



The Naga Inventor's Clever Mate

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Category: Romance, Fantasy, Science Fiction

Description: Min-Ji knows one thing for certain: Corin, the fierce, inventive Naga warrior, is her mate. So why does he avoid her?

Min-Ji

It's my fault we crashed on this strange, barbaric alien planet. The others might have forgotten for now, but I haven't. Then why does even my supposed mate avoid me?

Corin is smart, brave, and has a heart so big, he takes on far too much to keep our new clan safe. When he goes off on a mission to save our missing friends, I follow him. This is my chance to prove that we belong together, no matter the risk.

Corin

Once, my only goal in life was to protect my friends and uncover relics from the past. Now? The only thing I want is to keep my mate safe, and she does everything in her power to thwart me.

Going on a mission to rescue our friends and defeat an ancient evil is not the time or place to figure this out. But she leaves me no choice—neither does Triff, the little cleaning bot that insists on following me everywhere.

As dangers mount, I'm faced with a choice: Do I fight for our bond and let the passion between us ignite? Or is the greatest danger losing her forever?

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Prologue

Min-Ji

“What do you mean, the readings are wrong?” my colleague and superior officer said from behind the Navigator’s console. Officer First Class Jackson was always a stick in the mud, with an ego to boot; he didn’t take kindly to his subordinates talking back. Well, too bad, because his readings were definitely wrong.

That moon was not anywhere close to where he said it was, and the planet we were supposed to skim by, according to his pathing, was going to leave us dipping straight through its atmosphere. Jackson was an ass, but he was not a bad navigator. We’d been assigned to several missions together before, I knew how he worked. This was wrong, something had to be messing with our sensors.

“I mean, this course is going to make us flythroughthat big purple planet, not around it. That’s not what you intended, so there has to be something off with the readings.” I tried to keep my voice level but bright; the bubbly-calm method, as I called it. That always made the big boys think I was no threat, and that I wasn’t trying to step on any toes. Navigating a man’s world of pilots, marines, and space cowboys meant I knew exactly when to be tactful and when to push.

Jackson seemed placated by what I’d said, and he dipped his head over his screen to get another look. He was muttering to himself, a deep frown furrowing his brow; not a good sign. If he didn’t come up with a better answer soon, I’d have to take control, screw protocol, and find my own way around this huge purple orb.

My palms felt a little clammy around the yoke of the small shuttle, and I wished, not for the first time, that we were flying a bigger ship than this. The UAR Battleship the Preator had been our home for the past two years; I had been itching to get away from it for a solo mission. But that feeling had changed as soon as I'd entered this short-range shuttle.

I glanced over my shoulder at the curtain that had been hung in an improvised manner between the cockpit area and the rest of the small ship. From my seat, I could reach the head, the shower, and the bunk that I'd been assigned for the trip. That was it. Jackson had given me firm orders never to look behind the curtain, our cargo was beyond my clearance level. He'd made it abundantly clear that I had not been the first choice for this mission, but the change had been made at the last moment.

The curtain was a gray, ominous barrier, but it wasn't exactly hard to circumvent. All I'd needed was for Jackson to go to the head for a minute, and a peek took all of ten seconds. Now I understood why most of the marines like me aboard the Preator had not known the true nature of our mission. They might have balked at the truth, and too many marines struggling with the reality of their orders... Not a good idea on a mission that lasted years.

This was supposed to be a negotiating mission with important powers from the far-off Zeta Quadrant. This was supposed to be about securing supplies, allies, and manpower to strengthen the war effort in the other reaches of the Alpha Quadrant; all to protect Earth and its two alien partners. To protect the mighty UAR.

I didn't think the human population would agree with this method if it was ever discovered. It was also clear to me that my life would not be safe if Jackson realized I knew what we were transporting. "These readings are a mess..." Jackson muttered with a curse at that moment. "Switch to manual control, Pilot Yun."

That made me draw in a relieved breath as I hurried to obey the order. We should

have made this switch several minutes ago, but it had taken far longer than I expected for him to start verifying his readings. I tightened my grip on the small shuttle's yoke and started to pilot the spacecraft around the planet. I tried to give us a larger distance from the first edges of the stratosphere than I normally might. I didn't trust this situation one bit.

With good reason. My yoke trembled when the gravitational pull of the planet got hold of us with surprising force. My instruments went haywire, and Jackson started cursing up a storm. "Get it under control, Yun!" he shouted like that was an order I wasn't already fighting to obey with every fiber of my being.

I could see the writing on the wall. This shuttle wasn't strong enough to break free of this strange, powerful grip the planet had. We were going to crash, badly. I didn't want to be the one who had to tell my superior that news, but there was no one else on the ship besides me. He caught my gaze, his brow lowered even more, and his jaw firmed. "Pilot Yun. We are not crashing. Tell me we are not crashing. That's an order!"

My eyes whipped from his face as I struggled to get my own emotions under control. The yoke was shaking, my grip was all sweaty and slippery from the anxious fear that had a hold of me now. We were absolutely crashing, and with the system going mad, we couldn't even be sure I could direct this ship into some kind of safe landing. I licked my dry lips before I forced out, "You better say your prayers, sir. I don't think we'll survive this."

Maybe our cargo had a chance, the stasis pods hidden behind the stupid curtain were sturdy. They were made to survive crashes, or at least, they were supposed to have a better chance at surviving one. The selfish thought spun through my brain that I should climb into one of those pods myself. That was a horrible idea, I couldn't boot some innocent person from their pod to better my own chances.

Of course, my superior officer had arrived at the same conclusion I had, and he had far fewer qualms about it. “Get this bird safely to the ground, Pilot Yun,” he demanded. “The UAR won’t miss one of their condemned humans. They’ve got the whole Preator stuffed to the brim with them, anyway.” He unbuckled his flight harness and got up. “If you survive this, Yun. Wake me.”

He turned and headed for the curtain, fully expecting me to obey. I think he assumed I already knew what we’d been transporting, and my lack of surprise must have clued him in that he was right. A rebellious thought rose in my brain when he turned his back. He thought I might die, and he didn’t care. He was willing to kill a pod occupant to save his own ass.

My hand flicked to the laser pistol strapped in a holster on my thigh. I shouldn’t do this, but nobody would know, would they? I wouldn’t survive, he wouldn’t survive, and that uninhabited planet would forget we existed. Maybe the people in those stasis pods would wake one day, maybe someone would track the signal on the pod beacons and rescue them. They’d be more deserving of that than Jackson was.

Jackson, who knew we were transporting humans to hand over as bartering currency with an unknown power in an unknown quadrant of the galaxy. All so we could fight a useless war at the edges of Earth’s quadrant of space... My thumb flipped the clasp open and freed the pistol; it made a loud noise in the confines of the small shuttle.

My superior officer turned, alerted by the sound, and I stared him right in the eye as I lifted my weapon and fired. Shooting a person was not the same as shooting a target on a practice range. I had never done it before, and I didn’t think I’d have it in me to do it again. It was awful. The weapon recoiled in my grip, the laser fire sizzled through the air, and the wound stank of burning flesh.

I hit him in the shoulder, a bad wound but not an instantly fatal one. He screamed in rage and I was certain he would have charged me, that I was a dead woman. I was a

dead woman anyway, my brain supplied rather unhelpfully. It really didn't matter what way I died, did it? Dead was dead. The ship's systems blared with alarms, and I responded on instinct when we got thrown around in bad turbulence. We'd started entering the atmosphere.

My hand stuck the pistol back into its holster and secured it, my fingers slipped around the yoke, and my focus became the view out the front of the ship. I had to slow our descent, I had to pull up the nose of the shuttle. And while I was at it, I hoped desperately that we'd end up crashing on land, not a deep, endless ocean. That was something I would definitely not survive.

The shuffling behind me, unsteady in the rocking and jerking of the shuttle, had to be Jackson moving around. He wasn't saying anything, but he'd refrained from attacking me. Maybe he was at the back by the pods, trying to open one to get in. I hoped not, but I couldn't pull my attention from the ship now. That wouldn't achieve anything but certain death for all of us.

I gritted my teeth and fought with the ship, that was all I could do. When the hull started to tear apart with awful ripping noises, when the heat of the reentry bathed my skin, even when parts started falling off, I did not give up. A mountain filled my view, we were going to hit it, hard.

My last thought was that if I'd had the luck of striking a plain, I might have survived, but this mountain... We hadn't slowed enough. I assumed the safety position just before we hit the unforgiving planet. My head braced, my arms crossed. The planet looked pretty, all violet and purple, too bad I wouldn't get to see much of it.

I saw Jackson careen past me from the corner of my eye as we struck, hitting the navigator's seat and flipping over it. He might have already been dead, I couldn't tell. It was an odd thing to even care about during my last moments. Then everything went black.

I woke with a haze of pain over my mind, and a darkness that surrounded me that I couldn't pierce. Not at first. My brain throbbed awfully, reminding me I had a brain, though right now I wished I didn't. Anything was better than this pain. Why was I in pain? I didn't understand.

Then voices filtered through the rushing noise in my ears, and I focused on those. Anything was better than letting the pain consume me, and the voices were interesting. A female voice, tremulous and soft, speaking in English with an unmistakable UAR accent. The other voice was male, deep, rough, but with a dark edge that appealed to me. I could clearly hear what he said too, and it made me feel safe.

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“Stay close, both of you. We’ll exit the ancestral caves here. They shouldn’t be able to find us,” that dark voice said. I was picturing sinful eyes, bedroom talk, even secrets shared between lovers from hearing his voice. It made me forget about the pain pounding in my skull, or the way I couldn’t move or see a damn thing.

The woman made a squeaking noise of consent, but a new, male voice replied in crisp tones that sounded familiar. He spoke English just like the woman, UAR tinted, and doused with a heavy dose of that military directness that had been stamped into my bones. “On your six. Zathar and Vera should prove a distraction. Can you loop back once we’re in a secure spot to offer backup? I can guard the women.”

Women, as in plural. Was he talking about this female stranger and me, or were there more? He was definitely a soldier; he spoke the lingo, and he seemed unafraid when talking of protecting and rescuing. So maybe even a soldier who’d seen action or worked on the front lines. Not like me, just a simple pilot for cargo ships and shuttles.

“Blazing suns, you know I can’t understand either of you. Just stay close!” the dark voice said, the voice that was definitely not speaking English but that I understood anyway. My translator implants had to be doing the good work, but I couldn’t shake this gut feeling that it wasn’t that. Then it came to me, I’d crashed a ship, a shuttle with humans in stasis. I’d crashed the fucking ship onto a supposedly uninhabited planet. Had I survived? Had they survived? And was it inhabited, after all?

All those thoughts made my head spin, and I struggled to stay awake, to stay coherent. My eyes felt like they were open, but all I saw was darkness, and it felt like the world was seesawing around me. I tried to focus on my breathing, on feeling my body rather than running away from the pain. Not my head, but my limbs, my belly. I

wasn't cold; I was cradled against something warm, and a scent filled my nose that was delicious. Spicy and musky, a little sweet. Like some of my favorite dishes from back home, before my mother died.

I thought I saw the faintest glow of something silver from the corner of my eye, and I focused on that. A vibrant slash of glowing silver peeking from beneath the edge of a leather band. I saw more details now, felt more things too. The scale-covered skin in a beautiful light blue shade, the arms that carried me.

A man was carrying me, an alien man with silvery-blue scales and strong arms. I tilted back my head and looked up at his face. A handsome alien of a kind I'd never seen before, and then he glanced down at me and I saw his quicksilver eyes, eyes that held the coldest, harshest look I'd ever received. I wanted to wilt under that gaze, and then I wanted to stick out my tongue and make him laugh. I didn't know where that urge came from, it was bizarre. It was too much for my poor head.

Chapter 1

Corin

My scales rattled along my spine in frustration. Zeidon was the worst patient I had ever had the misfortune of treating, and after he went missing, everyone looked at me like it was my fault. No, that wasn't fair—I had to admit that. They hadn't blamed me, but I still felt guilty. I should have paid better attention.

I dug my claws into my hair and pulled; the sharp bite of pain helped me focus. Zeidon the Water Weaver was a pain in my ass, but I understood his desire to rescue his mate. If this were happening to... No, I couldn't even finish that thought. I had no business thinking about her. Talk about a pain in the ass. How was a male supposed to avoid someone when they made it their business to be everywhere you went?

I was trying to do the right thing! I was always doing the right thing; that's why I'd aspired to be a Shaman all my life. That's why I was here, in Outcast Haven, and not back in the Thunder Rock village. That's why I wasn't the Thunder Rock queen's consort, even though she'd tried to seduce me for as long as I could remember. I didn't want power, I just wanted to help.

The med bay in Ahoshaga was quiet right now, with no patients for me to take care of since Zeidon had recovered, for the second time. I was glad to see the last of him and his cantankerous pet, but now I had nowhere to focus my worry but on the missing. The missing, and the way one certain female kept running into me while giving me looks with her big, dark, and ever-so-exotic eyes.

I needed to get out of here. What we needed to do was mount another search for the warriors who were trapped—the group of warriors sent to find a female who had already been found. That group included one of my best friends and his mate, not to mention the former Warlord, whose female was anxiously cooking by the fire, pretending to hold it together.

Zathar couldn't leave, and Zsekhet and his dragon couldn't enter the tunnels to help them. So who did that leave? Me. I was their best bet because I was the only one who understood the relics in the caves beneath our mountains. I could make them work, I could read them, use them. It had to be me, and I was done waiting for Zathar to make up his mind.

My home was the apartment directly next to the med bay, what the humans called the doctors' quarters. Especially Min-Ji and she'd smile all sexily and wink when she did so. I didn't know what a doctor was, but it was tangling my insides into all kinds of knots when she looked at me that way.

I'd decorated sparsely: just my nest, my shelves with my projects, and a desk. I had at least half a dozen cleaning bots spread out along one wall in various stages of repair,

and several more interesting bots in a nearby basket. One particular bot I gave an extra suspicious look. It appeared to be turned off, but with that one, I never knew what to expect.

I bypassed all the interesting technology and packed my supplies and weapons. I couldn't resist the lure of the jars of solutions I had gathered. I might need a good, strong explosion to free the warriors—it was the perfect excuse to test out my latest mixture.

Zathar wouldn't want me to go alone, but we didn't have many warriors to spare with most of them trapped. Those that remained, like Xorare and Aks, needed to stay here to handle hunting and protect Haven. They had to stay to protect the females, many of whom were now pregnant.

I ducked out of my quarters and into the med bay, or the Shaman's rooms, as Vrash's figment called it in his grand explanation of the village beneath the mountain that he'd built. That was who I'd be up against if I believed the report from the Water Weaver male and his female: a strange replica of the very man who had once aspired to create a safe haven at Ahoshaga to weather the calamities of the past.

The medical supplies stored there were plentiful, but I only took what I thought I might absolutely need. That included the healing device I could slide over my hand, a device I'd carried with me since the moment I'd found it as a youngling, just after my seventh molting. I wouldn't be leaving the pregnant females and warriors without a healer when I left. The Shaman Artek had arrived a week ago to see this place with his own eyes. Zathar would convince him to stay until I returned.

My frustration and anxious energy had left me now that I'd set my course, but as I slithered deeper into Ahoshaga's mountain village, a different worry took hold. Who would watch over the last single female without me there? I didn't like the idea that another male might take an interest in my absence, even if I couldn't permit myself to

take her as my mate.

She was a willful female, stubborn and fearless. Her smile was radiant, lighting up a room, and she wielded it like a weapon. Any of the unmated males would be fools not to notice her appeal, and if I wasn't around, they might make a move. I growled in frustration, back to feeling anxious for these new reasons. My scales rattled along my spine as I forced myself to keep moving.

That's what I wanted—for her to move on and forget about me. I couldn't be selfish and stand in the way of her happiness when she found another male, a safer male. If it happened while I wasn't around, all the better. I wouldn't have to fight my instincts to lay my claim, instincts that would certainly urge me to kill the contender. No, not a contender—because I had made my choice.

The panel I needed controlled the water flow of the fountain at the bottom of Ahoshaga's village. It sat in a small village square, and around it, apartments and balconies rose in a spiral. It took a sharp twist of my knife to slide the hatch free and expose the pipes and machinery beneath. It was going to be a tight squeeze, but my agile body could handle it. With the access door into the bowels of the mountain sealed from the other side, this was the only way in.

I glanced over my shoulder, then tilted my head to gaze at the balustrades above me. No one was watching, but I couldn't shake the sudden feeling of eyes on the back of my neck. When a second search for watchers didn't yield results, I shrugged and started to move, twisting myself between the pipes and pulling the hatch shut behind me. No one would know how I'd left, but Zathar would find the message I'd left in the med bay. He'd understand.

I was certain there was one particular female who would not understand my decision to mount a rescue by myself. But Min-Ji would have no choice but to remain in Haven and wait; she'd be safe. This was the last time I would allow myself to think of

her. From here on out, it was the mission and nothing else. I didn't believe that resolution would hold, not even for a minute.

Determined to stick to that plan, I started sliding through the cramped space, following the pipes deeper into the mountain. I needed to find the missing warriors, and I needed to find this Vrash Revenant if it had somehow survived. Someone had to deal with it once and for all, so it couldn't threaten Haven.

Min-Ji

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“Hey, Naomi,” I said as I plunked myself down on the fur-covered log beside her. The small woman was stirring madly in the huge leather 'cooking bag' dangling from a tripod next to the fire. If that were an actual cauldron, I would've made a joke about how she looked like a witch.

No, maybe not. It was obvious that she was worried about her mate. She kept cupping her free hand around her flat belly, glancing over her shoulder into the entrance of our cave village. Since we'd learned that the rescue party now needed rescuing, everyone was in a heightened state of worry. It mademefeel stressed, and I was usually very cool under fire.

We all felt like they could simply appear from inside the caverns rather than through the palisade gate. Most of the girls hadn't been the same since learning that some creepy, deranged robot had tunnels beneath our homes. Itmight have been defeated, and itmight have blocked the tunnels, but it still felt like it could slither out and harm us in our sleep.

Cosima and Vera had their mates with them, as did our recent addition, Farah. But Naomi was alone because her mate was part of the rescue party that had gotten lost. If I had to guess, I'd say she was also expecting a baby. I might have let my curiosity reign and asked her if she was, but that just seemed wrong now.

Naomi wanted to share her news with Krashe first, but he was missing. Someone had to do something about it, but the warriors were still huddled near the meat-smoking shed. I glanced in their direction and glared, hoping they'd sense it and hurry up. Only Vera was with them, but I couldn't read the expression on her face from all the way over here. Did her crossed arms mean she was upset or angry? Or was she trying

to project confidence surrounded by all those big, brutish Naga males?

Zsekhet was leaning against the massive paw of his dragon in a relaxed pose. Despite having a dragon at his disposal, I knew Zathar would never send him for this rescue. A dragon didn't fit underground, and we needed him here to scare off any Bitter Storm warriors in case they wanted to attack Haven. That didn't leave many others...

"Hey, Min-Ji," Naomi greeted me as she plunked down on the log. "I can't get this to taste right. Everything tastes off. What do you think?" She held out a spoon to me, and I obediently leaned forward to take a bite. It was a flavorful stew, and in my humble opinion, there was nothing wrong with it, but Naomi didn't seem to know what to do with that kind of answer.

She fussed with her pet miniature dragon, a jewel-green little fellow named Kiwi. I knew what was wrong with her: she missed her mate and was going through something life-altering. I reached out an arm to take the time to comfort her, but my eyes had just noted something pretty big.

There was one particular shade of blue Naga that I was always on the lookout for, and it was odd to see it absent during that important meeting. Zathar was in the lead, azure and imposing as he talked or listened to ideas from his warriors. Even the visiting Shaman, Artek, was present, his opalescent white scales gleaming in the midafternoon sun.

I counted the handful of other warriors that had remained behind and came up short again. Corin wasn't there; his distinct silver-blue scales weren't part of the group. My mind started racing with ideas about how that could be immediately. It was nothing like him. As Zathar's closest friend and confidant, he wouldn't miss out on an important meeting. He'd be there to back up his friend and leader in that stoic, quiet way of his.

There was only one thought that sprang to mind: he had left on some secret mission of his own, either with Zathar's blessing or without. Others thought he was the quiet, intense type and that he kept himself distant, but I knew better. He had a bleeding heart, too big for his own good, and he felt responsible for everyone. If I had to guess, he was concocting a plan to save the missing warriors all by himself.

I was on my feet before I'd even considered what I planned to do, but once standing, an idea started to form. "What...?" Naomi muttered, staring at me when I ducked down and gave her a quick hug. Once I let go of her, I was already thinking hard, running lists through my head of the supplies I needed to gather.

"Take care, I gotta run," I said over my shoulder as I ducked into Ahoshaga.

Chapter 2

Corin

The grate came off with a good amount of brute force; it clattered to the stone floor with a loud echo. I slid out of the wall through it and groaned—it had been a tight squeeze. Leaning forward, I stretched my back with a pop, relieved to finally unfurl myself again. That had been a tough crawl through a seemingly endless twisting path of pipes, cables, and humming machinery. I now had a new level of admiration for what our ancestors had been capable of building.

The room I'd crawled into wasn't big, but it was tall enough for me to fully unwind. The grate I'd slithered out of was just behind me, set into a wall with several more vents leading in other directions. A control unit was located in the center, with a dormant viewscreen above a desk lined with several rows of symbols and buttons.

That was the perfect place to start my search; a machine not directly associated with Ahoshaga's living hub. If there was any sign of the Revenant that Zeidon and Farah

had encountered, I should be able to find it. My gut churned at the thought: an ancient, self-thinking machine roaming the tunnels beneath my Haven.

Zathar might be responsible for our newly formed Clan, but I felt solely responsible for running our home. A home unlike any other on Serant, one that had made me incredibly happy—until I learned of the Revenant's threat. I might not have been able to become a Shaman, but running Ahoshaga had brought me as close to that dream as I could ever get.

To think that turning on the hydro plant that powered Ahoshaga had likely given this Revenant power again too... I felt doubly responsible for the warriors trapped because of its evil machinations. I had to fix this.

My tail lashed roughly in the air in frustration. No matter how determined I was to fulfill this quest, my mind kept straying back to a certain, always-smiling female. A female whose dark eyes hid things I knew were not nearly as cheerful as she made everyone think she was. What was Min-Ji doing right now?

I pictured her sitting next to Naomi at the campfire, flinging an arm around the Warlord's mate to reassure her. That was what she always did: care for the others, cheer them up, be there for them. She was always welcome everywhere, always greeted by the others with a smile, but I still remembered that it hadn't been that way at first.

They hadn't trusted her, and I still didn't know why. It was a mystery I wanted to uncover, threads I wanted to pull until it unraveled into neat, orderly information I could understand. But this wasn't the information I should be focusing on right now, I had an important mission. People depended on me, including a small, pregnant human female who was without her mate.

The viewscreen flickered to life when I touched the first row of buttons with a claw.

A crack ran diagonally from the upper left corner of the screen, warping the images it displayed, but I could still make out enough to understand what I was seeing: diagrams of the vents and airflow status. All systems were green except for three. The pipe I'd used to slither into this room showed a warning symbol, and two others in a remote section were red. The latter might indicate a collapse, but they didn't appear to be critical parts of the system. I figured the first warning was likely from tripping or damaging a sensor on my way down.

A sound made my scales twitch and rattle along my spine, and my hand flew to the long knife strapped to the small of my back. I spun, my hunter training kicking in, instincts and skills that endless repetition had honed. My eyes locked on the grate I'd left open, my entry point into the Revenant's domain.

The soft noise came again, followed by a slightly louder whir and a muffled, high-pitched tone. My scales flattened, and my shoulders lowered. With an annoyed grunt, I slid the knife back into its sheath and returned my attention to the screens.

A small cleaning bot dropped out of the hatch behind me with a metallic thud and another high tone, one that came remarkably close to an indignant squeak. "I left you behind, you silly bot," I said. "You don't need to clean this place." My words fell on deaf ears, because this particular bot was as faulty as they came, and clearly it hadn't been turned off like I thought. It did clean like it was designed, but it only ever cleaned things it had decided needed cleaning. Far too often that was the tip of my tail, not the floors it should have been polishing.

It beeped a few more times, then whirred as its polishing discs spun on the underside of its small, round body. Of course, it was going to polish the floor of this room. As if I wasn't already frustrated enough, as if I didn't already have enough to deal with, now I had to keep the bot from harming itself while I was down here. I should deactivate it, but I couldn't bring myself to do that.

When it bumped into my tail, and I felt the gentle brush of a cleaning disc slide against my scales, I sighed. There we go. This bot always persisted in polishing every part of my coiled tail it could reach, humming merrily as it did so. Why it did that was beyond me, and though I'd asked Artek, the Shaman had been equally baffled.

"Fine, you can stay," I said, my eyes narrowing as I found the first clue that not all was as it should be down here. "But you've got to stick close. No wandering off on your own, and no cleaning any strange machines." I swear the little bot hummed, as though it was pleased. It settled down against the nearest loop of my body and didn't move again. I could almost believe it had understood what I said, but that was crazy.

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There was too much data stored here—strings of symbols and numbers that had no function. They certainly weren't related to the vents. I struggled to transform the gut feeling I had into words that made sense. For now, I settled for locating maps of the tunnels, information I didn't have access to from Ahoshaga's central hub. If I could locate the hydro plant chambers, I could find the warriors. I also needed to check the chamber where Zeidon and Farah had escaped. I had to make sure the piece of the Revenant that Farah had thrown onto the floor was still there.

The map was confusing, with several layers, but after a few minutes of puzzling, I was certain I'd located the spots I needed to check. On a thin, finely cured piece of pale lavender leather, I drew the path I needed to follow in charcoal. It was rudimentary, but it would ensure I didn't get lost. I couldn't estimate the distances on the map, and I needed to hurry; the warriors wouldn't have much food left.

"Come on, bot," I said when I finished my map. I eyed the only door to the room with a hint of suspicion. Farah and Zeidon had a lot of trouble with opening doors down here, would this door be similar? I was confident I could get around it, but if every door became an obstacle, it would slow me down significantly.

The little bot made an annoyed beeping noise, a sharp tone that almost hurt my ears. I wanted to think it was irritated because I moved my tail, but a bot couldn't nap, and it couldn't feel "comfortable" on my coil, so why would it be? "Stay close," I warned as I headed for the door.

The bot whirred as it cleaned the floor, leaving a shiny streak along the dust-strewn ground as it followed me. The door opened without issue, which eased one concern but left me with another. The hallway was dimly lit by dirty crystals in the ceiling,

and a massive crack ran along it, suggesting this place was not quite stable.

Once I had freed the warriors, I would have to do a complete survey to make sure our home was secure. I added the task to my already long mental list of things I had to fix. The females wanted their ‘plumbing’ to keep working, and Naomi wanted the ‘mess hall’ restored so we wouldn’t be forced to eat outside in the winter. This would have to take precedence. I did not have enough hands, and I definitely did not have enough hours in the day to take care of all our budding Clan’s needs. Not if they kept getting injured.

“Beep,” the bot announced, and he bumped against my tail as if urging me to get going. Ah, now I was even thinking of the bot as he. I was losing my damn mind—first over the female, and now over this faulty machine. If Iave knew about this, he wouldn’t recover from laughing so hard. I wouldn’t survive the ribbing that would surely follow. He? No, it was a bot. It didn’t have a gender, and it didn’t have a personality. It couldn’t.

The next sound I heard made me want to snap at the machine, tell it to back off, and let me focus. Only, it wasn’t the bot making a noise this time. It came from behind me, again. I spun, hand flying to my knife, and I flashed it through the air, held in a defensive grip in front of my body. What now?

The viewscreen flashed on the vent control hub, displaying the diagram of all the pipes and warnings. A red light on the vent I’d used blinked rapidly, flashing alerts about blockages and system failures if not resolved. Then, a foot slipped through the open grate, followed by a delicate ankle, a gently curved calf, and then a thigh.

I gaped in shock, but that shock was quickly replaced by a wild rush of heat. My tongue flicked out, drawing scent particles into my mouth, pressing them against the scent receptors at the roof of my mouth. Her individual notes teased my senses and gripped my mind, igniting the primal instincts of my body. Min-Ji. It was her.

She unfurled from the vent without making a sound, agile as a Sleara. She was much smaller than I was—much smaller—but even so, it couldn't have been an easy journey for her through those pipes. Human limbs didn't bend and move the way a Naga body could, and, begrudgingly, I was very impressed she'd made it.

I didn't know how to respond or what to feel at the sight of her. Elation that she was with me? Absolute terror for the very same reason? I needed her to stay safe—I needed her as far from me as possible. But if she was here, with me, no other male could encroach on what should be mine. That kind of thinking was going to get me in trouble, but the sense of satisfaction, the feeling of victory, was starting to win out.

Her sleek black hair had grown longer over the past few months, tumbling around her shoulders in a messy cascade. Her skin looked as temptingly inviting as ever, and her soft pink lips made me desperately curious to experience the mouth-to-mouth greetings humans seemed to favor with their mates. I was no other mate; I had not staked my claim, but that mouth made me want to, badly.

She rose to her full height, which brought her just below my midriff in my current position. Min-Ji was a tiny human, about the same size as frail Cosima, who had been dubbed the smallest among Haven's members. Min-Ji only had an inch on the flame-haired woman, but her cheerful personality made her seem larger. When she planted her hands on her hips, my cock surged in its pouch, pressing against the slit as it threatened to escape my iron control.

"Hi," she said with a beatific smile. That smile said everything. She knew she wasn't welcome, and that I would try to send her back. I also knew that she wouldn't go, that was in the smile too. Nothing I'd say or do would convince her to crawl back into that vent and up to Haven, so she'd be safe. Min-Ji made it an art form to be the thorn in my side. No, not really, that honor went to the faulty cleaning bot.

I leveled a glare at the small, round machine, but it just blinked its lights back at me.

When I turned that glare on Min-Ji, her smile grew a tad wider, but her relaxed posture didn't change. Neither of them was intimidated by me. I was losing my touch.

With a deep sigh, I rolled my shoulders and sheathed the blade I'd grabbed at the first sound. "Fine, you can come too, but the same rules apply." I held up a finger and pointed first at the bot, then at the wayward female. "Stay close." I raised a second finger. "And don't touch anything."

I turned away without looking at what she did, but I was hyper-aware of her position the entire time. I couldn't risk a stray touch revealing the secret I'd been holding. That kind of confirmation of what she already sensed would only embolden her more. For her safety, nobody could know, not even her. Definitely not the otherher.

Min-Ji made a squeaking noise, and I knew that sound was accompanied by her hands pressed to her chest as if she could not contain her excitement. She always did things like that, and I could not bear to see them, they were too cute. It tore at my heart. "You're not even going to try to send me back? Really, Corin?"

The grunt that left my throat was half-smothered laugh, half-pained groan. If I had been distracted by her before, it was going to be agony to stay on task now. "What's the point?" I muttered under my breath. "You wouldn't listen anyway."

Chapter 3

Min-Ji

I would never tell Corin, but my back ached, and I'd scraped both my elbows and knees coming through that narrow crawlspace. It was lucky that I wasn't particularly tall, but it was a tight fit, which made it all the more miraculous that Corin had managed to squeeze his huge Naga body through. I guess he could wind and flatten himself to fit through spaces in ways I couldn't. He was mostly made up of vertebrae.

If not for the open vent panel, I wouldn't have been able to find him either. I thought he'd been sloppy, leaving it open like that, but now that I spotted the scrappy little cleaning bot at his side, I had a feeling I wasn't the only one who had followed him down here against his wishes.

I was pretty sure this bot came from a pile of things that Zsekhet and his dragon had recovered from Zeidon's cave. Ever since Corin had gotten his hands on it, it had followed him like a lost puppy. Kind of like I was... Nope, not going there. Sure, it was a little sad to be carrying a torch for a guy who wanted to run from the room as soon as you showed up. But I had good reason.

Did I, though? I wondered, not for the first time, if my memories of our first meeting were clouded by the traumatic brain injury I'd been recovering from. What if I hadn't been able to understand him at all? What if my brain had filled in the blanks afterward? Those were thoughts that usually only plagued me in the dead of night, but today, I couldn't shake them.

Everyone knew what it meant if a female could understand a Naga male by touching him. The silver glow of his scales was even more telling. But what if I'd dreamed all that? Cosima and Reid hadn't recalled seeing a silver glow on Corin when he carried me right after the crash.

With nobody there except Corin, I didn't feel the need to maintain my facade of cheerfulness and helpfulness. He didn't care what I said or did; heck, he'd probably prefer it if I stayed quiet. I should focus on other things, like the mission I was certain he was here to execute: rescuing the trapped warriors.

My heart skipped a beat when I thought about achieving that. Naomi would be so relieved when Krashe came back, and Haven would be much safer with all its warriors returned to the fold. I knew we all missed Kalani and her brutish, often silent male, Iave. A little voice at the back of my brain helpfully pointed out that rescuing

them would cement my position as a good guy.

We were traveling in gloomy darkness, lit only by dirty crystals embedded in the ceiling. Some of them were broken, courtesy of the massive crack that ran along the side of the tunnel wall. When the crack disappeared, the crystals seemed a little brighter, but it still felt like we were traversing a maze. Crossroads and tunnels split off and diverged, but Corin confidently led the way. If I lost sight of him, I'd be as trapped down here as the warriors we came to save.

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The silvery-blue scales of my companion were a beacon in the dark; they would be hard to lose sight of. He was holding a scrap of lavender-colored leather with black scribbles—I hoped it was a map. Corin usually knew what he was doing. Out of all the Naga here, he seemed to know the most about the ancient technology that remained. Well, maybe the Shaman knew more, but Corin was fascinated and completely unafraid of anything new or foreign.

“You’re quiet,” Corin said, tilting his head as he glanced over his shoulder at me. His half-long hair slid over his scales, the deep, dark blue locks shimmering like midnight in the faded crystal light. His eyes were the brightest silvery blue, swirling like quicksilver. That stare hit me like a punch to the gut, and I was certain he could see right through me, to my core. Nothing would remain secret if he kept looking at me like that—I’d spill my deepest desires, my greatest fears to him.

So I looked away first, even though it was usually me who pushed and prodded. “Why are you quiet?” he asked again, but I felt his gaze slip away. A rustling sound made me think he was focusing on his map again, but I didn’t raise my eyes from my feet to check. “You always talk, why aren’t you acting like yourself? I said stay close, not stay quiet.”

Though I felt called out, vulnerable because of that stare earlier, I also felt a flush of warmth. That didn’t sound like he hated it when I endlessly chattered his ear off. He sounded like he missed my talking. Dare I say, he even sounded a little worried. That had to mean something, but did it mean what I hoped it meant? Or was it just another part of his caring nature, the nature he tried to hide behind his silence and distance?

I rolled a shoulder, not that he could see it. When I lifted my eyes from the steel toes

of my combat boots, I was startled to find that Corin had turned around and was now blocking the tunnel with his big, looming presence. The rubber soles of my boots squeaked on the stone floor as I came to an abrupt stop. If I had kept walking, I might have run into him, might have actually touched him. But I knew he wouldn't have let it get that far; Corin avoided my touch at all costs. It was the main reason I still held on to this stupid crush.

I thought you'd prefer the silence," I said, balling my hands into fists at my sides to stop myself from reaching out to him. He'd reject me, move away, and I didn't want to end this moment, whatever it was. He was close enough that I could feel his warmth in this cool, slightly damp tunnel. If I breathed deeply, his scent filled my lungs: sweet, spicy, and with a typical male musk that I found intriguing.

His mercury eyes gleamed, and I fought the urge to look away again. He was right, I wasn't acting like my usual self. It felt different down here in the tunnels, and for once, he wasn't avoiding me like the plague. He hadn't even told me I couldn't stay. It brought me back to the basics, to the things I really felt and thought. No facade, I'd been thinking earlier, I didn't need it with him. But maybe it would be safer if I did.

"Look," I said when his stare started to become too much for me. "I try not to be a burden in Haven because I haven't forgotten that I wasn't in one of the stasis pods. I was the pilot. Everyone else seems to have forgotten that, but I haven't." I shrugged a little helplessly when he kept staring, and I shuffled my feet.

"Pilot?" he demanded in the awkward silence. Ah, I kept forgetting which words were unfamiliar to the Naga, especially with Corin, because he knew so much about the technology they still had. He was the one who had helped lobby for the translator implants for the aspirants, so they could talk to us and understand us. If not for Corin, I wouldn't have understood a single word any of the Naga said.

"Yeah, pilot," I replied with a nod. "I trained to fly the skyships." I gestured vaguely

toward the ceiling, but I knew he'd understand; the interested gleam spreading in his volatile eyes said it all. Corin was always craving more information, more knowledge of how things worked, especially the skyships and the machines that could be found all over the planet. I had a feeling that, for once, I wouldn't be the one leading the charge in a stilted conversation.

"You can fly a skyship?" he clarified, slithering a little closer, a small miracle all on its own. My nipples perked beneath my shirt, and I wrapped my arms around myself to hide the evidence.

"Yes, it means I was the one that caused all of us to crash on Serant. It was my fault. And not just that, but it means everyone thinks I played a willing part in getting them here. You know they were all supposed to be executed for a crime, right?" Vera, Reid, all the other girls. On Earth, they had been condemned for a crime, big or small, false or true. They thought they were dead, only to discover the UAR had put them in stasis and shipped them off to god knows where for some nefarious reason.

Thinking about it made my stomach twist painfully, and any excitement over Corin's interest in talking instantly vanished. Even his warmth didn't soothe the chill that filled me now. I was no slaver. I didn't agree with any of it, but I couldn't deny that I'd played a part in their fate. A big part. It was wrong, and I had to make up for it. My survival meant I depended on their willingness to forget who I was, a UAR soldier who'd followed their orders with blind loyalty, right until we'd crashed on this planet.

"Willing?" Corin said, latching onto that one word with alacrity. Of course he did, he was the smartest person I knew. He could read between the lines. I opened my mouth, which had gone dry as a bone, struggling to find the right words to answer his question. I wanted to brush it off, deny it, so he couldn't strain my relationship with the others at Haven. Except a bigger part of me was suddenly convinced that he would never do that, say anything that could harm my safety. It had to be wishful

thinking once again.

I was saved by the bot. The little cleaning machine whirred as it suddenly rolled around my legs and positioned itself solidly between the two of us. It beeped twice, and several yellow and green lights flickered across the dome-shaped upper portion. “What does he want?” Corin asked, his low voice taking on a sharp edge of annoyance; a tone I knew well.

“He?” I asked, a smile suddenly finding its way onto my face. I didn’t think I could smile so soon after that conversation, but the admission of something other than dislike for his recently acquired shadow was too much. “You’re calling it a he? Did you name it too?”

The guilty look on his face made me think that yes, maybe he had named it. Though maybe that look was more about being caught assigning something more to what was supposed to be a thoughtless machine. Taking hold of this timely distraction with both hands, I said, “What is it? Not Mrs. Mop since you decided this bot is a guy... Bolts? Circuit? Oh, Robbie maybe?”

He bared his teeth, displaying the frighteningly sharp fangs that protruded from his upper jaw. The hiss that rattled from his chest was dark, primordial, and threatening. It was a sound that should have sent me running in the other direction, and certainly, a small part of my brain took note. A very small part, mostly I just thought it was hot.

Then he turned his bared fangs on the still happily beeping little bot, and that threatening display turned into something far more akin to disgust. “I did not name the stupid bot.” He spun around, his hands flying into his dark hair in what was clearly frustration. He gave those silky-looking strands such a rough yank that I winced in sympathy.

I opened my mouth to lob a few more suggestions. It was easy to fall into the familiar

groove, where I did my very best to get a reaction out of him. His quick departure made talking all but impossible. I had to jog to keep up with him, and the little cleaning bot whirred next to me, keeping pace on its rapidly spinning bottom section.

“Chip? Sparky?” I yelled after him.

Chapter 4

Corin

I hated the silence that followed us for the rest of the day. I kept track of the time by the distance we traveled and the way my stomach felt, pausing only long enough to pull out travel rations on the fly. We didn’t have time to linger anywhere; those warriors were counting on us to find them. Still, I missed the lively conversation Min-Ji usually kept going all on her own when she was around me.

Her words had set my mind spinning, and I wanted to curse the little bot for interrupting us just when we were starting to get somewhere. The fact that she was a pilot of skyships was exciting— that topic alone deserved a hundred questions— but it was the other things she revealed that really made me worry. The tiny female didn’t feel safe in Haven. She didn’t think her position in the new Clan was secure because of who she’d been and what she’d done in the past. I knew better than most that past actions didn’t dictate who a person was now.

She was keeping up, and though she was a distraction, I had to admit she was likely no more distracting than she would have been back at Haven. I had to face the truth: every second was filled with thoughts and worries about her. The bot, however, was a nuisance I could do without. I’d slipped up, calling it a ‘he’ again, and it drove me crazy that Min-Ji had instantly caught on. My mate was far too clever.

If my map was accurate, we should almost be at the first hydro plant location. I hoped

it was the one that held the trapped warriors, but there were four locations to check. Our chances weren't great, and nothing in Zeidon and Farah's account of their adventure had helped me narrow it down. The door that glimmered silver in the distance looked promising, and it appeared solidly locked.

My heart rate sped up, thumping rapidly in my chest as my body prepared itself for a possible fight. "Stay back, we're at the first location." I had not explained anything to my human companion yet, but she didn't ask questions. She flattened herself against a nearby wall with a determined nod, her leg slipping forward to jolt the bot to a stop. I saw her hand drop to her thigh, where a curiously shaped holster was strapped to her leg.

It could be a weapon I didn't recognize, but I wasn't taking any chances. I freed one of my spare knives and, holding it by the blade, extended the handle to her. "Take my knife as a precaution. More than likely, that room either holds our lost males or nothing interesting at all." I hoped my words were true, but unease filled my belly, making the scales along my back twitch.

When she nodded and stayed in place, I focused all my attention on the metal door in our path. If there was any door that was going to be locked, it was this one—unless the Revenant had truly been defeated. But I was certain we hadn't heard the last of him. Farah's description of their final confrontation left a very bad taste in my mouth. Maybe the machine core was too damaged to be fixed, but I doubted it.

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The door was stuck. It didn't respond to the panel at the side that was supposed to open it, and it didn't budge when I put my shoulder against it. That meant some good old-fashioned work on the wires behind the panel, and excitement thrummed through me. That was my favorite part. As I got to work, I remembered that Zeidon had also been good at opening doors. We needed to discuss techniques once this was all over.

I could feel Min-Ji's eyes on my back, burning against my scales as she watched me work. This wasn't the same as working on my projects in the privacy of my apartment, or even back in my hut at Thunder Rock village. If I failed, someone would be there to see it—and not just anyone, but the female I wanted to impress more than anything. Not that I was going to fail. It was a simple lock, held shut by some command from the evil Revenant. A few cut wires, some I reconnected, and the door swished open.

The room beyond was dark. No crystals glowed in the ceiling, but my eyes adjusted immediately to the gloom. The sound of rushing water washed over me, no longer muted by the walls and the door. I saw the hydro plant, several spinning turbines squatting over a large water channel. They made a groaning, grating noise, with the one at the back louder than the others. It wasn't a pleasant sound.

"Are they failing?" Min-Ji inquired from my left. She was so close that a tiny step was all it would take to bring her skin into contact with my scales. The rushing water had masked her approach, and I quickly coiled out of her way, slithering into the room to avoid her. Her question was observant, and if I knew humans—and I was starting to—I guessed she'd asked it based solely on the sound. Her eyes weren't adapted to this darkness.

I didn't want to contemplate that what she asked was true, but the sound definitely meant something was wrong. "They are not performing right, no," I agreed. This explained why I'd struggled to raise our power output at Haven to match the needs of the greenhouse Cosima had built. There were four hydro plant stations beneath Ahoshaga, but only three were working properly. This was going to be another task for my ever-growing list of things to repair and maintain.

The dust that covered the floor in a fine layer of grime warned me that this room had not been entered in a very long time. We wouldn't find our missing warriors here, nor would I find the core that Farah had left behind. This was the wrong plant.

We didn't have time to linger, but that groaning noise made me deeply uncomfortable. I needed to assess the danger before we could set out for the next hydro plant. The little cleaning bot hummed and beeped as it followed me across the room to the back of screens. The control unit wasn't lit, but a brush of my fingers over the dusty keys brought it to life. The bot hummed more as it started polishing the surrounding floor, its round body bumping into my coils as it stuck close. Almost as if—though it was silly—it was afraid to wander far. It was simply obeying my orders to stay close, that was all.

"I don't suppose you can make some light? Nobody is in here, right?" Min-Ji was still at the door, her voice trailing off into silence. I could easily picture her clasping her hands over her heart, her back pressed to the wall beside the door for safety. Most people didn't realize, but I knew why she asked. Always cheerful and upbeat, my brave female hadn't let on to anyone that she was scared of bugs and creepy crawlies. It wasn't the dark that was bothering her right now, she feared that something was in that darkness.

My hand lifted from the soft glow of the screen, which wasn't enough for her to see the room by, and moved to a pouch on my hip. I drew out a small light source and flicked it on with my claw. "Catch," I told her, and sent the small object sailing

through the air toward her. “Please tell me you brought at least some supplies.” She had a small satchel with her, and that odd holster strapped to her leg, but not much else.

She deftly snatched the lantern from the air, and I caught her doing exactly what I’d pictured—holding her hands to her chest with the light in them, creating a large pool of yellow around her feet. My eyes lingered on the holster again, and I had to conclude that it was... attractive. It drew my attention to the soft curve of her thigh, emphasized by the black straps.

“I brought food and water,” she said in a defensive tone. “And a fur to sleep on.” It wasn’t much, but thankfully I tended to overpack despite my efforts to take only the bare necessities. We’d make it work. I shouldn’t have been surprised that she hadn’t brought a light source; she probably didn’t have one. The other humans had mates who provided such things, but Min-Ji didn’t have anyone. I felt a pang of guilt that I couldn’t shake.

She didn’t let anything drag her down, not my comment about her lack of supplies or the darkness. With the light in her hand, she wandered deeper into the large chamber, her footsteps barely audible over the sound of the wildly rushing water and the groaning and grinding of the failing turbines. It better exposed the sorry state this plant was in, and I winced, hurrying to complete my diagnostics on the machines.

“There are some weeds tangled in the blades,” Min-Ji announced, but I didn’t turn to look. “And one blade is having some kind of rust issue. I thought this alloy didn’t rust. Nothing’s got rust down here.” The word was unfamiliar to my language, but I wasn’t relying on translating by touch. I had an entire database of her language, courtesy of Artek, uploaded directly to the implants behind my ears. I’d done the procedure myself, as I couldn’t travel to Artek’s home for it, but I knew they worked perfectly.

It was tempting to flick the tip of my tail in her direction for a quick brush along her skin, just to know, but that would be wrong. “Rust?” I asked her instead. Asking would be just as quick, and she’d happily tell me all I needed to know.

My screen was flashing all kinds of warnings, and I pulled out a scrap of leather to write down the tasks needed to fix this. Ink stained my fingers from all my scribbling; some scales had black dots that wouldn’t fade anymore. If my mother knew the state I’d let myself get into, she’d be horrified from beyond the grave. At least I didn’t have to worry whether Min-Ji cared about such things: it was never going to come up.

“Rust? Ah, it’s like decay, but of metal? It often looks brown or red,” she explained, and from the way the light danced around the walls, I knew she was gesturing with her hands. Always so expressive, my Min-Ji. I wondered if she even knew how to sit still.

“I have seen this,” I replied, tilting my head to glance over my shoulder at her. She was standing precariously close to the edge of the racing water, her sturdy boots planted right on the edge. Fear of bugs, not fear of water, but I was tempted to snatch her around the waist with my tail and yank her to a safer distance. Her long black hair brushed her shoulders in sleek waves, and she had one hand on a hip, near that holster, as she contemplated the turbines. It made my breath catch in my throat with how pretty she was, so small and exotic.

I forced myself to explain where I’d seen this ‘rust,’ and made myself focus on the readings instead of staring at her profile. “Krashe would know this better, but I’ve seen some of the big Revenants that roam Serant beyond Bitter Storm’s territories. Some of them are covered in red streaks and brown stains. A Revenant with such stains is often easier to defeat.”

Easier to defeat, maybe, but the giant metal beasts were still terrible foes. In that, the Clans were fortunate that Bitter Storm bore the brunt of their attacks. Only rarely did

one manage to cross the border into Thunder Rock land. I thought about the Vrash Revenant that Zeidon and Farah had faced, feeling a tingle of curiosity. A Revenant that small was unheard of, and I wanted to see it, study it. It might be evil—an enemy—but it was still fantastical technology left behind by our ancestors. What could we learn from a machine like that?

“I’ve got my list,” I said, brushing the screens off with an air of finality. I couldn’t do much more than this right now, but the situation was dire. The crack in the tunnel wall and this hydro plant on the verge of collapse—I’d have to deal with them as soon as we found the warriors. I might even need to enlist Zeidon’s help to find the right parts and handle some of the grunt work. Out of all the warriors, he was probably the most skilled to assist.

“How long is this list by now, Corin?” Min-Ji asked quietly. She’d approached again, but this time she hadn’t moved so close that we were at risk of touching. Her brown eyes held a warm, concerned hue as she peered at my face. “Seriously, you’re always busy. Do you even have time to sleep? How much work is this?” she waved her hands around the large room to indicate the failing turbines. “You can’t do it all alone.”

I bristled, offended that she would doubt my skills, but the concerned look in her eyes made me snap my mouth shut. This wasn’t about my abilities; it was about my time. Hadn’t I just been contemplating enlisting Zeidon for some of this work? I was swamped, trying to repair what I could and keep Haven running. Some nights, I didn’t sleep at all.

Lowering my raised shoulders, I let out a long sigh. “It needs to get done, so I get it done. That is all.” There were no other options but to keep going. At some point, I’d get all the repairs done. I’d slow down then.

The cleaning bot had settled down against my tail, and when I moved toward the

door, it beeped loudly, a sharp edge to its tone. It hummed as it hurried to polish the stretch of floor behind me, trying to catch up. “Come on, it’s almost night and I want to get halfway to the next hydro plant before we have to take a break.”

Chapter 5

Min-Ji

I should have realized it sooner, but I didn’t put the pieces together until I saw the way he was scribbling notes on a piece of lavender leather. Corin had far too many tasks on his plate to handle them all alone. He was our doctor when Artek wasn’t there, and he was also the only Naga who knew how Haven worked and how to fix any of the machines that made the little town beneath the mountain a comfortable home.

This was far too big of a job for one man, and now he’d added a whole rescue mission to his already full plate. I was relieved I’d decided to follow him, even if I might not be the most useful person to have along. Mental support was definitely my thing though—I knew exactly how to cheer someone up and keep them motivated

My eyes traced Corin’s sleek but muscular body as he slipped quietly through the dust covering the room. The cleaning bot chased after him, its polishing disks humming. When it caught up, it brushed the nearest coil with a gentle, caring little beep. Ah, I wasn’t going to be his only cheerleader down here, the bot would do its part too.

“Stay close,” Corin said, turning to glare at me over his shoulder. He was always so grumpy, but that was just to protect his soft heart. I smiled as I jogged to catch up, my light clutched to my chest, perfect evidence to show his caring nature. His mercury eyes glimmered, reflecting the light back at me, and then that silvery membrane slid over them from the inside corner. Guiltily, I lowered the light to the floor.

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“Oops, I didn’t mean to blind you,” I apologized, but my breath faltered as I caught the first hint of a sound. I hadn’t noticed it before—not over the rushing water—but here, by the door? Skittering, like a thousand tiny feet scuffing along the floor. My belly went ice-cold, and my hand instinctively gripped my laser pistol. ‘What is that?’ I whispered. Against my better judgment, I leaned closer, peering over Corin’s shoulder into the dimly lit tunnel.

“The ‘crab’ machines that Farah and Zeidon mentioned,” Corin deadpanned, slithering aside so we wouldn’t accidentally touch. I barely registered the quick motion, though it normally gave me a little pang of hurt in my chest. Crabs? That was uncomfortably close to a spider, and I wasn’t wrong. When I spotted them scuttling along the tunnel floor, goosebumps erupted on my skin, and a shiver of disgust ran down my spine. Their strange walk was crab-like, but they had eight legs like a spider. Yuck.

“Now what?” I said, my mouth dry. There were dozens of them, no, a hundred maybe. Too many to simply walk around, and what if they attacked? They weren’t big, but they weren’t small either, and I definitely didn’t want to find out what it felt like to have spindly metal legs crawling over my skin. No thanks. This was exactly why I’d chosen a career in outer space: no bugs.

“They’ve almost passed us,” Corin replied, “and then we follow them. They might lead us to the Revenant. Look, they’re carrying parts. They’re probably still trying to repair it.” He was right, but that didn’t make me feel any better. I was even less interested in facing the Revenant than seeing these crab bots. The accounts Farah and Zeidon had given made that freaky robot sound like something straight out of a horror movie. A mix of zombie Naga meets Terminator, it wasn’t high on my list of

creatures to encounter.

When Corin waited expectantly, I knew he was waiting for a reply, an acknowledgment of the plan. What was I supposed to say? “No thanks, I’d rather we go to the beach instead?” We had to do this. The Revenant was responsible for trapping the missing warriors and nearly killing Zeidon twice. If anyone needed to be stopped, it was that thing, and if anyone could, it was Corin. So, I swallowed my fear and gave him a determined nod. “Sure, let’s do this.”

I had my laser pistol with me. The charge was running low, but I should be able to get a few more shots off. That made our odds much better, and I wouldn’t even need to get close. It was tempting to destroy the creepy little robots, but I settled for walking behind them with the pistol clutched in my clammy palm. Corin was between me and the bots anyway, so I’d have advance warning if they turned to swarm us, but so far, they completely ignored us.

We were following them down narrow tunnels that twisted and turned, barely lit by grimy crystals in the ceiling. Here and there, the walls showed signs of damage, cracks and fissures that bisected the dark stone. My sense of direction underground wasn’t as reliable as when I flew a shuttle, but I still felt like we were heading back the way we’d come. Back into the area where we’d seen that huge crack in the wall. How safe were these tunnels? I hadn’t worried before, but now I wondered: were we at risk of a collapse?

The idea that we might end up trapped in this darkness like the people we were trying to save, was an excellent distraction. Too good maybe. I prattled in the gloom, speaking in a low voice to Corin’s scaly back. “This is safe, right? We won’t get trapped?” The cleaning bot whirred and beeped as if it agreed with me, but Corin didn’t reply.

He froze so suddenly that I nearly tripped over his tail. I managed to catch myself

against the wall, my fingers slipping into a crack and hanging on before I face-planted on the floor. I was about to scold him for doing that but snapped my teeth together when I realized why he'd stopped. The crab bots skittered ahead, winding around a corner in their creepy little caravan. The last one ducked beneath a pair of metal paws and disappeared from sight.

Claws clicked against the stone as the metal beast came toward us, its glowing purple eyes burning like shiny amethyst. If I had to pick an animal to describe this creature, I'd go with a dog, but that was really just my brain trying to find some comparison to make sense of the shape I was seeing.

Spiked back, sleek-moving shape, and four clawed paws. Its entire body was shiny silver metal with dark matte spots that seemed to absorb the light. It had a maw filled with sharp teeth, and when it opened, a sound like a chainsaw emerged as the teeth started moving. "Another Revenant," Corin hissed beneath his breath, "Small one again. I had no idea this class existed. How interesting..."

He sounded intrigued rather than worried, and I thought he was crazy for responding that way. That creature looked terrifying, and it was clearly there to block our path, preventing us from following the crab things to the Vrash robot so they could continue repairing it. It looked like it was going to saw us into tiny bits with that maw, and it was not a pretty prospect.

I took a few steps back and pulled my pistol from my thigh holster. The snap of the holster as I released the gun was loud in my ears, even over the sound of the chainsaw dog creature whirring away with its awful mouth. Corin's scales rattled along his back, a hissing noise that served as a counterpoint to the creature's threatening sounds. I knew that sound meant discomfort, unease. Those rattling scales, I'd often seen Corin do it, but it was rare for most other Naga. Maybe he wasn't as intrigued as I thought, maybe he was worried about that attack dog robot.

Then he coiled his body forward, moving toward the thing, and he hadn't even pulled out one of his signature long knives. Nope, no sense of self-preservation. I must have startled him with the snap of the holster button. Idiot. I raised my pistol and took aim, my shoulder pressed against the crumbling stone wall. The tunnel was narrow, and Corin's shoulders were wide, but the hound made a nice, big target.

My finger pressed gently against the trigger as I took aim, but I didn't fire yet. Was it going to attack or not? If we backed away, would it leave us alone? My hand trembled as I recalled the last time I'd fired this gun, my mind filling with images of my superior officer and the stench of his burning flesh. I hadn't killed him—not directly—but I was responsible. I told myself I'd never fire a gun again, but shooting at a robot dog wasn't the same as shooting a real, living person, was it? Then my eyes flicked from the dog bot to the tiny cleaning bot trembling against my boot.

"Stand down, Revenant," Corin said in a firm voice, the kind of voice you might use on a dog. I didn't think that would work, but he kept approaching the thing with his hands at his sides, like he was dealing with a skittish animal, not a robot. "We need to see your master. Where is he? Take us to him."

The hound's mouth snapped shut, and the silence felt deafening. No more chainsaw noises, just the amethyst glow of its eerie eyes. Honestly, that purple glow was kind of pretty. Too bad those eyes belonged to a metal snout that would saw your limb off if you tried to pet it. "That's it," Corin said in the silence, his tone soothing. "Take us to your master. Take us to Vrash."

The name of the robot Naga that had plagued Farah and Zeidon's courtship was a trigger. The silence ended as the creature revved its chainsaw teeth and lunged forward. Corin dodged with lightning speed, his black stone blades flashing through the air and scoring the side of the beast. It happened so fast, I had no time to respond, I just stood there like an idiot.

Then the screeching started, a loud, ear-splitting noise that tore through the air. It felt like my organs were trying to climb up my throat. My ears started ringing, and even the wall beneath my fingertips trembled and shook. Through eyes watering from the pain, I tried to make sense of what was happening. Was it the dog-thing?

Corin crumbled where he stood, all his many coils thudding to the ground in an ungainly pile. The hound saw its opening and leaped for him; I reacted on instinct. My finger was still on the trigger somehow. It squeezed in pure reflex, barely aimed in the right direction. The laser shot scorched through the air and, with a large sizzle, struck the robot hound on the side.

It snapped its maw shut, and the whirring chainsaw and the awful screeching abruptly ended. My ears didn't work right after that assault, the world seesawing around me. I narrowed my eyes, forcing myself to focus, to get my aim right this time. The beast leaped over Corin, paws outstretched, tipped with four-inch long knives. My shot sizzled through the air and struck it in the throat.

I felt the brush of a claw against my belly, slicing through my shirt. Stumbling back, I fell over, my ankles tangling with the cleaning bot huddled against my boots. This was how it ended, I thought. But I'd had that thought before, and I didn't enjoy having it again. With an angry scream, I locked eyes with the glowing amethyst orbs of the beast, my pistol firing again, straight into his freaking chainsaw maw. "Fuck you, die!"

My pistol fired once, laser fire burning, and then it sputtered out. The glowing eyes were right above my legs as it kept prowling forward. Fear filled my throat, my belly ached, and I was definitely filled with all kinds of regrets. Mostly, I was angry that I hadn't managed to convince Corin to kiss me. Ah, Corin! Was he dead? Had that awful screech killed him?

The metal beast collapsed so suddenly that I was left blinking at where its eyes had

been for several seconds before it finally registered. The weight that hit my shins—the cold metal, the hot maw of sharp fangs—and Corin rising above it with blood streaming from his ears, dripping down his throat and chest. My eyes focused on the metal disk on a leather cord he wore, how the blood seemed to funnel toward it.

His mouth moved, but I couldn't understand what he was saying over the ringing in my ears. I raised a hand to touch one, worried I might be bleeding like he was. My fingers came away clean, so that screeching had struck Corin harder than it had me. I wasn't sure if I liked knowing that, but I was infinitely relieved to be alive, and that he was upright and moving.

Okay, moving was a bit of a stretch. He was hunched over the downed robot attack dog, his upper body half-collapsed on top of it. I could see the leather-clad hilts of two of his long blades sticking out of the side of the beast, stuck between a pair of metal ribs. The dog was out, but it was starting to look like Corin was going to collapse a second time. Pass out, I mean.

"I'm fine," I said, my words sounding funny to my ears. The ringing was fading, and as it did, I felt less dizzy. The robot was heavy, and Corin, lying half on top of it, wasn't helping. I tried to shift my legs and couldn't. "Please help me get out from under this thing. Then I'll look at your poor ears. Can you even hear me?" I was prattling again, and I realized that Corin was staring with laser focus at my moving lips, his mercury eyes glowing. If he heard me, that was an entirely different thing. He didn't get off my pinned lower legs, and his eyelids were drooping.

If he passed out, I was going to be stuck under him and the bot until my legs went numb. With no charge left in my laser pistol, that was going to be a terrifying time... I had to do something now! I tried pushing, but no matter how hard I heaved or pulled, the robot didn't budge enough for me to shift my legs free. Its dimmed eye sockets glinted balefully at me, as if accusing me of this predicament.

“Come on, Corin. Stay awake a little longer for me, please! You can do that, can’t you? Help me out so I can help you.” He blinked, the weird semi-transparent inner eyelid sliding shut and then open beneath his normal eyelids. He groaned when he tried to move. His hands shot up to clutch at his head as if it hurt, but his weight shifted off the dog.

It wasn’t enough, and he was flagging, my worry for him growing. This wasn’t good; that screech had done a terrible number on him. I recalled that Zeidon and Farah had dealt with a similar weapon from Vrash, but I was pretty sure Zeidon hadn’t been as bad in that recounting as Corin was reacting now.

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A brush against my hand made me squeak with fear, and Corin jerked upright, his body swaying, but his hands raised, holding a third knife he'd pulled from somewhere. It was just the bot, no longer trembling from fear. It beeped a few times gently as it scooted past me in the cramped space. "What are you doing?" I asked, though I knew it was silly to expect an answer.

"Beep, bop, beeeeeeeep," the bot responded as it scooted itself beneath the shoulder joint of the robot. Its round dome top made a scraping sound as it made contact with the metal. Then the little bot raised itself a little taller with another determined-sounding beep. Holy crap, it was doing it! It was just a tiny bit of space, but that was all I needed to yank my legs free from beneath the metal beast.

With a wild spinning move, the little bot freed itself from beneath the robot carcass, and I swore it danced for me. A triumphant little spin and twirl after a successfully completed task. It was freaking adorable. "If you didn't name it," I said to Corin, "then I'm declaring its name is now Triff. For centrifugal force."

I raised my eyes from the triumphant little robot and looked at my silvery-blue Naga companion. "Ah, fuck!" He was about to collapse again. My legs ached fiercely as I clambered to my knees. Pins and needles—the whole kit and caboodle. I ignored it and scrambled over the downed robot to get to Corin, hands outstretched so I could touch his still-bleeding ears.

At the last moment, I froze in place and stared. If I touched him, it would only succeed because he was too hurt to move out of my way. It felt wrong to take advantage of that. But how could I help without crossing that boundary?

Chapter 6

Corin

The pain in my head was the worst I'd ever experienced. I could barely see straight, and my ears didn't work for shit, but sound was coming back slowly. It was my equilibrium that was completely messed up. Everything spun around me, and I had never been this close to vomiting unaided by Iave's home-brewed Absael.

I'd take this pain any time over the utter horror and fear I'd felt when I discovered the Revenant beast had charged Min-Ji. That image was engraved on my brain, and I would see it whenever I closed my eyes to sleep. My proud, brave female braced against the charge as she fired her strange weapon into its maw. Then her tumble, and the claws swiping for her belly.

I thought I'd lost her, that I'd be too late. I still didn't know how I'd made it from the floor and onto the back of the Revenant to strike it with my blades. That I'd managed was a miracle, a sign of that power that came with protecting one's mate. Thinking about that moment made me fear she was bleeding from a grave wound, and I raised my eyes to frantically search her body.

Things had changed since I'd killed the Revenant. I thought I'd managed to stay conscious, but Min-Ji was struggling beneath the metal body. I was on it; that wasn't what I last remembered. My weight was keeping her pinned. I tried to get up, I really did, but I felt so heavy and so dizzy. It was like I was underwater and caught in a whirlpool. It wasn't until the silly bot made a sudden move that a burst of battle readiness gave me the strength to coil aside.

"I'm fine. Are you hurt? Good bot!" Min-Ji's voice filtered through the pain in my head and I drew in a relieved breath. Good, my hearing wasn't permanently gone. My fingers trembled when I sheathed the blade I was holding in my hand.

“If you didn’t name it,” Min-Ji said firmly, “Then I’m declaring its name is now Triff. For centrifugal force.” She was looking at the weirdly spinning cleaning bot with a fond expression on her face, and, of course, one hand was pressed against her chest. My insides twisted at that look. It was so adorable, and I wanted her to stop it, but I couldn’t look away.

Then she lifted her chin and looked at me, and my belly swooped—but not with nausea this time. I didn’t even hear what she said next; I just watched as she scrambled over the body of the Revenant to get to my side. She was graceful, even in this situation, and she looked unharmed. I drew in a relieved breath: she was safe.

She raised her hands toward my face, and I braced myself for the inevitable. I was too weak to move out of her way, to stop her from touching me. She’d find out when her fingertips brushed my skin that I was her mate, that she was meant to be mine. That’s what she’d been dying to discover for months, and I felt a thrum of excitement at the thought that she’d know the truth. It was wrong, but I wanted her to know she was mine so very badly.

It was selfish. It would put her in grave danger, but I was weak right now. I wanted nothing more than to know her touch, and for her to know my claim. Her face swam in front of mine, her expression worried but blurry. No, that was just my nictitating membranes messing things up. I fought to keep them open so I wouldn’t miss a single moment.

Her fingers were almost to my cheek—so close! My breathing shuddered in my chest, and my scales ached as if they were eager to shine for her, to show off the mating marks. My lungs filled with her scent, all delicious and warm, like home. Then she faltered, her hand pausing in the air next to my head. If I shifted to the side, we’d touch. The world was still a wild, swaying ride of continuous and confusing motion. If I moved, maybe it was just because I slipped from dizziness... A lie. I wanted her touch so badly it ached.

“I will not,” Min-Ji said. Her eyes glittered, her brow lowered in the cutest frown. Everything about her was cute, but that was the mating bond. She was such a contrast to Naga females, who were all hard scales and harder moods. Then her words penetrated, and I fought against the instinct to lunge forward and grasp her, to make her see that I did want her, that I needed her more than I needed air to breathe.

“Not when you’re hurt and can’t make the choice. I want you to choose me, Corin,” she said. She didn’t understand, and I couldn’t explain. I would choose her any time, always. My beautiful, brave mate was the only one I wanted. I only stayed away from her to keep her safe, and that made this the right choice, even if I hated it.

She pulled a bit of fabric from her satchel and used it to carefully dab away the blood drying on my neck and ears. I wanted her to slip up, still caught in the selfish desire to have her, regardless of the consequences. She never did; her fingers were sure and steady as she cleaned the blood from my scales.

The world had righted itself around me by the time she was done, but the headache remained. The sonic weapon the Slithrazer-like Revenant had used packed a serious punch. My eyes strayed from Min-Ji to the metal body, and I wondered if I could locate the device that created the noise and take it with me. If I could study it, maybe I could find a way to guard against it.

“You didn’t get hurt by the noise?” I asked my mate as I rose unsteadily on my coils and moved closer to the beast’s head. I heard a soft swishing sound and glanced over my shoulder in time to see that Min-Ji was shaking her head, her silky black hair swaying. I focused on the unmoving Revenant, then glanced at the cleaning bot, Triff. “Triff is good,” I agreed. It did spin mightily for such a tiny robot.

The bot beeped in response, its spherical body sitting next to the Revenant but with a healthy bit of distance. If a robot with no face could have an expression, I’d say it was looking at the Revenant with suspicion, but it beeped happily when I said its

name. Her name? His? I wasn't sure what to think anymore.

I focused on what I did know, and that was the voice box of the Revenant. I needed it for study, to protect our Clan—my people. We'd lost the trail of the repair machines. They'd skittered off into the darkness while the Slithrazer Revenant distracted us. That had been Vrash's plan all along.

"Don't you have your healing device with you? Shouldn't you use that?" Min-Ji exclaimed in consternation as I started pulling apart the metal beast's throat with my claws. I ignored her and switched to freeing my knives so I could use them on the more delicate parts. She was hovering nearby, standing perilously close to my tail, but I trusted her now, and I had myself back under control.

Without looking up from what I was doing, I said, "No, it doesn't work on me. I can only heal others." Her silence was telling, it was a little angry. Even though I kept my eyes on my hands, I could tell that she was glaring at the back of my head.

"You're saying that there's nobody around to take care of you when you are hurt? That's bad, Corin. You're super important to Haven. What if you get injured or sick? We'd have to wait for Artek to get to us or take you to him!" That was no different from how it was for any other Clan around here. They didn't have a personal Shaman on hand. Sure, some clansmen, like me, knew just enough to handle a healing device for certain things, but only the Shaman could work the healing machines.

Haven was incredibly lucky to have a med bay so well-equipped that it rivaled the home of a Shaman. So I didn't see why this was a big deal to my mate. I dealt with it, and I was already recovering from this injury too. Once I had the voice box, we needed to retreat and get some sleep. We'd start fresh in the morning and hit the last three locations. Whatever it would take to find the warriors.

"Fine, ignore me," Min-Ji sighed. "See if I care," she added with a huff, but I knew

she didn't mean that. When I glanced over my shoulder at her, she was staring into the dark tunnel the small robots had disappeared down, her arms crossed over her chest, her chin lowered as she stared, and her shoulders raised. I knew what she was thinking; the bots reminded her of the bugs and other crawling things she feared.

"I'm all right now, I promise," I told her. The headache was pounding away at my temples, and it thrummed through my bloody ears, but a Naga healed fast. We healed faster than humans did; I'd learned that the hard way. With a little sleep, I'd be back in fighting shape, that was a fact. "Got it," I said, and with a final yank, freed the device I was certain was responsible for the crippling noise.

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I held the device triumphantly in the air and smiled when Triff beeped cheerfully. Min-Ji didn't share in my triumph, still staring into the darkness. "Come," I said as I rose, already much steadier than before. "We have lost the trail. We need to backtrack and find a suitable spot to catch some sleep. You must be tired. We've been searching all day."

It was very tempting to offer her a hand or to use my tail to guide her back to my side. That's what I'd do if I allowed myself to claim her. Instead, we walked side by side back the way we'd come, at a slower pace than before. Some of the urgency had left me now that we were simply looking for a place to rest, but my equilibrium was still off, which kept me from rushing as well.

I checked my map twice, and when I was confident we were at a good spot to resume our search tomorrow; I started searching for a camping spot. A room with only one entrance, a nice defensible position if we needed one. Preferably a room with a door, so we could have more light without attracting anything unwelcome.

"How about this room?" Min-Ji asked. She was a bit ahead of me now, her feet graceful as she set a pace faster than mine. Triff was nowhere to be seen, and I felt a pang of worry. Where had he gone? Then the bot whirred out of a doorway behind my mate and beeped merrily. He bypassed Min-Ji to stop next to my tail, his polishing disks brushing against my scales.

I hadn't realized I was slowing down, but when I reached the doorway the two had singled out, I was relieved. Yeah, this would work, and I couldn't wait to roll out my furs for a makeshift nest and crash for a few hours. Hopefully, the headache would be gone after a bit of rest.

The room wasn't big, and crates of varying sizes were stacked all around. Everything was covered with a thick layer of dust and grime, and Triff started tackling the dirty floor with obvious enthusiasm. I gave up; the bot had a personality—there was no avoiding it any longer. Maybe it wasn't faulty so much as it had... evolved?

Spreading out the thick fur from my backpack, I sank down with a groan I tried hard to mask. More than just my head ached, as if tension had wracked my body and left sore muscles in its wake. It reminded me of that time I'd managed to zap myself with a powerful electrical current. All that was missing was a sore jaw and buzzing teeth.

Min-Ji talked to the bot as it cleaned the room around us, each surface it managed to reach. I zoned out on the words but enjoyed the melodic cadence of her voice. It was tempting to study the pilfered voice box, but I'd need my wits bright and sharp for that. Instead, I pulled out the calorie-dense ration bars I'd brought, breaking a piece off one for Min-Ji, and giving myself the rest plus a second one. Healing took a lot of energy, but my mate ate shockingly little. All humans did, and it made me very worried until I realized it did not hurt them.

She sat down on her own, much smaller fur, and nibbled daintily. It was tempting to keep watching her as she ate, but I forced myself to devour my food and set up a lantern to burn through the night. Then I pushed some crates in front of the door, my head throbbing in protest against the motion. When I returned to my fur, it was to collapse gracelessly. All I wanted was to sleep now. "Stay close," I murmured, and my eyes slid shut.

Sleep pulled at me hard and fast, but I hadn't done enough yet to secure the room. I should put up a perimeter alarm, move more crates, turn on the portable heater so Min-Ji would be warm. My mind filled with nightmarish images as sleep claimed me, images of death and destruction, with a vengeful queen after my clever mate.

Chapter 7

Min-Ji

I blinked my eyes slowly, still caught in the cobwebs of sleep and the remnants of dreams. I wasn't cold, but I distinctly recalled shivering myself to sleep last night. Was it even morning, or was it still dark outside? Trapped beneath a giant mountain, I had no clue of the passage of time. Another reminder of why I hated being underground.

When I lifted my head and took a look around, I instantly understood why I wasn't cold. Corin's much bigger fur had been spread on top of mine, and a little space heater stood next to me. That meant he was up. I searched for him but the room was empty, no sign of him or Triff. The room was also spotless. Even the tops of the crates were free of dust, and I wondered how the cleaning bot had managed that.

I rolled from the furs with some reluctance, but I didn't want to be the cause of a delay. Kalani, Iave, and the rest of the warriors were still trapped, as far as we knew. Parts from the robot dog spread out on top of one of the crates beside the lantern. I could easily picture Corin hunched over them as he tinkered. That man never slept. Even after he'd passed out from exhaustion and injury, he'd already been up and doing all kinds of things.

The parts on top of the crate had been precisely lined up like little soldiers, a pile of tiny screws in one spot, a dozen straight pins in another. I couldn't figure out what I was looking at. It certainly didn't resemble the electronic part he'd pulled from the dog robot any longer. Maybe it was something else; he always had a hundred projects. I'd seen the inside of his apartment once. Every shelf and table, even the floor, was covered with some electronic device in a state of deconstruction or reconstruction.

I headed for the doorway to peer out. Corin wouldn't have gone far, but I was worried that I hadn't seen or heard him yet. What if he'd collapsed again? Or had another run-

in with one of those robot hounds? Farah and Zeidon hadn't mentioned them, but there could be more.

The tunnel outside the old storage room was empty, the floor shiny until it gleamed, and even the crystals in the ceiling glowed brighter. I wasn't sure if that was all Triff, or if Corin had been part of the cleanup, too. They certainly made a very cute pair last night. Corin a haphazard sprawl of tail and coils and limbs; Triff tucked away in one loop as it went into sleep mode. I'd stared for quite some time before settling down to sleep myself.

"Corin?" I called out softly. He wouldn't have abandoned me, he wouldn't. But I couldn't help but remember that I'd forced my company on him by following him down here. He hadn't protested, but only because he knew how stubborn I was. Was this payback? Or had he left me here so he could quickly rescue the warriors before coming back to fetch me?

I was beginning to wonder if he was ever coming back when I heard a voice muttering from very far away. My skin broke out in goosebumps, worry skittering up my spine. Was that Corin or someone else? My hand went for the laser pistol, but it was empty and I had no way to charge it. Casting around, I settled for picking up a knife left behind on a crate nearby. It was Corin's; had he left it on purpose or forgotten about it?

"I'm warning you, silly bot. No more scale polishing, please!" That had to be Corin, and he sounded exasperated by the small cleaning bot. Nothing new there. I risked sticking my head out the door again, the knife clutched in my fist and watched them approach. Corin looked much better than last night, and his silvery-blue scales shimmered; definitely polished.

I loved how the leather straps he wore accentuated his biceps, and the leather cord and metal disk around his neck drew the eye down his pectorals. They made me

linger on the defined ridges of his abs. He had hair some girls I once knew would kill for: a deep, luscious blue. Thick, silky strands with a slight curl at the tips. Add to that his mercury eyes, and you had a beautiful, mysterious, and sometimes surly package that ticked all my boxes.

“Morning,” I said with as much cheer as I could muster. Naga had a great sense of smell; I hoped he wasn’t going to flick that freaky, split tongue at me. If he did, he’d know how turned on I was from watching him approach; that would be embarrassing. He came to an abrupt stop just as I thought that, and I started to freak out, but all he did was raise a hand and wave.

“Ah, you’re awake. Good. We need to pack up and get moving. I want to find the others today, as soon as possible. I don’t think they have much food left.” He didn’t tell me where he’d been; he didn’t tell me good morning either. I shouldn’t be surprised when he slithered past me, carefully making sure we didn’t touch, and started packing our supplies. He always did that, pretending I was one of the guys, or not there, or not worth looking at. It made me want to throw things, and it made me want to prod him until he reacted.

“Thank you for the extra fur and the heater,” I said. “Cuddling to keep me warm would have been my preference, but this worked too.” A smirk pulled at my cheeks when Corin dropped the tools he was picking up with a noisy clatter. His shoulders twitched, and I could see the scales along his spine tremble. They made a soft whispering noise as they clattered together.

The only response I got was a narrow-eyed glare from behind a hunk of pretty lapis lazuli-blue hair. As far as taunts went, I was satisfied with the result: I’d made him drop what he was holding. I smiled and whistled a tune while helping with the packing; my mood was much better knowing I could startle him that way.

Not much later, I was following Corin and Triff back into the warren of tunnels. My

stomach rumbled with hunger, but I wasn't going to complain, since we really did have to hurry. "What was in those crates? Did you look?" I asked my Naga companion as we walked. He was holding the leather map and checking it carefully each time we came to a crossing, his nubbed brows lowered in concentration.

"Parts," Corin said, and I muffled a laugh behind my hand at the monosyllabic answer. So that was his mood this morning, we'd see about that. I was always extra tempted to keep prodding him when he got that way, until he told me all about his latest project or idea. It usually worked.

I opened my mouth to ask a question, but snapped it shut when something came sailing toward me. I caught it by reflex, my hands almost fumbling with the small, leaf-wrapped package. A ration bar, neatly cut in half so it was the right size for me. "Eat," Corin said without looking at me, and my smile grew. I knew he liked me.

I'd pause the questions for now, but I was going to get more than one word at a time from him today. That proved to be a bigger challenge than usual as we traveled through the tunnels at a quick pace. As soon as I said anything, Corin would pick up the pace and urge me to hurry. Alternating between jogging and speed-walking didn't leave me with a whole lot of breath for talking. I was in good shape; I'd trained with Kalani on a regular basis, but after two hours of that, I was starting to feel the burn.

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“There,” Corin announced, flicking the tip of his tail toward a doorway in the distance. “The next hydro plant.” That was technically more than one word, but I didn’t think it counted. I crossed my fingers behind my back for luck and hoped fervently that we’d find the warriors behind that door.

When it slid open without hesitation to Corin’s hand wave over the doorplate, my stomach dropped in dismay. That door wouldn’t open unless the warrior had escaped, but more likely, it opened because this was the room Farah and Zeidon had been trapped in—the one the Naga robot had unlocked.

Corin pulled his blades free from the small of his back as he slithered inside. Rushing water greeted us, much louder with the door open than it had been in the tunnel. Light spilled out too; this hydro plant was brightly lit, unlike the last one. I was more cautious as I approached, peeking into the room with a hip pressed against the wall. If I’d had my gun, I would have led with it. As it was, I clutched a knife.

It took only a few seconds to conclude that the cavernous room was empty. Then, I took in the differences between this hydro plant and the last one. Bright lights weren’t the only clue that this location was in much better shape. The control system was lit up, all the screens were clean and glowing, and the turbines were silent as they spun, propelled by the force of the water running through the straight, narrow channel. There was no rust, no clogging water plants, and no grinding noises.

“Look,” Corin said. He’d approached the rushing water near where it exited the large room, and he pointed to the other side. Scorch marks marred the stone floor: one darkened, soot-covered spot, and several smaller spots farther away.

“Do you think that's where Farah threw Vrash's core onto the ground?” I asked. That's what the brave woman had done—threatened the robot so it would release a trapped Zeidon from beneath the metal gate that had blocked the rushing water.

Corin nodded, his expression grim. “Damn it, we wasted our time. And that core is gone. That's bad news.” Ah, there were his words, but he sounded so worried that I refrained from gloating. I understood why he was worried. If that core was returned to the robot, we hadn't seen the last of it. Its time alone beneath the mountain for centuries hadn't done it any good; it was completely deranged.

“Do you think it's already fully repaired?” I asked. I wasn't entirely clear on the timeline. I knew Zeidon and Farah had been back with us for a few days before we'd set out on this mission, and I also knew that Zeidon had decapitated the robot body of the ‘Revenant,’ as he called it. When that had taken place and how long it took to repair such damage, no clue.

Corin shrugged one shoulder, making it obvious that he didn't know either. “How far to the next location?” I asked him instead. That was the only thing we could focus on. We needed to find the warriors and free them before they starved. I turned in the doorway and glanced back the way we'd come. Would we have to backtrack much? I should have taken a peek at Corin's map.

“About the same as we've already traveled,” Corin said. “I hope.” He didn't leave the edge of the water, still staring at the scorch marks as if they held all the answers. My eyes were drawn from him to Triff, for the first time noticing what the little bot was up to. If it were a dog, I'd say it was sniffing around the corners of the room, but this was a cleaning bot... It was humming and spinning the cleaning disk, polishing the floor as it went, but its lights were also blinking in frantic, busy patterns.

It suddenly shot away from the corner with a squeak and raced for the water. I thought it was going to end up in the churning stream, but at the last moment, it

swerved and clattered on top of a thin walk bridge across the top of a turbine. I clutched my fingers to my chest as I watched it cross, too fast to be safe. “Triff!” I called out, as if that would bring the bot back from whatever madness had hold of it.

While I had just frozen in place and stared, Corin leaped into action at the sight of the bot disappearing across the channel. He raced onto the turbine after it, hands outstretched to grab the robot, but he was too late. It managed to slip into a small hole in the opposing wall just as Corin dove for it with a shout. “Triff, damn it! Come back here...” Then his words turned into a storm of curses, and he came racing back over the water toward me.

It looked to me like he was about to pick me up and carry me, but at the last moment, he refrained. “Keep up!” he ordered as he ducked into the tunnel and pulled out his leather map. I broke into a run and chased after his rapidly departing form, confused about what was happening. There was no way that Corin would abandon Triff to its own devices, so he had to know of a way to locate the little robot.

“What happened?” I asked. I had to shout my question a second time to make Corin hear me. He was too fast for me to keep up, but I could see him in the distance. We were also traveling through a tunnel that had seen no visitors in a long time; he was leaving obvious tracks for me to follow.

“Triff went into a repair bot tunnel. I’m certain he’s chasing after one of those bots. It might have been spying on us.” Corin’s words trailed off, softer and softer as he replied, and the distance between us grew. I felt a pang of worry when he swung around a corner and I could no longer see him. What if this was the plan? Separate us so we were easy targets? My empty gun meant I was defenseless if anything attacked me. I wasn’t a warrior like Kalani, or brave and inventive like Vera and Farah.

When I reached the corner I’d last seen Corin, I was completely out of breath from running. A stitch in my side ached fiercely, and panic clogged my throat. I nearly

missed it in my fear, but at the last moment, I realized Corin's trail had turned into a room instead of continuing ahead. I skidded to a stop, nearly tripped over my feet, but clawed myself upright by grabbing the doorjamb.

Then I saw what was inside, and it felt like my heart wanted to explode inside my chest; horror, fear, and disgust all combined in a powerful mass of emotions. Disgust won out, along with a wave of nausea that threatened to make me throw up. This wasn't what I'd expected to discover at the end of that mad chase.

Chapter 8

Corin

I would never have dashed ahead as far as I had if I hadn't known that Min-Ji could keep up. Worry for Triff had made me race as fast as I dared through the tunnels, in what I hoped was the right direction. I hadn't scribbled the repair bot tunnels down on my map, but I had seen them when I made it.

Triff was exactly where I expected him to be when I ducked into the control room. Like the one I'd arrived in, this was a room directly connected to the air regulation systems, with a similar control unit at the center and grates leading in several directions, along with pipes controlling water, air, and power. I didn't expect the rest of the... things that filled the room.

The stench hit me first. It had leaked into the tunnel, and I recognized it for what it was in a heartbeat. Any hunter worth his salt would—that was decay. Something was rotting, and it didn't take a genius to figure out what. The long, sprawled-out body right beside the control unit was the first thing anyone saw when they entered. It was swarmed by the spindly, firesprite-like bodies of the repair bots, but whatever they were trying to do to fix this, it wasn't working.

The little bots were crawling everywhere; I'd never seen this many of them in one place, let alone this many activated ones. No wonder Zeidon and I hadn't been able to find any of these bots inside Ahoshaga, the damn Revenant had collected them all. Even while horror at what I was seeing still filled me, I also felt a pang of hope. If I could get control of all these repair bots, I could do so much.

On the control panel, wires lay in several long coils, and a head sat in the middle, hooked up to all those cables. Red eyes glowed from a metal face, partially covered by decomposing scales. I didn't understand everything I was seeing, but I could take a guess. The Revenant's body was made of metal parts and flesh parts, and those fleshy parts were failing after Zeidon had decapitated him. Good.

The cables that connected the control unit of the Revenant—the head—to the screens and computers controlling the systems below Ahoshaga weren't so good. What kind of evil things had he been able to do that way? And it wasn't just the controls of the hydro plants and the doors in this place; he had control of the airflow, the power, and the water up in Ahoshaga too. That was the real horror.

Triff was at the back of the small room. I could see the shining silver of his domed top as he burst from a small repair-bot tunnel. Several of the repair bots skittered out of the hole ahead of him, making chittering noises and clacking their spindly legs together. The entire horde of bots that covered the body shifted and clacked, raising up on their back legs as they directed all their attention at Triff. If they attacked, the cleaning bot wouldn't stand a chance!

"Hey!" I shouted, tapping my obsidian knife against the metal-reinforced chain sewn into the leather protection on my arm. It made a nice, satisfying clang, and as one, the horde of repair bots shifted to face me. My scales rattled along my spine in unease at how unnatural that was.

I knew they were bots, not living things; I knew how they were put together and how

to take them apart, but it still felt like a living entity was threatening me with a hostile, menacing display. It was a bit like staring down an enraged horde of Vakarsa beasts alone. Dumb, but together, absolutely capable of killing a hunter.

My senses were on high alert, battle-ready. I knew where Triff was, and I knew exactly where Min-Ji was, too, in the doorway just behind me. Nobody was going to harm either of them; I'd make sure of it. I might have wanted to be a Shaman once upon a time, but I'd been trained as a hunter, and I was one of the best.

The bots rattled and shivered as they stared at me, still moving as one single being, but I knew who was responsible for that—what. The Revenant's head couldn't move, and its jaw seemed unhinged, but the core that Farah had left behind glowed beneath its metal dome. It was controlling them somehow; the Revenant was the true threat.

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“Why are you doing this?” I demanded. “Ahoshaga is not the same as when you built it, you know that, right?” The eyes were lidless, as the decaying facade of flesh had slipped away, but it felt as if those red orbs blinked at me, a flicker of light. It heard me, and I could sense in my bones that it was calculating how to deal with me, with us.

At least it seemed the Revenant and the bots had forgotten about Triff, or maybe they had simply deemed him their lowest priority. I eyed the tiny cleaning bot and tried to urge it to come to my side. If I could pick him up, we could get out of here. I’d still have to deal with the Revenant, but I’d be able to take a moment to decide on the best course of action. Could I risk blowing up that control hub to end the Revenant?

Triff shouldn’t be able to look scared, but that’s what he looked like. Huddled against the wall, his cleaning disks trembling but not spinning beneath him. The lights at the front, what I was beginning to think of as his face, were blinking frantically. He didn’t seem to see my gesture, too afraid to move now that the repair bots surrounded him. They had their backs turned to him, but that didn’t seem to matter to the small bot.

“Ahoshaga is mine, regardless of change,” the Revenant’s head intoned in a grinding voice. “I built it, I control it, and it is by my grace that any of the Naga above are allowed to live in it!” He didn’t quite say ‘I am God,’ but it came close. “With my aid, we will rebuild Serant. We will make it great with our pure offspring. Our elite.”

I bared my fangs at the bot, my scales shivering, my tail trembling with the tension that gripped me. What the Revenant said was tempting and despicable at the same time. Rebuild Ahoshaga to its technological glory? Bring all its systems back online?

Yes, I wanted that for my people. But offspring and elites? That thing was out of his mind! He'd already tried to alter Farah's genetics to make her more Naga. I had to stop this Revenant before it tried on another human. Or worse, on one of their unborn children.

"Offspring?" I jeered. "You're a robot. A talking head and nothing else! Your real body has long turned to dust, Vrash. You are nothing but a broken machine." It did not like it when I pointed at the broken pile of metal vertebrae, coils, ribs, and pistons that lay beneath strips of rotting scales and flesh at the foot of the control unit. It didn't like that I'd called it by name either, but it couldn't do much at all. I knew that the system here had control of important things, but it did not control everything.

I lowered one hand to the small of my back and the dangling flasks there. He'd left me no choice; I was going to blow him up. I couldn't risk backing away and discovering that the repair bots had taken the head and the Revenant's core and escaped through the repair bot tunnels. Vrash's replica seemed beyond words, but the horde of repair bots shifted as one toward me.

My hand went up. I was about to hurl the potent mixture of liquid I'd concocted, but a sound behind me distracted me. Reflexes made me slide to the side as I turned toward the door and Min-Ji. She was moving fast, but I had enough time to catch the fearful expression on her face. She threw herself into a dive into the room, aiming herself carefully past the repair bots and toward Triff. On her heels was another of the Slithrazer Revenants.

If that thing let out a screech like the other one, I'd go down, and with my hearing not fully healed... I didn't know how long I'd stay down. Instincts made me react: saving Min-Ji was the only thing that mattered. My arm whipped forward, throwing my deadly missile, and my tail snatched her around her waist, yanking her to safety in my arms.

A billow of fire blazed where glass shattered and liquid made contact with the Slithrazer Revenant. Things popped, rattled, and groaned as they suffered inside the blazing heat. I flung myself away from that unnatural fire, Min-Ji protectively cradled against my chest, where my damning sigils blazed with silver light.

The fire caused utter chaos, and for a few agonizing moments, I lost track of where Triff was. When I saw the little bot, he'd scooted around the room toward me, squeaking and beeping all the way. I caught him in a coil and that silenced him, but his entire tiny metal body trembled and shook against my scales.

"What the hell was that?" Min-Ji asked, her hands around my neck as she raised herself to peer over my shoulder. I shifted her against me, one arm beneath the luscious curves of her rear so I could grab another fire flask and get Vrash too. Only, the damn Revenant was gone. The head was no longer on top of the control unit, and the mass of repair bots was swarming every which way on the floor around us. I couldn't tell which bots had it or where they were going when they moved in such dizzying, crazy patterns.

"Slithrazer," I muttered, "and a fireflask. My own invention," I added when that answer did not seem to satisfy her. "Did you see where the head went? Where is Vrash? We can't let him escape!" Destroying the Revenant had been my secondary quest, and I couldn't let this opportunity slip away. If those repair bots would stop moving, then I could put Min-Ji down and hope she hadn't seen my mating marks. I had to locate which repair tunnel or pipe system the Revenant had disappeared down.

She shook her head, then turned to look around and help me search. I didn't let her go, even though the repair bots did not seem to want to attack me. They were ignoring my tail, and when I moved, they scooted out of the way.

The fire that had ignited the Slithrazer Revenant died down as suddenly as it had exploded into existence. Its heat and light winked out, leaving behind a smoldering

pile of metal parts in the doorway. That was as far as the beast had gotten. It seemed to be a signal to the repair bots. They spun away as one and dashed into a dozen different tunnels and pipes.

We were alone in the span of blinking my eyes; the danger was gone. I had to put her down now, I had to. But without any threat to focus on, I was suddenly hyper-aware of everywhere we touched. Her tempting scent filled my lungs, and her soft breasts were squished against my chest. Her legs dangled from beneath my arm; they only reached a short way down my tail—my tiny mate.

“Good job, Triff! You found the bad guy,” Min-Ji said as she slipped one hand from my neck to wave at the bot trembling in my protective coil. At the gesture and the words, he beeped a happy noise, stopped shaking, then spun and shimmied against my scales. “Yeah, dance, little guy. But seriously, don’t run off like that again... I was worried!”

Ah, the sound of her voice, the soft smile she aimed at the cleaning bot—I could not resist any of it. When she wriggled against me, I was done for. A groan escaped my control, my heart pounded in my chest, and my free hand returned to her back. Let her go, now! That was my job, my only option. She raised her face at the sound I made, her brown eyes startled in her pale face. My eyes latched onto her pink, soft mouth. Naga didn’t kiss, but humans did, and I’d seen my mated brothers do that. I wanted it so badly.

My head lowered, and her eyes widened, but she did not back away. “Yes!” she hissed, all bold and brave. Her hands clutched my neck, pulling me closer, and our lips collided. It should have felt awkward and clumsy, it should have felt wrong, but it was like one of my fireflasks had gone off inside my brain.

This close to her, all I could do was taste, smell, and devour. I pinned her against me in my arms, unwilling to let her go, and my tail wound around her legs, holding her

tighter. My cock ached in its pouch, ready to extrude and claim her right then and there. Our tongues tangled, and I felt my fangs press against the soft pillow of her bottom lip. This was absolutely lurid, a mimicking of sex with our tongues, and I loved every second of it.

If I'd believed before that she might not have noticed my glowing sigils, I knew that was a lost cause now. They were the brightest they had ever been, glowing like daylight on my scales. This wasn't like that night when I'd carried her to safety from Thunder Rock village, through the Ancestral caves, and toward Ahoshaga. That had been a weak, barely-there shimmer, contained to my chest while she'd been unconscious. This? This was a blazing sun.

When she was safe at Haven, surrounded by her friends, it was easier to stay away. Down here, we were in danger. She was not safe, and it became harder to see the lines I'd drawn, the things I had to do to protect her. It felt too right to hold her, to taste her, to claim her. I spun us until her back collided with the nearest wall, and she moaned so sweetly when I pressed my cock against her core. I couldn't hold this back, not now that the gate had been cracked open.

There was no one here to stop me from taking what was always meant to be mine.

Chapter 9

Min-Ji

Corin was kissing me! It felt like a dream come true, like I was living in a fantasy. One moment, we'd been facing nasty robots, creepy spider bots, and one of those chainsaw-mawed beasts. The next, I was in heaven, held by the man I wanted, and his mating marks were so bright they were blinding.

Kissing a Naga male wasn't the same as kissing a human man—not that I had any

recent experience. My last boyfriend predated the mission to the Zeta Quadrant, where Serant was located. A year and a half of traveling at faster-than-light speeds to get here. It was one hell of a dry spell, and I was very ready to break it. Though, I wasn't quite sure if I wanted that to happen in a room with half of a zombie robot corpse. If we could just step out into the tunnel, that would work for me...

Then he did a thing with his tongue, twirling it with mine, and at the same time he pressed his hips forward and I felt the heat and pressure of his cock against me. Ah, fuck it. Who cared where we were? As long as he didn't stop, that feltso good.

He was the one who suddenly lifted his head, turning it to hiss in warning at something over his shoulder. His pretty mercury eyes glowed as fiercely as his mating marks did, and all I wanted to do was admire how pretty it looked, how sexy he was. Thankfully, he had more sense than I had at that moment. He set me down on my feet so suddenly that I wobbled and nearly fell over, his tail looped around my waist to help me, but he turned and moved away.

I stood there, clutching his tail and reeling from what had happened. I might've felt a smidgen of hurt that he could turn away and move on like nothing had happened. Only, something had happened, and I wasn't the only one who was affected. As my brain managed to catch up to the new situation, I took in the signs that Corin was shaken up, and one significant change.

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He was touching me. His tail was still looped around my waist, holding me tightly but gently, and his sigils were glowing. He wasn't hiding what we were; he didn't deny it, and he hadn't withdrawn completely. A surge of hope pounded through my veins—this was it, this was the first step. I hadn't imagined anything that one night while injured; he really was my mate.

Corin bent down and threw the remains of the naga robot away from the viewscreens. Some cables came unhooked as he did, but the metal bones were just that, a pile of bones and robot parts. With a disgusted hiss, Corin pulled another small flask free from his belt and threw it on the robot's headless remains. They went up in a violent whoosh of flames and fire, this time much more safely in the corner. I tried not to feel disturbed that he was carrying something so volatile around so casually.

My mate didn't even watch the inferno but got to work on the computer system instead. I would have offered to help, but I couldn't read the Naga letters. That wasn't something the translator upgrade Artek the Shaman had devised could help with. Corin was hunched over the controls, his scales shivering along his back, and it looked like he was in pain.

I glanced around the room and found Triff nearby, sitting idly with two slow-blinking purple lights directed my way. The robot probably didn't understand what was going on between Corin and me, but I still gave it a helpless look. I didn't want Corin to hurt from touching me, and I felt guilty for being elated over this change when he was acting like that. At least now I knew for a fact that we really were mates.

When I took a tentative step toward him, his tail slithered away like water. I almost tried to grab the tip before his touch disappeared, but I managed to restrain the urge. I

wanted to keep seeing the evidence of our bond, but this wasn't the time or the place to make a point of it. Corin's scales stopped rattling along his spine as soon as he stopped touching me, his discomfort or pain easing.

"What's going on?" I made myself ask. It was better if I focused on the problems at hand, we still had a rescue mission to fulfill. I had my proof. He wasn't going to get away without a very good reason, I'd make sure of it. That meant I needed to find some of that patience I struggled with, but I could do it.

"I heard an alarm. It looks like some repair bots set it off in one of the air vents to the west. It might be the direction they took Vrash's control core and head, but it could also be a distraction." He didn't move aside when I came to stand next to him, and I felt some tension shiver out of my body as I noticed that. We were almost touching, just a tiny step to the side and our arms would brush. This was normally when he created space, but this time, he didn't.

"So, what's the plan? How do we find out where he really went?" I asked, looking away from the leather strap that wound around his biceps and at the screen. Corin had pulled up schematics of the pipes, and there was one obvious spot with blinking red lights, but several more had orange blinking dots.

A feathery brush against the edge of my jaw nearly made me jump, but it was Corin, urging my chin up to his with a gentle finger. His sigils flared to life all over his chest, and they were starting to glow down the front of his tail too. I couldn't read the expression in his silver eyes, but whatever he was thinking, it was intense. It felt like he was promising to explain, to talk, later. "We let him go," he said, "because we have to find the warriors first. What Icando is try to take control of the repair bots. That should ensure he can't do any more damage."

His finger dropped away when he returned his hands to the controls and got to work. That gesture had said the world to me. It was a bit of acknowledgment that the bond

was real and that our relationship had changed. I was content to watch him work and guard his back after that. I didn't even get bored when ten minutes turned into half an hour, and then an hour. My desire for an explanation—a heart-to-heart—was growing by the minute, and it was hard to stand still as I contemplated what I wanted to say.

Triff started cleaning when the bot realized we were staying a while, and I watched in fascination as he opened the top dome part and beamed light toward the ceiling. Drifts of dirt and dust came tumbling down when it did that. That solved that mystery. A little of that treatment, and the crystals in the ceiling glowed as bright as ever.

“I got it, and I managed to retrieve data about the hydro plants. I think I know which one our warriors are stuck in.” Corin's voice was just a low rumble when he made his announcement, but it sounded loud in the silence. Then I heard the pitter-patter of tiny feet, and my skin broke out in goosebumps. Crap, that sounded like the repair bots were coming back.

Corin's lips tilted into a smirk, his silver eyes dancing with a hint of sudden amusement. “Don't worry, Min-Ji. I'll send the bots to the failing hydro plant so they can do their job. You won't have to see them.” Damn it, I thought I had managed to hide how much I disliked anything with more than four legs, but Corin hadn't missed a thing.

“Thanks. How far do we have to travel? We should hurry.” I hadn't been bored while watching my favorite person work, and my favorite cleaning bot clean, but I was feeling antsy. We'd been down here almost two full days. What if that was too long? What if they weren't just out of food, but out of air? They could already be dead.

“Not sure. I've filled in some blanks on my previous map, so our route should be more direct. Let's hurry.” He tapped the roll of lavender leather on which he'd hand-drawn a map with charcoal. I hadn't realized there were blanks, and now I was

relieved I hadn't known. I really didn't like the idea of getting lost in this maze of tunnels and storage rooms. "Good news, though," Corin said. "I now have a comprehensive list of everything stored down here. We could fix so much."

He was talking and moving, already heading for the doorway, and I had to break into a jog to catch up. Triff hummed at Corin's side, its polishing disks leaving a shiny trail in the dirt behind it. This time, it wasn't me keeping up an endless stream of conversation. In a complete turnabout from that morning, Corin was talking a mile a minute about what he'd discovered, the supplies, and how immensely helpful the repair bots were going to be.

At first, I enjoyed listening to his voice, but eventually I realized he was talking so much that I wouldn't ask questions. He didn't want to tell me what was going on, why he'd been hiding the mating marks from me when he'd known all along.

My worry for the warriors, my feelings for Corin, and the hurt from him rejecting me all coalesced into one big pile of anxiousness in my belly. Eventually, that emotional stew boiled over, and I couldn't help but burst out: "Why? Why don't you want me?" Damn it, that was not how I meant to breach the subject. Intellectually, I knew it was more nuanced than that.

Corin came to an abrupt stop in the middle of the tunnel, and I tripped over his tail and stumbled into the wall. He didn't reach out to catch me, and I glared at him, because that felt like another rejection. I thought we had a moment. I thought that the brush of his finger meant he'd tell me, and that he wanted me. But here he was, already back to his old antics of avoiding and changing the subject, never touching me.

Oh, no. Now my glare was turning into something else when I wanted to hold firm and make him feel my wrath. Instead, tears were starting to slip out, and, furious at that show of emotion, I wiped my eyes with my wrist. "Just explain it to me, please. I

need to understand.”

Corin was always a big mystery to me, but the look in his eyes was all pain and anguish. When he spoke, his voice was rough as a growl, and his hands balled into fists at his sides. “Not want you?” he said, his tail vibrating and coiling wildly next to him. “Not want you? I want you more than air, more than life itself! You are everything I’ve ever wanted. You’ve owned my heart and soul from the moment I met you, and it takes everything in me not to claim you.”

His words were exactly what I wanted to hear, but they didn’t make sense. If he wanted me that badly, then why was he keeping his distance? Why was he always telling me to leave him alone? “Then claim me! I’m not objecting. Why aren’t you over here kissing me? Why this?” I jerked my hand between us, indicating the space that separated our bodies.

My heart rate spiked with a hint of fear when Corin bared his fangs and hissed in fury. I didn’t fear him because I knew he’d never harm me, but my body had a healthy respect for how strong and dangerous a Naga male was. He could squash me like a bug if he felt like it—he was so much stronger than a human, and so much bigger.

“To keep you safe,” he growled. “Everything I do is to keep you safe. You’re better off moving on. Forget this exists between us. It’s the only way you’re going to survive on Serant.” He didn’t give me time to process that, but spun away and raced at breakneck speed down the tunnels. No endless talking this time. No words filled this silence except mine, and they fell on deaf ears.

No matter what I said, he wouldn’t tell me what danger I was in if I mated him. What risk I’d be taking. When I told him that was my choice, not his to make, he hissed, but that was the only response I got. Furious, I wanted to pound my fists against his scales; I wanted to call him names. Why did he get to decide? He wouldn’t even

explain what kind of danger. What a stupid, chauvinistic male thing to do! I had enough of men deciding the course of my fate.

It was very tempting to grab the tip of his tail and tell him to shove it someplace indelicate. He could forget about calling me his mate if this was how he treated me. I deserved better. But then Triff made a sad little beep and bumped against my ankle, and I shook myself out of my pain-filled anger to look up at Corin.

I noticed his hunched shoulders and the way he'd dropped his chin to his chest as he moved. The soft whisper from his twitching scales. He was always like that. Most Naga only twitched their scales on rare occasions, but Corin's scales twitched at least half the time I saw him. This wasn't easy on him either. I wasn't the only one hurting.

My mouth snapped shut on the last angry words, and I fell silent, staring. I needed to remember the type of person Corin was, not get lost in my feelings. He was caring, with a regular bleeding heart, and felt responsible for everyone. He took on so much on his admittedly wide shoulders, and everyone assumed that he could handle it. But who did he lean on when he needed help? I didn't think he confided in Zathar or Iave, his closest friends, the same way they confided in him.

Hadn't I only recently discovered how extremely long and important his list of tasks was? They included things like fixing up an entire hydro plant, surveying these tunnels for collapse, and restoring the mess hall and kitchens inside Ahoshaga so we humans could eat indoors when it got cold... That was just the tip of the iceberg. Knowing that, I had to assume he thought he was doing the right thing by staying away from me. And knowing that, I also knew he was wrong. But how did I convince him of that?

My brows lowered as I focused on what to do. I could figure this out. What could make him think that keeping his distance was the right thing to do? I knew enough about Naga mating bonds to know how all-consuming they were for the males and

how often they were one-sided when it came to a Naga female. But I felt it, I felt that bond just like he did. If it was hard for me to stay away from him, it had to be almost impossible for him. So what was the threat to my life if anyone found out?

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I was pondering that question when we arrived at the next hydro plant. Our third stop, but hopefully our last. “Oh no...” I murmured when I saw what had happened to the tunnel. “That’s bad.”

Chapter 10

Corin

I wasn’t sure if I liked Min-Ji’s silence any better than her anger. Both made me feel like my heart was about to burst out of my chest. It had been better when she didn’t know that the mate bond was real, even if she suspected. I didn’t want her to feel rejected; I didn’t want her to hurt. Not for the first time, I cursed the blasted female who made this necessary. If I told Zathar, I knew he’d tell me he’d take care of it, but he couldn’t, and it wouldn’t be right to ask that of him.

The tunnel collapse was a welcome distraction, but it was a major problem. Stones lay piled against the door we needed; only the upper half was visible. Even worse, I could see crude welds all along the metal frame of the part of the door that was still visible. Vrash hadn’t just locked them in there; he’d sealed their tomb.

“Can you climb up there?” I asked Min-Ji. She was small and nimble; she might fit on top of the rubble to reach the door. These metal panels weren’t always completely soundproof. If the warriors were still alive, she might be able to make contact.

My brave mate gave me a determined nod, her lips set in a firm line, and her brow furrowed. She pulled a leather strap from a pocket and used it to tie her silky black hair back into a tail at the nape of her neck. “You bet your ass I can,” she said

fiercely.

“Do you think one of those fire flasks could take care of the stones?” She was already clambering up the rocks, nimble as an Arazal or Sleara. I was glad to see her distracted; we’d focus on this mission first, and then we’d talk. I didn’t want to, because I didn’t know how to make it right for her, but she deserved a better explanation than the one I’d given her.

“Hello? Can anyone hear me?” Min-Ji shouted once she reached the top of the pile of rubble. I had watched her climb with the constant fear that the rubble would shift and she would get injured. I should have tried to climb it myself first or at least tested how stable that rock collapse was. When my mate started pounding with a fist on the door, I worried that the noise would set off another rockfall.

All I could do was scan the tunnel and the debris with my eyes to verify its state. I didn’t have any tools with me that could fully reassure me, though I knew that relics must have existed that could. The repair bots would be able to help, but I had sent all of them to repair the failing hydro plant, which was a dire task in itself. Those turbines had been at risk of catastrophically failing—and taking out the entire power system with them.

I would first have to try to move the rocks by hand to clear the exit, but Min-Ji was right; maybe a controlled explosion was the way to go. Excitement at that prospect pushed away my guilt over hurting Min-Ji. If I placed charges at several precise spots, I was certain I could manage a very small blast that would shift the rubble without causing another collapse. That would significantly speed up digging out the door.

“No response,” Min-Ji sighed, but she didn’t give up, and knocked on the panel in a precise rhythm. I knew why she did that—it was clever. A rhythm like that couldn’t be natural, so it couldn’t be mistaken for anything but another person. It paid off, too.

When she waited for a minute to give the trapped warriors a chance to respond, we heard it: a soft, muted knocking that mimicked exactly what my mate had done.

We shared an excited look. “They’re alive! We found them!” I said and moved closer, as close as I dared to get to the rubble that Min-Ji perched on. I didn’t want to dislodge any of it while she was sitting on top—one rock like that could crush her hand or foot. I didn’t want to test the extent of my healing abilities with the handheld device. I shuddered as I remembered the dire period when she wouldn’t wake up. It had taken her several days to recover from that head injury, and I never wanted to go through that again.

“Focus on telling them to back away from the door while we blow away this rubble. I’ll determine what charges to use.” She gave me a nod, then twisted closer to the door and started knocking again. She shouted at the same time, but it didn’t seem like we could hear voices through the sealed panel.

I was just about to question how we could warn them to back away from the door for safety. If we couldn’t, I’d have to dig this all out by hand, and that would take hours. But Min-Ji gave me a sunny smile. “Thank God! I think Kalani understands my Morse code! Or maybe it’s Reid. Either way, they’ve confirmed they’ll maintain a distance. You’re good to go.”

I did not know what this Morse code was, but I’d make sure to have her explain it to me later. It was clearly a very useful tool. When she dropped down from the rocks, I didn’t waste any time and started pulling out my mixtures. It was going to take a moment to find the best spots for my charges, but I could only do this once—it had to be right.

My mate’s eyes on me the entire time made me feel like a youngling, maybe even in the first stage of molting—all awkward and ugly. My fingers felt clumsy as I slid the first small cylinder into a crevice, but she was smiling and Triff was humming

merrily; they weren't judging me. That was all in my head.

This time, my vials with mixtures weren't volatile to air like the fire flasks. I had to ignite these with a flame, and to do that safely, I had to use nearly all the rolled-up fuse I'd brought with me. If this didn't work, I would be all out of supplies. "Back up more, around the corner." Min-Ji hurried to obey, her footsteps retreating, followed by Triff's hum.

Once I was certain they were at a safe distance, I ignited my fuse and hurried to take cover with them. It was very tempting to curl her in my coils then, for extra protection, but I made do with hovering protectively in front of her. If I gave in and touched her now... I wouldn't be able to stop doing it.

The explosion rocked the tunnel, rock clattering as it was flung in every direction, breaking apart from the force. A cloud of dust filled the tunnel, and I shuttered my nictitating membranes to keep it out of my eyes. Min-Ji coughed, and she threw up an arm to protect her face, as she lacked a helpful extra eyelid like I had. When the rumbling died down, it was tempting to move and see the results, but I made us wait longer. I didn't want to risk the tunnel collapsing on top of us.

Eventually, most of the dust had settled, and I could peer around the corner without risking the possibly unstable tunnel for an appraisal. "What do you think? Safe?" I asked out loud, but I knew it was up to me to make the decision. I saw no new cracks along the ceiling, and the large rocks that had fallen in front of the door had been broken down into many smaller chunks. They'd also spread out more along the tunnel, and I could now reach the metal panel and get a better look at the welds that held it closed.

"Only one way to find out," Min-Ji said. Regardless of the danger, one of us had to go. We had to get the warriors out. She pouted, her bottom lip sticking out when I told her to stay put, and the expression almost startled a laugh out of me. That was

my mate, always catching me by surprise. I knew she was a little miffed that I wanted her to keep her distance, but she also wanted to lighten the mood, to give me some hope that this had worked.

Triff had trouble with the rocks that covered most of the tunnel floor, but my tough scales and agile body had no issue with the rough terrain. To the sound of the cleaning bots' dejected beeps, I made my careful way to the now mostly revealed door. The welds were crude, done in a hurry, but they were straight as a knife. The repair bots must have done it, but they had not stuck around to fix up their seams.

Pulling a leather pouch from my backpack, I weighed it in my hand as I considered the welds. This powder would heat it when applied, making the weld easier to damage with my blade afterward. But this was a tight space, and the area had already collapsed once. "Close your eyes," I said over my shoulder. "This will be bright."

Min-Ji made a huffing noise, but I was certain she'd done as I'd asked; she was a very smart female. I applied the mixture with a claw, then blew the catalyst onto it that I carried in a second pouch. My nictitating membranes and my scales protected me from the heat and the bright, purple-hued light. It flashed and sizzled with a loud hissing noise, burning along the weld I'd treated. I didn't let it cool down, attacking the now-heated seam with my blade moments after the powder had burned away.

It took several treatments of my powder and catalyst before I had managed to undo one entire side of the door, but that was good enough. It would have to do because I was now all out of powder, and, thus, out of tricks. I pulled out my longest blade for this next step and wedged it into the narrow gap between the door and the jamb. With some rope and rock, I made sure I had the right leverage to apply. Then, I heaved with all my strength.

The metal groaned and creaked, but the remaining welds couldn't hold against that kind of power. The door started to slide, and once the gap was wide enough, many

hands made short work of the tasks. My brothers helped from the other side to yank the portal open with brute force. Then we were slapping shoulders, tapping tails and fists, and uttering relieved greetings.

I counted all the missing warriors, which included a very flustered Water Weaver male, a very calm former Warlord, and my best friend, Iave. The midnight sheen of his dark blue scales stood out among the many bright blue and purple Naga, and he greeted me with a tight embrace. “What took you so long, brother? We’ve been stuck down here forever!”

From the corner of my eye, I could see that Min-Ji was greeting people too, Triff tucked under her arm so the bot could cross the rock-strewn floor. She was smiling and laughing at things the warriors said, and they were blatantly flirting, not even a little hindered by their bout of captivity. They thought she was their last shot at a mate, the last single human female. They didn’t know she was mine, and it tore at my gut not to slither over there and stake a very public claim.

I forced myself to look away, my gut churning so harshly that I couldn’t focus on the relief of finding them all in one piece. My ears were attuned to anything Min-Ji said, and I couldn’t bring my attention back to Iave and Krashe until I heard her greet Kalani—the only woman trapped, because she was a fierce warrior like my friend Iave and refused to sit on the sidelines. Kalani and Min-Ji hugged, and then the two were whispering as they updated each other on what had happened.

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“Where is Reid?” I asked when I realized the human male wasn’t anywhere to be seen. Of everyone here, Reid and I had grown closest over the past few months. I deeply respected the human and his ability to keep up with the Naga warriors despite his smaller size and lack of a tail. Reid had a dry wit and a keen eye, and unlike my brethren, he understood when I talked about the relics of our ancestors.

“Over here,” Iave said gruffly, his deep voice taking on a worried note that only someone who knew him well would notice. I shot my friend a look and frowned when I realized he had lowered his brow in a deep furrow. He gestured with a hand at a pile of furs and blankets against the far wall, close to where the metal gate had lowered that prevented the water from escaping.

“I’ll have warriors secure the door and the tunnel beyond. We’ll be ready to move as soon as he’s done,” Krashe said, easily slipping into the leadership role he was so accustomed to. The red Naga slithered away, and I followed my friend to the furs. I noticed Reid’s pale face first, sticking out from beneath a lavender fur and covered with a fine sheen of sweat.

“What happened to him?” I asked. They had access to water, and I’d already been assured that they weren’t out of food yet, so it couldn’t be anything like starvation or dehydration. He looked sick. I slipped out my handheld healing device and crouched next to him to appraise the situation. He was out cold, his eyes moving rapidly behind his eyelids, his breathing a bit too rapid to be normal.

“On the third day we were trapped, a gas was blown into the cave,” Iave explained. “Kalani feared it was some kind of poison, but only Reid got sick. Nobody else did. We’ve all been in exceptional health, aside from being trapped.” I cast a worried

glance around the hydro plant, which was dormant on account of the water not moving inside the channel. Min-Ji was mingling with everyone. What if she got sick too? I had to find out what this was as soon as possible.

Chapter 11

Min-Ji

“Are you okay?” I demanded to know. Kalani was the picture of health, but I had to ask because she had been trapped for close to a week, with nearly twenty testosterone-fueled guys for company. I could only imagine how many fights she had to break up and how badly she craved a nice hot shower and some privacy with her mate. I could handle a lot, but I was pretty sure that I’d go crazy if I had to spend that much time with the aspirants, the hunters, or any of the single warriors.

“Min-Ji! I am so happy to see you!” The beautiful woman threw her arms around my neck and hugged me tight, a grin splitting her face, eyes twinkling. “I tried blowing open the door, but I think that caused the rock to collapse.” She pointed at the tunnel and then tapped the strange rifle she had slung over a shoulder. She had found that weapon in another underground cave system, and it was a powerful laser weapon. However, like my pistol, the charge was running low.

“Those super creepy spider robots welded the door shut. It wouldn’t budge without a bit more power.” I glanced at Corin, who was always easy to spot because his scales were such a pale blue compared to his brethren. Luckily, my mate had a whole lot of firepower at his disposal. Who knew that his favorite hobby, blowing things up, could come in so handy? Then my thoughts turned gloomy when I realized I couldn’t think of him as my mate. He’d made it clear unless something major changed, we couldn’t be together.

“Hey, hey! Are you okay? Where’d you go, honey?” Ah, I’d missed the way Kalani

always took care of everyone and how observant she was. She was a lot like Corin in that way, but more like the stern, motherly type. Vera's second in command when it came to running the human side of things at Haven. I had missed her. I threw my arm around her neck and hugged her again with a sigh.

"Nothing we need to worry about right now," I said. "Come on, let's get everyone sorted so we can get out of here. We need to get back home. Everyone's been so worried! And Farah and Zeidon are fine. They managed to find their own way out of this place. Safely." Well, it had been an adventure fraught with peril, but they'd made it, and that was all that mattered.

The only shadow to the festive mood that filled the ranks was the sight of Reid being carried out on a stretcher improvised from spears and furs. Kalani explained to me in a low voice about the gas that had been pumped into the room at one point. He was the only one who had gotten sick, and she wasn't quite sure how that could be. Like Kalani and me, Reid had all the same inoculations and immune system boosters. He'd served in the UAR just like we had, though both he and Kalani had been court-martialed and fake-executed like the rest of the humans here.

Krashe and the anxious Water Weaver male were in the lead, holding Corin's lavender map between them. It appeared they were going to try to locate the strange lab with the doorway into Haven, the one that Farah and Zeidon had been held. It was the fastest way back home, and they'd need to unseal the door from this side if we wanted to have full control of everything down here. I shivered, thinking about the creepy, crawling bots and the Revenant beasts that prowled the tunnels. I hoped they'd clear them all out, or that Corin could somehow get them under his control.

"Ekkire is the best pathfinder we've got with us," Kalani said with certainty as she pointed at the green scales of the Water Weaver male. I vaguely recalled that those green males liked to roam far and wide and that they had an uncanny sense of direction. "But it will still be a while. Plenty of time for you to tell me everything."

I opened my mouth to tell her that she'd have to wait until we were alone, but I was interrupted when Corin sidled up to us. He'd been with Reid and the stretcher as we traveled, but I'd watched him approach each male over the past few minutes and wave his hand device around. "Quick health check, Kalani," he said, pretending that I wasn't there.

Triff beeped from inside my arms, and I ducked to put him down, annoyed when the bot followed Corin to the next person ahead of us after a quick "you're fine." "So, whatever that gas was, it didn't even linger in your system. Do you know why Reid got sick?" I asked, looking over my shoulder at the stretcher and the man's pale, sweaty face. He looked like he was in pain, a grimace contorting his features.

"Have you heard of the Shadow Unit?" Kalani asked. I rolled a shoulder to invite her to keep talking. I'd heard the name. It was something whispered about in the ranks, but not really something confirmed to truly exist. "Gene experimentation, nanobots, cybernetic enhancements... I think Reid must have been part of that unit. You've noticed that he's just as strong as a Naga, right? It's the only explanation for how he can keep up with them."

I tilted my head and looked again, but he didn't seem as impressive as the mysterious, fabled Shadow Unit soldiers. He looked pale and sick; he was in pain, and honestly, he looked like he was dying. It wasn't good. Then I recalled watching Reid and Corin spar, one of my favorite things to do, and realized that Kalani was right. Reid had uncanny reflexes, and he shouldn't be strong enough to be a match for any of the Naga. They were just too big for that to make sense.

"Now, enough distractions. Tell me, Min-Ji. I know something's up with you because you're normally far more cheerful than this." Kalani's stare was piercing, and I squirmed as I walked. I wasn't getting out of this conversation, but I wasn't sure if I was ready to tell her about Corin and his obsession with staying away to keep me safe. I was tempted to think of that safety in quotation marks. Was I really safe, or

was that just an illusion in his head? Maybe he worried for no good reason.

I found myself spilling another big worry instead, the words rushing out easily once I'd opened that particular floodgate. "You know I was the pilot that flew the shuttle here, don't you? I was the one that got us crashed." And no matter how you looked at it, not all of us had survived. Farah had nearly died at the bottom of a lake. Other pods had fallen out of the breaking ship and been lost. It was a miracle that Charlie had survived that kind of landing. We knew at least one human had died because Naomi had reported seeing a human head-on carried by a Bitter Storm Naga.

Kalani flapped a hand at me. "Pfff, that old news? I know how the UAR works, Min-Ji. I was part of it." That was... anticlimactic, to say the least. I stared at her face to see if she was saying something other than what she was thinking, but her long-lashed brown eyes were dead serious. Then she smiled, and that tilt to her mouth made my stomach swoop with the first hints of relief. She meant it.

"I didn't know," I said fervently. "I swear to you, Kalani. I didn't know what the Praetor was transporting until I was ordered to fly that shuttle. Our sensor readings went haywire near Serant, and then..." I flashed back to the shuttle and those moments when I made the choice to shoot my superior officer. Jackson had deserved everything he got, but I had still played a part in killing him. I was no killer. I was just a transport pilot.

"Min-Ji," Kalani said, and she picked up my hand to squeeze it tightly. It made me jerk my eyes back to her face. I hadn't even been aware that I'd looked down at my feet. "The UAR compartmentalizes everything; it's how they stay in power. I understand. You got some hostility when we first got here, but that wasn't fair to you. We were all just reacting to an awful situation. Some of us"—she glared at poor, unconscious Reid—"needed someone to blame for a bit."

Reid had definitely been the most vocal about distrusting me, but he'd been friendly

and welcoming after we'd settled into Haven. He'd never brought up my role as the pilot to Zathar and Vera, and they had never accused me of anything. Still, I felt like at any moment someone could remember and decide to banish me.

"I shot him, you know," I rushed to say, though my attempt to stop Jackson didn't really feel like enough. I'd known for a while, before the crash, what we were transporting, and I had still kept on flying. I hadn't known what to do to fix it. "I shot my navigator because he was going to steal one of the pods to better his odds of surviving the crash." I still remembered what it had smelled like after I shot him, the taste of it on my tongue, and it made nausea rise in my stomach.

Kalani smirked. "Good. See, you have nothing to worry about. You're a good person. You tried to get Cosima out of her shell, you're always there for me, and I know you're always willing to be Naomi's test person for new foods. You're one of us."

It had been a thought when I'd joined Corin on this rescue mission that freeing Kalani and the others would help me fit in. But I hadn't been necessary; I could see that now. Kalani never held my role in the crash against me, and those words were a balm to my soul. It didn't soothe the ache that Corin had caused, but it eased the other jagged pieces inside me.

When I looked away, my eyes collided with a pair of mercury ones. My belly clenched with a surge of something else, something closer to desire. Yearning, maybe. That look told me he'd heard everything, that he'd paid attention to every word I'd said. The small nod he gave me felt as rewarding as Kalani's "You're one of us."

Corin

That was one mystery solved, maybe even the whole problem. Kalani did not seem to have any issues with what Min-Ji had just told her. That was good. She was going to need her friends to keep her company; it would help her pick her life back up once we returned to Haven. She had a place, she fit in, and she'd be safe.

I swiveled my head left and right as I glanced at the aspirant Haven members who made up most of this party. Good, strong warriors who had been cast out from their clans because they had not found their mates after a certain amount of time. Males like Zathar, Iave, and me. Though some of them, like Ekkire, the Water Weaver, had simply joined because they were curious. The Water Weaver clan did not cast out their males for not finding a mate.

They were going to pursue her, the one available female. After I'd tasted her, I couldn't stand that thought. I never could, if I was honest with myself. If I wanted my mate to be happy and safe, then I had to leave. But Haven depended on me; I was vital to running its systems and repairing everything. I couldn't leave, not until it was all restored. I didn't know if I could stay that long—and stay away.

Then there was Reid. His situation was grave, and I didn't have enough knowledge to know what was wrong with him. Looking at the readings on my handheld device now made me realize that I had never treated him before. All the humans, even most Naga at Haven, had been in at one point or another for a scrape or bruise, or a bout of sickness. Not Reid.

Something foreign was in his system—that was obvious—but I couldn't tell if it was

one or two substances. It didn't look like a sickness, and it seemed to be destroying him from the inside out, and I had no way to stop it. I had to consult with Artek; a full Shaman might know.

My hand went to the metal disk dangling from a leather cord around my neck, and a wave of sadness rushed through me. That disk was my invitation, and the Shaman council had not formally withdrawn it, even after the Thunder Rock Queen had stopped me from returning to my training. If I'd had more time to study, I might have been able to help Reid. I felt inadequate, trapped in a life that shouldn't have been mine.

I glanced back at Min-Ji, and my chest grew tight when I saw that she was smiling and talking cheerfully with Kalani. Iave was right behind them, not talking, but still part of the merriment, because his mate kept smiling at him. I didn't want to be jealous of my friend, but I was. If the Queen... If I'd finished my training... Things could have been different. I could have been there with Min-Ji. She could have been mine.

"We found it! This is the lab," Krashe's call at the head of our traveling group went out, and I took the opportunity to focus on what I could do: explore the lab and help the warriors unblock the door from this side so we could return to Haven. I'd have to come back down here to inventory all these experiments and relics too, to make sure nothing was dangerous. "Sweep out," Krashe ordered. "Make sure the Revenant's head isn't in here."

I switched into hunting mode along with the other warriors and easily fell into place among them, familiar and comfortable with the hunt, even in a place as spooky and strange as this one.

Chapter 12

Min-Ji

Corin didn't have more of that powder that worked on the welds, but that didn't seem to matter as much when you had this much brute strength and access at your disposal. After carrying off all the huge chunks of stone that had been piled against the door, the warriors worked steadily to chip away at the welded seams. It was honestly impressive how quickly they could do all that.

One moment I had been watching the weird bubbling tanks that populated this huge lab; the next, cheers were going up and a clean breeze blew in. Then it all became a bit of a blur as we left the dark, hidden warren of tunnels and rooms beneath Ahoshaga and entered the pretty part, the town. Here, the crystals glowed like daylight, and the dark rock had been carved to fit over a hundred apartments in a downward spiral toward a pretty fountain.

As we climbed into the inhabited world, Haven's members came streaming in from the outside to greet us. It soon became a chaotic mass of bodies and happy reunions. I saw Naomi and Krashe collide in a fierce embrace, the pretty, freckled woman crying, her Warlord growling. They disappeared into their home, and I knew that Naomi would be giving her mate her joyful news.

Ekkire snuck outside as soon as he could, clearly eager to be back under the open sky, while everyone else was just happy to be back. Vera and Kalani hugged, our blonde-haired leader crying as she cradled her heavily pregnant belly. I was pulled into a huddle of arms and smiles, but I didn't miss how Corin hurried Reid into the med bay. His head was already bent close together with that of the white-scaled Shaman, Artek.

That night, a feast was prepared to celebrate the safe return of everyone and to officially welcome Zeidon and Farah to Haven. Naomi would normally be our designated chef, but for obvious reasons, she was absent that night along with her

mate. I sat around the fire, enjoying the festivities and the fresh food, but I noticed Corin and Artek's absence. They were still working on Reid, and it didn't seem like good news that they were taking that long.

I was tempted to go find him; I mean them. It would be the right thing to do: check on the injured Reid. Bolstered by some of that potent Abseal that Iave brewed, I was almost at the door when I lost my courage. Corin told me to stay away for my own good. I still didn't know why he thought that was best, but now was not the time to push him on the subject.

When I heard a very dejected beep from my right, I discovered Triff peeking out at me from the small opening of a cleaning-bot tunnel. "Hey, did they kick you out of the med bay, buddy?" I asked the little bot. All the cleaning bots looked virtually identical, but I still recognized Triff. There was no other bot that could make their sounds have so much meaning.

He hummed as he rushed toward me, circling my ankles and reminding me a little of an excited puppy. I ducked down and stuck out my hand, and he pushed his round dome against my fingers. I wondered if he could feel that. It didn't seem possible, but he seemed to take comfort from the touch. It made me feel a little better too.

"Come on, you can bunk with me tonight," I told him, and he squealed, a joyful noise this time. That saved me from embarrassing myself in front of Corin as I drunkenly asked him again why we couldn't be together. Who needed a man anyway, or a male? I was fine on my own! I was going to crawl into bed for some well-earned rest and forget all about him.

My apartment was empty and cold when I stepped inside. The lights were warm and bright, but they didn't feel welcoming when everything was so bare and devoid of personal touches. I had a shelf, a desk, a chair, and piles and piles of soft furs, courtesy of all the hunters. Nothing that made this place mine. They were all things

given to me by guys who hoped I might be their mate, or they were charity from the mated males.

It was probably the alcohol talking, but I felt extra gloomy as I kicked off my boots and crawled under my furs. The bed was cold, and it wasn't even a proper bed. The Naga called them nests—round areas made up of hay, fragrant herbs, sticks for the raised edge, and furs to make them comfy. I still hadn't gotten used to how much space there was inside one, and it made me feel extra lonely.

Triff settled right next to the nest, beeping once before going into hibernation mode. Unlike a flesh-and-blood pet, he didn't make for good cuddling. At least I knew that he was lonely too, missing Corin like I was.

It felt like I'd only blinked a few times after dimming the lights when a sound jerked me back to full wakefulness. I couldn't see a thing in this darkness, but I recognized the sound of scales sliding against stone. There was someone in my bedroom. Adrenaline surged, and any sleepiness vanished like snow before the sun. This had never happened before. The aspirants all slept outside the palisade at night. Only the fully trusted males were allowed a home inside the mountain, like Aks and Xorare, but they were a couple, and then there was Corin...

The sound came again, and I jerked upright, my hand slipping beneath the furs to locate my knife. I hadn't felt the need for that protection in a long while, and I realized it wasn't there. "Who's in my room?" I demanded. There was no response, but I saw something glitter, something silver. "Corin? Is that you?"

The answering hiss was the only reply I got. He didn't say anything, but I knew it was him. My earlier fear forgotten—Corin would never harm me—I leaned over the edge of my nest so I could flick on the little lantern I kept there. The light was just a soft orange glow, but I had to blink a few times before my eyes adjusted.

He was inside my room, but barely, hanging back by the door and raised high on his tail. I'd never seen the expression on his face that he wore now, and I struggled to put words to it. A darkness clung to his eyes that I wasn't used to seeing. If I didn't know any better, I'd say he looked desperate and horribly sad at the same time. "Did he die?" I asked, my mind leaping to the most obvious reason for that kind of expression.

His head shake was firm, and I blew out a relieved breath. Okay, that was good. Then why the expression? Corin often wasn't very talkative, but this took the cake. And why was he here? I thought he'd made it clear that we couldn't see each other, but he was already breaking his own rule. He just hovered there inside my room, mercury eyes watching me and darkness clinging to him like a second skin.

At my wits' end on what to do, I lifted the fur that covered me and held it open in invitation. I didn't think he'd come closer, that he'd crawl into the nest with me, but he'd come here for a reason, and maybe that was company. Goosebumps broke out all over my flesh when he jerked forward and started to approach. He was doing it! I liked that, liked that he'd come to me for comfort, but I was confused too.

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The edge of the nest made him stop, and his bleak expression flickered. He was fighting with himself to back away. Determined to give him what he needed, I scooted back and fluttered the fur. “Come on, honey. You need this. It won’t change things tomorrow, I understand. Take what you need.” I was an idiot for making that kind of offer. Of course, it was going to change things, but I suddenly, very desperately, wanted him to stay.

I wanted to be there for him, and I didn’t want to feel lonely; we’d both get something out of this. His fangs glinted in the soft glow of the lantern with an orange hue, as did the sharp horn that jutted from his chin. He looked feral, dark, and a little lost, but my words did what I’d intended. He slithered over the edge of the nest.

Maybe he didn’t intend to touch me once there, but he was a fully grown Naga male. Suddenly, the size of the nest made a lot of sense; he took up so much space in it. My bare toes touched a coil of his tail by accident, and the light of his silver mating marks flared to life between us. As though the floodgates had opened, he surged forward and pulled me into his arms.

He radiated warmth as he curled around me, his arms tight around my middle, his tail coiling around my legs. A deep groan rumbled from his chest when I eagerly buried my nose against his pecs. He always smelled good, but it was extra nice knowing his scent would now cling to the furs on my bed. I pressed an open-mouthed kiss to the firm scales on his chest, and he shuddered against me.

His hand slid up my spine to dig into my hair, his grasp firm as he pulled my head back. Darkness engulfed us with a click. He’d turned the light off, but I knew that didn’t mean he couldn’t see me. He just didn’t want me to see him, but that was okay.

I didn't need to see his face to offer him comfort. His mouth found mine, his lips rough as he pressed us together. Then, his tongue slipped out, and all I could feel and taste was him.

He surrounded me, covered me, and this was no longer about comfort or being together. This was an explosion of passion, like when we'd collided in the tunnels before. I moaned as his tongue claimed, invaded. I shuddered when his cock pressed against my thigh, unrestrained and unashamed of the desire he felt for me. I'd learned from Vera that showing their desire was taboo for the Thunder Rock Naga males, but Corin didn't seem to have a problem with it.

I arched against him, urging him on with my hands against his heated flesh, my fingers roaming down his muscled chest in search of that erection. I'd make him feel good; I'd make him crave me so badly he could never escape. We belonged together. Whatever obstacle he saw, we'd conquer that too. I didn't want to believe that it was too big, too final.

I located his cock and was met with a hiss and wild bucking into my hand. The girls whispered about what it was like—some more frankly than others—so I knew what to expect. It was still a surprise when the tip split and curled, bifurcated like they said, but so very mobile—two thick fingers that twined against my hand, slick with a silky wetness all his. My core clenched, aching as I could suddenly, vividly, picture what having sex with him would be like.

He groaned, his open mouth locking on my neck, his fangs pushing against my skin without piercing my flesh. A possessive, not-quite bite, a claim that wasn't a claim. I had set out with the plan to make him feel good, to give to him when he seemed so dark and sad. That plan went out the window when he growled about needing me now! And that translated into him locking his tail around my wrists and yanking my legs apart.

I'd crawled into bed wearing only panties and a thin, hastily sewn nightshirt from fabric hunters had donated. They proved no barrier for Corin on a mission. He yanked the shirt over my head, the crude seams groaning from the strain, and my panties were shoved down my hips. He claimed my core with a hand, finding me shamelessly soaked for him. Then he was pushing my legs wide with his shoulders, and his mouth closed over the heart of me, his tongue expertly finding my aching clit and lapping at it like a madman when he discovered it made me moan.

This wasn't what I'd set out to do, but damn if it wasn't far better than anything I could have imagined. His tongue was too long to be human, extremely agile, and the press of his scale-covered shoulders against my thighs was a constant reminder of his alienness. I fought against the tight clasp of his tail around my wrists, and he let me go in favor of curling the tip of his tail over my breasts and flicking it against my nipples.

My hands arrowed for his hair, clutching him to me as I raced toward a wildfire, an orgasm that rushed through me from the tips of my toes, toes that I curled into his ribs as it gripped me tight. His name echoed into the darkness of my room. "Ah, Corin! Please," I moaned as he kept lapping at me, licking every last drop of pleasure from my folds.

I felt spent, wrung out, when he finally lifted his head and I could see the silver glint of his eyes in the dark. He didn't sound satisfied, and for one tantalizing moment, it seemed like he might rise above me and sink his cock inside me. Take that final step, lay his claim. He seemed frozen above me, his chest heaving like bellows, the sound of his labored breathing loud in the night.

"It's okay," I murmured through a tight throat. I really meant that it was okay. As I'd promised him, this was just about giving him what he needed right now, to ease the turmoil that had caused him to seek me out. I slid my hands from his hair down the strong column of his neck, along his shoulders, and then down his front. "I'll take

care of you. I know what you need.”

My fingers touched his cock, a repeat of earlier, but this time he did not pull away when I started to stroke him. This time, he held still above me, raised almost perpendicular by sheer upper body strength. His biceps bulged next to my head, visible in the silver glow of his sigils. “That’s it, honey,” I urged when his bifurcated cock flexed in my grip and seemed to swell in size.

Then his tail curled around my fingers, gripping my hands tightly against his iron-hard flesh. He helped me stroke him, finding a faster, better rhythm, and with a wild growl, his seed erupted from the tips. I couldn’t see it, but I felt each hot splatter as it landed on my chest and belly. The sweet, savory scent of caramelized popcorn filled the air, and my mouth watered. I didn’t even care for popcorn back home, but I was extremely tempted to taste this. If I did, though, all bets were off. I’d lose my mind to a mating heat only Naga seed could cause, and I wasn’t ready for that. Corin wasn’t ready.

Eventually, he released my hand with his tail from around his cock, and he shifted away. I thought for a moment that he might leave, that this was all he’d come here for, but he’d only shifted to pick up a piece of fur. He wiped my flesh carefully, with a tenderness I knew he had in him when he wasn’t feeling stressed or rushed. I returned the favor, using my shirt to wipe the last seed from his cock.

I held my breath as I discarded the dirty clothing. Was this when he’d leave? I didn’t want him to go, not ever. But I didn’t think this was the moment to push him, either. Something was still wrong with his mood, though he didn’t seem quite so heavy with darkness now. He settled on his side next to me in the nest, pulling the furs over my bare flesh so I stayed warm. “Thank you, Min-Ji,” he murmured against my hair, his arms gathering me close to his chest.

He was here to stay, at least for tonight. I fell asleep slowly, waiting for him to go

first, and listening to the steady thud of his heartbeat beneath my ear. This was almost peaceful, and my nest certainly didn't seem too big now. If only I knew I'd have this every night—if only Corin would tell me what was bothering him. If it wasn't about Reid, had Vrash returned?

When I woke that morning, I was still tired and groggy, but Corin was still there, and that made everything better. He was lying next to me, his tail and arms curled around me, our naked skin touching everywhere. I even felt the blaze of his cock press against my hip, and I wondered if he wanted another round of heavy petting before we went our separate ways. His silver eyes were dark, not heated in the soft light of a lantern, a light he must have turned on.

“Hi,” I said to him, offering a gentle smile. What would work to make him talk? Pushing Corin was often fun, but it rarely netted the results I was after. Maybe silence would do the trick, where pelting him with questions made him throw his shields up. So I just waited, my hands stroking along his chest and shoulders, brushing through his silky blue hair.

“Hi,” he muttered back, his fangs flashing as his mouth lifted into a sad smile. “No questions?” When I shook my head in reply, he sighed, his inhale long and slow, his chest expanding beneath my fingers. “It's what I have to do. It brought back terrible memories. I don't want to go, but it's the only way we can save Reid.” That made me so stinking curious, but I bit my lip and held back all the words I wanted to say. With my eyes, I hoped I conveyed my empathy.

Another sigh, his eyes darting from my face to glance around my undecorated bedroom and at the piles of spare furs in the corner. “It's her,” he said, and finally, I could start to put together the puzzle pieces that made up my reluctant mate. “The Thunder Rock Queen. Once, when I was still a youngling in training to be a Shaman, she coveted me. To convince me to be hers, she forbade me from returning to my studies. It's her... If she finds out you are my mate, she will kill you. She knows she

cannot have me, but she's a spiteful, vengeful Queen."

My heart started racing in my chest at this revelation. It sounded terrible, and at the same time, a distant Queen didn't seem like much of a threat at all. But it was very clear that the threat was real in Corin's mind, and that was the only thing that mattered. Maybe I couldn't see the dangers he knew were there; maybe he was right, but I didn't want to believe that.

Worse was the part where he admitted to a grown Naga female coveting him when he was young, and a friend of her own son to boot. That was twisted as hell, and even if he'd managed to stay out of her clasp, it had changed his life. He had just admitted to once training to be a Shaman, which was huge.

I opened my mouth, about to break my vow to stay silent so he'd speak, but Corin beat me to it. "I will have to face my past. I didn't know if I had the strength to do that. But I do. Thank you for showing me." He dipped his head, pressed his mouth to mine for a quick, tender kiss, and then he was slithering away, slipping from my grasp.

I let him go because, after what he'd just told me, that was definitely the right thing to do. It made my heart hurt; it made me ache for the young Naga boy he had been. I missed him as soon as the door to my apartment slid shut behind him. And I couldn't regret a single moment we'd shared. Not even a minute.

Chapter 13

Corin

Min-Ji was too clever for her own good. She'd tricked me when I was at my most vulnerable, when she said this wouldn't change anything. But things had changed. I couldn't even be mad at her, or at myself. I didn't have it in me to regret a single

moment. Her taste, her scent—both had been engraved on my brain, and I was going to cherish those memories for the rest of my life. They'd help me get through the coming challenge.

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Zathar had called a meeting, and humans and warriors gathered around the campfire to listen to what he had to say. The morning air was turning crisp, and several females sat huddled beneath thick furs to stay warm. Kalani was curled in Iave's lap, and it made me happy to see how relaxed my often closed-off friend looked.

My mate didn't have a mate to provide warmth or warm furs for her, but she wasn't lacking in aid. At least three hunters had offered her a warm skin to wrap around her shoulders. The sight made me bristle, my scales rattling against my spine, but I didn't interfere. The whole point was to make everyone think she wasn't mine, so word couldn't get back to the Thunder Rock Queen and put her in danger.

Min-Ji's eyes lifted from the proffered furs to me in a quick flick, but she didn't let them linger. Instead, she gave the three hunters a sunny smile and took all three of the offered furs. That was smart, even if I didn't like it. It wouldn't make any of the bachelors think she preferred one over the others. I still took note of the three males so I could make sure to keep an eye on them, and maybe question the others about their background. Only one came from Thunder Rock, and I had to begrudgingly admit that Ezho was a good male.

"Thank you all for coming here. We've got an important announcement and a list of tasks to divide before winter comes." Zathar kicked off the meeting with an air of authority, showing his princely roots by the way he made each person feel personally welcomed. Not everyone was used to being so included in the making of important decisions.

I knew what my friend was going to say next—the announcement he was talking about—but it tied my stomach up in knots anyway. Artek had made the decision last

night, just before I'd gone to see Min-Ji, and I still hadn't made peace with it. "Reid requires more aid than we can offer him here at Ahoshaga. It's been decided that he needs to be seen by our most learned Shamans. That means taking him to the Sacred Training Grounds."

His words made a deep hush settle over the crowd. The humans would not know what this meant, but it had an impact on the Naga. Only younglings sent to train to be Shamans, and Queens were allowed to visit the place. My fingers tangled with the disk dangling from a worn leather string around my neck: my invitation. An invitation that had never been withdrawn, though it certainly would be after this mission was over. A final closing of a chapter in my life.

"As Artek needs to remain here to care for our pregnant females and the other Clans under his care, it will be Corin who escorts Reid to the Shamans." If Zathar's previous statement had made an impact, this one was like one of my explosions. Voices erupted as hunters uttered their surprise and began to protest or agree with this decision. I wasn't a Shaman; I had no right to visit a sacred place like that.

"Silence!" Zathar thundered as the voices grew angry. I looked from our leader to Min-Ji; her opinion was the only one that mattered. She didn't know what any of this meant, but the steady look on her face was reassuring. When she gave me a nod, I felt a little calmer.

"This isn't one of those decisions we're putting to a vote. We are not letting Reid die, and this is the only way to save him. Understood? Corin has been to the Sacred Training Grounds. He knows all the Shaman teachers. I will remind you that Corin was once meant to train as a Shaman. Out of all of us, he is the most suited to go. Or do you want to put our females at risk by sending Artek?" That shut the crowd up, and they shared uneasy looks while some fervently shook their heads. Nobody wanted to risk the pregnant women.

“Zathar is right. This is the only way we can take care of everyone,” Krashe said in a tone that brooked no argument. The former Bitter Storm Warlord leveled a fierce glare at the handful of Bitter Storm Naga that had joined us. Out of the gathered hunters, they had objected most strenuously, but obeying Krashe was ingrained in them. They mutely nodded their agreement.

“Then it’s settled. Corin and Reid will be flown by Zsekhet for the first leg of the journey, then continue on foot for the last stretch. They will leave immediately.” My bag with supplies was already waiting at the entrance of the town, and Artek was preparing Reid for travel as we spoke. I didn’t feel ready to go, not even a little, but like Zathar had said, this was the only option we had.

“Hang on!” Min-Ji’s voice pierced the silence with a vibrant, confident note. I’d started to turn away, my tail feeling so heavy that it was a struggle to move. Her voice yanked me back to the present, to her. “He’s not going alone,” she said. “I’m going with him.” She had crossed her arms over her chest and stood with her feet braced hip-width apart, offering Zathar her most determined expression. I knew that look; it meant business. You didn’t change her mind when she looked at you like that.

I thought I was the only one unable to resist it, but Zathar pursed his lips and lowered his brow as he contemplated her. His fingers stroked the sharp horn that jutted from his chin as he thought. I didn’t know what I wanted. Taking her with me was a bad idea. It would be like the rescue missions from the tunnels all over again, and there was no way I’d be able to stay away from her if she and I spent more time together. But my heart felt lighter when I thought of facing my old teachers with her at my side. It wouldn’t feel so bad. I wouldn’t be alone.

I had told no one that Min-Ji was my mate, not even Zathar or Iave, who were my closest friends. When the two of them shared a silent look, a feeling crawled across my scales, reminding me that I couldn’t keep secrets from them. They knew. Ah, blazing suns... “Agreed,” Zathar said, a smug smile pulling at his mouth as he

glanced at me. Then he looked down at his own mate, his pregnant Vera, who was leaning against his side with a devious look in her blue eyes. “Min-Ji accompanies them.”

I only had eyes for the look of victory on my mate’s face.

Min-Ji

I had only flown on a dragon once before, when we’d visited Artek’s home lower down the mountain to get the translators installed or updated. Today would be my second time, and I tingled with excitement at the prospect. Flying space shuttles had been my job for over five years, and I kind of missed it now that I was grounded on Serant.

Not that I wanted to attempt to fly anything on this treacherous planet. While we’d been here, there had already been two reports of ‘skyships’ falling from the skies. Something about this planet made flying near it extremely treacherous, and until us, the Naga had never met anyone who’d survived such a crash. I didn’t want to crash again, but I still missed flying.

Flying on a huge, golden dragon wasn’t the same as flying a shuttle. I wouldn’t be in control, for one, and it also came with the rush of air against my skin and frigid temperatures high in the sky. They were wrapping Reid in several layers of fur as they prepped him to be carried in the dragon’s claws. I’d need to do the same to stay warm.

“Did you pack enough?” Cosima asked me quietly from beside my left elbow. The tiny redhead was bundled from chin to toe in thick fur clothing, holding a fur parka for me to pull on. Her face was flushed red because she was too warm right now, but

she knew better than anyone how to dress for flight. I didn't doubt that I'd need that parka once we got up there.

"Yes," I assured her, but I still slapped a hand down to touch the flap of my satchel. Had I packed enough food this time? And enough furs to sleep on? I didn't have one of those little heater machines that Corin had. I hoped he'd taken his because the nights were getting cold outside. The first hints of fall were in the air, and I'd learned that winter followed shortly on its heels on this planet. I wasn't counting on cuddles, especially not when Zsekhet and Cosima would be camping with us the first night.

Triff was also taking up a lot of space, but I couldn't possibly leave the bot behind. He was tucked under the flap, though I'd pulled it back enough that his sensor array stuck over the edge. I imagined that he preferred being able to see. He certainly seemed content, his lights blinking lazily. Cosima smirked at the bot. "Not the most conventional companion, but I like it." When she reached out to gently pat Triff on his round upper dome, the bot beeped happily.

"So, are you going to tell me what's going on with you and Corin?" the woman said while she nudged me closer to the huge front paw of the dragon. It was a little scary to consider that the enormous claws were big enough to pick up a car. The golden scales were the size of dinner plates along Sesethul's flank, and when he tilted his head and curled his neck, I was staring into an eye with a long, slitted pupil. A primal, atavistic response rose at the back of my brain, warning me to get away from a beast as huge as this.

Cosima was as calm as a cucumber when she pointed out the right hand- and footholds for me to climb onto the dragon. She'd done it a million times by now, and she was as relaxed around the golden monster as she was around her golden mate. From the shy and often depressed girl she'd been when we first got here, it was an amazing transformation. I was happy for her, but I wasn't happy that she was no longer too shy to pry into my personal life.

“What makes you say anything is going on?” I asked her while I carefully avoided looking at her. I had the perfect excuse: I was scaling the paw of a dragon so I could sit on his back. It needed all my concentration. She made a scoffing noise, and I could easily picture her rolling her eyes. My hand located one of the evenly spaced spikes along Sesethul’s back, and I hauled myself to the top with a slight grunt. She could roll her eyes, but I still didn’t want to talk, not until I’d figured this out. I didn’t want her pity.

I should have counted on the fact that Cosima was far better at climbing onto her mate’s dragon companion than I was. She’d scaled that beastie in no time and perched backward between two spikes so she could look me in the eye. “Now spill, Min-Ji. You’re my friend. You were there for me. Let me help you.” How could I refuse that?

Meeting her stare, I groaned dramatically and then glanced down Ses’ flank to check if anyone was within hearing range. That was high up; the dragon was really big. I didn’t have a fear of heights, but it definitely made me feel a little uncomfortable. The funny thing was, you could still be a pilot and fear standing on a ledge. It felt very different being strapped into a harness inside a cockpit.

There was a group of Naga hunters to my right, watching from the direction of the meat-smoking shed with gloomy expressions. I knew why they looked like that; they were upset that I was going to be alone with Corin on this mission. They saw their chances of having a mate slip from their grasp. Well, too bad. I was never going to be theirs anyway.

On the other side of Ses, by the statues that flanked the entrance into Haven’s town area, the rest of the humans and their Naga mates had gathered. Vera waved when she saw me look, and then Kalani joined in. I started to smile automatically and wave back just as enthusiastically. “Come on, nobody can hear you. Talk!” Cosima wasn’t as patient as she used to be, either. It suited her.

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“Nothing to say,” I insisted. “We’re not dating. We’re not mates. We’re not anything.” I wanted to say that learning the real reason for all of this had changed things, but Corin was determined. He’d taken my pistol so he could figure out a way to charge it, and that gave me hope, but things weren’t looking good. Stupid Naga queens. They’d been nothing but trouble to all of us, and I had no clue how to make this one leave us alone. I didn’t even know if she was still interested in Corin, or if he was right, and this was going to be a case of ‘if I can’t have him, then nobody can.’

“But something changed,” Cosima insisted. “I always thought you had a crush on him, but now he’s the one casting you longing glances. Come on, you can tell me. I’m good with secrets. It’ll feel good to let it out, trust me.” I pursed my lips as I contemplated that, my heart pounding hopefully in my chest. Longing looks, huh? It was tempting to search for Corin and see if it was true, but he was working with Artek and Zsekhet to get Reid’s unconscious body situated for the journey.

If anyone knew how good it was to finally talk, it was Cosima. Until Zsekhet came along, I’d worked futilely for months to cheer her up and get her out of her shell. Talking to the right person, being with the right person—it had transformed her. She was also right that we had a moment to ourselves. In not too long, Corin and Zsekhet would be up here with us. This was our only chance to talk.

“Fine!” I said, and I blew her a raspberry, but that was to cover how awkward I was feeling. I was usually the one who took care of others, so I didn’t really know how to lean on Cosima. Start at the beginning, I guess. I quickly told her what had happened, glossing over the spicy details, but explaining about the Thunder Rock Queen. “Corin is absolutely convinced that if Zathar’s mother finds out I’m his mate, she’ll have me killed. That’s why,” I flapped my hand a little helplessly. It wasn’t fair to say he

ignored me, because I knew that wasn't true, but it was why everyone thought my feelings were one-sided.

When Cosima reached out and pulled me into a tight hug, I had to admit that it felt good. A bit of tension left me, and what Kalani had started, the redhead seemed to finish. I wasn't at risk of getting kicked out of Haven, and I had friends—good ones. I was not alone. Then Triff beeped, trapped in the satchel between our bodies. We both smiled.

“Corin is going to find out that you are stronger together. He's not going to be able to stay away.” When a blush stained my cheeks at Cosima's words, she gave me a knowing grin. “I'm sure there's a way to defeat that stupid Queen. Why would she even care? She has no power in Haven.”

No, that's what I kept thinking too. Why was Corin so worried when she couldn't reach me at Ahoshaga? Most Thunder Rock people were very superstitious about the place; they thought it was haunted, and we only allowed trusted aspirants at the campfire. So why was he so worried? Unfortunately, I couldn't talk more about it with Cosima because it seemed the final preparations were done.

Soon, Corin had climbed up Sesethul's hind leg and strapped himself into place as far away from me as he could get, while Zsekhet nestled himself in front of Cosima and was double-checking that her flight harness was secure. “Let me see your buckles too, Min-Ji,” the golden Naga grinned at me as he pulled on knots and cinches with the tip of his tail. He did it professionally, not once touching me, but I still felt the fine hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

A glance over my shoulder showed me a dark, intense look in Corin's mercury eyes. He'd even bared his fangs, and I wasn't the only one who'd noticed. Zsekhet yanked his tail back, his golden eyes clashing with Corin's silver ones. Then our dragon rider grinned, slow and wide. A mocking, irreverent, and fang-filled smile that was all

about drawing Corin out even more. I felt like I was trapped between two very dangerous, opposing forces for several long seconds.

“Ready to go?” Zsekhet asked, and as quickly as that intense, dangerous taunt had risen on his face, it disappeared. With a whoop and a hiss, followed by loud cheering from below, Sesethul launched himself into the sky with the beating of his huge, leathery wings. As we soared skyward, my belly remained behind, and when it caught up, I’d lost some of the heavy, sad feelings from before.

Another adventure, more time alone with my stubborn mate. I’d make this work. All I had to do was figure out how to defeat a Naga Queen. Easy peasy.

Chapter 14

Corin

“You are certain we can't take you any further?” Zsekhet asked me. We were standing side by side at the top of a slight hill, looking out over the rolling, lush terrain in front of us. It was heavily wooded but wet, like the marshlands of the Copper Tooth Clan combined with the forests of Thunder Rock. We had well and truly traveled beyond the territories most of us ever managed to see.

At Zsekhet’s question, I tapped the silvery disk that hung from a string around my neck. It didn’t look like much, but that little disk was the only way a Naga could ever hope to find the Sacred Shaman Training Grounds. Not only was it an invitation-only kind of place, and those invites were offered only to individuals with an aptitude for the job or to Queens, but the Sacred Training Grounds moved. So, if you ever lost your invite, you’d never be able to find them again.

“Yes,” I said to the Serqethos male. Shamans and Serqethos dragon riders were the only ones who could travel Serant at their leisure. Zsekhet had seen far more of the

world than I could ever hope to see, and I envied him for that. Standing next to him, so close to where the Sacred Training Grounds were located, made me feel that thirst for knowledge keenly—the very desire that had once put me on the path to becoming a Shaman. “Any closer, and you might as well come all the way. The Shaman leaders won’t be happy if you learn their secrets.”

Zsekhet looked horrified at the prospect, and that almost made me laugh. I would have if I weren’t so nervous about coming back here. I didn’t know what my former teachers were going to think when I showed up. Sympathetic for Reid’s plight, of that I was sure. But me? I might end up shunned. My fists closed around the disk I’d worn without fail for the past twenty years. I might lose my invitation. It was a stupid thing to hold onto, and it was worth losing if it would save the life of my friend.

“What about your mate?” Zsekhet asked, and it was my turn to look horrified. He laughed, his black horn glinting in the early Serant light, but that laugh faltered when I couldn’t manage to get my expression under control. My mate? Why was he using that word? I must have slipped up. Did I look at her too long? I didn’t believe for a minute that Min-Ji had said something to another Naga male; she was too loyal for that.

Then I yanked my eyes from the golden twinkle in Zsekhet’s and looked over my shoulder at the two females. They were at the small makeshift camp, sitting beside Reid—one crown of black hair, the other a bright copper hue—bent close together as they whispered. She would have told Cosima, maybe, and Cosima would have told her mate. I’d purposely closed my ears to the noises coming from their little tent last night, for obvious reasons. I had missed the part where the couple talked about us.

“You tell anyone, and I will kill you!” I hissed furiously. Protective instincts surged through my veins, fear for Min-Ji’s life clouding my mind. It was foolish to attack a Naga male with a dragon friend. I had no hope of winning against a sky beast like Sesethul, but I didn’t even remember the dragon at that moment. All I cared about

was making sure that Zsekheth would never talk and put my mate in danger.

I didn't even remember that I'd pulled a knife, but it was in my fist when I surged forward and pinned Zsekheth against the trunk of a tree. He fought back, rage flashing in his eyes, but he didn't fear for his mate the way I did. I was stronger this time. "You cannot call her my mate. It is a death sentence. You hear me? Her life is in mortal danger if you tell anyone. And I'll know who to blame if she dies! I'll hunt you down and gut you. Understood?"

Zsekheth deflated beneath the arm I'd pressed against his throat. His sharp, black horn had stabbed me in the arm, and I hadn't even felt it. I didn't pay attention to the slow trickle of blood, either. It didn't matter until I was certain he understood how important this was. I had not even told Zathar or Iave, my closest friends, and I knew I could trust them. Zsekheth was a former Serqethos and still new to Haven. A former spy... I wanted to believe that he'd have my back on this, but this was Min-Ji's safety we were talking about; I didn't take risks with that.

"I swear," the golden male hissed, his hands opening at his sides, palms turned my way in a sign of surrender. "I will make sure that Cosima and I never speak a word of your mate bond until you release us from this vow. Please, what is this threat you speak of? I would send Sesethul to vanquish it for you. Nobody deserves the misery that comes with denying a bond... It doesn't end well."

The dragon had not even raised his head from where he lay napping in the clearing just beyond the females. When Zsekheth said his name, his huge nostrils twitched, and one eyelid slowly blinked open. So the beast had heard our scuffle, and he hadn't cared; that was very lucky for me. I couldn't believe I'd taken such a risk, now that my head was starting to feel clearer.

"You can't vanquish this foe for me," I said, and winced when I sounded forlorn, dejected, to my own ears. "You can't kill a queen without starting a war." I raised my

eyes from the dragon and the two females sitting at the campfire in front of him, still talking animatedly in hushed whispers. I'd do anything to solve this problem, to make her happy. I loved nothing better than watching her smiles, her genuine smiles when she solved a problem or helped someone. I loved her.

But I couldn't kill a queen, especially not one that commanded superior numbers to ours, made up of our friends and brothers. We couldn't fight them; they were still our family. I had no hope of convincing the queen not to kill Min-Ji either; she would do that in a heartbeat. Humans were so small and frail, so easily injured.

"A queen?" Zsekheth murmured thoughtfully, his gaze on his mate as he contemplated my problem. There had been real rage in him when I threatened him before, but it had vanished without a trace. In its place was the light-heartedness he was known for, tempered by the seriousness of my situation. "That is a problem. A human has no chance of ever defeating a Naga female in a formal challenge..."

I knew that. That's why I'd hidden our bond. If the Queen found out about Min-Ji, that would be the first thing she'd try. I needed to find a way to power her weapon again; that would even the playing field a little. It would upset the other Naga females if that's how a challenge ended, but it wasn't against the rules. All I cared about was that my mate survived.

The possibility of her weapon—something I hadn't known about until the rescue mission—tantalized me. It still couldn't be worth the risk, not until I knew how good a shot she was, and how she'd hold up against a living opponent. I'd overheard her telling Kalani about what had brought their skyship down to Serant. She'd shot a male then, bravely doing the right thing to save the others, but could she do that again?

"I will keep her safe by hiding our bond," I said to Zsekheth, and my glare made it clear that I expected him to do the same. "You do not need to worry about denial

symptoms. It's not like that." It would have been a concern if not for our passionate encounters. They had eased some of the denied hunger that would have torn me apart otherwise. It was selfish to use her that way, but I still couldn't regret it.

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Zsekheth held out his hands, palm out. “Got it. We’ll have to return to Haven. Bitter Storm is still a threat. Good luck.” He gave me a nod, then slithered away, snatching his mate up in his arms to the sound of her surprised squeal—one that quickly turned into a laugh. It made me jealous to see what I could have if not for this one female standing in our way.

Min-Ji rose to her feet next to the campfire and gave the couple a very bright smile that I knew hid what she was truly feeling. “Ready to go?” she asked. I should tell her to stay behind, but I couldn’t make the words move past my lips. We said our goodbyes quickly, and then I gathered the poles to Reid’s stretcher and started the last leg of our journey.

Triff had trouble with the rough terrain: his cleaning disk couldn’t handle grass and rocks, so Min-Ji carried him. I needed to find a solution because the little bot was eager to explore everything it saw. Min-Ji even indulged him by bringing his sensors closer to interesting trees, rocks, or other plants—anything that drew his eye. It made me worry that she’d step into a bog without realizing, or that she was tiring herself out too quickly.

If not for Reid’s labored breathing and his troubling moans, I might have allowed for a slower pace, but the human male was getting worse. We needed to reach the Training Grounds today because I wasn’t sure if he’d make it through the night. Two hours into our journey, I worried he might not even make it to the end of the day. He had started to rouse enough to mutter angry, delirious words, followed by flashes of clarity. In my experience, a warrior was in his final moments when that happened.

“How do you know where to go?” Min-Ji asked. She’d caught on that Reid was

struggling and had walked briskly at my side for the past ten minutes. Her eyes flicked from the hill we were climbing down to Reid's sweaty face, her brow furrowed. "It all looks the same to me."

It all looked the same, and I'd never been here before, just like her. Both my hands were required to pull the travois Reid was strapped to, but I jutted my chin horn down to the silver disk hanging from my neck. "This—it vibrates stronger the closer we get, but the vibrations mute if I turn in the wrong direction."

She gave the little disk a dubious look that made me smile; it was cute and made her scrunch up her dainty nose. "Okay, but that doesn't tell you how far it still is, does it?" What she really wanted to know was how Zsekhet had managed to put us down in the right area. She knew that the disk didn't vibrate all the time. My clever mate wanted to solve the puzzle.

"Artek activated it and told us the general area. He has contact with the trainers." It was not a secret I was supposed to share with anyone, but she was my mate. That was different. Once you became a Shaman, you had access to all of them through a private communications network. Artek had linked Haven to his home when he learned we had settled there, and that was as close as I'd gotten to being part of that information network.

"Ooooh!" Min-Ji exclaimed, her eyes sparkling. She opened her mouth to say more, but a sound drew my attention, and I quickly shook my head. The two of us searched the wooded area around us, my eyes quickly fixating on a thin plume of smoke a little to our left. We weren't alone.

Chapter 15

Min-Ji

I didn't know what Corin saw or heard, but I could tell he was worried. One moment we'd been talking, the next he'd gone all tense and battle-ready. I wondered if he knew the scales along his shoulders seemed extra pointy and big when he got like that. It wasn't like he could really control them the way some animals could raise their fur to seem bigger, but it reminded me a little of that.

"We've got company," Corin hissed under his breath. His hands lowered the two-poled A-frame thing he had been pulling like a sled. Reid moaned and muttered as Corin settled him on the ground. "Stay close." I ducked to kneel at Reid's side, still searching the purple woods for any sign of this company that Corin had seen.

It wasn't long before I saw them, but that was only because the Naga watching us chose to leave his hiding place. I had never seen this guy before, and I had a hard time deciding which Clan he belonged to. Maybe he was from an entirely new Clan I didn't know about; we had traveled far from Haven on Sesethul yesterday. We couldn't even see the mountain peaks of Ahoshaga or the Bitter Storm mountain range any longer.

This Naga didn't have the pretty sheen to his scales that Corin and any other Naga I knew had. His scales were dull, matte, as if they absorbed light rather than reflected it. Their color was something between blue and purple, something dark that made him extremely difficult to spot against the purple and gray foliage on Serant.

Then, two more Naga slithered out from behind some bushes, spears in hand, and aimed in our direction. These two were clearly blue: one, a bright azure similar to Zathar, and the other a darker blue that was very common among the rest of our former Thunder Rock outcasts. That made them Thunder Rock hunters, but how had they gotten here? Or were there more blue Naga Clans?

"Khawla, what are you doing here?" Corin demanded, making it clear at once that he knew the strange Naga at the front. Corin had pulled his knives, but, seeing former

Clansmales, he lowered his blades and lost some of his hostility. “You’re far from home...”

The oddly camouflaged male tilted his head and frowned. “I could say the same about you, Corin. What are you doing here? Are you aware that you are getting perilously close to the Sacred Training Grounds? Only Shamans and Queens are allowed to continue in this direction.” So we were getting close; that was good. Reid was on fire. I could feel how he was burning up now that I was kneeling right next to him.

Corin nodded. “I know. We are on our way to seek their aid. I am invited.” Those final words seemed to do the trick for the three Thunder Rock Naga. The blue ones lowered their spears and offered friendly greetings, while Khawla approached to peer around Corin at the moaning Reid. I didn’t miss how Corin carefully kept his body between me and the other males, not allowing them to get a good look or get close.

I kept looking at Khawla because he seemed to be the one in charge and was still suspicious of us. His eyes weren’t a shade of blue or gray; they were a bright amethyst. That was an eye color only seen among the Copper Tooth Clan. Was this guy half of both? That seemed impossible because, while Thunder Rock and Copper Tooth weren’t at war, they weren’t allies. All the Clans were very strict about staying inside their own Clan and color—that’s why we humans mating with their cast-out males was such a big deal.

“Hmm, are you sure about that?” Khawla murmured when he realized the patient Corin was transporting wasn’t Naga. At least, I was pretty sure that’s why he called Corin’s invitation into question, but he’d done it quietly, so his buddies hadn’t overheard. “Sazzie and the Queen are seeing them now. They’re busy.” Or maybe that’s what he meant; this guy was hard to read.

“What do you mean?” Corin demanded upon hearing the news, but Khawla turned his back on my mate and slithered away. With a gesture of his hand, the other two

disappeared into the bushes ahead of him, moving toward a small trail of smoke in the distance. Corin seemed frozen in place as he stared at their retreating backs until they were completely out of sight. “What do you mean, the Queen is here?”

Oh no. I knew what was about to happen. If the Queen was here, then he was going to refuse to let me come with him. A sliver of fear curled through my belly as I thought about what this meant, the implications. If she was nearby, if she was where we needed to go to save Reid, it would put me in great danger. Corin was going to have a meltdown about that. I knew it. But it wasn’t like it was safe for me to hide in the woods for a few nights alone. I was the worst person for that. I was terrible at outdoor stuff.

He spun around, his mercury eyes blazing at me, and I braced myself for a passionate speech. He didn’t disappoint. His words were a low, deep growl as he rushed them out. “You have to stay here and hide. If the Queen is at the Training Grounds, there’s no way you can come with me. You have to stay safe.” I knew he was speaking from fear, that this news had made him panic and think the worst, but he couldn’t possibly think this was the right choice.

I got to my feet, my fists balled at my sides. A weird kind of desperation filled me. This was when I had to convince him of something that felt impossible. I felt like I’d just lost him, and we hadn’t even faced her yet. Cosima said it was worth fighting for, that I couldn’t give up. But these odds felt overwhelming. How could I ask him to take me where she’d see us—his biggest fear? And it made me so mad, too. Why did this Naga female I’d never even met get to dictate the rest of our lives? It wasn’t right.

“Corin! Corin, listen to me,” I said, but he was still talking rapidly, one word tumbling over the next as he tried to tell me what to do. He wasn’t listening. He didn’t even seem to see me right now. All he could see was the future he feared: my death at the hands of a female who had ruined his lifetime again and again. I had

promised to hide our mating bond, to keep it from everyone so this damn Queen would never learn of it. But nobody was here to see us, just a delirious Reid who wouldn't remember.

I pressed my palms to his chest on either side of the vibrating pendant around his neck. Corin's mating marks flared to wild, exuberant life as I did so. They glowed so brightly that I had to blink against their strength, and they covered him from shoulder to the very tip of his tail. We'd touched before, but I'd never seen them this... feral, this present. As if his fear for me had made them more powerful.

"Corin! I can't hide in the woods for days. That would be just as dangerous!" His mouth snapped shut, and his quicksilver eyes lowered to mine. Finally, I had contact. I reached up one hand to cup his jaw. I had to stand on tiptoe to reach him, and I didn't miss how he lowered himself the rest of the way. "You can't leave me behind," I said, and then I kissed him.

Immediately, his arms closed around me, and he yanked me against his chest with a shudder. He kissed back, his mouth rough and possessive but his hands gentle as he clutched me close. That was my Corin. He'd come back to me, but was it enough? Our tongues tangled in a now familiar way, our breathing mingling, and his taste grounding me in the here and now. In his arms, I felt safe, like that threat he feared could never reach me, and I wished that I could do the same for him.

"You need to listen to your mate," a voice said. It took me a disorienting moment to figure out what had happened, but Corin was instantly back in battle mode. He hissed, his scales rattling along his spine, and his arms clutched me tighter. It was the weirdly muted Naga male, Khawla, again. This time, he was alone as he peered at us from beside a tree a little further away. I had a feeling that he'd never left, that he'd watched us the entire time to see what we'd do.

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“There are Rakworms in the area,” the male said, as he lifted a hand in the direction we needed to go. “At least three. You can’t leave your female unprotected, Corin. And she wouldn’t be safe at our camp, or I’d offer that.” Corin hissed in response, and I had a feeling he wasn’t really hearing Khawla; rather, he was sizing up the male as if he intended to attack.

“Corin,” Khawla said calmly, and I had to give the guy points for remaining so unfazed while getting measured for a coffin by my mate. The kill vibes were off the charts. If Corin weren’t holding me, he would have already attacked. “I will leave now, and I will forget we met. Do you understand? Now listen to your female. She's got the right of it.” He backed up slowly, his hands held out at his sides with the palms facing toward us.

When he’d disappeared out of sight, it still didn’t feel like we were alone, but it was the best it was going to get. That male had the most camouflaged scales I’d ever seen. If he wanted to spy on us, he could. I had to trust that he’d keep his word, though I didn’t understand what would motivate him to do so. There was nothing in it for him except kindness. We had a truce with Thunder Rock, but we weren’t friends...

Corin still hadn’t moved, and he hadn’t let me go. Actually, his tail had wound tighter around me, holding me closer and closer to him. “Honey, you understand what that guy said, right?” I asked him. Maybe, if I touched him more, he’d snap out of this weirdly protective mode he’d gone into. “Come back to me.” My fingers trailed along his chest, then back up his neck and into the silky strands of dark blue hair.

It was very tempting to kiss him again, and I bit my lip as I gathered my courage to try. Sadly, his eyes suddenly snapped from the woods to my face, and I knew he’d

managed to find his way back. “Min-Ji... I can’t. We can’t. If I lost you, it would kill me! I have to keep you safe.”

He leaned into my hand, his eyes intense as he watched me shake my head. I knew he was going to protest, so I beat him to the punch. “No,” I said firmly. “We can’t avoid this forever. We can’t even avoid her. I know I’m safer with you, and I know that leaving me out here with Rakworms is not an option. We have to confront this.” It made my heart pound in my throat to think about it, but I was very tired of hearing about a threat without having anything tangible to face. Not that I really wanted to face an actual Naga Queen. Vera had done it, and it hadn’t sounded fun.

The way he groaned and lowered his shoulders made it clear I’d won this round. We were going to the Sacred Training Grounds together. That meant I was about to see my first Naga Queen, and this one was supposed to want me dead if she knew I was Corin’s mate. Which meant we were going to have to hide it until we could find a way to make her give up. Secretly, I also wondered if she even cared or if fear had blown this problem out of proportion.

Corin had been so young when she tampered with his chance to be a Shaman and tried to convince him to be her consort. But he wasn’t a youngling anymore. Now, he was a fully trained hunter, with as much knowledge as he could gather on ancient relics. It might be different when he confronted her, and faced his demons. A girl could hope.

He tilted his head to search the surrounding woods, maybe for Khawla, or perhaps for the Rakworms. I’d never seen one in person, but Charlie had, and she’d described her experience in vivid detail. I wasn’t keen on meeting one of the giant snakes with fangs as long as my arm.

“She can’t find out,” he said eventually, but he still didn’t let go of me. He kept me tight against his chest, his tail pushing against my rear to raise me higher. This kiss

was different when he bent his head to mine, slower, tender. He didn't rush it the way every kiss before this one had, exploding into passion as if it were the only moment we were going to have. No, this felt more like a promise for more, but I didn't dare hope for that.

When he set me back on my feet, the tip of his tail remained coiled around my wrist. That's how we continued our trek downhill and deeper into the strange, boggy woods. Reid was quiet now, barely moving and no longer moaning in pain. If you ignored the fine sheen of sweat on his forehead, you could almost pretend that he was sleeping peacefully.

The area started to change as the day progressed, no longer quite so wet in the valleys between the hills. That made traveling quicker, as we could now stay lower on the hillsides, avoiding all the steep climbs. We only took one brief pause mid-afternoon for food and water. Corin took out his healing device, the gold bands and odd gems fitting around his clawed hand like a glove.

He gave Reid a thorough check, and I loved watching him as he worked. I didn't think he realized it, but his tongue kept peeking out as he concentrated. It was cute, which was a funny word to associate with a Naga like Corin. He wasn't soft anywhere, and since he was built along slender lines compared to guys like Krashe and Iave, he looked even sharper. Lean and muscular, but refined—if that made any sense—but definitely not cute. Unless he was focused and did that unconscious gesture: pursed lips, the tip of his tongue sticking out. I loved it.

"He has stabilized a little. I didn't think he would," Corin said as he tucked the device away again. "His chances might actually be improving." That was hopeful, but it didn't look like he was going to get better soon; there was a gray hue to his face. He was breathing normally, but I would have preferred the rambling and muttering from before over this quietness.

The glow of Corin's mating marks suddenly dimmed when he jerked upright on the base of his tail and whipped the tip around. The loss of his touch had me focusing on the wrong thing at first, but then I caught the way he was tensely staring into the woods. "I think it's a Rakworm," he murmured. "I need to check it out. Stay with Reid. Shout if you see anything moving." Then he pulled his knives and hurried down the hill without a backward glance.

Chapter 16

Min-Ji

The silence that hung in the woods was unnerving. I thought I would hear it if Corin found a Rakworm and fought with it, and I tried hard not to picture what that might look like: a giant, hungry snake with a maw big enough to swallow even Corin versus my silvery-blue Naga. I already thought the Naga were really big, but the Rakworm were supposed to be bigger.

I didn't hear the sounds of the usual woodland critters of this planet; it was that quiet. All I could pick up was the sound of the wind as it ruffled the purple and gray leaves of the trees. When Reid made an awful grunting noise, it sounded as loud as a gunshot to my nerves. I nearly jumped out of my skin before I managed to get my pounding heart under control.

It was instinct to reach out to the sick man with a hand to try to calm him. I pressed my fingers to his shoulder and spoke soothingly. "Hey, it's okay. You're going to get better. We'll take care of you." It didn't look like he heard me; his head twisted against the furs, and his jaw grew tight. So tight that I started to worry he might break his teeth—I could hear a grinding noise.

Worry filled me. First for Corin and his confrontation with a beast that seemed bigger and bigger in my mind the more I thought about it, and second for Reid, who was

trembling and twisting, his entire body growing tight. I feared he was about to have a heart attack, and I couldn't help him. Nobody could help him except those Shamans, but we were still a few hours out. Help wasn't going to come to us.

I reached for Corin's backpack and located the healing device, but it was too big for my hand, and there were no buttons. I knew that Cosima had used one and had described how it had shrunk around her hand to fit, but it didn't do that. If there was some secret switch I had to flick, I couldn't find it.

As suddenly as Reid had started to twist and turn, moving like he was under immense strain, it eased up. He blinked open his eyes, and I was staring into a pair of bloodshot, brown orbs. He blinked furiously, then went slack against the furs. "Min-Ji?" he murmured as he tilted his head to look around. "Where the fuck are we?"

He sounded completely lucid, and he looked out of his eyes in a way that made me think he was rapidly assessing his situation—from the way he'd been restrained against the furs tied to the weird pole sled thing, to the unfamiliar woods he was in. "Not in the caves beneath Ahoshaga," I said carefully. I didn't like how loud our voices seemed in the unnatural quiet that filled the woods. "You got really sick. We're taking you to see a Shaman, or maybe several."

"We?" Reid asked. "How bad is it?" Yeah, he was definitely more himself again. That was the Reid I knew, always frank and blunt, but usually kind. Now wasn't any different. He took one look at the healing device I was still holding and nodded. "Corin, huh? Are you okay?" I felt heat steal up my cheeks at the question. Did everyone at Haven know about my crush on him?

"Reid, I just told you that you're sick. And that's what you ask me?" I deflected with a headshake. "I'm fine. Corin's checking on some Rakworms, but he should be back soon. We'll be at the Sacred Training Grounds in no time at all." At least, that's what I hoped. Corin was taking a long time, and I still hadn't heard anything that sounded

like fighting. It was hard not to picture him in trouble when I'd made the Rakworm out to be a really big, creepy monster in my mind.

"Nothing I can do about that, can I?" Reid said, sounding shockingly casual about his health, his possible impending demise. Maybe I hadn't been clear enough to him, but he was a smart man. He wouldn't assume we were going somewhere special for a case of the flu. No, the way he shrugged a shoulder and didn't even comment about how he was tied down told me he knew it was serious, but he didn't care.

"Corin's got a tender heart," Reid said next, confirming my suspicions. "Promise me you'll take good care of him. He deserves a mate like the others. Once he stops running away, he'll see you. He'll need you." On the heels of that statement, he started to cough, a sound I hadn't heard him make before. Flecks of blood flew from his mouth, but he didn't seem to notice, his eyes focusing on something far away.

I hurried to dab it from his lips; that wasn't good, that wasn't good at all. Where was Corin? I turned to look around, searching for the telltale glitter of his silver scales, a hint of blue among the lavender leaves. A fist suddenly closed around my wrist, tight as a vise and growing tighter. Reid had slipped his hand from beneath the furs at his hip and managed to grab me, but it wasn't the lucid, coherent man I was dealing with now.

Something dark and feverish glittered in his brown eyes, and his mouth pulled into an angry snarl. "You're UAR," he growled, squeezing my wrist so tightly that it felt like the bones might snap beneath the stress. "What did you do? Why did you do this?" he demanded. He was delirious, the fever and the pain clouding his mind, even his understanding of where he was. But he recognized me; he knew who I was—that much was obvious.

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“You can’t be trusted. I have to warn the others,” Reid continued, and he coughed again. His fist released my arm, slipping limply away as his strength abandoned him. He was back in the past, in the days right after we’d crashed on Serant. And then his words placed him even further back in time, back to before he’d been court-martialed and fake executed. “The spies are everywhere. We must kill them. Trust no one... Trust no one.”

He slipped into a slumber after that, his eyes flicking beneath his eyelids as he dreamed of the past. I didn’t move, remaining at his side on my knees, and that’s how Corin found me.

Corin

“You can’t come with me,” I muttered to Triff, but the little bot rushed after me anyway. It seemed like neither of my companions knew how to obey a direct order anymore. I hadn’t fooled myself into thinking that Min-Ji ever would. That’s what I loved about her anyway. But Triff? The bot struggled on the grass, but at least it was no longer wet, and he wasn’t at risk of sinking into a bog.

“I’m off to hunt a Rakworm, you idiot,” I said to the bot, but I knew he was just going to beep merrily and ignore what I said. “What if it eats you?” On second thought, if the Rakworm tried, Triff would probably come out victorious. He’d be hard to digest. “Shouldn’t you watch my mate? Guard her? That’s what the Sleara do. Can’t you do that?” Buzz and Kiwi, the little pet dragons, followed their females everywhere. If Triff could do that, things would be easier...

When the bot stubbornly kept up with me, I gave in and snatched him up so I could pick up the pace. I'd heard the beast to our left, its low hiss drawing my attention. It was a sound too low for Min-Ji's ears to pick up, but she might have felt it as a chill up her spine. I only wanted to check that the Rakworm wasn't hunting us, to make sure we were safe. I had no intention of fighting the giant snake unless I had to.

I spotted its black scales when I reached a vantage point and managed to look down into the nearest bog. The worm had felled a Vakarsa, a great six-legged herd animal that made for excellent fur and food. That explained the unnatural silence: the fight had spooked all the nearby animals. Once it had fed, it wouldn't be hungry for weeks; this beast was no threat.

"Let's get back," I said to Triff, and the cleaning bot beeped his agreement. As the biggest predator in the area, the Rakworm didn't even respond to our noise. Only a dragon might be a danger to it, and those hardly ever left their desert.

Something was different when I returned to the hill where I'd left my mate and Reid. She had her back to me as I approached, but her shoulders were shaking. Then I heard a soft snuffle, followed by a shuddering sigh; she was crying. Abandoning all caution, I dropped Triff from my tail and hurried to her side. "What happened? What's going on? Are you hurt?"

I ignored the indignant squeak the bot made and picked my mate up to inspect her, frantically searching for any sign of injury. Her wrist bore an angry red band, with several indentations indicating fingers had gripped her. I raised her limb with a hiss. "Who did this?" The answer was obvious, but it didn't make any sense; Reid would never harm a female.

She shook her head as if she didn't want to answer, and I growled, turning my gaze to the passed-out male. He was sleeping peacefully, his chest rising and falling, his heartbeat steady, and it seemed even his temperature had improved. I didn't want to

give myself false hope, but it seemed he was getting better. And then I noticed the blood on his lips.

Turning to Min-Ji, I determined that her tears weren't for her sore wrist but for Reid. She thought he was dying, and she might not be wrong. I twisted my tail around her, hugging her tight as I located my healing device and pulled it onto my fingers. "He grabbed you. Did he break the bone? Let me see, sweetheart. Let me take care of you."

She did not answer me, but her fragile bone hadn't snapped. There were some hairline fractures and a lot of bruising, all of which the device could heal if I focused. "What are we going to do? We have to hurry!" she wailed. "We can't lose our friend."

"We're not going to," I said firmly, cupping her chin and lifting her face to mine. Her eyes were red-rimmed and watery, and I lifted the healing device to her face, easing the sting there. "He will survive." She tried to smile—like she often smiled through whatever turmoil she was feeling—but it wasn't working this time. When she leaned in and pressed her head to my chest, I felt a surge of power arc through me. She made me feel powerful when she trusted me like that, when she wanted my comfort.

I held her tight, rocking her gently while I ran the healing device over her back, just to make sure I hadn't missed anything. She was fine, but it didn't feel like she was fine when she was crying tears against my scales. I turned the device to Reid, hoping I could give her better news, but I didn't hold out much hope.

My handheld healing device couldn't make a noise like most relics did when something was wrong. It was a device that seemed to work entirely by instinct and intuition, simply knowing things, and this time I knew that something was off in a way I'd never encountered before. Reid's vitals were good, better than before. His organs were no longer under such tremendous stress that they were on the verge of

failing. And it wasn't blood on his lips.

I didn't want to let go of my mate, so I tossed the healing device aside and touched a finger to the male's mouth to draw some of the red specks onto my scales. When I raised the smear to my face, I knew, even before I flicked out my tongue to better draw in the scent. "This is metal decay. What did you call it? Rust?"

"Rust?" Min-Ji sniffled through her tears, utterly confused. When I nodded, she flung her arm around my neck to steady herself and leaned close to peer at the flecks that dotted my fingertip and claw. "Oh my God, you're right! How can this be rust?" Her fingers dug into my scales near my shoulder, pinching a tiny bit, and I relished the feeling. It meant she was snapping out of her sadness.

"Blood looks very similar," I said cautiously, though I knew I was right. "But Artek and I both agreed on our assessment. He has some kind of tiny metal specks inside his body—two kinds, one foreign and one that was already there—and they are battling and multiplying. That's what's been killing him, but right now, I think one side has won, and it's giving his body a reprieve." It was still not right. All my instincts told me he was dying, but it wasn't happening as fast as before, and that was good. It meant that instead of having to push ourselves to reach the Shamans tonight, we could make camp and continue the rest of the way tomorrow.

"That sounds like..." Min-Ji hesitated. "I can't believe Kalani was right about this. Reid must have nanobots in his system, and that's what's been making him stronger and faster. That gas introduced another set of them, I bet! And because he was the only one who already had nanobots, it's messed him up." She got more and more excited as she talked, and I found myself smiling at her. The glow was back in her cheeks. She knew about this stuff more than Artek and I did in some ways, and I was relieved to discover that Reid's situation was starting to make sense. We would save him.

I leaned down and pressed my mouth to hers, lingering long and slow against her softness. I wanted to stay here with her for as long as we could. She was right about so many things, but mostly, she was right that it was time to face our future head-on. I wasn't the same person I'd been the last time I'd dealt with the Thunder Rock Queen. She wasn't the same either, and I wasn't alone.

“Corin,” Min-Ji sighed when I dug my claws into her silky, black hair and held her tighter. “Corin, please...” I knew what she was asking, what she was saying with that single word. Please have me, please love me, please don't turn me away. It was an answering chorus to the words that sang in my heart.

With a sigh, I gave in.

Chapter 17

Min-Ji

We were so close to the Shaman's camp, and the Queen who had been throwing a wrench into our mating bond without even knowing it. It was not the moment I expected Corin to surrender to us, but he was. His kiss said it all—sure, demanding, but slow at the same time. He wasn't rushing this, and he was definitely staking a claim.

“I thought you were hurt,” he growled against my cheek when he started nibbling a path along my jaw. “You were hurt. You can't get hurt, Min-Ji. I can't... You should only feel pleasure, never pain...” We were moving, but I didn't pay attention to that, my focus entirely on the sensations he was drawing from my body with the touch of his mouth, his tongue, and the gentle scrape of his razor-sharp fangs.

The brush of his dark blue hair against my temple, the roughness of his scales beneath my fingers, and the warmth of his body surrounding me. We were horizontal; I didn't

remember how we got there, just that I was in his tail, against furs and grass. The clouds were extra fluffy and violet above my head, visible through the branches and amethyst leaves.

I forgot where we were when he lifted his head, quicksilver eyes burning with passion. “I can’t breathe if I think about losing you,” he said. “Ineedyou, Min-Ji. It’s time I admit that. I need you more than I need air.” And then he stole mine, his mouth claiming my lips, tongues tangling as he took my breath away.

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:17 am

The Naga didn't use the word "love" for their partner, they only talked of it when it came to their young. But I knew that's what he was saying—that he felt love, a passionate, fated-mate kind of love, for me. I curled my fingers in his hair to hold him close, to keep him from ending this moment. "I love you too, Corin," I said against his lips.

He shuddered, his muscles trembling as he braced himself on one arm next to my head. The silver glow of his mating marks, the sigils, they burned brighter, savagely. His hand came down to the front of my shirt, claws slashing through the thin, worn fabric like it was tissue paper. My belly clenched in anticipation of what was next, and I wasn't disappointed.

I felt his tail wind around my legs, coiling with gentle pressure, owning me, while his hands worked to pull the remains of my shirt from my body. My bra had seen better days at this point; I'd even been forced to repair one strap with a leather string, but the way his eyes glowed made me feel like I was wearing the sexiest of lingerie. He was careful as he hooked a claw beneath the left strap and began to slide it down my shoulder. "Take this off."

A command I was very willing to obey; it was an awkward shimmy to unhook the front clasp and shrug out of it. He didn't back away to give me any space, like he couldn't stand to create any kind of distance. The feeling of his scales against my belly reminded me of our differences, and it only stoked the fire.

With my breasts bare to his eyes, things felt different too. The last time we'd done this dance, it had been in the dark, and I hadn't been able to see his expressions. His eyes focused on my nipples, honing in like a predator. His tongue flicked out, the split tip

tasting the air, tasting my desire for him. Then he tasted me, the long, agile muscle curling around one hard peak. Pleasure lanced through my belly, my passage clenching in response, and a moan slipped from my mouth. The sound was loud, wanton, and it made him growl.

“Yessss,” he hissed, feral and wild. “Give me your sounds, my mate.” He lapped at my left breast and curled his fist around the right. I felt the tips of his claws against my sensitive flesh, pressure with a hint of danger, and all the lovely roughness of the fine scales that covered his palm. My spine arched as I sought more contact, more pressure. My legs twisted in the tight grip of his tail, seeking contact at the neediest part of me. When his tail wound tighter, it squeezed my thighs together and placed a lovely pressure on my clit.

I saw stars when he sucked my nipple into his mouth, his fangs pricking the slope of my breast without breaking the skin. The pleasure he promised me was already spiraling, my crest coming tantalizingly close, and I wasn’t even naked. He hadn’t touched me below the waist, but that didn’t seem to matter. It was coming like an avalanche. I shouted his name as he sucked harder, and I shattered for him as he ordered me to come. “Now, mate!”

My breathing was fast, like I’d run a marathon, but Corin was a steady anchor as he helped me come down. His arms wrapped around me, holding me tight, my naked chest pressed against his scales. I could feel the gentle hum of the metal disk on the cord around his neck. He rolled us as he hugged me, and a hug from a Naga was the most amazing, full-body experience. I wanted to stay in his arms forever, and I wanted him to claim me with the cock I felt pressed against my thighs at the same time. If only he’d let me shift my leg, but his coils held me fast.

I felt a first hint of disappointment; was it going to be this and nothing more? But his mating sigils were burning so bright, and his words had been so heartfelt... “Like this,” he said, his voice rough with his desire, and his hips bucked against me,

pressing his hard length against me. It made him shudder. "I want you like this," he repeated, and he rolled us again. Now I was draped over him and he was on his back, and when his coils started to ease from around me, releasing me, I felt like he was handing me the reins.

My eyes locked with his, and I searched his gaze for any sign of what he wanted. There was so much need in his gaze, and he wasn't holding back, but he was making this my choice. Because he was asking me to risk my life by becoming his, and he didn't want to make that choice for me. Well, there never really was a choice anyway, was there? This had been as inevitable as the tides, as true as the purple sun rising and setting over Serant.

He'd released me, but he was offering me everything I wanted if I reached out and took it. His body was mine as he sprawled on the furs beneath me, his arms open, his gaze filled with his need for me. Sitting up on my knees, I tried to get a handle on my feelings and the situation. We were on the hill in the woods, alone in many ways but exposed at the same time. We were lower on the slope than I'd remembered; the edge of Reid's furs was only just visible beside the tree. Corin must have moved us when he'd been distracting me with his clever mouth.

There were supposed to be Rakworms out there, but Corin had come back, and he'd started this. That had to mean it was safe. I lifted my chin to gaze in the direction of the Sacred Training Grounds, wondering if it was selfish to delay going there when Reid needed help. Then I glanced back at Corin, lying in the sun, waiting for me like I'd always dreamed.

I licked my suddenly dry lips and recalled that Reid was stable right now, doing better than before. That's what Corin said, and I knew he'd never risk anyone's life; he was too responsible to do that. That meant the only thing holding me back was me, and I wasn't going to stand in the way of this. Not a chance.

Climbing to unsteady feet, I lowered my hands to slide my pants down my hips. My UAR uniform had seen better days by now, but it had seemed like the best outfit for a rescue mission—sturdy, sensible, and suited to wear the holster for my laser pistol. I hadn't worn it from the moment I'd managed to cobble something together from leather and furs supplied to me, because I hadn't wanted to remind anyone of the crash and my role in it. But I liked how Corin's eyes clung to my ass as I started to slide the pants down, and then they fixated on my core, and his tongue flicked out, tasting me in the air.

I kicked off my boots, then the pants, and stood there watching him. I was always tiny next to the giant Naga hunters, and even sprawled on the ground, Corin managed to make me feel that way. His long body lay in several loops along the furs and soft grass. Every scale glimmered with a hint of the purple sunlight, a mix of silver, blue and Serant.

His cock rose proudly from his groin, the tips glistening with wetness, curled tightly together. Under my gaze, they parted, two firm but very agile fingers. The rest of his length was thick and veined, with glowing slashes curling around him that seemed thicker, texturing him. I remembered what it had felt like to hold him, and the way his marks curled along his length gave him a ribbed texture.

Taking a step toward him felt like I'd just crossed a country in a single leap; it felt monumental. Then I stepped over his hip and sank to my knees on top of his tail, just below his jutting cock. Any fanciful thoughts went out the window. Who cared about how big this was, relationship-wise, when you were staring at a cock that pretty? I drew my fingers up his length and was rewarded with a hiss and a flare of light along his mating marks.

I'd learned how this felt last time, but I still marveled when I couldn't close my fingers around his thickness. He also felt smoother than expected, given the fine texture of his scales. My hand slid up and down his cock easily, feeling each ridge

and bump of the veins and the glowing marks that covered him. When I reached the bifurcated tip, the split end curled toward my fingers, clinging, grabbing. I felt a gush of wetness in reaction to that firm grip of his odd cockhead, my mind already trying to imagine what it would feel like.

Corin had left it up to me to approach, but he wasn't going to patiently lie there for long. Was I brave enough to take him? To be that bold? When I lifted onto my knees, he hissed, and I heard the whisper of his scales as they shivered along his spine. His tail curled, and then it pushed against my ass, urging me forward. I grinned because I'd known he'd do that, and then my grin turned into a shaky moan.

His cock brushed against my folds, the tips writhing, slippery and hot. They stroked my clit with unerring accuracy, but Corin was a smart man; he remembered what he'd learned last time. "That's it," he hissed. "That's what we need. Do it, Min-Ji. No more fear." I jerked up my chin, abandoning the sight of his silvery cock as it slicked against my core. My eyes locked on his face, and I felt we were making a promise without words.

With a little push of his tail, I was higher and I nearly tumbled forward, but he hooked the tip around my waist and held me tight, balanced above him. Open for his impalement. "Yes," I said to him, "Now." That was all either of us needed. I sank down, lowering my hips to his; his tail as my guide. I felt the tips of his cock slide into my opening first; they were narrow and easy to take. It made everything in me tingle and tense as pleasure burned through my veins.

Then came the shaft, much thicker than the dual heads. It burned as it stretched me, but that hint of pain was nothing compared to the pleasure. His tips stroked my walls, easily finding the sensitive nerves and setting them ablaze. With a hand, he reached out to touch my clit, his thumb strumming the little bundle with agonizingly tender strokes.

I sank a little further onto him with each shudder and moan, each fanning of the flames. I thought I must have taken all of him by now. I felt so full, but when I looked down, I saw I'd taken only half of him. There was no way more could fit, but Corin wasn't satisfied. He bucked his hips beneath me, driving up, and like magic, more of him disappeared inside of me. I shook my head, not because I was fighting this, but out of disbelief.

"You are mine," he growled, "And you'll take all of me." I wanted that. It's all I ever wanted, but my body wasn't convinced it was possible. Or maybe it was my brain that was struggling to catch up with reality. My body had gone soft around him like I was melting for his invasion. Each pump of his hips brought us closer, and each thrum of his thumb against my clit brought me further to the edge.

He slid the tip of his tail around my hip, squeezing my ass as he pushed us closer. My orgasm broke with a shout as his hips came up and mine came down with a fierce push. That was it, all of him, and my muscles gripped and squeezed, milking him with every spasm of my core.

When I drew in a deep breath and forced open my eyes, it was to discover that now I was the one on the bottom, pinned to the furs, and my Naga over me, holding me. Everything in his expression was savage, possessive. This was tying us together in so many ways, and with each thrust of his hips, he fucked me like he owned me. He did, heart and soul, and now I knew I owned him too.

Corin

I knew I'd been an idiot for staying away like I had when my mate fearlessly finished undressing herself. She was braver than I was when she straddled me and made her choice. What we had was worth fighting for, and I was going to show her that.

Nothing could stop me from keeping her now—not fear, and certainly not a stupid Queen.

Only one female could stake her claim on me, and she had from the start. When she came around me, I felt like I'd shattered to pieces and reshaped as a new male, her male. It stopped being about her pleasure then and became ours. I'd tried to rein in my instincts, to hold back so this could be all hers, but they took over then. I pinned her, my mouth found her neck, and though I didn't mean to bite her sensitive skin, my fangs nicked her shoulder anyway as I rutted against her with helpless abandon.

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“Ah, Corin,” she moaned, all soft and welcoming, her body taking every inch of me and then some. She did not fight as my tail restrained her; she did not claw or bite back. Or maybe she did, but her blunt little nails felt only like pleasure against my tough scales. My seed erupted with a growl that rocked me, a deep wrenching of pleasure as it spurted from the tips and coated her womb.

She was so tiny beneath me, and she took every drop, every bit of me as it spilled like a river. And she bucked beneath me, clutching at me as it filled her with the same pleasure that had wrecked me. My beautiful, clever little mate was utter perfection as I watched the bliss on her face. It was a temptation I didn’t want to resist, to kiss her upturned mouth and tangle her tongue with mine as our bodies had entwined.

Chapter 18

Min-Ji

I was not the same person I was yesterday; I concluded when I woke up that morning. The entire world had shifted when Corin and I had made love, and that really was as cliché as it sounded in my head, but it was the truth. I felt different, stronger, and filled with happiness that just kept making my face fall into a smile.

Corin lay curled against my back, his tail twined around my legs, and his arm thrown over my middle to hug me tight. He was still asleep, I could tell from the slow way he breathed, and his sigils weren’t glowing. They weren’t glowing because we’d mated. Now they’d only glow if he felt intensely, or if he wanted them to. I felt immensely satisfied knowing that.

Then I realized that it would make it easier, in a way, to hide our mating bond from the Thunder Rock Queen. An accidental touch wouldn't give us away. Was that Corin's plan? Is that why he'd given in yesterday afternoon? I didn't think so, but a hint of doubt settled in my belly. I tried to tell myself that it didn't matter, because even if we had to hide it, that was better than not having him at all.

Triff's soft beep made me push away the thoughts and focus on the present. The little bot was sitting right in front of my face, a little lopsided as he leaned against a rock to keep his balance on the side of the hill we were sleeping on. Last night, we had shared food, and then Corin had set up a proper camp with a campfire to keep Reid warm. We'd moved to the other side of the hill for more privacy and left Triff to guard the sick human. "Oh, is something wrong with Reid?" I asked, worried when I realized that Triff shouldn't be here, but back with the patient he was supposed to guard.

"No," Corin muttered. "He's just lonely. Can't blame him. I'd miss you too after a whole night without you..." His arms tightened around my middle, and he buried his nose against my neck. It made my toes curl, and his words made my heart sing. Who knew my mate had poetic words like that hidden all this time? Maybe I should be less surprised, considering how he made love.

After we'd made our camp and hidden away in the furs on our side of the hill, he'd made me see stars so many times—with his tongue, with his hands and tail, definitely with his cock. I was still feeling the stretch, a little soreness, and it made me feel all warm inside each time my body twinged to remind me.

It was more than the mind-blowing sex, though, because it meant our bond was official now. He'd accepted that we should be together, that staying away was the wrong choice. Now I just had to have faith that we'd manage that stupid Queen somehow. That he wouldn't go back to pretending we were nothing as soon as we saw her. That might be the smart thing to do, but I knew it would hurt, irrational as

that was.

There were other things to worry about right now anyway, like how quiet Corin was, and how obvious it was that he didn't want to get up. That wasn't like him, because Reid needed us to get our asses in gear and take him to the Sacred Training Grounds. It could only mean that Corin was having a difficult time facing that place, but he'd feel guilty if our dawdling harmed our friend.

"I know you were meant to train there, and that it was the Queen who put a stop to your training. Is that why you're struggling to go back?" I asked him, and then I winced because that was way too blunt. I should have brought that up in a gentler fashion, but honestly, I wasn't as tactful as Vera or Cosima.

At least Corin huffed against my hair with what was clearly a smothered kind of laugh. He didn't mind, whew... It was still hard to figure out what he was thinking, and now it might get even harder. His scales didn't glow, even though he was touching me. That just meant we'd 'consummated' our bond, but it made my stomach swoop with nerves each time I noticed.

"It's not that I hate the idea of going back there, it's just... Even with Artek's blessing, I am misusing my invitation for training to help Reid. They will withdraw it once we leave, and that will feel final." That made sense. Once he no longer could return to the Sacred Training Grounds, it meant he was officially never going to be a Shaman. It was the end of a dream he'd had since he was a little boy.

"I'm not a natural healer, but I love everything about working with the relics, the machines our ancestors left behind. I feel like I've been fumbling in the dark for so long, trying to learn on my own. And now I'll never get the chance to become really good at it, for it to mean something." His heartfelt words sounded forlorn, and it made Triff beep sadly in response.

I twisted in Corin's arms so I could see his eyes when I spoke to him, so he could see that I meant what I said. "You are good enough. You know that, right? Without you, Haven wouldn't run the way it does. Without you, we wouldn't have power or running water. You did that. You might not be a Shaman, but you have so many skills! And they'd be idiots if they didn't see that. I know Zathar does. I know all the girls appreciate what you do. Seriously." Thanks to him, we had plumbing instead of having to go outside to do our business on a freaking latrine. We counted our blessings every freaking day.

His mouth curled into a soft smile, and he made me forget all about this heavy conversation by kissing me. That was on purpose, the distraction, but I was willing to let him. With our mating now official, I hoped to have plenty of time to help him see that being a true Shaman wasn't the only way he could prove that he had the skills. I knew he did. He was the only one who kept Haven running; he was vital to our home.

When we reluctantly left the furs a little while later to pack up our camp, Corin surprised me by returning to the subject. He hovered at Reid's side, looking down at the sleeping man with a dark expression. "If I were a Shaman," he said as he gestured at the furs and the wan-looking soldier, "we might not even be here. We would have been able to heal him at Haven."

"We?" I said. "You mean you and Artek, who is a Shaman, and didn't have the answers? Corin, you don't have to do everything yourself. That doesn't make you any less." I stepped over his looped tail to curl my arms around his waist and hugged him tight around his washboard abs. "Stop thinking you're lesser because you didn't get to finish the Shaman training. You are enough."

I heard Triff beep fiercely from near my feet, and then there was the sound of his cleaning disks spinning and whirring. When I peeked, the little bot was polishing the nearest coil of Corin's tail, and I smirked when I noticed that my mate didn't move out of the way. I knew he liked it.

We got on our way shortly afterward, trudging down our cozy hill with Reid asleep on the sled. Triff struggled to keep up when the terrain got more woodsy, with leaves and branches littering the mossy ground. Corin picked him up with his tail without comment and tucked him onto the sled near Reid's feet so the bot could look out behind us.

Then we picked up the pace, and any talk became a bit of a struggle, even though I was in decent shape. My breathing sped up, and a stitch started to form in my side, along with a burning in my thighs. I hoped we didn't have to keep this up for hours, because with how little rest I'd gotten last night, I'd need a break soon.

The trees broke apart so suddenly that I tripped over my feet in surprise. Corin's tail whipped out and caught me around the waist, holding me up before I could make a total fool of myself and faceplant right there in the dirt. I didn't even bother to get my feet back under me, simply hanging there in the snug, scaly loop and staring.

I didn't know what I'd expected the Training Grounds to look like, but it wasn't this. I should have expected it, though, because I'd been told they moved around to keep their location hidden. How else were they going to move? Why, flying ships, of course. I couldn't believe I hadn't made that connection, but there they were, a dozen distinctly serpentine-looking ships parked in a circle on a massive clearing.

Several were big ones, many much smaller. With my expert eye, I could classify them as short-range transports, not capable of exiting the atmosphere, and several larger cargo vessels. One was definitely some kind of cruiser with weaponry, and a similarly sized ship had to be a medical vessel or maybe a research vessel.

Their engines might be strong enough to leave the planet, but it wasn't a risk I'd be willing to take, considering the weird pull this planet had exhibited on my shuttle when we crashed here. Not to mention that I'd heard of more ships crashing on Serant since our arrival, without survivors. Maybe Reid would want to leave if he could, but

I doubted that any of the other humans had any desire to. They had mates. Charlie, Vera, and now Naomi were all pregnant... and they were presumed dead anyway. I didn't even have to think about whether I wanted to try to leave Serant. That answer was obvious. It was still a huge shock to discover functioning ships existed.

The smaller parked vessels had tents set up against their sides, some open-sided, others closed. They were colorful, with their purple hides, often painted with pretty geometric or serpentine designs. At the center of the parked ships, a large tent had been set up which housed some sort of seating area, complete with benches and a floating viewscreen. At least a dozen Naga younglings were industriously at work, with their colorful heads bent over their desks. And they were colorful: pink, purple, yellow, green, and blue. I saw scales in colors I hadn't even realized might exist—proof that there were Naga Clans that my friends back at Haven had probably never even heard of.

Their teacher was a Naga with a shimmering black hide, glittering with a sprinkling of gold and green flecks. He stood in front of the classroom and indicated things on the screen, his back to us. Ah, no, it was a woman—a Naga female. My breath faltered as I saw her in profile, her sleek breasts hidden beneath a fall of pale pink silk and dozens of glittering gold and silver necklaces.

"I see that Avrish is still teaching," Corin murmured, a hushed quality to his voice. His tail planted me more firmly on the ground, and I hurriedly stood up so he could have his appendage back. Nobody had seen us yet, as if there were no guards about or perimeter alerts, which was surprising given the wilds that surrounded it. There had been Rakworm sightings; shouldn't someone be watching for them?

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The little classroom of kids and the Naga female weren't the only Naga out and about. I saw two white-haired Naga in front of a shuttle with a tent. They sat on pillows and played a game with stones on a cloth gaming board. Another group huddled around an outdoor table, all as colorful as their students and decked out in so many different styles of dress.

The ones I was looking for were nowhere to be found, though: the Queen and her daughter, Sazzie. They should be in this camp, unless we'd just missed them. A girl could hope, but I doubted we'd be that lucky; they had to be inside one of the ships.

"I didn't know there were female Shamans..." I whispered, a bit scared to be the one to draw attention to us. Corin kept his voice hushed too, and he still wasn't moving. We hovered on the edge of the camp, looking in but not crossing the boundary to enter. Maybe Corin knew exactly where the perimeter was that would get us noticed; it wouldn't surprise me.

"They are rare, and often they remain as teachers. Avrish was very kind to me when I was here as a youngling. She's..." He hesitated, his silver eyes flicking from the Naga female, who was talking with expansive hand gestures, to me. "She's not like a normal Naga female. And don't comment on her lack of a horn." He tapped the ivory horn that jutted from his chin in a sharp point. "She's sensitive about it."

It was a soft moan from Reid that spurred us into motion. We left the shade of the trees and started crossing the short, purple moss that covered the clearing between a larger cargo ship and a small shuttle without an attached tent. As we walked, Corin softly pointed out things I could see. "That's a storage ship. It houses supplies and can only be accessed by those with authorization: the head cook, the elders."

He nodded toward the smaller shuttle. “I think that’s Altare’s home. He likes his privacy, so he always parks on the edge of the grounds.” He recognized more of the small ships and spoke of them in wistful tones. Even if he hadn’t stayed here long, it was clear that he’d felt at home in this place.

When we reached the edge of the inner circle, our welcoming committee came from around the side of one of the bigger ships: three Naga males, each a different jewel color but all crowned with hair as white as snow. I realized that I’d never really seen an old Naga before. Everyone at Haven was young, in their prime. Aks was the oldest of us, and he was barely middle-aged, so it didn’t count. Naga didn’t get wrinkles, so to me, he looked the same as the younger males.

These Naga looked old, though, from their white hair to the diminished sheen of their scales. They weren’t as bulky either, having lost some of their muscle mass, either by lack of training or age. One had milky eyes that made me think he was blind, or maybe he had cataracts.

The blue one wore long, fluttery robes in dark blue that contrasted beautifully with his azure scales—a male once from Thunder Rock, perhaps. The one in the lead was a shimmering white, like Artek, while the third, blind one, was yellow with orange spots.

“Corin, you made good time. Artek informed us you would be visiting,” the blue elder said, spreading his arms wide in a welcoming gesture. He was smiling, and his eyes crinkled at the corners in a familiar way, like he smiled a lot, the way my mom’s eyes would crinkle when she laughed. Seeing that expression made me feel a bit of worry slide away. Maybe they weren’t going to revoke Corin’s right to be here when we were done.

“Shaman Chen,” Corin answered. He dipped his head respectfully, the way Naga males did to show submission, by jabbing their sharp horn toward their vulnerable

throats. Not stabbing themselves, but clearly showing that they could. “Yes, we hitched a ride on a Serqethos dragon. Please, could you look at my friend Reid? It might be conflicting nanobots?” He glanced quickly my way for confirmation, and I felt warm inside to realize that he’d taken my assessment that seriously.

“Of course, we will,” said the orange-and-yellow male with the white eyes. He sounded affronted at the suggestion that they might not care for a patient, and I saw how that made a smile flash across Corin’s face. When the Naga spun around and imperiously gestured for us to follow, we fell in behind the three elders as they led us to the ship I’d pegged as a medical vessel. It was no surprise to discover that I was right.

“Thank you, Shaman Erish,” Corin mumbled at the male’s orange-spotted back. That made the Shaman flick his yellow tail at Corin in a gesture that read, “Don’t worry about it.” I thought they’d talk more, say something about how Corin had brought humans to their Sacred Training Grounds, or demand to know who I was. Their focus seemed to be their new patient, guiding us into the brightly lit and beautifully maintained ship to a med bay decked out in advanced technology that went beyond even what the UAR was capable of.

I gaped and stared—I couldn’t help it. This went far beyond my expectations, and I’d already seen the med bay at Haven, which was already advanced and beautiful, kitted out beyond anything I’d seen aboard the Praetor or other battleships I’d been stationed on. This was even better. And it was also laid out like the one medical ship I’d been on during my time as a Space Marine. This was a ship made to serve as a flying hospital at a time of war... What that meant made my head hurt to think about. What had happened to Serant?

From roaming war machines that the locals called Revenants to what was essentially a doomsday prepper town in a remote mountain, and now the sight of a medical ship meant to service the front lines—something really bad had happened, but what? Was

the calamity that had struck this planet what had caused it to be a shipwreck magnet, or had that always been a trait of this planet?

We stepped into a brightly lit med bay after a few turns through silver corridors painted with serpentine, twisting lines. Inside, several more Naga waited, including a distinctly feminine shape lying on one of the nest-shaped medical cots. A medical arm hovered over her chest as it worked. Ah fuck, was that the Queen?

Chapter 19

Corin

I saw the Thunder Rock Queen before Min-Ji noticed her and worked hard to keep my body from tensing up. My focus had to be on Reid right now. I was no longer one of her subjects, and the Shamans here all knew that. They would not expect me to obey her every demand. She was asleep right now anyway; she could not see me.

Sazzie hovered beside the medical cot, her scarred front partially hidden behind the silk scarves and jewelry she wore. Her arms were crossed in a defensive, closed-off posture, and her dark blue eyes were narrowed in a sharp frown as she stared at her sleeping mother. If I had to guess, I'd say that Sazzie was not experiencing fond thoughts for the female who birthed her.

That was no surprise; most Naga females struggled to get along with their mothers, especially when the rivalries ran high, like they did when jockeying for the position of Queen. Could that expression mean that my Queen problem would resolve itself soon? If Sazzie killed her mother for the position...

I helped my former mentors lift the weak and unconscious Reid onto the medical nest furthest away from the Thunder Rock Queen. He was always surprisingly heavy when I lifted him, especially compared to my pretty mate. But lying on the cot, he

looked small, diminished compared to his usual powerful self—the male I knew, who could hold his own against a fully trained Naga warrior in his prime.

Then I moved back and watched the Shaman elders get to work, all three of them humming and hawing as they gathered around the nearest control unit and watched the readings come in as the machines scanned their patient. It was very tempting to move closer to my mate and curl her in a coil of my tail, but I settled for freeing Triff from the furs on the abandoned travois and setting him on the clean metal deck of the skyship.

I felt eyes on me, and when I looked up, I noticed that the two shamans working on the Queen were watching me—along with Sazzie. “Corin,” she said, her tone neutral. “I didn’t expect to see you here.” Her gaze flicked from me to Min-Ji, down to the humming and excitedly spinning Triff beside my tail, before finally locking on Reid. Her eyes grew wide in surprise, her jaw firming as she snapped her teeth together, then she turned, angling her back toward us as if she intended to ignore us.

“You are correct,” Shaman Chen announced as he turned away from the viewscreen and Reid’s first medical results. “Nanobots, two kinds. Astute as always.” He offered me a gentle smile, one like the hundreds I’d received as a youngling studying here. He’d always been easy with his praise, unlike some of the other teachers, but that didn’t make him soft. There was a hint of steel in his eyes when he spoke next. “Why don’t you properly introduce us?”

The hint of a reprimand made me straighten, my shoulders snapping back as I felt myself slipping into the role of the student I had been here as a child. It was also hard to curb the impulse to slip my tail around Min-Ji in a protective gesture, though I knew none of the Shamans here would ever harm her. If I did reach out and touch her, it wouldn’t be my sigils that gave her away as my mate, but it would give it away nonetheless. With Sazzie in the room, I could not risk it.

“This is Min-Ji,” I made myself say through a dry mouth and the tight feeling in my chest. This felt wrong. I didn’t like the words that spewed from my lips. I should be shouting it out loud, roaring it like a dragon, but instead, I introduced my mate as a human friend, nothing more. Then I introduced Reid in even fewer words, and I felt the desire to turn tail and slither out of here as fast as I could. It was Chen’s kind smile and Erish’s much sterner and piercing glance that twisted my insides. They knew; they always knew everything somehow. But how could they know?

“Hmm,” Erish said, flicking his yellow tip to the doorway. “Show our guest around, then grab some food. We’ll talk later after we’ve got this fellow sorted. It might be a while.” The dismissal was a relief, and I was quick to thank them and usher my mate and my cleaning bot out of the med bay and down the opened hatch. Breathing in the outside air felt better, and a soft breeze cooled my scales, but I still felt too hot.

“It will be okay,” Min-Ji said sweetly from next to me, and I darted a quick, grateful look at her. She was smiling. Of course she was, and she had one hand pressed to her breastbone. “Truly, that is the most advanced med bay I’ve ever seen. They are going to save him.” Ah, she didn’t realize why I was so troubled. She thought this was about Reid.

Casting a quick glance around, I made sure no one was watching before I reached up and tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear with the tip of my tail. “I know he’ll be all right. Reid is in good hands.” I didn’t explain to her what I’d been thinking, but she caught on anyway, the clever female that she was.

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“It was a shock to see her there, wasn’t it?” she spoke in something close to a whisper, as if she were afraid to draw attention to herself, or the subject. “But it will be all right. I don’t think they suspect anything.” She sounded wistful that time, a little sad, and I felt a spark of anger sizzle through my veins. I was causing that; she was causing that. It wasn’t right, but I felt powerless to change it.

“Come, I’ll introduce you to Avrish and the others. They’ll be excited to see their first human.” I was certain that Min-Ji would happily let herself get distracted by talk and company. She thrived under those circumstances, and she’d win the hearts of any old Shaman who lived here in no time. That wouldn’t hurt our cause, because even if the Queen was here for healing, I wouldn’t put it past her to stir up trouble while she was at it.

That suspicion was confirmed not much later when we sat down in the meal area with Avrish. Class had let out a few minutes ago, and the little Shamans-in-training had all gathered around Min-Ji to ask her a million questions. They couldn’t understand any of her answers, as they had no translator implants, but she understood theirs and was game enough to pantomime and gesture to make herself understood by the curious horde.

“She’s sweet,” Avrish commented as she sat down on the bench across from me with a bowl of steaming, fragrant stew. She pulled out her familiar Rakworm ivory spoon and started digging in, speaking with her mouth full and grinning with twinkling eyes as she did. It was on purpose, because she knew it irked me when people ate noisily. There was no sign of the strict but animated teacher from earlier; now, she slipped into her warm and teasing persona. The one I used to watch with awe as she teased cool Altare. She was treating me as an equal, an adult, not a student. It was a very

surreal experience, but one I got used to in a hurry.

“Good with the kids,” she added after an extra-loud slurping noise. When I failed to rise to the bait, she dropped the pretense and ate her next bite daintily. Avrish was dainty—except for her size compared to Min-Ji. Her face was delicate and as close to human in features as a Naga could get: no horn, tiny scales, delicate brows, and a plush mouth for smiling. “She’s your mate, right?”

I ripped my gaze from Min-Ji, who’d managed to draw the younglings into a game that involved a lot of clapping and hand-slapping. It was accompanied by loud peals of laughter, and more than one elder had come out of their home, slipping away from their research to watch with amusement.

“How did you know?” I asked, not bothering to deny the comment. I did not want to hide it from Avrish, and I knew the female would not betray my trust. She was the kindest Naga female in existence, but I was willing to admit to being a little biased on that front. Avrish had definitely been my first crush as a youngling, but I felt only fondness for her and those past feelings. My feelings for Min-Ji eclipsed anything I’d felt in the past.

“It’s in your eyes. I recognize that look,” my former teacher responded with a laugh. She was, as Altare had once gruffly explained to a baffled young Corin, a throwback to older genes. I still did not grasp the concept of ‘genes’ entirely, something I’d missed out on when I had failed to show up for more lessons the next year. But I understood enough to know that he meant Avrish was more like a Naga female from before the calamities. That was why she had no horns, and why she was kinder, softer, and lacked a will to battle her rivals.

“The Queen,” I said, instead of explaining the convoluted difficulties of my mating. “Why is she here?” I could not imagine that she’d admitted to any sign of weakness to the Thunder Rock Clan, especially to her rivals. So, if she was sick, she’d come

here under false pretenses.

“Officially?” Avrish queried, instantly understanding my real question. “To discuss the worry of disease brought here by the humans.” The Naga woman rolled her golden eyes as if she thought this idea was utterly preposterous, but it was not entirely untrue. If any of them had been sick, it could have been a threat. After months among us without any issues, though, that was unlikely. The other way around, like what had happened to Reid? That was a bigger concern and one that suddenly filled my mind with all kinds of horrific scenarios.

“Unofficially, she’s here because Artek discovered a mass in her chest cavity—her lungs, to be precise. He treated her, but it has come back, so he suggested she come here for further treatment.” Avrish snorted, and I knew it was because she thought that kind of subterfuge was stupid. A sign of weakness rather than strength. I agreed. If she were a good Queen, her people would want her to heal, not stab her in the back while she was down.

“I see,” I murmured. “And why did she bring Sazzie? I would think her daughter would be her biggest rival...” I really couldn’t see that. Sazzie was always a brawler, loud and vicious in her fights. I did not recall a single fight Zathar’s younger sister had ever lost. Then again, Zathar did say that Sazzie had been sympathetic to his mating with Vera. Maybe she wasn’t all bad...

“Oh? You didn’t hear? Sazzie publicly denounced any desire for the Thunder Rock throne. Apparently, her mother believes her.” I had not heard that, and it made very little sense to me, but it wasn’t going to be my problem. I had other things to worry about, like the Queen’s presence and keeping my mate safe, like making sure that Reid would get what he needed to heal.

I spoke with Avrish some more while we ate, but I made sure to keep a portion of food ready for Min-Ji so she could eat as soon as she tired of playing with the

younglings. I loved how kind she was when she managed to entice and shy one into play. A youngling in the middle of molting and rather unfortunately disfigured by the process. That was normal, but sometimes the subject of teasing by peers. Even with the language barrier, she made that kid feel at ease. That was her power, which was the complete opposite of me in that regard. I loved watching her in her element.

Triff was having fun too, in ways a robot should never be capable of. The Naga younglings here did not fear him, and they were far quicker to adapt to his quirks than I had been. A bunch of them were playing some kind of tag with the beeping bot as it let them chase it around the teaching and eating hub at the center of the camp.

It was probably one of the calmest, most enjoyable afternoons I'd had in a while. Watching my mate have fun, my pet robot play, and being surrounded by mentors who came and went to catch up with me, I felt... accepted, at home, and welcome. Nobody said anything about how I shouldn't be here or that I wasn't a Shaman. It was almost as if I was one of them. But they couldn't really see me that way, could they?

Then my beautiful Min-Ji derailed all my thoughts when, panting and smiling, she finally joined me at the table to eat some food. She was out of breath from a rousing game of chase, with smudges of dirt on her knees and elbows. There was even a smudge on her cheek. We didn't have kids at Haven, though that would soon change. I hadn't had a chance to see how good she was with them, but now I knew. My mate was the prettiest creature in existence—utterly perfect. My chest ached with how badly I wanted her.

Her hip brushed against my tail as she sat down and my sigils started to flare, a response more to the heavy emotions filling my chest than her actual touch. I reined them in with effort and hated that I needed to do that. “Hi,” she smiled at me. “Is this food for me?” Silently, I nudged the bowl I'd been guarding for her closer to her hands.

From the corner of my eye, I saw the hatch of the med bay skyship slide open, and my body went tight as a bowstring. Either the elders were finished with Reid and had come to bring us news, or it was the Thunder Rock Queen. I wasn't ready for this afternoon to be over, but suddenly, it was.

Chapter 20

Min-Ji

I had never wanted to reach out and crawl into Corin's lap as badly as I did right then. I held back because I knew that's what he wanted me to do, but it felt wrong. He'd looked so happy moments ago, relaxed in ways I hadn't ever seen him. Now, he was sitting ramrod straight, his scales whispering as they rattled along his spine with his unease.

I didn't have to guess to know what had set this off: the Queen. Though my instincts shouted at me to reach out and touch him, to offer him silent support, I scooted away instead. My chest felt heavy as I did, and I felt tiny under the gaze of the pretty Naga teacher. Her golden eyes felt disapproving, like I'd done the wrong thing. I knew that; it felt wrong to me, too.

The two Thunder Rock Naga women paused on the gangplank as they exited the medical ship and gazed out over the camp. The younger female had so many scars all over her arms and chest that I wondered if she'd been in a paper shredder. She looked fierce, proud, and utterly fearless. But it was the Queen herself who struck fear inside my chest. Her face was pulled into the most vicious snarl I'd ever seen, and I felt tiny as a bug when her gaze landed on me—like dirt beneath her tail when she started to approach.

The Thunder Rock Queen was big and imposing, wider across the shoulders than her daughter, and definitely much stockier than Avrish. She looked like she could squash

my head in her fist like a grape; her expression said she was planning to do it too. Corin rose and moved between me and the approaching thundercloud, his fists balled at his sides. My heart went out to him, knowing how that woman had altered the course of his life. She had held power over him that she had not deserved and had mistreated in the worst way.

Corin looked angry rather than afraid, and that anger struck a chord inside me. Yeah, that was the right response. Screw her! She had no right to this. When she opened her mouth and spewed her vile words, it only stoked the flames.

“Why are there humans here? I came here to warn you of their threat! I want them removed or isolated!” she shouted and flung out a claw to point my way. “Don’t just stand there, protecting that vermin, Corin. Remove her.” It was as if the direct order made him snap, jerking him out of his silent, simmering rage and bringing all that anger fully to the surface—years of bottled-up rage against her mistreatment, resentment over what she’d made him lose. But it wasn’t any of that he expressed.

“Do NOT talk to my mate that way, Asizza!” Corin growled in the deadliest, most bone-rattling sound I’d ever heard him make. His tail snapped out and curled around my middle, sigils flaring brightly to life for everyone to see. My stomach swooped, my anger vanishing like snow before the sun from the shock of this rapid turn of events. Never in my wildest dreams had I expected Corin to declare me his this loudly, and in front of the person he feared the most.

The Queen responded with an outraged yowling sound, her claws raising as she lurched forward. I thought she was going to attack me, but she reined herself in at the last moment, halting a dozen feet away from Corin, fire spitting from her eyes and her chest heaving. The angry Queen didn’t get quite the response she was looking for.

Behind me, Avrish ushered the young Naga away, helped by Altare, whom I hadn’t even realized was present. When he curled his tail around hers just as they ducked

with their students into the nearest shuttle, his sigils lit up. That left us without the prying ears of children, but dozens of adults had slithered out from their traveling homes and research labs to witness what was going on.

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On the gangplank of the medical ship, the three elders who had taken Reid into their care appeared. They lined up in a neat row, arms crossed, expressions stern. Even though I hadn't done anything wrong, I still felt called out. They had that stern headmaster thing going on right now, and it was almost instinct to go over and apologize. Of course, the Queen just glanced over her shoulder and then hissed with more anger; she wasn't intimidated.

"Mate?" the Queen hissed. "You mated that... creature?" It was completely quiet in the clearing. Nobody said anything; they just watched. The Naga female seemed to shake herself out of the gripping rage from a moment ago and turned on the haughty and disdainful coolness now. "Out of all my hunters, I expected much better from you, Corin."

"Yeah?" Corin drawled. The loop of his tail pushed more tightly against my hip. Suddenly, I found myself tumbling forward until my hands collided with his side. He immediately wrapped his arm around my shoulders. "You expected me to be your lover, your plaything, until you grew tired of me. You're a sick female, lusting after your son's friend when I was only a youngling. It is you who forbade me from returning to my studies here because I refused your advances. I have nothing to be ashamed of. You, though?"

The Queen blanched, flinching back before she straightened her spine and began uttering all kinds of denials. It wasn't my imagination that more than one expression in the crowd of onlookers had turned disapproving—not to Corin, but to the Queen. Corin wasn't done either, and I was so proud of him for facing his worst fear, for standing up to this bitch. Honestly, being proclaimed his mate so publicly was also like a dream come true, and it was completely unexpected.

“You’re a terrible female, Asizza, and a terrible Queen, not deserving of that title. I am done fearing you, and I am done letting you control any aspect of my life. Min-Ji is my mate, and I love her—she is the best thing that has ever happened to me. You will not take that from me.” It felt like my face was on fire by the time Corin finished his declaration, but I discovered I could blush even harder when he swept me up with his tail and claimed my mouth with his.

The Naga didn’t kiss, so this was a double shock to everyone watching. I heard hissing, surprised gasps, and an utterly furious growl, followed by more angry demands from the spurned Queen. Corin ignored it all, and with his mouth on mine, I soon forgot about our audience. The taste of him was home—spicy and sweet. His split tongue tangled with mine, mimicking all kinds of naughty things. I felt like a puddle in his powerful embrace, all noodle legs and molten core.

He loved me; he said that! That wasn’t something Naga normally declared either, but he’d embraced all the human customs for me. I was so happy right now that I felt like I might burst. Tears clung to my lashes and trickled down my cheeks. My heart pounded in my chest, and I felt like I could linger in that moment forever. Cling to Corin’s wide shoulders, his mouth on mine, and his arms to shelter me.

“Ahum,” a voice, low and rough, broke into the moment. “Corin, let your female breathe. She’s leaking.” Corin instantly yanked his head back, and I gasped, my fingers clinging to the back of his neck as if I had the strength to pull him back to me. His silver eyes were glowing as they roved over my cheeks, but while the voice sounded mildly alarmed, Corin didn’t spook at my tears. He knew what they were by now, and it made him grin.

“Nothing to worry about, Shaman Altare. Humans cry when they are sad, or when they are very happy. Isn’t that right, mate?” How I’d longed to hear him call me that, and now he’d done it so many times already, in front of others. Yeah, happiness was right. I nodded, a smile spreading on my face to answer the one on his.

“Very happy,” I said, my voice embarrassingly husky. It made Corin groan, and his arms tightened around me, the heat of his hard cock pressing eagerly against my belly. It was the naughtiest thing I’d ever experienced, the press of his extruding erection against me, hidden only by my body from the prying eyes of one of his former mentors.

“Good. Congratulations on your mating,” the male, Altare, said. I was pretty sure now, now that I was no longer caught up in Corin’s kiss, that this was the guy who had helped Avrish with the Naga youngling a moment ago. Avrish’s mate. Altare was also the guy whom Corin had declared to be a loner who liked his privacy, which explained why he parked his shuttle all the way near the trees.

He was a hard-looking red male, possibly from Bitter Storm once, but his hair had streaked white, leaving some locks looking incongruously pink. “You called her by name,” he said, jabbing a claw in the direction of the medical ship. “That’s a grave insult, my boy.” Ah, it had seemed odd that everyone, even Corin, always called her ‘Queen,’ and now he’d called her Asizza twice. I didn’t even know Queens still had names. They were only ever referred to as Queen or with their Clan name added.

“She deserved it,” Corin hissed. “Funny how she seemed so much larger than life in my memory, but here... today. She was nothing to me. Nothing.” He hissed the last word with a deep lilt of satisfaction and flicked his eyes from his stoic mentor back to me. They glowed with warmth and happiness, lightened from a darkness he’d been carrying for far too long. “I’m sorry, Min-Ji. I should have known that we would be stronger together. Always stronger together.”

Ignoring the eyes of Altare, still hovering next to us, he bent closer and gently nuzzled the side of my face. His cock was still pressing fiercely against me, and it didn’t feel like that erection was going to abate anytime soon. If I wasn’t so elated right now, I might have started feeling embarrassed, but I just didn’t have that in me. I wanted him in me—that’s what I wanted.

“It’s all right, Corin. That was tough, and I’m proud of you. I love you,” I said. I’d given up on trying to pull him closer and slid my fingers into his pretty, dark blue hair. If not for our audience that still peered at us from nearby shuttles and Altare hovering close by, this moment would have been perfect.

“Yes, well,” Altare huffed. “Be that as it may, if that Queen challenges your mate in a formal fight, you know the rules. You can’t protect her.” That felt like a cold splash of water down my back. A formal challenge? That sounded bad. There was no way I could defeat a Naga female in a fight, not a chance in hell. No wonder Corin had been so worried.

Corin turned us, keeping my body still pressed against his rampant cock, and shot his mentor a devastating smirk. It made my insides go all twisty and gooey. That smirk. So confident, so happy. What did he know that I didn’t? “I’m not worried. Now, where can my mate and I nest for the night?”

The words made the red-scaled Shaman bark a surprised laugh, and then he pointed over his shoulder. “Chen and Erish have arranged a tent for you over there, with the triangles. Keep it down, please. It’s near my shuttle, and Avrish and I would like to be able to sleep at night.” With a loud guffaw, the male turned away and slithered off. I could just barely catch him muttering under his breath about the bizarreness of mouth-matings.

“Come,” Corin said as if I had a choice about where we were headed. My feet were dangling in the air, and his arms were clutching me tightly to him, as were at least three loops of his tail. “I think we need to celebrate our mating again, and again.” He winked at me with his nictitating membranes as he started to move in the direction Altare had pointed.

More people were still staring at us as we passed them, but nobody tried to stop us or looked outright disapproving. The nasty Queen had vanished without a trace, but I

saw Sazzie peering at us from the shade of the medical ship, a thoughtful expression on her face. This felt like a monumental shift, like danger was still looming around the corner, and yet... it felt like I'd just been handed the world on a platter.

“Hey, Triff. Go entertain the younglings. I think they’ll enjoy a sleepover,” Corin suddenly said to our little shadow. I hadn’t even realized that Triff was still following his favorite Naga. I’d been too caught up in my mate. The cleaning bot didn’t have as much trouble on the moss here as he had in the forest, and he beeped with a high, indignant note, followed by a more excited squeal. Then he careened away, his path haphazard until he suddenly honed in on the shuttle the younglings had disappeared into.

Then we found our tent, and my world narrowed to a single point of focus: Corin, and the lush furs waiting for us.

Corin

I felt like a weight had lifted from my shoulders the moment I declared Min-Ji mine in front of everyone. It was the peace and happiness I felt at being back here and talking to my mentors. There was only one right way to treat my mate, and only one way to keep her. Seeing the Queen ill and so much smaller than I remembered her also helped. She had been a giant monster in my memory, but I was no longer a small boy, and I wasn’t helpless about the course of my fate. I made my own choices now, and I would choose Min-Ji every time.

Spreading her on the furs inside our little sanctuary, I took my time to take her in, to admire every silky bit of skin I exposed to my greedy eyes. She was smiling, and it was a genuine smile, one that reached every part of her. I felt honored to be gifted such a pure sign of happiness and to know that it was my declaration that had caused

her to feel that way.

“I am going to taste every part of you,” I warned her as I freed her small foot from its covering. It thudded to the ground, oddly heavy for such a small object. She was already shimmying out of her pants, her fingers hooked beneath the waistband of both the outer and inner garments. She was as eager for this as I was, and that made me hiss in satisfaction. “Yesss, undress for me, my pretty little mate.”

Once I had her naked, I curled her in my tail, pinning her in place just the way I wanted her. Then I bent my head to her flesh and started licking and nibbling, as promised. She moaned and writhed beneath me, wetness soon coating her thighs, her scent tantalizing and sweet. My scales lifted along my spine to help me cool, while I ground my aching cock against the furs to stave off my mounting desire for her.

First, I needed to taste her at her core, and then I was going to fill her with my seed over and over again. She wasn’t going to forget that she was all mine now, and I wanted our scents to combine so that everyone else would know it too. When I dipped my head between her legs and drew my tongue through her folds, she bucked in my grip, moaning and thrashing her head. “Corin, please. I need you.” Her words were music to my ears.

Curling the tip of my tail around her hip, I pierced her core with the appendage and felt her inner muscles flutter and spasm as they clutched at my invasion. A few more licks and a firm tug of my tongue around that little pleasure bud, and she shattered, moaning my name and pulling on my hair with abandon. I kept licking, drinking her in as I guided her back down from that first peak. It wasn’t enough. I wanted more of that—much more.

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When I raised myself on my arms above her, she flung her legs eagerly around my hips, meeting my searching cock so eagerly, so sweetly, that I nearly lost all control. When I sank into her tight clutch, it was like fire bursting through my veins. It was like coming home. I was, without a doubt, an idiot for thinking I could ever stay away and that staying away was the right thing to do. I vowed I'd make up for it, make sure she still received every missed drop of pleasure.

“You are mine now, Min-Ji. Forever. I love you,” I groaned when she squeezed me tighter and tighter. She shattered first, her pleasure cresting when I pressed deep and rubbed her just right with the agile tips of my cock. Her grip was snug like a vise, and I couldn't hold back, couldn't stop the seed that erupted from me in hard bursts. It filled her, filled my tiny mate to overflowing, and gushed out around my cock. It coated my scales and her skin, and I was tempted to rub it in, mark her even deeper with my scent.

Then she gave me a challenging stare, slid her fingers down between our bodies, and brought some of the glistening white seed back up. My chest grew tight, my cock kicked hard inside her snug grasp, threatening to burst again. She brought that tiny taste of me to her mouth, her pink tongue darting out as she tasted it. It was my undoing. She knew what that would cause—the heat, the mating fever it aroused in humans—and she did it anyway.

Min-Ji

My body was already on fire for him, nowhere near satisfied after two orgasms. It

was a gamble, but I'd heard too many whispers from the mated girls at Haven not to want to try this. Just a single drop, licked from my finger after that heated clash, and it was more than enough to turn that heat into a conflagration.

Corin's eyes flared with light, silver fire glowing at me in the cozy twilight inside our tent. His cock grew even harder inside of me, the split end twisting and curling against my walls. He loved this, and as the heat grew hotter and my body grew slicker, I knew I'd love every minute too.

First, he fucked me again, just as we were. And when we came together, it wasn't enough. He rolled us, pulling me on top of him, and this time I rode him. Watching avidly as his eyes locked onto the bounce of my breasts with each collision of our hips. This differed from before, hotter, harder. Much more compelling. I was ruled by the desire to have him, to take his seed as many times as he could give it to me. They were right; this was mating heat, all because I'd tasted him.

Delirious with desire, with the happiness that preceded this moment, with being his, I felt no inhibitions—nothing held me back. I shouldn't have risked more, but when Corin pulled out, seed gushing onto the furs and my legs, I turned and licked his intriguing cockhead, tasting him at the source. He smelled so good, like caramelized popcorn—like salt and sweetness combined.

We weren't going to come out of this tent for a long, long while.

Chapter 21

Corin

My mate was still sleeping in our furs; furs I'd replaced early this morning so they'd be dry and warm while she rested. I couldn't regret any of our wild matings, and I certainly wanted her to taste my seed again so we could experience passion like that,

but it had exhausted her. This wasn't the best time or place for her to be anything less than at her best. Despite my bold words, the Queen could challenge her, and that would be deadly. Deadly unless I leveled the playing field.

Min-Ji would be safe inside the tent, but I needed to check on Reid and find out what Asizza was up to. I didn't trust that yesterday was the end of it. I also needed to find out what the elder Shamans and my teachers thought of the confrontation. I hadn't meant to start one right in front of the younglings. That wasn't right.

Triff was sitting at the flap of our tent, hibernating with his shimmering energy panels aimed at the first rays of the sun peeking over the edge of the woods. He hummed merrily when he noticed me, shaking off his sleep mode and reaching out to brush my tail with his polishing disks. "Thanks," I said to him. "Can you keep watch over my mate? Come get me if anyone starts to bother her." He beeped in what I could only assume was an affirmative.

Then I turned away from the tent with Min-Ji's empty "pistol" clutched in one hand. First, I needed to locate Altare and talk to him about my idea for charging the weapon. He wasn't far away; his shuttle was parked only a short distance from our tent, just as he'd said yesterday. The hatch was still shut, but he wasn't asleep. Morning classes had already been started by Avrish, which meant her mate was up too.

He wasn't talkative, but he let me fiddle with the cables and even use his shuttle as a power source. Once I was satisfied the weapon might function again, I went off to complete my second task that morning. Erish was with Reid, but otherwise the prime med bay aboard the medical skyship was empty. My human friend looked peaceful, deeply asleep inside the large Naga-sized medical nest.

"How is he doing, Shaman Erish?" I asked politely as I moved to hover at the foot of the nest. There was a small device attached to Reid's bare chest, and it blinked with

lights. I didn't know what kind of device it was, but I hoped it was helping. He didn't look quite so gray, and he wasn't making any sounds of pain.

“Steady,” the blind elder announced without looking at anything. “But you'll have to be patient. It is going to take us several weeks to repair the damage and restore balance in his body. The invading nanobots that were introduced nearly decimated the ones native to his system.” He was happy to outline the problem in further detail for me, but I was more interested in the audience listening in on our conversation.

Sazzie. She was just around the corner, but I scented her. Hanging onto every word Erish said—it seemed that way, at least. Or maybe she was waiting for me to leave med bay so she could confront me. By the time I left Reid in Erish's capable, and clearly very inspired, hands, Sazzie was gone.

Triff, chased by two eager younglings who had managed to avoid lessons, came to fetch me then. I rushed to our tent, worried that the Queen was about to harm my mate. As I passed Altare's shuttle, I quickly retrieved her weapon. All that worry was for nothing; Min-Ji was in front of the tent, going through some stretches, completely alone and at ease. When she saw me, her face broke out in a wide smile.

I swept her into my arms and hugged her close, my heart still pounding. Clearly, I hadn't realized how much of a threat I still considered Asizza. I needed to keep my mate in sight. Even if it wasn't necessary, it would give me peace of mind. “Here,” I said to her as I lowered her to her feet. The laser pistol felt flimsy and small in my hands, but the soft glow at the side of the handle made Min-Ji squeal.

“You found a way to charge it! That is fantastic, Corin. Thank you!” She bounced on her toes inside her big ‘boots’ and flung her arms around my neck. I was all too happy to dip down so we could kiss. I loved kissing my mate, and I loved it even more that I was now able to do it in public, so everyone could see that she was mine.

“Keep it on you, always,” I warned her gruffly when we finally parted. “The Queen could challenge you, and that should ensure your victory.” Her face fell, but she gave me a determined nod. I remembered that she’d told Kalani about shooting someone who tried to harm the females in the odd sleeping pods. She didn’t want to harm anyone else, but I knew that she would if it came to that. My Min-Ji was brave that way. She hadn’t flinched from fighting the Slithrazer Revenant.

“Corin, Min-Ji, I trust you slept well?” I hadn’t heard Chen approach; the Shaman elder was as stealthy as a Rakworm. He watched us from a short distance, his customary dark blue robes hanging elegantly from his shoulders. A belt with a knife and a healing device sat around his hips today. He was prepared for something, expecting more chaos in his domain.

“Yes, Shaman Chen,” I agreed politely and caught the flicker of a smile at my mentor’s mouth before his expression turned serious again. He was here to tell us bad news. I’d just seen Reid and gotten a status update that was promising a slow but certain recovery. So what was it? The Queen? Haven?

“Follow me. You have an incoming message from Shaman Artek.” The Shaman elder turned and started moving away at a rapid pace. Min-Ji and I shared a worried look, and the two of us hurried to catch up with him. Triff was hot on my tail, and to save time, I snatched him up so he wouldn’t have to struggle on the moss. I was certain our little cleaning buddy was going to be very happy to be back on stone floors once we got home. Home. I hoped nothing bad had happened. What if Vrash had struck again?

Despite worry for Haven’s safety filling me, I kept Min-Ji tucked safely beneath my arm, my eyes scanning for any sign of the Thunder Rock Queen. She was not going to catch us by surprise, right when my guard was down. That watchfulness didn’t turn out to be necessary; we reached the communication hub of the camp without incident. The three of us hurried into the small skyship bristling with all kinds of signal

boosters and antennae, the door hissing shut behind us.

“Artek!” I exclaimed as soon as I saw the face of the white-scaled Shaman on the big viewscreen inside the vessel. His scales glittered with hints of blue and pink in the Serant sunlight, and his blue eyes caught purple highlights. He was outside, which meant he was using some sort of mobile communication device.

It must mean that using Haven’s system wasn’t safe; it had been compromised. I didn’t think Artek would have left Haven and the three pregnant females without medical assistance on standby—not when these were the first hybrid children, and we didn’t know how things were going to turn out yet.

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“Ah, Corin! Thank the stars. How quickly can you make it back here? Haven’s systems have gone completely crazy. We need your help,” Artek rushed out as soon as he laid eyes on me. He didn’t even glance at how I was holding Min-Ji beneath one arm and a cleaning bot beneath the other. “I think Vrash got into the main control hub, but I can’t figure out how to get him out. You’re the only one who might.”

It was exactly as I’d feared: Vrash was back. I rolled a helpless shoulder and looked from my Shaman friend to my mentor. Even if we moved as fast as we could, we were without a dragon to hitch a ride, and it would take at least a week, maybe longer. They could send Zsekhet back for us as soon as they returned to Haven, but that came with the risk of the dragon missing us entirely. The other option was to wait, but if the situation was as dire as Artek’s worried eyes seemed to indicate...

“Have you tried a complete shutdown?” I asked, and Artek launched into a hurried spiel of what he’d tried and the troubles that were happening. Doors were locking people in, the lights and water had turned off entirely, and even the greenhouse was off, with plants already withering inside it. As a precaution, Zathar had moved everyone to tents outside. The med bay was off-limits, and Artek was of half a mind to move Vera down to his own home so he could better monitor her. She was having such trouble with nausea, and it made Zathar absolutely frantic with worry.

“I tried everything. But you are the one who knows this place. You know it, Corin. Chen,” Artek aimed his next words at the elder near my elbow, “can’t you spare a ship to send them? A shuttle would only take, what, half an hour to bring them here? Corin is the only one with the knowledge to take care of this Revenant once and for all.” Whew, no pressure at all. It was daunting to realize that Artek knew less of Haven than I did, that he thought only I could solve this problem. At the same time, I

knew he was right. I had sunk so many hours into figuring out its systems. I knew it inside and out. Artek's primary focus had always been healing.

"A ship? I can't spare any pilots," Chen harrumphed. Pilots? He was using the word that Min-Ji had called herself: pilot. There was an obvious solution to this problem, but I was afraid to utter it out loud. Asking the elders here to borrow a shuttle and expose that kind of knowledge to a new, unknown Clan of former outcasts was a big ask. That the Sacred Training Grounds were made up of functioning skyships was knowledge only Shamans, Shamans-in-training, and Queens knew.

Chen was wearing a thoughtful expression on his face, tapping his chin horn with a claw as he pondered the situation. "I agree that a ship would be the best solution. This Revenant is a serious threat we cannot allow to spread. If it keeps control of a hub like Haven, who knows what other systems it could take over?" I had not even considered that yet, but he was right. Haven had a communications hub, currently only able to access Artek's home. But if it hopped to Artek's systems, it could spread to any other system from there.

Min-Ji shuffled her feet, one of her small hands landing on my forearm. I felt her blunt nails dig into my scales just before she opened her mouth and announced boldly, "I'm a pilot. If you can spare a ship, I can fly it."

A stunned silence filled the communication shuttle's interior, all eyes turning to my tiny mate to stare—two sharp pairs of blue eyes and mine. Even Triff seemed to spin his lights to look at her, blinking rapidly. "You can?" Chen said carefully. "Interesting."

He gave a nod to Artek on the screen. "Expect them soon. We'll arrange something." Then he closed the connection and moved to rise on his tail in front of us, arms crossed over his chest. Only a braided leather cord with a disk just like the one I wore hung from his neck. They had not taken mine yet, but I was certain my old master

would not forget about it before we left.

“I am spread thin this autumn,” Chen said. “More Shamans than usual have needed to be dispatched to Clans around the planet, and more skyships than ever seem to fall from the stars. I have sent my best male to investigate that problem. I can’t spare a pilot, because that would mean too few to care for the sick and to teach the young. You understand that?” I nodded before glancing at Min-Ji. She was smiling; that was her natural way of protecting herself. Strain tinted the corners of her eyes—I could see it now that I knew her as intimately as I did, now that I had a mating bond to guide my instincts.”

“So that leaves you, my dear,” Chen sounded much kinder than he usually did when he offered Min-Ji those words. Her breathing shuddered out of her, her ribs trembling against my side from the forceful expelling of her breath. “A Naga vessel is not the same as one of your human ships, I am sure. Are you certain you can do this?”

Min-Ji’s bright spirit rallied under that challenge, as I knew it would. Her brown eyes sparkled when she pointed a blunt, clawless finger at the front of the shuttle we were in. “I see a yoke; I can fly that. Someone just needs to give me a rundown real quick. I can do it. Small craft like this were all I flew for five years straight. Trust me.”

I did, but would my mentor? My clever mate was certainly looking at him like he didn’t have a choice; we were lucky my mentor seemed to find that amusing rather than offensive. “Very well, this way.” Min-Ji seemed eager as she slipped from beneath my arm and followed Chen out of the shuttle and across the clearing.

I spared a quick look at Avrish beneath the central tent, inside the main classroom. She had only a handful of students at the moment; the rest were paired off with other teachers in small groups around the clearing. I saw several bright heads bent over the guts of a machine under Altare’s watchful eye, and younglings practicing with handheld healing devices beside cages of rescued animals under Erish’s supervision.

Chen led us to a shuttle hitched with tethers to the back of one of the larger cargo vessels; I remembered it. Some of the older Naga had been allowed to practice their flying skills in that ship. I hadn't been old enough yet to try, and I'd been so envious of them. It was a much smaller skyship than it seemed in my recollection; it was barely big enough to fit two Naga sitting behind one another.

"Oh," Min-Ji exclaimed. "It looks like a fighter jet. How quaint. It's adorable." I didn't have to look to know that she was clutching at her chest again; she really couldn't help herself. I looked because she was mine now, and all that cuteness belonged to me. Chen was staring at her with a similarly bemused look on his craggy face, likely just as unused to that kind of behavior from a female as I was.

Then he looked at me. "Right. I'll give you the rundown, and I'll set your navigational system for the right course. As soon as I have a male to spare, I'll send him to retrieve the ship. Understood? It's not for keeping. We need it." He repeated that a few more times because Min-Ji was caught up staring, full of admiration, at the small and clearly old ship. Her hand ran reverently along the nearest wingtip.

"I'll make sure it's understood," I told my old master when he snapped his mouth shut and shook his head. "She knows, sir."

Chapter 22

Min-Ji

I didn't think I'd ever lay eyes on a functional ship again, and this past day had been a joy in that regard. To be allowed to fly one was like a dream I hadn't even dared to dream. It was so pretty too, sleek, silver, and with all these swirling carved lines along the wings and the lower body of the ship. Were they functional or simply decorative? What was it going to be like to fly a ship of Naga design? It was mind-blowing to even discover they existed.

“Listen closely,” the blue-robed Shaman said from where he’d half-curved his long body into the cockpit of the jet. Corin had to pick me up so I could see what the male was pointing at, and I held my breath and dutifully repeated what each button did back to the Shaman. There weren’t any surprises; some of it was more simplified than what I was used to. I didn’t think this ship was going to give me any trouble at all. It made my heart race with joy to think about being up in the airway, but I wasn’t going to let anyone down by a lack of attention.

“Now,” Chen said firmly, and he waited until I’d lifted my eyes to his. “You must watch the altitude meter at all times. The shuttle can never climb beyond this red line, understood?” He tapped a display with red paint applied in a thick smear. It wasn’t part of the original system; that line was a manual, crude addition. I couldn’t read the Naga numbers on the display, but it was somewhere below the mid-range of the display, so it couldn’t be all that high.

Intuitively, my brain leaped to what it could mean, and I raised my eyes to the sky as if that would confirm it. I saw the violet streaking the heavens here, the soft, fluffy pink and white clouds, and nothing that could give me any indication. “Higher and we’ll crash? Why? What’s causing the skyships to fall?” Look at me—now I was calling them skyships too. Although the Shamans here didn’t seem to call their own ships skyships.

“A very unpredictable, heavily fluctuating EM field,” Chen said, his eyes narrowed. This was a test. I knew it was. Corin seemed confused; he didn’t know what EM meant, but I did. It was confusing, though, because while I knew there were definitely planets that naturally had them, they were usually either due to electrical storms or a permanent addition—not something that fluctuated.

An electromagnetic field, is it natural?” Such a field could disrupt electrical parts and definitely confuse sensor readings. It explained why ships crashed here when they intended to simply pass by Serant. If the phenomenon existed mostly in the upper

stratosphere, it explained why ships could still fly at low altitudes. Or maybe they could manage if they had the appropriate shielding.

“Natural,” Chen agreed, a smile spreading. “You’ll do. Let me set the navigation while you two fetch your things. We’ll keep Reid here until he’s better—it should be weeks—and send word when he can be retrieved.” I felt like I’d just scored an A on my report when Corin led me back toward our tent so we could gather what little we’d brought with us. The Shaman was going to trust me to fly that ancient fighter jet; it was going to be so awesome. I knew it.

It was easier to think about the fun flying part than to worry about what was waiting for us at Haven. That sounded bad, and I could tell it was weighing heavily on Corin’s mind. “I’m sure we can figure this out. We’ll beat that stupid robot, and then everything will go back to normal.”

I was bouncing on my feet with excitement when we returned to the waiting and now-prepped little ship a short while later. Altare and two more Shamans I didn’t know had worked with the elder Chen to free the jet from its tethers, and now its nose was angled free and clear in the direction of Ahoshaga. Or I assumed it was aimed at Ahoshaga, because, despite it being a tall mountain, we couldn’t see it from here.

“This is the stowage hatch. Come put your stuff in here,” Chen said, prompting Corin to take my satchel from my hand and hurry ahead. Triff raced after him, bumping and careening crazily over the mossy terrain. I admired Corin’s silvery-blue shimmer against the darker silver of the ship. They looked good together, and I couldn’t wait to see what Corin would think of flying in an actual ‘skyship.’

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I hurried after them, eager to climb aboard and find out. My boot hit the moss with one heel, but on my next step, my body was yanked backward when something firm snapped around my waist. I saw the glitter of azure scales before the rest of my senses caught up—the smell of something sickly sweet, hints of metal, and the sharp burst of pain across my abdomen. Screams came from around me, several low warnings, a mean snarl right next to my ear, and above all that noise, Corin and Triff.

I locked eyes with my mate, his quicksilver gaze wide with fear. He was perched on the upper edge of one wing, his tail draping down to the ground—too far away to be of help. Triff was on the ground beneath him, racing over the uneven surface toward me as fast as his cleaning disks would allow him. Corin was letting out an ear-splitting roar—a warning, a sound of intimidation. Triff was screeching so loudly that it hurt my ears, and I wasn't the only one cringing at the sound. The Naga were even more sensitive to auditory attacks.

“Nobody says no to a Queen,” Asizza snarled over all that din. Her head was above mine, her claws digging into my belly, and her coils were rapidly curling around my legs, tightening around me like a boa constrictor. There was no escape from a grip like that. I knew it, everyone knew it. I saw it on their faces—Corin's horror, the dismay on the others. Even the stoic Altare looked worried. I was a dead woman. Damn it, that wasn't fair, and I wasn't going to take it lying down.

“Issue an official challenge,” the only elder present demanded. Chen had infused as much authority into his voice as he could, and it was a lot. He was a male used to being in charge, and he'd been in charge for a long time. It wasn't enough, not to Asizza, who was clearly mad with her own power. I was coming to see that was a common thread among the Serant Queens.

“An official challenge?” the Queen hissed, and a peal of derisive laughter followed, her claws digging deeper into my flesh. “That is for Naga, for worthy contenders! This female is vermin beneath my scales. She is human; our rules do not apply to her!”

Fuck that. We’d assumed she would follow the cultural traditions she was used to, but she was clever. She thought she could worm her way around them.

Despite the pain that blazed through my abdomen, I forced my hand to reach for the pistol strapped to my thigh. Corin had charged it so I could take on this bitch on my own; it was the only way. Nobody was moving. My mate had climbed down from the ship, but each time he came forward, Asizza dug in her claws and made me yelp in pain.

“Let me go,” I said as calmly as I could. I had to distract her, stall for time until I could pull the pistol, and shoot her where it counted. A coil of her tail blocked my access, and it was squeezing tighter and tighter; I had to wriggle my fingers beneath it. “Let me go, Asizza. I’ll fight you fair and square.”

I’d forgotten about Triff. The little bot had gotten stuck behind a tree root halfway toward me and the enraged Queen, but he managed to free himself, disks whirring as he let out another angry squeak. The Thunder Rock Queen hadn’t counted on a tiny but very brave bot to launch himself at her tail. I didn’t know Triff could do it, but he’d fired up his cleaning laser at the top of his dome and aimed that beam like a weapon at her scales. It burned her, smoke curling into the air to the sound of her furious scream.

She moved in reflex, and a scream ripped from my throat as a different fear struck. Not Triff! The bot flew through the air as she batted it away with her tail. An awful sound, like a baseball bat cracking against his metal, filled the clearing. At least two people dove forward to catch Triff as he fell back down, all eyes on the poor bot.

Mine, Corin's, and the Queen's too.

In the confusion of Triff's brave attack, her coil had slipped, and my fingers closed around the butt of my gun. I yanked it free, aimed for the nearest azure coil, and fired. I wasn't quite sure if it was my definitely non-lethal shot, or something else, but Asizza collapsed around me. Her tail spooled into a pile of limp noodles around my feet, her body thudding to the ground behind me. As a last vicious act, her claws ripped from my belly, and blood spurted. Not nearly as much as I expected, but more than I ever wanted to see.

"Min-Ji!" Corin screamed, and then he was at my side, sweeping me into his arms. He was utterly careless about the pistol I still held in numb fingers, his focus entirely on my wound. I was okay with that. I'd take care of the gun; he could take care of that mess. I didn't want to look; I didn't want to know. It was cowardly, but I was certain I'd faint if I saw what she'd done to me. It would hurt more, too.

It wasn't until he'd lowered me to the ground, cradled gently in his coils, that I could see what had happened. My hand fumbled to holster the pistol safely on my thigh while I stared at the sprawled-out body of the now very dead Queen. She was lying face down, and the handle of a knife was sticking out of the center of her back. Sazzie was hovering on her tail behind her, a slightly dismayed look on her face. "She said she'd raze Haven. She said she was going to kill Zathar's baby..." she said, eyes huge in her face.

"Here," Chen said as he lifted Corin's hand away from my belly. He'd been pressing on my wounds to stem the flow of blood, and agony blazed when he moved. Then, light hit my flesh through my torn shirt, coming from the healing device that the old Shaman had been carrying with him. In seconds, all the pain faded away, and my flesh started to knit back together.

Erish and the other elder I'd seen yesterday had come up to flank Sazzie, gently

nudging her away from her mother's corpse. "Do not worry, Sazzie. You won in combat; nobody will question your throne," the blind elder said kindly, but that seemed to make the Naga female even more distraught.

"Won in combat? I stabbed her in the back!" she said in an oddly high-pitched tone. It was a very feminine sound, and it was rather unexpected coming from a Naga female as battle-hardened as her. But maybe all those scars that covered her meant something else. She shrugged out of Erish' grip to look my way, and her blue eyes reminded me so much of Zathar that it was startling to see. "I don't want to be Queen," she said firmly. "I just didn't want her to harm anyone else." It felt like she was apologizing to me, but that didn't make sense. It wasn't like she'd harmed me.

"You did the right thing," Corin said firmly, his silver eyes still locked on my face. "You saved my mate." That seemed to calm the Naga female down, and it made me feel calmer too. Like it was finally settling in that the threat was gone—not just gone for now, but gone forever. There was nothing standing in our way to be together. Okay, there was one thing remaining: Vrash. But that was more of a general threat, not a personal one like Asizza had been.

Sazzie sighed, then very casually avoided the hand of the elder on her left and dipped down to snatch her blade from her mother's back. "You are right. This had to be done. But I'm not going to be Queen." She gave Corin a nod. "Go, I heard about the situation at Haven. I will watch your human friend until he's better."

My belly already felt normal again, but I still felt a little wobbly and unsteady when Corin and elder Shaman Chen helped me to my feet. Corin didn't stop touching me, his arm around my middle. His tail gently pressed against my thighs to make sure I stayed upright. Altare handed him Triff, and my heart went out to the bot. He was a little scratched up and dented. The cleaning disks at the bottom struggled to spin right, but his lights were still on.

“Thank you, Sazzie,” Corin said with a thoughtful look at the scarred female. She didn’t look so fierce and warlike, even with a scar that bisected her face diagonally. Her scales were dull compared to those of the elders that flanked her, and her expression was forlorn. When Corin agreed to let her watch over Reid, her shoulders squared and she gave him a determined nod. Interesting. There was more going on here than I could see right now. Why was Sazzie, a supposedly typical Naga female, interested in a human guy? As far as I understood it, most Naga females didn’t feel the mating bond. It was a one-sided thing.

I didn’t get to ask questions. I didn’t get a chance to recover from what had happened. We had another fight to get to, and I needed to play a vital role in getting us there. Even if I was still a little dizzy from blood loss. A flask of water was offered as Corin helped me into the small ship and started to strap me into the appropriate buckles of the flight harness. It didn’t fit right. Some of it was based on a creature with a tail, not legs, but he made it work.

The drink was salty, which took me by surprise, but Chen ordered me to drink it all, so I did. I did feel better afterward: my hands no longer shook, and any cobwebs faded from my mind. It was starting to feel like I might actually be able to do this again. Though it was strange to get into a ship and fly while leaving Reid in the hands of still near-strangers, and a Naga female had offered to be his caretaker.

“Run me through it one more time,” the elder ordered. Obediently, and under a dozen watchful eyes this time, I indicated what each button did. They were worried, for obvious reasons. I was a little nervous myself, but I still remembered what I was supposed to do. With Corin in the seat right behind me, his tail wrapped around my waist for extra security, I knew I wouldn’t fail.

“All right. You’re good to go. Remember, never go above the red line.” Yes, I knew that. Don’t fly too high, or we’d get caught in the EM field and crash this ship.

Chapter 23

Corin

My body still felt like it was in fight mode, stuck in a battle in which I'd played no part. Asizza was dead; the Queen was dead. It was strange to suddenly be in a world that did not have her in it, when she'd been such a dark part of my history—and of my future—for so long. I owed Sazzie everything for doing what she did. It was unheard of for a female to interfere in that kind of situation, and to stab her mother in the back?

Yes, the Naga females fought one-on-one all the time. Everything turned into a dispute they solved with their claws, but it was always face-to-face. That's why Sazzie's scars were all along her front, but none marred her back. And to carry as many as she did meant she had been in alotof fights between each molting. Sazzie hadn't seemed a likely ally, but I had caught her staring at Reid...

Twisting my tail against Min-Ji's belly was like trying to erase the blood that still stained her torn shirt. I didn't want to remember what it had looked like, Asizza's claws digging into her vulnerable flesh. She was all right, unhurt. Chen had healed her wounds, and if he hadn't, then I could have done the same.

My old mentor tapped the side of the ship, his eyes going from Min-Ji and the controls she was holding to the necklace around my neck. My stomach swooped for different reasons. This was the moment he'd ask me to take it off because I was no Shaman and too old to learn now. "Yes, hmm," he said, his eyes narrowing on the silver disk. He tapped the one he wore, the one all the Shamans wore. "I think an exception needs to be made. Agreed, brothers?"

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He was still holding the side of the small skyship, preventing us from taking off, but it certainly felt like my stomach had catapulted into the sky. Min-Ji tilted her head and glanced over her shoulder at me with a soft smile, an encouraging look in her pretty brown eyes. She even splayed her fingers over the loop of my tail around her previously injured middle, gently stroking my scales.

I felt calmer when I looked back at Chen and noticed that he'd been joined by Erish and Fraesosh. Their three heads bent close together, each crowned with silver hair that indicated their advanced age. They muttered in low tones, and it would have been terribly impolite to eavesdrop, though it was very tempting. Their little meeting didn't last long, not long enough to tempt me to misbehave.

Erish was the one who spoke, his orange spots glowing against his yellow scales as he threw an expansive arm out at the clearing and the gathered people. Already, someone had dragged away Asizza's body, and now we were being watched by nearly everyone present at the Sacred Training Grounds. That included Avrish and her class of younglings, as well as a few more small clusters of young Naga and their teachers.

"Today, the council is appointing Corin of Haven to a special role. He will from now on be known as the Caretaker of Haven. Like all Shamans with appointed healing centers across our planet, Corin will report directly to us. However, his care will be of the ancestral relics, the town, and the machines, rather than one or more Clans. His job will be equally important to the continued safety of our planet."

When Erish finished speaking, both Chen and Fraesosh intoned their agreement. Their declaration was met with the slapping of fists to chests and the eager cheers of

the younglings. What the elders had done didn't sink in until Chen winked at me with one blue eye, his nictitating membrane sliding over the orb. I might not be called a Shaman, but Erish's words as good as declared me of equal rank to one. I would be required to watch over Haven, which I already did, but I would not be required to be a healer to any Naga who sought it.

My thoughts spun as I thanked the elders and clutched the locator disk against my chest. I was still processing when Chen ordered Min-Ji clear for takeoff, and the canopy slid shut over our heads. Not a Shaman, but something similar, something even more suited to what I loved to do. How had so many of my dreams managed to manifest in reality in so short a time? I was the luckiest male in the world.

Then Min-Ji warned me with a wild, happy grin on her face, and the tiny skyship shot straight up into the air with a gentle hum of its engines. My wild thoughts made abrupt space for what was happening right now: my mate at the yoke of a skyship, controlling the small vessel with cool confidence. She gave her controls an experimental few turns and then, in a graceful arc, sent the small ship to circle the Sacred Training Grounds.

I could see the crowd of young and old gathered at the center, waving as they watched us loop around the collection of parked ships. Even from the sky, the medical ship and the Sacred Elder Ship looked huge, as did some of the cargo vessels, while the tiny shuttles that served as private homes seemed impossibly small.

"Okay, this way, according to Master Chen," Min-Ji said, pressing on the yoke. We shot forward silently, the ship making almost no sound as we cut through the air. This was like flying Zsekhet's dragon, and yet, not the same at all. My stomach felt as if we'd left it behind at the Training Grounds, but there was no whipping of air in my face.

I fell in love with my mate all over again as I watched her handle this hurtling

machine with grace. She was right; she knew how to fly it. She handled the skyship as if she'd flown it a million times before. Her hands were confident as she guided the ship to where we needed to go. I gazed at the display with the red warning stripe and noted that she was keeping us well below that line. "Will you explain it to me?" I asked, yanking my eyes away from what she was doing to focus on Triff.

The little bot sat in my lap with silently blinking lights, not moving because the blow from Asizza had broken something in his cleaning disk. It couldn't spin freely right now, and though that shouldn't cause him any pain, he seemed dejected. Triff was under my care; he was one of the relics of Haven. I was the Caretaker now, and I'd take good care of him.

"I'm so happy for you, Corin. I know it's not the same as being a Shaman, but Caretaker of Haven? That sounds perfect for you." Min-Ji echoed my thoughts, one hand dropping from the yoke to pat my tail. It was very tempting to lean over and tempt her into a kiss, but I didn't know how much she needed to focus when flying. I didn't want to cause us to crash, so I flicked the tip of my tail to caress her fingers briefly but kept my focus on Triff.

My mate rattled off explanations of how the ship worked and how she controlled it. I would glance over her shoulder at the button she was talking about and realized that the same controls were lined up in front of my seat too. This ship had two spots for pilots. Why? But I managed to get Triff's cleaning disk spinning again just as that thought popped into my head. He beeped happily and twirled in my lap to demonstrate. "That's it, buddy," I said. "Good as new."

Then we were landing, our journey having passed in a blur of landscape until Ahoshaga rose like a giant in front of us. Min-Ji slowed our speed and carefully circled the open space outside the caves to find the right place to bring us down. I stared out the window to see the tents against the cliff wall and Sesethul lying protectively in front of them. The massive golden dragon took up a lot of space, but

there was still enough room for Min-Ji to land our tiny skyship.

The canopy hissed as it opened, and a flood of fresh, cool mountain air rushed inside. When I assisted Min-Ji and Triff out of the skyship, a crowd converged around the small vessel. Zathar and Vera were in the lead, but they were closely followed by a very worried-looking Artek. “Oh! A flyer! How did you get your hands on that, Min-Ji?” Vera shouted, while the other humans lobbed similar questions our way.

While Min-Ji hugged her friends in greeting and started to explain, I locked eyes with Artek and turned to follow him into Ahoshaga. We’d flown here because there was no time to waste, and already so much had happened that had delayed us. I needed to see what was wrong with Haven right away. Vrash was going to pay if he’d messed up any of my careful repairs and restorations. This place was mine.

Min-Ji

“I’m so glad you’re back! How is Reid?” Vera said as she hugged me tightly. Her protruding belly got stuck between us, making the hug a little awkward, but then Kalani flung her arms around both our necks, initiating a group huddle. Cosima and Charlie pelted me with more questions, and I had to silence them with a laugh to find the space to actually answer them.

“Yes,” I said, “Corin’s my mate. It’s official!” They squealed and laughed, and that felt good. But Vera quickly sobered and brought us back to heavier topics. She flicked a hand from our huddle toward Ahoshaga, the two Naga statues holding lanterns aloft looking sad without their warm, glowing lights.

I met her blue eyes and gave a curt nod to let her know I’d hit the highlights. “Reid is going to be all right, but it will take time, so we’ll have to return for him in a few

weeks. The Thunder Rock Queen is dead, and Corin has been named the official Caretaker of Ahoshaga. He will fix this.” I had full confidence that he would. There was no way my brave, clever mate would ever let anyone down, and he knew more about our home than anyone else; even his elders had recognized that.

I answered a few more questions and got the low-down about the situation here, but my eyes were searching for Corin. He wasn’t by the ship or huddled with Zathar and Iave to talk to them. No, a row of Naga stood in front of the entrance, clearly guarding the way, but there was no sign of my silvery-blue mate.

It sounded scary when Vera explained how the water and power had gone out first, and then Aks had gotten trapped in his apartment. They had to break down the door to get the male out. Then Artek had been locked out of the med bay and the control hub, and not even Zeidon had been able to open the doors. That’s when Zathar had ordered everyone out, and the camp of tents had sprung into existence against the cliff wall.

“Corin will fix this,” I said again, but I was feeling worried when I still couldn’t see him. Had he already gone in? Alone? I wrenched myself free from the safety of our little group and moved closer to the row of Naga warriors. Zathar was at the front, Iave flanking him, and several more were lined up with their spears or knives at the ready. Their watchful eyes were on the cave opening, watching for danger. But they were also there to keep anyone from going in; that much was obvious.

“I have to go in,” I said to Zathar when I strode up to our leader and he moved to block my path. He shook his head, but I gave him my most determined look. “He needs me, Zathar. I won’t come to harm, but I have to be there for him.”

It was Iave who gave his friend a nudge with the tip of his tail, his large ax lowering in his hands. He jerked his chin in the direction of the entrance, his dark gray eyes meeting mine, and then he moved aside. Zathar hissed, but he did the same. “Corin is

going to kill us,” he said, but then he grinned, as if he looked forward to it.

I didn’t give them a chance to change their minds, breaking into a run to pass them in a hurry. The tunnels were dark. I should have expected that, but it still caught me by surprise. There was no soft tinkling of water from the fountain down below, and my footsteps echoed loudly as I raced toward the one source of light I could see in the distance.

The door to the command hub sat open, and when I got closer, I could tell it had been wrenched in the frame—it had been opened by sheer force. The light came from the many lit viewscreens inside; those still had power, apparently. In front of them, Corin sat on one of the swivel chairs, his hands on the keys as his mercury eyes flicked through data after data on the screen.

“Careful,” a voice said softly, a pale hand shooting out to block my path further into the room. I nearly screamed in surprise, managing to hold the sound back at the last moment. Artek. It was only the Shaman, nothing to fear. I couldn’t help but compare the opalescent glimmer of his white scales to the sickly pale strips I’d seen on the robot’s corpse. For a second, I thought it was Vrash’s hand, reaching out to snatch me.

Artek was against the back wall, right next to the door, and he drew me to his side so I could watch Corin work. “He’s gotten further than I did. The system turned on. Don’t distract him.” Right as those words left the Shaman’s mouth, Triff beeped and bumped against Corin’s coils, doing exactly that. Corin tilted his head down to glance at the cleaning bot with a nubbed eyebrow raised, then flicked his eyes unerringly my way and offered me a confident grin.

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My stomach unclenched from the tight ball it had formed in my belly. If he looked that confident, it was going to be all right. It had to. What could a stupid disembodied head do anyway? Slamming doors and locking people out could be the entire extent of its abilities. Then he spoke, his voice issuing from the central computer inside the room, the one Corin was using.

“Ahoshaga is mine! You heathens cannot have it!” the voice growled. “I control everything, and now you are going to die!” With a screech of metal, the warped door slammed shut, locking us in. And vents hissed above my head as gas was pumped out of them. Triff squealed loudly and spun away, careening through the room and then into a tiny bot-tunnel. Oh, no, did Vrash have control of him too?

Chapter 24

Min-Ji

“Come here,” Corin demanded, his tail hooking around my ankle to yank me close until I tumbled into his lap. His scales started to glow with his mating sigils, and he let them blaze, his glow competing with the screens in front of us. “I should have known you’d follow me in here. Listen closely, my clever mate. I have a plan.”

He whispered in my ear as he outlined what he was going to do, and I feared that meant the Revenant was listening in. Corin didn’t include Artek but left the Shaman to guard our backs from his position at the door. I could see that the male had pulled a small handheld scanner from a pouch and was aiming it at the fine mist of gas to identify what it was.

“But Triff?” I asked quietly. I tried to breathe shallowly so I wasn’t pulling too much of the white mist into my lungs, but it was stinging my eyes a little. My worry for the little bot was echoed in Corin; he gave me a sad headshake and a worried frown. He didn’t know what had happened to Triff, and right now we had bigger things to worry about—like the megalomaniac robot hooked into Haven’s main controls. We had to find where his core was and destroy it.

When Corin moved his hands back to the keyboard in front of him, the gas hissed, more of it flowing into the room. It was a heavy kind of gas that pooled around my ankles like fog, but the room was going to fill up at some point and take away all our oxygen if nothing changed. I jumped to my feet, feeling a bit more confident when my mate kept a loop of his long tail around my hips. “Hey, Vrash! You dickhead! Is that all you've got? Why do you think you're going to win? You're nothing! You're just a stupid talking head! A relic from the past.”

I heard Artek draw in a shocked breath behind me, and I cast him a cheerful grin over my shoulder. He looked worried, but when I kept talking trash and darted my eyes quickly to Corin, he caught on to the plan. I knew he was a clever male. When I paused to draw in a shallow inhale of air through the collar of my shirt, he leaped into the silence.

“You think this gas is going to hurt us? You’re outdated. You know nothing of the Naga of the future. And you think you can shape a new Serant?” That definitely did the trick, and I hid a smile behind my hand at how silly it was to enrage a robot like this on purpose. A robot should be cool and rational, but this being was utterly insane. Corin’s plan was working, even if it was super simple, but simple was often the best.

As Vrash launched into a very incoherent speech about his plans for Haven once he’d booted the usurpers—us—Corin worked steadily at the control hub. His fingers flew over the controls. When the gas stopped hissing, and the vents whirled as fans blew clean air instead, I knew he’d regained some control.

“Got it. I need to cut power,” Corin said just as Triff careened back into the room with a squeal. He was followed by a horde of cleaning bots, and at first, I thought he was being chased, but when he circled the room, they did the same, and more of the gas dispersed. Had he gone to get his friends? Was this our backup?

“You can’t cut my power!” Vrash shouted. “The power is mine, you insolent, inbred barbarian!” Corin just smiled in response to the insult, and I did my best to hurl a few back, drawing the robot’s attention away from what Corin was doing. I followed Artek’s lead, marching around the room and waving my hands at the machines that lined most of one wall. Anything to distract the machine from the true threat.

The crystals above our heads had already been powered down, like every other light source inside Ahoshaga. Now, the screens all flickered off except for one—the one in front of Corin. A cursor and some symbols flashed over its dark surface before it, too, suddenly shut off. Triff and his horde of bots came to a stop around my ankles. Darkness filled the room, except for the glitter of purple and green lights on their domed tops. We all held our breath as we waited.

“Did you locate the core?” Artek dared to ask after ten seconds of tense silence. Nobody moved. The lights nor machines didn’t turn back on, but was that good or bad news? Corin nodded, his voice hushed as he explained Vrash’s location to us. Much closer than I thought he’d ever get, nestled right behind the wall of computers in front of us, not that I could see them in the dark.

I instantly pictured a spidery lair of cables and glittering lights on the other side, with Vrash's creepy head sitting at the center, glowing red eyes gleaming. The blue core that powered his personality beamed light through the metal dome of his head. Something out of an old science fiction movie, horrific and evil. It was probably nothing like that, but the thought of that robot squatting behind the wall like a malevolent spider made my stomach churn.

“How do we get him out of there?” I asked, aiming my question in the direction of my mate. I could still see him because his sigils glowed on his chest and down his tail, a loop still hooked around my waist. It wasn’t enough to see by, but at least I knew where he was. My fingers curled against his scales, taking comfort in his presence.

“I’ll have to yank him out through the maintenance bot tunnel with my tail,” Corin said as he started to wind his tail free from around me and slid it across the floor to what I had to assume was the access hatch. The little tunnels were very inconspicuous and only a little bigger than a cat door. It seemed like a terrible idea to slide his tail in there. He wouldn’t be able to see what he was doing; there could be a booby trap or something.

As though my thought had jinxed it, something flickered in the dark, and power surged. The crystal lights blazed with it, so bright it blinded me. The entire control hub booted, coming online with all its screens glowing a bright white. It hurt, and dazed, I slapped my hands over my face to protect myself from the glare. It meant that for precious seconds, I didn’t see what was happening, but I heard it.

Corin shouted, a loud, pain-filled noise. I heard a heavy thud that made my heart leap into my throat as I fought to get my eyes to work. Artek shouted too. “Corin!” I heard him move, his scales sliding over the floor in a rush. The Naga male would have been better protected against the sudden light with his extra eyelids. When I managed to get my teary eyes to work by squinting, I saw that he had crossed the room and was pulling Corin away from the wall by his armpits. My mate was passed out, his head lolling limply on his neck, and his body was a deadweight.

I feared the worst, but when I rushed to assist Artek, his sigils started to glow at my touch. “Yes, keep hold of him,” the Shaman agreed. “Your touch will stabilize him. It will draw him back.” I was only too happy to comply. It was one of the worst things I’d ever witnessed, to see my always-busy Corin lifeless like that. His body was limp

and heavy as we fought to pull the last of his tail free from the small passage.

Then things went from bad to worse. As Artek pulled the tip of Corin's tail free, Triff made a loud beeping noise that made me jerk my hands to my ears in reflex. Artek did the same, dropping Corin's tail in surprise. Then the bot raced across the floor to the small tunnel, with his little horde of cleaning bots following him. "No! Triff! Stop!" It was too late. Our little silver friend disappeared into the small tunnel, followed by the rest of the bots.

"What?" Corin moaned, his hands jerking to his head as he blinked his eyes. "What happened?" I drew in a relieved breath when he pulled himself into a sitting position and blinked blearily in my direction. "Are you hurt, Min-Ji?" he asked, his eyes brightening. That gave him more strength. Of course, it did. He leaned forward and pulled me into his arms, his hands running over my back to check for injury, even though he was the one who had gotten hurt.

"I'm fine. You're the one who got zapped! Artek needs to check on you." Corin didn't want to let the Shaman help, his mind already whirring as he pulled himself up by the edge of the desk and into the seat. He didn't let go of me; his arm stayed around my waist, and he may have leaned a little more on me for support than he'd intended.

"Where is Triff?" he asked as he took control of the system, or at least, he tried to. The screen didn't seem to respond to his touch, but it did flicker from bright white to a camera feed. Artek hovered behind my shoulder as the three of us leaned closer to decipher what we were seeing: darkness, a small, narrow space, and blinking purple lights beneath the faintest red and blue glow. My heart leapt in my chest when I realized what I was seeing.

"No! Triff!" I exclaimed, leaning even closer to stare at the purple lights and wondering which of them belonged to my favorite, quirky little bot. This was what

the Revenant saw; he was showing us what he was seeing. That could only mean that Vrash thought he had the upper hand. Corin was trying to do something—anything—but the keyboard was not responding; he was locked out.

The same electric surge that had knocked out my mate surged through the dark space. It made the lights above our heads flicker, and the feed filled with a blue brightness that made me blink against the glare. I didn't dare close my eyes in case I missed something, but I feared the worst. Vrash was winning, and now he'd claimed another victim: first Corin, now brave little Triff.

When the light died down, the feed didn't come back, but the computers suddenly hummed around us. Screens returned to normal, displaying statistics on Haven, a feed of a hydro plant, and even one of the greenhouse outside. I shared a baffled, confused look with Corin, and then he frowned and set his hands to work on the keys. "I've got control of everything," he murmured after a moment. "I don't understand how it happened, but everything is running nominally. I will pull up the feeds of the maintenance tunnels. Vrash should still be there. I don't understand."

I held my breath as he did so, and Corin did the same, his tail hugging me tightly. "Can you find Triff? He went in after you got zapped." When Corin shared a look with Artek, I groaned; that look meant bad news. They didn't think Triff could have survived.

"Found it," Corin muttered, and the screen to his left flicked to a dark view of a small, cable-filled space. Long coils of them ran in either direction, and a narrow pathway ran alongside. "This is directly on the other side of this wall," Corin said, nodding at the screen-covered wall we were standing in front of. "I don't see Vrash or Triff. Do you?"

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It was really dark, and I had a hard time making out much else beyond the cables. It did look a little similar to what Vrash had shown us, only there were no purple lights or the blue-and-red glow from the evil robot to guide us. “There,” Artek exclaimed, and he jabbed a claw at the screen, tapping the surface over an odd, bulbous shape. Horror filled me when I could make out more of the round shapes now that I’d seen the first. At least a dozen, and none of them blinked purple. Those were the cleaning bots, but where was Vrash?

I had the answer a moment later when Corin managed to make the camera pan to the left. More cleaning bots were lined up along the narrow path, their round shapes a dull silver in the gloom. Then came a weird dip in the heavy cable bundles, and on that was a spindly set of legs; I recognized them as the spider legs of a repair bot. On it sat a lumpy shape, lopsided, without a hint of a spark or light. “Did Vrash overload himself when he attacked the cleaning bots?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Corin said, “but he’s not in control of anything now. I don’t think it’s a trick...” He started to rise from the seat with a groan, a hand shooting to his chest. Artek immediately clamped a hand down on his shoulder and pressed him back into the seat. “I have to retrieve the core and get Triff!” Corin said fiercely, but the Shaman shook his head.

“Not in this state. You nearly died, Corin. Guide me through it. You can do that, can’t you?” the Shaman said, already moving toward the vent and sliding his tail toward the hole. I flung myself out of Corin’s embracing tail before I could think better of my plan. I didn’t even think about how rude it was when I snatched up the Shaman’s pointy tail and jerked it back.

“No! You need to stay here and heal Corin. Who’ll take care of him and the pregnant women if you get hurt? You’re too important.” I ignored Corin’s angry snarl as he yelled that I was even more important, and flung myself on my belly to crawl into the small tunnel. He was wrong, and he knew it. The two of them were crucial to Haven. I was not. It was only a tiny tunnel, and some turned-off bots. I could do this.

I heard them moving behind me—Artek and Corin clashing, maybe—but I didn’t look back. I just thanked my lucky stars that I was small and that I’d managed a terrifying crawl through the dark like this once before. I should have brought a flashlight; that would have been better. Or maybe not. Maybe it was better that I couldn’t see if there were alien bugs down here with me.

Corin

My body was horrifyingly weak, and Artek managed to wrestle me into the seat in front of the control hub with embarrassing ease. “It’s too late. She’s already crawled in. Help her from here!” the Shaman directed me. I didn’t want to listen to his sensible words; all my instincts told me to crawl after Min-Ji, to snatch her by the ankle and yank her to safety. But he was right. She had already gone in and hadn’t gotten zapped. Now, I could best help her from here.

My brave mate, so afraid of bugs and the darkness inside those small tunnels, faced that fear head-on so she could rescue Triff. Rescue all of us from Vrash, though maybe the little bot had sacrificed himself to defeat the Revenant. If so, we owed it to him to repair him, to bring him back. I vowed that I would.

“Sit still and tell me what is going on,” Artek ordered. I knew what he was doing, but it was working. I focused my attention on the view on the screen. On the dark shapes of deactivated cleaning bots and a hopefully equally inactive Vrash. I couldn’t speak

to Min-Ji. I only had the view, but I could reroute power from that area and prevent the bot from turning back on. My fingers flew as I did that, and Artek worked with his healing device over my chest, repairing the damage to my heart that the shock had caused.

“I can see her,” I breathed when I saw her pale face appear out of the dark, her slender fingers searching along the floor. “To the left of you,” I murmured when it appeared that she couldn’t see very well. By touch, she located Vrash’s remains, and I knew she’d screamed when her hand brushed the spindly leg of the repair bot it was attached to. I couldn’t quite make out what she was doing, but I thought that maybe she was fumbling around the many inactive cleaning bots. Was she trying to find Triff? I couldn’t tell him apart from the rest now that he was turned off. It was his behavior that made him stand out.

I shuddered in relief when I realized she was retreating, crawling backward because the space was so tight. She had Vrash’s head, as I couldn’t see it on the feed anymore. That meant the danger was over. Vrash could not control anything if he was not attached to the system. I pushed Artek’s hand away, interrupting the healing process, but it was more important to hurry to the small tunnel and assist my mate.

When I pulled her free by her ankle, my chest aching from the strain, she beamed at me with a relieved smile. “I got him!” she said, and I didn’t need to look to know which “he” she was talking about. Cradled against her chest was a silver half-orb, and the cleaning disk she exposed to me had a broken crack, held together by string—my improvised repair from before. It was definitely Triff.

I pulled her into my arms, my chest aching for different reasons. I was proud of my mate. I was happy that it was over, and sad that Triff had fallen because of Vrash’s will to survive eon’s past his lifetime. “Let me see him,” I said, and she opened her arms, and let the bot fall into her lap.

“Can you fix him?” she asked, her voice trembling. I hugged her tighter, ignoring the dead Vrash she'd tossed to the floor without any care, and focused only on the two beings that mattered most to me in this world. My mate and, damn it, the best bot on the planet. I had to make this right, but with all the scorched metal and fried circuits... it wasn't looking good.

I barely paid attention to Artek as he finished healing me with his handheld device and checked over Min-Ji to be safe. I didn't care when he announced that he'd take Vrash and dispose of him for good. When Iave and Zathar entered the control hub with their mates, Min-Ji talked to them, but I just held my mate tight and tried my best to salvage what I could of our little robot friend.

“Come on,” Min-Ji said eventually. “Your apartment is a better place for this. You've got time, Corin. As much as I'd want it, it doesn't have to be now.” She gave me a watery smile. “We won. Triff won the battle for us. Let's celebrate that.”

My clever mate was wise too. I rose with her in my arms, Triff held carefully between us. And then we went to face our happy Clanspeople as they reclaimed our home. My Haven, which we'd saved, together.

Epilogue

Corin

I'd snuck out of my apartment after claiming my mate for the first time in my nest last night. I hadn't wanted to leave her warmth, to linger in the moment, but she was not the only one who needed me. She was not the only one I needed, as I'd come to learn.

Once, I would have told everyone that I was a loner, that I didn't need anyone besides my two best friends, some relics to tinker with, and a good hunt to get the blood

pumping. But I had learned many things in the past few days: I needed my mate. She completed me, and she made me feel proud of the male I had become. I had needed to heal the bonds with the Shamans, to learn what my place was in their hierarchy. And to discover that I knew many things and that I wasn't any less for never finishing my official training.

I also needed one stubborn little robot at my side, as annoyed as I'd been with his insistent presence at first. Triff was part of my family, like Min-Ji, and nothing and no one could stop me from having all of it. Not a vengeful Queen, nor a Revenant.

After we'd celebrated our reclaiming of Haven last night with the whole Clan, I'd conceived a crazy plan. What if what the Revenant had done was possible for Triff too? What if I took his core and placed it in a new body? And what if I didn't trap Triff in a body too small for his big personality, but one that would allow him to really follow me everywhere?

That's why I'd snuck out last night and enlisted Zeidon and my friend's help to locate what I needed. Iave had been grumpy when I'd urged him from his nest, but they had all come with me to search the tunnels below Ahoshaga. I wanted to wake Min-Ji to a working Triff and see her smile with happiness, but now my heart was pounding with fear that it wouldn't work.

"You got this, Corin," Zathar said as he helped me arrange Triff's new form onto my work table. "I know this will work. But wake her. She'll want to be there for both of you." Wiser words had never been spoken. Min-Ji would want to be included in this plan. He was right, and she should be there when Triff woke up.

He left my chambers, the door whispering shut on his tail. I turned to the room with my nest and discovered that Min-Ji had huddled into a small ball at the center, furs piled high on top of her to stay warm. I also discovered that she was clutching the small amethyst core that held all of Triff's memories and his code. She clutched it

tightly to her chest, as if she were afraid to let it go.

She woke slowly, her lashes blinking sleepily over her soft brown eyes. “Come, my sweet mate,” I urged, picking her up in my arms and bundling her, furs and all, tightly against my chest. “I've got a surprise for you.”

Of course, Min-Ji's first reaction at seeing the deactivated body of a Slithrazer Revenant was to squeak in surprise, one hand flinging around my neck and clutching tightly. “Are you crazy? That thing nearly killed you last time...” I laughed because she was giving it a very suspicious once-over, but the hound-like Revenant was well and truly inactive. Zeidon and I had devised a way to zap it and shut it down without harming it permanently, and it had worked perfectly.

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“It’s okay. I’m going to put Triff in it,” I said to her as I set her down on her feet so she could watch while I worked. First, I had to open the metal skull so I could access the Revenant’s core. Then I had to find a way to attach Triff’s core inside it, so our little buddy could take full control of the Slithrazer body.

When I was ready to turn it on, I curled Min-Ji tightly in my tail for protection and backed away. We watched with bated breath to see if it worked, but for a few agonizing seconds, nothing happened. Then the Slithrazer blinked its purple eyes, and that reminded me of the blinking lights on Triff’s dome that he used to blink at us.

The four-legged creature rolled to its feet, spikes along its spine flaring up like a razor-sharp comb. Its flanks rippled beneath the velvet-looking spots on its artificial hide. Then it opened its maw, and the many teeth whirled as they spun—a deadly weapon all on its own, even if you didn’t know about the screech it could emit. I braced myself for it as the beast leaped from the table and started to slink across the floor toward us.

“Triff?” Min-Ji asked as I backed us up even further, worried that I’d made a mistake filling him. “Triff, buddy, is that you? Are you okay? I know it’s a little different, but now you can go outside all the time! Isn’t that grand?” Her voice made the beast jerk to a sudden, rather clumsy stop in the middle of the room. Then the strangest thing happened. The Slithrazer wiggled a little, and then its long, spiked tail started swaying, then wildly wagging left to right. The bot had gone completely mad.

“Triff!” Min-Ji shouted, laughing loudly and throwing herself out of my coils without warning. I chased after her when it appeared she and the Slithrazer were about to violently clash. Then, she was on her knees next to the beast, her arms around its

neck, and the bot was making odd beeping noises it was never supposed to make. Its violet eyes locked with mine, and I swore they looked happy. It worked. There was only one bot who could look at me like that, and that was Triff.

Min-Ji

Triff was like a puppy and a small pony combined into a deadly robot body. I couldn't believe that this was how Corin had decided to fix our little bot, but I had to admit that it seemed like a good idea now. Less so when I'd woken up that morning and discovered a deadly Revenant on the living-room table.

The bot was still getting used to its new body, but it certainly seemed to enjoy prancing around on its four legs on the purple Serant grass. He was making all those cute, coltish leaps and kicks that playful dogs or baby horses made. It was freaking adorable, and I wasn't the only one laughing and sighing over his antics. He had even enticed Kiwi and Buzz to come play with him. The two colorful Sleara were chasing him around and making cheerful squeaking noises in response to Triff's happy beeps.

"It's going to take some getting used to," Vera remarked. "But it's cute. I have to admit that." She wasn't so pale and wan this morning. Apparently, her morning sickness issues had started to pass—so much so, in fact, that in the early morning hours, Artek had packed up his things and left for his home. Apparently, the Shaman could only take so much company for so long.

I leaned deeper into Corin's embrace and smiled. "I think this is the best idea. He's going to love exploring the world. He's acting so much like a dog. We used to have a big Saint Bernard when I was little; he reminds me of him." Corin didn't know what kind of dog I was talking about, but Vera did, and it made her laugh and shake her head. It was a bizarre comparison. There was nothing dopey or sweet about Triff's new appearance, but he was acting that way, and that was all that mattered.

“I love you, Corin,” I said to my mate, a little louder than was strictly necessary, but I wanted everyone to know that we were officially a couple. Corin’s smirk said it all. He was on the same page and eagerly dipped his head to stake his claim with a kiss.

“And I love you, mate.” There were some sad and envious looks from our single males at the campfire, but most people weren’t surprised. Joxra was beaming a smile at me, holding his adopted Naga youngling in his arms as he fed her. Ekkire, the Water Weaver, had returned this morning and seemed completely fine with having missed out on a mate as well. He was more interested in Triff’s antics.

I did wonder what would happen next. Would the aspirants leave now that there were no single females? Would they stay for the company? Try to steal a female? I didn’t know. Whatever was going to happen, I knew I’d be facing it with Corin and Triff at my side.

Of course, such thoughts seemed to herald a change I couldn’t have predicted. The noise that streaked from the sky was deafening, sending us all ducking for cover. A ship soared overhead, huge and black, with smoking engines as it careened into a crash landing farther down the mountain.

Nothing was ever boring on Serant, and this ship was bigger than any I’d seen fall from the sky or spotted the wreckage of. This ship wasn’t completely out of control either, though it was in dire straits. Wherever it was going to hit Serant, it wasn’t going to be in pieces when it did so. Which meant... whoever was on that ship, they were going to survive.

THE END