,” he says, nodding. He turns and walks part way back.

“You are not angry?”

“No, not really,” I say, but I am nervous, though I don't say that. What is he doing?

“This is good. I did not intend to cause anger.”

He stares until once again I'm feeling awkward and can only imagine he is too.

"Was there something else?" I ask.

His hands convulse into fists then he releases them, looks at the ground, then back up.

"Did you get the flowers?" he asks.

*Flowers? Huh? Oh... oh.... They were right.*

"You?" I blurt. Stupid response and he clearly doesn't know what to make of it. His eyes widen, his frown deepens, and then he nods slowly. "The flowers. At my door. That was you?"

"Yes," he nods. "I chose them for you. You liked them?"

*Oh no. This is... this is bad. He is interested. Damn it Tamara, why do you see these things and I miss them?*

"Uhm, they were very nice," I say.

"This is good. Right? You like them?"

"Yes, look, uhm, Gerlar," I say. I don't know what to say. I don't want to be mean, but I also don't want to lead him on because I'm not interested. I am unable to suppress a yawn. It's so big my eyes are watering. I'll push this off to tomorrow. I'm too tired to think this through. "I need to sleep."

"Yes," he agrees. "Sleep well, Annalise."

"Yeah, you too," I say, grabbing the leather door.

I want out of this uncomfortable situation, so I don't wait for anything further before I step through and let it fall shut behind me. The burning embers in the firepit cast the room in a soft orange glow full of dancing shadows. I don't bother undressing before dropping into my bed cubby.

My eyes are too heavy to keep open and I expect to fall asleep immediately but don't. It's elusive, almost there, but my mind refuses to shut off and rest. I replay the encounter with Gerlar several times, looking over every detail. Every facial expression, every gesture, the intonation of his words, does he know? Was he tracking me? Am I about to be caught?

*I should stop. This is stupid. I'm going to be in trouble. We will be. He's in as much danger as I am. Maybe more.*

I know we should, but even thinking about it makes everything inside of me hurt. The universe feels wrong. What is the point of anything? I live for these stolen moments with him. I love my friends, they are the best, but life without him? I can't imagine it.

The memory of our first meeting is right there. Abs, Tams, and I had been captured by the Urr'ki and were being held in those small cages, but he was there. He knelt in front of my cage and that was it.

I don't think I ever believed in love at first sight. Lust, sure. I've seen my share of guys that I knew I wanted to take to bed, but love? Not me. But when our eyes met... as cliché as it sounds the world stopped. I don't think either of us could breathe. Even in that circumstance, captured, caged like a criminal or an animal, and scared to death, none of that mattered.

And he's so freaking alien. Rich, beautiful green skin with a broad nose that centers his face, like an anchor. His tusks protrude from his lower jaw and rise halfway up his cheeks. And his hair. Long, thick, two braids dropping to his chest. I was enraptured and he looked at me in the same way.

He crouched on the other side of the bars and then slowly, gently, reached his hand between them. Tentatively I took his hand. A jolt raced straight to my heart the moment we touched. His hand was surprisingly soft and his grip gentle. His breath was rapid, and he blinked a lot. His deeply brown eyes stared into my soul.

That was it. We both knew it then. I felt it, this connection to him that I still feel. And the idea of not seeing him again. Not continuing our secret rendezvous... how can I live without him? I try to imagine my world without him in it but all I can see is an empty bleakness.

Not seeing him is impossible. A little bit longer. I work for Rosalind now, maybe I can do something about that? Open some dialogue, change some minds, something. Maybe?

And Gerlar. I have to shut that down with finality. I don't know what is going on with him, but I do know I am not interested.

Ugh. Morning will be here too soon. I roll onto my side, staring all my problems in their metaphorical face, and try, with all my might, to go to sleep.



## ANNALISE

I push down a yawn. I don't think I slept for two hours. I couldn't stop thinking about my problems. Rosalind doesn't seem to notice. The woman is a machine. In constant motion, fast and decisive, and my poor tired brain is having a really hard time keeping up with her.

"Where is the report on the pregnancies from Addison?" she asks, shuffling through all the reports on her desk.

"She is on the agenda for right after lunch," I say. "She wanted to brief you in person."

"Everyone wants to brief in person," she mutters then looks up and locks me in place with a piercing stare. "As my assistant I expect you to avoid extra meetings. Most information can be relayed in a report and that takes me less time than meeting someone face-to-face."

"Yes, ma'am," I say.

"Sir," she says, absently.

"I'm sorry?"

"Sir," she says, looking up. Numb I nod understanding.

"Do you want me to cancel Addison?"

"No, she is right, that one should be a face to face," she says.

"Okay, you have the meeting with the Al'fa next."

She stops what she is doing, leans back in her chair, and sighs heavily. She runs her hands through her hair and then shakes

her head.

“Right,” she says at last. “We’d best be on our way.”

I feel like I should say something, but I have no idea what to say so I gather up the things she’d told me to bring along and then follow her out the door. Even her walk is intense. Full of purpose and pure intention. Rosalind does nothing in half-measure, she’s either all in it or she’s not doing it.

I have to step quickly to keep up with her as she makes her way down the hall and up the stairs. The room we enter is the same one I was brought to previously. It has a scale model of the compound carved into a table slash slab of rock that dominates the center of the room. At the far side of that table is the Al’fa. The leader of the Cavern Zmaj.

The Al’fa is huge and imposing. As one of the Cavern Zmaj, he has dusky scales and the same thick, black claws that I’ve seen cut through solid stone like it’s soft butter. Unlike the majority of Zmaj who run around shirtless, because apparently, they all want to show off their impeccably defined pectoral muscles, he wears a breastplate made of bones. The bones rattle every time he moves or takes a deep breath. He looks across the table fixing Rosalind with his amber eyes and a frown.

“You are late,” he says.

“I am exactly on the time I intended to arrive,” Rosalind snaps, undisturbed by his size or presence.

I have to say, and I noticed this before, though she is a third of his size at best she is every bit as imposing. Being in the room with the two of them is like being stuck between two massive centers of gravity and hoping you don’t get crushed.

The Al’fa growls in response to her but Zat’an steps out of a corner to stand at his side and then another Zmaj comes out of a side room. The other newcomer I don’t know by name but he’s one of ours. Huh, one of ours, like I own him or them.

He’s a surface Zmaj, but not totally one of ours. He’s one of the Franks, though I don’t think they liked to be called that. He has extra arms, and his tail is weird. Looking at him causes an



empathetic ache in my gut. He bears the scars of a hard life all over his body and they are on full display for anyone with eyes.

“We are ready for the briefing,” Zat’an says.

“I agree,” the Frank says.

“Well enough,” the Al’fa says, letting go of his impending beef with Rosalind. “Bring in Kri’sin.”

I watch the exchange between them feeling totally out of place. What am I doing here? These are all strong personalities, leaders, people who shape the way all the rest of us will live. That’s not me. I’m just... me.

Rosalind strides over to the scale model. I don’t know what I’m supposed to be doing so I follow a step behind and then take up a post there. Which really means I’m standing here bored out of my mind but that’s the job. I can’t keep from stealing glances at the Frank. I don’t want him to think I’m staring or being weird, but damn.

The extra arms are blue, reminding me of the Invaders. Where they attach to his torso there are old, twisted scars. It doesn’t look like the arms should work, but he uses them as easily as he does his natural ones.

His tail drags on the floor and it sounds different. It is different. The normal Zmaj tail is the same color as the rest of them, with scales along the top, usually a dusky shade of tan or brown, and ending in a thin tip. His is chopped about halfway down and changes from a normal looking Zmaj tail to something that looks like it was cut from a giant scorpion and stitched to his given one. The way it sounds when it moves it must have a hard carapace.

He stands on the right-hand side of the Al’fa. He’s the one who found this place. Something of a legend to the humans because he and that chick he’s hooked up with saved us all from the Bunker.

Part of me wants to thank him because that’s the nice, right thing to do and my mom didn’t raise me to be rude. Part of me does, but the rest of me knows this is not the time or place.

Which part is for the best because just looking at him terrifies me.

Zat'an stands on the left-hand side. Three Zmaj and on the opposite side is Rosalind. Rosalind and me, but I don't feel like I count. And it doesn't matter. Rosalind is not intimidated in the slightest. She leans onto the table, staring at the relief of the compound. Studying it with an air of complete control and comfort. She's not bothered by them.

The leather door pulls aside and Kri'sin walks in. He pauses seeing me and the surprise on his face is clear. I smile and he frowns, then nods. The three Zmaj on the opposite side stare at him waiting. He looks around the room and hesitates before deciding, then walks past Rosalind and me to stand on the left side of the table, halfway between Rosalind and the Al'fa.

*Very diplomatic Kri'sin.*

"You've been debriefed," Zat'an says. "But the Al'fa wants to hear from you directly."

Kri'sin drops his head. I don't have a clue what is going on, but his discomfort is clear. I focus on him. I know him a little better than Zat'an, but not much. Zat'an and Abs are together, but Zat'an is always kind of stiff and formal. Kri'sin is mate to my other best friend Tams and is much more casual and relaxed.

"Yes, Al'fa," Kri'sin says, then clears his throat, and squares his shoulders. "What would you know?"

"I am led to understand you think we should not do the offense that I am planning," the Al'fa says.

I can't put my finger on why, but the statement sounds dangerous. I don't know if it's only the tone of his voice or the phrasing or what, but chills race down my spine. Watching Kri'sin I think he feels the same way.

"You understand correctly, Al'fa," Kri'sin says, staring straight ahead.

The Al'fa glares, his wings partially opening and his tail rising so that the tip appears behind his head.

“And why is it that you think my plan is a bad idea?” Al’fa asks.

“I did not say it was a bad plan, Al’fa,” Kri’sin answers.

“Your disagreement is known, now you say you do not disagree with doing it?” the Al’fa asks.

“No, Al’fa, I still do not agree it is the right thing and do not wish to lead it. I stand by resigning my post.”

*What! Does Tamara know this?*

Zat’an was the Second in command. There was all this drama between Kri’sin and Zat’an that ended with the two of them facing off in the arena, and even that didn’t really resolve it. Kri’sin wanted Zat’an’s job and now we’ve come to this? Is he going to give it up? The Al’fa gave Kri’sin the title of Gorchym and made him commander of the forces because Zat’an refused to continue the fight. Zat’an was given a new, advisory position.

“Gah, speak plainly,” the Al’fa says, so angry he is choking on his words. Kri’sin’s eyes dart to the Al’fa then resume staring ahead. “Do you think my plan is faulty?”

“No, Al’fa, it is not the details of your plan I disagree with. I feel certain it will work.”

“Then what is the problem? Why are we here?”

Kri’sin swallows hard. The tension in the room continues to rise. Zat’an isn’t looking at anyone. I can’t get a read on his scarred face. The Frank looks between the Al’fa and Kri’sin, clearly reserving his judgment and input. Smart, probably, but also not helpful.

“I believe...” Kri’sin trails off. He closes his eyes. I’m not breathing. Waiting to hear what he says I’m not even sure if my heart is beating or not. “There are things we do not know and do not understand Al’fa.”

“About?”

“The Urr’ki,” Kri’sin says.

My heart is in my throat thundering so hard I feel it in my head. The vein that runs along my temple throbs painfully.

“They are the enemy,” the Al’fa snarls. “They have always been so and always will be. We know their tactics, their strengths, and have a good idea of where they gather their forces. Why should I not send the warriors to eradicate them?”

Kri’sin darts his eyes to Zat’an, looking for support. Zat’an either doesn’t see him, possible since he only has one good eye, or he’s decided to stay out of this. Kri’sin grimaces.

“They have learned our language, Al’fa.”

“And?” the Al’fa growls. “What does this change? Were they not the cause of the quake?”

“That has not been established for certain,” Rosalind says, interjecting for the first time.

“Of course they did it! In all our records there is nothing about the mountain quaking. If not them, then who?” the Al’fa argues.

“Quakes are a natural phenomenon,” Rosalind says.

She stands with her hands clasped behind herself and meets the Al’fa’s angry gaze with her own unflinching one. Everything about her from pose to tone of voice screams bring it bitch. I dare you. Gods I want to be her when I grow up.

“That may be on your Star Planet, but here this does not happen!” the Al’fa yells, slamming his fist onto the edge of the table. “Did you not receive the briefing? Do you not know how many of our people were injured? Killed?”

Rosalind leans in too but she doesn’t raise her voice.

“One hundred and twelve serious injuries,” she states. “Fourteen deaths, twelve of which were *my* people. Two of which were yours.”

“And that must be accounted for,” the Al’fa says. “There must be a reckoning, but more than that, we must prevent this from happening again.”

“And how is it you think these Urr’ki are able to manipulate the ground itself?” Rosalind asks.

“We know they are trying to wake the Paluga,” the Al’fa says. “This is likely a side effect.”

“The Paluga,” Rosalind says, drumming her fingers on the edge of the table. “You think it is real?”

“No,” Zat’an says, inserting himself. “It is a myth.”

“Then how does a myth cause a quake?” Rosalind asks.

“This is pointless,” the Al’fa says slashing one hand through the air. “The destruction of the Urr’ki will happen. Too long they have been a threat. It is time to end this.”

My stomach is a tight knot. He wants to eliminate them. All of them. No. This can’t be. I can’t stand here and let this happen.

“Is there anything further you have to add Kri’sin?”

Kri’sin is almost visibly vibrating. His hands are clenched tight at his sides, his jaw is tensed, and his tail twitches.

“Al’fa, I was trapped with one of them. He was... intelligent. I do not think they are the mindless monsters we believe them to be.”

“Bah,” the Al’fa says. “One encounter and you suddenly think they are not mindless beasts?”

“They did capture the humans,” Zat’an says, “and did not harm them.”

“Which only strengthens my position,” the Al’fa says. “They kidnapped them. From under our protection. In *my* compound!”

I dart my gaze from one person to the next trying to read the room. I can’t tell where Zat’an is coming down on this, but Kri’sin seems like he might be an ally. The Frank, whatever his real name is, remains silent and thoughtful. Rosalind, I’m not sure.

My heart hammers in my chest. If they launch an assault, if it is open war, Maz will be on the front lines. Our peoples will be killing each other. How do I stop this? Can I?

“Al’fa,” Rosalind says. “I understand your position, but there are variables at work here we do not see.”

“The only variable is when to launch our assault,” he snaps.

“We need more information,” the Frank says, shrugging all four arms at once. That is so weird.

“Then we will get it,” the Al’fa says. “But will hear no more talk of kindness to these monsters. They threaten my people. I will not stand for it. We will eliminate them, once and for all.”

“No!” I cry out and every eye in the room shifts to me.

*What have I done? Shit.*

I shake my head, eyes wide, lips trembling. My mouth is too dry to say more. I didn’t mean to shout out. That was stupid. The dumbest thing I could have done. Why did I do that?

“Who is this?” the Al’fa asks, glaring.

“She is my assistant,” Rosalind says. “She is new and has clearly not yet learned to keep her place.”

My head is spinning in counterpoint to the churning of my stomach. My knees quiver and I’m not sure I can keep standing.

“I—I’m sorry,” I mumble, unable to speak louder because my mouth is too dry.

“Yes, you are,” Rosalind says. “Return to my office and wait for me there.”

I take a step backwards, unable to turn around. The way they’re all looking at me is too much.

The Al’fa growls, something wordless, or I think it is. Zat’an crosses his arms over his chest. Kri’sin darts a quick glance in my direction before resuming his dead ahead stare.

The leather of the door brushes my back and I spin around, jerk it aside, and run out.



## ANNALISE

*M*y heart is hammering so fast that I think I might pass out. I press myself against the cool stone outside the room. The voices inside are raised as the arguing continues, but I can't make out the words. They're muffled sounds but those sounds are deciding the fate of someone I care deeply about.

*Not just care. I love him.*

No, I can't. Can I? Maybe? How am I supposed to know? I like him, that I do know, and there is absolutely no question I don't want him to be hurt much less killed. I don't want anyone to be hurt. Especially in a stupid war.

The Zmaj think of the Urr'ki the same way they do any other beast. Something to be killed if it becomes too much of a threat. No second thought given. They don't grant that the Urr'ki are intelligent, thinking, and caring. They are the enemy and that makes them less.

How do I get this entire culture to see they're wrong? I have to, somehow, convince not only them, but the Urr'ki too. Because from everything Maza has told me, his people think the same way. Though my head is still spinning, I push off the wall and make my way back to Rosalind's office. I know I'm in trouble with her but that can't compare to the bigger problem.

I try to stay busy to keep from working myself into a complete meltdown. I clean every inch of the office. Straighten every



paper, empty the waste into the clever bin that the Zmaj use for disposal. These guys are brilliant engineers.

The bin for non-compostable waste drops out of sight but it never fills up. The rumor is that it goes right to a stream of lava where whatever is dumped is efficiently disposed of by nature. If it's compostable, that goes into a different bin. Those bins are collected and used for the farms. The farms are how they keep themselves, and now us too, fed.

By the time the office is spotless, she still hasn't returned. Now I don't know what to do with myself. I have too much nervous energy to stand still so I pace until I can't stand that any longer either. I step outside the office. Lynn looks up from a book she was reading.

"What did you do?" she asks.

"What do you mean?"

Lynn is a pretty girl with big, expressive eyes. She rolls her eyes and shakes her head.

"Look, you don't need to play shy, we all screw up. What did you do to piss her off?"

"I spoke up in the meeting," I say, shrugging with a sheepish smile.

"That will do it," she says, returning her attention to the book.

"How much trouble am I in? Have I lost my job?"

"Probably not," she says, not looking up. "Depends on how much of a problem it creates for her."

"Oh," I say.

She doesn't say more leaving me with the same anticipatory nervousness of waiting with nothing to do. I move around this outer office space and straighten up stacks of things. When I feel Lynn's glare boring into my back I glance over my shoulder.

"Really?" she asks.

"I'm sorry, this is your space," I say.

She sighs and sets the book down. “You want my advice?”

“Please?”

“Don’t stress it,” she says. “If you’re fired, there is nothing you can do about it. Rosalind is intense and hard, but she’s also smart. She surrounds herself with smart people and would not have chosen you in the first place if she didn’t already know what to expect from you. She put you in that situation, I am certain she knew how you would act.”

“But... how... you mean she...”

I spit out incomplete sentences as I speak out the fragments of my thoughts that are jumping from one to the next faster than I can say them. Lynn watches, waiting with easy patience. When I stumble to a stop and am left staring, she smiles.

“Now you’re getting it,” she says.

“You’re serious.”

“I am,” she says. “I’ve been with her for a while now and if I have learned anything, Rosalind is never not in control.”

“Then she set me up!” I don’t mean to raise my voice, but anger and surprise won’t be held back.

“Yes, I did,” Rosalind says.

Cold runs up my spine, clenching my throat tight. I turn in slow motion, praying that her voice was only in my head and that she really isn’t standing right behind me. Even if I wasn’t fired before, I’m sure I will be now.

“Sir,” I say, coming to some approximation of attention as I force my spine to straighten and shoulders to square.

Rosalind’s hard as steel gaze looks me over then she shakes her head.

“Relax,” she says. “You’re not military and your posture is terrible.” I do as she orders. She brushes past me without a word. “Anything Lynn?”

“No sir,” Lynn says, apparently knowing whatever it is that Rosalind is asking after.

Rosalind nods and walks through the leather door and into her office. I'm left standing, staring at the door. Lynn picks up the book and I continue to stand, unsure what to do. Am I fired? Am I supposed to stay? Do something? A few minutes pass, then the leather of the door is pulled aside.

"Are you going to stand out there the rest of your shift?" Rosalind asks.

I shake myself and go into the office. Rosalind is behind her desk with one hand resting on it, finger drumming as she stares down.

"Ros... sir, I'm sorry," I say. "I shouldn't have opened my mouth. It won't happen again."

She glances up, only half-acknowledging that I've spoken before returning her attention to the things on her desk. She purses her lips and then shakes her head.

"You did exactly what I expected," she mutters.

"Really? You're not just saying that?"

When Rosalind looks up it's a hard, withering look.

"Annalise," she says. "You are not a stupid girl. Do not pretend to be one. I only want smart, intelligent people on my team."

My mouth is hanging open and I snap it shut.

"Sorry," I mutter at last.

"Good. Of course, I do not want this war. War is a risk. A risk we cannot afford." She moves some papers around on her desk. "We are above the minimal viability numbers, but a war could destroy all the gains we've made."

"Minimum viability numbers?"

"In order for our species to survive," she says as if that explains anything to me. She looks up and my confusion must be plain on my face. "In order for humanity to survive, we need a minimum viable number of different DNA contributors. The generation ship had all the math. Why do you think procreation was so closely monitored?"

“Space?” I ask, the thing that I’d always assumed was the reason.

“Yes, in part,” she says. “You’re not wrong, but the underlying truth was to make sure that the eventual colony at our destination would survive. In order for that to happen, without risk of inbreeding or other genetic disorders becoming prevalent, there was the monitoring of procreation.”

“But, I mean, how many people did we lose? It had to be... a lot.”

“It was. A bigger number than I want to ever say out loud. When we first crashed, we were below the minimum viable numbers. The human race would be extinct, for all intents and purposes on Tajss, within four, maybe five generations.”

“But the Zmaj, you didn’t factor for compatibility,” I say.

“No,” she says. “I hadn’t. How could I know? Before Calista had Illadon... well let’s say that that was a surprise.”

“And now? The numbers now?”

“All the births, human and crossbreed, have improved our chances,” she says. “But it is by no means assured. And a war...”

“That could kill hundreds...” I fill in.

“Or more.”

“That’s why you set off the bomb,” I say, suddenly realizing the truth of it.

“Yes,” she says. “It was the most likely avenue to success.”

The enormity of what she is saying hits me like a punch to the face. She’s not just dealing with the daily issues like food and supplies. Or who’s mad at who. She’s making decisions about the survival of not even only one species, the humans, she’s shepherding two entire species.

And, maybe, if I tell her the truth of everything a third species too. I open my mouth to tell her about the Urr’ki. I want to be honest with her, share everything, but something on her face

stops me. What am I thinking? Here, I know you're already carrying all this weight, let me add to it?

"How do I help?" I ask instead.

"You've done your part, for now," she says. "Take the rest of the day off. If anyone asks, I am angry at you and you're on probation."

"Who would ask?"

"I do not know," Rosalind says. "But if anyone does, note it and report."

"Yes, sir," I say. "And I am sorry."

"Good," she says. "Hang onto that. Now go."

I leave the office with a new reality and the weight of all she is bearing now on my shoulders too. And I've got the added burden of knowing that the Urr'ki are intelligent, kind, and even caring. One question burns in my thoughts as I leave.

*How do I stop a genocide?*



## ANNALISE

I wander around the compound, partially lost in my thoughts, and partly not having anything else to do. My only option is to go back to my room but then I'd be alone and right now, I don't want to be. Instead, I opt for aimlessly walking.

And as I travel, I look. I watch the people at work. People. No divisions of human or Zmaj. They're all, no we, we are all people. Living, working, and surviving. I see friends, families, mothers with their children and dads too. I see people arguing and others who are in love.

I walk and I look, and I wonder. Humans have been through so much. My generation would have been the fourth on the ship. My great-great-great grandparents decided or were forced to or whatever way ended up on a ship bound for a world they would never see.

Barring the crash, I never would have set foot on a planet either. None of us would have. We would have lived our lives, loved, had kids, and died without ever seeing a non-simulated sun rise or set. None of that happened because fate intervened.

On the ship we study Earth history. Earth, before the ships, was overpopulated and dying. The generation ships were a shot at survival and a better life. Before the ships, there was division among the different races of humans and war. It's the one thing we, as a species, seemed to be best at. Finding some reason to hate some other part of our own kind.

But on the ships, there was none of that. There couldn't be because, as Rosalind just told me, we were too closely policed. If the colony our ship established was to survive it would take all of us and we'd have to get along.

Our destination planet was being terraformed, but that was only to establish the ability to live on it. Fixing the atmosphere and soil so that our plants and animals would be able to flourish. And everyone on the ship was tested for any signs of psychosis that would lead to fighting and division.

Yet despite all of this the first thing that happens after we crash? A bunch of humans decide that they hate the Zmaj and everything they represent. Led by some ass named Gershom there was a lot of drama, none of which matters because that guy is gone and once a bigger threat came even those who hated the Zmaj were sure happy they were around to defend us.

Is that the secret? Is that how I stop the Zmaj from trying to wipe out the Urr'ki? A bigger threat?

That's kind of what the Urr'ki are doing with their Paluga. Maz says he doesn't believe in it, but a lot of, if not most of, his people do. They want to wake their long sleeping dark god and let it reset the world. How bad must it be for them if the idea of resetting the world is appealing?

My thoughts spin as I try to figure this out until at last my stomach grumbles and I realize it's dinner time. I don't want to eat alone so I go to Tamara's room to see if she is there. I knock on the wall next to the leather door.

"Just a minute," Tamara says, sounding breathless.

When she pulls the leather aside, I know my timing is awful. Her hair is disheveled, and her shirt is half-pulled up and her cheeks are flushed.

"Oh, shit, sorry Tams," I say. "I'll stop by later."

"It's fine," she says, grabbing my arm as I try to step away. "Come. Come!"

She pulls harder when I try to resist and leave her to what she was doing. I let her pull me into the room and see Kri'sin



kneeling by the firepit, adding chips to strengthen the flames.

“Hi,” I say, giving a half-wave.

Great. Not only do I have the extreme awkwardness of knowing I either interrupted or arrived at the very end of them having sex, but my embarrassment at the meeting also returns in full force seeing him, since he was there for it all. He doesn't speak, only nods, then returns his attention to the fire.

“What's up?” Tamara asks, setting her shirt to proper and running her fingers through her hair.

“Nothing, I, uh, you know what, never mind. Are you coming to dinner?”

“Yeah,” she says, dropping her hands to her sides and fixing me with a stare.

“Great, I will, uh, that's all. I wanted to check in. I'll be on my way. See you there.”

“Anna, you are almost as bad a liar as Abs. Spill. Come, come, out with it.”

I shake my head and turn to the door.

“No, it's fine,” I say. “My mistake.”

I feel Kri'sin's eyes on my back. What is he thinking? He was arguing for the Urr'ki. Well, he was presenting facts that could be taken for him arguing for them. Not quite the same thing but still, close, right? Does that mean he's on my side?

“You walk out that door and I will drag your ass back in here,” Tamara threatens, and knowing her, I believe it.

I stop with one hand on the leather, staring at the floor.

“I'm sorry, you guys are busy, it will wait.”

“No, it won't,” Tamara says, coming to my side. “Annalise, you're my bestie, don't try to hide from me. What's going on?”

Emotions swell and overwhelm. I can barely breathe, and tears are building in my eyes making everything sparkle. This is stupid, what is wrong with me?

“Did Kri’sin...” I choke on the words and can’t speak for a moment. I have to swallow and force the lump in my throat down. I turn towards Tamara and he’s right there, staring at us from the far side of the room. “Have you told her?”

“I have not. Yet,” he says, shrugging. “We finished sex first.”

“Gee thanks,” Tamara says with a laugh. “Why don’t you go scream it out for the entire compound?”

Kri’sin smiles broadly.

“I do not wish to make all the other males jealous,” he says. “But if you would like it, I will.”

“Don’t you dare,” Tamara says before returning her attention to me. “What happened today?”

I bite my lip, unsure what to say. She doesn’t know and while I’d been toying with telling her tonight, I don’t want to do it in front of Kri’sin. I just don’t know how he’ll react. What if he hates me? He could get angry. What then? Would he banish me from their house? Would he tell Rosalind? The Al’fa? I want to tell her, but I can’t. Not here and not now at least.

“I, uhm, screwed up with Rosalind.”

“On your first day? That’s a record, even for you. What did you do?”

“There was a meeting,” I say, eyes darting to Kri’sin unsure how much to say. Do I lie? Tell the whole truth? Does he tell her everything? What am I even thinking? Of course, I’ll tell her the truth. This is Tamara! “I was supposed to observe only but I got upset and shouted. Rosalind kicked me out.”

“Oh, wow, are you okay?” Tamara asks.

“Yeah, I mean, she kind of reprimanded me and all, but...”

“Wow, that is a rough day. Come here, give me a hug. Come on, hug it out.” She pulls me into her. I’m looking over her shoulder at Kri’sin. I can’t get a read on him leaving me unsure if he approves, disapproves, or maybe a third option of couldn’t give less of a shit. “Why did you ask if Kri’sin had told me?”

She asks after letting me go. I glance at him for reassurance or permission, which I'm not sure, but his face is the same blank mask.

"He was there," I say.

"You were?" Tamara asks.

"I was," he says simply.

"What was this meeting about? Did I need to be there?" Tamara asks.

"About the Urr'ki," I say. "The Al'fa wants to wipe them out."

"But that's genocide!" Tamara exclaims.

"Right?" I agree. "How can anyone consider wiping out an entire species?"

"They are the enemy," Kri'sin says, but the tone of his voice makes it clear his heart is not in it.

"You know better than that," Tamara says dismissively.

"I do not," Kri'sin says, shaking his head. "This could be another trap. They are clever, yes, but they have killed many. We cannot underestimate the danger they represent."

"Danger? They're just trying to live, like any of us!" I shout.

"Keep calm Annalise," Tamara says. "It's important but shouting won't get us anywhere."

I bite down hard, straining to keep my tears at bay. She has that look on her face, the one she gets when she is suspicious but hasn't quite figured it out yet. If I don't get myself under control my dirty secret will be out.

"I'm sorry. Killing people, and they are people," I say, glaring at Kri'sin who drops his eyes from mine, "is wrong."

"I'm not arguing against that, tell me what happened. Maybe I can help."

I relay the entire situation and Kri'sin adds some context to his part in it. Tamara listens attentively.

"Can Zat'an help?" she asks.

“Worthless. The old one is no help,” Kri’sin snarls.

“Kri’sin, he’s an adviser the Al’fa listens to him. Do you want to go kill the Urr’ki you were trapped with? What about his family? Are you all glad and happy to go wipe them out? Did everything you tell me about what happened when you were trapped with one of them not change your mind at all?”

Kri’sin growls and shakes his head, crossing his arms over his chest.

“That is not fair,” he says.

“Nor is your attitude,” Tamara says, and she’s harsh but not mean. I know when she’s being mean. “Remember, your rivalry is over with Zat’an?”

“Bah,” Kri’sin says.

Someone knocks at the door. The three of us look at each other as if we’re co-conspirators caught in an act of sedition. And for all I know, maybe we are.

“Abigail?” Tamara whispers. I shrug but there is only one way to find out who is at the door and Tamara takes it. She stands up, walks to the door, and opens it. “Gerlar?”

*Gerlar? Why? Gods above is he following me?*

“Greetings Tamara, I am looking for the Gorchym,” Gerlar says.

“Why?” Tamara asks.

“That is a matter I must discuss with him,” Gerlar says, offense clearly in his voice even though I cannot see him.

“We’re busy,” Tamara says, but Kri’sin crosses the room in what looks like a single long stride.

“I am here,” he says, stepping into the small space next to Tamara.

“And I guess he is available,” Tamara says, but I know that tone of voice. Kri’sin will have to answer for this later. I don’t envy him, when she’s annoyed like this, she can be quite a handful.

The two of them step back and Gerlar follows them into the room. He comes to an abrupt stop when he sees me.

“Annalise,” he says.

His voice is soft, tight, almost a whisper, but his eyes widen and his scales flush. I never would have believed that scales could flush before I got to know the Zmaj, but they sure can. Each Zmaj has a unique shading around the edges of their scales, and they seem to shift with their emotions.

“Hello Gerlar,” I say.

He looks around the room quickly, evaluating. What he’s thinking I don’t know. Does he think he interrupted some kinky love fest? Well too bad buddy, you’re not that lucky.

“What do you think of the Urr’ki?” Tamara asks.

“They are the enemy,” he says, his eyes coming back to rest on me.

“Right, easy answer, now tell me what you *think* about them,” Tamara says.

“I do not understand,” Gerlar says. “They are the enemy. What else must I know of them? Do you mean how they lay traps? Or signs of their passage? Or the way they use lower beasts to weaken a war party?”

I sigh and roll my eyes. Gerlar looks to Kri’sin for clarification.

“She is asking about the fact that some of them can speak our language,” Kri’sin says.

“A trick,” Gerlar says dismissively. “Another of their deceptions. They must be eliminated.”

He says it with such simplicity. It doesn’t even sound like an idea, just a statement of the way it is. A fixed idea without any consideration or even concept that he is talking about the destruction of an entire species of being.

“How can you be so cruel?” I ask.

“Annalise, let it—”

“No,” I cut Tamara off, walking up to Gerlar. I poke him in his stomach with my finger. “You would destroy them? Why? Because that’s what your people have always done? How is it you get the right to live but they don’t? What makes you so special?”

“You would choose the Urr’ki over the Zmaj?” Gerlar asks, a grumble in the tone of his voice.

“That’s not the point and you know it,” I shout.

“This is what you say. We should forget that they kidnapped you and your friends. Ignore how many of us they have killed?”

“What I’m saying is that maybe there is a way to resolve this peacefully,” I say.

“Peacefully? I would sooner make peace with a guster,” Gerlar says, looming large over me.

“Well, that makes sense since the two of you probably have a similar intelligence level,” I snap.

“Annalise,” Tamara says, jumping in between us. “Enough.”

“He started it,” I mutter stepping back.

“Gerlar did you need something here in *my* home?” Tamara asks.

He’s breathing heavily. His chest rising and falling in huffs. He shifts his glare from me to Tamara.

“The Gorchym did not approve tomorrow’s patrols,” he says.

“The same teams can go,” Kri’sin says.

“Thank you, Gorchym. I will take my leave then,” he says, turning slowly and keeping his eyes on me the entire time. Before he walks out the door, he shakes his head in disbelief.

Tamara stands at the door for a long moment before turning back around.

“I don’t know what that was really about, Anna,” she says. “But making enemies out of the Zmaj is not going to work in your favor.”

“I didn’t—” she holds up a finger, cutting me off.

“No,” she says. “Gerlar was being an ass, I don’t deny it. The way you handled it though was every bit as bad. We need these people. Diplomacy will get you a lot further than random outbursts.”

I close my open mouth because she’s right. All I’ve managed to do is make an enemy. Another one. And Gerlar is apparently interested in me. Maybe I could have used that to make him an ally if I changed his mind.

Maybe. But now I’ve screwed that up. My lack of sleep must be impacting my cognitive abilities. Or I’m an idiot. It could be as simple as that. I look from her to Kri’sin and back. I give a sheepish shrug to acknowledge she’s right.

“Good, let’s go eat,” Tamara says.

They walk hand in hand ahead of me while I follow. I’ve screwed this up twice today. If I’m going to stop a genocide, I’ve got to get better at this. Fast. I’m beginning to understand Rosalind and what it feels like to hold the fate of two races in your hands. It sucks.





## ANNALISE

Eight steps, spin. Eight steps, spin.

It's eight steps to go from my bed cubby to the carved shelf on the far wall. Eight back and repeat. How did I get into this situation? I need my friends. Abs would give me love and Tamara would have a bright idea. A wild one, something unexpected. Something that I'm not seeing.

I can't tell them now, though. It's really late and even if not for that I can't tell them in front of their mates. Kri'sin, maybe, but I'm not sure about that. The way he acted with the Al'fa, he was too... what? Subdued? Obedient? I don't know, but I think he's sort of on my side, or would be, but I'm not certain. I can't risk it.

I reach my bed cubby and turn. I have never been in a situation like this. It's always been the three of us. In trouble, out of trouble, boy trouble, parent trouble, whatever we got into it was the three of us. I don't think I've decided anything on my own in my entire life. At least not an important one.

There are at least a dozen possible paths forward, but which one? I keep playing each possibility out, trying to predict what the outcome of each one would be if I did that. Every one of them ends up with something terrible. Usually, a full-on genocide. Or would it be xenocide? I don't know. My stomach is a tight knot and bile continues to burn its way up my throat.

*Rosalind?*

I could tell her. She does seem likely to be an ally. But is she? Rosalind is going to do what it takes to avoid a war, but does that go this far? She spoke about saving two species, not three. All the plans she shared with me did not include any concerns for the Urr'ki themselves. And the Urr'ki have their own issues which complicates this even further.

I've never been a strategist. That has always been Tamara's role in our group. I was more the instigator of things. Acting on impulse and wild whims. Look where that's gotten me. I'm way out on a limb and it truly feels like someone is cutting that limb off.

A soft knock on the door stops my pacing. My blood turns chilly despite the fire. I turn in slow motion to the door. Who? What? It's too late for the girls to come over, they'll be asleep.

*Or getting laid. I wish I was getting laid. I wish I was with him*  
—

The knock repeats breaking off that thought, which is just as well. Wait. Could it? No. That's insane. It can't be, but if it is...

I run to the door and throw the leather aside. The shape in the dark is too big and my stomach drops to the floor, pulling my heart down with it.

"What?" I snap in a mix of anger and depression that it isn't him.

"May I come in?"

"Gerlar?" I ask. My head is spinning. The last person in the world I'd expect, well except for the one person I really want it to be, is him.

"Yes," he says. "May I enter?"

For the briefest of instances fear spawns a thousand reasons to say no. He's big. He might hurt me. Why is he here? I'm a girl, alone. What would I do if he... I shut all that down. If he was a human, those would be valid, but a Zmaj? Zmaj would never do any of the awful shit a human might do.

I step aside and motion for him to enter. He steps inside and cradled in the crook of his arm is a softly glowing bouquet of flowers. He stops just inside the door, shifting his weight. His tail protrudes under the leather door out onto the walkway.

“It’s late,” I say, something to break the awkward silence between us.

“Yes, I am sorry,” he says.

He’s not looking directly at me. His eyes are downcast just enough. If he was human, I’d assume his eyes were on my tits, and maybe they are, but not in a creepy, make my skin crawl way. More in a way like he’s embarrassed and can’t meet my gaze.

“Did you need something?”

He shifts his weight. His wings rustle with a leathery sound as he does. He starts to shake his head negatively then stops part way through and changes it to a nod. When he doesn’t follow that confusion up with any words, I ask the next logical question. “And, uh, what?”

His jaw tenses and he does a kind of whole body shake.

“I came to...” he trails off, picks up the flowers and kind of half-thrusts them in my direction. “I was incorrect, no, that is not it. I was... wrong. I want to apologize.”

He’s so incredibly awkward that I take the flowers as much out of niceness as any desire to have them, which I don’t really have.

“Thank you,” I say. “But it’s fine. You have your opinion.”

“Yes,” he nods, eyes darting up to mine and then away again.

“Is that all?” I ask, stepping back, then walking over to the shelf and the jar I have the last flowers he sent sitting in. I avoid Gerlar by arranging the new ones. They are quite pretty.

“Annalise, I...” he trails off. The only sound is his tail twitching on the ground and the soft crackle of the fire.

“Yes?” I ask, turning back around to look at him.

“Do you feel.... No that is not right... Is there...”

He stumbles over his words. Tamara's observation comes to mind. If she hadn't said it, I don't think I'd have a clue what he is doing. I wish I didn't. He's a nice guy, I don't want to hurt him, but I don't feel anything for him.

"Gerlar," I say, chewing on my cheek. "Look, you're nice."

"There is a human custom I have learned of," he says. "Would you like to go on a date? With me?"

My stomach drops.



## MAZABUTA

The yowls of the caged animals echo in my ears as I walk through the breeding farm. The cudov are the loudest. They leap at the cage walls, attempting to break free and sink their teeth into my flesh. The Breeder strikes the cage with his cudgel repeatedly, smashing the animal's protruding tentacles until it withdraws with a yelp and a low growl.

"You're stirring them up," he grouses. "What is it you need Mazabuta?"

I punch him, striking his left cheek with my closed fist. He yelps, falling back and raising his closed fists then he looks at my necklace and drops his hands to his side, lowering his head but his eyes glower still.

"Apologies, Kapatana," he says, anger dripping from the words but that doesn't matter. Submission is all I care about. I won't stand for him challenging me. "How do I serve?"

"Start by watching your tongue, Breeder," I say.

The coloring in his cheeks lightens with embarrassment. Good, he must remember his place. Anything else is unacceptable.

"Yes, Kapatana," he says, keeping his head bowed, eyes fixed on the ground.

"How many are ready for the assault?"

"Two hands," he says.

“Your quota was four,” I say. “The Shaman will not be pleased.”

If he was pale before he goes paler now. The Shaman’s name has that effect.

“If they hadn’t taken half my crop—”

“You have excuses for the Shaman?” I ask, cutting him off.

“No, Kapatana,” he says.

“Then fix it. We need four hands.”

“Yes, Kapatana.”

I turn my back on him and walk away. It’s a display of power as much as anything else. Turning your back on anyone is an invitation to be stabbed. Doing so shows I do not fear him or respect him enough to think he is capable of direct action. None of which means I don’t feel the itch between my shoulder blades.

As I expected he doesn’t act. I continue my inspection by heading for the forge, which is next. The loud clanging of iron being smelted and shaped is deafening. The fires roar and sparks fly with every strike of the hammer. A hundred men work making weapons and armor.

I inspect each station. I test random pieces for mettle and sharpness. At the fourth station, a young one works. He stops work when I step up. The Master Smith at my side yells for him to continue, reaching for the whip at his side. The young one jumps and resumes his work.

I inspect a sword that he has set aside. It does not yet have an edge. That will come with the finishing work. I swing the blade and then walk over to a dummy. I strike the sword several times, feeling its weight and balance. On the fifth strike the blade breaks. Inspecting the broken blade I see the flaw in the forging.

Silent, I turn to look at the young smith. The Master Smith’s face contorts with rage and his whip is in his hand. He raises it to strike the young one before he even knows what has happened, but I step between them. I should not do this. It

draws unwanted attention, but I do. I do because of her. Her influence touches everything and now I feel bad for this young one who made a mistake.

“Youngling,” I say. The young smith pulls the sword he is working on out of the fire and turns towards me. “Your sword has flaws. Why?”

When he sees the broken weapon in my hand his eyes widen and his cheeks pale. He darts a glance at the Master Smith who has the whip ready in his hand.

“I didn’t... I’m sor—” he stumbles over his words trembling in fear.

The snap of the whip is as fast as a cudov attack. The youngling jumps back, one trembling hand touching the cut dripping blood down his face. The Master Smith shows no mercy, drawing his arm back for another strike.

“Enough,” I demand.

“I will not tolerate substandard work,” the Master Smith snaps. “He serves the Queen.”

*You mean the Shaman. No one has seen the Queen in an age.*

“I said enough,” I say, not giving voice to my inner thoughts. “He made a mistake.” I fix the youngling with a hard glare. “Do not let it happen again or I will assign you to clean the cages.”

He nods hard and fast. Cleaning the cages is one of the most dangerous duties any Urr’ki can be assigned to since we have no place to move the animals while we do it. We lose as many troublesome Urr’ki to that duty as we do to raids.

I continue my inspection and the Master Smith remains at my side. He doesn’t say anything, but his displeasure radiates like the heat off one of the forges. I don’t give him any more of my attention. He is below me. Let him stew in his rage.

“The production is short,” I say after reaching the last forge.

“These young ones are lazy,” the Smith says. “I do my best, but you don’t give me any capable smiths.”



“Are you making excuses?” I ask. I don’t raise my voice or give it any inflection, but he hears the threat.

“No Kapatana,” he says quick. “I will get back on track.”

“I will tell the Shaman as much,” I say.

He squares his shoulders and slams his right fist onto his chest.

“For Her Glory,” he shouts.

I return the gesture then leave him to his work. There is more to do but it is time for food, so I make my way to the closest saravam. The stench of unwashed bodies, stale beer, and spiced stew makes an assault on my nose as I step inside.

I stand in the doorway a moment to let my eyes adjust to the smoky gloom. A dozen patrons are spread around the room, smoking, drinking, eating, and engaging in subdued conversations. A dozen sets of eyes evaluate me before resuming what they were doing. They look at my necklace, taking note of my rank, and assessing if I am a threat or not.

This is what we have become under the Shaman. Untrusting and broken. I sweep my gaze over the room and spot Purana tucked into the far corner by himself. I make my way through the scattered tables and stop before him. He looks up and motions that I am welcome.

A waitress brings a pitcher of beer and sets it between us. She wears a low-cut loose blouse that reveals her ample cleavage. Her tusks are yellowed with neglect, her hair a mess, and she is thick in the middle. Nothing like my Annalise. The comparison is automatic, but it makes me sad.

Sad that I am not with Annalise. That I see no way for us to truly be together, but also sad for this waitress. Annalise takes pride in herself and in who she is. Once, I do not doubt, this woman did too. Before. Before the Shaman Kire rose in the Queen’s esteem, consolidating his power and pushing his dark agenda.

“Food?” she asks.

“Stew,” I say, placing a coin on the table then placing a second one next to it.

“That’s too much,” she says.

“Consider it a gift,” I say.

She glares at the coins resting beneath my fingers then shifts to my eyes.

“Ain’t sunk that low yet,” she says. “Won’t be no extras.”

“And none are expected,” I say. “Sister, take the bonus, quietly and keep it.”

Her eyes narrow in suspicion. I understand her worry, but at last she nods and takes the coins, one disappearing into her cleavage. She leaves with my order for food.

“That was stupid,” Purana says.

“Perhaps,” I say, refilling his mug with beer before pouring my own. “Or perhaps not.”

“You are living in the past Maza,” he says, leaning over the table and speaking soft. “You know how things are. If she turns you in, the Shaman will have your hide.”

“For an act of kindness?”

“That is not your only act as you and I both know,” he says, then he drops his voice even further. “You endanger all of us with your actions.”

I sip my beer. It’s flat and warm, but what else can I expect?

“We cannot continue the way we have been,” I say.

“And what would you do?”

“Speed up the plan,” I say, smacking my lips. We both shut up as the waitress brings my bowl of stew. She sets it in front of me, then stands expectantly. I look at her and she’s watching. “Yes?”

“Try it,” she says.

I look at the stew but see nothing remarkable. I grab the hunk of unleavened bread and dip it then bite off the moist part. Flavor explodes in my mouth, and I stop chewing in surprise. The flavor flows over my tongue and ignites a fire in my brain. I look up at her and she flashes a smile. For that moment I see

the woman beneath the grime. The once proud daughter whose life should have been so much more.

“Thank you,” I say. She added season to the stew. A simple action but one that will likely earn her a beating from the Tavern Master if he finds out.

“I owe nothing,” she says with a sharp nod.

Pride shines as she turns away. I watch her go, remembering who we were before the Shaman. Our lives have always been hard, the Zmaj sees to that, but the Shaman has made everything worse. He and his cultist for what else do we call them?

“Stupid,” Purana says, downing his beer and pouring another.

“You want the Shaman’s war?” I ask.

He glares in response, the only answer needed. Purana’s hand trembles as he lifts his mug.

“Tell me,” I say.

“I have said it a thousand times,” he says. “And what has it gotten us? Trouble. Attention of the Maulavi and neither of us need that.”

“Tell me,” I insist.

I need to hear it. I need the hope his story stokes in my heart. Hope that maybe, somehow, I can figure out a way to be with Annalise forever. That somehow, in some unimaginable way, we can make peace with the Zmaj. He downs another beer and I know it’s as much to dull his pain as it is to steel any courage.

“I was on patrol when the quake happened. The ceiling collapsed and the Zmaj came after me. We were trapped together...” he trails off looking into the distance of memory.

I listen attentively. Sifting his words and filing them in my heart as I try to figure out a way to use them. For her.

She is my dragoste. I know it. She knows it. But if it is so, then there must be a way. Tajss would not be so cruel to her

firstborn as to fate us for each other with no way to do it. Even if, right now, that seems more than impossible.



## ANNALISE

I'm too tired to process this. Damn it, why? Why now? I didn't ask for this nor did I want it. Gerlar's smile looks fixed in place and strained, which gives him a nervous, agitated look. He stares intently, eagerly, and his wings rustle. My mouth is too dry to speak. I try to work in some moisture, but I can't. Holding up a finger I go to the shelf and get myself a drink of water.

It buys me some time, but not enough because when I turn, he's still there, waiting, and I still don't know what to say. I drop my eyes to the floor to avoid his gaze and take another drink. Okay, think this through. I don't want to hurt him. He has good intentions, but this isn't right. I turn around and force myself to meet his eyes. His wide smile doesn't falter making him look like an eager puppy ready to beg for my attention. All he needs to do is start wagging his tail. I stop my imagination from running any further with that inappropriate analogy.

"Gerlar, look," I say.

"Yes. I do look. You are very beautiful," he says.

My cheeks are instantly red-hot, and it feels like I'm squirming inside my own skin. I love compliments as much as anyone, but right now is not the time.

"No."

"No?" he steps forward raising his arms and I step back, doing my best to not encourage this. He stops but his arms remain

raised and outstretched towards me.

“No,” I shake my head. “Thank you, I mean. For the compliment, but no.”

“No?” he shakes his head, but at least he drops his arms to his side. “I do not understand.”

“This,” I motion between the two of us. “There can’t be this. This isn’t.... no”

“Oh,” he says, looking thoughtful. He rubs his forehead between his finger and thumb then looks brighter. “I see. Time. You need time. Yes, this is a custom too. Some of the males have spoken of it.”

“No!” my voice cracks. His eyes widen and he frowns shaking his head yet again.

“Annalise,” he says. “I am sorry. Have I done wrong?”

“Yes, no,” I stumble unsure what to say or how to make this stop.

“Then you will go on a date with me?”

“No,” I say. I am so tired it feels like a thick fog is filling my head. “No, Gerlar—”

“Please, explain. I do not wish to do anything wrong. I like you. You are very beautiful, but no? No what?”

“Give me,” I shake my head, raise my hands, and drop them ineffectually. I shift my weight from one foot to the other and try to figure my way through this all while I want nothing more than to be anywhere else. “Give me a minute.”

“I will give you all the minutes of the universe,” he says. “You have but to ask.”

“Gods above, don’t say things like that,” I say.

He snaps his open mouth shut. Clearly, he was about to say some more super cheesy, overly romantic bullshit.

No, not bullshit. He means this, for him it’s real, but he’s confused. I know the Zmaj have fate or whatever and that when their dragons stake a claim, that’s it for them, but this

can't be right. It can't be because I also know that he's not the one. Not for me. Maza is, no matter the impossibility of our being together I know, in my heart of hearts, that he's the one.

I take another drink, stalling for time while he stares with that puppy dog look. Which is the weirdest possible analogy I can think of when applying it to an alien dragon-man, but it's the only one that fits. I miss puppies. I wish some had survived the crash, but then they'd never make it on Tajss.

*Pull it together Anna!*

I mentally slap myself and force my thoughts back onto the rails. I don't know where these rails are going, but here we are. That's not true, I know where they're going. What I don't know is how they're going to arrive.

"I will give you space, if you like," he offers.

"No," I shake my head. "No, we need to handle this now." I hear my mother in my head telling me to not put off until tomorrow and all that. Well, here goes nothing. "Look, Gerlar, I do not feel this for you."

"This is okay," he says with a smile. "In time, you will. I will prove myself worthy of you."

"No, you won't," I say.

"I understand, but it will be," he says.

"Gerlar, let me ask you some things."

"Of course, you may ask me anything."

"What is it you think you feel?" I ask.

He frowns and doesn't answer immediately, which I appreciate. I want him to really think about his answers.

"I think you are very beautiful," he says. "And I have seen you, how you handle the world around you. This tells me you are very smart."

"And?"

"I like your nose," he says. "It is very... what is the word? Cute. Very cute."



Cute is a common word that doesn't translate fully to Zmaj, but he uses it correctly.

"Thank you, but what else? What do you feel inside of you?"

He frowns. "That we would be compatible."

And there it is. This isn't real. Well, not fate real, if those two words can be used together like that. Fundamentally he's horny. I get it, the Zmaj lost all their females a long time ago. He's probably not been laid in longer than I've been alive. But that is nothing to base a relationship on, especially when my heart belongs to another.

"You see that is not what you want, right?" I ask.

"I want you," he says, simply.

"No, not like that. Not my body, me."

"Yes, you."

I roll my eyes, okay, Gerlar. I'm really trying here, work with me man.

"No, I mean your dragon. What does your dragon tell you?"

He frowns and hesitates a little too long. "It wants you, of course."

"Are you sure?" I ask, pouncing on that moment's pause. "Is it your dragon or is it something else? From what I understand the dragon should be pretty darn clear. Undeniable even. Is that what you really feel?"

He doesn't answer immediately. He shifts, his eyes dart around, and his tail softly slaps the floor.

"I like you."

"And I like you," I say. "But not like this. I mean, we're not really compatible. Our views are different on a lot of things and that doesn't make for a good relationship."

"Such as?" he asks, putting me on the spot.

"The Urr'ki for one," I say.

"They must be destroyed."

“See!” I yell pointing at him. “This is what I mean. What if they are intelligent?”

“They are the enemy; I will help destroy them.”

“Why? Why are they the enemy? Who says they are? Why do you have to destroy them?”

“They are, this is the way it is,” he says, frowning deeply. “Your questions make no sense. They are the enemy.”

“You can’t kill an entire species without a second thought!”

I’m tired and frustration makes my blood boil. He’s the perfect example of what I’m up against. No logic, no reason, just kill the enemy. They’re not us, so why not? I ball my hands into fists so tightly my nails dig into my palms.

“I do not understand,” he says, shaking his head sharply. The edges of his scales shift in hue taking on a red tint. “You would do what? Let them attack us?”

“No. Of course not. But what if there was another way?” His blank stare is all the answer I need. This is pointless. I’m so tired that it feels like a weight on my soul. Pulling me down. A weariness so deep that I just can’t. “I need to sleep.”

“Of course,” he says, hesitating. “Sleep well.”

“Yeah, you too,” I sigh, turning away.

I listen as he leaves my room and then I’m alone. Alone and facing the hardest decisions and problems of my life. I need the girls. I can’t do this. But for now, it’s late and I’m tired. I crawl into my cubby and lie down.



## MAZABUTA

I am awake but remain partially in the realm of sleep. I do not want to leave because she is with me here. We walk the dark tunnels, hand in hand, and talk. Nothing more, but I am happy. Happy in ways I did not know I could ever be.

I cling to this imagination or dream, whatever it might be. This is all that I want. To be with her always, but the world and our societies work against us. I cannot bring her here. It is not safe here. My home has always been tough, but since the Shaman took over the Queen's ear it has been so much worse.

He and his cult of doom should never have risen to power, but we were desperate. I know this because I believed him too. In the beginning at least. Before his control became so absolute. I am sure I am not the only one who no longer believes, but I am perhaps the most certain he is wrong.

Now is not the time to reset. That cannot be Tajss' will. How could Tajss want to tear me away from my Dragoste when I only just found her? I cannot believe that Tajss would be so cruel. For now, I walk in my mind's eye with her. Her scent fills my nostrils. Sweet with her musky aroma that is indelible on my memory, the scent of her sex.

She is one of the Star People. Come down to Tajss and made in flesh, we have found one another, and this is the way it is meant to be. The two of us together, forever. And forever cannot end. The reset must not happen, but I have no idea how I will stop the coming doom.

*For her. I will for her. Somehow.*

“Mazabuta, wake,” a harsh voice barks.

I roll over and to my feet in a single motion, pulling the blade from beneath my pillow. The point two fingers from the neck of a robed Maulavi. He doesn't flinch, his amber eyes steadily on mine. The artery in his neck bouncing is the only sign of his nervousness.

“You dare,” I growl.

“Dare, Kapatan?” he asks. You are late for the ritual. Your absence has been noted.”

I stop myself from saying what I truly think because that will only end up with my being a sacrifice in their stupid ritual. I lower the knife and let it drop to the bed.

“Apologies Maulavi,” I say. “I will dress and be there.”

He nods sharply before walking to the door. He pauses and looks over his shoulder.

“Is there something I should be aware of?” he asks, eyes narrowing in suspicion.

Her. I should report about her, but I won't. I will never give her to your attention Cleric.

“No,” I say, pointedly leaving off his title. His amber eyes burn with an intensity born of fervent belief but at last, he nods.

“Good.”

And then he's gone. I watch the door for a long moment, letting my thoughts sort themselves out while my heart rate returns to normal. Does he know I'm lying or only suspect? I cannot risk drawing the ire of the Clerics. They could put me under constant surveillance and if they do, I'll never get away to meet with Annalise. I can't allow that to happen.

I grab my pants and pull them on then head to the ritual. They are doing more and more of these. The Shaman claims the quake is a sign of Paluga's impending awakening, but I do not know if this is truth. It seems too convenient and none of us really know what to expect when the Paluga awakens. All we

have are stories and myths, handed down over generations. And the Shaman uses those to manipulate us.

The cudovs attack the fences of their cages as I pass by. The Breeders strike the cages with their cudgels but it only serves to anger the beasts. It's all by design. We capture the animals, cage them, feed them just enough to survive, and do everything possible to keep them angry. Ready to be unleashed on the Zmaj.

"Down," the Breeder barks, slamming the cage repeatedly.

I pass through the Breeding Farm and into the heart of the village, passing by ramshackle huts and the poorer areas that are close to the central square. As I get closer I hear the sounds of the ritual. The Shaman's voice carries with practiced ease.

"Before the Star People there was only the Urr'ki," he says. I've heard this all before, the way he takes history and twists it to fit what he wants. "And the Urr'ki, our ancestors, lived on the surface. Tajss was green and lush, giving us all that we ever needed. Caring for us. Before they came."

"Monsters!" the assembled crowd shouts.

Hundreds of my people gather and give voice almost as one. The rising fervor is palpable in the air. He has them in the palm of his hand. The Shaman is a hunched, bent figure wearing his tattered robes and leaning on his twisted staff to remain upright, but no matter what the weakness of his body, his presence is dominating. He fills the space.

"Monsters," he returns. "Bringing their slaves, the lizards, to do their bidding. Seeding them onto Tajss like the sprinkling of cast-off sperm, raping the planet. They are?"

"Monsters!"

"Monsters," he says. "Destroying our mother. Taking and taking and when she had no more to give, did they stop?"

"No!"

"No, they did not stop. They pushed for more. Expanding the deserts with their machines. Destroying the lushness and life of our mother to feed their addiction. They had tasted the

sweet fruit of Tajss, and their greed demanded they have it all. More and more.”

He stalks the stage that he had erected in front of the Queen’s home. Her home is large, two stories tall, the lower level is carved stone, the upper level a mix of stone, wood, and metals cobbled together. Animal bones, horns, and teeth form a protective shield around the lower level. It makes an imposing backdrop to the Shaman’s posturing.

I stop paying attention to his sermon. I’ve heard it all before. He changes the pacing, but the message is always the same. The Zmaj are the evil spawn of the Star People. We’ve lost this time but if we awaken the Paluga, we’ll all be reborn into the same paradise our ancestors knew.

True, not true, I do not know. I do know that I don’t trust the Shaman. He is manipulative, greedy, and more than anything, it has been more than two hands since I have seen the Queen in person. And that is not like her.

After the Zmaj and Star People went to war, when they dropped their bombs, the sickness seeped even to us here in our deep tunnels. We lost many more females than males. They were more susceptible to the sickness though no healer could figure out why.

Is the Queen sick? Or... has he done something to her? The higher the Shaman rose in power, the less often she made appearances. I am not the only one to worry for her safety, but the Shaman, with his loyal Maulavi refuses to let anyone into the building. They number too many to confront and that only heightens my concerns.

“Bring forth the sacrifice,” he says, gesturing grandly.

“No, no, no,” the Urr’ki screams as he is dragged across the stage.

The Maulavi straps him to the infernal machine and still he screams for mercy. He will find none. The crowd is on edge and ready for blood. The last round of crops failed again. We’ve hunted the surrounding area to the point where there is

little to nothing left. We had stopped our assaults on the Zmaj but now we have no choice.

And all this plays into the Shaman's hands. His idea to wake the Paluga and reset the world has delivered the most desperate into his palms. The rest of our society came along rather than fight and now... now there are too few of us who see plainly.

The chanting of the crowd, calling for blood leaves no room for doubt as to how they feel. Our last two attempts to capture Zmaj for the sacrificing failed. Though I will never regret that happening. If not for the first failure I would never have met Annalise.

She is my dragoste, but how do I prove that to my people? They are too hungry, too tired, and too many of them are ready for it to end. Having given up hope of any future of their own, they will never accept her. Which is wrong because she is hope. She is the future that they have given up on.

The prisoner is strapped to the machine and the Shaman goes to the wheel. He pauses for dramatic effect and the crowd cheers, demanding the death of this poor soul. His crime is likely no more than being hungry and stealing some bread or some similar minor offense. It doesn't matter. They want his blood to feed the Paluga. To pull it from its long slumber.

The Shaman plays the crowd, building their anticipation until at last he slowly turns the wheel. The machine inflicts pain that slowly builds. And as the pain increases the blood flows from the victim. The blood runs in rivulets into the channels as intended and down into the ground, obstinately to feed the hibernating Paluga.

This is wrong. A crime and I will not be party to it. I turn and slip away while they are busy participating in this horror. If one of the Maulavi notices my departure they say nothing, for now at least. I work my way along the outer edge of the crowd and try to block out the cries of pain.

A hole is carved into the cave wall and I slip inside. It is quieter here, though I still hear the cries in the distance. I drop the leather door into place, further muffling the screams. The



cavern is massive. The torches are not enough to illuminate the ceiling. Stalactites and stalagmites dot the room, but the important things are on the shelves carved into the walls.

I make my way to the section that belongs to my ancestors. Each shelf is two handspans tall, dozens of them carved one on top of another. On the shelves are the mudrasti of my lineage. Each stick is the story of one of my ancestors. Their lives communicated to the next in line and placed here when they die, in a place of honor and memory.

I grip my own mudrasti which hangs from my necklace. There is not enough carved into it. I cannot add my dragoste for then all would know my secret.

All I want is to be with her, but she lives with the enemy. And even if not, I cannot bring her here. The majority of my people are caught up in the Shaman's cult of death. They've given up any hope for this life and are rushing to bring the next world on now. As much as it pains me, I know she would not be accepted, and I am not sure even I could keep her safe.

Running my finger along the length of my father's mudrasti I come to his testament to my mother.

*Father. Everything has gone wrong. Our people have become consumed not with hate, but with despair.*

The Shaman doesn't preach anger, though that is what his words would have you believe, he preaches oblivion. Giving up. Admitting the Zmaj have won. I growl involuntarily as the rage burning in my soul ignites again.

I will be with her. Not even the Shaman can stop me. Somehow, I will find a way.

"You left early," the voice of a Maulavi causes a chill to race down my spine.



## MAZABUTA

*M*y jaw tightens and my hands convulse into involuntary fists. The mudrasti digs into the palm of my hand. The pain helps, bringing focus. I force myself to relax then moving slowly and deliberately I place the mudrasti back in its place of honor. I let my fingers linger on it as I buy myself time to keep my composure.

“Maulavi,” I say, without turning around. “Did you need something?”

“It makes me curious, Kapatan,” he says. “You do not seem invested. You arrive late, leave early, and I find you here in the relics of our broken past.”

“Is there a question in there, Maulavi?” I ask, turning to face him.

“Yes. Tell, me, Kapatan Mazabuta, do you believe we have failed?”

“Of course, Maulavi,” I say, sticking to his title.

I know him. He is close to my age. We grew up together, but he was always a sick, weak child unable to participate in most of the games we played as children. And the older we got, the less I trusted him. He was always manipulative and meanly twisted in his head, but none of that means he is not sharp. And now, as a Maulavi, he is part of the Inner Circle of the Shaman.

“You do not doubt the words of the Shaman?” he asks.

I study his face looking for any sign he is certain of what I have done all while my thoughts are racing. Does he know? Have I been betrayed? Is he playing with me? His suspicions are undeniable and if I don't deflect them I will never make my rendezvous tonight.

"How is the Queen?" I ask.

"She is not your concern," he says, his eyes flashing with anger, the only visible sign I've hit a nerve.

"Is she?" I press. "It has been what, two hands since she appeared in public. That is a long time for her to not be seen by her people."

"I said she is not your concern," he snaps, his voice lowering until it's almost a growl. His tusks quiver and his eyes narrow. "You doubt the word of the Shaman's chosen?"

"No, Riak, I do not," I say, stepping into his personal space. I'm almost a hand taller than he is and I use my height to lean over him. "I would not dare."

He drops his shoulders and steps back, conceding the ground to my advance. The moment after he does it, though, I see understanding in his face. He knows he messed up, gave me control, but now it is too late. I'm not going to give up the advantage I've gained. I take another step forward.

"Of course you do not," he says, standing straight again. "The Shaman knows all."

"He does," I say. *He doesn't know about Annalise. If he did I'd be forced to choose and that is no choice at all.* "How could any doubt it? All his predictions have come true."

"Yes," he says with so much force that his spittle lands on my face. "He knows. He will guide us into the new world."

I don't bother answering because this is rhetoric and we both know it, though I cannot say so aloud. His eyes burn with the fervor of hate and destruction. I could meet it with my own anger, but I don't have any. Instead, all I have is pity.

This poor, twisted soul clings to his illusions of power and strength but he doesn't see the truth. Strength is not in words

or imagined prophecies, nor in manipulation. Strength is in honor and action.

“Was there anything else, Maulavi?” I ask, using his honorific.

“I have an eye on you,” he says, his voice so low it is hardly a whisper.

“The Shaman watches all,” I say and cannot keep a sly smile off my face. “Does he not?” I wait for him to answer. When he doesn’t, I finish. “I have a patrol to do if there is nothing else?”

“Go,” he says, his voice tight.

I smile and nod, having won this round. Or as much of a win as there can be with him and these doom cultists. I feel his hatred burning into my back as I leave but there is nothing I can do about it.

*Do not antagonize him. He is watching me, and he will not be the only one.*

Not antagonizing is probably the hardest thing for me to do, but I will do my best. If only because if I draw too much suspicion, it will be impossible to get out to meet Annalise. Or I could be the next sacrifice to the Paluga.

I stop by my hut and gather my things. Sword on my back, spear in hand, three days of dried rations, as I would for any patrol, but the blanket and pillow I tuck into my pack are far from standard. Those are for her comfort.

Stepping out of my hut the death scream of the prisoner is drowned out by the final clank of the infernal machine and the cheer of the assembled crowd. I look over my shoulder. Sadness fills my heart. My people, how far we have fallen. There must be a way out of this.

I nod to the guards who let me pass the checkpoints. I note spying eyes watching as I leave but this is my duty so none can question what I am doing. Patrolling alone is not usual, but I am a Kapatan and my reputation as one of the best buys me favor.

*The Queen would understand.*

If only I could get to her. The first thing the Shaman did was work his way into her graces as an advisor. From there it did not take him long to eliminate all his rivals. He had her ear, her trust, and one by one the others who served her came under suspicion or fell from favor.

The Queen is strong and beautiful. Wise, but she knows only what she is told and that is controlled by the Shaman. If I could talk to her, make her see what is happening to her people, I know she would put an end to this.

But she has been out of sight for too long. She used to walk among her people daily. It was not unusual to run into her wandering the city. Shopping, talking, interacting, and decreeing acts that would make the lives of her people better.

Her father was respected, a good king, but she... she went beyond anything he ever achieved. The love we all have for her is absolute. I hope, with all my heart, she is okay. I worry that the Shaman has not let her be seen in public, but he has such control over our society now that no one questions it.

*I could leave.*

And go where? Join the Zmaj? Our enemies? As if they would welcome me. And if my Queen is in danger, I cannot abandon her. Somehow, I have to find a way to see her. If I could talk to her without a Maulavi or the Shaman, there I know I could turn this around. Set our people free.

*Annalise. I could be with her.*

My heart leaps at the thought. The Zmaj that was trapped with Purana not only didn't kill him, but he also gave him aid. It brings everything we have ever thought about them into question. The Zmaj are supposed to be cold-blooded killers, but he didn't kill Purana. He could have, many times over. It makes no sense, and it creates many more questions than it answers.

I don't take a straight path to the planned rendezvous in case I am being followed. Traveling little used passages, tight squeezes, and hiding behind stalactites and listening. I barely

make it to our agreed-on place on time, but when I do she is not there.

I am not far from the Zmaj compound. I do not want her traveling far alone, it is too dangerous. But being here is dangerous for me too. We've been getting away with these clandestine meetings because the Zmaj are too arrogant to look closely at their own area. It doesn't mean that one of them won't, though.

I stick to the deeper shadows and wait. The caverns are not silent, if you know what to listen for. There is the soft skitter of insects and the regular dripping of moisture that collects and works its way down through the layers of earth above us.

Two hands into my wait, I become nervous. She should have arrived by now. Staring at the crack in the wall through which she should be coming I debate going closer. Is she okay? Did something happen to her?

I cannot stand this not knowing. Anxiety builds as I pace the cavern. I must know she is okay. Did her people find out about us? Have they done something to her?

*I will destroy every one of them if they but lay a finger on her. She is mine. My dragoste.*

Terrible, dark thoughts fill my head. I can do nothing about them except pace faster. Which I do, but it does nothing to ease my fears. I'm at the back of the cavern when I hear a scraping sound and a sigh. I whirl back towards the crack and she squeezes through.

"Annalise," I say, too loud.

Her eyes widen, she smiles, but then raises a finger to her lips and shakes her head looking back at the opening.

"Shhh," she says.

I do not care. Let them catch us, I will fight the world for this moment. I close the distance between us in a rush, grabbing her by her waist and pulling her off her feet. She wraps her arms around my neck then her legs on my waist and we kiss.

No words. We do not need them. We need each other. Desire burns white hot. Her hands twine in my hair and jerk my head back. She attacks my exposed neck, kissing and biting while her hips grind against me.

My cock rages at the confines of my pants. She forces one hand down between us and inside them to grasp my shaft. She squeezes then pushes further and takes my balls in her hand and squeezes just hard enough to hurt.

I groan loudly and she sighs. I grab the back of her head and force her off my neck so I can claim her lips while she kneads my balls as if they are bread dough. My cock spasms and sperm leaks in reaction to the pleasurable pain she brings.

“Mine,” I growl, between kisses.

“No,” she says, her eyes flashing as she jerks back. She grabs my jaw, her thumb and index finger on either side of my tusks. “*Mine.*”

I nod and she takes my lips. I give all I am to her. She loosens her legs on my waist and drops back to the floor then pulls her hand out of my pants. We kiss, gentler now that the edge of pent-up desire has been eased.

“I miss you,” I say.

She bites her lip and nods. “More and more.”

She looks down at my pants and arches an eyebrow. I know the look and unfasten them, letting them drop to hang from my erect dick. She giggles. This amuses her every time we’re together. She grabs the hem and pulls them out and over my erection, letting them drop to the floor. Her eyes drink me in. Starting at my thighs, lingering on my cock, then up over the hard muscles of my stomach.

She slowly pulls her shirt over her head and tosses it to one side as I step out of my pants. I love the way her tits flop when she does that. The bounce and shake of them makes my cock harder still and more sperm is leaking.

She wiggles out of her own pants to stand naked before me. We take the time to admire each other’s bodies. Our love is spiritual, the connection between us so much more than our



bodies, but that does not mean we don't appreciate the physical.

I love the swell of her belly. She has wide hips and enough paunch to show she is healthy and ready to have children. I am not sure we can have children, but I hope so. I wonder, not for the first time, what they might look like. Me? Her? Some amalgamation of the two of us? Would either of our people accept them?

I do not think mine will. Not while the Shaman and his death cult are in charge. Those worries are for later. Our time together is too short. Now is the time of pleasure.

I step close and then lower myself to my knees before her. On my knees, my face is level with her tits and I give each of them special attention. I tease her nipples with my teeth and tongue until both are erect.

As I do I massage her full, round ass and run my hands over her hips, across the fur of her mound, and back. My cock is throbbing, but I ignore its demands for satisfaction. The anticipation building will pay off soon.

She moans, tugs my hair, and runs her hands over my head, face, and shoulders. I kiss down and over the swell of her belly. The musky scent of her sex is heady and beautiful, filling my nostrils.

I tease her lips open with my tongue until I can pierce her soft, exotically pink folds. I drink her in, teasing more from her with every lapping. She pulls me tight and I work the little nub that I have found drives her wild. Teasing, circling, and working away until her back arches and she holds my face tight while she cries out in pleasure.

I wait for her orgasm to finish before breathing one last hot breath across her glistening pussy. She shudders and eases her grip. I look up and into her eyes and there is no need for words. We say it all by thought, by knowing, through this connection that we share.

This connection that happened the moment I saw her in the cages. She had been captured by my brethren. This love we

share is forbidden but to not act on it is impossible. We knew it the moment we saw each other. We belong together. It may not be accepted, our people hate each other, but that doesn't matter.

We are one. She is my dragoste.

She runs her fingers over my face then leans in and we kiss. Our tongues dance together as we explore each other with our hands. She lowers herself before me and I explore her depths with my fingers. She is hot. So hot and so wet that I know she is ready.

I change my position and lower her to the ground. We shift around until I am over her, she has her legs spread and ready. I slide easily inside. The moment of penetration is always the best. I force myself to stop, resisting the urge to slam my cock home. I want to savor the sensations and the moment.

She digs her nails into my back, moaning, pushing her hips up and trying to force me deep, but still I wait. Eyes closed, appreciating this. Appreciating her.

As I lower myself down onto her and my cock slides deeper instinct rises and in moments we are in sync. Rising and falling into each other with a natural, undeniable rhythm. Her pussy grips my cock like a glove, as if it was made specifically for me.

Our gasps and small cries of pleasure come in time to the heavy breathing and we both know it won't be long. She whispers she is about to come and this is good because I am close too.

I hold myself on that edge of perfection until she cries out. Her nails dig into my flesh as he lets out a long moan. Her pussy clenches onto my cock and there is no way I can hold on any longer. My sperm bursts into her, over and over. Filling her up until I feel it leaking onto my balls.

When the moment comes to its inevitable end I kiss her cheek and neck, whispering my love into her ear. She caresses my back, returning my soft whispers.

When the last spasms of cum finish I wait a bit longer, enjoying the sensation of softening inside of her but at last the demands of the time and our lives force me to pull out. She sits up and I do the same, sitting cross-legged in front of her.

“I was worried,” I say. “Is everything all right?”

“No,” she says, shaking her head. “They are preparing for war.”

“War,” I say, shaking my head. “It seems inevitable.”

“We have to stop this.”

I nod, scratching the side of my head. We have had this conversation many times, but neither of us has any idea how to stop the collision course our two people are on.

“We could leave,” I offer, not for the first time.

“I can’t,” she says. “You know this.”

“I do,” I agree.

“There’s something else,” she says, chewing her lip and not meeting my eyes.

“What is it, my love?” I ask, taking her hand in mine.

Her hand is incredibly delicate and seems so small inside mine. It’s also pale, like her. I like the contrast of her against my green skin.

“There is a Zmaj, his name is Gerlar,” she says, I kiss her fingers while she talks and she shivers. “He is... he’s been making passes at me.”

I stop kissing and growl.

“He has what?”

“It’s nothing, really, but he—”

“I will kill him,” I say, dropping her hand and standing. I grab my pants.

“No!” she cries out, jumping up too. No matter the anger raging in my guts, I cannot stop myself appreciating the way her tits bounce when she does. “Wait. No, you can’t. There is no way and he doesn’t—”

“Did he hurt you?” I ask, focusing my thoughts.

“No, he didn’t. He wouldn’t,” she says, patting her hands in the air between us. “Believe me, he won’t. It’s just, I didn’t want to not tell you but you can’t—”

“I will do anything to protect you,” I say. “Anything.”

“I know,” she says, stepping closer until her breasts are pressing into my chest and my cock is stiffening again.

“Do not distract me, this is serious,” I say.

She takes my cock in her hand and strokes.

“I know,” she says. “But you can’t do this. It will be fine. I promise. I only didn’t want a secret between us.”

“Secrets are bad.”

“Yes,” she says, then she’s on her knees and taking the head of my cock into her mouth.

I can’t focus my thoughts on this Gerlar. Her mouth is too magical, she is too special. I grab the back of her head and push her down onto my cock.



## ANNALISE

The back of my throat is pleasantly sore, same as my pussy. Apparently Maz getting jealous makes him even hornier, which I never would have thought possible. He fucked my mouth with a wild abandon and then still managed to get it up a third time to claim my pussy again.

It was hot. Sexy. Amazing. I love the way it makes me feel when he buries himself inside of me. And fuck me the way he growls that I'm his, staking his claim. Which I am, the same as he is mine. Forever.

The only thing in the way of our happily ever after is two entire societies of people who not only hate each other, they each want to wipe the other one out. Little details, no big deal. I wish. I splash water on my face and press my wet hands to my eyes but there is no way to hide the bags forming there.

I can't recall the last full night's sleep I've had. When I haven't been slipping out to meet Maz, I'm lying in bed wishing I was with him and trying to figure out a way to stop the inevitable hostilities we both know are coming.

Rosalind wants me with her early so I don't have time to wait on my friends for breakfast. I don't even take time to sit and eat. I grab some fruit and a piece of bread looking thing and then head to her offices.

I'm hoping to be there before her today. It's a game I've been playing, trying to beat her to the office. So far, no matter how early I arrive, she is already there. I have to wonder if she ever

leaves, or sleeps. All evidence points to the fact that she doesn't on either count.

A fact made even more impressive because I know her secret. Abs and Tamara are both on medical schedules thanks to their pregnancies. No longer working the long days those who aren't pregnant do, but Rosalind doesn't let anything stop her. I admire her. She is amazing and powerful.

I walk into the office without knocking. I've been working for her for just over a week now, long enough to know that this is the way she likes it. She hates anything that wastes time, including the breath it takes to say "come in" as a response.

Rosalind is, as I expected, at her desk. She does look tired, though. Even the drumming of her fingers has a weariness to it. I don't bother saying good morning or any other greetings. It's clear that she is deep in thought about something.

I look over the day's schedule and organize the stack of materials she'll need to be ready for each event. She makes time every day for anyone to come and see her. Those are the first hours of the day usually. I didn't know this was a thing, but apparently, lots of people do as there is always a long waiting list.

She listens to people's complaints with infinite patience and the thing that I've noticed is very often she never actually does anything, but they leave feeling better. She'll tell them she understands, never promising anything more, but they leave happy.

There are ten such meetings this morning before we have another meeting with the Al'fa. I know what that will be about. He's pushing for war and Rosalind has, and will hopefully continue to, stall him. She has no real control over his people, only her own, but he wants our Zmaj to help. The dance between the two of them is ongoing but for how long? Eventually she will have to either give in or put her foot down.

The thought makes my stomach churn. There has to be a way to stop this war. If there is, I know Rosalind will be the one to do it, but I want to help. For all my own selfish reasons, but

does that matter? The Urr'ki are not the mindless monsters the Zmaj think they are. They do not deserve to be wiped out.

I know Maz is strong and is probably a really great warrior, but I don't think that is enough. The Zmaj are bigger, stronger, and if they set their mind to wiping out the Urr'ki, even if they don't succeed, how many people on both sides will die?

"Rosalind."

Startled I jump around at the unexpected voice. Visidion, Rosalind's Zmaj mate came in and I didn't notice. He walks around her desk and moves behind her. He massages her shoulders then leans down and kisses the top of her head as she moans softly in relief. This seems like an intimate moment that I should not be witnessing.

"Hello, my love," she says, eyes closed, leaning over her desk. "That is wonderful."

"You left early again today," he says. "Our bed is cold without you."

"There is too much to do, as always."

"You work too hard."

"No, I do not work hard enough," she counters. "Not hard enough to figure this out."

I walk towards the door carefully picking my steps to not attract attention. I definitely do not feel I should be here for their private conversations.

"Hold," Rosalind says, and I snap to attention.

"Me?" I gulp.

"Yes, you," she says. "You do not leave. There is work to do."

I turn around. Rosalind is staring with her normal intensity, but Visidion smiles warmly and nods that I should stay. He is not unaware of the effect his wife has on those around her.

"Right, of course," I say, returning to sorting the day's agenda.

"There is no way I can see to stop this war," Rosalind says behind my back. Her fingers drum on the desk with a fast,



repetitive pattern. “He will not see the error of his ways. It is maddening.”

“Yes, my love,” Visidion says. “You are right. He does not see. The Urr’ki, they are the enemy. An enemy that rallies his people around his cause. Gives them all purpose, something to strive against.”

“And? Is the survival of his people not more important?” Rosalind counters.

“No, I do not think so,” Visidion says. “You are not understanding them. These Cavern Zmaj, or any one really, need something outside themselves to overcome. Look at our two peoples. Many of yours followed Gershom into the desert in rebellion against my people.”

Rosalind snorts. “Gershom was a power-hungry fool.”

“Exactly,” Visidion says. “And he used the fears of those people to gather them to his cause, which he molded into an appearance of strength.”

“You compare the Al’fa to Gershom?” Rosalind asks.

Prickles race down my spine. This is the problem we must overcome and I listen to every word hoping that it will lead to a solution. Wishing I had something useful to add.

“No,” Visidion says. “As in he is not such a fool. But think about it. After Gershom what brought our people together?”

“The Invaders,” Rosalind says.’

“Exactly,” Visidion says. “Another outside threat great enough to overcome the fear of those who followed Gershom. It forced all our people to work together for the greater good.

All their lives, for generations, these people have fought to survive. What I gather is they escaped ages before the Devastation happened. Leaving behind the Zmaj society for their own reasons and going into the caves to escape.

The Urr’ki have been their enemy since that time. The Urr’ki are not people to them. They are not intelligent, they are monsters. Something to be overcome.”

“But they are intelligent,” I exclaim, anger blasting right through common sense and reason.

Blurting out has served me so well in the past after all. Not. My face burns as Rosalind fixes her steely gaze on me.

“And you know this how? Because one of them was able to speak some Zmaj to you?” she asks.

And now I’m on the spot. I can’t tell her how I know because then I have to explain way too much. What do I say?

“He knew more than a few words,” I say, shifting my weight and unable to meet her eyes.

Rosalind stares and I resist the urge to squirm. I’m too scared to say the truth because though she doesn’t want a war, that doesn’t mean she’ll be okay with what I’ve been doing. The last thing I need is her to decide I’m in the wrong.

“And?” she asks at last.

I shrug and shake my head.

“What? He was fluent. I mean, he sounded... it was more than a few words. And they didn’t hurt us. They let us go even.”

“Be nice, my love,” Visidion says. “You have the young one on the spot. She is not the source of your frustration.”

Rosalind narrows her eyes as she frowns deeply. My heart is racing and I’m sure that at any moment I’m going to pass out because it’s shoving so much blood into my head.

“Yes,” Rosalind says and at last she looks away. I exhale my relief. “You are right, my love. I am sorry, Annalise.”

Rosalind rubs her eyes then shakes her head.

“It’s fine,” I say. “I mean, I want to help. That’s all.”

“Yes,” Rosalind says softly.

When she lowers her hands from her eyes, she looks back over to me and for a moment I am certain she knows. I don’t know why I think this, but it feels like it. She either knows what I’m doing or suspects it and she was giving me the chance to own

it. Ice-cold butterfly wings flutter in my stomach as my tongue swells with the unspoken lies.

I should tell her. Open up, be honest. But the soreness of my throat and pussy stop me. Or at least they give me the perfect excuse to continue living my lie. Because I can't lose him and if I tell her, she might stop me.

And then I'd be living without him and that, that I cannot do. I turn from her suspicious gaze and gather the day's agenda.

"I'll get the meetings organized," I say without looking back.

As I walk out the door the weight of her gaze and wonder if I'm not making a mistake.



## MAZABUTA

*Gerlar. Who is this Gerlar? How dare he make a move? I cannot leave her with those barbarians. I must get her out of there.*

“Are you going to buy the next round or sit there and drool out your daydreams?” Purana says, slamming his mug down on the table and making a loud clatter.

“Fine,” I grouse. “You’re going to leave me broke.”

“You’ll earn more,” he grouses, holding his mug up.

The waitress comes and takes his mug then reaches for mine. I pull it out of her reach and shake my head. She grunts and shakes her head. She probably earns based on number of pints served and I’ve been nursing this one drink for an hour. She flounces away unhappily but without further fuss.

“Tell me, again,” I say.

“Why?” Purana says, leaning over the table. His fermented breath wafts across my face. “I have told you this too many times.”

“And tell me again,” I say.

He leans back and looks around. The waitress brings his fresh mug and I pay for it. She huffs when I don’t leave a tip, but I motion for her to go away.

“You’re asking for trouble,” Purana says. “The Maulavi do not want this story told.”

“They have come to you?”

“They have ordered me to keep my mouth shut.”

“Or?”

“Or what? They’re the Maulavi.”

“They do not act without threat. What do they threaten you with?”

He frowns deeper. “They will not give me more medicine if I continue talking.”

I growl angrily. The Maulavi have worked their way into every level of our society. They threaten him with no more medicine despite his injuries and how much pain he is in. Purana is a hero, he should be honored, but that is not the way any longer. The Shaman has changed everything.

“He was intelligent?” I press.

“I have said as much,” he says, drinking deeply then belching and smacking his lips.

“Did you tell the Queen?”

He looks at me over the rim of his mug. His eyes narrow. He sets the mug down then leans over the table again. He keeps leaning until he is partway out of his chair and his face is a quarter of a hand from mine.

“You work for them?” he asks in a hiss.

“The Maulavi?” I ask. He narrows his eyes and nods. “No. Believe me.”

“Why should I, Kapatan?” he asks, spitting my title at me.

The sounds of the saravam become a distant background noise, dropping away as the world collapses around the two of us.

“Because...” I trail off. *Can I trust him? Should I?* “You know of the new aliens?”

He nods, his eyes burning coldly. “I have heard tales.”

“They are real,” I say. “We captured three of them. Females.”

He drops back into his seat with a heavy exhale.

“The rumors are true?”

I nod and look around to see if anyone is paying attention to us. I don't see anyone looking, but that doesn't mean they aren't. The Maulavi have spies everywhere. Another change to our society.

“They are,” I say. “I... I know one of them. Well.”

“How... well?” he ask suspiciously.

“Enough I want to talk to the Queen,” I whisper.

“Impossible, you know this,” he whispers too.

I inspect every patron around us. They all appear interested in their own drinks and conversations. I'm about to make a choice and what I decide cannot be wrong. If I say this out loud and word of it goes back to the Maulavi, I'll be in line for the infernal machine to feed my blood to the Paluga.

“This isn't right,” I say. “I think the Shaman has done something.”

Purana stares at me for a long time then he picks up his mug and drains it. When he finishes at last, he slams the mug down and wipes his mouth on the back of his sleeve. We stare at each other, sizing one another up.

I don't know what to expect. The back of my neck itches the longer this goes the more certain I am he's going to yell for the Maulavi to take me away.

“You are serious,” he says at long last.

I nod, unwilling to say anything more incriminating out loud. He shifts in his seat then grabs the crutch he uses to walk and heaves himself to his feet with a series of loud groans and grunts of pain. He stamps his way towards the door and is ten steps away when he looks back.

“Come. Now.”

I rise and follow him out of the saravam. A few patrons look as we leave but no one seems to give us any particular attention. Still the back of my neck is prickly. This could be a trap that I am walking into.

Outside the walkways are crowded with people going about their business and their day. The preparations for war keep everyone busy. Every Urr'ki, young and old, has duties to fulfill. Purana weaves unsteadily as he leads us through the throngs of people.

There are too many to be certain no one is following. It would be easy to remain out of sight. Purana seems to know this because he turns one corner, then another and after each one he pauses, leaning on his crutch and groaning in pain. The first time he does this I assume it is because of his injuries, but the second time he repeats it I realize it is a cover. He's looking for spies or followers. After the third corner I go to his side and loudly offer help.

"I need no help," he yells, pushing me away. "You think I am not still a warrior?"

I let him push me away. His eyes and slight smile tell me to keep up the charade. I barely nod understanding and we continue in the same way. The further from the center of the settlement the worse the conditions of the buildings and the people we pass. The lowest castes naturally filter their way to the edges of society. They have little in the way of belongings and less pride, which shows in the conditions of their hovels.

Purana stops in front of a shelter that looks as if it would collapse completely with a single push. He looks around but the street is empty. Satisfied he taps the crooked door with his crutch. Someone or something shuffles inside then the door swings open with a loud screech.

I cannot see who is in the door because there is no fire inside or any other light. There is a shape, and it whispers something that I do not catch but Purana does. He grunts, it's not a word, but an odd sound. The shape moves aside and Purana walks in. I follow but the shape is in the door stopping my progress.

"Let him in," Purana says.

The shadowy shape moves to one side with a lame shuffle. I step into the darkness and the door is shut behind me. There is more shuffling, then a flint is struck and a torch is lit. The



sudden light is almost blinding, and it takes me a moment to see clearly.

“Who are you?” a voice behind the light asks.

“I could ask the same,” I snarl. “Why have I been brought here.”

“We are the Queens Shadow,” the voice says.

“I’ve never heard of you,” I say.

“Wouldn’t be much of a shadow if you had, would they?” Purana says.

“What is this? Why have you brought me here Purana?”

“They told you their name, but their purpose is why I brought you here,” Purana says. He shifts his weight and groans.

“And what is this purpose that you think I need to be brought here for?”

“First we need to know we can trust you,” the voice says.

He moves the torch closer to my face. I growl and lean away as the flame moves in. I ball my hands into fists, ready to fight my way out of here.

“Trust me with what? I am a Kapatan in the Queen’s Army,” I say.

“Yes, you are,” the voice says. “Which makes you more suspect. Do you follow the Shaman?”

I hesitate. The right answer, the safe one, is yes. Of course, I do, for anything else would be to draw his ire. But I don’t follow him. He is leading us to doom and there must be a way to stop him. I can’t force the right answer off my tongue. I’ve already admitted my doubts to Purana and he brought me here.

I throw caution to the wind and speak my truth. If this goes badly, I can surely beat one broken warrior and this shadowy figure. I’ll escape and live in the tunnels. At least until I can find a safe place to take Annalise where we can live together for the rest of our lives.

“No,” I say.

“No what?” the voice insists. “Say it, Kapatan. Speak your truth.”

“The Shaman is leading us towards our doom,” I say but I do not stop. The truth is pouring out of me. “And I fear he has done something to our Queen.”

The shadow snorts then moves to torch closer to itself and dispels the veil hiding his face. I gasp in shock. I know this face. But it can't be...

“Janara?” I ask, his name falling off my tongue like a weight.

“Yes, Kapatan,” he says. “I live.”



## ANNALISE

*How could I be so stupid? I am the dumbest person on the planet. What was I thinking?*

The one rule is don't insert myself when I'm not wanted, but can I do that? Nope. I go around shooting my mouth off. I should write a book on *How To Not Keep A Secret*. Rosalind is going to figure me out, or she already has. All it is going to take, at the most, is one more time of me speaking out when I shouldn't.

*If she hasn't already. I need help. I should have told them when this first started but I didn't, but now...*

I can't finish the thought. I'm in trouble and the one thing I know for sure when I'm in trouble is to go to my friends. They're my safe-haven and though they may be pissed at me for not having told them already, they'll get over that.

I try to focus on my work. The days agenda I had already lined up last night. All the meetings are organized, and the reports are sorted just the way Rosalind likes them. No matter how I try to focus and do my work, my thoughts continue to race around and around.

*She knows. She will know. I'm in trouble. I should have told Abs and Tams already. I'll tell them. They'll know what to do.*

I stack the pile of reports on the basket. Lynn looks up as they make a smacking sound. My stomach is roiling so hard I'm not sure I won't be sick. It's nerves, I know it, but that does nothing to ease it.

“Are you okay?” Lynn asks.

It’s still early enough that I might catch the girls eating breakfast. I can’t do this. Not without them. I have to see them. Now.

“No,” I say. “Can you cover for me? For an... hour?”

Lynn frowns. “Seriously? You have a lot to do today.”

“I know, I’m sorry, I need, just a little time. I forgot to handle something.”

Lynn shakes her head and sighs. “Fine, but you owe me one, okay?”

“Absolutely. I’ll be back.”

Decision made, knowing that there is no time to waste, I run out of the office and through the halls with reckless abandon.

“Hey, watch it.”

“Sorry,” I yell over my shoulder.

I almost knocked that guy over, but I couldn’t stop to make it right. My window of time is closing too fast. If I don’t catch them at breakfast, I’ll have to wait until lunch. It would raise too many questions for me to interrupt them while they’re on work details.

I tear through the tunnels dodging people the best I can by jumping side to side as the halls fill with those heading for their duties. I get more than a few complaints. It’s okay. I know I’m creating a scene but seeing my friends is the only thing that matters. I need their advice before Rosalind realizes I’m gone.

I skid around the corner and into the dining hall. Desperately I scan through all the people that are gathered in this large space. I curse the Zmaj being so damn big. They make it impossible to see everyone.

It’s too crowded for me to run in here, forcing me to work my way through the throngs of people as I look for my friends. At last, I spy Abigail. She’s sitting at a table clear on the far side

of the room. When the Zmaj blocking half my sight finally moves I see Tamara is with her too. And they're alone!

This has to be a sign from the universe. I almost never see either of them without their mates and both of them at the same time? Incredible.

"Abs!" I yell, pushing through a group who mutter their indignation, but I don't have time for their grouching.

Abigail looks over and smiles, waving. Tamara leans across the table so she can see me too and waves for me to join them. When I reach their table I'm out of breath and feeling flush.

"You okay?" Tamara asks. "You look like shit."

"No, yeah, fine," I say, struggling to catch my breath. "Need to talk to you, both."

"Of course, take a seat," Abigail says, motioning to the open space next to her.

"No," I shake my head. "Not here. Private. Now."

And in this moment would be all the proof anyone would need to know these are my besties. They don't ask more questions or argue. Almost as one they gather their dishes, turn them in quickly, then close ranks around me. We don't talk again until we're in Abigail's room she shares with Zat'an.

"Okay, Anna, what's happening? Are you in trouble? How do we help?" Tamara takes the lead but she's giving voice to the same questions Abs has.

"I've..." tears suddenly fill my eyes.

I don't know why. I'm not a stupid girl and I know tears aren't going to do me any good, but damn it this is too much. What if I can never see him again? I don't think I can do that. Living without him is the worst thing I can imagine.

Abs and Tamara pull me into a tight embrace. The three of us hold onto each other in comfortable silence. They don't prod or pry, they give their unquestioning support. I love them both so much, but I love him every bit as much.

I manage to stop the tears and get my emotions under control. Once I have I step away from their embrace and shake my head. I laugh, staring at one wall.

“I’m an idiot,” I mutter.

“What’s happened? Did Gerlar do something? If he did I swear I’ll k—”

“No, it’s not him,” I say, cutting her off. “It’s worse. Way, way worse.”

“What is it?” Abigail asks.

She has the glow of pregnancy on her. It makes her shine almost as if she has some kind of internal light. I love the way she stands with her hands protecting her belly. It’s unconscious, I think, because I see Tamara does the same thing. They’re both going to be such good moms. I hope I can be a mom someday, but I don’t want anyone’s kids but his. I want ours to be loved like theirs will be. I want my kids to have the best aunts in the universe.

“You remember...” I swallow hard. I’ve kept this secret so long now that I’m about to say it, it feels like it has lodged in my throat. “When we were, uhm, captured?”

“Of course, how could we forget?” Abigail says.

“Yeah, well... one of the Urr’ki... he was... I sort of... there was a... connection,” I stumble over the words.

Abigail looks confused but Tamara gets it. Her eyes widen, her mouth drops, and she shakes all over.

“Oh shit,” Tamara says. “No.”

I shrug, feeling on the spot. Embarrassed, proud, conflicted, all at once.

“Yeah.”

“What?” Abigail asks. “What is it? I don’t get it.”

“She fucked him,” Tamara says.

“No!” I exclaim. “Not... well... you don’t have to be that crude.”

“Oh,” Abigail says, understanding dawning on her face. “No. One of them? Really? How?”

I sigh, throw my hands up, then shake my head.

“I don’t know,” I say, throat closing. “It sort of... happened. He kept looking at me and the moment we looked into each other’s eyes it... I felt it. He did too.”

“But how do you see him?” Abigail asks. “Does he come...”

“We developed a system,” I say. “I’ve been sneaking out.”

“This is going to be a problem,” Tamara says, thoughtfully. “The Zmaj blindly hate these guys.”

“That’s only half of it,” I say.

“What else?” Tamara asks.

“Rosalind,” I say.

“Where does she fall on this?” Abigail asks.

“She doesn’t want the war that the Zmaj are pushing for,” I say. “She’s doing everything in her power to keep it from happening, but that doesn’t mean she’s going to be okay with it.”

“This is... a mess,” Tamara says.

“You think I don’t know that?” I snap, tears threatening to return.

“It’s okay, Anna. We’ll figure it out,” Abigail says.

“Why didn’t you tell us sooner?” Tamara asks.

I close my eyes and run my hands through my hair before answering. My shoulders are too tight and it’s making my head hurt.

“I wanted to,” I say. “Believe me, but you two have been pretty busy with your new mates.”

“And you didn’t want to say anything in front of them,” Tamara says, filling in the rest of the thought.

“Oh Anna, I’m sorry,” Abigail says, holding her arms out for a hug. “You’ve been all alone with this, and we’ve been too



busy to notice.”

I stare stunned into silence then I can't hold back the tears as I step into her embrace.

“Me too,” Tamara says. “Don't leave me out of the pity party.”

She wraps her arms around both of us. These are my sisters of choice. My best friends and the ones I know will always have my back. The fear and weight ease, it's not gone but for the first time in days I feel a little lighter. Like there might be hope.

“Thank you,” I say when my tears have run dry.

“Okay,” Tamara says, breaking the embrace first. “We've got our work cut out for us.”

“Yeah,” I agree.

“You have to tell Rosalind,” Abigail says.

“What?” Tamara and I shout in unison.

“It's the only way,” Abigail says. “You said she's trying to stop the war. That puts her on our side right off. Also, she's going to figure it out. We all know the stories about her. You're working for her and know her best. Do you really think she won't?”

I purse my lips wanting to say she won't, but I can't. I can't because I know she's right. Damn it.

“She will,” I say. “If she doesn't already know. Which is why I ran for you guys. I think she does know.”

“Well, that's a thing then,” Tamara says, looking thoughtful. “I have to agree. The best plan is to head it off at the pass. You should come clean.”

I think it over and can't disagree, though I'm terrified at the idea of facing Rosalind. It's better to say it than to be caught in it.

“Right,” I agree.

“We'll go with you,” Abigail says. “If necessary I'll make Zat'an come too.”

“But first,” Tamara says, dramatically holding up a finger.

“First?” I ask.

“I, no we,” she motions her finger between herself and Abigail,  
“we have to know.”

“Know? What I told you.”

“No, you didn’t. How is he? Is the sex good? Big dick? Little dick? Fat? Does he make you come? Spill it. We want all the dirty deets.”

I stare at her in wide-eyed wonder then burst out laughing.

“You’re impossible,” I say.

“We are putting our asses on the line for you,” Abigail says with a rare, wicked smile. We deserve to know what we’re fighting for.”

I laugh but it’s clear they’re serious. And I tell them all they want to know. Because they’re right, they’ve earned the right to know. And now that they in on my secret, we might all get banished.



## MAZABUTA

“*H*ow?” I ask.

“I still have friends and allies,” Janara says. “There are those among us who still do not support the Shaman and his ways. They helped me to escape the prisons.”

“But I saw you...” I choke at the memory. That was the moment when I gave up hope. If they could get to Janara, how could I resist?

“Die? Unfortunate bit of showmanship there,” Janara says. “That was not me on the machine, but another poor soul. The Shaman couldn’t let the people know I was still alive. He needs me dead and I have stayed that way to work in the shadows.”

I’m shaken to my core. He’s alive. The Shaman is not as powerful as he has seemed. Suddenly there is hope. He can be beaten.

“The Queen?” I ask.

“We do not know,” Janara says, frowning deeply. “But I feel she is alive. A captive, I am sure, but alive. He has not solidified his hold on our people enough to eliminate her. Not yet.”

“What about the Paluga?” I ask.

A thousand questions race through my head. I want to ask them all, but I know there is not enough time.

“I do not know,” Janara says.

“How do I help?” I ask.

Janara grips my shoulder tightly. “That is what I want to hear.”

“I am at the service of the Queen,” I say, my heart swelling with pride.

“For now, you will act as if nothing has changed,” Janara says. “The Maulavi know you are friends with Purana. They see you together often enough, so you being seen with him will arouse no new suspicions. I need you to listen. Pay attention and pass through him all information that you come across. No matter how small it may seem, I need to know.”

“Of course,” I agree.

“He knows about the Star People,” Purana says.

“Do you? What do you know of them?” Janara asks.

Blood rushes to my head. Joining a conspiracy to overthrow the Shaman feels less dangerous than owning the truth of my love. If I say this I am not only putting my life in danger but hers. I must tread carefully.

“I know they are real and they are living with the Zmaj,” I say. “They came under with the Surface dwellers.”

Janara nods. “This we knew.”

“They can bear children for the Zmaj. The lizards will no longer die out in time.”

“Seriously?” Janara asks his surprise clear.

“Yes,” I say. “I am certain of it.”

Janara looks at Purana. “We will have to act on the backup plan.”

“What is that plan?” I ask.

“Not yet,” Janara says, raising his hand in a stop motion. “Some secrets are not ready to be revealed.”

I grit my teeth but nod understanding.

“How long does the Queen have?” I ask.

Janara’s eyes darken and he shakes his head.

“We do not know,” he says.

“How many...” I trail off not sure what I am trying to ask.

“There are more than you think, but not enough,” Purana says. “Our numbers are few, but growing. We must be careful. The Maulavi have eyes everywhere. We do not gather in groups, ever.”

“And you can stay here no longer,” Janara says. “They will grow suspicious. Return to your duties.”

“You are marked for a patrol, aren’t you?” Purana asks.

“I am,” I say.

“Then do not be late. They already watch you, do not give them more reasons,” Purana says.

I itch to do something. My suspicion about the Queen being confirmed is almost more than I can stand. How do I go back and act normal? My Queen is in danger and I am sworn to her service, my life for hers.

“Mazabuta,” Jurana says, grabbing onto my shoulders and squeezing tightly. “I understand.”

And he does. Or it feels like he does. I growl then nod.

“I will do as ordered,” I say. “But we must act soon. She is in danger.”

“Yes,” he says. “We will. But not yet. We are not ready.”

I nod sharply and there is nothing more to say. My duty calls. I leave but as I do I realize that my life has become even more complicated. I cannot even consider escaping and running away with Annalise. My Queen is in danger, I cannot leave without making sure she is safe first.

*I am sorry Annalise.*



## ANNALISE

*T*his is it. I think the instant I wake up.

Cold sweat drenches my sheet. I grab a handful of it and grip tight. I try to focus on taking one deep breath, holding it, then letting it out slowly.

*I can do this. It will be all right.*

I tell myself over and over, desperately trying to quiet the doubts and fears. We talked late into the night. So late that Zat'an came looking for Abigail, which was awkward. I have no doubts he knows we're up to something, but he was circumspect enough to not ask.

My heart rate is too fast and I'm still sweating. It's nerves. That's all. If this goes wrong... no. It won't. I don't know how it's going to work out, but I have to believe it will. Fate or hope I don't know, maybe they're the same thing.

I roll off the bed, placing my feet on the cool stone floor. I stand, stretch, then kneel by the fire and add fuel. One action at a time. Just another day, nothing to worry about. I blow on the coals, the flames ignite, licking around the fuel and I rise.

Water on the face, fingers through the hair, same old, same old. One foot in front of the other and all those happy quips. What's that? Butterflies in the stomach? No big deal. Let them flutter but keep on moving. No way this will come back to bite us all in the ass.

Next would be breakfast but there's no way I can eat. My stomach is a freaking mess right now. Even the idea of food



makes me nauseous. When someone knocks on the door I jump and a yelp slips out.

“Yeah?” I ask, voice trembling.

*Rosalind already knows. Beat you to the punch and they’ve come to take me away.*

Shut up. Stupid fear. The door opens. It’s too dark outside to see who it is but it makes my mouth dry. A shape walks in then a second one but they enter into the light of the low fire and I relax.

“You ready?” Tamara asks.

“You scared the shit out of me,” I say.

“It’s going to be okay,” Abigail says. “We’ve got this.”

“You think?” I ask only half-sarcastically.

I’m terrified. I’ve been sleeping with the enemy. Literally and figuratively. Except he’s not the enemy. He’s nice, and kind, and amazing. And I love him.

“We’re sure,” Tamara says. “Besides, you can’t be too serious about this guy.”

“What? Why?” I ask, head spinning with the shift of topic.

“Because we haven’t approved of him yet,” Tamara says and Abigail nods, a broad smile on her face.

“You can’t have a mate we don’t approve of,” Abigail says. “We have a pact.”

“We were eight years old,” I protest.

“Doesn’t matter,” Abigail says.

“Makes it all the more serious,” Tamara says.

I stare at them in utter disbelief then Tamara laughs and pulls me into a group hug.

“I’m sure we’ll like him,” Abigail says, laughing too.

“If he makes you happy and he treats you right, he’ll be fine,” Tamara says. “Otherwise... well I know two Zmaj who will be happy to beat the shit out of him.”

“That’s not funny,” I say.

“Isn’t it, though?” Tamara asks.

“We should go,” Abigail says. “Best to head this off at the pass. Get it over with and all that.”

“Are we sure there isn’t another way?” I ask, desperately wanting one of them to say yes and present some bright idea.

“This is it,” Tamara says.

“I can’t think of any other way,” Abigail says.

I take a deep breath and nod. “Fine, let’s go.”

We leave my room and work our way down the levels of the compound. It’s probably my imagination but it feels like everyone is looking at the three of us with judging eyes. As if they know or suspect. Guilty, their accusing stares say.

And I am. Guilty of being in love.

A stupid, unexpected, unfortunate love, but then does love care? Not in the slightest. I knew the moment I saw him that there was something. I don’t think it was love at first sight, but it was definitely strong interest.

Then, right before we were ‘rescued’ he gave me a flower. It was a quick exchange, hidden from both his people and mine. A flower that I kept. That is what started it. A single flower.

It wouldn’t have been a thing but then he snuck into the compound when I was on cleaning duty. The danger he was in was very real. If the Zmaj had caught him, they would kill him without a second thought. I still don’t know how he managed to get past the guards, but he did.

I was scared, of course. He was the enemy, or so we were led to believe, but he brought another flower. He looked at me, said one word, gave me a flower, and disappeared again. I didn’t know the word then, but now I do.

*Dragoste.*

A single word that even when I didn’t understand it, it communicated. It told me he was interested, that he liked me. I knew it, but I didn’t know what to do with it. Our relationship

grew from there. He'd sneak in and leave little gifts. How he'd find me I never have figured out. He claims he can feel me, which maybe he can.

Then the quake happened. I was trapped in a room; pretty sure I was going to die. The air felt thin, and it was getting hard to breathe. When the wall fell, I thought I was being rescued but it wasn't a Zmaj. It was him.

He stood there breathing heavily, filthy, torn, and bloody. Time seemed to stop, but my heart was racing, and I knew. He came for me. He didn't have to, but he saved me. Knowing that, I ran into his arms, and we shared our first kiss.

It was all too brief, but it left an indelible mark on my heart. The sounds of digging and shouts of approaching Zmaj broke us apart. He held my hand as he walked back to the hole, he'd dug to reach me. He didn't want to leave, but he couldn't stay, and I couldn't go with him.

*"Dragoste," he said.*

Then, with that single word, he disappeared right as the wall behind me gave way and two Zmaj came into the wreckage of the room I'd been cleaning. They 'rescued' me. I went with them to help and to find my friends, but my heart and my thoughts were on him.

"Why are they with you?" Lynn asks, jerking me into the moment and out of my memories.

"We need to see the boss," I say.

Lynn arches an eyebrow looking at Abs and Tams. She purses her lips and shakes her head.

"Not a good day for surprises," she says, speaking softly.

"Why? What's happened?"

She shuffles papers on her desk and shakes her head.

"The Al'fa sent out a patrol and he made Ladon go too," she says. "He is saying if they find any signs of Urr'ki that he's launching the assault. He's done being stalled."

I blink rapidly. This is bad. Really, really bad.

“Right,” I say, numb.

“Rosalind is pissed. I wouldn’t go bringing more trouble if I were you.”

Abigail and Tamara look to me for my lead. Lynn is right about this not being the time to bring more trouble to Rosalind, but at the same time... it’s now or never. If the Al’fa is going to launch an assault... how else do I stop it?

The butterflies dancing in my belly increase. There must be a million of them. I close my eyes but when I do all I can see is Maz’s warm brown eyes. They’re kind, intelligent, and full of love. If I don’t stop this, he could be hurt. Or killed. All his people, with all their own problems, will be destroyed.

“Okay,” I say, snapping my eyes open and squaring my shoulders.

I walk to the door. I can’t wait or I’ll lose my nerve. I pull the leather aside and step inside. Rosalind looks up. Her eyes widen and she frowns when Tamara steps in behind me and the frown is even deeper when she sees Abigail is there too.

“Was there a meeting scheduled that I forgot?” Rosalind asks.

“No,” I say. “I mean, this isn’t scheduled.”

Rosalind sets down the paper she was reading and gives us her full attention. Her right hand rests on the desk.

“Yes?”

“I need to... I have to...” I swallow trying to find the words. Abigail and Tamara each place a hand on my lower back, supporting me.

“You want to tell me your dirty little secret?” Rosalind asks.

“No, I need to tell you... wait. What?”

Rosalind arches an eyebrow and drums the fingers of her right hand.

“You think I am not aware of what happens with my people?” she asks.

“What...” I choke trying to finish the sentence. A coughing fit takes hold and until I get myself under control, I can’t speak again. “What do you mean?”

“You bribe the guard and take unauthorized walks outside the compound. Your preference is Chanka,” Rosalind says.

“No—I, yeah, but—” I stutter.

“It’s okay,” Tamara says. “Tell her.”

“Yes, please,” Rosalind says. “It saves me having to lay it all out for you. What is it you sneak out past the guards for?”

The way she says it leaves no doubt that she knows. She knows everything. No, she can’t know everything, but she suspects. I hope she doesn’t know everything. Sharing intimate details with my besties is a whole lot different than sharing them with Lady General Rosalind.

“I’ve been... I’m meeting one of the Urr’ki,” I blurt it out at last.

It is more than clear by the look on her face that Rosalind is not surprised. Not in the least. She also doesn’t say anything. She continues staring, waiting and I don’t know for what. I do my best to not squirm under her gaze, but that doesn’t last long.

“They’re in love,” Abigail jumps in to save me.

“Are they?” Rosalind asks, her voice so neutral I can’t get a read on her thoughts any more than I can from her face.

“Y-yes,” I say.

Rosalind nods. “Well, isn’t this an interesting turn of events.”

“You didn’t see that one coming, did you?” Tamara says, smarting off at the exact wrong moment, which is so, so Tamara.

“See it?” Rosalind muses. “No. Suspected, yes.”

“You did?” I ask.

“Why do you think I hired you?” Rosalind asks, waving a dismissive hand. “I need information. You seemed a likely

source.”

“Oh, I thought...”

Why does that hurt so much? I don’t know but it cut like a knife and now I want to cry. Rosalind looks deep in thought but then her eyes focus on me and she shakes her head.

“Annalise, seriously. That is not the only reason. You have skills and are very organized, but it did raise you to the top of the potentials.”

“Ah, uhm, thanks?” I say, not sure if that’s a compliment yet or not.

“All right,” Rosalind says, rising to her feet.

“Holy shit, you *are* pregnant!” Tamara yells.

All of us turn and glare at her as one. Of all the stupid things to do at the stupidest possible times. Rosalind’s frown somehow finds a way to deepen. I want to crawl under a rock and hide and that feeling is only worse when Rosalind directs her glare at me.

“No,” I say, shaking my head. “I didn’t... no. Nope.”

“What?” Tamara asks, her own surprise clear on her face and in her voice. “You knew? You knew? Holy...”

“I am glad you can keep some secrets,” Rosalind says wryly.

“She didn’t say anything,” Tamara says. “I sort of... I kind of knew already. But then I didn’t know how far along you are.”

“You knew?” Rosalind asks, leaning on her desk.

“Uhm... yeah. Sorry about that. I’m uh,” she pats her own stomach, “you know, me too. I saw you leaving Addison one day.”

“I see,” Rosalind says. “So what you are telling me is that you are also capable of keeping a secret?”

“Secrets? Sure,” Tamara says.

“They must be, because neither of them told me,” Abigail says.

Rosalind nods.

“Very well. Tell me of this Urr’ki you are ‘in love’ with. Leave nothing out.”

I swallow hard and tell her everything. Well, not everything, I don’t go into any intimate details, but I tell her all the rest.





## MAZABUTA

*P*rok is on point. Traski has our left flank and I'm on the right as we progress through the tunnels. We're using only the natural caverns, working our way closer to the Zmaj compound. The passages narrow and widen randomly. Sometimes we are in single file, other times we're in a phalanx.

"Here," Traski says, holding up a closed fist.

He is looking at a chokepoint. Prok and I both nod in agreement. This is a good position for a trap. I've managed to steer our patrol away from the tunnels that Annalise uses for our illicit rendezvous. I don't think I raised any suspicion. Traski is always taciturn, getting a read on him is difficult. Prok is an open book, him I am sure of.

"Use the chisel there," Traski says pointing to a natural break in the wall.

I don't need to be told twice. I pull a chisel out of my pack and get busy. It's delicate work. I have to widen the inside of the crack so we can set the trap, but I must leave no marks on the outside that would be noticed.

It takes at least a handspan to get the trap set but once we do we all agree it is good. Looking at it I have a moment of doubt. The trap, once triggered, will release a sharp blade that will slice across the passage. If it works as planned, which it should, the blade will cut deep into whatever Zmaj triggers it. And that is why I doubt.

What if they really are not the monsters we've been led to believe? Annalise says they are not. I not only love her, I trust her. Trust her more than the Shaman to be sure. She says they are good people, confused, but good. If they are then what we are doing is wrong? But how do I not do this? Our two species have been at war so long now that no one alive remembers a time we weren't.

Traski inspects the trap a final time before pronouncing it good and then we move on. Our job is to both spy for any Zmaj patrols and to set as many traps as we can. We are very close to their compound. It's a bold choice by Traski, probably not smart, but bold.

None of us talk because we know we're too close for that. Every corner and every intersection could be the one we come face to face with a Zmaj. There are only three of us and we might be able to take one of the lizards down, but we might not. I greatly prefer to keep the odds more clearly in our favor. We all do.

Killing Zmaj is our sacred duty. Or so we have always been taught. And I have never questioned this, until her. Now... I no longer know.

Sneaking through the tunnels my senses are on high alert. Every sense is hyperaware. The slightest of sounds, a change in temperature, and even the less reliable but no less important awareness of feeling. A feeling that something is wrong is enough for any one of us to stop the others. We trust these feelings because they have proven themselves true too many times not to.

We move through shadows, staying close to the walls. The tunnels are smoothing out. Unfinished work by the lizards who never learned to live beneath the mountain in harmony as we do. They do not work with the features of the mother but instead they shape it to suit themselves. Ignorant beasts that they are.

Pausing with my back pressed to the partially smoothed wall while Traski peeks around the next corner an irrational anger fills my thoughts. They damage the natural balance with their

‘work’ and improvements. Our stories tell of when they came. Invaders from the surface from which they’d already banished our people long before.

We are the First people. The lizards were brought here by the Star People with their singular intent to rape Tajss of her riches. They are instruments in the Star Peoples war. Annalise is a Star Person, but she is different than those we knew before. She explained as much to me. Her people are not from our galaxy.

I focus my thoughts on her to ease the rage. Rage has no place on a patrol. It will dull my awareness and I cannot afford it. Before Annalise, I did not grasp how big the universe beyond Tajss was. I have only seen the sky three times in my life, but I remember thinking how vast it was. The twinkling stars scattered like a million lost souls in the blackness. She says her people came from further away than I could ever see. Amazing.

The Star People have not been on Tajss for ages anyway. After the lizards started the war that led to the Destruction the Star People didn’t come back. We could have, possibly, reclaimed the surface at that time but what would be the point? They had destroyed it all leaving nothing but wide tracts of waste. Better by far to remain here in the warm embrace of the mountain, deep in the roots, and continue our war with those lizards who invaded our domain.

Traski signals that we are clear. I step around the corner and look the area over. We set to work on another trap. This one will collapse the ceiling when we’re done with it. We create natural looking cracks in the ceiling and then set small explosive charges. A small wire runs down the wall and is set across the path. The first Zmaj to come through will trip it. Prok builds the signal that will mark it for other Urr’ki while Traski runs the wire and I set the charges.

As I work to finish packing one of the charges a sound causes all of us to stop. A voice, deep and rumbling, speaking in Zmaj. The three of us quickly look at each other and then silently retreat into the tunnel we came from.

“They would not dare come this close,” a Zmaj voice says.

“Then it will not hurt to look,” another Zmaj says.

I control my breathing even as my heart speeds up and adrenaline pumps into my body making my muscles quiver, ready to react. Two Zmaj are a problem and lately they’ve been patrolling in threes, the same as we do.

“Bah,” the first voice says.

Prok holds up two fingers with a questioning look. Traski shakes his head indicating no certainty. Which is good, we don’t know. We might be able to take two, but three are too many. Best to not engage if we can avoid it. I listen as they come closer and closer. They must be close to where we were working.

“Hold!” one of them says. “What is this?”

“It’s their symbol,” another says. “I’ve seen these before.”

The sounds of rocks tumbling echo to us. I glare at Prok. His sign was too obvious if the Zmaj noticed it.

“Footprints,” one of the voices says. “This way.”

This is it. Traski holds up a closed fist indicating for us to hold. Maybe they won’t notice us. Or maybe there are only two of them. We wait, none of us even making a sound with our breathing. The shuffle of their feet and the drag of their disgusting tails comes closer. They are heading right for us.

I curse that we didn’t have a handspan longer to finish the work. A little bit more and they’d be trapped in the collapsed ceiling. But here they come, closer and closer. Soon they will be directly on us.

The first of them turns the corner. He’s looking over his shoulder, not ahead. Idiot. I look to Traski for his lead, do we flee or fight? He opens his hand and then motions for us to flee. He must see a third. It’s the only reason to run, but there is no time to question, now is the time to act.

Almost as one unit we burst from the shadows and run back the way we came from. There are several traps we set along

the route that we can use to gain an advantage. At the very least we will slow them down allowing us to escape.

“There!” one of the Zmaj yells and then they are giving chase.

I don't look back, keeping my focus on the path ahead. I pour every ounce of energy I have into moving faster. The Zmaj are larger with longer legs. They can outpace any one of us with the length of their stride alone.

We reach the last trap we set. Prok leaps over the trigger. I slow, letting Traski move ahead. He glances at me as I do, but I motion for him to go on and I am not far behind. On the far side of the trap, I slow further. I want them to think they have a chance of catching us.

On the far side I watch over my shoulder as the lead Zmaj moves on the trap. He doesn't see it. His foot is coming down on the trigger when the one behind him yells and grabs his shoulder, jerking him back. The blade swings, missing its intended target.

The Zmaj curses loudly, glaring at me. I laugh loudly. It's clear he's angry and I want him even more angry. I want him in a blind rage so he won't see the next one. Turning I resume running, trying to catch up to the others.

The sounds of the Zmaj resuming the chase are loud, drowning out all but the rush of blood in my ears. The next trap is a pit one. I will lead them right into it and then at least one of them will be out of commission.

I leap through a crack, having to turn sideways to fit through it. It's a pinch point and as soon as I get through I have to jump again to avoid the waiting trap. The idea is that the Zmaj will barely be able to squeeze through and won't see the trap in time.

I pause on the other side, waiting for them to catch up. The other two are further down the tunnel, waiting to back me up. The first Zmaj enters the crack, straining to get through. He starts to look down. I can't let him.

“Yo, lizard,” I yell in his language. “Too slow to catch me?”

He looks up as I hoped he would. His face contorts in anger.

“I will catch you,” he says ending with a growl.

He gets free of the crack and the next one behind him pushes in. He steps forward. I watch as his foot comes down over the pit but right before he places his weight he stops and looks down. When he looks up an evil smile spreads across his face.

“Come get me,” I taunt.

“You think to trap me?” he says, crouching, his wings opening then he leaps over the pit.

He glides over the pit and lands. The moment he does he triggers the second trap. The ceiling explodes and rock rains down on him. Dust and debris fill the air and for a moment I can't see. I wait, wanting to confirm his death so I can report it back.

Part of me hopes this isn't one of the monsters that Annalise likes, the ones she says are mated to her friends, but even if it is, this is war. I do not get to choose the casualties. She must understand this.

“Come on, do not wait,” Traski orders.

He is the patrol leader so I follow his command. I turn and walk towards him and Prok, no longer feeling any need to rush since the Zmaj triggered the trap.

“Gerlar!” a Zmaj yells.

I stop in my tracks and look over my shoulder at the Zmaj.

*Gerlar?*

Anger explodes into a burning rage. I turn and storm down the hall.



## ANNALISE

*I*t takes a while, longer because Rosalind keeps stopping me and asking for clarifications. When at last I'm done my mouth is dry and I feel weary. A bone-deep weariness that makes me want to go lie down and take a nap.

You'd think after revealing my big, dirty secret that I'd feel better. Like a weight was lifted but no such luck for me. All I feel is drained. Sad, even. Because even now that I've said it all, there is no solution. The Zmaj and the Urr'ki still hate each other and the most I can hope for is to keep one side or the other from wiping the other one out.

Rosalind sits silent, her fingers rat-a-tat tating on the desk. She's deep in thought. Abs and Tams stay close, both with a hand on my back. I stare at the floor waiting. I'm not sure what I'm waiting for. Hope, I guess. This is Lady General Rosalind. If anyone can come up with a solution to all this, it's her. I'm way out of my depth here, but she... she's a legend. A living one, yes, but no less legendary for that.

"You did the right thing in trusting me with this," she says at last.

"Really?" I ask.

She nods sharply but declines to say more. Instead, she rises from her seat, crosses her hands behind her, and moves to stand with her back to us staring at the wall. I look at Tams and Abs both of whom shrug. We wait. And wait. We wait until I can't take it any longer.



“What are we going to do?” I ask.

Rosalind sighs, shakes her head, then turns around.

“I do not know,” she says.

The moment she speaks my stomach hits the floor and my knees are weak. This is not the answer I wanted. She’s supposed to have some bright idea. Some way we set this all right. She handled Gershom and made all of it at least look effortless.

“You... don’t?” I ask.

She looks up. “Not exactly. We are in uncharted waters. On the one hand, we know all we need to know. On another, we know far less than we need.”

“That makes no sense,” Tamara says. “You can’t know all you need to know yet not know it all. That’s beyond oxymoronic.”

Rosalind affixes her with a steely gaze, but Tamara is not so easily cowed. She meets Rosalind’s glare with her own.

“I know the gist of what we need to do,” Rosalind says, deciding to clarify her statement. “But in order to do that, I need more information. I still do not understand the Urr’ki society. I do not know their culture well enough to find a way to bring peace between these two people.”

“What difference does that make?” Abigail asks.

“Everything,” Rosalind says, resuming her seat behind the desk. She looks pale and the corners of her mouth twitch.

“Are you okay?” I ask. “Do you need some water?”

“No,” Rosalind says, holding one hand over her mouth. “I will be fine.”

“Okay,” I say.

“I still don’t understand,” Abigail says. When Rosalind fixes her stare on her she pales and shakes her head. “I’m sorry. I just don’t get it. There has to be a way to stop this. No one wants war, right?”

“Unfortunately, they do,” Rosalind says. “Both of these species are culturally predisposed to hate the other. There are, usually, reasons for this but in most cases, they are so buried in long-forgotten, twisted history that the truth of the conflict is buried in misconceptions and lies.

That alone makes the task more difficult. How do I bring them to a table for negotiations when I do not understand the conflict? What started this could be simple or complex. What has kept it going, for generations, is one layer of untruth on top of another.”

“Right,” Tamara says. “Well let’s cut through all of that. What do you need to figure it out? Time is short here it seems, so all this talk-talk is getting us nowhere.”

Rosalind eyes look unfocused, but she is staring right at Tamara. She doesn’t speak. The three of us exchange quick glances, shift our weight, and in general grow more and more uncomfortable while we wait. When the door behind us opens I jump and an embarrassing squeak comes out.

Visidion, Rosalind’s mate enters. He’s the only Zmaj I’ve ever seen wearing a hood and cloak, most of them preferring to be shirtless. He lowers the hood as he steps through the door. He takes us in but his eyes are for her. The way he looks at her makes my stomach tighten and warmth flushes my skin. It’s the same way that Mazabuta looks at me and the same as Kri’sin and Zat’an look at my friends. A look that says everything that needs to be said. Love. Pure, unadulterated, and unfiltered.

He barely nods to us three as he crosses the room in only a couple of strides, coming to her side. He leans over, kisses the top of her head, then kneels so that they are at eye level. This moment feels private, like we are voyeurs. I don’t like this sensation at all so I avert my eyes and see that Abs and Tams have too. Rosalind and her mate whisper to each other too softly to be heard.

“Should we leave for a bit?” Tamara asks at last.

“You are welcome to stay,” Visidion says.

I'm exhausted. The simplest of things are coming to me too slowly. The weariness lies heavily on my body. I feel sluggish. Getting all this off my chest lightened the load but it did not bring me any closer to any answers. Visidion returns to his feet and turns to face us while Rosalind does too.

"This is a very hard decision," Visidion says. "You do well to bring this to us."

I dart a surprised look at Tams. She mouths a *what the fuck* to me with her own surprise on her face. How did Rosalind and he exchange all that information in that short of a time?

"Uh, thanks?" I say, it's a statement and a question.

I'm not sure if this really is a good thing or a bad thing. Truth is whatever they just did has only served to further throw me off any game I might have had. I feel way out of my depths.

"As I was saying," Rosalind says, "I need information."

"Yeah, you said as much," Tamara snaps.

"The unanswered question is how do you get that information?" Abigail asks.

Rosalind resumes drumming her fingers on the desk. She frowns and shakes her head.

"You remember when Gershom performed his coupe? After which I had to retake power over the City?" she asks.

"Yeah, sure," we all say or nod in agreement.

"When I banished him and his followers, it was a similar situation," Rosalind says.

"How do you work that work?" Abigail asks. "This has been going on for generations, that was nothing like it."

"You must understand one thing," Rosalind says. "In order for both our species to survive, we must have a minimum viable gene pool. To that end, I knew, in time, I would have to reunite the Followers of Gershom with the rest of our group."

"Still not making the connection here Ros," Tamara says and I elbow her in the ribs. Now is not the time to antagonize the one person who is the best hope of solving this thing.

“Okay...” I say, trying to encourage her to keep talking by trailing off to silence.

“I implanted a spy into their colony,” Rosalind says. “She fed me information which I was, eventually, able to use to open trade which then led to peace and re-integration.”

“I thought they rejoined us because the mining settlement was destroyed?” Tamara asks.

“That sped up the timetable, but the principle is the same,” Rosalind says.

A cold knot forms in my guts. It slowly spreads an icy chill, creeping out across my limbs. I know what she’s asking. She doesn’t have to say it. I’ve daydreamed about this, especially in the afterglow of great sex with Mazabuta, but it was never this close to real. Nor was it this terrifying.

Rosalind is staring at me with her hard, implacable eyes. She isn’t judging, or even asking, she’s looking. But it *feels* like more than that. She has this way of making you feel like she is staring right through you, as if she already knows all your secrets and you might as well spill them. Which, in my case, she does because I did spill them.

She’s judging, but it’s not a harsh, make wrong judgement. It’s a measuring. A weighing of your traits and your sins. She’s deciding how useful you are to her goals, which are so much bigger than anything I ever thought about before coming to work for her.

“I... don’t know... if I can,” I say.

“Can?” Abigail asks, looking between Rosalind and me. “Can what? She hasn’t asked you anything yet. What?”

Tamara looks at Rosalind, then me, then back again. Her eyes widen. She gets it.

“No,” she whispers. “It’s too dangerous.”

“Perhaps,” Rosalind says. “The decision is hers, though. I will not make it for her, though I am asking. If she is not willing, then we will have to find another way and hope we figure it out in time.”

“Asking? What? What is going on here?” Abigail asks, her voice growing frantic.

“She wants me to infiltrate the Urr’ki,” I say and Rosalind gives an almost imperceptible nod of her head.

“What? No,” Abigail says. “You can’t.”

“I could,” I disagree. “Maybe.”

“Maybe? You’ve already told us how dangerous Mazabuta says it would be for you,” Abigail says.

“His people are in a state, you can’t do this. No. We’ll find another way,” Tamara says, jumping in.

“As I said, it is her decision,” Rosalind says. “But I do not see another way. At least right now.”

I swallow hard. Fear trails its arctic fingers down my spine and I shiver. I can’t look at any of them. If I do this, Maz will keep me safe. Or he’ll try.

He and I talked about my going with him before, but he shut it down. The Shaman he’s mentioned, the one who wants to wake the Paluga, he is powerful and Maz fears him. Fears what he is doing to his people.

Can I do this?

I don’t know. I’m scared. I know that. Really, really scared. I swallow and wrestle with the decision.



## MAZABUTA

*R*age fills my thoughts. Burning like an out-of-control fire.

*Gerlar. He touched her. How dare he?*

The lizard is partially buried under the collapsed ceiling. He struggles to break free as my vision narrows until the Zmaj is all that is. Distantly I hear Prok and Traski yelling for me to stop but I ignore them. Gerlar is all that matters. I will destroy him. How dare he touch her? She is mine. My dragoste, this foul, cold-blooded lizard has no right. No claim.

His name roars from my lips and he twists his head until he sees me. His eyes widen in surprise and he growls, struggling to break free. I will not give him the time. I owe him no quarter, this invader. It is not enough that he and his kind steal our homes from us, but now he would take my love?

*Never!*

When I am close, I leap into the air, clenching my fist. I slam my fist into his face. Blood spurts as his head is rocked to the side. He swings and in his hand is a large piece of stone. It strikes me on the head, knocking me back. My head is spinning. I skid to a stop, dropping to a crouch in order to keep myself upright.

Gerlar explodes out of the debris. Rock, dirt, and rubble pelt against me. He spreads his wings, and his tail is high, arcing over his head. He spreads his arms wide and roars.

“Bring it,” I roar.

He is twice my size at least. I know, from experience, that going toe-to-toe with a Zmaj never works out in favor of an Urr'ki. They are too strong and surprisingly fast for their size. I don't care.

All I see when I look at him is him touching my Annalise. Pestering her to like him. Trying to take her from me.

Not taking time to rise from my crouch, head down, I charge. I thrust my right shoulder forward and tilt my head to try and take him down with a blow to the solar plexus. My best hope is to take him by surprise.

My shoulder drives into his gut and there is the satisfying woosh of his breath rushing out. Before I can fully appreciate the moment his tail slams onto my back knocking me to the ground. My nose hits hard. Blood flows, filling my mouth and dripping into my eyes.

Instinctively I roll to the side. An instant later his tail struck the ground where I was. I keep rolling and avoid a kick, but then I'm against the wall and there is no further retreat.

I scramble to get to my feet. He's closing with me, raging every bit as much as I am but he's bleeding too. His disgusting red blood drips from several cuts and from his mouth. As I get my feet under me I try to judge which way to dodge.

Something strikes him on the side of his head. He stumbles to the side, one hand coming up to touch the point of impact as he lets out a sound of pain. I dare a glance and see Prok has used his sling. It must have been a rock he used to strike the Zmaj.

"Get out of there," Traski yells, motioning for me to join them.

Rationally I know I should. It's the smart move. The right move. But when else will I have a chance to lay my claim on my love? The one who stalks her is here, within my grasp. All I have to do is finish him.

I shake my head. I cannot leave him standing.

Balling my fists I rush in swinging. Wild, wide swings to distract him. He is still dazed from the blow of the rock, I'm trying to use that to my advantage. He raises an arm to block



the blow with my left hand but I wanted that. I switch and hit with my right.

His nose mashes under my punch and more blood flies, covering both of us. Some of it his, some of it mine from my own broken nose. He stumbles back and I press the advantage. I hit him again. And again. I rain blows onto every opening. He dodges and does his best to block but rage steals strategy. I don't care. I am hitting him, that is all that matters.

I press my advantage hard. His friends are coming, they're digging their way through the collapse. Taking on one Zmaj is stupid, standing against three would be suicide. Even now I am not in such a rage as to even consider it.

No matter what, he will know that she is mine. I open my mouth to say as much then stop myself. She hasn't told her people any more than I've told mine. If I say something now I would be outing her. No, I cannot say anything. The satisfaction will have to be mine, in my head alone.

*She will not like this. Annalise does not like violence.*

The thought hits like a thundering bolt and as it does I stumble and miss my strike. My fist goes by the Zmaj big head, scraping my knuckles on his stupid looking horns. He doesn't hesitate. His fist drives into my gut.

My breath is gone. Exploding out in a single rush as I bend over the incoming blow, trying to minimize the damage. I lift off my feet, his fist raising me up. Time seems to slow as I leave the ground then I am flying backwards.

There is an impossible amount of time as this happens. I see Prok and Traski, I try to yell for them to leave me, but I have no air to make a sound. I look to my right and see the other two Zmaj have created a hole and one of them is almost through it.

And then there is Gerlar. His face is bruised and swelling. Blood pours from his mouth and nose, covering his face and chest. It continues to flow like a stream, bubbling. Pride fills my heart. I may die here, but I died defending her.

*I don't want to die. She needs me.*

No. I want to live for her. But my fate is not going to be in my hands for much longer. Gerlar staggers. He raises his fists as that deadly tail rises to arch over his head. He's too close. If I try to run now, he will capture me with almost no effort. I cannot outrun his longer stride. There is no choice. I take this brief moment to look at my fellow Urr'ki.

"Run!" I yell and then I attack.

I pummel Gerlar. Striking his chest, arms, and landing blows to his face every chance I get. He grabs onto my head. We're both slick with blood but he manages to get his arm around my neck and squeeze. I bite his forearm, piercing his flesh with my tusks. Blood sprays into my eyes leaving me blind.

Annalise fills my thoughts. I must live. For her.

I pound with every ounce of strength I have. Every blow is met with a grunt of pain as he struggles to keep his grip around my neck. Though I'm blinded by both of our blood a deeper darkness creeps around my awareness. I can't breathe and that darkness I know will be the end of me.

I let my legs go, dropping my weight. It almost doesn't work. My chin catches on his forearm as I drop but I twist and fall free. I roll along the ground to get space, hoping that I'm going in the right direction.

As I roll, I swipe the blood from my eyes and gasp for desperately needed air. I can see again and I am, by fortune or fate, rolling away from the Zmaj, but another of them is through the debris and the third is climbing through too.

I get to my feet and turn away. My one hope is to get away before they can get their bearings. I lean into the run. Wind rushes past. Far ahead I see Prok and Traski. They are running too, and I watch as they dodge around the trigger of the next trap.

The trap. If I can only make it to the trap, that will slow them. Buy me enough time to escape. I curse under my breath. We should never have come this close. It was stupid. I am not unaware that it would have been bold if we'd succeeded and not gotten caught.

I hear them coming. Gerlar roars but the sound of it is nasally and muffled due to his broken nose. I can't keep from smiling. Don't touch my dragoste. lizard.

On my right I see the sign. The trap is only three more steps. I dig deep, trying to find the strength to run somehow faster. As my foot comes down I bend my knee, intending to leap. As it leaves the ground and I take to the air a hand grabs my shoulder and I slam backwards onto the ground.



## ANNALISE

“*I*’ll do it,” I say, eyes, fists, and teeth clenched.  
“Excuse me?” Rosalind asks.

I clear my throat and then force my body to relax. I’m scared. Terrified would be more accurate.

*Fate isn’t an asshole.*

I remember my own words to Tamara. A bitch, yes, but not an asshole. Here’s to hoping I was right. It sounded good when I said it.

“I’ll do it,” I say, louder this time.

“Are you sure?” Abigail says softly.

I don’t have to open my eyes to know the look on her face. I feel her and Tamara’s eyes. I know their compassion and support.

“No, Anna, this is stupid. A terrible idea. What do we know about them? This guy, he might be okay, but... you’ll be alone. No,” Tamara says.

I force my eyes open. It’s a definite effort. My heart rate is too fast. My chest is burning. I take a deep breath, hold it, then exhale and as I do I unclench my fists.

“I’ll be fine,” I say and find some sense of pride in the fact that my voice doesn’t tremble.

“No,” Tamara says shaking her head. “No way. Not happening. There has to be another way.” She shifts her

attention to Rosalind with her last statement. She strides to the desk and leans onto it. “Find another way. This isn’t happening.”

I’m not sure what I expect to happen. Rosalind is... Rosalind. She could beat all three of us without raising her heart rate, but she doesn’t move. She doesn’t even blink. She watches Tamara with a thoughtful look while her fingers drum slowly on the desk.

“I am open to any other ideas,” Rosalind says at last.

“There is no other way Tams,” I say. In this moment I see it all so clearly. As if my life has been barreling towards this singular moment and I never realized it. “Rosalind is right. We need a fresh set of eyes to see what is really happening.”

“Bring your guy here, let him tell her all about his people,” Abigail offers.

“Yeah!” Tamara yells, slapping the desk and making a loud popping sound.

“That will not be very helpful,” Rosalind says.

“What? Why not? You want information, he’ll have it all.”

“He’s biased,” I say.

“Biased? Who cares? You want information, he has information. Simple. Easy-peasy and then Anna doesn’t have to go,” Tamara continues arguing.

I swallow in a vain attempt to force the lump in my throat down. Rosalind has her steady gaze fixed on me. There is a look I can only define as surprise. Surprise and... proud? When I meet her eyes, she gives an almost imperceptible nod.

“Your friend is right,” Visidion says.

For such a big, imposing guy he’s very quiet. Unlike Rosalind, who dominates any space she’s in, he seems to blend in. I know he was the leader of the Tribe faction of Zmaj, but his approach is the opposite of Rosalind. Quiet, thoughtful, and always observing.

“No,” Tamara says, shaking her head. Her face is flushing pink with anger. Her arms protectively cover her stomach. “No. You’re the Lady-freaking-General, come up with a better plan.”

Abigail and I look at each other past Tamara. She understands. Abs purses her lips as her eyes glisten with unshed tears. She steps over to Tamara and places one hand on the small of her back.

“Tamara,” Abigail says.

“No,” Tamara says, her voice cracking as she spins to face Abigail. “No. We can’t let her do this.”

“Tams,” Abigail says, shaking her head.

Tamara’s lip trembles and tears fill her eyes. The two of them stare at each other and I watch holding my breath. Then Tamara breaks. The tears burst free, and she throws her arms around Abigail, sobbing.

“No, no, no,” Tamara sobs into Abigail’s shoulder.

I clear my throat and square my shoulders. Tamara crying makes me want to cry too, but I hold strong. There is nothing to cry about here. I’ll get to spend time with Mazabuta. He’s going to hate this, but that is an argument yet to come. Right now I have to finish this.

“I’ll be fine,” I say.

Tamara raises her head and fixes an accusing glare on me.

“You do *not* know that!” she yells. “What if... what if something happens?”

“Tams,” I say. “Something could happen to any of us at any time. Remember what I told you?”

“You tell me a lot of shit,” she says, wiping away her tears.

“About fate,” I say.

“Fates a bitch?” she asks.

“But it’s not an asshole. This is my fate. Mazabuta is the one for me. I know it, the same way you know Kri’sin is yours and

Zat'an is Abs'. I feel it, in my heart. I want to be with him. Can you try to imagine how hard this has been?"

"You should have told us," Tamara says, pulling herself together.

"That I agree with," Abigail says. "You had to know we'd support you."

"I did," I say. "But I was scared. Stupid, maybe, but scared. Look around? How do you think my falling in love with the enemy would be accepted?" Abigail frowns but she nods. Tamara continues to look angry, so I continue. "Honestly I've been waiting for the chance to tell you, but you have to admit, you've both been busy."

"I'd have made time for you," Tamara counters.

"I know, but do you know what? I love you, Tams. Both of you, and you are both in new relationships that you were rightfully spending your free time on exploring and enjoying. What kind of friend would I be if I got in the way of that?"

"A cockblocker," Tamara mutters. "Never be a cockblocker."

The three of us laugh. It's an old joke we share. Tamara was trying to hook up with this guy and Abigail was, as usual, oblivious to it. She kept interrupting until at last the guy lost interest and wandered off. Tamara was really pissed at the time but it became a long running story we all laugh about now.

"Exactly," I say. "No one likes a cockblocker."

"I didn't know!" Abigail says, throwing her hands up in the air.

"As charming as this is," Rosalind interrupts. "Can I assume a decision has been made? There are a lot of logistics to work out."

We three stand and stare. Then we come together into a group hug, placing our heads together.

"I love you guys," I say.

"And don't you forget it," Tamara says. "You get hurt out there... I'll kill you."



“And whoever hurt you,” Abigail adds in a rare display of fierceness.

We chuckle as we break apart. I turn and face Rosalind.

“Okay, how do we do this?”



## MAZABUTA

*M*y left eye has swollen shut. Every inhale comes with a sharp, stabbing pain that causes stars to explode inside my head. Dimly I'm aware that my wrists and ankles are painfully numb from the overly tight bonds, but they barely make it to my awareness.

*I am sorry Annalise. I will find you in the next world.*

They beat me, but they haven't killed me. That I do not understand, but it does not give me any hints of hope. I am sure they are only waiting to get me to some place where they do not fear interruption. Listening to them talk they are worried about more Urr'ki patrols.

I don't tell them there were only the three of us. Let them be afraid. I smell the scent of fear on them and savor it. I see it in the way they look at every shadow, thrusting their torches at every collection of darkness. Weak. Stupid lizards.

The one named Gerlar leans on one of the others who helps him to walk. If nothing else, he is badly hurt. Good. How could any cold-blooded monster know the true passion of love? They don't. They are takers. Rapists and haters. Stealing without remorse or consideration for what they take. All his kind are the same. Monsters.

As much as I hate it, I am afraid. I have never been afraid of dying before, though I never bought into the Shaman's rush for destruction of the entire world. Death has always been an inevitability and why should I waste time worrying about that

which I cannot control. No, I never feared it, but that was before.

Before Annalise. Now I understand that I didn't fear death because I had nothing for which to live. I thought I did. That I lived for my people. For my Queen. And those are still, as I now know, worthy things, but they never ignited my blood with the burning fire that Annalise does.

When I hold her in my arms the future becomes a brilliant beacon, calling us ahead. The scent of her hair which smells of the sweetest of fruits fills my nostrils. Her small, delicate arms wrap around my neck. The softness of her skin. The plumpness of her lips. They incite passion but more than that, she, her, not her body, but her soul opens paths that I never imagined.

I never found anyone to settle with. Had no family, no companionship other than my fellow warriors, but it was always enough. Enough because I didn't know. Didn't know what could be and could never know because without here there was nothing.

*Go on my love. Do not wait for me, for my chance to be with you in this world is coming to an end. But know this. I will find you in the next. I will always find you.*

My heart beats with my love for her. Sending my wishes to her along the tether that binds our souls together. The Zmaj carrying me steps down hard, jarring me violently, and I grunt in pain.

"Paluga," I curse him. "Destroy you all."

"What did he say?" Gerlar asks with his mushy voice. I smile. At least I did that to him. Never touch my woman, lizard. "He is smiling. Why is he smiling?"

*Is that fear in your voice Gerlar? Is the big bad lizard afraid of me? You should be. Untie me, give me one chance.*

Annalise dreamed of our species finding peace. Of the two of us being able to live together in harmony. And when I was with her it did seem possible. But this is the truth. There can be no peace between the Urr'ki and the lizards. They are evil.

“We need to get back to the compound,” another Zmaj says.

“They are probably tracking us now,” the third says. “We need to get inside the borders. We are too exposed out here.”

“I want to know what he said,” Gerlar says, pushing off his companion. “I will beat it out of him if I must.”

“Bring... it,” I say, spitting blood. “Weak.”

Gerlar’s one eye that isn’t swollen shut widens as his mouth twists into a grimace. He roars and rushes ahead.



## ANNALISE

*I*t's going to be okay. I'll be with Maz. He will take care of me.

"You don't have to do this," Tamara says.

"Rosalind did say it's your choice," Abigail agrees.

The three of us sit in my room, the room that we shared before they found their mates. It's nice having them back here. It feels like a return to normal, though it's tinged with knowing this is the last time we'll be together like this. Possibly ever.

"Right," I say. "Anyone have a better idea?" They fall silent because we've gone over this a hundred times at least. "It will be okay. Right? Come on, cheer up."

Abigail forces a smile, but it is so strained it looks more like a grimace. Tamara shakes her head and crosses her arms over her chest.

"I need a drink," Tamara says.

"You and me both," I laugh. "Anyone got a stash?"

"The Cavern Zmaj don't ferment," Abigail says. "Zat'an doesn't understand why anyone would want to dull their senses."

"Because he's a stoic," I observe.

"Because he doesn't know how to have a good time," Tamara says.

Abigail shrugs and gives a half laugh.

“I miss the old days,” Abigail sighs. “Don’t get me wrong, I wouldn’t trade Zat’an for anything, but it feels like every time we begin to find some semblance of normal, it all blows up.”

I clasp her hand in mine and give her a reassuring squeeze.

“The Tribe made that alcoholic drink,” Tamara says, still on that subject. “Remember it? Tasted like burnt ass, but it did the job.”

“That stuff was awful,” I say. “Pretty sure my esophagus has scars from it.”

“It did burn,” Abigail agrees, and we laugh.

Silence comes again. It keeps happening. None of us seem capable of keeping a conversation going without it breaking down into a new moment of quiet.

“What about the babies?” Tamara whispers.

“Huh?”

She looks up and tears fill her eyes.

“You’re supposed to be the bestest Auntie ever,” she says. “What if... what if something... what if you aren’t here for them?”

The lump in my throat is too big for me to possibly swallow. I’m choking on it. I shake my head because of all the things I hadn’t thought about this is a big one. I was avoiding it.

“Oh,” Abigail says.

I open my mouth and try to say something, but I’ve got nothing. I raise my hands and drop them back into my lap. I close my eyes and see Maz. His big, strong arms embrace me. Protective. I imagine the way his tusks feel dragging over my skin and flush in response.

“I love him,” I whisper.

“You’re sure?” Tamara asks.

I have my eyes clenched tight and either out of fear or doubt, I don’t know which, I don’t open them. Behind my closed lids I am with him and with him I am safe. Here, I am certain.



“Yeah,” I say. “I am. I know he’s the one.”

“Then it will all work out,” Abigail says, gripping my hand tight. “Somehow.”

“It has to,” Tamara says.

“Yeah,” I say. “Man, I really need that drink.”

“You and me both,” Tamara agrees.

“Hey, you’ve managed to sneak off and have rendezvous with him all this time, why can’t that be the same? Except you’ll be meeting with us,” Abigail says.

“I’m not going make out with you, though,” Tamara jokes.

“Aww, you sure?” I joke, trying to shift gears into our normal banter.

“Nope,” Tamara says. “You want some sweet love from me, you have to stay. I’m not a part-time kind of gal. No sharing.”

The three of us laugh but we can’t maintain it. Knowing what is coming is a weight that crushes levity. The silence is also unbearable. We alternate staring at the floor, the far wall, then each other. One or the other of us opens our mouths but nothing emerges and here we are, still in silence.

Until, at last, I can’t take it anymore. I leap up, bouncing on my toes, and do a side-to-side jogging motion.

“All right,” I say. “Enough.”

“Enough?” Abigail asks.

“Yes, enough. I’m not going to spend my last full night with you two for... however long... moping. I love you guys and I will miss you. Of course, but I’m also doing something important. And, truth be told, I don’t think it will be that long.”

“How do you figure?” Tamara asks.

“Because if I take too long Rosalind won’t be able to hold the Al’fa at bay and there will be war,” I say. “I know, depressing, but it’s also not. It’s a timer on how long I have to be gone.”

“But... what if—” I cut Abigail off with a raised finger and a glare.

“Nope, not going there,” I say. “No more depressing thoughts. We are now in full on this is going to work mode. That’s it. I will have nothing else. Got it?”

Abigail and Tamara look at each other then as one they shrug and nod.

“Good!” I exclaim. “Now what can we do for some fun?”

“We could—” Tamara cuts herself off when there is an explosion of noise outside.

The three of us look at each other and they are every bit as confused as I am. We’ve never heard a sound like this before. I lead the way out the door and into the light. Dozens of torches blaze in the arena far below the level my room is on. The fires illuminate the normal gloom, drawing us forward.

When I work my way to the edge of the path and look down I can’t tell what is happening for sure. It’s late and normally by now everyone is bedding down, but not tonight. The arena floor is crowded with hundreds or more people and it’s filling up. There is cheering, jeering, and a whole lot of commotion.

“What is happening?” Tamara asks.

“I don’t know,” I say, but my stomach is a tight knot and I have a very, very bad feeling. “But we need to get down there.”

I don’t wait for their response before I’m rushing ahead. More people are coming from their rooms to investigate the excitement. By the time we make it down one layer, the walkway is full forcing us to slow down.

I don’t know why my heart is racing or my stomach is churning, but it is. All I can put it down to is a sensation. An idea. I know something bad has happened. I don’t know how or what, but I know it with such certainty that I cannot deny it.

“Excuse me, excuse us, please,” I repeat as the three of us push through the mixed crowd of humans and Zmaj.

We finally reach the ground level but the passage into the arena is a solid barrier of flesh. It comes down to finding the smallest openings between people and literally forcing my way through. Abs and Tamara stick with me but they're having as hard of a time as I am. People protest us pushing through but I don't have time to care about that. This feeling, this fear, pulls me forward.

The crack of a whip is followed by a cry of pain. Bile burns up my throat and into my mouth. I swallow it and it burns its way back down. This is wrong. So, so wrong.

"I work for Rosalind, let me through," I demand when I can't get the final ring of people to part.

I can see the packed dirt of the arena on the other side of them, but I can't see past them to find out what is happening. A Zmaj looks over and down at me. I don't recognize him myself but he's one of 'ours', a surface guy. He is also huge. Even for the giant-sized Zmaj, he's huge.

"Rosalind?" he asks.

I nod sharply and he grunts.

"For Visidion," he says as he steps to one side. As he does he pushes the people behind him back, his size alone being more than enough to force them to move.

I step through the opening he creates onto the dirt floor of the arena, and I see at last what is happening. My blood turns to ice, leaving me numb and unable to speak.



## MAZABUTA

*I*t's almost impossible to remain aware. I don't think I close my eyes, but I am blanking out. Gerlar beat me hard. My head hasn't stopped spinning. One eye is swollen, fully shut, the other is closed. My jaw feels broken, multiple ribs are broken, and I'm not sure about my legs. They're too numb to tell.

The world comes to me in flashes. Broken moments that don't connect together into any kind of a cohesive whole. The Zmaj carry me between them without concern for how much they jostle or bounce me around.

I relax. Strange, perhaps, but I accept my fate. I am going to die, one way or another. I can meet my death bravely or not and I choose to face it head on. With acceptance. This world is coming to an end soon enough and once it does the next will come. I hold onto the hope that in the next life, Annalise and I will find it easier to be together.

If nothing else, perhaps the Shaman and his cult will summon the Paluga and the reset will happen. I had intended to stop it and to save my Queen. But intentions are not always what we get. I have failed. I do feel bad about it, but I will not dwell on it.

Annalise brings me all the comfort I can ask. I know she will be there for me and what more can I ask of life? She is my dragoste. One way or another, fate will find a way. It is our destiny. This is but another setback in a life full of them.

I'm pulled into the moment by loud sounds. Cheering or jeers, I'm not sure which. Maybe both. I force my one working eye open, peeking around. Despair swells in my chest as I realize I am surrounded by Zmaj.

No, not only Zmaj. Humans. Star People like Annalise. They press in, touching, cheering, and making celebratory noises. My death, it seems, will not be clean. I will be tortured before I pass from this world.

Fine. I came into this world in pain, I will leave it the same way. In the next I will find my dragoste and know peace. And if not in that one, then the one after. I will never give up for as impossible as it should be, I have found her in this life. And knowing that is all the hope I will ever need.

My captors, including Gerlar, carry me through their compound. The bastards have destroyed the natural beauty of the mountain. Forcing it to the shape of their will instead of working with it as we Urr'ki do. What I can see of it offends me deeply.

"The arena," one of them says. "We'll present the prize to the Al'fa there."

They move faster which means I'm bounced more. I grunt often in pain and black out more often. I don't know how long it actually takes but it seems no more than a few moments before I'm bound to a stake planted into the ground.

Shackles on my wrists are mounted far above my head, straining my shoulders. They are set high enough that I am forced to stand on my toes. Every inhale is a sharp pain that blinds me for an instant. I let my head hang because I can't force myself to keep it upright.

"No smart words now," Gerlar hisses.

I lift my head and glare at him with my one eye.

"How's your nose?" I ask.

He growls and punches me in my ribs. The chains rattle as I'm rocked to the side. I hiss and grit my teeth, struggling to stay conscious as my body tries to shut down in response to the pain. I spit out a mouthful of blood then laugh.

“You are weak,” I chuckle.

I see him pulling his arm back to strike again but another one of the Zmaj stops him.

“Enough, Gerlar,” the other Zmaj says. “This is for the Al’fa to decide, not you.”

I chuckle and force myself to smile at him. The only pleasure I can take out of this, making him feel weak. He tried to take my dragoste from me so he deserves no less.

My vision is blurry but it occurs to me that Annalise is here, somewhere. Is she close? It feels like she might be. I have always trusted my instincts, even when I didn’t understand them, so I try to focus my one working eye and look.

I’m in what was once a large cavern but now it’s all odd and shaped by the Zmaj. There are too many bodies around for me to get much of a sense of it and there are lit torches all over the place which messes with my dark vision.

I follow the feeling. Turning my head, blinking my one open eye, and staring. Blood trickles from the corners of my mouth and nose. Dripping coldly onto my chest. It tickles and I want to wipe it away, but I can’t move that far. The chains pull, my arm sockets ache, but I strain to turn further. Trying, desperately, to find her.

The sea of bodies is a blur. Blending one into another. Hulking Zmaj mixing with the smaller bodies of the Star People. I can’t differentiate one person from another. The darkness drifts through my thoughts and they become little more than blurry shapes.

At last I give up. I think she is close and that will have to be enough. For now. Perhaps fate will be kind enough to allow me to see her one more time before I die. Until then I retreat into memory. The memory of her lips. Soft, sweet, and often insistent in the way she would kiss me. I loved it when she would get aggressive. Biting my lip and pulling while jerking my cock with one hand.

The memory warms and keeps the pain at bay. Suppressing how bad my situation is because in memory I am with her.

Something is happening. The mood of the room has shifted. It's quiet which pulls me out of my head and forces me to look around because I can't resist the curiosity even though I know I will regret knowing what is coming.

Those around me have turned, not looking at me any longer, they're facing away. I twist, rattling the chains, until I see what they are gazing at too. On a platform raised above the floor is a hulking Zmaj. He wears a breastplate made of bones and commands the attention of all those assembled.

He raises his hands and waits for... who knows. Whatever these cold-blooded lizards wait for. It's already silent so this must be some kind of show of power. I've seen the Shaman do similar things, which is almost enough to make my blood boil. If I didn't hurt so much.

"Al'fa, we bring a prize," one of the Zmaj who captured me yells.

The assembled shout in one loud voice before falling silent again.

"And you have done well," the one they call Al'fa says. "He will answer our questions and prepare us for our final offensive."

The assembled cheer as a cold ball of ice forms in my guts. They are planning an attack. The very fear that the Shaman has been heralding as our impending doom. All of us know that we could not stand against the Zmaj if they were to make a concerted effort to wipe us out. The stalemate that has lasted for generations is about to be broken. My people are doomed.

If all my people are killed, will that stop the coming of the next world? That is what the Shaman claims. That if we do not waken the Paluga and cause the reset, that this will be our final world. I never believed him, but maybe... maybe he is right?

I let my head drop as the weight of my ponderings becomes too much.

All I want is to be with her. That cannot be now. Never again. I will have to force them to kill me, the sooner the better. I cannot reveal anything to them.



I strive to find my resolve. I do not want her to see me like this. She knows me as strong and protective. If my love were to see me now... she would see me weak. The Zmaj cheer and the sound of their joy is a death knell in my ears.



## ANNALISE

“*N*O!” I scream.

It tears at my throat, ripping across my vocal cords. The chamber resounds with cheers and exclamations of joy, burying my protest. I’m frozen in place and shaking. It could have been anyone. Any other Urr’ki, but no, it’s him. Of all his people how?

Maz is chained to one of the poles that the Zmaj use as a training dummy. His shackled wrists are so far over his head that he’s forced onto his toes. His face is broken, swollen, and covered in blood. He hangs his head and is so still I’m not sure if he’s alive.

This isn’t real. I’m in a dream, a nightmare. It must be. I fell asleep and all of this... it can’t be. I shake myself. No, it’s real. The cold press of Zmaj flesh against my own. The cheers. All of it forces reality on me, undeniable and insistent. This is happening.

Numb I take a step forward. I don’t have a plan, only a desperate burning need to go to him. To make this stop. To save him. Somehow.

The Zmaj are ecstatic and so are the humans who have gathered. No one in the compound can possibly be asleep still. Even the ramps that rise around the arena are filled with bodies, all of them watching in anticipation.

Anticipation of what? Torture? Is that their plan? Is this what we’ve been reduced to? Monsters ourselves who will do

terrible things in order to... what? Destroy an entire species?

I should have told Rosalind sooner. If I hadn't been hiding my secret she could have helped. If only I'd known she'd be open to stopping this war. How was I supposed to know that though? I walk forward but it feels like I'm moving through a dreamlike state. As if this isn't really real. I'm a ghost drifting through this milieu. I don't belong here because I am the only one who doesn't want what's coming.

"Anna, stop," Tamara says, grabbing my shoulder and pulling me around to face her.

She grasps my face between her hands. Abs is right there with her a stricken look on her face that I imagine must match my own. Even her hands on my face don't feel real. I'm disconnected like the world is out there on the other side of a thick piece of glass. I see it, but it's like looking into one of my mom's snow globes. I see the scene, but I'm not part of it.

"I have to help him," I say.

"No, not you alone," Abigail says.

"We will," Tamara says as she looks around with desperation on her face. "We will hon."

The crowd cheers again. The Al'fa has been speaking from his platform where he looks down on all the rest of us. How long has he been there? What is he saying? I turn back to Tamara.

"Have to free him," I say.

"It is him?" Tamara asks. "Your man?"

I nod, my lips tremble uncontrollably. How odd. Why are they trembling? Oh. I think I'm about to cry. Yet even that is distant. An awareness more than a feeling. Once, when we were young, Tamara dared me to climb onto a high platform. I fell and broke my arm. The doctors gave me some strong painkillers. It felt like this. I knew my arm was hurt, I knew there was pain, but it wasn't with me. I was cuddled in a bubble made of medication.

Except I haven't taken any drugs. And this is real, and I know it no matter how much I don't want it to be. I'm trying with all

my heart to wake up and make this stop, but it won't. It just keeps going.

"Rosalind," Abigail says. "We have to get to Rosalind."

"Do you see her?" Tamara asks.

I'm watching my friends debate how to help, but there is so little hope. They have him on display like an animal. And that is how they see him. An animal. A thing to be questioned, tortured, and disposed of. The Zmaj are not evil. I know this but what they are going to do is wrong. How do I get them to see it?

"Rosalind," I say.

And as the idea coalesces a small ball of hope forms in my guts. Rosalind is powerful. I've watched her stand up to the Al'fa. I cannot free him now, not with all these people watching, but I can stop them from doing more. And the only hope of that is Rosalind.

"Yes," Tamara says, looking around. "Where is she? She's not up there."

She points to the balcony where the Al'fa stands. Zat'an is up there with him now and so is the Frank, the Zmaj with four arms, but no Rosalind. She should be there. Since she's not, does that mean she doesn't know?

"Rosalind," I say, shaking my head to try and clear the numbness.

Tamara and Abigail look at one another and there is no mistaking the worry on their faces. But it's okay because everything is coming into focus. Rosalind is hope. She is the one play I have. If she can't help, then... I'll cross that when it happens. She is first. She is the best hope.

With my decision comes clarity. The sense of disconnection and hopelessness fades. I spin away from my friends and I break into a run. They shout but I do not have time to slow down. Time is not on my side.

I dodge those I can and push past those who don't move out of my way fast enough. Breaking out of the crowd I run across

the middle of the arena which is mostly empty except for the patrol that captured Mazabuta. As I streak past his one open eye locks onto me.

It breaks my heart to see him like this, but when he sees me his face lights up, and his mouth moves. I don't have to hear his words. I know what he whispered.

*Dragoste.*

Yes, my love. I will save you.



## ANNALISE

The hall that leads to Rosalind's office is surprisingly empty. During the day there are always people around, doing whatever their business might be. This hall and her office are in the central hub of the compound. I've never been here this late at night before, so I don't know if this is normal or not, but I suspect that most everyone has joined the gathering to gawk at Mazabuta on the stake.

The outer office, where Lynn usually works, is empty, but from behind the leather door to Rosalind's office proper comes a tell-tale glow. She must be in there. She'd never leave a fire burning unattended.

I don't slow to knock. My friends are on my flanks in silent support as I burst through, jerking the leather door so hard to one side that it partially breaks. Inside the door, I stop. Rosalind is behind her desk, bent over, one hand rapping down. At her side is Visidion. The tension in the room is palpable.

"You have to stop it," I yell without preamble.

Rosalind looks up, lips pursing, her eyes narrowing. Visidion growls as he too straightens, rising to his full imposing height. Under the cloak he wears his wings rustle and there is the raspy sound of his tail dragging across the stone floor.

In any other circumstance, Rosalind's glare would stop me in my tracks. This, though, isn't any other circumstance and I'm not going to let anyone stop me. Not even her, but no matter how brave I'm trying to be, it does cause a quiver in my chest.



“We’re screwed,” Tamara adds.

Rosalind purses her lips and straightens. She drums the fingers of her right hand on the desk but doesn’t speak. Visidion walks around the desk. My nerves jangle as he strides towards us and for a moment the fear is almost overwhelming, but he walks right past us.

I watch him in my peripheral while keeping most of my attention on Rosalind. Visidion quietly fixes the door. Once I realize what he’s doing I exhale sharply, letting myself relax. He finishes the work and then walks back to Rosalind. All this time no one has said anything more. My muscles quiver, demanding to do something. Anything.

“I assume,” Rosalind says at last. She sounds calm. Quiet and in control and the tone of her voice alone soothes the nervous energy demanding I act immediately. “You mean the captured Urr’ki?”

“Yes!” I yell. I regret it the moment I do it, but it’s too late. I bite my lip, take a deep breath, then nod. “Yes.” I speak in a normal tone of voice. “He’s hurt and they’re going to do worse. We have to help him. Please.”

Rosalind nods. The only sound for the next several moments is the sound of her fingers drumming. Rat-a-tat-tat. Rat-a-tat-tat. I wait, expecting a miracle. She is the Lady General. By all the stars, she must fix it.

“This is bad,” she says at last.

It feels like a void opens beneath my feet and I’m sucked into it. That’s it? She’s going to casually observe this is bad? I knew that and her saying it is no fucking help.

“Bad?” Abigail says and her voice echoes my own thoughts.

“If you can’t help, say so,” I say. “I’ll fix it.”

I clench my hands into fists as I take a step forward.

“And what, exactly, will you do?” Rosalind asks, quizzically arching an eyebrow.

“I don’t know,” I admit. “But I’ll do something. If I have to steal him away, break him out, or...”

*Or what? What will I do?*

Kri'sin. Zat'an. I'll get help elsewhere. I am no match, physically, for any Zmaj. That would be beyond stupid, but those two are. I'll get their help and I know I can because they are in love with my best friends.

Rosalind nods slowly. She pinches the bridge of her nose. Visidion moves closer and places a reassuring hand on the small of her back. The two of them stand in an easy silence despite our intrusion. I see, clearly, the connection between them. The strength they are drawing one from another. It's a quiet, beautiful moment every bit as intimate as anything I have ever seen.

"They will not do anything tonight," Rosalind says. "They have him in the arena?"

"You can't know that," I counter.

"I do," she says with absolute certainty. "The Cavern Zmaj are rigid to their schedules, creatures of habit. They will leave him there, under guard. In the morning they will move him to a chamber for questioning."

"What good does any of this do us? We have to break him free," Abigail says.

"No," Rosalind says.

"No?" I ask. "Yes, we do. We can't leave him there. I can do it. Help me. I'll break him free, then I'll go with him. It will be the perfect cover! You can let everyone here think he broke out and kidnapped me. We can still do the plan. I'll infiltrate the Urr'ki. Get the information you need to stop this insanity."

"That opportunity has passed," Rosalind says.

"No," I shake my head.

"It's a good plan," Abigail says. "Why wouldn't that work?"

"Yes, on the surface it's fine," Rosalind says. "But it opens too many doors behind which I do not know what to expect. It makes for new problems that will only compound the issue at hand. If he escapes, the Zmaj will go into a panic."

The odds are great that the Al'fa will believe that the Urr'ki implanted himself to gather information and having done that, he then escaped. Taking that information back to his people. His timetable for an assault is already pending. His natural response will be to attack immediately.”

“But they will have Annalise, so they couldn't, she could be hurt,” Tamara says.

“No, that will only serve as a catalyst,” Rosalind says. “They have one of ours. It will light the fuse.”

Because everything she is saying makes sense I think I'm going to be sick. My stomach twists and I feel faint.

“I have to save him,” I say.

“Yes,” Rosalind agrees. “First I will speak to the Al'fa. I will convince him to move the prisoner to a more secure location.”

“Can I see him?” I ask, grasping at straws. “I need to... he needs to know I am here.”

Rosalind frowns deeply and looks at Visidion. Something passes between them. There are no words to it, but they clearly come to some kind of an understanding in that momentary exchange.

“I think that can be arranged,” she says. “I'll offer the services of one of my people to help keep him alive and ready for questioning.”

“Oh,” I gasp, knees weak.

Tamara and Abigail close in, keeping me upright. Tears fill my eyes but now is not the time. All I want is to fall into his arms. He is the one, I know it, but now he needs me. I will save him. Somehow.

“Be ready,” Rosalind says. “I will return shortly.”

She strides out of the room without another word. Visidion remains in his silent vigilance. My two besties and I turn into each other, resting our heads together, settling in to wait.

“Love,” Visidion says, surprising me. I jerk my head up and look over at him.

“Huh?” I ask.

“Love,” he says, smiling. “Tajss provides, but that does not mean the path is easy.”

“You think?” Tamara says sounding snarky.

“I do,” Visidion says, unperturbed. “The path fate weaves for us leads us into the future, always. Your love will see you through. Hold true to that and all else will work itself out.”

I stare at the Zmaj, not sure I comprehend, but at the same time feeling like he just said the wisest words I’ve ever heard.



## MAZABUTA

Consciousness fades in and out. So much pain. It pulls me out of the black then drives me back into it. A constant push and pull. The cheering stopped. Some time ago, I think. It's hard to know for sure. Time holds little meaning. I am here, then I am not, and in between things must be happening. For me, it is all waiting. Waiting to die.

*Annalise...*

I cling to her. The only comfort I have. The warmth of her in my arms. The scent of her in my nose. The way she frowns when she disagrees but isn't yet willing to say it out loud. I love the way she does that. How clear her displeasure is but that she doesn't strike out with it, unlike an Urr'ki woman would.

Annalise is soft, gentle, but beneath that is bedrock. She is as solid and, in many ways, as implacable as the mountain itself. I wonder what our children would look like? Would they take on her coloring or mine? Perhaps a mix?

We talked of one boy and one girl. I would be happy with either as long as they were all healthy, but she led me to understand that the Star People desired male heirs. A difference in our culture it seems.

Urr'ki females are revered as leaders. It cannot be that different for the Star People because she speaks of Rosalind, the leader of the Star People and she is a female. Yet she says it is not easy for women in her society, that they do not naturally rise to leadership. It seems short-sighted. Females are

more even-tempered than males, more contemplative and able to not react on reactionary thoughts.

*My Queen. I am sorry I have failed you.*

Regret is a bitter bile in my throat, rising into my mouth. I gag on it and spit.

“Stop that,” a gruff voice says. “That is disgusting.”

It takes an effort to get my working eye open. It’s crusted over with dried gunk, probably my own blood. It feels like it tears when I manage to at last force it. While I struggle to open it, I’m lifted off my feet. The constant pull on my shoulders stops and I cannot help but sigh in welcome relief.

A Zmaj has hoisted me into his arms, and another is undoing the chains from the pole. They clank and clatter as he lets them drop free. The weight of the shackles pulls down painfully.

“Wh—” I can’t force the word out.

My jaw hurts too much, my throat is dry, and my tongue feels swollen. I try to work my mouth to bring about the return of moisture, but it hurts so much I black out for an instant rather than experience it in full.

“He needs healing,” one of the Zmaj says.

“A waste. We should get it over with,” the other says.

“That is the Al’fa’s call now, not ours,” the first says.

The other growls. I’m tossed around between them as they adjust their grips then I’m carried away. If I wasn’t hurt so badly, I’d open my eyes and gather information about their compound. It would be helpful for later, when I’d return with a raiding party, but that’s a future I know will never happen because I won’t leave here alive.

Soon enough they shove me into a small space, dropping me onto the cold stone floor. They don’t bother undoing my chains but I am raised into a sitting position and water is held to my mouth. I drink greedily. Too fast. My stomach rebels and I choke, spluttering. The Zmaj holding the water curses and slaps my face.

The sound of iron clangs. When my head stops spinning from the slap, I see that a gate has been placed over the doorway. I'm in a cage, like one of the animals the Beast Tamer manages. It makes sense because after all what am I to them but an animal?

I close my eyes and let time slip past. I have never been patient. The hardest part of falling in love with Annalise was that my life became nothing but waiting. Waiting for our next rendezvous. The next time I could hold her in my arms, be near her. Every moment she was in my thoughts, no matter how I tried to busy myself with work or duties, part of me was with her. Always.

At least death will put an end to that. I will be in the next world and yes, I'll be waiting for her, but I won't remember it. At least that's what the stories say, who can know what truly happens in the next world? Though it makes sense. I did not remember her in this world until I saw her. It seems a safe assumption it will be the same in the next.

A scraping sound pulls me out of my imagination of being with her. My eye tears anew when I open it to look. It hurts every time I do, and it must mean I'm still bleeding. It's no wonder that I'm dizzy. I have surely lost a lot of my blood.

“Oh.”

My heart leaps and I straighten. I grunt as pain explodes but I know that voice. I must be dreaming because how could it be, but no. It is her.

“Annalise?” I croak.

“Maz,” she whispers, kneeling in front of me.

“You...” it hurts so much to talk. The pain makes it hard to form thoughts into words. “How?”

“Shhh,” she says, placing one finger on my lips. “Don't worry. I'm here.”

“No. Can't... not... safe...”

“It's fine,” she says.



She has a cloth in her hand that she dips into a bowl. Water drips as she rings it out then places the damp cloth on my face. It's so cold I shiver, but with the cool comes relief.

“Oh Maz,” she says, her voice tight and her eyes glistening.

*Tears. Her word for that is tears.*

She has been teaching me her language too. It's a difficult structure and has a lot of hard syllables that are difficult to make with my tusks. But it is hers and I drink it up on that alone. I always wanted to know everything about her. The hours she spent telling stories of her life on their ship before they crashed on Tajss were incredible. Who could imagine barreling through the blackness between the stars?

She cleans my wounds in silence. Her gentle touch is so soft and welcome that I begin to wonder if I am dreaming. Perhaps this is all some last clutching at happiness before I expire. I have heard tales from those who danced at the door between worlds. They spoke of being welcomed by loved ones and I have no one more loved than my dragoste, my Annalise.

“Real?” I ask at last, unwilling to hang in this cloud of uncertainty any longer.

“Yes,” she says, leaning in close and whispering in my ear. Her breath is warm across my skin. This must be real. It feels real. “I am here, my love.”

“Dragoste,” I say.

“Yes,” she says and there is a hitch in the single syllable as her voice catches. “Always. Lie still. I have some salve for your wounds.”

I do as she orders. I'm too tired and too sore to do much else anyway. She spreads a cool paste on my wounds but a moment after she applies it there is a burning sensation that builds and builds. I grit my teeth as it becomes almost overwhelming. Then, in an instant, it is numb. The pain is completely gone, even in my jaw.

“Hmm,” I say.

She finishes with the salve and then I hear her ringing the cloth again. She presses the cold cloth to my swollen eye.

“They did a hell of a number on you,” she whispers. “How did you get caught?”

“Patrol,” I say.

“You came too close,” she says. I grunt in response. “Are you hungry? Can you eat?”

My stomach grumbles but the ache in my jaw leaves me uncertain if I can chew. I know it is broken even though the medicine she put on it has numbed the pain, that doesn't mean I'm capable of working it to eat.

“Not... sure,” I say.

“I have some broth,” she says. “Let's try.”

She turns around and pulls a pot closer then produces a spoon and dips it into the pot. She raises it to my mouth, and I sip. It is a plain broth but warm. I swallow it and there is a welcome rumble from my belly demanding more.

With the patience of the mountain mother, she feeds me, one spoon at a time, until the pot is empty. I could eat more still but my gratitude for this much is beyond words. As she fed me, she kept glancing over her shoulder at the Zmaj who stands guard beyond the gate. He doesn't seem to express any interest in what we are doing here, but that doesn't mean he isn't listening. Never trust a lizard. They are duplicitous. Every Urr'ki knows this from the time we are born.

“Maz,” she says with a heavy sigh, raising her hands and then dropping them to her lap.

I watch her silently. Not because there isn't so much I want to say to her, but because none of it matters. I am here, with her, and this is more than I'd ever hoped to have happen again. My resolve to die in silence is shattered. She is here and now I want to live more than ever. How, I do not know, but death is no longer an option I can take. It would be the cowardly way out, to give up on her in this life.

Hope is a cruel bitch, though. I don't see a way out of this mess that ends with me alive, but I must try.

"How—" I stop because my throat hurts too bad to continue. I swallow, grit my teeth, and try again. "How do I handle?"

The frown on her face is the same one I was thinking of earlier. When she doesn't agree or she knows something that she doesn't want to say. She darts a glance at the door behind her and the Zmaj shifts his weight, his wings rustling. She leans in closer.

"It's all screwed up," she says. "I was going to come to you. To live. We had a plan..."

She trails off and I shake my head but have to stop when stars explode and I groan in pain.

"No," I say, pressing one hand to the side of my head to try and stop the spinning. "Urr'ki village, not safe... the Shaman."

"I know," she says. "You were supposed to protect me. Help me."

"Help you?"

"Stop the war," she says. "Rosalind had a plan."

Three words, but they leave me stunned.

*Stop the war? How?*

"Fix?" I ask, unable to put too many words together and even the ones I do my voice is hoarse and rough sounding.

She shakes her head.

"I don't know," she says, touching the side of my face and trailing her fingers along my cheek. I lean into her touch. "She's working on it."

I close my eyes and rest my head against the wall. Moving slowly to avoid an explosion of pain, I take her hand in mine and hold it. I'm tired. A heavy, dead tired that doesn't feel natural.

*Wait...*

I force my eyes open, fixing my gaze on her.

“You—” I can’t finish speaking the dark is pulling me down into it.

“Rest,” she says. “It’s medicine. I’ll return soon.”

“No—”

Darkness lays claim before I can finish the thought.



## ANNALISE

*H*e falls asleep mid-speaking. Good. The drugs I got from Addison have done their job. The Al'fa refused to let him be seen by a healer but was okay with me tending to his wounds based on keeping him alive for questioning.

I sit in silence, my hand still in his, watching his chest rise and fall. Addison wasn't sure of the dosage, making a guess based on my estimate of his body weight and size. She didn't say it, but I figure that too much and it could also kill him. A terrifying thought so I sit longer than I should just to make sure he continues breathing.

I don't want to leave. I have to, but it is tearing my heart apart, hurting so much I continue lingering. I circle my fingertips on his rough palms, wishing I could stay. He doesn't deserve this. It's painful seeing him like this, they've hurt him so badly. He should be free. Free with me.

Why did this happen? How can fate be so cruel? Was I wrong? Is fate really an asshole?

Rosalind's plan was good. I was going to do it, but now that's been blown apart. None of us could have predicted not only an Urr'ki being captured, but of all his species, it had to be him? What are the odds?

Chanka clears his throat and shifts outside the gate. In my peripheral I see him glance over his shoulder. He's uncomfortable and I'm giving away too much. I stay any

longer and it won't be doubts that Chanka has but certainty that something is going on between me and Maza.

Which it is, of course, but the one thing Rosalind warned me not to do was let any of the Zmaj know that. Not yet, she says. I bite my lip and force myself to stand up. I stare down at him, watching his chest rise and fall, then exert all my willpower to turn away.

"I'm done," I say.

"This is good," Chanka says turning around.

He picks up the heavy grate and lifts. His muscles bulge with the effort to slide the monstrosity aside. There was no prison cell to put Mazabuta into and this is a makeshift thing they threw together. Zmaj don't take prisoners, after all. Why would they? Easier to kill the monsters.

Except they're not monsters. This war is stupid. And now it's come to a head, much faster than it should have.

I step through the opening he makes and linger, staring through the bars at Maz while Chanka puts the grate back into place. When he finishes he moves over to my side. Friendly and open as he usually is he chuckles.

"He looks very bad," Chanka says.

"You think?" I ask, my voice tight with despair.

"Yes," Chanka says. "You are a healer among the humans?"

"No," I say, shaking my head and biting my lip.

"You are not? You did very well. You have many talents then."

"Yeah, right," I say.

Chanka turns his attention to me. His face is thoughtful and earnest. As Chanka usually is.

"Friend Annalise," he says. "You are unhappy. How can Chanka help?"

I can't hold his gaze. The truth dies on my tongue because if I say it, it will only make things worse. I think of a dozen lies

but they are all lame and will do more harm than good. I shake my head.

“You can’t. It’s fine,” I say, choking on the word.

Chanka continues staring, then shrugs and rustles his wings.

“No,” he says, shaking his head. “No, Annalise is not fine. Annalise, my friend, I wish to help. Let me make this better.”

“Do you hate him?” I ask.

“Hate him? Who?”

I point at Mazabuta lying in the makeshift cage.

“Him.”

Chanka turns and looks at the sleeping Urr’ki. He doesn’t answer for a long time. He tilts his head, frowns, furrows his brow, then at long last he shakes his head.

“No.”

“Then why do we do this?”

“Chanka did not do this,” he says, motioning towards Mazabuta’s sleeping form. “Gerlar did.”

“You allowed it,” I snap. I should let this go. I know it. I tell myself that, but am I going to? Nope. No way in hell.

“Yes,” he says, his frown deepening.

“Well?” I place a hand on my hip and glare.

“Friend Annalise, I do not understand,” Chanka says. “It’s Urr’ki. They are the enemy. This is how it is.”

I roll my eyes and sigh in exasperation.

“But it doesn’t have to be!” I can’t help but raise my voice. Maz mutters and shifts in his cell, but the drugs keep him asleep despite my loud protest. “Can’t you see? Come on Chanka. He’s different, so what? Does that mean we have to kill him?”

Chanka’s confusion is so clearly written on his face I should let him off the hook, but it only increases my frustration. It’s unbelievable to me that he doesn’t see it. None of them do.



“That is not the reason,” Chanka says.

“No? Then what is?”

“They attack us,” Chanka says. “You know. They kidnapped you and your friends. Friends do not kidnap friends.”

His words leave me with nothing. I stare for one long moment then throw in the towel. I’m done. He’s not the one I have to handle anyway. The Al’fa is the only one who matters. If he decides to change directions, the rest of them will fall in line.

“Fine,” I say, turning and walking away.

“Annalise,” Chanka calls after me.

“Yeah?” I ask, looking over my shoulder.

“I am sorry.”

“For?” I turn back to him, curious what exactly he is apologizing for.

“I do not know,” he says, shrugging. “But you are my friend. I do not want to make you angry. So I guess that is what I am sorry for.”

The absurdity of it all is too much. I force myself to give him a smile and let him off the hook.

“Thanks,” I say. “I’ll figure it out.”

“Yes, you are very smart. You will resolve this.”

His words echo in my head as I leave. I wish I had half the confidence that he does. Right now, I don’t.



## ANNALISE

“*Y*ou want me to get him to agree to betray his people,”  
I say.

My ass is numb. I’ve been sitting on this stone bench waiting for Rosalind to finish arguing with the Al’fa for what must be hours. The numbness has spread through my legs and was climbing up my chest.

“Not exactly,” she says. “But I am sure that is how he will see it. You will have to handle that.”

“Then what, exactly, is it you think I’m going to accomplish here?”

Rosalind frowns as her right hand twitches. I know that sign. If there was a desk near her those fingers would be drumming. She moves her hand around a bit then drums on her leg. It’s her one nervous tell.

“Our original plan isn’t going to work, but the reason for it hasn’t changed. We need information.”

“Of course, it’s not going to work,” I say, choking on tears.

I’m exhausted. I’ve been awake forever. Maz is captured and hurt and they’re probably going to kill him out of hand while all I can do is sit here and try to process her words. Stupid words. Rosalind places a hand on my shoulder and squeezes. I choke down the tears, clench my eyes shut, and push down my emotions.

“Annalise,” Rosalind says softly. “I understand. You’re exhausted and in pain, but I need you to focus. You’re stronger than this.”

When I open my eyes I’ve got myself back together. I can do this. She believes in me and I can believe in myself too.

“Right, sorry.”

“Information is what I need and now I have it,” she says. “In him. But he must agree to talk to me. To share, to tell me all he can about his people, their culture, everything. Only when I know it all can I try to plot a path to peace.”

*She’s asking you to trust her. Us to trust her.*

I look at it. How do I get Mazabuta who naturally distrusts all Zmaj and pretty much anyone that has anything to do with them, to trust her?

“Yeah,” I say.

“I know this will not be easy,” Rosalind says. “I’ve managed to buy time, but if I cannot come up with intelligence in a timely manner, then the Al’fa will kill him.”

I bite my lip and nod understanding. As soon as she says it, I’m choking on the words, but this is not the time for emotions. This is a time for strength, not hysterics. I square my shoulders and stand. My legs tingle painfully as blood flows back into them.

“I’ll do whatever I can,” I say. “But what is the future?”

“What do you mean?” she asks.

“They want to kill him,” I say, surprising myself by how steady my voice is. “They will torture him, then kill him. That cannot be. So what is the future? How do I get him free?”

Rosalind frowns, her eyes darting around.

“This is not a space for such discussion,” she says. “Come with me.”

She doesn’t say anything more as she sharply spins on her heel and marches away. I follow her until we are alone in her office. Inside she goes to the wall and opens a cabinet. She

pulls out a decanter made of pottery and two glasses that she sets on the desk. She uncorks the container and pours a finger width of milky white liquid into each glass. After replacing the cork she picks up both glasses and offers me one.

“Is this that drink the Tribe used to make?” I ask.

“Some of the last in existence,” she says softly, raising the glass to her lips and sipping.

I take a sip too. It is a thick drink with hints of a sweet fruit when it passes my lips that quickly turns to a spicy flavor as it passes over my tongue. In its wake, my lips and mouth are tingling and warm. This is much smoother and nicer than the stuff I’ve had before.

I close my eyes as the warmth coalesces in my belly and then spreads through my body. It does its job of easing the tension and bringing clarity of thought. Then I realize the problem with this.

“You’re pregnant!” I yelp.

Rosalind doesn’t react as she takes another sip of the beverage.

“Yes,” she says. “And Addison assures me that the minimal amount of this I partake of will not cause any complications.”

“Oh, good,” I say.

“You asked about the future,” Rosalind says at last, gesturing with her glass. “I will not lie to you. I do not know. The best I can see right now is that he remains a prisoner, alive, but not free.”

“That is awful,” I say. “They can’t keep him in a cage forever.”

“It is better than killing him,” Rosalind says.

I bite my tongue because I know Maz well enough to know he probably would disagree. I take another sip, savoring the warmth and the sense of calm that comes with the drink. All my worries, fears, and doubts are outside this bubble of warm well-being brought on by the alcohol.

“What if he escapes?” I ask.

“It is a possible outcome. But the compound would be on high alert and your secret rendezvous would become impossible.”

I think this over. It hurts. I’m sure it would hurt even worse if not for the drink, but even so it feels like a giant hand is crushing my chest. But do you know what hurts worse? Him dying.

“I could go with him,” I say.

“I do not think that is a good idea,” Rosalind says.

“Wait, that was the plan. Why would it be any different now?”

Rosalind frowns and shakes her head.

“It was a desperate plan in the first place. Now the landscape is changing fast, and I am not sure how either side of this conflict will react. I do not want to send you into a dangerous situation that I do not know I can extract you from.”

“Can we get them to all get along?” I ask, feeling desperate.

“You realize it is no easy thing to undo generations of hatred and fear, right? Even now the Followers of Gershom are a problem, though much less vocal and obvious, they still exist. There is an undercurrent of hating on the Zmaj among our people and that is all within this single generation.”

I open my mouth to protest but realizing she’s right I snap my mouth shut before I say something stupid.

“Okay,” I say at last. “You’re saying best case scenario is he becomes a permanent prisoner of the Zmaj. Worst case they kill him.”

“Worst case they torture him before killing him,” Rosalind says, bluntly. The look on my face must give her pause because she frowns and shakes her head. “I am sorry, that was uncalled for.”

“You think?”

Rosalind nods sharply.

“Information, Annalise,” she says, bringing it around to the starting point. “I need to understand. Can you get him to talk to me?”

“I will,” I say, resolving to make it so. Somehow.

“Good. Get some sleep while he’s still out from the drugs then when you wake, I’ll arrange for you to see him again.”

I finish my drink and set the glass on the desk. I trail my finger around the rim, hesitant to leave. I don’t know what I’m hoping will change but when nothing does I clear my throat, nod, and head for my room.

I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep but when I lay down I’m out almost immediately.





## ANNALISE

*H*is chest rises and falls steadily. I sit cross-legged in front of him and watch. I don't know the Zmaj on guard duty right now but it's a Surface one, arranged by Rosalind. She said he was an ally and that I would be able to talk freely with Maz.

Maz is beautiful. I love the green tones of his skin. He has a strong jaw with a sharp chin and rather high cheekbones that gives him a regal look. His eyebrows are kind of bushy, I wonder if he'd let me trim them?

His darker green hair hangs loose, not in his normal braids. His tusks are flecked with dried blood. The tusks protrude from his lower jaw and are a yellow-white shade. His broad nose is swollen at the bridge where it was broken. I press a cold compress to his nose and swollen eye to try and give him some relief.

His breath hitches then he snorts and shifts in his sleep. He murmurs softly as he turns away from the wet cloth. His eye snaps open and he huffs, jerking back, hands rising and curling into fists.

"Maz, it's me," I say, pulling back until he orients himself.

"Annalise?" he asks, his one open eye looking around wildly. "Dragoste?"

"Yes, love, it's me," I say.

He settles back against the wall, the tension dropping from his muscles. He looks around, orienting himself, and the look of

disappointment is clear.

“Ah,” he says.

“Yeah, still here,” I say.

“How are you here? You should not be seen with me,” he says.

“The lizards...”

“Maz,” I say. “Slow down. You’re hurt. Let’s take this one thing at a time.”

He focuses his gleaming eye on me then looks past my shoulder at the heavy gate locking him into this room. He grunts when he sees the shape of the Zmaj standing guard.

“How long?”

“How long?” I ask.

“Until they kill me.”

“I’m not going to let that happen,” I say.

He frowns, shifts into a more upright position, then leans forward and takes my hand.

“Annalise, my dragoste, listen to me,” he says. “Our time in this life has been short. There is much I wish I had time to share with you but hear me now. I will wait for you in the next world. I know I am going soon, and I am sorry. I do not wish to leave you, but I will prepare our home for you. I will be looking for you, I will find you again.”

I choke up and all I can do is shake my head. The conviction and resignation in his voice is too much. How am I supposed to not cry when he’s like this? I don’t have that much strength.

“No,” I say, holding back the sobs but my voice is tight from it. “No. Not yet.”

He squeezes my hand in his then his other hand cups the back of my head and he pulls me into a kiss.

“Yes, my love,” he says. “Fate has woven the threads. I am sorry for my mistake. I should not have come so close, but now we are here. I will meet my end with pride, knowing that you are mine and we will be together in the next world.”

“No!” I shout and the Zmaj at the gate jumps around. I look over my shoulder and snap at him. “It’s fine.”

He stares through the grate for a long moment before he nods and turns back around.

“I know this is hard,” Maz says. “But it will be okay.”

“Shut up,” I snap, clapping his face in my hands. “Shut up. Do not give up. Not yet. You hear me?”

His stare is steady and full of resignation. I’m not changing his mind because he doesn’t believe there is hope. He places his hands over mine as an improbable smile spreads over his face.

“You are beautiful,” he says. “I love you, Annalise. My dragoste.”

“You’re not listening,” I say, squeezing her face tight. “Rosalind has a plan.”

His smile falters then turns into a frown.

“A plan? What kind of plan?”

“She wants to broker peace between your people and the Zmaj,” I say.

“That will never happen,” he says. “Even if my people would listen, which they won’t, the Shaman has too much control. The only peace that could be made would be with the Queen and she has not been seen in too long.”

“You’ve spoken of your Queen before,” I say. “She sounds wise.”

“Yes,” he agrees. “Wise beyond her youthful years. But the Shaman and his clerics have her tucked away, out of sight.”

Now I’m frowning as my thoughts spin. How do I turn this around?

“Rosalind says she can keep you alive, if you will give her information,” I say.

“And why would she do this?” he asks.

“Honestly?” I ask and he nods. I let go of his face and sit cross-legged in front of him. “She is practical. Her goal is the

survival of my species. It is all she thinks about and works towards.”

“Your kind surviving has nothing to do with my kind,” he counters.

I snort and shake my head.

“You know, I would have agreed with you before I went to work for her, but now I know better,” I say.

He reaches over and rests his hands on my thighs. His fingers trace circles while he stares at me. My legs warm at the contact and for an instant I’m distracted by memories of making love to him.

“What is it you now know better? Our species are enemies,” he says.

“Not mine,” I counter.

He shrugs and then shakes his head.

“In our history, in legend, the Star People were where the problem started,” he says. “They brought the lizards to harvest and rape the planet.”

“Oh,” I say. “You never told me about that,” I say.

“There is much I have not been able to share with you yet,” he says. “Our time has been short and full of... other distractions.”

He smiles as he skips over saying that we’d been busy having a lot of sex. Much nicer to call it distractions. I glance over my shoulder to see if the Zmaj guard is listening, but he doesn’t seem to be paying any particular attention.

“Right,” I say, “fine. But even those Star People weren’t my people. My species comes from Earth, we’re, I don’t know, millions and millions of light miles from here.”

“I am not sure that my people would see the distinction,” he says.

I close my eyes as frustration swamps my thoughts.

“Do you not want peace?”

“Are you asking me or do my people want peace?”

“You, them, both!” I throw my hands up angrily.

“I want you,” he says. “And I will do whatever it takes to be with you. My people... even before the Shaman all we knew is war.”

“That is no way to live,” I say. “War without end?”

He stiffens, his face contorting with anger.

“We did not ask for this,” he says, raising his voice and balling his hands into fists. He points at the Zmaj guard. “They brought this war to us. Twice! We give them the surface, but even that was not good enough for them. They follow us here, under the mountain.”

“I followed you nowhere,” the Zmaj guard says from behind me.

Mazabuta pushes himself to his feet. His face contorts in anger, tearing open one of the wounds and causing fresh blood to drip. I jump up between him and the Zmaj, pressing my hands to his chest.

“You’re here are you not?” Maz shouts, clenched fists shaking past my head as he pushes his way towards the Zmaj who growls.

“Enough,” I yell. “I work for Rosalind, stand down.”

I command the Zmaj who stiffens but his tail lowers and slaps the ground. He glares at Maz who isn’t going to back down.

“Fine,” the Zmaj says at last. He turns slowly back around but stands partially turned so that he can see into the cage and not have his back to Maz any longer.

“Enough Maz,” I say. “Do not provoke him. I’m trying to help.”

“Help?” he growls. “Let him kill me. It will be faster.”

“No!” I scream, the word tearing at my throat painfully. Maz shifts his eyes to me for the first time. “You coward.”

He looks as if I slapped him across his face. He takes a step back, shaking his head.

“Annalise—”

“Don’t you Annalise me,” I say, pushing my attack. “You need to see this. Dying is the easy way out. The coward’s way. I need you to bring all your courage, be the man I know you are, and help me find a way through this. I need you to *live*. Live for me, not die. Do you get it?”

His mouth snaps shut then the tension drops out of his body. He hangs his head down to his chin and he trembles. When he looks up the anger and rage are gone from his face, he looks resigned, but ready.

“Yes, my dragoste,” he says. “Tell me what you need of me.”



## MAZABUTA

“*A*nd you say this Shaman’s rule is almost completely unquestioned?” Rosalind asks, repeating the question again.

“I have answered this,” I say, shrugging. “There is a resistance forming, I believe, but that doesn’t matter. The Shaman and his Maulavi have the power.”

Rosalind nods. Annalise squeezes my hand. My blood burns, wanting to leap into action, but what action can I do? I have put my faith in Anna. My love advises this is the way forward. The only other path I have forward is death. Her path gives the hope for life in this world so I will follow it as far as I can.

Rosalind looks at the cloaked lizard who stands beside her. He’s one of the surface ones. His claws are not black or as thick as the Cavern ones I am more familiar with. They whisper something to one another then Rosalind is looking at me.

“There has to be some way we can make this work,” Annalise says.

“Perhaps,” Rosalind says. “I hope. It sounds like our best hope is with the Queen of the Urr’ki.”

“The Queen is the only one who could stand against the Shaman,” I agree. “If she was to denounce him, it would change everything.”

“Would she be open to an alliance with the Zmaj?” Rosalind asks.



“Never,” I say, spitting out the word without thought. Rosalind frowns and Annalise gasps, shaking her head. I close my eyes, take a breath, then exhale slowly before amending my answer. “Perhaps, but it will not be easy.”

“Perhaps is better than no,” Rosalind observes.

“Do you have a plan?” Annalise asks.

I watch the human leader. There is a practicality to her and a definitive aura of someone who does what she must to accomplish her goals. Rosalind pinches the bridge of her nose and closes her eyes. She sits like this for a moment before meeting Annalise head on.

“One is forming,” she says. “But it will be dangerous.”

“I will not allow her to be put in danger,” I say. “If that is the only path, kill me now.”

“For you,” Rosalind says, looking at me.

“And what is your plan?” I ask.

I’ve told her everything, holding nothing back because Annalise has told me to trust her. Now we will see if this is the worst decision I have ever made or not.

“It sounds like your Queen is a political prisoner,” Rosalind says. “We must free her.”

My muscles quiver in anticipation of action. I search her face for any sign of a joke, but there is nothing. Her tense jaw and steely eyes indicate she is not kidding.

“You are serious,” I say.

“I am,” she says.

I scratch the back of my head trying to figure out her angle in this. No one does anything without getting something out of it. What is it she is gaining?

“Why?”

Rosalind drums her fingers on the desk between us. Annalise scratches my back between my shoulder blades, but I watch Rosalind. The thoughts playing across her face are clear, but

inscrutable as to their meaning. I wait for her to explain herself.

“I must stop this war,” Rosalind says.

“What difference does a war make to you?” I press.

“I’ve explained this,” she says, waving a dismissive hand. “What you really want to know is what I gain from it. Do me the honor of being blunt.” I grunt and nod in agreement. “I gain the future. For all our people.”

“You are referring to the minimal viable pool you explained,” I say.

“Yes,” she says. “The stronger I can make that pool, the more diversity, the greater the chances of success in the long-term.”

She meets my gaze and doesn’t look away but there is something more here. Something in her eyes, in the way her fingers continue to drum on the desk.

“That’s not all,” I say, calling her out.

She frowns deeper.

“No,” she says at last.

“Rosalind and I have been off planet,” the hooded Zmaj says, interjecting at last. “Tajss will not be ignored forever. Already they are aware of us. The Invasion is all the evidence that any of us should need. We bought time with the explosion, but not enough.”

“Not enough, especially if we distract ourselves with an interspecies war,” Rosalind says. “I have to prepare us. And I will need warriors.”

Annalise looks from me to her and back with evident surprise at the answer. She thought she knew it all, but apparently she did not.

“I see,” I say, looking at the Zmaj. “The Star People, the ones from fables?”

He nods sharply.

“Yes,” the Zmaj says. “They have already returned. They will not stop.”

“Epis,” I say and the Zmaj nods. Epis. The fruit of Tajss and its downfall. “How do I help?”

Rosalind looks at Annalise.

“I want to go back to our original plan,” she says. “But first I want to get the Al’fa on board.”

“How? His people think he’s dead,” Annalise asks.

“Very likely,” Rosalind says. “But he can use that. We’ll arrange for him to ‘escape’ and then he can return to his people. Join with them to overthrow this, Shaman. Then, with the Queen returned to power, we can broker peace.”

“It’s too risky,” Annalise says.

I hear her and I know what she is thinking. I can feel it, but I also know that Rosalind is right. If the Star People, not the humans but the ones who came before are going to return, neither the Zmaj nor the Urr’ki are ready to face them.

The Star People beat us before because we were not united. The original clans of Urr’ki were too busy warring with each other to stand against them. Then, when the Zmaj rebelled, we were already at war with the Zmaj too, so again we did not unite and help against the greater threat of the Star People. History is repeating itself, the only thing to do differently is try this new path.

“I accept the risk,” I say. “If you can bring the liz—the Zmaj leader on board,” I say.

“No,” Annalise says, leaping to her feet. “You can’t. I’m not going back to the way things were.”

“Annalise—”

“No,” she shakes her head violently and jerks away from my reaching arms. “No. I will not. I love you; I’m not going to send you off alone again.”

“I agree,” Rosalind says before I speak. I jerk my head to look at her so fast it hurts my neck. Rosalind has her lips pursed

and is staring at Annalise with an evaluative stare. “He won’t go alone.”

“No,” I say.

“Yes,” Annalise says. “You can bring me along with you. It’s a good plan.”

“No, it is too dangerous,” I say.

“I know it is dangerous,” Rosalind says. “But I believe you can and will protect her.”

“That is not the point,” I argue.

“No, not completely,” Rosalind agrees. “I want to understand your people and your people to get to know mine. I want them to see we are not the enemy. I believe we humans can be the bridge between the Zmaj and the Urr’ki.”

I open my mouth to protest but my words die on my tongue. When faced with wisdom, only the fool argues further. I look at Annalise, wanting with all my heart to say no, but the truth is greater than instinct. I want her safe, but where will she be safer than at my side?

And I want to save my people from the evil that is the Shaman. Maybe there is a future still in this world. If I can save my Queen and keep Annalise safe. A different path coalesces before me, all I have to do is walk onto it. I look at Annalise and my heart thunders. There is no denying the danger, but it is also a chance. This is hope.

“I’m going,” Annalise says. “All this time, I’ve wanted nothing more than to be at your side. Now I will be.”

The determination in her voice leaves no room for arguing. I snap my mouth shut and nod.



## ANNALISE

“Don’t forget your comb,” Abigail says.

Mazabuta grunts and shakes his head. He is leaning against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest glowering, making his displeasure clear.

“What, she needs a comb,” Tamara says.

“No,” Mazabuta says. “I will provide what she needs, but she cannot bring one.”

“Why?” Tamara argues. She is as defiant as ever, glaring at Maz.

“Because it is supposed to look as if he escaped and brought her with him,” Zat’an says. “If she is well-packed and supplied, that would give the lie to the ruse.”

Mazabuta shifts his glare to Zat’an but nods sharply that he has the right of it. My stomach is sour, but I shrug. Abigail puts my comb back on its shelf but remains in place staring at it. No one has been saying much. The tension in the room is too heavy for words.

I’m scared, of course, but I’m also happy. The weight of my secret is off my shoulders and that is an incredible relief. And I’d already decided to defect and infiltrate the Urr’ki village, so it’s not like this is a new plan, but it wasn’t this close before. We’re going to leave now. No more delays, no more nebulous future that isn’t real yet.

Icy cold wings flutter in my stomach as I walk around the room. A bag sits on my bed cubby with a few things thrown into it. Basic necessities, a couple changes of clothes, a pillow, and an artifact from the ship. The artifact, an ancient textbook, protrudes partially out of the bag. I walk over and tuck it deeper into the protective layers of my clothing.

This book, silly thing that it is, is my connection to the girls. My mom read to us from this book when we were babies. Our moms, well mine and Abs, traded letting us stay over, but when we were at my house my mom read from this book. The pages are stained and yellow with age. I don't know how old it is, but I do know it was brought on the ship by my great-great-great-great grandmother or something like that. I never did fully grasp the enormity of the family lines on the ship.

I run my finger over the spine. The title long ago faded to the point of being a shadow of the embossing and unreadable. It doesn't matter because I know the title well. According to my mom even on Earth this would be considered an ancient artifact. Handed down through generations from a time before the wars.

"You've got the book, right?" Tams says, appearing at my shoulder.

"Yeah," I say. "*Aesop's Fables*. I feel like I'm living one now."

"You kind of are," Abigail says. "I'm sure old Aesop would have made a fable out of our story."

"That's nice," I say softly.

It's time. I know it and they know it but none of us are ready. How do you get ready for a moment like this? I've never, in all my life, said goodbye to them when it really meant it. Our goodbyes have always been more in the line of see you in a few hours, not see you maybe never. This, this is a real goodbye. And it hurts. I sniff, close my eyes, and sigh.

"Hey," Tamara says, putting her arm around my shoulders and leaning her head onto my shoulder. Abigail mimics the motion from the other side. "This isn't goodbye."

I smile at her words. She's read my mind, but of course she has. It's what we do. We know each other so well that we don't have to say what we're thinking.

"Right," I say, wiping a stray tear away.

"I am ready when you are my dragoste," Mazabuta says.

"What does that word mean?" Abigail asks, speaking softly, for my ears only.

"It's like... when Kri'sin calls you his treasure. It's the Urr'ki word for the same concept."

"I like the sound of it," Tamara says. "Dragos-tay. It's nice, kind of powerful sounding."

"Yes," I say, a shiver racing down my spine. "I like it too."

I close the straps of the bag and turn around. The girls keep their arms on me, and we move into a three-way embrace. I hold them, cupping their heads in my hands and kissing the tops of their heads. Kri'sin and Zat'an watch from a huddle of their own on the opposite side of Mazabuta. Zat'an glares at Maz, but Kri'sin has a thoughtful look.

Before I break my embrace with the girls Kri'sin huffs and then walks across the room to Mazabuta. Kri'sin is a lot taller than Maz and overall bigger, but Maz doesn't even flinch. He leans his head back so he can meet Kri'sin's gaze with his own steady one.

"If she is harmed," Kri'sin says menacingly.

"If nothing," Maz counters. "If she is harmed, you can be sure I will already be in the next world before that happens."

Kri'sin grunts, puffs his chest out, then nods.

"Good," he says. "Then I will wish you well. Tajss provides."

Mazabuta's mouth works but he doesn't say anything until at last he shuts his mouth and nods sharply.

"I love you guys," I say, squeezing Abs and Tams tightly.

"Love you," they echo, clinging tight.



It's time. We all know it. I step out of their arms. It's the hardest thing I've ever done in my life. Their hands linger, keeping in contact for as long as possible. I move backwards, extending the moment, but time and space only allow for so much. Their hands drop away and my skin cools where their warmth was a moment before.

There are no more words. Maz places his arm protectively over my shoulders and moves to the door. My feet are heavy, no matter what my resolve. I know this is the way, but knowing and doing are not the same thing.

"You remember the signs?" Zat'an calls after us.

"Of course I do liz—" Mazabuta cuts himself off mid-word. He drops his chin and shakes his head. When he looks back up, he turns and looks directly at Zat'an. "Zat'an."

Zat'an frowns deeply, his milky eye gleaming, then he nods.

"Good," Zat'an says.

"We will be watching for it," Kri'sin says.

Mazabuta pauses at the door. All of us are staring one at another and part of me wildly hopes that someone will suddenly have a bright new idea that changes everything. I know that's not going to happen, but the hope is there for a moment.

"Thank you," Mazabuta says.

And in his voice is true gratitude. A depth of emotions that I don't know if anyone else recognizes but I do. Abigail and Tamara exchange a knowing smile. Zat'an grunts, but Kri'sin steps forward.

"Urr'ki," he says, holding out his hand. Mazabuta stares at the offered hand. The moment stretches and I'm not even sure what's going to happen next. When Mazabuta takes Kri'sin's hand and clasps it firmly the building pressure in the room evaporates. "Tell Purana I send greetings."

My breath catches in my throat. Mazabuta's eyes widen then his brow furrows as they narrow.

"I will," Mazabuta says. "I am sure he sends the same."

Tamara places both hands over her lips and throws me a kiss. Abigail hugs herself tight, willing her embrace to me and I smile. Then Mazabuta and I turn and leave my friends behind.



## ANNALISE

“Tell me again,” Mazabuta says.

“Again?” I complain.

“Yes, again,” he says.

“When I saw you, I felt something I’d never felt before, like a string pulling on my heart,” I say. “I was inexplicably drawn to you. Why do I have to say it again? It’s almost all the truth anyway.”

“Yes,” Maz agrees. “All except the parts that aren’t. The Maulavi will want to question you separately from me. I will try to not allow this, but if they suspect any part of our story this will not go well.”

“Not go well as in?”

He shoots me a dark look and shakes his head.

“It must go well,” he says.

I repeat the story again, in full. He’s had me repeating it over and over as he leads us through the tunnels to his home. I know he’s trying to protect me, which I appreciate, and he’s right. Practice makes perfect and all that.

“Good,” he says.

We come to a fork in the tunnel. The ceiling here is low enough that we’re both walking hunched over. He pauses at the fork studying something, but I’ll be damned if I know what. His low-light vision is so much better than my own he

sees all kinds of things where I see nothing but dancing shadows.

“Watch your step here,” he says, pointing to a spot on the floor.

I don't question his orders, carefully stepping over the spot. I don't know why, but his words are all I need. His people love to set traps, ones I have no idea how to see, but he does. He holds my hand as I pass over making sure I'm steady then we resume our travel.

“Are we close?” I ask.

My nerves are on edge. I know he'll protect me, but that doesn't make what we're doing any less dangerous. I try to focus on the path ahead, the walls, and studying the stalactites, anything to keep my attention off my swirling fears.

“Yes,” he says, pausing. He turns and looks me over with an appraising, appreciative eye. “It is not too late.”

I bite my lip, knowing what he is offering. We've discussed running off on our own but both of us have obligations to our people and neither felt we could leave those behind. Him for honor, me for... for what? Love of my friends? Sure, but something more too. My job with Rosalind has opened my eyes to things about myself. And in that, I feel an obligation to my people and even more to myself. I can be more, if I apply myself. And I'm going to.

“No, this is the right thing to do,” I say.

He nods, a sharp, harsh gesture.

“Yes,” he agrees. “But it will not be easy.”

“Your Queen sounds nice,” I say.

“She was,” he says. “I hope she still is.”

“You don't really think... how could he?”

“I do not know,” he says. “I hope—”

He stops midsentence, whirling around and stopping in a crouch. He has a club that he got from the Zmaj in one hand. He holds up a finger then motions down, indicating I should

crouch and stay in place. I nod and do as commanded then watch him stalk forward.

He stops behind one of the stalagmites, pressing himself against it. I hold my breath, afraid that even the sound of my breathing will give my position away. My lungs burn as I watch. I can't do this much longer.

Suddenly Maz moves. He goes from preternaturally still to motion so fast it's a blur in my vision. He roars and there is an answering shout. I inhale sharply, my heart hammering hard. This is it.

"Kapatan?" a voice calls.

"Stand down," Mazabuta answers.

I can't see who he is talking to and only partially understand what is being said. I know a few words in Urr'ki, but not many. I remain in place, waiting for him to come back to me as he ordered. He's alive and there are no further sounds of combat.

I listen to them talking back and forth. They're speaking rapidly and it sounds like it's going okay, but what do I know? I press my hands onto the stone, close my eyes, and offer a prayer to the universe or whoever might be listening. This is the first barrier to overcome. Getting into his village without both of us being arrested.

Eventually I hear their approach. The sounds of his hard soled boots echo on the stone flooring and is matched by others. I rise to my feet, not wanting to meet the new people in a crouch. The shadowy shapes approach but in their lead, I know the outline of my lover.

"Annalise," Mazabuta says. "This is Prok."

He motions to one of the two Urr'ki with him. This one I think I recognize. Or I recognize the gold ring that is drilled through his right tusk. I guess it could be a different Urr'ki. They're all big, green, and scary, but surely they don't all have the same decoration? Mazabuta doesn't anyway.

"Hello," I say, speaking in Zmaj.

He looks me up and down then looks at Maz. The other warrior with him does the same. The three of them talk in their own language. It's so rapid fire I think I'd have to be really fluent to keep up. I'm not sure if they're arguing, joking, or what.

"They're going to escort us," Mazabuta says.

"Good," I say.

Maz nods. The other new Urr'ki motions for us to walk ahead of him and he falls in behind me while Prok leads the way. As we travel Maz walks with a more pronounced limp and a lot more groans and grunts than he had been. He is seriously injured, but he's playing it up for the new guys. All part of our plan. It's going to be hard enough for his people to believe he escaped, but not being beaten within an inch of his life would arouse their suspicions.

I can't tell if anything has changed but Prok comes to a stop and says something to Maz. Maz nods agreement. There is a crack in the wall ahead that they seem to be looking at but that's not unusual.

"We are here," Maz says at last. "They want to bind our hands, but I will not allow it."

"Why? You escaped," I say.

"You are an outsider, no one is sure what to do with that," he says.

"Oh," I say. "Are they going to?"

"Only if they want me to beat them," he growls.

Prok looks at him, watching the exchange.

"Speak normal," Prok barks.

Maz answers him in their own language. It clearly gets heated but eventually Prok throws his hands up and shakes his head.

"Get us all killed," Prok says.

He sighs and presses himself into the crack, disappearing. I follow Mazabuta into it.





## ANNALISE

“Wow,” I exclaim.

Emerging from the crack in the cave wall into this massive natural chamber was like stepping into a dream. Bright fires illuminate the space, but what takes my breath away is the scope of it. I am looking over an entire city.

Closest to us are a lot of ramshackle looking homes built out of scrap parts. Pieces of leather, wood, iron, and bones hobbled together. There are also towers that rise above all else at least two, some three stories tall manned by guards who are armed with bows.

Running between the cobbled homes are wide paths, streets really, that lead deeper into the city. In my sight, right now, are at least twenty or thirty Urr’ki going about their lives. Two children tumble out of one of the houses, wrestling and shouting. They seem to have a toy or something that they are fighting over.

One of them ends up on top of the other, jerking the white object away and lifting it over his head in triumph. The one beneath him punches the one on top in the gut. The one on top doubles over, dropping the white object. The one on bottom wriggles free, grabs the object, then moves to kick the downed one. Before his barefoot makes contact, he’s grabbed by a female Urr’ki and swung around. She holds him up in one hand despite the fact he must weigh thirty or forty pounds and shakes him.

The female yells something at the child then sets him down. As soon as she has her back turned, he kicks the downed child anyway. Before the female reacts, he turns and runs away clutching his prize to his chest.

“That’s terrible,” I observe.

“They learn,” Mazabuta says.

Prok leads us past the downed boy without so much as a glance. The boy leaps to his feet and points at me, yelling something in his own tongue. It isn’t long before a mob of onlookers is lining the path ahead of us. They point, shout, and some jeer. Maz places his arm around my shoulders but other than that he doesn’t pay any attention to the crowd.

“Where are we going?” I whisper.

All these eyes on us makes me nervous. I don’t know what I expected, but this isn’t it.

“The Shaman,” he says darkly. “Or one of his Maulavi.”

“Why are they all staring?”

“Because they have never seen a Star Person,” he says.

“Oh,” I say.

As we move deeper into the city the state of the houses becomes better. They’re still a bit ramshackle, but they look nicer. More put together. More matching parts that make an overall theme and less scraps thrown into whatever usable service can possibly be managed.

The appearance of the onlookers also changes, improving. It’s not something I can put my finger on exactly, but they look more affluent. I bite my lip, darting my eyes all around and trying to take it all in at once.

We stop before a building that is mostly made of stone. There are sharp horns that I assume are either for defense or decoration placed an arm’s length apart all around the eaves. The roof is a reddish-brown leather, pulled taut over the frame. A metal door has a strange symbol engraved into it. It looks rather like a long skull with two huge tusks.

Prok raises his hand to knock but before he brings it down on the metal the door opens. An Urr'ki in a red robe is framed in the door with his arms crossed over his chest. The top of his head is shaved bald, leaving a fringe of long green hair.

He speaks to Prok and there is another exchange that I don't understand. When the robed man looks past Prok at me I wave. I immediately feel like an idiot. What am I doing? Oh, hi, just come to visit and all. The robed one stares then nods sharply and steps aside.

Prok moves to the side of the door and motions. Mazabuta, arm still over my shoulders, leads us through the door. It slams shut behind us with a resounding metallic thud. My stomach drops at the sound.

We're standing in a small room that looks like an antechamber. There is another doorway on the opposite side from us and a firelight comes from in there. The robed man stares at Maz for a long moment before speaking.

"She speaks Zmaj," Mazabuta says, for my benefit.

The robed man nods and then disappears through the door, leaving us alone.

"Is everything okay?" I ask.

"We will see," he says cryptically.

That does nothing to settle my stomach, but I nod. We knew this would happen. It's all going according to our plan so far. The robed man returns and motions for us to follow, so we do. The next room is really hot and smoky. I'm immediately sweating.

A fire burns in the middle of the room. There is no clever engineering though. The vent is a hole in the ceiling and looking up most of the smoke is up there, but far from all of it. The room is hazy with it.

This room has a raised dais on the far side with three chairs. Two Urr'ki sit in the chairs on the sides while the middle, more ornate one, remains empty. The robed one pulls two chairs off the side walls and sets them behind Maz and me. He then motions for us to sit.

Maz looks at the chairs and then nods. I sit down and Maz does the same. The robed man moves behind Maz and pulls his arms behind him. He growls and jerks his hands free. The two on the dais watch impassively.

“I will not,” Maz says.

“You can wait outside,” the robed man says motioning towards the door.

“No,” Maz growls.

“Let him be,” the man on the left sits.

“Sit against the wall,” the man on the right says. “My questions are for the Star Female.”

“She is mine,” Mazabuta says.

“Or she has enamored your mind for her own ends,” the man on the left says. “Which is what we must determine. To protect your soul.”

I swallow hard, my mouth suddenly so incredibly dry.

“I will stay at her side,” Mazabuta says, his hands balling into fists as he steps between them and me.

The two Urr’ki Shamans look at each other. The one on the left shrugs then the other waves his fingers in the air.

“Well enough,” Right says.

Mazabuta turns his back on them, walks past me, grabs a chair from the back of the room, then places it at my side. He takes my hand in his and together we wait for the questions.



## ANNALISE

“*I*’ve told you this,” I say, throwing my hands up in the air in frustration.

“You have,” Left Shaman says. They never bothered giving their names and I still think of them in terms of where they are sitting. “And you have left out details or changed them each time.”

“Let it go,” Mazabuta growls.

“If you interfere again, you will be removed from the questioning,” Right says.

They have been asking me questions for hours. Making me repeat the story over and over again. My brain feels like mush so it’s no wonder if I slip up some details. I’m getting a headache.

“I felt it when I first saw him,” I say.

“Define *it*,” Right says.

“I have, over and over,” I say. “How do I put it into words? Of course, I keep changing it, it’s love. Can you define love?”

“I can,” Left says.

There is a clatter from behind the dais then a door I didn’t see before opens. The room it opens on is so dark I can’t see into it at all, but a figure walks out and shuts the door. The figure slowly makes its way around the back of the dais to the left then climbs up the steps onto it. This Urr’ki is a paler green than the others I’ve seen. His hair is thin and stringy with a

receding hairline. He is also very thin, almost emaciated looking.

The other two don't say anything to the newcomer but they fall silent. The biggest indicator of him being a problem is from Mazabuta. He stiffens in his chair and his hand holding mine convulses painfully.

The newcomer takes the middle seat in silence. He adjusts himself for several seconds before at long last turning his attention to me. He blinks slowly, takes a deep breath and I think he will speak but he only exhales loudly. He leans back into the chair then waves his hand around in front of himself.

“Again,” Right says.

I roll my eyes and shake my head.

“You know what?” I say, stiffening myself now. “No. I have answered all your questions. There is nothing more to be said. I am in love with Mazabuta. I aided him to escape, and he brought me here. That's it.”

“Escape?” the newcomer says, drawing the word out oddly, making a hissing sound on the s syllable.

“Yes,” I say, feeling fed up and defiant.

The newcomer stands up and stalks forward across the dais. His eyes are locked onto me like a predator. It makes me really uncomfortable. He moves slowly but deliberately. Every step is controlled and intentional. He doesn't stop until he's right in front of me. While I'm sitting he's only a little taller than I am.

He's too close. He smells smoky with a hint of something stale, almost a moldy odor. He has a wide nose and snuffles as if he's testing my own scent. I'm suddenly very conscious that it has been three days since I've had so much as a sponge bath.

“A Star Person,” he says, inches from my face, still sniffing the air between us. “Who *happens* to be the dragoste of Kapatan Mazabuta.”

“Yes,” I say.

I try to keep my eyes on his, but he drops his gaze to my chest. He grabs my breasts without warning, squeezing them hard. I

cry out in surprise as much as pain. Mazabuta reacts almost instantly. He punches the man so hard that he literally flies across the room and lands in a heap against the far wall.

The two on the dais are on their feet shouting but Maz is having none of it. He strides towards the downed man, growling. The downed one laughs.

“As I suspected,” the downed man says. “He is under her wiles. See? He assaults a Maulavi, without a second thought.”

Maz isn't going to stop. His hands are balled into fists and he's walking right up to the downed man. I know, in that weird sense of knowing how bad a situation is when you see it, that Maz will kill him.

“Maz, stop,” I demand.

Maz does as I ask. Stopping in his tracks and looking over his shoulder at me.

“This must not go unanswered,” he says.

“It's fine,” I say. “He's pushing your buttons. Provoking you and he knows it. If this is what your people are like, then perhaps it's true. I have no place here among them.”

The door behind the dais opens again. The one who emerges is twisted, bent far over with a hunched back. He walks with a long staff, leaning heavily onto it.

“Enough,” he says and the instant he does the two Urr'ki Shaman on the dais drop to their knees and the one on the floor rolls over into an obeisance.

The twisted man clangs his way onto the dais, coming to a stop more or less in front of me. Maz slowly turns to face him and even slower moves to his knees with his head bowed. I mimic him mostly because I don't have any idea what is happening or what else I might do.

“Shaman,” one of the men on the dais says.

*Shaman? This is him?*

He's not impressive. A broken, twisted looking man but there is something about him. An aura of danger.



“Yes, yes,” the Shaman says. “Rise, Kapatan Mazabuta. Sometimes my Maulavi are zealous, but you understand, don’t you? We cannot risk the great endeavor. The Queen’s orders are quite clear, and the protection of her and our people is first.”

“Yes, Shaman,” Mazabuta says, not looking up. He does reach over and covers my hand.

“Right,” the Shaman says. “Priak, apology to the Star Person. That is no way to treat a dragoste and you know it. He will, of course, be punished.”

“I apologize, profusely,” Priak says.

“Good, good,” the Shaman says.

“You are most welcome,” the Shaman says. “Stand Star Person, your name is...”

“Annalise,” I say, looking up then over at Maz. I don’t stand, yet, because I’m not sure if I should or not.

“Annalise,” he says, rolling my name around his tongue as if he’s savoring the taste of it. It’s creepy. “Yes. Very good. Kapatan you have served your Queen well, bringing her to us.”

“Thank you, Shaman,” Maz says.

“Annalise, you say you are dragoste with the Kapatan, is this correct?”

“Yes,” I say.

“Good, then I will personally perform the Ceremony of Union for the two of you,” he says.

“That is not necessary,” Maz protests.

“No, I insist,” the Shaman says. “How could a humble servant such as myself do less for an honored Kapatan?”

I do not know what is happening. These are deep waters full of innuendo that I have no understanding of. It leaves me feeling lost and scared.

“You honor us,” Maz says.

“You honor your people,” the Shaman says. “I know you warriors, it is always just duty, but that does not mean duty and the performance thereof should not be celebrated. And we will celebrate. You are okay with your living quarters? Will they be sufficient for two of you?”

“They are,” Maz says.

His shoulders are such tight knots I can feel him vibrating with tension.

“Good,” the Shaman says. “That will be all, Kapatan. Go with the mountain’s strength.”

“And you,” Maz says, rising to his feet and pulling me up with him.

He doesn’t turn his back on the Shaman, walking backwards until we reach the exit. Only then does he turn and all but shove me out the door first. Outside he places a hand on the small of my back and rushes us away.



## ANNALISE

*I* stack the dried dishes in the small, but functional cabinet. Drying my hands on a towel I walk over to my dining table and sit down. Sipping the warm tea, I smile.

I like it here. Maz doesn't want me going out on my own as I attract too much attention, but that's okay. Life in the Bunker prepared me in totally unexpected ways. I no longer mind being cooped up like I would have before it. The tea is strong and has hints of mint in it. I like it a lot and Maz has made sure I have plenty on hand.

*This is life.*

Outside our home is the hustle and bustle of other people's lives as they go about their day. It's been two weeks since our interview with the Shaman. As far as I can tell, nothing has changed. Maz is paranoid and I see why, but that doesn't take away my pleasure of being here with him. Of keeping a house for him. And honestly it beats all the cleaning I had to do back at the compound. At least now I'm cleaning my home, not random rooms to make space for the impending explosion of new babies.

*Babies.*

I miss my girls, but I'll get a message to them soon. They're going to be so excited to find out my news. I set the cup down and press my hands to my stomach, hoping to feel a kick or a heartbeat. Stupid, I know, it's way too early for that, but I did miss my cycle and I feel like I'm pregnant. I think. What do I

know about pregnancy? The door opens and Maz fills the frame. His smile lights up his face as soon as he sees me.

“Dragoste,” he says.

“My love,” I say, rising as he rushes across the room.

He sweeps me off my feet, spinning me in a circle as we kiss. Laughing forces us apart.

“You’ve been busy,” he says, setting me back on my feet.

I motion for him to sit and pour a cup of tea for him too. He sips it and smiles.

“Yeah,” I say. “Keeping myself entertained.”

“I can assign someone to escort you if you want to go to market,” he says.

“That would be nice,” I say. “Tomorrow?”

“Of course, my love,” he says. “Take coins from the stash.”

I nod. The Urr’ki have an entire economy. We sort of had one in the Bunker but it was all underground, semi-legal trading and bartering. Their system reminds me of being on the ship, when we all had currency, got paid for working, and spent it on things we wanted. The familiarity of it is nice. Maz reaches a hand under the table and rests it on my knee.

“I have missed you,” he says.

I smile. “Oh? How much?”

“You need that I show you?” he asks, his voice low and husky.

“If you can’t show it, then it’s not very real, is it?” I tease him.

“I’ll show you,” he says, rising.

He steps around the table and takes my hands, pulling me to my feet. He lifts the skirt I’m wearing and vigorously kisses my thighs. His tusks drag across my skin as he works his way up. Hands on my knees he pushes my legs apart and then his tongue is bringing pleasure.

He works tirelessly, building and building until I’m squirming and tugging his hair. Still he doesn’t stop until my orgasm

comes and goes. Only then does he rise and grab the cup of tea I had prepared for him. He takes his seat and sips.

“You know you don’t have to do that every time,” I say, dishing stew into a bowl for him.

“Do you wish me not to?”

“I didn’t say that either,” I say.

“It brings you pleasure?”

“Yes, of course it does,” I say.

“It brings me pleasure also,” he says. “All day I am gone doing my duty, my thoughts are on returning to you. You are my everything. All that I want.”

“And you’re all I want,” I say. I sit across from him with my own bowl. We eat in comfortable silence for a little bit. “How was your day? Any progress?”

I don’t specify what I’m asking about and don’t have to because he knows. Even here in our home we talk in careful code, never spelling out our true thoughts. I’ve become almost as paranoid as he is because there really are people listening everywhere.

“Yes, I think so,” he says. “There is always hope.”

His eyes tell me more of the tale than his words. He met with the resistance and they are forming a plan, but it’s not done yet. We finish our meal and he puts the dishes away, helping to wash them with me. When we finish we cuddle together in our bed and he tells me stories.

“When will the Union be?” I ask.

“The Shaman hasn’t said and I have not asked,” he says. “Perhaps he was distracted and forgot.”

“Do you believe that?” I ask.

He grunts noncommittally. I slide my hand under the blanket and grab his cock, idly stroking it. He groans in pleasure and the rest of our evening is filled with making love.

Tomorrow is another day. And here, in our bed, I am as happy as I have ever been.

# EPILOGUE

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## ROSALIND

“*T*wenty names,” Lynn says.

“I want five,” I say.

“Lottery?” Lynn asks.

“That will assure the hand of fate is involved in those chosen,” Visidion says.

I give him a smile. I still do not put my trust in fate as he does, but I love him and respect that he does. I wish I could place my trust into fate, it would be much easier. In my experience fate responds best when I control all the possible outcomes and allow for them.

“Make it so,” I command.

Lynn nods, gathers the papers into her arms and leaves my office. I walk over to the cabinet and pour two cups of tea, one for myself and one for Visidion. He accepts the tea with a murmur of gratitude.

“This is the best we can do, my treasure,” he says softly.

“No, it’s not good enough,” I say, taking a sip of tea.

He doesn’t say anything as he sips. Watching over the rim of his cup. He doesn’t have to say the words, I know what he is thinking. I resume my seat behind my desk and he moves to stand behind me, setting his tea down and massaging my shoulders.

“Tajss provides,” he says.

“So you say,” I say.

“Has she not?”

“Has she? Or have I? Am I sending these girls to their deaths?”

“They accepted Annalise,” he says. “You worry they will not accept the newcomers?”

“I never underestimate a fanatic,” she says. “I made that mistake with Gershom. I will not do it again.”

“And you are not, my love,” he says. “We are preparing in every way possible, but some things we have to leave up to the fate.”

“Not if I can help it,” I say, drumming my fingers on the desk.

“Have you thought about a name?” he asks.

“What?” I stop my fingers, jerking my head to look at him.

“A name,” he says. “You are entering the second trimester. We agreed that we would wait this long to decide on a name. Have you thought of one?”

The smile on his face, the gleam in his eyes, he thinks he is clever, but I know his tactic. Changing directions, getting me to shift my focus. Visidion prefers an ambush to a direct attack always, and this is but one of the many, many reasons I am so deeply in love with him.

“I haven’t given it any thought... yet,” I say.

“A strong name,” he says. “Our child needs a name that means strength. Yet it should honor your people and mine.”

“Illadon is the first,” I muse.

“Yes,” Visidion agrees. “And he is a fine child. But our child is born of the leaders of two peoples and will inherit our roles.”

“You, my love, are distracting me from my concerns.”

“Am I?” he asks, sipping the tea and smiling. “Is it a bad thing?”

I pick up the piece of paper on my desk with the twenty names. All volunteers. All willing to put themselves at

extreme risk for what? Hope. I hold it up between us.

“They will go on my command,” I say.

“Yes,” he nods. “They will because they follow you. They trust you Rosalind and know that you are doing the best you can. Your people follow you, not blindly, but by choice.”

“Do they? Do they have a choice? After all that’s happened?”

“Yes, my love,” he says. “You are anointed by Tajss.”

“Bah,” I shake my head. “I do not believe that.”

“I know,” he says, taking my hand in his and squeezing. His thumb draws small circles on the back. “And that is okay, because Tajss believes in you.”

I close my eyes and shake my head.

“Adama,” I say.

“I do not know this word,” he says.

“It’s an ancient word, it means soil,” I say. “It means earth. An honor to our past and a symbol of our future.”

“Adama,” he says, rolling the word off of his tongue several times. At last he nods. “I like this name. Is it for a male or a female?”

“It is a male name,” I say.

“And what if our child is a female?”

I stare at the list of names. The list of twenty human female volunteers who are offering themselves up to be ‘captured’ by the Urr’ki. This plan has to work. If this war comes it will set us back a generation. Maybe two.

“It is not,” I say, not taking my eyes off the name.

“You know this?” he asks.

I look at Visidion and I smile. “Tajss provides.”

He laughs then leans in and kisses me.

“Tajss provides,” he says.

His kisses become insistent. I set the names to one side and take my lover in my arms. I treasure every moment with him more than I can ever put into words. Only in him do I find the strength to do what must be done.

The volunteers will go soon. I have to stop this war so we can prepare for the one I know is coming. But for tonight, there is only Visidion and I.

Tajss provides.

THE END

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If you missed it, start at the beginning with [Dragon's Baby \(Red Planet Dragons of Tajss Book 1\)](#).

If you want to know more about how the survivors arrived on Tajss read the prequel [Red Planet Dragons of Tajss \(Red Planet Jungle\)](#).

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today bestselling author Miranda Martin writes fantasy and scifi romance featuring heroes with out-of-this-world anatomy that readers call ‘larger than life’ and smart heroines destined to save the world. As a little girl, she would sneak off with her nose in a book, dreaming of magical realms. Today she brings those fantasies to life and adores every fan who chooses to live in them for a while.

Though born and raised in southern Virginia, Miranda Martin is a veteran who’s traveled to places like Korea, Hawaii, and good ‘ole Texas. She’s since settled in Kansas, the heart of America, with her husband and daughters, a cat, and wishes for a pet dragon or unicorn. When she’s not writing, you can still find her tucked away somewhere with a warm blanket and her nose in a book.

*Get in touch!*

[mirandamartinromance.com](http://mirandamartinromance.com)

[miranda@mirandamartinromance.com](mailto:miranda@mirandamartinromance.com)

