



Chained (Gladiators of the Gryn #4)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Feral and lethal, this alien gladiator wants me...and my baby.

The two blue lines weren't the last things I saw on Earth, but they may as well have been. Knocked up and abducted, I know how lucky I am to have landed a job with a horned alien arms-dealer where my accountancy skills come in surprisingly useful.

However, I can't imagine my new employer is going to want to keep me on with a baby in tow.

And when the massive, ridiculously handsome, winged gladiator growls *MINE* I know I'm done for.

Maxym worked out my secret in a single glance and the last thing I want is for him to go blabbing it everywhere, but my hope to avoid the dome for the foreseeable future is dashed when we win the contract to supply weapons for the games.

And I'm going to be the one doling them out.

The more time I spend with Maxym, the more I see through his feral nature and desire for violence. The more I see a damaged creature who desperately wants to heal, and wants me, and my baby, even more.

I shouldn't give in to my desire to be loved by someone, no questions asked, but as my heart warms to him, I begin to see a future for us.

And then the invasion of Trefa begins and it's all wiped away in a single moment. I'm not sure if I'll ever see Maxym again and my own chances of survival are tiny.

That is, until someone growls my name in my ear and I have to hope it's my gladiator come to save me or else all is lost.

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CLEO

My name is bellowed down the corridor, and I give the Cirmos with the large ladle in her paw a long-suffering look.

“What have you done this time?” Tibi asks calmly, the tip of her tail twitching as she goes back to stirring 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, providing the best dishes, on demand, all day every day.

“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. 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 after being abducted from Earth.

“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. His exposed arms battle scarred.

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.

Tibi has told me he was once a warrior who fought hard in the wars before and after he lost his planet, which was taken by another group of aliens and most of his species exterminated. 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 have absolutely lucked out.

I have the wonderful contradiction which is Retah. A hard-nosed arms dealer, who loves his sweet treats. A boss who expects perfection and who pays me very well for doing things I 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.

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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.

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.”

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CLEO

The vast metal doors swing inwards in a way reminiscent of a certain dinosaur film as Retah's ground transport approaches the dome. We're swiftly ushered through various layers of security to the main armory.

"Can you unload and set up?" Retah asks, craning his neck to look around. "I need to speak with the gladiator captain. He's an old friend, and I'm hoping he'll put in a good word for me."

"You know I can," I respond.

This contract is all Retah's been talking about for nova-weeks. He sees it as a way of becoming more legitimate, although given the dome is simply a palace of death, I have my own opinions on how 'legitimate' any contract with this place would be.

But it's what Retah wants, and he's been pretty decent to me, so I want to do a good job for him. And if he gets it, maybe I can broach the subject of my pregnancy with him.

Then at least I might be a thirty-four-year-old with a plan, rather than not knowing what the hell I'm going to do.

I pull my long light brown hair back into a ponytail and get to work. The feeling of nausea is still with me, but if I concentrate enough, I can pretend it's not there and that I'm not going to throw up...again.

I sort of wish I'd paid more attention to my friends when they were going through pregnancy, in order to know if what's happening to me is normal. But as soon as they got pregnant, and I wasn't, it didn't take them long to drop me for someone in a similar position. And as for when they'd had their baby, let's just say I didn't interest them in the slightest.

It's amazing how the divide between those with children and those who are childless manifests itself time and again, as if there's some unwritten code and never the twain shall meet.

But I'm going to be joining the new mums' club soon. How soon that will be, I'm not entirely sure as time is counted differently on Trefa. I'm hardly showing, I think. Since my abduction I've struggled with food, and as a result, I've lost weight rather than gaining it, which doesn't make it easy to date anything.

However, one thing I do know is I hadn't had a period for two months which prompted me to take the pregnancy test on Earth, and I've been here on Trefa for what has to be another two months at least. Which means very soon, I'm not going to be able to hide any longer.

I consider what I might say as I set out Retah's selection of pulsar pistols, the latest in weapons tech, and then I get out the swords and daggers.

My old job as an accounting assistant didn't put me in contact with much more than figures and spreadsheets. I certainly didn't ever pick up a sword. However, Retah's enthusiasm has somehow rubbed off on me. Maybe he reminds me a little of my dad, who loved hunting, even when I didn't. The big horned alien has shown me how to inspect a sword for quality, how to swing one, and how to move with one. Turns out maybe I inherited some sympathy for weaponry.

I like performing the slow dance of death Retah taught me because it clears my mind.

As I pull the swords out of their individual sheaths, I can't help but marvel at their beauty. Some have a Damascus style ripple, the metal folded over and over on itself until it forms waves and patterns like a fingerprint. Some are so light I can balance them flat on one finger.

Each one is a masterpiece.

With one of the swords in one hand and a dagger in the other, I move across the deserted armory. It's a little weird to be doing my dance now, but as I'd rather not throw up when Retah comes back with the procurator, settling the mind will settle the stomach.

With every swing of the blade, I'm centering myself, thinking only of the movements my boss taught me, thinking about the way to tilt the sword, to move across the floor without sound, to be able to catch my enemies unaware.

I'm never going to be abducted again, not without a fight. Not after what I've been taught. I will be keeping my baby and myself safe, now and in the future.

I'm in the zen when I hear the growl from behind me.

It reverberates around the large, vaulted room, causing weapons to rattle in their positions.

Maybe there was a reason the place was deserted. The dome is filled with Trefa's most deadly creatures, after all, and plenty not from Trefa who attend simply to slaughter in the games.

I pirouette on the spot, both blades raised.

He stands in the doorway. Massive. Winged. Blood and dirt streak his bare chest,

where a light glows dully on some leather straps. As I take him in, he uncurls the biggest set of claws I've ever seen from each hand. They have to be four inches long, sharp and as dark as night. I rake my eyes up his impressive muscled abdomen to his face. It's handsome, rugged even with his brow pulled down, a livid scar searing across his forehead, giving him the ultimate in bad boy vibes. Light glitters in his dark eyes in a way which entirely convinces me I am prey.

Only this prey has a trick or two up her sleeve. I spin the dagger in one hand and beckon him with it.

This time he doesn't growl. He groans.

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MAXYM

A female with weapons. A female who smells like she's been sent from the stars to taunt my senses. Her long hair, the color of the leaves late in the year, is pulled away from her face into a long bunch that swings as she dances with the sword and dagger in a movement so ancient all gladiators know it by heart.

This female is mine.

But this female is also armed, and she wants to fight. My cocks are painfully tight in my pants.

And fighting has never made me hard before.

Fighting has only ever made the pain lesser. I want to mate her. I want to fight and mate.

I can't fight and mate? They are incompatible. But the two urges war within me. This little female arouses me so much I'm not sure I can walk.

All I know how to do is fight. All I wanted to do was fight.

Now my cocks want me to mate with an intensity I don't understand. The female has weapons...and I want to plunder her until neither of us can move.

It doesn't make sense. It shouldn't make sense. I want it to make sense because I want her.

She gestures for me to engage. Perhaps she doesn't know much about the Gryn, but I'm on her in less than a nova second, pinning her against the wall behind us, her hands still clutching her weapons.

Very sensible. If I let her go, she will need to defend herself. This female has far more fight than her tiny size would give her credit.

“Eregri ,” I rasp.

I'm giving too much of myself away. I should not be telling her anything. She could be something sent by the procurator to harm me or worse, tame me.

He will get no satisfaction if that is the case.

I will not be tamed, even by this sweet creature.

Her scent increases as I tighten my grip. I suck it down like a Gryn starved. The more I can scent her, the more I want to both mate and fight. Or is it mate rather than fight?

Deep within the notes of her, along with the arousal, there is something else, something far more important, something which fills me with a desire so primal it's all I can do not to mate her on the spot and claim her for my own.

“You are with young.” I shove my nose into her skin and inhale deeply. “You are fertile and filled.”

“What? No! Get off me!” She struggles ineffectually. “Let me go.”

“You and your young are mine,” I respond.

“No, we are not.” She pulls one hand free, dropping the dagger in the process.

I make the mistake of noticing, and as soon as my attention is taken from her, she spins under my arm, wrenching her sword free and shoving the tip of it into my neck.

Now I'm the one pinned against the wall, by this tiny little scrap of a female.

"Don't move," she snarls. "And don't say anything about the baby."

Her free hand goes subconsciously to her stomach. The heavy clothing she wears obscures her belly, but her scent did not lie.

She is filled with young, and she is mine.

"Whoever the father is, you'll need to tell him you've had a better offer," I rasp, not moving a muscle.

Her eyes widen in shock for a second before her brow draws down and the sharp tip of the sword digs farther into my flesh.

"You arrogant twat. What makes you think..."

Her words are cut off as a Remek enters the armory, followed by the procurator and a cohort of Zarvu.

I take my advantage, knocking her sword to one side and taking hold of her. We spin to the floor as the weapon clatters away, and I cushion her body with mine but make sure I end up crouching over her.

"Fate cannot be denied, little scrap," I growl. "You belong to me." I drop my lips to hers and extract a kiss which she melts into for half a nova-second before twisting her head to one side, away from me.

“!” The procurator shrieks out my name before gibbering, “Someone deal with this galking gladiator!”

A dart thunks into my flesh.

“Narcotics?” I glare up at him out of one eye, the other no longer wanting to work. “Couldn’t you be more inventive?”

“Think yourself lucky you get to live this time, ,” the procurator responds.

I allow my last few seconds of consciousness to be on the female beneath me. She stares up like a simple look could kill me. It can’t. I’m not sure anything can anymore.

“I will come for you, do not doubt it,” I slur as the drug takes hold and darkness takes me away.

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CLEO

“Gak it, , are you okay?” Retah shoves Maxym’s slumbering form to one side and helps me up.

“I think your little assistant was holding her own with my prize gladiator.” The procurator chuckles, gesturing for his guards to deal with the huge creature.

Two of them take hold of his legs and pull. He slides away with a scraping sound, his arms and wings stretched above him. It is a horrible sight.

“He wasn’t going to hurt me,” I say rapidly. “Don’t punish him. He was inspecting the weapons, that’s all.” I touch my finger to my lips, the feeling of his kiss, taken rather than given, still lingering there.

Retah makes a choking sound and the procurator stares at me.

“He was inspecting the weapons ?” he repeats incredulously.

I nod, hating the fact the nausea has chosen this moment to reassert itself, even if the gorgeous cinnamon scent of the gladiator is still strong in my nostrils. But I don’t want to get him into trouble, given the procurator has always made my skin crawl, even on vids I’ve seen of the dome.

“He was, and one...fell.” I pick up the dagger from the floor. “That’s all that happened.”

The procurator huffs. “Maxym is going to be punished for disobeying orders in any event.” His gaze doesn’t leave me. “But not for this incident, if you say there was nothing to it.”

Retah sidles up to me, a beseeching look in his eyes. “I’m sure my assistant doesn’t want to cause trouble for anyone, least of all your prize gladiator,” he says smoothly.

“Maxym belongs to the dome,” the procurator says proudly. “You’ll have seen his odds, no doubt. He’s fighting the best he has in a long time.”

“And can you imagine how well he will fight with his weapons of choice?” Retah says with a pointed nod at the selection of pulsars, daggers, and swords. “Ones he picked on first sight and was so anxious to get hold of...”

My boss doesn’t finish his sentence. Emotions war within me at the way this is reflecting on Maxym, but then he did also disarm me and kiss me along with nearly revealing my pregnancy to all and sundry.

“He was very impressed with the dagger.” I force the words out. “And rightly too. They are of the finest quality Sartak steel.”

“I’m sure we can come to some...arrangement,” Retah says, running his hand over the blades I’ve laid out. “To make sure your gladiators get only the very best.”

The procurator smiles, all needle sharp teeth. “I see you are as good as your reputation suggests, Remek.” He glances at me. “How about you send your assistant away, and we can talk terms?”

I slowly release the breath I’ve been holding as Retah throws his arm around the procurator.

“That,” he says, “sounds perfect.” He spins them both around and they leave the armory, but not before Retah throws me a thankful glance.

Yes, misogyny is alive and kicking in every part of the universe. I heave out a sigh to myself, rub my sore elbows from where they hit the floor, although even if no one else noticed, I’m well aware Maxym did do his best to ensure I landed on him before he rolled me under him.

Regardless, he’s still a complete twat, even if he tried to make sure I didn’t get hurt.

“How did it go?” Tibi asks as I enter the food prep area and pour myself a cup of a hot drink the Tatatungans call Joh, and which tastes a little like chai.

It’s virtually the only thing which can settle my stomach, the subtle cinnamon flavor helping immensely. Tibi shoves a tray of fresh baked bread rolls at me.

“I nearly got eaten by a gladiator, but I think Retah got the contract,” I reply, tearing open one roll and shoving the soft fluffy inner into my mouth.

“A gladiator? One of the Habosu?” Tibi leans forward.

“No, this one had wings and was massive. And dirty, but not green,” I reply.

He was also handsome in a rough, tough way and made parts of me tingle which should not, but I’m not going to say any of this to Tibi.

“A Gryn?” She rushes around her cooking station, and before I can stop her, she’s running her hands over me. “Did he hurt you? Are you injured?”

I back out of her embrace. “No, he didn’t touch me.”

Not strictly true .

“You had a lucky escape. Gryn are the most dangerous creatures in Tatatunga, let alone on Trefa,” Tibi says with confidence as I return to my seat and finish up my roll.

“Yeah, it seemed that way, only...”

I want to tell her about the sadness in his eyes, about the marks all over his body, about how I felt like the only woman in the universe when he looked at me.

“What?” Tibi prompts me.

“Nothing. He was easily overpowered by the guards, that’s all. They shot him full of something.”

“Paraxio.” Tibi raises her lips to show her sharp teeth in disgust. “I’d heard that was how they made the gladiators comply.”

Tibi loves her gossip.

“They don’t have to make them fight though. They’re there because they want to be,” I respond.

She laughs, and it’s not a happy laugh. “Oh, my little human, the Gryn aren’t in the dome because they want to be. They’re in there to die.”

“What do you mean?”

“Most of their permanent gladiators have gone, but those left—they’re criminals, sent to the dome by the Galactic Council for their crimes.” Tibi starts up her heater again,

putting some vegetables in a shallow pan and shaking them as they start to sizzle. “They kill until they can’t kill anymore, and the dome exacts its final price. Then they’ve served their sentence,” she says, matter-of-fact. “Then they’re no one’s problem anymore.”

Despite my annoyance at Maxym, at the way he behaved, the way he decided I belonged to him, my heart beats overtime in my chest.

He has a death sentence and one way or the other, the dome will exact its price.

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MAXYM

I roll over onto my side with the obligatory groan. My head spins unpleasantly, and I retch, but my stomach is empty.

From the smell, I know I'm in the hole, the place all gladiators are sent when we disobey. There's little light and no home comforts.

"Drink some vrexing water," Klynn growls in my ear.

I fire out an arm but only get air.

"Too slow, old timer." He laughs.

"Vrexer," I growl.

I feel around for a pitcher, finding the thing and shuffling myself until I'm in a position where I get some of the liquid in my mouth. It tastes stale, but I feel better for it.

"What did you do to get both of us a dose?" Klynn snarls in the dark.

He hates narcotics more than he hates anything else. But I suspect if I was trapped in what passes for Klynn's mind with no escape, I'd hate them too.

"They got you?"

“No warning,” he grumbles. “Just shot me with the stuff.”

The image of my eregri swims into my head. It calms me a little, takes some of the pain away. I don’t want to kill Klynn as much either.

“I might have vrexed the procurator off by attacking one of his guests.” I lean my head back against the rough stone behind me.

Klynn mutters some curses at me. I hear his wings swishing as he paces his cage.

“He’ll get over it,” I say. “We won’t be in here long. There’s games soon.”

All I get is a deep growl, which is probably what I deserve. I close my eyes and think about the little creature I very nearly had. My cocks harden to the point of pain, including, in a surprise move, my second cock.

The vrexing thing hasn’t ever managed anything in my life before, but now it throbs more than the rest of me. Its desire to sheath itself in the ripe little female almost makes me want to take myself in hand.

Although the cold drip of water down my neck dampens my desire somewhat. Instead I concentrate on remembering her pretty face, the way her body felt next to me, the young rounding her belly.

Did she say if she had a male? I can’t remember, and I know it won’t make any difference. The little female belongs to me regardless, and that includes her young. If anything, her being with young makes me want her more.

I want all of her.

Which means I need to get out of the hole and somehow get a pass to search

Tatatunga.

I'm going to have to master the violence and rage which I thought I could not control if I want to have any hope of seeing her again.

Of sheathing myself in her.

Lights come on, and despite the wooziness which plagues me, I'm on my feet. Across from me, Klynn leans insolently against the bars of his cage, feathers pressing through. If I'm as dirty as he is, we both need several baths.

I need to get clean for my mate. When I find her.

The head clerk marches down the center of the cages, six Zarvu guards in tow.

"Gladiators," he announces in a high reedy voice. "Are you ready to comply?"

"I never comply, but I probably won't rip your head off and piss down your neck if you let me out of here and feed me," Klynn snarls at him.

The clerk is already within striking distance for my fellow gladiator, and he takes a step back, bringing him closer to me.

"What he said," I respond with a growl, making him jump.

The Habosu, skinnier than his species usually are, spins and glares at us both.

"Paraxio is expensive. You will pay for its use on you both. Basic rations for a week."

Klynn snorts but doesn't say anything. He simply exudes violence through every

pore. The clerk glares at him.

I lean my head against the bars.

“Let us out.” I fix him with a gaze I hope is relatively benign. “We have games to win.”

It’s the clerk’s turn to snarl ineffectually at us both. I guess he feels safe because he’s outside the bars. Only whoever designed these punishment cells did not have the Gryn in mind.

“Your release is based on your complicity. One wrong move will have you back here for a much longer stint,” he says, turning on his heel and gesturing to the guards.

I see Klynn swipe out at him, deliberately falling short but enough for the guards to pull out pulsars.

The head clerk marches away, unconcerned, leaving a set of very jumpy guards to deal with the pair of us.

“Move and we shoot. We all know you can fight even when injured,” the one closest to us snarls.

“I just want my rations and to bathe.” I groan. “You won’t get a fight from me.”

Klynn is silent, but I suspect he agrees, even if the vrexer pretends to hate everything.

We’re put into bonds and prodded back through the service corridors until we get to the our quarters where the captain is waiting for us.

“Gladiators.” He dips his horns slightly. “You are on your last warning.”

Klynn growls at him. I fold my arms over my chest.

“The procurator means it. You might make him credits, but there’s a limit to what he will tolerate without finding alternative income. Both of you are at the mercy of the dome.”

“A fact of which we are well aware, captain ,” I snarl.

“He believes he’s about to obtain another ziggurex.”

“Vrex,” Klynn mutters.

“And if he does, he will put you up against it in a death match,” the captain says.

“Which is the reason you are here. To pay your debt and to die well.”

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CLEO

I roll onto my back with a groan. Every single part of me aches after my bout with Maxym yesterday. I thought I was relatively fit, as far as I can be, but obviously not.

I drag myself out of bed, washing and dressing, making sure I'm as well covered as always before I make my way through Retah's dwelling to the food prep area where Tibi is already clattering around.

The spicy cinnamon smell of joh is the first thing which hits me, and for a second, I think Maxym has somehow followed me here until I get a grip on myself.

"Here." Tibi shoves a platter at me, filled with sweet pastries, and plonks a cup of the hot drink down next to it. "Get eating. I will be offended if you don't."

For once, I'm ravenous, but I've been caught out by my body before, so I don't dive in straight away, instead sipping my joh and nibbling on the flaky sweet treat to ensure my stomach doesn't immediately reject the tasty food.

Tibi smiles, her tail swaying appreciatively from side to side.

"Did Retah come back last night?" I ask.

"Rolling drunk." She rolls her green eyes. "He'll regret that shortly."

"Why?"

“I set an alarm.” She grins at her own joke.

“Don’t you ever worry he’ll fire you?” I ask. Tibi and Retah’s ongoing practical joke feud is rapidly becoming legendary.

“He’ll never fire me in the same way he’ll never fire you. He likes my food too much, and you’re too good at making order from his chaos.”

“You think? I’m sure he could get a bot to do it.”

“You can’t teach a bot new things or get it to laugh at your terrible jokes,” Tibi says, diving into the oven heater and pulling out a set of fresh rolls. “He likes you, . You remind him of...”

Before she can finish her sentence, the door bursts open, and Retah half falls in at us both, a silly grin on his face.

“We got it.” He laughs.

“Got what?”

“The contract.” He grabs my hand, pulling me up from the table and spinning me around in a dizzying dance. “We got the dome contract! They want all the weapons we have, especially the blades, and they want us to supply them for the rest of the games season! We did it, !”

I manage to pull away from his spinning, marveling how he isn’t throwing up, when potentially I could be.

“Despite my little show,” I mutter.

“Oh no, that was genius! Tangling with a Gryn is a surefire way to get the attention of the current procurator. And holding him at sword-point”—Retah giggles like a school kid—“perfection!”

“Then he nearly killed me!”

“Oh, , he would never have done that. I know Maxym. He’s not been quite right since he had the head injury, but he’d never have hurt you.”

“You know him?” I say, aghast.

“Well, sort of. One of the Sarkarnii I deal with know the Gryn.” Retah spreads his hands out in a conciliatory manner. “And they trust them, so I do.”

“I wouldn’t trust a Gryn,” Tibi says. “Too many feathers.”

I feel like I have whiplash.

“Anyway, I have assurances from the procurator that the Gryn will be kept under strict control while we work there.”

“While we work there? At the dome? Why?” I blurt out.

“If you think I’m trusting those galking Zarvu to handle our weapons, then you’re mistaken.” Retah pulls himself up to his full height of close to seven feet, and for a second or two, I can see how he was once a warrior. “We have to do it, or more specifically, you do.”

“You want me”—I point at myself—“to go to the dome to dole out weapons.”

“Only prior to the games,” Retah says. “You won’t be there all the time.”

“Me?” I stare at him.

“I can’t think of anyone else I trust,” Retah says. “You’re like a...daughter to me, . I want you to do it because you’re good at it.”

I shouldn’t let it happen, but a warmth blooms in my chest. I lost my parents too many years ago, but I still recall what it was like to make them say they were proud of me. I should not be allowing myself to get this close to Retah, to Tibi, or anything on this planet.

But what other choice have I got? If I do well, perhaps I can tell Retah about the baby. Perhaps he won’t want rid of me. Perhaps I might be able to make a life for myself, here on Trefa.

There’s only one problem.

Maxym.

And it’s a problem I’m going to have to solve, and fast.

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MAXYM

“You vrexed in training today,” Klynn growls at me as he shoves past.

I know I did. My temper getting the better of me, I took it out on him, and he, being used to having no boundaries, easily bettered me.

To Klynn, this is tantamount to giving up.

To me, with the captain looking on, I can wave goodbye to my pass. I won't be getting out of the dome anytime soon.

Such has been the cycle for the last nova-month in the run up to the seasonal games. The ones where species send challengers from across the galaxy.

The games where the prizes are the highest and I'm expected to be on my best form.

Only the blind rage which fills me has caused me to grind to a halt. All I want to do is hack and hack until there is nothing left. When I finally come to my senses, I'm usually at the mercy of Klynn's sword.

He loves it. I hate it.

I watch his wings swing as he swaggers away. The vrexer doesn't care for much other than himself, and on every occasion he gets, he'll remind anyone in the vicinity of how important he thinks he is.

My desire to find my mate hasn't abated. If anything, it's stronger. The more I don't have her in my arms or under me, the more my body wants her.

Except...how can I mate if I want to destroy the galaxy? When my mood changes like a snap? Could my inability to look for her be a sign? Fate pulled us together and now fate holds us apart?

"You were terrible today," the captain growls at me. "And the games are two nova-days away."

"I know," I snarl back. "Give me a proper opponent, not that vrexer, and I'll show you what I can do."

"I'm not worried about your ability to kill and maim, ." The captain snorts a hot breath through his be-ringed nose. "The procurator wants style. He wants a show."

"Vrex him. I'm here to do what I'm best at. If he wants a dance, he'll need to get dancers."

The captain sighs, his shoulders dropping as he looks me up and down. "We've got a new weapons supply coming in. Maybe that will encourage you to do better."

"A gladiator is not his sword," I respond.

The captain shakes his head and narrows his eyes. "Don't give me that. You love new weapons," he says. "And these are very good ones, sourced from a single forge in Sartak. Best I've ever seen."

Vrex it, he knows how to manipulate me.

I heave out a breath, doing my best to remain uninterested. All I want is to find the

little female who made my body sing and my head clear for the first time in vrexing nova-months. But in the absence of her...

“Fine,” I growl. “Show me.”

I follow the captain through the training area, through the gladiator quarters, emptier since my fellow Gryn found their mates and were able to escape this place, and then on up higher in the dome to the armory. A place kept well away from us (even if the poor security and an inability to keep a Gryn away from anything he really wants means we’re virtually always able to access it if we wish).

There’s a scent in the air, something familiar, as we enter the passage which takes us to the armory. I find myself speeding up rather than hanging back, something the captain takes as my enthusiasm for the weapons.

“I’ve got you and Klynn exclusive access,” he says.

“Not Klynn,” I growl as the scent gets stronger.

“Don’t worry, there’s no way I’m putting the pair of you in the armory,” the captain grumbles. “Not after last time. It took forever to get the place cleaned up.”

I think I’m probably hallucinating. Her scent is the one thing I cannot get out of my head. It haunts my dreams, makes me indulge in self-care on a regular basis. It gives me hope.

But she cannot be here, not after what I did.

Only when the captain pushes through the heavy doors, it hits me like a hammer or a ziggurag tail. It’s so great I’m almost on my knees when I see her.

The female.

My mate.

My eregri .

“You!” she says hoarsely, glaring at me, sword in hand.

“You.” I grin, my cocks instantly hard.

“I wasn’t told a gladiator would be here,” she fires at the captain.

“I’m trying to encourage in advance of the games. He likes new weapons,” the captain replies, making me sound like a youngling.

I pull myself up to my full height and set my wings. I am no youngling.

“I was promised an inspection of the items which will keep me alive,” I say, probably overdoing the imperious nature of my response, given the way she narrows her eyes.

“Depends how close an inspection you want,” the female retorts, not lowering her weapon. “Because a real close one can be arranged.”

Vrex! Her fire! Her ferocity! The swell of her belly is just noticeable under her clothing, and my cocks feel like they’re going to bust out of my pants at the mere thought of what she would look like unwrapped.

“I’m reliably informed by the dealer that Cleo is adept with these weapons and can provide you with a full history of their forging.” The captain’s grizzled face has a look of confusion as he attempts to work out what Cleo means.

Cleo. My mate. My fate. MINE.

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CLEO

Of course, the first fighter I had to encounter on my first day in the dome managing the weapons HAD to be him, didn't it?

Because the universe doesn't move in mysterious ways, it moves in bloody annoying ones. In this case, built like an outhouse, stupidly handsome, abs to die for, and cinnamon scented feathery ways.

I had hoped to avoid Maxym. My hopes are now dashed on the rocks of my inability to accept the inevitable. He's a gladiator, I'm the armorer—we're going to meet at some point.

"Captain!" One of the Zarvu guards labors into the armory, coming up short when he sees Maxym, who is a brick outhouse compared to the stocky guards. He eyes the gladiator warily as Maxym growls a storm at him. "You need to come. There's a flood in one of the guest quarters."

"Not my problem," the big Xnosson bull says.

"It's coming from the effluent tank."

"Hooves and horns!" The captain throws up his hands, his tail thrashing. "Do I have to do everything in this place?"

He gives me and Maxym a swift glance before following the guard out, leaving us alone.

Which is absolutely not what I was promised. Not at all.

Maxym doesn't move. He's like a carved marble statue with eyes which wander over me.

"These blades are made of the finest Sartak tritanium." I rush into my patter, one I've perfected over the last nova-weeks while Retah and I were ordering, receiving, and cataloging all the weapons required by the dome. "Created by a master weaponsmith with over sixty nova-years' experience."

I don't dare look at him as I pick up a sword and rest the blade at the hilt on my outstretched finger.

"Perfectly balanced," I state as a breeze blows the scent of his feathers to me. "The blades are sharpened to a specific method developed by the creator and the edges honed in order to avoid blunting during use."

Maxym still hasn't moved. He is still watching me. I don't think I've ever felt anyone undress me with their eyes before, but he is absolutely doing it.

And I don't dislike it. Even though I really, really should.

He cocks his head on one side. At least this time he's clean, although all that has done is made his abs look particularly delicious.

"What about the method of creating the blade?" he asks.

At the sound of his voice, dark and warm, with a rasp at the very edge which makes my stomach dip, my heart speeds up and, unbelievably, my core clenches.

What the hell is happening?

“The blade...” I stumble over the words which I’ve been practicing forever. “The blade is worked from tritanium...” I repeat like an idiot.

Maxym moves like a cat, sinuous and swift, and in two strides, he’s next to me and sweeps the dagger from my hand.

I’d forgotten how huge he is up close. This close. I’m not entirely sure I can breathe because somehow he’s robbing the area of all oxygen.

He lifts the weapon up to his eye and squints down it before spinning it in his hand, tossing it to the other, and then thumbing the blade.

“Too light,” he pronounces.

All the air rushes back into my body at his words.

“Too light?” I echo him.

“Too light for the dome. I need something with weight if I’m to defeat a ziggurag.”

“A ziggurag?”

Now I just sound stupid, repeating everything he says. I take a step back to my weapons table and give myself a mental shake.

“I have swords in various weights, dependent on the user and the usage,” I respond as I select a much larger one, far more Maxym’s size. I turn it and hand it over to him, pommel first, the blade resting on my arm. “Try this one.”

His wings flare briefly. He puts the dagger down and runs his clawed hand through his short dark hair before he takes the sword from me.

Again, he checks the blade, then he dances away from me, his great wings opening slightly as he slides across the armory into a lethal dance movement similar to the one Retah taught me, only Maxym is far, far better than I am. Watching him move with the blade is like watching a killer ballet dancer. Every single step, every thrust with the sword is perfectly, precisely placed.

“You can breathe now,” he says, back at my side.

Maxym is close, too close for the dangerous predator he is. Too close for me to be able to do anything, even with all the weapons surrounding us.

I’ve been waiting, expecting this moment for the last nova-month. But until now, I hadn’t realized what my anticipation was like. I don’t know what to do.

“Please breathe, little scrap.” He is right next to me, lowering the sword to the table, placing it precisely next to its brethren. “Breathe for me and for the young which grows within you.”

In a slow, slow movement, he puts his hand on my stomach, the huge span easily encompassing my small baby bump through my clothes.

I look up into his face, that handsome, dangerous face.

“Get your hand off me,” I say quietly. “I don’t belong to you.”

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MAXYM

My little mate is going to make this a challenge. Her scent tells me everything I need to know, but she has a dagger in her hand, and it's pointed directly at my cocks.

Cocks which would do absolutely anything to be inside her, save for actually being cut off.

I remove my hand from where it cups her swelling stomach. The knowledge confirmed there nearly made me mess my pants only moments earlier.

"I think you'll find you are mine, little scrap." I grin at her. "Whether you like it or not."

"I don't like it. And I don't want it. I have many other problems, and you are not going to be one of them," she retorts.

"Tell me your problems and I will eliminate them for you."

"Not even going there." She holds up a hand, the palm flat to my face. "Pick your weapon and I'll put it aside for you." She takes a couple of steps away and gestures to the table where the swords are laid out in perfect lines.

"And what if I don't pick?"

"I'll choose one for you." She glares at me as if I've wronged her.

“Then I will let you choose.”

Cleo blinks at me.

“You will?” she queries before her boldness returns and her body stiffens. “You will,” she states. “Now, if you don’t mind, I have other clients to fit.”

I’m unable to contain myself, my movements swifter than I thought possible, and I have her caged against her weapons table.

“No other gladiator will touch you,” I rasp. “None.”

“Because I’m yours? I already told you...” she says unblinkingly, unconcerned at my presence so close to her.

Her scent is as intoxicating as a flagon of mead-wine with a paraxio chaser. I feel myself swaying as it invades my senses.

“Because I am here to protect you from anything which may harm you,” I respond.

“Oh.” Her lips make a perfect circle, and it’s all I can do to hold back from claiming them. “I suppose that’s okay.”

“It is?” I reel back.

“I mean, I was promised protection while I’m in the dome.” She peers around me. “And I don’t see anyone else.”

My anger rises from within like the steam from a hot spring.

“You were supposed to have protection?”

Cleo nods. “And you’re it, apparently.”

“I am?”

“You just said you were.”

There’s a clatter in the passage outside the armory and the sound of voices. The captain marches through the door with a set of guards at his rear.

Instantly, I growl and tuck my mate behind me.

“Is he bothering you?” The captain eyes me with a look which says I can report this to the procurator” all nova-day long.

“ is my protection in the dome.” Cleo pushes her way through my feathers. “The protection I was promised.”

“Oh?” The captain narrows his eyes.

“You do remember, don’t you?” she says, and I adore her fierceness in the face of the old bull, even if I also hate with a passion that there are other males anywhere near her. “Retah was promised I would be kept safe all the time I am within the dome’s walls.”

“Er, yes, that was the deal.” The captain rubs the back of his huge, thick neck. “I hadn’t assigned...”

“I was requested,” I interject, “to provide such a service, given I am the best the dome has to offer.”

“You were?” The captain blinks at me, as I gently put a hand on Cleo’s shoulder.

Touching her sends short shocks to all parts of my body, especially my cocks which are hopelessly unruly. “Ah, yes, you were,” he says swiftly. “ is to be your escort and protection while you are in the dome, my dear. I trust your employer will be happy with such an arrangement?”

Cleo looks me up and down. “I guess so, providing he can do what he says he can do.”

“Other than when he is in the dome arena, he is all yours,” the captain says.

“He is?” A smile appears at the corner of Cleo’s lips.

“He is.”

“And he’ll do whatever I want?”

“Absolutely, whatever you want,” the captain says with feeling. “You only need to ask. is at your bidding.” The old bull is looking directly at me now, his dark eyes glittering with mirth. “He will obey without question.”

Vrex the Xnosson! Vrex the dome! I might have my little mate within my grasp, but she’s further away than ever.

CLEO

Maxym thought he had won, but what I've ended up with is a supremely grumpy gladiator who is being forced to watch me as I fit out a number of other species with weapons.

He sits in the corner, wings draped around him like a cloak, growling occasionally and often for no apparent reason, as gladiator after gladiator troops through the armory and is able to pick a sword, dagger, trident or spear, depending on their preference.

Pulsars are for guards, not for gladiators.

This should not have been so much fun, but with Maxym here, it has suddenly become an absolute riot. I can almost forget my other problems, if it wasn't for the fact I can still feel the warmth of his hand on my stomach and remember the look in his eyes.

He wants me, and he isn't going to take no for an answer.

But now, of course, he has me. Albeit not in the way he was expecting. Maxym's role is entirely "hands off," and he knows he's being watched by the captain.

So, there's nothing he can do about it.

Which means I have an enormous winged gladiator at my beck and call. Hilarious.

There's a brief lull in proceedings and I stretch, lifting my arms above my head, before sliding them down my back, which aches due to all the standing. Behind me, Maxym releases a strangled groan before I realize what I'm doing.

What I'm showing to him.

I check over my shoulder. He has one arm draped between his legs as he leans forward, eyes so hungry he could eat me up in one look.

"Do you need my assistance, little scrap?" he growls, voice filled with wickedness and velvet.

The door to the armory opens, and another huge Gryn marches through. Maxym is already halfway to him before I can even blink. Claws outstretched, he catches the other almost by surprise.

"Not you, Klynn," Maxym snarls.

Klynn, a Gryn with wings darker than Maxym, and a half-healed injury running from his left eye to his jaw, glances over at me.

I brace myself, expecting this situation to go sideways very quickly. I grab hold of a sword, arming myself against the coming storm.

Klynn releases a snarl which could rend flesh from bone as Maxym extends his wings and snaps them shut with a noise akin to half a dozen blades being rattled.

The second gladiator leans to one side and locks eyes with me. Something which might be a smile creeps onto one side of his mouth and it's quickly gone.

"Looks like you'll have something to fight for after all, Maxym," he rasps. "But I'm

supposed to be given a weapon.”

“I’ll choose for you,” Maxym says, folding his arms over his broad chest.

He is the larger, by a considerable amount. Not that I’d want to come up against Klynn either. He’s still massive and muscular but with a wirier build and an evil glint to his eye.

“How can I trust you to get me the best?” he asks, clearly enjoying goading Maxym.

“You can’t. And you’ll get second best, as always.”

Klynn snorts. “A blade is a blade at the end of the nova-day,” he responds. “They all kill the same.”

He gives me another look, which earns him a blood-curdling growl from Maxym. For several long seconds, I think the fight is back on, but instead Klynn hitches up a wing and backs off.

“Pick me a good blade, brother,” he says as he turns to leave. “One which I can use to take off your head.”

With his passing violence, Klynn is gone.

“Is he always like that?” I ask of Maxym’s heaving back.

“Klynn is Klynn. He does what he does, and he’ll never take my head,” Maxym rasps.

One wing droops as he turns back to me. I check over the weapons laid out on my table.

“He was the last. I’m done for the day,” I say as I count everything up.

Maxym carefully moves beside me. I’m surrounded by the scent of his feathers, spicy and delicious. My stomach growls.

“Do you have...hunger?” Maxym asks, his wings slightly flared.

I am so embarrassed, so caught unawares, for a second I think he means something else entirely.

“Do you need to feed?” Maxym adds.

I blink rapidly as my brain processes what he said and what it actually means.

“Yes, I’m hungry. It’s been a long time since breakfast.” I select a sword and put it into the box of sheaths next to me which denotes who gets which weapon. “I’ll get something from Tibi when I get back.”

“Tibi?” Maxym growls her name.

“Retah’s housekeeper and cook. She’s a Cirmos,” I find myself explaining.

My huge gladiator visibly relaxes.

“You need sustenance now, not later,” he says.

“I’ll be fine,” I respond, clearing the remainder of the weapons into the unused box and then setting up the locks to ensure Retah’s stock is safe from Zarvu, or others who might be light-fingered.

An arm snakes around my waist, and I’m spun to face my wall of muscle and

feathers. Without thinking, I put my hands against his warm skin, feeling the hardness beneath.

“I am here to protect you, even from yourself,” Maxym intones. “You will eat before you leave.” He says it as an order.

“I need to get back. I have to prepare for tomorrow.”

“No.”

“Retah, my boss—he’s waiting for me.”

“No. You will eat or I’m not doing my job.”

My shoulders slump. It doesn’t matter what I say or do. I got Maxym as my personal protection and now he’s in a perfect position to exploit it.

I think my victory has just turned into a defeat.

MAXYM

Cleo walks at my side as we make our way through the dome to the dining hall. Part of me delights in having her with me, the other half wants to exact violence on every single male who gets within half a click of my mate.

“You do know you’re growling, don’t you?” she asks as we make the final turn into the Gryn quarters and head in the direction of food.

“I am?” I clear my throat. “I am. It is to protect you.”

“You’re so transparent, .” She laughs.

“I don’t know what you mean.” I give my wings a good shake in the hope it might clear my head of the mate intoxication.

“Your growling has nothing to do with protecting me,” she says. “It’s for your own benefit.”

“It has everything to do with protecting you. No other male will come near,” I respond. “Which is the best way to ensure your safety.”

“I’m still,” she says as I steer her into the empty dining hall, “unsure as to why you volunteered to be my protection duty.”

“Volunteered.” I half choke on the word. “I volunteered because I...was at a loose end.”

“With the games starting in two nova-days’ time? I’d have thought you’d have been training,” Cleo says as I offer her a seat, which she takes with grace.

“What do you like to eat?” I ask, avoiding answering her.

“Oh, anything. I can’t stomach gila-eggs though. They bring me out in a rash since...” She gives me a shifty look. “Anyway, I can’t eat them,” she concludes.

“Gila-eggs are considered too rich for a gladiator’s diet anyway,” I say. “But I’ll bear it in mind.”

I make my way over to the hatch and slam my fist against it. “Food for two, no gila-egg.”

“Gila-egg? You’ll be lucky, Gryn,” a voice responds on the other side of the hatch. “Stand back.”

Blayn might be long gone, but his shadow remains, and the dining clerks, a bunch of vrexing Habosu who hate us all with a vengeance, will not put any food through until we’re away from the hatch.

With a grumble, I pace away. The hatch opens and two trays slide out. Basic rations. All I’m due for my punishment.

I’d prefer to offer my little mate something much more sumptuous, but then, if I can get a pass, it might be possible to take her to one of the many places in Tatatunga which accepts gladiators. Provide her beauty with an accompanying meal.

I pick up the trays along with some cooling water for us both and take it back to her, sliding onto the bench at her side.

The second the food is placed in front of her, her stomach makes the empty noise again. Whatever she may protest, my little mate needs to eat.

“You shouldn’t have waited so long,” I admonish her.

“I know.” She puts some of the roasted meat into her mouth and releases a small groan which, frankly, makes me want to mate her on the spot.

Instead, I do my best to rearrange the cocks which are threatening to poke a hole in the fabric of my pants and offer her a morsel from my platter as well.

“This is good!” she says, enthused, taking the piece from my fingers while further destruction is wrought in my crotch area. “Gladiators eat well. Retah will be interested.”

I dislike her speaking of this other male in such fond terms.

“Retah should not be interested in what you do,” I say before I can stop myself.

“He’s my boss.” She glares at me. “And my friend. He helped me out at a time when I thought no one would help me.”

“And he is excited you are with young?” I ask, hating every word which comes out of my mouth.

Cleo says nothing, her head dipping and her hands dropping from the table into her lap. It disconcerts me she is no longer eating as she has hardly consumed enough to keep a pikrat alive.

“He doesn’t know. You’re the only one who knows.” She lifts her head up. “And if you tell anyone, I will shove your sword somewhere you will regret for a long time.”

This little female is an absolute delight. Fierce, violent, willing to protect her young at any cost.

And she's mine.

She might think she has a say in what happens next, but she will not. Cleo belongs to me, every single delicious part, including the young which grows within her.

"I will not say a word, little scrap. Not with such a threat hanging over me."

Cleo goes back to her platter, which is pleasing.

"Like I said, , you're transparent as hell, but I will do it if you breathe a word to anyone about the baby. You'll be watching your back night and day."

"I'd prefer it at night, if you insist. Preferably in my nest."

Vrex! Did I just mention nesting?

CLEO

He is infuriating. Dragging the truth out of me, giving me food I can eat. Looking at me like he actually cares.

And his offer of a nighttime visitation...well, my treacherous lady parts absolutely throw me under the bus.

“A nest? You have a nest?”

Maxym looks away and clears his throat. “Forget I said anything,” he mutters. “Your employer will be wondering where you are. I will escort you out.”

He gets to his feet and holds out a hand in a way which is so old-fashioned, for a second I don’t know what to do. My head feeling scrambled at his sudden change of pace, I take it and he helps me up.

I follow him obediently as I’m led through a maze of passages until we pass through a door and we’re out in the service courtyard of the dome, where Retah’s transport is waiting for me.

“Why not come and meet Retah?” I blurt out suddenly. “He’s a big fan. He’d love to meet you.”

Maxym shakes his head. “Alas, I cannot, little scrap,” he rumbles. “I am not permitted to leave the dome.”

“Oh, because of the games?” I ask.

His gaze is piercing, as if he’s trying to see right through me.

“Because of the games,” he says in his gravel wrapped in velvet voice as we approach the transport.

As I reach it, I turn to give Maxym my thanks and find myself caged against the cool glass. The huge gladiator gazes down at me.

“You will be back tomorrow,” he says, and it’s not a question. “With more weapons.”

“I will.” I should hate this, being pinned by him in this manner, but I don’t.

Maxym’s incredible dark eyes glitter in the artificial lights above us.

“Then I will be here for you tomorrow,” he says.

And just like that, I’m released from my cowl of fragrant feathers and muscles as if it had never happened, and instead, Maxym stands a foot away from me, looking as benign as a predator can look.

Ridiculously flustered, my cheeks burning, I force out a goodbye and stumble into the transport. As it departs, I watch Maxym. He doesn’t move, staring at me until the gates close behind us. I don’t know why I just invited him back. I don’t even know if Retah would want to meet him.

It felt like the right thing to do.

It doesn’t take long to get back to Retah’s. His dwelling is attached by a series of tunnels to his shop in the Solyom area of Tatatunga and tucked away down a myriad

of side streets, which means the transport can avoid the main market.

“How did it go today?” Tibi greets me as I exit the transport in our courtyard, this one filled with multi-colored vegetation, some of which she is picking and placing in a basket.

“I got through all the gladiators I had on my list for today. Everyone was happy,” I reply.

“Excellent!” Tibi thrashes her tail. “I made you some of your favorite soup. Come eat.”

“I already ate,” I say, tiredness washing over me.

“Oh?”

“With the gladiator.” The words trip off my tongue before I can stop them.

“With the gladiator?” Tibi’s mouth curls up. “The very annoying gladiator?”

“Maxym offered to provide me with protection within the dome.”

“Did he?”

“As per Retah’s agreement with them,” I retort haughtily. “Nothing unusual. Is Retah around?”

I walk past her into the main dwelling, hoping she will let the matter drop or I can get away from her to process my own feelings about what happened today without an interrogation.

No such luck. Tibi follows me.

“He had to go away for a few nova-days, to finish off a few contracts.”

Damn, I remember him telling me that this morning. I can't use him as an excuse to get away from Tibi or to find out more about Maxym.

“Of course, I forgot.”

There's a small furry paw on my arm, halting my progress.

“I'm not the enemy, . You can talk to me,” she says.

If only!

“I'm sorry.” I take her paw in between my two hands. “I'm tired. It's been a long day.”

“Why don't you go have a rest. I'll bring you some joh, and you can do a comm with Retah,” she says sensibly. “He'd like to hear how today went even if he can't be here. Especially if it went well. You know how important the dome contract is to him.”

“Okay,” I concede, pleased she's dropping her line of questioning relating to Maxym. “That sounds nice.”

She gives my hand a pat, withdraws her paw, and walks off in the direction of the food prep area. I feel my shoulders drop.

Sooner or later, I'm going to have to come clean with her and with Retah. The fact Maxym knows about my pregnancy means it isn't going to be long before I can't hide it anymore. That's if he knows how to keep a secret...or a confidence.

I reach my rooms and, kicking off my boots, I climb into the bed, pulling the bedclothes over me and arranging them so I don't look...pregnant.

It isn't easy and it's only going to get harder.

I pick up my vid-screen, a device like a cross between a tablet and a mobile phone. Being an alien abductee, I initially thought I shouldn't like anything about my new living arrangements on a different planet in a different galaxy, but the tech is something else entirely. My vid screen is a single light transparent sheet, about the size of a piece of paper, but it can be expanded easily to be as large or as small as I want in a pinching motion reminiscent of the ones I used on a smart phone back on Earth.

I put in the comm request to Retah, and it hangs waiting for a while before he answers, his horned head and big smile lifting my spirits immediately.

"How did it go?" he asks.

I start off by telling him which blades were the most popular, and we fall into talking about what we'll need to reorder. Tibi brings in some joh and a sticky cake, smiling at me as she sets them down. Once she's gone, I decide to take my chance.

"I met Maxym again," I say, taking a sip of joh to stop my lips from trembling. "He's appointed as my protection within the dome."

"You can't go wrong with him," Retah says happily. "Although I wasn't expecting the procurator to use a gladiator for your protection." His brow furrows. "But you can't get any better than Maxym."

"Than one of the dome's best trained killers?" I chuckle. "That makes me feel so safe."

“Maxym is one of their best gladiators, and admittedly, he does have a history, but he’s also honorable and true...” Retah breaks off as he looks over his shoulder. “Look, I have to go, . I’ll see you in two nova-days, and thank you.” He smiles. “You truly are the best thing which has happened to my business. I don’t know what I’d do if I lost you.”

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MAXYM

I spin around the training arena, coming back at Klynn, who parries my first blow but is slammed to the floor with my second.

“Stay down,” I growl at him as I press my knee on his chest, disarming him with a flick of my weapon. “Or you’ll regret it.”

He gives me a brief, lopsided grin, his teeth covered in blood, which he wipes away with his empty hand.

“You chose the wrong sword for me.”

“You chose the wrong Gryn to bait. I am not Blayn,” I growl back.

Across the arena, there is a deep roar of appreciation.

“Well done, .” The captain approaches as I let Klynn get to his feet and shake the sand out of his feathers. “I’ve not seen you in such good form for a while.”

“New weapons.” I look down my sword blade. “Best we’ve had.”

Klynn huffs a harsh laugh.

“Which reminds me, you need to be back in the armory later. The female from the weaponsmaster is returning to fit out the challengers today.”

Klynn is silent. Which is good, because had he made a sound, I'd have beheaded the vrexer. I give the captain a brief bow.

"As you wish."

"You volunteered." He snorts. "Not a great use of your time, but if it means I don't have to go chasing you through the undercroft...both of you...then so be it."

"Both of us?"

"You think I'm letting either of you alone with the challengers? You'll both protect the female today. And neither of you will lift a sword, or any other weapon, in anger, or you'll end up back in the hole and lose your bonuses for the games, understand?"

Klynn looks across the arena, squinting as if he's seen something interesting.

"If they touch her..." I growl.

"It's your job to protect her, but you will not engage otherwise, or you'll never get a pass again," the captain says firmly.

It's clear his mind is made up. I'm stuck with Klynn whether I like it or not.

"I'll let you have some time with the little female," Klynn murmurs as the captain leaves us, his bulky form lumbering away across the training arena. "Protection duty doesn't have to start with me."

"What will you do instead?" I ask, relief flooding through me because as irritating as Klynn is, I'd rather not kill him today.

"I have plans," he says mysteriously. "Cover for me until I get there."

Klynn is rarely coherent, so I flare my wings and give them a shake.

“Okay.”

“You owe me one.” Klynn scoops up his sword from the arena floor and waggles it at me as he backs away. “And I will best you, later, in the dome.”

Like the vrexer ever has. No one has beaten me, and with my new weaponry, no one will.

I make sure I’ve bathed before I head to the armory. My feathers are still damp, but my desire to be there when she arrives is solid.

She will be greeted by a Gryn who will nest for her, when I have gathered all the things I need. And sparring with Klynn has taken precious time away from my search.

“What are you doing here, Gryn?” A Zarvu guard, his face covered by a helmet which is entirely unnecessary, asks.

“None of your business,” I growl at him. “Stand aside.”

“I can have you sent back to the hole, gladiator . You belong to the dome, it doesn’t belong to you.” He sneers.

I feel the anger rising, the need to do violence which is always sitting in the front of my brain like a squatting animal who is not me and yet is part of my soul.

I slam him into a nearby wall. Claws outstretched, I’m on top of him before he can make any move toward the pulsar weapons at his belt.

“I belong to no one.” I clutch at his throat, choking him, watching his color change under my hand. “I am here because the Galactic Council made an error. I won’t be here forever.”

He makes a few gurgling noises, hands flailing at mine, but he’s no match for me, not without weapons and not on his own.

“?” Cleo’s voice penetrates the anger.

Vrex.

CLEO

The massive gladiator is slowly strangling the life out of a guard as I round the corner to the main passage leading into the armory.

I can't imagine that is a good thing, for him or the guard. Maxym's wings shiver, and his form seems larger than ever as he growls at the guard.

"The Galactic Council made an error. I will not be here forever," he snarls.

"Maxym?" I hear myself say.

He turns with a growl, wings flaring and a feral look in his eyes. For a second or two, I'm not sure what he's going to do and whether I should have, perhaps, simply retreated.

His gaze slowly returns to the guard beneath him. With a disgusted snort, he lets the Zaru go, pushing away from him in an easy fluid movement, and stalks into the armory.

The guard coughs, rolls himself to his feet, gives me a searching glance, and scuttles away. Something tells me Maxym is going to regret tangling with this particular guard.

The luggage bot follows me as I enter the armory. Maxym stands in the far corner, next to a rack of spears, his back to me, his dark wings shaking slightly.

I position the bot as I unlock the cases from yesterday and begin to set up my table. After a while, I feel his eyes on me.

“I was accused of murdering my former owner,” Maxym says. “He was a member of the Galactic Council. They wanted to make an example of me, and I was sent here to thrive or die. Mostly die.”

I’m stunned. Stunned at the way he shared this information with me. Stunned he chose this moment to tell me.

“Did you kill him?” I ask, my voice trembling.

Maxym fixes me with a gaze which could cut steel. “No.” His chin drops to his chest. “I do not know who killed him. While I was his slave, I didn’t bear him any ill will. He was even trying to find the rest of my species, to see if I could return.”

“You do know how many criminals say they are innocent, don’t you?” I lay out the last sword.

“I am not innocent,” Maxym growls. “My claws drip with blood, little scrap. From what I was forced to do in the facility before I was sold, to here in the dome. I am the exact opposite of innocent. But I did not kill my master.”

Outside the armory, there are footsteps and rustling which reveals itself to be Klynn. He leans against the wall and watches us.

Maxym sends a growl in his direction.

“Klynn is here while you fit the challengers by order of the captain,” Maxym says. “For your safety ,” he adds with a sneer at his colleague.

I have to give silent thanks that he's not attempting to choke the life out of his colleague at least.

"I don't have many to fit." I pull my vid-screen from my pocket and check the list. "Most of the challengers bring their own weapons."

"And the ones who want ours either can't afford their own or think using gladiator weapons will give them an advantage." Maxym eyes the weapons I've put out.

"Both will die, regardless," Klynn says with no emotion.

"Is having you two here really going to keep me safe?" I wonder out loud.

Klynn stalks into the armory, his wing feathers shaking. Maxym unsheathes his claws, the inches long onyx scimitars I saw earlier around the neck of the guard.

I expect there will be violence.

"When we're given a job to do, we do it," Klynn says.

Maxym's wings flare for an instant. "We do?" He queries before slamming the huge appendages against his side. "We do," he says to me.

I dip my head to hide a smile.

"Okay, well...how about you both stand over there." I point to an alcove behind where I've set up the weapons. "And let me do my job."

"How about we stand here"—Maxym moves behind the table and folds his arms, where he is joined by Klynn who mirrors his movements—"and do our job."

I throw my hands up. “Fine! Just let me do what I’m here to do.”

The first challenger, a large lumbering Yetag, his tentacles squirming, enters the armory. He eyes the two Gryn with both fear and interest, and despite the occasional snarl from Maxym, I get him a sword and small handheld trident which he is happy with.

“He must think they’re flooding the dome again,” Klynn says conversationally to Maxym.

“I’ve not heard we’re doing aquatic games.” Maxym inclines his head. “Interesting choice.”

I fit two more challengers, a Habosu who can’t keep his mouth shut but is unable to goad the two Gryn to do anything more than growl at him. He gets a gladius and a dagger. He’s followed by an Oykgig who can hardly hold what I hand him, he’s shaking so much.

After each challenger departs, Maxym and Klynn discuss their choices with professional detachment. The situation is weirdly domestic, if domestic involves a room filled with sharp things and a couple of predators who would easily eat you for breakfast.

“That’s all I have for this nova-morning,” I say, checking my list after the second Habosu has left with a stream of insults at the two Gryn, who completely ignore him, instead loudly commenting on his poor choices of weaponry.

Klynn slips away from his position and, without a backwards glance, he’s gone.

“Did I say something wrong?”

“Klynn doesn’t do any more than is necessary,” Maxym rasps from directly behind me.

For an enormous winged predator, he can move silently when he wants to. I spin around, and I’m face to face with a muscled abdomen. He curls his hand under my chin and tilts my face up to his.

I should pull away.

I shouldn’t be letting this happen.

I can’t seem to stop myself.

“I, on the other hand, do everything I deem necessary.”

He gazes down at me, his liquid dark eyes seeming to bore into my soul. I feel my traitorous core pulse, and his nostrils flare.

“You tempt me at every turn, little scrap.” His clawed thumb brushes down my cheek. “A temptation I’m not sure I can resist much longer.”

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MAXYM

Cleo's gaze doesn't waver. Her chest heaves up and down as the scent of her arousal increases. I want to scatter the remaining weapons and mate her on the table here and now.

"We can't...I can't do this, ," she says, her voice a barely audible whisper. "You don't want me."

"Because you have a mate?" I hear myself growl far too harshly. "The one who put a youngling in your belly and yet makes you come here every day."

She pulls her chin from my grasp with her own growl of anger.

"No." Cleo marches over the table I was contemplating a second ago and begins putting the unused weapons in their box. "There is no mate . And my pregnancy has nothing to do with you."

If I had any control, it vacated me long before my head injury. I pull her into an alcove. The feel of Cleo in my arms is even better than I ever thought it could be.

"I think you'll find it has everything to do with me because I have claimed you and your young for my own."

"You can't do that. I don't belong to anyone," Cleo retorts.

"Don't you?" I pull her scent into my lungs.

“This baby is my responsibility.”

To my delight, she smooths her clothing over her stomach, revealing the small swell which causes my cocks to jerk hard against my pants, making me groan out loud.

“I have to provide for it. I have to make sure it has a home. I have to...” Her words end in a sob.

“Tell me,” I order.

“I have to tell Retah and hope he doesn’t fire me,” she says and then looks at me like I’ve ripped her lungs from her body.

“Your employer doesn’t know?”

“He doesn’t.” She hangs her head. “I don’t know what to do.”

I want to tell her I will have her and her young. I will worship her body, nest for her, keep her and protect her.

Only I’m a prisoner of the dome. I cannot do any of these things.

“I doubt he will fire you for being with young,” I say.

“But when the baby comes...” Her eyes are filled with water. It hovers at the edge of her lashes before a drop runs down her cheek.

I catch it on my finger, bringing it to my mouth and tasting a faint tang of salt.

“He will accept it, or he will have to deal with me.”

Cleo hiccups, a smile briefly appearing on her face as she dashes the rest of the water from her eyes.

“I guess that’s one way to manage it.”

“It is the only way.”

Cleo shakes her head, sidesteps me, and goes back to sorting her weapons.

I stand, arms by my sides, feathers itching with the need for her. The taste of the water from her eyes only fuels the fire within me.

“Come eat with me.” It’s all I can think of.

“I’m supposed to go back to Retah’s,” she says.

“Do you require your employer’s approval to have a meal?” I growl. If she is a slave, I will ensure her bonds are broken.

“No, only I have three nova-hours before I’m working again. It’s my only option.”

Now I smile. I smile like I haven’t done in a very long time.

“It’s not your only option,” I respond. “I can show you the dome, provide you with sustenance. I am here to protect your person, after all.”

Cleo stares at me, her fingers poised over the locking mechanism of the weapons bin.

I think she’s going to reject me, and if she does, I’m not sure what I’ll do. I can’t take her by force, but I can’t leave her alone.

She is my mate. She is my everything, and the sooner I claim her and her young entirely, the sooner she can be installed in my nest, forever.

Cleo takes in a breath. “Okay, show me the dome.”

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CLEO

Maxym looks smug at his suggestion. My heart twists in my chest. After all, he's just been both boorish and then incredibly kind.

I don't know what to do. Every option open to me leads somewhere I can't control the outcome, and I'm so, so tired of it.

"Okay," I say. "Show me the dome."

His feathers prick briefly, almost as if he wasn't expecting my response, despite his confident exterior.

A tour of the dome, while not exactly my thing, is a distraction I need.

"This way." He offers me his hand, an old-fashioned gesture I appreciate.

I take it, and he leads me out of the armory, turning right rather than left as we have done before. We make our way through the maze-like structure, occasionally encountering an Oykig or Zarvu, both of whom give us a curious look, but put their heads down and keep on going.

Each time I look at Maxym, he's entirely impassive, which makes me think he's on his best behavior.

The interior of the passages changes from scuffed and utilitarian to soft flooring underfoot, mood lighting and color changing walls. I'm steered to the right by him,

and almost without warning, we push through a set of double doors into the vast arena, covered by the dome.

We're about halfway up the stands, I guess, and yet the roof is still way, way above us. I see something which looks like a cloud over the other side, and as we watch, a flock of brightly colored podis flap past. I've seen the creatures outside the dome, a cross between a bat and a bird, but seeing them inside this structure brings home just how big it is.

Beside me, Maxym shifts his wings, all of his being concentrated on the little podis, eyes filled with interest.

"Do you...get to fly in here?" I ask him.

"It's the only place I can fly." He releases my hand to hike up his pants. Around his right leg is something which looks like a tattoo, only raised. "Tracker. If I attempt to lift off the ground outside of the dome, it will bring me down," he adds darkly.

"But you are allowed to leave, sometimes?"

"I get the occasional pass." He shrugs. "If the procurator thinks I've done well and I haven't..." He pauses while he searches for the words. "Done other things."

"What happens if you fly now, from here?" I gaze out at the arena, imagining Maxym in the air.

"Forcefield. I'd get fried." He chuckles, pointing at a slight shimmer in the light.

I bat him on his arm, unable to stop my own laughter.

"But if you want me to." He opens his great wings and stretches one out, inspecting

the length.

“No!” I grab for him, burying my hands deep within the feathers until I feel the heat of his skin. “I don’t want you to hurt yourself.”

A strong arm wraps around my waist, pulling me close against his hard body.

“If you keep touching me like that, I will burn down the dome, the galaxy, the universe for you,” Maxym murmurs, his eyes half-lidded.

I dig my fingers deeper into his feathers and actually feel his knees dip. Could it be this is the way to tame a Gryn, even one as feral as Maxym?

He rumbles something which might be my name, his hand spanning my waist and his eyes completely closed as my fingers trip through the soft down I can feel next to his warm body at the base of his wings.

Somewhere far below, there is a sharp crack. His eyes open, and he snarls, pushing me behind him as he glares into the arena for the offending noise.

“We should go,” he says, suddenly all business. “They’re preparing the arena for the games tomorrow, and it won’t be good for our health to stay.”

I remember the conversations he had with Klynn about the upcoming matches. He is a veteran of this temple to violence, even if he doesn’t worship here.

“Perhaps we could eat?” I suggest.

My appetite is probably the only thing which has improved in the recent weeks. I find I’m hungry all the time and this is no exception.

The smile which spreads over Maxym's face is the most genuine one I think I've seen on him.

"If that's what my mate...I mean, my , wants, then that is what she will have."

I'm herded by a huge wing away from the arena and back into the network of passages.

"How do you know your way around?" I grumble as we turn into yet another identical one.

"I've been here a long time," Maxym says as we turn left and I suddenly recognize where we are, outside the dining area from yesterday.

I take a seat with a sigh of relief as Maxym goes, again, to get us some food. Klynn is lounging in one corner of the huge hall which is otherwise empty, picking at food on a platter. He avoids my gaze.

We eat and chat. Maxym, when he's not doing the whole growly, brooding thing, is funny and sweet. He tells me about their rations, their training regimen, about his former colleagues who have left and whom I think he misses.

When the time finally comes, I feel like I'm dragging myself back to the armory because it means while I'm spending time with him, I can't spend time with him due to the constant comings and goings of other gladiators, guards, challengers and clerks. And as is always the case with time, the nova-afternoon flies past, and before long, I'm done.

Klynn disappears just like he did before, leaving me to lock up the weapons which will be staying in the dome and clearing up those which will go back to Retah.

“I have to check the remainder,” I say to Maxym. “The ones which will be”—I check my vid screen—“available for the arena?”

“Those are the ones the challengers can pay extra to have available for them during their bouts,” Maxym says. “We’ll need to go to the ante-chamber.”

“Oh.” I check my screen again. “I’m to check those tomorrow, not today.”

“You’re going to be here, for the games?” Maxym growls.

“Looks like I don’t have any choice.”

CLEO

I stare up at the ceiling of my room. Shadows chase light across them as various air transport fly over Retah's dwelling. Sleep is not coming easily tonight. I'm still turning over the events of the day.

I can't get Maxym out of my head either. What I thought was a male obsessed with violence, possessive, dominant, and a bit of a wanker, has turned out to be nothing like I expected. A prisoner, accused of a crime he says he didn't commit. Kind, easy to talk to, and fiercely protective.

There's also the reaction to me touching him and the brief mention of a nest, neither of which I was prepared for.

My hand strays to my stomach, the secret I know I can't possibly hide for much longer. Both Retah and Tibi are going to notice sooner or later. While I could potentially claim it's a human thing, the eventual emergence of a baby is not going to be something I can explain away.

And I don't fancy having to give birth in secret, on my own, either.

Outside, the forcefield across my window fizzes. I look briefly but expect it's one of the bird-sized moths which occasionally and rather dangerously flit across Tatatunga, given how many of them are likely to be eaten by predators or incinerated by transport engines.

It fizzles again, and this time there is a flash of blue light. I sit up. Retah's entire

dwelling is heavily fortified, even if you can't see it, purely because of the weaponry he often keeps stored in the basement below us.

I shove the bedclothes aside and make my way to the window, picking up the sword I have leaning next to my closet, the one I use for my daily workout. Keeping back, I risk a quick glance into the courtyard. It seems quiet.

Then something large moves from shadow to light. Something Gryn-shaped.

“Maxym?”

His face appears, grinning. “Let me in,” he mouths at me.

I have no idea what Retah is going to make of this if he catches me, but it's going to be worse for Maxym if he's found in the courtyard, a place where no one unauthorized is supposed to be.

“That way!” I say in a hoarse whisper, pointing down the building towards the back door.

I race through the dwelling in my bare feet until I reach it, activating the lock as quietly as I can. Maxym stands against the limited light, hesitating.

“Come in, before you activate the alarms.” I grab hold of his hand and pull him inside.

Once he's in, he seems bigger than ever and completely out of place. Retah is a big male, but Maxym is even larger. His presence is almost suffocating.

I certainly can't risk him being found here, so I pull him back along the passage and shove him into my room.

Before I can say a word, I'm caged against the wall by my feathered guest. His spicy cinnamon scent surrounds me.

"I couldn't get you out of my head, ," He rasps. "My head is not a nice place, but you make it better."

"Did you...get permission to leave the dome?" I breathe as his dark eyes gaze at me.

"No."

I now have a fugitive gladiator in my room. A huge predator who is here for me.

"You can't..."

My words are cut off as his lips consume mine in a kiss which is devastating in its intensity. It's the kiss I've been not thinking about since I first met him. The kiss he gave to me when I wasn't sure what I wanted.

And I want it now, my body melding to his as he gives me everything.

"Needy little mate," he murmurs over my mouth. "What else do you need?"

His hand runs over the swell of my stomach, but it doesn't stop. Even as a groan bubbles in his chest, the hand slides down, over my nightclothes and back up my bare thigh, pushing between my legs to reach my folds.

"Already wet," he rasps. "What have you been doing, bad little female?"

"Thinking of you," I admit.

"And were you touching yourself?" he says, swirling his finger over my clit and

making my hips slam into his hand.

“I was thinking about it.”

“Dirty little mate,” he growls in a voice so sinful I flood his hand with my moisture. “I want to watch you touch yourself while you think about me.”

Instantly, my Maxym cage is gone and my clothing removed. I’m standing, completely naked, in front of him.

“Touch yourself,” Maxym commands.

There’s a bulge in his pants I can’t ignore. Whatever he has in there is pretty spectacular, but it’s his eyes burning into me which mean I obey without question.

One hand rests on my stomach as the other inches down and underneath. I’m absolutely soaking, there’s no denying it as I swirl around my clit, dropping my head back against the wall at my own touch.

“Eyes on me, little scrap,” Maxym orders. “I want you to see what you’re doing to me.”

I do as he says and find he’s as naked as I am, his cock...no, wait...his cocks , ramrod straight as he palms them slowly from root to tip.

Even in his huge hands, they’re still massive. Pre-cum drips from the tips onto the floor in a long slow flow. The smaller (and I use the word advisedly) of the two fits into a groove under the larger, but Maxym separates them with every stroke.

“Touch yourself, my eregri ,” he says. “Touch your pretty cunt. I want to see you come undone.”

I can't look away from his cocks, but my fingers obey him as I imagine what it might be like to have those monsters inside me, buried deep before he makes me feel every inch on withdrawal.

So, when it hits, my orgasm takes me completely by surprise. I remember not to scream and wake the entire neighborhood, but my hoarse voice roars Maxym's name.

I find myself plucked from my feet and laid across the bed as he buries his head between my legs, lapping up my moisture like he's a male desperate for a drink. One clawed hand spans my small bump, encompassing it completely.

"Delicious." He raises his head, mouth slick with evidence of my climax. "Now you are going to take my cocks."

The great appendages are dripping as he gazes down at me, his dark eyes missing nothing.

"And you are going to ride me."

A ghost of my former orgasm ripples through me at his words.

"Ride you?"

"Ride me."

He rolls onto the bed and pulls me onto his hard chest as I straddle him.

"Maxym," I moan as his cocks press at both of my entrances. "I've never...I mean, not in my second hole...before."

"My cocks are made for you, little scrap. They want to be inside you and have since

the first moment I saw you,” he rasps. “Hold tight and relax, and you will be able to take all your pleasure from me.”

He thrusts up, and the tip of each cock breaches me. The smaller smooth, slippery as if covered in lube, pushes easily through the tight ring of muscle at my bottom hole as the larger one stretches me wide, wide, wide.

“Breathe, little scrap, breathe,” he murmurs. “You’re going to look stunning impaled on my cocks.”

I release the air I’m holding as if I don’t remember how to, and as I do, Maxym drills deeper. I’m expecting it to be painful, but it’s not. There is just a feeling of being incredibly full.

“You are made to be filled by me, . Made to be pleased by me, made to be bred by me.” Maxym cups my stomach. “And I can’t wait until you’re big and ripe and round with young so I can gaze on you like I do now.” His huge thumb sweeps over my skin. “And I can’t wait to fill your belly all over again.”

Without warning, my second climax hits me, I can’t do anything other than ride him, take him, and let him take me. Completely.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:31 am

MAXYM

The nova-second her tight channel clamps around my cocks, I can't hold. I explode within her like an untried youth, painting her oh-so-tight channels with my seed, coming like I've never come before, like I've never been with a female before.

Because Cleo is my everything.

I never want to be anywhere but between her legs, buried deep within her, pleasuring her. Cleo is my perfection, and her delightful evidence of her fertile nature is pressed into my hand as she takes her pleasure from me.

She is panting as my cocks continue to judder out their seed deep within her, but I can't linger over my orgasm. With soothing noises, I lift her from me. She moans a little as I am free of her delights and as I place her on the bed.

Her small sanitary area has a couple of cloths I use to clean her gently, her legs shaking and her cunt glistening with the evidence of my seed.

One day it will be my seed which fills her belly. In the meantime, I get to enjoy her changing body until she births.

I cannot wait. Whatever happens, I will be with her. I will be there for my mate and her young, every step of the way.

I lay beside her, slowly tracing my claws down her shoulder as she faces me.

“You’re not supposed to be here, are you?” Cleo says, her bright eyes studying my face.

“I have no pass.” I tuck my arm behind my head.

She slides her fingers into my feathers where they come to rest against my skin. I feel as if all the speech has been taken from me as she slowly works her way through them.

“So, what happens if they discover you’re not there?”

“Panic, alarms, mass searches,” I slur.

“Really?” Her fingers stop, and I’m able to concentrate on her face, her mouth hitched in an amused smile.

“They won’t notice I’m gone. Not before I get back.”

Her fingers start again, and I can understand why Syllas used to drool. Or at least I can understand why he had such a reaction, even where I do not.

My mind clears in a way it has not been for a very long time.

“So many of us were stolen away, taken from our planet, placed in facilities and experimented on, because we were seen as an asset, a potential warrior army to be controlled.” I turn my head to look at her as all these thoughts crowd in at me. “My former master wanted to expose this cruel, terrible trade. He knew who started it. He wanted all the Gryn freed.”

It’s becoming hard to breathe.

“He wanted to get the Council to intervene.”

Cleo’s touch goes deeper. Clarity comes.

“My head,” I murmur. “It doesn’t hurt anymore.”

“It used to hurt?” she asks.

“I was injured. It hurt and it made everything bad.” I can feel my eyelids drooping, the need to sleep overwhelming me. “And then you came. And it hurts less.”

“I don’t think so.” Cleo laughs softly. “You just got better.”

“I am better because of you, my eregri .” I roll onto my side, onto my wing, in order to take her face in my hand.

It means her fingers are no longer in my feathers, and I ache at their loss.

“I am better because I remember why I ended up in the dome. I let it take me. I let it take what I needed to do here, what Vernun sacrificed himself for.”

“Vernun?” she queries.

“The council member who bought me for his security, who found out what had been done to me, who vowed the trade could not go on.” I put my hand to my head, to the scar which burns there. “All of this was robbed from me when they killed him and framed me for his murder, but you have...” I pinch her chin with my thumb and finger. “You have brought it back.”

“I never thought you were a murderer,” Cleo says quietly. “I understood what you were in the dome, what you were forced to do, but not murder in cold blood.”

“That is the reason you belong to me.” I place my hand over her stomach. “Both of you.”

Cleo covers my hand with her tiny pink one, her eyes lifting slowly to my face.

“What are you going to do now?” Her voice trembles. “These are forces we can’t fight.”

“I can fight anything. It’s in my nature,” I growl. “But fighting to free my fellow Gryn means I have to find a way.”

I capture her lips with mine. Cleo’s kiss is the sweetest taste, her mouth allowing me to plunder it, to take her, to enjoy her.

She is the reason I fight. She is the reason I go on fighting. She is the reason I must be free.

CLEO

All of me aches as I take my morning shower as hot as I can make it. I should be exhausted after my late night activities, because Maxym didn't stop at one session. He made it two, and only after he had licked me to completion in between, strumming my body as if he'd known me forever.

My core pulses as I remember what he did. I can't believe my body is reacting to him in this way. The pathetic fumble which has resulted in my pregnancy pales into nothingness. Maxym can make me come simply by growling my name in his deep, sinful voice.

Which might make things a little difficult at the dome today...

When he stole away in the early nova-hours this morning, I didn't want him to go. I know what the dome is, and even if he is their best gladiator, the odds of him dying are still too high.

Except Maxym has fought for a long time. Regardless of what he was before, it is his job and he has to do it, especially while we work out how to deal with the information he's dredged up from some long-forgotten memory.

I'm not sure I can believe it is my presence which has stirred up all his forgotten knowledge. If it is, he seems happy at the memories, pleased to find out the reasons why he rages.

For me, I need to work out my feelings about him and about how he insists my baby

is his as much as I am. Such unconditional acceptance of my situation is the most alien thing about him.

That and the two cocks.

I'm still blushing as I walk into the kitchen.

"Good nova-day!" Tibi trills, overly enthusiastic as always in the morning.

The scent which fills my nostrils make my stomach growl. I grab a couple of her sweet rolls and devour them before I get my first cup of joh.

"You're eating well." She grins at me. "I'd have thought attending the arena on games day might have made you nervous, but I underestimate you as usual," she adds kindly.

Hopefully this means the nocturnal visit by the planet's largest pussy burglar has not been noticed.

"I don't know when I'll get to eat today. I expect I'm going to be busy, so I'd better load up on the carbs now," I say, licking my fingers as Tibi shovels more rolls onto a platter in front of me. "Where's Retah?"

"He had to return to Sartak again." Tibi makes a face indicating her displeasure. "He left some instructions for you on your vid-screen, but he insisted he'll be back tomorrow."

"When did he go?" I'm seized by a sudden fear.

"Early nova-hours. You'll have still been asleep." She gives me a benign smile.

I know I was doing anything other than sleep. Impossible with a huge Gryn in my bed. My face flushes hot again.

“Everything okay?” Tibi asks.

“Phew!” I fan myself with my hand. “Too many carbs too quickly.” I laugh.

She gives me a strange look but bustles off to check on her ovens and bubbling sauces.

I might just have got away with it.

“I’d have thought it was having the big gladiator in your room for most of the night that would have been the reason,” she calls over her shoulder.

“What? No.” I shake my head hard, causing stars to form in my vision. “I was alone all night.”

Tibi turns, a spoon poised under her whiskers.

“My sweet one,” she says. “I’d recognize the sounds of mating anywhere. You’re not fooling this old Cirmos at her own game.”

“What?” My head is spinning now, unsure whether to continue the denial and at the same time wanting to know what Tibi means about “her own game.”

She puts the spoon down carefully. “, is the youngling in your belly his?”

I want to curl up and die. All this time I thought I was doing well, hiding my secrets from this world, getting on with my life as best I could.

“Does Retah know?” I whisper, feeling faint.

“About the Gryn or your young?” Tibi says, planting her hands on her hips. “He knows nothing. So, is it the Gryn’s?” she demands.

“No.” My voice is hoarse. “I was pregnant before I was brought to Trefa. It was a mistake.”

“But he has accepted it?”

“Maxym? He says we both belong to him.” I can hardly hear the words myself, so I don’t know if Tibi heard them or not.

Her face softens. “He did?”

Pain, rage, and sorrow rise up in me. Tears I don’t want form in my eyes.

“I don’t want him to die,” I blurt out.

“My sweet one,” Tibi is by my side, “have you ever seen the Gryn fight? Because I can promise you, Maxym will not be dying in the dome, today or any other day. Not while he has a mate to return to.”

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MAXYM

The captain forbids any sale of gladiators for pleasure in the week prior to any games. He believes it spoils our performance.

Whether he's right or not, I currently feel like I could take on an army, let alone a dome of vrexing piss poor challengers who would pose little risk at best and a slight distraction at worst.

My biggest enemy in the dome used to be the Gryn-storm which was Blayn. While Klynn is not to be trusted, I can rely on him not to attempt to kill me, at least while someone else is.

I go through my paces in the training arena. The level of concentration I can put into my moves is intense, and I can feel the power flowing through me. It imbues my muscles with more strength than I think I've ever had, so when I throw the sword at the target, the thing embeds itself up to the hilt.

"Gryn and their mates." The captain leans against the wall next to the entrance to the training arena. He shakes his head. "I never thought I'd be rid of you all, but it turns out a female can draw you further than any pulsar cannon can fire you."

"What mate?" I growl.

"The little female armorer." The captain chuckles. "Do you really think an old bull like me can't see the change in you since she arrived? I'm not immune to the charms of a pretty female, you know."

I'm in front of him in a wing beat, snarling like I've never snarled before. "She is mine."

The captain holds up his hands, his hooves stamping on the dusty floor.

"She is yours, . I have no intention of getting between the two of you."

I take a step back, my conscious self asserting over the feral Gryn I have been.

"But the procurator on the other hand—he is bound by the Galactic Council decree, and even if he wasn't, the chances of him freeing you are...not great."

"I didn't do it," I rasp. "My master was murdered to further the interests of those who take species like mine and enslave them to their own ends. Like the Drahon."

"The Drahon are a spent force, confined to their planet in the outer quadrants," the captain responds. "Any reports to the contrary are..." he spreads his hands, knowing it was the Drahon Rych and I battled not so long ago. "Let's just say they're not a threat."

"They are here, on Trefa. They were there in the facility which held me before I was sold," I growl. "I know why I'm here and so do they. The foul creatures are an advance force for something else."

"So, the head injury knocked some sense into you after all." The captain grunts. "About time. Looks like your mate came along at the perfect moment."

"What would you have me do, if you think it is all for naught?" I growl at him.

"Fight," he says simply. "The more you fight, the more control you have and the more you can influence everything. The procurator believes one gladiator cannot be

bigger than the dome.” He looks me up and down. “It’s your time to prove him wrong.”

I set my wings and glare at him.

“There is no escape from the dome.”

“But there is freedom. If you please the crowd, if you push him to offer it,” the captain says. “An ancient bylaw of Tatatunga.” He grins wryly at me. “This place has been here longer than you, , even if you think it didn’t start until you arrived.”

“I want them all to be free,” I say, hoarsely.

“Even Klynn?”

“Especially that vrexer,” I growl. “If he remains here for much longer, there will be nothing left of the warrior he once was.”

“Then go, fight for your mate, for your freedom, and that of others. I will do the rest,” the captain says, pushing away from the wall and taking a step to the exit.

“Wait.” I touch his shoulder. “Why are you doing this?”

“Unlike the resistance, I have been a gladiator, and I have been free. This place”—he looks up at the darkness above us where the training arena rises towards the dome—“is doomed, as it should be. One way or the other, Tatatunga will be forced to give up its addiction to violence, and about time too.”

Having delivered his cryptic announcement, he walks away from me, his horned head held high.

I stare after him, contemplating my position and the need which rises within me to get back to Cleo.

“Vrexer,” Klynn growls from the shadows of the passage. “You ready?”

“Don’t come any closer,” I warn him.

“I’m saving my claws for the dome,” he responds. “You’re not worth it.”

I shake my head. Klynn is a special case. My rage is born of the injury I suffered. His runs far deeper.

“I’ll see you in the dome, gladiator. And if you attempt to take me, you will regret it,” I growl.

He huffs a hot breath, his eyes glowing unnaturally in the darkness. “I regret nothing,” he says, and with a swish of primaries, he has gone.

I make my way to the ante-chamber. Through the outer doors and the forcefield, I can hear the roar of the crowd. It makes my feathers prick, the thought of the violence seeping into my veins.

All around, the clerks are busy. Those who wish to be armored are having it fitted. Those who require stimulants are getting them. But there’s no sign of the weapons.

“Gak the new armorer!” the head clerk says, hurrying past me. “Where is he?”

A loud clatter at the rear of the chamber announces the arrival of the weapons bots. One after another, the battered square containers judder in, putting me on edge. I see Klynn across the chamber, and he too looks disturbed at their arrival.

Neither of us can stand the things.

Then the scent hits me, pulling my gaze back to the entryway like I've had my neck snapped.

Stood, framed in the light, is my mate.

And she is on her own.

CLEO

The ante-chamber is everything Retah said it would be. There is the faint smell of rotting meat covered by a strong antiseptic. The noise of the crowd outside in the dome is clearly audible and echoes around the large space.

It's filled with numerous clerks, mostly Oykgig and smaller, younger Habosu, all wearing the dull green tabards with gold piping denoting their status. They're bullying and cajoling the gladiators into their armor. But I can't see Maxym or Klynn anywhere, even as I crane my neck in an attempt to see every corner.

The weapons containers come to a halt and, for the ones which belong to the challengers, their clerks fall on the boxes, flinging them open to claim the weapons inside for their individual charges.

"Why are you here, little scrap?" Maxym says in my ear, his dark, sinful voice sending pulses where they really shouldn't be going in this place.

"I'm to give out the weapons which were fitted," I say as his hand snakes around my waist, cupping my stomach and sending a delicious shiver up my spine.

Maxym made no secret of how much he liked my pregnant body last night. And how he's looking forward to me being even bigger.

"It's too dangerous for you here," he murmurs.

"It's dangerous for me everywhere," I respond. "But the captain has assured me once

I'm done, I can watch the games from a secure pod until it's time to retrieve the weapons."

Behind me, I feel Maxym relax a little. "I will gather the weapons for you once we're finished with them," he says. "If it's dangerous now, you cannot be in here when we're done. Neither I nor Klynn will be safe to be around."

I turn to face him, shoving my fingers into the soft down at the base of his wings and am rewarded by the slight buckle of his knees again.

"You sure about that?"

"I know if you touch Klynn the way you're touching me, I will rip his wings off so he can never be touched again," Maxym says evenly with a half smile and eyelids drooping.

"I'm never touching Klynn. I prefer my hand to remain attached to my body." I chuckle. "And now I need to get these weapons out before there's a revolt," I say as I spot the Xnosson captain looking stressed on the other side of the busy chamber, making a beeline for us.

"Gladiator!" the captain bellows. "Get back from the weapons. You know the rules."

Maxym raises his eyebrows at me. "I was never one for rules."

He cups my cheek with his hand and kisses me oh-so-gently before he's shouldered aside by the old bull into the waiting arms of a pair of guards, one of whom takes the opportunity to shove a stun stick into Maxym's side.

"Hey!" I exclaim as he drops to a knee, clutching his abdomen.

Maxym grins, sticks out a wing, and swipes the guard off his feet, taking his stun stick and snapping it in half as if it were a toothpick. He glares at the captain for a beat.

“Go to your position, Maxym,” the Xnosson says, almost kindly. “I’ll take care of things here.”

My huge gladiator flicks his wings one over the other in a sawing motion before moving away. He weaves through the crowd until I see him sit on a stone bench where an Oykig clerk starts to fuss.

He gazes serenely at me as chaos goes on around him, the clerk fitting him with a life force indicator and various other pieces of armor.

“My dear, the weapons,” the old bull says gently.

Brought to my senses, I realize there is a gaggle of impatient looking clerks surrounding me. Swiftly, I activate the locking mechanism and begin doling out the weapons according to each clerk’s pronouncement, keeping one eye on Maxym’s clerk until he finally hurries over to collect the sword and dagger Maxym picked.

“Get back, gladiator,” I hear a guard growl.

“Klynn, you know the rules,” the captain says as the massive Gryn looms over us. “Your clerk is to collect your weapon.”

“My clerk is unwell.” Klynn sticks a thumb over his shoulder at the Habosu who is face down on the floor. “Give me my weapon.”

The captain looks at the scene and, unconcerned about the tableau, he puts his hands on his hips. “Go back to your position and a new clerk will be assigned,” he responds.

Behind him, Maxym now stands, looking at Klynn as if he hopes looks could kill.

“Do it,” he says. “Or die here.”

Klynn snorts, but he turns away and goes back to his seat.

“I didn’t need your assistance, Maxym,” the captain growls as my gladiator backs away.

“No,” Maxym says, glancing at me. “You didn’t.”

The captain follows his gaze and his shoulders drop. “I will see to it,” he says, and Maxym gives him a short bow, followed by a wink at me, before he returns to his seat.

A new clerk races in to collect Klynn's weapons, and two others drag their fallen comrade away. In his corner, Maxym shakes his head.

I get the impression this is a common occurrence.

“Come, my dear,” the captain says, once all the weapons have been distributed. “I have a secure position available for you, one where you can watch your weapons in action.”

My stomach squirms. He wants me to watch the games, and I had hoped I could stay here and not see anything, just live in hope Maxym returned.

“It is better to watch than to wait, believe me,” the bull whispers.

I stare at him in surprise as he nods encouragingly at me, his great horns bobbing. He knows about Maxym and me, I can tell in the smile on his face.

And neither of us are in trouble.

“Do it for him. He will fight all the better knowing you are safe,” the captain says with a brief glance at Maxym, who is preoccupied with having leg armor fitted.

In my heart, I know what the captain is saying is true. And I need to be sure Maxym can concentrate on putting our weapons to good use. I turn my gaze back to the captain.

“Where do I go?”

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MAXYM

The bellow of the crowd nearly drowns out the fanfare which announces the commencement of the games as we march into the dome arena, Klynn and I at the head of the procession.

We are the most dangerous, after all.

The arena floor is basic because this is all about the killing. There will be beast games and other bouts later in the calendar, but for this first one, the crowd wants to see the blood of sentient species spilt.

“Watch your back,” I growl at Klynn.

“Why? Are you going to try me?” he snarls back.

“Something’s...wrong...” I say. “Something’s different. Don’t let them get behind you.” The second fanfare rings out, indicating the countdown until the bloodbath.

All around the arena walls, electrified spikes slide out. Several of the challengers jump at the noise. One, an over enthusiastic Xnosson bull, takes a run at them, no doubt thinking he can use them as a ladder.

The jolt sends him skidding on his back halfway across the dome. The crowd roars with bloodlust. Is he the games’ first victim? The bull gets to his feet, staggering and shaking his horned head. Looks like it takes more than a shock to put him down.

“Did you get a mark?” I say out of the corner of my mouth to Klynn.

His wings are heaving with repressed violence. He’s struggling to contain himself as the huge holo clock high in the dome counts down.

“No mark,” he responds through gritted fangs.

Neither did I. And for these games, it’s unusual. I thought my lack of mark might have been a punishment of sorts, but then being given a mark to kill for money isn’t considered a perk of the dome.

Something isn’t right. At all. I glare around at the challengers and the other gladiators. None of them seems concerned. I heft my sword, spinning it in my hand, my head filled with thoughts of Cleo. I saw the captain taking her away from the ante-chamber as he said he would.

Safe.

The word fills my head as if it’s been shouted in my ear. My heart thumps in my chest as I reach out in the direction of the voice.

Is this the thoughtbond? So soon?

Above, the clock pauses at two nova-seconds. I stare up at it. Whatever is wrong, it is affecting the clock. A clock which seems to shimmer and move in a way the holo-projection should not.

“Vrex!” I growl. “Klynn, look!” I point my sword upwards, and reluctantly, he follows my gaze.

High above, the countdown has gone. In its place are hundreds of crawling figures,

scuttling over the underside of the dome, unaffected, it seems, by the forcefield.

“Bogarok!” one of the challengers growls.

“It’s an invasion!” another says, throwing his weapons to the floor and racing away in the direction of the dome’s exit.

He’s followed by many of the others, all dropping their means of protection.

“Bogarok?” I look over at Klynn.

“Big, multiple legs, jaws.” He spins his sword and widens his stance.

“How do you know?”

“There’s one right behind you.”

I’m in the air before I can blink. The huge multi-limbed creature snaps its massive jaws at the space where I was. I flip over and drive my sword through the back of its neck. It screeches and thrashes.

“In the abdomen,” Klynn grinds out, having inexplicably killed at least three of the creatures already and covered himself in their remains.

I yank my sword out of the creature’s head and plunge it into the abdomen. The thing slumps to the floor with a soggy groan and stays still.

Only there are more coming for us. Those challengers who were left are all dead, leaving Klynn and me.

If I thought for a nova-second this was some sort of performance put on by the dome

for the paying public, the sound of their screams, the holes rent in the forcefield keeping them from us, and the bodies dropping to the arena floor disabuse me instantly.

“Cleo.” Her name is on my lips as I slam my sword through a set of legs and finish the creature off.

I only have a vague feeling of where she is through the strange thought which entered my head. I left the arrangements for her safety to the captain, and I am regretting it. I have to find her. Now.

“Get the Gryn gladiators.” A staccato voice drops into my mind like a set of rocks.

I look over at Klynn. He has his hands pressed to the sides of his head, unable to move as five Bogarok advance on him. I can feel a buzzing in mine, but with a shake, the feeling leaves me, and I fire myself into the air, dealing with his assailants and dragging him away from where they are all pouring in.

“Klynn!” I shake him. He moans something about the pain.

He’s not usually bothered by injury, and despite being covered in Bogarok guts, he seems like he has no major damage. But even so, he’s limp against me, his wings drooping and his head bowed as if all the fight has gone out of him.

I back us to one of the many trap doors in the floor of the arena, stamping my feet until I hear it ring hollow. What the captain and the others don’t know is all of us, over the years, have developed exit strategies in case they tried to kill us more than usual. For me, it’s the use of the subterranean passages used to deliver the beasts to the dome.

Beasts I can handle.

I use the point of my sword to lever the trap open and shove Klynn inside. He slides in like a sack of meat.

I'm about to follow him in when I hear her voice. Cleo is calling my name and, while going underground would be the sensible option, I lose all sense.

No one touches my mate. Anyone who does will die.

With a beat, I'm in the air and flying for her. Because Cleo belongs to me, and I will not be stopped.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:31 am

CLEO

Until the horrible spider creatures started dropping from the ceiling of the dome, I was pretty much bracing myself for a bloodbath. For several long minutes, I'm not sure if what is happening far below my small hospitality pod is part of the games. Then the forcefields protecting the banking filled with the crowd fail, and the creatures leap inside. Bodies fall to the arena floor, some missing limbs and heads.

I race to the door of the pod only to find it locked. I pull out my personal dagger and slam it into the locking mechanism. The thing makes a strangled mechanical whine, but the door remains stubbornly shut.

I slam my fists against it, calling out as I hear feet in the passage outside, but no one responds.

The vid-screen in the pod which was showing the parade of gladiators and challengers has changed. I turn up the sound, and an accented voice orders me to evacuate due to an invasion. The message is on repeat, clearly a recording. I fiddle uselessly with the settings, but I'm unable to do anything other than mute the screen.

Heading back to the viewing window, I can't see Maxym or Klynn because the place is filled with the dark, multi-legged things crawling everywhere. My heart leaps into my mouth. Can Maxym be alive down there?

A thin leg appears at the top of the window. It tap-taps its way down before being followed by another, and another, then the bulbous abdomen of the creature. A hideous head with huge lethal looking jaws swivels in my direction as I back away.

But I'm in its sights. Multiple eyes gaze at me and goo drips from the jaw.

"Tasty." The word falls into my head like I'm being hit.

"Nope, nope, nope," I say, looking at my dagger. It is completely inadequate against the massive spider, if it can get into the pod, but it's all I have.

I hope it can't break through.

The thin leg spears the glass as if it's cheese. So much for the pod keeping me safe.

I'm back at the door, slamming my blade in between the frame and the door, using it as a lever as much as I can. I believe in the quality of the weapon, but it bends alarmingly as I attempt to prize open my escape route.

I have to make a decision as the glass behind me shatters—continue and risk breaking my only means of protecting myself and my unborn baby or turn and face the thing.

The door gives a tiny amount, and I redouble my efforts as something rakes down my back. I scream out as pain sears through me, but I don't stop. I can't stop. I have to get out.

Bracing myself for more violence, I shove the dagger as hard as I can into the gap I've made and twist. There's a rush of wind which nearly pulls me over, and I risk a glance behind me.

The creature is in several pieces, and Maxym stands like an avenging angel, his dark eyes inky and his torso streaked with innards I don't want to know about.

"My eregri," he growls.

“Maxym!” I take a step towards him, and my knees buckle at the pain in my back. I put my hand where it hurts, and it comes away red.

I look at him and at my hand. He snorts, hot and feral.

“Did it hurt you?” he snarls.

My head is already spinning at the sight of my own blood, something I’ve never been good with.

“I think...”

My legs go from under me, and I’m in Maxym’s warm, strong arms. A breeze filled with a metallic scent and something worse blows as I realize I’m no longer on the ground or in the pod at all. I’m in the air.

“Maxym!” My voice is weak in comparison to what it should be, but I can’t breathe properly.

“Medic,” he growls at me before we spin in a sick making motion first one way, then the other to avoid yet more of the spider things.

A brief glance up shows me we’re heading for a gap in the roof of the dome, the one where the creatures are getting in.

“Up there, really?” My voice is hoarse, as if I’ve been screaming.

“It’s the only way.” He says, beating hard to gain height and bursting through.

For a second, I see so many things my brain can’t process them. Finally everything resolves as if my head has gone from slow motion to regular time.

A huge ship hovers over the dome with yet more of the things pouring out like a dark stream of legs and jaws. Across the skyline, I can see many other ships each doing the same.

“What the hell is going on?” I rasp as Maxym sweeps away from the dome.

“Bogarok invasion,” he responds, and I feel the words rather than hear them.

He drops and my stomach rises. We’re skimming over the low roofs of the dwellings as he puts distance between us and the ship over the dome. I slam my hand into his chest.

“I need to be sick. Please stop,” I beg.

His liquid eyes turn on me and, in what has to be an instant, we’re on the ground and I’m heaving up my guts, my eyes streaming with tears as each movement is agony.

When I’m done, I attempt to straighten, whimpering pathetically at the pain which wracks my body. I can’t move, I can’t think, and I’m not sure if I can continue breathing. Maxym’s concerned face looks down at me.

“Don’t leave me, little scrap,” he says as my vision dims. “Don’t ever leave me.”

“I’m not...” I whisper as everything goes dark.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:31 am

MAXYM

Cleo goes limp in my arms. Not like Klynn, this is different. She is pale in a way I dislike, her lips having a blue tinge.

She needs a medic, but the best medics I know are in the dome, which is the one place I can't return to. Shouts and screams fill the streets around us as the invasion becomes something the inhabitants of Tatatunga respond to. These Bogarok are creatures I don't believe I've encountered, but my visceral reaction to them tells me everything I need to know.

That Klynn knew of them is not a surprise. Nothing he does is ever so. If I know of the foul things, then it is one more thing lost to the reptilians who held me before selling me to my master.

But my lost memory is nothing compared to the sick mate in my arms. She needs assistance, and she needs somewhere safe.

"Gryn!" a voice hisses from a doorway.

I spot a pair of gimlet eyes shining out at me.

"Come here," the voice demands.

"Vrex off." I open my wings.

"I have a cure for the poison infecting your female," the voice says. "She needs it

quick before it is too late.”

The voice isn’t quick enough to avoid my arm and claws. I drag the Cirmos into the light. His tail lashes, and he digs his claws back into me, but the needle sharp things are nothing compared to what I’ve experienced in the dome. I ignore them.

“You will give her the cure, or you will die,” I snarl.

“Hey,” he growls. “No need to be like that. All I want is some protection from the Bogarok, and who better than a gladiator?”

“Yeah? What if I tell you the Bogarok want gladiators?”

He stops squirming. “They do?”

“How do you feel about my protection now?”

“You have a mate. You will protect her to your dying breath. I’ll stand behind her,” he says with a shrug.

Vrexing Cirmos.

Except most of the medics in the dome are Cirmos. If I trust anyone with my Cleo’s life, it would be a Cirmos.

“Show me the cure,” I growl, dropping him to the ground. He gives me a hurt look, but my blood is up and my desperation to make Cleo well is too great for me to care.

“This way,” he says, pushing open the door. “But you’ll need to take your tracker off.”

Vrex! I'd forgotten about the thing. "I can't. I don't have the key."

"Let me." The creature drops down to my leg, pulling at my pants to reveal the device, and in a matter of nova-seconds, it clicks and falls to the ground.

I stare at it. "How?"

"Not done yet," the Cirmos says, pulling a small drone from his back pocket. He places the tracker inside and releases the bot. It soars into the sky. "If anything comes looking for you, they have that to chase instead," he says, standing and dusting himself off. "I'm Pryax" he adds, heading through the door as I follow.

",," I grunt.

"I know." He laughs. "Everyone knows."

I duck down to follow him into the darkness, my eyes adjusting instantly to the lack of light. The doorway leads to a passage carved from stone which slopes down. Behind us, I hear the door close.

"Now you are mine," Pryax cackles.

"Not if I make you my snack first," I respond with a growl which echoes down the passage.

"Bad joke," he grumbles, with something added about Gryn having no sense of humor.

The passage soon opens out into a larger cave with three further passages leading off it. Pryax takes the far left one. In my arms, Cleo stirs and moans, but she doesn't wake. I move quicker up behind the Cirmos, and he quickens his pace too.

The passage ends in a large room filled with equipment and furniture. The floor is covered in bright rugs, and despite the fact it's a cave, it's warm and welcoming.

"Put your mate on the healing chair." Pryax points to the contraption I know well. "I will prepare the cure." He hurries away as I do what he says.

The chair whirrs to life as I place Cleo on it. The way she lies reveals the swell of her stomach.

"This cure won't hurt her unborn young, will it?" I call out.

Pryax's head pops up from behind a set of drawers. "She is with young? Is it yours?"

"No," I rasp. "I believe it is human, like her."

Pryax mutters something to himself, and I hear him opening and closing cabinets. I brush Cleo's hair away from her face.

"Stay with me, little scrap," I murmur.

For a nova-second, her eyes flutter open, and I'm sure I hear her say my name, only her lips don't move. Then she's gone again.

"Stand back, Gryn," Pryax says, marching up to the chair with a hypo syringe in his hand.

"Not a chance," I respond.

He shrugs and activates the healing process on the machine which ramps up the chilling noise it makes. I should know, I've been in one enough times. Pryax growls under his breath, a low whining sound, and huffs out a breath while shaking his head.

He checks the settings and then inserts the hypo into the machine itself.

“What are you doing?”

“My job,” he retorts. “I told you to stand back. Let me work.”

“Are you a healer in the dome?” I say, slightly embarrassed I might not have recognized him.

Although I do tend to get out of the medic-center as soon as I can.

“Not the dome,” he says as he checks over the settings. “Although I worked there before your time, Gryn.”

A blue light covers Cleo. I reach out to touch her.

“Don’t break the seal.” Pryax bats my hand away. “The cure is being infused so she can metabolize it. Bogarok venom is unpleasant at the best of times, but more so for a defenseless species like a human.”

He looks at me.

“Now let’s deal with your wounds. After all, I need you to be fit to protect me.”

“What wounds?” I look down at myself in surprise. My torso is covered in slash marks. On one arm, the injury is down to the bone.

“A Gryn protecting his mate.” Pryax huffs as I stagger slightly. “I suspect they could cut your head off and you’d still keep going.”

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:31 am

CLEO

I can hear voices and there's the scent of woodsmoke in my nostrils, along with the spicy smell of Maxym's feathers. None of it makes sense to my foggy brain. I put my hand to my head and rub over my eyes before I open them.

I find I'm looking up into a cave roof. Lights are dotted within it like stars. They're almost too bright.

"Hello, little scrap," Maxym intones, his face coming into view.

I'm lying in his arms. He's sat on a large couch which is covered with blankets. When I turn my head, a fire burns brightly in a small grate.

"Where are we?" I croak.

"It's a long story," Maxym says. "Here, drink this." He lifts a glass with pale green liquid to my lips.

I take a sip. It tastes like orange, and I take a gulp of the cool liquid which is like a silky balm to my rough throat.

"Easy," he rumbles. "You've been out for nearly twenty nova-hours."

"The dome...the creatures..." I splutter over the glass. "I was...injured?" I inspect my arms, even though I know it was my back. I'm wearing a long dress I don't recognize.

“Healed,” Maxym rumbles, a strange look in his eye.

“The Bogarok invaded. They do that.” A male Cirmos, his stripes much darker than Tibi’s, appears from around the couch.

I look at Maxym. “Those things were Bogarok?”

“Foul creatures,” he growls.

“More than that, they only attack somewhere if they’re being directed to do so,” the Cirmos says. “So, it means they’re the advance party. Something else wants Trefa.”

“Who is this?” I ask Maxym, who seems surprisingly unconcerned about the proximity of the Cirmos.

“This is Pryax. He saved you and treated me.”

It’s then I see the bandages wrapped around his arm, along with a long tube snaking from it to a fluid-filled bag hung nearby.

“You were hurt? We were hurt?” I gasp, tears springing to my eyes as my hand goes to my stomach.

“You will all be fine,” Pryax says soothingly, although I note he keeps his distance. “The treatment to remove the poison from your system worked, and your unborn young is unaffected. The gladiator will live. I’m sure he’s had far worse.”

Maxym gives him a rather wet grin. “I have,” he slurs proudly.

“What have you given him?”

“Something to relax. He was on edge, wouldn’t stop pacing, and this space is not designed for those wings,” Pryax grumbles. “Plus he kept opening his wounds.”

“So, you drugged him?”

“He consented...sort of.” Pryax pulls the tube from Maxym’s arm.

I watch as the light comes back into my big Gryn’s eyes. He blinks a few times, half smiles, and then releases a growl, which is quickly cut off as I shove my hands into his feathers.

“See, you do it too,” Pryax snaps as he walks away, tail lashing.

“Do what?” Maxym asks, his voice soft.

“Look after you.” I smile at him. “Like you look after me.”

“You got hurt.” The confusion on his face indicates he hasn’t rid himself of the drug as quickly as I thought. “I failed. You are my mate. You should not get hurt while I can wield a sword.”

“You plan for a Bogarok invasion regularly then?”

“No.” His brow furrows.

“Well then.” I work my fingers deeper, luxuriating in the feel of his silky down under my touch.

“You are my mate, . I want to sheathe my cocks in your heat, make you come on my tongue. I want to feel your belly riding me as you grow round with young,” he says happily. “I want to fill your fertile womb over and over again with younglings,” he

continues, eyes closed. “You are mine.”

It looks like I have the unabridged version of Maxym today—fewer growls and more truth.

“Is that so?” I lean my head against his chest.

“Never leave me again,” he says, his voice filled with sorrow. “I cannot survive without you, little .”

“You can’t get rid of me that easily, Maxym,” I respond. “Who’s going to supply you with weapons?”

I feel the laugh rumbling in his chest before he sighs deeply. When I look up at his face, he’s clearly asleep, his strong jaw slack and his breathing even.

With some difficulty, I extract myself from his embrace, even if he is warm and comfortable. My muscles scream at me as Maxym shifts but doesn’t wake.

I find the Cirmos in a side alcove which appears to be a makeshift food prep area.

“Your mate is fine. He needs rest. All gladiators need rest,” he says without looking up at me.

“Maxym doesn’t strike me as the sort of male who rests.” I fold my arms over my chest.

“Which is why he should take it when he can.” Pryax replies.

“He was drugged enough in the dome. He’s free now.”

“And how do you figure that?” Pryax fixes his dark green gaze on me, his pupils slits.

“Because everything’s gone to shit and...” I hesitate as information I don’t recall receiving comes to the forefront of my brain. “He doesn’t have his tracker.”

“You have a thoughtbond with this Gryn?” Pryax is suddenly in front of me, looking me up and down as if he can see something different about me.

“What the hell is a thoughtbond?” I say, moving away from the Cirmos and instead pouring myself a cup of what looks like joh.

I need the alien equivalent of caffeine right now.

“It’s a mind link between fated mates.” Maxym’s sinful deep voice rumbles from behind me. “It’s the reason you knew about the tracker being removed without witnessing it.”

I turn and hand him the cup of joh, figuring he could use it more than I could, although potentially more stimulants might not necessarily be a good thing depending on what the Cirmos has given him.

He downs it in one and grimaces. “Cold.”

“I’ll put on a fresh pot.” Pryax makes a move, but Maxym already has him by the scruff of his neck.

“Why am I not free?”

Pryax shakes himself loose with a grunt and a grumble, pressing his thumb on a vid screen hung on the wall.

It fires into life, and there is a head of one of the horrible Bogarok large in the frame.

“All fighters are to give themselves up. All warriors and all gladiators.” The words drop into my head like a length of chain. “Anyone found harboring a gladiator, especially a Gryn, will be put to death.”

Pryax turns the screen off.

“So, no one is free, Maxym. Least of all you.”

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:32 am

MAXYM

My head feels clearer than it has been in a long while, even if waking without my eregri in my arms was a jarring experience.

Except I knew she was close by and not in danger, her thoughts indistinct but her mood clear. Irritation with the Cirmos. Looks like we have plenty in common.

But even without the thoughtbond, I can tell her mood as the Bogarok makes its threats. She is frightened for me.

Her arms wrap around her little body and a shiver runs through it as Pryax pronounces sentence.

“No one owns me,” I growl. “The dome was only holding me, and I have plenty I need to do before I die.” I put down the empty cup and draw Cleo to me. “I presume I don’t have to tie you up while I mate my female? You’re not going to do anything stupid, like give us up, are you?”

Pryax holds up his hands. “I might look like a typical citizen of Tatatunga, but I can assure you I am not. I have encountered the Bogarok before, and they do not treat anyone well, even those who comply.” He snarls. “I would no more give you up than cut off my tail.”

I shrug. “Good, because if you did, I would have to cut it off for you, followed by your head,” I say evenly.

“!” Cleo bats at my chest.

“And as for you, little mate, I need to be buried in you.”

I toss her into my arms. Waking without her was not good, but knowing I can sheathe my cocks in her wet heat is taking some of the sting out of my disappointment.

“What?”

“You hear my thoughts, little scrap?” I rasp. “You know what I want to do to you?”

Her breathing quickens. “You want to...mate with me.”

“I want to consume you, eregri.” I stalk through the cluttered open area to the fire where I place her down. “I want to taste you, enjoy you, and pleasure you. I want to give you my cocks and make you scream my name.”

She looks past me. “But...Pryax.”

“He’ll make himself scarce, if he knows what’s good for him.” I growl loudly. “All you need to do is concentrate on me, mate.”

I unwrap her from her clothing. The long dress the medi-chair wrapped her in slips easily from her form, exposing her gloriously soft skin to me.

“Legs apart,” I order, staring down at my beautiful female.

For a nova-second too long, she stares at me. I slide my hand between her knees and jerk them open. Cleo hisses, and the strong perfume of her arousal hits me, nearly sending me reeling. She runs her hand over her raised stomach.

“You like to test me, do you, little scrap?” I rasp.

“I don’t do what I’m told,” she retorts, causing my cocks to jump so hard in my pants, I think they might punch through the thick fabric.

“Don’t you?” I spread her thighs farther apart. “But this sweet cunt belongs to me, and I get to tell it what to do.”

Cleo moans as I swipe my finger through her soaking, swollen folds, my hand caressing her belly, marveling at her beauty before I drop between her legs and run my tongue over the glistening slit. Her flavor fills all my senses, and I can’t get enough of her, gobbling at her moisture as I grip her thighs to hold her to my hungry mouth.

“Perfection.”

I growl over the sweet bundle of nerves which guards her entrance and which causes her to buck further against my lips, her hands in my feathers and her mouth groaning out my name as she attempts to twist first one way, then the other. But she doesn’t want to be free. As I slide a digit into her slick channel, it’s clear what she wants as her walls clamp down over me and she cries out in delight.

“Tell me you need my cocks, little scrap. Beg for them,” I murmur lapping at her climax and causing her to curse me in her strange human words.

“Beg me,” I say again, holding her down. “Beg me or I’ll make you come again.”

“No!” Her eyes are bright as she glares at me. “I don’t beg.”

The thoughtbond tells me differently. I shrug off my pants and gently stroke my cocks from root to tip.

“Which hole are you taking these in today, eregri ? One, both? Because you will be taking them, and I will be making you scream my name until it echoes from the roof.”

Cleo shudders beneath me.

“If you don’t choose, I will choose for you,” I demand.

“Both,” she moans.

“Both.” I feel the smile spread over my face as I line up my cocks with her tight entrance.

If I thought breaching both of her holes was delicious before, the way she resists me this time is exquisite. Her soaking entrance wants me, but the ring of muscle takes some breaching, until it finally gives and I slide a little way inside before I stop.

“!” she growls at me.

“You didn’t beg,” I respond.

She stares up at me, fingers still buried deep in my feathers, her eyes glittering with malice because I know what she wants. Her pussy pulses around me, attempting to draw me in.

“Give me your cocks,” she growls.

I furrow my brow.

“Give them to me!”

“I don’t hear any begging,” I respond, slowly circling my hips.

Her breath stutters in her chest, her eyes closed, every inch of her on edge, on the very edge.

“Please.” She hesitates. “Please, . I need you inside me.”

“Say you want to be impaled by me.”

“I want to be impaled by you.”

“Say you...”

Her grip on my wing increases.

“Impale me,” she grinds out. “Do it now.”

My hips flick forward at her bidding, and I slide deep inside her, her tight channel nearly squeezing the life out of my cocks, and it makes me love her all the more for it.

“!” She calls out my name as I withdraw and thrust again.

“Call for me, little scrap. Make sure everyone knows who is impaling you.”

She grinds out my name once more before her pussy pulses so violently my cocks can’t hold. I can’t hold, my seed erupting from me like I’ve never mated in my life. My second cock swells hard against her, and pleasure floods every atom of my being. Beneath me, my sweet eregri gasps for a second before her entire body convulses yet again gripping both cocks and strangling them in the best possible way.

I feel my second cock explode once again. It needs to fill this creature with a youngling in a way I didn’t ever expect. Cleo is my everything. Her young is my

young, and soon we will be a family.

CLEO

Maxym is a demanding, dangerous, and delicious male, making my body sing at every possible moment. He makes me feel like a goddess and not a rather pregnant lady who has absolutely nothing and is a million miles from her planet.

I'm cradled in his arms, strong wings wrapped around me as my climax subsides and his continues. With both cocks, I was stretched to my absolute limit, even feeling a further pinch as we both came. I shift position slightly underneath him and the pinch is there again.

"We're stuck," I say in surprise.

"My second cock has swelled, eregri, we are locked."

"Does this always happen?" I gasp, still contending with the dying embers of my orgasm, my body pulsing over him.

"My second cock has never swelled before. But then it never arose until I met you. It only happens for a Gryn mating his fated one," Maxym intones.

"So, you getting stuck inside me means I'm your fated mate?"

"It does."

A warmth rises within me, coming from deep inside. Maxym wants me. Fate wants us to be together. I'm not some abandoned pregnant human anymore. I have him.

“How long does it last?”

“Until my body chooses to release you,” he growls. “And my body likes you very much, little scrap, so be prepared to be here for some time.”

I’m scooped up easily as he shifts his position to make us both more comfortable. The flames of the fire are reflected in his eyes as they flicker.

“What do we do about the Bogarok?” I ask. I don’t want to ask because I want to stay in this moment, all the good hormones running through my body, my brain wanting to sleep, but this can’t last, and it’s that thought which keeps me from succumbing.

“We can’t stay in Tatatunga,” Maxym says, gently stroking my face. “We’ll need to find out how far this invasion has spread. Past attempts to take Trefa have not gotten farther than this city.” He chuckles. “I guess the place eats invaders.”

“I doubt anyone is going to be eating a Bogarok,” I say with a grimace.

“If the invasion covers any other parts of Trefa, we’ll find a way off world,” Maxym says practically.

Maxym finally slips free of me and, having found a soft cloth, I’m carefully cleansed (something we both enjoy) before he helps me back into my clothing and stacks up the fire.

“How many of you were there in the dome?” I ask as he hands me a cup of hot joh.

“There were five,” he says. “We all came at different times, all with our own problems.”

He has brought a pile of round baked rolls. I watch as he carefully slices one in half

using his now clean sword, then spears it on the tip, holding it to the fire.

“Now there are two of you.”

“Sylas, Blayn, and Rych found their mates. They were free to leave the dome,” Maxym says, staring into the fire. “And they had good reason to. We were not always farmed as we believed. We have a planet. Somewhere, there are others, other Gryn that is.”

“How do you feel about that?” I ask. “Because if I had a chance to go home”—I dip my head, not sure about looking him in the eye as I know I’m revealing too much about myself—“I’m not sure I would.”

“I don’t know what I want to do. I feel like the other Gryn should have come looking for us,” he says quietly. “But they didn’t.”

A mixture of anger and sadness fills me as Maxym inspects one of the rolls, using his claws to handle the hot snack before using his dagger to spread it with a bright green jelly and handing it to me.

“Eat,” he exhorts.

I take a bite, and the flavor spreads over my tongue, sweet with a hint of salt. The hot bread melts in my mouth.

“Wow! This is good. What is it?”

Maxym grins, and it makes him look so much younger. “It’s a lekvar, a fruit from Choban, made into a spread. We occasionally got it as a treat in the dome.”

He spreads some on the other half of the roll and takes a large bite, chewing with

cheeks bulging as he eats his treat, his feathers shivering a little as he clearly enjoys it immensely.

My heart flips over in my chest as I watch him, my hand covering my stomach as I feel the evidence of the life growing within me. Seeing my huge gladiator revel in a simple pleasure makes me happy. He's a big, broken thing really, forced to fight for his life, forced to face death, forced to kill, whereas it strikes me his species are not killers.

I eat my roll and savor the sweet taste as Maxym makes another, again handing half to me and taking half for himself. It's domestic and pleasurable on a planet where neither of us know what's going to happen next.

Only I feel so completely safe, here with him, in this moment. It's bliss I haven't experienced for a very long time.

Pryax wanders past, the tip of his tail twitching as he does his best to ignore us. For an instant my face heats until...

"Maxym, I know where we can go." I put my hand against his chest, feeling his heart beat slow and steady. "We can go to my employer, Retah. He has weapons, all the things we need to get away."

Maxym furrows his brow.

"Please, I want to go. I owe him that much, as well as Tibi. I need to know they're both okay."

I'm pulled onto a warm lap before I can get far. "I'm sure your employer can look after himself," Maxym says.

“But what if he can’t?” I push at his chest. “You’ve fought the Bogarok. You saw what they did to the others in the dome, to the clients as well. Tibi is a Cirmos. She doesn’t stand a chance against those things.”

“Wily creatures, Cirmos,” Maxym rasps, one eye on Pryax. “It’s risky,” he growls. “I’m not sure it’s a risk we should take.”

“Retah was good to me, and so was Tibi. Neither of them had to be. Retah gave me a chance, and if he hadn’t, we might never have met.”

I feel like Maxym wants to say fate would have found a way, but he thinks better of it. It’s a weird feeling, as if I’m reading his mind.

“Fine.” He sighs. “I’ll go look for them, bring them here.”

“The Bogarok are looking for you,” I say, worrying my bottom lip with my teeth. “And you know how tight the security is at Retah’s dwelling. If you want to get in, I’ll need to come with you.”

A growl rumbles in Maxym’s chest. Again, I can tell he’s weighing up the options and he doesn’t like any of them.

“Have you been eating my lekvar?” Pryax shouts across the room.

Unable to help myself, I smile.

“Have we?” I raise my eyebrows at Maxym.

“Yes, and I have no regrets,” he says. “But I know I’m going to regret letting you come with me.”

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:32 am

MAXYM

Cleo is filled with worry about her employer and her Cirmos friend. I keep getting blasts of it, and then they cut off as if they were never there.

The thoughtbond is a strange phenomenon which I seem to know innately, and yet it is more of a surprise than I expected. It's also strangely comforting, not that I get some of her odd thoughts, but the connection we have.

However, I want to nest for my mate so badly it's physically painful not to be able to do it. By the fire, I was able to half pretend I'd made something for her with a few pieces of fabric and a small snack, but it hasn't alleviated my desire to nest. All of these things mean my feathers are permanently pricked and my body right on the very edge.

I want to snarl at everything and anything. I want to pick up so many bright and colored items we see because they would be perfect for my nest.

But I can't and it makes me rage from within.

We make our way through the back streets of Tatatunga. Pryax has provided us with a map cube, and I've worked out a route where we will mostly be hidden from any sky drones, which means on the ground, we are only at risk of the Bogarok and their patrols.

And they have plenty of patrols. Groups of ten or more march down the deserted main streets. I see the occasional window in a dwelling swing shut, so there has not

been an evacuation. Tatatunga is hunkering down, waiting for this invasion to be over so they can go back to business as usual.

Nothing can destroy this city, not even the Bogarok.

Cleo grabs a wing, and I'm pulled into a disused courtyard. She's shaking her head at the cube.

"There's supposed to be an exit here." She looks at the blank wall ahead.

"We can go over." I look up.

"And risk exposing you. Not a chance," she grumbles.

I like the way she thinks tactically.

"That's not all you like," Cleo says absently as she taps the wall.

And falls straight through.

"Vrex!" I race to where she was standing and shove my hand against the...in an instant, I'm tumbling forward into a void.

"!" Cleo calls out.

She's held in the arms of a Voltes, a pulsar pistol pointed at her head. The large, hairy creature bares its teeth at me.

"Drop your weapons, Gryn, if you know what's good for the female."

A creature like this forgets in the heat of the moment that I was a gladiator. I already

know he's alone as there are no more scents in here than his, and he has no other weapons than the aging pistol. And he's up against a Gryn gladiator with plenty of inbuilt weapons which I'm more than prepared to use.

Before he can blink, I've slammed him in the side of the head with a wing, grabbed the pistol, crushed it, and pulled Cleo into my arms. The Voltes goes reeling back, blood streaming from his long snout. The sight of the blood fills my head with a mist of ultra-violence.

"You dare to touch my mate?" The words I snarl are hardly even distinguishable.

The Voltes scrambles, looking for a way out.

But the only way out is through me.

"You dare...to touch...my mate?" I grind.

He whimpers. "I thought you were with the invaders."

"I'm wanted by them because I am their worst nightmare." I extend my wings, making myself as large as possible, dominating the space. "And I am yours too."

I slash out, my claws catching him on his chest and flinging him across the dark space until he hits a wall and slides down with a low groan of pain, before scrambling away. I grab hold of Cleo's hand and steer her to the door at the rear. Pushing it open a crack, the alleyway into which it leads is clear, and I shove her through.

"No one touches you, and no one threatens you without losing something precious, like their life."

Cleo stares at me, then she looks down at her map cube. "It's this way," she says

dully, taking a step to the side and heading down the alley, turning a sharp left into another.

I follow, my anger still seething inside, willing a Bogarok patrol to appear so I can appease my need to fight.

“We’re here,” Cleo whispers, as I almost walk into her, peering around a corner.

I gently pull her back.

“What are you doing?” she says in a harsh, low voice.

“I go first,” I say. “Always.”

“Except when the locks are keyed to my DNA,” Cleo says, pressing her hand against the wall.

There’s a click and the wall caves in to reveal a doorway.

“Then I go first,” she says.

“No,” I growl. “You do not know if the Bogarok are inside, locks or no locks.”

I tuck her behind me and push through the door.

Inside the dwelling, all is silent. There’s no heat and no scent of food, which there was when I visited last. Behind us, Cleo closes the hidden door.

“Retah likes to have escape routes,” she says. “Makes sense for his business. He knew he was likely to be a target.”

“Then hopefully he will have taken similar precautions for his safety this time.” I rasp. “Because the sooner we can get out of here, the better.”

We move through the dwelling. The place seems empty, the food preparation area smells of Cirmos, but it is dark and hasn’t been used for a while, the burners cold to the touch.

“Let me get changed into something more suitable,” Cleo says as we pass her quarters.

I push open the door and check the interior.

“Thank you for ensuring my underwear isn’t going to strangle me,” Cleo mutters as I allow her to enter.

“Where are the weapons?” I ask.

“If they’re still here, they’ll be in the basement.” Cleo opens her closet and pulls out items of clothing.

I prefer the figure hugging dress she’s wearing, the one Pryax provided. It shows every inch of her blooming body, especially the swell of her stomach, filled with the young growing within her.

My desire to nest and mate ramps up, warring with the desire for violence which hasn’t abated since the Voltes. The silence of the dwelling also isn’t helping. So, when I hear the scraping sound, already too familiar, I’m out of her rooms and down the passage, sword in hand.

Something has to die today. My soul demands it.

CLEO

I know he's broken. I know he's been through far too much for one living being, but his reaction to the Voltes was something else entirely.

I don't know how to handle it, to handle him. We're in this together, but he isn't making it easy. I pull on some underwear and pants, turning to see what he's doing as I lift the dress over my head.

But Maxym isn't there. He's gone. Where there was a towering seven and a half foot, winged warrior, there is a very much Maxym shaped hole. I swiftly pull on a top, catching sight of myself in the mirror, the damage done to my back by the Bogarok a long red streak on my skin from the base of my spine to my hairline.

With a shiver, I shrug on a long jacket which sweeps the floor and listen to see if I can hear Maxym moving around in the dwelling.

Silence closes in on me. All of it, save for a sharp click which freezes the blood in my veins.

Is it the Bogarok? Have they found us? If they've found Maxym, I'm not sure what I'll do. He might be feral, too quick to damage whatever is in his way but...

Do I care for him?

The clicking sound is getting closer. For all the secret exits in this place, I'm trapped in my room with no escape. I decide the closet is not a good option and drop to the

floor, rolling under my bed instead.

I daren't breathe as the door swings open, and I see a long slim black leg tap on the floor. I'm frozen with fear. The memory of the Bogarok which attacked me in the dome is at the forefront of my prey brain. I want to run so much my legs are shaking. Hiding is my only other option.

It doesn't stop every single part of me shaking.

"?" Retah's voice reaches me.

The long thin leg is joined by two booted feet.

"Where is she?" Maxym snarls, his feet joining the others.

"I'm under here." I manage to get the words out.

A huge set of feathers pools on the floor, and a pair of dark eyes peer under the bed.

"Little mate," Maxym says. "Why are you under here?"

"I thought...I thought you were the Bogarok." My teeth chatter. "I thought they had found us."

Maxym reaches in and gently slides me out, pulling me into his arms and wrapping his wings around me. I'm enclosed in the wall of warm, scented feathers as he holds me tight.

"Nothing will ever keep me from you, my sweet mate," he says. "I will move all the celestial bodies to hold you in my arms. You are my feathers, my claws, and my soul. Without you, I am a mere vessel. With you, I am a Gryn warrior."

He lifts my face to his with a clawed thumb and kisses me on the lips, a slow, delicious, dominating kiss which leaves me in no doubt as to who I am to him.

“I knew I’d seen Maxym somewhere before,” Retah says genially. “Or at least his species. I’d just never seen one close up, and it took me a while to remember.”

I’m still staring at Maxym, studying his face, the long scar which runs over his forehead, the sweet curve of his lips as he gazes at me.

“Remember what?” I ask in a daze.

“Remember hearing about their species, how they rose up against the tyrannical bots which took over their world, how they took it back. How they are searching the galaxy for those they lost,” Retah says, his voice tinged with sadness.

When I glance over at him, he’s in a terrible state. Slash marks cover his face and arms, bloodied bandages wrapped around them. What I mistook for a Bogarok leg is a stick he’s using as his leg is also heavily bandaged.

“I was trying to stop the invasion.” He gives me a wry smile filled with pain. “It didn’t go as well as it should have done.”

“Where’s Tibi?” I say, my heart seized with fear given how badly injured Retah is.

“She’s perfectly safe in the basement, grumbling about the cooking facilities. She’s fine,” he says, taking a step towards me and stopped by a growl from Maxym. “She told me you are with young,” he says quietly, eyeing Maxym carefully. “She says this warrior has accepted both of you.”

“and her young are mine,” Maxym snarls. “No one else can have them.”

“Question answered.” Retah holds up his hands to supplicate Maxym, the stick clutched in one of them. “I consider your mate like a daughter to me, Gryn,” he says. “She has been good for my business, and having a young creature around has been good for Tibi and me too.” He cocks his horned head on one side. “Whatever happens, I trust you will always consider this place home, .”

His words are delivered warmly even as he keeps his eyes firmly on Maxym.

I place one hand on Maxym’s chest and slide the other deep into his feathers. I’m rewarded by a stuttering breath and flickering eyelids.

All my huge gladiator wants is to be loved. He wants a simple kindness to pull him away from the violence, the only thing he’s known for a long time. I can feel his thoughts in turmoil, from not knowing what to do about Retah, to having me in his arms and my hand at the base of his wings. Maxym is confused and lost.

And he wants to be found.

MAXYM

Discovering the injured Remek warrior was not exactly a surprise. As soon as Cleo mentioned the basement, it was my thought he would be hiding there, surrounded by his armory. It made perfect sense for the place to seem deserted, and as I lift my head, I'm certain he's been using scent repressors to hide the evidence of his occupation.

Even though he's indicated he thinks of Cleo as a daughter, it hasn't quite assuaged my feral side, the mate who hasn't nested, who hasn't claimed his eregri in his nest. I give him a warning glance, and a tip of his horned head suggests he understands.

"Come and see Tibi," he says to Cleo. "She's been desperately worried about you after what happened at the dome."

My Cleo hurries out of her bedroom and back in the direction I took when I thought the place was filling with Bogarok.

"What did happen at the dome?" Retah says to me, placing his stick on the floor and hobbling after my mate.

I don't let him get far before pushing past.

"Carnage," I growl. "What do you know about the invasion?" I turn to face him in the narrow passage, my bulk stopping his progress.

"I know the Bogarok were sent as an advance force," he says. "I know they want every fighter, including you, in their usual scorched planet process, only this time it's

not to kill you all, it's capture."

"Why?"

"That I don't know. I got as much information as I could before I got out of Sartak."

"You were in Sartak?"

He nods his horned head. "Carnage," he says wryly.

I step aside to allow him to pass. The old warrior knows a trick or two, and I expect I'm only still standing because he's injured. Not that he would have me down for long.

Retah eyes me as we walk into his study, the hidden door to his basement open, light spilling from the stairwell.

"Cleo believes in you," he says.

"Choose your next words carefully," I growl.

He holds up his hands. "As long as she is happy, I'm happy. I'm just pleased she trusted you enough to tell her about her young. Tibi and I were worried she would never say anything."

"You knew?" I say, unable to keep the surprise from my voice.

"Tibi guessed and she told me. I don't know why Cleo tried to hide it from us. Whatever she wanted, we would always be there for her," he says kindly, his eyes glittering. "I was young once too, you know."

He walks down the stairs, and I follow, my wings brushing either side of the narrow passage. Behind us I hear the door click and a whoosh of air as our scents are cleansed from the area.

Retah knows his business.

The stairs open out into a large vaulted room, oddly not dissimilar to the one Pryax had. It's filled with boxes marked with various symbols, some of which my translator can interpret, some of which remain a mystery. I spot several crates of pulsar weapons and a brand new pulsar cannon, along with various types of disrupter small arms.

He definitely knows his business. There's enough weaponry here to take down a small army.

"You seem like a connoisseur," Retah says, pushing the top off a nearby crate with a wince before delving inside and pulling out a small pistol. "What do you make of this?"

He tosses it to me, and I catch it in one hand.

"Prefer blades," I say, turning the thing over in my hand.

It's small and solid, but it doesn't look like any pulsar or disruptor I've ever seen. The metal gleams with a dull iridescent sheen. At the handle, there is a small window which is filled with a glowing blue light.

"What is it?"

"It's the latest in Sartak tech, a pulsix. It packs as much power as three pulsar cannons."

“This does?” I stare down at the small weapon.

“And I have the only supply,” Retah says proudly.

“I presume the Gryn wants to eat. They’re always hungry.” A female Cirmos peers around the side of a crate marked ‘psi-grenades’.

She appraises me with an almost professional interest.

“You must be Tibi,” I say.

She snorts and disappears again.

“Tibi takes some impressing.” Retah chuckles. “Knowing her name isn’t going to assist.” He motions to me as I pocket the weapon. “But if you make the right noises while she feeds you, that might help.”

I follow the direction the Cirmos took and the scent of roast meat reaches me. It seems like a long time since I ate the toasted rolls and had anything more substantial.

We wind through several more piles of crates before we turn into an area which has been specifically set out as a dwelling. There is a table, comfortable seating, and cooking facilities. The tiny Cirmos has prepared a veritable feast laid out ready for us. My Cleo is already seated, and she pats the bench next to her.

I sit, flicking my wings back. Luxuriating in her scent. It’s like being in the dome, only I am not in the dome. I am here, with my mate.

As she slips her hand into my feathers, it feels like home.

CLEO

Maxym seems to be vibrating as I touch the skin at the base of his feathers. He relaxes a little, but they remain pricked up like spines.

“Eat, eat,” Tibi exhorts as Retah also takes a seat, moving stiffly with his injuries.

Maxym bows his head for an instant, almost as if in prayer, before he picks up a piece of roasted meat and hands it to me. I go to take it, but he moves it away, holding it to my lips instead.

I feel myself flush. He wants me to eat from his fingers, with both Tibi and Retah watching. Something rumbles in his chest, and I feel his desire swirling around my head, a desire and a need to take care of me, and this is the only way he knows how.

I take the bite, and the rumble increases, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

“You’ll be nesting soon, Gryn,” Retah says genially as he chews.

This time, Maxym does growl, the noise echoing around the chamber we’re in.

“Nest?” I look at Maxym in search of an answer.

He shoves a large piece of meat into his mouth and glowers at Retah. “I will nest when it is safe to do so,” he rasps.

“I’ve heard a Gryn nest is something to behold,” Retah says, shoving a bowl of

mashed root vegetables down at Maxym.

He takes the bowl, lifting his lips to reveal fangs. “A Gryn nest is for his mate alone,” he says.

It’s then I feel it, like a blast of icy air. Maxym’s confusion, his desperation, the deep, deep need to be more than he is. He knows he needs to nest—he feels it deep in his bones, and it’s something which occupies too much of his mind, but he doesn’t think he can do it.

“I’d like a nest,” I say.

“You would?” His dark gaze rests on me.

“We have plenty of space down here. Why not nest now?” I suggest, looking over at Retah.

“Yes!” he exclaims. “I’m sure you can find what you need, or at least that’s what I’ve heard about Gryn.”

Maxym looks around us and then shakes his head. “Not the right time.” He goes back to eating.

I rub my hand on his muscular arm. “Is there ever a right time? War, games, invasions, births, deaths. They all go on regardless of anything else in our personal lives. Do what makes you comfortable.”

I realize why I’ve been on edge for so long. It’s because of him, because he wanted to do something which is part of his DNA, part of what his species is, and he hasn’t been able to do it, or that’s what he thought.

“Do it for me, if that makes it any easier,” I breathe.

Maxym gives the others around the table a hunted look, grabs a handful of meat, and then he’s on his feet with a swish of feathers, stalking farther into the basement with a brief backwards glance at me.

“Eat,” Tibi says to me. “You’re going to need your strength if his resolve is anything to go by.”

“What do you...” I start my sentence and then catch her eye. “Seriously? This is worse than bringing my first boyfriend home to meet my parents.” I shake my head at the pair of them.

“I’ve heard Gryn can be quiet lovers,” Retah says. “Or at least, that’s what Tibi has told me.”

Tibi’s shoulders start to shake.

“Stop it, stop it,” I choke out as Retah attempts to contain his mirth. “I expected better from both of you.”

“I know if you weren’t already with young, that Gryn would have put a youngling in your belly after the noises my ears caught.” Tibi guffaws. “And for the record, it’s not Gryn I heard.”

“Tibi!” I gasp, shocked, shaking my head and trying to hide my embarrassed smile. “I can’t believe the pair of you.”

“I’m just pleased you’ve found someone, and we can finally talk about your youngling,” Retah says as he bites into a sticky iced treat. “We fully expected you to birth before mentioning it. Is this a human thing?”

I'm not entirely sure I can speak, as Maxym walks past us purposefully, arms filled with items including fabrics, into another part of the basement, where I hear crashing noises.

"It's going to be one spectacular nest," Retah murmurs as we look in the direction of the noise.

"You'll need to tell us all about it," Tibi adds. "But keep eating. You're going to need the energy."

Tibi isn't wrong. It feels like forever since I ate toasted bread with Maxym, and I'm ravenous once again. I hope he comes back to finish up once he's done making his nest because a huge male like him needs far more fuel than he's eaten.

"Nest is more important." The words form in my head, and I know they belong to him.

"Then I'll save you some," I think back.

Warmth spreads through my body, a warmth which can only come from love. Whether it's my love or his, I don't know, but I like it, and for the first time in forever, this galaxy feels like home.

CLEO

I help Tibi clear the table while wondering what Maxym is up to. Once everything is tidy, Retah asks Tibi to go with him to check supplies, and I'm left on my own in the makeshift living area.

"Little scrap?" Maxym's deep, delicious voice has me looking up.

He stands with his hands at his sides and his wings drooping, brow slightly furrowed. His level of concern fills me.

"What is it?" I stand and walk over to him, putting my arms around his waist and delving my fingers into his feathers.

"I have nested for you," he slurs happily.

"Then I need to see."

I remove my hands and stare up at him. He blinks a couple of times, manages to regain his senses, and smiles hesitantly.

This huge gladiator, this predator, this killer, needs my approval. He takes my hand, and I follow him through the crates until we reach an alcove at the very far end of the basement, or at least the farthest we can go before Retah needs to unlock the rest of the area. A curtain is crudely hung on nails recently slammed into the rock.

"This is for you, my eregri ." Maxym pulls the curtain aside, and I peer in.

I gasp. I genuinely do not know how he has done it, but what should just be a dark side alcove has been completely transformed. Lights glitter everywhere, blue, green, and yellow. There are sumptuous fabrics covering the floor, and in the center is a large cup made from upholstery and goodness knows what else. The ceiling has items hanging from it. They twist and glitter in the breeze from the basement. I have to take a second glance to realize some of them are daggers, and some of them are parts from pulsar pistols.

Maxym really has used everything he can find to his best advantage. I can feel his anticipation as a prickle down my neck.

But I decide to draw things out a little. I walk around the nest, inspecting what he has done, not saying a word and keeping my mind as blank as possible, before throwing myself into the comfortable cup-bed.

“Not bad,” I pronounce.

In the blink of an eye, I’m caged by the most enormous, most horny Gryn, my wrists pinned above my head and my legs spread apart.

“Not bad?” he queries.

“For a first attempt,” I sass, knowing full well it’s going to get me naked.

Maxym dips his head and scrapes his fangs up my neck, making me shiver.

“Then I will have to go on nesting until I impress you,” he growls.

“I love it.” I laugh as he nibbles at me. “I really do, Maxym.”

“Too late, little scrap. I have you in my nest, and you will be mated and claimed.”

“Is that right?”

“It is a promise,” he rasps. I can feel the calm emanating from him. This is his domain, and he has me captured within it. “As is my promise to pleasure you until this basement rings with my name.”

“Maxym!”

“That’s my name, but louder, my mate.”

In a snap, my clothing is missing, as is his. Huge cocks jut out, and he strokes them from root to tip thoughtfully while gazing down at me.

“I think you need to see the best part of this nest, little mate. The part I put in just for you.”

He reaches over my head and draws back a swathe of heavy brocade style fabric to reveal a mirror.

“I want to see you while I take you from behind. I want to gaze at your belly, your breasts and your face as I make you come,” he rumbles.

My core pulses. My experience in the bedroom wasn’t limited to the terrible fumble in a closet which resulted in the baby I’m now carrying, but this is something completely different...new and exciting.

“And I can see you too,” I whisper hoarsely.

“You can see me as I enjoy sheathing myself in your hot little cunt,” he rasps as he dips his head to give me a kiss to end all kisses, leaving me panting with need. “But first, I need to eat.”

I'm spread wide to accommodate him, one hand proprietarily on my stomach, and the second his mouth hits my clit I'm convulsing. I don't think I've ever hit an orgasm as fast in my life. And Maxym doesn't stop, doesn't slow his pace. He laps up my fluids and works on me until I come again, my mind a blank and my arms flailing to catch hold of his wings.

"Now it's time, little scrap, for me to impale you." His voice penetrates my fog of pleasure as I'm helped up, propped onto my hands and knees.

He is at my rear, stupendously handsome in the myriad of lights dancing in the nest. He gazes at my rump, dragging his eyes up to the mirror where they blaze at the sight of my body, my tits hanging down, already swollen even though I'm sure I'm nowhere close to producing milk, and my stomach also clearly visible. He draws in a ragged breath.

Cocks notch at my entrance, and he pushes the tips inside, stretching me intensely.

"You look so good stretched around my cocks, little scrap," he rasps, pushing deeper, inch by inch. "And what do we have here? A little bottom hole which also needs filling."

With one hand on my buttock, he swirls his finger around my tight pucker, making me shiver with anticipation.

"I'm going to fill you in both holes, eregri," he says. "Are you watching?"

I can't actually speak as his cocks slide the rest of the way inside me. I'm already full to the brim just with him, if he also...

"Ah!" I exclaim as my bottom stretches around his digit with extreme deliciousness.

“I can feel my cocks inside you, mate,” Maxym grinds as he withdraws and then thrusts back in, pushing his digit deeper again.

I’m so full I can’t speak, I can’t move, I can’t do anything other than gaze at him, at what he’s doing to my body, and hold on as he increases his pace, cocks and finger, finger and cocks.

“So beautiful,” he murmurs. “So ready to take my seed.”

His finger drills a little deeper, and I’m tipped over the edge as I can feel every inch of him, every node, every part, and I can see his eyes on fire in the mirror as he continues to plunder my body until my climax hits, and I’m pulsing, crying out, and spirited up to the stars as I dimly hear him roar out my name and his cocks paint my channel with his hot cum.

God help me, once I have this baby, he is one hundred percent going to put another in me.

MAXYM

My sweet mate slumbers in my nest, curled up next to me, as I cup her stomach protectively. I love the fact I can get the whole little bulge in my hand at the moment, although I'm sure once she progresses, I will need more than one hand.

I cannot wait until she is huge, due to birth, and needs my seed more than ever. Especially as she's a greedy little mate already. One who took my cocks twice after I nested, and it's only because she couldn't stay awake she didn't get them a third time.

As I gaze on her, watching her body move in time to her breathing, her pretty face wreathed in sleep, her soft skin warm and glowing, I know she is more than mine. She is my everything. When her youngling arrives, it is going to be the most glorious moment of my life.

"Do you really mean that?" Cleo says, her eyelids fluttering open. "About the baby." She curls her hand around mine.

"Why wouldn't I feel that way?" I ask, wondering if I said something out loud.

"Because my baby isn't yours," she says, water hovering in her eyes.

"But it is yours. It is part of you, and anything which belongs to you is mine," I growl.

It's simple. So simple, she shouldn't even be considering the alternative.

My sweet mate buries her face in my chest. She says nothing but the relief which flows from her is palpable.

“Thank you,” she says eventually.

“Thanks are not required. This is non-negotiable. Even if you didn’t want me to claim the youngling as my own, I will.”

She opens her mouth to protest, but I put a finger over it before moving in for a kiss to remind her I am her mate. When I release her, there are no more protests and no further mentions of what her youngling is to me.

I made my nest next to a small roughhewn sanitary facility, and after we have bathed (as far as we can without proper baths, which I find I miss) and I have made sure she is fully cleansed (something we both enjoy), we dress and return to the small makeshift living area where the Cirmos is producing food including, somehow, fresh baked goods.

She places a tray of them in front of me.

“Nesting is hungry work,” she says with a half smile.

“Yes, it is. So is mating, and my pregnant mate is insatiable,” I respond.

Cleo gasps out my name, covering her mouth with one hand and her little rounded stomach with the other. I put my hand over hers, feeling the swell of her belly. “Tell me it isn’t true,” I murmur.

She attempts to look at me like her eyes are weapons, but other than completely disarming me with their beauty, my Cleo isn’t getting anywhere, so instead she takes one of the rolls from the tray and bites into it ravenously with her blunt little teeth.

My cocks nearly punch through my pants, again.

“Wow, Tibi!” she exclaims. “These are so good. How did you manage it?”

“I can make my food wherever I am.” The Cirmos shrugs. “Here is no exception.”

“I’m very glad for it,” Cleo says with a wide smile on her face.

She radiates pleasure, but not the sort from mating, the sort from being here, with me, with Tibi, and even with Retah. It should make me want to rip things apart, but it does not. It makes me...happy?

I take some of the rolls and follow my Cleo’s lead in consuming them. The soft baked items are as delicious as I was led to believe, made doubly tasty because we were rarely allowed such things in the dome, and the captain had got to most of the bakeries in the area around to stop them selling the things to us.

I can only think his zeal was probably wasted. These things give me energy and vigour like I’ve never felt before.

Or it could be the mating...

“!” Cleo hisses my name and jabs her elbow into my side. She squirms, and the scent of her arousal greets me. “Whatever you’re thinking, stop it!”

I wrap my arm around her and press a kiss to her dusty sweet lips. “How can I with you around?”

“You could try not to think those things?”

“I could try, but I don’t want to, not with you so close.” I add another kiss and feel

her shudder under my touch. “It is a curse and a pleasure for fated mates to have this link,” I say. “I rather like knowing how much you enjoy my cocks.” I run my claws through her hair.

“You just can’t help yourself, can you?” Cleo says, attempting to hide the smile her mouth wants to make.

“Not where you are concerned, eregri. You are the light from the stars which touches me every day, my celestial body, my wings and my claws. You make this world, this galaxy, this universe better for being in it.” I kiss her again, this time long and slow. “I will destroy it all piece by piece to make you mine.”

“It’s a good thing you feel that way,” Retah says, limping to the table. “Because we’re going to need your expertise with the sword in the next few nova-days if we’re to take back Trefa.”

He sits and pours himself a drink, taking a sweet roll as well.

“What makes you think I want to fight for Trefa? I’d rather get the vrex off this doomed planet and be done. It hasn’t helped me, so why should I help it?” I respond.

“Because I won’t lose another planet to an invader,” Retah says, thumping a closed fist on the table. “And because you care about the fight. It’s what you’ve been made for.” He lifts his horned head, and his glowing eyes bore into me. “And it will bring you closer to the truth.”

CLEO

Maxym and Retah glare at each other. I have no love for Trefa, but I didn't think Retah felt so strongly about the place.

Maxym's feathers prick, rising like a wave over his wings. Suddenly, he twirls them all back into place in a rushing shuffle both violent and purposeful. It doesn't seem like an action he has any control over.

"Fine," Maxym growls, looking down at me. "But my mate must be safe before I fight. In your condition, you can hardly help me look after her."

"Wait, what?" I shake my head, attempting to access the supposed thoughtbond, but the fickle thing seems to be limited to emotions, not words at this moment in time. "You're not sending me away while you defend this place. I won't allow it."

"Eregri, you are with young," Maxym says in his deep velvet voice.

"Yes, I think that fact is well established," I growl, "but that didn't stop me being abducted and dragged millions, billions of light years from my home and deposited here. It didn't stop me working for Retah or in the dome. You're not sending me away with such a pathetic excuse."

Both males stare at me like I've grown horns or wings. Tibi snorts a laugh.

"Cirnos females fight while they're with young. And Cirnos have six or more young at a time, Gryn," she says.

Retah and Maxym look at her, eyes wide. What fires down the thoughtbond at me via Maxym is undeniable confusion and also...curiosity.

“Cirnos fight?” Maxym says, unwisely.

Tibi unsheathes her claws.

“We fight,” she says, her voice barely audible. “We have always fought because there are plenty who seek to enslave us.”

Maxym sits back. “Forgive me, mistress,” he says. “I am no stranger to slavery.”

I slip my hand into the base of his wings, seeking to diffuse the situation, although the rumble of pleasure I get from him is something which echoes in my brain and hits parts of me which are not going to help in this particular fight.

“I don’t want to leave. I don’t want to be without you. I know weapons. Even if I’m not in the thick of it, I can still be of use,” I say.

I do my best to push how I will feel if I can’t see him down the thoughtbond. How my heart will echo with emptiness, how it will feel like I’ve been placed in a vice, never knowing from day to day if he is alive or dead, and my life being a half life. Being no life.

“I know what you’re doing,” Maxym rumbles. “I don’t want you in danger.”

I see the chink in his armor, and I push. “How can I be in danger if I have you to protect me?”

“We all need something to fight for,” Retah says, briefly glancing at me. “I will always be safe, I will see to it. But I also agree we need her. She is the only one with

the knowledge of all this.” He extends his arm and sweeps it around at the basement. “And I’m not as injured as I look,” he adds.

Maxym growls under his breath. “I have your bond she will be safe?”

“I’m right here, you know.” I poke him in his side. “I promise I will keep myself safe. I’ve managed okay so far.”

He turns to me. “You shouldn’t have had to, and I am here to protect you now.”

“I appreciate it.” I take his hand. “I do, really, but don’t send me away.”

His dark eyes reflect the lights in the room as they study my face. I hope he’s thinking of the time I pulled a sword on him. I’m hoping he’s remembering how well I handled those weapons. I want him to let me stay so very much.

Maxym grimaces as the thoughts enter his head. “I don’t want to agree, but how can I deny you anything?”

“You can’t,” Tibi says. “She is your mate. That’s how it works, Gryn.”

I do my level best not to laugh, fail, and I know Maxym is not amused in the slightest.

“And as for you, little one, you have young to consider, which means you also need to keep yourself safe,” Tibi admonishes me.

I now have to appear contrite, but I think Maxym got the worst of it, so I simply put my best innocent look on my face.

Nothing fools Tibi, who huffs at me.

“So, if I’m fighting, who’s with me, save for you, old warrior,” Maxym growls.

“I’m in touch with the resistance here on Trefa. They’re putting together a force,” Retah says.

Maxym snarls. “The resistance is as self-serving as the council. I would not trust them with my mate’s life or yours.”

“Then you’ll be pleased to know I’m also in contact with a force off Trefa who have agreed to help us, youngling,” Retah says, teeth gritted.

“Who?”

“Not important, but what is important is they’ll be here in a nova-day, and we need to prepare for them.”

“In what way?”

“We need to access the dome, cut off the Bogarok communications, make sure they can get to the ground without the Bogarok being warned.”

Maxym grumbles under his breath.

“Yes, gladiator, that’s why we need you,” Retah says, clearly not needing the thoughtbond. “Your knowledge of the dome.”

“I was bound to the dome. Now I am free, and you want me to go back,” Maxym says, pulling himself up to his full height, which, even seated, is impressive. And wide. And muscular.

“You will never be their prisoner again, not when I present the information I have to

the Galactic Council,” Retah says.

“What?” I fire at him.

“Did you not think I’d want to help your mate?” Retah says, smiling at me. “I meant it when I said you were like a daughter to me, . I want you to be happy, and I never believed what was said about any of the Gryn in the dome.”

“But how? When my master could not...” Maxym asks as I curl my hand around his.

He looks down at where our fingers entwine, and I use the strange thoughtbond to tell him I’m here for him.

“Your master was murdered before he could pass on the evidence he had, but he wasn’t an idiot, and he made sure it was protected,” Retah says. “He didn’t anticipate you would be the accused, which is an oversight, but one which has, in the end, led us to come together.”

“You mean you want to help me?” Maxym asks.

“The Galactic Council has long had its own way, but when there is rot within, that rot has to be cut out, and you are the evidence those who seek to cleanse the Council need,” Retah says.

I stare at him. “You talk as if you’re some sort of politician, not an arms dealer,” I blurt out. “But you’re just a...”

He’s shaking his huge horned head. “I am sorry, little one,” Retah says. “It is true, I am an arms dealer as my cover, but my name isn’t Retah, and this isn’t my role.”

I give Maxym a worried glance, not liking this turn of events. He growls low and

resonant.

“Now, now!” Retah holds up his hands. “I am not the threat. I am Baronn, a crown prince of the Remek, such as our species survives. I have been in hiding since the Liderc destroyed our planet. Since they too were disposed of, my role has been to ensure all others involved are brought to account.”

My jaw is slack as he looks between me and Maxym. Not quite comprehending what he is saying. My sweet pastry loving arms dealing boss is royalty ?

“And it is about time there was a reckoning.”

CLEO

“I still remember the morning they woke me with pulsar rifles shoved in my face,” Maxym says, running his hand through his short hair as he stares into the fire.

Tibi is rattling in her makeshift kitchen and Retah, or Prince Baronn as he is apparently called, is digging through some of the crates on the other side of the basement and eating an iced cake, covering himself and the crate in icing.

“He’d given me the night off after we’d come back from some extensive negotiations on the other side of Banax, the planet he lived on...we lived on,” Maxym continues, heaving in a breath as if the memory is painful.

“You don’t have to tell me any of this,” I tell him. “Not if it hurts you.”

“I have to. I have to make it real. I have to tell someone else in case I forget it again.” He sighs. “And you have to know,” he adds urgently.

“I don’t believe you’re a murderer. I never did,” I reassure him.

“I went out. There were some places the other security detail suggested we go to.” Maxym’s wing feathers tremble. “We drank. A lot. We attracted...company.” He briefly glances at me, embarrassed and in pain. “Everything is blurred, until I went to bed. I remember going to bed. I was alone,” he insists. “Then the next day...they woke me.”

His broad shoulders square.

“They marched me past his body. He’d been ripped apart. I could never do that. I didn’t do it.” Maxym chokes, and I put my hand into his feathers to touch the place he likes the most.

“You didn’t do it, remember? Retah—I mean Prince Baronn—says you didn’t. You’ve always known you didn’t do it.”

“Sometimes, when I sleep...I don’t...” Maxym clutches at his head. “Since I got hurt, things got scrambled,” he says. “Until you.”

He leans into my touch like a cat.

“You got hurt?”

“Head injury,” he says with a wry smile. “I know...my head’s too thick to be injured.”

I trace the scar over his forehead. “I don’t think that.”

He takes my hand with his huge clawed one. “I don’t deserve you.”

“Perhaps I don’t deserve you, Maxym. But I don’t think fate would have put us together along with a baking Cirmos and a hidden prince if we didn’t deserve each other.”

“Perhaps you’re simply trouble,” he rasps, the smile widening.

“Perhaps I am,” I respond. “But you know trouble just as much.”

There is so much I don’t know about Maxym, and I don’t want to probe the thoughtbond. Except I’ve bound myself to him in so many ways, not least because

my heart quickens every time he looks at me with his liquid dark eyes, every time he smiles and shows all his fangs, every time he growls my name or calls me his “little scrap.”

I am invested. He belongs to me, to us, as much as he has ever growled mine.

His eyes are half closed as I shove my fingers deeper into his soft downy feathers, all warm and silky. He hums with pleasure.

It seems I have a gladiator who is putty in my hands, as long as those hands are in his feathers. Although, when I notice the lump in his pants, the thoughts which are firing down the thoughtbond are anything but benign. They are extremely naughty, and he’s getting hornier by the second.

“Before the Gryn explodes”—Tibi appears beside me—“Retah wants you.”

She levels her green eyes at Maxym, who has the cutest dopey expression on his face. “Both of you. Especially you.” She jabs a finger at Maxym. “Or you’ll be drooling on the floor.”

“I don’t drool,” Maxym says genially.

The flash in Tibi’s eyes suggests she knows otherwise. Maxym unfolds himself from the stool as I get to my feet, and he wipes the back of his hand over his mouth. I hide a smile, although he already knows what I’m thinking.

“Let’s see what Retah—Prince Baronn—wants.” I take his hand, and we walk over to where our newly elevated to the aristocracy friend is still digging into a crate.

“Prince Baronn,” Maxym growls.

“Just call me Retah.” He straightens out of the box with a wisp of packing material attached to one horn.

He looks anything but regal. I feel Maxym’s mirth even though my big warrior keeps his face entirely straight.

“Retah,” Maxym rasps. “The Cirnos said you needed to speak to us.”

“Yes.” He pulls the packing from his horn and looks at it as if surprised to see it. “Come with me. We need to go to my study where my comms are. I need to get you both up to date as to the invasion.”

We follow Retah back up into the house.

“Do you have a crown or something?” Maxym asks him. “Princes have crowns, or at least the ones I’ve killed have.”

Retah gives him a strange look. “I left my crown on my planet, along with my family, who all died,” he says.

Maxym holds up his hands. “Just wondering.”

“Look, I appreciate all of this is a revelation to you both, but...”

Retah doesn’t get to finish the sentence as Maxym has him up against the wall, scimitar onyx claws at his throat.

“I don’t like being lied to. I don’t like my mate being lied to, prince , so you’d better choose your next words very carefully,” Maxym snarls. “Why did you pretend to be something you are not?”

“I did not. I am an arms dealer,” Retah retorts, grabbing hold of one of Maxym’s wings. “I’m also a prince of a fallen planet who wants his revenge.”

“Why should we believe a vrexing thing you say?” Maxym slams his free wing into the wall next to Retah, and plaster falls out. “Why should we follow you?”

“Why wouldn’t you? I have the answers, youngling. I’ve spent my life gathering them while you’ve been killing in the dome,” Retah snarls.

“Woah!” I shove myself between them. Maxym instantly backs down. “This isn’t helping anyone.” I glare at Retah. “I’m not happy you didn’t deign to tell me the truth, your highness , but this”—I look at Maxym—“isn’t the time for recriminations.”

With a groan, Maxym grabs at his head over where his scar strikes like a silver spear. He drops to his knees with a sudden, sickening crack.

“There’s...something...my head,” he says as I grasp for him.

Pain slices through me too, not unbearable, because Maxym is holding it back through the thoughtbond as much as he can.

“Something is in his head,” I shout up at Retah. “We have to stop it.”

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:32 am

MAXYM

What goes on around me is as if time has been slowed down. I see my eregri . She shouts something at the Remek. He grabs hold of me, and I can't stop him, I can't move fast enough. I fall, he drags, I'm limp, he's stronger than I thought, injuries or no.

The planet might have given up on time, but I feel every bump of the stairs as I'm pulled down, anticipating the next and the next until everything speeds up, and I can hear Cleo's voice whispering my name as Retah growls orders at his vid screen.

"They're outside. I've locked everything down. They won't be able to detect us in here," he says to Cleo. "How is he?"

"I think he's coming round." Cleo is studying my face, her hand gently caressing my cheek.

"Wha—happened?" I croak, one wing flailing as I sit up.

"You said there was something in your head and collapsed," Cleo tells me.

"There was," Retah says grimly. "The Bogarok." He glares at me. "Has this happened before? In the dome?"

"In the dome, I had pain when the Bogarok arrived, but I always do. My injury made me that way." I clutch at my scar.

I look at both Retah and Cleo, searching for answers.

He looks at his vid-screen. “They’re using some sort of scanning tech. I’m not sure what it is and why not all of us are affected.”

I shake my head and immediately regret the action as my brain feels like it’s swimming in treacle.

“I’ve been...violent.” I look at my sweet mate. “Until I met my Cleo. Things changed.”

“Finding your mate has helped your healing.” The Cirmos bustles over and hands me a tankard, which unfortunately only contains water.

I take the tankard and swallow the cool liquid in three long gulps.

“Back at the dome, my colleague...another Gryn...he said his head hurt when the Bogarok arrived. He collapsed,” I say as the events in the dome gain clarity. “I had to put him into the undercroft.”

Cleo’s eyes widen.

“I mean I put him somewhere safe. I can’t imagine anyone being able to dispose of Klynn,” I say, putting my hand over hers.

“Could it be your injury was somehow blocking whatever it is the Bogarok are doing with their scanners?” Cleo asks.

“I don’t have the tech here to be able to tell, but if they’re using something which causes you pain, regardless of what the true nature of this tech is, we’re going to have to do something about that,” Retah says, looking me up and down. “Given you’re our

best weapon.”

I grin at him as he strides away down the basement. I look at Cleo, and she is not smiling. What flows down the thoughtbond is anything but mirth.

“It’s going to be fine, little mate.” I trace my finger down the side of her face. “It takes more than a little pain to kill me.”

“Gryn are virtually indestructible.” The Cirmos snorts.

“See?” I say. “Even Tibi knows.”

I can feel how hard my Cleo is trying to hold herself together, so many emotions packed into this little mate.

“Here.” Retah returns, carrying a large metal box which he places on the floor next to me. He presses a glowing disc on the side, and it unfolds with a hiss and a puff of sealant which makes my wings flare.

As the white steam dissipates, I peer inside and see a set of armor, including a helmet. It gleams dully gold under the lights of the basement.

“What is this?”

“A little something I picked up in a forgotten corner of the galaxy,” Retah says proudly. “It’s supposed to be impenetrable. Not that I’ve ever tried it.”

I pick up the helmet. It has a high crest on the crown, sculpted to look almost like feathers. The cheek pieces are integral, curving down to protect all the way to my jawline. I give him a long look before I put the thing on my head.

Instantly, any residual pain I had vaporizes. It's as if I've taken a huge dose of paraxio but without the narcotic effects.

"How is it?" Retah says.

"Good," I reply, expecting my voice to sound hollow, like it does whenever I wear a helmet in the dome. But I don't hear myself at all. It's as if I'm not even wearing it. "Very good," I add.

"You can wear the rest if you want," he says. "Or not. Entirely up to you."

I turn to my sweet mate. Her eyes are large as she studies me. "Wear the rest," she says, her voice hoarse.

I get to my feet, strength flowing through me. I reach for the rest of the armor, a set of wrist guards, a shoulder guard, and a breast plate.

Each one is lighter than it appears. Cleo helps me on with the breast plate, bucking the straps between my wings and back to the base. Once it's all on, it feels like a second skin.

"It looks...good on you," Cleo breathes. "Very good." I catch the perfume of her arousal.

"You like me in armor, little scrap?" I rasp.

"Might do," she says, looking up at me through her eyelashes.

"You don't have time for this," Tibi interrupts. "And surely you both did enough mating last night?"

My sweet Cleo flushes pink at the Cirmos' words, covering her mouth with her hand and her shoulders shaking.

"Our mating will take place wherever and whenever I deem it necessary," I boom as Cleo gasps. "My mate is with young and she is insatiable."

Cleo collapses into giggles and gasps. "You're too much," she finally forces out.

"Did I say anything which wasn't true?"

Cleo shakes her head, a smile dancing over her lips. "Maybe not out loud though?" she suggests.

"I want to shout my mating from the stars because I'm the luckiest Gryn in the universe," I respond, pulling her gently against me, wary of the breastplate and her tender form. "And now I will protect you 'til my last breath."

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:32 am

CLEO

It's a tremendous relief to see Maxym back to his usual self. He is extra sexy in the armor, a cross between a Roman centurion and a cyborg but still my handsome-as-hell gladiator.

If we survive this, I might have to insist on regular armor time...

"The Bogarok have vacated the area, so my security system seems to have worked," Retah says, studying his vid-screen. "Good thing too, given how much it cost."

"They'll be back," Maxym growls as he slides his sword into a holster between his wings.

I do my best not to add to my already aroused state as I watch him. I'm still trying to understand what it is about pregnant little me which has attracted this huge gladiator. Turning into a puddle isn't going to help anyone.

"You think so?" Retah asks.

"They're looking for us," he says with a chill to his voice.

"Then we need to take action," Retah says, heading up the stairs to the main dwelling.

Maxym follows him, and I'm shooed up after them by Tibi. When I arrive in Retah's study, the pair of them are looking at a larger vid-screen which is inset into Retah's desk.

“The Bogarok have created an exclusion zone around the dome,” Retah says. “They want it for something.”

“For those who follow,” Maxym intones. “What of the rest of Trefa?”

“Sartak is still resisting, obviously.” Retah shifts the view to a stream of messages scrolling over the screen. “Chohan too, but then I doubt the Bogarok have much time to repress that place.

“Artelek? Belen?” I ask, pushing between them.

“Belen has fallen, which isn’t much of a surprise. It’s never been well protected. Artelek has plenty of warriors, so they’re holding out,” Retah says, and a frown appears on his face. “Wait.”

His fingers fly over the screen until the scrolling stops.

“What is it?” Maxym peers at the seemingly frozen piece of tech.

“It’s all fake.” Retah tugs at one of his horns. “There’s no invasion anywhere other than Tatatunga and Sartak. Comms outside have been cut off. The rest of Trefa has no idea what’s happening here.”

“And presumably they don’t really care,” I mutter.

“They will when they find their main trading spaceport has been cut off,” Retah says, scrolling through half a dozen more screens. “But I expect we’re looking at another nova-day or so before it becomes obvious there’s a problem in Tatatunga, or at least one which affects the rest of Trefa in any event.”

“But why cut Tatatunga off? There has to be more to this than we know.” Maxym

growls.

“I have my sources,” Retah says, lifting his eyes from the screen, “but you’re right on this occasion, youngling. There has to be more to this than taking the planet, given the planet isn’t taken.”

“Whatever it is they want, they need time, and they are concentrated on the dome. Plus they were looking for fighters, for gladiators.” I put my finger to my lips. “It all has to be connected somehow.”

I give Maxym a searching gaze. He responds with a rather blank look.

“What is under the dome?” I ask.

“The undercroft? It’s a maze of passages filled with pikrats,” he says.

“Anything else?”

“Not that I’ve found,” he says confidently. “But”—his eyes darken—“I wasn’t exactly looking for anything other than violence or solitude.”

“So, conceivably, there could be something down there which might be of interest to those controlling the Bogarok?” I suggest. “If we went to look?”

Maxym thinks, his chin on his chest. “Klynn might know, but he’s most likely already a captive of the Bogarok. The only other Gryn I could ask is Blayn, but he’s off world and I don’t know where.”

“There’s only one way we can find out,” Retah says. “Stick to the original plan, storm the dome.”

Maxym growls in agreement.

“That’s your plan?” I query, hands on hips. “Just a big old fight to the death against the horrible spider things, which can bite you in half as soon as look at you?”

Maxym looks at Retah, and Retah looks back at him.

“Yes,” they chorus.

I roll my eyes up to the ceiling. “No.”

“No?” Maxym repeats, his voice higher than its usual rasp.

“It’s suicide. I don’t care what you both think of yourselves. Going charging into the path of an army isn’t going to help anyone, let alone Tatatunga, which, frankly, could probably do with a good invasion if it wasn’t Bogarok.” I sigh. “We need more information as to what they want and who is behind this before we do anything.”

Both Retah and Maxym look severely disappointed and the testosterone (or alien equivalent) in the room falls noticeably.

“My mate is correct,” Maxym rumbles.

“I think you’ll find females are always right.” Retah sighs at him. “We ignore them at our peril.”

I’m already shaking my head as I push Retah to one side and start working through the vid-screen.

“What we need is chatter,” I say.

“Cha-tur?” Maxym asks, confused.

“It’s a human term for information you get by listening in to your enemy,” I reply.

“We need access to their comms.”

“Not possible,” Retah says. “Even if we could break them, and I most definitely could, their language isn’t translatable by any known source. When they speak to us, they do it telepathically.”

“I remember,” I say grimly. “Only I’m not looking for what the Bogarok are saying to each other, I’m looking for what those in Tatatunga who are helping them are saying.”

Retah drags on a horn again. “Of course! They couldn’t have got past the space port entrance without assistance, or the early warning systems.”

“Trefa has an early warning system?” I bark a harsh laugh.

“It does.” Retah gives me a side eye. “And now you mock it, it also makes me wonder exactly why the asshole at the end of the universe would have such a thing.”

“Unless it was protecting something,” Maxym rumbles.

“Unless it was protecting something big,” Retah says. “Like a weapon...”

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:32 am

MAXYM

Weapons are my safe space. I know weapons. I can handle weapons. Anything else, such as managing an annoyed mate, is not within my remit, and Cleo looks very annoyed.

I'm not sure what to do, and the helmet I'm wearing, which admittedly has made me feel like I could fight a ziggurex bare handed, is also blocking the thoughtbond, so I'm not sure why she is annoyed and what I can do about it.

Retah works his way through a myriad of screens, lost in his work, so I pull my Cleo against me. She squirms.

“What is it, my mate?” I query.

She looks at me, her lips scrunched up in a weird way which can't possibly be good or comfortable.

“Don't think you can just kiss me and it'll all be fine, ,” she says as I wrap my wing around her, concerned her strange face is because she might be cold. “Or do this.” She pushes at the feathers surrounding her, my primaries rattling.

“Why not? You are my mate, and I want you to be happy.”

“Then don't offer to go charging in regardless of your own safety,” she responds, her hands on my breastplate, something I want to tear off instantly so I can feel her soft skin against mine.

I refrain.

“I would fight a supernova if it meant it kept you from harm,” I say.

“I know, but did it ever occur to you I’d prefer to have you by my side rather than dead in a ditch?” Cleo growls.

I love my growly mate. Her anger bristles through her like a rouse through my feathers.

“My sweet mate.” I drop onto one knee in front of her, keeping my wings wrapped around us both. “I didn’t mean to disrespect your feelings, but fighting is what I do. It’s what I’ve always done from the day I woke up in the facility to the day the Bogarok appeared in the dome.”

“I appreciate that, . I don’t want to change what you are.” Her breath hitches.

“I want to change who I am,” I say. “I will always fight, but if my fight is for you, then I want to be with you.” I shake my head. “I blamed what I have become on my injury, but it is my refusal to face my past which did that.”

Cleo gently runs her hand under my chin, and I lean into her touch.

“You are all I want, my eregri , all I’ve ever wanted, and yet I didn’t know I needed you,” I murmur, never wanting her to let go.

“Then let’s work this out, together,” she says. “Perhaps with less fight and more brainpower.”

I shake out my wings.

“You think I have brain power?” I hitch up a lip at her.

“I’m sure you’re more than a pretty face and endless abs.” Her mirth is evidence on her face, all traces of her annoyance gone.

“Then I must prove it to you,” I respond, snatching a kiss from her lips and running my hand over her sweet belly, the swell more than evident. “Before this youngling arrives.”

“I think we have time. Humans are pregnant for a while.”

“I’m not sure how long Gryn females are with young,” I puzzle. “I’ve never met one.”

“Not even your mother?” Cleo asks.

“All I recall is a soft touch and a brush of feathers. Other than that, none of us know what happened to our parents. Including Klynn, even if I can’t believe that vrexer ever had any.”

“You’re worried about him.” Cleo studies my face.

“I am not,” I growl.

“I think you are.”

“He’s a contrary vrexer who would kill me as soon as look at me, or anyone. I do not miss him, nor am I worried about him,” I huff.

Cleo folds her arms, and somehow the action makes my stomach squirm in not a good way.

“I saw you both together. You miss him.” she says.

“Cleo, come look at this,” Retah calls out, and before I can say anything, she’s by his side, staring at the screen.

“!” she says urgently, beckoning to me.

I’m by her side in two strides and staring down at the vid-screen.

“It’s not a weapon...it’s an info vault,” Retah says quietly. “Where the Galactic Council keeps all its secrets.”

I look closer at the heat signature at the heart of the dome.

“Why keep them?” Cleo asks.

“Because sometimes you need leverage, and the best place to keep it is the one place no one will ever look for it,” Retah replies.

“Until now,” I growl.

“Until now,” Cleo echoes. “And it’s where we’ll find the truth.”

CLEO

I know I shouldn't have been angry with Maxym. His nature is what it is. I should embrace it, but my heart aches with the suggestion I might lose him, that he might not be the large, winged presence in my life.

Somehow, he has become something I cannot be without. Somehow...I've fallen in love with him. Completely, head over heels, giddy like a teenager, as if love is something I've never experienced before.

Which it isn't. Whatever I thought was love before, it wasn't. My entire soul is consumed by my love for Maxym. I can't separate where it stops and I begin. I can't remember what it was like before I felt like this, and I know without him, I am a mere hollow of who I could be.

Love isn't supposed to be this intense, is it? Maybe it's pregnancy hormones or something? Maybe...

This was meant to be.

Maxym glares at the vid-screen like he's attempting to transmit himself through it rather than fight. The way his brow furrows is super cute, although admittedly his claws stretching out around the edge of the desk are less cute and more weapons of mass destruction.

"The council has many enemies. One of them has to be responsible for the Bogarok," Retah says.

“Yeah, but which ones, and does it even matter?”

“It matters to the force I have coming to our aid. It matters because I need to know what weapons to provide,” Retah says evenly.

“Then who are our main suspects?”

“The Drahon,” Retah rubs his chin with his hand. “It sounds like they’ve had scouts here on Trefa for some time. They’re known to hire the Bogarok for their dirty work, but wanting information is not their style. Whoever wants the info vault is the one controlling them.”

“I’m well aware of the Drahon presence on Trefa.” Maxym growls, “but who is controlling them?”

“The Protoex. Sometimes known as Proto.”

Maxym’s wings flare violently, and the vid-screen cracks under one of his claws. The others are buried deep into the wood of the desk.

“Proto,” he growls. “I know of Proto.”

“What is a Protoex?” I ask. “I’ve never heard of them.”

“Ancient, deadly, and until very recently, thought extinct,” Retah says. “And the only creatures the Drahon fear more than each other.”

I glance at Maxym. His brow is drawn low over his eyes, eyes which are deep pits of blackness. All his feathers stand on end.

“We have to kill it this time,” he snarls, pulling off his helmet. “It has to die.”

What fires through my brain is a knowledge which makes my knees buckle.

“What is it?” I whisper because I can’t speak any louder.

“I’m not sure.” Maxym is gritting his teeth. “But if Proto is involved, we’re all at risk. The Bogarok are nothing compared to what it can do.”

I slide my hand up his arm. His feathers are rattling like knives in a drawer. “You’ve encountered it before?”

“I don’t know.” Maxym shakes his head and runs his clawed fingers through his close-cropped hair. His anger at the lack of recall evident is without the need for the thoughtbond.

Retah puts his hand on Maxym’s shoulder and looks at me with concern.

“Maxym,” he says. “I make knowledge my business as much as weaponry. When it was clear my was interested in you, I did some searching, to find out more about you and your fellow Gryn.”

Maxym lifts his head and looks Retah in the eye. “What did you find?”

A half smile creeps over Retah’s face. “You are a killer.”

Maxym snorts.

“You are a killer, it is your nature, but you are not a murderer, and it is that which led me to the information about your master and about your other kind. The ones searching the galaxy for their kin.”

He places a fatherly hand on Maxym’s armored shoulder.

“You have been badly used, my friend,” Retah says. “So many of us have been, but the story of the Gryn is one of a civilization rising from the ashes. Even so, your species has been scattered across the galaxy, used as mercenaries, as security, as pulsar cannon fodder, and, yes, as gladiators.”

Maxym looks down at me. “I don’t know about any Gryn other than myself and the gladiators I fought alongside, but I am glad,” he says.

“You are?” Retah queries.

“I am, because if it wasn’t for my past, whatever it may be, I wouldn’t have met my eregri .”

Retah’s face splits into a huge grin, and he pulls Maxym into a hug, which seems to surprise the huge male more than anything else which has happened. His wings open, rowing at the air, and his claws appear and disappear. When Retah releases him, his eyes are huge.

“You are truly an honorable warrior,” Retah says. “I didn’t have any doubt you are the right match for my .”

Maxym shoots me a look, and it’s all I can do to stop myself from laughing as emotions flit over his face in a war as to what is going to come out on top until he absolutely glows with pleasure at Retah’s words. It strikes me for all he and the others are lauded in the dome, praise, where it’s due, is in short supply.

I delve my hand into his feathers, and I’m rewarded with a rumble of enjoyment from him and his arm around my waist too.

“When do we leave?” he asks Retah.

“Don’t you want a plan first?” Retah asks.

Maxym gives him a relaxed smile. “Plan? What plan?”

I roll my eyes at the pair of them.

“There will be a plan, because there’s no way we’re using your approach, not if we actually want to succeed.”

Maxym continues to purr with pleasure at my touch.

“What my mate said,” he half slurs. “Anything she says,” he adds.

“Looks like you’re a fast learner, youngling,” Retah says genially. “Whatever your mate says is the right answer.”

MAXYM

“The Bogarok are creating an exclusion zone around the dome,” Retah says, looking at his vid-screen.

I peer at it. “Air?”

“No go.” He shakes his horned head.

“Then we have to go underground.”

“But the dome is cut off from other conduits,” Retah says. “I checked the schematics.”

“What about the exclusion zone?”

Retah narrows his eyes and goes back to his screen.

“Is it going to be sewers?” Cleo asks. “Because, no. Just no.”

“Not sewers,” Retah says carefully, his fingers flicking through map after map. “I believe there are old tunnels which were used between jewel-makers’ establishments in a street near the dome...” His words tail off as he concentrates before exclaiming loud enough to make my wings flare and Cleo jump.

“Yes! Well done, !” He laughs. “Here are the old passages. The traders used them to store their wares and to transport them between stores rather than using the street.”

He taps a claw on the screen.

“What are they used for now?” Cleo asks.

“They are disused. The traders have long left that part of Tatatunga,” Retah says.

“How do we know they’re still operational?”

“We don’t, but it’s our only chance at getting inside the exclusion zone and on to the dome,” Retah replies. “In any event, I believe I have the necessary weaponry which can assist us.”

“So, let me get this right.” Cleo folds her arms over her chest, making her stomach appear to swell more and sending spikes of pleasure to my cocks. “The plan is to steal the information from under the Bogarok’s protection, and whoever they are working for?”

Retah grins. “Good isn’t it?”

“And what do we do with it to stop them coming after us?”

“They won’t know it’s gone, that’s the beauty of this plan,” Retah says. “By the time anyone realizes, the force we need will be here, and the Bogarok will leave.”

“And we’re making sure they don’t leave with what they came for,” I add with some glee. “And we have leverage with the Council.”

“Can I say this is a dangerous game. If someone is prepared to invade a planet to get this information, then they aren’t going to stop at ‘oh look, someone stole it,’ are they? They’ll come for us too,” Cleo points out.

“They might, but they’ll have to go through the force which is on its way to protect us. A force which will know the best way to use the information.”

“At any point are you going to tell us who’s coming?” I ask.

Retah gives me a narrow-eyed look. “I like a good surprise,” he says.

I growl at him, spearing my claws into his desktop, which is already half ruined from the mention of Proto.

Proto.

It’s a word which seems ingrained within me, not fear, but something else, an innate desire to fight harder than I’ve ever fought before. I instantly wanted to get hold of a sword and start swinging.

Anything which can stop such a creature, whatever it is, will be something I want. And if I can wield the killing blow, I will do so.

It will be the most important kill of my life.

“Everything okay?” Cleo asks me, running her hand around my waist. “You’re miles away.”

Retah is missing. We are alone in his office.

“I’m right here,” I state. “I wouldn’t leave you.”

“It’s a human expression.” She chuckles. “It means you’re lost in thought.”

I turn her to me, cupping her face in my hands and brushing a kiss over her lips. “It’s

a good expression,” I say. “What is a mile?”

Cleo laughs, her hand on my breast plate. “It’s a measurement of distance.”

“I never want to be a mile away from you,” I murmur, extracting another kiss from her. “I always want you in my arms.”

I lift her up onto the desk, spreading her thighs apart so I can get close to her. I run my hand over her breast and down to her stomach, where I span her entire area with one hand.

“So beautiful, so ripe and fertile,” I murmur. “I want to consume you, claim you, breed you.”

Cleo pants out a breath. “Here?”

“Anywhere. The fight, it brings up my blood to a boil, it makes me want to devour every sweet treat in my path.” I snarl against the soft, fragrant skin of her neck, my fangs grazing there, wanting to nip at her, but I’m doing everything in my power to hold back. “If you weren’t already filled with a youngling, I would be filling your womb.”

Her fingers delve into the feathers at the base of my wings, the touch exquisite agony as my cocks attempt to punch their way free of my clothing.

“You want me to have your baby?” she says, a slight tremble in her voice.

“I want you to have my young over and over. I want you to be filled with young as often as you like, and for me it would be always. I adore you, Cleo. I adore your body, your mind. Your young will be my young and my heart is always yours.”

She melts against me, her deft fingers undoing the catches on my breastplate until it slips free, and I toss it across the room where it lands with a clang.

Cleo hisses at me. “Retah and Tibi will hear,” she says with a laugh as I strip away her clothing, making her bare for me.

“A mating pair is nothing to be ashamed of,” I growl. “They are privileged to hear us.”

I dive between her legs, shoving one up on my shoulder as my Cleo has no option but to lie back on the desk, and I shove my tongue into her hot, wet slit, lapping her juices. Her taste explodes through my mouth, making me consume her faster, especially the little bundle at her apex. She moans my name, grabs my wings, and, as her body bucks under me, she comes in a rush, allowing me to lick her completely clean.

“We can’t,” she says hoarsely, as I lift her upright, propping her on her legs and turning her to the wall.

“We can, and I will. You are mine to claim, little scrap, and I’m claiming you.”

CLEO

The door to the basement is wide open but Maxym isn't stopping. He uses his foot to kick my legs apart as he places my hands on the wooden paneled wall in front of me.

"I can't be gentle, little mate," he murmurs in my ear, "and I want you to be safe, but until I've sheathed myself in you, I am a feral beast." He growls.

My already soaking pussy gets even wetter, and he inhales like he's a gladiator starved of air. My wrists are held in one of his huge hands as his cocks notch at my entrance.

"Relax, my scrap of deliciousness. I'm going to take you completely."

His cocks slide into me easily, stretching me wide until he bottoms out, and I gasp his name too loudly.

"That's it, my mate. You take my cocks beautifully," he rasps as he withdraws and then slams back inside, causing my body to clamp around him.

"," he gasps. I guess I can still surprise my huge, feral gladiator. "," he murmurs as I continue to pulse over him as a precursor to my second climax.

I'm pinned by him, unable to move as he plunders my body. Thrust and withdraw, thrust and withdraw, he doesn't let me think, breathe, or do anything other than concentrate on his huge members which are taking me completely. I feel every single node, every part of him, until my orgasm strikes, and I'm sent spiraling into pleasure

which sheets my vision and sets every part of me tingling.

Maxym has taken me completely. I'm sure I hear my name being called as he erupts inside me, hot cum spilling as there is a pinch and a huge stretch as his second cock swells and locks us together.

And I know, if I wasn't already pregnant, Maxym would have made good on his promise. I would most definitely be expecting.

"I want you, I want all of you. Say you'll be mine," he rasps in my ear as he cradles my throbbing body against him.

"I am yours, Maxym. All of me, including my baby. We belong to you," I hear myself whispering and I know I mean it.

His breath comes in a long hot shuddering swish over my neck, followed by a sensuous kiss.

"We're locked," I say.

"I know," he replies.

"You didn't quite think this through, did you?"

"Why break a habit of a lifetime?" Maxym says, adding more kisses to my skin and making me pulse over him, causing a groan.

"You know I don't believe that of you," I say as he finally slips free, followed by a deluge of our combined fluids. "You know you were more than a gladiator."

"I know nothing," Maxym says, "other than my desire for you."

He leaves me trembling for the shortest time before he returns with a warm damp cloth which he uses to cleanse me before helping me back into my clothing.

“You know I’m coming with you to the dome,” I say.

“I would expect nothing less from you, my eregri . I want you by my side.” Maxym gives me a short bow. “Without you, I have nothing to fight for.”

“Then we’d better get ready.”

The air of Tatatunga is surprisingly clear as we exit the basement via a passage which brings us out some distance from Retah’s dwelling. Maxym is once again in his full armor including the helmet, and he looks absolutely magnificent.

I’m bristling with weapons, daggers and pulsar pistols. Although I’m hoping not to get so up close and personal with a Bogarok, I have to try to use them.

Retah wears a long, almost ceremonial robe, his chest bare and criss-crossed with bandoliers containing a myriad of weapons. He’s leaving nothing to chance.

So, this is it. The three of us, well, four if you count the baby inside me, against an entire army of Bogarok and whatever it is controlling them. At least until Retah’s mystery force arrives. Something it appears he’s banking on but not prepared to divulge just yet.

A warm breeze blows as we make our way as swiftly as possible through the empty streets, past shredded awnings and overturned market carts, keeping to the shadows and once or twice, diving into deserted shops to hide from the sound of Bogarok craft overhead.

Retah holds a device which is constantly sweeping for their particular life force, and

he studies it, followed by a lengthy look at Maxym whenever they are close.

“Any reaction, warrior?” he queries.

Maxym taps the side of his helmet. “Working,” he responds.

Retah nods briskly before we move on.

“What do you think it is, the thing affecting Maxym?” I ask him quietly as my big Gryn goes ahead of us.

“I’m not sure,” Retah says, “whatever it is, it’s coming from the Bogarok and it’s designed to affect males of most species.”

“Why not you?” I ask.

Retah taps his horns. “Thick skull.” He gives me a grin. “And Maxym’s head injury probably changed something in his head which made it difficult for the frequency they’re using to get through. It is possible his healing then allowed it through, or maybe they cranked up the power, either way we’ll need to stop it once we get to the dome.”

“All I want is for Maxym to be happy.” I sigh.

“I think we can probably say he is, after what I heard earlier,” Retah says with a smile he is trying to hide.

I feel myself color instantly.

“I don’t know what you mean.” I cough.

“I do,” Maxym says as we reach him. “I mated my eregri well, no?” he says directly to Retah.

“You did.”

“Seriously, no!” I exclaim. “I do not want to hear this conversation.”

“She is well mated by you,” Retah continues. “As a warrior should.”

“ is a delicious mate,” Maxym says with the wickedest of grins at me. “She takes my cocks so well.”

I clamp my hands over my ears and close my eyes as my cheeks flame. “Stop. Just stop.”

I risk a peep. The pair of them are grinning at me like Cheshire cats.

“I should just shoot you and be done,” I growl at them.

Maxym’s wings flare. I think he might actually like it if I did.

Retah’s device chimes.

“We have to go,” he says urgently. “The start to the underground passages is up ahead.”

MAXYM

Teasing my little mate, even if it did involve another male, was glorious. The way she reacted means I want to be sure she gets teased more often, especially if she is considering attempting to fight with me.

I'll happily fight her, all nova-day, every nova-day. Because I know it will end with my cocks buried deep within her tight, sweet channel and her moaning my name.

Retah leads us into a disused store. It smells of decay inside, not just of the building but of other things, things which were once alive.

"Why did you say these stores were abandoned again?" Cleo asks, holding the back of her hand to her nose.

"The jewelers moved to a more secure location," Retah says without any confidence.

"Doesn't smell like they left at all," I grumble.

"This way," Retah says, leading us through to the rear of the shop.

The odor doesn't get any worse, nor does it get any better, and it sets me on edge. I pull my sword from my side and shift it from hand to hand.

"Stay behind me," I say to Cleo.

"With pleasure. I don't want to encounter the source of the smell before you, believe

me,” Cleo says, pulsar in hand as I tuck her into my wings.

Retah reaches a large metal door. “We’re going to need to use a charge to get it open,” he says.

“Won’t it attract the Bogarok?” I suggest.

Behind me, Cleo laughs.

“You are talking to Tatatunga’s foremost arms dealer, even if it also turns out he’s some sort of royalty,” she says. “He has access to charges you can only dream about.”

My heart quickens. “I like explosives,” I say.

“Then you’re going to love these.” Retah pulls a few small mines from his bandolier and places them on the door. “Stand back.”

I don’t particularly want to, because the mere idea of explosives has set my wings on edge with excitement, but as my little mate is here, I tuck her behind me, an action she seems to appreciate.

Retah swipes his hand through the air, and there is a low frequency crump , after which the thick door swings open.

I can’t exactly hide my disappointment, but Cleo laughs and strolls out from behind me, and using both hands, she pulls the door wide enough for us and walks through.

Retah cocks his head, looking for my reaction.

“I’ve seen better,” I grumble, following my mate. Behind us, I hear Retah snort.

The doorway leads into a vault. It also has the smell I dislike but again, it's not getting any worse. Cleo has taken out her light source and is inspecting the walls.

"Presumably there's an entrance into the passage around here?" she asks Retah.

He studies his screen, horns lit up in the glowing light as Cleo moves around the room and he is shrouded in darkness.

"Here!" she calls out.

"Don't touch it!" Retah responds. "Some of these places contain traps for would be robbers. As we haven't entered in the conventional manner, these could still be set."

I'm quickly by Cleo's side looking at the area she thinks is the entrance. It appears there is a frame set in the wall behind the shelving which runs the length of this area, only there is a faint scent of a corrosive substance. I gently pull her back into me.

"This is not it, little scrap."

"How do you know?"

I look down at her. With the helmet on, as much as it makes things clearer, I miss the thoughtbond very much.

"I can scent something within the walls, something dangerous."

"You can smell danger?"

"Of course." I allow myself to look smug. "I am a Gryn."

Retah has another device in his hand which he runs over the wall. "Trap," he says.

“See?” I grin at Cleo, proud to have kept her safe. “I smell danger.”

She bites in her bottom lip, but the corners of her mouth quirk upwards. “Well done for your sense of smell,” she says after a short pause.

I want to kiss her, but Retah has moved to another part of the vault and exclaims he’s found what we’re looking for. In no time, he’s also blown this one open, and as the exit swings open, a blast of stale, unpleasant air hits us.

“Good air flow,” Retah says. “It means the passage has an opening somewhere.”

“Let’s just hope it’s the dome,” Cleo responds as he steps through and she follows.

I look back at the vault we’re leaving in the dim light, which gets dimmer as Cleo moves away. Whatever the scent is, we’re not leaving it in here. It is coming from the passage. And it’s not something I like at all.

Walking through the door, I find I’m in a wide, vaulted passage, the walls smooth.

“I thought they were moving jewels through here,” I say as I catch up with Cleo and Retah. “Not space worms.”

“It’s larger than I expected,” Retah says. “But the records on this place and what it was used for have become corrupted over time, so other than the knowledge it used to link various jewelry traders, not much else is known.”

Trefa itself is an ancient planet, and the Tref, the native inhabitants, have a long lineage. The planet’s natural resources have brought in everything which is needed to exploit them, but it doesn’t mean the place didn’t once have a rich culture.

“Perhaps it was part of something else, once,” Cleo says. “Something older.”

I have to touch my helmet to make sure it is still on, because my eregri has echoed my thoughts without me saying anything.

“It’s possible,” Retah replies. “This part of Tatatunga is one of the older inhabited areas. It’s one of the reasons the dome was built here. There’s been an entertainment space on the site as far back as records exist.”

Dust rises from the floor as we continue to walk through the space, our footsteps echoing.

“But this place is uninhabited,” I say to Retah.

“Yes.”

“Then what the vrex is that?” I point a clawed finger at the figure barreling towards us, screeching as if raised from the dead.

CLEO

The thing up ahead releases a blood chilling scream as it races towards us through the shadows shed by our lights. I'm sure it's the source of the weird, unpleasant smell which has been pervading our every move. I already have my pulsar pistol in hand, but the terrible creature has me frozen to the spot.

"Xavir?" Retah bursts out.

The thing comes to a skidding halt.

"Retah?" Its voice is distorted, half scream, half words.

"What are you doing down here?" Retah asks.

What seems to be a pile of bones and rags suddenly shifts, opening in the middle as something inside shrugs off the costume to reveal an Oykid who smiles genially at us.

Maxym releases a growl which could strip paint, and the Oykid nearly falls over.

"Why is there a gladiator here?" he gibbers.

"Answer Retah's question first," Maxym snarls, lifting his sword. "Or you will die."

"I'm protecting the hoard," Xavir gibbers, his eyes not leaving Maxym.

"Hoard?" Retah looks as confused as I feel. "This place is supposed to be

abandoned.”

“That’s what they want you to think. But the Lepke jewelers still use this place to store their goods,” Xavir says. “We decided the best way to keep would be interested parties out would be to pretend it was abandoned and use scare tactics to deal with those more curious.”

“Xavir runs one of the foremost security firms in Tatatunga,” Retah says to us.

“You do know the Bogarok have invaded, don’t you?” I say, confused. “They’ve been on the planet for the last three nova-days.”

Maxym scents the air.

“The smell, it’s designed to repel, isn’t it?” he growls.

Xavir grins. “Well spotted, Gryn,” he says. “It is designed to repel predators like you. No one should really get this far.” He turns to me, brow furrowed. “What was that about Bogarok?”

“How long have you been down here, friend?” Retah asks.

“One of my staff was injured on a job, so I had to take over. My shift started three nova-days ago...I think.”

“You think?”

“Time is strange down here,” Xavir says with shrug. “But the Bogarok have invaded?”

“Yes, the Bogarok have invaded. We’re trying to get to the dome, to return this

gladiator who got separated from the others,” Retah says smoothly. “Can we still get through?”

“Of course. The way is clear.”

“You don’t have to stay down here. You know that, don’t you?” says.

“On the contrary. If there’s an invasion, I’m not going to get my relief, am I?” Xavir says with a smile. “Looks like I’m stuck.”

“We can get a message to your team, if they’ve avoided the Bogarok. They can come get you.”

Xavir snorts a laugh. “And risk the Bogarok eating the hoard? Not a chance.”

“Eating it?” I query.

“Bogarok eat precious stones and metals. It’s how they support their exoskeletons,” Retah says quietly. “You’d better get back to it,” he says with a smile which somehow doesn’t quite make it over the rest of his face.

Next to me, I feel Maxym tensing.

“We’ll be on our way,” Retah adds.

“Good luck,” Xavir says as we walk on ahead.

“Shouldn’t we help him or something?” I ask as we get farther away from the strange Oykgig.

“I’ve never trusted Xavir,” Retah says under his breath. “And there’s no way any

security firm boss would remain unconnected from their business for three nova-hours, let alone three nova-days. We're going to have to speed this up."

"You believe he's in league with the Bogarok?" Maxym rumbles.

"I believe my acquaintance with him is the only reason we're not completely dead, yet," Retah says darkly. "He's got to get a message to them first."

Both Maxym and Retah turn to look at the Oykgig who has vanished like smoke.

"Yes, speed it up," Maxym says, increasing his pace. "I'd rather maintain the element of surprise, if we can."

I jog to keep up with the pair of them, their much longer legs eating up the distance as the passage narrows and there are a number of branches leading off it.

"That one leads to the dome, but it's blocked. Potentially Xavir might think we're going to use it, so I think we should take..." He turns ninety degrees. "This one."

"Where does it take us?" Maxym asks, his feathers shaking.

"We'll exit on the far side of the square in front of the dome."

"Where there will be a thousand Bogarok waiting for us," Maxym rasps. "What are the other options?"

"I can't tell where this one comes up." Retah thrusts his vid-screen at Maxym, and I peer at it from under his wing.

Maxym grins. "I can," he says.

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CLEO

The damp passage runs uphill until we reach an old ladder which is mere metal rungs slammed into the wall.

“Up,” Maxym says, placing me on the first rungs and following behind until we reach the iron grating above.

He listens for a short while and then braces his back against the grate, shielding me with his body. He shoves and the thing gives with a grinding shriek, falling back over with a loud clang.

“If they didn’t know where to find us before,” I hiss, “they do now.”

“Unlikely. I do not believe Bogarok bathe,” Maxym says, helping me out of the drain and onto solid ground before following me out.

The air is thick with the smell of hot water and cleansing products. I might not have the sense of smell Maxym does, given he was able to literally use his nose to find the booby trap back in the vault, but I know the scent well.

“This is a bath?” I query. “In the dome?”

“Not quite,” Maxym says. “The hot springs which feed the baths in the dome are part of this system, but these are in a private bath next to the dome.” He smiles at me and lifts his wings over his head. “We sometimes came here, if we had a pass and if we needed to get away from all the fussing clerks.” He stretches out his left wing,

twisting it one way, then the other. “The minerals are better for healing here. Helped fix my wing once.”

“All well and good, but we still have to get to the dome,” Retah says.

“Did I also mention we sometimes came here without a pass because they’re more than happy to serve gladiators with mead-ale?” Maxym says with a wicked smile.

“Rogue.” Retah thumps him on his back between his wings.

“You never told me you were this sneaky.” I slide my hand into his.

“Survival makes you do what you need to,” Maxym says, “but survival is about more than just staying alive.”

“It includes mead-ale and bathing?”

“What is life without mead-ale and bathing?” he replies, pulling me against him. “And you.”

“What indeed,” I say as he captures me with a kiss until Retah clears his throat.

“Ah yes, the mission,” Maxym says as I’m released. “If I want mead-ale, bathing, and you all to myself in the future, I suppose we’d better get on with it.”

“As long as I know where I stand in the hierarchy of your life.” I laugh. “Somewhere behind mead-ale and bathing.”

Maxym gives me a long, dangerous look. “My life is yours, sweet mate. Always.”

Like I ever had any doubt.

“It’s this way.” He heads out of the rough-hewn room through an archway with Retah and I following.

We move through increasingly more ornate, and deserted rooms which have deep pools of steaming water. I can see why Maxym is attracted to this place, although the murals of naked females could also have something to do with it.

“Only you,” he whispers in my ear. “Even when I was sold for pleasure, there was none, until you.”

I’m about to ask what he could possibly mean about being sold for pleasure when we reach the outer door of the bathing house, and he takes a sharp left turn, leaping up a flight of stairs two at a time with Retah and I rushing to catch him up. I’m sure I see movement out of the corner of my eye, but I ignore it as we race through a few more rooms, some of which have beds in disarray, making me wonder exactly what else goes on in this bath house.

And why Maxym was so fond of it.

He pushes through a set of double doors, and we are out in the humid air once again, sheltered under a small portico. The dome looms up dead ahead of us.

“See the doorway?” Maxym points to a large black square about twenty feet from ground level.

“Only a Gryn would consider this a way to sneak in and out of the dome,” Retah growls. “How do you expect us to get up there? Because I’m not clinging to you while you fly us.”

“You don’t. I will, then I’ll open the door down there.” Maxym points to one at street level. “It’ll take all of half a nova-second.” He fixes Retah with a glare. “And how do

you think I got in and out while I was injured?”

“Fair enough,” Retah says. “There’s no way you’re carrying me anywhere, Gryn,” he adds.

“Not a chance,” Maxym responds.

I suspect their budding bromance has halted in the face of what we’re about to do. I step between them, sliding my hands into Maxym’s feathers and wishing he could take off his helmet.

I want to feel his thoughts again, the ones which tell me how he is, what he’s feeling, what he thinks about me. The baths, the murals, his mention of being sold for pleasure have all created a maelstrom within me which I find completely inappropriate and yet I’m unable to stop.

“Pregnancy hormones,” I grumble under my breath as his feathers lift and slick under my touch.

“What is it, little scrap?” Maxym asks.

“Nothing,” I say. “Nothing which can’t wait until later anyway.”

Above us, there is a clatter and a metallic screech.

“Bogarok,” Retah says, twisting his horned head to the sky. “We need to move from here or we run the risk of being detected.”

Maxym growls, launches himself into the air, and with several swift wing beats he’s on the side of the dome, deftly landing on a tiny ledge which I couldn’t even see. I’m impressed at the way his huge form becomes like a ballet dancer as he works his way

to the doorway and, after a heart stopping moment, it opens and he slips inside.

Whereupon, it slams shut, seemingly as if the dome has taken him again.

“Don’t worry, ,” Retah tries to reassure me. “He can take care of himself.”

“I know, but the Bogarok...” I say as a large shadow flits over us.

“Speaking of Bogarok, we need to get away from here. Our movement has most likely already been spotted.”

He drags me back inside as I can’t seem to tear my eyes away from where I last saw Maxym.

“Is this place only for bathing?” I ask out loud.

“It’s a pleasure house too,” Retah says. “But I’m sure Maxym wasn’t using it as one,” he adds quickly. “From what I’ve been told, the Gryn gladiators were not allowed to use pleasure houses unless they were being paid for their time.” He glances at me. “This isn’t helping, is it?”

“You might want to stop talking now,” I respond.

After all, whether I have a job or not after all of this is immaterial if I don’t have Maxym.

And at this moment, I don’t have him at all.

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MAXYM

The moment the door shuts behind me, the loss of my mate echoes in my bones. Helmet or no, her presence centers me in a way I didn't think was possible.

My only thoughts of violence are to protect her. My only need for the fight is to fight for her. My only reason to lift a sword is to keep her free.

The dome smells like Klynn's armpits.

“Home,” I say wryly under my breath. The dome is anything but a place I want to be.

There's a strange hum running underfoot as I make my way through from the disused service corridor and into the main access way. The scent of armpits is replaced with a smell I wish I didn't remember, but I do.

Bogarok. Hundreds of them. They stink like rotting meat and metal to the point my stomach rolls over. This is the last place I want to bring my mate, but if we have to get to the vault and take what will protect all of us, then it is something I'm going to have to do.

Scuttling noises up ahead have me pushing my way into a hopefully empty chamber. I wait until the noises have passed before making my way down until I'm at street level, searching for the door which I can use to let my sweet mate in and have her back in my arms.

I finally locate the door, and with some difficulty, I manage to get it to open. Across

the street is a blank wall.

Sticking my head out, I see the pleasure house and baths several buildings away. By chance, Retah appears, and I flick a wing to attract his attention.

Fortunately, the old Remek warrior is no fool and he sees the flash of white. Ducking back into the doorway, he appears with Cleo, and the pair of them run like the wind up to me.

Above them, several Bogarok appear on the rooftops. For half a nova-second, I think they might have not seen my mate and Retah, but with a rush, as one, they turn and descend down the side of the buildings. I will the pair of them to run faster because I don't want to use my pulsar. It'll only attract attention.

The last thing we need is more of the foul creatures.

Panting, they reach me, and I shove them through the door.

"Not this time." I grin as the things barrel towards me and I slip through the door, closing it tight.

There are a number of thumps before there is silence.

"I really thought they were going to get us." Cleo is doubled up, her hands on her knees as she tries to catch her breath.

"We need to go. I'm not sure if the door will hold them," I say.

Cleo straightens, but she's a pale color I dislike.

"Let me carry you, little mate?" I ask quietly. "We need to move quickly."

“I’m not here to be a burden, ,” she responds, pulling her hair back from her face and tying it behind her in a long tail. “If I thought I would be, I wouldn’t have come.”

There’s still fight in my little scrap.

“This way.” I usher her forward and through the service passages of the dome until we reach the hatch I need.

“Down there?” Retah queries.

“It’s the only way. Believe me, if I thought there was any other that wasn’t being guarded, I’d use it.” I grimace at the tight fit as I drop through.

Retah assists Cleo as I make my way down the short tube and onto the sharp metal rungs which will take us all the way to the undercroft.

The number of times I’ve dropped into it without even a thought, my feet and hands hardly touching the ladder in my desire to rage and howl. Or, long before, to chase Blayn and Klynn in order to get them ready for the games.

Some times in the dome were better than others. I have a pang of guilt about my fellow gladiator, given all I did was drop him into a hole and leave.

But then Klynn can take care of himself, and provided he got away from the Bogarok and their mindbending ways, he should be okay. I’ve seen him survive worse. We all have.

Looking up, I see the delicious globes of my mate’s ass, shifting as she climbs down above me. Whether I will get to follow my fellow gladiators who have all found their mates and left the dome for a new life, I’m not sure.

But what I do know is I will move all the celestial bodies in the galaxy to make it happen for my eregri and me.

I reach the solid floor of the undercroft and pluck Cleo from the ladder once she's close enough. She squeaks beautifully as I pull her into my arms.

"You're all hard," she grumbles, hand on my breastplate.

"And you're all soft." I shove my head into her fragrant hair, wishing it was loose like normal.

"And you really need to put her down and get on with the job at hand," Retah says as he reaches the ground.

I glare at him in the gloom. His eyes have a slight glow to them, almost like bioluminescence.

"We do need to go, ." Cleo places a kiss on my lips. "We don't know how long we've got before the Bogarok come after us."

My chest rumbles because she's right, but I'd rather nest for her.

"So far, other than the ones outside the dome, there seems to be no significant movement." Retah is lit with the light from his vid-screen.

"They haven't detected us?" Cleo asks. "What about the ones outside?"

"Maybe they didn't see us as a threat? I'm not sure," Retah replies. "Either way, we need to get moving before they do see us as one."

"I'm relatively confident your friend in the passages has already informed them we

are coming,” I growl at him.

Retah lifts his shoulders. “At least he didn’t kill us,” He offers.

I growl under my breath. The Oykig might have not done the deed himself, but it doesn’t mean he won’t cause our demise later.

Not something I’m going to allow to happen.

I lead my mate and Retah into the main undercroft. It rises above us, criss-crossed by conduits, by aged structures vaulted and echoing.

“It really is ancient,” Retah says as he stares around. “And the perfect hiding place for an info center you don’t want anyone to find.”

CLEO

The undercroft has lost the stench of feet and onions which the dome had. Down here, the air is thick, warm, and slightly metallic, almost as if we're by the sea.

There's something about this place which chills me. It's as if it's a receptacle for lost souls. The way Maxim's feathers prick suggests to me he feels the same, even if I can't catch his thoughts anymore.

Retah gives him his bright-eyed look. "You know this place. Where do you think the info center is?" he asks.

"I thought you knew?"

"I knew it was in this general area, but that's where Maxym comes in. He knows this place," Retah says.

"I came to the undercroft to deal with my violence, not look for data vaults," Maxym growls, squaring up to Retah.

The stress of the situation is getting to both males. I give Retah a warning look and slip my hand into Maxym's feathers.

"But this time, we're here for data," I say as I feel him relax just slightly and wish we could use the thoughtbond, a concept as alien as this planet and yet something which is so useful between lovers.

Maxym shakes his head. "I don't know, my . It could be anywhere."

"It won't have been obvious," Retah says unhelpfully.

"Was there anywhere you were unable to go or that was guarded perhaps?" I ask as Maxym closes his eyes, my fingers delving deeper into his downy feathers.

"We don't have time for this," Retah growls behind me.

"We have all the time," I snap back.

Maxym opens his eyes, staring straight at me. "There were automated pulsars." He heaves a breath. "If we went close, they'd open fire."

He lifts all his feathers at once, then twirls them back into place, making sure not to shake me off.

"Which way?" I whisper.

My huge gladiator gives me his best smile. "With me," he says and takes my hand from his back, kisses it, and then we're heading into the darkness.

The undercroft is vast. My small handheld light illuminates a tiny portion of it as we move across the open space and towards a number of tunnels which lead away.

"How long did you spend down here?" I ask, the hairs on the back of my neck rising once again at the church-like silence of the place.

"Too long," Maxym replies, quietly. "It is not a good place. But it is a place for a raging gladiator whose blood will not cool."

I squeeze his hand, huge and warm, in mine. He looks down at me briefly and his face is filled with love.

“But now I never have to come back here again,” he says. “As I have you.”

Warmth blooms from my center. For all my silly, presumably hormonal, concerns back at the bath and pleasure house, my heart knows Maxym. It knows no matter what has happened in his past, it is his past, and I am his future.

We can do this. We can beat the Bogarok and those controlling them, I feel it in my bones. Maxym will be free.

Ahead of us is a yawning mouth of a tunnel. Maxym releases my hand and draws his sword, flicking his head at Retah.

“Wait here,” he says to me. “Be ready.”

I pull out my pulsar and he smiles.

“Always ready,” I respond.

“Good,” he says. “With me, Retah.” The pair of them advance into the darkness, leaving me alone in a pool of light.

I can hear my breathing. I certainly wish I had Maxym’s ability to see in near darkness because this light feels like a beacon.

Ahead, in the dark, there is a low, horrible slicing sound.

“Maxym?” I take a step forward, the darkness somehow feeling like it’s closing in on me.

I call his name again as I walk a few more paces to the tunnel entrance.

Only there is no longer an entrance. My foot hits something solid. Something metal which rings at my touch. A door?

“Maxym!” I bellow out, thumping my fist against it.

“Looks like we caught ourselves a tasty snack for the Bogarok,” a voice sniggers in the dark.

I spin around to be faced with a large, bulbous Habosu.

Of course it would be Habosu working with the Bogarok. I roll my eyes.

“You really don’t want to do this,” I say, lifting the pulsar.

Neither of them move.

“A little female with a pulsar too large for her,” he says. “One she needs to hand over before she gets hurt.”

His eyes travel down my body, although I already know Habosu find all females other than their own kind repellant. They light up when he sees the rounding of my stomach.

“And a female who carries Gryn young,” he says gleefully. “My masters will be pleased.”

Could this Habosu be any more hench-alien? It’s like he’s been programmed or something...

Which is when it hits me. The way Maxym described Klynn as being rendered unconscious, the way he was affected by the proximity of the Bogarok the second time he encountered them.

“Mind control,” I say out loud.

“What?” The hench-Habosu is taken by surprise at my announcement.

“It’s mind control of some sort they’re using, isn’t it?”

It all suddenly makes sense. Why the Bogarok want all the males. It immediately stops any resistance and creates a built in, but expendable, army they control.

The Habosu furrows his brow. “A tasty snack...for the...Bogarok...” he says, struggling over the words as if this time, he doesn’t want to say them again.

“And what if I’m not?” I rush on, wanting to give Maxym and Retah more time, to get free, to reappear, or anything, because if any more Habosu appear, I’m not going to be able to get away. “A tasty snack for the Bogarok. What if I’m their worst nightmare?”

“Then, little female, he’ll bring you to me...”

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MAXYM

I'm already half in the air as the metal slices through the opening and cuts us off from Cleo. My sword rattles across it but leaves not even a mark on the stuff.

"Tritanium," I growl.

Retah pulls one of the new pulsix from his belt and lets rip. Unfortunately for him the bolt glances off the metal and pings around the passage, causing me to duck several times.

"I thought these would penetrate anything." I glare at the blockage. "I need to get to Cleo."

Retah says nothing. In fact, he seems to have disappeared, until a groan from the floor captures my attention.

He's clutching his shoulder, where blood is welling from a wound.

"Vrex!" I'm on my knees beside him. "Why didn't you avoid it?"

"I did. It was coming for my head!" He says through gritted teeth. "Grak! Those things pack a punch."

"Let me look." My entire body is on edge. Not only is Cleo on the other side of the door, but I have a badly injured Remek to deal with.

As I turn him over, the extent of the damage is clear. Retah might be a big warrior, but the blood loss alone will kill him unless I can get him some treatment.

“Drop your weapons, Gryn.”

I turn to face the cohort of Habosu and Zarvu, who have a single Bogarok at their rear. They’re armed, naturally and I have some grace left within me to know when I’m outnumbered.

And I have a damaged warrior to manage.

“I’m sorry, Retah. I have to do this, for you and for my mate,” I say quietly to him.

His brow, furrowed with pain, squeezes tighter with confusion.

“I have an injured male here,” I say. “He requires treatment.”

“We will see to it, if you surrender quietly, gladiator.” One of the Zarvu speaks, a guard I recognize from the dome. His name is Arluc.

Only there’s something odd about his eyes. Something which almost suggests he’s not quite in the present.

I have no intention whatsoever of surrendering, and given the state of all my opponents, other than the Bogarok, I know where I need to concentrate my attention.

“Once you’re fit, you need to get to the info-center,” I say, still crouched over Retah’s prone form. “It’s two levels up, near the entrance, you can’t miss it.” I murmur to him.

“You have a lot of faith in my healing abilities,” Retah says weakly. “And my ability

to escape.”

“A wily prince like you has done this many times.” I grin, grasping his hand. “I’m sure you will prevail.”

“Go find her,” he says. “She is more precious than you could possibly know.”

“I believe I know,” I respond. “The dome is no more and my body belongs to her.”

I rise up, holding up one of the pulsars and a dagger in my outstretched hands as I turn slowly towards my would be captors.

If the Zarvu remember what it was like to deal with a Gryn, then any knowledge is long gone behind their blank, concentrated expressions. And certainly the Bogarok, while it shifts on its long legs, is unaware.

The undercroft became my domain because I needed somewhere to hide.

Now it is my killing ground, but not for the unfortunate creatures in the Bogarok’s thrall, for the disgusting creature itself.

I throw the pulsar at the nearest Habosu and while he scrambles for it and the rest fail to react, I’m in the air, spinning over their head and slashing down at the Bogarok.

It raises its pincers, slicing at me, catching one thigh and sending me off course. The wound is deep, but I’ve had worse from Blayn. I swing out at one of its legs, cutting the thing in half, and it totters to the side before another one grows swiftly to take its place.

Vrex the vrexing things! They can regenerate. Which means a different tactic is called for. One I am going to hate intensely and yet one I’ve perfected over a

thousand beast fights in the dome arena.

Back in the air, I let the Bogarok snap its jaws and flail evilly sharp front legs at me, until I let one of them catch me and send me tumbling to the ground, skidding to a halt on my back as the Bogarok bears down on me, pincers grasping, drool falling as all sixteen eyes glitter with hate.

“You think you’ve won, don’t you?” I stare up at it. “Well, you have not.”

It dips farther towards me as I pull the sword from between my shoulder blades and with a tremendous push of my wings, I spin and slide back underneath, using the point to score all the way along the abdomen of the huge creature.

It lifts its head and screeches with rage, turning, spear-like legs stamping as it comes after me again.

Only this time I’m hard against the passage wall and there’s nowhere to go. It lifts a leg, the vicious point aimed right at my head until, with a deluge, the damage I’ve done gives way, and I’m engulfed in a swathe of guts while the Bogarok groans and collapses sideways.

For what seems like the longest while, there is silence, save for dripping. I wipe off my face and get to my feet, sword in hand.

“Anyone else want the same treatment?” I growl.

“?” Arluc clutches at his big head, eyes blinking hard. “What are we doing down here?” He looks around at the others.

“You were about to capture me and feed me to the Bogarok,” I respond.

“The invasion!” one of the Habosu blurts out. “Bogarok!”

“It’s some sort of telepathic control,” Retah says, having pulled himself upright against the far wall. “It must be the reason the Bogarok wanted all the warriors to give themselves up.”

“But why are you not affected?” I growl.

Retah taps his horns. “Thick head,” he responds with a weak smile.

“I have to go find my mate,” I fire at Arluc. “I presume you are not going to stop me?”

“Why would we do that? The Bogarok are our enemies too.” He gives the Habosu a side eye.

“Our clan never employs the filthy things,” the lead Habosu says. “We have no allegiance.”

“Then get my friend to the Cirmos for treatment,” I say. “And then get out of here.”

Arluc nods, tossing his head at his colleagues. Two of them get on either side of the big Remek, assisting him to stand.

“Go find your mate,” he says. “Good luck, gladiator.”

CLEO

The creature I'm staring at has to be at least the same height as Maxym, his body covered in a lumpy, warty skin which is, thankfully, mostly covered by thick leather clothing. His toad-like head has a large patch covering one eye, which is presumably missing.

Or he likes the drama.

I'm not sure I've ever encountered such a creature before. And, frankly, as I'm clearly already fucked, I've got little left to lose.

"And who the fuck are you?" I say, as the Habosu blinks, returns to his mind-washed state, and grabs the pulsar from my hand, twisting my wrist until I let go.

"I am Szek, a Varangy, if you didn't know." His face twists into a cruel smile. "You probably don't and that's the way we like it."

I find myself rolling my eyes yet again. "So mysterious, such a load of bollocks."

If he's bothered by my sarcasm, he doesn't show it. Instead he leans forward in a flood of stench which seems to leak from his every pore.

"We have good reason to stay in the shadows," he says. "But coming out in order to enjoy creatures like you is a sign from our great deity."

A shiver runs down my spine.

“And who might that be?”

“Protoex, the great one,” he says with the confidence of a religious zealot.

“So, you’re not in charge then?” I query.

He pushes his face closer to mine. The skin sheens with something I already know in my heart isn’t sweat.

“I am in charge of you, and as I’m informed you have access to the gladiator, you will do what I say, unless you want him to lose his wings.”

A nasty spike of fear runs through me. I don’t want to co-operate with this thing and whatever is controlling it and the Bogarok, for whatever ends. I’m also not fooled by his attitude. He’s a shit, scared as the Habosu is, and it’s looking decidedly unwell.

“Fine. What do you want me to do?” I fold my arms and tap my foot. “If you’re in charge, and you seem to know so much about me.”

“I can smell him on you,” Szek says, mouth wet and his tongue bulging horribly. “You are mated to a Gryn.”

“But you’re wrong about the access. I’ve lost him, and you certainly don’t have him. He’s pretty hard to hide.” I make a show of looking around in the darkness.

Szek splutters something I don’t catch then slams his fist into the side of the hapless Habosu’s head.

“Take her to the holding area.” He looks me up and down. “Actually, take her to the experimentation chamber. I’ve not come across a female like this before, and she should be thoroughly... examined .” He licks his lips, and the chill I had earlier

deepens. “Before I offer her to the master.”

In all my time on Trefa, I’ve heard rumors of other humans but never met one. Our rarity doesn’t seem to make us desirable, however. In fact, it’s almost been the opposite. This is the first time anyone has paid more than a passing attention to me other than Maxym.

And I’m not liking it at all.

The Habosu grabs my arm roughly and pulls me away from Szek. I’m not sorry I’m leaving him in the dark, but I really don’t want to be removed from the last place I saw Maxym. Even so, I don’t struggle, allowing him to tow me, away, down a dimly lit corridor and away from where I last saw my huge gladiator.

I know Maxym can look after himself. Of course I know it. He’s a gladiator, a fighter, an alien warrior with wings and claws and fangs. He has so many weapons on him he’s a veritable one male army.

But it doesn’t stop the grip around my heart as I’m taken farther away. It’s as if I crave him, need him like I need air. My body already seems to be responding to his loss, my legs cramping and my skin clammy.

Which means I pay little attention to where we are, at least until we pass a series of openings and I see a large open arena inside. The training arena! I’m not too far from the armory from what I remember of my tour with Maxym and my time in the dome itself.

The Bogarok and the horrible Szek clearly have taken over the entire dome, and they’re now using the gladiator quarters as their base. It might be something we already knew, but even so, it doesn’t fill my heart with any form of hope.

They have all the weapons, all the male-power they need. What exactly were we thinking coming here?

The Habosu flings open a door on my left, and I'm shoved through with a grunt, shutting it behind me.

"Ah, a new specimen." A lizard-like alien lifts its head to look at me.

I turn immediately and go for the door. It's locked. I check over my shoulder, and the thing, dressed incongruously in a long white coat, is regarding me with interest. There has to be another way out of the room. I stare wildly around and then make a run for it.

"If you're looking for another exit, you won't find one. This place is a maze, but it's designed to keep gladiators in," the creature says in an almost sing-song voice behind me.

I feel claws rake down my neck, and my collar is captured pulling me up short.

"So," the voice snarls in my ear, dripping with menace, "shall we get started?"

MAXYM

I want to know where my mate is, but given what the Bogarok mind control has been doing to the others, I also know I can't risk taking off my helmet. Any original natural defense I had against it has waned, and given my reaction back at Retah's dwelling, I can't risk it.

I can't risk becoming a mindless drone, not when I have even more of a burning desire to destroy this entire place with the Bogarok inside. Not when I have a mate to protect...and more importantly, locate.

I work my way up through the various layers of the dome to the gladiator quarters where the Zarvu have told me the Bogarok have set up a command center. If there's any way of locating my sweet Cleo, it will be there, and I get the added bonus of being able to take out as many Bogarok as I can in the process.

My hope is Cleo has not been taken by the things, but given what happened to us, it seems unlikely. My head knows she's a fighter, like me, but my heart beats double time at the potential risk.

She was mine to protect, and I failed.

As long as we were together, she was safe, and we are no longer together. I'm not sure she will ever forgive me, and I'm sure I won't ever forgive myself.

I need my eregri in my arms. I need to scent her hair and feel the softness of her skin. Cleo makes me a better Gryn in all ways. It's something brought into a stark reality

now she is not with me. The rage I once felt remains within me, but it's not the same, not as it was. It is something I can shape and mold to fit what I need to do, rather than driving my very soul.

Mating has given me something I didn't believe existed, a quiet mind and a new purpose. Her.

The first few Bogaroks are easy enough to dispatch. The vrexing things stink to the stars, and I don't hang around to see what happens when they're found by their compatriots. Instead I duck into one of the ancillary service tunnels which is a tight squeeze for me, especially in the armor I'm wearing, but I don't want to be discovered just yet.

Not until I know where Cleo is. Then I'll hack my way through any number of disgusting Bogarok to get her.

I come out near the gladiator area closest to the public parts of the dome, the area the clerks use to deal with the running of the dome. It has tech which might be able to assist me. Even if my Cleo doesn't have a tracker, her singular species should be something the dome can detect.

After all, the dome reserved the right to refuse entry, even after someone had entered among the hundreds of thousands of patrons. How else are you to find who you don't want? I thank the stars I actually bothered to pay attention to Syllas on all those occasions I thought he was trotting out some conspiracy or other.

Because, as it turned out, he was right, in a strange way. His memories were stolen from him, like mine were, like all of us. Memories he wanted back and which made him a stronger male. A stronger warrior, and one I wish was by my side.

But like Blayn and Rych and now me, he had a mate to think of, and if he has any

sense at all, he'll be a long, long way from Trefa by now.

This is going to be my battle and I'm ready for it. It's as if I've always been ready for it. My life in the dome has led up to this moment.

The battle for my mate, my Cleo, my everything.

I creep down the passage, which is devoid of Bogarok, as if they don't consider this area important, until I reach the suite of rooms where the clerks are usually busy.

It's an area of the dome I haven't frequented. Gladiators are considered too stupid to understand the workings of the dome, but that's because the clerks usually underestimate everyone. Rych and I have been here on occasion to obtain illicit passes (his ability to pilfer was legendary) and credit chips.

Keeping my breathing even, because in these close quarters, my size is a hindrance, I quickly look into the first room.

It's empty, a few items overturned but otherwise unscathed. I sheathe my sword and pull out twin daggers instead. I dislike the place at the best of times, but I'm going to have to go deeper within in order to get to the area where I know the clerks monitor the dome.

Daggers in hand, I sidle through the next door, into the open area punctuated by working stations and consoles, most of which are a complete mystery as to their purpose. On the far side is a bank of vid-screens some of which are still flickering.

The movement I see results in an involuntary action, the blade flying through the air, followed by me. There's a dull thud as the dagger hits its mark, and I descend, with chaos all around me, to find the small Oykid pinned to the floor by his green jerkin.

“What are you doing here?” I snarl.

He stares up in abject terror. A large scar through his scales runs from the top of his head and down onto his neck.

“I...I was hiding from the Bogarok,” he gibbers. “And the others. I’m sorry... I’ll come with you if you want.”

“The others?” I query.

“The other clerks. They were rounding everyone up,” he says, tongue flickering wildly from between his lips like most Oykig do when stressed. “Including the other gladiators.” He exhales and goes limp.

Oykig have no eyelids to indicate if they are unconscious, and as my blade hasn’t pierced any important parts, I give him a shake. His head wobbles and then life returns to his body.

“Don’t kill me!” he murmurs, his tail coiling away from me.

From the color of his belly scales, he has to be a young Oykig and my heart softens.

“I have no intention of killing you,” I say. “I just need help to find my mate and get her out of here, away from the Bogarok.”

“Mate?” He loses the dreamy, terrified look. “ You are mated?”

“Is that such a hard thing to believe?” I say, affronted.

“You’re , terror of the dome,” he says in hushed tones. “The unbeatable, the feral, the merciless...”

“Pleased to meet you.” I give him a little wave. Unfortunately, it’s the hand with the dagger, and he attempts to recoil but is stopped by the other dagger pinning his tunic to the floor.

I reach down and pull it free before offering it to him.

“And if you’re going to help the Merciless, you’re going to need this.”

CLEO

“Look into this light,” the lizard says.

“No.” I shut my eyes tight.

He sighs. “Look, for the final time, I’m being forced to work for the Bogarok. They have my family.”

“I don’t care. It doesn’t mean you get to experiment on me.” I fold my arms over my chest and realize it makes my stomach stand out, and I don’t want this creature knowing about my baby, so I drop them to my sides.

“I’m not experimenting on you,” he says, sharp teeth gritted. “I’m examining you, and the longer it takes, the longer it will be before I have to turn you over to Szek.”

“You mean you don’t want to?”

He shakes his head sadly. “Has your species never heard of resistance before?”

“I’m pretty sure we invented it.” I huff. “But handing me over to Szek isn’t resisting.”

“It is if I tell him you have a space virus and have to be quarantined so you don’t infect him and his crew,” the lizard creature retorts.

“Why would you do that?”

“Because you are with young. Because you’ve done nothing to warrant being at their mercy and because I hate them all with the force of a thousand burning suns,” he responds, fists curled up. His body shakes and his eyes close as he rocks on his feet.

I know all of this could be a ruse to get information out of me, but so far, given I’ve met Szek and seen what the Bogarok have done, this seems far too subtle. Far too slow a way of interrogating for them.

I have to take a leap of faith sometime, like I did with Maxym. Like I failed to do with Retah and Tibi. All three of which are my world.

Hesitantly, I put out my hand and touch his. His skin is warmer than I was expecting.

“I’m here with a Gryn and a Remek warrior. We’re trying to get to what the Bogarok want before they find it, and then we’re going to take back Tatatunga,” I say carefully. “Maybe we can help you?”

I hold my breath. I’ve given away more than I should, but it’s enough I should know one way or the other. Bracing for the door to burst open and Szek to shout in triumph or some such drama, I don’t let go of the lizard creature’s hand.

His eyes open.

“You’re trying to save this place?” he says quietly.

“Maybe not save .” I look around at the walls. “I’m not sure anyone wants to save a palace of violence, but certainly we want to get rid of the occupiers.”

“You and two warriors?”

“Got to start somewhere.”

He pulls in air over his tongue, eyes not leaving mine. This is the moment. I've thrown us all under the bus...or I haven't.

"That's insane..." he says. "It's so insane it has to be true." His hand curls around mine. "I'm Dirk," he says enthusiastically, wriggling his fingers, and I'm guessing it's a greeting.

"Hi, Dirk. I'm . I'm a human. My mate is Maxym, the Gryn, and Retah is the Remek. He's my employer." I feel a weight lift as the words escape my lips.

"You have a Gryn ?" Dirk gasps.

I'm beginning to feel like this is going to be a long process.

"Is that a problem?"

"I was given another Gryn earlier. When we first arrived. He did this." Dirk rolls his sleeve up and what was clearly a very nasty injury, now mostly healed to pink skin, is visible. "The Bogarok took him away." He shudders.

"That was probably Klynn." I make a mental note to let Maxym know the other gladiator is still here and was seen alive. "Not all Gryn are as dangerous."

"I've met the Gryn. None were as feral as that one," Dirk grumbles.

"You've met them?"

"My species, Kijg, were originally from Ustokos, the Gryn home world. I have returned occasionally."

I shake my head. "Maxym doesn't know much about his planet, if he has ever even

been there. Him and his fellow gladiators all had their memories wiped.”

Dirk makes a snarling, snorting noise. “Drahon,” he adds. “They were responsible for most of the trafficking of species in and around the galaxy. Some say they still are, even if the Galactic Council confined them to their planet.”

For a second, I wonder about telling Dirk our mission, but even if he does seem to be friend not foe, I’m not sure I can risk him having any more information.

Although what he said is starting to make things crystallize in my mind. The Galactic Council, the supposed species-non-grata in the Drahon, but who are still around, the Bogarok and the shadow Varangy. It’s all starting to add up to something highly unpleasant and which goes beyond anything I think any of us have imagined. And it all leads back to one creature, the Protoex.

“I don’t know about the Drahon, but I do know I need to find Maxym and do what we need to do,” I say instead.

My theories will have to wait until we’re all back together.

Dirk strokes his chin. “I can tell Szek you have a virus. It’ll buy you some time to find him.”

“What about you?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re coming with us, surely?”

He looks at me, half alarmed, half grateful. “My family...they have my wife and my daughter.”

“Here?” I ask.

He nods, eyes filled with despair. “In one of the motherships.”

“Then we’ll find them too,” I say with an air of confidence I’m really not sure I have.
“And we’ll all get out together.”

At that moment, the door explodes inwards, and through the choking dust, I see a large shadow.

“Szek!” Dirk gasps, eyes swiveling to me. “It’s too late!”

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:32 am

MAXYM

I might not be able to use the thoughtbond, but I can use all my other senses, and when I scent my Cleo, nothing is going to stop me. Not the Habosu guard, nor the locked door.

Cleo is sat in a medi-chair, like the ones they used to use on us at the facility after we'd been tested almost to destruction, and beside her is a being which looks very much like the ones who used to torture us. I slam him aside as I pluck my mate from the chair.

“Wait, !” She struggles in my arms, but all I can do is hold her to me, drink down her scent, and let it calm my being into submission.

“Did he hurt you?” I snarl.

“The exact opposite,” she says.

I release her enough I can see her face. Cleo gently runs her hand along my jawline, under my helmet. “Dirk, he’s a Kijg scientist, a prisoner of the Bogarok and some species called a Varangy. They’re all working for a Protoex.”

I pull out my remaining dagger, but my hand is stayed by Cleo.

“He’s a friend,” she says. “And we need all the friends we can get. What happened to you?”

“We were trapped on the other side of the door,” I tell her. “Retah got injured, but we were able to break the control the Bogarok had over the Zarvu and Habosu who were sent to capture us.”

“Retah got hurt?” Cleo’s eyes fill with water as she checks me over for injury too.

As if any injury would stop me from getting to her.

“The Habosu agreed to take him to the Cirmos for treatment.”

“Sensible choice. The Cirmos have gone to ground,” the Drahon-like creature says, flapping the dust from his long white cloak.

I snarl at him. He glares back.

“Gryn.” He lifts his lip in a sneer of what appears to be disgust.

Only to find there’s a small Oykid clerk with a dagger pointed right at his sensitive parts.

I raise my eyebrows.

“Are you friend, as my mate suggests?” I look down at the clerk. “Or do I give him permission to use the dagger?”

The little creature is having difficulty holding the thing, he’s shaking so hard, but at least he has the confidence I had hoped it would give him, even if the chances of him doing any damage to the Kijg are limited.

“Friend! Friend!” he shouts, obviously more intimidated by the shaking blade than I would be. “The Bogarok have my family.”

“It’s okay, Nate,” I say quietly. “You can let him go.”

The Oyvig looks up at me. “I can?”

“You can. You did good, little gladiator. We’ll find another fight for you later.”

He slips back from the Kijg and puts the dagger into his tunic with a smile.

Cleo searches my face.

“Nate helped me find you.” I tap the side of the helmet. “I can’t use the thoughtbond, but I can use the tech.”

“I might have something to help with the mind control.” Dirk still has his hands raised and is eyeing Nate with some concern.

I growl at him. “I have something for it.”

“I mean, I worked out it doesn’t work as well on any creature which has had a head injury.” Dirk glances at Nate again, his gaze raking over the scar on Nate’s head. “And I have a serum which should keep it that way.” He fixes his eyes on me, blinking once. “Because you had a head injury too, didn’t you?”

I snarl, pulling my sword from between my wings and pinning him up against the wall.

“How did you know?”

“Because everyone who wasn’t affected by the Bogarok signal managed to leave the dome. If you got out, you must have been damaged in the past,” he says evenly.

Cleo looks at me, I put my hand over the scar on my forehead which dips into my skin slightly. It would explain why Klynn was rendered unconscious and I wasn't.

"How do you know all this?" I growl at him.

"I invented it," Dirk responds.

I want to kill him. I want to hack him to pieces for what he's done. For what he is.

"." Cleo's voice filters in through the rage. "They have his family."

"It doesn't excuse anything," I snarl, but my heart isn't in it.

Not when I have my Cleo. Not when she's close enough to touch and scent. With a grunt, I pull back from him but don't lower my sword.

"I'm not proud of what I've done for the Proteus." Dirk says. "But your female says you're here to destroy all of this."

I glance at Cleo. "I'm going to burn it to ash."

"Then trust me when I say I might have been forced to make things to aid the Bogarok and Protoex, but I have plenty of tricks available to counter it all."

"Including the serum to counteract the mind control?" Cleo queries.

He makes a move and finds my sword back at his throat.

"I need to work, if I'm going to be of any use," he says, eyeing the blade with hands raised.

“I don’t trust you,” I growl. “If you cross me, I will kill you.”

“I understand,” Dirk says as I allow him to edge across to a table covered in vessels and equipment, where he picks up a hypo-syringe. “If you want?” He gestures to it. “I also have serum cartridges for pulsar pistols which you can use.”

“What we need to do is turn off the signal,” Cleo says. “But the cartridges will do in the meantime.”

My little mate is a force to be reckoned with. I offer her a smile just as Dirk jabs the hypo into my arm.

“Vrexer,” I snarl at him, but he’s already beating a hasty retreat.

“You’re a gladiator. You’ve had worse,” he retorts once he’s out of range.

My head swims.

“What the vrex have you given me?” I slur.

CLEO

Maxym sways on his feet and then lands with a thump on the weird medical chair. He puts his hand to his head, finds the helmet there, and then gazes at his fingers.

“What have you given him?” I say to Dirk, my stomach chilling. Has our trust been misplaced?

“There’s a very mild sedative within the serum, to make the transition a little easier. On a creature of his size, he’ll feel the effects for a nova-minute or two, and then it’ll be gone,” Dirk says.

The little Oykig makes a growling sound under his breath. “If you’ve hurt Maxym...” he says.

“I think we’ve got the idea,” I say kindly. The Oykig looks like it could be blown over with a single breath. “I’m ,” I introduce myself.

“Nate, clerk, second class,” Nate says. “Maxym asked me to help find you,” he adds proudly. “And I found both of you.”

“Both?”

Maxym raises his head from his hand, a rather wet smile on his face. “I knew which one was you.”

“There’s another human in the dome?” I ask, my voice stumbling.

“There is.” Nate nods enthusiastically.

“Did you know?” I demand of Dirk.

“I was unaware of any human, not even you,” he says. “It’s possible the Bogarok have found the other human and brought it here too.”

“No humans other than you,” Maxym says, partly to himself.

“You mean there were no other humans in the dome before me?” I ask, taking hold of his shoulders and making sure his glazed gaze is on me.

“Only you,” he murmurs, leaning in to snatch a kiss.

A kiss I’ve missed so much, it’s almost like it’s the first time all over again. A possession of my entire being, concentrated into spicy feathers and hard abs.

I hadn’t even realized I’d closed my eyes, but when I open them, Maxym stares down at me, like he’s trying to sear my image on his brain. His head bare, I can see all of his face once again.

“Only you,” he repeats, stroking a huge finger over my cheek. “All of the stars, all of my feathers, every nest I can make, I offer it all to you, sweet eregri .”

He cups my chin and presses another kiss to my lips, stealing my rational thought from me in an instant. Maxym and the baby growing within me have become my entire world.

“Szek will be coming to see my progress shortly,” Dirk interrupts us gently. “He will want answers about you both.”

“Szek?” Maxym queries as I am released.

“Szek is a Varangy. He appears to be in charge on the ground, as it were, for this Protoex,” I say.

“He is Protoex’s second in command,” Dirk confirms.

“Varangy are foul creatures,” Maxym growls. “I thought they were all dead.”

“Not all of them,” Dirk says, handing over a set of glowing blue pulsar cartridges to Maxym. “Szek and his crew remain.”

“You know about the Varangy?” I query. “He claimed they were nothing but ghosts.”

Maxym stretches his neck. “I don’t know what was in that stuff, Dirk, but it’s cleared my mind considerably,” he says before dropping his gaze back to me.

Clarity fires through me, as if a curtain is being drawn back.

“I was the commander of a small cohort of Gryn tasked with exploring this part of the galaxy when we were attacked,” he says, blinking as the memories return. “Our ship was disabled, and...”

“And the next think you knew, you were in a cage?” Dirk completes Maxym’s sentence. “The Varangy specialize in capture of species the Drahon and Protoex require. Large, vicious warriors like you, who can only be taken by stealth.”

“We were preparing to fight.” Maxym furrows his brow, and I feel the pain of his thought processes. “And then the air...got thick.”

“They use a stealth device to get close to the species they’ve identified, attach a

disruptor to the hull to scramble the functions and to inject a gas into the atmospherics in order to render the occupants unconscious. It's a trick the space-pirates, the Tormelek, have also started using."

"Let me guess." Maxym glares at him, his desire for violence rising like lava in a volcano. "You invented it?"

"Not me," Dirk says. "That one is all Varangy." His lip curls with disgust.

"You were with other Gryn?" I draw Maxym's attention back to me.

"Free Gryn," he says with a wide smile. "We were searching for others stolen from our planet. It is the main mission of the Gryn."

His joy at finally recalling who he is gives me shivers. I see through his eyes what it was like to be in command, to search for others like him, and as he cycles through all the newly recalled thoughts, his sudden despair that he, and presumably his team, ended up in exactly the position they were seeking to free others from.

"It wasn't your fault," I say quietly.

"We were too confident. We thought if we were free, if we had ships, no one would challenge us."

"That's what the Sarkarnii thought," Dirk huffs, "and they ended up in the Kirakos."

Maxym's brow darkens. "The Varangy cross the Sarkarnii at their peril," he rasps.

"Why do you think there are so few of them?" Dirk responds. "They've crossed far too many species for their own survival."

I'm beginning to think Dirk knows more than is good for him, or his family.

I agree .

Maxym's thought slams into my brain in a way which is entirely uncontrolled. It makes my left eye socket ache.

"My apologies, little scrap," he rumbles out loud. "We need to go. Is there another way out of here?"

"There is," Nate pipes up, still clutching at his dagger, one I recognize as being Maxym's. "But..."

"What is it, little gladiator?" Maxym rumbles.

"I'm not sure you'll fit," Nate finishes.

I attempt to hide a snort of amusement, but I can't hide it through the thoughtbond, a device between mates which I'm guessing it takes some getting used to.

"Believe me, little creature, I will fit," Maxym intones. "Show us the way."

MAXYM

I am not going to fit.

Nate slips through the narrow opening, followed by Cleo and then Dirk. He set some traps which he claims will slow down any Varangy or disable the mind control should they send in any unfortunate Zarvu.

I don't trust him. He's too similar to a Drahon and they can never be one hundred percent trustworthy. With my memory returning, I'm getting so much more insight into what has happened to me and what it all might mean.

The only real blank spot is what Protoex is. I recoil at the name, but there is nothing solid to know what I'm fighting.

Slicking my wings hard against my body, I angle myself through the hidden doorway and into the passage beyond. Once I'm through, I close the door and begin to wiggle sideways, slowly, to the voices I can hear.

It's not far, just keep coming.

Cleo's voice echoes around my head, sweet and serene. She seems to have a handle on this whole thoughtbond thing, far better than I. Her thoughts are calming, or mirth, or positive in a way I'm not sure I can muster.

It'll come, my love .

Her belief in me is unending. Even if I nearly got her killed. I cannot wait until I can nest properly for her.

I creep my way out into a larger room, pulling my wing free and shaking my feathers as hard as I can.

“I really didn’t think he would fit,” Nate says to Cleo.

I feel like I’ve been sucked through the insides of a ziggurag, so he’s not so far wrong.

“We need to go get Retah,” Cleo says to me.

“We need to finish the mission, and if he’s survived, he’ll be there,” I respond before she recoils.

I pull her into my arms.

“I didn’t mean it like that, little scrap. Retah’s tough. He’s stubbornly made it this far, and he’ll join us at the info vault.”

“Vault?” Dirk says.

All the words which need to be said pass between Cleo and me.

“There’s a vault containing a weapons stash,” Cleo says smoothly, “under the dome. We need it for the force which is coming to liberate Tatatunga.”

“Oh, I thought you meant the Galactic Council’s info vault,” Dirk replies. “The one Protoex has been steadily working his way through the council members in order to gain the location for.”

“What do you mean ‘working his way through’?” I growl.

“Mostly having them tortured and killed,” Dirk says.

I feel the anger rising, but this Kijg, whatever else he has done, was not the one responsible for the death of the council member who was helping me. It is those who seek to control him and others. This is where I need to channel my rage.

I feel Cleo’s approval down the bond.

The small passage has brought us out in the guest gladiator quarters. The place is empty and has a lingering scent of males I dislike.

“Back to the undercroft?” Cleo queries.

“Back to the undercroft, only this time we’ll take a different route.”

Neither of us know how much time we have before the force Retah alluded to will get here, but when it does, the entire place is going to erupt, and it means we must get to the vault before anyone else.

My feathers itch. I also want to nest with a desire which is almost overwhelming. Seeing the swell of my Cleo’s stomach, feeling her against me, scenting her—it’s all sending me absolutely wild. It certainly doesn’t help having a male with us I can’t trust and a little Oykig who is looking at her like she’s a goddess.

Because Cleo is my goddess.

It’s making everything ache, not least my head. I could do with a team, like I had when I was a commander. Several more Gryn would be most welcome.

A deep growl reverberates through the service passage we're using. It's coming from one of the conduit tubes.

"What was that?" Nate whispers.

"It was another Gryn," Dirk says. "The feral one who escaped me."

"Vrex." I run my hand through my hair. "Klynn."

As I say his name, Klynn explodes from the conduit. He has no weapons, and his body is covered in grime and blood, most of which is unlikely to be his. His claws are fully unsheathed and his fangs fully extended. I don't let him get any closer, slamming my body into him, forcing him farther away from my mate and our little group.

With some difficulty, I get my hand around his throat, his claws ripping at my flesh.

"Klynn, you vrexer. It's me, ," I snarl, hoping to get through to him, through the mind control and to whatever might be left of him.

"You dropped me on my head," he snarls, the words hardly forming past his fangs.

"It was the only place I thought wouldn't hurt you."

He stops struggling.

"Vrexer," he growls, but this time there's no force in it.

"I was going to say," Dirk interrupts, "I managed to give him some of the serum before he escaped. But being dropped on his head would have had a similar effect."

I sort of want to warn Dirk about getting too close to Klynn, but it's too late. Klynn fires out an arm and hooks Dirk by his coat, pulling him up to eye level.

"I remember you," Klynn snarls. "You were working with the Bogarok and the Varangy."

"Dirk isn't one of them," I say as the Kijg's scales start to turn an interesting shade of green. "They have his family, and he says he is trying to help us."

Dirk makes some noises like he is agreeing with me.

"We have a mission, warrior," I growl, as this has gone on long enough.

"A mission?" Klynn drags his eyes from where he's clearly considering what to chop off Dirk first.

"A mission."

Dirk is dropped to the ground where he clutches at his neck.

I now have one Gryn, my clever mate, and two...reptiles. And the Gryn I have is barely hanging on to his sanity as it is.

I'd say we're probably vrexed.

CLEO

Maxym doubts his abilities. Even when he had been wanting some additional muscle, the reappearance of Klynn hasn't given him the confidence he had hoped for.

The swirl of emotions from him is almost overwhelming. The return of his memory would have been something to be celebrated had it not taken place at this particular moment. He's struggling to process everything, and what's flowing down the bond is a male on the edge.

We could certainly do with Klynn. We could, however, definitely do with fewer males which is driving Maxym to distraction.

And, frankly, at the moment, we could do with a lot less distraction.

Maxym hands Klynn a sword and a pulsar pistol. The second Gryn's hands shake slightly as he takes them, and I feel Maxym's concern. Klynn looks very different to when we saw him last, his muscles highly defined and his cheekbones sharper than ever.

I scramble in the pack I have at my belt to find a ration bar, which I hand to him. I already know Maxym won't like it, and I do my level best to shove something calming down the bond at him.

"When did you last eat?" I ask, quietly. "Have this."

Klynn stares at the bar for a beat, then gives Maxym a feral look, tearing it open and

swallowing it whole as he glares at my mate.

Thank the stars for the thoughtbond. Maxym gives him a dead eye before turning his back and shaking out his feathers.

Dirk is looking like he wants to do something unpleasant to both Gryn, and Nate is grinning like he's got a ringside seat.

I can see why Maxym is concerned.

But while no one knows exactly why we're here, we still have a chance to get to the info vault before Szek finds it.

"We're going to the vault," Maxym growls over his shoulder at Klynn. "Nothing is to stop us."

It appears this is all the information the dark Gryn needs. He squares his shoulders, shakes a cloud of dust from his wings, and stalks off.

"I guess we're going that way," I say to Maxym.

"Vrexer," he mutters, but there's a softness to him which has me slipping my hand into his as we follow the direction Klynn took.

"He probably knows the way better than I do," Maxym says as we come out into a strange vaulted area, the light dim but enough I can see the huge drop below us. "Take care where you step," he says, gripping my hand harder as I peer over the edge.

Maxym snorts as we head for a rickety looking staircase, which turns out, fortunately, to be sturdier than it looks. He's thinking how he normally flies through here and for

a second, I'm flying with him.

A long way in the distance, there's a low grumble. It reverberates through the space, growing louder until a warm wind hits us. Maxym and Klynn lift their heads and scent the air.

"It sounds like the Varangy have found what I've left for them," Dirk says.

"Then we haven't much time," Maxym says. "Klynn, go ahead and secure the vault."

He glares at Dirk and Nate. "Get moving and find somewhere to hide," he growls. "We'll come find you when this is all over."

Dirk opens his mouth to protest, but it's too late. I'm tipped into Maxym's arms and in the air before I can even squeak in alarm.

"We're flying!" I say, the wind taking my words.

Do you like it, little scrap? Maxym uses the thoughtbond to its best advantage, the thoughts dropping into my head easily.

I bury my head into his hard chest armor as we swing around, flipping and spinning between struts which criss-cross the void like sinew. I want to look, but I also want to hang on. I choose hanging on and concentrating on the reassurances I get from my big male beamed directly into my head.

For my part, I'm trying not to worry about what's coming next.

All our enemies will be ended. Maxym points out. And I will nest for you.

Given his thoughts, when I catch him unawares, are mostly about nesting, I want it

for both of us, although especially for him, and especially after what he did for me in the basement of Retah's dwelling.

His utter seriousness, his delight, the way my chest contracted when I saw what he had made for me. Nesting is something I want him to be able to do over and over again.

This time there are no thoughts, just Maxym's joy at my pleasure.

We swing suddenly to the side, and I lift my head to see we're coming in to land. We bump down, and Maxym's wings kick up dust and debris as they row at gravity.

"Where are we?" I stare around because this place is like no other. The walls are shiny, but not from any metal. These walls are crystal. A dark striated crystal. As is the floor.

"We're close to the vault." Maxym pulls out his sword, and I pluck my pulsar from my holster.

"No," he says, handing me his. "Use this one."

I give the pulsar a quick glance. It's new and not one I've seen in Retah's inventory. It fits snugly in my hand, the weight reassuring.

Maxym tucks me behind him. He's doing his best to hide his concern, but he doesn't want his pregnant mate here any more than he would like to lose his wings.

"If it's any consolation, I don't want to be here either, but we have a job to do," I respond, trying not to let my teeth chatter.

"I will protect you, little scrap. You don't need to fear," he rasps.

It's you I fear for .

I can't stop the thought slipping through my defenses. For an instant, Maxym tenses, then his wings shiver.

Then I will need to show you there is no reason to fear.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:32 am

MAXYM

I was a gladiator. I am now a mated male. I thought there was no difference but there is. I am the keeper of my mate's heart as well as her body, and her heart means more to me than anything in the entire universe.

I will protect it with everything I have, which means ensuring I live.

Even after all the games I've fought in, living was never the aim. Surviving was. With Cleo in my life, it is so much more.

The crystal walls cause sound to echo as we move forward, weapons drawn. Even the slightest sound echoes back and forth, meaning any approach to the vault cannot be stealthy. We reach the final curve, and ahead, I see a reflection of Klynn. He's staring up at the pulsar cannon.

The cannon are still live , I tell my sweet Cleo down the bond, to avoid any additional sound.

I can disable them , she tells me. I furrow my brow, twisting to look at her.

Her stance is perfection, the weapon in her hand gripped in exactly the right way. My heart swells with love for my little warrior.

No time for that, ! We need to get closer.

Cleo's thoughts are churning, and I can't get a grip on what her plan is, but I do as

she asks, and as we approach Klynn, he turns with a snarl.

“Stand down, gladiator!” I whisper hoarsely. “Is there anyone else here?”

“There was.” Klynn thrusts his dripping sword at the two bodies. “Cannon got them.”

The state of his blade says otherwise, but who could know.

“What’s the field of fire?” Cleo asks quickly.

“Here.” Klynn grunts. “And there.” He waves his blade at a scorch mark on the crystal.

She looks around the entranceway. This is as close as I’ve ever been. The doorway to the vault is mostly concealed behind the crystal. The only indication it is present are the cannon which protect it. Cleo pulls a small square from her clothing.

“Disruptor?” Klynn grunts with an element of glee.

“Not exactly. This one won’t cause an explosion,” she says.

Both Klynn and I rattle our primaries. He huffs disappointedly.

“It’s designed to disrupt electrical impulses, and it should disable the sensors attached to the cameras,” she says, studying the cannon and moving swiftly to the opposite wall where she presses the disruptor onto the crystal.

“EMP,” Klynn rasps. I stare at him. He shrugs and spins his sword in his hand.

“Stand back,” Cleo says. “I can’t be a hundred percent sure this will work.”

I enclose her with my wing, and the square slowly cycles through black, red, blue, and finally green.

Nothing happens.

Next to me, Klynn heaves a sigh, raises his sword, and then throws it at the door. It impacts with a thud, burying itself in the stone and vibrating to a halt.

“Works,” he says, walking into the kill zone before either of us can stop him.

The cannons don’t fire.

“It worked, eregri .” I gather her in my arms. “It didn’t kill Klynn.”

But Cleo is still looking at the square on the wall.

“, it didn’t do anything, look.” She points at the thing.

It’s continuing to cycle.

“We need to move!”

With two beats of my wings, I’m behind Klynn, slamming him to one side and using his sword to lever the doors open. I shove Cleo inside and grab hold of him, pulling him with me as the cannon swings our way and fires. The blast sends us sliding back into the vault.

“Cleo!” I call her name as the cannons fire again, filling the space with pulsar mist and the scent of ozone.

Klynn spins on his back next to me as I scramble to my feet, my boots slipping on the

shiny floor as I attempt to get back to Cleo. It's only when I gain purchase that I realize the firing has stopped.

Cleo walks towards me out of the dust. She is unharmed.

"What...?"

"I turned them off. There's a console inside the door." She jerks her thumb over her shoulder.

I capture her chin between my thumb and forefinger, lifting her face up to mine.

"Don't ever put yourself in danger for me," I rasp, the dust making my voice raw.

"Only if you promise the same," she responds, her eyes bright and defiant.

I know she means it, as do I. My fierce, sweet, perfect mate will never be stopped. Just how I want her to be.

"Shall we finish this dance and get the hell out of here?" Cleo asks.

"Sounds like a plan."

"Never plan," Klynn growls as he stands up beside me and shakes the dust from his feathers.

Cleo pushes past me, shaking her head and muttering something about Gryn. I punch Klynn in the side of his head, and he snarls at me before I follow my sweet mate farther into the vault.

The place is carved out of the crystal, rather than being part of some natural cave like

the passage which led us here. Laser marks show how the place was created. Cleo has reached the far wall and is studying the tech which is installed there.

She runs her hand over the wall, and lights appear, causing Klynn to flare his wings and me to growl at him.

“What is she doing?” he grumbles. “If there’s no explosions.”

“Not everything has to end with an explosion,” I remind him.

“It should do,” Klynn says with a shake of his feathers. “All good things end with an explosion.”

“We’re here to steal this vrexing thing, not blow it up.”

“Shame.”

“I’m in!” Cleo exclaims. “Over there.” She points to the wall on our right, and a set of info cubes peel out from it.

“Is this it? All the Galactic Council’s secrets?” I gather them up and shove them into the pouch at my waist.

“Each one can contain a trillion terabytes of information, but I guess they can add to it when they need to.”

“Not anymore.” Klynn grins at me.

In one hand, he holds a set of pulsar grenades he has clearly stolen from me.

“We don’t want them to use this place again, do we?” I ask my Cleo.

“No.” She shakes her head. “But then they’ll use somewhere else.”

“Then let them. Potentially, it won’t be an inhabited planet where creatures like the Bogarok can do damage. If they decide to do it at all.”

I consider her answer then give Klynn the nod.

“Looks like things are ending with an explosion today after all.”

CLEO

Maxym can't fool me, not before the thoughtbond and not after. He wants the grenades as much as Klynn. But given the entire crystal structure is likely to fall on us, we make a sharp exit, leaving the dark one to do what he wants to do.

Even if Maxym would have preferred to stay.

"What about Retah?" I ask as we reach the strutted void. "He wasn't at the vault which means he has to still be somewhere in the dome."

"We need to cut comms between the Bogarok and the Varangy too." Maxym says. "If Retah's force is coming, they need as much of an advantage as they can get."

"How about..."

Maxym places his finger on my lips.

"I'm not letting you go anywhere on your own." His huge hand encircles my stomach, gently cradling my bump. "You and our young are with me at all times. We can leave the fighting to Klynn and the others."

Sounds of bickering have us both turning to see Dirk and Nate rushing towards us, just as Klynn emerges from the crystal cavern and there is a loud explosion.

It knocks poor Nate over completely and Dirk simply frowns at us.

Maxym looks at me before helping Nate up.

“Dirk, our friend Retah was injured. We think he’s with the Cirmos getting treatment. Can you find him? Let him know we have the...weapon.”

“I know you’ve penetrated the info vault,” Dirk huffs. “I don’t care what’s in it. I just want to get to my family.”

“Then you need to find Retah. He knows how to get to the Bogarok and their prisoners as he’s the one in contact with the force coming to liberate Tatatunga,” I say quickly. “We need to deal with the comms.”

Maxym looks down at Nate. “Something you can help with, little warrior.”

“Anything, Maxym,” he says.

Nate gives him a huge smile. The young Oykig is clearly star struck by the huge gladiator, and it’s infinitely cute to see how my big male treats him.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Dirk make a sour face. He’s clearly less enamored with the Gryn, but he has no other option but to assist.

“Klynn will go with you,” Maxym says to Dirk.

“I’m not going anywhere with that...that...creature!” Dirk splutters.

Klynn wipes his hand down his face. Already dirty, he adds a number of long black streaks which make him look positively unhinged.

“You’re as safe with Klynn as you are with me,” Maxym rasps. “He’ll make sure you get to Retah.” He looks at Klynn. “I believe he was taken to the Cirmos, who are

presumably in the second medi-bay.”

Klynn gives him a nod. The thoughtbond doesn't help with knowing what has passed between the two of them, and I guess there are some things which don't need such a bond, not when you've fought together for nova-years.

“This way,” he growls at Dirk, whose skin flushes a lime green.

“Please,” I exhort. “Retah was like a father to me. I need to know he's okay, and you're the only one who can help.”

Dirk's skin returns to its usual blue.

“Very well, given you're the ones who are supposed to be saving us all,” he grumbles and stalks off ahead of Klynn.

“Try to keep him alive.” Maxym sighs at his compatriot. “Even if he is a vrex-bag.”

I watch them hurry away, Dirk blotted out in the dim light by Klynn's huge, dark wings.

An arm snakes around my shoulder. “Retah will be fine, little scrap. I'm sure of it.”

I curl my hand into Maxym's feathers and feel down the thoughtbond. He believes it as much as he is telling me because he thinks Retah is a grizzled old warrior who could survive a direct hit even better than he could.

“Really?” I laugh at him, a laugh which is tinged with sadness.

“It takes a fighter to know one,” Maxym says before he looks down at Nate. “Now, little warrior, are you going to ride on my back?”

I think Nate is about to swoon again, but Maxym lifts him onto his shoulders and then holds out his arms for me.

“Both of us?” I query. “Are you sure?”

“All three of you.” He grins. “And I will always lift you up, my little scrap. It is my honor and my privilege as your mate.”

And he opens his great wings as I hop into his arms, beating down in a way which seems too slow for take-off but in fact lifts us easily into the air. At his back, Nate gives a whoop of enjoyment, and we’re carried upwards by my huge Gryn warrior who has promised to never let me go.

MAXYM

Nate slithers ahead, filled with excitement, as we reach the admin block once again. He said something about tech the dome has to block comms in order to stop illegal betting rings (because the dome wants to keep all the profits from betting for itself). It seems he thinks we can use this somehow.

“Did you say something about there being another human in the dome?” Cleo asks as we follow him.

“There were two signatures which corresponded with human DNA, yes.”

“How did you know which one was mine?”

I contemplate for a nova-second. “I just knew,” I say.

She curls her fingers around mine, her warm hand endlessly comforting.

“Over here, .” Nate waves at us from behind a console. “You’re going to want to see this.”

With my mate in hand, we make our way over to him. There are a number of screens, each filled with a different image.

“What is that?” Cleo points to something on one of them, a fireball it appears.

“Something is destroying the Bogarok ships,” Nate says excitedly.

“Can you do something about their comms. They’ll have others in orbit and they’ll call in reinforcements.”

Nate works his way over the console rapidly as I peer closer at the vid-screens, attempting to work out what’s happening out there.

It’s not looking so good for the Bogarok, but it doesn’t mean the danger has passed.

We need to find Retah and get out of here , my sweet Cleo sends me down the bond. We have to get the info cubes to a secure location.

I completely agree with her. The sooner we can get away from the dome, the better.

“It’s done,” Nate says triumphantly. “At least it extends from the dome and covers most of the main Bogarok craft.”

“We have to hope they weren’t able to get any comms to the other ships,” I say.

It looks like the creatures have been taken by surprise, given most of their craft are in flames and listing badly. I wish I could tell who was attacking them.

“Cleo? ?” Retah calls across to us.

My mate is running and running until she throws her arms around the big Remek, who gives me a careful look before embracing her with a wince.

“You’re okay?” She stands back and takes him in.

One arm is in a sling and his color is terrible, but otherwise he’s upright and that’s entirely what I was expecting from such an old fighter like him.

“I got all fixed up by the Cirmos, as suggested,” Retah says, tipping his horns at me.
“And I seem to have found a couple of new friends.”

He looks over his shoulder as Dirk steps into the room.

“What about Klynn?” Cleo asks.

“The other Gryn?” Retah queries. “He took off after he found us. Strangest thing.”

Dirk mutters something which could be good riddance .

“Something is destroying the Bogarok ships,” I say. “Any ideas?”

“Grak!” Retah exclaims, pulling at one of his horns. “They came through!”

“Who?” Cleo asks.

“The Sarkarnii.”

“Those scaly vrexers?” I’m next to him in an instant. “You called them in?”

“Who else to deal with the Bogarok on the ground? I met their leader Draco when I was off world and told him something was going on. Only they were bound for the far reaches, so I wasn’t sure if my request had reached them.”

“The Sarkarnii are the big guys who turn into dragons?” Cleo says, her breath hitching in her chest. “They’re friendly though, aren’t they?”

“Sort of,” Retah says. “They’re what they want to be, when they want to be.”

“I know the Sarkarnii,” I say to my Cleo. “They’ve been our allies in the past, and

we've helped them too on Trefa. They're not a threat."

"," Nate calls out.

"Not now, Nate," I respond, taking hold of Cleo's hands, attempting to reassure her down the thoughtbond.

"," he says again.

I turn with a growl, but his face has turned an unnatural shade of blue.

"What is it, Nate?"

"One of the Bogarok ships...it's crashing on the dome," he says.

A groan from above us confirms what he is saying is true.

"Vrex!"

"Time to leave," Retah says. "The dome can look after itself."

CLEO

We burst into the street outside the dome as burning debris falls from the sky. The huge Bogarok ship is already half buried in the structure, and as I look up, it lurches once again, fireballs forming underneath and Bogarok leaping from it, some already in flames.

“Horrible.” I turn away as Maxym takes hold of me.

“The Sarkarnii don’t believe in half measures. Or prisoners,” he says.

“Or saving buildings,” Retah says, stepping to one side as a large lump of the dome crashes down at his feet.

“So, not much help then?” I say.

“Depends whether you like being impaled by the Bogarok or not.” Retah digs into his clothing with his one free hand and pulls out a vid-screen comms device. “I need to let them know where we are.”

Overhead, through the smoke and embers, an enormous creature thunders through the air. I catch the swish of a tail before it’s out of sight.

“The Sarkarnii can change their shape,” Maxym says, seeming inordinately happy with the destruction they’re wreaking on Tatatunga. “They become big.” He grins at me.

I get the feeling it's not that they get big but that they can cause more damage that way he is impressed with.

"Can't reach them," Retah says. "We should go."

I'm absolutely not going to argue, especially after the dome releases a metallic groan which can't be good. Maxym puts a wing around me as we hurry away, this time risking using the streets until we get back to Retah's dwelling.

I don't think I've been happier to see anything, other than Maxym, in my entire life.

"Until I can reach the Sarkarnii, I suggest we stay below," Retah says as we enter.

"We can't stay for long. We need to get these info cubes away from here. We can't be sure the Varangy won't come after them," I say.

Retah taps his finger against his lips and looks at Maxym.

"My mate is right," he says. "While we have them, and the Varangy are still at large, we are a target." Maxym spins his sword in his hand.

Behind him, Dirk sits down on a chair, looking exhausted. Nate too looks like he's fit to drop. Maxym's gaze rakes over them, the thoughtbond silently agreeing with me.

"I'll take them to Tibi," I say out loud. "Keep trying to reach the Sarkarnii." I beckon to the pair, and they dutifully follow me through the silent dwelling and down into the basement.

The scent of cooking hits us as we enter and my stomach growls. I suppose I am eating for two, and I gave away my only ration bar to a Gryn. I shake my head at myself just before I'm hit by a striped body.

“!” Tibi purrs. “Thank the stars!” She checks me over, putting one small furry hand on my stomach before raising her eyes to mine.

“Retah is fine, a bit banged up, but he’ll live. Maxym is...Maxym,” I reassure her. “And we have some guests.” I stand aside to show her Dirk and Nate. “They could probably do with something to eat,” I whisper.

A relieved smile splits Tibi’s face as she peers at the two.

“Come, come,” she says to them. “Sit, sit.”

Neither Dirk nor Nate have to be asked twice. Dirk takes his seat, but he looks up at me.

“As soon as we get the comm frequency of the Sarkarnii, we’ll let them know about your family,” I tell him.

“I’ve come so far.” He looks down at the tabletop. “I don’t want it to end any other way.”

I’m probably risking his life, but as Maxym isn’t here, I put my hand on his shoulder and give it a squeeze.

“I have a good feeling. The Gryn believe in fate.” I can feel myself smiling. “I’m not sure I did, until I met Maxym. Why else would I have been plucked from my tiny planet in a dusty corner of the universe if it wasn’t to end up meeting him?”

“The Gryn always terrified me,” Dirk says. “The ones I met were feral and raging. All claws, teeth and wings. I knew they were the way they were because of circumstances but the violence...” He shudders. “Only now I see what they are, because of your mate.”

Goodbye little scrap. Maxym's voice drops into my head.

For a second, I stare at Dirk, not entirely sure what I just heard.

Then I'm running as fast as I can, through the basement, up the stairs, and out into the dwelling, back to where I left Retah and him.

"He's gone." An arm catches me before I fly out of the door.

"NO!" I grind. "Why did you let him go?" I struggle against Retah, but he has me held fast. "Why did you let him go without me?"

"He had no choice." Retah pulls me against him. "While the info cubes are with us, we're all in danger, including you, and he wasn't going to let anything happen to you or your young."

"His young." The tears are streaming down my face, hot and useless. "He promised...he promised he would be here for me and for my baby."

Retah clutches my shoulder with his good hand, his eyes glowing as he gazes at me. "Do you believe in him?"

My mouth opens and closes, my grief taking my words.

"Do you believe in him?" Retah punctuates his sentence with a gentle shake.

"Yes, yes! I believe in him."

"Then he will come back to you and your young. He has no other option. You are his mate, his fate, and his very end," Retah says, and the sadness in his voice rends my heart in two.

It's in this moment I see just how much he lost when his planet was destroyed.

And I finally understand why he had no option but to fight.

And why Maxym had to do what he has just done. Leave me behind to finish this.

But it doesn't make it hurt any less.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:32 am

MAXYM

The last thing I want to do is shut down the thoughtbond. I love hearing my Cleo's thoughts. Her softness blunts my edges and makes me a better Gryn.

But I'm doing this for her, I tell myself over and over as I put on the helmet and I rise into the clouds of smoke billowing over Tatatunga. I'm protecting her.

I am not abandoning her.

A huge body slides through the air next to me, a ball of flame bursting from it as I twist and dance to avoid being fried.

"What is this?" a voice booms. "A Gryn? I thought you were all dead."

"I am very much alive, and if you don't stop attempting to cook me, you will not be."

A deep chuckle resonates as a head pokes out into the small patch of clear air around me. Deep green, his eyes glitter like the fire he produces. In a flash, it's gone again, and I feel the down draft of powerful wings.

But the Sarkarnii, as fast as they may be in the air—their size works against them. I am nimble, and I am much quicker, so when he attempts to grab me, I easily avoid his grasping claws.

"Vrex it! I'm on your side, you vrexer!" I grind out. "Prince Baronn is trying to get hold of your leader, Draco. We have the info cubes."

“Draco is busy killing some Bogarok.” A new voice joins in, and a second shadow flows through the clouds, and I see a flash of blue scales. “Who is this Prince Baronn?”

“A Remek prince. He called you here.”

I beat my wings hard to get higher, to get above the Sarkarnii and out of their reach until I can be sure they are here to assist and not take the info cubes for themselves.

“I need to speak to Draco,” I insist.

I know Syllas had some contact with the Sarkarnii, but I mostly left it to him. Given my status within the dome, it wasn't always wise for me to be seen around species which can devastate a planet...and have a reputation for doing so.

A richly deserved reputation given how much of Tatatunga seems to be in flames.

“What do you say, brother?” The green Sarkarnii comes up behind me while the blue one comes from the front. “I'd hate to be the Sarkarnii who ate the last Gryn.”

His jaws snap at me, and I spin away, folding up my wings and dropping fast towards the ground. There's no way I can beat the huge scaly vrexers, but I can use my size compared to theirs as an advantage. Jinking around a building I slam into something even bigger.

And gold.

My sword is already in my hand, ready to deal with the Sarkarnii, if he is also going to be hostile. Only I am presented with a biped stalking out of the gloom towards me.

“A Gryn.” He looks me up and down with interest. “A species which has gone from

being a myth to being seemingly everywhere I look.”

“I’m looking for Draco, so unless you know where he is, get out of my way,” I snarl, my patience with the creatures at an end.

Behind me, there is the sound of masonry falling and two thumps which shake the ground.

“You’ve found him, Gryn.” The green Sarkarnii walks past me.

If I thought I was a large gladiator, he is even bigger. But I’ve fought all sizes and shapes in the arena. He is no contest.

“This is our brother Draco.” The second blue Sarkarnii ambles past, picking at his teeth.

The gold Sarkarnii folds his arms. “Where is Prince Baronn?”

“He was injured fighting the Bogarok in the dome. He’s in a secure location.” I don’t sheath my sword.

There’s something about the Sarkarnii which I can’t trust. It could be the lack of pants. It could be the way Draco and the other two size me up.

It reminds me of the games, and my desire for violence hasn’t quite dissipated yet.

Smoke curls from Draco’s nostrils. “I need to see him.”

The fact my mate is where Retah is means there is absolutely no way I’m taking the Sarkarnii anywhere near her.

“You don’t need to see him. I’m here,” I growl, shaking out my feathers. “You deal with me.”

“That very much depends what you have to deal with, Gryn,” the blue Sarkarnii growls.

“Let him speak, Drega.” The green Sarkarnii huffs out smoke.

“Nev off, Draxx. You’re getting soft in your old age,” Drega spits. “We came all this way to deal with some nevving Bogarok. Now I stink of them, and no aquium is going to get the stench out before I get back to my mate.”

My ears prick at the word ‘mate’. From what little I know about Sarkarnii, they have no females left.

“If you could kill one of them without eviscerating it, you’d avoid the worst of their innards,” Draxx says, as if killing Bogarok all nova-day is something he does. Green lights skitter under his scales as if he’s lit from within.

“Enough,” Draco grumbles. “We agreed to help Baronn because he was able to provide us with the pulsix cannon we needed. I want off this foul rock as much as you do, but we have a contract, and I want to get it done before we go back to finding the Sarkarnii.”

“You’re looking for Sarkarnii?” I query.

Draco brings his attention back to me with a snarl. “What is it to you, Gryn?”

“I was a Gryn commander...I think...my memories were stolen from me. I want to find the other Gryn, my unit, my species, and my planet.”

Draco looks at Drega. He inclines his head, making me wonder if these brothers have a thoughtbond like I have with my mate.

Or if they've fought together for a long time, like I have with Klynn, Rych, Syllas, and Blayn. I grip my blade and smoothly slide into a fighting stance, ready for the assault.

I've not survived so far only to be struck down by three ridiculously colored reptiles.

"Looks like Draxx is not the only one going soft," Draco says, pulling a pulsar from a belt around his waist and pointing it at me. "I appreciate an honorable warrior, and I appreciate his cause."

As he fires, I duck and roll, and I'm on my feet in an instant, roaring as I leap towards him, fully intending ending this meddlesome Sarkarnii.

"! Wait!"

Her voice.

Cleo's voice.

The thoughtbond lights up, brighter than a sun going supernova with her love and her desire for me. For our future, for the youngling growing inside her.

Draco hasn't moved, even with my blade an inch from his person. He tips his head on one side, his scales glittering in the dim light.

"A mate," he rumbles. "They are incredible things, aren't they? Mine worked out a way of making a belt so I could carry a pulsar even when shifted." He points to his waist. "It's called ex-last-tic," he adds proudly.

I don't quite know what to do, so I lower my sword as Cleo hits me, her arms wrapping around my waist and her fingers disappearing into my feathers.

I think I might have dropped my weapon as she touches just the right parts of me. But if I'm in her arms, I simply don't care anymore.

CLEO

Maxym captures my mouth with one of his demanding kisses, his thoughtbond a whirl of desire, fear, and pleasure, plenty of which seems to have made it to his crotch as what I feel pressing against me is not his armor.

“What are you doing here, little scrap?” he asks once I’m released. “I told Retah to keep you at the dwelling.”

“You really think he could stop me?” I respond, looking over my shoulder at a sheepish looking Retah. “Once Tibi got involved, he didn’t have much choice, and as far as we could tell, the battle against the Bogarok is almost won.”

Maxym’s gaze lands on the still twitching body of the Bogarok behind Retah.

“You...killed it,” he says to the massive gold Sarkarnii Retah identified as Draco, the Sarkarnii leader. “You saved me.”

Draco is impassive for a second or two before a smile hitches up the corner of his mouth.

“And you were going to kill me.” He looks over at the even bigger green Sarkarnii. “What did I say about honorable, Draxx?”

“I say you’re going to get your head nevvng blown off one of these nova-days,” Draxx grumbles. “Or removed by a Gryn warrior.”

“Drasus says he’s finished up with the final two planet-side ships.” The blue Sarkarnii looks up from a small comm device.

“And Daeos?” Draco asks.

“He’s secured the ships in orbit. Drelax has taken out the ones over Sartak.”

Draco nods. “Good work, Drega.”

“Please.” I turn to the huge gold Sarkarnii, swallowing hard as he turns his dangerous gaze on me. “One of our friends has family on those ships. They were being held hostage. Can you make sure they’re unharmed?”

Draco nods over at Drega who turns away to have a conversation with what looks like a bright red Sarkarnii.

Maxym pulls me tighter against him, one wing stretched protectively around me. His thoughtbond is filled with growls in the presence of all these males, but he’s doing an excellent job of hiding his vexation.

“We have what the Bogarok and the Varangy came for,” Retah says. “They’re working for a Protoex.”

“Nev,” Drega growls, “it’s been a long time since we came across one of those.”

Maxym’s feathers rattle almost uncontrollably and all three Sarkarnii stare at him.

“It’s possible…” he says, “a Protoex was responsible for…” Maxym shakes his head, and his frustration fires down the bond. “I can’t remember.”

“This nevver’s even more messed up than Daeos was,” Draxx rumbles.

“But he was a glorious gladiator,” Drega replies, looking up from his vid-screen.

“I am a gladiator,” Maxym growls.

“Not anymore,” Retah says. “Look.”

The smoke is beginning to clear, and as it does, the ruins of the dome jut up like a set of broken teeth. “It looks like you are free, Maxym, finally.”

I feel pain spike through him as his thoughts go to Klynn and the captain.

“We got out. I’m sure they did too,” I whisper.

“I’m not sure anything could destroy Klynn.” Maxym rallies, throwing his shoulders and wings back.

“So, we have a free Gryn on our hands.” Drega grins over at Draxx. “And a mated one at that.”

“Mated to a human female no less,” Draxx rasps.

This time I don’t get any say in what happens as Maxym shoves me behind him.

“This female is MINE,” he growls. “And I need to nest for her,” he adds desperately.

“I had heard Gryn were feral.” Draco flashes his fangs. “But I would never get between a warrior and his mate.”

He turns to the other two Sarkarnii. “Let’s get this wrapped up,” he says before returning to Maxym and me. “And I need to hear all about what the Bogarok and Varangy wanted.”

Draco takes up a considerable amount of room in what I thought was a pretty spacious dwelling. He's been supplied with plenty of food by Tibi, who fussed around him as if he was royalty (something he clearly felt he deserved), and plenty of mead-wine from Retah.

I'm sat on a slightly lumpy gladiator because he refused to let me go anywhere else, especially with the Sarkarnii in close proximity.

"Tatatunga was being used as a base for the Galactic Council to store their special information," Retah begins. "Turns out, it was under the dome." He nods at Maxym.

"Special information?"

"Their dirty secrets. How much they are involved in the trafficking of species like me, like my mate," Maxym growls. "All the other things they did, while pretending to be upholding order in the galaxy."

Maxym has removed his helmet and is taking full advantage of the though bond, where Retah and I have looked at the info on the data cubes.

I might not have wings but mine are itching like crazy. He wants to be anywhere but here, and his desire to nest is something which has my heart pounding.

Not least because of what he wants to do to me in it.

"And this information"—Draco leans back in the chair—"it's for sale?"

"No!" I say.

"Yes!" Retah says.

Draco moves his gaze between the two of us, smoke curling from one nostril as he contemplates our response.

“We don’t want to sell it.” I glare at Retah. “It needs to be somewhere safe, somewhere the Galactic Council will never get their hands on it.”

“I’m not sure all of the Galactic Council have hands,” Retah says, seemingly impervious to my ire, “but is correct, which is a shame. Those on the Council who have benefitted from what is contained on these cubes will fall if they are no longer able to access them. It means freedom for those enslaved by their work, and it means justice for those killed.”

He looks at Maxym long and hard.

“I will not be driven by revenge,” Maxym says, “nor violence, nor the fight.” His arm curls around me, hand spanning my stomach. “I have my mate, my fate, my guiding star. What’s on those cubes is no interest to me, not anymore. I make no claim over them.”

Draco releases a cloud of smoke and downs the rest of a tankard of mead-ale.

“You’re far too honorable, gladiator,” he says. “Far more honorable than any on the Council.” He lifts his lip, showing the sharpest of white fangs. “It’s no secret the Sarkarnii don’t trust the Council. After all, we ended up in the Kirakos because some within wished to hide their involvement in the destruction of our world.”

Retah huffs out a breath, dipping his horns at Draco.

“Yours too, Prince Baronn,” Draco acknowledges, “although you seem to have carved a life for yourself, here.”

“My family made many grave errors with both their approach to the Liderc and what happened on Kaeh-Leks. It is something I will be paying for for the rest of my life,” Retah says, his voice filled with infinite sadness.

“We all lost much,” Draco intones, “but we’ve been able to take those who controlled the Liderc to task.” He turns his attention on Maxym and me. “There is room on our planet for you, should you wish it. I can always accommodate an honorable warrior and his resourceful mate. And I will happily protect the information you have liberated within our hoard.”

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MAXYM

Dirk races across the debris filled square towards a female and a youngling. He picks them both up and spins them around as they shriek with joy.

“Not a bad day’s work,” Cleo says, slipping her hand in my feathers. “And it turns out he was telling the truth after all.”

Retah is inspecting some of the debris with Nate, who has removed his dome tunic and is now wearing one of Retah’s shirts, drowning in it.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot Pryax making his way through the ruins. He spots me, lifts a hand in greeting and slinks away.

“Did we do the right thing?” I wonder out loud, not that I even need to speak, given the strength of our thoughtbond. “Those were hard won.”

Draco stalks over to his brothers, handing the info cubes to Drega who inspects them.

“The Sarkarnii won’t benefit from any of the information. I mean, look at them,” Cleo says raising her head to watch a large red one in his shifted form fly over us. “They don’t need what’s on those cubes to be powerful, and no one on the Galactic Council will want to risk tangling with them to get the data back.”

I feel her concern down the bond. She feels, like I did, perhaps we should have considered destroying the cubes, keeping secrets as secret.

“If we want justice, if anyone wants justice, the information is there. It can’t just end with us—that’s not our choice to make.” I say.

The love which radiates down the bond nearly makes me topple. Instead I lean into her touch farther because being with her is everything.

“Not our choice to make,” Cleo murmurs, looking up at me. “That’s the best way of putting it.”

“Although”—I look over at the trio of Sarkarnii who appear to be bickering about something—“whether we’ve made the right decision is something which will play out over time.”

“I can’t believe they also have human mates,” Cleo says. “It seems there are more of us in this galaxy than I expected.”

“My three fellow gladiators all have human mates, so it appears delicious humans are far more than just a snack for hungry warriors.” I grin at her, easily sending my desires down the bond.

“Is that what you think?” Cleo sends me some desires of her own and my feathers itch so badly.

“I think I need my nest, I need you in it, and you should be thoroughly mated,” I growl.

Cleo looks around at the smoking ruins. “I’m not sure, . I mean there’s so much to do here...”

She laughs out loud as I toss her into my arms.

“Nothing will stop me from giving you pleasure, little scrap. Not war or invasion or vrexing Sarkarnii tearing the place apart.”

I glare over at Draco. He tips his head before I turn on my heel, shaking out my feathers as I carry my mate back to Retah’s dwelling.

We reach the place in no time at all. The Cirmos looks up from her food preparation as I stalk past her, Cleo clinging to me. I lift my lips in a snarl, and she grins at me, waving the knife she’s using cheerily. Cleo tries to say something but we’re already descending into the basement and to the nest I left.

It’s still not good enough, but my desire to nest is tempered by my desire to be sheathed in the squirming female in my arms.

“I’m going to bury my cocks in you, little scrap. I’m going to enjoy every inch of your delicious form.” I make it to the nest, and instantly my feathers feel calmed.

Cleo gazes up at me as I slowly unwrap her from her clothing. I’m gentle with her, even if I’m not gentle with what she’s wearing. My claws slide through the cloth until she is entirely bare, her glorious stomach protruding with the young she carries.

I gaze at her, tracking my fingers down from her throat, over the creamy skin on her breasts, her little teats sticking out proudly, as if they are begging to be sucked.

I oblige, and she shivers and moans about them being sensitive which only makes me heap more attention on them, plucking one peak as I suckle the other before continuing my journey down her body, pressing kisses over her belly until I reach her sweet mound. I slide in a digit and find she is already wet for me.

I groan. The scent she releases is the sweetest nectar. I slide my finger deeper as I fasten my lips on the bundle of nerves at her apex, the place which makes her call my

name and grasp at my wings. The place which causes a flood of her moisture to gush into my mouth. The place I continue to enjoy until she is panting and writhing.

The place which belongs to me.

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CLEO

Maxym plays my body like it's an instrument he's used all his life. And I respond to him in kind, hips bucking, forcing me farther into his mouth, hands in his feathers, mouth calling his name.

He finds my pregnant body irresistible, the thoughtbond tells me as much, and it's a body he knows he will only love more the bigger I get. Maxym makes me feel incredible with every touch, with every thought, with every...

"Little scrap," he murmurs, sliding his finger out and moving it back to my second hole where he circles deliciously, "are you going to take both of my cocks in both of your holes today?"

"In your nest?" I breathe.

Air stutters in his chest as I mention the nest, eyes half closed with pleasure and every muscle in his body taut as he attempts not to explode before his time.

I hear him count up plasma weapons and it's all I can do not to laugh. My feral but in control male can't always control himself.

"Not around you, mate. You drive me wild," he growls, fangs nipping at my neck as he slides his thumb deep into my bottom hole, making me gasp out loud. "How should this little scrap take my cocks?" he wonders out loud. "On her hands and knees like a good Gryn female? Pinned against the wall while I plunder her, like a bad female? Or will she ride me until I can't see straight?"

All of those options sound very enticing, but all I want is Maxym buried in me. I want to see him come undone, to be the feral creature I know he is.

“Then you get to ride me,” he responds to my thought thread. “Because I want to see you as I fill you with my seed.”

I’m lifted as if I weigh nothing and my huge gladiator slides underneath me, easily positioning me on his vast muscular thighs. He strokes himself languidly, separating out his two cocks, his gaze fixed on where my small pregnancy sits over him.

“You are the most beautiful creature in the entire universe, my ,” he murmurs. “You make my cocks stiff, my heart soft, and my blade bite all the harder because I have you.”

I think about protesting I can’t possibly be the most beautiful creature, but Maxym isn’t having any of it. Without any warning, I’m lifted again until his main cock is breaching my entrance and his second cock is pressing insistently at my other hole.

“Take all of me, mate. Let me claim you, fill you, pleasure you until we are unable to move or even think anymore,” he rasps.

With ease, he sinks inside me. The stretch from both cocks is incredible, verging on the painful for just a second or two before the bliss sinks in and I feel every node.

“I adore being in you, my . My cocks in your hot, wet heat.” He groans as he cups my stomach. “Soon you will be even bigger, even more ripe with young, and I will take you over and over in order to enjoy all your body has to offer.”

The flash through my head is him imagining me as a very pregnant lady. The intenseness of the image, of his pleasure, sends me over the edge, my orgasm crashing around us like the walls of the dome coming down. I pulse over him, and he

groans my name.

“You will be the very death of me, , and it is the death of a warrior, in the arms of his mate,” he breathes, doing everything he can not to come. To hold onto the moment. To make this last.

Inch by inch, he withdraws, every node scraping over my sensitive channel, my little bottom hole pulsing at his invasion, gripping at his second cock even as he plunges back inside me, thrusting, taking and giving at the same time. His pace is demanding, his eyes burning into me as he holds me onto him, my hands on his broad chest and my thighs spread wide to accommodate my big gladiator. Every inch of my body burns in one way or another, and every inch is spread with pleasure like honey.

When he plucks another orgasm from me, this time I’m taken up to the stars with only Maxym to hold onto, to keep me with him, to keep me on the ground. I dimly hear him roar, and I feel his explosion within both of my channels, not just with the hot cum he fires into me, but his climax too, the way his mind clears and fills with the most exquisite of pleasures, that of a mated male claiming his female.

I can’t stop my body pulsing, consuming, desiring and rising over him. I want all of my huge gladiator, my Gryn warrior, my love.

“Glorious mate, you turn me inside out,” he murmurs through ragged breaths as he gently moves onto his side to allow me to recover mine.

“And you nested for me.” I study his face, stroking my finger over his scar. “You accepted me for who I am, nothing more, nothing less.”

“Because my heart beats for you. Fate or no, you belong to me , and I will never let you go.”

CLEO

The sun breaks over the curve of the planet below us as I take a bite of a freshly baked pastry. The buttery, sweet goodness melts on my tongue, and I do my best, and fail, not to groan out loud.

When I say I'm big, I really am big. Although timing hasn't exactly been easy to work out, I have to be nine months gone by now. My back aches, my ankles are puffy, and Maxym loves me even more than he already did, even though I am basically a sentient moan at the current time.

"Good?" Maxym wraps an arm around me from behind, his hand caressing my stomach and avoiding the crumbs.

"Mm-hm," I respond.

Turns out having a prince as a benefactor has some perks, not least the star flyer he gave Maxym and me when Maxym decided he wanted to leave Trefa.

I go wherever he goes, no question asked. And it wasn't like I wanted to give birth in Tatatunga anyway. So instead, we've been making our way to the Sarkarnii planet, Orias, all whilst dropping in at various outposts where Maxym can ask about Gryn.

And, as is always the way, they seem to have just left, disappearing like smoke. I know it frustrates him, as does having to ask the Sarkarnii for help. But with my birth impending, we've run out of time.

“I’ve commed them. Some vrexer called Drelux says we can land, and he’ll meet us there,” Maxym says.

“There will be other humans too,” I remind him, as it was another reason we also chose to come to Orias.

“Of course.” Maxym gathers me in his arms and sits in the pilot seat with me on his lap. He does a very good job of making a big pregnant lady feel small and petite.

Since leaving the dome, Maxym has filled out some. Presumably all the fighting kept him from reaching his full potential. He’s impressively broad in the chest, still as heavily muscled as before only...bigger. A Gryn tank of a warrior, something he’s intensely proud of.

I very much like him bigger, especially as he’s also nestier. He seems to change out the nest he built in the largest quarters on the star flyer on an almost daily basis. I’m sure our hold is packed with nothing but nest materials. In fact, the thoughtbond tells me he’s just finished ‘making some final touches’ to his latest masterpiece.

We descend through the clouds following the co-ordinates we’ve been given, passing great mountain ranges and coming in over what is either a huge lake or an inland sea. Maxym pilots the flyer and lands where we’ve been directed as a massive Sarkarnii in his dragon form flies over us.

“I’ve asked them if they’ve been able to track down Klynn,” Maxym says.

Ever since the Sarkarnii routed the Bogarok and the Varangy from Tatatunga, no one has set eyes on Klynn. He might be a ‘vrexer’ according to Maxym, but he still cares about him in a way I think even he doesn’t quite understand. His other fellow Gryn gladiators are settled with their mates, but he somehow feels responsible for Klynn.

I'm inclined to agree with him, and given the only ship which got away was a Varangy, I can understand his fear. Klynn may have ended up in a worse situation than as a gladiator in the dome.

"If this mapping system they have is as good as they claim, maybe they can," I say, giving his arm a supportive squeeze.

And at the same time, my stomach cramps. I drop the remains of my pastry and wrap my arms around myself.

"Little scrap?" Maxym feels my pain down the bond. "What is it?"

Almost as quick as the pain hit me, it has gone, but I'm left with a residual ache in my back I can't ignore.

"The baby. I think he's coming," I say as calmly as I can, doing my level best to hide my terror through the bond.

"It is?" Maxym rises, with me in his arms. "It really is?"

"Yes, I think it's finally time," I say as my attempts to block him are rebuffed.

I am here for you, every step of the way, my eregri . Maxym tells me. No matter what .

And I know, I am never going to have to hide anything, from anyone, ever again.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:32 am

FERN

This was a terrible idea. All of it, not least my idiotic belief in myself that I could somehow make a go of it.

Now I'm trapped in this awful place, and the only weapons I have are a quasar multi tool and a pulsar pistol which are, as far as I can tell, useless against the great spider creatures which have filled the gladiator dome, a place not dissimilar to a Roman colosseum, only far vaster and with carpets.

I pull out my comm device again as I watch the mass of Bogarok swarming the arena below me. I've been trapped here for three nova-days. Fortunately I've been able to bypass the food replication to get power back into it, and I've been able to eat and drink, plus there is an attached bathroom to this hospitality pod, but I'm not convinced I can avoid detection much longer.

My device is still dead. I can't call my ship remotely or even one of the transport drones to get the hell off this planet.

But if I leave without my mark, I'm most likely dead anyway.

"What the hell made me think I could be a bounty hunter?" I mutter out loud.

A soft squeak comes from under my coat, and Beebie snuffles out, his coal-colored fur shining in the light and his beady eyes glittering as he searches for treats. I give him a stroke and he hums to himself. I'm not going to get an answer from the creature, but I appreciate the little vidra's presence.

Movement outside of my pod high up in the dome's stands catches my eye. This place cost me a fortune, or it would have done if I'd actually paid for it rather than hacking into their systems, and my assumption is the Bogarok went after those they could get at easily, so the open stands, rather than those of us within the pods.

It looks like that might be about to change as the things start to swarm up the walls, their long spindly legs moving expertly as they climb. Occasionally one stops, smashing open a pod in a search for something.

"Time to go." I scoop Beebie up and put him into my pocket along with a couple of crusts, which should keep him happy for the time being.

I check the pulsar for the millionth time. I dislike the weapon. I dislike any weapons, which is a joke in itself given I worked for a security company back on Earth providing mercenaries and protection to whoever paid the highest price.

Shame I was the IT girl. The one in the chair. Behind the screen. Not stuck in a huge dome facing down her imminent death at the pincers of spiders the size of elephants.

"Nope!" The word explodes out of me. This is not how I'm going to die today. The Bogarok can do one.

I open the door to my pod a crack and peer into the passage outside before checking my comm for the specifications of the dome, something else my hacking discovered. Two pods down, on the opposite wall, is a conduit which should take me into the service passages.

And away from a spidery demise.

Behind me, a long leg tap-taps on the clear frontage to the pod. I repress a shriek of alarm and dart out of the door, making sure it closes firmly in my wake. I race down

the passage, my auburn hair and long coat flowing behind me, to the conduit and use my multi tool to lever it open. There's the sound of smashing, and I jump inside without a second glance.

Turns out, this tunnel goes one way, down.

I release a stream of whispered curses as I drop, doing my best to slow my descent against the slippery walls. It doesn't work. I'm shooting downwards like a pea in a tube, and this absolutely cannot end well.

I feel like my life should be flashing before my eyes, except even death isn't interested in my boring existence until I was abducted by aliens. Even afterwards, it's not like I've set the galaxy on fire. Dumped on an icy moon, where there were no buff, blue-horned aliens at all, I found the particular skills I had could be useful and now I'm the universe's worst bounty hunter.

Who is presently about to go splat somewhere in the bowls of this colosseum.

My descent slows naturally. In a stroke of luck which has been sorely missing from my life, it's narrowed, and my coat is sticking to the walls enough I'm able to put out my hands and feet to bring myself to a halt against a small ledge which runs around the rim of the tube.

"Light on," I whisper at the comm, and it produces a bright glow which I use to inspect my surroundings. Between my feet, I spot something which at least makes my heart hammer less.

With a quick jump, I'm off the ledge and dropping the last few feet until I hit the ground. My muscles burn at me with the jarring fall. But then I could have broken something...could my luck be about to change?

Ducking down, I use the light on my comm to inspect where I've fallen to.

"Curiouser and curiouser," I murmur.

It looks like I'm in some sort of cave, which I wasn't expecting at all. Above ground, the dome is one of the more recently built buildings in Tatatunga, rising over the dusty streets and rough built dwellings like a squatting metal toad. I wasn't expecting it to have a cave system underneath.

I check my comm, but it's glitching. Either the underground isn't covered by the schematics or it's struggling to maintain a signal. Either way, I'm on my own.

And, away in the dark, there is a long, low growl which reverberates until I think it's inside my head.

I think I'm probably in even more trouble than before. Luck most definitely is not on my side.

KLYNN

The Varangy expires with a rattle. I pull my sword out of his guts with a soggy metallic sound and wipe the blade on his clothing.

The pain in my head eases with his death. Killing is the one thing which makes my life bearable, not just because I enjoy it but because it is a balm to the pain which wracks my body otherwise.

The enjoyment used to be secondary. It isn't any longer. It is what drives me. Except, on this occasion, with a dome filled with enemies I could be slaughtering, instead I'm stalking the undercroft looking for...something.

If I get to kill while I'm searching, it's a bonus.

I'm good with bonuses. All the other gladiators took theirs with a sneer of distaste, but I reveled in the kills I was paid for, the more inventive the better. I was always happy to offer advice if my patrons were unsure how to have their enemy dispatched.

And I was one of the gladiators most sought out for my skills. Not for me the soft bed with a female paying for my time. I lift my lips with a snarl at the very thought. Mating is not in my lexicon. Females are not creatures I have any interest in.

I helped my fellow gladiator and his mate out of a misplaced sense of duty which I still can't shake. But Maxym will be able to do whatever he needs to do without me. In the meantime, I will find as many Varangy and Bogarok as I can to dispose of.

The dome is done, I know it in my bones. My singular ability to cause death in all manner of ways will not likely be appreciated elsewhere. Which means I need to kill until I'm killed this day. I always knew I was due to die here, even if I expected it to be on the arena floor. It is no matter. I will die anywhere.

But I will die.

And I will take as many others with me as I can.

A skittering in the dark captures my attention. From the smell, there is a Bogarok close by.

Give. Up.

Its words drop into my head in a way which makes the pain flare to the point I'm not sure I can move. It was bad enough when they first arrived, the agony rendering me unconscious in the arena until the next thing I knew I opened my eyes down here with a lump on my head the size of a pikrat.

Maxym's work, no doubt. Although since then, the searing pain has disappeared unless one of the foul creatures attempts to communicate.

Even then, the pain has been worse in the past. This is nothing.

"Make me," I growl into the darkness.

Another death will be welcome in this continuous march of destruction towards my inevitable ending.

The thing leaps at me, one leg glancing over my chest, ripping at the flesh. It's nothing. I've had far worse and carried on in the dome until my blood had nearly run out. I shake my feathers and spin my sword in my hand. One of us will not survive

this encounter.

It comes for me again, all legs and snapping jaws. I appreciate the species doesn't rely on weaponry other than their size and legs which they use like spears, along with the venom and their crushing mandibles. Not many fight in this way.

Perhaps it's time for me to follow suit.

I throw the sword away, and it rings out, metal on stone as it disappears into the gloom. I unsheathe my claws, which I've always kept deliberately long even if they occasionally impede my ability to use some weaponry in the dome.

If this is going to be my final fight, it will be a good one. It will be the best of the best.

I hear it coming for me before I see it. The elegant tapping of the spindly feet belie the damage they can cause...and have already caused. My blood is hot on my chest, dripping on the floor as I open my wings, beating down but not lifting off the ground.

The Bogarok descends on me, but I take out two of its legs as the jaws sear my shoulder. It totters, ungainly, before spinning with a dull roar, regaining its footing while the two legs are useless.

I have one more chance or it will kill me. One more chance to add another body to the litany of my kills.

It rushes at me, now more angry than calculating, and it is an error which it won't make again. I duck down, and it is unable to stop its progress as I rake my claws through the soft part of its abdomen as it barrels over me. Sticky fluids drop, warm and stinking, as I roll out, no longer caring for my feathers.

Whether they work or not is immaterial. I am not flying today.

The Bogarok staggers on for a few more paces, lifting its head in a vain attempt to stay in the world of the living, but it's no use. I know my enemy and that was a killing blow. The Bogarok slumps to the floor, legs collapsing under it as its innards leak towards me.

I am not dying here and now. My time is not yet up. I collect my sword and wipe it on my pants in a reflex action. The blade fizzles with the Bogarok venom.

Looks like there is still time to dispose of more before I have to hand over my sword permanently.

A noise echoes around the chamber. Not so close to be a threat, but close enough to be of interest. I growl, letting the sound permeate everywhere before I stalk into the darkness, looking for my next prey.