



Bound (Gladiators of the Gryn #3)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Feral and deadly, this alien gladiator is here to protect not claim me for himself.

The alien virus I caught after I was taken from Earth has left me a shadow of my former self. The only saving grace, my voice is unaffected, but it means I'm the songstress to a wealthy alien who keeps me like a canary in a gilded cage.

Then, after someone attempts to assassinate him, he employs a gruff, grumpy former Gryn gladiator as his personal bodyguard. Rych is intimidating and handsome in equal measure, with a penchant for training outside my window in the early morning, all muscles, feathers and very little in the way of clothing.

I might be able to sing, but speaking to him is a different matter entirely, and I'm sure a virtual god like Rych wouldn't want a broken thing like me anyway.

Until the assassin strikes again and I find myself stuck in a cave with a massive feathered gladiator who is too hot for words. As we attempt to get back to Tatatunga and he takes care of me without making me feel like a burden, I find myself falling more and more for my big brooding bodyguard.

Until I discover the truth about the virus infecting me and if we don't find a cure, then not only will I lose him, I'll lose my life.

And I'm not ready to die yet.

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Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:28 am

CHRISSIE

“You did well tonight.” Fenek leans back in his chair. It creaks under his weight. “My friends were impressed.”

I’m trying not to sway on my feet. Every joint in my body is screaming at me, my head is pounding, and my throat is scratchy from overuse.

“That’s good,” I respond.

“They want me to share you with some other friends of theirs.” He smiles, showing crooked, sharp teeth. “Friends who will be very useful for me.”

“I...” I want to say I can’t, I need rest. The alien virus I caught shortly after I was abducted has ravaged my body and mind.

Fenek’s smile fades which is not good.

“I should be able to sing again tomorrow night, if I can rest,” I say quickly.

The smile comes back, and my huge business-alien boss settles himself into his creaking chair behind his huge desk again. He steeples his fingers, each one tipped with a black claw, and his usually mauve scaled skin flushes blue with his achievement.

Yes, he got a tiny, sick human to agree with him. Great job.

Shame it's my job. Keeping him happy, being his pet, his party piece, his way of getting contracts and credits where otherwise no one would entertain him.

"Go and rest your voice." He flicks one hand at me as a dismissal. "And make sure your wardrobe for tomorrow night is appropriate for council members."

I manage to keep my limp to a minimum as I exit his study into the darkness of the rest of Fenek's vast dwelling, but once the door shuts behind me, I heave out a painful breath and lean hard on the stick he deigns to let me have.

Sickness is weakness, . No one likes to see a sick creature.

Fenek dislikes the fact I haven't recovered from the mystery virus as quickly as he hoped after he heard me singing in a dingy bar on the outskirts of Tatatunga, the only place I could find which would give me a chance and offered me a job.

He always has an eye for anything he thinks can make him money, and that day, he thought I might be worth a few credits.

And I knew I had no other choice. If I didn't get out of the gutter, I'd have died there.

I creep through the silent house. I can't exactly do much else. Every step is agony, and all I want is my bed, even if I know the pain will still be there in the morning...and the afternoon...and the evening. It's never-ending, exhausting, and there appears to be nothing I can do about it.

All I can do is hope eventually my immune system will kick the virus to the wall and I'll be free of it. Until then, I'm at the whim of an alien employer who doesn't care.

Of course, his study is the farthest from my small quarters. I stop about halfway to catch my breath and consider whether I want to go to the kitchens, one floor below, to

get something cool for my throat, or drink the lukewarm water I can get from the bathroom.

I'm stood next to the floor to ceiling windows which mostly make up the walls in Fenek's dwelling. I lean my head against the cool, clear surface. Outside, his large yard is lit up almost brighter than day. It means I can't see the twin moons of Trefa or the unfamiliar stars which punctuate the sky. It means I can try not to think of home and my dad.

My poor dad who will be worried sick because I didn't come in to work one morning. Who will never know I was taken by aliens on a lonely road over Dartmoor on my way to pick up a broken down vehicle. My dad who will never give up trying to find me. His only child.

A tear slips down my cheek, and I bite my bottom lip to stop myself crumbling further when the outside lights wink out, and the entire place is in darkness.

I freeze. Fenek never turns out the lights at night. Maybe he didn't pay his electricity bill? I cough out a harsh laugh because I wouldn't put it past him given how tight he is, until I see the shadowy figure running down the side of the dwelling.

This is not a mistake. There's someone out there. Someone swift, dressed in black, and whoever it is can't be up to any good. No one who needs the dark ever is.

My heart pounds in my chest. I feel dizzy and sick. I'm taken right back to the night I was taken from Earth. I wanted to fight, but I couldn't.

Tonight I couldn't fight if I wanted to, and I don't want to. If this dark figure has come for me, then it looks like I'm taken once more. I'd struggle to fight my way out of a paper bag.

The silence of the dwelling crowds in on me. My breathing seems hopelessly loud. My feet are stuck to the floor because running is impossible.

With the same suddenness as when the lights went out, every single light in the house and outside comes on as an alarm rends the air, high-pitched and loud. I drop my stick to cover my ears, and I'm unable to go anywhere.

It seems like seconds but the air outside is filled with drones. Laser bolts flash randomly, hitting the ground outside with little puffs of dust.

There's no sign of the black clad figure.

Fenek's bulk rounds the corner. His face is a deep teal as he puffs and blows, feet stomping as he moves towards me.

"Assassin," he rasps, voice hoarse with the unexpected exercise. "Assassin!"

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RYCH

“I told you I don’t serve gladiators.” The bar keeper glares at me. “You’re trouble when you’re sober and worse when you’re drunk.”

“I’m not a gladiator. Not anymore.” I glare at him. “You’ll take my credits if you’ll take theirs.” I jerk my thumb at the three thick-set Habosu who are watching this exchange over their tankards of mead-beer.

My mouth practically waters at the thought.

And the suggestion I might have the credits to pay sticks in my throat.

“ They don’t smash up my bar. Get out, go find somewhere else, Gryn ,” the owner spits at me.

I bristle, all my wing feathers pricking up before dipping down again. I’ve been out of the dome for less than a nova-week, and the lack of respect is infuriating. Especially when the dregs of the universe like the Habosu get more of it than I do.

It doesn’t help I can’t access any of the credits I made while I was a gladiator. The vrexing dome has kept every single vrexing one of them. I ball my hands up, claws slicing into my flesh.

A chair scrapes as one of the Habosu gets to his feet. I feel like the level of stupid increased in this small bar.

“He said he wants you to leave, Gryn ,” he growls.

“Stay out of this,” I snarl back. “If you know what’s good for you.”

The Habosu looks at his two friends, and they crack crooked grins.

“I always wanted to try my hand at a gladiator in the dome but could never afford the fee. Looks like I get to have a go at the low rent version,” he says, pulling out a pulsar pistol.

Vrex. It looks like the barkeeper is going to be proved correct and I won’t get the drink I’m after.

“I don’t want trouble.” I put up my hands, slicking my wings hard against my body.

“You didn’t leave when you were asked, Gryn. You are trouble,” the Habosu growls.

But he’s showing off to his friends, and his reactions, already far too slow for me, are made even slower as I launch myself at him when he fires first, the shot going over my head and scorching the shoulder of my wing.

I pull the pulsar from his hand, slamming my uninjured wing into one of his compatriots, a foot into the windpipe of the other, and tip my would be challenger over until his head hits the ground with a dull thud.

It won’t have done any damage.

“Absolutely correct,” I snarl at him. “Gladiator or no, I am your worst nightmare.” I crush the pulsar by digging my claws into the casing, my specialty in the dome, and his eyes widen.

“Gak you, Gryn!” I hear the bar owner over the sound of blood rushing in my ears.
“You’ve really done it this time.”

I lift my head. My antagonist is dazed but alive. I’ve only broken a few sticks of furniture.

“I’ll pay for the damage.”

“You’ll pay for what you’ve done,” one of the other Habosu growls.

I drop my wing to look over my shoulder at him, only to see the third Habosu impaled on a spike of wooden chair. For a moment, I think he’s dead, until he groans and rolls to one side.

“Vrex.” I shake my head and get to my feet.

Tatatunga might be lawless, but these Habosu are going to do what they can to get me imprisoned for such an injury, even if they started it and I was acting in self-defense.

And as much as my current situation as a swordless gladiator is not to my liking, I don’t want to end up back at the amphitheater as fodder for the pre-games. A violent act like this won’t see me back in the dome. It’ll see me dead.

“You saw what happened. He came for me,” I say to the barkeeper.

He shakes his head slowly, his eyes fixed on the remaining, undamaged Habosu.

So this is how it goes. Killing in the dome is lauded. Outside of the dome it becomes a way of control, for the dead and for the living. I always knew it, only I had thought I’d end my days as a gladiator. The dome doesn’t have a habit of giving up its fighters.

Not for the first time, I curse Blayn under my breath. He might have wanted freedom, but I didn't know what I wanted.

"You will pay," the Habosu who tried to shoot me snarls. "You'll face the same justice you meted out in the dome, Gryn. "

"I think you'll find none of you will be reporting anything," a slightly nasal voice says from the doorway.

I look over to see a tall, although not as tall as me, male stood in the doorway. His scales are predominantly purple, but there are flashes of other colors as he surveys the room. He looks like an Oykig, only more colorful and without the tail, and there's something about him which puts my feathers on end. A name springs into my head. Drahon . Only I'm not sure what it means.

"And what are you going to do about it?" my would be assailant growls. "Our friend is badly hurt because of him."

"I'm sure ten thousand credits will be enough to aid in his pain and your own," the creature says. "And another ten thousand for your silence."

"Each?" the Habosu with the broken nose asks.

The purple male shrugs. "Each," he says without batting an eyelid...if he has eyelids. It's hard to tell.

He beckons to me. I feel my lips lifting in a snarl, but that only seems to make him smile. "I have a proposal for you, gladiator." He flicks the credit chips on the bar, causing a scramble of the occupants, who decided the credits are worth ignoring their unconscious friend.

“I didn’t ask you to intervene, and I don’t have the credits to pay you back.” I look at the scrum behind me. “This was your choice.”

“I don’t want the money back,” he says, going to put an arm around me, but I pull away. He doesn’t seem bothered by my refusal. “I want to offer you a job.”

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CHRISSIE

I swear as the glass tumbles into the stone basin in my quarters and smashes to pieces. It means I have to take another one from the kitchen.

The last thing I want is to go downstairs. I am exhausted, and I don't want to encounter my boss. Fenek's absolutely adamant the assassin came for him with the intention of kidnapping me. Something I find highly improbable...the kidnapping, not the assassination.

I try to take the glass out of the basin carefully but hiss as my hand is nicked by a sharp shard. My blood oozes out, deep scarlet, making my head spin as I reach for a towel and wrap up the wound. I'm so sick of being sick. I force myself to stay upright and clear up the remainder of the glass, which I deposit in the refuse incinerator.

As I do, I catch sight of myself. My skin is pale in the artificial light, and my hair looks like straw. But humans are virtually unknown in this quarter of the galaxy, and even though I think I look terrible, no one else does. The one saving grace.

I'm a sick thirty-year-old human. I might have an ability to entertain, but I'm not exactly a prize, even if Fenek touts me around like one. My alien boss excels at marketing himself, and he's done very well at it.

I decide to put my big girl knickers on and do what I need to do. Taking my stick, I make my way slowly down the stairs, listening for Fenek's whiny voice. All I hear is the hum of the internal generators and the sounds of the cleaning bots going about their business. Outside it's bright and sunny. I consider whether I should go out, get

some sun on my face, but then I remember how my skin reacted last time. Big purple blotches.

This space virus is something else. And sunlight is out of the question. Best just stay alone in the dark.

I descend another staircase which takes me into the basement, to the kitchens. Fenek rarely uses them, preferring to get food delivered or eat out. But as he doesn't want to take me everywhere, he has it stocked with basic re-hydrated rations and a kitchen-bot who can prepare fresh meals if I want them.

So, when I enter, I don't expect to see another living being, let alone a massive male, with slate dark wings, feathers pooling on the floor behind him as he sits at the kitchen bench, his back to me. He's eating his way steadily through an absolute mountain of meat.

I freeze.

He doesn't stop eating or even look around. It's like I don't exist. I contemplate my options. I could back out of here, pretend I didn't see this enormous creature and go back to my quarters.

Or I could get my glass of water because I actually live here, and I shouldn't be intimidated in my own living space, by whatever this...hulk of a male is. An absolutely vast creature who has a very muscular back and, from my current position, a bum to die for.

One thing is for sure—he works out. A lot.

I toss my hair back and stride, well, hobble but with bigger movements...into the kitchen, making my way past the male to the prep area on the other side of him.

“Hi,” I say breezily. “New here?”

Worst opening line ever. I cringe inwardly.

He grunts.

Maybe not such a bad opening line if he’s going to be rude. I fill my glass with water from the cooling fountain and lean against the counter.

“I’m ,” I say as he continues to shovel food into his mouth. He doesn’t speak. “And you are...?” I prompt.

The male lifts his head, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand. He has liquid dark eyes, and no white shows within them, only a reflection of me. His cheekbones could have been carved by a Greek sculptor, his face severely handsome. A small scar runs through one eyebrow, giving him a rakish look under his dark floppy hair. Around his neck are a number of heavy precious metal necklaces, tangled together.

And that’s all he wears on his upper half. Some jewelry. Otherwise he is bare chested and what a chest! The same sculptor has had a field day on his abs. I’m getting hot simply looking at him, and it doesn’t help his eyes are raking over me from my toes to the top of my head.

“Rych,” he rasps before going back to his food, eyes down once more. “You should get your wound seen to,” he adds, not making eye contact.

He has one hand on the counter and now I notice the claws. They’re nothing like Fenek’s. These things have to be close to three inches long, curved like a big cat with needle sharp tips. They’re digging into the surface as if it’s cheese and not solid stone.

I take a gulp of water, choke, and then run for it.

Whoever this Rych is, he's a dangerous predator, and as prey, I need to get as far away from him as I can.

But I only get as far as the doorway before I'm twirled around, and a hard, muscular body is pressed against mine, a pair of dark, dark eyes drilling into my soul. My treacherous body, the one I thought was broken, doesn't shy away from him. Instead, my core pulses.

"Don't think you can get away from me, little spark..." His voice is midnight velvet drawn over hot coals. "I eat morsels like you for breakfast, and I will certainly relish you."

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RYCH

Vrex it! The female ran!

Why did she run? I had no choice but to chase her, and given she seems to be injured, she didn't get far. Now I have her beneath my claws, her bright eyes, beautiful, clear, searching my face, her chest heaving, her breath hot against my skin. Her scent fills my senses, heady, ripe, fertile. Long hair, the color of the suns, flows over her shoulders, framing her pretty face.

"!" My new employer, the reptilian, stands next to us in the doorway. "Stand down, gladiator! This is my little pet, Chrissie." He leans back. "She's a human," he adds smugly.

Chrissie—her name rings in my ears like the sweetest music—glares at him and then at me.

"I know humans," I rasp. "I have met their kind before."

"She's not a threat to us, and she's not the assassin who is stalking us. In fact, she was here that night." He shudders. "And she was as much at risk as I was."

"You really do think the assassin was for me?" Chrissie says, clearly trying to keep a tremble out of her voice.

"It could have been." Fenek swells his chest. "In order to get to me. After all, you've been of great assistance to my empire of late."

As much as I don't want to, I back away from Chrissie, shuffling my wings back into place.

"I see you've met . He's a former gladiator I've employed as a bodyguard for us both," Fenek says to her. "He will be residing here and accompanying us to any meetings or shows."

"He's going to be living here?" Chrissie asks, the words seemingly sticking in her throat.

This is not the usual female reaction to me. Running I can understand, but not wanting to be in my presence? I was always the most requested gladiator when it came to being paid for my time in bed. I was popular with females.

But not this one and it irks me considerably.

"I've assigned him quarters above the transport block," Fenek says. "And he'll take his meals in here."

I straighten. "I've done a sweep of the perimeter. There are a few areas which could do with the security being tightened. I'll see to it."

Fenek looks pleased.

"In addition, I'll do hourly patrols." I shoot a quick glance at Chrissie. "Should you be wandering the corridors?"

She makes a choking sound again, and her hand flutters over her chest before she shoots across the food preparation area once again, and my wings flare in alarm.

Over on the other side of the room, she grabs her glass of water and drinks deeply.

“My little songstress needs to keep her throat well-lubricated,” Fenek says with a bored air. “Come and tell me about the increased security arrangements.”

He leaves the room. I risk another look at Chrissie, but she has her eyes closed and is clutching the glass to her chest as if her life depends on it.

I don’t want to leave her, but I have no choice, instead following Fenek through his house, a place I’ve already thoroughly explored, and as I go, I point out the flaws in his security.

No wonder the supposed assassin was able to get so close to him...and Chrissie. I grit my teeth as he chatters about his business contacts and how important the next few nova-weeks are to him and his position on the Tatatunga council.

All I can think about is the little female, so delicate, so stunning, who I had in my clutches and who I had to let go.

A female who seems to think having me here is the worst idea ever.

“This bot will show you to your quarters,” Fenek announces, indicating a squat butler bot waiting next to one of the five exits to the property.

I feel my feathers bristling at the sight of it.

“Bot,” I growl. “Do you have many of them?” I eye the thing warily.

“No more than anyone else in my position,” Fenek says breezily. “Is that a problem, gladiator?”

“I’m not a gladiator anymore,” I say through gritted teeth. “I’ve never trusted bots.”

“All of mine have custom programming which makes them answerable to me alone, unless I give access,” Fenek says, pulling himself up to his full height, which doesn’t even reach my shoulders. “Which I will give you, of course,” he adds imperiously.

I consider telling him where to shove his bots, but I’ve been in his employ since last night, having slept on a comfortable couch in the entrance to his dwelling after a celebratory drink or two and potentially the Habosu have taken his credits but remain out for my blood. This place is as good as any to lay low for a while.

“If you want.” I shrug.

“I have business to attend to,” Fenek says. “You will see to the security arrangements as discussed.”

I give him a sweeping bow, something the punters at the dome always enjoyed, even if it used to be followed by a killing blow. “As you wish.”

Fenek looks inordinately pleased with himself at my actions before bustling off.

I side-eye the bot. “Quarters,” I growl at it.

Lights blink and it moves off, the outside door opening, and I follow it through the extensive gardens to a large square building with a flat roof. I stride past it, entering the place and shutting the door to keep the thing out.

Bots. The vrexing things make me want to smash them into tiny pieces. I shake out my feathers as I explore my new surroundings.

My quarters are more extensive and luxurious than those I shared with the other gladiators in the dome, but something isn’t right. I need...more. My wings are itching like mad as I work my way through the place, gathering up all the items I think will

work and taking them into the large bedroom.

It's not going to be easy, but I think I can make it right, just as long as I have time.

Which is when the alarms sound, and I'm out of the place faster than I've ever moved in my life.

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CHRISSIE

I cannot believe his arrogance! Pinning me up against the wall like I was some sort of mouse trapped beneath the claws of the cat.

And the way he smirked at me—as if I already belonged to him. I shake myself with annoyance. I've seen vids of the gladiators in action, and they're all big, feral idiots who get off on violence and killing.

I should have absolutely nothing to do with this one, even if he's dangerously handsome and smells like...cinnamon.

That can't be right, surely?

I climb the stairs back up to my quarters, seething at the way I responded to Rych's feral behavior. Hopefully Fenek will keep him as far away from me as possible. The last thing I need is to be around some hulking male who could knock me over with his great wings and cause even more damage to my weak body.

And it's been a long time since anyone caused a reaction which almost destroyed my underwear.

I pause at the top to catch my breath and see him through the floor to ceiling window. Rych's wings swing insolently from side to side as he follows a small housebot down the path towards the garage where Fenek keeps his ground transport. I watch his progress. The sunlight shines off his feathers, which bloom almost purple in color.

This is silly. I shake my head as I turn away from the view and go into my bedroom, replacing the glass at the side of my bed and sitting down heavily.

I hate being alone with my thoughts and my aching bones and my lungs which crackle like a paper bag. All Fenek has are bots and more bots, as if he can't bear to surround himself with living creatures.

Save for me and Rych, although we're useful to him in ways bots cannot be.

I clear my throat and open my mouth to begin my warm-up. If I close my eyes, it's almost like being backstage with the band again. I could be in the dingy basement of a pub with Dan the bass player arguing with Morris about his amp being broken, and Morris "fixing" it by plugging it in. I could be about to go on stage and see my dad stood at the back, that goofy smile on his face as the band strikes up and the five people sat at the bar ignore us.

I could be there with them all, when I sing. Not on an alien planet wondering if I'll ever recover from this virus and knowing I'll never see home again.

The alarm blares, and I get up so quickly my leg gives way, and I tumble to the floor. Cursing, I heave myself painfully to my feet and make it to the doorway.

There's a strange, light smoke hanging in the air. Panic grips at my chest, icy fingers around my heart and lungs. I know I need to run, but my body isn't willing. I have to get down the stairs. I have to get out of this place.

With an effort I didn't think I could muster, I fling myself against the wall and half fall, half slide down to the floor below. My head is hot, weirdly muzzy as the smoke increases.

After everything I've been through, is it really going to end like this? The nearest

door is still down a long corridor which seems like a hundred miles away. I stumble forward, covering my mouth and nose with the sleeve of my top in a vain attempt not to breathe in the smoke. It doesn't work, and I start to cough, my vision sheeting red as I do my best to get down the corridor and away from the fire.

Coughing saps the last of my energy, and even though I'm trying to stay upright, my knees buckle, and I know this time when I hit the floor, I won't get up again.

But I don't hit the floor.

I hit something hard which yields under me.

"Take care, little spark. I have you."

Through my desperate attempts to breathe and not cough, my eyes streaming, I see him.

Rych.

He has me in his arms, and I'm being carried out into the open as the alarm ceases and I attempt to gulp down the clean air outside.

"You can...put me down," I rasp.

"You can't stand," Rych responds, eyes narrowing as he scans the building.

"I can and I will. Put me down." I do my best to glare at him, even if I can hardly see.

Rych lets me slide down his muscular body, one wing steadying me as I wobble like a newborn deer on legs which would have rather I stayed put. In his embrace.

Treacherous legs.

“What’s happening?” I ask.

“There’s been a coolant leak in the dwelling. Now the alarms have stopped, the system will purge itself and clear out any remaining gas,” Rych says, as if this is an everyday occurrence.

There’s a whooshing hiss from the roof of Fenek’s house, and I see a white geyser shooting into the sky. Unable to help myself, I cling to Rych’s wing.

“I won’t let you go.” His arm is around me, and I’m face to face with his bare chest and the tangled necklaces.

A clawed finger curls under my chin, lifting it until I’m staring up at him. His dark eyes bore into me. His full lips are something I ache for.

“You have to let me go.” The words are not what I mean. They come out in a hoarse whisper.

His lips are a millimeter from mine, his wings curled around my fragile body. A body which sings out in anticipation.

“Rych!” Fenek barks. “What is going on? What are you doing out here with my songstress? Why are you not neutralizing the danger?”

Rych lifts his eyes from mine. “There is no danger. Your dwelling is too automated, and the system has decided to purge itself, all while was inside. You should have it checked.”

Fenek stares at me. “Are you unwell?”

Like he cares.

“The smoke. It wasn’t good for my chest,” I say.

“But you’ll still be able to sing?” Fenek says with some considerable concern.

Because this is clearly his main concern.

“I can get the kitchen bot to make me a tonic,” I respond, pushing back from Rych.

“I’ll be fine.”

He lets me go, lets me walk away from him, my mind swimming and my body only just functioning.

What just happened?

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RYCH

“My dwelling has never purged itself,” Fenek growls. “Never.”

“Maybe it was about time it did,” I reply, watching Chrissie's slow progress back to the door, one leg dragging slightly.

I want to rush over and scoop her up, make sure she never has to walk again if it causes her pain. Anything as long as she is comfortable.

“I employed you for security, not to chase around after my songstress.” Fenek’s voice grates into my thoughts. “I’m well aware how you were treated in the dome, but it doesn’t mean you get to mate with the first female you come across. Chrissie is mine.”

If I had a sword in my hand, he’d have lost his head.

“She belongs to me,” he repeats at a slightly lower volume. “And she is proving extremely valuable. You will not touch her,” Fenek adds with an air of someone who actually thinks he can tell me what to do.

“I just saved her,” I growl.

“And I am grateful, but if you’re planning anything else”—he narrows his small eyes at me—“think again.” He turns away, stops, and turns back. “And you can check out the dwelling programming, find out why it did the purge. You’ll find the control center in the lower floor.”

I'm cursing my lack of weaponry as he walks away. I would very much like to teach him a lesson about what belongs to him. Because it's certainly not Chrissie.

Except I let out a long breath and allow my wings to relax. He's my employer, and I have zero other options available to me. The dome won't have me back, and my fellow free gladiators have all gone to ground. This is all I have.

A female I can't touch and a boss who I'd like to murder, providing his alleged assassin doesn't get there first. Although it's going to be my job to put myself in harm's way for him.

And for my little spark of light. The female who has eyes which burn like fire and who I didn't think I could let go, even when she asked me.

A female who is completely off limits.

I growl under my breath and stomp off back to the dwelling, making my way down to the control center. Just because I was a gladiator doesn't mean I don't understand tech. Just because I don't like bots doesn't mean I don't understand them.

We had a lot of downtime at the dome. As I didn't want to go roving the undercroft like some of my compatriots or off on various missions for other free species like some Gryn I could mention, I filled my nova-days with different pastimes.

The control center checks out. There's nothing unusual about the purge. It was unscheduled, admittedly, but it doesn't look like anyone has been in the place for a long time. I make a few security upgrades on the spot and then go looking for a console to order the rest of the items I need to install.

I want my Chrissie to be safe. I'd also rather Fenek didn't get killed on my watch. If I want other work in the future, having my first employer assassinated isn't going to go

down well.

As much as the dome was death, it didn't mean I didn't enjoy its vicious simplicity. I growl under my breath as I stomp back through the dwelling, booting the cleaning bots out of the way. Fenek's reliance on tech is severely overdone.

I reach the door as the delivery drone drops off my order. I take the delivery with a snort, and the drone zips away.

It makes me flex my claws with the thought of chasing it down. I feel like I haven't stretched my wings in forever.

I also haven't had an opportunity to visit some violence on anyone since this morning, and it's troubling me.

The rest of the day is spent avoiding going inside and installing the security measures I agreed with Fenek along with a few additional ones I feel are worth including, regardless of whether I've run them past my employer.

It's dark by the time I finish. I could do with a bath, but I want to be sure the systems work, and given the assassin was only here two nights ago, I can't be sure he won't try again so soon. If it was me, I'd be back to check the new security arrangements and to see what I need to do in order to fulfill my contract.

Fenek has made some powerful enemies if they're attempting to get to him or Chrissie in this way. Not for the first time today, I question exactly what it is my new employer does.

But then, I have no choice. As the lights go out inside the house, I pull my wings around me and settle down in the shadows.

No one will hurt my little spark while I'm on watch.

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CHRISSIE

I didn't sleep well, which is nothing new. Aches run through my joints in the night, jerking me awake, and then I end up lying in the dark and staring at the ceiling, watching all the lights from Tatatunga streaking in waves, making patterns and trying to think of nothing.

Especially not thinking about the hulking former gladiator who's been haunting Fenek's dwelling for the past three nova-days. The one I've been doing my level best to avoid. The one who has my stomach dipping and my cheeks heating every time I spot a flick of feather.

I'm jerked out of a shallow sleep by sounds outside my window. Given what happened a few days ago, I'm a little more careful about getting up, making sure I have my stick before I peep out into the yard below.

The sight which greets me is not one I'm going to forget in a hurry. Below me in the early morning light, Rych is working his way through a routine involving a very large sword and very tight shorts. His wings whirl around as he takes slow, sinuous steps, each one followed by a deliberate cutting motion. His skin is sheened with sweat and the morning dew, and his face is deadly serious as he completes the dance with a final stab through the air.

I am not going to lie—it has to be one of the hottest things I've ever seen. Admittedly, spending time with greasy mechanics and a band who hate each other's guts hasn't exactly exposed me to the best of male-kind, but Rych is as fine as fine can be. Even my bad leg has stopped shaking.

Then he turns and stares straight up at my window, lifting his sword to his chest, the blade pointing to the sky as he salutes.

I pull back instantly, embarrassed. He can't have seen me. I'm hidden behind a heavy curtain. He couldn't have known I was there, could he?

My body runs hot and cold as I sit down heavily on the bed, my lungs working overtime until I give myself a good talking to.

I've a hard enough time surviving as it is at the whim of Fenek. He's the only reason I have a roof over my head. I don't exactly know what I'd do without him, given Trefa and the capital Tatatunga are particularly unforgiving for those of us who are at less than full health.

I can't risk pissing him off, not least by fooling around with the bodyguard. Even if his body is something I'd very much like to see more of.

Oh boy, I'd like to have more of him...

I used to hate sensible. I used to love being wild. My dad always called me his whirlwind because I couldn't sit still. Now I can hardly move.

Washed and dressed, I make my way down to the kitchen, hoping I've missed Rych. He's got to have other things to do than parading around in the yard mostly naked.

But, as the door slides open, I'm greeted by the sight of slate gray feathers hunched over the kitchen island which sends my heart skittering in my chest.

"Good nova-morning, mistress," the food prep bot sings out as I hover at the entrance.

Looks like I don't have any other option but to enter now. The bot whirls into life, making my breakfast, and Rych doesn't turn to look at me.

Like yesterday, he's eating a pile of food. He's still shirtless, but he has changed his tight shorts for tight pants, and the sword is nowhere to be seen.

"Morning, Rych," I say breezily.

He grunts.

Delightful. Is this really the graceful creature from earlier who undertook a weapon filled ballet outside my window?

He tears apart a large chunk of meat with sharp fangs and chews noisily.

Maybe he has been replaced.

I sit at the end of the island as the bot places my food in front of me along with a hot drink called Fee which tastes a little like chai.

I move the food around my plate. My appetite has been terrible since the worst symptoms of the virus left me. The kitchen bot does its best to create things which are tasty and nutritious, but I'm still left staring at my food wondering why I don't want to eat it.

"Not hungry?" Rych asks in his deep baritone after we sit in silence with just the sound of his munching for a while.

"I...I'm never that hungry in the morning," I lie.

"You should eat," he says, cocking his head on one side, with what appears to be a

turkey drumstick slick with grease poised in one hand. “There’s nothing to you.”

“Rude,” I blurt out.

Rych’s wings flare involuntarily, and he knocks off several kitchen items behind him which clatter to the floor. The bot zips towards the mess, and he bats it away.

“Vrex off!” he growls. “Vrexing bots,” he adds as he picks up what he knocked off and puts it back. “I did not mean to be rude, little spark.”

“Commenting on a female’s weight is rude,” I point out, taking a mouthful of food, which is absolutely delicious. “Didn’t anyone ever tell you?”

“No,” Rych concedes. “I didn’t have a mother to tell me anything.” A sly smile appears on his face. “What about telling a female her body would look great pressed against your own?”

My cheeks flush instantly, and I fork another mouthful in to cover my reaction.

“Not as rude, but a bit creepy,” I respond.

“Hmmm,” Rych rumbles and strokes his chin, his dark stubble rasping under his claws. “I’ve never been called creepy by a female before.”

“First time for everything,” I retort, taking another mouthful. “I’ve seen you in action.”

“Have you?”

I can feel the flush on my chest as I realize he knew I was watching him earlier.

“On vids,” I say hastily.

He sits up. “In the dome.”

“I don’t get time to watch a lot of vids, but I’ve seen the trailers.”

Rych smiles, the points of his fangs appearing over his bottom lip. “What did you think?”

“About the violence and death? Not much.”

Some of the smugness leaches out of him. I don’t think he’s used to being told the truth. Rych shrugs.

“It wasn’t the only thing I did. I do this too,” he says.

“This?” I’m enjoying playing with him.

“Security.”

“Security? Is that what you call it?”

“You feel safer with me around, don’t you, little spark?” His grin has returned, and he leans back in his chair, tucking one arm behind his neck, the feathers on the shoulders of his wings lifting and dropping back into place in a ripple.

And the way he smiles at me makes me realize I am absolutely not safe around this dangerous predator because my heart is beating out of my chest under his gaze.

“Rych! My office!” Fenek barks over the internal intercom.

Rych runs his tongue over his sharp teeth and doesn't break eye contact with me as he hauls himself upright.

“Until next time, ,” he says, his voice dripping with wickedness.

I dip my head and stare at my plate. “Maybe,” I say.

Maybe? You live with him. You're obviously going to see him again, idiot!

By the time I look up, my cheeks red hot at my body's reaction to him, Rych has gone.

And my plate is empty.

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RYCH

I loved the pink spots in her otherwise too pale cheeks. My little eregri is an absolute spark when she wants to be.

Getting her to eat up, needling her until she reacted—it's made my cocks uncomfortably hard.

Just like they were this nova-morning when I spotted her watching me from her window. I had to concentrate deeply on my routine or I'd probably have cut something off. To make things worse, there's no bath in my quarters, only a pipe which sprays water over me, like the hose they used in the dome to deal with Blayn or Klynn.

Even icy cold, it didn't dampen my desire for Chrissie.

This is going to be a problem. My cocks have never desired anyone before. A combination of herbal drinks and various narcotics got me through the nights where I was sold for pleasure. But this is entirely different and, as I'm starting to understand, completely beyond my control.

I'm supposed to be protecting her and, unfortunately, my annoying boss. Not dreaming of sheathing myself in her wet heat.

“What took you so long?” Fenek fires at me from behind his large desk.

His office is on the side of the dwelling nearest my quarters. Large windows, like all

of this place, open up into his yard.

I level my gaze over his shoulder, flicking my wings back and tucking my arms behind me. The two daggers I have installed at my waistband are now obvious.

Fenek swallows as he spots them.

“I was finishing my meal,” I respond. “Food was included in your offer of employment.”

“Yes,” Fenek says, clearing his throat and tapping hurriedly on the vid screen in front of him, “it was.”

“What did you want?” I ask.

“I’ve been asked to attend a business meeting in Artalen, and I will be taking my little songstress. You will accompany her.”

“Just her?” I keep my eyes on the window, watching a bot tending to a clipped piece of topiary, its sharp inbuilt blades buzzing over the foliage with precision.

“I’ll...be going ahead. There are certain aspects I need to deal with before Chrissie gives a concert to my associates.”

“You are not concerned for your safety.”

Fenek leans back in his chair. “I have a high enough profile, gladiator, that when I am abroad, targeting me will be a bad idea. I am safe out in public.”

I do my level best not to let my astonishment show in my face. If I thought my ego was big, Fenek trumps me a thousand times over.

And my ego just took a pricking from a delectable little female who wasn't impressed with my sword play.

Yet.

“Chrissie, on the other hand, is a different matter. She is precious to me and not as well known. An assassin could easily target her. Which is why you will stay by her side at all times.”

“When do we leave?”

Fenek gets up from behind his desk and walks past me to the door. “I am leaving now. You can follow on this evening. I'd like Chrissie in Artalen for tomorrow, so she can be prepared to sing the next nova-night.”

“Have you told her?” I shift my position slightly, flexing my wings.

Fenek turns at the door. “I'll leave that up to you. Your pre-programmed transport will arrive here this evening. Be ready,” he says. “The itinerary is on your vid screen, along with all the details of the accommodation.”

I have a vid screen?

As if in answer to my un-voiced question, Fenek taps on a wall, and a drawer slides out. Inside is a vid screen.

“Keep it with you at all times,” he says, walking through the door.

I resolve there and then to be sure to not keep it with me at all times.

I follow him with an unconcerned air, one I've cultivated over a long time, keeping

my distance but still being close enough he notices, until he gets into the transport waiting outside.

“I need Chrissie. The concert I have arranged for her is very important to me, and to you if you want to keep this job,” Fenek says. “I expect you to follow my orders and check with me if you wish to do anything different.”

I get the impression he might have found out about my additional security measures. Not that he can complain.

I thump my arm across my chest and give him a short bow. “As you wish.”

Fenek looks inordinately pleased with my reaction. It’s a shame he hasn’t studied gladiators more, or he’d know my response was exactly the one I give all the challengers in the dome before I end them.

The transport moves away, and I look at the dwelling. Obviously, I need to break the news to Chrissie about this apparently impromptu trip, but I also need to deal with a few matters first, matters which are weapons related.

I’m not going anywhere unless I have what I need to protect her.

CHRISSIE

I set the small ‘beat box’, as I call it, on the table in the large living area Fenek never uses. It has the best acoustics I’ve ever come across and is the perfect place to practice without straining anything.

The box is programmed with my backing music. Music itself is not unusual on Trefa, or in Tatatunga, but it seems there are few singers. This could be due to the myriad of different species and cultures, but as so many seem to enjoy my singing, it does seem strange there are so few of us. But music means there are instruments, or tech, like my beat box, which allowed me to create a number of basic backing tracks I can use when I sing, although mostly, it’s only my voice.

Having run through a few exercises, I start with one of my favorite songs by Kate Rusby. One I hardly ever got to sing because the band preferred Eighties rock ballads, which I am not opposed to, but it’s nice to sing something soft every once in a while.

As my voice dies away in the room, I feel the hairs on the back of my neck prickle as if someone is watching me. I don’t want to move, so I slowly, painfully turn my head until my eye is drawn to a pool of feathers.

Feathers which I follow upwards until I come to a bare-chested, heavily muscled Rych, who has his arms folded over his chest. Along with his necklaces, he has a leather strap in a “v” shape which is set with a glowing stone and two heavy gold cuffs on his forearms.

“Is everything okay?” I reach for my stick and switch off the music.

“Fenek wants us to travel to Artalen, tonight. Transport will be here soon.” He says gruffly.

“Artalen?”

“Yes,” Rych replies. “Dry, arid, boring as vrex, but it’s where we’re going. He wants you to sing.”

“Somewhere dry. Awesome,” I mutter to myself, picking up my box and my stick and getting to my feet. “Did he leave you to deliver any more fun messages?” I ask Rych.

He straightens his shoulders, pulling himself up to his full height, which is pretty impressive.

“Only I am to take care of you.”

An anger rises up inside me. I want to shout about being able to take care of myself. I don’t need anyone else’s help. I can do this. I’ve always done what I wanted when I wanted. My dad made sure I was as independent as they come.

But it’s pointless. Utterly pointless.

“I’ll go pack.” I hobble past him, hating my leg for showing weakness next to this prime example of male alien.

But I don’t get far. A clawed hand curls around my arm, stopping me in my tracks.

“And not let you out of my sight.”

I shake him off, surprised when he does let go but also at how heat blooms on my

skin where he touched me.

“I doubt you need to watch me put clothes in a case.”

“Perhaps,” Rych says, his dark eyes even darker. “It’s my job. Let me do it.”

Now I feel like a complete arse for being angry. And I also feel exhausted from all the emotions.

“Fine, whatever,” I sigh out, and with my leg feeling a little easier, I don’t limp so much as I head up to my room, an enormous Gryn in tow.

He follows me into my room and stands just inside the doorway, arms folded over his chest. It’s clear, for whatever reason, he’s taking this seriously, and he’s not going anywhere.

I simply do not have the energy to get rid of him. Which means I’m going to have to tolerate him as I pull out the items I need and place them on my bed, before opening up my wardrobe.

“Did Fenek say anything about my audience?” I ask as I stare into my closet.

“No,” Rych grunts.

I peer around the door at him.

He’s glowering at something. When I look down, I see it’s the travel case I use. It’s a bot, like virtually everything Fenek owns. It’s rolled out of its cupboard, lights blinking, waiting for me to offer up what will go inside it.

It beeps. Rych’s wings flare out, slamming into the walls, and he swipes at the case

with a snarl, huge, thick claws scoring over the surface.

It rolls away from him.

“That’s my luggage. Thank you for protecting me from it,” I say, not quite believing what I’m seeing.

“Don’t like bots,” Rych growls.

“You’re not kidding.” I inspect the case. There’s only superficial damage. It chimes and opens up for me like a yawning mouth. Rych makes a strangled sound.

“Look, you’ve done your job protecting me from my luggage. I’ll not be long. Why not wait for me downstairs?” I suggest.

Rych growls under his breath, not taking his eyes off the luggage bot. He really, really doesn’t like it. His entire body is tenser than I’ve ever seen him, and his feathers are slicked down hard. Despite my earlier anger, I don’t like seeing him this way, at all.

“I can manage here.” I put my hand on his arm.

Slowly, he looks down at where I’m touching him, and it’s as if the light which went off when he reacted to the bot comes back on again.

His eyes bore into mine and it feels like electricity crackles between us. I’m lost in the deep dark pools. The scent of his feathers, spicy, sweet as they’ve fluffed again, fill my senses.

Rych’s hand curls over mine, hot, clawed, dangerous, and comforting.

Something buzzes on his belt.

“The transport is here,” he rasps.

“You’d better go do your job,” I respond.

He doesn’t move. I don’t move. His belt buzzes again, and he curses his “vrex” under his breath. I can’t stop the smile on my face.

“Did you really also do security when you were a gladiator?” I can’t help but ask.

Right now, he strikes me as the least likely bodyguard in the whole of Tatatunga.

“Of course I did.” He bristles, straightening, his hand falling away. “And I was one of the best.”

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RYCH

I would like Chrissie to believe in me, but my reaction to the bot has to have put a doubt in her mind. I've always hated the things since the day I woke up in the amphitheater and had a sword thrust into my hand. Before then, I have no memory.

None of us have much in the way of memories before the dome. And, as Syllas found out, what memories we do retain could be false anyway.

I've never let it bother me until now. I was good at being a gladiator. I carved out enough of a life for myself while in the dome. But I am no longer a gladiator. I don't know what I am.

With an effort which I didn't think it would take, I drag myself away from Chrissie and descend to check out the transport Fenek has arranged.

Why I lied to her about my experience I don't know. It's not a particularly impressive start.

The information he has provided to me seems ordinary enough. Plus, I spent some time in Artalen when we were hired out to do a set of traveling games. This should be easy.

I place my weapons into the transport and wait for Chrissie and her foul bot luggage. Sure enough, it trundles out ahead of her, and I have to do my best to keep cool. The thing hops into the transport on its own, and I gesture to Chrissie to enter ahead of me, inhaling her scent as she does.

She is perfection, wearing a long coat which sweeps the floor like my wings. The thing is even a similar dark gray. Pants hug her lower form, and I'm pleased to see she wears a set of comfortable looking boots edged with fur. A figure hugging top completes her outfit, and I have to give my cocks a good talking to in order to make them behave.

"What's the itinerary?" she asks as I shove my wings into the transport and she spots my vid-screen.

"We pick up air transport at the hub. It's an overnight flight to Artalen. You'll have some down time once we arrive, and you'll be singing for his associates in the evening. Then we return the following nova-day," I read from my screen.

Chrissie sighs. "He's dragging me halfway across Trefa to sing for one night. Typical Fenek."

I study my screen once again. "He has some interesting associates."

"He's a crook, ." She glares at me. "A criminal. All this"—she waves her hand around vaguely—"is him trying to look legitimate."

"I'm working for a criminal?" I gasp, putting my hand on my chest.

Chrissie narrows her eyes at me. "You knew that when he employed you. You're not stupid."

"Thank you for noticing." I give her a slightly squashed bow. "It doesn't make me a criminal too."

Although when I think of the maimed Habosu in the bar, that sentiment might be premature, even if I had no intent.

“I never said it did.”

“I know what Fenek is. I encountered enough of his kind in the dome as punters. The ones who were always trying to get their rivals into trouble, to make a quick credit or two, and not caring who they hurt in the process. I’m only surprised it’s taken him until now to need any form of security.” I fold my arms and incline my head. “Other than his beloved bots.”

Chrissie is impassive, looking out of the window at the outskirts of Tatatunga as we travel through.

“Do you think there was an assassin?” she asks, eyes still averted.

“There was something. Something testing his automated security systems,” I respond, not wanting to scare my little spark. “The why is probably related to someone he vrexed off. I suspect he’s vrexed plenty of people off before.”

Chrissie shrugs. “I’ve only been with him for a short time. I knew what he was the moment he found me. But I didn’t have any choice.”

I roar internally, wanting to take hold of her, wrap her up in my wings, and take her far away from Fenek and this life. Chrissie has to be the most beautiful creature I’ve ever seen, and protecting her is my only desire.

A desire I have to tamp back down, hard.

“Do you always do that?” Chrissie asks, looking at my hand.

I follow her gaze. My claws are buried in the seat of the transport.

“Not always.” I remove them with a dull popping sound.

The transport thankfully comes to a halt, and I'm able to leap from the door without further explanation. Chrissie gives me a strange look as she disembarks with her case following her.

I grab my weapons, stowing my swords in the straps between my wings. I run my hand through my hair as I contemplate the busy transport hub. We're embarking from pier D-X23 which is right at the other end. I look down at my little Chrissie. She is tiny, and it will take an age for her to get there. So, I scoop her up, and she squeals out loud.

"Put me down!"

"No."

"I mean it, ! Put me down!"

"No," I growl, striding through the crowd. "I'm doing my job."

She squirms delightfully, her skin soft against mine, and the scent rising from her goes straight to my cocks.

"If you don't stop wriggling, I will put you over my shoulder," I say.

With a final cursory movement, Chrissie goes still. All I have is a pair of eyes glaring up at me. Beautiful, fierce, filled with life.

This little female will be the death of me, I already know it. Because there is no way I'm ever letting her go.

CHRISSIE

I seethe in Rych's arms, glaring at him in the vain hope he might relinquish his hold on me. I appreciate it is a long way to the dock where our air transport waits, but even so, I could have walked.

We reach the sleek silver craft in no time at all, and Rych gently lowers me to the ground.

"Don't," I say through gritted teeth, "ever do that again without asking me first. I might have this"—I lift the stick and wave it at him—"but it doesn't mean I can be picked up like a doll whenever you feel like it."

Rych runs his hand through his hair, his wings shivering before he drops to his knees in front of me.

"My eregri , please accept my sincere apologies. I didn't think." He cocks his head on one side, a wicked grin hitching the corner of his mouth, one which makes my heart spin in my chest. "You see, it was a long walk and I only wanted it to be easy for you."

"Yeah, well," I grumble. "Next time, ask first."

Rych's grin somehow gets even badder. "May I assist you onto the ship, little spark?"

He's a cheeky male, I have to give him that. Plus he has a smile which lights up my life in a way nothing has since I was taken from Earth. I know the way my heart skips

a beat is ridiculous. Once he realizes how sick I am, he'll run a mile, but then why shouldn't I enjoy what I can get in the moment—a devilishly handsome male who thinks he knows me.

It's been a long time since I did.

“Why not?” I respond.

Rych doesn't hesitate, and I'm back in his strong arms, his feathers swishing as he carries me up and through the airlock into Fenek's ship.

Inside, other than the whooshing associated with the engines, all is silent. Lights flow over the consoles in the bridge area, and behind us, the door seals shut.

Fenek's ship is nothing if not a home away from home, with the same muted tones as his dwelling, same fabrics, same everything.

“Automated. I should have guessed,” Rych grumbles as he puts me on my feet.

“You expected nothing less from Fenek, surely?” I say, heading through the main leisure area to the cabins at the rear.

Only my way is blocked by seven feet of muscles and feathers.

“Where are you going?” he demands.

“My cabin. Fenek will have arranged quarters for you,” I respond.

“I need to check first,” he growls, and with a flick of his giant wings, he stalks away towards the cabin area. “Wait here.”

I hang back, watching him leave, turn the corner, and disappear. Rych surely can't believe there is an assassin on board? Like everything, Fenek has this ship coded to our DNA, as well as his own. No one else should have been able to get in. Clearly, Rych doesn't trust the tech.

And after all, the assassin nearly got to us before, so I guess the tech isn't everything. Or everything Fenek wants it to be.

I sit down on one of the comfortable seats which dot the living area. Above me is a wide open viewing window, which means I can look up at the unfamiliar stars, both closer and farther away than they were when we were on the ground. I'm not keen on these flights. The pressure makes breathing harder for me, my lungs still weak from the virus. I do my best not to panic, to keep my heart rate down. Not to think about assassins or anything else.

Just the swish of feathers and the scent of cinnamon.

"Little spark?" Rych's deep, warm voice penetrates my thoughts. "Were you sleeping?" he asks as my massive bodyguard resolves into his bare-chested form.

I stretch a little, find it hurts, and stop.

"I don't much like these flights," I say, words unfiltered tripping off my tongue.

"It is entirely safe," Rych says, gazing down at me.

I think about how warm and comfortable his arms are...and how I eschewed them because he didn't ask before picking me up.

"No assassins?" I query.

“No assassins. Your person is secure.”

“I’ve never had it called that before.” I laugh, wriggling painfully to sit up. Rych offers me his hand.

I look at it for a second, then take it. As before, it’s warm, softer than I’d have imagined, and he helps me sit.

“What do you wish, little spark?”

I probably should go to bed, get some rest on this overnight flight, but for the first time in a long time, I don’t want to.

“Should we get something to eat?” I suggest, half expecting him to shy away from my offer.

Rych’s smile widens. But then I’ve seen him consume vast amounts of food. A creature his size has to be constantly hungry.

I order up a selection of dishes, some of which I saw him eat the at Feneks along with a few things I find palatable, from the onboard automated kitchen. Within minutes, they arrive in the hot boxes next to the large table. Rych removes them, placing them out carefully, making sure they’re positioned in a pleasing way. I watch him as he takes his time with the arrangement, his face serious, brow furrowed as he concentrates on his task.

“Eat,” he growls at me.

“After you,” I say.

I shouldn’t have spoken. With a low roar from Rych, I find myself on his lap in the

blink of an eye.

“You will eat, little spark. I will ensure it.”

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RYCH

My feathers itch like crazy. I can hardly function with the desire to create a nest for my eregri .

No, not my eregri . My charge. My boss's employee. The one creature in the entire galaxy who should be mine and the one I cannot touch.

Should not touch.

Am touching.

Chrissie sits on my lap, her scent entirely intoxicating, like I've drunk an entire barrel of mead-ale. I can hardly see the dishes she ordered and the ones my nesting nature had to set out in a way which should be the most pleasing.

I need her to be pleased. I need it more than breathing.

"You can't force me to eat," Chrissie says, but it's a challenge, not a threat.

I feel my fangs over my lips.

"I do not need to, sweet mate." I swipe up a particularly attractive sliver of roast meat and take a bite. "Because you will eat with me."

I offer the food to her lips. She glares at it for a moment, but then they part, and her white, blunt little teeth bite into the juicy chunk.

My cocks are insanely painful. They need to be inside this sweet morsel, filling her, making her mine. I release the groan slowly, silently as she chews, swallows, and takes the rest from my claw, her lips touching my skin.

My feathers lift, rippling with the pleasure of feeding my mate.

“That’s really good,” Chrissie says, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. “Usually I find the food tastes of nothing.”

“This is good food. Better than the dome.” I eat another chunk before offering her some of the vegetation we were always forced to eat.

“Did you like it?” Chrissie asks as she chews. “The dome, I mean.”

She shifts slightly on my lap, and the friction nearly causes an explosion.

“It was all about control,” I say, in an attempt to hold back, hold on, not mate her on the surface of this table, enjoying her as my meal, rather than the food presented on it.

“Control?” she asks, her beautiful eyes blinking at me as she eats the green and red veg.

I’m mesmerized by her mouth, the way her delicate jaw works as she eats, the curve of her lips, the way her eyes are bright as she looks at me.

“Yes, control,” I force out. “We weren’t forced to fight. But there was control. We believed we were indentured.”

“Oh, I don’t like the sound of that,” she says, eyes wider than ever. “You were slaves?”

“Not slaves, as such, but certainly not able to leave easily.”

“So”—Chrissie swallows, and I watch the bob of her neck, desperate to span my hand around it, to taste the spices on her lips, to spread her out like the delicious meal she should be—“why are you not still there?”

“I was set free,” I say through gritted teeth.

“Sounds like you don’t enjoy freedom much.” Chrissie’s eyes dance, and all I want to do is consume her.

“I’d have enjoyed it more had the dome handed over the credits which belonged to me. Instead, I am here. With you.”

“I’m sorry.” Chrissie blinks.

“Don’t be.”

The air is heavy between us. Her scent, the food, the way her lips glisten as the tip of her pink tongue swipes over them...

“I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else,” I rasp.

Beneath me, her body trembles slightly, but her gaze doesn’t waver from mine.

She is mine. Chrissie cannot belong to anyone else ever again. I dip my head. Her hand cups my cheek, and her mouth is enticingly close.

Then the entire ship lurches to the left. It sends the food dishes crashing to the floor, and it’s only because I slam my claws into the wall behind us we don’t tumble with it all. Air hisses, loud and insistent. Alarms shriek. Chrissie clings to me.

“What’s happening?” she yells over the noise.

“Either we’ve been hit with something or we hit something,” I shout back.

The ship rights itself with a jerk, and Chrissie is thrown against me, and the force of her body sends me onto my back, meaning I have a little mate riding me.

“This is a position I could get used to.” I grin up at her.

“Not fucking funny, ,” Chrissie retorts, although there’s no venom in her voice. Only fear.

The ship lurches to the right, although not as violently or as far as last time. I get to my feet with my mate in my arms.

“Hold on to me,” I growl, placing her hand on the waist of my pants. “Don’t let go.”

I make my way through to the bridge with Chrissie in tow. Lights flash and the alarms are going mad.

“Do you know what’s wrong?” she asks.

I look at the consoles. It’s as if everything should be familiar, but there’s something blocking the knowledge. I shake my head to clear it, but it doesn’t work.

“I don’t...know. There’s...something. I...” Pain spikes through my brain over my left eye, searing as if I’m being sliced open.

I shove the heel of my hand into my eye socket.

“?” Chrissie's gentle voice pierces the pain, making it ebb away. “? I think we’re

descending.”

I open my eyes and look out of the viewer. The ground is far closer than it should be.

“We’re not descending, little mate, we’re crashing.”

CHRISSIE

I do not want to crash.

After everything which has happened to me, crashing into an alien planet is not the way I wanted to end my days.

“What do we do?”

“Escape pods,” Rych says. “Now.”

I find myself in his arms as he rushes through the ship to the rear and an area I’ve not entered before. It is more utilitarian, the luxuries stripped away.

I’m placed on my feet, and Rych slams his fist on a glowing green patch on the wall. A door snaps open, and I peer into the small space inside.

“You’re not going to fit.”

“This pod is for one. I’ll be in the other one,” Rych says as he gently pushes me inside. “Strap in.”

He presses another lit up square and straps of glittering metal, slide out. He crosses them over my chest, and his wing feathers brush my face as he fastens them around me.

“Don’t...” I breathe.

He lifts his head, his liquid dark eyes searching my face.

“Don’t leave me.” I feel the words more than hear them.

“I’ll be right behind you, my little spark,” he says, stepping back as the door drops shut in a snapping movement.

Before I can even scream, I’m forced back into the embrace of the pod by the g-force of the movement away from the main ship. In front of me, a screen flickers to life, and I wish it hadn’t because all I can see is the silver streak of Fenek’s air transport as I move away from it and it almost gracefully drops out of the sky, slamming into the ground before being obscured by the dirt and debris it throws up into the night.

Then it is dark, wind whistles around the pod, and I am helpless. I didn’t see Rych’s pod leave the ship, and I can’t see it as mine tumbles down and down.

I’m thrown around again as there is a roaring, deep, rasping resonating through me. I brace because it surely will turn out this is the way I die.

“I’m so sorry, Dad,” I cry out as the sound intensifies. “I should have tried harder to get back to you.”

Roaring and whistling fills my ears. I close my eyes, tears streaming down my cheeks, and my last thought is of Rych, of the hope he escaped this hell and is safe and unhurt.

Then there is nothing.

A rasping crack enters into my consciousness. The noise is loud enough to pierce the veil. It is completely dark. I struggle pathetically for a few seconds before I get out of the straps in the pod and slump to the bottom. My muscles scream at me, my legs half

dead from the harness.

The pod appears completely dead, the screen which was lit up no longer there. This place is going to be my tomb.

I release a sob.

The cracking noise gets louder.

Something is crushing the pod, and it seems I'm going to die sooner rather than later. I close my eyes again as there is a rush of cold air.

"Hello, little spark."

"Rych!" I don't think I've ever seen someone I wanted to see more as his silhouette reaches for me. I practically leap into his arms, and I'm dragged clear of the ruined pod. "You survived!"

"I am a gladiator, little mate. I cannot be killed by anything so mundane as a crashing air transport," Rych says, moons' light flashing off his fangs. "But losing you would have killed me," he adds quietly. "Are you injured?"

He places me on my feet, his hands running over my body. I can't say I dislike it.

"I'm sore, but no worse than before I got in the pod," I say. "Except I lost my stick."

"I can carry you," Rych replies.

"I know, but not everywhere."

"I will not accept any argument."

“Rych.” I put my hands on my hips. “Sometimes there are places a girl needs to go where you can’t take me.” My huge, hulking gladiator looks at me blankly. “Like if I need to urinate?”

“I do not care. You are mine to protect, little spark.” He leans closer, his lips pulled back and his fangs on display. “Mine to nest for and mine to mate.”

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RYCH

When I thought I'd lost her...my entire galaxy stopped turning, the spiral arms closing in on my heart like I was at an end myself.

Until I spotted her pod, half buried in an area of soft sand, some distance from mine and a good long distance from the now smoking remains of Fenek's craft.

I am never letting Chrissie out of my sight again. Never.

She looks up at me, eyes reflecting the moons high above, and then she shivers violently.

Vrex! She makes my cocks so hard, it's all I can do not to mate her right here and now.

"I left all my clothes on the ship," she says, ignoring my previous announcement. "It's cold out here."

"It's also vrexing dangerous." I look around us. "The badlands are not named for their fun nature."

"Badlands?"

"Badlands of Korr." I look over to the distant hills. "What separates Tatatunga and Artalen. Barren wastelands."

“Sounds like the perfect holiday destination,” Chrissie says, her little body trembling hard. “I’m so glad we came.”

I jump down into the pod, ripping at the padding to get at the emergency supply canister beneath, and drag it out. Inside is a warm covering I immediately wrap around my mate before I check over everything else inside.

“We’ve got rations enough to last us for a few days until they find us,” I say.

“Do you think anyone is coming?” Chrissie asks.

“The ship should have sent out a distress call when whatever happened, happened,” I say confidently. “But even if it didn’t, Fenek is going to come looking for it, and for you.”

The words stick in my throat. I hate the idea of Fenek having any dominion over my mate. Not when I’ve claimed her...will claim her...as my own.

Once I nest for her, she will be mine.

However, Chrissie does not look reassured by my confidence. She shakes again, despite the blanket.

“But I don’t think we should stay here,” I say.

“You don’t?”

“It’s too open, and I don’t like what happened to the ship. Having Fenek’s tech malfunction in two places within a few nova-days of each other?” I tap my claws on the side of the pod. “I don’t like it at all. These things cannot be coincidences.”

“So, you think it was deliberate?” Chrissie pulls the blanket around her tighter. “To kill me?”

“You or Fenek,” I say, knowing it’s hardly reassuring. “No one else was to know he wasn’t on the ship.”

“Awesome,” Chrissie mutters. “Of all the things I thought would happen to me once I was taken from my planet, being stalked by an alien assassin was not one of them.”

“Any assassin will have to come through me, little spark.” I sling the canister containing the supplies over my back, between my wings, and fix it there. “And now we go to find somewhere safe to wait it out.”

She lets me pick her up and I open my wings.

“...” Chrissie stares up at me, her bottom lip wobbling. “Are we flying?”

“It’s perfectly safe, my mate. I can carry far more than just you.”

“I’m sure you can...it’s just...I struggle to breathe in the air,” she blurts out pointing upwards.

“We will not go high then, little spark.”

“I’m honestly not sure if that’s going to be better or worse.”

“Time to find out.” I grin and beat down hard to get us both skywards.

Chrissie screws her eyes shut, and her fingers curl around the life force monitor straps across my chest. I feel my heart beating faster at her touch, at her proximity, at my need to be sure my precious parcel makes it safely to our destination.

My vision is almost as good in the dark as the light, and as we fly towards the mountains, I can make out an area which may have some caves. The closer we get, the more I can see the caves are high up on a sheer cliff. They speak strangely to my soul, making me feel more confident, more sure of myself that this is the right thing to do.

I swing past the cliff face and select the best looking entrance before diving through. In my arms, Chrissie squeals as we enter, and I land, my wings kicking up the dust from the cave floor.

“Can I open my eyes yet?” Chrissie pants.

I lower her to the ground, reluctantly, because having her close to me keeps my feathers from wanting to crawl off my wings.

She takes a few unsteady steps farther into the cave.

“We’re on solid ground, little spark. You’re perfectly safe.”

Which is when Fenek’s ship blows up.

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CHRISSIE

All the air is sucked out of the cave as the explosion of Fenek's ship takes place with a tremendous 'crump' and a fireball which lights up the interior.

Rych is thrown forwards by the blast and somersaults farther inside, coming to a halt in a tangle of limbs and wings.

"Fuck!" I rush towards him, but my eye is caught by what has been revealed by the rapidly dying light.

This place isn't just a cave, it's been a dwelling. It's carved...everywhere.

"Are you okay?" I ask as I reach him and the light outside dims to almost nothing.

Rych groans. I feel over him for the canister of supplies and delve inside, hoping to find something which can be a source of light. My hand closes around a small square, which illuminates at my touch. I pull it out and set it to one side.

"Vrexing ship," Rych mutters. "It shouldn't have done that unless the fuel cells were compromised, and even then, star fuel doesn't usually combust."

"For a gladiator, you sure know a lot about transport ships."

Rych shakes his head gently, putting one hand to his temple. "I do, don't I?" He grins at me, back to his usual self, cocky and assured.

“So, do you know where we are?” I pull out another square which lights up again and get to my feet.

The cave is incredible. It must go two stories high, and as my light hits the walls, they start to glow.

“What is it?”

“Bioluminescence.” Rych is on his feet beside me, combing through his feathers before he shakes them violently and then settles them back into place. “This place...it reminds me of somewhere.” He gazes up.

“Where?”

“I don’t remember,” he says, his voice far away. “But I do know I have to do something.”

With a swift, easy downbeat, he’s in the air and melting into the shadows high above. I go to call after him, but something comfortable in my stomach, something warm, tells me he isn’t leaving.

Instead, I inspect the carvings which flow over the walls. They’re glyphs, but my translator isn’t able to translate them. I trace my fingers over them, marveling at the delicate, intricate patterns.

With a thump, Rych lands behind me.

“Who do you think made these? They’re so beautiful, but I thought this place was a wasteland.”

“Maybe it wasn’t always so barren,” Rych says thoughtfully. “I have something for

you, if you'll come with me."

In the glow of the light source, his great wings are almost white. He could be an angel, albeit one with the wickedest grin.

"Flying again?" I ask as he holds out a hand.

"Just a short hop." He looks up. "Not far," he says as I take it.

I'm scooped up into his arms, and within three beats, we're over a storey up from the original cave floor, and the ledge I thought I could see is, in fact, a platform leading into yet another high-ceilinged cave.

Rych lands, striding forward deeper into the darkness, illuminated by my light source, the shadows of us flickering over the carved walls.

"Where are we going?"

"Somewhere safe."

I don't want to say it out loud, but I already feel safe.

Rych comes to an almost abrupt halt.

"Here," he says, lowering me to the ground.

A soft light comes from what looks like a doorway in the solid rock.

"What is it? Is there someone in there?" I whisper, my imagination running riot.

"There's only us." Rych's face is in darkness. All I can see is a glitter of light

reflected in his eyes. “But this is for you.”

He reaches past me, gently pushing at the door, a wooden structure which opens inwards to reveal something I wasn’t expecting at all.

“It’s beautiful!” I exclaim, and for a second, my excitement echoes into the vaulted outer cave. Because what’s within the much smaller, cozier one is like something out of a dream.

Instead of carved rock, the walls are covered in fabrics, swathes of them in dark reds and greens. The entire place is lit with the bioluminescence from earlier—it sparkles in jars hung from the ceiling and dotted around everywhere like fireflies. Dotted around the walls are carved wooden pieces of furniture, tables and chests, all painted in swirling symbols like those on the walls. In the center is a large platform, strewn with rich throws, that looks as comfortable as can be.

“How did you know this was here?” My voice is hoarse as I walk inside, running my hands over the fabrics, marveling at how soft and clean everything is.

In the doorway, Rych shifts from foot to foot, looking oddly uncomfortable.

“I...didn’t know...” he says, rubbing at the back of his neck. “I wanted to make it nice for you.”

“ You did this?” I stare at him.

“A nest,” he states, as if in a trance. “For my mate.”

“You made a nest, for me?”

Rych nods slowly, the light blazing in his eyes once again. “Do you...like it?” he

asks.

“It’s cozy and warm. Of course I like it,” I say.

As if he’s a wraith, Rych goes from near the door to right next to me, a towering wall of heat and feathers.

“,” he breathes. “I cannot deny it any longer. You are my mate.”

I look at the floor, my heart pounding. In this galaxy, being mated means something. It means everything. But Rych has to be mistaken.

“No, Rych, I can’t be. I’m wrong, I’m sick. I’m a human who is so out of place here it’s not even funny. I can’t be your mate.”

A clawed finger slips under my chin, and my head is lifted until I have no option but to look into his handsome face.

“The mate instinct never lies. I’ve seen it enough. I might not remember where I came from, but I know this is entirely real. You are mine, .”

CHRISSIE

I hardly dare to breathe as I look up into Rych's sombre face. He says he wants me. My heart believes him. It drums at my chest, battering there, wanting to get out, wanting to see this moment for itself.

Rych's hands move to my waist, and he lifts me up, setting me on a table where he trails a hand up my throat, tilting my head to him, moving so, so close. My body pulses and his nostrils flare. His hard, muscular form presses between my legs, pushing my thighs apart.

"I knew from the first moment I saw you that you belonged to me, my eregri ," he murmurs. "The entire galaxy, and here you are, my perfection, in this moment." He studies my face. "I need you like I need the air under my wings, my claws, and my sword, little spark."

My heart stops, flips, and for a moment, I don't think it's going to restart. Rych waits, one clawed finger stroking at my cheek. He's waiting for my answer.

"I...want you too." I exhale the words.

His lips hit mine in a kiss like I've never experienced before. He kisses as if I'm the only creature in the universe, demanding, controlling, wanting, and needing. His hands are in my hair, my back arched so I can take even more, let him give me more.

When he finally releases me, it's as if I've lost everything, left in a daze, my body on fire...for him.

“I’m going to mate you, little spark. I’m going to taste you first, make you ready, then I’m going to breed you over and over until our pleasure brings new life into this galaxy.” He growls, dipping his head to nibble at the skin on my neck, making me gasp in delight. “Then I’m going to do it all again, so you are always filled with young.”

This should not be sexy, it should not be turning my pussy to jelly, making me shake with desire, but I want him. I want everything he has to offer.

“Are you going to be my good girl and let me strip you bare?” Rych says.

It’s not a suggestion, it’s an order, and my mind goes strangely limp. I want to say no, I want to tell him I can do it myself, but also, I want him to do it for me.

Instead, I nod, biting at my bottom lip. Rych growls deep in his chest, and I flood my knickers. If he doesn’t get my clothes off sharpish, they will be completely destroyed. He plucks at my jacket, and I shrug it off. Next is my top, and sharp claws gently lift the thing over my head.

Bras are an unknown commodity away from Earth. Instead I have a bandeau strap which keeps my boobs in check. Sort of. Rych’s eyes nearly pop out of his head and the growl becomes a groan.

“This has to go too,” he says, plucking at the tight garment. “All of it.”

I lift the bottom edge, and as I look down, I see the bulge in Rych’s pants.

Whatever he’s packing down there, it is enormous . My hands tremble as I release myself from the bandeau, and I’m assisted out of it by my huge male. How is it going to fit? What is it going to be like? How...

Rych cups my breasts, thumbs sweeping over my peaked nipples. His chest rumbles with delight, and in a quick movement, he dips his head and captures one with his mouth, his tongue rasping over the sensitive skin, and I claw at his head, fingers laced in his hair as he sucks, first at one, then at the other, making me moan his name.

“I’m going to mate you, little spark,” he says, lifting his head. “Because if you continue to make noises like that, I will simply explode on the spot.”

I’m shaking as he makes short work of my pants and knickers, then he gazes at me with pure pleasure.

“So completely, utterly beautiful,” he says, voice hoarse. “Like you were made for me.”

I can almost feel his eyes raking down my body. I squirm, putting my arm over my chest and my hand over my pussy. Rych growls, deep and low, causing another rush of moisture and a clenching in my core.

“Why do you cover yourself, mate?” he says in a voice which could make ice melt.

“The virus...I’m...not like I used to be.”

My arms are pulled aside, and that heated gaze is fully on my body.

“You are the most beautiful female in the galaxy, and you should never hide what you are,” Rych says, dropping to his knees. “I will worship you always. Hold on to my wing, little spark.”

He shoves out the shoulder of one wing, and I take hold as instructed. Almost immediately, he lifts my leg, hand curling around my bottom as he props it on his knee. He gazes at my pussy with undisguised awe.

“Now I get to taste what smells so vrexing good.” He traces a finger through my wisp of hair and dips between my legs.

I’m so wet already, and Rych smiles widely before withdrawing and lapping at his finger.

“So good,” he murmurs, and my hips are jerked towards him as he buries his head between my thighs, tongue exploring my clit and making my breath come in short, harsh pants.

It’s all I can do to hold on as he licks at me, slipping in first one thick digit, then two, and as the third one stretches me more than I’ve ever been stretched, my body lets go, and my orgasm comes crashing down around me. It carries me to the stars on a wave of pleasure, my pussy clamping down on his fingers as he groans into my skin, licking up my delight until I’m shuddering at his touch.

“Such a delicious little mate. Ready to take my cocks.”

Wait. Cocks?

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CHRISSIE

Rych unwinds me from him, and I'm lifted onto the platform where he lays me out, eyes filled with hunger. He shucks off his pants and what juts out at me is like nothing I've ever seen or imagined.

"You have two!" I say, my voice strangled by the aftermath of my orgasm and the pure shock of seeing what he has in his hand.

Two cocks. The larger sits above the smaller, and as Rych strokes himself, his eyes not leaving me, I see it fits into a groove below, making two huge members into one. Both are studded with nodes, spiraling up to individual broad heads both of which weep pre-cum.

"Two cocks are the ultimate pleasure, little mate, and you will take them both with ease," Rych rasps, grin widening.

The platform dips as he drops over me, lips on mine, letting me taste myself on his tongue, sweet, sour, decadent.

"Do you like how you taste, my mate? Because I enjoyed you very much," he says, nudging himself between my legs.

Before I can answer, I'm caught in yet another long, sweeping kiss as he nudges at my entrance. I'm dripping wet for him, needy and desperate, but it seems like he's going to be a stretch I'm not sure I can manage.

“Rych, what if I get pregnant?” I whisper. “What will happen then?”

The guttural growl he releases is more than enough to have his primary cock breaching my tight pussy. Rych stares down at me, his eyes half lidded, his body taut over me, great wings sweeping out to the side of us.

“Only if I fill you with seed from both my cocks will I fill your belly, little one. And I can assure you, I will fill you. I want to breed you, sweet. I want to watch you grow ripe and round with my youngling. I want to mate you over and over, you riding me, your stomach full of the life we created, resting on me as I give you pleasure time and again,” Rych pants.

He slides a little farther in.

“It is your choice, my mate. Always yours,” he breathes.

“Not yet,” I say, still not sure, but sure enough. “Not yet, but mate me, please!”

“Then today I mate you.” His eyes are fever bright. “And soon I will breed you.”

I’m lifted upright, straddling his thighs as he places his hands on my buttocks, the huge appendages spanning the globes and parting me for him. As he continues to impale my pussy, I feel a gentle push at my tight pucker.

“Oh!” The insistent nudging is both pleasurable and naughty.

“Relax, my sweet treat. My cum will help,” Rych says in a voice filled with sin.

I take a breath and let him in, his main cock slipping inside, his second cock breaching my other channel until he is entirely seated.

“So full,” I moan, unable to move, to think, to do anything.

Until he withdraws and I am riding on ecstasy. Rych cradles me, easing into slow, insistent thrusts which consume my body and my mind.

“Take all of me, my ,” he murmurs. “Take me like the good little mate you are. I will be breeding you today like I will every nova-day until you are full of me, of us.”

His words are the catalyst to a huge climax, one which takes me entirely. All I have is the heat of my huge hulking male, all of him inside me, the nodes hitting every part of both channels, showing me things I’ve never seen before.

“Come for me, little mate, come and take every drop of what I’m going to give to you,” Rych growls in my ear as my pussy explodes, gripping at him, clamping, pulsing, grasping as he roars out my name.

Hot cum paints my insides as he erupts with an incredible force, his thrusts irregular as he makes sure I feel every single inch in both holes, full and over full. Until my vision dims and I’m gently lowered back onto the platform, where he cages me, chest heaving, eyes fixed on mine.

“You are perfection, ,” he rasps. “And you are mine.”

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RYCH

My desire to breed my little mate has not abated in the least. I will happily plunder every inch of her, and when she is ready, I will fill her gorgeous belly.

I cannot wait.

For now, I get to lie at her side and gaze at her beautiful face. Listen to her breathing. Watch her chest rise and fall and her eyes flicker under her eyelids.

How could I have found such an incredible mate in all of this? A mate who is supposed to be off limits, and yet who I couldn't help but claim?

It stirs something in me, the part of me which built this nest for her. The part I pretend isn't me, the unremembered I don't want to think about.

But now I have Chrissie, I have to think about it. I have to keep her. I have to protect her.

"You think too loud," Chrissie says, stretching out under the soft blanket I've draped over her. "What are you thinking about?"

"You, little spark, always you."

She smiles, her face squished up as she puts her arms over her head. I grasp at her wrists, pinning her down as I plunder her mouth once again. My Chrissie melts under me, her body pressed against mine and making me want to mate her.

“Again?” she asks, light twinkling in her eyes. “After the last two times?”

“I’d have you impaled on my cocks a hundred times a nova-day or more, little spark, twice as much at night.”

“Confident you could stand up to that much punishment?” She laughs, so full of life.

“For you, anything.”

Chrissie rolls onto her front, sadly denying me the view of her glorious breasts, the nipples standing proud under the covers.

“Any chance the rations in the survival canister are edible?” she asks.

Vrex! In my delight of her body, I’ve forgotten about food.

“Your word is a command, mate.” I grin, pulling on my pants.

I take one last look at her before I return to the large outer cave. Light from the dawning of Trefa’s two suns is creeping into the place from the large entrance. The scent of burning ship winds like tendrils into my nose.

It’s not enough to get the scent of her out of my head.

The canister is where we left it last night, undisturbed because this place has been empty for eons. The items I found to make my nest were stored in airtight containers. Containers I was able to find with ease, even if I didn’t know what I was doing.

I don’t know what I’m doing. Other than mating with my eregri , other than knowing that Gryn nest for their fated ones, I’m not sure about anything else, other than the fact I cannot be parted from Chrissie.

I gather up the contents of the canister and sling it over my shoulder. My feathers are itchy from the dust we flew through last night, and I could do with a bath. The thought of my eregri joining me makes my cocks hard yet again.

They enjoyed plundering her sweet, tight cunt over and over. I press at the bulge in my pants, hoping to dissuade my cocks from punching a hole through the fabric, when my attention is caught by movement out on the plains far below us.

There are craft circling Fenek's downed ship. I race to the entrance, opening my wings, ready to spring into the air, to capture the attention of our rescuers.

Then, with a snap, I shut them again. These are not rescuers. Pulsar beams strike the wreckage, not in the way of a rescue.

But in the way of ensuring there are no survivors. I pull back from the entrance.

Whatever it is my erstwhile boss has got himself into, it bodes no good for Chrissie or me. Not if the first creatures on the scene are the clean up team.

I make my way back to my nest. It occurs to me we could stay here, nesting, mating, creating younglings. I can hunt, bring us food, while my sweet mate fills these long forgotten halls with her music, making them ring again with life.

Maybe even persuade my fellow gladiators to come here too, with their mates, if I can find them. We could build a lair here.

Be free here.

A scout-bot zips past the entrance to the cave, and I freeze. They're not content with torching the wreckage. They're making a sweep of the area, and the last thing I want is for them to find us.

I can fight, but I know when the odds are against me. Once I'm sure the thing is out of range, I head back to my little mate. My dreams are just dreams, and it's been that way my entire life, what little of it I can remember.

So, there's nothing to be broken and protecting my mate is the most important thing I will ever do.

One day we'll find somewhere to nest, but not here and not today.

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:28 am

CHRISSIE

I stare up at the ceiling of the “nest” Rych created for me. It’s the only part of this place which remains bare rock.

A pattern which looks like the rolling sea is carved there. It seems Rych has chosen this place carefully for his nest.

The nest he made for me.

For once, I allow a warmth to bloom in my chest. To have someone who wants me for me, not for what I can do for them, is a brand new experience here, on this planet.

I can’t complain about Fenek’s treatment of me. Detached it might have been, with little in the way of empathy, but he gave me a roof over my head, food, a wardrobe, and credits, all to use a gift I’ve had since I was a little girl.

But it was at a price.

I have to hope what is happening with Rych is different. I know my body feels different after last night. My thighs burn at me with the unaccustomed exercise. My joints are painful as always, but today the pain seems more bearable. Possibly because I’m filled with the endorphins from being made to come over and over.

Rych was very insistent on multiple orgasms. In fact, he demanded them. A thought which makes my cheeks heat.

The door swings open, and my huge bodyguard enters carrying a canister.

“We’ve got some company,” he says nonchalantly, unpacking the thing and setting items on the table from last night.

The one which makes me blush a little.

“Company? You mean rescuers?”

“No, not rescuers. The exact opposite.”

“What?” I sit up.

“In fact, I’d say they don’t want any survivors at all,” he says, stirring one of the two cups he’s set on the side. “They won’t find us here, but we don’t want to hang around.”

“You mean we have to run?”

Rych stirs the other cup slowly, contemplating it, then he picks up both of them and carries them over to the platform, handing one to me. A warm, sweet scent rises up.

“Eat,” he exhorts. “Usually, I wouldn’t run,” he continues once I’ve consumed a spoonful of the pale colored porridge-like substance, which is surprisingly tasty. “Usually I’d fight, but I have you, and your safety is my priority.”

“Because you have to get me back to Fenek,” I say dully, the food having lost any allure.

I’m caged against the fabric on the wall behind me by a large gladiator who is all wing and muscle.

“You do not belong to him. You belong to me,” he rasps, dark eyes studying my face.
“I protect you because you are mine.”

Well, that settles that.

“So, what do we do?” I ask as he withdraws.

“Eat.” He nods at my cup.

“Other than eat,” I sass, but I quickly take another mouthful as he glares at me before narrowing his eyes as I lick the spoon.

“You are trouble, little spark. I always knew it.” He growls, the sound going straight to my core.

Rych’s nostrils flare.

“So much trouble.” He doesn’t let his gaze waver from mine.

I shrug and dig into my porridge.

“We need to get back to Tatatunga. Until I can find out what happened to the ship and where Fenek is, we need to be somewhere safe, and that place is the dome.”

I very nearly spit out my food everywhere. “The dome? Safe? It’s where you kill each other!”

“It’s where some of the best killers in Trefa reside, and it’s the one place I know you will be protected as my mate,” Rych says, finishing up his cup and putting it to one side.

He watches me as I finish mine.

“You believe I’m your mate?” I ask quietly, gently scraping the sides of the cup.

“I know you are my mate,” Rych says, gathering up the items from the canister, checking them over, and putting them into a smaller pack.

“If you’re sure the dome is the best place...”

“I know it,” he says with the self-assurance of a massive predator who has never had to worry about anything in his entire life.

“Then the dome it is,” I say, pulling on my clothes.

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:28 am

RYCH

Having confirmed the bots and the mystery party which was searing the wreckage with pulsar bolts have departed, I collect my little mate and bring her back to the entrance cave.

“I liked it here,” she says wistfully, trailing her hand over the stone where there is a carving which looks familiar.

“I liked nesting for you.” I study the wall carefully. “Maybe we can come back.”

The hope which sticks in my throat is pointless. Even keeping my sweet mate is going to be a fight—bringing her back here is a dream I can only put to the back of my mind. The fight is all.

“Maybe,” she says quietly, not looking at me. “I’d like to do that.”

“Are you ready?” I ask.

Chrissie nods, and I take her into my arms, my heart swelling as she settles herself. With a short jog, I leap out of the cave mouth and into the air. Chrissie represses a shriek as I spin around and up, lifting us higher until we’re over the top of the mountain and I can get my bearings. The twin suns are not halfway in their march across the sky, and as I turn, I feel the pull of the invisible strings which bind this planet.

There is a larger settlement to the west, I can smell it. To the northwest lies

Tatatunga, but it's too far away for us to make it in a nova-day. From what I can tell, we have a distance to fly and we're going to need to stop. Or rather, my little mate will need rest and food.

Chrissie plucks at my straps. I look down at her and find she has turned a strange pale shade, her lips rimmed with blue. Her eyes bulge.

"I can't..." She mouths at me, any voice she might have lost in the wind of flight.

Fear grips at me, and I dive towards the ground, wanting to keep my eyes on her but also needing to see where I'm going. In as short a time as possible, we're on the ground in the foothills of the mountain we stayed within.

"Little spark?" I brush her hair away from her face. "What ails you?"

She's attempting to suck in air, her chest heaving hard. I lay her down. "What's wrong? What can I do?"

Her eyes are wild, and her hand clutches at my feathers. Slowly the color returns to her cheeks, and her breathing gets better.

"Chrissie?" My heart pounds at my ribcage worse than any fight I've been in.

"I'm sorry, . I don't think I can fly with you," Chrissie says hoarsely. "My lungs can't take it. Maybe you should go on without me."

Her words cause a feral growl to escape my lips. "Never."

"I'll only slow you down."

"Never."

I pull her onto my lap, arranging one wing over her trembling body. “Whatever we do, we do together, my mate.”

A tired smile tweaks the corners of her mouth, a mouth I drop a kiss onto, one she responds to readily.

“There is a large settlement to the northwest of here. We can make it by nightfall and hopefully find transport to Tatatunga from there.” I trace my hand down the side of her face. “If you think you can travel.”

Chrissie wriggles against my cocks, making them perk up. “I can travel,” she says, getting to her feet, much to my cocks’ disappointment.

I look her up and down.

“I can travel, and you don’t need to carry me.”

“But you don’t have your...prop,” I say, seeing the opportunity to have her in my arms disappearing over the horizon.

“No, I don’t. I’ll manage,” she replies, straightening her shoulders and smoothing down her hair, made wild by our earlier flight.

I shake out my wings. “If you get tired, I will carry you,” I intone.

“If I get tired”—Chrissie grins at me—“then you may carry me.”

My little scrap of a female is pushing me, trying to see what she can get away with. The answer is absolutely nothing. I glower at her.

“The only way you will ever be tired is from riding my cocks all night, mate.”

Her cheeks flush a delightful pink, like they were when I had her impaled on me, and the scent which she exudes has my cocks hardening painfully in my pants.

“We’ll see about that,” she says, twirling around and setting off down the rough trail.

Her delicious ass swings from side to side. It’s a beautiful sight and one which has me palming my cocks in order to relieve some of the pressure.

Vrex it! She is going to test me to my absolute limit. The terrors of the dome are nothing on a mated male being teased by his female.

Something I will make absolutely sure she is punished for once we stop for the night. And, as she looks back over her shoulder, from the look on her face, she knows exactly what awaits her.

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:28 am

CHRISSIE

Rych jogs to catch up with me, his great wings bouncing as he jumps from rock to rock and finally lands at my side.

“Hello, little spark.” He grins, showing far too much fang.

I love teasing him, but something deep within my stomach knows I’m poking the bear. Rych is going to make me pay for every single sass, and in turn, the tingle inside slips to my core. It makes me want to talk back even more, just to see what he will do.

Because despite nearly dying up in the sky, here on the ground, with him, I’ve never felt more alive. I just wish the rest of my body would agree with me.

Still, I’m surprised how well I’m doing on the rough terrain without my stick. My knee and ankle seem to be holding up, and I wonder if perhaps I’ve become too reliant on the thing. At least until I feel it give way, and I stumble into Rych, who catches me with a growl.

A noise which makes me go soft inside. A noise I wish he wouldn’t make because I’d like to do terrible things to him when he does.

“Careful, my mate,” he rumbles. “If you will not be carried, at least hold on to me.”

He offers his arm, and I take hold of his bicep, the thing being almost as wide as my thigh. It’s a steadying influence which I’m grateful for even as the path smooths out

and becomes less rocky.

This side of the mountain range is not as barren as where we crashed, as far as I can tell. There are trees, albeit small, bushy things which sprout a range of colored leaves. Here and there are patches of vegetation, some tall, some short, all of which waves blue-green fronds in a non-existent wind. The ground beneath our feet consists of grey dust streaked with deep red, like strata, my boots becoming covered in a pink dust as we continue on our way from the foothills onto undulating land which seems deserted and uncultivated.

As the suns rise, the warmth increases, and I strip off my coat, which Rych shoves into his pack even as I protest I can carry it.

Protests I know I will regret later, given Rych's glower.

The heat permeates my bones as we continue to walk. Rather than feeling tired, I feel invigorated. Rych points out the occasional bit of flora as we pass, telling me how the clerks in the dome use certain items as medicines.

"I'd have thought everything would be synthetic, given your level of tech."

Rych furrows his brow. "I don't think so. Did your world not make cures from plants?"

"Yes, it did. But"—I wave my hands vaguely at my surroundings—"my planet had only been able to put people on our nearest moon. Our tech is way behind yours."

"Not my tech," Rych grumps. "I use tech, I know tech, but I don't like it."

"Why?" I lift my chin, already knowing I'm probably going to burn, but not caring for a change, not when I feel so warm and happy.

“Don’t remember,” Rych says.

“You don’t remember much, do you?” I respond without thinking.

Rych is silent for a while.

“Most of the Gryn from the dome have little memory of their time before,” he finally says. “Sylas found out his memories were wiped by an enemy of the Gryn. As for the rest of us, I’m not sure. All I know is I woke up in a facility which sold me to the dome.”

My heart goes into a dead spin.

“You were sold...like a slave? But slavery is forbidden on Trefa!” I exclaim.

“Only overt slavery. The council turns a blind eye to those who are traded without any ceremony,” Rych growls. “But I was not a slave. The procurators of the dome are not stupid. They pay for us, but then we have to pay back our purchase price through fighting. And pay for our board, training, medic-assistance, and food. We are indentured, most of us.” He sighs.

“So, you paid off your debts and you are free?”

Rych laughs harshly. “I wish that was the case. One of my fellow gladiators, with the help of his mate, found out our transactions were void, and I was released from my debts, out into Tatatunga without a credit to my name.”

“Freedom at a price,” I reply.

I find myself caught in a pair of strong arms, a set of dark eyes looking down at me. “If the price means I found you, my sweet mate, it was a price worth paying.

Freedom might not be what I wanted, but it was worth every fight, every injury, and every lost credit.”

“I’m so sorry, Rych,” I say quietly. “For everything.”

“You set me free, my eregri. ” He stops suddenly, pulling me against his hard abs. “You have nothing to be sorry for. It is those who had me in the facility who are the ones who should answer for what they did.”

He presses a kiss to my lips, possessing my mouth and making my mind go entirely blank. When I’m released, he has to hold me up.

Rych might have pretended he was something immovable, something fixed, but he’s even more mixed up than me.

“Now can I carry you?” he asks.

“Oh? Was all of this a ruse to get me into your arms?” I laugh.

“Everything I do to get you is entirely calculated,” Rych rumbles, lifting me into his arms. “And every single tease you’ve made me endure in the last three nova-hours will result in payment...later.”

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:28 am

RYCH

Chrissie makes an effort to protest, but she's soon silent as I press my hand under her delicious behind, doing some teasing of my own while I plot just what I can do to her later when we stop for the night.

With her in my arms, we make much better progress, and it's not long before the settlement appears between the undulations of the land. My feathers itch the closer we get. I don't like the idea of taking my mate into an unknown place. A place where gladiators are not respected.

Although, given the way I was treated back in Tatatunga, the lack of respect here is likely to result in some potential issues for the inhabitants, if they're that way inclined. I have no intention of behaving myself while I have a mate to nest for.

"You can put me down now," Chrissie says.

Reluctantly, I put her on her feet, and she straightens her clothing. I pull her coat out from the pack, and she shrugs it on as we walk through the dusty outskirts heading into the main trading areas.

Like many places on Trefa, in the provinces I've visited, this town is a spiral. From a central market, there are increasing levels of wealth away from the main thoroughfares, some of which can only be accessed by air transport. In this particular settlement's case, the spirals ring up on the natural hills which surround it, creating numerous tiers which are oppressive.

“Where do you think we should go?” Chrissie whispers to me, holding onto my arm.

Heads turn as we walk down one of central streets. All the traffic is, as far as I can tell, airborne. The ground is left for those who walk. The settlement itself is a mix of Tref, those native to Trefa, tall and graceful, and numerous other species including Lepke, Yetag, and Oykgig.

I get the impression they have not seen a Gryn, or a human, before.

“We need information,” I say to Chrissie.

“Where?”

“I find most taverns are the place to ask.”

She grips my arm a little tighter as I steer us towards an establishment which looks hopeful. As soon as the door slides open, the noise inside abates.

Perhaps not so hopeful after all.

I put my feathers on end, flicking out my wings and extending my claws as I stride inside, making sure Chrissie stays close as we approach the serving area. A stocky Zarvu stands behind it, eyeing me warily.

“Gryn.” He nods. “Don’t often get gladiators here.”

“I’m not a gladiator,” I respond.

“Unlikely,” the Zarvu says. “All Gryn on Trefa are gladiators. I should know.”

“You’ve worked in the dome.”

He stops wiping a rag over the surface in front of him. “My brother did.”

Vrex! This is not going well. I check around me, looking for weapons, looking for threats.

“He said the Gryn were treated worse than the beasts they were set to kill.” The Zarvu shakes his head. “To think Tatatunga was once considered more refined than Kal.”

“Kal?” Chrissie queries, and the Zarvu strains his neck to see her. My lips ripple with a snarl I cannot control. “Where is Kal?”

“You’re standing in it,” the Zarvu says. “Such as it is.”

“I need somewhere for my mate to rest and transport back to Tatatunga in the morning,” I say in order to get his attention away from Chrissie.

“I have rooms,” he says. “Not here, down a way. You’ll be wanting the baths too, I reckon,” he adds with a crooked smile on his horned face.

The thought of a bath makes all my feathers prick at once. I do my level best not to react. But by the look he gives me, I don’t think I’ve managed.

“My mate needs food too.”

“That can be arranged.”

I look down at my Chrissie. She’s dusty and she looks tired. We could spend the next nova-hour looking for rooms, rather than taking the first ones we come across, but I don’t want to put her under any more strain.

“We’ll take it,” I growl.

I can only hope Fenek made good on his promise to pay me, or I’ll be having an awkward discussion with the Zarvu later.

We’re handed a small key chip and given directions to the rooms the Zarvu rents out. He claims there are baths underneath which will be big enough for a fully grown Gryn.

I highly doubt it.

“The whole of Kal is fed by hot springs. You’ll find them better than anything you can get in Tatatunga,” he claims.

My feathers shake slightly, something I stop straight away when a small hand slips into them at the very base. I actually feel my knees buckle slightly at her touch in a place no one ever has.

“If you know what’s good for you,” I murmur. “You’ll take care what you touch.”

Chrissie looks innocently up at me and pushes her fingers farther in, the tips sweeping my skin. My eyes roll in my head, thoughts of nesting, of mating, of a ripe little female at the very center consuming me.

Then the hand is gone. The Zarvu stares at me. I growl, taking Chrissie’s hand and ushering her out of the bar.

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:28 am

CHRISSIE

I think I might have found a chink in Rych's armor. Something my big muscular bodyguard can't control. His own body.

The room the barkeeper promised us is more like an apartment. Situated at the back of the bright white building, away from the main thoroughfare, it's quiet, looking out over an open area filled with vegetation to the hills beyond which spiral with larger dwellings. I lean on the balcony outside and take in the air.

Breathing seems easy here. My joints don't hurt as much, even after all the traveling today. I feel alive.

"Little spark?" Rych's voice rumbles behind me.

A shiver runs through my body. He's promised me and threatened me with so many things during our journey here, the anticipation causes a fizz of excitement.

Yesterday, thoughts of sex were a dim and distant past. Today, it's been all I can think about. Whether Rych really wants me, whether he'll want me again, or if he'll wake up and realize his mistake. Realize he was wrong about me, that I'm just a weak, pathetic, sick human and no match for a bright, virile male like him.

But the tone of his voice now chases all those fears away.

"I have arranged for the Zarvu to send you some fresh clothing," he says as I turn to face him. "Food is available whenever we want. Just have to make a call."

God! He looks impossibly handsome stood in the center of the room, great wings set so I can see both the edges of slate gray and the stunning pale stripes underneath. Feathers which are so beautifully soft to the touch as I can now attest. His abs are outlined with the dust from the path we walked, his strong cheekbones also.

And his eyes, those dark pools—they are filled with hunger.

“I thought you might like to bathe first,” he adds, his brows dipping as I drink him in like a woman with a never-ending thirst.

“Bathe,” I say, my power of rational thought obviously deserting me.

“Come,” he says, holding out his hand.

What else can I do? I take it, feeling the callouses worn there by a long time spent handling the weapons which bristle from the straps on his back. He leads me through the apartment to a door, which slides into the wall exposing a set of steps, and I’m hit by the scent of hot water, metallic and fragrant.

“We have our own private entrance to the baths?” I query.

“I doubt very much the Zarvu would allow anyone to share them with a Gryn. Not if he knows what’s good for him...or anyone else,” Rych growls as he takes the lead into the rough-hewn passage.

At the bottom, we turn a hard right, and before us is a great cavern, the ceiling low and the entire place lit up beautifully to show off the natural features. Down here, the striated stone is jewel bright, layers of colors which sparkle as if they’re filled with diamonds. It curves all around us, sinuous and beautiful, the formations carved by the water almost sculptural.

Steam rises from the clear water, ripples from the surface reflected on the sandy bottom.

“Do you like it?” Rych says, shifting from foot to foot.

“It’s incredible. I’ve never seen anything like it in my life,” I say in a hoarse whisper.

Rych toes off his boots and shucks off his pants and stands before me naked. And aroused.

“Clothes,” he orders. “Off.”

I put a hand on my hip, and he growls. The sound reverberates around the cavern.

“Or I will remove them for you, and I won’t be careful, meaning you’ll have to stay bare until I say.”

I don’t really want my clothing destroyed by a feral Gryn, or at least not today, so I strip slowly, folding each item and placing them on a nearby rock until I am as naked as he demands.

When I look up, he is directly in front of me. An arm snakes around my waist, and I’m pulled against his hard body and harder cocks.

“Vrex,” Rych rasps, running a knuckle down the side of my face. “You are so vrexing beautiful, little mate, so fine, so perfect.”

“I’m anything but perfect.” I stumble over my words. “I’m...”

“You are mine, eregri , which means you are perfection,” Rych says with conviction.

“I’m sick. I caught a virus which has made me a shell of who I was. I’m a sick human no one else wanted other than Fenek,” I blurt out, unable to keep my emotions in check. My words echo around the cave, coming back at me, hateful and a truth I didn’t want to admit. “You don’t want me.”

“I know what I want,” Rych growls. “And I know you belong to me. I see no sickness, only you.”

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:28 am

RYCH

My sweet mate doesn't know what she releases within me. It is a volcano of desire, a rising inferno of need. When she claims she is sick, I can't comprehend it.

Chrissie shakes her head. "You don't mean that. Fenek said..."

My growl is loud in the cavern.

"I don't care what Fenek says or does. You are mine, Chrissie. If you are sick, I will look after you. I will make sure you get all the care you need, all the medics you require, and they will do your bidding."

She doesn't look up at me. I put my finger under her chin and raise it until I can see her face. Water runs from her eyes. I kiss it away. It's salty and sweet. It tastes of her.

"Now I am going to bathe you, then I'm going to mate you, and I can't be gentle. I have a need to be deep inside you, plunder you, feel you come apart around me."

Chrissie's little body trembles in my arms. "Yes," she whispers.

How can I be deserving of such a stunning little creature? I take her hand and walk her to the edge of the water. My hard cocks bob, pre cum dripping from them. Which is good—they will be fully lubricated so I can take her fully when the time comes. We walk down the slope into the water. The heat seeps into my bones. I dip one wing underneath and the other one shudders as it waits for its turn.

I sluice out the dust from our journey. Chrissie drops below the surface until only her head is visible, watching me as I clean out my feathers.

“You like bathing then.” She smiles.

“A little.” I shrug. “The baths at the dome are not as fancy.”

She laughs. It’s an incredible sound which winds around the cave and fills my ears.

“This place has amazing acoustics,” Chrissie says.

Then she opens her mouth and sings. It’s a song about love, and the way it echoes enhances even more the beautiful sound I heard back at Fenek’s dwelling. All too soon, she stops, and it ebbs away like a lost soul.

“Don’t stop.” My voice sounds rough in comparison, unrefined.

“I thought you didn’t like it,” she responds. “You stopped what you were doing and your face...looked pained.”

“Because I never wanted it to end.” I draw her to me. “I never want this to end, little spark.” I sweep my thumb over the tight peak of her nipple.

She makes a sound somewhere between a squeak and a whimper.

“Are you hurt?” I query.

“No,” she breathes.

“Then it is your turn to be bathed,” I respond.

I take up one of the washing cloths placed on the side for our use and, having wet it, I slide it over her body. I make her stand as I reach her abdomen, and she is out of the water, which laps around her calves.

“Legs apart. I have work to do, little mate,” I say, tapping the inside of her thigh.

She moves them a little.

“Farther,” I order, tapping harder.

The scent of her is as intoxicating as a night in Tatatunga with Blayn and a vat of Sarkarnii ale wine. I want to enjoy her, but she needs to obey my command.

“Farther.” I lift her ankle and pull her legs apart.

She grabs the shoulder of my wing to steady herself and sends a feral desire flowing through me. The desire to fill her, to consume her...

“I am going to breed you tonight, mate. And the more you disobey me, the more I will breed you,” I growl.

Her hand clutches me tighter, and the wave of scent I get is an answer. This female is going to test me every minute of my life.

And I’m going to enjoy it.

“Hold on, little spark.”

I shove my face into her sweet cunt, inhaling the scent as I taste her. She is wet from the bath, and the water mingles with her personal essence. Her thighs tremble as I swipe my tongue through her folds. I lift one and prop it over my shoulder.

Chrissie grabs my other wing.

Now she has me.

And I can't stop myself. No matter she is the forbidden fruit. This female belongs to me.

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:28 am

CHRISSIE

Rych licks at me like I'm his last meal on Trefa, the tip of his tongue teasing my aching clit until I'm seeing all the bodies in the galaxy, bringing me oh-so-close to the edge, that wonderful edge where I will tip over and my orgasm will take me far away, yet leave me grounded here with him.

Then he stops, abruptly, with no warning.

"Little spark, you do not know what you do to me." His voice is a bed of gravel.
"When you touch my wings."

I have my fingers curled deep into his damp feathers. The heat of the skin underneath is incredible and glorious.

"What does it do?" I rasp back.

"It makes me want to mate you, wicked little creature," he responds, eyes filled with feral lust. "It makes me want to breed you."

I go into convulsions. Rych has made me come from his words alone. I can't speak, can't see, can't do anything as the wave of pure pleasure flows through me.

Can I breed with him? Do I want to?

It seems my body has made the decision for me, given my hips swing at Rych without any encouragement.

“Oh, my little spark wants to be bred?” he rumbles, his tones reverberating through me, around the cave, sending further shockwaves to all the right places. “She wants to take both my cocks?”

“Yes!” The word is the barest moan ripped from my lips, but taking all of him is what I want.

What I really want, more than anything. Rych makes me feel alive in a way I haven’t since I was taken from Earth. I know what he wants too.

And I want to give it to him.

With a bellow which fills the cave, I’m scooped into his arms and pressed up against a wall, my legs parted to let him in, his thick cocks breaching my entrance, stretching me impossibly wide.

“Hold on to me, my mate. I have to take you like this, I have to...” He rasps, his forehead on mine, looking down to where we are joined, any semblance of control leaving him as he drives himself into me, the initial stretch as he fills me just to the point of pain is bliss.

“I will breed you, mate.” He withdraws and thrusts back into me, the nodes on his cock hitting my g-spot as they slide in and out again.

Rych sets up a demanding pace which means all I can do, all I have to do, is hold on for the ride. His eyes don’t leave mine as he pounds, hands gripping my buttocks, keeping me in place as he has his way, as his cocks do exactly what they were designed to do, pleasure me to oblivion.

When it hits, my climax overtakes me and my pussy pulsates, gripping at his cocks, making his thrusts irregular, needy, desperate. I’m yelling. What I’m saying, I know

not, but I hear Rych chanting my name over and over until finally, he roars it out loud as hot cum fills me and a final huge stretch pinches inside me before he buries his head in the crook of my neck and all that fills the cavern is the sound of our ragged breathing.

If he can breed me, if humans and Gryn can have babies, if after my illness I can still have babies...then there's no going back.

Rych lifts his head, his stunning eyes boring into mine.

"Sweet mate, I don't deserve you," he breathes, and my heart does a somersault in my chest.

He doesn't think he deserves me ?

I shift in his hands and there's a strange pulling sensation between us.

"Rych? Are you...stuck...inside me?" I ask, a growing sense of concern blooming within me.

I didn't expect two cocks, but I could see their uses. But this...is something different.

"My second cock has swelled," Rych says, as if he's dreaming. "The better to keep my seed in you, to make sure it fills your womb."

His eyes have a far-away look, as if these words are not his.

"How long?" I ask.

"Until my body is ready to release you," he growls. "Because it knows when you are fertile, little spark."

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RYCH

The more we mate, the more I'm remembering random things, about what it is to be a Gryn, to be a...warrior?

But I was a gladiator, not anything as honorable as a warrior. I've seen warriors in the dome. I am not one of them.

But being buried in my mate, having my second cock swell tight in order to fill her? The utter beauty of it makes my heart pound and my vision dance.

I would be a warrior for her, for my Chrissie. I would protect her with everything I had.

"Do not worry, my sweet mate." I brush a lock of her soft hair back from her face, her concerned face, with eyes too big and a bottom lip I have to kiss.

If I don't kiss her, my heart and soul will never forgive me. I drag us down below the surface, resting her body against mine, taking so much from her until finally, finally, I can let her go.

"Does this always happen?" she asks, keeping very still on my cocks, which are showing no signs at all of letting her go.

"I don't know." I look down to where we are joined. "My second cock has never arisen before, not even when I was sold to females for the night."

“You were...sold? For sex?” Chrissie gasps. “I thought I knew about Tatatunga...I thought...”

“There was no coercion?” I release a harsh chuckle. “There is always a way of making a gladiator do what he does not want to do.”

“I’m sorry,” Chrissie says, averting her gaze.

I bring it back to me, her chin between my thumb and forefinger. “I’ve already asked if you were part of the dome council, and if you were not, you have no reason to apologize.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t slice those who seek to exploit you to ribbons.” She says, teeth gritted.

Chrissie trembles in my grip, her gaze not wavering from mine. My heart swells in my chest. My Chrissie doesn’t pity me, she fights for me.

“I want you to know what I did, everything I did, because it is important to me you understand what I am. Why I am not deserving of you.”

“.” Chrissie takes in a breath. “You deserve to have a life, to have what you want. But is it really me you want, you believe you deserve?”

“You are my fate, my eregri .” I growl, unable to help myself. “I didn’t even believe it was possible, until it happened. That there was a female out there in the galaxy who I would kill for, who I would die for. But it is you.”

She studies my face.

“I can’t pretend to understand, . Humans don’t behave like Gryn. I’m not a Gryn. I

don't even know if I can have your baby. But I do know I want to be with you, no matter what. I haven't felt like this since I was taken from my planet, from my family. I never thought I'd feel like I was home ever again, until you."

"You were taken?" The last word comes out as a snarl.

"Abducted. My dad..." She hesitates, a sob rising in her breast. "He'll never know where I went. He'll be waiting...wondering."

I pull her to me, holding her tightly, my lips against the fragrant skin just under her hair.

"My sweet mate, it is I who should be sorry, that you were stolen and brought here to my galaxy. If it was in my power, I would take you back to your family right now."

She pushes back, her face wet but her eyes dancing with a sad mirth. "I can just imagine the reaction of humans to you," she says. "Probably a lot of screaming."

"I should think so." I square up my wings. "I am a gladiator."

Chrissie snorts out a laugh. "That would only be a small part of it. But thank you for thinking of me."

"You are all I think of, my little spark," I respond.

I want her to be able to get back to her home, to her family, almost as much as I want her by my side.

Chrissie moves over me, and my cocks slip free from her delicious heat. I carefully clean her up, the hot water making her sleepy. By the time I finish, she's happy again, and I carry her up and out of the baths to our room and place her on the bed before

going outside to spin my feathers and rid myself of the last of my bath.

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CHRISSIE

Rych orders the food. When it's delivered, he sets it out on the comfortable seating area near the balcony and then insists on making sure I eat what he considers is "sufficient" and is far more than I usually would consume.

I enjoy everything far more than I have for a long time. I also enjoy the attention from Rych. Part of me wants to deny it, to push him away, to make it difficult for him to like me.

But I've been alone, here on Trefa, for so long, having someone like him here, someone I find it easier and easier to talk to, about anything...it is right.

Whether I deserve it or not is a different matter, but I'm going to force myself to accept what we have because the alternative is a solitude I don't want to go back to.

"Did you enjoy fighting in the dome?" I ask him as I munch on a purple vegetable with the texture of a carrot and the flavor of an onion. "When you were a gladiator?"

"Perhaps enjoyment is the wrong word," Rych says, contemplating another piece of meat. He very much likes his meat. "My fellow gladiators might have enjoyed it more than me, feral creatures that they were." Rych releases a dry chuckle. "Klynn most definitely. That vrexer could cause a fight in an empty room." He takes chunk of meat and chews thoughtfully. "I am a fighter. I like to fight. Put a sword in my hand and I'll do a job." Rych gives me a wicked grin. "For the right price."

"I thought you were indentured?"

“We were, most of us. Some were sent to the dome as punishment for crimes they committed or were said to have committed,” Rych replies. “But we got credits for...” He eyes me as his words come to a halt.

“For what?”

He looks away. “For certain kills.”

“I don’t...”

“If someone was participating in the dome, and they had enemies, they could pay for that someone to be killed, sometimes in a certain way,” Rych says, still not looking at me, his voice strained.

I put my hand on his arm. He doesn’t move and he doesn’t look up. I slide a hand into his feathers, knowing how much he responded to my touch earlier.

“I didn’t like the dome. But it was all I knew,” he says quietly. “I didn’t want to leave.”

My fingers touch the warm skin underneath the soft down, and he closes his eyes. I find an apology hovering on my lips, but I know he doesn’t want it.

“But you’re here now. You have a job which means you don’t have to kill anyone.”

He raises his face, his jaw slightly slack. “I’d kill for you, my little spark. I’d protect you with my last breath.”

“I’d rather you didn’t. I like having you around.” I push my hand deeper, and a glassiness comes over his eyes.

“My...mate,” he says, a slight slur to his voice.

“Your mate?”

“Mine.” His eyelids droop in slow motion.

Having this huge beast at my mercy is somewhat empowering, especially when he’s been ordering me about all day.

“Yours?”

“ Mine ,” he growls, and I’m caged by a huge, feral monster who looks like he wants to devour me.

“Yours,” I say with a smile and a stretch. “But this mate is tired.”

Rych half hums, half growls as his dark eyes search my face.

“We’ve got a long journey tomorrow, little spark. I doubt we’re going to find direct transport to Tatatunga.” He dips his head and kisses me, his lips pulling a moan of his name from mine. “So, you should sleep and not be mated again.”

My treacherous core clenches at the thought. Rych’s nostrils flare.

“Oh, so my little mate thinks she can take more of me, does she?”

I gaze up at him and put my tongue in my cheek. The growl he releases does terrible things to my insides.

“It’s a hard job, but someone has to do it,” I tease.

“No one else touches you,” Rych snarls, his dark eyes darker than ever. “No one but me.”

I raise my eyebrows. I know I’m poking the bear, or in this case a delightfully feral gladiator, but I don’t care.

Rych has made me feel alive again, and I find I want to live more than ever.

RYCH

My sweet mate still sleeps as I return from finding out about transport. I disliked leaving her on her own, but the locks on the doors and the security systems appeared solid, and as a former indentured gladiator, I know about locks.

Mostly I know how to bypass them.

The transport situation is worse than I thought. Even with a fully loaded credit chip (at least Fenek did one thing right and I had no need to worry after all), there's nothing direct to Tatatunga. Kal appears to want very little to do with the supposed capital of Trefa. Not that I blame it.

"Hey." A pair of bright eyes are on me.

"Good nova-morning, eregri ." I leap onto the bed.

Chrissie squirms comfortably under the soft blankets. "What time is it?"

"Time for us to go," I respond, "when you're ready."

"To Tatatunga?"

"No, we can't get there, not today. There's no direct route. It seems not everyone is as keen on Tatatunga as those who live there."

"I'm not that keen on Tatatunga and I live there," she responds. "Did you get hold of

Fenek?”

“I think it’s best no one knows where we are, or if we survived the crash.” I give her a lingering kiss, enjoying her taste. “Until we can be sure Fenek remains alive.”

Once I release her, she swings her legs out of the bed and gets to her feet, smiling over her shoulder at me before walking into the sanitary facility.

I made sure she was thoroughly mated again last night, and the thought makes my cocks hard again. I have a feeling they will always be hard around her.

Chrissie sings as she cleans herself in the facility where water falls like rain from the ceiling. Her beautiful voice is enhanced with an echo, sweet and perfect. There are words, there are simple notes, but all of it has me bound to the spot, unable to move until she comes out, cloth wound around her form and her hair.

I have her in my arms in nova-seconds.

“I thought we had to leave,” she protests.

“We do, but if I don’t kiss you now, I will explode.”

“Explode? Well then, you’d better kiss me. I can’t have my gladiator exploding.” Mirth dances in her eyes, her cheeks pink from the hot water.

I kiss her.

My heart pulls against my chest. I don’t want to leave this place. The place where she feels she can sing whenever she wants. The place I can mate her over and over until she screams my name and buries her tiny hands in my feathers.

“Explosion averted?” she asks.

“For now,” I rasp. “May have to have further treatment later.”

She spins away from me with a laugh and pulls on the fresh clothing I obtained from the Zarvu, who seems to have an ability to procure anything.

We leave the accommodation behind and following the instructions I was given, we walk through the pleasant wide thoroughfares of Kal towards the transport hub.

“The water in the baths must have some excellent properties,” Chrissie says as we walk. “Usually my joints ache for half the day, but this morning I have hardly any pain.”

“Perhaps getting away from Tatatunga and crashing a space ship is what you needed,” I suggest.

Chrissie puts her hands on her hips. “I didn’t crash the ship, you did.”

“Let’s say it was a joint effort.” I grin and hold out my hand to her.

“I like the idea of being a bit destructive,” she says thoughtfully as we leave the room. “Makes a change from being sick.”

“Maybe you’re getting better?” I suggest, bringing her to a halt next to a stall selling hot joh and baked goods. I purchase both and put them in her hands. “Eat.”

Chrissie has a defiance flashing in her eyes, but just as I think I’m going to have to threaten a punishment, she takes a bite of the large bread twist and chews at me.

“Happy?”

“Always.”

“I don’t think I can get better,” she says as we continue walking. “Fenek had a medic look at me once, and he said the virus was permanently in my system.”

Something about her phrasing sets my feathers on edge.

“When we get back to Tatatunga, I’ll take you to the medics in the dome. They’re the best there is. They can tell us whether you still have the virus or not.”

“Okay,” Chrissie says, finishing up the food and licking her fingers.

An action which goes straight to my cocks, again. Something I’m sure she is well aware of, my naughty mate.

It’s early enough on a non-market day our presence is not causing the same level of interest as last night. I can’t imagine my sword, displayed between my wings helped much as the society here in Kal appears to eschew visible weaponry.

However, with fewer residents around, it means when I see the collection of armed Oykgig, they stick out like a pikrat at a banquet. I grab hold of Chrissie and pull her into a nearby alley.

“What the...?” she exclaims, attempting to keep hold of her cup of joh without spilling it.

“I recognize those Oykgig from the crash site. Although they don’t have any bots with them.” I keep my voice down, hoping she will follow suit.

“You do?” she says, quietly, peering around the corner at where I’ve indicated. “Are you sure? We saw Oykgigs yesterday.”

“These ones are from Tatatunga. They have too much in the way of plasma weapons on them to be from Kal,” I respond. “And I can smell the dirt of the city on them.” I snort.

“Not just a pretty face then.” Chrissie smiles up at me.

My abdomen is flooded with relief she is not frightened by this turn of events.

“I need you to do exactly what I say.”

“If it involves you going to hack them to pieces while I wait here, I’m not going to do that,” Chrissie says in a hoarse whisper.

I open my mouth. She holds up a finger.

“Or if it means we separate, I’m not doing that either.” Chrissie puts her free hand on her hip in defiance.

Fierce little mate.

“I was going to suggest we take a different route to the transport and avoid drawing attention to ourselves,” I say, unable to hide my smile.

“Then we’d better do it now because I think they’ve spotted us,” Chrissie replies urgently.

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CHRISSIE

I don't get a good look at the three Oykid as one points across the square at us, but I can't shake the feeling they're familiar somehow. Given they're toting enough ray guns to supply an army, I can see why Rych decided they were up to no good.

I should be terrified. I spent so much of my time post abduction frightened for my life and my body, until I caught the virus and nothing else mattered. Here and now, alongside my big, bad Gryn gladiator, his movements easy and sinuous, his abs rippling and his great wings held high as we make good our escape, I have no fear.

It's as freeing as finding my pain is so much reduced since waking up here. I heard about hot springs on Earth which were supposed to have healing properties, but I thought it was a Victorian myth. Could it be the same here on Trefa?

I'm not going to dwell on it. Simply reveling in feeling somewhere near how I was before the virus is enough. I can even keep up with Rych's long strides as we duck down a number of increasingly narrow passages before we come out into a small space between the buildings.

"Can I ask you to 'wait here'? Little mate, while I..." He points upwards and opens his wings.

"Just this once," I respond and stand back as he beats down, whipping up dust and debris as he fires himself upwards but doesn't get much higher than the roofs above before flipping over and disappearing out of sight.

I wait.

I don't like it, but I recognize in this particular situation, asking him to carry me with him is neither sensible nor going to be pleasant.

Minutes tick by. I tap my foot and drink the rest of my joh, a hot drink more like chai than coffee, and one I didn't realize I had a taste for until now.

Something blots out the suns, and Rych crashes back to the ground, his wings falling like a cloak around him.

"Rych?"

"We have to go, now!" he says, rising but keeping his torso hidden from me.

Pain flashes through my mind, but it's not my pain, it's a ghost of a pain.

"Let me see," I demand.

He glares at me for a second, then he unwraps the wing from around himself. A searing livid plasma burn crosses his abdomen down the left side.

"It's a flesh wound," Rych says, straightening up. "I've had worse in the dome. Let's go, little spark."

He ushers me ahead of him.

"You need to get it treated."

"I heal fast. All Gryn do," he responds as I'm rushed along down three more winding passages, at the bottom of which, I see an oddly shaped craft.

“I’d prefer we were flying, but this is all I could find on short notice.”

“What is it?” I stare at the thing, a skeleton sphere with what looks like a seat in the middle and a large block below.

“It’s a hover craft,” Rych says, clambering onto it like a motorcycle.

“I think hover craft on Trefa and hovercraft on Earth are two different things,” I say, partly to myself, as I get on in front of him. “How does it work?”

“Press here to start.” Rych wraps an arm around me and presses on the console in front.

The thing hums, and a set of bars rises up out of the solid block, molding themselves to my shape.

“Accelerate is...”

I’ve already wrapped my hand around what I think is the throttle, and as I squeeze, the sphere shoots forward.

“It is like a motorbike.” I laugh out loud. “I feel like I haven’t ridden in ages! And I haven’t ridden in ages!” I grip harder, and with a lurch, the hover craft increases its speed.

Behind us, a plasma bolt slams into a wall.

“Keep going,” Rych says.

A quick glance over my shoulder, and I see he has a pulsar pistol in his hand. I grip the throttle as he returns fire, and we jink through the alleyways which are,

fortunately, large enough for the craft and the two of us.

“Where to?” I shout over the sound of the engine and the wind as we race down a wide passageway.

“Next left,” Rych says in my ear, “and we should be out of Kal.”

I take the turn, feeling my way with the new machine. It’s incredibly responsive and stable as we whirl around, and I see, at the bottom of the hill, an open space. I increase our speed, and we race downwards before firing out from between two walls.

“Shit!” I try to slow down before we hit the wide river.

“Keep going! This is all terrain,” Rych calls out. I grip the throttle with all my might, and we skim over the surface, spray hitting the forcefield around us until we’re free of the water. I risk a check behind us and see, through the mist, two of the Oykids stranded on the other side.

“Go!” Rych exhorts me as several bolts hit the surface where we just were. “Before they get their own transport.”

We shoot forward again, into the waving grass of the wide plain, and I keep up our pace until the grassland morphs into low sweeping hills and there are places we can hide. I bring the hover craft to a halt.

Rych rolls off with a groan and throws himself down on the ground.

“Are you okay?” I ask, leaping off after him.

“Not used to fast ground transport,” he grumbles. “Prefer flying.”

“You’re travel sick?”

Rych nods. He has one hand wrapped over his abdomen.

“Let me see,” I say, gently lifting it away.

The burn doesn’t look great, but it also isn’t any worse than when I briefly saw it before.

“There are supplies on the hover craft.” Rych eyes the thing with suspicion. “I’m not sure what as I borrowed it.”

“Borrowed?”

He gives me a shrug and a wan smile. “Maybe stole.”

“Great, so we can add thieves to our resumes, as well as hooligans.”

“I already am a thief, little spark, and as for hooligan, if that has anything to do with the way you piloted the hover craft, I am in awe of your hooliganism,” he says with a twinkle in his eye.

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RYCH

I've never been good with ground transport. Although any flying we get in the dome isn't long distance, at least when we are sent anywhere, it was usually under the influence of paraxio.

The nausea wears off quickly. My pride in my little mate and how easily she adapted to the controls of the hover craft swells in my chest instead. It makes the pulsar bolt injury burn at me, but it's a small price to pay to see my Chrissie in action.

"Keep still," Chrissie orders. "I need to get this on your wound." She spreads a cooling salve from the craft's medi-kit over my injury.

"Don't like it," I grumble, attempting not to move but squirming anyway.

The smell of it makes me think of the medi-bay at the dome. A place I avoided as far as I could. One night there was enough.

"Don't be such a child! This'll stop any infection and you're already healing ," Chrissie says with not a little awe. "How?"

"Gryn heal well. It's one of the reasons we were chosen for the dome," I respond, wrinkling my nose and turning my head away from where she has applied the salve.

Instead I shove my head into her hair and gulp down her scent. It makes Chrissie chuckle, something I like much more than the salve.

“Don’t get yourself stuck to me,” she says, her voice filled with mirth.

“I am stuck to you, little mate.”

As much as I hate to admit it, the salve makes the pulsar burn feel considerably better.

“We need to find shelter for tonight.” I look at the darkening sky.

“Do you think they’ll follow us out here?”

“Yes, which means we need to find somewhere which will make it hard for them.”

“Where?”

I heave myself to my feet and go over to the hover craft, activating the mapping console as Chrissie joins me.

“Oh, I didn’t realize it had a GPS,” she says, slipping her hand into my feathers and making my knees go instantly slack.

“GPS?” I slur.

“I don’t know what you call it here, but on Earth, a map like this would be generated by satellites above the planet. We called it a global positioning service.” She studies the vid screen. “It meant you could get directions to wherever you wanted to go.”

I pull her into me. “Every time you impress me, I wonder what else you will do, and you do something more, little spark.”

“That’s what your planet gets for underestimating a sick female,” Chrissie responds.

“You were never that to me.” I tilt her face up to mine and press a kiss to her lips. Her hand curls against my skin and my mind goes gloriously blank.

“There’s a settlement not too far from here,” Chrissie says, pulling me back to the present. “Do you think we should go there?”

I look at the map. The tiny speck of a settlement which the map names as Szar. Not the place I was hoping we’d get to today, but given we have our own transport, at least until we can find something more legitimate, it’s probably the best we can do.

I climb onto the transport and lift my little mate on in front of me.

“You want me to drive?”

“I do. I can’t operate one of these,” I respond.

“What?” Chrissie says as the hover craft fires up. “How did you know I could?”

“I didn’t, but it turns out you do.” I grin. “A happy coincidence.” I wrap my arm around her waist as we shoot forward, following the map and heading in the direction of the settlement. “Everything is good if it involves you, my Chrissie.”

I feel her growl rather than hear it and bury my face in her flowing hair again. Chrissie is my happy place.

CHRISSIE

One thing I don't have to worry about is the health of Rych. From having a wound which looked very nasty, within a very short space of time, it was healing, the skin knitting together, and the entire injury could have been done days ago.

One thing I am worried about is the place we've reached. It's a complete contrast to Kal. Consisting of one street where all the commerce takes place, the rest is dwellings which are covered in dust from the plains. Dust no one can be bothered to remove.

"We walk from here," Rych says in my ear. "Put the craft behind this building."

I park the thing in a gap between a shack and a more solid structure.

"We could find somewhere else," I say, my legs trembling as I dismount. "We don't have to stay here."

Rych looks up at the sky. The suns went down over half an hour ago, and darkness is spreading its fingers over the terrain. He looks at me.

"You are the mate of a Gryn gladiator," he intones. "You are afraid of nothing."

He sets his wings, and I feel terrible. He thinks I doubt his ability to protect me, whereas I'm more concerned for him.

We walk around the corner and into the main thoroughfare. I miss my stick. Not because my leg feels like it's going to give way but because I could use it as a

weapon if I had to. Rych curls his huge hand around mine, comforting and solid.

I need to have more faith.

I need to have more trust.

As we make our way down the street, we get stared at by the inhabitants of Szar. I notice there are few Tref, and the ones I do see scurry away. The rest are scrawny looking Habosu, a number of Yetag, and the occasional Oykid.

“Here.” Rych comes to a halt outside a small place which seems better kept than those on either side. It has several steps up from the street and a portico with columns.

“Gladiator!” The word rings out down the too quiet street.

Rych turns to see a large Habosu glaring at him. He pushes me back. “I’ll deal with this,” he says quietly. “Go inside.”

I take a few steps under the portico, but I don’t want to let Rych out of my sight.

“I am not a gladiator,” Rych says evenly.

“Could have fooled me.” The Habosu sneers, his green-gray flesh wobbling. “My brother was in the dome. You killed him.”

“I’ve killed many. Something your brother would have known if he willingly came to the dome,” Rych replies. “If not willingly, then he would have always been executed for his crimes.”

A chill runs through me. Tatatunga is a vicious place, I knew that, but his words bring

the violence of the capital into stark relief. And how I've only survived because of my Gryn protector.

"He was killed by a Gryn, and now it is my turn to avenge him."

A small crowd is gathering around Rych and the Habosu.

"Then you will die also," Rych responds, pulling his sword from its sheath between his wings.

Something heavy drops onto my shoulder, and instantly I attempt to duck away. But I'm unable to get the grip released.

"What's going on, Bort?" A strong female voice rings out in the still, cool air.

The Habosu's stance suddenly changes. He straightens and blinks at me.

"There is a gladiator here."

"I see a Gryn and a...female. I see no gladiator," the voice responds. "If you spent as much time concentrating on your work as you do on your useless excuse of a brother, this town would be wealthier than Tatatunga," she says. "Go about your business."

The crowd melts away as the grip on me releases and I'm able to see who had hold of me.

A tall Voltes, an alien species which always reminds me of a werewolf, her tawny fur silky smooth, her blue eyes blazing at the Habosu who hangs on until the last moment before he too leaves.

Rych doesn't sheath his sword. Instead he glares at the female, who moves to one

side, away from me.

“You are not welcome here, Gryn,” she says coldly.

“No shit,” I mutter.

Rych lowers his weapon, takes two steps, and pulls me to his side away from the Voltes.

“I am Red, owner of this establishment,” she says, eyeing the pair of us. “Szar perhaps isn’t the place for you, Gryn warrior.”

“I am not a warrior,” Rych says.

“You protect your mate. You are a warrior,” Red states.

“I need food for my mate and somewhere to stay for the night,” Rych growls, not taking his eyes from her, nor replacing his sword.

“Food I can do, but I don’t recommend you stay here tonight. That idiot might not be prepared to challenge me in front of a crowd, however he will return.” Red sighs.

I hadn’t realized I was tired, but at her words, the familiar ache flows through my joints. Rych presses himself against me with reassuring warmth.

“We will accept the food,” he says. “And should the Habosu return, I will deal with him.” I feel his body vibrate with the words.

Red gestures for us to enter, and with Rych at my back, we walk into her place.

It’s cavernous and barn-like, but I’m grateful for the warmth inside. I stare up into the

rafters trying to work out what the marks are up on the beams.

“I occasionally host the Sarkarnii,” Red says, noticing my gaze. “They play hard as well as work hard.”

“This place is a Sarkarnii hide out?” Rych asks. “Bunch of vrexers! I always wondered where they went when they visited.”

“We’re out of the way enough and the locals are too frightened of them to say anything, but we’re within reach of Tatatunga,” Red says with a smile. “Whether I’ll see them much again is a different matter.”

“Scaly vrexers have got themselves their own planet,” Rych says with a smile.

“Maybe that is in your future too, Gryn,” Red replies with a knowing nod.

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RYCH

This whole place puts me on edge. Even the knowledge the Sarkarnii occasionally use it as a base doesn't help. Those scaly vrexers don't care where they stop, just as long as they can shift, eat, and are not bothered whilst doing those two things.

And very few species would ever bother a Sarkarnii without good cause. Not unless they want to be flame grilled.

Same for the Gryn, save for the occasional suicidal Habosu. I should be proud of what we are, but my need to protect my mate, to keep Chrissie from the violence and death—it is overwhelming.

As is my need to nest for her. I wanted to last night but couldn't procure anything to decorate the room in which we stayed in the short time we were there. My whole being feels like I'm being spun dry with the need to show her what a good male I am.

How beautiful a nest I can build.

If I don't get a chance soon, I have concerns I might lose my Chrissie to another male. Concerns I know are irrational, but I can't control them.

I set my wings and try to concentrate on what the Voltes is saying. It is something about food, which is good. At least I can feed my mate, even if I cannot nest for her.

“Sit.” Red points at a table which is reminiscent of those in the dining hall of the dome. Long and large, with bench seats.

Chrissie perches on one side, and I fold up my wings to sit next to her.

“What do you think?” she asks me. “Where are we going to go if we can’t stay here?”

I growl under my breath. “We will stay here. I am not having you lacking in your rest because of some pathetic Habosu.”

“I don’t want you to get into trouble,” Chrissie says.

“My little mate, I am trouble,” I growl.

I’m rewarded by the scent of her arousal, something else which makes me want to nest. I pluck at the fabric covering the table, enjoying how it feels under my claws and consider if it would make a good nest.

“All Gryn are trouble,” Red says, carrying two huge platters with ease from the back of her establishment. They steam, and the smell of meat surrounds us. “Gladiators are the worst.”

Chrissie slips her hand into my feathers, and I feel my jaw weaken.

“Oh, I don’t know,” she says. “I think you just need to know how to handle them.”

Red smiles, showing her white fangs as she puts down the food in front of us. My stomach makes a growling sound to rival any I might consciously make in my throat.

“Feeding and care of Gryn warriors,” Chrissie says. “Something I’m getting good at.”

Her fingers go deeper, and all I can think about is nesting, putting Chrissie in my nest and mating with her until she grows ripe and round.

“Okay, you can stay here tonight.” Red’s voice penetrates my haze. “Not in this place. You can come to my home.”

“We can?”

“I think you’ve demonstrated he’s dwelling trained,” Red says with a snort.

I growl at her. “I am perfectly trained, in all forms of combat and death.” I rattle my feathers.

“Good,” Chrissie says. “Red has some wood which needs chopping.”

It appears there has been an entire conversation I’ve missed. But given I got the opportunity to think about nests, I’m prepared to let it go.

The Voltes has brought plenty of meat, and having made sure my little mate has sufficient, I waste no time in consuming the rest. My appetite is almost as bottomless as Blayn’s today.

When we’re finished, Red takes us out of the back and through some winding streets until we arrive in front of a building built out of solid stone and which seems to be without doors or windows.

“Looks like a cell,” I growl.

“That’s because it is,” Red says. “And you’re going in it, Gryn, along with your little mate. Not only do we not want Gryn in our town, but there’s a price on your head.”

I thrust out my wings, but the planet tips on its axis and I find I can’t stand.

“Paraxio!” The word is like a poison. The one drug I can’t metabolize quickly.

“!” Chrissie cries, as she’s grabbed around the shoulders by the Habosu from earlier.

“We’ll get plenty of credits for these two.” He laughs nastily.

“I told you.” Red smiles, her eyes glittering with menace. “Put him in the cell. I’ll take her back to mine. Her continuing existence is an incentive for the Gryn to behave himself, and her continuing health will please the Loxzian.”

The paraxio rolls through my system. It must have been in the meat I was given as Chrissie seems unaffected.

I curse myself for this situation. Just because one place showed a kindness, I let my guard down. Red kicks me in the chest, and I go sprawling on my back, unable to help myself. She relieves me of my weapon and inspects it carefully.

“Good Haaluxian steel.” She puts a foot on my throat. “I think I’ll keep this, Gryn.”

“The Sarkarnii?”

“You think a place like this would welcome creatures like those?” She cackles. “Those marks were made by my own kind, Gryn. And I’m in need of an upgrade. The credits I will get for you will come in handy.”

She grabs hold of Chrissie, making her cry out in pain.

My entire body goes rigid.

“Do not hurt my mate,” I snarl out.

“Or what, you’re going to drool at me?” Red retorts and the Habosu laughs, reaching down to grab a wing.

“I warned you,” I respond, flicking the Habosu into the wall, which he hits with a loud crack. “I am trained in all forms of combat.” I flip to my feet and catch Red under her chin with my other wing. She releases Chrissie in alarm, and I pull her away. “And death.”

I spear the Voltes’ body with my claws and heave her over my head, spinning her away from us before I pull my mate into my arms, and with a clumsy running start, I pull us both into the air and away from Szar.

CHRISSIE

Rych's heart is pounding in his chest, I can feel it as we rise higher. Everything happened so fast, from Red seeming to be friendly to the bloody fight and our flight from the terrible mess.

"We have to go down," I pant.

"Must. Get. Away," Rych says over the roar of the wind.

"We're far enough away, please land," I plead.

He dips, great wings rowing at the air as if, for once, he can't defy it, and we land. He stumbles and releases me in time I'm able to stay on my feet, even if he doesn't. He rolls head over heels into a bush and doesn't move.

"What happened?" I race over, dropping to my knees next to him as he stares up at the night sky.

"Paraxio." He grins at me, an intoxicated smile which has no humor or delight. "It's a narcotic. I'm used to pleasure drugs, we get plenty in the dome, but not so much paraxio." He laughs.

"Is it dangerous for you?"

I'm pulled down onto his hard body and he covers me with a wing. "Not at all, little spark. I'm enjoying it immensely, but we have to sleep now."

“Here?”

Rych snores, and I’m more confused than ever. We have landed at the edge of an area containing soft waving grass. It creates a fragrant bed and, in the main, is concealing us from any casual observer. I pull his wing as far over the both of us as possible. I have zero chance of sleeping, but I have to try to stay warm. I listen to the drum of his heart as it slows with his even breathing.

I don’t sleep. Instead my body plays out the spiralling drop from the sky over and over until I’m exhausted and the stars in the clear sky above us become blurred.

“Oof!” I open my eyes to find I’m several meters from Rych and he’s sprawled out, wings everywhere. His eyes open and he attempts to get up, falls back, and rolls over.

“What the vrex happened?” He groans. “I feel like someone tried to take my brain out through my nose.”

“You were given some sort of drug last night, and they tried to capture us, to give us to a Loxzian.” I recall as I test my limbs for pain.

“Vrex!” Rych turns to look at me. “Are you sure? A Loxzian?”

“I’m sure,” I respond as he turns himself over, groaning and clutching his head as he sits upright.

“Vrex,” he mutters. “This just gets better and better.”

“Are you going to tell me what any of this means?” I say as a shiver wracks my body.

I feel bruised all over, and although it appears I slept, we were both covered with dew in the early morning, and my clothes are damp and wet in places.

“Little spark?” Rych crawls over to me. “Were you hurt?”

The pain in his voice as he speaks the words is indescribable.

“No.” I look at the ground, plucking up some crushed grass. “You made sure I wasn’t hurt.”

“I should have been there for you, I should have made sure you were protected.” Rych tumbles the words out.

I put my hand on his. The claws are fully extended. I remember what they did to Red last night.

“You did protect me. You did everything you could,” I respond.

“I will kill anyone who hurts you,” Rych says with a feral growl. “They all have to die.”

“I think,” I say quietly, “they did.”

I find myself clutched in his arms, his head buried deep in my hair and his body vibrating with life, with need.

“You are my everything, eregri ,” he murmurs. “I need to nest for you, mate you, hold you, until the stars go super-nova and time comes to an end. I cannot fail you, but I cannot deny what I am.” He lifts his head and his dark eyes drill into mine. “I am a killer, , and I will always kill for you.”

I cup his cheek with my hand. It’s my turn to have a pounding heart because I don’t want Rych to hurt any more than I hurt.

“It’s okay,” I say. “It’s okay. This place, this galaxy is filled with things I don’t understand and have had to accept. I don’t ever want you to deny your true nature.”

“I don’t know what I am.” Rych shakes his head. “Memories forgotten, half remembered, pain and death, it’s all churning away in here.” He taps the side of his head. “I live in the present, but with you in my life, I need to be in the past and the future. I don’t want these gaps. I want to be whole, for you.”

“Then we’ll find out who you are together,” I say as his dark, dark eyes study my face.

My chest feels tight, like it did when I was sick but not quite the same because his gaze makes my breathing easier, lighter.

“Together,” he murmurs.

“Together.”

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RYCH

I don't want Chrissie to know I'm still feeling the effects of the paraxio. The vrexing drug has never been one of my favorites and this is why. I'm probably not going to be free of it until the end of the nova-day, and even then I'm going to feel like I've been wrung out and left in Klynn's armpit.

Vrex the Voltes, Vrex Szar. Vrex all of this, save for my sweet mate who walks valiantly at my side.

The only good thing I did last night was to fly us close to a bright forest, the one we're walking through in the hope of finding out where we are. The vegetation cover means if anyone, or more specifically, the Loxzian, is looking for us, they're going to find it difficult. Not only does it reflect heat, meaning ours cannot be detected, but the dense canopy deadens any sound attempting to escape.

But within it, it's cool and calm, which is just what my brain and body require. Admittedly my body would also like to mate and nest, not necessarily in that order, but I'm doing my best not to think about either of those two things.

Instead, I'm planning what we have to do next. Having a Loxzian hunting my mate is enough to snap my brain into gear.

"Once we find transport, we have to get back to Tatatunga and the dome. You'll be safe there," I explain.

"I'll be safe in a place dedicated to killing?" Chrissie queries.

“You’ll be safer with more gladiators to protect you.”

“More?”

“My two compatriots, Maxym and Klynn.” I laugh, unable to help myself. “A greater pair of killers you’ve never seen, but they’ll help me. They have their own issues, but all Gryn understand what it’s like to have an eregri ,” I say, frowning at the words coming out of my mouth.

“What is an eregri ?” Chrissie asks innocently.

I sweep her off her feet, tossing her into my arms as she squeals beautifully.

“You are!” I inhale her scent deeply, pulling it into my lungs. “It means fate handed you to me. A precious star to be treasured.”

“And what does that make you to me?” she says, arms around my neck. “My rock? My anchor?”

“I want to be your everything, but I’ll settle for being your mate.”

“I think that fact is well established.” Chrissie chuckles.

I give her a good, long kiss, so I can taste her afterwards, before setting her on her feet because I know she prefers to walk. Her ability to do so has improved the longer we’ve been out in this wilderness, and it makes me wonder...

“Look!” Chrissie calls out, pointing up ahead.

The forest abruptly stops, and there are large, square metal boxes scattered around a clearing.

“Wait here,” I say, moving ahead of her. The place doesn’t smell abandoned, and the boxes haven’t been here for long given the freshness of the cut trees. Even so, to find something like this, deep in the middle of nowhere—it has to be related to contraband of some kind.

I stalk carefully around the containers until I come to one which is slightly ajar. Peering inside, my heart brightens considerably. I race back to my mate and tow her with me.

“Time to get back to Tatatunga,” I say, flinging open the door. “This time in comfort.”

“Is that...ground transport?” Chrissie gasps and then looks around. “Do you think these are all transport?”

“I suspect most of what’s in the rest is used for narcotic production, and this is what they use in an emergency to take away their crop.” I press the side of the vehicle, and it glides out of the box, waiting for us. “So, their loss is our gain.”

“We’re stealing from narcotic growers?” Chrissie’s eyes are wide. “Isn’t that dangerous?”

“My sweet mate, you’re standing next to one of the most dangerous creatures on Trefa. I can guarantee nothing and no one is going to deny me what I want.” I shake out my wings. “Your transport awaits, Chrissie.”

She flashes me the best smile I’ve ever seen, one filled with life, with laughter, with wickedness. One without pain and fear as she steps into the vehicle, and I join her.

“Tatatunga,” I announce as the thing rises up and, without any ceremony, shoots over the canopy heading west at an impressive pace.

“Wow,” Chrissie says. “Fast.”

“If you need to get your paraxio away sharp, this is the craft you want.” I give the side a pat. A small hatch opens up, making me flare my wings.

“Steady, my dangerous gladiator.” Chrissie laughs. “Or you might end up slaying these snacks.” She starts pulling out packet after packet of rations and handing them to me. “And given the night you’ve had, you’ll probably be wanting something to eat.”

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CHRISSIE

The amount of food Rych can put away is impressive. He makes me feel hungry enough to devour the contents of one of the packages. It's mostly sweet. Crackers, tubes of soft creamy paste in various flavors, and balls with a similar texture to boba which burst in the mouth. I can't remember enjoying anything as much.

Rych looks deeply satisfied, sat with his wings relaxed and his arms stretched out over the bench next to me. He watches with a different type of hunger as I lick my fingers clean before looking out of the window.

"Tatatunga," he says with not a little venom. "We're on the outskirts."

I risk a look and see the dusty shanty towns below.

Rych is at the controls, and he growls. "It's on a locked course, presumably back to its masters, vrexing bot," he rasps. "All I can do is slow us down, but we're going to have to leave before we come to a full stop."

"Leave? You mean bail out while this thing is moving?"

"I have to use my wings for something occasionally." Rych grins at me, filled with masculine glee.

"I'd rather not."

"Ah, my sweet creature, we don't have any choice. But you know you're safe with

me.”

I refrain from saying tossing me out of the transport doesn't seem safe in any way.

“We're closing in on the dome.” He holds out his hand and pulls me into him. “It's time to leave.”

The door snaps open and wind rushes in, sucking out all the debris from our meal.

“I'm really not sure about this, Rych,” I say.

“Trust me, little spark,” he responds. “I've battled a ziggurat in the dome. This is a lazy afternoon in the baths to me.”

His arm tightens around me, and he flings us out into the rushing wind and aerial traffic. We tumble for what seems like forever until his wings open and with an abruptness which jerks me against him, we're no longer falling.

We're flying.

Gliding over the rooftops of Tatatunga, it looks almost serene, even if the smells we fly through are less than fragrant.

And then I see it. The dome.

It rises up out of the low lying buildings like a boulder rolled from a vicious ice age. It has always been here, it will always be here. A temple to death.

And the one place Rych calls home.

We swing away from the dome and drop between the buildings into a dusty

courtyard. Rych gently puts me on my feet, his face streaked with dirt, giving him the ultimate bad boy mechanic vibe.

The one my dad always warned me against. Only I like to think he would have approved of Rych. All seven foot plus of winged gladiator.

“I thought we were going to the dome?”

“Too crowded,” he says. “We’ll get the dome to come to us.” He grins wildly, hand closing around mine. I’m towed behind him as he makes his way from the courtyard down a number of columned passages until we dive through a dark doorway and out into a hidden garden filled with lush plants, some of which I saw in the forest we recently left.

“Rych.” A deep booming voice growls his name.

A large red-green leaf is pushed to one side, and a tank of a Gryn gladiator looms out at us.

“Thought I could scent you, you vrexer,” the new gladiator says, eyeing Rych like he wants to eat him.

Rych tucks me behind a wing, but I hear the noise of metal on stone, and as I turn, there is another Gryn gladiator behind us. This one is a similar size to Rych, only his torso and arms look like they’ve been wound with barb wire, muscles upon muscles. He flashes me his fangs. It isn’t a smile by any stretch of the imagination, as he tosses a lethal blade in the air and catches it without even looking.

“We’d never miss Rych’s scent, would we, Maxym?” the second gladiator says, his voice rasping like sand over metal.

“And I knew I’d always find you pair of vrexers here when the games are finished,” Rych growls.

Maxym’s brooding features rearrange themselves into something which is slightly less terrifying as he claps a huge clawed hand on Rych’s shoulder. “Come drink with us, brother.”

“He has someone with him.” The second gladiator is glaring right at me as he balances a dagger tip first on the end of his finger and inhales, nostrils flaring. “A female.”

Maxym looks around Rych who releases a growl which he has to have dragged up from the depths of whatever hells this planet has.

“Mate,” he says, the word only just formed. “MINE.”

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RYCH

This was a mistake. I haven't nested for my Chrissie properly. I haven't claimed her. She is mine, but with other Gryn around, it sets every feather on edge.

"A mate!" Klynn exclaims. "This vrexer found a mate!"

Both of them take a pace back from me.

"Vrex!" Maxym shuffles his primaries. "a mated male. Who'd have thought it?"

As much as I hate it, I drop my wing to reveal Chrissie.

"This is Chrissie." I look down at her, and she smiles up at me. "Chrissie, this is Maxym and Klynn. Maxym is the big vrexer, and Klynn is the one with an unhealthy attachment to all things sharp."

"Hi," Chrissie says with a little wave.

"Bold," Klynn says.

"As I would expect any mate of 's to be." Maxym's brows draw down. "But if you are mated and free, why the vrex are you in Tatatunga? If it was me, I'd be far from here."

"My mate is being hunted by a Loxzian. Her employer seems to have vrexed off the wrong people."

“Her employer?”

Klynn has returned to his seat and is downing a tankard of mead-ale.

“I sing for Fenek. He’s on the council,” Chrissie says.

Maxym gestures to their table, and I sit, pulling her onto my lap. She only squeaks slightly but doesn’t protest.

“What is ‘sing’?” Klynn asks, slamming one of his blades into the tabletop where it vibrates.

Chrissie pulls in a breath and then sings out one of the tunes I heard when we were leaving Fenek’s dwelling for the last time. Klynn’s jaw goes slack as he stares and stares at her, until Maxym hits him in the side of his head.

Which is good, because I was about to rip it off.

In the face of the violence, Chrissie stops and glares at all three of us.

“I sing. It’s all I can do.”

“It’s beaut...” Klynn’s mouth flaps before he remembers he’s supposed to be a bad vrexer. “Interesting.”

“Why aren’t you in the undercroft bothering the pikrats?” I snarl at him.

“The dome wanted us out today. We’ve both got passes.”

I frown. “Why?”

“I get a pass occasionally,” Klynn growls. “Not that unusual.”

“I mean why both of you? Why would the procurator want both of you out?”

Maxym raises his eyes to mine. “There’s a new sponsor in the dome. A Loxzian.”

“Vrex!” I growl.

“Vrex indeed.” Maxym intones.

“This can’t be a coincidence,” Chrissie says. “But what does it mean? How is Fenek tied up in all of this. How am I? And who wants me dead?”

“How do you know they want you dead?” Klynn asks, having produced another dagger which he’s using to pick his claws.

Chrissie looks at me. “I don’t, I suppose.”

“Because if I wanted you dead, you would already be dead,” he says.

I release a snarl like I’ve never made before. “You would have to come through me.”

Klynn laughs, a harsh, mirthless sound. I feel Chrissie tense on my lap.

“I mean, gladiator , if someone is trying to kill your mate, they’re not doing a good job, and that’s because they’d have to go through you. Yet they haven’t.”

“As much as I do not want to say it, Klynn is right,” Maxym rasps. “The Loxzian are good assassins, even if they’re terrible fighters.”

“So, if they don’t want me dead, what do they want?” Chrissie’s voice is a mere

whisper.

I feel my lips lifting and my fangs showing at the others, for making my mate feel fear. She should never be afraid again.

“Vrex!” I slap my hand to my forehead, “Szar!”

“Vrex it all, ,” Maxym growls. “Were you giving your mate a tour of all the gak-holes on Trefa?”

“Red!” Chrissie sits up in my lap, her delicious bottom squirming over my cocks. “She said the Loxzian wanted me in good health...not dead.”

Klynn lifts a lip. He prefers death. I growl at him, and he goes back to messing with his weapons.

“We’ll go back to the dome,” Maxym says as he rises. “Get some more information about the supposed new sponsor, whose coincidental appearance can only be because they’ve realized there’s a Gryn involved.” He glares at Klynn who huffs, downs his second tankard and gets to his feet. “Can you stay here for the time being?”

I settle farther into the chair and pull Chrissie closer.

“We’ll stay here until nightfall,” I reply. “Then we’ll have to find somewhere else.”

RYCH

The two gladiators swagger out of the courtyard garden.

“Do you trust them?” Chrissie asks.

“With my life,” I respond. “Even that vrexer Klynn”

“They’re very...full on,” she says.

“They’re both lifers for the dome with no chance of freedom. It is all they will ever know.” I shake my head. “If it could be any different, I would do what I could to get them out. But they’re both in the dome by order of the Galactic Council.”

“And yet, they can go free into Tatatunga?”

“Both have trackers. If they attempt to stray without permission, they will die.”

“That’s horrible!” Chrissie says, clutching at my arm.

“It is Tatatunga. It is the dome. It is something that one day I hope will be resolved for them. Until then, they must fight and entertain in the games.”

She puts her head on my chest. “I hope that too.” I run my hand up her arm, and she sighs. “Sometimes I wonder what I angered to end up here,” she says, her eyes gazing up at my face. “Then I see you, and I think about fate. Fate is what drives this galaxy.”

“Fate is what comes to all of us. You are my fate, Chrissie. You are the turning of a star, the bright light which fills my existence,” I murmur, pressing my nose into her hair and drinking down her scent.

“That should be a song,” Chrissie murmurs.

“Maybe it will be, one day. A song you can sing to our younglings, when we have somewhere all to ourselves.”

“You mean that?” she asks, one hand delving into my feathers. As usual her touch makes speaking difficult.

“For you, I’d shift planets, move moons, and explode stars. You are worth it, eregri.”

As she settles in my lap and her breathing gets deeper, I luxuriate in this time to have with her, simple and easy.

At least until Maxym and Klynn return with a crash several nova-hours later.

“You have to get out of here,” Maxym says urgently as I help Chrissie to her feet. She blinks away the sleep. “The Loxzian is intending killing you and taking your mate. It is her he wants.”

“He won’t have her. Not while I have breath in my body,” I snarl.

“We can cover your tracks,” Klynn says, drawing a sword from behind his back and handing it to me, along with the pulsar pistol belt he wears around his waist.

“How the vrex did you get all these weapons out of the dome?” I ask as Maxym passes me a psi-grenade sling.

“Do you think anyone challenges a fully loaded gladiator?” he says with a semblance of a smile. “The captain agreed,” he concedes, “when we told him they were for you.”

“He doesn’t trust Loxzians, says they’re a slippery bunch,” Klynn adds.

“There was something else too,” Maxym says. “He was with a reptilian species I thought I recognized. Not Oykgig. Scaly, mostly purple, able to blink.”

“Fenek?” Chrissie says out loud.

“Drahon,” Klynn growls.

The word drills through me with an unpleasant familiarity. Maxym looks at us both blankly.

“They were...our enemy?” I force the words out.

“Vrex.” He shakes his head. “Of all the things done to us, the memory implants are the worst.” He slams the heel of his hand into the side of his head.

“Sylas broke them. Maybe we can?”

“Sylas had enhancements which meant breaking them didn’t break him. I have no such ability, do you?”

“What does he mean?” Chrissie asks.

“Sylas could heal fast, faster than any of us. He had memory implants, but he was able to break them. Chances are, unless ours are removed the same way they went in, we’d cause permanent damage if we attempted to break them ourselves.”

“I can live with being who I am,” Klynn growls, “but I still want to get the vrexers who did this to us.”

“That’s going to have to wait,” Maxym snarls at him. “ and his mate have to leave, now.” He hands me a small map cube. “Go here. I’ve been in touch with the resistance. You’ll be safe there.”

“I’m not hiding,” I reply. “I want to deal with the Loxzian once and for all.”

“And we’re behind you all the way, but your mate...”

I turn to my Chrissie and take her hands. “What do you want to do, my eregri? ”

“I don’t want to hide, but I don’t want to be a bargaining chip either,” she responds.

“Then we’ll go to this place together, and I’ll return to the dome to end all of this,” I tell her before pulling her against me and kissing her until Maxym coughs and I notice Klynn’s very interested gaze, which earns them both a snarl.

Klynn shoves his hand behind his head and pulls out yet another sword. Vrex only knows how many he keeps in his feathers. Whether he is going to be a liability or an ally is yet to be decided.

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CHRISSIE

Flanked by three huge gladiators, I make my way across Tatatunga using a network of overground passages and courtyards. We see no one on our travels, which is presumably why we've taken this particular route. Having Rych close to me is a reassurance after the news the assassin is after me and with the additional shock of finding out Fenek might be involved.

Why would my boss want me dead after all the fuss he made about my status as his singing pet?

We reach a courtyard which is so full of vegetation I can't image we can even enter it. Maxym pushes on a single stone slab on the wall, and there is a soft grinding under our feet as the blue-green bushes flop to one side and a large opening is dragged through the ground, revealing a set of steps.

"In here?" Rych asks.

Klynn stalks ahead of us with a swagger born of knowing how fucking dangerous he is and descends into the dark. Maxym shrugs and follows. Rych curls his hand around mine and gives it a squeeze before ushering me forward, and I too, walk into the dark.

I can feel the heat of Rych behind me as the slab closes over us and for a second or two the place is pitch dark. I try not to panic, knowing the place is stuffed with gladiators and I probably couldn't be more protected, but having been let down by my boss and duped by Red, trust, other than in Rych, is in short supply.

Fortunately a light winks on and I find we're in a passage. Two gladiators in front of me and one behind. They fill the passage.

"Ahead and to the left," Rych says.

We troop forward, following his instruction, and as Klynn and Maxym push open a heavy door ahead, I find we're in a huge vaulted room, not what I was expecting at all.

Further, the walls are lined with what looks to be bookshelves. Bookshelves filled with books.

I stare about me, drinking in the place which seems incongruously familiar.

"What is this place?" Rych growls. "It doesn't look like a safe house."

"I think it's the lost library of Tatatunga," I say in awe. All three gladiators stare at me. "As a sick human I had a lot of time on my hands, I watched a lot of vids." I offer.

There are three levels, each one linked by spiral staircases, all lined with shelving and books. We're stood in the center, where freestanding shelves radiate outwards to the walls. The floor is soft underfoot with a myriad of colored rugs, and there are several large polished tables surrounded by chairs.

"What's a library?" Klynn asks, his feathers vibrating and two swords at the ready.

Maxym and Rych have wide eyes as they look around, and I make my way over to the shelving, trailing my fingers over the spines.

They are books, some of them older than others. Some of the bindings change color

as I touch them. Books, but not as I know them. Except the air smells like old paper and leather and the silence within this place is one heavy with knowledge.

“It’s a place where you can learn,” I respond to Klynn’s question.

He huffs. “Unless it helps me kill quicker, I’m not interested.”

“If the library is lost, it has to be safe, doesn’t it?” Rych says to Maxym.

“I trust the resistance,” Maxym says. “They helped Syllas, and even if they’ve not been successful in gaining more freedoms for the repressed of Tataunga, they have at least stopped blowing things up.”

All three gladiators shake out their wings.

“More’s the pity,” Klynn growls. “I like a good explosion.”

“A fact of which we are well aware,” Maxym responds with a growl of his own. “Vrexer.” He thumps Klynn on the back of his head with a wing.

Klynn responds with a bloodcurdling snarl which is deadened by the books lining the walls. It’s enough to surprise him into lowering his swords.

Rych draws me to him, dragging his eyes from the shelves to me. He places his thumb under my chin, and his finger holds me in place.

“Do you like it here?”

“Yes, I’ve read about the lost library. I had time on my hands between singing for Fenek.” I look up at the books again. “I didn’t think it could be real.”

“Tatatunga is an ancient city. It wasn’t always such a den of iniquity and a palace to violence,” he says, eyes studying mine. “If I leave you, will you be safe?”

“Given this place is ‘lost,’ I doubt anyone is going to still be looking for it,” I respond. “And if the resistance didn’t think it was safe, they wouldn’t have sent us here.”

Rych brushes his lips over mine and sends a shiver of desire through my body.

“When I return, I will mate you here,” he says, nostrils flaring and his voice a pit of gravel. “Then I will nest for you.”

“It’s the least I expect. And you will come back to me, or I’ll come looking for you,” I growl back.

Rych smiles, a slow, delicious lifting of his lips, exposing just the tips of his fangs. A genuine smile, one he has for me alone.

“Such a wicked little mate, ordering her male around. You seem to seek punishment with every word.”

“Providing it’s you punishing me, I will always order you around.” I absolutely know I will pay for teasing him later, and it’s the only thing keeping me going.

“Rych?” Maxym sidles up behind us, not wanting to get close, his dark wings clamped tight to his body as he attempts to make himself non-threatening.

Quite a feat for such a tank of a Gryn.

“We need to go,” he adds. “There’s a small dining hall in the back which is stocked with food.” He addresses me. “We won’t be long.”

In the center of the library, Klynn moves sinuously, practicing his sword thrusts.

I know this is it. This is the point I have to let go of Rych and trust in him. I don't want to let go of the one good thing I've found in this galaxy.

"I will mate you and nest for you," Rych murmurs in my ear. "You belong to me, eregri . I will always come for you."

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:28 am

RYCH

Seeing Chrissie's face as the door closes behind us is one of the hardest things I've ever had to do.

"Come." Maxym slams a hand on my shoulder. "We will deal with the Loxzian, and you can return to your mate."

"I need to nest for her," I say through clenched teeth. "It hurts worse than being stabbed by Blayn."

"Nesting? Already?" Maxym queries. "I wouldn't have expected it of you."

"What do you mean?" I growl, my feathers itching like crazy as we come out of the hidden doorway and duck down the passage which leads to the street.

"He means out of all of us, we didn't expect you to find a mate," Klynn says, spinning his sword pommel on the palm of his hand. "In fact, Maxym said he thought he'd find a mate before you."

Maxym rubs at the back of his huge neck, almost as thick as a Xnosson bull's. "You seemed interested in things other than nesting."

"When fate finds you, it finds you," I respond. "Although I doubt it'll ever find Klynn."

"Good," he says. "Because I'll stab it."

I shake my head and squint up at Maxym. He grins.

“I’m not sure I endorse that particular strategy,” I say. “But then Klynn will never be mated, so it shouldn’t be a problem for him.”

Klynn snarls at me. “I’ll see you both at the dome. It’s about time there was violence,” he says, slipping into the shadows.

“Are you ready for the same?” I ask. “Because you don’t have to do this.”

“I was born ready.” Maxym draws down his brow, becoming the brooding terror he is well known for in the dome. “Violence is in my blood and soul, far more than Klynn.”

I grab hold of him, even though it could mean my life.

“Promise me, if anything happens, you’ll find my mate and help her get away.”

Maxym’s huge head swivels to where I have hold of him.

“You don’t need to ask, . She is as safe as she can be, and you will get back to her. But if anything happens, consider her under our protection.”

He backs away from me before darting away in the opposite direction to our comrade.

I feel rooted to the spot, not wanting to leave my mate, even if she is happy to have found a “lost library.” All I can think about is how the “books” will make good nesting material.

Which is probably something I don’t want to admit to my Chrissie. Something tells

me she might disapprove.

I duck back the way we came, traversing a number of passages until I come out into a street far enough away from the safe house I shouldn't be able to be traced back. As usual, the presence of a gladiator in the midst of the populace never goes unnoticed, regardless of whether or not I am still taking part in the games. Bodies part in front of me as I make my way to the dome.

As I get closer, the air fills with the scent of blood. It's a smell which hangs over the place no matter whether the games are on or not. I fill my lungs with it, recalling how it used to be like home.

But home is where my Chrissie is. My mate is everything. The dome is nothing.

I skirt around the outside until I reach the hidden door, which swings open at my approach. I lever myself inside to find Klynn and his numerous swords waiting.

"What kept you?" he growls. "There's fighting to be done." He turns, his long wings swaying as he stomps down the corridor ahead of me.

Klynn isn't happy unless he's killing, damaged vrexer that he is.

I pull out my sword and follow him. Taking on the Loxzian here in a place I know gives me the advantage.

We make our way to the training arena where Maxym is waiting.

"Are they still here?"

"Yep, but there's a problem," Maxym says. "The procurator is suspicious we returned early. He knows gladiators with a pass will spend their time drinking until we're

rounded up and brought back.”

“What did you say?”

“I told the captain Klynn was sick, but the chances of the procurator believing that vrexer ever gets sick is pretty slim.”

“What do you think he will do?”

“There’s a risk of lockdown,” Maxym growls.

Klynn bristles, every feather on end. As if he doesn’t like being in the dome.

“Vrex! I need to get back to my mate. I can’t be locked in here,” I fire out. “But I have to get to the Loxzian first.”

“He’s in the hospitality suite,” Maxym says.

“Vrex it.”

“I know. I’d hoped they might take him on a tour, along with his reptilian friends, but as yet there’s been no movement.”

Outside the training arena, we hear voices. Klynn drops to the ground, concealing his swords, and clutches at his stomach.

“I’ll get rid of whoever it is,” Maxym says. “Go!”

I’m in the air before I even take a breath, climbing up until I get to the hidden ledge we discovered many nova-years ago. It runs around to a small opening only just big enough for a Gryn to squeeze through. I wait until I can hear voices (and the

occasional dramatic groan from Klynn) and slide out of the arena into a stone passage which will lead me all the way to the dome itself.

The place is empty and silent. No gladiator likes an empty dome. Without the baying crowd, it is simply a killing ground. Even Klynn avoids it when it's like this.

I scan the area, spotting the procurator's hospitality suite is lit up, but there's no movement inside. Then the great doors to the ante-chamber open up with a cracking sound which reverberates around the dome.

I look down, expecting to see the clerks making the place ready for the next games. But instead I see a number of Zarvu followed by the new procurator, the one the council appointed after the demise of the previous one, and a small group following on behind. He's with the creature I'm seeking.

The Loxzian.

The assassin species is slim, covered in a silver fur which shifts like he can move to fit into spaces where no one should be able to fit. His long snout lifts as he attempts to scent past the stench of death.

His large, dark eyes miss nothing. The Loxzian senses are legendary, feared by any mark and well-regarded by any client. But their ability to fight is severely limited by their weak bodies. It makes them vulnerable out in the open although perfect as assassins.

The creatures following them send a shiver down my spine. It's as if I recognize them, but at the same time, I do not know what they are. Like Maxym said, they're like Oyvig, only with greater facial horns and darker scales.

None of them are Fenek, although they appear to be the same species. And just when

I'm attempting to work out whether or not that's important, my name rings around the dome.

“, Gladiator of the Gryn, show yourself,” the procurator's voice bellows out. “Your presence is required.”

CHRISSIE

The library is truly amazing. It shows me that books are something which every culture, every species has generated throughout their various histories, even if they are not something I've come across in the present day.

Tech has overtaken the humble book, artificial intelligence taking over from common sense. Fenek's reliance on bots rather than living creatures hardly served him well.

Or did it? I'm hopelessly confused and push all the horrible thoughts to the back of my mind as I browse the books on the shelves until my stomach growls and I remember Maxym saying there was somewhere I could find food.

I walk through the library, looking up into the ceiling which is covered in fading metallic stars. This place is like something from another world, another time, not here, not this galaxy and not mine. At the back, behind a large bookcase, I find another door which is set ajar. Inside is an incongruously Trefian kitchen, solid metal with a re-hydrator and plenty of packets of rations. There's also a wide comfortable squashy couch. I unwrap a ration tray and heat it up.

As I stand in front of the appliance, watching for my food, I feel like I'm back at Fenek's dwelling. I don't want this. I don't like my life without Rych, even if it has been non-stop danger from moment one.

But I feel alive. I even feel like the virus is leaving me alone, as if time has been suspended while I'm in his arms.

I never thought I was someone who couldn't cope with her own company, even if on Earth I spent most of my time at work, or with my dad, or out with my friends having fun. But now, I know. Being alone isn't for me. Yet when I was sick, when I was not me, I isolated myself. I thought it was the only way.

It wasn't.

The re-hydrator stops whirring, and the hum of the machine is replaced by another sound. The sound of footsteps, slow and even.

Not the steps of an excited Gryn. No rustle of feathers either. For a second, I freeze. Then I remember, I do not need to fear. Rych will come for me. I hop behind the couch. Hoping I don't end up hiding from Maxym or Klynn. I'm pretty sure neither of them will not take well to being surprised by a female popping up like a jack-in-the-box, and I'd quite like to keep my head on my body.

From my hiding place, I can see the shining metal cabinets and the door reflected in them. I pull back into the shadow of the couch as the door swings open and a creature enters. It looks so like Fenek, I nearly give myself away, only from the scar across one cheek, I see it is not him and stay put. His lips lift as he sees the hydrator, revealing pointed teeth.

"She's been here," he says, opening up the machine and sniffing at the contents. "No doubt she is still here."

He's joined by a second reptilian who inspects the ration tray.

"What if she's here with the Gryn?" it says.

"Have you seen any sign of the feathered gakker?" the first one spits. "Anyway, he's needed too. The boss wants a bodyguard, and Gryn take so well to memory

alteration.”

He drops the tray on the floor and the food scatters. “Tear this place apart. Find her,” he orders.

From outside there’s the sound of destruction. For several long seconds, I hold in place, covering my ears, not wanting to think what they might be doing to the beautiful library or what they might do to Rych or me, when I feel the couch tipped away, and I know all is lost.

At least the sounds of smashing have stopped as I’m hauled to my feet with a cry of pain.

“Is this her?” I’m twisted from side to side. “Funny looking thing.”

The original scarred reptile inspects me, his breath hot and foul on my face.

“Humans are ugly creatures. But they make excellent vessels. Bring her. The boss is going to be happy for once.”

The reptile who caught me binds my hands together with a flexible metal band. It bites into my flesh as he drags me behind him out into the library.

A library now filled with reptile creatures.

Pages flutter down from above. At least one stack has been tipped over, but otherwise the library remains mostly intact.

“What do we do with this place?” One of them asks the scarred leader.

He looks around. “It’s useless, outdated rubbish. Burn it.” He sneers. “Burn it all.”

RYCH

I'd rather not give the procurator the satisfaction of coming when called, but the desire to be close enough to end the Loxzian is too much. I unfurl my wings and swing high over the party and the dome floor, making sure my weapons are clearly visible before I land with a flourish.

The Zarvu move to protect the procurator, but he waves them away.

“, I have someone who wishes to meet you.” He gestures to the reptile standing next to him.

“This is Felia, chief scientist to the Drahon.”

The female, her skin a slightly darker tone than the males behind her, gives me a sharp-toothed smile. One side of her face seems burnt, the scales heavier.

“These Gryn are impressive,” she says in honeyed tones to the procurator. “How long did you say you'd had them?”

“This one was with the dome for the last ten nova-years. Only circumstances meant his contract came to an end,” the procurator says with not a little chagrin. “The others have been with the dome for longer. Maxym and Klynn have life sentences. They belong to me.”

“But you had more?” Felia's eyes haven't left me for a second.

“Alas, their contracts were also...ended,” the procurator says, “and they have left Trefa.”

“Yet this one is at a loose end.” Felia finishes appraising me. “And he has returned.”

I see the Loxzian move out of the corner of my eye, and in a whirl of feathers and blades, I attempt to stop him, but his body twists into something unrecognizable. A thin line shoots over my head which seems innocent enough, until the thing splits and wraps itself around my wings, around my body. I fight it, but it’s like fighting air, and instead I topple forward, hitting the ground with enough force to expel the breath from my body.

On the dusty floor of the arena I struggle against the net, but it’s wrapped tight enough I can’t move much.

Loxzians cannot fight. They’re supposed to kill.

This one did not.

I let out a stream of curses aimed at every creature here as the female, Felia, stands over me. She puts her foot on my shoulder, and with a push, she turns me onto my back. I snarl at her.

“My mother always said the Gryn had their uses. But her research was mired in the past. The Drahon empire requires more finesse this time.” She gazes down at me with an unnatural interest. “As this Gryn no longer belongs to you,” she says to the procurator, “you won’t mind me borrowing him, will you?”

“Not at all.” The procurator grins down at me, and I can already see him calculating how many credits he will save by not having to pay me what he owes. “You’re very welcome to him. If, at any point, you decide he is no longer of use, and he’s

physically intact, I'd be interested in buying him back."

Felia's expression changes briefly into something which could be a smile but which could also be wind.

"I'll consider it," she responds as crouches down next to me and I thrash my body as best I can. "I'd suggest you save your energy, Gryn. I have so many beautiful plans for you." She traces a cool hand down the side of my face as I attempt to bite. "So vicious, so much potential," she croons before standing up swiftly and barking at the others. "Put him out and take him to the facility."

My blood chills. A vision of steel spears through my head. Metal, cold, pain. I strain harder at my bonds. If I let them take me, I cannot protect my sweet mate, and I won't leave her to the mercy of whatever Fenek has planned—if indeed he has anything to do with this, but given he's the same species, a Drahon, as this female, I can't be sure he isn't involved.

"Don't bother, Gryn." A male Drahon is next to me. "This is Loxzian tritanium. It's impossible to break."

"Then you won't want to be around when you set me free," I snarl.

"You'll not want to be free in a few nova-seconds." He lifts his lips to reveal his sharp, small teeth. "You'll be very, very happy."

He presses a hypo-syringe into my neck and, with a hiss, empties the contents into me. I don't stop struggling as the drug heats the area around the entry. I don't want to stop. I don't want to let them take me away from Chrissie. I fight. I will always fight.

I have to fight.

I have to fight for her.

“And there he goes. The happiest you’ll ever see him.” The male chuckles nastily.

“Enjoy it, Gryn. You’ll never be this happy again.

CHRISSIE

I'm hustled out of the library, through the entrance passage, and out into the courtyard. In the passage outside, there is a blacked out transport waiting. I struggle uselessly against the iron grip of the reptile who has me and find he only digs his claws into my flesh instead.

I'm shoved into the transport and onto the floor as three of the reptiles climb in behind me.

I despair. The last thing I want is to lose Rych or for him to lose me. And these creatures obviously don't care about anything given they're burning the library for no reason at all.

The transport lifts from the ground, judders, and then slams back down. My captors look at each other. One shouts instructions at the transport which shivers like it's attempting to comply. A screeching, wrenching sound pierces the hull. There is the stench of panic in the cabin. One of the reptiles points a pulsar up at the ceiling while the leader grabs his hand, pulling the weapon free as the third frantically tries to open the door, but the hull must be buckled as while the motor grinds, it doesn't open.

A set of scimitar claws pierces the roof, and my heart leaps into my mouth as the metal is peeled back like a banana skin. A pulsar appears and the bolts take out all three reptiles.

"Little female?" A handsome face peers in through the hole he's made. "Are these Drahon bothering you?"

I burst out with a laugh.

“They were a bit, Maxym,” I call up, unable to stop smiling. “They’re also trying to burn down the library.”

“I’ve sent Klynn in,” he says, a statement which doesn’t exactly fill me with hope for the state of the place. “Take my hand.”

He reaches in, and with ease, he pulls me free of the wreckage of the transport.

“Where’s Rych?” I ask, scanning the sky.

“There’s a problem,” Maxym says, helping me onto the ground, and my stomach descends into my boots. “The Drahon have taken him too.”

“What do you mean?”

“He went after the Loxzian, but where we thought the Drahon, that’s these”—Maxym points at the bodies of the reptiles—“things, were working for him, it seems it was the other way around.”

“So, maybe my boss...?”

Maxym shrugs. “At this stage, it’s anyone’s guess what’s going on here, other than both you and Rych were wanted by the Drahon.”

“I need to find him,” I say as Klynn appears, soot smearing his face and torso. At least some of it is soot. Other streaks might be bodily fluids which are not his own.

“I promised him I’d keep you safe,” Maxym intones. “So, I’m going to take you back to the dome where we can protect you.”

“I can’t leave him. Not to the mercy of these creatures. They were going to burn the library.”

“They failed,” Klynn growls. “And they don’t fight well.” He sniffs.

The tiny amount of relief I feel at the library being saved is overwhelmed by my concerns for Rych.

“We have to find him,” I say to the pair of Gryn, each one bristling with weapons and with the desire to do what their comrade asked of them. “Whatever they want from him and from me, it isn’t good.”

Maxym stares into the sky. “Vrex,” he says. “I made a promise.”

“If you’re with me, then you’re protecting me, aren’t you?” I reply. “Putting me in a cage doesn’t make a difference. I’ve been in a gilded cage too long already. If you put me there again, I’ll only escape.”

“As much as Rych is an annoying vrexer, I don’t want these Drahon to have him either. He fights better,” Klynn rasps, wiping one of his blades on the fabric of his pants. “They’re not even worth my time as practice.”

Maxym growls low in his throat. “Rych is going to kill me for this.” He looks at me and his wings droop. “Where should we start?”

“We start where this all started, back with my old boss, Fenek. I need to go back to his dwelling and see if I can find any more information.”

Maxym shrugs and levels his gaze at Klynn. “I’m up for these games if you are, gladiator,” he says.

Klynn snaps to attention, placing the flat blade of his sword against his nose and chin.

“You have my oath and bond,” he says without blinking.

“Ignore him. He does that sometimes,” Maxym says. “The rest of the time, he’s a feral vrexer who will stab you as soon as look at you.”

“Then I’m perfectly safe with both of you.” I mutter.

This is what Rych has for his rescue. A sick human and two tortured souls.

We’d better make this good.

CHRISSIE

I step out of the ground transport as I spot the two Gryn landing within Fenek's compound. Both Maxym and Klynn had been very clear they were not able to carry me, partially because it was likely they'd be spotted, and picking up any other creature is strictly forbidden for them, but also because both of them insisted if Rych scented me on them, he would likely remove a body part from the perpetrator.

Which only left a ground transport. I did my best to clean myself up once I was inside, but my coat is all but ruined from where the Drahon left claw marks, along with the dirt and dust of the last few days across the planet. The rest of my clothes haven't fared particularly well either.

The doorway clicks at my approach and slides open with a slow, lazy rumble. As it does, I'm greeted by a sight I was not expecting.

Maxym has his sword raised, and as I step inside, he brings it down to split a butler bot in two. Klynn is surrounded by metal pieces and his chest heaves with violence.

"Um, I probably should have warned you about the bots," I say.

"Bots!" Klynn spits with absolute venom. "Vrex them."

"Neither of us do well with bots," Maxym offers as a half apology. "I'm not sure why." His great dark wings shudder.

"Rych doesn't like them either." I look at the remains. "And as a further warning,

Fenek loves them, so there will be more.”

“Have to kill,” Klynn responds.

“Be my guest, I hate the things too.” I walk up to the main entrance, and the door swings open at my approach.

I stand on the threshold as the two huge Gryn troop inside. Klynn sniffs the air and grimaces.

“Smells like Rych,” he says. “And death.”

I’m running before I realize it, through the lower floor living area, down to the empty kitchens, back up to the vacated bedrooms before finally finding myself outside Fenek’s office. Now I can smell it too, sickly sweet decaying meat.

I don’t want to go inside. I don’t want to find...

Maxym gently pushes me to one side. “Let me, little female,” he rumbles and opens the door.

I don’t want to look, but I look anyway. My heart spins, beats three times, and seems to stand still until I see the body on the floor.

It’s not Rych.

“Fenek!” I push through Maxym’s feathers and kneel next to my fallen boss.

There are pools of blood everywhere. The cleaning bots have done their best, but it is these which are producing the disgusting smell. Fenek looks all but dead, his usually vibrant scales dull. It is true, he does resemble the Drahon who attempted to kidnap

me, only he is smaller and his facial features softer. Two horns rather than three and, as I take his hand, he opens his eyes, the pupils round rather than oblong.

“I tried to stop them,” he croaks.

“You did a good job,” Klynn says, examining the damage in the room. “You fought well for a small creature,” he adds, something which is probably not a comfort to Fenek.

“They wanted you. I sent you away with the Gryn to protect you.” He swallows roughly, staring up at the others. “And you have found more.” He struggles to sit up, and I help him. “But you can’t stay here. It’s not safe.”

“I have to find Rych.” I grab a pitcher of water which has miraculously survived the onslaught in the room and hold it to Fenek’s lips. He gulps it down greedily. “He’s my...mate,” I finish lamely.

“He is?” Fenek slowly lifts his head. “You have mated with him?”

I suddenly feel like I’m bringing a boyfriend home to meet my dad, all squashy inside, embarrassed, nervous, worried what he’s going to say when he finds out who I’m with.

“Yes.” I look at the floor.

“Thank all the gods!” Fenek says. “I thought the dumb creature might take me seriously when I told him to stay away from you!”

“You did what?” I exclaim.

Fenek looks at the two other Gryn who are filling the room. “It was obvious from the

moment he set eyes on you that you were his mate. I've met Gryn before. I understand how you all work." He gives Maxym a long, hard look. "Only the Gryn I met were different to the gladiators here. I couldn't be entirely sure if he would mate you, so I gave him an incentive."

"By telling him to stay away?" I gasp.

"If you were his true mate, he would be unable to resist. It wouldn't matter if the Galactic Council themselves forbade him, he'd still come for you." Fenek grins, shifts, and grimaces, wrapping his arm around his midriff. "And it sounds like he did."

"He's been taken by the Drahon," I say urgently. "Do you know anything about this?"

"Help me up," Fenek says.

Maxym reaches down and picks him up by the scruff of his neck.

"My desk." Fenek's voice is a little strangled.

"Where is my fellow gladiator?" Maxym rasps.

"All in good time, Gryn," Fenek says as he settles himself behind his desk, looking marginally less like he's at death's door.

Klynn leans forward and stabs his sword through the top of one of the spherical cleaning bots which has unwisely decided to appear. Fenek's eyes widen.

"Don't like bots," Klynn growls.

“You see, my dear , I didn’t just have you as my pet. I was keeping you from the Drahon, a species mine have known about for nova-decades and who should, by all rights, be confined to their own planet.”

“I don’t understand.”

“They infected you with a virus. But not any virus—this one has a code which can disable any tech, especially weapons tech.”

“What?” I reel back, sitting down heavily on a chair opposite him.

“Using you as a host, they could get in anywhere. What they didn’t plan for was the pirates they paid to transport you to sell you on instead of completing their job. The Drahon have been looking for you ever since.”

“So, I’m not sick?” I’m struggling to come to terms with being a science experiment.
“But I am sick. I feel...I felt so bad.”

“It’s not like the Drahon care how you feel, but your body’s been getting used to the changes in your DNA. I had hoped with my care it would have happened faster, but it seems my care was not enough.”

“I want the virus out of me,” I snap. “I want it gone, not taking me over faster.”

“Then it seems we are all going to be looking for both Rych and the Drahon. They’re the only ones who can do it.” Fenek spreads his hands out on his desktop. “Believe me, I’ve tried everything to find a way for you.” He shakes his head. “But the Drahon are the only ones who have the tech to do it.”

“Then it’s about time we found them and showed them what happens when you mess with the Gryn and their mates,” Maxym growls. “It’s time to go get Rych.”

RYCH

I've had better nova-days. The Loxzian wire was removed whilst I was unconscious, but instead I'm pinned out on an X-shaped bed, naked.

The Drahon male was correct. Whatever it was they gave me provided me with dreams of perfect enjoyment. Dreams of my Chrissie and all the things I want to do to her.

I pull at my bonds, and the things slacken a little under the strain. Wherever I am, it has a scent I recognize. Aging food, no hygiene, the foul odor of the Drahon.

I have been here before, I just can't remember why. But given my current predicament, I'm most likely going to find out.

I toss my head from side to side, freeing myself from the strap which runs over my forehead, until I hear a scraping sound and duck back under it.

"It's awake, my lady," an obsequious voice says.

"Good." The face of Felia looms into my vision, and bright lights come on, pointing directly into my eyes.

I make a show of wincing.

"Yes, yes, poor Gryn. Does that hurt?" she croons with absolutely no warmth. "You have sensitive eyes, don't you, silly creatures." She runs her hand down my torso and

on down my thigh. “As well as other sensitive areas.”

With a will I’ve dredged up from somewhere, I manage not to react. I need to know what they want before I do what I need to do.

Instead I offer her a wet smile.

“Narcotic still in your system, I see.” Her face is stony. “We’ll have to change that.”

“Wha’ do you want with me?” I shove the words through fangs and my tongue to continue the ruse.

She gives me a pitying glance as she draws up blue liquid into a hypo-syringe.

“I want what all Drahon want. Revenge. But where you are concerned, I want my very own Gryn gladiator. You came to the previous chief scientist without memory, and he thought you worthless, but I think you will be absolutely perfect for what I have in mind.”

“What about the human?” I ask, knowing I’m pushing my luck, but I have to find out if the Drahon have her.

My cocks have swelled at the thoughts of Chrissie and Felia is glaring at them in disgust.

“The human carrier?” Felia gives me a sharp look. “Will wonders never cease. You’ve found your mate, haven’t you?” She shakes her head. “Disgusting creatures. Why do you persist in growing your young inside another?”

Whatever these Drahon are, wherever they have come from and whatever they want from me or any other Gryn, they are absurd, and I’m going to make sure they pay for

taking me away from my mate.

Starting with this one.

I snap the bond on my arm nearest her, and in the same movement, as her eyes widen, I slam my hand into her neck.

“What do you mean ‘human carrier’?” I snarl at her.

Felia flails at my arm, but she might as well be trying to get free from a tritanium bar. I want answers and I want my mate.

“The human has a virus which can infect tech. It’s designed to be injected into a compatible lifeform in order to get it onto planets or into facilities where it can be extracted and used. Tatatunga is the place it was needed, given the plans the council has.”

“You will extract it from her. It’s making her sick,” I growl.

“It’s supposed to make her sick, you dumb creature,” Felia snarls, which earns her a shake. “It’s when she stops being sick there’s a problem. It means the virus is bonding to her DNA.”

“And what happens when it does?”

“It will kill her.”

I look up as a number of well-armed guards run into the room. Felia smiles her nasty smile.

“Now, if you don’t mind, I have to get on. Starting with you.”

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:28 am

CHRISSIE

I never thought having two massive alien warriors backing me up would be a liability. In fact, I should be grateful for all the muscle.

Only it's like herding cats.

Maxym doesn't seem to be able to stop growling, and Klynn's delight in showing off his weapons (and I mean the sharp, pointy metal ones) at every opportunity is extremely disconcerting. I'm beginning to see how well behaved they were around Rych.

Fucking hell, I miss him so much. My heart physically aches in my chest at his loss, at my need for him. Being around the others emphasizes his absence.

Despite the disgust of the two Gryn, I was able to get a medi-bot to treat Fenek. We got him to his bed, and once I was sure the rest of his dwelling was still functioning enough to provide him with the care he needed, I set up the cleaning bots for a deep clean.

I didn't look back at the dwelling as we left in Fenek's private transport, and we headed out to Solyom, an area of Tatatunga where Maxym is adamant we'll get the information we need on the Drahon to find Rych.

Which is where I find myself in the feline wrangling business.

"Why not let me try?" I say as Maxym emerges from another bar snarling up a storm.

He snorts a breath. Klynn spins a sword in his hand. All around us, the inhabitants of Tatatunga give us a wide berth.

“This is the last place,” Maxym growls as I enter the bar, the two Gryn at my back.

“How about you wait out here and try to keep out of trouble?”

Klynn laughs. Which I think means he has no intention of keeping out of trouble. Maxym glowers.

“I made a promise.”

“And you’ll be right outside, won’t you? And both of you are the best fighters on Trefa, so I’m perfectly safe if I’m right next to you—or twenty feet from you.”

“What’s feet got to do with anything?” Klynn asks, his brow furrowed and his feathers shivering.

“Never mind. Just wait here.” I walk into the tavern.

The scent of stale alcohol and too many bodies hits me. I’m wondering if Maxym left this one until last because it’s the grottiest. My feet stick to the floor as I make my way to the main serving area.

“Whaddaya want?” A large hairy Panupal growls, not looking up. His silver tipped fur waves in a non-existent breeze, and when I don’t say anything, one of his eye stalks swivels in my direction. “We don’t serve females,” he says.

“By choice or because none of them would come into this disgusting establishment?” I retort. “I don’t want anything other than information, as I’d rather not get spaceworms.”

The second eyestalk spins and he lifts his head. “What?”

“You heard.”

Behind me there is a sudden scraping of chairs, which suggests Maxym and Klynn have been unable to wait more than a nano-second and have entered the tavern. The eyestalks blink.

“I’ll have you know, this place has a great hygiene rating,” the Panupal grumbles.

“For a barn, I presume. I want to know if you’ve seen or heard of any Drahon in Tatatunga.”

“Drahon?” the Panupal says, the inflection in his voice giving away his knowledge.

“Do you see those gladiators who are presently clearing your bar?” I query. The Panupal nods. “They’re with me, and I said this place looked like they wouldn’t have to wreck it for me to get the information I needed.” I lean over the bar. “Thing is, they love wrecking things, so you have about ten nova-seconds to tell me what you know before they start smashing the place up.”

I lean back and pull in a breath of slightly clearer air as the Panupal weighs up his options.

“The Drahon have been in Tatatunga for the last three nova-months gathering supplies. I’ve heard they have a base, a facility, near the old amphitheater on the outskirts of Holbak.”

“Thank you, that’s been very helpful.” I turn my back on the serving area to see Maxym and Rych about halfway to me. I give them an indication they need to turn around and leave by spinning my finger in the air.

They both look at me blankly. It's a good thing they're the planet's best fighters.

"We're going to Holbak," I say, walking around the pair.

I'm pretty sure I hear Klynn grumble something about this not being any fun as I pass, but at least they follow me as we head back to the transport.

"The Drahon have a base somewhere near the old amphitheater," I explain to the Gryn once we're inside.

Both of them bristle alarmingly.

"I do not like the amphitheater," Klynn snarls. "It's bad."

"We have to find the base, not go back there," Maxym says quietly, putting his bear-like hand on Klynn's shoulder.

"Never going back there," Klynn replies as the transport slips into the traffic above the city.

His eyes are darker than ever, and I see one hand is shaking badly. Klynn under normal circumstances is dangerous enough, but like this...I'd rather not be in a confined space with him.

Although, as the engine explodes on the transport and it drops out of the sky, I realize which is preferable, crashing or being with two feral Gryn in a tube.

Turns out, on balance, I prefer the Gryn.

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:28 am

RYCH

I look at the scattered bodies of the guards. Defeating them was easier than I expected, the one problem being Felia has managed to escape in the mêlée. Given she's the one who knows about my Chrissie, and potentially knows more about me than I do, she is the one I want.

Unfortunately I don't have any live Drahon to ask. Perhaps not inevitably, given I hate the creatures with a force inside me which seems to be entirely ingrained. They didn't even need to capture me or threaten my mate for me to hate them.

I have to find my Chrissie. The Drahon can wait until I do. And when she is in my arms, I will bring her here and force them to make her well again.

I will not lose her. Not after all the time I've spent fighting for nothing. Chrissie, my mate, my eregri is what I fight for now.

Stumbling over the bodies, my legs still suffering from the narcotics, even if my claws were not, I find myself in a wide passage lined with metal. The tang in the air over the stench of the Drahon suggests we are underground, and I need to make it up into the light.

Lifting my head, I do my best to work out the best way to take, although the pulsar bolt which flies over my head ends up dictating I turn left in any event. Returning fire with a pulsar I took from the guards who attempted to subdue me, the thing fires twice before jamming.

“Vrexing Drahon.” I fling it away and move as fast as I can through the maze-like corridors until I reach a hover-lifter similar to the ones used in the dome to transport beasts from their cages under the arena to where they will do the most damage.

The doors spiral open, and I grab hold of the first Drahon to exit, swinging him around to hit the one behind him as I take charge of his pulsar and spray the rest of the interior with pulsar bolts.

Turns out there are only the two and they’re both out cold. So much for reinforcements. I shrug as I get into the lifter, the door closing as I order an ascent to ground level. When the doors open again, I step out into a large clear atrium, through which I can see the tattered amphitheater walls. This place is also littered with bodies.

I’m confused for a nova-second or two. I haven’t been in this atrium...I’m sure...so this has to be something which is not of my doing. I stare at it for a short time, trying to work out what has happened and if I’ve done something I didn’t remember when there’s movement which has me raising my stolen pulsar.

“!” The movement resolves into a running Chrissie, her hair flowing behind her as the vision leaps into my arms and I drop my weapon.

“Eregri ?” I’m wondering if a hallucination can feel real, smell real, be as real as this one. “How are you here?”

“We’ve been tracking you since you were taken from the dome.” She laughs, pressing a long kiss to my lips and proving she is very, very real. “We saw some Drahon and...Maxym and Klynn did the rest,” she adds shyly.

“They’re here?” I growl, not wanting to lift my head from her hair which holds so much of her delicious scent.

“Like we’d let you have all the fun, vrexer,” Klynn says stepping out from behind some potted vegetation, which he cuts down in a single blade sweep.

“You do realize you’re naked, don’t you?” Maxym adds, looming out from behind a pile of storage cases.

“Yes,” I respond. “The Drahon did it in order to marvel at my magnificent form.”

“More like they wanted to experiment on you.” Klynn grins mirthlessly. “After all, you did let them catch you.”

“Like you’ve never been caught in the dome,” I snarl. “These vrexers knew what they were up against. They had help from the procurator and others.” I bristle my wings at him.

“I have a virus.” Chrissie looks up at me, her eyes moist. “We found Fenek. He’s not a Drahon but a species called a Kijg. The Drahon have been after him, they got to him back at his dwelling, nearly killing him but he’s alive, just, with the help of a medi-bot.” I shake my feathers at her words, mirrored by the other two Gryn. “The Drahon and the Kijg have been at war for as long as his ancestors can remember. He says the virus in me is designed to affect tech, which is why I’m so sick. It doesn’t agree with me.”

I brush at her hair. “That’s not all, my sweet mate. The Drahon told me if the virus is not removed from you...” I don’t want to say any of the words out loud. I don’t want to make the possibility real.

“What is it?” she asks me.

I give my fellow Gryn a helpless look.

“Felia told me the virus would kill you.”

“I know,” Chrissie says, cupping my cheek. “Fenek said it too, but all they have to do is take it out.”

My heart beats out of my chest, wanting to give her my life, my blood, my health.

“It might already be too late, my eregri ,” I breathe. “Once it has bonded to your DNA, the Drahon say it cannot be removed.”

“But I feel fine,” Chrissie says, staring up at me, her beautiful eyes shining. “I feel better than I ever have.”

“It’s the virus. I have to find Felia and get her to remove it.”

“Felia?” she queries.

“The chief scientist of the Drahon. Vrexer slipped out of my grip while I was fighting off the others.” I scan the fallen, but she’s not among them. “She has to be somewhere in Tatatunga. She still wants you, and she still wants a Gryn.”

“She can’t have us,” Maxym growls. “Or your mate, unless she is making her well.”

Both Gryn rattle their primaries. Klynn bares his teeth.

And then there is the most almighty explosion. It slams Chrissie into me and nearly pushes us off our feet.

“What the vrex?”

“I think the procurator has found us,” Maxym rumbles. “We were out of the dome

without a pass after all.”

He watches as multiple black clad Zarvu enter through the hole they’ve blown in the side of the atrium. There’s more than enough to pose a significant problem if any of us want to get away. The Xnosson captain, all horns and bluster, pushes through the throng.

“Gladiators, you are to come with me,” he bellows. “Return to the dome without incident and the procurator guarantees no punishment will be meted out.”

“He said that last time,” Klynn mutters, “and we were on vegetable rations for a week.”

“You should go,” I say to Maxym. “You’ve helped us enough and you shouldn’t risk a punishment or worse.”

“You are my brother in arms,” Maxym says, eyeing Klynn who is growling and drooling at the Zarvu, “as much as Klynn is. I will always protect you and your mate.”

“And this is me protecting you,” I say, calling out to the captain. “Come and get them. They were just visiting an old friend. They’ll go quietly,” I add with a glare at Klynn.

“If you need us...” Maxym says, stepping towards the guards.

“Well, there is one thing I could do with.” I look at his pants pointedly. Maxym shakes his head and strips off his pants and boots, tossing them over the planter Klynn destroyed.

I pick them up and pull them on.

“You owe me,” he says.

“I’ll add it to the list,” I reply as he and Klynn troop over to the captain and are duly bound at the wrists.

I clutch my Chrissie tightly as they leave.

“What do we do now?” she whispers.

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:28 am

CHRISSIE

I still feel fine, other than extremely anxious. It's like I have a ticking bomb inside me, and I have no idea when it will go off. I could ignore it, or I could panic.

Only here, in Rych's arms, I don't want to do either. I want to fight it. I want to be with him. I want us to be together. I want to protect him from the anguish on his face.

I want to protect him from ever being alone again, like I was.

"Sweet mate," he says quietly. "Where did you go?"

"I'm fine," I say abruptly. "We need to find this scientist." I look around us, but it's pretty clear Maxym and Klynn did a good job. There's no one left alive.

"She won't have stayed," Rych says. "The chances are she's gone to another facility or is attempting to get off Trefa."

"We should go back to Fenek. He might be able to help find her or, at the least, use his contacts to draw her out," I respond. "I'm not going to let her go. She will fix you," he says fiercely.

We pick our way out of the atrium. Rych eyes the amphitheater with disgust.

"Have you been in there?" I ask.

"All gladiators are sent there when we first arrive." He growls. "It is a bad place." His

nostrils flare as he looks at the distance between the atrium we've just exited and the amphitheater. "And the Drahon knew it."

"Someone sabotaged Fenek's transport. It's beyond repair. We'll need to find another way of getting back to Fenek," I say, exhaustion from the crash, being saved by Maxym and Klynn from slamming into the ground and becoming jam, along with the subsequent massacre flowing over me.

Rych steps out in front of a transport traveling towards us and opens his wings. I cry out his name, but the thing stops within a hair's width of him, and he slams his clawed hand on the front screen.

"Out," he growls at the occupants, a set of Oykgig females who scramble to exit, a knot of scales and tails.

My huge gladiator holds out his hand to me.

"Little spark, your transport awaits."

"Interesting technique," I say as I climb on board. "How did you know it would stop?"

"I didn't," Rych says. "But for you, I'd do anything. I'll follow you anywhere, and if death comes for you, I will fight him until the end of time."

I curl up against him, enjoying the warmth of his torso and the soft sweep of his feathers.

"I don't expect any of that from you."

"I know, sweet mate. Which is why it makes it all the more important I keep

fighting.”

“Don’t you think you’ve fought enough?”

“I wasn’t fighting, I was surviving. Now I have something to fight for. I have you.”

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:28 am

RYCH

Chrissie is cool against my skin, and I cannot wake her as we arrive at Fenek's compound. As much as I hate the things, I race with her up to his room where the medi-bot should be tending to the Kijg.

Fenek is sat up in his bed, his scales pale, but he's alive if nothing else.

"You found her!" he exclaims, seeing Chrissie in my arms.

"The Drahon told me unless the virus is removed, it will kill her." I place her gently on the bed.

"Tend to the female," Fenek orders the bot.

I growl.

"Let it do what it can, ," he says gently. "She needs all the help she can get, even from a bot."

"We have to find the scientist, Felia," I growl. "She got away. She's the only one I know can help Chrissie."

At the mention of her name, Chrissie groans, her eyelids flickering. The bot moves away from her, which is a good thing because if it hadn't, I'd have rent the thing in two.

“My eregri ?” I murmur as I gather her to me.

“Hey,” she says with a weak smile, her beautiful eyes dull. “Guess I spoke too soon about feeling well.” She puts her hand on my chest, but it slides away.

“I’m going to make the Drahon get this virus out of you, my mate. Then I’m going to kill them all.”

“Good,” Chrissie says. “But where are Maxym and Klynn?”

“Back at the dome, my mate.” I remind her quietly. “The captain took them, remember?”

She nods, her eyes closed again and I feel the bond weakening between us.

“Not exactly,” Fenek says, interrupting us. “I might be able to help.”

I give him a withering look. “You’ve helped enough. And in your present state, you’re more of a liability than a fighter.”

“I wasn’t offering my services,” he chuckles, “but those of the resistance.”

“The resistance? They’re useless.” I snort. “They claim they’ll bring down the dome, but they’ve done nothing.”

Fenek shakes his head slowly, clucking his tongue. “Young Gryn, you really don’t understand anything other than fighting or mating, do you?”

I bristle, all my feathers shaking until Chrissie slips her hand into my feathers, and it feels so vrexing good, I forget myself. I’m not even listening to Fenek anymore.

“...and that’s why the resistance is still fighting. Only they’re not taking direct action at the present time. They’re working from within, and this is the information they need to take down the council and the Drahon.”

“All I want is my mate to be well. All the rest is meaningless,” I snarl at him despite my mate’s fingers working at my feathers.

“I quite understand.” Fenek smiles.

I want to kill him.

“If the resistance will help us, and if helping us helps others,” Chrissie says quietly, “then it’s fine, . We should let them.”

“I don’t want to replace one regime with another,” I respond. “I don’t want Maxym and Klynn to be in any worse situation than they already are.” I glare at Fenek. “Because power isn’t all, but some believe it is.”

“The resistance is not after power. They just want Trefa to be fair, for those who are repressed to be free, for those who are enslaved to be free. They don’t want to rule, they just want those who rule to rule for all.”

“Because you can’t remove the gak from the rest of the cesspit?” I retort.

Fenek shrugs. “Something like that.” His scales flush with color. “But surely Tatatunga being better is preferable to how it is now?”

“,” Chrissie says quietly. “You know what this place is like. I think better is an improvement.”

I lift my lips in a snarl at Fenek, as if he’s the source of all my pain. “I want revenge

on the Drahon. They know what I was before I ended up here. They're responsible. I can't promise there will be no violence for what they have done to me and my mate."

"And the resistance will not want such a promise."

"Because I am a weapon?"

"Something like that."

Fenek's smile has morphed into what I remember, shrewd and knowing. It's my turn to feign indifference.

"It's not like I haven't already been used by Tatatunga. It was supposed to have brought me great wealth. Instead it led me to my sweet Chrissie." I drop my head to hers, extracting the gentlest of kisses. "If using me helps her, it's all I want."

"Then they're waiting for you down below," Fenek says.

"My little spark." I gaze into Chrissie's beautiful face. "We have to go. Can you walk?"

"I can." She unfolds herself from my grasp and gets to her feet.

The medi-bot comes to life, moving towards us. I pull out my sword.

"The patient must rest. The virus is multiplying," it says.

"Fuck that. I'm not resting unless I'm dead," she retorts, putting a hand on my abdomen, warmth blooming under her touch.

"And anything which wants to kill you will have to go through me."

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:28 am

CHRISSIE

Rych's absolute belief in himself, in his desire for revenge, in his desire to keep me safe, gives me strength. I want to be there for him. I don't want to let this virus beat me.

And I want to get the creatures who hurt him, who hurt Fenek, and who hurt the other two gladiators. It seems like revenge can drive us all.

Holding onto my massive gladiator, who most definitely enjoys my proximity, his feathers shivering, we make our way down to the main living area. There's the sound of voices from behind the door, and Rych draws his sword again, pushing me behind him as we enter.

The voices fall silent. I move out from a great wing to see a motley collection of aliens who are gazing at Rych.

"Gladiator," a large male Voltes growls.

He very nearly loses his head. Rych is on him in a nano-second, sword raised as the pair of them tumble over the furniture and end up on the floor, his blade at the Voltes' throat.

"You ," Rych snarls, "get out."

"Gryn." An Oykig female moves forward. "We are not your enemy."

“This one is,” Rych says, his voice deep and dangerous.

“We met a Voltes who tried to hand us over to the Drahon,” I say by way of explanation. “A female called Red.”

Under Rych’s claws, the male Voltes snorts. “She is not of my clan. She was disavowed many nova-years ago.”

I’m not sure what’s going to happen. The entire room seems to hold its breath.

“I can assure you, Axel is not a threat to you,” the Oykid says. “He might not be the brightest, but his loyalty is entirely to the resistance.”

Rych continues to press the sword at Axel’s throat for several more seconds before he flares his wings and backs off. Axel returns his glare for a beat, but then Rych offers his hand. Axel takes it and is lifted from the floor where he shakes himself like a dog.

“I am Gytha,” the Oykid says. “I understand you have information for us.”

“The procurator of the dome is working with the Drahon,” Rych says, not taking his eyes off Axel. “Or at the very least, taking their credits. They have a virus which can control any tech. Chances are they intend selling it to the highest bidder here on Trefa.”

“It was you at the amphitheater,” Axel growls at Rych, who lifts his sword again, and the Voltes backs off.

“What he means is we heard about the mess there.” Gytha sighs at the Voltes.

“That was the Drahon. They sought to hold me. I believe they have something to do with why I ended up in the dome in the first place,” Rych says, “but that is secondary

to making sure the virus is removed from my mate.”

“You’re the one with the virus?” Gytha turns to me.

For the first time since I found myself on Trefa, I find I’m straightening my shoulders, taking my strength from Rych.

“I am.”

“Interesting.” Gytha’s eyes rake over me.

“What is?”

“Humans. You have so many qualities, although I wouldn’t have thought being a vessel is one of them.”

I look over at Rych, confused.

“Two of my former gladiator colleagues have human mates. That’s how I knew what you are. It’s how they know you are human.”

“Humans and gladiators we have assisted, Rych,” Gytha adds. “As well you know.”

“We can look after ourselves and our mates,” he retorts, spinning the sword in his hand to make a point.

A sharp point.

Why doesn’t it surprise me there are more humans on Trefa? Probably due to the cesspit mentioned earlier.

“It seems humans are whatever this galaxy wants of them,” I say. “But I don’t want this virus any longer.”

“We need to find the Drahon scientist, Felia,” Rych says. “She got away from their base at the amphitheater, and she’s the only one who knows how to extract the virus.”

Gytha looks over at Axel.

“The Drahon have another base, one they think is entirely secret,” he growls. “But I know where it is.”

“Then you will take us.” Rych takes a step towards the Voltes, who holds his ground this time, lips rippling with a snarl.

“First, we need to know about the procurator,” Gytha says sharply.

“Speak with the gladiators at the dome. They will tell you. The Drahon are the new sponsors,” Rych replies, pulling me to him. “I don’t have time for this. My mate needs assistance and we have to go.”

I feel my knees buckling as my vision dims but then comes back as quickly as it went. I look up into Rych’s handsome face, and my desire to fight warms me from within, heating up my limbs.

“Are you okay, little spark?” he asks in a low, sinful voice which goes directly to my lady bits.

“As I’ll ever be,” I respond. “As long as I’m with you.”

It’s the one thing I know for sure in all of this. The one thing I cling to.

I belong to Rych, and I want to be his until my dying breath, which I'm determined will be many, many years from now.

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:28 am

RYCH

My Chrissie is doing her best to appear strong, but something within me is being pulled so vrexing hard, I know it's her hidden pain. Maxym told us all about the thoughtbond, a psychic connection with a fated mate, like the one Blayn developed with his female.

I don't know who I am, or how the thoughtbond manifests itself, but I want this to be it.

I want to give her part of myself, the part which can keep her alive, keep her with me. Vrex! I'd give all of me for her to survive.

The Voltes pilots the air transport over Tatatunga as Chrissie lies in my arms. She opens her eyes occasionally, but most of the time, she appears to be sleeping. I try to tune into her thoughts, but I don't seem to be able to.

Maybe that's not how the thoughtbond works. I curse inwardly at my loss of memory. Sylas could at least recall something, even if it was false. My memory is simply the facility, where I was shunted around by bots, and then the dome via the amphitheater.

"You think too loudly," Chrissie says, not opening her eyes.

"I do?" My heart leaps.

"You're growling under your breath."

“I growl for you, my sweet eregri , because I am going to destroy those who did this to you.”

“After they’ve put it right, I hope?” She looks up at me, eyes dancing.

“And then they die.”

I’ve never felt more feral, more willing to do the deed. My mate is all, she is everything. No one can harm her, not unless they want to feel my blade and my wings be the last things they ever see.

“We’re here,” Axel announces, dropping the air transport into a clearing in the Pax district, not too far from the dome. The building doesn’t cast a physical shadow here, but it might as well.

My feathers prick at the thought the Drahon were so close. Pax is a mixture of derelict buildings and trading storage units. It’s a maze I don’t want to get into.

With a finger on my lips at Chrissie, I pull my sword and stick it at the back of his neck.

“Where’s here?” I snarl.

“Gytha told you, I told you—I can be trusted!” Axel whines.

“I’ll be the judge of your loyalty, not the vrexing resistance,” I respond. “Tell me where the base is.”

“It’s half a tick from here, down the road. It looks like a meat processing plant.” Axel says with a huff. “You gain access via a shack on the left side.”

“Another underground base, vrex!” I mutter.

“If you wait, Gytha will send reinforcements, and we can all go in together,” Axel says confidently. “The Drahon won’t put up much of a fight. They’re terrible fighters. They prefer to use their credits and influence.”

“What sort of influence do they have?” Chrissie asks, interested.

“They were around in the galaxy for a long time before they fell out of favor and the Galactic Council confined them to their planet. They know things,” Axel says.

“And what do they have on you?” I growl in his ear. “Because I’ve already disposed of one Voltes, and I can easily deal with you in the same way.”

“Nothing! I told you, I’m loyal to the cause,” he retorts.

If nothing else, this Voltes is prepared to stand up to me. It should give him honor, if I could trust him at all.

I can’t trust anyone with my Chrissie’s life. So, I slam the sword pommel into his head, and he slumps over the console of the flyer.

“Didn’t we need him?” Chrissie asks.

“I don’t need anyone, not when it comes to saving your life.” I rip through the transport until I find what I was looking for, a pair of bonds which I use to tie him to the console. “If the resistance is coming, they’ll release him.”

I cup her face with my hands, studying it, searing her beauty onto my eyes.

“I want to leave you here, but if I get to the scientist, I need you there with me, so she

can do what she needs to do,” I say fiercely. “I want you to stay close at all times, do what I say, and”—I reach to my belt, taking out the pulsar which I hand to her—“never hesitate to fire, if you can.”

If I cannot go into battle with my fellow Gryn by my side, then ensuring my mate is completely protected is the best I can do.

Chrissie bites her bottom lip and takes the pulsar from me, tucking it into her pocket.

“Stay close, stay low, do what you say,” she repeats.

When I kiss her, it’s like all the stars in the galaxy are turned on, flaring brighter than they’ve ever shone before.

Chrissie is mine to my last breath.

And that breath will not be today.

CHRISSIE

The meat processing plant is where Axel said it would be. I admit, I struggled to trust the big Voltes after what happened with Red, so I'm not exactly annoyed with Rych. Although I do think it might have made sense to wait for the others.

But then how long have I got? My breath was already short by the time we got here, my legs feeling like they're made of rubber. All I want is to lie down and sleep.

Rych isn't going to let me, and if I take a moment, it could get us both killed.

"There's the shack," I whisper to him as we peer around the corner of a building. "How are we going to get in unseen?"

"We're not." Rych grins at me, shoving his sword under his wing and pulling off the weapons bandolier he's wearing, dropping it on the ground. "We're surrendering...for a bit. How sick can you look?"

"Sicker than this, I suppose," I say, my words cut off with a squeak as he lifts me into his arms.

"Look sicker," he suggests, and I go floppy.

"Any good?" I murmur from the side of my mouth.

"Perfect, as always, my eregri ."

My heart thunders in my chest as he carries me over to the shack and bellows at the door.

“Let me in! My life for my mate’s.”

This is a spectacularly dangerous game we’re playing. I already know the Drahon make up the rules as they go.

The shack door swings open, and inside I see the exact opposite of the wooden structure on the outside, a smooth, clean corridor which leads to a set of metal doors.

Rych strides in, covering the distance to them in a matter of seconds. He puts me down in a single smooth movement as he pulls out his sword and the doors open.

The Drahon inside don’t stand a chance against my seasoned gladiator. Their bodies slump to the ground even as it seems he hardly touched them.

His sword flashes in the artificial lights, swinging and moving like it’s part of him as the initial wave of Drahon are all cut down. Rych spears one and then grabs his shoulder, pulling him down the blade.

“Where is Felia?” he snarls. The Drahon shakes his head. Rych twists the sword. “Where is she?”

“Two floors down,” he gasps. “In the lab.”

“Good.” Rych pulls his blade free, and the Drahon drops.

I’m pulled against his warm body, my brain seared with the destruction he has wrought.

“It had to be done, little spark. If there was another way, believe me, I would have taken it. But the Drahon don’t want credits, not in the sense of what little we have. They want power. And power means violence.”

“The Drahon did this to me—they put the virus in my body without a care for how it would affect me, or if I lived. I should not care for their passing.” I stare at the bodies.

“The mere fact you do is one of the many reasons I love you,” Rych says, nuzzling his head into my hair as if to take solace. “After this, I will never fight again, unless it is to protect my mate.”

“You really don’t want to go back to the dome?” I ask.

“I never wanted to be there in the first place. It was all I could remember. Maybe the Drahon can reverse what they did to me, maybe they can’t, but either way, I belong to you now, . You are my eregri and nothing will ever change that.”

A pulsar bolt zips over our heads.

“Looks like the Drahon have upped their weapons game, even if their aim leaves a lot to be desired.” Rych grins at me.

“Then it’s time to go. You’re a big enough target, after all,” I tease.

Rych’s eyes heat. If we survive this, I know he’s going to make me pay for my comment.

And I’m going to enjoy every second.

He rises as do I and uses his sword to deflect the few pulsar bolts which come our way. Having never seen him in action, I can’t help but be impressed. Rych is sexy

under any circumstances, but when he goes full gladiator, he is sex on legs.

“Stop distracting me, little spark,” he growls. “Your scent will make me mate you on the spot.”

I might be about to die, the virus installed in me about to snuff out my life, but to be desired by Rych, regardless of what I am, is more than enough to keep me going.

We reach a set of ramps leading down and I’m tossed into his arms once again.

“Hold tight,” he says, opening his wings.

“You’re not going to fit!” I exclaim.

“I think you should know by now, I will fit anywhere I want to go,” he rasps.

Rych is in the air, and with a sudden, sickening lurch, he folds up his wings, and we drop until he flares them again and lands as easily as stepping off a plane.

“I fit,” he says with a wicked grin.

He goes to put me down, but I find my legs don’t want to work. I can’t stand without help.

“Rych?” I cling to him, and without a word, he pulls me back into his arms, taking the pulsar pistol from my pocket.

“We’re nearly there, my ,” he says, feathers fluttering as he marches down the passage towards a set of doors at the end. “Hold on for me.”

One pulsar blast and the doors fly open. I’m carried through into a large space filled

with equipment. None of it looks very nice.

Around us, like mice, Drahon flee, all except one.

“I knew you’d be back,” the female says. “And this time you brought me my prize.”

“Save her,” Rych says. “Take the virus out.”

In a weird flash, the female is next to us. I’m struggling to hold my eyes open. I’m struggling to breathe.

“It’s too late, Gryn. The virus has bonded to her DNA,” she says, triumphant. “She is already dead.”

I close my eyes, wanting to fight the darkness, wanting to stay in the moment with Rych, wanting to have a future.

It shouldn’t end like this.

“I’m sorry,” I hear myself whisper as the lights go out altogether.

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RYCH

“No! NO!” I roar as Chrissie goes limp in my arms, but this time she is not pretending. “You will save her,” I snarl at Felia. “You did this, you will undo this.”

“I cannot. I warned you, Gryn. The virus will kill her. I can remove it now, but she will still be dead.”

My mate cannot be dead, she cannot. I can still feel her in my breast, in my heart. Her body is still warm. I won’t accept her death.

I will not accept her death.

I level the pulsar at Felia.

“If you kill me, then you’ll never know the truth, and your mate has no chance at all.”

“With my mate dead, I don’t want the truth,” I respond. “I have nothing left to live for.”

“Ah, , we all know you live for the credits,” Felia says nastily. “That’s all that matters to you.”

I say nothing and it clearly irritates her. She wants a response.

“Well, Gryn? You’re usually so talkative, so full of action. What are you going to do now?”

“I’m wondering if Drahon limbs grow back like Oykgig tails.” I cock my head to one side and look over her. “And I’m wondering if it’s as painful.”

For the first time, Felia’s face contains an expression. And it’s one of fear.

Now she is speaking my language.

“Put her over there.” Felia points to an unpleasantly familiar specimen table, covered in straps and bristling with bot arms. “Maybe she’s not dead enough.”

I lay Chrissie down, gently brushing her hair away from her face. She doesn’t open her eyes and my heart curls in on itself. I want her with me. I want her by my side, in my nest. If I can’t have her, I will destroy everything which led to her being no more.

“Let me see,” Felia demands.

I spin, pointing the pulsar at her, and she remains impassive. I stand aside.

The specimen table hums, and my brain seems to go into free fall at the sound. Pain spears through my head for a nova-second. I shake it and concentrate on what Felia is doing.

“You won’t remember, Gryn. Even if you think you do. I did the best job removing your memories.”

“Of course you did,” I growl. “Because you didn’t want me to kill you on the spot.”

Her shoulders rise slightly, then they drop again. “Good guess.”

“It’s not a guess. Memories aren’t everything. It’s not the way Gryn work. Our nature runs deeper than memories. My mate taught me that.”

She half turns, her eyes narrowing. “So, you know...”

One of her machines lets out a strangled chime, and she suddenly turns back, all her attention concentrated on a small vid-screen.

“This can’t be right,” she mutters.

“What is it?” I lean a little closer.

Felia whirls around and shoves a hypo-syringe into my chest, emptying the contents into me. I go to brush her away as my vision fills with delightful colors.

“Arm or leg?” I growl, grabbing hold of her before she gets away.

“You won’t be able to do anything soon, Gryn. This was one of your favorite narcotics.”

“Arm or leg?” I repeat, towing her with me as I stumble back from Chrissie and the specimen table.

I know the Drahon, this Drahon, had me before I was in the facility. I know she took me from somewhere. But other than that, the pain in my head, dulled by what she’s injected into me—there is nothing.

I recall what Sylas told us all, not to go poking about for memories, and right now, they mean nothing. Chrissie is everything.

“Arm or leg?” I snap.

“You wouldn’t,” she retorts. “You want me to save your mate. You need me.”

“But you don’t need all your limbs, so pick one.” My head spins.

“Gak you, Gryn. The gaking narcotic usually has you on the floor by now.”

“You sent me to the dome. I got stronger. I got better,” I snarl. “I got wiser. So, pick, Drahon. Most creatures I face in the dome don’t get a choice. You don’t deserve one either, but I want you to save my mate.”

Her movements are blurry, but I see her hand dart under a console. I fire, but the bolt goes wild and instead, pain sears through my leg, causing me to fall back, all the breath expelling from my body as I hit the floor.

Felia stands over me, looking down with an expression of disgust.

“I never understood why my mother put such time and effort into Gryn. Not only are you all the same, you’re all uncontrollable, feral things which should be put down at?—”

Her words are cut off as a thin wire wraps itself around her body multiple times, right up to her neck, and she’s jerked upwards, away from me, with a strangled cry of pain.

I stare upwards, wondering what’s going on until my heart pounds, and I know I have to get to my mate. As I struggle to sit up, there’s a bot next to my leg, peeling back my pants where there is a wound. I go to bat it away.

“No, !” The beautiful voice has me looking up, my vision blurring with the sudden movement.

I’m not sure I can trust my eyes.

Chrissie is there. She’s standing upright. She looks better than ever, stunning,

delicious, in need of being mated over and over. She needs a nest, and she needs to be in it. If only this vrexing bot would leave me alone.

“It’s a healer bot. Let it do its work,” Chrissie says, crouching down next to me.

“Are you real?” I reach out to touch her face.

“I’m real. I’m alive.” She cocks her head on one side, looking up at a squirming Felia. “No thanks to her, or maybe it is thanks to her.”

“But the virus?” I’m slurring my words now, sobriety deserting me.

“It’s become part of me.” Chrissie looks at her hands. “And I can control tech.”

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CHRISSIE

Rych looks at me unsteadily, one wing folded unnaturally under him as the bot cleans up the laser wound on his leg.

The clarity I see things with is incredible. After so much time not knowing what was going on inside me, to finally understand is like waking from a long sleep.

I know what I want. I know how to get it, and I'm linked into anything I want to be.

Except one. Rych. Somehow, I'm linked to him in another way, a way which means I see through his narcotic addled brain as he thinks about nesting and...

"Oh!" I feel my core pulse at his thought.

I hold out my hand, and a bot hands me a hypo-syringe. I inject the contents into Rych's arm, and he blinks at me a few times before I'm pulled into his arms and he kisses me to oblivion.

I'm not complaining.

"How did you know what to do?"

"I didn't. I just thought it and the...bot...did it for me. I'm connected to them all," I say, unable to keep the wonder out of my voice. "It connected me to everything."

"Not possible." A high-pitched voice comes from above where Felia dangles. "The

virus was designed to be removed and to kill its host if it wasn't."

"Is that the case?" Rych gets to his feet, swaying slightly. He looks up, fixing the Drahon above us with a predatory stare. "You fully intended to let my mate die if you didn't get what you wanted."

"Yes." She glares down, unapologetic. "But now she's...something else, I want to study her."

"I remember what your 'studies' are like, even if I don't recall anything else," Rych growls, swiping out a clawed hand at her leg like a cat at a bird.

She shrieks and wriggles. Completely the wrong thing to do to in the face of a large, hungry predator. Rych's hands twitch with anticipation.

I shove my fingers into his feathers, and instantly, my vicious predator is putty.

." He slurs my name, whether from the residual effects of the narcotic Felia gave him, weaponizing what she could, or from my touch, it's difficult to tell, but if it stops him from ripping her limb from limb at the moment, I'm grateful.

"Rych." I cup his cheek and his eyes close in ecstasy.

"I thought I'd lost you," he murmurs.

"This galaxy is going to have to try harder if they want rid of me."

"But you're here, and I have to nest for you, to breed you, to own you," he says, voice rasping and sending shivers all through me.

Above us, Felia snorts her disgust. Rych leans in to kiss me as he swipes upwards

again, this time connecting with the Drahon, and she hisses like a cat.

“As long as you are mine, the stars continue to burn, the planets to spin, and the galaxy to sparkle. It’s all I want, it’s all I’ve ever needed, eregri ,” Rych says. “Fate has brought me my very own super-nova, and I will cherish you until the end of time.”

My heart thumps in my chest, both at my new existence, where part of my head is filled with naughts and ones, and the rest of it is filled with the desires of my mate, my huge gladiator who is going to do very bad things to me the moment he gets an opportunity. Not only is he not hiding the thoughts from me, he is in fact displaying them openly in my mind.

“I think not,” Felia says from overhead. “It’s time I got my specimen and you died, Gryn.”

There’s a clicking sound, and as we unpeel from each other, the room is filled with Drahon, armored, armed, and with all their weapons pointed at us.

“Maim the female and kill the male,” Felia shrieks.

Rych flings us both to the floor behind a large console as the pulsar bolts fly.

“Vrexing Drahon,” he grumbles, spotting the pulsar pistol a short distance away. “Don’t go anywhere.”

He flings himself out, somehow miraculously avoiding any further bolts, grabs the pulsar, and is back with me.

“I didn’t go anywhere,” I say. “Can you let me have that?” I nod at the pulsar.

Rych grins, looks puzzled, looks at me like he wants to eat me, and hands me the weapon.

I feel the tech inside it like a series of musical notes. Notes I can tweak to make the song greater. I hand it back to him.

“Should work better now,” I say.

Rych shrugs, leans around the side of the console, and fires. The force nearly blasts him from behind our makeshift screen. He stares at the weapon.

“I usually prefer a blade, but this is...” He drops his head back in ecstasy. “Loud.”

He grins at me, grasps the thing with two hands, and lets rip. Smoke fills the air and Felia screams into the din, any noise she makes lost in the sounds of destruction.

“Vrex it, Rych!” A voice we both recognize spears through everything.

“Maxym?” Rych ceases fire, lifting the pulsar up to his face.

“The same.” The huge Gryn intones as he looms out of the fog.

“How did you get out of the dome?”

“Some vrexer called Axel freed us. He was lucky Klynn wanted Drahon blood, or he’d have settled for Voltes.” Maxym chuckles, spinning his sword and spearing a Drahon who has somehow escaped the mayhem and is racing at us.

“Yeah, we found him annoying too,” I say.

“And look, your little mate is well again.”

“She can control bots,” Rych says proudly, his arm and wing curling around me.

“The virus has bonded with my DNA, just like the Drahon said, but it didn’t kill me. I don’t understand exactly what’s happened, but I can...speak to tech.” I explain.

“She can control bots.” Rych nods at Maxym with a grin.

“Only you’d end up with a mate who could do such a thing,” Maxym rasps.

Rych turns his high wattage smile on me. “I would, wouldn’t I?” he says with tenderness. “She’ll keep me from the dark, no matter what.”

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RYCH

Between us, we've made a decent mess of the Drahon. Those who are not dead are unlikely to cause us a problem in the near future. All save the vrexing scientist who twists above us shouting obscenities.

"What do you want me to do with that?" Klynn finishes wiping the goo from his blade on one of the prone Drahon as he looks up, one eye fixed on the swinging female.

"Dispose of her," I growl.

Klynn raises his sword, but Chrissie catches hold of my arm.

"We can't."

"I vrexing can," Klynn snarls, earning him a box on the side of his head from Maxym, which he hardly responds to.

"If we kill her, we're as bad as they are."

"And what do you suggest we do with her?" Maxym says, leaning on his sword pommel. "Given everything else we've done." He looks around at the mayhem in the room. "One more won't be missed."

"Just kill the thing and get all this over with. There are games tomorrow," Klynn rasps. His feathers, gummed up with all manner of fluids, rattle in their positions.

He wants to kill, he always has. He'll never change.

"She's unarmed. This is not the dome." I snarl.

"We can give her to the resistance," Chrissie says. "She has plenty of information they can use."

"I'll never talk," Felia screeches.

"I think you will. My mate will see to it." I look at Chrissie. "Won't you?"

"I'm sure one of her bots can come up with something," Chrissie says, looking around the ruined lab.

"I'm hungry," Klynn grumbles. "If I'm not going to get to kill more Drahon, I want to eat."

"The procurator has been withholding rations since our last break out." Maxym sighs.

"With any luck, the resistance will also be having words with the procurator," I say. "Given what he seems to have got himself tangled up with."

"He'll wheedle his way out of it. Oykig always do." Maxym pulls himself up to his full height. "And as Klynn says, we have games tomorrow, and there are too many credits riding on it for any further punishment of us, or him. The council will turn a blind eye, regardless of the resistance."

"Nothing changes overnight." Chrissie curls her hand in my feathers and my eyes roll in my head. "But getting these brave Gryn something to eat is possible."

"These brave Gryn?" I growl at my fellow gladiators.

“I meant you too. After all, you took a hit for me.”

Maxym inhales and grins. “A hit of paraxio,” he barks.

“It’s a dirty job, but someone has to do it,” I retort, stalking to the ruined doors, with my gorgeous mate on my arm. “Now I’m going to feed my mate and I’m going to nest for her. You can join in with the first one, but come anywhere near me for the second, and you will lose your wings.”

I hear a chorus of laughs behind me, but I have my Chrissie, and I simply do not care for anything other than having her, alive and next to me. Our fledgling thoughtbond wraps like tendrils around my mind. I can feel the buzz within her as she talks to the tech in a language I can’t understand, and she does so subconsciously. I feel her deep desire for me, her anxiety about what happens next, and her need for an explanation.

“If there’s one thing I know, little spark, it’s that explanations are not always what will make you the most happy.”

“I know,” she says as we make our way up and out of the Drahon base. “I’m not sure I want an explanation. I just wish...”

She’s trying to hide something from me. I stop dead in the street outside and grasp her shoulders.

“You wish you had your father here.” I study her face, but she won’t meet my eyes. “You feel bad because you want to be with me and he isn’t here.”

“Yes,” she says quietly. “I love you, . I don’t ever want that to change, but my dad...” A sob hitches in her chest. “He’ll never know what happened, and I miss him.”

I pull her to me, kissing the wetness on her face.

“I can’t remember my parents, but I know I’d miss them too. If there was any way to get you home, to get you to him, I would do it.”

“But then I’d lose you.” Chrissie stares up at me. “And I can’t lose you, not now, not ever. I want to think my dad would understand. Bringing a big bad alien gladiator home probably wasn’t in his life plan for me, but I know he’d want me to be happy.”

“And are you happy?” I ask, my heart pounding at the words.

My head is flooded by the best feelings in the galaxy.

“Does that answer your question?” she says with a shy smile. “I am so happy, . Happy to be rid of the virus, even if it’s now part of me, happy to be here with you. Happy we’ve maybe made a difference for those two.” She nods over my shoulder as Maxym and Klynn emerge from the smoke billowing out of the Drahon base.

“They can take care of themselves,” I growl. “But”—I shrug—“it doesn’t mean life should be so hard.”

“Then we’d better feed them. Before there’s more explosions.”

As the words leave my mouth, the Drahon base blows, sending us all up into the sky. I row my wings, spinning in the searing heat of the blast, catching my mate and then beating hard to get us away from the danger.

Below me I see Klynn. He swoops in to grab Maxym who seems unresponsive.

“What the vrex was that?”

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CHRISSIE

“The tech.” I stumble over the words as we land amongst the falling debris.

“It’s...gone?”

Rych checks me over, cupping my chin with his huge hand. “Gone?”

“I can’t...feel it, like I feel you.”

The song of the lab, of the Drahon base, has been replaced by something more general, larger, more like a city. But what was down there in the lab is no more.

“There was a self destruct?”

I think for an instant, trying to recall all the music I heard from all the tech. Was there a song about ending everything?

“Maybe. I can’t be sure, not now it’s all been destroyed.”

Klynn lands beside us, holding up Maxym.

“We need to get him to the dome medics,” he says without emotion. “He’s taken some damage to his head.”

Blood drips from Maxym’s downturned face onto the ground.

“Vrex,” Rych growls, carefully lifting his head up.

Maxym's eyes are closed and his face pale.

There's a hum from overhead, and the transport Rych and I used earlier swoops past and lands. Both Klynn and Rych flare their wings as the door opens. But no one gets out.

"Come on." I hurry into the transport.

Between them, Rych and Klynn get Maxym inside and we rise up over the destroyed base, the plume of smoke billowing out.

"How did this get to us?" Rych says as we turn in the direction of the dome.

"I, er, wished it were closer. I guess as it has my DNA signature from earlier, I can control it," I respond hesitantly.

Rych studies me, and as much as I want to know what he's thinking, as much as I could know, I don't want to find out. I don't want to discover he thinks I'm a freak. It was bad enough being the sick human, without now being some sort of robo-human.

"You amaze me every nova-second of every nova-day, my little spark," he says, dipping his head and pressing a kiss to my lips.

My body relaxes and for the first time in a long time, there is no pain, no aches, nothing except Rych and me and this kiss.

"But I think this new talent of yours is something which might make you desirable to others," he says, "and that's not something I will allow."

"Because I can control tech?"

“Because potentially you can control all tech. Like the virus would have been able to do. Perhaps it might have been better if you had not survived the base explosion.” He raises his eyebrows.

“Oh? Oh!” I get his meaning as Klynn gives me a brief, terrifying smile. “So what do we do?”

“Other than Fenek and Gytha, no one else needs to know you live. The dome doesn’t know what or who you are. We can stay there until I can arrange passage off Trefa,” Rych says quickly.

I feel his hesitance, his concern down the thoughtbond, and I push back.

Just as long as I’m with you.

A smile fills his face, and it’s as if his heart starts beating again. I guess the thoughtbond is going to take some getting used to on both sides.

As is my understanding of what I can do with tech.

The transport swings around the dome, and Rych takes the controls to pilot the thing down in front of a pair of huge doors. They open inwards, and we are in a large steel courtyard.

Klynn is already out, bellowing for medics, Maxym draped over his shoulder.

“Wait here and activate the privacy screen,” Rych says. “I have to speak with the procurator.”

He’s out of the transport in a flash, the door closing behind him as I watch the Zarvu guards milling around, uninterested in what the Gryn are up to or the small transport

in their midst. A few play a game of chance on a makeshift table. Some sit around sniffing from small vials of a mild narcotic which is sanctioned for general use. One kicks a rock and the sight of the huge horned creature dribbling the stone like a soccer ball nearly makes me laugh out loud.

Then, as one, they all suddenly straighten, and I see Rych, along with a huge Xnosson bull, heading to the transport.

I sit back in a corner out of sight, activating the door as he approaches.

“The procurator has released your credits, along with Blayn’s,” the big bull says. “Something he should have done some time ago, but I suspect the visit from the resistance may have had something to do with it.”

Rych looks down at the credit chip in his hand, but I already know it is loaded with a considerable fortune as its stream of ones and zeros sings to me.

“I need to know about Maxym. We...I mean...I will be staying at the Pompas for a few nova-days, until I know how he is.”

The Xnosson claps Rych on the shoulder. “I’ll keep you informed. He’s a tough one. Destined to die in the dome rather than out of it. He’ll survive.”

“Thank you, captain,” Rych says, ducking inside the transport and looking around for me.

Not subtle .

I push the words down the bond, and he does a terrible impression of being nonchalant.

“I’ll be going now,” he adds, louder than necessary.

Yep, the thoughtbond is going to take some getting used to.

The Xnosson steps away from the transport as Rych takes the controls. The huge doors open and in no time we’re up in the air, flying towards the spaceport.

“How is Maxym?” I ask.

“He took a blow to the head. Given how thick his is, I’m surprised it did any damage,” Rych says, but his emotions whirl despite the words. “He’s with the medics. They’ll fix him up. They always do.”

“And the Pompas?” I ask, sitting beside him.

“You’ve never heard of the Pompas?” Rych grins at me. I shake my head. “There is no dome for you, I can finally treat my mate to what she deserves.”

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:28 am

RYCH

I know Maxym is in good hands at the dome, and the procurator was a gibbering wreck after his visit from the resistance. It seems his dalliance with the Drahon is not one he wants to be public knowledge or to get back to the Tatatunga council.

I can only hope they got the information they needed to do whatever it is they want to do. For my part, I have to nest for my female. It's a need which is becoming increasingly desperate. My feathers itch like crazy, and my cocks are straining at my pants. Getting to the Pompas seems to take far too long.

"Your usual suite, ?" The Yetag concierge meets us on the rooftop landing pad with his customary smile.

"Yes, along with your finest banquet," I respond, ushering my Chrissie into the building ahead of us. "And I require a service you'll not have offered before."

"You are nesting? Our storerooms are at your service," he says with a short bow.

"I'm...what? How?"

"The Pompas makes it a particular point to cater to all our guests' particular needs," he says knowingly. "I can show your mate to a waiting area while you...prepare?"

"I will take her," I growl.

"Of course." He smiles, his tentacles flicking with amusement. "This way."

He shows us into a comfortable room. One wall is entirely clear and the view over Tatatunga as the suns set is impressive.

“I just need to do a few things,” I tell her, unable to stop my feathers from shaking.

“Are you okay?” she asks, pushing down the thoughtbond at me.

But it’s not something I can articulate or even make clear in my own mind, which is swirling with everything that has to be done.

“I’ll be okay in just a short while,” I respond.

Leaving her is hard, but not nesting for her would be harder. I make my way through the storage rooms with ease, given there are plenty of beautiful items for me to choose.

Once I’m in the suite, I get to work, pulling and tweaking until I’m absolutely sure it is perfect. Perfect for my beautiful mate, the one I’m going to fill over and over until neither of us can move.

The mate who has teased me over and over and will have to pay the price.

When I return to the waiting area, Chrissie seems surprised to see me.

“I thought it might take longer.”

“When I nest, I nest hard,” I say, taking her hand and leading her through to the suite and to the room where I have prepared my masterpiece.

She pushes open the door and gasps, her hand covering her mouth.

I feel out the thoughtbond because I'm unsure what she is thinking. What I get is a blast of pure joy which makes me harder than ever and almost knocks me from my feet.

"It's stunning, !" Chrissie throws her arms around me, and the thoughtbond is drowned by her happiness in being alive, in being with me, in my nest and in her...very dirty thoughts about what she wants me to do to her. "Did you really make all of this for me?"

"Why would I make it for anyone else, my eregri ?" I respond, burying my head in her hair and inhaling her scent.

This female is mine. My body wants her with an ache I didn't ever think possible outside the fight.

"It's stunning." Chrissie gazes up at me. "I want to spend the rest of my days with you, . You protected me, fought for me, believed in me. I don't know how having the virus as part of me will work, but as long as you want me, I know it can."

"For tonight, I will have you in my nest and your belly filled by morning." I sweep a lock of her long soft hair, the color of starlight, from her cheek. "Because the thoughtbond works both ways, along with my other senses."

"What do you mean?" she half whispers, her stunning eyes studying mine.

I lean into her a little more, my lips brushing the shell of her ear, making her shudder.

"I know when you are fertile, little mate, and that moment is now."

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:28 am

CHRISSIE

Rych removes my clothing in record time, shrugging out of his pants to reveal his magnificent cocks which look bigger than ever.

I'm already soaking, his whispered comment, his thoughtbond filled with desire—it caused me to absolutely destroy my knickers in a single second.

The nest he has made for us is astounding, even more beautiful than the one back at the canyon. Luxurious fabrics, so many pretty sparkling items hung around on the walls, from the ceiling, spread over every surface. I'm pretty certain some of them are items of cutlery, but it doesn't matter. It's what Rych believed was nice, what he wanted in our nest to please me. And all of it does, very much.

My pleasure is even better communicated through the thoughtbond, his own amplified back to me once again in a loop which is never-ending and so beautiful I want to cry.

Not that he's going to let me do anything other than hang on. I'm picked up and gently deposited on the bed as the items he's hung up (is that a ladle?) spin and catch the light. Rych's great wings spread over us as he gazes down at my naked body.

"So beautiful," he murmurs. "My eregri ." He parts my thighs, dropping between them to fondle my folds, sliding a digit inside me with a groan. "Tight and wet. Are you going to take both my cocks, little one? Because I'm going to put a youngling in your womb tonight," he growls.

The pad of his thumb swirls over my clit, and my back arches involuntarily into his touch. A huge hand caresses one of my breasts, the tips of his claws tripping over my peaked nipple.

Rych's tongue swipes over my pussy, sending me into orbit. He doesn't let up with his finger, and it pumps inside me as he laps my clit, sucking gently until I can't hold back anymore. I'm flailing, grasping at anything as my orgasm hits and I take handfuls of feathers as I shout his name, my hips bucking, shoving myself into his mouth, his perfect touch, my channel clamping down on his finger, pulling at it as if it can never let go.

"Oh, my sweet mate." Rych wipes a finger on each side of his mouth and sucks it deeply. "You taste like you need to be bred by a Gryn."

"I need you," I respond. "I want you to fill me." I gasp out the words, not quite comprehending what they mean for a second or two, until Rych's desires slam me back onto the bed.

"I want you to breed me, Rych. I want to have your young," I breathe.

His wings flare, his eyes darker than ever as he gazes down at me, palming his cocks which run with pre-cum, dripping between my legs.

"On your hands and knees, little mate," he rasps. "I'm going to take you like my ancestors did."

His eyes burn into me as I slowly turn over, a groan as my bottom is exposed to him. I push myself up into a crouch as I feel his hot body behind mine.

"This is how bad little females get all ripe and round with a youngling," he murmurs in my ear as he swirls a sodden finger around my entrance before replacing it with his

broad cockheads. “They mate with a male and he fills her up. Are you a bad little female who needs filling, ?”

“Yes!” I moan, shoving myself back at him, desperate to feel him inside me once again, but he pulls away with a deep, wicked chuckle.

“I’m not sure you are bad enough, female,” he rumbles. “Bad females don’t care if they get one cock or two from a male. They mate and don’t care they’ll end up with a big belly in a few nova-months. A big belly which will tell everyone how bad they’ve been.”

“I’m bad,” I groan. “I don’t care if I end up pregnant.”

With a swift flick, the cocks breach my channel, and grasping my hips, Rych drives himself deep inside me, the nodes on his cocks hitting my g-spot over and over, bringing me to the brink.

“So delicious, little mate. I’m going to take you like this when you’re filled with young, your breasts heavy with milk and your little body ready to birth.”

My pussy contracts, clamping down on him as he roars out my name, thrusting, withdrawing, thrusting again into me, his huge hands holding me in place as he plunders my body, as yet another orgasm crashes through like a wave.

I’m riding him as much as he is riding me, his mind stuffed with the thoughts of how he will delight in my changing form, how he will love our young with the force of a thousand suns, how he will ensure I’m always pregnant, always happy, and always his.

So, when it hits again, my climax is not a surprise, it is an absolute delight, my vision dimming, my pleasure plucked from him, from what he wants because it’s what I

want too. Rych explodes within me, his hot cum filling my channel, and with a pinch, his second cock swells, locking us tight together.

To ensure my seed takes root in your fertile womb.

I pulse over him, my body wracked with aftershocks as Rych pulls me to him and collapses on his side, clutching me tightly.

“I never want to let you go, little spark. Of all the things I thought I wanted in the galaxy, it turned out fate had different plans for me,” he murmurs in my ear.

“You’re not sorry you didn’t recover your memory?” I ask as I get my breath back.

“No, I want to make new ones, with you,” he responds. “Ones involving our nest and our young. Ones without violence and bloodshed.” He pauses, pushing his face into my hair. “Whatever I am, maybe I’ll find out in time. For now, I’m more than content with belonging to you.”

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:28 am

CHRISSIE

I've gained a huge Gryn mate and the ability to control tech, which is not exactly what I thought would happen to me as I lay sweating in a dirty bed on the ship which took me from Earth.

Rych has given me back my life, completely and utterly. And in a twist, I'm now in control of the one thing I thought I'd never quite understand here in another galaxy. Their technology. It sings to me, and music is the one thing I do understand.

As for the thoughtbond, that is going to take some getting used to. Who knew what went on in a big gladiator's head? Not me, until now!

Rych is currently thinking about food...and mating...in that order and occasionally more about mating than food. He also thinks he's too comfortable to get up.

Eventually food wins out because he thinks I might be hungry, and he leans into me with a kiss on my cheek.

"Are you listening to my thoughts, little mate?" he rasps in his only just woken up voice.

"How can I not? You think loudly." I laugh, snuggling back into him.

"And you do too," he says as my stomach releases a growl of hunger.

He vaults out of bed, walking out of our nest and giving me the best view of his

naked bottom. He's gone for less than half a minute before he rushes back into the room, swearing.

"What is it?" I sit up, everything on edge.

"We've got Gryn," he spits. "Currently eating their way through the banquet I ordered." He runs his hand through his hair and pulls on his pants.

"Is it Maxym?"

"No, it's Klynn and another of my former colleagues, Blayn. He's brought his mate."

"Another human?" I scramble out of the bed and grab my clothes.

I'm going to look like a fright, but another human after all this time on my own—I don't really care if I look like I've spent all night mating...mostly because I have. I drag on my clothes and follow Rych out of the nest and into the rest of the suite, which has floor to ceiling windows looking out over Tatatunga.

Klynn stands with his back to us, sword in hand in a completely unnecessary threatening pose. Seated next to the low table groaning with food is another Gryn, huge, dark, and tattooed. His entire attention is devoted to the food, initially anyway. As Rych and I enter, he growls and curls a wing around the petite dark-haired lady next to him.

She sees me, gets to her feet, and rushes over, flinging her arms around me.

"I heard there were other humans on Trefa, but I didn't want to believe it," she says, releasing me. "I'm Izzy. This is Blayn, my mate."

," I respond. "Sorry, I didn't expect to meet another human either. It's a

bit...overwhelming.”

The new Gryn has gone back to eating, having decided I’m not a threat. Rych plonks himself down beside him, snarls, and slams a wing into Blayn’s side. It has zero effect on the food consumption. Rych shrugs, his thoughtbond spinning with fond insults about his fellow Gryn, and he grabs a handful of meat for himself.

“Do you have it?” Izzy says. Her voice holds a hint of a quiet North London accent. “The thoughtbond?”

She’s following my gaze to Rych.

“Yes.” I respond. “I also have a virus which allows me to control tech,” I admit. “It’s been an interesting few nova-days.”

“Oh?” Izzy studies me. “And here’s me thinking the thoughtbond is confusing enough.”

“You love hearing my thoughts,” Blayn rasps.

“Some of them. Others I do not need to know,” Izzy retorts fondly, giving me a wry smile.

Blayn goes back to eating. I laugh, unable to help myself but enjoying this somewhat strange but at the same time familial situation. An actual human for company and three huge Gryn, two of which are armed.

“How’s Maxym?” Rych rasps at Klynn.

“He’ll live,” Klynn responds, not turning around. “Not regained his senses yet, but the medics are confident he will be back in the games within the nova-week.”

Pain spikes through the thoughtbond. Rych hates the fact he can't get Maxym and Klynn released from the dome. I do my best to soothe him with the thought of the resistance and the work they are doing.

"Come and have some breakfast," I say to Izzy, making my way back to the seating. "And you too, Klynn."

The dangerous one turns with a half-growl as I say his name, seemingly surprised to be included. He drops to his knees next to the table and looks at the food as if it might be poisoned before selecting a strip of rare meat, carefully tasting it with the tip of his tongue, then gobbling it down.

Rych releases a snarl which could freeze water until I sit next to him and put my hand into the feathers at the base of his wings. The noise cuts off instantly.

Izzy giggles.

"Yours does that too?" I ask.

She nods, biting into a sweet pastry.

"You're lucky to catch us. We were about to leave Trefa, to go looking for Blayn's family," she says. "Then we got word the procurator was releasing Blayn's winnings." Izzy speaks as she eats, her hand hovering in front of her mouth. "Something I believe we have Rych and you to thank for." She smiles and nudges Blayn.

He briefly stops eating, narrows his eyes at me, and then starts again. I have a deep suspicion that is the best I'm going to get.

"All I wanted to do is make a nest for my mate," Rych grumbles, looking at our

guests. “Not feed a bunch of vrexers who turned up uninvited.”

I slide my hand deeper, and I’m rewarded by a feeling of complete bliss flooding the thoughtbond.

“I presume I’m not intruding?” All three Gryn are on their feet. Blayn and Klynn have drawn swords, Rych has his wings raised and has unsheathed a formidable set of claws.

Fenek isn’t bothered in the slightest. He pushes through them all and sits at the end of the table, selecting a piece of blue fruit which he pops in his mouth.

“The Pompas.” He looks around at our opulent suite. “Your mate has good taste, .”

The growling hasn’t stopped. I shove my disapproval down the thoughtbond at Rych.

“Fenek? How did you know where we were?”

He looks around at Rych. “I have my ways, although I know you are not supposed to have survived the blast at the Drahon base.” Risking a limb, he puts a hand on my arm. “As it should be. What you have can’t ever fall into the wrong hands.”

I gape for a second before I remember myself.

“Izzy, this is my boss, Fenek. Fenek, this is Izzy, another human, like me. She is also mated to a Gryn.”

“The Gryn are a very lucky species,” Fenek says with a smile. “It is a joy to meet you, Izzy, and your mate. But my visit here isn’t just for pleasure.” Fenek takes some more fruit and smacks his lips. “I came to say the resistance is pleased with the information they obtained in the dome. It’s likely they now have some influence with

the procurator and potentially the council.”

“What about you? Your ambitions for the council?” I ask.

“I still have hope, even if I don’t have my songstress to help me,” Fenek says fondly.
“And you have your Gryn to protect you.”

“Did you plan all of this, Fenek?” I ask. My boss has always been a wily one.

His eyes glitter, his scales flushing a slightly darker color. “Not all of it.”

Rych jumps onto the seating next to me and glares at Fenek. “Fate had plans for both of us, my eregri , and I believe in fate,” he says, taking my hand and kissing me gently. “I am at your service for as long as you want me.”

“I’m always going to want you, Rych. Always. I love you,” I respond as I’m consumed with another long kiss.

“Then it’s time to start living, together,” he murmurs as he releases me for a brief moment. “It’s time for the rest of our lives.”

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:28 am

CHRISSIE

I run my hand over my rounded stomach as I settle back into the co-pilot's chair. Gryn pregnancies progress quickly, and I feel like I have a bowling ball inside of me.

"Is my mate hungry?" Rych calls out from somewhere in the rear of our sleek spaceship.

"Are the stars shining?" I sing back at him.

The pilot and co-pilot's chairs are largely redundant in this ship, given I can control the ship from anywhere, but they give the best view, so we use them often.

"How long until we get to Haalux?" Rych asks, handing me a platter groaning with all my favorite food.

"About half a nova-hour, same length of time when you last asked me." I take the platter. "I'm never going to be able to eat all of this," I complain.

"You will," Rych growls.

In a fluid movement, and possibly to prove yet again he will fit, he slides into the seat, displacing me to his lap and all without disturbing the plate of food in my hand.

"Oh, will I?"

He rubs my belly and deep within his chest is a groan of pleasure. "You will or you

will be punished.”

Punishment, as the thoughtbond tells me, is very much something we’ll both enjoy.

“You might have to save it for later. The Haalux are very strict.” I take a bite out of a large piece of what looks like melon but tastes like ginger.

“I like strict.” Rych chuckles. “I think I’ll like the Haalux.”

“I mean they play by the rules. You don’t want to upset them.”

“Why? Because I don’t like rules?”

“Yes!” I laugh. “Since we left Trefa, you’ve been nothing but trouble.”

“I have not. I have protected my mate and my young,” Rych says with fake affront.

“Then you need to be well behaved on Haalux, especially if you think they might have information about other Gryn.”

Rych settles under me, watching me like a hawk as I eat.

“We can go find somewhere, settle down. You can have our young and we can make more, if you want,” he says, carefully shielding his thoughts.

“We started this search because it was what you wanted. With Earth being off limits, I want you to find your species.” I put the empty platter to one side and cover his hand with mine. “It’s important to you and it’s important to me.”

The thoughtbond fills with uncertainty for a second.

“I know I need to find them, but that’s it. It’s hardly a reason to drag my pregnant mate all around the galaxy.”

“Perhaps this mate wants to see the galaxy, given she didn’t think she’d ever leave Trefa?” I suggest with a kiss to his cheek.

A kiss which is followed by another on my lips from my gorgeous dominating male.

It’s not like the virus has gone anywhere, and potentially I’m as much at risk from it now as I ever was, given the abilities it has given me, but providing we live quietly, there is no danger.

“I have heard the Haalux have many hot springs on their planet inside caves which look like nests,” Rych says dreamily.

The thoughtbond fills with a myriad of nests, all the ones he’s thinking of building.

“More nests?” I query.

“I can never build a nest to match your beauty, eregri ,” Rych says. “But I’m not going to stop trying until I get one perfect and where I can worship you every nova-day.”

He’s loved my pregnant body from the moment we found out during our preparations to leave Trefa. The dome medic confirmed the baby was unaffected by the virus, which was a huge weight lifted and then the next day we left.

I can’t say I miss it. I’m absolutely sure Rych doesn’t, even if he remains concerned about the Gryn left in the dome, thoughts which echo down the bond.

“Klynn can look after himself and Maxym is better,” I respond, feeling his thoughts.

“Better but not how he used to be. He joins Klynn in the undercroft now, and he has little care for himself in the arena,” Rych says darkly. “He was always a brooding vrexer, but now he’s even worse.”

“The resistance and Fenek will get them released soon.” I rub my hand on his wing soothingly.

“Attention, unidentified craft, transmit your identity!” a voice barks through the comm.

“I guess we’re near enough to Haalux.” I laugh as Rych presses kisses down my neck, his hands descending lower and lower until my knickers are toast.

I tell the ship to transmit the identity confirming we are not a threat to the Empire and we have an audience with one of their ambassadors.

Haalux space control responds with the coordinates for our landing, and the ship swings around the large planet.

“Looks like we’ll have a little more time,” Rych says, mouth on my collar bone and his finger buried deep within me, thumb caressing my clit. “And I suggest we spend it wisely.”

The thoughtbond tells me exactly how he intends to make best use of our time. And I couldn’t imagine spending it any other way either.

Book 4: Chained: A Sci-Fi Alien Romance is Maxym and Cleo’s story, read on for a preview!

Want a sweet spicy bonus scene with Rych and ? Then click [here](#) to sign up for my newsletter.

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CLEO

My name is bellowed down the corridor, and I give the Cirmos with the steaming tray in her paw a long-suffering look.

“What have you done this time?” Tibi asks calmly, the tip of her tail twitching as she stirs the large pot of stew on the heating rack.

“Not be where he wants me to be.” I sigh. “I’m never where he wants me to be because I can’t read minds.” I tap the side of my head and Tibi hisses out a laugh.

The little striped Cirmos, an alien who bears a remarkable resemblance to a tabby cat with her tan and black fur, large ears, and green eyes, is an incredible chef, one my employer doesn’t deserve.

“Do you want to taste?” she asks, offering me the stirrer.

Bile rises in my stomach. I feel like I’m going to puke at the mere suggestion of food, given it’s so early. I clamp my teeth together and shake my head.

“Can’t do spice this early in the morning.” I manage a watery smile.

Tibi narrows her eyes, the slit pupils becoming round as she does.

“You eat hardly anything. You’re like a teeny tiny Jiaka. You’ll fade away to nothing,” she admonishes me.

I laugh at the reference to the four-armed creatures which seem to inhabit every uninhabitable area of Trefa, the planet I was dumped on.

“Like a Jiaka? Really?” I move away from the heating element and rearrange my clothing. “Humans don’t eat much.”

Tibi snorts her disapproval. “Everyone eats.”

Everyone who can keep their food down, I think to myself.

“Gak you, .” Retah shoves his huge horned head through the doorway. “Why are you never where you’re supposed to be?”

“I am where I am,” I say, doing my best to not appear as bilious as I feel.

“Come on, we’re due in the dome this morning. I want this contract. Supplying weapons to the dome is a...”

“...surefire way to make credits.” Both Tibi and I finish his sentence in unison.

Retah huffs at us. The horned Remek is grizzled, his dark hair and beard peppered with grey, battle scarred, his purple skin covered in tattoos.

He does his best to hide his morose side when he can. Like too many others who end up on Trefa, in Tatatunga, he has a good reason to want to hide himself in this city of a thousand sob stories. His planet was taken by another group of aliens and most of his species exterminated.

Tibi has told me he was once a warrior who fought hard in the wars before and after he lost his planet. But now he deals arms to anyone who wants them instead.

I guess I'm not the only one who has problems. Although mine are very, very different to his.

"Look, if you want me to continue to pay your wages, you'll take this seriously," he says, hands held out flat towards us.

"We always take you seriously," Tibi says. "Would you like some sweet kifili before you go?" She nods to a tray of bright pink, iced pastries.

"Oooh, yes!" Retah says, far more excited about the sweet treats than a huge horned creature should be. Swiping a couple up with his claws, he immediately covers his face and hands with the pink icing as he munches happily.

Yes, I work for one of Tatatunga's foremost arms dealers. The one currently making himself stickier than duct tape. I absolutely know my situation could be worse. Given I was wandering the streets of Tatatunga in a daze after my abductors suddenly released me when Retah took me in, and as bosses go, I absolutely could have had worse.

Instead I have the contradiction which is Retah. A hard-nosed dealer and one who loves his sweet treats. A boss who expects perfection and who pays me very well for doing things I absolutely know he could do himself.

Retah licks at his fingers with considerable satisfaction, although it makes little difference to the amount of icing covering him. He could probably use a hose down.

"I'll finish off getting the samples ready," I tell him, feeling the nausea rising once again. I scuttle out of the kitchen before either of them notice.

"Make sure you put in the blades and swords," Retah calls after me. "That's what the gladiators prefer, and we got some good ones from our last trade with Sartak."

I shudder at the thought of the place. Sartak is like hell's boiler. Factory after factory churning out weaponry. Admittedly the small forge where the swords and daggers were made was marginally more pleasant. The ancient old Lepke, his downy wings shriveled almost to nothing and with only half an antenna left, who sold us the blades had a calmness about him which soothed my soul.

And a knowing look in his eye which made me terrified he might say something out loud to Retah.

My boss is kind in his own way, but I don't dare tell him the complete truth. I don't want to lose this job, and until I can make myself indispensable, he can't know what I'm hiding.

Maybe then he'll be prepared to accept what he's taken on.

I make my way as quickly as I can to the sanitary facility in the back part of his dwelling nearest the armory and plonk myself down, leaning my forehead on the cool wall next to me, attempting to get a grip on the nausea which rises and rises.

My hand involuntarily goes to my stomach. Not that there's much to show, but it doesn't have to. I was abducted from Earth shortly after I watched two blue lines appear on a pregnancy test. Going out for a walk at six o' clock on a windy winter's night over Dartmoor from my rented cottage to "clear my head" was not the best idea, but then neither was the terrible drunken one-night stand which put me in this situation.

I'm pregnant, and the father is a million light years away.

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:28 am

MAXYM

The cold water hits me full in the chest. I open my wings.

“You’re going to have to try harder than that,” I snarl at the three clerks who want me to drop my weapons.

Or at least I may have spoken to them. It’s difficult to tell these days. I eat up all the violence I can get, and the dome provides all the sustenance I need.

The water increases, and I don’t relinquish my weapons. I did well today. I vanquished everything in the dome. I deserve praise, not punishment.

“Stand down,” the captain, a Xnosson bull who claims to have been a gladiator once, stands to one side, watching the efforts of the clerks.

The water is shut off.

“Do you want me to use the net again?” he asks gruffly. “Because I will if you don’t drop your weapons.”

My head pounds. I want to lie down somewhere cool and quiet, but the ever-present violence bubbles up again from within.

On the other side of the ante chamber, Klynn roars out his anger as he glares over at me.

I know where he's going. It's where I want to be too. I open my wings, staring the captain straight in the eye.

“Don't do this, ,” he growls. “Don't make me follow you. I've better things to do than chase you down.”

I beat down once, the draft knocking two of the clerks off their feet.

“Do you really want to live off pikrats for the next three nova-days?” the captain says, exasperated.

What I consume is not uppermost in my mind as I fling the sword and dagger at him and get airborne. It takes less than a nova-second to be out of the ante-chamber and, with Klynn hot on my feathers, it takes no time at all to descend into the undercroft, swooping through the struts which hold up the dome and going deeper into the foundations until all is silent.

Silence helps the feral rage I can't control anymore. The darkness, the chill, the damp—it tests my body and makes me forget what I am.

If I even know.

Somewhere above me, there is a snarl, quickly cut off. Klynn follows me to make the dome guards work for their credits, he has no desire to be in the undercroft or consume pikrats. He only exists to make life difficult for others.

I don't know if I exist at all.

My life was bad enough when I was accused of murder and sent to the dome. Now with the volcano of rage I feel after the head injury which saw me in the medi-bay for more time than I care to remember, it's even worse. The rage I have is uncontrollable.

It left me feral, needing the violence of the dome to keep me from ripping every living thing I encounter limb from limb.

I slump in the dark. It's filled with the dripping of water and the occasional scurry of a wary pikrat. They'll become curious soon, too curious, and I'll have a disgusting meal.

It's all the turmoil deserves. It's all I deserve.

And the worst thing is I'm a better fighter for it. I was good in the dome before, but now I'm unbeatable. My odds are excellent. I'm being paid thousands of credits for my deaths. The procurator is pleased. My future is secured.

Until the day I die.

In the undercroft, in the dark, in the cold, I could already be dead. These are my little deaths. This is where I feel what it's like to be living once again as my breathing slows and rationality returns.

I'm covered in the dirt from the dome. My feathers itch, and I would like a bath and a hot meal which isn't raw. I'd like to be how I was before my injuries, even if it was a life sentence.

With a groan of pain, I slide to the floor. The rage is replaced by resignation. I can't stay here, not while my head hurts and blood flows. I close my eyes. If I rest for a while, I can return. I'll be punished but not much, not while I'm making credits for the procurator and Tatatunga's council. They don't care about anything else.

When I wake, water is dripping onto my face and pikrats skitter away from my feathers. I heave myself to my feet, the heel of my hand shoved into the scar on my forehead as I stagger back through the struts and stone columns until I reach the entrance.

Not surprisingly, there are a couple of Zarvu guards. One of them is called—I wrack my limited brain—Keef.

“Look what the Cirmos dragged back,” he barks with a laugh.

“And he’s supposed to be the crowd favorite.” The other guard who is not called Keef looks me up and down. “He’s half dead.”

“I wish,” I grumble.

“You’re coming with us, gladiator. The captain needs to see you,” Not-Keef says.

“Vrex off,” I growl. “I’m hungry.”

“I prefer Klynn,” Not-Keef grumbles as he reaches for his pulsar weapon. “He doesn’t even pretend to be nice when we capture him.”

I slam my wing into his neck, and he drops the pulsar as he chokes, his hands around the offended part of his anatomy. The other guard fumbles for his weapon but he’s too late. I already have the fallen pulsar in my hand.

“Come on, ,” the so far uninjured Keef says, wheedling, his palms flat. “I’ve never hurt you, have I? I’ve always been good to you, haven’t I?”

It’s not untrue.

I power up the pulsar.

“You’re a murderer, like they say,” his friend chokes, hand still clutching at his throat.

I fire at him, and he yells as the bolt impacts the wall immediately behind him.

“You want to find out?” I snarl. “I’m happy to provide proof, one way or another.”