



# The Naga Princess's Soldier Mate

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**Category:** Romance, Paranormal, Fantasy, Science Fiction

**Description:** He calls me beautiful in his husky, damaged voice. Kind. A Naga Queen has never been called kind...

Sazzie

I have hidden who I am from everyone my whole life. Turned myself into something I detest: a fighter, a brawler, a princess worthy of the Thunder Rock throne. Then I meet Reid...

A human male. A kindness in his dark eyes that I do not understand. His body, a work of art—muscles, power, and sigils that don't glow but sit like black ink tattoos on his skin. When he says I'm beautiful despite my scars, when he says I'm worthy of more than a life full of fights, I believe him.

But not everyone is willing to let me forget who I am—who I was always meant to be: an heir to the throne. And they'll kill me to get what they want.

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# Page 1

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## Prologue

### Sazzie

The Ayala had a broken paw. The poor thing was mewling pitifully from inside the small hollow it had dug beneath the roots of the tree. It was no way to hide, but it was too young to understand that crying like that would draw out the predators—predators like me. I winced at the thought, but it was true. If my mother saw me right now, sitting at the base of the tree with tears in my eyes, she'd be so furious. She'd tell me to pull myself together and take care of grabbing my dinner.

My belly clenched painfully as I thought about that, my hand lowering to scratch at the few scales still molting from my hip. I felt miserable, I felt sad, and I didn't know what to do. Listening to my mother's advice should have been my only consideration—I knew that—but everything inside me rebelled at the thought. Kill that poor little creature? That cute, fuzzy ball of fur and spikes? Honestly, there was nothing on the planet as cute as a young Ayala, with its black-and-white stripes and large brown eyes. If I could, I'd keep the little baby. I wanted it so badly that I ached, but I knew it could never happen. If I took it home, it would be in even greater danger than if I left it here, hurt and alone.

I didn't know what to do or how to help it, and I knew there was absolutely no one I could ask for help. No, that wasn't true! I suddenly recalled the Shaman and his young apprentice who had visited our village a few weeks ago. I had never seen a Shaman before, let alone Naga who weren't blue, so they'd made a huge impression. My scales were a pale azure that would still darken as I grew older—or so my mother hoped, since pale was not a desirable color. But the Shaman's apprentice, an

adolescent boy similar in age to my brother Zathar, had scales as white as snow, while the Shaman he was with had been green like the fabled Water Weavers. I liked the Shaman boy; he'd given me candied dried fruit when nobody was looking. He was nice. Would he be nice to the hurt baby Ayala?

There was only one way to find out. I raised my eyes from the tiny, moaning Ayala to glance through the canopy of trees at the rising peak of a mountain. I'd never traveled that far from the village, though nobody had told me that I was not allowed. As a Naga female, I was supposed to be tough, a warrior, and brave without exception. As a princess, I was expected to be the bravest of them all. No goodnight hugs and kisses like my father had for his sons—not for me. I was tougher than that. I didn't need them, not like Zeske needed coddling at only three moltings, with a little lantern by his nest as he fell asleep.

Swallowing roughly, I scratched away the last loose scales from my own sixth molting. Save the Ayala, I could do that. It wasn't that far to travel to the Shaman's den, was it? That mountain looked close by. Checking the straps of my spear and knife, I ensured I wouldn't lose them. Then I checked my waterskin to confirm I had water; everything was in order. Next step: pick up the injured little baby.

Nothing had prepared me for what a cornered, injured animal would do. When the Ayala bit and scratched, my instincts rose, telling me to fight back, to battle. Hissing, I bared my fangs at the beast as it clawed through my still-soft scales after the molting. Blood welled in the scratches on my hands, against my chest where I tried to hold it, even on my belly. More tears sprang from my eyes—a weakness that would get me punished if my mother saw it. A Naga princess showed no pain, no fear. She was the toughest of them all.

I chanted that in my head, over and over as I tried to control the scratching, bristling Ayala. It had raised its quills, and they were stuck in my flesh in more than one place, stinging with terrible pain that I knew I was supposed to ignore. Move, come on! This

wasn't fun, and the Ayala wasn't so cute now, but I'd made it this scared. I was responsible. It needed my help.

The injured animal tired before I did, and I would never know how close a call it had been, that little battle of endurance. My wounds ached and bled as I forced myself to hurry through the woods as fast as I could. My tail propelled me forward, my arms curled around my precious burden, and my focus locked on the mountain in the distance—the one I knew was the home of the Shaman and his apprentice. I just needed to get there. How long could it take? A few minutes? An hour? All afternoon?

I didn't count on being found; it had never crossed my mind. When I ran into Astrexa and her friends, my heart plummeted into my belly, sinking like a stone. Not her! Anyone but the awful Astrexa, who seemed to take such pleasure in tormenting me every day of my life. She was a few moltings ahead of me—so were her two friends—which made them bigger and stronger. There wasn't a day that went by when my mother, the ever-so-powerful and perfect Thunder Rock Queen, didn't remind me that Astrexa was exactly who I should aspire to be. If I did not toughen up, a female like Astrexa would kill me. My mother said if that happened, it would be exactly what I deserved.

“What have we got here?” the female hissed. Her blue scales were an envious dark blue, like some of the precious stones my mother wore in her coveted gold jewelry. “I think it's a worm—a worm with a handful of dinner.” She curled her lip in distaste and spat on the ground in front of me, an insult I knew I shouldn't allow. But my heart raced in fear, and all I wanted was for someone to sweep in and help. I wanted my brother Zathar or my dad. Fighting was awful and scary, and I was already sore from the Ayala. If I dropped it, I wasn't sure if I'd have the courage to pick it up again.

“Leave me alone, Astrexa,” I said, tilting my chin and jutting my horn at her the way I'd seen my mother do. Maybe it would work if I bluffed, but my tail was trembling

so badly you could hear it rattle against the fallen leaves that carpeted this part of the woods. “Leave me alone!” I repeated firmly, hissing at her for good measure. It just made them laugh. They mocked me, and they knew they’d get away with it. More fear soured my stomach, rising in my chest until I feared I’d throw up.

I didn’t know what to do, but I knew what I wanted: save the baby Ayala at any cost and avoid further pain. It would have been easier to drop the Ayala and run, but then word might get back to my mother about what I’d done, and she would be very disappointed. I knew what I should do, but my mind was so scared of it that I didn’t dare. My sisters called me a coward; so did some of my brothers and the rest of my peers. My mother curled her lip each time she saw me, her azure eyes filled with disappointment.

“She’s too scared, coward!” Astrexa jeered, laughing and elbowing her friend. That girl hissed and bared her fangs—not at me, but at Astrexa, warning her off for the elbow strike. That washow I should act too: fight and posture, even with my friends. If I had any friends, but I didn’t, because I was the odd one out. I knew that my brothers formed lifelong bonds with others. It wasn’t like that for me, or, as far as I’d seen, for any of the Naga females. They’d just as soon stab you in the back. No thanks. I had enough to worry about already.

“What’s going on here?” a voice suddenly demanded, a deep bass that lightened at the end of the question. It was full of authority, even though it was still in the stages of turning into that low, adult male voice. I recognized that voice in an instant, because it belonged to one of my favorite people in the entire world. Besides my father, who snuck me hugs whenever nobody was watching, Zathar was the best. As my oldest brother and the firstborn of the Queen—our mother—he was already a powerful male, and Astrexa and her friends slithered backward to give him space.

My scales eased along my spine when he settled his already huge, bulky body next to mine. His scales were a deep azure, glittering beautifully in the early Serant light.

Patterns dappled him as the violet glow filtered down on us through the canopy of leaves above us. He wore his swords, and a spear was in his hand, along with supplies strapped to his back. He was about to leave on a hunting mission, and I wished I could go with him. I'd be safe then, away from the village, without the company of my peers or our mother. Zathar didn't mind when I was scared, or when I cried at night over a bad dream.

His eyes were the exact same shade as mine—as all our siblings'—and they darted from me down to the bloody scratches and the panic-frozen Ayala. Then he glanced at Astrexa and the two females at her side. They weren't talking, but I didn't think he needed them to say anything to understand what was going on. For the first time, there was a hard cast to his normally kind expression when he looked at me. I felt tiny beneath that gaze, and my heart pounded with even more fear.

"I see," he muttered. He did not glare at Astrexa as he normally would, nor did he warn her away. With a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach, I realized that he wasn't going to protect me—not today. His long, drawn-out sigh sounded frustrated, but when he lowered himself onto his thick, muscular tail, his expression was gentle. "Give me the Ayala. What were you going to do with it, Sazzie? You know you can't keep it."

Drawing myself up taller, I tilted my chin and jutted my horn, indignant that he'd even think I'd be that stupid. "I know that!" I snapped at him, feeling safe to do so because I knew Zathar would never hurt me. "I was going to take it to the Shaman, to his apprentice Artek, so they could heal it!" I did not dare let go of the shaking, poor little creature, but I dipped slightly so Zathar could better see the broken leg. A bit of string was stuck around the paw, evidence of a snare it had been caught in, but it had managed to chew its way out. It was hurt because of one of our hunters. It could have even been hurt by one of Zathar's snares.

His mouth twitched, and I wasn't quite sure if it was because he was hiding a smile or

a frown. No, there was a twinkle in his eyes, and I offered a more hopeful smile. Was he going to help me after all? “Do you know how far it is to the Shaman’s den, little one?” he asked me. I rolled a shoulder in response, and his mouth twitched again.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said to him, stubbornly clutching the Ayala against my cut-covered chest. “She needs help, so I’m getting it.” When that made the three Naga girls snicker from their safe little distance, I shot them a belligerent glare. They didn’t care; they were mean, angry predators to anything smaller than them, and that included me. If I were stronger, I’d teach them a lesson, but they were so much bigger than me.

“I see,” Zathar said, and, with his fourteen summers under his belt, he made that sound so wise. “Give the Ayala to me. My hunting will take me close.” I glanced from his reaching hand to the small Ayala in my arms and felt the overwhelming desire to keep holding on, to refuse that kind offer. But his question made me fear that the Shaman’s den was too far away, and it would be scary alone at night. “Okay,” I said, and I shifted the Ayala in my grip so I could hand it over to him.

It struggled, refusing to go quietly. Little snarls and hisses, which sounded cute coming from such a tiny, furry creature. Zathar gripped it by the scruff of its neck, which turned out to be a much more practical method of holding a struggling Ayala. Then he opened a pouch at his side and dropped the little beast into it. I winced, certain that the indignant squeal meant it had hurt its injured paw when he did that. But, in the pouch, it was dark and quiet, and it calmed almost immediately.

“Good luck, Sazzie,” Zathar told me, and then he lowered himself enough to clasp my shoulder with his hand. “It is now or never, do you understand? Fight them, fight them with the fire you feel here.” He tapped my chest with a claw, just above the burning, aching cuts and puncture wounds. At first, I thought he meant those aches, but then I understood. He was talking about the fire I felt when I wanted to protect the Ayala. I still felt it in my veins, and it had ignited more strongly when the girls

laughed.

“You want to survive in this life? You want to be safe?” Zathar asked me. I nodded fervently—of course I did! That’s why I preferred his company over that of my sisters, and that’s why I escaped into the woods any chance I got. It wasn’t safe anywhere. “Then you must fight,” he said gently, his tone sad. “I can’t protect you forever. You must learn to protect yourself.” He raised that claw from my chest to point it at Astrexa. “Challenge her. Show her no fear. I know you’re scared; I get it. But you can’t let them know. You can’t let anyone else know. Understand?”

My eyes burned and ached, but I did not let any more tears spill. Swallowing those feelings was harder than it had been to hold the clawing, angry Ayala, but I did it. I understood everything he said; it wasn’t anything I hadn’t heard before. If I did not protect myself, no one would. I had only one choice right now.

Balling my fists, I gave him a single nod. Instead of staring after him when he turned toward the Shaman’s mountain and left, I focused my eyes on Astrexa and mustered the best glare I could. Inside, I felt like that small, injured Ayala—terrified. But Zathar was right: nobody could know that was how I felt. With a shout of rage—fueled, as my brother had told me, by the fire I’d felt when I wanted to protect the Ayala—I attacked Astrexa.

## Chapter 1

Reid



## Page 2

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My mind was hazy, filled with fire and smoke. Each thought raced but never fully formed, adding to the confusion and the nausea that rocked me. Everything was wrong—my thoughts, my body, the fire that raced through my veins, and my memories. Especially my memories. They warped and stretched, yawning wide like a dark abyss.

I was on the sands of Scrak-4, fighting the Scrakoids to the sound of a buzzing in my head. Crush the rebels, destroy them, wipe them out. The sand tasted green, like the woods that remained in Oregon, where I'd grown up. The wind scoured like sandpaper, abrading my flesh, and I wished I had scales like the Scrakoids. Blood in my mouth: coppery and stale.

Blood on my lips as I coughed, and the sound of voices in my ears. A UAR accent like my own, crisp with the military precision that had been drilled into me from the day I'd joined their ranks. A fellow soldier, a fellow human. My thoughts tumbled as the past and the present collided. There were no humans on Scrak-4, none that survived from my unit. They were all dead; I was dead.

Wires in my flesh, water in my lungs. Everything tasted like saltwater and brine, and it stung my eyes when I opened them. The lab was gray and white, bobbing around me, distorted by the thick glass of the water tank. I was submerged, and parts of me were... gone. I wanted to scream in horror, but my mouth was sealed shut, a tube down my throat. A lifeline stuck to my chest. Every nerve ending in my legs was on fire—aching, burning, exposed.

There was a face swimming in front of me: a pale oval with white hair. Black-framed glasses surrounded dark eyes—a fashion choice, vanity. Everyone could get their

eyes fixed, especially a labrat like this one. He spoke, a hand waving in a calming gesture. “Go back to sleep, Soldier. Stand down.” So I did.

My skin was clammy with cold sweats, and my legs ached as I remembered the traumas from the past. Everything was all wrong; why was the sky purple? Why did the voices around me hiss and sigh, growl and lisp? This wasn’t Scrak-4, this wasn’t the lab or a UAR med bay, and yet... I swore it looked just like any ship I’d been on as we moved from a bright outside into a darker inside. Gray metal surrounded me, flashing by above my head.

I could not move, but I saw a flash of yellow and orange. The Scrakoid were yellow, their flesh covered in tough scales capable of resisting laser pistol fire—even something as punishing as my trusty rifle. Battle readiness surged through me: my muscles grew tense, and my hands balled into fists. There were furs on top of me, soft and warm, stifling me with the heat pumping from my flesh. I fought to tilt my head, to face my enemy, to kill the bastard that had laid waste to my platoon.

“Why is he reacting like that, Elder Erish?” a voice said. Light struck me, piercing the veil that clung to my brain. Clarity filtered through at the sound of those gentle, feminine notes; that was the voice of an angel. I was not on Scrak-4, where I’d died the first time. And I was not in the lab where I had been reborn into the UAR’s Shadow Unit of secret soldiers. This was Serant.

“His mind is stuck in the past, forcing him to relive previous battles. Don’t worry, it’ll ease.” That voice was kind but male, speaking in the slow, precise cadence of a man who had seen many years. Patient in a way I never could be. He had to be a doctor—no, a Shaman. If this was Serant, that’s what they called their healers. I racked my brain for more pertinent information, but clarity was already fleeing once again, pushed aside as the surge of adrenaline started to fade.

“I see. Does it hurt him?” the beautiful, dulcet tones of the angel asked. They pushed

against my mind, that voice luring me like a siren. For that voice, I wanted to stay, to bask in her warmth and beauty, in the gentleness that emanated from it. She sounded so worried, and I wanted to tell her that I was fine, that I was tough—a soldier to the bone, able to withstand any torture to keep someone as pure as her safe.

“Hurt? I do not believe so. I have him sedated, and my hope for his recovery grows with each passing hour, though I fear the road will be long, my dear.” That was the doctor speaking, and his words brought me back to another memory, another time. It was too much for my brain, but I fought with all my might to stay with what had to be the present—to stay with the angel, my pretty light.

“He’s going to make it,” my commanding officer said, his arms crossed over his wide chest, which was covered by the silver sheen of his nano armor. Captain James Barrett was a stern but fair man, his hair going as silver at the temples as his armor. We were standing side by side in front of a glass wall, peering into the high-tech med bay aboard one of the medical ships that orbited Desert Planet Seven. Beyond the glass, medical professionals were working on one of our teammates, who had been damaged so badly that his nanobots had been unable to compensate.

“Are you sure?” I asked the Captain, and our eyes clashed—his gray, mine brown. The Captain frowned deeply as he considered my question, glancing back at the view beyond the plex glass at the badly burned and broken shape of Harrington. “The locals are not offering any resistance, so how did Harrington get hurt? You were there—what happened?”

I was not supposed to question my superior officer; I was supposed to follow orders, obey. The ultimate weapon of the UAR, the blade in the dark, the shadow in the night. We did not exist, so we could not be questioned, and we could not be denied. But this... this wasn’t right. All my instincts rebelled at what I was seeing. Desert Planet Seven did not resist UAR occupation; its inhabitants were bird-like, small, and completely pacifistic. They did not fight, and they would not have harmed Harrington

even if he started killing their young—which I knew the man would never do.

Captain Barrett's eyes narrowed, the gray of his gaze turning flinty with displeasure. "Are you questioning my command, Caldwell?" I shook my head, my hands going up defensively as I tried to figure out what the best course of action was. Question harder, and I'd be disciplined, but I couldn't escape the feeling that something was very wrong. Why were we on Desert Planet Seven, locally known as Exrata? There was nothing to fight here—at least, there shouldn't be—but Harrington's injured form belied that.

"No, sir, not at all. I just want justice for Harrington—don't you?" That placated my officer, and he gave me a short nod before returning his attention to our injured teammate. Then, the telltale drawn-out beep sounded, and we held our breath and waited. Would he pull through, or would that flatline be the end?

"We've got him, he's back!" the doctor announced, his kind, old voice tinted with heavy relief and a hint of triumph. "Let's make sure this is the last time, shall we, friends?" That question was met with several hums of agreement, more male voices blending together. I sought the one voice I wanted to hear again, but their rumbles were louder, and they blended together as they talked rapidly. Medical words—big, long, confusing. That wasn't my world; all those terms were beyond me. I heard words like stable, balance, damage, and things about recovery time, but it meant very little. Were they talking about me? Or was this about Harrington?

No, not my fellow shadow soldier. Harrington was dead and gone. He'd died on the operating table while I watched, and it was so long ago that it might as well have been a century. That's how old I felt when I thought of all the things I'd seen and paid attention to the pain and heaviness in my body. Harrington was dead, and he might as well have been murdered at the hands of my captain. It was Barrett who had pulled the trigger, Barrett who had destroyed the life of a good, honorable man.

Barret had destroyed my life too, pulling the trigger that ended it just the same as he'd done to Harrington—all to protect the secrets of the UAR. The endless might that was the United Alliance of Races: good and kind only if you blindly obeyed, and only if you were one of the three: Praxidar, Dragnell, or human. The Extratians? They were nothing but a slate to be wiped clean—bugs on a windshield.

Everything ached, but I was clearer this time than the previous times I'd surfaced. I still could not follow much of what was being said, not until a female voice cut through the clutter. "He looks better today. Will he wake soon?" she asked, unaware of the chaos that had reigned around me not that long ago. I had flatlined—I knew it—just like Harrington had flatlined in my memories. If not for that voice, that angel, I might have chosen to stop fighting what seemed inevitable. How many times could a male die and come back? There had to be a limit.

"We hope so," a voice said, not as familiar to me as that of the doctor. "He went through a rough patch, but his vitals seem much more stable now." Ah, that was good news; I certainly felt more stable. There was no pull on the back of my mind, no fog rolling in from the edges to cover my brain and push away my thoughts. No shroud of memory to hide the present. If I was not dead—and I knew I wasn't—the female voice was no angel, but I could not think of her any other way.

Twisting my head, I fought to open my eyes so I could gaze at her, searching for more of her words and her kindness. My life had been one long battle for a cause I had come to hate and for leaders who had lied and cheated. That voice was hope—hope of something true and good. I didn't know how I knew it, but it felt like that voice belonged to my new cause, and I wanted to surface from this pain so I could tell her she had my loyalty and my fealty.

"Good, that's good," she murmured, and she sounded so much closer, right at my side. With a Herculean effort, my eyes opened, and I locked my gaze on the purest of blue. Eyes like sapphires, a narrow pupil, and the softest, gentlest smile. She was

mesmerizing in her beauty; she was exactly what I expected my angel to look like. She took my breath away. “Hello, are you awake, male?” she said, her mouth tilting deeper into that welcoming smile until dimples popped in her cheeks.

Yeah, I was, but answering the call of that siren was beyond me. Exhaustion claimed me after that battle of wills, all simply to open my eyes and gaze upon her. I slipped away again, cursing furiously in my mind as I went.

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Sazzie

Sitting next to the medical nest, I rested my hands in my lap, but it was hard not to fidget as I waited. Erish thought he might wake at any moment now, and I wanted to be there when he opened his eyes. I couldn’t explain it, but meeting this human male was different; it was pulling on parts inside of me I had buried long ago.

It brought me back to a fight I’d lost, fights I’d won, and scars I’d earned. My hand fluttered to my face, my finger running over the line that bisected my left eye and dug cruelly into my cheekbone. That one was courtesy of Astrexa, like many of the scars I wore. She had always remained my rival and, for a long time, was favored by my mother—until Zathar’s brave mate had put her in her place. I grinned, my finger stroking the scar as I recalled the tiny human female digging her blunt teeth into Astrexa’s scales. Oh, that had been so glorious, and it had finally put an end to the endless fights between her and me.

I shivered, more of my scars tingling along my flesh. Most of those scars covered my front, as Naga females only fought openly, face-to-face. I thought of my rival females as backstabbers—conniving and manipulative—but there was no literal backstabbing. No, that was very frowned upon. We fought to prove our strength and declare our status in the Clan, not to end each other, though that was sometimes the result.

After what had happened with the Queen and Corin last week... I had vowed never to go back to that kind of life—Astrexa and any of the other contenders for the throne be damned. They could fight it out among themselves, but I was done. Shaman Elder Chen had granted me permission to live in the Sacred Shaman Training Grounds for as long as I wanted to remain. I hoped that was enough to deter any of Thunder Rock's females from coming after me and declaring their challenges. The Training Grounds were hidden, and they were sacred.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:15 am*

My eyes shifted from my lap to the male stretched out inside the Naga medical nest. The bed wasn't sized right for him, as it was made for a being with a long tail and coils to curl up in the round bowl. This male had legs, two of them, and large feet with five toes on each foot. They were so foreign, so weird and alien, yet I couldn't keep myself from staring. He was fascinating in his differences, beautiful even.

Reid. That's what Corin and his small human mate had called this male—Reid. The name was as foreign as the black sigils on his skin. Sigils that were always visible and formed images rather than savage, violent slashes and lines. His left arm was covered in the snarling faces of beasts I did not know, though I recognized them as predators instinctively: the fangs inside a beastly mouth, the shape of something akin to a Rakworm curled around a thick wrist, and the wild mane and sharp eyes artfully drawn in black, belonging to a very regal-looking beast.

His chest was bare, and little circles had been stuck to it by Elder Erish—relics from Serant's past that could monitor all kinds of things about his life: the steady thud of his heart, the rhythm of his breathing as his chest rose and fell. On a viewscreen, lines and images I barely understood indicated the progress of the battle waging inside his magnificent body. He looked peaceful, but war raged within him.

I did not understand any of that either; just that two foreign entities fought to control him, and only one could be the victor. I had never heard of such a thing, but Elder Erish was very sure of his diagnosis, so he had to be right. Reid seemed to be improving day by day; that alone was proof.

The deep brown of his eyes was engraved on my heart, so warm, so... I had no words for that kind of color or the look I'd seen in his eyes. I knew nobody had ever looked



at me the way he had in that one moment, four days ago, when he'd nearly died. I craved seeing it again, certain I'd imagined it. That alone was the reason I was sitting here, vigilantly keeping watch, when I could be doing so many other things. I had made a promise to Corin, one of my brother's closest friends, but even without that promise, I'd be here.

No male had ever caught my attention, nor had any male made me crave to be close or to gaze into his eyes. In that, I had been just like my sister Naga: as cold and indifferent to the males who wooed us. Not even a desire for offspring had influenced my choices, as it had with so many others. But this Reid—this human—made me want to talk to him. He made me curious about the things that had drawn my brother and his friends to the human mates they'd found.

I knew I was different, and Avrish, the lone female Shaman at the camp, had tried to approach me several times to speak. I couldn't bear to face it—not yet. But I could face this: Reid. More than anything, I wanted to know if the pull I felt between us was real or imagined. Did he feel it too?

When he started to stir, it was slowly at first, but my attention was so tuned to his large, muscled body that I noticed it right away—the change in his breathing, the slight movements of his head, and the way his fists clenched against the furs. His brown eyes flicked open quickly, leaping from sleep to full awareness. Everything about his gaze was sharp, alert, and it locked onto mine with unerring accuracy.

The desire to reach out and touch him was overwhelming. I tried to curb the impulse, but I never stood a chance. The tip of my tail curled over the edge of the nest and settled against his leg—a tiny brush of scales against warm, heated flesh. So innocent, so tiny a touch that he might not even have noticed.

“Hello, angel,” he drawled, his voice low, husky, and carrying a vulnerable rawness. “Aren't you a sight for sore eyes?” I could understand what he said word for word.

His tone held nothing but admiration, despite my visage resembling nothing of the pretty, scarless girl I'd used to be, let alone the smooth perfection of the human females I'd seen. Heat flashed through my chest, curled in my belly, and settled like a blanket around my shoulders.

"Ah, I forget," he murmured, his husky, damaged voice creaking as he lowered his tone. "You can't understand me. You don't have a translator, do you?" But I could. I understood him perfectly, and there was only one reason for that—an impossible reason.

## Chapter 2

Reid

"Ah, come on, Erish!" I said. "Just a small trip outside. These walls are driving me crazy." I'd been awake for three days, and I was starting to think I'd dreamed my angel while struck down by the fever that had gripped me. I swore she was real, but despite asking Erish, the Shaman healer, who she was, I had learned nothing. This was my next attempt to find her. Sure, I was going a little crazy stuck inside a med bay, but it was killing me not to know if she was real or not.

"You are not strong enough yet," the Shaman elder said, but he was laughing, his blind white eyes somehow managing to twinkle. For a male who supposedly couldn't see a thing, he got around very easily. When I quietly raised a hand so I could lever myself out of the nest, his tail was there. "No, you don't, boy. You are staying put until I say otherwise." When he got stern like that, I felt both inexplicably scolded and cared for at the same time. It was a very odd combination.

I curled my lip and crossed my arms, sulking over being thwarted, but the truth was that he was right. My body was a mess, and everything hurt; even my fucking hair ached. The memories of how this had happened were still tangled up inside my brain

with memories from the past. I didn't like how unbalanced that made me feel—when I couldn't even trust my own mind. It made me feel even more insecure about the existence of my angel, but there was no way I'd imagined those pretty blue eyes.

Erish sighed as he smoothed the furs back over my leg with gentle hands, his expression kind and a little melancholic as he settled himself on the edge of the medical cot—or “nest,” as he called it. “I know you want to find her,” he said, “but what if she does not want to be found?”

My heart soared in my chest at those words, and the pain that burned in my nerves every minute of the day was briefly pushed to the back of my mind. So she was real. This was as close to an admission from Erish as I was likely to get, but it was enough. In my mind, I pulled up the image of her. It was engraved in my brain; I'd never forget it: her long, dark blue hair lying in soft waves around her face and shoulders, the paler blue of the fine scales that covered her delicate features, and the intelligent gleam in her beautiful azure eyes. I never knew I was that partial to blue, but I really, really was.

“Tell her that I'd never harm her, Erish,” I said, exhaustion pulling at me as the elation ran its course. “Not my angel. I'd protect her till the day I die, and beyond.” I laughed hoarsely. “I've done death a couple of times now, so I really mean that.” Three times, by my count, I had died and somehow escaped its greedy jaws: first on Scrak-4, ending my normal military career for the UAR; then on Exrata, which ended my career as a soldier in the Shadow Unit; and then here, on Serant, as UAR-designed nanobots waged war with nanobots designed by the ancient Naga of the past.

Either I was a cat, or death really wasn't all it was cracked up to be. I was starting to grow an admirable set of whiskers at this point, but I wasn't ready to go with cat, just yet.

“That’s not something one says to a Naga female,” Erish murmured thoughtfully. “You would be better off staying away from this one. She has a particularly fierce and cruel reputation.” The words made me laugh, which made me cough, and I tasted copper in my mouth. Her? Fierce and cruel? There was no way. My angel was the kindest, gentlest of them all. She was nothing like the Naga females described by my friends back at Haven. Maybe Erish didn’t realize he’d slipped up even more, but I sure had. He was talking about her now. Pretty soon, I’d pry her name from his lips.

“I mean it,” I told him, tapping my chest in vain to ease the cough still tickling the back of my throat. Raised bumps sat beneath my skin in odd, geometric patterns there, and I still hadn’t gotten used to it. They hadn’t been there when I’d passed out in the caverns beneath Haven. They weren’t part of what made me a Shadow Unit soldier, but they were there now, a permanent reminder of the damage these conflicting nanobots were causing inside my body. “Tell her she’s safe with me. I will protect her.”

Erish did not comment on how unlikely that offer was. I was in absolutely no shape to keep anyone safe, let alone a beautiful, powerful Naga female like the one I remembered. That’s what she was: a Naga, with scales and fangs, a delicate horn jutting from her chin, and a long, sinuous tail. She was still an angel in my mind, and I doubted anything could shake that faith.

“Very well,” Erish said with a nod. “If you promise to take the sleeping medications to rest, I will pass along your message.” His smile was wry, his sightless eyes locked on a point above my head rather than my face. He wasn’t supposed to see it when I nodded, but testing him was exactly what I did. “Good,” he agreed, and his hands flew to the control unit beside my bed. Before I could process the new information I’d learned about my healer and about my angel, drugs flooded my body through my IV. It was lights out in seconds.

My vision narrowed, darkness creeping in from around the edges. Just before it

closed all the way, I swore I saw her: blue scales, a lock of silky blue hair, and a sharp, intelligent gaze as her azure eyes met mine. I dreamed not of memories this time but of my beautiful angel—and all the very non-angelic things I wanted to do to her.

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Sazzie

“You can’t keep them waiting forever,” Elder Chen said, his arms crossed over his dark blue scales, and the even darker blue robes framing his lean body. He followed me into the medical skyship, his scales making a soft, whispering sound against the metal flooring, where mine made none. As the head of the triumvirate that ran the training grounds, he was probably the most important male on the planet. Turning my back on him was rude, and it was exactly the kind of thing my mother would have done—a power play to let him know he was not the only important person around, and as a male, he was far inferior to a Queen.

But I was not a queen, and the last thing I wanted was to be like my mother, which was precisely why I was ignoring the Thunder Rock escort that waited on the outskirts of the Training Grounds—far enough away not to be sacrilegious, but close enough to be there the moment their Queen decided to leave. I’d killed their Queen, so they were waiting in vain. There was no reason for them to linger, and I was certain that a Shaman had gone out to meet them and tell them the news of the Thunder Rock Queen’s death.

“Watch me,” I snarled in frustration. I was not going back to Thunder Rock; there was nothing waiting for me there but more violence, more death, more pain. Zathar’s advice from long ago had been right; it had been the only way to survive. If not for his push, I would have died at the hands of Astrexa or one of my other female peers before long. I was done with that kind of life, and even if it meant living in exile with

the Shamans, it would be better than continuing to live a sham. I couldn't recall when I'd been happy—certainly not since my father died when I was eight summers old, maybe not even since Zathar left with the injured Ayala. I had never dared to ask my brother if the poor creature had survived.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:15 am*

My mind flashed with a pair of warm brown eyes—eyes that belonged to a human face. Rugged, despite not having any scales to cover his features and protect his fragile skin. Powerful, even though he had no tail and appeared to be lying dying inside a medical nest aboard the medical skyship. Reid. I wanted to see him, but I didn't want him to see me. It was stupid, but I was filled with fear over meeting him. What if he saw me again, and he didn't look so full of admiration? And was it vain to want that? It wasn't something a Naga female ever concerned herself with. I was convinced that if he saw me again, he'd see the Sazzie everyone else saw: the violent female who conquered all those who challenged her, the Queen's favorite heir after Astrexa's fall from grace.

“Khawla has already sent back messengers to Thunder Rock. You can't put this off, Sazzie. Before long, challengers will start to show up here. We can't have that.” Elder Chen sounded stern as he said this, and I felt a deep sense of shame wash over me. I was putting off the inevitable by not facing Khawla and his warriors—hiding like a coward again, seeking a shield to protect me from what fate seemed to have in store for me, despite how hard I tried to deny it. Zathar had taught me that no one in this world could shield me except me, and dread over what the future held clawed deep into my flesh.

“But not yet,” I said to Chen, and it was the lack of bite, of fire, that made him snap his mouth shut and nod. I liked the elder very much, even when he pushed me to act like the Naga I was. His eyes were kind now, very gentle, and the laugh wrinkles at the corners made it obvious he was rather merry than fierce. It was with kindness that he looked at me now, understanding dancing in his eyes, that made me feel hollow inside. He saw my weakness. And, being of Thunder Rock originally himself, he knew well the challenges a female there faced.

“All right, Sazzie. Not yet,” he agreed. “Are you going in today?” He gestured at the doorway to the primary healing room. I hissed, upset when I realized just how much the Elder Shaman had seen, but my hiss only made his smile grow wider. He was not a male easily intimidated, as my mother had discovered to her great frustration the previous week. My stomach flipped as I recalled the events that had taken place—the shift of my world as I ended the one female who had controlled my life, and that of many others. No, I was not going in. There would be no kindness or admiration from the human male once he learned what I’d done.

The temptation to steal a glance was too much, though, and I ducked my head around the corner. Our eyes locked, drawn by an impossible force. His eyelids dropped slowly, fluttering as though he was fighting to keep them open, and then he was out, asleep—his warrior body tense, like he was in a battle even when he was supposed to be resting. His fists curled into the furs, his head tossed back to expose the corded column of his throat. He looked like he was in pain, and, throwing all caution to the wind, I hurried into the room.

My hands found his balled fist, and it was instinctive to stroke my fingers over his heated skin, smoothing out the tension. It seemed to help when I uncurled his fingers and ran my palms up his arm to his even tenser shoulder. With several deep, shuddering breaths, his body eased. Rolling to his side, with his face aimed my way though his eyes remained closed, he finally appeared to be resting peacefully.

“Remarkable,” Elder Erish murmured, his hands lying on the blinking panel on the other side of the nest. His white gaze was aimed at the wall, but I could see from the tilt of his head that he was listening to every move I made. “That seems to help him, Sazzie. He hasn’t rested this peacefully before. I think I might finally be able to try the next part of his treatment. Could you stay?”

Stay? I didn’t want to leave. It felt good to help, and it was very obvious that what I’d just done had helped. There were days when it felt like all I did was destroy things;



this was a novel change, and it felt good. “He will remain asleep?” I asked, and when Erish confirmed this, I settled down on the edge of the cot. “Then I’ll stay.”

“Good,” Erish nodded. “I must boost his native nanobots—juice them so they start to replicate and overtake the invaders.” None of that made sense: replicate? Invaders? And what in the blazing suns was a nanobot? They had used that word a lot around Reid, but I still had no explanation for what it was or why it was harming him. I didn’t ask, though—partially because it was ingrained not to, but also because I feared I wouldn’t understand anyway.

“He wanted me to pass on a message, by the way,” Erish said with a thoughtful hum in the back of his throat. He shifted his head and looked at the doorway, though his white eyes wouldn’t be able to see that Elder Chen was still there, observing us. My scales shivered along my spine, nerves fluttering in my belly. Erish expected me to ask what, but I could not bring myself to speak.

“He said he’d protect you. That you’d be safe with him,” the Shaman eventually said, unable to keep the words to himself. I saw the smile that flitted at the corner of his mouth and felt a surge of instinctive, protective anger. Protect me? He thought that was funny, did he? A Naga female who needed a protector? But I swallowed those feelings as quickly as they rose, because neither Shaman would mock me—it wasn’t in them. That was a female thing to do, and I needed to unlearn those instincts if I wanted to be allowed to stay here.

“Thank you for letting me know,” I said as politely as I could, my throat dry. It wasn’t until he nodded and returned his focus to whatever he was doing on the strange, ancient machine that the words sank in. Protect me, keep me safe? That’s what Reid had said to Erish? It was such a strange, unheard-of offer that I struggled to wrap my head around it. Had I seen Corin and Zathar’s protectiveness of their human mates? Yes. Had I envied that? Also yes. But I was Naga and though it was my greatest wish, I was deviant for desiring that kind of thing. How had Reid known

to say that? To have an answer to the biggest desire that weighed on my heart?

As soon as he started to stir, I had to leave. I couldn't stay around a male who tempted me this much. I couldn't put him in danger, and I couldn't let him discover that I wasn't who he thought I was.

Of course, nothing ever went as planned. It seemed that this human in particular liked to throw us for a loop, doing the unexpected—the impossible. Erish had only just finished the next stage of his treatment and left when he blinked open his eyes. He caught me in that gaze, and I felt unable to move, trapped. “Ah, angel. You're here,” he said, his voice low and husky, but every word perfectly clear. My hand was still around his wrist; that was why. I knew what it meant, but...it was impossible.

### Chapter 3

Reid

Whatever Erish had said to my angel, it had worked. There she was, sitting at my side, and I hadn't felt this good in ages. My body felt easier, lighter, and some of the constant burning had faded. When I wriggled my toes beneath the furs, it didn't cause agony to spike up my spine. Progress: good. Pretty soon, I'd be out of this bed and back in fighting shape.

Thoughts and obligations filtered in now that I felt better. How were the others doing at Haven? Had I imagined Corin and Min-Ji at my side throughout some of my illness? And had everyone safely escaped the chamber we'd been locked up in for over a week? Damn, I was behind on everything. I had no clue what was going on, but those worries faded to the back of my mind when I focused on my angel's blue gaze.

“God, you're so fucking pretty. How'd you get to be so beautiful? I can't believe

you're real." Those words might have been embarrassing as they tumbled from my mouth, but then I recalled that she probably didn't speak my language. I'd quickly gotten used to the mated males understanding everything back at Haven, thanks to the mate bond. Then we'd gotten the translator updates. Chen and Erish had gone through that procedure, but I couldn't expect everyone here to have done the same. They had no reason to...did they?

"Can you understand me? Do you have translator implants?" I asked her, but though her gaze never wavered from my face, she did not reply. Her blue eyes were a mystery to me, and I wasn't used to being unable to read an expression. Still, I was pretty sure she had not understood a word I said. That only deterred me for a moment; my desire to speak to her, to learn about her, was too great to contain.

"I'm Reid," I said, and I carefully raised my right hand to tap it against my chest. I didn't move my left hand, where her fingers rested gently against my wrist. There wasn't a chance in hell I'd break that contact voluntarily. The soft brush of her scales set my blood on fire, her hand warm and proof that she was really here. She would not slip from my grasp this time. "What's your name, angel?"

She did not answer, but her blue eyes grew wider in her face, her mouth dropping open in a lovely O. The expression made my thoughts spin straight into the gutter, but I wrangled my wayward feelings back under control with a little effort. Everything she did turned me on, and I was grateful the thick furs that covered my lap hid the evidence. The last thing I wanted was to scare her away again. "Okay, angel it is. It suits you. I felt like you were watching over me before, calling me back to the land of the living. The transition has never been this...smooth."

My mind flicked to the previous times I'd escaped the clutches of death. The labs had been horrible; they had wrenched my body from the jaws of death and forced it back into their molds, reshaping me until I became the ultimate weapon—a weapon that had been matched against many different aliens who should have been too strong for

a normal human to face. That included the Naga here, all their warriors big, powerful. They would joke when we faced each other on the training field, but they always slithered away humbled.

The nanobots coursing through my veins made it so. I touched my chest again, rubbing against the triangles and squares that lay just beneath the surface. I could feel them, and they felt... they felt as if I were supposed to control them, but I couldn't. It was like something blocked me from accessing their power. The foreign Naga nanobots—they'd done too much damage.

I feared that these weird shapes beneath my skin would be the only evidence that remained of the strength the UAR had once bestowed on me. No, not bestowed—cursed, maybe. I hadn't asked for it, and it hadn't been a blessing so far—not until I'd gotten to Serant. Even then, it was debatable. I wouldn't be in this med bay if not for the experiments the UAR had performed on me.

I hadn't meant for my thoughts to slip like that, to get caught in the memories again. When my angel shifted her small fingers against my wrist, it pulled me back to the present with a rough shock. Right—med bay, Shamans, my angel, and fire in my veins—not all of it related to my sickness. There was a soft tilt to her mouth, almost a smile but not quite. It occurred to me that she looked sad, and that made my chest ache in new ways. She shouldn't look so sad; she should be smiling fully, with a cute baby in her arms or one of those pets the girls back at Haven went all gaga over. I couldn't help but think that maybe she looked sad because of me, because I was still hooked up to electrodes and an IV right now while these two competing types of nanobots duked it out inside me.

"I'm going to be okay," I said to her, my voice rasping roughly in my throat. "Last week, I was comatose; today, I'm here, talking to you, gorgeous. I couldn't be better." When I smiled, she smiled back slowly, just the barest tilt of her lips. There was a scar across her face, bisecting the ridge of her eyebrow, crossing her eye, and

digging into the upper curve of her cheek with a little divot—a claw mark. There was no mistaking it for anything else.

My brain grew hot thinking about that, but the mark looked old and well-healed. Naga females fought, that's what all the males at Haven said—which was why they liked the human girls so much. Earth girls enjoyed their protection, being coddled, hugged, loved, and all that. Naga females weren't supposed to do any of those things, but I was certain my angel was different. Call me stubborn. Heck, that was my middle name. Still, I was certain that she needed me as much as I needed her right now.

“That's better,” I agreed with her smile. “Fucking beautiful.” A million stupid, lame pickup jokes suddenly tumbled through my mind, one after the other. The kind of stuff I used to hear Harrington spout when we were on leave. Somehow, it always worked too. I doubted it would work on my angel. Besides, she deserved much better than a “Hey, did you fall from heaven?”

It should have been awkward: me lying there in bed, her sitting quietly at my side while I blabbed on. But it was nice to compliment her, to say the things I felt, because she couldn't understand. She was so sweet, letting me talk while she listened, keeping me company. Earlier, Erish had exhausted me, but sitting with her had the opposite effect. I felt stronger by the minute.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:15 am*

A sound interrupted the quiet in the med bay: noises from outside—voices talking loudly. They sounded male, but I could not hear what they said. I tried to focus my attention, canting my head for a better angle. The voices went from low, distant murmurs to shouts so fast that my head spun and my ears rang. It was as if I'd turned the volume dial from one to a hundred.

“Ouch, fuck! What the hell was that?” I clutched my hands over my ears, but the sound had already faded back to a barely discernible mumble. My angel hadn't experienced the same thing; she was sitting next to me, one arm raised as if she intended to touch my shoulder but had changed her mind. There was no discomfort in her face, no hint that sound had just blown up for her like it had for me. Great, so now my ears were fucked up, too.

“I'm okay. It's better now,” I assured her when she kept looking worried. I reached up, caught her floating hand, and boldly pressed it to the steady beat of my heart. “See? Strong as an ox. I'll be in fighting shape in no time.” I really hoped so; I hated lying in bed all day. The company of my angel helped, but I wanted to be outside again soon. I needed some sun, a good fight, and, most of all, I really wanted to seduce my angel. I couldn't do that as an invalid—not when I knew she needed my protection.

“I wish you could tell me what's going on with you. Are you a Shaman? Why are you here? Why don't you talk to me? And why do you look scared?” She hid it well, but I could sense her unease anyway—not with me, but with something else. When she tilted her head and glanced at the door, I knew it was to check for danger. She did that often, but in a casual, practiced way. I would say like a warrior, but there was something harried about the way she did it.

I knew I'd lost her when my doctor arrived. Erish slithered into the med bay with precision, his yellow-and-orange scales gleaming under the crystals embedded in the ceiling. Though blind, he pretended not to notice my angel as she fled the room. "Your readings look much better, boy," he said, pressing his leathery, wrinkled hands to the viewscreen. His claws were gnarled and bent, yet still powerful. He seemed to use his hands to read the data, though it wasn't like braille—there had to be implants or technology involved. I was impressed. But if they could do that, why couldn't they fix his eyes?

"So, I can go for a stroll now?" I remarked. I felt strong enough for it. The pain in my nerves had faded to a background hum, and my body felt itchy with the desire to move. Mostly, I wanted to race after my angel, find out where she'd gone and why she'd fled. I wanted to know why she was scared and what I could do to protect her.

"Not yet," Erish laughed. "So impatient. Look here." He pointed at something on the viewscreen. It looked like nanobots to me, replicating themselves inside my bloodstream. "They are multiplying, but they are not activating, not pushing out the invading nanobots. They should have begun to fight the foreign force, but they are not. Why?" He turned away, his hands working at the medical machines and his mind clearly elsewhere, not expecting a response.

"Those foreign nanobots—they infected me, but they must have affected the others trapped with me at the time. Are they still in their systems, too?" I asked, but my mind was not really on the answer. How distracted was Erish? Could I test my luck this time and slip away? The pull to follow my angel was beginning to feel all-consuming. She needed me, I was sure of it.

"Yes, yes," he murmured, "they would have healed the others, then deactivated when they had served their purpose. Nothing but little medical helpers. Unlike your nanobots—they do much, much more, don't they? Clever little buggers." I muffled a laugh when my implants translated his excited murmurs as 'buggers'; it fit the older

male, but I could never picture a proud warrior like Zathar saying such a thing.

Sliding the furs aside was easy. Erish did not comment on it; maybe he did not even notice. Then I shifted my weight, and he did not stop me with a clever tail when I planted my feet on the ground. The IV was disconnected with a quick yank. The electrodes had no wires, so I simply left them. Erish was still talking to himself when I started walking, his voice fading behind me as I stepped into the corridor beyond the med bay.

This was the first time I'd seen anything beyond the healing chamber, and I was a little stunned to discover I wasn't inside a cave somewhere. The med bay in Haven looked high-tech, but the hallways beyond were all stone, carved from the mountain. This was different. This was a ship—a spaceship. There was a gentle thrumming beneath my feet as I padded along the hallway barefoot—a working ship with a running engine. How was that possible?

The Naga civilization had tumbled back into the Stone Age after achieving great technological heights. They had relics from the past—working technology—but nothing like this. This was a planet that made ships crash: big, small, it didn't matter. Like a magnet, it drew them down to the surface for big, fiery explosions. The gangplank of the ship was down, leading to a massive clearing inside a lush purple forest. The sight that greeted me took my breath away.

At least a dozen serpentine-looking shuttles, short-range vessels meant for ship-to-planet travel or planetary travel. This wasn't a one-off, the ship I was standing in; this was a whole fleet of them. A small fleet made up mostly of small vessels, but there were at least two larger supply ships too. And if I wasn't mistaken, that larger, dark shape that sat like a hulking shadow to the side was a warship. It wasn't some peace-loving, healing ship, but a full-blown war vessel with a bristling weapons array, and it looked to be in top condition.



All the ships looked good—until I squinted a little and brought certain things into sharper focus. Hints of rust, a patchwork welding job on a shuttle, and tinkered parts cobbled together to repair an engine compartment. These ships looked good because they were well-maintained, but they were old.

“It’s something to see, isn’t it?” Elder Chen said. He had sidled up to me from my left with a whisper of his scales against the metal hallway flooring. He did not sound surprised to see me or upset that I’d escaped the med bay and was staring at what had to be one of the best-kept secrets on the planet.

“How long ago did it happen?” I asked, referring to whatever calamity had struck Serant and dropped their society back into the Stone Age. At least, most of their society—but clearly a small part of it had managed to cling to the highlights of the past. Chen crossed his arms over his chest and propped himself against the open hatchway next to me in a casual, relaxed pose. His tail curled beneath him, forming a seat for him to sit on comfortably. He wasn’t planning on going anywhere, which meant he was willing to talk.

“Two thousand cycles of our planet,” he said eventually. “Give or take a few years.” I stared at the ships, baffled by the possibility that they could be that old and somehow still function. Technology was good, and it got better at repairing itself the more advanced a species became, but this? How much careful work had gone into maintaining these ships?

My mind flashed to the Revenants that roamed certain parts of Serant—giant, self-thinking warmachines that still attacked any Naga on sight. Or, closer to home, the robot Vrash: a Revenant shaped like a Naga that had tried to take control of Haven and destroy my friends. That particular Revenant was the reason I was here, sick from the invading Naga nanobots he’d pumped like gas into the chamber where we’d been trapped.

“That’s a long time. Do you know what happened?” I asked, tilting my head to glance away from the center of the camp, where most of the activity was happening. I’d seen no sign of blue other than the old Shaman at my side—no sign of my angel. Impatience simmered through me, itching to go find her, certain she was in danger, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that this was going to be the only time the Shaman was willing to share anything either.

Chen rolled a shoulder and jutted the bone-white horn that grew from his chin forward. It looked like a goatee, but made of sharp bone, and it put my currently rather wild beard growth to shame. I needed a shave and a haircut, but that would have to wait until after I’d rescued my angel. Maybe Chen knew where she was; that was going to be my next question.

The older Shaman shifted forward on his coiled tail to look at the crowd of Naga gathered beneath a central tent in the middle of the encampment of ships. I could see young Naga and old, all talking together and gesturing as they spoke. It was obvious they were excited, but about what? I didn’t dare focus too closely on them, fearing that doing so would cause my hearing to go haywire a second time.

“Several things,” Chen said in a contemplative tone. “This planet, as far as we can tell, has always had a natural type of EM field that fluctuates through the atmosphere. It makes... flight hard, yes?” I tilted my head up to look at the cloudless, violet-purple sky, feeling the warmth of the strange Serant sun as it brushed against my skin. An EM field? It would explain why ships seemed to crash to the Serant surface with alarming frequency—our shuttle included, which had crashed a little over four months ago.

“Our histories indicate war followed our first successful spaceflight and contact with other alien species. Not, mind you, with those other species, but with our own. Then there was a pole shift, and here we are.” He held out his palms to indicate the camp or maybe the planet in general. I tried to think about what that would have entailed; it

wasn't hard. I knew firsthand how devastating war could be, but I didn't know what a pole shift would do to a civilization. Was that good or bad? Probably bad—it sure sounded bad.

“But you're not here for a history lesson, are you, boy?” the Shaman added, laugh lines crinkling around his eyes as he pierced me with a sharp blue gaze. He and my angel were both from Thunder Rock, though Shamans seemed to forgo any alliance to their Clan. “You're looking for Sazzie,” he added when my restless eyes slipped from him back to the crowd of busily and loudly conversing Naga at the center of the camp. She was not there—I knew it. But where else could she have gone?

“So that's her name, Sazzie?” I said, testing the sound on my tongue. It felt good, sounded even better, and it suited her. Sazzie made her seem sassy, and now I was dying to find out if she would sass back at me if I teased her. “Is she in there? What are they so excited about?” My legs were starting to cramp from standing upright as long as I had, the kind of cramp that came from muscle fatigue. I knew I'd been out awhile, but not that long, had I? If I wanted to find and help my angel, I needed to get a move on before I made a fool of myself.

Chen shook his head, his kind smile growing into an outright grin. “They're excited because our recon group just got back—they were investigating a major skyship crash from a few days ago.” I processed the information: a skyship crash. Not strange. Also, not a surprise that the Shamans on this planet would keep a handle on those crashes by investigating them. But it really wasn't important, was it? I needed to find my angel—now.

“Sazzie is not in there,” Chen relented, chuckling outright as I paced forward, down the gangplank. My impatience was obvious, and I didn't care if it was rude. I turned to him and urged him on with my hand. “She's gone to meet with her challengers. Go that way. I will stall Erish.” He laughed when I didn't even thank him but broke into a run. I was glad he was on my side, but none of his words eased my worry.

Ignoring the surprised shouts and gasps as I dashed through the Naga camp, my legs burned and ached at first, but then settled into a familiar, steady rhythm. I was a fast runner, zigzagging around the shuttles and darting into the woods beyond. Even while dreading the onslaught of sound that had occurred in the med bay, I strained my ears, focusing on any sign of Sazzie and those she was supposed to meet. Challengers? What did that mean? This was why she'd been scared earlier, wasn't it? Not on my watch.

## Chapter 4

Sazzie

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:15 am*

The camp was in a state of great excitement, and it made for the perfect cover to slip away unnoticed. Let them talk about fallen skyships and what sounded like many survivors. I did not care. No, that wasn't true. A part of me was as curious as they were—it wanted to turn around, go back, and ask questions. Survivors? Of a skyship? It was unheard of. It had only happened once before, as far as I knew.

My mind instantly flashed to the human male in med bay, the male I'd left only moments ago. He was one of the survivors from the last incident, and that seemed just as miraculous. It felt like a dream, sitting at his side while he was awake, while he talked. Oh...the things he'd said. He thought I couldn't understand him, but I could, and I had never been talked to the way he'd talked to me. Beautiful? Kind? Sexy? Gorgeous? Those were not words that I'd ever consider using to describe myself. I was a Naga female, first and foremost, and one covered in countless battle scars—scars that detailed a life filled with near-daily fights to keep my place on the food chain. How could he find me beautiful?

The scales along my spine shivered with unease and dread. I was about to step back into the very life I had been trying to escape. Elder Chen had made it clear that I had no choice but to face this head-on, or it could put the entire camp in danger. He would not allow me to stay if it risked the sanctity of the Sacred Shaman Training Grounds. I didn't want to do this, but I also could not let my problems taint what the Shamans had built. They could move—relocate their camp at a moment's notice—but if too many challengers came here, it could expose the secrets I had sworn to keep before being allowed inside the camp.

Drawing a deep, shuddering breath, I forced myself to cross the final distance between myself and Khawla's last known location. He had said he'd remain until I

was ready to assume my role as the new Queen of Thunder Rock. The way he had said it made me feel like assuming that mantle was my only choice, but I refused. I would not be like my mother, and I was done fighting. This was about telling everyone I wasn't standing in their way—that they could challenge each other and leave me out of it. But I knew it wasn't going to be that simple.

I never saw Khawla; his matte scales, a muddy dark blue that almost crossed into purple, gave him perfect camouflage beneath the dark purple foliage. As the Master Scout, it was no surprise he was good at hiding, but I always felt there was more to it than that. It was like he could turn invisible, like it was magic that made him disappear.

“Princess Sazzie,” he drawled, slithering out from behind the trunk of a tree that couldn't possibly be big enough to conceal all of his bulk. His long, thick tail coiled in a sinuous, undulating motion as he blocked my path, his spear lowered horizontally across his body. He dipped into a bow, folding his body across the solid wooden staff of his preferred weapon. I had always thought Khawla was as deep and mysterious as a pool of water, hiding what he thought behind the irregular amethyst of his eyes. This male was cunning and clever, and he held his own agenda. I wasn't sure what to think of him or his continued presence.

“Master Scout,” I responded, freezing in place, uncertain what to do with the deference he appeared to show. It had to be an act, because I could not fathom why this male would prefer me as Queen over any of the other females from the village. His own mate was a prime candidate herself; she had always won her challenges. It would not surprise me if she was here with the others to face me now. So I could not trust Khawla—not for a minute. I had to assume he would work to establish his mate as Queen.

“They arrived last night,” he said solemnly, shifting his spear to indicate the spiral of smoke rising from between the trees behind him. “Made camp at that clearing. Too

close.” I did not ask him what he meant by ‘too close.’ It could mean a number of things, and I was too nervous to give it much thought. Too close to the Shaman Training Grounds? Did he know the secrets of the Shaman camp? I would not put it past this male to have been able to sneak up to the perimeter and see it all. But at the same time, Khawla tended to be a stickler for the rules; I did not think he would do such a thing.

“Thank you,” I murmured, my mouth going dry as bone as I moved around him to head where he’d pointed. The smokestack was an obvious beacon, and it would not surprise me if all the females who wished to challenge me had gathered there. They had probably fought among themselves to decide in what order each of them would be allowed to face me. Another shiver shook me, my scales whispering as they rubbed together along my spine. I pretended not to see the surprised look in Khawla’s eyes as he followed me to the camp.

When I got there, I had to agree with his ‘too close’ assessment. They had set up on a hillside, which permitted them a view over the woods, possibly allowing them to see all the way to the clearing where the Shaman camp was located. This came too close to allowing females not yet Queen to discover the truth the Shamans hid—the history they kept alive by living inside the skyship relics, by flying them, and by using them as easily as breathing. My stomach clenched painfully in my belly; that was my fault. I should have left as Khawla had suggested, taken these challenges elsewhere. Too late now.

After my mother had died, I’d received her key to the camp from Chen, and it burned against my chest now. A simple little disk of silver on a string, always hidden by the many gold- and jewel-encrusted necklaces my mother wore. I wore no adornments and, thus, did not benefit from the jewelry’s protective effects. The disk was plain to see for anyone who cared to look. Pausing just before I would be visible from the clearing, I pulled the worn leather cord over my head and tucked the disk safely into a pouch at my hip. Better. Khawla stared—of course, he did—but he did not ask, and

when I haughtily raised my chin, he quickly averted his eyes.

I slipped from beneath the trees into the clearing silently, my ears picking up the sounds of raised voices and the hiss and clash of an ongoing fight. It was exactly as I'd imagined—at least half a dozen Thunder Rock females, and they were deciding the challenge order by battling it out among themselves. Astrexa, always my biggest nemesis, had fallen steeply from grace, but I was not surprised she was here. Defeating the crown princess, the heir, would restore her reputation; she'd be extremely motivated and dangerous. It was clearly visible in the vicious way she fought with her opponent, Scraikee.

The pair fighting did not appear to notice my arrival, but the other four females definitely did. They fell silent, their ongoing argument abruptly ending as they focused their blue eyes on me. Their various shades of blue to bluish gray were as familiar as they were threatening. All my life, I'd been surrounded by Naga with shades of that color—like my father, my brothers, and, yes, my sisters and my Clan. There had never been another home, but seeing them made me feel so unsafe that I also knew I never wanted to go back.

The word “home” brought forth only one image in my head—a thoroughly distracting image, given the situation: Reid's brown eyes and the memory of his marked, muscled chest as he lay on the medical nest. Only, thinking of him in a nest made my stomach heat with a sharp burst of arousal, unlike any I'd ever experienced before. What would it be like to curl up next to him? To press my head to his chest, hear his heartbeat, and feel the shelter of his arms around me?

Proving how bad a time it was to get distracted, the female in the lead struck at me—thankfully verbally—while I was daydreaming. “Ah, there she is! The new Queen. Done hiding, Sazzie?” She must have been the winner, the one who got to go first, because she charged down the hill toward me with an excited gleam in her eye. The last time we'd clashed, I'd come out on top, but it had been a very close call.



“Evarah,” I said, forcing my voice to turn sharp and cold. I couldn’t show fear; if I did, it was over before it began. That gleam in her eye made me feel like she wasn’t going to back down from a fight, no matter what I said. “Not hiding. Mourning! That was my mother, if you recall. Or have you been so hungry for power that you forgot to grieve for your Queen?” I drove that barb in as hard as I could, and it halted Evarah a few feet away from me. She hissed but dipped into an appropriate bow and tapped her arms with her claws in a sign of respect and mourning.

“Shame on all of you!” I said, raising myself a little taller. I opened my arms out at my sides. “None of you are wearing mourning sashes or colors. None of you shed your adornments in respect for the Queen’s passing! Are you all so hungry for the throne that you forgot how to pay your respects?” A hush settled over the females; even the pair fighting slowed down to stare at me. That silence was only interrupted by a flock of birds taking off behind me, cawing loudly as they fluttered into the sky in a panicked disarray that quickly fell into formation.

One female in the back raised her hands to her neck as if she were going to shed her strands of gold on the spot; the others were frozen in place. Evarah curled her lip first, but it was Astrexa—always my biggest opponent—who actually hissed in anger. She did not speak up, though; she knew her place in the recently determined pecking order, and it wasn’t at the top. I took at least a little satisfaction from that, but it could not outweigh the dread that filled me. This was going to be a fight no matter what I said. I hated it.

“I am not done mourning,” I said, and I swept my hand over my bare chest, covered only by a plain leather bandeau. I’d shed all the shiny gold things I’d worn as much as armor as because I liked them. Doing so had made me feel lighter, more myself than I had in years. It had nothing to do with mourning the death of the mother I hated and had killed myself. But it was the custom to forgo adornments for at least a week after the death of a Queen; none of them had done so.

“And I will not be ascending the throne. You lot can fight for the title. I am done, and I am leaving Thunder Rock.” My declaration seemed to evoke silence—not just from the eager, fight-ready females, but from the woods around me. A silence that felt deadly, ominous. Turning my back on Evarah was a dangerous risk, but it was the only move I could make to drive home my point: dismiss them, leave, and never look back.

It was hard to suppress the instinct to twitch my scales with unease, and harder still to keep moving when I had exposed myself so thoroughly to the most dangerous challenger of them all. With a shriek of outrage, Evarah charged after me. She was younger than some of the others: hot-tempered and very strong. She was only a handful of summers younger than I and very eager to prove herself. As she flung herself into my path, she had enough grace not to attack my exposed back, but she had her claws out, and her fangs gleamed with a hint of venom. “No! We must defeat you for our claims to be legitimate! You cannot escape this, coward!”

It was a dizzying reminder of the past, of a fight I’d tried to avoid long ago. It hadn’t worked then, and, like I’d already known, it wouldn’t work now. “Coward?” I said, hissing through my teeth in what was supposed to be mockery but really masked my fear. They were going to kill me; Evarah was going to kill me for this. She was insulted that I refused her challenge. “No, just disinterested. Go on, fight Astrexa or Scraikee; they want it. Not me, I’m not the Queen, I will never be the Queen. Now get out of my way!” I slashed my claws at her belly, catching her by surprise, and the scent of her blood curled into the air.

Her attempt to dodge had come too late, but she followed through on the motion anyway, coiling aside. I took full advantage, rushing past her to escape, my heart pounding in my chest and fear coating my tongue with a bitter taste. Evarah was not the only one who roared with anger, and, as I passed Khawla, I could see his expression shift from confusion to worry. So he cared, at least a little. And now he was going to be the witness to my demise.

I felt the brush of air against my back as Evarah came after me, and then the world turned on its head. Something struck me on the shoulder with enough force to send me tumbling to the ground and rolling across the moss. I came up ready for a fight, my claws out in front of my chest, but then floundered at the sight that met my eyes.

Evarah was on her back, pinned to the ground, and a figure towered over her. It took me a long moment to figure out what I was seeing, because I had never seen him standing upright before: Reid, with the heel of his bare foot pinning Evarah's sharp chin horn against her vulnerable neck. He stood over her, arms out at his sides, muscles straining along his back, chest heaving, and his black hair a wild, tumbled mess. "Stayawayfromher!" he roared, his words slurring together, undecipherable but crystal-clear nonetheless. I knew their meaning without touching him.

He looked like the brightest, strongest, most wonderful being I'd ever seen. So strong, so wild, and here to protect me. ME. Tears welled up, which I fought to squash, but my chest felt tight and warm, struggling to come to terms with what I was seeing. Then horror followed. No, Reid was sick; he couldn't be here! Once Evarah twisted from that chokehold, she was going to kill him! He was a big male for a human, his arms roped with muscle, his abdomen ridged, his pectorals thick slabs. But how could he possibly stand against half a dozen enraged Naga females?

Evarah howled in outrage beneath his foot, her claws curling around his ankle and digging into his skin. I saw how blood welled at several points, running in rivulets down his tanned skin. She was bucking and straining, her arms bulging as she tried to wrest him off her, but he wasn't moving. It didn't even look like he'd noticed the bite of her claws or the way she tried to twist his leg. Was there power in those appendages I did not know about? Was it that different from a tail?

Reid planted his fists on his hips, accentuating the narrowness of his waist compared to his massive shoulders. He spoke, but nobody could understand what he was saying. His words resounded in a dark, booming voice that sent a tingle through my body in

all the right places. That was power—the way he spoke—and it was intimidating. The handful of Naga females gathered in the clearing stared at him, motionless, and I realized they were uncertain how to proceed. Khawla had been joined by two more Thunder Rock males, who watched the scene unfold from beneath the trees but did not interfere.

Rising, I smoothed my hands over my hips and straightened my belt of pouches. I didn't want to approach the pinned Evarah, certain that, if I got too close, she'd try to strike at me rather than Reid, which was surprisingly ineffective. The temptation to slip the tip of my tail against Reid's skin so I could understand what he said was too great. Staying out of Evarah's range was impossible; her tail was as long as mine, but her claws were the real danger. She did not pay me any attention when I stayed far behind Reid and only used my tail to make contact with the edge of his foot, the one planted solidly on the moss next to Evarah's shoulder.

"There are going to be no challenges," Reid said loudly, his head swiveling around the clearing so he could pin each of the other Naga females with a dark-eyed glare. "Not unless you want to go through me first," he warned. "I'd like that very much. I've been itching for a good fight. Try me; I fucking dare you." He was crazy. That was the only explanation. He might have caught Evarah by surprise, but the others weren't going to be as easy to defeat.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:15 am*

“What does that mongrel want?” one of the remaining females snarled, daring to be bolder when Reid didn’t seem to make any further moves. We were all familiar with posturing and loudly talking to intimidate, so they might have felt like they were getting back on somewhat familiar ground. In any case, they were all looking at me as if I had the answers, and I wasn’t sure if I should reveal that I knew what he’d said.

It was Khawla’s mate, and she flicked her long, dark blue hair over her shoulder and shimmied a little closer, disdain on her face. “Well? You’re touching him, so I assume you understand him. That’s how it works, right? Mates understand each other. Figures you’d get matched with a filthy mongrel like this.” To underscore her words, she flicked out her clawed fingers and indicated Reid.

Reid proved to have understood everything Kusha had said, courtesy of the technology that he and the Elder Shamans had implanted in their brains. It could just as easily mean nothing, but the others wouldn’t understand that—and they were right. Kusha’s disgust over such a match made fury simmer in my belly and it made me reckless. When Reid shifted his eyes from Kusha to me in a quick glance, I knew he was trying to see in my eyes whether what she’d said was true. Then, he jabbed a finger at the female and growled, “Sure, call me mongrel, call me names—I don’t care. But you do not talk to Sazzie with that tone. Try again, and I’ll wipe that smirk right off your damn face. Got it?”

The way his fists curled, the way his chest seemed to swell with power, the geometrical markings beneath his skin shifting and warping—I knew he spoke the truth. He was ready to give Kusha the fight of her life if she didn’t change her tune. Ah, stars, why did that make me feel so good inside? Why did that make me feel like I was worthy and like I was safe?

I moved a little closer to Reid—not quite at his side, but slightly behind him and still out of reach of Evarah’s claws. “There are not going to be any challenges,” I said carefully, my tone as calm and neutral as I could make it. If I could, I wanted to keep Reid in the dark about my ability to understand him. If he knew, I had a feeling he would be relentless in pursuing the mate bond, and I couldn’t shackle him to a female like me: a killer, a brawler without a single soft edge, tainted by the past. I was not his pretty ‘angel,’ and I was not tender or beautiful. The thought that he’d be disappointed when he discovered those truths was killing me.

“I am standing down. I do not wish for the throne. You will leave right this instant.” When that made Kusha and Astrexa hiss with displeasure, I gestured at Reid. “Do you want to test him?” On cue, he leaned forward and snapped a hand toward Kusha, and, in reflex, she startled back.

“Hide behind your mate, coward!” Astrexa snarled as she pushed past the female she’d been fighting when I arrived. The action made Scraikee hiss and snap her teeth, but she must have been the loser of the fight, for she did not attack Astrexa over the slight. “Nothing has changed, has it? Are you hiding an injured Ayala in the bushes somewhere? Is your brother going to come to your aid? Zathar is banished; he can’t help you now.” She tapped a claw against her pouty bottom lip when I did not rise to any of her bait. The others did not silence her, so she grew bolder. “You might have fooled some of us over the past few years, but I’ve always seen the true you! You did not deserve the title of princess, and you do not deserve to be Queen!”

With a final, furious snarl, she leaped forward, hands outstretched. It was clear she meant to come around Reid and straight for me. As fast as she was, she should have made it. Reid was faster. He collided with her with a furious shout, curse words spilling from his lips, though I could no longer understand them. They tangled as they fought, Astrexa coiling around him and clawing at his back. Khawla and his males lowered their spears, hissing, but they did not know what to do. Then Evarah rose in furious humiliation at my side, and I was too late to see that threat, my eyes locked

with the supposedly sick, fragile human male who was somehow standing his ground—and more than that, he was gaining, winning.

## Chapter 5

Reid

My Sazzie was in trouble—big trouble. All my senses were heightened, my heart pumping steadily in my chest, and the nanobots were finally doing as they should. I could hear every sound, every breath, moan, and scream. I tasted the copper of blood on my tongue, and though I felt the bite of my injuries, they meant absolutely nothing to me. These Naga females were not nearly as big as the Naga hunters I regularly sparred with back at Haven. My opponent would not have stood a chance if I had fought her before this strange illness, but today? I was grinding her to dust beneath my fists.

Tossing her aside when she passed out from a simple chokehold, I spun and located my angel. She was pinned face-down beneath the female I'd first attacked when I arrived—a show of force to make it clear I meant business. They might not understand me, but I could hear every word they said. Sazzie did not want to fight with any of them, and they would not leave her in peace. “Princess,” “Queen”—those words had been thrown around, but they made little sense. Wasn't my Sazzie a Shaman? Or maybe an apprentice? I'd even fantasized that she didn't speak because she'd taken a vow of silence, but clearly, that was not true. She'd spoken to these females, so it was just me she didn't want to talk to. It was a silly fantasy anyway because it was her voice that had drawn me back to the land of the living in the first place.

“Let her go, right now!” I warned. When the three Naga males present started to move forward, as if they intended to stop me, I growled. The one in the lead was oddly colored—his scales a hue between blue and purple, with a dullness that made

them seem matte. He froze, but the other two kept going. Nobody stood between my angel and me, especially when she was in danger.

With speed I shouldn't have, I darted forward and felled the first warrior with a precise blow to his neck. He never saw me coming. The other raised his spear, but I dodged; his movements seemed so slow it was preposterous. I grabbed the shaft of his weapon with my fists and snapped the heavy pole in two. With the broken, blunted end, I slammed him in the center of his chest, and he crashed to the forest floor like a ton of bricks.

Their leader was backing away, a grin on his face, a glint in his eyes, and his hands open at his sides in a typical Naga sign of surrender. With my senses as wide open as they were, I could hear the excited thud of his heartbeat and read every minute movement in his expression. He was pleased, which meant he was no threat right now. Dismissing him from my mind, I flung myself on top of the dark, serpentine shape that was pinning my angel to the forest floor. She had clawed Sazzie all along her spine and back, creating deep, possibly deadly furrows in her delicate, azure scales.

This attacking female weighed nothing as I picked her up and flung her away. She crashed through the underbrush, then into a tree, and did not get up again, though I could still hear her heart pumping inside her chest. "Sazzie, my sweet angel, are you okay?" I asked as I went down on my knees next to her prone form and gently touched her shoulder. Her wounds looked bad—she'd been caught by surprise, stabbed in the back by that traitorous female. When she rolled her head toward me and gave me the slightest nod, her blue eyes were filled with tears she was fighting to hold back.

Twisting my head, I gave the downed viper a death glare, but she was still out cold. Turning to the others still hovering in the clearing, I bared my teeth. "Try that again, and I'll kill all of you. Female or not, I'll have no fucking mercy." They might not



understand my words, but I was certain my threat came across loud and clear. In the past, I might have felt guilty about threatening a woman, but on Serant, the rules were very different.

Sazzie made a soft, shuddering noise, and then I saw her move her arms as if she intended to push herself up. I was having none of that; she was injured and needed medical help as soon as possible. I dipped my arms gently beneath her hips and shoulders, rolling her into my grip with surprising ease. I had once tried to help carry Zeidon, the badly injured Water Weaver male who had been out cold—and as heavy as a freight truck. Sazzie, in comparison, was light as a feather when I stood up with her cradled bridal style in my arms.

Her long, elegant tail draped over my left arm and down to the ground; it would drag across the forest floor when I started walking. “Why don’t you curl that around my shoulders, angel?” I remarked, offering her a light-hearted grin I didn’t feel. My worry for her overruled everything, but I did not want to frighten her. Proving that she understood me perfectly—though she’d tried to hide it earlier—she lifted her slender tail and slid it in a loop around my waist, then up around my shoulders. I tried very hard to pretend that the sensation of her scales as they slid over my bare skin did not turn me on; I was certain I failed.

I started walking, then jogging back to the Shaman camp, hoping the physical exercise would make my rampant cock go down before my pretty angel noticed. She was staring up at my face with an expression I wanted to think indicated awe. There was pain too, evident in the furrows at the corners of her eyes and the pinch between the delicate nubbed ridges of her brows. All her silky azure hair hung in a cascading wave over my arm, and as I jogged, it swayed and brushed against my hip with tantalizing strokes. All my nerves were on fire for her, and after the heat of battle, that fire was steadily morphing into lust. I could not get enough of her scent, was dying to taste the delicate lushness of her bottom lip.

“Hang on, angel,” I told her. “We’ll be back at the camp soon. Good old Erish will take good care of you. I’ve got you.” Focusing on the care she needed helped to keep me going. If I faltered a step, I knew I’d claim her mouth. That would be wrong; she was badly injured. I could not let my desire overrule her needs. When she raised her hand and gently trailed her fingers over my shoulder and up the side of my neck, my resolve almost broke. Damn it, that felt so good. I felt it a thousand times over, far more intensely than I’d ever felt anything before.

“Why did you do that? I thought you were sick...” she murmured softly. Her eyes were searching mine, trying to find the answers. Maybe she was trying to find out how I was doing. I had to admit, a few hours ago, I never would have thought myself able to get into a fight and win, let alone travel through the woods at something that far surpassed my previous running speeds.

I felt alive, powerful, stronger. I knew it was my nanobots. Erish had forced them to replicate inside my body so they could drive out the invaders. I had never had this many nanobots in my system as I did now. I could feel them beneath my skin, see them in the shapes that pressed against the flesh on my chest. They were doing this, enhancing me beyond anything the scientists who had created them had ever managed.

We were almost at the camp when I caught a flash of red from the corner of my eye. Red scales. I froze in place, then swung us around and ducked to press my back against the cover of a nearby tree. My precious cargo I pressed closer against my chest, urging her to put her arms around my neck. “I know your back hurts, sweetheart. I need you to hold on. Can you do that? Can you be strong for me, angel?” She bit her bottom lip, and my damn cock surged again in my pants. Clearly, my body didn’t know the difference between fight and fuck.

“What did you see?” she asked, her voice pitched in a low whisper. She’d given up pretending she couldn’t understand me—good—and she proved to be as smart as I

thought she was; she sensed the danger too. Leaning to the side, I angled my head and peered around the tree, searching the lush purple and gray foliage for another hint of the red I'd seen. There it was, not even well hidden, and once I'd picked out one shape, my vision sharpened, and I counted a dozen more.

“Ah, fuck. Bitter Storm warriors. How did they get here? Isn't the Shaman camp supposed to be secret? Seems to me a few too many know its location.” My words made her eyes grow huge in her face, and if she were human, I was certain her skin would have gone pale. I thought maybe some of the scales beneath her eyes did go silvery, and she definitely shivered. Holding her, I could feel how the scales along her spine raised with her unease, and that made her hiss out a pained breath as the motion aggravated her injuries.

“This is all my fault,” Sazzie murmured. “Please, we have to hurry and warn Elder Chen. Bitter Storm is not supposed to know about this place!” Her fear and panic were very real, and it was very obvious that she blamed herself for this development—the watery glint in her eyes and the rapid pulse at her throat betrayed her feelings. Why would she think that? What did Bitter Storm want with my angel? I felt a surge of energy go through my body, strength concentrating in my core muscles as I prepared for a confrontation. If those warriors wanted my woman, they were in for one hell of a fight. Nobody was taking Sazzie anywhere—nobody but me.

“I count a dozen, including a scrawny fellow missing his front teeth. How odd.” I also saw that they were more interested in the plumes of smoke from the Shaman camp and the single campfire from the Thunder Rock females. They had not noticed us, and I wasn't going to let them. The Naga had a strong sense of smell, though, and Sazzie's wounds were severe and still dripping blood. We were leaving an obvious trail, and if the wind turned and blew their way, they'd know we were there in a heartbeat.

Backing away, I made my footsteps quiet against the moss. Without shoes, it was far

easier to sneak around than when wearing my combat boots. To be sure they did not track us, I looped back once, then circled around several large boulders so there was cover between us and the enemy force. When I crossed with my angel into the perimeter of the camp, I felt the tingle of the sensors and knew we'd have a greeting committee soon.

They came rushing around one of the smaller shuttles parked at the edge of the large clearing. Chen was in the lead, but several of the younger camp residents surrounded him. They weren't taking any chances, and several of the males held weapons—guns, if I wasn't mistaken. "Ah, Reid!" Chen said with obvious relief. "Bring her here, quickly now." I was only too happy to follow the older Shaman back into the camp, but an odd wash of trepidation came over me when I caught sight of the large medical ship.

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Obviously, that's where I needed to take my angel, but that place felt like a trap—one I could not escape. It was a fanciful, stupid thought. A trap? Why would I think that when Erish and his healing hands had been the only things saving me from death this time around? The medical ship and its abilities had been my salvation, and the cure had made me stronger—more powerful than I'd ever been: the super soldier that the UAR had only been able to dream of.

“Bitter Storm warriors,” I said to Chen as I made myself walk up the gangplank behind him. The metal had heated in the sunlight and warmed the soles of my feet, which had gotten wet and cold from the trek through the marshy woods. The warmth soaking into me made all the muscles in my legs feel heavy, and suddenly, they started trembling with fatigue. Oh no, that wasn't good. “A dozen of them in the woods.”

Sazzie had been quiet so far, and her voice sounded thready and thin when she spoke up now. Her head was lying limply against my chest; she was fading and in pain. “They must have followed the Thunder Rock challengers. I'm so sorry, Elder Chen. This is all my fault.” I rumbled a shushing noise at her. She was not responsible for the choices others made; she had not asked to be challenged. I still did not know what exactly those Naga females were challenging her for, but Sazzie had made her choice, and I was going to make sure they respected that.

Chen said nothing, but from his expression, I gathered that he did not disagree with my angel's statement. Screw him; he was wrong, wise man or not. Sazzie didn't want to bring danger to anyone. She was kind and sweet. She was not to blame for seeking sanctuary where she could find it. Serant was harsh and cruel, especially their women. Sazzie was too tender-hearted for all of that. But I was here now, and I was

going to fix this. I was going to protect her—right after I took a nice, long nap.

It was an effort to take the final steps into the primary med bay on the ship, and by the time I started to gently lower my angel onto her belly on a cot, she no longer felt as light as a feather. Not that I'd ever dare to call her heavy, but... my arms didn't want to obey; they couldn't carry on much longer. The trembling in my legs had spread, and as soon as Sazzie was safely in the nest, they gave out. "Erish," I said, and my words sounded oddly fuzzy, slurred. "Take good care of my angel, will you?" This felt like I was drunk, in the not-so-fun passing-out stage of drinking. My vision was as blurry as my voice was fuzzy, the world spinning.

The deck was approaching awfully fast. I hit it hard and then didn't recall how I'd gotten there. No pain—just sheer exhaustion as it dragged me down. A void came up, darkness wrapped around my mind, and I was out like a light.

## Chapter 6

### Sazzie

"Let me up! Damn it, Erish!" I shouted, my fists balled beneath me as I strained to get up from beneath the magical force that kept me confined to the nest. Face down, I couldn't see what was going on, but I could hear them, and I'd heard my Reid go down. I didn't know what had happened, just that he'd suddenly collapsed. Frantic with fear for him, I couldn't stay still to have my own wounds tended to; I had to help him.

The past events had seen my supposedly famous battle instincts all but fade into the background, but they were here now. Zathar was right, as always. When I knew what I was fighting for, I could do it; all the fear went away. I didn't care about my wounds, or dying, or pain—all I wanted was to know that Reid was fine. He hadn't appeared to be injured when he'd carried me through the woods; I hadn't even seen a

sign of the claw marks Evarah had made on his ankle. He'd healed in the blink of an eye. But what if he'd been injured somewhere I hadn't seen? What if Evarah had poisoned him?

The underhanded tactic of dipping claws in poison to win a challenge was low; it was frowned upon, but it was not unheard of. I wouldn't put it past Evarah or Astrexa to do something like that. "Reid! What's happening?" I begged when the magical field that trapped me against the healing nest refused to budge. I could hear Erish's machine buzz as it worked on the large gashes on my back, but I could not feel any of it. Nor could I see any of the Shamans that were in the healing chambers with me. Not Erish, not Chen, and not any of their apprentices, but I could hear their voices as they talked rapidly, hear them groan as they worked to lift my brave brown-eyed human onto a cot so they could work on him.

"Heart rate is dropping," Erish said, and that sounded ominous, even if I didn't fully understand what it meant. Dropping? Out of his chest? "How's his blood pressure, Codish?" There was a garble of noise, voices layered one over the other, and I could not quite follow what was said next. Something about no wounds (good), no poison (also good), then something about organ failure, which sounded really bad. What I definitely didn't hear was Reid himself, and I knew him, he was not a graceful patient.

When the force pinning me to the bed finally released me, I rose with a furious hiss. Silence had settled over the healing chamber by then, save for the steady beep of a relic. The chaos that had ruled when Reid first collapsed abated, but I did not trust it, and nobody had told me if he was okay. Only Erish remained, his unseeing gaze aimed slightly above my head while his hands roamed the relic beside the nest Reid lay in. Reid himself appeared to be sleeping, his chest rising and falling in a steady pattern, his expression serene.

A breath shuddered out of me at the sight, and a sudden wave of powerful feelings

rose inside my chest. It grew tight and painful, and I rubbed my knuckles against my breastbone in vain. Stars, what was this? I wanted to cry again. I was a mess today. Sliding from the nest, I stretched my muscles and tested my range of motion; all my wounds were gone. Only a slight itch remained where scales had regrown.

I was a little light-headed when I crossed the room to reach Reid's side, but I wasn't going to tell the healer about that. I refused to lie back down, not when my human might need me, and I owed him. Without him, I never would have made it out of that clearing, and if I had, I would have blundered straight into the arms of the Bitter Storm warriors. I'd always dreamed of having a protector, of not having to be so strong and hard on myself, but not at the cost of his health.

"Is he going to be all right?" I asked, my voice small now that my worst fear and anger had abated. He looked okay, like he was just taking a little nap and would leap into bright, powerful motion as soon as he woke up. I wanted that. I wanted him to wake up and look at me again, tell me those sweet things that nobody ever said to me. Call me beautiful, tell me I was safe with him.

"Why don't you lie down, Princess Sazzie?" Erish said kindly. He was pretending that I hadn't been angry throughout my entire treatment. Fine with me. I gave him a glare I knew he couldn't see, and then I gripped the edge of Reid's nest and hauled myself into it. The nest was made to fit all the long, thick coils of a Naga male, and while Reid was larger than life, he did not fill the nest the same way; there was plenty of room for me. I rested my head on his bare chest and fingered the delicate metal chain he wore around his neck, from which dangled two small metal plates.

Erish huffed; something that sounded almost like a laugh. "That's not what I meant, Your Highness," he said, his hands still on the ancient machines beside the nest, but his cloudy white eyes had lowered to settle on Reid's face. "But it will do. To answer your question: Yes, he will be fine. Whatever he did when he chased after you finally activated his nanobots. They are doing exactly what they were designed to do—and



then some. They had depleted his system of all nutrients, which caused the crash. I am devising the appropriate stabilizer for him right now.”

More fancy, difficult words and intricate explanations filled the air, but I caught the most vital message: Reid was going to be fine. He would survive—not merely from this crash, but he was also freed from the affliction that had plagued him from the very beginning. With Erish’s ingenious final treatment in place, Reid would soon be strong enough to return home, to Haven. To Zathar and his mate...

With a sigh, I huddled closer against his chest, my fist curled around his odd necklace. His arm had rolled closer, pressing against my back as if he were hugging me. I felt safe, but I also felt sad. What was I going to do when Reid left? Where would I go? Would Zathar welcome me at Haven? It would be nice to see my brother again, but I wouldn’t blame any of the males there if they considered me too much of a threat to their females. They might expect me to want to start fights, claim a position of power, and seek status. Going with Reid would also bring my problems along, and I couldn’t do that to the fragile little Clan of humans and outcasts—not if Bitter Storm was now involved.

Reid had described the odd appearance of one of the Bitter Storm males, and I knew exactly who he had been talking about. Skinny, with missing front teeth? That could only mean Aser, the only male in living memory to ever claim the title of King. The sniveling bastard who had killed the Bitter Storm Queen after her failed attack on Thunder Rock Village and sent the once-numerous Clan into civil war. Now, Bitter Storm was but a remnant of itself, scrambling to hold on, gather enough food, and maintain its massive mountain home.

My thoughts were still spinning, stuck on what Aser’s presence could mean, when I sank into sleep, lulled into a sense of calm by the steady beat of Reid’s heart beneath my head, his scent filling my nose, and his warmth soaking into my scales.

When I woke, I was groggy and disoriented. Everything was dark around me, though some tiny lights glowed like stars here and there around the room. It took me a long minute to recall where I was, but when I did, it all came back to me in a rush: Reid charging to my defense, his mighty warrior pose over a pinned Evarah, and the way he had declared that he was going to protect me. My mind flashed to the recollection of those Bitter Storm warriors—the true threat—but then it all faded to the background.

I was lying inside a soft nest, and I was not alone. When had I gotten so bold as to lie down with a male—a human male at that? He didn't just have his arm lying against my back; no, he'd actually curled it around my waist and was holding me close. His fingers feathered up and down my ribs with soft strokes, and, from the sound of his breathing, I knew he wasn't asleep.

Jerking back, I began to raise myself so I could leave the nest. What was I thinking? What was I thinking? What if he didn't like that I'd gotten this close? My thoughts spiraled quickly with my uncertainty, wondering how he could possibly want me near after the chaos and pain I'd caused. After he'd seen that I was no angel. "Hush, angel," he said, right on the heels of that last thought, echoing the words reverberating through my head. "It's okay. We're okay. And I know you can understand me. Don't try to hide it, little minx."

He did not let me get away either, his strength far greater than mine as he pulled me back against his chest. This time, it wasn't a one-armed hug, but both his arms wrapped around my waist as he hauled me close—practically on top of him. I could feel the geometrical shapes beneath his skin; there were more of them now than before. I could also feel a hot, thick bar pressing against my hip, and I didn't know what to make of that. If it was what I thought it was, it shouldn't have made me feel all weak-limbed—it should have made me feel angry. He was shaming himself, and me, by showing such a lack of restraint. But the only things I was feeling were relief and happiness. He wanted me close, he was holding me, and he wasn't hurt.

“No hiding,” I murmured against his skin, my fingers returning to his odd necklace to grip the two small rectangles dangling from it. That was a better option than giving into the desire to pet every inch of his skin. My eyes had easily adjusted to the near-dark, and I was picking out far too many tempting details—like the odd markings that painted the skin on his arms and shoulders. They depicted the shapes of bizarre, mythical predators: living artwork on his skin, lovingly following the bulge of his biceps and accentuating the thick veins that corded his forearms.

He chuckled, the sound low and husky. It sounded so intimate in the dark when I was too afraid to look up and see his expression. “Good, angel. That’s good. Do you know what happened? Last I remembered, I was tuckingyouinto bed. And I wake up and find you in mine. Not that I’m complaining, mind you.” His arms grew a little tighter around my middle, ensuring that not so much as a hair separated our bodies. I could feel the heat of that rigid bar press against me, and it made parts of me tingle that I didn’t know could feel that way.

“You collapsed,” I said, vividly recalling the moment and how helpless I’d felt when I couldn’t see if he was okay. “Shaman Erish says you were missing nutrients, but your nanobots are working.” My tongue felt odd as I twisted it around the foreign word. It was a Naga word—all syllabic and guttural, nothing like the language that Reid spoke. I could not wrap my head around the thought that there was a Naga word for such a thing, but there was, and Erish knew it. He’d taught it to me by speaking of it often as he worked to heal Reid over the past week.

“Ah, that makes sense. I must have been burning massive amounts of energy to sustain that speed and strength, not to mention the rapid healing. My nanobots were performing far beyond their normal parameters.” More complex words, but I was starting to understand them a little. Reid was saying that he had been stronger and faster than normal, and that his healing rate was vastly improved by these nanobots. Such a thing seemed like magic to me, but I was grateful for it. It had made Reid so powerful, so capable, and he’d gotten me out of the encounter with Kusha, Evarah,

not to mention Astrexa. Though I had a feeling we hadn't seen the last of Astrexa yet, she was the least favorite; she had much to prove.

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“Now, Sazzie, why don’t you explain to me what the hell is going on? Why did they call you a princess? Why are they challenging you? And what the fuck is going on in the Shaman camp? It was chaos when I left...” Reid seemed to want to know all these answers; he certainly spoke with demand, a forcefulness to his tone that a Naga male would never dare to use against someone like me. But Reid didn’t know who I was. Despite his demands, his hands were roaming, and they were very distracting.

One hand dipped down my spine. At first, it seemed like he was simply checking that all the slashes Evarah had gouged into my back were gone. Then it dipped lower. I had never allowed a male to touch me there, but he stroked his hand across the curve of my hip and along the rounded part that shaped my rear. From there, my body tapered into my long, sinuous tail—so very different from his pair of legs.

“Pretty angel, tell me now, before I forget what I was asking,” Reid said huskily, and I shivered in response to that heated tone. He wanted me in ways he shouldn’t, in ways I shouldn’t let him, and he was so blatant about it. It was strange. It was supposed to be wrong, and yet it felt so right. When his hand roamed around the side of my hip, coming perilously close to my slit, my entire body trembled against him. What was he doing?

“Reid...” My voice came out like a moan, a sound all soft and mewling. I had never made a sound like that—not in my entire adult life, maybe not even when I was young. It was so weak-sounding, but it felt powerful when it made Reid groan, his hips bucking beneath mine.

“Ah, fuck, Sazzie. You are too sexy. You know that?” He appeared to have given up on his questions; after all, his hand rose, unerringly finding my chin. He tilted my

head up, forcing me to look at his handsome face. “Kiss me, please,” he said, and the way it sounded like a plea made me want to do exactly as he asked. Except I had no clue what he meant. Kiss? It was not a word that had a translation. It meant nothing to me, but he seemed desperate for it. Helplessly, I stared at his warm brown eyes, at the heat and fire that burned inside those orbs for me.

Reid didn’t seem to require me to move, though; he was the one lowering his head to mine. Then he did the most shocking, most lurid thing I’d ever experienced: he pressed his mouth to mine—his lips against my lips—and he didn’t stop there. No, he slipped his tongue inside, delving deep in one fell swoop. I jerked in his grip, surprised to discover that one hand cupped the back of my head while the other rested on my rear, pressing me tight against his erection. I had nowhere to go, and unless I wanted to harm him, I could only surrender to his touch.

When I did, I did not regret it. It felt good. He tasted good, and within seconds, I was the one pressing closer, squirming needily in his grip. “Ah, Reid, what is that?” I moaned when his mouth released me for a breath of air. He dipped again, his mouth claiming mine, and I could only cling to him as he flicked his tongue against mine and dragged it against the roof of my mouth. When I curled my much longer, more narrow tongue around his, he shuddered.

“Fuck, Sazzie. I forgot you guys don’t do this. Why are you so fucking good at it if this is your first fucking kiss?” His hands were roaming again; no longer did he grip my rear or the back of my head. He found the strap of my bandeau, and then he was sliding it down and cupping the small peak of my breast. “A perfect handful. Are you made for me or what?” He could not possibly know how close to the truth he was with those words, but I could not bring myself to admit that. A Naga female was supposed to be lukewarm to indifferent to her male. He was good for strong offspring and caretaking; that was it. But Reid was already so much more to me.

“Shut up,” I told him firmly, “and keep doing that thing with your tongue.” I wanted

more of that, and when he laughed but obeyed, I let myself get carried away by all the pleasurable sensations. How it was possible that touching my tongue with his could make my blood sing and my belly ache with pleasure, I did not know. I just knew I wanted more of it. I wanted everything he had to give me.

Reid rolled us as if he'd heard that wild, naughty thought, his breathing much faster than before. With one hand, he pinned one of my wrists above my head, his body pressing down against mine until I felt surrounded, safe. I was not the one in control of this dance, and I liked that. Reid seemed to know exactly what he was doing, and though I'd been taught to consider his blatant erection shameful, his confidence turned me on. He wanted me—me—and he was not afraid to show that.

His mouth left mine, and I mewled in dissatisfaction. “No, come back!” But then I felt the scrape of his teeth along the edge of my jaw, his tongue lapping at the hollow of my throat. Ah, stars, that was even better somehow. I did not know where he was going, but I was dying to find out. His hand massaged my left breast, and then that fantastic mouth closed around the right. The suction was out of this world, and pleasure flashed hot and bright. It tightened in my abdomen, pooling there until I ached, teetering on the precipice of something great, something just out of reach.

“Ah, precious angel, are you going to come for me? Will you do that?” Reid murmured against the hard, aching point of my nipple. I did not know what he was asking of me, but when he lifted his hips—thus his cock—away from mine, I knew that wasn't right. His hand was distracting as it slid from my breast down to my belly. His agile fingers swirled around my belly button, then dipped lower. Ah, my slit; he was going to touch me there. Part of my brain went, “With his hand?” The rest of me was onboard, waiting for whatever he wanted to do with me. He could do anything—it all felt good. I had never felt this good, and I was greedy for more.

His fingers parted the hidden folds like an expert, as if he'd known exactly what to expect. There was a spark of anger, a hint of jealousy at the back of my brain at that

realization, but it was quickly gone. I couldn't think when he found the tight bundle of nerves at the top of my slit and flicked it with his blunt finger. Then he did it again, and again, and stars burst and shattered behind my eyes, pleasure cresting hard and sudden beneath that much sensation.

"That's it, Sazzie. That's it," Reid praised me, and his finger dipped lower, finding my core and pressing inside. I moaned, sounds coming from my throat I didn't know I could make. My muscles clenched around his invasion, pulling him in even deeper. Each wave of my crest spiraled me higher and higher until I was certain the crash was going to hit me hard. It didn't, because Reid was there to catch me, easing me down with gentle strokes and softly murmured words of praise. Then he gathered me tightly against his chest and rocked me through the last of the shudders as if I were a youngling. "Good girl, my angel. That's it. That's good, isn't it?" His husky voice, raw and a little rough, sounded so good right now.

When my breathing evened out, my head was still spinning. What we'd just done—that wasn't a mating. His cock was still a hard bar pressing against the fabric of his strange leg coverings. He had not pierced me with it, but with his thick finger instead, and already that had felt like too much, like it barely fit at all. Tilting my head, I slid it against his chest so I could glance down and measure the size of that bulge: as thick as my wrist, maybe, and as long as my forearm. I hadn't realized males were that big down there. Or was that a human thing?

"Later," Reid said, his mouth against my head, inhaling the scent of my hair as he spoke. I felt the warmth of his breath, sensitive everywhere after what we'd just done. Restlessness coursed through my veins as well, urging me toward something I wasn't sure I was ready for. "I mean it, angel. Go to sleep. It's night out, and we have much to discuss tomorrow." He was being firm again, and everything inside me tingled in response. It was nice because it meant I didn't have to be the one to make the hard choices. I could simply trust him.



I settled more comfortably in his arms, and it was comfortable—so very warm and safe. Was this what Vera felt when she curled up with Zathar in his nest at night? Was this why so many of the outcast males gathered at Haven just for a chance at a human female of their own? I felt sad when I considered that my Naga sisters might never enjoy this. It was hard to imagine that they didn't even want it. How could you not want this?

I eyed Reid's cock again, hidden behind the dark fabric that covered his lower half. What did it look like? "Sazzie," Reid groaned, "I am still getting used to these heightened senses. Stop smelling so fucking good." He laughed, his mouth pressing against my forehead in another 'kiss,' only this one felt affectionate rather than arousing. He was laughing at himself as he said it, and I liked that.

"I can't control it," I said to him. "And it's not like you aren't doing the same to me." I flicked my tongue into the air, drawing scent particles deep inside my mouth and pressing them against the scent receptor at the roof of my mouth. Reid's scent and taste exploded into hyperfocus in my mind—musky, salty, the perfect blend of savory. A scent uniquely his, and more intense than it usually was.

"Fair enough," he agreed, "but we should talk before we take things further." I didn't know what that meant. We were mates; that's why I understood him. Taking things 'further' was the point of a mate bond—and mating. Maybe he hadn't realized it yet? I felt a hint of trepidation as I realized he might think I had those strange relics in my head, like Erish and Chen had told me about. Relics that translated things, instead of the mate bond doing it.

"Sleep, Sazzie. We both need it." He seemed to find it easy to fall asleep after that, even though it took a very long time for his cock to soften beneath his coverings, so I could no longer see it. Had it properly retreated into its pouch? Did human males even have a pouch? It took even longer before I managed to fall back asleep, but when I did, it was deeply and filled with dreams—nice dreams. Dreams about a baby

Ayala, and then my babies, but they had brown eyes.

## Chapter 7

Reid

Sazzie was still asleep by the time I woke early the next morning. She lay curled against my chest, her head tucked beneath my chin, and her fist clung tightly to my dogtags. I wasn't sure why I was still wearing them—habit maybe, a way to remember my past. My angel seemed fascinated with them; that was a good enough reason to keep wearing them.

Erish wasn't in this morning, though he usually was by now, which could only mean that he was giving us privacy. I appreciated that. It was very tempting to wake my angel with a kiss and seduce her into some more steamy kisses and heavy petting. She had responded so beautifully to me last night, and I could not wrap my head around it. Sazzie was perfect—beautiful, kind, with far too many soft edges she left unshielded. How could she exist in a world like this? She appealed to every single part of me, and I hoped that my rough sides matched her softness somehow. I wanted that very much. I had earned a little slice of heaven by now, hadn't I?

The Naga believed in mate bonds, in true mates. I'd seen it in action at Haven several times over, and it was easy to believe it was true after that kind of evidence. Zathar and Vera had fallen first, heavily, but by now, all my fellow humans had paired up and found marital, mating bliss. Was that what I was feeling for Sazzie? Could humans sense it too? It looked that way to me, and I was more than willing to go there. Sazzie needed me, and, frankly, I needed her.

She stirred slowly, her eyes blinking open as if she were fighting hard not to rise. My angel appeared not to be a morning person; she squinted at the light crystals with a frown, her mouth turning down in a sultry pout. Then, she realized where she was,

and that pout transformed into a startled "O," her pretty sapphire eyes growing wide. "I... uh... I should go," she whispered, her tongue slipping out to lick nervously at her soft bottom lip. After how she'd let me touch her last night, she had no reason to be this nervous, and I thought it was cute. Nobody seemed to see it but me, but my angel was so shy.

"No, you do not," I told her, but I loosened my grip around her waist so she wouldn't feel trapped. That, I didn't want. "You want to stay right here, with me." If possible, her eyes grew even larger in her face, and a dark flush colored her azure scales in streaks along her cheekbones. Interesting. I'd seen that on some of the males back at Haven, mostly when they were feeling a battle high. I didn't realize it functioned much like a blush, too.

Reaching up with a thumb, I brushed the divot beneath her left eye, the one made by a claw in the past. "Tell me who did this to you," I demanded, my body thrumming with energy as I contemplated how I'd make them pay. I could feel an itch along the markings on my chest and shoulders—not my tattoos, but the ones I'd woken up with since my nanobot clash. There was itching along my belly as well, but it all morphed into heat that warmed my muscles. I was starting to get the hang of this. It felt like controlling the nanobots myself was almost within my grasp. If I just focused a little more, I could do it.

"This?" she murmured, a soft smile starting to curl around her mouth. "Don't worry about it, Reid. It's in the past, all of it." I didn't think she meant to draw my attention to the other scars that marred her body, but she did. They were numerous, mostly on the fronts of her arms, shoulders, and belly. Her chest had been spared, as had the rest of her, and I surmised it was because Naga females only fought in face-to-face combat, duels. She had not been wounded on hunts, where anything could happen. From what I'd seen yesterday, Naga females wore a lot of metal jewelry around their necks. If Sazzie had done the same, it would have protected her chest. Which begged the question: where was her jewelry now?

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I stroked my thumb down her cheek, along the curve of her jaw, and the delicate point of her dainty chin horn. When I touched her throat, she shivered, and I could hear how it made the scales along her spine whisper as they brushed together. I grinned as I traced her collarbone. “Fine. Now, tell me why they were challenging you. Tell me everything, Sazzie.”

Her eyes narrowed on my face, her fist tightened around my dogtags before she released them, and I could see how her pulse picked up in her neck. “I don’t want to tell you,” she said after a long silence. I quirked an eyebrow at her, inviting her to keep talking, and that worked. She was smiling, but it was a soft, tremulous thing—nervous. “I’m afraid you won’t look at me the same afterward...”

“Impossible,” I burst out, and that made the smile grow wider, startled, but also hopeful. “I see you, Sazzie. The real you, the one you don’t dare to show to anyone else. I see you, and you don’t have to be afraid. I’ll keep you safe. Don’t you know that?” If I was feeling a mate bond, then so was she, I was certain. Even if I wasn’t sure of that, I was sure of her need for a protector, her need to feel safe.

“I was made to be a warrior, a shield,” I told her. “That’s all I’ve ever wanted to do: keep people safe, protect.” I raised my arm and flexed my fist, the ink that marked my skin growing tight. “Let me be your shield, Sazzie. I need to be yours.” Her shield, hers in every way. I had often been called impulsive; I was not a patient man, going with my gut rather than my mind most days. If my fellow humans had trusted their Naga counterparts to take the plunge so wholeheartedly, then how could I not put the same trust in my angel?

She raised herself on her elbow, daintily leaning on my chest. It brought our faces

closer together, and I was tempted to kiss her again. “We both nearly died yesterday. How can I ask you to put yourself in harm’s way for me?” She shook her head, her expression turning grim as she recalled yesterday’s events. I felt anger roll over me as I recalled them too, the way that one female had struck her in the back, clawed her pretty blue scales. That cowardly bitch... I did not finish that thought, wresting control of the rising need for violence that coiled through my body.

The nanobots inside me responded to that call to action. I could feel them shifting beneath my flesh, as if they wanted to bubble to the surface and coat my skin like armor. Once, I had worn silver nano-armor in my duties as a Shadow Unit soldier—armor that self-repaired, could morph at will, and withstand any heat or cold. But the nanobots inside me had never been designed to do the same; they were there to repair damage and enhance my strength and senses, not to protect.

Shrugging off the strange sensations of my weirdly evolved nanobots, I focus on my woman. “You’re not asking; I’m offering,” I said, and then I shook my head. “No, I’m demanding. It’s my choice, angel. I’ll protect you whether you say yes or no.” Somehow, those words made her laugh rather than ruffle her feathers. She sounded relieved by my persistence, and when she sobered, I could tell she wasn’t quite so worried about sharing what was going on.

“When your friends brought you here,” she said, “I was visiting the Shaman camp with my mother.” A mother, huh. I had not gotten the impression that there was much love lost between Naga females and their offspring. Zathar had certainly described his mother as a cold-hearted bitch. Zathar... It clicked in my brain, very belatedly. I was certain, it had practically been spelled out to me yesterday. Zathar was Sazzie’s brother. That’s why the blue of her eyes was so familiar to me. Oh, fuck. Did that mean the Thunder Rock Queen was here? Haven had an uneasy truce with her, but that meant nothing if it didn’t suit that woman.

“Corin and the Queen, they have history, and...” she faltered mid-sentence,

swallowing roughly. Her eyes flicked nervously from my face to the med bay's exit, as if she expected someone to be listening in and judge her for what she was about to say next. "My mother did not want Corin to be happy. She tried to kill his mate, so I..." Another rough swallow as she hesitated, and I found myself reaching up with a hand to pet her along her spine. Sazzie wore very little, and cold did not seem to bother her the way it would a human. It was very tempting, being able to curve my palm along so much of her bare body.

"I killed her," she admitted at last. "I killed the Queen. I killed my mother." Her eyes locked onto mine, and whatever it was she was looking for, I knew she wouldn't find it. She was a little calmer when she continued talking, but her hand flicked through the air between us for emphasis. She talked about how they decided who got to be the next Thunder Queen, that it was her by default unless she was defeated, because she was the crown princess. The heir apparent. So that's what all that shit in the woods yesterday had been about. Now it made sense.

"You don't think they're going to stop, do you?" I asked when she fell silent. She nodded, her sharper canine teeth digging into her bottom lip. Cupping the back of her head, my fingers tangled with her long, silky blue hair, I pulled her down so I could kiss her. "Bring it," I whispered against her lips. "I'm ready. I'll lay waste to the entire village if that's what it takes."

"You can't do that!" she said, incredulous. When I winked, it made her eyes twinkle, and her sharp cheekbones darkened again into a beautiful lapis lazuli. "You're joking?" I rolled a shoulder, not quite willing to admit that, if it came to that, I absolutely would. That kind of thing was a bit intense, and I did not want to frighten her. She had started to relax, and I adored the open, warm expression on her face and the light in her eyes.

The sound of voices in the distance indicated we were about to have company. I focused on the sound with a hint of trepidation, but I had much more control this

time. It was like twisting a volume dial; when I wanted it, the sound got louder until I could hear what was being said. It sounded like Chen and Erish, along with a third voice I did not recognize. They spoke to each other in a familiar, friendly manner, on equal footing.

“We must move the camp today, Chen,” said one voice. “With Bitter Storm so close, we cannot afford to wait.” They had paused in the hallway outside the med bay, because I could no longer hear the sound of scales sliding against metal. Erish was making a heated argument about my health, that I needed more time to heal, but it was soon clear that they were waiting for the Elder Chen to make the final call.

“We move today,” he agreed at last, his voice sounding heavy, weary. He clearly did not like having to make that decision, which meant Sazzie and I were about to see some changes. Were they going to kick her out? For bringing the challengers to their doorstep? Challengers that Bitter Storm had followed to get here? As the technology-hating Clan, it was no surprise that Sazzie had told me they were not supposed to know the location of the Training Grounds.

I carefully shifted Sazzie off my chest and rose to my feet beside the round medical cot. Shaped more like a padded bowl than a bed, it wasn’t entirely comfortable for me to stretch out in, and it was slightly awkward to get out of. Rubbing my hand over my stubble-covered chin, I wished, not for the first time, that I could get a good shave. At this point, it couldn’t really be called stubble anymore; it was practically a beard.

Unshaven or not, I was ready for them when the three Shamans glided into the med bay. Protectively positioned in front of Sazzie inside the nest, my arms out at my sides. If they were going to kick her out, they’d have to kick me out too. I was strong enough for it now—even if I might collapse afterward, it would be worth it. Of course, the kind expression on Erish’s face made me feel like an ass for acting hostile. Erish was a good guy—a healer through and through—and he didn’t want to see Sazzie or me come to harm.

“You heard us, did you, boy?” Chen said. His voice was pitched sternly, but I could see the twinkle in his blue eyes. Okay, so nokicking was about to happen. I straightened slowly and twisted my head to glance at my angel; I wanted to know what she was up to. Was she worried like I had been? She looked calm, serene, as she sat with her tail in an elegant loop inside the nest. She looked like the fucking royalty she apparently was, with her chin at a haughty angle. When she looked like that, I felt, more than ever, that I ought to be her bodyguard, her protector.

“I heard. You are moving camp. Does that mean Sazzie and I overstayed our welcome?” I could understand it. If they didn’t want Bitter Storm to know about the ships, then they needed to move them. The technology-hating Clan might tolerate the Shaman Artek on their border out of necessity, they wouldn’t tolerate this.

“Not overstayed so much as... You are well enough to leave,” the third Shaman said, the one I hadn’t met before. He was white-scaled like Artek, but his opalescent sheen had dulled with age. I was pretty sure I had heard Erish argue that I was not healthy enough yet, but he did not object to what his colleague said, so maybe I was wrong. I opened my mouth to question this myself, but Sazzie’s hand on my wrist halted me in my tracks.

She curled out of the nest in an elegant move and rose beside me, forming a unit. With her fingers against my wrist as an anchor point, she confronted the three Shamans with a warm, gentle smile, very at odds with her supposedly volatile nature. “And we will go, of course.” She fished a leather cord with a silver disk from a pouch at her hip and held it out to the Elder Chen. I did not know the significance of that odd little piece of jewelry, but I did recognize it. Corin wore an identical disk around his neck, and he never took it off.

“No, keep it,” Chen said, and he pressed the disk back into her hand, carefully folding her fingers around the small metal object. “You should know that you may always find sanctuary with us. Before we leave, I also want you to talk with Avrish. No more



dodging her, understood?” I hated being out of the loop, and I was starting to feel more and more like I was. Avrish was an unknown entity to me, and female from the sounds of it, I did not trust it.

“Where are you taking the camp? To the crash site?” Sazzie asked as she lifted the string around her neck and patted the disk close against her chest. It was clearly precious to her, so it had to be very significant indeed. My attention sharpened when she mentioned a crash site. Chen did say a spaceship had crashed to Serant a few days ago. Was that the crash site?

It was the unknown male who answered again, unexpectedly taking the lead while Chen smiled serenely at us. “That is correct. Our scouts have reported numerous survivors. We must pay close attention.” Hang on, survivors? That was huge news. As far as I knew, my fellow humans and I were the only survivors of a crash—ever. What were the odds that more had made it?

“Humans?” I demanded, stepping forward in my eagerness. All of us that had made it to the surface alive had been tricked by the UAR, our government. We’d been accused of crimes and executed, a court marshal in my case, but normal court in the case of the others. Then we’d been put in stasis and shipped out of the Alpha Quadrant, where Earth was located, to be used as currency. When I thought about it, the odds were extremely low that more humans had crashed to Serant and survived, and yet I was hoping for it all the same. If they were here, they would be out of the UAR’s reach and safe. It would mean a chance at happiness for more of the good, outcast males that lived at Haven—many of them my friends.

“No,” Chen said with a shake of his head. “The beings our scout reported seeing were not human; he would have recognized humans. These were beings on two legs, yes, but with tusks and particularly unappealing features—very crude and mean. Many of them lived and are now building fortifications around their ship cutting down whole swaths of trees to do so.”

I did not know of any alien species that matched that description, and my hope quickly plummeted. The survivors sounded like a menace to Serant, but at the same time, it sounded exactly like something a UAR ship might do after a crash landing. They'd need to survive and repair their ship, and, depending on the damage, that could take a very long time. Maybe they were waiting for help, but another ship might not want to risk attempting a landing. They'd just as easily suffer the same fate.

As exciting as this sounded, it wasn't nearly as important as the risk that Sazzie faced, so I put it out of my head. "Okay, good luck with them. You can call on Haven if you want assistance, maybe someone there knows more about these aliens." Kalani had seen much of the universe, like I had, but the truth was that we were all newcomers to this part of the universe. I did not even know what quadrant Serant was in. Though maybe Min-Ji knew more. Actually, the more I thought about it, the more I was certain Min-Ji might know more. I said as much, and the bossy Shaman, whose name I did not know, assured me they'd reach out to her.

"That leaves us with a choice to make, doesn't it?" I said to Sazzie. "Where do you want to go?" It was entirely up to her, but if we were left behind, we would likely have to go another round with those challengers for the throne and evade Bitter Storm while we were at it.

"What do you mean?" Sazzie asked, her voice clearly conveying her uncertainty. "Don't you have to go back to Haven?" she added when I waved my hand at her to elaborate. She looked confused, and the Shamans looked amused, as if this little break in communication between us was funny to them. No, not funny—endearing, maybe. Chen smiled like my grandfather would when I was little and my parents had a little argument—say, about directions—and then made up again.

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“I go where you go. It’s as simple as that,” I told her. Her mouth snapped shut, and she gave me a baffled look before she twisted to look at the Shamans again. She asked for their advice, and they huddled closer to discuss options. Seeing that they posed no threat to my angel, I pulled Erish aside to ask him about my sudden, unexpected crash yesterday. If I could, I would like to avoid such incidents in the future, and he had to have the answers. While we were at it, I needed to ask him where I could shave, it was high time I got rid of this out-of-control beard. I also needed a haircut if I wanted to look presentable as an escort for a real princess.

### Chapter 8

#### Sazzie

“I wish I’d known about you, Sazzie,” Avrish said. The elegant and oddly hornless Naga female sat elegantly curled on a stack of soft pillows inside the main tent at the heart of the Training Grounds. Avrish taught the youngest pupils when they first arrived here, covering all the basic subjects like reading and writing. She was beautiful, with black scales dotted with pretty green and gold freckles along her shoulders and back. A bright green streak also livened up her black hair and matched the vibrant hue of her eyes.

This Naga female was the most exotic creature I’d ever seen, besides the humans, of course. I did not even know what Clan she had come from originally, and she had not explained. There were more Naga in the camp with colors from Clans I did not know. Come to think of it, I did not know what Clan the Shaman Artek came from once, either. His white scales were just as exotic as Avrish’s black scales. But Avrish seemed even stranger because of her missing chin horn and the way she was so sweet

and gentle with the younglings who came to her for classes.

The excitement from yesterday had died down, at least on the surface, and normalcy had returned for their young students here beneath the main tent. We were sitting at the back of the class, curled up on pillows, while, at tables at the center of the tent, students were bent over their work, scribbling with ink and quills or working on glowing relics with clever fingers. It was a sight that still awed me every time I saw it, ever since I first arrived here two weeks ago.

“It wouldn’t have changed anything,” I said to Avrish with a shrug of my shoulder. Avrish was completely free of any scars, her scales smooth and shiny all along her front. I couldn’t recall when I’d last seen an adult female without any scars from challenges and duels—unless it was right after a molting, but that was also when scars were most likely to form, as our scales were still soft.

“Of course it would have,” Avrish told me. “If a Shaman had recognized your differences, they would have brought you here. Raised you differently—better.” I touched the small, delicate horn that grew from my chin. It was much smaller than the horns of my peers and often a point of mockery. I recalled that time when Artek was a young apprentice, visiting with his mentor. I remembered a loud verbal disagreement the former Water Weaver male had with my mother. Afterward, I’d been punished by my mother, though I couldn’t recall what I’d done wrong.

I shook my head. Just as my mother had been unwilling to allow Corin to continue training as a Shaman, she would have been unwilling to let me go. “My mother would not have released me. I think Artek’s mentor”—I was sorry to say I did not recall his name—“tried. But it was in vain.” Regardless, I had made it here, to adulthood. It was fine.

Avrish gave me a sad but understanding smile, her hand reaching out to curl around my fingers. She moved slowly, yet still, my first reflex was to bat her hand away. I

knew she did not wish to harm me, but the survival instincts were hard to restrain. The way she just gently squeezed my hand made me feel odd inside my chest—warm, cherished. Similar to when Reid held me in his arms, but very different at the same time.

“Erish told me he ran your genes,” Avrish explained, and at my confused look, she began to clarify. “Genes tell your body what you are like, how you are built. They’re a blueprint—a plan. Your genes are a little like mine—not quite as pronounced, but similar.” She touched her hornless chin, which marked her as exotically different. “Somehow, your genes more closely resemble those of Naga females from the past—the way our ancestors were. We call that a throwback. That’s why you’re not like the others. You don’t like fighting; you don’t feel territorial or aggressive the way they do. And it’s not because there’s something wrong with you, Sazzie. It’s because there’s something very right.”

I didn’t know I needed to hear those words until she said them, but I did. And when my eyes welled with tears, Avrish did not condemn me for it; instead, she squeezed my hand again in support. She explained much more about the past, particularly what Naga females had been like before the calamities ravaged our planet. It resonated with me, made me feel whole, and suddenly made me feel less like a failure and more like the female Reid saw—the one who made his eyes go all shiny with admiration and desire.

Why had I been avoiding this talk? It seemed silly now. When Avrish and I had to say our goodbyes, it felt like parting ways with a sister—or, better yet, one of my brothers whom I actually loved. Or maybe Avrish was now filling a spot in my heart that had once been filled by my father.

I was still feeling melancholic and sad when Reid, weighed down by several bags of supplies, escorted me to the edge of the clearing. We were staying behind, and, as Chen had firmly suggested to me, we’d head toward Haven. That was Reid’s home,

and though I feared I might not be welcome, I didn't have any other options. I had not told Reid yet that I thought Zathar might turn me away because he feared I was too violent. I already knew what he'd say to that, anyway.

"This is going to be a sight to see," Reid said as he slung his arm around my shoulders and casually tugged me against his body. I'd never been held like that before—hugged from behind, his chin resting against the crown of my head, his solid bulk curved against my back. He'd pulled on more clothing: a shirt with long sleeves and a pair of 'boots' to protect his feet. Despite that, I could still feel every ridge and curve of his muscles against my spine, feel the strength of him.

Another change was his face. Gone was the odd growth of hair on his chin and upper lip. He'd shaved all of it off while I'd been with Avrish. He had even cut his hair shorter. It looked... neater, less wild. It made his face look sharper, and once I got used to his bare chin, I had to conclude I liked it. There was no sign of the barely-clinging-to-life male I'd first laid eyes on when Corin and Min-Ji brought him here. This was the male who had haunted my dreams after I'd seen a glimpse of him four months ago at Thunder Rock village.

I had only seen him very briefly, but I hadn't forgotten a single thing about him. He was dressed now just like he'd been then, and the haircut was the same, too. I recalled it that well because I'd never seen a male with hair that short before, and it had baffled me. It had baffled my peers, too; they'd muttered about it for days, just like they had discussed his black arm markings, those strange sigils.

I was trying to distract myself with what he looked like now, and what it felt like to be in his arms so casually. It was a little daunting to think about what lay ahead of me, what my future would look like. So I didn't. But that got thrown in my face when the last of the Shamans climbed inside their skyships, and the humming of the ancient machines became too loud to ignore.

After morning class and my talk with Avrish, they had struck down the center tent, where most classes and the communal cooking and eating took place. Other tents and canopies had been taken down that morning with shocking efficiency. Now, all that the Shamans had to do was take their skyships up into the air and fly away.

“Won’t the Thunder Rock females and those Bitter Storm warriors see them when they fly away?” I asked when the worry suddenly sprang to mind. If they found out the truth about how the Shamans moved their camps, how closely they lived like our ancestors had... It would cause complete chaos back at the village. Then, word would spread. It could mean the breakdown of trust between the Shamans and the Clans.

Reid’s arms tightened around my middle, just enough of a squeeze to tell me I had his full attention and that he wanted me close. “They are going to fly as low as they can in the opposite direction, from what I understand. They must fly low regardless, or they will risk getting struck down by the EM field higher in the atmosphere.” My eyes started to glaze over from those difficult phrases, and I felt like an idiot for not understanding.

“A Shaman went to distract the delegation from Thunder Rock, but there is nothing they can do about Bitter Storm,” Reid said, and he pointed with a hand toward where a smoke plumerose over the woods. My stomach clenched painfully in my belly. Was that where the Bitter Storm warriors had made camp? It was unlikely that, if they saw the skyships, they’d tell anyone, as they were hostile to every Clan. Was that going to be enough to protect the secret?

Then the first skyship rose in the air, one of the small ones with a sleek shape of black metal. Metal, not the sharp black obsidian of which all hunters made their weapons, but metal like the blade that hung from Reid’s belt, and that he wore around his neck, the strange squares he called dogtags. It was a heavy material, and I could not wrap my head around the idea that it could float in the air like it weighed nothing.

Then, a second rose, followed by the medical skyship Reid and I had spent so much time on. That one was huge compared to the other two, and, when it shot away over the treeline at dazzling speeds, all I could do was gasp and stare. Every other skyship followed the first one in a mad aerial dance I did not think was possible: ships rising into the air rapidly, some shooting off in a straight line, some skimming the tops of the trees. Others took a neat little spin, or looped with joy around the clearing before they followed the rest.

The humming of the relics was not as loud as I expected it to be; it never rose higher than a fireant's buzzing. It filled the clearing, but as soon as they shot away over the woods, the sound disappeared. In less than a minute, the clearing was empty, leaving behind a dozen flattened, brown areas in the moss. Some of those areas were big, but most were no bigger than a home at Thunder Rock. The moss would reclaim those spots in a few weeks, and no sign would remain that the Training Grounds had ever been here.

The empty clearing mirrored the empty feeling inside me. I felt abandoned, with nowhere to go that would feel safe. Then Reid lowered his head and brushed his mouth over my shoulder in one of those 'kiss' things he liked to do. "Let's go; no sense in lingering. Chen drew me a map. It should take us a few weeks to get back to Haven." I wasn't alone. Reid was with me, and he had been adamant that he'd never leave my side.

"I will follow you," I told him. He was technically the one who was a stranger to this planet, but he was so confident and strong. When I remembered how safe he made me feel, it was intoxicating. After talking with Avrish, it also felt far less like I was flawed for wanting that—for needing it. It felt easy to slide my hand into Reid's and follow him into the woods with nothing but supplies strapped to our backs.

"I don't know that we'll be able to avoid Khawla's notice," I said to him in a low tone that would not carry. The Master Scout was unpredictable; he might not give us



away, but he might warn his mate, Kusha, where I was to give her the advantage. Bitter Storm's plume of smoke was easy to circle around, though, and we knew exactly where the Thunder Rock females had made their camp.

"Khawla is the leader of those blue guys?" Reid asked, and the glint in his eyes told me he knew exactly how disrespectful it was to speak of Thunder Rock that way. I wanted to bristle, but then I recalled that I'd left my Clan; I'd become an outcast by choice when I had refused to fight for the throne. I lowered my shoulders and simply nodded before carefully summing up what I knew of the male.

"He is mated to one of the biggest contenders for the throne, Kusha. They have two young children together, I believe. Khawla is our Master Scout, uncannily good at hiding and at finding things." I tapped a claw to my chin as I contemplated what else I knew about the male. He was older than my brother by a handful of years, so they had not been in the same training groups. I vaguely recalled that there had been a bit of a stink about his mating with Kusha because nobody had seen the mating marks. "Khawla is pretty calm and steady, a stickler for the rules, if I recall," I finished finally. "I don't know if he'll try to help his mate or let us go..."

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Reid hummed in the back of his throat in response, his eyes scanning the woods around us with laser focus. He'd been doing that the entire time we'd been traveling, as if he expected trouble. We'd gone in a big, circular motion away from the Sacred Training Grounds by now, easily bypassing both the Thunder Rock and Bitter Storm camps. I had a feeling it wasn't going to be as easy as that, though. Even though the sound of the skyships had not been as loud as I thought it would be, it had been loud enough to draw attention.

I had only just finished those gloomy thoughts when the sound of a twig snapping echoed beneath the trees. It had gotten steadily more hilly as we moved, so the sound had to come from close by. My scales shivered along my spine, and fear made my stomach grow hard in my belly. Was it Bitter Storm? One of the females from Thunder Rock? The only one it definitely wouldn't be was Khawla; he'd never do something as stupid as snap a twig while stalking someone.

Reid spun toward the sound, his hand around mine twisting to pull me behind his wide shoulders. "Show yourself," he said firmly. "I don't like that sneaky stuff. It makes me think you're an enemy, and I don't treat those kindly." He had his hand on the knife at his belt, his feet braced apart, and his eyes never left a single point between two trees and a large shrub. He knew exactly where our stalker was hiding.

There was a furious, angry hiss that could mean anything and be from anyone, but it was Astrexa who rose from the bushes with an angry expression on her face. Her dark blue scales caught a violet beam of sunlight and glittered beautifully, sharply reminding me that my much paler azure tone had never been good enough for my mother, even though her own scales had barely been any darker than mine.

“Tell your mongrel to back off and face me, you weakling,” Astrexa demanded as she dared to come out of the underbrush completely and approach us. I should have known that she was going to be our biggest issue; Astrexa had way too much to prove to give up. She, more than any of the others, would need the legitimacy that defeating me would give her claim. Without it, I could easily imagine she’d have to go through all the contenders—and then some—in challenge after challenge. It would be too much for any female, even a fierce brawler like her.

“Don’t call him mongrel,” I said to her, though I kept a tight grip on Reid’s hand, unwilling to get separated from him. “His name is Reid, and he’s a good, strong male.” That was the one thing I was certain of: any female should be proud to call him hers. That they couldn’t see that was their failure, not his, and I wouldn’t stand for any insults. I felt heat curl through my chest, and it was pushing out my fear of a confrontation. I’d fought Astrexa many times in the past—I had lost to her many times and won plentytoo. I realized that if it came to protecting Reid and his honor, I’d gladly clash with this female again. I knew all her tricks.

Astrexa had locked eyes with me, a mean glint in her eyes that shot a shiver down my spine. Okay, thinking I’d defend Reid’s honor was one thing, but honor was meaningless when it came to life and death. That look told me that if I ended up fighting her, it would be kill or be killed. The thought of having to strike a fatal blow turned my stomach. Despite fighting for my spot in the hierarchy ever since my sixth molting, I had never killed anyone—until my mother tried to kill Corin’s innocent and harmless human mate. I never wanted to do it again; it still gave me nightmares, even though I knew I’d make the same choice if I had a chance to redo that moment.

My stare-down with this tormentor from the past had made me oblivious to everything around me. I did not realize it until Reid suddenly disturbed the moment. He shifted between us with an angry, “Back off!” Astrexa was much closer than I had thought; she had drifted closer with stealthy movements. It was one of those tricks fighters used at the start of a confrontation, and I was shocked to discover that I

hadn't caught it. I should have. How could I be rusty already? My last fight for power had been a few weeks ago, right before I'd traveled to the Shaman Training Grounds with the Queen.

"Stay out of this," Astrexa told him. I had never thought she was stupid or reckless, but she jabbed the tip of her tail at him as if she thought she could knock him out of her way. Hadn't she gotten smacked into a tree by him the last time they met? Had she not seen how easily he'd defeated Evarah? Reid might not be as tall as a Naga male in fight mode, and he lacked protective scales, but he was not to be underestimated. I knew that now, so it was no surprise to me when he grabbed her tail in his fist and yanked on it.

She swept across the mossy, leaf-strewn ground with a startled scream. I thought Reid might actually pick her up and throw her, but he yanked her sideways and sent her rolling across the moss. "I told you, back off!" he said with an impressive growl. He'd let go of his knife, bracing his free hand on his hip as he towered over the now-prone female with a glare. "Stay away from my girl," he added.

As my mother's once-favorite female scrambled back upright, brushing leaves and sticks from her long, dark-blue hair, I found myself smiling. "He says to stay away from me unless you want to taste the dirt a second time." That made Astrexa hiss, but she did not call me a coward this time for staying behind my male. She did not call me anything, though she was clearly furious and embarrassed, and she did not try to approach a second time.

"Well, this is sure interesting, isn't it, my mate?" a new voice drawled. Reid twisted his head slowly toward this newcomer, as if he'd known all along they were there. I nearly jumped out of my scales at the sound of Kusha's voice. She was beneath the trees, right at the spot where I'd first spotted Astrexa, so she'd come from the same direction. Her mate, Khawla, was at her side, his big arms crossed over his chest and his head lowered, a frown marring his brow.

“It is,” he agreed with her. They looked united, but at the same time, I could see something in their relationship that I had never realized was off. When Reid stood next to me, he couldn’t keep his hands to himself; even now, he stood close and held my hand. Kusha and Khawla were next to each other but very much apart. When the statuesque female moved closer to him, Khawla backed away, like he did not want to touch her.

“Step away, human male. This is Naga business and does not concern you,” Kusha said haughtily and she waved her hand at Reid. Then her dark blue eyes settled on me. “Translate my words for your male, Sazzie. He must control himself and let us handle this like adults. You know this. Fight me, and I promise you I’ll make it quick. One fight, and it will all be over.” Maybe she did not mean to sound so ominous, but it sounded like she intended to kill me, just like Astrexa held only murderous intent in her glare.

“My male understands just fine,” I told her. “And I am not fighting anyone. I am leaving. Defeat her,” I said, pointing at Astrexa and noticing how that made the female freeze in surprise. “Nobody else here will stand in your way.” I knew Kusha understood what I was saying; she was a clever, cunning female. Where Astrexa was blunt and mean, this one always pulled strings with the bigger picture in mind. Honestly, she was the perfect Queen, probably better for the Clan.

I had forgotten why Khawla and Kusha were a match; Kusha was just as much a stickler for the rules as her mate was. She curled her lip in distaste, displaying her fangs to me. She would have said something scathing and angry, something about how much of a disgrace I’d become. I knew it, and I was almost relieved by the next interruption.

Bitter Storm warriors streamed out of the woods, and both Reid and Khawla spun to face them. The Thunder Rock Scout, with his spear lowered and aimed at the nearest threat, Reid, with his knife out. Everyone—including Astrexa—forgot about the

throne, focusing only on this new danger. There were six of them, all big and brawny, all male. I saw no sign of their scrawny leader, Aser, but I was certain he was nearby, waiting on the sidelines like a true coward.

I hissed, my claws curling and my scales shivering. Weren't there twelve warriors? Where were the rest? Nobody said anything. There was a pause before the fight, and then an explosion of motion. Khawla and Reid burst forward at the same time, as if they had fought together before. I did not know what to do; it wasn't customary for a Naga female to fight alongside her male. We only fought each other—not males, not enemies. We did not even hunt.

Reid was moving uncannily fast, slashing with his knife and disarming enemies with grace. Khawla was also proving to be much more than a simple scout, wielding his spear with deadly precision. But it was two against six, and then the other six showed up from the opposite direction. They could not possibly win. I came to that conclusion at the same time Kusha did, I was certain. The two of us shared a wide-eyed look and then both of us turned to attack. Astrexa was slower on the uptake, but she was left little choice when one of the Bitter Storm males tried to manhandle her.

Flinging myself beneath the guard of the nearest warrior, I clawed deep furrows across his red-and-orange-freckled chest. My claws dug deep, pulling blood to the surface, and he screamed in rage. I had to move fast to avoid a blow from his spear, nearly getting caught beneath the spear of another male. I was out of my depth; I had never fought an armed opponent before, especially one with far superior training to mine. The truth was, I had no training except what I'd learned fighting my sisters. All of it was instinct.

"Not her!" a male shouted. "We need her! Damn it!" Aser. I locked eyes with him from beneath the raised arm of the warrior I'd clawed. He snarled but changed tactics, turning his spear to strike me with the blunt shaft. I blocked the first blow with my wrist but wasn't fast enough to protect myself from the next one. Reid was just

suddenly there, his arm between the spear shaft and my head. His skin gleamed impossibly silver and violet.

He'd left himself exposed to protect me, and a scream ripped from my throat when I saw another spear jab him in his side. Red blood spurted, the scent of copper filling the air. When the spear withdrew, his wound knitted itself back together before my eyes, leaving only a bloodstained gash in his shirt. But it cost him. I knew what it did to him now, when he fought and healed this fast. How long before he collapsed? Before he ran out of the fuel that powered his body and those weird nanobots beneath his skin?

I heard Khawla roar as Reid knocked out the male who had stabbed him with a rapid-fire blow to the throat. My eyes shifted and caught sight of Kusha pinned beneath two big Bitter Storm warriors, her tail restrained by one of theirs. She'd suffered a blow to the chest, and I did not think she was getting up again—maybe not ever.

After that, everything went too fast. I was still scrambling to get back upright and make sense of the battlefield when the tide turned. More warriors streamed from the woods. This wasn't six males or a dozen—there were at least another twenty males, and they piled onto an enraged Khawla before giving Reid the same treatment. I no longer saw Astrexa anywhere, and then I had no more time to look, either. All I could do was dodge hands and claw at exposed tails and arms. If they restrained me, it was all over.

I took a big, venom-filled bite out of one biceps, then managed to slap a male so hard across his head with my tail that he collapsed. But then, a blow struck me against my temple, and darkness claimed me—a horrible, rapid descent into unconsciousness I could not stop. My last thoughts were of Reid: did he make it? Did he escape? Had they killed him or captured him?

## Chapter 9

Reid

Once they had control of Sazzie, the fight was over. I hated it, but it was my only option if I wanted to live another day. To live was to have another chance. Though my instincts rebelled—my nanobot-enhanced body was riding a wicked battle high—I knew I had to be smart about this. That didn't make it easy to allow the Bitter Storm warriors still standing to restrain me with my hands behind my back, though.

There was a ticking time bomb in my body, one that would cause me to collapse and possibly die if I did not replenish the fuel my nanobots had burned. I knew I hadn't pushed myself as much this time as I had last time; I had been in control. But I did not know how bad it was, where my limits lay, or how long I had. There was a hollow feeling in my stomach, warning me with hunger that I needed to refuel, soon.

These warriors did not say anything to me, and they talked freely around me as if they thought I could not understand them. They were rattled by this fight and worried because their leader wanted to take all of us to their home alive. One male, who had his claws around my biceps and was urging me into a walk, was quietly complaining to his friend that things were better when they had a Queen—words that I suspected would get him killed if this Aser fellow, the King, heard them.



*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:15 am*

I had never lost track of where my angel was and had to fight hard against my instincts not to break my bonds when I realized someone was going to carry her. A male had his filthy paws all over my girl, I hated it. I vowed to myself that I was going to make sure that male knew Sazzie was all mine before this was over. His orange-flecked chest was unforgettable; I'd remember him.

As quickly as the fight had escalated, and as quickly as it had ended when Bitter Storm's reinforcements had shown up, our departure was even faster. Astrexa and Sazzie were hauled over shoulders after their wrists were tied behind their backs. Khawla was rolled in a net and hoisted on poles so he could be carried safely. And me? They made me march with them, a hand around each arm to keep me in line. I was last in the line, with a view of the entire snaking party as it wound beneath the trees back in the direction of Bitter Storm's large mountain range.

I recalled Chen's careful instructions for getting back to Haven, the map he'd shown to me on one of the med ship's view screens. To reach the Thunder Rock Territories, and Haven beyond that, Sazzie and I would have had to travel around that very mountain. It would involve a large stretch of swamp and forest, travel through Copper Tooth Territory, before we'd reach the safety of our own lands. The journey would have taken us at least two weeks on foot. I wondered what it would do to our travel time to cross through that mountain, rather than go around it.

For hours we marched—or rather, I marched, and they slithered. Khawla had woken up by late afternoon, but he did not move from where he was trapped inside the net. Our eyes met, but his were listless, despondent. I knew why: he'd just lost his mate. They had left her body behind where they had ambushed us. Would I be able to count on his help to get out of here when the time came? Or had he lost all will to survive

by losing his lady?

Sazzie was the hardest one for me to lay eyes on. They had her at the front of the line, and I was certain Aser was talking to her as we traveled. It was her they had been after, but why? What did they want with my angel? She had to be scared out of her mind, but she'd been so brave during the battle, fighting even though she hated it so much. Did she have any injuries? She'd been awake by the time we'd started moving, but I was certain I'd seen the male who carried her knock her out.

By the time the violet Serant sun had started to dip below the horizon, every muscle in my body ached and trembled with fatigue. I was very close to collapsing; if I did not eat something soon, I feared I might slip into a sleep and not wake. My nanobots had healed every bruise and cut on my flesh, and I could feel how the largest concentrations had settled beneath my skin on my chest, shoulders, and belly. They felt like an itch I could not scratch, warning me with their presence that I was running out of time.

Gritting my teeth, I kept walking—one foot, then another. What more could I do? Surely these warriors would make camp soon and feed us? Someone had picked up our bags of supplies and taken them with him; if I could get my hands on the capsules Erish had crafted for me...

When they did make camp, full darkness had fallen, but that did not bother the warriors. Naga had good eyesight in the dark, and these Bitter Storm males lived in caves and tunnels beneath their mountain. They were used to darkness. I could have used my nanobots to enhance my own vision to aid me, but I did not dare risk it. Besides, it annoyed my escort each time I tripped and stumbled. "Why are we even bothering with this abomination?" the one on my left said with a fierce scowl I could not see but could hear anyway.

The other one tightened his grip around my arm and hauled me higher, forcing me to

keep walking when my legs wanted to give out. “King’s orders. He knows things; he always does.” I had a feeling he was warning the other guy not to speak out of turn, like he had earlier—that it wasn’t safe for them to say disloyal things about this Aser. If I remembered correctly, the scrawny Aser had once been assigned as an aide to the one Bitter Storm male I would trust my life to: Krashe. The former Warlord had brought Naomi, his human mate, back home at the cost of abandoning his Clan and causing a civil war. Aser had come out on top, killing the Queen and becoming the first-ever male to rule a Clan.

From the sounds of it, there was plenty of discontent now, and he was no longer as in control of the remaining Bitter Storm forces as he wanted to be. Was that why he was after Sazzie? Did he think that adding fresh blood, a mating to a crown princess, would make him more respected in the eyes of his subjects? Well, he wasn’t getting my princess; she was taken.

The two warriors escorted me to a tree and started to tie me up against it in a sitting position. It gave me a chance to rest my legs, but I was not able to move much, let alone eat. Khawla’s net was hoisted into the tree I was tied to, and he gently swayed and spun from a branch above me. In the dark, I could not make out any part of him; his dark, sheenless scales made him a shadow. I only saw the glow of his amethyst eyes when he spun around to face me.

“Never, you filthy bastard! Get your paws off me, right now!” Sazzie’s voice rose above the murmur of voices and the sounds of males gathering wood and setting up camp. My abdomen grew tight with worry, and it was very tempting to urge my nanobots to my arms to give me the strength to rip the ropes that bound them. In this state, it would kill me, but could I drive enough force to my limbs to free her before I succumbed?

What I did give into was the desire to see, urging my nanobots to enhance my vision. The darkness resolved itself into clearer shapes almost instantly, and now I could see

enough to count the number of warriors that still remained. I could also see where they had tied up Astrexa, who sat in a similar position to mine against a tree across from the small but neat camp. She was awake and wearing an angry but also fearful expression.

Sazzie was where the warrior who had carried her was building a campfire, and the smallest male out of the lot was at her side. Aser, had to be. He had black hair slicked back from his face with some kind of oil or grease; it was neatly tied in a long braid over one shoulder. He wore brown robes that looked like they had seen better days, the robes of a beggar. It made him look anything but kingly, and yet a male bowed deeply and with great respect when he brought his King a small, wrapped package.

I recognized the package for what it was, and though I had not enhanced my sense of smell, I imagined I could smell what was in those folded leaves anyway: food, the type of dense, fat- and meat-heavy rations that Naga hunters liked to prepare. If I couldn't get to the capsules Erish had made for me, that would be the second-best thing, I imagined. My stomach rumbled painfully at the sight of the wrapped food, and it took precedence over any other feelings as Sazzie seemed unharmed. She was not even tied up right now and had her arms crossed over her chest while she glared at the Bitter Storm King.

Sazzie glanced from Aser to the package of food he was now holding, then tilted her head and locked eyes with me across the camp with uncanny accuracy. With my enhanced vision, I saw that she knew it was exactly what I needed. The determined tilt to the angle of her chin told me that she was going to get it for me. My heart clenched in my chest—a reflection of my exhaustion and my fear for her. We were in bad shape right now. If I could recoup my strength, maybe we'd make it...

My energy waned quickly, and darkness crept back in from the edges—slowly at first, then rolling at me in a wave. It was the nanobots that had run out of power to safely enhance my vision, and now my muscles weren't just trembling from fatigue;

they were eating themselves up to sustain me. I closed my eyes—rest for a moment, sleep. Aser wanted Sazzie alive. I had to trust that she'd be okay.

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Sazzie

If I were to believe in such a thing as bad luck, I had to be cursed. Running into Astrexa was awful, but these Bitter Storm warriors? I couldn't get the sight out of my head of Reid's beautiful body as he flowed at uncanny speeds through that skirmish, until that spear blow to his side. After that... I hissed with frustration at the bindings around my wrists, which their cowardly King had put back on me after I'd refused to share a meal with him.

I knew what he'd wanted when he made that offer: for me to sit down and eat the food from his fingers. To show his warriors that I was allowing his advances, that I was letting him court me. Never. I could not even play at that because it felt wrong to betray Reid that way. Not that he and I had spoken of the mate bond or commitments, but I felt like we both knew. I had agreed to come live at Haven with him, hadn't I? Now I wasn't just frustrated; I was worried that Reid wasn't going to make it, and that if he did, I had misunderstood him. Relationships were not covered in a Naga upbringing, the mating marks said it all.

"This doesn't have to be difficult, Sazzie," Aser said from where he sat on the ground next to a barely burning little fire. It was there more to give a hint of light than to warm a person. The night was balmy, and though cool, not cold yet this close to the marshy lands that belonged to Copper Tooth. Higher up in the mountains, it would already be cool enough to hint at the rapidly approaching fall.

I was resting on my tail beside him, but I kept a careful distance because I refused to give anyone ideas. Astrexa was watching us from where they had tied her up, and I

didn't need to wonder what she was thinking. Her jealousy was plain to see on her face; she definitely would have welcomed the advances of a male wielding as much power as Aser did, even if he was the most unappealing Naga I had ever laid eyes on.

It was the missing front teeth that made him off-putting, if I were honest. It looked unhealthy, like he had not taken care of himself. And his scrawny body and bony shoulders reflected that same sentiment. It was like he purposely ate very little so as to reassure his Clan he would never take too much from them. He had not eaten a bite from the wrapped ration bars he held in his hands, and, though he had offered to feed me, my refusal seemed to mean I was not getting any food at all.

I flicked my eyes from Astrexa to my host and captor, fighting hard to curb the instinct to check on Reid. He had collapsed in his bindings, I had seen that, and fear for him coated the back of my tongue with a bitter taste. If I looked at him again, I would give away to this cunning, evil King that he meant something to me. I was certain that couldn't end well, but how could I get that nutritious food he was holding from his hands into Reid's mouth?

My nemesis was the one who came to my aid, though I was certain Astrexa did not intend it that way. She might have been the only captive who was getting food without any strings attached, and she chose to throw it in the face of the male who brought it to her. He had been foolish enough to untie her hands so she could eat, and she took the moment to throw herself at him and claw his eyes. Once they had managed to restrain her—which took an impressive three males—Aser left me by the fire to address her.

As he slithered away, he paused to glance over his shoulder at me, his red eyes glowing like embers in his face. "Are you going to do the same if I hand you this? Or are you going to be more sensible? I always did think you were a more sensible female than most." The patronizing tone and his choice of words all made anger rise, hot and fiery, inside my chest, but unlike my sisters, it didn't rule me.

Rolling a shoulder casually, I offered him a half-smile that I hoped was mysterious rather than flirtatious. “Oh, yeah? Is that so? Only one way to find out, is there, Aser.” I purposely called him by name rather than by the title he’d claimed with the force of his loyal males. I knew it would irk him—and it did; his mouth twitched. It also goaded him, and he held out the package of ration bars.

My heart rate shot through the roof with my excitement, but I made certain he saw none of that on my face. Holding an expression of bored indifference was very hard, but I managed it as I took the package from his fingers. I did it by forcefully brushing my fingers against his scales, letting him know that I was not afraid of that touch. I wanted him aware that he was not my mate, and that we both knew it.

It was he who hissed as he turned away to deal with a still-raving, angry Astrexa. She was bucking and coiling beneath the males who pinned her, a snarl on her pretty face, but she knew real power when she saw it. Aser looked like nothing, but he was the male who controlled it all at this camp. I did not continue watching them as Aser bent his head close to hers, and the two started whispering in low voices. It gave me a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach to see those two together, but I had the precious food now; there was no time to waste.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:16 am*

I made my path casual as I unraveled the leaves from around the thick, fatty, meat-and-nut-filled bars. There were two males who stayed hot on my tail, one of them being the orange-freckled one who had knocked me out. I did not like the look in his eyes; it made me feel dirty, like I wasn't a Naga princess but a toy he could play with. The heat in that gaze made me feel cold inside.

I reached Khawla, trapped inside a net, first. They had bound his wrists in front of him as well, which seemed like a fatal flaw—it would allow him to gnaw through the rope. Then, I saw the despondent look in his eyes, and my belly sank with mirrored pain. That's right; Kusha had not gotten up from that fight. I broke off half a ration bar—a small portion for a big male like him—but I was going to save as much food as I could for Reid.

When I reached up and slipped that piece into his limp fingers, he blinked his amethyst eyes at me slowly. "You'll need your strength, Khawla," I whispered. "Your children need you." He blinked again, first with his outer eyelids, then sliding his nictitating membranes in from the sides. The gaze I received next was more alert, sharper. He gave me a small nod and raised the food to his mouth, swallowing the chunk whole.

I turned toward Reid next, my heart pounding furiously and my scales itching with the urge to tremble. If I let on to my guards how nervous I was, I was sure they would put a stop to this. All I could do was try to act as casually as possible and hope that they saw no objections to my sharing food with the other prisoners. Food was important to Bitter Storm; they never had enough of it. Would they understand my urge to share?



Lowering myself beside Reid, I forced my hands to move slowly as I raised a tiny bite to his mouth. He appeared to be sleeping, his head drooping low, chin to his chest. If not for the steady rise and fall of his breathing, I might have thought he was dead. His lips were warm to the touch when I brushed the food against his soft skin—another good sign. I hoped the scent would rouse him enough to get him to eat, and it did. He opened his mouth and swallowed when I pushed the bite inside.

Neither of my guards said a thing as I continued to feed my male more of the dense food. I could feel their eyes boring into my back, though, and imagined the disapproval on their faces. I did not care; I had achieved what I wanted to achieve. Every bite that Reid swallowed would make him stronger—or, at least, that was the theory. There had never been anyone in my life to rely on except Zathar and my dad when I was little, so it was strange to put my fate in someone else's hands now. I just knew that if I could give Reid his strength back, we'd have a chance. He'd know what to do to get us out of this.

My ration bars were almost entirely gone when Reid hazily lifted his eyes to my face. The warm brown was a balm to my soul, as was the rapidly sharpening alertness. He was back—it had worked! On the next bite, his lips brushed against my fingers in a way that shot a sharp lance of sensation through my belly. He'd done that on purpose. How did he always know how to make me feel like that? This was the worst moment to be turned on, but I felt better for it, like things were going to turn out just fine.

I did not hear him approach, but I saw how Reid raised his head and rushed to take the last bite. When Aser spoke, I was not surprised he was there. "Feeding the prisoners? I did not take you for a soft-hearted Kepi," he drawled, with a hint of dismay and confusion. Of course, he had not—out of all the Thunder Rock females, I had been the one in the most fights. After Zathar's tough love, I knew I would have to be the one to strike first if I wanted to make it, so I had. What information about me that had reached Bitter Storm would have made my reputation sound fierce, even if females like Astrexa and Evarah had sensed my weakness.

I raised my brows at him and gave a derisive snort, making myself sound as annoyed and dismissive as I could manage. “Who says this is anything but self-interest? I need to keep my options open and my potential allies strong, don’t I?” I hated what had come out of my mouth and feared what Reid would think of it. But his warm brown eyes weren’t on my face; they were locked on the food as I kept feeding him the last bits while I spoke. He looked much better already, the paleness had left his skin, as had the dark circles beneath his eyes. It could have been my imagination, but it even seemed like he’d gotten bigger with every bite he took.

Aser seemed to like what I said; he tossed back his head and laughed, the absence of his front teeth and fangs obvious in his almost gaunt face. “Right you are, Sazzie. But you don’t need an abomination like him,” he said, gesturing with his black claws at Reid. “That barbaric creature has nothing to offer a female like you. I, on the other hand...” He grinned widely, and it was anything but a humble smile. “I am King, and I can offer you a kingdom—two of them. We could unite our Clans, expand our territories. Together, we could wipe Haven off the map and take Copper Tooth’s rich marshlands!” The fanaticism that gleamed in his red eyes was sickening.

Since when did Bitter Storm want to unite Clans? They had always been secular, rapidly multiplying in their mountain halls. I knew my history lessons, taught by some of the village elders. Bitter Storm always outgrew its territory, struggled with famine, and shrank. Then the cycle started anew. Never in those histories had a male seized power and turned his greedy eyes outward.

“Tempting,” I said in a tone that made it clear I found it anything but tempting. “Why don’t I sleep on it?” I turned my back on him in clear dismissal. Ignoring the surprised gasp of one of my guards, I settled myself on the moss between Reid and Khawla. I tried to make it seem like I had no preference for either male, simply curling up in my tail and resting my head on my arms. When I closed my eyes and pretended to go to sleep, Aser sighed in frustration, but he left after barking at my guards to keep an eye on me. They did not tie me up again, and I hoped I’d be able to

use that to my advantage.

## Chapter 10

Reid

Clever, brave, beautiful girl. She'd done it. She'd gotten the food from Aser and somehow managed to feed all of it to me. I had not missed how she had not taken a single bite for herself and had heard the discontented rumble of her belly as she lay down to sleep. I hated that I had taken the food out of her mouth, and I vowed I would make it up to her.

Already, I could feel strength return to my limbs, my vision and hearing improving. There were too many Bitter Storm warriors to risk an escape; at least half a dozen stayed awake to guard the camp. Of the twenty or so warriors that were sleeping, the majority had grouped themselves around us, meaning that we would have to climb over their long, sprawled-out bodies if we wanted to leave. I had a lot of faith in my skills, but I did not think I could manage that without waking at least one or alerting a guard. There were at least three pairs of eyes on me at all times.

The Bitter Storm King might not have looked at me as if he saw a threat, but some of those warriors I'd bested in our skirmish that afternoon. They remembered. So, although I hated waiting and was terrible at it, I settled in to do exactly that. With my strength still not at full power, I forced myself to get as comfortable as I could and wait till morning. Slumping in my bonds, I made sure to make myself look as pathetic as I could; I wanted them to continue underestimating me. So far, they did not realize that I could understand them, and I hoped that meant they'd reveal their plans for Sazzie—for us.

By morning, I had not seen a chance to take my angel and slip away, but I did feel almost fully recovered. On top of that, I had noticed that the bag of supplies, which

held the pouch with capsules from Erish, was in the possession of a male not far away. He was soundly asleep, using the bag as his pillow, long auburn strands fanned out across the leather satchel. The guards were murmuring together on the other side of this male, and, by a stroke of luck, the flap that opened the bag was aimed my way. If I could just wriggle the nose of my shoe beneath it, I could dislodge that pouch.

It fell with a whisper onto the slightly soggy, cold ground beside the male, but it had rolled out of reach of my stretched-out leg. I winced, my mind spinning as I contemplated how to get to the pouch without anyone noticing. There was no way I could reach it without breaking my ropes and giving away that I was feeling much better. Could I risk leaving it until they untied me for travel? Hope that I could snatch it up without anyone noticing then? I doubted it.

Turning to look at my angel, I saw that she was still sleeping where she'd curled up on the cool ground last night. A spot somewhere between Khawla and me, neutral ground. Her chest rose and fell, barely covered by the dark purple band she wore. She had slept fitfully, and I did not want to disturb her unless I absolutely had to. That left only one other possible option.

Khawla was awake, just like I was, and when I locked eyes with him, I knew instantly that he'd seen what I'd done. The male had lost his mate yesterday; I did not expect him to look in any kind of fighting shape. But there was a fire in his eyes, a glow that hadn't been there last night. The question remained: Would he align himself with Sazzie and me? Or would he prefer Astrexa?

When he slipped the tip of his tail through a maze in the net, I had my answer. He was closer to the pouch, dangling almost directly over the spot. In seconds, he'd curled his tail around the pouch and pulled it out of sight into the net that trapped him. Nobody was the wiser when, a minute later, everyone started to rouse and the camp burst into action. I hated that I was not in possession of the capsules myself, but at least now I knew Bitter Storm didn't have them.

Sazzie woke from the commotion, and for a brief, heart-stopping moment, our eyes met. I hoped she could see the promise I wanted to make to her in my eyes: I would get us out of this. I would keep her safe, at any cost. She was not offered any food, and I overheard remarks that they were withholding it because she would just give it away. Aser also ignored her, and to my worry, he was accompanied by an unbound Astrexa that morning when we set off toward the mountain once again.

My female was made to travel under her own steam, but they kept her separate from Khawla and me. It went like that all day, the women at the head of the group, with Aser and Astrexa talking in whispers. The orange-freckled guard kept my angel under close watch, and at all times, I was surrounded myself by the sharp ends of spears. I did not fancy another spear to my belly, even if it had healed at an astonishing rate. That fucking hurt.

Late that afternoon, the mountain began to loom overhead. We'd moved fast, and I had a feeling it wouldn't be long before we were in Bitter Storm territory. It was now or never if we wanted to escape. I took a big risk by increasing my pace so I could come abreast with Khawla, trapped in the swaying net. Bitter Storm warriors had taken turns carrying the net dangling from poles, and I had the impression the rear male was younger. I hoped that meant he wasn't as watchful.

They were muttering about my pace. One older male was definitely suspicious and warning the others to watch me. They didn't think I could understand any of what they said, and one of them jabbed my shoulder with the side of his spear shaft to get me to back up. Khawla was on the ball, though, proving he preferred to be my ally right now rather than my enemy. His tail slipped out as I pretended to stumble from that spear jab, and there the pouch was—casually slipped into my hand without anyone the wiser. The Thunder Rock Master Scout did not know the significance of that pouch; he just knew I wanted it, and he'd helped me get it.

With the leather warming against my palm, I felt better. I could feel the little bumps

of the capsules inside it, hard like beads. They were going to be unpleasant to swallow, but that didn't matter. With these in hand, I could recover the nutrients my nanobots burned mid-fight. It would turn the tables.

Allowing the Naga warriors to urge me back in line, away from Khawla, I briefly let them think they were in control. Then, I started counting. If I popped a few of those capsules now, would that be enough to take them all out? Four males surrounded me, Khawla would help if I broke him out of that net, and two dozen were up ahead, with Aser and my angel.

I was assessing the risk that they would try to harm Sazzie to get me back under their control, rapidly calculating those odds in my head. Did they think she meant anything to me? They could, because in our last skirmish, I had surrendered as soon as they captured her. But they might not make that connection, because they clearly thought very little of me. I was the human abomination; I heard them discuss me, ridicule my legs and lack of tail. Even if I'd kicked their fucking asses yesterday, they wanted to believe I was inferior to them. Fine with me—I'd prove them wrong.

There, a rock outcropping meant our party had to go around it, briefly causing half of the warriors to be out of sight. It was the perfect opportunity. Unobtrusively, I loosened the opening of the pouch and prepared to pull free some of the capsules. At the last moment, I hesitated, sensing something was off without knowing what. Pushing the bots to enhance all my senses, I caught what I had already noticed subconsciously: the lack of birds in the trees ahead, the low sound of more voices in the distance. I even caught the scents of more Naga—the leather of their armor, and the muskiness of a damp cave.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:16 am*

Two dozen males I would have risked with extra fuel and an ally, but this sounded like at least that number yet again. I couldn't do that. Those were overwhelming forces. I would not be able to free Sazzie before they got to her, and I did not fool myself into thinking that Aser wouldn't sacrifice her if it meant saving his own skin. Frustrated that this chance had slipped through my grasp, I made myself tuck the pouch away into a pants pocket, out of sight. Battle readiness surged through my body like ants crawling beneath my skin, but I forced myself to wait. I had to have faith that there would be other opportunities.

As we rounded the rock outcropping, I saw what I had already smelled: the opening of a cave leading into the ground and, no doubt, into the mountain—Bitter Storm's stomping grounds. Once in there, it would become so much harder to escape. But Sazzie was already at the opening, surrounded by so many red-scaled bodies... I did not like those odds. I did not like them at all.

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Sazzie

The darkness of the tunnel opening made my skin crawl. It was damp and musty in there, with a hint of rot. The tunnel was wide at first, but no one bothered to light a torch, relying on their ability to see in the dark. But even Naga eyes needed a hint of light to see, and soon, it felt like I was half-blind and surrounded by nothing but hostile warriors. When I flicked out my tongue to draw scents deep into my lungs, I could smell Aser's musky scales beside me and the lighter notes of Astrexa. There was leather and stone, many different male scents, and only faintly could I locate the unique notes that made up Reid. It felt like an impossible distance separated us,

though in reality, it was no more than thirty feet.

I wanted his arms around me, his warmth at my side. I wanted him to hold me so I could feel safe, but every foot traveled deeper into the mountain brought us closer to Bitter Storm's hordes, to danger. Haven was starting to sound like its name—a haven of safety. Now I wasn't just picturing Reid's arms to protect me, but Zathar and his best friends. What I wouldn't give to see my brother's kind eyes, the gruff but hulking form of Iave, or Corin with his cleverness and penchant for exploding things.

It kept me sane as we traveled through the dark to concoct stories in my mind about how the three of them—and Reid—would take care of this bunch and rescue me. If there was one thing I'd learned in life, it was that you couldn't count on anyone to come to your aid. They were nice fantasies to have, but if I wanted to get Reid and myself out of here alive, I had to do something about it myself.

At some point, I realized that something did emit a light in the tunnel—gentle veins of an unidentified substance shimmered with the barest hint of luminescence. Like a web of pinkish vines, or maybe it was ore inside the rock—I didn't know. It was just enough to see by, and the farther we traveled, the brighter their glow seemed to become. Now I was thinking about rock and wondered faintly how heavy a mountain was. What if it collapsed on top of us?

The voices of Aser and Astrexa, as they conversed, seemed to bounce off the stone too, jumbling their words together so that I struggled to hear what they said. When I did catch snatches of their conversation, it made my stomach turn. They were becoming fast friends, united in their desire for power. It was a friendship that was bound to fail someday, but it boded nothing but bad things right now. If I wasn't mistaken, Astrexa was trying to convince Aser not to pursue me, but to allow her to defeat me in front of his warriors. Then she would be the undisputed Queen of Thunder Rock, and they could join forces as he wanted. I could not hear what Aser replied to that proposal, but I was certain it was exactly what he wanted, so why



wouldn't he agree?

The sounds that came from ahead of me in the tunnel made me think we were almost at our destination. It felt like everyone picked up the pace, eager to get home, while I wanted to drag this out as long as possible. I smelled their Hearth Cave long before we reached it—a particular kind of stench that was hard to describe. Latrines, campfires, and bodies packed together, their scents combined with the various trades. The leather workers, in particular, fouled up the air. I had never considered what all those scents inside a cave would combine into—it wasn't good.

There was light, though, when we left our tunnel and entered a huge, massive cavern. The roof soared high above my head, and hundreds of wooden huts covered the area. Naga moved everywhere—hundreds of them—and many were younglings or warriors. With a shocked breath, I realized that if I ever did see a female, she was always accompanied by a spear-wielding warrior. And there were shockingly few of them. Too few.

“This is your stop,” Astrexa drawled when our party halted just inside the massive cavern. I glanced around, surprised and uncertain about what she meant. We were on the edge of the sprawling, packed-together, and very crowded village inside a mountain. No building stood out in particular, and all of them looked old and ramshackle, as if they had been there for a very long time without any improvements. When you did not need to worry about rain and wind, I supposed your building standards might slip a little.

When my orange-speckled guard grabbed my upper arm in a tight squeeze, I knew Astrexa and Aser had come to an agreement. He grinned malevolently as he squeezed my biceps, forcing me to turn to the left. I saw it then: a wooden door set into a stone wall. Another Bitter Storm male swung it open, exposing the dark interior with a hard dirt-and-stone floor. “In you go, Princess,” Aser told me, grinning so his upper gums were exposed. He straightened his already very straight, dull-brown robes as if he

were wearing royal vestments, pleased as can be.

My guard forced me inside, swinging me through the doorway with some momentum so that I tumbled forward. Flinging myself angrily back upright with a hiss, I was just in time to see that they were tossing Reid in after me. I had my claws outstretched, intending to scratch my spotted captor, but managed to sheath them just in time to avoid injuring him. He caught me around my waist, and the two of us twirled sideways, almost like we were dancing.

The door was swinging shut behind us, leaving me with a last look at how they carried the net-tangled Khawla deeper into the Hearth Cave. Then, we were alone, trapped in the dark, with nothing but dirt and rock to accompany us.

## Chapter 11

### Sazzie

I had what I had been craving at last: Reid's strong arms around me. It was odd because nothing in our situation had changed, but now I wasn't alone, and I felt safe once again. He was warm and solid, his heart thudding steadily beneath my ear. My human male was anything but weak; I sensed his power in every part of his body where we pressed together. Most of all, he was okay; the food had helped, which meant I had helped.

"Now what?" I whispered against his chest, where I could feel the press of his odd necklace beneath the fabric of his shirt. Reid hummed softly in the back of his throat, his arms tightening around my middle as he lifted me up. I helped by pressing with my tail, and then I was meeting his mouth with mine in one of his human customs. This kiss was all fire and passion, coiling its claws through my flesh as desire soared. Always, this male managed to make me forget myself or where I was.

“Now, I check every inch of you for injuries, angel,” he growled huskily. I loved the timbre of his voice: low, with a rough edge no matter what he did or how he talked. It always made me feel like he was a little on the wild side, a little uncivilized. Having been spoken to with nothing but deference by most males all my life, the way Reid talked to me was refreshing; it felt honest, real. “We’ll have to wait till nightfall anyway, so we should find a way to distract each other, don’t you think?”

There were more of those trails of bio-luminescence in the walls here, but they were very faint. Barely enough for me to see by, yet the hot glint in his warm brown eyes was unmistakable. How did he do that? Switch to something so warm and lighthearted when we were in dire straits? He claimed my mouth again; his teeth nibbling on my bottom lip made me gasp, and then his tongue swept inside. Oh, yes, that felt so good. Like that, I could forget everything around us and become a being of sensation and touch, a being all his.

It was not supposed to be like that; my passions should never rule me. Reid made me forget about the lessons I had learned of nestplay and male advances. He made me simply want to be his, and he made me want to pleasure him as much as he evoked pleasure in me. “They have left a single guard,” he tsked as he trailed kisses from the corner of my mouth to the edge of my jaw. “The idiots have no clue what they are dealing with. Once night falls, I will take him out, and we will escape.”

I wanted to warn him not to speak of his plan so boldly and loudly, but then I realized that nobody would understand him anyway. No Bitter Storm male would ever allow a relic for translations to be implanted in their head, and they had not realized that Reid and I could talk. If they had, would they have separated us? My handsome male paused long enough for my thoughts to surface and spin, but just as I started to worry about Khawla, he latched onto the side of my neck and sucked. The sensation made me yelp, and then that startled shock turned into hot pleasure—as if his mouth were drawing a line from my neck straight to my slit. All of me felt hot, forgetting about cold, damp caves and the endless piles of stone above us.

“Reid,” I whispered, afraid the guard would hear me. “Reid, what are you doing to me?” I felt out of control—hot and achy, like something was missing. He was holding me tightly against his body, and I could feel his cock pressing like a brand against my belly. If we continued down this path, we would find ourselves mating in the heart of the enemy’s territory. That was outrageous—or was it? As soon as my doubts surfaced, another part of me said, “But why not?” If tomorrow might never come, why would I deny myself this?

“Ah, angel, I don’t deserve you,” Reid muttered against my skin. He had carried me forward, and now I felt the cool press of stone against my back. “You taste so good, Sazzie. So sweet. I want to fuck you, claim you, mate you! Tell me that’s what this is—you feel it, don’t you? You are my mate!” He didn’t even manage to make that last sentence sound like a question, and a thrill shot through me. Yes, his mate. Claim me. I wanted that so badly, and I was done feeling ashamed for needing my male that way. It was right. It was good. I was his angel, and I wanted to be sweet to him—so very sweet.

“Yes,” I hissed. “Yes, Reid.” Then I realized that he might not understand the significance of my ability to comprehend every word he said. “I haven’t got a relic in my head—don’t you know that?” He jerked back from where he’d been nuzzling my cheek, his eyes growing huge, his mouth dropping open. I had never seen him look surprised, but I had caught him off guard this time. I liked it—he looked cute as he tried to wrap his head around what I had told him.

“Ah, you knew all along, didn’t you? You minx,” he chuckled, as if he enjoyed knowing that, but his expression sobered almost immediately. “I knew I was your man—your male—the moment I heard your voice. I’m glad you knew it, too. There’s no getting out of this, Sazzie. And I’m not waiting. Life’s too short to wait for anything. You’ve got to reach out and claim it, so I’m claiming you. Forever.” I wanted to say something, respond to that, but he was kissing me again, and all thoughts fled. He drew a moan from me, and it was loud. I did not even care if the

guard could hear.

His hands roamed my body, cupping my breasts, then sliding lower to my front to touch my slit. He yanked my belt from my hip, discarding anything that got between his hand and my body. I wanted to do the same to him—he was wearing far more than I was. A shirt, and those foot and leg coverings. I wanted to rid him of all of it. When I pulled on his shirt, he obliged, shrugging it over his head in a practiced move and exposing all of his beautiful markings. “What are these?” I whispered, sliding my fingers over his biceps and tracing the sharp, exotic eye of a predator.

“Tattoos,” Reid responded. “Ink just beneath my skin,” he added almost immediately, as if he already knew that the first word was meaningless to me. Naga did not have skin; our scales were tough everywhere, though more translucent in our faces—softer to allow for mobility in our expressions. Ink beneath our scales would be invisible, but with him, these beautiful patterns and images emerged, living art. “And these?” I asked when I touched a triangle at his throat. It was like his skin was slightly raised, and it felt as tough as a Naga scale.

“Nanobots joined together to form some kind of plate while they were inactive—I think, at least.” Then he laughed. “Enough talking, sweet angel. I want to taste you now. Taste, then fuck. Got it? So no more distractions.” I felt chastised and turned on at the same time. When he got so firm, it did things inside of me that I knew I shouldn’t like but loved all the same.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:16 am*

He kissed me again, our mouths mating the way I wanted him to mate with the rest of me. Tasting him was good, though; I loved the way his scent filled my senses and his taste flooded my mouth. It felt like we were becoming one that way—a claiming, just like he'd said. I was beginning to get the hang of this, and, of course, that's when Reid changed the rules.

The world shifted around me when he raised me higher, my back sliding along the wall until he could cup my breasts and suck a nipple into his mouth. Pleasure spiked through me at that touch, so good that it felt like I saw stars. I knew better what to expect now; when that crest began to rise, I didn't fight it. He was so confident as he ran his hand down my front and located my slit. That was all it took: a brush of his finger through my folds, pressing against the sensitive bundle of nerves at the top. I splintered to pieces for him, a moan loudly echoing through our prison.

"That's it, angel. Come for me," Reid told me, both an encouragement and a demand. He sank a finger into me, and this time it didn't feel like too much; it felt good. As my inner muscles contracted around his invasion, it only drew out the pleasure I felt. I didn't like it when he began to lower me, his mouth slipping from my breast, but his finger kept pushing into me, so I moaned rather than protested. Why did he know my body this well? Was that a thing of mates? Or was it all Reid?

We were not in a soft nest this time, but that didn't seem to matter to my body. Even the cool roughness of the wall against my back felt good while Reid was stoking the flames with his fingers. He'd added a second, and I felt full but not full enough. "You can take me, can't you, pretty angel?" he husked, and I mewled pathetically when he withdrew his hand.

“Reid, more, please...” I begged him, my arms around his neck, clinging to his wide shoulders. That made him laugh: a husky chuckle full of satisfaction, his dark eyes gleaming. I felt how he slid his hands around my hips, his grip firm as he held me exactly as he wanted, yet not touching me where I needed him most. That part of me felt painfully empty now.

“You’ll get what you need, Sazzie. I promise,” he told me, but I did not believe that, especially when he seemed to be pulling away. “Ah, so impatient. I just need to get my belt.” I heard the sound of his buckle then, and through my needy haze, I realized that he’d never gotten around to taking off his leg coverings. I tilted my head, glancing down between our bodies, and for the first time caught sight of his cock. He was freeing it from the dark fabric with his fist, and the tip was round, singular—like a thick, blunt club rather than the agile, bifurcated tip of a Naga male.

He smirked at me as he let me look my fill, then he took my hand and curled it around that thick bar. It was very warm and smooth, covered by silky-soft skin over stone. Veins ran along the length, throbbing with his passion. The unusually shaped head was round and blunt, the edge that defined the shape pronounced. He smelled good there too—salty and warm, both comfortable and arousing at the same time.

“I’m going to take you just like this,” Reid said, his mouth still tilted in that satisfied smirk. I felt heat curl through me again, reminding me sharply that he’d given me pleasure, yet left me oddly unfulfilled at the same time. When I nodded, his expression morphed—his jaw firming as he clenched it. His hands grew much more urgent on my body as he pressed us close again, his exposed cock brushing against my slit. I shivered at that first brush, then shook, my tail going weak when the second brush was right across the nub at the top.

“Ah, I love it when you shout my name,” Reid drawled, his mouth right against my ear. “Do that again, Sazzie.” I hadn’t even realized that I’d shouted, let alone his name. But when he used his hand to guide his cock inside of me, I did shout—again.

That push was too much. It was a lot; his cockhead was so thick and blunt. It did not slide in easily, stretching me around his invasion so it burned and ached, yet I craved more of it.

He kept pushing firmly and confidently, as if he knew it would work, even though my body seemed determined to resist him at every step. It was his mouth that distracted me from the sensation of his invasion, and then, everything just worked. I melted when he kissed me—my muscles relaxed—and, with a final shove, he was inside me, filling me. We were one now.

“Ready?” Reid asked. Confused, I opened my eyes. Our mouths were still so close we were almost kissing. Ready for what? Wasn’t this it? I blinked at him, and that made him smile. Slowly pulling back his hips, I felt the ridge of his cockhead—the blunt thickness—as it dragged along my walls until only the tip remained. My breath froze in my lungs as I looked between us, seeing how that looked. Then he slammed his hips forward, tunneling back inside forcefully. I jolted, pleasure sparking. I definitely screamed his name that time. Then he did it again, and again.

Every drag and pull, every push, felt amazing. I never expected it to feel like this—so close to another being, so entwined. Even when my trembling tail felt too limp to hold on to him, when a crest caught me in its clutches, it was all-consuming, powerful. It swept me away, and this time, it was beautiful because I was not alone. Reid’s cock swelled inside of me, kicking firmly as warm seed jetted from the round tip. He groaned—a deep, guttural sound that made me feel proud. I’d made him make that sound; my body had given him that pleasure. We were good together, and we’d made each other feel good.

With my arms snug around his shoulders, I clung tightly, unwilling to let him part our bodies after that climax, unable to find any words to tell him how good that was and how badly I wanted to do it all over again. His hands were petting me, sliding along my sides, my hips, stroking my arms. The stone wall had warmed against my scales,



and he kept me pinned to it with his chest, his hips, his still-hard cock deep inside of me. I wanted to stay there forever.

“How was that for a mating?” Reid whispered in the dark. “Think we need a little more practice?” I heard the hint of laughter in his tone but still blinked in confusion at him. Then he kissed me, his hands going from gentle patting to inciting as he tweaked my nipples. Ah, my mate wanted more; I was not alone in my desire to prolong this moment, this pleasure. Good. I was all too happy to surrender to more of his expert touches, to the rhythm he set with his cock.

## Chapter 12

Reid

Sazzie lay curled up against my chest, the dark blue strands of her hair caught in my five o'clock shadow. She wasn't asleep, but something close to a peaceful slumber—drifting, but not quite. The stone and sand were cold against my back, but it was worth it to see her dressed in my shirt. The expression on her face when I'd offered it to her after we'd made love? Also worth it. Full of wonder, like she'd never considered wearing something that belonged to someone else before. I had to admit, the delicate sniff at the collar once she'd pulled it over her head, followed by her delighted smile—a total boost to the ego.

Despite the idyllic afterglow and the cuddling, my mind was already processing all the sounds outside our prison. They had not died down but had gotten louder instead. A raucous crowd cheering and chanting had provided some cover for what we'd been up to in here; Sazzie had not been quiet. Though I was certain the guard had gotten an earful, no doubt he'd already sent a messenger to his boss to inform him that Sazzie and I were a little too close and that she could understand me.

That meant they had leverage, which meant I could not let them get their hands on

me—or her. We had to get out of here before Aser and that Thunder Rock female came back to deal with Sazzie. The other one, Khawla's mate, had seemed reasonable. Too bad it wasn't she who survived, but this viper instead. I had not forgotten that it was she who had clawed up Sazzie's back a few days ago.

The guard was moving restlessly, his scales whispering against the rock; that was a change from before. "Stay here. I'm going to get a look," I said to my girl, and I gently shifted her off my chest. She made a grumpy noise but clutched more tightly at my dogtags and tucked her chest around the pouch of precious capsules I'd shown her earlier. It seemed she did not like rousing from slumber regardless of the time, and I couldn't help but grin at that.

When she finally fluttered her eyes open, her brow was scrunched up tight but smoothed out as soon as she saw me. Then, she started to give back the pouch almost immediately, her eyes wide as if embarrassed to be caught holding it so tightly. "No, you keep it. I have a feeling they're less inclined to search you for contraband than me." Though they hadn't bothered to check me for weapons in the usual places when they captured me, I still had a small knife sheathed at my ankle. Perhaps that was simply due to their inexperience with dealing with an opponent who had legs.

I opened the pouch and swallowed a capsule before making my way to the door—just a precaution. My body could only store so much fuel for the nanobots before it stopped making sense, and I didn't want to waste what we had. Still, it couldn't hurt to be a little prepared in case I saw our chance the moment I looked outside. The loud noise of a roaring crowd filtered into our prison just then, and the feeling of unease in the pit of my stomach bloomed. It told me that Bitter Storm might have dwindled in size recently, but it was still a very impressive crowd.

Sazzie was alert now, no longer rosy and groggy. I wished I could give her more warm cuddles and lazy slumbering than this and vowed to myself that I'd make sure she got to sleep in all she wanted when this was over. She rose and followed me as I

padded to the wooden door, both of us moving as silently as possible. Near the door, the toe of my boot nudged up a broken piece of wood, possibly part of a crate at one point. I ducked down to pick it up and discovered most of it was rotten, but a sharp metal nail stuck to one end. Perfect—that might come in handy. I pried it out and tucked it into one of the pockets in my cargo pants.

At the door, I searched the panel for any sign of weakness. It was an old door, made of vertical planks held together by two horizontal planks—a very simple design that had allowed the door to warp, creating a gap on the left side big enough to fit my hand. Through that gap, I could see the guard moving, his red scales gleaming like blood in the dark at the edge of the cavern. He had his back to the door and was edging further away, drawn by the noises coming from the center of the massive cave—a cave that, to my eye, had a few too many straight edges and precisely placed pillars to be natural.

The town, packed beneath the domed shape of the stone roof, was entirely made of wood. Some of the houses were little more than shacks, while others were much sturdier and decorated with carvings and serpentine designs.

Enhancing my vision a little, I squinted at the area where most of the light was concentrated. Bonfires and torches surrounded what appeared to be a circular pit, and if I wasn't mistaken, everyone inside the cave had gathered there. When the crowd quieted, I could hear the clash of weapons and the grunts of males fighting—an arena, and either practice fights or... My blood went cold as I realized they might have taken Khawllathere. It wasn't like we were friends, but the thought that they'd thrown him in there for fight after fight until he died seemed particularly cruel.

It was, however, the perfect distraction to get away. Even our guard was so occupied with what was happening at the arena that he wasn't doing his job, straying further away from our prison door—a door that was hardly a barrier to me; it had rope hinges my knife would make short work of. “We’re breaking out, Sazzie,” I said to my

angel, casting her a look over my shoulder. Excitement thrummed through my veins almost immediately, and, in response, the shapes the dormant nanobots formed beneath my skin started to shift.

“Okay,” she said so quietly that it was barely a breath of air against the back of my neck. My girl was feeling hesitant; I could sense that in the way she placed her hand on my back and sidled closer. It only made me more determined to get us out of here. I did not want her to be scared. If only I could get her to Haven—I knew she’d be safe there, and I knew it would be the perfect place for her to discover her true self. The girls at Haven wouldn’t judge her for who she was, and I’d make sure—with my fists if necessary—that the Naga males wouldn’t either.

One thing at a time. Getting out of here was going to be rough, and I hated that we’d have to abandon the Thunder Rock male. He did not deserve this fate, but Sazzie’s safety was my priority. I would not risk it for him. I did not tell my angel that, though; I was not sure if she would like my plan if I did. We made quick preparations instead, checking our meager supplies. Sazzie returned my shirt to me, insisting that it was better that way.

With my knife, I cut through the top hinge first, then held on to the door as I cut the bottom one. Timing my breakout with the roaring of the crowd, I threw the door at our guard before racing after it and leaping onto his shoulders. He never saw me coming, too focused on the sounds in the distance. My nano-enhanced muscles had too much strength and speed for his reflexes, and I snapped his neck with a quick, merciful twist. It was over in seconds, and I’d barely broken a sweat doing it.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:16 am*

Ducking down, I rummaged through the few supplies he carried with him. I took his knife, a pouch containing some of the dried, dense ration bars the Naga liked to make, and a waterskin. “Into the tunnels,” I said to Sazzie. “How good is your sense of direction underground?” I was fairly certain which way we needed to go to reach Haven—my survival skills were well-developed and extensively trained—but it couldn’t hurt to have a second opinion, especially in the dark.

I grabbed our downed guard by his arms and dragged him into what had previously been our prison. With the door propped into the opening, it might pass a first inspection. Then I picked up his spear, and, with Sazzie’s hand in mine, the two of us set off into the tunnel we’d arrived through.

As soon as the dark of that hole swallowed us, Sazzie jerked to a stop. Her blue eyes gleamed brightly in the dark, glowing like a pair of cat eyes. “Khawla, we can’t leave him! Do you know where they took him?” I should have known she’d remember the male, and since he’d helped me with the capsules, I did owe him. And yet...

“We can’t reach him,” I said firmly. That was the truth; we’d have to face the entire cavern of Bitter Storm Naga to get to him. Those odds were impossible, and Sazzie’s safety was more important. “Come on, we’ve got to hurry before they discover we escaped.” I did not think we’d get a second chance as easily as this one if they managed to capture us a second time. Aser did not seem like the type that easily forgave. From the stories Krashe and Naomi told me of their dealings with him, he held a grudge.

She protested a second time, but when I pulled on her hand, she came with me. I sensed her discontent, but there was nothing I could do about it. She was my only

priority. We hurried through the tunnels until we reached an intersection. At least five tunnels split off in various directions, and I was pretty sure I did not recall this place from before. Somehow, we had already gotten into another tunnel, and I had not noticed. It drove home how badly we could get lost down here if we were not careful.

Hesitating over which of the five options to take made me antsy, but I could not do this lightly. One tunnel sloped down, one definitely went up quite steeply, but the other three were all level and pretty much the same. When I sharpened my vision in the dark, I could tell two of those twisted and got narrow in the distance, while the third remained a squarish shape, straight as an arrow. It was such a neat tunnel that, here too, I suspected hands had smoothed the way. It was that tunnel I guided Sazzie into, and soon, I was certain I'd made the right choice.

“Wow, I smell the woods,” my angel whispered. “How did you know?” I smelled them too, but it was only a faint trace. The woods smelled like they did on Serant, not back home on Earth. This wood smell had all the same notes of leaves and dirt; that was the same. But the trees here weren't the evergreens or pines I was used to. They smelled more like lavender or something similar, and I still could not get used to that. Woods were supposed to smell musty, fresh, and manly—not this delicate, froufrou scent.

I opened my mouth but snapped it shut again, tilting my head to listen more closely. The risk of using a tunnel so defined and straight was that we were clearly visible from far away. A sound had drawn my attention, but, when I tried to focus on it, I did not hear it again. I didn't trust it, though, and that was probably the only thing that saved me. The arrow that whizzed through the air made an odd sound as it traveled down the tunnel. I ducked, throwing myself on top of Sazzie, and felt it brush against my shirt before it clattered against the tunnel wall behind us.

“Ah, fuck, this is gonna get ugly,” I muttered as I raised my head and caught sight of the Naga slithering out of the darkness ahead of us. I heard them behind us too; that

party emerged from the intersection, led by a Naga with red and black edging his scales and a strand of white at his temple. He stood out to me because he was an older male with a particularly vicious expression on his face.

“Stay small, Sazzie. I’ll protect you,” I told my angel, and I pressed her shoulders against the cave wall. Then I rose, swished my pilfered spear through the air, and offered the nearest Naga a battle-ready grin. Bring it—a dozen? In small quarters? They didn’t stand a chance. Not when I had my Sazzie to protect. Nobody touched my princess.

## Chapter 13

### Sazzie

I caught whatever Reid had noticed a fraction of a second after he did. By then, it would have been too late—I was certain of it. If he hadn’t acted as fast as he had, one of us would have been pierced by that arrow. Now, all I had was a bruised rear and a few scratches along my scales where the obsidian shards of the shattered arrow tip had scraped me.

My heart was pounding in my throat when Reid pressed me more tightly against the wall before rising to a defensive position in front of me. Like him, I had looked down the tunnel in both directions and seen what we were up against. I had counted the number of Bitter Storm warriors approaching, and I did not like those odds. Six were coming from what I assumed was the outside, where the tunnel brightened at the end. Another such party was coming from behind, from the direction of Bitter Storm’s Hearth Cave.

That party was led by a more senior male; I could tell from the sash of red tied around his biceps and the dangling obsidian shards around his neck. A Senior Sentinel, tasked with guarding Bitter Storm’s tunnels and mountain. Out of all the males there,

that one was the most dangerous. Then he grinned, showing off blackened teeth, and my stomach turned. That was a new trend I had heard about but not seen, and it seemed the rumors were true. He was not the only male to display blackened teeth when they started advancing.

“Tell that abomination to stand down if he wants to live, Princess Sazzie,” the sentinel demanded. He had halted a safe distance away and lowered his spear to aim it at Reid, a disgusted glare twisting his features. “You are outnumbered.” I could see that, but I also knew they would kill Reid regardless. I had a use; it was a miracle they hadn’t killed my brave human yet, but they had to be out of patience with him now.

Sliding with my back along the wall, I rose, but I made sure never to leave the safety of the rock. “I can’t do that, Sentinel,” I said. “He does not obey me; he’s my male. What would you do if it were your mate in danger? You wouldn’t stand down.” I had not outright called him my mate, but it came dangerously close. The Sentinel narrowed his eyes at me as he processed what I’d said, but some of the others behind him and on our other side made the connection as he did. They murmured; one elbowed another and hissed furiously, and a third made a gagging noise as if the idea of a mating between human and Naga was so disgusting it upset his stomach. I curled my lip at that one and mouthed “Weakling” at him, though I did not say it out loud.

The Sentinel seemed to conclude that a fight was his only option, but he appeared not to relish that idea as much as I thought he would. “It’s Sentinel Sra to you, Princess. Surrender yourself peacefully, and I will speak in your favor to our King.” I laughed, the mirthless sound startling me by how loud it was. Surrender? To Aser and his fanaticism? To him and his alliance with Astrexa? He might as well kill me himself; the result would be the same.

“Enough of this,” Reid said, though nobody but me would be able to understand what he said. It was the first time he had spoken since we’d mated while we weren’t



touching, but I was not surprised that his words were crystal clear to me. That's how it worked: once fully mated, I no longer needed to touch him to understand him. "The princess does not want to go, and the princess gets what she wants. It's as simple as that."

Sra and his two patrols had started to move toward us, no doubt planning to subdue, or even kill, Reid. When my mate moved, it caught them by surprise. I had been watching Sra's face when my mate leaped into action, so I could see his shock as Reid became a blur of speed and power. There was nothing on Serant that moved as quickly as that, except perhaps the Revenants beyond Bitter Storm's territory. They did not expect it, and two fell before any of the warriors had even raised their spears.

Reid had gone for Sra's party first, but while they were gaping at their fallen brethren, he turned and hurled his pilfered spear over my head at the second party. It landed in the chest of one of those warriors with such force that it pinned him to the tunnel wall. Everyone stared, and then they all roared and charged at him. I was completely forgotten and ignored in the ensuing battle rage. The violence made my chest ache; it made me want to squeeze my eyes shut and curl into a tight ball. I couldn't do that—I needed to help Reid where I could.

The truth was, I hated fighting with my sisters, but fighting these Bitter Storm warriors was ten times scarier. They were so much bigger than me and stronger—shockingly strong. When a spear clattered to the ground next to my huddle, I forced myself to grab it. The next opening I saw, I took, hitting one of those huge males in the back of the head with the blunt end. He did not go down, howling in rage as he spun on me, and Reid was just there. The male fell without blinking his eyes, and my mate was gone again, spinning around the next opponent and trading blows with another.

Impossibly, it seemed to me like Reid had only gotten faster and stronger since the last time he'd fought. Maybe that was because he'd taken one of those capsules from

Erish, or maybe it was a matter of getting used to this. Whatever it was, it was in our favor—not many warriors were left standing. Only three remained upright; many lay dead or dying, while others were moaning or passed out. In the distance, I could see one crawling away as fast as he could, his tail limp as if he were unable to move it.

“Give up,” Reid shouted as he struck Sentinel Sra in the side of the head with his fist. “Sazzie is mine, and your boss cannot have her.” His brown eyes seemed to glow with an inner light in the dark tunnel, and silver glittered on his skin through the tears in his shirt. I didn’t know what that was, but he seemed stronger than any of the others because of it. I wondered if it was a sign of his ‘nanobots,’ the ones he and Erish talked so much about.

We were winning—or rather, Reid was. A dozen against one, and he had decimated their numbers like it was nothing. Hope soared in my chest as I realized that this battle was almost over, and it was my male who stood victorious over them all. In that moment, I knew that fate had matched me with the perfect mate—one who would always help me feel safe. One so strong that I knew when we left this mountain, I would never have another worry or another fight again. I did not think I deserved all that, not yet anyway, but I was going to make sure my male knew how much I appreciated him.

The feeling that swelled in my chest was hard to describe, hard to put a name to. It was not really something I’d ever felt before—not this strongly. I thought that maybe a very gentle version of it had existed between my father and me before he died, and perhaps even between Zathar and me. It was a pale shadow compared to how I felt for Reid. This emotion choked me up, caught in my throat, and came awfully close to fear—but it was not fear. I could lose him, and I’d never be the same again. But I wouldn’t, because my Reid was the strongest male there was. He’d protect me, even from this strange new feeling in my chest.

Sentinel Sra had traded a quick flurry of blows with my male while I’d been caught

up in my feelings. He was the only Naga left standing, and he was desperate—his grimace so rigid, his fangs were digging into his lower lip. A final blow to his chest sent the male stumbling back, and Reid waited, offering him a chance to retreat. “It’s almost over, Sazzie,” he said to me in a low murmur. “This one is smart enough to know when to back down. We’ll be out of here in no time.”

I hoped he was right. The tunnel was growing quiet, and the body-strewn floor was a macabre sight. It did not seem to me like Reid had gone for killing blows, but some males definitely would never get up again. Mostly, though, they lay passed out, unconscious from their injuries, or playing dead so they would not have to go a second round. Twisting to look over my shoulder, I searched the darkness in the direction of the Hearth Cave. I recalled that a warrior had crawled that way—had he made it far enough to sound the alarm?

Squinting, I flicked out my tongue to draw scents more sharply into my nose and mouth, filtering through the ones I already knew in search of any sign that more warriors could be approaching. I did not hear anything, nor did I smell anything—just the sound of Sra as he hit the ground behind me. The fight was over. I needed to hurry to Reid’s side so we could get out of here. My hands were already flying to the pouch of capsules secured on my belt; he’d need those too.

“Let’s go,” Reid said, just as I started to move toward him. Something drew my attention—something faint, just beyond full awareness. A sound or a smell, whatever it was, made me turn one last time to look toward the Hearth Cave, and what I saw made my belly turn as cold as ice: the glint of obsidian, the gleam of a pair of red eyes in the dark. Then, all I heard was a loud ‘twang,’ followed by a whoosh that instinctively made me duck.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:16 am*

Rock exploded above my head the next moment, stones falling from the tunnel roof. This was exactly what I'd feared the moment we'd entered the mountain: it was collapsing on top of us. Dust rolled over me in a great big cloud, making me cough as I struggled to see, until I flicked my nictitating membranes protectively over my eyes. Fear made my heart pound. Where was Reid? Had he been hit?

Another cough struck me, but no rocks—big ones, at least—had landed on top of me. Before the dust had settled, I rose, blindly flinging myself in the direction I was certain Reid was in. He had to be there, but he'd been right beneath the rock collapse. No, there was no way he was dead. He would have seen it and moved just in time!

A dozen feet away, my hand bumped into something warm beneath the rubble. For an elated heartbeat, I was certain it was my mate, but then I realized the arm was covered in scales. Hissing, I crawled forward, searching. This time, I used my sense of smell rather than my still-useless eyes. He had to be there. He had to be okay. I found him, pinned beneath a large rock, one too big for me to move without help. It was just his fingers, but they twitched against mine, then curled around my hand in a tight fist. "Sazzie?" he said hoarsely, but he did not cough from the dust. I did not know why, but that worried me.

I followed his hand to his wrist, then had to push rocks out of the way to reach his shoulder until I could cup the side of his chin. "Reid! Are you hurt? Can you get out?" I was starting to see more as the dust began to settle, and the sight alarmed me. The boulder that sat on his chest was too big; it was simply impossible that he wasn't crushed badly beneath that thing. I had seen a male trapped beneath a rockslide once, as a young girl. The sight had haunted me in my dreams for years. He had been alive, and then they'd moved the rock off him, and he'd died just like that. I didn't

understand why that had happened exactly, and nobody had explained, but I feared for it now.

Reid healed fast. I told myself he could survive this, unlike that Thunder Rock hunter. This was different. It had to be different. Reid had not responded to my questions, and with his eyes closed, it looked like he'd fallen asleep. But he felt warm, and I could see how his breathing stirred the dust in the air. I grabbed the pouch with Erish's medicine—the capsules that supposedly gave power to the foreign things inside his blood. Pulling several out, I worked to make Reid swallow them, my thumb brushing over his throat to force them down. "Come on, Reid. You have to live. I can't lose you. Swallow, damn it. It's just a little boulder. You can handle this, can't you?"

His eyes remained closed, and he never said my name again. I tried to feel hopeful that the capsules had stayed down, but I didn't know if that was a good sign or not. I just wanted a sign—anything—that would tell me he was going to be okay. But things weren't okay, were they? I could never move that boulder off his belly and legs, not without help. Bitter Storm warriors would be here long before I could do anything to save him.

I knew what he'd say if he were awake: he'd tell me to run, to get out while I had the chance. He'd tell me to save myself. I didn't want to be safe when I didn't have my mate at my side. Safety was important, but at this cost? Overwhelmed with despair, I curled myself closer against his side, begging quietly for him to open his eyes.

I heard the movements behind me—the approach of my enemy, ready to drag me back to the Hearth Cave. That couldn't make me care enough to move. I felt so heavy and sad that all I wanted was to lie down and stay at Reid's side. After all we'd been through, and after he'd seemed so invincible, I could not accept that he'd never open his brown eyes again, and stare at me with warm affection.

The soft glow along his nearest arm was so delicate that, at first, I did not see it. Then I blinked, certain I was imagining it. A silver sheen shimmered over the beautiful ink that marked his skin—his protective totems. It swirled in slashes and savage curls, the way mating marks on a Naga male did, and then it blinked out. I lifted my head and skimmed my eyes up and down his body, hoping to see them again, but met his eyes instead.

They had opened, though his expression was hazy and unfocused. Red tinted the corners of his eyes and lay like a web over his left orb. “Sazzie, go. Save yourself,” he husked, followed by a shuddering inhale that did not seem to pull enough air into his lungs. “Leave me, go!” he said, with a hint of his usual bossiness.

Tears sprang to my eyes, and for once, I did not fight to hold them back. I did not even feel ashamed for crying. “Reid! No, I’m not going anywhere. I’m staying with you.” He started to shake his head, but that clearly hurt, and he froze in place. His eyes briefly squeezed shut, and when they blinked back open, I told myself they weren’t as red and bloodshot as before. Fumbling with the pouch, I pulled out a few more of the small, round capsules and offered them to him. “You’ll get better. You’ll heal. You’re going to be fine. And I’m not going anywhere without you. You are my mate!”

A curious thing happened as I said that, declaring it loud enough that those approaching would have heard. They were taking their sweet time to reach me, as if they enjoyed seeing my pain. That silver I’d seen on Reid’s skin before? It now shimmered over my arms and upper chest. I ducked my head to confirm what I saw and was just in time to see it wink back out. I might have imagined what I saw on Reid, but this—this was no fantasy. How was that possible? Naga females did not have mating marks; they did not shimmer and glow for their male. And yet...that was exactly what that was.

“What?” I murmured, confused by what had just happened. My eyes flicked back to

Reid's instinctively. Had he seen what I had? I couldn't tell. Then his expression turned furious and agonized at the same time. The muscles in his neck grew taut, as did his arm beneath my hand. He shook his head, his mouth opening as he strained to speak. His warning came too late.

There were a lot of them, and Aser was with them when I turned around to look behind me. They were close now, and rather than fight, I chose to rise smoothly and offer my wrists as regally as possible. "Take me then," I said to Aser with a tilt of my chin horn in his direction. "I have nothing left to lose, and as you all know, a cornered female is most dangerous." All Aser did was give me a slow, satisfied smile, his red eyes gleaming with pleasure.

Heart pounding in my chest, I moved away from Reid and let the Bitter Storm King's warriors tie my wrists. As long as I had their attention, they might forget about Reid. They might not have noticed how I had slipped the pouch with the last remaining capsules into Reid's hand before I rose. If I was lucky, they would leave him alone, thinking he was a dead male anyway. My chest ached, but I couldn't lose faith. I had to believe that he'd somehow survive and come for me.

When Aser and his escort of warriors led me back to the Hearth Cave, it felt like my heart had been left behind—a giant, gaping hole inside my chest. It felt so real that I glanced down to check whether I had been wounded in the tunnel collapse. What I saw instead brought a chill I could not shake long after I'd been taken. Reid and I had not been the only ones trapped in that collapse—a collapse triggered by a large harpoon shot from a distance into the tunnel ceiling. A collapse caused on purpose.

Not far from where Reid lay, I saw the glow of a red pair of eyes—Sentinel Sra, trapped beneath debris just like Reid was, and still alive. None of his brethren reached out to help him, and he did not ask for it either, though I could see he was conscious. The same could not be said for the broken bodies of many of the others Reid had fought—many of them stuck or crushed beneath the rock, and many, I knew, who had

not been dead.

How evil was a king to sacrifice his own males like that? Not even my mother would be that cruel. Not even, I imagined, Astrexa would be that cruel to her people, should she manage to seize power. Clan above all others—that's how it was supposed to be. But as I left that tunnel behind, I knew Bitter Storm had forgotten that creed. I felt sick to my stomach as I was escorted into the Heart Cave—sick because I'd been forced to leave Reid behind, sick because I now knew how deep the rot inside this Clan went. It was hard to feel hope in the face of all that.

And then, I was brought to Astrexa.

## Chapter 14

Reid

I faded in and out of consciousness for quite a while. Darkness filled my vision while air struggled to fill my lungs, and it was becoming harder with each breath I took. A boulder sat on my hips and chest, and each time I exhaled, it became harder to fill my lungs again. There was a name for that: compressive asphyxia. I didn't know why my brain conjured up a stupid piece of knowledge like that when I had far more pressing matters to worry about. Hah, pressing. I chuckled weakly, but the faint trace of humor brought me more fully to awareness, rousing me from my delirious, rambling thoughts.

Immediately, my brain focused on one thing: Sazzie. My beautiful, brave, but scared princess. My angel. She needed me to be strong. She needed me to overcome this and save her. She needed me, and that was reason enough. Forcing myself to move my arms, I groaned as that action awakened every nerve in my chest. Until then, I had mostly been numb, but now, pain roared through my body. It felt like pins and needles multiplied by a thousand, and, except for the one time I'd woken in a vat in a



lab, I could not recall ever feeling this kind of pain before.

“Ah, fuck,” I groaned as I managed to grab hold of the giant block of rock lying on top of me. It was bigger than I expected, but if I wanted to get up so I could rescue Sazzie, it had to go. Tensing my muscles, I began to push, but it did not seem as though the rock would ever move. I refused to give in—not when I knew Sazzie needed help. All I had to do was picture her with that rotten Bitter Storm King, and fury blasted through my veins. Add that Thunder Rock female with the killing intent to the image, and that fury shot through the roof. With it, the boulder moved.

“You crazy bastard,” a voice said hoarsely from my left. I ignored it because the voice belonged to a male in worse shape than I was—the one I believed had called himself Sentinel Sra, the leader of the group that had discovered and attacked us. He had been the opponent I considered most dangerous, and I’d been wrong. The one who got me, I had not even seen or heard.

Twisting my head, I gave a final shove, and the boulder started rolling. If I thought I’d been in pain before, I was wrong. With the pressure gone from my spine and abdomen, everything became so much worse. I must have blacked out for a minute, maybe longer. Sazzie had fed me several of Erish’s nutrient-replenishing pills, and I knew that was what saved me. Already, I was healing—from injuries I should never have been able to come back from. There was no way I hadn’t broken my spine or crushed my pelvis when that rock struck, but I could wiggle my toes inside my boots.

Getting up was much harder, but after breathing through the pain for a few minutes, I managed to sit up. That’s when I discovered Sazzie had left the pouch with capsules behind. “Ah, clever girl,” I said as I picked it up and considered what to do. I could feel how my nanobots surged through my body, repairing every injury in their path. Pain was fading at an astonishing rate, and before my eyes, my left leg straightened from what had been a nasty compound fracture. The question that now remained was how many of the capsules I should take to give myself the strength I needed to rescue

Sazzie.

I could feel how all these repairs had already depleted my system again, and I'd need a lot of power if I had to face the entire Hearth cave of Bitter Storm Warriors. The pouch was half-empty by now, and I was tempted to take them all. That way, I could not lose them.

The hoarse cough drew my attention from the pouch of capsules to the Sentinel trapped beneath the rubble on my left. He was still pinned, though not as badly as I had been, but he was injured, and the rocks were too heavy for him to shift. If I did not help him out of there, he would die. It was then, for the first time, that I realized he'd been abandoned here by his own Clan. Why would they do that? I had never heard of such behavior before. If anything, I had been convinced that these Naga followed a strict "no man left behind" mentality.

"Blazing suns," the male rumbled before coughing a second time. "How are you up and moving? This is impossible. You should be dead." His red eyes were no longer gleaming with hatred and intelligence, but had dulled with pain and fatigue. He stared up at me as I rose to my feet and took a few testing steps in his direction. All felt good; I felt like myself, but the faintest stirrings of hunger warned me that I needed more fuel. Taking a gamble, I swallowed all of the remaining capsules, one after the other.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:16 am*

“I’m just very motivated, buddy,” I told the pinned Naga. Scanning the tunnel, I took in the devastation that had been wrought. The ceiling above my head bore a large crack reaching up several feet, and a spear with fletching on one end, like a huge crossbow bolt, was stuck inside it. So that’s how they’d done it—a type of ballista to set off the cave-in. I was willing to bet it was an invention of Krashe’s, and I’d have to remember to let him know it worked.

With a thought, my vision sharpened, and I started to see more details in the darkness. It wasn’t dark to my eyes once my nanobots enhanced my vision. Rocks had fallen onto many of the Naga I had fought before, and it was clear that only Sra had survived. What a waste of life—so pointless when you thought about it. And more lives would be lost before the night was over; that much I knew. I would not hesitate to kill to save my mate.

“Wait,” the sentinel said as I stepped over his tail to head toward the Heart Cave and my mate. “Don’t leave me here,” he added. I glanced down and knew it wouldn’t take much to dislodge the rubble that pinned him; he was badly injured. Maybe it evened the scales a little if I gave him a chance. It was not like he was strong enough to stand in my way. From his expression, I did not think he intended to, either.

With a toe, I nudged the nearest rock off his tail, and that seemed to incite the male to speak. A river of words fell from his blackened mouth and razor-sharp teeth. He appeared to think I could not understand him, which seemed to loosen his tongue. “She had the glow of mating marks. I have never seen a female glow with mating marks. How is that possible? And you glowed for her too. How can fate reward you—an abomination—and a pure-blood princess with mating marks? There have not been mating marks in our Clan since the last lorekeeper died.”

He hissed with pain when I picked a rock off his chest and aggravated his injuries. “Ah, not since Krashe glowed for that...” His words trailed off, and his eyes began to glow with an inner fire when they finally settled on my face. It seemed to me like this was the first time he truly looked at me—maybe he stopped seeing our differences and saw our similarities. “Stars above, have mercy on my soul,” he groaned, and then he fell silent at last, just as I shoved the last stone from his scales.

“Unless you have any advice on how to get Sazzie back, you’re on your own,” I told him with a shake of my head. I did not expect him to answer because he definitely did not understand me. Turning, I placed my palm on the side of the tunnel for balance and started to climb over the debris in the direction of the Heart Caves. My heart felt heavy in my chest, the way I imagined Sazzie had felt when she’d been forced to leave me. If only she’d fled as I had wanted her to, but she was too sweet to leave me. I could still hear her despair when she tried to get me to rise, and I’d heard her desire to believe that I would. I was not going to fail her.

“Wait,” the sentinel called out from behind me, and I heard the sliding and hissing as he tried to crawl into a sitting position. “If you are going back for her...” He paused, as if he couldn’t quite believe himself for speaking up. “There’s a back tunnel you should take.” I turned my head, interested now, and met his eyes. He hadn’t fully believed until then that I could understand him, but he believed it now, and he explained to me exactly how to get to their practice arena without being seen.

It was worth the five-minute delay of digging him out when, not much later, I was racing through a warren of tunnels with purpose. Unseen and unmet by any resistance, just like Sra had promised. Some of these passages were lit with a faint radiance coming from the veins of ore running through the rock, and the noise of the Heart Caves always drew me closer. My fingers tingled, and, with surprise, I pulled them back from the rock to discover that silver coated the tips, and the same radiance clung to them. It was as though my nanobots had drawn the ore straight onto my flesh. That was new, but it was not something I could concern myself with right

now.

I was almost there, and my body was so pumped with adrenaline that it felt like I was flying. My boots were a blur as they raced over the stone, but my eyes were sharp as an eagle's—or better yet, an owl's, considering the dark. I counted openings until I reached the one Sra said I should take. Silencing my footsteps, I was forced to move more slowly, but the promised single guard never saw me coming. I knocked him out and tied him up, trying to avoid more bloodshed where I could. Then it was a short few hundred feet before I could peer out of the narrow tunnel and into the Hearth Cave.

The training grounds the Bitter Storm warriors normally used for practice stretched out in front of me. They were located in a dugout, oblong-shaped pit with fortified wooden walls. Most of the Clan had gathered around that pit, standing right at the edge, peering inside, and cheering at the sounds of combat. There had to be hundreds of them, mostly males with their red-scaled bodies and long tails. When two of my friends at Haven had been captured by Bitter Storm a while ago, they had mentioned that Aser had put their women in cages. I hadn't been willing to believe that would remain a long-lasting situation, but the evidence was there: I saw only a handful of Bitter Storm females.

Aser was clearly visible on the other side of the pit, sitting beneath a canopy of red fabric. The sight of blue scales made my breath stall in my lungs, but it wasn't Sazzie. Astrexa lounged at his side on a pile of pillows as the two gazed down into the fighting pit. From this distance, I could not see what went on inside, but I feared the worst. If they had thrown my angel in there... I did not want to think about how awful she must feel, forced to fight in front of a crowd this huge, forced to commit violence with her tender, gentle heart.

I had to get closer, and for that, I needed a distraction. What I needed was a high-value hostage so I could make them do what the fuck I wanted. My eyes narrowed

across the crowd and the fighting pit to the canopy beneath which Aser sat. There was only one such target here.

## Chapter 15

Sazzie

The guard, who held me by my upper arm, was squeezing too tightly, but I didn't complain—not when I had a front-row seat to what had been going on for hours now inside this fighting pit. Horror had my breathing stuck in my chest, lodging something hard and painful in my throat.

Khawla had never been a male I knew well; he was older by at least a dozen years, older than my brother Zathar, so they hadn't been friends. The male was also a loner, always out in the woods. However, since he'd been named the Master Scout, he was also a leader—leader of the hunt, leader of the scouts. I knew Kusha was his mate and that she was barely involved in the raising of their two children.

When Khawla left, it was his brother or his friends who watched the two younglings. I did not even recall their names, as they were quiet and withdrawn, like their father. All things considered, he was a fair male—a rule follower and a good contributor to the Thunder Rock Clan. What was happening here was a fate worse than death, and he did not deserve it.

“I think this female is broken,” the male holding me said as he laughed and pointed at my face. A tear had slipped out and was rolling down my cheek; another dangled from my lashes and would soon follow the first one. Broken. I wanted to laugh at that statement. A week ago, I would have agreed with it. But then I'd spent time with the Shamans, and after that, I'd met a human male who looked at me like I was perfect.

No, I wasn't broken. I was exactly what I was meant to be—what a Naga female was

once supposed to be. As I considered this nasty fight pit, the jeering crowd, and the pleased Astrexa and Aser presiding over it all, I was struck by a chilling thought: once, our ancestors had built great cities. Once, they had built skyships and healing machines. Two thousand years had passed since that great era, and yet, here we were, still scrambling in the dirt, killing each other. Was it because the females had become so deadly and aggressive that we had been unable to reclaim our past?

I winced when the large warrior Khawla was fighting struck a particularly vicious blow across my Clanmale's face. He crumpled to the dirt, braced on his hands, and struggled to rise while blood gushed from his right eye. My free hand shot up to touch the scar that bisected my left eye from an injury similar to the one Khawla's opponent had just inflicted. My sympathy went out to him, but there was nothing I could do. Spears surrounded me, and I had four huge guards at my side. I was here as the next round of entertainment, waiting for my turn.

The male he was fighting was one in a long line of fighters; I did not know how many he'd already gone through. Khawla was proving to be a powerful opponent, and it seemed Bitter Storm enjoyed seeing their own blood spilled as much as his opponent's. When the brawny, red-scaled male approached Khawla's prone form, I thought it was over. This had to be his final fight, and a good male would die—for nothing—for the sport of a sick, power-hungry individual and a tainted Clan.

The warrior raised his spear above his head, then slammed it toward Khawla's exposed back with a roar. At the last moment, the Thunder Rock male rolled out of the way. His tail came up in a fast, agile move, and—snap—the warrior's neck was broken. He rose slowly, swaying on his tail, blood dripping from his face and the numerous slashes and cuts across his body. The crowd roared and screamed; they sounded happy about this result. Khawla did not respond to his fans. He did nothing but stand there, his head turned toward Aser and Astrexa, awaiting his fate. But why fight this hard if he didn't want to survive?

Aser rose and stretched out his arms, and the crowd began to quiet down. Two warriors darted into the arena to pull their downed brother from the field, tossing him aside in a corner where other bodies already lay. I tried to ignore the macabre sight, but it was hard not to quickly count them and wonder if that was how many fighters Khawla had defeated already. Were all these fights bouts to the death? What was the point of this? It made no sense.

“Why don’t we give our guest a chance to catch his breath?” Aser said into the silence. Then, he gestured at Astrexa, and my nemesis rose from her languid pose atop a pile of pillows. As always, she was graceful and vicious-looking at the same time, drawing every eye. “Let us watch the future Queen of Thunder Rock as she ends her rival, the crown princess Sazzie.”

Oh no, why hadn’t I seen that coming? Astrexa was grinning widely as she moved to the edge of the fighting pit and dropped down onto the hard dirt. The crowd cheered again, thumping their spear shafts against their shields and slapping their hands against their chests. The noise was deafening, drowning out the instinctive panic clawing at my chest. Fight Astrexa? I couldn’t do that. For a moment, I was back in the woods outside the village, a hurt, clawing Ayala pinned to my chest. I had lost that fight, but I had gotten away because I had fought hard enough. I knew losing this fight would mean the end.

Then my mind flashed back to that moment right after the cave-in, when I discovered how badly hurt Reid had been. His magnificent body was pinned beneath a giant boulder, silver flashing over his arms. Silver flashing over my arms. Naga females didn’t have mating marks—or did they? I had done all I could to help Reid survive, and I wanted to believe that meant he’d made it. That even now, he was crawling out from beneath the rubble to make his way toward me.

The tears that had welled at the sight of Khawla’s treatment were nothing compared to the cascade that fell when I thought of my male—my mate. Tears were useless, I



snarled furiously at myself. What I needed was the fire inside me, fire to carry me through this. I hated fighting; I hated all the violence I'd been forced to see or commit. But when I thought of Reid battling his way to my side even now, I knew I owed it to him to do the same. I had to live for him so I could return to his side. If I wanted what my brother had found with his human, then I needed to step up.

“Equals,” I said under my breath. “We are mates, and mates should be equals.” Reid deserved my protection as much as I deserved his. That resolution shivered through my body with such strength that, when I raised my eyes to meet my challenger, I knew I could win this. Her dark-blue gaze had been confident, mocking, drunk on her own power. It faltered now, and a slow smile spread across my face as I shrugged off my captor's grip and moved across the blood-soaked battlefield toward her.

I was not aware of the silver glow on my scales until the crowd hushed and absolute silence fell inside the Hearth cave. It curved from my shoulders in spirals down my arms, pooling in my hands until my palms glowed the brightest. When I lifted a hand to look at what was happening, it felt like I was staring into a relic light source or a bright, open flame. The silver was still spreading, too, flowing along my chest, down my belly, and then to my hips. These were full mating marks.

“Yes!” I declared loudly, and with a brightly glowing hand, I brushed the last remains of my tears from my face. “This is the truth we have forgotten! Mating marks should not be one-sided! And my mate is human. We do not shun differences! We celebrate them; they make us stronger, they make us better! Like my human mate has made me better—has brought me this gift of the past!” I spread my arms, and the mating marks across my scales glowed even brighter.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:16 am*

Astrexia hissed in fury, but the crowd remained completely silent—eerily so. I could feel all their eyes boring into me, feel the unease that had settled over them. Jabbing my hand at the pile of dead warriors Khawla had left in his wake, I curled my lip in distaste. “You claim to be the most enlightened Clan, the Clan that guards us from another calamity, and this is what you do to each other? Needlessly waste blood, kill and banish your females, deprive your males of a mate!”

That had gotten Aser’s attention, and with a furious hiss, he rose beneath the red silk canopy. So far, he’d acted magnanimously, faintly amused, but I’d crossed the line now. Before he could say anything, Astrexia interfered. “You talk of mates!” she said gleefully. “But your abomination of a male lies dead beneath a tunnel collapse! He is gone, and soon you will follow him!” With a roar, she charged. There was no more time for words or displays, no time for posturing like what usually preceded these fights. My body knew what to do, though, having gone through these battles hundreds of times before.

Astrexia was also a familiar opponent; she had singled me out from a young age and relentlessly fought with me. Sometimes, we’d clashed multiple times a day. Now that I was not at war with myself over what to do, I felt free—stronger, faster. It was kill or be killed, and I could not die when Reid needed me. There was only one option: defeat Astrexia once and for all.

We were all fangs and claws as we clashed, and I held nothing back, driving Astrexia back across the battlefield with strike after strike, my mating marks glowing like beacons. Vaguely, I recalled campfire stories of the males. They niggled at the back of my mind, trying to tell me something important, but I could not figure it out—not until I struck Astrexia across the face and marred her cheek the way she’d marked

mine. The female flew to the side, crashing against the dirt-packed, straw-strewn floor, and skidded several feet away from me.

I glanced at my hand in surprise, my eyes wide at how hard I'd managed to strike my nemesis. That had never happened before; it hadn't happened before because I didn't have a mate then. But I had one now, and my bond with Reid was not one-sided. I recalled the rumor: a mated Naga male grew stronger to protect his female. Maybe the myth was true, and maybe my mating marks allowed it to work both ways.

"Did not expect that, did you? I'm stronger now, Astrexa. It's over. I don't want the Thunder Rock throne, but you aren't getting it either," I told her as I gave her a moment to get back up. She hissed furiously, blood dripping from her face and from the claw marks across her chest. I only felt the sting of some scratches on my hip, nothing more, but I'd scored plenty of hits on her. I did not feel satisfaction about that the way I almost expected, and that relieved me. I did not relish seeing her in pain, humiliated, even if she deserved it. That wasn't me; that was all her. But I was proud of myself for finally showing her that I would not take her crap.

"Surrender now," I told her as she began circling me. She could not have signaled more strongly that she was running out of options. Unlike our male counterparts, we always fought face-to-face, but now she was circling to find an opening, to catch me by surprise. If she could, she'd stab me in the back at this point. "Surrender, and your life will be spared," I warned her as I turned with her, rotating slowly to keep her in my sights.

"Never!" she hissed, her eyes flashing with fury and misplaced pride. The crowd was finally responding; I could hear them roar and hiss, but I did not look at them. If I so much as blinked, Astrexa would strike, and I was not going to fail at the last moment by making a stupid mistake. When she leaped at me, I was ready for her, and we grappled together, tails tangling, claws ripping.

When I rose, it was to tower over an unmoving Astrexa, curled in a ball on the ground. She was not dead, but I'd caught her across the throat in a bad way, and blood was rapidly pumping from the wound. I could not mask the horror I felt at being the one to do that, backing away slowly, my mating marks winking out like they had never been.

"Sazzie!" a voice called out, and in surprise, I turned to search for the source. There he was—my mate. He stood beside Aser, his hand wrapped tightly around the smaller Naga male's throat, and his eyes glowed silver. He was all right. He was here! My warrior. My soldier. My mate. Standing so proudly inside the nest of the viper, its king his hostage. Yes! We were going to be fine; I knew he'd come for me.

"Reid!" I shouted back at him and began to rush across the pit toward him. I never saw the strike coming, though I should have. Pain flared through my body, and I went tumbling to the ground. Black spots danced in front of my eyes, and, from a distance, voices called my name.

## Chapter 16

### Reid

The distraction I needed came far sooner than I wanted it to, or maybe it just felt that way because I didn't want it to be her. Sazzie shouldn't have to put herself in danger—not ever—but she was. Instead of leaping into that pit and fighting the danger for her, I had to be smart about this and trust that she could hold her own. For a little while, at least.

Then she stunned not just me, but the entire crowd with her proud and blatant display. I could barely believe what she was saying; it was too good to be true. The mating marks—they did not lie, and neither did she: proudly declaring me her male, her mate. My brave angel. Never in my wildest dreams had I expected her to make such a

bold move. If I wasn't already head over heels for her, I was now. I loved this girl, this Naga female with the tender heart.

It felt like I was being torn in two as I passed the turned backs of the crowd and moved away from Sazzie rather than toward her. There were too many guards around the fancy sitting area Aser was in, so I could not approach him directly. Thanks to my mate, all eyes were on the fighting pit, where her bold declarations had now ended and transformed into a vicious clash between my mate and her nemesis.

The crowd was deadly silent, stunned by what they had witnessed, but the two battling Naga women made enough noise to cover my approach. It held them all riveted too, even Aser, who had risen and was watching them with a frown on his squirrely face. There was a towering pillar not far from where the self-proclaimed King was located, and I used it to my advantage, climbing the thing as high as I could. My fingertips shaped into metal claws with a thought, the nanobots rushing to do my bidding.

Once I was high enough, I timed my leap just right and came crashing through the red fabric roof, directly on top of the viper in charge. We might have been tangled up in all that cloth, but my vision zeroed in on his body heat. My fist curled around his throat before any of his guards could interfere, clenching so tightly that all he could do was splutter and wheeze. "Call off your hounds," I demanded. I knew he could not understand what I said, but I assumed he'd be able to infer from the context. I was right. He was already hissing at his males to stand down, afraid for his life. The crowd roared now, clamoring together, pointing and shouting at the sight of their King in danger.

I knew his type. They were all cowards at heart, willing to do anything to save their damn hides. "Sazzie!" I called out as soon as his warriors froze around us, uncertain about how to proceed with their leader in my clutches. Proving that this Aser was anything but a warrior, he did not even attempt to use his best weapon—his tail. He

hung in my grip, clawed fingers biting into my forearm as he fought for breath, but otherwise remained completely limp. This was a politician, not a warrior, and I thoroughly detested politicians.

Sazzie had struck a disabling blow to her opponent just before my shout, and pride sang in my chest. Look at my brave angel, facing down her nemesis—the childhood bully she’d told me about. The one female, out of all those stupid challengers, who had tripped her up emotionally. “Reid!” she shouted back, elated, and our eyes met. I felt that look sear into me—so warm, so happy, and so welcoming. That look felt like home, and everything else started to fade into the background.

She hurried toward me, and I jerked Aser’s neck hard enough to make the male squeal in pain. “Tell everyone to stand the fuck down!” I warned. But unless Sazzie made that demand heard, I knew we were running out of ways to communicate. She was halfway across the fighting pit when disaster struck. I screamed her name in warning—and I wasn’t the only one.

Astrexa rose drunkenly behind her, the tip of a broken, discarded spear in her fist. When she charged after Sazzie, my muscles cramped, and I leaped without thinking—into the pit, toward her. I never let go of my hostage, and I knew I was going to be too late, even as I raced toward her. My angel began to turn; Astrexa was almost on her, and then there was a blur of dark blue—bodies tangling, colliding, and dust rising in a great cloud.

I knocked Aser out with a sharp blow to his temple, then dragged him with me as I raced across the dirt to that tangle of limbs and tails. The dust began to settle, and I could make out three bodies, Sazzie’s palest blue scales at the bottom of the pile. Astrexa lay on top, bleeding profusely from her neck and abdomen. I dropped Aser to the ground, picked Sazzie’s nemesis up by her arm and belt, and yanked her out of the way. She moved like a ragdoll as I tossed her, and though I could sense a heartbeat, I knew she would not last much longer. That threat was gone.

Beneath Astrexa was Khawla, and briefly, his presence confused me. I had not seen him move; I had not seen him at all, but here he was, between Astrexa and my mate. “Reid?” Sazzie moaned from beneath the limp body of the big Thunder Rock scout. It felt like my heart restarted at the sound of her voice, the blind panic and worry for her safety receding to the back of my mind so I could see clearly again.

“Are you hurt anywhere?” I demanded to know as I began to pull the warrior’s big body to the side. He was unconscious, and blood covered nearly his entire face in a macabre red mask. The broken spear tip was protruding from his abdomen, buried deep inside a jagged, gaping wound. He was heavy, but my nano-enhanced muscles had no trouble sliding him off Sazzie and into the dirt at her side. She rolled and sat up almost immediately, hissing, her eyes flashing. She did what I should have been doing: she scanned our surroundings for danger, and we were very much in danger still.

“Bruised, but fine,” she said, sounding surprised. “Back off!” she shouted before I could do so. Warriors had begun to drop into the pit with us from all sides, and her words halted their approach. I grasped hold of the unconscious Aser again and hauled him up in my arms, knife flashing dramatically so they would all see how much danger their leader was in. “Tell them to let us go, or he gets it,” I told Sazzie. I did not want to be holding this despicable coward; I wanted to hold my angel in my arms right now.

My angel took Aser’s brown-clad shoulder in her fist, the fabric bunching and tearing beneath her sharp claws. “We have your stupid King. Move, and he dies. Get it?” she snarled, and when she yanked, I allowed her to pin Aser to the ground beneath her tail and her claws. That left my hands free to check her for injuries, and I rushed to run my fingers over her spine and along her hips, where a few shallow scratches were all she had to show for her fight with Astrexa.

“Fuck, Sazzie! I thought you died,” I told her, my arm curling around her middle to

haul her against my chest. I placed my boot on Aser's hip to help pin him as I did so and twisted my head to glare at the silent, watching warriors. They had frozen around us, but they were angry—very angry. Without their leader, they were also unsure as to what to do. I hadn't hit Aser hard; he'd rouse soon enough.

“And I knew you hadn't, mate,” Sazzie responded, then baffled everyone around us by raising her mouth and pressing a kiss to mine. My body heated in response, battle readiness eagerly morphing into arousal that I wrestled under control with an iron fist. This woman kept turning my world upside down, and I was so fucking proud of her.

Then Sazzie proved how sweet and tender she was. She twisted above the unconscious, pinned Aser to look at Khawla's prone and dying body. His wounds were very grave, especially the one Astrexa had struck—the blow meant for my mate. He was bleeding out, his breathing shallow and far too rapid, his heartbeat sluggish as it struggled to pump what little blood remained inside of him. He had given his life to save my mate, and for that, he had earned my deepest respect. If not for him, Sazzie would be the one bleeding out at the bottom of this fighting pit. “Can you save him?” my mate asked me.



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Can I save him? We had barely saved ourselves; death still surrounded us on all sides. The angry looks on the faces of these Bitter Storm males made me wonder how long the threat to their King would even hold them back—not long, I was willing to bet. At some point, they'd decide they had enough. Sazzie looked at me with those big, luminous blue eyes, and I could not deny her anything. Besides, Khawla deserved a shot at life. After what he'd done to save Sazzie, I had to try.

Handing Sazzie my knife, I told her to keep him under tight control. "Tell them we'll let him go if the three of us get safe passage out of their territory." Then I went to my knees at Khawla's side, shrugged out of my shirt, and pressed it to the gaping wound in his abdomen. The injury to his right eye was bad too, but I had to conclude it wasn't life-threatening. The gut wound would get him first in any case.

My first-aid skills were a little rusty; I had not needed them much as a Shadow Unit soldier. Apply pressure, but then what? I did not have any supplies—not a med kit, a tissue regenerator, or even a bandage. And though I pressed hard against that wound, the bleeding was not stopping. We did not have long. I looked up from Khawla, snarled a warning at the warriors that surrounded us before I twisted my head to look at Sazzie. "I don't know what to do," I admitted to her. "I'm not a healer! And his wounds are really bad. I know we owe him, but I don't think I can save him. I'm sorry."

Sazzie glanced from Aser, who had begun to stir at her feet, to me with a soft look in her eyes. Then her arms shimmered with silver light that pooled in the palms of her hands. The markings spread, their glow curling down her chest, teasingly beneath the leather band that covered her breasts, then curling around her belly button and over her hips. They were proof that I had not imagined seeing them earlier—she had

mating marks just like the males of her species. That glow caused the whole cave to hush again in stunned silence, and that alone told me just how special it was that Sazzie glowed for me.

My skin tingled in response, and though I knew I had no mating marks that could glow for her, my nanobots did not seem to have gotten that memo. They moved beneath my skin, rising to the surface in streaks across my bare arms and chest. They did not quite glow with light, but their silvery material made up for that. We matched.

“I know,” she said gently. “He’s dying. That’s why you are his only chance. Your machines, Reid. Can you give him some of those? They heal you.” Ah damn, that was clever thinking on her part, and it proved she’d begun to understand more and more of the technology inside me. My clever mate. My nanobots had clashed viciously with the Naga-made nano-healing bots I had been exposed to. Did that mean the horde of microscopic machines inside me was dangerous to a Naga? Maybe. But he was dying anyway; it was worth a shot.

“Abominations! Both of you, twisted, sick, filthy mongrels!” Aser hissed, rousing just in time to display his bigotry. I reached out and slapped him upside the head—not hard enough to knock him out, but definitely hard enough to rattle his teeth together. He hissed with fury, displaying his lack of front teeth, and Sazzie, beautiful angel that she was, wrapped her tail around his neck and squeezed.

Ignoring the spluttering King and Sazzie as she once again addressed the crowd that stared at us from far too close, I focused on Khawla. This time, I pulled my blood-drenched shirt away from his wound and slipped my fingers around the broken spear still lodged in it. It came free with a sucking noise that made me wince, and it made Khawla jerk and moan weakly. “That’s it, buddy,” I told him. That moan was hopeful; it meant there was more life in him than I thought there was.

From my pocket, I yanked the pilfered metal nail I’d found in our jail cell earlier. I

held it up with a hint of trepidation, but Sazzie still had full control of the Bitter Storm king. She also had my knife, which was why I resorted to grabbing the nail. Slashing a cut across the palm of my hand, I hissed as I forced blood to drip from the wound into Khawla's. This was breaking all the rules I knew about wound care—about sanity, about contamination. Then again, it wasn't like we could keep a wound sterile in these conditions. The male was dying, and this was a long shot—a very long shot.

Of course, my nanobots eagerly fixed the wound in my hand, but they did nothing for Khawla. Unwilling to give up that quickly, I scratched another cut across my palm and pressed it against his injury. At the same time, I tried as hard as I could to will my nanobots not to heal my injury just yet. "Heal him, damn it! I need you to heal him!"

This wasn't going to work, and as I stared into Khawla's heavy-lidded gaze, it turned vacant, unseeing. There was a particular look to the eyes of a dead person—a flatness that only came from one thing: death. Resigned, I sat back on my haunches and allowed my nanobots to heal the slash across my palm. We had lost him. Now I had to think about the living, about my angel, and nothing else. Our situation was getting more dire, and it wouldn't be long before it escalated into violence.

Sazzie and I shared a look—hers sad but as resigned as I felt. Then I took control of our royal hostage and, with it, I hoped, control of the situation.

## Chapter 17

### Sazzie

I had a hard time with my emotions right then; there were a lot of them clamoring for attention, big ones like sadness for Khawla and for the younglings he was leaving behind. I knew that Reid had tried, that my idea was a crazy one to begin with, but it

still hurt to see the male die. If not for him, it would have been me dying inside this gloomy Bitter Storm fight pit. It felt selfish to be relieved that I wasn't dead, that I had another chance at a life with Reid. Those younglings needed their father more than Reid needed me.

There was no time to untangle the rest of my feelings; Khawla's death was at the forefront, anyway. I could not stop glancing at his damaged body—at the destruction caused to his abdomen by Astrexa's blow, or the injury to his eye. I did know that I did not want to leave him behind, even dead. That wasn't right.

Reid had wrested Aser off the ground and was holding him tightly by the throat again. He was making demands that the Naga could not understand, and I forced myself to pay attention and translate. "We are leaving," I said firmly, trying to mimic the commanding way Reid spoke. "Safe passage for us, and you can have your King back." They were unsure—I could see that in the eyes of the nearest Naga, as if they were wondering if they even wanted their King back at this point.

Impulsively, I said the first thing that came to mind, speaking before Reid could come up with another threat for me to translate. "Let us go, and you will not bring down the wrath of Thunder Rock upon yourselves. They will not take lightly the death or imprisonment of their Queen! They will punish you for taking the life of their Master Scout. Your Clan is starving; you are dying out without females. You cannot afford another war. Let us go, all of us, now!"

Aser finally started to struggle in Reid's grip, but it was clear he was no match for my mate's strength. "Don't listen to her. When we fall, the Revenants will conquer Thunder Rock. It will be exactly what they deserve!" His eyes glowed with a fanaticism I did not expect; I thought he was more conniving than this. "They are relic lovers, abominations, all of them! They deserve to die." He seemed to desire vengeance and mutual destruction more than he desired to survive. That surprised me, because, so far, all he'd done had been to improve his position and ensure survival.

He'd been willing to arrange a mating with Astrexa just to gain power over Thunder Rock not that long ago. Now, he was telling his Clan to condemn themselves to death so that Thunder Rock would fall to the Revenants.

It did not appear to please his Clanmates, and, finally, that jarred them into motion. Two slightly older males separated themselves from the crowd, followed by a Naga female with a chain wrapped around her neck. She had her head downcast, but a furious expression glittered in her eyes. "Safe passage for all of you," the first of the two males agreed. He raised his hands to hush the crowd when it began to murmur uneasily. "We are not dying out; we will survive. Bitter Storm is strong! But this female is right: we do not need more death and war."

Another male came from behind us, separating himself from the crowd and puffing up his chest. My stomach revolted when I saw him because he was the orange-speckled male who had been my guard so much of the time. That male had leered at me more than once, making me feel dirty, touched. I did not trust him. "Nobody gave you the right to speak for Bitter Storm, Thrastos. And we are not letting a Thunder Rock Queen walk! She is our leverage against the Clan! We will use her to force them to give us food; we will be strong again."

"Oh, boy," Reid muttered under his breath. "They're splintering into factions right before our eyes. This isn't good." He was right. On the heels of the orange-speckled male, another spoke up, and then another. They all had different opinions on how to solve this situation, but they all seemed to agree that Aser was no longer important. They were going to start fighting each other, and we'd be caught in the middle.

"Now what?" I asked quietly, spinning in place slowly so I could keep an eye on all the different—by now loudly shouting—males. It seemed there were several who had enough clout to grab for power, and males were gathering behind each of their chosen leaders. Bitter Storm had drastically reduced in numbers since they had fought my Clan several months ago, but it was still a very impressive crowd.

“Hold this for a second,” Reid said, and he slung Aser around. I caught the former King and grappled him tightly around the neck, pressing Reid’s knife against his scales to keep him from fighting. My scales shivered with unease along my spine; I did not like holding this male, nor did I like the way many of them were now glaring at him and at me. The crowd was growing more and more riled, and they were beginning to shout accusations at Aser—things like mate-killer, female-hater, destroyer of Clans, liar, and promise-breaker.

Loudest was the guard with the orange speckles, and he spoke fervently of holding me hostage, keeping me captive, and using us against Thunder Rock. Most of the others just wanted to get rid of us, but his faction was quickly gaining more backing. Reid moved so fast I hardly saw him move—a blur of gleaming muscle, intricate ink markings, and sheer determination. He kicked the broken spear tip he’d pulled from Khawla off the ground and launched it through the air. It struck the speckled male in the center of his chest, and silence instantly reigned.

Darting away from me, he reached the male as he began to lurch forward, a sharp metal spike in his hand that he planted beneath the male’s chin, driving it up through his jaw. “This is what I’ll do to all those who oppose our freedom. And I can keep going forever,” Reid said as he pulled back his hand, allowing the male to crash to the ground. My mate held up his wrist, which had been pierced by the speckled male’s chin horn during that final strike. As I translated his words for everyone, the wound began to knit together, healing before our eyes. It drove home his point: I can do this forever. I heal—can you keep up?

Then I added, “Once we are safe, you can have this worm to punish as you see fit. He’s the one you want, not us. He’s the one who led you to this!” I gestured with a hand, then lurched forward to keep a firm hold on my hostage. Aser was stronger than he looked, and whatever escape plan he’d had in mind, he now saw it dwindling before his eyes. Beneath his breath, he began to offer me riches and treasures, troves of golden jewelry, as a reward for his safety.

I wanted to laugh, even as I was tempted just a little by the promise of shiny baubles. If this is what he'd offered Astrexa, it was no surprise she'd readily agreed to be his ally. It was a universal truth that we all loved gold, and those with status had the most of it. But I was not Astrexa or Evarah; I did not want those shiny things more than I wanted to do the right thing, and to be with Reid. So I bared my fangs at him and hissed, "Never."

Reid's demonstration was getting us the desired results anyway. The newly arisen faction leaders were now huddling together for a quick conference. It did not seem like their decision was a hard one; within moments, males raced off, only to return with a wooden cart. They were rude and careless as they tossed both Astrexa's and Khawla's bodies onto it, but a path was cleared for us at the same time. Suddenly, we were moving. Reid dragged Aser by the arm, his other arm around my shoulders protectively as we began to head toward an exit. I could not wait to leave this pit, this darkness, behind.

"Almost there," Reid whispered against my hair. "We're going to make it, my love." My heart leaped hopefully in my chest at the sound of those words, and I dared to believe it. Yes, we were going to make it. We were going to be fine. Reid had kept me safe, protected me, and taken care of me. But I had done the same for him, and I felt so proud of that.

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*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:16 am*

We left the pits behind us, but not the hostile crowd that surrounded us. Aser was as much a burden as a hostage now; they wanted him, but only to kill him. And I understood their anger because nothing he'd done for the Clan had improved their fortune. I realized now that Aser had thought to escape with us, but my denial of his bribes had dashed that hope. He was fighting Reid every minute of our approach to the exit.

The cave entrance was visible in the distance, an arch of light and hope. We were close to reaching it: a stretch of flat granite was visible beyond it, and beyond that, clear skies and forests, the beautiful purple and violet hues of Serant's lush world. We were guided to it through a path of Bitter Storm members that lined the sides, some hissing angrily as we passed, and some just staring. It was beginning to look like we'd make it without another fight.

Then we exited the cave and stood on the terrace outside, fresh, cool air blowing past my scales. I could see so far from here, including the lower mountain arm where Artek, the Shaman, kept his home and the tall peak of Ahoshaga, where Haven was located. From here, we could travel to Reid's home in less than a week if we moved fast.

Of course, nothing ever went exactly according to plan. When a desperate Aser lunged, I didn't expect him—I wasn't ready.

## Chapter 18

Reid



I breathed in deeply the moment I set foot outside the cave, drawing in the clean scents of the planet rather than the stink from inside the caves. Our escort was fanning out around us, but the path was now free and clear. Aser had stopped pulling, and ahead of us, the Bitter Storm Naga had abandoned our cart with the dead at the edge of the terrace, at the start of a path that led down into the woods below.

Locating the male, Tharsos, and his two companions, I flung Aser toward them, happy to get rid of that burden. I did not expect the coward to turn on us; I had expected him to try to flee instead. But a cornered crook was always unpredictable—I should have remembered that. He spun as he rolled across the granite plateau, then coiled his tail beneath him and leaped.

He was going after Sazzie, and I could not let that happen. He was fast, but my nano-enhanced reflexes were far quicker. Throwing myself between them, I caught his reaching claws in my hands and slammed him down. Things snapped in my grip, but even though he screeched like a banshee, I did not let go. Our eyes locked—his, a burning red like coals, full of pain and full of hate too. “You cannot have her. You are done,” I told him, and then I tossed him away from me.

Naga pounced on him as soon as he rolled to a stop on the granite. Aser would not keep them busy for long. Already, I could feel their focus shifting from him to us. They were closing ranks again, changing their minds, letting their hate and fear of all things different lead the way.

“We must hurry,” I told Sazzie, drawing her into my arms and starting to run. She curled her tail around my hip, her arms around my neck, and I knew she was watching what was happening on the plateau behind us. Even without seeing it, I could hear the carnage and wished I could shield her from it. Aser got exactly what he deserved, but my angel did not need to witness any part of that.

Reaching the cart at the edge of the large rock ledge, I yanked Astrexa out of it, then

eyed the steep path down. It was a gamble, but it was the fastest way to get down. “Hold on tight, angel,” I said, and leaped onto the wagon, setting it in motion down the rocky path. We immediately began accelerating down the mountain, and I fought to keep control of our direction—first by shifting my weight around, then by putting my feet on the ground to halt our speed.

Sazzie screamed in my ear, her blue hair streaking against my face, her eyes wide with fear. We were still going faster and faster, and the path was getting rougher. In the distance, I could see the trees, and we’d crash into one of them if we kept going this way. I knew I’d survive that, but Sazzie? If she broke something, it could be catastrophic.

Giving up on braking by hanging from the back of the wagon, I threw us both forward onto the wagon bed. Then, I pressed Sazzie against the wooden side and flipped over it myself so I was now in front of the cart. It forced Sazzie’s arms to rip from around my neck, but her tail stayed clutched around my middle. This time, I could brace my arms against the wood and dig my heels into the gravel slope we were sliding down. I could also see what was happening above us—the row of red-scaled faces peering over the edge of the plateau to follow our descent.

They weren’t following us down—either letting us go or thinking that our speed would kill us against the tree trunks when we hit them. But we were slowing now: my legs ached with the strain, and rocks flew against my back, nicking or bruising my bare skin with their force. Then, a bigger rock struck a wheel, and it broke, sending us lurching to the side, off the path and down the slope instead.

Slower, almost slow enough, we hit the treeline with a cracking of branches and leaves. Sazzie screamed again, throwing herself out of the wagon and into my arms. The two of us rolled across the ground, and I did all I could to protect her from the fall. My back struck a tree trunk, scraping us against tree roots and bark, and then we finally came to a stop. She lay on top of me, breathing fast, her eyes huge in her

delicate face, the arches of her brows as high as the firm nubbed scales allowed them to go.

“Are you hurt?” I demanded, taking full advantage of the opportunity to touch her everywhere. Sliding my hands along her spine, I cupped her curved rear, then kept going to check every inch of her pretty tail. She was petting my shoulders at the same time, a sob wrenching from her chest as her fingers tangled in my hair.

“Am I hurt? You’re the one who struck the tree! Are your nanobots managing? Do you need more of those capsules?” she demanded through her tears. I sat up, cradling her in my lap, and winced when that sent a shot of pain through my spine. That pain smoothed away almost instantly, and my arms shimmered with a hint of silver as my nanobots rose to the surface. In response, Sazzie began to glow too, her mating marks slashing beautifully across her body. I was the luckiest damn human on the planet to have found my angel—to be granted such a miracle.

A little guiltily, I admitted that I’d eaten all of them before I came to the fighting pits. My body was still on fire, running on far more energy than it knew what to do with. Despite everything I’d made it do, my body had not run out of fuel yet to power the nanobots. “You are crazy, Reid,” she told me with a huff, but it was followed by a wet sound as she tried to hold back more tears.

Cupping the side of her face, I leaned my forehead against hers. “Crazy? Hell yes,” I agreed against her mouth. “Crazy in love with you. I know Naga don’t say that, but humans do. We love wholeheartedly. And I love you, Sazzie. So much.” Then I kissed her, sweeping my tongue past all her defenses and laying my claim.

When we finally parted, I was greeted with a bright, glowing look in her pretty azure eyes. It was a look full of wonder. “Love? You love me?” she tilted her head at an angle, and I grinned because the head move was so alien and so familiar at the same time. “Yesssss,” she hissed, drawing out the sound as she pressed her hand to her

chest. “This is love. I love you, Reid.” I knew that, I knew I would never doubt it. My Sazzie was a miracle, my angel; she was everything I’d ever dreamed of.

I climbed to my feet with her in my arms, unwilling to let her go. If it were up to me, we’d stay in that embrace and make love right at the foot of this mountain slope. I did not think our Bitter Storm audience would be okay with that, though, and, frankly, I did not need them to see the things I wanted to do to my mate. “Let’s get out of here, angel,” I told her instead.

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Sazzie

Reid loved me. I was literally glowing because of those words; I did not know words could have that kind of effect. My mating marks were so bright, and they were coming down the front of my tail all the way to the tip—big and bright, like those of the males I’d seen in the village, as bright and eager as Zathar had glowed for his human mate.

I did not want to let go of my male when he rose, but he was right to urge us to start moving. A look up the slope of the mountain showed me that we still had a huge audience of Bitter Rock males staring down at us. They had not decided to pursue us yet, but I knew that was only a matter of time. With some reluctance, I helped Reid locate what remained of the wagon we’d ridden down the slope—a wild ride I was never going to forget, though I desperately wanted to. I did not think Naga were made to go that fast. It wasn’t right, and I never wanted to try that again.

“Over there,” Reid said, pointing over my shoulder further into the trees. He had not let go of me, his arm snug around my waist as if he could not bear to be parted from me. Since I felt the same way, I eagerly clung to him as we searched for the wagon and poor Khawla’s remains. I was not prepared for what we found when we rounded

the base of a large tree and discovered a few broken planks of the wagon sticking out of the dirt.

“Are you seeing that?” Reid muttered, as confused as I felt. Khawla’s body lay nudged up against the planks and the trees, turned on his back, tail spiraling around the base of the tree. The wound in his abdomen was no longer a gaping hole but a strange pink slash. Pink... no, it was scaleless skin, much like Reid’s skin. The flesh had knitted back together over the wound, but it had left behind this odd mark. I did not dare to hope what it meant. Had Reid’s attempt at giving Khawla some of his bots worked after all?

“Yes,” I whispered, afraid to say it out loud in case it wasn’t true. Reid shuffled us closer, angling his head as if he were searching for something, and then he nodded. I heard it at the same time he must have: a heartbeat, slow but there. Khawla lived. He must have fallen into a very deep healing sleep to aid his recovery, but he might just make it.

After that discovery, Reid and I worked together to improvise a travois from the remains of the wagon. We tied it all together with rope I quickly wove from the tall, tough grasses that grew here. Then we strapped Khawla to it, and with Reid pulling the Master Scout, the two of us set off down the mountain. “That way,” I indicated. “It is where Artek makes his home. He is closest.” Artek would know how to help Khawla, and he would have news on what was going on at Thunder Rock and Haven too.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:16 am*

It was tough terrain to travel through—rocky, with gnarled trees and tough grass slowing our pace. But as we progressed down the mountain, it became clear that Bitter Storm was not following. Not only that, but Khawla's breathing and heart rate were improving. We were all going to make it.

### Chapter 19

#### Sazzie

It was nearly dark when we halted for the night inside a small glen. The stars were beginning to glitter overhead, and the violet Serant sun was setting with beautiful purple and orange streaks on the horizon. A hint of fog was beginning to rise beneath the trees, its scent wet and fragrant as it stirred the forest. It felt a little magical, a little cleansing.

We had no supplies, not so much as a waterskin or a ration bar to nibble on. We also had no furs to sleep on tonight. I didn't mind any of that because Reid and I were alive, and we were together. I felt safe, safer than I'd ever felt. My mate gave that to me, and it was he who made me feel like myself, and that self was worthy of existing.

I sat with Khawla, watching his chest rise and fall as he slept, and I gently washed the blood from his face with water from the glen's small stream. Reid wasn't far; he'd promised me food and was adamant about getting it. I thought about making a fire—I knew how—but I worried that it would draw the eyes of unwanted guests. Unable to sit still while my mate was hunting, I gathered wood anyway when I was done caring for Khawla.

When Reid returned not much later, I had prepped a fire pit, just to keep my hands busy, and was rewarded with a pleased grin. “Perfect. I don’t much feel like eating this bird raw,” he said, holding up one of my favorite types of fowl. He couldn’t have known that, but it felt like a gift anyway. We prepared it together, then shared every bite. It was the tastiest, best meal I’d ever had—probably because it tasted so much better from the hands of my mate. Maybe it was also because I felt free to moan with the flavor and flirt with him until his eyes heated like flames. I felt powerful. I felt so free.

“You’ll regret teasing me, angel,” Reid growled with his husky, raw voice. I loved his voice so much—it was perfect, sinful. It made me ache for him when he made such threats. He made me feel like I was small and pretty, which was exactly what he desired. I did not need words to convey how much I needed him when he said such things. Undulating my tail, I scooted closer, then teased him by sliding the tip up his leg and curling it around his thigh. He hissed, eyes flashing.

Hauling me into his arms, I went willingly, loving the way he picked me up and moved me—a little rough in his excitement, yet ever so careful when he stroked his fingers along my cheek. “I cannot believe we made it out of there, my beautiful angel,” he said. “We must be the luckiest pair on the planet, don’t you think?”

I shook my head and loved how that made his fingers tangle in my hair; that little tug at my scalp was delicious. “I think luck had nothing to do with any of that,” I told him. “That was all skill and quick thinking.” But I did not want to think about our narrow escape from death or the fate of Bitter Storm after they lost yet another leader. They were fractured now, and that couldn’t mean anything good—not for Thunder Rock, not for Haven, and I didn’t even want to contemplate what that meant for the giant Revenants that roamed on the other side of Bitter Storm’s mountain. Would they invade our lands if the red Clan was unable or unwilling to hold them back?

When Reid kissed me, I gladly let him sweep me away. Our tongues tangled, and I

took pleasure in stroking his, sweeping the split tip of my tongue along the roof of his mouth until he laughed. He fisted my hair with one hand, pulling snugly but without hurting me. He used that grip to angle my head back so he could nibble on my throat. Soon, I was draped shamelessly over his arm, my breasts thrust up into the air and bared by his eager hands. “So pretty,” he murmured before laving the tip of one breast with his tongue.

I knew he meant that, but a hint of uncertainty still struck me. I was not a smooth-skinned human for him to love; I had scales and scars. I was not pristine. “I am scarred,” I said to him. It was all I was willing to admit to on the subject, but he heard the raw vulnerability in my tone. My Reid, with the warm brown eyes, was always so perceptive.

“So what? Am I not marked by life too?” he said, and he spread his arms wide to indicate his bare chest. He’d sacrificed his shirt back in the fighting pit to stem the blood flow from Khawla’s wounds. His arms were marked with beautiful artwork from his homeworld—predators to protect him outlined in perfect detail in black ink. Geometric shapes sat beneath his skin along his upper chest and collarbones, trailing into his leg coverings from beneath his belly button. He was saying he was not smooth and unmarked either, but he was pretty all the same.

The triangles that arched from the dip of his belly button down were a tempting path, as were the sharp lines along his hips, the ridges of his abdomen, and the muscular upper parts of his legs that cradled my rear. He was built like any warrior I knew; his skin and art made him seem vulnerable to me, but I knew that was a lie. My Reid was the strongest male there was, and he’d keep me safe, always.

“Okay, we’re both marked,” I agreed with a nod, and then I found myself smiling. “Until I have to molt next year, of course.” He gave me a baffled expression, but I didn’t feel like explaining to him right now that when shedding my scales for new ones, the scars would shed as well. I wanted to go back to kissing him, back to having



his mouth on my chest. I let him know that by dragging my claws through his short black hair and urging his head toward my chest. “I am done talking now.”

He laughed, the sound so marvelously deep and husky, and then he obliged my wishes. Sucking a nipple into the wet, warm cavern of his mouth, his teeth scraped the tip with delicious pressure. When he cupped my rear, I undulated against him and felt the hard bar of his cock press hotly against my hip from beneath the fabric of his leg coverings. Hissing, I dropped my hands from his shoulders and glided them along his sexy chest before reaching the buckle that held that fabric shut.

“Open this,” I demanded. Last time, he’d been the bossy one, but he did not seem to mind this role reversal at all. His cock pressed even more firmly against my hip, twitching eagerly. His hands flew from my waist to the edge of his leg coverings, and they parted like magic. “Yesss, mate me, Reid. Seed me.” That’s what the Naga males called a proper mating—a seeding—and that’s what I wanted now: sex with my sexy mate and a promise of life to be created.

“As you wish, princess,” he said roughly, and he helped me free his hard cock from the tight fabric. I marveled at it all over again, surprised by its size, the silky smoothness that covered it, and the mushroom shape of the tip. A single, firmly rounded tip, whose ridge I could feel when he filled me. He did not waste time either, his hand sliding to my slit to test my readiness with a thick finger. I loved how boldly he slid that digit into my passage, and how wetly and eagerly my body received him. “So ready. You need me, don’t you, angel?” he drawled.

I shifted my hips, pushing up on my tail, and he grabbed them, guiding me down onto his lap. “That’s it. Take me then,” he murmured. His thick, round tip brushed my core, pushing slowly but inexorably into me. It ached so good when he stretched me, and I gripped his shoulders more tightly, clinging to him so fiercely that my claws pricked his skin. He was braced with his back against a tree, the rough bark biting into his skin, but I knew that all he felt was me.

When he had pushed all of his thick length into me, I was pressed against his lap, my tail curled around his braced legs. “Move,” I demanded breathily and squeezed his shoulder tighter when that made him chuckle. Who was teasing whom now? But he started to move, his hips rising and falling beneath me with each thrust. Immediately, pleasure began to rise: his pelvis provided delicious pressure against my sensitive nerves, his cock rubbing along my inner walls.

He covered my mouth with his, his warm brown eyes sliding shut as he savored each touch. I did the same, and my pleasure spiraled higher, my body winding tight as a coil, teetering on the edge. When I tumbled, it was with a hoarse, surprised moan at the speed of it. My body grew tight around his cock, and that made him shout, his hips stuttering. I felt the wash of his seed as it spurted from the thick, round tip, coating me, heating me, and filling me—just like I’d demanded of him. It was perfect.

Resting my head against his shoulder, I trembled in his arms, but I knew I was safe. Reid loved me, cherished me, and he had all but demanded to be my protector. I was so lucky. And then, Reid turned my world upside down all over again, surprising me with his next demands. “Lie down for me, angel. Let me see you. I need more.” He had seeded me—I knew he had—weren’t we done? But he had my trust, so I did as he wanted, sliding away from him to stretch out on the soft moss that covered this glen.

“That’s it,” he agreed, his eyes glittering as they reflected the stars. Rising to his knees, he rubbed his still-hard cock while watching me before tucking it into his pants. I couldn’t help but mewl in protest, even though I should have expected that. His hand palmed my hip, squeezing gently but firmly, and that warm pressure made me feel owned. Stroking me with his other hand, he traced my body, brushing my scales until I was all sensation and desire, aching for him.

Wetness gushed from my slit—a mixture of his pearly-white seed and my own dew.

He zeroed in on that instantly, his eyes locking on my front as his mouth curled into a satisfied grin. Swirling his fingers through the moisture, he raised them to his mouth and licked. Again, he did something bizarre—something I should find wrong or disgusting—yet my body responded instantly, igniting with fire. Moaning, my hips twisted up toward him, silently begging him to do it again. And he did.

Leaning forward, he grabbed my hips in both hands, hauling me toward his face, and he dragged his tongue through my folds with a deep, rumbling groan of pleasure. “Fuck, Sazzie, you taste so good. We taste so good together.” He licked and licked, lapping until he’d gathered everything, and still, he licked. My body was on fire, ready to explode. I was so close, and yet I couldn’t tumble—not until he pressed two fingers deep into me and sucked on the sensitive nub of nerves at the same time.

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Reid

Lying beneath the stars on a soft bed of moss, my mate curled in my arms, her tail wrapped around my legs, things couldn’t be better. I’d slept a few hours, lightly dozing with my senses wide open, but nothing had disturbed us. Khawla was still out cold, but I could hear the steady thud of his heart. All was well, and I was finally starting to relax. Bitter Storm probably had far too much chaos on its hands to care about us.

With dawn brightening the sky in beautiful colors, I contemplated what Zathar would think when I returned to Haven with his little sister in tow. Did Naga brothers get protective of their sisters? Somehow, I very much doubted that. But he might worry she was a threat to the human ladies. Preposterous—and I’d soon convince him of that. If there was one thing I was certain of, it was that Zathar was a reasonable guy.

“Morning, mate,” Sazzie breathed against my neck at that moment, and my thoughts

returned solidly to the here and now. Okay, not entirely—I definitely flashed back to the sexy way Sazzie had ridden me last night, or how she'd tasted when she came on my tongue. Immediately, my cock went stiff as a board, pressing against my pants so tightly it ached. When my pretty angel flicked out her tongue, her eyes growing wide, I knew she knew I was aroused.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:16 am*

I began to rise, propping myself up on my elbows, but she caught me with a palm on my chest. “No, wait,” she said, then averted her eyes, glancing down. Acting shy, was she? Instantly intrigued, I froze, waiting to see what she’d do. My reward took a minute, but then she slipped down my body and brushed her fingers over my belt buckle. I helped her undo it, hissing with pleasure as she gently freed my hard cock. “Can I... Is it...” She trailed off, looking embarrassed, and that was so freaking hot that I couldn’t speak for a moment.

“You want to lick my cock, angel? You want to suck my dick into your warm, wet mouth? Is that what you want?” I said, mouth dry and voice raw with desire. If she said yes, I was going to combust on the spot. Her azure eyes glowed when they met mine, her mouth dropping open. My cock twitched in her hand, responding to that look. Then she licked her bottom lip and nodded, dark blue coloring her cheekbones in dramatic stripes. Yes, the battle flush—definitely also simply a blush or a sign of arousal. I knew my girl now. Naughty angel. She wanted to do exactly as I said, but she was too shy to move.

Inhaling deeply, I drew her hot, aroused scent into my lungs. “Do it, take me in your mouth, Sazzie,” I said, and the command jerked her into motion. Oh, yeah, she was perfect for me. She loved it when I got bossy. She ducked, and her mouth closed around the thick, mushroom-shaped head of my cock. I saw stars when she sucked and shouted when I felt the press of her dainty fangs and the long curl of her tongue around my shaft. “Fuck! That’s so good, angel.”

My hips bucked toward her—a reflex I barely managed to restrain before I risked choking her. She mewled, as if she liked it, sinking deeper down on my shaft with her mouth. I stared, entranced, because holy crap, Sazzie could take way more of me into

her warm mouth than I had expected. No gag reflex, just pure heat and tight warmth. I came so fast and so hard that I had no time to warn her, my seed shooting down her throat in thick spurts, her name shouted so loudly it could probably be heard miles away.

When the pleasure began to ebb, she raised her head from my cock with a sucking noise, her wide grin so pleased. “Ah, I love you, Sazzie,” I told her fervently. Then I dragged her into my arms and returned the favor, eagerly rewarding her for the pleasure she’d given me.

## Chapter 20

### Sazzie

We’d been traveling most of the day, but moving downhill made the trek go fast, and Reid had endless endurance, even though he was pulling Khawla’s heavy body on an improvised sled. The air was getting a little warmer as we descended, but it was clear that autumn was coming; summer was over. A brisk wind had set in from the south, and though I was not easily cold, I was starting to feel it. Reid, on the other hand, seemed completely unbothered by the temperature, and he had lost his shirt.

Throughout the day, we’d talked, and I’d learned more strange things about the world that Reid came from than I could have ever imagined. But it was all light-hearted things—like the differences between his trees and mine, and the color of the sky. Blue? That was so strange; I could not imagine looking up at the sky on a bright day and seeing anything but Serant’s gentle violet. It was fascinating.

“What about gold?” I dared to ask, a smile stretching across my mouth. I still liked shiny gold and gems, even though I’d shed all of my pieces after I had killed my mother. When Reid glanced over his shoulder at me from beneath a hank of shiny black hair, his warm brown eyes twinkled with laughter. It felt as if he were letting

me in on a joke with that look, and warmth bloomed in my chest. I felt included, part of something.

“Ah, all things that glitter,” he said. “Yes, Earth has gold. It is valuable everywhere I’ve been.” He paused to readjust his grip on the makeshift sled before crossing a particularly rocky stretch. Several large boulders made it tricky to pass without dumping poor, still-unconscious Khawla onto the ground. “And human girls tend to like gold and diamonds, just like Naga ladies do.”

Diamonds? I considered the super-tough, white or translucent gems that were set in some of the more intricate pieces of jewelry from Serqethos. Yes, I liked diamonds, but I was beginning to be much more partial to warmer tones—brown, like Reid’s eyes. Was there a gem that could match his eyes—the warmth and love I saw there every time he looked my way?

“Humans have a custom,” Reid said, pausing again, but this time not to readjust the sled. He put it down and smoothed his hands along his thighs. The gesture seemed oddly nervous when I caught it. Why would my brave, confident protector be nervous? Gesturing at him with my hand, I urged him to continue, and his mouth twitched into a smile. I had to be mistaken; now he looked happy, relaxed—not nervous at all.

“It’s called marriage. It’s pretty much the same as mating. Humans don’t have mating marks, though, so we came up with something else: a ring.” He tapped one of the fingers on his hand, then reached out a hand to one of mine. Without hesitation, I placed my fingers in his. He pointed to my second-smallest finger. “Ring finger. That’s where a man or a woman wears a band to indicate they belong to one another. Usually, it’s a gold band with a diamond.”

Naga did not wear rings—at least, not at Thunder Rock. Rings got in the way of daily tasks, could be a hazard on hunts, or were easy to lose. But I knew Artek wore them;

I'd seen the glitter of gold or silver on the Shaman's fingers more than once. I eyed my own hand, tried to picture a ring with a cool, glittering diamond on it—and struggled.

“Would you like that? If I got you a ring? Zsekheth could help me make it; he's from Serqethos.” Reid's fingers twitched around mine before sliding away, and with them, his gaze dropped to the ground. Nervous again? I loved the way he looked in the late afternoon sun: his skin gleamed golden, and the ink stood out dramatically along his arms. I even loved how the geometric shapes of his nanobots pressed beneath his skin. So pretty.

“Yes,” I said, even though I did not like the idea of a diamond. If he wanted to make it for me, that would mean everything, and I would wear it proudly. And aid from a Serqethos male? It was so very tempting, because the Serqethos Clan was the very best at jewelry-making. They were artisans, true craftsmen. All my mother's best pieces came from their Clan. They were expensive and worn with great pride.

My answer made him beam a bright smile, his brown eyes glowing. I reached out and cupped the side of his face, my thumb brushing his cheek just below his eye. “I want a stone like your eyes, Reid. I love your eyes.” His smile grew so wide it was radiant, and I felt proud to have caused that kind of happiness. He swept me into his arms, holding me close and gently rocking us back and forth as if we were dancing.

“As you wish, princess,” he said, pressing his mouth to my hair with a warm, quick kiss. “That sounds even better.” We kissed then, but Reid jerked back so suddenly that it made my head spin. His chin rose, his eyes sharp and focused as they searched the trees around us. He sensed something, so I did the same, searching for any sign of life. My tongue flicked out to taste the air, and instantly, I knew it was all right. The scent I drew into my lungs was a familiar one, and we had nothing to worry about.

Reid seemed to conclude that at the same time; his shoulders relaxed, his arms



growing soft around me. “Artek! Are you there, my friend?” I held my breath as I waited to see from which direction the Shaman would come. I thought he would come from below, where his home was located, so it was a surprise when he appeared from above us. His white scales gleamed with hints of blue, green, and pink in the late Serant sunlight, shimmering like a pearl.

Artek did not look as polished and refined as he usually did when visiting Thunder Rock Village, which caught me off guard. His long, golden hair was slightly disheveled, his colorful sash conspicuously absent, and a twig was lodged beneath the gold-and-blue chain around his neck. His sapphire eyes widened in surprise as he ducked under a branch to reach us. “Reid? Sazzie? What are you two doing here? I thought you were at the Training Grounds.”

He did not say a word about how close Reid and I were standing; my mate still had his arms around my waist, casually resting his hands against my spine. “I could say the same about you,” I told Artek. “Isn’t your home down there?” I asked, pointing down the ridge of a mountain flank we’d been following to reach the caves he lived in.

Immediately, the Shaman nodded, seemed to finally become aware of the twig caught in his necklace and hurried to remove it. “Yes, well, I was at Haven because Vera is almost due, but then the skyship crashed, and I needed to return home to check on things.” His eyes finally left Reid and me, dropping down to the sled at our feet, and they went huge again. “Oh stars, what happened?”

He raced forward, coiling at Khawla’s side to inspect the unconscious scout. Already, he was pulling a handheld device from his satchel, slipping it over his fingers so he could take care of the male. “We had a bit of a run-in with Bitter Storm on our way home,” Reid said, then proceeded to explain what we’d gone through and what had happened to Khawla. He left very little out, even boldly declaring that I was his mate and that my mating marks had glowed for him.

Artek did not seem the least surprised. “Yes, that’s good. I always did think your potential was wasted in the shadow of the Queen, Sazzie.” He glanced up at me, his blue eyes friendly, though he also appeared distracted, focusing more on his patient than on us.

“Shall we help you get him down to your home?” Reid asked, sounding a little grumpy. I smiled behind my hand at the sight of his sour expression. Did he expect something else from the Shaman? Congratulations? A Shaman with a patient was single-minded, so Artek’s behavior did not surprise me.

No, I took that back. When the Shaman quickly shook his head, something felt off, but I couldn’t put my finger on it. “No, no need! I can take Khawla home myself. It’s close. I’m sure the two of you wish to hurry to the pass so you can get to Haven. Everyone has been very worried about you, Reid.” While all those things were true—and Reid looked pleased again—they still didn’t make sense to me. Khawla would reach his healing chamber faster if we helped. And, truly, we could use a few supplies. Artek was normally quick to offer those, but not today. Why?

“If you are sure,” Reid agreed slowly and dubiously. That reassured me—I was not alone in feeling a little suspicious. There was not much we could do, though; Khawla would be in good hands with Artek, even if he was up to something. The Shaman would never harm anyone; he didn’t have an evil bone in him. I had seen that as a child, back when he was still an apprentice with another Shaman. I had wanted to bring that injured Ayala to him because he was the only person I knew who would help me.

As if my thoughts of the Ayala I’d once tried to save had summoned it, the bushes rustled below us on the mountain flank. Then, they parted to reveal a black-and-white-striped snout, and a sturdy but slow-moving Ayala trundled out. All its quills bristled along its rump, making it look shaggy and big. A gold band around its chubby neck marked it as something other than prey. It couldn’t be... How old did an

Ayala even get?

I flicked my eyes from the more-white-than-black snout to Artek and was trapped in a suddenly, very kind blue gaze. “Yes,” he said to me, his mouth tilting in a smile. “That’s Zap. She’s been with me for nearly twenty years...” He did not say more, but he didn’t need to. This Ayala came a little closer, and now I could see the slight limp she had; her back leg was a little crooked. It was her—the little baby I’d tried to save so long ago.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:16 am*

Tears sprang instantly to my eyes, my throat closed up, and a sob shook my chest. Artek just kept looking at me with kindness, while Reid frantically began asking me what was wrong. So out came the whole story about that impactful confrontation with Astrexa, with Zathar's interference and advice. "I can't believe she's still here—that she made it!"

"Zap has thrived under my care. She's been a good friend," Artek told me. Now, he wasn't impatient or distracted. Khawla must not be in any immediate danger, because he circled around the sled to come closer to us, lowering himself to stroke his palm over Zap's snout and ruffle her soft, round ears. My palm instantly ached to do the same. She did not look nearly as soft as she had been as a baby, but it still looked so nice.

"Zap wears a collar that protects her from predators," Artek explained, more to Reid than to me, because my focus was entirely on the now-very-old Ayala. Slipping from Reid's grasp, I dared to move a little closer to her, lowering myself like Artek had, so as not to be a threat. How was it possible that nobody had ever told me that Artek had an Ayala with him? Twenty years was a long time for that to be a secret...

The Ayala was big for one of her kind, evidence that she'd been well-fed and nurtured, just as Artek said. She also wasn't shy; a huff through her snout was followed by her abandoning Artek's petting to nuzzle my outstretched fingers. A deep inhale made her striped flanks expand, and then her quills shivered; they seemed to smooth down a little, as if she were relaxing. Her black nose was a little wet but soft, as was her white cheek. I was still marveling at the sensation when she abruptly turned around and scuttled back into the bushes. "Oh... Was it... did I do something wrong?"

Reid folded his hand around my shoulder, silently offering support, but Artek's words were the most reassuring. "I doubt it. Nothing bothers Zap these days. She's been nesting near here for a few months now; her latest litter must almost be old enough to be on their own. I bet she's simply gone to check on them." Artek rolled a shoulder, then shrugged out of the satchel that dangled from a strap. "Take these supplies, Reid. There should be enough to get you to Haven."

Reid took the bag, and I heard the two males talking as they stuck their heads together, but I didn't pay attention. My eyes were still fixed on the bushes the Ayala had disappeared through.

Artek was picking up the handles of the improvised sled when I finally wrenched my eyes away from the purple fronds and leaves. His body was already turned toward his home lower on the mountain, and he gave only a vague, hurried parting greeting as he started to leave. It was so out of character that I was, once again, surprised. Why was he in such a rush to get rid of us?

I opened my mouth to ask him, even though it was a little nosy. The Sazzie I had always been to others would never have done that; acting callously disinterested had been the best way to protect myself. I had Reid now, so I didn't need to do that. Artek ducked his head low, his pale shoulders rising to his ears as if he sensed my intentions. He picked up the pace, and my curiosity almost made me hurry after him. I would have, if not for the timely distraction.

Zap was back, chortling cutely as she jogged around a tree. Something small and wriggly dangled from her mouth, and in the precious seconds I needed to parse what it was, Artek was gone. "What've you got there, girl?" Reid said, and the seductive drawl of his voice seemed to work on me as much as it did on Zap. She made a very satisfied chirping sound as she approached us, the baby Ayala still dangling from her mouth. I crouched in front of her, smiling wryly as Zap gave Reid an adoring look.

"Yeah, it makes me do that too," I agreed with her. It made her chortle again from the

back of her throat, her young mewling much like Zap had done in my arms all those years ago. When she took another step toward me, my heart clenched in my chest. I almost didn't dare to reach out with my hands, but Reid gently nudged me, and his presence helped. I shouldn't have feared rejection; Zap dropped her baby into my hands without ceremony.

It was almost exactly the same size Zap had been when I rescued her, and the sensation of that warm ball of fur in my hands brought back all the memories—especially the strong desire I had felt then to keep her, to care for her myself. Zap seemed far less fussed about giving me one of her young. She gave the small rump a lick, huffed once while giving me a look, and then turned and trundled away. I was left holding a wiggling ball of fur with a pair of dark eyes and hints of pink still visible through its white fur. “Reid, did Zap just give me one of her babies? Why did she do that?”

I struggled to look away from the small bundle lying trustingly in my hands. It was old enough to jump out and survive in the woods on its own, but it didn't seem to want to leave. It was the opposite of what Zap had done twenty years ago. “She did. Maybe she's repaying you for saving her,” he said, and then he chuckled, and my belly clenched with a spark of heat at the sound. “The little one will be very welcome at Haven, that I can guarantee. Come on, we'll need to forage for it on our way home.”

I rose, gently cupping the small animal to my chest and marveling when it sighed and settled its head on my shoulder rather than fighting. “You're fine with me keeping it?” I asked Reid, not quite certain if any of this made sense to me. Nobody at Thunder Rock would ever consider keeping a pet, but Reid seemed very casual about it.

With his palm pressed to the small of my back, he urged me to start moving, and I soaked in his warm touch. We were turning toward the rising mountain arm, away from Artek's home, where we clearly weren't welcome. “You know, the first time

you sat with me in that med bay, I remembered thinking you should be holding either a pet or a baby in your arms. Of course, you should keep it. What do you want to name it?”

Ah, now I was crying again, but it was because I was so happy. I felt so loved. Reid got me; he saw the real me. With him at my side, I wasn't even scared that Haven might not welcome me. Now, we just had to get there.

## Epilogue

### Sazzie

“I still think he was acting weird,” I told Reid as we traveled. It was definitely getting colder. At night, we had to cuddle together to stay warm—all three of us. Thankfully, the small amount of supplies Artek had given us included a few furs for sleeping. Sorbet was sitting on my shoulder, clinging with her paws to my scales without hurting me. She wouldn't be able to sit there when she got much bigger, but for now, both of us liked this.

“Artek always seems a little mysterious and closed-off,” Reid responded. “Maybe he was just homesick.” He wasn't disagreeing with me exactly, but doing what he called playing the devil's advocate. He'd explained it to me, but I wasn't entirely sure why he did it—something about trying to keep an open mind on all the options. “Granted, he was definitely trying to get rid of us. We just don't know why, and is it really any of our business?”

That was true, too, but obsessing over Artek's quick departure was easier than thinking about our impending arrival. Ahoshaga's peak rose above us, and Reid said we'd be at Haven's gates soon. A cliff wall was on one side, and forest spread out on the other for most of the morning, but now that, too, was turning more rocky, strewn with giant boulders—some as big as a house. I could scent smoke in the air, which was a sure sign of civilization.

“Okay,” I agreed. “It’s not our business.” Artek had a right to privacy, but I could not let go of the idea that he’d been hiding something big from us. If he left right after that skyship had crashed with all those strange, wart-covered alien survivors, he should have had plenty of time to get home. He hadn’t come from home, though, so he’d made a detour to somewhere...

Sorbet chose that moment to tilt her snout and snort in my ear, and I giggled, instantly cheered. She kept doing that, sticking her nose in my ear as if she expected to discover food there. Maybe she just kept doing it because each time she did, I reached up to give her some of the Exar berries we’d harvested that morning. That’s why Reid had dubbed her Sorbet, and the name had stuck—because those berries had been partially frozen by morning frost, and she’d seemed to love the frozen berries even more. Apparently, sorbet meant frozen fruit in his language. It was a weird word, but I could easily wrap my tongue around it, and it sounded cute.

The small Ayala was already bigger than she had been three days ago, when Zap had given her to me, and she was eagerly licking the last drops of juice from my fingertips when I caught sight of the wooden wall. Oh, we’d arrived. The palisade was tall and thick, with guards posted along the top who sounded the alarm as soon as they saw us. There was a wooden building outside the gate and several tents around a large central fire pit. When we got closer, I saw that at least half a dozen males were sitting around it, working on various tasks. Males in shades of Copper Tooth purple, Water Weaver green, and Thunder Rock blue. Even, much to my surprise, a red male from Bitter Storm. So many colors, so many different males, but all working together in friendly camaraderie.

“Hey, Joxra!” Reid called out, waving at the Bitter Storm male with a smile on his face. “Ekkire, still here? I thought you were itching to go, my man! What happened?” He knew all of them and hurried to greet us, him. I received many stares and looks, a wide berth, as they slapped fists to chests and shoulders in greeting. Many of them exclaimed over Reid’s appearance and his incredible luck at surviving yet again.



I did not say anything, just held Sorbet to my chest, petting her soft fur. Reid kept his hand curled around my fingers the entire time, making sure I could not flee and ensuring I felt his support. When the males quieted, I thought things were over, but no—more people were streaming from the gates. Then I caught sight of one particular shade of azure. My chin lifted, and I locked eyes with Zathar, my brother.

“Sazzie,” he said, his voice painfully familiar, and it sounded friendly too. I had imagined a million different ways this could go, but the soft expression in his eyes had not been in any of those fantasies. “Why am I not surprised?” he laughed when he glanced at Sorbet. Then, he drew me into his arms, hugging me for the first time in our lives, as far as I could remember. “Welcome home, sister.”

THE END