The Monsters Among us: Dealing with Naga

The night air felt strange in Cory’s mouth, even after nearly a week patrolling through the darkest hours. There was something deeper than just a matter of familiarity. The period the guild had been acting as guards and enforcers for this town, it was a small part of his experiences even if it felt like home now. When he thought of night, it was still largely memories of rousing from his tent to a different world. A world where his senses were dulled, where death crept and slithered. Any sensible person avoided the night. That was why every chilled breath prickled at his instincts, telling him he was exposed.

By his side was his newest apprentice, looking human… in the moment, but the slim boy by his side was a dragon. One of the very nightmares that made the night so deadly. He’d noticed no trepidation in Daniel when they moved to the night patrol. No difficulty adjusting, no stumbling steps. He couldn’t imagine it, what it must be like to such a beast, you became top of whatever food chain you wandered into.

“Smell anything?” Cory asked as he looked back towards the lights of the guild building. They should be far enough for Daniel to change. Not for the first time he second guessed keeping Daniel’s secret.

Beside him, the change began. He felt it, like a warm breeze as air was displaced by the expanding body. What was human, dropping to fours, stretching out, sprouting wings, looming high above Cory’s head.

The mercenary drew a slow breath, glancing along the powerful predatory frame of the, admittedly majestic, and terrible, lizard. The air was different now, warmed by the dragon’s mere presence. Served as a reminder of, one of the reasons he was giving Daniel the benefit of the doubt. Betraying the dragon’s secret could see him eaten and even young as Daniel was, he doubted the dragon would have difficulty doing so.

“Nothing much” Daniel considered, the long blunt muzzle aiming at the sky, drawing a long, deep breath “things are around… but they’re not as loud as they used to be”

Hardly surprising, Cory mused. For him this was a patrol, keep the streets safe. For Daniel, this was a hunt, for the now nocturnal dragon’s breakfast. Lesser maneaters were prowling with their new hunter in mind.

“Well, do your thing” Cory muttered “I’ll be looping by the docks. Apparently the biters have been getting more active over there”

“Oh, ok” Daniel stretched, joint creaking like thunder “I’ll bring you anything I’m not sure about”

Cory grunted. If any other apprentice of his had said something like that, they’d mean, bring him anyone they thought was suspicious… Daniel, meant anything he wasn’t sure if he was allowed to eat

“Avoid people, Daniel” Cory grunted “even if they’re wearing biter marks on their clothes, don’t let anyone see you. We’re still figuring out… how I’m meant to handle that”

“Ok” Daniel agreed easily, before trotting by, over Cory. Deadly paws thumping around him for a moment, before the dragon swayed off. On the one hand, it was nice to see Daniel calm down, less wary and nervous of getting to stay. On the other… he never thought he’d be discussing a dragon’s hunt with it.

The ominous thump of dragon paws faded into the town, and Cory went on his own way, keeping a blazing torch high to light his way. It acted like a beacon, but he felt better being able to see. Despite some early attempts on his life, lately nothing had come after him. Perhaps those hunters capable of thought had come to think of him as a lure. That though made him wonder if Daniel was watching him, or looping back to check on him. The thought was comforting in a way. Though he wouldn’t be sure if he’d feel it meant Daniel cared about him, or, was essentially a hunter checking a trap. Of course, if it was true, it was also unsettling. It would mean Daniel could monitor him without him seeing or hearing the dragon. He’d never liked how quietly Daniel walked when he wanted to.

The night trickled away, Cosy tense as he moved around the dockside. He kept one eye always on the inky black of the sea. The city had a wall, so most predators in the city either flew over it or went around it. The largest problems crawled right up out of the water and retreated to it by morning. Others might simply wait in ambush. The worst though, were those who took the risk of swimming around the wall. Naga mostly. Gigantic but flexible serpents. They could silently swallow a person down, then slither somewhere dark and secluded and hide. Such was the fate of his apprentice before Daniel. That naga had been lurking in town for months. Once inside, leaving was not easy for such a monster… and their main source of food, naturally, would be the people.

Being so close to the water, made his blood as cold as its depths. If a set of jaws locked around his leg, and pulled, he’d probably have no chance to be rescued by Daniel. The overwhelming sense of danger, it was baffling the biters had been seen sneaking around in the late hours.

The, loose union was hard to define really. Criminals, rebels, foreigner hating thugs, all applied to some member or another. The latter becoming all the more prevalent of late. Cory wasn’t sure what to make of them, whether it was the guild’s fault they had even formed here, as their first presence was in opposition to the guild. But their dislike for a foreign mercenary group had been expanding to anyone not from their patch of dirt, meaning the merchants at port.

The cynic in Cory felt the criminal element was at the root of the group, framing issues in ways to manipulate anyone who would listen to them. Following that logic, he took the recent emphasis on the foreign merchants as an indicator the group needed more supplies, and just needed an appropriate target to steal from. The merchants fit the narrative they were already spinning.

His eyes roamed the boats in port at the moment. All sealed up tight, naturally. Who knew the sea monsters better than the sailors. He felt confident no biters would be getting on board during the night. No, more likely, he reflected, they’d be after any crates left out or warehouses. Anything edible was normally sealed up pretty tight, but other supplies, the ones monsters would ignore, weren’t so heavily protected. The nature of the night was a factor as well. Much as the people tried, if delays saw good sitting outside as night fell, they would have to just leave them there for the morning. Working into the dark hours was a good way to get eaten.

The docks were quiet, so it didn’t seem any of the more callous merchants were ordering their crews to take the risk… or, if they had, their workers had all been eaten. His wandering found a few crates laying out, a few by the dock. None just laying in the middle of the path today. Which either meant nobody had needed to drop one to run for safety this evening, or if they did, biters carried it off.

He had patrolled the docks a lot in his time, seen the crates the boats used. Enough to see these had been disturbed. The seal on one was broken, another had a gap between its boards too big to go unfixed. So, someone had been playing opportunist.

A low, agitated sigh escaped him, free hand rubbing his temples. But no biters around. It made sense, the group operated mostly at dusk and dawn. They strayed into the dark hours, but not even they were crazy enough to be out and active all night. There was a period, sure enough, when the predators were still rising and moving, and another when they started to retreat flanking either side of the peak hours of hunting. Dangerous still, but manageable, if you were a desperate band of renegades, wanting to act without rebuke.

He spent some time wandering the docks. There were only two ships in, though both still had some crates sitting outside. One of the sets was raided, the other, smashed. Not much in the broken crates… either it had something the biters really wanted or, it might be spite. He glanced to the boat. He knew the one, it sailed into port often enough. Crewed by the bizarre animal folk, foxes and wolves that walked around on two legs and talked like a human. It had never really occurred to Cory to treat them much different though, except when it came down to some, necessary physical differences. Like how they weren’t exactly bound by the same clothing norms on account of their fur and the fact most of the time he couldn’t tell males and females apart, especially with the wolves. All the wolven crew he’d seen on board wore the same thing around the waist, blocking the only clue, but he’d drunk with a few enough to know both sexes populated the ship’s crew.

But it was dawning on him the locals were from a different world than him. The city was their safety, build strong, solid and maintained it kept most things out. He couldn’t deny, it was a luxury he’d rarely known to walk down its streets during the day with nary a fear. Problem to his eye, it meant they saw the outside as danger, anything foreign wasn’t to be trusted. It had just gotten worse since his group settled in. Maybe the distaste had been managed when they could keep outsiders at arm’s length, his group didn’t work with that worldview. Himself though, the mercenaries, they had no home. Their safety was unity and perseverance. Valuing each member of the group, mutual protection, and a harsh hand for any who would take advantage or disrupt the group’s sense of trust.

He could understand the distrust for any outside the group, but in his mind it was a threat assessment, and an understanding of their needs. He didn’t trust predators, their needs involved himself in their guts. But a merchant? They wanted his coin, and to convince him to part with it for their wares. He saw little threat there. His musing drifted back to Daniel. There was the problem. Daniel was a predator, but, maybe it was seeing him a little deeper, he was grasping the dragon had other, conflicting needs. Cory sighed, part of him, admittedly, wished it was nice and simple, trying to figure out the balance of needs to decide if he should see Daniel as a threat or ally strained his mind. Perhaps worse still, it made him wonder if other, speaking maneaters had similar conflicts. Could it be for some, they were no threat because they needed something more than they needed human meat?

Cory sighed into his gloved hand, rubbing along his jaw. The topic of thought was unsettling him, and he nudged it aside. Focus, while out and in danger. He was getting complacent, well adapted to the environment of the day. Night was different. Short version was simple, the biters increasing aggression was a problem. He’d have to report the added vehemence in their looting of the wolvenkind’s stock.

Cory finished his perusal of the docks and moved up into the streets again. It was a relief to be away from the water, a relief he didn’t encounter any biters. Still, there could be waddling lizards in the streets, hiding from Daniel, seeking a snack, or, hurrying back towards the sea. Couldn’t feel too safe yet.

He didn’t get too far before, heavy steps stopped him. A hand on reflex going to his weapon, full attention on the sound. Was it Daniel? It sounded mostly like Daniel. There was a hiss he was hearing, that was certainly not the dragon. Another day he might have ducked for the nearest shadow, but he hesitated. Something finding the sound more familiar than different. Around a bend ahead, came into view the tall, looming figure of their new local dragon. Cory feeling an unpleasant chill to be reminded of the sheer difference in size. He was one, solid paw swipe from death.

His gaze traced the muzzle, and down. A long cord of scales briefly confusing him before it clicked. The extended, coiling body of a naga dangled from the dragon’s jaws. Lower tail sealed inside the dragon’s maw, leaving the body, seemingly from the midpoint up to dangle and hiss in panicked objections.

It wasn’t the naga he’d seen though, this one was new, smaller, less bulky, thinner and winding. The scales were a bright green, with yellow and red diamonds across the back. The natural signalling was clear. He could see the naga curling up itself, trying to bite into Daniel’s jaw with long, blood chilling fangs.

A Daniel padded in closer, rumbling a starkly casual greeting, Cory could see some red spots on the jaw where, seemingly the snake had made some successful bites.

“Daniel, careful” Cory kept himself from shouting, but put some force into his words “the naga is venomous”

“Oh” Daniel spoke slowly, something seeming to click as the beast settled down, his body taking up the streets and bringing the naga closer to Cory’s level. The mercenary stepping back to stay well out of the snake’s range “that’s why she keeps biting” he shook his head a bit “it stings a little, but I’ve eaten snakes like this before, it’s fine”

Cory nodded mutely, considering the naga’s patterns. There were lots of different venomous naga. From this one’s patterns, he wanted to say it wasn’t one of the worst, depending on your perspective. Some naga gave wracking pain, leaving their prey gasping and spasming till they died. Naga like this one, their venom made the body go limp for easy swallowing, alive. Though he was of the understanding a particularly bad bite could kill, the numbness spreading to something vital, seemingly.

The naga’ confusion and fear were plain, tongue flickering, eyes taking him in for a moment, before writhing in the dragon’s grip again “let me go” the voice whined

Cory felt increasingly uncomfortable. It wasn’t that he had any love for naga, but seeing one in distress, in a position he himself had nightmares about wasn’t exactly pleasant “So, you caught a naga, good work. They are especially hard to track down once they find a dark place to hide”

Daniel nodded, head tilting a little bit before asking the question Cory had been dreading “what do I do with it?”

Cory turned his gaze from the frantic snake “didn’t we talk about this? Have you caught this one before? If not, I suppose you can probably release it with a warning, or…”

Daniel’s voice hummed for a long moment “I was going to, but then I thought, you might prefer I just eat it since it’s a snake, your kind seem to really not like the snakes”

Cory drew a slow breath “I’ll leave the decision to you, Daniel, what to do with it. Just, whatever you do, somewhere I can’t see, preferably. I’d rather not know”

“Oh, ok” Daniel responded chirpily, as the naga whimpered, and shrieked as suddenly more of its body was slurped between the lips. That sleek, streamlined body working against. A low purr from the larger predator “I like catching the snakes, they wriggle so interestingly, all coiling and moving”

Cory drew a breath “one rule Daniel… whatever you do, don’t, torture or torment your prey. The naga is… upset. Just go and do… whatever it is you have to do”

Daniel’s ears dipped a bit, but he nodded, and rose to paws, stepping over Cory again in the direction of docks. The mercenary left to watch the dragon’s swaying haunches. He hoped he didn’t get used to this… playing jury over monsters Daniel caught, when the only options were release, or digestion. Was it his thoughts from earlier… surely it was as simple as a naga seeking easy prey, like the other one. He sighed heavily, and stepped on. He had work to do… either way he didn’t expect to see the naga again.

Daniel trotted along, mouth full of weaving, thick and heavy coils. His stomach looking forward to putting the snake inside. They’d been a favourite, when he could catch them. The docks were nice, he liked them. More open, easy to walk. He had to watch his flanks every moment down the streets.

The naga, now much deeper was pushing at his lips. Stronger than a human, not strong enough.

“Please” the preything spoke, and his ear idly twitched, hearing but paying minimal attention “I want to talk, please… you, what’s your deal with the human, you didn’t eat him… we can make a deal too, please”

Daniel hummed faintly, voice thrumming through the coils, he could practically see the jaw of the naga rattling with the vibration. He toyed with whether to speak back… his chatty nature winning out as he made for the big building he’d been allowed. Good place to rest to digest.

“He’s my mentor, I live here, he helps me… not annoy the other humans”

“You, live here?” the point seemed to stall the naga “that’ what I want, to live here… you can understand, please, I just want to live”

“Can’t” Daniel shook his head, and be extension, shook her “I get to live here because I hunt the things that hunt the humans. Like you”

The naga pressed against his lips for a moment “if, I promise not to hunt them, would you help me?”

Daniel snorted as he padded to the warehouse, looking about… no humans, slipping his way into his den “I wouldn’t believe you. Why else would you want to be here? Talking snakes hunt humans all the time, isn’t it your favourite food?”

The naga shivered against his tongue, the fight seeming to leave her. Hi tongue rolling up, trying to get some more squirm, but it didn’t come “I, didn’t intend to eat them… or… not many, because I just wanted to live in here, if I made trouble, they’d hunt me down… even without you, they’d find me eventually”

Daniel’s head cocked, musing on the sombre words, sitting himself in his den “So, why then?”

“You wouldn’t understand” the naga muttered “look at you, you’re… huge. You snatched me up with barely an effort, I bit you so many times and you’re unphased… I’m bigger than a human but not much wider, I fit the same throats they do. My people don’t make cities, this huge nest, so big even a dragon might hesitate to hunt them there”

Daniel was quiet a moment, brushing the still but heavy coils. There was no human in them certainly. He considered the naga, it was true, she wasn’t any harder for him to eat than a human. Easier even, sometimes humans had annoying metal.

“You just want to live in the city?”

“Yes… can, you understand… you live here, right?” She pressed up his snout, to peer over the edge towards his eyes “I won’t hunt the humans… if you’ll just let me stay. It’s dangerous to leave and hunt outside, but having a safe place to sleep and come back to is still so… huge. And I’ll make it up to you, I can, I’m sure”

The dragon faltered a bit, a paw scratching up under his jaw. Almost as if she could read his mind, she pushed on.

“The human there… the humans here, they gave you a chance, right… you’re a resident here, can you, give me a chance?”

“I’m a resident of the city…” Daniel mumbled around the snake, tail swishing a bit to think of himself that way. Accepted. How badly he’d wanted humans to just accept him, even though he was dangerous. His heart sank. To accept it when he said he didn’t care about eating them, if he could just live their life. He felt a creeping sense of disappointment, echoing up from his stomach, as it realised the choice had been made in the back of his mind, even if he hadn’t quite accepted it yet.

A low, deep breath escaped him, as his head lowered down between his forepaws, hesitating “I’m going to release… if you try to slither away, I’ll eat you”. With that said, his jaws relaxed, and the slimy body of the snake pooled between his forepaws.

She looked down herself, tensing as if, she was going to make a run for it, but, staring at the looming snout in mild terror, at the beast that was going to be her death moments ago

“I’m Daniel” he announced, crouching lower, chest to the ground, considering his released catch

“Dia” She answered carefully “thank you… a thousand times thank you… I’ll do anything, anything you want, anything you say… for sparing me”

“Well, no hunting humans…” Daniel murmured “if you hunt them, I’ll hunt you. There’s already one naga my mentor really wants gone, and I’m going to catch it to make him proud” he voiced his master plans in a low, conspiratorial tone “I guess you can live in here” he glanced about the warehouse “it’s a little wet and cold… but no humans are using it for now. I’ll be coming here most evenings to digest… but I’ll come back every day to check if you’re being good… ok?”

Dia was trembling. Her heart still pounding. The expectation the dragon would change his mind at any moment and doom her to the massive stomach below that scaled flank. She just nodded meekly “Can… can I have permission to bite? Not to hunt, but self-defence… my venom won’t kill them. Or… or am I not allowed to do that”

“Oh…” Daniel seemed to muse “It’s probably best humans don’t see you… I guess if any attack you… that’s ok” his tail dragged on the stone… this was starting to feel complicated… digesting her was simple, but he’d let her go… that wouldn’t be, right.

“I can’t thank you enough” Dia mumbled. Her senses felt on fire with… well, fear, but it was turning a bit into different forms of energy as she gradually felt, safer. The dragon could still change his mind… her mind raced for ways to make herself invaluable, something he couldn’t easily replace. One thing flashed clearly… but he probably wouldn’t trust her enough yet… “I promise… I, I’ll not let you down, and… I’ll do anything for you” let me be valuable, she thought with desperation, staring into the slightly curious eyes of the titan.

“I’m a little on edge” she said to his puzzled gaze “but tomorrow… tomorrow I’ll thank you, properly”

“Didn’t you thank me already?” Daniel mused “a lot of times actually” the dragon pressed up, rising with a long, wide yawn that echoed over the smaller reptile “well… since I’m not digesting you, and my early catches are gone enough I can probably still change, I’ll get back to the hunt” he turned himself, sparing a look back, to the curled up ball of snake meat… stomach lamenting how nicely she’d have fit. Naga were great, they could be pressed into a ball, fill up all the space. Maybe he’d be lucky and catch another.

“I’ll not betray your trust, Daniel” Dia called to the turning behemoth. Barely believing her luck. Already scolding her past self for making this crazy move, but how was she to know there was a dragon? The aches of being caught were starting to play out across her scales. Her jaw ached, venom sacs complaining from overuse.

The dragon nodded quietly. At least if she did he’d get to eat her, he reflected as he padded out back into the night, tail brushing the door shut behind him. Still, he felt a little good. He hoped she really was like him, and didn’t mind putting aside the easy prey all around for the perks.

Cory found himself looping back towards the guild. His eyes glancing to the horizon. A slight glow beginning, and implying their shift was nearly over. An all too familiar yet no less intimidating thud of paws to stone trotted up behind him. The man stopping to give the dragon time to get in close. He preferred to not give the dragon a moving target to calculate his steps around.

Daniel was making good pace to catch up. While Cory didn’t consider his eyes trained, he didn’t see a particular sag to the dragon’s midsection “didn’t think I’d see you again tonight Daniel…”

“I didn’t need to sleep in the warehouse” Daniel noted as he got closer

“I see” Cory felt an uncomfortable quiet in the unspoken “so, the naga…”

“You told me not to tell you” Daniel’s ears flicked down to his horns

Cory brushed his jaw “I don’t want the details… just, tell me if you released it or ate it”

“Released it” Daniel murmured

Cory sighed. Mixed feelings, but, it did feel fairer to simply drop first offenders beyond the walls “honourable of you Daniel… though I suppose that leaves you hungry”

“I’m alright” Daniel mused “I caught two of the biter humans at the start of the patrol, it’s been long enough I can change comfortably”

Cory’s thoughts froze, looking up and along the dragon “Daniel, I said to not let anyone see you”

“They didn’t see me” Daniel answered simply, as the dragon wandered by. A sharp chill shooting down Cory’s spine, a sideways look at the passing flank of the beast.

“Must you take everything so damn literally…” Cory exhaled sharply, cupping his face in his gloves before following the dragon, getting to observe from behind as Daniel’s stature and shape reduced as they got closer to the guild hall. Two people vanished just like that. He wondered if they were the ones who raided the dock?

He couldn’t feel even neutral about it. Mind just filled with how very easily he could be next, and not even see the jaws coming. What manner of monster was he helping live in their midst…