

"I'll go talk to them..." Zaryusu suggested, knowing his mind should have been on his duty to protect his tribe... but... *'That one... that's the most beautiful female I've ever seen...'* He thought, and all he wanted to do was get closer to her.

He didn't wait for his brother to respond, or rather, didn't plan to, but before he could leap over the front, his brother had his finger claws on Zaryusu's shoulder. "Wait-"

"Don't worry," Zaryusu said with a deferential nod, "I am a traveler, I can take this risk without hurting the tribe."

"It will hurt your brother." Shasuryu said in a low, gruff voice when he looked down his long face at his brown scaled kin.

"I will be fine, brother." Zaryusu said and put his hand over that of his brother, he slowly pulled the touch away, "If they wanted to fight, we'd know it by now. We're just being cautious..."

Shasuryu let his hand be taken away, and Zaryusu put a hand on the wooden wall before launching himself over the side. He landed on the soft ground below with a light splash and approached the Red Eye tribe. The sword he kept at his side, Frost Pain, the jagged blade of winter ice, one of the great treasures of the lizardmen drew murmurs from them as he came closer.

Zaryusu stopped six paces away and held his hands open and out at his sides to show he held no weapon. "I am Zaryusu, Traveler and member of the Green Claw tribe."

"A traveler is the chief?" Crusch Lulu asked and cocked her head to one side.

"My brother is the chief, I am his ears for now, why have you come?" Zaryusu asked, trying very hard not to immediately utter a mating call and maintain a serious air. *'They wouldn't be here without reason, if not to fight... then what?'*

Crusch Lulu accepted the answer, raising a hand when some behind her muttered that the chief should have come out, it stilled their tongues and she took a slow breath. "Our village was attacked by an army of frogmen."

"An army? Not a tribe?" Zaryusu asked, his scaled brow narrowed.

"No, an *army*. There were many... many, led by a female named Heketi. She was enormous, taller than your walls, and broader than your gates... they've vowed to kill us all. We need help, we need-" Crusch stopped when Zaryusu raised his hand.

"If they want to kill all of you... why should we get involved?" Zaryusu asked, looking her up and down and then trying to focus on the desperate numbers at her back.

"No. Not 'us' my tribe. She intends to kill all of 'us' as in the lizardmen... she wants to take control of the entire lake and the swamp... we have no place in her world..." Crusch bowed her head, "Please, if we don't work together, she will crush us all one by one. There will be no Lizardmen..."

"Wait here, I must take this to my chief... I... I will be back." Zaryusu promised, and tried not to appear rushed as he returned to the wall. *'Frogmen... dangerous enemies, their powerful legs carry them over forts, their ranged weapons are a problem, though they don't have the strongest magic... they reproduce fast, they could well have an army of their own...'*

When the gate opened a little and closed as soon as he entered, he looked up and called to his brother, "Shasuryu, privacy... you need to hear this!"

The big green lizardman traced a hand over the large scar that ran down the middle of his light tan front, the green scales of his hand caught the light during the act and glinted back up at him. *'This can't be good.'* He thought and hopped down onto the soft ground. He followed his brother to his own hut.

Their huts, mounted on stilts and raised over the water, covered with grasses and broad leaves that let the air flow freely while also providing shade and

warmth, were home. They were not luxurious temples or stone hearths, but they were home.

That was all anyone needed them to be.

The pair sat, and Zaryusu explained what he'd just heard. Shasuryu nodded, "I see... a frogman army... your thoughts?"

"They wouldn't be here if it weren't a problem... we may in fact need the other tribes to deal with this also... a great alliance of tribes. Either we fight them as one or we flee, and where can we go?" Zaryusu spread his hands open when he asked the question, and watched his brother think that over.

"Nowhere I can think of, what about you?" Shasuryu answered.

"I traveled much, I saw no place better for us than this one. There are other lakes, but there are other peoples in them, even if they let us settle, it won't be our old lives anymore, and who is to say they won't simply enslave us? We will be scattered all over, and no two of us will stand together again... we will die out." Zaryusu answered with finality.

"Will the other tribes agree, do you think?" Shasuryu replied with a question which Zaryusu couldn't quite answer.

"I don't know, but we can try. But we should also search for help, the frogmen outnumber us in the best of times, and that war we fought against each other didn't help us." Zaryusu slumped, "We need help."

"How can you be so sure?" Shasuryu asked, a rumble in his throat when he did it.

"Not to offend your pride as a warrior, brother, but when we fought our war of six tribes, did you hear anyone call any gathering of tribes an *army*?" Zaryusu asked, and his brother went quiet again.

"No. But even if the Red Eyes didn't fight in the war, they definitely knew of it, and they might even have seen some of it. They never fled from the

threat of invasion by the other tribes, but now here they are. However many frogmen they fled from... it was too many for Red Eyes alone."

Zaryusu held his breath while his brother, his chief, thought it over.

"Alright. We'll let them in and send word to the other tribes." Shasuryu said and slowly rose to his feet.

Zaryusu stood up, "We need to know more than we do, and I believe we need more than what the Red Eye tribe can tell us."

"What are you suggesting?" Shasuryu asked.

"We need to strike the frogmen, take prisoners, we need information. How many, what they're after... how they'll do it... and if we can, we need to slow them down." Zaryusu replied and reached for Frost Pain, his hand wrapped around the hilt of his sword, emphasizing his point.

"No, first we need the others. Then we can raid the frogmen." Shasuryu said immediately, "First I will go with the Red Eye chief and-"

"No!" Zaryusu exclaimed.

"No?" Shasuryu replied.

"Ah, brother... you're our chief. If you go, who will lead us?" Zaryusu asked, and then he cut his brother off again before an answer could come, "If our chief is absent, and their chief is absent, our elders... they are very old fashioned, they will not treat the Red Eye fairly. They will be suspicious, they may make a mistake and cause infighting instead of unity. I will go, I am a Traveler, my loss will not hurt the tribe."

Shasuryu looked down at the grass woven mat flooring. He didn't have to speak his heart. Zaryusu understood it.

"I know." Zaryusu replied, "But trust me, this is for the best, if a traveler goes, and I take the Red Eye chief, suspicion will fall, none go to war without their chief."

"I... I guess that is true." Shasuryu answered with no small reluctance.

"Having me here and the Red Eye chief gone will bring some sense of security that there is no rivalry, and perhaps their chief leaving will convince them that the danger is real."

Zaryusu suppressed the sudden release of a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. While everything both lizardmen said was true, the truth was, *'I want to be alone with her! I don't want anyone else to be!'*

His heart pounded at the very thought.

"Let's go let them in... explain things to the Red Eye chief, and the two of you can take your hydra and go, you'll make better time that way." Shasuryu commanded, speaking as a chief, only to take a step closer and grab his brother's arm.

"But come back. Alive." Shasuryu added, speaking not as a chief, but as one brother to another.

Minutes later, the gates were opened and the refugees of the Red Eye tribe began to stream into the gate, fears of 'invasion' faded when the elders of the tribe, as well as their infants and children, began to filter in behind the young and strong.

The gravity of the situation began to hit home, hard. Lizardmen faces did not change much, but much could be said for the occasional blink, and there was a great deal of nervous blinking as the many families began to enter, with desperate, hungry looks, growling bellies, frightened, and darting expressions.

Cries for food from small lizardmen young were not yet answered when Shasuryu raised his hands overhead to call for silence.

"The frogmen have an army. They have decreed the extinction of lizardmankind. They have destroyed the village of the Red Eye Tribe, and nobody knows where they will strike next." Shasuryu shouted, and the cries of the Green Claw tribe were many.

Frogmen were old enemies, and fierce ones when war broke out. Though fighting wasn't common, it happened. *'Usually when the Baharuth Empire diverts manpower elsewhere and leaves them in control of the area around the swamp... but why would they do that? They've always easily kept the frogmen at bay and confined to the swamp and the great lake region...'*

Zaryusu couldn't think of an answer to the riddle, and so he waited in silence.

"My brother will take the Red Eye chief with him to the next village, and the next, and the next, and the next. We will have a grand alliance of lizardmen to fight against the frogmen, and with us all together, it is the frogmen who will be destroyed!" Shasuryu spoke with more confidence than he felt, but the relieved looks on the Red Eye refugees said plenty.

"Each family will host one other until my brother and the Red Eye chief return, and we will prepare to fight the frogmen until then." Shasuryu proclaimed, and, weighted down by the heavy news, no mouth nor tongue had the ability to voice an objection.

Zaryusu approached the albino lizardwoman. "Come with me, we will be riding on my hydra, and we can't spare a moment."

Her tribe looked to her with downcast eyes, "I will go with the bearer of Frost Pain, be at ease, we will come back, I *promise* you." Crusch Lulu said and put a hand over her heart, then bowed lightly with her red eyes briefly shut, and then when she straightened up and they bowed in acknowledgement, she faced Zaryusu again.

"I'm ready, let's go, you're right, we haven't a moment to spare." She said, and to her great relief, the long strides of the brown scaled lizardman were proof enough that he agreed with her sentiment.