



THE **NAGA**
OUTCAST'S
UNWANTED MATE

SERPENTS OF SERANT SERIES
ROBIN O'CONNOR

The Naga Outcast's

Unwanted Mate

Robin O'Connor

Table of Content

[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](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Excerpt: The Naga Brute's Warrior Mate](#)

[Robin's Mailing List](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Books by Robin O'Connor](#)

Chapter 1

Vera

My heart was pounding in fear when they led me into the courtroom in chains. I didn't look to the left, where I knew my family sat in the benches, but I could feel their angry glares on me anyway. There was the glint of a camera drone as it circled in front of me, its lens zooming as it tried to get the best angle of my face.

My steps faltered as I shook my hair back, cursing internally that I had no hands free to wrangle the strands in place. Or that the guards had refused me the courtesy of freshening up before they dragged me from my jail cell. Earth justice was always extremely quick these days, nothing like how it had been back in history, more than three hundred years ago.

Now, the police made an arrest and provided their testimonies and evidence to a judge who decided that same day if the accused was guilty or not. The time between my arrest and my sentencing hearing had been less than three days, and that was fairly long as I was a high-profile case. I never got to say a word in my defense. There was no defense of any kind really... In my opinion, at least, but that was a rather unpopular opinion in this day and age.

How far I had fallen, the media was reporting. The princess in her ivory tower was finally brought down to the level of the poor plebs. No longer was I in the media as the pretty debutante from the mega-rich Clayborne family that lived in their fancy domes on the moon. Now I stood accused of forging documents of ownership to line my family's pockets, stealing things out from under the noses of our biggest rival.

The Claybornes had washed their hands off me immediately, painting me as the black sheep of the family in the media. Making sure everyone knew they had no knowledge of this and that I'd acted on my own. I knew what the outcome of this trial was going to be too; for my family to save face, I had to die. So even though I was innocent, and even though they

knew this, they were the ones making damn sure my trial would end in a guilty verdict.

Either way, the clear winner in this whole thing was going to be our biggest rival, Satara Group. With me the definite loser. Nobody cared about me, just that it made sense for their bottom line that I take the fall. So here I was, marched into this courtroom like the criminal they had already convinced themselves I was.

No, not even that. When I couldn't help myself and turned my head just enough to catch sight of my parents... I could tell from the tight displeasure on my mom's face that she hated being here, that she thought every second of this was a waste of time. She was actually checking the com strapped to her wrist twice in the brief moment I dared look. I knew her; she knew I hadn't done this because it was exactly the kind of thing she would applaud, and I was always and forever her biggest disappointment.

Dad didn't even look up from where he was rapidly scrolling through data on a datapad; working, always working. I didn't think I'd ever seen him do anything other than work. I wondered if he even knew the meaning of the word relax.

With sweaty palms and a rattling chain, I was led up to the defendant's stand. A misnomer because there would be no defense. I lifted my chin and squared my shoulders, trying to make myself look anything but the terrified, heartbroken girl that I was at that moment. If this was to be my final media performance, let them at least see a composed person. So what if my hair was a rat's nest and my mascara had streaked across my cheeks from my tears?

I thought I managed to put up a good show for a little while, but when the cool-faced, disinterested judge pronounced me guilty and sentenced me to death, I struggled not to break down and cry. *I didn't want to die, damn it.* This was so unfair.

There was no chance to think about it, no time to contemplate how fleeting my life was and how little I'd

accomplished. I was led from the room by two stone-faced guards and briefly confronted by a crowd of reporters and their camera drones. They asked me questions and demanded to hear me speak one last time, but I was so derailed by it all, despite knowing this was coming, that I said nothing. It wasn't like any of these vultures deserved to hear the last words I might ever speak.

Brought to a small receiving room, I was chained down to the table by my hands. The guards left and for the first time that day, I was left alone, alone with my racing thoughts. Tears did fall then. I was so scared; I was shaking like a leaf. I really, *really* didn't want to die. I yanked on the chains that held my hands but their mag-locks held with a steady hum.

Panic clawed at me as I looked around, desperately searching for a way out, anything to stop this damn farce. I had done nothing wrong; I was framed. My family knew it. The supposedly wronged Satara Group knew it; they had fabricated the fake documents I was accused of making, after all.

The whole justice system on Earth was meant to be fair, quick, and just. But look how corrupted it was, how things had turned out. Just as rotten to the core as every other aspect of Earth's ruling class and the Alliance of United Races, the UAR.

With the sound of clacking heels preceding her, my mother strode into the small room and gracefully settled into the single chair across from me. Her cool blue eyes surveyed me, nose wrinkled in deep distaste. "Paw, you can't even hold it together enough to properly represent your family one last time," she sighed. Her tone made her sound bored, cutting me to the quick.

"Fuck you, Mom," I shot back angrily. "You're not the one about to die for something she didn't do! You know I'm innocent, and you're letting me die, you cold-hearted bitch." My angry diatribe didn't do anything to her, didn't ruffle a single feather on her perfectly cold shell. Just like it never had

in all my years rebelling against her and the whole damn Clayborne family. *I knew exactly why they didn't lift a finger to stop this. They thought they were better off without me.*

My mother shook her head, tssking as if she were scolding a small child. "You're such a disappointment. I knew your dad and I made a mistake when we didn't have your genes polished before inception as we did with your siblings. Thought we were being adventurous pioneers." She rolled her eyes and tapped at her wrist com, scanning a message that had just come in, like she hadn't just crushed every last shred of hope that she held some kind of maternal feelings for me.

She rose to her feet, done with this conversation. "And you were too stupid to even realize that *I* set you up with those papers, that this *fall* is your last service to our family." With a sick smile on her face, she strutted to the exit, "And what a beautiful result it is. You've made us so much money with your death." She tossed back her thick blonde hair, which was as always perfectly styled with never a hair out of place. With a practiced, warm laugh, usually reserved for fancy parties, she walked out the door.

In her absence, I crumpled, falling forward with my head on my arms across the cool metal table. My eyes burned as tears forced their way out and I shook from emotions. The sense of betrayal was far worse than I should have expected it to be. The mighty Clayborne family had never cared a single bit about Vera, the rebel, the black sheep. So why wouldn't they set me up to die if it benefited them?

Still... I had come onto this planet alone, unaltered, and as it soon became clear, unwanted. I was leaving this planet in just a short moment, in just the same way. Always alone, always unwanted, and never good enough.

The guard who came to escort me to my final destination a moment later didn't show me even an ounce of sympathy. I knew there was a second door to exit this room, allowing a convict to avoid the crowd and the reporters. This guy took me by the arm and pulled me straight back into that mayhem,

making sure the last shots the camera drones took of me were those of my red-rimmed eyes and my tear-streaked face. I curled my lips at them in an angry snarl, enraged by the injustice of it all. Desperate for a way out that wasn't coming.

Then he was pulling me through a blessedly quiet corridor, pushing me into a small room no bigger than a broom closet, and shutting the door on me. I had only a second to look up at the small glass pane in the door and see his satisfied smirk. Then fog rolled in from the grate beneath my feet and fell down on me from a hole above my head. Instantly, everything went hazy around me, my head started spinning, and my heart pounded in overtime.

Already? Was this really the end? I wish I had more time. I wish I could have done more. Fall in love, find a moment of happiness somewhere. Be WANTED for once in my life.

Instead, everything went dark.

*

Zathar

I slithered along the tunnel system at a quick pace, hoping to outpace Iave and Corin. We'd heard the sound of the crash as we were hunting, the sound of something huge falling from the sky right into Bitter Storm Clan territory. They would be rushing to this spot too, eager to get their claws on whatever it was that the gods had seen fit to gift us with. I couldn't let them get there first; they would squander it with their filthy claws and their recklessness.

Even if this was their territory, I was going to make sure that whatever prize had landed in our mountains, I was the one to claim it. If it was a good prize, maybe I could use it as bargaining power with the Queen to restore our positions in the Clan. Give my brothers and me another shot at finding our mate among the females of the Thunder Rock Clan.

I knew Iave didn't care; he claimed we should try to find other Clans and see if any of their females were ours. But somehow... Just the idea alone of trying my luck with a Bitter

Storm female made me shudder, my scales clicking together in discontent.

We, from Thunder Rock, were all in shades of blue and gray, with the occasional silver, but all of Bitter Storm was red. A warning flag if there ever was one, as they were zealots, determined to eschew any technology and any advancement. I wouldn't mind a female of a different color, some of the other Clans had shades that were very appealing. But that zealous distrust of anything new, anything different, and any advancement; that I couldn't get over.

My two closest friends were following right on my tail; I could hear their steady breathing, the sound of their scales scraping across the rocky tunnel floor. We were close to the point of exit I had in mind. If my calculations were correct, this would take us very close to where this sky-ship had fallen. My mind was already imagining the possibilities, alien tech from the advanced civilizations that populated our skies? Precious metals?

The Queen loved anything shiny, especially gold. If we found enough gold... I could already see her response as she allowed us to return to the fold. The envious looks of the females that had rejected my brothers and me as I presented the Queen with our treasure.

A shaft of light pierced the deep darkness ahead of me, my nictitating membranes sliding down over my eyes to protect them from the harsh brightness. My hand slid to the leather harness straps that crisscrossed my chest, checking that my twin blades were secure. With a leap and a powerful twist of my tail, I curled myself up through the hole, my clawed hands finding purchase on the rocky walls as I pulled myself into the *outside*.

I curled my tail protectively around the opening the moment I left it, providing cover for my brothers in case of a threat. Scanning the rocky slopes around me, I noted the deep purple and pink of the forest covering the mountain down below, the thicket hiding any who might be in it. The slope above me was

far more sparsely covered with plants. High enough up the mountain that the trees had given way to short shrubbery.

There was no smoke. Whatever had fallen from the sky had crashed through the ceiling of a cave in the mountain's flank. One that had housed a huge, subterranean lake. I could see the edges of the crater, see the wreckage of something alien hanging over the edge of it, slowly grinding and sliding further into the black water it had revealed.

I cursed right as Iave slithered over my coiled tail and into the open, he had his ax already in hand. "That's not good, is it?" he asked, "If it sinks any further, none of us are getting any treasure." Despite his disagreement on how to get females for our own, he was fully on board with getting our claws on this treasure from the sky. Already, his keen black and gray eyes were searching out options, calculating our best path into that crater.

When Corin joined us *outside*, I didn't wait another moment, hurrying up the slope. I was a strong swimmer; whatever we'd see when we reached the wreckage of this alien vessel, I was not leaving without at least *something*. Both my friends were right on my tail and I knew they'd feel the same about it.

I crested the edge of the crater, appraising what appeared to be half of a sky-ship. The other half had likely already broken off and sunk into the black water, or it had dropped to the planet somewhere else. It was a small, narrow vessel, the front half of it if I was not mistaken. The tip of the nose had broken into the mountain, exposing the lake. It was a splintered, crushed mess. The back half of the piece looked intact; it gave me hope that something worthwhile might be inside it.

We needed to hurry, tech of any kind was valued by my Clan, but if the Bitter Storm Clan arrived, they would torch it all. They considered anything foreign to be taboo; they wouldn't rest until each part of this ship was destroyed. If they discovered we took anything, they might even attempt to hunt us down.

Though the ship was twisted and torn, the back half of it seemed to lie balanced on the edge of the crater, a huge tear in the side providing access. Normally, I would be more cautious and test my approach, but with time running out, I chanced it. Sliding through the crack in the hull of the strange vessel, I opened my nictitating membranes to adjust my sight to the darker setting. This was not going to be a find of gold or jewels, but we might find other tech to scavenge and use; it was still a valuable find. Ships crashed more often, but it was a rare enough occasion that tech was a commodity. We could trade it or use it; the Clan would want it.

I was taken aback by what I did find inside this ship, not expecting it to be filled with coffins. I froze, my hackles rising, my scales twitching in discomfort. Who were they? That they had been transporting their dead in this manner? Our tribe only buried our most revered, like the queen and her consort; we had cremations for everyone else. Were these important people?

“Wow... what is this?” Corin asked in a hushed whisper as the three of us stared at our find. “We can’t touch this,” I decreed. We were *not* so desperate that we’d resort to grave robbing. Iave hissed as he slid past me and curled his large body around the various coffins, looking inside each of them with a curious expression.

I wanted to follow suit, but it seemed disrespectful. My nose twitched, my tongue flicking past my sharp teeth to taste the air. Something smelled good, very good. I hissed in annoyance but gave into my baser instinct, sliding around the coffins as I tracked the enticing scent. From my periphery, I could tell that Corin was going around the edges of the vessel, carefully avoiding the coffins but checking the walls, panels, and any other likely spot for tech for us to use. *Good, at least one of us was doing something productive.*

My eyes snagged on the last coffin bolted to the floor in the row of six coffins. It was nearest the crushed front of the ship, where I could see one arm smashed between two sections of metal. It was covered in red blood, a dark blue sleeve torn and

burned. A clawless hand with tan skin and no protective scales was all that was visible of the body. Tearing my eyes from that limb, which was much smaller than my own, possibly belonging to a female, I eyed the coffin I was next to.

A panel at the top was clear, allowing anyone who wanted to take a look inside of it. This coffin was not big; a full-grown Naga would never fit, not with our long tails. The figure inside it only seemed to take up half the space available. Was it a child? I could see a mane of hair, long and silky. It was a pale color I had never seen before.

The face was even paler, a pinkish white, with fine bones and a small chin. It was vaguely similar to a Naga female's face but far softer and rounder. It was oddly appealing I decided as my eyes traced the delicate feather of pale hair that lay on her cheeks and the full pink of her lips, which looked even softer than the rest of her. I had the oddest urge to flick my tongue against them.

My cock stirred in its pouch, which was disconcerting. Why was it responding to this creature in a coffin? It was *dead*. I cast my eyes left and right to make sure neither of my friends was watching me. Then I pressed the heel of my palm against my pouch, willing the first stirrings of arousal to go away.

My eyes were glued to the face of the creature in the coffin. She was slender, with small shoulders that didn't take up all that much room inside the confined space. Her chest curved like a feeding female, the teats round and soft, another enticing part of this creature. A female; had to be. Her arms were even smaller, thin but softly curving, especially compared to that dismembered arm I'd spotted before.

Sliding my hands across the surface of the coffin, I pressed against the blinking buttons of light on the top without a clear plan. I couldn't read the script that scrolled across the screen's surface. The only one who could possibly do that was a Shaman but he wasn't here. Whatever it was, I had no business activating the tech on this coffin. Was it going to activate a memorial plate? Show me more of the indecipherable letters?

With a hiss, I scooted back, rising up high on my tail while my hands went for the grips of my swords. The outer shell of the coffin was sliding back, the transparent lid moving until it clicked down over the bottom part. Leaving the female exposed from the waist up.

“What happened?” Corin demanded. The male had risen up as well and, from a few coffins away, was staring at this one with a dismayed expression on his face. Iave was curled over another coffin, barely paying any attention to what I had done. He seemed as engrossed with a creature inside that coffin as I had been with this one.

I shrugged, dropping my hands from the handles of my swords while I leaned in a little closer to better inspect the female. “It just opened. I don’t know...” but my breath faltered when I realized that her soft, curvy chest was moving up and down. Was she breathing? Was she *alive*? Before I could stop myself, I’d placed my hand on the center of that chest, startled when her skin was warm to the touch. Definitely *not* dead.

Her eyes blinked open. A bright blue color I’d never seen before, when I thought I’d seen every shade of blue there was on my clansmen. Her mouth dropped open, revealing blunt little teeth. An ear-splitting scream issued from it that had me clasp my hands over my ears. What the fuck?

Chapter 2

Vera

I woke up to the sight of a monster hovering right above me. Fangs, scaly skin, and glowing azure eyes. This was a creature straight out of my nightmares, alien and monstrous. Of course I screamed. I yelled my head off because this was so *not* what I expected to see first thing after dying. I was dead, right?

Pinching my arm with my fingers, I yelped when that hurt. So alive, no wait... Wasn't the arm-pinching thing for when you thought you were dreaming? What did someone even *do* to check if they were dead or alive? No, I was definitely alive, my panicking brain told me. There were electrodes stuck to my chest that I could brush off; I was in a stasis pod of some kind.

The monster above me flinched back when I started screaming, clutching clawed hands over ear openings in the sides of its head. *His head*, because that was a very masculine face, with a sharp jaw with two pointed little horns sticking from it. And whew... that chest... It was one rippling, carved slab of muscle. It was also very blue, with a silvery pattern across the scales that was very pretty and delicate.

When I stopped screaming, he leaned back in a little, tilting his head this way and that while he looked at me. Bright blue hair clung in strands around his face, the rest secured in a knot on top of his head. His mouth opened to display sharp fangs and a split tongue that flicked out and tasted the air. I shivered, my body heating with a sharp burst of arousal that had no time or place for this situation. *Definitely not related to that agile tongue.*

I was unsure exactly what had happened, except for the fact that I'd been put in stasis. A quick look around showed me several more stasis pods and the mangled remains of a small spaceship. A UAR vessel from the looks of it, its acronym stamped on several hatches and bulkheads. Son of a bitch, they'd *executed* me, only to transport me somewhere else, and

for God knows what purpose. I had a feeling it would have been nothing good.

My eyes fell on the male hovering above me, staring at me with intense curiosity. I should continue to be terrified of him, he looked so incredibly alien, but I felt rather calm in his presence. When he reached out a clawed hand towards me, I paused to look at the smooth inside of his palm, before I grabbed it and allowed him to pull me from the stasis pod.

I went a little faint in the legs, staring in shock at the fact that this male didn't have any himself. He had a snake tail; the entire lower half of his body and then some was a long thickly muscled, scaly tail in the same beautiful light blue and silver as his upper body. The entire front of him, like his belly, was a lighter shade than the back part.

My feet were standing right between two thick coils of his long body. I gaped at those coils, trying to wrap my mind around such a creature. *Ahaha, wrap... Like a snake.* I was going nuts, what kind of alien planet had the UAR stranded me on?

The male made a soft hissing noise, rumbling from deep in his chest. It sounded soothing like he was trying to calm me. Tilting my head up, I met his bright look, an inquisitive gaze on his features. "I'm sorry, my translator doesn't appear to have your language in its database," rolled off my tongue, surprising myself. *Why the hell would I even say that when he couldn't understand a word I was saying?*

Alien that he was, he didn't blink at me in any normal kind of fashion, eyelids sliding shut over his eyes for a short moment from the inside of his eyes. Sliding horizontally across to the outer corners. What? I stared at his eyes, the bright azure briefly glowing through the pale, milky white lids.

With a loud groaning sound and an earsplitting shriek, metal tore, and the mildly tilted floor of the ship we stood in slid and shook. It was so sudden and unexpected that I tumbled forward, right against the alien snake-man's chest. My palms

flattened against his scaly pectorals, my entire body following suit, and then his arms came around me, steadying me.

“We need to get out of here, now! This whole vessel is about to slide into the water,” a male voice urged. It wasn’t the guy holding me that was speaking, his chest was silent, though all the pretty silver lines along his body had lit up and started glowing. My body flushed with heat while I tilted my head and caught sight of a second snake-man creature hovering near the exit. This one was a little smaller, leaner, and paler in color.

“Correct, we should leave,” a deeper, more resonant voice answered. My skin broke out in goosebumps, my nipples going hard, rubbing against the rougher texture of his scales through the thin shirt I was wearing. This time I knew it was the male holding me who spoke, I could even sort of tell that he was still speaking a foreign language, I could just suddenly understand it perfectly.

“No!” I said, shaking my head as I looked at the other pods, “We have to get the others out!” I pushed myself off that rock-hard chest, stumbling over a thick coil of his tail, and managed to stay upright by grabbing onto the stasis pod I’d just vacated. “Hurry!” I urged the males, unsure if they could understand me or not. I dashed to the nearest pod and ran my fingers over the wake-up sequence, muttering under my breath at the pod to get it to hurry up.

There was a brief, startled silence, and then I heard a whole volley of hissing, growling language exchanged between the two males. The pod I was trying to start was just sliding open when I spotted the long coil of midnight blue scales that curled around the next one.

Oh shit, there was a third of these guys? Yeah, there he was, a huge brute of a male, his dark skin making him blend into the darkened interior of the ship. He was curled over another stasis pod, his face almost pressed against the glass. My skin prickled with unease, why was he so fascinated?

“Where am I?” a frightened female voice asked me. My eyes slipped from the big male down to the woman I’d just managed to wake up. “No time to talk. We’re on a crashed ship and it’s about to sink into the water. Help me wake the others and get out of here.” My words were clearly distressing the young woman but she bravely bit her lip and struggled out of the pod, her eyes huge as she scanned her surroundings.

I hadn’t heard him approach, he was incredibly quiet as he slithered along the floor between the pods and the debris. He was just suddenly there, right behind me. Right in time too because the ship heaved and bucked with another loud groan as it slid a few more feet. I lost my balance again, stumbling on still weak legs, but this male had his arms back around me immediately, steadying me.

“Easy there, easy,” he rumbled in my ear, again, perfectly understandable. This time my back was to his front, one of his arms curled around my middle, the other braced on the edge of the stasis pod. The girl that I’d just woken hadn’t been so lucky, she’d gone down on the other side, quietly sobbing as she struggled back to her feet. Her eyes were wide and terrified as she noticed the scaly males surrounding us.

“Can you understand me?” I asked the guy holding me, I wanted to help the woman, but it seemed more prudent to get out of this broken, sinking ship first. For that, I’d probably need the help of these aliens. He made a low hissing sound that was close to a moan, his hand on my belly pressing me more tightly to him. “Yes, I can. We must hurry if we’re to free all your people.”

I agreed, my skin breaking out in goosebumps from his mouth, so close to my ear while he spoke. Why was I having such a potent reaction to him? Was it adrenaline fueling me? This was making no sense at all. When he let go of me, I hurried away, trying not to look back as I rushed for the next pod.

It was confusing that when he spoke next, I couldn’t understand a single thing he was saying, but now the smaller

of the three males sprung into action. Messing with the panel of a stasis pod to try and open another stasis pod, while the female I'd woken was leaning against another one. "Are they safe? Can you understand them?" she asked, voice trembling.

I nodded, "I seem to understand them sometimes, they're our best bet right now. We'll figure the rest out later, okay? Just get these people out before we all sink." She took a deep, rallying breath and gave me a nod. I was glad to see that she was putting her fear aside and getting to work on opening the pod she was next. There were six pods in all, and only two of us were out yet.

Heading for the next one myself, the huge dark blue male suddenly threw himself in my path. His huge body rose up high before me, towering over me, while he hissed words at me I couldn't understand. I yelped, cringing back, and was immediately curled protectively into the arms of the male who had woken me. One thick arm bent around me, tucking me into his side, the other brandishing a sharp, curved sword in the face of the other male.

"Watch it Iave! What the blasting sun is wrong with you?" he angrily demanded. His voice a hissing growl that seemed to filter through my brain into crystal clear words. The huge brute backed up, raising his palms, dipping his chin in deference. While my protector had two sharp bone-white tusks sticking from his chin, this guy had only one with a broken jagged tip, he pressed that almost into his own throat.

"Please, tell her to open that coffin now!" the male rumbled, his arm swinging to the side to point at the stasis pod he'd been curled over a moment ago. I looked at it and felt a shiver of apprehension, what was he going to do to its occupant? He seemed completely obsessed with that pod. There was no choice though, we had to open it if we wanted to save the person inside it, and I very much wanted to get everyone safely off this broken ship.

"Okay!" I said, but the arm around my middle was keeping me from going. And the brute was repeating his demand, more

angrily this time. I tilted my head so I could look up at the guy holding me. Really, I appreciated the help and the defense, but seriously he didn't need to keep manhandling me.

"Tell him I'll do it," I ordered, his sharp azure eyes flicking down to my face for a quick second before glaring at the other male again. With a little shiver, I realized his eyes had narrow stripes as pupils, they were very, non-human-looking eyes, and the glare was intense. Despite the size difference, I figured the midnight blue brute had to be sweating it by now.

"Move aside, she'll open the pod," he said with a hiss, lips curled up to display a long set of impressive fangs. "Back off Iave! I'm warning you." The midnight male curled his body backward, moving out of the way, but my guy wasn't letting me walk off. I was suddenly up in the air, cradled protectively against his wide chest while he slid his long body in two rapid curls toward the right pod. When my feet touched the ground, he never moved away, his chest pressed close against my back.

"Back off buddy, haven't you heard of personal space?" I demanded, my fingers already flying across the stasis pod's controls. Inside the pod, I could see a young woman, she was very pretty. She had dark skin and tight curls on top of her head, the sides shaved in a geometric pattern. I really hoped she was made of sturdier stuff than the first girl I'd freed, she was going to need it if she had to deal with Mister Midnight over there. He hadn't approached, just hovered a little distance away, watching avidly as I worked on the pod.

"If I back off, you and I cannot speak," the male at my back declared, drawing my attention back to my own problem. It looked like Midnight wasn't the only one who'd fixated on a female. I wasn't sure what to think of Azure-Eyes picking me, I wasn't planning to be some alien's pet or worse... Of course, the thought of what this male might like to do to me seemed to turn my traitorous body on.

“Wait, we can only understand each other if we’re touching?” I asked, his words penetrating. So maybe it wasn’t the same kind of obsession as Midnight had for this woman. Maybe he was just being practical. *Figures, nobody ever wanted me.* Why would it be any different with an alien?

He didn’t answer, his attention suddenly snapping to the side, zeroing in on the crumbled front of the ship. “Iave, Corin, I think there’s a person trapped in there. Get her out, she’s probably injured,” his clawed hand pointed at a section of rubble. Despite the standoff between Midnight, I think his name was Iave, and my guy only moments ago, he rushed to do his bidding now. The two males hurried to shift debris with precision to get to whoever was trapped there.

As the pod opened in front of me, I hurriedly focused my attention on the woman. She blinked awake, freezing while she took in her surroundings and the hulking shadow, glued to my back. “It’s okay,” I started, hurrying to explain our dire situation, and that so far these males didn’t seem like a threat. With a glare over my shoulder, I added, “We’ll figure that part out later.”

The female was lithe and strong and with practiced moves she jumped from her pod. “I’m Kalani,” she declared, her dark eyes scanning the wreckage of the ship before settling with a fierce look on the male behind. “I will help get everyone out. Careful, they look dangerous.”

She made no fuss at all as she slunk between the pods on light feet and started urging the female I’d woken and the one other that had climbed out of their pod to the tear in the hull. I noticed that it was a guy, so we weren’t all girls, and only two pods remained to be opened. I hurried to the nearest one, yanking myself out of Azure-Eyes’ grip to get there. He seemed willing enough to let me go this time.

Bending over the pod I got to work, pressing the buttons to make its occupant wake up. It was another female, but this pod had taken some dents and scratches from fallen debris so the glass was clouded. I hoped she was alright in there, I needed to

get her out fast because whatever it was the snake-men were doing at the front of the ship, it was causing more water to run inside. I could hear it burbling and swishing.

Something bumped into my ankle, causing me to stifle a scream, but it was only the light blue and silver tip of a tail. It curled against the bare skin of my ankle, and I wondered if it was Azure-Eyes' way of making contact without quite encroaching on my damn space so much. When I cast a look his way, I saw that he was lifting a huge chunk of debris out of the way so that his smaller friend could slide in and lift out an injured woman. Mr. Midnight was doing the same from the other side and the way their impressive muscles strained as they worked, it definitely had my eyes linger for a second longer than necessary.

The thunk of the cover of the pod opening had me turn to look at the pod's occupant, the woman inside it small and frail-looking. If I had to guess, I'd say she was not exactly healthy. She struggled to open her eyes, her dark lashes feathering against the deep bruising beneath each eye. "Woah," she muttered, staring up at me in surprise, "Aren't you Vera Clayborne? I thought you got executed."

Taken aback by her statement I floundered a little for words. "I am, and I thought I was executed but the UAR screwed us over a second time." I updated her in a few short sentences about the situation while assisting her into sitting up, she ruefully eyed her legs as she started using her hands to pull them free of the pod. They were thin, lacking any kind of muscle definition, and with some horror, I realized this girl probably couldn't walk at all. That had to be terrifying, to be that vulnerable in this situation.

"I'm Naomi," she offered, sticking out her hand while she bravely started to slide out of the pod, balancing on the edge with what looked like a well-rehearsed move. I shook her palm, "Not to be rude, but you probably aren't going to be walking fast are you?" Her eyes had a determined gleam to them as she declared that she'd keep up.

“Iave, pick her up and get her out of here,” I heard Azure-Eyes demand of his hulking friend. I didn’t like the sound of that but the male swooped in almost immediately, startling me with his speed. Naomi didn’t utter a sound as the huge, strange alien slung her into his arms, though I saw how wide her eyes had gone. “It’s alright! So far they’ve been helping us,” I tried to reassure her. I had absolutely no idea if that would continue to be the case or if they were going to sacrifice us to a volcano or eat us at a later point in time. Right now, they seemed the be our best bet for safety, and my odd attraction to Azure-Eyes was making me recklessly desperate to just trust them. *Stupid idea, never let your damn ovaries do the leading.*

I rushed for the last pod, catching sight from the periphery of my eyes of the smaller male slithering after Naomi and Midnight out of the wreckage. He was cradling the injured female they’d dug out from the front carefully in his arms, a concerned expression on his face that warmed me. Didn’t look to me like that one had thoughts of eating us in mind.

Right as I reached the last pod, close to the huge tear in the side of the ship. The entire vessel lurched and shook, and a wave of black water washed up over my feet. I grabbed for the pod but missed by a hair as the trembling of the ship got so bad that I went tumbling down into the murky depths filling up the wreckage.

A hard appendage curled around my midriff and yanked me upright, spluttering and spitting out water. I was disoriented for a moment because everything around me had shifted, only the band of scaly flesh around my middle remained the same. “Hang on, I’ve got you mate,” a deep voice rumbled.

I was hanging in his tail, azure eyes blinking at me from somewhere above me. It was even darker than before but I could just make out that the entire vessel had tilted, now it was almost vertical in the water. That tail had me dangling suspended above the surface and from the only source of light, I could just make out the shadowy shape of a pair of wide shoulders.

Then something fell from above, clunking me in the head,
and everything went dark.

Chapter 3

Zathar

My heart was pounding in my throat when my female suddenly went limp in my grip. How badly was she hurt? I hadn't even seen what had hit her, but our situation was dire. Our exit was tilted such that the only way out was now a several-foot drop into the deep water, an icy swim, followed by a steep climb.

I heard Corin and Iave call for me, urging me to hurry; they'd seen the first Bitter Storm warriors approaching through the woods below us. Not good, they would outnumber us, and I doubted they'd do anything good to these strange new people we'd found.

Curling my tail up, I pulled the female's limp form in close until I could lift her beneath one arm. My eyes told me there was a red smear on her temple, a cut from where something had hit her. I didn't like the look of it, but the taste of her salty, metallic blood on my tongue was enticing. With her under one arm, I pulled myself through the hole, my long tail curling and twisting to find purchase. Draping my body just right, I let us slide down the slick side of the vessel and into the water, breaking our fall with my muscled coils.

She gasped and spluttered as she hit the water, rousing a little; much to my relief. She had only been out for a few seconds altogether but that was still far too long. I curled her just so in my arm that her head remained above the water, coiling my body to propel us as fast as I could to the nearest climbing spot. A wave caught us, sending us to the rock wall far faster than I anticipated as the vessel finally sank completely beneath the water.

I braced for impact, hitting the rocks with my tail and shoulder but shielding the fragile female with her soft, warm skin. Skin that was rapidly cooling in the near-freezing water, her lips turning an alarming shade of purple and blue. Grabbing on, I hauled us over the edge, helped at the last

moment by Corin's tail as he slung it in my direction, yanking us onto soft pink grass. "You made it, thank the stars."

We had made it, but my female was shivering in my arms, her eyes fluttering as she struggled to rouse. As I lifted myself up off the ground, cradling her to my chest, I eyed the approaching warriors. They had fanned out, hoping to surround us. Their red scales shimmered in the sunlight, their obsidian blades black and sharp. "We'll head for Vangor pass," I instructed Corin, "You carry the injured female." I indicated the wounded woman we'd pulled from the wreckage.

"Iave, you carry the one with bad legs," I instructed, casting my eyes about to locate my other friend. He was between the humans, squaring off against a dark-skinned female and one slightly bigger male that stood at her side. The other two females were on the grass, sitting down with pale, scared looks on their faces. They were arguing, but Iave was hissing in our tongue, while the newcomers spoke in their oddly lyrical language. I doubted any of them understood each other, but the effect was dramatic and they hadn't even noticed the approaching warriors.

"Iave!" I yelled, pointing my hand at the row of menacing Bitter Storm males. They were grinning furiously, their teeth painted black, spears readying for a throw. Iave's eyes went wide and his hand went to his ax, but this was no time for fighting. He seemed to conclude the same thing because he dipped and lifted the female with bad legs into his arms, throwing her over one shoulder as if she were a sack of goods. "Vangor?" he demanded, proving he'd heard me after all.

For a brief second, I wondered if the pitiful group of crash survivors was going to protest, especially the male and the tough-looking female. A look at the approaching warriors seemed to make up their minds. With Iave and Corin each with a burden in their arms in the lead, the others scrambled to follow. I was the last, with my mate in my arms, but I made sure to protect our rear.

A wave of spears came flying at us through the air just as my female fully roused. She let out another of her earsplitting shrieks, making my sensitive hearing ring. As far as defensive mechanisms went, not the most effective, but it was definitely uncomfortable. While I swung my body left and right, dodging the falling obsidian spears, I could tell the Bitter Storm warriors were briefly derailed by the sound.

My female hadn't been the only one that screamed, some of the others had as well. The male and the brave warrior female had yelled in angry tones, not nearly as impressive, more reminiscent of cursing. They must be able to temper their fear response better. If I wasn't so worried about making it out of here, I would have wanted to ask my mate about this difference.

Ahead, Corin was the first to slide between two narrow rock faces, out of range of the Bitter Storm spears. Iave paused, freeing his ax with one hand while he kept hold of the small injured female with the other. He was urging the refugees through, which they did in a mad scramble to get to safety. The only one who paused was the warrior woman, she stepped up at his side with a fierce glare, yanking a knife from a sheath at Iave's hip and brandishing it in front of her.

I smirked as I rushed past them, no wonder my friend had gotten so intrigued with her stasis pod. They seemed well-matched and I was happy for him. This would heal the chasm between us and end the arguments we'd had over how to find a mate. I was very ready to be done arguing with my friend, it would leave more time to woo my new mate.

"Kalani, careful!" my female said, "Those look like they're not here for a friendly chat." I didn't pause for the female to respond back but slid myself and my precious burden between the tall rock walls with only a little room to spare. I trusted my friend to follow us through the narrow crevice immediately after us.

As soon as my tail was free, I whirled around. I shifted my precious burden to the crook of my elbow, so I could free up

one hand and grab for one of my swords. I brandished it in front of me as I carefully watched for any sign of trouble. Iave was pushing the dark-skinned female through the crevice and she was yelling and gesturing with her hands as she went, almost hitting my friend in the eye with her pilfered blade.

I saw the change in Iave's face before I caught on to what he'd sensed. Tilting my head, I spotted the pair of Bitter Storm Naga with their shimmering red scales and even more menacing black spears. They were coming down the mountain to our passage, having found some other path up there, worse, they were jabbing their spears down into scree rubble lying on a ledge above us. They were about to create a rock avalanche, one that could very well crush us, but it was going to take them down with it.

Locking eyes with my friend through the narrow opening, he gave me one sharp nod, his jagged horns almost hitting his chest from the quick move. He whipped his tail around and yanked the warrior female out, just as I leaped my body back, yelling at the others to start running.

The rocks started sliding, first just a few thudding into the narrow passage we were in, then more, until it was raining down on us. I hunched myself over my mate, shielding her from the blows with my much tougher scales. The chaos of our frantic retreat meant I had lost sight of the two enemy Naga but I had my focus on our rescues and Corin; they were out. They'd made it far enough before the rocks started pelting down.

The roar behind me had me spinning, slashing my sword without thought, while I remained curled around my mate. I caught the Naga across the chest, my sharp blade cutting deep. The male fell limply to the ground and was promptly covered by the last of the rocks, a sharp pain at the tip of my tail warning me that I was now pinned in place too.

No longer at risk of getting crushed, I gently put my female down behind me and whirled back the way we'd come, peering at the settling crush of rocks that now filled the narrow

passage. Where was the second one? Had he survived? I had to locate him or I just knew I'd end up with a spear in my back when I tried to leave this place. I had the uneasy feeling that someone was watching me, and I wasn't talking about the huddle of refugees at my back. Corin was trying to calm them but I didn't think they were finding the sound of his voice all that soothing.

No longer touching my mate, I couldn't understand what she was saying, but I was fairly certain *she* was talking about the rocks piled on the end of my tail. Lifting my head I growled when I finally spotted my adversary, still on the ledge somehow and yanking free his own tail with a scraping noise that certainly meant he'd just lost a good amount of his scales.

I grabbed my second sword, meeting the male head-on as he leaped down the crevice, making more of the rocks tumble and slide. We clashed fiercely, our bodies writhing together, as the both of us growled and hissed insults. I was only too aware of my fragile mate with her head injury, just a few feet behind me, standing unsteadily on the sandy path.

This fight needed to end two minutes ago, and I couldn't let it get anywhere near her. With my tail pinned I was limited in my movements and he wasn't, but that didn't matter. I was the superior fighter, and I was extremely motivated. My blades soon found a home and I'd only caught a small cut on my bicep for the effort. Heaving with breath, I rose above my downed opponents, grinning victoriously.

Glancing at my mate, I hoped she appreciated what I'd just done. I hoped she could tell what a good catch I was. She was still standing, her hands clasped over her mouth, her pretty eyes huge in her face. The first Naga was lying dead at her feet and I really didn't like how close that one had gotten to her.

Corin was close behind her, his arms full of the bleeding, unconscious female. But he was holding his crossbow one-handed as if he had intended to come to my aid if I needed it. "Very stuck," I told him wryly, while I gazed back at my half-

buried tail. I was not as much in a rush now as before, because the rock slide had accomplished two things. Separating us from Iave and the two females, but also blocking Bitter Storm from reaching us.

“I can see that,” he confirmed. He didn’t move to put down his burden, just watched the rocks piled on my tail with a smile flirting at the edges of his mouth. I knew Corin had a wicked sense of humor, and normally I enjoyed it, but this wasn’t the time for that.

It was the human male that brushed past him, carefully skirting the dead Naga and started to dig me out. Up close, I realized he wasn’t as small as I first thought, his chest probably rivaled my own, and his shoulders were just as wide. He was strong too, seeming to have no trouble shifting the big rocks pinning me. He talked as he worked, his brown eyes flitting to me several times.

He only briefly flinched when I curled around so I could help dig myself out, my blades hissing as I sheathed them on my back. I couldn’t understand what he was saying in his low bass. It still sounded musical and song-like to my ears, even spoken in those much lower tones.

Reaching out a hand, I laid my fingers on my mate’s shoulders, gently squeezing her because I just couldn’t resist how soft she was. “Translate, please,” I asked her, jerking my head toward the crouching male.

“He’s saying he’s glad you’re on our side, and he’s wondering if the others are okay,” she promptly responded, “His name is Reid.” I didn’t care what the male was called one way or another but I was grateful that he was digging me out. Between the two of us the job was done much more quickly and I knew that we needed to leave this place sooner rather than later.

The rock slide was only going to delay a determined Bitter Storm warrior for so long. I didn’t want to contemplate the fact that they might be more focused on chasing after Iave and his two refugees. Iave was a very resourceful warrior, and he

was a huge male. Having always towered over all the others; he was very adept at using his giant size to his advantage. I had to have faith in his survival.

I couldn't keep holding my mate while I dug myself out and I hated that I couldn't understand what she was saying to the others as I worked. Was she saying something good or bad? Was she expressing fear over the Bitter Storm warriors? Her expression when I glanced her way seemed to indicate she wasn't worried, but the sight of the blood drying on her temple made my scales rattle with unease.

The male huffed out a short laugh, his brown eyes glittering with amusement. It was shocking how familiar their faces were, despite their lack of scales, chin horns, or even a functional nictitating membrane. I ignored him, and the fact that he seemed to find my interest in my mate funny. He was tailless, I could take him if he decided he wanted to make a move on her; I wasn't threatened.

With a final heave, the two of us rolled a rather large block off my poor tail and I hissed in relief as blood flow was restored and nerves unpinched. Everything started tingling but I relished the feeling, it meant my tail was undamaged, my tough scales had protected it from real harm, and we'd freed it in time.

I listened carefully for the sound of the Bitter Storm warriors on the other side of the blocked crevice but I could no longer hear their shouting. That meant they'd moved on, either to forge a better path in our direction, or they'd refocused and were now chasing Iave exclusively. I didn't intend to stick around and find out.

"Let's go," I growled, picking up my mate and cradling her carefully in my arms. Moving past Corin cradling the wounded female, and then the weepy one who'd sat down on the narrow sandy path, her arms curled tightly around her body. From the safety of my arms, my female repeated what I'd said, leaning over to offer a reassuring smile.

“Damn right, let’s get out of here,” the male, Reid concurred, “As soon as you give me a weapon. I can help if those scaly red fuckers show up again.” I tilted my head to look at him over my shoulder, raising myself a little higher on my tail so I was *definitely* towering over him. Then I shared a look with Corin, who nodded. Fine, the male could have a knife, it wasn’t like he could sneak up on me on those big clumsy feet.

Chapter 4

Vera

I was going to get used to this if he kept it up. Being carried around in Azure-Eyes' big brawny arms was far more pleasant than it ought to be, considering his rather monstrous appearance. I seemed to have a thing for monstrous as it turned out. Maybe that was the head wound talking. The knock on my head had caused a fierce pounding and throbbing in my temple. Probably a mild concussion, but I couldn't worry about it now; there were bigger things at stake.

"Hey, my name's Vera. What's yours?" I asked, licking my dry lips. His eyes darted from the narrow path we were on, down to my face, and then lingered for a moment on my mouth. His own tongue flicked into the air, showing me that it was split like a serpent's. Of course it was.

I couldn't keep calling him Azure-Eyes, at least not to his face, even if they *were* really pretty blue eyes. When he drawled, "Zathar," my belly tingled in response. Oh yeah, that was way better. The name Zathar fit him like a glove, it slid right off the tongue, even if mine wasn't split. It matched the serpentine vibes.

"Thank you, can you tell me where we're going?" I asked, trying to remain polite when nothing about this situation was normal. I had been manhandled and touched by this male far more than my last boyfriend ever had in the span of the three months we'd dated. To be fair to that ex, he'd been approved by my mom and I had abhorred every moment I had to spend with him, which was not exactly conducive to a physical relationship.

Why was I even thinking about relationships and sex? Zathar was a stranger, an alien that was so different from me that he didn't even have legs. I shouldn't be contemplating anything but my survival and the survival of the other humans with me.

“We are headed to Vangor Pass, and after that, our hideout. It is where Iave will meet us with the others.” Zathar dipped his head to mine, his eyes blinking at me in a sideways blink as fully developed nictitating membranes slid closed over them from the inside corners of his eyes. “Don’t worry, he will protect them. They are fine.”

I liked that he was trying to reassure me but I wasn’t fooled. We’d already lost one poor person to the watery depths. Now Kalani and Naomi were left behind in the middle of a horde of very hostile Naga. I didn’t think they, or Zathar’s friend, stood much of a chance at all. That just left the other girl, whose name I didn’t even know yet, and Reid. Plus that very injured lady that Zathar’s other friend was carrying, but I wasn’t sure if I was going to be advocating for her yet or not. She was one of the pilots of the ship that had brought us here, did she know what she was transporting? I mean how could she not?

My head wound made thinking about all of this, and about our future, far harder than I liked. The gentle swaying motion my body made in Zathar’s arms didn’t help either; I was starting to feel lightheaded and dizzy, with matching nausea rising in my belly. I did know that if I had to walk up this steep path that wound into the mountains with sharp twists and turns, I would have passed out by now.

Sucking it up, I tried to just focus on one point in the strange, alien surroundings. Maybe that would help me battle the dizziness. Every bit of foliage I could see was tinted in shades of purple or gray, from the deepest dark colors down to pale lavender. It matched the glow of the purple sun shimmering high overhead. The mountains were all rising in sharp, jagged peaks, some of them capped with snow that looked lavender in the purple sunlight.

I couldn’t tell where we were going, but it was obvious that Zathar knew this terrain like the back of his hand. He was sliding along the narrow path full of confidence, leading the pack while his friend held up the rear. I tried not to think of that as a prisoner escort, but a protective detail instead.

I struggled to imagine the hideout he mentioned, was it going to be a cave? A camp? A little village? Would there be more Nagas there? I wasn't sure how happy I'd feel if we were going to a place where we'd be surrounded by more of his species. Those other ones hadn't seemed happy at all to see us; was Zathar sure his own people were going to be more receptive?

When the path started to get even more narrow, and a deep drop opened up on our left, my head really started to spin. A cool sweat was starting to break out all over my skin, and my belly was fervently rebelling. I wasn't too fond of heights but with my vision dancing, it was exponentially worse.

I was just about to open my mouth, a risk considering I felt like hurling, to ask Zathar for a break. The path opened up as it turned sharply to the left and suddenly there was no drop but a gently rolling field of grass, cupped protectively between the flanks of two mountains. It was without a doubt one of the most idyllic places I'd ever seen.

Then I ruined the moment when my stomach rebelled. I could only just fling myself forward in his arms to prevent shamefully spewing all over his pretty, shiny, azure scales. He made a shocked hissing noise and then he was lowering me, his tail flicking around to hook my hair behind my ear with the agile tip.

"Oh no! Vera," the girl yelled from behind him. Figures that she'd recognized me too, had they all been taken *after* my shameful trial and execution back on Earth? I didn't want that to haunt me out here as well but it seemed like there was no escaping it. When she braved Zathar's presence to hover near my side with a worried expression, I felt like a heel for thinking that.

She was deathly pale from shock, and red rimmed her eyes from all the crying she'd already done. Her eyes were actually still shimmering with unshed tears, but she was biting her bottom lip so hard it was nearly bloodless from the pressure.

She was trying to hold all those big emotions inside so she could offer me support.

Zathar was being shockingly nice too, gently holding me, keeping my hair from my face, the whole shebang. He was flicking his tongue at the air, his azure eyes sliding frantically over my face, lingering on the pulse in my neck. If I didn't know better, I'd say he was absolutely terrified that there was something seriously wrong with me.

"I'm okay," I croaked out to reassure both of them. "Just, if I could have a sip of water? That would help." The girl was casting her head about immediately as if she would personally locate water for me if she could. But Zathar was the one who immediately slipped one hand to his belt to grab a leather waterskin.

"Thanks," I said after I'd taken a few careful sips and swirled out the bad taste in my mouth. "I didn't catch your name," I added while looking at the girl. In response, her eyes welled and she started quietly crying again, pressing her hand over her mouth to muffle the heart-rending noises she was making.

Zathar gently pulled me away from her, sidling backward with me in his arms as if he were afraid that the crying was contagious. She sniffled a little louder and up I went, higher as he raised himself on his tail and just *stared*. I was certain that wasn't helping the poor girl, and now that I was feeling a little better again I knew I couldn't let that go on.

"Hey, stop that, she's just crying. And you're making it worse," I said to him in a hushed whisper. He hissed, his tongue flicking out. His expression told me he was thoroughly disturbed by what he was seeing, far more than by my puking a moment ago.

"Her eyes are leaking!" he said, horrified. Then he looked over the girl's head at Reid and his buddy who were both just watching what was going on from a distance. Reid looked almost as uncomfortable with the situation as the two snake-men, he had no excuse though, he knew what crying was.

Huffing in annoyance, I ordered Zathar to put me down, which he did with obvious reluctance. Then his tail curled around my middle, holding me up and I had to admit I was grateful for the support, my legs felt like noodles and the world was already back to swaying a little too much. Avoiding the evidence of my upset stomach, possibly the remains of my last meal on Earth, I went to the girl's side and put my arm around her shoulders.

She was younger than me, and just a tiny little thing too. Freckled and pale, with long red hair draped around her shoulders in messy waves. She looked like she could fall apart at just a look, timid and small, hunched in on herself. It was obvious that while my life hadn't been all roses, hers had been rougher when I spotted the small nicks and scars that covered the backs of her hands.

"Cosima!" she stuttered out, finally giving me her name. I hugged her tight and tried hard not to flash back to my final confrontation with my mother. I had desperately desired a good warm hug then, so I knew what Cosima was feeling. I was happy I could be there for her right now. Whispering reassurances at her, that soon just became babbled nonsense, it didn't take all that long for her to get herself back under control.

I admired how hard she was trying to end her crying jag and move on, even if crying right now was the least useful thing to be doing. She couldn't help it. And if I hadn't gone through the tough things I'd gone through, my heart wouldn't be this hardened right now either. Maybe I'd be a bumbling mess too.

When she had calmed down, we both got back to our feet. Obviously, I was helped a little by Zathar's tail. "Okay, we're good. Both of us. Right, Cosima?" I eyed the weepy girl a little warily as her bottom lip started to tremble at the question. She held it together with sheer willpower this time, just barely giving me a nod.

I wanted to try to walk a little on this much more gentle terrain and feel the ground beneath my feet. I didn't want to be the damsel stuck in the hero's arms the entire time; like I was just a little weakling who couldn't take care of herself. There hadn't been a day in my life when I hadn't had to be my own advocate, my own defender.

It didn't take long for the dizziness to come back though, and I realized that I was seriously slowing down the pace. Zathar was patiently hovering at my side, his tail never leaving my waist so I couldn't possibly stumble or fall. With the added side effect that we could understand each other since that apparently required physical touch.

But it was the other Naga that made me realize I had to suck it up. Zathar had introduced him as Corin while I walked, and his face was drawn in anxious lines as he kept glancing at the injured woman in his arms. I was being selfish by trying to walk when that woman needed aid. So I allowed Zathar to pick me up again for the rest of the journey.

We crossed the beautiful meadow and made it down the side of the mountains into a wide valley. The air started to heat up a little at this lower elevation, but beneath the tall purple trees with their gray bark, it was humid and refreshing. I could tell that fair Cosima was getting a mild sunburn along the bridge of her nose and it was obviously better for her to be in the shade. For my head too, the shadows were easier on my eyes, giving me a little respite from my nasty headache.

When the trees started to thin out I realized we were headed straight for a giant cliff face rising in the distance, beyond it a mountain towering higher than any of the others. It was like a fang piercing the sky, the tip shimmering deep purple in the strange sunlight, the rest a forbidding gray.

I gasped in surprise when I saw the giant gate carved into the cliff, with what appeared to be several statues guarding the entrance. Nobody said anything, the silence pierced only by the occasional weepy snuffle from Cosima or the foreign bird and insect noises of this planet.

When we got closer I could tell just how tall that gate was, and how black the hole into the mountain beyond it. The statues were as tall as a house, towering over us as we crossed between them. They were old too, weathered almost beyond recognition, the gray stone pockmarked and cracked, all features lost except the general shape. A long sinuous form with a man-shaped torso, these were statues of ancient Naga. So ancient, that time had all but erased them.

The gate had been carved with symbols and shapes too, but now mostly it was a bumpy texture along the edges of the gate. The pillars were the only thing that made any real impression. It reminded me of when I visited some of the ancient ruins in Egypt, the scale and the erosion had impressed me. How a civilization could have built things that were still there, still admired, thousands upon thousands of years later, was mindboggling.

These statues were just as old, if not older unless the weather was very extreme on this planet. This looked like the entrance to an ancient temple, or an ancient underground city maybe. It looked like it was built by a civilization far more numerous than just three Naga males. A gate this large should be buzzing with people, but it was empty, abandoned.

As we passed silently beneath the stone arch, a chill went up my spine. It felt like we'd walked into a ghost city or like we were walking across graves. I didn't like it, it felt unwelcoming. Like we were about to get seriously cursed if you believed in that kind of thing.

Chapter 5

Zathar

The city of the ancients was forbidden for all but the Shamans to visit. It was a long-standing decree made by a Queen that long predated my mother, and it was a decree upheld by all the Naga Clans. As outcasts, it wasn't like they could punish us further for being here. It had been Corin's idea to take refuge inside the city, always curious about any of the ancient technologies or the sky-ships.

We needed shelter from the many predators of this planet, shelter from the sweltering sun at midday. Corin and I had hoped that delving deeper into the city could yield us things that could win my mother back over, things that were useful for the Clan. Just like we'd hoped to find something like that on the sky-ship I'd pulled my mate from.

I eyed her slight form, her curves pressed up against my chest, so soft and fragile. She was not what my mother would consider useful, but she *was* my mate. And no longer without a mate, I might be welcome back at the village anyway. I missed it, missed my status as the firstborn son of the Queen, the respect I received for my skills as a hunter. The safety at night of the walls we'd built around our homes. The certainty that my Clan members were there to have my back, because we were Thunder Rock, and we stuck together.

Letting the air escape from between my fangs, I shook myself from my thoughts. Vera, my soft, vulnerable mate wouldn't be safe in the village, she would be a threat to all the Naga females. Fights between females were frequent, and they wouldn't hesitate to challenge her. As my mate, she could be an heir to the Queen, and that was the last thing any female would tolerate.

My scales itched along my back as I realized that several of my sisters would be first in line to fight her. No, I couldn't let that happen, no matter how badly I missed home. It was time to accept that I was never going back.

When I glanced at the small orange-furred female I huffed, that one was even more fragile. She had no mate to protect her either, she wouldn't survive a single day in the Thunder Rock village. We'd just have to make our home here, in the halls of the ancestors, and hope that they forgave us for taking shelter in their territory.

Just beyond the gate, there were chambers branching off on either side of the long tunnel winding deeper into the mountain. In some portions of the ancestor caves, crystals still glowed with light. But the gate tunnel was dark, and so were the chambers that flanked it. It didn't matter for Corin or me, we had good sight in the near dark, but it was obvious from the tense way that Vera held herself, that it wasn't the case for her.

"Your eyes, they glow. Like a cat's!" she exclaimed, one small hand reaching up to pat my cheek with soft, clawless fingers. I had no clue what a 'cats' was, but she had to be referring to the reflective properties of my eyes, making them appear to glow with what little light they did manage to catch.

Shrugging, I unhooked the small lantern I carried from my belt. With a flick of the small switch, it started to shine with a soft yellow glow that didn't blind me but provided just the right amount of light to aid my low-light vision.

Ducking into the chambers on the left of the gate, I headed for the pile of furs that was mine and gently put my mate down in them. There were baskets lining the walls with our supplies and a drying rack with strips of smoked meat that we still had to package. There were no rodents or insects inside the ancestor caves, a phenomenon that always served to make me just a little uneasy. But it did mean that leaving our food out was perfectly safe.

"Grab your healing device," I said to Corin. "We've got to heal my mate and that female," I added the last with a dawning realization that the female was more injured than my mate, she'd need care first. It went against my instincts, but I held

my tongue when Corin pulled the device from a basket near his nest and started working on her, not my mate.

Vera hadn't stayed in place, she was sitting up and scooting to the edge of my nest while curiously staring at everything inside the room. Her eyes lingered on the supplies and then on the wall with the strange table attached to it and the mirrors embedded in the stone. I didn't want to let go of her when I wasn't sure if she was going to do something foolhardy like try to get up. But I needed to get a few things done to make us all comfortable, Corin had more important work to do.

It was an effort to uncoil my tail from around her luscious body, but once I had, I hurried away. Lighting the lamps around the room and setting up the small heat source that Corin had gotten to work last week. The refugees, even the male, looked like they were getting cold in the coolness of the caves. I offered the weepy one a fur from the stockpile, and then I gave one to the male. My mate had already appropriated one from my nest, which I found extremely satisfying. She was covering herself with my scent, good. Let there be no mistake who she belonged to.

Once I had water heating over the heat source for tea, I started piling plates with ration cakes we'd made the day before, and some of the dried meat for extra flavor. Once everyone had food and was sitting down, I returned to Vera and coiled my tail around her, cupping her back. "The food is fresh, it will fill you right up. You'll feel better soon."

She eyed me with a frown, then poked the ration cake; testing the white fatty surface which we'd mixed with grains, dried fruit, and nuts. Very nutritious and filling, it always helped me recover faster from an injury. It would help her too. I liked very much the way it looked when she started to gently nibble on the edge of the thing. It looked sexy, and her blunt, straight teeth were so harmless looking that I was imagining all kinds of things I wanted her to nibble on.

Adjusting my position, I made sure my flushed cock couldn't extrude. That would be highly inappropriate and

unwelcome. I was no untried youth, I wouldn't shame my mate in such a manner. I just needed to keep myself distracted and looking at the injured female that Corin was working on was just the thing.

The female was as pale as all the others, but her hair was a deep black, matted at the top of her skull from a nasty head wound. I was fairly certain that at least one of her limbs had broken, her leg at an odd angle that made me extremely glad I had a tail. She hadn't roused at all, which couldn't be a good sign.

"She's a pilot," Vera quietly said, "For the UAR, which is the name for the coalition of three races that run our part of space. Uh, our territory." UAR was a strange name for a Clan and I wasn't certain what she meant by races. Was that to indicate that it was made up of three different Clans of her people? I tried to imagine working together with some of the Clans I knew in a tight-knit fashion and just couldn't.

Thunder Rock Clan, my own Clan, was proud and driven to work with as much technology as it could safely find without entering any of the ancestor caves. Then there were the Copper Tooth Naga, fierce and independent hunters. The others that came to mind were even worse fits for such a coalition, the water Naga were barely even a Clan, they were scattered all over the lakes and rivers to the west. Bitter Storm was out of the question for very obvious reasons.

"Anyway, the UAR and I aren't on speaking terms. They, and my family, tried to have me executed for a crime I didn't commit, and then they had the gall to actually put me in stasis and ship me off to God knows where. All of us went through something like that, except her." She pointed at the injured woman Corin was treating while my head was still reeling with all the information she just shared.

Executed? For a crime? That was barbaric, as far as I knew, only Bitter Storm did such a thing. The worst punishment that existed for all the other Clans was banishment. My skin chilled just thinking about it. My friends and I were banished but we

lived, and I'd even found a mate. Vera had faced death, truly faced it in a way I couldn't even begin to fathom.

Then there were the words I didn't understand, like pilot, and ship off? I figured she meant the sky-ship? And stasis? What was that? I felt like an idiot, sitting next to my mate and not being able to understand half the things she was saying. But it was nice to have her melodic voice in my ears, her eyes on my face as she spoke, and to watch her graceful hands dance through the air to emphasize her words.

"What is stasis?" I dared to ask, hissing on the s sounds in the word, which had no translation in my language. "Or pilot?" I needed to understand why that woman being a pilot made my mate so hesitant about her. Was it something bad? Like an executioner? Had that woman tried to kill my mate? I felt my body swell with protective instincts. Rising a little on my tail I glared at the injured female, placing myself between her and my mate.

Vera placed a hand on my arm, "Cut it out, she's no threat right now. She's completely out of it. It'll be a miracle if she even wakes up at all." She was right, so I allowed myself to settle back down, sliding just a little closer and leaning my arm into her hand which was still touching me. Her soft palm was warm and felt good against my cooler scales, I liked the contrast between her softness and my hardness. I had to muffle a chuckle at the thought, I was definitely hard for her, all the time, and it was a constant fight not to let my cock slip from my sheath.

"A pilot is someone who can fly a ship, and stasis is those pods you found us in. We were made to sleep, frozen in time kind of. So I don't even know how long ago I was supposedly executed." Fly a ship? Did she mean that that woman knew how to fly the sky-ships that fell from the sky? I had always wondered what they did up there, how far they flew before they died fiery deaths on our world. Intrigued rather than angry with the female, I glanced at her again, wondering what mystical powers she possessed that allowed her to control these vessels.

“So, we can’t trust her, because she knowingly flew a ship with us on it,” she gestured at Cosima and Reid to indicate she meant all the people we’d pulled from these strange ‘stasis’ pods. “And they meant to sell us somewhere far from Earth, where our family would never know what really happened. They are using the excuse of these executions to ship off the supposed criminals to sell them into slavery.”

Her features grew dark and grim, her fingers clenching so tightly around the ration cake she was holding that it started to crumble between her fingers. I knew what slavery was, some of the Clans further south practiced that despicable custom. Enslaving the Naga of enemy tribes for a year of servitude if they were captured in battle. What Vera was proposing, sounded much more permanent.

“Hey, come to think of it, maybe we shouldn’t trust Reid either...” she hummed quietly to herself. “We are all here because we were accused and executed for something, who knows, he might actually be guilty of whatever crime he committed. What if it’s murder?” She didn’t mention Cosima in that same vein and I could see why, the female was the smallest of all of Vera’s people, and so... leaky. She couldn’t be a threat but Reid was big enough to pose a real risk, especially to my fragile mate or the other females.

“I understand,” I said easily, while I scanned our motley collection of people a little more thoroughly. Corin was still working on the pilot, his brow drawn in concentration; obviously, completely focused on his task and nothing else. Reid and Cosima sat side by side right next to the heat source, huddled under the furs while they ate without talking. The female was leaking again and Reid was just staring vacantly at the glowing red center of the device, oblivious to her distress.

Vera and I were furthest away from all of them, in the corner where my nest was. Our voices hushed as we spoke, especially Vera’s. I liked that she’d chosen to share what she had with me, it showed that she was starting to trust me; she knew in her heart that I was her mate. She wasn’t shying away,

she wasn't denying my touch, and she was eating the food I provided for her without hesitation.

"Zathar," Corin's voice pierced my quiet bubble with my mate, jerking my attention from the crown of her silky pale hair. "I need to splint her leg and make a poultice but I don't have all the supplies..." My close friend looked exhausted when I glanced over; working with the healing device always took it out of him. I felt a hint of guilt, he was working, and I was just sitting around, and that while Iave was still missing.

"What do you need?"

*

Vera

When Zathar left to find supplies for the injured pilot I felt strangely bereft. I was already missing his presence after having been in his arms, or tail, for the better part of the day. I still couldn't shake the feeling that I could trust him implicitly, and that was a feeling I'd never experienced before.

I felt abandoned when his long, azure body slithered soundlessly out of the cave. Shaking myself, I tried to take stock of my situation in a more rational fashion. I was injured, the concussion was making my head ache and my stomach so queasy I could hardly stomach the high-fat food that Zathar had handed me.

I was sitting on the edge of what could only be described as a nest. A pile of sticks, moss, straw, and furs that was shaped much like a bowl, one big enough for Zathar to curl his body into. Big enough for me to stretch out, reach my arms up, and only just graze the other edge with my fingers. If anything, it made it obvious just how freaking big these Naga were.

Without Zathar or that other one present, even Corin looked like a giant, his long silvery blue body stretched out around the nest that he'd put the pilot down on. His clawed hand was so pale it was almost white and he was holding a device in it that beamed light down on the woman's chest. It looked like it had several bands going down around his arms, gleaming copper

against his silver skin, and a loop over his middle finger to anchor a disk in place over the center of his palm.

I could tell it was costing him a lot of effort to do whatever it was he was doing. I'd never seen a healing device that took it out of the healer to work but I'd also never really seen a healing device that was able to work on such heavy injuries without actual surgery. There was no doubt that the pilot was suffering from internal bleeding, and he was using that thing he was holding to stop it.

If I were feeling less miserable, I would have gotten up and sat down with Cosima and Reid. I had to figure out what their stories were, I had to know they were safe to be around. Though it was fair to say that Cosima was very unlikely to be a raving murderer, she seemed to burst into tears at the sight of everything.

Feeling eyes on me, I glanced up from my food just in time to realize that Reid was staring at me. He appeared a little suspicious even, his eyes narrowed beneath an impressive frown. Oh... I hadn't realized they might be harboring similar thoughts to my own. At least, he was. Had he recognized me too? Had he seen the spectacle of my trial in the media?

"You're awfully cozy with them," he said, hostility tinting his voice so strongly that Corin jerked his head up from his work and glanced his way. I was a little taken aback by the tone too, he'd been the one to help dig Zathar out. He'd looked on board with going with them, so why was he acting like this now? Or had he just been hiding his real feelings all this time?

"Uhm you do realize that Zathar has to touch me for us to be able to communicate? I just happened to be the first one he woke so I'm his go-to, that's all." I explained the situation carefully, trying to brush away the feelings of inadequacy that bubbled up. I was just convenient, there was nothing more to it, and that was oddly painful which just served to piss me off. I didn't need anyone, I never had, so acting like I wanted Zathar to need me and me alone was utterly crazy. It wasn't

like he mattered anyway but that thought felt extremely untruthful and disloyal.

Reid got to his feet, bracing his hands on his hips and I was suddenly aware that he was a big man for a human. Well over six feet, with big shoulders, his chest and thighs packed with muscle in the green army fatigues he wore. A former soldier if the dogtags dangling around his neck were any indication.

“No Vera,” he said, twisting my name on his tongue to make it sound like he was talking to a complete idiot. “It only works like that for you. Not for any of us. I know, because I touched his scales when I dug him out. He thinks you’re his freaking mate, are you that desperate for approval that you’re going to let that snake touch you?” He outright sneered the last words and I nearly fell over backward from the force of the venom he was spitting.

My eyes growing wide, and then embarrassingly wet. Was that what was happening? Was I latching on to Zathar because he was being nice? And was he only being nice because he wanted to have sex? I felt so shaken that I didn’t have any kind of comeback for Reid, and he didn’t seem to be looking for one.

Satisfied he’d said his piece, he sat back down and pretended to ignore the shocked look Cosima was giving him. He’d done serious damage with his words, to me, my confidence, and my relationship with the other girl. Her eyes were turning grim and hostile when I met them.

Corin moved as silently as Zathar so I nearly screamed when he was just suddenly next to me. “Ah fuck, we need to put a freaking bell on you or something,” I said, and though I knew it would just make Reid think this was more evidence of how chummy I was with the Naga, I lifted my head towards the healing device in his hand when he stuck it out. Silently granting him permission to heal me. I needed a clear head if I wanted to figure out our future.

Heat blasted into my face from the light glowing from the red eye at the center of Corin’s palm. At first, it felt intense

and bordered on pain, but as the heat washed over my skull, the throbbing ache started to ease. In just a few short minutes my headache vanished and my nausea eased. “Thank you.”

He vanished back to the pilot as silently as he’d approached me, not a word uttered. He hadn’t tried to touch me to help ease the language barrier, which just drove home that Reid was right. It was a thing exclusively between Zathar and me. And the excited beat of my heart told me how much I loved that, which proved his other point. I *was* desperate for approval, for a place to be wanted, and desired.

Zathar returned with his arms full of leafy things which he dropped at Corin’s side without ceremony and without a word. As he turned and faced me, my breath caught in my throat at the sight of him. He was magnificent, his scales glittering azure, with hints of green and silver in the warm light of the lanterns. His chest was sculpted with muscle, heavy pectorals, a row of washboard abs, and that lovely v-ridge leading to his groin area which was emphasized by his hips tapering into that giant tail instead of a pair of legs.

His azure eyes glowed like a cat’s in the light, the slitted pupils declaring their reptilian roots. I loved how alien his features were while at the same time being so similar. His chin jutted into a pair of pointy horns, bone-white compared to the rest of him. His eyebrows were a ridge of thicker, more arrow-shaped scales, and his long hair was tied in a topknot. The bright azure strands a slightly lighter blue.

My heart started racing, my mouth went a little dry, and arousal tingled through my belly, making it clench with a sharp lance of near pain. He approached, because he had never heard of a thing called personal space, and his tail slithered around my ankle as he settled next to me on the edge of the nest. “I am back, mate.”

If Reid hadn’t said what he said, I wouldn’t have been in this weird head funk, I wouldn’t have exploded. But he had so that’s what happened. I shot to my feet, anger washing over me. Anger that came from many things but there was only one

outlet right now. It wasn't like I could have another shouting match with my cruel mother or disinterested father.

“Stop touching me!” I yelled out, and grabbing that sneaky tip of his tail, I yanked it from my ankle. It curled around my palm, the thick muscle contracting and holding on tight. There was no escaping his grip, and when he rose on the thicker part of his tail, balancing over me, it was clear that I'd been dealing with his soft side so far. This was *not* the soft side of Zathar.

His face seemed more angled, fiercer, and more feral. He looked savage when gripped by his own anger, his lips growing thin, his eyes huge pools of blue as the pupils contracted even more. “I am touching you so that we can speak! You know this,” he hissed at me. His split tongue flicked out of his mouth, lashing the air before it withdrew again. His expression grew harsher, arrogant, with a hint of smugness that infuriated me even more.

“But it doesn't work like that for the others! Does it?” I pointed at Reid and Cosima who were staring at us with fascination. “You're not touching them so you can talk!” I said and tried to stalk away. The tip of his tail still clinging to my hand meant I didn't get much further than fifteen feet before I was yanked to a stop.

Zathar hissed, the sound angry and threatening, causing Cosima to whimper in fear. I didn't feel scared, he could hiss and growl all he wanted, I wasn't going to let him push me around. Even if he was a big snake with huge muscles. Even if he was our host and currently our best bet at survival.

“You should not be thinking of touching others, only me!” he said, while his tail pulled on my fingers. I stumbled forward, and then again as he kept on pulling. I dug in my feet, pulling back as hard as I could but my soft shoes slid across the smooth stone floor. With my free hand, I tried to wrest my captured fingers from his tight grip, but apparently, he shared some traits with a boa constrictor or something.

“Hey! Let her go!” Reid yelled out, rising to his feet and stalking over, his chest puffed up, his fists clenched. Well

thanks, buddy. You yell at me, and now you're coming to my defense? Make up your damn mind. I didn't need him to rescue me, I fought my own battles.

Zathar's growl rattled through the cave, deep and primal. My skin broke out in goosebumps and the fine hairs on the back of my neck rose. "Stay out of this, male," he said, not that Reid could understand the words. He made sure the human understood the sentiment by pulling one of his short swords free and angling the blade tip straight for Reid's throat. There was no clearer threat.

A final yank sent me tumbling forward so quickly that I realized he'd been holding back before, letting me put up that little fight. Probably because he thought my resistance was funny. I collided with his chest and shimmering lines along his pecs and belly lit up with a glow that was nearly white. "Is my mating display not good enough for you? Have I not shown you what a capable male I am?"

One arm curled around my waist, pinning me to his body, and the other still pointed his sword at Reid. The man had raised both his hands in the air in a sign of surrender and was slowly backing up, his eyes huge. "Are you okay, Vera?"

I was far from okay but I shrugged and nodded at him. My panties were soaked and that was *not* at all what I wanted to be feeling right now. I was angry damn it, not turned on by that display of strength. But seriously, what guy had ever asked me if *he* was good enough for me? No one. Mating display... My God, he was serious, he wanted me for his mate. Then I was struck with that familiar sense of inadequacy. All of this just meant he wanted me because his whatever things lit up on his chest, it didn't mean he wanted *me*.

"I'm not your mate, Zathar," I told him, but my fingers were digging into his chest, holding him instead of trying to push away. He growled at me, his tongue flicking out so far that it almost touched my nose. The look in his eyes could only be called heated and I was struck with the horrifying thought that

maybe, like a real snake, he could actually *taste* scents with that tongue.

“Yes, you are.” He hissed, and his head dipped lower, his jutting chin horns grazing his own chest. “Mine. Forever.” I was convinced he was going to kiss me, stake his claim, and steal a little part of me. But he didn’t, his forehead brushed mine, the bumpy texture of his scales smooth and warm against my skin. The gesture was gentle, almost sweet.

“You only want me because your chest lit up like a Christmas tree,” I shot back, but much softer this time. I was suddenly aware of how much of a spectacle we were making; everyone was staring and Reid and Cosima could understand every word I said, we hadn’t exactly been quiet.

“That is not true!” he denied, but when I tried to yank myself out of his arms, he let me go. That was all the confirmation I needed; it *was* true. He didn’t know me from Adam, so that was all it could be. My face felt hot from embarrassment. If my mother was here, she’d have plenty to say about how much I’d screwed this up. How stupid I was for even hoping a little.

Shuddering, I fought to hold back my wild tangle of emotion, and spinning on my heels, I ran.

Chapter 6

Zathar

My mate ran off with the beginnings of those watery leaky eyes. I was pretty sure that was a normal function of her body, considering how often the other female did that. With Vera, it made my chest feel tight, and my belly ached. She was sad, and those leaky eyes just made that more clear. I didn't know how to comfort her, how to prove to her that I did want her. *Her*, the strange two-legged creature with the pale hair and the soft curves.

When I moved to go after her, the male had the guts to rise to his feet and block my path. It would be very easy to fight him and let out some of this frustration with a few well-aimed punches. Not that the male would make for a good wrestling partner, he had no tail, so it wouldn't be a fair fight.

Vera had not gone far, she had only left the chamber and then frozen in place. She was safe there because no predators or critters ever entered the Caves of the Ancestors. That didn't mean I didn't worry as long as she was out of my sight. I circled the chamber several times, trying to ease the frustrated energy inside of me.

"I healed her, you know," Corin assured me. He was still at the pilot's side, carefully repositioning her leg and splinting it with the supplies I'd brought. I was lucky to have him here with me, with his training to be a Shaman, he was the only one who could use the healing device, or attempt any other remedies. It had always felt extremely unfair that my mother had blocked a true apprenticeship for him. Nobody knew why she had done that.

"Thank you," I said, and I circled the room for another lap. It was making the other two stare, and the female flinched when I crossed behind her. They were behind this, I knew it. Vera hadn't questioned my touch, my presence, until after I'd left her to gather supplies. They had said something to her.

When she walked back into the chamber, it was with her head held high, her face composed. She was beautiful and she was fierce, especially when she glanced at Reid and me. I was glad I wasn't the only one on the receiving end of that glare.

She walked right up to me and I had to force myself to hold still, to freeze in place, and not reach for her with my hands and my tail. She had no idea just how desperately I wanted to have her in my coils, and she also didn't know how many rules I'd broken by doing so already. If she were a Naga female, she would have bitten my head off by now.

"Listen," she said, as she pressed the tip of her pointer finger against the center of my chest. Or rather, she jabbed me with it as if she intended to stab me with her blunt little claws. I tilted my head, angling one ear her way to indicate that I was doing as she said. My breath stalled in my lungs in anticipation.

"You think I'm your mate, but I don't agree with that. But I understand that communication is important so I'll concede to impersonal touch to facilitate that. That's all. Got it?" She spelled out her terms with a determined frown on her face, her pale blue eyes flashing fire at me. Ah, so she was going to try and deny this, was she? Pretend that I hadn't tasted her arousal in the air, and scented her attraction?

It went against every instinct in me to agree, but if she needed to think she was in control for a while, that's what she'd get. "Fine!" I said, but I clasped my hand over hers, pressing it fully against the center of my chest, my heart. "For now."

I let her go and purposely moved away, settling next to Corin on the hard floor. I angled my head so I could still see her from the corner of my eyes, but I made sure not to fully glance her way. Corin huffed out a low chuckle, no doubt highly amused by my current lack of success with my female. He was smart enough not to comment, turning the conversation to Iave instead. "Do you think he made it out of there?"

I hoped so, Iave was the best warrior I knew; he wouldn't go down without a fight. On top of that, I was positive that the dark-skinned female was his mate, even if I hadn't seen his sigils glow. Protecting his mate would make him extremely driven, and it was talked of among my fellow hunters and warriors that having a mate could make a male more powerful. I hoped that was the truth, and that Iave could draw on that right now to keep both those females safe.

Behind me, I heard Vera talk with the other two in her beautiful melodic language. I wished I could understand what they were saying. I wanted to warn the male to stay away from her, I didn't like how close they were sitting. When they started yawning, I got up to gather more furs for them to lie down on.

Not long after, the two females were fast asleep near the heat source. The male was lying down but I was sure he was still alert. He didn't say a word when I gathered Vera in my arms and took her to my nest. Good, he knew where she belonged, that was one down. Now I just needed to convince my mate.

She didn't need to have a heat source to stay warm when she could sleep in my coils inside my nest. I would provide her with everything she needed, starting with a better place to live. One that was not the Thunder Rock Village, even if my mother might let me back into the fold now that I had a mate. I fell asleep with the taste of her on my tongue and my head filled with thoughts of the future.

When I woke a couple hours later, it was with a jolt, my body on high alert. The lights had all been turned off but sunlight filtered in through the gate, just enough brushing the entrance to this chamber to help my sight. Corin was already at the door, but all our rescues were still sleeping, including my mate whose face had turned pink, her lips looking soft and pillowy. I was extremely tempted to just let Corin deal with whatever noise had intruded on our rest, but I couldn't, it could be Iave, it could be danger.

Rising quietly, I gently extracted my coils from around Vera, my well-oiled scales quiet as I slithered across the chamber to meet up with my friend. When I passed the male and female asleep next to the now extinguished heat source, I realized the male had his eyes open, watching us. That one wasn't a force I should just dismiss I was starting to realize; he had training.

"There's a scout in front of the gate," Corin murmured when I reached his side. "He doesn't want to come in but I saw the tip of his tail as he made a first pass. It's Khawla." A Thunder Rock scout sent directly to where we'd been camping, it couldn't be a coincidence. Khawla was a very capable scout, a master at camouflage. If Corin had spotted him it meant he'd showed himself on purpose.

Khawla was a little older than Iave, Corin, and me, we hadn't been in the same circles growing up. He also had a mate of high rank in the Clan, although I vaguely recalled there had been some excitement concerning their match. I couldn't recall what, but it wasn't relevant anyway.

"Wait here," I said to Corin, and just a glance over my shoulder was enough to convey what I wanted. He nodded his head, his hands going to the long knives he carried on the belt around his hips. Ready to defend, even against a former Clan member. I was lucky to have such a loyal friend at my side.

I left the Ancestor Caves with my head held high, pausing between the two giant statues that flanked the path inside. If Khawla wanted to talk, he'd show up when he was good and ready but I had a feeling I wouldn't have to wait long. He was here with a message from my mother and it was no coincidence that he showed up so soon after we'd discovered Vera and her kind.

The male came out from behind a pair of trees that didn't look like they could provide adequate cover, and yet, I hadn't seen him until he moved. His scales were a deep blue that hinted at purple, they appeared dull, almost lifeless compared to my own luster. As far as males went, Khawla was probably

the least attractive male I knew. Dull and plain, but it worked in his favor, as it helped him to hide.

He stopped at a respectable distance, his face carefully neutral as he looked me over. “Your mother, the Queen, requires an audience with you,” he said, his tongue flicking the air as the words left his mouth; sneakily searching for any strange scents. “She will be here shortly, so you better all meet her outside. Don’t keep her waiting.”

His eyes were a very out-of-place purple that hinted at a mixed ancestry, likely with a Copper Tooth Clan member. I always thought they looked wise and calm, like the placid lake surface of Lake Irace just west of our clan village. That’s what Khawla usually was too, calm and placid, hard to ruffle. Which made the edge I detected in his demeanor all the more out of place.

I narrowed my eyes at him, was he hiding something? If so, it wouldn’t sit well with the straight-laced male I knew. That could explain it. Suspicious of everything, I drifted back toward the Cave of the Ancestors, but I left my hands out at my side, relaxed. I didn’t want to fight Khawla or any other Clan member. I had lived with them, grown up with them, I didn’t want to be forced to kill people that I once called friends.

Khawla sighed, his clawed hand reaching for the back of his head to scratch beneath the long braid of nearly black hair. “You were always an observant one, weren’t you, Zathar?” he said, and now he moved closer, his posture relaxed, his shoulders hunching a little as he passed beneath the statues. Khawla really didn’t like being here, near the Ancestor Caves, and I recalled that he tended to be a little superstitious.

“Zeti and Rossh saw you retrieve those strange beings from that sky-ship. That’s why she’s here, she wants to see them for herself. I’m sure that’s all it is. Just a trip to sate her curiosity.” The master scout spoke in hushed tones, pitching his voice low so that nobody could possibly overhear him. I appreciated his attempt at reassuring me, and I was glad that I now knew what

this was about. I could prepare because I sure as fuck wasn't going to let my mother see Vera or the mating sigils. I had decided my mate wouldn't be safe in the village and seeing that... I knew what she'd do.

"Wait here," I said to Khawla, "I will inform the others of the visit." I turned around and headed back beneath the giant gate into the caves, not worried that Khawla would try to follow me. The male winced as I went inside, probably imagining all kinds of bad things befalling me for what he imagined was an insult to our ancestors.

I updated Corin quickly and then tried to figure out how to explain the situation to Vera. She was stirring in my nest, a very adorable, slightly confused expression on her face when she sat up and discovered she wasn't where she went to sleep last night. Then she frowned, glaring at me from all the way across the chamber and I knew she was mad about it, but I couldn't regret spending hours with her in my arms, covering myself in her tasty scent.

The male, Reid, was up. Neatly folding the furs he slept in, his posture relaxed. He wasn't worried when I passed close to him either, good, he'd need that if I was going to show him off to my nosy mother. I hoped he wasn't too much of a curiosity for her, my father was dead and she liked to flit from one young unmated male to another until she had her fill. Reid wouldn't enjoy that kind of attention from her, it never boded well.

Leaning down near my nest, I ignored the fierce glare on her pretty face and cupped her hornless chin in my palm. "My mother is arriving soon," I said, ignoring the fact that my touch was more intimate than the 'impersonal' touches she's stipulated where allowed.

"Ah, and you don't want her to see me, is that it?" she said with a sharp edge to her tone. I nodded because yes, that was absolutely it and I was glad she immediately understood but I couldn't shake the feeling that she was upset with me for saying this. There was no time to figure it out, to have a real

conversation about any of this, I could hear the approach of more Naga outside the caves, we were running out of time.

“She knows we rescued beings yesterday, she is just curious. Please convey to Reid that I need him to come out with me so she can see him, while you and Cosima hide.” I helped her to her feet, with a hand this time, not my tail like I wanted to. Once she stood, she dusted off her strange coverings, then strode right past me and headed for Reid with her chin held high.

I didn't like the sight of her approaching another male so confidently, the sway of her curved rear far too enticing. I needed to pull in a steadying breath and force my eyes away from the shockingly erotic side of her swaying ass.

“We're called humans you know, hu-man. Remember that,” she said over her shoulder. I could still understand every word she said, which meant... I hadn't even realized my tail had followed her, the tip curled around her ankle. She really had me in knots; she had no tail, but I was still trapped in her coils.

Hurrying after her, I added a palm to the small of her back once she squared off with Reid and quickly and concisely conveyed what I wanted from the male. He was nodding, saying things back to my female that made her angry. Things like, he's right, you should stay hidden. And more about how she needed to tread carefully with unknowns approaching. What mattered was that he agreed to come.

“You need to warn him, my mother, the Queen of the Thunder Rock Clan is without a mate. It's possible she'll find him interesting and try something... He needs to make sure she doesn't try to touch him with her coils, it's taboo.” She frowned at me for a long time, her gaze dipping down to the tip of my tail, looping around her ankle.

Yeah, I knew I was breaking the rules myself, she was just too irresistible. The difference was, that she was my mate, my one, which meant I was driven to please her, to make her happy, and keep her safe. I wanted to fill her with my

offspring. The Queen had no such limits on her, if she wanted the hu-man male, she would have him, toy with him, and then toss him like he was garbage.

Vera explained this to Reid as well but he just crossed his arms and shrugged. Then he jerked his chin at the entrance to the chamber and barked out a few short words that clearly meant 'let's go.' I would have gotten that even without the benefit of touching Vera right now. I dipped down to her, nuzzled my face against her silky hair, and then with much regret, I led the way outside. "Stay hidden," I warned her just before slipping the tip of my tail from her leg.

Chapter 7

Vera

I woke up to the scent of something spicy and very distinctly male filling my nose. Everything was still dark around me but I knew immediately that I hadn't woken up in the same place that I'd fallen asleep in. I recognized this scent, Zathar. Forcing myself to sit up and shrug out from beneath the thick, warm furs, I searched for him to give him a piece of my mind.

Impersonal touches only, that's what I told him. This did *not* qualify. This was borderline creepy and he should not have done it without my permission. My fingers twitched in the soft pelt beneath them as I struggled with the rising feelings inside of me, feelings that made me feel extremely conflicted about the whole situation. That he moved me to his nest, meant he wanted me there, even after we fought last night... I'd never been wanted that way before and I couldn't trust it, I didn't think I believed it.

When he cupped my face, my traitorous body just wanted to melt into his touch, snuggle against his heat. I wanted to know what it had felt like to be curled up in that nest with him because I didn't doubt that he'd slept right at my side. Of course, he managed to ruin the moment by saying something that made it clear he didn't want to introduce me to his family. How could I be his mate if he didn't even want his mother to know about me? I wanted to push him away for saying such a hurtful thing, but putting space between us was all but impossible when I had to play translator for him and Reid.

It wasn't until after the two of them had left the darkened chamber that I started to come to my senses. Stay hidden had been uttered as much as an order as a prayer. Zathar was really worried about his mother, and his Clan, seeing me. This wasn't a 'you're not good enough to meet my mom' kind of thing. This was a 'my mom is a psychotic bitch' kind of warning.

“What’s going on?” Cosima whispered from beneath her pile of furs. She wasn’t moving, I could only just see the pale circle of her face in the near darkness in here. I knew the feeling, it was a little chilly, and I too wanted to go back to the warm furs in Zathar’s nest. Maybe Cosima wasn’t feeling ready to face the day, preferring to hide away for as long as she could, I couldn’t blame her.

“We need to stay quiet and hide,” I whispered back, moving to squat at her side so we could talk. “There are other Naga outside and Zathar seemed worried.” Cosima flinched, a muffled sound that was a mixture between a squeak and a moan escaping through her lips. I ignored her response, rising to search around the chamber for a better hiding place than just sitting in the middle in the dark. Zathar could see well at these light settings, I was sure of it, so that wouldn’t stop any other Naga from spotting us.

At the back wall, furthest away from the hewn entrance was a bank of consoles and viewscreens, or a slightly alien-looking version of them. I had been shocked to see them last night, but also too tired and distracted to give it much thought. Unlike the entrance into this mountain, this was very *different* from the ancient pyramids in Egypt. This was a utilitarian room that reminded me of a guard office, though everything in it except the computer bank had disappeared.

It could only mean that Zathar’s species had once been advanced enough to make not just fascinating stone gates and giant statues, but computers too. Between then and now, something had happened that had made his species devolve back into something close to Stone Age levels of technology.

“Come,” I urged the girl, dragging her from beneath the furs to where the pilot lady still lay slumbering. She was in a nest much like Zathar’s and I was pretty sure Corin had spent all night watching over her, healing her as much as he could, and yet, she still wasn’t awake. “Lie down in there with her. We’ll cover ourselves with the furs.”

When shouting went up outside the caves my blood chilled in my veins and my skin broke out in goosebumps even though I was covered in several warm layers and huddled up with two other women. That sounded like Zathar's voice and it was followed by the clash of metal against metal, were they fighting?

Cosima was sobbing again, her tears getting the best of her, which was *not* helping us hide, her sounds were going to give us away. When the fighting sounds abruptly ended my chest felt heavy. No, had they hurt him? Killed him? I was so worried that I was almost ready to burst out there to find out.

I didn't hear them approach, they were as quiet as wraiths. The silence only filled with Cosima desperately trying to be quiet as she wept. One moment we were hiding, still convinced they were all outside of the caves, the next the furs were being yanked from our bodies. I could only just contain my own scream, but Cosima's pierced the dark at the sight of three unfamiliar Naga towering over us with their spears aimed our way.

We were hustled outside with those sharp points at our backs, and angry hissing orders I didn't understand. One of them was carrying the injured pilot with a deep sneer of distaste on his face as if he was forced to carry a sack of shit. I was honestly completely shocked by the treatment, despite Zathar's warnings of his mother. They were treating us like prisoners.

I threw up my hand and blinked hard when we approached the gate, trying hard to make my eyes adjust to the daylight. A dozen Naga with various shades of blue scales had congregated just beyond the towering pair of statues. One was very clearly in the lead, and it was the first female Naga I laid my eyes on.

She was angular and tall, but her tail was slightly more slender than those of the males. Her chest was banded by a bright strip of purple fabric that covered barely-there breasts. She was covered in glittering gold jewels from the tips of her

claws to her long wavy azure hair. Bracelets, rings, necklaces, and some kind of pauldrons that were more ornamentation than armor.

I could see the family resemblance too, mostly because she was the exact same shade of azure as Zathar. So that was his mother, the Queen of his Clan. The woman he didn't want me to meet. Like he'd made me warn Reid, she was closely circling the human man, interest gleaming in her reptilian eyes. For his part, Reid was standing tall and he deftly sidestepped the winding tail that wanted to trap him.

Then my eyes finally landed on what I really wanted to see; Zathar. He was just outside the gate, between the two statues, and Corin was at his side, holding him back by one arm, another unfamiliar Naga holding him on the other side. As soon as his eyes lit on me, I saw fear wash over his features and I felt an answering fear inside of me. If my confident snake-man was worried, this had to be really bad.

Our captors urged us forward, and I could tell they intended to move us past Zathar and Corin and toward the Queen. I didn't think that would be good, to get separated so I adjusted my course at the last moment and threw myself at Zathar. He growled, ripped himself free, and caught me with his arms and his tail, wrapping me up tightly.

I instantly felt safer, Zathar had me, and he wouldn't let anything happen to me. "Vera! I've got you," he said in my ear, and now that I was touching him, the voices of the other Naga also suddenly made sense. I heard shocked exclamations and angry warnings from the guys with spears, and then above all of that the Queen's voice rang out.

"Your mating sigils lit for that *thing!*?" she screeched, leaving no doubt of what she thought of me. From the safety of Zathar's arms, I could see how she'd withdrawn from Reid, and with an imperious gesture from one hand, several Naga males rushed for him. He put his hands up defensively but he was no match for so many big aliens, and they had him down on his knees, hands tied behind his back in seconds.

“Vera is not a *thing*,” Zathar hissed in my defense, “They are Hu-mansss that need our help!” My heart melted at the words, at how he was standing up to her on our behalf. Zathar might not personally know me, yet, but it was clear he viewed me as something equal and that scored him major points in my book. I liked his compassion too, that he wanted to help all of us, even though only I was his supposed mate.

Nothing he said was persuading his mother; that was definitely a losing battle. Corin and he were severely outnumbered, and from the sight of Zathar’s swords dangling from the hands of one of the other warriors, he had tried anyway. I scanned what I could see of his body but didn’t notice any injuries, that was a relief, and hopefully a good sign. The Queen wouldn’t want to hurt her own son, would she?

They didn’t consider us a threat, keeping only Reid tied up and escorted between two brawny Naga. And though the Queen clearly wanted to have me removed from Zathar’s arms, she didn’t order her men to try. I didn’t think Zathar would give me up now. The walk to wherever it was they were taking us felt long, hours at least, but they never paused for a drink or a pee break and my stomach was aching from hunger, thirst, and the need to *really* go long before we got to our destination.

“Thunder Rock Village is not a safe place for you and the other Hu-mansss,” Zathar said in a hushed tone. “You must stay close to me at all times. The other females will want to challenge your right as my mate, they will kill you if they can.” I really hated the sound of that, I never asked to be his mate. I was pretty sure I still didn’t even *want* to be his mate but from the sounds of it, that wouldn’t matter to the women of his Clan.

Zathar had more to say as we walked, explaining in whispers how he and his friends had been cast out for the lack of a mate. At a certain point, the males lost their value if they couldn’t reproduce with a female and males tended to be more numerous than females. It sounded extremely harsh but Zathar

didn't sound upset about his situation, he was far more worried about what the Queen had in store for us now.

"She's going to lock you up somewhere while she plots, she'll separate us if she can. I am her firstborn son, and I have status. The female I mate has as much right to be the Queen's heir as her own daughters... That's why she's so upset." I got the message, I was not queen-material. But if Zathar was already an outcast, why did it even matter? Couldn't she just send us on her way and forget we existed?

All thoughts of what was about to happen fled my mind when the trees opened up to show us the village nestled in the valley below. It was a small town with several dozen thatch-roofed houses, enclosed behind a palisade of thick gray poles; whole trees stripped of branches by the look of it.

I could see many Naga move behind that wood wall, some even on top of it; guards watching over this little place. Smoke was curling from chimneys and a town square opened up in the center of it all, with many houses facing the center. I got my first glance at Naga children playing in the stream of clear water that bisected the place like a shimmering ribbon.

When we neared the gates, shouts went up and soon it was a whole spectacle, everyone lining the dirt road to watch what the Queen brought home. I heard shouts and jeers, laughter and mockery at the sight of us, and at the sight of Zathar's sigils glowing for me. They thought he had bad luck or was sick in the head for having a mating response to a creature such as me.

How could he continue to want me under such pressure? When his own people made such claims about me, felt such distaste for my scaleless, tailless being. Surely he wouldn't want to keep me after this, especially if his mother offered him a place back home?

"Don't listen to them," Zathar hissed at me, his face grim and his grip tight as he cradled me in his arms. "I don't care what any of them say or think. You are beautiful and soft and

tasty, and you are so very very brave. They don't know what they're missing. I am the luckiest male there is."

Ooh, he sure knew how to say all the right things. I felt myself grow hot with the flattery, did he really think I was pretty when I looked so different from a Naga female? Did he really think I was brave? I didn't *feel* brave, I felt terrified out of my mind. When I met his eyes, the azure orbs were narrowed, watching his Clansmen angrily but they instantly softened for me. "You mean that?" I asked him, desperately wanting to believe it was true, that someone could actually think such good things of me.

"Yes, every word of it, Vera," he answered huskily, "I will get us out of this, I promise. And then I will claim you and fill your belly with my seed." Oh woah, that went from romantic to steamy in a heartbeat but the answering heat in my body told me that I kind of liked that too. Zathar was direct, I had to give him that. Maybe that meant that I really could take his words at face value. I just hoped he wasn't going to regret picking me over his Clan later.

Our parade ended at the town square in front of a house. There was a commotion I couldn't quite see from behind the many backs of our Naga escort. It became clear when Zathar was urged to the door where the Queen gestured a graceful hand at the dark interior. "Leave it here, you and I need a private talk." She didn't wait for an answer, simply turned around, chin raised haughtily in the air, and glided away.

Zathar remained frozen in place in front of the opened door, his expression shrewd as he considered his options. I was pretty sure there was only one, he had to be cunning to get us out of this jam, and that meant not fighting right now. She was locking us up for the time being, not killing us. I hated it, hated the thought of yet another prison, but I knew I had to be brave. He thought I was, now I had to prove it.

"It's okay, go. Better to figure this out without any bloodshed, right?" Zathar nodded, but he still looked very conflicted, his grip on my body growing tighter like he really

didn't want to let me go. On impulse, I cupped the side of his face, feeling the softly pebbled texture of the fine scales that covered his cheek. Leaning up, I captured his lips with mine in a quick kiss. "Go, put me down."

He hissed, his eyes growing wide and his tongue flicking out to taste the air. Long and agile, with a forked tip, I was suddenly very curious about what he could do with that thing. "What was that?" he murmured, both of us ignoring the sounds of shocked gasps and outraged murmurs from around us.

"A kiss, don't you do that?" I said, but my last words were muffled when he slammed his mouth back against mine, his own version far more awkward but flatteringly eager. I opened my mouth, licked at the seam of his, and then his forked tongue came out to play, tangling around my own. The muscle was unexpectedly powerful when he gave a gentle tug that caused an answering shaft of heat in my belly.

When we pulled apart, his tongue was flicking at the air, drawing scent back into his mouth with each pass. Eyes like molten lava, he let me slide down his long, serpentine body until my feet touched the ground, my legs a little unsteady after that mind-blowing initiation. As my belly slid along his groin I thought for just an instant that I felt something wet kiss my skin where my shirt had ridden up. But once I was standing I didn't see anything that could explain the sensation.

The guards flanking us were out of patience with our goodbye. One gestured angrily with his spear at the open door, another pushed his way between Zathar and me, talking rapidly at him and pushing him in the direction the Queen had gone. Neither dared to touch me, yet, and I wasn't going to risk it. With a final wave at him, I darted through the door.

Chapter 8

Zathar

Leaving Vera inside the food storage building was one of the hardest things I'd ever done. Everything in me screamed that I was making a mistake by leaving her there without my protection. She was so fragile without scales or claws, completely defenseless against a Naga.

Then there was the 'kiss' she'd bestowed on me. I had never heard of anyone doing such a thing, it seemed outrageous to press mouths together, it didn't sound like it would feel good. I'd never been happier to be wrong though, my cock was aching in my sheath. When I had her pressed up against me, I hadn't been able to stop the tip from partially extruding and I still vividly remembered the touch of her silky skin against the sensitive tips.

Once I had my mate safe again, I was going to demand as many kisses from her as she was willing to give me. I would never forget the taste of her as I drew her essence into my mouth and now I was wondering what else I could do, where else she'd let me taste her.

"Zathar, firstborn!" my mother called out, jerking me roughly from my vividly erotic thoughts. Thoughts that had no place in this situation, I needed to keep my cool and think ahead if I wanted to resolve this the way I wanted. She was beneath the Pagode on the edge of the town square, draped among the many pillows and pelts. Rich fabrics created by the Lagoon Weaver Clan waving gently in the breeze created a sense of privacy; fake walls for a building that had none.

Several of my sisters sat around her, and a young hunter was coiled just below the raised platform she resided on, her current lover. Everything about this scene screamed decadence and wealth, from the many jewels each of the females wore, though none outshone my mother, down to the expensive fabrics.

It had bothered me before I was cast out of the Clan, that the wealth we earned with our hunts and our trades went into things to keep the Queen and her chosen females happy, not into bettering the rest of the Clan. Now it felt even more glaringly obvious that my mother was a Queen who cared for her power and her wealth but not for her people.

I was glad that she didn't even remember Corin's involvement in all of this, leaving him out of this audience. Maybe she would forget him altogether, just return him to the fold and forget about it. I hoped so, my friend deserved a good life.

Sliding between the pillows into the semi-circle my sisters and some other high-ranking females formed, I came to a stop in front of my mother. On her raised platform she was taller than me, and I was forced to look up or rudely rise on my tail. "I am here, what do you wish of me?" I said by rote, the required phrase that started any audience with her, whether I was her son or not.

The tip of her tail flicked and then coiled along the edge of the platform, sliding down to curl around the throat of the male sitting beneath her. He was several years younger, a hunter barely out of training and I was horrified with the realization that she was picking them younger and younger each year. The movement was insulting and possessive and it was wrong that she was bold enough to do that in plain view of everyone. I knew she meant it as a threat to me, symbolizing that she had *my* neck in a noose and I better obey.

"What I wish, is for my firstborn not to dishonor my proud lineage!" she hissed, her clawed hand shooting out to point at the storage building in which Vera was locked. I hadn't missed the sound of the heavy bar locking into place behind me, or the two Naga that had taken up flanking positions right outside.

"What does it matter to you? I am an outcast, what I do no longer concerns anyone," I responded calmly, staring defiantly at her narrowed eyes. When I was a young hunter in training,

her gaze could make me feel withered to the bone, worthless, and tiny. No more, she had lost that power long ago and I knew it had been a contributing reason to my outcast status. My mother preferred her sycophants.

“It does now. I have decided on a better future for you,” she answered, her body elegantly rising. Still sleek and powerful though she’d birthed more than a dozen young already. Like all Naga females, she had birthed twins and triplets. But the two sisters with whom I’d shared the womb were both dead already, dead before they’d even fully matured because of the challenges most females were so fond of.

I didn’t rise to her bait, asking her what she meant, I simply waited with my arms crossed over my chest and my chin held high. High enough that my horns were angled just a tad her way, a minor insult I delighted in getting away with.

“Astrexa,” my mother said, the name a demand and answer both. As the female she’d called for rose from her pillows to move to my side in front of the dais, I knew what she was going to say. A mate approved by my mother, her favorite sycophant, raised to the status of heir in that manner. Only a mating to the firstborn son could do that. Which meant that she might have intended to return me to the fold before she’d even learned of Vera’s existence.

The female in question was slightly younger than I was, with dark blue scales patterned with the palest blue spots along the back. Unusual and pretty but it didn’t stir me in the least. Not even when she smiled seductively and flipped her long black hair over a shoulder to display the delicate arch of her neck.

“She will be your mate, forget about the pale, tailless thing. You will mate Astrexa, return honor to my line, and provide the Clan with many healthy Naga.” My mother said it casually, her gaze flicking from my defiant one to the female’s eager smile. She made an imperious gesture with a hand that counted as a complete dismissal but I wasn’t going to roll over for her like I was expected to do.

“I will consider your proposition. You’ll have an answer in five days,” I said. Stalling for time was the only thing I *could* do. She wasn’t going to let me walk out of her with Vera willingly, not when she had other things in mind. My mother *always* got what she wanted, but not this time. I’d have to break the humans out, and then we’d have to escape Thunder Rock Village.

The shocked gasps that echoed through the Pagoda were satisfying, as was the furious expression on my mother’s face. Astrexa looked downright offended as if she couldn’t fathom that I wasn’t leaping at the opportunity to be hers. I remembered her as a particularly vicious one when growing up. She always fought over the slightest of offenses and it showed in the claw scars that lined her chest, arms, and stomach. Points of pride for any Naga female.

“Three days!” was the offer, which was far more than I expected. I grinned as I conceded, letting her know that I was aware I held more power than it had previously seemed. She had shown her hand, and now I was going to run with it.

I had three days to retrieve my mate from her current prison and escape the village. Three days was plenty.

*

Vera

The door locking behind me felt ominous, like it was final and I was now locked inside my own tomb or something. I was shivering, not from the cold but from the fear that took hold of me. For the first time since I’d woken up on this planet, I was without Zathar nearby. I hadn’t realized how much I’d relied on his strength and his steadying presence. I had never had that before, and the sudden absence made me keenly aware of how lonely it was. How lonely I had been all my life.

The house was completely dark, I couldn’t see anything and I didn’t know if they’d put Reid and Cosima in here too. I was

actually scared to call out and find out, what if they were somewhere else? What if I was really alone?

No, I couldn't think like that. I promised Zathar I would be brave, and I had to do that as much for him as for myself. Focus on nice things, like that mind-blowing kiss a moment ago. That was hands down the best kiss I'd ever had. Impressive, considering Zathar hadn't even known what kissing was until I'd shown him just now. His first foray had been rough but my God, he'd caught on quick, and that thing he'd done with his tongue...

Remembering the wetness I thought I'd sensed on my belly, I lifted my shirt a little and pressed my palm against my skin. I gasped in surprise when I felt a bit of sticky wetness at the edge just above my pants. I raised my now coated fingers to my nose for a sniff and the spicy, hot scent that swirled into my nose was unmistakably Zathar's. His nest in those caves had smelled exactly like this, only not quite as intensely.

He'd leaked precum on me, somehow. Where had it even come from? I hadn't seen his cock, I definitely hadn't felt it. My thoughts were immediately filled with questions and fantasies. Was it hidden? Could it pop out of a hidden pocket, like a marine animal? What if he was more snake than man? What if he didn't even have one?

Thoroughly distracted from how scared I was only moments ago, I tried to make myself refocus. This was the least appropriate time to get turned on, I needed to figure out what was in this place, and where Reid and Cosima were. The noises from the village outside were still loud in here, voices talked in guttural growls and hisses, and I heard the higher-pitched shrieks and shouts of children. I was pretty sure there was some kind of animal mooing in the background too.

Now that my eyes were starting to adjust to this dark interior I was starting to make out shapes. Stacks of crates rose to my left, shelves with baskets on my right, and from the rafters hung many swaying shapes that looked suspiciously

like drying sausage. Then I noticed the lumpy pile a few steps ahead of me. Was that a pair of legs?

Hurrying to him, I dropped to my knees and gently put my hand where I thought his shoulder was. “Reid? Are you alright?” He didn’t respond but I was pretty sure his chest was moving up and down beneath my hand; alive at least. “Cosima, are you in here?”

The shivery noise I heard was all the answer I needed, but I was relieved anyway when she crawled out from between two big barrels. “He fought when one of them grabbed my uh... boob,” she said. She sounded a little husky but she wasn’t crying, which I counted as a huge improvement.

“I’m pretty sure that while extremely rude, you shouldn’t consider it sexual. Have you seen their females? Their chests are all as flat as a pancake. It might have been curiosity.” I could well imagine that to be the case, but it was boundary-crossing and awful regardless. Even if we were prisoners, we deserved to be treated with more respect than that.

“I figured as much,” she said, “Do you think we’ll get out of here?” That was the big question, wasn’t it? I had no clue, but for the first time in my life, I felt like I actually had someone in my camp.

Chapter 9

Vera

Two days. That's how long we'd been stuck inside this damn storage building. I had not seen hide nor scale of Zathar during that time but Corin had come in a few times, with several Naga with spears as an escort. He only came to treat the pilot lady and the goose egg on Reid's noggin. We had a bucket to do our thing in that was emptied once a day, and twice a day someone brought us a meal. The rest of the time was spent in perpetual twilight, with nothing to occupy any of us except to talk or sleep on the hard-packed dirt floor.

I was starting to have this niggling doubt that Zathar was going to get us out of this mess. His mother was the Queen of this whole Clan, why couldn't he get us out of here, surely he had some kind of clout? I had been a pawn in many high-stakes games before, mostly maneuvered around by my own mother or the men she'd wanted me to date. Was this just another game like that and we were collateral?

"I saw the way he looked at you," Reid said from somewhere to my left. He was rummaging through the many crates, always searching in the hope that he could find something useful. So far all we had been able to conclude was that we wouldn't grow hungry, but that was it.

"And what was that? I thought you didn't trust him, or me for trusting him," I said. Nobody asked which 'he' Reid was talking about, we all knew he meant Zathar. Zathar was the only he my mind was filled with, and I'd asked for him each time our guards or Corin showed up.

Reid's head popped out of the crate he was leaning over to look at me, his voice gentle when he replied. "I owe you an apology for that, I was just... reacting you know? To this whole situation, and I took it out on you. I could see that Corin and Zathar were trying to help us just as you did."

I sucked in a breath and then nibbled on my bottom lip as I thought back to that evening. What a chain reaction of anger that had been, and Zathar deserved any of that anger the least, he had just been trying to help. And also trying to get into my pants at the same time.

From spying through one of the tiny gaps in the wall, we'd managed to observe the Naga as they moved about their day. I had a better understanding of the relationships between the males and females, even if I still had many questions. The females were very easily angered, they often fought with the other women. While the males seemed to manage to work in a much more cohesive manner.

What had fascinated me was the pairings. The males and females that formed couples were very sweet together, which was shocking considering how harsh the women seemed, even lacking much of a maternal instinct. They let their male dote on them, which they did happily. That's what Zathar indicated he wanted with me, a mate, a bond. If he wasn't lying about that because I was starting to have doubts, considering how long I'd gone without seeing him.

"Apology accepted," I told Reid, and I got up to pace around the shelves to stretch my legs and ease some of my nerves. If I didn't get out of here soon, I'd go absolutely stir-crazy. I hated sitting still for so long, I wanted to do something, but we'd tried our best at the back wall to make a hole and all it had resulted in was a few gaps that barely fit my arm. We had no tools to work with, and the clay and straw walls were much tougher than they had any right to be.

All of us froze when we heard the door to our prison rattle, the telltale sign that they were lifting the bar to unlock it. I sat down with Cosima and put my arm around her shoulders, while Reid took up a place protectively in front of us. Corin led the way though, and we all relaxed a little at the sight of the pale, silvery Naga.

He was carrying a flat basket with bread and fruit in it, the healing device he always used on the pilot dangling from his

belt. He had no weapons on him, and I suspected he was made to leave them outside. His silver eyes were kind, as was the smile he offered us. Reid accepted the food and Corin immediately bee-lined for the pilot.

She still hadn't woken up, and Corin was very careful with her as he took care of all her needs. That alone assured me that he was solidly on our side, you weren't that gentle with a prisoner, even if they were unconscious and unlikely to ever wake up.

Since the Naga that Cosima most feared wasn't with the two guards watching us, I let go of her with a reassuring smile. I sat down on the pilot's other side so I could pretend to assist Corin with her care. "Please, do you have any word of Zathar?" I asked him under my breath like I always did. So far, he'd always responded with a minute shake of his head and a down-turning of his eyes. He might not understand the question word for word, but he recognized the name of his friend and my intonation enough to catch my meaning.

Today, his eyes lingered on my face instead of dropping to his patient. Then they flicked to the back of the storage shed, to the wall where we'd been fruitlessly trying to create a hole to escape from. Did he know about that? No, that wasn't what he meant. "Zathar," he whispered, and his eyes flicked to the back wall a second time.

Excitement rushed through me, did he mean Zathar was on the other side? Could we finally talk? Was something happening at last? I wanted to rush over immediately but I forced myself to stay put and simply work on the pilot like I always did. I couldn't draw any suspicion from the guards or this was all over before it even started.

Once Corin and the guards left, and the sounds of the bar sliding in place had faded, I got up and raced for the back of the shed. Dropping to my knees next to the wall, I shoved away the crate and basket we'd piled in front to hide what we were doing. "Zathar?" I whispered, peering out through the highest of the four holes we'd managed to create.

The palisade rose up in the distance, and three more houses were situated along it. Daylight still brightened everything outside, the roofs of the buildings were nearly black but glinted dark purple in the light. As I watched, at least three Naga males, armed with spears and blades passed right in front of me, packs with supplies weighing down their broad backs.

Disappointment filled me, it was too busy. There was no way Zathar could linger at this wall to talk with me. Maybe Corin meant later, tonight when it was dark. Putting the crate and basket back in place over the holes, I returned to Reid and Cosima, their curious glances enough of a prompt to explain to them what I was up to.

Waiting was hard, I kept pacing along what little space we had, driving Reid and Cosima crazy with my restlessness. When it got too much for me I'd check the holes to see if it was dark yet, to see if he'd arrived, and each time I was disappointed. It got worse when it really *was* dark out, and quiet as a mouse too. Why hadn't he showed up yet? Had something gone wrong? Had I misunderstood?

I had almost fallen asleep, curled up with my head on the crate at the back of the shed. Reid and Cosima were both fast asleep at the front; huddled together with the unconscious pilot to keep her warm. "Veraaa," a voice drawled softly. I jerked upright, blinking sleepy eyes and then rubbing at them to try and make them work better in the near complete darkness.

"Zathar?" I asked, my own whisper loud in the silence. During my last attempt to locate Zathar, I'd moved the crate in such a way that just the top hole was open, all I had to do was lean over to peek out. At first, I thought I was looking at a last sliver of sky, blue and warm in fading sunlight. Then my eyes picked up on the finer details, the scales, the faint line of a scar. He was with his chest right in front of me, if I stuck my fingers through the hole I could touch him.

Too tempted, and using the excuse of needing touch to even be able to understand each other, I slid my fingers through the narrow opening. I got stuck with the wider part of my hand but

with a little wiggling and stretching, I could brush the pad of my middle finger over his scales.

He jerked backward, and then an eye appeared, azure and bright. It lit up at the sight of me and then he was searching the rest of the wall. I helped by shifting the crate again, freeing up the other holes. The one almost all the way at the floor was the biggest, we'd managed to actually break some of the branches woven through the clay. Or rather, Reid had with a few solid kicks but it had made quite the ruckus so we hadn't dared to try again.

The slender tip of Zathar's tail slithered through that opening as far as it could go and I reached for it with both hands. "You're here! What's going on? Can you get us out?" I whispered, leaning my cheek against the wall right next to the highest opening, straining to catch another glance of his face.

"Are you alright, Vera? You haven't been hurt?" He asked at almost the same time, his tail twisting to curl against my fingers, gripping me back. I loved the sound of his deep voice, rumbling at me in a hushed whisper filled with concern.

"I'm fine, we're all okay. Just worried about what's going to happen to us." I had a feeling that the Queen of the Clan wanted to get rid of each of us. There had been gawkers staring at us through the open door when our guards visited us with Corin, but nobody was reaching out to be our friend. As Zathar's mate, supposedly, I was a huge threat and at the same time, nothing at all.

"Good, I'm going to get you out. Tomorrow night. I promise. Can you hold on a little longer, my brave mate?" Zathar asked me. I didn't tell him he shouldn't call me his mate. Right now I kind of liked how it made me feel when he said that. Like I was wanted and like I belonged.

"We can do that, can we help in any way?" More than anything, I didn't want him to leave yet. I wanted to keep talking to him, find out what he'd been doing for two days that meant he couldn't talk to us, me, sooner. I wanted to know he

was alright, and that I had been thinking of him, and especially if he'd been thinking of me.

“These holes are a good start. Here, I think I can give you one of my knives. Use it to work on this wall once it gets dark tomorrow. I'll be here at midnight, I'll break you out, and we'll go over the palisade.” He pulled his tail from my fingers, slid it back outside, and then I saw the glint of metal as he pushed the promised knife through the hole. I took it, worried that he was already leaving, but the tip of his tail came back through.

Shoving the knife across the dirt floor away from me, I reached for him. I wanted to make sure he couldn't leave without saying goodbye. “Zathar, what's going on?” I asked, which wasn't goodbye, I really didn't want him to go. And maybe he didn't want to leave either because I heard movement as his body slid along the wall when he settled.

“My mother wants me to mate her favorite to make her heir. I don't want to, I have you. She's given me three days to think about it, but I already know my answer.” My chest felt tight when I realized how committed he was to me. Accepting the mate his mother wanted for him meant returning to the fold and being allowed back into the Clan. I understood just how huge a choice it was to leave so that he could be with me. With Vera Clayborne, the black sheep, the unwanted child.

“I couldn't visit sooner because they have been trying hard to keep me busy, hunts, parties, visits, and training advice. It's all to make me see how much I'd be missing out if I picked you. She doesn't understand, it's not the same for Naga females as it is for males. My mind is made up, Vera, you're mine.” His voice turned all rough and husky on the last words and my body felt like it went liquid in response. I melted from the inside out, heat pooling in my belly, my heart a mess.

“I don't belong to anyone,” I said, I wasn't some possession to be claimed. It was just token resistance I was feeling, which scared me a little. Reid's words rang in my head even though

he said he hadn't meant them. Was I latching on to the first person that made me feel like I belonged?

"Yeah, you do," he shot back, and then his voice filled with amused satisfaction. "You even like it when I say such things." I wanted to deny that but I was turned on, my passage aching, and my clit throbbing. I had never had a response this strong from just a few words, but everything about Zathar seemed to be sexy.

His tail had been coiled around my fingers, but now it unwound. Like it could sense my heat and like he could see me right through the wall. The agile tip nudged against my thigh and then slid up it. My jeans were thin enough that I could feel the heat of him through the fabric but not the texture of his scales.

Because I couldn't really see him I felt bolder, or I wouldn't have let this happen; I was sure. Spreading my thighs, I let him slide that appendage all the way to the seam at my crotch. When he flicked the tip over it, I jolted, biting down hard on my lip so as not to make a sound. He knew anyway, I could tell from the long, drawn-out hiss he quietly released. "The things I wish to do to you," he groaned. "Be quiet mate, while I give you a taste."

I could imagine him sitting with his back to the wall, his tail curled around so he could reach me through the hole. His head tilted back to the sky, eyes closed while his tongue lashed the air, drawing scents into his mouth. Was he tasting my arousal that way?

His tail pressed more firmly against my slit, stroking me in a maddeningly slow but steady rhythm. My body grew tight, my passage spasming on nothing. I bit my lip to contain any sound that wanted to escape. I cast a look over my shoulder to make sure that Reid and Cosima were still sleeping. I could only just see Reid's big feet sticking out from behind a crate; they were otherwise completely obscured, good.

"Faster, Zathar. Please," I whispered, desperate for him to help me find that pinnacle and leap off the edge. Was he

touching himself while touching me? Was that why he was making soft hissing and groaning noises? I really wanted to know but at the same time, that would break the spell. Without this wall between us, literally, I wasn't sure I was ready to let him touch me the way he was.

“Like this?” He asked and his motions sped up, the tail flicking along the seam of my jeans with more speed and a little more pressure. Heat spiraled through me, yeah, that was it. So close. I wondered what it would feel like if I opened my pants and let him slide his tail inside of me, would it feel like sex?

My hand was already hovering over the button of my pants before I stopped myself. No, I couldn't do that, not when the others could wake up at any moment. Too bad, it would probably feel so good.

Zathar's tail flicked me at a steady pace, but it was the feeling of a coil of him clenching around my thigh that helped set me off. With that pressure I could suddenly vividly imagine him holding me with his entire body, coiling around me as he fucked me. The fantasy was so vivid I came with a gasp, thumping my forehead against the wall and biting my hand to muffle the noises rising from my throat. My legs were shaking, clamping around the tail curled between them and pinning it in place.

When I came back to my senses, I could hear Zathar's panted breathing coming through the wall. “Yes, that's it, beautiful. I need a taste, can you do that for me? Stick your hand beneath your coverings and coat your fingers with your essence. Please, I need it.” It was the desperate sound of his voice that had me flick open the button on my pants before I could come to my senses.

My folds were slick and swollen from my orgasm, coated with my wetness. I was sensitive to the touch when I rubbed my fingers through the evidence of my arousal for him. Nerves struck me when I started to stick my hand through the higher hole to offer it to him, but by then it was too late. His hand

grasped mine, holding me tight, and then his split tongue flicked against my fingers, lapping away my desire like it was his favorite treat.

I shuddered, my belly clenching with more arousal, why was that so damn sexy? Why did his tongue on my fingers feel so good? I had never considered my hand to be an erogenous zone but tonight it definitely was. My body was already climbing to another peak, and this time, he wasn't touching anything but my fingers. It seemed like tonight was one of many firsts for me.

Then Zathar's tail slid along my thigh, arrowing back for my core, feeling its way along my leg until it found the unbuttoned opening. His tail stroked along the bare skin of my belly, down into my pants, and pressed between my thighs again, this time with full skin-on-scale contact.

When the tip found my opening it was all over, I wasn't going to stop him, it felt too good. As it filled me, narrower than a cock, thicker than a finger, my hand found my clit and I strummed myself in time with the push and pull he started with his tail into my core. I splintered apart in seconds, panting, my passage clamping down on him like a vice, pulsing with my orgasm.

He growled, and I knew he'd come too. He'd shared in the pleasure every step of the way. I really hoped nobody had seen him, and that the others hadn't heard me. That would be embarrassing. Although I felt a little embarrassed anyway, sitting here with my pants wide open and his tail buried deep in my pussy, my fingers coated in my own come, one stuck through the wall where Zathar still had hold of my fingers, even if he had stopped licking them like a man possessed.

I pulled my hand free from my pants, then his tail, wincing when that made my passage ache, not because he'd made it sore, but because I felt empty. "That... oh..." I started to say but I really had no words. I couldn't believe I'd let things get this far, through a wall; it was *crazy*.

Zathar seemed far more collected when he slid his tail back out through the hole, his grip on my hand tightening to make sure I couldn't retreat yet. "That was perfect. Thank you, my mate. I will keep your scent with me as I prepare for our escape. Stay safe, Vera." Then he let go, finally allowing me to retreat.

Chapter 10

Zathar

I needed to slip away from the next round of festivities at the center of the village. This time they'd filled the town square with the rowdy games all males loved, wrestling, contests of strength and prowess. Archery, weaving, races, all of it made the place fill with laughter, cheering, and good-natured ribbing.

My mother was right on this one, it ached a little to know that I was never going to participate in another day such as this. Not for a long while if it was just my mate and me and the other humans. It just wouldn't be the same. That didn't mean that the sacrifice wasn't worth it because it definitely was.

I hadn't wanted to wash my tail, so I'd wiped the evidence of her desire off my scales with a soft cloth which I kept in a pouch on my belt. A vivid reminder of how willing she had been last night and how perfect she felt. Never in my wildest imaginings had I pictured filling a female with my tail, but it had been amazing. I had come harder than I ever had, coating my belly with rope after rope of my seed.

Vera was perfect, she was worth any sacrifice. So I slipped the pair of watchful eyes near a table of Absael, a potent drink brought out for this occasion. A favorite with most hunters, my pair of spies included.

When I doubled back from my sleeping quarters with my supplies packed on my back, I was ready to break out Vera and the others. I'd used my mother's parties to say goodbye, not to let them convince me to stay. I was ready. Far more than I was the first time I had been cast out and it felt good that it was my own choice this time.

"There you are," Corin said as he joined me near the mouth of a dark passage between two homes. He was carrying a pack

just like mine on his back, ready for a long journey; his was possibly even bigger.

“What are you doing here? You were welcomed back, you can stay,” I said to him. I hadn’t involved my friend in any of my preparations except to ask him to convey a message to Vera so we could meet last night. He wasn’t officially back to being a member of the Clan, but he was not invested in this and was not important to my mother. She might forget he was still here if he stayed, this was his one shot at being part of the Clan again.

Corin rolled his eyes and punched my shoulder with a fist, “And leave you to have all the adventures by yourself? No way. Besides, what would you do without my help? Admit it, you’d be totally lost.” I punched his shoulder right back, nearly sending my friend ass-over-coil. Grinning widely as I did so, my chest a little tight at his show of loyalty. I should have known that Corin wasn’t going to stay behind, he probably loved living right smack in the middle of all that ancient technology. Technology he wasn’t allowed to procure or even touch if he stayed with the Clan.

“Fine, I can use the extra pair of eyes. It will be a challenge to get all four of them out.” That was the truth. With one human unconscious and the other always weeping, things were going to get complicated, especially if we were caught. I still didn’t like the idea of fighting my former Clan, many of whom were friends I grew up with, family. But I would if that’s what it took to get my mate to safety.

I turned towards the storage building where she was being kept; light and the noise from the festivities filling the air. The building was right on the edge of the town square. The noise was going to cover the sound of us breaking through the back wall but anyone could stumble away from the party for a moment and happen right upon us. A risk I’d have to take.

“Wait, you go to the humans. I will set a distraction and then meet you on the wall,” Corin urged, and his silvery eyes lifted to indicate the spot on the palisade I planned to go over. Right

in the middle between two guard towers but close to the storage building so we had to cover only a small amount of ground.

“Are you sure about that?” I asked my friend, vividly recalling the last time he’d done such a thing. Corin was always tinkering with old technology, and he liked it when things went boom. There was no doubt in my mind that his distraction meant he was going to use one of those trinkets. A fire in the village could be disastrous. Last time, he’d used one of his explosive thingies out on the plains, nearly causing a bushfire. What if the Clan couldn’t contain it this time? They might all end up without a home.

Corin’s eyes were deadly serious, with no hint of a grin or amusement this time. “I know the stakes, Zathar. Don’t worry. Now go, wait for the commotion, and then get them out. Reid can carry the unconscious one.” He disappeared back into the shadows without a backward glance and I took a few deep, steadying breaths. I was an outcast, by choice now, but I wasn’t without friends.

I vowed to myself that once I had Vera in a safe place, I’d search for Iave if he hadn’t made it to the Ancestor’s Cave yet. But my friend was resourceful, I suspected I’d find him sitting there, babysitting two humans, and grumpy as fuck that he’d missed out on this excitement. Iave lived for a good fight and an adventure, being an outcast had suited him the most.

Sitting in the shadows while I waited for Corin’s distraction, I had to reflect that it had been the hardest for me. My mother had known that and she’d counted on it the past few days to make me fall in line. She’d cast me out to teach me a lesson, to make me obey. Well, too bad for her, I’d gotten my priorities shifted, and while Clan life was tempting, my mate was even more tempting.

The sound of thunder split the cloudless night sky, and I instinctively clasped my hands over my ears, despite expecting it. A thick plume of smoke started curling into the air from my left, from near the bathhouse. Good call, the spring ran right

past it, partially diverted to fill the bathing pools. It would burn but with so much water around, it was unlikely it would burn for long. Plus, the location meant it was nearly all the way across town from where I was.

Racing from my hiding place, I zigzagged around a building to avoid the crowd rushing for the fire. I was at the back of the storage building in only a few seconds, casting my eyes about to make sure nobody could see me. The back wall looked the same as it did last night and for a moment I was unsure what to do. Vera couldn't understand me unless we touched, and I needed them to stand back so I could break down this wall.

"Vera?" I called out, but the noises from my Clan yelling were pretty loud, as was the sound of the fire roaring. That wasn't good, had Corin overdone it? Pulling free the ax I'd brought for just this purpose, I placed it against the wall and realized it had lost some of its structural integrity, they'd cut the Weeper branches from the inside. Good.

"Stand back!" I yelled but I had no time to wait and hoped they got the message when I tapped a wall a few times with my ax. Hard enough to make it shake, but not enough to break yet. Through the upper gap, I could just make out a few shapes, far enough away that I judged it safe. Then I wound up my swing and with a crash broke through the center of the wall.

Yanking the ax free, I gave it two more good whacks and then I used my claws to widen the gap. Vera was beyond it, her face glowing with an eager smile that turned a little shy when I helped her crawl free from the building. "I got you, my mate," I told her, anchoring her to my side with one arm while we waited for the others to get out.

Reid was carrying the pilot, just like Corin had suggested, and Cosima was clinging to his back. She wasn't leaking water though, which I considered an improvement. "This way," I urged them. Our path was still clear so I led them around several buildings to the section of wall I had in mind. It was a straight climb up to the walkway, and then a steep drop I was

certain the humans couldn't do unaided. I'd have to carry them over one by one.

Swinging Vera up in my arms, I rose on my powerful tail. Then I grabbed the upper edge with one claw while cradling my precious burden tightly to my chest. "Grab on," I said but she was already doing it, clambering onto the palisade with surprising agility considering her short pair of legs.

Dropping to the ground again, I scanned the clearing between the wall and the next building; we didn't have much cover but all was still clear. "You next," I said to Cosima but she obviously didn't understand me, squealing in fear when I gathered her in my arms. Not good, she was going to call everyone to our location with that noise. I wasn't as patient as I had been with Vera, nearly tossing her onto the palisade, but my mate was there to pull her to safety.

I turned for Reid, ready to take his burden right as I heard the first shout of alarm go up. It was one of the scouts that spotted us as he came to investigate. Zeti hated to do work if he didn't have to, even work such as fighting a fire. It was not a surprise he preferred investigating instead of working to save the village from the destruction of the fire.

"Stop! You can't leave!" he yelled, "Zathar is escaping with the prisoners!" That was going to draw them to us in a heartbeat, we had to be over the wall before they reached us. I spun for Reid, intending to pick them both up in one go. Corin's tail had just coiled down the wall, the pilot already cradled in it. Reid turned worried eyes to me but then he charged for the wall himself, leaping up and climbing the palisade. I was thoroughly impressed, the male had skills if he could climb that without claws.

Corin was already down on the other side by the time I got back onto the wall, using my backpack as a shield to fend off at least three spears thrown our way. They were *not* playing around, which meant the group of hunters chasing after us had been instructed by my mother to aim to kill the humans.

I didn't worry about Reid this time, certain he'd make his own way down. Eye contact was enough with Corin to convey the plan and I picked up Vera and threw her down at him, certain he'd catch her. She screamed as she plummeted, then glared furiously at me once her feet were safely on the ground. I didn't wait, just grabbed Cosima, and repeated the same thing.

The next spear thrown was aimed *my* way, landing in my shoulder when I was too slow to turn. Hissing in pain, I threw myself over the palisade, slowing my descent with one set of claws as I raked them through the rough bark on the outside of the wall. They would be up on that palisade behind us in seconds, we had to race for cover or we'd be dead.

Yanking the spear from my shoulder with no patience, I already had Vera up over my other shoulder. Then I caught a screaming Cosima and started racing for the woods up ahead. Corin and Reid were right behind me carrying the pilot. We were going to make it, the woods weren't far.

Once I reached the treeline I zigzagged behind them, not bothering to hide my trail or to be quiet. The shouts of my former Clansmen made it clear they were following us and we only had a small head start. My burdens were slowing me down a little but I had some tricks that were going to help us get out of here.

Hitting the stream, Corin and I swerved into it, racing against the gentle water, Reid cursing behind us as he followed our lead. "Zathar! Damn it, you are bleeding!" my mate said near my ear where she hung over my shoulder. I was, but the wound wasn't deep, and currently most of Cosima's weight was on it which stemmed the flow. The female that leaked from her eyes so much was quiet again, just panting in fear. Like Vera, she could see behind us, see how close the hunters were on our tail.

"It's nothing. Can you still see them?" If they could, we'd have to make sure they lost sight of us in the warren of trees up ahead, it was a thick overgrowth that limited movement and

sight. It would slow us down but we'd make sure to make some strange twists and turns to confuse and misdirect, and then we'd head for the Ancestor Caves and make our escape.

“Yes, but they seem to be slowing down. I think that Naga that came to the caves first is in the lead...” Vera told me and I drew in a relieved breath. Khawla was the best scout and tracker there was, but I had the sense that he wouldn't actually want to hurt the humans or me. He'd let us escape.

The thicket loomed to our left and Corin and I dashed inside it. Now it was just a matter of keeping track of our own location and where we actually wanted to go, without losing sight of one another. Corin and I had done this a million times, a game we loved to play as younglings. It came naturally to us to race through the dense growth. But our scales were tough, we weren't bothered by the slap and brush of the branches that we passed. That wasn't the case for Vera or Cosima. “Quiet, Cosima! We need to shake them and hide,” my mate urged the other female when she yelped in pain.

Doubling down on my speed, my breathing rapid from the exertion, Corin and I flew through the thicket. I was once again impressed with how Reid kept up, his legs much longer than my mate's as he pelted across the forest floor without fear. His breathing the loudest noise, sounding like an angry Vakarsa bull ready to charge.

Breaking free from the trees, the mountains were to our left and we turned in that direction. Slowing down our pace we made sure to cover our tracks and make our passage quieter. “I think we're in the clear,” Vera whispered. I thought so too, but none of us spoke as we made our way back to our temporary hideout.

After we'd crossed a few miles I paused to let the females down so they could walk, and Corin briefly lifted his healing device to my wound to patch me up. Vera hovered at my side the entire time he worked, and then she held my hand as we resumed our trek. I felt elated, even if I was tired and sore.

We'd escaped, my mate was unharmed, and she was holding my hand like she didn't want to be separated.

I was really starting to believe that we'd made it when the trees started to open up and the Ancestor's cave loomed in the distance. Then I spotted the female Naga and the handful of males with her and my heart sank; Astrexa.

Chapter 11

Vera

I was exhausted from that frantic escape from Zathar's village. I was pretty sure it was starting to near dawn because pink was coloring the sky faintly back in the direction we'd come from. Which meant we'd gone the entire night without rest. My arms were sore from how hard I'd worked at chipping at that back wall, cutting branch after branch without breaking through entirely. Reid had done most of the work but he and I had alternated whenever he needed a break, and I was definitely not used to that kind of workout.

My legs were tired too from walking, which felt stupid because Cosima and I hadn't walked nearly as far as the guys. Zathar had carried both of us while injured for miles on end and at breakneck speeds, I was pretty sure he was some kind of superhero at this point. But he wasn't invincible, and the blood that painted Cosima's shirt red was evidence of that, even if Corin had used his device to heal him.

I recognized the mountain with the giant, carved gate into the rocky face. We were nearly back to the place where Zathar and Corin had been living when they found us. I wasn't sure if this was going to be a safe place though because they knew we'd stayed here before. What if they just came back and captured us again?

The thought had only just crossed my mind when Zathar froze in place and started cursing. It took me only a second to figure out why. The silhouettes of several Naga were emerging from the trees up ahead. They had intercepted our path and were lying in wait.

"Corin, take the humans. I will keep them busy and then follow you. We'll meet up at the other side, yeah?" Zathar said grimly. His fingers started to release from around mine, and I knew he was about to push me away while he was going to do something heroic. He dropped his huge backpack at his side, his eyes fixated on the Naga female in the lead.

“Reid, Cosima, go with Corin,” I said, “He’ll take you to safety.” Cosima quickly squeezed my shoulder and then darted away but Reid paused at my side while watching the Naga with me. There were six of them, far too many for Zathar to fight on his own. Although I was unsure if the female in the lead was actually going to get involved in the scuffle or just watch it.

“You are staying? Careful Vera, they look like they mean business. Good luck.” He risked a glare from Zathar to draw me into a quick hug and then he jogged after the already disappearing Corin and Cosima, the pilot draped over the pale blue Naga’s shoulder.

I swallowed away my nerves as the Naga approached us and like a pack of bullies started to spread out to circle around. I dipped down, grabbing rocks from the ground as an improvised weapon. Then I stayed crouched low, near the end of Zathar’s tail, and carefully pressed my fingers to his scales so I could understand the hissing and growling words they were exchanging.

“You should give up, Zathar,” the female said. “You can’t possibly fight all of us.” She was a Naga with long black hair and the darkest blue scales I’d seen so far. They sharply contrasted with the nearly white spots that covered her, patterned much like a python. She was beautiful, with her sharp face and her slanted eyes, her body slender and athletic in a way I could never be. The scars that crossed her arms, chest, and bared belly told me that she loved to fight. I might have even seen her in action back in the village during one of my spying forays.

Zathar’s posture seemed to indicate he was relaxed but I could see him gently work his previously injured shoulder. “Oh yeah? Shall we find out?” Zathar taunted, “Because unless you suddenly discover some compassion and let us go, that’s the only way this is going to end.”

My eyebrows shot up. Woah, he really didn't think highly of that lady, did he? If the situation weren't so dire I might feel relieved that she was no competition. Her next words made my heart drop into my shoes, shock, and worry filling me all over again. "You are to be my mate, Zathar. I'm not letting you get away!" the female Naga hissed. With a gesture of her hand, the five males with her started approaching us again.

Zathar just laughed, and then he was moving, his body coiling forward fast as a whip. I lost contact with his tail, but it seemed like nobody was paying any attention to me and they weren't talking now. I backed away, my rocks cradled against my chest as I watched for an opening.

They weren't fighting with weapons, at least not with blades or spears. The claws that tipped their fingers were razor sharp and they were definitely slashing with those. In seconds, the scent of blood filled the air and I saw more than a few drops spray the dirt beneath their rapidly coiling bodies.

They were swapping in and out, trying to wear Zathar down turn after turn. So I raised my arm with the biggest rock I had and aimed for the back of the head of one of them. I'd always had good aim, and though this was a rather unwieldy projectile, it wasn't far. With a thump it hit the big male on the crown of his shiny blue hair, his head whipping to the side from the blow. I cheered, but when he spun around to glare at me my smile dropped. Oh no, now what?

The male was quick on that long tail, gliding through along the forest floor unhindered while I stumbled over a tree root and then managed to get smacked in the face by a branch. But hey, with him chasing me, I was evening out the odds for Zathar.

With more luck than skill, I managed to swerve around a thick tree I could barely see in the dark. He was closing in on me and turned rapidly, his shoulder slamming into a low branch which broke with a snap causing him to loudly curse. Spinning on my feet, I raised another of my rocks, my chest rising and falling rapidly from running.

I steadied myself when he started approaching again, a triumphant look on his smug face. Releasing the rock with a shout, this time I hit him square in the center of his face. He jerked backward with the blow, his body coiling in reflex, and somehow he hit that branch again, and down he went, his body a liquid puddle as he lost consciousness.

He wasn't moving, his body just one giant snake coil, long blue hair fanned out over one of them where his head was. Had I really just defeated a Naga? With a freaking rock? I stood there staring longer than I should have, so surprised by this stroke of luck. It was the sounds of the ongoing fight behind me that brought me back to the situation at hand.

Making sure I had enough rocks, I ran back through the woods. Bracing myself against a tree on the edge of the clearing where they were fighting; I appraised the situation. Zathar was wrestling with two males, a third was sitting on the sidelines cradling a broken arm and pressing a wad of fabric to a belly wound. The last male was sprawled on the ground, his long snake-like body stretched out like a sinuous line, definitely unconscious.

The Naga female was hovering behind them, shouting and hissing instructions but when she saw me, she screamed. She was lightning fast as she came around Zathar's tangle of fighting bodies. I lifted my arm, threw my first rock, and scored a glancing blow along her shoulder. The many gold chains dangling around her throat clattered together with a jangling noise.

She screamed again, possibly words I couldn't understand, but the message was clear; it infuriated her to be fighting me, to be pelted with rocks. So I did it again, winding up for a good throw, my small projectile scoring her in the belly this time. My nerves were getting to me. I had to step up my game, if she reached me, it was all over for me. She'd crush me with those muscular coils, or shred me to ribbons with her claws.

With only a couple of feet separating us, my last stone flew from my hand, my fingers clammy from nerves. The female

howled, curling sideways to avoid the rock and then her claws were reaching for me. I threw myself out of the way but her claws stopped inches from my chest, her arms outstretched, her expression furious. She was straining forward but not moving, something held her trapped.

Leaping to my feet I backed away. Beyond her stretched-out body, I caught sight of Zathar holding the female's tail in both hands, pulling to keep her from me. The two males he was still fighting were holding him in turn, landing blows with their fists on his back. He'd exposed himself to harm to rescue me, and his sigils were glowing like when he touched me. Lighting up the dirt around him with their bioluminescence.

He would hold her as long as he could to give me a head start but I knew I couldn't outrun a Naga in the dark. I doubted I could repeat that last stroke of luck a second time, and the female was far more motivated. Scanning the ground for more rocks, I spotted the thick branch near my feet. On impulse, I picked it up and holding it like a bat, I whacked the female in the head with a scream.

She was out like a light in an instant and empowered, I yelled again and ran for Zathar's opponents. "Leave him alone! Don't you hurt him!" The nearest one reared back, letting go of Zathar to stare at me with an expression that was more shocked consternation than fear. Words rasping from his throat that I couldn't follow.

The other was still holding Zathar down but he'd frozen in place as well, his eyes on the passed out form of the female Naga. Reaching the nearest part of a tail that was definitely not Zathar, I slammed my branch down on it as hard as I could. It cracked and broke, the blow reverberating up my arm painfully.

The male staring at me hissed, so it had to be him I hit, but he didn't move to attack which was a pleasant surprise. I was pretty scared of facing another Naga, and we couldn't be sure that any of the downed ones would *stay* down either.

Zathar shrugged himself out of their grip with a quick motion, and they let him go, I was sure of it. The one still avidly staring at me, the one I hit, was even holding up his palms in surrender. Was this it? Was it over? I darted a glance over my shoulder at the downed female and wondered if they lost the will to fight now that she wasn't watching.

I stepped over the nearest coil to his side, relieved when he pulled me into his chest and held me tight. His chest was moving rapidly with his elevated breathing, but he sounded calm when he spoke. "Are you letting us go, Assoz, Reshar?"

The one who'd fixated on me finally lifted his eyes away from my body to meet Zathar's fierce glare. "She's really your mate, isn't she? I thought you had the worst of luck, brother. But..." His voice tapered off when he glanced at the broken branch I'd, probably unsuccessfully, tried to wield against him. "Yeah, we'll let you go. Right Assoz?"

The other Naga jerked his head up at the sound of his name, his tail whipping against the floor in frustration but he nodded. "He is more powerful, did you feel that?" he said, not to Zathar, but his buddy. Already dismissed from his mind, he turned away to bend down next to his conscious but injured friend a little ways over.

"You were, must be the mating bond. I can't believe the rumors are true. I didn't think they were," Reshar said thoughtfully, staring at me again. His eyes dipped down to linger on my chest and Zathar hissed, his arm curling over me, shielding me from the male's eyes. He laughed, held up his hands, and backed away, "Good luck brother, you'll need it as an Outcast. Serant is a dangerous place."

They picked up their fallen, waking one of them, though not the female, and disappeared into the woods without another word. Zathar stared after them, holding me close to his body the entire time, slowly letting his breathing ease to a more normal rate. I could feel his heart pound beneath his scales, but his heart rate lowered as well when his former Clan members disappeared from sight.

As silence descended again on the woods around us, the sounds of night critters resuming, his tense shoulders finally lowered. “You crazy, reckless female! You could have gotten hurt, damn it! I told you to go with Corin to safety! You weren’t supposed to stay! A human is no match for a Naga! They could have killed you.”

The angry rant ripped from him like he’d been bottling it up for some time. A smile started to crease my face that I just couldn’t seem to stop. It was a silly, inappropriate moment to be smiling. He was so serious and so upset that I’d risked myself, and all I was feeling was elation and happiness. Zathar was so freaking worried about me and while I didn’t want him to worry, it was making me so damn happy that he was.

“Vera! Stop that, I mean it. You shouldn’t have stayed, Astrexa would have killed you if she got her claws on you! You made Msera chase you! Don’t you know how dangerous that is?” He said, hauling me up in his arms so that my face was almost in line with his. Yes, good, now I could lean in and kiss him.

“I owed you, Zathar. You gave up everything for me, nobody has ever done something so selfless for me before... So I owed it to you to try and help.” I couldn’t recall a single instance back on Earth where anyone, least of all my family, had ever set aside their own needs to help me. Especially not when it involved giving up status like Zathar had. It was starting to sink in that this mating urge he felt for me was more than just biological, it was driving a kind of loyalty toward me that I couldn’t have imagined actually existed outside of stories.

He made a huffing noise, his breath ghosting over my face, warm in the balmy early morning temperatures. “You are my mate, that’s what mates do. So you better get used to it. I would give up my life at Thunder Rock a thousand times over to make you happy.”

“Exactly,” I smirked at him. My chest felt tight and was filled with warmth from what he’d said. Zathar was a good

guy, I was unbelievably lucky that the UAR had shipped me off and then crashed me on his planet.

He laughed at my response, shaking his head a little, “Fine, I concede the point. Soft one. Next time though, you’ll need a better weapon, or *I* might expire from worry.” Pleased, I did what I’d imagined a moment ago. I leaned in to press my mouth to his firm one, moaning when he immediately flicked out his split tongue. Zathar’s skills were definitely improving. When I opened up for him, his tongue made love to my mouth with gentle flicks, and my body was instantly on fire for him.

Proving that he remembered what had made me writhe last time, he curled the agile appendage around my tongue and gave a gentle tug. This time, we had no audience and I allowed the pleasure-filled noises to escape me without hesitation.

“Mate,” Zathar panted, “We have no time for this.” To lend power to his words, the sound of an angry screech split the night air from some distance away. The female Naga, she’d woken up, and she wasn’t happy. It doused my pleasurable haze enough for me to come to my senses and pull away.

“You’re right, later. We need to get out of here first,” I agreed with him. The heated glint in his eyes was a promise, later wasn’t going to be long from now. We both needed this.

Chapter 12

Zathar

With regret, because my cock was painfully hard for my mate, I gathered her in my arms. I slung my backpack with supplies on my back and then we were off, headed for the looming mouth of the Ancestor's cave in the distance. I knew that Astrexa wouldn't give up, she was going to follow us and I doubted that any superstitions would stop her from entering the cave either. Definitely not the standing decree from the Queen that banned any Clan members from exploring them. The Queen had previously broken her own rules after all; Astrexa would think the means justified the end result.

Our way out of this narrow valley was cut off by now too, I had no doubt that hunters were circling the place at this very moment. The only way out was through the mountain, deeper into the caves. Corin and I had only ever skimmed the surface, this was going to make my ever-curious friend so very jealous.

I felt better about our odds as soon as I slithered through the carved gate into the dark tunnel. But no light was coming from the guard chamber we'd taken over as our home during our banishment. I deflated a little, which meant Iave wasn't here and a quick search of the place showed he hadn't dropped by and left again.

Worried about my friend, I took a moment to set Vera down; but I left a portion of my tail wrapped around her middle. "I need to leave a mark for Iave, so he knows where to find us if he gets here." If not when; I wasn't so certain now that he'd made it and the thought made me sad. Iave was brash, and most days he was a grumpy asshole, but he was one of my closest friends; always ready to have my back.

"I'm sure he's alright," Vera offered, "He seemed very big and capable." She hesitated while she watched me scratch symbols into the stone wall with my knife. "I think Kalani

might be his mate. If it's true that a mate makes you stronger... Then that must have helped them survive."

Her words gave me pause as I contemplated them. It was true, I had felt stronger, and she was right about Iave and Kalani too. That I'd definitely seen, even if he hadn't touched her yet, and displayed glowing mating sigils where I could see.

During my fight with the hunters, I'd been severely outmatched. I was a strong fighter and a good hunter, but so were Reshar and Msera. When I told the others to flee, I'd intended to fight them for a few minutes and then run, but with Vera right there, that wasn't an option. Yet somehow, I'd bested them. I had escaped the fight with deep bruising along my back and a few scratches on my arms but that was it. It should have been impossible.

Finishing the last symbol for Iave, I glanced down at the pale yellow hair on top of my mate's head. She had helped, and her aim had been good. I needed to make her a sling so she could be more effective next time.

"Thank you," I said to her, "That helps. Iave is like a brother to me, closer even." I laughed ruefully because Reshar was my direct kin. And while he'd let us go, he hadn't been on my side and I doubted he'd do it a second time. It was his fascination for the bravery Vera had displayed that had stayed his hands, not any love for me.

"That must be nice," she said quietly, a hint of wistfulness to her tone that I intended to investigate. "Are we going into the caves? Down that giant tunnel?" she gestured with one hand out the chamber, deeper into the mountain and I nodded, trying to gauge her reaction to that news. She seemed excited, curious even, which was good. I had to remind myself that she came from the stars, with a sky-ship, she probably knew more of the technologies we scavenged than I did.

With my message scratched into the wall, it was time for us to go but I did a final sweep of the chamber just to be sure I wasn't leaving anything useful behind. For Vera's sake, I lit a

lantern to guide her way, and then we walked into the dark tunnel gaping like the giant maw of a beast.

Since we weren't in a rush, I let her walk, allowing my bruised body to take a break for the next while. I didn't think Astrexa was gutsy enough to actually follow us deep into the caves, so I breathed easy as soon as the gate was just a tiny dot of light behind us.

Nothing branched off, there were no other passages for at least an hour as we walked in the dark. Just a long narrow line down the center of the tunnel, and unlit crystals that dotted the ceiling at precise intervals. At some point, Vera pulled me with her to the side of the tunnel to lay her hand on the wall and she grinned. "Woah Zathar, the walls are made of viewscreens or something. Wanna bet that during its heyday, this entire tunnel was filled with images? Maybe they made it look like you were above ground."

I did not know what a heyday was, but I knew what she meant with a viewscreen. The Shaman, Artek, had such viewscreens in his home, and each time I saw them, I marveled at the images they could display. I tried to imagine it the way Vera described and it was mind-blowing to picture a ceiling like a sky and walls like the forest outside. That seemed like pure magic to me.

"Why would they do such a thing?" I asked her. At least it was comforting to know that she could make sense of what we might discover down here. She answered with a lot of words, about how daylight was good for people, that it might be pretty, or show the status of the world above ground. She had lots of ideas and I liked that she was talking with so much enthusiasm the more she warmed up to the idea.

But she was flagging too, her feet dragging the further we walked. We had to find a place to camp out for a few hours and grab some sleep, but I didn't like how big and exposed this tunnel was. I wanted to find us a nice secluded spot, with no draft preferably. To boost our flagging energies I handed

her a filling ration cake; she took it and immediately started nibbling as we walked.

The sight of her blunt teeth and soft lips working on the food made my blood heat and my cock grow heavy and thick in my pouch. Another reason to locate a good spot for a nest, I needed my mate in my coils as soon as possible.

It took us both by surprise when the long tunnel suddenly opened up to a steep drop. Vera let out a shocked gasp when we reached the edge, peering over it to stare down into the deep black below. “You know,” she mused out loud. “I don’t think this tunnel was meant to be traversed on foot.” She glanced at my long tail and added, “Or tail.” I did not understand what other option there was, this was a tunnel underground, and it wasn’t as if a sky-ship could fit.

My eyes couldn’t make out much beyond the ledge, the place was vast and cavernous, with no light to reach the corners. I needed very little to be able to see, but our lantern light could not reach far enough to help even me.

“I think there’s a path down this way, shall we try it?” Vera asked, pointing to my left, where the open platform we were on, curved along a smooth, round wall down into the depths. I led the way, but since there was no railing to prevent either us from a deadly fall, I made sure to keep my body between my mate and the dark abyss.

As we walked, I started to see shapes in the dark, tall towers, and buildings with many gaping windows. It was like my village but everything was bigger and just *more*, and the buildings were starting to get crowded together the further we descended. I tried to wrap my head around what I was seeing but it baffled me how so many buildings could exist in one place, underground. Did so many ancestors live here together? That was more Naga than all the known Clans together.

When the path suddenly started to level off I was certain we’d reached the bottom of this giant village. We ended up in a little square with three buildings surrounding us and the unnaturally smooth wall of the cave behind us. The building

directly across had this tunnel running through the center, a building with a path underneath it; it was absurd.

The center of the square had a round basin with several shapes curling above it. Vera laughed when she saw it in the light of the lantern. “A fountain, wow. This looks like a city Zathar. What happened to your people? Why are you no longer living in this place? I don’t understand.”

I didn’t understand it either, not really. I had a vague recollection of stories hunters told at the campfire. Ghost stories told to scare the younglings but not real history. “Some say a calamity struck our world, long ago. But I never believed it and I don’t know what.”

She slid her hand along the smooth, pale stone of the basin but her eyes were raised to the tall building beyond it. Staring at the black holes that dotted its facade she murmured, “Well, you’ve got to believe it now, just look at this place.” She pointed at a shape near a doorway, “There’s all kinds of technology here. There’s another screen over there, and this place couldn’t have been built by hand.”

I had to agree with that, I didn’t know of any Clans that built stone buildings, let alone carved them out of the mountain. My old Clan built their homes of clay and straw, Copper Tooth did something similar out in the swamps, but on stilts, and the scattered Water Clan liked to build their wooden homes over the water. Nobody did something like this; that was stuff the ancestors left behind.

“Let’s find a place to make a nest in,” I said to my mate. “We’ll explore after we’ve rested. There are other paths out of this place and we need to find the one that Corin is headed for.” My sense of direction was good, even underground, and though I couldn’t see it, I was certain I could find it. For now, this was good enough, we’d find a room in one of the buildings to sleep in.

Vera followed me, her footsteps slow as she craned her neck this way and that to study the buildings that surrounded us. I found them creepy, and melancholic, and they made me

uneasy. I felt like at any moment a ghost could drift out of one of the black holes in the building's facade, furious that we'd disturbed its resting place. I didn't say any of those things to Vera, certain she would find my thoughts foolish.

The doors weren't made of stone and they weren't made of wood. When I touched one I was shocked to discover it was some kind of metal. I didn't know how to open this, there was no handle and nothing to slide my claws between and pry free. I didn't even see any hinges to work on.

"Let me," Vera murmured and I slid aside, watching avidly as her fingers danced over the round orb set into the carved stone doorpost. It sparked purple and pink beneath her touch and I hurriedly yanked her into my arms and backed away.

"Did it hurt you, Vera?" I asked as I picked up her fingers and inspected them for any sign of damage. Pale pink, with blunt nails, they looked as soft and harmless as always but that didn't mean it hadn't tried something nefarious.

"I'm fine, it was just the door responding. Look!" she pointed at the portal and I realized that it had silently opened while I was preoccupied. She shook out of my grip but kept hold of the very tip of my tail as she walked back without any hesitation. My mate was brave and fearless in the Caves of the Ancestors, I had to follow her lead.

I glared at the, once again dull and lifeless, orb as I passed it which made Vera giggle in this adorable way. Fine, the orb was harmless and I'd overreacted, but that didn't mean we shouldn't be on our toes in here.

There were several rooms and a set of stairs leading up into the building but I didn't trust those so I made sure we stayed on the ground floor. Most rooms appeared empty, except for layers upon layers of dust. Not exactly nice to sleep in, so I made my mate wait outside while I used one of our furs as a makeshift sweep to clear out a space.

It didn't take long and soon we were sitting together in the pile of furs I'd brought along; a makeshift nest that would

have to do for the next few hours. We ate, and then came my favorite part, curling up together to sleep. She gave me a thoughtful look before she settled down against my chest but she didn't offer me another of those mouth matings I had come to love.

Later, after we'd rested. My body was sore and tired, I needed a few hours of good sleep to get back to full strength anyway. I swore to myself that once I was in peak form, I'd woo her into my coils, she wouldn't be able to resist me. For now, I just enjoyed the simple pleasure of touching all of her softness against my tough scales. Of her warmth and her scent in my coils.

*

Vera

I woke up to the soft sounds of Zathar's breathing, the steady thump of his heartbeat beneath my ear. He didn't make the best pillow, with his hard scales, especially those that plated his chest, but I had to admit that it was nice anyway. I was warm, I was safe, and I was with a man, male, that was willing to leave everything behind to be with me. What more could a girl ask for?

My heart clenched in my chest at the thought; family, a sense of belonging? Had I really found it with Zathar? I was too scared to grab onto it, for fear that it would just vanish like smoke between my fingers. He was so gorgeous with his bright azure coloring and the long blue hair he kept in a topknot on top of his head. I even found the two prongs of the horns on his chin sexy.

He was deeply sleeping, I suspected because he'd been more injured than he'd let on from his fight with those hunters. I felt much better though, I'd slept well for the first time in days. When the urge to pee got too strong, I slipped out from between the coils of his long body without waking him to find a quiet spot.

When I returned, he hadn't woken yet, but my empty stomach made me bold enough to rummage through the huge leather backpack with supplies that he'd brought along. It was considerably less full now that all the furs had been unpacked and I quickly located the leaf-wrapped ration cakes that Zathar had brought.

The flavors were starting to grow on me, and the water here was fresh and clean, which helped to wash down the calorie-dense food. I was chewing thoughtfully on a last bit of dried food as I contemplated the ancient city we were in when Zathar started to stir.

"Vera... Mate, yessss," he moaned, his head tilted to the side and I realized his eyes were still closed. His body was growing tense, was he having a nightmare? No definitely not, I realized very quickly, not with the sounds he was making, interspersed with my name to leave no doubt who he was thinking of.

Should I wake him up? He was having some kind of erotic dream about me and I should put a stop to that, shouldn't I? The way his body undulated, his abs growing tight, it was sexy, and I liked it even more when his fangs dug into his bottom lip like he was fighting to hold out. My passage grew slick just watching him like this. I wanted to touch, to have a replay of that steamy moment when I was stuck as a prisoner. Just thinking about that made more wetness pool in my panties.

His tongue flicked at the air and I just knew that he was smelling that, tasting it even. He groaned and I clamped my legs together, trying to mask the scent. He'd know I was turned on the moment he woke up and now I wasn't sure if I wanted the show to be over.

Then the most surprising thing happened, at his groin, where the scales normally laid smooth and flat, I saw a bulge pressing up. Then it split open down the center, a seam that parted to let the tip of his cock escape. I could only stare, my mouth dry but my channel growing wetter. It was dark blue,

almost purple, and as more of it escaped, I could see that it split down the middle.

I stared, he had a freaking bifurcated dick? I'd never seen anything like it before, but I shouldn't have been surprised, he had a split tongue too. The tips were as long as my fist and the separate parts moved independently of each other. Curling together, untwisting, seeking the air as if searching for a female to sink into.

My mind filled with fantasies of what it would feel like if he did that inside of *me*. A moan escaped from me before I could stop myself, loud in the silence. Zathar's azure eyes flicked open immediately and I froze in place as we stared at one another. His slitted pupils narrowed, his tongue flicked out and then his body grew even tenser, a low groan escaping him.

Curling the tip of his tail across the distance that separated us, he touched my ankle first, then started to slide it up my leg. Sliding a hand down his body, he reached for his partially extruded cock and I was certain he was going to boldly touch himself in front of me, my passage clenching with desire.

"Forgive me, my mate. I should not have behaved so shamefully," he said, his voice gritty and husky. His hand landed on the writhing tips of his flushed cock and he started to push, trying to make it fit back into his hidden pouch. Pain written across his face as he did so.

I didn't know what came over me, I just knew I was confused by the dual message. His tail was sliding up my leg as if he was about to touch my core with it, but at the same time he was embarrassed he'd shown me his cock? I launched myself across the small distance that separated us, landing at his hip on my knees and shoving his hand away to stop him from causing himself more pain.

"No, let me see it, please!" I begged. I didn't care how that made me sound, I just didn't want him to hurt, I wanted to prolong this sexy moment. His eyes grew wide, then heavy-lidded as he acquiesced with my request, sliding his hand

away from his cock and allowing the thick dual tip to slide out once more.

Apparently, I wanted to do far more than just see what he was packing. As soon as the tips moved, curling toward my face like they could sense I was there, I leaned in. With a finger, I reached out and as soon as it got close, the tips latched on, clenching my appendage between them. He was slick with his own kind of lubricant, and he was warm and hard, and unlike a human cock, those tips were muscles, firm and capable of all kinds of things.

At my touch, he hissed from between his teeth, his hips jerking upward, but he didn't let more of his cock escape. He was keeping a tight lid on himself and it was like a little imp had a hold of me now, I wanted to make him unravel. I wanted to see him come apart, not just hear it through a wall.

"All of it," I demanded, and he obeyed, his body shifting restlessly on the furs beneath him as the rest of his cock pushed out. It was thick, and there were fine scales along it, which weren't present on the dark blue tip. He was much lighter at the base and the soft glow of what he called his sigils extended here, swirling around it in savage slashes.

The slender tip of his tail wound more tightly around me, drawing my attention to my aching, weeping core. I wanted to have him fill me again, but I was pretty sure I needed some practice before I could fit that massive erection.

Leaning in before he could stop me, I opened my mouth over the bifurcated tip and sucked on both of them. His body went tight like a bowstring, the tail around my leg growing so tight it almost cut off circulation. Most rewarding though was the shout escaping him, his head thrown back, the cords of muscle in his neck growing rigid. I was pretty sure he hadn't meant to come so quickly but seed erupted from him in several waves.

He tasted like cinnamon and salt, a little spicy but shockingly tasty. The first blast filled my mouth, and I pulled back to swallow it down, the rest sprayed across my chest and

my face. There was a lot of it, far more than I could handle but the combination of bliss and shock he wore made the sticky mess totally worth it.

We stared at each other when his orgasm eased. “Vera... I... What?” he mumbled. He was so confused that I found myself smiling, warmth filling my chest. I guess his response meant that, like kissing, he didn’t know about blowjobs either. For such a sexy, virile male, he sure didn’t know a lot about sex but considering how quickly he’d caught on to kissing, I had no doubt he’d learn about the rest in a hurry too.

When I realized that his expression was starting to grow grim, instead of blissful, I hurried to reassure him. “I didn’t mind that Zathar. Maybe that’s not what Naga females like but I’m human, you need to forget all you know and relearn the rules, got it?” To prove my point, I touched my finger to some of his seed still clinging to my cheek and licked it off.

I did it just to show him I didn’t mind that he’d coated me, but I fully expected the drying seed to taste much worse. Nope, still good. What was in this stuff? It felt like my body was humming with desire and each time I tasted his seed, the desire seemed to ratchet up another notch, making me feel achy and empty between my legs.

His hands stilled mine, preventing me from trying to taste more of the seed that was clinging to the upper slopes of my breasts. “Vera,” he said, voice hoarse, “Your scent... It’s like you’re in heat. Do humans go into heat?” He didn’t let me answer, suddenly the tables were turned and he was the one in control, not me.

Pushing me over, he pinned me to the furs with one hand on my shoulder, grabbing a soft fur with the other to clean my face and chest of his spend. I moaned, writhing beneath him, seeking the pressure of his long, heavy body on top of mine. I didn’t want him to clean me, I wanted him to fuck me, I wanted that big, bifurcated cock inside of me, now!

“No, no heat for humans,” I croaked out, feeling hot and pleasurable. I needed to shed some of these clothes or I’d start

to burn up. Zathar's face was a mixture of excitement and concern. Why was he concerned? He needed to get his sexy ass in gear and undress me. I tried to tell him that but my tongue was feeling thick and unwieldy in my own mouth, that was weird.

"I think you are responding to something in my seed..." Zathar said, but he was finally doing what I wanted. Flicking open the button on my pants and yanking them down my legs. He took my drenched panties with them in one fell swoop and the cool air that hit my swollen folds felt so good that I moaned.

His tongue flicked at the air just above my mount and I arched, "Yes, lick me." I was never this bold, and in the back of my mind I realized that something was happening, something intense. He was right, but in the heat of the moment, I really couldn't worry about it. I just needed to find release and he needed to give it to me, now.

His clawed hands curled around my thighs, spreading me wide, and then his tongue lashed my folds. The swollen bud of my clit was easy to locate and the moment he touched it, pleasure spiraled through me. He hissed, and then he lapped at it in earnest, his split tongue curling around it and tugging. Then his tail, curled up my leg again, a favorite thing of his to do, and I eagerly angled my hips to receive him. It wasn't his cock, but it would still feel really good.

Pumping his tail into me in shallow strokes made my world light on fire, and combined with his talented tongue? I was swallowed by my orgasm in seconds, followed by a second, deeper one right on the heels of the first. I came harder than I ever had, and still, my body craved more.

Chapter 13

Vera

I sat in front of the little portable space heater with a fur curled around my shoulders. Otherwise completely naked, I had no plans for moving for the next while, my thighs still sore and shaky from the strenuous activities from the past hour. Hours? Zathar wasn't here with me or I wasn't sure if I wouldn't have attacked the poor guy for another round, it was a little frightening to realize that.

He'd left a few minutes ago to track down the source of water he could smell, and he'd taken my clothing with him so he could wash them for me. He'd given me his waterskin to wash myself with which I'd done as soon as he'd left. It had been a little painful and embarrassing how much I'd been covered in our combined essences and he hadn't even done any actual fucking. I didn't know how he'd restrained himself, I was pretty sure I'd begged for his freaky, sexy cock more than once.

Oh boy, he had to be right, his seed contained some kind of aphrodisiac that I responded to. Too bad, I liked it when I gave him pleasure, and I loved how shocked he'd been by the blowjob. If I responded like that to the taste of him, I really shouldn't risk it again. I definitely didn't like how out of control I'd been the past few hours. What kind of filthy things had spilled from my mouth? I was afraid to look at my memories too closely on that front.

I hoped we didn't have to do too much walking today, I was pretty sure my legs weren't up to much. What I wanted to do most was just curl up under the blankets to go to sleep and pretend I hadn't been a total sex fiend before. What was Zathar thinking, right now? I knew he'd come too, several times in fact, though he hadn't let me touch him.

As if my thoughts had summoned him, he appeared in the doorway to our little nest. His wide shoulders filled up the space, his head almost reaching the tall lintel above him.

“Vera,” he murmured, his voice filled with warmth. He was carrying two waterskins he’d refilled and my wet clothing was draped over his arm.

I offered him a smile in return and watched as he draped my things over the little heater to help them dry quickly. Of course, the tip of his tail had already found my ankle beneath the furs and curled around it. I knew it was to help us speak but I still felt a warmth unfurl in my chest at this sign of wanting to be close.

“How are you feeling?” he asked carefully. “Better?” His tongue flicked out to taste the air and I felt a flush rise in my cheeks, he was checking to see if I was still in the throes of intense arousal or not. I was pretty sure things had calmed down and rational thought had returned to me. He seemed to conclude the same thing and looked almost disappointed about it.

“Better,” I said and then I asked the question that had risen in my mind. “Why didn’t you, you know? Actually fuck me?” My eyes dropped to his groin where his scales now lay flat once again, not a hint of his cock visible. I couldn’t believe he could hide such a big cock just like that, but there really was no trace of it now that he was relaxed.

Zathar sat down at my side, his arm curling around my shoulder to draw me closer. So close that I was almost in his lap with my still very naked ass. “It wouldn’t be right. You did not seem to know what you were asking of me, and once I seed you, our mating bond is complete. I did not want to take that choice from you.”

I was pretty sure he’d seeded me more than once, but I got what he meant. It was very thoughtful, he’d been looking out for me in far more ways than I could count since the first day we met. My chest felt tight with a feeling I didn’t really know the name of. Was this what it felt like to be loved? But how could he love me when we’d only known each other for such a short time?

“Thank you,” I said to him, and then I was happy to just sit there in his arms and rest for a while. He seemed to feel the same way, happy to just hold me as we stared at my drying clothing, lost in our own thoughts. Neither of us wanted to break out of this bubble to get moving as if this time in this ancient city was like putting the rest of the world on pause.

Of course, it couldn't last and the noises that intruded on us made both of us shiver in response. It sounded like the slithering of dozens of snakes, voices filling the silence with their hissing and growling. Zathar raced for the doorway while I scrambled to get into my still slightly damp but thankfully clean clothes.

“Did they find us? Is that that Naga woman?” I asked his back, knowing he'd understand me because his tail was still around my ankle. He shrugged one shoulder, his hand going for one of the swords on his back, hovering there as if he wasn't sure if he needed it or not.

He tried to tell me to stay behind while he went to investigate but I wouldn't let him. If we needed to run, we should be sticking together. Leaving the safety of the building we'd taken shelter in, the two of us followed the sounds further into the city. We ducked through the tunnel leading beneath one of the buildings edging the square. Then followed several streets until we were suddenly standing on the edge of a grand balustrade with a ramp spiraling down to a lower elevation.

We didn't need to keep moving to see what was going on though. From the top of the stairs, we looked out over a city plaza that was lit up with thousands of glowing, pinkish crystals. A procession of Naga was making its way across it to a huge sprawling building on the other side. It could only be called a palace, made of shimmering, rose-colored stone.

It sounded like they were singing, or chanting something but we were too far away to be able to make out what. Each of the elegant Naga gliding across the plaza was dressed in a long flowing robe, their tails tipped with gold or silver. Their scales

varied in shade and color, covering each facet of the rainbow in a dazzling display of diversity.

“What is this?” I whispered, rubbing my eyes in confusion. Was I dreaming or was this real? Zathar looked as baffled as I felt, staring at the beautiful, stately procession with huge eyes, his mouth opened in surprise.

“Ghosts,” he said, “They are ghosts.” I was almost inclined to believe him when I realized that they weren’t completely solid. They were specters crossing the plaza, not fully there, just transparent enough to see the square tiles beneath them straight through their otherwise real-looking bodies. They had almost reached the palace, its gates closed and forbidding. They passed right through it, and Zathar flinched back. “We have disturbed their rest, we need to leave.”

They winked out of existence during the next heartbeat. Just vanishing like they were never there, the lights of the crystals slowly dimmed all around the plaza until we were once again stuck in complete darkness.

“No, not ghosts,” I said to Zathar as he rushed to gather me in his arms and race back to our hiding place. “A hologram, a recording that is stuck on an endless loop, replaying that procession. I am sure that if we are here at the same time tomorrow, it will play again. Never changing until it runs out of power.”

As I spoke the words, I was certain I was right. Technology slumbered all over this place. I’d seen the evidence of light fittings, screens, and the remains of unfamiliar machines all over the building we’d slept in. It was no different for the rest of this place, and some of it still worked. That was all it was.

Zathar’s rapid pace slowed down as he processed what I said. “Not ghosts but a picture? A moving picture?” he clarified and I grinned at him and patted his cheek, happy that he got it. That was exactly it, and it was nothing to fear, even if it was a little creepy.

“Yeah, no need to rush, they can’t harm us. They don’t think or feel anything, they’re not real.” He tried to act like he was reassured by my explanation when we returned to the ‘nest,’ but I wasn’t fooled. He still hurried as he packed up all our things in his giant backpack. The ghostly procession had spooked him and he didn’t want to linger any longer than he had to.

I guess it was a little cute that he was superstitious like that, but I was sure that with more exposure he’d come around. I was dying to figure out what happened in here, who were the Naga that had come before Zathar? Why had they disappeared? And how long ago had it happened? Thousands? Hundreds?

When he swung me up in his arms, I didn’t protest, relieved he wasn’t going to make me walk more when I was still so tired. I was not going to complain about being curled up against his chest if he didn’t mind it. I just held the lantern to light our way as he zigzagged across the completely abandoned city.

The longer we were inside it, the more I had to admit it *was* creepy. Everything was so quiet, with only the sound of water breaking the silence when we crossed underground rivers or streams. The place was strangely preserved too, each building still immaculate and undamaged by time or the wear and tear of weather. Just a thick layer of dust and fine debris that had settled everywhere.

I suppose I was grateful that there were no remains, no piles of bones that lined the streets. Had they simply completely disintegrated with time? Were they the dust that covered everything? Or had there been some kind of mass exodus of this place?

“Talk to me,” Zathar said at some point, “I don’t like this silence.” I was happy to oblige even if I was telling myself that I didn’t believe in ghosts. First I just talked about silly things back on Earth that I liked or didn’t like, it was fun to explain strange concepts to him to see how he’d respond. He couldn’t

quite wrap his head around things like the library or a coffee shop, and it was cute to see him try.

But when he asked about my Clan back home I found myself spilling everything. The Clayborne family and their status on Earth, the rich homes I'd grown up in, sometimes beneath the domes on the moon, sometimes on Earth itself. I told him about my black sheep status and my unedited genes that had made me an outcast in my own family. I even told him of my mother's last words to me just minutes before I was supposedly executed. How she'd set me up to take the fall for something so it would benefit my family.

Zathar hissed furiously, his expression growing darker with each word but he didn't interrupt me and that was nice. It felt cleansing to spill it all, to put into words what I'd gone through and how I'd been treated. It was unfair, and I hadn't deserved any of it.

"I do not understand what this gene editing is, but it sounds to me like it let you keep your heart and your soul when they did not." His deep voice struck a chord inside my chest, something good and bright that unfurled in response to it. I was a good person, and my family was not, they were cold, selfish, and greedy. Maybe it was the gene editing that had caused it, and if so, I was glad they hadn't done that to me.

"So we are both outcasts, we match," he added with a grin. "Made for each other." I liked that; that he was my match, and that he was the one person in the whole universe that I fit with so completely. For the first time in my life, I knew what it felt like to be wanted, truly wanted.

It was also easy to talk with Zathar. When I ran out of things to tell for the moment, he took over, filling me in on his life here on Serant, the village, and his position as firstborn of the Clan's Queen. I loved his anecdotes on hunting and the antics Iave, Corin and he got into. It made the time pass as we moved through the ghost city and then suddenly Zathar was following a narrow path up against the wall that zigzagged with sharp pin turns all the way to the top.

Both of us could smell the fresh air from outside as soon as we reached the tunnel at the top. This one was not nearly as big as the one we'd used to enter this place, but it still looked like a highway that could accommodate a double stream of vehicles, one heading each way. If my hunch about these paths was correct, then the empty stone city we were leaving behind must have once been awash with flying vehicles skimming above it, beneath the giant stone dome. It must have been one hell of a sight and I hoped we could go back to see if there was a hologram of that too.

“Almost there, I don't think this tunnel is quite as long,” Zathar said. His pace picked up once we were just following a gently curving path. I cradled the lantern in my arms, watching the walls and ceiling as we flashed by at a rapid speed, his tail moving soundlessly as he slithered over the smooth stone floor.

When the tunnel exit came into view he slowed and we could tell it was similar to that huge gate we'd used to enter this place. Only this was a much smaller version, with a chamber branching off on either side and carved pillars that wound like snakes around the opening.

There was a clearing beyond it, the skies pink and silvery, with dark purple trees sticking up like jagged teeth in the distance. I didn't think this entrance had statues like the other one, but when we exited the gate, my breath faltered at the sight of the carvings.

These had been better preserved, or maybe they were just newer, but it allowed me to see far more of the exquisite details that made up the segmented snake tails wrapped around each pillar that framed the entrance. They were actual snakes, with giant heads and long fangs; not Naga, and they looked both beautiful and menacing.

“They are Rakworms,” Zathar explained, “And that is their actual size, if you ever see one, run to dry land as fast as you can.” That was an ominous warning if there ever was one and I eyed the beautiful carvings in a new light. After knowing

Zathar, it wasn't nearly as difficult to imagine a fifty feet long snake but it was still terrifying.

"Okay, Rakworms are like Anaconda, they like the water?" I asked, smiling when Zathar slid me down his body to set my feet on the ground just outside of the tunnel. I was still looking at the carvings, impressed with the detail to each scale carved in the black stone, down to the vicious look in their eyes.

Zathar was moving around me, but a part of his tail was already curling around my legs, keeping contact, almost forcing me to stay in place with the way he now gripped me. "Mmm, yeah, that's it, they prefer water. Marshes, rivers, ponds, that sort of thing, but they'll migrate to follow prey."

He sounded lost in thought, his vivid blue eyes scanning the ground around the mouth of the cave. When his hand moved up to hover near the handle of one of his swords alarm bells went off in my own head. He had noticed something, seen something, and it had put him on edge. I wasn't sure if he was aware of that hand near his weapon but now that I'd seen it, I was extremely aware of how unarmed I was.

Come to think of it, wasn't this the place where Corin, Reid, and Cosima were supposed to meet us? Scanning the small clearing I saw no sign of them, no campfire remains, no footsteps. But maybe they would have camped in one of the chambers just inside the tunnel, not that I was brave enough to go in there on my own.

"There was a struggle," Zathar murmured, "But they are gone now." His arm lifted to point at a tree on the edge of the forest. Deep purple like the rest of them, the trunk was a dark gray, and its shape was reminiscent of a giant conifer. To me, it looked no different than any of the others but when I stepped over Zathar's long tail to get a closer look I noticed what he had. Scratches in the bark, too uniform to be anything but intentional.

"Corin left us a sign to follow, this way," he added and he shouldered his backpack and turned in the direction of a tall mountain peak in the distance. Not tall enough to be capped

with snow but sharp and jagged, like spikes or fangs. It looked frightening and far away, were we going all the way to that mountain? That would take days...

It was also the complete opposite direction from the scratches, or what could be construed as an arrow-like shape left carved as the upper left symbol. Zathar had told me about the coded message he'd left for Iave, was that what Corin had done for us?

Chapter 14

Zathar

Following Corin's directions, I led my mate through the thickly overgrown valley of Darspines in the direction of Ahoshaga. The mountain was not the tallest spire by far in these territories, but it was one that most avoided. Even those of my Clan, my former Clan, when it was technically in their territory. I knew that Corin had gone there a few times, once with Artek, the Shaman, but I had never visited the caverns below it myself. It was rumored they were riddled with sightings of ghosts.

I reflected back on the moment inside the Ancestor caves when Vera and I had experienced our own sighting. She said it was a hologram, a picture similar to the ones Artek could display on his viewscreens. That would make it technology, not a ghost that we'd seen, but I couldn't shake the feeling that it was more than that.

If Vera was right, maybe the sightings beneath Ahoshaga weren't ghosts either, maybe there was nothing scary about them. But if they *were* real, it was a place I'd much rather avoid. Corin was far too curious for his own good, and he loved hearing about places with sightings. If Vera was right, was it because he thought they were a sign of functioning technology?

Whatever the case may be, I knew Corin had faced adversaries at the mouth of the cave we just left. He'd won, and he'd left his mark for me to find, but he'd been followed; I could see the faint tracks of long tails moving along the mossy ground. By my count, there were at least five of them, enough to outnumber my friend and the human male if they tried to fight. Neither had a mate to protect, they wouldn't win against such odds.

I didn't tell my mate about my concerns, leaving her to walk at my side and stare in wonder at the forest around us. I liked how happy she looked right now; her wonderment made me

look at everything with new eyes too. Serant was beautiful, and Thunder Rock Territory was one of the finest places as far as I was concerned. I loved the foothills, the mountains, and the forest.

I wouldn't want to live in the wetlands that Copper Tooth inhabited, or the warren of caves that housed Bitter Storm beneath Orshala Peak. I suppose we technically needed to leave the territory since we were outcasts, but living beneath Ahoshaga, right on the edge would probably work. If it weren't haunted it wasn't a bad location Corin had picked.

It was nearing noon when our path led us past the thundering noise of a waterfall cascading down into the foothills, pooling in a shimmering clear little lake before running off in a stream that would feed into the small tributary that bisected the Thunder Rock Village. It was a beautiful place, so I wasn't surprised when Vera gasped at the sight, her eyes glowing with delight.

"Oh, can we take a break here? I would love to be able to wash up... I don't have any clean clothes but at least I can freshen up, right?" She turned her beautiful blue eyes on me with a pleading look that made my cock twitch and my chest grow tight. When she looked at me like that, I couldn't possibly say no, even though I really wanted to hurry after my friend.

When I gave her a nod, she made a happy noise and started pulling her shirt over her head. She tossed it behind her without a care, already moving on to strip the tight coverings that molded over her legs from her soft, creamy body. I couldn't regret the delay then, there was no way I'd miss out on a chance at seeing my mate so gloriously naked.

Dropping my backpack next to her discarded clothing, I neatly folded her things as she waded into the shallows of the lake. Her soft skin was breaking out into tiny little bumps and her rosy nipples were growing hard. Was that a reaction to the cold? I had never seen skin do that. My scales were impervious to such changes, at the most I could twitch them

along my back when I was angry or threatened and create a kind of susurraton.

Once I stripped my weapon belts from my chest, I was as bare as she was and I followed her to the edge of the water. I watched avidly as she splashed water over her skin, bathing herself in a rush, possibly because she was cold. This water was fed from a spring high up in the mountains, frost melt, so it was always icy cold.

“Too bad I can’t wash my hair,” she said when I slipped closer and curled my tail around her hip. She tilted her head up so she could look me in the eye as she spoke and I was happy to note that the cold wasn’t bothering her too much; she was still smiling. Water was sparkling like gems off her now slightly spiky lashes, her cheeks pink, her lips darker than normal. I couldn’t resist leaning down to press my mouth to hers, these mouth-matings were amazing, and I couldn’t get enough of tasting her this way.

She accepted me without hesitation her spine arching a little as she raised herself on her toes for better access. With my tail beneath her softly curved rear, I pushed her higher, wrapping my arms around her body to hold her pinned to my chest. I could feel the soft mounds of her breasts, the perked nipples, and my cock surged from my pouch, punching against her stomach. “You are addictive, mate. You taste so good I lose all control.” The tips of my cock writhed against her silky skin, she was cool from the lake water and it provided a sharp contrast against the heat of my own body.

“Oh yeah? I’m the one with the addictive flavor? You do remember what happened a few hours ago, don’t you?” she responded with a laugh. My body heated as I remembered it. She had wrapped her lips around my cock and tasted my seed. I had *never* heard of a female doing such a thing and I couldn’t get it out of my mind. The sheer pleasure of that act, the selflessness of the gesture, it was too much to contemplate. I might combust on the spot.

But she didn't mean that, she meant her reaction to tasting my seed. She was right, it was an unusual response that had thrown her into a kind of frenzied heat. It had been sexy, the hottest thing I'd ever experienced, to have my mate beg for the pleasure only I could give her. I wondered if that's why Naga females didn't do it because they knew they would no longer be the ones in control during the seeding. Or was this a strictly human response, a quirk in Vera's biology that had her respond that way?

"You like thinking about that, I can tell from the look on your face," Vera said in my arms. She was trailing the clawless pads of her fingers along my cheekbones, "You get a darker blue here when you think naughty things."

I grinned, "Oh yeah? What do you think I was contemplating?" She made me laugh when she answered in this saucy, cheeky tone. Not shying away from saying naughty things herself, and she wasn't flushing along *her* cheeks as she did so either. My mate had a dirty mouth and she wasn't ashamed of it.

"Your cock in my mouth, duh." With a hand, she reached down between our bodies and gripped the base of my shamelessly extruded cock. "I shouldn't taste your seed again, but we can touch, can't we?" I hissed as she stroked along my length and then I spun around, moving to the bank of the lake to press her down in the silky sands.

"No touching," I ordered, yanking her greedy little fingers from my cock. "You wanted to wash, so I shall wash you." And I was going to touch every inch of her soft skin in the process, and then I'd make her scream my name as she came on my tongue, but she couldn't touch me, I'd lose all sense if she did and our first mating wasn't going to be rushed.

She laughed, arching her spine and undulating in the much warmer shallows. It displayed her breasts, big and bountiful, and made her skin glow in the soft purple glow of the sun. Slinging my tail around without looking away from the beautiful sight, I yanked up the soaproot I'd seen growing

along the bank. Mashing a portion of it between my hands, I lathered them up until they were nice and foamy and then I went to work.

“Oh, Zathar, that feels good. Does that stuff clean hair too?” She jumped from being a sexy vixen to a more practical mode disappointingly fast. Reaching out eager hands for the soapy foam dripping from my fingers. I raised them so she couldn’t reach them, laughing when she pouted in response.

“No, that’s my job. Come here, beautiful.” I did what she wanted, threading my claws through the pale strands of her hair. She tilted her head back into my palms, her eyes sliding shut as I gently massaged her skull, making sure I got everything nice and clean. Then I massaged the soap into each inch of her body, making sure I paid special attention to the soft curves of her breasts and that special place between her legs. She moaned as I cupped my fingers over her mount, eagerly spreading her thighs.

She would consent to a full mating soon, I knew I wouldn’t have to wait long if she was this responsive to my touch. My heart soared at the realization that I had successfully wooed my mate, and our spirit connection would soon be complete.

I rinsed her with water from my cupped palms, sliding my fingers along each nook and cranny, each gentle curve until I was sure she was clean. She protested a little at the cold water but was instantly appeased when I stroked her wet folds, making sure to apply just the right pressure to the small button at the top of her slit. Her release was soft, like the lapping of the lake against our skin, gently washing over her and I watched it play out across her face, imprinting the image into my memory.

She was limp in my arms when I picked her up, smiling contentedly as I cradled her. “That was nice. Amazing. Spectacular. I don’t think anyone’s ever washed me quite like that.” She shifted to curl her arms around my neck and I dipped down for her ‘kiss,’ my cock surging again beneath her rear, it wanted to seek out the heat just out of reach above it.

As tempting as it was to urge her to spread her thighs for me so I could fill her completely, I held myself firm. Which was extremely difficult when she smiled all sultry and sexy, “Now it’s my turn to wash you.”

My mind filled with images of her small hands on my scales, soaping up my cock until I was so slippery that sliding into her passage would meet no resistance. I groaned, my shaft aching but I firmly set her to her feet on the shore. “No, we don’t have time. Soon my mate, I will fill you with my seed, you will be connected to me body and spirit.”

Her eyes went round at my words and then she crossed her arms beneath her ample chest, making her bountiful breasts rise, as if she was presenting them to me. “I could still jerk you off right now. This shouldn’t all be one-sided...”

“It is not,” I shot back, flashing instantly to the memory of her mouth on my cock. Alright, maybe it wouldn’t be possible to push my engorged shaft back into its sheath, but letting her touch me was a risk I couldn’t take right now.

Slithering out of her reach, deeper into the water where I knew she wouldn’t follow me. I wrapped my fist around my aching cock. I was no longer touching her, so I could not understand the stream of words coming from her pretty mouth. I could tell she sounded annoyed, urging me to come back to her.

She was still the most gorgeous thing I’d ever seen and it took only a few strokes of my eager dick to make my seed explode from me in a powerful orgasm. Her eyes were round, her mouth dropped open at the sight and my cock kicked hard in my hand, another jet of seed exploding from the tips.

When I was done, my tail was tingling but while my cock finally subsided and returned to its pouch, I didn’t feel truly satisfied. I wouldn’t, not until I’d filled my mate. I felt a little calmer when I washed up and returned to the shore to wrap my mate up in my coils again.

“Seriously, Zathar?” she huffed. “Why didn’t you let me do that for you?” She didn’t sound angry any longer, and just a flick of my tongue told me new arousal coated the insides of her thighs. She hadn’t dressed, despite being cold, just watched me touch myself while trying to urge me to return to her side. My mate was as addicted to my body as I was to hers, I wanted to preen but I wanted to mate her mouth even more.

I bent my head down to do just that and she tipped her chin up to meet me halfway. A sound reached me that made all thoughts of the pleasure with my mate fade into the background. Adrenaline surged through my body in a rush. “Go, get dressed now,” I said and put her down on her feet next to her things. I spun away to strap my weapons to my back while she asked me what was going on.

“A shout, Naga. And it was followed by a female scream. Cosima’s voice.” The humans all sounded distinctly different from anything on Serant, and I’d learned to recognize the weepy female’s fear responses the most, she made them all the time. That she screamed wouldn’t necessarily mean danger, but that Naga grunt... Those two combined were bad news.

At least Vera made the switch from this sexy moment to action without complaint. She was stamping her small feet into her foot coverings when I finished the final buckle. She hadn’t put her shirt back on yet, prioritizing what was needed to quickly move. Smart mate.

Shrugging the backpack onto my back, I waited only until she had her head through the head-hole of her shirt before I had her up in my arms. Speeding away from the idyllic clearing without a backward glance.

Chapter 15

Vera

I hated leaving a partner unsatisfied, it wasn't my style to take and not give. All of this between Zathar and me was new, it was a growing thing, but I was starting to see how much potential there was. Nowadays on Earth, alien/human pairings were not uncommon so it wasn't that hard to feel open-minded about hooking up with Zathar, even if his lack of legs made him less humanoid than most species I knew.

There were the Dragnell who were our allies and the wolf-like race often visited Earth. They were a little purist so they didn't often mate outside of their species, but that still left *many* other aliens. They were not part of the UAR that ruled almost the entire Alpha Quadrant, but they still visited for work. Or they were inside the territory and ruled by the UAR without being part of the ruling structure.

Even with Reid's initial criticism about my infatuation with Zathar, I knew I wasn't going to let it stop me. We would just take it slow and have a dating period before I accepted full commitment, even if I knew that's where this was headed. It was a little exhilarating to think, that I was going to be with Zathar for the rest of my life. I had no clue what that life was going to look like either, nothing like the endless loneliness I'd been destined for back on Earth, that was certain.

So when he denied my touch, I felt that first as rejection, like he was saying no to me, not to this moment. Then I got my head out of my ass; just one look at the heat sizzling from his azure eyes was enough to know that he was so into me he was bursting at the seams. It was sexy to watch him stroke his cock, and I loved how I could now properly enjoy the expression on his handsome face when he came. Came while stroking himself and looking at *my* naked body.

My thighs squirmed together, wetness seeping from my passage with how much it turned me on to see him pleasure himself. Okay, so maybe I'd been wrong in the past, maybe

having him touch himself wasn't because I wasn't willing to give. It was just an amazing addition to all the play we could have.

When he returned to shore and picked me up I still felt the urge to complain just a little, mostly to let him know I would have gladly helped him get off. That sexy smirk on his face just made me want to kiss him. I loved how much he was into me, and how easily he carried me or picked me up. I also loved how much he liked kissing me and how good it felt to tangle with that split tongue of his.

His expression turned to alarmed so quickly that I struggled for a moment to get my own head out of the lust-induced gutter he seemed to have gotten me stuck in just by being him. Then I was shifting gears right along with him, if he heard Cosima scream they couldn't be that far away. We needed to help them.

Getting my shoes and clothing on as fast as I could, I stuffed my pockets with several rose-colored smooth stones from the lake's shore. If there was fighting up ahead, I was going to need some projectiles, if not to do any real damage, they might at least be distractions that could provide Zathar with an opening he needed.

He picked me up when I was still fighting to get my t-shirt on, my light jacket still in one hand, and raced away through the woods. At least the pertinent bits were covered, but I was chilled from the lake and not properly dried. The wind whipped past us as Zathar sped up the mountain slope, which made me break out in goosebumps. So I burrowed against his chest, craning my head around to search for any sign of Cosima and whatever threat they were facing.

There was a rocky ridge rising on our left, the wall climbing higher as we passed. It felt like we were about to get boxed in, all we needed was a second wall on the other side and we'd be traveling down a funnel. I'd just thought it when I realized the landscape on that side was turning rocky too. Not so much a cliff as scattered blocks of stone, giant boulders that dotted the

forest. Like a giant had tossed some stones around willy-nilly.

Zathar didn't slow or attempt to make our passage quiet; was whatever he was hearing that urgent? And then I heard it too, the sounds of Naga voices as they exchanged words and Cosima's muffled sobbing. I was touching Zathar, so when we got closer I could make out what was being said.

"Where is he, Corin? I won't ask again," a male voice demanded, followed by the sound of a smacking noise. Were they hitting Zathar's friend? The reply was too softly spoken to be heard but the response was affront, anger, so it was probably something rude.

"Don't Msera," another said. "You know how loyal he is, he's not going to give up the Prince." And then changing tack that same male said, "Come on Corin, I just need to talk some sense into him, that's all. We're not going to hurt anyone." The new voice sounded more mature and in charge, I hoped that was a good thing. Maybe this wouldn't turn into a big fight like last time, it certainly didn't appear like there was a female Naga present, which I surmised could only be to our advantage.

Zathar didn't pause to listen or to make some kind of sneaky approach, he just burst from between the trees into the clearing and then barreled straight into the midst of the ongoing confrontation. I had only a brief moment to assess it all but I counted five Naga males that surrounded Corin down on the ground. A sixth was holding a sword to Reid's throat while Cosima had the pilot lady half in her lap, holding the injured female partially off the ground.

She might be muffling a sob, but her expression was determined. Then I had a bit of a surprise when I noticed that the pilot lady was blinking her eyes, her vision hazy as she tried to focus on what was going on. She was awake, which was a miracle if you asked me.

We burst between two Naga, Zathar swinging his body around to stand in front of the two girls on the ground, already

protecting them. He let me slide down his torso until my feet touched the ground. Keeping his arm curled around my shoulders, his long body twisted until he was partially in front of me too.

At least I still had a front-row seat to the confrontation. Corin was pinned down on the ground by a Naga male holding him by the back of his neck. Two others were holding spears or swords to keep him under control but Corin's long tail was coiling behind him, the tip twitching in agitation. He was dripping blood from his mouth, his silvery eyes glowing with a rage I hadn't expected to see in him; I'd pegged him as the calm one.

The one holding him down looked familiar to me, as did the one male calmly presiding over the entire scene. The dark blue male that was pinning Corin looked furious, I was certain he was the one that I'd heard speak first. When he shifted to look at Zathar and me, his eyes flicked to mine and grew even more enraged. Oh yeah, I knew that look, that was the guy I'd somehow managed to knock out. He was one pissed-off snake.

"Zathar," the calmer one said. His hair was black and in a tight braid over one shoulder almost all the way down to his belly. Unlike all the other Naga I'd seen, this one didn't have beautiful scales that shimmered, his were a dull color somewhere between dark blue and purple which blended extremely well with the dark soil and the foliage around us.

"Khawla," Zathar shot back, "There's no need to hurt my friend if you want to talk to me. Let Corin go, now." The steel that I heard in Zathar's voice was, if not unexpected, still new, and it shot a tingle through my body, straight for my clit. That was sexy, and it was extra hot when the one holding down Corin, despite his rage, shifted back to let Corin go.

Zathar's friend reared up as soon as he was let go, his body coiling in two quick twists that brought him back to our side. He was making a kind of rattling noise, fangs bared and

bloody, his silver eyes flashing. He wasn't going to forget being pinned down like that.

The male called Khawla shifted on his tail, lowering himself a tad so he wasn't as imposing as Zathar, a sign of deference, maybe even respect. "You know you can't defy the Queen, she's your mother..." He said, his voice trailing off when shockingly purple eyes shifted from my future mate to me, trailing over my face with obvious confusion marking his expression.

"So? She cast me out, she has no say over me or my actions. You know this is true Khawla, and you know that a spirit connection, a mate bond, is sacred. I have a mate, I do not wish to have Astrexa." Zathar's voice still had that steely note but on the name of the female Naga his mother wanted him to mate, it turned into a harsh kind of hiss.

Khawla reared back and so did several of the others, though the angry one leaned closer instead, baring his fangs. "Oh fuck off Msera, you're just embarrassed that my tiny mate kicked your scaly hide," Zathar said, this time amused as he flicked his hand at the angry Naga before glancing down at me. "Get your damn tail out of that knot, you're a better male than that."

Msera, as the dark-scaled Naga I'd accidentally bested was called, backed down with a hiss. Some of the others in the clearing were laughing, one even jabbed him with the blunt end of a spear in the shoulder. But Zathar's words did make him do it, he settled on his coiled tail with a surly expression, arms crossed over his wide chest, and dipped the sharp horn on his chin until it nearly jabbed him in the neck.

"Please, Zathar. I hear you but think of what you are giving up. Your position as a prime hunter, as the Prince of Thunder Rock Clan. A beautiful, coveted female for your mate, to be her consort when she becomes Queen... You can't seriously think to give that up, can you?" Khawla gestured over his shoulder as he spoke, directing his clawed fingers back the

way we'd come. Presumably, in the direction of the Thunder Rock Village.

I held my breath as I awaited Zathar's response. I knew what he was going to say, but my nerves spiked anyway. It was still hard to believe that any man, or male, could want me as much as Zathar did. So when he said so, it was like a balm to my soul. They were words I soaked up like I was parched, desperate for that kind of approval and affection.

Khawla looked at me again but this time Zathar hissed and shifted me until I was behind his back, out of sight. "Fine, a word of warning then. If you intend to camp in this area, you should know that our scouts have noticed increased Bitter Storm Clan activity on the border. This is not the safest location."

Then the male spun around and slithered out of sight between the trees, his body vanishing as my eyes simply couldn't keep track of him among the plants. The other Naga offered various parting greetings, from nods to a simple goodbye as they left. Only Msera didn't say anything, just raced away with an angry slash of his tail.

I exhaled in relief when they were gone. We'd escaped them, we were in the clear, and I couldn't quite believe that the adventure was over. Now we needed a place to settle down at, to make a life for ourselves. Tilting my head, I craned it back so I could look at the jagged mountain behind me. Were there caves there? Another ancient ruin we could appropriate?

"I know the way," Corin said while wiping the back of his hand over his bloody mouth with an annoyed look on his face. "The entrance to the caves beneath Ahoshage isn't far from here, it will make a good place for us to stay at."

He turned around, lifted the dazed but semi-conscious pilot from Cosima's lap, and started moving without a backward glance. Something had gotten him in a snit. Maybe that was just because those Naga from before had bested him, but my intuition told me it was something else.

“Welcome back,” Reid said, grinning and raising his shoulders in a shrug when I darted my eyes after Corin in question. “Yeah, no idea what’s up with him. He’s been grumpy since the moment Min-Ji woke up.”

I didn’t know any Min-Ji but I could deduce that it had to be the name of the pilot that Corin was carrying off into the woods. So he was upset because of her, had she said anything? No, Corin couldn’t understand a word that any of us humans said, and they couldn’t understand him. So why was he acting out?

“I see,” Zathar said in response, grinning back at Reid with his sharp fangs on display. It made Cosima whimper from my left but she still reached over to pull me into a tight hug. “Let’s follow him, Corin knows Ancestor Caves as though he is a Shaman.” I had heard Zathar mention a shaman before and now I was starting to get curious; who was this Naga? Would they know about the technology hidden in those caves? Corin seemed to know how to use some of it, did their shaman know even more?

I walked with Cosima, Zathar at our back and Reid leading the way. The woman talked to me in a quiet voice, recapping what happened to them once we’d gotten separated. Apparently, their flight through the woods that night was when the pilot had first woken up. Disoriented and scared she’d screamed for help several times, which had drawn some kind of beastly predator to them, but no Naga thankfully.

Privately I didn’t think it was a wonder that Corin was a little grumpy, he’d had to deal with not one but two hysterical women. Although the pilot hadn’t seemed all that scared when I’d seen her, mostly just dazed and confused. She had to be suffering from an even worse concussion than I had and weak from her comatose state on top of that.

“She said her name was Lee Min-Ji and she swore up and down during her most lucid moment that she didn’t know what she was transporting,” Reid confided over his shoulder. His long-legged stride was eating up the distance between us and

the silvery blue Naga up ahead and I was starting to grow a little short of breath just trying to keep up. I could feel Zathar's eyes boring into my back, silently offering to carry me but I refused. The danger was over, I could damn well walk up this little hill. Okay, it was a mountain slope but still. Cosima didn't seem out of breath walking, the slender woman was in much better shape than me.

All my thoughts of Min-Ji and how out of shape I was fled when we broke through the treeline. Another cave with a carved entrance. This one was very different from any of the ones I'd seen so far. The mountain rose sudden and jaggedly above it, with a scree slope leading to the top of the gate. It was carved as exquisitely as the last one, but while that one had depicted threatening Rakworms, this one was all flowering garlands. It was peaceful.

The clearing in front of the gate was a surprise too. The mountain slope cradled the place with two giant arms in a gentle curve and just to the left of the gate a structure remained that vaguely reminded me of a greenhouse. All the glass panes that had once made up the domed building were broken or gone, but a skeletal hexagonal frame still stood strong; shining a silvery lavender in the purple sunlight.

There were guardian statues too, one on either of the carved entrance into the mountain. Both were Naga and they too had remained relatively un-weathered, a male and a female statue that each raised a lantern high into the sky. Crystals glowed yellow inside each lantern, and I wondered if they might actually provide ample light at night.

"Woah, what is this place?" Cosima asked in wonder, echoing my own sentiment. I tilted my head to look at Zathar, hoping for an explanation but he hadn't been touching me so he hadn't understood. He had risen high up on his tail, towering over me with his arms crossed as he surveyed the place. It almost looked like he was uneasy, worried. His azure eyes were blown wide by the way his slitted pupils had expanded.

Corin had already disappeared through the gate, not hesitating, not looking back to see if we'd even followed him. Reid offered me another shrug and started to follow, not nearly as awed as I was, or maybe he was hiding his thoughts better. I went to jog after the man but Zathar's tail whipped out, catching me around my waist. "No, wait here while I check it out."

I huffed, about to protest but he was already sliding away, his hands gripping both his swords. Woah, he was really worried. I shared an uneasy look with Cosima, "I don't know what's up with him. Corin seems to think it's fine..." Maybe Zathar wasn't as at ease with being inside these Ancestor caves as he'd made it seem. He'd certainly been spooked when that holographic parade had popped up in the ancient city.

"Let's follow them," Cosima said bravely, a shudder wracking her slender shoulders that betrayed her nerves. I appreciated how hard she was trying to keep it together since we'd been reunited. Taking her hand for support, I led the way into the darkness.

We'd only just crossed the threshold when light flared to life inside of it and then we both gasped in shock at the sight that greeted us.

Chapter 16

Zathar

I braced myself as I entered the Ancestor cave beneath Ahoshaga, my scales rattling along my spine in discomfort. This place was the epicenter of so many ghost stories; why was Corin going here? This was a bad idea so I had to make sure it was safe before Vera stepped foot inside these caves. If it were up to me, I'd turn tail and leave right this instant. It appeared that it was not my decision, however, so I steeled myself and crossed beneath the decorative arch of the gate.

Opening my eyes as wide as I could to catch the light, my vision honed in on the unusual configuration of this place. The gate led through a small antechamber directly into a large circular room that delved deep into the mountain. A walkway surrounded the 'pit' and doors led off it at intervals, spiraling all the way down. A strange round platform was to one side of the pit as well, with a railing that hung open above the hole. Each of the doorways was flanked by a set of windows.

If I didn't know any better, I'd say this was a tiny village inside a mountain, with the bottom of the pit functioning as a town square. It was quaint, and cozy, not at all what I expected of a place that inspired so many stories. A place so spooky that hunters tried to avoid going there at all costs.

Corin had one door open at the top of the circle, only the tip of his tail sticking out. Reid was next to the door, leaning against the door jamb as he watched what my friend was doing. Light flared to life just as I heard a noise behind me, the scuff of foot coverings on rock. Throwing up a hand to cast shade over my face, my nictitating membranes slid over my eyes to help me adjust to brightness.

Vera and Cosima were right behind me, staring with open mouths at the little village inside the mountain. Vera looked awed and happy, and she looked beautiful silhouetted by the fading sunlight at her back and the soft glow of the yellow

crystals in the ceiling. I moved because I just couldn't help myself, she was like a magnet, always drawing me closer.

“Woah, Zathar, this place is amazing! It could be exactly what we need, don't you think?” she asked me as soon as I curled the tip of my tail around her ankle. I grunted in response, wondering the same thing, but where was the catch? This place was supposed to be haunted, this looked too good to be true and it was obvious that Corin knew his way around it.

Still, I nodded at her, “Yeah, it does look promising.” And with its location, we could still reach Artek if we needed the Shaman's help, but we were out of the way enough not to be bothered by any of the Clans. Corin appeared from the room, the pilot slung over one shoulder and his hands covered by some kind of dark grease.

“Zathar, inform the humans this room is off-limits, it's the control hub. We can each pick quarters to bed down in, I'm taking Min-Ji to the medicine room. Don't disturb us.” He spun on his tail and entered the next door down the walkway, the human over his shoulder lifting her head just enough to give me a vacant-eyed, confused look.

Turning to Vera, I repeated what my friend said, and she passed the message along yet again to the other two humans. Then I found myself trailing after them, still clutching one sword in hand, my senses on alert. They were opening doors along the top walkway that circled the pit as they checked out each space.

I expected a ghost or a phantom to leap out at us from behind every door but all that met us was dusty rooms. Apartments Vera called them with delight. Before I could really process what was happening, Reid and Cosima each claimed one such place for themselves and Vera was staking out the next one with equal excitement.

I eyed the space with trepidation, glancing over my shoulder at the hazy violet light filtering in from the cave entrance.

Wouldn't it be wiser to sleep outside for now, so that we could properly check each place tomorrow, during full daylight?

"You can have the next one Zathar, they're all the same in size," Vera told me, and my whirling mind ground to a halt. What? Why did she say that, I was sleeping where she was. Did she really think I was going to leave her alone in here? In this haunted place? She was smiling at me as though she'd said something perfectly normal but it wasn't until I shoved my own worries aside that I realized she was nervous too. Not about ghosts, she didn't believe in those, something else.

Was it our mating? She wasn't having doubts now, was she? I was about to ask when Cosima dodged around me, nearly tripping over a coil of my tail. She swung an arm around Vera's shoulder, smiling brightly my way, "Sorry Zathar, let me have a word with Vera for a quick second."

The two females disappeared into the apartment, stepping out of sight around the corner. My tail, which had loosely been coiled around Vera's ankle, tightened on instinct and I allowed her leg to drag it with her as she moved. I did not want her to be out of my reach in this place; not until I was sure we were safe here. I had to talk to Corin to figure that out, but I couldn't interrupt what he was doing right now.

That was my reasoning for keeping in contact, it wasn't because I meant to spy on their conversation. I really didn't intend for that to happen but once I caught their hushed voices, my ears tingled and I leaned in closer anyway. A flush stole along my cheekbones that darkened my scales, I shouldn't do this, but I couldn't seem to stop myself. I wanted to know what human females said to each other when they thought a male wasn't listening.

"Whew Vera, you are one lucky girl, you know that right?" Cosima murmured. Vera sounded defensive and confused when she asked why that would be and I could easily imagine her standing there with her arms crossed over her chest. After what she'd told me of her life back on Earth, I assumed that she didn't consider herself a very lucky female at all.

“We were all supposed to be dead, and here you are with this hunky male after you, declaring you his fated mate and all that. You’ve got a real chance at living, a chance at something good and amazing! And I’m going to have to live vicariously through you, you get that right?” I had never heard Cosima string so many words together, possibly because she wasn’t shaking in her foot coverings in fear right now. And unbelievably, it sounded like she was advocating on my behalf of all things, urging my mate to be with me.

“I see,” Vera said, amused. “You don’t think it’s too fast? Or too strange? We’ve barely gotten to our feet here.” She moved her legs, pressing one against the other, pinching my tail between her calves. I instantly knew that she was letting me know that she knew I was listening in. Busted. I should feel bad for doing so but this conversation was far too interesting to move away, so I curled the flexible tip of my tail a little more tightly around her appendage, making sure she knew I wasn’t leaving.

Cosima huffed, “This is a new world, we can make up our own rules here.” She sounded fierce and determined as she said it but her next words were much less certain. Her voice wobbled a little as she spoke, “I had a fiance on Earth you know. Time could be short, you should grab it with both hands while you have a chance at happiness.”

The sound of footsteps was my only warning, I twisted my body out of the way as the small female rushed out. Her eyes were leaking again and she was dashing them away with her fingers, barely able to see where she was going as she ran. I kept careful watch until she’d ducked into the chamber she’d claimed as her own. Worried that she might make a misstep and tumble over the railing and fall to her death on the quaint village square below.

Vera’s hand on my arm and her warmth against my side made me angle my head to look down at the silky crown of pale hair above her round face. She was staring after Cosima as well, a sad look on her face. “I don’t think Cosima led a very happy life, but she’s right. I shouldn’t dither, I shouldn’t

think about what others might think when they're not even here. Join me in these chambers, Zathar?"

I grinned, my heart speeding up. Thank you, Cosima. I vowed to myself that I would try to be more patient with her and watch over her like I would over Vera. I clearly owed her for talking Vera down from her nerves.

*

Vera

Zathar swung me up in his arms and kissed the daylights out of me as soon as the door closed behind us. I'd been ready to just say screw it to all the dust in this place, I wanted to see where that kiss would lead us. Zathar was more disciplined than that as it turned out. Taking off his huge backpack he'd sacrificed one of the smaller furs inside it for a cleaning rag.

He'd gone outside to gather some supplies, urging me to come with him and telling me the others should be there too. Then he'd shown us all how to craft our own hand brooms from the vegetation present. Mine was a bit lopsided, and branches kept slipping out because I hadn't managed to tie it tight enough. Cosima turned out to be a total perfectionist, and she remade hers three times before she was satisfied she had it right.

While we humans set about sweeping the dust from our chosen rooms and the upper walkway, Zathar went to get water. Disappearing deeper into the several stories tall center of the little village. I'd seen the look of trepidation on his face, but he'd masked it well. If I leaned over the railing I could see him putter around at the circular center all the apartments looked down on.

He returned with two earthenware jars in his arms filled with water. After that, the four of us made short work of the remaining dirt and debris. Corin showed up, without the pilot, by the time we'd handed out the furs available to make beds for everyone. We were just sitting down at the entrance to watch the sunset while we ate.

“You worked hard I see,” he said as he sat down with his own ration cake. He coiled his tail around himself, almost huddling together as though he was cold. Zathar in comparison had his tail spread out, a good portion of it curled around me, and the rest soaking up the remaining rays of sunlight, his scales sparkling a pretty blue.

Zathar twisted his head to look at his friend, “How is the pilot, is she healing?” Corin’s expression tightened briefly but he nodded. Affirming that she was getting back to good health in a few clipped words. He was acting like a completely different person from before but when Zathar expressed what had been worrying him since we got here, his expression cleared up and he started to laugh.

“Zathar, this place isn’t haunted, there’s just a lot of working technology here. That’s why there’s flickering lights, strange sounds, and even sightings. It’s just holograms. I’ve been working on restoring some of it with the Shaman’s help. We’ll have working power for light and heat, and running water once I get the pumps to work. Trust me, this is a fantastic place to live in.”

The possibility of running water, of actual plumbing made *me* super excited too and I eagerly prodded Corin with questions about it. With Reid pitching in his own when he realized what we were talking about. I told Corin about our experience with the holographic parade down in the city and now the male was practically vibrating with excitement. If not for his need to be here, I imagined he might have marched off to visit that hologram himself.

Cosima didn’t participate in the conversation, she picked at her food and stared at the remains of the greenhouse. Her head tilted at an angle, I didn’t think she was actually seeing anything on this planet, lost in her own memories. She’d been reminded of her life back on Earth earlier, and it was clear that she’d been crying a lot again, her eyes red-rimmed.

I didn’t know how to help her and was still contemplating that when Zathar picked me up and carried me inside. The

sound of Reid and Corin laughing behind us echoed in the tunnel entrance, followed by a loud whistle from Reid. A blush was stealing up my cheeks but I felt elated too. This felt like a thing friends would do and that wasn't something I ever really had. Cosima was right, I had a real chance at happiness, and I should grab onto it with both hands.

Zathar, the kinship I felt with the others here, it was going to be good. We could make a life here, not the life I thought I would have. Something better.

Chapter 17

Vera

Zathar put me down in the still nearly empty bedroom of the apartment we'd claimed. A pile of luscious furs was spread out in one corner, the bedding softened by stacks of soft moss that Zathar had gathered. It really did look like a round nest, especially with the branches he'd woven together to form a round barrier for the edges. The branches were much like willow saplings, fresh and flexible.

"Undress," he husked, and my skin broke out in goosebumps. Okay, he was going to jump right in, was he? I could work with that. I'd made my choice anyway, this would stop me from getting cold feet. Zathar was doing as he told me himself, shucking the pair of crossed weapon belts from his chest, and raking the leather cord from his shoulder-length blue hair.

At the front of his hips, I could already see his scales part, the bifurcated tip of his cock sliding out, a deep purple-blue, shimmering with drops of precum. My passage pulsed with arousal in response. I wasn't going to risk his taste tonight, I wanted to make sure that he knew I was on board every step of the way.

His pupils were narrow slits in his eyes, his split tongue flicking at the air. "Hurry up, mate. I need you," he said. I'd frozen in place as I watched his sinuous body move while he stripped what little he wore. Wetting my lips, I dropped my hands to the hem of my shirt and yanked it over my head. I toed off my sneakers and shimmied out of my pants, leaving me in my underwear. A look Zathar clearly appreciated, his cock had slipped out completely, the monstrous length reaching up for his belly, and the dual tip writhing.

In a few twists and curls, his long tail coiled around me, pinning my arms to my side as he lifted me in the air. My body heated, this was so alien, so illicit. To be held like this, restrained. I knew that Zathar was a good guy, one who'd held

back for me more than once. Yet right now? I was seeing the conquering Prince, I was seeing the side of him that took, that dominated, and I loved it.

“You’ve made your choice, haven’t you, Vera?” he said, his voice resonant and deep as he pulled me closer to him, lifting me until my face was right in front of his. I nodded, and the scales along his sharp cheekbones seemed to grow darker in color, flushing a dark cobalt. All the stripes and swirls that patterned the front of his body glowed with blue light, the mating display, his sigils.

“Say the words, I need to hear them,” he ordered. His eyes were boring into mine but he still moved us, his body sliding over the edge of the nest. He was lowering me until I was lying down, his tail moving over my body as he re-positioned me just the way he wanted. A coil of his tail around my waist, curling with a heavy weight over my throat, lashing my wrists together just above my head.

He’d tied me up as effectively as if he’d used silk rope, the touch of his warm, dry scales against my skin jacking up my arousal. I’d never let a lover tie me up before and it was a revelation to discover how much I liked this. From the way his grip gently tightened on my wrists if I struggled to the pressure of that coil on my neck. He was in complete control of me this time and it set fire to my blood.

“Yes Zathar, take me. I’m yours,” I said because he was holding me in suspense. Waiting for me to give him that signal before he let himself off the leash. As the words left my mouth, he hissed in pleasure, his head tilting back as he looked at me through hooded eyes.

“Yes. That’s it,” he murmured, lifting my legs and gliding my panties down them with his claws. I felt the tips scrape along my skin, just a tiny hint of pressure, of the danger he presented. I was dealing with a Naga, a creature not quite civilized, and a little barbaric.

Bared to him, he dipped his body to flick his long, split tongue through my folds. His hands around my thighs to pin

me open. I moaned, arching off the soft furs as the agile tip curled around my clit and tugged.

Then he was lapping at me in earnest, my body tightening with heat, climbing sharply to the pinnacle. A finger slipped into my passage, followed by a second, and then a third. Each time I got close to the edge, he withdrew his talented tongue, his eyes lifting to my face to flash me a fanged grin. If my hands hadn't been pinned above my head with his tail, I would have fisted them in his hair and yanked him closer, holding him in place as I took my pleasure.

All I could do was urge him on and beg him to let me come. "Not yet, you're so small, I'm making sure you'll take me," he told me. His fingers moved inside of me, stretching me as he spread them. I already felt full but a glance down his body at his cock told me he was right. He was huge, and if I wasn't so turned on I would be daunted by that.

"Please, Zathar," I begged, "I need you. I'll be okay, I can take it." He lifted his head from between my thighs, cocking it to the side as he ran his reptilian eyes over my face. Then he was moving, rising above me and I thought this was it, he was finally going to fuck me with that monstrous snake-cock.

His fingers remained embedded in my core as he curved over me, his cock bumping along my folds, the writhing tips leaking wetness on my mount. "You think you are ready? You think you can take this?" he drawled. Fisting his length, he pumped it through my slick folds, the hard length brushing along my sensitive clit.

At the same time, he made a come hither motion with his fingers inside my passage, rubbing them just right along my g-spot, and stars exploded behind my eyes. My core clamped down hard on his invasion, soaking him with my release. "Zathar, aah," I groaned, spine arching off the furs, my arms instinctively yanking on his masterful restraints.

"Yes, Vera. You are ready for me," he murmured as I panted in the aftermath. With a claw, he tugged on the cup of my bra, somehow the one clothing item I was still wearing. My breast

spilled out and he repeated the motion with the other. Leaning down, he curled his long tongue around one tip and tugged, and it felt like he was tugging on my clit at the same time. A sharp lance of pleasure made my passage contract around his fingers.

With a wet, lurid noise, he withdrew his digits from my passage and I moaned again. "Oh... so empty." I hadn't realized just how full he'd made me feel with his intruding fingers but now that they were gone I was so empty it ached.

"Hush, I've got you," he told me. "I know what you need." He ran his wet fingers along his cock, coating himself with my juices and then he lined up the wriggling, bifurcated tip. I groaned as I felt them slide into me. That wasn't too much, but it felt odd. The tips moved independently but worked together to widen me for his invasion.

The part of his tail coiled around my middle slid down, lifting my hips up for a better angle. His eyes met mine, glowing and fierce, they were filled with a promise. His claim on me. With a single shift of his hips, he pressed inside of me, my body bowing up to meet him. It was too much, it burned as he stretched me, yet it felt so good. I felt him move inside of me, felt the tips of cock twist and curl.

My body clamped down on him so hard he couldn't move as pleasure washed over me, sharp and fierce; it caught me by surprise as much as it did him. Smug satisfaction washed over his face when it happened, his cheekbones flushed, azure strands of hair clinging to the nubbed ridges that formed his brows.

"Yes, that's it," he hissed, "Pull me in. I will seed you, my mate. I will fill you to bursting." I groaned in response, the words painting a vivid picture of what he was about to do to me. My passage eased around him and then he was in to the hilt, filling me to bursting. The tips of his cock moved and I could feel that, feel the way they writhed inside of me, stroking my insides.

His pace was fierce as he thrust between my thighs, pounding me into the furs with each pass of his massive erection. I understood now why this was a claiming, why this was the point of no return. I could feel it, threats that wove us together as we shared this passion, this pleasure. His eyes never left mine and it felt like I was staring straight into his soul, seeing the passionate, fierce heart of him and he was looking right back into mine.

When we first met I would have been scared to be this exposed, to show this much of my heart to anyone. I had before never been able to trust someone with it, my family would have crushed it, *had* crushed it, without a second thought. But this was Zathar, and he was exposing himself as much as I was exposed to him, it was an equal trade and combined, that made it so much more. The two of us combined was better than apart.

I came with his name ripping from my throat, my scream loud enough that the others couldn't possibly have missed it. Zathar's hips stuttered and then he was right there with me, falling over the edge together, curled up safe in his coils.

His seed bathed my insides, something I'd never been able to feel before. Hot, it coated me, gushing out and flowing over my thighs. I vaguely recalled how much there had been of it last time, and now was no different. He had well and truly *seeded* me.

*

Zathar

My body was still shaking from the mind-blowing pleasure we'd just shared when I gently uncoiled my tail from my mate's slender wrists. She was limp in my coils, her gaze heavy, her cheeks flushed, and her soft pale hair a tousled mess along the furs. She was resplendent like this and if this was all I could have, I would be a happy, lucky male.

She moaned when I slipped my cock from her silken heat, and I took a moment to appreciate the way she looked. Her

flushed pink lips, the narrow passage below that was gaping open and spilling with my seed. My cock twitched, eager to do that all over again.

“Are you sore, Vera?” I asked. She was pink and her passage drew me, but I saw no signs of chafing. Then again, I’d made very sure she was ready to receive me, she’d stretched so beautifully around my invading member. I groaned as I remembered how that felt, how that tight grip as she first came had clasped me, freezing me in place.

She shook her head, barely opening her eyes as she did so and I loved the way her pale lashes made crescents on her cheeks when she closed them. “Not sore,” she added, her voice husky from how ferociously she’d moaned and screamed for me. My mate was noisy and I loved every second of it. I didn’t even think she was aware of how much sound she made for me.

“Roll over, beautiful. We’re not done.” Her blue orbs blinked up at me in confusion, then dropped to my still-hard cock. Her mouth opened and I couldn’t stop myself from leaning in to taste her there, to mate her mouth as I’d mated her sweet, tight little channel.

“Really? You’re not done?” she murmured, but I saw the flash of heat in her eyes. She rolled onto her hands and knees and as her legs pressed together some of my seed was pushed out and gushed along her thighs. I groaned, that was so sexy that I could feel it at the base of my cock, more seed preparing to fill her.

Coiling my tail, I supported her beneath her belly, curling the very tip around one soft breast and flicking it along the turgid nipple. She moaned, her spine arching and her channel opening for me. With a nudge of a coil, she widened her stance and then I lined us up and slid inside her in a single, smooth thrust.

“Zathar! Aah!” she screamed, and I flicked my tail around so that I could press the tip along her little button. Stroking her with my cock and my tail in tandem she shattered around me

in minutes, her passage clamping down around my writhing member. It felt like she sucked me deeper, pulled me to the core of her as my seed erupted for the second time that night, filling her.

I growled, “Vera, Mate. You are mine.” As the pleasure washed white hot over me. My second load of seed filled her, not nearly as much as the first but I was satisfied that she was now properly mine.

I rolled us over, making sure that Vera didn't end up in any of the sticky mess we'd created on the furs. A fine sheen of sweat coated the back of her neck and made some of her pale hair stick to her forehead. She looked beautiful and exhausted but I wasn't ready to untangle myself from her yet. “Rest, I will take care of you,” I assured her. With my body coiled around her and a single clean fur pulled over her shoulders, I knew she was warm and safe. She was asleep in minutes and I reveled in that trust, and in the nearness she let me have, with my cock still embedded deep inside her and my body curled around her.

Chapter 18

Vera

Everything felt different when I woke up that morning. Like something fundamental had shifted inside of me, something huge. Zathar was curled around me, his warm scales pressed to my skin in many places where he'd wrapped me in his long coils. There were furs over me to keep me warm and a pleasant ache between my legs warned me of all the things we'd been up to in the late hours of the night.

My clit tingled just thinking about it and though Zathar was asleep, I saw how his tongue flicked out and tasted the air in response. It was impossible to hide it from him if I was turned on, asleep or awake, he'd always know. I kinda liked that, I just hoped that it didn't have the same effect on other Naga as it had on him, that would be awkward.

I was surprisingly clean though, which had to mean that Zathar had taken care of that after I'd fallen asleep. He must have been very careful not to wake me up, considering the giant mess we'd made. I flushed, there had been far too many fluids, if he was human I would have worried he'd end up dehydrated.

His tongue flicked out again and then he let out this low rumbling growl. "Ah, my mate, already eager for me again? I will oblige, don't worry." There was a teasing note to his voice that I loved, and I loved the warm, affectionate look in his azure eyes even more when he opened them. The slitted pupils had appeared so foreign before but now I loved how they looked and I could read the expressions in them easily.

"Oh yeah? Are you sure you still have more seed to give me?" I teased back, laughing at the affronted look on his face. He rolled me over, pinning me down into the clean furs, and fused his mouth to mine, claiming my tongue with his. Showing me what he planned to do between my legs in a moment; I couldn't wait.

A sharp knock on the door had us both freeze in place. “You guys awake?” Reid demanded, and he rapped his knuckles on our door a second time with a loud cracking noise. “Come on, we need to discuss our next course of action. Everyone is waiting.”

I groaned and Zathar hissed, “They can wait.” Shaking my head, I nudged him against his shoulder and he let me up until I was sitting and he was still lying down in the furs next to me, his coils all around me.

“They shouldn’t, we already kept them awake last night...” I felt my face grow hot as I thought about that. I had been loud, and Zathar hadn’t been quiet either. They would have been able to hear us. That was a little awkward but I wasn’t going to make that worse by making them wait while they could hear us having sex. That was even worse.

“You are beautiful, and I want you,” he said, reaching up to cup one of my bared breasts. I didn’t recall when I’d lost the bra last night but I didn’t see any sign of it now. Smiling at the heat and appreciation on his face, I pushed his hand away and leaned in to give him a quick peck on the lips.

“Come on, I’m hungry anyway,” I said and that was all it took to get him to move. He offered me my clothing with a smile, explaining that he’d gone out to wash them last night after I fell asleep. I almost teared up at how thoughtful that gesture was. It was my only outfit right now and I was extremely grateful that they’d been cleaned and dried overnight, there was nothing worse than pulling on a dirty pair of panties.

Once I’d checked the odd oval mirror in the attached bathroom-type room in this little ‘apartment,’ I was ready to go. I had only been able to finger brush my hair so far but Zathar had procured a comb from one of the many pockets on his backpack, eagerly offering it to me. For the first time in days, I felt kind of normal, if I discounted the sex ache between my legs.

Everyone had gathered at the cave entrance again, sitting on the soft purple grass in the early morning sunlight. Min-Ji, the pilot lady, was sitting next to Cosima, and picking at a ration cake. Her Asian features were still a little pale but her dark brown eyes were alert for the first time, focusing on Zathar the moment we joined them.

“Morning everyone,” I said with a wave, avoiding the knowing grin on Reid’s face or the saucy wink Cosima gave me. “Hi, I’m Vera and this is Zathar,” I said and I stuck my hand out to the pilot. Right now, it didn’t matter whether she might have known what she was transporting or not, she just woke up from a coma; we’d deal with it when she’d recuperated.

She shook my hand in return and when Zathar followed my example, she swallowed hard once and then shook his hand too. “I’m Min-Ji, thank you for saving me.” She touched her hand to her head where she’d suffered severe head trauma.

Zathar assured her that she was safe here and that he and Corin would make sure it remained that way. When I translated, Min-Ji’s eyes grew larger. “Wait, you can understand what they say?” Her eyes darted to where Corin sat, his coils draped over a big flat rock a little distance away, sunning himself in the warming purple sunlight.

“Yeah, that’s because I’m Zathar’s mate. We share a spirit connection, it allows us to understand each other’s language. But only when we touch,” I explained to her. She narrowed her eyes as she took in Zathar, towering over me on his long tail. He wasn’t paying attention to our conversation but staring off into the far distance, a worried frown on his handsome face.

“Uh, Vera. You do realize you guys aren’t touching right now, do you?” Cosima pointed out while darting a finger from him to me. Startled, I looked down at my body and discovered she was right, he didn’t have the tip of his tail curled around my ankle or anything like that. I’d gotten so used to always having that touch that I had just assumed it was there...

Zathar tilted his head down to me, a smile on his face that temporarily erased the worry from before. “That’s because I seeded you my mate, our spirit connection is complete. We no longer require touch to understand.” The tip of his tail lifted into the air, gently brushing along my cheek. “Although, I’d gladly do so anyway.”

Trying not to openly swoon I cupped his tail against my cheek and rubbed the smooth scales along my skin. “Alright. I got it. What’s the plan for today? Is Corin going to get the water to work?” I was dying to see if we could restore the bathrooms and have actual indoor plumbing. Right now we had a designated spot behind some rocks and trees a small distance from the entrance. I wasn’t looking forward to having to squat in the woods for the rest of my life.

“Iave,” Zathar said, and that one name was enough to put my eager plans for this place on hold. It also yanked Corin out of his reverie, he lifted his head to pierce Zathar with his silvery blue gaze and gave my mate a sharp nod, nearly jabbing himself with the horn on his chin. “We need to find out what happened to our friend and the two humans with him.”

He was right, Iave, Kalani, and Naomi had gotten separated from us on that first day. Zathar’s friend and the two humans were very likely dead considering the overwhelming force of Bitter Storm Clan warriors they’d been up against. That didn’t mean we shouldn’t try to find out what their fate had been.

I tried to picture what Zathar’s other friend had looked like, recalling mostly the midnight blue of his scales and his overwhelming size. Iave had wielded a giant battle ax, with scars crisscrossing his chest. Honestly, if anyone could make it, it was a warrior like him, he looked indomitable. Maybe that’s why Zathar hadn’t given up hope yet; he knew how strong his friend was. I just hoped that Naomi and Kalani had made it too, but Naomi’s legs were paralyzed, it wasn’t as if she could run when cornered.

Corin slid off his rock, approaching us silently through the soft purple grass. “I think we need to revisit the place where we were separated, maybe we can find tracks, or discover what happened.” His eyes went to Zathar and then to me as if he was considering what to say next. “I suggest I go alone. You can understand the humans, and you should stay here to protect your mate.”

My heart sped up at the thought that Zathar might insist on going with his friend. I didn’t want to be clingy but I really didn’t think it was a good idea to be without at least one of our Naga friends here. What if hunters from Thunder Rock showed up? What if Astrexa tried again?

But I shouldn’t have worried, Zathar simply nodded, “Alright. Be careful Corin, don’t take any unnecessary risks.” He leaned forward to clasp his friend by the shoulder and briefly pressed his forehead against that of his friend. When the two let up, Corin hooked a small backpack from the ground near the entrance and swung it over his shoulder. He’d already prepared as if he’d set his mind to this plan before it had even been uttered.

He darted away at a quick pace, his long body curling through the grass, silver blue and bright against the darker purple ground. Over his shoulder, he called out, “I’ll do whatever Iave would do for one of us. We owe it to him.” The words made Zathar growl and laugh at the same time, which could only mean that Iave was a risk-taker but at least my mate was losing some of the worried tension now that a rescue for his friend was underway.

“Where is he going?” Min-Ji asked with a gasp, rising to her feet in a rush to stare after Corin. She swayed a little, still unsteady, but shook off Cosima’s help while she frowned, nibbling at her bottom lip. I was surprised by her response, she looked almost scared that Corin had left.

When I explained Corin’s mission to her, Reid was nodding, looking relieved. He seemed disgruntled that he hadn’t been asked to help out, but that was it. Min-Ji, however, shook her

black hair from her eyes and exclaimed, “But he’s our doctor! We can’t risk him.” Ah, so she was worried about her health, worried she might still need his aid while she was healing.

Zathar lowered himself on his tail until he was only a little taller than me and swung an arm around my shoulders, pulling me close to his chest. I was pretty sure that he was trying to make himself look a little less threatening to the human who was clearly in distress while at the same time using the opportunity to touch me. “Corin only knows the basics, if we need medical aid, I will retrieve the Shaman. Artek will gladly help us.”

When I explained that to the pilot she didn’t seem to feel any more at ease, staring anxiously in the direction Corin had disappeared in. In an effort to distract everyone, I gestured at the cave entrance at my back. “Come on, while Corin is off on his mission, we have our own work cut out for us. We need to make this place habitable.”

“And defensible,” Zathar added, “Weapon lessons first. Translate for me, mate.” Soon I found myself target practicing with a sling for my rocks while Zathar was instructing Reid on how to use one of his swords. The two were sparring at a slow pace, just going through the motions and I only occasionally had to call out something to clarify for Reid. He was a natural at picking it all up, or possibly he had prior training that he could lean on.

Cosima had nearly fainted at the suggestion that she learn to fight, and Min-Ji had bowed out, saying she was still recuperating. The two women had gone inside and I could hear them talk as they worked on cleaning up more of the spaces on the upper walkway. There was a water well all the way down below and they’d gone to fetch water so they could give everything a proper scrub.

I was contemplating the next big issue, food, when a scream issued from inside the caves. I clutched my sling tightly in my hand and sprinted inside. I was closer to the entrance so I beat Zathar and Reid by a couple of feet. Rushing through the

opening, a stone at the ready for whatever threat the girls had uncovered.

I didn't expect the hologram projected just inside the entrance of a life-sized Naga male. At first, it looked to me like the pale figure was real and I let my stone fly before I could check the impulse. It went right through the shape, briefly making the apparition flicker. It looked so much like a computer glitching out that I sagged in relief and started to laugh. Especially when I saw that Cosima had sprawled on the floor and crawled backward with a hand over her mouth in shock. And the cherry on top was Zathar hissing and growling while he slashed his sword through the hologram.

"Easy," I said, still chuckling while I grabbed onto his arm to stop him. "It's not real. A picture, not a ghost. Don't worry Zathar, Cosima must have triggered something when cleaning. Can you hear what he's saying? Breathe and listen." He calmed down at my touch, lowering his weapon and staring intently as the holographic image reshaped back into the shimmering, nearly white shape of a Naga.

Like the ones inside the underground city, he wore a robe and a sash beneath it that covered his hips, but his chest was bare. He was nearly white, with a hint of gold glimmering in his eyes and the long hair swirling around his shoulders. His face was narrow and elegant, a bit more refined than Zathar's savage but beautiful features.

"Welcome brothers and sisters, if you found this place you are welcome to take shelter here. I am recording this in hopes of passing on the history of our people. I hope you will learn from their mistakes while taking the resources I have gathered here to restore the Naga race back to its previous glory."

The gold eyes of the hologram seemed to look right through us as the male spoke, aimed at a camera we couldn't see. Zathar was no longer scared but transfixed instead. Head cocked to the side he listened to every spoken word as the male expounded about his duty as a Shaman to care not just for the current generation but all the ones that came after.

Everyone else had settled down now that it was clear there was no threat. Since they couldn't understand what the hologram was saying, they were quietly talking to each other. Reid was trying to figure out what Cosima had done that had triggered this apparition.

“Two hundred years ago,” the Shaman in the recording said, “A great catastrophe befell our planet, but the worst of it was the fear of technology that came from it and the distrust of our government. Don't let that happen again, technology can be your friend, and you'll need it to restore our grand species. We fought among ourselves, we lost the ability to create, and now we are devolving into the savages we were before. We can't let that happen, we need to fight this, and bring life again to our beautiful cities. And above all, we shouldn't let this stop us from exploring the great universe beyond our planet once more.”

The hologram winked out on that final declaration in an unnatural fashion as if the recording was cut off before the Shaman was done saying his piece. What he said was stunning anyway. It sounded like Zathar's people had once been space-faring, or at the very least, on the cusp of it. How was it possible for an entire race to devolve back to a tribal time of hunters and gatherers after such a high?

Reid quietly asked me what I'd just learned and as I started to explain it to him, I kept my eyes on Zathar's rather thunderstruck expression. He'd known his kind was capable of building giant cities before but maybe he hadn't realized they could make sky-ships or the technology his Clan scavenged from them.

Turning to him so I could ask him how he felt about it, I was startled when he suddenly moved, dodging around Cosima near the door to the room that Corin had declared off-limits. I didn't hesitate to follow him inside it, and Reid did too; stunned to discover a room decked out in screens and a metal desk. Lots of lights were blinking all over the place, with diagrams being displayed on several of the screens.

One screen showed a frozen image of the Shaman Naga from the hologram in the hallway and Zathar was hovering in front of that one. With a clawed finger, he traced a series of symbols below the image, his mouth moving as he tried to decipher it. “I think it says this picture was made about a hundred years ago... But Corin can read this better, he’ll have to confirm it.” His eyes were huge as he lifted them to my face. “How can my kind change from building cities to the life I know in only a dozen or so generations?”

“It doesn’t,” I said. The ruins were much older than that, especially that big city Zathar and I had spent a night in. Thousands of years maybe. He must have read the numbers wrong but I didn’t say that, Corin could check it when he returned.

Zathar’s nubbed brows lowered as he frowned, eyes returning to the frozen image of the Shaman on the screen. “This male does not even look like any Naga I know. Look, he has no horn on his chin, see that?” He was right, the Shaman had a bare chin, which looked strange and nude to me. That was either because he’d removed his horn, or was born without. Now I wondered if the Naga in the hologram in the city had been hornless as well, we hadn’t been close enough to really see that.

“Zathar! We’ve got a problem,” Corin’s voice yelled out from behind us, jolting us away from the bank of screens. He darted into the control room with a big frown on his face, “Why are you in here? I told you not to come here.”

Chapter 19

Zathar

I jolted guiltily away from the viewscreens that lined the wall and table inside this room. Raising my hands in the air, I told my friend, “I haven’t touched anything, I swear. There was a picture in the hallway, I thought it came from here.” Pointing at the still-frozen image of the Shaman on the screen I offered that as proof to my friend.

Why was he even back? He couldn’t have possibly found Iave in so short a time but I leaned to look around him anyway, searching the hallway to see if his hulking shape might be there. Corin pressed his hand to my shoulder, “No, I didn’t get that far. We’ve got another problem, a big one.” His eyes went to the image of the supposed Shaman, “I see you found Vrash’s recordings of this place and what happened in the past. We’ll talk about that later. Come with me first.”

I shared a worried look with Vera and she shrugged, following after Corin as he headed back for the cave exit. “Khawla warned us there were Bitter Storm movements on the border, right?” Corin said just as we reached the exit of the cave, he pointed for the border to their territory on our left and I nodded. The master scout had indeed said so, but I hadn’t worried, Bitter Storm liked to make a show of force from time to time, but they’d never attacked before.

“I think they’re going to move on the village soon. I saw war machines Zathar. Trebuchets on wheels, a ballista, and more Bitter Storm warriors than I could count. This is dire. They outnumber Thunder Rock three times over, and our former Clan will be caught completely by surprise when they start moving. And it will be soon too, they looked like they’re almost ready.”

I stared in shock as I tried to process all the implications, my mind already whirling with all the options we had. Ignore this? Let Bitter Storm kill Thunder Rock and take their territory? Warn Thunder Rock and risk being caught? Pack up

our things again and move even though we'd just found a place that might work for us?

Behind me, Vera was translating what Corin had said to the others and Cosima's eyes started leaking in the noisiest fashion almost immediately. Min-Ji was taking it in stride, mostly staring at Corin as my mate talked. While Reid was clutching the sword I'd given him in a white-knuckled grip. "We've got to do something," he said when she was finished. "It's not like Bitter Storm will leave us in peace once they're done conquering the Thunder Rock Clan."

Vera turned her head to meet my eyes, giving me a firm nod. "I think Zathar and I should go to warn them. We'll have the best shot at making them see reason, and they'll owe us, that can only be a good thing." Her words all made perfect sense, not only did my position as the former Prince make me the best candidate, giving them the news would indeed make the Queen owe us. We could end up with a truce and build something from there. Support for our budding little Clan could be extremely useful.

And yet... My instinct was to say no. Mostly I just didn't want to take Vera with me for these talks, she would just be putting herself at risk. She was small and fragile and we'd have to make the trek down the mountain as fast as possible, not to mention that Astrexa might try to kill her on sight; thinking it would clear the way for her ambitions.

I opened my mouth to say so but Vera forestalled me when she placed one of her small hands on my chest. "I'll hide in the woods while you do the talking, okay? But seriously, don't you think it's better to have at least a little backup while you go in? If you recall, I did knock out that Msera dude on my own, didn't I?"

Reid snorted behind her shoulder, grinning at me as if to say she's got you there. I wasn't going to tell her that it would be more prudent to take the human male with me for backup if I wanted that. Taking her with me had one advantage, no two if I thought about it. I'd have her in my arms each night away

from this place, and on top of that, she wouldn't be this close to the preparing army. They might consider wiping out our little colony first if they caught wind of our presence.

“Alright, then that's the plan,” I huffed out. “Corin, we'll have to let Iave wait a little longer. You'll need to stay here to guard the humans. Vera and I will be back as quickly as possible.” She beamed at me, obviously pleased that I was taking her along and I hoped I was making the right choice. I didn't like that I might be taking her straight toward danger, toward where that gathering army would be headed.

I accepted the pack of supplies my friend held out to me. It had been meant to sustain him while he searched for Iave, now it was going to have to be used to get Vera and me back down the mountain. It wouldn't take more than a day and a half to reach the Thunder Rock Village if we kept a direct course. But how much time would we have to get back out of there before Bitter Storm attacked?

Vera was hugging the girls goodbye, murmuring soothing words to the one with the leaky eyes. She slapped Reid on the shoulder and laughed when he hauled her in for a quick hug. I kept my eyes on him but it was a quick and friendly embrace, verging on brotherly so I gave him a nod. “Keep the sword, you might need it.”

Then it was just me and my mate again, traveling hand in hand beneath the trees and that felt nice. A good portion of the time that we'd known each other had been spent this way, I might have to convince her to take trips like this with me just for the fun of it once the danger had passed.

“Hey, we're out of sight of the Cave, aren't you going to insist on carrying me now?” Vera said, a teasing note in her voice. I knew she was trying to lighten the serious mood as much as she was making a genuine offer. So when I bent down and picked her up without comment she simply settled in my arms, her sling clutched in her fingers. Good, she was alert and scanning the woods along with me, ready for any sign of

danger. My mate was a quick study, she was brave, and she knew how to lead. I was so grateful that she was mine.

We traveled in silence for the first hour but talked quietly for the next few. Taking only a short break near a stream of water to freshen up and eat. When night started to fall we were nearly at the village; if I pushed on now, I could reach it before anyone headed to bed but I hesitated. Was it better to approach in the daylight? Or better to do it now and get it over with? In the dark, Vera would be better able to hide but I knew a good spot regardless of the light.

“Go,” Vera said with a serious look. “You are worried about the friends and family you still have behind those walls. I will be alright. I’ve gotten the hang of the sling. I’ll hide until you return. The sooner we get out of here the better, right?” She was absolutely right, but I hated that I’d brought her all this way, where she was at risk, and now I was going to leave her alone on top of that. Even if she was hidden from my former Clan, she might still fall prey to one of the predators that roamed Serant’s surface. There were many, it was only because they feared a healthy Naga hunter more than we hadn’t seen any so far.

“Are you sure? We can still turn around,” I started to say, tilting my head up to look back the way we’d come. You could only just see the jagged peaks of Ahoshaga rising sharp and jagged between the taller spires of the other mountains. We’d crossed a lot of distance in a short time and I was tired, but not tired enough not to make the trek back if I needed to.

She pressed her hands to my cheeks, making sure my eyes met hers when she spoke. “Are you crazy? You know you need to do this. The Queen might be a bitch, sorry but it’s true, that doesn’t mean you can’t feel loyalty to some of the other people you grew up with. We have to warn them.”

I truly was blessed with a mate like her, she understood me, and I couldn’t help but laugh at what she said of my mother. I did not know the word bitch, but I was certain it meant something bad. She was right on that count, my mother was

the least maternal person I knew, and I'd always envied some of my peers for having less ambitious but more caring mothers. With Vera, I knew I wouldn't have to worry about any of that when we had younglings, she would love them unconditionally, I knew it.

She was right that I had to do this too. Some of the hunters, even surly Msera, were once friends, and I knew they felt sympathy for my situation. No hunter truly turned their back on the males that were cast out by a Queen, that could have been any of us if we didn't find our mate. So I couldn't turn my back on them now either, because doing so might wipe out my entire former Clan, a thought that was still horrible to contemplate. There were many younglings to consider too, they were all innocent in any of this.

"If you are certain too," I said, leaning in to press my mouth to hers. She kissed me back eagerly, threatening to ignite passion between us we had no time for. "You will hide and not come out for anything but me, got that?" She nodded immediately, sending her mane of pale hair flying around her face. I molded my mouth to hers again, struggling to let her go but this time she used her nimble fingers to tug on my chin horn.

"Go Zathar, put me down, I'll hide. Don't worry about me." I didn't put her down, but making sure to cover my tracks I rushed for the hiding spot I had in mind. A tumble of rocks with a fallen tree partially covering the crevice behind it. The tree was moss overgrown, having fallen years ago and the hiding spot no longer fit me, but it had been perfect as a young Naga when I played in these woods. Vera would have no trouble tucking her slender body inside it.

She couldn't see as well in the dark as I could but the pale white orb of the moon gave enough of a glow that she could make out the hiding spot. "Yeah, that'll do," she whispered. When I slid her down my body, I savored every soft curve and dip against my scales. Fervently praying that this wasn't the last time I'd see her, there was always the chance that I'd

managed to enrage my mother so thoroughly that she had me killed on sight.

I struggled to lift my hands from her hips, and she was hanging on to the strap of my sword sheath. “One more kiss, Zathar,” she said and I obeyed, bending down to mate her mouth with my own, eager for her taste. Flicking my long tongue along the inside of her mouth, I savored the rich taste of her, letting it imprint on my senses. Then I curled it around her own and tugged on it as a final departure, knowing what it always did to her.

Sure enough, flicking my tongue in the air, I could taste her arousal. I grinned as I forced myself to let her go and her eyes were limpid, filled with the desire we couldn’t act on. I liked knowing I left her in that state, that she’d be ready and waiting for me when I returned. There was nothing like an eager mate waiting for a male to motivate him to great speeds.

Though I backed up to help me find the self-control I needed to leave, I didn’t head for the village until I’d made sure Vera was properly hidden, our pack of supplies tucked into the crevice with her. I even went so far as to adjust a few branches to provide maximum cover, and then I spent several minutes erasing our tracks toward this place. I couldn’t be certain that a master tracker like Khawla would be fooled this way, but most hunters wouldn’t be able to spot her now.

As I rushed for the village, circling around to make it even harder to locate where I’d come from, I tried to reassure myself. There was no need for scouts to be scouring the hillsides, they wouldn’t suspect that Vera was out there hiding. She was safe, and she had her sling to scare off any predators, her scent was covered up with my own from being skin to scale all day too.

Nearing the most western gate into the village, almost directly opposite where Vera was hiding, I was happy to notice the guards manning the palisade. Good, they weren’t complacent at least, that was going to help in the days to

come. They spotted me when I broke through the treeline but then I didn't make any attempt to hide.

"Evening hunters," I called out, "I'm not here to fight. I need to speak to the Queen. I have important news." The two males were both mated and a good dozen years older than I was, we'd never run in the same circles. I respected them both as skilled warriors and hunters, both with mates that were on the quieter side, not nearly as ambitious and war-like as a female like Astrexa or my mother.

"Stand down, Zathar. Drop your weapons," one said cautiously and I did as he asked. Leaving the one sword and knife I was carrying on the flattened earth in front of the gate. It was a little overbearing, I didn't plan on hurting any of my former Clansmen. I'd only fought the hunters in the mountains when they threatened my mate.

"What news?" the other asked, his spear resting butt first on the ground while he leaned against it with his torso. The posture was very casual, indicating he didn't consider me a threat, which was true. He wasn't being insulting, he was letting me know he knew I was an ally, not an enemy.

"I'll tell the Queen first, Imvru," I said to him, my eyes following the other male as he darted inside to fetch help. I braced myself for the appearance of one of my sisters, or even Astrexa as they escorted me inside. It wouldn't surprise me if they'd make a show of it with hunters holding me under spear point as they paraded me through town. My mother was always ready for theatrics.

My prediction came true, a whole crowd of males showed up under the leadership of a handful of my surviving sisters. I'd been speaking with Imvru about his growing handful of younglings but both of us fell silent at the sight. "Hmm, you sure know how to create excitement, don't you son?" he remarked quietly.

I didn't protest the spears, just greeted my sisters and then asked them to take me to the Queen as I had important news. I counted myself very lucky that Astrexa wasn't among them,

but I hoped she would be at the Pagode. It made me uneasy not to know where she was.

“Of course, brother,” the youngest of my sisters said. She was barely out of her last growth molting, nearly a dozen years younger than myself. I didn’t think we’d spoken more than a handful of sentences to each other in our entire lives. She had that vicious cast to her face that was so very similar to my mother’s, a snarl curling her lips, displaying her fangs. On her body, nearly as many scars covered her as Astrexa wore with pride. It said enough.

“Lead the way Sazzie,” I said, gesturing to the center of town. She gave me a haughty look and did exactly that, her tail moving with sharp, angry motions as she led the way. The way our older sisters let her do that said everything about Sazzie’s place in their hierarchy. I hadn’t paid enough attention to her when I was still in the Clan, or maybe she’d just risen fast since I’d been cast out for the first time several months ago.

The Pagode was devoid of my mother or Astrexa and when Sazzie and my other sisters just curled up on their customary pillows I knew what was about to happen. They were going to make me wait and twirl my fucking tail tip, making sure I knew my place. I was no longer a Prince seeking an audience, I was an outcast, a nobody to the Clan and the Queen was not summoned for such a lowly Naga.

Furious, I said, “I don’t have time for this! YOU don’t have time for this. I have dire news or I wouldn’t even be here. Life or death!” But my words didn’t move them. Sazzie actually threw back her head and yawned in an exaggerated manner. For the first time in my life, I considered doing violence to one of my own kin, well, discounting my own mother. Sazzie had gone from just a small, unnoticeable sibling, to the most annoying creature in all of Serant.

But no matter how much I ranted, how much I demanded or pleaded, they remained unmovable. They were set on making me wait and each minute was one I could ill afford, leaving Vera exposed and at risk of being caught in the middle of a

war we weren't part of. Damn it, I should not have come here, and I should not have let my mate convince me to take her with me.

Chapter 20

Vera

It felt like I'd been sitting in this cramped crevice for hours but I knew it couldn't be that long. The moon had only barely moved across the sky, a big silver disk that only vaguely hinted at the purple that tinted almost everything on this planet. Beautiful but also a reminder that I was not on Earth any longer and never would be again. That didn't make me sad, I'd gained so much since coming here, even with all the lurking and not-so-lurking danger.

It was quiet here, the loudest noise seemed my own breathing and the pounding of my heart. The longer it took, the more I struggled with sitting still. It was cold, and my legs were starting to cramp, but it was my idea to come with Zathar. I wanted to show him support and be there for him when he did this thing. It had to be hard to confront his mother again, and I wanted to make sure that he was alright.

Crazy to think that in such a short amount of time I'd gone from trying to feel distrustful of him, despite this weird pull I felt, to caring so much. I had no real experience with the emotion, but I was pretty sure that what I felt for Zathar was love. That's why I was here, to let him know that, even if I was still too chickenshit to actually say it out loud.

"Found you, come on out," a male voice suddenly said, startling me so badly that I dropped the sling I'd been clutching in my fingers. I nearly screamed too but I managed to hold it in at the last moment, my eyes going wide and my heart rate shooting through the roof at the sight of the Naga male suddenly appearing right in front of my hiding place.

To my eyes it looked as though he'd appeared out of thin air. Just suddenly a pair of glowing purple eyes and two pearlescent fangs catching the light of the moon. He was a big shape that seemed dark and muted in the soft light of the moon, difficult to focus on as anything but a shadow. I was pretty sure it was the scout leader from last time, the one that

Zathar had called Khawla. I hoped that meant he wasn't going to hurt me.

He used his claws to cut through the branches that covered the hole I was in, yanking the falling trunk of the tree aside with his tail. A display of just how powerful a Naga could be when they wanted to be. I cowered away, still not making a noise or ready to crawl out of the hole I was in. I knew it was a futile thought to have, but maybe he hadn't actually seen me. I felt like the snow hares I'd read about, who froze in place, hoping their camouflage would keep them safe.

I knew that wasn't working for me, but I still didn't uncurl from my hiding spot. I just watched the Naga male with the oddly muted scales as he ripped my hiding place apart. He wasn't being rough or vicious, just dismantled everything in a very methodical way. It was extremely unnerving.

"Come on, there's no escaping this. You can understand me, can't you?" he said. It was the calm note to his voice that finally convinced me to get up. That wasn't the voice of someone who intended to harm me. That just left the countless others he was probably going to hand me over to, but it didn't look like there was any chance of avoiding that.

Nodding to let him know I could understand what he said, I rose on my shaky, cramped legs. Stalling for time, I made a show of stretching them and moaning in pain. It seemed to work because Khawla just looked at me with a frown on his face but didn't urge me to get a move on. I eyed the dark woods around us and the soft glow of lights to my right where the village was. Could I make a run for it?

Though snakes on Earth weren't particularly known for their speed, Zathar had shown me just how fast he could travel. I didn't think I could run for it and get away, not with this guy chasing me, who'd just track me down if I did outrun him. What would happen when he took me with him? I tried to weigh my options quickly before he lost his patience.

I'd be dragged before the Queen and that female Naga, Astrexa. The latter definitely wanted me dead, the first just

wanted me out of the way so her son did as she wanted. That ship had sailed though, whether I lived or died, Zathar would never bend to her will again and I took great satisfaction in knowing that.

Finally, I had to conclude that the Queen had to know that too, her only leverage was me. With an eye for these kinds of manipulations that I didn't think I had, I knew that we had a card to play too. Our news for our freedom, as long as they actually needed the warning. The Queen wouldn't kill me either if she thought it was the way to control Zathar, which it absolutely was.

"Ready?" Khawla asked, perceptive guy that he was. "You're not going to run, are you?" That he added with an almost put-upon sigh as if he found the thought alone exhausting. I rolled my eyes and considered picking up Zathar's backpack and my sling but then just left them there. If I brought those, they might confiscate them, and Khawla didn't look interested.

With lead in my shoes, I let him guide me through the woods toward the town. He didn't say anything, and he didn't restrain me. It *really* was very tempting to try to run, but then I saw the silent shadows moving through the woods with me. More Naga, quietly escorting us. I should have known he wasn't alone, had they been scouring the woods just to find me? Or was there another reason they were out here tonight?

I was relieved I saw no sight of a single Naga female, not even when I walked into town and the Naga males closed in around me. I saw many grim faces, and when I spotted the male I'd knocked out once, Msere, he even offered me a slight nod. That almost looked like respect to me, what was going on here?

Spotting the storage shed where they'd locked us up before, I tried to hide how uneasy the sight of it made me. Then we were past it and entering the village square, a structure with obvious importance looming on the edge of it. A roof on poles, with no walls other than fluttering drapes in many colors. The

edges of the pointed thatch roof had wooden boards carved in decorative serpentine shapes, shimmering gold in the firelight coming from many torches around the square.

Khawla and the hunters that surrounded me were headed that way and I tried my best to resolve the shapes I could see behind the curtains. My heart started racing when I thought that the bigger shape at the center might be Zathar. I knew it was going to upset him to see me right now, but I was still happy they were bringing me to him.

“I’ll take it from here, scout,” a female voice interjected and I winced and ripped my eyes from the promising sight of my mate. Rising high on her slender tail was Astrexa, a wicked grin on her sharp features. I could see the set of sharp fangs on either side of her mouth and when she flicked out her split tongue I winced back. On her, that was definitely creepy, but that was mostly because I was pretty sure she was savoring the taste of my fear.

Khawla met her bright blue eyes with his own purple orbs for a long second. It looked to me as if the master scout was briefly considering objecting but then he inclined his head respectfully and with a gesture of his hand, he and the other hunters started to melt away. The sneer on Astrexa’s face was briefly directed at his departing back before it settled back on me and I felt about ten inches tall beneath it. That look rivaled the ones my mother used to level at me and the response was instinctual.

I wasn’t the same person now that I was back on Earth. I could feel it in the way my fear made way for rage at that look, I wasn’t going to let anyone treat me that way any longer. Lifting my chin and squaring my shoulders, I ignored the urge to cower beneath her and glared right back.

She curled her lip at me, “You are nothing, hu-mhan!” Her hiss was strong, filled with venom and though I tried to dodge, she was whip-fast when she grabbed for my arm. Her tail slinging around behind me and caging me in. “I know you can

understand me, prey,” she said, slitted eyes narrowing on my squirming arm, excitement filling her features.

“If you wish to live, you are going in there and renounce him as your mate. Make it sound good and I won’t eat the flesh of your bones and use your ribs for hair combs like I did with the last female who dared to stand in my way.” For emphasis, she lifted a clawed finger to the bone-white decorative combs stuck in her black hair. I stared at them with horror, vaguely recognizing the curved shapes of rib bones, had she really done that? Wouldn’t her previous opponent have been a female of her own kind? Did she just admit to cannibalism to me?

Whether it was true or not, I was definitely terrified. Not only did it sound like a horrible fate, but I didn’t want to contemplate the pain and horror that Zathar would feel if that happened and he was forced to mate her afterward. Having to see his horrible mate prance around with my ribs in her hair day after day. It was the stuff of nightmares; I couldn’t let that happen.

I gave her a nod and she smiled with satisfaction. Snapping out a hand, she curled it in my hair and yanked, a scream escaping my throat as pain seared my scalp. Then she was dragging me by the grip she had, and though it hurt, I knew this was as much for show too. She was going in there dragging me like she’d conquered me, showing everyone inside that I was a nobody, that I was weak.

My growls were not as impressive as those of a Naga, but I growled in anger at the treatment, furious with myself too that I wasn’t strong enough to stop this. But I *was* strong, I knew that, and I was *wanted* which mattered even more. For Zathar, I would endure anything, because that’s what you did for those you truly cared about. Faith was there too, faith in him and his skills.

When Astrexa dragged me inside, the drapes parted around us by two young Naga, probably young teens. My eyes locked on Zathar, for a moment his azure orbs were all that I saw,

drawing us together as if there was no distance between us at all.

The drapes behind him parted and the Queen curled her long body onto the dais, every shimmering blue scale glowing with a sheen of oil. Gold covered her arms and chest, and draped in chains around her waist. She was smiling smugly at her son, and I knew that they'd kept him waiting while they went to search for me. They were convinced they held all the cards. I knew differently, but was the threat we came to warn them of enough to convince them to let us go? Now I suddenly doubted that as she wanted to gain control of her wayward son so badly, she might do so at any cost.

"Yes, Zathar," the Queen drawled as she casually coiled her long body on the pillows on the dais. She was acting so damn casually, obviously enjoying my discomfort and pain, and Zathar's absolute fury at seeing me restrained. He'd moved toward me but several females had risen from around the edges of this little receiving hall and blocked his way.

Our eyes were still locked and I willed him to see that I was okay. Astrexa was yanking hard on my hair and sure, I was losing a few strands because of it, but that was all. I was alright and he needed to say his piece now that she was here, make it clear that he wasn't here to submit.

"Now what is your plan, my son? Did you come here because you finally realized what a weak thing she is? Are you ready for a proper female?" The Queen laughed haughtily and pointed in my direction. This must have been some kind of sign for Astrexa because the female yanked harder on my head, making me tilt back and raise myself on my toes to relieve the awful pressure.

Zathar growled and shoved toward me again, pushing the Naga females that blocked his path roughly out of the way. Immediately several males darted through the curtains and held him back, spears aimed at his chest, forcing him to freeze in place. "I'm okay, it's fine. Don't worry!" I told Zathar, though I was definitely worried. I didn't want him to try to

fight to get me free, we had to use our words or we'd never make it out of here.

Zathar's eyes searched mine over the row of spears and scaled shoulders that separated us. He shot a furious glare at Astrexa that just made her laugh and curve her tail to coil it around my body. Now I was really pinned, trapped. This was what it felt like to be trapped by a python, the muscled loops of her body tightening around me with every breath I took.

"So this is how you repay the loyalty I am showing?" Zathar snapped, swinging his head around to his mother to pin her in place on her throne. "I came here to warn you of the approaching danger. I came because despite being cast out by you, I did not wish any harm to befall the Clan. And this is how you treat my mate? Forget it!"

While the Queen rose, opening her mouth to respond. Zathar swung around, his tail moving, his hands slashing through the air. Astrexa seemed to know what was about to happen better than anyone here, her body tightening as she threw us to the side, out of his path. With the sound of a roar accompanying him, he bowled straight through the handful of males blocking him, instigating total chaos for the next few minutes.

Astrexa tried to retreat with me, her claws rising to my throat as if she intended to threaten my life. While the other Naga females present were backing up as if they weren't about to get in the way of the fighting males. I could see why, though much bigger and stronger than me, the Naga males were nearly double in size sometimes. They could very well get flattened like pancakes in this scuffle.

There was one moment, a single second frozen in time that Zathar's eyes met mine. He was enraged and completely focused on ending this standoff. Then they dropped to the claws at my throat and I worried he was going to surrender at the sight of it. A blow from one of his opponents caught him in the back of the head and with a roar, he spun around to retaliate.

The female holding me hostage hissed out a laugh, certain she was going to get what she wanted. I snapped my head back, catching her face with the back of my head in a blow that reverberated through my skull. Ouch, that was far more painful than they made that look in movies but I had no time to whimper. I had to suck it up.

Letting my head bounce forward, I used the momentum, opening my mouth and closing my teeth around the fingers near my neck. I bit down as hard as I could, so hard that my teeth and jaw ached from it. Blood swirled over my tongue, the taste strong and metallic. Astrexa screamed in agony, yanking her fingers free but I hung on like a fucking pitbull.

With a whoosh, her coils loosened from around my body. I dropped to the wooden floor and I finally released her while I forced myself to move, out of her reach. She had claws and fangs, my bite was all blunt teeth and pressure, but when I looked over my shoulder I realized I'd done significant damage anyway. Her fingers were bleeding badly and she was cradling the hand against her chest, staring down at her fingers bent at awkward angles with horror.

“Vera, duck!” Zathar yelled and I hit the floor without a second thought, throwing myself to the ground. A tail raked the air above me, whistling through the air. When I looked up, the three males Zathar had been fighting were all down on the ground, scattered around him like fallen trees. Then Astrexa screamed and the Queen demanded that he end this now.

I started to get up just as Astrexa leaped through the air toward me. Her entire body coiled in a rapid strike like a cobra might. Zathar was there, blocking her strike with a single punch of his closed fist. He struck her right in the face and she crumpled like a paper towel in a pile on the floor at my feet.

Leaping up, I threw myself into his arms and he curled himself protectively around me, his chest heaving and slick in a few places from blood. “Enough!” he roared over the chaos that reigned inside the wall-less room. “Vera and I are leaving and you can just choke on your own fucking doom.” With that

final snarl, he turned around and heedless of the bodies strewn about, started to glide away. Turning his back on his mother like she was no threat to him at all. I could see her shocked expression over his shoulder as we left, the way her gaze lingered with distaste on Astrexa's prone body before snapping back to us. No, to me.

"Wait," she called out. "What do you know? What is about to happen! You must tell us, you can't doom the entire village over something as minor as this!" Oh, did she really just say that? The bitch. I wanted to crawl over Zathar's shoulder and bite her stupid finger too; see how she liked *that*. Minor? They had tried to separate us, tried to enslave Zathar to a life of total misery.

Zathar paused at the edge of the room, the drapes already opened. When I looked at what he was seeing I realized that the entire village had turned out to witness our altercation. Males and females alike had gathered in the town square, and they were all staring at us. There were kids too, young Naga clinging to their fathers, and some to their mothers too. I even spotted a female with a tiny baby Naga curled in her arms.

Oh shit, this had to be heart-wrenching for Zathar, no matter how furious he was. Facing all these people meant he couldn't possibly walk away without warning them. His mother didn't deserve it, neither did Astrexa, but these people, Clansmen he'd grown up with? They definitely did.

"Minor?" Zathar hissed out, turning to look over his shoulder at his mother while his arms tightened around me. "You threatened to kill my mate. Astrexa nearly did, you think to call that minor?" He lifted his chin to look at the people gathered around him, "It isn't me dooming you, that's on the Queen." He jerked a claw at his mother and I realized she'd actually gotten off her throne to move closer to us and she finally looked rattled.

No wonder, the crowd of Naga gathered around us looked pretty upset, and I had a feeling it wasn't directed at Zathar and me. There were glares on the faces of many of the

females, the males not quite as open in their anger. I still saw clenched fists and quickly silenced growls and rumbles. Then one youngling asked fearfully, “Is the Queen going to let us all die?”

The hiss the matriarch of the Clan let out was nearly completely silent as she smoothed out her angry features for a more pleasant expression. Faking a calm I doubted she actually felt, she addressed the gathered crowd, offering many platitudes and assurances that she would do no such thing. Zathar stayed in place, holding me tightly in his arms but watching what was going on with a much calmer expression. I took that to mean that he knew we’d won and I dared to hope.

“Let us talk privately, son,” the queen said at last, turning back to us now that the crowd had settled down. It was a little scary to see the smooth politician side of her in action, it was far too alike to my own mother. Maybe that was why Zathar and I were meant to be because we had shared experiences that helped us understand each other.

Talking privately didn’t actually mean a conversation with just the Queen. It just meant that we were urged back inside the little building with no walls. Astrexa and the guards that Zathar had fought had all been dragged away but several Naga females settled themselves on the pillows around the perimeter once more. One female in particular was staring at us with barely restrained fury, almost vibrating where she had coiled her long, slender tail. That one reminded me far too much of Astrexa, including the many claw scars that slashed across her body.

The Queen didn’t return to her dais to lord over us, she remained standing, raised high on her tail in the center of the room. Zathar moved us right up to her until the two could bend their heads together and speak without their voices carrying. I was possibly the only one close enough to hear what they said.

“What does it take? To receive this dire news from you?” Zathar’s mother urged in a whisper. She didn’t like to humble

herself but apparently, she had enough sense to know she couldn't spit any venom at us now. She would have let him walk away without hearing what he had to say if not for the fear the villagers felt. Now she had her back against the wall.

Zathar curled his lips at her. "Free passage on Thunder Rock land for my mate and me, for all the humans, and for any outcasts that chose to join me. You will let us live in peace beneath Ahoshaga. A truce that can grow into trade and peace." I was impressed, Zathar was demanding things I hadn't even considered, things that would benefit us in the future. He was safeguarding our right to live in that abandoned village, opening up a possibility for trade. He was talking about other outcasts, not just Corin and Iave, did he have a plan?

The Queen looked like she was about to swallow a lemon whole, thoroughly disgusted with the terms her son was laying out for her. "You are asking me to give you a part of my territory, your news can't be worth that." I didn't miss how she considered it *her* territory, not the Clan's it was a subtle hint in how she thought of everything. She really was a self-entitled bitch.

"A part of the Clan lands that nobody wants, the hunters won't even go there. It wouldn't be missed," Zathar pointed out. His eyes flicked from his stare down with his mother to me, and I spotted a glint of mirth in the azure depths. Oh, he was actually enjoying watching his mother squirm. Yeah, I would probably love it too if I had the chance to see my mother put on the spot.

She glared a little fiercer, but Zathar just waited until she was done fighting the inevitable. When she conceded to his demands, it wasn't with any grace but that was alright. My emotions soared with elation, we'd beaten the odds yet again. Zathar was amazing and in a few minutes, we'd be out of here, finally free to live our own lives.

"Fine, I agree to your terms, now tell me what you know." Zathar made her wait just a few seconds longer, just long

enough that she started to hiss, and then he explained the threat of the Bitter Storm Clan waiting for them in the mountains. He provided as many details as possible of their numbers and the weapons they had amassed. Willingly staying as long as needed to answer any questions, then repeating it all again when his mother called in the leaders of the hunters and the scouts.

Khawla didn't meet my eyes the entire time he took in Zathar's news, then simply melted away to gather his best men to verify everything Zathar just told him. When we were finally free to go, I was filled with the same nervous energy that Zathar had to be feeling. Dawn was streaking across the horizon. What if we were about to get trapped down here with the Thunder Rock Clan when Bitter Storm came sweeping down the mountain with their charge?

"Sazzie, escort them out," Zathar's mother said, and the female that reminded me of Astrexa rose from where she had remained on her pillows the entire time. With a glare for Zathar and a huff, she flounced ahead of us, leading us through the village without a word. Everywhere around us chaos had erupted as the elderly and the young were gathering supplies to head to a hideout for safety. Warriors everywhere were sharpening weapons and fireproofing buildings, life stock was being herded out of a gate in the other direction, their bleating and mooing far too similar to Earth cattle.

"You were magnificent in there," Zathar murmured against my ear shell. His split tongue flicked out once, tasting me behind the back of my ear and I shivered in response. "I saw what you did to Astrexa, seems those blunt little teeth of yours are a better weapon than any of us thought. You cut through her scales!"

I felt a little sick thinking back on doing that and recalling the taste of her blood in my mouth, I hoped she didn't have any diseases that I could catch. I vowed to rinse out my mouth a dozen times over as soon as I had access to water.

“She’s never going to live that down, it’s lost her all her status in the Clan, beautiful,” he added gleefully. I could well imagine that the scarred female leading us from the village was going to be usurping her place. She looked just as mean and vicious and I doubted it would be an improvement.

The Naga female ignored the mass of activity near the gates as we exited, leading us into the woods which was well beyond what I expected her to do. She paused once we were all out of sight to gaze at us both and I was startled by the marked change on her face. She didn’t look so mean now, she looked young and vulnerable.

“Sazzie,” Zathar murmured, sliding me down his body to settle me on my feet. Reaching out with a hand, he offered it to the Naga female, palm up. She stared at it for a long moment, almost as if she was uncertain what to do but finally, she placed her own hand in it and let Zathar give her clasp a gentle squeeze.

“I know we are years apart, but I realize now that I should have spent more time with you when you were growing up, I’m sorry for that.” Oh, she was a sister of his. Now that I knew that, I could see the resemblance. She had the exact same azure eyes he had, with the same shape of her nubby brows arching over them.

“Msera was regaling the hunters with stories of how she bested him, is that true?” Sazzie asked, her eyes going to me. She was much taller balanced high on her tail and her scaled arms while slender were defined with muscle beneath the many slashes of her scars. I could imagine that she couldn’t wrap her head around my tiny shape beating a big hunter. Her azure eyes were piercing, the slitted pupils contracting when she focused them on my mouth.

I laughed, baring my so bafflingly blunt teeth at her. “Yup, that was definitely me,” I said and though she couldn’t understand me, she seemed to know what I’d told her, her eyes growing wide. They shifted away from me, back to Zathar and

when he nodded, confirming what she thought I'd said, she offered me a wide, fang-filled grin.

“Good luck beneath Ahoshaga, I heard it's haunted,” she said as a final parting and then she turned and slithered away. Her darker scales blended in the semi-dark, making her figure hard to spot beneath the trees. Zathar stared after her with a thoughtful look on his face, his brows lowered and his shoulder-length blue hair in disarray from his fight.

“She helped me in the Pagode, putting a coil in the way of one of my opponents and making him trip. I thought she'd be as opposed to our mating as the others... But it didn't seem that way, did it?” He was still mulling that over when he lifted me back up in his arms.

“Don't you think she's just taking care of her competition? Astrexa?” I said and he made a laughing noise that he quickly muffled against my hair. I shivered as his warm breath ghosted over the skin at the back of my neck. As soon as we were back in what was going to be our home, I wanted to rechristen our nest, we deserved that after all this.

“I should have known there was an ulterior motive. Let's get out of here before Bitter Storm arrives.” With those final words, he moved into the woods with haste. I left behind the Thunder Rock village with relief, but also a hint of worry. Like Zathar I didn't blame most of the people living there for how we'd been treated, some had been nice and the kids were definitely innocent. I hoped they made it through the coming attack.

Chapter 21

Zathar

With only a small detour to retrieve our supplies, Vera and I made it back through the mountains toward Ahoshaga at a good pace. I had to move with stealth and once, we had to hide for half an hour in a dense thicket while we watched Bitter Storm warriors pass, dragging with them a massive, wheeled trebuchet and struggling to keep it upright in the rocky terrain.

I was sorely tempted to sabotage the thing and contemplating how to do it when Vera pointed at the scree lying temptingly on the hillside a little above them. If we could get that to start rolling... A rock slide would definitely tip the unwieldy war machine over, rendering it useless.

She handed me her sling, and I squeezed the soft leather and fibers between my fingers as I contemplated it. If they realized someone had started the rock slide on purpose, if they saw where it came from, we would be in great danger. There were at least three dozen warriors surrounding the weapon and more pulling at the back to keep the machine from rolling down the hill unchecked.

“Do it,” she whispered. “You’ll feel better knowing you helped.” I really couldn’t believe how lucky I was to have a mate like her. She got me, she was willing to risk herself for my happiness. It was more than I could have ever asked for. More than I thought I deserved when I set out for the sky-ship she arrived in, hoping to win back my position in the Clan. I knew now that I didn’t need anything in the world but her.

“I love you Zathar, and I trust you, do it.” I froze, staring at her upturned face, the warm, gentle smile that stretched her mouth. The word she said was one I only knew as something used for younglings or the warm feeling I felt for my friends. It wasn’t a word that a Naga female said to her mate and yet... It felt so right. It felt like she was using it to describe all the massive feelings she encompassed for me. And she was saying she felt them for me in return.

That's when I knew, truly knew, that having a human as a mate was far better. Vera was willing to show me her soft sides, and her vulnerabilities, she didn't hesitate to share her feelings with me, good or bad. A Naga female would never do any of those things, not any of the ambitious ones at least.

Filled with warmth and happiness, with this growing sense of elation at just what kind of lucky male I was, I yanked her against my chest. Heedless of the crunching branches and leaves of the passing army I pressed my mouth to hers and invaded the warm cavern with my tongue. "Yes, that's right. Love. We love each other. That's what mates are supposed to do."

We were lost in that embrace for a long, breathless moment and when she pulled away I wanted to protest. Her slightly glazed-over eyes and the pink flush of her lips were incredibly tempting but she drew a finger over my shoulder at the scree slope and I forced myself to refocus. She was right, I needed to do this one final thing and then we could start our love-filled life, create many younglings, and start our own Clan beneath Ahoshaga mountain.

*

Vera

I was still a little breathless and shaky from the adrenaline high after the rock slide Zathar had caused with my sling. I kept seeing it in my mind, the grace with which he'd swung the simple weapon, the whistling noise as the smooth pebble flew through the air, and the harsh rumble that followed immediately after.

We'd made a mad dash up the mountain, staying bent low against the thick foliage of the dense thicket we'd hidden in while around us the red-scaled Naga and their war machine started sliding down the mountain. The wild chaos that had ensued had covered our escape, but from a higher vantage point, we'd turned to look. The trebuchet, a giant catapult on wheels, had been broken into pieces against several trees, and

at least a handful of Naga had been injured during the cascade of tumbling rocks Zathar's single pebble had caused.

They weren't using that thing to attack Thunder Rock now, we'd done our bit to level the playing field, and now the Clan had to do the rest. "Almost there," Zathar said, pointing up through the sparser woods at the sharp, jagged peak of the mountain. When we walked out from beneath the trees just a few minutes later, eager calls rang out from the entrance.

There had been a slight transformation of the place too. I spotted several wooden drying racks outside, with the remains of a hunt hanging from them. A space had been cleared and logs from the woods dragged out to sit around a dugout fire pit.

And the people that greeted us... I saw an unfamiliar woman, and a Naga male of a deep purple color, but the rest of the gang was all there too. Including Corin, who hurried toward us and eagerly started exchanging words with Zathar. It was obvious he'd been worried about us and the fate of his former Clan.

"Vera!" Cosima eagerly greeted me, jogging outside in her sneakers but dressed in a leather dress with just a single tie over one shoulder. "You're back! And look, another pair arrived, can you believe that? They say the Shaman sent them here."

The woman was a long-haired blonde with dark brown eyes. She grinned happily at me, pumping my hand in greeting. "I heard all about the brave Vera who went down the mountain to warn an enemy Clan of their impending doom! I'm Charlie, and that's my mate, Mox, previously the First Hunter of the Copper Tooth Clan."

Tilting her head over her shoulder she grinned at the Naga male hovering just behind her. He was big, with shimmering amethyst scales that shifted to a paler lavender on his belly, his eyes that same bright purple. His expression was stern and alert but when he met the eyes of his mate it went all soft and warm. I liked him already.

Zathar clasped the wrist of the male, “Welcome Mox. Another spear is a welcome addition to this little Clan.” Soon we were all gathering at the new fire pit, sitting down and exchanging stories while Reid stoked the fire and handily started prepping food on a tripod above it. It was a little bit surprising that he’d taken over the food-making duties but he seemed very adept at it. He worked with the primitive supplies at hand as if he’d already done that a million times before.

The only one not joining us was Corin. Now that we were back, he was hurriedly gathering supplies and with a short goodbye to Zathar, he was gone. Finally, able to search for Iave. I hoped he and the two women with him were alright, that they’d made it but just needed some guidance to find our camp at Ahoshaga. But the worried feeling in the pit of my stomach told me otherwise. Zathar had left marks for his friend to find, he would have found us if he’d been free to do so.

“Come, my mate,” Zathar said into my ear later that evening after we’d eaten and shared our stories. “Let us forget our worries and celebrate our homecoming.” And with that heated promise, he swung me in his arms and slithered into the cave he’d once dreaded as haunted. Catcalls and laughter followed us but we didn’t pay any attention to that.

“I love you Zathar, I meant it when I said it earlier. I’m happy that I ended up on Serant, and even happier that it was you who found me.” Like before, the words seemed to strike him hard when I said them, his beautiful azure eyes growing moist as if they were about to overflow from emotion, only his species didn’t cry.

“And I love you, Vera. I am the luckiest male on Serant. I knew my fate was about to change when I saw the sky-ship streak from the heavens. I just didn’t know how and I’m going to celebrate every single day I have with you for the rest of our lives.” Shouldering his way into the apartment we’d claimed, he slithered straight for the warm, soft nest waiting for us. “And now I’m going to seed you, and make your belly swell with my youngling.”

So he was a little savage, but I loved that claim, that promise with every fiber of my being. I was going to be the most well-loved, well-pleasured being on this planet if he was true to his word and I had no doubt that he would.

Here, I was not the unwanted outcast daughter of a family of sociopaths. Here, I was the most desired woman Zathar had ever laid eyes on, he wanted me with every scale on his body. Two outcasts who'd found their home, together.

THE END

Author's Note

Hi lovely readers!

There it is, the first book to the Naga series! My Serpents of Serant is sooooo much fun to write that I feel like I'm flying through the words. I'm going to love bringing Iave and Kalani's story to you next. You'll find out what happened to them and Noami in the next book: The Naga Brute's Warrior Mate.

Please, if you have a moment, I'd love it if you leave a review, good or bad. Reviews make my day! I'd really appreciate it. Even if it's just, hey, this book was rad, read it ya'll. ;-)

Much love,
Robin

(Pssht! Sign up for my newsletter for free goodies and announcements on the next books! Totally worth it, I promise.)

Excerpt: The Naga Brute's Warrior Mate

Iave

I grumbled to myself under my breath as I followed Zathar and Corin into the outside from the tunnels we'd traveled through. A sky-ship was a good catch, scavenging technology and valuables could indeed do as my best friend hoped; restore our places in the Clan. I just didn't think we should want such a thing.

The Queen had discarded each of us because we'd grown old enough to have found our mate if she was among the Clan. We hadn't, so we were a burden Thunder Rock didn't need. Fine with me, I didn't need them either. I liked being out here with just my friends, testing myself against Serant's predators and against the forces of nature.

I didn't need some stupid Queen to tell me what to do or how to behave. It would pain me to say goodbye to Zathar and Corin, but if this sky-ship indeed held all the treasures they hoped for, I wouldn't be returning with them. I was done with Thunder Rock.

Up on the mountain flank, just over the edge into Bitter Storm territory lay the smoking remains of the sky-ship we'd spotted streaking from the heavens. I groaned when I realized that it had partially sunk into the subterranean lake it had exposed. That was going to be such a hassle to extract anything from.

Even I knew that we had to do this, whether we were going to use what we found to get back in with the Clan or not. The technology we might find inside the sky-ship could make our lives so much easier, and Corin was an expert at figuring out how things worked.

It wasn't until we'd slipped into the cracked side of the ship that my curiosity fully engaged. Coffins lined the interior of the ship, making for a bizarre cargo. While Zathar and Corin

talked, I scanned the rest of the ship. There was a fragrance that stirred the air, and I followed the enticing scent I could taste without hesitation. Something really delicious was here, and I was going to find it; no matter what.

I flicked out my split tongue to draw more scent particles into my mouth, pressing them up against the receptacle at the top to get the best taste. Yeah, that was better than Abseal, and any hunter worth his salt loved the spicy, alcoholic drink. I was especially fond of it, but this.... This was much better. Spicy, sweet, and mouth-wateringly good.

There! It was coming from a coffin near the front of this broken sky-ship. In just a few twists of my coils, I was at its side, leaning over the hard, transparent top and peering in. The sight that met me made my heart stutter in my chest. The creature inside it was beautiful, it was like a goddess had fallen from the sky aboard this vessel. A goddess made just for me.

I leaned in further, almost pressing my nose to the hard, transparent surface so I could take in every perfect detail. From the way her nose tilted to the sky, to the deep brown smoothness of her cheeks. I loved every single part of her face. In an instant it felt like my entire universe had shifted. No longer was I anchored to Serant, my loyalty binding me to my friends, now my compass would always point to her.

She was nothing like a Naga female but that hardly mattered. I greedily cataloged each difference I could find, from her slender but muscled shoulders to the soft smoothness of her richly colored skin. The hair on her head was not long and smooth like mine, though it was the same midnight black. Hers was this crinkly texture I wanted to sink my claws into; would it feel as interesting as it looked?

There was a slight rise and fall to the curve of her chest where her breasts were abundant, like a nursing female. These weren't coffins like Zathar and Corin thought, these were resting places and my beautiful goddess was asleep, not dead. But how did I wake her? It seemed of the most urgent

importance now to know what the color of her eyes was. Would she smile at me when she woke? Would she know that she was meant to be mine like I did?

I'd been so engrossed with her that I had barely paid any attention to what was going on in the rest of the wrecked sky-ship. The sound of a strange, melodic voice was what shook me from my obsession, briefly. Lifting my head, I was startled when I located the source. There was another female similar to my goddess standing next to Zathar and my friend's azure eyes were completely focused on her.

When she moved to the nearest resting place and started messing with the lid my heart rate sped up. She knew how to open them! She could get my goddess out. As soon as she was done with the first pod I was practically vibrating when I made my move. Blocking her path to the next one and demanding she open mine.

I winced back when Zathar got in my face, unsheathing a sword to lay against my neck as though I'd just threatened him personally. I only needed to glance from him to the pale-skinned female to know what he was feeling. Then he laid his arm around her waist, hauling her protectively against his body and all the sigils along his body lit up. That was his mate.

Dipping my chin, I offered the symbol of respect by exposing my vulnerable throat to my own horn, jagged and broken though it was. Fine, I would back off, as long as she opened the shell my goddess was in. Mates were sacred, Zathar would understand, just like I understood his protectiveness.

It went against everything instinct I had, but I backed away, uncoiling my tail from around the shell my female was in. Zathar would never let his mate approach if he thought I was a threat, I couldn't stand in the way. I would just hover at the edge of darkness and watch as my goddess opened her eyes and took her first breath of Serant air. There would be time enough to conquer her heart once she was free from that strange shell.

I would simply wait and watch, I'd stake my claim when she was ready for me and everyone here would know that this goddess from the heavens was meant to be mine. Mine, and mine alone. I would make her the happiest mate, give her everything her heart desired, and protect her with all my might.

The Naga Brute's Warrior Mate will be out soon! But in the meantime, check out some of my other books. You could start with [Beast Unburdened: A Sci-fi Gladiator Romance](#). A steamy full-length romance about a beastly gladiator and his beautiful human mate as they fight for their freedom.

Robin's Mailing List

Want to know more about the Naga and their future mates?
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inbox!

About the Author

Robin O'Connor is the pen-name of an author who loves to write about strong, alien heroes and quirky heroines. She lives with her husband and four-year-old son along with a couple of hundred books (hers, definitely hers) and probably just as many computer parts (her husband's). Her house therefore probably resembles something like a mad-scientist's lab on any given day.

She's always working on at least a half dozen projects at the same time but is never without time to answer questions, write up funny extras or hang out on social media to speak with her readers.

Find her at:

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Books by Robin O'Connor

Serpents of Serant

The Naga Hunter's Lost Mate (*novella*)

The Naga Outcast's Unwanted Mate

The Naga Brute's Warrior Mate (*coming soon*)

The Naga Warlord's Virgin Mate (*coming soon*)

Gladiators of the Vagabond

Gladiator's Sanctuary (*novella*)

Beast Unburdened

Trickster Caught

Deviant Challenged

Feral Tamed

Healer Hunted

Stone Awakened

Doom Averted

Steel Reforged

Warrior Enchanted

Logic Broken

Standalone in the Vagabond Universe

There's an Alien Down My Chimney (A Scifi Christmas Tale)

There's an Elf in My Cockpit (*Coming soon*)