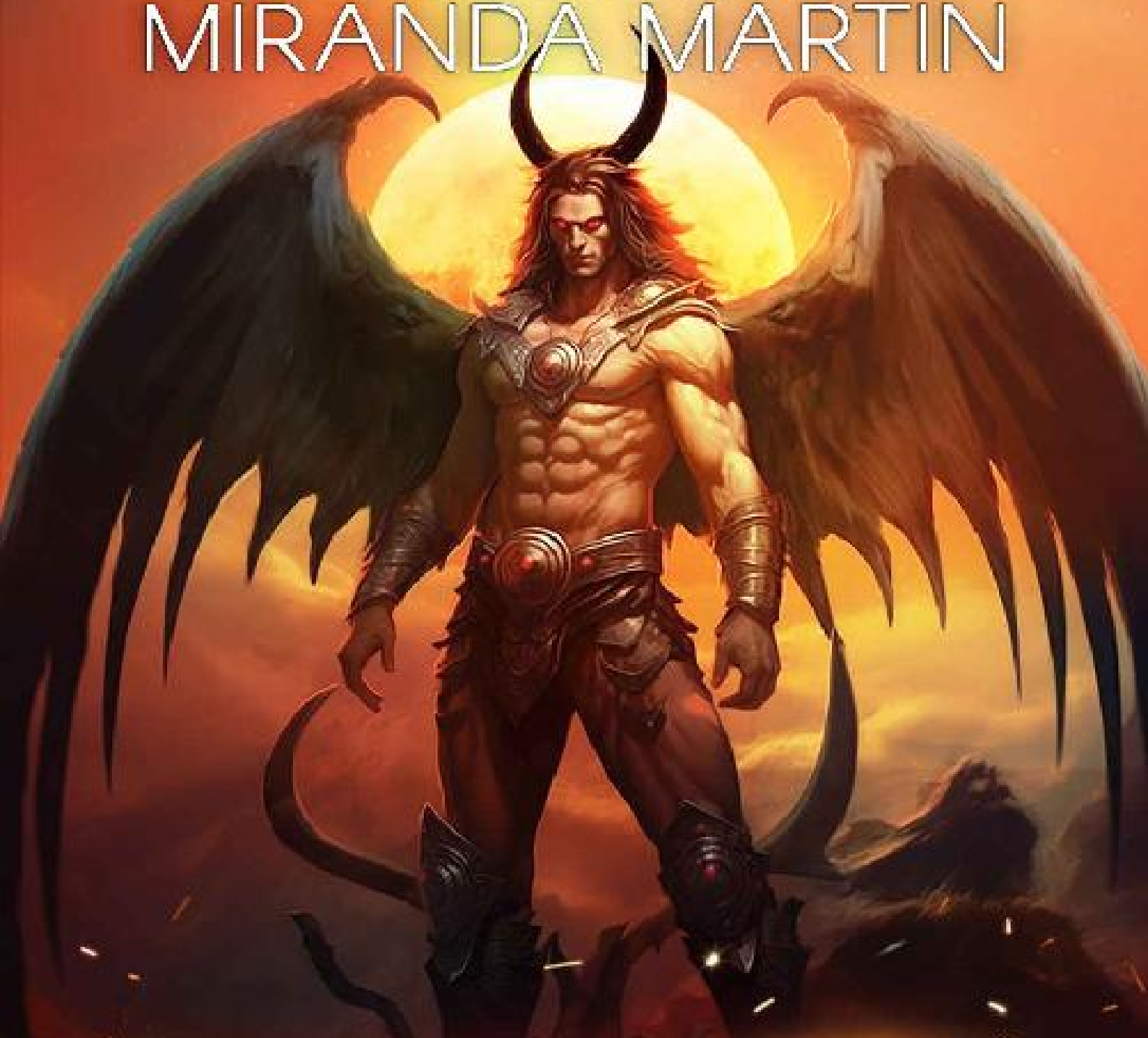


USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MIRANDA MARTIN



DRAGON'S SECRET BABY

RED PLANET DRAGONS OF TAJSS

DRAGON'S SECRET BABY

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

MIRANDA MARTIN

CONTENTS

[Get A Free Book!](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Join Miranda's Reader List](#)

[Also by Miranda Martin](#)

[About the Author](#)

Copyright © 2023 Miranda Martin
All rights reserved.

GET A FREE BOOK!

BE THE FIRST TO KNOW WHEN THE NEXT RED
PLANET DRAGONS OF TAJSS STORY IS OUT!



[CLICK HERE](#)

TAMARA

“*I* don’t feel like it, okay?” I snap.

Kri’sin frowns. It’s weird when he frowns, in a weird but kind of good way. When he frowns his forehead wrinkles, like anyone’s does, but he has horns and those pull down too, making them look more prominent. Odd, but interesting. If I wasn’t so annoyed by him right now it would lift my spirits.

It’s not him. Or not only him. Everything is annoying. Frustration with life, I guess, I don’t know.

“But she is your friend,” he says, shaking his head and making his wings rustle, causing a leathery, raspy sound.

“And?” I ask, placing one hand on my hip while arching an eyebrow in defiance of his logic.

His frown deepens, pulling his horns down further. Their points catch the light, refracting it, which causes tiny rainbows to dance around them. I can’t keep myself from staring. It’s such an incongruous, unreal moment, counterposing against the boiling anger that seethes in my head.

My big, handsome, alien dragon-man, replete with scales, wings, a tail, and oh so many muscles, literally has rainbows dancing off his horns. It’s magically surreal. Much like all my life has been ever since our generation ship crashed on this desert hell called Tajss.

Kri’sin shakes his head. His mouth opens then snaps shut. He’s smart enough to know that what he says next will matter. As irrationally angry as I am, and I know full well this is

irrational, I still care deeply about him and appreciate his intelligence. He scratches his head behind his left horn and his arm blocks the light enough to stop the rainbows.

Damn. I was enjoying those. It made him look almost like he should be in an old Earth vid they called cartoons. Comical, sweet, and cute.

“Do you not wish to spend time with your friend? Is there something else you need?”

“I do not *need* anything. Didn’t I already say that?” I ask, throwing my hands up in exasperation. We’ve been over this ground a dozen times and I can’t get him to understand. “I don’t feel like it, okay?”

He takes a step forward and I step back. I don’t know why I do it. I don’t think it through or plan it in any way, it just happens, but the moment it does I see the pain on his face. Kri’sin, for all his values, will never make a poker player. His face is like an open book.

“Have I done something wrong?” he asks, his voice resonating with pain.

Or maybe I’m imagining it. How does a voice resonate with pain? Gah, what is wrong with me? This is why I’ve never settled into a relationship. Who discusses your feelings with someone?

Well, I do, no I did, with my besties, but they’re different. That’s what we do for each other. And I know if I talked to them about this, they’d understand. Unlike Kri’sin, whom I’m clearly only confusing.

But I can’t talk to them. Not at this dinner. Tonight is supposed to be about Abs and Zat’an. It’s her first “meal” since she found her love. And no, it’s not a ‘hook-up’ it’s the real deal. I’m happy for her. Truly.

Yet I’m angry. Not at her. At life, at this place, at the universe. It’s a scratching, clawing thing in my brain that won’t stop. Everything is either at best annoying or at worst downright pissing me off. I can barely sit. Even that causes an itching in

my head that makes me want to reach inside my skull and rend it apart.

And now Kri'sin wants to know if it's him. And it's not. Not really. But how do I say any of this? What words convey what I'm feeling? I shake my head and then rub my temples.

"No. Yes. Maybe. I don't know," I say, shrugging.

He steps closer again and this time I don't move away. I want to, on some deeply instinctual level, but I catch it before my body acts without thinking and force myself to stay in place. Gently, he places his hands on my shoulders and crouches until we're at eye level. He's not quite on his knees, but close enough. And even this is frustrating and adds to my anger.

Why am I so short? Why is he so tall? Why can't we be closer in height? Ugh.

"How do I help?" he asks.

I stare into the warmth of his soft brown eyes, and they magically ease my frustration. It's only for a moment I realize, but it's something at least.

"I don't know Kri'sin," I say. "It's not you. It's me. I don't know why I'm being like this. Just, I don't know, just give me some space, okay?"

"If this is what you desire, then I will make it so."

And there it is. Anything I want, he'll do it. Period. No questions asked, if I desire it, it's mine. How can even that be irritating? Which brings me back to all that I am currently feeling and dealing with is absolutely irrational. Meaning, thusly, that I'm the one who's wrong.

Broken. Her voice whispers in my head but I ignore it, though it makes me mad. Again. Or more. Or whatever.

"No," I shake my head. "This is... this is stupid. I'm sorry." I sigh, shake my head, run my hands through my hair then change my mind. "Fine. Let's go to the stupid dinner."

"I will make excuses for you," he offers.

Something in my head snaps. Why can't he just let me be? He must see it on my face because the half-smile that was forming on his face disappears and turns into a frown.

"I said I would go," I say.

"But you do not wish to, I will—"

"Did I not say let's go?" I snap, cutting him off. "Do I need to spell it out?"

My mouth is running and saying awful things and yet the entire time it feels like I'm a spectator in my head. I don't mean these hurtful things, but there they are. Flying out of my mouth. Each word cutting him like hundreds of papercuts.

He lowers his head then rises and takes a step back. My chest aches with regret. I want to apologize. I try, it forms in my head, but my mouth won't let it out. Maybe I'm going crazy. What is wrong with me?

"I am sorry," he says. "I did not mean to upset you."

I take a deep breath and then rub my face while holding it. I scratch my head and exhale heavily.

"No, Kri'sin, I'm sorry. I'm off, maybe I'm sick or something, but I don't mean that. Let's go, okay? I'd like to get this over with."

He nods and then leads the way out of his room. He holds the heavy leather door aside for me to pass through then steps out behind me. He pulls a torch off the wall and with a single, sharp exhale belches a ball of fire to light it. I will never, in all my life, get used to that. It's incredible. Strange, but incredible.

He stops, staring at the ground, then turns his head towards me. My stomach tightens which is almost immediately followed by a wave of nausea. I swallow hard.

"We do not have to go," he says softly.

A simple statement. Soft-spoken and gentle as he always has been. It soothes the irrational desire to rage at everything in a way nothing else has. I touch his arm and smile. The first genuine smile I've had on my face for what feels like days.

“We need to,” I say. “But Kri’sin, thank you.”

He hesitates, clearly thinking of how to handle this, but then he nods gently and leads the way. I walk at his side thinking about excuses to leave early without hurting my friends’ feelings.

TAMARA

I take the lead and enter Abigail's home first. The clatter of dishes welcomes me as soon as I walk into the room. It fills the room with a homey kind of warmth that is something I don't think I've ever really felt before. Abs, Annalise, and I have been best friends and roommates for pretty much ever, but on the ship, we never had meals like this.

We had dinner, but it was always an ad-hoc affair. There were periods when we'd try to be all formal about it and each of us take a night to cook but that would fall apart within a week or two of trying it.

We were happy. The three of us. Enjoying our lives and each other. My sisters, not by blood, but by choice and experience. When I was little, I spent more time in one or the other of their homes than I did in my own. My mom was... special.

The slightly queasy feeling continues to linger and right below that is a short fuse to a raging temper. Maybe if I understood what was happening with that, I could control it but all I know is something is off. I don't know what but it's something inside of me.

Abs is clearly nervous. She has an even worse poker face than Kri'sin. I walk right over and pull her into a hug.

"Are you okay?" she whispers in my ear.

Damn, my own poker face must suck too. Involuntarily I glance over my shoulder at Kri'sin. He's standing just inside

the door with his arms crossed over his wide chest. The pose looks deliberate. Set to show off his bulging muscles and he's standing extra straight with his head tilted slightly back.

Irritation crawls through my head. He's showing off for Zat'an. No matter how much I've asked he still feels the need to poke that bear. Why he can't accept that done is done I don't understand and I'm not sure I want to. All I know for sure is that it makes me angry.

No, I'm being irrational again. I don't know if that's what he's doing. It could only be in my head. He's just standing there and here I am being an utter bitch and judging the way he stands? Jeez Tamara, chill.

I force myself to smile and nod to Abigail. She grabs my hand and meets my gaze, not needing to speak because she knows. She always knows. That's the magic of the three of us. There is literally no hiding anything from each other because we all know each other so well.

Something in my chest softens and warmth flushes my skin. She loves me. I know it, she knows it. We love each other in a way that nothing can tear apart. And that makes me happy because I realize now I wasn't sure.

Abs was the only one of the three of us who'd never had a boyfriend or a lover. I don't think I'd put it into words, but I was worried now that she had Zat'an, and he was her fated mate or whatever that she'd no longer need us. I shrug and shake my head.

"It's fine," I say. "Seriously, not tonight. This is your night."

"You're sure?" Abigail asks.

I nod and my smile transforms from forced to a genuine one. She does that. Here in this moment, which is supposed to be all about her, she doesn't hesitate to put my petty concerns above hers. If that's not love, then what is?

She smiles, accepting my truth, and lets go of my hands. Looking around the room I can see that Abs has done a stunning job of creating this meal. The table has candles in crude stone holders, each carefully placed for maximum effect.

Every place is set exactly, ready for us to take our seats. Annalise walks up and throws her arm over my shoulders, leaning in close.

“Can you believe this?” she whispers.

“No,” I shake my head. “When Abs falls, she falls hard, huh?”

“You’re telling me,” she laughs. “Look how happy she is. She’s glowing!”

I look over at Abs and Annalise is right. Abs does have a glow on her cheeks. She’s always been a cheerful person, but this is something more. The way her eyes constantly dart to Zat’an. The way he follows her closely, always right there to jump in and help. The two of them look like they are made for one another.

Kri’sin, on the other hand, is stiff and uncomfortable. He and I exchange glances but nothing like Zat’an and Abs. I like him and I’m not a fool, I know I like him a lot. But he’s also a bit much.

“You okay?” Annalise asks, catching my side glance at Kri’sin
I’m sure.

“Yeah, great,” I say.

“Liar,” she says.

I force my smile and shake my head.

“It will be fine,” I say. “Tonight is Abs, put it off till later, okay?”

She squeezes me in her arm and it’s all the acknowledgment I need. She gets it and I do too. There is no way I’m going to let my minor irritations disrupt all of Abs’ hard work. For one night at least I can put off being a needy, selfish bitch.

“Okay, who’s hungry?” Abigail asks.

She dashes around the table uncovering dishes as she asks. The smells are delicious. Then, out of nowhere, a wave of nausea crashes over me so hard I almost lose it. I’m hot, sweaty, and shaking. I turn away from the food, blocking my

nose between thumb and forefinger, and breathing through my mouth.

“Tamara,” Kri’sin says, placing his hand on the small of my back and I jump away. It’s not a thought-out thing, purely a reaction. “I am sorry. Are you okay?”

He’s whispering but concerned. I shake my head and as fast as it came, the nausea is gone. But, unfortunately, the irritation with him isn’t it. It’s stupid, but it feels like this is all his fault. Even though I don’t know what this is.

“Fine,” I snap.

I turn back to the table and take my seat before anyone else notices that I’m having an issue. Kri’sin tries to hold my chair for me as I sit but I don’t want his help. I don’t need it and the fact that he assumes I do piles onto the frustration that is boiling in my guts.

I jerk the chair under my butt, pulling it up to the table. He takes his seat at my side without a word. There is an assortment of food laid out. Succulent looking meat, don’t ask what it’s from because you don’t want to know, and two different steamed vegetables that glisten with some kind of glaze. Rounding the meal out is a tossed salad that isn’t predominantly green like it would have been on the ship, but a rich, vibrant blue leaf mixed with some red and some white leafy vegetables.

I fill my plate and eat with a ravenous hunger that belies I was so nauseous as to almost throw up only a moment ago. I tear through the food barely taking time to chew, but I don’t miss how delicious it is.

Everyone compliments Abs between rounds of chewing, but the conversation is minimal. We’re too busy enjoying the meal to take time to talk. I’m masticating a piece of meat with my hand resting next to my plate when Kri’sin lays his on top of mine.

Anger flashes white hot. Stupid, unreasonable, but I act out in a flash, jerking my hand away then try to cover what I did by picking up my fork and shaking my head.

Kri'sin looks so incredibly hurt, and I immediately feel bad. Why did I do that? What is wrong with me? I'm acting on impulses and without thought or care until the aftermath when I regret it. It feels like I'm going a little crazy, losing any impulse control.

I pat his leg under the table, and it seems to ease the pain I've caused but I am sure it's not fixed. I have to get myself under control.

"Okay Abs," Annalise says as the clatter of utensils settles. I stab a final piece of salad with my fork and shove it in my mouth. "Let's hear it."

Abs clears her throat as all our eyes land on her. She's nervous but hiding it well. I don't miss it because I know her as well as I know myself. Probably better than I know myself, at least the way I've been acting the last few days.

"It's true, I," she pauses, clears her throat, and smiles at Zat'an. "No, we have something to share."

"We know, could you not drag it out any longer? The suspense is killing me!" Annalise shouts and I can't keep myself from laughing.

"I'm pregnant," Abs blurts out and her cheeks flush bright red while she stares at her plate.

I'm stunned. How did I miss this? Of course, she is. The glow and her and Zat'an are new to each other, which means they're doing a lot of time in bed, I'm sure. And I didn't ever talk to her about how to prevent such a thing. I never thought of it.

"No, really?" Annalise asks, using her mocking tones. "I mean, I can't believe it. How does such a thing happen?"

Annalise is laughing and I dutifully chuckle at her joke.

"I mean—" Abigail starts, but Annalise cuts her off.

"I'm kidding," Annalise says. "Congratulations! This is awesome. We're going to be Aunts, Tams."

"Yes, congrats, Abs. I'm happy for you," I say, doing my best to feign joy despite the fact that in truth I'm scared.

The crossbreed babies are obviously possible, there are plenty of them around, but the birthing process is really hard on the mother. Their gestation period is longer, and the last few months will leave her bedridden. All on top of the natural dangers of pregnancy with limited medical care available.

I look at Kri'sin, the thought pounding in my head. *What if I get pregnant? I can't be a mother. I'd be terrible at it. Thanks Mom. You were the perfect bad example, but that stuff is hereditary, isn't it? She didn't love me and maybe she couldn't?*

Kri'sin has a small smile on his face, but it fades when our eyes lock, turning into a frown.

"Congratulations," Kri'sin says, his voice stiff and tension is clear in it. "You are both very lucky."

"I'm sorry, if you'll excuse me," I say, rising from the table.

"Tams, are you okay?" Abigail asks, getting up too.

"I'm fine," I say, motioning for her to stay. I walk towards the door, but Abigail and Annalise are right behind me.

"Tamara," Abigail says.

I pause and look over my shoulder. My chest feels like it's exploding when I see the concern on my two best friends' faces. I smile, for real, and pull her into a hug, squeezing for all I'm worth.

"Seriously," I whisper, holding out my other arm to embrace Annalise as well. "I love you guys. Congratulations. I am, truly, very happy for you."

"But... don't leave," Abigail says.

"I'm not feeling well, that's all," I say. "I need to lie down. Don't worry."

"Are you sure?" Annalise asks. "I can walk you home."

"No," Tamara says. "I'll be fine. Just need to rest."

I squeeze them both tighter and hold on for a long moment. When I let them go the concern is still on their faces but there

is also resolve. They know me as well as I know them. I look past them and see Kri'sin standing at the table.

He looks lost. Hurt. And unsure. It's not a good look on him because I doubt he's ever felt any of it before. My chest constricts and part of me wants to run over and give him a big hug. To hold him and make that pain go away.

Then a fresh wave of nausea grips my stomach and the last thing I'm going to do is lose it here in front of everyone. I rush out the door into the cooler air outside the room. The heavy leather door falls into place with a swish and it sounds like the sweeping away of all that was before.

KRI'SIN

I watch her walk out the door and it feels as if the world is breaking. The air is too thick to breathe and cold. So cold that I cannot move. I can barely form a thought.

I should follow. But she pushed me away and I should not transgress with her again. She is mine. I know this, in my heart and in my soul, but that does not mean I own her. She is hers. Brilliant, beautiful, perfect in every way and I have no claim to her she does not willingly give.

Which she clearly has not, not now.

The bijass, that red fog of primal instincts and rage, surges with the racing of my hearts. It crashes against my thoughts, trying to override rationality. The bijass wants domination. To force the world and everything in it to submit but even more it demands I protect what is mine. Her. I must protect her. Care for her. Provide for her. She is everything.

“Females, especially human ones, are unique,” Zat’an says, suddenly at my shoulder.

I growl, angry not so much at him but at the fact he walked this close, and I did not notice his approach. If he was an enemy, I would be dead. And he is almost one. A rival that I did not truly vanquish in the arena and all know it.

“I do not understand your words, old one,” I say. “There is nothing wrong with my female. She is perfect as she is.”

He stares with his one good eye. The other, milky one remains unfocused but somehow it is more piercing than his good one.

The scars on his face, broken horn, and his graying hair belie the strength I know he still has. The challenge between us remains unresolved. I did not dominate him in the arena. Not truly. Fully. His avoidance of that has left me unsatisfied and I would like nothing more than to challenge him. But I won't.

I am promoted and have my place in society. He has his, an honorary position, one created for an old one who is too proud to take the old ones' walk as he should.

"Your female left," he says at last. "I thought perhaps a word was in order."

"When I need your words, *old one*," I pour all my anger and contempt both at him and my entire situation with Tamara into the two words making them as derogatory as I possibly can, "I will ask for them."

I turn my back and walk across the room. I should leave, but where would I go?

Chase her down. Make her see. Protect her.

No, that is the *bijass*. She needs her space. She knows enough to not go outside the safe areas. She will be fine. I must respect her desire to be alone.

"How about dessert?" Abigail asks.

My stomach grumbles as I see her reveal a bowl full of xara berries mixed with slices of lychnara fruits. The plump berries glisten with juice from the lychnara making my mouth water. I growl in excitement and return to my place at the table.

The bowl passes around and Annalise hands it to me. I scoop a serving onto my plate then enjoy the fruit. It passes some time while the others make small talk. I try to participate but my thoughts are on Tamara which makes it hard to focus and follow the topics of discussion.

She will be okay. She is safe. I am respecting her. This is the right thing to do.

I tell myself this over and over in what seems to be a vain hope that I will believe it. In truth, I do not know if what I am doing is right. What do I know about love? Or of females? I

cannot recall the last time I saw one, much less having ever been in love before.

And this is love.

That I am sure of. The moment I saw her I knew it. My stomach tightened, my balls ached, and my chest felt compressed yet expansive. As if a massive hand was crushing me, but then it was gone and I was freed into a new universe. All the while my dragon roared, making my blood thunder in my ears as it ran hot.

I would do anything for her. Whatever she wants, needs, or desires I will make happen. And that is what I am doing. I think. I hope.

I look across the table at Zat'an. How can he be so at ease? The way he interacts with his mate is easy, smooth, and effortless. He cannot be more worthy than I. He is old, broken, and a failure, yet when they look at each other there is no doubting the connection. The love between them.

Only occasionally has Tamara looked at me like Abigail looks at him. Involuntarily I clench my hand into a fist so tight my claws dig into my palms. It is not fair. He must know some secret I do not. He is old enough he probably knew females before they were all lost.

He's so old he probably dug the original caverns when our people retreated from the surface. A growl slips free and no one at the table misses it. Anger flashes red across my thoughts as they all look. I want to yell at them. I want to hit Zat'an. Punish him for having all that I want and desire, for being so smooth where I am fumbling.

Which is stupid. I am not angry at him. He has done nothing wrong. No, he is only a target to place my irrationality on, to focus the bijass. I will not, because that would be stupid. I push aside the anger, though it resists, and shake my head.

"This is very delicious," I say, attempting to play off my angry growl as one of pleasure.

I fool no one, but they let it go. I am grateful for that at least. Annalise clears the dishes from the desert then takes the seat at

my side. Tamara's seat.

She is okay. She is fine.

“So, Kri'sin,” Annalise says. “How is your new position? What do you have to do?”

I stare at her uncomprehending her words. It takes a moment for me to process them, and I know it's taking too long because the three of them are staring but my thoughts are on Tamara, not my duties.

“It is fine,” I say at last.

“Fine, right,” she nods. “What is it you have to do?”

Irritation is like an itch inside my skull. I do not want to have this conversation; I want to find Tamara. I want to hold her in my arms, wrap my tail around her waist and squeeze her close until we are one.

Annalise stares with her bright eyes and easy smile. She reaches one hand over and lays it on top of mine where it rests on the table. I stare at her hand on top of mine. It is a friendly gesture clearly carrying no further intent. Her hand is small, tiny fingers that look as if they could belong to a child. Her skin is pale against my dusky scales. Slowly I slide my hand out from under hers then rise from my seat.

“You will please excuse me,” I say. “This was a very lovely meal. Thank you.”

I move to the door before any of them can speak. I do not want to be bothered nor be a burden on them. They mean well and it is not their fault that Tamara and I are having this difficulty.

Outside the room I take a deep breath of the cool, humid air and it eases the irritation. I give myself a moment to let my eyes adjust to the dimness. Torches dot the walkway at an acceptable interval for a Zmaj. Humans need more light than we do to see, but the adjustment from the brightly lit room to the normal outside does take a moment.

The leather door rasps on the floor as it is pulled aside. I look over my shoulder with a grimace. What part of I want to be alone was not clear in what I said?

“Are you okay?” Annalise asks.

I stare. Her face is earnest, and her concern is clear. Superficial words flash and I almost say them. Platitudes of yes, I am fine and that there is nothing wrong, but they would all be lies.

“No,” I admit.

It feels as if the weight of the mountain itself crushes onto my shoulders with the admission. I can barely take my next breath because of it. Annalise frowns as she nods in response.

“Sometimes she needs some space,” she says.

“I understand,” I say, but that is another lie. I do not. I would help her with anything. Why does she not tell me what she is going through?

“Tams is...” she sighs and shakes her head. “She had a rough childhood. I don’t know what’s going on, not for sure, but you have to understand that. Her mom...” She trails off, raising her hands then dropping them helplessly back to her side. “She will come around. There are times she needs to work things out in her own head.”

I nod and give my own sigh.

“Thank you,” I say.

“She does care about you, I see it and so does Abs,” she says. “She’s doing the best she can.”

A lump forms in my throat as pressure builds in my head. It is an effort of will not to grab the sides of my head to keep it from exploding. I slap my tail on the ground struggling to relieve the pain by giving myself something else to think about.

“Yes,” I say, but even my voice sounds tight, and I cannot get anymore words out.

“She will work it out,” Annalise says. “We’ll help her. I promise.”

There is nothing more to say and even if there was I do not think I could speak it. I nod then we are staring at one another

until it feels awkward and uncomfortable. I shrug and turn but there is only one thing on my mind. I need to find Tamara.

Even if I do not approach her, because I do want to give her space, I must see that she is okay. The underground is not without its dangers, and I must know she is safe.

TAMARA

The fresh air free of the smells of food, no matter how delicious it may or may not be, helps. My stomach calms as the beads of sweat dry.

Breathing deeply, I walk down the path that circles the hub of our new home. When I reach the room that I share with Anna and Abs, well until Abs moved out, I pause with one hand on the heavy leather door. I could go in but then what?

Restless energy fills me. I don't want to sit still. If we were home, back in the City, I would take a walk. I guess there's nothing stopping me from doing that here too. As long as I stay inside the area where the Cavern Zmaj protects and guards I will be fine. Or so I think.

I drop the makeshift door and let my feet carry me away while my thoughts wander. I'm struggling to come to terms with my own irrationality. I won't deny I've always had a temper, but this goes way beyond that.

A temper is in response to specific things that push my buttons. This is more nuts. I can't even tell what is going to set me off. Or why. Or how long. Yesterday I was a crying mess because I couldn't find my hairbrush. If Annalise hadn't found where I had left it in a box for some stupid reason, I don't know if I would have ever gotten over it. This is not normal. Something is wrong, but what?

It could be...

No. I cut that thought off before it can fully form, letting it remain a vague concept that I refuse to acknowledge. There is no way. I'm too careful about that. Of course, I've been hooking up with Kri'sin, but I make him pull out to finish. And I can't be. I'm not right for that. I'd be a wreck, terrible even.

A soft blue glow pulls me down the hall. It's pretty and I have nothing better to do than explore. Besides anything to put my attention outside my own head is welcome at this point. The opening to this room is wide, twice as big as most. Peeking in I see a massive cavern that is filled with blooming plants. More plants than I've seen since we crashed onto Tajss.

They are incredible. Beautiful. Some of the plants glow with their own luminescence which is the source of the light that attracted me in the first place. There are what look like hundreds of squares raised from the floor, and each has different plants growing in it.

A lone Zmaj is walking down the aisles between the squares, inspecting, or guarding, I'm not sure. He sees me in the doorway and walks over, coming to a stop with his arms crossed over his chest.

"What?" he asks, his voice so deep it rumbles in my chest.

Instinctively I take a step back while crossing my arms over my belly.

"I am looking," I say.

"I can see that," he says with a grunt. "Why?"

He's big, grumpy, and obviously doesn't want me here, but that is just enough to push my buttons and piss me off.

"Why? What difference does it make to you why?"

"Because I am in charge here," he snaps, dropping his hands to his side as he raises his voice. "The farm is under my care, and I don't need any of your *kind* stumbling around here messing things up more than you already do."

"I'm not messing up anything, I'm looking," I say, raising my voice to match his. I don't miss the derision in his saying my

kind either.

“Well look somewhere else. You’re disturbing my plants.”

We glare at one another, neither of us willing to back down. My cheeks are burning, and my heart is thundering but there is no way I’m going to let him win. I may not know how to handle Kri’sin right now, but this, this I can win.

“I,” I pause for dramatic effect. “Am going to keep on looking.” He growls, eyes narrowing. “And if your plants are affected by my look, then I would say you are one piss poor gardener, aren’t you?”

His eyes widen and his mouth forms an o of surprise. A small smile plays on my lips, but I school my face to hide it, no matter that I’m taking a mental victory lap for scoring points on this bonehead.

“You dare,” he says, barely above a whisper.

“Dare? Done, is the word you’re looking for.”

“Why I ought to—”

“Ought to what? Go ahead, tell me what you ought to do.”

He’s so angry he’s shaking and why I don’t know any more than I understand anything this past week or so, but it makes me happy. Warmth floods my limbs and chemicals dump into my brain making me feel giddy with joy.

“You touch anything, one leaf, and I’ll bodily throw you out of here.”

“Fine, I agree to your terms.”

He glares a moment longer than gives a sharp nod and storms away. I watch him go as the sense of satisfaction comes. I cling to this feeling. I need it. It’s warm and comfortable and understandable, unlike everything else I’ve been experiencing of late.

The sense fades too fast as I walk into the farm. In its wake is the same antsy, uncomfortable feeling that drove me to come here in the first place. A desire to move, but to sit still at the same time.

There are so many different plants, some of them I recognize from the food we've been eating. Others I don't know if I've ever seen. Gorgeous colors that are vibrantly exciting. I keep my word, not touching anything, but I do pause often to smell.

The scent of dirt, fertilizer, and the fragrancy of the flowering plants at first is too much. It begins as a muddy mix but the longer I wander the easier it becomes to separate the mishmash into distinct scents.

I'm leaning over a rich orange flower with bright gold streaks in its petals when I hear footsteps approaching. I look over and my heart leaps the moment I see Kri'sin. I want to apologize, to run into his arms, I want him to take me home, make love, then hold me tight until at last I fall asleep.

I want to, but the look on his face turns the warm and kind thoughts almost immediately. He's frowning so deeply that the line is forming between his eyebrows. He is almost running down the rows.

"Tamara," he says.

"Hi," I say.

"You are here, you are safe," he says, looking around. I glance around too but don't see any sign of the Zmaj who was here.

"Of course I am," I say. He opens his mouth, snaps it shut, raises his hands between us then drops them. The entire time he stares as if he can't make up his mind if he's angry or happy. And right then my own irrationality comes again. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"You are a female, alone."

"And?" I ask, arching one eyebrow as I cross my arms over my chest. "Are you saying I'm too stupid to be left alone?"

"No," he says, shaking his head.

"It sure seems that way," I say. "Are the caverns not safe here? There is no attack happening. Am I not free to explore the civilized areas?"

"Yes, of course," he says. "I was—"

“Worried? Right, that’s what you’re going to say.”

“Yes. I felt fear when I could not find you. I want to know you are safe.”

“Well here I am and I’m fine,” I snap.

“Yes, I see.”

“Good. What else?”

“I have done something wrong,” he says. “But I do not understand. Please. Will you explain?”

The look on his face as much as his words melts my heart. The anger is gone as fast as it came. It’s Kri’sin. He cares, he’s kind, and he’s gentle as the day is long. He doesn’t deserve to be treated like this.

“It’s not...” I trail off trying to process what seems impossible to figure out. Giving up I sigh and shake my head. “I don’t know, Kri’sin. I’m being irrational, I know it, but I can’t seem to stop it. I am sorry. It’s me, not you.”

He moves closer, his hands touching my waist then sliding around and pulling me in close. I lean my head back as our bodies meld together and our lips find their proper place. He kisses gently but with a soft insistence that makes me flush with desire.

As the kiss goes on his arousal is clear too, digging into my lower belly, then as suddenly as it was gone the irrational anger is back. Returning in a flood but this is more than anger. I’m afraid. Of what I don’t clearly know, but all of a sudden the room becomes small. Too small. I’m trapped and all I can think of is I have to get out. Get free.

I pull back from Kri’sin, and he lets me go, though the confusion is clear on his face.

“I’ve got to—I’ve got to go. Now.”

“Tamara, I will walk you home,” he says.

“No, no,” I repeat shaking my head as I back away from him,

He extends his arm towards me and something in my head snaps. I can’t be here, can’t let him touch me, I have to get

away. I turn and I run.

TAMARA

I cannot get a deep enough breathe. I huff air but every breath feels short. The walls of the tunnels are closing in, stealing the air. The compression crushes my chest and no matter how hard I try I can't stop.

I run. Why? Where? I don't know. Away. Away from Kri'sin. Away from everything. Mostly, away from myself. My past.

Nausea comes on like a crashing wave. Cold sweat beading across my face and forcing me at last to stop. I double over, hands on knees, panting as I try to keep from losing it. I lean against the stone wall of the tunnel. It's cool and slightly damp from general condensation, both of which feel great.

My stomach clenches, spasming two then three times before deciding at last it can give me a break. I straighten, resting one hand on the wall to steady myself then pressing my back against it.

"Get it together Tams," I mutter, wiping my face with my sleeve.

I know. I know what this is.

No. It can't be. I shake my head, unwilling to admit I know what's going on with me because it can't be. It can't be that. Of the three of us, I'm the worst. Abs and Anna, their moms, were around. Their moms were more a mom to me than mine ever was. My mom always said she was broken, that she should never have had a kid.

“Don’t ever have kids Tamara,” Mom says, staring at me with her haggard, sunken eyes. “You’re too much like me. I’m sorry. Something in us is broken.”

Tears slip free despite my best effort to hold them back. She tried, I know she did, but she wasn’t well. The meds they gave her didn’t help. Therapy did, a little, but not for long. She even tried going to one of the Ministers of the Faiths and that helped, but again only for a little while.

I tried too. I tried so hard to make her proud of me. To make her love me but it never felt like enough.

I push off the wall as I do the same mentally, pressing the past back into the box where I keep it. It’s over and there’s nothing to be done about it. I shouldn’t have run. That was stupid, especially because I don’t know why I did. Dumb. I’m sure I hurt Kri’sin, which is the last thing I want to do. I have to pull my shit together. This is ridiculous.

I muss my hair, square my shoulders, and stand up straight. Inhale, nice and deep. Hold it, then exhale sharply. Right. There is nothing I cannot do. I haven’t survived this long being a weak, damsel in distress. I’m a bad ass bitch and nothing is going to change that.

I glance down at my belly. Not even this. If this is what I fear it might be. Yes, I’m afraid. Fine. Admitting you’re afraid is the first step, or some bullshit platitude like that. I’ll handle it, that’s what matters.

Something in us is broken. My mom’s voice echoes in my head and cold trickles along my spine making me shiver.

God above, I hope not.

KRI'SIN

*T*urn to my left side, uncomfortable and unable to sleep. Every time I drift towards rest my thoughts return to Tamara. How can I sleep when she is angry and hurting?

The depth of my feelings for her is unbelievable. I may not know her well, but I feel as if I do. I feel her discomfort as if it is my own. I care for my fellow warriors, but it does not compare to this. And then I have known for all my life. The sense is strange and yet, despite its strangeness, it is right. Comfortable.

When I am with her, I want nothing more than to please her. To see her smile and know that she is happy. When I am not, as now, I can do little else but think of her. I struggle to find the right balance because I am obsessed.

I do not mind. Obsession is a natural state, I think, for a Zmaj. Our primal instinct that we struggle to control, what we call the *bijass* is nothing more than obsession. An instinctual obsession, a demand that we dominate, control, and be the best. It is because of this that I think it is how we are meant to be, by whatever creator began the enormity that is the universe and life. But my obsession is not hers. She is not a Zmaj.

When I saw her that first time, while her friend Abigail told me and my friends off, she was watching me, and I could not take my eyes off her either. I thought, at first, it was only a reaction to her beauty. She is, after all, a gorgeous female, despite her being human and not Zmaj.

That attraction is there, deep, and true, even this passing thought of her causes my prime cock to stiffen and my balls to pull tight. Intercourse with her is truly the most pleasurable experience I have ever had.

Now, though, sleep is even further away. How am I to sleep when my cock is throbbing like this? Sighing I slide out of my bunk and free my dick. The fire burns low, mostly coals ready to be brought to life when I need them. I move close to the soft warmth they emit and stroke my cock.

Memories of our times together flutter through my head until I settle on one. Not the last time we made love, but a recent one. I had bent her over so that she was half into my bed alcove. She had spread her arms wide and was gripping the blankets as I slammed into her from behind.

She is so small and tiny. When I first enter her, I always take it slow, letting her body adjust to my girth and size. As each ridge passes into her, she gasps in pleasure. It is an exercise of extreme will to not blow my load at the first of her gasps.

I love them. The way her breath exhales sharp and fast making a soft umph sound as my cock pushes deeper and deeper inside of her until I am fully seated.

Then she wiggles her ass, moving me around inside, and once again my balls throb with the need to release, but I hold them off. I want to experience every single moment of this pleasure. I can't waste an instant.

I run my hands over the round cheeks of her ass. Her skin is so soft. She has no protective scales at all, only skin that is like the touch of the wind. Warm and gentle, feeling so incredibly nice that I could experience that alone forever.

The orgasm comes on fast and my balls pulse as they spew their load onto the dull fire. The coals sizzle as the long streams splash across them until at last I am left spent. An empty, aching, unsatisfying sensation coalesces in my stomach. That was hers and here I am wasting it. Expending it to no end and no pleasure but my own. Now I feel even worse than I did.

Sighing, I tie my pants and return to my bed. I had hoped to find relief but instead I only found further reasons to berate myself. I should go find her.

No, she wants space. I found her in the gardens, and she pushed me away. How much clearer do I need her to be?

Is she done with me?

The thought is haunting. If she were a Zmaj I would know that that could never be, but she is human. Do humans mate for eternity? Does she feel what I do?

Doubts. I don't think that I have ever felt this much uncertainty in my entire life. Until her, life was a simple series of decisions. I knew my destiny from the moment I was old enough to lift a club. I would be a warrior. I would rise the ranks and lead, which I have done. I should be happy and content. My goals have been achieved.

Except for her. She is both happiness and regret together. She is everything and without her I cannot know contentment.

I must have dozed off some because the sounds of the compound waking up and work beginning jerks me to awareness. Sleep or no, I am not rested. If anything, I am more restless than ever. I run my fingers through my hair, pulling out the tangles that formed overnight then go to breakfast.

"Kri'sin," Burshtin calls as I walk into the meal cavern.

He waves and I nod in response. I fill a plate with foods from the selection on the wall, taking an extra helping of the steaming meat the cooks have prepared for the first meal. The succulent scents of it clear some of the fog from my thoughts.

I make my way through the filled and bustling stone tables to where Burshtin and Chanka sit together. They must have been up earlier than I was by far as their plates are almost empty. I take a seat across from the two of them. Wrapping a piece of the meat in a blue leaf I throw it into my mouth before speaking.

I do not have anything to say and hope to discourage conversation for as long as possible. I am tired, irritable, and cannot stop scanning the room hoping to see Tamara. She must

come here for food, this is the only place in the compound. Did I miss her? Has she come already? Is she avoiding me?

“Kri’sin!” Chanka raises his voice cutting into my thoughts.

I shift my gaze back to him and Burshtin and it’s clear that I have missed out on whatever conversation they were having as they are waiting for me to speak. I shrug, hoping this will be enough to keep them moving. It is not. Chanka grunts and Burshtin frowns.

“What?” I ask.

“I was asking what is wrong with you,” Burshtin says. “But I think it is clear.”

“What do you mean what is wrong with me?” I ask around the mouthful of food I am still chewing.

“It is the female,” Chanka says, rolling his eyes.

“And if it is?” I ask, swallowing the half-chewed meat. It catches in my throat and I have to take a drink of the bivo milk to wash it the rest of the way down and avoid choking.

“Why?” Chanka asks. “They are all tiny and too small. If you were to bed one, how do you avoid breaking them? They barely look big enough to fit your cock into.”

“My cock fits just fine,” I snap without thinking.

The two of them exchange a look that is followed by wide grins and laughter.

“You owe me one night of privileges,” Burshtin says slapping the ground with his tail as he laughs.

The bijass surges faster than I can stop it. I jump to my feet, both fists on the table as I lean across putting my face close to both of theirs. I growl and my tail rises above my head.

“You dare.”

“Woah, seriously,” Burshtin says, raising his hands in surrender but Chanka is a hot head too.

He is on his feet, leaning to meet my challenge.

“You want to do this?” he growls.

The dining hall goes silent. Everyone is looking at us. Anger thunders in my ears. Every beating of my hearts is a drum calling me to battle. I stare into his green eyes and see rage surging in him too.

“Stand down,” I say. I speak in a whisper, pitching my voice for him only. “Or meet me in the arena.”

He blinks. It is the first sign of submission. He knows it and I do too. He growls but I have won. The arena is not a threat, but a promise. There is a reason I have been promoted to Gorchym. My skills as a warrior have been proven time and again.

“Fine, Gorchym,” he says, straightening. “I apologize. We did bet, it was a foolish thing to do.”

I shift my gaze to Burshtin who raises his hands in surrender.

“I already gave in,” he says. I growl and cross my arms over my chest. “Fine, I apologize. We should not have been betting on your bedding the human.”

I give a sharp nod of my head then grab my unfinished plate.

“You do not have to leave, it was a joke,” Chanka says.

I glance over my shoulder and debate resuming my seat. They are my friends. We came through the ranks together, bonding in the way only those who have been tested in battle can, but no. I cannot sit with them. Not today. The anger is a sandstorm below my thoughts.

“I am not in the mood for companionship,” I say. “Tomorrow will be a better day.”

Burshtin nods understanding but Chanka scoffs.

“This female has you twisted, Kri’sin.”

“Perhaps you are right,” I say. “But this is the way.”

I stride away from my friend and toss my uneaten food into the compost bin. The buzz of conversation resumes in the meal cavern as it becomes clear there will be no fighting today. No, my fight is not with my friends, it is with myself.

I cannot lose control, not even for her. Especially not for her. If I were to do that then I would likely act on my instinct to find her, claim her, and take her away until she realizes she is mine and no others. That I will not do.

For her, I will wait. No matter how hard it is.

TAMARA

The stone bench is cold and hard on my ass. At least the queasiness has stopped, for now. I close my eyes and rest my head against the wall.

Slipping away from Annalise was almost impossible. She peppered me with questions and concern. It's her and I appreciate it, but I couldn't tell her what I was going to do. As soon as I woke up sick, she was there. Holding my hair back, getting a damp cloth, and fussing over me to no end.

The sickness passes as fast as it comes leaving me exhausted and empty, before I even had breakfast. Which has been the case for the past week or two. The look in Annalise's eyes was more than I could face. She knows, or suspects, which I'm not an idiot, I do too. But suspecting and knowing are two entirely different things.

I don't *want* to know. Because if I know then it's true. And if it's true then I have to face it, head-on. I'm not ready. I can't.

I should tell Kri'sin.

No. Tell him what? I don't know. Not yet.

Something in us is broken.

Shut up mom. Shut the fuck up. I don't need you haunting my memories. Not right now.

"Tamara?" a short woman with light brown hair stands in front of the door to what I assume is an exam room.

She has picked up the clipboard that I put my name on and is looking directly at me. There are only three people in the room so it's not like she singled me out, right? I stand and raise my hand.

"Me."

She smiles and it's a warm, welcoming smile. She pulls the leather that acts as a door aside and holds it so I can go into the next room. In this room there are several lit candles that fill the air with the scent of wax and hints of soot.

It's a plain room. In the center is a massive table which I assume is the examination table. It's sized, as is everything, for a Zmaj. There is a counter literally carved out of the wall on the left side. Vials, jars, and other things are arrayed in careful placement along its length. I inspect the room as I walk to the table, but nothing looks out of place. It almost reminds me of the medical bay on the ship.

"My name is Addison," the woman says. "Go ahead and hop up on the table there."

I do as she instructed. Dangling my legs over the side I stare at the floor. I'm forcing myself to do this but there is a very loud voice in my head insisting I don't. Run away. Ignore it a while longer. If I don't know, then it's not true.

"What brings you here today, Tamara?" she asks.

"I've been nauseous a lot lately," I mutter. My tongue feels too thick, and cobwebs are filling my head.

"Okay, how long has this been going on?"

"Two weeks, give or take," I say.

She nods and makes a note on the clipboard. I glance up but can't meet her dark brown eyes. There is too much kindness in them and for whatever stupid reason I can't accept that.

"Go ahead and lie down," she says.

I do so. The stone of the table is as uncomfortable as anything. I force myself not to squirm. She moves in close and presses her fingers painfully into the sides of my stomach, moving them around. I close my eyes and grit my teeth.

“When was your last cycle?” she asks.

Panic comes rushing in like a stampede of bivo. My voice locks up, my head is swimming, and I want to scream but fortunately my throat is closed off and I can't. I shake my head.

“You're not sure?” she asks then looks up and sees my face. She places her cool hands on my cheek. “You're burning up.”

Stupidly I nod. The room is too hot. Stifling and it feels like its crushing in on me. Addison moves away out of sight and a moment later she returns with a wet cloth. She dabs my face, wiping away the pouring sweat.

“Sorry,” I manage to say.

“Do not be,” she says.

I'm struggling to not hyperventilate myself. All the while I can't quit hearing my mom's voice in my head. Whispering her inane utterings all of which tell me how broken I am because she was.

“A month,” I say answering the question she asked what seems like hours ago.

Addison nods, finishes dabbing my face with the cloth then helps me to sit up. I rest my hands on the edge of the stone table, gripping the lip tightly.

“You are sexually active?”

I nod, the lump in my throat having returned to stop any and all words. Addison is watching and nods that she got it. She frowns.

“You also know what this probably is, don't you?”

She's not mean when she says it. Her voice, her demeanor, everything about her is the very embodiment of kindness. I nod but then the tears come. Unbidden, unwanted, but unstoppable. They pour forth leaving me here sobbing with this stranger.

Tears are weakness Tams. Knock that off, big girls don't cry. They take it like a woman.

I try to stop them as they are making my mother's voice louder than ever, but I can't. At any moment I am sure that Addison is going to berate me, as my mom would have, but through my glistening vision she approaches and pulls me into an embrace.

"There, there," she says softly, holding me tight and patting my back.

"Sorry," I utter as soon as I can, trying to pull out of the embrace.

Addison doesn't try to keep a hold on me. She steps back then hands me the damp cloth. I dab my eyes with it, feeling how swollen they are and I'm sure they're red too. I shake my head.

"What are my options?" I ask.

Addison bites her lower lip for an instant but seems to realize she's doing it and stops as fast as she does.

"I have to ask you something first," she says. My stomach tightens but I nod agreement for her to ask. "Is the father a human?"

I feel the blood rush out of my face. The room spins and I press my hands onto the table to steady myself as I lower my head to try and keep from falling off and planting on my face.

"No," I say and even to myself the word sounds strangled as it fights its way around the blockage in my throat, the thickness of my tongue, and falls between us with the weight of a planet.

She places a reassuring hand on my shoulder. She doesn't say anything for a little while. The two of us quiet and waiting for the coming of I don't know what but in her silence, there is so much kindness that the tears threaten to return.

"It will be okay," she says.

"Will it?"

"Yes," she says. "We're getting very good at caring for the mothers and the children too. I've got plenty of experience."

"Great," I say, an empty sensation of impending doom building in my head.

Experience. Just like you have. Being a broken thing, unable to love. Shut up mom.

“Does he know yet?”

“No.”

Addison nods. “You are familiar with Zmaj culture, are you not?”

“You mean that they’re possessive, demanding, and think they mate for life?”

“That is,” she stops whatever she was going to say in protest and nods. “Yes, that.”

I nod.

“You need to tell him.”

“What if...” I trail off, unable to put the concept in my head into words. It’s too big, too broken. “What if I can’t?”

“Honey, trust me, you can. We’ll get you through this just fine. Your body will go through a lot of changes and not all of them will be comfortable, but it will be fine.”

“No, not that...”

She watches me closely, striving to understand while I work to figure out how to say it.

“I’m not understanding your question.”

“What if... I mean... being a mother. I don’t... I can’t.”

She doesn’t say anything at first. She smiles, nods, squeezes my shoulder. And because she doesn’t immediately contradict me, trust grows between us. She’s not going to give me platitudes, she’s going to be honest.

“It’s not necessarily easy,” she says. “Babies and kids, they’re an entire learning experience. But you will have lots of support. All the help you could ever want, believe me.”

I nod and shrug. I take a deep breath, hold it, then exhale it sharply. I repeat this a couple of times trying to push out all the negative thoughts in my head.

“Right,” I nod. “Yeah, help.” I think about Annalise and Abigail. They’ll help. Abs is pregnant too. Our babies will be born close together and that’s nice. Cool even. I can do this. I think.

You’re too much like me, little one. You’re broken too.

And just like that the budding certainty is shattered. I force a smile, nod to Addison.

“You’ll need regular checkups,” she says. “Come to me, not Tsi’tel. He’s not familiar with the crossbreeding yet, but I’m getting him up to speed.”

“Who is Tsi’tel?” I ask.

“The other healer, a Cavern Zmaj.”

“Oh,” I say, barely registering the fact. “Okay. How, uhm, how often?”

“In a month unless something goes wrong,” she says.

“Wrong?” I ask, looking up in surprise.

“You’ll be fine,” she reassures me. “Believe me, but if you have any concerns or anything seems out of the ordinary, come see me.”

“Right,” I say.

“And you should tell him,” she says.

“What if...” I trail off. “How long until it will, uh, you know, until it shows?”

“Two months, give or take.” Time. That gives me time. “But I would not wait. The Zmaj are tricky like this. It’s not the kind of thing you should hide from him.”

It’s as if she was reading my mind. I frown, then shrug and smile.

“Okay.”

“Tamara, I am serious,” she says. “This isn’t something you want to do alone and your Zmaj, he’s chosen you. No matter what is happening between the two of you, this will bring you closer. Lean into him. He will take care of you.”

“Right, I got it,” I say, sliding off the table.

She frowns, clearly not believing me but she shakes her head apparently realizing that there is nothing she can say to influence me any further.

“A month, then we’ll see how it’s progressing.”

“Right, one month.”

I walk out the door before she can say more. All the doubts and the voice of my mother echoing in my head. Now I know. And it is exactly what I feared. Great. Now to figure out how to face that fear.

KRI'SIN

“*B*ut have you seen her today?” I repeat, holding my anger at bay.

Annalise shakes her head but her eyes dart to the side. She is not telling me the entire truth.

“Not since this morning,” she says.

I am missing something. She knows something that she is not telling me, but why? The bijass roars like an oncoming sandstorm. Loud in my ears, thundering, urging anger and violence. I suppress a growl but even so, Annalise’s eyes widen, and she takes a half-step back.

Fool. Scaring this poor human is not the way.

I close my eyes and focus my thoughts. We train our minds as well as our bodies and I will not act out of primal impulses. This is Tamara’s best friend. She will be, eventually, my friend as well. All I want is one thing. Ask for that.

“Is she okay?” I ask, getting myself under control at last.

Annalise’s face softens as she frowns. Her eyes meet mine and she purses her lips. She is clearly debating her next words.

“I don’t know,” she says, and it is an admission for her as much as a statement to me. I wait. Silence is often a warrior’s best friend. She drops her eyes, shakes her head, raises her hands and drops them, all signs of her internal debate while I watch. “She hasn’t been herself. She’s been sick.”

“She is sick!” I exclaim, unable to maintain my composure as anger is replaced with worry and fear.

“No, not bad, I mean, it is, but it comes and goes.”

“I thought it was something she ate,” I say, knowing she had been throwing up before our argument.

“I did too, but it’s still happening.”

“Where is she Annalise? I must talk to her.”

Annalise crosses her arms over her chest and tilts her head back defiantly.

“First tell me what happened between the two of you?”

I shake my head. “I asked my question first. What is between us does not matter, I must know where she is. That she is okay.”

“I know you asked first,” she says, finding her courage at the worst possible time. My hearts beat faster and faster, pushing blood to my head and limbs and with the blood comes the bijass and its clarion call for dominance. “But tell me what happened. I am not going to tell you anything until you do.”

“Did she not tell you?”

“You know she didn’t. Quit dodging the question Kri’sin.”

I can’t stop the growl that slips from my lips, but now it does nothing to back her off. It is clear from her face and stance that she is in full defense of her friend mode. It is one of the things I admire about her and Abigail both. These three females are loyal to each other in a way that I can only compare to those who have been tested in battle. Which, I suppose, they have.

Surviving the Zzlo attack on their ship, the crash to Tajss, and a war with the Pertinaxians. Their bodies may be frail and ill-adapted to life on Tajss, but that does not mean they are weak. They have a strength of spirit that is admirable.

I shake my head to clear the spinning thoughts. I close my eyes, feeling the surging of the bijass and riding the current it brings. Letting it wash over me, no longer fighting it, but

experiencing it and letting it pass over. When I open my eyes, it is not gone, but no longer affecting me as it was.

“I am not sure I know,” I admit. It hurts to say the words. I should know. I am a warrior, how can there be a problem I cannot overcome? “We argued, she has been... different lately. More... emotional?”

Annalise nods understanding and in an act of kindness she places a hand on my arm. The warmth of her hand radiates into my scales and forms an anchor of friendship that I welcome with all my heart. She and my Tamara are as close as any two beings can be. Tamara may be mine, but I will always be sharing her with her friends. And that is a good thing.

“Thank you,” she says so softly it’s barely a whisper. She clears her throat and wipes away a drop of moisture the humans call tears. “Sometimes when Tamara is dealing with things, she will retreat. She’s done it before, but all we can do is give her some time to work it out and be there for her when she is ready.”

“I do not know how to wait,” I pause, unsure how to phrase the thought and sensations, “it... it hurts.”

“I know,” Annalise says. “Believe me. But this is the best we can do. Give her space and be ready to support her no matter what.”

I want her to be wrong, but the wisdom of her words will not be denied. Still, it hurts. Hurts more than I could ever easily admit, but this is the way it must be then I will fight my way through it. Though waiting may be the hardest thing I have ever done in my entire life.

KRI'SIN

The males I am responsible for will be training and I should be there, but I cannot, not before I know she is okay. I walk the tunnels letting my feet carry me forward while my thoughts turn around her.

Annalise is right and I know it. I should give her space. No, I will give her space, but giving Tamara space and not knowing she is okay are not the same thing. I must know where she is. The dragon's roaring demands I at least see her. I must know she is well.

If the illness is lingering, then perhaps she went to the healer. The human healer has a space next to Tsi'tel, perhaps she is there? If not, then their healer may know where she is. Finally having a path forward my steps quicken. Intention and purpose align.

No one dares to stop me as I rush towards the healer's quarters. I come to the final corner before their space and stop. I sniff, her scent is heavy on the air, lingering. Excitement, desire, and love rage in my core causing my cock to stiffen.

When I step around the corner, I see her. Her perfect, beautiful ass as she walks away. A lump forms in my throat, thankfully stopping me from calling out to her as I remain frozen in place. Every fiber of my being wants to run to her, grab her by her waist, and pull her into an embrace. I want to kiss her, hold her, protect her, give her everything.

But the one thing she wants is space.

Space for herself. To work out whatever she is going through and that is a razor-sharp knife slicing my heart into pieces. Her shoulders are hunched, head hanging low, as she walks slowly away. Every step she takes feels to me as if there is a long chain that stretches from my heart to her. As she walks away it tears my heart apart.

I force myself to step back around the corner and wait. I press myself against the cool stone of the wall and wait, listening to the beatings of my hearts loud in my ears. I clench my hands into fists so tight that my claws dig into my palms.

I wait, as long as I can stand it, but the roaring of the dragon and the surging of the bijass win at last. I step around the corner, anticipation building, hoping in the deepest corners of my hearts, that she will be there, waiting. Arms open and welcome me home.

The hall is empty.

I swallow disappointment and heartache and go into the new healer's room. As I step past the leather door a strange odor fills my senses. It's clean and yet somehow makes me think of unpleasant medicines. It's sharp, an assault on my nose, causing me to take a sharp inhale which alerts the female who has her back to me. She jumps and spins around. Her hands fly up protectively in front of her.

"I am sorry, I did not mean to startle you," I say, slowly raising my own hands to show my empty palms.

"Fine," she snaps, shaking her head, but she's breathing heavily, and her eyes are wide as they study me. "Who are you and what is it you want?"

"My name is Kri'sin," I say, placing a hand on my chest. "I would like to ask a question if I may."

The tension drops from her body as she nods. She pushes off the counter, walking over to the examination table with a damp cloth that she uses to wipe it down. The strange smell is stronger as she moves the cloth through the air.

"Sure," she says. "How can I help?"

She wears an unbuttoned long white coat that goes down to her knees. As I watch she scrubs the table vigorously.

“May I help with that?” I ask.

She looks over her shoulder in surprise. “I’ve got it. You had a question?”

“Yes,” I say. “I am...” I trail off as I’m suddenly unsure what to say.

She turns around studying me then her eyes widen as if she recognizes me.

“You’re him,” she says, but I do not know what that means. She clamps her mouth shut so fast and hard it clicks.

“Him?”

She shakes her head. “Nothing.”

“This does not seem like nothing.”

“Okay, you’re right,” she says. “It may not be nothing, but it is not mine to say either.”

Anger surges causing my wings to partially open and my tail to lift off the floor.

“Is Tamara okay?” She frowns in confusion. “Tell me. She is okay? Is something wrong? Is there some medicine she needs? I will get it. No matter what. You must tell me.”

Involuntarily I’m stepping forward and only stop myself when I see her pale and step back.

“No, she’s fine,” she says. “It’s nothing like that.”

“You are certain?”

“Yes, very,” she says, her face flushing rich red color. “I am not going to talk about one of my patients. She is having a hard time, but she’ll talk to you soon, I am sure.”

I study the female looking for any hint of an untruth, but she is as sincere as anyone I have ever seen. I nod.

“If there is something wrong, I must know,” I say.

“It will all be fine, in time.”

“I am sorry, I did not mean to frighten you.”

“It happens,” she shrugs. “Give Tamara some time and she’ll talk to you, I am sure.”

I nod but have no more words to say so I turn and leave. The aching in my chest is so deep it makes it hard to breathe, but I will do as everyone advises. I will give her space. I know she is safe inside the compound. For now, that will have to be enough.

TAMARA

*A*nnalise stares. Her eyes are wide, and her mouth is hanging open. She blinks, then blinks again. My stomach is a tight knot forcing bile up into my throat while cold sweat trickles down my back.

“Well, are you going to say something?” I ask butterflies dancing in my stomach.

Moving in some kind of weird slow motion she closes her mouth then blinks again. As her lips meet, they spread into a wide smile then she literally explodes from her seated position throwing her arms in the air, waving them wildly, while she loudly whoops.

“I knew it, I knew it, I knew it!” she sing-songs as she dances around our room. “Humph, I knew it, humph, I knew.”

She rotates her hips, waves her arms, and makes a full-on dance out of her overt display of rightness. I watch her in something akin to disbelief. I wasn’t sure what to expect when I told her, but this is not anything I could have imagined.

“Okay, okay,” I say, motioning for her to sit down but that only encourages her to sing and dance louder. Then she laughs.

“Oh, oh, oh, yes!” she fist pumps the air. “I’m going to be a double aunt!”

“A double what?” I ask as I stand and grab her arms to make her stop waving them around. The motion is making me

nauseous and the last thing I need is any reason to lose it. That's happening often enough without any help.

"Aunt! Me. I'm going to be an Aunt, twice over," she laughs.

"Your," I stop unsure what to say.

I shake my head and suddenly I want to cry. There's no reason for it. She's happy, I'm fine, everything is fine, but the tears are there, and I'm left struggling to hold them back for no stupid reason which makes me feel even dumber which makes me want to cry more.

"Oh Tams," Annalise says, pulling me into a tight embrace. "I'm so happy for you. You're going to be great."

And there it is. I lose the fight to not cry, letting out a sob as they break free.

"How do you know? How do I?" I ask between bouts of uncontrollable sobbing and flowing tears.

"Oh Tams," she says. "Your mom was awful, but you'll be great. You're so much better than she ever was."

There's something broken in us Tamara. I never wanted you and yet here we are. Two broken things.

"I don't know," I say, as the tears run out and I'm left dry and empty, but Annalise holds me tight and brings comfort.

"I know," she says. "I do. But listen, I know you. You are kind, warm-hearted, and full of love, none of which anyone in the universe would have ever said about your mother. Besides, you won't ever be alone."

"That's true," I say, letting her go and drying my eyes. "Oh no, I got your shirt all wet."

"It's fine," she says. "What are friends for if not a shoulder to cry on?"

"You're more than a friend Anna," I say, tongue and throat thick with unspoken emotions. "You and Abs... your family."

"Stop," Annalise says, waving a hand in front of her face now. "You're going to make me cry too!"

I smile, not pushing it any further because we don't need to. She knows and I do too. We embrace one another again then pull ourselves together.

"Right," I say, transitioning to the next thing, though I don't know what that thing is. I knew I had to tell her and Abs, but I found her first.

"Have you told Abs?"

"I found you first," I say.

"What about Kri'sin? Is he excited? Of course he is, why wouldn't he be?"

"He doesn't know," I say.

"What?" she asks, her eyes widening again in surprise. "You've got to tell him. I mean, he's going to want to know, why haven't you told him, is something wrong?"

It takes me a minute to parse the flood of words streaming from her. I blink and shake my head, mostly to buy time.

"I, uhm, I wanted to tell you first," I say.

Not a lie. Not the whole truth. No need to say I'm scared. Scared I'll be a shit mom. Scared that I'm not ready for this. Unsure I should go through with it, but then I can't not go through with it.

Something in us is broken.

If only I could quit hearing my mom's voice. It's funny, I barely remember what she looks like, but I hear her. All the damn time I hear her.

"Right, that makes sense," she says, grabbing my hands. "But we need to tell Abs! You haven't told her yet have you? Please tell me I'm first."

"I told you that you are," I laugh.

"Right. Good! I love being first. Okay, let's find Abs."

"She's busy, I should tell Kri'sin," I say.

"Oooh, then she'll be third, I will have well and truly won then, won't I? Is there a prize for being first? What am I

talking about, first is prize enough.”

“You’re impossible,” I say.

She grins and gives a sheepish shrug.

“You love me.”

“Yes, yes I do.”

“Good. Okay, go. Tell your man then find me and we’ll tell Abs. I want to be there when she hears it. You two are going to have your babies close together. How great is this going to be? I cannot wait to help raise them.”

I nod, appreciating her enthusiasm even though I’m terrified. No matter what she says, I’m still worried I’ll be a terrible mom. What do I know about raising a child? What if I totally screw it up? How do I take care of one? Keep it safe, keep it from being as screwed up as I am? It’s a lot.

“Okay, I’ll see you at dinner, then we’ll tell Abs,” I say.

“Perfect. And Tams?”

“Yeah?”

“You’ve got this,” she says, grabbing my hands and squeezing them in her own. “Believe me. I get it, but also trust me, okay? We’ll do it together. Just like we’ve done everything. You are not your mother.”

“Thanks Anna,” I say and this time my smile is as genuine as it could possibly be.

KRI'SIN

“*A* gain,” I order.

The sharp sound of the word echoes off the stone walls of the training room and a sense of pride washes over me. It is a skill I have been honing since accepting my new position. The warrior’s attack in unison with a single exhalation of breath that makes a loud hah sound followed by the crack of their clubs against the stone dummies.

Zat’an watches from the sidelines. He has his arms crossed and his face is an unreadable mask. I cannot tell if he approves or has considerations. No, I do not care. I do not need his approval of my work. I know what I am doing.

A soft growl slips past my lips but I cover it by barking the next position. Twenty clubs swing and strike, but two of them are slow. I walk the line stopping at the first of the slow ones.

“Chanka, you are dead,” I say.

“But I—”

I stop his protest with a glare. His head droops and he steps back from the line. Before I can reach the next one, he has already stepped back, head also hanging low. I move to the front of the room.

“The Urr’ki will give no quarter,” I say. “If you hesitate, if you are slow, you or your brother at your side will be dead. Never forget this. Their small size is deceptive, they are a deadly foe.”

“Yes, Gorchym!” twenty voices shout in unison.

“Good,” I say staring at each one of them in turn. Only when I am satisfied that there are no doubts do I give the next command. “Chanka, Burshtin, reset the targets. Everyone else has a five-minute rest.”

Chanka opens his mouth to protest but I give him a commanding look and he snaps his mouth shut and sets to work. The rest of the warriors gather in a group at the back of the room. I go to Zat’an.

“Well?”

“Well what?” Zat’an asks.

Anger surges with the bijass and before I can stop it my right hand is a balled fist. I want nothing more than to smash his nose in, but that is not the way. I push down the emotions, unclench my fist, and clear my throat to hide my growl.

“Your evaluation, old one,” I say.

“They are coming along,” he says and I hate the sense of pride that swells in my guts. “Slowly, but progress.”

And that sense is shattered by the words he adds, immediately replaced with anger.

“I assume you could do better?”

“I said no such thing,” he says, crossing his arms over his scarred chest but every aspect of him screams that this is exactly what he thinks. Arrogant dung heap.

“Where is he? Where is Kri’sin?” a new voice yells and there is a commotion on the far side of the room. One of the surface Zmaj is storming out of the tunnel yelling. He has bronze-colored scales and green eyes that burn with anger. His wings are parted, and his tail is above his head. “Where is he? Which one of you is Kri’sin?”

The warriors on rest are blocking his path forward out of loyalty or instinct I do not know, but they are looking at each other and some back at me in confusion.

“I am Kri’sin,” I say, stepping towards the fray.

He pushes his way through the group. Anger comes from him in waves. The bijass gleams in his eyes, he is struggling to remain in control. I watch his every move, ready for him to attack.

“How dare you,” he growls when he is less than a handspan from my face.

“Dare I what?” I growl, straining to keep my own bijass in check.

“You threaten a female? *My* female?”

I narrow my eyes and frown. I do not know what he is referring to. I have threatened no female. Perhaps he is lost to his bijass. Is he insane?

“Who is this female I threatened?”

I feel the weight of the eyes of the warriors on me. They watch in silent judgment. If they think I did threaten some female, they will turn on me and rightfully so.

“Addison,” the newcomer growls. “She is mine.”

Understanding hits like a strike of lightning, illuminating all that is happening. I did not mean to threaten her but I see what he is thinking. And with understanding comes compassion. Would I react any differently if someone startled or frightened Tamara? I know I would not.

“Oh,” I say.

“Oh?” he shouts, raising his fists. “Oh? This is your response? I will beat respect into you.”

His arm pulls back to strike and I have only a moment to stop this from escalating. I do the only sensible thing. I drop to my knees in front of him with my head bowed and my tail flat on the ground, submitting.

“I apologize, it was a mistake, not my intention.”

“Get up,” he shouts. “You do not get out of this that easy.”

“No, you are right,” I say. “I startled her. I did not mean to and did not think through my actions.”

He is still shaking with rage but now there is no target. I do not resist his anger, pushing down my own instinctual response to his threat. I keep my head bowed, staring at the claws of his feet.

“A mistake?” he asks.

“It was,” I say. “I needed to know information. I did not mean to frame my request as a threat. That was my mistake.”

“You will apologize to her, not me,” he says, lowering his hands and unclenching his fists.

“As is only right,” I agree.

He continues standing in my space, staring down. I lift my head and meet his eyes, letting him see the honesty of my words and my regret. His anger cannot hold against the simpleness of the truth.

“Fine,” he says, then offers me a hand. I grasp his wrist and let him help me back to my feet. We stand, arms clasped, taking measure of one another. At last he nods and takes a step back, letting go of my arm. “Do not forget. You owe her an apology.”

“I will not,” I say. “I have given my word.”

He nods and looks around the room, shaking his head as if only now aware of all the warriors that are watching. He rolls his shoulders, huffs, then strides away without another word. I watch him leave until he is out of sight then turn my attention back to the warriors.

“What are you waiting for?” I bark.

They jump and return to their training. I put them through their paces, pushing them extra hard. All the while my thoughts are on Tamara. What is wrong with her? Is she sick? What did the healer female say to her mate?

My stomach ties itself into knots as worry eats away at my nerves. I want to act, but I can't. The only thing I can do is this. My duty to the compound.

Tamara, I love you. You must be okay. Soon. She will tell me soon.

TAMARA

“Can we, uh, take a walk?” I ask.

The dining hall is too noisy. Too impersonal. Too many people around. Butterflies dance in my stomach and every time I think about saying what I have to tell him a fresh round of nausea comes. I’m going to, but I’m still trying to find the courage.

You’re broken. Like me.

I’m not broken, damn it. I’m not. I clench my hands into tight fists, digging my nails into my palms while forcing a smile.

“Of course,” Kri’sin says, grabbing my dishes before I can.

I sit at the stone table while he handles them then returns. He offers me his hand and I take it, letting him lead. We leave the dining hall behind and before long there are only the two of us. He grabs a torch and carries it in his free hand so that I can see. I know he doesn’t need it so I’m grateful for that.

“Abigail’s dinner was very nice,” he says, his version of small talk.

“Yeah, big news, huh?”

“News?”

“Yeah, you know, the baby and all.”

“Yes, that is very joyous news,” he says.

We walk in silence. I try to work up the courage to say what I must. I’m close, it’s right there on the tip of my tongue, more

than once, but I don't say it. I never let it leave my mouth like I know I should. As I must. Afterall, he has a right to know.

You're broken. Just like me.

I'm not broken. I can do this. We can do this.

“What do you think about, uh, that? You want kids?”

“I do. Very much,” he says.

I close my eyes and sigh. This isn't us. We're talking like two strangers. Stilted, not natural, non-flowing conversation. It's not like I don't know why. I've got a secret. One I have no right to hold back, yet here I am. Not just saying it.

“Yeah,” I agree, once again holding back what I should be saying. “It would be nice. Right?”

I watch for his response. Judging his reaction. Is he being nice? Saying the right thing because that's the kind of guy he is? Does he really mean it?

“Indeed,” he says, nodding thoughtfully. He looks over and down and his brow furrows. “Are you okay?”

“Huh? Yeah, fine,” I say, looking up in surprise at the question.

His frown deepens but he nods as his lips purse tightly. I know him well enough to see that he's debating his next words, whatever they might be.

“I know you have been to the healer.”

“Oh? What of it?” I snap, suddenly feeling on the spot. He knows. He knows and knows I haven't told him, and this is going to be a problem. My heart is racing and cold sweat trickles between my breasts.

“Did the Urr'ki harm you while you were captured?”

“Huh? The Urr'ki?” I ask not comprehending. That isn't it, he doesn't know? What is he thinking? And all the while my thoughts are speeding, I hate the sense of relief that underlies all of them. “No. You know that. They treated us fine.”

“It was not fine, they are monsters,” he says, his voice going so low it rumbles. “If they caused you any kind of harm, I will, destroy every one of them.”

He slams one closed fist into his other open palm and it makes a loud smacking sound as he growls.

“They didn’t do anything,” I say. “You were there. They were nice.”

“Nice!” he shouts. “You do not know them. They are evil. Nice. They are not *nice*. That was a ploy, a game of some kind. A strategy to lull us into making a mistake.”

“You realize how stupid you sound, don’t you?”

His fixed idea makes me angry. I latch onto that because it’s so much easier than saying what I’m trying to say. Besides, this is stupid. The Urr’ki didn’t do anything to us. They were, if anything, very decent considering they kidnapped my friends and me.

He stops and drops my hand at the same time, turning in towards me. Rage contorts his face and I should probably be scared. He is huge and angry and could hurt me, but I know he won’t and besides that I’m every bit as angry as he is.

“Your kind does not understand,” he says. “We have been at war with the Urr’ki forever. They have killed more Zmaj than can be counted. They sneak in the shadows, setting traps, plotting how to bring about the destruction of our entire species.”

“You know this for a fact?”

“Of course I do!” he yells. “It is a truth I live. What do you think we guard against? What is the purpose of our patrols? To make sure they are not attempting another incursion into what is ours.”

“Maybe they’re just trying to live their lives too,” I counter, meeting his anger with my own. “You ever think about that? They probably think you’re the evil ones.”

“Bah,” he scoffs, waving a dismissive hand. “They are not capable of such rational thought.”

“They seemed pretty damn rational when they had us and as I recall they caught you too.” I regret my words the instant they leave my lips. His eyes widen and his lips pull back baring his teeth. I didn’t think them through like an out-of-control idiot. Hormones are raging but regret kills my anger. “Kri’sin, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“No,” he cuts me off. “You speak your mind. I admire that about you.”

“I’m not myself, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that.”

He takes a step back and looks in either direction.

“I must attend to my duties.”

“Kri’sin, please,” I plead as he walks away. “I need you to forgive me.”

He stops and looks over his shoulder.

“Tamara, I love you. I will always forgive you.”

Tears fill my eyes as my heart shatters. A lump closes my throat blocking any words I would say. I reach my hand out towards his retreating back but I can’t even force myself to chase after him. I stand, paralyzed, by fear and regret.

TAMARA

“Oh honey,” Annalise says, holding me tight while I cry onto her shoulder.

“I’ve screwed it all up,” I say.

I had to find her as soon as Kri’sin left me behind. I told her the entire story, about how stupid I was and how I hurt him.

“Yeah, you have,” she agrees. “But you can fix this. He will forgive you; he said as much.”

“Yeah, but will he?” I ask, sitting up and rubbing my eyes with the palms of my hands. “Really? I was such a total bitch!”

“Tams,” Annalise says shaking her head with a rueful smile on her face. “You can be the world’s biggest bitch, but you know what? We still love you. Abigail, me, and most of all I am sure that Kri’sin also loves you.”

“Why?” I ask, shaking my head.

“You got issues, hon, but that’s okay. We all do. No one is perfect and you have a temper in the best of times. I can only imagine with all those changes going on in your body right now it’s being magnified. Once you tell him, explain to him what’s really going on, it will all be fine.”

I chew my lip and nod.

“But what if it’s not?” I voice my fear.

Annalise takes my hands in hers and squeezes them.

“It will be.”

“But wha—”

She places a finger on my lips shushing me as she shakes her head.

“No. It *will* be. If he resists, give him a blowjob, that always fixes a guy’s upsets.”

I can’t keep myself from laughing. Her self-assured smile and confidence cuts through all my self-pity and regret. I dry my eyes with my sleeve, take a deep breath, hold it, then let it out.

“I can’t argue with that,” I say.

“Of course you can’t,” she says. “Auntie Anna is right. As always.”

She squares her shoulders and preens with a broad smile and I’m laughing again.

“You’re taking to that title a bit early, aren’t you?”

“Trying it on for size. Not sure if I want to be Auntie or Aw-nty. Either or, I’m going to be the best. I have to fill all the roles for these little ones, you know? They won’t have grandparents so I’m going to be the one that spoils them and sends them home hyped up on sugar.”

“The heck you are,” I protest.

“Oh just you wait,” she grins devilishly, steepling her fingers. “I have plans within plans. Now, enough of that. You need to go find Kri’sin. Apologize, tell him the truth of what’s going on, then come find me so I can gloat over Abs that I knew first.”

“Yeah,” I agree. “You’re right.”

“Of course I am, my dear, I am Aw-nty Anna,” she says affecting a haughty accent.

I roll my eyes and take my leave and go to find Kri’sin. It’s been more than an hour and I know his routines so it shouldn’t be too hard to find him. Usually at this time of day he’ll be overseeing the drilling of the younger warriors. It’s all part of his new duties.

The caverns and tunnels are so much more spacious than the Bunker we'd retreated to before. I still pass by and see other people but not like it was. In the Bunker we were piled on top of one another. Trying to get anywhere was a total pain. You had to fight your way along and everyone was always so close. Here I only see a couple of dozen other people, human and Zmaj, total.

The area that the warriors drill in is adjacent to the arena. The arena is a central location to the entire cavern system that these new Zmaj call home and have welcomed us humans into. The arena itself is integral to their society and social structure. They're very focused on who can dominate who, which seems to serve in part as a way to keep their barbaric primal instinct in check.

I step onto the delineated grounds of the arena. The stone floors of the rest of the complex give way to packed dirt. Pounded by the feet and actions of thousands of fights that have taken place here apparently since time immemorial.

Torches are placed every twenty feet around the square. Beyond them rise stone bleachers. I walk towards the far end. Instead of bleachers at that end there is a box that looks down on the arena itself. That is where the Al'fa and our human leader Rosalind watch the fights taking place below them.

Beneath that box is a wide opening which is my goal. I pause, staring at the dark, open passage. Fear flutters in my guts. A wave of nausea comes and I press my hands over my belly and bend forward, waiting for it to pass.

"Greetings Tamara," Hak'ti says, walking up. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah," I say, straightening as the nausea passes. I force a smile as I do my best to steel my nerves for confronting Kri'sin. "Is Kri'sin back there?"

He frowns, looks over his shoulder then back to me.

"No, he is not."

"Oh, I assumed he would be overseeing the training."

Something on his face makes it clear that I'm missing something. He frowns, his eyes squint, and he avoids meeting my gaze.

"Yes, well he is not there now. Be well."

He steps past me, but I turn with him.

"Hak'ti," I say. "What is going on."

He stops, staring at the dirt of the floor. Slowly he turns back and looks at me.

"He is on patrol."

"What? Why didn't you just tell me?"

He frowns, shakes his head. He shrugs, which is weird when a Zmaj does it because their wings rise and fall, and their tails tend to slap the ground along with the motion making a sharp crack to back up the gesture.

"I assumed you knew," he says.

"Hak'ti, you're a terrible liar."

The shading of his scales darkens. A sure sign that a Zmaj is experiencing a strong emotion is when the edges of their scales shift in color. I'm hoping his means embarrassment at having been called out, but I don't know him well.

"Yes, I am."

"Okay, then what are you not telling me?"

He shakes his head, makes the shrugging gesture again.

"Kri'sin was angry," he says. "The Al'fa wanted a patrol to investigate an incursion far outside our normal patrol areas and he volunteered."

"Why?"

"I do not know, it was not his duty," Hak'ti says, shaking his head.

"So, he's gone, way out?"

"Yes," he says. "I am sorry. I volunteered."

My head is spinning. *What if he gets hurt? What if he doesn't come back?*

Shit, this is bad enough that I'm pregnant. I'm already not sure I can handle this period, but doing it without him?

My knees go weak, and I stumble. Hak'ti grabs my shoulders and steadies me.

"Are you okay Tamara?"

"I'll be fine," I say, pushing his hands back and forcing myself to stand on my own.

I will be. Somehow. But damn it he has to be okay. I can't lose him, not now.

Hak'ti stares with blatant concern on his face.

"I will get you to the healer," he offers.

"No, I've been to the healer. I'm fine."

"You are sure?"

"I said I'm sure, Hak'ti. If I need help, I'll ask for it," I snap. I shouldn't, he's done nothing to earn my anger but it's flashes too fast and my mouth is running faster than I can stop it.

"I understand," he says, holding his palms up between us. "I apologize."

"No, it's not you, it's me. I am sorry. But I will be fine."

Don't mind the girl dealing with her raging hormones. Because I'm broken. Just like my mother.

He nods acceptance but stares for a long moment.

"He will be fine," he says at last. "He is one of the best. No matter what he must face, he will be victorious. How can he not? He has you to come home to."

I smile but it's forced. The sentiment is sweet, and it does warm my heart, but it does nothing to allay the cold fear that has a tight grip on my guts.

You better be okay Kri'sin. If anything happens to you, I'll kill you myself.

KRI'SIN

“*T*here,” Chanka says, pointing to a small pile of stones that is tucked against the tunnel wall.

I walk over, kneel, and inspect the pile. While it is clearly intended to look natural, it is not.

“Good catch,” I say, and he grunts in appreciation. Ak'tral snorts and shakes his head. I stand and face the older warrior. “Is there a problem?”

“Younglings,” he says.

I bristle at his insult but if I am to be a leader, I cannot give into the anger that surges through my veins.

“And what would you advise, old one?” I ask.

His tail drops to the ground with a smack. He shakes his head.

“Nothing. It is fine,” he says.

“No. You have advice then share your wisdom. How else do we younglings learn?” I press him.

He narrows his eyes and growls.

“You've made your point,” he says.

“I have no point to make,” I say, eyes narrowing, “you have wisdom to offer, *old* one. Please do so.”

Chanka watches the exchange between us with wide eyes. I cannot read him to see if he is supporting either side or not. Chanka, Tajss bless him, is not the brightest of warriors.

“We’re chasing signs and ghosts,” Ak’tral says. “They leave these signs for us to find on purpose. You think our enemy is not smart? You are wrong. They are clever. Signs like this will lead you right into one of their traps.”

I rub my chin and think about his words. They make sense. I know, more than anyone probably, how smart our enemy is. The fact that they have learned the Zmaj language is not widely known by order of the Al’fa, but it is another indication that they are smarter than we have ever given them credit for.

“You are right,” I say.

Surprise is plain on Ak’tral’s face. He hesitates then nods as if he knew I would agree all the while. That is fine, a good thing even. Before Tamara I would never have listened to him. My temper would have kept me from hearing his word. Tamara has tempered my patience. The number of times Zat’an irritates me and she keeps me from confronting him are paying off. I will have to share this realization with her, I am sure she will be pleased.

“How do we proceed?” I ask, looking over my shoulder at the pile of stones.

“The stones indicate they passed this way and they’re on the left side of the tunnel. The next fork they want us to go left, so we go right.” Ak’tral says.

“Are you sure they do not want us to think this?” Chanka asks.

“What?” Ak’tral asks, annoyance clear in his voice.

“What if they know we know how to read their signs and therefore they set the sign to make us think they want us to go left but they really want us to go right. That could be the entire point,” Chanka says.

Ak’tral and I stare in disbelief. I cannot make up my mind if this is some kind of brilliant insight or the stupidest thing I have ever heard. One way or another it is not actionable intel and if I am going to put my trust in either of them, it will be Ak’tral. He is the elder and has seen more than Chanka who is one of the youngest of us.

“We go right,” I say, making the decision and noting that Ak’tral nods agreement.

Decision made we continue moving down the tunnel. We travel in darkness that is almost absolute. Even my dark vision is barely enough to see. The natural growing bioluminescent fungus has been harvested, reducing the amount of light. A further sign that the Urr’ki have been through this area.

They are not the only things that survive on the fungus of course, but no other creature consumes the fungus to such a degree. Eat some, yes, but the primal beasts know by instinct to leave enough for future growth. The Urr’ki destroy the light source to make it harder for their traps to be spotted.

It is not long, as Ak’tral predicted, before we come to a fork. The rough-hewn openings are yawning dark maws, neither inviting. Without hesitation I go to the right and continue our patrol. We are a long way from the compound, further than most patrols go, but we’ve been following small signs, looking for any hints of another invasion.

We know it is coming. The only question is when. The more we know, the more prepared we can be. The better I can protect Tamara.

I have been trying to keep my thoughts from her. I am doing what she needs, of that, I am sure. She needs space, which I am giving her, but it does not make me happy. The dragon rumbles deep in my core, rattling my bones, demanding I take her.

That would be stupid, and I know it. She is mine, I know this too, and in time she will come to me when she is ready. All I can do until then is keep myself occupied and busy enough to not do something stupid. Force myself into her space for example.

Of all the things I have done in my life, this is the hardest.

“We have gone far enough,” Ak’tral says.

“We have not found anything,” I say.

“But we are further away from the compound than anyone ever goes,” Chanka agrees.

“We will go further,” I say.

They look at each other and I expect them to argue further. The idea that they will boils my blood, but Ak'tral shakes his head and motions for us to continue. I take the lead for now. We rotate point position regularly. The point must have the sharpest eyes to spot any traps before we stumble into them. Rotating keeps the point fresh.

We travel deeper. We are in a new territory. I do not know when the last time a Zmaj set foot in these tunnels was, if ever. The ceiling lowers until we have to hunch to continue.

“Have we not gone far enough? There have been no signs for a wingspan,” Chanka says.

“No,” I say, not stopping.

“Kri'sin,” Ak'tral says. “Enough.”

The bijass hits faster than I can stop myself from acting. I spin and grab for him. He moves back quick as a zmeja.

“I will say when it is enough,” I growl, balling my empty hands into fists.

“You are pushing yourself and us,” Ak'tral says. “Further than the Al'fa ordered. Further than we should be. This is too far.”

“Too far, old one? Are you afraid? Do you think we cannot handle it?”

He bristles at the insults, wings spreading and his tail scraping the low ceiling. He opens his mouth then shuts it. His wings close with a snap and his tail slaps the floor.

“I am returning,” he says simply. “Chanka?”

“I am sorry Kri'sin,” Chanka says. “The old one is right.”

I glare at the two of them while struggling to keep the bijass from dictating my next actions. My vision is covered with red. They defy me and all I want to do is make them submit.

“You dare,” I say, and it comes out in a low hiss.

“Daring is what you have done,” Ak'tral says. “No one questions your bravery. Why do you push so hard?”

Tamara. I do this for her.

I will not say that. She is mine. Private. Not to be shared with them or anyone.

Mine. All mine.

“Further,” I say. “We are close. I feel it.”

Ak’tral sighs and shrugs. “We have traveled a passing; how much further do you wish?”

“A wingspan of time,” I say.

“I agree, but then we return,” Ak’tral says. “Do you agree?”

The taste of victory is soured by the compromise, but I nod agreement. Settlement reached we continue, and I remain on point. Every beating of my hearts is fuel to the fiery rage of the bijass. It is distracting and I know it. I should not be on point but right now I am too proud to admit such. Tamara’s influence only goes so far, I am still who I am.

Thinking of her my thoughts turn to the arguments we have been having. She has changed. Being more emotional than normal. Is this something that humans do? Is it natural? Is something else happening? Something that I am not aware of.

This is the crux of the problems that holds my attention. I do not know enough about the human species. They are alien and their ways are as strange as her body is exotic. She is a source of endless delight and also of consternation from her strangeness.

If she were a Zmaj female this would be different. She would not withdraw, she would attack. She would dominate me, and I would let it be so gladly, because she is my mate. My treasure. The singer of the songs that makes my dragon roar.

“Kri’sin, it is my turn,” Chanka says, placing a hand on my shoulder.

I glance and the sincerity on his face is the only thing that keeps me from slapping his hand away. He has an easy, unbeguiling smile that negates my anger. I nod and turn so he can slip past me into the lead while I take the middle position.

We are close to the end of our agreed-on time to explore and there have been no new signs of Urr-ki. My frustration grows because I know they are here. Somewhere, but finding them seems to be an impossible task.

“It is ti—” I stop what I am saying when I hear a click. “Freeze!”

“Wha—” Chanka says turning and as he does there is another click.

I leap without thinking, tackling Chanka. My shoulder hits into his chest and together we fly down the tunnel before the click finishes triggering. We stumble as I push him back and the two of us fall to the ground entangled with each other.

There is a soft rumble then a whispering hiss. Dust falls from the ceiling and a stream of rubble comes with it.

“Back,” Ak’tral commands, pointing at the dust.

I try to get to at least a sitting position, but Chanka is trying to do the same and we are fighting each other unintentionally.

“Stop,” I demand, pushing him down.

He obeys and I roll to one side. The tunnel is barely wide enough for the two of us. I crawl past him and get to my feet reaching for my club as Chanka gets up.

There is a hissing sound that I recognize. I grab Chanka and jerk him back just in time. A large zmeya glistens as it darts through the air where Chanka was a moment ago.

I swing my club trying to strike the creature but fail to connect. Zmeya grow large this deep in the ground. The creature is over an arm’s length and as thick as the palm of my hand. It twists its body and coils on the ground hissing. Its diamond shaped head pointed at me, beady black eyes glistening in the dim light of fungus.

I push Chanka behind me with one hand and keep my club raised between the zmeya and myself. I weave the club as I retreat. The zmeya follows the motion with its entire head and upper body.

Behind it, Ak'tral creeps closer. When I judge that I am out of reach of its strike I stop and crouch, never stopping the weaving of the club. Ak'tral hand flashes and he grabs the zmeya by the neck right behind its head.

The zmeya hisses while its body twists and turns as it fights to break free or to bite Ak'tral. Ak'tral calmly pulls a knife from his waist and cuts the head free of the body. He throws the remains to one side while the body continues to writhe its death throes between us.

"I told you we were close," I say.

"And we are tired. None of us should have made that mistake," Ak'tral says. "Chanka would be dead if you hadn't acted in time."

"We have antidotes for zmeya," I counter.

"Not with us!" Ak'tral says, raising his voice. "And it is too far back for us to get him to the compound before he would have been dead."

I want to argue with him but he's right. I cannot counter the truth of his words. He walks over and places a hand on my shoulder, dipping his head so our eyes meet.

"I am okay," Chanka offers.

"I do not know what you are struggling with," Ak'tral says softly. "But it is time to return."

Tamara dances in my thoughts and maybe, just maybe, she has had enough time and space. I can only hope. Besides, Ak'tral is right.

"Yes, let us return," I say.

I am coming Tamara. I hope you are ready.

TAMARA

Sweat trickles down my back and between my tits. It tickles as it does, making me itch. I pace the length of the corridor again, if for no other reason than because I've got nothing else to do. I reach the far wall, spin on one foot, and march back.

Abigail and Annalise watch. I went to Annalise first and she rightly insisted we find Abigail too. Which meant I had to tell Abigail about the pregnancy. She took it in stride because that is what Abs does. She's always been the calmest of the three of us.

"He'll be fine Tams," Abigail says.

"You don't know that," I snap.

"Zat'an says it's not unusual for a patrol to go further or longer than expected," she says.

"Abs, you're not helping," Annalise says.

"I... you're right," Abs says, shaking her head. "I'm sorry."

I should answer her, but my thoughts are consumed with so many bad scenarios. Terrible things happening over and over. Kri'sin hurt, dying, alone. And I would never know. He'd just be gone. Forever and I never got the chance to tell him about...

It's what I deserve. Broken things don't get what they want in this world.

I shudder as my mom's voice insinuates its way into my thoughts. My chest hurts and my shoulder muscles are hard knots. The two Zmaj who are standing guard at the end of the tunnel silently watch me pace.

Abigail and Annalise lean against the wall watching too. They want to help, and I know it. I want their help, but what can they do?

"He should have told me," I mutter. "Why did he leave without saying anything?"

You've been in a bit of a... mood Tams," Annalise says.

"You think? I've got a bit of something I'm dealing with here," I say, angrily whirling on her.

"Tamara!" Abigail cries out as Annalise raises her hands in surrender.

Abigail pushes off the wall and steps between us. Anger burns bright for a moment then it fizzles. I want to be angry because anger is an easier emotion than this other one. This despair I feel every time my thoughts skirt anywhere near the fact that I might never see him again.

"I'm sorry," I say shaking my head. "It's, argh, I don't know. It's everything."

Now I want to cry. Great. What is wrong with me? I'm an emotional wreck and it feels like the hits keep coming.

"It's fine Tams, seriously," Annalise says as she and Abigail close around and crush me between them.

I cling to my friends as we have always clung to each other. Each of us has had our personal trials and through every one of them the other two have been there.

"I don't know what I'll do," I say, my voice hoarse.

"You'll be fine, we've got you," Annalise says.

"You know we will," Abigail says.

"I don't want to..." I trail off afraid to say it, but the words are like a pressure in my head and I'm going to explode if I don't

get them out. “I can’t do it without him. The... uh... you know.”

They don’t push me to say it for which I am grateful. They don’t need me to because they know. They know me as well as anyone. Maybe better than I know myself.

“He’ll be back,” Annalise says.

“He has to be,” Abigail says. “Fate won’t be this cruel.”

“Fate,” I snort. “You buy into that bullshit?”

She stiffens, the only indication that I hurt her but it’s all I need to know I did.

“I’m sorry Abs, I don’t mean to be mean. If you believe it, then good for you,” I say.

“Don’t you?” she asks. Her voice is soft and tentative as if she’s terrified to ask the question.

I lock eyes with Annalise and bite my lower lip. Annalise arches an eyebrow and tilts her head towards Abigail.

“No, not really,” I say, understanding Annalise is urging me to be honest with Abs. “I mean, it’s not my thing. You know? But I respect your belief.”

“Oh,” Abigail says.

And now I feel like an asshole and this time I can’t even blame raging hormones. I didn’t have to tell her the truth. I should have lied. What good did it to do say that? I glare at Annalise and she shrugs in response, clearly convinced she was right that the truth is better than a lie. I’m not sure about that, sometimes a little lie keeps the peace.

“We each believe what we believe and that’s okay,” Annalise says. “It doesn’t change how much we love one another, does it?”

“No, it doesn’t,” I agree.

“It’s fine, really,” Abigail says. “But... you know I didn’t, well... I don’t know. I mean, we’re here. And the odds against that are like, you know, incredible. Then to find Zat’an. I

mean, I know he's the one, you know? Don't you feel that too Tamara?"

The empty aching void that fills my guts screams yes that this must be what she's talking about but is it? Is this what love is? Terror that something will happen to the one you care about? A constant fear that you've done them wrong?

I am happy when I'm with Kri'sin. And the sex is incredible. Out of this world good, but is that love? I don't know. I do know that I hate the way I feel right now, and I want it to stop. Maybe that is the beginning of love.

Missing him when he's gone takes on an entire new meaning when being gone could mean that they were eaten by some god-awful monster that this hell planet spawned specifically to fuck my day up.

"I, uhm," I pause trying to figure out if this is love or not, but I decide in this case maybe honesty is best. "I don't know."

"You will," Abigail says. "I see the way he looks at you. He knows you're the one. Maybe it will just take some time for you to see it too."

"He does look at you in that way," Annalise says.

"What way?" I ask.

"Possessive. Like he might kill anyone else who even glances in your direction kind of way," Annalise says.

"Yup, that's about it," Abigail says, and they both laugh.

"Right, laugh it up chuckleheads," I say rolling my eyes. "And he doesn't look at me like that."

"Then how do you think he looks at you?" Annalise asks.

I smile coyly. "Like I'm the best lay he's ever had in his life and he can't wait to do it again."

"Pretty much what we said," Abigail says chuckling.

I can't stop myself from laughing with them. We hug and rest our heads against each other in our trio circle. They bring comfort in all the best ways. The ways only your best friends can. The ones who know you at your worst and your best.

“We’ll get through this,” Annalise says softly.

I nod, moving my head against hers and Abigail’s, unwilling to break away.

“Tams?” Abigail says.

“Yeah?” I mutter.

“I’ve got a crick in my neck,” she says.

“Me too,” Abigail says.

“Fine,” I huff, but I’m putting on a show and they know it as I let them both go.

We stand straight and each of us roll our shoulders and necks, stretching the muscles. As we each finish, we’re left where we started. Waiting. I look towards the open tunnel, hoping against hope that he’ll appear there like some magical wishes come true.

The demarcation of smooth, carved walls, floor and ceiling ends a foot beyond the two guards, giving way to roughness. The compound is all worked over and made nice, or as nice as a hole in the ground can be, but the tunnel network under the mountains is extensive. To hear the Zmaj talk about it sounds like there could be hundreds of miles of wandering tunnels and caverns going deeper and deeper.

The tunnel remains tauntingly empty though. No magic for me. No intervening of fates hand bringing my man back to me. Not me because I’m not the lucky girl. I’m the broken one.

Broken like me.

The memory of my mother standing imperiously over me is so vivid it feels like it’s now. The haughty look on her face, her upraised hand, and the dismissive demeanor right before she turned and left me behind.

I am not ready. How can I, of all people, be a mother? Abs? Sure, she’s nothing but kindness and goodness. She loves everyone without hesitation. Not me. I don’t know how to love and how do I know I will love this child? How can I inflict that on another tiny person? Should I not be the one to break the cycle?

“Who goes?” one of the Zmaj yells as they both shift to a defensive position with their clubs freed and in their hands.

“Patrol returning,” Kri’sin’s voice comes from the dark of the tunnel.

My heart leaps into my throat as it speeds into a thundering gallop. I gasp in surprise. Abigail and Annalise close in, each placing a reassuring hand on my back.

Kri’sin emerges from the shadowy gloom into the light of the torches, and he looks fine. Unharmed, if dirty and tired. Two other Zmaj are on his heels as he strides forward until he sees me. He stops and the air between us buzzes with electricity.

His mouth opens then his jaw clenches tight. His hands flex as a tremor rushes through his body. He shakes his head then he bursts into a run. His feet and tail slap the ground as he runs, barreling past the two guards and closing the distance between us fast.

TAMARA

*B*efore I can speak or even take a breath he has me by my waist, sweeping me off my feet and spinning around. He pulls me in close and our mouths smack together. Then his tongue pierces the soft flesh of my lips, seeking mine.

I wrap my arms and legs around him. His kiss pushes away all the fear and concern. The world doesn't matter because he's okay. I kiss him, he kisses me, *we* kiss. When we break, I'm breathless and gasping for air. I stare into his beautiful, sharp eyes, and he smiles.

"I missed you," he says.

"You left without telling me," I accuse. The corners of his mouth turn slightly down, but he nods.

"You were angry. I was giving you space."

"Space? Seriously? That's how you handle my anger?"

His frown deepens and he tenses his jaw before shaking his head negatively.

"Thank you for caring for her, I would like to speak to Tamara alone. Might we be excused?" He's not talking to me but to my friends, looking over my shoulder at them.

"Uhm, sure," Abigail says a note of uncertainty in her voice, looking for my approval.

"You okay Tams?" Annalise asks, being blunt as she usually is.

“It’s fine,” I snap. “I’ll handle this.’

“Can you report our findings to the Second?” Kri’sin asks one of the Zmaj with him. The older one of them nods in agreement. “Good.”

Then, shifting me to his hip, he turns and strides away.

“Don’t think you’re getting off the hook this easily,” I say.

“I do not think that at all,” he says.

He’s moving us through the halls so fast that the walls are blurring. He’s all but running. The damp air rushes in my ears.

“Then what do you think?” I ask.

“That it is time we had this out,” he says, and he slaps my ass.

I’m in shock. The slap was hard enough to sting, and it not only shut me up, but it was also exciting. I’m turned on in ways I have never felt before. As my butt burns where his hand smacked through my pants my pussy grows wet.

He doesn’t look at me, doesn’t say another word, he’s in full focus on getting us to his room. As he rushes up the ramp to the bedrooms, we pass others who move out of his way without a word. He throws the heavy leather aside and steps into his room.

The firepit has burned to little more than coals and casts the room in a mix of orange glow and shadows fighting to extinguish the dying embers. He sets me on my feet, puts his hands on my shoulders, then steps back until he is at arm’s length. He meets my angry gaze with a steady one of his own.

“Tamara,” he says, not even having the decency to be out of breath from having run half the compound with me on his hip.

“I love you. With all I am, I know you are the one. My treasure. The one who completes me.”

“Then why did you—”

“I am not finished,” he says, cutting me off. I snap my mouth shut, glaring. “I love you, but this cannot be. Something is happening with you. I do not know what, but I want to be here

for you. You and I are together. We will face whatever is happening together. Do not push me away.”

“I—”

His eyes flash hot and I can't continue to meet his gaze. I drop my eyes towards the floor but that brings his throbbing erection into view. He's so hard that his pants are not only tenting there is a wet spot growing where his cum is leaking.

And then hormones take over my brain, blasting away what I should say and do. All I want is to fuck him. I want him to take me fast and hard and more than that I want to hear him crying out my name in pleasure. I step away from his grip and give him a wicked smile.

“Do you under—”

“Enough,” I order and he stops talking. “You want to be mine?” He nods and I grin. “Good. Do as I say. Drop your pants.”

He hesitates, confusion on his face. I arch an eyebrow and then he does as I ordered. His cock bounces free as he drops his pants to the floor. He steps towards me, but I hold up a hand and he stops.

“No,” I say, shaking my head. “You're mine.”

He nods and waits but his cock is bouncing with excitement it's so hard. I study his body. His perfect, hard body. I love the way his scales reflect the glow of the coals. The way his muscles ripple beneath them when he moves.

“Pose for me,” I say.

He frowns unsure what I mean so I walk over, and he lets me move his body into the position I want. In moments I have him standing and flexing in a side pose that puts his bulging muscles on full display but unlike an old earth body builder, his enormous cock is jutting straight out to the side. It makes my mouth water.

“Good,” I say, slipping a hand into my own pants and rubbing my clit. He relaxes the pose and starts to turn towards me, but I frown. “I didn't say to move.”

He resumes the pose and a smile spreads across his face. His eyes are locked onto my hand in my pants and his cock is leaking like a sieve full of water.

“You like this?” he asks, his voice deep and rumbling.

Slowly he lowers his back hand to his cock and strokes. I gasp, groaning in pleasure as the tightness in my lower belly builds towards an orgasm. I nod, biting my lip.

“Turn towards me,” I say.

He does as I command still stroking his cock.

“Undress,” he orders. “Now.”

I want to say no. I should resist. I’m the one in control, this is my game, but all I really want is his cock in my pussy and I want it now. That part of my brain demanding instant gratification wins and I’m sliding out of my clothes. The pants hang up on my knees and I struggle to break free, almost falling over but Kri’sin catches me before I do.

He steadies me then steps back, resuming his more or less submissive position, hand on cock, staring at my naked body.

I flush across my entire body but with the onslaught of blood comes moisture and I’m wetter than ever. He inhales deeply, closing his eyes and a look of bliss on his face.

“Your scent,” he murmurs then growls. “Mine.”

He drops to his knees in front of me and grabs my hips. He jerks me forward and his tongue is all over my pussy. He works magic with his mouth on my lips while his hands knead my ass. He is going all out like a man starving, eating my pussy in ways he never has before.

I steady myself by gripping his horns and spreading my legs to give him better access. The moment I do he’s on my clit and that’s it. An orgasm explodes with blinding power. I’m shaking, convulsing, and thrusting onto his face while he refuses to stop. His tail is around my waist making sure I stay up and I know for sure that without it I would be a puddle on the floor.

When it passes at last, he rises, lifting me along with him and then gently laying me onto his bed. He doesn't wait or ask, his cock slides into my ready pussy burying himself to the hilt in one single thrust.

He holds, deep inside, moaning then he pulls back. He holds, the head of his cock just inside and then he shoves it in hard and deep. I gasp and he cries out my name screaming how good it feels.

We fall into a rhythm with one another, and it isn't long before he arches his back with a loud groan and shudders. I know him well, he's coming.

As he does I do too then we're left in the sexy afterglow. As we lie, both of us panting, I listen to the thundering beats of his two hearts in his chest. I could drift to sleep but I hadn't told him yet and that was why I was looking for him for in the first place.

"You are amazing," he says, a low rumbling growl coming right after indicating just how satisfied he is. If he was an Earth cat he'd be purring.

"You're not bad yourself," I say.

"Not bad?" he asks, chuckling. "You've had better? Who are they? I would learn their techniques before I kill them."

"No," I laugh. "You're the best and you know it."

"I better be," he says. "And I will continue to get better. I will learn every little thing that causes you pleasure until I am a master of your body."

"I am sure you will," I say.

"But Kri'sin, we need to talk," I say.

Dread and fear build in my head. This is the moment. I knew it was coming and I thought I was ready, but all the doubts coalesce to assail that certainty. All I hear is my mother telling me how terrible I am and how broken. It's so crushing I can barely breathe. I'm struggling to push past it when he speaks in response.

“Yes, I agree,” he says, shifting around to rest his head on his hand. “You cannot push me away any longer. You are mine. That is not acceptable.”

I know the words coming out of my mouth are ones I’m going to regret. I don’t even mean them, don’t want to say them, but they fly out before I can do a damn thing about it.

“Not acceptable?” I snap right into something my mother would say. “You, telling me, that something is not acceptable? You who just took off onto a dangerous patrol without so much as a hey I’ll be gone a while?”

“I am the Gorchym, it is my duty,” he says, sitting up as his eyes flash angrily.

“Duty? Your duty is to me! You should have told me you were leaving.”

“I would have if you weren’t pushing me away.”

“Don’t you turn this on me,” I say, climbing off the bed. “No. This is on you. You left. I didn’t know where you were or how long you would be. I didn’t know if you were hurt!”

“I was fine,” he yells. “I am a warrior. Facing danger is what I do.”

“And now you have responsibilities beyond your duty. You have me.”

“Tamara, I will always take care of you, but I cannot ignore my duty.”

“To me!”

“To you or the commune,” he says. “I must serve both.”

“Gah,” I shout unable to form words I’m so angry.

Emotions are a storm in my head clouding away any hint of rationality. I’m acting like my mother, and on some level, I know it. But that level is not anything I can seem to control. Blindly raging hormones and old wounds are running the show no matter how much I know I’m going to regret this.

I open my mouth. I intend to tell him I’m pregnant.

Say it. Tell him he's going to be a father.

And then tell him that I'm broken. That I'll fail as a mother because there's something wrong with me and I won't be able to love our child, just like my own mom couldn't love me.

I see it so clearly it stops everything. Our child being laid in my arms and knowing I should feel... something, but there being nothing. Where I know there should be a connection and immediate love, there is emptiness.

You're broken, just like me.

And that stops me. I snap my mouth shut and shake my head.

"Do what you want," I shout, throwing my hands in the air. "I can't control you and I won't."

I haphazardly throw my clothes on. He gets off the bed and tries to pull me into a hug, but I push him away.

"Tamara, I am sorry," he says.

"No," I glare. "You don't get to be sorry. Just... no."

I run to the door.

"Tamara, please," he calls after me.

"This was a mistake," I say. "I'm sorry. You're better off without me."

I run out the door while he's still trying to get his pants on.

KRI'SIN

“*J*amara!” I yell, hopping from foot to foot as I try to pull my pants up while chasing after her.

My pants catch, causing me to stumble and almost fall. I flap my wings and swing my tail, barely managing to regain my balance. The bijass surges and with it comes rage. I ball the pants and throw them across the room then run out the door without them. I do not care who sees me naked. She is all that matters. I must catch her.

The air outside my room is cold, chilling my blood the instant it hits. I hate being cold. It makes my muscles sluggish. I skid to a stop before I go over the edge of the ramp. My new position affords me a position room close to the floor of the arena, a perk, but in this case it is a problem. If my room was higher up the ramp she would have had further to run to disappear into the network of tunnels. Desperate, I look around and barely catch sight of her ducking into one of the exit tunnels.

I lower my head and run. My feet pound the stone of the floor making a slapping sound accented by the slapping of my tail as it bounces with each step. There is Zmaj training on the arena grounds. They stop and look but I don't have time for their stares. I must catch her. I cannot let her run. Not again.

Reaching the tunnel, I saw her take I almost collide with a group of humans. Two females and three males who are looking in the opposite direction, down the tunnel, in

confusion. I shout, waving my arms, shouting for them to move.

“Ah, oh,” one of the females exclaims her eyes wide as she stares at my cock.

“Are you kidding me?” one of the males says.

“You have no pants!” another female says.

“What is wrong with you? You’re big enough, do you have to fucking show off that too?” the other male says angrily pointing at my cock.

“I must pass,” I say, staring past them. I do not see her. The tunnel is empty but there is a conjunction three wingspans ahead.

“Pass?” the angry one yells. “You need to put on pants. It’s bad enough we have to put up with your kind, but now you’re what, a nudist Zmaj? Seriously. Could this get any worse. Come Betty, turn away, you don’t need to see this obscenity.”

My dragon is raging. Roaring in my head with every thunderous beating of my hearts and I growl. I cannot stop the bijass as it surges through my head filling my thoughts with red. I grab the angry male and lift him off his feet.

“I said I must pass,” I say, hissing the last letters.

He is pale and wide-eyed as he sputters. He kicks his legs and struggles to break free, but my grip is too strong. By some chance of fickle fate, he manages to land a solid blow to my dangling balls. I roar both in pain and surprise that the tiny male caused so much pain.

I drop him and he falls to the ground in a heap as I double over. Two of the females punch me. Their hits are ineffectual as far as causing any pain or damage, but they do not need to. The true pain is caused by me and by Tamara.

The bijass left with the blast to my balls. I remain in a hunch, letting the humans take their revenge on me. I deserve no less. What was I thinking chasing after her?

“What is happening here?” I recognize Zat’an’s voice from behind me.

The punches stop and the blinding pain of my crushed balls eases, but I remain in my humble position so as not to further frighten the humans.

“He was chasing some poor girl,” one of the males says. “Then he grabbed Rick, shook him, and I thought for sure he was about to kill him.”

“He’s gone mad,” a female voice says. “You need to keep your kind under control.”

“I will take this from here, go about your day,” Zat’an says.

Zat’an. Of all the people that could find me in a position like this, it had to be him. It could have been anyone, anyone but him, but fate is obviously cruel and not done punishing me yet.

I rise from my crouch but do not meet his eyes. The humans complain further but their voices are noise that I give no attention. I stare down the hall and debate taking off to find her. The dragon urges me to go, but rationally I know this is a bad idea.

I was not wrong to give her space. Something is happening with her. Something I do not understand. She has never been impetuous or so quick to anger as she is now. I must give her more time. I pushed too hard, too fast. That was my mistake and realizing it I turn away from the tunnel and step back towards my room.

“You’re going to just let him walk away?” the angry male whom they called Rick yells as I leave.

I don’t pause my steps. I’m leaving and there is nothing he can say about it. I may need to give her space, but that doesn’t mean I must put up with abuse from others of her species.

“I said I will take care of it, now go about your business,” Zat’an says, his voice is low, and I know him well enough to know that this is when he is at his most dangerous. I have heard this tone with young, impetuous warriors who tried to defy him in training. “Or there will be consequences.”

“But—”

“Come on Rick, let them deal with their own kind, we have duties,” a female says.

“It’s not right,” Rick argues.

I cannot keep from looking over my shoulder, hoping to see Zat’an do what he would do to a youngling who acted like that. In training he would knock him out with a single punch. This Rick is clearly not a nice person.

Zat’an’s tail is partially raised but he doesn’t act. I only see his back and note the tension in his muscles making it clear he is struggling to control his own anger but unlike me, he doesn’t fold. My own bijass surges, angry that he is doing better than I did, but I push it down this time.

Zat’an crosses his arms over his chest and growls. The human in front of him turns a whiter shade of pale and takes a step back. I should have done that. Smart. Damn him.

The three females are pulling on Rick and he backs up further, but doesn’t turn his back on Zat’an. As if it would matter. Zat’an could take him out with a single swipe of his tail. It would be less than a thought to drop this tiny male.

I am at the entrance to the tunnel and not unaware of the training Zmaj who stares at my nakedness. I jerk my attention off the humans to them. I flex my muscles in the way that Tamara just taught me, and the onlooking trainees slap their tails on the ground in appreciation. Face saving done the best I can I return to my room.

I pull on my pants and then kneel to stir the fire back to life. As I rise from this task there is a knock on the stone next to my door.

“Enter,” I say.

Zat’an walks in and I growl. Of everyone who might have walked through the door he is the last one I want to see. Not after what just happened. I do not need his sanctimonious bivo dung attitude.

He doesn’t speak, standing inside the door with his arms crossed over his scarred chest. He stands so his milky eye and the burns on his face are closer to me and his broken horn is

further. We glare at one another while I struggle with the urge to punch him in the face on the basic principle that I do not like him.

I wait for him to speak but the longer we stand staring the more uncomfortable I become. My scales itch and I cannot keep my tail from twitching across the floor.

“What?” I demand. “Say what you want old one and go. I have enough problems without you.”

“Yes. You do.”

I wait for him to elaborate but he says nothing. Adrenaline hits my muscles making them thrum with unspent energy and fueling the bijass as it surges.

I'll show you problems old one.

I do not speak my thoughts. That is not the way. Yes, I beat him in the arena, but it was an acquiescence on his part, but that does not matter to our society. He gave in. I won. If I beat him again, now, I would be the one in the wrong. Denying my responsibility to those who are beneath me in the rankings.

“And?” I growl.

“What is happening with the human?”

“How do I know?” I cannot stop myself from yelling and throwing my hands up in the air. “And if I did know, why would I tell you of all people? Why do you not take the old ones walk and go gracefully like any other elder would?”

He doesn't react to my insult and that makes me angrier. The rage is a thundering sandstorm in my head. Eroding at my last bastion of reason. Beneath the storm the dragon roars. I am shaking with the effort to not attack.

“Kri'sin,” he says, not raising his voice. He lowers his arms to his sides and bows his head in a sign of submission. “I am here to help.”

“Help? Why would I need your help? Are you suddenly some expert on humans since you managed to get one on your dick?”

His head snaps up and his one eye glares. His mouth twists into a grimace as he growls.

“Do not bring her into this.”

I open my mouth to add insult to injury but stop myself before more hurtful words can escape. He is right. His female is not part of this, and she is, after all, Tamara’s best friend. I do not mean my words. I only seek to hurt as if I am some adolescent warrior unable to defend myself on the arena floor.

Shame dissipates the emotional storm causing me to hang my head.

“I am sorry,” I say. “I do not know of what I speak.”

“It is fine,” Zat’an says. “I understand you are hurting.”

“I am not hurting,” I lie.

“Tell me what is happening. Perhaps I can help.”

I stare while my hearts thunder loudly in my ears. This goes against every fiber of my being. I would rather face an army of Urr-ki alone than to put my faith and trust into him, but who else will understand? He and Abigail are getting along and seem to have no problems. He might be the only one with any true insight into what is happening between Tamara and me.

And I can do no less than all that is possible for her. Even if that means listening to my greatest rival.

“Fine,” I say, motioning for him to take a seat on the bench along the wall. I sit on the edge of my bed and tell him all that I know and all that I think I know.

As much as I hate to admit it, I feel lighter when I am done. Zat’an, for all his faults, it turns out is a good listener. He doesn’t interrupt me, letting me spin it out as it comes. When I finish, he sits silent and contemplative.

“I truly wish that I had an easy answer for you,” he says, and the weight of my problems returns with all the crushing force of the mountain above. “I do not. The difficulties between a male and female are, it seems, no different between two Zmaj than it is between a Zmaj and a human.”

“This is not helpful; in case you are wondering.”

“No, it is not,” he agrees. “But what I do know is that you are not wrong. She will trust in her friends first. This is something I have come to accept from Abigail, and you will also have to come to terms with that. Until then, I think it is best you do something to keep your mind from it.”

“And what does that mean?”

“We have intel of a disturbance,” he says. “I could ask the Second to assign you as the leader of the squad going to investigate.”

“What is the intel?”

“Another long-range patrol found what looked like a ritual being performed,” he says.

“They cannot seriously be trying to raise that, can they?”

“I do not know,” he says, shaking his head.

“But it is a myth. There is no Paluga.”

“If there is one thing I am sure of at my age it is that all myths have some basis in reality,” Zat’an says. “Do not dismiss the reality only because you have not seen one.”

“Even so, you cannot believe that any ritual by the Urr-ki will lead to one appearing.”

“No, I do not think that,” he says. “But they do. And if they do, that means they are preparing for an end game. All the myths and stories, though they worship the Paluga, it is an indiscriminate destroyer. The world ender, which would include them. If they are willing to even try to summon such a thing, what does that say about their state of mind?”

I close my mouth, shutting off the next stupid thing I was going to say because I had not even considered this. Perhaps there is a good reason the old one hasn’t taken his last walk. He may yet have some value to give.

I shake my head, clearing it of my own rivalry and negative thoughts.

“I will lead this patrol,” I say.

“Good, I will tell the Second. Prepare yourself, they want it to go out within a handspan.”

I nod, feeling the call of duty but it pulls at the argument I just had with Tamara. I should tell her, but how? I do not know where she is, and I do not have time to find her.

“Zat’an,” I say, stopping him at the door. “Do me one favor.”

“What is that?” he asks, looking over his shoulder.

“Tell Tamara for me.”

“Of course. That is no favor, that is a duty.”

“Yes, I agree. The favor is to tell her she is my treasure and my truest love. That no matter what, I will return to her.”

He nods sharply and leaves. Having no time to waste, I gather my things for a patrol.

TAMARA

I'm an idiot. Why did I run? All I had to do was listen.

Tears cool my burning cheeks as I turn another corner and only now that I've run far away do I bother to look where I am or where I'm going. The healer quarters are not far away. Maybe there is something they can give me to stop this irrationality. I know I'm hormonal, but this is beyond anything I have ever experienced and it's frightening.

Because you're broken, just like me.

That can't be it, can it? The longer this goes the more it feels like maybe it is true. Maybe it's genetic. My mom was incapable of loving me. At least she told me so often enough. She said she never felt anything for me, no magical connection, and she made it clear in every day of my life.

I don't think she ever hugged me, not once. Or smiled. I can't recall her smiling anyway. I do remember the first time that Abigail's mom hugged me. That moment is as clear as anything in my memory.

I had scraped my knee and was holding back my tears like I always did. Her mom had seen what had happened and came over to see if I was okay. I was clenching my teeth to keep from being 'overly emotional' as my mom would have accused me.

Abs mom knelt before me and asked if I was okay. I nodded I was because what was the point of anything else? She looked

at me with the kindest eyes, which is where Abigail gets them from, and she pulled me into a hug.

I didn't know what to do. I was stiff as a board as she crushed me against her chest. The confusion I felt at that moment left me spinning and uncertain but then some instinct kicked in at last and I returned the hug. I felt the love of this other woman for me, but I didn't know then how to return it. I still don't know if I know how. Or if I can.

And that is why I'm scared. What if I can't love my child? What if I don't feel anything, like my mom? Is it genetic? Is something broken inside of me? Is that why I keep flipping out on Kri'sin when he doesn't deserve it? As I approach the corner that turns into the healer hall, I hear voices.

"You won't be able to hide this much longer," I recognize Addison's voice.

"I know, but I want to be certain before I announce anything."

I stop dead in my tracks. That sounds like Lady Rosalind. A rushing sense of intruding, of overhearing some terrible secret blossoms. I am not supposed to be here or hearing this. I don't know what they're talking about but it's obviously private and here I am stumbling into the intimate moment. I bite my lip, uncertain what to do but knowing that I should turn away and leave.

"Rosalind, there is no reason to keep this a secret," Addison says, confirming my first thought of who she was talking to.

"There is, Addison. I shouldn't be. It should be impossible," Rosalind says. "You know my medical history. I shouldn't—"

"Don't say it Rosalind," Addison cuts her off.

I press myself against the wall not wanting to interrupt. I don't want to eavesdrop but more than that I don't want to be caught, not now that I've heard too much.

"The facts are the facts," Rosalind says. "Yes, the epis has accomplished a miracle. Vis and I both know this, there is no denying what is. But this, this is more than we expected, and I want to be sure there are no complications before anything is said."

“You’re already showing signs,” Addison says.

“I will wait,” Rosalind says firmly.

“Fine,” Addison says. “But I do not understand your reasoning.”

“Well enough, but I trust that you will keep your oath,” Rosalind says.

“Of course, I will,” Addison says offense clear in her voice.

“Good, I will check in with you in a couple of weeks,” Rosalind says then I hear footsteps leaving.

I thank all the powers that be she is leaving in the opposite direction of where I am. I don’t know how I got so lucky. I stay standing with my back to the wall for what feels like a long time. I don’t have any way to measure its passage.

When it seems like long enough to seem casual, I push off the wall and turn the corner. The hallway is empty, so I walk to the door to Addison’s rooms. Right as I reach for the leather door to announce my presence the door next to hers is pulled aside and a Zmaj emerges.

He sees me and stops. I recognize him. Chanka is his name, he works under Kri’sin. I force a nervous smile and nod.

“Greetings Tamara,” he says cheerfully then he sees my hand about to knock on the wall. His smile fades and is replaced with concern. “You are not well?”

“I’m fine,” I lie.

He stares waiting for more of an explanation that I am not willing to give. He has an eager, yet friendly look that reminds me of a puppy dog waiting for a treat. We continue to stare at each other as I grow more and more uncomfortable.

I shift my weight from foot to foot not wanting to go into Addison’s chamber without some explanation of why I’m seeing the healer because I know he will report this encounter to Kri’sin. I need to be the one to tell Kri’sin. I cannot let him find out from one of his men.

Chanka has an easy smile and the kind of guileless face that makes you think he might not be the brightest of people, but he makes up for that with his overt friendliness.

“Is someone you know ill?” he asks, all sincerity and concern.

“No, Chanka,” I say, shaking my head.

I’m casting around for an excuse. Anything to get out of this situation without sending him running right to Kri’sin. My nerves are jangling as the pressure builds and I can’t think of a single viable lie.

“Ach, Tamara, it’s so good to see you,” Addison says, suddenly appearing in the door and holding the heavy leather to one side. “I’m glad you stopped by to see me. Seems it’s been quite a while. Would you care for some tea?”

She has an easy smile as she comes to my rescue. She looks over at Chanka and nods to acknowledge he is there.

“You are friends! This is good,” Chanka says. He chuckles loudly and claps his hands before turning and striding down the hall.

Addison and I watch until he is out of sight then she motions for me to come inside. The moment the heavy leather falls back into place she locks me in place with a solid glare.

“You haven’t told him,” she says and it’s not a question.

“No, not yet,” I admit, feeling sick to my stomach.

“Why? You know you cannot hide this,” she says, and I suspect her exasperation isn’t only because of me and my situation but because of what I just accidentally overheard adding them both together.

“I know,” I say, shaking my head. “I was going to then... look... I...”

She continues staring as I sputter and try to find words for what I want to say. This is almost worse than what happened with Chanka. My mom’s voice is loud in my head, telling me over and over how I’m broken and there is no fixing me.

Tears swell in my eyes as I wave my hands ineffectually around the air as if I can make the voice in my head go away if I brush it aside hard enough. It doesn't work and the entire time Addison watches.

"Okay," Addison says at last. "Come, sit."

She guides me to a makeshift chair, and I sit gratefully. She goes to the counter. I can't see what she is doing but she stokes a small fire in some kind of a stone bowl then sets a pottery piece over it.

She busies herself while I struggle to get my emotions back under control. Which is the entire reason I came here, to get something that will stop all these over reactions to pretty much everything.

The smell of fresh brewed tea fills the air as Addison busies herself at the counter. In a few minutes she turns and walks over with a steaming cup in her hands.

"Here," she says, handing it to me.

I take it and inhale the steam which smells of star anise with hints of cinnamon. Blowing on the contents I sip and the warm brown water slips over my tongue with a tingling sensation. As it goes down my throat warmth and a sense of wellbeing spreads over my limbs.

"What's in this?" I ask.

"A couple of herbs and a tiny piece of epis, some of the last I have left," she says.

I nod and take another sip.

"Thank you," I say, feeling calmer and more myself.

"Of course," she says. "Sip it slow. My supply of epis is very limited."

"I've been wondering about that. Aren't we supposed to suffer withdrawals without it?"

"Early on, yes," she nods. "But that seems to be only while it is still adjusting your body. Once the first onset of changes is done, it is not necessary to have such a constant supply."

“Oh,” I say. “That’s... disturbing. What changes did it make to our bodies?”

“Mostly increasing tolerance of heat, lowering the impulse to sweat and waste water, strengthening muscles. Some other... surprising things,” she says the last looking over at the door and I get the sense she means Rosalind but I, of course, say nothing.

“Now, why haven’t you told him yet?” she asks, changing the subject back.

“I was going to, but,” I shake my head, gathering my courage. “I have to ask you something.”

“Okay, what?”

“Is being a mother genetic?”

“What do you mean? It is a function of the female body, of course. The females of the species are the ones with the reproduct—”

“No, not like that,” I say. “I mean,” I shake my head trying to figure out how to put this into words. “I mean the, I guess the instinct. They say that when you have a baby, you instantly feel connected to it. Is *that* genetic? What is that? Can a person not have that?”

“Oh,” Addison says, scooting in closer. “Is that what you’re worried about? That you won’t be able to be a mother?”

I bite my lip and nod because my throat has clenched itself tight preventing any words from escaping. The tears are there, pressing behind my eyes, and the only thing stopping them right now is the voice of my mother yelling in my head that crying will do no one any good.

Addison nods and pats my leg.

“In my experience,” she says. “You will be fine.”

“You can’t—” I choke on the words and have to swallow hard before I can finish, “can’t know that.”

“No, you’re right. I can’t. But I’ve helped deliver a lot of babies now and I can tell you, one for one, every mother had

that connection.”

“Mine didn’t,” I say.

“Maybe,” Addison says. “Or maybe your mother had other issues of her own.”

“Maybe,” I agree. “But does that mean I have them too?”

“Look, I cannot say I know you well as we’ve only recently met, but here is the thing. People who are broken, and I mean truly broken, don’t question how they are. They don’t see it. They are how they are and everyone else is wrong for not being like them. Does that make sense?”

“Sort of, I guess.”

“Good, because trust me, if you know enough and care enough to ask if you’re broken, then you’re not.”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t have to, I’m telling you. Do you have problems? Sure, we all do. Every one of us. That doesn’t make you special. Worrying about it, worrying about this, I see almost every single mother to be go through this concern. Every one of them and they’ve all come out all right.”

My mom’s voice is fading into the background. There, yes, but not nearly as loud as I do feel reassured by Addison’s insight.

“Okay,” I say.

“Good now finish that tea,” she orders. “Then you need to go and tell your mate. Trust me, you think you have problems now, wait until he finds out some other way than you. That will create a whole barrel full of issues for you.”

A sense of relief and well-being fills my chest. I don’t know if it’s the tea or her words or what, but for the first time since this began there is silence in my head. A welcome, blessed silence.

I finish the tea as I try to work through how to tell Kri’sin.

KRI'SIN

I linger in my room for as long as I possibly can, hoping that Tamara will return. I want to tell her what is happening myself. I want to see her. Touch her. Fill my nose with her scent so that I might carry it with me. Time, though, is as implacable and undisturbed as the mountain itself. It passes without care or concern for what effect it creates on me.

“Kri’sin, the patrol is ready,” Hak’ti says from outside my door.

“Yes, I will be right there,” I answer.

“We have been waiting,” he says.

“Do you think I am unaware?” I ask, throwing the leather door to one side to glare at him directly.

He takes a step back dropping his head in deference.

“No, Gorchym,” he says.

“Good, now go and wait for me to join you.”

His wings partially open as his mouth does but then he snaps both shut, turns, and leaves.

I should not have yelled at him. I also should join him now. Keeping the patrol waiting is selfish. It borders on disregard for duty. That tears at my soul, but I continue to wait. Hoping.

At last, I can wait no longer. I look around the room then walk over to the bed. Picking up the pillow she uses I press it to my face and inhale deeply. Then I place the pillow back in place and turn to the door. The flowers I picked for her sit on the

shelf where I hope she will find them. They will have to serve as a statement of my love.

I walk out the door, reluctant, but committed.

“They have been this way,” Ak’tral says.

He is kneeling and inspecting the floor of the tunnel. We’ve been exploring for three wingspans of time. Back at the compound everyone will be settling for the night. The patrol is tired, I am too, but we have not yet found what we are looking for. Information on what they Urr-ki are doing.

“Why have we seen no creatures?” Gerlar asks. “Not a cudov, not a thing.”

“They have gathered them all,” Ak’tral says.

“Further evidence that they are planning something,” I say.

“We should return,” Ak’tral says.

“No,” I say.

“Kri’sin, we know that an attack is imminent. We must return and inform the Al’fa and the Second.”

“No,” I say, shaking my head and walking ahead of the group. “There is more to this. Everyone at the compound knows that an attack is coming. That is not new information. We need more.”

“We are further than any patrol has gone in ages,” Gerlar says.

“And we will go further,” I say, turning to face the two of them. “I will take point.”

They want to argue further but their training is such that they shut their mouths and nod. I take the lead, moving slowly. I took point because it is the right thing to do, but I am distracted, and I know I should not be the one in the lead. Half of my attention is on Tamara.

I do not understand what is wrong. She is my treasure. I know this. I did not push it with her because she was not ready, but I believe, given enough time, she will understand it is so. Besides, she and I have been together, and our relationship was strong. I felt no need to put labels on it and she did not seem too either.

Until recently. When she has often been ill and even more, she has been short-tempered. I do not understand what is happening. I had urged her to go to the healers, but she kept refusing, insisting she felt better. All I had accomplished was her trying to hide how she was sick most every morning.

Something is wrong. I hold up my closed fist as I stop and kneel to inspect the tunnel floor. The natural dust of the cavern has been disturbed. Something passed through here and not long ago. I edge my way forward, carefully placing each foot.

A scattering of pebbles is the only sign but fortunately I do not miss it. Stopping the others, I lie down on my stomach and study the trap. It is clever, as most of the Urr-ki traps are. I take my club from my hip and push it across the demarcated line of the pebbles. At first nothing happens then there is a soft rumbling sound as the weight of the club reaches a certain point.

I leap up and back, crashing into Gerlar as the ceiling in front of me drops. A massive boulder now partially blocks the tunnel. Gerlar growls and we tangle together. Ak'tral presses himself against Gerlar keeping the two of us from falling to the ground.

“Hold,” Ak'tral says.

I get my feet under me and manage to disengage from Gerlar. I approach the blockage carefully. It would not be unusual for there to be a secondary trap. The boulder is as wide as the tunnel but only half as tall.

On the far side two Urr-ki step out of the shadows. One of them draws a bow and takes aim.

“Drop!” I yell, doing so even as I bark the command.

The twang of the bow is loud then I hear the arrow as it whistles through the air. No one cries out in pain and an instant later I hear it hit stone.

I roar as I leap upright.

The red rage of the bijass surges, urging action. I dive over the boulder, making it half-way through but then I stick. I'm staring at the two Urr-ki who are barely out of my arms reach. They stumble back in fear.

I struggle to break the rest of the way through. My tail and wings scrape on the boulder and ceiling as I wiggle and strain.

The one with the bow raises it, pulling back. The point of the arrow glistens and I know what that means. Poison.

"You fool!" Ak'tral yells then hands are pushing on my kicking feet.

I pop through to the other side and tumble to the ground even as the arrow flies. It passes through the opening where a moment before I was. I land hard, knocking my head. Stars dance which only makes the bijass sing louder in my blood.

I lost my weapon, but I do not need it to handle these two. I scramble to my feet, roar, and charge.

The two Urr'ki flee, and I give chase. I hear Ak'tral yelling but his words don't penetrate the blasting roar of the bijass in my head. I know, rationally, this is a bad idea, but knowing it and stopping this burning need to destroy the enemy are two different things.

The bijass is stronger because I feel a need to prove myself worthy. Tamara pushing me away. The distance she is forcing between us makes me feel I need to be somehow more. Be stronger and more worthy of her. And I will be.

The tunnel narrows then twists to the right. As it does the ceiling becomes lower and I have to hunch to continue after them. They chatter in their language then one of them runs faster than the other.

I am closing on the one who is running slower. I reach my hand for him, almost able to catch the back of his loose shirt

but he throws himself forward evading my grip. If I dive, I might catch him, but the tunnel is too tight to use my wings for gliding.

The ground trembles. I don't stop running after my quarry, but I do look around. I fight the bijass down, wrestling to clear my head of the primal desires it brings. The ground should not be trembling. Something is wrong.

The Urr'ki barks something in his own language and it echoes off the stone walls. He is also slowing down. The tremor comes again and now dust falls through cracks in the ceiling. Something is wrong. I feel it, know it with a sense that is not one I can name, but one I have learned to trust in my years.

"Kri'sin, something is happening," Ak'tral's voice echoes, not far away but I glance back and do not see him.

"Here," I call, slowing my steps.

The Urr'ki is no more than a wingspan and half away having also come to a stop and looking up. If this is a trap, he is the bait. I stop chasing. A deep rumble echoes and it feels like it comes from deep in the mountain making the floor, ceiling, and walls vibrate.

"Kri'sin, we need to get out of here," Gerlar says, appearing in the tunnel behind me.

Ak'tral is right behind him, the tunnel not being wide enough for them to walk side-by-side. I nod agreement then look back to where the Urr'ki stands, mocking me with its closeness.

"Next time," I say, touching my forehead as I nod my head.

Then the world crashes around me.

TAMARA

*B*reathe. *It will be fine.*

I repeat this to myself like a mantra. The tea Addison brewed continues to help. The sense of calm remains and is keeping the anxiety at bay. Maybe it's suppressing my hormones, I don't know, but right now I am more than grateful for its effect.

The warriors are at work on the arena floor doing their training. The clacking of wooden clubs striking poles echoes off the stone walls. The sound creates a rhythm that is almost musical. It might be the effect of the tea or the epis in it, but I find I'm stepping in time to the beat.

Dozens of warriors strike in unison, at the command of their trainer who stands in the box that protrudes from the first layer of the ramp around the arena. He barks a command, and they move as one.

At this moment they are standing turned to the right side. Each of them has one fist raised in a defensive position before them, their other arm arcing over their head clenching the wooden clubs the Cavern Zmaj favor. All of them have their tails straight up behind them. As I've learned it's a sign of anger and preparedness and that they are ready to attack.

The commander barks something I do not understand because it is so deep and guttural that it doesn't sound like a word. All the warriors step forward, twisting off their front foot and swinging the club. They end the move in the same position but reversed and they do it in almost perfect unison.

I stop and watch for a moment. Partially in admiration but also because I am looking for Kri'sin. I'd expected him to be the one leading the training from the box above, but I've seen him marching up and down the rows also, correcting the other warriors on the finer details of their motions.

My search for him is fruitless. The commander barks again and the warriors repeat the motion they just made, taking another step forward and this time they all exhale sharply at the same time. It creates a sharp sound and I jump in surprise.

Maybe he's in his room.

He could be waiting for me there. It's not like things ended well. Or he could be out looking for me, in which case the best thing to do is wait for him there. Addison is right, I cannot put this off any longer. I must tell him, must let him know what is coming for the two of us. And I'm ready. I think.

You're not ready, you're broken.

Gritting my teeth and clenching my fists steadfastly ignore the voice of my mother as I walk up the ramp. Other humans pass by, and we nod at one another. It's a social mechanic. A nod acknowledges I see you. You're real, greetings fellow human. You are not alone. All that communication tied up in a simple head gesture. It's reassuring and more than anything, for me, it keeps my attention off mom's voice.

I come to Kri'sin's room and pull the heavy leather aside. The fire inside is almost burned out leaving the room largely in shadow. I step in and wait for my eyes to adjust.

“Kri'sin?”

No answer. I make my way over to the fire pit, grabbing the metal rod and stir the coals to life. I open the stone box that sits nestled against the wall and pull out some of the dung they use for fuel, adding it to the coals. The fire slowly comes to life, tendrils of smoke curling up until the fuel takes light. I wash my hands at the small station for it then look around the empty room. I cross my arms over my chest and rub my arms. The caverns are naturally cool and goosepimples are racing

over my arms and chest. I don't know how long I will have to wait so I take a seat on the bed and try to settle in.

There's something broken in you, just like me.

Shut up Mom. I'm not broken. You were. It's not genetic, it was mental. You had problems that you hid well enough to avoid being fixed. It has to be true because if she was right...

No. Stop. I am fine. I will be fine. We will be fine. Kri'sin will help.

Crossing my arms over my belly I take a deep breath and hold it until I can't any longer and then let it out in one long exhale. No, mom. I am not you. I will do this. I will be better than you.

A carved tube of stone comes down from the ceiling over the firepit. It's a curiosity that I've never bothered to inspect because it was just there, part of the scenery. Now, desperate for anything to occupy my thoughts, I study it.

The tube goes up into the ceiling, looking like a natural extension, though it clearly cannot be. The seam is so smooth I only see it when I get close and really look for it. The craftsmanship is impressive. At the bottom of the tube, over the firepit, is a round shield that is the same size as the fire. This also looks to be carved stone or maybe some kind of pottery work. The smoke from the fire is pulled up the tube and goes... somewhere.

There must be negative air wherever it is because it's pulling the smoke out of the rooms. Every room has one of these. It's an engineering marvel now that I look at it. Something I have taken for granted because I didn't look. Too consumed with my own thoughts and worries to appreciate the world around me.

I am going to try to not do that. To not take things for granted. Not anymore. I look down at my stomach inside of which grows a life. I'm going to try and appreciate the world more. Look at it with admiration and love.

Like the way Kri'sin looks at me. It's not desire. Well, not only desire, but it's also more. When he watches me, his eyes burn,

and a smile plays on his face. I've seen it in my peripheral all the time and never once have I acknowledged it.

Or the way he confers with me on even the smallest of things. As long as I don't ask him to choose between me and duty. But even then, I think he would be choosing me because he sees his duty to the compound as part of protecting me.

Protecting us. I press my hands to my belly. It is starting to swell. Subtle, right now, but it will not be for long. Zmaj babies are big. Really big.

Ugh, don't think about that. Even the thought in passing makes my vagina hurt. Birthing something that size? Ouch. But it can be done. Lots of women have done it before me with no problems. Or at least if there were any problems, they aren't advertising it.

And they would. Wouldn't they? I would think it would be a thing that it was known if birthing one of the crossbreeds wrecked your pussy for life. A handful of girls might decide to keep it secret, but not as many as have them now. The adage applies, I would think. Two people can keep a secret if one of them is dead.

Morbid. Come on Tamara.

Finishing my inspection of the chimney I return to the bed and sit. I'm bored and kind of tired, so I lie down and let my thoughts continue to wander. Mostly I think about Kri'sin. And the way he treats me. The way he acts, the way he moves. How tender and gentle he is, especially as a lover, despite his massive size. He's funny too. Well, he makes me laugh.

Come on, Kri'sin. Where are you?

Footsteps pass by the door and time slips away. It has to have been more than an hour. I can't believe he hasn't come here looking for me. Where is he?

Frustration building, I sit up, deciding to try looking for him again. Someone has to have seen him. The compound is big, but it's not that big. And all these Cavern Zmaj know who he is since he was promoted.

I think they did before too, but they're all kind of weird. Their entire society being built around who can beat who, but only during certain times and only in the arena. Which kind of makes no sense. What if you have a bad day on that day? You're stuck for an entire, what, year? More?

How do they even know when it's time to do their big ta do again? There are no seasons down here. No suns to measure the passage of time. Yet they do. Somehow. Maybe it's an all-group agreement. Who knows. What it really is, is a distraction. A way to keep my thoughts away from the fact that I haven't told him yet and worrying about him being angry.

Of course, he'll be angry. How can he not be? I've known all this time and didn't tell him. He has every right to be mad about that.

Gah, I can't take this anymore. I stand up and walk to the door. As I do I hear footsteps outside. I don't think anything of that because it's the main concourse but when I pull the door aside, I'm face to chest with Zat'an.

"Greetings," Zat'an says.

"Uh, hi," I say, looking up at his scarred, scaled chest. I take a step back and he takes over holding the door open.

"I was looking for you," he says.

"Why?" I ask instantly suspicious. He is Abs' guy, why is he looking for me? My mind immediately leaps to the worst thing possible. "Is Kri'sin okay?"

"He is fine," he says and right as relief comes, he continues, "I think."

"Think? What do you mean think?" I ask.

"May I come in?"

"Tell me what happened? How do you not know?"

He looks to either side. People are moving past and around him as he continues to stand in the door. All of them are gawking with open curiosity.

“I should come in, if I may?” he nods his head to either side.

“No, yes, I don’t care, just tell me.”

I take two steps back to make room. He frowns and steps inside, letting the door drop back into place behind. Cold chills form in my chest and ripple along my limbs as I wait for him to speak. He shifts his weight from one foot to the other, his tail making a rasping sound as it twitches on the stone floor.

“Kri’sin asked me to come and tell you in person,” he says.

“Tell me? Why didn’t he tell me himself?”

“He could not find you and the matter was urgent.”

“So urgent he couldn’t wait to tell me? Where is he? How do you not know if he is okay?”

“He is on a mission for the Al’fa.”

“What mission? Is he in danger?”

“We are all in danger,” Zat’an says. “You must understand that he does not do this for any other reason than to prote—”

“Do not tell me he is doing this for me!” I yell, cutting him off. “You think I don’t know? You think I’m stupid? I know why he thinks he’s doing it. What I don’t know is why he couldn’t wait to tell me himself.”

Zat’an frowns as he lowers his head and scratches behind his broken horn.

“Yes, that would be my fault.”

“Yours?”

“I pressed him to go, you see time was of the ess—”

“So much of the essence that he could not say goodbye?”

Anger makes me want to cry and that only pisses me off more. I don’t want to cry. I’m not weak, I’m angry. The one thing I asked of him was to tell me and here he went and ran off again.

“Yes, I am afraid it was,” Zat’an says.

I stare in utter disbelief.

“You don’t know that,” I say. “You cannot possibly know that.”

“Yes, I do,” he says. “The Urr’ki are preparing something, we must know what. We must prepare.”

“Abigail made friends with one of them. They didn’t seem that bad to me when they captured us.”

“You do not under—”

A low rumble cuts me off. It sounds like the aftereffects of a distant explosion. Zat’an looks over his shoulder then he drops into a crouch and places his hand flat on the floor.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

He looks up and on his face is something I never want to see again in all my life. Fear. He bursts forward, arms widening, wings spreading, and then his shoulder drives into my chest forcing all the air out of my lungs. I can’t even scream.

And as he shoves me into the cubby of Kri’sin’s bed and dark thoughts and fear of what he is about to do, the room shakes.

Dust falls from the ceiling then the chimney breaks free and crashes onto the burning flames sending sparks and burning fuel into the air. Zat’an rolls into the bed and on top of me, covering me with his body.

Everything shakes violently. My head is bouncing between the stone base of the bed and Zat’an’s chest. Suddenly my head cracks down hard and everything goes black.

KRI'SIN

*P*ain. The darkness pulses with it. Every beating of my hearts is a throbbing ache. It is inescapable as awareness creeps in, advancing then retreating when the hurting becomes too much.

I groan. I'm prone. I try to push myself up but can't. Something is on my legs. I try to open my eyes, but they don't obey. I concentrate and force them open. It feels like the lids are being torn apart. That pain is so minor compared to everything else I barely register it.

My nose and mouth are dry and full of dust. I work my jaw, forcing moisture to return then I sneeze several times clearing my nostrils. I hear another person grunt then cry out in pain.

"Ak'tral? Gerlar?" I ask.

No answer. It must be one of them. Are they hurt? Unconscious? What happened? This must have been a trap. I should never have chased the Urr'ki. That was stupid.

I try again to sit but I cannot feel my legs. There is not even a hint of light, not even enough for my low-light vision to allow me to see. I run my hands down my sides and over my thighs. My legs are buried. I cannot tell if it is a boulder or debris.

This is on you. You left. I didn't know where you were or how long you would be. I didn't know if you were hurt!

Tamara's words fill my thoughts and all I can think of is how sorry I am. She was right. I was wrong and I am sorry Tamara. I will return. I promise. Somehow.

I must free my legs. I cannot tell how much damage has been done to them. Do not know if I can walk or if I will have to crawl back to the compound. Ak'tral and Gerlar, where are they?

No, first things first. Free myself and then find the other two.

I inhale a deep breath, hold it, then exhale sharply to create a burst of flame. The ball of fire lingers in the air long enough for me to see that a boulder is on my legs then disappears leaving the aftereffects burning on my retinas.

I lie my head back down and wait for the dancing images to pass. While I do the orange-red blobs shape themselves into Tamara.

This trap will not keep me from you. Nothing in this universe will keep me from your side.

I slide my hands down until they are on the boulder. I push, straining with all my might, but it doesn't even shift. Once it is clear that is not going to work, I change tactics, sliding my hands along the left side of the rock and then pushing.

The boulder shifts. It's a slight movement but any motion is better than none. I push harder and the boulder scrapes and shifts. As it does dust falls from the ceiling and right into my partially open mouth, nose, and eyes. I stop, wiping my eyes and spitting to clear my mouth.

"Pointless," a voice I do not recognize says.

"Who is that?" The voice snorts, then loudly wheezes, but does not answer. I wait as my hearts thunder loudly in my ears.

"Who spoke? I do not recognize your voice."

"You wouldn't," the voice says. "Why would you, killer?"

I shake my head in confusion. Who is this? Why does he call me a killer?

"Who are you?"

"Your mortal enemy," the voice says. "The one you would destroy. As your kind do, ruining all."

My kind? Can it be? No...

“An Urr’ki?”

“As you label us,” he says. He coughs and it sounds wet then I hear him gag and spit. “Your kind have angered the planet. The Paluga will reset the world. Return it to how it was meant to be.”

“My kind?” I ask rage rising and with it comes the red fog of the bijass.

He insults me. I will show him anger. I push on the boulder again and it shifts further. More debris rains down but I do not care. I will be free. This monster will not insult me. I will show it who the better warrior is.

“Yes, finish the job, monster,” he says. “Kill another of my kind. What is one more when your hands are steeped in blood?”

“I will kill you,” I growl, straining. The boulder moves and one leg is free. Blood rushes painfully in and I grit my teeth to keep from crying out.

“You think I do not know this? I am resigned. My blood will fuel the Paluga’s rage and well may it be.”

The boulder rolls and I am free. I sit fully up but both legs are a mess of tingly pain and numbness. I do not wait for them to function, instead I roll over and crawl on my belly towards the sound of the voice.

“Kill you,” I rage.

My hearts are pounding. The red haze of the bijass covers thoughts as I force myself ahead.

“Come, monster,” he coughs. “Finish what you started. It will only hasten your own end.”

A spark flashes giving me pause as it blinds me. A moment later there is another spark then a small flame lights. I see, for the first time, the Urr’ki.

He holds a torch and is sitting with his back against the wall of the tunnel. Blood trickles from the corner of his mouth, one eye is swollen shut and his tusk on that side is broken. His left leg is twisted at a sickening angle.

His one open black eye glistens as he meets my eyes without fear. He is resolved and something in that resolve gives me pause, clearing the red haze from my mind and leaving me cold and empty.

I stop crawling toward him, resting on my elbows I am about eye level with him. We stare at one another. The torch he holds flickering as the fire hungrily consumes oxygen.

“You are hurt,” I say.

“And?” he asks, defiant still.

I shake my head. The pain in my own legs feels worse looking at him, as if I am empathizing with how bad his must be.

Tamara talked about how they were treated well by the Urr’ki. When I was captured, they did not kill me, though they had the opportunity and something about that gives me pause. No, not my capture. Tamara.

She would not kill him. He is hurt and far from a worthy opponent. This would be nothing less than a murder if I kill him now. And of all the things I am, a murderer is not one of them. I resume my crawl forward and his one eye widens but that is the only reaction.

As I approach, he closes his one eye and leans his head back, baring his neck. I roll over and into a sitting position then slide backwards until my back is against the wall next to him. I stare at my legs which are slowly coming to life. I’m hurt, but I do not think anything is broken.

“What are you doing?” he asks, turning his head towards me.

“Resting. You?”

He stares silently then his mouth works but no words come out.

“You. Insane?”

“Likely, yes.” He nods and chuckles then rests his head against the wall. We sit in silence for a long while. As we do I look around and try to piece together what happened. This looks like the tunnel, but we are blocked in. There are cracks in the

walls and ceiling that were not there before. “This is not a trap.”

“Trap?”

“You know,” I say. “Your kind love traps. I assumed I had fallen for one.”

“No, fool,” he says, sighing heavily. “No trap. This is the anger of the Paluga. Brought about by your kind.”

“The Paluga is not real,” I say.

He looks over in disapproving silence.

“Fool,” he snorts at last. “It is real. I have seen it.”

“You have not,” I disagree but I do not know why. What do I know of what he has seen or not seen?

“Have I not?” he laughs. “Fine. Believe as you wish. That is the hallmark of your kind. Destroyers of all that is and all that should be. You believe in nothing but yourselves.”

“We live in balance with Tajss!”

He laughs until it is stopped by a burst of coughing. Blood spatters from his lips. He wipes the back of his hand over his mouth and stares at it for a moment before raising his burning eyes back to mine.

“Fool,” he says with a chuckle as he shakes his head.

TAMARA

“*W*ill she be okay?”

Who is talking so loud? For the love of all that's holy stop it.

My head is a giant ball of throbbing, blinding pain. It must be blinding because I can't see. I'm aware, but I don't want to be. It hurts too much to be here. Everything is darkness but a darker dark creeps in, offering relief.

“She is hurt, but will recover,” Addison says. I recognize her voice as I slip towards unconsciousness. “Any word on Kri'sin and the patrol?”

Kri'sin? He was on patrol. What happened?

Mentally I leap away from the impending unconsciousness and push myself upright. The instant I do I regret it. My head explodes, it feels like literally. My stomach flips and it's all I can do to not vomit.

“Woah, lie down, stop,” Addison and another, deeper voice says, both too loud.

Hands push me back down. I don't fight it because I don't have the strength. I press my palms against my temples in what feels like a vain attempt to keep my head from tearing itself apart.

“Tamara,” Addison says. “Lie still. You've been hurt.”

“Kri—” my mouth is too dry. My tongue feels thick. I can't make it work to say his name. I try again but gag and have to

turn my head to the side which only makes the pain worse.

Other hands are on my head then a cool cloth is on my face which I only now realize feels feverish. My stomach clenches, forcing burning bile up my throat. Left with no choice I ride the wave of pain and nausea until at last it passes.

I'm pushed backward and I am lying still, panting, and trying to focus my thoughts through the pounding in my head. I'm aware of hands on me, I assume Addison's but I don't dare to open my eyes. Not yet, a few more minutes. Let the pain ease a little more.

Gathering all my courage I force my eyes open. The light is not bright, I know this, but it *feels* bright. It feels like I'm staring straight into the primary sun of Tajss at high noon. The flickering torch burns through my retinas and sears itself into my head. Defensively, I snap my eyes closed and then, moving as slowly as I can, I roll onto my back.

The pain doesn't quit, but it also doesn't explode if I move slow enough. It's manageable. My tongue still feels like it's swollen. I move it around inside my mouth and manage to get a hint of moisture then something touches my lips and cool liquid passes them. I drink greedily but it's pulled away too soon.

"Not too much," Addison says. "Easy. Easy."

"Kri'sin?" I ask, not opening my eyes. My voice is hoarse and cracks on his name, but I manage to get it out.

Silence answers my question. Fear is a vortex in my center, sucking me down into what I know will be despair.

"We do not know," a deep voice. I know this voice. Why can't I place it? "No one has heard from his patrol yet."

"Wh—" my voice cracks. I swallow again then Addison, I think, gives me some more water. It's wonderfully cooling and almost magical as it seems to ease the pain too. Did she drug the water for me? "What... happened?"

"An earthquake," Addison says.

“The mountain moved,” the deep voice says and when he does his name comes. Zat’an.

I was with him. He was telling me that Kri’sin went on patrol. Again. Without telling me. The anger tries to ignite but pain and fear overwhelm its tiny spark, squashing it before it can catch. My stomach clenches as a wave of nausea passes through.

“Addison,” I say, still afraid to open my eyes.

I don’t want to ask this next question. I don’t want to know if it’s bad. I’m looking at Schrodinger’s cat. He’s okay until I ask. Once I ask there will be no going back. I will know and knowing will change everything. If it’s bad, if it’s not then nothing changes. I move my mouth, trying to say it, but fear locks my throat and keeps the words from coming out.

A hand on my shoulder squeezes. It’s Addison, I’m sure because the hand is too small to be Zat’an. She leans in close, her warm breath tickling my ear.

“It is fine,” she whispers.

Relief rushes in. I open my eyes. I’m staring at the ceiling of the healers’ rooms but there is a large crack running along the middle of it.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

I can’t even begin to process the emotions storming in my head, warring with the pain, but this sense of rightness, of relief rides above everything else. I don’t know where Kri’sin is or if he really is okay, but our baby is. For now, at least. Which frees my attention to worry about him.

Something in us is broken.

No, mom. Something in *you* was broken. I will love this child. I will be a better mother than you ever could be and that’s okay. I forgive you. I’m sure you did your best, but I am not you. I cross my arms over my belly and while I’m sure it’s only my imagination I feel the baby beneath them. As if it is a tiny bonfire growing in my belly. A spot of warmth and the promise of a brighter future to be had.

Moving gingerly, I turn my head to the side. Zat'an is there, watching with his one good eye but short an eye or not he doesn't miss much. He knows. I don't know if it's because Abs told him or if he guessed it right now, but he knows that I am pregnant, I am sure of it.

"Easy, girl," Addison says. "You've a concussion. Give your body some time to heal."

"No... time," I say, pushing myself upright.

The room tilts and swirls. I grip the edge of the stone table tight and wait for either my head or the room to stop, not caring which one does first, only wanting it to stop. This feels like I'm really drunk, except there was no fun had to lead to it that's for sure. Zat'an steps in and grabs my shoulders, holding me steady as I lean too far forward.

"You are injured," he says.

"No shit?" I ask and instantly regret the accompanying sarcastic nod of my head as the room rocks harder.

"I do not understand," he says looking over my head to Addison. "Will she be okay?"

"She will if she takes it slow and gives her body lots of rest," Addison says. "There is not much I can do for a concussion."

"I will be fine," I say, determination winning out enough to make the room stop its spin. "Kri'sin. What do we know?"

"Almost nothing," Zat'an says. "His patrol has been gone for too long now. I do not know how bad the movement was where they were."

"Has this," I pause, panting my way through dizziness. "Has this happened before?"

"Not in my lifetime," Zat'an says.

That's saying a lot. The Zmaj are incredibly long-lived and he's old even for one of them.

"Not natural then?"

"I do not know," Zat'an says.

“We have to rescue Kri’sin,” I say. No one speaks. I wait, dealing with the throbbing pain until it is clear they aren’t going to. “What? We must save him.”

“Tamara,” Addison says. “We have a lot of injured people. There are not enough warriors free right now to send out help.”

“No!” I shout but in doing so I move my head and almost pass out from the pain. The two of them grab onto me but I shake them off. “No. Let me be. I will go...”

“No. You will not,” Zat’an says.

He doesn’t raise his voice or display the slightest bit of emotion. He is stating a fact as if commenting on the redness of the sky that day.

“You can’t stop me. He needs me.”

“No,” Zat’an says, shaking his head. “Do not be a fool.”

“Fool?” I ask. “Kri’sin might be hurt.”

“He might be,” Zat’an agrees.

“I won’t let him lay out there,” I say.

“Perhaps,” Zat’an says.

“Then I’m going to him!” I shout, pushing myself off the table but the moment my feet hit the ground my knees refuse my weight and I’m falling. Zat’an catches me before I hit and sits me back onto the table where I started.

“No,” Zat’an says. “You are injured. I promised Kri’sin I would care for you while he is gone.”

“Care for me? What about him?” Desperation makes my voice high-pitched and crackly even to my own ears.

“He will be fine,” Zat’an says. “He is a solid warrior. He knows how to survive.”

“But...” I trail off not wanting to say it but the throbbing pain pushes it out of my mouth. “What if he’s not?”

Tears stream down my face. The idea is too much. I don’t know if I’m ready to be a mother or not, but I am dead sure I

am not ready to be a single mom having lost my mate to some stupid earthquake.

“He will be,” Zat’an says, “and you know it. Here.”

He points to his chest then turns the same finger to point at mine. I look down at my filthy and torn blouse. Dust, grime, and spots of blood obscure its original print but he’s right. I know Kri’sin is alive. In my heart.

All I can do, for now, is wait and hope. Reluctantly I look up and meet Zat’an’s eye. I bite my lip then force myself to nod agreement. He grunts and turns away.

“Others need my help,” he says. “I am glad you are okay. Remain in Addison’s care until she releases you.”

“Zat’an,” I call after him and he stops. “He needs help. I know it.”

Zat’an nods. “I will do all I can.”

He walks out the door and I am alone.

KRI'SIN

The Urr'ki's head drops to his chest and he startles awake, coughing more blood.

"You sound worse," I say.

"Yes," he agrees. "Are you going to finish your job now?"

Every breath he takes wheezes but his black eyes glisten with sharp intelligence. I shake my head, ignoring his baiting.

"If that leg is not set, it will not heal properly."

"Your insight is astounding," he huffs.

"I will set it for you."

"No."

I meet his glaring eyes with my own. He is defiant. I respect that. I know how bad his pain must be but he does not let that make him weak. He is holding on to his own integrity and no matter that he is an enemy, I acknowledge the strength he is showing.

"I would like to help."

"Why?" he asks then has a coughing fit that sounds wet. He groans and shakes his head.

I do not answer him immediately, sorting through my own thoughts. Why would I help him? He is the enemy. The Urr'ki have always been our enemy. Attacking our compound and trying to drive us out of our home. And yet, I want to help him.

“You are a warrior,” I say, musing my thoughts out loud. “I respect that.”

“Respect my green ass,” he says. “You want me to let you close so you can finish me off. Bring it on lizard. I will destroy you.”

He raises his hands and balls them into fists but his arms tremble with the effort and he grits his teeth and narrows his eyes. He is in agony but still he will try to fight. I cannot keep myself from smiling then I laugh and shake my head.

“Do not laugh at me,” he yells ending with a growl. “I will not let you kill me without a fight.”

The laughter keeps coming. It feels like a release, letting go of all the stress, the worry, the fear. And then all my mistakes come and go with it. I should not have left without seeing Tamara. It strikes me, for the first time, that I might not see her again.

The laughter dies on my lips as the sobering thought becomes real. I too am injured. My legs are not broken, but the bruising is such that the muscles are not functioning normally. My left wing is a throbbing knot of pain and will not move on command and my tail is also hurt.

I look at the Urr’ki as much to take my attention off my own body as to see what he is doing now. He has managed to scoot himself into a more upright position while continuing to defiantly glare. His arms give out and his clenched fists drop onto his lap. Blood trickles from the compound fracture in his leg and I am sure that sooner than later he will pass out from blood loss.

“You may fight,” I say. “That is fine, but it changes nothing. I have decided I will help you.”

I roll over and onto my hands and knees and crawl towards him. He tries to kick me with his good leg but the pain makes him cry out and his kick is ineffectual. I grab his thrashing leg and push it down to the ground.

“Let me go.”

He struggles but to no avail. I rest my weight on his good leg while shifting to get a closer look at his broken one.

“It is bad.”

“Your insight is incredible.”

I stop inspecting the leg and look at him.

“How is it that you are fluent in my language?” I ask.

“Know your enemy.”

I nod. “Smart.”

“Your kind underesti—”

His words turn into a high-pitched scream as I snap the leg back to straight. As I look from the leg to him, I miss the thrown fist. It drives into my jaw, and I fall back, trying to roll with it. I manage to lessen the force, but not completely. Stars dance in my eyes as the bijass surges.

I roar and leap forward, extending my hands to take him out. His humorless eyes and the expression on his face stop me. I drop my hands and sit back shaking my head. “No.”

He blinks in slow motion then nods his head.

“That hurt.”

“And it doesn’t still?”

He looks down at his broken leg. Blood continues to trickle from the wound, but it has slowed. And the bone is back in place. He needs a splint to keep it together and I need to stop the bleeding.

I climb to my feet, trusting my legs for the first time. I’m unsteady and my head is throbbing. I hold myself up with one hand on the wall and pant until the dizziness passes. Once it does, I move, slowly and painfully. I need to figure a way out of here.

The tunnel collapsed on either side blocking us in. The cracks in the ceiling continue to rain down gravel and dust. If another quake hits, we will likely be buried. I press my hands on the rubble blocking the path back where we came and shove, but

my right knee won't hold my weight and I can't generate much in the way of force.

"We'll have to dig our way out," I mutter.

"Kri'sin!" Ak'tral's voice is dim and I'm not honestly sure if I heard it or not.

"There is no poi—"

"Hush," I order, pointing one finger back at him as I rise onto my clawed toes and strain to hear. "Ak'tral?"

"Kri'sin!" Ak'tral says. "Are you hurt?"

"Not badly," I yell back.

"It's completely collapsed. We'll get help," he says.

"Good," I say. "See you soon."

I don't hear him answer but exhaustion hits and I slide down the rubble to sit on the floor opposite the Urr'ki.

"Finish me now," he mutters. "Please make it quick."

"No."

"You will not even grant me a swift death?" he grunts and shakes his head. "Should have known better. Your kind are evil. The Paluga will reset the world and then there will be no more evil lizards."

"I am not a lizard."

The Urr'ki stops running his mouth long enough to look at me in disbelief.

"Do your kind not have mirrors? You have the word for it, I know it. Or are you too stupid to use one? Is that what it is? You are dumber than the rest of your kind?"

I growl, straining to control the surging bijass and the urge to punch him in the face until he shuts up.

"You press your luck, green skin."

"Luck," he snorts, "you speak of luck and here I am where I will never again see my family. Never hold my wife in my

arms. Not feel my child's arms around my neck. What luck is this?"

"You have a family?"

He snaps his mouth shut so fast that his tusks click. He growls and narrows his eyes.

"Shut up lizard."

I am halfway across the space before I get myself under control. The bijass was that quick, that subversive and if I hadn't stopped myself, I would have hurt him.

"I need to tend your leg."

"Why? You will kill me sooner or later. Let us end this now."

"We do not hunt you," I say. "You attack us. Your kind, not mine. We defend ourselves, that is all."

"You are invaders and do not belong. The surface was your world, but you could not be satisfied with all that great expanse. No. You had to invade our realm. Steal our land. Overtake our spaces. And still you kill us on sight."

I frown.

"Your stories are different than the ones I grew up with."

"Because mine are true. Yours are the lies of your people."

I growl and shake my head. Why am I engaging with him? I should kill him. This is pointless.

Except for Tamara.

I close my eyes and rest my head against the wall. Memories of the last time we made love fill my head bringing a smile to my lips. She is perfect. When I am with her, I am a better male. A better being overall.

Then I remember the argument. How can she not understand that I have a duty to her and to the compound both? They are not mutually exclusive, they serve each other, but she doesn't see that. I must get back to her.

"No. This is on you. You left. I didn't know where you were or how long you would be. I didn't know if you were hurt!"

Her words are even sharper in memory than when she said them. A finely honed blade slicing through flesh and cutting into my heart. I growl, slamming my fist onto the ground. The impact and pain in my fist pulls me out of the memory.

“What are you staring at?”

The Urr’ki frowns and shakes his head.

“You,” he says.

“Stop.”

“And where should I stare?” he snaps, trying to push himself off the floor but his broken leg shifts and a spasm rushes through.

He collapses, his eyes closed, head hanging to his chest. Damn it, he has knocked himself out. I must stop the bleeding. Climbing to my feet I walk over and set about administering first aid.

TAMARA

*W*himpers and cries of pain are a constant, unending background noise. The arena has been turned into a triage for those with minor to moderate injuries while the worst-off ones are being cared for in the healers' rooms, but that space is already over full.

My head is throbbing, beating in time with my heart. Every time my heart beats my eye twitches because the pain multiplies. I rub my temples and do my best to focus. Zat'an is with me, but I don't know where Abs and Anna are.

"Hey, excuse me," I ask Calista.

I do not know Calista personally, but I know of her. The first woman to mate with a Zmaj, the one who found them and saved us, she has a reputation that precedes her. At her side is what must be Illidan. Her son, the first crossbreed.

He's tall, over three feet, and already has broad shoulders. He has hair so dark even in the dim light it looks black as if it absorbs the light. His wings look thinner than the full grown Zmaj, his tail drags on the floor behind him. As I step up to his mom, he moves between us with a deep frown. He crosses his arms over his bare chest and his tail taps on the floor.

"It's okay Illidan," Calista says. She looks exhausted. Her cheeks and eyes are sunken and there is a haunted look to them. Her face is smudged with dirt and though she forces a smile it is tired and worn too. "How can I help?"

“I’m looking for my friends,” I say. “Is there a system to check in with?”

“We’re trying,” she says, frowning and shaking her head. “But not yet.”

“How,” I stop, not sure I want to know but then I have to, don’t I? “How bad is it?”

The haunted look grows on her face. She looks around the open space which is full of injured people on blankets being tended to by those few who are less hurt.

“Bad,” she says. “One entire wing collapsed.”

“Which,” my throat tries to block the words, but I have to ask. “Which one?”

“A new branch that was being cleaned to prepare for the new arrivals,” she says.

Numb, I nod. “Thank you.”

I turn in a slow circle, looking around the arena. I don’t know what I hope to find, maybe I’ll see my friends? Know that they are okay? Someone touches my arm and I turn my head to look but no one is there. The touch comes again and now I look down. Illadon is staring up at me with his sharply intelligent eyes and a deep frown on his face that pulls his horns down.

“What do they look like?” he asks.

“Huh?”

“Your friends,” he says. “I am helping my mom and dad. What do they look like? What are their names?”

“Abs—Abigail and Annalise,” I say.

He nods grimly and I give him descriptions. He lowers his arms as he gives a sharp nod, then rolls his shoulders.

“I will keep my eyes open for them,” he says with solemnity. “If they are to be found, I assure you they will be returned to you.”

There is a beautiful absurdity to him and this entire interaction. I don't see his mom, she's moved on to whatever duty she is doing but here her son, who is maybe eight or nine years old is reassuring me. And, surprisingly, it helps. A lot.

"Thank you," I say.

He shrugs, shakes his head, then flaps his wings as his tail slaps the floor.

"Friends are important," he says. "If my friend was missing, I would do anything to find her."

"Me too," I say.

He flashes a broad smile that shows his sharp incisors then nods and walks away. Watching him leave I press my hands to my belly. Warmth radiates from my stomach and suffuses my limbs.

Are you a boy?

You're broken like—

Shut up mom. I am not broken. My heart swells until I swear it's going to burst out of my chest it's so full of love. No, not only love. Hope. This child represents a future.

Did you feel this way mom? Did dad love you like this? Did he love me before we lost him?

I know that Kri'sin loves me, that's never been in doubt. And I love him. The way he makes me laugh. The way he scratches himself when he doesn't think I'm looking. All the little things he does when he's being himself. The sincerity with which he does everything, throwing himself into the smallest of tasks with a zeal that is enviable. Even cleaning. He works with gusto and delight, while the entire time he is watching me with love and admiration.

Kri'sin will love our child. I've seen the other Zmaj, on occasion, with their children. All of them love their kids, it's clear. But their culture is different than ours. Well of course it is. They're aliens after all, but it's more than that.

The Zmaj had given up hope. All their females died in or after the war they call the Devastation. Somehow that event even

affected the Cavern Zmaj here deep in their retreat from the world. A testament to how intense that cataclysm must have been.

Without women they had no future. We, human females, gave them back the hope of a future. We are their only hope to continue and not slowly fade from existence. Coming from that unconquerable despair must change a person. I wonder what they were like before that happened?

Did they love their kids as much then? Their wives? Did they date? Did they fall out of love? What was Zmaj society before us? Before the Devastation?

“Tams!” Annalise cuts through my musings and jerks me back to reality. “Thank the stars you’re okay.”

She jerks me into a tight hug before I can speak, squeezing so hard I can barely breathe. I return the hug and unbidden tears stream down my face. She’s okay.

“Have you seen Abs?” I ask, when we ease our death grip on each other.

“She’s okay,” Annalise says, swiping at her own tears with the palms of her hands. She shakes her head and half-laughs. “This is crazy.”

“Yeah,” I agree. “We need to help.”

“That’s what Abs is doing,” she says, waving a hand over her shoulder.

Annalise is filthy, as I’m sure I am too. The dirt on her face is streaked by her tears. There is a nasty looking, dark contusion on her left cheek and a bandage on her right arm. But other than some tears in her clothes she looks unharmed.

“You’re, okay?” I ask.

“Yeah,” she nods, clasping her hands on my face and staring into my eyes. “And you? You’re okay? Is,” her eyes drop to my belly then back up, “okay?”

“I think so,” I nod. “Zat’an was with me when it happened.”

“Zat’an? Why?”

“Because Kri’sin is—” I can’t finish the sentence. My throat clenches tight and a fresh round of tears swell behind my eyes. I shake my head, pursing my lips, and trying to force the lump in my throat down.

“Oh Tams,” she says, pulling close again.

I cling to her like a rock in a storm as I fight the storming sense of loss.

KRI'SIN

The only sound is a distant drip. It's consistent and constant enough that it creates a rhythm. I tap my fingers on a stone matching its time. The Urr'ki is still unconscious. I moved him around and stopped the bleeding the best I can. The remnants of my pants stop at my knees, having used the rest to make bandages.

My bare legs have deep bruises. They hurt, but as I thought nothing was broken. I sit and I wait. While I do, I stare at the Urr'ki.

His race is small. Human-sized is how I think of him now that I have that comparison. Big human, but human sized. Bulkier than most of the human males, though I have seen a handful of them that are more muscular like this Urr'ki.

He wears a necklace made from the bones of various creatures that live underground. I wonder if there is some significance to the bones or their order on it. The bone that hangs at the center looks different. I do not think it is an animal bone. It looks more like a finger bone, and it points down the center of his chest where I imagine his heart would be. If Urr'ki anatomy is similar to Zmaj, which I do not know for sure.

I growl. Why am I thinking about him. He is the enemy. His kind probably caused the quake. And thinking about the quake new fears blossom. How widespread was it? Did it affect the compound? Is Tamara okay?

Tamara. I will return. I promised you and I will keep my word.

I rise into a crouch, staring at my enemy. I should kill him. It is simple, no contest. He is not even conscious. A simple matter to place my hand over his nose and mouth, pinch shut his wide nose while pressing down. In moments he would be done. Or I could grab his head and snap his neck. Fast, simple, and clean.

And murder.

I have killed many Urr'ki in my time. Killed many, many things, but I have never in all my life committed murder. Never killed an unarmed or disabled Urr'ki. And for whatever reason this feels wrong.

I sit back down, leaning against the stone with a sigh. Everything hurts anyway.

“Can you not do it?” The Urr'ki mutters. “Weak.”

“You wish me to kill you?”

“I wish to end whatever game you are playing,” he says, opening his black eyes which burn with anger.

“I play no game,” I say. “I will not kill a helpless male.”

“I am far from helpless,” he says, balling his hands into fists and raising them but the twisting agony is clear on his face.

I snort and shake my head, not moving. He holds his fists up for a while but eventually he cannot do it any longer and drops them.

“What is that middle bone?”

“What?” he groans. He rubs his face with both hands in a motion that reminds me of any Zmaj I know. A motion I myself have done many times when I am pushing my way through pain or discomfort.

“The bone, in the middle of your necklace,” I say. “I do not recognize what it is. I assume it means something.”

He grabs the long bone, eyes closed as he grips it tight and breathes heavily.

“It is a reminder,” he says at last.

“And what does it remind you of?”

“That Zmaj are evil.”

I open my mouth to protest then snap it shut because I have the same thought about his race. He opens his eyes and turns his head. Rage burns in his eyes and his mouth twists with it. I try to summon my own rage to meet it but even the bijass refuses to surge.

I meet his anger without defense of my own. Accepting it and as I do I think of Tamara. And that all I want is to return to her.

TAMARA

I am so exhausted I can barely think. The effort to move is overwhelming, but somehow, I manage to keep going. Probably because there is no choice.

Abs, Annalise, and I have helped to triage all the minor injuries but that was only the beginning. The compound is severely damaged. And the collapsed tunnel collapsed has trapped people in the rooms they were in. Or worse.

We've spent the past several hours passing buckets of rubble down a line. No matter how much it hurts, we cannot stop. We don't know if anyone survived, but it is certain they won't if we don't dig them out.

I step out of line to get some water. Three of the relief workers steps in, replacing Abs and Annalise too while the three of us take the moment to rest.

"He'll be okay," Abs says.

I sip the cool water. My mouth is full of dirt from all the dust, but I swallow it down. Water is entirely too precious on Tajss to rinse and spit. I'm pretty sure a dozen people would line up to beat me if I did that.

I close my eyes as the water passes down my throat. Breathe. One breath in, one out. One in, one out. Hands squeeze my shoulders and I do not have to open my eyes to know that it's Anna and Abs. They're the best, supporting me the only way they know how. The only way any person could in a time like this.

“Yeah,” I agree.

Not because I believe it. I’m not sure if I do or don’t. This level of tiredness, the bone deep weariness I’m experiencing doesn’t leave a lot of energy for random thoughts. All my attention becomes absorbed in what I’m doing. The bucket in my hands as I pass it to the next person in the line.

The sounds of digging, grunts of effort, and groans of pain fill the tunnel. I look at my friends as I roll my shoulders and try to ease the tense muscles.

“You look like shit,” I say, forcing a false smile.

“Gee, really?” Annalise says, striking a pose. “This is my new disaster chic, you saying it doesn’t work for me?”

Abs makes an attempt to laugh but it’s too hard and she gives up after a croak emerges from her mouth. In any other time or situation, she’d be horrified but right now none of us can muster the will to tease her.

A group is walking towards us from down the long tunnel behind us. Zat’an is in the lead. I look over at Abs, but she already sees him. Despite everything she stands straighter, thrusting her chest forward, and underneath the grime that covers her face is a genuine smile. She lights up seeing him, all but trembling with anticipation.

It feels like an empty chasm opens in my chest and it hurts. Almost as if someone punched me right between the tits. I gasp as it hits, unable to not express the pain. Annalise glances in my direction then moves over and places her arm around my shoulders. I kept it soft enough that Abs misses it, which is fine. I don’t want to burden her with my worries. She has plenty of her own.

Zat’an gets closer and I notice, for the first time, behind his wide girth is Rosalind and another Zmaj I do not know on sight, but he is definitely not a Cavern Zmaj. His scales are too bright, and his claws aren’t dark or thick enough.

Zat’an, knowing no shame or having any concerns about public displays, grabs Abigail. He kisses her with such a quiet, passionate force I feel like I’m spying on them in their

bedroom. While there is nothing pornographic about it, it is after all only a kiss, the burning desire between them is such that it *feels* dirty to watch. Like I shouldn't bear witness to this intimate moment.

Casting about for anything else to look at I accidentally lock eyes with Rosalind. Her eyes are like forged steel. Implacable, unwavering, and intense. It makes me feel like I have my hand in a cookie jar, and she walked in on me. She has haughty features, sharp cheeks and a high forehead framed by long dark hair. She has a scar running down one cheek that though it is fading, looks like it was once jagged and nasty.

The Zmaj with her wears a cloak that is a reddish color. The hood of it rests on his shoulders but it bulges where his wings are under it. He has the greenest eyes I have ever seen. So green they almost seem to glow, like there is a fire in them and his scales have a blue tint to their sandy color.

“You are Tamara,” Rosalind says.

I stiffen, unable to speak because I can't believe she knows my name. I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. I cough, trying to clear my mouth and throat of the filth, but still no sound will come out. Giving up I nod.

“You are mated to Kri'sin,” the Zmaj says.

“Not officially or anything,” Annalise answers for me.

Cold coalesces in my stomach and spreads over my limbs then climbs my spine. I shudder as it reaches my shoulder blades and clears my throat at last.

“Why?”

Rosalind and the Zmaj exchange a look. She keeps one arm over her belly as she speaks and moves. I drop my eyes onto that arm involuntarily. I know her secret and that makes me even more uncomfortable standing here in front of her. When I force myself to raise my head away from her belly there is a calculating, cold look on her face. She purses her lips as her eyes narrow.

“We have information about Kri'sin,” Zat'an says. “Come with us.”

“She’s not going alone,” Annalise and Tamara say in unison, both stepping protectively around me.

Rosalind, Zat’an, and the unknown Zmaj look at one another. Finally, the unknown Zmaj speaks first.

“Friendship is an admirable thing,” he says with a shrug.

Rosalind’s face softens and she nods. No one says anything further. Rosalind turns and walks down the hall and the three of us follow.

KRI'SIN

I'm thirsty. My stomach grumbles loudly. I have been trapped for several handspans with this Urr'ki, waiting to be rescued. I spent some time inspecting the cave-in but without tools there is no way to clear it. Even though my claws are designed to dig through stone, this is so thick and there are so many large boulders that it would take longer than I would survive.

Having given up at last I decided it is smarter to conserve energy and wait. I groan as I lower myself back to the floor. The damage to my body is not insignificant and every cut and bruise is a constant ache.

The Urr'ki stares at me with his glistening black eyes. The torch at his side is burning low. I do not know how much longer it will last. Once it goes out, we will be left in the dark. I should end him now. On the one hand it would be a mercy. The pain he is in must be indescribable. Though I applied what first aid I could the bone is still broken.

"You never answered me," I say.

"No," he agrees. "Why should I?"

I grunt, understanding his position. I am curious though.

"Right," I say shaking my head. "You have something better to do?"

He glares, his mouth turning down at the corners then he makes a sound I do not understand. The sound continues as he grimaces and only now do I realize he is laughing. It is a deep,

guttural sound that makes me think he is perhaps about to cough up a lung or other part of his guts, but he doesn't stop for a long time.

"No," he says at last, shaking his head. He says something in his own language I do not understand.

"What is that? What did you say?"

"That you are a crazy fool," he says, the same guttural sound following the statement.

"Yes," I nod, leaning my head back, my thoughts drift immediately to Tamara. "I likely am."

We sit in silence. I listen to his labored breathing. I strongly suspect he has broken ribs too but there is nothing I can do about that.

"My ghiranki," he says, gripping the long finger bone.

"I do not know this word."

He narrows his eyes as if he suspects I am lying to him. He glares for a long moment then mutters something under his breath.

"What is the word..." he trails off thinking. "Uncle, that is your word for it."

"Your uncle, I see," I say. "What happened to him?"

"What happens to all of us? We are hunted by your kind!"

"We do not hunt Urr'ki," I say.

"A lie!"

Anger tries to stir and the bijass rushes in, but I have no energy left to rage with. I am too tired, too injured, and there is nothing there for the bijass to fuel. I shake my head and wave a hand at him.

"As you wish. I do not want to argue."

He continues to glare but I lean my head back and close my eyes. Tamara dances in my head. Once, before we made love, she did this dance. Slowly removing her clothing, one piece at a time while she thrust and gyrated in a way that burned itself

into my memory. It was amazing, exotic and so incredibly sexy.

“What is it you dream of?” he asks.

“What were your words? Why should I tell you?” I ask, not bothering to open my eyes.

He grunts.

“Right.” The silence returns until at last he speaks again. “A trade?”

“Trade?” I ask, opening my eyes.

He nods. He has two long black braids tucked behind his ears that drop onto his shoulders. The ends of the braids are held by gold bands which rattle against his chest plate when he nods.

“Yes. My story for yours.”

I frown, trying to decide if he has some angle. Is he trying to get information from me? Does it matter if he does? What could he possibly learn?

“Agreed,” I say deciding.

I will be careful in my answers to make sure I do not reveal anything, but most likely he will be dead before he ever sees another of his kind. He nods and waves his fingers at me. I hesitate. Uncertainty continues but I cannot see the harm in sharing a tale of my love with him.

“My mate,” I say.

“Treasure.”

“What did you say?” I ask, pushing myself off the wall as the bijass finds depths of instant anger to fuel I did not know were hiding inside.

“Treasure. You dragon men, you call mates treasures. Your precious. Am I wrong?”

“You should be careful what you say,” I growl.

His sharp barking laugh echoes off the stone walls.

“Or what Zmaj? You will kill me? You think that I do not know I am doomed? When your kind returns, they will finish

me if you have not. Here, facing the end of my life, what do I have to lose?"

I sit back down and huff. I close my eyes and push the anger back down into its recesses.

"Yes, my treasure," I continue as if he had not interrupted me.

"Tell me of this treasure. Why is she special?"

"Does your kind not know love?" I ask.

"Do we know love? Of course we do! Why else do we fight? What do you think we do this for? Why do we die? For our loves!"

"Truthfully I always assumed Urr'ki were no different than any other rutting animal."

I am not trying to be mean, though I am sure it sounds so. I have never, in all my life, given a thought to Urr'ki beyond protecting the compound from their incursions. We know they are clever, using traps and animals to offset their weak bodies, but I never once considered they might be intelligent. I do not know if any Zmaj has.

"And you wonder why we consider you evil," he mutters. "You see us as animals. We know you as destroyers. Your kind invaded our realm, claiming our lands. Invading our homes."

"This has not happened in my life," I say.

"Does that matter? You are descended from those who came before. Those who stole from us."

"Your turn, tell me of your uncle."

"You have not finished your tale," he says. "Tell me of her."

"She is beautiful," I say.

"Of course, she is," he says derisively as he waves a hand between us. "You are in love with her, she will be beautiful to you even if she is as ugly as the backside of a cudov."

"Your tongue is loose. I can fix this for you."

"I ask you to tell me of her and all you have done is talk of her beauty," he says. "As if I could find one of your kind attractive

in the slightest. You are all bulging muscles, disgusting scales, and cold blood. Is all you think of her wrapped up in her body? And you consider us animals? Tell me of *her* or forget this trade for it is not worth the price.”

A low, guttural growl begins deep in my throat as the red rage of the bijass surges. My hands ball into fists and I rise into a crouch. Then the Urr’ki does the unthinkable. He laughs. His sharp, barking mirth cuts through the primal instincts. I’m in a crouch pressing my knuckles into the stone of the floor ready to leap across the small space and destroy him, but the desire disappears as fast as it came.

“You have a sharp tongue,” I say.

“So I have been told,” he wheezes.

Beads of moisture form on his forehead as flecks of blood dot his lips and chin. He is dying and there is nothing I can do about it. He needs a healer with skills far beyond those I have. I am capable of field dressings, which I have done for him, but what is wrong with him is internal.

I go back into a sitting position and think about what he said. He is not wrong, but how do I put my thoughts into words? She is too big for them. She is everything and even that word cannot come close to containing the concept or the being that she is.

“I am not a poet or a philosopher. I am and always have been a warrior,” I say at last. “But I will tell you, the best I can, because a trade is a trade.”

“The first statement of honor I have ever heard from an over muscle-bound lizard,” he huffs.

My scales itch with the desire to punch him for his insults but there is no point or need. I decide to ignore the barbs of his words because, if nothing else, trying to put my feelings for Tamara into words feels like a worthy endeavor. A way to pass the time and to keep my attention off the pains in my body.

“We call them our treasure.”

“I know the word,” he says. “Explain it. Tell me, murderer, what does the word mean to you?”

I purse my lips and close my eyes.

“That she is everything. That I need nothing more than her. Not food, not water, nor even air. Without her there is nothingness. Before her, I was an empty shell. I did not know it, I did not know that I was but half a male, less than I was intended to be, but when I saw her... I awakened.”

“Dragoste,” he says. I look and he has his eyes closed too. Behind the lids I see his eyes moving, a sign he is remembering or thinking of something. He opens his eyes when I do not continue talking. “Our word. My language for...” he motions a hand weakly waving it through the air, “the concept.”

I nod understanding but a feeling arises that I cannot identify. What is this? A sense of wrongness. Of doubt.

They know love? They have treasures?

I shake my head to clear it of the distracting thought, but it buzzes in my head like the thrumming of a maqyth in its mating season.

“You understand then,” I say at last. “She is all.”

My heart beats faster and my chest expands until I am sure it must burst but before that can happen, I look at the cave in. I realize, for the first time, that I may never see her again. I may never get to tell her I am sorry. That I should not have left without seeing her.

If I die, here with this Urr’ki, I will never understand why she has been angry. Why did she become short of temper? And in this moment, all I want is to hold her in my arms. There is nothing in the entire universe more important than holding her.

Frustration rises and I slam my fists against the stone. I have to get back to her.

TAMARA

The room we are led to is too small for this many people. There is a scale model of the compound that dominates the center of the room but looming bigger is the Al'fa. I've only seen the Al'fa from a distance. Normally he stands on his raised shelf looking over the rest of us and issuing his proclamations. A larger-than-life figure.

In person he has a gravity of his own. The only thing that competes with his demanding of all my attention is Rosalind. She is a third his size at most but exudes that same air of authority, of dominance. Everything about her screams she gives no fucks that he is three times bigger, she is the big deal in the room.

And there is clearly tension between the two of them. Two alphas forced into too small a space, and under circumstances that demand they work together. There is no doubt that in any other setting they would be rivals or the bitterest of enemies.

Abs, Anna, and I stop inside the door. Rosalind, the Zmaj with her, and Zat'an move to the far side of the scale model. Rosalind stands on the right of the Al'fa, Zat'an on the left, and the unknown stays at Rosalind's side.

Rosalind says something that I cannot hear to the Al'fa and he grumbles as he nods. He looks at me with sharply cunning eyes that don't seem to blink. Like ever. It's creepy. No one should be able to stare that steadily. Does he have some superpower that keeps his eyes from drying?

The four of them stare at the three of us in judging silence. Instinctively I protectively cross my arms over my belly and shift my weight. Abs is doing the same thing but Annalise steps forward. At some point our natural roles seem to have switched. Before I was always the bold one taking charge of whatever situation. But before I never gave it a thought, it was only me.

Now I must. I am no longer only risking myself. I'm risking... junior. Ugh, what a terrible thing to think. No, I'm risking her.

Yes. Her. I like the idea of a little girl. One I can raise. Influence. Guide.

You're broken like me.

No, I'm not and shut up mom. I'm done with you. I will have a perfect little girl and she will be beautiful and amazing.

And she'll have a tail, wings, and horns. Oh. Shit. Horns. How does that even work? Do I really have to pass those damn things out of my... oh god, will I be deformed?

"I am sure you are wondering why we brought you here," Rosalind says, which is exactly not what I was thinking but I should have been.

"Yes, we are," Annalise says.

Rosalind eyes shift to her, and my mouth is instantly dry.

"You invited yourself, I am addressing Tamara," Rosalind says, her voice devoid of the slightest hint of emotion. She is stating a fact, pure and simple.

Annalise bristles with anger but I place a hand on her shoulder. When she glances over, I shake my head. This is not a fight she or we can win. She frowns, unclenches her fist, and steps back by my side.

"I'll bite, why are we here?" I ask.

"Kri'sin is in trouble," Zat'an says, interjecting himself into the conversation.

My heart leaps into my throat blocking any words. The most intense pressure I have ever felt builds in my head and I'm

pretty sure I'm going to be sick.

"What?" I croak.

"The quake caused a cave in," Rosalind says. "He is trapped by it. The others on his patrol made it back, but we will need to dig him out."

"Let's go," I say, turning back to the door.

"It is not so simple," the Al'fa says, speaking for the first time.

His voice is surprisingly soft and gentle sounding. Every other time I have heard him speak it was loud and booming, pitched to carry to the furthest corners of the arena and echo off the stone walls. It's an inane thought, unimportant in comparison, but striking.

"Why not?" Abs asks.

"Where he is trapped and the way it collapsed is dangerous. Ak'tral noted a crack in the ceiling and on the wall. The process of excavation could lead to a full collapse."

"You guys live down here forever, you must have the ability to make new tunnels," I say.

"We do," the Al'fa says.

"The problem is time," Zat'an says.

"I don't understand," I say.

"We do not know if he was injured and he has a limited number of supplies, if we assume they were not lost when it happened. Getting him out of there, safely, will take time," Rosalind says.

"I don't care," I say, shaking my head. "Get him out."

"We will try," the Al'fa says.

"Try?" I ask, my voice rising until it cracks. "Try? You will not try. You will! You sent him out there, you get him back."

I point at Zat'an, screaming by the time I finish. My arm is shaking. I'm actually shaking all over. They're writing him off? No. This cannot be it. I cannot do this alone.

The Zmaj I do not know moves so fast I don't even see it happening until he is right in front of me. I try to draw back but he pulls me into an embrace. I try to resist, but he is both insistent and his kindness radiates from him. He encloses me in his arms and then the tears I did not want to let go break free.

"There, there, child," he says. "We will find him. We will rescue your mate."

"You have to," I say. "Must."

"Yes," he says, one hand holding my head against his chest.

One of the few memories of my dad I still have is from when I was really little. I remember him holding me like this, before we lost him. I had fallen and skinned my knee. He had gathered me up and held me tight. I have never, in all my years since, experienced that feeling again but now I do. Warmth and love and a depth of concern that my mother surely never had.

It doesn't take long for my tears to run their course once I let them go. The emotional storm that has pretty much been in my head since I found out I was pregnant continues to switch gears faster than I can keep up with. The tears stop and with the flick of a switch I am immediately back to anger.

Angry at Kri'sin for going. At Zat'an for sending him. At the entire world for putting me through this. I step away from the stranger Zmaj, wiping at my tears and he lets me go. I look at him with anger but his kind eyes and wizened face blast that apart leaving me empty with only the barest hints of frustration.

"How do we help?" Annalise asks.

I finish drying my tears and look at our leaders waiting for the answer.

KRI'SIN

I try to tear my way through the collapse. I have to get free. I must return to her.

My claws dig into the rubble, pulling handfuls free and revealing a large boulder. I tear into it. Dust, gravel, and smaller rocks pile around my feet. I roar her name and work faster. The large boulder shifts and when it does there is a loud rumble.

I pause and in that instant the danger we are in becomes clear. The boulder shifts and then I see the large crack in the ceiling and fresh debris pours through the break. I jump back as it rushes in. The rumble continues and the crack widens and lengthens until it extends beyond the blockage. The walls are shaking as the rumble continues.

“You will kill us both,” the Urr’ki coughs.

“Shut up,” I snap.

He laughs but doesn’t say anymore. The crack stops growing but there are stress fractures on the walls. Angry, but in control, I walk over and inspect them. I know stone. I know the tunnels and the ways of the underground. All that knowledge informs me how bad this is.

The walls of this tunnel are close to collapse. If that happens, we will no longer be trapped, we will be crushed. The mountain will reclaim the open space and we will barely be a stain on the floor. Tracing one of the lines to its epicenter I growl.

“Curses,” I mutter.

“Might as well finish the job,” the Urr’ki says. “At least I will take you with me.”

I spin to face him, my tail rising and hands balling into fists.

“Will you, for the love of Tajss, shut up!”

His black eyes glisten wetly but his lip trembles. The flickering torch is almost gone but it is close enough to him that I see how pale a shade of green he is. He coughs and it sounds wet. There is most likely bleeding happening internally.

“Fine,” he says.

I cross the small space and take a seat next to him, cocking one knee up and leaning my head against the wall. I stare first at the collapse then at the spiders’ web on the wall where the stress fractures make an interweaving pattern.

“Your story,” I say, closing my eyes as I give up trying to find a solution.

“What?” his breath is coming in harsh huffs, each one a soft gasp of pain.

“The trade, do you not have honor? Will you not keep your word?”

“What of it?” he says punctuating the sentiment with a groan and a shake of his head. “Fine.”

“Tell me your story, what of your uncle? Do you have a love of your own? A... Dragoste?”

He grips the finger bone as I have seen him do many times now, but his eyes are closed and he is so still I wonder if he has not passed. Then he inhales sharply, grimaces, and opens his eyes again.

“I did, but that is not a tale for you.”

I growl. “I shared mine with you, what do you mean it is not a story for me?”

“I owe you a story,” he wheezes. “I did not promise which one.”

“Fine, share your story green-skin,” I agree.

He closes his eyes and seems to struggle to gather the strength to continue.

“I did know love,” he says softly. “Once.”

I wait for him to continue but the silence stretches longer and longer. I watch him out of the corner of my eye, letting him speak at his own pace.

“Oh?” I say at last.

“Yes, she was... as you say, my everything. But I lost her, my everything. She was taken from me.”

His hand balls into a fist and he slams it against the ground. His face twists with pain that goes beyond that which he is in now. I know the pain he is feeling. Pain of the heart, it cuts so deep and so true that you might never heal.

“I am sorry for your loss,” I say and strangely, I mean it.

He is my enemy. An animal to be driven back, slaughtered, but that is not true, is it? We make fun of his kind. We demonize them, paint them as the villains behind everything. I believed that to be true. But here, with him, he is nothing more than another being trying to survive.

And he knows, or at least he knew, love. How is that an animal? Animals do not know love. Love is of consciousness, of the heart. Only sentient beings can know love as he speaks of it.

I stare at the Urr’ki. His chest heaves and there is a wheeze with each shaky breath. Green flecks of blood speckle his lips. But his eyes. They glisten in the same way humans do when they shed moisture. Tears. They call the leaking wasting of water tears.

When she feels too much sadness, this happens. Is he...

I cannot finish the thought. It cannot be. Have I been wrong all my life?

“You are sorry?” he asks, pushing himself straighter. He leans forward and raises his fists. “You and your kind took her. But it is now okay because you are sorry?”

He is sneering, his lips pulling back to reveal his sharp teeth behind the tusks. The bijass is in my head, pushing itself forward, but the anger and primal sense it would normally attach itself to is not there. I am not angry, and I do not need to dominate him. He is already broken and is no challenge to me or mine. He is hurting, in his heart as well as his body.

“You lost her. How?”

He is trembling with anger that comes off him in palpable waves. Black eyes boring into me and if looks could kill, I would be dead but then his strength runs out and he collapses back against the wall. The tears, as the humans call them, trickle from his eyes and trail through the dirt on his face.

“Your kind,” he mutters.

“You said as much and I can tell you now, I am sorry.”

“Sorry,” he huffs. “We do not want this war, but it will end when the Paluga awakens.”

I do not know what to say in response, so I sit in silence. He is my mortal enemy. His kind have always been the enemy. The threat in the dark that threatened our existence but maybe I have been wrong. Maybe we have all been wrong.

“Did you...” I trail off.

I am unsure if I want to ask this question or not. It feels dangerous. If I give voice to this, if I say it out loud, it will change something. I do not know what the danger is, it is a nebulous idea. Mostly a feeling that knowing the answer will change some fundamental truth.

“What?” he asks.

“Did you have children?”

He barks sharply which I recognize as a laugh but it is ironic sounding.

“Yes, we had, no have three children. They have not yet been killed by one of you monsters. Why? Do you plan to hunt them down once you finish me? They are each a warrior; you will not find them easy prey.”

“I am not going to kill you,” I say. He glares but doesn’t say anything. After a long pause he shakes his head and snorts. “Tell me of them.”

“Do you have children?”

“That is not a trade, I asked first.”

He grumbles but then he nods.

“Two males, one female,” he says. “The female is as beautiful as her mother and as good or better a warrior as her brothers.”

“A thing to be proud of, I am sure.”

“I am proud,” he says. “And they will kill many of you before they return to the mountain. They will each put many notches in their mudrostri before they pass on.”

“What is a mudrostri?” I ask.

“None of your business!” he snaps then is taken by a coughing fit. The cough is wet and watching his face it is also clearly painful. When it passes, he swipes the back of his hand over his mouth then stares at the streaks of blood on it. “Heh.”

“Your daughter is a warrior?” I prompt.

“Of course she is, we do not produce weak, ineffectual offspring like your kind.”

“There are female Urr’ki? Still?”

He glowers, working his mouth then shakes his head.

“Some. Your kind saw to that, didn’t you? You brought the sickness with you.”

Pain blooms in my chest like the opening petal of a flower but the beauty is how intensely it hurts. I can hardly breathe it cuts so sharply.

“Did she... is she gone?”

He closes his eyes and a new tear drips from his eye and trails along the side of his broad, flat nose.

“She was pregnant,” he says. “It was a miracle....”

He doesn't have to say the rest. I know the story. And though he blames my kind, it was not my kind that caused it. It was the surface Zmaj and their wars with the star people. My sire's sire was among the first to retreat under the ground to escape their society.

The culture of the surface was one of subservience, we are all taught the tale of our exodus. How the surface society was little more than slaves. Slaves to the demands of the Star Farers who's ever growing demand for the fruits of Tajss' were never ending.

More. Always more. Never returning, never paying back in kind, but demanding. As if there was no end in sight. After we had done our exodus the surface Zmaj went to war with their alien masters. The Star Farers dropped the bombs.

Even here, under the ground, we were not immune. I was a youngling, but I remember the quakes, but they were not the worst. The worst was yet to come, the sickness that took so many. But especially the elders and the females.

But if that is what happened to his daughter, how old is he? The Devastation was lifetimes ago. I was a youngling when the sickness came.

“I am sorry,” I say, rubbing my temples to ease the pressure building in my head.

“You should be,” he says. “You cost me my grandchild.”

“I did not, it was not my kind.”

“No? Did your kind not invade the underground? We lived in peace before you surface dwellers came. There was no war, only survival. You brought us war; you taught us this. Now you reap what you have sown.”

And I cannot argue with his logic because I see enough truth that any denial is futile.

TAMARA

The tunnel is full of dirt. Dust swirls in the air, dancing in the lights cast by the torch that Gerlar carries. Abigail coughs and immediately there is an echoing tickle in the back of my throat.

“Drink,” Annalise says, popping the stopper out of the waterskin she carries.

Abigail thanks her after she takes a sip. I accept the offered skin and take some too.

“Is it just me or is it hotter than normal?” I ask.

“It’s not just you,” Abigail says. “How much further?”

Six Zmaj are being led by Gerlar. Three are ahead of us and four bring up the rear. Gerlar doesn’t stop to converse. We’ve been walking a long way. How far did Kri’sin go?

“Almost there,” Gerlar says.

There is a wide crack in the ceiling and the walls have stress fractures too. This isn’t one of the smoothed tunnels of the Zmaj compound, this looks natural, like it was cut by some long-gone water or maybe one of the creatures that burrow through the underground of Tajss.

Rough hewn walls and the floor are uneven. Even worse after the quake, I watch every step to avoid the fallen debris. I’m exhausted but I have to get to Kri’sin. I must know that he’s okay.

“There,” Gerlar says.

I stumble to a stop as my stomach drops. This is worse than anything I could have imagined. The entire tunnel collapsed. Debris blocks the way forward, angling up past where the ceiling should be because the ceiling gave way too. It looks as if a giant fist of the mountain itself slammed down blocking the way forward.

Gerlar barks orders and the Zmaj set to work. They guide us to one side of the tunnel so that we are out of the way then immediately start digging. Gerlar and another Zmaj stand on either side of the collapse. Both focus on it, studying the structure and giving orders as to what the rest of the Zmaj are to do.

The worker Zmaj operate in a rotation, pulling boulders out and passing them back in a line, or digging through loose debris. When more debris streams from the ceiling Gerlar barks to stop the work. He and the one I don't know do a restudy of the collapse and change in reaction to what is happening.

Abigail takes a seat and Annalise and I join her. We watch them work. Our purpose here isn't to do manual labor. The Zmaj are both better built for that and stronger. We'd only slow them down. My purpose here is to see Kri'sin, but also to make sure he knows I am here. There was concern that if he is trapped, he might give up hope. Zat'an thinks it will be good for him to know I am close by.

Or, perhaps, Zat'an understands that I want to be close. Though he was not happy when Abigail insisted on coming too. He tried to join us when he finally saw he would not change her mind, but the Al'fa forbade it. He is needed to help with the defense of the compound.

I am acutely aware of the four Zmaj standing guard past us. The rumor is that the Urr'ki caused this. That somehow, they managed to damage something in the mountain enough to cause the quake in an attempt to take out the Zmaj.

That doesn't make sense to me but then I'm not a structural engineer. Maybe it is possible. Or, what seems more likely, is

that the Urr'ki are the boogeyman for the Cavern Zmaj and a convenient scapegoat.

In the City, before the Invaders when our biggest problem was water and food, there were the Followers of Gershom. I never understood them, really, but now I kind of get it. Not hating the Zmaj because their different thing, that's just stupid. But I do get needing something to blame for life being crappy.

I need something too. I've been blaming my mom for not wanting to be a mom. Blaming Kri'sin for not listening and abandoning me, but I'm not angry at him. I'm angry at the situation. No that's not true either. Truth is I'm scared. Scared I'll be a bad mom, like my own was. And now I'm scared that he'll die, and I'll be alone.

Alone.

The idea echoes in my head like I shouted it into a dank cavern. My mom was alone. When we lost my dad, she changed. My memories of before his death are dim, buried under all the cold heartlessness that followed, but they're bubbling up. Unbidden, but not necessarily unwelcome.

"You okay Tams?" Abigail asks.

"Yeah," I say, but it's an automatic, social response. Of course I'm okay. No one asks how you're doing and really wants an answer. I look at Abs, at the way she is nervously biting her lip. The way she keeps one arm over the swell of her belly. I look and I see in her eyes the love that only my best friends could have for me. And I can't keep silent. "No. No, I'm not."

She frowns as her and Annalise scoot in closer and they both wrap their arms around me. The three of us bow our heads together and sit in silence.

"It will work out," Annalise says.

"We're here for you," Abs says.

"I know," I say, struggling to get the words out. "I can't..." No one says anything. There is no pushing. They let me work it out but though silent they are both rubbing my back and giving me all the support I could ever need. Unlike my mom, I'm not alone.

“I can’t do this alone,” I manage to say, my voice hoarse with unexpressed emotions.

“You won’t be,” Abs says, and Annalise murmurs her agreement. “We’re here for you and besides,” she pauses, lifts her head and looks at the work. “He’ll be okay.”

“I hope so,” I say.

“He will be,” Annalise says. “Fate is a bitch, but she’s not an asshole.”

I snort and then I’m laughing.

“Seriously?” I ask, tears filling my eyes because I’m laughing so hard.

“What?” Annalise asks. “Tell me I’m wrong?”

Abigail is laughing too then the three of us are together. And this is why I love them both. Even here, in this darkest of times, in the moment I don’t think I can make it, they make me laugh. Make me see I can make it, no matter what.

KRI'SIN

The Urr'ki's breathing comes in heavy huffs. It is almost panting. His chest is rising and falling irregularly. I do not know how long he will last without a healer. Nor, in truth, do I know why I care.

Watching him die like this, slowly, torturously is not something I would ever do by choice. Death in battle is a different thing all together. I do not take pleasure in death itself, only in victory. In protecting my own and what is ours. But now even that is in doubt. I have, all my life, trained and fought the Urr'ki. They are the enemy.

Were. Were the enemy.

I am no longer sure. This Urr'ki, he knows love. He seems intelligent and has a family that he cares about. Have we been wrong? I do not think we have been misled, not on purpose, but I do wonder if we have not been mistaken. Staring at his green face, twisted in pain, his lips shiny with flecks of blood, a trickle of it trailing down his chin, I doubt.

“What?” he asks, his eyes fluttering open.

“I said nothing,” I say.

“Not you, fool lizard,” he huffs and tries to push himself up to a sitting position. His faces twists and he cries out in pain.

“Fool,” I say, crossing the space and grabbing him under his shoulders. I pull him upright and he weakly slaps my hands.

“Let me go, monster,” he says, but his voice is soft. Fading.

“There,” I say, once he is in a sitting position and I move back to my own spot across from him.

The torch is almost gone causing the shadows to dance faster as they deepen. He tilts his head to one side and closes his eyes with a look of concentration.

“That,” he says a moment later. “You hear it?”

I did not but rather than say as much I close my eyes and focus on listening. I do not hear anything at first but then there is a faint scraping sound from behind me. I rise and press my ear to the fallen rocks.

“Rescue,” I say, looking over my shoulder to him.

“For you,” he says. “That direction is your kind, not mine. Finish this. You have played with me long enough.”

“You will not die by my hand. Not this day,” I say.

He glares, black eyes glistening. He coughs and it is wet sounding.

“Why not, this is what your kind do.”

I frown as I consider my answer. I sit down cross-legged in front of him with my palms resting on my thighs. I twitch my tail idly.

“No, it is not,” I say. “We fight for safety. To defend our own. To have a place in the world.”

“Which you destroyed.”

“Perhaps,” I say, pushing down the surging anger at his words.

It is a struggle to not give over to that rage. His words provoke me, but I think that is the point. He is pushing. Trying to get me to kill him which I have no intention of doing.

“You keep me alive so I can be entertainment for your kind? They will torture me, but I will tell you nothing.”

“No,” I say, shaking my head. “You will not be tortured.”

“Do not give me false hope,” he wheezes and breaks into a fresh round of coughing.

“Do not mistake me,” I say. “We are enemies. Your kind have killed too many of mine. This is not a truce, only a reprieve. When we meet in battle, I will kill you and not think twice about it. But only when you are well and healthy. When you can fight and Tajss will see which of us is the better warrior. Zmaj are not like your kind.”

He snorts. “You are worse.”

“If you say so.”

“I do!”

“Kri’sin? Can you hear us?” I recognize Gerlar’s voice.

“I do,” I shout, not taking my eyes off of the Urr’ki.

“Are you hurt?” Gerlar asks.

“Nothing that will not heal.”

“We are coming.”

“Good.”

The Urr’ki pants and stares. After a long while, during which the only sound is the digging from the other side of the cave-in, he wipes his mouth on the back of his sleeve.

“You are serious?” he asks.

“I am,” I agree.

“Then help me to stand,” he says. “I will not meet fate on my back.”

“A noble idea, but you are badly hurt.”

“I do not care! Help me to my feet.”

I do as he asks. It takes time because he is very badly hurt, but as he said, he does not care. At last, he is standing unsteadily and I back away.

“This does not mean I will not kill you when next we meet,” he says.

“Nor I you,” I say.

He nods, staring at the cave-in. He hobbles forward, his legs quavering. He is barely standing but somewhere he finds the

strength to keep up. He rests his hand on the cave-in, looking up at the ceiling in silence then studying the rest of the collapse.

“Tell them to stop,” he says.

“What?”

“Tell them to stop, now,” he barks. “They are going to—”

Whatever it was he saw it is too late. There is a loud rumble then the crack in the ceiling widens. Gravel and dirt pour in. I grab the Urr’ki and pull him away as the rumbling grows. The floor bucks and I’m thrown from my feet.

I wrap my tail around the Urr’ki and twist to keep him on top so that I take the brunt of the impact. The torch extinguishes leaving us in the dark. The cracking and rumbling keeps going. I place myself over the Urr’ki, protecting him.

I am not sure why I do it. Instinct, perhaps or honor. Something about knowing I have been, to whatever degree, wrong about him and his kind demands I make recompense.

In truth my only thought is of Tamara. I act because I think she will appreciate what I have done and I will do anything to make her happy. Her joy is all that matters in the world to me and for her I will move the mountain itself.

In the distance there are shouts as the quake continues. Beneath me the Urr’ki emits a long shriek that seems to be unending. I would think with his wounds that he would not be able to continue it for so long, yet he does.

Rocks slam against me. Dirt and gravel piles around us. I hold myself over him, grunting with every impact. The torch goes out and darkness collapses around us as rocks and dirt pile onto my back.

TAMARA

“*N*o! No! No!” I scream, my throat is raw and aching, but I cannot stop.

Gerlar and another Zmaj stand over the three of us acting as physical shields. The tunnel shakes and shudders and though I hear crashing rocks and boulders, nothing strikes my friends or me. I try to stand and push my way past the protecting Zmaj, but they push me back down between them.

“Stay,” Gerlar orders.

“Kri’sin!” I shout.

After what feels like forever the rumbling slows. It was probably only a few seconds, but it felt like an eternity. Gerlar steps aside and I rush through the opening to the collapse. The crack in the ceiling is wider and all the progress they had made in digging Kri’sin out has been lost. It’s worse now than when we started.

I skid to a stop, my stomach sinking. Oh god. I’ve lost him. A cramp hit so fast and sharp it doubles me over. Annalise and Abigail are at my side, shouting and trying to find out what is wrong, but I can’t speak.

The stabbing pain in my belly slams in then is gone as fast as it hit. My mouth is dry, tongue is swollen, and my thoughts and body are going numb with cold chills racing over my limbs. I can’t think clearly. Nothing makes sense. He cannot be gone. This is not the end. It cannot, must not be. What about our child?

A wave of nausea comes but I'm barely feel it. The numb emptiness suffocates it into nothing more than a dim awareness. I force myself to stand. The Zmaj pull the three of us back and away. One of them, Gerlar, seems to be giving special attention to Annalise. I see it but she's oblivious.

No surprise there. Annalise, as much as I love her, usually was unaware of such things. She is so incredibly beautiful. Her bright smile, sharp, intelligent eyes, and her cute button nose that I've always been secretly jealous of, my own being much too big. For all that she only notices when someone is flirting with her when I point it out to her and every time, she is genuinely surprised. As if she is not as pretty as she is, or she can't quite believe a guy would be interested in her.

An unimportant thought but one that avoids the dark pit of despair threatening beneath the fluff. I'm struggling against a vortex in the middle of my head that is trying to suck me in. If I can stay focused, keep thinking about anything but... no, not that.

He is fine. He must be. I cannot do this alone. Because you're broken. Broken like me, little one. And this is how it begins.

No. No, damn it, no. I am not broken. I am fine. I am strong. I can do this, but... I don't want to. I want him at my side. I want him to hold me. I want him there when our child takes its first step. Says its first word. Spreads its wings for the first time.

The nausea hits so hard and fast I can't keep it down. I spin away from my friends and get sick. The moment I do the nausea is gone and I'm fine again. Fine. I snort as I wipe my mouth on my sleeve. I'm anything but fine. No, not fine, but not sick.

"Tams, it's okay, we've got you," Annalise and Abigail both say soothing words and neither of them can keep their hands off me. Someone is rubbing circles on my back, the other is pressing their cool hands to my face. They need the contact and I do too. It feels like an anchor keeping me out of the swirling pit.

"Fine," I mutter, wiping my mouth on my sleeve.

“What’s that Tams?” Abigail asks.

“Fine,” I say, louder. “Him. Kri’sin. He’s fine.”

“Of course he is,” Annalise says.

The Zmaj are in a huddle talking softly. I can’t hear what is being said, but I have to know. They cannot give up on him. There must be a way to reach him. There must. He doesn’t know yet. He can’t leave me, leave this world, and not know he’s left his mark behind. How could I have been so stupid? I should have told him the moment I suspected it. I was so caught up in my own bullshit.

You’re broken.

No, I am not. And for the first time in my entire life, I *know* it.

“I’m not her,” I say.

“Not who hon?” Annalise asks.

Abigail nods, though. She grimaces then smiles.

“You’re damn right,” Abigail says, looking at Anna and not me.

I see her mouth the word, mother, to Annalise but I can’t take my attention off the Zmaj huddle that is deciding the fate of my love. My treasure.

“He’s *my* treasure,” I say.

“Yes!” Abigail exclaims loudly and all of the Zmaj stop their conversation to look at the three of us. “And he is fine. We’ll get to him. It’s a bit slow, that’s all. A setback, not a stop.”

“Exactly,” Annalise agrees.

They don’t know, of course, but I do. I know he’s alive. He might be hurt, might need care, but I know, in my heart of hearts. So deep it feels like a resonance in my soul, that he is alive. He has not left me. Not yet at least. But I also know he needs me. We have to get to him.

I step away from my friends, stalking up to the huddle of hulking Zmaj warriors. Gerlar has a deep frown and all of them have a look of resignation on their faces.

“He’s alive,” I say.

One by one I look into each of their eyes. I see it on their faces. The doubts, the consideration that they are too late. That he is lost. That what they are doing is not a rescue but a recovery.

“Tamara,” Gerlar says. “We cannot—”

“No,” I say, slashing my hand through the air between us to emphasize the singular syllable. Gerlar snaps his mouth shut and looks at the others. I can read them. His look says help me with the crazy female, but I’m not crazy. I know. There is not a shroud of doubt in me. “No. He is alive. Make a plan. Now.”

The Zmaj stare at one another in some weird kind of silent communication. Maybe they are telepathic, or something, I don’t know but what matters is after a few seconds one of them shrugs. Then they all sigh, shrug, and nod.

“We can’t go through the collapse,” Gerlar says.

“What if we tunnel?” one of the Zmaj offers.

“What are you thinking?” Gerlar asks.

The Zmaj touches the wall behind him then flattens himself against it. He opens his wings and moves until the tip is barely touching the collapse. He leans his head back, notes a spot, then moves away from the collapse to about that spot.

“Here,” he says, after looking up at the crack in the ceiling. He’s standing a good meter past the start of it. “We dig here, go in a wingspan, then turn and heads toward him.”

“It will be slower, but it could work,” Gerlar says, rubbing his right horn. He looks at the others and when no one objects he nods. “Good. Get to it. We need to hurry. Kri’sin is waiting.”

I move out of the way. My friends and I find a seat on the opposite side of the tunnel and watch the Zmaj work.

KRI'SIN

I must lose consciousness because I'm suddenly aware of pressure. The next thing I know is pain. I try to move but there is a crushing weight on my back. I move my tail and hear the sound of gravel falling.

I take a deep breath and there is a sharp stabbing on my left side. At least two ribs are broken, but now is not the time to worry about that. I shift and work until I have my hands pressed to the floor beneath myself. Another painful deep breath and I press up.

“Get... off...” the Urr'ki huffs.

I do not bother responding. I need the energy to do this. Muscles strain, arms are shaking, but I am rising. Slowly, one finger width at a time, but I keep at it. Pulling on every reserve of strength in my body.

Push. Harder. Tamara is waiting.

Rocks rattle then something crashes, and the weight is gone. I push fully upright then roll to the side. I lie on piles of rock and debris, panting my way through the pain. The bijass is a surging red cloud swirling through my head and thoughts. It wants to rage, to destroy, but what target? The mountain is implacable, no matter how I might act, it will remain.

“Fools,” the Urr'ki mutter.

“What are you talking about?” I ask.

“Your kind. Fools.” He makes painful grunts with every inhale that comes almost between every syllable he speaks. “All. Fools.”

It’s dark but there is a small amount of light, just enough for my low-light vision to allow me to see shapes. I force myself into a sitting position. A few bioluminescent plants fell with the collapse of the ceiling and are the source of light. I shift around to face the Urr’ki.

He lies on his back. His chest heaves and he’s staring up shaking his head. I wait for him to say more but the only sound he makes is the wheeze of each inhale.

“Why?”

Slowly, clearly in great pain, he turns his head to look at me.

“They worked against her,” he says.

“The mountain?” He grimaces and nods. “You know that from this side? How?”

He raises a hand, waves it through the air, then drops it to the ground.

“Your kind... do not... belong,” he says, patting the rubble he lies on. “She... speaks. Paluga... fix you. Reset.”

“Paluga,” I snort. “Your own myths say it will destroy everything, including your kind.”

“Yes... reset,” he says and there is a wistful hopefulness to his voice that I do not understand.

“Why would you do destroy your own kind?”

“Tajss... the mountain... she will bring us back,” he says. “Sit... me up.”

I shouldn’t do it, but I do. I help him into a sitting position. He breaks into a coughing fit that sounds terrible. He coughs up something and spits a bloody looking glob to one side. It must help because his breathing sounds clearer.

“Is your life so bad you would destroy everything?” I ask.

“Your kind does not understand,” he says. “Monsters. Invaders. You are the destroyers.”

I stare and try to understand. He has a daughter, but she lost her child. How would I feel if I was to lose a child? What would I be willing to do?

“I am sorry for your loss,” I say.

He opens his mouth and I expect a fast retort, some cutting remark, but it doesn't come. He closes his mouth, lowers his head and then shakes it.

“How can you understand?”

“I do not know that I can and will not pretend to,” I say. “But I can imagine. And that alone fills me with sadness and horror.”

He nods, not looking up for a long time. When he does, he sighs then his eyes focus behind me.

“Oh,” he says.

I turn to look at what he's seeing, and I am every bit as surprised as he was. The collapse of the ceiling created an opening. A crack in the wall that looks like it goes into a tunnel. There is a soft glow emerging. I look from it to him.

“That is your direction,” I say.

He looks grim, frowning deeply then shakes his head.

“This is it then,” he sighs, a heaviness in his voice. We sit and stare at the opening in silence then he breaks it. “Could you make it quick?”

“Quick?” I ask, not understanding.

He barks, I think it might be a laugh, but what do I really know of these Urr'ki?

“Do not toy with me,” he says. “I am ready to die, but that does not mean I will enjoy it. Or that I want to suffer more than I have. Has this not been enough for you?”

“I do not want you to suffer,” I say, not catching up to his thoughts.

The barking sound goes on until he stops holding his sides and coughs up more blood.

“Then you are going to let me go?”

I look from him to the crack in the wall and back.

“Can you walk?”

He stares wide-eyed. I climb to my feet. I have hurt myself, not as badly as him, but there is a lot of damage, and it takes me a moment to be steady on my feet. I walk over and stand over him. He looks up and I can only think of the look on his face as one of resignation. I move behind him and he doesn't resist until I hook my hands under his arms.

“Wha-what are you doing?”

“Helping you up,” I say, struggling to not drop him as he resists.

“Why? What is this? Can you not just end it?”

“No, I cannot,” I say.

He's on his feet but I keep my grip under his arms until I am sure he will not fall again. He weaves but remains upright. I do a search of the space until I find my forgotten club. The end of it protrudes from a pile of shale and debris. He is watching as I walk to him with it, still with that same look on his face. I hand him the club and he stares at the offered stick.

“Well?”

“Take it,” I say, pushing it towards him again.

Tentatively he takes the club. The club is long and heavy, but still a bit short for my idea. I have nothing else to offer. He is too weak to hold the club upright between us and the thick end cracks as it hits the ground.

He stares at it, the length of it, then seems to figure it out. He shifts his grip on the club and moves it until he is using it to help support his weight. I move to one side and point at the crack. Silence engulfs us but neither of us moves.

“Why?” he asks at last.

The sounds of digging come into the room. They are tunneling around the collapse to get to me, and I do not think they will be long.

“I told you,” I say. “On the battlefield, when you are well, I will give no quarter.”

He nods and takes his first step. It is hard but he manages to keep himself up. He makes it to the crack where he has to turn sideways to slip through and looks back.

“Goodbye, warrior,” he says.

I nod and he slips through the crack and is out of sight. Pride swells in my chest. The other warriors may not understand this, but Tamara will be pleased. I cannot wait to hold her in my arms and tell her of this encounter.

TAMARA

*A*bigail's grip on my hand is so tight it hurts but I don't pull away. I need the contact. The Zmaj continue to dig straight through the stone wall. The Cavern Zmaj have claws that cut through the stone like it's nothing more than mud. They work fast, though it's been hours it's much faster than a human could do it without major machines. Already they've dug a tunnel, rough, but no matter it's enough that they are turning it to the right, towards Kri'sin.

"He's all right," Annalise says, softly.

"Have you thought about names?" Abigail asks.

"Huh?" I ask.

"Names, you know, for," she looks down at my belly then back up.

"Oh, uh, no," I say, what a naïve question. Names. I wasn't even sure I was going to go through with this and she wants to know if I have a name for it?

It. No, not it. Her. It's her.

My stomach flutters as if in confirmation of the sudden knowing. I am certain, impossibly so, that my child will be a girl. I stare at my own stomach. My shirt covers the swell that I know is forming there. The little baby bump.

Baby. My baby. Our baby. Our little girl.

"I can't make up my mind," Abigail says. "Nothing seems right."

“You’ve got time,” Annalise says.

“Do you,” I stop and swallow hard to force the lump that is forming in my throat down. “You have an idea of what... you know, uhm, what sex?”

“I like sex,” Annalise quips.

“We know,” Abigail and I say in unison which makes all three of us laugh.

“What? I know what I like and what I like doing,” Annalise says.

“I...” Abigail trails off and I watch her, ignoring Annalise. Abs cheeks flush soft pink and she is staring at her hand gripping mine. “It’s silly.”

“No, tell me,” I insist.

“Come on Abs,” Annalise says. “We all want to know.”

“I had this moment...” she trails off again, shaking her head. “I don’t know.”

“A moment where you just knew?” I ask.

Abigail quickly looks up, her eyes widening and her mouth forming a small o shape. She nods, slow and deliberate.

“I thought... it can’t be, right? I mean, sure lots of women think they know but... I don’t know. This felt—”

“Certain,” I say.

“Yeah, certain. That’s it exactly.”

“You two are so cute,” Annalise says. “This is going to be so much fun.”

“Right,” I say, glancing over at her. “It’s not your pussy about to be wrecked by passing out a horned, winged, Zmaj hybrid.”

“Oh you know, pussies are resilient. You’ll bounce back,” she says, waving a dismissive hand. “Lots of women have done it and none of them are running around acting like they no longer get laid.”

“You think it will hurt?” Abigail asks, a tremor in her voice.

“Of course, it will, Abs,” Annalise says. “But it will be worth it!”

“Shut up Anna,” I say. “She’s worried and rightly so.”

Annalise looks ashamed but grins sheepishly. “I know, I’m sorry. I’m trying to help.”

“I know,” Abigail says, biting her lip and staring at the ground. “But I am scared.”

“Me too, Abs,” I say, staring at the black hole of the tunnel the Zmaj are digging.

They’ve gone far enough now that I can’t see the front guys. They work in a line, taking turns being the one actually digging while the others pass back the debris from the excavation.

A tremor rumbles. The three of us yelp as we duck and cover our heads. It passes as quickly as it came and nothing changes, thankfully.

“Kri’sin?”

I can’t tell who said his name but it echoes out of the new tunnel followed by the sounds of commotion and then one of the Zmaj emerges from the tunnel. He has his arm around Gerlar’s shoulders who is helping him walk.

I don’t wait before leaping to my feet and running to him. I throw myself at him, wrapping my arms around his neck and kissing his filthy face. I don’t care that I get a mouthful of dirt and grime. None of that matters because he’s okay.

He wraps an arm around me as he returns the kiss. When I break to catch my breath, I stare at his filthy face. Blood is trickling from a cut below his horn, and he is clearly bruised and battered.

“You’re alive,” I say.

“I will never leave you,” he says.

“You did and you damn well had better not,” I say, stepping back. Tears leak from my eyes, but it’s not sadness. Anger,

relief, and maybe more. I don't know. "You left without telling me."

He nods, frowning. "I am very sorry."

"And you almost died," I say. "Look at you."

"Tajss is not so cruel," he says.

"How do you know?" I counter. "You got lucky. Do not do this to me. Ever again."

"We need to get him to a healer," Gerlar says, interrupting our private conversation.

"Come Abs, let's get him back," Abigail says as she and Annalise close in on either side of me.

I wipe the tears away as I nod agreement. I can't take my eyes off him until a wave of nausea so strong it almost doubles me over hits. Kri'sin is in front of me, holding my hair back, pressing his palm to my forehead while my friends are on either side.

"I'm fine," I say, as it passes though I feel feverish.

"You do not look fine," Kri'sin says. "You will see the healer too."

"I don't—"

"Tamara, my treasure, love of my heart, do not argue," Kri'sin says, and he sounds exhausted. "I am so very tired, but I will not fail in caring for you. You need a healer as much as I do."

I have one hand on his shoulder, and I look up into his warm, caring eyes and I cannot do anything else but nod. He smiles, his white teeth breaking the monochrome filth that covers his face.

"Fine, but we need to talk," I say.

"Soon, my love. Care first, then talk."

I nod agreement and our friends close around to help.

TAMARA

I dip the rag into the bowl of water several times then ring it out before resuming wiping the dirt from Kri'sin's face. He closes his eyes, saying nothing, but I know every time I touch one of the dozens of contusions because his jaw tightens.

"Kri'sin," I say, choking on my surging emotions.

"Yes, my treasure," he says, not opening his eyes.

I wipe around the base of his horns and the rag is filthy again. I dip it, struggling to not cry, or laugh, or scream. I need to do something to let the pressure out. I ring the rag out and then back to work. He really needs a shower but that's not something that we have. The Cavern Zmaj are clever and have figured out some of the most amazing engineering feats, but even they can't solve the shortage of water on Tajss.

He opens his eyes and touches my cheek. His fingers are cool. He's always cool to the touch, slightly different than whatever the ambient room temperature is. I grimace, trying to give voice to all my thoughts, but they crash in my head, and I'm left with nothing to say.

He leans in and gives me a soft kiss. It's not what I would consider a passionate kiss, not intended to lead to sex or ignite that burning desire. This is a kiss of a different kind of passion. Of love. It is, in its own right, a communication. An expression of desire, but much more it is a claim. A claiming of my lips and of my heart.

We rest our foreheads against each other and let the silence hang between us. In the first seconds my heart pounds and it feels like I should fill the quiet. Say something or do something. Grab his cock, force my tongue into his mouth, tug on his horns, something.

But I don't. We sit and we say and do nothing. Except be.

Be together. Be, in some deep way, one. And in this moment, we draw closer. Barriers I didn't know existed crumble to nothing. I wonder at this and then, after I don't know how much time passes, I understand.

My mom's voice isn't there anymore. All my self-doubts have always sounded like her and since I figured out I was pregnant it's been worse than ever. Almost to the point I thought I might be crazy. And who knows, maybe I was. But she's gone.

A wave of sadness and loss comes. That empty ache where she should be. My mom was a very far cry from perfect. Or even a good mother, but still, she was my mom. She did try and she had her problems. That doesn't mean they have to be mine.

"I'm not broken," I whisper.

"You are perfect," Kri'sin answers. "My treasure."

A sudden giddiness lifts my spirit. A weight disappears and it feels like I'm stepping into the sun for the first time. Opening myself to life and living for the first time, ever. He loves me unconditionally, no matter how crazy I might or might not be. No matter how much of an emotional train wreck I've been.

I pick back up the dropped rag and resume cleaning him up. He has a lot of cuts and even more bruises, but I take my time and carefully tend to them. He has a wide bandage around holding his broken ribs and on the wounds, I dab a paste that Addison gave us onto each of them. I coat each one to make sure he doesn't get an infection.

As I work, he plays with my hair, twirling it in his fingers. The salve numbs my fingers making them tingle. I make sure every wound is covered, carefully inspecting him all over. Once I'm satisfied, I haven't missed anything I stand up and nod.

"There," I say.

He's sitting on the edge of the bed, naked, watching me. I bite my lip, knowing this is it. I've tried so many times to say this and every time I've not for one reason or another. There is no more holding back.

"Kri'sin," I start, then hesitate. I half-expect my mom's voice to be there, in my head, but it's not. Silence reigns so I continue. "I'm, uhm, I don't know how to tell you this, but uhm..."

He waits patiently, with a half-smile on his face. When I stumble again, he traces the line of my jaw with two fingers.

"Tamara," he whispers my name. "My treasure."

Confidence fills my heart. I square my shoulders, meet his steady gaze, and say it.

"I'm pregnant."

The word magically hangs in the air as if it is filled with a buoyancy of its own. I see an understanding dawn on his face. His half-smile spreads from horn-to-horn. His eyes widen. His hands rise.

Then time rushes forward as he grabs my waist and lifts me into the air. I yelp as I'm swept off my feet and he spins us in a circle. Nausea hits hard but I manage to keep it under control. I focus my attention on the far wall and rest my hands on his shoulders.

"YES!" he yells so loud that it echoes off the stone walls.

I am certain that the entire compound must have heard his yell of exultation. He stops spinning just in time, I'm not sure how much longer I could have kept my stomach under control. He pulls me tight, and though he does it fast, it's also with a surprising amount of gentleness.

"You're... happy?"

"Happy is too small of a word," he says. I force a smile but the doubts of my own fitness to be a mother creep in. "What is the matter my love?"

"I'm..." I trail off, shrug and wipe away a stray tear. He drops to his knees so that I don't have to strain to look at him. He

keeps a grip on my arms while he waits. I wipe another tear, shake my head and snort. “I don’t know.”

“Whatever it is, we will handle it,” he says with absolute certainty.

I bark a harsh laugh. I’m sure my mom thought the same thing. I sincerely doubt she decided to be as terrible as she was, she had problems but wasn’t evil.

“Right,” I say. Tears build behind my eyes, a threatening flood that I do not want to let go because it feels like they will never stop if I do.

He wipes one stray tear away with this thumb.

“Tamara,” he says, “how do I help?”

I shake my head, staring past him. I hear my mom, but it’s a memory, not her voice in my head like it has been. A dozen memories. A highlight reel of moments I needed her, and she didn’t, no couldn’t give me what I needed.

“I, uhm,” I lick my lips trying to force moisture back into my mouth. “My mom was not.... She had a lot of problems.”

“And this worries you?” he asks, perceptively. I bite my lip and nod. “Tell me.”

I look down, this not being the response I expected. I don’t talk about my mom. I haven’t in, well, ever. Abs and Annalise were there so they know. Why talk about it then? My heart pounds in my chest and there is a hint of fear. Fear of admitting the truth or fear of facing it, I’m not sure.

But Kri’sin looks at me with so much earnestness, so much love, so much... him. The barriers I’ve built between the memories and myself don’t stand a chance.

“We should sit,” I say. “This could take a while.”

He stands up and we take a seat on the edge of the bed. He holds my hand in his. I take a deep breath and I tell him everything.

TAMARA

“*T*amara,” Kri’sin says when at last I’ve finished telling him all the sordid details of my childhood. “I am sorry your childhood was like this. But...”

He trails off and I wait but he doesn’t speak. I wait longer but at last I can’t stand it any longer.

“What?”

He clears his throat and shrugs.

“I am no poet,” he says, shaking his head. “Words... I am a warrior, my love. Words are not my weapon and I do not know how to put this into something so confining as sounds and syllables.”

He stands up then kneels in front of me. He takes both my hands in his and stares into my eyes.

“Just say it,” I say, breathless, uncertain what he’s going to say.

“You,” he says, and his voice is tight, almost strained. “Are perfect. Your heart is filled with love. The love you feel for your friends, the love you share with me, you will lean into this. You will be a beautiful mother to our children.”

I’m choked up once again and I can’t hold back my tears. I shake my head and he squeezes my hands, his own eyes glistening as if he too is about to cry, which is silly because I know that Zmaj cannot.

“Children?” I ask. “Are you planning something without me there?”

He grins and shrugs.

“A male can hope, can he not?”

I laugh, wrap my arms around his neck and pull him into a kiss.

“Thank you,” I say.

“Thank you for telling me,” he says. “It explains much.”

“Yeah, you think?” We kiss more but then I pull back. “But no more heroics, you got that? I cannot do this on my own.”

He frowns and pulls back.

“My treasure, do not make me choose between duties, they align.”

“Yes,” I agree. “I get it, I don’t like it, but I get that. I don’t mean that.”

“What do you mean?”

“You think I didn’t hear about your heroics and pushing the other warriors to keep going?”

“Oh,” he says, having the decency to look ashamed.

“Yeah, that,” I say. “No more. Duty, fine, I get it and I know that Tajss is dangerous but don’t take any extra risks. Okay?”

He lowers his head and places a kiss directly on the slight swell of my belly. He looks up into my eyes.

“I swear it to both of you,” he says with a wicked grin as his hands slide up my legs and around to grab my ass.

He grabs the hem of my pants and pulls them down. I lift my hips and let him undress me. He spreads my legs and buries his face in my pussy.

I twine my hands in his hair as he goes to work. All my worries are pushed into the future. One way or another, I know that we’re together and we’ll figure all the rest out. I give myself over to the pleasure of his mouth, which is indescribable.

I'm in love. And I'm pregnant. It may not be easy, but I'll figure this mom thing out. And if nothing else, I've got plenty of help with Kri'sin and my friends, I know that we'll be okay.

The first orgasm he gives me comes fast and hard. I arch up and pull his head tight onto my wet pussy until it passes then collapse.

"I love you," I cry out as the last spasms wrack my body.

"Always," he says, when at last I release my grip. "My treasure."

"And you are mine," I say as he crawls onto the bed with me, somehow having lost his pants before he did.

We shift around until he is on top, and his cock is sliding into my wet and ready pussy. We make love, fast and hard on the first round then going slow with his second cock. Taking our time, not that we don't know each other well already, but in an act of affirmation.

I have three more orgasms before we're left breathless. I'm resting my head on his chest, listening to his hearts and letting my thoughts drift as sleep comes.

"Is a girl okay?"

"A female would be perfect," he says. "If she is anything like you."

"You say the corniest things," I say.

"I do not know this word," he says.

"Silly," I say.

"Oh," he says, shifting and moving until he is resting on one elbow and looking at me. "Silly?" he shakes his head. "No. I speak my heart. You are so much more than you seem to see. A daughter of ours will inherit your strength, I can think of nothing better."

"You don't want a male?"

He grins devilishly. "Are you limiting us?"

"No, but I... I mean, I don't know. This could be rough."

He looks serious. “Many of your kind have had mixed babies. Are you concerned?”

“A little, yeah,” I say.

“Then we will consult the healers,” he says. “And if you need something, I will get it for you. You will have the best and nothing less.”

I smile and run my fingers over his chest.

“You...” I trail off, the concept too big in my head for words and now I understand what he was saying earlier. I shake my head. “I’m no poet. You get it.”

“I do,” he says, leaning in for another kiss and just like that, his cock is stiffening yet again.

“We’re going to be okay.”

“Better,” he says. “We are complete.”

As he kisses me I know he is right.

THE END

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 \(Red Planet Jungle\)](#).

JOIN MIRANDA'S READER
LIST

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SUBSCRIBE TO BE THE FIRST TO KNOW WHEN THE
NEXT RED PLANET DRAGONS OF TAJSS STORY IS
OUT!



[CLICK HERE TO SUBSCRIBE](#)

ALSO BY MIRANDA MARTIN

[Complete List of My Books](#)

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

miranda@mirandamartinromance.com

