

CHAPTER ONE

Elsie

The warmth of the soft sand beneath my back is welcome in the cool, dry air. The weather isn't warm and humid like I've grown used to in Lona, and instead of smelling like moss and flowers, the breeze carries a stale, salty scent.

Goosebumps run over my arms under the light fabric of my shirt. I stretch out to better soak up the pleasant heat from the sunbaked beach. Squinting at the misty glare of the white sun, I study the colorless sky. There's not a pterosaur or cloud in sight.

I'm lying on the shore of a small silver lake with gargantuan trees all around it. The star-shaped leaves are so delicate they're almost transparent. They catch the pale light twinkling on the branches and sparkling in the reflection of the water. The fallen leaves glitter like a lacy carpet of cobwebs on the ground. The lake isn't deep

because the same trees dot the surface, standing up to their knobby roots in the water.

Betty, my quetzalcoatlus friend, sits close by in the shade of a palm tree, which is such a deep green it almost looks black. She watches me sulkily, her gaze flitting between my face and the weird tadpole-ish thing she's plucked from the water and tossed next to me. It looks like a giant sperm with catfish barbels and two disproportionately miniscule lizard feet at the front.

"Nope," I tell Betty. "I'm not going to eat that."

She extends her giraffe-like neck and pokes the beige-brown, slimy glob with her beak. It wobbles like jelly.

Eww. And I'm definitely not eating it raw.

The tadpole hisses and slashes its tail viciously through the air, kicking up sand as it hits the ground.

"You'd better throw it back in the water." At the almost dejected way in which Betty hangs her head, I add quickly, "But thanks for wanting to feed me. I appreciate it all the same."

She lifts her long lashes, blinks innocently with those soft, big eyes, and unceremoniously gobbles up the tadpole.

Gross.

I suppress a shudder as she tucks her head beneath a wing to doze off in the hollow she's scrubbed for herself in the sand. After a moment, I follow her example and interlink my fingers behind my head to make myself more comfortable and finally process what has happened.

I flew.

I freaking flew.

On a dinosaur's back, no less.

The knowledge is so unreal and exhilarating that it still feels like a dream.

How much distance did we cover? I have no idea. I only

know we were in the air for a long time. The landscape changed from stark iron-blue cliffs and foamy white-capped seas to rolling hills of succulent grass and tree-studded lakes. The vegetation slowly grew denser and darker until it turned into a jungle. We landed in a small clearing next to the water so that Betty could eat and drink. I sensed she was getting tired.

If anyone back home had told me I'd fly across a strange world on a quetzalcoatlus's back, I would've laughed in their faces. How is this even possible? All I had to do to steer Betty in a specific direction was to think where I wanted her to go. Back at the palace, I only had to reach out to her with my mind, and there she was, landing on the balcony.

The strange power zapping like currents of electricity under my skin is responsible for this ability. It's hard to believe that a short while ago, I lay in a hospital bed in Cleveland, Ohio, while my parents grieved in a corner as a doctor told me I was dying. Just as I was mourning my impending mortality, a circle of lights appeared, and I was sucked onto a different planet, an Earth-like world in what I figure must be a parallel universe. A world where lizard people would've gang-raped me and sold me as a slave if a darkly handsome prince with a terrible power hadn't saved me, claiming that I was his mate.

I take a deep breath and slowly let it out. I've been too preoccupied with staying on Betty's back to dwell on what happened with Aruan, but now I can't help myself.

We had sex. He took my V-card, only to treat me with a cold, cruel indifference in the aftermath.

My chest tightens as I relive those terrible moments.

He must've hated the sex.

For all his claims that I'm fated to be his, we're clearly not compatible as mates.

At the time, I was too overwhelmed to think clearly. I simply had to get away. What I've done only hits me now.

I escaped.

Holy fuck.

I actually did it.

This is what I wanted. This is what I set out to do from the moment I arrived on Zerra and doubly so when I found out that my presence could be dangerous for this strange, beautiful world. So why do I feel so down, so disturbingly... forlorn at the thought of putting distance between me and Aruan? Sure, we had sex. But it wasn't like we made love. It was more like "let's rip each other's clothes off and just get it over with."

No, that's not true. Aruan did take his time with foreplay. I can't fault him for that. He ensured my pleasure, even if the act was painful at first. He'd vowed that I'd enjoy it, and although I have to admit so begrudgingly, he kept his promise.

An involuntary sigh falls from my lips.

A certain something, a feeling I can't place, is growing inside me, and it's not a pleasant sensation. I feel as if I'm out of sync with myself, as if I'm somewhere I'm not supposed to be. It's as if I'm... incomplete. Yet at the same time, I feel good in my own skin. This weird power that has taken over my mind has settled inside me with the ease of something that has always belonged there. But there's also something amiss. With the distance from Aruan, the pull toward him is stronger. Which is stupid. And silly. And doesn't make sense. Especially seeing how he treated me. He even told me our mating wasn't complete, so there's no reason for me to feel so dejected.

No, it's better like this.

I'm not pining for a man I slept with once. I'm just a bit out of sorts, seeing that it was my first time. Besides,

Aruan's power is far too dangerous, and he's demonstrated on multiple occasions how easily he loses control of it when he thinks the safety of his mate—a.k.a. me—is at stake. I can't shake the memory of those strange scrolls and their prophecy, the warning that a powerful prince will destroy Zerra because of his mate.

Aruan is certainly powerful. The man can set off a nuclear explosion, for crying out loud. And he is a prince.

Yeah. I'm not superstitious or into prophecies, but I'm not willing to take that risk. It's better for everyone that I left—for Aruan, who was clearly disappointed with our sex, for me, and for Zerra.

I made the right decision. I'm sure of it. Yet when I push onto my elbows with newfound determination, the heaviness doesn't lift from my chest, and the illogical sense of loss only worsens when I get to my feet and command Betty with my mind.

"Let's go, girl."

Betty lifts her head and shakes out her feather tuft. I climb onto her back and hold on tightly to her neck, knowing the take-off is going to be bumpy.

She leaps into the air with a powerful thrust of her legs, spreads her wings, and takes off over the water. Once we're high enough, she picks up speed.

I try to enjoy the wind in my hair and the incredible feeling of freedom I experienced earlier, but I fail to rekindle those thrilling sensations. There's a heavy stone in my stomach, my chest tight with a peculiar sadness.

Wiggling my shoulders as if I could physically dispel those feelings, I focus on the landscape instead.

A black lake stretches out to the left. My pulse jumps. I recognize that gray, windswept shore. That was where the Phaelix almost loaded me on their slave boat.

A shiver of repulsion runs over me.

They brought me here, so they must know how to create a portal to send me back to Earth. My poor parents must be worried sick about me. I don't even want to think about what's going through their minds. They must expect the worst. Their only child—a dying child—disappeared from the hospital where they'd left her. A cult could've kidnapped me to use me as a demonic sacrifice. A shady organization that supplies dead bodies for people wanting to fake their own deaths could've stolen me. Maybe Mom and Dad have started preparations for a funeral, but they won't even have that closure if they don't have a body.

I can just imagine them grieving while looking for me everywhere. Knowing them, they would employ private investigators. Mom would make posters and put them up on lamp posts. She would post on social media and on all her local app groups. Dad would be driving the streets around the hospital, showing everyone a photo of me and asking if they've seen the woman in the picture. In my mind's eye, I see him sitting hunched over his steering wheel and squinting in the darkness as he searches for me until late in the night.

My chest clenches painfully.

"I'm coming, Mom and Dad," I whisper. "I'm so sorry."

The water seems to go on forever. The sky is even paler here, almost white. With the flat, black surface reflecting the washed-out light, it's a bleak portrait.

Just when I'm about to give up hope of ever seeing land again, the opposite shore appears in the distance. Humongous palm trees fringe the narrow beach. Beyond the trees, a jungle stretches to an indigo mountain, and there, at the foot of a hill, a thin ribbon of smoke curls into the air.

My heart jolts.

Fire.

That means there's life.

I steer Betty that way. As we circle over the hilltop, I suck in a breath. A village of crude wooden houses on stilts stands in a clearing, their scrawny thatch roofs like cone beacons in the midst of the jungle. Meat skewered onto sticks is roasting over a fire in the center of the space. The smell of barbecued chicken reaches my nostrils, reminding me of the meal my kidnappers fed me after abducting me.

Five Phaelix sit around the fire, poking at the coals with sticks. They look up when Betty crosses the clearing, their bulging eyes narrowed. Jumping to their feet, they speak excitedly in their guttural language, but I have no idea what they're saying. They can't see me because they're looking directly up. All that should be visible to them is the underside of Betty's belly.

One of them bends down and picks up a long stick with a spiked end. He holds it in the air, ready to launch it, but we're too high for Betty to get hit.

Okay, so I need some kind of leverage or bribe to convince these dudes to portal me back to Earth. I have to think about that.

Just as I'm about to fly us out of here, I spot movement on one of the decks of the stilted houses. The door opens, and a Phaelix with a basket in his arms steps out. Another with a spiked stick exits. He turns back toward the door and shouts in an angry tone while waving at the clearing with his stick and slicing his hand through the air as if he's telling someone to hurry up.

The two Phaelix on the deck steal glances at Betty. A third appears at the doorstep, holding something that resembles a slingshot in one hand and a big rock in the other.

They must think Betty is circling them to pick one of

them off the ground as a meal, and that slingshot is their best chance at protecting themselves. A hit to the head could be fatal.

I'm about to hightail it to safety when someone else stumbles through the door, someone with blond hair.

Holy cow.

It's not a Phaelix. It's a woman. She screams and hangs back, trying to duck into the house, but the Phaelix with the stick grabs her wrist and pulls her roughly onto the deck before pushing her toward a rope ladder. She screams again, lifting her dirt-streaked face toward the sky. Her clothes are in tatters, and her arms and legs are so filthy they look brown.

Hold on.

I know that face.

Oh, my god.

It's the woman from the slave barge, the one who spoke to me in English with a British accent.

The Phaelix leading the party drops his basket to the ground. It lands with a thud, sending a cloud of dust into the air. He barks out something to the others before climbing swiftly down the ropes. The Phaelix with the stick shoves the woman toward the ladder, inviting even louder screams. The one with the slingshot takes up a position on the deck and fixes a menacing gaze on Betty.

The leader snatches up his basket and turns it over next to the fire. A heap of rocks falls at his feet. Ammunition. It looks as if they may try to stone poor Betty to death if they can't get her with a single rock from the slingshot.

By now, the woman and the Phaelix with the stick have also climbed down the ladder. The Phaelix grips the woman's arm and drags her a short distance away before forcing her onto her knees. Her sobs and pleas have no

effect on him as he points the stick at her and tells her in his rough accent, "Shut up, slave."

It's a trap. They're using the woman as bait to lure Betty closer. They have no qualms about sacrificing a slave, turning her into dinosaur meat to save their own skins, or I should say, scales.

Bastards.

I steer off to the right and land behind a hill where we're hidden from sight.

"Go home," I tell Betty, giving her a quick hug before clambering off her back and jumping to the ground.

There's no way I'm allowing them to hurt her. I also don't want to give Betty a chance to be tempted by the human meat waiting for her in the clearing. She may be as tame as a poodle with me, but I haven't had a chance to test the extent of my power yet. Betty remains a wild animal, and a dangerous, giant predator at that.

She tilts her head.

"Go on," I urge.

She's hesitant, but I can always call her back if I need her. However, if my plan works, I'll be on Earth before sunset.

Fuck.

I may never see Betty again.

I won't be able to explore this parallel world and its dinosaurs.

I'll never see Aruan again.

The notion hurts with unexpected force, but I push it down. I need to focus. I need to think about Mom and Dad.

Putting everything else from my mind, I run to the foot of the hill. When I look back over my shoulder, Betty is hovering in the long, fatty blades of swaying grass, following my movements with unblinking eyes.

“Go,” I say again, trying hard to speak normally when my voice is close to breaking. “Go home before it gets dark.”

It’s not until I’m halfway up the hill that Betty finally lunges into the air. I stop, shading my face with my hand. She circles me once, twice, and then flies back in the direction from which we came.

“This was awesome,” I whisper. “I’ll never forget it.”

Tears burn at the backs of my eyes, but I blink them away and carry on climbing until I reach the summit.

The village is visible from the top of the hill. I can make out the activity that, now that the threat of a “dragon” attack is over, is focused on preparing dinner. The blond woman is no longer kneeling on the ground but setting out wooden bowls on a flattened log. Another woman with red hair, whose face I recognize from the barge, is throwing logs on the fire.

How many human slaves do the Phaelix keep at the site?

I must get them out of here. Once I’ve freed them, I can force the Phaelix to take us back to Earth via the same way they brought us here. The question is, how? We’ve already established I’m no match for them in strength. I had a few cracked ribs and two missing teeth to show for my efforts, until Aruan’s brother healed me. But that was before my Alit superpower made itself known.

Glancing around, I look for signs of animal or insect life. When the Phaelix brought me to Zerra, there wasn’t a shortage of big, scary creepy crawlies in the jungle. True to my expectation, a line of giant ant-like insects with lobster-sized pinchers climbs up the trunk of a blue rubbery tree. They’re so big I can clearly make out their compound eyes, elbowed antennae, and powerful jaws. Their hairy,

scissored back feet resemble those of crickets. With their bright orange bodies and brownish-red heads, they look like enormous Parktown prawns.

I skirt around a purple fern the size of a bus with leaves like octopus tentacles to get a better look. The prawn-like insects form a steady line to the top of the tree where some weird teardrop-shaped cocoons hang from the branches. They deftly cut one open with their pinchers, exposing a fat, ash-gray larva as long as my arm.

The larva starts to wiggle, sticking its black, horned head outside, but the prawn-ants are on it before it has a chance to escape. They strike from all sides, cutting their prey to pieces with their gigantic pinchers. The larva lets out a high, shrill sound—almost like the whistle of a kettle—as the insects quickly chop it up.

Before I can blink, the army of alien prawns has cut open all the cocoons and is making minced meat of the larvae. Poor larvae. I feel bad for them, but I don't dare interfere in the cycle of nature or the natural food chain of this world. Who knows what disastrous ecological effects my meddling may have? As sorry as I am for the larvae, I have to admit that the prawns are impressive. They'd be lethal if they attacked in thousands.

A piercing cry comes from the Phaelix settlement. I swing around, just in time to see the group of Phaelix holding the redhead face-down on the ground. From the angry red forked dicks that slither from their groins toward her, there's no question about their intentions. I have to act quickly.

A single thought from me sends the prawns back down the tree and across the jungle toward the clearing. One of the Phaelix cackle-laughes as he hooks what's left of the woman's torn dress in a claw and pulls it up over her waist.

All the while, those snake-like, dripping dicks are moving closer to her naked butt while she screams murder.

'Faster!' I command the prawns.

Their speed and agility are astounding. As they advance, their number grows. Hundreds of prawns pour from small craters in the ground to march with the rest in the direction I'm sending them.

By the time the prawns reach the village, they're a sea of orange that quickly swallows up every other color. The only sound that gives warning of their approach is the rustling of the vegetation they traverse.

They catch the Phaelix with their dicks hanging out off-guard. By the time the lizards see the insects, they're surrounded. The prawns are all over them in a second. The Phaelix jump up and down and grope for their pointed spear-like sticks that lie next to them on the ground, but in another beat, not a single green scale is visible beneath the crawling, pinching mountain of dirt-brown heads, bright orange bodies, and the pinkish red of the insects' undersides.

The chilling shrieks attract the attention of others Phaelix who pour from the jungle with fishing nets in their claws. At the sight that greets them, they drop their nets and run yelling for their houses, but the prawns cut them off from every angle. Soon, they, too, are drowning in the orange sea.

The redhead has scurried to her feet and is clinging to the blonde next to the fire, both of them sobbing uncontrollably. I command the prawns to move around them. The patch of mud in which they stand barefoot is like an island in a squirming saffron-colored sea.

Green goo and glob cover the soil as the prawns make steak of the lizards. I try to block out the horrific screams

of the Phaelix. It's like an Alfred Hitchcock movie with prawns instead of birds. I still need some of the Phaelix alive if the humans and I are to make it out of here, so I command the prawns to back three of the Phaelix up against a tree before encircling them. One of the three is the guy who called the shots when Betty and I arrived on the scene, whom I presume to be their leader.

When all the lizards except for those three are dead, I clear out the prawns but leave the ones guarding my prisoners. The insects quickly disappear. I don't waste time in getting to the clearing.

The women stare at me with terrified, pasty faces while the Phaelix shout something in their language that sounds like insults.

"You're Elsie," the blonde exclaims. "Elsie from Cleveland. I remember you!"

I grin. "Fancy running into you again."

"What are you doing here?" she asks with a slack jaw.

"Looking for a way back to Earth."

She continues in a daze as she looks around. "What happened? Where did these insects come from, and why didn't they attack us?"

"There'll be time for questions later." I point at the Phaelix. "Do you speak their language?"

She rubs her dirty arms, shivering as she gazes at the treetops nervously. "A little. Be careful. There may be more of them. They live in treehouses."

I glance over my shoulder at the makeshift bungalows on stilts. "Do you mean those aren't their homes?"

"Those are the prisons," the redhead says. "They're for us."

I take in her bony frame and the ribs protruding from underneath her threadbare dress. Bruises cover her arms

and legs. Those lizards did a number on me too when I first arrived, so I have no doubt about who put those marks on her. They didn't starve me, but maybe they were just fattening me up before they intended to sell me. Yeah, no. I don't find any compassion in my heart for the dead lizards.

"How many humans are here?" I ask.

"Six, including us." The redhead's green eyes flash. "We were twelve, but Penny and Sabrina got sick and died. The other four guys were killed when they tried to overpower our captors."

Fuck. "We need to grab the others and get out of here." I turn to the blonde. "Ask them who can create a portal to Earth."

She opens her mouth, but instead of speaking, she lets out a scream as she fixes her gaze on something behind me.

I twirl around to see at least a dozen Phaelix swinging down on ropes from the thick foliage of the trees.

Before I have time to even think "prawns," a Phaelix jumps right in front of me, clutching a branch like a baseball bat.

Forget the prawns. There's no time. Think lizards.

I focus hard on the Phaelix surrounding me, commanding them to knock each other out with those bats they're waving around, but they only snarl and snap their shark-like teeth.

Oh, fuck.

My power doesn't work on the lizards. I guess I can't command intelligent species. I should've kept the prawns around, but it's too late to rectify that oversight.

Both the blonde and the redhead scream at the top of their lungs. I'm screaming too. Or I think I am, but maybe I just want to and never get a chance because even as I

make a beeline for the jungle, something hits me so hard on the head that my brain rattles in my skull.

I'm trying to think of dinosaurs, but my mind is fuzzy, and my vision goes out of focus.

As I go down, the strange world with its vivid reds, yellows, purples, and oranges turns black.