Under Ice Chapter 4

They were provided more food that night, but in their own room this time. Rangavar was fine with that; after his conversation with Zag earlier, he had kind of a lot on his mind, and didn’t need another taxing conversation with Garren right now. He also didn’t want to hand out any more information to the friendly dragon if it would end up causing problems. He wasn’t sure that everything Zag said was true, but he made some very good points.

Currently, the chubby Darkal was thanking the dragon at the door dropping off the extra food. The moment he was out of sight, Zag closed the rickety door and groaned. “I’m still full from earlier.”

“Nobody’s *forcing* you to eat it,” Rangavar pointed out, but he had a feeling he was wasting his breath. “You could always save it for later.”

Zag brought the crate over to the bed, which Rangavar realized looked exactly like the crate that large Faerian was carrying the night before. There must be an elaborate food delivery service or something to make sure everyone was fed.

When Zag pulled off the lid, Rangavar wrinkled his snout.

“You know, you’re probably the only dragon in this cave who could ever actually lose weight trying to eat this stuff.” Setting the box on the edge of the bed, Zag happily took some of the weird items out of the box for himself, no matter what he’d just said about being full. “If you’d literally rather starve.”

“How can you find anything appetizing about it?” Rangavar had genuinely tried it earlier, and everyone was right about one thing; it was really, really dense. He felt full after half a plate of the stuff, and frankly found it amazing that Zag managed to eat two. Even now, Rangavar was pretty sure his stomach was still working hard to digest it.

Zag shrugged. “Maybe it’s an acquired taste.”

Yeah, a taste he ‘acquired’ after two bites. “Okay.”

Despite telling Rangavar he was still full a moment ago, Zag was quick to stuff a piece in his mouth. It at least resembled fruit more closely than some of the other stuff they’d been given.

“You’re not allowed to make faces at it if you’re not even the one eating it,” Zag forced out through a full mouth.

Rangavar looked away, rolling his eyes.

It took a while before Zag could swallow. “What, you really don’t want any?”

“What, are you planning to eat all of it?” Rangavar retorted. “I’ll have some later.”

“Not *all* of it…” Zag grumbled. Rangavar sensed he might have had a different answer before he asked.

He sighed and grabbed a piece for himself. “Happy?”

Zag shrugged, watching him while shoving another bite into his open maw. He wasn’t rapidly scarfing it down or anything, but at least seemed to be enjoying it. Rangavar was doing his best to nibble at his own, although he was quickly growing full again.

He finally set down the fruit after eating half of it. “You can have the rest of mine.”

Zag was just finishing up another and paused to raise his brows. “That’s it?”

Rangavar scowled. “How are you still hungry?” A guilty expression crossed Zag’s face, and Rangavar suddenly realized he might not be, despite continuing to eat. Which he knew Zag usually felt bad about. “Sorry.”

The other dragon had looked on the verge of taking another, but slowly put the lid back on the box, his ears flat. “No, you’re right. I’m not hungry anymore.”

How did he do that? How did Zag always make Rangavar feel mean? He scowled to himself. Long ago, when Rangavar worked for him, it had been the other way around. “I wasn’t trying to stop you.”

“I’ll save it for later.” The chubby Darkal pushed the box away. “Maybe… maybe we could go exploring or something.” He brightened a bit. “The others said we could get a tour of the place, and it would pass the time.”

“I think they meant with supervision…” Rangavar started to say, but trailed off as Zag excitedly pushed himself onto his feet. His gut sagged heavily into the front of his sweatshirt, but it didn’t seem to bother him. He was in a good mood again. Rangavar tentatively took a few steps after him as he made his way to the door. “Weren’t you the one whining about ‘getting into trouble’ just yesterday?”

“Oh, right.” Zag gave a bit of a half-grin and suddenly pitched his voice a bit lower. “*‘YoU dOn’T hAvE tO foLLoW mE’*.”

“I don’t sound like that.”

“It was pretty close.”

Rangavar crossed his arms and scowled.

Zag was no longer paying attention to him, wandering over to their room’s ‘window’. The square hole provided a slight view of the space directly outside, and was only covered by crossed sticks that were clearly just vines from the garden. Rangavar didn’t know why they’d bothered. What, was it keeping the weather out? They were in a cave.

“Well *I* like the window,” Zag grumbled as he picked up Rangavar’s thoughts. He put his nose up to it and stared outside for a moment. “I think most people are turning in for the night.” He next moved to the door. He pushed it open a crack. “I hope you have fun while I’m out exploring.”

“Oh hell no, I’m coming too.” Rangavar took several quick steps his way. Zag could be annoying or not, but Rangavar wanted to find out more about this place just as badly—if not more so. Particularly after Zag’s keen observations about the people, too.

And if Zag was to be believed, it was technically his right.

There weren’t a lot of torches lit during nighttime. Zag supposed it was supposed to mimic the real world outside. Or maybe they were just trying to save resources. Either way, the tunnels were dim as the two Darkals explored.

Zag had started out in the lead, but actually ended up walking behind the other dragon as he panted to keep up. He felt like he couldn’t complain, though, since this was his own idea. He knew it was better to be doing this, rather than staying home and stuffing himself for no reason, but… Vaugh, did the tunnels really need to be this long? Who the shit decided on all these inclines? Would digging them in straight lines really be too hard?

“Need a break?” Rangavar sounded amused.

Zag knew he wasn’t in his head, but was obviously picking up on his sour mood. “I’m good,” he huffed.

Rangavar stopped. “I need one too,” he lied.

Zag scowled. Since Darkals could hear lies, Rangavar was saying it on purpose.

He was too winded to argue, though, merely bending forward to rest his paws on his knees. Looking downwards, he saw that his swollen belly was somewhat in the way, a defined bulge beneath his shirt. For the millionth time this hour, he asked himself why he’d stuffed himself. Right now his full, heavy belly reminded him with every step that he definitely had not needed more. Why had he eaten anyway?

When he felt ready, they started forward again down their current tunnel. Zag found himself somewhat bored by the plain, rough walls, counting lit torches to pass the time. He knew it probably just felt longer than it actually took to reach the end of this tunnel, but they didn’t find anything exciting; another dead end. The entire underground network seemed rather monotonous.

“If they offer up that tour again tomorrow, I think I’ll pass,” Rangavar sighed. “I don’t think I can take another minute of this.”

Zag frowned, going to the wall at the end to inspect it with his paws. There was a weirdly dark slit in the side that didn’t match the rest of the reddish clay-colored walls. When he approached, he realized that it was actually caused by a curve of the wall bulging out and casting a shadow on the wall behind it. Zag grabbed the edge with his paw. Wait, no, it wasn’t just a shadow—it was a crack.

He snorted. “I wonder why they bothered to make this before they stopped digging.”

“Make what?” Rangavar took several steps forward until he could see. He grabbed the edge next to Zag’s paw, running his own paw down the smooth side. After inspecting it a moment, he frowned. “I mean, have you seen the sheer size of some of these dragons? I wouldn’t have bothered with this crevice either.”

Now that he mentioned it, Zag realized that it was true enough the gap was plenty wide enough for a dragon like Rangavar to slip through, but most of the dragons down here? Not so much.

“Maybe they could have kept digging, but there didn’t seem like a point. This little crack might lead nowhere,” Rangavar shrugged. Then he pointed out the weirdly smooth sides. “Or since it looks hollowed out naturally, they were nervous about the cave’s structural integrity.”

“I’d be curious to find out.” Zag didn’t want to let go of the one interesting discovery they’d made in the past hour. He turned back to the main tunnel and grabbed one of the torches off the wall. It still had glowing embers from earlier in the day, and he blew on it until it flared slightly. It lit the area well enough, although still dim. Ah, if only bipeds could breathe fire.

 “Let me see that.” Rangavar extended a paw. “I’ll wave it around inside and see what’s at the back.” He graciously didn’t mention that between the two of them, slipping into the crevice was definitely a job better suited to a more lithe dragon than Zag.

Zag handed it over. He watched the black horns on the back of Rangavar head as the other Darkal turned back to the wall and started to move inwards, holding the torch forward and turning his shoulders slightly to make sure they didn’t brush the sides. He made it look easy. Zag shook his head in confusion; there were still quite a few dragons more similar to Rangavar’s size down here, even if they were the minority.

So why did they abandon this tunnel?

“It widens out right on the other side,” Rangavar said after a second, his voice echoing slightly. “Oh…”

“What do you see?” Through the crevice, when Zag went up to it, he could see the light of the torch waving inside, illuminating Rangavar’s face slightly as he turned around in what was clearly an open space. His expression was pretty neutral, but Zag sensed a trace of interest.

“It’s actually pretty big in here. It’s like another room.” Rangavar finally glanced back at the opening he’d passed through, his gaze meeting Zag’s. The wavering light reflected slightly in his violet eyes.

“Do you think I’d… uh, would I fit?” Zag asked cautiously. Standing at the edge, the area behind it lit up, he was pretty sure the narrow gap was larger than he’d first imagined. It also helped to know there was a larger space behind it. “Could I come in?”

Rangavar looked him up and down. “I mean…” Zag could tell he felt uncertain, but he eventually just shrugged. “Maybe if you turn to the side a bit? You’re kind of… stocky.”

Yeah. Stocky. That was the reason his bloated belly was pressed up against the front of his shirt. Although, at worst, he just… wouldn’t make it through, right? He’d have to stay outside. No harm done. It would be somewhat upsetting, but potential embarrassment wasn’t a reason to not try. Right? “Give me some space, I’m gonna come in.” Deciding that his smooth scales might help a bit, he wormed his way out of his sweatshirt. It felt as though his belly hung forward more prominently without the constricting shirt, but that wasn’t anything new.

Rangavar backed away a few paces as Zag turned sideways and sidled up to the entrance. Up close it actually was larger than he’d anticipated, although it would still be a bit of a squeeze. He tried not to be embarrassed as he immediately took up more space than Rangavar had a moment ago. His shoulder led the way and slipped inside alright. There was a problem a moment later, however, as the side of his belly pressed up against the outside.

He wriggled a bit, easing some of it through while Rangavar suddenly found something interesting on the ceiling and walls to stare at as the much chubbier dragon huffed trying to force his way through the crack. The taut bulge of his binge from earlier wasn’t making it any easier, stubbornly halting his progress. He tried bringing his paws to the bottom of his gut and hefting it a bit to help push it through, but it didn’t seem to help. He went back to squirming, inching his belly farther into the crack.

The sides of the crack weren’t thick at all; the one half of his body on the inside was already in the open space, so he didn’t feel claustrophobic. Just… stuck. “Vaugh dammit.”

“Here.” Rangavar extended a paw. Zag took it and let the other dragon help pull for a moment as Zag tried to physically push more of his belly from the other side. He felt it squeeze another inch, the widest part of his rounded middle gurgling uncomfortably from the pressure. Maybe he should have waited until there was no longer a dense meal packed inside. Not that it would have made a difference to the layers soft blubber folding around the edge of the crevice, he knew.

All of a sudden, Rangavar gave another huge pull at the same time as Zag shoved himself against the hole, and he felt the center of his gut squeeze past the threshold. “I’m almost through!”

Rangavar pulled again, and finally, Zag’s belly squeezed the rest of the way into the mysterious cave on the other side, the pressure releasing him hard enough that he practically crashed into the other dragon.

Rangavar was almost bowled over, but managed to stand against Zag’s weight and steady him with his paws on his shoulders. “You good?”

Zag nodded sheepishly. He picked up the torch that Rangavar had wedged between some rocks on the ground. “Now, let’s see how far back this area really goes.”

They started walking again, this time Zag carrying the torch and leading the way, since now he was only catching his breath for different reasons. He was also rubbing his belly a bit to try taking away some of the soreness. He wasn’t sure whether the chilly air back here was helping or not, and sort of missed his sweatshirt. At least his pants were keeping his lower half warm, even if the waistband was still digging in a bit tightly.

It didn’t take more than a minute or so before they reached the back of the space. What they saw was confusing; there was a pile of smaller, looser boulders slanting towards the wall, like the result of a cave-in. But there were no other loose stones on the ground in the rest of the space around it. More like the stones had been pushed there on purpose.

“Cave-in?” Rangavar asked. He didn’t sound overtly upset to find the back blocked or anything, but Zag could tell he was a little disappointed.

Zag pointed out the distinct lack of rocks on the floor. “Maybe not.”

Rangavar went closer to the sloped area, finally pushing a paw into some of the small rocks. They tumbled down the slanted side of the pile, but didn’t cause any disturbance to the rest of the cave. The pile seemed very… deliberate. “Hmm.”

“Maybe we should come back and check it more thoroughly when we have energy,” Zag suggested. He wasn’t willing to admit that he was the one sorely lacking in energy, but this also wasn’t the first tunnel they’d explored. They’d spent time walking up and down countless others before finding this one with the weird crack. He thought it was a pretty good excuse to be tired.

Rangavar appeared to think about it for a moment, but Zag sensed he knew he was right. “If we’re here for a few days anyway, it’ll give us something to do,” he acknowledged. Zag could tell he still felt disappointed anyway.

They turned to cross back over the short distance to the crack. Now that it had been brought to his attention, as Zag looked around he realized that there were no signs of a cave-in whatsoever. It didn’t take telepathy to know the other Darkal was thinking the same thing. If the back had been blocked off on purpose, though…

What was behind it?

Rangavar had completely forgotten about their more immediate problem until they were standing right in front of it. The opening in the wall beckoned. He avoided looking at Zag while stifling a groan. He was certain the other dragon could tell anyway. This was going to suck.

Zag flattened his ears slightly. “Should I go through first this time?”

“We already know it worked when I helped pull. We don’t know if it’ll help as much if I just push,” Rangavar pointed out. He couldn’t actually imagine how much help he could provide by standing on the inside and pushing. And push what? Zag’s… side? “Give me back the torch.”

Holding it in one paw again, Rangavar easily slipped through to the other side, setting the torch into one of the empty wall-sconces. They were lucky there were enough rooms along this tunnel that the dragons bothered with torches at all, or they’d be doing this in near darkness, making it ten times harder.

Zag pushed one shoulder through first, like before, and the series of events that immediately followed went much the same way; the space closed in on his chubby potbelly as he tried to squeeze it through next. The flab folded around the edge of the opening, his squirming pulling it through a little at a time as he sucked in and jerked himself to the side. All of the wriggling made the rolls of blubber jiggle, but his bloated midsection soon became a larger part of the problem. It was still distended from the several meals he’d stuffed himself with earlier, providing a more prominent obstacle that blocked him from worming his way through any farther.

Rangavar grabbed his arm and began to haul back on it, grunting slightly as he strained. Zag felt as unmovable as last time, but he didn’t see why he wouldn’t slip back through in much the same way. The crevice wasn’t really shaped different from either direction.

The wedged dragon paused for a moment to catch his breath, his belly pressed up tightly against the opening, pancaking against the other side when he leaned into the main tunnel.

“Maybe when we come back tomorrow, we should skip dinner,” Rangavar said in amusement.

Zag scowled.

They shortly resumed pulling, feeling more determined than ever to get this over with and turn in for the night. Zag’s grip was strong despite all of the pudge, their paws interlocked. He grunted a bit as his other paw strained on the other side of the wall. He eventually started physically trying to knead his belly through a little at a time, his thick fingers sinking into the layers of lard. Rangavar noticed that he budged a bit. Finally. “Keep doing that.”

Zag frowned. “This isn’t fun for me either, you know.”

Rangavar put one of his feet up on the wall and hauled back on Zag’s arm with all the force he could muster.

“Aaah—!”

Zag finally scraped through. Rangavar was already unbalanced, and couldn’t do anything about the much heavier dragon crashing into him. They both went down.

“Oof!”

For a moment Rangavar had the breath knocked out of him, but looked up to see Zag on top lying across his chest. Zag seemed to notice at the same time, and quickly scrambled back. He flattened his ears. “Sorry!”

Rangavar realized he was glaring at the other dragon. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. It wasn’t Zag’s fault. Well, it was his fault he ate a lot, he supposed. Nothing could be done about that now. “I’m alright. You?”

He saw Zag nod. He was also clutching his belly a bit and blushing. Some of his scales were probably scraped and bruised, but he looked well enough. Rangavar tossed him his sweatshirt. “Let’s get out of here.”

When Zag woke up, the previous night almost felt like a weird dream. Had they really spent all night wandering the tunnels? Did they actually find a secret room?

He was reminded a moment later by the slight pain of his bruised scales. It included an odd, burning feeling, since Darkals turned calories into magic, and their magic helped heal their injuries. The pain he was feeling was proof; last night had definitely happened. He rolled over and groaned.

Rangavar had squeezed himself onto the opposite side of the mattress as far as physically possible. He was still asleep, his expression neutral and relaxed for once. Zag was careful not to jostle the bed too much as he pushed himself out of it, the slight pain in his belly flaring in protest.

He went into the shower room to inspect the damage. He wasn’t really surprised by what he saw, although he was confused that he still looked a little bloated. He hadn’t bothered eating the rest of their food when they got back last night; he’d just gone to bed. Putting both paws under the curve of his potbelly, he hefted it a bit, feeling the heavy weight of it as it squished in his paws. It sort of felt like… well, fat, he realized. He was just fat, like he was every day. Just, today, seeing that he wasn’t still bloated from food alone, he felt… more so?

He shook his head slightly to himself; it made sense that with the huge amount of calories in the cave-food, he might gain a pound or two. Fortunately, his Darkal body was perfectly designed for turning calories into more useful things like magic, so he was sure most of the calories would just do that. They were only here another day or two anyway. Yeah. Nothing to worry about.

Still, as he inspected the way his rolls of blubber folded over his paws when he grabbed at his belly, he couldn’t help but feel unsure.

Zag was pretty deep into the box of food when Rangavar began to stir. He lifted his nose for a moment to watch the other dragon groggily sit up, but didn’t greet him out loud, busily shoving another bite into his maw.

When Rangavar saw Zag already sitting on the side of the bed nosediving into his food, he frowned. “How late is it?”

Finally, Zag swallowed. “I have no idea what time it is this deep underground,” he admitted.

Their attention was taken a moment later by the sound of someone coming toward their room.

“I feel like someone’s always coming to get us,” Zag muttered around a new mouthful.

Before Rangavar could reply, there was a sharp rap on the door. He hopped up to answer it, pulling it open to reveal Rift with an amused expression. “Finally awake?”

Rangavar frowned, wondering how Rift had known. Maybe it was a coincidence that he had shown up. “Yes?”

“Good. Garren wants to speak with you.” Rift backed away a few paces, Rangavar carefully stepping outside after him. He could hear Zag hurrying to follow, putting their food back in the box, although he noted that the chubby Darkal held onto the bit he was currently eating.

As they descended back into the main tunnels, Rangavar wondered what Garren wanted this time. Probably to keep his promise about that tour. He stifled a groan. After last night, he could do without seeing any more long, monotonous tunnels for a while.

This time, they were led to what was more like a moderately sized office than the large room they normally visited. Garren was sitting behind a desk, but there were several chairs pulled up in front of it. He looked deep in paperwork when they arrived, but brightened as they stepped inside. “Come. Sit. I have good news.”

The two Darkals shared a glance as they each took a seat.

“The weather looks like it’s letting up,” Garren announced. He gave them a bit of a half-smile. “Although, I’ll personally miss having new faces around.”

Rangavar thought he should probably feel bad for him, but after all of the trouble their stupid distress signal had caused, he didn’t. “Thanks for letting us wait it out.”

Garren waved dismissively. “It was no trouble.” He took a moment to eye their clothing. “Think you’ll be warm enough up there?”

Rangavar nodded. Whatever weird cave plants were used in the fabric was obviously well adapted to the cold. He could tell Zag was actually feeling a bit stifled in his own right now, but figured that might have less to do with the clothing, and more to do with the other ‘layers’ underneath.

It wasn’t beyond Rangavar’s notice that the ‘bloating’ from Zag’s heavy meal hadn’t just gone away. He had a feeling that it had been partially replaced by new, soft layers of pudge, caused by the high calorie content. It would be a little odd if it happened that fast, but based on the amount of food he’d been downing, it didn’t take much effort to do the math.

He suddenly realized he still hadn’t answered. He glanced at Zag and shrugged. “We’ll be better off than we were the first time.”

Garren just nodded. He finally pushed himself out of his chair. “Well, it was nice meeting you two. I hope you have a safe travel back to…” he paused. “I’m sorry, I just realized I never actually asked where you came from! It must have seemed so rude to ask about news from every other world.”

Taken off guard, Rangavar scrambled to think of an answer. He didn’t know much about Iylarians, but at least knew they had a rather arduous history with other dragons from Edaca, which was where he and Zag were both from. He quickly thought at Zag, “You answer. You’re the one good at politics.”

He could tell Zag felt an ounce of annoyance, but fortunately, came up with a response. “Miynfell.”

Garren looked puzzled. Rangavar supposed that was one solution; name a place that hadn’t existed back then. Zag didn’t even have to lie.

“I… haven’t heard of that place. Sorry.” At least Garren was polite about it, although his emotions were still radiating confusion. Well, the two Darkals had thought they were all done with questions, so that’s what he got for springing it on them.

Rangavar was trying hard not to glare. At this rate, the cycle of questions would continue. “Well, we should probably head up while it’s still daylight,” he said loudly. It probably sounded rude, but either they’d spend forever talking, or worse, they might end up spilling more information.

Zag pressed his lips together and thought at him, “Be nice! We need them to like us in case we have to come back.”

“Come back?” Rangavar started to ask, but was distracted by having to respond to Garren’s outstretched paw. They shook. Out loud, he said, “We really do appreciate all the help.”

They were being led through the tunnels by Rift a few minutes later, who wasn’t much of a conversationalist, giving Rangavar time to think. He was silent as they turned into a tunnel that inclined steadily from their location. Turning slightly to look at Zag, Rangavar thought, “What did you mean by ‘come back’?”

Zag didn’t really meet his eyes, fidgeting anxiously. “I’m just nervous about how long it’ll take to fix the ship, is all. You passed out, so you don’t remember almost freezing to death. But I do.”

“If the days on this world are long enough to provide the light we need, I don’t see why it wouldn’t also keep the temperature manageable, too. We can be out there longer.”

“I guess.”

Rangavar frowned. “We didn’t lose anything important during the crash, did we?”

“Not that I’m aware of,” Zag thought back, casting him a glance.

Rangavar shrugged. “Then we have light, warmth, and everything we need to fix the ship.”

He could tell Zag felt a bit reassured. Although, he could also tell he still felt a bit nervous. Rangavar tried not to let it affect him, but pretty soon, they were both feeling a bit nervous.