



Absolute Perfection

Stephanie Burke



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Dedication

This is for D. Renee Bagby, who didn't scream when I mentioned Nāgas. She just asked how big because the ones in her Multiverse were the size of a planet. She also just asked what color the sea horses were going to be when I mentioned who the Nāga was with. Crazy people stick together.

This is also for Irene Williams and the crack team of ninja editors who spent reread after reread helping me get this story into shape. I use the word "crack" 'cause that's what your head feels like happened to it when they are done! LOL Editors are not appreciated enough. And deserve high praise indeed!

And finally this is for Den, who gave me sixteen years of sticking beside me, even through midnight descriptions of gay male sea horse and Nāga sex, while barely showing his need to "pacify the crazy woman lest she put me in a book next!"

Chapter One

“You are a dick, and I don’t think I like you.”

Chris growled the words while leaning with arms braced on his bar.

“I have a mighty fine dick, thank you very much, and I really don’t care what you think.” Astika stared at the bartender as he answered with all the sarcasm he could muster. “I just need some information and some quiet, and in that order.”

“I can tell you the same thing I told your contacts. I don’t have the information you seek no matter what your family told you”—the bartender began to grin a little maniacally—“but boy, do I have the perfect drink for you.”

“I don’t drink.”

“Maybe you should start.” This came from what must be the bastard of a bartender’s wife, the Nāga decided. She peeked out from behind the swinging doors to the kitchen before she disappeared again, no doubt to fry up some small, defenseless creature for consumption. “It just might soften your disposition a bit.”

Everyone knew that the vampires who operated this bar worked as a team, and it was said that the female was often more trouble than the male.

“I really don’t care if you do or if you don’t”—the vampire shrugged inelegantly—“but I have to agree with her and say that maybe drinking would improve your attitude.” Chris gave him his words back, smiling as a small frown curved down the ends of Astika’s rather thin lips. “You came into my bar tossing your name and title around and demanding things, Nāga, and it is my job as the best bartender in the tristate area to see to it that you leave with exactly what you need.”

“But not what I want.”

“Buddy, haven’t you heard that you can’t always get what you want?” called a youngish female voice.

The reluctant customer felt his frown grow deeper as he looked around the place. There were two small children staring back at him. It was the girl child who had spoken the sarcastic words, her brown eyes glowing as she stared up at him. Her brown hair was styled into two ponytails, and she had the same countenance as Chris, the bearded asshole of a bartender who refused to give him straight answers.

She appeared to be around seven or eight—with vampires it was hard to tell the age of their young ones—but her eyes looked ancient.

The boy child was a bit smaller than her, with dark blond hair and green eyes and looked just like the female who popped out of the kitchen earlier to add sage bits of advice. The family resemblance was stunning.

But the young male vamp said nothing about the antics of the adults, merely shaking his head at their childish behavior. He absently rolled a chess piece between two fingers before boldly reaching out to the board that sat between him and the small female who could only be his sister. He then blithely moved her queen a box over before making his own move. “Checkmate,” he declared, his face looking as innocent as a preacher’s daughter.

“Cheater!” his sister squawked, turning back to their game, and then the familial arguing commenced as the pair proceeded to ignore the adults once more.

“You make that sound like a threat.” The blue-haired Nāga ignored the goings-on of the young ones and focused his attention on the bartender again.

“It sounds like fact to me.” Chris sucked at his front fangs as he reached for a collection of tall bottles and a metal shaker. “You would do well to listen.”

Then with a few deft moves, Chris made the bottles dance.

It was an art form the way the muscular brunet juggled three uncapped bottles, tossing them over his head, behind his back, and twisting them in midair, never allowing a drop to spill where it wasn’t supposed to.

Finally, in short, controlled flicks of his wrist, measured amounts of liquor were poured midjuggle into a tall metal shaker. Once the proper amounts were reached, he flipped the bottles back into their places and took up the metal container.

The bartender capped it and began to shake it gently as he eyed the blue-haired man. After a moment and a few considering looks, he placed the shaker on the bar and retrieved a tall, frosty glass. He poured the pale-colored mixed drink with flourish. And after a final squirt of juice from his bar gun, he whipped out a cherry from its dispenser and tossed it into the glass before he slid the drink in front of the frowning blue-haired man.

“Not impressed?” Chris asked, flashing just a bit of fang from behind his neatly trimmed mustache as he grinned widely at his customer.

The Nāga just glared.

“Too bad.” He attempted to sound remorseful and failed. “And I gave you the free show and everything.”

“I don’t drink.”

“You will drink this.” Chris chuckled. “After all, it was tailor-made just for you.”

The man reached out with long, thin fingers and tapped at the condensation beading up on the glass before him. He pulled it closer to himself, eyeing the slightly blue liquid, before inhaling deeply. He raised an eyebrow as he again turned to stare at Chris.

“I’m not getting anything out of you until I drink this, right?”

“Smarter than you look.” And from the look in Chris’s eye, his estimation of him put him somewhere between arrogant ass and airhead lackey.

He looked behind Chris to stare at the mirrored wall behind the bar and tilted his head, trying to see what the vampire was seeing.

He had long, flowing deep blue hair—not the electric stuff you find in bottles, but a deep dark blue that had subtle purple highlights. His eyes were beetle black, no light escaping and allowing no emotions to show. His nose was rather aquiline, his nostrils thin and flaring, his face narrow with a slightly pointy chin.

His body gave off a useless-pretty-boy facade as well; he was thin and tall with a model's body and tight musculature.

But most damning was that he was quite feminine in the face.

He knew he was the epitome of the word *twink*.

He appeared childlike but was saved from being almost too cute to be male by his height, the thin lips, and attitude.

“Gee, thanks,” he deadpanned before lifting the drink to his mouth. “What is this called, anyway?”

“Well, they don't have a drink called jackass yet, so I did you one better. This, my friend, is perfect for you. It's called an Absolut fucker.”

“I am not your friend.” The Nāga paused with the drink in his hand, nearly to his lips. “And you may call me Astika.”

He frowned again.

The kids chuckled.

Chris grinned.

Astika shrugged, lifted the glass fully to his lips, and was just about to take his first tentative sip when the doors to the bar exploded open and a terrified shriek filled the air.

“He's going to eat me!”

Before the blue-haired Nāga could move off his bar stool, what appeared to be a fall of silver highlighted blue hair slammed into his chest and burrowed beneath his arms, hiding as best as it could.

Astika's black eyes widened as he stared down at the female—male—creature that was now trying to do its best to burrow under his shirt, shivering in what smelled like fear and...and french fries?

“What the hell...?”

“He's going to chop me up into little bits and eat me with malted vinegar and salt!”

By now the smaller creature had managed to work its way behind Astika, pulling along with him what had to be yards of hair and a slim, compact body. He somehow managed to get all that hair and his small frame underneath the back of Astika's shirt.

Astika's muscles tensed as he caught a wisp of very real fear and cooking oil.

He looked up at the brunet barkeep. Chris's blue eyes were wide in disbelief, his mouth open enough to show more than a hint of fang as he leaned on the bar. One finger was still in the air as if poised to make a point, and he was bending aggressively forward, his eyes locked on Astika and the thing that was trying its best to burrow into him from behind.

No help there, Astika realized before he began the delicate feat of turning without destroying his human clothing and extracting the little...thing that was now shivering and blubbering behind him.

“Scaler! He had a fish scaler and a fillet knife!”

The Nāga did note that the...creature also carried the tang of the sea and was still damp, something that was made apparent as his white shirt became transparent where the little beast was clutching at his sides.

“Cocktail sauce!” it wailed, burrowing its head in the small of his back. “Cocktail or tartar sauce! He gave me a choice!”

“What...?” Astika began again, only to have his words cut off by the door flying open, and a dark, towering figure raced into the bar.

“The fish-boy is mine!”

The human was mentally off, Astika decided, taking in the scent of the man as his gaze swept the room before dropping to the floor at the doorway. He groaned as he watched those crazed eyes narrow as the human's gaze followed the damp trail left on the floor where it led over the dark wood and tile, directly to him.

Of course. Trouble never fails to find me.

The figure behind him began to tremble harder, whimpering slightly, digging sharp nails into his side. "Mine!" the human roared, rushing toward Astika, fist balled up and drawn back in preparation to strike.

"Oh, I don't think so!" Chris bellowed, but the human ignored him, completing his headlong rush toward Astika and his own imminent demise.

As he reached him, the Nāga jumped to his feet, forcing the figure clinging to him to back up. Then instinct had the Nāga turning his head to the right and leaning back.

The fist coming toward his face sailed harmlessly past him with a rush of warm air, missing him by several inches, but that left Astika not a very happy Nāga.

He reached out and gripped the elbow of the massive brown-haired man as he slid past his body and jerked, using the man's own momentum against him.

The human went flying to the ground, landing hard on his stomach with an audible groan, all the breath flowing from his lungs at once.

Astika took a step back, but before he could follow up on his takedown, there was a growl, and the children were on the man, straddling his body as if daring him to move a muscle.

"A positive," the girl on his legs growled, her eyes gleaming as she bared a conspicuously large set of fangs of her own. "I am sure of it."

The boy said nothing, but he began to pet the man's face, his eyes dreamy as if he had just been handed his favorite treat.

“One bite, Papa?” he asked, his voice breezy and whimsical. “He, after all, did invade our kiss...”

“No one comes into my bar and starts shit,” Chris growled, his face reddening in anger, his voice drowning out the noise of his excited children.

Chris nodded, and a huge shadow separated from the back wall, moving slowly toward the human.

“It’s mine!” The man whimpered, cringing from the children who were now snarling in earnest. Their mouths parted enough to show long white fangs made all the more scary by their thin, rose-colored lips darkening to black. Spittle slowly dripped down from the sides of their mouths, splashing near his face as if adding extra insult to their papa’s threatening actions.

“I don’t know what ‘it’ you are talking about,” Chris snapped. “But whatever it is you think you own, you won’t find it here.”

“You say that a lot,” Astika observed, eyes wide, as the tall, dark, shadowy blob gently shoved the children away. Without a sound, it tossed the human over his shoulder before carrying the now cowering man to the door. The human offered no resistance and almost seemed to float in the dark thing’s arms before the door slid open unaided and the thing unceremoniously tossed him out on his ass.

Astika shifted his weight again, trying to reach behind him to pull the wet...creature out from behind him. But it was stuck fast and too afraid to move. He could feel its claws digging into his skin.

Although it was rather uncomfortable, he refused to acknowledge that small and unusual pain. So he changed tactics. Instead of jumping and twisting like an idiot, he would appeal to a greater power—in this instance, the power of words.

“I say it a lot and I always tell the truth.” Chris snorted his answer as the door silently slid shut and the amorphous blob dissipated. Turning back to his bar as the two pouting vampire children silently made their way back to their seats, grumbling about missed meals, he nodded at the glass still on the bar. “Finish your drink.”

“I would rather you assist me in other matters,” Astika growled, shifting from foot to foot, maintaining his balance despite the small lump hiding under his now partially transparent shirt.

Still attached to his backside was the damp and whimpering squirming form.

“Finish your drink and get the hell out.” Chris threw his hands up in the air in exasperation. “The opening rush is going to start soon, and I don’t need the distraction of you hanging around and whining.”

“Whining...” Astika was trying to sound assured and in command, but that was a wee bit hard when he was dancing from foot to foot while a wet sea creature was clinging like...like a barnacle!

“Whining.” Chris slammed down the bottles he was replacing and glared at the front door as if he expected more interruptions. “You came to me because you wanted to know about any ritual sacrifices going on around here, and I told you that I can’t help you. I don’t follow that kind of thing unless it’s to steer people away from it. So unless you’re looking to be the first on the sacrificial chopping block...?”

“I was told that you were the one to talk to about matters preternatural...”

“You were probably told that I was the one who could guide you toward what you needed.”

“Yeah...”

“Then take your present”—he nodded toward Astika’s now lumpy back—“and get the fuck out of my bar.”

The kids chuckled.

Astika glared at Chris, noting that he probably looked ridiculous arguing with the vampire while there was a shivering sea creature clinging to his ass.

“Present?” he asked softly, eyes narrowing as the whining behind his back became more prominent.

“I give people what they need, not necessarily what they want.” Chris’s grin was more than evil, and Astika felt a lump of fear begin to grow in his stomach. It

was not fear of what Chris would do to him—he was a nearly immortal Nāga, after all. It was more of a fear of what the vampire would say next.

“And because you are such a nice—and I do mean that despite your gruff exterior—creature, the stars have aligned to give you exactly what you deserve.”

“I was told I was needed here...”

“Whoever told you that lied. There are no great and evil sacrifices being carried out. There are no creatures crying out in distress for you to save...as long as you don't discount the thing you have clinging to your back. What the hell is it, anyway?”

“How in the name of Shiva's left nut am I supposed to know?” Astika's voice was growing uncommonly loud, something he usually fought to avoid. Maybe he needed a vacation.

“You are the fucking prince of the Nāgas!” Chris pointed out. “Why don't you stick out your pointy little forked tongue and smell what it is?”

Chris was now mopping up the wooden bar, a smirk on his face as he stared at Astika, almost challenging him.

“This is what I get for calling you a no-account, sway-backed, nosy bloodsucker, isn't it?” He sighed, noting that Chris was now grinning and exposing all of his fangs.

“You reap what you sow, my man.” *Cheery* was too mild a word to use for the vampire's attitude.

Astika stared at him, his face showing he was suddenly at a loss for how to proceed, and then he shook his head, accepting the inevitable.

“And you came in here demanding instead of asking.”

“I'm used to demanding,” Astika pointed out. “In my world, it's how we get things done.”

Chris snorted, rolled his eyes, and pointed to the still-waiting glass. “Finish your drink. It’ll make you feel good. And pull that poor thing out of your shirt so I can see what you caught.”

“I’m trying!” Astika finally snapped, wiggling and shifting, reaching behind him in an attempt to grasp some kind of flesh or hair. He noted that the sea creature was whimpering so loudly now he probably couldn’t hear a word of the conversation going on around him.

“Hey!” he finally called out, giving in to the urge to swat at the large lump that just had to be the thing’s head.

“Ouch!” it yelped, and then the claws released his sides, no doubt leaving a few welts in their wake.

Astika could feel the tingling, burning scratches, but the pain relief was instant when the little thing let go. And more than anything proved that this creature wasn’t among the common creatures he was used to dealing with in his part of the world. If it could penetrate his thick hide, then it had to be special, maybe even royal, and royal always meant trouble.

“Come out,” he grouched. “The big bad human is gone.”

“Gone?” the voice warbled before the back of the shirt was pulled up and out enough to expose huge blue-green eyes peering at him from underneath his arm. “It’s gone?”

“Gone,” Astika assured it, rolling his eyes as Chris tossed down his bar rag and bent over, his laughter filling the bar with the deep, amused sound.

“It won’t eat me?”

“No, but I just may slap the shit out of you if you don’t get out of my clothes,” Astika growled, closing his eyes as his frustration grew.

The shirt dropped, and then he felt a cool draft as the damp body separated from his skin.

He shuddered, hating the idea of anything cold against his skin, and this thing had definitely left a large cool spot as it moved.

“Safe?” the timid voice repeated, and Astika stepped away, yanking his shirt back into place, turning to see what had disrupted his argument with the vampire.

“If you want to call it that,” he drawled, tilting his head to the side, confused as to what he was seeing. “I don’t see why you couldn’t have taken care of that human yourself. You seem to have a pretty good...amount...”

Astika’s words trailed off as he took a good look at what he had inadvertently helped save.

It was gorgeous.

Huge teal eyes dominated the triangular face, eyes the same color as the silky hair that was cut into the longest Mohawk he had ever seen. The ends fairly dragged the ground, covering a body that was clad in sea foam and air.

So...sea foam was the source of the salty smell he’d automatically cataloged as he took a good long look at the body which had been clinging, to him.

Even when not compared to his nearly seven-foot frame, the creature was a tiny thing. It was slender, yet its well-defined musculature gave the impression of delicate strength. It was barefoot and shivering, its full pink lips quivering, its dark complexion seemingly unusual for its hair color, like the bright pink nipples that peeked through the fall of hair.

Its small nose quivered as it looked around the room before those unique eyes landed on Astika again.

“You...you saved me.”

“Huh?” Astika was struck dumb. This whining creature, this pain in his side—it was...unique.

“You saved me!” It smiled.

And Astika was struck mute again even before he could speak, for the sea foam shifted, and he caught a glimpse of the package that was swaying between the

thing's knees. *Equine*—the word came to his mind as he watched the flesh shake before it was hidden in a layer of sea foam once more.

It was definitely male, Astika thought, blinking at the feelings that seeing that soft swaying flesh evoked within him.

“I...” He blinked and took another step back, feeling as if the hands of fate were beginning to get a stranglehold on his neck.

“You saved me,” he continued, “and according to the law, you now own me.”

“What?” Those words killed the growing admiration rather quickly.

Astika could not believe that particular high-pitched sound which had emerged from his throat any more than he could believe the words the creature just shouted at him. The little beast was happily bouncing and clapping his hands. But those actions combined with his spoken words gave him an evil intent that made Astika want to turn tail and run.

“I belong to you,” the small male called, spinning in a circle, sending damp hair flying all about, allowing his sea foam to play peekaboo with the tender unclothed flesh.

“Chris...Chris and his imps saved you!” Astika stammered, his eyes growing wide as he stared at the creature dancing in front of him.

“He's not alive.” The small male...thing waved a petite hand dismissively at the vampire. “He does not count.”

“See? I don't count,” Chris mocked, leaning forward farther on the bar, eyes gleaming with suppressed laughter.

“We're not alive,” the little girl added, all interest in the game lost again as she stared at the beings around her, her head tilted to the side as if considering the small creature that was trying to wreak havoc in Astika's life.

“Looks like he's all yours,” the boy child added, smirking at him, just a little fang showing. “You found a playmate.”

“But...” Astika stammered. “But...but...”

“You felled the hunter!” The creature beamed up at him.

“I dodged...”

“You defeated him. The undead one just removed him from my presence.” Huge eyes stared up at him, utter adoration in their depths. “You are my savior.”

“What am I ssssuppossessed to do with you?” Astika shouted, tugging at his hair in frustration, not even noticing that his voice was slipping into sibilant tones.

“Well, I understand that my kind make great lovers...”

“Loverssss!” Astika nearly shrieked, his eyes growing huge while his pupils pulled into black vertical slits.

“But I am not meant for that life.”

“Thank the mother goddesss,” Astika said under his breath, his eyes going back to normal dimensions, his heart rate slowing from the racing mode it had jumped into when the creature spoke of lovers.

“No, a mere lover won’t do for one of my pedigree. I am meant for a mate.”

Suddenly some of that innocent and childlike glee fled with the speed of those dissipating sea-foam bubbles.

“Guess who that is?” The small blue-haired thing was leering at him! He was leering, and...and it was waggling its eyebrows!

“Mate?” Astika’s voice was reedy as he again stared, at a loss, at the small blue, suddenly frightening thing. “What are you, anyway?”

“Sea horse!” he supplied, tossing the damp hair of his Mohawk behind him and preening. “And I am a royal too! Eldest son of the king of us all.”

International diplomatic nightmare. Astika paled at the thought.

“And now I belong to you.” He—the insane sea horse—winked at him.

“No.” It was time to take control of this situation. Crossing his arms, Astika glared at the smaller male—sea horse—trying to instill a little fear into the creature. “I don’t think sssso.”

“Well, I do!” the sea horse insisted, his voice growing hard.

“Look.” Astika pointed at him, nearly jabbing him in the chest. “Whoever you are, I am not in the market for a mate. Sssso you are jussst going to have to find ssssome other fool.” Arms akimbo now, he leaned downward in a suitably intimidating manner, making his feelings known.

“I don’t think so.” The cute expression left the sea horse’s face altogether. In fact, he started to look quite...feral. “You saved me, you own me, deal with it, in that order.”

“Oh I don’t think ssssoo!”

“Well, I do!” the sea horse insisted, stepping forward, reaching up and poking a finger into Astika’s chest, his suddenly serious eyes glaring hard as he actually managed to move the large male back a few steps.

“That is the way things work where I am concerned. You won me; you got me!” He eyeballed Astika from the toes of his shiny wing tips to the top of his multifaceted blue-haired head before he demanded, “Get over it.”

“Why would I want a half-drowned, whimpering little...pissssant of a ssssea horsssse?” Astika hissed, recalling the step he had given and taking another for good measure, getting right into the little male’s personal space. “You look like a female, you whine like a bitch in heat, and now you think to tell me what I am going to do with my life? Kid, you have another think”—he nearly choked on the word—“coming.”

The more he spoke, the more upset Astika became. He had finally gotten some control over of his life, and he refused to let anyone or anything take that away! This was his final job for a long time, and then he could retire...or at least take a long vacation. And his plans did not include a small, Mohawked, sea-colored menace!

“I do not look like a female,” the menace growled, exposing... Astika blinked. Were those tiny little fangs? They were almost cute in a curiously odd way. When combined with those huge eyes, they gave him the look of a feral puppy.

“When I’m dressing like a woman, I’m whorishly commanding!”

“You aren’t dressssed like anything!” Astika shouted. “You are practically naked!”

“Practically.” The sea horse grinned. “But only you are allowed to see all of me.”

“But...but I don’t want to ssssee all of you!” He threw his arms up in the air. “Don’t you understand what I am ssssaying to you? I don’t want a mate!”

“Un-huh.” The sea horse nodded, smiling, eyes wickedly arrogant. “My name is Taza, mate of mine. Taza of the fifteenth dynasty of Coushrin, heir to the power throne of Coushrin. Your mate for life, lest there be war between our two peoples.”

“War!” Astika shrieked. It was his job to prevent wars, not start them! And with the power behind the title that the little one bandied about...and with his own high-placed position as the heir of the High Nest of Shiva’s blessed Nāgas, the *only* prince, no less... “But...but...I don’t want to be mated!”

“Tough luck, my tall, blue-haired twinkie...”

“Twinkie!” he wailed. He knew he fit the description of a twink in most circles, but that didn’t mean he wanted a tiny sea horse to point it out. “I am sssseven feet tall! How am I a twinkie?”

“Looks like a girl in the face, looks young enough to have the undead one arrested for having you in here without proper ID, looks like you’ve never been laid in your life... You, my mate, are a twinkie!”

Taza even winked at him as he laid down the truth as he saw it.

“*Argh!*” Astika threw his hands up in the air again, bemoaning the matrimonial chains he felt tightening around his neck.

“My mate!” Taza crowed, clapping his hands and jumping in place as if the whole matter had been settled. “And if you behave, I’ll even let you top me sometimes.”

“I think...” A grinning Chris interrupted, picking up the drink and sliding it across the bar toward the blue-haired sea horse. “Yes, I really I think that this was meant for you.”

“Thank you.” He nodded politely before picking up the drink and downing all sixteen ounces in one shot.

“Tasty, just what I wanted, just like it was made for me.”

Chris and the kids laughed before Chris informed him, “It’s called an Absolut fucker.”

Astika whimpered.

He knew from this moment on, life as he knew it would never be the same.

Chapter Two

“What?” Astika’s roar could probably be heard all over Fells Point, if not all over Baltimore itself.

The Nāga, paying no attention to his new wide-eyed, blue-haired consort, wrapped his fingers around the phone’s handset and squeezed. If it had been alive, it surely would have had the life strangled from it, so tight was his grip.

He could not believe the words that were coming out of his mother’s mouth!

“What...what do you mean...it was a ruse?”

The words sounded strangled from his own throat, barely recognizable as his voice.

His eyes were growing wider and wider with each word that came through the handset. And the laughter! Was that his father roaring in amusement in the background on the other end of the line? Had the immortal man come to visit his wife at this worst of all possible times?

“Your grandfather...”

“Shiva?”

“And your father felt that, well...*shehed*—Hush!” He could hear her admonish his father. “Frankly, you were getting on our nerves.”

“Don’t call me honey,” he growled. “Getting on your nerves...”

“Well, you did a great job in saving the snakes here, *shehed*. You solved a lot of our problems. But...there...there really aren’t any more *real* problems for you to solve.”

“But that’s what I was bred to do!”

“I know, *khubsurat*, my beautiful one”—Manasa audibly sighed—“but your grandfather Shiva and your uncle Vasuki were discussing the fact that you were getting into trouble—”

“Is this because one of Uncle V.’s mistresses came to me about how he is treating the younger females of his harem with more reverence than the males and older females who have been there for years?” Astika was incredulous, and it sounded in his voice.

“Perhaps,” his mother hedged. “And you know those two old goats get talking and—”

“But I handled that situation with gentleness and tact!” Astika wailed, running his hands through his hair.

“You got the younger ones watching *Waiting to Exhale* and the older ones watching *Basic Instinct*, shehed.” His mother sounded exasperated. “How is that tact? Several of the elder ones started carrying butcher knives, and they pop out at the most inappropriate times. And adding *Brokeback Mountain* and *Jeffrey* to the list did not make anything easier on the males. They took to weeping and wailing and comforting each other more so than Vasuki! And he is king! You are fortunate that you are his only heir, shehed; otherwise I am sure that he would have had something nasty done to you.”

“And Grandfather S.?” Astika grumbled. “What did I do to make him hate me?”

“Nothing, *khubsurat*, my lovely one.” His mother breathed out heavily. “But Shiva now lives in eternal fear of you getting your video collection into the hands of his harem.”

“Well,” Astika grumbled, “Uncle V. should treat his harem better, and Grandfather S.’s consorts have not come to me with complaints, but he could do better by—”

“And that is part of the reason that they decided you needed a vacation,” Manasa interrupted. There was a moment of silence before his mother continued. “Never in all of my imaginings, shehed, had I ever thought something like this

would happen to you in the Americas. We thought that you would get there, have our plan revealed to you, and go off and enjoy yourself for a time. I don't think we ever thought that you would find yourself with a mate—”

“He”—Astika cut her off—“is not my mate!”

“According to the sea-horse law, he is.” She spoke calmly despite his obvious irritation. “And Jaratkarū—”

“What about Father?”

“Well, once he stops laughing, I am sure that he will begin negotiations with the power throne of Coushrin. We will ensure that we will not have to pay a hefty bride price—”

“Bride price?” Astika resisted the urge to throw the phone against the wall in a fit of pique. “Mother, you miss the point of this conversation. I do not want to wed!”

The increased laughter in the background noise was not helping his temper any.

“We cannot start an international incident over this,” Manasa pertly informed her son. “And I believe that being wed will be a good thing for you, shehed. A mate will give you someone to look after. You know that caring and the desire to protect were purposefully bred into you, my son. And I am more than certain that those skills will once again come in handy, but for now you need to consider your own life for a change.”

“Mother... *Walda...*”

“It will be fine, *baita...*my son,” Manasa crooned. “But there is nothing we can do. You have saved this sea horse's life, and thus according to their laws, he now belongs to you.”

“Mother...”

“Now, now,” she soothed. “Things happen for a reason, *baita*. Now I suggest you spend some time getting to know your mate, as their life spans seem to match ours.”

Astika moaned, closing his eyes and leaning his back against the wall, suddenly having to fight down the need to cry.

“And because there are no harems in the sea-horse power seat...”

“No heirs.” Astika’s eyes widened just before a tear flowed down his cheek.

He...he had always wanted to have children, to have a mate lay a clutch for him to protect and look over, to hear the scrape of small scales on silk pillows as his young ones learned to move in their primary form, teaching them the intricacies of human movement and encouraging their first human steps...

He turned, resting his head back against the wall, and slid down until his butt rested on the floor.

His life, his plans, his future—now his future was nothing but so much dust in the desert winds.

“There may be a way for heirs, Astika.” His mother sounded concerned now—rather sad actually, as if her dreams were being deferred as well. “There is always surrogacy...and we are not sure about the genetic makeup of these sea horses, though we are aware of their existence. They tend to cover the Pacific territories more so than the seas we control around our waterways. But we are learning now. I may be able to help with a fertility charm...” She paused for a moment. “And we will learn more, *nanna bachcha*, my baby. We will see to it that you have a wonderful life, even if this is not the life you would have chosen for your own.”

What could he say?

So Astika said nothing.

“Astika? Astika?” His mother sighed again, sounding anxious, concerned while the laughter coming from the background ceased.

“Baita?” This new voice was deeper and decidedly male. His father had finally stopped laughing at his misfortune long enough to speak to him.

“My son, I know that this current situation is hard, and understandably you are upset. But please remember that as hard as it is for you, it must be harder still on your mate.”

Silence.

“Okay, my son, just listen for now. The Coushrin dynasty has ruled the Pacific for longer than you think, having taken out a dynasty that lasted over fifty generations before installing themselves as rulers. And they are a wondrous people, my son. You have managed to ally our families in a match that most parents could only dream of having. Succession passes through the female line, though it is the males who carry the young. Young Taza is the only male in this generation to be born, so he is heir to the family bloodline and secondary to the throne. He is much prized for his fertile abilities as much as his bloodline, as his offspring will be direct descendants to the secondary throne. Take care of your mate, because even without a ceremony, he truly became yours. He was yours the moment he latched on to you and you defeated the villain. You are so lucky, my son! Fortune smiled down upon you! Even your uncle Vasuki is no longer peeved with you!”

“Power,” Astika snapped, his father’s words rattling around in his head along with his keen disappointment. “You are pleased by the power this brings?”

“Dual crown,” his father crowed. “Now you can do almost anything you wish, my son!”

“Anything but choose a mate of my own desiring.”

“Astika!” his father rapped out.

“Father, once you get over the first flush of the power that I have brought to your name, and once you take a moment to realize that your power base has expanded to the point that your only child has become a pawn, and once you decide what is more important to you, call me. Because if I speak with you now, I will say something we both will regret, something from which we both will never recover!”

Then Astika gave in to the urge to hurl his phone across the room.

He watched as it exploded into a million small pieces of plastic and dozens of electronic chips.

Just like my life.

Acceptance, he was coming to realize, was damn difficult.

“Mate?” The concerned voice pulled him out of his immediate doldrums. He cocked one eye open and stared at the small creature, the royal sea horse who had disrupted his life in so many ways.

“What?”

“Mate.” Taza moved closer, his eyes showing compassion and understanding. Then he opened his mouth. “You are out of your split-tongued mind if you think for one second that I am cleaning that up! If you want to have a temper tantrum, go scream into a pillow.”

He turned in a fall of hair and sea foam and flounced away, headed, no doubt, toward the kitchen.

Astika shook his head, and he considered the pert butt playing peekaboo with the long, luxurious fall of hair. After perusing the shapely legs of his mate as he sauntered away from him, he began to accept.

Chapter Three

“Mate! Oh mate?” Taza’s huge eyes teared up pitifully as he searched the small house for any signs of his tall, thin male. “Mate?”

He stomped his feet in a fit of pique, not ready to admit defeat yet.

In one hand he held a power cuff, one capable of allowing him to know the whereabouts of his mate at any given time.

In the other he held a bottle of lube, hoping for the chance to explain some things about sea-horse mating rituals.

Maybe leaving out those hastily hand-drawn sketches had not been a good plan for introducing him to the world of sea-horse sex.

But what was done was done, and it was time to move ahead with matters...before his family managed to find a loophole in this arrangement. Being married off to that sea hag and popping out a dozen of her brats for the sake of posterity—no. Nothing was worse than that fate—even death! And he *had* flirted with the idea of taking on his humanoid form and slashing his legs before swimming with the sharks quite a few times.

But this solution seemed so much better.

Actually things could not have gone better if he had planned them.

He had only wanted to escape into the human world for a while—maybe ten years or so—just until they forgot about him. That overgrown human who had netted him while screaming about eternal life if he consumed mermaid flesh had not been in his plans.

In fact, the whole “being tied down and covered with garlic and cracked pepper” idea had not been in the plans. But when the crazy human had pulled out a fillet knife, Taza knew it was time to depart in the most expedient way possible.

Chewing through the netting wasn’t the most glamorous thing he had ever done, but it had gotten him out unnoticed. And when the butcher had left to get oil for his deep metal bowl he called a fryer, Taza knew he had to make his move.

He was still picking hemp out of his rear fangs from chewing through the netting, but he was doing it as a free and uneaten being.

The bar was the only open sanctuary he had seen during his freedom flight—besides, he felt drawn to the place—and he’d raced to get there. Hiding behind the tallest being seemed to be the best idea he’d had in a long time, especially since the human had discovered his escape moments after he had climbed out of the ground-floor window of the crazy human’s wood-and-metal shack.

Watching that fool get knocked on his butt was the best thing ever. And the vampire—he and his family were pretty cool too. But the best...ah, the best was Astika.

The male managed to give new meaning to the words “tall drink of water,” which was a human expression he had learned in Fells Point while trying to gather enough intel and language to fit in with the indigenous population.

“Gathering intel” was human military speak for finding out what was going on in a new place before he made a fool of himself.

He didn’t want anyone thinking he was crazy or odd or anything like that. He wanted to be known as a nice, bright, human military commander. He had seen some of those around on the docks.

Apparently all one needed to do to rule the people was drink a lot and yell at men and women who wore strange garb called uniforms. All too easy! So he had been prepared to yell and scream “semper fi” a few times to make his story believable during his first real excursion onto dry human land.

The hair might be cause for some concern with some of the uniformed humans, but he could just tell them that he was deep undercover.

They had to have blue hair in the Middle of the East, or whatever that place they were sending their men to. It would be odd if all of humanity was stuck with just the black, blond, brown, and red hair that he had seen. Some interesting people had shown up at the docks from time to time with their hair the color of sunsets, vibrant pinks and yellows. Surely a military command officer would have the longest, brightest hair of them all!

Astika had the most amazing dark blue-black hair. And he was so tall too! Rarely had Taza ever seen such a tall specimen—one that wasn't bent on eating him, that is.

And he hissed when he talked. That was exciting, almost as exciting as his split tongue.

It had been clear from the beginning that his mate was not human. One had to be a real plankton-head to miss that with this tough skin and his slitted eyes.

And unlike the undead one, his mate was warm to the touch and smelled like exotic spices. His skin was so soft and yet so tough that his claws barely made a scratch, yet it felt so firm and luscious...

Just what *was* his mate, anyway?

Whatever he was, Taza knew that his mate possessed some power.

He really hadn't meant to eavesdrop on his conversation, but when his mate's voice rose, so filled with agitation and despair, he'd had to see what was going on.

What he'd heard astounded him.

He didn't know what half the titles were or what language he was speaking, but it was clear that his mate was royal as well, and that he had issues with his parents.

Who didn't in this day and time? But when he caught the echoes of pain in his mate's voice... Taza had to do something.

But before he could act, his mate hurled his cell phone-talking device across the room and watched as it shattered into a lot of little metallic and plastic pieces.

He seemed so lost that the only thing he could think of doing was to irritate the male until he sounded normal. Irritated seemed to be the norm for his mate, so he said the first thing that came to mind and went to investigate outside his new abode.

It was beautiful—there were sand gardens and bright vibrant flowers in all the colors, and it all filled him with a sense of peace that he had not felt since he had been in his undersea gardens at home.

He lost himself there, spending way more time than he expected. So when he made his way back to the house, he was a little surprised to find it empty.

The cell phone still lay where it had been, in pieces, but it had been swept up in a neat pile.

To Taza, it looked like his mate would be willing to compromise.

So now it was time to find the mate in question and actually figure out what he was. There were so many new and important things to discover. Not only did he have to learn about his likes and dislikes; he had to find out just exactly what his new mate was.

“Astika,” he called again, moving through the house, checking out all the rooms on the first floor.

There was a foyer, which was well lit and filled with colorful tiles. There was a small living room, a den where his mate had spoken on the phone-listening device, which was filled with bookshelves. There was a small desk and several armless couches strewn with pillows. There was a kitchen that was ideal and spacious, filled with large windows that allowed the sunlight to shine through. And there were two rooms he had yet to vet out.

Approaching one, he found a small room bare of furniture except for what seemed like hundreds of pillows and a huge set of glass doors that overlooked the rear of the house and a beautiful human-created pond.

But no Astika.

He was tempted to explore this room further but decided it would probably be in his best interest to find his mate.

He exited the room, found a small bathroom behind a door that blended seamlessly with the walls, and then came upon the final room.

If his mate was on the first floor, he had to be in this room. But if he was on the second floor, there would be problems.

Sea horses were...well, they were notorious for being afraid of heights. And by heights, anything seven feet or more off dry ground would send them into a paralyzing seizure that only time and a lot of cuddling would cure.

It was one of the reasons that his people so rarely came to mingle with the folks on land who loved their tall structures and walking ways.

So, praying that his mate would have enough common sense to keep his feet firmly planted close to the ground, he turned the knob and pushed the door open.

And there was his mate, all several feet of...

Several feet? More like several miles.

“Gah?”

At the inane sound that poured from his throat, the long thing that appeared to be his mate turned in his direction.

Okay.

It was a snake...kind of.

It was long—several coils filled the large room, almost hiding the body of his mate in a ropy, snakelike, copper-colored body.

It also had his mate’s upper body and head.

Yes, it appeared to be his mate—it smelled like him, and it sounded like his agitated sighs...

“Um, mate?” He took a step toward the hall, just in case it was some kind of serpent that was having trouble digesting Astika and was choking on his lower limbs.

The power cuff, the only real memento of his birthright, was dropped and forgotten.

“Yes?”

The voice sounded like Astika’s.

“What...are you doing?”

“Relaxing.”

“I mean...what are you”—he waved his arms at the whole package, taking in his mate’s long blue hair right down to the spaded tip of his tail—“doing?”

Sighing, the snake that was apparently his mate turned fully toward him, affording him a view he never thought that he would see.

It was his mate’s torso, and the dark top half of his skin began to lighten around his waist and hips, where a delicate scale pattern began and the humanoid part ended.

The snake body started as small, dark-hued scales, which gradually lessened in color until the underbelly was nearly white. The scale pattern blended in and out, the copper becoming pale in some areas and then transitioning to bold splashes of color.

His mate’s body looked like the ebbing and flowing waves of the sea.

“I am relaxxxing in my natural sssstate,” he muttered as he adjusted his body in order to fully turn to his mate. “If I sssstay in my human guise for too long, it causes me great pain and disssscomfort.”

“Oh.” Taza nodded as if that made sense, as if his words were completely understandable and coherent.

“What are you again?”

He knew that he looked confused, but it was not every day a sea horse realized that he was mated to...to a snake!

“I am a Nāga.”

“N-Nāga?” Taza paled.

“Nāga, yessss.”

“But...but they—I don’t know if you know this, Astika, but Nāgas have been known to eat...well...my kind.”

“As if.” Astika snorted, rolling his eyes and crossing his arms as he glared at his new mate.

“It is a documented fact! Sea serpents...”

“I am not a ssssea sssserpent!” Astika fairly roared, his eyes nearly glowing in his anger. “I am a Nāga! I am the thing that eatssss the ssssea sssserpents!”

“You...” Taza paled further. “Y-you eat sea serpents?”

“Figure of sssspeech,” he said with a groan, rolling his eyes and shaking his head.

“Oh, so you won’t eat me?”

“No.”

Huge liquid eyes blinked up at him, almost glittering in the sunlight that the large windows let into the room. A small smile tugged at his lips, a smile that was both innocent and questioning.

“So...does this mean you will not eat me in the good way either?”

Astika answered by dropping his forehead into his palm, shaking his head as he muttered quietly. Taza was only able to make out a few words.

“Mate...? Inssssane...inssssane creature... What am I going to do with it? Father...kill...sssslowly...much...pain.”

His words jerked to a halt as Taza moved in closer and grabbed the spade of his tail.

“Warm,” Taza noted, stroking the firm skin of his tail. “Warm and firm, yet soft. I thought scales were supposed to be cold and slimy.”

“They are...if you are a fisssh!”

Astika flexed his muscles and jerked his tail from his mate’s clutches. “And do you mind? My sssspade is very ssssensitive.”

“Spade,” Taza mused, ignoring the fact that his mate was glowering at him. “What else is sensitive?”

Before Astika could answer, Taza entered the room fully and was busy stroking every bit of tail he could get his hands on.

“I kind of like this,” the sea horse mused, grinning madly as he investigated the snakelike body of his mate. “It is odd. You know, eels never feel like this, and we avoid sea serpents.”

“I am a Nāga!”

“Quiet, mate,” Taza grumbled. “It is impolite to interrupt.”

“It issss alssso impolite to sssstroke anotheher’ssss body without permisssion!”

“But I am not just any other person. I am your mate,” Taza purred, his fingers dancing over the smooth scales. “A mate does not need permission or have to ask. Love the hiss, by the way.”

Grumbling, Astika jerked his tail away again and began to slither out of the room.

“Where are you going?” Taza called out, admiring the flex and press of the tail’s muscles as his mate moved from the room. “I wasn’t done exploring!”

“You are done,” the irate Nāga snipped, sliding past his mate and moving down the hall.

“But...but there is so much I need to know about Nāgas!” Taza called out, fuming as he gave chase.

His Nāga sure could move fast. He wondered if it was a trait of the species or just Astika specifically.

“What you need to know,” Astika called back, “issss that I am hungry. And ssssuddenly ssssea horsssse issss looking good for my menu.”

“Well, hell,” Taza snapped, pausing in the hall, watching as the spade of his mate’s tail disappeared into the kitchen. “What am I supposed to feed you, anyway? What do Nāgas eat?”

This required some thought.

Humming to himself, Taza turned away from following his mate. He moved toward the den, remembering the bookcases filled with human books, and decided that maybe he would do a little research.

The dolphins had been good enough to teach him to read the squiggles the humans called writing so he could avoid potential trouble spots like underwater bombs and tuna-boat nets, though he still felt that writing was stupid. Why would you write words that would eventually disappear or people could interpret wrong? And why did they have to have so many languages to begin with? It would have made more sense if they established at least one language that they all could understand and trade in...though they traded goods for paper.

Stupid humans. Everyone knew you traded goods for other goods or service.

But the bound writings—books—were here, and instead of dwelling on the general oddness of humans, he would be better off spending his time learning what he could about his mate.

He lived in this dwelling, so there should be information about his kind here.

He should be able to find what he needed for the care and feeding of Nāgas in the books.

After all, that’s what books were created for. The dolphins told him you could always trust what you read in books.

Chapter Four

“You are never topping!”

The enraged shriek was quickly followed by a small blue-green ball of hair who thought that it would be fine and dandy to pounce on his back.

Astika turned, eyes slitting, forked tongue lashing out as he dropped his cup of orange juice and glared at his mate.

“Topping?”

“You are a fertility...thing!”

The little sea horse reached around to brandish a book and glared up at him.

“Fertility...thing?”

“You and your kind make lots of babies! I didn’t leave my home to escape that fate only to become a broodmare on dry land!”

Taza was so angry that his sea foam was slipping, and the way the sea horse was clawing at his tail was amusing but not too comfortable.

“Broodmare?”

“Have lots of babies, you penis-shaped...snake!”

At his words, a slow smile spread across Astika’s face.

“Babiessss?”

Maybe mating would provide him with what he wanted after all. He had almost forgotten that.

“Oh no you don’t!” Taza began, only to be cut off as the tail he was squashing quickly looped around his waist, pulling him closer to his mate’s body. “What are you doing, Nāga?”

“You can make babiessss for me?” Astika’s smile was almost wolfish for a snake as he exposed his fangs, his eyes shimmering with delight.

“I said I wouldn’t become your broodmare!”

“But...you can make babiessss.” That was said with a bit of finality that made Taza pale.

“I don’t want—”

“All my life, I have always sssstroved for certain thingssss.”

Astika reached out and ran his fingers softly over his mate’s face, making the shorter man’s protests stutter to a halt.

“I have always wanted peace for my people, and now with the might of your people added to my own, I am assssured that we have peace that will be lasting for a great long while.”

Astika ran his fingers through Taza’s hair. “I am amazed that something that looks so soft can be so stiff at the same time. It grows, only along the top and back, the sides bare but for this very faint scale pattern that matches the colors of a rainbow when you move. Very unique and quite pretty my mate.”

“We have more important things to discuss, Nāga,” Taza snipped.

“Well, if you insis—”

“Damn right I do!”

“I have wanted peace for my family, and I have been told that I am damaging them by playing mediator between my grandfather and his twelve concubinesssss.”

“T-twelve?”

“Yessss, each one more fecund than the last. I have plentiful unclesssss and auntsssss, and they themssssselvesssss have been quite fertile.”

Taza’s eyes widened as he grew paler, his breathing increasing rapidly as his eyes dilated into huge pools of turquoise.

“Sssso I have done enough for my family, or at leasssst I have been assssured by my mother that this issss sssso.”

He rolled his eyes at that.

“And I have fulfilled my duties to my people by ending generationssss of pain and fear by sssstopping the ritual ssssacrifices that Janamejaya demanded without bloodsssshed or losssss of life. I have acted as mediator between my mother, Manassssa, and my grandfather’ssss first wife, Chandi, though at timessss it sssseemssss that it would be better to let my mother and that woman take their rage out on my grandfather.”

He closed his eyes, shaking his head sadly.

“So if they have their valued peace,” Taza asked, running his fingers over his mate’s chest, “why do they argue and fight so? To me it seems counterproductive.”

“Asssss my mate, there are a few thingssss you need to know about my family.”

Sighing, he looked up and loosed the coils that held Taza fast, but not so loose as to allow the small sea horse to wiggle his way to freedom.

He shifted his body, easily moving about the kitchen with the rear end of his tail holding his mate, until he was facing a large window.

For a moment it seemed as if Astika had forgotten about his diminutive mate, but then he turned to stare at him again, his black eyes filled with pain as his tongue darted out to taste the air around Taza.

“My father left my mother ssssoon after I wassss born.” He sounded matter-of-fact, but when discussing royalty he was filled with pain he could not hide.

“What?” Taza narrowed his eyes in anger. “This is a great offense and a devastating insult to your lady mother.”

“Thisssss is maybe sssshocking to you?” he asked and smiled a little when Taza’s head bobbed in agreement.

“Yessss, well my grandfather’ssss first wife had a lot to do with that. Sssshe terrorized my mother out of jealoussssy and sssspite, and my grandfather was too enamored of her to do anything to sssstop her. Sssshe cost my mother an eye and

refused to relent even when my mother sssaved her own father's life when he was poissioned. So finally my grandfather Ssshiva abandoned my mother on earth."

Taza sucked in a breath, but he didn't interrupt.

"Oh, he left her with ssservants and a protector, her brother Vasssuki, but he sssstill abandoned his daughter. I guesss it doesssn't help that sssshe was a bassstard child that he begot, but her blood wasss jusssst asssss royal as Chandi'ssss. Sssstill, he abandoned her. He left her without a great ssssense of worth. Mom is what they call a half-breed, and apparently an insssult to Chandi'ssss delicate ssssensibilities."

Astika rolled his eyes and snorted at that.

"Anyway," he continued, "my mother met my father and fell deeply in love. My father issss a sssage, a wise man"—he snorted again—"but he wasss introduced to her by my uncle Vasssuki and decided that sssshe was the woman he would ssspend the rest of his life with no matter the circumssstances behind her birth. Nothing that anyone could ssssay or do would change Father'ssss mind. But after Chandi loosed ssssnakes into their rooms on their wedding night, it issss amazing that he returned and sssstayed long enough to create me. But then I believe that had to do with Grandfather Ssshiva needing ssssomeone to take care of Janamejaya and his ssssnake-killing philossssophy."

"You were born to create...what? A way to stop snake sacrifices?"

"Generally." Astika nodded, releasing his mate now that he was sure he had engaged his attention and it seemed that the little sea horse would not run away.

"So you are... a disposable child?" Taza sounded appalled. "Was your whole existence merely created just to fulfill a need within your kingdom?"

"In a way." Astika nodded. "Ussssually I am kept quiet and in the background unlesssss Grandfather needsss me."

"But...but that is wrong!"

“No more wrong than what my mother had to endure. My father left her, Taza. He shows up when he thinkssss he needs more power. I mean his father-in-law is Sssshiva! How much more power does one man need? He never saw the sssstruggles my mother had when he abandoned us. She had to prove herself time and time again, had to run and hide with me, her unnatural Nāga child, when my royal family offered no hope and no help. Sssshe had to rain so much destruction on people, had to kill so many, had to fight so hard that even Chandi is wary of her now. Yet my mother is fiercely proud and protective. She helps with fertility, even though she only hasssss one child—me. Father refuses to dissssolve the match, thussss my mother is sssstuck with him and his infrequent visitssss, and she cannot do what she has alwayssss longed to do, and that is to have a large family for her to love and to have them love her in return. I am all that sssshe hasssss.”

“And your grandfather? Does he not do anything to assist her?”

“With eleven mates and Chandi?” Astika rolled his eyes. “I find it fortunate that he even allowed me to enter the palace, but as I ssssaid, I believe my birth was by hissss design, so he had to have his creation nearby to train and to disssplay. Mother allowed it, but just barely. She wanted me to know Grandfather’s other wives, and they are kind and generousssss, just afraid of Chandi’ssss wrath.”

“So you really are just a pawn, huh?” Taza’s face took on a compassionate cast. “I am so sorry for that.”

“Yessss, a pawn,” Astika agreed. “And now with insisssting that your rightful place issss at my side as my mate, my father and grandfather ssssee another avenue for power through our joining. So again, I am being dusted off and ssssacrificed to the gods of their greed.”

“I...I... Damn.” Taza shook his head as he turned his face toward the floor. “I didn’t... I am sorr—”

“No.”

Astika’s voice was sharp and it forced Taza to look up at his face.

“No, what is done is done. There will be no regretssss. We have to make the best of this ssssituation... Well, I know I intend to make the best of this ssssituation.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that you jussst confirmed for me that you can bear children.”

“So...?” Taza began to pale again.

“Sssso.” The coils tightened around him once more, lifting him up to the level of his mate’s eyes. “Sssso it means that out of this ssssituation, I will get ssssomething that I really want.”

“A mate who will assist you in your daily endeavors?”

Taza’s laughter sounded forced and nervous as he started squirming, seemingly looking for a way out. It was apparent to Astika that Taza didn’t want to hear what he had to say next.

“No, though that would be a blessing all in its own right.” Astika smiled.

Taza frowned.

“No, my mate.” Astika framed his face between both of his hands. “What I want—what you will give me—issss...lotssss and lotssss of children.”

Taza opened his mouth to protest but was unable to make a peep as Astika descended upon him, the long forked tongue flicking and fluttering along the sea horse’s.

Then he had Taza moaning, kissing Astika back, forcing his tongue to invade the Nāga’s mouth, shuddering as the intensity of the kiss increased.

“I am damned.” Taza pulled back to whimper before Astika gripped his body tighter and pulled Taza closer, the spade of his tail caressing his back. “But what a way to go.”

Astika threw his head back, cascades of his hair trailing over his arms, cool and slick as Taza’s tongue began to explore his body.

“Th-this,” Taza stammered, “is amazing.” His eyelids fell closed and a light rolling trill emerged from his throat.

“Mmm,” Astika agreed as he hefted his mate even higher, his hands gripping the tiny waist tightly as his wicked tongue traveled down his neck to tease at his left nipple.

“St-stop.” Taza tried to call a halt to Astika’s sensual exploration, but he ignored him. Instead of stopping, Astika’s hands lifted, slid him up farther, and forced his mouth closer to the smaller body. And then with a moan of surrender, Taza gave in to the inevitable.

“Harder!” he demanded, tightening his fingers in Astika’s hair. “Harder! Do it now!”

Astika’s amusement was clear. “I can feel that,” Taza griped, and Astika could not help the smile spreading across his face even as he pressed his lips against Taza’s rapidly sensitizing chest. “And”—a moan escaped Taza’s throat—“I don’t care! More suction!”

Astika felt his mate’s cock harden and press against the soft scales of his belly.

“Oh Astika,” his sea horse moaned, his hips thrusting forward almost against his will. “Keep doing that!”

“Frottage,” Astika mumbled then released his nipple with a *pop* and lapped at the hard nubbin of flesh.

“Whatever,” Taza screamed. Exquisite was the only way to describe the perfect hip thrust and full-body wiggle that his mate performed. Taza’s eyes closed, and he clamped his teeth down on his bottom lip to prevent the scream that was building up in his chest from escaping. “Just keep doing it.”

So as Taza’s mate lowered his head to his neglected nipple, a loud thrum exploded from Taza’s mouth as his body exploded into action.

“Don’t stop,” he said between pants, arching his chest farther into Astika’s mouth.

Taza wrapped his legs around the trunk of his mate's body, his balls and his cock sliding deliciously along his delectable skin. And he wiggled and rubbed and humped until he had to close his eyes.

"Yesssss," Astika hissed, his hands leaving Taza's waist and wrapping around him. "Take what you need."

And Taza did.

His thighs tightened around Astika's form, and his toes curled.

His head dropped back, and the sounds of his moans and gasps filled the air, driving his sexual tension high.

"Sssso hot." Astika breathed into his ear, his tongue lapping at it and his neck before his sharp teeth nipped at them. "Sssso hot for me, are you not?"

Taza didn't answer. It was apparent that his mind was awash in this pleasure.

Astika found himself in the enviable position of being awash in the feeling of being possessed and being able to concentrate on his own pleasure as Taza's body began to move on its own without his guidance, seeking what it most desired.

With his mate's body cradled to him protectively as he moaned from this delicious friction that made his heart race and his mind blank, Astika began to relish the thoughts of having this particular mate.

"Ah—Astika," Taza demanded, "Don't you stop! Don't you dare stop!"

In response, Astika sent the spade of his tail up and around the cheeks of Taza's ass that his straddling position on his tail conveniently held spread, just teasing at the puckered opening, pressing and hinting at the penetration that he found himself desiring more and more with each second.

This sex act was lewd and rough and hard and fast and everything he needed from his mate at this very moment.

He wanted to be the only one to ever make Taza feel this good; the only one to drive his senses so high; the only one to ever care enough to make him want to lose all his control and just explode!

“Are you going to come for me?” Astika was whispering in his ear now. “Are you going to mate me, little one?”

“Oh yeah,” Taza moaned. “It burns...feeling... Oh yeah, so good.”

“Sssso good?” Astika repeated, tugging Taza’s head back by a handful of hair, his sharp teeth prickling the skin of his neck. “Sssso good?”

“Yes,” Taza cried out, his balls pulling upward as his cock swelled rock hard, the shaft sliding through the moisture that was leaking from the head of his cock. “Astika, yes.”

And then he was freezing in place, his cock pressed hard against the soft yet rough scales of his mate’s torso. Taza was whining and panting, his arms wrapped around him, his whole body one tight quivering mass in Astika’s arms.

“Hmmm,” he mused; one of his hands slid down Taza’s sweat-dampened back, squeezing the widely spread cheeks of his ass, and then one finger slid down his cleft. “Yessss,” he hissed again, and then that single finger was sliding into Taza’s ass.

Astika stiffened as he felt the strong guardian muscles that ringed his mate’s ass part, and then white fire exploded in his brain at the heat and tightness his little one’s body held for him.

“Astika!” Taza bellowed. His toes pointed, and his head fell back as his hips slammed against his mate’s stomach.

Wave after wave of pure sensation poured through him, killing all thought, racking his body in an ecstasy so pure he thought he had died and gone to the great beyond.

“Oh Creator, oh Mother Ocean, oh Astika!” he whimpered, losing all control.

He was a panting, shaking mess, and through it all, his mate held him tight in arms and coils, his warm skin soothing and comforting him as his hearts slowed from their pounding rhythm to something calmer.

He had never felt anything like this before. It was so good, so hot, so powerful that he wanted to fall sobbing into his mate's arms and never move again.

But he could not. He had to secure his position in this childbearing thing. He had to make his point known. He had to...

His mate hissed comfortingly in his ear and ran his broad hands over his back and sides. He felt his body being held tightly within his Nāga's safe grasp and he began to let his mind float in the pleasure it had just received.

"Sssso nice, my mate," Astika whispered in his ear, cuddling him as he moved toward the pillows in the library.

"What...?" Taza wanted to inquire about his mate's need, but lethargy was pulling him under.

He felt like he had swum around the castle three times. He felt like he had run the whole of Fells Point. He felt...

"I am fine, for now," Astika murmured. "Tired?"

"Tired." Taza nodded in answer, resting his head against his mate's shoulder.

"Then ressst," Astika purred. "Resssst and all will be well."

"Yes." Taza snuggled deeper as his mate settled in among the pillows.

"We can give thossssse baby-making genes a break. But I can't wait to fill you full with my sssseed."

Taza's eyes popped open even as his mate wrapped tightly around him.

Somehow, he didn't think he would be napping anymore.

"Stupid Nāga," he muttered, pouting.

His mate just lipped at his ears and sniffed him lightly.

"I am not getting pregnant!"

But he didn't think his mate was listening.

Chapter Five

“What do you mean I need clothes?”

Taza stared at his mate, his eyes narrowing as the snake in man’s guise slithered around him as if considering his form and finding it decidedly lacking.

“We only cover up abnormalities! I am free of blemishes, my mate. The only covering I need is my modesty draping.”

“You mean the sea foam.”

“Modesty draping for now.” Taza said it slowly, as if dealing with someone with diminished mental capacities. “It changes to cater to my needs. Your hiss is gone.”

“Well, it is not enough to get along in the human world. And I am actively controlling the *hiss*, as you call it. I will take my secondary form soon.” Astika leaned in and closely examined his body. “Though your scales look like an elaborate tattoo setup...”

“I don’t have scales,” Taza protested. “I am not a fish! I have armor and...”

He broke off as he felt a prodding pressure in his midsection. Astika had begun to poke at his stomach with one long finger.

“Stop that!” he snapped, taking a step back. “I am not a toy for your amusement!”

“It feels like skin,” Astika mused. “Hmm.” He leaned back as the foam tried to slap his hand.

“Well, it’s not! They are a very advanced set of subdermal plate scales, impervious to all but—”

“A fillet knife.”

Silence was Astika’s answer as Taza crossed his arms and pouted.

“Well, they appear to be a form of truly useless armor.”

“They are not useless!” Taza was outraged. “I have to have protection when I travel to the deep-deep waters near the bottom of the sea. They stop my body from being crushed by the pressure there. It is not my fault that humans have to resort to such barbarity as cutting up helpless sea horses into bits and frying them for some stupid theory about immortality!”

“Mermaid legend.” Astika rolled his eyes. “The stupidity of humans. Like such a thing can be gained by the consumption of flesh. Instead of chopping up every sea creature that resembles their fantasies, they would be better off spending their time trying to stop some of the pollution that is taking over their seas and choking their lands.” Taza began to smile until Astika added, “You do partially resemble the mermaid in human fairy tales.”

“I do not look like a mermaid!”

“Let us see.” Astika rose up to about seven feet, casually manipulating his Nāga’s body. “You have long, flowing hair the color of the sea. You walk around naked save for your sea foam—”

“Modesty draping!”

“And you shriek like a girl.”

“I do not!” he immediately shrieked, then pouted as he realized what he had done.

“So the average person who has never heard of the great Coushrin power throne will take in your appearance, and the fact that you were caught rising out of the sea like a goddess in a Greek creation tale, and bam! You have a mermaid.”

“I do not look like a female! I lack the cirri!”

“Cirri?” Astika looked confused for a moment before leaning in close. “Explain.”

“Cirri are the horns that all mating females develop.”

Taza figuratively donned his teacher's voice once more, explaining sea-horse anatomy to his mate. "Not all females of bearing age develop cirri, but the most powerful do."

"And the breeding males?"

"Oh." Taza warmed to his topic. "That's easy! We get a pouch plate."

"Pouch plate?"

"See?" As Taza spoke, his sea foam—which was once again acting as a modesty draping instead of a defensive hand slapper—dipped low on his hips and exposed a small, darkish blue plate. "The color tells that I am fertile, and the positioning tells that I have the ability to carry young to term."

"How many?"

"Oh, anywhere from one to eight offspring at a time."

"And the plate proves this?"

"And the fact that I am the eighteenth child my father bore and the only male out of his broods—Why are you smiling?"

"So you are easily bred?"

"I am not liking that look on your face, Astika!"

"So," the Nāga continued, moving in closer to his mate. "So, future parent of my children, how long does it take for you to pop them out?"

"Pop them out? What am I? A human candy dispenser?"

"No, but you are quite lovely standing there in the nude—"

"I have modesty draping!" The sea foam shifted and thickened in his agitation.

"Nearly nude, and I find myself loving the idea of those plates pressing against my scales, making babies, and—"

"Clothing!" Taza shouted, ignoring the fact that his mate's black eyes were glowing and that it was causing his stomach to do flips in an all too pleasant way. His heart was racing, his cock was tingling, and he was finding it hard to concentrate.

It was arousal, and it was dangerous! Arousal led to sex, and if he lost himself in the sex, then he would allow Astika to put him in the role of receiving. And receiving meant creating more than mutual pleasure—it meant creating fertilized eggs! And fertilized eggs meant...

“Human clothing.” Taza choked, his eyes going wild as he fought against that dangerous, mind-numbing arousal. “If I am going to fit in this human world until my voyage to your home, then you are correct. I will need human clothing.”

The sea foam, almost as if it were insulted, slumped.

Stiffening his resolve, he ignored the laughter in his mate’s eyes and pushed at his large, scaly tail.

“I will meet you in the pillow room after you change and get me some garments to wear until I am outfitted properly.”

He turned on his heel, each line of his body showing confidence, and tried not to bolt like a scared fry to get away from what he was beginning to think was the inevitable.

It looked like he would be producing children for his mate sooner than he had expected. But he didn’t have to let his mate know that. There was no way that he would let Astika think that he was in charge of this relationship!

He was the only son of a king. There would be mating, and he would bottom—his reactions told him that—but only after Astika proved himself in word and in deed.

That was the way of the world, after all. One just didn’t lie down for every royal fertility Nāga with whom one came into contact.

It just wasn’t done.

Firmly in his place of power, Taza seated himself in the pillow room and waited for his mate to bring him what he desired, so long as it didn’t involve fertilization and children.

Chapter Six

“Is it supposed to be so loose?” Taza wriggled, trying to find a comfortable position and failing. “I mean, I thought tighter was better.”

“If it were any tighter, how would you be able to move?”

“But...”

“Just hush and move. We don’t have all day, and this is taking longer than I expected.”

“How long is it supposed to take, anyway?”

“I don’t know.” Astika grunted, shifting a little, trying to find a position that would take the strain off his joints. “I am not used to being on my knees. Usually people are on their knees before me. This is a novel experience, Taza, one that I am not sure I care to repeat. My knees are killing me, and I am not sure that I will be able to walk straight after being in this unaccustomed position for so long.”

“I’ll try to hurry.” Taza sighed, taking a step in the lace-up shoes he was trying on. “I’m just trying to gauge what feels right. Bare feet seem much more sensible.”

“Humans do not have armor plating in their feet. It’s too dangerous to walk about without. You might cut yourself or step into something disgusting. You have to wear shoes if you are going to fit in,” Astika grumbled from where he was kneeling. It took some doing, but before they left the house, Astika had his mate dressed in a long dark sarong, his sea foam shrinking until it turned itself into a small star-shaped ornament that now rested in his hair. The costume wasn’t perfect, but in a party town like Baltimore in the middle of the summer, he didn’t stand out too much.

Shoes, on the other hand—or foot, be that as it may—had been a tad more difficult.

Astika wound up fabricating a story about Taza losing his sandals at the harbor so that the people inside the shoe store would let them in. They took the creed “no shirt, no shoes, no service” seriously.

After a shoe purchase, he would endeavor to outfit his mate from the skin out. Something told him that it would almost be as difficult as finding a pair of shoes he felt comfortable in.

Taza looked down at the “sneakers” he was currently sporting. “They feel...odd. I am sure that a tighter fit would ensure that my feet would not wiggle around and that I will not walk right out of these stupid shoes.”

“Feet are special and must be protected while you are in your human guise.”

“But are they all this bulky?” Taza frowned, pushing out his bottom lip in a pout that made him look too young and too tempting for Astika’s comfort.

He’d had a taste of the little male, and now he wanted to explore that tiny body more.

“I don’t know. My family’s tailor created all of my shoes for me. I have never owned a pair of sneakers.”

“And are they supposed to cost two hundred American dollars?”

“I don’t know,” Astika mused as he rose to his full seven-foot height. Beings that tall, he decided, were not meant to kneel, especially Nāgas, with their unique physiology. “My family takes care of household finances. What money I have earned for my mediating skills, I keep for my own. And I had thousands transferred into American currency for my stay here. So if you want the two-hundred-dollar shoes, you may have them without worry.”

“Like I would worry.” Taza turned his head away, his face turning red. “It’s just that I have never been gifted. This is an act of kindness I have never...uh, I

expect you to keep me outfitted in a manner that is acceptable for a royal. I also expect you to have the means to do so.”

He peeked up at Astika and then lowered his head quickly. He knew that Astika took this new deeper blush to be one of pleasure. At his mate’s continued stare, the color on his cheeks grew darker as he absently toed the carpet in his new shoes. The harsh veneer his mate was trying so hard to maintain was crumbling every second he contemplated the pretty shoes on his feet.

“But it...it is wonderful that you feel the need to do so, my mate.” A smile was blossoming across Taza’s pretty face, and he began to trill under his breath.

“Right,” Astika drawled, his tongue discreetly lashing out to taste the air around Taza.

He tasted of pleasure and happiness...and oddly enough, gratitude. It was a strange combination, but he was still in the getting-to-know-you phase with his new mate. The meaning of that particular scent could be open to any interpretation, but Astika felt that he was getting to know his mate pretty well by his actions and not his words. The little sea horse appeared touched and seemed almost afraid to let his pleasure show. Was he scared that any pleasure he allowed to show on his part would be taken away?

Turning to a nearby assistant, he nodded to the shoes. “He’ll wear them outside.”

He’d bought socks the moment they went inside, so now he only had to find a few outfits to hold them until he took them back to his home in India.

Swiftly completing his purchase, he grabbed Taza by the hand and turned to lead him from the store and away from the bemused-looking clerk.

“Does this mean I can wear underwear now?” Taza asked, nearly bouncing as they exited the building. “I always wanted some; they look so nice on males. But there is not much call for them when the family requires you to be nude for most events and...well, just about all the time.”

Astika turned back to stare at the clerk watching them leave the store. The bemusement left his face, and his skin paled as he looked down at the diminutive Taza before staring up and up...and up at Astika.

“Takes all kinds,” he finally muttered, shaking his head and turning away after nodding his good-byes.

The shoe salesman had probably seen it all, Astika mused. Or maybe it was this area? After all, there was a vampire bar mere blocks away, and no one seemed shocked about that.

It had to be the area.

Baltimore was known for weird things happening, including the paranormal. One only had to look at the area they were now inhabiting.

Fells Point was filled with pirate bars from the late seventeenth century, and along with the bars came the ghost stories.

In truth, Baltimore, Maryland, was a hotbed of the unusual, with people so strange that anything preternatural just blended in. There were a few unspoken rules about ignoring the paranormal for the sake of survival, but this place was great for disguising nearly magical happenings...as well as dumping the bodies of those who ignored that unspoken rule. With their murder rate, Astika once heard a group of teenagers remark the unofficial city slogan was “Welcome to Baltimore. Now duck, motherfucker.” He assumed that it was part of the charm of Charm City. But as he looked at that same slogan on the T-shirt that was fluttering in the window of a corner shop, he wondered if that was another unspoken rule.

But then Taza was tugging Astika, pulling him down Broadway Square and toward a window display that caught his eye almost at the same time it drew his mate’s attention.

“What are butt plugs,” Taza asked, looking innocently up at him, “and why do humans want to stop up such a sensitive area?”

“Come along,” Astika said with a groan, already quite familiar with human sexual practices. After all, his people had perfected a lot of them and then passed most of them on with the *Kama Sutra*.

“But I want to know!” Pale eyes looked up at him imploringly. “If I am going to fit in, I must know!”

“Do we have to do this?” Astika moaned, having no clue how to explain anal stretching to a sea horse! Didn’t they do this kind of thing under the ocean?

“Yes!”

Taza stamped his sneaker-shod foot, and Astika suddenly found himself trying not to laugh at the odd picture the little male made.

He was cute, even with the odd way his hair grew. With his huge eyes dominating his face, Taza had the ability to move the most hardened heart with his gaze alone. He was fit. Any doubt about his age was erased by the upper-body development his mate had, his arms muscular and tight, his abdominals very well developed.

It was the orange and white sari tied around his waist paired with his white tube socks and his new blue sneakers that almost brought him to his knees.

And with his stomping his feet and pouting face, Astika had to fight hard against losing it.

“Fine.” Astika gave in and led him into the store. “But don’t blame me when you get a headache. Humans and their desires—some of it can be strange.”

“Coming from a society that developed tantra”—Taza rolled his eyes—“that sounds really twisted and judgmental. I read up on your people when I discovered the fertility thing. I am sure I’ll be fine.”

“Tantra is a way of life, to catch a glimpse of infinity for a human. It is about delay of pleasure and appreciating the journey, not the climactic ending. That is something that most humans don’t understand.”

“So foreplay,” Taza deduced. “I like that.”

“More than foreplay.” Astika shook his head. “It is about putting your partner’s needs above your own. It’s about understanding and helping them in their delay. It is about finding the perfect harmonious positions that will allow you both to catch a glimpse of infinity.”

“So,” Taza drawled. “Foreplay.”

“Some humans believe that you have to beat each other to get off,” Astika tossed out as a deterrent.

That stopped the little man, although his mouth was still open to comment. “No!” Taza finally breathed.

“Yes. Does that not scare you? And some of them tie people up before they indulge.”

“With ropes and things?”

“With specially designed restraints.”

“Oh!” Taza’s eyes looked three times too large for his face.

“And some of them,” he leaned in close to say, “insert things into their orifices.”

Taza was speechless.

So Astika went in for the kill.

“And some of those toys vibrate and squirm and twist and use batteries!” Astika smiled smugly. “Does that not scare you?”

“Oh, oh, oh!” the small sea horse stammered. “That sounds like fun!”

“Fun?” Astika’s growing wicked smile came to a grinding stop before it could be fully realized.

“Oh yeah! Sounds like great fun. Looks like these humans are not as stupid as I thought. We need to go into that store and now! I am your mate. I demand this of you for the sanctity of our mating!”

“Aren’t you scared off?” Astika asked, looking a bit frazzled. “You’re supposed to be disgusted by this.”

“Disgusted, no!” Taza clapped his hands in eagerness. “I can’t wait to try some of this out. If you get scared, feel free to hold my hand. Sexual exploration is a wonderful thing, my mate. I promise not to hurt you, and if anyone looks at you oddly, I’ll put them in their places and ensure that they mind their own business.”

Together, the disgruntled Nāga and the doe-eyed, overly excited sea horse walked into the store, Sex Me on the Bay Side, and closed the door firmly behind them.

They never noticed the tall, hulking figure lurking in the shadows, pale blue eyes glued to their every move. And they would have been seriously upset if they had seen the way he licked his lips and stroked his belly. “Soon,” he muttered to himself. “Soon I will have everything I always wanted delivered to me on a silver platter. Bo Stockton always gets what he wants.”

Chapter Seven

“I can’t believe this stuff comes in flavors,” Taza crowed as they exited his new favorite shop. “And all the while I thought this stuff was just for your cracks and crevices! Then I find that I can eat it too! This place is great!”

Astika groaned, rolling his eyes, and tried to ignore the hot little sea horse trotting at his side swinging a large bag filled with sexual aids. “This introductory mating is going to be fun, Tika. I can call you Tika, right?”

“You can call me what you want,” Astika muttered. “Just lower your voice a little.”

“Why? Are you too ashamed to let the world know that you are going to bend over and take it up the rear from me?”

“What?” He looked around quickly to see if anyone had heard that, and shook his head when a couple walking past, one man holding a chain attached to a collar around the other man’s neck, winked at him. He supposed the remark was business as usual in Fells Point, where sexuality was placed on display.

“That’s what this bottle says.” Taza giggled, holding up a small bottle of Trench Oil. “For when you feel the need to be a real man, bend over and take it up the rear. You are a real man, right, handsome?”

“No.” Astika blushed as two ladies holding hands paused to stare at the two of them before breaking out in giggles and walking away.

The trip to the sex shop had been horrendous. Taza had wanted to try on everything from assless chaps to some rather interesting latex dresses.

He had questions that the helpful salespeople were all too eager to answer.

They had backed Astika into a corner and demonstrated whips and paddles and floggers. His ass would never be the same, though not from the pain.

With all of the paddling came a new awareness of exactly how sensitive his ass really was.

And then there had been that display of blow-up dolls with motorized mouths that Taza kept sticking his hands into while leering at him.

There had been an interesting display of gay erotic movies that Taza was fascinated by. He kept reading the cover blurbs out loud, much to the delight of all those who entered the shop.

For them, Taza was just another “fun fag,” but to Astika it was embarrassing...and somewhat arousing...to hear his mate panting and groaning as he excitedly gave readings of *It Came from Planet Deep Throat* and *Wrath of Cock Seven: Cock Spots Back*.

“I mean,” he groaned, covering his eyes and wishing he could just go back home, “I am a Nāga, Taza. I only wear the guise of a human male.”

“So the legs are false?”

“No, they are real. But they are only a secondary form. I was hatched in my real form, which you saw earlier.”

“So that means that when I bend you over, you will be in human form.” Taza smiled slowly. “Cool. I was wondering where I was going to stick this!” He hefted a bright neon pink dildo.

Astika opened his mouth and closed it a few times before shaking his head and scowling. “Even if I bent over for you, you still couldn’t reach.” The newly named Tika snorted. “And you forget that the main reason I stopped fighting this mating is because I get the family I always wanted.”

Taza frowned.

“And w-what’s so great about k-kids, anyway?” Taza stammered, his eyes going wide as he stared at his mate. The male seemed really serious about this children thing. It would definitely cause some issues.

He remembered what his sire had looked like after each litter was born—he seemed to have aged after each birth. Taza didn’t want that fate, to be nothing more than a broodmare to be paraded out before dignitaries to prove the power of his mate’s prowess and virility. That was a fate worse than death in Taza’s estimation—well, almost.

“Children are a way for a male to seek immortality.” Astika grinned as he spoke. “The prophets and the wise men all say that through our children, we never truly die even when death pays us a visit. Through our progeny our place in the continuing cycle of life is assured.”

“That,” Taza sputtered, “that is a...”

“Beautiful sentiment, yes?” Astika smiled down at his mate as if pleased to see that he was moved by the powerful words and the images they invoked.

“That is the most ridiculous piece of claptrap that I have ever heard.” Taza frowned. “Our actions render us immortal in the eyes of this world. How many kids we pop out only makes it harder to feed each of them.”

“It is not a matter of food—” Astika argued, but Taza cut him off.

“I am not speaking of food, mate. I am speaking of spending time encouraging, loving each and every one the same. How can you do that when you are constantly on bed rest because your body is exhausted or you are so covered in young ones that the older ones have to go without your personal care and attention?”

Taza could not stop the haunted look in his eyes as he spoke, one hand absently reaching up to touch the sea foam that seemed to snuggle into the caress.

“That is not our way, Taza.”

“Well, it is the only way I know. And in the end, as you well know, children are nothing but pawns to be manipulated.” He eyed his mate, a sorrowful expression

crossing his face. "I am sure you know what that feels like." He paused for a second to let that sink in before continuing. "I refuse to let any babies of mine go through this."

"Taza." Astika spoke softly, reaching out to take both of his mate's hands in his. "That is not our way."

"It is the way of the world."

"No," Astika vowed, bending over to stare deeply into his mate's troubled blue eyes. "No, Taza. It will not be our way."

Taza looked down at their joined hands before he whispered, "I don't know what to feel."

Taza had not meant to expose so much of himself, had never done so before in his life. He still didn't know why he had vented to this Nāga. Maybe he was starting to trust him just a little.

"It...it won't be our way?" he asked. He knew this was dangerous territory, but the words just slipped out. The Nāga way of doing things was so much different than what he had experienced, and he wasn't sure if his mate was making things up or exaggerating to make his case for children stronger.

But the only way to ever find out, short of being caught unawares with a pregnancy, was to ask.

He looked up into his mate's eyes, searching for some form of duplicity, but found his gaze calmly returned.

"Never," Astika promised. "We will make our own way, start our own traditions. No one will ever make our children feel like an unloved burden."

"Astika," Taza breathed, his eyes going large and liquid, "your words hold merit." Then he smirked. "And you will look wonderful filled with my seed and glowing."

The sea devil made him do it.

Astika's eyes grew wide for a second before he rose to his full height, frowning at his mate and his words. He was not the one designed for childbirth, and he refused to go through with it. Taza would just have to get over it, he decided, and start with the baby popping—with the blessed duty of producing and nurturing any beloved children that would grow under his hearts.

“Now I assume you will outfit me with human clothing?” Taza chuckled, tossing his long hair over his shoulders as he turned and strutted down the sidewalk. “I think I'll fit in niicely—”

Astika looked up as his mate ended his prattle suddenly, his tongue lashing out, tasting the sudden fear that surrounded his mate.

Taza seemed frozen, staring at something in the shadows between the buildings, his whole body trembling.

Astika, looking in the direction where his mate's gaze was directed, moved up to his side, concern building within him.

He peered deeply into the darkness between the buildings, and it took a few seconds before he saw what had arrested Taza's attention.

The shadows seemed to be moving, shifting, whirling until they slowly began to take shape.

As he watched the, two female shapes began to emerge, short and menacing, with... Of all things, they had horns perched neatly on either side of their heads. Their hair was similar in style and design to Taza's, and the expressions he could make out on their faces were not welcoming.

Their bodies were stocky and muscular for all their short height, and they moved with purpose. They obviously wanted Taza to see them even while they lurked just beyond clear vision to prevent other eyes from prying.

The larger blue-haired female opened her mouth, but before she could speak, Taza sprang into action.

He turned, grabbed Astika's hand, and began to run.

“Taza!” Astika shouted, but the little sea horse paid no attention. He was running blindly, wildly even, desperate to get away from the females and tugging his mate along in his headlong rush.

Astika grunted as he dodged from side to side, avoiding newspaper boxes and lampposts, desperate to keep his balance on the cobblestone streets.

Then suddenly, Taza pulled him from the sidewalk and off the curb, running them directly into the street and right in the path of an oncoming car.

There was a blaring of a horn and the screech of tires, and Taza froze, his eyes growing even wider as the daytime running lights of the SUV made his scales glimmer and glisten.

“Shit!”

Astika lurched forward, diving into Taza, engulfing him in his arms, hissing as his body collided with the concrete. But he never released his protective hold.

There was a terse beeping of horns, a muffled curse shouted at them, and then the Doppler-effect sound of the truck retreating.

Then, and only then, did Astika uncurl his body from around his mate’s.

“Taza.” He rose up above the smaller male and ran his fingers gently over the pale face.

Taza’s eyes were squeezed shut, his body trembling, his hands fisted at his sides.

“Taza...?”

“I’ll die.” He gasped, finally opening his eyes, making Astika wonder at the dilated state of his pupils. They were so wide that almost none of the irises showed at all.

“What?”

“I’ll die before I go back.”

Then the smaller male closed his eyes, a stray tear flowing down to glisten on the soft scales that started at his temple.

Astika had no answer to that.

He was a great negotiator—he had talked an evil madman into giving up his main hobby of torture and death, and it had cost him nothing but time and patience.

But with his mate—his mate—lying before him in this elevated state of depression and fear, he was speechless.

So there was only room for action.

Astika rose to his feet, ignoring the few humans who paused to watch the spectacle, and gathered his mate into his arms.

As Astika rose to his full height, Taza's arms reached out and wrapped around his neck. He nestled his face into his neck, and he held on as if his whole world would disappear if Astika let go.

And maybe it would, Astika decided as the smaller man shivered, attempting to hold back his tears and fears.

Tears and fears—Astika knew all about those.

And as his mate's body relaxed trustingly into his grasp, he suddenly was no longer at a loss for words.

"They will never take you," he vowed. "No one will ever take you away from me."

A small place in his heart that he had thought numb the first time his father refused to even look at him suddenly began to warm. It warmed just a bit, but it was enough to give him the confidence to squeeze the little man tighter to his chest.

Suddenly he had purpose again; he had a reason for being. His mate needed him.

He would protect the sea horse. He didn't know what dangers awaited his mate or the reason those females had sent the skittish male running into traffic, but he would protect him always.

With that vow firmly in mind, Astika turned and made his way back to his temporary home.

He required answers, and his mate was in no condition to give them at the moment. But he would have his answers and soon.

“He dropped this,” a passerby commented, reaching out to hand him the bag of lubes and sexual devices that Taza insisted on buying.

Astika nodded in thanks, taking the bag in hand and holding it beneath the slight body of his mate.

“Thank you...” He paused to get a good look at the man who had spoken and was now clearly hovering. There was something...

“Bo. Bo Stockton.” He smiled in an all too charming way. “I saw the whole thing. You need to tell your friend to be more careful.”

Astika stared at the man for a moment; something about him seemed familiar. Maybe if he had more facial hair...? He discreetly stuck out his tongue, wanting to taste the air around the man, but Taza’s shaking increased, pulling his attention away from the large stranger. The man nodded, and Astika backed away.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Astika said before turning down Bond Street and moving in the direction of his house.

He never noticed the glint in the man’s eyes as he dropped back and then began to follow at a safe distance.

And even farther behind him, two females glared at the tall, blue-haired male and began to stealthily follow the pair as well, always sticking to the shadows.

Chapter Eight

Taza snapped out of his funk when he heard the door slam behind them.

He sighed deeply, opened his eyes, and let out a scream loud enough to deafen a Nāga.

“Down!” he bellowed, squeezing his eyes shut and freezing, all of his muscles stiffening.

His head began to whirl with a thousand panicked thoughts, the majority being that he was going to fall and he was going to die.

His hearts began to pound, and his breathing was so rapid that he was in danger of blacking out. Even the small gill slits at the side of his neck made their appearance known as his oxygen-deprived body sought to get some air inside his four sets of lungs.

“Taza!” Astika roared.

But Taza was frozen in fear. A cold sweat broke out on his skin, and panicked squeaks and squeals emerged from his tightly pinched mouth.

He began to dry heave as he felt himself being lowered, but he was not getting down fast enough!

“Down, down, down,” he managed to gasp, while his body felt as if it would shake apart. “Please, please, please...”

“You are down.” His mate’s urgent voice broke through the clouds in his head, but only momentarily. The fear and the panic were taking over again.

“Down!” he managed once more, his sharp nails slicing through the skin on his palms. He could feel his flower-shaped ears begin to wiggle, and he knew that he was going to die.

Then he felt himself being lifted again, and then they were moving down, down, down, blessedly down!

He could feel the gravitational pull of the earth once more, could feel the ebb and flow of the sea, could hear the hum of Mother Earth growing nearer, and Father Sea comfortingly close.

And then he could feel his mate’s soft hand running through his hair, caressing his face, holding him close to his solid body.

Suddenly he could breathe.

His body began to relax, his hearts began to slow, and his tremors began to ease off.

He peeled his eyes open and was almost blinded by the concern coming from Astika’s black eyes.

He shifted slightly and looked around to find himself in the pillow room, safe in his mate’s arms.

“Taza? Are you all right?”

Taza managed a weak smile before he blasted his mate with his voice.

“What rotten eggs were you spawned from, Nāga?” His voice was thin, a weak imitation of his usual vibrant tones. “What were you thinking?”

“What?” Astika looked confused, so Taza took it upon himself to enlighten the male at very high decibels.

“You never take a sea horse way aboveground! Are you trying to kill me?”

“Huh?” Astika looked a whole lot confused and a little bit hurt, and Taza realized that his mate had no idea what he was talking about.

That eased his anger greatly, but it also added to his embarrassment.

Yes, Taza was embarrassed by his actions. He was a grown male, fertile and capable, and yet he had thrown a tantrum like a small fry when he felt himself being carried up the stairs.

Despite his shame at the irrational fears possessed by sea horses, he had to explain in order for his mate to understand why he wanted to pluck each dark blue hair out of his head.

“Sea horses,” he began slowly, lifting one hand to wipe the clammy sweat away from his face, “are afraid of heights.”

“You’re kidding!”

One of Astika’s eyebrows was raised in disbelief as he stared down at him, and that made Taza roll his eyes in exasperation.

“No, I always put on a screaming show for my mate. It’s such a turn-on.” Sarcasm, it seemed, was universal. “All sea horses are afraid of heights. It is in our makeup.”

“So...ranch-style houses?”

“What?” Now it was Taza’s turn to look confused. “Houses come in different styles?”

“Ranch-style,” Astika explained. “Single-floor homes.”

“Oh.” He nodded slowly, considering.

“This will be no problem when we reach my home in India. All of my properties are single-floor dwellings, though quite a few are recessed into the mountains and have underground chambers.”

“Nice.” Taza sighed, trying to shake off the last of his fears. “Nice. Underground is very nice.”

He felt his sea foam roll from his hair to nuzzle against his neck before it began to expand and envelop his face and neck.

When it retreated, he felt the soft, clean flesh it left behind.

“Okay.” He looked up to see his mate staring in disbelief at his sea foam. “I think that...”

“What exactly is...that, really?” Astika pointed to the small moving blob. “It behaves like a pet.”

“It’s sea foam.”

“Sea foam does not exist outside of the confines of the sea,” his mate denied.

“Explain that...that...that thing!”

“I guess there are a whole lot of things about me that need to be explained.” Taza groaned but made no move to remove himself from the safety he felt in his mate’s arms. “Sea foam is just—it just is.”

He petted the silvery, bubbly mass as it again shrank and retreated into his hair to take on the perfect star shape once again.

“When we are born, the sea foam bonds with us. We each have our own distinctive sea foam. It helps us and aids us all our lives. It is not alive really, nor does it require sustenance, but it is connected to us and fulfills our wishes to the best of its ability.”

“So I won’t find it crawling around the house, chewing on the furniture?”

“No.” Taza snorted at that image. “It would only leave me if I actively sent it away, and then it would always come back to me after its appointed task was completed. It doesn’t think or act on its own, Tika. Sea foam just is.”

“And are these all the oddities I need to know about your kind?”

“Oddities?” Taza huffed out a breath. “Like your kind aren’t strange. Whoever heard of someone actually wanting to float out into the sea in the middle of a storm?” He rolled his blue eyes as his mate shrugged. “Those books I read held all the sordid details. Your kind really like courting death.”

“It’s fun.”

“It’s dangerous, and you had better be happy you were never ripped in two!” He jabbed a finger in his mate’s chest and glared. “And then there is that half-snake look you have going...”

He rolled his eyes as his mate stuck his forked tongue out at him and wiggled it.

“Let me explain a few things.” Taza sighed before finally sitting up and adjusting his mate’s arms around himself accordingly.

His mate had chosen to seat them in the center of a cluster of huge silken pillows, something that Taza really appreciated as he settled himself comfortably but kept quite a lot of skin contact with his mate.

“Sea horses are rare and delicate creatures?” his mate asked. “Where the males give birth and obviously recover quickly from fear,” he added.

“We are hardy.” Taza nodded, glad that his mate recognized some strengths in his species. “But there are some things—well, a lot of things that are dangerous to us.”

“Such as?”

Taza paused, wondering if he would have to disclose all his secrets.

“I need to know if I am to protect you, little one,” Astika urged.

Taza slowly lifted his head, and he stared at his mate in growing astonishment. His mate wanted to protect him. Not the obligatory consort that he never wanted and had been forced to take by tradition and duty and his parents, but the real him. He never had anyone want to protect him outside of his father, whose help was ineffectual at best. It was a heady feeling that made his hearts lighten considerably.

And Astika just stared at him in return. Taza blushed as he accepted the fact that Astika had used a term of endearment for him without even trying to use it as a manipulative device. His mother had only called him by a sweet diminutive name when she wanted to lure him into some scheme usually involving the females of

several prominent houses. It made Taza's hearts sing with joy that his mate gave him a love name just...just because he cared. But Taza shook himself and pushed that emotion to the side for now. He had a mate to educate, and he was going to do it properly. There would be no misunderstandings later.

"Well, you know that the male is destined to carry children."

Astika nodded.

"But you may not know that we all have an overwhelming urge to mate under the full moon once we reach our majority and become fertile."

Astika's eyes widened at that.

"The full moon?"

His gaze went to the window, where the sun was slowly sinking in the west and the quarter moon was rising in the east.

"Yeah." Taza smiled. "I kind of made a mad dash from home soon after my first moon time. I didn't want to be caught and trapped. My sire and dam would offer little protection if a strong female had made it past the castle guards to lay claim to me."

"They would not protect you?" Astika sounded incredulous.

"They would see to it that the female would not mark me up or permanently scar me, but they would do little to interfere. My sire is constantly surrounded by his newest herd, and my mother...well, she has affairs of the realm to worry about."

"I am so sorry." Tika reached out and ran his fingers gently through his mate's hair.

Taza found that the gesture comforted and relaxed him like nothing he had ever experienced before. He closed his eyes, leaned into the caress, and without even noticing, began to emit a low, melodic hum.

"What is that?"

"Huh?" His hum broke off and his eyes opened, which felt just a bit glazed and glassy. He arched an eyebrow at his mate and waited.

“You were humming.”

“Oh.” He could feel a small smile begin to spread across his face. “I do that when I am happy.”

“Really?”

“We all do. And I’ll positively sing when I take you for the first time.” He leered at Astika, who merely rolled his eyes.

“What else, mate?”

“Well.” He paused briefly. “We don’t like the cold.”

“Something we both have in common.” Astika nodded with a smile.

“If it gets too cold, we die.”

The smile disappeared.

“And if we get too exhausted, we can die.”

“What?” Astika sounded disbelieving.

“Too much exhaustion means death. That is why my sire is always confined to the castle, flat on his back surrounded by his herd of new fry. If he gets too tired, he will keel over, and Mother will have to fight for a new mate.”

“Haven’t they ever heard of birth control?” Even Astika sounded a bit outraged by this.

“No.”

“But that’s…”

“We are almost always fertile under the full moon,” Taza continued, not wanting to speak about his family life. His was almost as crazy and convoluted as his mate’s. “We love to have a connection to our mates and only to our mates.”

He nodded to where he was still almost seated on top of his mate, though both reclined on pillows.

“I noticed the hand-holding and touching.” Astika reached out to again run his fingers through Taza’s hair. “And it is something I am quite pleased to find is common for both our peoples.”

“And we take single mates, Astika, and we are loyal to our mates until death.”

There was a moment of silence before Astika sighed and lifted him into his arms.

Taza was not exactly stunned by his mate’s actions, but they were still unexpected.

He threw his arms around Astika’s neck and giggled when his mate’s long tongue flashed out to taste the air around them.

“I never stood a chance, did I?” Astika tilted his head to the side and examined his mate.

“Not once I chose you.” Taza snickered. “I get my stubbornness from my dam and my tenacity from my sire.”

“It is a common trait among your peoples?”

“No, not among the males.”

“So that makes you unusual,” Tika mused but went on. “And that brings us to the next question, mate.”

Tika nuzzled against him, and instinctively Taza nuzzled back, a low hum of pleasure filling the room with the sounds of the sea.

“Question?”

Taza relaxed, knowing that his mate had accepted him and all of his oddities. “What is left to know? I think you’ve gotten it all, mate. That is about it.”

“Not exactly.” His mate’s grip tightened on him, and he looked up to see black eyes clouded with worry. Taza bit his bottom lip, worrying at the skin as he wondered what his mate wanted to know now. He didn’t have very long to wait.

“Who were those two women?”

And Taza felt himself freeze again, only his mate's firm grip stopping his instinctive flight from the terror those words evoked.

Chapter Nine

“Um.” Taza stalled, looking down. “That is kind of a long story...”

“We have time.”

“But...”

“There are many nights before the full moon, mate,” Astika crowed. Then in a move worthy of a striking snake, Astika flipped his mate flat on his back and loomed over him, his weight pushing him deep into the pillows.

“Astika!” His eyes widened in shock, and Taza felt the blood rush to his head as he took note of the position of his mate’s body.

His legs had sprawled out to the sides as he was moved, which pushed them through the side split in the sarong, leaving a perfect space for his mate’s slim hips to nestle against his groin.

The heat from his body was amazing, and he found himself widening his stance just to get the snake a little closer.

His mate’s hair spread around them, a dark curtain that blocked the light. Astika’s dark hair and eyes emphasized the deep copper of his skin and made his gaze seem all the more piercing.

His mate’s large hands, with their rather long nails, held his own smaller hands in place beside his head, and as he leaned forward he was struck by how obscenely beautiful his mate’s tongue was, lashing out and tasting the air around them.

He shuddered, the buried attraction he felt for the Nāga exploding into a nearly full-blown heat.

Astika was pushing all the right dominance buttons for him. It was in his nature to crave a strong, demanding mate, and Astika was finally acting the part.

Taza's breathing was harsh, and he leaned in closer, examining his face carefully.

Okay, Taza decided. The snake was majorly hot. With that fierce expression on his face, he looked like he was going to eat him or fuck him. And at this point, he wasn't too sure which, and he really didn't care. But then his mate was talking again. He forced himself to leave the sensual haze his brain was getting lost in and pay attention.

"Who are they?"

And just as fast, the haze was gone, and he was left feeling cold.

"I-I don't want...I don't want to talk about it."

"You had better find the desssire to talk real fast, my mate," Astika hissed, and all the blood that had previously drained away from his vital parts suddenly traveled back to its points of origin, immediately making his cock expand.

"Astika..."

"You will tell me all that you know, and you will do it now!" Those dark eyes were starting to glow.

Oh boy!

"And if I say no?" His voice was rough with his growing desire, raspy and getting deeper with his arousal.

"Then I will have no choiccce but to punissssh you."

The words were whispered, his mate's tongue darting out to tickle his flower-shaped ear, sending a flash of fire shooting down his body and leaving him breathless.

Taza groaned, closing his eyes as he felt his mate's heat warm his body considerably. He was unable to keep his hands to himself, his fingers reaching out to grip, then caress Tika's shoulders.

“P-punish?” he stuttered, his hips arching up as he felt his erection swell.

“You like that, don’t you, pretty one?” Tika murmured, his tongue lazily stroking the soft skin of his face. “You like it when I talk to you.”

Taza moaned, feeling the pressure rise up, squirming as the feelings his mate evoked became too much for him to hold still.

He pushed at Tika’s shoulders, hoping to get some space, some room to breathe and regroup, but his stubborn mate seemed to have other ideas.

“You want me to hold you down?” Astika asked, a swift shift of his hips planting him solidly between his mate’s quivering thighs. “You want me to force your compliance?” he muttered, rising up enough to stare directly into the too-large eyes gazing back at him with need growing unchecked.

“I-I want—”

“I know what you want,” Tika whispered, his hands going to the knot of the sarong before ripping it free, jerking and pulling at the silken material until it was in shreds around those slim hips and that oversize erection.

Taza grunted, biting into his lower lip with his sharp, pointed teeth as his body danced beneath his mate’s.

He had never felt this way before. Those chance encounters he had had while his guards were turned away were nothing compared to the intensity that his mate brought to the sexual act. And he wasn’t even attempting penetration yet!

“You will tell me what I want,” his mate breathed, grinding his hips into his, letting him feel an erection that was thicker and longer than he had anticipated.

Taza shuddered, feeling the hot, hard length of his mate press against his stomach, feeling the intensity of his hips circling his groin, pressing hard against his own dick.

He could feel the precum bubbling up through the head of his dick, smearing on his stomach armor, filling the room with the bitter tang of salt and of the sea.

“I-I—” He moaned again, his nails digging into his mate’s shoulder, his hands almost of their own free will tracing over the softly scaled flesh.

“You are wearing too much human clothing,” Tika growled, his control almost visibly breaking as he began to shred the cloth that hid Taza’s flesh from his gaze.

Astika sat up suddenly, resting on his knees as he gripped the shirt in his hand at the waist and jerked the thing over his head.

His gaze traveled along Taza’s body, his gaze so strong that Taza could almost feel it run over the hair that flowed around him like a teasing curtain, skimming his body, hiding and revealing pale glimpses of his near perfection.

Taza moaned in response, his fingers just itching to tear at all that copper-toned flesh. But he wanted more too.

He wanted to taste the male, to run his tongue all over his body, to bite and scratch at him, to bend over and invite him deep within his body, pounding at him and slamming into him until the sweat from both of their bodies combined, making a slick mess of the pillows.

He wanted to drown in his mate’s scent, his fluids, his beautiful hair, those dark, brooding eyes.

Sweet Mother of the Sea, Tika had him burning with those teasing glances.

And then Astika was running his hands over his flesh, tugging at his nipples as he joyfully gazed at the sweating, shivering heap of the sea horse he was becoming beneath his mate.

“The...the pants,” Taza stuttered, wanting, needing to see more. “Off, please.” He attempted to be polite while keeping the whining in check. He wasn’t sure if he was too successful, but at this point he didn’t care.

He wanted those pants off and his naked mate in his arms.

Astika reached up to grip handfuls of his hair, and, tossing it over his shoulders, he grinned, making Taza’s hearts race to almost dangerous levels.

His hands slowly skimmed Taza's body, pressing into the muscles that made up the planes of his stomach before his fingers outlined the bulge that hung heavily down his left thigh.

Taza felt his mouth dry as he waited in anticipation, wanting to reach up and rip the material away but holding himself in check.

If this was a power game, he was losing dreadfully, though he really couldn't bring himself to care. Still, there was a small voice in the back of his head that told him it was too dangerous to give up too much too fast. He had to take his time and feel his mate out, to ensure that he would not wind up living his worst nightmares made flesh.

But that didn't mean he couldn't enjoy the feel of his mate's body or the delights offered by what he thought was hiding in those pants.

"Off!" he demanded, his breathing coming faster as he impatiently ran a hand through his own long hair, tucking it back so as not to obscure his view of the near perfection that was his mate. "Now!"

"Impatient little one." His Astika chuckled, his low thrumming sound going straight to Taza's head, the one below his waist.

Taza couldn't help but bring a hand to his own erection, taking the thick purple shaft between his fingers, teasing at the prehensile head that pushed free of its protective coil.

"Tika," he pleaded, and his mate gripped the zipper, lowering it slowly.

The sound was loud in the room. He fought for control as the first thatch of soft-looking black curls appeared, followed by miles of thick, hard-looking thighs.

Then his gaze followed as the scale pattern started below his mate's navel. He watched as the pants dropped lower and lower, exposing the hard copper shaft of his cock, a shaft that seemed to be a snake itself traveling up his mate's leg.

"There are ssssome things you should know," his mate hissed, that long split tongue lashing out to wet his kiss-swollen lips. "About a Nāga'ssss body—"

“Stop talking!” Taza demanded, cutting off his mate before he could complete his sentence. “Take it off.”

Shrugging, Astika leaned forward, allowing his hair to flow over his body as he sat back and removed the remainder of his clothing.

Taza nodded, looking up from between his now widely spread legs and his aching cock, and waited as if expecting his demands to be met and met immediately.

“Stop teasing!” Taza wailed, his hand pumping faster as it seemed that the target of his desire was moving farther away from his grasp. “You get back here!”

Astika chuckled and then moved back, resting between his mate’s legs, his fingers slowly reaching out, running over the soft skin of his inner thighs, his nails scratching teasingly at his flesh.

Taza raised his hands and made gimme motions before reaching up to grip handfuls of his mate’s hair.

He moaned, dragging the cool silk up his body, rubbing his nipples with it as he felt his mate bend low, his breath hot over the rushing head of his cock.

“Eat me, eat me, eat me!” Taza chanted over and over as he felt his mate’s cool hand encircle his shaft just before he felt that split tongue dance over the slit in his head.

“Ah!” He gasped, arching up into the tight grip as the hand tightened around his cock as his mate settled comfortably between his thighs.

He forced his eyes open to look down the length of his body to see those burning eyes that stared back at him.

It was too much. He whimpered, throwing his head back, his body jerking under the expert touch of his mate.

“How...?” He groaned. “How...?”

Then he gasped as Astika lowered his head once more, and he could feel that delightfully long split tongue encircle his cock.

The heat was amazing, fantastic as Tika slowly pulled his length deep into his mouth.

“Astika!” he all but screamed, his body freezing, his nerves on fire as he stiffened up in reaction.

It was too much! It was driving him mindless!

His hips arched upward, causing his mate to grip his hips as he felt the tongue release him, only to dance and flicker all around his shaft as it was slowly swallowed into the hot silk of his throat.

“Oh, Cr-creator.” Tears were flowing from his eyes as his mate hissed.

The vibrations from that alone were enough to make him see stars.

He was tugging, pulling at the hair flowing through his hands, his body glowing as the sweat poured off his soft armor, and he began to come apart.

He began to hum, a series of high-pitched tones that softly blended one into another, until a unique and erotic song began to fill the air.

Astika’s hands were now stroking his body, running over the flesh of his side, reaching back between his legs to grip and massage his bollocks, his tongue dancing over the cock that sank deeply into his throat before sliding out, only to slam into that covered heat again.

Astika was allowing him to fuck his face, to slam as deep into his body as he wanted, and from his reactions, the hissing moans, he was enjoying it every bit as much as Taza.

“Gonna explode!” he wailed, the tension in his back ratcheting up to unbelievable heights as white light filled his eyes. “Astika!”

His legs tensed, his body arched upward, and then he was exploding, releasing his salty seed deep into his mate’s caressing throat, feeling him swallow around his

thick length as his body collapsed into the nest of pillows, feeling weak and useless and utterly destroyed.

He managed a low groan as he felt the silk of his mate's hair pull from his fingers as his softening shaft slipped from between his mate's lips.

He forced his eyes open to stare as Astika tossed his hair behind him once more before sitting up, his forked tongue lashing out to clean the silvery remains of his seed from his lips.

"B-beautiful," Taza managed as his mate rose above him.

His gaze roamed down that glistening, sweat-shined body, down over the tight muscles of his chest and arms, following the iridescent scale pattern that started at his navel and flowed down, disappearing into the thatch at his groin before starting again on the copper-colored twin shafts of his two penises—

Two?

His eyes widened again, and he rose up a little to take in what his eyes were telling him.

Yes, his mate had two cocks, and both were rather hard and pulsing.

"You have two?" He gaped, looking up into the amused eyes of his mate.

"I tried to warn you." Astika smirked, his voice low and sultry, sounding like unsated sexual acts and illicit things. "Doessss it matter?"

"No," Taza breathed, reaching out with a curious finger to caress.

Both penises were thinner than his, but combined... He shuddered at the thought.

Both of them filling him, stretching him like fingers couldn't...

Oh yeah, he mused, not even knowing that a new, hungry look was filling his face. He could get used to that.

Both penises were soft, he discovered after gripping them both in his hand. The scales here were as soft as his sea foam. Warm and pulsing in his hands, they were, but the pearlized heads had no outward protective cowl.

“You have no cover?” he asked, running a finger around the heads, grinning as he felt the sticky seed lubricate his touch.

“This is my ssssecondary form,” he reminded his mate. “In my primary, my ssssexual organssss are internal. It is the way of the male Nāga.”

He began to thrust his hips, grunting as his twin cocks shifted through his mate’s tight grip.

“When I take you,” his mate hissed, “have no fear. I will enssssure that they both fit.”

His smirk was evil, and Taza found himself falling in love.

Had he been capable, he would have grown another erection right then and there. But it was too soon, his flesh too sensitive without the three-minute refractory period.

But there was something else he could do.

With a smirk on his face, he reached up and whipped his sea foam from his hair, quickly encasing the dual cocks within its soft heat.

Astika gasped, his eyes going wide as he stuttered, “What are you... Oh Shiva’s bollocks!”

The sea foam began to vibrate and quiver at Taza’s touch, sending what had to be almost painful shafts of pleasure shooting through his mate.

Taza would know. His sea foam was one of his best masturbatory tools, and it was self-cleaning.

He pumped the sea foam up and down the twin shafts, watching as his mate fell forward, cloaking him behind a curtain of dark hair as his hips helplessly thrust forward.

Astika was hissing, moaning in a language that had to be his mate’s native Urdu as he suddenly thrust forward, taking his pout in a powerful kiss.

His Nāga mate's forked tongue slipped cleanly between his lips, tangling around his own tongue and dominating his mouth as he twisted his head to ensure full possession of his lips.

Taza was aware that he was humming again, that his mate's pleasure was bringing about his own, and that made him pump faster, grip him harder, driving him hard against the wall of control that stopped Astika from totally breaking under his caresses.

"Let go," Taza moaned, pulling back from the kiss, licking his lips at the taste of his own seed in his mate's mouth. "Give me my due!"

And then with a roar, Astika exploded, both shafts quivering in his grasp as his hips pumped helplessly before he collapsed on top of his mate, a mountain of sweaty flesh and silken hair.

"I forced you to release," Taza crowed, leaning back into the pillows, letting his mate's heat and the scent cover him, possess him, shelter him like the long body that twined snakelike around him.

"And that doesssn't change a thing." Astika panted, resting his face in his mate's damp neck. "Get talking, ssssea horsssse. I want to know about thosssse women."

"Well, damn." Taza pouted. "There goes the afterglow."

Chapter Ten

“To put it simply,” Taza explained as he rested against his mate’s side, replete and relaxed. His sea foam had done an admirable job of cleaning them both up, so now they reclined lazily on the pillows that cradled their tired bodies.

A tangle of torn and ripped clothing lay forgotten beside them, and the heat of their bodies made any covering unnecessary. “Remember when I told you that I ran away?” After his mate nodded, he inhaled deeply and began to speak again. “They were—are—prospective mates.”

“You are mine.”

The fierceness of his mate’s answer both amused and pleased him.

“They don’t know that,” he explained.

“Then I suggest you draft a missive immediately and tell them.”

“It’s not like they will believe me.” Taza groaned, closing his eyes and snuggling closer to Astika. “And if I told them, it’s not like they still wouldn’t give chase. I did run away from the castle, and they followed, after all.”

“Well, you had better inform them, Taza.” Astika was adamant. “I refuse to give you up.”

“How you have changed your tune,” the smaller male grouched. “I recall you stating that you didn’t even want a mate.”

“I didn’t.” Astika snickered, reaching out to run his hands over his mate’s compact body. “But you insisted otherwise. Do not be upset with me because all that you wished for came true.”

“Point,” Taza allowed, burrowing closer to his mate’s heat.

He closed his eyes and prepared himself for sleep. He reached out to wrap his arms around his mate's waist...and froze as his skin touched smooth, soft scales.

He cracked one eye open and peered downward. His eyes, used to the depths of the sea, had no trouble seeing that the tight, muscular legs that he had tangled with his own were now one long, muscular column.

"This," he reported softly, opening both eyes as his mate slowly and sensuously looped coils of his snakelike body over his own, "is odd."

Despite himself, he reached out and began to pet the thick skin, amazed at how soft his mate's scales could be.

"It's how I ssssleep," Astika murmured, flicking his long tongue out to taste the contentment that surrounded his mate.

"You're cold."

"No, I'm cool. You are warm."

"You have cold scales," Taza complained for the sake of it.

"I have cool scales, and you are warming them quite nicely. Thank you, my mate."

"And to think I ran from the women who wanted to take advantage and cuddle me to death." Taza snorted, but instead of pushing his mate away, he continued to pet him.

"From what I saw, those females did not look very cuddly, Taza."

"They have—Well, they are...they are warriors," he finished in a rush. "Their main job is to provide defense and protection."

"Did I see horns?"

"Yes, that means that they are very powerful and fertile females."

"And they were quite short."

"They are no taller than I, Tika."

"As I have stated, short. And did I catch a glimpse of a weapon?"

“Spears.” Taza nodded. “The spear is their weapon of choice. They are long enough to give them extra reach, easy to hurtle through water to strike a moving target, and very useful in day-to-day living.”

“I see.”

“No, you do not. Those women are vicious, and they will do whatever they can to get me back to my mother’s realm, including hurting you.”

“Oh, I am terrified.” Astika chuckled. “They are sooo dangerous.”

“You should take them seriously, my mate.” Taza’s words were solemn. “They scare me sometimes.”

“They may scare you,” he responded, “but you forget one thing, little one. I am *your* mate. I will remove any threat from your path. I will crush your enemies beneath my feet. I will destroy anyone or anything that will stand in the way of your happiness.”

As he spoke, Astika’s eyes took on an odd glow. He seemed to double in size right where he lay, though Taza knew that the increase in stature was merely an illusion.

But it brought to mind that his mate was a being of intense power.

He was a being of magic, of his pantheon’s gods, and he was more than dangerous in his own right.

“I will lay your enemies at your feet, my little one. I will protect you until there is nothing left of me, and then I will watch over you from beyond. You do believe this, yessss?”

The hiss was coming back in his voice, and instead of being frightened by it, Taza was strangely comforted by it. It eased the stress and fear that he was trying his best to keep at bay, and it made him smile.

And when he was calm and smiling, he found thinking much easier.

“I believe you,” he whispered, reaching up to pet his mate as he had once petted his sea foam. “I believe you. And I will attempt to send a message to my mother and sire.”

He made to rise up, but his mate’s arms wrapping about him pulled him back into the pillows.

“Tomorrow,” Astika insisted.

“Tomorrow,” he agreed after reading the sleepy-eyed contentment on his mate’s face. He burrowed back into the faint heat of his mate’s body with a replete sigh. “We will do it tomorrow.”

“Now remember that you acquiesced to me,” Tika teased. “Recall your reaction and repeat it. Frequently.”

“In your dreams.” Taza snorted, feeling like he was back on proper footing with his stubborn mate. “I think that you forgot that I am a royal prince.”

“Yes.” Astika groaned. “And to think I once dreamed of having a quiet, sweet, biddable mate.”

“That was before you met up with your true destiny,” Taza retorted. “Now hush up and produce more heat. I want to sleep.”

“Yes, my mate,” Astika intoned, but he quieted down, wrapping himself fully about Taza’s body.

“Remember that.” The sea horse had to get in one last jab. “And repeat that often.”

“Yes, mate.” Astika chuckled before closing his eyes and snuggling his face into his mate’s neck, inhaling his scent deeply.

“I could get used to this.” Taza grunted, then closed his eyes, feeling as safe as he had since...since...since forever.

Chapter Eleven

“You really are going to send a message in a bottle?”

“It is the time-honored tradition to send messages from a land mass.”

The look on Astika’s face screamed skepticism.

“And it’s so amusing when humans attempt to duplicate it. You would think that they would understand that putting your innermost feelings on something that can just float into anyone’s hands would leave them open for laughter and ridicule. My people have been sending responses to that heartfelt flotsam for years.” He simpered, pressing both hands under his chin, prepared to deliver elocution from an old fifties romance movie.

“Oh Peter!” He fluttered his eyelashes as his falsetto took on new and feminine dimensions. “How I have longed for your touch. I know that we only knew each other for an hour before I fucked your brains out despite the fact that I am married with five children and was only looking for a vacation fling!” He covered his mouth with both hands as he began to laugh uncontrollably.

“Our response”—he choked—“was priceless. ‘Dear Anna. After having such an interesting sexual experience with you, I have decided to give up all physical forms of pleasure, as the very thought of coitus scares me now. Sex with you was so frightening that I am afraid I was barely able to fake my pleasure and get you out of the room until I hurled. Please don’t try to contact me again as the doctors at the sanitarium say I am not ready for visits from the outside world.’ And then we signed it ‘Hugs and kisses, Peter.’ It was the best laugh I had that year.”

“That is...” Astika appeared at a loss for words.

“And when they have to give up their secrets and share them with the sea...” Taza chortled. “They can get pretty raunchy sometimes, Tika. I mean, humans can be so depraved. But for us, sending a message in a bottle is a time-honored tradition that has never failed to express the seriousness of any situation.”

“So how many times have your people been actually stranded on land masses that required this method of message delivery?” Tika arched one eyebrow.

“Oh, hardly ever.”

“And how long have you all existed and sent messages before the invention of glass?”

“You doubt?” One pale blue eyebrow went up, an eerie imitation of Astika’s favorite gesture, as Taza stared at his mate.

“I have every reason not to believe that a bottle with a bit of blood will convey a message. And to do that to the humans...”

“Well, it’s not like celling-phone devices work underwater.” Taza wrinkled his nose. “And the humans who sent out those ridiculous letters were asking for it.”

“Cell phone.” Astika sounded aggrieved. “And no one deserves—”

“Whatever!” He waved a hand negligently. “Enough about the humans and their petty issues. I just know that when I send this blood in this bottle”—he hefted the small glass bottle they had earlier found in a craft shop, complete with cork stopper—“my mother will get the message and will converse with me at her earliest convenience.”

“Meaning?”

“When she feels like it, okay?” He rolled his eyes. “My sire and dam are not very hands-on when it comes to their parenting techniques.”

“They should meet my father,” Astika mused, shaking his head. “That would be an interesting visit.”

“The poor bastards would hate each other, and someone would die,” Taza drawled under his breath. Their parents’ meeting would equal a disaster of

unprecedented proportions. Then he added brightly so that his mate could hear, “Besides, this union will draw our families tighter together.”

“And keep you away from ugly females.”

“They are not ugly, per se...”

“They have horns, Taza.”

“Yes, very nice horns.”

“And they look like small muscular men.”

“Yes, they have very nice muscles.”

“And they carry spears, from what you tell me.”

“Yes, very nice spears. It is one of the reasons I want you to hush and let me do this. They are not known for asking questions first before they start the slaughter. Nāga you may be, but they outnumber you two to one.”

“They would be no match for me.”

“You, no. But your ankles, Tika—they would never be the same. And I don’t think I could live with myself if they did anything to damage your ankles, as fine as they are.”

Astika rolled his eyes at his mate’s antics, and he quietly observed as the smaller male carefully reached over to him and ran his fingers through his long hair before rubbing his now Nāga-scented fingers along his wrist.

“One small slice here...” He extended a nail and carefully parted the skin in a short, quick dash.

Taza hissed at the obvious pain, eyes closed as he held still for a moment, gaining control of the sensation before he uncorked the bottle with his teeth and held it below the wound.

“It is not pretty,” he informed his mate as a drop of blue-green blood oozed into the open mouth of the jar. “But it gets the job done.”

“And by combining our scents—”

“I let them know that a mate has been chosen. I just have to avoid power-hungry hunting women until my parents respond.”

The sea foam oozed from his hair to surround the wound while he corked the bottle and tossed it into the blue-green waters of the bay.

The bottle sank quickly out of sight, and Taza stared out over the waters quietly for a moment. Then he turned to his mate.

“Are there oceans by your home?” he asked.

Today Taza wore another sarong, this one in muted shades of burgundy and gold. The colors lent warmth to his skin, and the cut of the sarong ensured that his pretty legs were on display.

They had stopped on the way to the docks, and Astika had bought his mate a pair of lightweight sandals that human males seemed to find comfortable.

His mate had no problems walking in them, and he approved of the minimalist style, so Astika was pleased.

Shirtless and dressed as he was, Taza fit in with the crowd that wandered along the streets. Though the blue hair and the Mohawk-style gave him the look of a bad boy, the ready smile on his face and his diminutive size belied any tough-guy image he could ever hope to achieve. He was a walking conundrum, and the people of Baltimore welcomed him wholeheartedly.

“There are seas.” Astika smiled, thinking that this creature who now belonged to him was built to exist by the water. “There are warm seas for you to play in and rivers and lakes by our home. You will have your fill of your element, for Nāgas must exist by the waters to stay healthy.”

“So your...our home has a lake?”

As he spoke, he walked over to his mate and gripped his hand softly.

“Yes, and you can easily access it from our gardens.”

“We have gardens.” Taza smiled. “What do we grow? Is it something that we can eat?”

“I can eat anything with no negative consequences. It is a part of my divine birthright.” Astika arched one eyebrow. “What is it that sea horses eat to remain healthy and happy?”

“Meat and fish.” Taza nodded as he spoke. “We do eat the occasional seaweed or sea cucumber, but we can basically eat what humans do. For a while, I heard that humans were considered a delicacy, but I really don’t want the taste of tattoo ink and food preservatives in my mouth.”

“You speak the human language well,” Astika mused as he walked them toward a restaurant where exotic spices perfumed the air.

“I have been watching them for years. They send down messages to the whales and dolphins, and we all got a great big laugh out of what they were saying. It is the dolphins’ opinion that humans are not too bright. That is why they keep playing the ball game with them. It makes getting fish so easy and effortless for them, plus they don’t have to hunt when the humans come around.”

Astika snickered at that. The snakes of his acquaintance didn’t care too much for human intelligence, which they felt was nearly nonexistent.

“And they never realize that what they send down by way of those wires and cables, what they say, travels a long distance. I learned a lot of human language when I was a child, then more as I played at the docks, listening to their words. It can be hard to place what they say with what they mean sometimes.”

“Explain.”

“Well, I understand car. I know what it does. I know that it gets poor gas mileage and shuts down easily and costs a hell of a lot to maintain—whatever *hell* is. But I didn’t know what a car was until a dolphin pointed one out to me. It had fallen into the water, and the humans in their fake sea skins came to retrieve it. I got a good look at it then, and I didn’t like it. It stank, and it was leaking nasty things. I’ve seen them on the roads before and again when that man snatched me, and I still don’t like them. They are noisy and even smellier on land than when they are in the water.”

Astika chuckled and led his mate inside, turning to the dark-skinned, black-haired man who greeted them at the door.

He spoke in a quick spate of Urdu, and the man quickly took them to a table and placed glasses of fresh water before them.

“I understood that that was a human language,” Taza began, “but I am not familiar with the words. They seem to meld together. Is it Urdu? The book wrote that Nāgas are from India and I assume that this is the language you were speaking before.”

“That *is* the language of my homeland.” Astika smiled. “It *is* called Urdu, and I understand that it can be difficult to learn if you are not a native speaker.”

“I will learn,” Taza vowed. “Now tell me what you said.”

“I but ordered us a meal.” Astika smiled. “But I can help you with a language lesson.”

“Wonderful.” Taza brightened up considerably.

“Cup,” he stated in English before repeating the word in Urdu. “*Piyaalaa*.”

“*Piyaalaa*.”

“Good, now here is another. *Pani* means water,” he stated, flicking a finger inside the glass.

“*Pani*,” Taza parroted.

“Excellent. Now say lips, *hont*.”

“*Hont*.” Taza leaned in closer. “How do you say kiss?”

“*Choomna*.”

“*Choomna*,” Taza purred. “Oh, I think I like this language. It’s so expressive.” He winked. “*Choomna*.”

“Hmm.” Astika was shifting in his seat, beginning to look rather...disturbed as his mate licked his *hont*.

“Do you want to teach me more?” Taza asked, blinking innocently at his mate, his blue eyes shining.

“Not really.” Astika swallowed hard, his eyes glinting as he stared at the irrepresible sea horse sitting across from him.

“Oh, why not?”

Closing his eyes and praying for strength, Astika leaned across the table and hissed.

“Because I ssssee where this is going, little one. You will not behave.”

“Is it behaving if I do this?” He leaned back in his chair, innocently crossing his arms and doing his best to look like an eager student.

But then he went and ruined the whole thing by running his tongue, his very long, thin tongue, over his lips and humming.

The hum was a low thrum that went straight to Astika’s groin, leaving him shifting in his seat and with both cocks plumping up.

“Sssstop that,” he hissed, looking around and hoping that no one caught a glimpse of what his tiny mate was doing.

“What?” Taza smirked at him before lifting his hand to his lips and running one finger along the damp surfaces.

“Doing...that!” Astika whispered, sliding closer to the table to hide his growing reaction to the teasing. “Not in public.”

“Hmm, would it be more appropriate to tell you about sea horses, then?”

“You mean I don’t have to seduce it out of you?” Astika inhaled deeply and tried to get his heart to settle.

“No.” Taza shook his head. “This time I’ll volunteer.”

“Okay.” Astika began to relax marginally. “Enlighten me.”

“No gag reflex.” Then he smiled prettily.

“What?”

“We have no gag reflex, mate. And since we are mostly made of cartilage, just about every orifice expands.”

Astika blinked at his mate; then a blush began to run up his neck.

“Expand?”

“Oh yeah.” Taza motioned his mate closer.

And like a snake being charmed, Astika moved in, his gaze fixed on his mate.

“I can swallow both of your cocks at once,” he breathed, and Astika’s eyes grew wide.

“I... Uh...”

“Well, if you are going to provide your mate with such exciting playthings, Tika, it’s only fair that I show you that I am qualified as well as equipped to play with them properly.”

He waggled his eyebrows, and Astika inhaled sharply.

“Yes, mate,” Taza continued. “I can suck them both down. Would you like that, Assstika?” He stretched out the name. “I can wrap my tongue around them, pull them deep in my mouth, and suck them...hard.”

Astika whimpered, hoping that the sound didn’t carry.

“I bet you’d like that.” Taza flashed his tongue out, and Astika watched, entranced as that long, slick appendage wrapped around his fingers twice.

Astika bit back a low sound of pain as he slid low in his seat and watched that tongue pulse around his fingers before slowly retracting back into that tiny pink mouth.

“Naan?”

Astika jumped as the waiter stepped up to him holding a basket of the warm flatbread in one hand and a tray with sauces in the other.

“Naan?” Taza innocently looked up at his mate. “What does that mean?”

“Flatbread.” Astika panted, pulling himself back under control rather quickly.

“Ohh,” he purred. “I like it when you teach me things.”

Astika rolled his eyes as the waiter placed the food on the table and left with a cheery smile and a promise that their meal would be forthcoming.

“You...you are a teasssse,” Astika accused as he watched his mate pick up a pie-shaped slice of the blistered flatbread and dip it in a bright red sauce.

“*Tease*, from what I am given to understand, means that I have no plans of fulfilling what I promised.”

Taza shook his head, and...well... His mouth kind of just opened—wide—and he shoved the whole piece of naan into it without even breaking a corner.

Astika watched, his own mouth hanging open as his mate’s throat pulsated, and he watched the whole triangle-shaped thing just slide down.

“I believe I am very hungry, mate.” Those blue eyes locked on to his; all innocence fled as a burning hunger seemed to build there. “Very hungry.”

And to that, Astika did the only thing any self-respecting Nāga with a wayward mate in need of correction would do. He sat up, raised one finger in the air, and bellowed, “Check!”

* * *

It was hard to walk when you were being engulfed by a five-feet-five-inch sea horse, but damn it, Astika was making the effort.

Taza had latched on to him the moment they made visual contact with the house.

Who knew that language lessons were aphrodisiacs for sea horses? Or maybe it was the naan, but whatever the reason, as soon as they made it to the front yard, Taza had leaped into his arms, wrapped his legs around his waist, and tried to tickle the inside of his throat with his tongue.

Astika had just managed to get the door open and slam his smaller mate against the first solid wall he found before they slid to the floor fingers gripping and mouths devouring each other in heated display of passion.

Tired of waiting, he pounced. The small sea horse had ignited a fire in him that could no longer be denied.

He wanted inside that luscious little body, and nothing short of the world coming to a catastrophic end would stop him—and maybe even not then!

With one hand buried in his mate's hair, the other tearing at the knots in the sarong, Astika wanted nothing more than to feel that lithe naked body against his own.

Taza must have been in total agreement with this arrangement, because his hands were tearing at his shirt, sending buttons flying even as he lapped and chewed at his mate's mouth.

The Nāga now tasted of spice and lust, a heady combination he tasted on the lips of his sex-crazed sea horse as well.

“Pillows!” Taza demanded. “My bags...”

“Quiet!” Astika purred. “I will take care of you.”

“Mmm.”

Taza's fingers were tearing at the buttons to his slacks when a throat cleared above them.

Almost instantly Astika was on his feet, knees bent, standing with arms spread in a defensive position above his mate. His fangs bared, the danger they represented clear in the bright light of the sunshine streaming in through the windows.

His eyes were solid black and searching for the source of the noise, a low growl rumbling through his throat.

Who dared stumble into his lair and then have the audacity not to hide? A negotiator and mediator he might be, but that had never precluded him from kicking ass when it needed to be kicked. And right now the more violent part of his nature was in the forefront. All rational thought was blocked, and only instinct remained—the instinct to protect what was his no matter the cost.

And there, standing before them, was a tall male. The taste of the air around him screamed human, but... There was something odd about this one. The invader scented of old parchment and more caution than fear.

“Whoa!”

That voice was very familiar too, as was the way the being cocked its head to the side.

“Son?”

With recognition of that voice, rational thought returned, and his more basic instincts were pushed aside for calmness to take over once more.

“Oh great and bloody hell.” Astika hissed his displeasure and relaxed his stance over his mate, standing fully upright as he retracted his fangs.

“What a way to greet your *abbu*.”

“Father.” Astika nearly spat the word. “What do you want?”

Chapter Twelve

“Is that any way to talk to the one who gifted you with life?”

“I don’t see Mother anywhere around here. You’re just someone who keeps turning up at the wrong time. And I am definitely sad to say that the habit of yours has not changed in a millennium.”

As if reluctant to turn his back on the man, Astika contoured his body in such a way that he could assist his mate to his feet and still keep much of him hidden.

“Harsh words, baita.”

“Nevertheless, they are the truth.”

“I only came to meet your mate.”

“You came to see if I would follow my grandfather’s orders and truly take my mate. And then you probably want to see what you can get out of this match, being power hungry and all.”

“You shame me, my son.”

“As you shame me, Father.”

During this time, Taza’s head turned from mate to man, his eyes watching the exchange of words with something akin to awe and disbelief as if he could never imagine speaking to either his sire or his dam in such a manner.

He was also angered, bordering on embarrassed, since most sea horses were modest and respectful of their dams by nature, and he knew himself to be anything but in the face of his new mate’s father. He knew that he had already flouted several rules of etiquette and behavior, and he should apologize for his actions, but

all the same, he found himself too fascinated by this new turn of events to give in to what proper sea-horse manners dictated.

“Astika...”

“Father...”

There were similarities between the two males in front of him. Each male was tall and slim, but Astika topped his sire by several inches. And where Astika’s body was thin and muscular, his sire’s stomach had a round little paunch and was a bit fleshier around the eyes. Could nearly immortal male humans touched by fertility gods carry children? Because it certainly looked like the elder sage was going to be pushing out a herd of his own soon.

Astika’s hair was a deep blue-black that shone purple in the sunlight. Its length caused the stick-straight silk to fall somewhere around his ankles, while his father’s hair looked to have the same texture but though it was straight and black, it only touched the man’s shoulders.

Also the elder’s face was not as perfect—a bit more masculine, but not as striking and powerful as his mate’s. However, he decided that his mate took after his sire a bit in both height and appearance.

But the one thing that the two males had almost exactly in common was a beautiful, low, dark voice. Although the elder’s was perhaps a touch deeper, the voices were indeed so similar that if you were not familiar with them both, you would have to be facing them to tell the difference between the two of them.

“And that was your mate you were mauling?” The elder crossed his arms and stared up at Astika.

“No.” Astika rolled his eyes, blowing a stray lock of hair out of his face. Sarcasm was easily identified in the strained tones of his voice. “He was some random sea horse I picked up just to defy your orders to claim the dual crown.”

“Astika...” There was a warning in the elder man’s voice, and Taza could see how his mate reluctantly gave in and listened, the respect for the elder’s rhetoric that he must have been reared with coming into play.

“Jaratkarū, this is my mate, Taza,” he offered with as much ire as he could before turning to his mate.

“Taza, may I present the one who provided the seed from which I sprang.”

Jaratkarū frowned and opened his mouth, surely to deliver a stinging reprimand, but Taza beat him to the punch.

“Hello, seed sac.” He smiled brightly, showing off a little fang. “It is wonderful to meet the thing that provided the seed from which my Astika sprang.”

Dead silence.

Smiling, Taza moved past the stunned Jaratkarū and the amused Astika and all but danced his way to the kitchen, his long mane of hair swinging behind him like a tail.

“I would offer tea or something,” he added over his shoulder, “but since you found your way inside, I am sure that you can find your own refreshments.”

A united front was always a good position in which to defend against the enemy. And Astika’s father looked to be an interesting adversary indeed.

* * *

“Your mate,” his father began. “He is fully grown, yes?”

“Would it matter to you?”

“Of course it would.”

“Right,” Astika drawled, unconvinced, as he turned and gestured to the den. “If you want to talk, here’s the place to do it.”

“Neither you nor your mate are very friendly, baita.”

“You have yet to give us a reason to be.”

Astika took a seat on one of the large armchairs and gestured for his father to sit.

“Yet here I am, trying to be a good father to you.”

“Try harder.” He forced a smile that showed his fangs. “Leave.”

“I am here to ensure your safety.”

“You are here to laugh at my plight and of course see what power you can milk out of this situation. I remember our phone conversation very well, Father. It cost me an expensive cell phone.”

“That is not my intent.”

“Then what is?”

“I am here to see that this match is worthy of you.”

“I find it acceptable.”

“Those were not always your words, baita.”

“Things change.”

“And so do people.”

“I have yet to see that.” Astika sighed, sitting back and crossing one leg before the other. “In fact, I have various forms of evidence that prove otherwise.”

“And here we engage in what your *ammi* terms *highbrow kickboxing*. I call it an exchange of words and ideas and—“

“What do you want?”

Astika had grown tired of fencing with words. His father’s influence and teachings were what had helped him shape his debate style, and he knew that they could, if it was allowed, speak in circles around each other for days if need be. But he was exhausted, and he wanted only to be with his mate. His groin still throbbed with hunger, and the object of his desire was just out of reach.

He flitted his tongue out and nearly moaned at the pheromones that were rolling off his sea horse. Even from this distance, he could smell the want that he inspired in his mate. Eliciting these emotions from his lover made him feel just about as proud as a Nāga could get, and at the same time it made him more frustrated than he had ever thought he could be and still survive.

Absently he adjusted himself as he waited for his father to explain himself, not really caring that the other male saw that he wanted and desired his mate.

In fact, it might make the visit go quicker.

“I told you, baita. I am just here to see to your welfare as a father should.”

“And I noticed how you raced to my side, all concern and help when I first called you. No, wait.” He slapped himself in the forehead with his palm. “That was you offering advice through guffaws and snickers. How silly of me!”

“Sarcasm is a form of aggression.”

“Then it is the perfect medium to express my ire, Father.”

There was silence again as the two males stared at each other, neither blinking until his father shifted.

“Okay, my son. I admit I could have been a bit more careful of my words—”

“Of your laughter,” Astika interjected.

“Yes, of my laughter, my son.” Jaratkarū ran his fingers through his hair before his large brown eyes sought the black depths of his son’s. “You are so like your mother.”

“No.” Astika shook his head. “Mother would have tossed you out before this.”

“Fine!” The sage finally exploded. “I did come out of a sense of fatherly obligation.”

“Oh, I am all ears.” Astika rolled his eyes before settling more comfortably in his chair. “This should be good.”

“I wasn’t going to inform you of this, but after meeting that creature to whom you are mated, I find that I have no choice. I know a way to break this bonding.”

“Run from the marriage bed?” Astika asked, arching one eyebrow, knowing that his words were cutting very close to home. But he felt his father deserved no quarter.

“Astika. I am your father. You will respect me.”

“Father, yes. Respect...maybe.”

“You will respect me after I tell you this. According to the Coushrin power throne, the only way to break this bonding is through death.”

“Do tell,” Astika rumbled, narrowing his eyes and lashing out his tongue to lick his lips.

His father never noticed the danger, never noticed that his son was looking less than humanoid and more snakelike or that his anger was growing.

Jaratkarū rose up and walked over to one of the bookcases, his gaze scanning the titles as he grinned slyly, taking up a position of power and control. He acted as if he believed that his son should be listening to his words, like any dutiful son would be trained to do. And apparently, Astika thought, he had a lot to say, because he placed his hands behind his back and began to speak again.

“Death is such a final thing, my son. And there are many and varied ways to bring about this condition.”

“Like our sssspeciessss may not be compatible?” Astika arched an eyebrow and bared his fangs a little more.

“Yes, or if they are, who’s to say that he can survive a birth?”

“Sssso I keep him pregnant until he diesssss?”

Now venom was slowly beginning to fill the hollow canals in his fangs, making them burn with the urge to strike.

His father never even noticed the danger he was in. He spoke as he pulled one book from the shelf, examined the cover, and pushed it back into place.

“He will die eventually. I understand they are not very strong.”

“Exhausssstion can kill them.” Astika’s eyes were now narrowed, and his legs began to burn. The change was coming, and this time he made no effort to stop it.

“And a wise man would keep him in such a state.” His father laughed. “The rude little thing looks like he would die after a vigorous fucking or two. Not much, these sea horses, are they, my son?”

“Fuck him until he diesssss or keep him with issssue until he diesssss? Either way, he diesssss?”

“And you control the dual throne fully, as our society does not follow matriarchal rule. And if it is an issue, I am sure that you can find a sweet, easily led mate that can be controlled with minimal effort. You will possess the dual crowns. And then your mother and I can pair you with a suitable mate of your choosing.”

Astika was nearly growling and hissing, deaf to all that was happening around him, shifting from side to side as he pinned his father within his sights.

He never even heard the gasp of horror or the door slamming as he concentrated on the best place to strike.

“Kill him and ssssteal his power? You will find me an accceptable mate?”

Astika’s words rose in volume as each one was uttered.

“Either way, you get to control the Pacific Ocean and its denizens. Though you are young to rule, I, of course, can offer my assistance.”

“And I passsss that power on to you, Father?”

A low hiss and the sound of fabric beginning to pop at the seams filled the room.

“If you insis—Son?”

As Jaratkarū turned, there was the crack of breaking wood and the loud rip of cloth being shredded.

Instinctively he ducked as wood and stuffing came flying in his direction.

He stared, wide-eyed, as Astika rose to his full height, the widening of his thighs tearing through his pants as the legs solidified into one solid mass.

He jumped to the right and rolled toward the door as several feet of tail lashed out at him, destroying the bookcase near where he had once stood, sending wood splintering through the air like tiny missiles.

“You want me to murder my mate?” Astika screamed, his nails elongating as his body shifted rapidly to track his father’s movements.

There was little of the man left; the Nāga protecting his partner was in full command.

“Astika!” The man threw up his arms, his eyes wide in shock and fear as he tried to dive from the room.

“You are lesssss than dung! You are a travessssty of a sssage! You a worthlesssss wasssste of sssspace and flesh, and I am going to end your existence now!”

Jaratkarū screamed and raced out of the room, ducking several coils as he tried to escape.

But the deranged Nāga was hot on his heels, the human body bent forward, those long, straining arms with their tattered remains of his shirt, the talons on the fingers fully exposed.

He was quick-fire death, and the venom in his fangs begged to be injected into the monster who had sired him.

“You will die, Jaratkarū!” he sneered. “Never again will you interfere with what issss mine!”

“Patricide is a sin against God!” Jaratkarū screamed as he tried to make it to the front door while dodging the coils and arms that reached for him.

“Sssso issss murder.”

“Shiva help me!” his father cried out as he was finally caught.

Astika’s tail deftly tripped the running man and then caught him in midair before he could fall.

The tight, strong muscles spun Jaratkarū wildly, encasing him in a circle of raw power.

Slowly he was drawn toward the death he now saw in his son’s black eyes.

“You will die sssslowly,” Astika promised. “For your plotting, for Mother, for my mate, and for me. I conssssign you to the depthssss of hell!”

“Astika!”

It was not Shiva who saved him.

No, it was a powerful voice, but it was female, and most importantly, it was the only voice that could have ever hoped to stop a Nāga on his quest for revenge.

“Manasa!” Jaratkarū managed to choke out as his son was slowly constricting his coils around his body.

Walking toward them, a cobra coiled around her neck, was none other than Manasa herself.

A golden eye patch covered her left eye, while the right glowed black and fathomless. Her arms jangled with the many bangles that encircled her wrists as she moved, and her dangling gold teardrop earrings emphasized the exotic beauty of her face, despite her missing eye. The *bindi* in the center of her forehead, proof of her married state, looked dark as blood; the expression on her face was one of foreboding.

“Allow me to kill him, Mother.” Astika’s gaze never left his father’s face.

He stood, arms at his sides, his coils lifting the man until he was at eye level.

“Hissss death will be sssso ssssweet.”

“Astika.” Manasa sighed and adjusted the scarlet and gold of her sari, the snake around her neck rising up to pay attention to the tableau before them. “You know I cannot allow you to do that.”

“Heeee hassss earned it, Mother.” His tongue lashed out, tasting the fear that surrounded his father and relishing every taste.

“More than earned, my baita, but still, it is not our way.”

“Sssso I sssshould let him get away withhhh hissss plotting?” Finally Astika tore his eyes away from his father to look at his mother. “You are looking exxxxceptionally well, Mother.”

“I thank you, baita.” Manasa smiled. “But that is beside the point. You must release your father. Your grandfather and uncle will be disappointed if you spill his blood.”

“Do you know what he wantssss me to do to Tazzzza?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Doessssn’t matter?” Astika was outraged now, his coils tightening reflexively on his father, making the man groan and whimper.

“Does not matter, my son. His schemes will work only if you play into them.”

Astika paused, slowly turning to face his father’s pale face and wide eyes. His lips were turning blue, and absently Astika thought that it was a good color for him.

“You know I speak the truth. Do not let your anger at his duplicitous ways force your hand into doing something you will later regret.”

Astika’s shoulders slumped. He could not fault his mother’s logic. He was allowing his father’s words to be the catalyst for doing something he had dreamed of attempting for years. And his reasons were not good enough to murder his own father.

“You sssspeak the truth.”

His father’s face brightened considerably, but quick as a flash, Astika struck out and slammed his teeth into his father’s shoulder.

“Astika!” his mother shouted, her eye wide as she advanced onto her snakelike son.

Smirking, he withdrew his teeth and smiled as his father grew paler and began to sweat.

He released his coils, and the man slumped to the wood floor at his mother’s feet.

“You were right. I ssssshould not kill him.”

“You bit him!” By now his mother was kneeling beside her husband, straightening his limbs and assessing his condition.

“Yessss, but not to kill. I jussst gave him enough venom to make him regret ever making thissss vissssit and intruding on my life.”

He knew he looked smug, and after a moment his mother’s stern visage turned into one of amusement.

“You are indeed my son.”

Astika nodded in acknowledgment.

“So where is this mate?”

“Taza.” He smiled. “You will like him, Walda. He issss intelligent and fearlesssss and...”

“Gone.”

Manasa stood up, her own tongue lashing out as she walked over to her son and reached up to caress his face.

“Gone?”

“There are three scents here, Astika. You and your father and that of a male who tastes of the sea. His scent is recent, and there is a trail of anger and fear tainting it by the door. It is also the scent of the same young male I saw streak past me as I sent the driver on his way. Your mate is gone.”

“Gone?” Astika’s eyes grew wide, worry evident on his face. “Why?”

Then he recalled the sound of a door slamming, of the patter of footsteps leading away from the ruin of his study.

“Maybe he overheard Father and me argue,” he groaned, covering his face with his hands. “It issss dangeroussss out there for him! There are ssssome females out to get him and claim him for their own!”

“I scented some females tinged with sea...”

“They may have followed him. I never consssidered...”

“And there was a male scent as well, Astika. I am not sure of its purpose, but the human male was filled with eagerness and satisfaction. He also carried the scent of your male.”

“The crazy human!” Astika hissed. And then he went charging for the front door.

“Astika!” his mother shouted, shoving her husband out of the way with a foot as she chased after her son. “Your form!”

“No time!” he bellowed back. “Taza is in danger!”

And quick as that, her son was gone, heedless of his Nāga form as he raced through the streets of Fells Point.

“See what you have done?” Manasa turned to hiss at her stricken husband, who was now curled into a fetal position, moaning as chills and fever racked his body. “You had better be thankful that Shiva likes you and granted you a long life.” She shoved him with her foot. “Otherwise I would leave you to the tender mercies of our son.”

“He has none,” Jaratkarū muttered from between chattering teeth.

“He is what you and my family have made him”—Manasa grinned—“and I have never been prouder.”

* * *

With a petulant look set on his face and tears filling his eyes, Taza raced away from what he had begun to think of as his home.

How dare his mate say such horrible things? How dare he agree with that monster that had sired him?

How dare he...?

Had he?

Taza’s feet slowed as he began to consider what he had heard.

Had there been agreement in his mate’s voice, or had it been sarcasm and anger?

That was the problem with these sudden matings—one never really got to know the creature with whom one was destined to be bound.

And would Astika really want him dead? All the man had spoken of was his want of children and a proper family.

Had he not been abused by his own family and insistent that his mate and his children would not be tortured in the same fashion?

Astika had been patient and generous with him, he realized.

As an alpha male, Astika could have staked his claim at any time, yet he had chosen frottage and oral sex over true penetrative sex out of concern for him.

Would someone who wanted him dead by sexual overdose do that?

There were too many questions for him to form an accurate conclusion.

He had to go back.

Snorting at his own stupidity, he turned and quickly reversed directions, heading back to the house and demanding some answers.

He would not run away. This was what had gotten him bound in this mating in the first place.

No, he would face this problem with his mate head-on and get the answers he wanted. Then he would kick Astika's father out and screw Astika into the pillows—preferably in that order. But if Astika's idiot of a father became stubborn and wanted to stick around and watch, he...

He never got to finish the thought.

Clang!

Something smashed into the side of his head.

Puzzled, he looked around just in time to receive another whack. It moved his body backward a bit, but he maintained his stance, his anger growing.

"Ouch?" Something hit him a third time in rapid succession, and he began to grow irritated.

He spun around just in time to get a good smash to the face. His blinked as he reeled backward, the blow temporarily upsetting his balance

"Got ya!"

Taza didn't even have time to scream as a pair of large arms scooped him up.

He tried to kick and fight his way free, but the arms just tightened even more, locking his limbs to his sides. And because of that awkward position in which he

was being held, he couldn't even scratch at the human holding him. And he knew it was a human by the smell.

He twisted his head and...

"You!" He gasped.

"Imagine what a hot shower and a haircut will get you," Bo crowed.

Something rather stinky was thrust into his face, and his mind began to spin.

"And you ran right into my arms, mermaid," the human chortled before stuffing Taza into a sack.

"You are mine, little mermaid," he heard just before he was tossed into something that forced what remained of his oxygen from his body.

His head struck metal, and the world inside his dark sack began to spin faster.

Nausea and fear were overwhelming him, but Taza tried to hold on to awareness.

He cursed himself for being several different kinds of fool and leaving the protection of his home. Now he could only hope that his mate would come for him.

"Please be soon," he muttered as he smelled the distinct odor of cooking oil and the spice called garlic. "Please, Astika! He's going to eat me."

And...

Unbeknownst to Bo, who was happily driving away in his small pickup truck with his victim in the back, two females nodded at each other and sneered, and left their hiding place among the shadows of the domicile where their little prince had been hiding.

They tightened their grips on their spears and moved out on foot, prepared to follow and get the fertile male, no matter what it took.

Chapter Thirteen

“Ouch!” Taza wiggled on the table where his captor had dropped him.

He hadn’t known one human could be so fast!

First something struck him on the head, several times and hard enough to daze him, before something plastic wrapped around his hands, holding them behind his back.

Never had he been more grateful for his head armor, but the pain and the sudden violence of it left him stunned enough for the human to confine him but good.

But then the human began carrying him up!

And it wasn’t the small distance that had caused him to freeze on Astika; this human had to have carried him up a whole floor or more.

The yawning feel of falling, of vertigo, filled his mind as his stomach heaved and his hearts began to race.

He was too far away from earth and land; gravity was pulling at him, telling him that he was in the wrong place, that he didn’t belong here. His nausea increased, and his whole body began to pale with cold, then flush with heat.

This was no place for a sea horse, and his body knew it.

Once Taza’s hands and feet had been secured and his whole body nearly frozen stiff with fear and uncertainty, the human whipped the cloth from over his head as he dropped him on a table.

“Mine,” Bo cackled, rubbing his hands together in glee.

Taza just whimpered.

“What? Don’t you have any fancy talking to do now?” He sneered, looming over the stricken sea horse. “Don’t you have any deals to offer me in return for your life? That’s what all the legends say, mermaid. You are supposed to offer me gold or grant me wishes in return for your life.”

“D-down,” he stammered, blinking rapidly as his mind tried to rebel and leave his body for good.

But Taza couldn’t allow that to happen. If he gave in to his fears... If he panicked... If he...

“Down? You want down, mermaid? You want the floor?”

With a grin, Bo kind of shoved him backward, and then the world was spinning again before it solidified with a hard *thump* on the wooden floor.

“Ow,” he muttered, the sudden pain of it all pulling him out of his paralyzing fear.

“Now what? You are down, little mermaid.”

“I’m...a...boy.” Taza gasped, his eyes watering as his stomach threatened to toss up all that good Indian flatbread he had recently consumed.

“Boy?” Bo had leaned down far enough to snort. “You got long, pretty hair, and your skin sparkles. Boys don’t sparkle.”

Some part of Taza’s mind recognized the fact that he was dealing with someone whose brain wasn’t fully incubated or functional, and that both pleased him and terrified him even more.

“B-boy,” he insisted.

“I ain’t never heard of a merboy.” Bo rose to his feet, scratching at his hair as he peered down at Taza.

“Boy.” Taza pushed back his fear enough to confirm.

“Hmm.”

Bo reached down and tugged up his sarong.

Taza attempted to squawk and twist away, but he was now lying on his side, unable to do most things because of his stupid fear of heights! And he was regretting not taking a pair of those human underpants his mate had tried to foist off on him. They would have given him some dignity as this idiot—

“Well.” Bo goggled, staring at Taza’s limp and exposed genitalia. “You *are* a boy.”

“Boy.” Taza breathed a little easier, hoping that Bo would just toss him back now. “Y-yes, b-boy.”

“Those legends never said anything about a merboy...”

“L-let m-me g-g-go?” Taza managed.

“Nah.” Bo smiled, rising to his feet. “I guess you can’t have a mermaid without have a merboy,” he reasoned, scratching at his nose as he rose to his full height, letting the sarong drift from his fingers. It fell partially over Taza’s groin, but the rest floated over his head, obscuring some of his view. “But I guess that means that your wishes will be more powerful. You never hear of boys getting caught.” He nodded, smiling at his own logic. “So I guess you had better start giving me wishes, or I’ll start filleting pieces of you for my dinner. I suspect that won’t feel too good, but you were as stupid as a girl for getting caught. Girls are so easy to beat. You must think like a girl. Stupid merboy.”

Stupid, Taza thought. Well, maybe just a little for running when there were so many things after him.

He shuddered in his bindings as he recalled running to Astika because of this idiot in the first place.

Hadn’t he been there when he was almost hit by that monstrous human car?

But he looked and smelled different now from when they had first met.

Human camouflage, he thought as he tried to put together the pictures of this well-dressed albeit stupid male and the wild-haired crazy human smelling of fish and grease who had grabbed him in the first place.

Back then he only had his sea foam to cover him and no idea where he was running.

It was like fate had directed his feet that day. And when he had seen Astika standing so tall and strong, he immediately had run for him, knowing that the tall male would protect him from the crazed human and from just about anything else this world above the sea could toss at him.

It had been a matter of instinct, and he had never distrusted his instincts before.

It was his instincts that told him to flee his mate but not to run out of the house where there was protection. It was his own personal anger and sense of betrayal by one he had believed in that forced him into his foolish actions. He could have run to the kitchen and threatened to scale the son of a bitch for his words, or he could have gone out back to the gardens and pissed on some of his flowers, or he could have...

There were a million things he could have done, including going into the room and asking what was going on, before he chose the easiest path of flight.

“Don’t cry, merboy.” Bo chuckled as the sound of his footsteps carrying him away from Taza. “It won’t hurt that bad. I’ll make it quick, and then you won’t hurt no more. That, or you start giving me wishes...”

Taza had not even realized he was crying.

There was too much going on in his head at the moment to pay attention to only one emotion.

There was regret that he had left his mate, fear that he was going to die and never see him again, anger at himself and at this idiot who had caught him...

He sniffled, and his sea foam ran over his face, cleaning away the mucus and tears, offering him some comfort in a way. He nuzzled against it like he had when he was a child and...

Sea foam?

“Go,” he growled, his body still shuddering and stiff, but his mind was now determined to act to save himself. “G-go! T-Tika!”

The words were reinforced with mental images of his mate.

Find my mate, he wanted to scream, but he didn’t have the words.

His mind was skittering as he tried to infuse the sea foam with his desires.

“G-go...” he managed again, but then Bo was looming over him once more.

“Eww.” He shuddered, reaching down and grabbing the sea foam and tossing it out of an open window. “You had something on your face.”

Taza stared wide-eyed at the large human, or rather at the large knife the human held in his hand.

“And your time is up. I don’t see no gold, merboy. Now I’m gonna have to cut ya.”

Chapter Fourteen

Astika had never felt so desperate in his life! He could taste faint traces of his mate, but they disappeared suddenly, replaced by the harsh smell of auto exhaust.

He snarled, not really caring if anyone saw him in his Nāga form. He had more important things to concern himself with.

The scent that was so intermingled with his mate's was that of the man in the street before, the one who had handed him their dropped packages.

It was a familiar scent, and it was filled with hunger and malice and a satisfaction that bordered on afterglow.

It was the scent of someone well contented with what he had done, and that type of satisfaction usually came at the expense of someone else.

He snarled, his lips pulling back from his fangs as he came to a conclusion.

He would track that scent, follow it back to its source, and then maybe he would find his mate.

Moving almost faster than the eye could follow, his tongue tasting the air, Astika backtracked and trailed the scent, his eyes narrowed in anger as a soul-chilling fear began to fill him.

He wanted his mate. He wanted to explain, to tell his side of what had happened, to let him know that he would never disrespect him or treat his life so cheaply.

Again he mentally berated himself for letting his temper get the best of him as he followed the dissipating trail.

It led him back to the street where Taza had almost been hit by the truck.

Once there, he jerked to a pause, noting that not many of the people who still roamed the streets paid any attention to him.

Maybe having a vampire bar on this block desensitized people, or maybe someone else divine was giving him a helping hand, but no one seemed to notice a nearly twelve-foot Nāga streaking through the streets.

Maybe...

With determination, Astika raced toward the bar, slamming the doors open and racing inside.

He was fortunate that the sun was beginning to set, for Chris was there, standing behind the bar, yawning widely as he looked over to see who or what had just abruptly entered into his bar.

“Nāga.” He spoke around a second yawn. “Didn’t you get what you came here for?”

“Yessss,” Astika answered, lowering his body so that he could look straight into the vampire’s eyes. “And what I sssso dessssired was taken away from me.”

“Bummer.”

“Bummer?” Astika raised one eyebrow, staring down at the vampire, disbelief in his face.

“You lost him—”

“Chris!”

“But you will find him. Of this I am sure.”

“And you can be sure because...?”

“Because everyone who comes in here finds what they need. It may not be what they wanted, but it will definitely be what they need.”

Astika sighed, knowing that he was not going to find any easy answers here.

“Buddy?” Chris gave an odd sort of snickering giggle. “Are you planning on walking around...?”

He waved his hands at Astika’s snake body, his expression disbelieving.

“No one has noticed yet,” Astika grumbled, turning and leading his long, long body toward the door.

“You must be well connected,” he allowed, “for the protection geas to extend to you. Generally we have to take an oath and offer blood for the people of Baltimore to have their minds muddled as to what we are. It’s odd that you didn’t have to. Maybe it has to do with your grandfather’s—Wait,” he called, halting Astika’s exit.

“What? I don’t have time for you to become sssspeculative about what the fatessss will or will not allow. I have to find my mate!”

“Take this.”

He reached under the bar and tossed Astika a small backpack.

“What...?”

“If you need to change, then you need something to put on. Speaking from experience, it’s not so much fun to run around swinging pipe. Your junk bounces against your thigh, and that just hurts.”

Astika stared, mouth parted as if he wanted to say something, backpack held in one hand, but Chris’s words had shocked him into silence.

“I know, it’s a curse and a gift,” his wife chimed in, walking around the bar to stare up at the Nāga, “unless you are not, um, built toward what the dimensions show...” She gestured toward his snakelike body, and Astika felt a blush building on his cheeks.

“Coleen,” Chris chided. “You are going to embarrass him.”

“No, I’m not.” She grinned, tilting her head to the side so that the ponytails on either side of her head bounced. “I am merely stating a fact.”

She thrust her hands into the pockets of her white chef uniform and grinned more broadly, showing her own massive set of fangs.

Astika could see where the children got their mannerisms.

“Besides, it’s too much meat for the little one. I have a wonderful recipe for snake. I am sure I can shave off a few inches and have enough left over to please the

wee one. It's such a delicacy, you know?" She leered, her huge breasts struggling to break free of the jacket that kept them contained.

"He never complained," Astika finally choked out. Then, adjusting the straps on his back, he headed out of the front door. "And I have a sssspare to enssssure that there issss alwayssss enough to pleasssse him."

"Snakes." Chris chuckled, running a hand through his hair as he watched the Nāga slither out the doors. "Always have to have the last word."

"But they have two penises," Coleen pointed out, leaning back against her husband and one true mate. "I guess that feat alone gives them some leeway. Just wait until he opens that bag. I think the little one will thank me."

"Recipe for snake?" Chris asked as he cocked his head, his shoulders shaking as he held in a laugh. "And I trust you put in appropriate clothing?"

"You know me." She chuckled, her eyes flashing red. "Something for everyone if you but ask."

"Now I am truly frightened." Chris shuddered playfully.

"You?" She giggled. "Not since the kids were born." She turned to make her way back to the kitchens. "And then I think we both cried a little."

"I think he will find his sea horse." Chris spoke softly, his eyes going hazy as if his mind was lost in thought. "And then he will be the one learning the true meaning of the word *fear*."

* * *

Outside of the bar, Astika inhaled deeply, again finding the scent of the man he was tracking. It was faint, being days old, and *raunchy* was the best word that he could come up with to describe it, but it was unmistakably the same man who had handed them the bags and apparently tracked them back to their home. In his concern for his mate, he had never allowed himself to contemplate the similarities between the man who had first run his mate into his arms at the vampire bar and

then later the man who handed him their purchases on the street. He had scented something familiar but was too easily lost in his own situation to piece together the puzzle of why the man who had handed him his bags gave him cause for concern. Now it was clear that the man had removed his rough facial hair and cleaned himself up in an effort not to be discovered. And not being well versed in anything but the more obvious differences of humanity, he had been tricked by the simple changes. Plus he had never expected someone to track him and his mate at all. He had underestimated the human, and for that he was now paying dearly.

He snarled, calling himself all kinds of idiot for not investigating the scent more thoroughly. But he pushed himself away from the self-loathing that filled him now, because he knew that his mate needed to be found and taken to a place of safety first.

He roamed the alleys and dark corners, still following the scent, when another, more familiar scent began to tease at his nostrils.

He paused near an alley cloaked in shadows, and a feral grin spread across his face.

That familiar scent was that of the female sea horses.

It was also one of the scents intertwined with his mate's. The sea horses were following the man, and that meant that he could follow them both back to his mate.

His tongue flashed out in triumph as he again began to streak through Fells Point, this time keeping to the shadows.

He was hot on the trail when suddenly he was hit with a scent that almost knocked him off his scales.

It was the teasing scent of salt and musk that only came from one being.

He stuttered to a halt, stopping so suddenly that he almost careened into a brick wall.

Where? Where was it?

Bending low, his tail lashing in his agitation, Astika scanned every section of bricked-in alley ground that he could see.

There!

He moved close to a Dumpster and a pile of old plastic bags and newspapers, and something leaped for his throat.

“Sssshit!” he hissed, jerking backward before the teasing scent of the sea overtook the smell of garbage and decay.

This was what he had been searching for, what had been carrying the tease of his mate’s scent.

It was...sea foam?

Astika’s black eyes widened as he stared in disbelief at the elongated bit of sea foam that was now slowly but surely making its way in his direction.

“Ssssea foam,” he whispered, reaching down to poke at the writhing mass.

It held the consistency of cotton, soft and cuddly, yet there was strength to it that made it seem more than substantial.

It was the sea foam that Taza never went anywhere without.

“Ssssea foam,” he repeated, his voice a little stronger. “I know that Taza said you were not sentient, but I have my doubts about that.”

He lifted the mass into his hands and raised it to eye level—whatever eye level for a mass of living sea foam was—and began to speak slowly.

“I need you to tell me where Tazzzza issss.”

The sea foam didn’t move.

“Maybe, that wassss the wrong choicce of wordssss. Can you take me to Tazzzza?”

Still no response.

Sighing deeply, his shoulders drooping, Astika dropped the sea foam to the ground and prepared to continue on his search for the scent of the man and the female sea horses.

But before he could move, the sea foam gave a wiggle and squirmed away from him.

Curious now, Astika slowly began to follow.

He shook his head, calling himself all kinds of fool, but he still followed, pausing only when the bit of foam was leading him toward a populated area around Broadway and Broad Street Wharf toward the Ann Street Pier and away from the odd shops and stores that made up Historical Fells Point.

Shrugging, he paused to shift back into his secondary form and dig into the bag that Chris had provided. If there was a geas, he had no idea how far it extended, and they were getting away from the weird and wild shops where oddities were a norm.

He reached into the backpack and groaned at what he felt.

“Funny,” he muttered, rolling his eyes as he pulled out a loincloth and a pair of gladiator-style sandals.

After checking and finding that the clothing was brand-new and in his size, he shook his head in wonder.

“Is there anything that vampire doesn’t know?” But on second thought, the clothing selection had probably come from his wife or his children, which was scarier.

He quickly dressed, and though not inconspicuous, it was better than running around town in his Nāga form.

Strangely enough, the sea foam waited for him.

“Looks like you may be leading me in the right direction after all,” he decided as it inched forward the closer he moved.

He began following behind the mass, not even caring that he looked like a reject from a bad Bollywood movie following a large ball of snot down the street.

Chapter Fifteen

The two female sea horses ran swiftly on bare feet, following the human in his metal transport that carried the body of the fertile royal male. Even while keeping to the shadows, the two well-trained hunters managed to keep the land conveyance in their sights.

Neither female was pleased.

The breeding male had once again eluded their grasp.

They had followed him back to the domicile he shared with the strange magical being, but after that they were forced to bide their time, waiting for him to exit the structure.

Then when he exited in a state of what appeared to be agitation, the strange human who smelled of oil and spices had made off with him.

They had stalked their prey for a long time, and to lose their quarry to a mere human—it was preposterous.

“At least this one is easier to track than the magical one,” Ti, the female with the larger horns, muttered to her companion.

“I like this not,” the second female, Zot, muttered. “There are too many elements surrounding this royal. We should return home. I am sure the queen will beget a male fry on this new batch the king now carries.”

“And would you like to wait?”

She arched her eyebrow and stared down the smaller female.

“No,” Zot agreed with a small sigh. “But the currents that surround this one...”

“You worry too much about these bipeds.” Ti snorted. “We will continue to watch for this human, and then...”

She broke off as a loud scream rent the early-evening air.

“You can’t cut me!” Taza shrieked as the knife came down on his stomach. “Oh Great Mother, I think I’m going to die!”

He squeezed his eyes shut, bracing for the pain of the slicing blade, when—all he felt was pressure.

He slitted one eye open, chest heaving in his renewed fear, and he saw the human standing there with a confused look on his face.

“You broke my blade.” He frowned, staring down at the remains of what was once a huge hunting knife in his hand.

And indeed his knife was broken; the blade curved and turned in on itself, rendering the sharp knife totally useless.

“Hmmm,” Taza managed before he squeaked again.

The human had reached onto a table he hadn’t really paid all that much attention to and pulled out what appeared to be a long, rectangular-bladed knife with a short black handle.

He screamed, slamming his eyes shut again as the human brought this blade down onto his stomach.

Again, there was a *thunk* when the blade struck, but only pressure.

He cautiously opened one eye to find the human standing over him. But instead of confused, the male was looking quite angry.

“That was my best hatchet! You are going to pay, merboy!”

He tossed the ruined tool aside and this time picked up a huge blade that had a chain wrapped around it.

The human gave a short dangling string on top of it a jerk, and the thing sputtered.

Taza began to squirm as much as he could. He was still partially paralyzed by his fear of heights, but this whole situation was growing ridiculous.

If he weren't frozen with fright, he might have chuckled. It seemed his armor was too tough for human blades, and the human was now resorting to strange tactics.

The human grunted, frowning down at the smoking-chain thing in his hand before he bent over and placed it on the ground.

Now that it was closer to Taza's perch on the floor, he could smell the sickening odor that the thing emitted, almost like the cars the humans drove but not as strong. And he saw the chain on that thing. It was almost enough to make him faint. This new horror had dozens of sharp-looking blades embedded throughout the chain's length.

No matter how much his armor protected, he just had a feeling that it would not blunt this chain.

He watched as the human placed a booted foot on one side of the thing, gripped the string again, and gave it another tug.

It coughed and then nothing.

"Stupid chain saw," Bo muttered, wrinkling up his nose and giving his chain saw another shake. "I wanted to do this with a knife and not get blood splatters on my good clothes. But it looks like it's going to have to be a slaughter."

"S-slaughter?" Taza managed.

"Yeah, your skin is kind of tough, but this little beauty will rip right through it. You may be a little mushy, but hell, I figure I can always put your remains in a blender and drink you down like a shake."

He gave the chain saw another tug, and the damn thing started to growl.

"Here we go!"

Taza's screams drowned out the sounds of the saw.

Chapter Sixteen

Astika rounded the corner of the warehouse district, still following the crawling sea foam and getting more and more frustrated with each passing second.

“Can’t you move any fasssster?”

He glared at the little ball of snot as if his gaze alone would will it to move.

“I know Taza said that you weren’t sentient, but one could only hope that you can think a little about the danger Taza is in and just move a little faster!”

He ignored the looks he was getting from the people he passed, and just nodded at the hoots and catcalls that some women and men let out in his direction.

“I loved you in *300!*” was a familiar cry, as well as comments on his chest and legs.

“Humans,” he growled, recalling some of the earthier suggestions that were put to him.

They moved onward, leaving the populous farther and farther behind, and were soon surrounded by the tall buildings of the warehouse district, right near the docks where Taza had sent off his blood to his people.

He closed his eyes for a moment, his thoughts going to his mate, and felt a pang of loss mingling with his fear and anger.

Taza was special. He spoke his mind, and he was straightforward and direct.

When dealing with a family whose stock in trade was deception and aversion, Astika felt that the little sea horse was a refreshing change.

He’d had a wrecked childhood, and yet he hadn’t descended into depression or self-loathing.

Astika closed his eyes, inhaling deeply as he thought over his own life and his reactions to his family.

He had never realized that he was on the verge of becoming some brooding hulk of a Nāga.

Looking at his future as it had been progressing before Taza, he realized that he probably could have become some brooding, angst-ridden, opium-afflicted dreg. With his family and his own reactions to them, drugs were the only thing that he could think of that would have deadened the pain if his life had continued on its previous path. With his grandfather's ignorance, his other grandfather's stupidity, and his father's—he didn't even know what label to lay upon that man. With all of them combined, it was amazing that he hadn't attempted mind-numbing drugs already. All his life, he had only had his mother to rely on. Maybe it was time for that change that Taza instigated within him so easily.

And it all started when he had stood up—actually stood up—to his father. For once he hadn't just agreed with what the man said just to shut him up and get him gone.

He openly defied the bastard, bit the hell out of him, and declared his independence from his father's oh so sage wisdom.

And lost his mate because of it.

Hmm, he mused as he followed along behind the slowly moving ball of snot; he should have pumped just a little more venom into his father. True, he would now have shakes, fever, diarrhea, and muscle aches, blurred vision, and a massive migraine headache. But if he had held on a moment longer, he was sure that he could have induced some bladder-control issues at the very least and left one eyeball paralyzed at the most. Walking around with one eye frozen open would have taught his father to keep his eyes on his own affairs.

Missed opportunities, he supposed. Like he was in danger of missing out on having his small mate to rely on as they tried to make this mating work for the both of them.

Hell, if he could get back the small male, he might seriously even consider having those kids himself—maybe—in the distant future.

He grinned as he pictured the sea horse's outrage when he informed him that he could top, but only with a human condom if one of his mother's fertility charms was active. And knowing his mother's love of children, she may have already placed a fertility charm on him.

His mate's screams when he found out would be heard for miles around.

He paused and blinked, his whole body freezing.

That screaming was not in his imagination! He could actually hear his mate bellowing out in pure fear!

His tongue darted out and—yes! He was picking up his mate's scent again—and that of the human who had first tried to claim him!

Reaching down to scoop up the sea foam, Astika took off running, his mind on only one thing: retrieve the mate and destroy anything that got in his path. His black eyes glowed eerily in the growing darkness as he raced toward his mate.

Patience and intelligence were replaced by the need for vengeance and death.

His Nāga nature was running hot and free.

As he slipped through the shadows, the night grew silent.

Death had come out to play, and no being wanted to draw its attention.

Taza's renewed screams were still filling the air as two female sea horses burst into the room.

Bo eased his grip on the handle of the chain saw and spun around, surprise clearly on his face.

"Release the..." The larger of the two looked around, then paled as her eyes grew wide.

The second and smaller female fell to the floor, her body twitching as it apparently dawned on them that they had raced a whole floor up.

“Mermaids!” Bo cheered happily as the spear the first one held clattered to the floor. His grin was big enough to split his wide face in half, and if Taza could have moved, he would have rolled his eyes at them all.

“Mermaids! They came to me! Here I was wishing for some mermaids instead of the merboy, and see what happened?” He grinned at Taza. “I don’t like boys that way really. I think I would rather eat a girl.”

He paused, blinking as he stared at the paralyzed duo. “I was going to eat you, though, and you are a boy.” He cocked his head to the side, a confused look on his face. “Does that make me gay?”

Taza broke through his fear long enough to gasp, “What?”

Then Bo pulled the string on his chain saw again. It started with a horrific roar.

“I’ll mix you all up in my shake,” he decided, smirking, as the females didn’t move at all in the face of this new threat. “I guess that’ll make me bi.”

He took another step toward Taza, hefting the smoking, roaring saw above him.

“You first,” he sneered at Taza. “Never cared for that ladies-first crap in the first place.”

Taza tried to move again, tried to scream to do anything to save himself, but his damn genetic fear would not allow him to do anything more than whimper, his eyes wide, his hearts feeling as if they would tear from his chest as he watched the whirling death move closer and closer.

He squeezed his eyes shut and, with his last breath, pictured the dour face of his mate and felt regret for what could have been.

I’ll have the damn babies, he thought. Just come and save me.

And then the heat and wind from the chain saw were close enough to make his skin crawl in fear.

“Astika!” he screamed, despair filling him.

“Get away from my mate!”

Was he hallucinating? Had abject horror driven him to imagine his mate’s voice?

Taza opened his eyes and gasped.

Astika stood in the door, Taza’s sea foam in one hand, death in his eyes, and a loincloth girding his...loins?

Who cared? His mate was here!

“Astika!” he bellowed again, a grin breaking across his face as the human turned away from him and began stalking his mate.

“Taza!”

Astika felt rage wash over him, overwhelming his senses as he took in the situation in the room.

His lover was lying on the ground, his body twisted and bound; two female sea horses were frozen near the entrance from what had to be that genetic fear of heights. And a human, the same human he tried to track, was standing over them, anger twisting his features.

“Mine!” Bo bellowed, his face contorting into a grimace of rage as he shifted his weight and turned toward the doorway.

“Never!”

The words were whispered harshly as a ripping sound filled the room.

Pieces of his loincloth and the sandals sprayed about as Astika took on his true form.

His large snake body grew in a flash, several feet of tail whipping around the room. He threw his arm up as several wicked-looking spikes popped free, just in time to meet the clashing *whir* of the chain saw as Bo brought it down toward his head.

“I don’t think sssso, human!” he roared, his free hand coming up to punch the human in the face as his left arm engaged with the chain saw and shoved the dangerous blade aside.

The chainsaw connected with a deep, meaty *thud* and a screaming whine that caused Bo to stagger back several paces but maintain his grip on the saw as it slid away from the angry critter.

“What are you?” Bo gasped, his eyes taking in several feet of snake body attached to a muscular torso and a horrific face where an open, fanged mouth spewed forth angry growls.

Astika began to move his torso from side to side, his body swaying in a dangerous, seductive dance. He hissed, extending his fangs even as his tongue flashed out from between black predator’s lips. He scented the human, taking in the fear that began to fill the room as Bo got a full glimpse of a Nāga in battle mode.

“Release what is mine!”

Astika moved carefully, his body too big to maneuver comfortably in the small room. He didn’t want to take the chance of getting himself tangled up and giving the crazed human a chance to attack his mate again.

So with a flick of his tail, the metal table went flying across the room, turning Bo’s attention away from him, the horrified stare he cast upon his body now instinctively following the sound of the table crashing against the wall to his right.

When he turned toward the sound, Astika moved again.

He lowered his body and dived toward the human, striking out with long fangs and furious anger.

Bo turned back just in time to see death swarming toward him and again brought his chain saw up in a defensive manner, trying to protect his vulnerable face and neck.

This time Astika caught the blade with his hand, swatting it aside carelessly, ignoring the scream of the chain as it came up against impenetrable scales. Bo

staggered, exposing the right side of his body to the lightning-fast swipe that rent clothing and skin in several places as Astika struck with his claws.

“Jesus!” Bo gasped, fighting to stay on his feet as the smell of his blood filled the room.

He staggered around, swinging the chain saw back blindly toward the monster attacking him.

Astika hissed as the blade struck his face, leaving a thin red mark across his cheek, severing several inches of his midnight blue hair.

“Tika!” Taza gasped, tears filling his eyes as he struggled to move, to go to and protect his mate, but his efforts were in vain.

Astika slowly turned his face toward the human, who was staring in horrified awe at the face the whirling chain saw had merely scratched.

“What are you?”

“You will die!” Astika roared, diving toward the human again, his tail rolling up to crash into the human’s back, driving him into the death of fangs and teeth that awaited him in Astika’s open arms.

The chain saw fell from the human’s hand, the engine halting, the blade slowly winding down as clawed hands gripped shoulders, digging in. Blood welled up from the incisions he created with his talons as he lifted the large human as if he weighed no more than a child.

Bo was carried, his legs kicking and his eyes wide in horror, several feet into the air.

“You dared to touch what is mine? You dared steal from me? You dared harm my mate?”

Clear thinking had long fled from Astika’s mind. He was filled with a murderous rage at the thing that had dared to accost and injure his mate.

“I...I... Merboy...” Bo babbled, but Astika roared in his face, his lips pulled back to expose gleaming fangs, his solid black eyes showing no mercy.

“Taza issss mine!”

Then Bo squealed as he felt a flash of anger-cooled flesh right before he felt something tear into his throat.

Astika let his rage carry him as he buried his fangs into the human’s neck.

He wanted it to die! He wanted it to suffer! He wanted it to—Damn. He blinked as a low whimper from his mate reached his ears.

Could he murder this pitiful creature with his delicate mate looking on? Could he taint his mate’s vision of him with blood and death?

No.

Astika pulled back before the human got a lethal dose of venom.

“Trassssh!” he hissed, carelessly tossing the human aside, ignoring the *thud* of his body crashing into overturned tables as he turned toward his mate.

Taza was still lying pretty much where he had fallen when the human hovered over him.

By this time, his sea foam had managed to inch into the room and was expanding, wrapping around him like a blanket.

Astika moved cautiously toward his mate before he noted that Taza’s eyes were not on his full Nāga form at all.

Now they were staring at the two frozen female sea horses who lay near the door, his breathing erratic as he tried to inch away from them.

Slowly Astika turned toward the females, and he hissed.

They both jumped, their blue eyes staring at him as he reached his mate.

“Mine!” he roared again, reaching down to lift his shaking sea horse into his arms. He was filled with a mix of pride and fear, pride that his mate had shaken off his paralyzing fear of heights long enough to try to defend himself, and fear that he would still lose his mate. “No one elsssse issss to bother ussss. No one elsssse comessss near ussss. He issss claimed by me, and no one touchesssss what issss mine!”

Taza blinked, his body relaxing as Astika's arms surrounded him, offering him protection and safe harbor from all the things that would do him harm.

At his words, a small grin spread across Taza's face.

"Yours?" Taza whispered, drawing his mate's admittedly frightening visage down toward his face with a word.

But instead of being afraid of the dripping fangs, the solid black eyes and lips, the face twisted in a sneer of anger, Taza smiled.

Astika blinked at that smile, feeling the bitter, frozen places in his heart begin to melt.

"Tazzza," he hissed, his tongue flicking out to taste the air around his mate, tasting the air to see if his Taza had been injured, purring slightly as he discovered his mate was perfectly safe.

"You came for me."

"I will alwayssss come for you."

Astika now ignored the rest of the world and the female sea horses who watched in horror as he lifted Taza high, the coils of his thick, heavy snake body embracing him gently as he lowered his mouth and took his mate's lips in a scalding, burning kiss.

Astika parted Taza's lips with his own, his long tongue fluttering against his mate's as it forced its way inside.

He moaned as he took in the taste of the mate, took in the receding terror and the building lust that slowly began to fill him.

Taza no longer felt the fear of heights that he would never overcome; he no longer felt vulnerable before the gaze of the females, because he was in his mate's arms, safe and well protected.

Moaning, he returned the kiss, taking in the tang of the venom that his mate used so well, ignoring the tingling as it flashed across his tongue along with the

small taste of human blood from the thing that had wanted to slice him up, knowing that as mate to this creature he was immune to its poisonous bite.

He sought a pure taste of his Astika and found it when his mate's tongue fluttered along his.

Slowly his hands reached up to tangle in Tika's long hair, burrowing into the cool silk as his fingers reached his scalp, massaging and rubbing as he tilted his head to the side, deepening the kiss.

He felt his sari push to the side as his blood turned into hot lava and slowly rolled through his body.

His cock hardened, pushing aside the material that concealed it, making him want to grind his heat against his mate's torso.

"Mmm, Tika." He pulled back to sprinkle kisses along his mate's face.

"Need you." Astika groaned, running his hands over his mate's body, finally dispensing with the sari.

There was a whimpering sound, and in a flash, Astika turned to face the sea-horse females lying on the ground, their eyes wide in shock.

"Mine!" he roared at the two watching.

He would ensure that they all would know the sea horse was *his* mate! He would ensure that they could not get within throwing distance of him without smelling his scent on Taza's body. He would take his mate, he would fuck his mate, he would claim his body and soul in front of them so that there would be no excuses!

No one would ever dare to take what was his again!

He lifted his mate, spreading his legs and wrapping them tightly round his waist.

He could feel Taza's nails dig into the skin of his shoulders and back as he hefted himself higher, rubbing his slick, hot cock against his stomach.

But it was not enough. He wanted more, wanted to hear his mate scream, to feel him writhe, to feel him come apart in so many pieces that no one would ever be able to put him back together again the same way. He would forever exist within his mate, and he wanted them all to see.

“Tika.” Taza was moaning, tugging at his hair, biting at his lips. “Tika, now! Please, Tika!”

“Now.”

Lowering his hands to his mate’s ass, Astika got a firm grasp and began to knead the round globes of flesh.

His attention returned to his mate as his head dropped back, and a hiss of pleasure announced his appreciation for the gesture. Taza’s thighs tightened around his waist as a musical, hissing trill rolled from his throat.

Astika growled at the friction and stared down into his mate’s eyes as a small seam in front of his groin opened and the twin heads of his cocks began to peek out.

Taza managed to roll his head downward and gasped as he saw his mate’s penises sneaking from their protective space.

Almost as if he was in awe, Taza slowly dropped his hands, gripping the thin, slick cocks, running a finger between them, stimulating the nerves there until Astika thought he would lose all control and slam into his untried mate’s body.

Yes. That would show them; that would show them all. But...but that would hurt his mate, and that was wrong. That though alone allowed him enough control to pull his mind away from the haze of sexual violence it was descending into.

Instead one of his hands went to his mate’s back, pulling him tight so that their upper bodies pressed against each other and Taza’s hand had room to slowly slide up and down his cocks, stimulating them as only a man in heat could fully understand.

“Together,” Taza moaned, shifting his hips enough to allow Astika’s cocks to entrap his, stroking all three together.

Sweet friction, Astika thought, throwing back his head before bending over to capture his mate's mouth. He invaded it with a slick forked tongue and hint of desperation.

He fed his mate the moans and gasps that only Taza could so easily draw from his body.

"I want you so badly." His mate pulled away to growl as his fist pumped faster. "I want you on your back, you deep inside me, pounding me with both these cocks. I want them so deep, Tika."

At his words, Astika bared his teeth, his head flashing down as his teeth sank deeply into his mate's shoulders.

But instead of venom, he marked his mate with his bite, creating two wounds whose red would never fade, never vanish, and would show the world that the sea horse was fully possessed by his Nāga mate.

Taza screamed, his legs trembling as he began to hump his mate, to ride the force of the slim hips that thrust up against him, vibrations shaking both of their bodies as passion began to consume them.

"Never let you go!" Taza was now screaming, his hand flying between the two of them, his own cock dribbling silvery strands of precum, which mingled with his mate's natural secretions, making them both slippery and hot, and so delicious to feel. "I will never let you go!"

Astika released his mate from his bite, lapping at the wounds his fangs had easily made in the softly armored skin, a primal scream building in his lungs as he watched the two red wounds darken.

"My mate," he roared. "Mine, mine, mine!"

"Yours!" Taza screamed as Astika buried his hands in his flowing hair, yanking his head back so that he could shout the word in his mate's face. "Yours!"

"Mine!" he roared again, looking at the dazed females, who stared back, barely conscious, eyes wide in shock.

“Mine!” He threw back his head and roared to the world at large as he redoubled his efforts, as his cocks thickened in his mate’s grasp, as the fire he felt internally began to burn fiercer and hotter at every point of contact he had with his mate’s body.

His stomach twisted; his groin burned; his cocks twined naturally around his mate’s stroking fist.

He was going to come; he was going to spew all over his mate, drowning him in his hot seed and the scent of his possession!

Still holding his mate’s head back, he licked up the pale flesh of his neck, his forked tongue teasing at the flower-petal ears, his teeth snapping at the lobe before he began screaming his mate’s name.

“Tazzzzzzaaaa!”

Then his vision began to white out; all sound ceased, the world disappeared, and there were only him and his mate and the awesome inferno that exploded between the two of them.

“Tika! Tika! Tika!” Taza was chanting, his whole body growing stiff as his cock began to pump his seed, hosing down his Nāga lovingly, passionately, and with the most explicit of possessive gestures.

The sea-salt smell of his mate’s release forced Astika over the edge. His hips snapped up against Taza’s stomach, his pulsing cocks sliding over the softly armored skin. The soft-rough texture stimulated the very sensitive nerves in the forks of his cocks to the breaking point, and with a low groan of completion he let go.

In spurts and in pulses, he drenched his mate in his cum, the spicy scent of his seed mixing and mingling with the sea-salt tinge of his mate’s, creating a scent that was so distinct, so intrinsic to his being, so theirs, marking them both so that anyone who dared approach would notice and be warned off.

He ignored the sting of his mate's claws in his back, the hate-filled gazes of the frozen females, the eerie metal room where his mate had almost met his end, and he wallowed in his sea horse, his Taza.

His tail began to protectively wrap around them as he lowered his body closer to the floor, tightening his grip on his mate's body as his own coils created a small world where the only things that existed were their mingled scents and the sound of their pounding hearts.

"Tazzza." He panted, feeling weak and, oddly enough at the same time, the strongest he had ever felt in his life.

"Home," his little sea horse squeaked. "Take me home, my mate, and let's do this again."

Apparently his little one had forgotten his fear in his mate's arms. As it should always be, Astika reasoned.

Ignoring the rest—the incapacitated, poisoned human, the hate-filled eyes of the females, the weapons of human death and destruction—Astika tightened his grip on his mate, swung him up into his arms, and unwound his body.

He still had a job to do before they could rest.

He had to bring his mate home.

Chapter Seventeen

It was a triumphant Astika who carried his mate into his temporary home, heedless of the drying semen the sea foam was struggling to clean off them and the entwined scent of two newly joined mates.

He was pleased that people in the street seemed to pass them by without noticing the large slithering Nāga carrying a small, sated sea horse.

He nodded to his mother as he made his way inside but said nothing to her.

“My son?” she called, making him pause to stare back at her, his mate still clinging to him like he would never let him go.

“Yes?” He spoke breathlessly, wanting nothing more than to lose himself within his mate once more.

“I have seen to it that no one notices our presence here. There are a lot of strange forces converging on this place, and they seem to like those who are different.”

So what the vampire had thought was correct, Astika mused as he waited for his mother to continue.

“And in addition to making sure you were not seen by those who would not understand, I have taken the liberty of having your father removed to a place where he can cause you no further mischief.”

“I thank you, Mother.” He spoke, a strange calmness settling over him. More of his worries seemed to have dissipated with his mother’s words. Now that he needn’t worry about exposure, he was now free to take his mate as he should be taken—with respect, trust, and a burgeoning love.

“Your mate?” she questioned, her own forked tongue sliding out to taste the air around them. “He is unharmed?”

“Just fine.” Taza finally spoke, looking down from his perch in his mate’s arms. “I think you are better than most mothers I know.”

He grinned at her, showing his sharply pointed teeth and a growing appreciation for a family matriarch who genuinely seemed to care.

“Well, that indeed is a compliment.” She smiled back, absently petting the cobra on her shoulder. “And I hope that you and my son have very wonderful years together.” She leaned closer, speaking softly now. “And I find myself unable to hold in the anticipation of having grandchildren to spoil and send home.”

“Well.” Taza shuddered a little but then nodded. “One day, if possible.”

“I am a fertility goddess.” She spoke imperiously, standing up to her full height, proving indeed that Astika got most of his physical attributes from his mother. Their eyes were the same shade of solid, unforgiving black, their hair had the same dark blue sheen with a hint of purple, and they both moved with the same snakelike grace. In fact, he looked like the same masculine version of the goddess who now stood before them. “When you are ready, just send me word.” Her one eye sparkled in amusement as the sea horse eagerly nodded.

“Just,” Astika added, “just do not, as the humans say, hold your breath, Mother. I believe that I will require time to know my mate before we can properly rear any offspring correctly and not have them suffer.”

“As you have suffered?” she asked quietly.

“I would not say that I suffered—”

“But your conditions were not ideal, my son. This I know. And I am proud that you have learned by example. I bid you take time to know your mate truly before you commit to children. Children are a huge responsibility, and you are wise to take time to prepare yourselves both mentally and spiritually. Unlike—”

She looked sad for a moment, but just a moment. She straightened her sari and petted her cobra on the head. "You go on and learn your mate," she decided. "I will remain here and see to it that no one interrupts your marriage night."

"I thank you, Mother." Astika nodded formally before a wicked grin broke out over his face. "I have marked him in the presence of others, yet I still feel that the claiming was not complete."

"That I can scent, my son." Manasa chuckled. "Go on. Go and treat each other well. Take ease in each other and find love."

That said, Manasa turned and exited the hall, making her way toward the kitchen and leaving the way clear for Astika to take his mate into the pillowed lounge.

"You know," Astika mused, "doing this in a bed is quite comfortable."

"Bed?" Taza tilted his head to the side. "I have heard of this concept, yet I have never experienced it. As sea horses, we shift into our primary form and wrap our tails around sleeping poles."

"And how do you connect with your mate? Do you not sleep together?"

"Tails are long." Taza grinned. "Not as long as yours, but long enough to tangle around each other and the sleeping pole."

"You will have to show me this."

"When we get to your lake." He winked. "Where is your bed?"

"Upstairs." He nodded toward the staircase, and Taza paled.

"I think I had enough of that today. How about we go to the pillows instead?"

And before he could blink, Astika had moved them inside the pillowed lounge and was slamming the door shut with his tail.

"You gonna take me like that?" he asked, patting the tail. "I love its texture, but I like the legs too."

Closing his eyes, Astika inhaled deeply, and his body melted, melded, and shrank until he was holding his mate in desperate arms and striding across the room toward the pillows with a pair of long, muscular legs.

“I never get tired of seeing that,” Taza purred as his mate lowered him to the mound of pillows.

“Good,” Astika murmured, lying beside his mate. “It is a sight I plan to show you quite often.”

“Is that right?” Taza spoke softly, leaning up toward his mate, his voice low and smoky. “You plan on showing me a lot?”

“A whole lot,” Astika breathed, leaning over his mate and looking at the mating marks that were proudly displayed on his neck.

Intense was the only word strong enough to describe his mate’s gaze.

Those deep black eyes swirled hypnotically, their slit pupils easily telling of his desire.

“You have done this before?” Taza asked a bit nervously.

Blowjobs and handjobs aside, he had never allowed himself the particular pleasure of penetration from any of his male friends.

“You don’t grow up between harems and not learn things, Taza,” Astika chided softly.

“So you have all the experience.”

“Just some.”

“And now I benefit.”

“From my education, yessss,” he deliberately hissed.

“Should I be jealous?”

“You should be pleased that I understand how to use all of those wonderful curiosities that you have procured.”

“My bag!” Taza tried to sit up, only to have his mate push him back down into the plush pillows.

“Right here.” Astika smiled, delving one hand beneath the piles and pulling out the rumpled little bag.

Before Taza could reach for it, he upended it, pawing through the various toys and bottles until he pulled up a small tube of lube.

“Edible,” he purred, his tongue flashing out to lap at his lips. “I like this.”

“If you are thinking what I am thinking...”

Taza trailed off as Astika leaned back, gripped his thighs, and pulled his legs straight up.

“Eip!” He squeaked as his mate reached down and pulled the sea foam from his body. “What are you doing?”

Before he could comment, his mate’s long tongue was lapping at his lips, his eyes intent on his mate’s scaled cock and heavy balls.

“Playing,” was the deep reply before Astika dipped his head low and pulled his mate’s cock deep into his mouth.

Taza screamed out a laugh, his hips arching as he smiled up at his mate, liking this playful side to the usually stoic man.

Then, before he could open his mouth to retort, Astika swallowed around his cock once, before he appeared to unhinge his jaw and lick both balls into his mouth as well.

Taza’s shock was apparent on his face, making Astika choke on a giggle. He spit out his mate’s organs as a full-throated laugh erupted.

“Your expressssssion,” he hissed, mirth filling his eyes.

“You could have warned me,” Taza grouched.

“And give up surprising you?” Astika asked, resting his head on his mate’s thigh, licking at his still-swollen organs. “I like surprising you.”

Taza inhaled deeply before reaching down and running his hand through Astika hair.

“It’s going to be okay?” he asked. “I think I just need to hear the words.”

“Everything is going to be beautiful.” Astika smiled softly. “Everything is going to be *behtareen*, perfect. Repeat, *behtareen*.”

“*Behtareen*.” Taza relaxed, his own smile growing softer, gentler as he relaxed into his new position as a claimed mate. “Perfect. Everything is going to be perfect.”

“Remember that,” Astika urged as he bent to take his lover’s cock and balls back into his mouth.

Taza gave a small grunt at that, arching back into the pillows as Astika began to feast upon him, giving all to his mate.

Astika took great delight in his mate’s submission, feeling powerful as his mate demonstrated his trust by opening himself to his fullest. Taza spread his legs and opened his arms wide at his sides, ready for anything his mate desired.

And his mate desired to taste him slowly all over.

He suckled at the thick organ, running his tongue over the scale patterns that were similar to the ones that covered the vulnerable points of his mate’s body, loving the texture and the sweet, salty flavor. He allowed his tongue to tease at his slit, sucking down the essence that flowed freely with his mate’s rising desire.

He pulled back and ran his tongue along the length of his mate’s cock, watching as his legs began to tremble and his thighs lifted invitingly.

He lowered his mouth farther and again pulled his balls into his mouth, toying with the soft sac before allowing the whole mouthful to slip out.

“I know what these are,” he mused, bending low to examine his mate’s testicles. “I have seen them before, played with them on my other male lovers. But I find myself intrigued with yours.”

“You...you don’t have them.” It was more of a statement than a question.

“No.” He pulled at the plump, wrinkly sac, tugging just to hear his mate whimper. “All of my reproductive organs are internal.”

“Except your two friends,” Taza pointed out.

“Yes, except for them, but they only come out when I am stimulated by your wicked fingers. How else can I pass on my seed to you?”

“I could...swallow it,” Taza teased, then began to twist, working his way around his mate until he had turned completely on the bed of pillows. Now he lay on his side, facing his mate’s two best friends.

“You like taking me into your mouth?” he pointed out.

“Well, my mouth is big enough.” Taza licked his lips before bending low and lapping at the twin heads, relishing the taste of his mate. “Your flavor is so good. It is unlike anything I have tried before.”

“And have you tried a lot?” Astika hissed as he felt his mate’s hot mouth suckle at his heads, first one and then the other, before Taza let them both go with an audible popping sound.

“No.” Taza blinked innocently up at him. “Just enough to know what I like and what I don’t.”

“I ssssee.” Astika closed his eyes and enjoyed the touch before moving his attention back to the situation in his hands, his mate’s single cock and his hard round balls.

He hefted the churning testes, watching as they lurched in his grasp, releasing more of that sea-salt scent before he examined the small pink hole below them.

“And do I please you?” Taza asked. “With all of your experience and all.”

He lifted his head and watched his mate pull him back into his mouth, his gaze curious on his face, seeing what he was going to do next.

“Very much sssso.” He breathed over the small aperture, watching as it winked at him. “You are perfect, little one.”

“So long as you remember that,” Taza teased, then choked as his mate made a move he didn’t expect.

Astika chuckled as he let his tongue flitter over his mate’s hole, caressing the outer muscles.

He ran his tongue over the small bit of skin beneath his balls before lapping at the hole again, catching his mate's hips in his hands as he thrust forward, his cock running alongside his nose.

"You like that, I think," he pulled back long enough to say.

"I-I may not be sure," Taza was quick to say. "Maybe...maybe you had better try that again...just to see..."

"Gladly."

And then he lowered his head, pressing his tongue hard against the muscle until it gained entrance.

His mate moaned, his hips sliding forward, struggling against his grasp as those sweet, dulcet tones began pouring from his throat.

"Yes." He pulled back, letting go with one hand to release his grip on Taza's hips and to tease at the swollen cock, rubbing its essence over his face, scent marking himself with his lover's precum. "Yes, you do."

"More," Taza moaned, forgetting about the twin cocks in his hands. "Tika, that—Oh Mother Sea, that is—It's—"

"Delicious." Astika completed his sentence. "You are delicious."

Astika closed his eyes and wallowed in this most potent taste of his mate, all sea salt and sugar.

Taza's hips were grinding, his top leg lifting to encase his head as he allowed his tongue to enter and dig deep.

He knew that humans had a special gland and that Nāgas had several, and learned that apparently a sea horse's whole tunnel was like one huge pleasure spot, because immediately his mate's cock stiffened, and he erupted, sending his cum spraying over his forehead and into his hair.

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" the little sea horse trilled, his body flopping to lie bonelessly on his back, though his cock was still rock hard. "Oh yeah!"

Chuckling, Astika rose up, loving the light blue flush that filled his mate's face as he swiped at his forehead, mixing his seed into his dark hair.

"I am bathed in you," he whispered, bending low to steal a kiss, groaning as his lover's arms went around his neck and pulled him down to deepen the intimacy.

"Yes," Taza purred, his chest rising and falling rapidly, his hearts pounding in the center of his chest. "Now I want something more of you in me."

"Whatever you desire." He gave one final lick at his mate's lips before rising up to his knees, his erections bobbing as he bent and grabbed the tube of lube. "Cotton candy," he mused, shrugging as he unscrewed the lid.

He popped the tamperproof seal with one fang before he squeezed a generous portion out onto his fingers.

He looked down at his mate to see him spreading his legs wide and bringing his knees to his chest.

"Get on with it," his sea horse demanded, looking so impatient and aroused that it was almost more than he could stand.

"Happily."

He bent low and placed one final kiss on his mate's hole before he coated two fingers generously and sank one inside.

"Hot and wet and soft," he mused, realizing that the scale patterns were repeated in a more silken texture within his mate. "Oh, I am going to love being inside of you."

"If they both fit," Taza teased on a moan, his hips arching as he tightened his grip on his knees. "You had better see to it that they both fit, Tika. It is really important."

"You just have a hungry ass," Astika teased back, but he pulled out and added another finger, loving the way his mate's body just opened to him. "So hungry for me."

"Yes," Taza agreed. "Feed it."

“Not yet!” He began to twist his fingers, stretching his mate gently, grinning as those tones began to emerge again.

It was proving easy to tell when he pleased his mate. His little one didn't even try to be coy or hide his pleasure.

“Now, Astika!” Taza panted, resting one leg on Astika shoulder, his free hand going to stroke his once-again-leaking cock. “Now, Nāga! I am ready now!”

“Very well, my mate,” he finally agreed, pulling his fingers out and going back to the tube to lube up both of his cocks thoroughly.

He leaned over his mate, allowing his hair to flow forward, creating a dark world where only the two of them existed.

His mate whimpered as his heads kissed his opening, pressed against it, and then began to ease in.

“Mother Sea!” Taza gasped, his eyes going wide before they squeezed shut, his body opening slightly but deciding whether to eject the invader that was seeking entry.

Astika paused, resting with the twin heads barely breaching.

“Are you good?”

“It burns,” Taza moaned, his head rolling from side to side, both his hands now gripping Astika shoulders. “It burns, my mate. It burns and it stretches and it stings and it feels so damn good and...and...and I think I need more, and I'm going to scream...”

“Breathe with me, Taza.”

Astika's blew his warm breath over his lover's face, before inhaling the scent of him deeply, smelling of spice and the sea, and Taza felt himself slowly begin to relax into his possession.

“That's right,” Astika urged. “Breathhhhe with me.”

Astika felt his lover's chest expand, felt him slow his irregular breaths in an attempt to match them with his, and he consciously slowed his breathing.

As Taza breathed, his body began to ease, felt the heads of Astika's two cocks slowly begin to breach the guardian muscles that protested his entrance.

"Good," Astika whispered, leaning forward to take his mate's mouth, swallowing his moan and closing his eyes as he gained more ground.

"Oh, oh mother." Taza whimpered, breaking away from the kiss and turning his head to the side. "I-I—"

"Sssshh." Astika was slowly licking at his neck, running his split tongue up to his ear, where it lapped at the delicate petal shape. "You are doing so fine."

"I am not a woman!"

Astika pulled back and stared down into a pair of eyes that were squinted up at him in more than passion, though the lust was still there.

"I am not some weak female. The one thing that sea-horse males are prized on is our ability to fuck. So fuck me, my mate! Don't treat me as if I am this delicate thing that will break."

To emphasize his point, Taza reached up and gripped handfuls of his mate's hair, pulling in sharp intent.

"You are in, now fuck me!"

Astika could not argue with that.

Easing back a bit, Astika pushed forward, firmly and steadily, closing his eyes as the hot tunnel of his mate's body opened for him.

If he believed in heaven, this would be as close to it as he could get while still on earth.

A low grumbling hiss pushed out from between his lips as his mate whimpered beneath him.

"Okay." He panted. "Maybe that was a bit much."

Tika opened his eyes and saw his mate panting, an overwhelmed expression on his face.

He immediately began to pull out, but his mate's legs wrapped themselves tightly round his waist, holding him in place.

"I didn't say stop!" the indignant sea horse complained. "Just...just don't move for a moment."

Partially buried in his mate's ass, Tika smiled down at him and shook his head.

"Will there come a time when you will sssstop giving me orderssss?"

"No." Taza grunted up at him. "It takes time to properly train a mate, and I have to start now with you, or we will never get you right."

In response, Astika paused and eased the rest of his twin cocks deep within his mate with purpose.

He got a low trill in return, his mate's eyes closing as his hands wrapped around to his shoulders, the nails digging in deep.

"Oh wow," Taza moaned, his hips arching up. "Just...just... I can feel you deep."

Astika leaned over Taza, pressing his mate's swollen cock against the soft hair and ripples of muscle that made up his abdomen, ensuring that the sensitive backside of his cock was caressed fully with his first stroke.

"Oh, do that again!" Taza wailed, his whole body in spasms, his silken walls pulsing around Tika's twin cocks "Do it now!"

And Tika pulled out, looking down as his mate's hole stretched wide to accommodate two writhing cocks.

"Thissss lookssss sssso perfect," he hissed, the sight almost making him lose control. As he pulled out, the pink rim of his mate's hole hugged his cocks as if his body never wanted to let his dicks go. Then it opened freely to welcome him back inside.

Entranced with the view, Astika repeated the slow movements again and again until the wailing from his mate penetrated his dazed haze.

“Harder!” Taza was bellowing. “Harder now! More! I want more! Fuck me!”

Taza’s body was sheened in sweat, his armor glinting in the pale light of the lamps, his muscles clenching and relaxing as he thrust his hips upward, making his mate move deeper, faster within him.

“Sssso perfect,” he hissed, leaning forward, feeling not only the pleasure of being inside his mate’s body but having both cocks taken inside that perfect place. “My own!”

Taza, in response, opened his mouth, and a trilling song, tones of infinite beauty and pure joy, poured from his throat.

Then he tightened his legs and, in a move that left Tika gasping in shock, flipped him over onto his back.

“Fuck yeah!” he roared, his Mohawked hair flying around him as he began to ride his mate as if he were—well, as if he were a horse.

His teeth gritted, his hands fisting in the long blue-black hair like it was reins, Taza threw back his head, both song and curses flowing from his throat as he slammed his body down, moving faster and faster.

Tika planted his feet flat and raised his knees, giving Taza support even as he bettered his position to watch his cocks sink deep into his mate.

Taza’s bobbing cock was a temptation that was too hard to resist. He found himself fisting that pretty organ, rolling the foreskin back and forth over the purple head, feeling the soft armorlike scales that encircled the shaft.

He looked up to see the pale eyes staring into his, his mate’s full concentration on him as sweat poured from his body and filled the air with the tang of salt from the sea. His body was shuddering, his nipples hard points, his hair a beautiful frame for a perfect piece of art. Astika was entranced.

He was also very close, and the sight of his mate bouncing happily on his cocks was driving him over.

“I...I—” He gasped, groaning and struggling to keep visual contact with his mate. “I’m gonna—I can’t—”

“Come!” Taza wailed, his inner walls tensing as he suddenly stiffened. His eyes fluttered closed, and his head fell back as a loud scream echoed from his throat.

And Astika was lost.

It started as a low vibration deep in his back and traveled up his spine until it encompassed his whole body. Fire poured through his veins, his mouth dried out, and his eyes began to water as the pressure built, and pleasure so pure it was nearly pain raced through him.

He was only conscious of gasping his mate’s name before he felt it slam into him, a release so great, it threatened to steal his soul.

His back arched, his hands slipped to his mate’s waist, tightening his grip and slamming him down as far as he could go, his twin cocks swelling before bursting, sending his white-hot seed flowing deep into Taza’s body.

He was aware of his mate screaming, of his long nails raking down his chest, marking him and drawing blood, of his body tightening and wringing every bit of his orgasm from his body, of his name being chanted over and over.

And then there was the boneless exhaustion that came with a job well done, of muscles stressed to their breaking point suddenly releasing and sending him spiraling toward oblivion. The feel of his mate’s body settling over him added to the warmth and comfort that he craved.

“Taza,” he moaned, burying his face in the flowing hair, inhaling the scent of his most precious mate, the scent of the salt and of the sea.

He wrapped his arms around the small trembling body, ignoring the wet of their mutual release, which covered his stomach and stung his welts, but he found it hard to care.

“My mate,” came the response. He moved slightly, repositioning, then sliding partially out of Taza but with the bulk of his semierect cock remaining inside the small tight body.

“Next time,” Taza panted, smiling down at him. “Next time I get to top.”

Epilogue

“Where is my son?”

The short, horned woman barged into the small house, her hands on her hips and fire shooting from her eyes. “I know that he is here!”

“Oh, you must be the queen of the Coushrin power throne.” Manasa gracefully rose to her feet, her eyes flashing dangerously for a moment before she allowed a smile to spread across her face.

“I am. And may I ask who is now barring the way to my fry?”

“You may.” Manasa nodded as she rose to her full height, which made her tower over the sea horse. “I am Manasa, goddess of healing, childbirth, and longevity, daughter of Shiva, the god of pure destruction and transformation, wife to the great sage Jaratkarū, mother to the god Astika, master of philosophy and mediation and mate to Taza, next in line for the Coushrin power throne.”

She paused to let that information sink in, noticing how the female’s eyes grew wide before she controlled her reaction behind a haughty visage.

“And who might you be?”

“I am Leza, current queen of the dynasty of Coushrin, mother to the one you name as mate to your offspring.”

“Well, it seems you finally received our messages about the mating.” Manasa smiled sweetly.

“I received no messages.”

“Then you had better have a talk with your staff. A royal message was sent out about dowries if you so require one, and stipulations for our sons. But it appears to be a straightforward mating, no real need for concern.”

“I have no knowledge of this!” The female sea horse was tall for her species, at least five feet three inches. Her hair, a long, flowing dark green Mohawk, touched her lower back and a set of blunted pale horns rode high on either side of her head.

Her eyes were a deep blue, with large pupils that seemed to take in everything around her.

And her body was covered in a large fall of pale white sea foam that covered her breasts as well as protected her brightly armored skin from casual observers.

As Manasa watched, she reached up to grip at an oddly shaped pendant around her neck.

Manasa leaned in closer to see what it was and smirked as she puzzled out the shape of a small bottle.

“I received a blood message from my child. I guess your son would explain why the scents are mingled, but I have no knowledge of a bonding between our fry.”

“Well”—Manasa grinned—“it is done. I am eagerly anticipating the first clutch of eggs—”

“Our species may not be compatible.”

“Please.” Manasa rolled her eyes. “My father is a god of destruction and creation. My child will get what he longs for, and I will have my son’s offspring to love.”

“Then as it is a thing already done,” the queen sneered, “I think I will pray for useful females.”

“Useful?” Manasa’s right eye began to twitch.

“Males are only good for reproduction, and your father had better be powerful if he plans on getting anything useful out of two males.”

“I see.” Manasa glowered. “I am also a goddess of fertility and health.”

“You will need it. Males are so weak, a little exercise can kill them. Take my mate. He only has delivered twelve nests, and already he is seeking rest. My own sire bore fifteen nests before he required a rest.”

She paused, securing the bottle back to her neck. “Well, at least my mate is good at delivering daughters. We only have one son, thank the creators, so there will be no real battle with any female trying to claim and assuming the power of the throne.” She narrowed her eyes at Manasa. “But I guess that is a moot point, seeing as how the throne will pass to your son upon my passing and then on to any of the half-breed abominations that they will have. You are human?”

“Never have been.” Manasa’s teeth were gritted, so her voice sounded a bit pinched.

“Well, that is something. Your child, he is something preternatural as well?”

“You could say that.”

“And he must have some power to him if he trapped my male fry. That should account for something.”

“And yet the females could not catch him,” Manasa pointed out as she took a step back and inhaled deeply. It would not look good to kill the queen just now and allow her son to assume the throne so quickly after they had been introduced.

“What happened to them, anyway? You know about the females hunting him. If they had been worth their names as warriors, they would have captured him and had him pregnant by now.”

“I believe you will find them both tied up in a warehouse. That is where my son, I believe he said, left them.”

“Hmm.”

“Are you going to go and fetch them?”

“I guess I have to. Don’t want any humans getting them and coming up with some strange ideas. But if it were not for the risk of discovery, I would leave them there to rot.”

“Ignorance and incompetence have no place in a royal house.” Manasa moved closer to the queen, a smile spreading across her face. There was death in her eyes, but the sea horse did not seem to notice.

“We seem to share the same philosophy on that, at least,” the queen allowed. “I will send a message to my people, and the mating will be official before the sun sets once again. All attempts to take the worthless male will be halted. If you are sure they are mated.”

They were interrupted by a high-pitched scream from a room deeper in the house.

“As-As-tika! Oh sweet seas! Again! Do that again!”

“I think that proves it.” The queen sighed. “Well, at least your male can keep mine in line and remind him of his place.”

“You know”—Manasa smiled, reaching out to touch the queen’s shoulder—“you remind me of someone.”

The sea horse tilted her head inquiringly.

“Oh, I remember.” She smirked. “You remind me of another stern woman I have in my life. My stepmother, Chandi, would probably love to meet you.”

“A stern woman?”

“Yes.” Manasa ran a finger over her eye patch as a bright glint entered her remaining eye. “Very stern.”

“I would meet this woman. If she commands respect and believes in discipline, I believe we shall get along nicely. I hope she is an example of the women in your family.”

“Pantheon,” Manasa absently corrected. “After all, you are joining with a house of gods. Now shall we go and punish your minions?”

“Yes, sounds like a plan.” The sea horse sniffed, nodded, and then turned toward the door. “You will show me the way?”

“Oh, I’ll show you the way.” Manasa grinned, showing all her bright white teeth.

Anyone else would have been afraid, but the queen just nodded.

“Then let us depart. The sooner I take care of this, the sooner I can return to my kingdom and assure my weak mate that his male fry is fine. They expire over the oddest things, and I don’t want to have to replace him. His dam is still alive, and that woman is really tough. You lead the way.”

“Wonderful, my dear,” Manasa purred, wrapping one arm about the barely mollified sea-horse queen. “I will treat you as I have treated my stepmother, Chandi. You both deserve that consideration from me. Now tell me, how exactly do you feel about small creatures like...snakes?”

~ * ~

Glossary of Terms

Abbu—father

Baita—son

Choomna—kiss

Hont—lips

Khubsurat—lovely

Nanna bachcha—mother's baby

Plyaalaa—cup

Pani—water

Shehed—honey

Walda—mother

Fun Facts About Sea Horses

from <http://www.iseahorses.com>

Endangered Species

Sea horses are an endangered species and gained international protection on May 15, 2004. They live in the tropics and can also be found along temperate coasts. Twenty-five *million* sea horses are traded worldwide on an annual basis, causing increasing concern that sea horses are even more at risk. Their natural predators are crab, tuna, skates, rays, and now humans.

Mating

Sea horses are loyal to their mates and mate for life. Male sea horses have a small pouch into which the female deposits her eggs, making the male sea horse the only male in the animal kingdom that gives birth.

Physical Characteristics

Color

Sea horses come in a wide variety of colors and patterns! Some have spots, others have zebra-like stripes, and they can actually change color to blend in with their surroundings.

Size and Structure

An adult sea horse can range in size between two and eight inches. Sea horses are vertebrates; i.e., they have a backbone, and are of the Teleost suborder (bony fish). Their small dorsal fins beat back and forth very quickly, which moves them through water and helps them stay upright. Their pectoral fins help them steer.

Tail

Sea horses have prehensile tails. They use their tails to hold onto things, like seaweed when they're resting, and each other, too. You can often see two sea horses swimming around, linked together by their tails. A sea horse's tail only curls one way. It cannot curl backward.

Know Your Hindu Deities

Astika: the Original Child of Necessity, or a Case of Mama's Baby, Daddy's Maybe

The ancient Hindu *rishi*, (sage) Astika, was a son of another sage, Jaratkarū (Jagatkarū) and Manasa, the serpent goddess.

Astika saved the life of Takshaka, a king during the time King Janamejaya was making serpent sacrifices. According to legend, Astika persuaded the king to stop persecuting serpents.

Takshaka was a Nāga who lived in Takshasila, a territory he formed after being banished by the Pandavas. It was headed by Kurukshetra and Arjuna, from the Khandava Forest.

In revenge for wrongs committed by the Pandavas, Takshaka decided to assassinate King Parikshit, Arjuna's grandson. Takshaka disguised himself and poisoned the king's food. He also bribed a priest who could have saved Parikshit.

Parikshit's son, King Janamejaya then led a battle at Takshasila and successfully expelled the Nāgas. He continued massacring Nāgas, intending to exterminate the race.

Takshaka fled to the Deva territory, asking for protection from King Indra. Janamejaya's men captured him, intending to execute him and other Nāga chiefs.

Astika at that time was a young boy as well as a sage like his father. His mother was a Nāga, and the boy petitioned Janamejaya to stop killing the Nāgas and let Takshaka go. After that the Kurus and Nāgas lived peacefully.

Manasa: Loving Nāga Mother, Protector, Healer, Fertility Goddess... The One-Eyed B*tch You Just Don't Wanna Mess With!

Manasa (sister to Vasuki, the serpent king) is usually depicted as a woman covered by snakes. She's often seen standing on a snake or sitting on a lotus flower. The hoods of seven cobras cover her. Sometimes a child, presumably her son Astika, sits on her lap.

Her stepmother burned out one of Manasa's eyes, earning Manasa the title of "one-eyed goddess."

Manasa was accepted in the pantheon worshiped by lower-caste Hindu groups, even though she was originally known a tribal goddess. By the 1500s, she was identified as the goddess of fertility and marriage rites and was assimilated into the

Shaiva pantheon, related to the god Shiva. She is now considered a Hindu goddess who protects people from snake bites.

According to *Manasa Vijaya*, Vasuki's mother sculptured a statue of a girl. The statue was touched by Shiva's semen and Manasa was born. Vasuki accepted Manasa as his sister.

Shiva was sexually attracted to the girl. When she proved he was her father, he took her to his home. Chandi, his wife, thought the girl was Shiva's concubine, and burned out one of her eyes. Once, Chandi kicked her; Manasa rendered the other woman senseless with a single glance from her burned out eye.

Eventually tiring of the squabbles, Shiva deserted Manasa beneath a tree. A surrogate mother, Neto (or Neta), was created from Shiva's tears.

When Jaratkarū married Manasa, Chandi ruined the couple's wedding night. She'd suggested Manasa wear an ornament of snakes. Then she tossed a frog into their chamber, causing havoc. Jaratkarū, scared, ran away from the house. A few days later, he came back and their son, Astika, was created.

Manasa descended to earth to obtain human devotees. She brought calamity to those who denied her, forcing people to worship her. She successfully converted the Muslim leader Hasan. She failed to convert a Shiva and Chandi devotee named Chand. She left him penniless and killed his six sons, the eldest on his wedding night. Finally convinced by his wife and widowed daughter-in-law's pleas, he offered a flower to Manasa. The flower pleased Manasa and restored his fortune, his fame, and brought his sons back to life. Worshiping her has been popular since.

Jaratkarū, The Wise Absentee Father and Deadbeat Husband You Just Gotta Love... Or the Man with a Great Fear of Snakes Despite Being Married to One

According to Hindu legend, Jaratkarū, the sage, had decided not to marry until he happened on a number of men hanging upside down from a tree. The men were his ancestors. Because their children had not performed their last rights, the men were doomed. They suggested Jaratkarū marry and have a son, a son they hoped could perform the ceremonies to free them. Vasuki offered his sister, Manasa, in marriage. The couple's son was Astika.

Astika freed his father's ancestors and also helped save the Nāga race when King Janamejaya decided to sacrifice them in his fire offering.

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☪ THE END ☪

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Stephanie Burke, known as Flash, is just your typical housewife who keeps a collection of slave-type males in her attic, leather and bondage gear in her living room, dimensional portals in the downstairs bathroom, and a few dozen worlds in the basement where they tend to collect dust and require vacuuming every now and again.

Stephanie has no pets; she has a husband and two little ones instead, gardens when weather permits, forces family members and loved ones to pose for her paintings, and has an unfounded reputation for assaulting waiters! (Big untruth! No one has documented proof!)

In between maintaining her own little piece of the universe (the sky really is magenta there), she writes constantly, travels to conventions, is actually paid to give lectures (go figure), and devises new ways to try and push the envelope, any envelope, just a little bit further. Find Flash's chat group at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/FlameKeeper>.